



ANYWHERE BUT HERE

by

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Synopsis

Set in London, “Anywhere But Here” tells the hilarious and moving story of reluctant mini-cab driver Ese Urhobo.

Having just left university with a degree in law, Ese takes up mini-cabbing to clear his debts. Unamused, his long-time girlfriend decides to dump him.

Ese will find the love of his life in the stunning Mary. But all goes wrong when Mary’s sexuality threatens their perfect relationship. But Ese’s problems are only just beginning when a passenger dies in his cab, and the young graduate is charged with murder.

The circumstantial evidence is overwhelming; as Ese knows too well. In sober reflection, he tries coming to terms with the chilling possibility of spending the rest of his life behind bars for a crime he did not commit. But all is not lost, if anyone can help him, it has to be his mentor and old lecturer, the distinguished Professor Hopkins. He agrees to take the case after a long absence from the law courts.

The story develops from Ese’s graduation ceremony through his cabbing experiences and on to the emotionally charged courtroom drama that captures the imagination of the country’s media. Through all of this, Ese nurtures one dream: to return to his native Nigeria and practise law, a dream that can only become true if he is found innocent.

Chapter One

‘Ese Urhobo, LLB (Hons)’

My name was announced over the loudspeakers, and my heart leapt. As I walked onto the platform I was filled with joy and excitement, a real sense of achievement. I felt like jumping in the air shouting,

‘YES!’

This was indeed the crowning moment. For the past four years I have waited. It was unbelievable. Here I was at the Barbican Centre receiving a warm handshake of congratulations from the distinguished Professor Peter Hopkins.

‘Well done Ese, well done.’

He smiled, patted my shoulder and motioned that I proceed. The hall was packed. There were not enough seats. Many people were standing. The guests must have exceeded the

Barbican's capacity by far. There was an audience of more than 3000 people, all clapping. A few feet from where Professor Hopkins stood were the seated Lecturers of the University. All were dressed in ceremonial robes. As I walked past them towards the Chancellor, I paused to nod my acknowledgement to the panel of my would-be alma mater.

'Congratulations!' smiled the Chancellor with his out-stretched hand.

'Thank you, Sir.' With both hands, I shook his.

The audience was clapping continuously like a beating drum. Those few minutes had been my moment of glory.

As I walked off the platform to give way to the next graduate, I looked up at the crowd to find a few of my friends who had come to share this moment. They were seated in the centre of the sixth row. Some were clicking their cameras whilst Pat stood up clapping excitedly. She blew me a kiss as I waved back at them. It was one of the most incredible moments of my life. A great sense of pride and accomplishment, my beloved grandma was the only person missing. Both my parents had died when I was only two years old, and I had been brought up by grandma. If only she had been here to witness the occasion, she would have been even more proud than me. Silently, I blessed her soul. If she was up there watching, I knew she would be smiling from ear to ear.

The clapping and cheering continued. All I could think of at that moment was thank goodness I made it.

The award ceremony took three hours, after which all students with their friends and families came out of the hall to take more photographs. There were lots of proud parents about from all parts of the world all in different brightly coloured clothes. There were Arabs, Africans, Asians even Scots in their distinctive kilts.

Amongst us there were lots of back slapping and hearty handshakes saying: 'Well done';

'Thank goodness it's all over.'

'No more assignments.'

'No more deadlines to meet.'

'Good luck for the future.'

Pat, a smile on her face was clicking away at her camera. She must have taken well over forty pictures of me and any friend I shook hands with, including Professor Hopkins.

I have always looked up to the Professor with admiration from the very first time he became our lecturer on Criminal Law. He is a distinguished gentleman and a scholar in every sense of the word. At sixty-four years old, over six foot tall and of medium build. He is at all times immaculately dressed with his silver hair always neatly cut, giving him an all round dandified look. Until recently, the Professor was a practising Barrister, combining his practice with lecturing part-time, but he gave up practising completely to focus his attention on lecturing. He once told the class that he actually prefers the teaching of law to the "rigmarole of the courthouse" as he prefers to call it. He did, however, make his criminal law lectures the most interesting by always drawing on his long experiences at the Old Bailey and other court houses.

Professor Hopkins had a way of making our hopes and ambitions seem so easy and realistic. When in class he would always go out of his way to analyse the most complex of cases. Outside the lecture hall the Professor was also very helpful to his students, but noticeably more so to foreign students. Once he said, 'The drive of students to leave their various countries, and travel to England for educational purposes is a manifestation of a student's admirable determination to learn'. He was never too busy or tired to help with whatever academic problems a foreign student might have.

'England is the origin of the modern day common law, and there is no better place to study it, but in England,' the proud English Professor would sometimes say. 'Whatever academic problems you have, never hesitate to come to me.'

There was always something of a colonialist patronage about the Professor, but you would never hear anybody say a negative word about him. Perhaps, it was the authority and eloquence with which he lectured or the enviable dignity with which he conducted himself, in and outside the lecture hall.

Though it was the middle of December, the weather was uncharacteristically bright and remained sunny all afternoon. Once we were all gathered, Professor Hopkins joined us for a special group photograph of what used to be our criminal law tutorial group. Every graduate in the group also took individual pictures with him, before he bid us all a final good luck for the future, knowing we might probably never meet again.

After the ceremony, Pat, Ejiro, Grace, Ochuko, James, Tobor and I all went over to 'The Harvester Restaurant' along Lordship Lane in Dulwich, where we had arranged to meet five more friends whom for various reasons could not make it to The Barbican Centre. We had a champagne dinner. My friends know how to have a good time and were in high spirits all evening. By the time we left the restaurant it was 11:00 p.m.

I woke up at ten o'clock the next morning. But for a terrible hangover raging in my head, all else in the flat was calm and peaceful. Pat had left for work two hours earlier. She always kept some medicines I remembered, so reluctantly I staggered out of bed and into the bathroom to explore the medicine cabinet. My legs were having difficulty supporting the weight of my exhausted body. My eyes also felt fuzzy, as much as I tried, I could not spit out my unwanted tongue. At this time just about any tablets would do, I made a quick mixture of Alka Selza and gulped it in one go. The fizzy drink has to be the most disgusting thing that has passed through my mouth in a very long time. I rinsed out the remnants from the glass and helped myself to a couple of Paracetamol tablets, then went to the kitchen and forced a bowl of cereal down my throat. Still feeling tired, I retreated back to bed. I will think of what to do with the rest of the day when Pat returns from work.

It was not until 4:30 in the afternoon when she came in the door.

'Hello, anybody home?' she called out.

'Only the burglar' I replied from beneath the shower. I could hear her shuffling about in the kitchen, as she put away her shopping. A few moments later she came into the bathroom.

'How was your day?' I asked.

'Nothing much,' she replied. 'You know what it's like at the beginning of the week. A new kid joined my class today. She was a bit shy settling down.'

'That's kids for you, give her a couple of days, she will be up and running about like she owns the place.'

'I know, tell me about it. Anyway how was your day?' she asked.

'Very busy, very busy sleeping off my hangover,' I replied as I pulled aside the shower curtain.

Pat was sitting on the toilet seat without her jacket and shoes. She was wearing her white blouse and black trousers. Her feet were resting on the edge of the bathtub, her smile was weak. Until I started dating Pat I never knew that being a pre-school teacher was that demanding a job.

'You look tired,' I smiled at her. 'You want to join me? A bath will always refresh any tired body.' Playfully I grabbed my crotch. 'Come on, the water is still hot.'

'Yes, as if.' She sighed with a half smile and walked out of the bathroom, but returned a few minutes later, this time wearing her bathrobe. Slowly, she let it slip off her bare shoulders. In a moment her body was bare, my rush of excitement was also instant. Pat stepped into the shower.

'Umm, just how I like to see you. Come to me my voluptuous princess,' I put my arms around her and gently pulled her closer to my wet body. 'Let's do the Teddy Pender thing. I wash your body, while you wash mine.'

'Yeah, yeah,' she giggled. 'Better not have any ideas, you are not Teddy.'

Her hands went around my neck to anchor her soft and tender body. True contact was made as the softness of her big breasts squeezed against my soapy chest.

'No problem,' I whispered in her ear. 'Let's pretend I am Teddy just this once.'

'No, no, no, for that Mr Urhobo you will need another degree,' she paused and smiled....'in love.'

'For you, I don't need a degree.' We both locked in a kissing hug. Soon there was only one noise in the steamy bathroom, the sound of the running shower splashing on two naked people, man and woman. Fifteen minutes later we left the bathroom for the king-sized bed.

Chapter Two

This week has been as quiet as can be expected, except for Wednesday, when I took an elderly couple from St Thomas's Hospital in Waterloo to Brighton. It was a good run, about fifty-five miles of driving, forty of which was on the motorway, taking in all that fresh country air and beautiful scenery. It has been a long time since I last visited anywhere close to the sea, that sure added to the pleasure of the journey especially because the job came through at 3:15 in the afternoon meaning there was no need to rush back to London as it would be my last job for the day. It was a drag getting out of London as usual. The school kids come out at about 3:30 p.m. and the streets are gridlocked. Just when things are about to get better, vehicles that created the morning congestion on their way to work, return to continue from where they left off.

I did, however, manage to break through the traffic. I only had Brixton Road to worry about. Streatham can also be problematic even at the best of times, but after a short while as a mini-cab driver, one soon begins to fetch out all the back streets. In no time I was at Norbury and onto the A22, before connecting to the M23. My passengers were a pleasant enough couple in their seventies. The man was very opinionated and was a bit too talkative regardless of the fact that it was a one-sided conversation. He seemed to have a way with words, mysteriously connecting one topic with another. At first he started with his experiences as a young man during the Second World War, which I found very interesting and listened to with fascination, but soon he changed the topic and that was when I started to get well and truly fed up: how inflation has gone up since he was a young man, how he had developed kidney problems, how incompetent the government was at not been able to bring down the waiting list of those in need of heart operations.

He happens to be a retired coal miner and somehow manages to hold former Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher personally responsible for all the misfortunes that have befallen him before and after his retirement from the mines. Mrs Thatcher's premiership has been the worst fate Britain has ever suffered since the Second World War, he lamented endlessly. Reminding him that Mrs Thatcher's popularity sustained her for almost twelve years in office only seems to aggravate him further; for my own peace of mind I decided to join his wife and kept quiet, but that did not stop him.

Having exhausted his condemnation of Mrs Thatcher, he shifted his attention to the alarmingly high wave of drugs related crime in Brighton. He only retired to Sussex because his wife wanted to be close to her relatives. Not that there was any lost love between him and his in-laws of course, he only did it for his wife.

We did eventually get to Brighton, an hour and a half after leaving Waterloo. My

eardrums were still intact, but I was feeling hungry. After dropping off the old couple, I drove down to the sea-front, found a parking space and went into one of the many restaurants that tail the sea-front. It was half full of Japanese and American tourists with their trademark camcorders and cameras dangling from their necks. Who comes to Brighton at this time of the year I wondered. It was, after all, still dull February where sunshine was a rarity; it has to be one of those bargain off-peak package holidays I thought. It took a good ten minutes before a happy faced waitress brought me my late lunch, a large piece of the most mouth-watering battered cod, wedged in with home-made chunky chips, peas and coleslaw with a few onion rings thrown in, and complimented with a half pint of cold lager.

After finishing the delicious meal, I bought another half of lager and took it out with me to sit down on one of the benches by the misty sea that merges with the dull sky.

It was beginning to get dusky, but not quite dark. The deserted sea-front was calm and peaceful. I was the only person within two hundred metres to my left or right. A few pedestrians walked past behind me, but soon their footsteps faded. Looking out towards the sea, I watched as the seagulls ducked in and out of the water harmoniously. What a breathtaking view, even in its dullness it appeared beautiful and peaceful, if only I could have such a job once a week, mini-cabbing after

a long and difficult study for a Law Degree would not be such a miserable thing. As I sat watching the sea that early evening, the thrashing waves against the seashores seemed to merge into such a consuming rhythm. Gradually, the music began to develop as the singing birds dancing in the sky readily provided the lyrics that gave soul to the redeeming song. Slowly, I drifted into a parallel universe where I felt enveloped into a mystical harmony I can only compare to the softness of fresh cotton, setting me apart from everything else around me. The voyage transported me far beyond the distance of the sea, and into a world to which I truly belong, a world I long for. I had returned to my beloved home country as a fully-fledged Barrister.

I was handling another major case as a defence lawyer. My client was a woman who was charged with killing her husband. At face value it looked bad for my client. The prosecuting barrister was convinced he had a watertight case. Smirkishly, he had sat down after concluding his closing address to the jury. Even my client had given up hope and resigned her fate to life imprisonment. But as the packed court silently waited, I stood up confidently, and rearranged my gown around my shoulders. The legal garment was my armour of invincibility; the wig I wore was my crown of justice.

All geared up, I was now prepared to walk into the valley of injustice, but I will know no fear.

I turned to address the members of the jury. With a unique style of charm and brilliance, I called upon their sense of justice for my poor client, whom had been pushed to the limit by a wicked and faceless brute of a husband, a man whose violence knew no bounds. Two witnesses had testified that on previous occasions, the husband had brutally beaten her almost to death.

'Members of the jury,' I implored. 'My client was faced with a life or death situation, on this instant she grabbed her inalienable right to life. Please, do not take it from her. She has been through enough.'

As I spoke, the captivated court digested every word that my silver lips had to utter.

By the time I sat back in my chair after a passionate plea for justice, the members of the jury were moved. It came as no surprise to me when a not guilty verdict was returned in favour of my client. The little woman and her family were ecstatic, the entire court house applauded, but for me it was no big deal, just another day in court, averting the miscarriages of justice was after all my calling.

After thirty minutes of day dreaming, I returned to the real world, still a mini-cab driver. I decided that the day's job was done. I stood up, and walked across to the restaurant to return the empty beer glass. Incidentally the happy-faced waitress was clearing a table by the entrance. I thanked her for a lovely meal and gave her back the empty glass.

Once outside the restaurant, I felt the cold breeze for the first time. I pulled my jacket closer around my neck, turned left and headed for my car. It was going to be a quiet drive back to London.

It didn't take long to join the M23, with any luck I should be home within an hour. That would be almost an hour past my normal finishing time during the week, Pat might begin to worry. As I drove, thoughts of her occupied my mind. Her birthday was the coming Friday. I had forgotten it last year, although she didn't make too much of a thing about it, but she has given me a lot of reminders this time. I could never really see what the big deal was about birthdays, it was after all just another day. I remember a schoolmate at university, whom I usually met once a week, a Chinese guy called Lee Chung. We were in the same tutorial group for Land Law, a simple ordinary chap, quite a shy fellow, the type you would think would be scared of a housefly. He wore thick-rimmed glasses and always the same old pair of blue jeans. The only distinctive thing about him was the black T-shirt he always wore. The T-shirt had the simple inscription: "*Same Shit, Different Day*". That always made some sense to me. But for Pat I would do whatever makes her happy. She is a great girl, I know I am lucky to have her. More so because unlike some girls I have dated in the past, she does not demand much, just the simple things in life make her happy. She had hinted that we go out for a meal.

It has been a long time since we have been out for some "*Quality time*", as she calls it. On Thursday perhaps, a trip to our favourite bar, "The Calabar Kitchen" in Camberwell might not be such a bad idea. We might just catch up with some of our Nigerian friends we haven't seen for some time. From the M23 motorway I soon joined the A22 to take me through to Croydon. Nothing much was on the radio so I slid one of my favourite tapes into the cassette player. Listening to the songs of Teddy Pendergrass, I enjoyed the journey back to London.

Unlike the rest of the working population, when a mini-cab driver says 'Thank God its Friday' it is not because he is looking forward to a relaxing weekend with his friends or family, but because he is in fact looking forward to two days and nights of making lots of money.

Once again the weekend was here, it was my second month on the job and I knew what to expect. Because it tends to be busy at night time, I do not usually go to work during the day on Fridays, preferring instead to spend all day sleeping. That way I can work all night long from six o'clock in the evening, till six in the morning. The routine is pretty much the same on Saturdays.

All evening it has been busy, a good start to the weekend. Sinbad is on the controls, he is usually very patient with the drivers, but today he seems to be losing his cool. The phones would not stop ringing. More and more jobs were coming through, so were angry customers that were getting increasingly impatient waiting for their cabs and therefore ringing repeatedly to query the delays. The jobs were just piling up and whenever this happens the drivers were the unfortunate ones always held responsible for the delays and therefore take the brunt of it.

'What the fuck is wrong with your bloody firm?' Some will curse when the driver eventually turns up.

'I booked the bloody cab for six o'clock mate, now I am fucking late!' Others would consider it necessary to inform the driver.

'I am bloody 20 minutes late, you lot should sort your lives out or else I will never use your firm again!' would come a threat from yet another disgruntled passenger.

The mini-cab driver's constant reply is: 'Oh sorry, we are a bit busy tonight'.

This scenario continues from six in the evening till about nine or ten at night when things calm down a little. At this time most passengers had already arrived at their various locations. But come 11:00 p.m. when the pubs close, the mad rush begins all over again. Only this time the passengers are more likely to be merry and in a better mood. Many become friendly, wanting to have a light-hearted conversation with the driver.

'All right cabby?'

'Yes am all right, you?' the driver will reply, but the intoxicated passenger might consider it unnecessary to reply to such an intrusive enquiry. Only the sober and civil one will say, 'Oh yeah, I am fine.'

'You busy tonight then?' The passenger will continue in a sloppy voice.

'Yes.'

'Working all night, are ya?'

'Yes.'

'What time did you start then?'

'Six o'clock.'

'You like this job, do ya?'

'Yes.' Most drivers would lie.

'How long have you been a cab driver then?' the passenger would continue.

'Not long'

'This is your car then, is it?'

'Yes.' The driver would confirm his ownership.

'Nice motors they are, these Fords. I used to have one meself.'

'I see.'

'You married are ya?'

'You have any kids you know of?'

So the continuous and pointless question and answer sessions would go on and on forever. The passenger oblivious to the fact that, because of the combined smell of alcohol and tobacco oozing from his breath, the one thing the driver wants at that particular moment, is for him to sit there quietly and just shut up. That is of course if the passenger does not fall asleep in mid-sentence, and the driver has to help the drunken passenger locate exactly which house he came out of only a few hours earlier. On some occasions the driver has to be the judge of which passenger to take, distinguishing between those that are just tipsy from those that are thoroughly drunk and therefore too risky to bother with, especially when the passenger has that sloppy expression on his face that threatens to bring your evening to an abrupt end at any moment. This disaster he would bring about by simply vomiting in your cab. Ninety percent of the time, such passengers are males between the ages of eighteen and thirty-five. The women sometimes have their own anti-social attributes. The other day a drunken lady let out a terrible fart in my cab. I have never smelt anything more disgusting in my life.

Younger passengers especially those between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five years old are the worst. With the aid of alcohol and youthful exuberance they become suddenly brave, more so if travelling in groups of three or four. They consider it part of the fun to start a fight with the driver for whatever reason they can think of. Not to disrupt his night with young troublemakers, the driver has to allow smoking in his cab if the youngsters so desire; retune his radio to their preferred pirate station, and most importantly, hope they pay their fares at the end of their journey. Surprisingly, it is those that are well-dressed and responsible-looking who are most likely to abscond without paying, whilst the stereo-typical,

troublemaker type will not only pay his fare, but give the driver a handsome tip at the end of the journey.

It was about one o'clock in the morning when I picked up a couple from the Dewaniam Tandoori Restaurant along Stanstead Road. They were only going on a 'Local job' as short journeys are called. On this occasion the fare was only £2.50, but the elderly gentleman generously paid £3.50.

'Thank you sir' I said in gratitude.

'You're welcome, goodnight and mind how you go young man.' The man said in reply. If only all passengers could be this polite at all times, then the life of all mini-cab drivers may be a bit easier.

'Driver 95 cleared.' I reported to Sinbad on controls over my two-way radio.

'Roger 95,' came the reply. 'Come take the base job.'

'Roger.' I responded, before driving to the cab office to pick up the waiting passenger. He was a well dressed young man in his mid twenties and indeed quite responsible looking. When we started on our journey he was neither drunk nor tipsy, just an ordinary chap going to Pepy's Estate in Deptford. We did however go through the useless ritual of questions and answers. I did not mind, he seemed okay to have a social chat with. Fifteen minutes later we got to his destination.

'What's the damage mate?' he asked.

'That will be £5.50 please,' I replied.

'Alright mate, that's cool give us a minute,' he said. 'I can't reach me wallet.' He stepped out of the car and gestured to reach for his wallet, but suddenly he broke into a run!

I could not believe it. I am not having any of this I decided. Quickly, I got out of the car and ran after him into the estate. As we both came to a bend, he suddenly disappeared.

It was a dark and silent night, I could not see him; he was obviously hiding. So, I too came to an abrupt halt, held my breath and looked around for a few seconds if only I could just make out his silhouette in the semi-darkness. But I could not hear or see a thing move. Damn! I cursed myself. Experience should have warned me of what to expect. I looked around me and waited, but nothing moved. I decided to give up and count my losses. But just as I was about to return to my car, I could just about hear a laboured noise. It was him breathing heavily. He was a rather fat chap of about 20 stone in weight, unfit and lacking in stamina. He was now out of breath and therefore panting heavily after the short run around the block of flats.

Slowly, I tiptoed to where the sound of breathing was coming from. As I got closer I could just about make out his silhouette squeezed in against the hedge. Very slowly, I got to where he was squatting, and there he was sweating profusely with his right-hand firmly pressed against his mouth to prevent any sound from escaping.

'Come on man,' I was angry. 'Don't be ridiculous; just pay your fare so I can go about my business.'

He now stood upright, removed his hand from his mouth to gasp for air. His face was glistening from the moonlight. Still breathing heavily, he then bent forward resting both his hands on his knees trying to catch his breath and at the same time saying in between gasps of breath.

'Sorry....., sorry....., sorry cabby. I have no money.'

At this stage I was too upset to listen to any explanation he had to offer. In a no-nonsense tone I said to him.

'That's your problem. You should not use a cab, if you know you cannot afford it.'

'Please....., please.... please cabby. I will....bring the money...to your office...tomorrow. Honest, I promise.'

'Look, you have wasted enough of my time already. If you don't pay your fare, I will have

to call the police.'

At the mention of the word 'Police', the situation worsened. Like a possessed person this guy suddenly broke into a run again, only this time with greater speed than before. He had taken up enough of my time already, and I had no intention of letting him get away without paying. After about fifty metres or so of running he must have stumbled and suddenly came crash-landing on his face, falling over like a sack of potatoes.

'Exactly what the hell is your problem man, why can't you just pay your bloody fare?' I too was beginning to get out of breath and very angry. I looked down at him, resisting the urge to give him a slap across the face. Sitting on the pavement with both hands holding his right foot, and eyes tightly shut, he was whispering loudly in agonising pain.

'Oh cabby,.... me leg,..... me leg,.. me leg....'

'Get up man.'

'Me leg, me leg.'

'Are you going to pay your fare or what?'

After a few moments, when his anguish had eased a little, he struggled to his feet and in-between more gasps of air said,

'Okay..., okay cabby, I am sick of all this, and now I have injured me leg. Take me to the cash machine and I will give you your fucking money.'

I was not going to fall for anymore of his pranks, so I asked him first to give me his mobile phone as a guarantee. Reluctantly, he handed me the phone and we both returned to the car with him limping on his injured foot in front of me. When we got into the car he was still sweating and breathing heavily like a frightened pig approaching the slaughterhouse. One glance at him, I felt like swinging my fist against his nose, I was absolutely upset. Silently, I drove him down to the Barclays bank cash dispenser along the Newcross Road. He paid me the fare, which by now, I had unilaterally increased from £5.50 to £8.00 for my time wasted; but then, he still had the cheek to say.

'Fucking take me back to Pepys estate.'

'Well, you can get lost!'



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