

MYRA TRUDEA OKUMU

After the clouds, the sun

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*For Catherine, Caroline, Chrispin and Nashukuru,
May you find beauty in the life that you have and gold in
everything you set your heart on.*

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Foreword

“Who wants to become a writer? And why? Because it’s the answer to everything. ... It’s the streaming reason for living. To note, to pin down, to build up, to create, to be astonished at nothing, to cherish the oddities, to let nothing go down the drain, to make something, to make a great flower out of life, even if it’s a cactus.”

—ENID BAGNOLD

Dear Reader,

It is with great pleasure and anticipation that I present to you this collection of short stories, originally titled ‘Sinful basket’ and then later changed to ‘After the clouds, the sun’. As the author, I am both humbled and excited to share these tales that have woven themselves into my imagination. The journey has been rewarding.

In each story, a fragment of the human experience, and the countless inspirations that have shaped my creative endeavors. The characters within these pages are not just figments of imagination; they are reflections of collective experiences, painted with words to evoke *so many* emotions.

I hope that these stories resonate with you, spark your imagination, and perhaps, offer a moment of solace or inspiration. As an author, my greatest joy lies in the connection between the words on these pages and the hearts of those who read them.

Thank you for joining me on this literary adventure.

May these stories weave their magic into your thoughts, linger in your dreams, and leave a mark on your literary journey.

Happy reading!

xoxo

Myra *'the dreamer'* Okumu

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Thank you to myself for not giving up and braving through the days, especially when they all blended into each other.

And to my partner, Abdullah Ahmed, for being there for me through all my blocks and wonderful days. You are the light to my days.

I

Part One

Sinful Basket

“There are people who are never content, never appeased, forever dissatisfied—who continually look to what escapes them, convincing themselves that if only they could attain that one desire outside of reach they would be happy. It seems almost pointless to give to these people because their eyes immediately shift from the gift to stare miserably at the portion held back. Their wants, demands, expectations, appetites are never satiated, thus they refuse to be happy. And you cannot make them so.”

*~Richelle E. Goodrich, **Smile Anyway: Quotes, Verse, and Grumblings for Every Day of the Year***

* * *

October had come with unrelenting ferocity that year, evident in the dry sand that sought to settle in everyone’s orifices as the dry and hot wind blew. Sand dunes filled the packed

market as people shuffled along the wooden stalls, admiring and purchasing the occasional item. A buzz filled the market air, a mixture of hysterical bargaining and vendors hollering at the non-existent crowds, urging them to be what they termed 'the lucky customers'.

Children littered the streets, unaccounted and uncared for. *Ana amaskini*, as they were called, were thugs that terrorized passerbys and robbed anyone they could gang up on. A menace to the people, they walked around with razor blades, knives and screwdrivers.

God forbid anyone crossed their path.

Jane was tired, to say the least, and it did not help that the sun was blazing hot above her and her stomach rumbled from going a full day without food. Her eyes felt dry from sitting too long in the sun and acid pain filled the emptiness that craved to be sated, to be filled with a warm decent meal.

The thought of anything other than water cruising down her dry throat had her salivating and only worsened her hunger.

She had woken up at the crack of dawn as she had for the last five years and bathed her three children, getting them ready for school. Her husband had passed on a few months ago from a headache after he had had a dream about being hit with a hammer. He was murdered through witchcraft for all Jane cared and she did not spare the details on how people were jealous of her husband to anyone who cared to listen. The truth was nobody cared enough about her womanizing, ill-tongued husband to give her claims a moments thought. The rumor mill churned that he had, in fact, gotten into a fight at a bar and had been hit on the head with a bottle.

Something about her husband making advances on someone's wife with her violent and drunk husband sitting a few

feet away.

From then on, Jane woke up everyday to go sell vegetables on the market to keep a roof above their heads and food in the stomachs of her growing children.

Lettie, the youngest of the girls, had just turned four and was quickly outgrowing her sister's hand me downs. The same could be said for the twins, Kaso and Umodzi. It seemed like yesterday they were babies, needing their mother's constant presence and attention all the time but times had changed. She was the breadwinner and she had to hustle everyday to see them through, even if it meant she saw less of her children.

A headache was forming at the back of her head at the thought of returning home, cooking, cleaning, washing and preparing for the next day; the daily woes of a woman. The children would be home in a few hours giving Jane enough time to clear her stall and walk the seven kilometer back her to her house.

Moments later, Jane was packed and ready to hit the long treacherous road with the vegetables that remained from sales that day. Ma Ju, the woman who owned the stall next to hers, helped her lift her nearly empty basket onto her head and Jane slowly navigated her way out of the market with small easy steps, mostly to avoid bumping into people or stepping on anyone's feet. She took small easy breaths that failed to fill the hollowness in her life, her heart.

Rent was due as were all the other bills, and the children's fees had not been paid for two consecutive terms. Money was as scarce as a hen's teeth and the girls dropping out of school did not seem ludicrous with the current state of their finances. Maybe, the girls could learn a thing or two selling vegetables

with their mother on the market.

As Jane neared the road that led her out of the market, she spotted Azengali, the richest man within a 25 mile radius, sitting at the middle of his *kaunjika* clothes that stretched at least 7 meters in each direction: left, right, front, and back.

An envy started deep within Jane that slowly manifested into anger. Not at him but at herself for not having enough money to even buy her children an article of clothing each. Even a shirt or a dress would light up their little faces, make their day. It broke her heart to see them wear the same old faded, and sometimes, torn clothes while their friends around them sported new clothing. Their church clothes resembled regular clothing and did not even look presentable in the least. The seams stretched when they wore them, the threads thinning as they neared breaking point and the colors had faded from years of wear, being held together by spit and prayers.

Being a market day, Azengali's space was packed with shopping customers, people choosing from the endless piles of clothing that surrounded him and then proceeding to pay for them at the center. The squabbling of the market was centered there as everyone attempting to escape the capitalism of the market stalls ended up in front of clothes that were priced to nothing, a bargain many people lapped up as they nearly buried themselves in heaps of clothes.

Clad in a blue jeans and black shirt, Azengali was not much to look at. Short, dark and word had it, unmarried. His nose covered half his face and his eyes shrunk back into his school, not exactly the man that women would line up for.

A horrible thought crossed Jane's mind, growing like a seedling in good soil as she stood, hands balancing her basket on her head and eyes set on Azengali.

* * *

Jane's heart raced and skipped as she put distance between her and the market. She could feel her heart thumping in her chest and hitting hard against her rib cage, trying to escape her sinful body. Her palms were sweaty and her legs wobbled a little as she hurriedly walked, almost breaking into a run.

I did it, she thought to herself as the market disappeared behind her. The thought of not being caught brought with it an exhilarating feeling that was new and unfamiliar to Jane. She was no thief but in that moment, she felt as though she had pulled off a high risk heist and gotten away with it.

Midst the crowds of people, Jane had snuck clothes for the girls and packed them under her vegetables. Scared of being caught and beaten or, worse, burned, Jane had taken two dresses for each girl and quickly fled the scene of the crime.

The girls will have something new and nice to wear, she thought as a smile formed on her full and plum lips.

Jane was not tall but she had enough fat to cover her bones and her skin was a rich brown tone that complemented her striking hazel eyes. She had worn her blue V-neck blouse with her floral *chitenje* which sat nice and comfortably around her protruding behind, emphasizing her curvaceous body and almost non-existent waist.

With trouble and stress after her husband's passing, Jane had lost a few pounds but even that curve ball was not enough to move her towards figure-less. She had always been a head-turner as men clamored for her attention and some were even tongue-tied in her presence.

Jane knew it— the effect she had on men, and basked in it.

Jane's neck started aching as meters became kilometers, a dull ache that started from the base of her head and migrated onto her shoulders. She ignored it, boiling it down to fatigue and the adrenaline rush that had threatened to engulf her earlier on.

Guilt had started to seep in as the adrenaline left her body and she returned to baseline. Jane had never stolen a thing in her life nor had she ever done anything criminal yet she found that act of thievery oddly satisfying.

I'm sure anyone would understand, she thought. It was not like she had stolen the clothes for herself.

The sun was still high in the sky as Jane soldiered on, the ache in her neck spreading to her shoulders and the weight of the basket growing heavier with each step, too heavy for a couple of vegetable leaves and children's clothing.

Cassava fields lined each side of the road, the sturdy green stalks standing in regimented rows.

The road was empty and Jane's determined walk came to a halt, the weight of the basket overtaking her need to get home as fast as she could. She had only been walking a kilometer or three, she shouldn't have been that tired and the basket should not have been that heavy. Feeding her stomach was long overdue, she was losing daylight but the weight on her head had most quadrupled in those last two minutes.

With a deep and heavy sigh, Jane grabbed the basket on her head in an attempt to set it down for her to rest for a while and maybe, drink the last of the water she had carried from home.

Jane tried to lift the basket off her head but it did not budge, the load remained fixed on her head as though it had been expertly stitched to her scalp. Bewildered, she tried to focus all her strength and muscle into lifting the basket yet it did not

move from where it was initially nestled, if anything, it got heavier and the dull ache was morphing into pain that radiated from her head to the base of her spine.

Fear gripped Jane's limbs at the thought of the goods she had stolen, her blood running cold in the October heat.

The attempts to lift the basket had already proved futile and Jane, thinking fast, resorted to tilting her head to allow the basket to slip off her head, onto the ground, relieving her pounding head.

It did not matter if her vegetables tumbled into the dust or got soiled because her every thought, driven by pain, centered on getting that basket off of her head.

The weight remained glued to her head, very much oblivious to her efforts and with complete disregard to the pain of the poor woman. Jane's aching neck refused to bend even though her mind willed it.

Her neck remained rigid, in an upright position and the basket felt like a tonne of cement blocks had been adjoined to it.

Her body refused to free her, relieve her from the sinful basket that sat on her head. The weight of the basket was almost unbearable and hot tears took form in Jane's eyes.

Voices behind Jane, who stood trembling on the side of the road, brought her a glimpse of hope. She couldn't turn her head to see who it was but as two men passed her, Jane spoke with a cracked voice.

"Excuse me," she said, instantly getting the attention of the two men. "I do not mean to bother you, but could you please help me put down this load? I have been walking a while and I need to rest my head."

The two men, looking at the beautiful and attractive woman standing there in her lonesome, agreed to lend a hand. It wasn't a big ask as they were well built men with superb physique who worked hard in the sun judging from the rich melanin that colored their skin a dark chocolate brown.

"Let me help you," the shorter of the duo said, extending his arm to reach for the basket.

The man firmly gripped the hem of the basket, lifting with all his might but the basket refused to make any apparent movements, the oppressive weight of the basket untroubled by the man's attempts to dislodge it from where it sat. He grunted as he lifted, the veins in his arms popping from under his skin yet nothing happened.

The taller man broke into laughter at his friend's pathetic and embarrassing attempts. His body shook as the chuckles turned into bellows.

"Angozo, you are failing to lift a basket?" He laughed at his friend's dismay.

Jane's pain was at an all time high and she felt the torment everywhere on her body, even in the soles of her feet that were cooking in the plastic shoes she wore.

"You try," Angozo said to his friend, who with a bounce marched to where Jane stood. It was not long before he realized why his friend had failed. The weight of the basket was unnatural and seemed to get heavier the more one tried to lift it. In all the efforts, the basket had not moved an inch in any direction. The two men eyed each other, confused and out of breath, before they averted their eyes to Jane who looked very near collapse yet the basket remained fixated on her head.

Questions clogged their minds.

"What is in the basket?" Angozo asked Jane, flexing his arms

to release the tension build-up from trying to lift the devil of a basket.

Jane burst into tears, weak and ashamed. Her sobs and wails were almost hysterical as her body heaved with each cry and trembled from the need to collapse.

“I didn’t mean to, I swear,” Jane cried, a fresh batch of tears making it out of her eyes and streaming down her face, the salty rivers ran down her plump cheeks and dried in the heat. The pain was three-quarters past intolerable yet something kept her standing, kept her awake and very much aware.

The man stood less than a foot away from Jane, confused and pitying her for the weight of the world she carried on her shoulders.

As Jane narrated her thieving moment in waterworks of pain and shame, the men gasped aloud staring at her with ashane faces.

“Azengali!” Atulenji shouted in disbelief. “Of all the people in this world, you stole from Azengali.”

The unmatched and critical levels of stupidity in this woman, he thought to himself.

Azengali’s wealth was cursed and everyone with ears to listen knew it. Some said it was blood money while others argued that he came from a long line of ritualists, yet this woman dared steal from him.

Jane’s cries had gone up nine octaves by the times Angozo had finished giving her a brief but terrifying history of the man she had wronged.

They spared no detail, letting her know of the human sacrifices he turned into dwarfs and the snakes he owned that supposedly spit money or were sometimes sent to avenge him.

“I am going to die,” Jane wailed, choking on her tears. Her

mind was already racing, the thought of her innocent children suffering because she stole a few clothes. They already did not have a father and because of her thoughtlessness, they would be orphaned.

The emotional pain was a heavy addition to the physical pain she was experiencing; a final nail on the coffin, the last shovel of sand on the grave she had dug for herself.

She could not sit nor bend her neck or legs to rest and every step felt like a thousand needles pierced her muscles simultaneously.

“You will have to go back to the market,” the men said, pity filling their hearts. They could only imagine the pain that the woman was experiencing. “You will have to go back to Azengali and apologize for stealing.”

“I can’t walk,” Jane lamented. “My body hurts and it feels like I am going to fall apart.”

“There is no other way,” Atulenji sighed, shaking his head. The men knew they could not offer to carry her burden on her behalf, nor could they aid in her return to the scene of the crime. All they could do was hope that she made it back in one piece or, in the very least, alive.

* * *

The ground radiated with heat from a full day of contact with the sun. The trees bent and rustled as the warm wind frisked through the leaves, mimicking as a collective note the sound of rushing water. Nature’s sweet hollow melody: devoid of bird’s song and the blare of human life.

Jane took what seemed like the ten millionth step of her

life, a step that constituted her dragging her almost numb leg forward. Tears had dried as she had cried every last drop of water out of her body. Her eyes stung from drying out, and her lips cracked and bled from an assault of hunger and heat. Her hands remained firmly placed above her, holding the basket while her head hang in agony. She had made it to the market but shame overtook her, making her wish she had never conjured the thought of stealing and cursing the thoughts of inferiority that had forced her to commit such a heinous act. Her biggest fear still loomed ahead: not finding Azengali at his stall.

What if he had packed his things and retired for the day? What would she do then? It was not like she knew where he lived.

A wave of relief washed over her body as she spotted piles of clothes still laid out at his station.

Thank the heavens, she thought as she forced her aching existence to take another step towards Azengali.

What am I going to say to him?, Jane thought as she approached Azengali where he sat at the center of his business. Last minute buyers were hurriedly choosing clothes and paying for them.

As she should have, Jane thought as a fresh wave of shame washed over her. How had she not noticed that Azengali was alone selling over 20 piles of clothes? How had it not crossed her mind that people went to him, *at the center*, to pay without thinking twice about stealing?

Letting out a forced breath to calm her nerves and ease her racing heart, Jane took the steps and stood in front of the short and dark frame that was Azengali.

Azengali looked at the woman who had positioned herself in front of him, looming over him like a wounded bird. A good minute passed before the man began to laugh, a loud and thick

laughter that shook his frame. The one sided exchange caught the attention of nearby shoppers who turned to onlookers. As his laughs subsided, Azengali shook his head and eyed the woman who carried a sorry excuse of a basket.

“How may I help you?” Azengali inquired, his eyes slightly narrowed. His tone bordered amusement and scorn, the line between the two obscured.

“I have come to apologize for stealing from you,” Jane cried, tremors overtaking her body from pure exhaustion. She did not care that people would recognize her or that she would be shamed for her actions. Her being was tired and she could not take it anymore, she had reached a threshold of pain that was inhumane.

“Nothing of mine has been stolen,” Azengali replied calmly. “You must have me mistaken.”

Jane trembled.

“No, please, I stole clothes from you on my way home and I am here to return them and apologize,” she pleaded. “I will pay for them. I just want to put this basket down. I am in so much pain, please.”

Shoppers had already gathered around the pair and listened attentively. Something was brewing and everyone was eager to get the good parts of the story, the ones that could be narrated as gossip later on.

“You have me mistaken,” Azengali repeated with a stern and decisive tone. “You are holding up the line.”

He dismissed her with a shrug of his shoulders, tuning to serve his customers but nobody came forth. They were all set on the woman who looked very much near death. Her face was covered in a thick layer of dust and her lips bled from the cracks that had formed.

Her whole frame shook.

“Please, Azengali, I have children,” Jane begged, her voice cracking as she spoke the last part. The crowd watched with pity filled hearts while others empathized with the mother who had crossed the gap between bravery and stupidity.

An elderly woman spoke from the front of the crowd. “We are all humans here and we can all agree that times have not favored any of us as of late. This woman was wrong but she has admitted to her mistakes. Please, pity her and relieve her of the basket.”

The crowd murmured in approval to what the old woman had said. Jane’s breathing morphed as the crowd looked on, her breaths turning into wheezes as life evidently departed her body. Her vision blurred but her body still stood. Seeing the judgment that filled and lodged itself into the eyes of the spectators, Azengali got up from his stool and walked to Jane. He grabbed the basket by the hem and effortlessly lifted it off her head, placing it on the ground beside her.

Jane’s body violently shook and spasmed as the full weight of exhaustion engulfed her, sending her limp body spiraling into the ground. She had fallen unconscious, her body finally registering and processing the trauma she had experienced; the wages of her sin.

Men from the group carried her limp body to the side, away from prying eyes and Azengali took his place at the center of his empire. He looked at the pieces of clothing the woman had stole and pity filled his heart. She had not lied, the clothes were not hers but for her children. He turned his body to look at the stunningly beautiful yet unconscious woman and in the new found truth, he saw her in a different light.

Not as a thief deserving of the punishment he had served

her but as a mother who would do anything for her children's smiles.

Lupanga la Moto: Padangotelo

Dedicated to the late L. Y Lupanga and his late wife, Viola Chadzamakono. The family misses you, ababa and antinye.

“You gain strength, courage, and confidence by every experience in which you really stop to look fear in the face. You are able to say to yourself, ‘I lived through this horror. I can take the next thing that comes along.’”

~Eleanor Roosevelt

* * *

The first she heard was a stampede, the sound of heavy feet as they hit the hard ground.

A sudden rush of heat flooded Nambe’s body starting from the pits of her stomach and radiating into her limbs.

No, it wasn’t heat. It was adrenaline.

The thudding in her ears matched the frantic beating of her heart and her mind acknowledged what she already knew, she

was trapped.

Nambe's limbs wobbled under her and she felt her whole body surrender. This was the end it seemed. They would take turns with her and scavenge her little body until there was nothing left to take. She would be sold as a slave or worse, killed.

Burning hot tears, heated by defeat and anger welled in Nambe's eyes as she stood there wondering what had happened to her brothers and if she would ever see them again. The sound of running feet drew closer with each second, louder and more determined.

A field rat scurried in the maize and disappeared.

No.

She would not be raped, she would not be touched, and she would not accept defeat.

A fresh wave of determination and adrenaline engulfed her, almost toppling her into the ground. She quickly moved towards where the rat had disappeared, ignoring the sound of imminent doom in the light of the setting sun.

To the disdain of her mother and the rest of her family, Nambe had learned to hunt mice with her older brother. The field mice would be a delicious add to the bonfire they held. The more you had, the more power you held that night over the other children. Eager to fit in with the older children, Nambe had quickly learned to hunt and capture field mice and today, it seemed that skill would save her.

It was her only lifeline.

"I can't see her," one of the soldiers shouted in the near distance.

Good, Nambe thought staring at the mouse she held in her hand. The poor mouse looked as scared as she was, frantically

squirming and squealing in her hand, its chest heaving up and down.

Nambe could see herself mirrored in the animal she held in her hands.

Trapped, scared, helpless, and alone.

Closing her eyes before her moment of weakness overtook her, Nambe held the animal in both hands and chose to save her own life.

* * *

The maize field was a living and breathing maze, the leaves of the maize stalks hissing and crackling in the evening breeze that was tainted by the fire the hunters had set to draw Nambe out.

They had resorted to hunting her down like a wild animal. The earth beneath her bare feet was hard and unyielding, the ground carpeted with dry husks that crunched loudly with each step. The air was thick with the scent of roasting maize, and the whooshing of the wind through the leaves created a soothing sound that belied the danger lurking in the shadows.

Nambe felt the air slice through her as she ran for her life.

Barefoot and exhausted, she used her hands to swat the maize as her feet propelled her forward, further into the maize field. Her breathing was ragged, her heart was tired, and her legs hurt from the endless running.

The fierce and untamed flames soared to towering heights, creating monstrous columns of orange and red. They seemed to sway with an evil, chaotic grace, their tongues reaching out to devour everything in their path. Trees became towering

torches, their trunks alight with seething fury, while bushes and grasses crumbled into glowing, molten streams.

The fire stretched, reaching high into the sky and leaving a trail of thick, billowing smoke in their wake. The cornstalks, now reduced to mere skeletons, crackled and popped, the sound echoing like a demented melody.

The very air shimmered and distorted, as if nature herself had melted in the furnace of destruction. The sky turned a shade of crimson as the sun, obscured by smoke and ash, struggled to shine through.

Deep down, Nambe knew she could not escape but giving up seemed like a weak thing to do. She had to move forward.

“She is moving towards the sun!” one of the men shouted, and feet came rushing in her direction.

She was being hunted in every sense and tense of the word, they were going to kill her and gut her.

The thought involuntarily escaped her mind, and weakened her.

Exhausted beyond comprehension and coughing up the debris she had inhaled, Nambe fell onto the ground beneath her. Air refused to fill her burning lungs, and her legs quivered at being overused. It did not help that she had been inhaling smoke in efforts to fill her lungs with poisoned air.

Seconds later, four men were standing over Nambe wearing evil and malicious smirks on their scarred faces. They did not care that she was just a little girl or somebody’s daughter, they had been on the road for months and she would, like the others captured, quench their thirst and satisfy their every burning desire. They carried swords and spears in their arms, armed to their teeth with weapons paraded by the king’s army. They had been sent on a raid and would return home with spoils,

slaves and women.

“We have a fighter here,” the tallest man remarked, laughing in pure evil and delight at his catch. His teeth were broken in more places than one and plaque covered their surface.

Nambe looked up at her captors with defiance, refusing to cry or show any fear. She knew her fate had not been sealed, she had thrown her gamble into the universe and could only pray fate did not call her bluff. Some naive part of her hoped that the smoke would alert any person in the vicinity of her predicament but that hope flickered and dimmed with each passing second.

“Get up,” the man on her right grunted, smiling to reveal crooked, tobacco stained teeth. A shiver of disgust ran down Nambe’s spine as she sat there contemplating whether to defy them or simply obey. Defiance would be met with harsh repercussions, Nambe chose the latter and used her hands to support herself off the ground.

Standing almost a head or two shorter than the men that surrounded her, Nambe could not help the feelings of vulnerability that came with standing around men whose every thought was bent towards defiling her and preying on her innocence. She had heard stories of girls being taken and never making it back to their families, nobody ever knew what happened to them. Whether they were sold to the white men for clothing and grain or kept by the king himself as slaves, nobody quite knew. Once you were taken, your family mourned you like you were dead and life seemed to go on.

Nambe thought of the bonfire she would miss that night and every night for the rest of her life. She thought of her poor mother who would wallow in grief at the loss of her three living children. Grief would overtake her and the gods forbid, kill

her.

“Start walking,” the tall man said, striking her backside with his blade. Nambe winced in pain but the pain from the hit was nothing compared to her bleeding heart.

The men roared in laughter at her obvious discomfort, and quietly, Nambe took steps away from her home and into a daunting future.

* * *

The four walked for what seemed like ages and the sun had long set into the distant horizon. Their shadows had grown long and disappeared with the last light.

Her captors chatted among themselves the whole way; talking of the rewards the king would bestow upon them for bringing with them such splendor, the warm beds awaiting them at home, and a lady named Patuma who seemed to entertain every man in her house. Nambe marched forward ahead of the men who, the whole time, kept a steady eye on their flight risk.

They think I will make a run for it, Nambe thought.

Quite the contrary.

Nambe had weighed every option in the time she had been walking and staring at the endless rows of dried maize. At first, she had hoped and prayed someone would come and save her but that was a fool’s dream and she knew it. When it neared the harvest season, people generally avoided the main roads in fear of being ambushed, robbed, or abducted. If she tried to run, the men would tire of her and drive spears right through her body, killing her.

Most importantly, her brothers could still be alive in the

camp they were heading towards. If that was the case, the three could escape captivity and be reunited with their family. Nambe casually brushed off the nagging thought that anything had happened to her brothers. Her thoughts veered to her mother, who would at this moment would start wondering where her children were and wrongly assume they went to the bonfire early.

“Ouch!” Nambe exclaimed as her foot landed first into a rock. She had been so consumed by her own thoughts, she had not seen the boulder that stuck out of the ground like a sore thumb.

“Shut up,” the man referred to as Kozimasi said with annoyance and shoved her forward with force.

Nambe stumbled forward and quickly regained her balance, hiding that she was hurt and very bothered. Keeping her limp to a minimal, she continued to wonder about her poor mother. They had lost their father after the youngest was born and her mother did not take it well. Her heart broken from losing the love of her life, her mind had followed suit. She began to neglect her children and herself, choosing to spend her days sitting under a tree, crying. Their relatives said it was a sickness of the mind, and she needed time to heal herself as grief, the price of love, remained such a consuming emotion.

She had gotten better as time healed those wounds.

Nambe had taken on the responsibility of caretaker; cooking, cleaning and making sure the house ran smoothly but this, the loss of all her children, that would drive her to madness and ruin her recovering mother.

“We are here,” Dzolela said as the group came to a clearing. Nambe had quickly learned the names of the three men; Dzolela, Kozimasi and Leveya. Leveya was quieter than the

others and only spoke when he was spoken to but that did not mean Nambe trusted him any more than the others, if anything she trusted him less.

Better a man with bad intentions than one with no intentions. The former made clear their motives and you did not doubt that you did not trust them, the latter swayed on the fence and could lure you to believe you were safe before stabbing you in the back. The worst kind of people, truly.

In front of them was the soldiers camp, the resourceful ones had built temporary shelter made from wood and banana leaves. A fire roared in the middle and men wandered around armored with knives and spears. The soldiers, weary but vigilant, huddled around the fire, their faces bathed in the flames; illuminating the faces of warriors that had seen battle and survived.

Nambe counted more than fifty men outside and knew there would be more around the camp and some still on raids. At the corner of the camp, where the light disappeared and touched the darkness of the trees, Nambe could see figures of women and children tied to trees like animals. No males in sight.

Her breath caught in her throat.

Where were her brothers?

The ground beneath her swayed, her vision blurring and finally letting the tears flood her eyes. She needed the salty rivers to cleanse her of the pain that threatened to drown her and physically rip her apart. A scream clawed its way up her throat at the agony that came with loss and Nambe staggered forward.

Khozimasi looked at the girl and nodded to Dzolela to put her with the others. He grabbed the girl who suddenly looked weak and defeated, as though all the fight had been drained

from her flimsy body, and dragged her towards the trees.

Dzolela grabbed rope from the last prisoner and tied her hands and legs to a tree. Her bound hands lay almost lifelessly on her extended legs and the image of her dismay sent chills down his spine.

Nambe looked at the girl beside her, and even in the dimly lit clearing Nambe could see that her eyes were red and puffy from crying, and her body heaved from the last of her wails.

She was no more than ten, Nambe felt sorry for her and for all the girls who, like her, had been uprooted from their lives and faced an uncertain future.

“Hey,” Nambe whispered to the girl, seeking companionship in the most trying of times. The girl wore a red dress that was stained with mud and dirt, her jet black hair was cut short and her bloodshot eyes obscured her dark brown eyes.

The girl averted her sore eyes to the strange girl.

“My name is Nambe,” she continued, “what is your name?”

“We are not allowed to talk to each other. Please, keep to yourself.” The hoarse voice of the girl sounded like gravel.

Nambe nodded, her heart sinking further into her chest. She needed to know if any male victims had been taken, how long they had been here, and if there was a possibility—even the slightest chance, that they could escape.

“Listen,” the girl began again, drawing Nambe’s attention to her. “When the guards come, pretend to sleep or you will be taken.”

Taken? Taken where?

A thousand questions rushed over Nambe as she stared at the men that drank and sung around the fire. The moon was full and bright, bathing the scene in a silvered glow but that peaceful night was distorted by the sound of weeping girls, the

drunkenness of immoral men and Nambe's gamble.

Minutes compounded and passed, some girls had cried themselves to sleep while others remained awake and alert, ready to fight if need be. Seven girls had been taken from their homes, each too traumatized to recount where they came from or who they were, their minds shielding them from the horrors that came and the ones they were about to face.

Nambe's stomach growled as hunger set in but she did not let that sway her into weakness or sleep. She had to be awake in case her brothers showed up or one of the guards tried to touch her or the other girls. From what she could gather, she was one of the oldest in the group and the younger girls looked up to her strength and resilience. She had not cried once since she had been brought, her eyes fixated on the soldiers and her mind occupied with silently comforting her mother from that terrible distance. She didn't know how but she would survive.

The breaking of a branch caught Nambe's attention and she looked up to see an unfamiliar soldier walking up to the trees. Her body tensed, her pulse quickening as the man staggered towards them.

A shiver traced its way down her spine and a prickling unease settled in the pit of her stomach. Her senses were all over the place, every rustle of leaves and distant sound seemed amplified.

The man stopped in front of her, his shadow engulfing Nambe's sitted frame.

He stood for a good second letting the thought of his presence marinate in the minds of the girls like a predator finding delight in letting his prey knowing that he was coming for them.

He crouched, coming eye level with Nambe. The man reeked of alcohol and his smile was crooked, his ears overpowering

the rest of his face.

“Hello beautiful,” he cooed to Nambe, who recoiled from his words the way one would to the sight of human excreta. He laughed at her disgust with him, and he did not care that she found him repulsive.

The other girls had woken up and stared helplessly at this assault, knowing there was nothing they could do to help her.

“I hear you have some fight in you,” the soldier continued. “I hear they had to use fire to draw you out.”

His eyes glistened as he spoke, darkened by filthy desires. He wanted this girl that posed as a challenge, he wanted the thrill of the struggle and fight.

Nambe kept her eyes on the man’s face and did not bat an eye to his words. She refused to be intimidated by a vile predator like him. He was simply not a man if he preyed on young girls and took advantage of them, it made him less than a human and worse than a wild animal.

She would not be shaken.

Nambe kept her mouth shut even though her mind willed her to curse him.

The man reached out and caressed Nambe’s face but she moved her head out of the way, and revulsion passed through her expression. It was a silent, cutting judgment communicated through the narrowing of her eyes and a subtle, dismissive turn of her head.

The man raised his arm, angered by her rejection, and struck Nambe with the back of his hand, sending her body into the ground.

Ringling.

That was all Nambe could hear in the aftermath. The echo of the impact left a hush between the cries of the girls and

the chiming in Nambe's ear. The atmosphere seemed to have shifted, charged with a mix of shock and fear from the girls as they watched.

Nambe stared at the ground, rapidly blinking to stop her tears from betraying her pain and letting the soldier know that he had hurt her.

When the lump in her throat cleared and her breath steadied, Nambe eased herself from the ground and looked back in the face of the man, unbothered.

The commotion had gained the attention of other soldiers around the camp who gravitated towards the girls, wanting to see the cause of all the ruckus.

"You think you are so tough?" The soldier exclaimed, balls of spit erupting from this mouth and landing on her face. Nambe remained quiet, her resolve enduring despite the hysterical man.

These can not be the men that have been put on Earth to provide, she thought in distaste, *throwing tantrums like a child.*

The man grabbed Nambe by the shoulders and shook her so violently everyone in their vicinity could hear her teeth rattle as they smashed against each other. The man's grip was unforgiving and his calloused hands on her arms made for painful company. The soldier quickly and painfully untied the ropes and balled his hands into her long hair. Nambe let out a scream at the assault, her hands instinctively rushing to her hair and clawing at the hands of the soldier as he dragged her away from the trees and towards the tents.

The cries of the other girls and the laughter of the other soldiers filled the air and added another layer to the night.

Nambe kicked at the ground and swatted at the soldier as he dragged her on the ground by her hair. Her scalp ached, and

her screams landed on deaf ears.

The man grunted as he pulled, his efforts slightly dumped by the struggling girl who remained stubborn.

Nambe knew what was coming but she also knew something nobody else did; she would not be touched. Not by this man, not by anyone. Her head ached from the vicious tagging but pride swelled where fear should have grown.

The rat in the field would save her life. She knew she would be captured once the fire had been set in that field and her gamble was the safety net she had cast into the universe.

The blood of the rat had been smeared between her legs. A sacrifice for her innocence.

3

Where the winds left silence

*“Mphirimo! Mphirimo! Mphirimo!
Kudzabwera Napolo!”
Mbona was checked in mid-leap
Chilembwe turned over and went back to sleep.
-Steve Chimombo*

* * *

The ground was rotting. It emitted a smell so foul the dead stirred in their eternal slumber. Sticks and bones stuck out from the uneven, and muddied ground. It was the acne of horror stretching on for miles.

Bodies were buried so deep into the ground it would take months to find all the pieces and make them fit.

Freddy had ripped through with a fury that left nothing unturned and untouched. It had flattened even the oldest trees, uprooting lives with a violence Tala couldn't wrap his head around. He waited, hoping for any sound, any sign of life but

there was only silence. A silence so loud and still it felt like the world itself was holding its breath.

In the aftermath of Freddy, not even the faintest call of a bird could be heard. It was the beginning of an eternal silence. Every hut, fence and wall had been peeled away by Freddy's fury, and a wasteland remained on what used to be a village full of life, laughter and stories. Talandira's hands shook as he wrapped them around his battered and muddied body, trying and failing to keep himself from shattering into the debris. His small frame was adorned in dry mud and his clothes were tattered, held together by spit and prayers.

The cyclone had raged for days. It had swallowed lives whole and spit out a wasteland.

Tala had survived, and somehow, that felt worse.

He vaguely remembered the warnings.

A storm was coming, the chief had said, but they had seen storms before and lived through many. Each time the village was hit, they had rebuilt and this would be no different. The people had faith in the land and in their strength.

The soft rain had been innocent, Tala could still feel the water droplets run down his cheeks.

"Get out of the rain!" his mother, Salima, had shouted, hurriedly removing clothes from the line. The neighbors hauled buckets to catch the rainwater and children playfully splashed around in the puddles that formed.

"The rain is just beginning."

"What does that mean, mama?" he had asked, but she shook her head. Her smile thinned.

The harrowing winds came with the night.

An unsettling whistle that slithered its way through the trees, and made the hairs at the nape of the villagers neck stand. Tala

had laid on his mat, surrounded by the darkness of the room, and listened as the wind picked up speed and groaned loudly through the walls of their home.

He could hardly make out his father's figure as he peered through the hut.

His tall frame sat cross-legged, staring at the ceiling and listening to the brewing storm.

"Does the wind sound different, baba?"

Baba nodded slowly, and pressed his index finger to his lips, silently asking him to lower his voice and not wake up his mother.

"It does," he had murmured. "It has a weight on it."

The next morning, everyone worked hurriedly to secure their homes. They tied down thatched roofs and closed wooden shutters. Their faith was failing them. They could sense, feel and taste doom in the very air.

"It's just wind," Musa said, tugging the ropes around his family hut. "Our fathers have seen worse."

The winds moaned as the day descended into the darkness of night.

Threads of air circled through the village, hissing through leaves and tall grass. The trees groaned as they bent and branches cracked.

The rain poured in from the sky in a continuous stream. It did not have a beginning and the end would only be witnessed by Tala. The air was so thick with water even the children that usually rushed to play in the waterfalls and laughed as they splashed around in the water were quiet and clung to their mothers.

Lightning flashed and crackled through the dark grey clouds, and each flash was a blow to the villagers' courage.

They had never seen such menacing flashes of light. It felt like an omen, one that sent chills down to their bones.

Tala watched the onset from the threshold of his home, and gripped his father's hand tightly.

Roofs lifted slightly as the wind combed through; trees bent and broke as the wind picked up speed and strength, and clawed the village.

Thunder rumbled. It was so loud, and so fierce that the ground vibrated through the earth and beneath their feet.

The caoine of the banshee tore through the village. It was a terrible, guttural roar that drowned out every sound. Roof ripped away and spun through the air. Screams rang through the air but were quickly drowned out by the laughter of the rain. Debris hit the huts in loud bangs, and rock flew aimlessly into walls and trees.

"The storm...it's not like the others. It's watching us."

Salima had always been superstitious and in that moment of turmoil, her old coded beliefs surfaced. Goosebumps rose on her skin as she stared at the fury of the storm.

Tala's father, Eli, placed a hand on his wife's shoulders and squeezed reassuringly. "Hush now. It is only a storm."

She did not believe him, Tala thought as he watched his mother move closer to her husband like he could somehow make it all go away. He was a strong man and he made his family feel safe with his presence alone. He was his son's hero and his family's stronghold. A head taller than everyone in the village, biceps the size of a toddler's head and skin so rich and dark, it almost shimmered.

But Tala's mother was right.

It was not just any storm.

It was certain death. It was the end of many bloodlines and

a full stop to many untold stories and unsung songs.

The village was surrounded and its inhabitants trapped.

Tala heard the sound of the earth ripping and outside the window of their house, they witnessed in stunned horror as Musa's family hut was lifted clean off the ground and was thrown like a rugged doll. It rose almost gracefully at first.

Salima gasped and covered her mouth with both hands as tears rolled down her cheeks. Tala could barely breathe. His heart beating from his stomach as he watched the hut hang in the air like it was being held by invisible strings.

The beams of the house and thatch came apart as they watched on, and scattered in the wind and rain. What was left of the house flipped and hurtled end over before it came crashing down. It landed in a twisted and broken heap a few feet from their house.

Goosebumps rose on their skin and tremors shook through Tala and his mother. Fear trickled down their bodies, and seeped into every pore and into their bones.

The crush of the hut sent mud into the air, and the roof caved in with a sickening crunch.

Gone. They were all gone.

There was no way they could have survived, neither by prayer nor miracle.

Musa's house and his family had been reduced to rubble.

Tala's stomach lurched and twisted. He had no idea how long he stood there and stared at the mess. He did not feel his father's hand grip his shoulder, trying to pull him down as if that would save any of them from the storm, and the encouraging words were lost.

The rain poured from the sky in sheets.

It hammered against the ground, and turned the earth to

thick, sludgy mud that oozed into their hut. It filled the room with the smell of wet earth and leaves. They crouched at the opposite end of the door, and watched as the muddied water swept their belongings outside. The wind had broken down their door and ripped away their makeshift windows.

What time was it? Tala silently wondered from behind his father. They had been inside their dilapidating hut so long, they had lost all sense of time. They had not eaten for so long. None of them had slept a wink and their bodies strained under the weight of sleepless hours.

The rain blurred everything into shadowy shapes and broken forms. The water and winds consumed their world.

Tala's whole world held onto one another against Freddy. They waited on death and prayed that they could survive the weapon fashioned against their lives.

The winds would pause every once in a while, just for a heartbeat it would calm down. It took a second to catch its breath and gather its strength before it floated through the village, shrieking with so much rage, hearts faltered.

Faint screams sounded through the air every now and then, but they were quickly swallowed up. They were cries of desperation, full of fear and soul wrenching.

Every sound vanished into the storm and the ones that still had breath listened with helplessness.

Would no one come to their aid? Had the world forgotten about them?

The ground under Tala's family shook and shuddered, and it braced to give way beneath them.

When their own roof buckled and caved, Tala's father pulled him and his mother out.

He led them into the storm.

The rain stung like needles as it landed on their skin and seeped through their clothes, and the wind felt like it would peel their skin away.

Tala's father kept moving, half-crawling, half-running as their home crumbled behind them. He grabbed Tala firmly to his side and held his wife's hand tightly, knowing it was the difference between life and her being swept away.

They could hear water roaring in the distance, but through the assault of rain and water, they could not make out where the monstrosity of gathered water was flowing from or towards.

They only prayed it was not in their general direction.

His father yelled something to him, but the words were swallowed by the storm, and all Tala could do was follow, feet sinking into the mud that sucked at him with every step.

They reached the neighbors' home.

And it was gone. A gaping sinkhole had taken the place of the house. The ground had collapsed and filled with black water.

Where was Chisomo and her newborn baby, Josephine? Where was her ailing mother and noisy toddler?

Gone is where they were and Tala's stomach tightened into a hard knot.

Death had surrounded them and snared at everyone they knew. Tala could feel it — the cold, indifferent presence of death itself, sweeping through the village without a hint of mercy.

Death wasn't a figure with a hooded cloak or a comforting angel; no, death was a storm, a black, mindless force that tore through their lives. It craved only flesh and bone, and cared nothing for who they were.

He felt his father squeeze his hand. His grip cold, but they didn't have time to mourn; the storm was about to swallow

them too.

“Here!” his father shouted. He guided them toward an empty house at the far edge of the village. It was a shelter they hadn’t dared look at before. The walls were intact, thank goodness. The door was left ajar, and it swung slightly with the gusts. They ducked inside, breathless and soaked, and huddled against the walls. They tried not to think of who had lived here, or where they had gone, or if they’d had any chance to escape.

It was a small, cramped place, and they crouched close together in the corner, faces pale and streaked with mud. Tala’s father’s hand stayed firmly on his shoulder, grounding him, keeping him steady as the walls creaked and moaned under the pressure. Tala tried to keep count of the seconds, to find some sense of time, but his thoughts were jumbled.

The howling wind and thunder seemed to go on forever.

Their lives were no more precious than the splinters of bamboo or the fragments of thatch being ripped from the earth.

Outside, the world was breaking, but deep in the pit of the valley, they could barely understand how close the destruction was.

Tala and his parents clung to each other, breathing in shallow gasps, when suddenly a strange sound rose over the roar of the storm — a low, rumbling roar that grew louder and louder, until the very ground beneath them shuddered. The faint sound of drums beat in the devastation outside and the whistling of the wind picked up speed.

“*Napolo*,” Tala’s mother shakingly whispered before bursting into tears.

She couldn’t take it anymore.

They were going to die. All of them.

Napolo was the big snake with many heads that rested in

the mountain. It was made of mud and ravaged everything in its path, punishment to the people for forgetting their beliefs. *Napoli* carried with her fire, mud and rocks and everyone she took with her was never seen again.

“What is *Napolo*?” Tala innocently asked, screaming slightly to be heard. His father shook his head and looked away.

Napolo was their retribution.

The hill above them had given way, and a massive river of mud and debris was surging down, roaring as it barreled toward the village. The water slithered down, shaking the earth on which it passed. *Napolo* was a devastating spirit, whose story was passed on from generation to generation; from the people of Zomba to the people of Ulumba and Ntonya mountains to the Mulanje district.

There was no shrine for *Napolo*; nobody prayed for her salvation or her materialisation.

The walls around them shivered and crumbled with a sickening crack, and they felt the floor tilt slightly as the foundation that held the house began to give way.

Tala screamed as his left foot lodged into muddied ground.

Tala’s father pulled them to their feet, and his voice shook for the first time. “We have to go,” he urged, guiding them toward the back of the house.

Everywhere they turned, the earth seemed to be shifting, the mud swallowing in gulps everything in its path. Craters and pits quickly formed inside the house and took the place of solid ground.

They stumbled back out into the storm, and watched in horror as *Napolo* and her many heads swallowed entire sections of the village.

“*Akundiwotcha!*” someone screamed in the distance and then

silence.

Fear gripped Salima and her body felt heavier than it had her whole life. The rain pelted her skin and the wind threatened to push her into the water. They did not know whether their next step would land on solid ground or be their demise.

They were surrounded by fallen trees, dissolved houses and the unforgiving maw of *Napolo*.

No standing structure remained in the village and people's lives floated past them; clothes, basins and mats.

Salima felt as though they were living through a nightmare — everywhere they turned, there was destruction, and holes in the ground where they could have sworn there had been solid earth just moments before.

Salima broke free of her husband's grip and began to run.

Blindly paddling her bare feet through darkness and screaming at the horror. She was driven by fear and she did not know which way was up. Fear had possessed every vein, every nerve

Tala could barely make out his father's face through the thick sheets of rain and darkness. His eyes were wide with desperation, and his grip on Tala unyielding. There were no words left to say, no room for anything but survival.

"Salima!" Tala's father yelled but she was too far gone. Her silhouette had disappeared into the darkness. "Salima, please!"

No answer came to his desperate cries. His wife was gone in the blink of an eye. Grief swallowed him and choked him as he carried Tala into his arms. The rain continued to beat down on them as if punishing them for being alive.

"Salima!" Tala's father screamed until his voice gave out. He stepped carefully on the trembling ground, praying that it would hold just long enough for him to find the love of his life.

Eight years of beautiful marriage were gone. Like the rest of

the village.

Houses had fallen, souls had been ripped from the bodies in which they were housed and very little stood. Their history had been erased from the face of the earth.

“Wait here,” Tala’s father said, setting him down on what was left of the maize mill.

It was far enough from the running water and the path of *Napolo*.

“I have to find your mother.” He crouched down and caressed his son’s face. Tears were streaming down his face and his heart was full of emotions he could not begin to comprehend.

He had known grief, but nothing like this.

His woman was out there, scared and alone, and he had to go find her and bring her to her son. She was his everything and more. He could not imagine a life without the light that brightened his days.

“Baba, I am scared,” Tala cried, choking on his own tears. He too was scared and scarred. He wanted to close his eyes and find that it was all a horrid, god-forsaken nightmare. That the storm had not drowned his whole life. That the *Kachere* tree still stood at the centre of the village. Musa and him would walk to school, hand in hand.

“It will be okay, Tala.” His father lied. “Be brave, I will be right back.

With that he took off into the darkness.

Seconds turned into minutes, and minutes into hours, but Eli never came back for his son. Hunger plagued Tala but he was too scared to move just in case his parents came back for him and he was not around. The house crumbled around him and soon, he was backed up into a corner.

The mud brick disintegrated into the water and ran off.

Water rushed around him, roaring and beckoning him into the brown waters. It kissed his feet and retreated, repeatedly soaking his body.

The sounds as the rain poured and the winds howled felt almost normal.

“Baba!” Tala screamed, but his voice cracked from thirst.

“Ma!” he cried.

Exhaustion overtook his body, and Tala’s body slumped onto the muddied floor.

When he woke up, he was greeted by the sickly light of a cloudy morning, and the storm was finally quiet.

What time was it? What day was it?

He rose unsteadily and saw his village—his home, was buried under the thick, oppressive layers of mud. Only a few broken, withered beams and scattered belongings stuck out from the earth; a basin here and a mat there.

The smell hit him first: a thick, sour scent that stuck to his throat and made it difficult for him to breathe. It was the smell of decay, of bodies rotting beneath the mud as the earth pressed down on them.

Entombed in the muddied earth were the people he had grown up with, including his parents that had not come back for him.

Memories swallowed by a nightmare.

Bile rose in this throat and burned him from the inside at the thought that he’d been spared — or cursed — to bear this silence. He wanted to cry out, to scream against the emptiness, but even his voice felt swallowed up in the silence that surrounded him.

He was alone, the last witness to a life that had been erased.

AFTER THE CLOUDS, THE SUN

* * *

*These tears, my friend, are wrung
From a heart shattered
By the apocalypse
That was Napolo.
-Steve Chimombo*

The Dead Get Left Behind

*"I will not say: do not weep; for not all tears are an evil."
~J.R.R. Tolkien, **The Return of the King***

* * *

Funerals are...something, especially in the African setting. A cinematic competition of who contributes the most, or cries the loudest.

The grief must be portrayed in a way that puts Shakespearean actors to shame, the mother of Broadway.

The people come in their numbers, even those you never said two words to or remotely cared for who you are. Nonetheless, they sympathize with you whose life has been tragically cut short. You lay there in your beautiful white (*and expensive, might I add*) casket, with gold-coated handles bought from *Ndirande* Coffin shops, oblivious to the theatrics that surround

you. They have adorned you in the most expensive suit in your death, the same amount of money you had asked from the family group to start a business. It is rare that human beings help each other in time of need; if you want flowers handed to you, you must die— when you can neither smell them nor understand their value.

Your mother's eyes are red, dried, and cracked; scorched with riddled pain and grief. Reality flees the woman whose tear glands bleed and offer her no relief from the agony that hemorrhages into her body. She sobs quietly, defeated and alone even though she is surrounded by women that pat her back and whisper words of encouragement. She hears none of it, her thoughts cloud her vision and block her ears; the day you were born, the laughs you shared, and the day you graduated.

What a cruel twist of fate.

Her child, her only child lay in a coffin: cold and his eyes closed forever.

Her heart painfully constricts, layers of pain piercing her lungs and her already aching heart. She screams; a dry, hoarse, cracked and inhumane sound that rumbles from her sliced throat, cursing the ground that is soon to swallow you whole.

Her unsettling cry turns the heads of on-lookers who shake their heads and quickly look away, rubbing their arms to dispel the goosebumps that rise in the wake of her cries. The women around her join the harrowing mourn, asking the heavens why you, why it happened the way that it did.

Her son will never smile at her again, or playfully tell her that she had poured Lot's wife into the beef stew as he ate the last piece of meat from his plate.

You hear none of it; the mourners that grieve noisily as they make their way to where the food is being served, or the men

that whisper in hushed tones about the cost of living like you do not lay in the house, stuffed into a box and destined for eternal solitude.

Your aunt will arrive late at the scene of farewell, screaming and throwing herself onto the ground, impervious to the rocks that blanket it. She yanks off her headscarf and wails in anguish at the loss of her closest friend. The family had often misunderstood her but, in your company, she could be her noisy and troublesome self and not feel judged. It was you that sneaked her into the house when she was out late, and you that hid her when your grandfather wanted to belt her.

She feels robbed, denied of a companion.

The women rush to where she lays on the ground and pick up her limp body that fails to carry and accommodate the weight of her broken heart. Her headscarf is left to wallow in the dust. They carry her to where her now childless sister sits, and she falls onto her lap. Her body heaves and her heart breaks for you and your mother, who has cried her voice into non-existence.

Understanding of this reality eludes them both.

Your mother quietly pats on your aunt's back because her mind has wandered so far. The pain is passing, numbness has set in.

Her heart will be buried with you.

There is no celebration on that day and people mourn what could have been: the wedding you will never have, the children you will never bear, and the life you ~~would~~ could have built.

The friends of the bereaved bond over smoke, back pains and fire, cooking for the multitude that has graced your doorstep. The smell of well-spiced meat fills the air that has been dimmed by the shroud of grief and sorrow and for a brief moment, hunger surpasses pain.

In the rush for food, nobody notices that your father has not left your side. Nobody comes to comfort him as they did your mother, he is a man and he is expected to control his emotions even when he has lost his only son.

Your father sits with his knees raised to his chest and his eyes set upon your relaxed face. He is hunched over, his quavering hand resting on the edge of the polished coffin before him. The coffin that houses you. His eyes are vacant and clouded, dimmed and defeated.

How does he even begin to say goodbye?

He looks at every crease on your face and how your lips form into a slight smile, memorizing the features that made you unique; the beauty mark on your lower lip that he always teased you about, or the scar on your forehead from falling off a bike on your way from school. He wants to reach out and hold you in his arms as he did all those times you were hurt by the world or unsure, but there is a glass between you.

Words, unspoken and unheard, clog his throat; he is proud of the person you were, envious that death holds you, and crushed that this is goodbye.

Death is cruel, and it leaves the strong man you knew, helpless. He does not know where to begin...being without you.

Love chokes him, it suffocates him.

Love is the receipt that he holds at that moment at the price he has paid for being your dad.

A lump forms in his throat and tears well up. His child, his baby, the other side of the mirror. Gone.

The poorly wiped streaks of tears cried in solitude betray him.

His heart will be buried next to your mother's.

Surrounded by mourners, he feels isolated; a solitary island

adrift in a sea of sorrow. His grief is his alone. Later that afternoon as they lower your coffin into the gluttonous earth, the walls of sticks and pebbles holding your father's resolve will crack and break as will he. In complete and unquestionable anguish, he will fall forward onto the ground, overtaken by an emotion his body cannot understand, his legs giving away from the weight bottled inside. His hands, trembling, as they fist the dirt that will shield you from him.

Forever.

You will be missed, friend. By all of us who loved you and cared for you. We have all been deprived of closure, the uncertainty of what lays beyond the veil keeps us all at night. Your dreams are gone with you, and your mark burns brightest today.

I hope you lived a life you loved, that you enjoyed this one chance we all have to be our best selves. You were magic and this grief is the price we pay for knowing and loving you. The world is darker today, dimmed by the loss of your smile and laugh.

Rest well.

5

Forsaken

*“There is no fire like passion, there is no shark like hatred,
there is no snare like folly, there is no torrent like greed.”*

~Siddharta Gautama

* * *

Mdziweziti’s breath came out in short bursts as she walked the last miles towards her matrimonial home where her sick and elderly husband lay, bedridden. Her thoughts wandered as she made determined strides on the dusty road that connected most of the people in Chiledze village.

Barren and devoid of any wildlife, livestock or wandering people, the road was quiet and unbothered.

She took in a deep breath and sighed loudly.

She had her child and husband to feed, bathe and her pestering in-laws to deal with too. The idiots, heavens forgive her, always looked for faults in her: in her cooking, in the care

she took in her home, and in the care of her sickly husband.

To them, she was too loud, too outspoken, and too radical. One would assume she had packed her bags and belongings from her parent's house and forcefully lodged herself into their family like a stubborn bull.

Mdziweziti was sixteen when she had been wed to her husband, Victor, who was four times her senior. Her protests against the marriage were met with cruelty from her poor parents, who saw the marriage of their daughter to a rich old man as a tunnel out of their poverty and, of course, one less mouth to feed. Mdziwe, the youngest of three sisters, had been pawned off to the highest bidder, traded for crop produce and livestock. She was stuck with in-laws that hated her and a sick bedridden husband who required the same amount of care and attention as her two year old daughter, Viola.

She longed for home but knew that she would not be welcomed. She would be treated like a stranger by her siblings and an intruder by her parents.

Viola lay asleep, strapped to her mother's back, and completely oblivious to the turmoil that brewed inside her mother.

Mdziweziti approached the compound she shared with her husband's family with dread and discontentment. The compound was nearly clear, aside from the chickens that loitered around the center, pecking at the ground for food scraps. Her house was at the far end of the square compound that had five houses randomly scattered about it. The barren compound, the size of a football pitch, resembled a wasteland with no flowers or trees in sight except for the forest at the back of her house, stretching all the way to the road.

As she approached the hut, Mdziwe could hear voices inside. "Where is she?" Jemusi, the third born in her husband's

family, bellowed from inside. “What useless and senseless person leaves a sick person to their misery?”

Mdziwe sighed and swallowed the rage that threatened to erupt from her vocal cords. They took turns in bullying her, the women were worse. They made snide remarks about her appearance and did everything to make her life miserable; from using her firewood to plundering her food and water.

Victor was the first born followed by Jesse, Jemusi and lastly, Steward. Their lives had all amounted to nothing and they fasted —prayed earnestly, for Victor’s demise for them to divide among themselves the wealth he had accumulated. Mdziwe set down the bucket of water, calmly adjusting her *chitenje* before pushing aside the mat that served as a door curtain and entering the house she grudgingly called home. In the room that served as both bedroom and sitting room, Victor’s siblings surrounded him where he lay on the mat situated on the floor.

“You wanted me?” she asked, Viola squirming at her back.

“Stupid girl,” Steward scowled, his face morphing into a hard snare. “You have the audacity to ask such a rude question. Where were you?”

Before she could muster a response, Jesse had already hopped into the conversation.

“You are ungrateful,” Jesse interjected. “Victor has been good to you, we all have. Didn’t your poverty stricken parents not teach you any manners?”

Although it was true that Victor had indeed showed her the utmost kindness and respect, they did not have to insult her family.

“I was getting water to bathe him,” Mdziwe offered, obvious disdain echoing in her tone. “Or would you prefer he remain unbathed?”

Jemusi opened his mouth to give her an earful but was held back by Jesse, who gestured at Victor. He might be bedridden and unable to talk but they were not sure if his hearing was faulty. Jesse wondered why the burden did not just die and leave them in peace. This small girl he had brought as a wife would be sent back to her parent's house with nothing but her offspring and the clothes on her back. She would have put him out of his misery if Mdziwe did not keep such a close eye on her.

"Bathe him," Jemusi commanded, instead of the profanities that almost clouded his vision.

Mdziwe shifted toward the makeshift bed she had made for Viola in the corner of the room, unstrapping her from her back and gently setting her on the blankets.

Jemusi and Steward grabbed the stools they had been sitting on, and moved them to the wall near the door, giving the women space to get Victor ready for the wiping they considered a bath. Jesse grabbed the washcloths while Mdziwe fetched the bucket of water from where she had left it outside. Viola would have to wait for her to get rid of her pestering in-laws before she was fed. Mdziwe heaved as she lifted the bucket into the house, overtaken by its weight. The men looked on, not lifting a finger in aid and over their rotting carcasses would they offer help to the nuisance of a girl.

"You start with his legs and I will clean his arms," Jesse barked, squeezing water out of the cloth she had dipped into the bucket.

Victor lay perfectly still aside from the rhythmic heaving of his chest. He would have easily passed for a corpse. Victor was on the heavier side and had over the years only gotten larger. Mdziwe required all the strength she had from the porridge that morning to lift her husband's leg, in her mind regretting

all the days she had overfed him. Jesse was vigorously wiping Victor's arm when she looked up and saw Mdziwe struggling to keep Victor's leg up and grab the washcloth simultaneously.

This is my chance, Jesse thought as malicious ideas drifted in her mind taking shape. This was her opportunity to get rid of the wench.

Jesse firmly grabbed Victor's arm and quickly but swiftly yanked him towards herself, masquerading the vile and well calculated gesture as an effort to clean his upper arm.

The abrupt shift in weight caught Mdziwe off-guard as intended, setting in motion Jesse's plans.

Time slowed down as Mdziwe lost balance and grip on her husband's leg, watching as Victor's leg slipped from her tiny hands and hit the edge of the bucket with a deafening thud. The bucket, filled with water and hit with such force, toppled over, spilling its contents on the mud floor. Her eyes widened in stunned disbelief, her mouth open in horror at the events that had just unfolded.

"Stupid girl," Jemusi bellowed, lunging for Mdziwe who stepped back in horror, lost her balance, and slipped on the muddied floor. She landed on her behind and squirmed away from Jemusi who was on a mission, a war path, to beat some sense into her.

"I did not mean to," Mdziwe stuttered, shifting her body on the floor in any direction away from Jemusi. Steward had also gotten up from the stool and followed closely behind his brother.

"You come into this family by marrying our brother and now that he is ill, you try and kill him?" Jesse questioned, maintaining her position at Victor's side, evil gleaming in her eyes like bloodied diamonds.

Mdziwe looked at the siblings with a new found fear. She knew they never liked her but in that moment, she knew she was about to find out just how much. The nearest house from her compound was several kilometers away, screaming would do her no good. She surrounded by enemies that should have been family and terror licked at the back of her neck with each step Jemusi took towards her.

The first blow was from Jemusi which landed square on her face, sending the slender little girl spiraling into the floor. Before she could scream in pain, Steward had already grabbed one of the stools, lifting it towards the roof before he brought it crashing down onto her shoulder, shattering the wooden structure. Pain erupted from her shoulder that almost felt detached from her body, waves of pain engulfing her limbs and caused her to scream in pain. The brothers, deaf to her pain and obvious suffering, took turn in kicking, hitting and punching her, branding onto her body anything they could get their hands on.

They had invested time and efforts into banishing this girl from their family and with each blow, came their receipt. Mdziwe cried in pain as her body took on assault she did not deserve, her body twisted into fetal position and muffled screams emerged from her lungs. Jemusi grabbed a stick from God-knows-where, striking her again and again, with no remorse or empathy, almost taking sadistic pleasure in watching the life slowly seep out of her as her fight died and her body went limp.

Mdziwe's cries had morphed into moans of agonizing pain, the light in her eyes dimming as blood pooled on the floor as it unwillingly left her body. Viola's cries filled the room, shaded together with the sound of blows as they made contact with

Mdziwe's body. She could barely open her eyes to see past the red that bloodied them, any attempt leading to mind-shattering pains.

Dear heaven please, she thought as wave of pain pulsated through her body, sending her into the darkness of unconsciousness.

* * *

The first she heard as she slipped back into reality was the distant sound of Viola's cries that seemed to jog her senses. Mdziwe jolted, pain rushing over her body anew, through every crane and nook. Her limbs felt disjointed from the rest of her body yet remained firmly attached as resounding pain radiated through them. Her face, swollen, pulsated with pain.

"She is almost dead," Jesse said, eyeing the unsalvageable body of Mdziwe splayed on the floor. "We can dump her body in the forest and pretend robbers beat the life out of her. She will be dead in hours."

Mdziweziti lay half out of her life on the floor they had bludgeoned her into. She felt movement around her and almost passed out once more as they lifted her bruised body off the ground. Her body wanted to scream, to acknowledge the pain that snaked in incomprehensibly harrowing waves; yet the only sound she could voice mirrored the groans of a wounded animal. The life slipped out of her body in drops of bright red blood that darkened as it pooled on the path they chose to carry her on into the dark humid forest. Her breathing was in gasps and rasps as the two brothers shouldered her weight by her broken limbs.

“Carry her child, Jesse,” Steward hissed as they made it out of the hut. “Let them die together.”

* * *

Mdziweziti opened her eyes.

How long had she been out?

Viola’s cries echoed through the thicket of trees, slightly lifting the fog in her mind. She gasped, pulling air into her failing lungs, trying to force some life back into her beaten body.

What time of day was it?

She strained to open her eyes fully but the effort was too great.

Viola lay beside her in the pile of dead leaves that littered the ground, face streaked with salty tears. Her blood had stained the brown leaves with a dark red that almost looked black in the dimly lit forest, yet blood still seeped from her body forming a bright red film atop the black.

I am dying, Mdziwe thought into the silence.

Viola would die with her if she did not make it out. The swelling around her eyes had gone down and she could see that Viola had let down her blouse to expose the breasts she eagerly fed on. A wave of determination washed over Mdziwe who fought the pain and strained to get onto her hands.

She blacked out, startling herself awake seconds later. She thrust herself forward on the hard ground, bellowing with the pain that came from broken limbs, bruised ribs and a failing body before sinking into unconsciousness.

The sun was fast setting, bringing with it cool winds and a chill in the air. Mdziweziti shivered as she zoned into reality once more. Her tired body was in pain and efforts in any movement shoved her into momentary episodes of nothingness. She wanted to cry out but that too brought with it pain.

This was where she would take her last breath. This was where the book would close on her.

What time was it? Where was Viola?

A new fear gripped her heart as realization that her daughter was nowhere in sight clogged her mind. Her heart threatened to break through her chest as she tried to call out to Viola but only a croak came out in its stead. In the distance, she could hear crying.

She must have wandered off, Mdziweziti thought, feeling the darkness scratching at the back of her head, inviting her for one last dance, one last spiral away from the world that had caused her hurt.

As spots formed in her vision, Mdziwe could make out the silhouette of Viola running towards her. She wanted to raise her hands and hug her, tell her that they would be okay but even she knew that would be a lie. This was the bitter end for her. Hope flashed momentarily in her heart like a lighthouse in the middle of the storm when her eyes settled on larger silhouettes behind Viola.

They were close to the road and pedestrians had heard a baby crying in the woods. They were here to help.

This time, Mdziwe succumbed to the void, welcomed oblivion with eager arms.

Viola is going to be okay, she thought as her eyes closed.

Hello darkness, my old friend.

For Taira and Christine

"My mother has done more praying for me than she has done for herself, and if she kept the receipts, I would owe her the world. I am blessed. "

~Fall on me, Guvna B.

* * *

I knew it was love when she smiled and my heart skipped a beat.

She radiated motherly love and a warmth that never sized to make the clouds part and allow the sunlight in.

She had small eyes, not the novel round ones that draw you in,

yet her gaze remained steady and her eyes told a million stories.

Of battles fought and battles lost,

those she won and those that drained her but were never her

own.

A pillar to the small family she raised, a stepping stone to the ones that came after her, a mother to her adoring litter.

She never had much to say, she never had much to give,
yet she poured out in abundance love and purity.

I knew it was love when she looked in my eyes and all i could see was pride and her want for my greatness.

I knew it was love when her prayers centered around me,
her back heavy from carrying responsibility,
her hands on her chest as she manifested prosperity,
and she lifted me into God's line of sight,
her eyes wide open to the answers of her inquiries.

I knew it was love when she had nothing to her name,
not even a name, just mother.

Yet she poured out the nothing she had so I had everything.

I knew it was love when the skies rumbled and let down their unforgiving wrath

and she strapped my sickly body on her back and conquered the night in pursuit of my well being.

I knew it was love when she woke up every morning, hopeful, and struggled to make ends meet, or let me say, trying to tie the knot, not in marriage but in the basket of a house she was trying to keep afloat.

I knew it was love when I realized she was the basket. Trying to keep herself together

Trying to keep us all together.

Putting herself second to keep us afloat.

Protecting what she held in herself; her dignity and pride,

yet risking hairs ends to see as through.

I knew it was love when she mended my aching heart with a smile and pieced back together my pieced apart world.

I knew it was love when she stood by my side when the world saw nothing but a shame, choosing to share the burden.

Seeing me, not as another problem in her busy day, but as her child in need of my mother's love.

She is love.

She is my love.

To The Man I Love

"When I love, I give all that I am.

Four barrels of water,

three slices of fire,

two pounds of earth,

bound together by air in a house of skin."

~Lebo Mashile

* * *

I remember everyday you were in my embrace, or lay next to me, beaming me a borrowed smile that I knew would never be mine. The time we spent between the sheets, holding hands and whispering sweet nothings yet we knew it was never meant to be, or last.

Your eyes only met mine momentarily and you would hold my hand but never tight like a fleeting thought, quick to be lost

in the sea of lies.

I cannot say I lost you as you were never mine to begin with, a man belonging to another whose name we never spoke. Our love known only behind closed doors, drawn curtains, secret rendezvous points, stolen moments, and short bursts of laughter.

Your love was a whisper, said with pressed lips and two times the secrecy.

The memory of you is a distant motion that replays itself every time silence echoes in the walls that hold our bleak and dying secret. You are and will remain just that; a memory of misplaced love. The remnants of forbidden feelings that never flower, shrouded by the dark walls that never let the sunlight in.

I wonder what it is like to be her, the love of your life.

The one you chose and the one you fought for, the one whose arms hold you longer than mine...the one you call home. To be the one whose hand you would publicly hold and with whom you share more than lustful passion and dreams that are imprisoned in the walls in which they are spoken.

Ours was a forbidden love, your dirty little secret meant for minute pleasure but not for the long haul. Heaven knows how I pleaded for time to come to halt when we were together, how much I dreaded night falling, your soft kisses and whispers of goodbye as you stepped out the door into a life where I did not exist.

We were together one moment, chasing a false happiness and sinfully whole, but I was always left alone in that bed longing for your touch and wishing your love was mine to have.

It is in times like this, times of reflection, that I think about you. Just you, because they was never an 'us' to begin with.

I secretly hope you are not happy, that misery deals your home her own deck of cards, and that you reminisce on the days we spent in that room reveled in a love only we knew.

I find myself wishing you would miss me or the people we would have been together if only our love had seen the light.

Maybe all this would hurt less if I had, from the beginning, accepted that our paths did not align and that your heart belonged to another.

My heart, endeared to you, has your name. Words that can hardly be seen as they are shadowed by scars of the scribbles I wrote over it as I forced myself to put one step in front of the other, heal but never forget.

Maybe healing would have hurt less if the wounds did not run so deep, if I had known when to stop hoping, wanting... needing.

It would have hurt less if you were mine to lose in the first place. Maybe if we were more to each other than forsaken memories, the pain wouldn't be there at all.

Being A Man is Bad For Your Health

“When a resolute young fellow steps up to the great bully, the world, and takes him boldly by the beard, he is often surprised to find it comes off in his hand, and that it was only tied on to scare away the timid adventurers.”

~Ralph Waldo Emerson

* * *

The sun beat down in Blantyre town, casting a heat haze over the surrounding buildings. The air was thick with warmth, and the ground seemed to radiate waves of heat. People hurried along the sidewalks, and sought refuge in the scanty shadows offered by the mobile money stalls, while cars queued on the one way road. There was a certain life to the city that had become the middle ground for Malawians from all walks of life, cultures and upbringing.

The ruthless street children that robbed and harassed people in broad day-light, the hawkers that dragged people into buses they had no intention of boarding, and the recorded advertisements that blared noisily from the shops, practically begging people to buy and offering discounts next to nothing. Countless tailors had set up shop on the sidewalk parading well designed clothes on their mannequins.

It was November but the October sun maintained the same ferocity of summer. The rain was no where in sight and if the heavens did not cry soon, people would be looking for the rain god.

Tawonga sat on an old bench perked on the side of a building. His clothes clung to his small frame, and the flimsy suit he wore was drenched in sweat from the harsh heat. The parched earth beneath him absorbed what little shade the bench provided, leaving him exposed to the rays.

Beads of perspiration glistened on his forehead as he took a deep, labored breath, feeling the dryness of the air in his throat. He was tired, and the fatigue was evident in the droop of his shoulders.

It had been a dishearteningly long morning and he was desperate for whatever break the world could offer.

He clutched a nearly empty water bottle in his hands. It was the last of a once-refreshing supply. The plastic was warm to the touch, and he could feel the last few drops of liquid life inside.

He brought the bottle to his lips with a tired and deliberate motion, savoring the precious liquid that remained. Each sip was a cancellation of punishment from the unyielding heat and provided temporary relief from the burn of the sun. Not that it did any good in the end.

He quickly swallowed the last drops and exhaled, his chest heaving in relief and resignation..

The reality of his situation set i. He was alone in the desert like heat with nothing to show for all the walking and knocking he had been doing since morning.

Tawonga had bid his mother farewell early that morning clad in one of his late father's old suit in search for a job. Without any transport fare and ashamed to ask his mother for money, he had walked the road from Chileka to Blantyre town, hope in one hand and his papers in another.

This was going to be his day, he was almost sure of it.

It had been three years and change since he had graduated but he did not know what the doors to an interview room looked like or what a paycheck was. His mother had prayed and fasted that something—anything, come his way but year after year nothing materialized.

“It happens, this is God’s plan,” his mother would frequently say but Tawonga was a quarter mile past patience and three miles away from severe depression.

Uncles and aunties called for his curriculum vitae every other month they remembered their family existed, each one promising a connection or a job. That tune had been overplayed and Tawonga had quickly learned that no one was coming to his aid.

His mother did her best to provide, but it pained Tawonga to see his mother and three younger sisters struggle when he had a degree that collected dust.

That day, however, he chose to knock on every door he could find and ask to be hired. He had the papers but lacked experience, but he was a hard worker and was willing to put in the hours to learn. All he needed was someone willing to

listen and take a chance on him.

Tawonga got up from where he sat, dusting his suit and flexing his shoulders to release tension. He had woken up hopeful and although that hope had slightly faltered, he had enough of it to continue to the next office.

Chitepo building stood in the heart of Blantyre town with sleek glass walls reflecting the ongoing life below. Tawonga took hesitant steps towards the entrance. He could hear his heart pounding in anticipation and the sounds of traffic and distant chatter overriding his own train of thought.

The doors whooshed open as he pushed the heavy glass doors soundlessly, revealing a polished lobby with tiled floors and artificial plants in marble vases. The black tiles contrasted the white walls and the tall, white marble vases.

The conditioned air enveloped him as he stepped inside the building. It dispelled the heat from the streets as the door closed ceremoniously behind him. The lobby was empty aside from the receptionist at the far end of the floor. The air tasted and smelled like formality and corporate pleasantries.

Tawonga felt out of place in the display of wealth and business. He adjusted the knot of his tie also hoping to dislodge the knot in his throat, and attempting to mask the nervousness that covered his hopeful expression.

Tawonga took a deep breath, clutched his papers in slightly trembling hands and steeled himself. He had not come all the way to be scared away by a bunch of nerves or lobbies that were three times the size of the house he and his family lived in.

The receptionist looked up from her desk, and offered him a polite smile. Her black braids were pulled into a tight bun and her makeup was well done and almost inconspicuous. Tawonga

returned the gesture and approached her, the echo of his steps the only sound in the room. He could taste his own nerves as he neared the desk.

“Good morning. How can I help you?” the receptionist inquired, her tone professional yet friendly. She maintained her smile and Tawonga momentarily admired her beauty: *kilimu ya ku Malawi indeed.*

“Uh, hi. My name is Tawonga,” His voice betrayed his nerves as he stammered through his sentences. “I am a recent graduate looking for a job or paid internship, and I was wondering if I could speak to someone about it.”

The receptionist nodded, and reached for a phone. “Sure, I can check if someone is available to meet with you. Which department are you interested in?”

“Uh, yes, any entry-level position in the marketing department,” Tawonga replied as he handed over his resume.

She dialed a number with her perfectly manicured hands, and Tawonga fidgeted, glancing around the lobby. Moments later, she hung up and smiled.

Tawonga silently wondered if her smile was genuine or if it was part of her job description like that bank that fined their tellers for not greeting customers.

“Mr. Jere from HR will see you. The elevator is out of commission, you will take the stairs to the 7th floor. First door on your right.”

She handed his resume back to him.

Tawonga nodded, turning to the staircase that would lead him to a new job or an additional disappointment. It was his last stop for the day, this had to be it.

His mind crowded with thoughts of his family’s struggles as his feet took the steps up the building. His father had been the

anchor of their small household, and his untimely departure left a void that seemed impossible to fill. It was only after his passing that Tawonga truly got to appreciate all his father did for the family and those over-sized shoes were filled by the only boy in the family, Tawonga.

His mother, a strong-willed but weary woman, worked tirelessly to make ends meet selling samosas and snacks by the secondary school, yet even that was not enough to support the weight of the household.

What of his grandparents that also relied on his mother? Too old to work or farm, requiring financial support and additional care from relatives.

Tawonga could feel a headache forming at the back of his head, and he closed his eyes momentarily, letting the darkness behind his eyes cleanse his thoughts and stop the pinch he felt in his heart. The stairs went on for a while before Tawonga saw the number seven painted in black against the wall.

He had made it to the seventh floor, sweating profusely in the heat and unwarranted exercise. He, like everyone else, wished the sun would let up and let the rainy season begin.

His first right took him directly to a mahogany door with the words “Mr Jere” engraved into the fine wood.

This was it, this was his chance to kick poverty to the curb. Tawonga took a deep breath to steel himself. He muttered a quick and silent prayer to heaven before he reached out a shaky hand to knock on the door. His palms slightly sweaty as he quickly rehearsed his words.

“Come in,” a baritone voice said on the other side.

Tawonga gripped the door handle with his sweaty palms, and pushed the door into a bright office overlooking the city.

The office was neat and organized with muted colors and the subtle smell of pine and a hint of lavender.

A huge mahogany desk sat close to the window, the occupant of the chair sitting directly opposite the door. The man was tall, dark and chiseled.

He gestured towards the chair.

Tawonga's nerves almost overtook him as he took a seat, the leather chair cool against his palms.

Mr Jere, sitting behind a sleek desk packed with paperwork, looked at the bundle of nerves with a warm smile, "How can I help you today?"

Tawonga felt the weight of the moment stubbornly resting upon his head and quickly stammered through his introduction, hands visibly trembling as he handed over his papers.

"I can be an invaluable asset to your company," Tawonga said firmly. He had to continuously remind himself to remain calm and collected despite the crippling fear of rejection that resurfaced every time he looked up from the floor. The water that rested in his empty stomach boiled as he sat there.

Mr Jere nodded, and opened the folder Tawonga had handed to him. He scanned the documents silently, occasionally nodding as his eyes skimmed through the words. The papers rustled as they were scrutinized and reviewed; the turning of the pages remaining the only sound in the room, hitting Tawonga's ears and flowing to his uneasy heart.

Tawonga looked around the room for any assurance but got nothing from the plain walls and muted palette, except from the clock that signaled the passing of time every time it ticked

"Your papers seem to be in order," Mr Jere finally spoke into the silence, drawing Tawonga's attention back to him.

Tawonga waited for the 'but' but it never came, the silence

stretched out for a bit longer.

“Tell me about yourself, Tawonga Chizama.”

“I hold a degree in —”

Tawonga was interrupted by Mr Jere raising his hand, “No, Tawonga, that is not what I want to know.”

Mr Jere placed Tawonga’s papers on the desk between them and tapped them lightly, leaning back in his chair.

“I know what you have written in here, but who are you as a person? What sets you apart from the crowd?”

Tawonga swallowed back his tears as fear took the place of confidence and the sound of his rapidly beating heart drowned all the hope he had carried into the room. He only knew the textbook answer to this question and his palms were betraying him again.

What set him apart from the crowd?

Mr Jere could sense the tension that filled Tawonga in that moment and leaned forward slightly, offering him a reassuring smile.

“Just tell me about yourself,” he added into the conversation.

“Sir, I will be frank with you,” Tawonga began, collecting all the small amounts of courage he could conjure. “I have no experience beyond my student internships but I am willing to put in the work.”

Mr Jere remained quiet and kept his eyes firmly placed on the boy he knew had so much more to offer him.

“I am a hard worker and I am willing to put in the hours because I need the experience. A father’s shoes are hard to fill,” Tawonga said sadly, “but it has to be done and by me. This job offers me two things: a shot at advancing my career and a way out for my family. I have everything to lose in not putting my best forward.”

“Sorry for your loss,” Mr Jere offered.

Silence descended once more.

Tawonga settled into it, his gaze focused on the manager and the air in the room seemed to shift.

Mr. Jere leaned back, steepling his fingers, his eyes thoughtful. “Tawonga, we appreciate your enthusiasm. Leave your papers at the front desk and we’ll be in touch.”

Tawonga rose from the chair with a nod, gratitude mixed in with the lingering nervousness. He had done his best and that had to be enough, it had to be. His palms were clammy as he closed the Mahogany doors behind him and stepped into the silent corridor.

He replayed every word of the interview in his mind, clutching his papers tightly and scrutinizing his answers.

His thoughts dripped of self-doubt as he made his way down the flight of stairs, each step feeling heavier than the last. The weight of desperation pressed on his shoulders, and he couldn’t shake the fear of rejection that held onto his clothes.

Tawonga absentmindedly clutched the crumpled papers in his trembling hands and walked towards the front desk on the ground floor.

He quickly handed the papers to the kind receptionist, mumbling a ‘thank you’ before darting towards the exit. The door swung open with a whoosh, releasing him into the cool breeze of the late afternoon.

Tawonga paused on the sidewalk, the city alive and chaotic around him. The light of the setting sun unlike the whiteness of the offices in Chisepo building.

His forehead creased with worry and the world around him buzzed, indifferent to his life situations.

Tawonga sighed quietly At least this time they had asked him

to leave his papers behind and that was the glimmer of hope he would carry.

The sun would be setting and Tawonga had to walk back home, and face his problems. He did not want to be out too late as crime had taken over the city of Blantyre. He still had hope, that was enough for him.

Ransom My Heart

“It does not need doors and windows — sometimes it does not need people. It can exist free and wild, running from ear to ear without ever touching lips.”

~Terry Pratchett

* * *

Thokozani jolted upright from her mattress on the floor, still hazy from the dream she was woken from and could barely make out the chanting outside. As the fog of sleep lifted, she could make out the words that seemed to come from a thousand vocal cords. The voices synchronized to echo the mantra over again.

“Adzuke¹! Adzuke!” The crowd chanted.

¹ She should wake!

Always ready for a good story, Thoko threw her flimsy blanket aside and put on her slippers that had seen too many good days. Hurrying outside into the dark, Thoko almost bumped into her neighbor who also happened to be running in the direction of the noise.

Who should wake? What has happened?

Thoko adjusted her cloth and squinted in the dark as questions took form in her mind, sending adrenaline rushing at the thought of what the commotion was all about. It was past seven, yet the noise signaled that people were very much awake for one thing or another. Not wasting anytime, Thoko joined the crowd that was running towards Nellie's compound.

Nellie was eighty one years old and lived with her grandson, Khadzi. He was good for absolutely nothing; he lazied around all day while his poor grandmother cooked for him and cleaned after him.

A shame, really.

A crowd had formed in Nellie's compound and it seemed as though everyone was there; the local gossipers, the church goers, the smokers, the drinkers and even those who warmed peoples beds for a fee.

This must be serious, Thoko thought as she pushed herself through the sea of people to the front. The police, dressed in their uniform, has surrounded Nellie's house and crying could be heard from inside.

"Adzuke!" The crowd continued to chant loudly.

The story slowly unfolded.

Nellie had started her day as she usually did when around nine in the morning, as she swept her yard, she collapsed and did not wake up. No matter the efforts to return her to consciousness, Nellie did not awakeneven after buckets

of water were drowed on her. The neighbors found the old woman's body splayed on the ground and immediately pronounced her dead.

Before long, the village charlatan was summoned.

The charlatan, whose name nobody knew, said Nellie was not dead, she was only sleeping and instructed them not to prepare for her funeral.

Nobody was allowed to shed a tear.

"Where is the person she lives with?" The charlatan had asked.

It was at this point that everyone noticed that they had not seen Khadzi the entire time these unfortunate events were unraveling.

"Nobody has seen him since morning," the neighbors replied.

"He has put his grandmother in this state," he declared, possibly a revelation from whatever or whomever he worshiped. "He has stolen her heart."

A murmur arose among the few that gathered and the hunt for Khadzi began. Word spread quickly, and news reached the compound that Khadzi had left the village for his mother's house, the next village over.

Some swore they saw him leave right after Nellie fell unconscious. They swore he was running away.

The actions of a guilty man.

"Run and fetch him." The charlatan had declared. "He has his grandmothers heart in this left pocket. If it is not returned to her before five in the evening, she will surely die."

Everyone's blood ran cold as Nellie's life ran on borrowed time, the hunt for Khadzi gaining momentum and popularity.

The worthless brat wanted to kill his own grandmother, people said as word spread like the scent of roasting meat

midst a famine.

Khadzi, upon hearing that there was a manhunt for him underway, grabbed his mother and fled to the nearest police station for shelter against the mob. The police, housing the perpetrators, were caught between a rock and a hard place: they could either keep the two in custody lest they be killed by the angry mob or they could let them go and avoid having their station burned to the ground. They opted for the third option and transported the two to a bigger police station, thereby washing the blood of all who might be harmed off their hands.

It was four, Khadzi and his mother were no where in sight. The group of people gathered in the compound slowly turned into a crowd of hundreds. Food, drinks and snacks were being sold by those who saw a business opportunity in the crisis. Any passerby would have thought it was a political rally or, even better, a football match.

Time was running out for Nellie.

Four slowly crept towards five but the suspects failed to show face. Five came and went as the crowd grew bigger, angrier and fiercer.

Nellie was pronounced dead and the wailing began. As though on cue, torches were lit and pitchforks were raised.

“Adzuke! Adzuke!” the crowd chanted in unison.

It was not until seven that the police arrived on the scene. The people, angry and grieving, salvaged the police van looking for Khadzi, wishing to send him the quiet place and bring back his innocent grandmother.

They came out empty-handed.

And unrestrained chaos descended.

“Adzuke!” they chanted, louder than the first trumpet. People clamored out of their house, bringing into the compound the

story-eager Thokozani.

“Khadzi should be released from the police station,” someone in the crowd shouted, followed by the cheering of the masses. The police stood firmly at the door of the house, unshaken and unyielding, almost oblivious to the chaos that surrounded them.

“He should return his grandmother’s heart,” another person exclaimed.

Thoko was not sure if it was the mention of the heart or Nellie, but a stampede ensued that trampled the weak, the small and the elderly. The crowd surged forward with the undeniable force of a hurricane, pushing and shoving each other to get to God-knows-where.

Being no heavier than a bag of maize and a few packets of sugar, the crowd carried Thoko with it, her feet barely touching the ground and dangling limply. The smell of sweat and bodies that had stayed too long in the sun, cooking and roasting, hit Thoko’s nostrils forcing bile up her throat.

*Tifelapo za eni apa*², she thought as she struggled against the people, seeking to find a way out of the madness.

Fighting the tide of people and coming out victorious, Thoko limped to the sidelines; out of breath and bruised in a few places. She watched as people manhandled the officers of the law while others vandalized their car. Nellie’s compound was turning into an active crime scene.

“*Afumu akubwera*”³, a boy screamed in the distance, loud enough to be heard by a few but not authoritative to stop the violence. It did the trick; a new murmur arose and the people

² I will die for things that do not involve me.

³ The chief is coming.

that had assaulted the officers fled the scene, the rumbles of the crowd subsiding. The one dense crowd parted like the Red Sea, leaving breathing room among the people. The elderly who had been caught in the stampede limped to the side while others were carried away from the compound.

A police siren could be heard in the distance, the sound growing louder and more determined with each second. The crowd only grew thinner as more people disappeared from the scene; no one wanted to be implicated. Thoko remained rooted in Nellie's compound having found shelter under a mango tree a few safe meters away from the house, still waiting to see how the story would end.

Would Khadzi bring back his grandmother's heart? Would Nellie be buried?

A few other people also remained, onlookers of the tragedy, scattered around the compound.

Chief Midimala came charging into the compound like a bull when it sees red, his advisors hot on his heel.

"What happened here?" he bellowed to the people that remained, seething with bottled anger that his people had barbarically assaulted officers. Nobody offered him an answer or rose up to explain the situation in the silence that followed the Chief's question. At 6'3, Chief Midimala was pure muscle and raw grit, a force to be reckoned with.

He stood a few heads taller than most men and looked twice as daunting. His face housed a square jaw overgrown with a thick beard that engulfed his dark brown face. His eyes round and bloodied, hardened with responsibility and, in that moment, rage.

The handful of men loitering about the compound met his gaze, then immediately averted their eyes. In the chief's piercing

glare they all saw the portal to his suppressed anger, and knew that if anyone engaged him, even for a moment, the reckoning would be far too much to bear.

A police cruiser came speeding into the gate-less compound, tires screeching and sending dust into the warm night air.

Maybe someone sent out a distress call, Thoko thought as she monitored the scene that seemed to dress itself with a new layer every hour. The remaining villagers watched with baited breaths as people dropped from the vehicle that still flashed its lights, a silent warning to the people, warding off any shenanigans that may have been tempted to happen.

A common thought made its way through the minds of the people gathered: was Khadzi in the car?

A few gruesomely slow minutes passed as the vehicle continued to offload, Khadzi was not among the body count.

A fresh wave of disappointment rode through the crowd.

A peculiar man scurried to where the chief stood with the heavily armed soldiers and seemed to join in the conversations with the occasional hand gestures. He looked misplaced in the company of men that oozed triple refined masculinity; short and a little scarce of meat. The chief nodded to what the man was saying and pointed him in the direction of Nambe's hut.

Another charlatan?, Thoko thought as she watched the balding, middle-aged man enter Nellie's house, obscuring him from view.

"What is that man doing in there?" Jelisa asked. No one around her knew, but she uttered the question regardless.

The seconds ticked into minutes and the night grew darker. Those with homes and spouses to be accountable to left as nothing stirred or seemed to happen, closely followed by those with curfews. Only a few people remained, the true lovers of

gossip.

Thoko's feet grew weary from standing around, forcing her to sit at the base of the tree whose roots protruded slightly above ground.

"Some people are reckless." Thoko could hear the chief shout to his advisors. "They did not think things through."

His advisors nodded.

"The old woman was scheduled for heart surgery," one of the advisors added. Thoko could not make out any of their faces which were shrouded in partial darkness, nor did the distance between Thoko and the chief's troops help the cause.

"Surgery?" Thoko asked aloud, not expecting an answer.

As though summoned by her question, the balding man emerged from the hut. The crowd has since grown impatient from waiting and tired of swatting mosquitoes and insects. He shook his shoulders casually before fixing the oversized glasses that slipped off his nose. Clearing his throat, he made determined strides towards the posse and spoke to them in harsher tones. A few nods and grunts were exchanged before the man turned to address the eager crowd.

"Excuse me," he began. "It is with deep sadness that I must inform you all of the passing of Nellie."

We know. Get to the part about the heart, Thoko scowled in her head.

"Nellie died from the fall. She hit her head causing acute subdural hematoma," he narrated.

"What about the heart?" Someone questioned loudly from the darkness. Eyes averted to look for the person who had posed the question but no figure stood out.

"Nellie's heart is exactly where it is supposed to be, in her chest," he answered, adjusting his poorly fitting suit. "It was

not stolen.”

The once juicy story was turning boring, stale and uninteresting with each word the man uttered.

There should have been a heart robbery!

What an anticlimactic ending, Thoko thought as she got up from where she sat.

No Khadzi, No Nellie and no story to tell the others in the morning.

Thoko dusted her shredded *chitenje* and started off in the direction of her house, contemplating on the events of that night and how things would have ended differently if the charlatan hadn't been proven wrong.

Khadzi, for all his uselessness, was innocent and would have been condemned to a horrible fate, beaten and probably killed by the mob.

Thoko thought of all the people who had been wrongly accused, a shroud of shame sitting heavy on her shoulders for ever wanting an ending worthy of a story.

A chill ran down her spine as a thought crossed her mind: *what if it had been her who was wrongly accused of such a heinous crime?*

A Place Called Here

“Love as powerful as your mother’s for you leaves its own mark. To have been loved so deeply, even though the person who loved us is gone, will give us some protection forever.”

~J.K. Rowling

* * *

Dear mother,

The sun had long started its descent. The sky glimmered and twinkled with stars that appeared to almost wink and shimmer against the mosaic of colors behind them.

The artist that had drawn the sky had taken special care to blend the purple into the orange and red, creating an exquisite masterpiece that could not be duplicated on such a scale. The colors never quite touching but never quite straying from each

other.

The trees shook, and bent as the wind blew through them, and the late afternoon sun cast a golden light over the streets. The combined sound of the rustling leaves filled the air. The branches bowed and bent, swaying in the winter winds.

Tupo shivered as the chill crawled up her body, and settled in the pores of her skin. The sound of her slippers slapping the ground repeatedly almost drowned the sound of the wind around her.

She was late.

If she did not make it home in time, the consequence were unpredictable and, sometimes, bordered cruel. Her punishment would be worse if her whereabouts were known.

The scene was a mix of movement and color. Pedestrians passed by. They were all strangers passing like shadows, each with their own destination and story.

She walked between the streams of people, swerving around street vendors thrusting their wares directly into her face. Tupo clutched the straps of her backpack tighter and almost broke into a run.

Aunt Marie did not like her very much, if at all, having been burdened with Tupo when her parents passed away. Orphaned at fourteen, Tupo had been left with her father's only sister and no siblings. Sometimes, in her moments of weakness, she wished for siblings, someone or anyone to share her problems with. Even a friend would have sufficed but the sound of her own sobs were the miseries that kept her company.

Aunt Marie did not have children of her own in her marriage of six years to uncle Ben and the more sour her marriage grew, the more she became resentful of Tupo.

I should have gone with you.

As she neared the gate to the house she was grudgingly kept like an item in a warehouse, Tupo unstrapped her bag which was filled with school books. She knew she only had a few seconds between opening the gate, giving Mr Zayine her bag and rushing into the house. She said a silent prayer her guardians were not home as she moved the latch and pushed the metal frame. Her breaths came in shallow quivering gasps, as if the air around her had suddenly turned heavy. Her doe-like eyes glistened with unshed tears, reflecting the emotions that bubbled within.

On cue, Mr Zayine stepped out of his station, grabbed Tupo's bag and quickly retreated.

Bless you, Tupo thought as tears welled up once more as they did on those rare occasions.

Tupo walked into the house through the kitchen, getting to work making food for the couple. It was Wednesday, aunt would want to have rice and something meaty. Tupo opened the double door freezer and pulled out the packet of meat that lay frozen, quickly placing it in the sink.

She could mop the house and iron while the meat thawed.

Time rushed by as she cooked and cleaned; she had done most of her chores before she left that morning, but she double checked and cross checked in case she missed some thing.

She did not want to miss anything.

The car honked at the gate as Tupo spooned the rice into the food warmer. She looked up at the watch above the fridge.

5:36PM.

Only Aunt Marie came that early and uncle only arrived after seven or eight. To Aunt Marie, her husband was out cheating

on her and disrespecting their marriage because they could not bear a child of their own. She was so sure that he had a family elsewhere and that only added to her overall bitterness and cruelty towards everyone.

Despite the fighting between Aunt Marie and her husband, they never once separated.

Tupo closed the food warmer before wiping her hands on her dress. One of the few wearable clothing items she owned, all bought by her parents. The Mtase's never bothered to buy her any clothes as she outgrew her own. The seams were stretched thin, and the threads held on for dear life. Her clothes were so thin and worn out she had to layer them to avoid walking around in see-through clothing. She walked out of the kitchen door, and took the paved path to help her aunt with her bags.

"Good evening," Tupo said quietly, reaching out her hand to take her aunt's bag from where she stood locking the doors of her car.

"Don't annoy me, Tupo," Aunt Marie replied, narrowing her eyes at the dark and skinny girl she kept in her house, a silent warning.

"I have had a busy day and I don't want you adding to it."

Tupi nodded and retracted her hand, familiar with her aunt's volatile moods. She stood rooted there, her eyes aimed at the ground. Aunt Marie's legs stretched on for days and the woman was nothing short of stunning. Even at thirty seven, she did not look a day past twenty-two. Tall, slender with naturally curly hair that went past her shoulders and caramel brown skin. Every feature on her face was symmetrical, sculpted to perfection. In the rare occasions that she smiled, Aunt Marie was the embodiment of beauty and the personification of Aphrodite.

“Are you just going to stand there? Take my bag into the house,” Aunt Marie retorted, the annoyance masking and dimming her beautiful features.

Tupo took the bag from her aunts well manicured nails and walked into the house. Aunt Marie was not in a good mood and it was best to keep space in between her and everyone else. It was one thing to be shouted at and quite another to be on the receiving end of her wrath. From the corner of her eye, Tupo saw Mr. Zayine close the gate and quietly return to his station, not a word was uttered or a look shared.

Tupo placed the handbag on the stool by the door of the living room and made her way to the kitchen. She always tried to remain out of sight, shrinking herself into spaces and blending into the background. She hoped that if she did not speak as much, walk around a lot or breath loudly, they would forget she was there altogether.

She sat on the small stool, thinking of her day at school and smiled a little. Aunt Marie barred her from attending school, citing that it was a waste of time for her even though she reaped benefits from the education she denied Tupo.

I wish you were, Ma. Even if to only hold me when I cry and tell me everything is going to be okay.

“Tupo!” Aunt Marie yelled from the living room. Tupo jolted from her seat, making determined strides to where her aunt sat. The living room was exquisite, from the white leather chairs, the big TV that hang on the wall, the glass stools to the magnificent chandelier that promised to swallow the ceiling whole. They had the money to send her to a private school, they just did not want to, making excuses about her education

and frankly, nobody cared to probe.

“Did you wash my clothes?” Aunt Marie asked, barely raising her eyes from her phone to the girl that had knelt close to the door.

“I ironed them too,” Tupo answered.

“What food have you made today?”

“I made rice and beef, Aunty.”

Marie’s frowned slightly before she continued to scroll on her phone. “I hope you did not salt the food too much.”

She’s fishing for reasons, Tupo thought to herself. She wanted an excuse to scold her for something, anything.

They don’t believe me and the ones that do say I should be grateful for a roof over my head.

The opening of the door made Tupo and Aunt Marie turn. They had not heard the sound of the gate nor the car. Uncle Ben, tall and chiseled, walked into the living room clad in a brown suit and a briefcase. His presence overpowered the room and he stood as the dominant figure, pure and raw masculinity. He eyed the two briefly before setting his case on the nearest chair. Marie’s attention had reverted back to her phone, her feet crossed and propped up on a stool.

“Marie, draw me a bath,” Uncle Ben said, unbuttoning his jacket and loosening his tie.

“Tupo, draw your uncle a bath,” Marie said, eyeing her niece from the corner of her eyes. Tupo got up from where she knelt but was stopped by Uncle Ben’s authoritative voice.

“I do not remember asking Tupo to draw me a bath, Marie,” Uncle Ben slowly worded but there was nothing calm about his voice. Tupo knew what was coming.

They both had had bad days at work and this was ground zero, a battle of heads.

When they got to it, it was best to stay out of the way lest she got squashed and became a casualty of war.

“What’s the difference?” Marie retorted, locking eyes with her husband: baiting and challenging him.

“You are my wife, and when I say draw me a bath, you get up and you do as I tell you.”

As he spoke, he slowly walked towards Marie towering and overpowering her with words and demeanor alone. His voice, normally steady, carried an edge of frustration as he spoke, each word landing with a sharp precision, and his neck held thick cords that rippled when he talked. Uncle Ben’s gestures punctuated his discontent, hands clenching into fists as he struggled to hold his emotions without letting them boil over.

Uncle Ben towered over most men and everyone in the house, including Marie; who made up for her height deficiency with plenty of attitude. Tupo had retreated into the shadows, holding her breath as not to make them remember she existed in that moment.

The two stared each other down for a full minute, the air vibrating with unspoken words, and the anticipation thick between her fingers.

His clenched fists trembled with suppressed rage, while her firm posture was mold with defiance, though her eyes betrayed a hint of caution.

The tension was palpable.

Her eyes faltered as she watched the typhoon in her husband’s eye grow fierce and more intense. Knowing what was coming, she got up from her chair, grabbed her phone and stormed out of the living room. The aftermath was quiet and

tense, her uncle still reeling from the anger his body had failed to hold.

Tupo quietly backed out of the room before this became her fight, she was safer and better off in the kitchen. The kitchen had become Tupo's sanctuary; the place where she felt the safest and most at peace as the Mtase's rarely set foot there. Tupo set the table and dished the food even though she knew that the husband and wife would not be dining together. Uncle Ben would eat at the table while Aunt Marie would eat from the living room.

Tonight, she would be okay, they were too focused on being angry at each other they would pay her no mind. Nobody called for her as the night pressed on. Tupo waited for the Mtase's to eat and retire to their bed before she cleared the plates and washed them. Her mind wandered into the night, at the birds that rested in their nests at the end of the long day, to the night that carried quiet winds. The weight of the day rested in her pores and slowly sank through her muscles and into her bones.

She had been reduced to a servant in her relative's house, treated like an outsider undeserving of family support and love. She wasn't completely alone though. Mr Zayine and his wife offered her shelter when her aunt's moods drove her out of the house and stood as her parents at school. They believed in her future and that was enough. If she worked hard enough, she could make it to college and apply for a loan. She would be rid of the Mtase's and their lives, she would be free.

Tupo got up, propping her hands on her knees and the fatigue set in. Her movements were slow, deliberate, navigating through the fog that set in every night.

Tonight, she would rest and tomorrow, the sun would rise

again.

Tupo opened the store room that sat between the fridge and the door to the living room, pulled out a mattress that has seen too many good days and laid it on the floor. The blanket she had been given lay on the floor of the room, next to the bags of maize.

Her heart constricted but she knew that pain too well to dwell on it. This would not be her life forever.

She picked up the torn blanket and cocooned herself on the mattress. Her eyes fluttered closed, and a deep sigh escaped her lips, carrying away the burdens of the day, even if momentarily. As the sleep set in, her features softened, and the burdens of the day seemed to lift.

A single tear escaped, leaving a trail that carried trials and tribulations too big for a girl so small. The room cradled her weariness as she drifted into her dreams, and the world seemed to exhale with her.

I wish you were here, mama. How could you leave me when all I needed was you?

The Nkhanzani Forest

The Nkhanzani forest stood tall and intimidating between our village and the Zothe village, and located within its depths lay an old graveyard in which people swore up and down they saw ghost.

Some were audacious enough to say they saw the ‘ghosts’ of people carrying coffins and crossing the path between the forest to lay on the other side, all the while grumbling about crying babies and pestering toddlers.

They were probably thieves digging up coffins but apparently, nobody thought that far. They were ghosts and that was that.

Old man Josiah built a house right outside the forest where his farm had stood long before the forest had grown into a menace. His ancestors had lived and died on the lands on which he farmed, watching as brunches sprout new trees and animals gathered in the depths of the forest.

Nkhanzani forest was popular for two things: the graveyard and dwarfs. Yes, I said dwarfs. Not the creatures you hear about in these fairy tales on TV nowadays, I am talking about

real life dwarfs. Short, barely making it past one's knees with long arms and big hands and heavens, could they run.

Dwarfs were known to be slaves that worked tirelessly for their masters. Today, you see your neighbor's field uncultivated and overgrown with weeds then come tomorrow morning, he has properly made ridges, sown seeds and applied fertilizer.

How? Dwarfs.

Nobody questioned it and nobody talked about it.

They were mischievous spirits filled to the brim with rage and hatred, probably because they came from reincarnated human sacrifices.

Before now, there were no schools in our village and for us, that meant we had to walk all the way to Zothe, and Nkhanzani forest stood daunting and thick between us and the key out of our adamant poverty. Every day, my brothers and I woke up at the crack of dawn and divided the chores among ourselves; Atipatsa swept the compound while Atikonda washed the dishes from last night and I made breakfast and put water for everybody in the little mud bathroom a few feet from our house.

Atipatsa and Atikonda were running late that day, which was an inconvenience I could not afford having been punished severely for being late that entire week.

They know the way, I told myself as I put miles between me and the compound.

The sun was starting to creep out and it would soon be out. I couldn't tell the time, but I knew it was running and soon, I too would be running, but late.

We were warned and often heard about stories of the creatures that dwelled in the forest, from witches to evils spirits but on

that day, it did not matter because I had to make it through the cursed forest.

I stepped into the Nkhanzani with a heart full of fear and a handful of courage yet the rustling of the trees and the deep breaths I took to fill my lungs did nothing to ease my racing mind.

An owl hooted above me sending my heart racing.

It was June, in the dead of winter and the clouds lay heavy in the sky above me but I could feel hot sweat trickling from my neck down my spine, I was quivering in the face of the unknown. I clutched my books closer to my heart as though Steve Chimombo's poems would ease my fears and hopefully, ward off evil beings.

The dried leaves crunched with every step I took as I picked up my pace, and the leaves rustled and swayed as the June breeze combed through them.

Shafts of sunlight struggled to pierce through the thick foliage, casting a dappled light on the ground. Despite the chill in the air, beads of sweat formed on my forehead as a shiver traveled down my spine.

I had walked a great distance, having grown accustomed to walking alone when I felt a slap on my calf.

My spirit left my body and chose to take my heart with it.

Shock, fear, and adrenaline coursed through my body at once. Instead of fleeing from the scene, my body was rooted to the ground.

Run! I yelled to my body which still hadn't initiated flight.

A second slap resounded, echoing through the quiet woods, and jogging my body to look for an enemy.

I turned vigorously, left and right; arms raised in defense but there was no one in sight. All I could see where trees,

tombstones, and mounds.

Realization slowly dawned on me. I was at the center of the forest, right where the cemetery was.

Perspiration formed at the top of my head right before I broke into a run.

That is when it started raining slaps from above and below, very painful blows landed everywhere: my legs, my behind, my back, anywhere contact could be made, I got a severe beating.

Tears were long overdue, yet they made no appearance, it didn't matter because I was getting out of there as fast as I could.

Mid stride, I bent down and picked the first thing that remotely resembled a stick and started to swat at my legs at the enemies I could not see. The slaps did not seize nor falter, if anything they got angrier and smacked my skin hard enough to cause swelling where contact was made.

My legs were growing tired, my muscles were burning from unprepared rigorous exercise and my enemy laughed in the silence.

"Leave me alone!" I screamed through my ragged breath.

No sooner had the words escaped my mouth, I saw the edge of the forest which in that moment looked more like salvation. I sprinted the last remaining meters with the speed of an athlete, ignoring the aching pain in my lungs that were threatening to give up and my muscles that felt like they were being burned.

The fresh air came crushing into my face as I passed the barrier between the forest and Zothe village, yet my feet kept going.

I put a safe distance between myself and the forest before I turned to look at the source of my marathon.

In the darkness, I could make out 8 pairs of eyes looking at

me with loathing.

That is the last I remember before I collapsed from pure exhaustion. I welcomed the comforting darkness like an old friend. Apparently, one of the teachers found me laying on the ground, a book beside me. The book had made it too!

It was after recounting my experience, with the help of being drowsed with water, that I learned that old man Josiah had passed earlier that week and there was no one to feed his dwarfs and they had been on a rampage ever since.

I was not the first and I was most certainly not going to be last.

Troubling Lazarus

“The majority is by no means omniscient just because it is the majority. In fact, I’ve found that the line which divides majority opinion from mass hysteria is often so fine as to be virtually invisible.”

— *J. Paul Getty, How to Be Rich*

* * *

“That is not how it is done!” I shouted, laughing at what were supposed to be dance moves.

Chikondi glared at me before she continued her attempts at the dance we had been taught at Sunday school earlier that day. An octopus had better chances of getting it right compared to the rubbish that took place before my eyes.

The sun was blazing hot. October had just begun and the dust in Area 25 was not having it. As if to remind us that

undeveloped areas existed with sand dunes, dust storms rose and whirled around us. Being the day of our good Lord, our mothers had no spared us; waking us up before the rooster had even sang it's daily lamentations, one would have thought the women were trying to beat the roster at crowing to betray Jesus.

Dressed in long skirts, hair combed and glued to the back of our heads, Chikondi was not having the easiest time persuading her rigid body to ease into flexibility. Unlike me who would not have cared less, she was determined to have something to show for all the screaming and trampling she had done to and on the devil.

Another dust swirled and landed directly into our faces, throwing Chikondi off balance. Before Chikondi landed face first into the ground, a voice bellowed from one of the houses.

"*Afiti!*" The voice shouted, followed by the thud of Chikondi's body as it hit the ground.

Staring at my friend on the ground, time stood still with my taunts and jeers lodged in my throat. Her white skirt resembled the ground she fell on, coated in beige and different shades of brown.

Tears swarmed like bees in her eyes.

I averted my eyes from the ground searching for the owner of the voice.

An old lady stood on a veranda of a small white house, 10 feet or more from where we were. Her wrinkled face had seen too many sunrises and her poorly fitting clothes lived a lot to be desired. The glasses she wore on her small pointy nose did nothing but draw attention to how poorly spaced her facial features were.

I looked around the street but nobody was passing by. Where

were the witches? Before I could open my mouth to ask, the woman bent down and picked a rock from her compound, throwing the material in our direction. The rock flew a few feet and landed in front of us.

“Get out of here, witches,” The old woman screamed hoarsely.

It dawned on me; Chikondi and I were the ladies of the darkness in question.

Windows and doors started to creak as people stuck out their heads to see the fuss outside. My heart started pounding in my chest with anger and embarrassment at being insulted. The accusation of practicing unworldly magic was not something I could stomach, especially on the day of worship.

I quickly grabbed Chikondi from the ground and ushered her towards our homes. I was a church-going, God-fearing person who knew the books of the bible in order, why would that woman call us witches?

I fought back the hot tears that so desperately wanted to escape and walked the remaining distance home in silence.

* * *

Two uneventful weeks had gone by, taking with it the memories of the woman who had made us out to be witches. The sun was setting in the horizon bringing with the night a warm summer air. I lazied on the chipped veranda with my older brother, Mavuto or Vuto as everyone called him. The pile of tattered sacks had just turned 20, proving everyday to be the problems he was named after.

Not only did he drink like a fish and smoke like a chimney, he had three mothers at the house the previous week, each swearing on every strand of hair on their bodies that Vuto had impregnated their daughters. One mother even swore she could identify his red underwear as she had seen him running out of her house, clothes in hand.

Vuto swaggered home as late as two in the morning, causing unnecessary noise and commotion as the alcohol dulled his already questionable senses. He had dropped out of school and spent his days smoking and drinking with his friends. Father had tried beating the stupidity out of him but as grandmother often muttered, "Beat him until he is threads away from death, his foolishness is his to keep."

"Funeral! Funeral!" The Chief's boys shouted in their coarse loud voices followed by the funeral whistle. The story Vuto had been telling about his past school adventures caught mid sentence and my hand, carrying delicious *usipa* into my mouth, stopped halfway.

The whistle was blown again, followed by the sound of doors opening and closing as women clamored from their houses to get information from the boys. My mother hurried from the house carrying a folded K50 in her hand to offer as condolence, totally ignoring us as we sat there as quiet spectators. Our house was not fenced as were most houses in our area, the neighbors business was your business and gossip always traveled fast.

From the dimly lit veranda, we could see the adults whisper and shake their hands in sorrow, before offering money, maize flour or firewood, customary to aid the bereaved. After what seemed like an eternity of whispers and low muttered explanations,

the crowd began to disperse with grief stricken faces.

My mother slowly approached the house, her plaid skirt bunched up her hand as she tried to keep it from sweeping the ground. Short and lean, my mother was intoxicatingly beautiful. She kept her hair long, her skin glowing and her body clean and healthy for as long as I could remember. She could pass for my sister.

She hesitated as she made her way through the door and paused there, eyes lost in a distant thought.

“Bule, do you know Mrs Matemba?” She finally asked.

I shook my head, I had never heard that name.

“The lady who used to sell doughnuts right after the grocery on street two,” she continued. “Her house is on your left as you come from church.”

Realization struck faster than lightning.

The witch woman! Mrs Matemba was the woman who had called Chisomo and I witched and she was late, it seemed.

“Mrs Matemba called us witches last week,” I almost shouted as I leaped from the floor, plate in hand.

The back of my mother’s hand struck me on the face as the words escaped from my mouth.

“Stupid child,” she hissed through her teeth, eyeing me with annoyance. “We do not speak ill of the dead.”

I stared at her in disbelief, my face stinging where her palm had landed.

I was the victim! Her child had been called a witch on the good Lord’s day! I shut my mouth and sat back down, fighting back the tears that brewed in my eyes and blurred my vision slightly. I shot daggers through my eyes to Vuto who was hysterical with laughter.

“Impregnator,” I muttered as soon as my mother was out of

earshot. I quickly grabbed my plate, dashing into the house as Vuto's face shifted towards anger.

* * *

It started as rumors, sightings of a woman dressed in church clothing walking around unaccompanied at night but rumors were not scarce in our areas and everyone took it with a pinch of salt.

Probably another story to scare the folks, people said as no sensible woman would walk around the streets of Area 25 with the crime rates at an all time high.

The guard by *Nsungwi* Market woke up to the sound of footsteps passing by the shop veranda where he slept. Robberies had gone up since the last devaluation and shop owners had employed a guard as added protection to their chains and locks.

The guard looked up and saw a woman walking towards Farmer's World wearing church clothing . The woman, wrapped in a coat that fluttered slightly in the chilly breeze, walked alone. His sharp eyes scanned the surroundings, always on the lookout for anything amiss. The silence of the night was broken only by the distant barking of dogs.

Concern flickered across the guard's face as he took a few steps forward, the gravel crunching beneath his boots. He assumed she was new to the area and was unaware how unsafe the streets were at such odd hours.

The guard, a bulky man with a stern expression softened by empathy, felt a sense of responsibility wash over him. Without hesitation, he decided to step forward, his footsteps echoing softly against the tar road.

He cleared his throat gently, not wanting to startle her.

“Excuse me, miss,” he called out. The woman turned, her eyes briefly meeting his, a mix of surprise and wariness in her gaze. His massive form seemed to quiver, and a gasp escaped his lips. The fear intensified and his legs gave way beneath him. The colossal figure crumpled to the ground, and he lost consciousness.

The guard, whose name I learned was Mr Chepo, was woken up the next morning as people drowsed buckets of water on him. The poor man was found splayed on the ground like a starfish, limbs cast outwards. Word quickly spread across the area of the guard who had met a ghost and lived to tell about it. Crowds gathered where the frightened man stood, his breathing rapid and shallow, and a cold sweat broke out on his forehead. I stood at the very front, listening as he narrated to the onlookers about the woman.

Back then, I thought the guard to be lazy. Was that not this job? To protect the shops from all threats physical and spiritual? Why did he not run?

The woman’s name was on everybody’s lips; Mrs Matemba. My blood run cold in the afternoon heat. Was that not the woman that had called us witches? What if she came for me and Chikondi? I felt a sudden surge of terror coursing through my veins as I stood frozen in place, my eyes wide and fixated on Mr Chepo. My mind was running at several kilometers per second as fear navigated its way into my body.

The scene before me became blurry as I made my way home. I wanted to warn Chikondi about Mrs Matemba, but each man for themselves and God for all of us; she would find out soon enough. My priority was getting home. Thank goodness, it was Saturday and I would not be going out of the house until Monday.

I spent the rest of the weekend indoors, watching other children play from the windows.

By the following week, multiple sightings of Mrs Matemba were being reported. Neighbors swore they saw her sitting on the veranda of her house while others said she was visiting the homes of those who owed her and asking for her money. As the stories of Mrs Matemba circulated and grew in size as they spread, fear spread among the township.

Vendors packed with the last light and fled to the sanctuary of their homes, while classes were scheduled for afternoons when one could distinguish faces. Teachers did not punish anyone for coming late, if late even existed during those times. I laugh now that crime rates had gone down. Even thieves, those spawns of satan, feared Mrs Matemba's ghost. Mabvuto was home before sunset and his drunk escapades came to staggering halt.

My mother did not let us discuss the matter in the house, she said to let the dead rest in peace and not spoil their name for gossip but as the stories became more frequent and the occurrences closer to her house, her warning faded in the fear.

The church that Mrs Matemba attended refuted any claims that their esteemed church member was anything but a servant of the Most High. They were soon to learn that were there is smoke, surely there is fire.

* * *

The walls of the church shook and the windows rattled as the church members prayed; shaming and trampling on the devil. Their voices were raised, the congregation was united in their shared faith, and in the act of prayer. Some raised their hands in surrender, while others knelt with heads bowed, their voices

rising above the rest in a plea for divine intervention; blissfully unaware of the scene that unfolded outside.

The guard was sitting at his station, boredom etched on his face as he listened to the news. The radio host was going on about an imminent devaluation of the kwacha when he caught movement at the corner of his eye.

A woman dressed in their church's attire walked from the side of the gate and into the light that shone from the guard's station. The guard had worked there many years and the tales of Mrs Matemba's ghost has not escaped his listening ears. Without warning anyone or making a sound, the guard silently got up and exited his station. This was not the flag he was willing to fight ghosts for. The radio remained on and the sermon inside the church continued.

The sermon ended after midnight and those that had cars crammed as many people as they could. The rest formed a group and chatted about the powerful sermon as they walked home. The men walked slightly behind the women, muttering in low voices and laughing at the occasional joke. A woman separated from the group and walked several paces ahead of everyone. It was dark and late, and while people rarely walked at night, the woman was still too far from the group for comfort.

"Let us catch up to her," the women muttered among themselves, signaling the men to follow suit. The group quickened their pace and as they approached her, Mrs Chirwa tapped the lone woman on her shoulder.

"Amayi, you shouldn't walk ahead of the group," she said gently. The woman turned, startled and faced the group.

Chaos ensued.

Mrs Matemba stood in front of them flesh and bone. Nobody

screamed or yelled, they simply fled.

The men being steps away from the women simply turned and stepped on it, leaving their wives to face Mrs Matemba. Nangozo, a big lady, ran faster than the rest and jumped the nearest fence faster than you could say 'ghost', while others fled into the maize fields and the only thing left from the entourage was the dust from their speed.

It seemed the vow of thick and thin was null and void when ghosts were involved. That thin was too thin for the church group that did not see each other until the sun was high and they could tell each other apart.

No husband asked their wives where they had gone and no wife questioned their husband's whereabouts; maybe out of shame that they had abandoned each other when spirits came calling.

Non-believers, the lot of them, I thought when I heard the story.

A meeting was called that afternoon and all of the members that had been there were in attendance, traumatized and in disbelief. An esteemed church member was terrorizing a township from her grave and all eyes were upon the church. Fasting sessions were booked, prayers scheduled and pastors called. One question remained rooted in everyone's mind: why could Mrs Matemba not rest in peace?

Mrs Matemba's family had turned a deaf ear to all that was being said about their late family member, most concerned and unbothered where her two daughters, Esther and Phoebe. They strongly believed that someone was impersonating their mother and trying to ruin her image. What they failed to understand was why someone would go the extra mile in

impersonating their innocent mother. Sure, their mother had been a difficult woman but what actions of hers warranted the township to call her evil?

Phoebe, the youngest of the siblings, sat in her room quietly scrolling through her phone that night, her legs crossed on her bed.

The lights had gone off and her sister was in the kitchen preparing dinner for them. The candle flickered and the flames bent as the wind passed through.

The shadows danced on the walls of her room, creating silhouettes that merged and swayed.

The air was still, broken only by the sound of the pots as her sister cooked in the kitchen. A gush of wind blew into the room, dimming the flame that kept her room alight. Phoebe shivered, placing her phone down and turning to close the window.

She peered into the darkness, a chill running down her spine. She could not shake off the feeling of being watched that settled over her like a second skin. Phoebe could make out the figure of a woman in the darkness outside her closed window.

The only sound was the crackling of the candle and the distant barking of dogs in the still night. The room held its breath before Phoebe let out a scream that could wake the dead.

Her heart raced as she recoiled from the window. Panic seized her, and without a moments thought, she ran across the room, scrambling in her haste. The flickering candle cast long, daunting shadows that seemed to reach out to her.

Her screams bounced against the walls of her room, ricocheting inside the whole house. Phoebe stumbled in the darkness, falling on to the cement floor and recoiling there in fear.

Esther came charging into the poorly lit room.

“What?” Esther asked, struggling to catch her breath.

Were they getting robbed?

Phoebe lay on the floor, crying and shaking in horror. Esther looked at the window and noticed the silhouette that stood outside. Goosebumps covered her body and a chill made its way down her spine.

Despite the fear and the clog that formed in her throat, Esther tentatively made her way to the window.

“Why won’t you rest?” Esther said to the figure. “Why should we live in fear and shame?”

The dogs outside barked louder in the silence that followed.

No answer came from the other side of the window. Phoebe’s screams had subsided and she lay there muttering to herself.

A few seconds passed before the figure disappeared, seamlessly blending into the night.

Mrs Matemba’s ghost was never seen or heard of again.

Maybe it had been someone impersonating the woman and realizing they had taken the joke too far, or Mrs Matemba had truly rose from the dead and terrorized the township.

It would not be the first case of mass hysteria in our township; that and the days people danced themselves to death.

The Last Plague

Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned.

~Unknown

* * *

Jayako was a quiet village where everybody knew everybody. If you ate chicken for lunch that day, rest assured, everybody knew and it was because of that familiarity that crimes were nonexistent.

If theft occurred, it was someone from the neighboring villages. The first real stride towards development was the borehole that sat at the center of the village. It saved the girls and women time to go over the mountain to the nearest stream.

The second was the maize mill that was located at the far end of the village and when a man from the city built this fine structure it shook up the village. The last time a maize mill was erected in the village, people had dropped like flies. Abanda, the previous owner, was a cultist and had died at the hands of

the villagers.

Before Abanda owned the maize mill, he was all but a nobody without a penny to his name. It was almost surprising he could even afford a name! He lacked everything, even sleep. Abanda could be seen walking at night, inebriated and muttering to himself when surprisingly, he stopped.

Days went by and nobody saw or heard from Abanda. He had fled to the city, some said but the truth is, nobody cared enough to look into it. He emerged two weeks later, skinnier and if humanly possible, dirtier.

Rumors began to hum.

He had gone to the city and became a robber, some said.

No, he had visited a distant relative and was ambushed on the way, others argued.

No one wanted to ask Abanda where he had been. He was one, if not the only person, the villagers shunned. He walked alone and he drunk alone. He had no children and no known family, nobody to mourn his absence.

Imagine everybody's surprise when he started having bricks built. In a few weeks, Abanda has bought land and was building something, nobody knew what and nobody asked. The villagers almost fainted when Abanda bought a maize mill and placed it in its rightful building and so his business began.

A few weeks into operation, Abanda went missing again. A few days this time.

He came back as he had the first time, skinny, dirty and this time, bruised.

If anyone noticed, they paid no mind and went about their normal everyday lives.

That is when the deaths began.

The plague of Egypt, they call it today. Children started dying in their numbers after a long illness. They would have headaches and fever followed by spasms and eventually, die.

A dark cloud hang over the village that year.

Abanda's business picked up after his second disappearance. The man nobody knew had suddenly grown wings of money. He went and bought himself a bicycle and built the first house with iron sheets.

It was around six and the sun was setting fast. Anathidzi and her eldest daughter, Nambe were crushing sand fast to get to the maize mill before it closed. Nathidzi knew that if she did not make it in time, her family would starve and it was with fierce and determined strides that she walked to the edge of the village.

As she neared the maize mill, she could make out voices inside and a little hope leaped in her heart. Seeing as the sun was saying it's final goodbyes, Nathidzi put one leg after another and almost sprinted up the stairs of the maize mill.

The door was bolted shut and her heart sank.

Nambe couldn't have cared less. Her thoughts were back home where her friends were playing *chitelela*. Nambe could sense her mother's dismay.

"Ma, let me try the back," Nambe suggested, resting the bucket of maize she had been carrying on her head on the veranda.

Lost for words and on the verge of tears, Nathidzi nodded silently, which proved difficult considering she balanced more than twenty five kilograms of maize on her head. Nambe nodded and quickly disappeared at the side of the building.

* * *

Abanda was woken by the noise.

What noise?, he thought as he tried to hold on to his sleep.

The noise persisted, if anything it grew louder.

Was that his name being shouted?

Slowly, Abanda opened his eyes. As his eyes finally opened fully, he heard the breaking of his front door, the sound of cracking wood filling the frenzied air. That jolted him awake and he leaped from his brand new mattress on the floor clad in his underwear. Was he being robbed?

“Abanda has finished us all!”

“Just kill him before he uses our remaining children!”

“Burn his house down!”

“Kill him!”

The chants had migrated from outside and were inside his house, loud and deafening. Confused and frightened at what was being said, Abanda made it for the door of his bedroom only to be met with angry villagers.

Anchise, the man heading the mob, grabbed Abanda by the neck, squeezing mercilessly and threw him back into the room. Abanda landed with a thud on the floor and the impact blacked his eyes out for a good two seconds. Abanda lay on the floor, his limbs spread before him and pain pulsed through this body. More men squeezed into the small bedroom and Abanda could not make out most of them. The rest stood by the door in case he decided to run.

What was happening? Why were these people here? What did they want?

A thousand thoughts rushed through Abanda’s head yet he

couldn't land a single answer. As he opened his mouth to seek clarification, a sudden movement at the corner of his eyes caused Abanda to avert his eyes in time to see one of the men holding a panga knife. His heart sank and all the blood in this body ran cold.

"You killed our children!" Ankhoswe bellowed into the room.

The women had been denied access to this execution.

Out of sorts, Abanda having gained some bearing and tried to get up from the floor. Surely, there had been a misunderstanding of sorts.

To accuse him of killing someone or anyone's child was utterly ludicrous. Before Abanda could get up from where he was, one of the men lunged forward and punched Abanda square in the face sending the poor man spiraling back into the floor. Abanda spat out blood on the muddy floor on which he laid, a radiating pain starting from his temples and resting in his nose. It was at this point that one of the women lounged outside screamed, "Give me my child back!"

One would have thought that was the agreed upon death sentence as the men zeroed in on Abanda and beat him mercilessly. Hands, feet and sticks landed upon Abanda's bare skin, hurting, punishing and bruising him. Nobody objected and nobody sympathized as the man screamed in soul snatching agony and begged to be left alone. The men remained relentless and insatiable as they hit, beat and, kicked: his head, his guts, his limbs, nothing was not touched by them. The blood spurt from his nose and mouth, and soon his fight died down together with his screams.

Abanda has fainted from the excruciating and unbearable pain. Seeing as he was unconscious, two of the men grabbed Abanda's heels and dragged the limp and almost lifeless body

of Abanda outside.

Women wailed as Abanda's body was dragged from his house. The sympathetic ones turned away and simply walked to their houses. They could not face the cruel torture of a fellow human, no matter the evil he had done. It was nobody's job to take a life. They realized they would not sway the angry mob either.

Abanda's ebony dark skin was stained with blood, his eyes swollen shut and his hands spewed above his shoulders. Angondo and Ankhoswe continued to drag the nearly dead body of Abanda on the coarse, rock infested ground to the giant *Kachele* tree that stood at the center of the village. The rocks pierced Abanda's back, opening fresh streams of blood and sand roughly lodged itself into his pores. The pain was indescribable.

It was inhumane.

The women followed behind, cursing Abanda and the day he was born, cursing his mother for raising him and the sun for ever rising on him.

"A useless human with an evil heart!" One screamed.

The women wailed at the loss of their children.

"May your sins never be forgiven!"

"Why bother us when we never bothered you?"

"Spawn of Satan!"

Arriving at the center of the village, a small party of villagers had already arrived. Word was spreading past and people were gathering from all around to witness the execution. The chief and his advisors sat on majestic chairs, adorned with animal skins, waiting to hold trial the man who had amassed riches overnight.

The body of Abanda was tossed at the center of the circle the villagers had formed and the crowd cheered. A sound so

fierce, so full of hate and anger.

Abanda lay on the ground, his head bloody and bruised, his dignity stripped from him. The strength had evaporated from him and he was oblivious to the cause of his suffering.

What had he done? Whom did he kill?

Aches and pains pulsed through his body and he was barely holding onto his life force. His breath came out in ragged gasps and his body shook. The villagers had squeezed God's breath of life out of him and he could barely hold onto consciousness.

The chief raised his hand and silence descended. The people sat down while some chose to stand in fear of missing out in any live action that would start.

"Abanda," the chief said, "Get up."

Confused, beaten and weak, Abanda drew strength and came to a sitting position. His eyes could barely see, his face was swollen and his mouth bloodied. He could make out a few familiar faces and as he averted his eyes to the tree that stood majestically behind the chief, his heart sunk.

This really was an execution.

A rope hang from the tree with no owner. Abanda had already been judged for a crime he had no memory of ever committing. A crime he was yet to find out about. In his heart, he knew he had already been found guilty. The trial was a mere formality.

"Nambe," the chief begun, "Step forward and tell everybody what you told me."

The villagers looked around at each other and from behind the figures stepped out Nambe. Obviously scared to be out on the spotlight, the little girl fidgeted with her chitenje and took small steps forward.

Abanda looked up and gasped.

The crowd had gone silent now, eager to hear what had transpired for all the events to have led to that moment.

“M-my mother a-and I went to Abanda’s maize mill yesterday,” she began, stammering a little as sweat broke on her forehead. “It w-was late and I went b-back to ask that h-he help us. We had heard v-voice inside so we knew th-there was someone there.”

The crowd hang on her every word and Abanda’s eyes, like everyone else’s, were fixated on her. Her every word was highlighted and filed, to be examined and judged for truth. A rooster crowed in the distance as the little girl gathered her courage to continue.

“As I entered using the back door, I heard children crying so I walked slowly into the building,” she continued to narrate to the captivated crowd. Nobody moved, flinched or breathed loudly. An ant’s footsteps would have echoed in the silence between her pauses.

“I saw Abanda putting Chisomo and Mwayi into his maize mill and he was telling them not to lose him money. The children were begging to go home to their parents, saying they were tired.”

“Hhhhhiiiiii,” the crowd shouted in unison, followed by the hollow cry of the mother of the children. Grace, the mother, lunged forward to kill Abanda with her own bare hands but was caught by her fellow women. They patted her on the back as she wailed in grief and cries shook her frail frame.

Abanda sat perfectly still, in utter disbelief. He must have misheard the story or worse, they weren’t talking about him and he was simply a victim of mistaken identity.

It started like a rumble.

The crowd was building anger and would turn into a mass

of rage and unrelenting anger. The chief grew anxious as he could smell the storm that was about to erupt. The grieving mothers were barely being held back by their peers.

Their custom dictated that both parties be heard but the villagers were blind to reason, the chief thought, if he gave Abanda a chance and the tides turned in his favor, his authority would be questioned.

The chief raised his hand and gradually, the rumblings of the crowd subsided.

“Abanda, you have done wrong and you have wronged this village and it’s people,” the chief said and watched as the crowd nodded in agreement. Somebody had to atone for the deaths of those poor children and Abanda, it seemed, would be the scapegoat.

“This is a peaceful village yet you went and brought black magic and death has ensued. As is customary, you have to hang for your sins. Find peace, Abanda.”

The villagers roared in victory and the men came to where Abanda sat defeated. This time, they do not beat him. They simply lifted him on his feet and carried him to the rope that would drain the life out of him.

He did not fight them.

His death had been sealed. The women wailed and the ones who pitied the man simply shook their heads and walked away.

Abanda was hang that day and his body waved from the tree for hours before it was taken down. People refused to pass by the tree where his blood covered body hang and nobody came to claim the body.

No funeral whistle was blown and life went on. His body was buried away from where everyone else was buried and his grave was left unmarked, unnamed. His house was burned to

the ground with everything in it and his maize mill torn to shreds, brick by brick.

He lived like a nobody and was buried as one too.

* * *

Nambe walked across the brick walls that made the maize mill, looking for a back entrance. Her mother was waiting for her and they had no food for that evening.

She had been chatting to her friend, Karen, who had just gotten a boyfriend when her mother called her. Nambe had felt a pang of jealousy as Karen spoke of the long walks her and her boyfriend had and the sex.

Sex. It was such a strange concept for her but she wanted to try it too. All her friends had had it and she felt left out.

Nambe saw light coming from a door in front of her and proceeded to make her way towards it. She could make out voices inside although they sounded distorted.

“Odi?” Nambe called out to announce her presence but nobody came to the door.

“Odi? Is there anyone here?” She tried again, a little louder this time. Seeing as the sun was setting and her mother was quickly losing hope, Nambe grabbed the handle of the door and pushed. It opened.

Inside was Abanda who sat on a wooden stool next to the maize mill. He crouched towards a small box that was producing voices.

Abanda, having heard the door creak open, turned to look at the intruder. A small girl stood at the door, she looked 15 at most and was wearing a blue short sleeved shirt and a chitenje.

Like most girls in the village, her hair was cut short and her height matched the length of her hair, short.

“Can I help you?” Abanda barked at the girl, who shook with fear. She was disturbing him, he thought, he was listening to news on the radio he had just bought.

“Yes. My mum and I have maize we would like you to mill for us,” she retorted, choosing to not show just how much he frightened her.

“We are closed,” Abanda replied, turning his back on the girl and diverting his attention to the radio. There was a tetanus outbreak in the country as most children were not vaccinated, the people on the radio said. Symptoms included spasms, difficulty in eating and difficulty in breathing, resulting in death.

This must be what is killing the children, Abanda thought to himself. He could see from the corner of his eyes that the young girl had not budged.

“Can you please leave and come back tomorrow?” Abanda said without facing the girl.

“Please, we don’t have food for tonight,” Nambe insisted, refusing to be brushed off.

“Which part of we are closed did you not understand? Are you daft?”

Nambe was running out of options and she did not want to break the bad news to her mother.

“I will offer you sex,” she barked out without a moments thought.

Abanda, shocked, turned and looked at the young girl. What had the world come to for such a young girl to be offering sex to a grown man like him? He thought.

He eyed her for a full minute before he spoke.

“You are young and you are stupid,” he began calmly, “Young girls like you should not be offering what is between your legs for favors. Your parents obviously did not raise you right and you will end up pregnant for any nobody and unmarried. Instead of focusing on school and trying to get a better future for your family, you are here offering your body. I want you to remember these words next time you think to offer anyone that cheap thing between your useless legs.”

Nambe stood dumbstruck and embarrassed.

He had not only turned down her offer but he had gone what step and humiliated her. He had called her out as a cheap whore but heavens knew she was not one. Tears leaked from her eyes and Nambe turned and ran out of the building.

Thoughts raced in her head. What if he told her parents or anyone? That would bring shame to her family. They would call her a whore. No one would want to be associated with her, let alone marry her.

In the few seconds it took her to get to her mother, Nambe already had a new version of the story tucked in her mind.

She met her mother on the veranda in front of the maize mill and proceeded to tell her about the people she had heard talking out of the small box, how Abanda had refused to help them and how he had then tried to rape her. She sobbed through the entire story and Nathidzi stood there in disbelief.

The audacity of that man to lay hands on her daughter! The nerve to try and rob her of her innocence!

It was okay to say no milling their maize but to try and consummate her child?

No, that was a line.

He had stooped low but she could go lower.

“Wipe your tears, Nambe, and listen,” Nathidzi said with an

aching heart, “Here is what we are going to do...”

To My Someday

"I wish someone had told me that love isn't torture. Because I thought love was this thing that was supposed to tear you in two and leave you heartbroken and make your heart race in the worst way. I thought love was bombs and tears and blood. I did not know that it was supposed to make you lighter, not heavier. I didn't know it was supposed to take only the kind of work that makes you softer. I thought love was war. I didn't know it was supposed to... I didn't know it was supposed to be peace."

~Taylor Jenkins Reid, Daisy Jones & The Six

* * *

Maybe it is not always about falling for the wrong people.
Maybe it is also about falling for the ones that make us whole.
"Be enough for yourself." Yeah, I know.
But how am I supposed to fight the feelings that come

tumbling down when he tells me he loves me?

The fire that starts in the pits of my stomach and burns my heart every time he is close?

The constricting feeling of my lungs,

Tagged to his heart,

Tethered to this love,

Yearning for his touch,

wishing he could look at me and actually love me.

Not leave me here confused, wondering what I am going to do and why I was never enough.

The 3-hour calls turn to days without the sound of your voice,

the inside jokes now barely said,

And you don't even have the decency to at least lie to my face.

There is a wedge of sort and I cannot begin to ask what I did so wrong.

It is Valentine's day and you could not just be around for me.

I am surrounded by love, choked by its intensity yet none of it is from you.

I am still in my feelings waiting by the phone, my lungs crossed, feeling the burn from the passion that lit my heart,

feeling the cracks in my bones from where I fell and was never caught.

I feel hot tears burning at the back of my eyes at the thought of what I am worth to you.

Not worth your love, your time, your effort, or your attention.

I am just another girl begging for your validation,
blowing up your phone, it hits close to desperation.

It is the day of love yet I have never felt so unloved, and it is

an execution.

Its Valentine's day and the one that makes me whole would rather do without his unwanted attraction.

Today and every other day and your sorry excuses for effort are becoming exhausting.

I have questioned myself, sat in my dark room and inquired to thyself on why you just cannot love me.

The moments of silence are relentless.

I cannot breathe under the weight of my hurt.

This is not what I meant when I said I want a man that leaves me breathless.

Can't you hear me cry out to you? Or am I bump in the road? Another nagging distraction in your busy day?

You see, I am tired of being apologized to. Nothing will change.

Show is over, take your bow, close the curtains and please? Turn the lights off on your way out.

Dem Go Still Talk

"If, before every action, we were to begin by weighing up the consequences, thinking about them in earnest, first the immediate consequences, then the probable, then the possible, then the imaginable ones, we should never move beyond the point where our first thought brought us to a halt. The good and evil resulting from our words and deeds go on apportioning themselves, one assumes in a reasonably uniform and balanced way, throughout all the days to follow, including those endless days, when we shall not be here to find out, to congratulate ourselves or ask for pardon, indeed there are those who claim that this is the much talked of immortality."

*~José Saramago, **Blindness***

* * *

To the girl with a breaking heart, the day was the proverbial darkest hour. Sunlight poured into her dark room through the window and curtains that remained partially open; enough to let a little sunlight in and enough to keep the darkness inside. A storm had brewed for long and she knew it. She was too aware of what was to come.

Naomi turned her head to the door that creaked as someone on the other side slowly pushed it open.

I am not ready, she thought as a fresh batch of tears, hot and salty, erupted from her eyes and streamed down her already streaked cheeks. It was almost midday and for the most part of that morning, Naomi had been confined to her room as the storm brewed outside; the consequences of her actions.

The door swung open, revealing the sympathetic face of Vanessa, her older sister. Vanessa was beautiful in every sense and definition of the word, and her parents' prized child. The church sang her praises as one of their dedicated youth, the school threw awards at her as their star student, and her parents had to swat away suitors that came knocking on their gate.

Tall, slender and brilliant in everything she chose to touch and pursue.

Her coily hair was tied back in a bun and her long slender legs extended from her body as gracefully as the rest of her.

"They want you outside," Vanessa finally spoke into the dark and silent room. Naomi sat on the floor at the far left corner of her room, away from her bed that nestled under the partially open window.

Vanessa glanced at the face of her little sister and a familiar anger rose from deep within her, promising to choke her.

A huge part of her wanted to walk across the room, grab Naomi and shake her until her bones rattled; that part wanted

to know why she had been so naive and careless but the love she had for the child overtook that anger.

Instead, she wanted to wrap her arms around Naomi's small figure, hold her and assure her that everything would be alright but she could not. Their father would maim and disfigure them both if he found out that Vanessa had said more than five sentences to Naomi or comforted her.

Vanessa's throat clogged with emotion as she watched Naomi rise wearily from the floor, her face catching the light for a split second to reveal all the paths and trails her tears had traveled that day. Her beautiful brown eyes, once filled with life and excitement, were swollen, dull and drained of all joy.

"It is going to be okay," Vanessa spoke from the door, unable to hold back her words.

Naomi raised her bloodshot eyes and nodded. Words were not going to fix her problems but hearing them soothed her heart.

Vanessa took one last look at Naomi before she retreated back into the kitchen. The room resumed its silence.

Naomi forced her feet into her plastic slippers before she followed her older sister out of the room. Her body seemed alien to her, borrowed. Her protruding belly unproportional to her slender frame.

Placing one foot in front of the other, Naomi weaved through her parents' house that no longer welcomed her until she came to the living room that, at that moment, served as a courthouse.

The room was well lit by the chandelier that hang from their whiteboard ceiling, and reflected off the huge mirror that stood adjacent the entrance door. The three-two-two-one chair were spread evenly throughout the rectangle room, the black leather seats standing out against the white walls.

On one side of the room sat her parent and two of her uncles, and on the other end sat strangers.

He had not come, she noted with dismay. He had not come to defend himself against her parents.

The room fell quiet as Naomi's frame made it into the room, the hostility from her father palpable in the air. Tensions were high in the room and Naomi's presence threatened to be the straw that broke the camel's back.

Terrified of making any unwarranted actions that would spark her parents anger, Naomi remained transfixed at the entrance of the living room, rooted in her own fear and uncertain outcomes that lay ahead.

"Sit down," Mr Phiri, Naomi's father, barked at her, hardly looking at his daughter. She disgusted him and had, in her actions, shamed them as parents. An embarrassment.

Naomi quietly obeyed, bringing her body to the cold tiled floor. All eyes in the room remained firmly placed on her, the attention unwelcome and unbearable.

"This is our daughter, her name is Naomi," Uncle Thom narrated to the strangers, breaking the silence. "The reason you were called and we are all gathered here."

The strangers nodded solemnly.

A man in his early fifties sat at the end of the two-seater, his small nose begging the glasses he wore for mercy. Balding had found him and welcomed him as hair sprout everywhere but the middle of his head. The woman next to him was much older, wearing a *chitenje* and closed flat shoes. Her face was hostile, her eyes burrowing into Naomi's head and her frown etched onto the wrinkles around her mouth.

"As you can see, our daughter here is expecting and while that should be a cause of joy, she is too young and unmarried,"

Uncle Tom continued, leaning forward and clasping his hands in front of him.

The strangers nodded solemnly, agreeing with Uncle Thom. He was a levelheaded and reasonable man.

“Where is the man responsible?” Mr Phiri bellowed into the room, casting an accusing finger to the people sent in his stead. “Show me the coward!”

Uncle Thom grabbed Mr Phiri by the shoulder, whispering profusely into his ears. Mr Phiri was beyond reason but chose to keep quiet.

Uncle Thom cleared his throat and let the silence grow for a few seconds before he spoke.

“The man responsible should offer support to our daughter.”

The man. Bernard.

The man and woman looked at each other before they turned to whisper among themselves.

Naomi sighed quietly, averting her eyes to find her mother’s eyes on her. The disappointment was surplus but even then, Naomi could see that her mother pitied her and did not love her any less. She desperately wanted to be in her mother’s arms, to tell her that she was sorry and she was scared but her father stood as the wall between her and any member of the household.

“We understand that a mistake has been made,” the woman begun, breaking the word-filled stare between Naomi and her mother, “but you have to understand that my son is a married man with four children already.”

Naomi’s breath caught in her throat and her eyes widened. What did she mean married with children? Bernard had told her that he lived with his mother and his sister’s children. Naomi wanted to object but deep down she knew that she

had been lied to and her naivety had let her swallow the lies he handed to her, eagerly licking love off of a knife. It made sense and maybe a part of her did see the lies but had turned a blind eye to them to stomach the relationship.

The stinging in her eyes took form as the words sank in and were grudgingly processed.

Her hands, slightly trembling, clutched her temples as if trying to contain the thoughts raging within her mind. The headache, following the rivers of tears, pulsed with each beat of her heart. She winced, the pain across her face as she pressed her fingertips to her temples, as if hoping to massage away the ache that resonated through her skull.

Naomi heard a gasp sound in the room, followed by searing pain as something landed, with unrestrained force, on Naomi's head. Naomi, stunned and wide-eyed, clutched her head, momentarily frozen in surprise. She screamed in pain as the object, a shoe, landed on the floor a few inches away.

Lips trembling, she looked up to see her father being held back by Uncle Thom, one of his shoes missing. Her mother sat exactly where she had been the whole time but tears had broken down and silently coursed down her face.

"Kelvin, settle down," Uncle Thomas said as he placed his brother back into his seat. "She is still a child."

"Get her out of here! Get her out of my sight!" Mr Phiri bellowed, his words hitting Naomi like daggers.

Naomi began to sob loudly, the heaves shaking her shoulders and she breathes short and insufficient. She was beaten down and tired, she wanted peace and rest: craved it but some consequences were inevitable and too hard to bear.

"I said get out!" Mr Phiri roared, startling everyone in the room.

Naomi cried as she pushed herself from the floor onto her feet, feeling the loneliness and abandonment seep in. She did not know her fate from here but she knew that her father hated her with so much passion that he would never forgive her. His reputation had been dragged in the mud together with hers and quite frankly, Naomi did not blame him.

Her parents marriage shook for the first time in twenty-eight years as they fought over her living in the house with them, her father's voice echoing in the air and screaming profanities as to why Naomi should be sent to the village. Her mother was shunned by the women at church for her daughter's mistake and her friends had all but abandoned her, saying they should not be associated with '*someone like her*'.

Her future dimmed by the lies of a man.

Naomi walked, defeated, into her room, carrying the weight of her actions and the bloody aftermath on her shoulders. She had tried to be strong but she was exhausted beyond belief.

As she closed the door, all the threads holding her together broke at once sending her body into a state of despair. She had no tears left to cry and as she stood there, hand on the door knob and forehead resting on the closed door, Naomi knew what she had to do.

She had to end her pain and everyone else's; she had to leave. She had enough money saved up to last her a few months until she could find a job but who, in their right mind, would hire an eighteen year old pregnant girl?

Naomi tentatively walked to her bed and sat at the edge, staring at the walls that had been hers for as long as she could remember.

Life was hard with her parents but deep down, she knew it would only get worse if she ran away. The world outside was

brutal and she could not work, do school and take care of a newborn even if she wanted to.

She could stay there with her parents for a little while, save up and move away; hopefully, after she finished school and could land a job that paid enough.

All that could take years, she knew: years and a lot of hard work but this was her life now.

Naomi sighed heavily, placing a hand on her stomach.

“We will be okay,” she said to the stranger in her belly. “We will be just fine.”

The door opened and closed, bringing with it Vanessa. Naomi looked up at her sister and offered her a weak smile.

Vanessa crossed the distance between them and hugged Naomi, offering her love and comfort. People made mistakes, her little sister was no different but this wasn't the time for her to be alone and without support.

She needed it the most.

“Naomi, you will be okay.”

To The Man I Loved

“Some birds are not meant to be caged, that’s all. Their feathers are too bright, their songs too sweet and wild. So you let them go, or when you open the cage to feed them they somehow fly out past you. And the part of you that knows it was wrong to imprison them in the first place rejoices, but still, the place where you live is that much more drab and empty for their departure.”

~Stephen King

* * *

We stood at the door we had once called our home, our sanctuary. A place that was now haunted with bitter memories of the wreckage our marriage turned out to be. The silence was loud, sadness skin deep, and heartbreak tangible.

Our bags lay packed in two separate trucks outside: to each

their own, dividing among ourselves years of memories and leaving no trace of the 'one person' we once were.

Life had been great for a year or two, young love we could barely keep our hands off each other. Following our dreams to the forever we sought, saying 'I do' and packing our bags to settle into each other's lives, to find a place we both called home.

Home looked empty now, maybe an echo of the emptiness we both felt inside at that moment of goodbye. Each weighing and dreading the finality of the word but knowing it was for the best, knowing we needed to save what was left before the love that had become indifference morphed into hate. We were happy at first, dancing in the kitchen at dawn and giving each other kisses that said 'I love you' more than words ever could. Sweet nothings, the train of flowers and companionship that seemed to go till forever.

There was love until there wasn't.

Out came the versions of ourselves we thought we could tame or maybe, hide away: the selfishness, the anger and the silence closely sewn to the differences we could not shape. Instead of settling them in long talks and mutual understanding, we let them grow, letting lack of communication darken the relationship we had. Your stubbornness became your inability to compromise, your playfulness meant I could not rely on you to show up or take things seriously, and your mysteriousness was a facade for not opening up to people and shutting the world out.

I found that my tender love had somehow put you on a pedestal of sort and as reality started to settle in and routines

took the place of romance, I could see you for the flawed man you really were. The wounds you never healed, the cracks in your heart, and the corrosive leaks from your past.

Maybe it was the same for you. Maybe, you also got to see me for the mess that I am; avoiding confrontation, letting assumptions eat at me in silence, the jealousy that almost consumed me, and my sharp tongue that lashed out every-time the bottle in which I kept my feelings overflowed.

The nights spent in each other's arms were replaced with an impassable canyon in between, each of us clinging to their own self, affection being clouded by emotional distance. We hated each other for being the only available person in the room, for not having other people to run to when we were the problem that needed fixing. We had no one to blame for our fights and our misfortunes so we blamed each other.

We became ghosts of the people we were, losing ourselves in a sinking ship and rising tides, the dying embers of a fire that once lit our passion.

We stayed, too afraid to let it go and let the spilling of our dark colors paint such a horrendous mess. Poltergeists in the house we once called our home.

To the world, it was still us holding hands and still in the summer of our union. Behind closed doors, we could have been nothing less of strangers: not showing anything resembling a thought, an opinion or feeling. We were gone, on opposite sides of a wall that seemed to go up gradually until we could not see what on the others side.

The world would never know the mascaraed we kept up, ever oblivious to the wreckage of us—once so passionate, saying 'excuse me' as we passed in the narrow hallways of our home, like strangers on the sidewalk.

Standing at the end of this road, seconds away from closing the door to our home, we hate each other for ruining what we had and for not fighting enough and for having to go out separate ways. We had drained the life out of our marriage and here was the consequence of a collection of small actions. Missed dates, late nights at work, and words that should have remained thoughts.

We wish we could go back, patch things up before they got so bad but neither of us has that power, the damage has been done and sadly, it is irreversible. As we close this door, I breathe in the last few minutes of being together, of being yours and brace myself for the sun that will rise on me without you in.

This is not the ending we thought we would get yet here it is as clear as day. The tears have already seeped through my eyelids and looking at you standing there on the verge, I cannot decide what hurts more: the actual end or knowing that there is no one to blame but ourselves.

Here is to you and here is to me, to facing the days ahead with hope and clear plates. To erasing the disappointment of what was to be a lifelong experience of happiness and companionship. To falling back in love with ourselves and with life. Here is to accepting the part we play in our own misery and realizing that happiness for both of us lays in a place without the other...no matter how hard the truth, no matter how relentless the hurt.

Goodbye.

Maybe I Could Have Endured

“What have I not endured? What have I not suffered?”

To days like these,

I know it's pretty difficult to carry on, especially with all that is going on around. I know you tried your best to build something, to grow something the very whole time and when the time came for it to blossom, everything seemed to have fallen apart all over again. I know you have always believed in hard work and the goodness of spirit, yet sometimes when you find your hard work slip through time's fingers and your goodness going absolutely unnoticed in a world of camouflaged realities, I hope you hold on. I know you feel angry and hostile and you seek answers but hold on, dear heart for nothing goes in vain in a universe that absorbs every bit of one's actions and intentions. Hold on, dear heart for it doesn't matter how

many times you fall but how you remember to walk ahead having full faith on the Justice of Time. Hold on, dear heart for faith is not when you carry on when the way is smooth and lit but when you cross tunnels of darkness to become the light yourself, for faith is knowing He is there with you, even in the darkest of nights and the fiercest of storms. Hold on, dear heart for Nothing is certain in a world that revolves around a star of Fire, only that you have the same fire within yourself, the very Stardust that He has put in your soul. And no matter what, carry on, walk ahead with kindness and grace, seep deep in that passion of hard work that pushes you to wake up in the morning to create something, to grow something and to find something wherein you can pour a flicker of your spirit, while wearing the smile of goodness, the very one that makes you, You.

Hold on, dear heart! We will grow our garden, all over again, with a little more sunshine and a smile of strength!

Love & Light, always
~Debatraye

* * *

Do you remember 7th March as vividly as I do? Does the thought of my tear-streaked face and battered body keep you up at night or phase you in the least?

Do you remember the day I came back banging at your door

with my one-year-old daughter strapped to my back and my son trembling in my arms from the horrors he had witnessed?

You said to endure.

He was my husband after all, and he had the right to see other women without being questioned. In a marriage of two, it was my duty to hold it up and make sure it never sinks. Those vows I made at the altar were for life and, forgiveness is a virtue I should have as a wife.

No, you couldn't let me into your house to seek shelter. My husband is a respectable man and word of this will tarnish his reputation. He is, of course, a church elder.

Ephesians 4 verse 32, you said, I should go back home.

I returned home that night with a heavy heart and more than my spirit broken judging from the sickening pain that radiated from what I was sure was a bruised rib. Now that I sit here and think about it, you never even asked if I was okay.

I didn't know what to do and was rather low in numbers as to who to confide in. I did not come to your door because I did not have family members, I could tell but their response had always been the same.

"That is how married life is. Endure, he is your husband after all."

My mother would go two steps for that and add that no one would marry me if I ever left. No one wanted a woman who already had another man's children.

He had come home that night reeking of cheap alcohol and women's perfume. The children had been woken up by the banging at the door, the rattling of the hinges and as the man

that they called their father screamed every profanity on God's green earth.

I was greeted with a slap as soon as I open the door and the ringing in my ears left me in a daze. He said I took too long to open the door, what if he had been jumped while I took my sweet time? He had staggered passed me into the living room where he found food waiting for him.

A king in the castle, I thought eyeing in the man who had once upon a time worshiped the ground I walked on.

It was two in the morning.

The food has been there since 8 PM, of course it was cold. The charcoal was done, he hadn't given me money to buy food for four days now and it was with shame that I had to borrow money from the neighbor to buy soap to wash Callie's nappies. Everton hadn't been in school for a month, he was taken out because his fees was not paid, and I couldn't afford books.

My business selling alcohol had run into the ground a few months earlier from carrying the weight of the household. The clothes on my back were the same ones from before I even got married, the seams held together by thin threads and prayers. The children's clothes were falling apart as they stretched and grew. My heart physically hurt from watching my children suffer in the world didn't choose to be born in.

Remember my battered face? That was from reminding him that rent was due, and the bills hadn't been paid. How dare I make a budget for household necessities on a salary he earned? What gave me the right to tell him that we had no food tomorrow? That Everton needed books when all I did was sit at home and take care of his children and our home.

Remember my eyes that were swollen shut from receiving undeserving blows?

Remember the limp in my walk from having my legs beaten with the legs of a broken chair. The chair that hit my head with a brute force and shattered into pieces.

Two months ago, I got wind that he had a mistress, a local girl known for luring stupid men and idiotic husbands to use them for money. Money you and I know cannot sustain both our family and a mistress. I didn't put it off him nor did I confront him about it.

The Lord shall fight for you, you shall have your peace, I recited repeatedly. So much so the words hang over my head like an umbrella from all the things people told me were happening in front of their very eyes.

I am not a strong woman and I found myself breaking down constantly.

I was nothing short of miserable, my life was a humorless joke that seemed to go on and stretch past the expanse of time.

What would become of my children?

What would become of me?

I could not stand on my own and everybody knew it. My children still needed the place to call home and food to at least stop their stomachs from rumbling. I could do neither. I could not even on the cleverest of days describe how the standard 1 door looked like.

To your door I marched yet again.

You are the pastor after all, you would know what to do. You would talk to him and make him see sense since he does, after all, answer to you.

Matthew 6 verses 14 to 15, you said, I am married to him and not those other people.

They were snakes and were sent by the devil. They were

trying to ruin my marriage. My loyalties should remain with my husband and in his wrongs, I must forgive him.

You are right, I thought to myself, and I walked out of your house thinking I found wisdom oblivious to the guillotine that hang over my head.

Monetary help around the house dwindled into nothing, together with his presence. The rumors of his affair resounded on every street corner, and I wore shame every day as I fed my children boiled mangoes.

Enough was enough.

I slapped my child on my back and walked to his mistress's house. The neighbors eyed me as I approached and whispered among themselves.

They must know why I am here, I thought. My heart pounding and my palms sweaty, I knocked on the door with false determination. A part of me hoping the door wouldn't open and that my fears would remain speculations.

My husband of nine years opened the door in his boxers, obviously at home.

I broke down there and then as he shouted at me for following him there. He told me to go home, and he was through with me. I was old and disgusting, I did not know how to please a man, that I was loose down there from having his children.

His children!

People had gathered around and listened as I was demeaned and belittled. Me, his wife who tended to him when he was sick, washed his clothes, and cooked for him. Me, who had stuck by him when he lost his job and when he got involved

in an accident that left him on bed rest for five months. I was old and disgusting that day. I was reduced to a used rag and a nagging hag.

Two days later, I was hospitalized from low blood sugar. The doctor said I had fainted on my way from drawing water and my sugar levels were too low because I wasn't eating enough. I really can't tell you even today if it was the aftershock of my husband's betrayal, or it was truly my lack of food from rationing portions between my children and myself.

They were energetic and growing and needed more food, so I skipped more than a few meals to make up in their rations. I couldn't watch them starve and suffer.

My children stayed with me in the hospital for the three days I was there. My mother refused to take them in and forbade anyone and everyone from taking care of them.

They were my responsibility, she said, I had shamed them by being a useless wife. So much so that my husband left me and publicly humiliated me.

At least they had food in their bellies from the hospital rations. The nurses, God bless their hearts, took care of them: bathed them and fed them.

One week later, my husband came back home. He said the mistress was useless and she had used Black Magic, yet word on the street was she had kicked him out for not contributing to household expenses and living off her money. He said it was his house and it was the devil's work. He even brought his uncles and my mother's to plead his case.

They said he was sorry.

They said I should let him back into the house and he had changed his ways. When I remained unmoved, they brought

you in.

First Corinthians 7 verse 10 to 11, you said, I had to take him back he is a human and prone to error like everyone else. I am a strong woman, I should endure.

You signed my death sentence.

Three days later, he broke my leg with a metal bar for coming late from the market. He said I was having an affair and I was an unfaithful wife. He told the hospital I fell. The real blow was when the doctor ordered a full blood screen.

I am HIV positive now and was treated for STI's. He couldn't even look me in the face as I sat there and cried. He said he was sorry, that we should stick together now more than ever. We were married and God brought us together for a reason.

He said he would change and that he would be a better man. He promised to quit drinking and spend more time with his children, but I have since learned that snakes shed their skin to become bigger snakes.

A week ago, the mistress showed up at our doorstep heavily pregnant and demanding that she come stay with us or he move out and live with her. She sat on the veranda and crossed her legs and waited for him to come back from wherever his feet had led him to. The sun danced in the sky as she waited and with each passing minute my heart sank deeper and deeper into the pit that had formed in my stomach and continued to grow. Tears were far and my love for my husband even further.

She told everyone who cared to listen that he had impregnated her and that he would marry her.

The looks of pity were stomach turning.

People looked at me as you would an innocent person that had been robbed, beaten within an inch of their life, and left

for dead.

He never denied it. He never even apologized.

I came to you on Wednesday to cry out my sorrows, that Everton had been caught stealing in the market and was ruthlessly beaten. They beat my child so much he needed stitches in over five places, they broke his tiny bones. My son is only eight. He stole food!

My child was just hungry and my heart tore into a thousand pieces.

I cried to you that the hospital refused to attend to my daughter because I could not afford medical bills, that the landlord had given us two days to leave his house, that the people my husband owed money came and ransacked the house and you *sat* there and said I should endure.

I found out I was pregnant three days ago and in most households that would be cause to celebrate, a child is a blessing. Instead, my heart felt destroyed and deep sadness robbed me of joy.

My husband had raped me on one of his drunken nights, forced himself on me despite my protests and had left me bruised and bleeding. No one would have believed me or, worse, they would say he had rights to my body.

He is my husband after all. This is not the world I wanted to have another child in.

Thank God for the ones I had but I was done.

Two days ago, my husband was given a promotion by the church, by you. You praised him and called him an exemplary member of the church. You said he was a man leading by example and I sat in the congregation listening to your lies.

The scars on my body begged to differ. My husband was a

drunkard, but he was clever. You see, he learned to beat me and bruise me where no one could see, like the burn marks on my back where he had poured hot charcoal because I asked him to stop drinking the Kachasu I made for business.

I was a living testimony of his cruelty, yet you stood there and lied through your teeth.

Before everyone, before God.

A day later, he sold my mother's land and moved in with his mistress. My mother, cold hearted and calculating, had given me the ownership papers to keep them away from my late father's relatives. My husband had gone and sold that land without my permission. He ripped my children for my hands, calling me an unfit mother and sent them off with his sister, a woman I had never met and had only heard of. I was evicted from the house with nothing but the clothes on my back so here we are.

I have prayed and cried and prayed some more.

I have nowhere to go and no one to listen to my cries. My children have been taken for me to a place I do not know. Even if I wanted to follow them, I wouldn't know where to go. My mother shut the door in my face and said I am to blame that my husband is a drunkard and beats me up she said I let him in that I am weak. I did not even tell her about the land.

I just blankly stared at her.

Maybe, she's right and I am weak.

I tell you this, all this, in a letter because I do not have the strength to come knocking on your door. I have been tried and I have failed.

My biggest regret is that I will never see my children grow, that they were and might continue to be abused and they

probably think that their mother is weak and could never stand up for herself.

I have cried my eyes out, cried my eyes sore and I have no voice.

Everything that can be taken from me has been taken and my frail body can no longer carry the weight of my heavy heart.

I think it is time for me to go.

I have endured and I hope you endure the weight of my death that will rest on your shoulders. I hope you find peace in the fact that you told me to endure, and I was too weak to heed your advice. For my marriage, I endured. For the church, I endured. For my children, I endured.

My spirit is tattered, and the remains cannot be salvaged even for scraps. My soul is weary and uneasy.

Wherever I go, I hope I no longer feel like a prisoner cornered or betrayed.

Maybe, just maybe wherever I go, I won't be asked to endure.

II

Invisible Things

The woman who...

She never understood being a woman.

All she knew was that she hated it and all it entailed.

Her name was lost in a sea of other general names, like 'wife' and 'mother'. So much so, she could hardly remember her name on some days. It started with an 'S', she thought and she could feel it on the tip of her tongue but it quickly got lost.

She had disappeared, simply put. Probably died slowly over the years. It had brought pain. Emotional, psychological and in times, physical.

A pain she did not understand and one that was frequently misunderstood by her friends.

"At least you have your children."

"You should be more grateful for what you have."

Yes, she felt a lot of things but grateful just didn't make the cut.

She sighed as she wobbled home. Left, right, left. The soft breeze soothing her skin but doing absolutely nothing for the anger and frustration that burned inside her. She walked slowly and deliberately, urging her swollen feet forward.

The ground was uneven but she barely noticed. Her mind had wandered back and she got lost in the rhythm of her wobble.

What was her name again? Sarah? Sandra? She couldn't remember and it didn't seem so important now. Maybe she could think about it another time. Maybe when her husband was snoring his lungs out, or when the children were off to school during the day.

She didn't have to think about where she was going. She knew the streets like the back of her hand. She barely acknowledged the lives that seemed to go on around her.

Ten years.

She had been married for ten years but that seemed like a lifetime ago. Who was she before her marriage? Sheila? Samantha?

Surely, she could remember her own name.

It didn't matter anymore.

She was someone's wife now and would only be addressed by his name. It began shortly after they got married.

"You don't have to work. What will *people* say when they see you running around in an office."

People.

People seemed to have a hold and say on their lives.

"I also want to make my own money," she had insisted in the conversation that spanned days and later got family members involved.

"A married woman like you should stay and look after the home," his mother had said, tutting and shaking her head like the thought of having a daughter-in-law with a career disgusted her.

What would the *people* at her church say? Again, the *people*. The faceless, nameless and invisible jury.

“Your husband and home should always come first.”

And where did she come in? Somewhere in the middle? Or lost in the background of shadows that basked where dreams should have thrived?

Her husband had resigned to not talking to her, wanting her to change her mind by imprisoning her in her solitude. She had remained adamant and kept her job, although she later quit after her first child. He couldn't have been more happy. He didn't say it with words, but rather a subtle smile he couldn't suppress even if he was paid to.

He had won. Or at least, that's what it felt like to her.

Who would she have been if she had chosen herself sooner? It's not that she *hated* her life but she just wished that things could be...different...somehow. Not drastically different, perhaps, but just enough that she could recognize herself in the mirror or remember her name without straining her brain again. Just enough that she could remember what it felt like to dream without guilt.

She was a professional day dreamer, that she was sure of.

“Mama,” a child's voice broke through her thoughts. A whirlwind of black curls came hurtling towards her, beaming a smile that could blind the sun.

She didn't hate *all* of her life, she thought as she picked up her six year old and hugged her. Love flowed through her every vein.

“Where is your sister?”

“She is making porridge in the kitchen.”

The woman's heart constricted a little. Mary, her oldest, should have been out playing with friends but she was stuck in a kitchen assuming the role of the eldest daughter in an African household like the job was meant for her. The expectation was

unspoken.

Of course, she never complained. That was not what was expected of her but her mother saw through it all.

She saw the sadness in Mary's eyes whenever her friends called out to her from the front gate, the way her movements had become slower, and the smile on her face less frequent.

The woman entered the kitchen and dropped the small grocery bag that dangled from the crook of her arm.

"Mary, go play outside."

She hesitated as she placed a lid over the pot of porridge. Relief dropped her shoulders but she shook her head, banishing the thought of being anywhere but helping at home.

"I'm making porridge, Ma," she answered calmly.

"No. Out."

It wasn't her job to take care of the household. She could help every now and then, but she was a child and she needed to play and make friends.

Mary darted out of the door, momentarily forgetting her slippers before running back and picking them up. She didn't even bother to put them on.

She wobbled to the stove and turned the dial to medium heat. She rested one hand on the small of her back where the weight of her belly tagged her body forward.

Baby number 3.

She glanced at the sink full of dishes and the floor that begged for cleaning.

Maybe she could rest a while as the porridge simmered, and while the children ate, she could get a few chores done.

Left, right, left, she wobbled into the living room and sank into the couch. Between the fatigue of the day and the strain of growing another human in her stomach, her eyes drooped

and she fell asleep.

What was her name again? Salma? No, that wasn't it. Or maybe she got the letter wrong and she was someone named Brenda. Or Priscilla? Charity, maybe. No, they all sounded wrong and did not fit her skin. It didn't matter, not then it didn't.

The sound of the door slamming jolted her from her brief moment of rest and her husband trudged in. She mustered a weary smile, but he didn't look at her.

What time was it? Had she been asleep for long. The porridge!

"Honey, could you please check on the porridge for me?"

He ignored her remark.

"I'm starving," he announced as he lowered himself onto the couch. His voice carried that clipped tone she had come to dread. "What's for dinner?"

She straightened and winced as her back protested, and explained softly, "I'm just making porridge for the children first. Then—"

He cut her off with a sigh. She knew that sigh too well. He didn't have time for her explanations and her 'theatrics' as he called them. He worked all day to keep a roof above their heads and food in their bellies while she lazied away at home looking after their home and their children. She could physically feel her stomach tighten from the dread that followed such moments.

Where did the time go?

"I will make you tea," she said quickly. She struggled to her feet, gripping the table for balance as the room seemed to tilt briefly with her fatigue.

He didn't even look at her or offer any support. He simply

leaned back and tuned on the TV, peeling off his shoes and discarding them on the floor next to him.

The woman's eyes narrowed as she watched this display. Couldn't he at least put his items into the washing basket?

Swallowing the sudden burst of anger that blocked her throat, she wobbled to the kitchen and grabbed the first pot she could find. The porridge hadn't burned so she hadn't been asleep for long. She set the pot on the other plate and turned the heat on.

She was awake, tired but awake. She cleaned the dishes slowly, her gaze focused on the small crack on the window.

His voice used to be warm and so full of love.

"You won't have to do anything. You won't ever have to lift a finger," he had promised her when their love was new, barely used.

Back then, he had paraded her around with pride, his beautiful, intelligent wife who lit up every room she entered. She was his entire world, the center of everything he did. His life revolved around her and the home they would build together. He went out of his way to please her, showering her with attention and care.

They married, she had their children and she quit her job.

And that is where the danger was. That was the beginning of her slow death. The suffocation, the micro-aggression and the weaponized incompetence.

She wanted to blame his mother for not raising him right but then she would be part of the people. The people who always blamed a woman for a man's shortcomings.

"She should have taught him to look after himself." True.

"Boys will be boys." False.

Her husband was a grown man and all accountability for his actions should have rested on his head but it didn't. It first

rested on hers.

They used to be married but now they just living together.

Hell, he couldn't even notice her vanishing right in front of his eyes. She had become part of the furniture.

He barely looked at her. He didn't invite her to his office functions anymore, and when he was home, he was only a shadow. She could hardly remember the last time they had laughed together, or when he had touched her without impatience.

Even her anger had waned and was replaced by a dull ache that felt like resignation. Maybe numbness.

There was no time to linger in sadness. There was always something to be done, someone to be cared for. She poured the tea into a chipped mug and carried it to him.

"Here," she said quietly, setting the cup down on the table near him. The effort was great seeing as her stomach extended so far she had not seen her feet in months.

He didn't thank her, didn't even look up. She stood there for a moment longer, as if waiting for something. Some recognition, maybe, or a kind word. When none came, she turned away, returning to the stove where the children's porridge waited to be stirred.

Carried the world.

The heavy silence in the house amplified the ticking of the clock, and her own labored breathing.

She leaned against the kitchen counter, one hand gripping the edge as another contraction ripped through her. It stole her breath, bent her over, but she clenched her jaw and forced herself to straighten. There was too much to do.

Four hours ago.

Her water had broken four hours ago.

The pot of soup simmered on the stove while she rigorously washed the dishes. The clothes were drying outside and the floor was lined with water paths were a mop had passed.

You've done this before. You don't need me there for this one. Call your mother.

She had heard the words come out of her husband's mouth but she hadn't quite processed them. Maybe if he had said her name, she would have remembered who she was and maybe, the woman she had forgotten she was would not take such disrespect.

But she was wife and mama. Her stunned silence did not

last long after he hung up on her, his wife. She had wanted to scream at his indifference and call him all seven types of fools.

But she didn't say them. She couldn't.

"Okay," she had said instead.

Jane, maybe? Her name. Like the woman who lived next door. What were the odds of that? Probably slim to none. She felt like a Fatima but it didn't suit her either. She had known a Fatima, but that seemed like eons ago.

The next contraction made her pause, slowed her but didn't ultimately stop her war path. Her husband insisted they did not need a maid. It was just him, her (pregnant), and their two daughters. What did she need the extra help for?

She had never agreed, of course, but she had stopped arguing. What was the point? He didn't understand, and he didn't care to.

The house was quiet and the silence was occasionally broken by her wobbling feet as they moved from one room to the next; fixing, cleaning, preparing for the day she would not be around. The children would need clean clothes and food, and she couldn't leave a mess behind. Her body begged for rest and somewhere deep inside, she hoped someone, hell anyone would say, "It's enough. You've done enough."

When everything was done, she called her mother.

Mary could look after her father and her sister, that she was sure of.

There was that burden again. Dragging her eldest daughter into the troubles of womanhood.

This wasn't how it was supposed to be.

The bitter thought surfaced suddenly but she shoved it aside. Thoughts like that were dangerous. They led to places she couldn't afford to go. Besides, she couldn't even remember her

own name and nobody around her seemed to acknowledge its existence.

A list.

She needed to make a list for Mary to follow; what to do, when to eat, how to help around. She pressed a fist to her mouth to stifle the groan, biting down until the wave of pain passed. It wasn't just a contraction though. It was mixed with guilt and hurt. She wanted to grab the world and shake it until it rattled back to its senses.

How had it come to this?

Did Mary even know what it meant to be a child anymore?

Did the people not care for this?

The throbbing in her back intensified.

Her contractions were getting closer together.

She glanced at the empty chair at the dining table, the one where her husband used to sit and tell her about his day, laughing about the mundane things like the coworker that called their boss a stuck up prick. Or the time he had farted during a presentation.

He wasn't her partner anymore. He was another weight on her strained shoulders, another person to consider, and another demand that drained her. She had come to realize that, in many ways, she was taking care of him in the same way she took care of their children. How could she be expected to feel attraction toward someone who resembled another child, someone whose emotional needs and demands had surpassed her own?

She cleaned up after him; wiping pee stains off the toilet after him, picking up his shoes and socks from where he tossed them in the living room.

She was his caretaker, if anything. He did not see her as his

wife deserving of his love and affection. Or as the mother of his children, human and in need of support. He had stopped seeing her as a person, as a woman with desires and dreams of her own.

She found herself enduring his presence, and his touch became repulsive.

“Men are like that sometimes.”

Not all men, but somehow, always a man.

She had heard women in her community whisper about how marriages could change, how love could wilt but she didn't understand the sentiment until her last contraction had her writhing on the floor. She barely made it out the door before another one rocked her frame.

God, just a little more time, please.

Was already gone.

Why couldn't she stop? Why couldn't she walk away?

What would *people* say? There.

Again, the *people*. Who even were they?

"But think of your children."

"Do you want them to grow up without a father?"

"All marriages have their downs."

What would it take for her to feel like a woman again?

Or was she too late? She could barely remember what being loved felt like. 10 years. Where had the time truly gone? Wasn't she supposed to be a nurse by now? That was her dream, wasn't it? But when she had passed the nursing entrance exams, her husband said they could not finance it, and his next breath talked about getting himself a better car.

She had smiled at him. She always smiled. It was a reflex, a way to make it seem like everything was fine. The *people* didn't ask for her pain; they only demanded that she continue, that she keep going, that she fulfill her duties without complaint.

Irritation surfaced as she tried to remember who these *people* were and why they had such a hold on her life.

Who made them judge and overseer? No, they were self-appointed.

Bitterness.

Yes, that was what she felt and a touch more resentment. Envy too at the nurses who tended to her as she laid on in the hospital bed. They had followed their dreams, while she stayed idle in a life that squeezed her throat more each day.

A small tap on her shoulder brought her back to the reality she felt she no longer belonged in.

“I have been calling your name. Are you okay?” her mother asked with furrowed eyebrows.

She had called her? She blinked absently. She must have missed the mention of her own name. Damn it. It seemed silly to ask now.

It was a while since anyone had asked if she was okay. What did that even mean anymore?

“I am fine, Ma. Just a little tired is all.”

The baby had come minutes after she had arrived, heaving and distraught. She had done this before but that did not mean she did not feel like she was being ripped into two. It did not stop the capillaries in her eyes from bursting or the perineal tears.

She simply had the misfortune of being a woman.

The woman paused. A thought had occurred to her.

“Ma, what is your name?”

Remembered her name.

The straw? The one that broke the camels back? Yeah, well it is not talked about enough. The proverb "*the straw that broke the camel's back*" refers to the final, seemingly small burden or event that causes an overwhelming collapse after a series of increasingly heavy and unaddressed stresses. It's not the single event itself that causes the breakdown, but the accumulation of weight that has already been carried.

The woman stepped through the front door cautiously. She balanced a small swaddled baby and her overwhelmingly heavy hospital bag.

Her husband hadn't come to the hospital. Not even once. He had said he'd wait until they were discharged, but she had expected more. She had expected *him* to come.

What was that they said? Great expectations make frustrated men.

The house was filled with the sound of the evening news. He was probably sprawled on the couch as his wife hailed a taxi from the hospital with their newborn baby.

Lest he lift a finger and die.

The poor bastard.

The woman quietly dropped her bag and walked to the kitchen where Mary bent over the stove. She had hunched over the pot, gracefully taking on the responsibility of an adult with such quiet grace that it only seemed to make her mother's guilt grow.

Her heart squeezed painfully.

She wanted to tell Mary to stop—to go outside, to leave the cooking, to be free.

She searched for the words and failed. They had burned. The words had burned in the fire of rage that roared inside her.

She hadn't protected her daughter from this. She hadn't protected *any* of her children.

Her mind was spiraling when she heard the words.

"Where's my dinner?"

She turned to face him where he stood in the doorway. He casually leaned against the door frame.

Dinner. He wanted *dinner*.

She didn't expect any kindness at this point and she couldn't stop the fury.

She could feel the tears welling up, the ones she had been holding back for days, weeks, months, and years.

The frustration, the betrayal, the loneliness; it all rushed forward.

She wanted to hold it in; the rage, the frustration. She wanted to swallow it all down but her body was sore and could not stomach that assault without ripping her apart.

She looked at him, really looked at him. What had she initially seen in him that had made her think he was the love of her life? What was the foundation of their relationship that she could

hold onto in that moment? Friendship? Partnership? Trust?

“I just had a baby.”

He wasn't impressed and the expectation held in his eyes. “You've had babies before. It's not a big deal.”

She wanted to shout, to scream at him, to tell him how much she had carried, how much she had endured, how much she *needed* him. But he would call her emotional and hormonal. Her feelings would be disregarded.

“If she cries, she is being hysterical.”

“If she complains, she is a nagging wife.”

This was what their life had become: her giving, him taking, and never, ever giving anything in return. Never an appreciation or an affirmation. Just take, take, take until she had nothing left to give.

“Mary, go to your room.” Her daughter didn't have to be there for her next words.

Mary didn't ask why. She just nodded and walked away.

The woman gently set the baby down in the crib. Her hands trembled. No matter how hard she clenched them into fists, and how tightly she pressed them against her sides, they betrayed her.

“You don't see me anymore,” she began, her words trembling as she tried and failed to steady herself. “You haven't seen me in a long time.”

His indifferent expression made the pain in her chest swell but she did not care anymore.

“I've lost myself in you, and try as I might to find my love for you, I can't. I haven't loved you in a *long* time. I don't even remember what it felt like anymore to be loved and adored by you. Which should be a ridiculous notion considering I was once the center of your universe.”

There was so much left to say and she needed to steady herself or she would cry and never stop. She took a deep breath. One that filled her lungs and brought her back to life.

“I’ve forgotten my name, my identity. All these years, I’ve been *just* your wife, *just* their mother, and nothing else. It’s never been about who *I* am, what *I* want, what *I* need. Do you understand? I’ve been nothing but an extension of everyone else’s needs. I’m *invisible*.”

She paused, her chest heaving as she struggled to breathe.

God, she needed to breathe.

“I feel like I’m *forgotten*. I feel overlooked. Like you don’t even see me, don’t even care enough to look anymore. And I keep doing everything, everything that needs to be done, *everything*, but it’s not out of love. I’m sick and tired of putting everyone but myself first. I don’t even know how to find myself again. But I can’t keep doing this.”

“Lower your voice. The children will hear you.” He narrowed her eyes at her.

Maybe he was trying to warn her but frankly, she did not care.

“Let them hear it.”

She waited for his response as her heart punched her rib cage over and over again but it never came.

Why did she think this time would be any different?

She could see the walls in his eyes, the indifference that had built up over time, brick by brick, and she knew, he wasn’t listening. Not truly.

“I want to leave,” she whispered. She wanted to breathe again. She wanted to leave the woman she had become. Maybe, she could give nursing a shot. Or teach like her mother. Her dreams were endless and had been boxed for years. Neatly

packed under the responsibility of being a mother, a caretaker, a wife, a daughter, a nurturer, a shoulder for the world to lean on; the list was endless.

She had to go. Somehow, she had to go.

His eyes flickered for a moment, but only a moment. He shook his head, as if the thought was preposterous.

“Where would you go?” he mocked, like he couldn’t fathom her wanting anything more than what he had given her. “You have nothing without me.”

He was right.

She had built her life around him, around their family, around the idea of being together forever. She had put herself last, buried herself and desires beneath layers of self-sacrifice.

She wasn’t nothing and she didn’t have nothing.

That much she knew.

“I don’t need you to give me permission to leave.”

Her husband didn’t say anything else, and for the first time, she didn’t care. She brushed past him. She had only taken a few steps when she turned back to him.

He hadn’t moved from where he stood. *Dinnerless.*

“What’s my name?”

He eyed, skeptical of the intention behind her question. She was trying to trick him, surely. The woman didn’t move from where she stood.

She wanted, no, needed her name.

“Inara.”

Yes, that was it. It fit like a glove, it was hers.

And that, at least, was a beginning.

III

Freddy

The Caoine of the Banshee

The ground was rotting.

It emitted a smell so foul the dead stirred in their slumber.

Sticks and bones stuck out from the uneven, and muddied ground, and the acne of horror stretched on for miles.

Bodies were buried so deep into the ground it would take months, maybe years, to find all the pieces and make them fit.

Freddy had ripped through with a fury that left nothing unturned and untouched; flattening even the oldest trees, uprooting lives with a violence Tala couldn't wrap his head around. He waited, hoping for any sound, any sign of life but there was only silence, so loud and still it felt like the world itself was holding its breath.

In the aftermath of Freddy, not even the faintest call of a bird could be heard.

It was the horrifying beginning of an eternal silence.

Every hut, fence and wall had been peeled away by Freddy's fury, and a tomb remained on what used to be a village full of life, laughter and stories. Talandira's hands shook as he wrapped them around his battered and muddied body, trying

and failing to keep himself from shattering into the debris. His small frame was caked in dry mud and his clothes were tattered. The only thing that held him together were prayers.

The cyclone had raged for days. It had swallowed lives whole and spit out a wasteland that was unrecognizable and obscene.

Tala had survived, and somehow, that felt worse.

He vaguely remembered the warnings.

A storm was coming, the chief had said, but we had seen storms before and lived through many.

Each time the village was hit, they had rebuilt and this would be no different. The people had faith in the land and in their strength.

The soft rain had been innocent, Tala could still feel the water droplets run down his cheeks.

“Get out of the rain!” his mother, Salima, had shouted, hurriedly removing clothes from the line. The neighbors hauled buckets to catch the rainwater and children playfully splashed around in the puddles that formed.

“The rain is just beginning.”

“What does that mean, mama?” he had asked, but she shook her head. Her smile was thinning.

The harrowing winds came with the night.

An chilling whistle that slithered its way through the trees, and made the hairs at the nape of the villagers neck stand. Tala had laid on his mat, surrounded by the darkness of the room, and listened as the wind picked up speed and groaned loudly through the walls.

He could make out his father’s figure as he peered through the hut.

His tall frame sat cross-legged, staring at the ceiling and listening to the brewing storm.

“Does the wind sound different, baba?”

Baba nodded slowly, and pressed his index finger to his lips, silently asking him to lower his voice and not wake up his mother.

“It does,” he had murmured. “It has a weight on it.”

The next morning, everyone worked hurriedly to secure their homes, tying down thatched roofs and closing wooden shutters. Their faith was failing them; they could sense, feel and taste doom in the very air.

“It’s just wind,” Musa said. He tugged at the ropes around his family hut. “Our fathers have seen worse.”

The winds moaned as the day descended into the darkness of night. It was a mockery of their resolve.

Threads of air circled through the village. They hissed through leaves and tall grass. The trees groaned as they bent and branches cracked.

The rain poured in from the sky in a continuous stream. It did not have a beginning and the end would only be witnessed by Tala. The air was so thick with water even the children that usually rushed to play in the waterfalls, and laughed as they splashed around in the water were quiet and clung to their mothers.

Each flash and crackle of lightning eroded the villagers’ courage.

They had never seen such glaring flashes of light. It felt like an omen.

Tala watched the onset from the threshold of his home. Fear like he had never known ripped through his body and gripped his father’s hand tightly.

Roofs lifted slightly as the wind combed through; trees bent and broke as the wind picked up speed and strength, and clawed

the village.

Thunder rumbled; so loud, so fierce, the ground vibrated through the earth and beneath their feet.

The caoine of the banshee tore through the village, a terrible, guttural roar that drowned out every sound.

Roofs ripped away and spun through the air.

Screams rang through the air but were quickly drowned out by the laughter of the rain. Debris hit the huts in loud bangs, and rock flew aimlessly into walls, and trees.

“The storm...it’s not like the others. It’s watching us.”

Salima had always been superstitious and in that moment of turmoil, her old coded beliefs surfaced. Goosebumps rose on her skin as she stared into the fury of the storm.

Tala’s father, Eli, placed a hand on his wife’s shoulders and squeezed reassuringly. “It is only a storm.”

She did not believe him, Tala thought as he watched his mother move closer to her husband like he could somehow make it all go away. He was a strong man and he made his family feel safe with his presence alone. He was his son’s hero and his family’s stronghold. A head taller than everyone in the village, biceps the size of a toddler’s head and skin so rich and dark, it almost shimmered.

But Tala’s mother was right.

It was not just any storm.

It was certain death, the end of many bloodlines and a full stop to many untold stories and unsung songs.

The village was surrounded and its inhabitants trapped.

Tala heard the sound of the earth ripping and outside the window of their house, they witnessed in stunned horror as Musa’s family hut was lifted clean off the ground.

The old hut was thrown like a ragged doll and rose almost

gracefully at first.

Salima gasped and covered her mouth with both hands. Her breathe caught in her body and stayed there. Tala could hardly breathe. His heart was beating from his stomach as he watched the hut hang in the air, and was seemingly held by invisible strings.

The beams of the house and thatch came apart as they watched on, and scattered in the wind and rain.

What was left of the house flipped and hurtled end over before it came crashing down, landing in a twisted and broken heap a few feet from their house.

Goosebumps rose on their skin and tremors shook through Tala and his mother. Fear trickled down their bodies, seeping into every pore and sinking into their bones.

The crush of the hut sent mud into the air, and the roof caved in with a sickening crunch.

Gone. They were all gone.

There was no way they could have survived, neither by prayer nor miracle.

Musa's house and his family had been reduced to rubble.

Tala's stomach lurched and twisted. He had no idea how long he stood there and stared at the mess. He did not feel his father's hand grip his shoulder as he tried to pull him down as if that would save any of them from the storm.

All the encouraging words were lost.

Freddy

The rain poured from the sky in sheets.

It hammered against the ground and turned the earth to thick, sludgy mud that oozed into their hut. It filled the room with the smell of wet earth and leaves.

They crouched at the opposite end of the door, and watched as the muddied water swept their belongings outside. The wind had broken down their door and ripped away their makeshift windows.

What time was it? Tala silently wondered from behind his father. They had been inside their dilapidating hut so long, they had lost all sense of time. They had not eaten for so long. None of them had slept a wink and their bodies strained under the weight of sleepless hours.

The rain blurred everything into shadowy shapes and broken forms. The water and winds consumed their world.

Tala's whole world held onto one another against Freddy, waiting on death and praying that they could survive the weapon fashioned against their lives.

The winds would pause every once in a while, just for a

heartbeat it would calm down. It took a second to catch its breath and gather its strength before it floated through the village, shrieking with so much rage, hearts faltered.

Faint screams sounded through the air every now and then, but they were quickly swallowed up. They were cries of desperation, full of soul wrenching fear.

Every sound vanished into the storm and the ones that still had breath listened with helplessness.

Would no one come to their aid? Had the world forgotten about them?

The ground under Tala's family shook and shuddered, bracing to give way beneath them.

When their own roof buckled and caved, Tala's father pulled him and his mother out.

He led them into the storm.

The rain stung like needles as it landed on their skin and seeped through their clothes. The violent gusts of air felt like they would peel their skin away.

Tala's father kept moving, half-crawling, half-running as their home crumbled behind them. He grabbed Tala firmly to his side and held his wife's hand tightly, knowing it was the difference between life and them being swept away.

They could hear water roaring in the distance, but through the assault of rain and water, they could not make out where the monstrosity of gathered water was flowing from or towards.

They only prayed it was not in their general direction.

His father yelled something to him, but the words were swallowed by the storm, and all Tala could do was follow. Their feet sank into the mud, plunging into the mushy earth and struggling to surface. The earth begged to swallow them whole.

They reached their neighbors' home.

And it was gone.

A gaping sinkhole had taken the place of the house. The ground had collapsed and filled with black water. From where they stood, it looked like an abyss but with each strike of water, waves rippled on the surface.

Where was Chisomo and her newborn baby, Josephine? Where was her ailing mother and noisy toddler?

Gone is where they were and Tala's stomach tightened into a hard knot.

Death had surrounded them and snared at everyone they knew. Tala could feel the cold, indifferent presence of death itself as it swept through the village without a hint of mercy.

He felt his father squeeze his hand, his grip cold. They didn't have time to mourn; the storm was about to swallow them too.

"Here!" his father shouted, guiding them toward an empty house at the far edge of the village, a shelter they hadn't dared look at before. The walls were intact, the door left ajar, swinging slightly with the gusts. They ducked inside. They were breathless and soaked, and huddled against the walls. They tried and failed not to think of who had lived here, or where they had gone, or if they'd had any chance to escape.

It was a small, and cramped place, but it did not matter in the slightest. They crouched close together in the corner with their mud-streaked Tala's father's hand stayed firmly on his shoulder, grounding him, and keeping him steady as the walls creaked and moaned under the pressure. Tala tried to keep count of the seconds, to find some sense of time, but his thoughts were jumbled.

The howling wind and thunder seemed to go on forever.

Their lives were no more precious than the splinters of bamboo or the fragments of thatch being ripped from the earth.

The world was breaking outside, but deep in the pit of the valley, they could barely understand how close the destruction was.

Tala and his parents clung to each other. when suddenly a strange sound rose over the roar of the storm. It was a low rumbling roar that grew louder and louder, until the ground beneath them shuddered. The faint sound of drums beat in the devastation outside and the whistling of the wind picked up speed. Their breathing came in shallow gasps

“*Napolo*,” Tala’s mother shakingly whispered before bursting into tears.

She couldn’t take it anymore.

They were going to die. All of them.

Napolo was the big snake with many heads that rested in the mountain. It was made of mud and ravaged everything in its path. She was punishment to the people for forgetting their beliefs. *Napolo* carried with her fire, mud and rocks and everyone she took with her was never seen again.

“What is *Napolo*?” Tala asked. He had to scream slightly to be heard. His father shook his head and looked away.

Napolo was their retribution.

The hill above them had given way, and a massive river of mud and debris was surging down. It roared as it barreled toward the village. The water slithered down, and shook the earth on which it passed. *Napolo* was a devastating spirit, whose story was passed on from generation to generation; from the people of Zomba to the people of Ulumba and Ntonya mountains to the Mulanje district.

There was no shrine for *Napolo*; nobody prayed for her

salvation or her materialization.

The walls around them shivered and crumbled with a sickening crack, and they felt the floor tilt slightly as the foundation that held the house began to give way.

Tala screamed as his left foot lodged into muddied ground.

Tala's father pulled them to their feet, and his voice shook for the first time. "We have to go," he urged. He guided them toward the back of the house.

Everywhere they turned, the earth seemed to be shifting. The mud had come alive and swallowed in gulps everything in its path. Craters and pits quickly formed inside the house and took the place of solid ground.

They stumbled back out into the storm, and watched in horror as *Napolo* and her many heads swallowed entire sections of the village.

"*Akundiwotcha!*" someone screamed in the distance and then silence.

Fear gripped Salima and her body felt heavier than it had her whole life. The rain pelted her skin and the wind threatened to push her into the water. They did not know whether their next step would land on solid ground or be their demise.

They were surrounded by fallen trees, dissolved houses and the unforgiving maw of *Napolo*.

A few standing structure remained in the village and people's lives floated past them; clothes, basins and mats.

Salima felt as though they were living through a nightmare. Everywhere they turned, there was destruction, and holes in the ground where they could have sworn there had been solid earth just moments before.

Salima broke free of her husband's grip and began to run.

Blindly paddling her bare feet through darkness and scream-

ing at the horror. She was driven by fear and she did not know which way was up. Fear had possessed every vein, every nerve.

Tala could barely make out his father's face through the thick sheets of rain and darkness. His eyes were wide with desperation, and his grip on Tala unyielding.

"Salima!" Tala's father yelled but she was too far gone. Her silhouette had disappeared into the darkness. Her frantic screams had been swallowed by the chaos. "Salima, please!"

No answer came to his desperate cries. His wife was gone in the blink of an eye. Grief swallowed him and choked him as he carried Tala into his arms. The rain continued to beat down on them as if punishing them for being alive.

"Salima!" Tala's father screamed until his voice gave out. He stepped carefully on the trembling ground, praying that it would hold just long enough for him to find the love of his life.

Eight years of beautiful marriage were gone. Like the rest of the village.

Houses had fallen, and souls had been ripped from the bodies in which they were housed and very little stood. Their history had been erased from the face of the earth.

"Wait here," Tala's father said, setting him down on what was left of the maize mill.

It was far enough from the running water and the path of *Napolo*.

"I have to find your mother." He crouched down and caressed his son's face. Tears were streaming down his face and his heart was full of emotions he could not begin to comprehend.

He had known grief, but nothing like this.

His woman was out there, scared and alone, and he had to go find her and bring her to her son. She was his everything

and more. He could not imagine a life without the light that brightened his days.

“Baba, I am scared,” Tala cried He was choking on his own tears as he spoke. He was scared and scarred. He wanted to close his eyes and find that it was all a horrid, god-forsaken nightmare. That the storm had not drowned his whole life. That the *Kachere* tree still stood at the centre of the village. Musa and him would walk to school, hand in hand.

“It will be okay, Tala., His father lied. “Be brave, I will be right back.

With that he took off into the darkness.

Seconds turned into minutes, and minutes into hours, but Eli never came back for his son. Hunger plagued Tala but he was too scared to move. In case his parents came back for him and he was not around. The house crumbled around him and soon, he was backed up into a corner.

Water rushed around him. It roared and beckoned him into the brown waters. It kissed his feet and retreated, repeatedly soaking his body.

The sounds as the rain poured and the winds howled felt almost normal.

“Baba!” Tala screamed, but his voice cracked from thirst.

“Ma!” he cried.

Exhaustion overtook his body and Tala’s body slumped onto the muddied floor.

Buried in Silence

When he woke up, he was greeted by the sickly light of a cloudy morning, and the storm was finally quiet.

What time was it? What day was it?

He rose unsteadily and saw his village was buried under the thick, and oppressive layers of mud. Only a few jagged beams and scattered belongings stuck out from the earth; a basin here and a mat there.

The smell hit him first: a thick, sour scent that stuck to his throat and made it difficult for him to breathe. It was the smell of decay, of bodies rotting beneath the mud as the earth pressed down on them.

Entombed in the muddied earth were the people he had grown up with, including his parents that had not come back for him.

Memories swallowed by a nightmare.

Bile rose in his throat and burned him from the inside at the thought that he'd been spared or cursed to bear this silence. He wanted to cry out, to scream against the emptiness, but even his voice felt swallowed up in the silence that surrounded him.

He was alone, the last witness to a life that had been erased.

I lied.

Dear Reader,

I lied.

Cyclone Freddy was far worse than I have described. The horror I've portrayed is but a fraction of the truth. In many villages, there were no survivors. Entire communities were swallowed by mudslides, buried in sinkholes, or carried away by raging floods. Those villages remain, even now, as unofficial mass graves, unmarked and unremembered by all but the storm's survivors.

The bodies rotted in the ground for days. The heavy and foul stench of decay clung to the air, and saturated the earth. The land itself mourned, and exhaled the grief of countless lost lives. Eventually, even the smell faded, leaving a haunting silence in its place.

Many tried to piece together what remained. But where could they even begin?

There were too many lives.

Each effort to rebuild seemed futile in the face of the sheer scale of destruction. Freddy had left nothing behind but

heartbreak and mud.

Endless lives were lost, and so many more were uprooted.
Entire families vanished.

Many came back to their homes and found their families
swept away.

I write this not to horrify you, but to remember. To honor
the villages that did not survive, the people who were lost and
buried under the storm.

Their stories deserve to be told.

Their lives deserve to be remembered.

I write this to remind you of the devastation Freddy left
behind, to ensure the storm's victims are not forgotten. Freddy
was a force that left scars on the earth and on all who bore
witness to its fury.

These tears, my friend, are wrung

From a heart shattered

By the apocalypse

That was Napolo.

-Steve Chimombo

About the Author

Myra Trudea Okumu is a Malawian author, newspaper columnist and blogger. She is a microbiologist by profession but spends her days writing and reading with her dogs, Coh, Olly and Ghost. “After the clouds, the sun” is Myra’s second book after her anthology, “Uncharted territory”. She is also the owner of ‘Inkspire’, a literary magazine in Malawi.

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