

THE RETURN OF SENZENI

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Suddenly, 1980 sets in. The war torn trees began to heal the grass which had been trampled upon by many feet of soldiers who fought to liberate a people. The green grass stepped on severally by civilian helpers who were in transit every second to relay messages to required destinations, or by soldiers who fought to retain colonisation, and betrayers who callously collaborated with the obstinacy of the people's enemy. The grass, which had stubbornly resisted yet desperately bowed to the buzzing Alouette helicopters flying low dropping Rhodesian forces in war zones, started healing. Wild animals in the mountains had for a very long time been subject to the incongruous crack of rattling gunfire, whistling bombs and unforgiving machine guns, now 1980 too was their year.

Senzeni heard the silent breathing of women who participated in the liberation struggle, of the determination that took them into war frontiers, into the thick of battles, the blood, the warzone shouts, the deafening rumbles of bombs, gunfire, empty metal drums rolling off and about. She remembered the skulls of unfortunate comrades both female and male. They could not escape the obstinate accuracy of snipers who slowly eliminated those among the national liberation fighters. Fighters who had little training or somehow those who passionately joined the struggle to see their Zimbabwe become independent.

A wartime woman is like a leopard that has seen Noah's time. That has seen the seams of life and death. Senzeni, unlike most girls of her age who prioritised education in missionary schools across Zimbabwe during the mid-1960s, felt it was betrayal to set herself before ink and paper while her fellow brothers and sisters were smouldering in war. They had chosen to defend everybody's freedom, every wild and tamed animal's freedom. They had stood up for those that never believed in freedom to be free ultimately.

Would post-independence Zimbabwe mean anything to those who knew how to use the barrel of the rifle to claim some God-given rights? Yes. No. Senzeni must have been among those who were unfortunate upon returning home, to realise that the independent Zimbabwe wanted the free citizen to hold at least 'Standard 4', an academic qualification in Rhodesia's education system. That is, to qualify for blue collar jobs, to occupy the much revered middle managerial posts, the pride in making a sensible contribution to one's economy. But the determination to exhibit much courage by joining the war as a woman! Wasn't that enough? Who knew? Who knew the dust that choked her when mortar bombs missed her as a target and plunged into gravel tracks, cratering road networks.

The mournful horn of a train echoed across the valleys of the Mutare mountains in the province of Manicaland. Crossing through its lush vegetation, it disappeared into the thick fog and religiously followed its path. It was 3rd July 1983. Senzeni was heading to Harare, the capital city of the newly independent Zimbabwe. Getting across the meadows, she fell asleep and enjoyed the chugging tortoise pace of the train. The street lights on the morning of 4th July 1983 beamed with a heavenly glow that rendered the streets appear as if it was day.

Sex workers dashed across the streets holding inflated purses that either had some money fetched over the past ten hours or so up to the early hours near dawn. But the average lady must have been asleep or at least preparing to leave home for work somewhere in town, or the industrial parks such as Willow vale and Southerton. Heavy engines roared and whined in one of the busiest bus terminuses, Mbare Musika. They went past the thronged aisles with kempt and unkempt wanderers going about their businesses in the early morning hours, all dotted the whole scene as if they were ants convening for honey.

With determination, Senzeni took off her suitcase and grabbed a taxi. “Number 63 Chidziva Close, Ruwa,” she directed.

The taxi driver gently drove the green taxi, a Peugeot 504 sedan that looked like it must have been some white man’s because of stickers that faintly remained on the dash board with a few inscriptions reading, *White Farmers Union: The Rhodesia we want*. In no time, they were at number 63 Chidziva Close. One of Senzeni’s best old friends resided there in a single room that had only one window with sash bars and louvres. The ceiling of this room had visible protrusions that shouted loud messages about possible roof leaks during adverse weather. It originally must have been white but due perhaps to recklessness of the owner or the successive tenants who would come and go after perhaps failing to meet up the rental costs, it was brown.

Senzeni had to find a job, or be offered one by the newly created Women’s Support for War Veterans Fund. She spoke a lot with her friend, Martha who was working as a clerk at a tobacco auction floor in Norton, a small farming town just a few kilometres’ drive from Harare. She was in love with a ex-Rhodesian Zimbabwean soldier. Senzeni was sensitive about these stories. She knew how these

ex-Rhodies, as they were referred to, abused women during the war because they believed that they were serving the white government, believed to be an invincible system.

After resting for some hours, Senzeni proceeded to the Headquarters of the Women's Support for War Veterans Fund. She left her letter and the receptionist told her to check after three working weeks. Three weeks later, Senzeni's stay at Martha's place started to become uncomfortable. Two issues kept bothering Senzeni. The first was the idea that she was inconveniencing her friend from having her own time. The second was the mounting pressure that woefully grew inside her. Was she going to be offered the funds? Who knew? She was getting anxious.

One Monday morning she found a taxi and left. The fine ladies putting on winter wear, the polo neck jerseys and trousers signified a new transformation in fashion. Senzeni had last worn trousers when she was in the war, a service uniform trouser. As she knocked on the secretary's door, she was jolted by a male voice that boomed in the empty corridor.

"Hey, she is not around," he said.

As he drew closer, Senzeni telepathically felt the insatiable grunt of a man who had just thought he would by any means prey on her for all imagined reasons. Yet, Senzeni was in fact in search for life, not the wants and needs it can offer.

"I am the one in charge today. Good morning, madam. You look pretty. I am sure you must be looking for your father, right?"

A fine lady in her early thirties, so serene, innocent and determined but sometimes impatient and uncaring if tempered with.

She looked on and politely responded, “I am sorry, morning. I need to see Miss Mahofa.”

There was a deafening wave of silent air that if one concentrated like a Zen Monk, even the crawling feet of unseen cockroaches would be heard. Silence. The heavy thuds of footsteps, that surely must have been a pair of feet for a gigantic man, could be heard ascending the stairs that would lead to this corridor.

The approaching figure had a usual characteristic, a known addiction to a wireless radio that he carried like a handbag wherever he was. His need for news made him alternate from one station to the other, listening to all the programs whenever his schedule opened a gap. His neck seemed like it was not there. It was swallowed up by his fleshy upper body, the combination of his bald head and the short neck coming to the shoulders was something that made him walk like he was leaning. He was at one time employed at a certain quarry mine owned by Russians in Mhangura area, an area infested with tin and ore. The unidentified man whose preying intentions were interrupted by the approaching wireless radio addict quickly disappeared to one of the corridor ends. He wanted to masquerade as the acting Secretary for a reason.

The radio man finally appeared, with his inflated belly slowly untucking his tucked shirt. He coughed, then said, “Welcome madam!”

The man was actually the one in charge Senzeni introduced herself. The man quickly figured what she wanted. It was the application for funds. The euphoria of independence coupled with inexperience to manage resources has caged many during Senzeni’s days. Her situation was not an exception. The Old Harare

Times newspapers had published a story that indicated that the very funds meant to benefit the war veterans were fraudulently misappropriated. The absence of the female receptionist, Miss Mahofa, was because of investigations that were underway to inquire on the matter.

The Old Harare Times had in that same article reported that government officials had used multiple pseudo war veteran accounts to get the money to buy huge vault-like Mercedes Benz sedans. These sedans were driven around with tinted glass for privacy and gloss black to increase the suspicion of an executive being hauled inside by the luxury. Senzeni was never given the letter but only told to reapply within six months. She had been robbed of a lifetime achievement. She had been taken to the edge of a cliff and asked to jump and get some bread and all the riches of the world. She was devastated. Senzeni. Her mother knew her daughter was a hard worker who believed in progress, both personal and impersonal. She had to leave.

The old brown fan continued to run slowly, slicing the air into apparent ripples that sounded like the tired rotors of a faulty helicopter. She made her way out and quickly realised that she had to look for a job soon.

Along Julius Nyerere Street, a thronging crowd was jostling to be the first on the queue. The bulk of the jostlers are young men and women, they are all carrying small envelopes and are dressed in smart casual. Among them, nobody is a young war veteran but college graduates baying for jobs. A man dressed in a blue overcoat appears holding a flat file, with spectacles that have supporting strings. He laughs as if to mock, or perhaps because a joke must have been said and they missed it. Suddenly, the indistinct hubbub becomes orderly then a few people drop out of the queue then

almost half of them drop out. Among the half Senzeni approaches and converses with one of the attendees. She hastily joins the queue and the man in a blue coat takes her identity card. After a while, their cards are returned and they are told to follow instructions on some yellow half pages.

Senzeni's prayer could be answered.. The man in blue returns, this time he asks everybody given the yellow page to submit their slips. He tells them to include an administration fee of five Zimbabwean dollars. In that day, that sum was not a mere penny. It is as good as booking an average motel for a night. Senzeni quickly searches in her handbag, finds her wallet and fishes out four dollars and fifty cents. She checks again and, finally, a fifty-cent coin rolls to the ground. She hastily picks it up then proceeds to submit as she was the only one left. She is told to go back the next day.

The busy Harare streets were congested that Tuesday morning. Light winter showers started to pour, catching by surprise all those pedestrians who had left their houses without umbrellas and mackintoshes. Haberdashers scurried for cover into verandas and under small flyover bridges where street children were curled up together like banana bunches. It is winter.

Senzeni followed the address and with a huge smile on her countenance. After a while, she found it Then made her way in directly to the reception. The Indian lady over the counter, Ranah, greeted and offered her a place to sit.

"How can I help today madam," she inquired.

"I am Senzeni Moyo. The lady who came here yesterday. I was among those who were taken for the job by Mr Pauls, your Human Resource Manager," she answered.

To express her consternation, Ranah did not take seconds. She rose up and grabbed her head as if she wanted it replaced.

“You got conned! I mean... we don't... my God!”

Far in the frontiers of war, Senzeni thought of how she had laid her heart to the nation's welfare. She longed to see a day, to see the sun freely, to be her own boss, to sleep, dream and live the dream. She was conned. How can a fine woman who missed a raging war fire be conned? She had to go back to her Mother. Senzeni.