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## *A Degree of Alone*

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Where do children with six fingers come from? This question troubled Jojo when he started going to school. His first day at school was one of many firsts. First uniform, first school bag, and first shiny, dustless, black Bata shoes. He was finally going to join the children he saw through the bars of the gate every day, walking to school pristine and returning with dirt-patched uniforms and the occasional missing shoe. His mother seemed excited for him to make some friends. She spoke of her first day of school and the many friends she had made. Jojo wanted a friend to play with, too.

He stepped into classroom 1B in his crisp white shirt and grey trousers, and was greeted by columns of desks that seemed unending. There were three children squashed onto each of these foreign lumps of wood. His father handed the teacher a note from the headmaster. She read it, then looked at the two of them before her eyes fell upon the mass of children who had already flooded her classroom.

“First time at school?” she asked the father, studying the miniature being before her.

“Yes, we decided to start him a bit late. We waited until he was seven,” he replied, squeezing the boy’s shoulders.

“Hmmm... Jojo take the desk next to the back window. You can sit with that girl over there,” she said pointing at the left corner across the room. She had forgotten the girl’s name, but she was not bothered. Her name would eventually come.

The father watched Jojo grip the straps of his bag as he shuffled his tiny feet to the back of the room like a lost cub searching for his cave. It looked like he wanted to tell his son something but did not

know what to say.

“You may leave now. He will be fine,” the teacher said and that is when Jojo’s father finally left.

The girl sitting by the back window was big, round, and chubby-cheeked, with two hair buns held together by red ribbons. Jojo sat in awkward silence, trying to figure out what to do next. He had never seen so many children in one space before. The most children he had ever seen were for his only birthday party, when he turned five years old. Five children had come to his house that day.

More parents came into the classroom with notes, and nervous children were instructed where to sit. When the teacher moved to address the classroom, nearly every free desk was taken. There was chatter coming from everywhere but Jojo’s corner.

“Shhhh,” the teacher said, putting her index finger at her lips. “I am Ms. Mwila. When I put my finger on my lips you should all do the same, okay? Shhhh,” she said, repeating the gesture, and with military precision, the children’s index fingers went up to their closed lips. A sheet of silence swept over the classroom as all eyes were locked on the teacher, waiting for the next instruction.

All eyes except those of the round girl seated next to Jojo. Her eyes were staring at one of his hands, which had something crooked protruding from the side. She counted his fingers, starting with the thumb and moving toward his pinky finger, moving just her lips without making a sound. The fingers did not stop at five. She counted six. She did it again and confirmed that the boy had six fingers. She looked at her own hand just to make sure and all she had were five fingers, no fewer and no more.

After two hours of lessons, the bell rang and the teacher announced that it was break time, and they were free to go to the playground. The children scurried out through the door and scattered in the direction of the slide, swings, monkey bars, and seesaw.

Jojo, timid, unsure, and uncomfortable, made his way to a leafy tree that cast a shadow over part of the playground. He sat under the tree, listening to the noises made by over two hundred small bodies. Sharp voices. Laughter. Screams. Cries. Laughter again. Jojo spotted a couple of faces from his class but he did not recognise the others. He removed his lunchbox from his Spiderman bag and placed it on his lap. His mother had made a fried egg sandwich. There was half a banana too. He reached for his drinking bottle, which was filled with Mazoe, and he sucked at it, getting ready to go and jump on one of the swings.

In the distance, he spotted the round girl he'd sat next to in class. She was pointing at him as she talked to a group of three other girls. Jojo did not know how to respond to someone pointing at him. He assumed it was a friendly gesture and reciprocated with a forced smile, waving his hand side to side. The four girls began to walk towards him. Jojo snapped his lunchbox shut and took another suck from the drinking bottle straw before tucking it in its Spiderman bag compartment. He was ready to play now.

"Can we see your hands?" a girl with thick braids asked.

Jojo found this request odd but somehow found himself stretching his hands toward the band of girls, as if waiting to receive a birthday present.

"See, I told you that he has six fingers. He is weird," the round girl whispered. The rest of the girls looked fascinated and curious. One of them cringed.

"Yes, he has six fingers," they said under their breath.

Jojo looked at his hands to see what was strange. It took a while to realise that the girls had not come to play, and that his hands were a spectacle. He withdrew them from view and stuffed them in his pocket. The crowd grew from four girls to seven, then ten. Soon there were too many for Jojo to count, as the kids swung off the monkey bars, jumped off the swings, and careered down the slides, all

running toward the source of commotion. They surrounded Jojo, pointing at him, jostling and laughing. Everyone tried to get a glimpse of the strange phenomenon that was being whispered about from one kid to the next. They had never seen someone with six fingers before, and this was their opportunity.

Jojo began to tremble as if a winter breeze had just hugged him, yet the fireball above was unhindered by clouds. He felt his heart drumming, his throat locking. His eyes grew heavy. He retreated and touched the tree behind him, wishing that it would swallow him, protect him, or hide him. The tree did not oblige. He felt two boys tugging at his arms, trying to pull his hands out of his pockets. Jojo squeezed his eyes shut and disappeared into a dark space. He took short, laboured, stuttering breaths. He could still hear the kaleidoscope of voices, growing loud, aggressive, and threatening.

Dark space.

The bell rang.

The herd that had gathered began to disperse.

Dark space.

When Jojo opened his eyes, the playground was empty. He freed his hands from their enclosures and wiped the tears that had spilled from his eyes. His heart was still pounding relentlessly. He tried to process what had just happened a few moments ago, but his mind could not stitch together an explanation for him to hold onto. He got his bag and cautiously made his way back to 1B.

Ms. Mwila was writing on the board and she paused to watch as Jojo interrupted her class by walking in. She was not amused by this tardiness.

“Didn’t you hear the bell?” she asked in a stern tone. Jojo gazed at his shoes, trying to figure out how to respond.

“Didn’t you hear the bell? When that bell rings, it means that break time is over. What is your name again?”

“Jojo. Jojo Mwanza,” he said, just the way he had rehearsed with his father. The rest of the pupils snickered and whispered into each other’s ears.

Frustrated and realising the hopelessness of the interrogation, Ms. Mwila ordered him to go take his seat. His shoulders humped, Jojo dragged his feet on the way to the corner of the classroom where he’d sat earlier in the morning. This time, however, it was empty. The big round girl had moved. On the other side of the aisle, there were four bodies squashed at one desk, looking like a can of baked beans. As Jojo took off his bag, Ms. Mwila realised that he was sitting alone.

“Pretty go back to your seat.”

Pretty raised her shoulders and dropped them twice. The other pupils chuckled at this silent denial.

“Pretty, I am not going to tell you again. Go back to your desk.”

“But teacher, I cannot go back there,” Pretty said. Only half of her body was on her seat; the rest hung in mid-air.

“Pretty.”

“Teacher, I cannot sit with a mutant,” she said, her voice cracking. The classroom broke out into a chorus of laughter that rose, swirled, dipped, and faded away. This exchange between teacher and pupil, the dissent an attack on Ms. Mwila’s authority, tipped a reaction. Ms. Mwila left the front of the class and walked down the aisle between Jojo and Pretty. She stood with one hand on her hip and the other on the desk, staring down at the defiant girl.

“Pretty, that is a very bad thing to say to your friend. Can you say sorry now or I am going to punish you.”

“It is true, teacher. He is not normal. You can... you can even ask Mwenso. We saw his six fingers,” Pretty said, tears beginning to fall down her cheeks.

“Yes teacher, we saw them!” the other three girls who were

squashed with Pretty spoke up in unison.

Ms. Mwila sighed in frustration at this barrage of information. It did not make sense. She'd never encountered such a dilemma in her brief teaching career. Jojo had shifted to the wall, his eyes fixed to a round spot on the coffee brown desk. His hands were hidden from the teacher's view, tucked away in the cocoons of his trouser pockets.

Her voice soft and cautious, Ms. Mwila asked, "Jojo, can I see your fingers?"

As if removing something fragile from his pockets that would break from any sudden movement, Jojo slowly took his hands out and placed them on the desk. His eyes continued to avoid Ms. Mwila and everyone else. There were gasps and giggles among the pupils. Meanwhile, Ms. Mwila stared at his fingers, took a deep breath, careful not to give away any emotion for the rest of the children to latch onto.

"You can put them back," she said and returned to the blackboard as if nothing had happened. She continued where she left off. "E is for Egg, F is for Fish, G is for Goat..." But her eyes kept straying to Jojo, whose gaze had still not left the round spot on the desk.

The bell rang.

The pupils ploughed past each other to leave the classroom as Ms. Mwila reminded them to do their homework. A bunch of pupils rushed to the playground to get in some last-minute play before their parents came to pick them up, and the others went to the pick-up area. Ms. Mwila finished erasing the black board while whistling a tune. She was startled when she saw Jojo still seated at the desk, in the same humped posture. There was no one in the classroom but the two of them.

"It is time to go home. You can go wait for your father to come pick you from the platform," she said, packing the textbooks. Jojo was still locked to the wood. He did not even acknowledge the suggestion. She was searching the depths of her mind to find the

right words to say: to make him move, to make him smile, and most importantly to make him forget the day. As she was thinking, Jojo's father poked his head into the classroom.

"Sonny let's go," he said. This time, Jojo stood up without hesitation and grabbed his father's hand as they left the room. Ms. Mwila was grateful for the interruption but troubled that she had not explained to Jojo's father what had happened during the child's first day at school. She also wanted to ask him questions. How does a child come to have six fingers? How do you explain to another child why a child has six fingers? What do you do with the extra fingers?

The next day, Jojo's father again dropped him off. The teacher was more relieved than anxious to see the boy walk into the room. She had spent the previous night worrying about her pupil and whether he would return in the morning. Immediately, she spotted the black gloves on his hands. His father followed her gaze. His face bore an apologetic expression.

"I'm sorry about that. It's the only way he was going to come to school today. I don't know what happened yesterday, but this morning he refused to come. This was the compromise," he said.

Ms. Mwila nodded her head in affirmation, "I understand."

It was summer and she worried that Jojo's palms would sweat like a draining swamp. She had over thirty children to mind, but now she had one who needed extra attention and she felt an obligation to be his guardian. She had been trained in how to deal with naughty children, uninterested children, bright children, and even in how to identify a dyslexic child. But there was nothing in the manual on how to handle a child with extra body parts. She felt inadequate, yet felt that she had to do something.

She began with the scheduled class activities for the day. They were supposed to learn three songs, holding hands while singing — "Twinkle Little Star," "Baba Black Sheep," and "Old McDonald." Instead, Ms. Mwila made them stand up and sing from their desks.

Jojo paid attention to the teacher's lesson as he sat solo, mindful of where he placed his fingers. When Ms. Mwila raised her index finger to her lips to silence the class, he did the same but lowered his finger just as fast. He repeated her words as instructed—Apple! Orange! Banana! Peach .... He sang all the songs but did none of the gestures. He was still afraid to look at Pretty because he thought she would remember and, if she did, she would remind the others to remember and then they would tease him again. For the moment they had forgotten him, forgotten that there was a boy with six fingers in class.

The bell rang.

The classroom emptied of children carrying their multi-coloured lunchboxes and cartoon- printed drinking bottles. They shouted out for the monkey bars, swings, and seesaws, some of them with their arms around each other's shoulders as they walked out. Jojo waited for all of them to disappear before taking out his lunchbox and bottle at his desk.

"Aren't you going outside to eat?" Ms. Mwila asked.

He moved his head left, right, and left again.

"You don't want to go and play?"

Left, right, and left again.

"You need to play with your friends. Go outside. If anyone troubles you, come and tell me," she said with a level of assurance and calmness.

Jojo lingered before getting up with his items and slowly walking out through the door. Ms. Mwila smiled at herself for this small accomplishment. She thought that she was connecting with him. That he was trusting her.

But Jojo did not go to the playground. He did not go to the tree where he'd sat the previous day. Instead he found a location between two classroom blocks where a jacaranda tree stood in full bloom,

sprinkling its purple coloured harvest to the ground. Jojo sat on one of the tree roots that protruded from the earth.

He felt his hands warming and getting wet. He removed the black gloves and allowed his fingers to breathe. He looked at the crooked extra finger on one hand and asked himself why it was there. Who had put it there? Why didn't everyone have six fingers?

Jojo unpacked his sandwich and dug in. He heard the cheerful noises from the playground being carried on the wave of the wind. They made him imagine that he was on the monkey bars, swinging from one bar to the next, dropping to the ground and climbing up to clasp the metal bars once again. He was chasing other boys and girls while they pursued him.

"You are sitting on my tree."

Jerk. Stiffen. Scrabble. Rush. Jojo struggled to put his gloves back on. He glanced over his shoulder to see the source of the voice. There stood a slim pale girl with flashes of pink on her face and bare arms. She wore a green bucket hat that was unable to hide the shrubs of her blonde woolly hair. Jojo got up and dusted his trousers, ready to disappear. He wanted to vanish and be forgotten. He was afraid that once his location had been found, the children from the playground would flood in to harass him. He wanted to scream for Ms. Mwila to come.

"It's ok. We can share," the girl said and dumped herself on another jacaranda root.

Jojo sat back down. He was silent as he chewed his sandwich and slurped his drink. The girl crunched on the biscuits from her packet.

"You did not spit," she said.

"*Ati* what?"

"You did not spit on your *chesty*," she said. "Everyone spits on their chest when they see me. They do not want children who are *chidangwaleza*."

Silence.

"They do not like me either," Jojo said. "No one wants to be my friend."

"I will be your friend," she said, handing him a biscuit with a shy smile. Jojo welcomed this kind gesture and the numbing feeling of fear began to fizzle away. There was someone who wanted to be his friend after all.

"What is your name?"

"Chimwemwe but my mummy likes calling me Chichi."

"Ah! Like a train, choo choo."

"Nooo, I don't *wanty*, not like a *trainy*."

They giggled, forgetting about their food and drink. They were lost in this space of genuine conversation, in the pleasure of the uninhibited companionship of which they both had been deprived.

"Why are you wearing a hat? If teacher sees you..." Jojo said noticing the green bucket hat again. "Plus why did you colour your hair yellow?"

Chichi lowered her eyes, embarrassed. "My hat is to protect me."

Jojo was amazed. "Like a shield for a superhero?"

A smirk. Her eyes brightened as she replied, "Yes like the Powerpuff Girls... *Whaty* about you? What are the gloves for?"

He moved his shoulders up and down twice.

"Tell me, is it your superpowers also? Me I told you..." she said, reaching over to snatch the gloves from his fingers. They slid off like droplets gliding on ice. Before Jojo realised what had happened, his fingers were naked. Instinctively, he folded his hands into fists but the protruding fingers did not comply and fold. Each one was like a dried twig had been stuck into the fist and did not belong. Chichi saw what Jojo was trying to hide and covered her mouth with her palms, dropping the gloves in the process, her eyes growing wide.

The bell rang.

Chichi grabbed her things and darted away without a word. Alone, Jojo relaxed his balls of fingers. He zoomed in on his extra fingers. He felt his chest closing in, a stinging feeling below his stomach, his eyes welling up. He sniffed and made a futile attempt to force the tears back into his eyes by blinking rapidly. Then he picked up his gloves and put them on again. He brushed his eyes to wipe the streams of tears. He packed his lunch box and drinking bottle, then raced back to the class. Ms. Mwila's warning the previous day about getting back in time refreshed in his mind and he quickened his pace.

As he walked into the class once again, everyone was in place. Ms. Mwila watched him sneak in. Jojo paused momentarily and waited for the reprimand but when none was forthcoming, he continued to his desk. Then he saw Chichi sitting at the desk next to his, the green bucket hat on her head. Their eyes met. Jojo sat gingerly, putting his bag on the floor.

"We are both superheroes," Chichi whispered. She smiled.

Jojo smiled.

Ms. Mwila smiled and continued her lesson.