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Kutogunduwa (To Be Overlooked)

Marc Eichen
State University of Zanzibar

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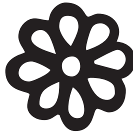

Kutogunduwa (To be Overlooked)

Marc Eichen

I.

You know, cousin Juma, it is all too easy to concentrate on the small things and fail to notice the big things; those things that are absent, those things that look us right in the face.

The road is sealed so those going by can pass without so much as a wave. You must think it was always this way. But when I was young, well before you were born, what was the road, crushed stones? And before that was it deep red earth, rutted when the rains came, choking us with dust the rest of the year?

Years ago, my father, your uncle, would sit in front of our shop, where the road petered out to little more than a path, selling fruits and vegetables. Those passing would slow to greet him, to ask about our family, about the weather, about Kidonge, our village, our *shehia*. It was difficult for me to believe he knew everyone who stopped but he opened his hand to all. "You are welcome to join us. God has been good to us here. The children will be healthy. The rains will come in abundance. And the farms of our neighbors will bless us with their goodness, their shade and their fruit. *Insha Allah*."

"I swear," you say to me now, Juma, "I heard this in my dreams."

I'm laughing. Because when you say this you pull at your face as if you've found a familiar bug stuck once again in your ear.

Were my father's words a prayer? Maybe he thought if he said it a hundred times, a hundred thousand times… If he said it to every person on the island, it would come to be true.

You had already come to live with us after your parents died and you asked at the mosque, just after my father's funeral, "Who is to say these prayers did not help us, at least a little?"

But my father was more than a jovial shopkeeper; he was our *sheha* and a good listener.

For every piece of news he shared—that one's son has married and lives in town behind the Persian mosque, this one's daughter, just older than you, died last year of diabetes—he received two.

My father would tell me God had given him the patience to answer a question with a question. When it was time to calculate taxes and Ali, the clerk from the ZRB, asked how many new homes were built in the *shehia* during the past year, father would say, "My friend, who is to say what a home is? Is that *boma,* there on the beach with the crazy *mzungu*, a home? What about that shed past the field? A family lives there now. But perhaps they are staying, until God takes them someplace better, like all of us. How many new homes were built? It's not such a simple question. Let's have tea and discuss it." Even I could see these negotiations would conclude in our favor.

Yes, yes. I know. You remind me often, I too am an important person. I am the *sheha* of Kidonge. Walking in my father's footsteps after his passing. May God rest his soul.

I would not want to boast too excessively, but I have seen many changes. And so have you. You hardly went to school and can barely read or sign your name. You too have lived to see a sealed road, mobile phones, latrine toilets…

And now you're laughing, Juma, because even you have one. *Humdu Allah*.

You complain. Yes, don't put your hands up. It's true. You ask why we must buy water from the truck on the days when our water tastes of salt. You say there is little work beyond

mending nets or fixing a bicycle here and there, beyond bringing chai when I ask and helping in the kitchen. Yes, yes, I know. There is little work. Maybe it is because we have been blessed with so many young men. You say Amina's father hardly notices you, hardly greets you when you see him at the mosque. Can you blame him, honestly? He only wants the best for his daughter. And what can you offer her beyond the life of her mother and grandmother?

But life here is not so bad. Each morning as we wake we see the world is young and green. We say to ourselves that we have lived to see the many ways in which God has blessed us.

But what we can't see... What we don't see...

"What is it?" you ask me. "What is it that we don't see?"

A good question. An important question. I will tell you.

What we don't see—is a bridge.

Those who come north by *daladala* will tell the driver to hurry until the road ends abruptly at the river, like it had been chopped with a blunt axe. And then, on the far side, if the fog has not already thickened, they might make out our village. They might see men returning from the mosque, women half submerged in the rice fields as the sun rises in the east and children darting behind sheets and *khanga* hanging outside each house. When the wind comes in from the shore, they might smell the smoke from the charcoal fires that bake the bread.

When you were a child, Juma, not so long ago, the channel was narrow. Do you remember? I think you were seven when you hit Amina by successfully kicking a stone across the river. She told her aunt, who yelled, so the entire village could hear, that your penis would fall off that very night unless you apologized. You're laughing, but you remember when the river was narrow enough that a single board could span it easily. Even Issa, who lives on the bank and was lame ever since a horse crushed two of his toes, was able to carry bags from one side to the other.

Now the river grows wider every year. The seasons make no difference. During dry season, even, everyone must be escorted. Those few visitors from town must leave their taxi and cross by balancing on stones. And if someone is going in the other direction, from our village, it is the same. “Place your foot here, but be ever so careful of the smooth spot on the submerged board. Watch out. Don’t step there. That stone, yes that very one, will tip under your weight.” If someone is carrying something heavy, they will not be able to cross without the young men offering their opinion and assistance for a small fee. What do you call them? Ah yes, our “crossing guards?”

God forbid someone begins to cross while another person is coming from the other shore. Do you remember the time Idrissa was coming north to us with bolts of cloth, and Momfrieda was going south to town? I can see from your face that you do. They met in the middle, arguing for over an hour. Neither was willing to give way until Momfrieda threatened to pelt Idrissa with every egg she was carrying.

And that is on the days when the sky is clear and the weather good. In the rains when the river is swift and even the large footing stones have been swept away, no one, not even the strongest of the crossing guards, dares to venture into the river.

Some in Kidonge ask, what does this matter? There has never been a bridge. This is how life has been since before we were children. Why change now?

But this is the dilemma my father understood so well. As it was then, we have the blessings to see our children and their children grow. We tell them our dreams and our dreams become theirs. This is our life and we would not trade it lightly. Yet these days the river has widened and the *masika* rains grow harder and longer each year. And when they do and the young men are afraid to cross, the children cannot go to school and the old people cannot get to the clinic in Masingini or Mwera. The propane gas and the plastic pots sink into the mud on the far bank while we wait. We

are always last. And these days, as time passes ever more quickly, to be last is to be left behind forever.

That why I must go to town tomorrow morning. That is why, without so much as a cup of tea, I will be standing on the other side of the river, my sandals in hand, my feet still wet, having crossed the river in darkness.

And you? Maybe, if we go together you will put aside any thoughts—how do they say it in English?—that the grass will be greener on the far side of the road. Maybe if we are able to deliver a bridge, the elders of Kidonge will make you *sheha*, after I have retired. Or maybe, well, maybe I like your company, traveling all that way to town.

II.

The *daladala*, a converted pickup truck, squatted in the small field just beyond the river next to a couple of broken chairs, a haphazard pile of tin roofing and bales of plastic trash. Just beyond, two boys were unenthusiastically selling candy, cigarettes and pens. The way they looked over their shoulders at him, they might have been assigned this task by the man, dressed in a nylon undershirt and Chelsea football jacket, hoping to sell sweetened tea from a single cup.

The seats in the cab, next to the driver, hunched over the wheel, snoring, were given to older women as they boarded. Others walked quickly out from the darkness to fill the two rough wooden benches facing each other in the back.

Two women sat together. They were dressed in black *buibui* that covered all but their hands, which had elaborate henna designs, and their eyes, decorated with *Omani kohl*. Five young men, smelling of sweat and dressed in clothes soiled with concrete, plaster and paint, were squeezed together in a space that was big enough for only two. A young pregnant woman, who didn't look older than eighteen, boarded with her daughter, maybe four or five years old, who knelt on the floor at her feet. An older man, dressed to

work in a hotel or a government office carried a worn file folder and sat on the bench across from Juma.

When the *daladala* was almost full, the *conda* jumped onto the running board at the back and banged twice on the iron frame with a handful of coins. The driver awoke and in a single movement, released the brakes and jolted the engine to life as the broken teeth of the gears ground together.

Every two or three hundred meters the driver pulled over haphazardly to pick up—or pass, without apology or explanation, additional passengers. The *conda* banged once on the frame so travelers could alight and then banged twice or yelling *“Tembea”* to continue the journey. When all the bench seats were taken, there was always room to kneel or, for the men, share the running board at the back.

“Are you going the entire way to town?” the older man with the worn file folder asked. “Yes,” Juma replied as Abubaker elbowed him in the ribs.

“No need to tell everyone.”

“I don’t mean to pry,” the man continued, “but I can see how you are dressed. This must be important.”

“I’m meeting with the Minister of Public Works,” replied Abubaker. And then as an aside to Juma, “He won’t believe me if I tell him we’re both meeting with the Minister.”

“Congratulations. You must be a famous person.”

“In Kidonge.”

“Oh yes. A small place, just on the other side of the river. I’ve never been there because, you know, there’s not much there.

“It’s peaceful.”

“Unremarkable,” the man laughed, “like any of the hundred other villages we will pass this morning on our way to town.”

Abubaker, to his chagrin in front of Juma, was unable to formulate a reply, to think of anything which made Kidonge a place worth visiting much less a place of renown.

“Have you been to town before?”

“Juma here has not, but he is with me. He thinks he wants to live in town. Can you imagine it?” Abubaker chor-

tled, looking around to find some support for his view of this unlikely prospect.

"Permit me," the man said raising his eyebrows in surprise, "to tell you something. These days you have to be careful in town. Watch out for your money, particularly in the market. There are young men, probably foreigners from Congo or Nairobi, on drugs." All the women, who suddenly appeared to be paying attention, nodded in agreement.

Juma listened as Abubaker responded.

"So, you're telling me town is dangerous?"

"Yes, that's true."

"And I've heard it is expensive."

"It is expensive to find a place to live," the older man warming to his own description of town life, "and there is no land to grow your own food."

While Abubaker shook his head trying to picture the place where they were going, Juma looked at the village fields as they passed. Their similarity to Kidonge made him wonder how his life might be different, different from every other Juma in every other village on the island.

Except the workers, who had fallen asleep as soon as they got on and leaned over each other like a pile of unwashed clothing, everyone riding the *daladala* seemed to know someone in town and was planning to stay for a few days at least.

One of the women in black said, "I have a cousin who lives in Amani and another in Mwanakwerekwe."

"I'm going to stay for a few days with my sister in Kiembe Samaki," added the other.

"Tembea!" The *conda* jumped back aboard and *daladala* regained the road.

"Oh yes," Juma said to no one in particular, "Amina has a brother there and Yasir Ali, his uncle owns a boat."

"It sounds like this could be a terrible place." Abubaker's face looked as if he had eaten rotten fish. "Why would anyone want to live there?"

The older man leaned forward as *daladala* swerved to avoid two men pedaling bicycles, "Can I tell you a story?"

"Of course, time will pass more quickly."

"My cousin had a very small plot in the south of the island where his wife's family lived. His neighbor had four kids, a girl and three boys."

The older man gave his file folder to one of the women so he could gesture emphatically, waving both arms as he continued.

"The oldest of the boys was very naughty. He'd tangle up this one's fishing net or throw stones at that one's cow. His older sister, whose job it was to watch the younger children, would beat him and then, when he got home in the evening, his father would beat him again. They called him *dafu* because he became so hardened to the beatings. He would be good for a few days, attending school, running errands for the elders in the village. And then, the next week he'd be at his mischief again."

"Finally, his father told him he could either get a job on a fishing boat or they would send him to town to live with a cousin's uncle."

Without a second thought he chose town. His family put him on a *daladala* and said that his uncle had a stall in the market. He could ask anyone to find it. They told him to send money when he could."

"His uncle gave the boy a job running errands and minding the stall when he was at the mosque. Within a month the boy got a used mobile phone and was able to send money to his mother. And then less than a year later he was able to borrow money and open his own market stall. In just a few years he had a wife, a house and twins."

"A house... a wife. And after only a few years? *Allah kareem,"* Juma exclaimed, thinking of his minuscule chances for either.

Abubaker looked at the floor of the *daladala*, saying just slightly under his breath, "I've heard twins are bad luck."

"I know an even more remarkable story," said one of the construction workers suddenly arising from the slumbering pile. "My friend knows a young man who worked in a hotel in town. He went up to a room to fix one of the lights and

the European woman staying there asked for his help carrying her bags in the market. Less than two weeks later, they were married. She got pregnant and arranged for them to live outside, in Europe."

One of the women in *buibui* shook her head. "What can you expect from a such a woman? He'll be back within the year. What do they really know about being married."

"Don't believe everything you hear." Abu said to Juma.

"Yes," replied Juma, "but there must be some truth to these stories. Everyone seems to have one."

"We've all heard such stories," said the older man. "And who knows if they're true in every detail. Town is where the very best and very worst in people are on display. You see all of it. But it isn't what you see that's important. It's what you don't see."

"What you don't see…" Everyone in the *daladala* leaned forward to be sure to hear. "What you don't see is that town makes things possible."

As the man leaned back and crossed his arms suggesting that was the end of the story, everyone on the *daladala* began offering their opinion about this. One said such possibilities were an illusion. *Allah* determined what would happen to you from the moment you were born. Another said such possibilities were only there for you if your family already had money. And another said such success was only there if you sold drugs or committed a crime.

As the passengers debated and Abubaker dozed, Juma, looked at the dead-end lanes of the passing villages and repeated quietly to himself, "town makes things possible, town makes things possible," first in amazement, then as if he was negotiating and finally in acceptance. But of what, he wasn't yet sure.

In the waiting room of the Ministry, Abubaker washed his hands and Juma discreetly adjusted his *kanzu,* straightening the collar and pulling on the sleeves, to make sure they made the best impression. After the appointed hour they

were ushered in to the Minister's office, Abubaker leading and Juma close behind. Although Abu wanted to make it seem as if he went such places daily, they were both taken aback as the door to the office opened. There was air conditioning and several fans turned above their heads. The mix of sweat and dust from the journey congealed on their faces and under their clothes.

"Juma, this temperature. This must be what it is like to live," Abu paused, "in Europe."

Along with this, they were both surprised to see a woman sitting behind the ministerial desk. For an instant they both thought they had caught one of the office assistants illicitly reading official papers. But when she spoke, they realized by her demeanor that she in fact was the Minister of Public Works.

"Ah, *Babahamid, Mzee, Shikamoo. Karibuni kae."* She pointed, and they sat in two low, hard chairs. The size of the wooden desk and the piles of documents atop it made the minister's head to seem as if it was bobbing like a boat barely afloat on an ocean of paper.

"Marahaba, Bibi," replied Abubaker.

"So tell me, how are things in…" the Minister looked at the paper in front of her, "Kidonge?"

"Life is good. The children grow, the old are respected."

"Ah, life in the country. It is so pure. I trust your journey was uneventful?"

"Uneventful, praise be to God. Yes, we are all well. And your family?"

"Things continue peacefully. I believe your father may have known my father, the *sheha* of Vuga."

"Ah yes." Abu's face flushed with the embarrassment of ignorance. "My father spoke of him often. A learned man."

"He instilled the love of learning in all his many children. I went to the University in Kampala."

"A very impressive achievement."

They sat a moment in silence. Juma was aware of an unseen clock ticking somewhere in the office.

"How can I be of help to you this fine morning?"

"You know our village? It is on the road north, of course."

"Of course." The Minister looked again at the papers in front of her. "Kidonge. I know it. A beautiful place."

"It is beautiful and we manage. God provides and our wants are few."

"Indeed, God provides. Compared to God, what could the Ministry of Public Works even hope to bestow?"

"True, but some small things are more in the purview of the Ministry and less in the purview of the Divine. I was hoping, we were hoping, to get your help—"

"Of course," the Minister nodded, "that is what I am here for. What we are all here for."

"You see, the road north is—"

"Well kept. Although I seldom get to Kidonge because it is so far, I ride on this road often, back and forth in the ministerial automobile. Just to verify the condition."

"Indeed, men from the Ministry come several times each year to repair it. The road runs up until it reaches the river, and that is the problem."

"What could be wrong with that?"

"Well Ministeress, how shall I say this? The road runs up until the river, but it doesn't cross the river."

"Most roads do this. They end, eventually." The Minister laughed at her own joke.

"Yes, yes, your Grace." Abu quickly laughed as well. "But it would be more...efficient if there was a... bridge."

"A bridge?" The Minister looked through the papers on her desk as if Truth were there, if she could only locate it.

"Ah yes, it is here. There has been a request for a bridge for many years. Made by," she thumbed through several layers of the paper, "your own father. You must have been a young man when he made such a request."

"That is true, your Highness."

"And I can see that the Party and Government, after all these years, finally approved this request most recently, with my strongest support. And not just for any bridge—for a modern bridge, one made from concrete and steel."

"And we are extremely grateful, your Majesty. Without

your strongest support, we are just…words fail me."

At this moment, Juma spoke up, shocking both the Minister and Abubaker, "Yes, Madame Minister, in Kidonge we are just small potatoes. And without your support, Madame Minister, we will continue to be uncooked potatoes. That is the problem."

"Uncooked potatoes. That's a big problem. But forgive me for asking but, who is this?"

"Forgive us, your Ladyship, this is…my assistant, Juma."

The Minister looked from one to the other, *"Karibu,* Assistant Juma." She continued, "So if a bridge, a modern bridge, has been approved already, what is the problem?"

"The problem," Abu said slowly, "is that the river has grown. With time, it has gotten wider."

"The river is wider." The Minister looked at the papers again. "And if the bridge is a modern one, why is that a problem?"

Gaining confidence, Juma spoke up again. "You approved half a bridge."

"How is that possible. It is true at university I majored in library science and not engineering. But I would never approve a bridge that only went in one direction?"

"No, no, your Grace," Abubaker said, "it's not exactly that—"

To Abu's shock, Juma interrupted him again.

"The river has grown. It has gotten wider. The modern bridge you approved would only go halfway across the river."

Despite his interruption, the Minister avoided looking at Juma when she spoke.

"Well then, there it is."

"There what is, Your Honor?"

"There it is." she repeated. "It is not our fault. Look on this paper, it's very clear. We approved the request your father made, albeit many years ago. And that's the entire budget."

"Yes, your Excellency, but—"

"If your father had wanted a longer bridge, he should

have asked for one."

"But, Your Highness—"

The Minister shuffled the papers, closed the file on her desk and rose from her chair, "I'm certainly glad we had this meeting. You know the Government, and of course the Party, is always glad to hear from as many of the *sheha* as possible, even those from the small and rural areas. It keeps us in touch with the people we all serve."

The meeting was over. Abubaker and Juma stood up so as to not offend the Minister. But as she opened the door, Juma whispered into Abu's ear, "She doesn't know about bridges. She knows about... budgets. Ask her for the foundation only, the foundation which supports the bridge."

"Your Excellency, could I have just a moment more of your valuable time?" The Minister looked at her watch.

"We are very busy here, but yes."

"Suppose instead of half a bridge," Abubaker began, "the government could build the foundation of concrete and steel? And we, the citizens of Kidonge, could add a traditional wooden roadway."

"You want the Government to build only the foundation?"

Standing behind Abu's shoulder, Juma replied, "Yes. The foundation could span the wider river. Our crossing guards and the men in the village would add the necessary wooden roadbed as the river grows in the future."

She hesitated and Juma seized the moment.

"We will build the roadway at our own expense. It will cost the Ministry less."

The Minister seemed to consider this for a moment and nodded, "Abubaker, that is an excellent idea. I'm glad we thought this through together. It's a creative solution to a difficult and perhaps intractable problem. Let me call one of my engineers." She dialed a number on her mobile and talked for a few moments.

"He says, his crew will build the bridge supports in the river from concrete and when these are set, men from your village can build the roadbed from wood. Our road crew will continue maintaining it in the future. If this is agreeable,"

she stopped and the three of them leaned forward as if they were looking through a window into the future, "then I will write a memo to the Engineering Department. It is done."

III.

The heat of the day was beginning to yield to the late afternoon as we left the Minster's office and walked toward the market. Our *kanzu* were slightly stained and dusty from the day, but no one seemed to notice. The *mwenyeduka* called to Abu, offering plastic bins, tooth powders, kitchen containers, sharp knives, all of which were unavailable in the countryside. In the swirling dust and noise, we were treated no better than others—visitors, whores, traders and *imams*—but then, probably no worse. Abu purchased spices from Pemba, as well as cashews and apples from the mainland, that his cook had requested. I bought a few special *khangas* in the upstairs shop across the main road, and Abu did not ask for whom as he gave me money to buy *mandazi* and chai. We sat together and rested at one of the small tables behind the Gapco petrol station.

"I suppose, Juma, I should be thanking you."

"For what?"

"Well, you know." Abu adjusted the packages and took a small sip of the tea. "For your solution to our problem. You have a good head for business. These things will go well for you when it comes time to consider the next *sheha*. Yes, I should be thanking you for—"

"You know, *baba,* I am just a small link in the chain."

"What do you mean?"

"If you had not invited me to attend this meeting, as your assistant, what then? And before that, if Kidonge had not asked you to meet with the Minister, where would we be? And even before that, so many years ago, if your father hadn't made his original request, what then?"

"And you think each of these steps was important?"

"I think each was—how do they say it in English?—neces-

sary but only together, sufficient."

Each of us us of us had a sip of tea and a bit of the *mandazi*.

"And you know, Abu, I think if we don't hurry you will have to stand all the way to our river on that *daladala."*

"I will? And what about you?"

"Me," I said, taking another sip and feeling the rhythm of the market in front of us. "I think I'm not going to return to Kidonge, at least not today. I think I'll stay here in town and try things out."

It was as if I had hit Abu with a rock.

"Are you joking?"

"Not at all. Do you remember when you told me it was important to see what can't be seen? Do you remember the story the man told us on the *daladala?* I'm going to try finding what my life might be, what I can't see yet. To do that, I need to live here. Maybe I could persuade Amina to come and claim the *khangas* I bought for her. Maybe I could persuade her father that I am more than a simpleton, not even worth a greeting. Or maybe not."

"But what about the next *sheha?* What about your future...in the Kidonge? Yes, now you are uneducated. You work in the fields. Now, you are," Abu stammered, seemingly wanting and not wanting to speak his mind, "nothing."

"Exactly. And that is why I want to live and try my luck here. Even if I become *sheha,* it will be many years in the future. I am uneducated. I have no land and no wealth. For so many in Kidonge, I will always be less than nothing. My life will be a bridge to nowhere."

"That's not what I meant."

"Yes you did. And you spoke the truth, *baba*. So please let me finish."

"In Kidonge, that is my life now and that is what my life will be for as long as I live. But if I come here, to town, my life might be something else."

"You want to be one of those?" Abu said, pointing at men struggling to haul vegetables in a cart with a broken wheel.

"It is true, *baba,* this is where life will start for me. I

might be a broken wheel, at first. But if I push hard enough even those wheels can begin to roll. There is no guarantee. *Mwalimu mdogo* taught me a little English and you said yourself, I have a head for business. If God is good to me and if I have some luck, here I have a chance at a different life, a life which has not been already written from the time I was born. For this reason, I will stay in town."

Abu took my cup and dusted off my *kanzu*. We looked at each other. His brown eyes were wet and his skin reflected the dusty sunset in the harbor. Over his shoulder I could see the ferry coming in from the mainland and the fishing boats letting the wind take them out for a night's work.

"I will go to the mosque tomorrow morning and pray for you," he said. "Pray especially for your future."

"May *Allah* hear your prayers."

We wished each other a safe journey. For me to wherever God might take me. And for him to Kidonge. A place where the children share our dreams and the *sheha* might answer a question a question with a question. A place just beyond where the road ends, where the river meets the sea.

This story was translated to Swahili by Shani Khalfan. To read it, scan the QR code above or visit our website.

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