

Excerpt from **MIXED BLOOD** or **ADOPTED BY AN AMERICAN HOMOSEXUAL IN THE BELGIAN CONGO** by **Albert Russo**, which is part of the **AFRICAN QUATUOR**

SECRETS

What took place at Giorgios' one night nearly cost me my life. Everybody believed it was a car accident and that was just as well. I would never have wanted Léo to learn the truth. But here is what actually happened. Though I had called Giorgios regularly, a month had elapsed since we had last met. When I saw him, I immediately sensed something was wrong. He didn't look drunk, but acted as though he were under the effect of an hallucinogen. There was a sardonic expression on his face.

"What's the matter?" I asked him.

For a while his eyes were blinking like a puppet's. Then, making an effort to regain some composure, he said, "Having fun, with that commissaire-what's-his-name, hein!" He grinned. "Dumping Giorgios for a pretty boy. Tell me, is it so much better with him?"

I stared at him intently and spoke in a quivering voice. "We agreed to see each other on a different basis after what you did in front of Léo. Or don't you have any memory of that at all?"

"No one's talking about Léo. I've kept my promise." His tone rose and he began to insult me.

I shouted back, "If you carry on with your foul language, it's adieu, fini."

As I made for the door he grabbed a large copper jug and hurled it at me with all his might.

"Voilà, you can go to hell now!" were the words accompanying the terrible blow that knocked me out.

The next thing I remember was lying in a hospital bed.

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The accident version was concocted by Giorgios. For Léo's sake, he couldn't have been wiser.

Once I recovered, Giorgios and I had a long, serious discussion. It was a real heart-to-heart talk, something we had never had before. He analyzed his act and told me he had done it for fear of losing me. He couldn't bear the idea and even considered committing suicide. He cried softly.

He had had time to ponder over his impulsive gesture and kept saying, as if to himself, "Life is sweet. It is precious. What demon got hold of me? I'm not asking you to forgive me, Harry, but you should know that I'm a different, perhaps a better person now. It sounds silly but you've opened my eyes."

I believed in his sincerity, yet couldn't decide on what course of action to take. I needed time to reflect. I felt no bitterness against Giorgios nor was there any of that pity I had felt towards him the evening he knelt before me begging for my indulgence.

We embraced and I said to him, “With the commissaire, it’s really unimportant. Don’t let it bother you; it’s practically over.”

I had spoken somewhat prematurely, yet I hadn’t lied.

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Eric spaced his visits and, when I told him I would rather we didn’t see each other anymore, he showed no reticence, no regrets.

I hesitated long before “readmitting” Giorgios to our house and had to prepare both Léo and Mama Malkia.

“Since the accident, he’s been awfully nice to me,” I told them. “He’s a different man; you will see for yourselves.”

Léo looked at me with disbelief and asked about Monsieur le Commissaire. My answer saddened him. Then suddenly he said, imploringly, “He won’t hurt you, papa?”

Mama Malkia’s reaction was as violent as I had expected it to be. “A mazimu who’s a drunkard on top of it. And you want him to come back here! M’sieur Harry, you’re making a big mistake, let me warn you. The accident, tsss tsss,” she hissed. “One of these days he will roll over your body. The accident, ha! But don’t count on me — for me, he doesn’t exist!”

Mama Malkia kept her word. As soon as she would see Giorgios’ car approaching the driveway, she would disappear, refusing to serve “that nioka (serpent).” She also threatened to go away. Léo became literally sick. That was the only reason she stayed on.

I had taken a great risk but couldn’t let Giorgios down, not this time. The period of readjustment was a delicate one. I had almost made an enemy of Mama Malkia and, though Léo acknowledged the change in Giorgios, I knew he didn’t like him. I wanted my son to understand that I, too, had certain needs. He was young but I couldn’t go on evading the question. So I decided to be more explicit about my tendencies.

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That Sunday morning the weather was crisp and sunny. We were walking amid the flower-scented paths of the Spandre estate in Elisabethville’s northern outskirts. Now and then the breeze wafted the potent, invigorating odor of eucalyptus. It was one of our favorite spots. When Léo was younger, we used to go there more often and spend one or two hours admiring the lush vegetation or watching people fish at the pond. The place, with its pastel hues and royal water lilies, could have been painted by Monet. A stone’s throw away, Gauguin’s fiery colors would come alive; birds of paradise, arums and clusters of hibiscus offered their corollas to the sun’s balmy embrace. We would pick ourselves basketfuls of freshly cut strawberries, vegetables, and the dairy products for which Spandre was so famous. Here and there, hatted ladies accompanied by farm piccaninnies armed with shears would halt in front of a bed of carnations or gladioli. On the other side, through a curtain of leaves, one could perceive a wheelcart drawn by a pair of oxen.

I needed nature’s complicity to broach this most sensitive of subjects, and beauty does have a way of smoothing out life’s rougher edges.

A brief spell of dizziness took hold of me as I lifted my gaze to the sky. I clutched

Léo's hand and it went away. Something strange was happening to me as I was talking. It had the effect of a daydream. Léo's silence resounded with my words. It was no longer my voice that spoke, but his, and now I seemed to be the one listening. In fact, what I was hearing was a reverse monologue, punctuated by the rumors that surrounded us.

"Granddad never did like you, papa...I know how much you missed your beloved mom, Susan. She's so lovely in that picture hanging above the piano...and so young, you look like brother and sister...granddad didn't have the right to say that she died because of you...you were very shy with girls, papa, and thought that one day perhaps you would meet someone as beautiful as Susan...you searched and searched but couldn't find her. Yet you didn't like being with boys, either. Their games were too rough for you. And so you preferred to remain alone. I, at least, have Ishaya and you and Mama Malkia...

"Then, when you were almost a man, you met John. He was the gentlest and most wonderful person you had ever encountered. With him you understood that people could live differently...

"People were confused when you adopted me... Monsieur Giorgios thought you wouldn't be able to manage and advised you against the idea. But nothing would stop you and you did have a friend in Madame Janine... Now everybody's used to seeing you as my father. I don't remember who it was, but someone called you a pédéraste. I was terribly hurt and looked up the word in the dictionary. But I wouldn't, for all the gold in the world, have another papa, my papa...

"Some people believe you were born as...as if you had a sickness of some kind. Yet you prefer to let them talk. It's a matter of conscience, you say, so personal that even I should make up my mind about it. You claim you had no choice and tell me the happiest moment of your life will be the day when I will have a child of my own from the woman I will cherish... Papa, don't let's continue...my heart is going to burst...I want to go back home to Mama Malkia. I can't explain why, but now that you've told me all this, I'm afraid of Monsieur Giorgios... Do tell him not to come this evening...or any other evening. I'm sorry...so sorry.

PART 3: THE UNIVERSE OF MAMA MALKIA

“Maamkizi Mama,” greeted the young truck driver as he helped Mama Malkia climb into the cab and wedged her aluminum-plated case behind the seat.

“Have I kept my word?” he said jovially, pointing at the sun which had reached its zenith. During that first portion of the trip, Nkoze was garrulous and wanted to show off a bit. “Two more missions to visit and a couple of outposts on our way to Elisabethville, then I will have finished my rounds. The boss will be happy but he’d better give me a fat commission,” he added with a chuckle, “for as sure as I’m Nkoze, the son of Bambaya and the grandson of the valorous Guneya, he’d have a hard time finding a salesman of my caliber.”

“In fact,” the young man went on, changing gears as if in counterpoint, “I’ll ask him for a raise. I don’t only do deliveries, you know, Mama. I’ve become an accomplished factotum.”

He stressed the word “factotum,” separating each syllable. “It’s someone who’s a specialist in everything,” Nkoze explained. “There isn’t a day that the boss doesn’t tell me ‘Nkoze, you have sound judgment. Do you think we should deal with such and such a customer?’ or ‘How about writing this account off?’ And Mama,” Nkoze exclaimed as he pressed on the accelerator, “I’ll be my own boss one day, even if I have to daub my face with that powder the European women use to please their husbands.” He guffawed.

Mama Malkia ah-ahhhed in a half-scolding tone that Nkoze, so elated was he, mistook for a compliment.

Those city boys are such braggarts! Mama Malkia thought. All they want is to get rich. But is it right to blame them? she asked herself indulgently, reminiscing about the days when she and her young husband arrived in Elisabethville.

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They had left their baby daughter Mutumbu with her parents at the village; Mutumbu, who today was herself the proud mother of four children.

How long the journey had seemed to be! They walked the whole afternoon through the bush, carrying their wares bundled up on their heads while at the same time holding together a heavy wooden crate filled with utensils, blankets, and food.

By the time they caught sight of the river, the barge had already sailed off. Exhausted, despairing, the young woman sobbed. She wanted to go back home.

“Mpenzi, Mpenzi (darling),” Kilumbwe pleaded, for he hated to see his young bride weep. “Don’t be afraid, I’m with you and so are the kindly spirits. I’m sure another barge will come by tomorrow.”

She slept on the river bank, Kilumbwe keeping watch over his Mpenzi and their belongings much of the night.

After the day-and-a-half boat ride they had to walk again and wait at a level crossing for the train. They had never seen a train in their lives and when the huge black monster loomed, rolling towards them, bellowing and whistling, Mpenzi scampered into the bush.

The carriage was full of people, young and old, children and suckling babes, goats and chickens. It resembled a long hut with a very numerous family but moving on iron wheels, and from the snout of the monster, which pulled them through the

countryside like a never-ending snake, dark clouds of smoke billowed skyward just like the roaring mountain when it gets angry.

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During the initial period the young couple stayed with Alphonse, a nduku of Kilumbwe's in what would grow into the Cité Indigène, not too far from the mighty Lubumbashi river.

The contact with Elisabethville and so many bazungu (whites) at once, with their bizarre customs and manners of dressing, their thunderous engines and other contraptions, shocked their senses.

Kilumbwe, who had come full of hopes and expectations, listened to his cousin Alphonse and showed much servility toward the Europeans for whom he was working as a houseboy.

"You must be obedient with them if you wish to be rewarded," Alphonse lectured him.

In the beginning Mpenzi, a shy and faithful wife, kept quiet, but in her heart she strongly disapproved of Kilumbwe's subservient behavior. She didn't like Alphonse's bossy ways. It wasn't enough that her husband accepted the rudeness of his European employers, he had to bow to the whims of his cousin — the latter would send Kilumbwe to run his errands after a hard day's work and use him as a go-between to deliver messages to the bad girls he would call his amoureuses. No, Mpenzi did not appreciate that at all. Kilumbwe would sooner or later fall prey to those women who were too busy messing around to even think of establishing a family.

And more than once she would witness how those city guys, some of whom were respected for being 'évolués,' laughed at her husband.

Mpenzi became extremely unhappy and told Kilumbwe she no longer wanted to live with his nduku, cooking for him, washing his clothes while getting scolded like a child when this or that didn't please him. He tried to sleep with her, too, but that she didn't dare tell Kilumbwe. Of course, she would always vehemently reject his advances. Once she had to hit him. In return, Alphonse kicked her between the legs and knocked her down, saying, "You deserve a nioka (snake) to twist those entrails of yours. Pffft, they're poisoned anyway," and he spat at the ground.

That was the last straw. Mpenzi disappeared for several days.

Alphonse told the distraught Kilumbwe that it was no great loss and there were plenty of women he could choose from in the Cité. Kilumbwe finally understood what his nduku was made of and promised himself to find somewhere else to live.

Mpenzi returned to her husband one evening while Alphonse was out chasing after some new lover — he was as insatiable as a herd of zebu — but she imposed her own conditions.

Kilumbwe was now at the service of a gentler couple of bazungu (these at least had a smattering knowledge of Kiswahili, not like their predecessors whose only way of communicating was to bark orders). At Mpenzi's insistence Kilumbwe obtained permission for the couple to stay in the backyard 'boyerie.' Of course, Mpenzi would, in exchange, do certain household chores and take care of the two children. It was, she felt, a fair enough deal for, like all African women, Mpenzi had a natural inclination for watoto, whether they be hers or those of her masters. She became their

surrogate Mama, and naturally she longed for her own daughter.

When at last Mama Mpenzi got accustomed to city life and thanked the gods for keeping her and Kilumbwe healthy and free of evil influences, a tragedy occurred that would change the course of her life.

One morning, as her mistress was maneuvering her car out of the garage — in general, meupe ladies seemed to get intensely quarrelsome once they sat behind a steering wheel — she by mistake flung the heavy-bodied Chevrolet backwards and sent it crashing into the wall. Kilumbwe, kneeling down and busy connecting the hose pipe onto the faucet, was squeezed to death almost instantly.

As a consequence, the mistress had a nervous breakdown. She couldn't get over the fact that she had killed a human being, even if he was a Congolese. She was so affected she remained blind to Mpenzi's pain. She also totally neglected her husband and children and had to be sent to an institution in Bulaya (Belgium).

Aside from the fine he had to pay, the bwana gave Mpenzi a generous compensation, but no money would return Kilumbwe to his bereaved widow and, in spite of the bwana's kind words and her love for the children, Mama Mpenzi didn't have the heart to remain in his service.

She went back to her native village to see her daughter, parents, and ndukus, but the city had done something strange to her. She had grown restless; she easily lost her temper and found herself bickering with her relatives over trifles.

During an argument, a cousin of hers blurted out, "The way you order people around, one would think you were the Mama Malkia (queen mother) of this village."

"Mama Malkia" — she liked the sound of the name and adopted it. The young widow thus traveled back to Elisabethville, which she now considered her permanent home, and immediately found a job at a guesthouse. Gone was her shyness toward the white folk and gone, too, was her patience with the Congolese wise guys who tried to court her. Kilumbwe was no more, and she had no intention of replacing him.

It took the bazungu for whom she worked some time to get accustomed to her forceful manners. At first, they were disconcerted, but soon she got what she wanted out of them. She only had to say, "Take it or leave it, M'sieur!" and they would give in.

So thorough was she in her work that Mama Malkia earned herself the reputation of "*la négresse qui sait tout faire*" — indeed, there was no task she couldn't cope with. As a result, she made herself indispensable and allowed no one to interfere with her duties, especially not the braggarts of Alphonse's type. She was a no-nonsense woman and acquired the respect of her black sisters. They often came to her for advice, in particular when they had problems with their husbands. The latter referred to her in private as "Mama Sumbufu" (the troublesome one) or as the "*ngufu sana mwanamuke*" (the tough woman). When they would mention her name, they would let out a long whistle, which said it all.

No Congolese male would dare stroke her buttocks, let alone pass her lewd remarks, not after she knocked two teeth out of that philanderer of a Ntuli who had slipped his hand between the pleats of her kitenge while she was busy mopping the verandah floor.

"Next time," she crudely warned him — his mouth looked like a red fountain —

“watch your nbolo (penis) if you want to keep it.”

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At a point where the dirt road hugged the river a sudden jolt thrust Mama Malkia out of her musings. The truck squealed to a halt.

“What was that?” she asked, yawning.

“Must have been a branch or a big stone,” Nkoze said as he opened the door. “Just want to make sure it hasn’t damaged anything.”

The young driver’s face soon reappeared through the window with a satisfied grin. “I need to relieve myself,” he told her and slid behind the truck.

A moment went by, when all of a sudden a booming scream rent the atmosphere. Nkoze came flying into the cab, turned the starter, engaged the clutch so fiercely the vehicle whined and croaked before it finally rattled along, catching speed.

He was quaking with fear. “Aia aia aia,” he rapped out. He stopped panting, and then told Mama Malkia what had brought him to such a state.

“A mamba (crocodile), Mama, we ran over a mamba. At first it looked like a felled tree. When I heard it puff and saw the snout, I understood.” Nkoze’s eyes were bloodshot.

“It wasn’t even dead.” he said, still shaking. “That’s a bad omen, Mama, a very bad omen.” He spat out of the window to ward off the evil spirits.

Mama Malkia patted his shoulder, lulling him as she would a little boy. A long silence ensued. Even city boys can’t escape from the influence of our ancestral ena (spirit), thought Mama Malkia.

She had visited her home village after so many years because she felt the need to go back to the Source. There were two Africas: the Africa of her elders, immersed in the eternal savannah, and that which the Europeans had created; two worlds that might appear irreconcilable, but whose gaps the Congolese folk, with their tremendous sense of adaptability, bridged relatively unscathed — on the surface, at least. But the temptations were too many and could easily break the very fabric of the traditional family, as in Alphonse’s case. Even the stronger among them, like Mama Malkia, were not immune to the change of mentality in their city brethren.

Had she not stood her ground, especially after the death of her beloved Kilumbwe, she too could have been lured into the company of those loose girls who corrupted pubescent males and slept with white men for money.

It had been refreshing to meet again with the members of her clan and to listen to the wise ones. They were overjoyed to have her back and questioned her about her life in Elisabethville. Seeing her daughter, Mutumbu, and for the first time her four grandchildren, Mama Malkia was convinced she and Kilumbwe had done the right thing to leave their daughter with the clan. Kilumbwe’s ena, wherever he might be, was watching over the well-being of his progeny. They looked healthy and content, but above all they perpetuated the spirit of the clan.

It was so good to watch them as they gathered around the fire in the evening, listening to the storyteller. Mama Malkia had heard the same tales when she was their age. In Elisabethville such customs had practically disappeared. Her ndukus, cousins and aunts, couldn’t understand why she hadn’t found another husband. She was determined to talk to them but took great care lest they be hurt. One of the reasons

Mama Malkia had taken this trip was to consult with the wise ones.

She told them how she came to work for M'sieur Harry, the American muzungu. She didn't hide the fact that he wasn't a ladies' man — that revelation provoked disapproving glances and loud yooyoos, for the bwana surely must be possessed; wasn't a man's sacred duty to procreate as many children as possible, transmitting thus the ena he received from his ancestors? Wasn't that also why he often had more than one wife?

Mama Malkia explained to them that the white man had very different values, some she herself couldn't always comprehend. Although he only believed in one mungu (god) whose son had been killed and nailed on a cross, unlike the Africans, he thought he could daunt the elements or at least justify them whenever they wreaked havoc. He was also able to create light and darkness, as well as self-propelling contraptions that were called motorcars, trains, and airplanes. In a fashion, these were his lesser gods, albeit he did not claim them as such. Yet, in his eyes and in his acts, money seemed to be more important than the mungu he and his family revered every Sunday at church.

Strange as he appeared, even among his own race, M'sieur Harry was an honest person and certainly kinder than many Europeans. He often heeded her words before making a decision.

Having prepared her audience, Mama Malkia spoke about Kitoko Léo. That was perhaps the touchiest point. Questions came in a flurry and the yooyooing resumed. What did the bwana want to adopt a son for? Why a métis? Mama Malkia took great pains in dispelling their fears regarding M'sieur Harry's motives. It was awkward, she had to admit, but the bwana truly loved Kitoko Léo and had chosen her to look after the child. She was thus in a position to reassure them about M'sieur Harry's attitude. And more than once he had disclosed to her that the happiest moment of his life would be when he would see Kitoko Léo take a wife.

As they listened to Mama Malkia, the elders nodded their heads.

They had reservations about her behavior. It had less to do with the adoption of Kitoko Léo — mankind was after all a big family — than the white man's homosexuality. Shouldn't she have thought twice and talked to them before engaging herself in the bwana's service? How good a father could he be when he had relinquished his sacred duty as procreator? What kind of example was he setting for the child? There was a clash of views. The elders spoke with the voice of common sense.

Mama Malkia hadn't come here expecting their consent, but because she deemed it important to hear what the wise ones had to say. In some mysterious way even their disapproval was comforting.

Her stay at the clan was celebrated with dancing, eating, libations, and thanksgiving. She knew that part of her strength stemmed from these ancestral rites, which had permeated her being from the first memories of childhood. She enjoyed chatting with her sisters, being assailed with questions by her own grandchildren, and impressing her audience with the many fantastic tales of the muntu meupe's religion, of the miracles performed by Jesus Christ, their god's son who had risen from the dead.

The elders joined in the merriment and showered her with their blessings. She would always remember the parting ceremony. She was leaving the clan to reintegrate herself into the white man's civilization. Unlike some of her peers, Mama Malkia did not suffer from this dichotomy. Over the years she had forged her own ideas and very little could affect her. Her major concern, however, was Kitoko Léo. She couldn't discuss with her elders the boy's tribulations, like his fear of M'sieur Harry's friend and lover, that foul bwana Giorgios. Or what that devil of a Sébastien had exposed him to when the latter took Léo to the brothel.

There were other painful particulars she thought it wise to keep to herself. The elders would have been alarmed and unduly offended. Anyway, some practices were best left unmentioned. As long as Léo was near her, she could cope with them, doing everything in her power to protect him from evildoers.

There was that last and despicable act perpetrated by the blue-eyed commissaire. Upon hearing about it, she was taken completely aback. Never would she have suspected the kaboke (policeman) to be so violent. She should have stuck to her initial distrust of kabokes in general when M'sieur Harry had invited the commissaire home. The manner in which the facts were recounted was in itself hard to believe.

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Mama Malkia was putting the back yard shack in order when a clang reached her. It was that drunkard of a Giorgios banging the kitchen door.

"Harry, Harry," he shouted, sobbing, "is Léo home? I must speak to you at once."

Léo was still at Ishaya's, doing homework. He had called earlier to say he would stay at his Jewish friend's house for dinner.

Mama Malkia dropped the tools and ran to the living room to hear what was happening. Le Giorgios, whose breath reeked of ouzo, was so emotional he didn't even realize her presence. M'sieur Harry's face had turned livid. He looked struck with consternation.

"But it can't be true," he then said faintly, his lips quivering. Le Giorgios, a little calmer now, reiterated the sequence of events in detail.

"I swear it, Harry, as I see you sitting here before me, this is exactly how it happened. I had been...well...spying on Eric Van Pool for some time. Then that day — it must have been around 5:30 p.m. — to my great astonishment I saw Léo standing at the door of Eric's verandah. He looked uneasy. Eric invited him in and said in his usual honeyed tone, "You must wonder why I asked you to come. You know how close your father and I were. It's three months since we've stopped seeing each other. You know, he's the one who really left me, because of Giorgios."

At this point M'sieur Harry interrupted le Giorgios.

"You're so jealous, you could have made all this up. How am I to believe you?" The Greek bwana then turned to Mama Malkia, apparently surprised to find her there. He was sweating.

"I wouldn't lie to the two of you about such a serious matter, would I?"

"With you everything is possible," muttered Mama Malkia.

Giorgios lowered his gaze and carried on. "I have many defects, Harry, but I'm not that bad. You're everything to me. I couldn't have invented all this out of spite alone. Where was I? Yes...Eric told Léo he had been suffering atrociously from the

separation, that even when he and Harry were together he would pretend to be unfeeling because he was too wary of Léo and feared he would hurt him. Then he became almost aggressive and said, 'I resented your father seeing the other one (i.e. Giorgios). You know that car accident Harry supposedly was involved in? It's a complete fabrication. Giorgios nearly killed your father. I'm sorry, but I owed you the truth.'"

"Can you imagine what that bastard said to Léo?" quipped le Giorgios.

"Now, you won't deny it, hein!" Mama Malkia interjected.

Le Giorgios' brows twitched; he was ready to burst in tears.

"Stop this!" M'sieur Harry exclaimed. "Let's hear the rest."

"After a pause, Eric appeared to regain his composure and motioned toward Léo to follow him. 'I'd like to show you something,' he said. They went to another room. Through the mosquito net I could only recognize shadows." Le Giorgios took a handkerchief to wipe the film of perspiration circling his mouth and continued his description.

"Eric suddenly grabbed him. Léo, who now understood what the other was driving at, tried to defend himself. I heard the shattering of earthenware and the shuffling of feet."

"Enough!" M'sieur Harry yelled, his voice broken with rage. He then held his chin with his two fists as if it were going to slip out of place. Mama Malkia, her yellowed eyes filled with tears, went to him and cast le Giorgios a venomous look.

"Go away, bird of ill omen!" she shouted. How Mama Malkia wished she could strangle that vile kaboke and emasculate him. But it was more urgent to attend to Kitoko Léo.

M'sieur Harry was too dejected to face his son. He kept saying, "It's all my fault. Oh God, why did this have to happen?"

Mama Malkia's efforts notwithstanding, he was inconsolable. He spent sleepless nights and barely touched his food. Finally, she felt she had to shake him up.

"Now that I've spoken to Kitoko Léo, you buck up, M'sieur Harry!" She couldn't contain herself any longer and continued, "It's time you proved to him you're a real manume (virile man)."

It was hard for M'sieur Harry to swallow but she had no intention of nursing him, too, especially as she knew he would continue to see le Giorgios. That was their business, not hers.

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Laughter soon reappeared in Kitoko Léo's eyes. In a few months he had grown so much he was now taller than his father.

Mama Malkia was indeed very proud of him. As for M'sieur Harry, he tried to be cheerful, but he had lost weight and that wasn't a good sign. Something was brewing in his mind; she felt it.

The dry season settled in and the nights got chilly.

Kitoko Léo had just finished his school year, bringing home, as usual, an armful of book prizes.

"I have a surprise for you," M'sieur Harry said to him and produced two Sabena air tickets from his briefcase. "We're leaving next week for America."

The young boy — more a young man really — was overjoyed. Not Mama Malkia though, particularly after M'sieur Harry told her of his plans.

"It took me a long time to arrive at this conclusion," he said gravely. "That is why I didn't consult you earlier. I honestly think, Mama, Kitoko Léo needs a change, and a radical one at that. He will go to college in the United States. We shall visit the country first and meet my sister. By then I will have prepared Léo for his new life. He should be away from us for a while. This separation is going to be hard on us. I'll miss him as much as you will. But his future comes first."

Sadness sank in Mama Malkia's chest and with it resentment. Kitoko Léo, to whom she had dedicated so many years, was being wrenched away from her. Whatever the difficulties, she could cope with the boy as long as he was around. M'sieur Harry was a weakling. Not only had he been the indirect cause of what had happened to Kitoko Léo, but now he was cowardly relinquishing his duties as a father. Her elders were right. America! It was farther still than Bulaya (Belgium). "To hell and gone", as they said. How would Léo feel in that foreign land, even if he did speak their language? And who could trust that aunt Clara, M'sieur Harry's sister, if the boy should find himself in trouble? Bazungu took the plane so easily. How come she never flew to the Congo to visit her nephew? Would she be as weird as her brother? She too had never married. And if Kitoko Léo felt homesick...? What was more, winters up there in the Great Lakes Region were unbearably cold and even the cities became white, like the peaks of Mount Ruwenzori.

Mama Malkia wouldn't forgive M'sieur Harry for sending her boy to the other end of the world. But she was helpless. Despite his attitude towards women, she had always believed M'sieur Harry was of a better stock than the other bazungu. Well, this disproved it. He was as capricious, impulsive, and fickle as any fair-haired mwanamuke (female). There would be no sense staying with him once Léo was gone. Still, she would remain, if only to get news about the boy, and of course to receive him during the summer school recess. The first year he would also return to spend Christmas with them.

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When she woke up, Mama Malkia caught a glimpse of the flickering lights of Elisabethville and the black pyramid of the Union Minière etched awesomely against the purple horizon of the setting sun.

"I've brought you safely back home, Mama," beamed Nkoze.

"Akisanti, akisanti sana," Mama Malkia thanked him, her mind still numb from her long musings.

EPILOGUE

Kitoko Léo was expected to arrive at the end of the month — he had just finished his freshman year at an American college. But things here in the Congo had changed ominously. The Whites were gloomy. Many spoke of leaving the country for good, especially after the bloody riots and looting that occurred in Léopoldville on the fourth of January 1959 following an unauthorized political rally. Unlike the football stadium scuffles of June 1957, the clashes opposing the Force Publique and the populace resulted in hundreds of casualties among the Congolese.

The word ‘Independence,’ which so far had been anathema, boomed in public places.

It was amid such excitement that Léo spent the long-awaited family reunion. The spirits had somewhat calmed down and the more optimistic ascribed recent events to a mere adolescent crisis. Mama Malkia knew better, though. Upon seeing a pair of woodcarvings Léo showed her one afternoon, she rolled her eyes and said, “Kitoko, where did you get those?”

“I bought them at the market,” he replied, smiling. “The merchant told me they were very old. Don’t you like them, Mama?”

“That’s not the question,” said Mama Malkia gravely as she felt the carvings with her fingers. “They’re old, all right; the man didn’t lie to you. But look at them closely, Kitoko. Do you see what they are?”

Léo shook his head and ventured, “They’re playing at something.”

“No, Kitoko, these statuettes are bound in chains. They were carved long before you were born, when there were still slaves in this country. The Arabs and, unfortunately, the white man, too, treated thousands of our people like cattle.”

“But that’s half a century ago, Mama.” Léo’s jaw muscles had tensed.

“That’s not the case,” said Mama Malkia. “The Arabs continue to sell our brethren to their sheiks in the Middle East. These woodcarvings bode ill for the future, Kitoko; there’s going to be matata mingi (big trouble) and we all have to be on our guard.”

* * *

Time flew. Léo became accustomed to his new American life. The following year he returned for the last time to what was still the Belgian Congo. As he was registered for summer session courses, he only stayed two brief weeks in Elisabethville. He did not want to miss the Independence festivities.

* * *

Elisabethville, July 25, 1960

My handsome Léopold,

It’s not even one month since you left us. How proud you looked on that thirtieth of June when the Congo ceased to be a colony! You wanted so much to be part of it. Selfishly speaking, however, I’m glad you took that flight three days later. It would have been too painful for you.

The mutiny of the Force Publique in Thysville spread like wildfire, plunging much of the nation into an indescribable chaos. The Whites — I, too, for that matter — had felt somewhat edgy, but never did we expect such an eruption. The news is sketchy and alarming. Communication in several parts of the country, especially in

the Interior, has been totally disrupted.

We here, thank God, have been spared. Mama Malkia and I are well, so please, Léo, don't worry. Life around us carries on rather peacefully in spite of the changes.

As you know, Tshombe has proclaimed Katanga a new state. I honestly don't know how long he will be able to manage. It's all still so new. Belgium and the U.S. are backing the secession. Of course, it's because of the Union Minière.

We shouldn't complain, really; in a way, we're privileged. Let's see how the world community will react and, in particular, the Soviet Union.

Take good care of yourself, my Léopold. Mama Malkia hugs you.

Your loving father,

Harry

* * *

A year later, having obtained, his Bachelor of Science degree with a B+ average, Léo returned to Elisabethville for a month and a half. The atmosphere was relaxed and everything seemed under control in the young Katangese nation. But a mere ten days after Léo's departure for the States, trouble started again.

At the insistence of the Léopoldville government, the United Nations troops intervened in Katanga to try and put an end to the secession. Their first attempt was a failure. With the help of white mercenaries, the Katangese gendarmes held them at bay for several months.

* * *

An air letter despatched by special delivery reached Léo on the Tenth of January, 1962.

Elisabethville, Noël 1961

My Kitoko Léo,

It's about papa Harry, Kitoko. Something awful has happened. I've asked my faithful nduku, Ambroise, to write these lines to you.

Do you remember Ambroise, the 'évolué' who sent your teacher a note on my behalf when you were in bed with malaria? It was the time papa Harry had his accident. Well, in fact, as you now know, that was le Giorgios' doing.

But let's not stir bad memories. It's what has just occurred that our good Ambroise will relate to you.

The other day I was sick with fever and couldn't swallow anything. Papa Harry called the doctor, but didn't get any answer.

There have been quite a few people wounded lately in the street fighting between UN troops and gendarmes.

Even Ambroise says, 'What are these foreign devils doing here, shooting at our men?'

Probably the doctor was at the hospital. So papa Harry decided to drive to the Cophaco pharmacy.

I was breathing heavily and waited. The waiting seemed endless.

The spirits have played a horrible trick on us, Kitoko, for papa Harry never came back. It's Ambroise who brought me the news. On his way to the Cophaco, papa

Harry was stopped by those foreign UN devils. They ordered him to get out. Papa Harry told them he had to buy medicine for a sick person. He spoke English with them but they didn't want to hear. They called him a traitor. Papa Harry, a traitor! What mazimus (madcaps)! And then they just shot him. Ta ta ta ta! Without any reason. It wasn't even the curfew.

Kitoko, I'm thankful for Ambroise. My heart is bleeding... Poor Papa Harry... You were the apple of his eye... What wouldn't he have given for his son, Léopold!
Mama Malkia,
whom neither the thunder nor the seas could separate from her Kitoko Léo