

Extract from

Co-wives, Co-widows

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Translated from the French by Rachael McGill, 2021

‘Who is it?’

‘Me!’

‘Who’s me?’

‘Me! Lidou!’

A laugh exploded from behind the door, followed by the word ‘coming!’

Ndongo Passy was smoothing cream over her naked body. She grabbed the towel she’d used after her shower and tucked it round her waist. She opened the door. She was caressed by sunlight from head to toe.

‘What is it, Lidou?’

He entered the room in silence, pulling the door closed behind him. It took a moment for his eyes to adjust to the dimness. When they did, he gaped at his first wife as if he’d never seen her before. Her nipples, still pert from her shower, pointed in his direction like a challenge.

‘What is it Lidou?’ Ndongo Passy repeated.

Before he could answer, she let out that laugh again. ‘What is this? Have you come straight from my co-wife’s room to mine? Don’t try to tell me Grekpoubou doesn’t know what she’s doing!’

‘Mother of Gbandagba,’ Lidou murmured, ‘Come closer. Come over here.’

‘I’m here! What do you want?’

He pulled her towards him and began to suck on her breasts as if she was his own mother, not the mother of Gbandagba, his son. He sucked as if he'd been thirsting for those two teats since the beginning of time. After three minutes he stopped, satisfied. Ndongo Passy sat on the edge of the bed.

'It's Sunday, isn't it?' she asked him. 'It's January 24th, isn't it?'

'That's right.'

'Then you have to get out of here now. I need to make myself beautiful. It's election day, remember? I'm on the register, I've got my polling card in my bag. I'm going to go and vote to the best of my abilities, like a good citizen.'

'But do you know how?'

'Yes! My co-wife and I are going down together. We've been discussing this election for some time.'

'What are you going to vote for? Who, I mean?'

'The same as Grekpoubou. We've decided.'

'You didn't consult me!'

'I've got my card, you've got your card. This is every man for himself!'

'But you're not man, Ndongo Passy. You're my first wife.'

'That's got nothing to do with it. Husband and wife vote separately. That's what democracy is.'

'Who said that?'

Lidou left to let his wife get dressed. In the living room he found Grekpoubou, with whom he'd spent the night. She served him a plate of *yabanda* and a large glass of *kangoya*, then left him alone to eat. She had to make herself beautiful too. It was the first time she'd voted. She was voting

for her own future and for that of her four children, who weren't old enough to do it for themselves. Ndongo Passy was voting for herself and for her only child, Gbandagba, who was twelve.

Ndongo Passy wore an indigo suit, her co-wife a long black skirt and a golden yellow blouse. As the two women stepped out into the dusty street, their husband was making himself comfortable in his armchair beneath the shade of the mango tree. 'Safe trip!' he shouted with a chuckle.

Who knows which of the women was the first to complain about the sun. It beat down mercilessly and democratically on all citizens, regardless of gender, ethnicity, religion or age, regardless of whether they planned to vote for the president or to sneak a vote for one of the four opposition candidates into the envelope. The sun, like the mosquito, was pan-sexual and gregarious; every variety of flesh was welcome.

The polling station for the first arrondissement was in the nursery school in Cité Cristophe. It had been open since 7am. By the time Ndongo Passy and Grekpoubou arrived at 9am, the queue outside was 25 metres long. A question for the older pupils at the primary school: at a rate of 2.5-2.7 metres of voter per hour, at what time would the two women fulfil their civic duty?

Lidou was in possession of two beautiful wives. He spent two nights with one, the next two with the other, and was never required to choose between them. He preferred to let his two wives go to the polling station alone while he stayed in his courtyard, under the shade of his mango tree, flicking through the Christmas double edition of his French magazine, *Maisons d'aujourd'hui*. He hadn't decided whether to go and vote himself. Making a choice usually meant getting it wrong. This time it was an even more devilishly deceptive than usual: five candidates! Like having to choose between five serious illnesses. Mind you, not all serious illnesses packed the same punch; not all were incurable, for example. Lidou placed the magazine on his knees for a moment and closed his eyes. Some people said, correctly, that life itself was a mortal illness, that death was a garment everyone would have to put on one day. Maybe that meant he should go and vote; choosing one candidate or the other wasn't as serious as life and death. The world wouldn't end if it turned out he, Lidou, was no better at voting than the next man, even if the next man was as illiterate as a perch in the river.

Lidou's radio was always tuned to *Ndéké Luka*. The music began to work its way under his skin: he could've got up right then and started dancing the *yangbabolo*, alone in the courtyard. Business was good: he was throwing up building after building in the Republic, and he'd carry on

for as long as the Congolese and Cameroonian cement lasted. Building houses was as important as voting, more important in fact. At the centre of Lidou's magazine of exclusive new houses built by the French, in France, was a glossy red and white Father Christmas spitting out a speech bubble that said, 'Laying the foundations for a prosperous nation!' Wise words. Santa had certainly earned his status as a prophet, alongside Jesus Christ (amen) and Mohammed (Inch'Allah).

Who better to believe in on election day than Father Christmas and his international prophet friends? Me, thought Lidou. Me and my small business. I'm constructing this country, brick by brick, using nothing but my own graft. I'm a living example of the electoral slogan, 'work, only work'. I should be voting for myself. Come to think of it, I'd probably make an excellent president, but it's not as if I can do everything.

He gazed upwards. A red powder coated the leaves of the mango tree like some sort of leprous plague. Perhaps it would kill the tree. Lidou shuddered, closed his eyes again.

After 3.10 metres of voters, the co-wives had reached an enviable position under the shade of the giant rubber tree that filled the courtyard of the nursery school. A pregnant woman walked the length of the queue to the front. She had priority, as did the old and infirm. If there'd been a pregnant candidate for the presidency, they could all have saved some time by just letting her go first: she'd be elected in the first hour of the first round of voting without even needing to distribute extra polling cards to her friends or pay a magician to make certain ballot boxes appear and certain others disappear.

Time ticked by. 'How are your feet, sister?' Ndongo Passy asked Grekpoubou.

'OK.'

'That's good.'

'But we don't vote with our feet, do we?'

Ndongo Passy burst out laughing. It was probably the tenth time she'd laughed since she got up that morning. Perhaps it was the laugh that kept her large body, solid but supple, in such good shape.

'You vote with your finger, sister. You press your finger into the ink, just once.'

‘Just once, and vote once?’

Standing was becoming difficult for everyone; the woman in front of them had sat down on the ground. Some lucky voters were able to squat with their bottoms on the cement border that ringed the rubber tree. Policemen watched from a few paces. They had a bench, but would clearly have preferred a bed: they slumped, eyes only half open, AK47s slung casually at their feet.

The queue was like a long, lazy, multi-legged *makongo*. But, against all expectations, and without ever getting any shorter, it moved forward. Ndongo Passy and Grekpoubou were now not far from the door to the office, a location as sought-after as Ali Baba’s cave.

Two white men appeared with cards hanging from blue cords around their necks. They were from the EU, an organisation that preferred presidents to seek re-election by consulting their people. These were the kind of EUs who might say, ‘This election could do with a bit more salt, but it’s basically acceptable’. As they entered the building, one said to the other, ‘This crowd reminds me of queuing for a Michel Sardou concert at the Olympia as a kid.’

The other, a slightly classier type, smiled and said, ‘It reminds me of the Tutankhamun exhibition.’

An old woman in the queue, dried out by that morning’s and yesterday’s sun, murmured to herself, ‘At the end of patience is heaven.’