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# THE STREET SWEEP

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MERON HADERO

Getu stood in front of his mirror struggling to perfect a Windsor knot. He pulled the thick end of his tie through the loop, but the knot unraveled in his hands. He tried again, and again he failed. Did he really need the tie? He guessed it would probably be easier to persuade the guards at the Sheraton to let him in with one. And even then ...

But he couldn't work out the steps, so Getu put the necktie in his pocket and decided to try his luck without it. Sitting at the edge of his mattress, he waited for the hour to pass. (He didn't want to arrive too early, too eager.) His mattress was on the floor in the corner, and it was covered with all of his clothes, which earlier that evening he had tried on, considered, ruled out, reconsidered, tossed aside before choosing a blue shirt (stained under the arms, but he'd conceal the stains with his jacket) and black pants. Until that day, Getu thought this was an adequate wardrobe, fairly nice for a street sweeper, but he had noticed even his best pants were worn at the hem, so he brought them to his mother.

She was busy chopping onions, and her red hands and tearful eyes gave Getu pause. He didn't want to add to her burden, but he needed her help. "Momma," he said, and she immediately responded, "Later," and walked right passed him to the garden to pick some hot peppers.

26 He thumbed the rebellious threads that seemed to be disintegrating in his fingers. “Please, momma. This stitching is coming apart.” She didn’t look up from her vegetable garden, so he pressed on. “I need to look nice for Mr. Jeff’s farewell party.”

“Ah, Mr. Jeff,” she turned to face Getu and would have thrown up her hands except for the peppers resting on her lifted apron. “Again with Mr. Jeff,” she groaned.

“I have to see him. It’s his last night in Addis Ababa. And he’s been so good to me,” Getu explained, following his mother back to the kitchen.

She called over her shoulder, “Has he been good to you? What has Mr. Jeff actually done for you?”

Getu hesitated, then said, “Mr. Jeff told me he has something for me.” He’d have said more but she was barely paying attention to him, focused on wiping off the peppers on her apron, splitting them in half, and taking out all the seeds. “Momma,” he said.

“I heard you, it’s just ... what is it you imagine he has for you?” Getu didn’t dare honestly answer that question, his mother’s ridicule primed for the slightest provocation. Ever since Jeff Johnson invited him to the party, Getu couldn’t stop himself from guessing what this something might be. Over their months of friendship, Jeff Johnson had told Getu how important Getu was to him, how his organization could use a young man like Getu, and what a brilliant, keen head Getu had on his shoulders. Getu’s hopes had soared as he pictured the good job he’d surely be offered. In this moment, he nearly told his mother all about the new, stable life he’d imagined, the freedom from worry that would come from the big paycheck he’d surely bring in, which would be so liberating now that the government seizure of land was creeping closer, neighborhood by neighborhood. Even the Tedlus had lost their home just a month ago, and they only lived five blocks away. But Getu simply replied, “I just want to say goodbye to Mr. Jeff.”

“Getu, if this Mr. Jeff really wants you at his party, then he won’t care what you wear.”

“But, Momma, it’s at the Sheraton,” Getu whispered.

“At the Sheraton, did you say?” She turned and stared at him with raised eyebrows and a sorry look in her eyes. “It’s at the Sheraton?” Her tone started high, then fell with Getu’s spirits.

“Do you really think this man wants you there? At the Sheraton? He invited you to a party at the Sheraton? Only a man who has spent every day here having his shoes licked and every door flung open would be so unaware as to invite a boy like you to *the Sheraton*. To the Sheraton! Who is this Mr. Jeff?”

Getu didn’t have the courage to reply, so she continued. “Let me tell you. He comes, is chauffeured to one international office after another, and at the end of the night, he goes to the fancy clubs on Bole Road, feasts, drinks, passes out, wakes up, then calls his chauffer who has slept lightly with his phone placed right by his head and with the ringer turned up high so as not to miss a call from the likes of Mr. Jeff and disappoint the likes of Mr. Jeff. And then one day this Mr. Jeff invites my boy to a party at the Sheraton. At the Sheraton! They’ll never let you in of course. The Sheraton? Oh, I could go on about this Mr. Jeff.”

Getu’s mother had long ago formed her opinion about the Mr. Jeffs of the world. She had seen men and women like Jeff Johnson breeze through the country for decades, an old pattern. She’d kept her distance from these eager aid workers flown over for short stints with some big new NGO, this or that agency, such and such from who knows where. They appeared in her neighborhood, gave her surveys to fill out, and offered things she reluctantly accepted (vaccines and vitamins), things she quite happily pawned (English language books and warm clothing), and things at which she turned up her nose (genetically modified seeds and antimicrobial soap). Without fail, the Mr. Jeffs shaped then reshaped

28 her neighborhood in new ways year in, year out. She compared them to the floods that washed out the roads in the south of the country each rainy season, carving new paths behind them, a cyclical force of change and re-creation. Each September after the rainy season ended and the new recruits from Western universities came to Ethiopia, she was known to have said, “And now let the storms begin.”

“Momma,” Getu said softly, snapping his mother out of her thoughts. “This is a really important night for me.”

“I know you think that. But you’re eighteen, and you haven’t seen enough yet to know what I know.”

“Eighteen here is like seventy-five anywhere else,” he rebutted.

“Can’t I talk sense into you? Is a mother’s love and wisdom no match for whatever hold Mr. Jeff has over you?”

“But momma, we need him. He’ll help us save our home,” Getu said, finally owning up to that hope that had started as a little seed and sprouted and taken root and now seemed as sturdy as an oak.

After a pause that would have been enough for her to turn the idea around in her head more than once, she asked, “Do you think he can do that?” She didn’t believe in the Mr. Jeffs, who seemed predictable by now, but she knew Getu was full of surprises.

Getu held out the clothes he needed mended, and she took them cautiously. Getu followed her to the living room and watched her sew expertly. As she moved the needle through the thin fabric, she flicked her wrist, and mumbled the long list of chores she was putting on hold to take care of this task. Getu found his mood lifting as he saw her expertise with the needle and thread. His clothes looked almost new. When she’d finished, Getu took them gratefully from her, though he felt her resistance still, for she held her tight grip even as he pulled them away.

Anyone could see the Sheraton was palatial, seemed literally ten-times bigger than the presidential palace, and there were several reasons

why. Of course there was the size; the Sheraton was sprawling. Also, the presidential palace was gated and tucked into a forested acreage in the city, so the structure peeked out from between the iron fencing and shrubbery. It was impossible to *behold*. But you could *behold* the Sheraton looming above all else on a hill in the city center. At night, it was spotlighted from below, and with the neighborhoods around it empty or without electricity because of frequent power shortages, the Sheraton, alone with its invisible generators, illuminated that part of town each night, every night, no fail. Most importantly, the Sheraton was exclusive but not exclusionary. Some were allowed in while others were not, and this selective accessibility gave it more mystique than the palace, which was completely off limits to all but the president and his close coterie. The Sheraton created a sense of hope when it opened its arms to the few, and so occupied the ambitions of many.

This expansive, expensive hotel had been built by one of the world's richest men, a man who was legendary across the city, made bigger by rumors that surrounded him about his exploits, his connections, his billions. Inside, there were cafés, restaurants, a sprawling pool, and enough amenities to fill a hefty foldout brochure, including a multi-DJ nightclub called the Gaslight. The Sheraton was a strange presence in this impoverished city, an isle of exclusive luxury that didn't quite touch down.

Walking the long road from his home to the Sheraton, Getu carried his jacket, tie in pocket. He walked slowly so as not to get too sweaty by the time he arrived, and as he walked, he practiced all the ways he'd ask Mr. Jeff for his job, his just reward. As soon as he had the courage, he'd gently bring up the matter of the job he felt was due to him. As he made his way through town, he passed burdened mules, cars trapped in traffic jams, old men and women who preferred trudging along the road to waiting for the crowded buses. Young men sat on street curbs

30 getting stoned on chat, which they languidly chewed with nothing better to do than watch the slow moving yet frenetic scenes drift by.

When Getu approached the foot of the hill that led up to the Sheraton, the buzz of the city quieted. Around this barren land, bureaucrats had erected yellow and green fences of corrugated tin to keep out any unwanted men, women, dogs, cats, and others they considered strays. It started with a single law: if a house in Addis Ababa is less than four stories tall, then the government can and will seize your land. To keep your home, build! Whether there were new investors lined up or not, land across Addis Ababa was being exuberantly razed to make way for the new. Neighborhood by neighborhood, stucco houses vanished; makeshift tent homes made of cloth and rags and wood were swept away; moon-houses—put up at night by leaning tin siding against a wall—were tossed aside by morning.

“Who has a four-story house?” Getu’s mother had shouted frantically when she first heard about the law. “They’ll get rid of everything, except maybe the Sheraton,” she had said.

Getu said, “Be calm, I’ll take care of it. We’ll make it work.”

“What will we do? Of course we’ll move wherever they put us. I hear they’re pushing people to the outskirts of town, but how will I get to work then? I was born in this house, and why don’t they just leave me alone to die here, too.”

“I’m going to handle it, Momma. You’ll see. I’ll make you proud,” Getu said, stepping close to his mother and rubbing her back.

“Lord, this son of mine,” Getu’s mother said into her folded hands.

“There’s a way. I can get a new job,” Getu assured.

“You sweep sidewalks. What could you do with your broom and your dustbin? Anyway, who’s to say that today they tell us to build a four-story house, tomorrow they won’t demand the Taj Mahal. Just let it go.”

“But, Momma—”

“What food crossed my lips when I was pregnant to end up with a dreamer for a son?”

“I could get a job with one of the international organizations. We could build a dozen four-story houses.”

“Didn’t I forgo meat and dairy each holiday? Didn’t I pray enough? Every week, did I not attend church?”

“Mother, you don’t understand. I have a new friend.”

“Did I stare too long at someone cursed with an evil eye?”

“I’ve helped him. He’ll help me when the time comes. Mr. Jeff is a friend of mine.”

Up through the swept-clean land, up the hill, along the winding road, Getu walked to the Sheraton and, before he was in the sight line of the guards, put on his jacket and smoothed his shirt, the necktie still in a bundle in his right-hand pocket. Getu also brought a small wrapped gift, a map of the city that he bought at a tourist shop in Mercato. Getu circled where his house was on this map, and on the back he wrote his address and phone number should Mr. Jeff want to visit.

Though the sun hadn’t set yet, the spotlights in front of the Sheraton were already on, illuminating the driveways and pathways outside the hotel, every inch meticulously landscaped with palms, hedges, and blooming flowers punctuating the long curving roads leading to the five-story building and its various wings and annexes. Getu took a deep breath and stared at the vast space. He tried to visualize walking up to the guard, throwing a casual smile, saying a quick, “Hello, how are you?” Maybe he’d affect an accent so the guards might mistake him for one of the diaspora who lived abroad and returned with foreign wealth and connections and, it seemed, ease.

He took his first step down the hotel pathway. The concrete beneath his feet was spotless, as if it had just been scrubbed clean. “Remarkable. They even kept out the soot and the dust,” Getu said to himself.

When he reached the guard stand, Getu mumbled a greeting to the two guards. One of the guards, the short one, walked up to Getu, and the other, quite tall, stepped back and began to read the paper. The guard in front of Getu was dressed in a khaki-colored suit and wore a black top hat with gold braided trim. He casually flung an AK-47 over his shoulder, then looked around Getu, to his left, his right, almost through him, it seemed. “Are you here alone?” the guard asked.

“Yes, I’m here to meet my friend Mr. Jeff for his going away party.” Getu tried to hold himself tall. “He invited me.”

“A party, huh? Here?” The guard swayed onto his tiptoes and tilted his head back, and so managed to look down on Getu, despite being a couple inches shorter than him. “Where are you from?”

“I’m from Lideta. I have cousins in America, so that explains my accent.” He was from Lideta, a small, poor neighborhood that rested in the shadow of the Lideta Cathedral. The rest was lies.

“You call him Mr. Jeff?” The guard considered this. “Are you his servant?”

Getu shook his head. He wasn’t convincing them. He’d have to think fast, and fiddled with the necktie in his pocket. If only he had stopped along the way to get help putting it on. “I am, as Mr. Jeff says, his man on the street, his ear to the ground. I help with his work.”

“What kind of work?” As the guard walked around Getu, his heels clicked rhythmically against the ground like a ticking watch.

“NGO work,” Getu said, and seeing the guard’s eyebrows rise, he kept on. “International NGO work,” Getu stressed. He had the guard’s attention.

The guard looked Getu up and down closer than before: Getu’s worn clothes, his short rough fingernails, the quality of the calluses on his hands, the tan lines at his wrists, the red highlights in his hair, his muscular form, the freckles on his cheeks, the cracked skin of his



lips. “What do you do for him? A farmer, maybe? A herder? Are you his laborer?”

This was taking a turn for the worse, and Getu scrambled to get back on course. “I help my uncles in the countryside a few times a year. A man who is at ease in the city and the countryside, Mr. Jeff says. I’m his versatile aide, Mr. Jeff calls it.”

“But what do you do?”

“He asks me questions about local things, and I answer them.”

“Does it pay well?” The guard’s skepticism mingled with blossoming interest.

“It will. He says I’m important. The exact English word is ‘*invaluable*.’”

“*Valuable?*”

“*In-valuable,*” Getu corrected, thinking of how to steer the conversation back to those big closed doors.

“But why you? Why are you *in-valuable*? You don’t look like you went to Lycee or the British school?”

He wished the guard would stop inspecting his clothes like this, like they were his calling card. If only he’d had another way to identify himself. “Just think of me as a scholar. I mean, schooling-wise, I’m mostly self-taught, but I was accepted to American university. The fellowship wouldn’t cover all the expenses, but this impressed Mr. Jeff enough when I told him.”

“That can’t be true.”

“It is,” Getu said. And it was. Getu was still staring impatiently now at the door of the Sheraton, held open for what he guessed was a French family, and he talked faster. “My mother says it’s like a disease, but I’ll read anything. Math, science, history, literature, law, politics. And I remember it, too. Mr. Jeff says it’s a near-miracle.”

“Yeah right,” the short guard said, looking over his shoulder and taking the day’s paper out of his partner’s hands.

“You read English, of course,” he said to Getu sarcastically.

“Of course,” Getu said back. “English, French, Amharic, German—”

The guard put his hand up. “Just read this first paragraph.” He pointed to the story on the top left side of the paper, then watched as Getu read. A few seconds later, the guard snatched back the paper. The AK slipped a little, and the guard hoisted it back over his shoulder, his attention fixed on Getu’s eyes. “What did it say?”

Getu recited word for word the story about the new round of World Bank loans for modernizing agriculture. “That can’t be!” The tall guard came closer to see what was going on. “This boy’s like Solomon, watch,” said the short guard as he put the paper back in front of Getu. “Read this paragraph,” he ordered.

Without needing to be told, Getu read, looked away a few moments later, and recited the column about farmland rented out to foreign corporations.

“It’s a trick,” the tall guard said. “No way you memorized it just now.”

“He works for an international NGO,” the short guard explained.

“Can you let me in, I need to go to my boss’s, my friend’s, Mr. Jeff’s party. It would be rude of me not to, and he is an important man.” Getu said this impulsively, not sure that it was true.

“What was his name? What’s your name?” the tall guard asked.

“My name is Getu Amare. His name is Mr. Jeff. Jeff Johnson. Jefferson Johnson to be precise. He introduced himself to me as Jeff Johnson, but out of respect—”

“He’s with an NGO. We can let this guy in,” said the short guard.

“Is he on the list?” the tall guard asked.

“I don’t know about a list. I am Getu Amare.”

“Wait here,” the tall guard said, and as he turned and pulled open the tall glass doors of the hotel, a gust of cool air sent a chill down Getu’s neck as he watched the guard disappear inside.

Getu had met Jeff Johnson six months before by a bar across the street from the UN agencies. Every night at six, the bar filled with aid workers, both locals and foreigners, but mostly foreigners. When Getu was sweeping the sidewalk one warm evening, Jeff Johnson and a group of other Americans stood outside smoking and talking loudly. Jeff Johnson called out to Getu and asked him to settle an old argument about whether “everyday people” benefit from aid given to corrupt governments. The parking lot attendant heard this question, turned, and walked quietly and quickly away. The bouncer stepped inside, making a general gesture of being cold in the 70-degree weather. But Getu, who’d never had an audience like this before, spoke loudly. Jeff Johnson and his friends fell quiet, leaned in, and listened attentively to each word.

Jeff Johnson pointed out that as a street sweeper, Getu must see a lot in the city, and Getu said, “Not only see, but smell, hear, and clear.” Jeff Johnson and his friends leaned in even closer. Someone asked Getu, “What do you feel would be the most meaningful change for people your age in your neighborhood?” Getu thought about it and said, “It’s a long way to school from my neighborhood, and so I’m self-educated. Many of my friends also forgo school because the bus is too unreliable.” Jeff Johnson and his circle told Getu what a terrible shame this was, and the more they shook their heads, the more empowered Getu felt. Jeff Johnson and his circle asked for details, exact locations, the number of people who would benefit, community impact, scalability. A few weeks later, a private free shuttle suddenly began stopping on Getu’s block taking passengers from around where Getu lived to the closest grammar school. Getu could hardly believe his eyes, like he’d conjured it up himself with his fingertips. Jeff Johnson saw Getu soon after the shuttle began running and listened as Getu praised the deed, which would make a big difference in the lives of his neighbors. “Team effort on this one,” Jeff Johnson deflected. “You know, we could use a man

36 like you in our organization. It's important to know what the man on the street thinks about what we do. You'd be an asset to us. Look how much you've already done." The words rung in his ears all that night as Getu imagined a new life for himself with those new friends, their salaries, their style, their access, their influence.

That experience left an impression on Getu, and the relationship that developed over daily discussions outside the bar during Jeff Johnson's cigarette breaks was the most significant in Getu's life so far, Getu thought. Through their discussions, Getu was able to magically engender new textbooks for the local library; a water well near the slums, where he'd often seen people drink from a contaminated stream; a seminar series on prenatal care, which Getu hadn't suggested but had approved. After each new program, Jeff Johnson would tell Getu, "We're a dream team. We'll be *running* this show in five years." Getu couldn't imagine not saying goodbye to Jeff Johnson on his last day in Addis Ababa, and he trusted Jeff Johnson—with all his powers—would come through for him somehow, now that Getu was the one in need.

Getu was still waiting for the tall guard to return when he caught a snippet of conversation between two women and realized one seemed familiar to him. "I wouldn't trust Jeff with my book collection," she'd said. "He'd probably end up giving it away." The young woman was pink with sunburn and was applying aloe to her shoulders.

"Or misplacing it all," said the other woman who was walking slowly while looking at herself in a compact and opening a tube of lip gloss.

"So then I don't know why you'd let him borrow your car," said the first woman, putting away her tube of gel.

"Because," mumbled her friend, who paused to apply the gloss then smiled into her compact. "But he does always mean well, that Jeff," she said, pursing her lips, walking up to the door of the Sheraton without casting a glance at the guard station.

Just as the short guard held open the door, Getu approached the woman with the pink sunburn, and he called out, “Madame!”

“No change, sorry, honey,” the woman dismissed. The short guard heard this and shook his head; he knew Getu wasn’t a beggar, and clearly disapproved of the woman’s words, for she should have blessed Getu, invoked some higher kindness if her own did not compel her to give.

“Madame, it’s me, Getu. I’m Mr. Jeff’s aide. His man on the street. I think we met by the bar outside the UN.”

The young woman looked at him for a moment, and said, “Of course, Getu.” She leaned in to kiss him three times, as was the custom, but the spark of recognition never entered her eyes. Getu could smell the scent of the aloe gel, subtle, like a broken blade of grass.

“Madame, forgive me, but I don’t know if I ever got your name,” Getu said bowing slightly.

“It’s Patricia,” she said. “Pat. And this is a friend of mine Lisa, Lis.” She gestured toward the other woman, who also leaned in and kissed Getu on the cheek, left, right, left. The two women reached into their purses and pulled out their business cards, which Getu took, memorized, and put in his jacket pocket. Pat worked with a management consulting firm, Lis with a multilateral.

“We were just going to see Jeff now,” Pat said to Getu.

“I wish I could join you. Mr. Jeff invited me to his farewell party, but the guards are asking a lot of questions,” Getu said, trying to look inconvenienced but not desperate.

“Come with us,” Lis said, then linked her arm with Getu’s and boldly walked through the door, passing the guard, who smiled as Getu entered. Inside, Getu, Pat and Lis were searched, and Pat and Lis tossed their bags on the scanner before walking through the metal detector.

Pat turned to him and said, “Entering the Sheraton always feels like going through airport security, don’t you think?”

Getu nodded, but he had never been inside, nor had he flown, either. He wiped his shoes several times on the doormat as he stood by the scanner. The guard there asked him to take off his jacket and put it through the machine. He hadn't planned for this, and wished he had asked his mother to help wash away the stubborn sweat stains on his shirt. He took off the jacket using a rigid motion, keeping his elbows tucked into his body, then walked through security without swaying his arms. He put the jacket on again using the same constricted motions.

But Getu quickly forgot about his jacket or the stains. Such insignificant things could hardly compete with the opulent gilding, glass, and marble that surrounded him, and the colossal fountain in the center of the lobby. The polished clientele wore colorful clothes from West Africa and India, or the gray and black geometric shapes of New York or London. Getu inched as close as he could to Lis and Pat, and followed them as they led him through a kind of abundance he'd never seen before. The air-conditioned lobby opened in front of him with its high archways, its shining floors, its multitude of rugs that would have had to be folded in quarters to fit in his bedroom. Overcome and transported into a world that seemed to swallow him whole, Getu couldn't sense himself.

Pat's loud laughter broke his trance, and she threw her arms around two tall men and a young Ethiopian woman. Getu was introduced and handed three new business cards from Pete from DFID, Chuck from OECD, and Nardos from OHCHR, and he trailed the group, almost stepping on their heels as they made their way downstairs to the Gaslight.

The party was a blur at first. Pat declared she was going straight to the bar to start a tab, and the others followed, leaving Getu to wander on his own. After fifteen minutes, Getu found the man of the hour, and when he saw Getu, Jeff Johnson quickly came over, and shouted, "You made it! You came!"

“Yes, of course. I said I’d come. It’s your farewell,” Getu said and embraced Jeff Johnson, who wore a gray suit, his dark brown hair shaggy and loose, a departure from his usual combed-back style. Getu noticed Jeff Johnson had his tie untied around his neck. “You couldn’t tie it either?” Getu said.

“What?”

“Your tie—”

“Yeah, after a long last day, I had to loosen the grip, you know.”

“Yes, mine’s in my pocket,” Getu said, and mimicked his host, throwing his tie around his neck and letting it hang loose like an untied scarf. Getu then took the small gift from his pocket, and handed it to Jeff Johnson, who seemed to appreciate the present. “I love maps,” Jeff Johnson said, half-opening a crease, then folding it back up.

“That’s my home, here,” Getu said, unfolding it all the way, pointing to the circled spot. “It has been in my family a long time,” he added, wondering if he’d still be living there the next time Jeff Johnson came to town, if there was a next time. He began to ease into his ask, saying, “I wish you could visit. I know we’ve talked about it—”

“I’ve really meant to,” Jeff Johnson said, and put the map carefully in his pocket.

“Next time,” Getu said, adding, “I might have to get you a new map then, though, with all the changes in the city.”

“Yes, I bet when I see you again, you’ll be living in one of those big new houses. I’m not worried about you, Getu.”

“Really? I’m quite concerned—”

“Hope is the greatest asset a man can have, you know,” Jeff Johnson said, then trailed off, distracted by a group who passed to wave hello. “Anyway, I really think with a little optimism a guy like you—intelligent, kind, driven, and articulate—can do anything he wants, if he puts his mind to it.”

“Do you really think so, because—”

“Hey, Jeff, there you are!” Pat was standing with Lis, Nardos, and a tall red-haired man with square glasses. Jeff Johnson introduced Getu to Toni from AfDB, and others who made their way into and out of the discussion. Getu collected business cards from a roving editor, a strategic specialist, a starlet and her agent, a relief worker, and a freelance philanthropist.

“Can I buy you a drink?” Jeff Johnson asked Getu after a lull. Getu was about to direct the conversation back to his home, but talking over a drink seemed like the best approach.

“Oh, let me buy you one,” Getu said taking out his wallet.

“Oh no, they’re overpriced here,” Jeff Johnson said, and flagged down the bartender. “Can’t allow it.”

“It’s the Ethiopian way. You are a guest about to go! You must let me.”

“Okay, if it’s a cultural thing, I guess I’ll have a beer,” he said to the bartender. “Just a draft. Local.” Getu ordered water. Jeff Johnson was absorbed in a heated debate, so when Getu got the bill, no one was paying attention when Getu realized the water cost more than the beer, and either way, he couldn’t cover what he owed. Getu thought of his mother, and her insistence that Mr. Jeff’s world was not his world, even if they shared a city code. Still, here he was in whatever world this was, and someone had to pay. He began counting his money discretely under the bar; somehow he’d misjudged his cash by a factor of ten. Getu leaned toward the bartender, and without knowing what he was going to say, found himself whispering, “Can you put this on Miss, on Pat’s tab? Patricia Walcott, Pat. She’s getting this one.” The bartender nodded without asking any questions, and like that, Getu wondered if once in, he was operating within a new system of trust. Whereas in his life, establishing those bonds required quite a lot, especially around money matters (too much to lose), here, an unfamiliar nonchalance



seemed to permeate. He took a chance, and ordered himself a beer, just one, on Pat's tab, too.

A fog machine was positioned in the corner of the room, and small spotlights and stage lights dotted the trance-like Gaslight with glimmering blue, purple, and white. The atmosphere disoriented Getu, and as soon as he walked away from the bar, he realized he'd lost Jeff Johnson again. Getu ran into a few people he had met in the past through Jeff Johnson, but for the most part, he walked around the party looking for the host, introducing himself to one guest after the next as "Mr. Jeff's man on the street," which others found endearing. He hopped from conversation to conversation, gathering business card after business card from employees of all kinds of organizations (PEPFAR, GFAR, DADEA, ICSID, ILRI, USAID, UNFPA, UNESCO, UNICEF, UNDP, UNECA, IDB, IFC, ICTSD, FAO, WIPO, OIE, WTPF), memorizing them, putting them in his pocket in careful order. He was pulled onto the dance floor as he followed Mr. Jeff's trail, dragged upstairs where he heard Jeff Johnson was by the fire pit gorging himself on tibs, but Getu didn't find him there, either. From time to time, he touched the business cards in his pocket, fingered them, played with the stack as he made his way through the maze of a hotel. He finally found Jeff Johnson by the swimming pool in the back, sitting with a group, and went over to his host. Just as he arrived, Jeff Johnson stood and announced it was almost time for him to go. The night had snuck by and Getu still hadn't asked after his job. He'd have to be direct, risk being awkward about it, or miss his shot completely.

Jeff Johnson said goodbye to his friends and left them at the pool, but Getu insisted he'd walk to the gate. Jeff Johnson said, "You've been a good friend to me, Getu. A gracious host, my man on the street. I'm lucky to have met you."

"Thank you very kindly. About that, I—"

“It’s like I always say, we really could use a man like you on the team.” Jeff Johnson spoke all his familiar lines.

“Then hire me,” Getu said, pointing at himself and finally voicing what had been on his mind the entire night, if not their entire friendship. “Hire me.”

Jeff Johnson laughed gently. “I know, right? Exactly. I wish I could.”

“Then do!”

“Oh, Getu.” Jeff Johnson looked at Getu, and seeing his serious face, he turned serious, too. “I’m sorry, did I give you the wrong.... Did you think...?” Getu listened very closely. Jeff Johnson took a step back, a look of clarity descended. “I think you’ve misunderstood somehow. I’m just a junior staffer, so obviously...,” he said as if that explained it. “I mean, of course I’m hoping this assignment will lead to a promotion, but you know ...”

“But you know people. I’m counting on you,” Getu said. His voice was tense though he tried to sound casual. If he’d misunderstood, hadn’t he been misled?

“You can do so much better. You don’t want to work for these guys. There’d be no culture fit, I don’t know, they all have their own—”

“Culture fit?” Getu almost heard his mother’s voice come back to him. *They’ll never let you in*, she’d chided before. Getu said to Jeff Johnson, “I could be a guide, an interpreter between your world and my world.”

“They already have guys like me as interpreters, so to speak.” Jeff Johnson’s sympathy only sharpened his authority.

Getu’s mother’s voice practically rang in Getu’s ear. *Ask him the difference between an interpreter and a thief*, she would have said.

“I have other skills,” Getu explained. “I’m a trained street sweeper. I’m good with directions. I’d make a top chauffer.”

“Getu, I’m afraid you’ve somehow been misinformed,” said Jeff

Johnson, avoiding Getu's eyes.

"But didn't you say you had something for me? And what else could it be, all this talk of working together?"

"Did I say that? Yes, I guess I was just, not being literal," and Jeff Johnson furrowed his brow and started to walk quickly toward the gate. Getu walked sort of next to him, sort of behind him trying to keep up.

"Oh, a joke," Getu laughed uncomfortably, walking quickly, trying to sound friendly, but wondering what to do next.

"No, it really wasn't, but I can see how you'd take what I said—," Jeff Johnson said stopping.

Getu lifted his right hand out toward Jeff and said, "Well, I was just joking with you, too." Getu imagined his mother's voice again, this time aimed at him. *When someone slithers out of a tight spot by saying they're just joking, they're not just joking. Never let anyone get away with that. Never do it yourself.*

Jeff Johnson awkwardly approached Getu's outstretched hand, and shook it quickly. "Still, I wish I could, Getu. I don't know how this happened. I really wish—"

"I really wish, too." Getu didn't know what else to say, watching this vague but powerful expectation unravel before him.

"Stay optimistic, Getu. Things will work out for you. I'm sure of it. For a guy like you," and Jeff Johnson had so much passion in his voice, so much hope and promise that Getu almost felt ashamed by the impossibility of his situation.

"I'm sorry. I'm so sorry." He felt like he was saying this to himself, his mother, Mr. Jeff.

"For what?" Jeff Johnson said.

Getu didn't know why he suddenly felt so guilty, but he also felt he was meant to. "I'm sorry for everything," Getu replied, then added, "Thank you for everything."

44 “No, thank you for everything. I’m sorry for everything,” Jeff Johnson responded.

Getu composed himself, pushed away thoughts of his mother, their house, the enchanted future on whose doorstep he had briefly lingered. Had he made a mistake, and if so, when, how? Or was his mother right, had he misplaced his trust, believed too much in these elusive words? He’d wanted to save their home, but he also wanted to be an exception, an exception to the rule that he’d seen proven over and over again that someone like him could be so easily swept aside, his home cast aside, his dreams cast aside. He wanted to prove his mother wrong, but more than that, he wanted to prove everyone wrong, the whole setup wrong, the whole system that marked him from birth and placed him at the mercy of the powerful, relative as that may be.

Getu thought about this as he walked Jeff Johnson around to the side exit and said a rushed goodbye, parting words—some combination of “Good luck” and “Take care”—back and forth a few times. A line of blue and white taxis circled the gate like a moat around the property; like so many, they, too, were not allowed to enter. Getu watched Jeff Johnson get into the first one, and as it sped away, the line inched forward. Getu waved until Jeff Johnson’s taxi was out of sight, and Getu imagined it twisting down the road, down the dark hill, past the empty lots, the barren slope below. Getu pictured his house leveled, nothing left in the city but the huge spotlight structure looming beside him, its tinted bulbs attracting his gaze again, captivating his attention like gleaming jewels, and he wondered if somehow he could still collect on what had turned out to be an illusion of a promise. For wasn’t a door still left a little ajar?

Getu adjusted his tie that hung loose around his neck, then walked up to the entrance of the Sheraton. A new set of guards was standing there.

“Can we help you?” one asked blocking his path, the other ignored him.

Getu didn't flinch. "I just stepped out for a minute," he said to the guards. Getu felt the thick stack of business cards in his pocket, and pulled out the fourth from the top, carefully removed it, and handed it to the guard. "My name is Elias Isaacs with the WHO. I'm an interpreter here to meet a client."

Getu spoke with ease, and he was ushered in, the tall glass doors flung open. ☞<