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The Legacy of Moombe

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The illustrious old man stood at the bus stop, his hawk-eyes scanning through traffic to find us. His hair was inexpertly dyed black; tufts of white hair emerged at his temples. The hair was thinning in those areas too, as he frequently rubbed his temples in irritation. He was doing that now, scanning through the long beetle like line of cars, for our beat up Nissan Bluebird. He perked up as soon as he saw us, and walked towards the car, commanding respect with just his steps.

“Good evening Carol,” he said gently to my wife. She nodded slightly back at him, cooing the baby.

“Mwachoma bwanji ba pongoshi” she replied, barely above a whisper. Carol had always been afraid of my father.

“Son,” he said turning to me, “Any progress?”

“I’m doing fine, thanks for asking,” I replied drily. “And no, Lydia is being difficult.”

My father huffed and kept silent. I knew his expectation was that my relationship with my sister would be strong, but my sister and I were polar opposites; worlds apart. I eased the car onto Great East Road, and drove, staring into the setting sun, trying to keep my patience in the rush time traffic.

As we drove past the industrial area, onto the road home, my father spoke again. “I cannot constantly speak, about how important it is to find ba Nevers,” my father coughed. Suddenly he seemed to crumple. The respect he radiated seemed to dim and he wiped his mouth feebly. Red rays of sunlight streamed through the car, and somehow in the half-light he didn’t seem as illustrious as before. All of a sudden, my father seemed weak and tired, like he was slowly giving up.

“Dad, why do I have to make up for your mistakes?” I emphasized, looking at him. My father coughed again, this time more violently. His body leaned forward as he succumbed to the intense wave of coughs. I averted my eyes and pretended I didn’t see the dark blood trickling down his chin. He wiped his face with a handkerchief and straightened himself. He looked like a statesman all over again.

"I am dying," my father said simply. "There is no point beating about the bush. The doctors have told me to tie all loose ends. And ba Nevers is a loose end. He mostly calls himself Malindi now. Don't forget that"

I sighed and put my hand over my fathers. Affection was not something we often showed each other, but given the circumstances, it was necessary. Carol caught my eye through the rear-view mirror, urging me with her eyes. Urging me to be patient, to be understanding and to try harder.

Harare, Zimbabwe - Malindi's residence

There were many thoughts running through my mind, the two foremost being, this room was ugly and Malindi was drinking too much.

"I think that's enough for a night," I said coldly.

"I disagree," he replied equally coolly, setting his gin and tonic on the table in front of him. He sighed and rubbed his temples. His hair was thinning over there, and the few hairs that survived his persistent assault, were slowly graying. Malindi was stressed.

"I received a call from home today," he said presently.

"What did they want?" I asked, sitting up. Malindi leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes. I could almost feel the mental turmoil he was going through, taste the pain in his heart, hear the words unspoken.

"I'm thinking that I should perhaps visit them sometime soon." He sighed eventually.

I knew his struggle. Many years ago when we were younger and more daring, we left behind our families to build one of our own. We thought it was befitting that a man should leave his mother and father, but we never stopped to think that a man should return. Whatever home fires were burning, we put them off as we rushed out to be independent.

My husband had decided to leave his family and carve out his own path. I never fully knew what his family did, I just knew that Malindi wanted nothing to do with them. So he set out, changed his name from Nevers to Malindi and became a new man. We met just as I had finished university, I was a young girl, seeking adventure. He was quiet, the calm to my storm. We wedded soon after and begun to build our life together. Our life had been good, until this phone call. I couldn't place my finger on it, but I could tell my life was about to change drastically.

Lusaka, Zambia

"What changed?" I asked my sister, smiling brazenly across the table

from her.

She laughed mirthlessly. "There are things that need to be done, and these things may require your help."

"I only asked for Ba Nevers contact," I groaned. This time she laughed convincingly. Lydia was my sister by virtue that in our culture; there was no such thing as 'half siblings.' I was reminded of the stark difference between the Houses. The children of some of my father's wives were better off than others. When Lydia decided to meet me in a swanky hotel that was probably worth two months of my measly teachers' salary, this fact was flagged by the bourgeoisie air. She waved her government credit card with the daintiest flick of the wrist and I knew this was the only way we could have a real conversation. Not that my sister abhorred poverty, she just felt most at home in luxury. Despite being of the same family, I felt she would never "step down to my level." I had to butter her up, if we were to have a civil discussion. So here we were, in a hotel that made me feel heavily out of place.

"You don't need to worry about Malindi," she said, in her most syrupy voice, "I already spoke to him."

I suddenly felt a loud ringing in my ears. My father's instructions were as clear as they were short. Talk to ba Nevers myself. There were to be no middle men involved this time.

"Listen, Charles," Lydia said, leaning forward in her seat, "we're having a family meeting. I now you rarely come for these, but it's time you cemented your place in the legacy of this family. We wouldn't want to disadvantage you." She leaned back in her seat and smiled indulgently. As annoying as Lydia was, she definitely was not a fool. She had made a dangerous play and the ball was in my court. The legacy of my family, was not immediately clear to outsiders. The money, the luxury, it certainly hadn't come easily. Lydia's words, though sweet and syrupy were a threat to my birthright. If I was out of the picture of the family wealth, who knows what chaos would ensue? I tried to keep my head low, but my role in the family was much deeper than the uncle who appears occasionally at meetings.

I had parked my car two streets away from Lydia's house. The meeting didn't start for another half hour and I smirked to myself as I saw official government cars speed past me, making their way towards the meeting place. I sighed and closed my eyes, wishing I was another man, who lived

another life. But it was time to face facts. My family was an influential one. And while I may have been regarded as the pariah, I knew it was because my sisters firmly believed that a chain was only as strong as its weakest link. My father used to berate me for “marrying poor” but I held firmly to my choice. The dealings of the family of Moombe, were not the dealings of Charles Moombe.

I walked in just as the meeting was starting. To anyone else, this was a family gathering, the chatter and wine proved it. The façade was hard to see past. But to me, I could see the vein popping in Lydia’s forehead, could see the cloud that settled over many of the faces. I sat down just as the meeting was called to order. “My brothers and sisters, we have long been known as indomitable. This why the family of Moombe has its reach throughout the government and the private sectors; we may not necessarily own these schools, hospitals, or institutions on paper, but Veronica may merely nod her head and she can control bank accounts of ministers. Mira can sign two papers and reorganize the whole Department of Defense. I could snap my fingers and create a coup against the president. It’s all that simple.” She paused; it seemed like she was giving room for her words to expand in the room in settle in our heads, then her voice turned hard, “We are being threatened, though, by a family that is like a weed to us. A tumor to our establishment.”

“Who?” someone asked from a corner of the room.

“N’gandu.” She spat the name out vehemently. A murmur spread across the room, catching on like a wild fire. The N’gandu family had ties in the private sector. As with most public-private partnerships, there was always someone who walked away from the alliance with fatter pockets. Despite Lydia’s effort as Permanent Secretary of Finance, to stop these private partnerships, she faced heavy opposition, from external investors, who unsurprisingly held ties with the N’gandu family.

‘I thought they had no buying power,” I said, thinking deeply. Lydia smiled garishly at me.

“Glad to know you are a part of this Charles, despite your living condition,” she taunted.

“The thing is,” Veronica said to no one in general, “it is impossible for us to legally own everything. Half of us have infiltrated the government, and while most policies are tailored for our benefit, we do have to put out some public concern. People will talk if we make some policies that seem too harsh. Besides, at the core of it all, we still serve the country before we

serve ourselves. That family, is solely private sector. And the government relies on private investment to achieve certain things. There's two ways around this, we either infiltrate the private sector heavily, or we sabotage the family."

Before I could ask what the suggestion was, someone said loudly from the back, "Malindi!"

The meeting took a quick recess. I sidled into the yard as my sisters hissed angrily amongst themselves in rapid Tonga.

"Hello," a voice said, from somewhere behind me. I spun around and eyed the small man that approached me.

"I'm a distant cousin," he wheezed. I eyed him up and down and then took a sip of my whiskey. There was something...off about this man. Our family was renowned for rich dark skin and tall genes. This man was very light in complexion and incredibly short. He smelt like cheap liquor. Uncharacteristic of a family that only drank the most expensive wines.

"Can you tell me what you know about this relative of ours? Ba Nevers?" The man said seedily. I eyed him suspiciously. "No one calls him that." He man trembled ever so slightly.

"Fair mistake. He was once known by this name."

"The past remains in the past Mr..." I hesitated, I didn't even know his name.

"Impisi," he introduced himself simply.

"That is neither a clan name nor a Tonga one," I said carefully. "It is not even Zambian."

He giggled. "And you think the indomitable name of Moombe is?"

I laughed, knowing full well he was right. I turned away, I had to find Lydia. I found her huddled with her sisters, deep in their conversation. Suddenly she stood up.

"I call an impasse. We'll meet again another time."

Someone ran up to Lydia and whispered urgently in her ears. I felt as if the world around was spinning so fast I could barely focus. Before I knew it, someone whispered in my ear, "Do not look alarmed. That small man is a traitor, from the N'gandu family. He is out for blood."

I turned my body and whispered back to the small girl Lydia had sent. I knew of her. She was working in the ministry of works and supply. Most of the road contracts went to an uncle of ours, who in turn used the money to grow our empire. We tried our best to reach into every sector of the country, after all, our most powerful weapon was our legacy.

My great grandfather had been instrumental in the Rhodesian government. He traded his honour as an African for wealth from the Europeans. He earned the name Moombe from all the emissary work he did in British colonies. The more he worked, the more money he had to build his own little empire. The name Moombe was from Kenya, a clan name of the Kikuyus. He blended in so well, everywhere he went, they gave him this nickname, and it stuck. From that moment on. He made the decision to amass as much wealth as possible. Most of it was stolen, but as he grew older, and had enough sons from his many wives, he started to make a legal living.

The legacy of theft never really left us. We just found more efficient ways to steal. Every member of the family had a role to play. To the outside, I was simply a humble teacher at a B-grade government high school, but to my family, I was an asset. The eyes and ears of our empire. I immediately knew something was wrong, and ran out to my car, rushing against time.

So I had lied; to my father, and to my wife. The dealings of the family of Moombe were deeply seated with the dealings of Charles Moombe. We all liked to pretend I was a pariah, but if I really was, I wouldn't even be at the meeting in the first place.

The first thing I did when I reached my car was dial my father's number. The dial tone went on for a minute, but there was no answer. I sighed and cursed out loud, I may be late. I reached into the glove box and pulled out a shot gun. When I was satisfied the barrel was loaded, I sped into the setting sun.

Night had fallen by the time I reached our house. Everything was eerily normal, as if it was all orchestrated by a lunatic, masquerading as a sane man.

I tucked the gun into the waistband of my trousers and walked cautiously to the front door. I would usually call from the kitchen that I was home, but I needed the element of surprise. The door creaked as I opened it, and I held my breath.

"Charles, is that you? You're early." Her voice rang out from the living room.

"Yeah, I couldn't stand the hobnobbing of my sisters much longer," I replied, stalling in the kitchen.

She replied with a simple 'oh.' I knew something was wrong. She would have been waiting for me in the kitchen, laughing at me for deserting the

meeting too early.

I sighed and removed the gun, savoring its weight, and proceeded to the living room.

"Hello there Impisi," I said calmly. The scene that met my eyes was one I was not surprised to see. My wife and my father were bound two dining chairs, and Impisi sat lounging on my couch, sipping on my wine.

He laughed hollowly and smiled, "I thought I would have to kill them. Your phone was off."

I ignored him and assessed the situation. Their hands were tied in such a way that my wife would be able to untie herself and their feet were not tightly bound. If all went well, maybe no blood would be shed.

"How long have you been on our tail?" I asked, edging my way round the living room. "For about six months, since you started looking for Malindi."

"You won't get to him," I growled. I had to protect the family at all costs. "Too late. Ask your wife what happened."

Harare, Zimbabwe - Malindi's residence

I had a heavy weight in my chest. I watched Malindi pack frenetically, and for the first time ever in our marriage, I didn't help my husband.

"Please just fly out tomorrow. That's all I'm saying," I pleaded with him. He tore around the room like a tornado, flipping through files and leaving their contents scattered.

"This could be our big break." He sat on the small bulging suitcase and forced it closed. "Listen, I love you with my all my heart. This family would be nothing without you."

He approached me, and held my head in his hands. He tilted my face up ever so gently, and for the first time since our marriage, he really looked at me.

"Why are you saying these things?" I whispered.

"Because you never know when it's too late."

Thirty minutes later, I watched his car drive out into the night. The red taillights blinked at me, as if laughing, like they knew a secret I didn't.

Five hours later, I received a call from the mortuary attendant at a rural hospital. He hadn't even made it past the border.

Lusaka, Zambia

I held Carol in my arms as she sobbed uncontrollably. My father paced

the living room, stepping carefully around the limp body of Impisi. I hadn't intended to kill, but red hot anger over took me, and before I could stop myself, I pulled the trigger, not once but four times. Four headshots. I shrugged hopelessly, we had contacts in the police too. Soon after, I was hit with a tsunami wave of remorse that forced me to my knees, clutching my thinning hair. I was a liar, a terrible husband, and recently, a murderer.

Impisi had come into our house, he hadn't injured anyone. He made sure to lock the baby in the bedroom, before forcibly bounding my father and wife. He didn't act alone, but his accomplices left before I arrived. He wanted to face me on his own.

The next thing he did was grab my wife's cell phone, and send an SMS to Malindi, telling him to travel immediately. The irony is that their spy network was much larger than ours. They cut the brakes and let fate take its course.

Even though I was comforting my wife, I knew that she would never trust her life with me again. I also knew that I had lost my father's respect. One night and I had lost so much; my father's respect, a long lost brother, my dignity, my pride.

The funeral cliché in Zambia is not black umbrellas in the rain. Its frail woman clad in threadbare chitenges, slamming their fists into the ground. Its straight-faced men, standing expressionless at the side of a grave, holding back tears they aren't supposed to cry.

It's me standing next to my father, who now looks less illustrious, gripping his hand like I'm a child again.

"I'm sorry I failed you, dad," I whispered, looking at my dusty shoes.

"The indomitable house of Moombe will live on after this. We will mark this as a loss, and we continue as if Malindi never existed. His widow will be comfortable, and we shall move on," he said harshly. "We will be remembered for our greed."