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Squad

by Linda Musita

“The tea is not as good as it was last time. We should go somewhere else.”

“You always say that but when given a choice end up here. How have you been?”

“Great.”

“Despite your silence?”

“Yes.”

“I am your friend. Talk to me.”

“Friend is a bad word used by small shits. I feel overstretched by ‘friends’. I feel like one of the freaks playing chess to a hollow-eyed audience in the Boniface Maina painting. I gave so much to ghosts in the name of friendship. Got nothing back.”

“I have never seen a Boniface Maina painting.”

“The Maina effect is me feeling like everyone sees my over-extended failures. Things that should have stopped multiplying on my face are festering.”

“Why?”

“Betrayal.”

“The guy?”

“No.”

“Who?”

“Let me take this call first.”

“Why do Brits end phone calls so abruptly? You have a great conversation but then the conclusion is so weird. They say okay bye and hung up before you say okay bye back.

“You are dating white men?”

“No, I am not dating a white guy. I can’t.”

“Why?

“It’s unnatural.”

“Racist.”

“If I was racist I would not be suffering bad tea in a white-owned restaurant. I would be drinking very hot tea at Mama Njeri’s. Maybe support a woman’s business for a change.”

“White makes beautiful babies.”

“All babies are beautiful if you look at them properly.”

“Speaking of women, look at the gang that walked in while you were being offended by curt goodbyes.”

“The Femioso eat here?”

“Your BFF is one of them.”

“The Squeegee appointed herself. I respected her pseudo-feminist outrage until I discovered she is anti-me and anti-every-other-woman-on-blue-earth. As are all Femioso. Mean girls.”

“Explain.”

“Okay. Cunt psychosis. They all scream for women’s rights and tell everyone they meet ‘I am feminist’ before they even say hello and all other cosmetic shit they do as a gang. Then separately they turn on each other.”

“How do you figure?”

“Ideally, if someone is going to replace her mouth with her vagina and make it talk to you, the vagina should be sanitised. The mouthing vagina shouldn’t vomit on you at any point of intercourse with your faculties.”

“Harsh thrash. Where is your vagina now?”

“Where it should be.”

“So how did you find out that their vaginas are desecrating their faces?”

“Years with an imposed bestie.”

“I see.”

“I know all their secrets, thanks to Squeegee.”

“Tell me or shut up.”

“Well, you see the one with the menu?”

“Yes.”

“Squeegee says her dad cheats on her mum because mama has become unbearably mad and manipulative. She is also thinking of moving out of home because of her mum. Squeegee says the madness runs in the family because Menu Girl is also seeing a shrink and is on anti-depressants for like three unwavering disorders.”

“And how did Squeegee know?”

“She was told by Menu Girl. In confidence.”

“And the confidence was assigned to you?”

“Gladly.”

“What about Hot Lip?”

“She attacked a number of women on twitter DMs over some guy she apparently hasn’t fucked let alone met. Yet, she is the self-proclaimed queen of sisterhood. The other members of the gang don’t really like her but for some reason their interaction with her in public does not show it. They worship her then later laugh about all her shortcomings. Squeegee says Hot Lip is weird as fuck and can’t keep a man. See how that sits badly? Saying someone can’t keep a man when in public you help her scream that men treat you like tools and they can go fuck themselves. Cunt psychosis.”

“Cunt psychosis is hard on my mind. Just use basic words.”

“Let my poetry prosper.”

“You suck at it. How about Afro?”

“Well, according to Squeegee, Afro is a slut who fucks strangers in the name of freedom of expression or some shit like that. Sijui ati artistic spirituality and owning her body through multiple sex partners….”

“She does not look like a slut.”

“Nobody looks like a slut. But, yeah, according to the inside source she can’t keep her legs closed for anyone. And when the sex is bad or the dude comes back for more she accuses the mistaken penis of taking advantage of her vagina and making it do things she did not *particularly* permit. Then the army will rise and fight Mr. Penis Mistake without first asking him if he hypnotized Afro or not before sleeping with her. Now that I think about it, Afro could be a sophisticated sex pest in an alternate universe with memory erasing laser tools and shady hi-tech stuff like that.”

“Stop yourself right now.”

“It gets worse. Pick another gangsta.”

“Braids.”

“Braids got an STI from this C list guy on twitter. So she started a ‘private callout’ to see how many women had slept with this guy and gotten the STI.”

“Like a support group for Herpes survivors?”

“Whatsapp group. So all of them came out and bitched about the guy forever. How dare he make them sick? Why don’t men respect our sexual expression enough to carry condoms and use them? What happened to full disclosure to a sexual partner and *that kind of a thing*? The obvious concern would be why they are having unprotected sex in the first place…”

“Stop laughing. No one thought about shaming the guy in public.”

“Nope. But guess what happened?”

“Tell me or shut up.”

“Squeegee leaked the quarantine secrets and now just about everyone on earth knows which of them bought antibiotics and their fellow survivors who bought the same dose.”

“Did they tell the guy to go see a doctor as well?”

“Nope.”

“So as we speak there is probably another woman getting infected with something thick?”

“Yes.”

“And the Femioso are cool with that.”

“Look at them laugh and eat. No Gonorrhea. All on cloud nine.”

“Do you know who this C List matafaka is?”

“Why? Are you sleeping around without gloves?”

“I have slipped a couple of times. Who is he?”

“Some blogger.”

“I haven’t touched a blogger… yet.”

“Don’t. Now, you see Jugs?”

“The hottest of the pack.”

“Yes.”

“Enhe?”

“Squeegee says she fucks all married men in town including their fathers in exchange for manicures, pedicures, trips to some fancy ass places in Arabia. So she is a great enemy of women just by the mere act of engaging in an act of betrayal with their husbands.’”

“Is that bad?”

“Technically? No. In real sense the men owe loyalty to their wives. Jugs owes them nothing. She didn’t pay dowry or swear things before gods. But it is bad as far as Squeegee is concerned. And that’s the crazy contradiction that makes me think she is a serial poser. Squeegee has a Catholic background and is quite a prude on her best-true-to-herself days. You can’t even talk about cum without her breaking into a sweat. But she rolled around with someone’s dude for quite some time without any traces of guilt. A sexually-liberated Catholic feminist who respects her parents’ marriage and does not want children. She would make for a fantastic exorcism candidate, if she doesn’t end up shagging the priest as well.”

“You are not perfect either.”

“I am not pretending to be perfect. I am not a bloody chameleon. What you see is what you get here. One shade.”

“Alright, the one in pink?”

“Apparently she is always looking for good dick and collapsing on short fingers. Such bad luck is hilarious. She has kids and Squeegee says she is setting a bad example. Curious that a woman who has no children knows how they should be raised…”

“So basically these women are every woman’s nightmare.”

“That’s not even the tragic part.”

“Tell me or shut up.”

“They don’t fight for anything. They just make noise. Bad noise.”

“As opposed to good noise?”

“Yeah.”

“Which is what?”

“Noise that has tangible results. Like when I plant my flowers I pour water on them so they grow. I won’t pour acid on them and keep saying At least I planted the damn flowers what have you done? every time someone questions the acid decision.”

“I kinda get it.”

“I wish they got it.”

“They don’t have to.”

“You know, you can’t tell them anything. They have the final word. I am a very practical person. I use my brain most of the time. So, no. I don’t have any resources to spare on them.”

“Yet you just took some time to tell me all their dirt.”

“I was making a point.”

“What point?”

“Fuck them.”

“But they are women like you?”

“Well, a good tree also bears bad fruit…or no fruit at all.”

“The last one. The one with the burger. What do we know about her?”

“That bugger stole someone’s man…well not really cause men are not money to be stolen and when your man likes someone else it is not usually that other person’s fault. Willing seller and buyer… Anyway, she ran off with this guy and apparently his ex keeps calling her and demanding her boyfriend back. But the guy seems to have made up his mind and is even doing permanent things with this one. Not that it is a mark of anything, but you know… But I like her. She should upgrade her crowd though. Those rats will eat her brain.”

“Alright. Now tell me what Squeegee has told them about you that has you distrusting everybody.”

“I don’t know what she has told them. But I know what she told someone else.”

“What?”

“I won’t tell you what but I will tell you how.”

“Okay.”

“She told someone who goes to my AA meetings. Then this person later comes to ask me how I am doing after this and that happened. Being sympathetic to my suffering and you know how I hate a sympathetic stranger. I felt like total shit. It was my story to tell. I needed to heal before telling it because I always tell my own stories without holding anything back. But this bloody bitch just decided to own my business and sell it for free. Then when I confront her she tells me ‘oops’ like my life is a cheap glass that she dropped

in her slum kitchen. I let people sit in my affairs and think whatever the fuck they want to think, make fucking fucked analysis and go broadcast it to fucking strangers. Strangers sympathising with me because someone decided to own my misfortune. You have to be some phenomenally fucked up demon to peddle people's bad luck in exchange for friendship. Her only claim into conversations among friends is regurgitating things she was told in confidence."

"You can't blame Squeegee though. You knew she is a pathological gossip. Why did you tell her intimate things?"

"I needed to talk to someone. And I assumed that she would be loyal to me. I don't know…like I was special enough for her to respect. Bullshit."

"Like how a mouse would sit in front of a cat and expect to be safe?"

"I was foolish. I am paying for it."

"Did you ever spill her dirt?"

"Nope. I would never. Maybe just what I told you today."

"So what type of friendship was that?"

"Something like what I have with you."

"I am not like her."

"You just fed on gossip and asked for more. You haven't even ordered anything."

"I should order. In the meantime, the pack of hyenas is checking this direction with laughing eyes. I suppose that means she told them everything."

"I have the mind to go over there and turn the table on their tits."

"Nope. We'll order and eat sickly sweet cake, and walk the fuck out of here. My treat."

About the writer:

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The Somalification of James Karangi

by Abdul Adan

One afternoon, three young people were sitting around a table at Khalfan's restaurant in downtown Mombasa. Their gestures and murmurs were like those of disloyal soldiers plotting a mutiny. The trio was comprised of Khalid Bawazir, his cousin Ayaan and her forbidden fiancé James Karangi, aka Mohamed.

"I told you from the beginning," Khalid was lamenting, "there's little hope along the line of religion. You could be the Imam and lead all of the late-night prayers in the month of Ramadan, but the Somali guy who steals shoes from the mosque would still stand a higher chance of taking her hand."

"This is tribalism! It's un-Islamic. You should have told them that," protested James.

"I have told them everything I could, upon Ayaan's request, knowing that it won't work," said Khalid. "But you better understand that what we are dealing with here is way beyond tribalism. They are talking of differences in appearance, hair-types and such nonsense."

He looked at Ayaan and she nodded, saying, "You've certainly done your best, my beloved cousin."

"That isn't my best," corrected Khalid. "I haven't exhausted all of my resources yet. Like I promised before all this began, I am committed to your happiness, my dear."

He tenderly squeezed Ayaan's shoulder and continued: "You have every right to marry the man of your choice. If he happens to be a Kikuyu, a Luo, or a Meru, I will always have your back."

He smiled upon saying Meru, reached into his pocket and produced a small plastic bag filled with khat. "This is a half-kilo; it's my fix for the day. Were it not for the Merus," he shook his head, "would I have this here today?"

James, who was a new Muslim, looked away and laughed modestly. Ayaan held her veil to her lips to suppress her laughter.

"Well, I called you here today," announced Khalid, "because I believe I have the solution to this mess once and for all." He spoke in a low pitch, like an ailing old man delivering a farewell speech to his sons.

"I am tired," he went on. "I can no longer watch our young people being oppressed by unreasonable traditions. All humans are one. So long as their internal components are the same, there's no point in some assuming superiority over others. It's ridiculous. I mean seriously, which of the world's races or tribes are immune to tuberculosis, pneumonia, cholera, or the need for water and sleep? I have tried convincing my people, both on my father's side and my mother's, that all humans are the same and that our differences are mostly man-made. I have even asked my mother to divorce my Yemeni father and take back all of the experiences they have had together if indeed she is an honest Somali. But

unfortunately I am a result of their marriage, and they've named me 'Khalid', the immortal."

He paused, faced Ayaan and added, sounding furious: "If James can't marry you, then my father ought not to have married my mother."

His voice rose to a frenzy which seemed to boil from his throat, and he stood from his chair shaking his head and biting his lips.

"I can't take this anymore! Can't you see this ignorance undermining our humanity?" he said, bending forward over the table towards his overwhelmed listeners.

"Can't you see?" he repeated, louder this time.

"Khalid!" said Ayaan, trying to calm him.

"I'm tired!" he shouted, and then quickly looked about him as if embarrassed.

"Khalid!"

He put his hands in his pockets and walked over to the restaurant window. Then he went to the bathroom, washed his face, dried it and came back to the table, apparently composed.

"Anyway," he said grimly, "you're being mistreated because you're not Somali. What my aunt and Sharmake don't know is that we can change that."

Sharmake was Ayaan's elder brother. A young man of fiery temper who'd sworn to kill the James in question if he ever found him in his sister's presence.

"How is that possible?" asked James.

"I can see to your Somalification. It's just a matter of time. All I need is your full cooperation."

"I have embraced Islam. What more does she need from me?"

"You still don't understand, do you? Listen to me. Do you love my cousin?"

Ayaan's eyes lit up and she looked eagerly at James, as though this had been the question she'd anticipated all afternoon. James, for his part, turned his gaze away from Khalid and stared at the table, his hands shaking.

"Do you doubt my feelings for her?" he said.

Khalid brought his fist down hard on the table, nearly knocking over his glass of water. "Give me a yes or no before I declare this over, and side with my aunt and Sharmake."

James started sweating and his face quivered. Khalid was a key person in his quest to marry the girl of his dreams. The mere thought that he could lose Khalid's support set his nerves going. He leaned forward trying to say something but words failed him.

"C'mon, give me an answer," insisted Khalid. When James didn't reply at once, Khalid crossed his arms and looked away, far through the restaurant door.

"If you ever thought," he said, "that you could sneak your way into my cousin's heart without loving her truly, then you're fooling yourself and only yourself because I am here for her. My interest in this is for her to be happy. I don't care whether she's fallen for a lion in the bush. If I have to ensnare him and remove all his canines and claws to ensure her comfort I would. Break her heart, and you have yourself an adversary in me.

"If you don't love her, tell me now and we shall close this chapter. But once it goes beyond this point, then you're in it for good. And I will Somalify you for her. Her mother will have no case against you. If she tries anything to jeopardise an eligible Somali man's marriage to her daughter, then she will have to answer to the elders. Just be clear and honest with me and I will help you."

"Somalify me?" asked James uncertainly.

"That's beside the point! Do you love her?"

"Of course I do!" said James. His voice was loud, firm and impatient.

"Now we are talking," said Khalid pleasantly. "You will be Somalified Inshallah. I will call HassanZuu right away. He's had the entire house to himself since his parents moved to Zanzibar. That's where most of your Somalification will take place."

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The Somalification of James Karangi was to begin, according to Khalid, with a demonstration of loyalty. James must use his physical resources to help a member of the community in an endeavour. If he dared question his role it would indicate disloyalty, and so he agreed to help a Somali, in this case Khalid, retrieve some money from a khat seller. Khalid claimed that he had overpaid the man earlier that morning. The two young men walked into the khat store at sunset. It was Khalid who addressed the shopkeeper.

"I'm here for my money," he said.

"What money?" asked the khat seller, a middle-aged man with a round belly and a red cap on his head.

"I overpaid you this morning. You owe me 150 shillings. Let's not waste time. C'mon, hand it over."
"You are crazy!"

"Okay, James," said Khalid. "Use your Kikuyu muscles; you won't be having them for long."

James jumped over the counter that separated the seller and his customers. He took hold of the man's right arm and twisted it behind his back. Khalid grabbed the man's head and pushed it down against the khat leaves on the counter. As it was a humid evening and as the man was sweating, some of the khat leaves attached themselves to his face, making it look like a collage. He gave little resistance, only shouting repeatedly, "Are you crazy?" It had never occurred to him that one of his trusted customers would turn on him.

Khalid reached into the cash-drawer and retrieved 200 shillings. He searched for smaller bills but there were none, just coins. Then he reached into the man's back pocket and found a number of 20-shilling bills. He replaced the 200 and counted the smaller bills until he had 140, before putting the rest back in the man's pocket. He opened the drawer again and added a 10-shillings coin. When he had 150 shillings he showed it to James and ordered him to release the man.

"A Somali man must take only what's his. You understand?"

They left the shop and headed for HassanZuu's home. HassanZuu was waiting for them when they arrived. Khalid asked James to sit down and took HassanZuu aside for what he called 'a brief high-level consultation'.

"This is the project I have been waiting for, brother," he whispered to HassanZuu. "We now have a chance to help someone get married to his love. There isn't a more noble undertaking. I will need your full support. It shouldn't take more than two weeks."

"Anything you say, my brother," said HassanZuu. Of all the friends of Khalid, he was the most loyal and practical. "I have the rope ready for you and all. I have also secured the door. Everything is as you've requested."

Khalid hugged HassanZuu and returned to the back room where James was waiting. HassanZuu followed him a short while later, carrying a small, narrow bed. James sat crouched in a corner. Khalid tapped his shoulders and smiled at him, tight-lipped.

"Do you trust me?"

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James spent the night in HassanZuu's back room by himself. The rules were that he should have as little human contact as possible for a week and that he should not leave his room except for the calls of nature, and then under the strictest supervision. The next morning HassanZuu brought him black tea for breakfast. For lunch he received no food. When he asked HassanZuu later in the afternoon, he was met with a short, cold answer: "It's the rules."

HassanZuu didn't even look at him directly. He wasn't a Somali and therefore was to keep himself as distant as possible from James, by Khalid's directive.

That evening Khalid came to see James in his room, carrying a tightly-folded plastic bag. James could see the opening of the bag, from which green and reddish leaves of khat stuck out.

“Ever tried these blessed twigs?”

Khalid asked. James shook his head. Khalid called aloud to HassanZuu to bring in the dinner of rice, mixed with spaghetti. James took to his meal. Khalid ate little, saying: “I am only helping you along.”

A white carpet was spread before them and Khalid brought out the contents of the plastic bag. He handed a bunch of the twigs tied together by a small string to James and they began the chewing session. James chewed reluctantly and was amused by Khalid’s creativity in the first chewing minutes. He spoke continuously, with such energy and analytical abilities James had never seen before. Khalid’s left cheek protruded gradually till it stretched to the full and shone as though carefully polished. Meanwhile, James was undergoing an ordeal. His jaws ached and his inner cheeks were getting bruised, but he kept chewing nevertheless; he had agreed to the Somalification, he reminded himself.

The first practical lessons began an hour into the chewing. Khalid had ordered a bottle of Coca-Cola to be brought in from outside. He drilled a small hole in the top. There wasn’t a need for a bottle-opener. All one needed to do, he said, was suck at the hole and swallow whatever came through. That way the drink would last two people through the entire chewing period, and any khat pieces that might escape the cheeks and get trapped in the throat would be washed down.

“As a Somali man,” said Khalid, “you must always order for your friend what you order for yourself. If your friend is broke, simply pay the bill without hesitation. And do not ask the money of him in future or remind him of it. Your money is yours, but it’s also for your relatives and then for your Somali brother. If you want to extend your love beyond the confines of the community, it’s your choice. But never let a non-Somali pay your bill at a restaurant. You do the honours, always. We are free people and therefore we are generous.”

“Maybe you should begin to teach him the language,” suggested HassanZuu, who had been drinking coconut juice in a corner of the room.

“Thanks for reminding me, brother Zuu,” said Khalid. “We might as well begin the language lessons right away. We don’t have the whole year.”

James was pleased at the prospect of learning Somali. He had heard Somali language being spoken many times, but hadn’t been able to make out a single word. As a matter of fact, to him the sound of Somali words was similar to the sound of broken glass mixed with water and poured down a zinc roof. He had never been able to conceive how a fellow human being could articulate such sounds.

“We shall begin with the hardest words and gradually move towards the easiest,” said Khalid.

“Ok, let’s try,” said James.

“Say, ‘Dhicis.’ It means ‘premature baby’.”

James attempted to say the word: ‘Dees.’

“Dhicis!” repeated Khalid.

James tried again: ‘Dees.’

“Okay, that’s enough,” said Khalid. “You realise I am dedicated to your service, don’t you?”

“Of course,” said James.

“Well then, you have to cooperate with me by all means. I will have you drink a glass of bitter lemon for your throat and try the word again.”

HassanZuu handed him the preserved bitter lemon in a steel glass and went out.

“Take it down in one gulp,” said Khalid. “Good boy. Let’s try again: “Dhicis.”

Khalid listened as James said the word, asking him to repeat it twice and a third time before standing up to call in HassanZuu from outside. The latter came in with two ropes folded in his right hand. He was accompanied by another young man, a short, muscular fellow, whom he introduced to James as Othis. He handed Khalid one of the ropes, about four feet in length, and quietly took his position next to Othis. Khalid ordered that all khat twigs be cleared away.

“Brother James,” he said, twisting and stretching the rope. “We are about to conduct a simple procedure that has the potential to work miracles. The bitter lemon hasn’t been successful in getting your throat flexible enough for your Somali articulation. I am certain this little rope here will work.”

James looked at Khalid, then at the other two men. He stood up, ready to defend himself.

“Don’t get all worked up,” said HassanZuu. “It’s just a simple procedure. There’s the hard way and the easy way.”

“Fellows, get to work!” Khalid ordered.

They seized James by the arms. James, who was stronger than both of them, could have fought himself loose, but he was dizzy from the poor diet and the strange twigs he’d chewed. He fell flat on his chest, and both of his hands were tied behind his back. Khalid made a little knot in the rope he was holding and, when he had the perfect noose, slid it deftly around James’s neck. He tightened it, gradually and slowly, until he could hear a certain agitation in James’s voice.

“Please don’t take this the wrong way,” he apologised to James. “This is all for your sake. Your throat must get flexible enough, or you won’t learn a single word of this language, not to mention marry my cousin. I am positive this will work. You will be the first Kikuyu ever to pronounce Somali words without an accent.”

“This is abuse,” moaned James.

“Say that again,” said Khalid. James moaned again. Khalid thought he had heard a raspy sound in James’s voice. He looked at Othis and HassanZuu, nodded, and said to James, “So far that’s the closest thing to a Somali word that you’ve uttered. I told you it can work miracles.”

“You might want to loosen the rope, brother Khalid,” warned Othis. “You don’t want to make any mistakes.”

“Well, so far now,” considered Khalid, “I have choked him about 80 percent. If I loosen the rope it may not be as effective unless I extend the timing. We would have to prolong the exercise to produce the same results as by two days of this tightness level.”

James changed his moans into a series of gasping sounds until Othis, possibly noticing an impending tragedy, hastened to loosen the noose.

“That’s it. No looser or it won’t work.” Khalid stopped him lest his heart get in the way of his work.

For 13 days James was locked in, neck-tied except during meals and khat chewing sessions. He was allowed one meal a day. Every other night Khalid would visit him with a kilo of khat, from which he had to chew for at least three hours and listen to the language and cultural lessons. When the chewing was done, Khalid would tighten the strap around his neck and leave. James resisted the daily and nightly procedures at first; however, as time wore on, he became weak and emaciated. On many occasions he tied the rope around his own neck when it was time, making it clear that he preferred ‘the easy way’.

To his surprise, the procedure worked. He pronounced many difficult words that required a thorough working of his throat. However, when he repeated complete sentences after Khalid, he perceived an extraordinary change in his own mood. Each time he said a Somali sentence with correctness he felt his temper rise, and lost patience for repetitive lessons. Subsequently he demanded, with a marked urgency, to be taught new words and sentences by the minute and maintained a choleric, intolerant disposition.

Once HassanZuu sent him his breakfast through Othis and he rejected it.

“I don’t eat from the hands of one who smells of lake fishes. I am not even sure you are circumcised.”

He took a long time putting the words together but spoke them with the right pitch and emotion. He raised himself on his knees, wagging his index finger violently at Othis. But unaccustomed to the strain of Somali words, his heart beat too fast, and he placed his right hand on his chest and fell back, out of breath.

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On the last day of the programme, Khalid gave him a summary of the cultural lessons.

“Your throat will no longer be an obstacle to your learning,” he told him. “We will give you skin applications for your neck bruises. Ultimately you will be a man without regrets. The benefits you’ve gained from this programme surpass by far any difficulties you’ve gone

through… One thing you should never forget is that a fellow Somali's interest is always your interest. Never hesitate to help a Somali man who is at war with others."

Khalid continued his farewell lesson late into the night. He gave clear directions as to how James should live his Somali life. Thanks to the diet, James's body, according to Khalid, had come to resemble that of the average Somali male. He had lost at least thirty per cent of his weight and his cheeks had gotten hollow. True strength, he was told, is in one's soul. Only slaves seek all strength in their muscles. If one's fury is intense enough, he can defeat anyone. Khalid also taught him how to live an outgoing, flexible, yet conservative life.

"Do not ever imprison your mind with rules," he was told. "All land belongs to Allah. No government should ever limit or dictate where you can or can't go. Budgets and financial records are a nuisance, created to make lives hard. You will find in being a Somali that money stops being a serious issue. You will learn to spend it even before making it. Money is like women. It comes and goes. You must never for a second think about how much you got left when you want to help a brother; such attitude can only invite poverty into your life. Never hesitate to share what you have with your fellow Somali.

"Lastly and most importantly, you live for yourself and the community. If you get hungry in a foreign land, join any Somalis who are dining. They should be welcoming unless they have something else in their blood."

"So emotions are good, huh?"

"Well, positive emotions are," answered Khalid. "The kind that you need when saving a brother who is in danger. If you try to be reasonable in such a case you will waste precious time in which you could have served the community. One who defends his own is never at fault. A Somali man must always know his rights. That's why our ancestors, in all their wisdom, said: 'Give a Somali man his right or your head.' You see! You've got to walk away with something: your rights, your Somali brother's rights, or the oppressor's head. Haven't you noticed that oppressive people are happier when their victims are cool and reasonable? Beware! Pacifism is a sanctuary for cowards, the un-revolutionary."

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Early the next morning James was freed from the bed and the rope around his neck was permanently removed. Ayaan was brought in to see his new, Somalified form.

"Oh Allah!" she gasped. "What have they done to you? Why did you let them do this to you, my love? I hardly recognised you when I walked in. You look like a refugee who's fled on foot for months without food. Allah! Allah!"

"But isn't that the whole idea?" said Khalid. "How else would he lose his Kikuyu muscles, gained by centuries of vegetable farming? You should be glad we didn't take him to the desert to look after camels."

But Ayaan's rage was not to be easily quelled. She leaped up and slapped him numerous times, scratching him with her nails and clawing at his shirt.

“You sick brute with a worm-filled head!” she cried. “I thought you were going to teach him the language and the culture. How much of that does he know now? Huh? You sick torturer!”

Khalid gently pulled her hands off him and tried to explain himself.
“Teachings, by themselves, are not successful assimilation tools; the individual must change,” he said, “physically and psychologically.”

Ayaan, now suddenly composed, bent over James and shook his thinned biceps. She touched him about the chest, laid him on his back and shook his kneecaps. Soon, her lips tensed and she stopped the inspection. Her eyes constricted in renewed rage and she opened her mouth like someone in pain, gritted her teeth, and, clasping her neck-beads, let out such a squeal that HassanZuu and Othis cowered on the floor, terrified. Khalid tried to console her but she shook him off and paced across the room, back and forth, before falling on top of James. She gathered him into her arms and rocked, sobbing.

“My darling,” she stammered in Swahili, “what do I do? I can’t… I don’t…”

Behind her the door creaked, and it didn’t take long before everyone saw the intruder. It was the dreaded Sharmake, Ayaan’s elder brother. He had followed Ayaan when she suspiciously absconded from the breakfast cooking duties earlier that morning, and from the Somali traditional dagger he carried, his intentions couldn’t be clearer. He leaped across the room and seized Ayaan by the hair, throwing her to one side, away from the frail, gaunt figure on the floor. Then he kicked James in the mouth and prodded him twice in the back with the dagger.

HassanZuu and Othis, at first frozen with fright and wonder, ran to James’s aid and, just in time, wrestled away the assailant.

“Bloody Kikuyu fool,” said Sharmake, amid rapid gasps. “You never get it, do you?”

He tried to kick James again but Khalid blocked him. Ayaan launched at her brother, tearing at him with her henna-coloured nails and biting his hands. She called him names and then said a few rude things about his mother, who was her mother too, and then his sister, who was herself.

“I wish James was in a position to listen,” thought Khalid. “These would have been useful notes to take.”

******

Two days later James woke up in a hospital bed. Khalid and Ayaan were at his side.

“Thank God you’re back,” said Ayaan.

“You’re lucky to be alive,” added Khalid. “He hit your spine, you know?”

“My dear,” said Ayaan, leaning closer to James, “I must end our relationship. I don’t want to risk your life anymore. I am sorry.” She kissed James on the forehead and went out.

“What did she just say?” murmured James.

“Don’t worry. You don’t need her,” said Khalid. “Women, like money, come and go. Now, my brother in Somaliness, I am here for a most important thing.”

Khalid bent over James and turned him gently sideways. He inspected the bandaged stab-wounds and pouted his lips in grave contentment. Having confirmed the adequate extent of the Somalification, Khalid lifted his right hand in the air like one taking an oath and declared in a solemn, formal voice:

“Brother James, on behalf of the Somali community, I congratulate you on a successful Somalification.”
Then he lowered his eyes, waved, and left the room in haste.

About the Writer:

Abdul Adan’s work has appeared in Kwani?, Scarfmag, Gambit; an anthology of newer African writing, The Caine Prize anthologies of 2014 & 2016, African Roar, Jungle Jim, and elsewhere. He is a 2016 Caine Prize shortlistee and a Miles Morland Scholarship winner.

New in Town Etc.

by Leila Aboulela

New in Town

I pushed open the door that said 'Black Bastards' in pen, and stepped into the mosque. A woman was taking off her shoes, untying laces, left shoe then right. I greeted her and after she replied, I said, 'Where can I get soap and water to wipe what's written on the door?'

She said, 'Leave it now, we must be quick'.

I took off my shoes and hurried after her down corridors thick with toddlers, little girls in long braids, fights over bubble-gum.

When I reached the hall, I heard the imam say in a loud voice, 'Straighten the lines! Straighten the lines and pray as if this is the last prayer.'

My father has been coming to me in dreams

My father has been coming to me in dreams. One night he wants a glass of water while I am busy at the kitchen sink, a child pulling at my clothes, my best friend at my side, pouring over the angst of her life, luminous as the soap suds in my hands.

Another dream: my father wants the windows closed. It is too cold for him while I hand out crisps and shout at the child, who in the maverick way of dreams, got hold of the mosque's collection box for the orphans and is prancing about, fists full of coins.

So I telephoned my father across the world. Thousands of miles, time zones, a different language to talk. 'Where are you?' he said. Strange question. Old age?

'In Aberdeen, of course.'

'But Leila', he said. 'You sound so close'.

Life Events Translated Literally From Arabic

rare with night grew in the elephant's trunk. night came from higher ground, the lineage of rare was veiled.

from the island rare sent letters with excellent. night sent cookies, carried by one of the gazelles.

heart showed night another night: night eternal. in the seventies night eternal held a gun, hijacked airy lines for the sake of palestine.

days rotate.

days rotate.

near the river dee, words from the criterion are said aloud. and night is again in the flowers opened.

Writing A Novel*

The words come out of me like blood, burning, with difficulty, in clots. I know the bloated feeling beforehand, madness, the dark dip through scum. This is my fever and my cure.

Sometimes a flow, unexpected release. I am in awe of this gushing. Too much and there will be an embarrassment; accidental stains no one should see.

When I was young I was told that the blood is the womb lining itself, furnishing itself every month. So too my heaviest feelings are mucous, my secret thoughts are dense clots. They build up and then sidle out. Ink on the padded white of dry sheets.

**The Translator*, published in 1999*

Another Game

I stepped into his home and he stepped into my heart. And settled.

I saw inside him, through his skin; sadness like honey, sadness like mud. The way he paused when he spoke to me.

'Let's play a game!' I said. I wanted my eyes to shine and please him, 'Your turn first'.

'I am a seal', he said, 'away from water. I cannot move with ease. I remember the time I swam and swam, turned and glided back. Now I am heavy, shifting on the ground in very small increments.'

On the map he showed me his land; blue ice and snow, blue frost and sugar cubes. He smiled when I traced with my finger the Nile flowing north, pushing through desert before it fell into the sea.

He knew all kinds of names and their lives. I learned why he was sad. Only liars could be cheerful now. And those for whom the sky was opaque.

He said, 'All idols in our time are idols of the mind'. His words were balanced like a string of pearls.

About the Writer:

Leila Aboulela was the first winner of the Caine Prize for African Writing. She is the author of four novels,*The Kindness of Enemies, The Translator*, a New York Times 100 Notable Books of the Year, *Minaret* and *Lyrics Alley*, Fiction Winner of the Scottish Book Awards. Her work has been translated into 14 languages, broadcast on BBC Radio and appeared in publications such as Granta, The Washington Post and the Guardian. Leila grew up in

Sudan and moved, in her mid-twenties, to Scotland. Her website is www.leila-aboulela.com

The Invisible Map

by Maaza Mengiste

DAY

Tigist sits in a cramped jail cell that the Libyan smuggler uses for an office. It is a block of hollowed out concrete stuffed with a desk and two chairs. She is trapped in a large prison smashed into the middle of the Sahara desert, surrounded by armed men who pace like predators.

"Make the call," he says, waving his cell phone in her face. "Tell them you're in Kufra and once they wire the money, we'll take you to Tripoli then put you on a ship to Italy." He wants her to call her parents and ask for the ransom for her release. It is twice what her parents make in a year.

Tigist stares at Kufra on the map and shakes her head to sharpen the blurring lines. How long has she been in this place? She can't remember when her mornings stopped ebbing to afternoons. It is one long hour turning on its own solitary orbit. An endless circular journey marked only by the rise and fall of the stinging desert sun.

She doesn't know how to ask for money when she didn't even say goodbye. It had been so hard then to explain the hopelessness of unemployment, the fear of working hard and getting nowhere, the guilt of having more than some and wanting as much as others. It had been easier to simply look in the horizon and say, 'I will call them when I get somewhere and they will understand.'

"Do it now," the smuggler says.

Tigist dials her parent's phone number in Addis Ababa. The phone rings. She pictures her father sitting in his favorite green chair with the crooked leg, reading the newspaper and grumbling to himself. Her mother is humming and roasting coffee beans in the kitchen. They have the curtains open in the sitting room and the gentle sun is falling in the same place it has been falling for the last nineteen years of Tigist's life, just on the edge of their flowered sofa, the bright magenta roses now a dull, soft pink. Possibly, her mother will look from their tiny kitchen, swipe aromatic smoke from her face and say what she's always said on those sunniest days: When will we get a new sofa? And her father, always frugal, will shake his head and say,"Fikir, my love, it still works." Somewhere in the foggy distance, a monk's tender voice will push through the din of the growing traffic and prayers will weave like a thread into their home. Her mother will make the sign of the cross and both of them will bow their heads and give thanks. Or maybe all routine has been broken by her absence and they are praying for her in tears, jolted out of each other's arms by the shrill telephone that her father always lets ring three times before answering.

She stands in the cell that is the same size as the smuggler's office. This one is filled with forty-five damaged women, six children, and one broken toilet. Tigist tries to swallow the bitter taste of the phone call. She can hardly remember what her parents said, only her father's steadfast reassurances and her mother's shuddering sobs. She didn't ask how they would get the money but she imagines this: her father, the fastidious civil engineer, dressed in his best suit and polished shoes, walking to save petrol, begging the Chinese

boss he distrusts for more hours, another project. 'I'll work every day without a break,' he says. Her mother will knock on every door in their modest neighborhood and point towards Libya and say, 'Anything you can spare. I'll do anything to pay off the loan.' Her father will go to the bank and take out all his savings. Both will come home and stare at the small pile of cash. They will struggle every day to get the money, and Tigist knows they might not make it.

It should have been an easy journey, a series of connecting dots navigated by guides who would take her and her friend, Helina, from Ethiopia to Sudan then into Libya. But they were arrested by Sudanese police who led them out of the holding house in Khartoum at gunpoint. There had been an exchange of money with smugglers, then they were forced into a metal box crammed with other desperate men, women and children begging for water and air. The truck had rattled through the Sahara and when they stopped, those alive had let the dead tumble out first.

"Sit here, Tigist." It is Helina. The one who said: I know the way to a better life. "Think of something good," she tells her now. "Think of something good and pray." She wants to push Helina away but then she realizes that Helina, too, had to make the same call the day before. She, too, is waiting. She, too, is ashamed.

Tigist takes her hand instead, and that simple gesture sends her back to their high school graduation day and the shy smiles of the boys one row ahead of them. She'd been proud of her cap and gown, its shade like the clearest sky on the brightest day. She hadn't been afraid then of boys verging on manhood. Back then, she could say, 'No,' and they wouldn't. They simply held your hand and smiled and asked you to have coffee at Kaldi's café or go dancing at the latest club or watch a soccer match from the big screen at Meskel Square.

But this isn't back then and this isn't Ethiopia. She is in a place where it is normal to point to a man you do not know and say, 'Yes, he is my husband,' and hope that this will save you from what has happened to every other woman. She is in a place where women are being pulled apart slowly, left in pieces in the dirt and filth, collapsing under the weight of their own dark, inescapable skin. She is in this place called Libya, but Libya is for the Libyans, not for black dogs like her, the guards say. You are Jews, some guards also say, even when the prisoners show their crosses or some plead: we are Muslim just like you. But the guards insist: you are all Jewish spies who come disguised in black skin and crosses. Sometimes, she doesn't know what she is except an excuse to extort money from humble people whose only crime is to be her parents.

NIGHT

As she waits, she writes letters to her parents. When she has the money for paper and a pen, she will put them into real words and send them. She skips formalities and begins at the heart of every matter. Do you remember those leaning shanties just past Saint Gabriel's church, the ones Abbaba said were held together by mud and stubbornness? Do you remember the incense you burn every Easter morning, Emama? Abbaba, I wish I could count the rain drops tapping on our roof with you again. She reminds them of her annoying morning chores and the drudgery of homework; the dusty roads full of labourers on their way to work, one of them her handsome, proud father. She wants to gaze from Entoto Mountain at the pockets of dug-up land and dream of living in the latest housing development. She wants to buy candy from Sissay at the kiosk shaped like a giant Coca-cola bottle. Even the constant sing-song shouts of scrappy boys calling the next bus stops,

she misses them now, very much. She leaves out many details: that there is nothing steady in this prison but the stench of human waste, that there is a kind of fear as solid and thick as human flesh, that almost every day trucks unload more prisoners and others disappear, that this place is a revolving door of bodies. In her most honest moments, she might say that their cell door opens often and a flashlight roams over the crouched women. She might allude to what happens next when she says they pray often before falling asleep. She might say that the women take care of each other, that on certain days, they all gather around one or two and become each other's mothers. Because you are not with me, Emama, she might say, some women have been kind to me. She ends every letter with a promise to see them soon, to send them the money to pay off their loans.

DAY

She doesn't know why she says it when she is still waiting for the money to arrive, when she is still in this prison, but she does: "Helina, I want to go home. I want to go back."

She would risk the suffocating ride through the Sahara, the smugglers and the random killings. She would tolerate the slow dying in those burning metal boxes and swallow her own spit for nourishment. She would do all this just to hug her father and kiss her mother. To go home. To stand beneath their orange tree and touch green leaves, to pick yellow daisies wet with morning dew. She wants to look at the smuggler's map again and memorize every road that branches like a broken vein towards her country.

"Tigist, there is no way but forward." Helina shakes her head, as tough as the warrior grandmother she was named after. "Every road we've traveled disappears as soon as we pass it. There's nothing to mark where we've been but the bones of those who died along the way. It's an invisible map. We just have to be strong until the money comes. We have to pray we will live."

Tigist knows Helina well. When she says, "There is no way but forward," what she really means is, "We're stuck."

NIGHT

She dreams. She hears a telephone ringing and it is her father. He doesn't say hello. Instead, he reminds her: There is room for you here. Aren't you crowded there? Another time, it is her mother who calls by sending spasms to her heart. You're not eating enough, she says. Ask for a few more grains of rice. In another, the quiet boy in her class who once asked her out stares at the flashlight beam hovering on her thighs and tells her, You're not new anymore.

Sometimes, she wakes just before morning and listens to the ragged breathing of the other women. She imagines the sun, burnt by the strength of its own rays, burrowing into another cloudless sky. She dreams Helina builds her a ladder made of bones. She climbs to the sun and says, "In Ethiopia, our day starts each time you appear, at 6am. But in Libya, a new day begins in the pit of darkness, at midnight. What does this say about my chances of escape?"

DAY follows NIGHT follows DAY follows NIGHT follows DAY follows NIGHT follows…

Then it happens. The flashlight finds her and she knows it's her turn to be one of those night women. She closes her eyes and grabs Helina's hand, but Helina is pushing her away.

"Stand, Tigist," she says. "Get out. Go. Don't you understand?"

It is the Libyan smuggler this time, not one of the guards. "Hurry up," he says.

Tigist pulls Helina with her to the door and they both push against the smuggler's hands, two silent women with a single beating heart. If they could have found the voice to speak, this is what they would have said to him: 'We have made an oath never to leave each other's side. I am the steady hand that holds her up. And I sing the songs she needs to fall asleep. We have promised to help each other until we get to Tripoli, until we board the ship to Europe, until we land, until we pay our debts, until we fall in love, until we marry, until we can sing again. I can't leave her. Yes, I cannot leave her either.' The smuggler pushes Helina back and pulls Tigist forward and soon she is grasping onto nothing but air.

Later, the guard slams the two creaking doors of the container, cutting the sun in half then snuffing it out altogether. It is crowded and the people are moaning, but even with the rumble of the loud truck, even in the cacophony of men, women and children begging for water, for mercy, for God, Tigist can hear her name floating on a feeble breeze and she knows it is from her friend, who is a sister, who is swiftly becoming a memory.

28 June 2016

She begins every letter the same way:

The sea is a kind of blue you have never seen in your life, Helina. I am in Rome. Where are you? People who have come out of the prison say you are not there anymore. My sister, forgive me for leaving you in a country cracking open and getting worse. Only part of me lives here. The other half is wherever you are, on an invisible map, trying to gather bones and build a body. At night, I hear you telling me not to scream, but Libya comes alive in the silence. Maybe noise is what keeps us human. Maybe that is why we cry. I will keep looking for you. I will never give up.

About the writer:

Maaza Mengiste is a novelist and essayist. Her debut novel, Beneath the Lion's Gaze, was selectedby the Guardian as one of the 10 best contemporary African books and named one of the best books of 2010 by Christian Science Monitor, Boston Globe and other publications. Her fiction and nonfiction can be found in The New Yorker, Granta, the Guardian, the New York Times, and BBC Radio, among other places. She is the recipient of a Fulbright Fellowship and was awarded Runner-up in the 2011 Dayton Literary Peace Prize. Maaza writes fiction and nonfiction dealing with conflict, migration, and the relationship between photography and violence. She was a writer on the documentary

projects, GIRL RISING, and sits on the boards of Words Without Borders and Warscapes. Her second novel is forthcoming.

Dead White Guy

by Tendai Huchu

aPhiri was a man who liked to live a simple life. He did not enjoy strife, and had arranged everything around him so that his life would be as easy and as peaceful as possible. This he did in certain practical ways; his wife, amaPhiri, went to work while he stayed behind to look after the home. They had no children because even the issue of his loins could not be arsed to swim very far. This, of course, meant he did not have to expend energy in rearing his progeny like some of his less fortunate friends. aPhiri did very little around the house, preferring his wife, who could not stand a mess, to do it instead.

In many ways the Phiri household was happy and comfortable. On Sundays, aPhiri would relax at home, where he had the full Sky Sports package, and wait for his friends to visit. This particular Sunday, being a Ford Super Sunday, Nato was in very early with a case of their favourite beer, *Stella Artois*.

'I'm telling you Chelsea have a problem on the central left,' Nato said.

'What does that even mean?' aPhiri replied.

'They have to cover runs from the right wing and keep it tight in defensive mid to free up their central left which feeds the winger.' Nato thrived on regurgitating commentary he couldn't understand from the various tabloids he bought, especially the Daily Sport. 'Abramovich must strengthen the squad and fire the coach…'

Nato went on and on, while aPhiri was content to sip on his beer and filter out his voice as background noise. This is what he did when a subject did not agree with him — in this case, it was Nato's call to fire the coach.

amaPhiri came in through the front door. She was tired and her weave was dishevelled. She'd just commuted from Basingstoke, back to Reading, as she often did in her work as an agency carer, drifting between various nursing homes.

'How was work, my sweetie, my lovie, my pretty,' said aPhiri, tilting his head so she could kiss his cheek.

'That nursing home is terrible,' she whined. 'Is there any breakfast?'

'I have cereal in the cupboard, water in the kettle, and milk in the fridge.'

She said hello to Nato and went to eat before she retired. Theirs was a happy marriage, the partnership of the rider and the horse, each contributing what they could of the gifts God had given them. From her salary, which paid their bills, aPhiri had a little allowance each month which he used on football and the horses. Sometimes he won and they were flush, most times he lost, so you could say he was a professional gambler of sorts.

There was a knock on the door, and Madzibaba who made up the last member of their little trio came in. He wore his red Man U jersey, and the green and yellow scarf that was all the rage those days.

'Two-nil and two-one, that's what you wanted, right?' he said, handing aPhiri betting slips from Ladbrokes.

'Did you also get my lottery ticket?'

'I met a bloke in the shop who asked me where I was from. I told him Zimbabwe, and he starts telling that he'd been to Kenya on safari twenty years ago. I had to listen to this guy go on and on, like, why the hell should I care about Kenya? What's the relevance?'

'Did you get my lottery ticket?' aPhiri repeated.

'Imagine I met an Englishman and started going on and on about how I'd been to Croatia, and I loved the culture, the people, the architecture there, and all sorts of bollocks. How does that work?'

'Lottery ticket.'

'Yes, and three scratchcards.'

aPhiri inspected his numbers, while Madzibaba helped himself to a pint. When he was satisfied the numbers were correct, aPhiri began to work on the scratchcards. It Could Be Ewe yielded nothing, and he moved on to Money Spinner which had a grand prize of £8000, with odds of 1 in 4.90. He stood to win any amount between £1, £2, £5, £10, £20, £40, £100, £500. Alas, he lost and he set about working on Pigs Might Fly which had the slightly better odds of 1 in 4.78.

A film of silver dust fell as he worked his lucky 2p coin on the scratchcard. The first row revealed numbers £2 £40 £5000. He took a deep breath and began working on the next row £250 £5000 £2 it was looking good, there was a chance to hit the jackpot £40 £2 £250 and when the last row was revealed, he let out a loud whoop and shouted, 'I've won.'

'How much?' Nato asked, rising from his seat and crossing the room.

'Two pounds,' replied aPhiri, grinning from ear to ear. Nato took the card, inspected it and confirmed the win. 'This is a sign today is going to be a good day, praise the Lord.'

'Amen.'

They drank their beers, full of good cheer, their spirits raised by aPhiri's good fortune. The winnings meant he could invest in the mid-week lottery. You have to be in it to win it, and aPhiri was in it. Madzibaba wondered out loud whether they had enough beers to last them from morning until the second match. Once they were settled, they didn't like interruptions, and having to go to the corner shop on Oxford Road would have counted as a major interruption. Nato answered they were well stocked and could dip into aPhiri's emergency stash of whisky, if push came to shove.

‘I hope it won’t come to that,’ aPhiri mumbled under his moustache. There was a knock on the door that startled him. He looked to his friends to see if any of them was expecting someone else. Debt collectors never operated on a Sunday, and so aPhiri called out, ‘Come in,’ avoiding the effort of rising from his chair.

A skinny, old white man with a pale face came in, walking slowly. He wore a sombre, black Herringbone tailcoat, striped trousers, black shoes and a black top hat which he doffed as he crossed the threshold.

‘Can I help you?’ aPhiri said.

‘Yes, yes you can,’ the old man replied, his voice wispy with the crackly quality of a dying wood fire. He paused and did not say any more. He looked round the room, very deliberately, taking in the worn carpet, flowery wallpaper and mismatched faux leather sofas.

‘You’ve got the wrong number,’ said aPhiri.

‘This is the right place.’ The old man spoke slowly. ‘Ere’s the story. I’ve got one of your lads in me freezer. He’s got no family or nothing, and your embassy won’t do anything about repatriating him.’

‘What are you talking about?’

‘The stiff that’s in me freezer.’

‘What’s a stiff?’

‘Look, I’ve had him for two months now, that’s not right, is it? That’s storage, mate. We don’t come to your country and leave dead bodies all over the place, do we?’ The old man held up his hand to stop aPhiri talking. ‘It’s not right. We don’t have to take this sort of thing anymore. I’ve got a colleague in Luton who’s been sitting on one of yours for fourteen months now. Who’s gonna pay for that? You ain’t doing it to me, I can tell you that. We’ve been in the business for three generations and never had anyone pull a fast one on us.’

‘What are you talking about?’

‘This,’ the old man reached into his breast pocket and threw a picture on the table. Madzibaba took it, looked at it and passed it on to Nato, who did the same and passed it on to aPhiri.

‘Who’s this?’

‘That, my friend, is the stiff, and it’s going to be up to you to make sure he gets a decent send-off.’

‘This is a white guy. I don’t know any white people.’

‘Says on his passport he’s Zimbabwean, and since your embassy won’t help, I’ve decided it’s got to be up to you guys.’

aPhiri looked at Nato to see if he could make any sense of it all. The old man reached down and took the silver pocket watch that was dangling from his right breast pocket. He flicked the cover open, checked the time, and replaced it.

‘It’s a little after ten. I’ll come back ere at five and you better have a grand, wonga, or coconuts, whatever you people call it, that’s gonna cover me expenses. If you don’t have the money, I’m dumping the stiff here.’

‘But it’s a white guy,’ aPhiri raised his voice, something he seldom did.

‘You’re Zimbabwean?’ the old man said, unperturbed.

‘Yes, but-’

‘Then I’m making it your problem. Five o’clock – one grand or corpse. The choice is yours. *Comprende*?’

The old man put on his hat, bowed slightly, and turned round stiffly. He left with the same deliberate pace he’d entered with, and closed the door gently behind him. Nato stood up, scratched his head, and walked over to the window where he watched the old man get into a hearse and drive off.

‘Mashura chaiwo. Screw it, it’s Super Sunday,’ said Madzibaba.

‘What do you mean screw it? You’re not the one who’s getting a corpse dumped at his house.’

‘Look, you have to draw a line in the sand. Where will it stop if you have to accept responsibility for every dead white person in this city? No way, aPhiri,’ Madzibaba spoke with conviction, a sense of righteous indignation pouring out. ‘We’ll watch our football. Don’t worry about that idiot.’

‘No one’s watching any football until we get this sorted.’ aPhiri turned the TV off.

‘We could always bury it in your back garden,’ Nato mused.

‘Why don’t we bury it in yours!’

‘His wife wouldn’t approve, she’s just planted new fuchsias,’ Madzibaba said.

Nato shrugged and looked up at the ceiling. aPhiri drank his beer in sullen silence. Anything that breached his peace resulted in the onset of an immediate depression. He had achieved near-perfect homeostasis in his life, and lived in such a way that he did no harm to others, so was it too much to ask others to do the same in return. Where would he get a grand from? He looked at his Pigs Might Fly and calculated he was nine hundred and ninety eight quid short. There was no one he could call, because he already owed money all

over town. Nato and Madzibaba yakking on about Chelsea's problems with their new, fifty million pound striker didn't help either.

He asked Nato to get some whisky from his emergency stash. A shot or two would help clear his head. He drank it, straight, whipped out his mobile and called Chikot, the one guy he didn't owe money in Reading, this being because Chikot never had any money. He described his problem in great detail and besieged him to come and help. Chikot was one of those clever, university types, and if anyone knew what to do, it would be him.

Madzibaba looked up from his mobile and said, 'Pompo is coming over, his wife threw him out.'

'This is not a good day,' replied aPhiri.

'She went through his phone and discovered texts from his girlfriend.'

'He's stupid for cheating.'

'No, he's stupid for not deleting. Now he's going to stay at my house until she takes him back. She always does.' Madzibaba sent a text back.

There was a knock on the door. Chikot came in with a blonde girl by his side. He greeted aPhiri and the others, and introduced the girl as Chloe, his new girlfriend. aPhiri gave them a beer each, and found himself worrying about his supply of alcohol. If Pompo was coming round as well, then there was going to be even less to go round. This was a dreadful state of affairs. He slyly hid an unopened bottle behind his sofa.

'I called Banda on my way here. Your case is a very complex one,' said Chikot, sipping aPhiri's precious beer. 'It's a manifest violation of your human rights.'

'Human rights,' aPhiri echoed, impressed by this new legal, ethical dimension.

'This is an example of everything that's wrong with this country. They are happy to spend money, deporting living, breathing human beings, but they won't spend a penny to flush out a dead guy.'

'His ancestors were probably from here anyway and they want me to deal with it.'

'It's the Big Society which Cameron has been pushing around for months now. Everything's going to be privatised. They don't even respect the dead anymore. Didn't I tell you, Chloe, that the Tories are only for the rich?'

aPhiri was impressed by the depth of his friend's knowledge of politics and the law. The phrase, 'manifest violation of your human rights', played in his head. With Chikot here, he was sure, his human rights would be protected. He felt a slight pressure in his bladder, but it was not yet time to break the seal. He'd hold it in for as long as he could.

There was another knock on the door. Pompo and Banda, who'd met up in the street, came in together. aPhiri was relieved to see Banda, who was steaming, carrying a paper bag with

a twelve pack. Pompo looked miserable, carrying a black bin liner that contained all his worldly possessions. aPhiri had no respect for cheaters. It was too much hard work. The lying and sneaking about was a waste of time and effort. He wondered whether he should tell Pompo about his philosophy on how to live an easy life.
'I'm sorry to – hic – about what – hic – ppened,' Banda said, shaking his hand.
aPhiri could smell the alcohol on Banda's breath. 'It's terrible.'

'I just – hic – want you to know – hic – that I am here for – hic. I told my sister, and we will support you through this difficult ti – hic.'

aPhiri felt his spirits rise when he knew others were being told about his dilemma. Everything was going to be okay. Madzibaba turned the TV on, in time for the kick off for the first game. Liverpool took the initiative and pressed the attack, only for Chelsea to concede an early corner. He took a look at his betting slip and kept his fingers crossed. The room came alive with the sound of voices talking over one another about the game. Madzibaba kept trying to steer the conversation to his beloved Man U, arguing that all the other teams were inferior bridesmaids, whose only role was to escort Man U to glorious victory. Pompo sat sullenly in the corner, nursing the beer from which he took intermittent sips.

Around half-time, there was a knock on the door, and Samero walked in. aPhiri was alarmed because he owed him money, and for him to come at a time like this was socially awkward. Samero brushed past Nato, solemnly, and went to aPhiri, shook his hand, mumbled something unintelligible, gripped his shoulder and looked into his eyes for a few seconds before going to sit beside Madzibaba. aPhiri, a little confused, asked Nato to give Samero a beer. He hoped that their noise wouldn't wake amaPhiri up, especially since she was off to another nightshift later on.

The football on TV ping-ponged back and forth, with the commentators all awhile keeping up the impression that somehow this was an impressive display of tactics on both sides, and that the nil-nil score at the final whistle was evidence of an epic battle. aPhiri crumpled one of his betting slips and threw it on the floor. His hope now lay in the next match which would be on shortly. He was content to sit back and watch his guests chatting energetically about the game. It had been a long time since he'd had so many people in his house. Perhaps he could start a little shebeen and make something extra on the side. amaPhiri wouldn't approve though, so the idea was quickly shelved, as he did so often with his schemes.

The second game had kicked off when they heard voices singing a familiar verse from outside:

Mamutora, mamutorawo, mamutora nhai Baba,
Mamutora, mamutora nhai Baba…

aPhiri looked outside his window and saw a group, led by a man in a suit, holding a thick book, coming towards his house. The group was let in by Banda who sat closest to the door. They continued singing the mournful, repetitive dirge for a good few minutes, drowning out the TV. aPhiri recognised some of them: Pastor Bere of the God's Guided Missiles Church, amaSorobhi, amaManjengwa, amaMandaza, Elder Mandaza, Elder Zvasiya, amaZvasiya, amaNetsai, amaTasara, Petros, Cecilia, Brian, Kuda, and three other youths he didn't know.

Pastor Bere held out his hands high in the air, to signal that the singing stop. aPhiri remained stunned in his chair. He was not into the whole church business and, to be fair, they were ruining his Super Sunday as it was. Pastor Bere began to speak in a booming voice:

'Switch off that TV,' he commanded, before launching into an exhortation. 'Dearly beloved, we are gathered here in Reading on a sad, sad occasion. Life in the diaspora is hard, because we are like the Israelites in Egypt. I said, "We are like the Israelites in Egypt!" Only Jehovah God can lead us back to Canaan, hallelujah. We must keep faith in the Lord, especially in these trying times, because Jehovah is faithful, Jehovah is powerful, He alone is worthy. Death is not the end, no! We are called to the kingdom to receive our due after toiling in the vineyard of the Lord. aPhiri's brother did not die in vain…'

Banda hiccupped. aPhiri tried to intervene, but the pastor was in full flow. The pastor shook and quivered with fervour, the veins on his neck bulging, his hands waving in the air.

aPhiri sank back in his chair and covered his face. The game was still on. Super Sunday had been hijacked by the fundamentalists. They cried out in tongues, made exclamations of affirmation which must have woken amaPhiri up, because she appeared in the doorway wearing her sleeping gown, a pair of pulling stockings on her head. The pastor lowered his tempo and strode through the crowded room towards her and put his hand on her head.

'Death is not the end, sister. Jesus said to his disciples, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I go to awake him out of sleep." Amen. This death in your family-'

'Oh my God,' amaPhiri cried out and threw herself on the ground, for her father was old and infirm. 'Father, father, why have you left me an orphan?'

The small living room was hot with the press of bodies and people praying. aPhiri held onto his bottle, unsure whether he could sip it or not with his wife crying and the pastor speaking in tongues.

'It's gonna get expensive with all these deaths going on,' Nato whispered.

'You have to stop them,' Madzibaba replied.

'I'm enjoying this too much.'

'We're missing the game, man.'

'You're right!' Nato sprang into action, he cleared his throat loud enough to be heard above the din. 'There has been a big, big, misunderstanding. No one is dead. Well, someone is dead, but-'

'He's confused,' said someone.

‘He’s right,’ aPhiri found his voice at last. ‘No one is dead, but someone is dead. Well, it’s not someone we know, so it’s no one.’ He went on to explain the events of that morning loudly for everyone to hear.

It turned out that in a case of Chinese whispers – he had told Chikot, who told Banda, who told his sister, who told baSorobhi, who told amaSorobhi, and so on – the message had altered ever so slightly with each iteration, and spun round until, in its final incarnation, it ended up as the death of amaPhiri’s father.

There was all round relief, a little embarrassment, and a lot of mirth over how the day had played out. aPhiri played round with the remote in his right hand, unable to decide whether it was safe to turn the TV back on or not. At least the Pentecostals didn’t drink, and so despite having this large group in his house, it would have no impact on his standard of living.

Just then, there was a knock on the door, a firm knock. Banda opened it, and stood back to let the undertaker in. The old man walked in, unperturbed by the mass of people in the house. He walked right up to aPhiri.

‘Time’s up, my friend. What’s it gonna be?’ His voice carried a hint of menace.

‘So this is the Satanist,’ Pastor Bere took a quick opening to re-establish his authority and remove some of the egg on his face, ‘the man who would threaten a member of God’s Guided Flock?’

‘Who is this guy?’ The old man looked at aPhiri and pointed his thumb at the pastor.

The pastor waved his hand as though willing the old man to vanish. This didn’t work, and so he resorted to more conventional methods: ‘I am the one who will stop you from abusing this poor child. Look at you there in your black satanic clothing. I command you by the power of the Spirit to depart.’ He puffed up his chest and continued, ‘Remember we are many, old man, and there is nothing you can do to the army of God’s Guided Missiles.’

‘Is that so?’ The old man turned to aPhiri. ‘So I take it you won’t cough up. Alright then.’ He went to the window and signalled.

A minute later, a big man, more Neanderthal than human, walked in, muscles bulging from under his tank top.

‘We have a problem here, boss?’ asked the big man.

‘I don’t know, do we?’ The old man turned round the room and found there were no objections, before he turned back to the big man. ‘Bring in the package.’

There was a loud gasp from the crowd when the big man, helped by a second Neanderthal of similar stature, came in with the corpse, wrapped in a white shroud, and dumped it on the little coffee table that sat in the middle of the room. amaMandaza fainted. aPhiri took a swig of his beer and crossed himself.

The old man smiled revealing yellowy-brown teeth, 'I told you and I warned you. It's your problem now.'

He turned to leave with his two goons in tow. aPhiri's head began to spin. He gripped his Pigs Might Fly as though it were some kind of sacred relic to ward off evil. He would have swooned had he not been in his favourite chair. There were voices talking at once in every corner:

'Mashura chaiwo.'
'Kutinakurira nyoka mhenyu, so.'
'Baba vangu shava.'
'I need to get out of here.'
'Lord help us!'
'Mashura chaiwo.'
'Hezvo?'
'Ah.'
'The world is coming to an end.'
'Signs and wonders!'

Pastor Bere called for calm amidst the chaos. He begged the old man to wait, dipped into his wallet and fished out a twenty pound note, saying to the people around, 'Who will multiply my money? Come on, show us a miracle.' Nato fished into his wallet and gave him a few notes and coins. Banda gave him fifty pounds. A few of the congregation asked to leave for the cash machine on Oxford Road, since they'd already emptied their wallets for Him at church. The old man and his goons looked on as the spontaneous whip around gathered steam.

When everyone had given something, each according to his ability, Pastor Bere, counted the money, blessed it, and begrudgingly gave it to the old man. It amounted to nine hundred and ninety eight pounds, plus a Pigs Might Fly scratchcard.

'See what you people can achieve with a little common sense,' said the old man.

'Just take it and go,' aPhiri replied. He suddenly felt more in control of the situation.

'Steady on, mate, we know what to do. Come on, lads, let's lift him up – gently does it now. We'll see to it that he gets a decent sending off, don't you worry about it.' The undertaker put on his hat with a wolfish grin.

After the undertaker and his goons had left with the dead white guy, aPhiri gave his profound thanks to the group. He did not touch his alcohol until the last Pentecostal left. Later that night, when everyone was gone, and he was drinking with Nato and Madzibaba, he felt the betting slip in his pocket, and complained that they had missed the Man U – Arsenal match.

About the writer:

Tendai Huchu's first novel *The Hairdresser of Harare* was released in 2010 to critical acclaim, and has been translated into several languages. Between projects, he translates

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