

RISE

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“Baba said he will be telling you the news himself,” Mama whispers faintly.

She is standing by the window, staring blankly at the old mango tree by the fence. Mama’s usual stunning big-boned frame suddenly seems small and old. She has snuck into my bedroom early in the morning to warn me about Baba’s announcement.

“Ropafadzo!”

“On my way, Baba!” I shout already running to the dining room. Knowing my father very well, delaying him was calling upon ‘bitter-sweet old reliable’, a name he gives his whip designed specifically for Mama and I. Baba is sitting comfortably in his rocking chair. A small hill of snuff on the palm of his left hand, a pinch in his right. I watch him inhale the snuff in his right, following is a sneeze that shakes his whole frame. Mama follows a few moments later, makes her way straight to our little kitchen to make Baba his morning *sadza*.

“Madzibaba Eriya,” he pauses, pinches some snuff, inhales it and sneezes then continues, “Madzibaba Eriya from church dreamt about you being one of his wives. I have already given my permission. He will be here to take you to his homestead tomorrow by nightfall.”

Madzibaba Eriya, is an 85-year-old with 25 wives, 55 children, 22 grandchildren and 11 great grandchildren. He used to have more. They died one followed by the other But because the sect discourages hospitals and medication, nobody knows the causes of their deaths. We had recently learned about AIDS in school. The signs and symptoms they all portrayed were the same as those in the science book our teacher had made us read.

“I’m not interested,” my voice comes out as a whisper so silent and yet so loud, fully laced with anger and rebellion.

Baba lets out a cackle, before spreading the whole 8 inches of his palm across my face in one single clap. Darkness and death, mixed with traces of that awful stench of Baba’s patriarchal ego fills the moment. I look at Mama who I know is in as much trouble as I am for raising an ‘insubordinate daughter’ after failing to give birth to a son. Mama always gets the blame whenever I do anything Baba disapproves, yet he always gives himself the credit for my accomplishments.

“I had to accept to feed a female baboon, now it’s talking back at me?” Baba says through his teeth, coming towards me, fists drawn back ready to throw a punch.

I leap towards my bedroom, making a beeline for the door just in time to jump in and lock it from inside.

I try using my pillow to block out Mama’s cries, “*Waandiuraya murume wangu!* You have killed me, my husband!” Baba flogs her ruthlessly.

‘Sorry ma,’ I keep murmuring as I start running around my bedroom packing my basics in a small duffel bag. After I throw the bag out through the window, I peep out of my bedroom door’s keyhole hoping to take one last look at Mama before I run away.

There are cumulonimbus clouds lined all over the sky, a nice breeze is blowing lazily, a heavenly smell of lightly wetted mud all around, that delicious smell which makes you want to lie on your stomach and lick the dirt. *That* kind of atmosphere that would be appreciated under different circumstances. I try to ignore the dreadful feeling again, as if a thousand spiders are crawling in my hair. Looking up to the sky as if to ask God to take away the darkness of night, I dread having to sleep under that bridge on a pile of card boxes for yet another night. I have been living on the street for a whole week.

'Cyclone Idai: 1,300 feared dead,' my eyes keep lingering on the newspaper headline despite all my efforts to dodge it. The newspaper is a publication from two years ago. My mind takes me to March two years before.

"Ropafadzo, wake up *mwanangu*. The radio said it's a cyclone and ... and... we need to find high ground."

Mama had woken me up in the middle of the night trying to hide the worry and panic in her tone. Baba, Mama and I survived this tragic event, losing *Gogo* and *Sekuru*, Grandma and Grandpa. The loss of our belongings, property, livestock and my grandparents led to Baba looking for a job in the city as a general hand, resulting in our migration to the city. The white family that Baba works for agreed that we stay in the two-bedroomed cottage.

A deafening thunder clap startles me back to reality. The cumulonimbus clouds are still lining up the sky promising heavy rain, the breeze now stronger, making the maize fields nearby hiss weirdly, the sun is setting, leaving creepy shadows to everything in sight. The shadow of one jacaranda tree looks like it has claws, ready to strangle me whenever I take my eyes off it.

"Ropafadzo!"

I search the perimeter, and there she is. “Mama?” I ask, trying to get up and run to her but I fail.

She walks over, sits across me and says, “*Mwanangu*, my child. Life is what you make it. If life throws you lemons, it’s up to *you* to either make lemonade or cough syrup. *You* are not a failure, *woman* up and start living up to your standards, show them a taste of their spite.” Her tone is serious, her eyes focused deeply into mine like she can see directly into my soul. Heavy rain wakes me up just as I am about to ask Mama to stay. It’s just a dream.

“Dollar, dollar tops!”

“5-dollars skin jeans, they were worn by Rihanna! Sister!”

“Don’t walk around without underwear, what if your dress is lifted by the wind? Dollar for two all size pants!”

The paupers at Mupedzanhamo Musika market go on and on, calling for customers to buy second-hand clothes. The market is crowded with customers competing to find cheap second-hand clothes to buy. Following the morning of the dream, I had gone door to door in every factory, house and company looking for employment. One man had told me that people who are actually educated were jobless, me being a woman and uneducated, looking for employment was a lost cause. An older woman I had met earlier had advised me to forget employment and look for a husband instead. A man at the factory had offered me a cleaning job but I had to ‘scratch his back’ first. Two weeks searching for employment to no avail, having sat at a stone one day, tired and hungry, thinking for two hours, I stood up, went to Mbare and sold my phone. From that I got the capital to start a *bhero* selling business, selling second-hand clothes. I was now living in a *mukuku*, shack in Epworth.

“It only kills white people.”

“How can it only kill white people when it was created by them to wipe out the black race?”

“The president will be addressing the nation tonight concerning COVID-19.”

There is loud chatter at the bus stop where we are waiting for a *combi*, commuter omnibus. A lady with her brows nicely drawn, fake eyelashes glued on, beautifully manicured nails, and perfect makeup that goes nicely with her skin tone, swears that she has evidence that her prophet had prophesied about COVID-19 three years ago. Two men are debating on whether COVID-19 is real or not. Another man says that it was manufactured in a lab. An older looking woman argues her traditional-spiritual point of view.

These are the kinds of conversations that I hear on my way to and from my business every day. It is a few days after the president’s national address declaring COVID-19 a national disaster and announcing the start of lockdown, people are back to business as usual. People selling, customers crowded in the market, racing against time to grab stylish cheap second-hand clothes before the other person does. Four trucks full of armed soldiers and police officers pull up, throwing tear smoke to disperse the crowd. We all scatter running for our lives, if the tear smoke doesn’t get you on your heels then a button stick will do the trick. Suddenly, it’s just me and my thoughts back at my shack, reality finally settling in. I cannot go to the market anymore; I could sell at my doorstep but that would be impossible considering the fact that all our stuff has just been confiscated by the armed forces. Whatever did I really do to upset my ancestors? If I was born male would I be facing all these troubles or better still if it so happened, would I be facing it all alone? Hot tears roll down my

cheeks, no one is there to wipe them away for me. I realise how much I miss Mama, and for a moment I consider going back to Baba to ask for his forgiveness and get married to Madzibaba Eriya like he wants.

“I would rather die,” I murmur. “How many pandemics does one person have to fall victim to in one lifetime?” I ask loudly, as if expecting the walls of my shack to give me an answer.

There is just a packet of mealie-meal and salt at the corner of my shack. I can only afford *sadza* and salt, for supper. Gatherings at the community water source exposes us to this deadly virus, but it is either dying from thirst or from COVID-19, the latter seems like a better devil. Having no radio, phone or television as most of the people in the illegal settlement, the community water source is the platform for breaking news. That is where I get information about the extension of lockdown and the deaths of those rich people whose lives are important to make breaking news. That is the same place I got to hear about *Dzoka Kumba*, the reality TV show which resolves family disputes. I had written a letter to them two days ago asking for them to mediate between Baba and I.

The days are dragging and I have lost track of dates since every day is basically the same, wake up, bath, sun bath then sleep. The sun is already high up, blazing hot. It’s still hard to believe that a season ago I was living under a bridge. The air is filled with a stench that is now familiar, the smell of sewage. I walk lazily to stand by the door of my shack, it’s like I am the only one feeling how hot the sun is. There is a group of children laughing, singing and screaming as they play *chikweshe*, a ball made from plastic bags. Occasionally, there is a man, woman or child who comes towards the growing pile of waste by the roadside to dump more

waste. The sky above the shacks is covered with thick black smoke from the fires used for cooking around the settlement. Three shacks to the left side of mine is a group of women sitting by the door who laugh and high-five after every 5 minutes. It's like there is no COVID-19 or lockdown at all.

I make my way to the group of women joining in on the chatter and gossip. A young girl probably in her early teens speaks about how she has always wanted to be a preschool teacher and how she has given it all up because her husband is not comfortable with a working wife. Another slender, light-skinned woman talks about how her husband had dumped her for a mistress because she couldn't give birth to a son. A stout and dark woman with a red eye, who had been quiet all this while speaks about how her husband had beaten her the other night for hurting their child by mistake.

"A man can kill you for hurting *his* child," she says with what I can only hope I wasn't mistaking for joy in her voice.

The younger looking woman answers, "All hell will break loose that day, the whole husband's family tree will rain down on you for hurting their blood."

A child is never really a woman's in Africa, they are their father's *blood*. Isn't it bad enough that a woman leaves her maternal home, her parents, her religion, her maternal surname and everything else that identifies her as an individual to go to a new place and start life from scratch? To carry the child for nine months, with everything that comes with it, the emotions, the sickness, the cravings? Unless biology says sperm carries blood, at what point does the child get their father's blood? I'm frustrated, the chit chat of the ladies vanishes as I am deep in

thought asking myself unanswered questions. It is the little things that matter in the fight against gender inequality and for women empowerment. For example, there being only one title (Mr.) for every man, divorced, bachelor, young, older and married, and there being different titles which describe the struggle of life for women (Mrs. Miss, Ms.). A man's title has no backstory or judgement whereas a woman's title can say if she is married, divorced, young, widowed, a single mother, etc., which means women are pre-judged and vulnerable from the word go.

Spending time with these ladies makes me realise that women are brainwashed to believe that they cannot be anything other than disciples, and them spending more time with the children means the tradition of patriarchy continues as they teach their sons to lead and daughters to submit. Patriarchy, just like bullying in school, is some kind of bullying made normal by society. Bullies bully others because of their own insecurities and fears. Men need to be assured in some way that what women need is an equal partnership not total power and control. Women on the other hand, just like these women are ignorant on their potential. A small boy pulls me out of my thoughts when he hands me a letter from *Dzoka kumba* the reality TV show.

I wake up around 12 pm the next day, *Dzoka kumba* the reality TV show is on the way to take me to my father's place. It's a hot day, the sun is blazing, the journey ahead is tough but it has to be done. I scrub myself rigorously with an orange sack and water, a little bit of soap and lotion would have been really appreciated for this occasion but at this point in my life, it's a luxury. I dread having to confront my father, but it has to be done, at least this time I have backup. The reality TV show's truck is comfortable than both my homes (the bridge and the shack) combined a

million times. The camera is rolling all the way to my parents' house as the presenter gets my side of the story.

By the time we reach the house, camera still rolling, I can make out Mama's screams "Baba Ropafadzo *kani!* Ropafadzo's father please!" I throw the door open in time to expose Baba connecting his whip with Mama's skin using so much force. I swear the whip untangled with a bit of Mama's skin.

"Invasion of privacy! Invasion of privacy!" Baba keeps shouting as if he has gone crazy, running towards me with his right hand wide open ready to clap. I duck behind the bouncer who in turn man-handles Baba while the producer calls the police. All this while, the cameraman is rolling his camera. Capturing the drama. Baba has been caught red-handed, the evidence is there to put him away for a long time. This was not my intention but it works too. The police arrive and Baba is taken into custody. The reality show is a hit; it follows up on Baba's trial. I testify against Baba. Baba throws the apostolic sect leadership under the bus and they are all incarcerated. It's been seasons since Baba's incarceration. Its spring, trees are blossoming, the air smells nice. Mama is now working as a house help for the white family Baba worked for. That means we could still live at the cottage. I had moved back in since Baba's arrest.

Mama is standing by the doorway, she barely notices me as I enter into the dining area, her gaze is focused on a red shoe box and envelope. She is glaring at them as if expecting them to melt from her glare.

"You ok?" She looks up, startled.

"Good morning *mwanangu,*" she says evading my question.

“*Ndamuka mamukawo Mama*, I slept well.”

She points at the red shoe box. “I found that in your father’s belongings.”

Inside the red shoe box is a dried up rose stem, on the stem is my passport size photo tied in place with a red string. The rose stem is in a small bottle with dirty water, but the stem does not go all the way down to reach the water.

“Looks like Baba was using voodoo charms to throw all those hiccups in your life all this time so that you come back home and submit to his demands,” she says looking me straight in the eyes.

I wince.

“Don’t worry *mwanangu*, its exposed hence powerless,” she pauses and studies my face, “You are a fighter.” Mama’s smile is re-assuring. She hands me the envelope, “A letter from the State prison.”

I take the letter, stuff it in my pocket and join Mama on the doorway. Silence follows as we silently admire the sunset