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A hand to hold

Mali Kambandu

The bright Lusaka sunlight beams upon the compound. The bodies, busy with activities – sweeping mounds of hair from their salons into the dusty street, clinking bottles in the shebeen, mopping spills of brew. Toyota taxis roll along, beeping pedestrians out of their route. A driver hangs his arms out of the window, and picks up yesterday's conversation with the barber sprawled on a plastic chair, waiting for customers outside his stall. They laugh uncontrollably, and only they know why.

Tinny Zampop beats blare to all the neighbouring plots, stalls, shops, houses, filling the streets with music to carry them through their day. The music, at this piercing volume, doesn't stop conversations from carrying on. Voices lilt and dip with the tunes, magically adjusting to the music.

Life courses through Ngombe at a frenzied pace.

The small shops and stalls slowly take on a residential feel – small houses, crammed so close to each other that the neighbours can hold hands from their windows. The houses are as busy as the shops: ladies dip their laundry buckets to splash out grey water; a tiny stall displaying salt, cooking oil and guavas for sale with two young children standing guard over the wares. In all the houses, windows are cracked open with curtains wafting out, adding colour to the grey bricks.

One house displays none of these activities. The windows are closed. No signs of laundry. No doors opening with people coming and going. Chickens scratch the soil and peck around for nothing. There is nothing there.

The two low steps leading into the house were once polished with red oxide, but are now slightly dull, with a thin film of dust settled atop. No feet have crossed this threshold in a while. The door has been weathered by rain and sunlight, with the wood standing sturdy and brown.

Inside, it is dark. Streaks of light from the small windows pierce the darkness bringing in small shards of brightness. The dusty entryway opens into a tiny kitchen. Faded plastic pails are stacked under an unstable sink. Piles of well-worn dishes line the bare wooden shelves jutting out of the walls. A piece of twine hangs loosely over the window frame, serving as

the curtain rail. There are too many cobwebs for a house that is lived in.

Beyond the kitchen area, a set of puffed settees are arranged around the room, in the middle of which stands a small coffee table holding plastic flowers in a large vase. In the corner, another table carries the television. The carpet is frayed at the edges where many feet have shuffled by.

Only one wall tells a story. The pictures have faded in the sun over the years, but they weave a story of family. Framed and cardboard pictures of faces: smiling, stern, serious. One stern face appears in only two pictures. She stands beside three others all sharing the same nose, and then her stern face is framed with a wedding veil.

A wheezy cough erupts from the doorway. It continues but seems to weaken and weaken, the cougher suffocating but still puffing on. Through the doorway, a steel frame holds a thin mattress piled with blankets. The blankets cover a body so thin that its profile barely rises above the bed. Beside the bed, a small table holds a collection of medicines, a half-empty glass of water, a bowl with crusty porridge, dried up sides curling away from the container. On the bed, a thin, child-like arm rests beside what should be a body but has now become skeletal. The bony hand clutches a small black phone. The hand tightens as the coughing wracks her body again.

Hazy sunlight beats down on the silver Toyota rolling and dipping along the gravel road. This car is shinier and newer than the average car that passes by. Inside, Kunda taps her fingers on the steering wheel. Every few metres she cranes her neck to check the signs, the shops, the houses, the landmarks that will tell her where to go next. She slows down, ready to turn, but speeds up again when she doesn't see the right words. She travels another 50 metres, slows again, stops. She revs up the engine, travels a few more metres, and turns as the road curves.

The stalls on the side of the road spill over with mangoes, green vegetables, thousands of colourful tubs of cosmetics, electronic trinkets. People stream back and forth, and Kunda keeps driving along, eyes trained on the houses, not finding the particular one.

It has taken her a long time to prepare for this trip. It had been months of feeling unsettled. Kunda sat to discuss her coming marriage with her mother but pulled back, feeling a rift widening between them. She was crossing over into another life, but couldn't hold hands with the people

who had brought her here. And that was a lump in her chest, weighing her down.

So she drove. She dug deep into her memories, found where to go and drove.

She takes another turn. The road gets narrow. And narrower. Any further and the car would be wedged between hedges. She cuts the engine and steps out into the dust. She looks around, choosing her direction, teeth pinching her lip. With a shrug, she steps in one direction, her patent leather shoes carry her over tiny rivulets of grey water. Children stop and look at the lady walking by but Kunda ignores them. She doesn't want to seem out of place even though she knows deep down that she doesn't look the part here.

She reaches the end of the street and turns into another. When she reaches the end of that one, she turns again and again until she realizes she is going in circles.

"Mwa sowa, mummy?" a voice calls out from beyond a hedge. Three men stand over a mess of cement, their shovels digging and turning the pile to create the perfect mix. "Ni sakila Ba Reeda Mwale? Mu ba, do you know her?" Amused smiles tickle their faces. This stilted conversation would be fun.

"Baliko, Ba Mrs Mwale, ba nkala pa plot 23. Mu ba ziba bwanji?" "Benzo sevenza kwatu. Many years ago. But I know she stayed kuno mu family house." "Ni pamene apo. First turn, three houses. Pa right." Kunda's eyes follow his directions. "Zikomo."

"Zikomo, mummy," they call after her, knowing they'll have a good laugh at her accent when she's out of earshot.

Kunda follows their directions. When she sees the house, she knows she has the right place, from the strange atmosphere that sets the house apart from its neighbors. But her feet are planted in the dusty road, not able to take a step further. She panics and doubts why she is there.

Kunda's bony hand cups her pear-shaped face. She sighs deeply. An aunty sitting on the other end of the room has her gaze fixed on Kunda. Their eyes meet. Kunda slowly rolls her eyes away and gazes into the garden.

The conversation continues to swirl around her. Matrons. Guests. Gifts. Mother's basket. Drums. Food. Venue.

She looks around the table and can barely remember a happy moment with these women who are helping her mother plan the happiest moments in her life. Around the table are her mother's friends and sister-cousins. Her mother's biological sisters died in this house. Kunda almost envies their luck, but immediately regrets it, thinking herself ridiculous. She scolds herself, reminding herself about gratitude. This occasion should engender nothing but gratitude for the loving, devoted man and friend with whom she would share this life.

She sighs again.

"What is wrong with you?," an aunty inquires. The frown on her face has made her brow strangely furrowed.

"Me?," Kunda looks around to confirm that the sharp tone is actually meant for her. All the ladies turn towards her. A pause. Kunda checks her chipped nail. It needs to be filed down soon. "Actually, I was thinking."

The lady at the top of the table puts her pen down and shifts her body to give Kunda her undivided attention. But when their eyes meet, there is tension. Kunda's mother has met her daughter in conflict before. And she's willing to take her on again, even in the company of the relatives helping her plan the biggest social event of her life. Hair, head-dress, make-up and jewelry are all perfectly in place. She could be ten years younger than the youngest woman here, but more than half of these women call her BaMaggie because they revere her.

"What about Aunty Reeda?"

"Who is Aunty Reeda?"

"Aunty Reeda, you know, you remember her? She was here from when I was in grade 2, I think, for years."

Maggie turns her head to coax out the memory. "The maid?"

"Yes. Remember her? She was with us for so long and was so lovely. She took such great care of me. I'd love to see her again. And wouldn't it just be great to have a woman so important to us at the shower?"

Muffled gasps sweep across the room. The women steal a glance to look at Maggie, scared of her reaction, then look at each other, confirming if they gave the right reaction.

"You want to invite the maid? To your kitchen party? As a guest?"

Kunda nods slowly, keeping eye contact with her mother. The others are watching.

Maggie is the first to look away. She lifts the pen and writes 'Reeda.

Maid' under the guest list. "I suppose you'll know how to give her the card? And I also expect that you'll ensure she knows that contributions are K450. Per person." Her measured tone jabs at Kunda, but only she can feel it.

"It was an idea," she says, forcing the smile to colour her words.

"Shall we carry on? There are only a few items left to discuss?" Kunda quickly checks her watch. "May I be excused, I think I need to..." she mumbles the rest to herself, knowing that no-one cares and they don't expect her to stick around.

Kunda gently turns the door handle and inhales as she steps in. She quickly unbuckles her sandals at the door and places them neatly on the mat. The murmur of the television reveals her mother's location. Kunda takes a couple of steps and she's in the kitchen.

"Kunda?" She freezes in the doorway. But she quickly relaxes, in case she's being watched. "Hi Mummy. Just getting some water. So hot outside."

The water is refreshing. It also steadies her breathing, helps to calm her. Prepares her for what's coming. Kunda knows it's coming.

"Hi Mummy. Did you have a good evening? I made supper before I left. Did you eat or can I get some for you?"

"No thanks," Maggie barely lifts her head from her tablet. She keeps swiping and scrolling. "I ate with your aunties."

"Okay."

"After you embarrassed me."

Kunda breathes to keep calm. "Sorry?"

"I know that isn't an apology. You don't understand what that silly comment did to me?"

Kunda perches on the edge of the couch, her bony hands clenched, her breathing shallow. Fearful.

"Why would you even think it's a good idea to bring your old maid to your kitchen party? What a ridiculous suggestion! I know you don't think much of the even, but you don't have to turn it into a circus, a ... a joke. It makes me look foolish!"

Maggie has never looked foolish. Maggie has always been so poised. "Mummy no... I ... that is not what I wanted. Want. It's not what I want. Not at all."

“Then?”

“I just remember how Aunty Reeda was always there with me. When I came home from school, she helped me undress out of my uniform, we had lunch, we would play and tell stories. She was my friend. I grew up with her.”

The silence is long. No swiping, no scrolling. Maggie’s fingers are frozen above the tablet. “You’re saying she raised you?”

“Mummy, I... I meant she was with me for so long.”

“It’s always that. I was out working, travelling for work, working late, never here. Of course. Never mind that I was doing it all for you. Where was your father? What was he doing for you? So, because I was mother and father, I get maids coming to my daughter’s kitchen party?”

“I just wanted to share this moment with her.” In her mind she adds, she was always there for me.

Maggie’s sucks her teeth loud and heavy. Kunda flinches at the sound her mother has always detested for its lack of decorum. To use it now, Maggie diminishes Kunda as something far beneath her. Kunda catches her mother’s eyes as she lifts herself off the couch. They are filled with disgust tinged with hurt.

Kunda’s arm reaches out to touch her mother, but it can’t cover the distance fast enough. Maggie is out of the room.

Today, Ngombe is more familiar to her. She parks her car in the right place and walks confidently through the paths. She moves with determination and defiance. Defiance of that party-planning meeting. Defying society’s shame of women like Aunty Reeda. Defying her mother.

Outside the house, she doesn’t hesitate.

The two low steps leading into the house have collected more dust. The windows are barely cracked open. Kunda leans towards the door, straining to hear some sound. She gently knocks on the wood then pulls back from the door and looks around the house again. No response.

She tries to peek through a window. “Aunty Reeda?” Kunda goes to knock again but a cough startles her.

“Aunty Reeda?”

“I’m here.” The voice is small and hoarse. Kunda hurriedly pulls down the door handle and pushes the door open.

Darkness envelopes her. She has to blink to adjust her eyes. The voice pulls her deeper into the dimness. Kunda moves steadily, but her breaths are small and shallow. There is no relief from the mustiness. She slows as she sees the bed and the stern face, now gaunt and sorrowful, framed by a colourful nylon scarf. Reeda stretches out her thin hand to Kunda.

“Kunda? After all these years?”

Kunda inches forward. She perches on the wooden bedside chair.

“Aunty Reeda.” The two hands hold each other, wrinkles and boniness entwined.

“You are a beautiful, beautiful lady.” Kunda can only smile. The stench of urine fills her nose and gets trapped in her mouth. She tries to swallow it down. This is the hand she wants to hold.

Reeda pushes herself off the bed, trying to receive her visitor, but ends up leaning against the headboard. She draws the blanket around herself to keep out the chills.

“Why are you ... alone?”

Her scrawny shoulders lift ever so slightly. “I’ve always been alone. I only had you children after Mr Mwale died.”

This is a hard truth to remember. Aunty Reeda worked endlessly. She was there when Kunda woke up each morning, and she patted young Kunda her to sleep each night. Weekends. Public holidays. Maggie came and went, rolling her suitcases in and out of the house. But Reeda was there. The substitute mother. Year after year. It was the same before she came to them. And after. Reeda was a constant presence in all her work-homes. Eternal.

Feeling guilty, Kunda can’t look at her oldest friend. She glances around the room – the medicines. The uneaten food. The wardrobes and chests of drawers filling space and crowding the room. Blank walls, except the one beside the bed. Faded sheets of paper, pasted to the wall, almost reach the ceiling. The papers are filled with sketches showing families in different arrangements – mother, father, two boys, a girl; mother, father, three girls; mother, father, two girls, a boy; mother, father, one boy, one girl; mother, one girl. And always on the page, the squiggly letters from a toddler spells a name.

“Aunty Reeda, these pictures. You kept so many.”

“From all my children.”

Their eyes hold, travelling back to their long days of games and

confidences; giggles, scoldings, and hugs; mealtimes and lunchboxes.

“Is there ... can I st... Is there anyone to help you with your food?”

“It’s only pneumonia. I’ll be fine. They gave me what I needed. Just need to rest.”

For twenty, thirty years, Reeda held children’s hands, wiped their tears, coaxed them into behaving and eating well. Weeks after her husband’s kidneys failed, sunken in grief, she became absorbed in a life where she was completely in demand. A part of her soul tingled when children ran to or cried for her over their mothers. Their warm bodies blanketed the loneliness she feared would consume her.

Her sister and two brothers had their own children but lived in the village or close to the border, long distances away. Dedication to her life’s work meant infrequent visits, which her family mistook for lack of interest. With time, the distance grew, children matured and their aunt became an obscure character. She was the face seen occasionally at funerals and weddings. Her nieces and nephews charted their paths without her in mind;

She had already given ten years of her life when she realised that the demand for her time and attention was not love. But it was too late to start over, to find someone she could love as she had loved Mr Mwale. As her joints stiffened and her hair became more grey than black, Reeda stopped living in her employers’ houses and did her best to make a comfortable home for herself. But it was always empty.

“Aunty Reeda, is there a family expecting you back?” Reeda shakes her head slightly but clutches the phone. “Not anymore.”

The gate slides open to reveal her pristine, emerald garden. She pulls in, engages park beside Kunda’s car and gathers her handbag. She doesn’t get out of the car. Maggie fiddles, re-arranging items in her handbag. Aside from her purse and phone, there’s nothing in this bag that she can’t live without. It wasn’t always like that. When Kunda was little, Maggie would carry everything valuable with her in her bag, afraid of losing things that mattered, things she needed to make purchases, arrange schedules, travel, work. Money, jewelry, her passport, Kunda’s passport, health insurance certificates, car papers. Her handbag was her life because she had built her life from nothing. The struggle to educate herself at university was an

accomplishment but keeping Kunda and herself off the streets was the trial that came out of nowhere. She fought to find and keep her job, and fought even harder to rise in it; making more money and having greater success was important to Maggie – it was what she did to keep her child clothed and fed. Soon, she rose above keeping Kunda clothed and fed. Her success sent Kunda to good schools. Her success rented a lovely home and eventually bought them a home. It brought women to her door, seeking her validation, wanting some of her success to rub off on them. It meant that on trips to her poor village, she was welcomed as a queen. Her success meant she mattered.

But it also meant she wasn't home much. It meant she relied on others to pick up where she could not. It meant she was tired when she was home; she was distracted and irritable enough to send Kunda running off to Reeda. It meant she was never the first person her daughter ran to with confidences. It meant a distance with her daughter, a distance Maggie still hadn't managed to conquer.

Maggie sits there, filing her manicure, over and over. Maybe her greatest accomplishment wasn't her daughter. Maybe it was her social status. Maybe it was her career. Maybe it was her reputation.

She rearranges her handbag and straightens her skirt, ready to have this conversation with Kunda. Lines go through her head: "Listen more, speak less. She is a person too, she deserves to be heard. Don't be a bully. You love her."

Family meals are virtually non-existent, but the dining table is the centre of their home. They hurry through their breakfasts and catch snacks there, but its true purpose is a repository. Both Maggie and Kunda use it as dumping ground for shopping baskets, handbags, cardigan, pens, water bottles, writing pads, receipts, sunglasses, chocolate bars. Everything ends up here but, throughout the day, magically disappears again.

Kunda tips out the brown bag of small cardboard boxes onto the table. She opens the dispenser labelled with the days of the week, wipes it over, and starts filling each hole with tablet after tablet.

Maggie's steps don't interrupt Kunda's activity. Maggie observes her carefully for a minute. "What is all this medicine for?"

Kunda counts two more tablets to finish the week. "Mummy, please

listen before you ... react. I found Aunty Reeda. She lives in Ngombe and is terribly sick. She says she has pneumonia, but I think there is something else. She has no one. She never had anyone. I never knew that at all. But there's no one there to take care of her. So, I thought if I could buy her the medicines, it would help."

When Maggie gestures, asking whether she can speak, Kunda nods, expecting a verbal battering.

"So, she won't be coming to the kitchen party?"

"Is that your only concern?"

"What exactly are you trying to achieve, Kunda? Why spend all this time and money on this old woman who you haven't seen in decades?"

"She was with us for years."

"And she left, like anyone does when they leave a job. It was her work, Kunda. She wasn't doing you a favour!"

"She was the only person I had. Sometimes for weeks when you were on 'mission!'"

Kunda rises from her chair to face her mother, the blood boiling in her ears, her hands tightening. She didn't know this meant so much to her. Was she standing up for herself or standing up for a woman that the world has forgotten? Was she soothing the guilt growing inside her, keeping her up at night, making her stare at the walls of her cubicle at work every day?

"She understood my moods when I came from school and worked to change them if they were bad. I can't stand by and let her die alone. She nursed me when I had ear infections and tonsillitis. She took care of me for years. Why can't I spend ten days by her side?"

Tears prickle her eyes. Her throat closes up. She knows she'll soon be sobbing. But she's powerless to stop it. She bites her lip in anger, fighting to keep the tears at bay. Conversations with her mother have too often ended in tears, which often left Kunda powerless and vulnerable to her mother's will. This can't happen again. Not this time. Kunda blinks as the image of Aunty Reeda in that dark room flashes before her eyes.

Maggie tuts and turns away from her daughter. "Calm down, Kunda. It's not that serious."

"Not that serious? I would hate for that to be you, Mummy, at the end of your life. The people you loved and devoted your time to ... vanished."

Something burns in Maggie's eyes and shoots through to Kunda. Was that comment a threat or genuine concern? Kunda can't hold back the tears

anymore. She crumples a little, dropping into her chair, her shoulders rocking with sobs.

Maggie stands beside her. One minute. Two. When the sobs become less frequent, Maggie gingerly puts a hand on Kunda's shoulder, expecting her to flinch. They do not often touch. Perhaps they never did.

"Calm down. She cannot come to your kitchen party. It's not her place."

"We can't just forget her," sniffs Kunda, wiping her eyes and nose.

Inside Reeda's bedroom, it's hard to tell whether it is night or day. The windows may be cracked open a sliver, but neither air nor light gets through. The curtains remain drawn on their simple threads. On the ceiling, the bare light bulb has been glowing for days.

The dishes on her bedside table have been replaced with tubs of yoghurt, a small tumbler, a bottle of water, and two oranges. The medicines are arranged in a day-by-day container. Two intact scratch cards lie beside her phone.

Reeda's eyes flutter open and shut. Her face is turned towards the wall. She reaches out to the wall and weakly strokes the edge of a drawing. "Musonda. Chipepo." Each name is a whisper. The eyelids drop again. Her chest barely rises and falls.

"Jaden. Mohammed. Faziya. Twaambo. Phillip. Mukuka. Patience. Bwalya."

Another moment as she dips away. With a burst of strength, her arms suddenly scramble for the wall, nails clawing at the drawing. "Phillip. Mukuka. Bwalya, Mohammed!"

With a new familiarity, Kunda opens Reeda's door and makes her way to the bedroom -- the sick room, as Kunda calls it in her mind. She's tried to make it better so she can breathe better during her visits.

"Aunty Reeda, how are you today?" Kunda's voice is overly cheery, but Reeda welcomes it and lifts up her body to receive Kunda.

"Don't worry, stay comfortable. I just wanted to let you know I've asked someone to come to help you sometimes with whatever you need until you get better."

Reeda reaches for Kunda's hand, caresses it.

"Why?"

"Why? Why not? You need it."

“Go to that drawer there,” Reeda points to her chest of drawers. When Kunda reaches it, she’s not sure which drawer to open.

“Here?”

“The next one.”

Kunda pulls the drawer towards her, gently. It is stuck, but a firm yank forces it open.

The entire drawer is filled with envelopes – different sizes and colours. Each labelled with a name. Jaden. Mohammed. Faziya. Twaambo. Phillip. Mukuka. Patience. Bwalya. Musonda. Chipepo. Moonga. Langiwe.

Kunda brings them to Reeda. “These?”

Reeda takes the envelopes. A few slip out of her weak hands. “Open, open.”

Kunda’s hands shake as she rips open an envelope. The handwriting is shaky but legible as though done by a hand with little practice.

Dear Faziya, You are now seven. Eeedi Meelad Saiidi. I hope Mama has boughten for you the rainbow cake you kept asking for. Did you misbehave or are you good girl? By now you are go to ISL like your brother. Learn well. Become good student. You like reading. Keep reading. Mama she buys books. Get many books and read. Goodbye Faziya, little angel. Aunty Reeda

“Open, open.” Kunda opens another envelope.

Dear Twaambo, Mr Munsanje, you grow big. I think you still riding bicycle. Grow to be strong. Look after your sister. When you a big man, look after your mummy. Goodbye Twaambo, Aunty Reeda

They held over twenty letters in their hands.

“Aunty Reeda, what are these?”

Reeda carefully arranges the letters in a pile. Kunda keeps her eyes on the pile, hoping to glimpse her name among them. When the pile is finally neater, and she hasn’t spotted her name, she’s surprised to discover she was holding her breath in anticipation. She exhales and tries not to let the disappointment darken the visit.

“When I left a family, I would think of those children. The children were my friends. I was here, my brother’s children faraway. I would miss the children, so I wrote them small letters.”

“But you never sent them?”

“I thought of them, but they did not think of me. Did you think of me?”

The question hangs for a minute. Kunda composes the right response in her mind, but she knows it would be a lie.

“I would have liked to think of you. I only remembered you when it was too late.”

Reeda strains her small body to reach around her pillow. She pulls out a miniature stack of envelopes and places them in Kunda’s lap, holding her hand

“On that first day you came, I took out these. I am glad you came, my child.”

Kunda’s car rolls out of Ngombe, dipping and rising over the gravel road. She reaches over to the passenger seat and places her hand on the small pile of envelopes. None is open. Kunda knows she will sit in her bed tonight and savour each page. That thought alone brings tears to her eyes, and she’s powerless to stop them.

She’s glad she remembered her. Finally.