

Sheenah is selling pilau



BY ARNOLD MUGABE

Sheenah wanted to go downtown, around Kikuubo, Mini-Price, or Old Taxi Park, to buy a scientific calculator. But her best friend, Sisi, warned her that parents usually do last-minute back-to-school shopping in the final week of the holidays, making downtown almost impenetrable for a normal shopper.

"Sheenah, shopping in Kikuubo during this week is not for beginners! You will not manage," Sisi warned.

"I will go there and flex with everyone. I need a scientific calculator, and the shops here are selling them expensively," Sheenah countered.

"Besides, we always fight at school to beat the line to the dining hall whenever they cook chicken," Sheenah said. "And I don't think Kikuubo is any different," she added.

"And don't forget I played rugby in Senior Two. I am the tugging queen. If need be, I will elbow anyone who dares to shove, pick-pocket, or steal my stuff!" Sheenah threatened, laughing.

Soon, Sheenah jumped on a boda boda and headed downtown, ignoring her friend's warning.

However, the moment she got off the boda boda, she received a harsh reality check. Sheenah had never seen so many people packed into one place in her entire life. Even her confidence disappeared.

Right in front of her were men chanting the same annoying song on repeat:

"Kwaata seeti lukumi!

mi! Kwaata seeti lukumi! (Get a mathematical set at Shs1,000)

They chanted while grinding two empty mineral water bottles against each other in a rough, grating motion. The ridges of the bottles created an unbearable, screeching sound. A few steps away a woman was slapping two sandals against each other to create a thundering noise.

This trick of crushing items together was repeated all along the Kikuubo corridor by hawkers selling mathematical sets, buckets, basins, spoons, and everything in between.

The crushing sounds, amplified by the vendors' hoarse voices, merged into a chaotic choir. It was so haunting and deafening that Sheenah almost turned back.

In that moment, she began imagining all the bad things that could happen if she dared step into the sea of madness.

Catching COVID-19, fainting, pickpockets, phone snatchers. Also, what if she needed to use the toilet? What if she bought a counterfeit calculator?

Still, the prices were fair, and tempting. If a mathematical set is Shs1,000 out here, then I might get a scientific calculator for Shs3000 inside the Kikuubo shops, she thought.

Sheenah took a deep breath and stepped forward. Her plan was to squeeze her body through the crowd and slowly make her way toward the inner shops.

Unfortunately for her, the second she took her next step,

she was suddenly sucked into the crowd. Her feet lost contact with the ground. The pressure of bodies from all sides squeezed her upright, locking her arms to her sides. She was not walking anymore. She was airborne. The crowd shifted, surged, and swallowed her whole, lifting and pushing her forward like rain water in a flood.

When the pressure eased and she finally regained her balance and looked around, she found herself in the section that sold baby creams, insect repellents, wines and spirits, empty jerrycans, doormats, sisal bags, and gardening tools.

Her heart pounded. At that point, the only thing she prayed for was to go back home. Then God answered her prayers.

Two men selling pilau rice in huge saucepans mounted on wooden wheelbarrows passed by. Sheenah noticed that one of them had a child scooping the pilau, while the other man had to stop and climb up to scoop it himself.

She also noticed something else, the Kikuubo crowd was voluntarily parting to give way to the pilau sellers.

Quickly, Sheenah struck a deal with the second man. She would help him scoop and sell pilau to the hungry crowd while he pushed the wheelbarrow. That way, she could move along with the wheelbarrow as the crowd cleared a path until they exited Kikuubo.

The pilau-scooping "job" took almost two hours, but it saved her life.