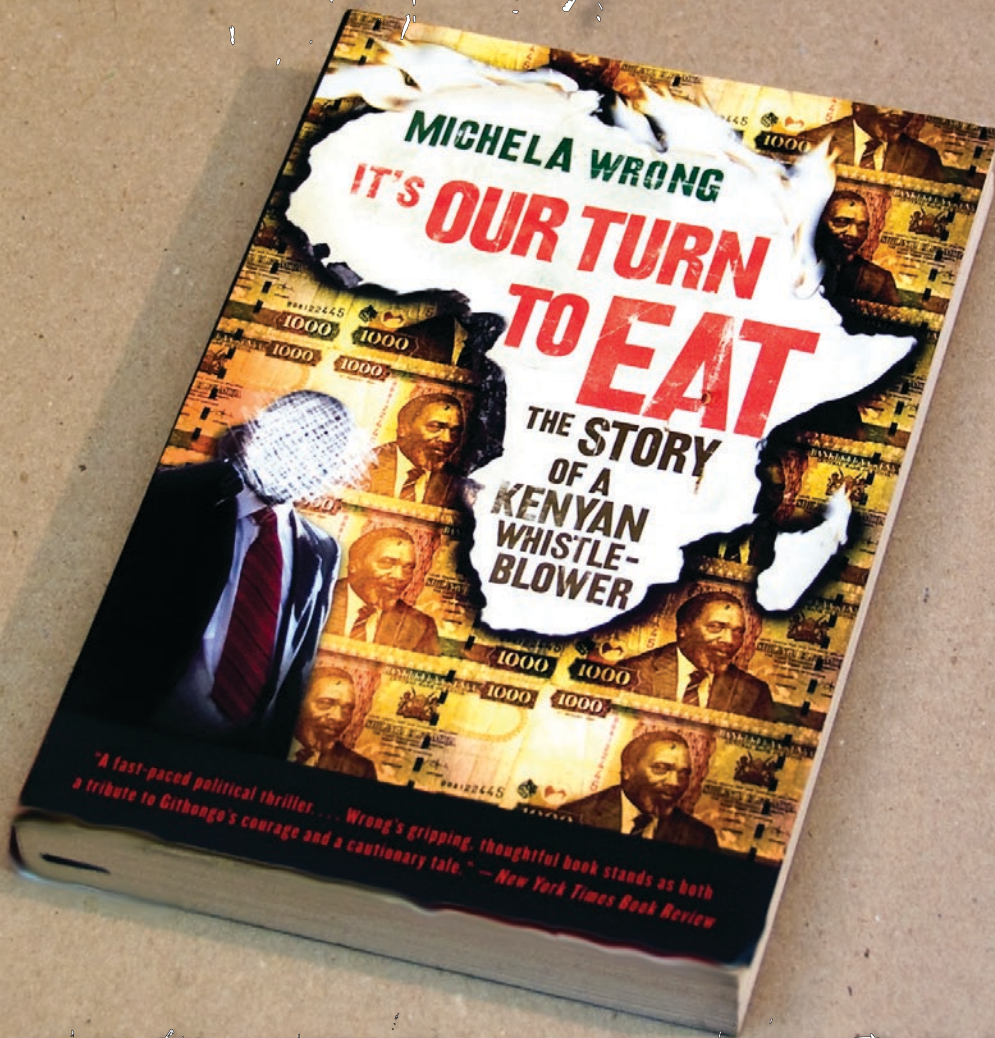


# THE BIG MAN



**MICHELA WRONG**

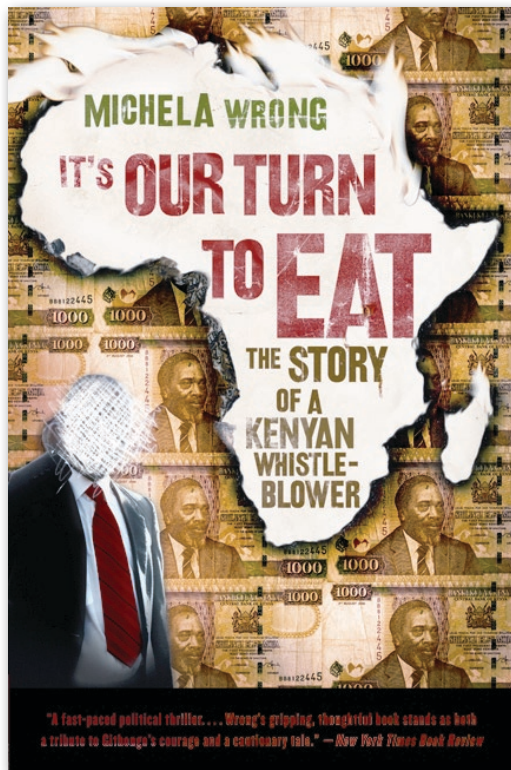
An excerpt from

**IT'S OUR TURN TO EAT**

The Story of a Kenyan Whistle Blower

ColdType





## THE AUTHOR

**MICHELA WRONG** has spent the last 15 years reporting on Africa. As a correspondent for Reuters news agency, based in first Cote d'Ivoire and then Zaire, she covered the turbulent events of the mid 1990s in west and central Africa, including the fall of Mobutu Sese Seko and the genocide in Rwanda. She then moved to Kenya, where she became Africa correspondent for the Financial Times. In 2000 she published her first book, "**In the Footsteps of Mr Kurtz**", the story of Mobutu, which won a PEN prize for non-fiction. Her second book, "**I Didn't Do It For You**", focused on the Red Sea nation of Eritrea. Her third book, "**It's Our Turn to Eat**", tracks the story of Kenyan corruption whistleblower John Githongo. It has been described as reading "like a cross between Le Carre and Solzhenitsyn".

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An excerpt from  
**IT'S OUR TURN TO EAT**  
The Story of a Kenyan Whistle Blower

By **Michela Wrong**

**A** BROWN CLOUD OF EARTH, trailing tufts of grass like a green scalp, soared through the air and landed on the stage, thrown from the surrounding slopes. Then another one sailed overhead, hitting the journalists packed against the podium. The first rows of the crowd hunched their shoulders and hoped it would get no worse: there were kids up there from Kibera slum, and they had a nasty habit of using excrement as missiles. The mood in Uhuru Park's open-air stadium was on the brink of turning ugly.

For much of the morning, the atmosphere had been cheerful. The thousands

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**The first rows of the crowd hunched their shoulders and hoped it would get no worse: there were kids up there from Kibera slum, and they had a nasty habit of using excrement as missiles**

of Kenyans who had begun streaming into the amphitheatre at 7.00 am for the presidential inauguration had every reason to pat themselves on the back. By casting their ballots, they had turned their backs on the retiring Daniel arap Moi, 24 years at the helm, a president credited with reducing East Africa's most prosperous economy to “nychi ya kitu kidogo”: land of the “little something”, country of the bribe. Campaigning on an issue that infuriated the public – the corruption souring every aspect of their lives – the opposition had united under the banner of the National Rainbow Coalition (NARC) and stomped to victory, breaking the ruling KANU party's 39-year grip on power. When it became clear which way the vote

was going, slum residents had rounded up all the local cockerels and slaughtered the hated “jogoo”, symbol of the once-proud KANU. The partying had gone on into the early hours, with Tusker beer washing down roasted chicken. This morning, December 30, 2002, they were turning up to bear witness to their own historic handiwork.

Up on the dias, an array of African presidents and generals in gold brocade and ribbons sat fanning themselves. Next to them sweltered the diplomats, ham-pink under their panamas. Kenyan VIPS, finding no seats available, sat meekly on the floor, their wives’ glossy wraps trailing in the dust. An urchin on the rooftop of the podium wiggled his ragged arse to the music from the military band, which, like all the armed forces present, was beginning to lose its nerve. They had rehearsed exhaustively for this event, but had not anticipated these numbers.

Pinned against my neighbours, I could feel small hands fluttering lightly through my pockets in search of money, mobile, wallet. With a heave, I scrambled onto a creaking table where a dozen sweaty photographers and reporters teetered, bitching fretfully – “Don’t move!” “Hey, head down, you’re blocking my shot!” The ceremony was now running six hours late. A Kenyan reporter next to me rolled the whites of her eyes skywards, gracefully fainted and was passed out over people’s heads in the crucifix position, like a fan at a rock concert. People were keeling over left, right and centre, ambulance crews plunging bravely into the throng to remove the wilting bodies.

Finally, an aide walked on bearing a gold-embroidered leather pouffe. This, it turned out, was the Presidential Pouffe, there to pop up the plastered leg of winner Mwai Kibaki, who had survived the years



**The inauguration had been an organisational debacle, but tragedy had been skirted. One last indignity was reserved for Moi. As his limousine drew away, heading for a helicopter to whisk him upcountry, it was stoned by the crowd**

in opposition only to be nearly killed in a campaign car crash. Next came Kibaki himself, his wheelchair carried by eight straining men. He was followed by Moi, ornate ivory baton clutched in one hand, trademark rosebud in slate-grey suit, face expressionless as a mask. Moi took his salute and delivered his last presidential speech without a hint of bitterness, hailing the rival by his side as “a man of integrity”. He was determined to fulfil this last, painful role impeccably. “Bye bye,” jeered the crowd. “Go away.”

Then it was Kibaki’s turn. The concentrated anger of his speech had those sitting behind him blinking in surprise. Never deigning to mention the man sitting by his side, Kibaki dismissed Moi’s legacy as worthless. “I am inheriting a country that has been badly ravaged by years of misrule and ineptitude,” he told the crowd. “The era of ‘anything goes’ is gone forever. Government will no longer be run on the whims of individuals.” Then he pronounced the soundbite that would haunt his time in office. “Corruption,” he said, “will now cease to be a way of life in Kenya.” Whenever I hear it today, I notice a tiny detail that passed me by as I stood in that sweaty scrum, smeared notebook in hand: Kibaki, always a laboured speaker, fumbles the word “cease”. Lipped, it comes out sounding very much like “thief”.

The speeches over, the various presidents headed for their motorcades as the security services heaved sighs of relief. The inauguration had been an organisational debacle, but tragedy had been skirted. One last indignity was reserved for Moi. As his limousine drew away, heading for a helicopter to whisk him upcountry, it was stoned by the crowd.

Climbing down off the table, my bag momentarily became wedged in the melee, and hands reached out from the

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crowd. Remembering the little fingers at work earlier in the morning, I rounded my shoulders and gave my bag an aggressive yank. “Oh no, no, madam,” sorrowed a man, knowing exactly what was in my mind. “Those days are over now in Kenya, this is a new country”. They were reaching out not to mug me but to help me, a member of the international press who had played a tiny part in Kenya’s moment of glory by mere dint of witnessing it. “You will see, this will be our best ever government,” chimed in a smiling student, and I felt a spasm of shame.

In the days that followed I would often feel ashamed of my professional cynicism. For there was a tangible feeling of excitement in the air, a conviction that with this election, Kenyans had brought about the country’s long-promised second liberation. Many of those who had represented the country’s frustrated conscience, human rights campaigners, lawyers and civic leaders, were now in charge. Mass happiness blended with communal relief to forge a sense of national purpose, expressed in an impatience with the old ways of doing things. Newspapers recounted with glee how irate passengers were refusing to allow *matatu* touts to hand over the usual *kitu kidogo* – that ubiquitous “little something” – to the police manning the roadblocks. There were reports of angry members of the *wananchi* – ordinary folk – storming an upcountry police station to demand refunds of bribes paid over the years. Large signs – “This is a corruption-free zone”, “No bribes”, “You have a right to free service” – went up in government receptions, along with corruption complaints boxes, which swiftly filled with letters. The social contract taken for granted in so many Western countries, barely tangible in Kenya, suddenly began to make itself felt. When Gallup conducted an end-

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**Many of those who had represented the country’s frustrated conscience, human rights campaigners, lawyers and civic leaders, were now in charge**

of-year poll, it found that Kenyans were the most optimistic people in the world, with 77 per cent saying they had high hopes for the future.

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**T**HINGS FINALLY SEEMED TO BE GOING right for Kenya and the news spread beyond the country’s borders like a warm glow. “The victory of the people of Kenya is a victory for all the people of Africa,” South Africa’s first lady, Zanele Mbeki, pronounced at Kibaki’s swearing-in, and she was right. For Kenya is one of a handful of African nations which have always possessed a significance out of keeping with its size and population, whose twists and turns are monitored by outsiders for clues as to which direction the continent is taking. Somehow, what happens here matters more to the world outside than what happens in many larger, richer, more populous African countries.

This preeminence can in part be traced to Britain’s colonial role and the astonishingly-resilient memory of “a sunny land for shady people” where dissolute white women had adulterous affairs with English aristocrats. But there are less romantic reasons, too. The most advanced economy in the region, Kenya has held linchpin status since independence by mere dint of what it is not. It has never been Uganda, where Idi Amin and Milton Obote demonstrated how brutal post-colonial rule could turn, or Rwanda, mourning a genocide, or Sudan, venue for one of the continent’s longest civil wars. Kenya’s dysfunctional neighbours have always made it look good in comparison, the obvious place to train your soldiers, in the case of the British army; to moor your warships, in the case of the Pentagon; base your agencies, in the case of the United Nations; or set up

your Africa bureaux, in the case of Western television stations.

So when Kenya, in the latter part of the Moi era, appeared to veer off course, the world took notice. The end of the Cold War had delivered no obvious dividend here. Hopeful talk of an emerging group of Renaissance leaders who would find “African solutions to African problems” did not include Kenya. Moi had been nothing like as crudely predatory a Big Man president as Zaire’s Mobutu Sese Seko, Togo’s Gnassingbe Eyadema or Cameroon’s Paul Biya. Yet he had pauperised many of his 30 million citizens, of whom 55 per cent now lived on less than \$1 a day.

Given that Kenya had never experienced a civil war, never been invaded, and had started out with so much in its favour, the fault must lie elsewhere. And everyone agreed where: in a system of corruption and patronage so ingrained, so greedy, it was gradually throttling the life from the country. Whether expressed in the petty bribes the average Kenyan had to pay fatbellied policemen, the jobs for the boys doled out by civil servants, or the massive scams perpetrated by the country’s ruling elite, sleaze had become endemic. Which is why so many eyes now rested on Kibaki and his NARC government. If they could get it right on corruption, if Kenya could only find its way, then perhaps there was hope for the rest of the continent.

The first announcements the new president made after unveiling his cabinet certainly continued to send out the right signals. A brand new post – Permanent Secretary in Charge of Governance and Ethics – was being created, Kibaki said. This anti-corruption champion, Kenya’s version of Eliot Ness, would run a unit working out of State House and enjoy direct access to the president’s office. And that key job was going to someone who seemed tailor-



**A giant walked in. The tag that automatically sprang to mind on first meeting was “The Big Man.” Standing well over six feet, he had girth as well as height, the V-shaped silhouette of the comic-book superhero**

made for the role. He just happened to be an old friend.

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**I** HAD KNOWN JOHN GITHONGO SINCE moving to Nairobi in the mid 1990s, when he was an up-and-coming newspaper columnist and I was the Financial Times’s Africa correspondent. Limpid and articulate, his columns commanded one’s full attention, like a clear voice carrying loud and strong across a room of cocktail chatterers.

I asked him to lunch. A giant walked in. The tag that automatically sprang to mind on first meeting was “The Big Man.” Standing well over six feet, he had girth as well as height, the V-shaped silhouette of the comic-book superhero. He was a gift to any newspaper cartoonist, but this exaggerated outline was built of muscle, not fat. It was a bully’s physique, but no bully ever walked with his tentative, splay-footed step, the step of a man feeling his way, anxious not to tread on smaller mortals milling below. He was only in his 30s, but seemed older than his years, thanks to the receding hairline, deep baritone and seeming gravitas. But in fact, John was prone to fits of the giggles. An inveterate conspiracy theorist, he loved a gossip. “Is that SO? Is that SOOO?” he would whisper in fascination, on being passed a nugget of clandestine information, mouth forming a round “O” of wonder.

I began quoting John in my articles. Other Western journalists were also discovering him. Soon, the name “John Githongo” was cropping up in more and more media stories as pundit. Then he’d left journalism to revive the local branch of Transparency International, an anti-corruption organisation established by his own father and a group of like-minded Kenyan business-



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men. He had found the perfect platform from which to hold a morally-bankrupt government to account. TI's reports finally quantified Kenya's amorphous corruption problem, giving the media something solid to get their teeth into. The foreign governments who funded many of TI Kenya's activities loved it. Here was proof of how donor aid, cleverly directed, could bolster accountability.

In the wake of the inauguration, I tracked him down with a fellow journalist, keen to hear his thoughts. We found him in frenetic mode, both exhilarated and exhausted. Halfway through the conversation, he revealed why he was so distracted. The Kenyan businessmen who sat on TI Kenya's board, old friends of both his father and Kibaki, had been in touch. "The *Wazees* (old men) have put my name forward as someone to lead the fight against corruption." His laugh was half-embarrassed, half-excited. "It looks as though the new team is going to offer me a post in government."

My heart sank. I could see exactly why any new government would want John. No Kenyan could rival his reputation for muscular integrity, or enjoyed as much respect amongst the foreign donors everyone hoped would soon resume lending to Kenya. In coopting him, the incoming administration would be neatly appropriating a high-profile symbol of credibility. But I remembered all the other shining African talents I'd seen warily join the establishment they had once attacked, persuaded that now, finally, the time was ripe for change, only to emerge discredited.

"Don't take it," I said. "You'll lose your neutrality for ever. Once you've crossed the line and become a player, you'll never be able to go back."

He listened, but my advice, it was clear, was being given too late. Effectively, he



**It was obvious that John was more than just a passive player in a deal done by his father's friends. He had dedicated his short career to fighting corruption. Now along came an administration that had won an election promising to do just that, and it was asking for his expertise**

explained, he wasn't being given a choice. The old guys had taken his acquiescence as read. He'd found them drinking champagne together. They had ribbed the young man over the fact that he probably didn't even own a suit for his meeting with Kibaki, offering to lend him one. "They'd all cooked it up together. I drove away stunned. It was a great honour." In later years, he would think back over that episode with the *Wazees* and detect an unappetisingly sacrificial element to the whole episode. Like the prophet Abraham, these men he had grown up with had trussed him up and delivered him to his fate.

But it was obvious that John was more than just a passive player in a deal done by his father's friends. He had dedicated his short career to fighting corruption. Now along came an administration that had won an election promising to do just that, and it was asking for his expertise. How could it be legitimate to criticise if, when you were explicitly asked to join the fray, you refused? "We discussed whether he should take it and concluded he didn't have a choice, morally speaking," remembers economist David Ndi, who had worked alongside John at TI. "If he didn't, he would always wonder if he could have made a difference."

Leaving John that day, I felt a deep tinge of melancholy. Working in Africa, I'd grown accustomed to friendships premised on wilful ignorance on my part and an absence of full disclosure on my friends'. When visiting a former Congolese prime minister, sitting in a villa whose bougainvillea-fringed gardens stretched across acres of prime real estate, I knew better than to ask if his government salary had paid for this lush beauty. Staying with a friend in Nigeria, whose garage alone dwarfed the family homes of many Londoners, I took it for granted his business

dealings wouldn't stand up to a taxman's scrutiny. Life was complicated. The moral choices needed to rise to the top were bleaker and more unforgiving in Africa than those faced by Westerners. It was easy for me, born in a society which coddled its failures and compensated its victims, to wax self-righteous. I had never been asked to choose between the lesser of two evils, never woken to the bitter realisation that I was the only person stupid enough to play by the rules. If I was to continue to like these men and women – and I *did* like these men and women – it was sometimes necessary to focus on the foreground and ignore the bigger picture.

But not with John, never with John. Through the years, I had never caught a glimpse of any sinister hinterland. I looked at him that day and thought: 'Well, that's over. In the years to come, I will pick up a Kenyan newspaper and spot an item in a gossip column about his partnership with a shady Asian businessman, the large house he is having built in a plush Nairobi suburb. Then there'll be a full length-article, a court case in which the judge finds against him but it will go to appeal, so I'll never know the truth. And one day, I'll be chatting to someone at a diplomatic party who will say: "Oh, John Githongo – isn't he completely rotten?" and I'll find myself nodding in agreement....' Oh, I would still like him. But what had once been clear-cut would have become murky. And already, I mourned our mutual loss of innocence.

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**T**HERE WAS ONE LAST HOOP to jump through before his appointment was confirmed – an interview with the man who had just become Kenya's third president. At that first encounter on January



**After a lull, I started getting the occasional, worrying bulletin: John had made powerful enemies and travelled around Nairobi with two bodyguards. New scandals were surfacing; John had been moved sideways, then reinstated**

7, 2003, watched benevolently over by the *Wazees*, John listened, humbled, overawed, as Kibaki outlined his expectations. But he plucked up just enough courage to make a remark that went to the heart of the matter. If his time at TI had taught him one thing, he said, it was that since corruption started at the top, it could only effectively be fought from the top. "Sir," he told the president, "We can set up all the anti-corruption authorities we want, spend all the money we want, pass all the laws on anti-corruption, but it all depends on you. If people believe the president is 'eating', the battle is lost. If you are steady on this thing, if the leadership is there, we will succeed." The appointment was announced soon after.

After that, we met only rarely. I was busy writing a book in London, he was a man in a hurry. After a lull, I started getting the occasional, worrying bulletin: John had made powerful enemies and travelled around Nairobi with two bodyguards. New scandals were surfacing; John had been moved sideways, then reinstated. It got worse: a journalist friend returning from Nairobi said John had told him that 'if anything happened' he had left instructions for both of us to be sent certain packages. And his hitherto unblemished reputation was taking its first hits. He was going down the route the cynics had always traced for him, from superhero to flawed mortal.

Then, on a visit to Kenya, John joined a meal I was having in a French restaurant with four Western journalists. So, John, when are you going to resign?" asked one of my colleagues, and John chuckled ruefully, shaking his head in defeat. As we prepared to leave, I turned to him on sudden impulse. He had not said as much, but under the ebullient, resolute cheerfulness that was his public face, I glimpsed a certain dismay. "I've just moved into a



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larger flat in London, John, with a separate guestroom. If you ever need a base’ – the phrase “bolt hole” was on the tip of my tongue – ‘somewhere to rest up, just give me a call.”

The response came a few months later. A call from Davos, where he was attending the World Economic Forum. “I was wondering if I could take you up on that offer of a room?” He gave no hint of how long he planned to stay or why he needed a place for the night when, as a government VIP, he enjoyed the pick of London hotels. Something, clearly, was up. And on the morning of February 6, 2005, when the winter sky over the capital was its customary dull white, he arrived on the doorstep of my London flat, let in by an elderly lady down the hall who seemed to find nothing remotely suspicious about a huge black man in a KGB-style leather jacket herding a pile of luggage so large it was clear that this would be no weekend stay. As



**On the morning of February 6, 2005, when the winter sky over the capital was its customary dull white, he arrived on the doorstep of my London flat**

he deposited the various bags in my guest room, John’s mobile phones trilled and vibrated, like a chorus of caged starlings. “One of the first things I need to do,” he said, “is resign.”

He was on the run, he told me. Whatever I might have fondly liked to think, his appearance on my doorstep at this moment of crisis was no tribute to the intimacy of our friendship. Quite the opposite. He was there precisely because so few people in Kenya knew we had ever been friends.

“They told me it was *them*,” he said, pacing the floor. “These ministers, my closest colleagues, sat there and told me to my face that they, *they* were the ones doing the stealing. Once they said that, I knew I had to go.”

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This is an abbreviated version of Chapter 1 of Michela Wrong’s book, *It’s Our Turn To Eat*  
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