

A few vignettes from Kilimanjaro (1980-1981)

1 Of warring European monkeys:

Baba Msika, the History and 'Siasa' [politics] teacher at Weru-Weru Girls' Secondary school where I taught English, was second only to the principal, Mama K., in being a parental figure to the students. Ngugu [comrade] Msika was passionately committed to the ruling philosophy of 'Ujamaa' [Tanzanian socialism] and disdainful of its detractors. With his grey Kwanda suits and smile of polite tolerance he seemed to embody his nation—for both good and ill.

While appreciating his sense of humour, more than once I imagined him— rotund and smiling— sitting beside Madame Defarge at the foot of Lady Guillotine:



In the quiet of late yesterday afternoon in the staff room, Baba Msika related an interesting tidbit of local history:

"Oh yes, this school *shamba* [farm field] — Mrs. K.'s and the Assumption Sisters' *shamba*— that whole area was a detention center during World War II. Italian prisoners— they built our section of the Arusha Road – the 2 bridges – entirely by hand."

Chuckling, Msika went on to describe how the Italian prisoners taught the *wachagga* to make *gongo*, the local rot gut distilled from bananas, and passed on their genes among the local population ("You know, those yellow skinned girls you see around *Mila Sita*?")

He then narrated an incident he recalled when he was in Primary school in nearby Kibosho during World War II:

He said that a shrieking Italian prisoner leapt into a classroom window with another Italian brandishing a pistol. After shots went off, a British soldier leapt through the window in hot pursuit ignoring the terrified students and teachers cowering on the floor behind their desks. Msika said he looked up a few minutes later to see the British soldier nonchalantly leading the handcuffed prisoners away.

"Oh, those British were very cunning," he said.

Thumbing through exam papers, Msika went on to dismiss World War II as: "2 tribes of European monkeys fighting one another." His blind eye twitched as he looked up into my face to determine my reaction.

Gently, I suggested that the leader of the tribe of monkeys who called themselves Nazis would not have been keen to make the lives of Africans any easier had their tribe won the war.

Msika responded with a teacherly smile: "Oh yes, this is what *Mwalimu* Nyerere told us when we were fighting Idi Amin. Fascism is at odds with African culture. That's why we had a duty to rid Africa of a fascist dictator." He went on to describe how Amin had antagonized all his neighbours, including Kenya.

"Why didn't Kenya join you in the war against Idi Amin?"

"Oh, they wanted us beaten," said Msika, tapping his knee. "They wanted to see us punished for having closed their border. Probably they were getting their instructions from outside."

Msika chuckled again before launching into a tirade against "capitalist Kenya egged on by Western business interests." In this conspiratorial view, the western lackey Kenyans ached to retaliate against democratic Tanzania for having closed the border and stopped the transit of lorries that cut off their markets "to the south" (the suggestion being clandestine trade with South Africa).

"So why did Tanzania close the border?"

He looked slightly shocked by my impertinence.

"Actually, it was really very simple. Our own industrial development was stunted and those damn lorries were ruining our highways! So we put a stop to them... After that they even tried to sabotage the Tazara railway to Zambia. The next step was to have us 'punished' by 'Idi Amin! What is it they say in English of 'the best schemes of mice and men?'"

He gave another chuckle and slapped knee. For a guilty instant, I thought of Squealer the pig in *Animal Farm*, whisking his tail while clinching another party-line truth before the befuddled and cowed...

-1980, December

2 Barbed Cordiality at Marangu Lodge:

During my sojourn at Weru-Weru, I was fortunate in having twice had the opportunity to accompany graduating classes on treks to the summit of Kilimanjaro: a four-day slog which Tanzanian teachers usually declined. The following is an account of an encounter in the den of the park manager on the evening before the second such excursion:



PARK HEADQUARTERS ALTITUDE 1970 M/6400 FT AMSL KILIMANJARO NATIONAL PARK MARANGU ROUTE.			
PLACES.	E.T.A.	ALTITUDE.	VEG. ZONE.
MANDARA	3HRS	2700M	FOREST
HOROMBO	5HRS	3720M	MOORLAND
KIBO	5HRS	4703M	ALPINE DESERT
GILMANS	5HRS	5685M	ALPINE DESERT
UHURU PEAK	1 1/2 HRS	5895M	ICE CAP

With the first day of the arduous four-day Kilimanjaro climb on the morrow, I was looking forward to getting early to bed—especially with a fledgling sore throat.

Yet on the way back to the bunk in the Marangu lodge after the supper of ungarnished rice with the students, a diminutive park warden invited me into his office. Initially nervous that even though I was there as a ‘chaperone’ I would be asked to pay the exorbitant Kilimanjaro Park admission fees like every other foreign tourist, I was put at ease by his smile and offer:

“Would you like to join us for a drink?”

I was led into a big cold room with glossy wood paneling, mounted game trophies and a massive stone fireplace. On the zebra skin draped sofas were a small group of neatly-dressed Tanzanians politely sipping beer. Stacked by the door were 3 cases of (hard to obtain) Kilimanjaro lager beer. A man in a western suit and tie stepped toward me with outstretched hand introducing himself as *Ndugu* [comrade] Lassan, chief accountant for the park.

“*Karibu, mwalimu.*”

He motioned me to take the chair at one side after which we made our introductions. The 3 KRTC [coop stores] managers along with the KRTC accountant with wives and girlfriends nodded their heads in turn. After a momentary lull in the conversation, I insisted that I would not be in the least uncomfortable in the conversation continuing in Swahili. “*Napenda kusikilieza,*” [I like to listen], I said.

A beer was immediately pressed into my hand despite my protest that I would need to start the climb clear-headed in the morning. At the same time, the bucket of *mbege* came round the circle. I held up the basin and took a token sip amid the smiles of approval.

"So you like our *mbege*?"

With the ice broken, pleasantries were exchanged for a few minutes ("How do you find our Tanzanian students?" *etc.*). Then with mention of the election of Reagan, the *mazumgumzo* [conversation] predictably came round to politics: Will the belligerent new US president, try to start a war with the USSR? Are the war-mongering Americans now not openly supporting the Boers in South Africa?

At that point it occurred that *Ndugu* Lissan, had started drinking long before my arrival and was moving past the jocose stage and headed for the bellicose:

"Let me be frank," he said, "I just don't understand how you western tourists can come here and pretend to be so friendly. Yes, you can talk and drink with us. But really, you want Africa just to remain a big game park for your pleasure. You don't give a damn for our development. And this capitalism you people love so much—what is it but sucking the blood of the poor?" He coughed and took a long swig of lager.

Throughout Lissan's speech, the KRTC managers had nodded in approval while the women sat toying contentedly with their digital watches. With eyes then turning to me, it occurred that I was expected to make some kind of defense— but of what? Of capitalism? Of the western world? Of my presence?

"You might be mistaken", I began, "in thinking that all the tourists here are rich. Most are workers—not capitalists—although they may have well-paying jobs. For most tourists here, a chance to see wildlife or climb this mountain is an adventure of a lifetime."

Even in the bleary faces, I noted skepticism. I tried a more personal tack.

"I feel very grateful to be here with my students. I couldn't afford to climb the mountain as a regular tourist. I get the same salary here as any Tanzanian teacher with the same qualifications."

"So then most of your salary goes in your bank account back home, isn't it?" grilled *Ndugu* Lissan.

"No— no— not me," I chuckled, "I don't have one of those big expat contracts. My entire salary is paid by the Ministry of Education. My sponsoring organization just provides a tiny subsidy."

"But you still get a big salary and dollars back home." He persisted.

" I told you— I get nothing back in Canada. In fact, working here puts me at a disadvantage when I go back. I'm not paying into a Canadian pension plan. But really— I've happy to have this experience."

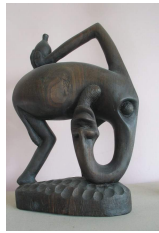
Ndugu Lasser shook his head and took another swig. The warden chuckled and unsteadily raised his glass of whiskey. The KTTC managers smirked and stared at the floor while their girlfriends continued plucking at their watches.

- 1980, October

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3 Snippets of ‘uchawi’:

Due in part to the strongly nationalist spirit of ‘ujamaa’ [Tanzanian socialism] Tanzanians in the early 1980s tended to be guarded in speaking about traditional beliefs with ‘wazungu’ [whites]. However, in the privacy of my home on the school compound, I heard fascinating tidbits about local folkways from my domestic helper and informal Kiswahili tutor, Ester. Also, a friendly colleague at the school, Ngugu Chobya, a geography teacher and former soldier, sometimes dropped his guard— especially over a shared container of ‘mbege’ [banana beer]:



After telling me more of his harrowing escapes in the 1979 Kagera War, *Mwalimu* Chobya insisted that ‘uchawi’ [magic] had played a key role in the successful expulsion of Idi Amin from Uganda.

“So many of our troops had to advance straight into the line of fire”, he said. “To this day, I cannot imagine how there were so few casualties on our side...” He scratched his head and then with a lop-sided grin, continued: “You won’t believe this— but there was a rumour that some of our boys had bulletproof underclothing. It was hard to get but especially the Swahilis from Zanzibar were said to have this very special bulletproof material. He paused for a two-handed pull on the *pombe* bucket. “Can you guess what it was made from?”

“No,” I said.

“Human skin.”

Wiping his mouth, he went on to speak of the skyrocketing black market demand for human skin during the months of the war... It was a terrifying time, when anyone careless enough to stumble into a dark alley in Dar es Salaam to relieve themselves would almost certainly disappear. There were even reports of a spike in missing children— whose skin was believed to be especially efficacious in repelling bullets...

According to Chobya, the fear of becoming a victim of this illicit trade was slightly lessened by the belief that the clandestine procurement of human hides did not depend on the murder of Tanzanians as much as on the smuggling of products across the Kenya-Tanzania border.

Still, the anxiety that was generated by the rumours, Choya admitted, had hurt the legitimate need for blood donations. He claimed that since almost no Tanzanian dared to donate blood, there was a black market trade. Many locals believed that the government itself was sponsoring sinister blood collection schemes... Secretly contracted blood collectors were alleged to be prowling the midnight streets of Dar es Salaam. The Chinese gadgetry employed was reputed to stun victims at a distance and drain off their vital fluids in seconds. He claimed that there had recently been a sharp increase in the discovery in early morning of corpses in the alleyways. When these bodies were brought to the city morgue, they were found drained of all vital fluids...

“Do you really believe that?” I smiled.

“Absolutely— *Kweli cabesa!*” he laughed, raising his right hand.

Later in the afternoon I mentioned to my domestic helper, Ester, that Chobyas has been an *askari* [soldier] in the Uganda war. She said that her “brother” had also been in the Tanzanian army and had also seen many “*mambo ya ajabu*” [strange things]. Leaning on her broom as I sat in my chair by the bookshelf, she went on to say that in the liberation of Kampala, her brother has gone right into the palace of Idi Amin.

She claimed that her brother had even entered Amin’s trophy room. There he saw the mounted skulls of victims who had had their hearts cut out and eaten. In her brother’s story, each of the grisly trophies had a name stenciled on the forehead.

“*Mtu mkali sana*”! [what an evil man] she tsked, turning to poke at the cobwebs in the ceiling corners.

So, it seemed that ‘*uchawi*’ [witchcraft] had served both good and evil in the Liberation of Uganda.



Today Esther informed that little Mary, the former house girl of fellow Canadian G.M., had been caught with a horde of pilfered cigarettes, soap, knives and forks stashed under her mattress.

"Mary's stolen things before," says Ester. "It must be in her blood. A few years ago her mother caught her with a stolen *kanga* and gave her some strong *dawa* [medicine]. The potion was a little too strong. She had to go into the KCMC Hospital. She almost died there from poisoning—but she still wasn't cured."

Ester made a face of disgust. " I would *never* steal anything. From the time I was a child I've been taught that it's *dhambi*" [sinful].

"Any child might steal once or twice", I suggested. "That's nothing to get upset about. It only when it becomes—" I paused searching for the Kiswahili word, "You know, *tabia* [a habit] over and over again."

"*Sawa!* [for sure] *tabia!*" She repeated.

"Poor Mary, that's too bad," I said.

"Don't feel bad for her," she scoffed, "she's no child! Let me tell you, when a Chagga child starts to steal— even one time—we make these cuts across the knuckles." With her spoon, she demonstrated. "We rub in some salt, lemon juice and pepper. She'll never try to steal again. It's the best cure, *kweli!*"



In visiting this evening, Chobya spoke of the current alarm among many young Tanzanian men of catching "yellow VD". Chobya insisted that one of his classmates in secondary school, drafted at the same time he was for the Ugandan war, contracted this dread disease which was believed to have originated in China. The poor lad was so embarrassed he couldn't go to the dispensary. Still, he took a mutual friend of Chobya's into confidence. Once inside a closet in the empty sleeping barracks, he pulled down his fatigues to reveal his condition. The ravaged organ was reputedly bright yellow. What's more:

"The bacteria and eaten right through it, *Kweli!* His organ was leaking in several places he could not even urinate. His tool was like a sieve!"

"Com'on!" I burst out laughing.

"No, no— *kweli*—it's true!" he joined me in a hearty laugh.

Most amusing for me was the thought that *Chobya's* 'fable' for the warning of young men against '*uasherati*' [immorality] could reflect a sign of disillusionment of young Tanzanians with the *wadugu* [comrades] of China and the (erstwhile?) sacred Red Book of Chairman Mao.



Over the regular lentils and rice today, Ester spoke of her friend, Berta, from Mila Sita. Berta's light skin was apparently the inheritance of "an old Jew called Max". Before independence, the old *mzungu* apparently had a coffee *samba* near Moshi and had fathered several children with more than one local *Chagga* woman. She said that Berta had apparently asked after me—the "bachelor" *mzungu* at the school.

"Is she the girl with the green eyes?" I asked, recalling passing her a few days ago when she was carrying a basket of bananas along the roadside.

"I hate those *Wazungu* eyes that are just like cats," Ester said, with a click of her tongue,

"Are my eyes like cats?" I chuckled.

"No, no—yours aren't like that—but Berta's are!"

Moments later, the table talk turned to James, the school watchmen who is often seen at the school gate carving a piece of ebony—a common craft among his Makonde tribe in his home territory of the southern coast.

"...Oh yes, the Makonde people do eat human flesh. Even today! Especially if they get children who are a little sick, they'll put them into the cooking pot, *kweli*. They like to make a stew with human meat. They throw in onions and tomatoes. *Wageni* [foreigners] too, have disappeared in Dar es Salaam."

I had to chuckle in imagining just how Ester feels, twice a day, entering and departing from that gate where James keeps watch.



This afternoon over a plastic container of *mbege*, Chobya reported on the strange creatures which fisherman who cast their nets off the Sere Bridge in Dar es Salaam sometimes haul up:

“‘*Chunusi*’: the bottom half of their body is a fish and the top half a beautiful woman. They have breasts but no sexual organs.”

“We call them ‘mermaids’ in English,” I said, “They are imaginary creatures, like unicorns.”

“Maybe in Europe—but *chunusi* exist, *kweli*!”

"Why hasn't anyone taken photos of them?"

"Who knows?" he shrugged and grinned. "But they *are* real. Not just in the ocean but also in the rivers and lakes."

He told of how swimmers in Lake Tanganyika were hypnotized and dragged into the depthless waters by beautiful ‘*chunusi*’.

“But even more dangerous,” he claimed, “are the *wajini*.”

“*Wajini*?”

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“Sometimes men think they are picking up a beautiful girl— even a prostitute— but they are not human.”

Ndugu Chobya then described how young males in the darkened streets of Dar es Salaam have succumbed to the deadly seduction of gorgeously perfumed creatures who even more commonly haunt the city of Tanga...

He gave the example of the unlucky taxi driver in Dar es Salaam who picked up a beautiful girl in the dark. While driving along, he glanced casually towards her sandals only to see she had the forelegs of a horse...

In terror he swerved and crashed his car. When bystanders ran to his rescue, no passenger was found. Much later, still dazed, the driver left the hospital supported by his wife who had come to collect him. After recounting to her the strange story, his ‘wife’ sweetly asked:

“*Did she have legs like mine?*”

The poor man looked down— and to his horror— saw the forelimbs of a horse. To this day, said Chobya, the poor fellow remains in the Dar mental institution— a raving lunatic...

...Then there was the football player in Dar es Salaam, tricked on the way to a championship match into having sex with a *mjini*. He arrived at the stadium just in the nick of time but had to go to the toilet before joining his teammates on the field. He stepped from the roaring din of the crowd into the *choo* [toilet] for just long enough to pee and splash water on his brow. When he ran back through the doorway, he was met by deafening silence. Stunned he looked up into the stands. They were empty. Down the field was only a single grass cutter, swiping away.

“What’s going on here?” He demanded. “Where’d everyone go?”

The grass cutter looked at him as though he were mad. “The championship game? That was *last* week!”

The shiver in the punch line was not unlike that felt in hearing ‘urban myths’ in childhood...

Again, I appreciated how Chobya seemed intent on imparting richly hued impressions of Tanzania beyond the greyness of *Ujamaa*. Yet I also wondered— not for the first time— whether he simply enjoyed pulling my leg...

-1981

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4 Kilimanjaro Robin Hood:

The discovery that the flashy school bursar at the girls' boarding school had been long embezzling the school account was a scandal that rocked the neighbourhood for weeks.

While the school principal was justifiably livid, for many in the surrounding hamlet, Al Haji Madongo was a folk hero whose escape could only be due to the facility of 'uchawi' [magic]:



1

The rumours swirling through the school about the flamboyant Al Haji Madongo, the school bursar, were addressed today at the opening of the term staff meeting chaired by the Deputy Head Mistress, Sister Mosha. The Head Mistress Herself was saved further embarrassment by her timely vacation in Germany. She was spared having to explain how she could have so trusted Madongo for so long.

Up until last week, Madongo was to be seen almost daily at the Head Mistress' desk or rustling about the school in dazzling white Swahili robes, smiling like a politician. Well known for flaunting wealth, he drove a gleaming white Peugeot, wore gold necklaces and a fancy watch. Yet he was also known for his generosity: often dispensing sweets and biscuits to the girls after their team victories. He memorably treated my student group to Cokes and *samosas* upon our return from the Kilimanjaro trek.

Madongo was also known to sometimes drop fifty-shilling notes into the laps of *wazee* [old men] squatting outside the Moshi mosque. The largess, it was assumed, was all from his own pockets... At the same time, few locals wondered how he could afford his lifestyle on the salary no greater than that of a lowly teacher.

"We all thought," said Sister Mosha at the meeting, "that he was getting his money from the *magendo* [black market] or maybe in money exchange at the Kenyan border. Maybe in the smuggling of diamonds or tanzanite."

Meanwhile, she confirmed that the discovery of the embezzlement was made only when the new bank manager was suspicious of the authenticity of a school cheque of a large denomination that Madongo was trying to cash. The new manager told Madongo that direct confirmation from the Head Mistress would be needed. Madongo then frantically

phoned the school secretary instructing her to confirm the check when the bank called. However, the call from the bank had already gone through— straight to the Head Mistress' desk.

Stunned, the Head Mistress, phoned Madongo's compound rather than immediately calling the police. One of the three senior wives answered and said Madongo was not at home. All the *watoto* [children], his two taxis and the splendid furnishings were undisturbed. However, the senior wife reported that her husband had driven off an hour before in the new Peugeot 504 accompanied by the junior wife.

Meanwhile, after a little digging, the bank manager had come up with some startling information: Madongo had forged a letter requisitioning check books and had forged the signature of the Head Mistress on each leaf. Over two years, he has cashed nearly 1,000,000 shillings for his own use! Even though the cheques had all been cashed at the local branch—in all that time none of the fraudulent cheques had been sent to the central bank to be cleared.

That, said Sister Mosha with widening eyes, was almost certain evidence of collaboration from inside the bank.

Yet while the local branch is on the hook, the reputation of Weru-Weru is not unscathed. In this regard, Sister Mosha informed that all transactions on the school's account—including the payment of salaries for support workers— had been temporarily suspended for the pending investigation. In that announcement there were gasps from the teachers. Might their salaries be affected?

“Let's not worry about that right, now,” admonished Sister Mosha.

She went on to report that the police—even the army— were on the lookout for Madongo's white Peugeot. Thus far, he seemed to have vanished. She could not explain how he could possibly have got past the army roadblocks set up on all routes out of Moshi.

Apparently even the police believe he will be hard to find—given his reputation for having powerful *uchawi* [magic]. At the same time, there was a rather more sensitive rumour that Madongo was effectively given a head start on his escape. According to some teachers, the enraged Headmistress confronted him in her office yet apparently waited two hours before calling the police.

“It's a terrible thing— *kweli cabesa!* “ the sister tsked. While the faculty clucked and whispered, Sister Mosha shook her head—but not before flashing a grin.

“Madongo’s people come from Tanga,” said my domestic helper Ester after lunch, “*Wachawi sana!*” [They’re all witches].

"Do you think he's hiding in Tanga?" I asked.

“He could be anywhere.” she said, stopping to twirl the broom, “He could be still right here... He could have changed himself into a cat or dog; into a lion— or even into a *kitambe*.” She pointed to the water jug on the table. "Do you know that in Tanga the people can even hide in *nnazi* [coconuts]? You might open a coconut some time and hear a voice calling from inside: ‘*Stop, stop! Leave me alone!*’”

She went on to tell how *shatani* [satanic spirits] can slip under the door at night or even through a crack in the window. A sudden cold wind may signal the presence of such a spirit.

With a shake of the head and a sigh, she repeated her observation and regret that the *Wachagga* of the mountain or the *Maasai* of the plains were never a match in the arts of ‘*uchawi*’ with the diabolically clever *Waswahili* of the coast.

This was still not to deny that the *Wachagga waganga* [Chagga native herbalists] do have a range of expertise. The best ones, Ester avowed, can cure almost any disease: from stomachache to blindness; from lameness to *wazimu* [madness]. Of course, that was simply the knowledge of ‘*dawa*’ [medicine] she said, in a matter-of-fact manner. It had nothing to do with *uchawi*...

She chuckled in the strangeness that a *mzungu* should be unable see the obvious difference.

-1981, July

5 *Détente in Weru-Weru:*

Ndugu [comrade] Pozharov, who taught Physics in the same girls' school in Kilimanjaro District where I taught English, had been posted to Africa under the provisions of a Soviet-Tanzanian Friendship agreement. He lived with his wife and two children on the other side of the duplex we shared.

On the eve of his departure at the end of a 3-year term, I wrote the following lengthy journal entry in acknowledgement of our good neighbourliness:



1

Eugene Pozharov rarely falters in his duty to be an exemplary representative of the U.S.S.R. here in Tanzania. Although I have always assumed that Pozharov would never have been allowed here if there were the slightest doubt of his loyalty to the Soviet motherland, his manners and looks seem more Mediterranean than Slavic. He is smallish in stature, quick moving with a warm smile, which only rarely seems forced.

Even as the Cold War grows frostier—Eugene Pozharov and I have determined to maintain neighbourly relations. Our daily greetings are marked with firm— even vigorous—handshakes, chuckles and even the odd wink.

If the noises coming through the partition between our living rooms are a fair indication of the private Pozharovs— the lives of both Eugene and his wife, Natalya revolve around their kids, Katya, eight and Dima, five. While there are occasional shouts and yelps, there is more of laughter, clapping and singing: often to the accompaniment of the same scratchy Mazurka tunes played over and over again.

Eugene once mentioned he admires “the Japanese tendency” of letting kids play and explore largely unrestrained for their early years. Indeed, Dima and Katya romp freely around the school compound, usually along with a group of local kids including the 2 younger children of the Head Mistress. Thus, Dima and Katya speak in a jumble of Kiswahili, English and Russian.

Several times a week, the Pozharov children knock at my door. After I return from the market in Moshi, they usually drop in to check if I have brought back any treats.

Recently on one such visit, Katya watched wide-eyed as I sat reading in my living room chair, munching a handful of peanuts.

"Do you praying, Mr. T?" She asked.

"No," I said.

She shook her blonde bangs. "You think Jesus is making it rain? That's so *stupid!*"

"You're probably right," I said.

Possibly conveying her papa's recent teaching, she went on: "You think you get some food by praying? No, you must work. Yes!" Fingering her necklace thoughtfully, she awaited my response.

"Would you like some peanuts, I asked proffering the bowl.

Polite, as always— she took a measured handful.

"What's that?" I then asked nodding to the brass pendant dangling from her neck.

"Len-in," she said, swallowing. "Do you know Len-in was being a little boy?"

"Can I see it?" As she held it up, I fail to see any resemblance between the wavy headed boy etched on the medal with the bald and goateed icon.

"Why is he so special, Katya?" I coyly asked.

Delicately eating her peanuts, she told a little story of a wicked man called Nikolai ("He couldn't be Russian. He was German, I think!") who lived in Russia long, long ago. Nikolai killed many poor folk before the kind but strong Lenin broke the spell of Nikolai and his wicked wife and set free the Russian people...Indeed, her chirpy recitation could well have been of a fairy or a bible story.

"In Russia, we don't have Jesus," she said eyeing the bowl again...

2

Her little brother, Dima, sponges up every crumb of English he hears.

"Hodi! Hodi!" He'll announce using the Kiswahili greeting before creaking open the door handle. With his sister observing saucer-eyed from behind, he usually begins his routine of circling the living room or kitchen, grabbing and lifting:

"What's this? What's this?"

"Koroshu," I will first use the Swahili word.

"In English!" he'll insist.

"Cashews."

"Right, Dima."

After responding to the cue for their handful of nuts or sweets, whether I return to my book or continue preparing food in the kitchen—Katya and Dima typically linger, observing me intently. If there is silence, they blink around the room for a few moments before Katya declares: "OK, I'm going now!" upon which her little brother chases her out the door.

3

I see little of Natalya Pozharov, who speaks just a few words of English and Swahili. She is thick in the middle and usually frumpily dressed, but has a youngish face, rather than like a puffy eyed version of Katya. I typically only see her only in coming to their door to deposit a packet of meat in their refrigerator.

"Hodi!" I give the customary Swahili greeting then pause for her *"Karibu!"*

Pushing back greasy blonde hair, she opens up the door with a wane smile. Shyly nodding, she accepts the packet.

"Asante sana," I say, and then *"spasibo!"*

By the time I'm back to my side of the duplex, through our common living room wall there come the sounds of her shuffle into her kitchen and the squeak of the opening fridge door.

On the few occasions Eugene has invited me their living room for a snack, Natalya stands back shyly smiling. "No English," she said in first introducing herself. "School study little French."

4

On a typical afternoon Eugene and Natalya are often seen with garden hose and hoe poking about the wilting and ant-ravaged vegetable patch on the back of their side of the duplex.

"So what if the *wadudu* [bugs] eat everything?" Eugene once asked, "I won't use fertilizers. Even if nothing grows well, I want to keep it natural— organic! We have all the supplies we need here. This is not a necessity— just a hobby. "

In that, he was alluding to the ample supplies— cooking oil, tinned meat and fish— even vodka—that he readily accesses from the Russian embassy.

When he recently procured for me, at minimal cost, a bottle of Russian cooking oil (a little smoky, but a welcome change from the unprocessed coconut oil) in my profuse thanks I told him that only diplomats and higher-status contractors had access to the treats imported by the Canadian embassy. Lowly 'volunteer' teachers were expected to fend for themselves.

"In Russia, we believe in equality for all."

Like a missionary with good instincts for not offending a potential convert, he typically smiles and leaves me to draw the lesson.

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5

There have been occasional moments of public awkwardness between us, such as a few weeks ago in the staffroom:

When I saw that the Chinese-made clock hanging above the staff room was ten minutes slow, I took the liberty of taking it down to reset it.

Almost before I sat back down and lifted my pen to resume marking—Comrade Eugene checked his wristwatch then bolted up before the clock. Lest it be forgotten that Yuri Gagarin circled the earth a year before John Glenn— Pozharov steadied his forefinger and pushed the minute hand fifteen minutes forward to reflect precise scientific socialist time.

Both Mr. Chobya and Miss Kashangaki looked up curiously from their scribblers then down at their own watches.

"Oh, Mr. Pozharov— you want the time to move too quickly," cooed Kashangaki.

"You're eighteen minutes fast," said Chobya.

Pozharov blinked in alarm. "I set my watch this this morning—by the, um, BBC!"

Baba Msole and Mrs. Mtau then looked up. Pozharov jerked the minute hand back.

In his wince was there not a sting of a minuscule setback of Soviet technology?

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As fellow expatriates dealing with the same local privations, Pozharov not only shares the space in his freezer compartment and has sold me items from his embassy store but he has unclogged my outside sink drain and even once fixed my wristwatch. I pass on my old magazines, often deliver his mail from the staffroom and once loaned him a mattress when his Russian comrades visit from Moshi.

As determined as we are to remain mutually cordial, our neighbourliness is undeniably being tested by the world beyond Weru-Weru. In veering into “friendly” political discussions, I take pains to give the impression that I am personally opposed to the aggressive interventions of both superpowers. Still, while he so plainly proselytizes as ‘ambassador’ for his country, I often cannot escape being in in the eyes of the Tanzanians— however reluctant in the role— a spokesman for ‘the west.’

In the days following reports of anti-Soviet flare-ups in Afghanistan and the boycott of the Moscow Olympics, Pozharov’s usually firm handshake seemed limper and his usually broad grin, tighter. When a meat packet came back partially spoiled two weeks ago, I asked him whether his fridge is still working properly.

“It’s a Russian fridge,” he said curtly, “of course it’s working properly!” He quickly apologized for the inconvenience but informed that he had bought several kilos of pork, so my ground beef packets had been relegated to the lower freezer tray. “A temporary measure,” he said.

Still, every morning at 7:00 AM, the BBC news signature chimes though his side of the duplex partition. As much as he would deny it, we are seemingly getting the same daily news— including updates on the cold war tensions.

So it was that I wondered about the coincidence of the morning BBC report of Reagan’s warning against any expansion of a communist sphere of influence and my partially spoiled meat packet?

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Yet anxieties were quelled the following weekend when he unexpectedly knocked on my door and invited me over for a drink.

He said that Natalia and the kids were staying overnight with the Russian comrades at Moshi Secondary and halfway through a bottle of Stolichnaya, he was apparently craving

company. Moment later we were on opposite sides of the coffee table with a bottle of vodka, a saucer of sliced lemon and two shot glasses between us:

Over the following hour and a half, we emptied the vodka and started on a bottle of Russian brandy. In that process, we touched upon a range of hot-button topics in which I, the guest, was content to play the role of polite listener to my host, who interestingly took a more proselyting tone than I'd heard before.

Even through the alcoholic fog, some of his comments are clearly recalled:

"Lenin", he gushed, "was a real man of the people. He understood even the simplest peasant. He was humble and incredibly intelligent! The best kind of leader any country could ever have..."

Khrushchev, in utter contrast: "was frankly a fool. He talked big—let off steam. That's no good. When you're really powerful—you don't have to boast".

He was more circumspect in regard to Comrade Stalin:

"Mistakes were made," he said, "and some people suffered. But it was but nothing like these crazy exaggerations in the west. This is crazy to compare Stalin with Pol Pot: crazy western propaganda. Pol Pot was a monster. He killed millions in Kampuchea and made a backward country even more backward. Stalin fought against the fascist invaders and moved the Soviet Union forward. In the Great Patriotic War, millions of Russians suffered and died... Many in my own family! Stalin defeated the Nazis. His time was a time of great sacrifice for our country... Whatever else you can say about Stalin, you must appreciate that he brought us to where we are today."

That was the one time in the evening that he consulted his Russian-English dictionary:

"The sacrifice we made in the time of Stalin was in that was an *investment*—an investment for future greatness..."

It was at that point that I brought up Solzhenitsyn's *Gulag Archipelago*. Eugene blinked. "All but maybe 10% of what he writes (even if that much) is outright lies!" he said in a flash of anger. "I remember when I as in I first read '*One Day in the life of Ivan Denisovich*', I was shocked! I thought this could never have happened in Russia— not in my Russia!"

He then offered a personal anecdote: "You know, a cousin of mine knew Solzhenitsyn. He had him as his secondary school teacher cousin in Ryazan in the 1950s. My cousin said he was a very intelligent man, a very interesting literature teacher but there was something strange in his personality —treasonous, actually— that every single student noticed." In that intriguing insinuation, Eugene nodded and smiled.

Deeper into the brandy bottle, he waxed more into the pedantic: “Do you understand the dialectic of history? Before a party can succeed it must eliminate the opposition, the contradictions— that's how history moves forward. That's how we succeeded in Russia. Yes, we are powerful today and very proud of it! We're not an aggressive power, you understand, but we do have enemies and have to show them— and show the world too— that we're powerful.”

Although tempted, it seemed too delicate to ask my host if he thought that a nuclear war between the USSR and the USA was likely... Instead, I asked him what he envisioned for a more distant future:

He exhaled a long breath. “Really,” he said, “I think the workers in the capitalist countries will one day rebel. There'll be no more exploitation. There will be universal peace! There will be no more need to make war when we all get what we want and need through super-advanced science and technology. No need for nationalism either.... There will be a universal language – maybe Russian, maybe English— who can say now? Or maybe we won't need language at all—maybe we'll just learn to communicate telepathically!”

Head swimming, I still managed to feign the moment of reflective silence. Then as he lit another cigarette and set the glasses aside, I took the cue:

“Well, this was all so very interesting. And so very generous of you...”

“Anytime, anytime...” He rose and shook my hand. “Sorry again— really— about the freezer last week. We bought five kilos of pork for the big birthday meal with all our Russian friends. We have plenty of room now. Bring over anything— meat, milk, anytime. There will be room.”

“I appreciate it, Eugene. Very, very much.”

Blearily and unsteadily, I stepped out into the chirping darkness, warmed by the assurance that even though the cold war is likely to grow colder— détente at Weru-Weru was secure...

-1981, Tanzania,

