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The Letter

Abstract

It was fortunate that Mrs. Agwambo had, in what she would have thought uncharacteristic of herself, walked straight onto the carpet in her high and pointed heeled shoes, for the door she had just gently pushed shut narrowly missed her as it violently swung open. Mrs. Agwambo turned to see who it was, her forehead wrinkling in disapproval. Auntie, who had flung the front door open, did not come in. Breathing heavily, she leaned forward, most of her weight falling on her right hand which firmly gripped the handle of the door it had shot after and reined back. 'There's a letter for Bebi's father,' Auntie said, then paused to catch her breath, before continuing, 'on the sideboard.'

T. MICHAEL MBOYA

THE LETTER

It was fortunate that Mrs. Agwambo had, in what she would have thought uncharacteristic of herself, walked straight onto the carpet in her high and pointed heeled shoes, for the door she had just gently pushed shut narrowly missed her as it violently swung open. Mrs. Agwambo turned to see who it was, her forehead wrinkling in disapproval. Auntie, who had flung the front door open, did not come in. Breathing heavily, she leaned forward, most of her weight falling on her right hand which firmly gripped the handle of the door it had shot after and reined back.

‘There’s a letter for Bebi’s father,’ Auntie said, then paused to catch her breath, before continuing, ‘on the sideboard.’

Mrs. Agwambo’s impulse was to ask who the letter was from, but she decided to hold the question in for a moment, and instead, first to tell her maid a thing or two about the proper opening and closing of doors. She looked down at her shoes and swallowed. Then she looked up in time to see the door banging shut. Presently Mrs. Agwambo heard Auntie’s footsteps on the pavement as the house help lumbered towards the gate. The girl was going to fetch Mrs. Agwambo’s daughter from school. And — as usual — she was late. Mrs. Agwambo shook her head slowly as she turned about and walked to the nearest seat, an armchair. Clutching against her stomach the handbag that had been hanging on long straps from her left shoulder, lazily trailing along, Mrs. Agwambo flopped into the seat. When she was comfortable she unhurriedly, carefully wrenched her shoes off, first using the sharp nose of her right shoe on the dent between the heel and the upper body of the left shoe, then the toes of her left foot on the seam of the hind part of the right shoe. With her heels she pushed the shoe under her chair. Enjoying the vaguely ticklish feel of the fluffy carpet against the soles of her feet, she slowly stretched her legs before her. Then she blew her cheeks.

Mrs. Agwambo was tired. She always was at the end of a working day. Even though well paying, her job as a teller in a bank was very monotonous and lonely. But there was the status, the money, and of course the concealed challenge: the fact that it was a position of responsibility and trust that required the kind of maturity Mrs. Agwambo knew she possessed. The warmth in the house soon made Mrs. Agwambo drowsy. But she did not want to doze off. She reasoned that she had to get up: to get up and organise things. To get up and see about supper: about evening tea: to get up and have a bath: to get up... She wriggled her left shoulder a little, and the handbag strap fell on an arm of the chair. She extricated her left hand from the trap-like loop that the strap had formed. With her right hand she lifted the bag by its handle from her lap, where it had slid to, and carried it towards the

side stool on her right, but when it was in mid-air she brought it back onto her lap, opened it and rummaged through the contents. She found the roll of lip balm she was looking for. She placed the roll on her lap, just above the bag which she now carefully lifted onto the side stool. She then picked up the roll from her lap and, after sitting further back in the armchair, deliberately rolled it across her lower lip. Then Mrs. Agwambo sat up, stretched her right arm and dropped the roll back into the handbag on the side stool. Again she relaxed in her chair, and because she was no longer looking she fumbled before she managed to pin the handbag shut. That done Mrs. Agwambo rested the back of her head against the top of the armchair's back rest and let her right arm fall limply across the armchair's right arm. Her left arm collapsed, with her elbow on the armchair's left arm and her hand on her lap. Mrs. Agwambo sat thus, almost sprawled, thinking nothing in particular, her eyes wandering desultorily all over the room as she spread the lip balm over her upper lip by folding her lips into each other, unfolding them, and lightly rubbing them against each other. This went on for a while until, looking out the window she sat facing, Mrs. Agwambo saw, against the sky that had been azure only a moment ago and which now looked as though someone had sprinkled dust on it, a light-ish, foam-like cloud, its belly bloodied by the desperate shafts of the dying sun. Mrs. Agwambo gazed long at the cloud. It struck her as looking like, like a used cotton towel. The association made the cloud both repulsive and, quite against her conscious will, fascinating to Mrs. Agwambo. She tried not to look at it but she found herself staring. By and by an increasingly insistent noise from a second direction diverted Mrs. Agwambo's attention from the cloud. She turned her head and looked out a window to her right. The noise came from a tree near the fence. It was a boisterous chattering of weaverbirds. One could imagine they were having a party, Mrs. Agwambo thought; it was, after all, a Friday. Before her wedding, and even for a while after, Mrs. Agwambo remembered, Friday nights... The vain things one enjoys when young.

Auntie and Bebi noisily clattered into the house, crashing through Mrs. Agwambo's reverie. Mrs. Agwambo turned her head slightly and saw the pair. They looked like they had been arguing, or racing. Bebi's rucksack dropped onto the floor at the same time as the door banged shut.

'You should not bang doors,' Mrs. Agwambo managed to squeeze in before the giggling Auntie, rolling on in the direction of the kitchen, disappeared through the doorway linking the sitting room with the dining room.

'Mom! Mom!' Bebi called urgently at the same time, and she strode towards Mrs. Agwambo 'Bebi, shoes!' Mrs. Agwambo cried. Bebi impatiently kicked off her shoes at the edge of the carpet and walked on in her socks, determination inscribed on her round honest face.

'Mom, can one person have two best friends?' Bebi was now standing beside Mrs. Agwambo's seat, on the left, her hands on her mother's left arm. Mrs. Agwambo looked into her daughter's earnest face. There was dust on the girl's

cheeks, on her forehead, even on her plaited hair that now desperately needed undoing. And on her T-shirt and shorts, naturally. It must have been quite a P.E., Mrs. Agwambo thought.

‘Mom, can — ’

‘Of course, yes, ‘Mrs. Agwambo confidently answered Bebi, and took the girl’s hand in hers. They were very dirty. Mrs. Agwambo slowly released Bebi’s hands, and sat up. ‘One person can have two, even three best friends,’ Mrs. Agwambo said off-handedly, then added, trying hard to sound more interested, ‘but why do you ask?’

‘Two best friends!’ The whispered wonder escaped through the wide eyed Bebi’s lips. Recovering quickly she said, ‘It is that Winnie. She doesn’t know whether to be my best friend or Kadogo’s best friend’.

‘You can all be best friends, ‘Mrs. Agwambo said in a school mistressy voice. Bebi did not look convinced. She shrugged.

‘Your hands are very dirty, ‘Mrs Agwambo commented, and looked at her own hands. She looked at Bebi and the girl’s face broke into an embarrassed smile, her eyes twinkling. Bebi looked at her hands, hid them at her back, then turned and ran off, back to her rucksack, which she hurriedly hoisted onto her back.

‘Shoes, shoes,’ Mrs. Agwambo called. She had followed the sound of Bebi’s movement and she knew that the little girl was on her way out. Her voice arrested Bebi at the doorway to the main corridor that led to the bedrooms. Bebi shambled back. At the edge of the carpet she squatted and picked up the shoes, one in each hand, then she turned and started walking away, slowly, her head hanging. As she was shuffling past the sideboard the envelope caught her eye. She stopped, and craned her neck.

‘There’s a letter for Dad on the sideboard,’ Bebi said.

‘Ah, yes,’ Mrs. Agwambo sighed, then on an impulse added, ‘let me see it’.

Bebi let drop her shoes. She lifted the envelope from the sideboard with exaggerated care, holding its edge by her fingertips. She tip-toed towards Mrs. Agwambo, approaching her from behind. At the edge of the carpet Bebi playfully threw the envelope over the armchair’s backrest, over Mrs. Agwambo’s shoulder and giggled. She jogged out of the room, picking up her shoes en route. Mrs Agwambo looked at the envelope. Expensive. Good hardish paper. Nice cream colour. Not flippant, not boring khaki. She turned it over. Her husband’s name. Mr. Ondiek Agwambo. No address. Nothing else. Mrs. Agwambo turned the envelope over twice and stared at her husband’s name. The writing was not familiar. It was rounded, careful: feminine.

‘Auntie!’ Mrs. Agwambo shouted. She looked at the handwriting on the envelope even more closely ‘Auntie!’

‘I’m here,’ Auntie responded from the doorway linking the sitting room with the dining room.

‘Do we have supper?’

‘Yes.’

‘Is the tea ready?’

‘Almost.’

‘Do put my bathing water on the fire, then,’ Mrs. Agwambo said. As Auntie turned to go Mrs. Agwambo asked the question that had made her call the house help, although she made the question sound like an afterthought: ‘And, Auntie, who did you say brought this letter for Bebi’s father?’

‘The man in the servant’s Quarter.’

‘Okay,’ Mrs Agwambo made to unseal the envelope, and Auntie turned to go away, then, ‘Auntie?’

‘Yes?’

‘Here, put the letter back on the sideboard.’ Mrs. Agwambo had just thought up something, something daring. And mature. And civilised.

* * * * *

An hour and a half later Mrs. Agwambo, dressed in a comfortable jogging suit, lay in the big three-sitter sofa, a cushion reinforcing the seat’s arm that supported her head. Her legs were stretched over the second arm. She was reading a pamphlet on the philosophy of the Hindu religion. Now and then she raised her face from the book, stared ahead at the now drawn-shut curtains, or turned her head and looked at the TV. On the carpet, before Mrs. Agwambo’s seat, lying on her stomach, her position perpendicular to the sofa, was Bebi. Bebi, clean and prettily dressed, was watching TV. Congolese music. From the kitchen filtered sounds of Auntie at work: tap forcefully running, then abruptly stopping; little utensils tingling, an occasional bang... The house help was washing up after the tea, and also preparing for the supper she would start cooking soon.

Over the long and winding sentences and the Congolese music and the noise from the kitchen Mrs. Agwambo heard the car pull into the garage. She raised her face from the book, turned her head, looked at the clock. It was a little after six-thirty. She looked at the TV: fat barely-clad Congolese women were violently gyrating their hips to tedious music...

‘Hey, hey,’ Ondiek Agwambo jovially greeted at the doorway to the main corridor. He had come in through the side door that opened in from the garage.

Mrs. Agwambo turned her head and looked at him. He smiled broadly, playfully at her, and she smiled back indulgently, as to a naughty child. Then she went back to her pamphlet.

‘Hey, hey, hello, hello,’ Ondiek Agwambo sung, swinging his bunch of keys. He took a step into the sitting room and craned his neck to look at his daughter.

‘Bebi, what are you so engrossed in, hey?’

‘Hi, Dad,’ Bebi flashed her father a quick smile and went back to watching TV. From the corner of her eye Mrs. Agwambo saw Ondiek Agwambo, still smiling,

shake his head. Presently she heard his footsteps and whistling on the corridor, then a door opening and closing.

‘Bebi, your father’s tea,’ Mrs. Agwambo said after a while.

‘Just a minute, Mom,’ Bebi did not take her eyes off the TV. After a minute she sighed and rose. The music programme was over. She stretched, looked at her mother, whose head was buried in a book, and took a step towards her. Bebi craned her neck and took a peep at her mother’s book. She read a sentence, then another, and not understanding them, padded on to the kitchen.

Mrs. Agwambo struggled on. The pamphlet was difficult. And Bebi kept interrupting, walking in and out, ferrying the tea things one by one. When, after several trips, the girl gently let herself down onto the carpet, in her former position, the act totally severed Mrs. Agwambo’s concentration. She put the pamphlet down on the carpet and turned her attention to the TV. News. Chaos in the capital city. Poorly dressed unkempt young men fighting the police. Tyres burning in the middle of streets. The voice over said something about drugged youth being misled into demanding a new constitution. The infantile disregard for the law, and for life itself, amazed Mrs. Agwambo. The item was soon over, and the usual news about foreign aid continued...

Ondiek Agwambo disrupted Mrs. Agwambo’s view when, a quarter of an hour after he had come into the house, he walked back into the sitting room, and over to the armchair she had sat on earlier.

‘Hear there was action in the city this morning,’ Ondiek Agwambo said after a while. From his tone it was obvious that he supported the rioters. Mrs. Agwambo grunted. She glanced at her husband. He was in casuals and he smelled fresh. His shoe laces were untied. It was obvious that he was going out.

He had never stopped going out, never grown out of the habit, never — as Mrs. Agwambo had taken to thinking lately, irritably — quite grown up.

‘Going out?’ Mrs. Agwambo asked after Ondiek Agwambo sat up in his seat. There was displeasure in her voice.

‘Just a drink or two. Will be back early.’

‘Early today, early tomorrow?’

Ondiek Agwambo smiled. He poured tea into his cup. Mrs. Agwambo saw her moment.

‘...And before I forget,’ she said, ‘there’s a letter for you on the sideboard.’ The statement sounded like a by-the-way.

‘Who is it from?’ Ondiek sugared his tea. Bebi twisted a little on the carpet and, looking at her father, said, ‘From — ’

‘Yes?’

‘From your best friend.’

Something tightened in Mrs. Agwambo’s chest. Ondiek Agwambo frowned. ‘Let me see it,’ he said wearily. Bebi jumped to her feet and got the envelope from the sideboard. She handed it over to her father and stood next to him. Ondiek

Agwambo looked at the name on the envelope, very briefly, threw what would have been a surreptitious glance at Mrs. Agwambo who ostensibly was studiously watching the TV weather report, and placed the envelope on the coffee table, next to the vacuum flask. He stirred his tea with more force than was necessary.

‘Dad, should I open the envelope for you?’ Bebi asked, pointing at the envelope.

‘No Bebi, that won’t be right,’ Mrs Agwambo firmly cut in. The intervention surprised father and daughter, and they both looked at her.

‘It is not good manners,’ Mrs Agwambo explained simply.

‘Come here, Bebi,’ She called to Bebi and stretched her hand in the child’s direction. Ondiek Agwambo sat back in the armchair and watched Bebi walk to her mother. Mrs. Agwambo’s stretched arm went round the child’s waist and drew her nearer her mother.

‘You see,’ Mrs Agwambo said to Bebi, but loudly for Ondiek Agwambo to hear, ‘letters are personal and private. Only the people they are written to should open them. That particular letter is your father’s, and only he should open it. Then he will read it, and if it has anything we should know he will tell us. Okay?’

Bebi nodded. She slowly slipped out of her mother’s hold. She started for the bedrooms but turned in to the dining room and walked on towards the kitchen, whence sounds of frying were coming. Mrs. Agwambo kept up the pretence that she was absorbed in the TV. Now and then she stole a glance at her husband. She thought he looked uneasy, and that — well? — thrilled her. She wondered how he was going to get off this time, if he was going to get off, and she waited. As she waited she thought. Why does he do it? She asked herself, as she often did. He cared for her, that much she did not doubt. He was a better husband than many of her friends’. And he loved Bebi. Supposing she walked out, then what? She couldn’t, she couldn’t. What with, with the society and everything. But she had done the mature thing. He was going to be forced to confess, and to explain. And maybe after that he would change...

Bebi jogged back into the sitting room and dived onto the carpet. She noisily resumed her former position and was soon comfortable and watching a local comedy. Ondiek Agwambo drained his cup. Then, as Mrs. Agwambo noted, he most uncharacteristically poured himself another. Mrs. Agwambo waited. At the end of his second cup Ondiek Agwambo relaxed, sat deeper into his seat. He lazily played with his keys, hitting them rhythmically against his thighs. The waiting was oppressing Mrs. Agwambo.

‘Bebi,’ Mrs. Agwambo commanded, ‘take away those tea things.’

Bebi got up.

‘Use one of the trays in the sideboard.’

Bebi silently went about the chore, and was soon out of the room. She came back with a rug to wipe the table. ‘Mind the letter,’ Mrs. Agwambo warned unnecessarily.

She looked at Ondiek Agwambo and asked him, 'Aren't you going out?'

'Ai!' Ondiek Agwambo exclaimed, trying to sound cheerful, 'Am I being chased out of the house?' He looked at Bebi as though he was appealing for her support. The child finished wiping the coffee table and walked back to the kitchen.

'If you leave here late I don't see how you're to be expected to be back early — unless of course you meant that we should expect you early tomorrow.'

'Okay then,' Ondiek Agwambo said. He got up and, yawning, stretched. He stepped away from the armchair. He knelt on his right knee and tied the lace of his left shoe, then on his left knee and tied the lace of his right shoe. Straightening up he dragged himself out of the carpet. Mrs. Agwambo violently cleared her throat.

'Caught a cold?' Ondiek Agwambo asked flippantly and turned to look at Mrs. Agwambo.

'Who is the letter from?' There was a hard edge to the question. Ondiek Agwambo opened his mouth, but he did not say anything. He looked at Mrs. Agwambo who looked back at him steadily, accusingly. He reluctantly walked back to the coffee table and picked up the envelope. Again he looked at Mrs. Agwambo as though he were seeing her for the first time. She looked back steadily. He beat the envelope against his right palm twice, looked at Mrs. Agwambo defiantly — and ripped the envelope open.

'Jimmy's rent for the month. Jimmy, you know, the new tenant in the SQ', Ondiek Agwambo said as he placed the envelope on the sideboard. At the door he added lightly, triumphantly,

'You keep the money, I may drink it all if I carry it.'

* * * * *

After the car had driven out of the compound Mrs. Agwambo, still uneasily suspicious that Ondiek Agwambo had pulled a fast one on her, rose and walked to the sideboard. She accidentally stepped on her pamphlet as she went. She shook the envelope's contents out. Besides the rent money — which was all there, Mrs. Agwambo counted it — there was a neatly folded foolscap page. She straightened it out. It was a note:

Jambo Bwana,
I'm going away for the weekend. Here's the
month's rent. See you when I get back.
Regards to the family. And thanks.

Jimmy

The note was still in Mrs. Agwambo's hand when Bebi marched humming back into the sitting room. The little girl loudly halted next to her mother, executed a stiff right turn and gave a heil Hitler salute. Then she saw the note in her mother's hand and the open envelope on the sideboard. Her eyes widened, she started opening her mouth, but she shrugged, turned and ran on to watch TV. And now Mrs. Agwambo felt — defeated.