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The Guest

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The vehicle snaked its way down the maze of narrow dirt roads that crisscrossed the sprawling, bustling shanty compound. It moved slowly, dipping and rising while negotiating the uneven road surfaces, slightly rocking its occupants in the process. Amber rays of the evening sun glinted off the windscreens and the shiny blackness.

The two young men Gabby had asked to show Liwa where Dawson stayed sat in the backseat.

One was the guide, telling Liwa's driver, the old man, which way to turn. The other covered his ears with headphones and kept changing cassette tapes on his Walkman. The young men had been preparing to go to a disco dance when Liwa showed up at Gabby's door. They only agreed to be his guides when he promised to reward them for the task.

As the vehicle drew towards the market, the old man gave Liwa a sidelong glance, wondering if his boss was sure of what he was about to do. Did his wife agree to it? Was she even aware? He wanted to ask but thought best of it. His opinion wouldn't matter anyway. Liwa was a strong-willed, self-assured man. Besides, the old man's short contract was ending in three weeks, so it was none of his business.

The roads that ringed the market square were lined on either side by ramshackle stalls displaying various wares. Loud rhumba music from taverns blared above the humdrum of conversations between traders and customers haggling over prices. The old man had to further slow the vehicle down and hoot continuously for the crowds to give way. Heads turned twice to stare, and eyes lingered a little longer; a big fancy car stood out in this part of town.

During the trip, Liwa tried to gather further information about Dawson from the two young men, but they couldn't tell him more than what Gabby already had, so he kept quiet and stared ahead.

The crowds thinned out, and the noises gradually faded as the car pulled away from the compound's hub and headed toward the periphery.

Here, they were met with a sense of decay, of dying. Most of the shops were abandoned and rundown. The houses were small, squalid structures clustered in disarray, with most residents having to pass through several backyards to access the road. A gutter of used bathwater from decrepit outside bathhouses flowed right through the middle of the road.

The youth, who was the guide, pointed at an abandoned building a short distance ahead of them. "That's the place." He said.

The car stopped at the roadside across the building. The two youths got out and went to the front passenger's door expectantly.

"How much for your troubles?" asked Liwa as he reached for his wallet from the back pocket.

The youths hesitated, each expecting the other to answer. Liwa waited, staring at them. They both wore white takkies on their feet. One was clad in a stone-wash up-and-down jeans suit; the other wore stone-wash jeans pants and a flowery visco shirt.

"Feel free to name your price, boys; we are now in a free society. This is 1992." Liwa chuckled.

"You can give us a ninja each boss." Said one of them.

"A ninja?" Liwa asked, surprised.

The old man intervened. "My boss got back from abroad two months ago. He doesn't understand your street language yet." Turning to Liwa, he said. "they want a fifty kwacha each."

Liwa gave the youths their money.

After the youths had gone, Liwa and the old man sat silently in the car, watching the building. The yard was overgrown with grass and wild shrubbery and was apparently used as a rubbish dump by the nearby residents.

"The last time I saw him, I was getting into a taxi to the airport after I won a scholarship to study abroad. Him and some friends had just hosted a farewell party for me in their hostel some twenty years ago." Liwa said wistfully.

“Time changes things.” The old man said. They stayed silent again, then after some time, Liwa said. “Let’s go and get him.”

They made their way to the entrance on a footpath that cut through the tall grasses.

The moth-eaten door barely hung on its hinges, squeaking as Liwa slowly pushed it open. It was semi-dark inside, and it took a while for their eyes to adjust to the half-light. The room, which appeared to have once been a barroom, was littered with old broken barstools, broken beer bottles, cigarette butts, all covered in a thin layer of dust. Profane graffiti covered the dirty walls, and the timber that held the rusty, half-moldered, corrugated iron roof sagged heavily, threatening to cave in at any moment. Apart from the occasional twitching and scurrying of rats and lizards, the building was eerily silent.

They found him in the small adjoining room, which used to be the counter. He was sitting on the floor, his back leaning against the wall, arms hugging his knees. His eyes were half closed, staring into empty space as if in a trance. Two glazed slits on a disheveled face.

“Dawson,” Liwa called out calmly. Gabby had told him that there were times when he had moments of lucidity, and Liwa hoped he was in such a state now.

Dawson’s eyes opened fully and went wild with fright at the sight of the two intruders. He opened his mouth, revealing a missing set of front teeth. “Thieves. You want to steal my things.” His voice was a horse whisper. He half stood, his hands frantically pressing the wall behind him as if trying to push it down and find an escape route.

“It’s me. Liwa. Your friend. Remember me?” Liwa looked Dawson in the eye. He produced a photograph from his breast pocket and held it for Dawson to see. “You and me at college.”

Dawson narrowed his eyes at the photo for a long moment, then cast them back at Liwa. A flicker of recognition flashed in the wild eyes. His tense body relaxed. “Lee?”

Liwa smiled. Dawson was the only one who had ever shortened his name in such a way. “I have come to take you home. Everything will be alright.”

A suspicious look flashed in his eyes. "This is my home."

"Yes, I know. We are your guests, and you've been a good host. We've enjoyed ourselves." Said Liwa slowly, exchanging a conspiratorial glance with the old man. "Now it's time you visited my home as well, just like old times. Remember?" He reached his hand out to Dawson tentatively, held his arm, and gestured towards the old man to help lift him up. "Let's go."

They led him to the car with little resistance, and Liwa repeatedly reintroduced himself. He sat in the backseat with Liwa while the old man took the wheel and drove them uptown.

It was nightfall when the vehicle entered a quiet, leafy suburb, and a few minutes later, they reached home. A green lawn, cobblestones, and luxuriant trees and flowers covered the spacious yard. The vehicle eased past a driveway canopied by palm fronds and cypress leaves to reveal a large colonial-era house.

Izowa, Liwa's wife, came out of the house when she heard the sound of the car. She had tidied the living room, draped the furniture with elaborately embroidered tablecloths after preparing a sumptuous supper, and sat waiting for her husband and their guest. Earlier, Liwa had called her on the telephone from his office and told her he would come home with a guest in the evening. An old friend of his who was unwell was coming to stay with them. Izowa was alarmed, but before she could say anything, Liwa hung up. When she called him back, his secretary told her he had gone out. Izowa went about her day's activities, shopping at ZCBC stores and getting a wetlook hairstyle from a saloon in town, with a bit of apprehension about Liwa's friend's coming.

When the three disembarked from the car, her eyes went straight to Dawson. She flinched in disbelief but quickly composed herself.

Her words came out slowly. "who is this man?"

"This is Dawson, the one I told you about on the telephone. He's the friend I used to talk about back in Aussie. Remember?" Liwa said. Then seeing his wife's eyes narrowing into slits, he raised his hand. "Now, don't get mad. I know this comes as a surprise, but I want to assure you that- "

“A surprise?” She was looking at Dawson from head to feet, consternation on her face. “You’ve just brought a madman into our home!”

“He won’t be in our way. He will be staying with the old man at the servant’s quarters.”

Izowa gave the old man an accusing stare as if this was his idea. The old man shrugged his shoulders and turned his head to Liwa, absolving himself of any guilt and throwing it at his boss. Izowa looked at Dawson and then at Liwa, her eyes going from one to the other as if wondering who was crazier between the two.

“We need to talk.” She spun around and entered the house.

Liwa instructed the old man to take Dawson to the servant’s quarters and prepare bathing water for him. Then, he followed his wife inside the house.

“You look like you’ve seen a ghost,” he said. She was standing in the middle of the living room, her arms folded.

“I have, more or less. Now, can you please take that madman back to wherever you found him.”

“He’s my friend. He’s sick and destitute, and he needs my help.” Liwa spoke in hushed tones.

“When has it ever been a crime to help a friend in need?”

“Why you, why us? Why not his family?”

“They abandoned him. Their whereabouts are unknown.”

“Understandably so. Have you even taken a good look at him? He’s beyond help.”

“The doctors will decide on that.”

“So why is he here and not at the Doctor’s?”

“We talked about that on the telephone this afternoon,” he said casually.

“Did we, really?” She sighed. His indifferent, dismissive reaction meant that he had already made his decision, and there was nothing

she could do to change his mind, which greatly irritated her. "You call that talking?"

"Should I consult you on every single little thing I decide to do?"

"Is bringing that mad friend of yours here a little thing? Was quitting your job in Australia and bringing us here a little thing?" She asked, countless other grievances circling in her head.

"But you never objected to coming here."

She thought. I never objected because you said the job back home will give you more time to devote to your family, Liwa, not picking up strays from the gutter. Out loud, she said. "That madman is not spending a night in this house!"

"You see now why I didn't consult with you? I knew you wouldn't agree."

"For a good reason. We have a family. We have kids here, in case you forgot."

"He's harmless. Gabby, who knows him and how his sickness began, assured me of that." Liwa started off towards the door. "Listen, like I said, he won't be in our way, so let's not make a big fuss out of nothing." He said dismissively. "I have to go help the old man wash Dawson up before we introduce him to the kids."

"You really are doing this, Liwa?" She said, disbelief and resignation on her face and in her voice.

He left her standing without another word.

Washing up Dawson was a painstaking task, which they did thoroughly. Dawson reacted unease and discomfort to being clean after a very long time. The old man shaved off his hair and beard, and Liwa helped him put on clean clothes.

Then Liwa brought him food and beddings and, after eating, took him to the main house to meet his kids.

Liwa found his youngest three girls, Suwi, aged ten, Izu, aged eight, and Wanza, aged six, playing snakes and ladders in Suwi's bedroom. He told Izu to call Mwiche from her bedroom.

Mwiche came and leaned on the side of the door, her hands folded, a bored look on her face.

She wore blue corduroy dungarees. She was fifteen years old and Liwa's firstborn. When Liwa began telling them of greeting a certain Uncle Dawson in the living room, Mwiche rolled her eyes, an expression she had unconsciously copied from her mother. She couldn't wait for the greeting to be over so she could return to her room. She was still angry at her dad for refusing to let her remain in Melbourne in a boarding school. She had been a member of a local all-girl teen pop band, and their performances had received rave reviews. Clinching a record deal was just a matter of time.

"No, young lady, we are all going home. Back to our roots." Liwa had said, laughing at her suggestion. "There are tons of boarding schools and musical bands there, too." He had assured her, as tears rolled down her cheeks as she saw her dreams and life as she knew it going up in flames.

Liwa prepared his kids for their meet-up with Dawson, telling them not to be afraid of him or be surprised if he didn't return their greeting. He was sick, and their dad would help him get better.

"Good evening, Uncle Dawson." His youngest three said in unison upon entering the living room, a mixture of fright and curiosity in their eyes. Dawson sat on the sofa with his head bowed down, staring at a spot on the floor tiles. He lifted his head and stared at the kids, one from the other, stared past them, then turned to the floor again.

The sight of him startled Mwiche. She turned to her mother, who sat in her chair with folded hands, for some explanation. The resigned look on her mother's face told her all she needed to know.

She turned to her father, a mocking gleam dancing in her eyes. "And the downward spiral continues."

Liwa gave her a stern look. "What did you say, young lady?"

Her eyes went to Dawson. "Looks like we are definitely back to our roots."

"Mind your words. Where are your manners?"

Under her breath, she said. "I left those in Australia. Others left their heads, apparently." Her father didn't hear her, but her mother did and gave her a sharp, disapproving look.

When Liwa took Dawson back to the servant's quarters, Mwiche accosted her mother. "How could you allow such a thing to happen?"

Izowa, who thought it important that her and Liwa always present a united front when confronted by their children on anything, sought to take a middle route. "I'm against your father's misguided decision, just as you are, but it's coming from a good place. He's just trying to help his friend, though blindly so."

"He's been making strange decisions of late. Could he be going through a midlife crisis?"

Izowa gave her daughter a puzzled look, then let out a mirthless laugh. "Where do you even get such ideas at your age?"

"I read books."

Izowa told her daughter she was wrong and that she shouldn't attach anything she read in a book to real life.

The servant's quarters consisted of three rooms. A tiny bedroom, where the old man slept, and a similar-sized living room furnished with two threadbare chairs. A disused kitchen was to be Dawson's room. The old man cleared it out to make room for Dawson's mattress. But he soon discovered that Dawson rarely slept and roamed around the room all night, muttering unintelligibly under his breath.

For the next few weeks that he was Dawson's carer, the old man treated him like a parent would a small child, tirelessly guiding him on what to do or where to put things, gently but firmly stopping him from doing crazy stuff like drinking dirty water from the handwashing basin, eating food crumbs from the floor leaving the morsel on his plate, or washing his hands in the jar used for storing drinking water. He would help him to take a bath, change his clothes, or to clean up after eating or using the toilet. He would force him to take his medication and then observe the reaction per the doctor's instructions, and then he would report his observations to Liwa.

Liwa took Dawson to the mental hospital for evaluation and treatment the day after bringing him home. Dawson was diagnosed with schizophrenia and a host of other manic disorders and was prescribed those pills with long, hard-to-pronounce names. The doctors advised Liwa to discontinue administering the medication and report to them immediately if the reactions were overwhelmingly adverse.

The first prescription made Dawson extremely irritable. He moved around the yard restlessly, scratching himself all over, discomfort plastered on his face. The second weakened him, lethargy overpowering his body. He struggled to stand up, and when he sat on a chair, his hands dangled at his sides, his head drooped down, saliva drooling from his mouth. His bowels gave way involuntarily. The third type of pills lengthened and worsened the trance-like state that seized him occasionally. He would spend the better part of the day staring into empty space, his body unmoving.

The doctors told Liwa that there was nothing else they could do for Dawson since all their medication for his condition worsened his symptoms. They advised him to return Dawson if he became aggressive or violent.

“Why don’t you just have him admitted at the same hospital?” Izowa asked one night when they were in bed. “Professionals there are better equipped to take care of him than us here.”

“The decent wards are full; the doctor told me that’s where the politicians and the rich dump their crazy relatives. They rarely visit, only send monthly checks so the hospital can continue hiding their shame.”

“How about the other wards? That is a big hospital.”

“You’ve never been to that place, have you?” Liwa folded the newspaper he was reading and threw it on the dressing table. “Those wards can make a sane person go mad. They are worse than jail cells. Dirty, overcrowded. The violent patients are mixed with the non-violent. People howling screaming everywhere. And then there are the guards, moving around with malicious little eyes. The patients fear the

guards. I'm sure they get beaten when no witness is around. How can one recover in such an environment?"

"The old man is leaving us very soon, and you go to work every day, who will be taking care of him?"

"I've already found the old man's replacement. He will start work the day the old man leaves."

Izowa sighed. "I understand that you want the best for your friend. I, too, want him to get better. I've seen what he meant, and it still means to you. But you don't have to turn our home into a mental asylum."

"I thought we discussed this the day I brought him here. I won't be going around in circles."

Liwa turned his back and pulled the covers over his head.

Every morning before going to work, Liwa went to the servant's quarters to check on Dawson, and every evening after coming back, he would pop in to find out about his day. Uneventful is the word that summed up the old man's narration of how Dawson's days mostly went, including the usual unusual things any person in his condition did, which Liwa and the old man now considered normal.

On some evenings, Liwa would come to the servant's quarters, beer bottle in hand, with a loosened necktie and rolled-up shirtsleeves. He would sit on the floor next to Dawson, his back against the wall. Then he would begin to talk. The years would roll away, and he would feel like it was the old days again when he and Dawson would sit on their college hostel's balcony, drinking beer and watching the sun disappear, talking about girls, music, football, and their future dreams. Only this time, Dawson never did any talking. He just sat there mumbling under his breath, studying the back of his hands or frozen in a trance, a glazed look in his eyes. Liwa talked about his life in Australia, his college days, his friends, his experiences, and the places he frequented. He spoke of his first job after graduation and the challenges he faced as the only black staff member. Some executives were bothered that he was entrusted with company funds. "The irony was that most of them were descendants of criminals who were sent down there as punishment." He laughed. He told Dawson how he met his wife, how he won her heart and the places he used to take her to.

“She used to work at a flower shop across from a popular restaurant with African students. She had the most dazzling smile.” He said, a wistful look in his eyes.

One evening, in his storeroom, Liwa unlocked an old trunk where he kept his memorabilia. He dug out an old photo book from high school and brought it to Dawson. As he flipped through the pages, explaining the occasion on each photo, a faint hint of recognition would flash in Dawson’s eyes.

Then Liwa realized that his kids had never seen the photos before. He told the old man to call them. Mwiche stood lazily at the door while her three younger sisters came and huddled around their dad’s seat, feasting their eyes on the old black and white photos, awed by images of their dad as a teenager. With a smile, Liwa watched them giggling at the late sixties urban look; the halo-shaped afros, the eliganza high heels, the bell-bottom slacks, and the open necks.

“Who do you think this one is?” Asked Liwa, pointing at a tall youth with a white-toothed smile.

The kids scratched their heads but could not answer.

“Take a look at Uncle Dawson.”

They all did. Then Suwi said. “He looks a bit like him, but the one in the photo is cute.”

“That’s him, alright,” Liwa said.

The kids exchanged puzzled looks.

“He’s in over half of your photos,” Suwi said.

“That’s because we were best friends.” Then, looking at Mwiche, Liwa told Izu to pass the photo book to her sister so she could also have a look.

As she flipped the pages, Mwiche’s eyes kept going from the photos to her dad to Dawson and back to the photos again. Then, her eyes were transfixed on one page. “You used to

perform music?” She asked surprise on her face.

“Where do you think you got that talent of yours from?” Answered Liwa.

Mwiche rolled her eyes.

“We weren’t real musicians. We never had any original songs of our own,” Liwa said. “We just used to perform hit songs of the popular bands. We would dress up like them and perform during school functions and other open-air concerts. The Beatles, the Rolling Stones, Highlife, you name them, we did them.”

“Perform for us dad, we want to dance.” They were Suwi’s words, but Liwa suddenly found eight pairs of eager eyes watching him expectantly.

“I haven’t practiced for a long time.” He said defensively. “It’s like football, if you don’t train, you will be terrible on the pitch. You guys weren’t born the last time I held a guitar. And Uncle Dawson here is not in a condition to perform.”

“We can watch you practice.” Said Izu.

But Mwiche’s daring stare made him take up the challenge. He told Suwi to bring him Mwiche’s guitar. “I’ll be terrible at the beginning so I’m warning you not to laugh at me.” He chuckled.

He strummed the guitar, releasing stray twangs as he warmed up his fingers while thinking of a simple melody. He cleared his throat and settled for Dr. Hook’s ‘Silvia’s mother.’ His voice was a little rusty but not very bad, thanks to those few minutes of singing he did in the shower every morning. But the guitar rhythm was bumpy and tremulous. His fingers had grown stiff from lack of practice. He kept restarting the song and laughing at each failure. The kids would join him in laughter.

Then he noticed how Dawson was keenly staring at him. Dawson’s eyes had come to life, and he was observing Liwa’s guitar play. The intensity in his eyes reminded Liwa of those times when they were on stage. Instinctively, Liwa handed Dawson the guitar.

Dawson stared at the strings, his fingers moving over them slowly, feeling them. Then, he began to play ‘Silvia’s mother’ with ease as if he

did it every other evening. Everyone was stunned, Liwa not the least among them. They watched him play with rapt attention.

Then Liwa began to sing, adding vocal chords to the strings. Liwa began a different, high tempo, rolling Stones song just before the song ended. Dawson caught on immediately, raising the strains while simultaneously changing the tune to a more complex one. With a hand gesture, Liwa urged his youngest three to start dancing, which they did merrily. The old man added his clapping to the tune, a smile beaming on his face.

Mwiche stood transfixed with disbelief and fascination at Dawson's guitar play, watching how the rough, bony fingers ran, danced, skipped, and slid on the taut strings with grace and effortless ease.

Dawson swayed, his body moved from side to side, becoming one with the guitar, his eyes closed as if his real sane self, forever trapped in the jungles of his tormented soul, found expression through the guitar strings.

Each evening, when Dawson was in a lucid state, he and Liwa would play the old hits, reliving their youth. Sometimes, Izowa would come and watch them, and when Dawson played the low strains, a nostalgic look would come into her eyes as she recalled the days Liwa would pop up at her flat and serenade her with his guitar. Liwa would think of the same thing, and their eyes would meet and hold for a moment, and then they would both look away. Back then, they would have found themselves in each other's arms in a spontaneous waltz, but a gulf too big for music to bridge had grown and widened between them since.

The day the old man was to leave, his job came, and Liwa drove him to the bus station. When the car stopped, the old man did not immediately disembark. He sat silent for some time, thinking. Then he turned to Liwa, "your wife is a good woman."

Liwa nodded.

"What happened to your friend is a tragedy. He must have been a good man."

"He had a big heart."

“Then he would understand.”

Liwa turned to the old man, puzzled. “Understand what?”

“Let me tell you a little story.” The old man said. “A long time ago, in the plains of Bulozhi, where I hail from, a king died, and there arose a struggle for the throne among his heirs. The one chosen by the kingmakers began eliminating his rivals, those who refused to accept his kingship. He did so to consolidate his throne and unify the kingdom against its enemies. His last victim was his cousin, Prince Musiwa, who was captured and tied to a tree. Musiwa’s three executioners were members of an elite regiment sworn to take orders without question and to protect the king at any cost. Among them was Mahela. Now, Mahela was a close childhood friend of Musiwa.

They used to eat from the same bowl and learned to hunt and fight together. Before killing Musiwa, Mahela did obeisance to his prince, and Musiwa commended Mahela for having risen in the warriors’ ranks to be given such important tasks. Mahela shed tears. He had no choice. Musiwa understood.” The old man disembarked with his bag and went his way without another word.

For the better part of that night, Liwa lay awake, staring at the ceiling. The following day, he packed some clothes and other provisions for Dawson and drove him to where he had found him. When the car stopped, Dawson recognized the abandoned structure that was his dwelling place. He got out, clutching the bag containing his provisions, and for the last time, Liwa saw him walk down the path that cut through the grass and disappear into the building.

On his way back home, Liwa saw a flower shop, noticed it. He saw it every day when driving to and from work. It was there in his mind, in the mental images of this stretch of the road. But he’d never really noticed it until today. And it took him far back in time and to a distant place. When Izowa’s heart and his used to beat as one. Before their kids were born. When she used to look at him like there was nothing else to look at in the world. Now, her smile no longer reached her eyes. Time changes things.

And like a river, time never reverses its course. He stopped the car across the shop but left the engine running. He hesitated. Can the

things time swallowed be reclaimed? He sat thinking for a while. There is no better way of finding out, he decided, than trying, going back to the beginning. He killed the ignition and got out of the car.

