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Crazy Town Stories

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CRAZY TOWN STORIES

by

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ABSTRACT

Crazy Town Stories focuses on the themes of strife, pain, perseverance, and faith. The memoir focuses on my childhood in a town called Epworth, one of the worst towns in Zimbabwe. Epworth was a town of compromises. We couldn't afford decent food, so we ate whatever we could as long as it filled our stomachs. We couldn't afford to finish up the house we lived in, so we had to live in a house with no flooring, doors, and a ceiling. Since we had to make all the compromises, the town had a habit of changing people. It took people's dreams and chewed them up because everywhere we looked, the town was screaming at us that we would not make it out of Epworth. That our fates had been settled, we were worthless, and nothing good was to ever come out of that wretched place. These changes are seen in our neighbors and everyone we interacted with daily. They all made questionable decisions, and it is easy to judge them from a distance, but when one considers the circumstances they were in, one will realize that these people lived in a place that didn't offer them a lot of choices.

Along with everything happening in the town, there is also a nationwide crisis as a backdrop. We dealt with political turmoil, economic instability, and a corrupt government. All of this added to our plight. We were already a town full of miseries, and having a national crisis seemed to cement the idea that we were never going to leave Epworth. The story focuses on my family and how we tried to navigate Epworth without

losing our belief that we were meant for better things, and without giving up on the idea that we would one day leave for a better place.

DEDICATION

To my mother for putting yourself through hard work
to make sure I had a secure future

To my father for indulging my curiosity and fostering
my love of learning.

To my five siblings for being my other parents and
your willingness to put your life on hold for me

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The Dark City

Growing up in Zimbabwe is a feat worth celebrating on its own. It means you have survived economic crisis after crisis, political turmoil and starvation. It means you have just survived a lot, trust me on that! However, the town I grew up in takes that to a whole other level. Epworth, a town in the outskirts of the country's capital Harare took every bad we were experiencing in Zimbabwe and tripled it. It was a Voldemort of towns, just uttering its name caused a shriek of terror to anyone who heard it. Yet, that is the place my family and I lived for twelve years. Those years made us cry but also gave us perseverance, faith, and hope. We may want to deny it, but that place shaped us into who we are, especially for me, given that I pretty much grew up there. However, before I dive into the stories that happened, I must give you a glimpse of what Epworth was like as a town. If I don't, believe me, you will think the stories I am about to tell you are nothing but fiction.

You probably have visited a place once in your life, where the moment you get there, you can already tell that these people have it rough. You don't need to hear their stories; to be in their homes, you can just tell by looking at your surroundings that this is a whole different ball game here. Now at times, we have that reaction because we have our own biases, or we were so closed off from the rest of the world that we had no idea how other people fare. So maybe to you, when you go to a place and see five beggars in the street, you start to think this must be as worse as it can get. So, at times our reactions

to certain places may often be exaggerated. I mean, come on, I'm from Africa I know a thing or two about exaggeration.

"Do you have houses in Africa?"

"Do you have cars?"

I once told a girl that only the president of Zimbabwe owns a car, and we all walk around naked.

"I only bought clothes because I was moving to the United States. Walking around naked is a crime; public indecency."

She believed me! How disgraceful that is.

To be fair to Epworth, we didn't have beggars, not in the traditional sense. I never saw anyone sitting by the street asking for money or anything like that. I guess it was understood that begging here was useless because there was no one with the means to give. So instead of hearing "Spare me some change," you would hear *"Kunama Mapotooooooo,"* which means "We are sealing pooooots." These were people offering to seal pots that had holes for a fee. You would also hear "*Cooobra!"* No, they weren't selling snakes; cobra was a brand of floor polish; although those that were selling it didn't have the cobra brand, they had the floor polish they were making themselves and putting it in cobra containers. Everyone was hustling for a little bit of money; beggars were a luxury our poverty-stricken town couldn't afford.

The town was also nicknamed Eparton Park; a jab since many places that end with "park" in Zimbabwe are middle- and upper-class suburban towns, and Epworth was the furthest you could be from that. The two names became a synonym for poverty and

people who lived in the worst conditions one could conjure up. Epworth represented the rockiest of rock bottoms, for each family, no matter their struggle or where they lived, would find comfort in the fact that they did not live in Epworth. The first thing you would hear from those who did not live in our town was that we did not have electricity, which earned us the nickname “The Dark City.” This made firewood a very good business because that was what people used for cooking. I hear people talk about deforestation these days, and I think, man, our town probably used up an entire forest in one day.

However, there was a moment when firewood went out of style, and people started using sawdust. Sawdust was wood shavings from furniture shops which were plenty by the way. I don’t quite understand why. I mean, who really was buying furniture when people were struggling to buy food. Anyways, far be it for me to criticize anyone’s business sense, I assume it was a booming business because everyone had a furniture stall. Calling it furniture stalls might be a bit of a stretch though; most of them only sold beds. I guess you can’t be hungry and sleep horribly too; you gotta pick one or the other. Thus, because of numerous “furniture shops,” we had a surplus of sawdust. It was sold in fifty-kilogram sacks, and you always had to go back and forth with the dealer so that they pack it tightly to get your money’s worth. Otherwise, they will just fill it up, and because sawdust is very light, you will have only a quarter of the right amount by the time you got home. We would stuff the sawdust in a small cylindrical container like the ones used to hold paint. The first step would be to put a bottle in the middle of the container while you stuff it in. Once it holds firmly, you carefully remove the bottle, leaving a hole in the middle for the fire to breathe.

There would also be a square-shaped opening on the container's side where you would insert one log of firewood. This was why sawdust was preferred. It was cheaper because it burnt slower and used way less firewood. Like any other commodity, you had to know which dealer had the good batch. I don't know what type of wood some shops used, but it didn't burn at all, which made the shavings from the wood suck as well. Dark-colored sawdust was no good unless late dinners were your thing.

Candles and paraffin lamps were also basic necessities. Paraffin lamps were nothing special. You would take paraffin in a small container with a lid and puncture the lid to make a hole in the middle. You would put some thread in through the hole so that it touches the paraffin. Then you would light up the end of the thread that stuck out of the hole. The thread would suck up the paraffin keeping the lamp lighted up. You just had to make sure the paraffin wouldn't get used up because that would mean the thread was now burning on its own, which was a fire hazard. I mean, of course, the whole thing was a fire hazard, but that one was, let's say, a higher risk fire hazard. It rarely came to that anyway because most times, you were saving the paraffin for the next night. No electricity meant no streetlights, so the streets would get dark except for the tiny lamps and candles used by street vendors. Their lights and candles never blew out, no matter how windy it got. They would cut a cylindrical shape from juice containers and put it over the lamp to shield the light from the wind. The vendors usually left their posts around 9 pm, so after 9 pm, it would go really dark, so everyone was usually indoors by then. Later on, generators became a thing, with many households owning one. So late at night, we slept to the humming of generators. I don't remember ever complaining that they disturbed our sleep. The only complaint we had was how unlucky we were not to have one of our own,

because it took us a while to get ours. Who the hell did they think they were with their electric lights on and enjoying their T.V.s while we sat by candlelight?

There were always rumors that electricity was finally coming, but it never amounted to anything. People were so desperate for the day to come that every time people saw a group of men carrying long cables, they would start celebrating that the days of living in darkness had come to an end. Knowing the place, I won't be surprised if, at times, we cheered at people who had just stolen some cables at some factory somewhere as our saviors who would bring us to the light.

Electricity was not the only issue. Running water was also a problem. Not all houses had access to running water. This was because there were generally two classes of people in Epworth, those that owned "stands," which means their houses were built on land allocated for residential buildings by the city. Those who owned stands had bigger land plots, and some could afford to build *durawalls* around their property. *Durawalls* are walls built around houses, usually in a masonry style, so it isn't just an ugly wall. This was our class, not only did we have a "stand" we did have a big house as well, on top of that we had a *durawall*. We were the crème de la crème. The other class lived in squatter-like conditions, in tiny houses so close to each other that they practically lived with their neighbors. These tiny houses were built almost anywhere, there was no place, and I mean no place that was unsuitable for building. This made taking backroads anywhere so complicated because one day, you would find a house built in the middle of your path, and you had to find another route! As a kid, we took backroads to church, and at one point, there was a house that blocked our path. The house owners would not let us pass. The path was their property now; we were trespassing. I was with a couple of friends, and

we tried to plead with them to no avail. They had been gracious for a bit, constantly telling people that there was no longer a path there but let them pass anyways. However, people kept coming, and they were eventually fed up with us.

Since these houses sprang up everywhere, there was no way the city would give them access to running water. So, they were at the mercy of those that owned stands because that's where they would get their water. It didn't take long for that to turn into a business. People started selling water; not only were they selling it, but they also put limits on the number of buckets one would get per day, which was usually seven, and don't you dare think you would cheat and get an eighth bucket, they would always know. Some of the squatter settlers built some wells of their own. It usually wasn't water sanitary enough to drink, although some drank it all the same. I remember I went to a house of an owner I shall not name (because chances are high, they will read this memoir), and I asked for some water. Their water tasted bitter, and I never asked for water at that house again. Then there was a time when there wasn't any water for the whole town. It wasn't an Epworth only problem but the whole country. It was a mixture of the water purification sites not working because they were worn out and had never been replaced ever since they were installed by the colonizers, and lack of electricity since the electric generating sites were also not working because they were also worn out and had never been replaced since they were installed by the colonizers. So, we got to feel what it was like to go without water, and suddenly those with wells were now kings. The lady that lived a house down from us had a well. Good for her; she had running water and a contingency plan. We got water from her for a while, being limited, of course, to the seven buckets. However, my mom and our neighbor Mrs. Murehwa were

allowed to get as many as they pleased; we were being rewarded for being good neighbors. Later, a community borehole was built, but it was built on someone's land, so he charged people for the water. Bastard!

Everything about Epworth just screamed neglect. A town that an already incompetent government abandoned to fare on its own. No one even bothered to name areas in this town. For instance, the area I lived in was called Overspill. What kind of name was that? It was only named that because there was an Overspill shopping center about a kilometer from my house. Why was the shopping center named that you ask? This was because there was a supermarket in that center named Overspill. It must have been one of the first shops built in that shopping center. So, you have a whole area named after one shop! At one point, someone attempted to name the street my house was on by writing it on the corner you took to get into my street. They tried to name it *Jonara Street,* no doubt their name or nickname**.** Kudos to them for trying because naming anything in Epworth was fair game, but unfortunately for them, it didn't stick. My mother tells me that another tried name for our street was Spillway. Seriously, come on, like we hadn't had enough with the spilling theme.

That's not all though; trust me, it gets worse than Overspill and *Jonara street.* There was a place called *Domboramwari,* which directly translates to "The stone of God." The name itself was wrong because the stone they referred to was more like a hill, so it should have been *Gomoramwari.* They couldn't even get the terminology right! Anyway, it was called that because it was rumored that on the hill somewhere was a footprint that belonged to God. Yep, you got that right, God's very own footprint. The footprint was believed to fit anyone, so it would increase and decrease in size depending

on who slid their foot in the footprint. The only issue was if you went to the hill explicitly looking for the footprint, you wouldn't find it, you just had to come across it by chance, so of course, nobody ever did see it. There was another called *kuDomboremaziso,* which translates to "The Stone with Eyes." This time they got the name right, it was indeed a stone. The story for calling it thus was a little different. No one claimed it had God's eyes because I guess that would have been deemed a little too far. I was told it was named thus because there were two huge holes created by weathering, and they looked like eyes crying.

There was also *KumaBala,* which was short for "At the Balancing Rocks." This was because, in the area, they were a pile of huge rocks that were on top of a smaller rock and somehow maintained their balance. There was a place called *Munyuki.* I don't even know what the heck that means. Then there was a place named *KwaFanta,* which means "Fanta," like the place was called Fanta the drink! I heard stories that it was named so because there was a tuck-shop there with the Fanta logo, and some genius was like, "Hey, let's name this place Fanta now." There was a place named *KwaRuben,* which meant the place was called Ruben. I don't know who this Ruben fella was, and what made him so famous to have the whole area named after him. Perhaps he was the inspiration to our *Jonara Street* guy.

Some places were unnamed, making it hard for people to give directions to their houses. For instance, there was an area called *KumaE,* which directly translates to "The E's." I didn't even know which exact area this place was, and I was not the only one. At times the name would be used to describe an exact place, and at times it was used more so as a phrase that meant super faraway place, within the belly of the Epworth's squatter

houses. I don't even know how far it was; I just know it was far. I later found out that there was an area beyond *KumaE* that was only known as the area *beyond KumaE*. I don't know who decided the border; like, "okay, you guys are too far away, we gotta draw the line somewhere, so you guys are beyond the *E* area." Those excluded were usually not too happy about it, so they would debate that they were still part of the area and the border was after them. No one wants to live in a nameless place.

If you thought the names were bad, the bus stops were even worse. There weren't any designated areas for public transport to stop, so they were made up like everything else. Some of them, to be fair, made sense; they would stop at shopping centers and the likes. However, some bus stops were just weird.

You would hear someone yell out, "At the church!" which meant he wanted the bus to stop at some church along the road.

Others were, "At the white house!" They wanted the driver to stop at the house with the white paint.

Who decided that the house would be a good bus stop? I have no idea at all.

The funniest was probably "After Hump," which meant the driver had to stop right after a speed bump!

What in the world man, who came up with these stops? One of those spots along my route home was called *Pamuchenje,* a Diospyros kirkii tree. Well, it so happened that later on, the tree was cut, and I heard this woman who wanted to stop there say *Paimbova nemuchenje!* which directly translates to, "Where there used to be a Diospyros kirkii tree!" I couldn't help it; I laughed out loud.

Chapter 2

From Rags to Riches, to Epworth

Whenever I talk about Epworth, people often ask me how in the world we ended up in a place like that. A fair question, one that requires me to dive into my family's background if I'm to give an honest answer. To leave no stone unturned, I find that the best place to start is when my parents met in 1982. My mom was a temporary teacher at a rural school called Chamapango. The school was far from where she lived; thus, they needed to find her a place to stay at one of the teacher's cottages. Unfortunately, all the cottages were occupied, so they asked one of the teachers if she would share her cottage with my mom. The teacher was my dad's youngest sister, Maria. The two got close, and my mom went to see my grandparents, not knowing she would eventually be married into the family. It so happened that my dad came to visit her little sister and saw the beauty that is my mom. He was struck, and my mom told me he told his sister that he would marry her.

"I'm going to marry that teacher friend of yours."

To which my aunt replied,

"You don't even know if she likes you, and now you are talking about marriage."

She was right; my dad was getting too ahead of himself. My mom had a boyfriend at the time, and she even introduced the boyfriend to my dad (Ouch). My sister Tebby said that my mom referred to my dad as her brother since he was her friend's older

brother. You were talking about marriage dad, but it doesn't get more friend-zoned than that. However, he was persistent; he kept coming to "visit his sister" in his Nissan Bluebird. He wasn't fooling anybody; the other teachers started commenting that his frequent visits had stopped being about his sister. Kudos to him; it worked out for him. Maybe it was the confidence, persistence, how smooth he was or all the above, but he got his girl, and they were married by the end of 1982.

They did their traditional ceremony, which was the paying of the bride price. In Zimbabwe marriage is done in two parts. The first is the paying of the dowry by the groom. The second part is a regular wedding. My parents, however, couldn't do an actual wedding yet. This is because my dad had an earlier marriage that ended in divorce. Both of them being Catholic hindered that because the Catholic Church does not recognize divorce, making it impossible to get married in the church after a divorce. However, they never gave up on the marriage thing; they kept working on it until they eventually got officially married by the church in 2007.

After six years of being married (traditional ceremony), my dad left Zimbabwe to go to the United States in February 1988. He studied in Alabama and taught at a university for a while, but no one remembers the university he studied or taught. I ended up studying in Alabama myself when I was getting my master's. It may seem like a full-circle moment to you that I ended up following my father's footsteps decades after he had left the U.S. I can tell you right now it wasn't; my move to Alabama from North Carolina, where I did my undergraduate studies, was difficult for me, and I hated every bit of it for the first three months. I celebrated that full circle moment when I moved to North Carolina from Zimbabwe, but when I came to Alabama, I was going through the motions that I didn't even have the time to think about it.

When he left for the U.S., my family was living in a town called Chitungwiza. Chipo, my oldest sister, was seven years old, my sister after her Tebby was four, then the twins, my sister Tambu and my brother Tinashe were two. Things were tough when my dad left. My mom was pretty much a single woman who had to take care of four young children. She had to do some side hustles to make ends meet, like knitting jerseys to sell. She also started selling towels; she would go to the factories and buy the rejected towels because they had been knitted wrong or had some minor defect to sell. My sister Tebby used to help her a lot with the selling, taking the towels every day after school, and going on her routes. To this day, Tebby is an excellent marketer; I swear that lady can sell you anything. However, it wasn't only her marketing skills that helped her sell the towels, sometimes people bought from her out of kindness. She tells a beautiful story of this soldier who helped her with the towels. One day my sister had walked and walked with her towels, and she hadn't sold a single one. People don't buy towels every day, so it was a hard business. This soldier, upon seeing my sister called up to her and asked the prices of the towels, then bought every single one. He had probably seen her before in that route and saw the little success she had and felt sorry for her. He figured they must need the money at home so bad if this little girl was willing to walk in the sun for hours and hours selling towels. He then said she should come to see him whenever she didn't sell any towels. So, whenever my sister didn't have any sales, she would go to his house, and he would buy all of the towels. Anytime she sold any, she would still pass by his house, sometimes wait for him to come back from work and then tell him the good news. My sister says she would wait until he came back, and as soon as he saw her, he would ask

"How many have you sold today?"

"Two," she would reply.

"That's great! You did amazing today."

Whenever she didn't sell any, he would buy them all. It became my sister's routine; she would not go back home until she gave him a sales report. She does not recall his name, but she speaks of that man fondly and always wishes she could meet him one day.

My dad would send money here and there, but it came sparingly because he was a student. It was very expensive to send money the official way those days, so my dad used to sneak it in his letters. He would write on thin pink pads; then, he would put the money in the middle of the letter. His letters always came in envelopes with windows, were always written with a dotted pen, and were signed by my dad's Shona name Munhuwamwari instead of the English name everyone knew, Thaddeus. My mom recalls when one of his letters got lost and went to Zambia instead. It was at a time that she really needed the money, and she was starting not to believe him when he kept assuring her that indeed he had sent the money.

After multiple years in the United States, my grandfather (mom's father) became concerned. He started asking himself what-if questions, like what if his daughter's husband was never to come back, what if he had found someone else over there. My siblings were pretty much growing up without their dad. Tambu and Tinashe had no memory of him being that he left when they were two. My mom, however, would always tell them about their dad, tell them that he was in the United States and whenever my

sister Tambu would hear a plane flying overhead, she would rush outside look at the plane

"My dad is on that plane," she would say. Then she would wave

"Goodbye, daddy"

All this was concerning my grandfather, so he went to my mom to see how she was doing, and he also told her,

"Always know that you still have a home with us, so don't feel like you have to tough it out here on your own."

My mom told him that, yes, things were indeed difficult, being that they didn't see each other, but they were okay. They communicated as frequently as they could. My mom later found a job working for a bank called CABS, and things got a bit better. Around this time, my parents started thinking of relocating to the United States. The plan was for my mom to go first, then the kids would follow. It looked like the move was about to materialize, so Tebby, Tambu, and Tinashe were sent to live with Aunt Maria; my sister Chipo was staying with my grandmother that time (mom's mom). The whole thing about the plan is wild to me because it means there is a possibility that I would have been born an American. If you believe in the multiverse, then there is a universe out there where there is an American Tawanda who went to American schools, doesn't have the Zimbabwean accent, loves sweet tea and iced coffee. Christ above, maybe he watches American football too, blasphemy! In all seriousness, despite knowing that my life would have been way easier had my parents made the move, I am okay with how things turned out, happy even. Yes, we were poor, but we were together; my time in Epworth has also

made me into the person I am today, the person that is grateful for every single thing, the person that does not take anything for granted. I wouldn't want to change anything if there is even the slightest chance that those things would not be.

The move never happened because my mom was denied a VISA. She was devastated, could not hold her emotions, and started crying while she was coming out of the embassy. While she was crying, a man coming from the embassy recognized her and called after her. It was her uncle Mr. Chitongo who was also applying for a VISA only his was to go on holiday. He was running a company called Chitkem Security, and it was doing really well. He consoled my mom as best he could by trying to make light of the situation.

"Look at you crying as if you have been denied entry to your own country."

He told her to come see him at his offices, but my mom never went. It was not until she was not working at CABS and things started getting tough again that she remembered her uncle, who had told her to come see him. So she went to see him, he offered her a job, and my mom started working for Chitkem security. Her uncle had a good heart and helped her in her time of need, but he was a mess in business. The problem with the dude is he easily believes in his own hype, which usually leads to some rush decisions on his part. I met him a couple of times, and all the conversations I had with him were always comical. I remember when he came to our house to see my mom one time. My mom was not there; I was the only one at home. He was driving a ford ranger at the time; I couldn't forget it even if I wanted to because he talked about how expensive they are so many times in our conversation.

"You see this car? It's a Ford ranger, latest, brand new. I have three of them."

"Come, come, let me show you something, see these three packets of full chicken. I bought them for your mom, three of them! Tell Theodora (my mom) that I said that."

That was the bulk of our conversation, him bragging to me about things he had. That is what having a conversation with him is like, period. My brother tells me how he once bragged to him about his massive tie collection!

He is a man who can get a bit overconfident in his abilities, and despite his business being successful, it was a mess. My mom worked hard to get his books in order, and she was featured in the national newspaper as the woman who had revitalized Chitkem at a time when a few women held high corporate positions. Communication between my parents got way better when she started working at Chitkem. She now had access to a landline, so they no longer relied on letters. My mom tells me my dad would call every day in the morning. He called so often that the receptionist who used to transfer the calls to my mom's office assumed he worked in another city. There was no way someone outside the country would call that often. She used to tell my mom that when she got married, she would want a husband like Mr. Nyahasha because this man was so dedicated to his wife. That is one thing my mom is constant about; despite the distance, despite how difficult it was, my dad did his best to be there for her. She recalls an incident when she started working at Chitkem; she got sick and was bedridden for days. She wrote to him telling him that she wasn't feeling well. Days later, she heard the postman's bell, and she assumed it was a letter from dad. It wasn't. It was a letter from a doctor who had delivered Tambu and Tinashe. He was telling her to come see him at his office. When she got there, he told her that dad had called his office asking him to do a

check-up on his wife and that he would pay him for everything. My mom doesn't even remember what the problem was, but she will never forget the gesture. It was a time that she mostly felt alienated, and those little moments were precious.

My dad returned to Zimbabwe when my mom was still at Chitkem in 1995. I was born two years after my dad came back. When my siblings found out my mom was pregnant, they held a meeting discussing how they didn't want a younger sibling. I don't know what they were hoping to achieve with their meeting; they were getting a baby brother whether they held the meeting or not. Someone will mention it whenever we make fun of each other, which happens a lot.

"Why is he talking? Does he know we didn't even want him in the first place?"

Aside from my siblings not knowing what was good for them, things were looking good for my family at the time. My mom was doing well at her job, and she had also started a side hustle of knitting school uniforms, and the business boomed as many schools around the nation were now contracting her. My sister Tebby was in boarding school at the time, and she tells me she was the envy of many kids at her school. At the time, my dad was working for a N.G.O (Non-Government Organizations usually foreign organizations that specialize in giving some type of aid), a good job that paid well, and saw him travel a lot.

This was when my parents decided it was time to buy a house; they were tired of renting. I remember my sister Tambu mentioning they almost got a place in Ashdown Park, a very posh suburb. I remember th**e** conversation vividly, she was in her room while I was in Tinashe's room, and we were talking through the walls, something we did quite a

lot, to be honest. When everyone was chilling in their rooms, we often talked that way because no one wanted to leave their room.

"You know we could have been in Ashdown Park."

"Really! What happened then?"

"Don't know, but we were so close to getting a house there, and then somehow we landed here."

When I asked my mom about this, she told me there was never an Ashdown Park house in consideration. That makes me think that my siblings might have misheard something, and they took it and ran with it to make themselves believe that we were in Epworth by mistake. Even though there was no Ashdown Park, my parents had no intention to go to Epworth. My mom only found out about a plot being sold when she went to Hatfield, a town neighboring Epworth, to get her car fixed. The mechanic was an uncle of ours, Uncle Murehwa, who would eventually become our neighbor. He told my mom about the plot for sale after she had mentioned she was looking to buy a house. The moment she heard Epworth, she didn't want it, but she thought, well, it wouldn't hurt just to go and see. When she got there, her sentiment changed. She told me what she thought when she got there,

"Well, I get there, and I see how big the plot is, how big the Murehwa house was, and I thought to myself, this is exactly what I am looking for. Now maybe there was an immaturity in there, but I was just tired of renting and thought this would be a good move."

To be fair, hindsight always makes us look foolish because I can see how my mom would have been convinced that this was the right move. As I mentioned in the first chapter, there was always talk that electricity was coming, and every time it seemed like it was really close. Everyone also believed that the main issue with Epworth was electricity. Once that was resolved, then its value would rise. Thus, this might have looked like an excellent investment; get a house in a neighborhood on the up and up while it is still cheap because once development comes, and prices shoot up, you already have a house.

Development never came, and the situation in Zimbabwe at the time didn't help either. In 1998 Mugabe got Zimbabwe into the Second Congo Conflict. The war effort drained the economy, and things were starting to look bleak. On the home front, my dad's contract with the N.G.O. he worked for ran up, and they didn't renew it, so he was now out of a job. My parents fought on despite the circumstances, and they were able to build their home.

The house was beautiful, I must say. It was big, something my parents wanted. It had a verandah that led to the lounge, leading to the dining area. After the dining room came the kitchen. After the kitchen came on bedroom then the study room, all these rooms were to the left side of the lounge and dining room. My parent's bedroom was the first room after the lounge to the right. They had an in-suite bathroom in their bedroom. After their bedroom, there were the bathrooms, then two bedrooms followed after that. Since the house had so many rooms, we had a long corridor from the lounge door to the study room, which was the last room. We also had a cottage at the back, which was built to rent it out, a common practice in Zimbabwe. The yard was equally if not more

impressive. There was a green lawn that covered the front of the yard. My mom is a flower person, so flowers were surrounding the lawn. We also had a couple of trees in the front, two willow trees and two rose trees; one had pink roses, the other white. On both sides of the house, my parents maintained a vegetable garden that led to the back of the house.

We moved to the house in 2000. The house was not all the way finished, but it was livable. It didn't have a ceiling; we got accustomed to seeing the beams that held the roof together. The lounge, dining room, kitchen, and my parents' in-suite bathroom had no flooring. All the rooms except the bathrooms had no doors. The lack of doors and ceiling made it possible to have our conversations while everyone was in their rooms. The cottage outside was now on the roof level, but no roof had been laid yet. The plan, of course, was to finish up these things while we were already in there. There was no need to continue renting when we could live in the house and complete it while we were there.

Well, circumstances happened, and none of those things were ever finished. The economy in Zimbabwe was getting worse and worse. Not only were we still involved in the Congo War, we were hit by economic sanctions by the U.K. and the United States. This was after Mugabe used war vets to seize land from white farmers. The West deemed this a violation of human rights and imposed sanctions on us. If we are to be brutally honest, it was quite hypocritical of the British to take this stance, given how they had indirectly caused this situation to happen in the first place. Don't get me wrong, Mugabe had his own agendas when he did this; he was becoming less and less popular. So, he thought this move would ease things, especially between him and the war vets who were claiming that promises made to them during the liberation struggle were not being met.

With all that being said, let's not excuse the role of the British in this. After independence, the British had an agreement with Mugabe's government that the white farmers were to be allowed to keep their land. However, if a white farmer was to sell a farm, they were to approach the government first before selling it on the open market. This would allow the government to re-allocate the land to black farmers who had been kicked off their land during the colonial regime. The deal was England would provide the funds that the government was to use to buy the land as a form of reparations. However, the British pulled out, leaving the government with no money to buy the land. Thus, most if not all the farms being sold went to the open market. This left a lot of disgruntled people who felt owed by the government. After all, the fight for independence was to get back their land.

This turn of events made things even harder for my parents. My mom's business went under, and by 2001 she wasn't working at Chitkem anymore. Chitkem itself was seeing the roughest of rough times like any company was at the time. The economy continued to sink because now the agricultural sector, the backbone of Zimbabwe's economy, was as good as dead. Government ministers used the land seizing as an opportunity to take the land for themselves. They took it just because they could, but they had no interest or expertise in farming. The whole nation worked against my parents, so the house was never finished. To top that off, the builders had done some undercuts in the building. They were buying cheaper materials and pocketing the rest of the money. So, after some months of living in the house, holes started appearing in the corridor. It was as if Epworth was warning us that we were in for a rough time.

We managed to make our stay as comfortable as we could. To compensate for the lack of flooring in the lounge and the kitchen, we put out black industrial plastics to cover up the floor. My mom's brother supplied the plastics. We didn't change them as often as we wanted to because they were hard to come by. So, at times the plastics would start to get worn out, begging to be replaced. I remember one day when my uncle came to visit, and my mom asked him

"Did you bring my plastics?"

"No," he replied

"Ah, come on Pindurai!..." My mom was about to give a whole speech when he busted out laughing, telling her he was joking. We took the old plastics out and replaced them with the new shiny ones. Sometimes we had to cut the plastics to fit where they were to be put. After we were done, the room brightened up; we had a new floor until it had to be replaced too.

We went on without doors for a while. You just had to know when someone was changing so that you didn't walk in the corridor. Sometimes someone would call out

"Ndukuchinja."

"I'm changing," so that you know that the coast wasn't going to be clear for a while. Tebby would sometimes make a joke out of it. Whenever someone passed by her room, she would yell

"Iwe, iwe handina kupfeka iwe!"

"Hey, hey, I'm not dressed!"

We would immediately face the other direction, walk fast complaining that she didn't give us a forewarning, then she would start laughing. She got us every time because we couldn't afford not to take her seriously.

As my siblings started working and bringing in some income, they started thinking about our stay in Epworth. Maybe finally they could do something about it. The truth is they couldn't, they weren't making that much money, but it was important to think like they could. It served as a reminder to everyone that we were not going to accept our situation. Above all else, they were interested in leaving; they weren't interested in revamping the house. Besides things like doors that were essential, they were not too pressed about the idea of finishing the house and making it all nice. This was because they understood that, yes, as much as our house needed improvements, it wasn't our only problem. The bigger problem was the town we lived in, so they were more receptive to the idea of moving rather than fixing the house. Rightly so, what is the point of living in a lovely house in a town like Epworth? Here and there, they flirted with the idea of finishing up the house and electrifying it, which was possible because there was a house not too far from where we lived that had electricity, the guy paid for his own transformer. The idea never sank though, because it wasn't about the electricity either. I mean, yes, it was a big part of it, but the problem was Epworth itself. The only reasonable thing to do in Epworth is to leave Epworth.

This mentality my siblings had that they passed on to me was one thing that saved us. We never felt like we belonged in Epworth, and we were not willing to live the rest of our lives in that place. We dared to dream that we could leave, and for a place like that, a dream can take you so far. I remember when all my siblings were all together, my parents

were not home at that time. My brother pulled out a sheet of paper, and we began to write down things we needed to change in the house and where we wanted to be. Some of the things that were on the list were,

Electricity: Seeing how we can go about getting our own transformer

Put the ceiling up

Finish the flooring in the lounge, dining, kitchen, and mom and dad's in-suite bathroom

Furnish up the kitchen: Putting built-in cupboards etc.

Doors

Finishing the cottage

Eventually, leave and put the place up for rent.

The process was fun, and I guess, therapeutic on some level. It filled us with hope, a promise of better things to come. Things like that kept us from settling in, accepting that this was our fate. Even my mother did that too. I remember when she would help me imagine some distant future where we would not be staying in Epworth anymore, where all her children were doing big things and some other cool stuff. So, I was taught to dream of a better future from a very young age, something many of my peers did not have. To them, Epworth was all they had and all they will ever be. This made a massive difference in how we handled ourselves. We were in Epworth, but it didn't break us. We still believed we could leave; we still believed we deserved much better, and believe me when I tell you, in a place like Epworth, belief is a rare commodity.

Chapter 3

The Little Dynamo

I remember quite a lot of things in our first year in Epworth, which is surprising given that I was only three when we moved there. I even remember when I was being potty trained! (Let me not say potty trained, it makes me feel like a dog). When I was learning to go to the toilet by myself, I would go to the toilet and sit on the seat. Then, after I was done, I would yell, *"Ndapezha!"* I was trying to say *"Ndapedza,"* which means "I'm done," then someone would come and clean me up.

Speaking of toilets (I know, I know, but I had to find a segue), I was locked in a toilet once. I was three, and I had mastered the toilet going, and I felt like I was a big boy now—a man who could take care of his own business. A man like that needed his privacy; it was only right. So, I started locking the door after myself every time I went into the toilet. One day, I went into the toilet and locked the door as usual. Only this time, when I tried to get out, the key wasn't turning. I tried and tried, and it wasn't working. I started panicking, banging on the door, "I want to get out, I want to get out!" Chipo and my mom's sister Aunt Tafadzwa were the only ones at home that day. They rushed to the door; Chipo was the first to shout

"What's going on?"

"The door won't open." I was crying now. They tried to give me instructions on what to do, which wasn't working, which made me more frustrated, so I started crying

"It's not working!"

Then my aunt had an idea, "Take out the key and pass it to us from underneath the door; then we will unlock the door from the outside."

It was a grand idea, but I couldn't remove the key from the hole either. That led to more cries; I was screwed. We had two bathrooms at our house right next to each other. The one I was in was just a toilet and a standing shower. The other bathroom had a bathtub and toilet like any other bathroom. The two-bathroom situation helped a lot if you had to use the bathroom when someone was taking a shower, especially if it was my brother, who notoriously takes long showers. The guy takes ten minutes brushing his teeth before he even gets in the shower. While I was bellowing away, Chipo went into the other bathroom, and she somehow was able to climb all the way up until she could poke her head into the toilet from the top of the wall. Thank God we didn't have a ceiling. The first thing she had to do was make me stop crying and panicking.

"Hey Tawanda, no need to cry, I'm gonna get you out. I just need you to listen, and for that, you have to stop crying."

I nodded; I was calming down now.

"Okay, turn the key slightly towards me, okay good, now pull it towards you. There you go, now slide it under the door."

I slid it under the door, and my aunt opened the door. Just like that, I was free; I didn't lock the door after that for quite some time. To be honest, I am so thankful that Chipo was there. If it had been any of my other siblings, it wouldn't have ended well. There was no way Tebby would have climbed up to the ceiling from the next room; her

tomboy era of climbing trees was long over; she was an elegant lady now. Tinashe probably would have gotten impatient because I was failing to do simple things in between my crying. He would have ended up shouting something like, "Tawanda, you are not listening. Why are you crying right now? It's a simple task. Just turn the key!" My brother is not the most patient man on the planet. Tambu, who wears her heart on her sleeve, probably would have started crying with me. Chipo is the only one who could have done this. Out of all my siblings, including myself, Chipo is the most street-savvy. If I'm in a fight and have to pick one sibling to back me up, I will take Chipo, no question. It's not even because she can fight; she can't. She actually has a height disadvantage being the shortest out of all of us. When I was in high school, I measured how tall I was standing beside Chipo every school holiday. I reached her height when I was fourteen. For God's sake, her thirteen-year-old son is taller than her now. Not only does she have the height disadvantage, but she doesn't look menacing at all. She's a beauty who looks way younger for her age. If you see her walking alone, you can never guess she's a forty-one-year-old mother of three.

However, even with the height disadvantage, I know she will back me up; she will talk a big game even if she was scared, which will scare the problem away. They will probably think this woman must have a black belt or something. She's this short, yet she's not backing off.

She's more than my would-be protection though. Being the eldest, she's like a second mom to me. Sometimes she laughs and says that I'm her firstborn and she's not wrong. She was a big presence in my life those early years because my mom was out

through work a lot. I was kinda scared of her too; being the tough disciplinarian that she was. I laugh with her now about it, often telling her,

"I can't believe I was ever scared of you. Psssh, I was just scared of everything when I was a kid."

She laughs and usually replies,

"Kid, you better show respect to your elders, or I will make you scared of me again."

The fear might be gone, but the respect has never left and never will. I couldn't have asked for a better sister, a better second mom, a better protector, someone who would literally climb walls for me. Long live our little dynamo!

Chapter 4

Protect the Innocence

It took me maybe till my fourth birthday to get over my fear of keys. As a man who had grown up in wisdom, I had to let go of my past fears and enter the new year with optimism, so I had to get rid of this fear. I don't remember much about my fourth birthday. The only thing I recall is running towards Tebby, who had just entered the gate. I jumped into her arms; she picked me up and said, "You are a big boy now; how old have you turned?"

"Four!"

"Yes four!' she repeated excitedly. That's all I remember about that day.

At four, I started the habit of talking to myself. We had a landline in the house that of course, wasn't working because of the electricity issue. So, it became a personal toy of mine as I would have full-blown conversations with myself, pretending like I was talking to someone else.

“Hello!”

“Makadii henyu?” (How are you?)

Then I would reply in a whisper, "*Tiripo hedu makdiiwo"* (We are well, how are you). I was replying for the whole family.

After the pleasantries, the person on the other line would ask, *"Tebby arkio here?"*

(Is Tebby there?)

Then I would reply, *"Ehe ariko"* (Yes, she's here). For some reason, the person on the other line never asked me to give the phone to any of my siblings so that they can talk to them themselves. No, they preferred to talk to them through me. After asking for Tebby, they would ask for Chipo, Tambu, and everyone. I spent hours on that phone, especially on rainy days when I couldn't go out and play. I vividly remember sitting at that telephone desk one rainy afternoon. I was wearing this ugly jersey Aunt Tafadwa had knitted for me. It was brown with white lines and had a turtleneck. It also had this weird bridge in front. Tebby and Tambu were in the lounge, listening to my conversation. My pretend play amused them, making me shout into the phone even louder.

When a kid starts talking to themselves, it is time that they go to pre-school. The pre-school I went to was very different. It was kind of like a boarding school setup. We were dropped off Sunday and picked up on Friday. All my life, I have never seen any other pre-school like that. Years later, I asked my mom why she enrolled me in such a pre-school.

"If I could go back, I would never do it again," she said

"I was in Epworth at the time, trying the best I can to make sure my children don't get swept in by their surroundings, especially my youngest. The pre-school wasn't in Epworth, it was different, and at that time, I was disillusioned to think different meant better. If what they did was different from what Epworth was doing, then it was better."

To be fair to her, I didn't have a bad experience there or anything, and I get her sentiment. Most of the time, she had to make these decisions by herself. My dad could not get a job in the city, so he returned to our rural home and started farming, growing

tobacco. It wasn't ideal; that's not what he wanted to do; it meant he had to live away from his wife for long periods again, but what could be done, food had to be put on the table somehow. To her credit, I think it worked in our favor sometimes. Being away from home for five days shielded me from the struggle back home. There were times when things were hard, and no one could afford mealie meal. I didn't realize this because when Tebby came to pick me up, she told me-

"Oh, by the way, you will love being home this weekend. We don't eat sadza anymore for supper."

Sadza is Zimbabwe's staple food. It looks like white playdough and is eaten with a relish of meat and vegetables. When my sister told me this, I was happy. Not eating sadza was a delicacy because, on special days, people didn't cook sadza. For example, no one ate sadza on Christmas; people mostly ate rice or, if you were part of the super-elite, you would have pasta. So not eating sadza sounded to me like a delicacy; we were up in the world. It was not until I was a grown-up that I realized we weren't eating bread out of want; it was because we couldn't afford mealie meal.

My parents and siblings tried as much as they could to shelter me from the ugly truths of our situation. So, for the most part, all I remember about my time in pre-school is my time at the school. I remember the old guy who was the head cook; we called him *"Sekuru"* (Grandpa). Then there was a white lady that owned the school. She was very fond of me for some reason. Every time she saw me, she would call after me give me some candy or any other little gifts. We called her Nana, and I'm not going to tell you how old I was when I finally figured out that Nana wasn't her actual name. I also remember one of the teachers *Gogo Agnes* (Grandma Agnes). Now I remember her

precisely because of two incidents. The first one involved Chipo. I don't know why, but I told Gogo Agnes that Chipo had gotten married. I must have been so sure of myself because she believed me, so when Chipo came to pick me up, she said,

"Congratulations on the marriage!"

Chipo was confused, so she asked, "I'm sorry, who's marriage?"

Gogo Agnes was even more confused, "Yours, Tawanda told me you got married."

Chipo told her that was not the case at all, and on the way home, she asked me why I would say such a thing. I couldn't come up with a legitimate answer, so I was scolded for making things up.

The other incident was a story my mom told me. I struggled with reading and writing, and Gogo Agnes told my mom that I was lagging behind.

"There was something in her tone that was suggesting that you were a lost cause. I was not going to let anyone label my son, so I took it upon myself to teach you reading and writing. In a few weeks, you were the best student there, and they were showering you with praises."

There were cottages at the school so that the staff could stay at the school. So, some of their older kids would hang with us from time to time since they lived there. I got into trouble with my dad because of one of the older kids. She taught us a catchy song:

Imi maSalad munonetsa

Imi maSalad munonetsa

Every Sunday kuTonaz

Every Sunday kuTonaz

Chidhuma naMasendeke ndaivada

Chidhuma naMasendeke ndaivada

The song was a nonsense song without any meaning. The term *maSalad* usually means super westernized Zimbabweans, in other words, pretentious people who try so hard to be American or British. Sometimes it is used to reference those in the middle and high class. The song aims shots at them for doing the most and wanting to go to town every Sunday. However, the last two lines have nothing to do with the theme as they translate to "I loved Chidhuma and Masendeke." I didn't know who those fellas were; I just thought, "Who cares who they were? They must have been some cool dudes." So, I went to my dad so that he could hear the new hit song. When I reached the last two lines, he looked quite horrified with what he had heard. He asks,

"Wait, what did you say?"

I thought he was feeling it, so I confidently sang the last two lines again.

"Do you know who Chidhuma and Masendeke are?"

"No, who are they?" I replied.

Turns out they were criminals who were wanted by the police. They had escaped prison and had gone on a rampage committing crime after crime, including robbery, murder, and rape. I was instructed never to sing that song again. When I went back to school, I told the girl who had taught us not to sing the song again because my dad said it was bad. I don't remember how she took my advice.

My niece Leah once told me that this wasn't the only song incident I had with my dad in pre-school. Apparently, I went to my dad again with a song I had learned from my friends. The song went like this:

Admire Kadembo! Pirori
Admire Kadembo! Pirori
Akatanga kusura! Pirori
Akatanga kusura! Pirori
Zimbabwe yese! Pirori
Zimbabwe yese! Pirori
Inotanga kunhuhwa! Pirori

I don't remember this incident at all, and I doubt that it ever happened. Unlike the first song, I knew what this one meant, and there is no way I would have sung this to my dad. The song is about a boy named Admire Skunk, who, when he farts, the whole Zimbabwe smells terrible. The *"Pirori"* part doesn't mean anything either it was put in the song to add rhythm or mimic a farting sound no one knows. According to Leah, my dad laughed when I sang it to him and made a joke about what I was learning in pre-school.

Surprisingly, some memories stick out from my days in pre-school, like a girl who was a huge fan of bread with marmalade jam. She would be so giddy every time there was bread with marmalade, especially if she had the crust, which she called "butter" for some reason. There was this kid who was dropped for the first time at the school; I don't remember his name. He wasn't happy about it; he cried for his mom for hours, refusing to eat anything. I didn't get it; what was he crying about? He would see his mom in a couple of days; what was the big deal. I also remember this soup that was cooked for dinner one night. Everyone loved it except me. I didn't like its look, which was too

watery for my liking, and I thought it tasted bitter. I spilled some by mistake on my pajamas, which caused a huge stain on them. Now I know what I'm about to say is impossible, but the crazy thing is that is the memory I have in my head. I recall how my pajamas had a huge hole where the soup had spilled as if I had spilled acid on them. I must have really hated that soup that I convinced myself that's what happened because no matter how much I tell myself it's impossible, I still see it happening.

I remember playing the *"Tauya kuzzona Mary* game." (We have come to see Mary) in the dormitories when it was raining, and we couldn't go outside. We circled around someone in the middle who would be acting as Mary's mother singing

Tauya kuzoona Mary Mary Mary
Tauya kuzzona Mary, Amai Mary arikupi

Which translates to:

We have come to see Mary, Mary Mary
We have come to see Mary; Mother, where is Mary?

The mother would reply with varied responses Mary is outside, Mary is cooking, and we kept singing. Later the mother would reply Mary is sick and then we would sing in quite sad voices. After the sick response, the mother will ultimately reply that Mary was dead, then we would fake cry as we kept on singing, we have come to see Mary. It wasn't until I was an adult that I started thinking what a weird song it was for kids to be singing. A song that ended in death; I don't know what the objective was. Later on, an officially released version of the song didn't have the death part. Instead, it had Mary being sick, Mary going to the hospital, but she would recover, and everyone would be happy. I never found out who came up with the song's original version.

Then there was *"Amina"* This was a game played by two where they would clap their hands and give each other high fives while singing:

Amina; Amina Kadeya

Simoreya; Amina sunshine PO Box Marandera Marandera

Gumpepe Gumpempe Gumpepe

Amina Ju Jekesen

When you said "*Amina ju jeksen"* you would try to poke the person you were playing with in the stomach. For so long, I thought the song was a bunch of gibberish that didn't mean anything. Someone later told me that there was a whole story behind the game. I thought it was my brother who told me, but he says it wasn't him. He learned the origin story from me. Anyways the whole thing starts with an old man who had one son. He worked on the grounds of the local school but was so poor that he couldn't afford to send his son to school. As he grew older, it became harder for him to keep working the grounds, so he employed his son to help him out with the work. One day while the son was at the school to work, there was a downpour, so he went into the tool shed to hide out from the rain. While in the tool shed, a girl who was a student at the school rushed into the shed to hide away from the rain too. She introduced herself to the boy by saying

"Hi, I'm Amina,"

"To which the boy replied, "I'm Kadeya."

They instantly clicked and talked for hours and hours, not realizing that the rain had stopped. Years later, Kadeya had to move to another village. They were sad that they were going to be apart, but Amina promised to write to him. The problem was Kadeya being illiterate, couldn't write back. He, however, went to the local school, and he would

ask the students to read the letter to him, and he would also dictate the reply to send back. When it came to the address, he made it into a song so that he wouldn't forget it:

Amina,

Amina and Kadeya

Small Area,

Anina 1 Sunshine PO Box Marondera

Goom pe-pe Goom pe-pe

The children found this funny, so they started teasing him by singing the song back to him whenever they saw him. Just like that, a game was born, and at one point, someone added the *Amina ju jeksen* part, and out of a man's illiteracy, a game was born.

Chapter 5

Good Kids Fight with Their Mamas

Apart from singing songs that got me into trouble, I was generally a good kid growing up, maybe too smart and stubborn for my own good sometimes, but I wasn't like most Epworth kids. I didn't have stories about stealing money from my parents. I didn't dodge school just because I felt like it. However, I don’t want to give the impression that all the kids in Epworth were a bad and worthless bunch, no. I will never forget that I was a kid in Epworth myself. Even for bad kids, it wasn't their fault; they were victims of circumstance. The biggest parental tactic in Epworth is neglect. Letting the kids to their own devices for the most part because they had too much to worry about themselves. It almost seems inevitable that it would turn out that way. I mean, sometimes the parents were kids of sixteen themselves.

My mom never adopted an isolationist policy (thank God). She let me play with other kids, but it was understood that I was never to bring any of my friends' habits to the house. For example, nothing foul was to ever come out of my mouth, I had to always understand that school came first, and I was not to do any stupid stuff while with my friends, like waiting around for trucks carrying sand used to mix with cement when building. (There were many of them because there was a dam nearby where they got it in abundance). When the trucks slowed down either at a speed bump or took a turn, they would run to catch up with the truck then clung to the backboard for a thrill ride.

It was dangerous because sometimes the backboard wouldn’t be securely locked, so the moment someone clung to them, they would open, and you would fall on the tar road. To top that off, the truck drivers were notoriously bad drivers, and they hated when kids did that. So, they either would stop the truck and come out with a whip, which of course never worked because, by the time they got out of the truck, all the kids would have been long gone. So, they went for option number two, speed up whenever they saw kids hanging on so that they fall off. Jesus Christ! I never did any of that stuff, my mom didn't even know it was a popular thing among kids, but I just knew she would disapprove. I also had a bit of common sense; a joyride for a few meters wasn't worth all that.

I did have my moments though, like when I tried to fight my mom when I was five. This had nothing to do with Epworth but with how stubborn I can be, especially if I think I'm being unfairly treated. My boarding school tales of clashing with teachers will tell you that much.

Believe it or not, the mom incident was because of a door. I was in the lounge, and my mom was in her bedroom. Someone had left the kitchen door open, and the wind pushed it against the wall. My mom called out from her bedroom.

"Tawanda, go close the kitchen door."

I left everything I was doing and headed to the kitchen. While I was in the corridor, the door banged against the wall again, and my mom called out one more time.

"Tawanda, go close the kitchen door."

I said nothing, I kept walking to my mission. I was almost there, the door banged again, and my mom was getting irritated.

"Tawanda, how many times do I have to tell you to go close the kitchen door!"

That was it; I had had it with this woman! I again said nothing, closed the door, and went straight to my mom's bedroom. She was sitting on her bed with her back leaning against the headboard reading,

"Why did you have to tell me over and over again to close the door? I was on my way there, but you didn't give me time to get there. You kept calling for me to close the door as if I was not listening."

I was fuming, and my mom was quite amused by this,

"So, do you want to fight me Tawanda?"

I thought, "Oh if you want a challenge, challenge you shall get woman. It is a matter of respect here."

So, I replied, "Yes, if you are ready, let us fight, right here, right now."

She didn't expect that answer. She put her book to the side, leaned forward, and just looked at me, shocked she didn't even know what to say. I stood there, waiting for her to come so that we could start this fight. Tebby, who was in the corridor listening, came and dragged me out to give me a talk on how I shouldn't talk to our mom like that. This was probably the first time I heard the Shona saying

"Ukarova mai unotanda botso."

"If you assault your mother, her spirit will haunt you for revenge."

The words *kutanda botso* scared me. I imagined myself walking in the streets aimlessly, running away from something I couldn't see. I later found out that *kutanda*

botso does not even mean going mad. Instead, it is the ritual done to get rid of the avenging spirit. Either way, I didn't want to be haunted, so there were no more fight challenges from me.

No more fights didn't mean we still didn't bump heads. When I was six, I vowed never to speak to my mother again. I don't remember how that one started, and my mom doesn't even remember the incident at all. I just know I went to her and said,

"I will never talk to you again."

My mom thought, "Ha! We are going to use this as a teaching moment, so she said,

"Okay, that is fine with me."

So, we didn't talk to each other. The whole thing was comical because it wasn't that I avoided her; I was just not saying a word to her. It was a thing that when I found spare change lying around the house, instead of keeping it, I would give it to my mom, just in case she needed to use the money. That day, I found some coins under the television set, went to her, put the coins in her palms, and didn't say a single word. I was a perceptive kid though; somehow, I understood that my mom was doing this to teach me a lesson, and the lesson was I could not go a day without talking to her. I wanted to go a full day and show her I could do it, but I thought if I called a truce, I would have proved her right, and that probably would make her happy. I figured making her happy was worth losing the battle, so I called a truce. I went into the kitchen while she was cooking breakfast and apologized. The battle lasted around three hours, from eight to eleven, when we were about to eat.

My mom asked, "So what did you learn?"

"That I shouldn't have said what I said, and it's impossible not to talk to you."

Bridges were mended, and we were good, and I went about thinking I had helped my mother out. I had made her happy by proving her she was right.

Besides our little quarrels here and there, I was very much a mama's boy. She nurtured my love for reading and storytelling. She used to tell me folktales she heard from her mother. I remember the *Tembo* tale about this girl named Tembo living with her grandma, a witch. The grandma was very possessive of Tembo and would kill any man who tried to marry her. Well, one time, she found Mr. Right, and she didn't want her grandma to kill this one. So, the tale was about how they escaped from the evil grandma. At some point, they ran away, and the grandma followed them, tracing their footsteps singing,

"Aka katsoka kaTembo aka katsoka kaTembo."

"Here are the small feet of Tembo. Here are the small feet of Tembo."

They took shelter in a giant tree when they couldn't outrun grandma. They figured she would get tired of waiting on them to come down and eventually go home. But grandma was determined. She countered that by using dark magic to grow one tooth as strong as an axe and started chopping down the tree while singing of course.

"Kuti gu nemizhio wangu kuti shii nemuzhino wangu.

It's a bit difficult to translate that one word for word, but she essentially was saying, "I cut this tree with my tooth." The song made her axe tooth stronger, so she had to sing while

cutting the tree. She ended up dying an unspectacular death of being swallowed by the river.

There was another story a very sad called *The Tale of Mwari.* That one would have me on the verge of tears. It was about a girl who went home one day and found that her parents had been murdered. That was how it started! She had an older sister named Mwari, who lived far away and had not seen her in years. She took the animal hides worn by her parents so that Mwari would know she was indeed her younger sister. While she was on the way, she befriended a girl, who was actually a baboon, that could turn into a girl. (Don't ask, it's better if you don't ask questions.) The baboon girl asked our main character where she was going, and she told her that her parents had been killed, and she was now going to her sister's house, but she hadn't been there for so long, so she didn't exactly know the way.

Baboon girl told the main character,

"Oh, I know the place I gotchu; I will show you the way."

While on the way, the Baboon girl began eyeing the hides our main character held.

"That's some nice-looking hides you got there. Do you mind if I wear them for a bit?"

Our main character being a little naïve, saw no harm in that, so she gave her the hides. They were now a close distance to Mwari's house, and the sister said,

"Hey, we are almost there now. Can I have the hides back because that is the only way my sister will recognize me? "

Surprise, surprise, Baboom Girl says no, and when they get to the house, she poses as the sister and says our main character was just some girl who tried to steal her hides away.

So, they had the girl work in the fields to ward off the birds that ate the crops, and whenever she saw birds in the field, she would say

“Svaaa shiri, usaddye munda wamukoma wangu, vakatora chavo vakarasire sango, vakatora mhuka vakaisa mumba svaa shiri.”

"Hark birds, don't eat in the field of my sister, who took her kin and threw her in the jungle, and saw an animal and took it in. Hark birds"

It was this part that pierced my heart. Like, come on, Mwari, what are you doing? Take your sister back now. What made the story sadder was that the sister's name Mwari is the Shona word for God. So, every time you were pleading with Mwari to do the right thing, it was like you were offering a prayer to God to intervene in the story. However, the story ended happily with the sister finally figuring out she had taken in an imposter, but Christ, we would have cried bucket loads by the time we got to the end.

The Tale of Tindirimani was the Shona version of Hansen and Gretel. Some tales my mom made up on the spot, like *The Tale of Laina.* That's how you know it was made up. All folktale characters had Shona names since they were all set before the white settlers came, and Laina is sure not a Shona name; we don't even have the letter L in our alphabet! The story also involved someone calling the cops at one point. Yeah, there is no

such folktale. I loved the story, though, and requested it so many times that I would say some parts with her when my mom would tell it. Whenever that story is brought up, my siblings always laugh at me, imitating my voice as a kid, *"Hande kuma puyisha."* I was trying to say *"Hande kuma purisa,"* which means let us go to the police. This, of course, was the part of the tale where the main characters had to go to the cops. I repeat, there is no such folktale.

My mom also used to read to me. She would read English novels to me then translate in Shona so that I understood what was going on. She was very good at that. She would animate the characters, and she never had a blank moment for someone who was translating on the spot. She read *The Secret Garden* that way, and I loved that book. I have vivid memories of lying next to her on her bed while she read. The way her eyes widened and the high-pitched voice she used when a character was surprised. I re-read the book a couple of years ago as an adult, and I could hear my mom's voice and still see her animations as I read. There was a part where the main character sang a lullaby to her friends. I didn't know what a lullaby was, so I asked her, and she made up one. I also heard that lullaby when I re-read the book. Some books she read to me, like *The Railway Children*, had songs. She would translate the songs to Shona too.

This fueled my love for reading as I became so eager to reach a point where I could read the novels by myself without the need for a translator. I was eight when I read The Railway Children by myself; I ran to her,

"Mom, Mom, I finished it! I could understand every word."

She was very proud; from then on, nothing was translated, she trusted that I could handle it now. This also fueled my love for storytelling. All the folktales and the stories she read to me, I would go to school and tell them to my friends. Whenever we had a free period at school, the teacher would ask if anyone had a fable they would like to tell the class. That is where I made my name. I would do voices too, the voice of the witch grandma, the voice of the scared granddaughter. So, every time our teacher would ask if anyone had a story to tell, the whole class would yell; Tawanda! It got to a point that the teacher wouldn't ask the whole class anymore; they would just say, "Tawanda do you have a story for us," and I always did. I had plenty of material since I had the traditional fables and the English stories my mom read to me, and like her, I would translate them into Shona.

She also would read Bible stories to me. We didn't have the kids' version, so she read from the Bible itself. One of the things I appreciate about my parents to this very day was how they introduced the Bible to me. They didn't make it a chore that I should read it every day so that I'm a good boy or overload me with too much doctrine about how it was the holy word of God. I mean, they told me that, but they knew that I wouldn't have understood any of that as a kid. They introduced the Bible to me as a compilation of amazing true stories to counter that. So, when my mom read it to me, she read it like any other story she read to me. One time she read me the crucifixion story; it was around Easter. We probably used up the whole candle because we stayed up very late that night. I was sitting at the edge of her bed while she sat in the middle of the bed. Our maid at the time was taking out her braids as she read from the last supper to the crucifixion. I was so engulfed in the story, and when she was done, she looked at me and asked,

"So, what do you think?"

"That was amazing and entertaining."

She laughed. "My son finds the death of Christ entertaining."

Chapter 6

We Hate Our Neighbors… No, Wait We Love Them

In the December of 2004, when I was seven years old, we went to our rural home, *kwaRota,* for my December school holiday. All of us went except Chipo and Tinashe. Chipo, who was now twenty-four, had to go to work. Tinashe, who was eighteen, wasn't busy with anything at all. In fact, he was on a more extended holiday than I was, because he was waiting for his final A-level results before going to university. He stayed simply because "there had to be a guy left at the house." To be honest, I think he just didn't want to go. I have seen him volunteer a lot of times to be the "guy that stays behind," and I don't know, maybe it's a coincidence that all those times we were going somewhere, he didn't want to go. I didn't mind going; the rurals were the only place where I could forget a bit that I was from Epworth. When I was there, I was just a city boy, and sure enough, I acted as one, not because I was being pretentious but simply because it was a world I was not accustomed to. I mean, some parts weren't new to me, like cooking with firewood, using candles and paraffin lamps. I grew up with that. However, it was a new thing to go with the herd boys while they tended to the cows. It was a new thing just to see cows and explore fields, to observe oxen pulling the plow for the tilling of the ground. It was fascinating to sit in the kitchen hut and sit on the built-in bench that covered the whole left side of the hut. It was the bench designated for men when they were in the kitchen, and boy did I feel proud to be counted among 'men.' I also got to wear some farm boots, which was a source of pride. To me, the whole man thing wasn't complete until I owned

a pair of boots. They gave me old boots no one was using anymore because the rubber was tearing; they used some black insulation tape to cover the tearing. In some instances, the tape was the thing that held the boot together, but I didn't care; I was sitting on the bench with my boots on, the world was perfect.

Despite our rural home being like Epworth in many ways, especially the lack of electricity, I was never enticed to live there instead of Epworth. I did enjoy myself whenever I went, but it was always a place that was fun because it was temporary. If I were told we would stay there forever, I wouldn't have been happy. To be honest, there were so many ways Epworth was better than the rurals. Yes, we both didn't have electricity, but Epworth had running water, which made the bathroom and toilet situation a lot better. However, in the rurals, due to the water issue and lack of a sanitation system, we had to use blare toilets and shack-like bathrooms where we had to use buckets because there was no tub. It was essentially just a tiny room with a little hole in the corner that would let the dirty water out. The housing situation was also better at our house in Epworth. We had a big house, so space wasn't an issue, but if we were to stay at our rural home, there wouldn't be a place to sleep for everyone. Living in Epworth was hard but living in the rurals was way harder. In Epworth, everything was a hustle, that is how we survived, but in the rurals, everything was hard labor. Everything was reliant on it, hard labor in the fields, hard labor to fetch water, it would have been hard work to even go to school, which was very far away. To top that off, the rurals always came with some family politics that I shall not get into for the sake of keeping the already frail relationships with some of my relatives intact.

Thus, staying there forever was a no-go but visiting for school holidays was always fun. I always felt like I was exploring a brand-new world, and it was this

exploring that got me in a pickle on this particular visit. Apart from growing corn, peanuts, groundnuts like everyone else, we also grew tobacco for commercial sale. The tobacco fields were, however, quite far from the house. I wanted to see those tobacco fields so badly. I don't know why I was so eager to go; it wasn't because of the tobacco; I didn't care about that. I think it probably was because it was far, and I figured it would give me an opportunity to sightsee. I begged for someone to go with me, but because it was far, people were either too busy or too lazy, plus what was the point of walking all that distance just to see some tobacco. I gave up asking people and thought maybe I should just go myself. All I needed was someone to give me the directions, and I was good to go. Unfortunately, no one was willing for me to do this either. My aunt, *Tete Mai Pama*, the oldest in my dad's family, and the one who lived there and took over the fields and everything after my grandma died, was the one who thought it was a bad idea. I was a city boy who didn't know this place at all. It took a lot of backroads and walking through the woods; she would not let me do that by myself.

"It is far; you will get lost."

"But I'm very good with directions. Just tell me where to go, and I will be fine." I was lying; I am terrible with directions.

I kept begging and begging until she agreed. It wasn't a dangerous trip by any chance; boys my age and younger took that trip countless times. The big issue was I wasn't from there, and she was almost certain I would get lost. However, after much begging, she thought, you know what, maybe I'm being unfair to the city kid; if he says he's good with directions, he's good with directions.

“I will give you the directions, but you must take the dogs; they will show you the way. Once they see you going in a certain direction, they will know you are going to the tobacco fields, and they will lead the way.”

I thought, “I didn’t know there was the dog plan; what was everyone so afraid of?” I knew the dogs wouldn’t let me down; they were trained by constant routine and never got lost. They were all left to roam around without being enclosed behind a fence or anything, and they never strayed away from home unless they were going on a walk with someone.

Around 8 AM, I called all the four dogs, Pretty, the loudmouth. She was the enticer, always the first to bark to get others riled up. Jimmy, the cool head, everything he did oozed of chillness, but he was not to be messed with though, silent as he was, he would go straight for the bite. He took his guard duties very seriously, always posted at the entrance silently watching. Joker was not as smart as the other two. He just went along with what everyone was doing; if they were barking, he would bark too; if they were biting, he would bite too. Danger was so much like Pretty in that he was an enticer. He was also very hard to please; he took his time to trust people. As a guest, it took a while before we got to where he didn’t look at me with suspicion every second.

I took my good comrades with me, and we headed to the fields. It was a perfect day too; the sun was already up and bright, making it warm even though it was early in the morning. This was a gift, another sign I was supposed to go; you rarely get days like that in December, given how much it rains that month. I almost got lost because there were so many times that I would go one way and the dogs would go the other, and I will just know, “Ooops, wrong path.” So, I followed the dogs until we reached the fields. The

journey there was quite exciting. Walking in the woods with my four dogs made me feel like I was a hunter, like one of those characters in the fables my mom used to tell me. I was absorbing everything. The birds, the trees, the squirrels running up and down the trees, I was cooing at the birds trying to mimic their sounds; I was having a blast. We even crossed a little stream on our way there. My companions did not like that bit; they were stones placed in the stream for people to step on as they cross. They were smart enough to use the stones, but they didn't even like the water touching their paws, so they tried to hurry on with it. The more they rushed, the more they splashed water on themselves, they weren't big splashes at all, but every one of them shook their coat vigorously after they had crossed as if I had just baptized them in the water, such divas.

The fields though, were just meh, it was just a sea of green leaves, nothing exciting about that. But I had come here all the way, so I thought I might as well stay a little while, roam in the fields maybe I would see something interesting. It turns out I wasn't the only one finding the fields boring; the dogs were also quite bored. They waited for me for a while, but as I roamed more and more into the fields, they got impatient and were like, "screw this guy, let's go home." I got out of the field ready to go, and my companions were gone. I called after everyone, "Pretty! Jimmy! Joker!" No answer, I even called after my frenemy "Danger!" Nada, I didn't panic, I was a little overconfident, and I thought, "I don't need them; I memorized the way back." I hadn't, I tried to remember some landmarks, but everything looked the same to me. I stumbled on some house, and as soon as I knocked on their door, tears started streaming out, *"Ndarasika Ndarasika,"* "I'm lost, I'm lost." The family recognized me immediately, "Ah, that's the Nyahasha kid," one of the boys there was told to go with me and show me the way back.

We reached a point where I was absolutely sure where to go now, so I sent the guy back. I didn't want him to tell everyone that I was lost. It was a matter of pride here. I went home, the dogs had arrived, and they looked like they had been back for a while, traitors! I didn't tell anyone I had gotten lost; my aunt was waiting for me when I got back,

"What happened? The dogs came before you."

"Yeah, I stayed behind a bit. I knew the way back, so I let them go."

She was impressed, well, until the truth finally came out. My niece Leah wanted me to accompany her to the shops. She asked me if we could make a detour on the way back.

"Ah, I might as well pass by my friend's house just to say hey."

I recognized the friend's name; she lived at the house I had made a fool of myself.

"Come on; we have been walking non-stop. Let's just go."

"It won't take long, I promise; we won't even stop; I'll call after her, and she will walk with us."

I still protested, but she wasn't hearing me. As soon as we got there, her friend's brothers started shouting *"Ndarasika, Ndarasika,"* mimicking my crying. Leah was confused; "What are they talking about?"

"Oh, he didn't tell you; he came here when he was lost a couple of weeks ago."

Leah busted out laughing, "Why didn't you tell us? You told us you came back by yourself."

As soon as we got home, Leah told everyone, and the whole incident became a running joke for the remainder of the holiday.

When the holiday was over, we got back home, where we were welcomed by the site of new neighbors to our right, The Normans. (That is not their last name, but I call them that because their son Norman was such a character and the most popular in their family.) Before they came along, two brothers stayed in that house. No one in my family remembers much about them; in fact, everyone had forgotten about them until I reminded everyone that the Normans came after them. They owned a tuck shop, which was a blessing to us because that meant we could buy things like bread, matches, and salt from our neighbor. It saved us, particularly me, countless trips, given that as the youngest, I was always the one who was sent to buy stuff.

The Normans moved in under mysterious circumstances. Tinashe told us that there was a huge commotion at the house one night. The tuck-shop was torn down during that chaotic night, and the following day the Normans were our new neighbors. No one knows what happened. Were the brothers renting from them? Did the brothers owe a debt? No one knows but them.

No one in my family likes to admit it, but we resented the Normans for a bit when they were new. The first reason was because of the circumstances of their move. We didn't know what happened, but whatever it was hadn't been smooth. Being a family that avoided drama at all costs, we all thought here comes a family that looks like they are coming with it in overloads. Then there was their youngest child at the time, a kid called Norman. He was three years younger than me, and that kid was as vulgar as they come. That boy had a sharp tongue, and it almost felt like every time he was in an argument

with someone. It didn't matter who; it could have been another kid or an older person coming by. He perfectly fitted the stereotype of short people being so hot-headed. He was a chubby kid, and his cheeks always looked like he had a mouthful. For the first three years, I knew him; his teeth were falling out like the rest of us, but I don't know what was wrong with his baby teeth; they had this brown staining. No one ever made fun of him about his teeth because that was a fight no one would win. In almost all his fights, he was the one who started them. At one point, an old man was passing by their house, and Norman shouted,

"Haha, you bald head."

The old man saw this as a teaching moment and tried to talk to him calmly. That was a mistake; he should have kept on walking. The moment he said,

"Now, young man…."

Norman didn't even give him a chance. He uttered a slew of curse words that I dare not repeat here. Shona curse words are brutal and very vivid; I don't think any Zimbabwean would forgive me if I put them in here, even for the sake of narration.

The old man just looked defeated and did what he should have done in the first place; he walked on in silence. Norman enjoyed his victory by throwing more insults at the man and laughing dramatically to make sure the man heard him.

There was a time when we lived in fear of this kid. You just didn't know what qualified you as his target. However, he was always respectful to us and never gave us any grief. I remember one day coming from school, and he sat perched in front of his house. Instead of attacking me with insults, he greeted me quite enthusiastically. This was

a refreshing surprise because, as a kid, I suffered from insults from kids and adults alike because of my albinism. Wherever I walked, people would call out after me *Musope Musope* or *Hona Murungudunhu,* which means "Look at the fake white man." I grew up with these insults and what hurt me the most in those situations was when older folks would join in with their kids to call me names. I used to get angry at such things; I remember one kid called me one of those names, and I said something back to him, and the mom came at me for insulting her kid! I tried explaining my side of the story, but she wasn't listening. In her eyes, her kid had done no wrong; he had just stated a fact, I was a *Musope,* so why the heck was I being sensitive about it.

I was lucky to have a supportive family because I have known some people who have faced discrimination from their own families. A guy I know once told me that he visited one of his relatives and asked for some water to drink. When he was done, his relative threw away the cup he had drank from while he was watching. I was also lucky to have an older brother who had albinism. It normalized things for me, so no matter how much people insulted me, I knew I wasn't a freak; I had an awesome brother who looked like me.

Even with all that though, the insults still hurt. So, it was very refreshing when Norman didn't bring up my albinism. He never called me any derogatory name all the years I knew him. Bless his heart! I was surprised by his politeness that I went home and said,

"Guess what? That kid next door just greeted me nicely, and he didn't come after me like he usually does with other people."

It was such big news; years later, Norman became one of my closest friends. He had his issues, but he was a good kid, a good friend, loyal as hell. To be fair to him, he toned down his profanities once he started school. He no longer sat around waiting for victims. We were playing soccer together instead. My family also grew to like Norman, surprisingly. He was just an interesting character and had this I don't care attitude that just made him a funny guy to hang around. Sometimes I didn't like his antics though. I remember how he went to receive the eucharist at Chipo's wedding. People were going to receive, and there was Norman, a Non- Catholic in line with them. As Catholics, we were taught that you had to treat the body of Christ with the uttermost respect. You didn't devour it hungrily like a mad man; you delicately put it in your mouth and walked back to your seat with a solemn face, kneel and do the prayer you were supposed to do. This was a serious affair. Well, Norman didn't care about all that, he put it in his mouth like he was eating a regular cracker, and when he saw me looking at him, he winked at me! I was concerned; I thought he was going to die. No one played with the eucharist like that. But Norman didn't die, so I figured God must have forgiven him.

The Normans also had other children. The firstborn Howard was the son of Mrs. Norman's sister, whom she took care of after her sister had passed. I don't know how we found out. I think Mrs. Norman told my mom, but you could never pick it up from them. He was their older brother, and that was that. Then came Jonathan; I think he was the one who tried to name our street *Jonara Street* because it was the nickname some of his friends called him by. Then there was Samson, a couple of years older than me, then Norman. Years later, a baby girl would come along called Opa, but we moved when she was around four. Mrs. Norman had a habit of shortening her children's names in a

peculiar way. She would just cut the name short, just like shortening the name Meridth to Meri. So, Howard was called Hawi, Jonathan, Jonah, which is okay; Samson was called Samu, which annoyed Tambu because every time she would call out Samu, it sounded like she was saying Tambu. Norman was just Norman. Of course, he was; it's Norman we talking are about here!

Mr. Norman was a chilled dude. He was a military man who mostly kept to himself. He was also a hunter, and occasionally, he would come back with an antelope, and they would gladly share the meat with us. The whole thing was kept hush-hush. They would wake up early to prepare the meat, i.e., skin the animal and stuff. This was all done before everyone was up; that is when they would bring us the meat, and it came with instructions not to talk about it. You probably have guessed it by now that Mr. Norman was a poacher, and he made us accomplices.

Even though we eventually warmed up to the Normans, they did a couple of things that we still were not fans of. One was how they valued privacy less. We had a durawall around our house for a reason, and we valued the privacy it gave us. We also weren't a family that heavily interacted with the outside Epworth world, so in some sense, we closed ourselves in behind our gate. The Normans were like, screw all that; you are going to interact with us whether you like it or not. They had a lot of junk metals on their side of the wall that bordered our two houses, and they would climb on top, poke their head into our yard and call out whoever they wanted to talk to. Norman formed the habit of jumping the durawall when he wanted to play instead of going around to come through the gate. This was strictly forbidden, and he only did it when no adult was around, and even then, most of the time, I forbade him from doing it.

Another issue was the pigeons they kept, which to my mom's annoyance, would fly over and poop on our windowsills. That was never an issue for me since I didn't have to clean it up. I did have a beef with one of their chickens though. (Yeah, they kept chickens too.) The chicken had just hatched some eggs and had some chicks. When chickens have new chicks, they are quite fierce because their instinct is to protect their young. The Normans made a game out of this by always pretending like they were about to grab one of the chicks and then have the mom chase them around. Strange, but hey, when you don't have T.V., you invent ways to be entertained. One day I came over to their house with my dog, Spa. Spa was minding her own business walking by the mom and her chicks. I guess she was walking a little too close for the mom's liking, and she charged at my dog. Spa ignored the charge and kept walking; she treated the whole thing as a nuisance to not bother with. However, the Normans, oh my God, how they were spinning the story.

"Our chicken scared off Tawanda's dog! Our chicken scared off Tawanda's dog!"

In that moment, I wished Spa had ripped that little chicken apart.

Chapter 7

Same Circumstances, Different Mentalities

I think this is the best time to introduce you to my other neighbors, the Murehwa's. They were part of why we moved to Epworth in the first place. If you recall, Mr. Murehwa was the uncle who told my mom about stands in Epworth while he was fixing her car. Despite our relations, our families couldn't have been more different. Both sets of parents raised their families in their own way, imposing their own values on their children. It was because of these differences that we sometimes found the Murehwa's quite bizarre.

I mentioned that my family never involved itself in Epworth business. We didn't want to be sucked into Epworth politics. That is not to say we didn't have friends in Epworth, not at all. We just distanced ourselves from the gossip and the typical neighborhood politics. Once you get involved, in no time, you are invested, and what do you know, in a couple of years, you will start thinking Epworth wasn't so bad after all. We didn't want that to be us. The Murehwa's, on the other hand, were the direct opposite. Nothing was happening in the neighborhood that Mrs. Murehwa and her daughters didn't know about. Like us, they also had a big house and a durawall, which made them a member of Epworth's elite club, a position they loved so much.

I suppose, depending on who you ask, my family were a pretentious bunch who believed their elitism made them better than anyone else.

Thus, they closed themselves behind their durawall. I know a lot of people despised us because they thought we were always trying to prove we were better. Like going to boarding school when everyone went to the local Epworth secondary school? Who the hell did my sisters think they were for not showing any interest in Epworth guys? The truth of the matter, however, is that we never believed we were special at all. We did what we did for our preservation, to protect our future, not because we thought we were better. My mom taught us to understand that we were indeed privileged than most people in Epworth, but we weren't to be roped into thinking that we were Epworth royalty. If you get tangled up in that, maybe you will start enjoying the status, and bam, you enjoy Epworth now, you don't want to leave, and again that wasn't going to be us. That is where we differed from the Murehwa's. They truly believed they were royalty, and they enjoyed the attention it got them. This made them involved in every tiny bit of Epworth business they could get involved in because they loved the attention they got.

Our mothers were very different. My mom never asserted her dominance in Epworth. She mostly minded her own business and only concerned herself with the affairs of her own house. We have already established that Mrs. Murehwa was not like that at all. Mrs. Murehwa also felt the need to remind everyone that she was part of the aristocracy. She was like one of those rich people that are not satisfied with just being rich, but they have to let everyone know how much money they have. If my mom were that type of woman, she would have had Epworth by the balls. As stated, all her kids went to boarding school; it was also when we were in Epworth that Tambu and Tinashe were in college, Chipo moved out of Epworth, and Tebby later moved to Namibia. These are things that would have made everyone bow down to my mom, but she wasn't like that.

I don't want to trash the Murehwa's more than I already have here, but for people that loved to brag, they sure didn't have a lot going on. I mean, yeah, they had the durawall and the big house, which were big things in Epworth, believe me, but that was it, nothing else. This led to the invention of many lies to make everyone, especially us, believe that they were living the life. When one of the Murehwa daughters, Reyana, got "married" (I will explain why that is in quotations in a moment) to an Epworth dude who lived in one of the squatter houses of Epworth, she had to cook up a story. So, she told Tebby out of nowhere,

"Tebby, you got to knock some sense into Reyana. Her husband has a house in Hatfield, but Reyana refuses to move there because she doesn't want to leave Epworth. So, she opts to live in that little squatter house."

Such nonsense! Who would choose to not only live in Epworth but in the squatter houses too, when they could have moved to a more comfortable place? That wasn't the only time; Mrs. Murehwa once told us that Reyana's husband, that very same husband with a house in Hatfield, was very educated; he had studied at Monte Casino. Monte Casino was indeed a good school; Tambu went there for high school. The problem is Monte Casino is an all-girls school.

Our mothers also differed when it came to the upkeep of their homes. It is strange that Mrs. Murehwa was Epworth through and through while my mother was not, yet it was my mom who took extra effort to make her house as beautiful as she could. If you didn't know, you would assume that it was my mother that was in love with Epworth. The thing is my mom does not believe in wailing about things we cannot control. Yes, we were in Epworth, yes, we didn't like it, but it was our home nonetheless, we could at least make it

pleasant to the eye; we at least had control over that. I'm not saying Mrs. Murehwa's house was filthy; I'm just saying compared to my mom, she looked like she didn't bother at all. Our front yard was covered by a lawn and various trees and flowers; the Murehwa front yard was bare. Even the front of our durawalls was different. Ours was again full of flowers and a palm tree, and the Murehwa side had nothing. I'm not going to lie. Sometimes as a kid, I envied them a bit. See, I didn't care about the beauty; all I cared about was that those many plants meant that we had to water them. They had a peach tree though, bent over to our side, which was a blessing because it meant we had free peaches. It was understood that the peaches on our side were ours. We also had a mango tree that branched to their side, so it's not like it was a one-way affair here. Although they sometimes abused their privilege, we only ate the peaches on our side; the ones on theirs were off-limits; it was their tree after all. However, when it came to our mango tree, they would sometimes reach for the mangoes on our side with a long stick with a wire hook at the top. If they couldn't reach it still, they would call out for someone; then they would tell us to pluck the mango for them. Such entitlement!

The daughters of our two families were also different. All my three sisters are very beautiful women, and I can guarantee you that I am not biased when I say this. Chipo is forty-one has three kids, and Tambu is thirty-five with two, but they still look like ladies in their late twenties. No one seems to believe me when I tell them that Tebby is also in her late thirties. When we were in Epworth, they were indeed in their twenties, and to top that off, they were from an elite family. They could have had every guy in Epworth under their thumb, but they knew that was not the attention they wanted to get, especially in Epworth. Truth be told, they were rarely in Epworth. We moved to Epworth

in 2000, and by the year 2003, Chipo had moved out. Tebby moved to another city in 2005, and Tambu was in boarding school for the first three years we were there, so she was only home for three months every year. After boarding school, she went straight to college.

The Murehwa daughters, Linda, Reyana, Cynthia, and Esther, were beauties too, and as already established, they were part of the elite as well. You can already guess that they loved the spotlight. They were all married in quick succession right after the other. In Epworth, when someone says they got married, you have to clarify what type of marriage they are talking about. There is the legit marriage, in which there is the traditional ceremony first. This is the paying of the bride price (dowry), which is done by the groom. Then a wedding would follow, usually a couple of months after the traditional ceremony. Some people do the traditional thing and leave it at that, primarily because of the expenses. Paying a bride price is not cheap, and then after that, you have to pay for a wedding too. Then there is another type of "marriage," which was the one that was common in Epworth. In this version, there is no dowry or the exchanging of vows. The girl just shows up at the guy's house usually because they are pregnant and say, "Guess what, we are married now," and just like that, a family is born. In Epworth, this not only happened because the girl was pregnant but sometimes because of pressure from parents and family members. The families would pressure the girl if the guy she was dating were from an elite family, seeing it as an opportunity to move up a rank. Families like mine were always targets, and it almost happened to me, and I wasn't even dating anybody! We won't dive into that one now; we will leave it for later.

This was how all the Murehwa girls were married. It didn't help that the mother pushed them into it. She saw marriage as an achievement, a thing to attain, and the ultimate dream for a woman. Her daughters being married also meant they were out of her care but that of their husbands, and also, there was a chance that the daughters would be able to take care of her through the husbands. The latter didn't make sense because it's not like her daughters were marrying rich guys. They were marrying guys who were also in Epworth, and most of them were in worse conditions than them. Often, she would ask my sisters when they would get married; it didn't make sense for her that they were not. The whole idea of them having dreams of their own that didn't involve marriage didn't compute for her. Tebby told me that she once told her daughters, "If I die now, at least I know you will be fine, you are old enough to get married, and if you don't want to get married, prostitution is always an option." This was the advice given by a mother to her daughters.

It was as if everything about our two families was polar opposites. Well, maybe except our dads, they were both chilled. I never saw Mr. Murehwa hang out with anyone; in fact, I never saw him talking to anybody at all. I barely ever talked to the man myself! I mostly saw him coming from work in his Toyota pickup truck. My dad was also a chilled man who never meddled in the affairs of Epworth. He never hung around bars; he would buy his beer, come back home, take out his reed chair, and sit in the front yard. His spot was usually under our avocado tree, and he would drink his beer while reading a book. He was a very private man who once again could have bragged a lot about his children and his job (engineering professor), but no one even knew what he did.

Other than that, everything about us was different. Our religions were different; we were all raised Catholic, although my siblings and I would shift from Catholicism to Protestant. The Murehwa's were part of a religious sect called the Apostolic Sect, commonly known in Zimbabwe as *Mapostori.* They are different denominations within the sect. The popular ones are the *Masowe* sect founded by a guy called Johani Masowe, the *Mwazha* sect founded by Paul Mwazha, and the *Marange* sect founded by Paul Marange. All denominations wear white gowns to their services; the men also have shepherd rods as part of their regalia. Their men shave their heads and keep a beard. They don't hold church services in buildings but in open plains and mountains. Some of them have cult-like characteristics, like discouraging members from going to the hospital, promoting polygamy, arranged marriages, and child marriage. Their members are also not allowed to read the Bible, which is only reserved for the prophet. When I was doing my A'Levels, one guy in my class belonged to this sect, and he studied divinity with me. The only thing with divinity is you have to read the Bible to study it; you cannot analyze and write about the book of Amos if you don't read the book of Amos. So, he read the Bible on that account but told us that he would get rid of it as soon as he was done with divinity.

Their singing, I must say, is amazing. They don't use any instruments; they only use their voices and clap their hands for a beat. Their songs are also quite catchy; there is this one about Samson that I always go back to. Their prayer habits can be a nuisance if you live next to them, which of course, we did. Each household has a designated spot they pray at called the *Krawa*. They cannot pray anywhere else but at the *Krawa,* which is fine. The only thing is they don't pray silently. They shout their prayers in very loud

voices, which is not very neighbor-friendly. The Murehwa's *Krawa* was at their side of the durawall that bordered with ours, so every day at 6 PM, which was their designated prayer time, we would hear someone shouting out their prayers. The Normans were also members of the Apostolic Sect; they weren't strict observers though we never heard anyone from their side utter a single prayer.

We even differed with the Murehwa's on the pets we kept. My family is very much a dog family. My dad was a dog lover, and we all took up after him. For most of my childhood, we always had a dog, and sometimes we had three dogs at the same time. My mom is not a dog lover who would need to buy one if she lived by herself, but she doesn't mind them. However, she and my dad shared their hatred of cats, which we all inherited from them. I am actually afraid of cats. I feel like whenever a cat sees me, it knows I hate it and that I love dogs, so it is always plotting something against me. Whenever they look at me, I just feel like they are sizing me up and scheming something evil.

I remember when my mom, Tebby, Tambu, Tinashe, and I visited a relative of ours. While we were in the lounge, their cat came in and started to move around, climbing the couches. We were so uncomfortable, but we didn't want to cause a fuss by saying something. Our hosts noticed how uncomfortable we were though, and they asked, "Do you guys want us to take the cat to another room?" There were a lot of yeses and thank you's from the Nyahasha corner. Of course, the Murehwa's had to have cats, and their cats sometimes would jump over to our yard. See, they knew! They knew we were terrified of them!

Chapter 8

Mr. Bla Bla Bla

All the effort my mom didn't put into Epworth business; she reserved it for my schooling. She was always involved in my schooling all the way to high school. It was less intense then because I was in boarding school, so she couldn't pop in any time she wanted, but she still made her presence felt at visitation and consultation days. Sometimes it was very inconvenient to me, especially at my first boarding school at St. Francis of Assisi, a Catholic mission school in a rural town called Chivhu. We had corporal punishment, and if you didn't do what you were supposed to do, you could either be hit or sent to do some work in the gardens. Due to my albinism, all my teachers were afraid to punish me, and I milked that to excess. For example, we were responsible for cleaning our dormitory toilets which were always disgusting I might add. However, in all four years I was at Assisi, I never cleaned a toilet once; it was detrimental to my skin somehow. To be fair, I wasn't the one who initiated it; during our first week, when we were told to go clean our toilets, the prefect on duty took me aside and told me I didn't have to do it. Everyone assumed it was me who took him aside and told him I had a health condition that freed me from toilet duty, and I just let them believe that for four years! I remember when all Form Ones had done something to offend one of the prefects, a guy named Seda. Of all the prefects we could have offended, we sure picked the wrong one. Prefects had the power to send us to punishment, same as teachers, and Seda had the record of most punishments given out of all the prefects. I don't even remember what we

had done but the punishment was to clean the toilets of every dorm. Even then, I was exempt from the punishment. He later relented though he never intended to make us do it; he only wanted to scare us. This special treatment made me walk with a sense of invulnerability because I knew the teachers and prefects couldn't touch me. However, at consultations without being asked, my mom would say,

"And just so you know, don't give him any special treatment; treat him like you do other students."

I could see the teacher grinning like, "Oh really!" While looking at me with a face that said, "When you misstep, I will be waiting."

I would immediately look at my mom thinking, "What is wrong with you woman? I had a good thing going here!"

However, to be fair, I hated when people in general, treated me like a frail egg because I was an albino. This was especially irritating when it was done outside of school because it wasn't of any benefit to me; I just found it condescending.

"Are you sure you will be okay out here? There is too much dust." As if my skin would disintegrate the moment I come in contact with dust. So, I couldn't be too mad at my mom; either I wanted to be treated as an egg, or I didn't; I couldn't have it both ways.

In primary school though, my mom was a force. Every teacher I had knew her, and the headmaster also got to know her. Whenever I got a new teacher, she would ensure that she saw that teacher and ensured that I was seated in front of the class because of my eyesight. I didn't mind it when she came to my school this time. I was a good

student both academically and behaviorally, so my teachers had nothing to report. Although she once embarrassed me in second grade. Somehow, it had gotten to her that I had a crush on this girl called Mavis. So, one day when she came to see my teacher, and after she was done talking to her, she said,

"I have a random question, who is Mavis?"

My teacher was confused, but she complied nonetheless, so she said, "Mavis can you stand up?" Mavis eagerly stood up; she had this wave of excitement around as if she was being told to stand up because she had done something great, and the teacher wanted to show her off. She probably thought so, although I'm not sure how she rationalized why my teacher wanted to show her off to my mom.

My mom smiled and said to the teacher, "Thank you, Tawanda talks about her a lot at home. I just wanted to see who she was."

My classmates looked at me, wondering why my mom had asked to see Mavis. Luckily, my mom was kind enough not to shout what she told the teacher, and the teacher didn't tell the whole class either. Mavis herself wasn't bothered. She stood up and sat back down when she was told to, and she didn't ask me why my mom wanted to know who she was. When I got home, my mom told my siblings,

"So, I saw Mavis today."

My siblings were super interested, "So who is this lady that stole our little brother's heart?"

My mom laughed and said, "Eh… he can do better; her eyes are too big."

That was the beginning of the end of my love for Mavis. It wasn't necessarily because my mom had said her eyes were too big. I just started to lose interest. It hadn't taken that much for me to like her either; she sat beside me in class, we talked every day; that was enough. She probably moved desks or something, and I couldn't handle the long-distance relationship.

Maybe apart from the Mavis incident, my teachers didn't mind my mom's visits. She wasn't rude or aggressive to any of them, plus it was rare for them to see a parent who cared about their child's welfare in Epworth, so they loved talking to her. Most parents just sent their kids to school and whatever happened there stayed there; they couldn't be bothered about any of it.

In fourth grade however, my mom gave an earful to the headmaster, and it was all because of my fourth-grade teacher, Mr. Bla Bla Bla. His real name was Mr. Mashonganyika, but he called himself Mr. Bla Bla Bla. We loved him; he was the easiest teacher I ever had. He was a peculiar character, and he did some very bizarre things at times. I recall an art class we did with him at one point (we did a lot of art classes with him by the way). He was teaching grass weaving that class period, and it didn't go well at all. Grass weaving is a skill that takes long to master, and it requires a bit of concentration that fourth graders do not have. All we did was tie some string at the back ends of the long blades of grass he had brought with him, and we started beating each other with them. The classroom was full of grass, and to take control of the situation, he demanded that we give him back all the grass we had. After he took it, he tied one bunch quickly into a circle and put it on his head, he put one on his waste, and he made one

stick out of his pants like a tail, and he started dancing for us, saying, "I'm a *chigure,* I'm *a chigure*!"

Chigures are dancers who wear terrifying masks and dress in traditional attire. They walk around dancing for people for some bit of money. There is more to being a *chigure*, though; one cannot just buy a mask and say, "Oh, I'm a *chigure* now." You have to be initiated into their guild, and there is a lot of speculation as to what that initiation entails. Some say they spend the whole night among the graves of dead *chigure's* and do some secret rituals there. Some say they eat raw meat and drink blood; no one knows. There are different sects of them, some scarier than others. A maid of ours who lived in a village in a town called Bindura told me once that they had a sect that only came out at night in her village. They would announce that they were doing their rituals that night, so no one was allowed to go out after a certain time. This was because they walked around naked singing their songs, and if anyone were to be walking around, they would beat him severely because he saw them naked. Safe to say, Mr. Bla Bla Bla did not impersonate that kind. He thankfully had his clothes on the whole time.

During one class period, we were told to bring musical instruments. I brought *hosho* as my instrument. *Hosho* is a traditional Zimbabwean instrument made up of empty guards filled up with seeds. You then shake the guards for a rattling sound. *Hosho* is played as a pair. You don't play just one because it is hard to make up a rhythm when shaking one of them in one hand. There are modern versions of the instrument now that do not use guards, but some hard plastic made into an oval shape. There are fitted sticks in the holes of the oval shape for handles. A guy in my class brought two drumsticks, just two drumsticks that was his instrument. The funny thing is when we were about to do the

activity; another classmate borrowed one of his drumsticks, so he only was banging the table with one. For the activity, Mr. Bla Bla Bla taught us a new song which was a nonsense song with no words in it. The song went like this:

Mi fa so la so!
Mi fa so la so!
Mi fa so re do!
Mi fa so re do!
Mi fa so la so!
Mi fa so la so
Do re mi so
Do re mi so
Fa fa fa so la so
Fa fa fa so la so
Fa fa so mi re do
Fa fa so mi re do

His song was made up of musical notes, but he taught it like a legitimate song with words. I'm not a music player, so I don't know if the notes play any music or they are as nonsense as the song was. However, nonsense or not, the song was fun to sing, and we had a blast all day singing our new tune. We did have other lessons during the day, but he made the mistake of starting with the art lesson, a mistake he always made by the way. Who would concentrate on reading for comprehension when all we wanted to do was sing the best song ever?

My mom had no idea that this was what was going on in the classroom. She started to pick it up, and it started when she asked me what we did in school. One day after asking me what we had learned, I told her,

"We learned about Gwekwerere today."

Gwekwerere is a retired Zimbabwean soccer player who was famous at the time. My mom thought they must have learned something else, but he only remembers Gwekwerere because it was the most interesting thing to him, so she let it go. A couple of days later, she asked again,

"So, what did you learn today?"

I replied, "We talked about Honour Gombami," another famous Zimbabwean soccer player.

"Do you always talk about football in your class?"

"Yeah, our teacher is cool!" My mom did not share my enthusiasm, but she waited for the school term to finish before going to the school to do something about it. When my term grades came in, I was number one in my class, but my grades were low. At my school, classes didn't write individual tests. All the fourth graders would write the same test based on what the students should have learned that term. So, I was the best in my class, but I had a lot of bad scores because I didn't know anything. All we had learned was art, Gwekwerere, and Honour Gombami.

I remember one question in one of our tests, "What are the three main parts of an insect?" The answer they were looking for was head, thorax, and abdomen. Well, Tawanda did not know that, so Tawanda replied head, stomach, and legs. Even the day we got our report cards fueled my mom to do something about the situation. We weren't allowed to be given our report cards without a parent or guardian present. They were

afraid the report cards wouldn't reach home. My mom sent Tambu to get the report card, and she went back to my mom, stating

"Umm, Tawanda's teacher is weird."

He wore a dreadlock weave, dark shades, and a black woolen hat. That was his attire the day parents were coming! As soon as the next term started, my mom went straight to the headmaster.

"I don't want my son in Four Red anymore."

The headmaster asked her why which, according to my mom, was total B.S. because as soon as she said she wanted to switch me from Four Red, he got nervous. Apparently, other teachers and parents had been complaining about Mr. Bla Bla Bla.

My mom didn't hold any punches. "Simply because they are not learning anything in that class. My son comes home every day telling me they have been talking about Gwekwerere."

"Well, we can't just switch your son from one class to another just because you asked."

The headmaster clearly had no idea who he was talking to; this was my mom here. Nothing was going to deny her. She gave him a reply that scared him.

"He is either moved, or you are going to see me every day here at the school sitting in his classes making sure they are learning something!"

The next day I was switched to Four Brown, and my journey with Mr. Bla Bla Bla came to an end.

Chapter 9

Father and Son Bonding

I must say so though during that year, Mr. Bla Bla Bla (as bad a teacher as he was), was the least of our problems. The economy of Zimbabwe kept getting worse and worse. This was the year 2006, and as a nation, we were heading downhill fast. Things were starting to get super expensive, and I'm talking about the necessities, such as bread, sugar, and mealie meal. Usually, when a family is going through hard times, the child is not aware of what is happening, the parents try their best to shield the child from the struggle. However, when things turn really bad, nothing the parents do shield the children from seeing what is happening.

That is the situation we were in; other kids my age and I knew of the food shortages at home, and we talked about it sharing our misery stories at school.

"Yesterday, we drank tea without sugar."

Yesterday we didn't have breakfast at all."

No one was embarrassed to share their stories. We all knew everyone was going through it and to pretend otherwise was folly. We made jokes about our situations; what else were we to do? We were fourth graders, and there was no point stressing about situations we could not control. Some guy called George who was in my class taught us this song:

Mazuvano chingwa chinodhura varume wee
Saka kana une flour kanya ubike chimodho kanya
Kana une chibage svurisa ubike manhuchu svurisa

The translation was, "These days bread is super expensive, so if you have flour, make *chimodho*, and if you have corn make *manhuchu*. *Chimodho* is our version of cornbread, and I hate that bread. When making *Chimodho* you take two cups of flour, add a bit of mealie meal, add sugar, salt, and yeast. You will then add water to make it into a dough. After that, you wait a bit, maybe like fifteen minutes, then you bake the bread, which in Epworth we did in an open pan over the fire. I repeat, I hate that bread; it's like eating an unsweetened cake or a cake that tastes more like bread but is not quite bread. People say all these things like it's better when it's hot. I don't care. I hate it when it's hot, cold, or freezing. I hate that bread! The thing is, everyone also knows that when you are eating *chimodho,* you are eating it because there is no money for real bread. I suppose that probably adds to its sour taste because as you put it in your mouth, you are thinking I could be eating real bread right now; instead, I am eating this B version of it. There are a couple of outliers that genuinely love *chimodho*. I had a friend in high school who strongly debated that it was better than real bread. People looked at him like he should be sent to an asylum whenever he said that. Just to make it clear, I also hate cornbread!

Manhuchu, also known as Samp rice, is made from dried corn kernels that are pounded and broken but not as finely as mealie meal or rice. I'm not a big fan of them either, but I don't feel as passionately about *manhuchu* as I do *chimodho.* Tambu is not a fan of *manhuchu* as well, but that's not saying much. She's a very picky eater and is not a fan of most traditional foods. Unlike Tambu, there are certain recipes where I like *manhuchu,* like when it is used to make *mutakura. Mutakura* is a dish made up of a

mixture of round nuts, cowpeas, corn, or *manhuchu.* Some people like Tebby add milk to their *manhuchu* and eat it as cereal.

I know some may dispute with me and say these foods taste good, that's fine. However, there is a difference between eating *chimodho* or *manhuchu* as a delicacy and how we ate these foods from 2006 to 2009. We ate them then because that was all we could eat, and believe me, even those that love them so much got tired of them. We weren't singing these songs as fourth graders because we loved them so much, we were tired of them, but it was either that or going hungry. That was always a possibility, especially to many of my classmates, considering how schools in Zimbabwe do not prepare food for their students unless it's a boarding school.

I remember when one classmate of mine, Admire was sick. He had a boil on his leg, and it got bad that when it was time to go back to school, he couldn't walk. We had to hoister him on our shoulders to his house. While we were walking there, he told me that his biggest concern was that the pain would make it difficult for him to sleep, which he did every time he came back from school. He did so because he was always hungry, and when he fell asleep, he wouldn't feel the hunger anymore for those couple of hours. These were the conversations we were having as fourth graders.

At home, Tambu and Tinashe had just started college. This, of course, put more financial strain on my parents. It was already difficult to pay for boarding school during their final high school years. In some cases, there would be enough money to only pay for the school fees of one of them. Tinashe would tell my parents to go ahead and pay for Tambu's instead of his. He would go to school without the school fees, given that the school allowed a grace period for everyone to pay their fees. After that, the bursa would

go classroom to classroom with a list of students who hadn't paid their fees yet, and they would be called out from the classroom and sent home. My brother's name was always on the list, but the bursa liked him, so he would tell him to sort it out and send it back to the classroom. Sometimes the bursa's hands were tied, and he would pull him from the classroom. My brother never came home though; what was the point? He knew there was no money at home. Besides, his school was two hours away from home, so he would need bus fare, money he didn't have. So, he would leave campus, go into the nearby town, linger there for some hours, and come back to school. He often hitched a ride to town in the headmaster's car, who also liked him. Tinashe was very popular at his school, being a prefect and all. The headmaster didn't even ask him why he was going to town, which was very unusual. When you are in boarding school, you just don't leave because you feel like it; you have to get a pass to get off the school premises. He didn't have one, not that it mattered; the headmaster never asked for it. So, he would ride with him there, linger around for hours and then ride back with the headmaster to school. Some popular guy he was.

Sometimes there was no money for both of them. They would be sent to school regardless, and my parents would ask to be on some financial plan, the school would begrudgingly agree. Both were good students, popular students, and maybe that helped smooth things over. Who knows why they were never kicked out. It definitely cannot be their popularity alone; schools do not operate like that. Whatever explanation that can be made up, one thing I can say for sure is my mom's faith can move mountains. No school fees? It didn't matter; she would send them to school anyway and have faith that they

would not be kicked out. She had to have faith; Zimbabwe can be tough if you don't have something to lean on.

Here they were about to send them to college, with more expensive fees. Both of them weren't working at the time. My dad had given up the tobacco farming he was doing at the rurals after my mom begged him to stop. His health had deteriorated, so he came back home. His blood pressure was giving him problems, and his legs would swell and not be able to walk. Farming is a very stressful business, and being in an environment like that wasn't helping. To generate some funds, my mom made a plan to go to Kadoma, a small city two hours away from Harare, where her sister lived, and do vending there, selling clothes. It was not going to be enough to pay for college tuition for both, but it was the only thing she could do at the time. The rest she left it up to faith.

This was a thing my mom used to do going to and from Botswana. Botswana was doing better economically than us, so she would buy some clothes in Zimbabwe and sell them for profit over there. It was hard work that took a toll on her health. Sometimes she would come back with swollen legs from all the standing she did while selling her stock and the constant walking she had to do over there. She would stay there for a couple of months whenever she went because she had to wait until her stock was finished. There was no means of communicating as well because we didn't have a phone at home. She would stay with other vendors who were Tswana's while she was there. One of the sons of the woman she stayed with did stay with us for some time at home when he had some business in Zimbabwe. Despite the hospitality from some of her co-workers, not everyone was welcoming. The Tswanas were tired of Zimbabweans pouring into their country, and they made their feelings known. Comments like, "Go back to your

Mugabe," or the typical, "You are taking our jobs away from us," became familiar to her. However, she pushed through; she couldn't afford to give up. When she came back, she would come back with a lot of groceries because it was cheaper to buy food from there. One time when she came back, her legs were so swollen, and she was showing them to us while she lay on the bed. We were all worried about her; the mood was turning somber. Instead of celebrating the groceries she had brought, there was a worry on everyone's face. Chipo attempted to light the mood.

"You know the look kinda suits you."

She succeeded; my mom burst out laughing. My dad was still doing the tobacco farming at the rurals at the time. If he were there, he would have begged her to stop too.

This time, however, she was going to Kadoma because there had been a gold rush in Kadoma and many people flocked there, which also meant that there was a lot of money to be made because people had money to burn. She was going to open a flea market there. This was quite dangerous; a gold rush meant an influx of illegal gold miners called *makorokoza.* These were dangerous people. You needed to be if you were to sneak into mines at night, evade the police, and sometimes the military daily. Often, they killed each other for the gold they found, so if one found some gold, they had to hide it from the police and the other illegal miners because finding gold could mean death. There were also many bandits who positioned themselves on the roads that led to the mines to rob those that may have gold. Thus, as ironic as it sounds, a place that had struck gold was the place you wanted to avoid at all costs, but it was desperate times, and money was needed, so mom went. I was a kid then; I didn't know these risks she was willing to face. She made sure I didn't know.

With my mom gone, it became my dad and me for a while. Chipo and Tebby had moved out by then, and Tambu and Tinashe, as already established, were starting college. We did have a maid though, who helped around the house. Hiring a maid is common in Zimbabwe; it is not as expensive as hiring a maid in the United States, which makes having a maid a privilege only the rich can have. Hiring any type of service in Zimbabwe is not expensive compared to the United States. That's because no one has any money, so if your fares are super high, no one will hire you. When I was taking an internship my freshman year of undergrad, Chipo told me that the rate I was being paid, $10/hr., was the same rate paid to medical doctors, so you can imagine how much maid services would cost. On top of that, maids typically stay with the family that employs them. This becomes an added bonus because they are leaving rent-free and have free food, and trust me, that counts for something in Zimbabwe.

Anyways, we called our new maid *Gogo,* which means grandma or aunt in some cases. We called her thus because she was related to the Murehwa's, so by being related to them, she became our grandma as well. Relations or no relations, I loved that woman. She was a tall, pretty lady, but that is not why I loved her. She was funny, probably the funniest maid we have ever had in my book. Growing up, there was a popular game we played called *kutsvinyirana.* The game was basically trading insults, sort of like a roasting session. However, unlike a roasting session where you might make fun of someone for their appearance and the like, *zvitusnyo* were at times well-crafted stories in which whoever was receiving the insults was the stupid character. A designated time was set whenever the game was played, and the two players would go at it while the rest listened, enjoyed the show, and acted as judges. The winner was decided on a number of

categories: longevity (who outlasted who) originality (who had the most insults that had never been heard before.) As I said, this was a popular game, so some insults were so overused that they didn't pack a punch anymore. Finally, you were also judged on delivery (who made the crowd laugh more.) Sometimes if your delivery was that good, the crowd will go wild and declare you the winner without even going for longevity.

There was a tactic to the game. At the beginning of the battle, you would start with the short and direct ones.

Wakashata zvekuti ukaenda kuZoo mhuka ndidzo ndzinokupa chikafu.

Wakafuta zvekuti kana uri muSchool Assemby unogara paside pemunhu wese.

You are so ugly that when you go to the zoo, the animals are the ones that feed you.

You are so fat that when you are in the school assembly, you are sitting next to the whole school.

After you have exhausted the direct ones, you would move to the narration kind because those were the money shots.

Ndosaka pawaka kwira ndege kekutanga waisaziva zvekuita. Uri mundenge pakaita turbulence iwewe ndowabva watanga kuchema. "Ini ndagara ndiri munhu ane munyama. Pese paitwa maihumbwe ndaingonzi iwewe ita imbwa inorara pnaze. Izvezvi uchanzwa pilot achitinditi buruka upushe."

That's where when you boarded a plane for the first time, you had no idea how everything worked. It so happened that there was turbulence during the trip, and you

started crying. “I’m a guy with the worst luck. Whenever we played house as kids, I was always told to play the dog that sleeps outside. Now with my bad luck the pilot is going to tell me to get off and push the plane.”

When *Gogo* came along, she became my secret weapon. She had an arsenal of insults, and she would gladly share them with me. She won me many contests; how can you not love somebody after that. My mother did come back for a brief period while *Gogo* was there. I was so used to my mom coming back from Botswana with tons of groceries, so I was excited for her to come back. I didn’t understand how this time was different. She came back with groceries from Botswana because stuff was cheaper there. She had just gotten to a different city this time, so no more groceries. When she came back, I was at school, and by the time I got home, she was sleeping in her room. I didn’t want to wake her, so I rushed to *Gogo*

“What did mom come back with?’

She showed me a dish with beans my aunt had given her.

“No, I don’t mean that! What else has she brought?”

“That’s it, that’s all she came with.”

Gogo thought maybe I was expecting a toy or something, so she said,

“Maybe she has something; I just didn’t see it. I only saw the beans because that’s what she gave me.”

I knew she thought I was expecting candy or a toy. I didn’t bother to correct her. What was the point the groceries weren’t there, so what was correcting her going to

achieve? I didn't ask my mom though. I knew that would have been an insensitive thing to ask; after all, we were at a stage where kids were no longer shielded from the financial struggles of their parents. So, I shared my disappointment with no one.

My mom left again, and things pretty much remained as it was before. This was until Heroes Day. A public holiday for commemorating those who died in the liberation struggle. Tinashe and Tambu came back from college, and *Gogo* was given the holiday off. She was all smiles when she left,

"I will see you guys in a couple of days."

She also talked to Tinashe and Tambu,

"What time are you leaving to go back?"

"Mid-morning," they replied.

"Well, I might miss you when I come back, so I guess this is goodbye for a while."

Gogo was supposed to be back the day Tinashe and Tambu were going back to college. The day came, Tambu and Tinashe left mid-morning, *Gogo* wasn't back yet, and she still wasn't there by dinner. We thought maybe she was hindered by something, and she was coming the next day; she didn't. Just like that, she was gone. We later heard from the Murehwa's that she started working for another family in an area called Massasa Park. It was messed up what she did, leaving without saying a word, but no one blamed her. There were better living conditions there; they had electricity.

So, it became just me and my dad. We had a system going, he would do the hard chores, and my job was to entertain him while he did them. I recall when we were sitting in the front yard while he was doing laundry. I was reading him some fairy tales from a book my mom had bought for me. He was an excellent listener; he acted as if he was hearing these stories for the very first time. There was a story about a prince who got together a band of misfits to confront an evil Queen who kept her daughter imprisoned. Whenever I would read what the Queen did, my dad would drop whatever item of clothing he was washing back into the dish and say, "No, she did not!" That got me excited to read more. He would interrupt me whenever the protagonist was in danger. "No, no, no, is he going to die? I thought you said this was a good story!" I would laugh, "No, dad, you got to wait. It's not done yet! It's not done yet!" I loved reading to him; he reminded me of how I felt when I read the stories for the first time.

We did the same thing when cooking. He would cook, I would entertain. He also loved to have everything he was going to use for cooking around him before he cooked, and it was my job to make sure he had everything he needed. Since we used firewood, we didn't cook our food inside because that would mess up the walls. So, whenever my mom or sisters were cooking, I would hear, "Tawandaaaaa, bring me some tomatoes!" A few minutes later, "Tawandaaaa, bring me the mealie meal." I took dozens of these trips whenever they were cooking because they would always forget something. My dad had a different system.

He said, "Tawanda, don't you hate it that whenever the girls are cooking, you have to be sent back and forth because they keep forgetting to bring what they are going to use?"

I thought, “Oh my God, this man gets me!” I replied excitedly, “Yes, I’m never sitting down when they are cooking; I might as well be cooking with them.”

He laughed; he loved enticing me ever since I was a kid. My sisters always complained whenever he would say to me when I was five, “Tawanda, I’m going out; you are the man of the house. Make sure the girls don’t stir up trouble.”

I took my job seriously, closely watching my sisters’ every move. When he came back, he would ask, “So has there been any trouble when I was gone?” I would air everything out while he laughed hysterically. One day when he had given me that job again, some guy came to see Chipo, and when my dad came back and asked for a report, I was ready,

“There was this guy who came here to see Chipo, and she was so happy to see him. I have never seen her so happy like that!”

My dad almost cried from laughter, and he kept egging me on, “She was happy, huh? Has she ever been that happy to see me?”

“No way, she was way too happy this time,” and my dad would start laughing again.

So, it was no different that I was in fourth grade now; he still found it funny. I was quite an opinionated kid, and it amused him.

“Well, we are going to do something different.” He said in between laughs. “Before we start cooking, we are going to make sure we have everything we need so that once we sit down, we only get up when we are done.”

Once he was done cooking, he asked, “Now, isn’t this a better system?”

I fell for it and went on a rant against the girls’ system to his amusement.

After dinner, he would read me Bible stories before we went to sleep. We read the entire book of Acts, and sometimes he would pause to explain things I didn’t understand. I loved our reading routines; I would be lying under covers in bed while he sat on a chair with the bible on the little stand beside the headboard. Sometimes he would hold the candle over the words as he read because his eyesight wasn’t good. Like my mom, he never put pressure on me to understand that this was the holy scripture and all that. He just read it to me like a book that contained awesome true stories, and I loved every second of it.

Later on, my dad became sick. His legs started swelling, and he was now having trouble walking. So, for a bit, I helped him walk around the house. He started using a walking stick as a crutch when he walked, although, at times, it was still difficult for him to get up, so I would help him up. Tebby got off work for a bit and came to see us; she was living in Bulawayo at the time, a city four hours from where we lived. When she came to the house, my dad asked her to take me to Chipo’s house for the remainder of the August school holiday. He felt that I needed a breather and that it was a lot to ask for a nine-year-old to take care of his dad.

Tebby agreed, but she couldn’t drop me off, so she called Chipo to come pick me up. I didn’t know these conversations were being had, so I was chilling when Chipo came to pick me up. I was in Tinashe’s room acting out a play I had seen in school. It was a play based on a popular Shona novel, *Jekanyika.* The main character of the story,

Jekeanyika, was a Hercules type of character, and the story followed his exploits. I was Jekanyika; I was his king, his foes; I played everyone. I was acting out all the parts myself and having a blast doing it. I was busy with my act when suddenly Chipo's face appeared in the mirror; I was ecstatic to see her and even more thrilled when she told me I was going to go with her for the remainder of the holiday.

However, when we were leaving, I felt guilty for leaving my dad behind. He needed me, who was going to help him move around the house, who was going to bring all the stuff he needed when he was cooking, he was going to read by himself now that I was leaving him. I didn't know he was the one who had asked that Chipo take me; I never knew until years later because I never said anything. I just carried my guilt and remained quiet.

Chapter 10

Chili Man!

Two great things happened in 2007. First, my dad got a job as a professor at The University of Zimbabwe, the most popular university in the country. His new job did not do wonders for our financial situation. The economy was on its last breath at the time, and no one, especially teachers of any level, was getting paid. However, it was better than what he was doing before. Finally, he had a job that fit his expertise, something he enjoyed. The tobacco farming stint had destroyed him health-wise and worsened his blood pressure; at least this time, he would have peace of mind. He hadn't given up teaching of his own volition anyway; he couldn't find a job, and instead of sitting around doing nothing, he made use of the available land at our rural home to make some money. Tobacco is one of our export products, so there is always a market for it. However, the profits always go to the government, and the farmers are left with next to nothing. The Tobacco Institute and Marketing Board sets the price that the tobacco is going for, and usually, that price is quite low. They then go to these auction floors where their tobacco is auctioned to merchants, and most of the time, the tobacco is even sold at a way lesser price than the already low price the board would have declared. They go early in the morning to these auction floors to get the chance of getting in first because typically, they have to wait for about three days until their stock is auctioned. There are also contractors that lure farmers into debts by providing them with seeds and pesticides and charge at an interest. So, when they eventually sell, most of their money goes to cover those debts.

When all is said and done, the farmer is left with almost next to nothing and can barely afford to buy seed for the next season. All the hard work they put in, the health risks because of the pesticides, and the constant inhalation of tobacco almost comes to nothing. No wonder my mom asked him to stop.

The second thing was the new maid we got, Judy. Judy is, without a doubt, my favorite out of all the maids we ever had. She was the only one that genuinely felt like she was my friend, not someone hired to take care of me. We did have someone for a short stint right before Judy came called Mary. She didn't last long, she was from the same town as Judy, and my mom was introduced to her through a friend of hers from church, Mrs. Zharare. Both Mary and Judy were from Mrs. Zharare's rural home, and they had come with her to Harare when she came back because they were looking for work, and she knew she would be able to find them work. I don't remember much about Mary; she didn't last long enough to make an impression on me. I remember though, that she ate a lot. I recall one time she cooked porridge in too big a pot, so after we had all eaten our share, there was half of the pot left of it. My mom expected that she would throw it away because no one wanted to eat re-heated porridge. But, to her surprise, Mary downed the whole pot of it by herself! That wasn't what got her fired though; we didn't have a problem with that. My mom's policy was that you could eat as much as you wanted. She got fired because of her own undoing.

Mary had a relative that lived a walking distance from our house. She left home one afternoon to see her, saying she would be back in a couple of hours. She took the "I lost track of time" excuse to excess because she returned after three days. When she came back, even she knew that her job was gone. Judy came to stay with us right after since she was still with Mrs. Zharare.

We all took a liking to Judy. She was young, being sixteen when she started working for us. She was the youngest maid we ever had, and to make her feel at ease, my mother made up a relation and told her she could call my mom aunt. Mom thought it would make living with strangers less intimidating, so she became my mom's niece and my older cousin. All our neighbors legitimately thought she was my mom's niece because that's what she told them as well. Given that she was that young made us close because it felt like I had an older sibling who was a bit closer to my age. There was still a gap, I was only ten at the time, but it was better than the twenty-one-year-olds, Tambu and Tinashe, who I came after. I also must say when I was young, being in their twenties was as good as ancient to me, making it difficult for me to relate to my siblings.

We weren't the only ones who took a liking to Judy though. One of our relatives, a nephew of ours, took a romantic interest in Judy, a man called Mhiripiri or, as my cousin Leonard called him, Chili Man. I don't know how exactly we were related to Chili Man. I just know he was our nephew. There are a lot of those relations in Zimbabwe; we are a people obsessed with being related. People will go to lengths to find shared kin, and they will go back generations if they have to. If that fails, totems are a good backup.

Everyone in Zimbabwe is born with a totem as you inherit your father's totem. It is, I suppose, what you would call a spirit animal, and it's an important part of our identity as Zimbabweans. You will hear people say, "You are of the lion totem; my uncle married a woman of the lion totem. I am your nephew then!" The more this happens, the more people will not bother looking for relations with that totem. It will just be like, "Oh lion totem, monkey totem here. That makes you my uncle," as if the animals themselves are related. I may not know how we were related to Chili Man, but I know that whatever

connection we had with him came from my mom. My mom's totem, *Dziva* (hippopotamus), is one of the popular totems. My siblings and I's totem (since we inherit our father's totems) was *Nondo* (tsessebe). You rarely find people with that totem. Thus, most of our totem-connected relatives mostly came through my mom.

Chili Man had two children, a daughter named Shoro, which was a nickname. Her real name was Scholastic which didn't help either. It was a weird name but not the strangest I have heard. I learned from first grade to third grade with a guy called Doctor. I guess his parents were determined that their son would be called a doctor no matter what. So Scholastic, strange name as it was, wasn't the worst name. Shoro had a brother Tafadzwa. Sometimes the two would come to the house to play since they were the same age as me.

When I was doing my homework, my mom would include them in the extra lessons she gave me. Shoro was quite bright and, from all accounts, did well in school. Tafadzwa, on the other hand, struggled a lot; he dropped out of primary school, tried again some years later, and dropped out again.

When Chili Man fell for Judy, he was frequenting our house quite often because of his need for water. He lived in one of the squatter houses, so he didn't have access to running water. My mom allowed him to come to our house to get as much water as he liked, and he should have taken her on that offer. He indeed needed it. Whenever he came to fetch water, he would only come with one twenty-liter container to fill up and put on his bike.

Again, he should have taken my mom on her offer of getting as much water as he wanted because one little container surely was not doing the trick. I say this because Chili Man was always dirty, from the clothes he was wearing to his very being. Up to now, the only image I see of Chili Man is of him wearing some gray pants that he rolled at the bottom, a blue button-down shirt that was only blue in name because of the lack of washing. He would tuck in the shirt in his pants which made his big belly stick up.

This is the image I have of him because those were the only clothes he wore. He was also allergic to shoes because he never wore them at all. He must have had hobbit feet because there was nowhere that his feet couldn't step. Sometimes you would catch him early morning coming from work where he worked as a security guard. He would be wearing his uniform, and of course, he did need shoes, but it was as if the first chance he would get to remove them he would because you would see him in his full uniforms peddling on his bike, but the shoes would be tied to his backpack.

It was out of these frequent visits that he started falling for Judy. He started shortening her name from Judy to Ju, and he would say it in a semi disturbing tone, *"Ju shaaa."* Which is kinda like saying, "Heyyy Ju." I recall one time he came over. It was just Judy and me at the house. Those were the times he would do his shenanigans because he was afraid of my mom. I was standing with Judy leaning against one of the windowsills. He came over to where we were standing and would get too close to Judy. Poor girl got so uncomfortable, and she started using me as a buffer between the guy and me. I didn't realize that was what was going on at the time. When he left Judy was not happy,

"Did you see what he was doing?"

"No, what are you talking about?"

"He was getting too close to me; that's why I was moving around to make sure you were always between us."

It became obvious after she said that, and I encouraged her to tell my mom; we both knew she would handle it. She did tell my mom, and for sure, she handled it. We don't know what was said because none of us were there, we just know he got a telling, and Chili Man's water visits stopped. It's not like he was using the water much anyways. When he eventually started coming back, he was on his best behavior. He also no longer had an excuse to come every day either because we didn't have water ourselves later that year. It was a Zimbabwe-wide problem; the water purification sites were all torn down, and we felt the effects. We now relied on the newly built community borehole like everyone else.

He later got married, and of course, I mean the illegitimate type of marriage here which was strange for a man his age. No one knows where he got the wife; he just came to our house one day and told us he had a wife. There was always drama between the two. The wife would leave him, then come back and leave him again. It was always something new. My mom got involved probably more than she should have to be honest because taking up Chili Man's problems would leave you drained.

Personally, I never understood what it was the woman found appealing. We have already talked about his hygiene, and his house was the same. Tebby once went to his house with my mom when he was having issues with his wife, and Tebby came back shocked with their living conditions. First off, their house was super tiny, it was only two

rooms, so I'm not sure how the sleeping arrangements worked there. It was one thing to have a tiny house; the least you could do was keep it clean, but Chili Man couldn't be bothered. When Tebby got into their house, there was a live chicken chilling on the bed. The bed itself was not a bed but rather a hump of concrete with blankets over it. You tell me how this man was able to get a wife! If that doesn't outline the problems of Epworth, I don't know what else will.

Chapter 11

Glory Glory Man United!

The year 2007 was a blessing that kept on giving because I got to do some exploring that year. I was on school holiday for the first term of the school year and Tebby had come home from Bulawayo for the Easter holiday. She was leaving to go back on Easter Monday, and I had casually asked if I could go back with her for the remainder of my holiday. I casually asked because I didn't think there was really a chance that I would be able to go. The issue wasn't that my parents would say no. I didn't even ask them; I knew it was up to Tebby. The main reason I wasn't optimistic was because no one would bring me back. It was unlikely going to be Tebby since she would be working by the time my holiday ended.

Bulawayo was four hours away; there was no way Tebby was going to let a ten-year-old kid travel back home by himself for that long. Tebby's response when I asked wasn't promising either; she gave me an "Uh, it will be difficult, will see," and I took it as a "No, you are not coming."

I wasn't hurt; I knew it was a long shot anyway. That didn't mean I wasn't hopeful. I kept praying for a remote chance to go. I was ravishing the chance to see something different. In primary school, it was common to share with friends the things you did while you were on holiday; so far, I had nothing spectacular to share; I was doing the same old stuff. But here was my chance for some adventure

It was also exciting because, unlike Epworth Tebby's place had electricity and that meant T.V. I grew up without access to a T.V so whenever I had the chance to go somewhere with a television, I always got excited. It was an opportunity to watch new movies, movies I would re-tell in school like I did all the fairy tales my mom used to read to me. I also knew Tebby would spoil me; that was always the reason I wanted to go with my sisters anywhere because wherever it was, I was assured some good food. On top of spoiling, Tebby is also quite adventurous, always going to new places and doing fun stuff; if I were to stay with her, I would tag along with her everywhere. This was a golden opportunity, but the probability of it happening was zero to none.

The day Tebby was leaving, I was at my friend's house, and his mom said, "Tawanda, your sister Tebby is at the gate asking for you."

I went to the gate.

"You are leaving already?" I asked

"No, not yet; I came to tell you that you are coming with me to Bulawayo."

I didn't respond, but I ran back to my friend, shouting, "I'm going, I'm going!"

Tebby was going to tell me to get ready and pack up, but she didn't get the chance to - I was gone, so she had to relay the message through my mom's friend.

Tebby was going into town to run some errands; then she was coming back to get me. Her errands took longer than expected, and she didn't come back home until 5:00 pm. I was nervously looking at the clock, wondering what was going on. "What was taking her so long? Were we still going?" To make matters worse, my dad wasn't happy about the prospects of us traveling at night, and he was starting to murmur something

about not going; I was devastated. Tebby had to assure him numerous times that we would be okay. She also guilt-tripped him a little bit.

"He's excited to go; I can't tell him no now." It worked. I was given leave to go.

My dad, though, had a right to be worried. Tebby didn't have a car then, so we traveled by public transport. Well, not exactly. I think this is a good time to give a brief description of how the Zimbabwean transportation system worked at the time. Public transportation was highly privatized in Zimbabwe. City busses were few, with the majority of the busses provided by private companies. Busses were not the most preferred mode of transportation. That spot belonged to the Kombis. Kombis are eighteen-seater minibusses, and all of them were privately owned. They were preferred because they filled quicker, being that they are eighteen seaters. That's the other thing in Zimbabwe; since public transport was hugely privatized, the goal was to make profit. So, the bus would not leave the terminus until it was full. This could take a long time if you were on a bus.

The other reason was Kombis stopped anywhere. You recall those weird bus stops. That was a Kombi specialty, but busses only stopped at official bus stops. Lastly, Kombi's were generally faster, especially for travel between cities. However, at the time, a few Kombis were traveling city to city, so many private commuters would scoop in some passengers in their cars for some extra cash since they were going that way anyway. They were and still are a popular mode of transport that no one fears getting into a stranger's car. Most of the time, the car is picking up about three other passengers, so you tend to feel safer than when it's just you and an unknown driver, although that does happen at times.

That is not to say they aren't any unfortunate incidents involving private transportation. My aunt, at one point, was coming from a music course, and she and a couple of other people got a ride from this man. After they drove for a few kilometers, the car came to a stop.

"My apologies, people, the engine is acting up. Would you mind getting out of the car to push it?"

No one objected; it wasn't that unusual after all. They all got out, leaving their belongings in the car. One lady had even taken her shoes off, and since they were not going to be outside for long, she left her shoes in the car. They pushed the car a bit, and the engine roared to life, then the guy drove off. They thought he was testing the engine making sure it was running smoothly, and their assumptions were supported when they saw him turn around. They were wrong. He turned around sped past them with their belongings in his car, no doubt on the way to pick some more unsuspecting passengers.

Tebby and I also took the private car route but thankfully, our journey didn't have any of that trauma. Our ride was a little pickup truck with a canopy on top. We all sat in the back; some ladies had blankets that they put on the floor to sit on. Tebby and I were secretly making fun of the other passengers to make up time. Our main target was a lady trying to philosophize, but she was uttering nonsense, jumping from topic to topic from religion to politics. This is what Tebby and I do; by the way, whenever we go to an event together, we are always looking at our surroundings, looking for someone or something to laugh at. We arrived Bulawayo late, around 9 pm. We got to Tebby's flat, and she showed me to my room which had a small bunk bed in there. The top bunk was empty; I

climbed into the second bunk and fell asleep. The next morning, I woke up to see a strange woman leaning her head from the top bunk looking at me.

"Umm, Hello?" I asked.

"Oh, I didn't mean to scare you; Tebby told me before she left for work that you were here and to keep an eye on you."

It was then that I found out that Tebby had roommates. Well, one roommate technically, the lady she shared her flat with was a working single mom, so the girl looking at me was her maid. I met the roommate's annoying five-year-old daughter a couple of days later. She begged a lot. She came into my room one day, and I was eating cereal, and she walked over to where I was sitting and said,

"Can I have some?"

I was confused because I wasn't sure what she was asking to have here. Surely not the cereal that I was eating! She sure was, and she looked at me like she was about to cry if I didn't give her any. So as bizarre as it was, I scooped a spoonful of cornflakes and gave it to her. I thought that was it, but no, no, it was far from over. A few minutes later, she had her hand held out again,

"Can I have some more?"

I gave her another spoonful, but that too wasn't enough. I then realized that she was matching my eating now, one spoonful for me, one for her! What an entitled brat! I'd had enough, so I went to the kitchen and fixed her a bowl. When the maid saw her eating, she said, "Oh, she already ate; you shouldn't have." Like hell, I shouldn't have. I thought

to myself, “Where were you when she was begging for the cereal in my bowl?” When Tebby came back from work, I told her about the kid, and she laughed.

“Yeah, I should have warned you. I either eat in front of her mom, and she won’t beg then, or when she can’t see me at all. If she sees you, you might as well share whatever it is you have with her.”

Apart from the kid, the roommate was all right. I rarely saw her; I mostly interacted with the maid and the kid. Sometimes the maid and I would have philosophical discussions about the Bible. It all started when she was telling me about the story of Elijah. I don’t know how it had come to that, but she was mixing up her stories.

“No, that’s Elisha.”

“What?”

“That’s Elisha, not Elijah; you are mixing up the stories.”

She looked at me in disbelief that was half mockery as if she was saying, “And how would you know that.” She didn’t know how much my parents read the Bible as a storybook for me. So, I went and took Tebby’s Bible and read the passage she was talking about,

“See Elisha.”

“How do you know that?”

“I read the Bible a lot.”

“What’s one of your favorite stories?”

‘Have you ever heard the story of Hezekiah?”

“Who?”

Next thing you know, I was reading the Bible to her. This went on for several days. I would ask her if she knew a certain story, and if she said no, I would read it to her.

I stayed with Tebby in her flat for two weeks; then, for a week and a half, I went to visit my aunt, one of my mom’s younger sisters who stayed in Bulawayo as well. When Tebby first moved to the city, she stayed with her before she found her own place. It was fun staying there because I got to hang out with her two youngest sons, the cousins I rarely saw because they stayed far away, Nama, who’s a year older than me, and Pindu, who’s the same age as me.

It was during my stay there that I fell in love with Manchester United. Tinashe probably thinks I support Man U because of him since it’s the team he supports. But no, that credit goes to Pindu. When I was at their house, Pindu played a popular soccer game FIFA the 2002 version, on an old computer. FIFA is like any other sports game. There are different modes you can choose when you play. For example, you can choose the career mode in which you play a regular season, and you will access all the teams in the league and choose the team you want to use. Then there is the ultimate team mode where you can build your own team from scratch using players past and present. FIFA 2002, however, only had the career mode, and Pindu, an avid Man United fan, always picked Manchester United.

I sat beside Pindu whenever he was playing, although I didn't know squat about football given that we didn't have any means to watch it at home. So, Pindu told me about the players.

"What you don't know about Man United? It's the best team in the world!" Something to which his brother Nama objected being a Liverpool fan.

"Okay, let me give you the rundown. You see the number eleven right there? That's Giggs; he's very fast and a very good dribbler. Number eighteen, that's Scholes; you won't find a greater passer of the ball."

Pindu's game was outdated since we were now in 2007, and there is a new FIFA game that comes out with every year. So sometimes he would point at some players and explain to me that they currently were no longer at Manchester United.

"That's Veron; he's no longer at the club. We have Rooney and Ronaldo now, absolute beast of players."

I became a Man U fan from then on, and I don't think he even knows that he's responsible for that. Although I must say, I'm not sure if I should thank him for that. Nothing has given me more heartbreak than Man United. I cannot tell you how many times I have hated myself for loving that club asking myself. "Why do you have to support Man U? In fact, why do you have to watch football at all. Why wouldn't you be one of those people who do not like sports, or I don't know - watch golf?" That's sports for you; when your team loses you question your whole existence.

My first Harry Potter encounter was at their house as well. All my cousins were obsessed with Harry Potter at the time; they had all the books. One of the movie channels

was airing all the Harry Potter movies that were out in a week. I remember the night we were to watch *The Sorcerer's Stone.* Everyone was so excited, and I had no idea what the fuss was all about. I hated the movie because it scared the crap out of me. The scene when Quirinus Quirrell took off his headscarf, and he had Voldemort's face at the back of his head, stayed with me for days. The next day they were *airing The Chamber of Secrets*; I went to bed early. Pindu and Nama tried to persuade me to watch it; I pretended like I was tired. I stayed off anything Harry Potter after that encounter. I later read all the books, though after I was done with my A'Levels, and I loved them.

When my holiday was over, I went back to Harare with Tebby's friend, who was driving back to the city. It had been an exciting school holiday filled with adventure. I met an annoying kid, I was given Harry Potter nightmares, and I fell in love with Manchester United. Now that's what you call a holiday!

Chapter 12

2008

The year 2008 was when shit really hit the fan in Zimbabwe. I mean, where do I start? Everything was bad, and I do mean everything. I was in sixth grade at the time, and I can tell you this; that year, I learned nothing, absolutely nothing. Teachers and all civil servants were not getting paid, well, maybe not all civil servants. The soldiers were probably still getting paid, that Mugabe never failed. The military was the backbone of his power, and he would do anything to make them happy. With teachers not being paid, they went on strike. They simply stayed at home.

At first, it was fun; we went to school to play. I mean, what kid wouldn't wish for that. However, even that became tiring too, nothing is ever fun when it is given to you in abundance, and we were given all the playtime we desired and then some. Recess became meaningless; we were always on break. There was no more excitement whenever that bell rang. Now it only rang to tell us what time it was.

We weren't even excited about school being over anymore; what was the point? What would we be excited about? Going home and play? We did that already. Parents eventually stopped sending their kids to school. What was the point of sending children to school if they would do nothing but play, especially if they could help with chores? For me, my parents' rationale was, why send our kid to go and play when we can teach him ourselves at home?

At some point, the government tried to intimidate the teachers into going to work. They didn't intimidate them by threatening to hold their wages, not that it would have worked anyway; no one was getting paid. Instead, they pulled a Mugabe special; send in soldiers to beat the teachers up. I remember one day when all hell broke loose at my primary school. We just saw a bunch of soldiers pulling up in the school, a lot of them in civilian clothing. We were all wondering what was going on; even at our age, we knew seeing a truck full of soldiers pull up was not good.

One soldier came over to where we were sitting, "Why are you not in class?" He asked.

"Our teacher didn't come today, so we don't have anything to do."

He sighed, "Why don't you just go home, rather than sitting here and doing nothing."

We didn't answer. He didn't expect an answer anyway because he walked off before we got the chance to respond. His suggestion meant nothing to us because we knew we could go home anytime we pleased without reciprocation. There were no teachers, and the teachers that would come did not stop us at all. Teachers that came only sat in classrooms doing nothing. After about ten minutes since they had arrived, the soldiers started rounding up all the students.

"Everyone to the football fields!"

They were quite nice to us. They could have easily made us run to the fields. Even when some students were moving slow, they didn't lose their cool.

"Come on, let's move a little faster guys."

It's as if they were trying so hard to make it look like their visit was normal and nothing scary was about to happen. What the soldiers did to our teachers while we were at the football fields, I can only speculate. A gate and durawall separated the fields from the classrooms, and when every student was at the fields, they closed the gate so we couldn't see what was happening inside. After about half an hour, we were called up for an emergency school assembly, where we were told to go home. We could all tell something was wrong. The teachers were trying hard to make it look like everything was normal, but we could see their fear. Thirty minutes after the assembly, every student was gone, and I don't know what they did after we had left. Many rumors circulated among students saying teachers were running from the soldiers by jumping the durawall, but no one really knew what had happened.

The crazy thing is that operation or whatever you want to call it didn't work. The soldiers were trying to force teachers to teach instead of just sitting in classrooms when they came to school. They didn't think that through because their stunt made teachers not show up at all; they couldn't be beaten up if they weren't at the school. The thing was, even if teachers wanted to go to work, a few of them, if any of them could afford to do so. Many of my teachers did not stay in Epworth, which meant they needed bus fare, which was hard to come by. It was difficult to get money at the time. There was a shortage of cash, and the government responded in the most typical Zimbabwean government way; they started printing more money.

That, of course, led to hyperinflation that is comparable to Germany's after the First World War. The government reset the currency three times, slashing out the massive

zeroes and issuing new bills as if that would cure the problem. Of course, it didn't. The new bills lost value quickly, and the government printed more of the new bill, and the cycle repeated. We got to a point where we had trillion-dollar notes. It became a regular thing to hear announcements on the news about new money that had just been printed, and with each announcement, the bill that was being printed added a few more zeroes.

"*The government just issued a one million dollar note; we have a fifty million dollar note, hundred million, five hundred million, one billion*."

We just kept going; nothing was stopping us. The president was fulfilling his campaign promise. He said he would make us financially secure, and if being a trillionaire doesn't say secure, I don't know what does. Being a kid, I didn't quite understand the magnitude of the situation. I would get excited to see the new note and see how pretty it was. It also became a thing among my friends to see who would hold the new money before everyone else. We didn't understand that a country that announced a new note almost every week was a dying country.

The money was worthless as soon as it was announced. I have this specific memory of some relative of mine who gave me some money as a gift for doing well in school. It was a couple of trillion-dollar notes. I was grateful, but that money could only buy me the round green candy which everyone hated. It was homemade, and it was basically a hardened ball of sugar with added coloration. That was what a trillion dollars could get me, the cheapest and most hated candy in Zimbabwe.

That was why teachers and everyone else couldn't go to work even if they wanted to. There was no money. Prices also rose by the hour, so if you took public transportation

to work, by the end of the day, the money you have for the ride back wouldn't have been enough because the bus fare would have doubled or tripled. People didn't collect their money from the bank because the government limited the money people could withdraw. Since there was a cash shortage, they couldn't afford to have everyone withdraw large sums of money. The government could not even afford the paper they were using to print the bills. Even if there were no restrictions, no one would have bothered to get their money anyway because the money you withdrew wouldn't be enough for a bus ride back home

There was also a scarcity of everything and long queues everywhere. It got to a point where if you were to see a long queue, you would join, not knowing what the line was for because it was probably a line for a basic commodity you needed. While in that queue, you would be hoping and praying that the price doesn't change before you buy your goods because most of the time, the price would change three or four times while you were in line. I remember at some point Judy and I went to Overspill. There were rumors that cooking oil and mealie meal were available at the shops.

As you already know, Judy was like a friend to me. I went with her on almost every errand she had to do, and we made the most out of it. We would race, chase each other, anything to make it fun. However, on this occasion, there was none of that; we had to rush and get there as fast as we could before it was all gone. It was a serious mission, and we weren't going to mess it up by having fun. Judy kept urging me to walk faster,

"Come on, they might be a long line there already; we don't want to miss this chance."

We got there, and the long queue we saw confirmed the rumors. Judy handed me some money.

"Since it's the two of us, I will go the mealie meal line, and you go buy the cooking oil."

I got my goods first, so I waited for her outside. While waiting outside, I dropped the bottle, and a little bit of the cooking oil spilled, and I truly mean a little bit. The whole crowd outside bellowed at me as if I was to be hanged.

"Hey kid, what the hell are you doing? Do you know how much that costs, and you are busy spilling it on the ground? What's wrong with you?" They all felt the pain of seeing that little bit of oil waste away.

The whole nation was suffering, but places like Epworth got hit the hardest. Most people there relied on informal jobs, and no one was hiring for those now. It was brutal; no one could afford decent food. So, we ate a lot of weird stuff that was cheaper to come by. The first was chunks or soya chunks made from deflated soy flour. They are known for their high protein, and in Zimbabwe, they became popular because they tasted a bit, and I do mean a bit like meat, and most importantly, they were cheap.

I'm just going to go ahead and say I never want to see them ever again in my life. They are not the type of food you eat out of choice. Then there was bulgar. Our bulgar was not the same as the Middle Eastern cuisine, mostly used in cereals. The bulgar we ate resembled the chaff of the wheat more than a foreign cuisine. We cooked it as rice, and because it was so fine and small, it would stick together. However, it didn't have much taste, so gravy was needed to make it taste better.

Even though we were struggling, my mom still did her best to help others. There was a lady who lived in our street with two daughters. They didn't have any clothes, and they always wore the same clothes. My mom went through her stuff, took the clothes she wasn't wearing anymore and did the same for my sisters. She put them all in a bag, went to the lady's house, and handed the clothes to her. She even gave her some of my stuff and my brother to sell if she needed some extra money. The lady was so surprised that she didn't know what to say. She wasn't my mom's friend; they rarely talked. My mom also went to extra lengths, ensuring no one saw her doing it; she didn't want to advertise her generosity. She made sure the lady was alone. She gave her the clothes after she was invited into the house to make sure no one would see her.

Even when she had nothing to give, my mom still tried to give back. In one of the streets, you took to our house; there was an old man who lived at the house on the corner. We didn't know his name, so we called him *Sekuru vepakona,* "Old man from the corner house." For some reason, the old man took a liking to me, and every time I passed by his house, he would call out to me in a raspy voice, *"Ta… Ta… Ta… Tawanda. Hu... Hu... Huya pano, Hu… Hu... Huya pano."* To translate, "Ta… Ta… Ta… Tawanda. Co… Co… Come here. Co… Co… Come here."

He dragged most of his words like that, and he always said everything twice; he would say my name twice and say come here twice. Whenever he called, he would tell me to get anything from his vendor stall.

Most of the time, I would say, "No, thank you," because I figured this guy would not make a profit if he kept giving me stuff. However, telling him no was pointless; you weren't going to leave there without getting something.

It happened almost every day because he liked to bask in the sun in front of his house wearing an overcoat and a woolen hat no matter how hot it was. I later found out that the vendor stall was not even his, but it was owned by one of the tenants that lived in his cottage, so every time he gave me something, he was paying from his pocket! One day, the vendor owner had not put up his stall, but still, Sekuru would not let me pass. He called me to his house, and he gave me some money. I felt so bad accepting this because he got the money from underneath his cupboard, which made me think he was giving me money from his stash. He was giving me money out of what looked like his savings, but I couldn't say no; that would have offended him.

Later, he started taking it as a responsibility that I wouldn't pass by his house without getting anything, and it was all because of my mom. Aside from his tenants, the old man lived by himself, so no one did anything for him. Some of his tenants cooked for him, but that was it. So, my mom went to Sekure and asked him for all his clothes so that she could wash them. They were all so dirty that my mom had to soak them for hours before attempting to wash them. After that, she ironed them, took some of my dad's clothes, and gave them to him. The old man was so grateful, and he re-told that story to anyone who would listen. Every time I passed by his house, he would tell anyone around him,

"Do you know what this boy's mother did for me? She took my dirty clothes, clothes that hadn't been washed in a long time, and washed them all. Then, on top of that, she gave me some new clothes to wear."

One day when he was about to tell the story again,

"Do you know what this boy's mother di-"

One man he was sitting with cut him off,

"We know, old man; you have told us the story a thousand times."

With things being hard for everyone, The Murehwa family had to pretend they were immune to the struggle, of course. Mrs. Murehwa went to their rural home for about a month. When she came back, she was raving that people in her rural home were doing so well, "They don't even know there is a crisis in the country." What nonsense; we have already established how much of a liar she was though, so it shouldn't come as a surprise. She went on raving about how plentiful the food was over there. "They have bulgar, sweet potatoes, maize! They are living well over there." Truth was, the rural areas got hit even harder than us. I don't know who she was trying to convince that she was not struggling; what was even the point of doing that? Everyone was struggling. It became part of how we greeted each other

"Ndeip zvirisei"

"Haa tanzwa nekutambura vakomana"

"Hi, how are you?"

"We are struggling man."

There was no point in those fake pleasantries where I am to ask a person how they were doing, and they reply that they are doing good. There was no point in saying that because no one was good, so why not console each other in your troubles.

With our neighbors, the Murehwa family trying to keep up pretenses, our other neighbors, the Norman family, showed in kind that maybe things weren't as bad for them as they were for everyone else. A year earlier, their firstborn, Howard, left for South Africa. Many Zimbabweans were doing that at the time; there was nothing to stay for in Zimbabwe. The unfortunate thing is that hasn't changed much; people are still leaving Zimbabwe to look for pastures anew in foreign countries; I'm living proof of that.

No one knows what Howard was doing in South Africa, but whatever it was, it was working out for him. That's because when he came back, he brought with him a new generator and a home theater system for his mom's house. He would put the speakers out at night and have an impromptu party every week. He had the whole setup too, the disco lights and everything. It was also surprising that he had the money for petrol for all those days because he would have these parties late into the night and petrol wasn't cheap. The whole street flocked to his house; he became a success story Epworth mothers would tell their children. Here was a man who had done something for himself, and here he was, giving back to the community. Howard's giving back meant our sleep was interrupted a lot, but I must admit, sometimes I would be jamming to the songs he was playing from my room. It was Howard who introduced me to a then-rising star Winky D, who is now one of the most celebrated musicians in Zimbabwe. I had no idea who he was, and when Howard was playing his songs, I remember thinking to myself. "Wow, this guy is really good." I have no clue how Howard knew of the talent coming from Zimbabwe when he had just spent a year in South Africa.

The truth is Epworth needed that; the people needed that distraction. Even the people that weren't a fan of his parties, it was good for them too. It gave them something

to direct their anger at, something tangible. We were all having the worst time of it because apart from the lack of food and the inflation, we also had to live in constant fear because of the intimidations and beatings we took from the government.

The year 2008 was also an election year, and with how bad things had turned out in the country, there was fear that the ruling party would lose this election. So, they started carrying out waves of attacks to intimidate people into voting for them. The attacks were mostly carried by the ZANU PF youth militia. Most of them were a bunch of hungry kids who had nothing to do. They were given some money, sometimes alcohol, which is all they needed. Sometimes they were given nothing at all, just some ZANU PF regalia to wear.

Being given an identity, a purpose, during the time we were living, was enough, plus the power was appealing. It probably made them forget they were in the same boat as everyone else. They would run around the streets singing ZANU PF songs beating everyone who stood in their way. We knew if you heard singing, stay clear of the road, or they would run you over.

That wasn't all, though; they destroyed property that belonged to those who supported the opposition party, Movement for Democratic Change, MDC for short. Houses were torn down and burnt; if they owned vendor stalls, they were torn down too; it was a mess. That was the other reason being part of the youth militia was appealing; whatever they looted from people's houses stayed with them. Now I think it is necessary to say this when I say militia. I don't want you to imagine child soldiers carrying machetes.

No matter how bad things got, it never got that bad. It is like an unspoken rule in Zimbabwe; no matter what, we shall never harm the children. We can beat and kill each other, but the children are untouchable. However, child soldiers or not, these were still scary times. We all lived in fear; these were people we knew who were having their houses torn down; they were our neighbors, our friends. The thought of being suspected of supporting MDC became scary; that was all it took for you to have your house broken into, for you to be beaten up, and to see your livelihood go up in smoke.

People were being forced to go to rallies. No one would dare to skip those because if you did, that would serve as confirmation that you supported the opposition party, and they would come after you. My parents and siblings had to go to these rallies; you had to be seen there. I never went; I was too young; remember, "we shall never harm the children."

People were taught chants and slogans at these rallies. You had to know how to reply to these slogans to show that you were at one with the party. I only remember one line, the leader would shout "*2008,*" and the reply was supposed to *be "Mugabe muOffice!"* "2008, Mugabe in office!" Not knowing the slogans meant you were a traitor, which wasn't good news for you. Later, it stopped being about being suspected of supporting MDC at all. The youth militia started targeting whoever they dammed well pleased. At some point, rumors were flying around that they were targeting people who owned stands, specifically those with durawalls. This was us! They were targeting us! Their rationale was that we thought ourselves untouchable behind our gates, and they needed to rectify that. In truth, they probably were targeting us because they thought they had a better chance of looting bigger scores from these houses. Most of us went to their

rallies, and they knew those who didn't go, so there was no need to go after all the gated houses other than the fact that they simply wanted to.

One night our fears almost became a reality. It was just Judy and me that day, and the youth militia came singing their chants, and they stopped at our gate. They started singing in front of the gate, banging the gate. I slept in Judy's room that night. We were both terrified. We sat in complete darkness without saying a word. We thought if we didn't say anything, they would think no one was home and then go away. We had a dog called Spa at the time. She stayed in front of the gate, barking the whole night. They banged on the gate, singing their chants for a good ten minutes, and then left. Spa became a hero after that. In all truth, I don't think they wanted to get in. If they wanted to, they would have got in; they wouldn't have waited at the gate; they would have jumped the durawall. In all her barking, Spa wouldn't have been able to do a single thing. She was one dog, and they were a mob.

The intimidation continued until the election. Despite all that intimidation, the opposition party still won. However, Morgan Tsvangirai, the opposition leader, won by less than 51% of the vote. Thus, they had to be a re-run. You better believe things got way worse on the days leading to the re-run. They were not going to let that election fall from their grasp again. The intimidation, beatings, and destruction of property were amped up. It worked; the opposition party leader withdrew from the re-run election to save lives, and Mugabe won by a landslide. The whole nation buckled up for another four years of pain and suffering.

Despite all the suffering, we still had some great moments as a family in 2008. That was the year Chipo got married. The bride price was paid in April at my grandma's

house. I didn't go, bus fare issues, plus I was too young anyway I was not going to contribute much there. The paying of the bride price is very different from a wedding; the ceremony is looked at more as a necessity that must be done; thus, it does not have the feel-good factor a wedding has. So, missing a bride price ceremony, especially at my age, was no big deal. No one even officially told me that Chipo was getting married. I remember when Chipo eventually told me. We were walking back from church, and she looked at me and said,

"Tawanda, do you know I'm getting married?"

I knew, no one had told me, but I had heard things. I had to pretend like I didn't know because it seemed I wasn't supposed to know yet.

"Oh, really, that's wonderful!"

My acting left a lot to be desired. Chipo looked at me and said,

"You knew, didn't you?"

"Yep."

She laughed, "Well, now you officially know."

It wasn't deliberate that no one had told me; everyone just forgot to tell the kid, which happened with many things. At least, I had met the husband before. He had come to see my parents a couple of months before the bride price ceremony, as is the custom. When the suitor sees the girl's parents, it is taken as a sign of intention to marry their daughter. I remember thinking, "Wow, he is tall!" Other than that, I didn't have any opinion about him. I was too young to care. He, however, claims I was too protective or

attached to Chipo, and I would not let him have time alone with her. I don't remember that. Her wedding was in August, and it was there that Norman pulled his stunt with the Eucharist. It was a beautiful service and ceremony. Chipo had Tambu and Tebby as her bridesmaids, and Tebby was her maid of honor. I was old enough then to appreciate weddings, but I was too young to really appreciate the value and meaning behind it. For the most part, this was an opportunity for me to hang out with my cousins who had come to the wedding.

The year ended with even better news for us. On December 22nd, 2008, Chipo's firstborn, my nephew Jason was born. So, in a year that had taken a lot from us, it also gave us far more important things than the things we lost. Yes, we were struggling. Yes, things were hard, but we were alive, happy, and had a bright new addition to the family.

Chapter 13

Injury Time Winner!

The beginning of the end of Epworth for me began in 2009. From then on, Epworth and I rarely saw each other, and my disdain for her grew until the very year we left her for good. As a kid, I always knew we lived in one of the worst towns in the country. I knew our living conditions were not normal. I knew we were poor, but it never bothered me. After 2009 that changed, I was growing up and seeing things that I didn't always see as a kid, but most importantly, I had also gone outside of Epworth for a long time and seen what was out there compared to what we had.

After the chaos of 2008, everyone was dreading the upcoming year because it looked like things kept getting worse and worse. However, the year 2009 wasn't as bad as everyone thought it would be, with some things surprisingly changing for the better. First off, the beatings ended, they had won their election, but we weren't even sure if they were going to stop. What mostly helped was the change of government that came that year. At the backend of 2008, ZANU PF made a deal with the MDC party to make an inclusive government. They didn't do it out of the goodness of their hearts. They knew they had pushed the people too far this time, the events of 2008 were not going to be forgotten that easily, and they smelled that this might be the end of them. The MDC could also see that ZANU PF had backed themselves in a tight corner, and they were not going to bail them out by helping them do something that would get them in the good graces of the people again, so they told them they weren't interested in the deal.

However, ZANU PF started painting their own narrative, that they were trying to do the right thing that would benefit the whole country, but MDC was being selfish, and they would instead let people suffer as long as it serves their interests. Funny that they would use that argument when that has been their mantra always. After that, the pressure was now on MDC, so they came to the negotiation table. After months of talks, an inclusive government was formed. Mugabe remained president; Morgan Tsvangirai became Prime Minister, a role made only for him given that Zimbabwe does not have a Prime Minister. The cabinet positions were shared among the parties, and things looked promising.

Economically things were getting better too. Long queues for food slowly started disappearing. Inflation was now gone; we got rid of the Zimbabwean dollar altogether and started using the U.S. dollar. However, the education sector was slower to heal, especially in places like Epworth. Teachers were still not getting paid, and it looked as if strikes were going to continue. That year I was going to seventh grade, which meant I would write national exams that determined if I would go to a good high school. So, that year was too important to leave up in the air and hope that the strike would end and teachers would show up.

This is where Ruwa came in. Ruwa is a small town outside of Harare. My aunt, Aunt Maria, taught at a small school there called St. Vincent, where I attended for seventh grade. This meant I had to relocate because I was to live with my aunt for the whole year. The school was located in an area that mostly had plots and farms, and most of the students there were children of the farmworkers. It wasn't a very lucrative school, nothing fancy at all. One could say it was backward as hell. If you asked me about the uniform of St. Vincent, I could not even tell you. As I said, most students who attended

the school were children of farmworkers. That meant they didn't have that much money, especially considering the place Zimbabwe was at that moment. Thus, no one could afford the standard uniform, so everyone wore what they had, some wore uniforms from their old schools, some regular clothes, it didn't matter, all you had to do was bring yourself to school.

This was also my first time attending a Catholic school. That wasn't a problem for me though; being a Catholic, I was already accustomed to Catholic practices. Aside from its location St. Vincent was also a pretty good school with excellent teachers. However, most importantly, it was still open. The parents and teachers devised a plan amongst themselves. Instead of paying massive amounts of school fees that no one could afford, they were to pay five dollars per month, making it fifteen dollars per school term; that money was then distributed to the teachers. St. Vincent, being a Catholic school, could do this, unlike the government schools that had to abide by government policies. Most private schools were doing this; in some schools, students were paying fees in the form of groceries distributed to the teachers. In the heart of 2008, that was a better move than handing people money because money was useless. Looking back, I'm now even shocked that St. Vincent remained open. I know for sure, those five bucks fees we paid, after being all put together and evenly distributed, it still wasn't that much money. How were they surviving on that little of a salary? What of the school expenses if all the money was going to the teachers?

All that didn't matter to me at the time. I was too young to think of all that, and all that mattered to me was the school was open and functioning. So, in January 2009, at the beginning of the school year, I moved in with my aunt. I barely knew her at the time, the

last time I had been at her house was when I was five, and I could not remember anything about the trip. My aunt had housed a lot of kids at her house. Tebby, Tinashe, and Tambu had all stayed with her when they were in primary school. A cousin of mine had also stayed with her two years before I arrived to attend St. Vincent. It was as if the school became a Nyahasha right of passage. I didn't mind moving away from home; I thought of it as going to boarding school. I was going to go to boarding school for high school the following year anyway, so this was like a preparation for boarding school.

She lived in one of the teacher's cottages at the school. It was very small with only four rooms, the dining room, kitchen, and my aunt's bedroom. The other room was an extension made a couple of years before I arrived. I slept in the dining room because the extra room was full of junk. The only useful thing kept in there was a wheelbarrow; everything else was random metals and empty twenty-liter containers. This is also where she kept her chickens at night. Someone had been stealing her chickens, so she solved the problem by making sure they didn't sleep in the fowl run at night.

As I said earlier, the part of Ruwa I was at was not fancy at all. In fact, it was like Epworth in a lot of ways. Most people there were relatively poor. I remember my first weekend there; there was a wedding at the Catholic Church my aunt attended that was also at the school. It was an elderly couple that had lived together for years, but marriage being a sacrament in the Catholic Church meant they had to have a Catholic wedding if they were to be allowed to do certain things in the church like receiving communion. I was used to a wedding being an all-day affair, with a lot of food. The highlight being the food. I mean, that is how Zimbabweans typically judge if an event went well. Was there enough food, did the food taste good, and was the food delivered on time?

I remember a wedding I went to as a kid, and I went back home and started giving my brother the report. “The wedding sucked!” I vented to him. He asked me why I thought it sucked, and all my complaints were about the food.

He laughed and said, “So because the food sucked, the whole thing was a bust.”

Yes, indeed it was. However, the Ruwa wedding was worse. They had mass at three in the afternoon, and after the mass, it was announced that there was tea for anyone who wanted tea. It wasn’t tea with cookies or tea with any snack; it was just tea!

There were many incidents like that that made the area a bit Epworth-like. However, with all that being said, it still was not Epworth. They had one thing that was always our Achilles heel: electricity. That automatically made them better than us. It was then that I started to feel the shame of saying I was from Epworth. I saw how other students looked at me every time I said that - a look of pity and disbelief. The truth is my family was probably more well off than most of them, but it didn’t matter; I was from Epworth. That place followed you everywhere like an unwanted stench making people dismiss you immediately.

I loved attending mass in Ruwa more than I did in Epworth. It was a small community church which made the congregation closer. Being at church felt like being at home. I was an altar boy in Epworth, and I continued my duties in Ruwa. There were two Spanish priests there, Father Joaquin and Father Fermin. They were later joined by Father Peter Paul, who was from India. They all embraced Zimbabwean culture, particularly the Shona culture in all its magnitudes. Zimbabwe is made up of two main tribes, the Shona and the Ndebele. The Shona, which is also my tribe, are the majority. The Ndebele settled

in Zimbabwe from South Africa when their chief was fleeing from Tshaka Zulu in the 19th century. Most of them reside in Bulawayo, which is close to the South African border. Many of our cultures overlap, but we speak different languages, Shona and Ndebele, respectively. With Ruwa being in an area inhabitant by the Shona, the priests were only exposed to Shona culture.

They were all fluent in Shona and could read and write without trouble. That was expected though their parishioners were Shona anyway, so it would have been tragic if they could not communicate with them. When Father Peter Paul came, he surprised me with how quickly he mastered the language. When he came to the church, he could not speak a single word of Shona. However, in a month, he could read the Shona Bible, and no sooner after that, he was preaching sermons in Shona. They also enjoyed Zimbabwean food. When we had church events, you would see them busy with their *sadza and mazondo*, using their hands like everyone else. *Mazondo,* which are cow heals, are loved by Zimbabweans. They are quite expensive because of how much they are loved.

The priests also gave themselves Shona totems, and they took their totems seriously. They knew the praise poems that came with each totem they chose; I only know one line from mine!

When Father Peter Paul could speak Shona, both Father Joaquin and Father Fermin asked the congregation to stay for a little while after mass. They wanted the people to auction their totems and pick one for Father Peter Paul. It was a funny experience, with people giving short presentations of why their totem should be the one. I don't remember which one he picked.

I enjoyed my schooling in Ruwa. I was popular with the teachers being a nephew of one of the teachers. It also helped that I did well in my classes which added to my esteem. I also quickly made friends in and outside the classroom. I was popular with everyone in the class, and part of it was because I moved spots a lot. Our classroom was set up in groups based on how well you did in class. Group One was for the top students, and they sat close to the teacher's desk. Group Two was the second tier, followed by Group Three then Group Four. Most primary school classrooms are set up like that, a system I thoroughly despise. This is because students from Group Four are often neglected, and interaction between students from Group One and Group Four is discouraged. If a student from Group One starts slipping, the teacher checks if they have been playing with Group Four students lately. It also shames the students because the narrative is if you are in Group Four, you are not smart enough.

If you are not doing well, you can be demoted to a lower tier which also adds to the shaming aspect of it all. It also went both ways though, with students who did well moving up, mainly between Group One and Two, with the other two groups mostly staying the same. The surprising thing is all the classes I was in when I was in Epworth didn't have that seating arrangement. We were evenly spread out throughout the classroom. I was a Group One student, but I moved around the whole class because of my eyesight.

We had two blackboards in our class, and if the teacher was using the right side of the front board, I remained in my seat because that was in front of where I sat. When the teacher wrote on the left side of the front board, I moved to Group Three because it was in front of where they sat. Likewise, if the teacher used the left side of the backboard, I

would move to Group Two; if he were using the right side of the blackboard, I would move to Group Four. So, most days, I would shift seats at least twice. This meant I had friends with all the people in all the groups since I sat with everyone.

Outside the classroom, I played with other teachers' kids who also stayed at the school. There was Blessing and Chipo, the nephew and niece of the headmaster. Like me, they didn't stay in Ruwa but had moved there for school. Blessing was my best friend when I was in Ruwa. He was two grades below me and was taught by my aunt. He was a funny guy, and he always had a witty comment at his disposal. Even my seventh-grade classmates liked him, which was rare considering how it was considered a crime for a fifth grader to try to hang out with the big boys. His *sister* Chipo was in seventh grade. She was a bit of a tomboy, and most of the time, she played football with us. Then there was Munashe, or as we called him, Munso, the son of the teacher that neighbored my aunt. My aunt didn't like them very much; she was convinced they were responsible for stealing her chickens. So she would subtly suggest to me that I shouldn't play with Munso.

"The boy next door, him and his brother can be bad influences. Everyone knows they steal other people's chickens and garden produce, but their father does nothing to stop them. I think he even encourages them."

Her warning was unheeded. Munso had two legs to play football with; that's all I cared about. In truth, though, it was Munso who shouldn't have been playing with us, given that he was older. He was already a Form Two student at St. Vincent secondary school, which adjoined the primary school. When I was in Form Two, I wouldn't be caught dead playing with primary school kids, but Munso did some things that his

primary school friends thought were childish, like playing with toy wire cars and making himself a cardboard WWE belt that he wore around. Toy wire cars are popular among kids in Zimbabwe. They are entirely made of wire with exquisite detail. The wheels are made from bottle lids, especially battel lids for a popular alcohol beverage called *Chibuku.* These are preferred because they are a perfect size. The car is controlled by a long wire attached to the front of the car, which acts as the steering wheel. Most kids make them themselves. I never knew how to make them; my friends would always make them for me.

Then there was Alfred, whose parents taught at St. Vincent Secondary, so they lived in the secondary school compartments. Alfred was sort of pushed on me by my aunt. He was my classmate, good in school, so my aunt thought he would be a good influence. He was a great guy though, so it was no problem, although he did betray me once.

Our teacher had this statement that he gave if you responded to a class question with an off-the-wall answer. *"Wakufunga neBase,"* meaning you are thinking with your ass. I gave a wrong answer in a math lesson in one class; he paused for a second, looked at me, and I knew it was coming.

"You are thinking with your base my man."

The whole class laughed as they often did whenever someone was told that. A classmate of mine, Courage, did not come to class that day. He later went to Alfred's house to ask what he had missed in school. I also went to Alfred's house because we had

planned to meet up after school. When Courage saw me, he greeted me with a grin on his face

"So, how was class today?"

"It was good."

"Anything happen today?"

I knew what he was referring to, but I played stupid, "No it was ordinary, nothing happened."

"You sure?"

Then Alfred pitched in, "He's just asking that because you were told you were thinking with your base today."

I didn't mind Courage laughing, but I was annoyed with Alfred. Why the heck would he tell him that? My most embarrassing moment of the day. I felt betrayed.

There was also Natasha, the daughter of my aunt's friend Mrs. Chimombe. Mr. Chimombe taught at the secondary school, so that's where she lived. I had a horrific incident with Natasha because of my brother and cousin Leonard. I had come back to Epworth for the holiday, and I was mostly hanging out with the two of them. Tinashe and Leonard took my phone and went through my contacts list. Then they saw the name Natasha, and they started teasing me

"Who's this Natasha?'

"No one, just a friend."

"Just a friend, huh. I think we should call Natasha and find out for ourselves."

"No, no, no!" Too late, my brother had dialed her number on his phone. I couldn't hear the other side of the conversation; I could only hear what Tinashe said.

"Hello"

……

"Is this Natasha?"

…….

"Perfect, my name is Tinashe. Tawanda's brother."

…….

"Really, he mentioned me; yeah, he talks a lot about you too. Seriously all we hear is Natasha this, Natasha that." I was now pleading with him to stop; he got more excited.

……

"Natasha, I have to ask you this, are you my brother's girlfriend?"

……

"You are not; why would he tell us you are then. That's what he told us here."

……

"Okay, I will talk to him, bye."

He looked at me. "You are in trouble bro."

Leonard was laughing; I didn't know what to do. I started asking for advice from them, the two that had ruined me!

"Should I call her and explain you were joking."

Leonard replied, "If she believes you, Tinashe was very convincing."

I never called; I tried once but hung up before it rang. Luckily, I still had a couple of weeks left on my holiday, so I didn't have to return to Ruwa immediately. When I eventually went back, I expected her to ask me about it, but she never did. So, I figured, well, if she didn't bring it up, who am I to bring it up? Years later, after I had moved to the United States, I was on the phone with Leonard, and I brought up the story.

"I can't believe you two embarrassed me like that."

"You do know we never actually called right. Tinashe was talking to himself the whole time."

"What! What if I had called and apologized for something she had no idea about?"

"That would have been even funnier. We meant to tell you after some days that we faked the whole thing, then we forgot."

Such jerks, but betrayals and girlfriend incidents aside, I loved hanging out with all of them. Alfred and I were both Man U fans, and whenever there was a game, we would dissect it, talk about the goals, and celebrate the wins together. We also shared our losses together, like the 2009 champions league final we lost to Barcelona. I was hurt; Samuel Eto'o scored the first goal, then Messi scored the second goal, a header. It took

me a while to forgive him for that; he had no right scoring that header especially considering how short he is; that header gave me nightmares. I couldn't hate him forever though. He's that good of a player that you can't help but admire him. It took me longer to forgive Cristiano Ronaldo. He left Man U for Real Madrid the following season, and I felt betrayed; I thought he was abandoning us because we lost a final. But, like Messi, he's too good of a player to stay mad at him forever. Anyways he's back at Man U now, so all is forgiven.

We played a lot of football ourselves. Munso, Blessing, and I usually played football together. We would play a game in which each of us had a mini goal of our own. The objective was to make sure no one scored in your goal because if five goals were scored on your goal, you were out of the game and had to wait until only one person was standing. It was a game with a lot of dribbling because the obvious tactic was for you to score on someone's goal before they had the chance to score on yours. Sometimes we would have primary vs. secondary matches. The kids who stayed at the primary school would play those who stayed at the secondary school. Those were planned way in advance, and a week leading to the match, that was all we could talk about. The girls also loved these matches because they could play with us. The primary school team only had Munso, Blessing, and me, so we called on the girls to bolster our squad. One weekend when the match was scheduled, my aunt told me I had to study since it was too close to my Grade Seven exams. I was devastated; I was letting my team down. I looked at the book for about ten minutes then I sneaked out, I couldn't concentrate. My aunt saw me leave though, and when I was back, I was given a lecture.

"This is important; missing one match is not going to kill you. Let me ask you this, was Alfred there with you?"

"No," I replied

"Was Chipo with you?"

"No"

"That's because they are preparing for their exams. You were there with Blessing, who is in fifth grade; he doesn't have exams. Munashe is in Form Two. He also doesn't have exams. You were the only seventh grader there; that should tell you something."

I apologized, although I didn't mean it. I was still happy I had gone. Sometimes the primary and the secondary teams would combine and then play against kids from nearby farms. This was the ultimate game, bragging rights were at stake here. One time the game was scheduled on a day which again coincided with something I had to do. We were practicing for a Nativity Play at church. It was the December holiday; Blessing and Chipo had already left to go home. I was leaving the following week, which made the whole thing pointless; not only was I not going to be there, but I was leaving Ruwa for good because I had already taken my national exams. This Christmas drama was getting in the way of a good football match. Munso and I were the only Catholics on the team, so the game wouldn't be canceled on our account. I wanted to speed things up so bad. "Yeah yeah, the angel visited Mary, cool. The angel and Joseph, yeah yeah, good stuff. The Wiseman, Herod is going crazy. They bring gifts to baby Jesus. Yay, play over people. Now let's go play some football!"

As soon as we were released, Munso and I rushed to the door. We got there, and there were ten minutes left in the game. It sucked, but it was better than nothing. We were quickly put on the field; there was no need for a substitution. The opposition team had brought the same number of players we had, including Munso and me, so when we weren't there, two of their teammates had to be on the bench. They added two of their teammates on the bench when we got there, and we were even. The game was tied 1-1. If it remained like that, we were going to go to penalties. In soccer, draws are an acceptable result, but not in this game; there had to be a winner. Someone had to earn those bragging rights. We had a corner kick, the ball landed at my feet, and I hit it before anyone could react. GOOOAAAAL! We were ecstatic! Teammates rushed on to me; I had won the game for us, me, my goal. What a feeling, and to think that I almost missed all of that because of a Christmas play. Seeing how much that goal meant to us, that win, even Jesus himself would have given me leave to go.

Chapter 14

Radicalized Youth

If there was a time I was genuinely excited for the new year, it was at the backend of 2009. I was starting Form One in 2010, and I was giddy. I was finally going to boarding school. All my siblings had gone to boarding school, and I was always fascinated by their stories about their time in school. Now it was my turn; I was to have my own stories. I wouldn't be quiet when my siblings started reminiscing about their boarding school days. I would finally have something to contribute. It also felt like I was continuing the family tradition; I wouldn't have wanted to be the only sibling who didn't go to boarding school. Also, my other options did not look good; going to a local Epworth secondary school was risky. My parents and siblings did not want that; they were afraid that if I spent most of my teenage years in Epworth, it would be hard to take the Epworth out of me. I needed an outside experience to know that what we had wasn't all they was; there was a better world out there.

I almost didn't get in if it wasn't for my mom working her magic. There are two main options to apply for boarding school in Zimbabwe. One is the entrance test route, which is the most popular option. Schools set up entrance tests to determine who gets in or doesn't. It's highly competitive, and many students turn up to these tests, so you have to be in the top percentile to get in. The other option is the grade seven results option. This is for students who don't write the entrance test but wait to use their grade seven results to apply.

My teacher showed me the ad for an entrance test for St Francis of Assisi, the school I eventually went to for Form One. He knew from my aunt that my parents wanted me to go to boarding school, so he thought this would be a good opportunity. There was another entrance test for Kutama College, another Catholic mission school the week after the St Francis one, and the plan was for me to go to both so that I could have options.

However, the fee for entering these entrance tests was relatively high, and after I wrote the St Francis of Assisi test, my parents couldn't afford to take me to the other one. So, after my first test, they asked me if I was confident that I had passed.

"If you are not sure, tell us that's okay, and we can figure out where to find money to send you to the other test."

"No, I'm sure I passed."

"Are you sure? You don't need to tell us that you passed because you think it will make us happy. Are you absolutely sure?"

"Yes, I'm sure."

Then it was settled; I was only going to write one entrance test. It was risky, but my parents trusted that if I said I had it, I had it. I wasn't wrong, I got in, but the problem is I got the acceptance letter way late, and the deadline to accept my admission and pay my school fees had long passed. I was on the verge of tears, I had done it, but I wasn't going to get in because of a mail issue. My mom started calling the headmaster to explain the situation. He was having none of it, the deadline had passed, and that was it. Another headmaster that didn't know my mom. She kept calling and calling until he got tired of her and said,

"if you can have the school fees paid in a week, then it's fine; he can come in."

The school tuition was about $400, a lot of money for us and to come up with it in a week was near impossible. The headmaster knew that too; he said that to shoo her away. He should have known better, impossible is nothing to my mom. My mom replied,

"I know you know it's impossible to get that money in a week, and you are saying that to stop me from calling you, but you will have your money by next week."

Next week, he had his money, and the headmaster knew who she was from then on. It then became a scramble to get me all the stuff that I needed, uniforms, books, tuck (the grocery we went to school with), and so forth. Finally, I was good to go; my mom and I left early in the morning. We had to commute all the way, to Chivhu, where the school was, which was about three hours from Harare. We took a bus to town first, then a second bus to where we would get the transport to Chivhu, a place called Mbudzi. While we were there, a kombi passed us, and then as if they had recognized us, they reversed. They had noticed my uniform and the guy sitting by the window shouted at us,

"Are you going to Assisi?"

"Yes, we replied."

"Come on in, that's where we are going."

They had a Form One student going to Assisi as well. His dad was the one driving, and his brother was the one who called after us. That is how Tinashe Mambanje became my first friend ; it was better going there someone already. I wouldn’t say he became y closest friend or anything like that, but we were cool with each other. We even started writing together in Form Three.

I think it might be good to give you a sense of the type of boarding schools in Zimbabwe. Private schools are the fanciest schools where the upper class sends their children. Then there are the government schools which I suppose is our version of public school. These are pretty good as well, not as fancy as the private schools, but they are the second best for sure. They are mostly in cities and associate with the private schools in some competitions. Then there are the mission schools which can be broken into two subgroups. The fancier mission schools are on par with the government schools, and some of them can even be comparable to the private school. They, like the private and government schools, are in cities. Then there is the outskirts type of mission school. They are mostly located in rural areas. They have strict rules, don't have many extracurricular activities, and are primarily focused on academics, and the food they serve sucks. St Francis of Assisi was in that tier.

Evaluating my time at Assisi is a complicated affair. I didn't hate it when I was there; in fact, I liked being there. However, when looking back, I don't remember my time there with such fondness. It was when I switched schools for my A'Levels that I started noticing how much Assisi had chewed down my confidence. I had gone there as one of the best students at my primary school, but when I got to Assisi, I was an average student, even below average at times. I struggled in math and anything that had to do with numbers, and most times, I was made to feel stupid because of it. I remember when we were doing geometry in Form One, and my teacher held out my book for everyone to see how bad I had done in the previous exercise. He got embarrassed though because the whole class came to my aid and told him to stop what he was doing. He was disappointed. He wanted the class to laugh.

In all fairness, not all my teachers were like that; I loved all my history teachers from Form One to Form Four, same with my religious studies teachers. I had the same English teacher from Form one to Form Four, and she was a tough lady. Her first words when she walked into my class for the very first time were,

"If you don't do what I like, I will hit you. It's as simple as that."

She wasn't lying. Whenever the bell rang to signal the beginning of English, we would put everything away and only have English textbooks on our desks. We had found out the hard way that she didn't like us doing homework for other classes in her class period, even if she wasn't in the class yet. Even though she was a tough lady, I loved her as well. Plus, corporal punishment was very common so being hit by your teacher wasn't a big deal. My economics teacher from Form Three to Form Four was also amazing. She made me interested in current affairs and understanding Zimbabwe's economic policies. It also helped that these were the subjects that I thoroughly enjoyed. There were some subjects I didn't necessarily hate, but I didn't care for them at all. Subjects like geography, integrated science, agriculture all fall into that category. Although I did hate agriculture sometimes, especially when we were doing a practical. That meant working in the gardens, and I hated every minute of it. I did like the teachers though; they were all reasonable people. I unfairly disliked some teachers because I didn't like their subject; by default, it extended to them, like my accounting teacher from Form Three to Four.

I say all this to clarify that my drop in confidence was not because I had horrible teachers. That incident with my math teacher in Form One was the only time a teacher came at me directly. My academic strength had been a source of pride throughout my primary school years, and now that I was struggling, I felt like I had nothing. It didn't help that the school I went to had the "you are either good in academics, or you are nothing culture," which, to be fair, is the mentality for most schools, even primary school. I just didn't notice it then because I was doing well.

My lack of confidence trickled down to my own identity as well. For the first time, I became too self-aware that I had albinism. I grew up with teasing about my albinism throughout my childhood. It felt like everyone was trying to identify me as Tawanda the albino as if I was from a subspecies with the need for that distinction. It did make me angry, but it never led me to see myself as anything other than Tawanda. I wasn't Tawanda the albino as people pointed out over and over; I was just Tawanda. This changed when I got to Assisi, and it's not because I was teased there a lot; quite on the contrary, no one ever said anything disrespectful or condescending to me. I guess that's what happens at times; when you are low in confidence, you just start to question everything about yourself, even the things that never bothered you before. When I say I became too self-aware of my albinism, I don't mean it positively, like accepting that's the way I am and that my albinism is a part of me type of thing. It was the opposite; I felt as if people were always looking at me and judging me. I was afraid to take off my hat in public for four years because I thought everyone would laugh at my hair. When I switched schools for my A'Levels, I told myself that I was going to get rid of the hat. I was going to make it normal to walk around without my hat on; I was going to make it

normal for people to see my hair. I did wear a hat one day to class, and everyone kept asking me,

"What's with the hat today?"

They had no idea how much that question meant to me. I had done it; I had gotten rid of my insecurities and now seeing me wearing a hat was the weird thing.

My living situation also didn't help. When I was at Marlborough High, the school I went to for my A'Levels, we had moved from Epworth. For the first time, I could have friends visit me at home; it was refreshing. However, out of the four years I was at Assisi, three of them we were still in Epworth, and there was no way I was going to tell people that. People start looking at you differently the moment you mention you are from Epworth. You will be the subject of their scorn and pity, and I wanted neither, so I lied, I told them I was from Ruwa. It was a lie I thought I could maintain. After all, I had lived in Ruwa for a year. It was not, turns out there was also another guy from Ruwa, and he was excited to meet another person from his town. When the term ended, he wanted us to commute together back home. Whenever the term ended, the school busses would drop us off in Harare, and from there, everyone would figure out their own transportation back home. That is when he would want to commute with me; I always dodged him. Next term, he would then ask,

"Man, what happened to you? I thought we were going to commute together. I was looking for you."

I would reply, "I was looking for you too man." All lies; I was avoiding him at all costs.

Just my luck that in Form Two, we started sharing a dorm. At Assisi, a dorm was not the building we lived in, we called that a hostel. Dorms meant the rooms we slept in. Most of these rooms were big and were shared by ten people. So, we were literally living in the same room; it was going to be hard to dodge him now. I was resourceful though; I would purposefully get on a different bus than the one he chose. The busses arrived pretty much the same time though, but it was easy to slip off during the commotion without being seen. One time we were put in the same bus and there was no escaping him. We got to the terminal for Ruwa and Epworth busses. How in the world was I going to explain getting into an Epworth kombi? I made up a lie; I told him my mom had told me that she was in town and wanted me to wait for her. I waited until his kombi had left, then I went into an Epworth kombi.

St Francis of Assisi, like most mission schools, radicalized me a bit. In mission schools, all the teachers are strict and quite mean, and given that we had corporal punishment, it made it even worse. Many teachers prided themselves in how hard they hit and how much students feared them. This radicalized us because sometimes you had to stand up for yourself because these teachers would walk over you if you didn't. There were teachers who didn't hit anyone but were quite respected and liked. My religious studies teacher and Shona teacher were good examples. I don't remember them ever hitting anyone, but everyone pretty much respected them. It was the teachers that were all talk but had no bite that we would tell to piss off. The boarding master, God bless his soul, was one of them. He was scary when we were in Form One and Two, but after that, we started to realize that he was just talk. When I was in Form Four, he picked a fight with me. It was my dorm's duty to clean the toilets. If you recall, I fed everyone the story

that I had a medical condition that excused me from cleaning toilets since Form One. So, when he came into my dorm, he saw me chilling on my bed.

"Nyahasha, why are you not with the others cleaning toilets?"

"I don't clean toilets, never have since Form One," I replied.

"Why is that?"

"I was excused from it."

"That's not a legitimate reason. You need to go and clean the toilets with everyone else right now."

"Unless the headmaster and deputy headmaster start reporting to you, you will never see me clean a single toilet." He couldn't think of a reply; he walked away.

I'm not a confrontational person at all, but Assisi forced you to be at times. I once refused to be hit because I felt like it wasn't justified, and honestly, it wasn't. Some important guest was coming to the school, and we were cleaning our dorms. We were clearing some huge rocks around our dorm, putting them into huge metal trash cans, and dumping them somewhere else. We were taking turns carrying the bins. I had just made my trip and was sitting waiting for my turn again. Then this dude sees me sitting and says,

"Nyahasha! You are just going to sit there while everyone is working?"

I respectfully tried to explain what was going on, "No sir, I'm waiting for my turn to go again. I just took the trip with the bin."

He was having none of it, "Get up and do some work!"

“But sir-“

“Are you talking back to me? Hey you, give him the bin. Let him carry it.”

I was irritated; what the hell was wrong with this guy? “No, sir, I told you I just came back from a trip.”

“Are you challenging me?”

“No, it’s not about that; I just think you are not being fair.”

Everyone around us was starting to get excited. Teacher student confrontations were always fun, and he thought I was doing it to please other students. So he charged at me and tried to hit me with the broomstick he was holding. I caught it before it could hit me.

“Nyahasha, let it go!”

“No!”

If he thought I was disrespecting him by answering back, he wasn’t doing himself any favors now. I was taller than him, so the sigh of me holding his weapon while he tried to get it from me was quite comical. He realized there was no way I was letting go, and the longer this went on, the more he was embarrassing himself. He stopped struggling and said,

“I’m going to see you in my office later; then we will see if you this clever then.”

He never called me to his office. It wouldn’t have done anything either I probably wouldn’t have gone, and if I had, I would still tell him no. Unless he had my hands chained, there was no way I was going to let him hit me.

I also had an incident with the headmaster. Now our headmaster was a scary guy, and he was not the one to play with. He had this habit of going from a zero to a hundred in a few seconds. One time we were coming from weekday mass. We were going to the dining hall, and we had to pass through the administration building to go to the dining hall. He was standing beside his office door, smiling and greeting everyone, asking us how mass was. Then this guy, out of a moment of sheer stupidity, decides to take off his tie right in front of him. That was a dress code violation, and what in the world was he thinking, taking his tie off passing in front of him. Suddenly, his tone changed,

"You think you can take off your tie in front of me?"

Then SMACK! He slapped him in the cheek, and we all heard it. The mood turned somber right then, and we went into the dining hall in utter silence. One time he hit a guy with his belt because the person had coughed! It was the first week of the third term of Form One, and as all first weeks were, people were jovial, and not much studying was being done. We had mandatory study hours from six to eight, and during the first week, we merely used the time to catch up on what we did during the holidays. The girls would study in the classrooms while the guys studied in the dining halls. So, Form Ones to Threes studied together because we shared a dining hall, Form Fours by themselves because they had their own dining hall, Lower and Upper Six students studied together because they too shared a dining hall. When the bell rang that announced the end of study time, it was met with cheers, and we were all rushing out to get out of the door. The cheers were a mistake, we didn't know the headmaster was in his office, and his office was right next to the dining room. He came in and shouted,

"Everyone sit down!"

Immediately we knew we had messed up. He started shouting about us making noise during study time, and while he was giving his lecture, someone coughed. He paused, then he went on speaking; a couple of minutes, someone coughed again. He thought whoever did that was messing with him, and maybe they were who knows,

"Who did that?"

Silence….

He went on speaking; then someone just had to cough the third time. If he was doing it trying to be funny, he should have known better. If he genuinely needed to cough, that was the most wrong of times to do so; in that instance, it was better to suffocate. Unlike the first two, he was spotted.

"You think you are funny? Come here."

SMACK! He fell to the floor, and the next thing we know, he's getting hit by a belt. There was total silence for the next hour; no one sneezed or coughed.

I was one of the few students who weren't scared of him, not because I was tough or anything like that but because he liked me. Whenever people saw him, everyone would disappear, but I was one of the few who would walk up to him and greet him. Later, he started fist bumping me, which became our thing, and most students would look at me thinking, "Did he just fist bump the headmaster." We would joke too, but I was smart enough to know my limits; I would keep my distance when he was in one of his moods.

However, one time our friendship, like all friendships, hit an obstacle. I was in Form Four, and we were doing general work around the dorms. He talked to us afterward,

and I don't know what I said to him, but he didn't like it, or I think he didn't like it. It was confusing because he laughed, and as I said, when he was angry, you would know, so I was lost when he decided to punish me for what I had said.

"You think you are funny, Nyahasha?"

"No, I didn't mean it like that," I replied, laughing.

"Why are you laughing? You think this is a joke?"

"No sir, not at all." I was still not taking him seriously.

"Enough of this; he keeps thinking this is funny. Nyahasha, roll on the grass now!" I still thought he was joking, so I laughed.

"Nyahasha! I'm not messing around. Roll on the ground now!"

"I can't do that, sir."

We were cool and all, but there was no way I was going to roll on the ground just because he said so; that is the most degrading thing ever. He told all the Form Fours,

"Okay, since he likes to do things his own way, let's leave him there and meet somewhere else."

He thought he would scare me by doing that, but I just sat there until they finished the meeting then I went back into the dorm. This happened on a Saturday and Monday morning; I went to his office to apologize. This was one guy; I didn't want to have a

problem with. I was stubborn, not stupid; he could make my life hell if I made him my enemy. I went to his office, and it seemed we were friends again,

"Nyahasha! Oh, punishment, umm, pick up some litter around my office." There was no litter around his office; I walked out and went straight to class.

A couple of weeks later, on consultation day, I thought he was going to tell my mom. She would have understood if I told her my side of the story, but the problem was that he would have the opportunity to tell his side first, which wouldn't bode well for me. An angry Mrs. Nyahasha is a force to be reckoned with, and I didn't want that. While they were talking, my mom jokingly said

"I hope he hasn't been giving you any problems."

I was thinking, "Oh God, here it comes."

To my surprise, he replied, "Oh no, me and him we are always good," then he winked at me! True friends do not snitch.

Chapter 15

August 12th, 2010

I rarely talk about my father to the extent that many people assume that I was raised by a single mom. One time I mentioned my father to a friend of mine in undergrad. I had been accepted to the University of Alabama at Birmingham for my master's program by then. I mentioned that my father had lived in Alabama too. She responded by saying,

"I have always assumed you and your father were estranged; you don't talk about him at all."

I don't deliberately choose not to talk about my father. It always seems like I talk more about my mother and siblings because I haven't been able to make any new memories with my father. This is because he passed away on August 12th, 2010, when I was thirteen. I don't often talk about his passing either. Many acquaintances of mine do not know my dad passed away. A classmate of mine in high school always talked to me about my dad because she assumed he was alive. She would say things like, "Your mom and dad must be proud." I never corrected her. I do the same thing with many other people who make that assumption. I used to, but then every time I mentioned that my father had passed, they would feel guilty for assuming he was alive, then they would feel guilty of talking about their own fathers because somehow, they thought I would be triggered.

The day he passed was like any other normal day. He wasn't sick. He didn't have a headache or anything like that. He was preparing to go to work. We had a funny exchange before he passed. My mom had asked me to accompany her somewhere. I wasn't exactly thrilled because it meant I had to wake up early. I was on holiday, and I meant to sleep in as much as I could after having to wake up at 4:30 am every day for three months. I woke up as late as possible, which left me with no time to take a shower. So, I went into the bathroom to wash my face and hair; that would have to be enough. My dad walked in the bathroom, and he laughed,

"You still think you are in boarding school, huh?" I had told him people rarely took full showers at school. We were woken up at 4:30 am and expected to take cold showers. No way in hell!

"Well, I don't have time to take a full shower."

"Uh huh," he laughed again.

I walked out of the bathroom while he walked in to take a shower. He never walked out. He collapsed in the bathtub, heart attack. My mom was the first to see him. She wanted to tell him she was leaving, when she heard no response, she thought something was wrong. She opened the door, and the next thing I heard was her shouting my cousin's name, Leonard! He rushed to where she was.

"Help me with him. He has collapsed."

My sister Tambu came out of her room too. She started crying immediately. My mom was trying to calm her down,

“Tambu, we don’t know what happened yet.”

I was in the kitchen when all that was happening. I didn’t move from my seat the whole time. I never even entertained death as a possibility. He had fallen and was out of it for a bit. He was going to be okay. My sister called the ambulance. While waiting, I went into my mom’s bedroom, where Leonard and my mom had carried him to. He was lying on the bed with a blanket over him. He looked like he was sleeping.

“The ambulance is coming. He is going to be fine,” I thought to myself. Once again, death didn’t even enter my mind. People didn’t just die out of nowhere, not like this. He was preparing to go to work a couple of minutes ago.

The ambulance took longer than usual to come. I suspect being in Epworth had something to do with that. By the time they came, a couple of people were at our house. Mrs. Murehwa was with my mom, trying her best to comfort her. A nephew of ours named Mukusha, who lived across our house, was there too. My cousin Wesley’s wife Janet was also there. She lived in a suburb called Greendale. I didn’t understand why my mom needed comforting from Mrs. Murehwa or why all the people were there.

When the ambulance came, the EMTs confirmed what the adults already knew at this point. He was gone. When they said he was gone, there was a loud cry coming from our dining room, where everyone was sitting. Some more people had arrived, I hadn’t seen who. I had gone to the back of the house to sit there. All these people flocking in were annoying me. Why were they all coming and making a fuss? My dad was okay. He was going to be okay. I was sitting with Leonard when I heard the cry,

“Why are they crying? Do they know he just collapsed? He’s going to be fine.”

Leonard didn't have the heart to tell me he was gone, so he agreed with me. I was the only one who thought my father was still alive.

My brother came back from work; Leonard had called him earlier. My brother was trying to understand what had happened, but Leonard was not coherent. He asked to speak to somebody else, Leonard gave the phone to Mukusha.

"Mukusha, what's going on?"

"It's not looking good uncle."

"Mukusha tell me straight on, has my father passed?"

"Yes, he has passed."

Tinashe dropped everything and came home. I was outside when these conversations were happening. To me, my father was still alive. I found out he was gone in the worst possible way.

Tambu came over to where I was sitting. I had been sitting there for hours now. My face was buried in my knees, half asleep. As soon as Tambu sat opposite where I was sitting, she received a phone call. I don't know who called her. I only remember hearing her telling the other person on the call,

"My dad has passed away."

She thought I already knew. Her words woke me from my half sleep. A floodgate of emotions just opened up. I was sad, angry, confused. I was everything. I started crying. I ran into the house and headed straight for my brother's room. I figured people weren't going to be in there. I wanted to be alone. Tambu realized I didn't know; she followed

me, calling my name. I couldn't hear anything. I pushed forward to my brother's room. I wanted to be alone. My brother was in there when I got in. I threw myself on the bed and buried my face in the pillow and continued crying. Tambu tried to come over where I was, and Tinashe stopped her.

"Let him cry," he said. He stayed in the room the whole time. I didn't notice him. I continued to cry. I eventually cried myself to sleep. I slept for about two hours. When I woke up, someone had put a blanket on top of me while I slept, probably Tinashe. A lot of people were at the house now. Everyone was mourning. He was really gone.

Running water was still a problem. Leonard took me with him as he went to fetch some more water. I needed to get out of the house anyway. He did his best to comfort me without comforting me. I didn't want to talk about dad, so we didn't. I don't remember what we talked about to and from. None of us do. For a second, talking about trivial matters with Leonard made it feel like he wasn't gone. He was still here. He wasn't. When we got back home, I was reminded that he was truly indeed gone.

I didn't cry anymore after that. I was hurting, but I couldn't cry anymore. It seemed like I had cried all the tears out. I talked to Tebby on the phone that night; she was flying in from Namibia the next day. She was asking if I was okay. I told her I was. I wasn't. None of us were.

He was going to be buried at our burial plot at our rural home. Before we left, we did body viewing. I was in front of Tebby, which made me feel better. I needed at least one family member with me for strength. I paused as I looked at him. He was wearing his church attire, the red and purple scarf of the Sacred Heart of Jesus Guild. He looked like

he was sleeping, like I could wake him up, and all of this would be over. Tebby couldn't bear to look at him. She started crying. I remember her saying,

"He looks so peaceful, alive, like I can just wake him up." We couldn't. No matter how much we wanted to, we couldn't.

The next time I cried was when I went back to school. My mom had told the headmaster that my dad had passed. He announced it in the assembly,

"We offer our condolences to Tawanda Nyahasha, who lost his father during the holidays."

I wished he hadn't done that. Everyone looked at me, shocked. I hadn't told anyone. I didn't intend to. When the assembly was over, everyone walked towards me to comfort me.

"I'm sorry for your loss man."

"Are you okay?"

"Hey, sorry to hear about your dad."

"I didn't know your dad passed; sorry to hear that."

They meant well, but it was too much. I didn't want to hear any more kind messages. It was stirring up some emotions in me. It placed me right back at the funeral. So, I ran, ran to my classroom. That probably concerned people more, but I didn't care. I wanted to be out of there. I buried my face in my desk and cried. My classmates stood around me, letting me know they were here for me. My Shona teacher, who was also my assigned

class teacher Ms. Nzenza came to see me after a couple of days. She asked me to walk outside with her without drawing any attention.

“Tawanda, can you help me carry the exercise books to my office?”

When we got outside, she asked, “Are you okay.”

“Yes, I’m okay.”

She stayed with me for about fifteen minutes. I was wearing a cardigan jersey, and I don’t know how but I had caught some grass on it.

“What happened there?” She asked, pointing at my jersey.

“I don’t know; I have been meaning to take it off and pluck it out.”

“Well, we can do it right now.”

That’s what we did. She sat down with me, helping me pluck the grass off my jersey. I understood that this was not about the jersey. She was letting me know that she was there, that she would be there whenever I needed her.

It’s been eleven years since my dad passed. We still talk about him. We laugh at the happy memories we had with him. We have all grieved him, now whenever we think of him, whenever I think of him, I don’t think about the funeral, I don’t think back to the time I lost him. I think of the time we stayed together, just the two of us, I think of the time he read to me, I think of the time he laughed at my jokes, I think of the time he was so happy with my sixth grade report card that he was at a loss for words. He kept saying, “Well done, well done.” He would close the report card, open it again, then repeat the words, “Well done, well done.” That is the father I choose to remember.

My family says I'm becoming more and more like him as I grow older. They say I talk like him. I walk like him. I even want to be in the same profession he was. I may not always talk about him, but I think about him. Every milestone I take, I think of him; what would he say? I thought of him when I passed my O'Levels, when I passed my A'Levels, when I moved to the United States, when I graduated undergrad. I think of him every step of the way. We all do.

Chapter 16

Till Death Do Us Part

My family almost went through another tragedy in late 2011. I almost got married. I say that because it was not my choice, I wasn't thinking of marriage, I wasn't even dating anybody, but I was almost given a wife. Why you ask, because I was a Nyahasha. A son to well-educated parents, a sibling to well-educated siblings, a boy who was in boarding school, and a boy with a bright future ahead of him. In Epworth, those qualities would make me into a well sought out bachelor; it didn't matter that I was only fourteen.

While many families were probably eyeing me from a distance, wondering when I would get married (we are talking about the illegitimate kind of marriage here), one family wanted to waste no time. They were going to make sure that I married their daughter, scoop in to draft the hot prospect before anyone could do so. That was the Limbikani family. They were part of the elite club of Epworth; they owned a flea market and later a shop. If you owned a shop in Epworth, people automatically assumed you were doing well. These were our entrepreneurs of the town; we were proud of them. Hence owning a shop was our version of being on the Forbes list.

The Limbikani's were a family of five. The dad was a short, chubby dark-skinned guy who always wore an over-the-top grin on his face. He was very eccentric, and he talked very fast as if he had a gun pointed at his head.

He called me by my last name but instead of saying Nyahasha it sounded like he was saying Nyasha because he spoke too fast.

The mom was a big lady who towered over her husband. Apart from the marriage arrangement incident, I rarely interacted with her. I do have a specific memory about her from my father's funeral though. I was sitting with my grandma when she came in with other women from the neighborhood. When she walked in, she uttered a loud cry that was so fake that if it weren't my father's funeral, I would have laughed. It did make me mad a bit; I don't know why she felt compelled to fake cry. My dad never talked to her ever. She could have come in, paid her respects, and left, but no, she had to make a performance out of it. They had a son called Tau; I rarely talked to him or saw him. I didn't remember what he looked like then; I don't remember what he looks like now. Their other daughter Agnes, I rarely saw her too. Then came Notando, their youngest, the one I was to marry. She was a year younger than me, making this a match in heaven. They figured my family would be more willing to accept her, given she was my age, than having to marry someone way older than me.

I should own up and say this whole debacle started with me and my cousin Lessy. He is to blame too. It was the 2010 December school holiday, and Lessy was staying with us. We were sent to the shops one day, and we got into the Limbikani store. There were no aisles in the store. Everything was behind the counter. So, you had to tell the person behind the counter what you wanted to buy, and they would get it for you. Notando was on the counter, and she was the one that served us. Her mom was in the store too, but she was sitting in the back. That was the first time I ever met her; I didn't even know they had a daughter my age. When we walked out of the store, I looked at Lessy,

"Dude, that girl on the counter. Oh my God, she is so pretty!"

"I was thinking of the same thing!" Lessy replied.

The whole trip back home, we talked about her, how pretty she was, and how we didn't even know she existed. We started making it a point to go to their store every time we were sent to the shops. I don't even know what we were trying to accomplish by that because all we did was buy whatever we needed and get out. My conversations with her were strictly transactional. Our frequency got noticed by the parents, which was not hard to discover. Before Notando, I would come to their shop maybe once every two weeks, but now all of a sudden, I was using every excuse to get into their store, and they were seeing me in their store at least three times a week. Their shop was at the far end of all the stores, so I never went there unless all the other stores didn't have what I was sent for, but now we were purposefully walking to the tail end of the stores just to get in their shop. I would also think that I started to dress less and less like I was going to a nearby store but as if I was getting into town to meet a girl. No more walking to the store with sweats and slides on; that wouldn't do. I had to get a whole outfit together now. I would pull out the best pair of sneakers I had, jeans and a t-shirt. I even wanted to wear my favorite coat, but it was too hot; I would have looked ridiculous.

When the break ended, I went back to school, and Lessy went back home. I forgot all about the girl; three months is an awful lot of time. That is the way it is with teenage boys, isn't it? When what they find appealing is present, it is their whole world, but when it's gone, it's like it never existed. It so happened that was also the time I had a huge crush on a girl from my school, so the pretty girl in the store was forgotten about.

The parents, however, did not forget, and when I came back home for the April holiday, they were ready for me. I was no longer going to their store as frequently as I used to with Lessy; I was back to my regular visits. Even with that, it was still quite a bit. I was the youngest one, so every time someone had to go to the store, it would be me. One day when I walked into the store, the mom asked me,

"Hey, how is boarding school?"

"It's great; I love it." I have always hated small talk; I'm a very introverted person, and small talk annoys me and makes me nervous because I know I suck at it. There was no need to talk; I was just going to buy my things and leave. She went on,

"I want Notando to go to boarding school as well. Do you know how we can apply there?"

"I know they will probably have entrance tests in August, but I don't know the exact date. I have the headmaster's number. I can give it to you, and you can call and ask." Of course, I had his number; if you were cool enough to fist bump the man, you were cool enough to have his phone number. Simple logic here people.

"Oh yeah, that would be helpful." I pulled out my phone to give her the number, but she declined.

"No, no, I would rather you send it to me through text. Here is my number."

I thought, okay, that's a bit strange, I could have given it to her right then, but maybe her phone was dead or something. So, I took her number, and I texted her the headmaster's contact as soon as I got home.

The next time, I was sent to the stores to buy a bunch of stuff. They had everything I needed except matches. It was no biggie; I would get them in another store. If not, I would definitely get them from one of the vendors. I was about to walk out, but the mom was having none of it.

"We have matches at home; we just haven't brought them here yet. Notando can walk with you to our house to get you a box."

I thought, "Jeez, do they really need my money that bad? It's only 20c."

Their house was on my route back home, so I had nothing to lose, so I said, alright, we'll go. Looking back, I suppose this trip was to make us talk to each other and maybe spark something there. It didn't, I mean, we talked, but I didn't go home thinking,

"What an awesome conversation I just had." All I was thinking was, "They better not send me to the store again."

The school holiday ended, and I went back to school, then I came back for the August holiday. When I got home, my mom was in the business of selling potatoes. She would buy them from the farmers and sell them at a price a little lower than regular stores would charge but still enough to make a profit. She was to deliver a sack of potatoes to the Limbikani house, and she wanted me to go with her so that I could carry it for her. I wasn't thrilled about the trip; I'm a lazy guy at heart. The less activity I do, the better. My mom laughed,

"There is no need to pretend as if you don't want to go; I know you will be happy to see Notando."

The house erupted, Tinashe and Leonard suddenly became invested. Just my luck that they were both at home. Tinashe hadn't gone to work that day. Leonard, who was in college, didn't have class, so he didn't go to campus. My mom also picked the worst possible time; we were all sitting in the kitchen talking. It was those moments that we always made fun of each other. They were definitely going to react.

"Who is Notando?" my brother asks

"The Limbikan's youngest daughter."

"Wow, we didn't even know they had a daughter, but of course, Tawanda knows," Tinashe and Leonard were having fun now.

I started mounting a defense, "Why would I be happy to see her though?"

"Aaaah, look at him trying to deny it. It's okay bro, no need to deny it; go and see Notando bro." These were certainly the moments Leonard was born for.

"No for real, I have never had a single conversation with her; I only see her in their store."

My mom interjected, "That's not what her sister said; she told me you guys text a lot, and she couldn't wait for you to come back from school."

This was getting entertaining for Tinashe and Leonard. Tinashe, who had been leaning on the stove all this time, moved to the chair next to Leonard. They were both facing me across the table. "Oh, he has her number. All along we thought it was just a crush, but you are texting!"

"I swear, I don't have her number!"

Everyone laughed. Tinashe moved to the chair beside me. He put his hand on my shoulder, “Bro, come on, no need to-“

“Here, let me show you.” I went through my contact list, no Notando. My mom said

“But the sister said you guys started talking because she was trying to get into Assisi, and you were helping her with that.”

“What! That’s not what happened.”

I told them what had happened and how I had the mom’s number, not Notando.

“Let me see the number you have,” my mom asked. I gave her my phone, she looked at it and frowned.

“That’s not Mrs. Limbikani’s number; that’s her daughter’s. She gave you her daughter’s number on purpose.”

Tinashe charmed in, “Oh boy, they are trying to get you together, man, and you know what that means. The moment you start talking to her, she’s yours.”

We later figured out that the plan was after I texted the daughter’s number thinking it was the mom, she would correct me, but then we would start our conversations. She never did; I guess she didn’t want to marry me either, so when that failed, they were now saying that we were so close, hoping that would force us to talk.

My mom went into defense mode, “Forget it; you are not going there. I’ll carry the bag myself.”

I was told to avoid their shop at all costs. She wasn't going to give them any opportunity or excuse, and that is how I escaped marriage.

Chapter 17

New Horizons

The year 2012 was not the best year for my mom. Her health started to deteriorate, and most of it was because of stress. Her blood pressure was reaching scary levels. One night Tambu, Tinashe, Leonard and I found her in a semi unresponsive state. She was laying on the dining room floor as if she had collapsed. Tambu was the first to see her,

"Guys come here quick!"

We rushed to the dining room. We were all shouting trying to wake her up.

"Mom! Mom! Mom!"

She was weakly responding, but it was as if she was not fully aware of her surroundings and what was going on. Tinashe called a relative of ours who had a car to come take her to the hospital. After our dad, we couldn't trust the ambulance anymore. The whole situation scared the heck out of us. We had lost our dad that way, and this brought back scary memories. We rushed her to the hospital, and she was admitted for a few days. It was as if she was being haunted by the house that her husband had died in. Everything in the house reminded her of him, of what she had lost. They had been together for twenty-eight years through every hardship; they had been each other's support, and now he was gone.

My siblings thought she needed a change of scenery. She went back to Kadoma to stay with my aunt for a while. She needed her sister's comfort more than ever. After months in Kadoma, Tebby took her to Namibia to stay with her for a while. I was in school when she went; when she came back, she visited me at school. She came back with photos of her and Tebby site seeing. They were riding four-wheelers in the desert; they went to the beach, she looked happy in the pictures. It seemed the break did her some good.

When she got back from Namibia, she was better, but she wasn't a hundred percent yet. Even when I ask her about events that happened that year, they are a blur to her. I also didn't help the situation. That year was when my mom and I were not seeing eye to eye, and it seemed as if every time I came back for the school holidays, we had something to argue about. It all started from my decision to leave the Catholic Church that year. That hurt my mom a lot; I think part of her felt like I was only doing this now because my dad was no longer with us. It probably made her wish that her husband was still there and maybe he would talk me out of it. My mom is a Catholic woman through and through, but I wasn't the first of her kids to leave Catholicism. All my siblings except Chipo had left the Catholic Church. She even went to church services with them sometimes. Our parents raised us in the Christian faith but not in a regiment type of way. They left room for us to discover God on our own, what he meant to us, and to develop a faith of our own. They understood if we were to believe in God, we would because he made sense to us, to our own lives, not because they had told us he does. This was the mom who read Bible stories to me as a kid and never pressured me to understand that we were reading holy scriptures. It was not like her to get wound up by this as much as she

was. It was just that the timing was all wrong. That year she was going through a lot, and she felt like everything was shifting under her feet.

We argued almost every day. That never happens in my family, yeah, we may disagree on something, but they never boil up to full-scale arguments. Aside from this, I cannot think of any other time my family ever argued about anything, either with our parents or between us siblings. We are very honest with each other, and if someone does something we think was not right, they are told so without tiptoeing around the issue. However, there is a general understanding that there is an unchangeable unfaltering love we have for each other. We have survived what we have survived because we were together, supported each other, and leaned on each other. Thus, even when someone calls you out, yes, you may not like what they are saying to you at the moment, but you always know that whatever they are saying is coming from love, that it is never coming out of spite. So, this arguing with my mom was a new thing. However, despite our constant bickering, that understanding was always there. At no point did I ever think that my mom did not love me or that maybe I should cut her off from my life and not speak to her or anything like that. I never even thought that our relationship had been damaged or would be damaged by this. She was my mother, she loved me, I loved her back, and we shall forever remain close. I never doubted that, never.

Our arguments never stopped though. I would promise that I would go to the Catholic service with her so that she would drop the issue. She was the parish secretary, so she left earlier than me because she had to make sure everything was in order. After she was gone, I would go to church with my brother. My mom didn't like that a bit, it was one thing to leave Catholicism, but lying was not the way to go. Our arguments were

not stopping, and Tinashe had to pitch in to help mend things. He called me out for lying to both my mom and him. This is because every time I went to church with him, I never told him of the promise I had made to my mom. He then talked to my mom and assured her that my leaving Catholicism was not because of her failure.

"I think you should take pride in knowing that you raised us in such a way that we have the courage to search God for ourselves. That is something we are all grateful for. Us leaving the Catholic Church shows one of the greatest gifts you gave us as a parent."

She promised him that she would talk to me. The next day she called to me her room. She was lying in bed, and I sat on the chair my dad used to sit in when he was reading. She asked me why I was leaving the Catholic Church. I gave her my reasons; she didn't speak much, she listened. After I had said all I had to say, she said,

"Okay, if that's what seems right to you, I won't stop you," and the saga was over.

If that year had taught us anything, it was the fact that it was now time to leave Epworth. We had stayed there long enough. My siblings thought they had deliberated it enough; my mom's health would not get better if she remained at that place. It was time to move, and we had to move now. So when Tebby came back from Namibia in December for the holidays, they started looking for new houses. They wanted to do it together. They found a lot of houses that were good enough, but they weren't convinced of the areas they were in. We weren't just moving for electricity; they didn't want us to move to a place that its only quality was the fact that it wasn't Epworth. They eventually found a house in a place called Emerald Hill. It is one of the poshest places to live in the

city. This was perfect; this was the place that would shake off all the shackles Epworth had put us under for thirteen years.

The plan was moving smoothly until it met a big obstacle, my mom. She didn't want to move. She hated Epworth like all of us, but that's the thing with strife; it can be a weird relationship sometimes. She felt like she had given a lot for that house, a lot of years, a lot of struggle, and now she felt as if she was giving up. What was the point of all the hardships she and my dad had endured if they were only to leave the place? It would have satisfied her more if we were to fully finish building the house and have electricity, then it would all have been worth it. However, it just wasn't about that, and she knew that for our sanity, we needed to leave that whole place behind.

She also didn't want to leave the house because of my dad. As much as that place was haunting her, it was still a home she shared with him. Leaving the house two years after his passing felt like leaving behind all her memories with him. Once again, our relations with struggle can be quite strange. This house for my mom represented pain, pain from losing her husband, but it also contained their memories together. She couldn't have one without the other.

It took her some convincing for her to consent to the move, not only from my siblings but her siblings as well. It was not as if she didn't know a move would be good to her but letting go is not the easiest thing to do, even when letting go to a place like Epworth. In the end, she agreed, and the primary reason she agreed was a reason behind everything she had done for the past decades. She did it for her children. We wanted the move; we needed the move for her and us. She was still our mother; her instinct was still the same despite all my siblings being adults now. It didn't matter how old we had gotten.

A mother's duty never changes. A mother sacrifices for her children, a mother must take care of her children, a mother must do all she can to make her children happy. At that time, what would have made us all happy was if we moved, so she agreed. She agreed even though it was tough for her to let go, she agreed because she was a mother who would do anything to make her children happy.

January 1st, 2013, we packed our belongings and headed for Emerald Hill. After twelve years of being shackled in Epworth, we were finally leaving it all behind. After years of believing that we would leave, years of believing that we were meant for so much better, here we were achieving what felt impossible. We were now the Nyahasha family from Emerald Hill.