

A Modest Adjustment

By Dan Rebellato

June 2005

Characters

- John Swift** British, male, about 30, smooth and persuasive. IMF Chief Negotiator.
- Chris Middleton** British, male, about 50, facts at his fingertips. IMF assistant negotiator.
- Jerry Hansen** US, male, 30s, a joker with a short fuse. World Bank representative.
- Dr William Misosi** Male 30s, Chief Financial Minister.
- Akilah Makwete** Female, 20s, Minister for Communications.

The scene takes place in a run-down presidential palace in Mboshi, the capital city of a subSaharan African country shortly after the peaceful replacement of its ruling military council.

“Capital is dead labour, that, vampire-like, only lives by sucking living labour, and lives the more, the more labour it sucks.”
Karl Marx

Akilah

[*alone*] My grandfather fought in Ethiopia and when he came back he brought with him a collection of stamps in an album. I always liked to look at them and when he died, though I was only eleven, he left them to me.

I had never seen so many colours and shapes, so many designs and so many different letters and languages. I did not leave my village until I was twenty-six but through my grandfather's album I imagined the world.

The revolution in my country was a quiet one. Fearing reprisals, I gave two necklaces to my sister, placed my album in a box and buried it in the yard. We were angry when the Military Council introduced a new curfew. To demonstrate our resistance we gathered in the evenings, in the streets and fields, in the flatlands and scrublands. Together we stood, beneath the black and beautiful sky, holding hands through the night. Our campaign spread from town to town. It lasted for four months and the newspapers gave it a name; they called it 'The Stars Shall Witness'.

Our campaign was a message into the night sky, like a letter send out without a stamp. But to our surprise the message was heard and one morning in a radio broadcast the General and all his councillors announced that they had resigned.

In the days that followed, and the nights too, I did not think about my buried treasure. Bamboo wine and dancing and gunshots in the air. Until they came for me and asked if I wished to be Minister for Communications. I said yes I will, but we must have new stamps.

The stamps bear the design of our new flag. Green, black, white with a cluster of silver stars to remember those nights when the sky was at its darkest. When the first sheets emerged from the printing presses, I gazed at the fields and fields of colour, and the stars shall witness that I cried.

Lights up. Two men in suits stand waiting in a presidential palace in a sub-Saharan African country. The room is shabby. Two new flags have been hung up above the main door. Chris Middleton is an older man, about fifty. John Swift is younger, in his late twenties.

Middleton [*Reading from a file*] 'The flag has two bars of green at the top and bottom, indicating the beauty of this land.' (Must have missed that.) 'The central bar is black set apart from the green by thin white lines, indicating our country's' (here we go) 'proud tradition of respectful coexistence...'

Swift Chris - do you mind?

Middleton Sorry, John.
Hangover?

Swift Mm.
Have you ever tried kipumu? A local brew. Made from millet which they inexplicably seemed to feel was a selling point. I thought vaguely it might taste like Hoegaarden. Which it did: but Hoegaarden on the way out, not Hoegaarden on the way in. How was your night?

Middleton Oh the usual.

Swift Ah.

Middleton Found a willing girl in the north of the city.

Swift Good for you.

Middleton Seventy-five dollars. Her family is fed. My appetite is satisfied. A very satisfactory transaction.

Swift So where's the World Bank?

Middleton He is here, I saw him at breakfast.

Swift You didn't come in together?

Middleton The IMF does not car-share, especially not with the World Bank. You have to set a standard.

Enter Jerry Hansen. American, in his thirties.

Hansen Sorry, sorry, sorry. Snarly traffic outside my hotel. Somebody spills a box of chickens on the eastern roadway the whole city grinds to a halt. It's like living in Kentucky.

Swift Goodness me, did I just hear the World Bank apologising to the IMF?

Hansen For reasons of market stability I would rather not comment. Ah the new flag?

Middleton Yes, the horizontal bands of colour have particular significance...

Hansen I can read, thank you Chris. I noticed you turned up your nose at the breakfast buffet this morning.

Middleton Still full from last night.

Hansen You should have seen the maid who did my room this morning. I coulda eaten her up for breakfast, yessir.

Swift And how *is* your wife?

Hansen Unlike the traffic management in Mboshi, relations between Mrs Jerry Hansen and myself are practical, realistic and efficient.

Enter William Misosi and Akilah Makwete.

William Good morning gentlemen. I'm sorry we're late. Six months in and we still get lost in the palace.

General introductions and shaking of hands before William conducts them to an area of comfortable chairs.

I see you're admiring our new flag. The green, you know, represents the beauty of the land, the black and white the fraternal relations between races and creeds –

Hansen What is it with Africa and flags?

William I beg your pardon?

Hansen Is it an efficient use of resources to design a new flag? Your streets are in chaos. Your potholes have potholes. But that's okay because you have a new flag.

Swift Sit down, Jerry.

Hansen I'll stand if you don't mind.

Pause.

Misosi We're grateful that you made the journey.

Swift We're here to help. You've had a bruising few months.

Misosi That is an understatement. You'll appreciate that we do not call on the IMF lightly.

Middleton The lender of last resort is rarely called upon lightly.

Swift I assume you approached the bond markets.

Misosi We were rebuffed, I think I could say.

Akilah They laughed us out of the room, I think I could say.

Swift Many people don't realise that there is a single system of credit-rating for every institution and person in the world. There seems to be this idea around that countries are somehow different. But as you've discovered, that's not the case.

Middleton You may be interested to know that your country's credit-rating is slightly worse than my daughter's. And the bank actually sent someone round to cut up her card, so you can imagine.

Misosi That is some kind of perspective.

Middleton And, ironically, once again I am lender of last resort. I got her a card on our account. She's gone travelling for a year before she starts a course in Tourism Studies at Sunderland. It's rather nice actually. Every time I need to know where she is I just open the Amex bill.

Akilah May we ask your opinion of something?

Swift Certainly.

Akilah Why do you think the currency markets turned against us?

Swift Ah.

Misosi The Military Government we replaced was responsible for political assassinations, death squads, acts of rape and torture. Their financial corruption was flamboyant and total. We came to power without a drop of blood being shed. We have abolished the death penalty, freed the presses, dismantled the militias, and we have set a date for elections within a year. And how did the markets respond? By dropping our currency with such force that it shattered irreparably on the stone floors of the exchanges.

Swift Chris, perhaps you'd like to speak to this.

Middleton Basically you've been happy-slapped by the International Currency Markets.

Swift We do feel for you, of course. It's a shock, it's humiliating.

Middleton But it was also inevitable. There's a certain amount of Foreign Direct Investment in your steelworks and in the mining concerns.

Hansen Everybody thought you'd nationalise them, seize the assets.

Misosi We never had any intention of doing so.

Swift But they thought you might, and *because* they thought you might, they also reasoned that you'd either introduce exchange controls or devalue and decided to pull out their commitments to your currency before you did.

Misosi Before we did what?

Swift Introduce exchange controls or devalue.

Misosi But we didn't.

Swift No you didn't but if you had, well they were very exposed.

Misosi So we're being punished for something we didn't do.

Hansen And your point is?

Swift Rather than see only the chaos, the shock, try to understand that the market is a rational instrument. Look for the wisdom in its power. This was perhaps a gentle reminder not to anger the market. The market is a wise teacher and a firm disciplinarian.

Akilah A gentle reminder?

Middleton The market moves in mysterious ways, its wonders to perform.

Misosi Anyone would think the markets prefer military dictatorship to democracy.

Pause.

Middleton We have actually found in places like Chile, Nigeria, Argentina and elsewhere, that a vertically integrated command structure can usefully ensure the development of an effective and reliable internal distribution and transport network.

Swift Or, put another way, they do make the trains run on time.

Misosi If I may say, that seems a rather immoral attitude.

Akilah You have never lived under the noose, Mr Swift.

Swift Let us remind ourselves of the purpose of this meeting. We are assessing the lie of the land. We are two dogs, sniffing each other's arses in the park. You want to make out your case for assistance. We, on the other hand, will want to return from this meeting confident of your sense of economic responsibility.

Misosi I can assure you that we take our responsibilities very seriously.

Hansen Sure, but that's not quite enough. In the McDonalds corporation they like to say that to prosper in their company you need to have ketchup instead of blood.

Akilah They *like* to say that?

Hansen They do. As for us, we like to say that our truly successful clients have the market in their hearts.

Misosi I understand that, of course, but what –

Swift We explained the market's pragmatic view of military dictatorships. You accused the market of being immoral.

Misosi I said the *attitude* was immoral.

Swift No attitudes are immoral. Nothing is immoral until the market has processed it. Because the market is the simplest and most beautiful mechanism yet discovered for organising and releasing human potential. And that's a good thing, surely? If ever there were something beyond reproach in ethical terms, it would be releasing human potential. (It actually goes back to Aristotle.)

Middleton Only the market is able to respond to the actual moral choices of millions – *billions* of people. The market reveals what we really believe, morally. But if you make so-called moral judgments before the market has got to work you choke off the glorious moral flourishing of the world. In its way, morality is deeply immoral.

Hansen. As far as the market is concerned, there is no moral difference between price controls and the Ten Commandments. They're both as bad as each other.

Swift It's terribly important that you understand this.

Uneasy silence.

Misosi We had hoped that, as a gesture of support for our emerging democracy, the Europeans would help us by buying our crops.

All laugh faintly.

That seems not to be so.

We briefly allowed ourselves to hope that debt cancellation would be seriously on the agenda at Gleneagles. I spoke at some length to a member of the team running the UK's presidency of the G8. The line was poor but I received the distinct impression that for the British delegation debt cancellation was a less momentous prospect than the reformation of Pink Floyd.

More faint laughter. It dies down.

Hansen Well, we got a plan.

Akilah Ah yes. The 'structural adjustment program'. Sell off the state. Slash welfare. Open your markets.

Middleton We don't call them structural adjustment programs any more.

Akilah What do you call them?

Swift 'Policy Reduction Strategy Papers'.

Akilah What's the difference?

Swift ... Different name?

Middleton It may, however, require a very modest adjustment to your preconceptions about the industrial future of your country.

Misosi Of what kind?

Hansen If I may:
A couple hundred years ago, a man called David Ricardo discovered a very important principle. If every country tries to make everything, some stuff gets made. But if each country specialises in a few things and trades them, *everyone* is better off.

Middleton "The theory of comparative advantage."

Swift In other words, don't make what everyone else already makes. Find out what you can make most easily and specialise in it.

- Hansen** If the ice-cream guy gets a hole in his shoe, does he give up half his day to mend it? No sir, he takes it to a cobbler. The cobbler wants an ice cream, does he make it himself? No sir, he goes to the ice cream guy. The system means more ice cream and more shoes for everybody.
- Misosi** I understand the principle, of course. You're suggesting we find something we're good at that nobody else does and specialise in it.
- Middleton** Exactly.
- Hansen** What do you have a lot of?
- Akilah** Hunger. Poverty.
- Middleton** Absolutely and my God you know we feel for you but these things are effects. They happen because you have a lot of...?
- Pause.*
- Misosi** People?
- Swift** Exactly! People. You are abundant in people! You have the highest density population of any country in the region! You are people-rich!
- Akilah** Sure, but our skills base is narrow, most of our children have never seen inside a school. Our labour does not travel well, as you know.
- Hansen** It's not labour we have in mind.
- Beat.*
- Misosi** What *do* you have in mind?
- Swift** We are proposing a small piece of mental deregulation to enable you to open up your markets.
- Hansen** Free your mind and the economy will follow.
- Middleton** Several of the crops planted in the Eastern regions are economically unviable. There is no market for the crops you plant. We suggest that you change the use of those farms and rather than raise crops you raise – well – we're suggesting that instead you raise children.
- Misosi** We already raise children. I don't understand.

Swift We're suggesting that you raise children for export.

Pause.

Misosi You're suggesting that we –
What you mean is –
No, I'm sorry I don't know what you mean.

Beat.

Akilah You don't mean.
Oh God, you can't mean.
For prostitution...

A moment. Then the IMF and World Bank officials burst out laughing. The African ministers, relieved, begin to join in the laughter.

Various *(overlapping)*
Oh good Lord.
Prostitution??
You didn't think –
Listen to her. This is what we're up against.
You seriously thought...?
Prostitution!
As if we would sit here and –
The look on your face!

The laughter dies down.

Swift No no, that market is much too crowded.
No, what we're talking about is human bodies in a more general
and also more fundamental sense.

Hansen Over the last decade we have seen a relatively new market
emerge.

Middleton It's small so far because it's technically illegal but we think the
law can be challenged on the grounds of a restriction of trade.

Hansen The trade is in human organs.

Swift A kiddy needs a kidney transplant in Los Angeles. Chances are
the local hospital won't have what he needs. But just over the
border there's a country full of Mexicans with kidneys to sell.

Hansen Ah but It's illegal. But why?
Make it legal: the Mexican gets his money; the kid in LA gets a
new kidney. Everyone's happy.

Start preaching, try to stop the family, the kid dies and that Mexican stays poor.

Middleton It's comparative advantage. The family has the money. The Mexican's got a spare kidney.

Swift A perfect example of how moral regulation makes everyone worse off. Morally deregulate and everyone wins.

Middleton An appeal to the World Trade Organisation is being planned. A ban on trade in human organs is uncompetitive and an attack on personal freedom.

Hansen Who are you to tell me I can't sell my liver?

Middleton If I want to put my arm on eBay, that's my business and no one else's.

Hansen My body is a material asset that I should be permitted to exploit as I choose.

Akilah You want us to start trading in bodily organs?

Misosi Because if Mexico and China are selling body parts already where's the ... comparative advantage ... for us?

The men look at each other.

Variously He's good.
He's catching on fast.

Swift You need to find your own specialist area.
Take a look at this. Chris?

*Middleton hands over files containing some 10 x 8 photographs.
Silence as the ministers look through them in puzzlement.*

Misosi I don't understand, what are we looking at.

Middleton That, minister, is human flesh.

Pause.

Akilah Oh my God.

Swift Your response here is crucial. It would be so easy to rely on the careworn clichés –

Middleton The hand-me-down expressions of so-called moral so-called piety –

Akilah Oh God.

Swift Careful. These things you're feeling are just bad habits. Work them out of your system. Think: where did these photographs come from? And let that thought go. Think: they have shown me my fellow human beings carved in pieces. Then let it go. Think: what have we sunk to? I never knew of such depths. And let that thought go.

Middleton Each time you take in the sight, try to hate it just a little less. It is terribly important that we go back to Washington with a good impression.

Swift My superior will look me in the eye and say Johnny, can these people really make sound economic decisions? Or will they start banning this and regulating that as soon as our backs are turned? I want – I so want – believe me – I so want to look him unflinchingly in the eye and say: Yes. These people have the market in their hearts. Because then you will have your money.

Akilah Who on earth will want to buy human flesh?

Hansen Oh sure some people won't, but trust me, some people will, and soon a price will be found that brings supply in harmony with demand.

Misosi What could they possibly do with it?

Middleton Oh, a hundred different things, use your imagination.

Misosi But what if they ... what if they eat it?

Swift Well, what if they do?
Some people buy books to read, others use them to prop up table legs. Under a market system, your responsibility is to bring your goods in saleable condition the point of exchange. Your responsibility for the product ends there.

Middleton Do you think Mr Campbell went to Andy Warhol and said 'stop painting my soup tins – just eat the soup'?

Hansen No he did not, he pocketed the money and said thank you very much.

Swift I hope your objection is not a moral one. I have tried to explain that your responsibility ends at the point of sale. Morality, as I think we have made very clear, is only decided by the market, after the point of sale. It is uncompetitive and economically

inefficient to have qualms about selling your children's flesh in an international market.

Middleton It is possible that the market will reveal a general distaste for the idea of eating human meat. This will be a judgment made up of the hundreds of real choices made by real people across the world.

Swift I, for example, wouldn't eat a Frenchman. I have colleagues who wouldn't eat a German.

Middleton You wouldn't eat a Frenchman? Gosh, you're missing out. Frenchman, yum yum.

Swift It's just an example.

Middleton I would eat a Serbian, but not a Croatian interestingly.

Hansen I'm never gonna eat another Hungarian, that's for sure.

General agreement.

Misosi What?

Swift You are literally sitting on a fortune. Human flesh will be more of a goldmine than your goldmines.

Akilah So the recommendation of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank is that we invest our way out of debt by farming our children for meat.

Beat.

Middleton Rather well put.

Agreement.

Akilah Why us? Why don't you sell your children?

Hansen Because our lives mean more to us than yours do.

Pause.

It's true. You have lived in brutal conditions of poverty and disease, want and famine for so long. Death is part of everyday life. I'm not saying it's normal for you but it is more normal.

Swift The Chief Economist for the World Bank said this over a decade ago. He got some stick for it but he was right; all he did was to point out that (and I'm quoting here) 'the economic logic behind

dumping a load of toxic-waste in the lowest-wage country is impeccable' (end quote). Why worry about some chemical that will give you prostate cancer in your old age when 20% of the population won't even reach the age of five?

- Hansen** It's undeniable. Your expectations for life are much less than ours. And that is your comparative advantage. It gives you a really competitive edge in an emerging market. You have the whip-hand.
- Middleton** I envy you, in a way.
- Hansen** It's exciting. It's like the microprocessor, videotape and the MP3 player all rolled into one.
- Middleton** You'll have to brand yourselves properly, of course.
- Hansen** Put the flag on the packet, give it a regional name, make it a local delicacy.
- Middleton** And in any case, before the market has really built, you can trial projects for the domestic market – solve your overpopulation and your hunger problems at a stroke.
- Swift** And I have to say you'll have to stop showing up at the UN and African Union summits shooting your mouth off about poverty.
- Hansen** Show someone a sad-looking cow, they're not going to want to eat the beef.
- Middleton** You know the Laughing Cow? That French cheese? It's 'La Vache qui rit', not 'La Vache qui va aux United Nations et constamment parle des problèmes de la monde'. And there's a reason.
- Hansen** You need to rebrand yourself. You're sunny, you're healthy, you're get-up-and-go people from the open fields of East Africa.
- Middleton** Or 'Eat Africa'. That could be a slogan.
- Misosi** What would we tell the children? How could we tell them they are being raised for meat? That they will be on a rich man's plate somewhere on the other side of the world?
- Swift** Ye of little faith! They will cope. Really, they will. Human beings cope with more suffering and misery than you'd ever think possible. I have the most tremendous respect for the obstinate power of human tenacity and survival.

Last night, at midnight, I flew across your city and looking down, you know what I saw? Opportunity. Possibility. People, everywhere. In every street corner, in every doorway, dreaming, talking, pulsing with life.

Don't do your people down, Minister Misosi. They'll rise to this challenge. I know it.

Akilah Stars bear witness.

Hansen Morality is a burden, Minister. Morality is pain. If you choose your old habits, your people will suffer.

Akilah Stars bear witness that this did not go unprotested.
Let them witness we did not sit here and let our people be carved on the tables of the North.
Stars witness that we did not fail them.

Swift The stars shall witness nothing.

For my wife's birthday you know what I did? I bought and named a star. For her. It was the last star to be named. The stars have all been bought. The stars pull my private plane through the night. The stars push my car through the streets. The stars are on our side, Minister Makwete, not yours.

Akilah What sort of men are you - ?

Misosi Akilah, please.

Silence.

Swift Thank you, Minister.
Do we have an agreement?

Fade.

Akilah *[Alone]*
I was in the first Government delegation to the African Union.
I do not mind saying I was excited
Black cars to the airport
My first time in a plane
After the terror of take-off
I forced myself to look down at my country
Below me the maize fields.

Set out in squares, I felt my heart breaking to see that they looked like the sheets of stamps I had seen glide from the presses.

I have not returned to unbury my box
I do not believe I could do it
I think a dog will have taken it, and torn it to shreds

I know that if I should see it
I would not see the colours
Only the perforations.