

# A Certain 36th of November

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| Congo |

translated by Lemuel Robinson

Once upon a time, according to my father, there was a land where an assortment of people lived in a building without a ground floor, comparable to our plot. This assortment of people constituted a Nation-House in the same manner that the occupants of our plot make up a family. The head of our family occupies a chair, and the head of the Nation-House, an armchair. The difference? The head of the family is my father and the head of the Nation-House is called, or was called, Bwana-Kitoko.<sup>1</sup> Nickname given to King Baudouin of Belgium in his 1955 visit to the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), then known as Belgian Congo. “Beautiful boy” in the Bantu language of Lingala In fact, his name varies according to moods, the times, and the centuries. At one time he was named Caesar to differentiate him from the Tsar, even if both terms refer to the king. However, royalty is deemed archaic, and thus, to modernize it, they traded the kingdom for the republic. So we put on the president’s hat ourselves and tossed out both Caesar and the Tsar before telling Bwana-Kitoko to go fuck himself.

Once upon a time, and this is according to my father — it was like that each evening, my father gathering all of us to tell us stories. In reality, he told us the same story, modifying it each time. He did it so well that we were used to listening to the same things without getting bored of them. He sat on a chair and we sat on the ground. Holding his bottle of beer that he strictly forbade us from drinking, Papa launched into a flowing speech, telling

the same story in a new version. No one could leave before the end of the story, and the story didn't get to the end before my father got up from his chair to go back to his room. So I used to have the sensitive task of carrying my father's chair into his room. But this one time, and I don't know why, I didn't do it.

And boom, it disappeared! My father's chair disappeared. I died. Dead and buried. How could I leave that chair outside? How could I be so negligent? The chair could not disappear by itself, it had surely been stolen. I must catch that thief before my father dismisses me as a vulgar thief, a son not fit to avenge his chair.

Curses to me! Cursed be my children! Cursed be my grandchildren! Even if they still aren't born, they're already cursed. I will not even have the time to explain to my father. I will not even have the chance to place one: before I can say A, my father will have already exhausted the entire alphabet. Curses! I will not even make him understand that I was tired, that I had a crazy urge to sleep, that my legs barely supported my weight... All that I will tell him will be but sin... sin... sin! Even my brothers will be furious with me. This evening, Papa won't tell his multiple-version story. This evening, I'm going to fry. And to make up for it, I won't be able to hear my father tell the story of the Marshall anymore. Oh my God! I must find that chair. Yesterday evening, perched above us, my father had told us about the Marshall's flight from kids who barely knew how to man a Kalashnikov twice their size. Damn kids! Where did they get the courage to give their enlightened guide a kick in the butt?

The Man-State, the God-Man that glided in the clouds. Seated on his chair, my father glides through the clouds, and he has done it since he has been my father, so since forever and ever, on the same chair. If I don't get that chair back, Oh my God! My father is going to kill me. No one can imagine my father sitting down anywhere else besides his chair, his well-loved armchair. No one imagines him sitting on the Marshall's armchair. Between us, it is my father's chair, the Marshall's armchair. It's impossible that my father would sit anywhere besides his chair.

He's an idiot, that thief, or maybe an amateur. Of all the objects nearby, he took only the chair: my father's chair! Fortunately for me and unfortunately for him, there are only four

plots besides ours. Worse, he didn't run fast enough: he walked. I can catch him. I will trap him. What kind of thief runs, but takes their time? He adored taking his time, the Marshall. And according to my father again, after the departure of Bwana-Kitoko, it was the priest-abbot that occupied the armchair — the latter didn't occupy it comfortably and he had to worry with his top ministers the whole time. During the whole household scene between the priest and Patrice concerning the armchair, the Marshall was there, taking his time. But on a certain 36th of November, the Marshall took matters into his own hands and kicked the priest-abbot out of the chair and acted as God the Father for... 32 hundred years.

At first, he would normally have done five years. And during these five years he had mastery over the land, the air, the fire, and the water. He controlled everything, even the thoughts of citizens. Evariste, the last of the prime ministers of the priest-abbot, that didn't even have the time to savor the delights of power, knew something about that. One day, along with his four friends, he had the bad idea of thinking about replacing the Marshall. The Marshall was in a good mood that day. He ordered only that they be hanged in the public square on the day of Pentecost. As he was in a good mood, the Marshall wanted to bring the Holy Spirit down upon them. So they didn't think about replacing him. So they wouldn't pose questions like: Who is going to sit on the chair after the Marshall? I think that it is the same sort of punishment that would be reserved for me if I don't bring that chair back to the house. I hope my father is at least in a good mood like the Marshall that had that public square built, that same place where the last of the top ministers and their four friends had done their Ave Maria before receiving the Holy Spirit, a football stadium. Today, only historians know that the stadium rests on the place where those called the "martyrs of the Pentecost" were hanged, according to my father as always. Pray to God that I'm not the next one! He was very nice, the Marshall, so nice that he didn't wait five years before letting everyone else know that he adored sitting on the armchair and counted on resting his buttcheeks there a little while longer still. My father is similarly nice, he formally forbids anyone from sitting on his chair.

You bottom-shelf thief, may I catch you! I am not going to yell at him to alert the neighbors. These days, you can only count on yourself. The Marshall realized this at his own expense. One day the Marshall fell ill. One day the Marshall had problems with one of his loyal lieutenants — who coveted the armchair — and one day the Marshall needed help. And the

support that he received from his neighbors, who supposedly came to help him, is a cohort of kids that played cops and robbers the way adults do. The result: the Marshall ran away. I am going to trap him by myself. I don't need neighbors. I don't need the police, or the infantry, or the people. This great people, united forever singing the *djalelo*<sup>2</sup> *Anthem sung in homage to Mobutu Sese Seko, dictator of the DRC from 1965 to 1997* in honor of the *mulopwe*<sup>3</sup> *The title of king/divine emperor during the Luba Empire (1585 - 1889) in the area now known as DRC*, all sweating the *ndombolo*<sup>4</sup> *Dance and musical style of the DRC* like the traditional fighters. This same people who quickly turned their backs on the Marshall to applaud the head of the gang of children wearing boots too large for their feet. The Liberator is his name...my father calls him The Liberator. The Marshall's empty armchair is now the armchair of the Liberator, he will pass it down to his son. But I run the risk of losing my inheritance if I don't catch that chair thief.

I risk even more: being evicted from the family home for just a chair. Yes! For just a chair. The Liberator took a bad-mannered bullet in the middle of his heart for just a chair. Maybe that's well done for him. Maybe not. It matters little. With the Liberator you didn't know who did what, how, or why. It was whatever. Except that there it's me that does whatever. I had the duty of watching over that chair. My father trusted me, he trusted me to guard the symbol of his authority. What a waste!

Farmyard thief, I have you! How could a guy as burly as you be brought low enough to steal a chair, a simple chair? Don't you have shame? Give me that chair. You think that your size scares me? No. Waya<sup>5</sup> *"Under no circumstances"* in Lingala! I would prefer to have my face remade before I lose my father's trust. I prefer that you bury me right away before I go back home without my father's chair. You want to know who I am? I am my father's son. The chair that you carry is my father's chair. No, I am not the Liberator's son. The Liberator's son tries to resize the chair to his measurements. I am my father's son. You haven't asked yourself questions like, what is my tribe? Why do they not know me? Who is my mother? Who is my real father? Who is my gang? Questions with answers each as fanciful as the others. Nyet<sup>6</sup> *"No"* in Dutch, one of the official languages in Belgium. The territory currently known as DRC was granted as a personal good to King Leopold II of Belgian in 1885 under

the name of The Congo Free State. Later, in 1908, the royal property was converted into a Belgian colony under the name of Belgian Congo. Belgian colonization of Congo is considered to be one of the most violent in the history of the African continent.! I am not the Liberator's son. I am my father's son. The Liberator didn't last on the armchair and I don't mind that he doesn't have the time to make introductions. I introduce myself, I am Issa, son of my father, the indisputably undisputed owner of the chair that you carry.

No, I'm not threatening you. I want to simply recover my father's chair. I am not going to yell "thief" like all the victims of war that do. Those that threaten the Son with stealing his chair will have to wait for the elections. No need for voting to recover my father's chair. It's not necessary to confuse my father's chair with that of the Marshall. It's my father's chair — it doubly goes back to him by right. First, it's my father, and second, it's his chair. You can say it's yours, but both of us know that's false. This chair, this armchair, many make claim to it, but only my father and the son of the Liberator can take it. Why? It's simple, Mr. Thief. The rules of the game are clear. The chair belongs to my father, and the armchair, to have it, it's necessary to wait for the next session of gunshots for democratic purposes. He who scores on the first try has the possibility of shooting another penalty, one time nothing more. The Son has already shot two penalties. It seemed that he bribed the referee to have a third penalty shot. Look, I'm not bribing you. I say that it seemed--it seemed...one has to verify. That there is another penalty, I don't care, I just want to get my father's chair back...

No, I don't want to fight with you. One doesn't fight over a chair, Mr. Thief. The people have taken to the streets to protest this guy who wants to hang on to an armchair, I go into that dark street to recover my father's chair that you have... that you have accidentally confused with the Marshall's chair. I'm not saying that you stole it. When the people went into the street, some said that it's to protest, to protest against the Son, the father, the grandfather, and that is in protest that the young people have set up barricades to block the road to the large *Mopao*<sup>7</sup> "Boss," in *Lingala* that rolls around in the big boxes where it's colder than the North Pole. For the others, the young people are out to sack the stores, the houses, the nightclubs, the schools, the Prime Minister's office, the churches, the mosques, in short all that could be pillaged. With you I don't protest because you have pillaged nothing, only stolen... no... You took my father's chair. What? Me, fight with you? Never in my life. Between civilized people, you resolve differences in a peaceful, diplomatic manner. The time

for blows has passed, Mr. Thief, let's be civilized. What? You want to always fight? You're going to fight for the Marshall's armchair and leave my father's chair in peace, that's better for you. With the armchair, people respect you, they call you Excellence. Everywhere you go they'll roll out the red carpet. There will be a cheering crowd, with people who only live to chant your name, sing your praises, and dance to your glory. Think of the glory that you will have with the Marshall's armchair. Think of your success with women everywhere. You like women? The women will come surrender to your goodwill. There will be all the colors, all the races, all the shoes. Think about it Mr. Thief. You will have none of that with my father's chair. You want a chair? Go sit on the armchair. You want success? Go sit on the armchair. You want money? Go sit on the armchair. Go steal it, you will gain a lot Mr. Thief. This is according to my father. No, no, I am not mocking you. No, I do not want to fight with you. You are too strong for me. Save your fists...

"Issa, wake up. It's my sister's voice."

My God! I am all sweaty, without a scratch, in my room. I didn't come back from it, I recovered my father's chair. A straight punch was enough to neutralize the thief. My father will now tell us the story of the Marshall and his armchair. I want to know what comes next.

"You sleep while we are all outside, teases my sister."

"What's outside?"

"We caught a thief."

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