

Two Brothers

There was a commotion outside the door; dogs barked. The mail had arrived.

"Got it," yelled Jendayi.

A moment later she came bouncing in.

"Uncle! I got the invitation!"

She held out a card. In cursive script the invitation cordially requested the presence of Jendayi Mbawbe to the thirteenth birthday celebration of Beauty Gono. This was something Jendayi had been chattering about the last week or so. Eliot frowned, pipe in his teeth, as he examined the card.

"Hmph! Bit pretentious for a girl's party," he said. "And during times like these?"

"It's her birthday, Uncle."

"Let them eat cake, I suppose."

"And I'll bring Muppet!"

"Now, hold on, now. How do you propose to get to this thing? I don't have a car. And it's outside of the city, in a suburb." Eliot checked the address. "No, further than that."

"I don't care. I have to go, Uncle. I *must*. And I'll bring Muppet. Yes?"

Jendayi grabbed up a turtle from its straw bed. The turtle was called Muppet because its neck was wrinkled, along with the fact that *The Muppet Show* played on state-run television in a seemingly endless loop.

"Pleeee-ase?"

For a moment Eliot tried to recall the advice from parenting books he'd furtively perused over the last year. No magical formulas were forthcoming; he was on his own.

"No," he said. He shook his head. "I must forbid it."

Jendayi gasped. She stared through her glasses.

"You for-bid?"

This was the first time either of them knew him to expressly forbid something. But Eliot was firm. It was unconscionable to have a silly party when people were starving in the streets and everything was falling apart in general.

"Yes, Babu. Now when's dinner, I think it should be ready by now?"

"But, but I have to!"

Tears rolled down Jendayi's face.

"Come, Babu, please..."

"I hate you!"

Eliot winced. "Come on, now, you don't mean it."

Jendayi stamped her foot and, turtle cradled in her arms, dashed out of the room. Eliot sighed. He was definitely doing a poor job of it today. He thought of his brother in South Africa or wherever he was, far away from his responsibilities. It wasn't fair. With a grunt Eliot sat down

at his desk. Relighting his pipe, he happened to notice the card. He picked it up. Idly he read the script until one shining word, one that had eluded him before, struck him: GONO.

He found Jendayi tragically asprawl on the floor.

"Babu, listen, I'm sorry. But... Is this the girl you told me about, that has a father in the government?"

Jendayi said nothing.

"Babu, please..."

Sniffing, Jendayi looked around. "Yes," she said. "That's her."

"She's really the daughter of Gideon Gono?"

Jendayi shrugged. Then a shrewd light came into her eyes.

"This means we're going, then?"

Eliot said nothing. A parachute of pipe smoke carried him off into a reverie. Gideon Gono. The Minister of Finance. Inflation was out of control. A loaf of bread cost trillions. The other day Eliot had taken a cab to the dentist, and by the time he'd got out the rate had risen by fifty percent over the course of the ride. If he could talk with Gideon Gono himself, maybe get him to halt the printing of currency notes, have him see how necessary it was to encourage the IMF and reserve banks to cast a vote of confidence in a new government monetary policy; as it was, they needed a real solution, not an empty dance of zeros. While the president was hopeless and decrepit, Gono was a possible voice of reason in all the madness. Yes, if Eliot could talk with the Minister himself, get his ear...

"Hello? Uncle?"

The Citroën honked. Dented and old, it was a motor vehicle, at least. It had taken some prodding to get Michael to agree to take his daughter to a birthday party. He was back from South Africa and back with the Tamba Circus as part of something called the Clown Corps. Was the man even going to ask about Jendayi? Over the phone, as they talked for the first time in ages, Michael finally got around to it, oh yeah, my daughter, how is she? Which led Eliot to explain how important the party was not just for her, but for the entire country. Michael laughed at his brother's grandiose description; all the same, he was intrigued. He thought perhaps he could perform at such a swanky affair, maybe even tell some fortunes. Eliot was already irritated. He demanded his brother not embarrass him in front of Gideon Gono.

"Then leave me alone and take a taxi," Michael had said, with that aggrieved yet bullying tone Eliot well knew from their childhood days.

"No, no. A taxi drive would break me. On that topic, we're a little short for money this month. You could help out a little? In supporting your child, brother?"

"Aren't you making a good salary, Mr. Professor?"

"Doesn't stretch with this terrible inflation, I'm afraid," Eliot had said. "It's as true for me as for everyone. Now, come Saturday around noon, will you? We can count on you?"

The Citroën honked again. Almost disbelieving, Eliot and Jendayi came down the stairs. Michael got out and grinned, gold tooth gleaming.

"Papa!"

Jendayi jumped into her father's arms. They laughed, and she tugged at his new beard. Eliot watched from a respectful distance as they had their reunion. It irked him that his brother was lavished with so much affection despite never being around, but he told himself it was for

the best the child didn't harbor resentment against her father. And not for the first time did Eliot observe with quiet amazement that he and his brother had sprung from the same location in their mother's belly. Puffing, he turned and circled the car.

"Missing the side mirror. Anything else we should know? Like a missing engine?"

"Rides like a dream, brother. And got her for a good price."

Jendayi climbed into the back seat. She had her gift, a wrapped box with a pink bow, and Muppet in her other arm.

Wearing a crisp white suit, Michael looked taller, almost regal. He also looked older, even old. His face was still mobile and rubbery, however, the lips loose, eyes buggy, his carnival of expressions having earned him a living over the years; his hair was tinged red, apparently from a recent performance. He held up his large hand as Eliot made to get in the car.

"No need, brother," he said. "We'll be fine."

"I'm coming," Eliot said. "Or this doesn't happen."

Michael stretched his face into one of wounded pride.

"You don't think I can handle it?"

"It's not that," Eliot said. "As I already explained, I have to talk to the Minister. It's a matter of national interest. Now, please, unlock the door."

Michael hesitated.

"Papa, let Uncle come. Please? It'll be a fun family trip!"

The door unlocked. Eliot got in, the car rocking.

"It won't be easy to find, in Chishawasha Hills," he said, in an attempt to smooth over the awkwardness. "I brought a map."

Turning down Praetoria, they passed a group of men with rifles slung on their shoulders. In front of the National Bank was the statue of Cecil Rhodes. Eliot liked to tell his students that, while Rhodes was hardly a hero or a palatable figure these days, he'd done significant things in his time. The sight paradoxically seemed a good omen, and it put the exhilarating thought in Eliot's head: would there be a statue of himself someday?

"Watch your speed, brother. Cops everywhere."

"This I know all too well."

Red peppers and bananas were piled on the sidewalks. Crows skirmished over piles of blackened bones. A construction site was roped off, pedestrians streaming into the avenue that buzzed with motorbikes. They hit a pothole; tobacco spilled from the pipe Eliot was refilling. At a stoplight a man with crazed eyes came to the window. He started to jabber.

"Not interested, not interested," Eliot said. He shooed the man. "Whatever it is. Thank you! Goodbye!"

They traveled north on Takawira Street. At every turn they came across fragments of the Great Leader on posters and electronic displays: a chin, an extended hand, rows of giant teeth, a watchful eye. At another light, a boy came running. He held up a hubcap. It had come from the Citroën, another pothole casualty. Eliot accepted the hubcap through the window as if a giant novelty coin. Then he handed the boy some money.

"Here you go, young man. Buy a *mapapo*."

The boy gaped at the ten billion dollar note.

A policeman in white gloves waved them into the roundabout. Overhead, helicopters glided across the hot, hazy sky.

"You okay, brother?"

"Yes, yes," Eliot said. He mopped at his face with his handkerchief. "Just drive more carefully, please."

"I can't be more careful, unless you want us to walk alongside the car."

"Papa," Jendayi said from the back.

"Yes, honey?"

"Where have you been? Why haven't you called, or anything?"

Michael pursed his lips. He shot a glance at Eliot. A dark expression, calculating, worried, even on the edge of anger. Finally, his characteristic cloudless expression broke through: he smiled, the corners of his eyes crinkled, and he spoke.

"Been busy, baby girl. Making people happy, you know. But I thought of you every day. I love you. You know that, don't you?"

"Yes, Papa."

"And I think of your mama every day. I miss her very much."

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Cursing, Eliot folded and refolded the map. They were stopped on the shoulder of a tar road that ran through a forest. Birds sang and called overhead; clouds of insects droned.

"Are we going to be late, Uncle?"

"Not at all, dear. We're almost there. Just missed a turn, I think. Is this going north?"

"We're lost," Michael said. He lit a cigarette. "And are those drums I hear in the distance? The *nko'moba* are coming to eat us, I bet."

"Will you be serious? We're just a little--"

"Uh-oh."

Two men with faces covered in bandannas came onto the road. They approached the car.

"Better turn around."

"Another behind us."

"Oh, no. Oh, no. Oh, God."

Michael grunted, stubbed out his cigarette. "Relax. Let me do the talking, brother."

They were ordered out of the car. One man, with a red bandanna and dark glasses, held a knife; he demanded their valuables, his voice high, squeaky.

"We don't have time for this," Eliot said. "Take what you need. But we're on official government business."

The men muttered, laughed.

"We're just a little lost, *b'wane*," Michael said. "Can you help us?"

"You make it worth our while?" said one of the men. He looked at Jendayi. "Yeah?"

"Watch yourself," Michael said. He scowled.

Eliot got out his wallet and peeled off bills.

The man with the knife shook his head. "Worthless paper," he said, and gestured at Michael. "Nice suit. Take it off. Must be worth something."

With surprising swiftness, as if performing a magic trick, Michael whipped off his jacket and shirt and pants. He neatly folded them on the hood of the car. His skinny legs poked out of his blue boxers.

"Now we'll be on our way," he said, cheerfully. "You fellows go with God. Yes?"

"Him, too." The man waved his knife at Eliot.

Eliot shook his head. "No," he said. "Take my money. You can have my wallet."

"Your jacket. And shirt. Come on."

Michael and Jendayi looked at Eliot. They knew the problem. Eliot stood sweating, calculating the proposed humiliation in the scales of the nation's improvement. He was fiddling with the top button of his shirt when a car came by. It slowed, but then sped off.

"Come on, tubby," one of the men said.

"What did you say?"

"Tubby! Come on, tubby!"

The men laughed.

Eliot was suddenly on top of the man with the red bandanna, both of them rolling across the tar and into the grass.

"Brother, brother, hey! Don't kill him!"

Michael pulled at Eliot. Fists flailing, Eliot finally rolled off the man. The thief got up and, spitting curses, limped off with the others into the forest; whooping, they had Michael's suit.

"Uncle, are you okay?"

Eliot nodded, woozy. He leaned against the car. His heart beat painfully. Blowing out breaths, he wiped at his face and neck.

"About killed the poor fellow," Michael said. He chuckled. "I must say I'm impressed. I didn't know you had it in you, brother."

"There's much you don't know about me," Eliot said. He glanced at Michael, suddenly dismayed. "Oh, but you can't go naked like that. What are we...?"

"No worries, brother. I brought my work uniform."

"Your work...?"

Nearly as fast as he'd undressed, Michael got his costume from the trunk and put it on. Clad in bright blue afro, red nose, yellow overalls with pink dots, he held out his arms.

"Let the show go on!"

"Oh, God."

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RESTRICTED ZONE was painted across the metal gate. A soldier in uniform came out from a kiosk and, hearing they were there for Beauty Gono's party, asked for the invite. Eliot fumbled around in his jacket; he cursed under his breath.

"Uncle? Did you forget...?"

"I might have... With all the hectic... Oh, dear."

The soldier looked inside the vehicle: a clown, a large man with a pipe, a young girl with a turtle sitting on a hubcap. Michael smiled at him.

"We're the entertainment, *b'wane*," he said. "Let us in, please!"

The soldier stared. Finally, he stepped back and waved them in.

"No one can deny a clown," Michael said. He grinned back at Jendayi. "Eh?"

"Let's hope Gideon Gono sees it that way," Eliot muttered.

They parked in the courtyard amid Bentleys and BMWs. A fountain splashed before a marble façade, flanked by msasa and jacaranda trees. Red and silver balloons were tied to the balustrades; a man with a rifle paced on a balcony.

Eliot lit his pipe with a trembling hand. "Keep calm, everyone," he said. "If you look guilty, they will think you are guilty."

"Are we guilty, Uncle?" Jendayi said.

"Only of saving the country, Babu."

They climbed the stairs to the giant doors. A large man wearing a black kaftan and cap answered the bell.

"Yes?" he said.

"We're here for the party?"

"Your invite?"

Michael crossed his eyes and pushed out his tongue. "How's that?"

Jendayi stepped around the man, and waved. She rushed to join a group of girls.

"There's your invite, sir," Eliot said.

With contrasting styles of dignity, the brothers traversed the vast stone floor. Beyond the glass was a rolling green lawn, people standing around a swimming pool; smoke rose from a row of barbecues; a DJ played music.

"Well, we made it," Eliot said. "Now to find our man."

"We'll get him, the bastard," Michael said.

"No, no, just a talk, please. Now... ooh, my hip, that'll be a bruise..."

Grimacing, Eliot hobbled to a floor-to-ceiling painting. It was a portrait of Gideon Gono with his hunting dogs and a world globe atop a huge desk.

"I don't know if I can do this. I don't think I can. Who am I? I'm nothing. I can't..."

"Yes, you can," Michael said. "Remember what Father said about you? How smart you are? Come, you can talk to this man. I'll be with you. We can face him together."

"Together? No. Please, brother, this is where you..."

"Where I...?"

"Please. This is a serious matter."

"I see. No place for clowns."

"No. I'm sorry. You..." Eliot winced. "Ugh. Oh... I need... Just where is the lavatory? Just a moment."

Once he was finished, feeling refreshed and up for the challenge, rehearsing in his mind what he needed to say, Eliot went out to the party. He wandered the garden. There he found the Minister himself gaping at a clown. Eliot groaned. All was ruined already!

"...just rolling there in the mud! You should've seen it, ah, ah...!"

Michael flailed before Gideon Gono and other dignitaries, performing and acting out something, face mugging and stretching. Suddenly the Minister, this man whom Eliot had seen on TV and in newspapers, this man who held the fate of the nation in his hands, this man who wore glasses and had white hair and a double chin, who was the very image of governmental gravity, reared back and let roar a guffaw.

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It was National Heroes' Day. Crowds jammed the streets. Fireworks exploded, blue and green smoke writhing. A helicopter rained down paper packets; children squealed as they fought over the spilled candies. Eliot watched from his window, puffing. A week before the government had announced it was halting the printing of new currency. Prices were already dropping. The revelry in the street seemed to reflect that the worst was over.

Post hoc propter hoc, Eliot reminded himself grimly.

Just because Michael had made Gideon Gono laugh did not mean the economy was magically fixed. This was real life, not the Tamba Circus. Still, the signs were heartening. The mood was hopeful. And the story of Dr. Eliot Mbawbe, the esteemed professor, fighting with a thief in the mud over a suit of clothes had heartily amused Gideon Gono. The farcical scene, as energetically acted out by Michael, had perhaps been a welcome relief from the burdens of work. Whatever it was, the man even lent an ear to Eliot and his ideas about the state of the economy. Then he went back to laughing at Michael.

So there it was. The gears of history, it seemed, moved not by logic but by motley, by buffoonery. Eliot tapped out his pipe, shaking his head. Amazing. Unbelievable.

Jendayi was in the next room. She was finishing packing her things. It was a sad day, despite the mood of the nation. Jendayi was going off to live with her father, as was only natural. *It was only natural*, Eliot told himself over and over. Still, it gave his heart pain. And not just for him. Jendayi had been blue all morning, whether out of a sense of courtesy or she felt truly sad. Sounds came from the other room. Jendayi was dragging her suitcase, almost as big as she was, to the front door. Then she came padding in with Muppet in her arms.

"Uncle," she said. "I don't want to go."

"I know, Babu."

She wore the glasses she hated, and her hair was tightly braided with colored, patriotic bows. Distant booms went off outside, hopefully fireworks; children squealed, dogs barked.

"We have an hour still," Eliot said. "Let's play a game. Yes?"

They played Tycoon. Jendayi counted out denominations and aggressively traded Widdicombe Road for Umtali Station and Kariba Airport. Eliot watched her fussily arrange her currency bills. He smiled. Already an economic prodigy.

"Will you come see me often, Uncle?"

"Of course, my dear," Eliot said.

Jendayi bent her head.

"Now, now..."

Eliot gathered her into his lap, kissed her, and let her sob on his shoulder.

"There, there," he said. "There, there."

A knock came at the door. It was Michael. Smiling in a guilty fashion, he wore a new crisp white suit, as if his closet had an endless supply. He took up the suitcase.

"You have Muppet?"

Jendayi hung on her uncle. Eliot gave his brother a stern look.

"You take good care of her. Brother."

Michael smiled, nodded.

"Off you go, now," Eliot muttered.

He pushed Jendayi away at last, afraid he might be ridiculous at any moment.

"Bye, Uncle."

"Bye, dear. Bye, Babu."

Once they were gone Eliot sat unmoving with his unlit pipe, staring and sighing and wiping at his face. There was a sound in the hallway. At first he thought he was hearing things. But then came the knock. He started up.

Jendayi had demanded to come back! Eliot joyfully flung open the door to see an elderly woman holding a steaming pot of something; it smelled delicious. The lady was his neighbor Tawana. She lifted the pot and smiled.

"I thought you'd be hungry," she said.

It wasn't a statue, but it would do.