

THE SMOKE COMING from the lit firewood blows in Thoko's direction, and she coughs to relieve the sting she feels in her throat and eyes. A large three-legged pot with steam rising from the slightly open lid stands astride the blazing fire. The aroma of beef stew and samp maize meal has drawn all the children to the backyard to sit around the fire. Christmas at Thoko's grandmother's house is always a big event, with New Year celebrations coming a close second. This year is no different as Thoko's parents took turns driving the eight hours from Lusaka to her father's home village in the rural eastern part of Zambia.

"Mum, Thumbi is playing with fire again!" Thoko calls out to get the attention of her mother, who is inside the house with the other adults. Thoko has stayed outside to tend to her younger siblings and cousins. Now twelve years old, she had requested to be given more tasks during the family get-together. But as her cousin Thumbi draws closer to the flyaway sparks of the fire, Thoko feels the burden of responsibility.

"Thumbi, behave yourself. Don't make me come out there!" Thumbi's mother warns. Thoko almost laughs at the flash of fear that passes through her cousin's eyes when he hears his mother's voice.

LUSAKA IS THE CAPITAL OF ZAMBIA, A COUNTRY IN SOUTHERN AFRICA



SAMP MAIZE IS CRUSHED CORN.



RURAL MEANS IN THE COUNTRY, FAR FROM THE CITY.

Thoko's Gift

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Thoko's older sister, Doris, beckons her from the back door. Since turning sixteen last June, Doris avoids hanging outside with the "babies."

Thoko follows Doris into the house and finds her peeking through the open front window of the bedroom they share. A shiny blue car has pulled up, and a large man is lifting packages from the trunk.

"Look at the gifts Uncle Tito has brought for us!" Doris says excitedly. "That package is huge! Who do you think it's for?"

Uncle Tito is the most lovable member of the Mawere family but also the most elusive.

He has an easygoing personality and a lavish lifestyle that sometimes causes tension with Thoko's father. Although their uncle rarely comes to other family functions, he always brings gifts around the Christmas season for the children. Thoko remembers how, when she was eight, she had begged her parents for a pencil case and a new school bag. It had been a surprise when her uncle instead bought them for her.

Uncle Tito hefts the last of the gifts into the waiting arms of their grandmother's servant, and the girls settle down on one of the bunk beds.



“Did you tell him what you wanted this year?” Thoko asks Doris.

“I don’t remember saying anything. Did you?”

“I don’t think so either. But I like surprises!”

They let out twin laughs when they realize just how unpredictable Christmas at their grandmother’s house can be.

Temperance Zulu walks in to find her granddaughters giggling on the bed. At seventy-nine, she is a tiny woman, with a head full of gray hair. Thoko and Doris are her favorite grandchildren, although she would never admit it.

“My babies, you have to watch over those children outside. They’ll spoil our dinner if you don’t.” Thoko and Doris get up with a groan as their grandmother adds, “And Thoko, your father wants you to tell Mavis’s mother that the cow is almost here.”

During the holiday season, the village comes together to buy food for the Christmas feast. This year, there is to be a big braii, or barbecue. Families share costs, and remainders are given to those who cannot afford to buy their own food.

As she walks the familiar pathways leading to Mavis’s grandmother’s house, Thoko is grateful that the December rains have cooled the summer heat. For as long as she can remember, Thoko has spent the festival season with Mavis, her best friend from school whose parents also come from her father’s village.

“Thoko, you want your friend?” Mavis’s grandmother asks when Thoko walks into the

yard, which is surrounded by a bright red brick wall.

“Yes, please,” Thoko replies.

“She has just gone out with her mother. Do you want to wait for her?”

Thoko guesses that Mavis and her mother are at the community beauty salon, since Mavis had complained about her unbraided hair when their families arrived yesterday.

“No, grandma, I will come back later. But my father says the cow is almost here.”

Mavis’s grandmother lets out a joyful, ululating cry that brings a smile to Thoko’s face. Some of Thoko’s friends at school laughed when she told them that she spent Christmas in her father’s little farming village, but Thoko always enjoys this part of her December school holiday. She loves the familiarity of the people and surroundings.

As Thoko is returning to the house of Temperance Zulu, Doris runs out to her with a big smile on her face. “I was looking for you. Uncle Tito is going back to the city tonight, so he’s giving us his gifts before he leaves.”

Doris takes her hand and pulls her along. “The others already got their gifts. He saved us for last. You should see what Thumbi and Grace got!” Doris says with a whistle. “And he brought us the biggest fireworks to light up for New Year. He got the short fat ones, Thoko, the ones that shoot up into the sky! Where do you think Uncle Tito works?” she asks.

A CHRISTMAS
BRAII?
WHAT FUN!



ULULATING IS A LONG SOUND
WITH WAVERING NOTES!

"I think he works in a bank," Thoko replies. She has never heard her parents talk about her uncle's work. She tries to remember any conversation about Uncle Tito but only recalls her grandmother saying something about investments Uncle Tito is involved in. "He works in a bank," she says surely now.

As soon as they step into the living room, Uncle Tito says in a booming voice, "Thoko, you ran away from me?" He has his hand across his chest to feign the heartbreak he had felt at her absence. When Thoko sees the mischievous glint in his eyes she flies into his arms and hugs him tight, taking in his presence.

"I went to see my friend Mavis," she says as her uncle pulls out a big box with "Doris" written in bold red across it. Thoko laughs at the stunned expression on Doris's face as she accepts the gift with both hands.

"Thank you, Uncle Tito," Doris murmurs.

"Girl, you haven't even opened it. What are you waiting for?" Uncle Tito asks with a chuckle.

Doris doesn't need to be told twice as she tears into the wrapping paper and box and pulls out a pair of knee-high leather boots. Thoko hears her mother sigh. Then Doris reaches into the box again and screams as she pulls out the latest Chinese cell phone.

"Thank you, Uncle Tito! Thank you so much! But how did you know what I wanted exactly?" Doris asks between her squeals of excitement.

"A little social media stalking goes a long way, and you are welcome, baby girl," Uncle Tito replies with a wink. "And for you, my last but not the least," he says to Thoko, handing her a brown envelope.

Thoko takes it, wondering what present could be inside such a small thing. Her eyes fill with tears as tickets to the Barefeet Theatre

Christmas Concert tumble out. It is what she has secretly wanted, but she knew the tickets had sold out and were too expensive for her parents anyway. Also in the envelope is a night stay for her family at the hotel where the concert will take place.

Her mother takes the papers from her hands as Thoko breaks down in joy at this



FEIGN
MEANS TO
PRETEND
OR PLAY-
ACT.



precious gift her uncle has given her.

“Don’t cry, my baby. I promised you I would always make your wishes come true,” Uncle Tito says to her as he wraps her in his arms.

Thoko hears her father in the background pretend to grumble about his “rich little brother who makes us all look bad.” But everyone chuckles at his quip as he comes forward to pat his brother on the back and shake his hand.

The Maweres always came together for the festive season, but as they bid Uncle Tito farewell that night, Thoko sees her family in a new light. She sees the love, loyalty, and respect they all have for each other, and she feels again her childlike joy for Christmas. Thoko loves her gift, but she loves where she comes from the most. 🐛



Author’s Note Christmas is a countrywide holiday in Zambia, where I live, and a time for families to come together. Our traditions include a Christmas feast, which is usually a braai for most of the middle-class families, fireworks at night, and a church service on Christmas morning.

The Barefeet Theatre is a group of artists of all ages that perform dance, plays, and other activities. I attended their Christmas concert as a teenager and have never forgotten the wonderful experience.