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Up the Eucalyptus Tree

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A 71-year-old dad clutches the side of his abdomen. And hopes Junior, his only son, has not noticed his suppressed wince. There will be plenty of time to tell him properly. He might even carry him along to the doctor's office as the doctor had offered. They have time.

'Are you okay?' Junior opens the backseat door of his company, Toyota Hilux.

'Yes. Yes, I'm okay. How did you travel?' He leans against the fender on the driver's side of the car.

Junior turns to meet his father's eyes. 'I travelled okay.' He pauses, taking in his father from head to toe. 'Have you been taking your insulin? Watching your diet—'

'I said I'm fine.' Junior's youthful eyes are male equivalents of his wife's. Dark. Warm. Almond shaped with a depth that always consumed him when he dared to stare into them too long.

Junior turns back to the backseat of his car and gathers his things. 'I was surprised at the transformation Chipata has gone through in just a year. Still can't believe I haven't been here that long,' Junior says.

'I'm sure you were waiting for another funeral to bring you back here.'

Junior turns to his father and holds his eyes. 'That's not fair, Dad. You know I'd visit more if it wasn't for work. The Bank's looking to rebrand and—'

'I understand. You're here now, that's what matters. And I'm happy.'

He turns to the old farmhouse behind him. An orangey glow of impending sunset shrouds the five-bedroomed mint-coloured bungalow. Tall grass (yellowed like his eyes and palms) and the drying trees of the scanty woodland borders the yard at the back of the house.

The house is at the top of the hill. The ascent is rocky and always treacherous, even for Junior's Hilux. But at the summit, the ground levels and the rocks crumble into finer gravel that smoothens the hundred-meter drive to the house. The tall eucalyptus trees lining the edges of the driveway stand close together in a huddle, and the grass shrivels, cowering beneath the high tree canopies. As he turns back to Junior, he smells the eucalyptus-infused air, looks up at the cloudy sky through the trees, and concludes that it must be raining somewhere. He hopes it'll rain here, too.

Junior throws an almost empty backpack over his shoulder.

'Is that all the luggage you have?'

Junior looks up from the bag. 'Yes. And this.' He lifts a yellow Shoprite carrier bag from the backseat, whose contents are obvious to his father, and chuckles as he closes the car door.

'I thought you were going to stay longer.'

Junior's slippers munch the gravel as he walks past his father and eats up the distance to the house. 'I have to be in the office Monday morning.' His blue woolly shorts make him appear taller than he really is. And his crisp white t-shirt emphasises his muscular stature.

He follows. 'So, you drove all the way here today, only to go back tomorrow?'

'I'd have loved to stay longer, Dad, if I could.'

Junior avoids his father's eyes when he finally catches up with him.

'Why are you really here?'

'I'm here, Dad. Isn't that what matters?'

He looks up into Junior's face. It's not the face of a boy anymore. Evidently, not the fourteen-year-old boy he taught to drive fifteen years ago. Put gas – gas – gas! Ugh! Okay.

Start the car. Clutch – clutch – cluuuutch. Osa taba pa clutch. Now it's a bearded man's face.

He nods, turns away from Junior, and opens the door to the house.

The warm night finds them on the porch gazing upon the lights of the rapidly expanding Chipata city. In the twenty-two years he's lived here, those lights have multiplied from only a handful to a dazzling, dense congregation. A half-empty beer bottle and two empty ones, a quarter-empty whiskey bottle, and a bowl of groundnuts the house-help roasted for them just before she left, clatter up the small round old wooden table between them. Just like old times. Except, it's just the two of them instead of a happy troupe of seven. There's no raucous laughter. No inconsistent stories from school, his five children often recounted. No disheartening, sometimes warm, and sometimes funny tales from the casualty ward of Chipata General, his wife often shared. And he has no new stories about tobacco farmers.

The nightly sounds of nearby crickets and grasshoppers, distant frogs and owls, and the easterly wind rippling through leaves command the long silences that punctuate their conversations.

It still won't rain.

The glass in his hand, almost as full as it had been when he had received it from Junior, feels ten times heavier than it did once in his life. He takes a little sip. 'How's that sweet church girlfriend of yours?'

Junior sips his beer, too. Then he turns to his right, away from his dad to the tall indigenous trees bordering the yard. Beyond the old trees, where the hill begins its steep descent to Chief Kapatamoyo's palace, darkness looms. And Junior's eyes seem to settle there.

When Junior turns back, his dad meets his stare. He sips his beer. 'She's fine.'

He begins to nod. But, unbidden and unannounced, a sharp pain strikes the side of his abdomen and interrupts his nod. He closes his eyes to mask his grimace.

'Dad, are you okay?'

He hesitates. 'Yes, I'm fine. I just felt some pain here – that's all. It's nothing.'

'You don't look fine, Dad. Talk to me. I know it must be hard for you after —'

'Stop it.'

He sets his glass on the table and forces himself up from his reed chair. His hand reaches for the armrest for support. His knee hits the table. The table tilts and almost topples over but finds its balance again. But not before tipping his glass to the hard floor. It smashes into a thousand shards. The whiskey it held splutters and follows the partitions between the tiles like rushing floods in miniature trenches.

Junior shoots up from his seat and offers his hand.

He ignores it. Instead, he supports himself against the wall until he finds the door. As he admits himself into the house, he catches the blurry sight of his son's panicked and uncertain face.

The brown tweed-upholstered sofa, the wooden coffee table in the centre of the enormous living room, the TV mounted on the white wall, and the bookshelf that largely holds many of his wife's cookery books appear to him in a foggy montage as he rushes past the living room. The white walls advance on him with threatening intent. He pushes himself on.

'Dad!'

He focuses on the fuzzy image of his grey bedroom door and wills himself towards it.

Despite losing more than fifteen kilograms in the last six months, his body is heavier than ever. And the constant pain in his abdomen refuses to be ignored. But each laboured footstep steadily draws him closer to his goal.

'Dad, wait!' Nearer this time.

He pushes his bedroom door and allows the darkness the door releases to swallow him. Fumbling with the key in the keyhole, he locks the door just as Junior reaches the door.

He collapses to the floor, clutching his midriff.

'Dad, please open the door. Please. Talk to me. Dad. Dad!'

He crawls to the edge of his bed and reaches for the glucometer on his nightstand.

His hands act on their own. With the hazy mechanical precision of a practised and perfected everyday routine, they prick his finger and squeeze a drop of blood onto the strip.

‘Dad! Please open the door.’

The number 23 greets him in an ominous, blurry, large neon font on the screen of his meter. His right-hand pulls the drawer on his nightstand, almost scattering its contents on the floor. Then it forages into the drawer and fishes out a syringe. With the help of his left hand, he draws liquid from a vial and feeds it into his left arm.

‘Dad! Dad. Please! Open the door. Please.’

When he opens the door, Junior stands in the doorway.

‘I just needed an insulin shot. I’m fine.’ He drags his feet past Junior and heads to the living room.

Junior’s muted footsteps follow behind after some hesitation. Slow and unsure.

He clutches his side, groans, and sinks into the sofa.

Junior settles down on the opposite sofa facing him. ‘You scared me.’

‘I’m sorry.’

‘Maybe we should see a doctor tomorrow.’

He looks at his son for a long time.

‘Have you told anyone yet?’ the doctor had said.

He shook his head and turned his stare to his moccasins. ‘It’s difficult to talk about some of these things on the phone.’

The doctor nodded.

‘But - my son.’ He breathed deep and wrung his hands together. ‘He says he’s coming to see me on Saturday. Maybe I’ll talk to him.’

‘Talk to him, please. If you find it hard to tell him, bring him here with you. You need to tell someone.’

He had nodded.

But his son has arrived carrying a load of his own. Something a father knows even when he has no way of knowing. He just knows.

‘There’s nothing they can do,’ he says, at last. ‘I just have to take care of myself as I have all these years. Of course, it was easier when...’ He sighs. ‘But I’m doing the best I can.’

‘Come stay with me. You don’t have to be here all by yourself—’

‘You’re all busy with your lives, the last thing I want you to worry about is—’

‘None of us is too busy to care—’

‘I said I’m fine.’

Junior draws a deep breath. Loud. Like the first breath above water from a deep pool dive. He massages his scalp with both his hands.

‘What about you?’

‘What about me?’

‘Something is bothering you.’

Junior looks up and meets his father’s eyes. His hands rest on either side of his neck so his elbows point towards his dad. ‘I’m fine, dad.’ He looks away.

‘You didn’t travel all this way here just to see me.’

Junior rises from the chair and rounds it. His eyes find the portrait of his mother on the wall, and he approaches it. Her smile, captured on the A1 canvas with the realism it would have had if she had been here in the room with them, has always been the most comforting force the family has ever known. Junior had that photo made for her sixtieth birthday. April last year. Many things have changed in the nineteen months since then.

‘I miss her,’ Junior says. ‘She always seemed to know what to do. Always.’ He turns back to his dad.

He nods.

Junior has that smile from his boyhood when he tries to hide his nervousness. Or sadness. Or fought his tears. The same smile his

mother wore sometimes in similar circumstances. His dad holds his eyes until they turn back to the picture.

‘She’s pregnant.’ He turns from the picture to his dad and hesitates. Maybe measuring the words in his head. ‘I thought we were being careful, but...’ He takes a deep breath. ‘She doesn’t want anyone to know. Being a pastor’s daughter has its own burdens.’

He rounds the chair and sits back down again. He rests the elbows of his clasped hands on his knees. ‘So – anyway – I organised a few of my friends – we went to her family, and we talked.’ Another deep breath. ‘They want twenty-five thousand kwacha as lobola. And – the wedding can’t take place before it is paid in full. My future father-in-law, the man of God, is adamant about that.’

He listens in silence.

‘I have about fifteen thousand right now – I can only manage the other ten in two months’ time – which may be too late – and then the wedding to prep—’

‘And that’s why you came here. You need money.’

‘I’m sorry, dad, I didn’t have anyone else to turn—’

‘What about the ones you turned to when you went to discuss lobola behind my back?’

Junior sighs. ‘I am sorry, Dad, I—’

He rises to his feet and struggles to keep his wasting body erect on his feet. ‘You should get some sleep. You have another long way to drive tomorrow.’ He lumbers towards his bedroom.

‘I’m sorry, dad. I didn’t know what to do.’

‘Good night.’

Deep into the silent, long night, the darkened ceiling above him plays images of his children.

His daughters, all grown and married in dignified ways, now have children of their own. Then Junior. The youngest of his children. Has he failed as a father to guide his only son?

His grandchildren will number thirteen now. The oldest is seventeen and heading to university. They grow up too fast. One minute, they are tiny crying bundles of skin, next, they are actual little humans who make him laugh. And challenge him with new knowledge.

Sometimes, they engage him with their ridiculous questions. Questions like why humans have two arms instead of four. Or, indeed, six.

‘Granpa, can you climb a tall Eucalyptus tree?’ one of them had asked him once. He can’t remember which one. A little girl.

‘Yes.’

‘But how, Granpa? Because the branches are so high up in the tree.’ She stood up from his lap to demonstrate how high the branches were. ‘You can slip and fall. Because eucalyptus trees are very slippery.’

He laughed. ‘It just seems difficult at the beginning, but if you hold on to the bark, and keep pushing yourself up, you’ll reach the branches, and it becomes easier thereafter.’

She sat back down on his lap. ‘Have you ever climbed one before, Granpa?’

He nodded with a reminiscent smile. ‘When I was a little boy, just about your age, we had a few of them not far from our village.’ He ran his hand over her hair and turned to meet her smiling face. ‘I fell a few times, bruised myself, and almost broke my leg, before I ever managed to reach the branches.’ He laughed. ‘But the day I reached the top, it felt like the best day of my life.’

His eyes, ever retreating behind the wrinkles around them, release a tear at that memory. The warmth of it races down his cheek. He coils back into the foetal posture. His gut hurts. His skin itches. And his muscles tremble with the fatigue he has no business having. The time and shape for climbing eucalyptus trees seem too far from where he lies on his bed.

The nostalgic aroma of scrambled eggs, fried bacon and sausage, and freshly brewed coffee greets him in the hallway. He stops and allows the smell to teleport him to a time in his life. A time when he

thought everything was good. Children running around the house. Screaming.

Laughing. Maybe crying. His wife shouts for one of them to just sit still or else she'll slap her back to the book of Genesis. He approaches the delicious aroma. And when he enters the kitchen, she turns to him and smiles.

'Good morning.' Junior's voice breaks his trance. 'I made you breakfast. Just the way you like it.' He sets a plate on the kitchen table and pours him a mug of coffee.

'Where's Amai—'

'I don't know. I chased her out of here to give me space.' He chuckles.

'What's—' he clears his throat. 'What's the time?'

'I don't know. Eight. Why?'

He pulls a chair. 'What time are you starting off?' He sinks into it.

Junior fidgets with a can of baked beans. 'Are you chasing me?'

'You know I don't like people driving at night.'

'Everyone knows that.' Junior chuckles as he completes opening the can. 'You scared me last night, and I couldn't sleep. So, I called the others first thing in the morning.'

'We've decided I can't leave you alone. I'll stay a few days as we make a plan.'

He sipped his coffee. 'You don't have to—'

'Dad, I'm staying.' He put some baked beans on his dad's plate. 'We all know you'd die before asking anyone for help.'

He looks at his coffee. Its steam rises much like the smoke from a traditional charcoal kiln. 'I thought you were busy at the office.' He looks up back to his son.

'Yes, I am. I'll call my boss tomorrow morning.'

Junior picks a mug cup from the shelf and stops. As if frozen in time. His mother's favourite cup. She loved it so much that when the

first one broke, she bought another one exactly like it. That's almost twenty years ago. He puts it back on the shelf and gets another one. Pours himself coffee and pulls a chair on the opposite side of the table.

'I can't leave you alone like this. Not after what I've seen.'

The dad forces his breakfast down his throat in silence.

They have guinea fowl for supper. He hopes he won't surrender it to the toilet like he had done the fish he had for lunch. Then, they watch Qatar lose to Ecuador in the opening match of the World Cup. In that time, Junior has emptied five bottles of Budweiser.

He nurses a bottle of Fruiticana. 'So how much do you need?'

'What?'

'For your lobola, how much money do you need?'

Junior shifts so that he faces his father. He hesitates. 'You know, being here – the house – the trees – the wind. Nature. Memories. I thought a lot during that walk I took in the afternoon.' He sips his beer. 'Remember that time I broke the handle of mum's favourite cup, and I tried to cover it up by gluing it back on?' He pauses. 'I ended up making things worse because when she tried to use it in the morning, the handle came right off, and the cup smashed to the floor. Do you remember what you told me?'

He sips his Fruiticana.

'You told me that we don't fix our problems by covering them up, we fix them by confronting them and facing the consequences.' He takes another sip of beer. 'So, I don't know. I don't think I need the money anymore. I don't know. I just – I don't think I do anymore.'

He nods.

In his bedroom, after relinquishing much of his supper to the toilet bowl, he takes his insulin shot. He later watches the darkened ceiling above him, thinking about Junior. And about

climbing eucalyptus trees in Wachepa village. He imagines himself and his son facing a straight, slippery, tall tree they must scale. Junior holds out his hand towards him, beckoning him to take it. Then he thinks about his daughters. And his grandchildren. About seeing them

again. To hear their high-pitched laughter chasing the gloom in his heart. To feel their warm embraces melting the coldness in his veins. He closes his eyes and lets these thoughts usher him into a deep sleep.

The first rays of the sun on Monday pierce the blue curtains and scatter the darkness in the house. They bounce off the white walls and shower the furniture in the living room with a sort of ethereal glow.

He turns back to Junior's door and hesitates. He knocks once more. Then twice.

Louder each time. He is about to knock again when the door opens.

'Dad, what's going on?' Junior yawns.

'Get dressed. We need to talk.' He lumbers back towards the living room.

He wrings his hands together, twiddling his fingers. Occasionally, he scratches his legs through his grey cotton pants. The brown leather suitcase he had packed in haste sits at his feet like a loyal pet.

'Dad, what's up?' Junior's voice is hoarse with the lethargy of interrupted sleep.

He springs to his feet with an urgency that shoots a sharp pain through his abdomen.

Junior stops at the threshold to the living room. He follows Junior's gaze to the suitcase at his feet. Then he looks up just as Junior looks up.

'Dad, what's going on?'

He motions Junior to the opposite sofa.

Junior takes a long, deep breath and clasps his hands in front of him. 'How long have you known?'

'About six months now.'

Junior closes his eyes, brings his hands to his face, and breathes into them. 'How much longer?' A shiny gloss smears his eyes. He springs to his feet. 'How much longer, Dad?' His voice cracking.

He remembers asking that question six months ago.

The doctor let go of his pen and allowed it to fall on the chart in front of him with a sharp knock. Then it rolled noisily down the paper. And just as the pen stopped at the edge of the chart, an audible sigh escaped from him. 'It's hard to know for sure.' He paused. 'But – looking at the extent the carcinoma has metastasised –' 'English, Doctor. Please.' He managed a slight chuckle.

'Sorry.' The doctor reciprocated the chuckle. Albeit constrained. Awkward. 'The way it has spread to other parts of the body from the primary cell.' He paused. 'I'd say twelve months. Maybe more. Maybe less.'

And that's what he tells Junior.

Junior closes his eyes and releases the tears he has been holding captive. 'Why didn't you say anything, Dad? Why didn't you – you could have said something. You could have –'

'Because I didn't want you to mourn me before I die. Like you're doing now.'

Junior looks up at the high ceiling. Then, he looks down and holds his dad's eyes. He sniffs hard and closes his eyes. Then he wipes his eyes with the back of his hand. And sits back down in his seat.

'I want you to go on with your lives, and not worry about me.'

Junior sniffs.

'And please promise me. No hospitals. No drugs.'

'No. Dad, you just can't give up –'

'No hospitals. No drugs.'

Junior takes a deep, long, noisy breath.

'I need to leave a few instructions here. We'll discuss everything else on the way. For now, go and get ready. You know I hate travelling at night.'

Junior chuckles, tears lingering in his eyes. 'It's zero-six.'

The 71-year-old dad laughs and coughs. And realises he hasn't laughed for a long time.

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