

# SAVING THE PAST

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The road lay clear that day. A stretch of tarmac across the fields of the Kenyan savannah. A herd of zebras grazed gracefully as the sun set below the horizon. The orange glow of the African sky caressed the animals, silhouetting them and creating a great picture. One with nature. This is what Almasi truly loved. His head resting on his knee, he gazed into the horizon. Something was missing. Perhaps the blue strokes of paint on his yellow shirt provoked the thought. Maybe he just loved the colour blue such that no picture was ever complete without it.

“Look Almasi!” his mother’s beautiful voice stole into his thoughts. He turned his head towards her. She was seated at the front passenger seat next to his father. “The mountains. I know you love the mountains.”

Almasi’s face brightened with excitement. He rushed to move to the other side of the back seat but the buckle held him back. There was no way this was keeping him from seeing the mountains. He unbuckled the seatbelt and reached for the window raiser but it was broken. It had always been broken. Still, this made him frown. Then the thought came. He leaned forward to look through his mother’s window. He smiled as he looked at the blueish horizon. The way the forest carpeted the mountain gave him great joy. Now, this is what was missing, he thought to himself. He wished the two horizons could join as one. That would create the perfect picture. Perhaps that was his role as a painter. To make a great picture, perfect.

“Careful now!” his father warned as he changed up the gear bringing his attention back. “We do not want you to catch the flu.”

Almasi had not realised that his mother had been coughing into a handkerchief. He leaned back to his seat and had one last look at the blue horizon through his dusty window. After all, the picture was in his head.

Almasi’s father turned on the radio. He twiddled with the radio knob and found the right channel. He used another knob to adjust the volume. His face glowed revealing his love for the song. He tapped the steering wheel to its rhythm as the lyrics filled the car. Setting his cloth cap upright on his head, he stole a glance at his wife as she leaned against the side window. She was beautiful. Sadly, the smile on his face turned into a frown as she let out a dry cough.

“It must be the cold,” he said as he raised his window.

“Don’t worry honey, we are almost there.”

“Stop! They said not to stay in a closed room.”

“But honey...”

She let out another cough. He decided not to argue with her but to let her rest. The news was on. A coup had taken root all over the country and no one was allowed to be outside after sunset. As they continued driving along the road, they saw a crowd of people up ahead. They carried banners over their heads. Some held torches of fire, others machetes and others held out spears. Almasi moved to the other side of the back seat to have a better look at the mob as they drove through it. He squinted his eyes trying to read what the banners said.

“Why would they be out at this time?” Almasi asked.

“Stop looking at them!” His father’s tone became razor sharp. “We don’t want to attract unnecessary attention.”

As he sat back, Almasi saw his father grab his lieutenant badge from the top of the dashboard and throw it under his seat. His mother kept her face low as she passed him a cap.

“Buckle up! And put on that cap!”

His father slowed down. The mob started banging the body of their Peugeot Saloon to a rhythm as they sang a song of rebellion to the government. To this family, it felt like time had frozen, fixing them in this uncomfortable situation. Almasi’s father put on a great show of mimicking composure as he drove past the mob. Eventually, it fell behind them.

“Did we lose them?” he asked.

Almasi looked through the rear window as his mother looked to the side-view mirror. They saw the mob carrying on with their protests behind them. They had left the savannah behind and were now in a town. Almasi’s father saw the poster to the Long Drive Hotel on his right side. In a hundred metres, he would take a right turn to get there. It had been a long drive.

“Watch out!” her voice carried a hint of horror.

The car swerved suddenly taking Almasi by shock. First, it was to the left then to the right and then to a halt.

“We didn’t hit them, did we?” she asked frantically, only no one had the answer. They all fell into silence. Looking through the rear-view mirror proved futile.

He put the handbrake on and unlocked his door. For a moment he stopped to think. Could this be a trap? Should he just drive on? No. That’s not the man he was. And besides, what would the two people he cherished most in his life think of him? He opened the door and got out.

“A...are you okay?” he paused and listened. “We... we didn’t mean to do that.”

With some of the street lights broken, the road was barely lit. In the darkness, he saw two human figures getting up from the road. These were dangerous times and no one could be trusted. It was enough to see them unhurt. After all, he had counted two people as he swerved to avoid the accident. He got back into the car and drove off, disappearing into a curve along the road behind some fixtures with *makuti* roofs.

It was not long before the street fell into a semblance of silence but the ambient sounds of a typical evening. The wind whispered secrets that no one was listening to and the palm trees that graced the terrain swayed in acknowledgement of this. A man stepped from the shadows and into the light. The orange colour of the street lights glistened nicely on his dark skin.

“Is he the one?”

“Yes he is,” another man answered as he too revealed himself from the shadows. His eyes glimmered with accomplishment. He picked a clock pendant with a vintage look and astronomical inscriptions that lay on the tarmac. “The coup has begun. We have no time to waste!” The street lights flickered on as they walked into the curve of the road. “Mr. I can’t allow you and your family inside. You have disease,” his Indian accent could be heard from the furthest end of the hotel. The reception area was quite cozy with the decor mimicking the Swahili culture in every aspect.

“We’ll pay double,” he persisted.

It had been a long day. All it would take is for this man to hand him a key to any room. That would be enough kindness for one night. And besides, the keys were right in front of him. The excuse that there was no unoccupied room, as the man had earlier insinuated, could not stand.

Mr. Arjun brushed through some keys and picked the one for *Room 14*. It was the largest.

“Double?”

“Yes. Double.”

Almasi and his mother were outside by the car park. She leaned against the hood of their car as she made a call, while he sat at the back seat with the door open. With his lean body, he maneuvered to the driver’s seat and reached for the badge under it. The lights in the parking area flickered as he stared at it. In the distance, he saw a peculiar tree that stood magnificently. Curiosity got the better of him and he decided to have a closer look at this tree. He closed the door behind him.

A breeze whistled gently as he got closer. He had never seen such a tree before. It had two branches that formed the shape of an antelope’s horns. The trunk was wider than those of all the trees he had ever seen and the bark was thick. He lay his hand on it and felt one with nature.

Almasi’s father was walking towards the car when his wife ended the call.

“They will not allow anyone with the flu back to the city,” she broke the news.

“Well!” he let out a sigh. “That’s a problem for another day. We got a key.”

“And what did we have to sacrifice this time around?”

“We are paying double!” he responded as he walked over to the back seat. “The man went to fix the electrical problem.”

He knocked on the window of the back seat with his knuckle and signaled for Almasi to get out.

“Let’s get our bags and go.”

Almasi was confused. One moment he was by the tree and the next he was in the car. He tossed the badge back under the seat and opened the door, behaving like nothing had happened. His father

opened the front door and picked the badge. They all picked their bags from the boot and walked towards the hotel. Almasi looked at the tree one last time and followed his parents inside.

Efficiency is a necessity when it comes to running a hotel business and Mr. Arjun understood this. Holding a torch, he walked towards a cabin that lay a couple of yards from the main building. He held the torch with his mouth as he unlocked the door and switched on the lights. They flickered. He went for a red generator in the furthest corner of the room and pulled the cord until it roared to life.

“We want to borrow your electricity!” a mysterious voice came from behind him. Mr. Arjun turned from the generator and saw two men standing by the entrance of the cabin.

“We need that electricity,” Yala, the darker of the two men continued. “We must have that electricity!” Lukaku insisted.

The two men read out the inscriptions on the clock which, made it float into the air. Jolts of electricity flashed from the main generator that lay in the middle of the room and got sucked into the clock. The lights flickered violently until the flashing stopped. Mr. Arjun was shocked by all this. The clock slowly fell into Lukaku’s hand and the men turned to leave.

“Wewe ngoja!” Mr. Arjun shouted for the men to stop as he followed them outside. Yala and Lukaku looked at Mr. Arjun straight in the eye and suddenly a past tragedy became a reality. He vividly remembered trying to save his pregnant wife’s life when he rushed her to the hospital only to be denied the services since she was bleeding. This memory felt very real. He fell to his knees and begged for the doctors to take his wife in. Yala and Lukaku left for the reception area and took a key. They followed two men in room service uniform into the hotel.

Almasi sketched the tree to precision on his drawing board. He stroked his pencil on the paper as he drew the crown of the tree. He had sketched the two horn-like branches which, made it resemble the tree in the parking area even more. His parents were in their room. The doorbell rang and the words 'room service' came from the other side of the door. He heard a key turning and the door open. Yala and Lukaku got inside pulling a trolley and closed the door behind them. They got busy doing what any other room service personnel would do. They placed the food in the dining area, placed some clean towels by a towel rack and tidied up the room.

"That's a nice drawing," Yala said. He looked at the tree and knew he was in the right place. "Do you know the name of this tree?"

"No," Almasi replied. He had never seen this tree before. To avoid suspicion, Lukaku continued with his activities around the room.

"This is a culturally treasured tree across Africa," Lukaku said. "Rumour has it that it has special abilities. Ever heard of the *Mugumo* tree?"

This name rang a bell. He'd heard about the tree before but had never seen it. "I hear that if you go around it seven times you can change your gender?" Almasi announced.

Lukaku and Yala laughed.

"You want to become a woman?"

Almasi turned to Lukaku. "So you also know about the tree?"

"More than you know," he replied. "We saw you do a little trick earlier tonight. That's just a taste of what the tree can do. We can show you."

"But my mother and father..."

"We'll be back before they miss you."

Almasi and the two men got out of the room and went by the tree. He could not help but marvel as the horn-like branches appeared to glow in the dark.

"Did you know that trees have souls? The older the tree, the greater the power it holds. We come from a time where the world is falling

apart. Nature is weeping from the destruction that man has caused and to cleanse itself from this, it unleashed the deadly flu. Back at home we call it vudu. The flu that destroys. We are from the future,” Yala explained.

Almasi was bewildered by this. Many thoughts flooded his mind, still, he could not explain how he got in the car when his father knocked on his window.

“Touch the tree,” Yala advised.

Almasi put his hand on the tree. The feeling was intense. Again, he felt one with nature. He heard his parents calling out for him. From the drawing, they knew where to find him. As they got closer, he could tell that his mother’s cough was more chronic than before. Suddenly, a bud grew from where Almasi lay his hand.

“Nature has its own way,” Lukaku said in marvel. “You are a quick study.”

“Your mother has the flu. Give her the bud.”

With all that had gone down, Almasi had no reason to doubt the men. Besides, his mother had nothing to lose. They all knew that the flu was fatal. Almasi gave the bud to his mother.

“Now inhale it,” Yala instructed.

“Trust him, mother,” Almasi convinced her.

With one slow breath, the pollen from the bud flowed into her nostrils. Her cough suddenly stopped. Lukaku felt convinced that this wonder would cast away all doubts.

“We are from the year 2025. The future of the world is doomed and man discovered a way to live in the past. Somehow, the flu found its way into the past too. Now the world is doomed.”

As outrageous as the revelation sounded, they did not doubt it. There was a lot of myths going around about the flu but this one seemed quite compelling.

“We have travelled to the past to cure the world of this rot. The coup, as written down in history, should go down as an attempted coup. It



has lasted longer than it should have. It is now obvious that people from the future are trying to take control of the past.”

“We have a heavy task ahead of us,” Yala declared

Almasi’s father was bewildered by this revelation but his love for his country was stronger than his doubt.

“Deforestation has seen the destruction of all trees including the Mugumo tree which, as revealed by scientists, is nature’s solution to the contagious flu,” Lukaku added.

“The three of us have the *Mugumo* spirit inside of us and only we can cure the world of this rot. Your connection to the tree is stronger and we cannot do this without you,” Yala concluded.

Almasi, filled with great intrigue, placed his hand on the tree and they all disappeared. With the little information that they had, they were willing to save the past.