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The call came at 11 o'clock sharp that Monday morning, as if the caller had timed it to ring in the ambassador's office at precisely that hour, perhaps from a prearrangement to minimize interferences and insure confidentiality.

Marie recognized the man's voice as belonging to the ambassador's special contact at the State Department. She told the caller that the ambassador was unavailable and offered to take a message. She was surprised when he asked where the ambassador had gone. She replied, "Capitol Hill," reading from the note the ambassador had written down for her, prominently displayed beside the telephone.

"How long will he be away?" he then asked in a tone marked by surprise or maybe annoyance.

"A couple of hours," she told him. After a moment of hesitation, he said thank you.

Marie did not hear the tell tale click of the telephone ending the call, and only when the line had gone dead did she know for sure that the party she only knew as a voice had hung up. Marie shivered from the concern that had washed over her as quickly as she had responded to the caller's questions. Something had happened. Because she could not think what it could be, she was frightened. Her mind churned improbable disasters to the refrain of the security chief's warning that remaining in Washington depended on knowing everything about the ambassador's activities.

Marie loved being in Washington; away from Kinshasa, she was a person of importance, and no one from home who visited the imposing embassy building on Massachusetts Avenue failed to notice how regal she had become. She wore makeup here and spent hours at the hair salon every Saturday afternoon where two stylists took turns braiding her hair in the latest fashion. The queen of the embassy they called her back home. Now, fear was her crown. She debated with herself, before deciding to call the ambassador on his car phone, hoping that he would let slip a tad of information she could use to alert her control in Kinshasa.

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Washington was no longer happy with the Dictator. In May the State Department had sent William Klingesthousen to Kinshasa on an official mission to speak to him. Klingesthousen was a well-

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groomed man, anxious that the hair on the left side of his head cover his bald pate just so. He held his blunt nose up, seemingly to keep the contraption in place, giving him a pinched look of disdainful authority.

Klingesthousen was nicknamed “Thug” for his practice of the “New Diplomacy” of bluntness that had come into vogue following the disappearance of the Soviet Union. Soon after arriving on the State Department’s ninth floor, he remarked that his appointment signaled that Washington would no longer pooh-pooh irresponsibilities and corruption. Half rising from his high-backed leather chair like a stotting springbok, he declared, “Unless they are good, aid will be rationed — not as before. And don’t tell me the Soviets will provide what I won’t. That shit don’t work anymore. Pass the word: that shit don’t work anymore.”

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“I am convinced that Africans are gene deficient; a chromosomal abnormality may be responsible, making you incapable of doing what is right for yourselves or for anybody else,” Klingesthousen told the Dictator to his face. To journalists, he said, “I told the president democracy is self-motivating — democracy like virtue is its own reward — democracy is the only way out of the impasse in the region.” Heaving his chest forward perceptibly, unconsciously, the biggest boy in the yard. “And I read him the riot act about stability not being democracy. Democracy is what we demand! We will not stand; will not stand” —his hand chopped the air— “for undemocratic rule anywhere. The administration expects these countries to fall into line.” A victor flushed with triumph like a glutton his dinner, Klingesthousen expounded his views to the skeptical journalists, mindless of what was sensible.

The Dictator was astonished. No one — especially from the United States — had ever said such nonsense to him. A realist, he was not really offended. Compared to the Belgian colonizers of his youth, Americans, even those like Thug Klingesthousen, were more considerate of Africans. In any case, he had ways of dealing with careerists like Klingesthousen who, he reassured himself, were out to make names for themselves at the expense of dependable but no longer desirable African autocrats.

What, however, did offend the Dictator was that before coming to Kinshasa, Klingesthousen had stopped in Lyauteyville to confer with the president there, a former Soviet client. It was a new act in an old play; the dialogue had altered, but not all the players had changed

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costumes or moved on. Until Klingesthousen's visit, Washington would not have thought of sending a high-level bureaucrat to Lyauteyville without first securing the Dictator's acquiescence. Was it not only a year ago that the Dictator had arranged for the humiliation of the Lyauteyville President by withholding his agreement for the President of the United States to welcome him to the White House for a photo opportunity?

It had been the Lyauteyville President's turn, as the elected chairman of the Organization of African Unity, to visit the United States. As was customary, the new OAU Chairman had gone to the United Nations in New York to make a speech about Africa and made a quick stop in Washington for a picture with the President of the United States. But for a week, the Lyauteyville leader had cooled his heels in the refurbished Willard Intercontinental Hotel. He took boat rides on the Potomac River, organized by investors interested in making telephone poles out of trees from the luxuriant central African forest, waiting for an invitation to have his White House picture. With time to waste and desperate to show that he had been to the U.S. capital, he had even paid a visit to the mayor, for whom he had to wait forty minutes before a quick handshake. In the end, they told him to go see the vice-president at his senate office — not the White House.

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The Dictator was grinding his teeth, an indicator that forces were out of his control, the telling sign of fear, soon to be followed by rage. For Klingesthousen to go to Lyauteyville before stopping in Kinshasa was deliberate disrespect; Washington was signaling him as openly as allowable that it was displeased with him. Or was it more than displeasure? And why had Ambassador Sakeseba failed him? Sakeseba's most important job was to advise him of what Washington thought of him every hour on the hour if necessary; and briefing him thoroughly before a meeting with any American official was routine procedure, which Sakeseba until then had carried out in exemplary fashion. The Dictator could almost feel the cane in his hand as he imagined how he would exact his retribution. For reasons the Dictator had not yet fathomed, his ambassador, one of his most competent and trusted aides, had failed to warn him of the brutal reality Thug Klingesthousen had come to Africa to insult him with.

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When his secretary reached him on the car phone, Ambassador Sakeseba had almost reached his destination in the Washington suburb of Fairfax. Like the exuberant sunshine, Molu Sakeseba felt a special excitement driving through the quiet, lawn-strewn community of King's Park; it reminded him of the lush woods of his Congo's north. Driving in King's Park under the speed limit on a workday, he would recall walking for days surrounded by the tranquility of his woods with only the macaque cries ruffling the peace of the canopies. Even the cries had been a welcome disturbance, enhancing the eternal quiet of the forest — the forest, indulgent, inviting, endlessly patient, welcomed him. That reminiscence never failed to sharpen his excitement at what awaited him shortly in the arms of his remarkable mistress. Squirrels scampered across the road between passing cars, while three crows perched on a rooftop looked on, waiting for the inevitable tragedy to occur.

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Usually he stayed in his office on Mondays to talk to his contacts in Congress and the various governmental agencies about what had taken place over the weekend when policy makers made decisions that might concern Kinshasa. But this was an 'off' Monday. He had not been with the woman in the suburb for a while. And State would not announce who would be the new American ambassador to Kinshasa for another month.

He had done everything, spending lavishly to ensure that the Dictator's choice would represent Washington in Kinshasa. Secure that his man would prevail, and by way of rewarding himself for his efforts, this Monday, the ambassador decided that he deserved a few relaxing hours away from the office.

The telephone's ring brought him out of his reverie. His secretary would not have intruded on his outing unless there was an emergency.

"Yes, Marie."

"Your man at State called."

He waited; she would not have called him for that alone.

"He asked where you were, and when you would return. He *never* asked anything before. I thought that was strange. I didn't want to take a chance after what happened in May; maybe Thug is going to Kinshasa again." After a pause she repeated, "I didn't want to take a chance." Concern had given her voice a rasping tone, like manioc being grated for the evening meal.

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“Thug Klingesthousen is gone,” Sakeseba said, catching his breath, “he’s doing Latin America or Asia, telling the people there about their genetic discrepancies.” Marie’s anxiety hit its peak; she had been right — the trepidation in the ambassador’s voice, which he made no effort to disguise, was telling. After a pause the ambassador said, “I’ll be in the office in a couple of hours. I’ll call him then.”

“OK, is there anything you want me to get ready for you?” she asked.

“No,” he said, “I’ll take care of it.” And hung up.

Concerned caller ID would capture his car’s telephone number, he started looking for a shopping center where he would find a pay phone to call the man who had disturbed his outing in the quiet suburb of King’s Park. Making a U-turn on Sideburn Street, he drove two miles before reaching the shopping center on Braddock Road and the phone in front of the Safeway supermarket.

“What’s up, Marcel? You scared Marie with your questions about my whereabouts.”

“Well, you were out of the office at 11 o’clock on a Monday morning.”

“I am sorry; I should have told you I wouldn’t be in.”

“About Marie, that’s understandable. She was probably thinking about the guy in Kinshasa who paid the price for not warning Motutu about Thug Klingesthousen. Motutu put that poor bastard through one of his shoeshines with the cane. If Marie knew he was now one of Kinshasa’s pitiful beggars, she would die. So that you don’t become one yourself, I have to see you right away. I’ll meet you in half an hour at the usual place.”

“Make it forty-five minutes, Marcel.”

“That’s right. I forgot. You are — what did Marie say? — at the gym, exercising...” the man from State said with a strained laugh.

Molu hung up and ran back to his car. The King’s Park woman would wait another day. In minutes, he was back on Braddock Road, heading for the beltway and the District of Columbia.

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When Molu arrived at the restaurant on Kalorama Street, his friend and a drink were at the bar waiting for him. They shook hands and walked to a table in the back where the light from the bar was less bright.

The friend was 1976 Morehouse College graduate summa cum laude in anthropology, Marcellus Garinaldi, an African American foreign service officer who, like many black FSOs, had served in

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Africa. After multiple bouts of malaria, he had requested an assignment in Europe. "Forget it," the director had said to him, "you look better in Africa. Sierra Leone is where you belong." It was a policy commonly applied to blacks.

Molu Sakeseba had befriended him and showed him the ways of Africa when Garinaldi was a junior officer posted in Kinshasa twenty years earlier. In time he had become this African ambassador's most perceptive adviser, using his familiarity with State Department's bureaucratic practices to guide Sakeseba through the diplomatic and foreign policy mazes.

"Relax Mr. Ambassador," he told Molu, concern on his face and in his voice when they took their seats. "I didn't mean to scare you, but after the Klingesthousen fiasco in May — you know, I didn't know what that clown was up to — I wanted to make sure you were in the loop no matter how bad the news."

"What are you talking about, Marcel?"

"It won't be announced for a couple of days, but the new ambassador for Kinshasa was picked at the Assignment Board meeting this morning."

Sakeseba stared at his companion, his lips pursed. "But I thought that decision was at least a month off. What happened?"

"That's what I thought too, but the word came from the front office to get it out of the way."

"So it's not the old man's choice?" Sakeseba said, his voice flat.

Marcellus took a sip from his drink to hide a grimace. With his free hand, he reached into his pocket for the ever-present cigarette case. He did not understand why his friend called the autocrat in Kinshasa "old man." You called your father "old man;" someone you respected you called "old man," but a corrupt dictator? Another African trait he did not understand.

Marcellus was unlike colleagues who made a great show of "knowing" Africa, acknowledging that his understanding of the continent and its people was limited at best. "There is more to Africa than we comprehend," he would invariably say.

From behind a smoke ring, Garinaldi answered that the Dictator's man had lost out.

"God, who is it then?" asked Sakeseba.

"Judd Mosley," Marcellus said, folding his hands on his lap, knowingly, anticipating his friend's reaction.

Molu leaped to his feet, as if an explosive had gone off in his chair. "Mosley? the black man?" he whispered, incredulous, through his teeth, standing over Marcellus.

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“Well, he doesn’t call himself that. But, yes, that’s the one.”

“But why?” Molu asked, sitting back down, when he saw the people at the bar looking at him, his face contorted, almost in tears.

“Look Molu, we have discussed this before. Kinshasa is no longer on the A list, where only a white ambassador will do. Why do you think Thug Klingesthousen did what he did over there? He wouldn’t have done that two years or even a year ago. And can you imagine that clown telling a European that he had a dead chromosome? Kinshasa is now on the D or C list, who knows? You have to have African American ambassadors, right? This is America, and it’s the late twentieth century.”

“Second class citizens for second-class countries! Is that what you are telling me?”

“I wouldn’t put it that way myself,” Marcellus said. But, yes, that’s basically what it is. The State Department sends an African American only every five years or so to a European country — and a small one at that. If you are black, get back. You know. They do it behind your back, and you’re never the wiser. Not that you could do much about it, even if you knew.”

“What’s the definition for this shit? Racism?” Molu asked.

“No, it’s not like that. It’s something that has no name. They are not all rednecks over there.”

“So what’s your explanation?”

“Diversity frightens most people, in some form or another,” Marcellus answered. “This is how I explain our assignment system to my department mentorees. From October to December, those in the market for assignments seek support from people they have worked with. A reference from someone influential is especially welcome. Expected as much as resented are visits to offices to drop off resumes, grovel, and make a pitch for a job. The practice, in this arena, having evolved into a norm to flush out the strongest contenders has degenerated into a support type of system. And since complaints are common if muted, only the candidate whose hand an authority has shaken knows for sure he or she is the anointed one for a particular assignment, while his colleagues — in hopeful ignorance — continue to solicit furiously. I don’t want to bore you with more details.”

“What’s the social corollary of this? Can you tell me that?”

“The social corollary is that perceived abuse leads to anger, which creates a vicious circle. Akin to prison, to wash off the indignities we put up with, we become abusers ourselves. And there is a political aspect to these appointments, too.”

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"Political, you say?"

"Sure! The Black Caucus for one is breathing down the neck of the White House for more equitable appointments. And at election time, politicians can say progress is being made under their administrations. They don't have to say where they send African Americans.

"This is all internal stuff. Who cares? What I want to know is what's that got to do with Kinshasa?"

"Mosley's appointment is a product of this internal stuff, Molu!"

"They could have picked a second-class somebody else," Molu said, anguish in his voice, "it wouldn't be as bad." His anger no longer all-consuming, his mind was passing in review all the implications of the Judd Mosley appointment to his country. Like a man on a tightrope, he desperately sought to regain his balance. He was hearing admonitions from his ancestors.

"I understand, I understand; but if you want an American ambassador in Kinshasa, it will have to be a black man," Marcellus said, exasperated.

"God!"

"What I told you is for your ears only," Marcellus said. "I brought you a copy of the Task Force Report on State Department Reform. John Leighton was the chairman. You can use it when you talk to the man about the Mosley appointment. All you have to do is read from its findings. Convince him that a dysfunctional organization makes dysfunctional appointments."

"You don't know the old man, do you?" Molu asked. "What you told me does not change the fact that I failed him. It's my fault that he is going to lose face big time. This is one indignity he will not suffer. He knows your organization is dysfunctional; he has been dealing with it for thirty years. But he sent me here because he thought I was the one who would protect his interests — and I failed. And he knows how to deal with failures."

"Wait a minute," Marcellus said, worried. "What are you talking about?"

"I am dead," Molu said. "That's what I am talking about."

"You did what you could — and more," Marcellus said solicitously now. "You lobbied and kissed all the right asses. This is not your fault. Come on!"

"Tell me this, is there anyway to reverse this decision?"

"As long as it's not announced, I suppose so. The man has friends in Congress; you can try there. But I don't think it will work this time; it would be too easy to leak to the media that a congress-

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man is standing up for the Dictator of Kinshasa who has got billions in Swiss accounts. And they are saying he is to blame for the Tutsi genocide three years ago. For any Congressman, it would be the kiss of death. Your man is now in the same league as Baby Doc, Abacha and Idi Amin, you know.”

“He hasn’t got billions in Swiss accounts,” Molu said. “Most of the funds he uses to pay people off to stay in power — not to maintain corrupt Swiss bankers who robbed people fleeing genocide. I was with him once at a meeting with European journalists. They asked him about his billions. ‘Tell me where they are?’ he asked them. All they could do was point to villas in the south of France, Brussels and Switzerland. ‘At the most, you are talking about a few million dollars,’ he laughed; ‘you said billions.’”

“The perception that he is the most corrupt man in the world is not a laughing matter, Molu. And this is what the public responds to.”

“You don’t care that he is corrupt,” Molu said, having gotten angry again. “Corrupt has nothing to do with it; he is no different today than he was when you were all kissing his ring for favors.”

“That time is gone,” Marcellus said. “But corrupt does have something to do with it. If it were just a question of geopolitics, they would simply discard him like all the others in Africa. But the fact he is perceived as the most corrupt man in the world makes him a burden, an embarrassment to be shunned.”

“Where would Kinshasa be without him?” Molu asked rhetorically. “Kinshasa would have been balkanized — Katanga in Soviet hands. And do you think that Savimbi would have lasted as long as he did in Angola against the Cubans and the Soviets? He was corrupt then, wasn’t he?”

“He was needed then,” Marcellus said, “that’s also the difference. But this isn’t a seminar on the whorish ways of nations. This is about you. Motutu is a violent man whose cruelty feeds on his vindictiveness. He finds disloyalty even in his own closets. You were lucky the mud from the Thug Klingesthousen farce didn’t splatter on you. I lied to your colleagues at the United Nations that it was because of your efforts they removed Klingesthousen from the Africa account. They told the man who must have bought it — you are still here. You are going to have to use the Leighton report to explain this Mosley appointment. Call him right away to tell him what you have heard, and don’t fly to Kinshasa until you know it’s secure. Give yourself time.”

Molu looked at his friend in silence, as though he would not see him again and wanted to remember what he looked like. His

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mind drifted. He should tell the old man this afternoon about the State Department's decision. But the worst thing he could do was to use obfuscation.

He remembered that his mother always forgave him if he was the one to tell her first the mischief he had committed. Standing on the road from the market, waiting for her to explain what he had done always got him through. Raised by an African mother, he would always be an inveterate optimist.

"Look, Molu," Marcellus said, "this is a friend speaking. I think you could be the future of the Congo; the man has had his day. God knows corruption is not the only way. You seem to forget that 80% of your people live in absolute poverty? And I mean *absolute* poverty. The average Congolese was 53% poorer in 1995 than thirty years earlier. With that river you talk so much about, only 14% of the people have access to safe water. And minerals? Your soil has so much of it, cockpit instruments go haywire during flyovers. Just think what you could do with a country like that and a few honest institutions."

"What are you telling me, Marcel? That I should overthrow the old man? Are you nuts? I wouldn't be a bootleg head of state for anything in the world. I know we need change. I've known it since I left my village. But why think of coups when talking about change in Africa? You don't say that about your country."

"Look, the last time I was at the UN, I met the Senegalese foreign minister, you know, Fatou-Anne Cerusu. I stared at her for both her age and her beauty. She was amused when I just stared at her, so she came over and introduced herself. I have never met someone with a better understanding of Africa in the world today than this woman. Not even Madiba Mandela gets it the way she does. Get in touch with her; she can help."

"I know who she is," said Molu. "She never misses an opportunity to accuse the old man of one thing or another."

"But won't you at least talk to that colonel friend of yours? The military may have a take on this Mosley appointment that we haven't thought of."

"Yea, I'll talk to Freeman."

"OK man," Marcellus said, "it's your funeral."

Molu thanked him for wishing him good luck the way an African would. It was similar to saying "break a leg," a way to dupe perverse fate. He hugged his friend, thanking him for his help, promising to stay in touch.

"I'll take care of the tab," Marcellus said, "you have troubles enough."