from Buttocks of the Almighty

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That evening, a fried tender turkey and sautéed potatoes were the first dishes that Gasendakenshi, the guest house’s cook, brought to the dining room where Father Gafuku was entertaining his guests with martinis and passion fruit punch for Father Gilbert Murasi. Gafuku had been telling them another story they had never heard — how a month before, during his Majesty the King of Belgium’s last visit to Rwanda, the Patriarch was dishonored by a hawk in the eyes of the Belgian monarch and his queen. Having taken them on a safari in the national park, the one-hundred-eleven year old Father of the Nation talked non-stop to impress his dignified guests who rode with him in an armored Mercedes all the way from the capital to the distant savanna. For hours on end, he proselytized with an accomplished actor’s gestures about his own epic prowess which had redeemed the country from the fangs of colonization and about his immortality, ratified by God, because the country still needed him. “I have leaped over sixty-seven coups, your Majesty,” the Patriarch stated.

They reached the park three hours later. They then got out of the car and penetrated the wilderness, while body-guards stalked them. The Patriarch and his guests had not been in the park an hour when, as he was still voicing his torment at not having in the whole country a single soul with enough charisma to take over the tough reigns of presidency after his death, a myopic old hawk that mistook the Father of the Nation’s purple
hunting beret for a meat loaf, plunged from the torrid sky and swept up the hat with a lightning’s stroke. The Father of the Nation’s endless blustering and swaggering came to an abrupt end. In one second, he dropped his shotgun and bolted for shelter, crawling to escape from what he thought to be the sixty-eighth attempt to topple him.

Glimpsing the seasoned gigantic turkey on the platter in the cook’s hands, Father Gafuku cut the story of the hawk and the Patriarch short — abandoning the latter down the creek, still hollering to the king and queen to take cover — and started instead on an anecdote about Cardinal Mario Gigglione who died due to a turkey. Father Joseph Gautier and Father Murasi had heard this story from Gafuku more than once before, but a good storyteller is like a good chef; both know how to play tricks on people by serving them the same dish and making them believe it’s different thanks to a simple touch of additional ingredients. And so they let Gafuku begin his yarn about how Cardinal Gigglione of the Vatican died of a heart attack in the archbishop’s dining room in Kigali one week before Pope John Paul II landed at the airport on his visit to Rwanda.

Having received sacred instructions from the Archbishop himself about the eminence of the visiting personality, the Archbishop’s cook put to use all of his culinary creativity and thirty-seven years of experience to prepare a dinner that would impress the Cardinal’s palate. The cook, who had all his career looked for such an opportunity to exhibit his skills, expressed his joy with confidence:

“Your Excellency,” he said to the Archbishop, “I have been training to cook for the Supreme Pontiff himself at least once before I die.”

The Archbishop frustrated his illusions: “No, you
will not have the honor of cooking for the Supreme Pontiff, but for his emissary.

Bigeragezo — for that was the man's name — spent half an hour delving deep into the layers of his knowledge, figuring out how to please the palate of the Archbishop and the Pope's personal emissary. Before long, he was struck by a vision that nothing could impress them more than a fried, unbutchered turkey that he would put on the table with all its feathers and wings, all its talons, as well as the intact beak, wattle and eyes. Having seen the dish in culinary magazines from Europe, with a man dressed in the garments of a bishop, ready to assail the turkey, the cook considered the dish to be the peak of culinary mastery. He even imagined that white people live forever because they eat animals that look alive.

The Archbishop and the Cardinal had not finished their aperitifs when Bigeragezo appeared from the kitchen in his special butler's costume, and, with a wide smile on his Bantu lips, set a huge, covered platter on the table three meters or so from the two personages. With a calculated wave of his hand, the Archbishop signaled his guest to rise and move on to the table so that they could, while eating, keep on talking of the touristy corners of Italy and the Vatican — the Via Appia, the Cosmatic cloisters of Saint Paul-Without-the-Wall, the Swiss guards and the stray cats in Trajan's market. As both men prepared to sit at the table, the Archbishop remembered that he needed to go to the bathroom. "Feel at home, and help yourself." He blessed the food with another wave of his hand.

A short moment later, standing in the bathroom and looming above the toilet bowl, the Archbishop had hardly lifted his stole and started to unzip his fly when he was startled by a shrill squeal coming from the monastic
quietude of the dining room, and he was almost raised from the floor by a loud noise and an eerie yell that shook the whole house like an earthquake.

“Oh my God,” he said, recognizing in the yell the voice of his eminent guest. The archbishop did not even zip his fly again before he rushed back to the dining room. He nearly collapsed when he found Cardinal Mario Giggione breathless, lying on his back on the floor, in the regalia of his purple habit and cap, his legs in the air pegged by the tilting chair he had been sitting on. The archbishop knelt on the floor, leaning over the cardinal, and touched his heart in a quick, amateurish medical checkup. The Cardinal was dead.

“Bigeragezo, my God,” the Archbishop called.

“Present, your Excellency.” The cook had rushed all the way from the backyard where he had retreated to let the personages enjoy his experimental dish. No sooner had Bigeragezo arrived in the dining room and seen the tragedy than he’d dropped down near the table, his hands clasped. He was in such a confusion that he could not hear the Archbishop screaming at him.

“What did you cook? Satan?!”

“Turkey, your Excellency,” he stammered.

That’s when the two men turned their eyes to the table and saw no shadow of turkey in the casserole. The Archbishop was about to ask the cook whether the Cardinal had eaten up the whole turkey in less than a minute when his eyes were caught by a trail of sauce the color of the Cardinal’s robe that went from the casserole to Giggione’s face, continuing along the floor all the way to the corridor leading to the bedrooms. Almost paralyzed by the scandal, the Archbishop summoned up courage and followed the trail, wondering whether it was the Cardinal’s own blood. He zigzagged through the labyrinth of the mansion until he found the adolescent
turkey seeking shelter in the study under the shelf stacked with old copies of Saint Augustine’s *Les Confessions*. Although it had been incapacitated by the infernal two hours heat in peanut oil, the animal was still alive, wagging its monumental wattle and cackling.