

**The First Two Pages: “Twilight Ladies” by Meg Opperman  
Winner of the Derringer Award for Best Short Story, 2016**

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An Essay by Meg Opperman

The inspiration for “Twilight Ladies” began after I stumbled across an article in an English-language newspaper while I lived in Tanzania in the late 1990s or early aughts. In an op-ed piece disguised as news, a staff writer ranted about recent events in Arusha where young women given rides by married men were, unfairly, “carjacking” and blackmailing them. After arriving at her destination, a twilight lady would refuse to get out of the vehicle until the driver gave her money. She threatened to scream rape or even contact his wife. In this version of the story, innocent men were being harassed, stalked, and embarrassed by brazen, lawless women. The over-the-top verbiage at this injustice cemented the story in my mind.

The article opened by claiming:

Men are becoming endangered species in Arusha municipality. Gangs of strange ladies, believed to be ‘night hounds’ have of late taken into capturing lone males, especially motorists, holding them ransom.

Considering the differential gendered power dynamics in Tanzania, which skewed heavily in men’s favor in the 1990s and early 2000s, this article reads as more farce than news.

When I read it, I knew I'd want to write a story around it someday. I just wasn't certain of all the details. Since I am a seat-of-the-pants writer—as opposed to plotting it all out—I only need a theme and a voice to start. The plot will come. But I didn't have the voice at that moment. The idea then sat in the back of my mind for years.

During that time, I wrote my first novel. “Novel” may be a little too generous. I wrote a draft—or it might be more accurate to say that I learned how to write a draft—and celebrated the win. I read it over, took notes, and after a lot of consideration put it in a drawer, never to be seen again. I'd loved the premise for that book. It was the first time I set a story in Tanzania, and during the novel writing process I learned so much. Unfortunately, I didn't have the right point-of-view character for the story, and I was only beginning to develop my voice as a writer. I didn't think I could fix it and keep what I'd loved about the premise intact. So, into the drawer it went. No regrets.

At that point, I'd become a mom with little extra time to work on another novel. I figured out quickly that I didn't possess the memory or energy to continually set down a novel and pick it back up (sometimes weeks later). A writer friend then recommended I try my hand at short stories.

Short story writing was its own masterclass. It's where I began to figure out my voice, learn the rules and when I could break them, and try out new ideas—

some that were successful and some that weren't. It felt so satisfying to take small increments of time for myself and see the bones of a story settle into place. And then, one day—10+ years from when I'd read the news article—Police Constable Kokuteta Mkama's voice spoke, and I listened.

The theme was built into the original news article. I wanted to play with the idea of oppressor outrage and oppressed agency within social constraints. I needed a sympathetic point-of-view character. She would become key to the twist in this story. And so I wrote about a heavily pregnant police officer in the scorching heat of the Mwanza summer who experienced microaggressions in her job—because being a police officer didn't protect her from sexism—while also having a home life that was less than ideal.

I opened the story with Koku's marriage difficulties:

Police Constable Kokuteta Mkama squeezed the bridge of her nose, her short nails digging crescents near the corner of her eyes. Poring over her bank statement for the third—or was it fourth?—time, she knew she had a problem.

A husband problem.

He'd stolen money from her account again.

Another girlfriend? Of course. The numbers didn't lie.

But he would.

I wanted the reader to know upfront that Koku was not with someone who viewed her as an equal partner. Cheating, lying, stealing. Traits that would make her husband unappealing and that would hopefully push readers to sympathize with her plight.

To add to the oppressiveness of her situation, I showed how miserable Koku is in the stifling heat:

Sweat trickled down her back and seeped through her uniform blouse, the unseasonably hot summer—especially with a baby on the way—unbearable and unrelenting. Not even Lake Victoria took the edge off the January heat. How would she ever find the energy to finish the endless stack of paperwork on her desk?

She reached into the pocket of her wilted uniform and drew out a handkerchief to mop her brow. A small fan perched in front of louvered windows blew hot air around, but did little else. Pitiful.

P.C. Lubadsa worked nearby, his pen racing across a form, not a hint of sweat on his angular face, his uniform still stiffly pressed. She sniffed. If he was as big as an ox with his first child, he'd be uncomfortable too. But she mustn't take her foul mood out on the constable. He'd been nothing but kind, even giving her the less vigorous tasks as her girth increased.

This section also gave me the ability to slip in bits of her backstory—pregnant with her first child and struggling to keep up with the demands of the job while being so uncomfortable.

I then introduced the victim and the crime. Motete Vincent, a wealthy man, is “mugged” by a twilight lady. Motete is not a good man. As Koku says,

He might be a prominent businessman, but he reminded her of a spotted hyena—small head, wide-set eyes, overfed body. With a character to match.

It's clear Koku's no fan of this man. And he's rude and condescending to her:

“What I *need* is something to drink, constable. Fetch me a Coke.” He waved a 1,000 shilling note under her nose.

Koku's lips tightened, but she didn't dare offend him, since he was close with her commander. She reached for the bill. "Of course, *Mzee*."

Vincent held the money just out of reach. "You twilight ladies. So eager to grab men's hard-earned cash."

Koku gaped. Twilight ladies? His hard-earned cash? What about *her* money?

Then there's the crime—a twilight lady "mugging" a married man who likely propositioned her for sex. I wanted the crime element to be specific to the Tanzanian context. At the same time, I tried to present the crime in a way that spoke to how power, sexism, and autonomy could play out in any cultural context, including our own. I felt the combination of specificity and universality would intrigue the reader. Koku became our conduit for understanding those dynamics. She also became the voice that asked us all: Who's the real villain here?

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Meg Opperman was the 2016 recipient of the Short Mystery Fiction Society's Short Story Derringer for "Twilight Ladies." Her stories appear in *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine*, *Black Cat Mystery Magazine*, *Sherlock Holmes Mystery Magazine*, and elsewhere. She currently writes LGBTQ+ romantasy as Meghan Maslow. In 2021, she received the Reviewers Choice Award from the Paranormal Romance Guild for Best LGBTQ+ Fantasy Novel and was a runner-up in the Rainbow Awards for both Best Gay Paranormal Romance and Best Gay Fantasy Romance. In 2023, she was a finalist in the Goodreads M/M Romance Members' Choice Awards for Best Book of the Year. [www.meghanmaslow.com](http://www.meghanmaslow.com)