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Career Battle

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(unedited script as submitted by the author)

Mapalo was a school-leaver. A cloak of lethargy hovered around him. He did almost everything slothfully and late. He had all the seconds to himself after all. He needed not to rush for anything.

On a fine Monday afternoon, at half past fourteen, he was having his first meal of the day. He, himself, didn't know if he was eating breakfast or lunch. All he knew was that he was eating.

His mother, Theresa, kept herself busy in the kitchen. She was cooking ifisashi; cassava leaves mixed with pounded groundnuts. Bashi Mapalo's favourite. She decided to take a day off as she waited for her merchandise from the United Kingdom.

The hinges of the front door squeaked. Suddenly, the door flew open. A man clad in a turquoise long-sleeved shirt stormed in the living room. Mapalo could not recognize the man who just stormed into the house. The opening between the dining room and the living room couldn't allow him to see the full figure of the person who just got in. Moreover, it was unusual of Phillip to make an appearance at home in the afternoons.

"Subjects of my noble empire, is anybody home!" Phillip screamed while his right hand freed his neck from the smartly knotted black and white striped necktie. His left hand still holding the briefcase.

Theresa was about to pour some granules of salt in the food she was cooking when the noise made her rush to the living room, holding a cruet in one hand and a wooded spoon in another. She almost missed a step, but she quickly recovered her balance.

"Darling! You startled us! What has become of the day?" "Is the household safe?" "... I mean.... what?!" Theresa anxiously asked a series of questions to which his panting husband gave no answers.

She dropped a wooden spoon greased with groundnut paste on the sparkling glass table, never minding the stains that would remain.

Mapalo was about to swallow the last chunk of the banana when his

father barged in. He immediately span his neck to face the source of the loud call. The bolus almost blocking his windpipe. He rushed to the living room too. "Dad! Is everything okay?" Mapalo asked anxiously.

Without providing an answer, Phillip began to open his big black leather satchel that contained only important documents. He unfastened the buckles of the satchel and took out a small rectangular slip of paper with the Education Council of Zambia watermark printed in the middle. He beamed a smile, his cheekbone almost meeting the earlobe. Then he calmly congratulated Mapalo on passing grade 12 exams. "Well done son, you have done us proud."

He threw the results slip on the table, as if it became irrelevant at the time and embraced Mapalo. Mapalo could feel the fatherly warmth that gave him the feeling of relief. The load was off his mind now. He was always worried about what an embarrassment it would be if the outcome of the exam didn't match the expected. Theresa tied a chitenge around her waist and started to dance. Typical of African mothers. "*Waabomba mwana wandi,*" she said in her funny Bemba accent. "*It's wabomba not waabomba.*" Phillip tried to correct his wife. They all laughed.

The whole family was in a *hyper mood* where nothing could calm them down. Phillip didn't bother going back to the office. The office he only leaves when serious matters arise.

Mr. Mutale Phillip was a renowned politician who held one of the key positions in Parliament. His wife, Theresa Banda Mutale owned a clothing boutique for ladies at East Park mall. Theresa was a beautiful woman from Chipata. She caught the eyes of a Bemba man, Phillip Mutale, two decades ago. They were a lovely couple. Their union served as an epitome of true love to the neighbours and to everyone who knew them. They were blessed with two sons: 17-year-old Mapalo; the genius of the house and Madalitso who was 2 years younger than Mapalo.

At night, Phillip and Theresa spent a quality time discussing what they would give Mapalo as a congratulatory present. Suddenly, the chanting trailed off to silence. "We have never talked to our sons about career choice. We know what we want from them, but we have not taken time to discuss it with them," Phillip said in a low tone. He sounded regretful. "Let's have a family dinner tomorrow evening so that we can let Mapalo know our plan," Theresa suggested. Phillip didn't object the idea.

“You are a remarkable commodity my son,” Phillip proudly said while opening a bottle of Champaign. “We need to trade you at a good profit,” his mother added while smiling at him and proudly caressing his right shoulder. Mapalo gave his parents a satisfying smile and then looked at his younger brother Madalitso whose thumbs were busy pressing the screen of his smart phone. “It’s your turn now kid brother. I have set a standard for you,” he jokingly said. Madalitso was engrossed in conversation with his friends on Facebook. He didn’t give any comment to Mapalo’s statement. “Do you ever put away your phone?” Phillip asked Madalitso. “Yes, I do. When I go to bed.” He replied with little concern. Phillip shook his head in wonder.

The dinner table was filled with a variety of foods. From confectioneries to fruits. There were only four people, but the hip of food was like that of ten. A few minutes later, a slender lady, wearing a white apron and hat, walked towards them and laid a big cake on the table. The cake was decorated with Mapalo’s picture in the middle and the words, ‘congratulations Mapalo’ written in his favourite colour green, encircled the picture. They joyfully ate, made toasts and talked about less important family issues.

It was time for the core reason for dinner to be spilt on the table. Phillip cleared his throat from the fragments of the food particles and began to speak. “Mapalo, your mother and I have decided to send you abroad to study Economics or any business-related course of your choice.” He announced with a serious look on his face. Theresa nodded in agreement. “You can choose any American or European country that befits your preference,” Phillip continued while handling a glass of wine to Mapalo. Madalitso looked at his elder brother with a delightful smile of admiration. He couldn’t wait to be the recipient of such a warm and honest offer when he completes high school. For a moment, he realised that this award was due to outstanding results, which he doubted he would obtain, but he quickly brushed that thought off his head and re-joined the family in the joyous celebration.

Mapalo’s broad face beamed a light appreciation. What his father just said crossed the borders of his expectance. He stood up and began to speak in a more serious tone. “I am greatly humbled dad. This really is an honourable gesture that shouldn’t be left unappreciated.” He turned to his mother who was sitting right next to him. Theresa’s round face even looked

more beautiful as her eyes met Mapalo's. The rays of light from the chandelier hanging above them illuminated her skin, exposing her natural beauty. She touched her head wrap, as if fixing it, though it was still in its right position. "Thank you so mum..." Mapalo continued. They all looked at him as he spoke.

In a fraction of a minute, the smile on Mapalo's face changed to a slight frown. His father noticed the radical change of the facial expression, but he convinced himself that Mapalo was just too amazed at the offer of studying abroad.

"Dad, Mum," he posed for a moment. "I have been waiting for you to ask me what I would like to study, the legacy I would love to leave behind. This, today, has surprised me. I had no faintest idea that you wanted me to join the business world."

Phillip and Theresa looked at each other curiously. They didn't know what their son was driving at. They somewhat felt guilty of not having open career talks with their boys.

"I want to be a Psychiatrist. Mapalo boldly made his choice known. "And I want to study at the University of Zambia."

"You want to be a...!" "And you call that a choice!" Wrinkles gathered on Phillip's forehead. A patch of grey hair at his right temple, and now the wrinkles made him look older than he actually was. He looked at his wife, then at Mapalo, with a look of disgruntlement. "That's what I want dad," Mapalo mumbled while looking at his father frighteningly.

Theresa, too, was stunned by this announcement. "You can't make such an unpleasant choice Mapalo" Theresa softly said. She wanted to make Mapalo realise that his choice of career has hit the mark of disapproval. Mapalo didn't anticipate such disappointment from his parents. He expected moral and parental support. It grieved him that things didn't turn out that way.

Madalitso covered his mouth with his right hand and chuckled as he watched how the best moment of the family turned into a scandal.

Phillip stood up in rage. "Let's go back home!" He ordered everyone. Mapalo stood alone in dismay. He thought that he deserved some more minutes to be heard and understood. Neither his father nor his mother was ready to be more distraught than they were already. They all left.

The following day, Mapalo was not ready to meet his parents. Therefore, he decided to spend the entire day in his room.

At noon, he lay quietly on his bed. His eyes glued to the ceiling. He was still soaked in the pool of shock. He felt a violent shake intruding in his psyche.

He searched his mind with the desire to conquer the seemingly cascading odds.

Mapalo eventually drove his thoughts to his grandfather Mr. Mutale Mwila Mumba who died two years ago.

Mr. Mutale Mwila was a well-known man whose fame anchored its roots on kindness. He was soft-spoken too, atypical of a man. He served as a reverend at the United Church of Zambia in Mansa district; his hometown. After his death, his lifeless body went 6 feet under but the humour he displayed remained alive.

Mapalo got up and sorrowfully looked at a framed picture of his grandfather that he kept on his nightstand. "I miss you grandpa. I wish you were here to give me a voice of defense. I know that you could have understood me." Mapalo spoke to himself as his eyes became watery. He wore a mournful look, but the man in him told him to be strong. He remembered all the best moments he spent with the wise man who happened to be his father's father. Mapalo wondered why genetics failed to transfer these benevolent traits to his father. Philip was kind, but only to whom he shared a close relationship.

Being born in a wealthy family didn't give Mapalo a sense of pride. He disliked the praises he received on behalf of his father. He desired a quiet and private life, but the social status of his father didn't give him that concession. At times, he wished reincarnation was real so that he could be born in a humbler family. He hated the notoriety of politicians. He believed that most of them were just egocentric leaders who cracked nuts on the heads of poor citizens who vote them into power.

Mapalo was an intelligent boy. If only ten people made it, he was always among them if one person got a distinction in class; it was he. He earned himself so much respect; however, he was too humble to let the praises get to his head.

His grandfather noticed that Mapalo didn't take pleasure in the

luxurious life he was born in. Mr Mutale Mwila, being a wise man, constantly reminded him that he should use his status as a privilege to give a helping hand to the fainting hearts.

Reminiscing about his grandfather, whom he sometimes called 'godfather', gave him a nostalgic breeze deep in the soul. While the eyes on the picture met his own, he could feel the spirit of strength hovering him. He was ready to face his parents again.

He was still holding the framed picture when Maxi entered the room. "You really miss this coffin-dodger huh!" Madalitso said as he walked closer to Mapalo and made himself comfortable at the edge of the bed. "You startled me, I always tell you to knock before you enter my room!" "Is that hard to do?" Mapalo angrily said without even looking at his brother.

Madalitso sat comfortably as if no one was talking to him.

Mapalo calmed his nerves and placed his right hand around his younger brother's neck and softly said, "back to your question; yes, I miss grandpa. He was such an honorable man; his mind was a nest of wisdom and a fountain of ideas. I wish he was here to witness the man I am about to become."

Madalitso giggled then pushed his brother's hand away from his neck and stood up. Before he made a step away from his current position, he made an annoying comment, "oh I see!! So he is the one who turned you old at an early age right!"

"Get out of my room you thick-headed boy!" Mapalo shouted authoritatively while pointing his index finger to the door.

"Whatever! Mr. I know it all," Mapalo said as he sluggishly walked towards the door.

For three consecutive days, Mapalo didn't neither talk to his father nor his mother. They also didn't bother talking to him, or maybe they just wanted him to get back to his senses.

On the fourth day, Phillip summoned Mapalo to the living room. Mapalo didn't want to look disrespectful; hence, he rushed in.

"I believe your brain is serving you well now," Phillip began to speak. Mapalo gave his father a confused look, pretending not to have understood

what his father was talking about. Phillip understood the facial game Mapalo was trying to play. He had to act fast. He narrowed his eyes and gave his son a penetrating gaze.

“Don’t stare at me like that son! You do quite understand me” Phillip finally spoke. Theresa was sitting quietly in anticipation of another father-son argument.

“So, my beloved son, are you still cocooned in your old thoughts or are you willing to obey us?” Phillip asked. There was an interim of silence at the sound of the question. Mapalo’s heart hopped so hard that he could feel it hit the ribcage. He knew that his answer would drive everyone in the corner of rage; nevertheless, he just had to say it.

“Dad, I know I am only 17 years old, but I have already evolved into a man of my words. Nothing has changed; I still want to be a Psychiatrist.”

Anger painted Phillip’s face. Disappointment attacked Theresa again.

“Mapalo you are a disappointment to us!” After all the support we gave you, this is how you have decided to repay us!” We sent you to David Kaunda National Technical High School to become a better man, not a nuisance. For heaven’s sake Mapalo, you are the cream of the nation!” Phillip spat out the words while wandering about in the living room. Mapalo tried to utter a word again, but his tongue was heavy to even say the first syllable of the word he wanted to say.

After minutes of silence, Mapalo found his tongue. He began to speak. “Dad, mum...I am saying it again, I am sorry that my choice of career has grieved you this much, but this is what I want to do. This is what I feel is right for me. Once again, thank you for sending me to that reputable school. Not only did I become the cream of the nation, but I also became the future *saviour* of the mentally oppressed. Being a Psychiatrist is not as bad as you people think of it to be. You are all behaving as if I have committed a crime that has sent the whole family to prison. I will be working with people, saving lives...”

“Will you shut up son!” Theresa shouted as loud as her voice box could allow her to. “From where did you get the guts to talk to your father like that!?” “I didn’t bring you up in that manner.” She added furiously. A tear from her left eye raced down her cheek. Mapalo slowly sat down on the couch and looked down on the floor. He regretted grieving his parents to

this degree. He had never seen his mother cry. Let alone, he, being the reason for that tear. Nevertheless, he had already decided, and nothing would stop him, not even his parents' anger. He was convinced that being a psychiatrist was his vocation. Seeing the mentally retarded people regain their sanity was his desire.

While the ranting was going on, Madalitso was listening in his bedroom. He was debating whether to join the session or just let it pass. He decided to join. Everyone was now quiet. Phillip was standing like a monument, his hands holding his waist, forming a V-shaped figure on both sides of his ribcage.

Mapalo looked at the sad faces of his parents and felt sorry for them. He apparently didn't have any kind words for his elder brother. Madalitso, unlike Mapalo, was docile to the decisions of their parents. What they said he should do, he did without retaliating.

"I think you need a Psychiatrist and not you becoming a Psychiatrist big brother," Madalitso sarcastically said. Mapalo angrily turned to his younger brother, with his fingers clenched into fist, ready to punch him in the face. "Would you sit down Mapalo!" Phillip vehemently shouted and pushed Mapalo back to the couch. "Don't you ever make such an attempt!" He yelled, pointing his index finger at Mapalo's glabella as a warning sign. "Besides, Madalitso was right. You need a Psychiatrist for some serious mental check-up. My own son can't spend more than seven years in school, studying the behaviour of humans who are kept in a menagerie-like place." Philip said, as if he was stating a fact. "You don't even understand the meaning of your name, do you?" He asked, expecting no answer at all.

In a fit of pique, Phillip walked out of the living room, leaving his sons looking at each other like furious bulls. Theresa was lost for words. She sat in the couch like a dry log with her right hand supporting the chin.

Everyone thought Mapalo was under a spell that needed to be purged.

There was a myriad of professions that he could choose from, but he settled for what his family called 'indecent.'

Philip and Theresa hoped to see their children running successful businesses, travelling to various countries for business meetings. That's the family legacy they wanted to create. Mapalo's choice seemed to stop up all these hopes. He was not willing to give it a second thought. They all knew

how indomitable he was.

Mapalo started visiting Chainama mental asylum. He always had a good time conversing with senior Psychiatrists. They all smiled at him, the smiles, that sent a recognition of a young fellow.

Each day he spent at the asylum was an ecstatic one for him. He came back home in an elated spirit. He wished to tell someone how his day was. However, they all gave him unpalatable looks.

Anger got the best part of Phillip. One day he woke up with the thought of withdrawing financial support for his first son, but his wife talked him out of it and made him realise how an irrational decision that would be.

Before Mapalo were two key tasks: Sonship and the intense career battle. He had to protect the former and win the latter. Otherwise, nothing would be of use to him under the sun.

The battle did not end there. Unbeknownst to Mapalo, Phillip called in a motivational speaker for his adamant son. Mr. Mudenda was a motivational speaker and a career advisor.

As they talked, Mr. Mudenda felt the strong desire that was deep rooted in the heart of the young man. They talked man-to-man. Just the two of them. They sat under a branchy mango tree that grew at the back of the house. At the end of the long talk, the two men shook their hands and said goodbye to each other.

Phillip saw them approaching the foyer of the house. He hurried to approach them. Mapalo's eyes dodged his father's and rushed to his room unhesitatingly.

Phillip concluded that nothing had changed. Maybe he was right.

"How did it go?" Phillip asked Mr. Mudenda who was putting his A5 sized brown notebook in the briefcase. Mr. Mudenda looked up, smiled and shook his head. "He is a determined young man," he answered. "Let him quench his thirst, he is hungry for it," he added. In a couple of seconds, his image was out of Phillip's sight.

'Determined!' Phillip repeated the word as though he didn't understand what it meant.

He despaired his efforts. He stood alone, slump-shouldered, in front of the house. With all the respect that was due to him, he had to learn how to

nurse the humiliation caused by his son.

A debris of umbrage accumulated on his throat, again. He could feel the sutures of his skull disintegrating. He squeezed his hands intensely, curled up his fingers, ready to strangle anyone who came by. He was alone.

He looked defeated.