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Inswa

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(unedited script as submitted by the author)

When I was thirteen, my best friend Wongani kissed me.

In those delicious seconds, while her coal-black lips were pressed on mine, my stomach exploded into an army of golden flying termites, spilling out of their underground castles after a December storm.

My skin tingled, and I jerked back, unable to place the feeling. Joy or shame? I scanned the sprawling savanna for prying brown eyes but found only the wide, dusty road wedged between two endless lines of baobabs.

Wongani clutched a plastic bag of school books to her chest, leaned back to examine my face, and asked, "How did that feel?"

My heart thumped, ears buzzed, but as I gawked at the impression of her budding breasts through the transparent bag, I blurted, "Like inswa," describing the termites that swarmed Mutengo Village after the rains. I smacked my mouth, but it was too late to swallow the words.

Joy. It was joy I felt.

She giggled, resurrecting the flutters in my gut, then she knelt to pick up a copper coin and used it to draw a square around the edges of our bare feet.

"This is our inswa box, Tamando," she said, flipping me the nickel as she spun to face Mutengo Village, our home.

I ran my fingertips over the head of President Kaunda, on the five-shilling coin, and read the legend – 24 October 1965.

Since our first days together, toddling between our mothers' mud huts, that was Wongani's way: to do the unexpected and act like it was ordinary.

"Tiye," she said, beckoning me.

I savoured the lingering salty taste of her mouth on mine, I nodded.

Holding clammy palms, we skipped back home, past Headman

Amutengo's brick house in the nsaka—village square, until we arrived at our matching mud huts, meters apart.

Each time we kissed after that day my heart raced; yet her lips closed off my questions.

Is this allowed?

What if we are discovered?

Have you done this before?

How do you make me feel this way?

Then, as we approached the end of the blazing summer of '65, Amama, my mother, caught us underneath a leafy, wild loquat tree, where Wongani and I had stopped for shade on our way back from fetching water at the Luangwa River.

Amama's clay-brown skin turned ashy, and her wide eyes narrowed to slits. "Mucitanji mweol?" What are you doing!?

"Paliye," we mumbled. Nothing.

Swiftly, Amama reached into the tree and snipped a thin branch, sending clusters of the ripe brown fruit tumbling on our heads.

"Where did you learn this filthy habit?" she asked through gritted teeth.

Wongani bit her lips as she stared at her dusty feet.

Amama gripped me with her free hand and thrashed my back, letting Wongani escape back into the village.

"I! Should! Never! Catch! You! Doing! That! Again!" each word, accented by the whip landing on my back.

"Amama!" I screamed.

She ignored me and asked instead, "Uninvwa?" Do you hear me?

"Yes!" I said between snuffles, wiping my runny nose with the back of my arm.

"Good! God did not give me one child, just for you to bring me shame with this abomination. I should tell your father, but his hand will not spare you like mine."

Blood rushed to my face.

She stormed off, leaving the threat looming.

For days, her warning hovered over me like a rain cloud, refusing me peace while I did my chores.

At dawn, while I swept the chigugu—kitchen, I confused the creaking of the metal door for my father, Atata's leather belt cutting through my skin.

At noon, while weeding Amama's bonongwe, her wild-spinach garden transformed into the sharp strokes of Atata's thin fingers, slapping me.

At dusk, the crackling evening fire was the lash of his belt across my back.

But Wongani, in her carefree way, went about as though nothing had changed, taunting me with, "Give me inswa," whenever we were alone.

"Why do you do that?" I whined one afternoon as we walked home from the river.

She raised an eyebrow, "What?"

"Wongani, if Amama finds us again, she will tell Atata, and you know how he..." The words caught in my throat, and I clicked my tongue, redirecting my attention to steadying the shaking pail of water on my head.

Thunder ricocheted through the blackening skies.

"She won't catch us."

"Eh? And how can you be so sure?" My bottom lip quivered, and I started to cry.

Wongani placed her bucket and mine on the ground, then hid both in the bushes.

"Look, I found a place where they won't see us." She pulled me towards a huge, grey rock that broke the monotony of the meter-high maize stalks. The stone bent into a cave, barely big enough for us. As we sat inside, my weeping subsided.

Wongani drew a line with her big toe, from one end of the cave to the

other, turned to me, closed her slanted eyes, and said, "Give me inswa."

I sank my feet into the warm soil, leaned in, and planted my parched lips on hers.

Through our T-shirts, our hardened nipples grazed, sending shivers coursing through me, dissolving the rock of fear in my pit. The skies opened and poured.

Our new inswa box became the final destination of every day.

If Amama wove my woollen braids too tight: "Give me inswa."

If she beat me for spilling too much water on my way from the river: "I need some inswa."

And the growing maize stalks only made it easier for us to hide.

One day, while tilling the fields with our mothers, Wongani and I snuck away to the inswa box.

"Open your mouth," I murmured, surprising myself.

As my tongue slipped into her mouth, the inswa spread around my tummy, threatening to flee through the space between my legs.

I squealed and tumbled out of the secret place where I met Amama's disgusted face.

"Amake Wongani!" Amama shrieked, calling Wongani's mother.

The sound of thumping followed as her stubby friend came running.

"What?"

"Take your demonic child away!"

"What, why?"

"She wants to bring sin into this village!" Amama snapped.

Amake Wongani's stared at her daughter, then glowered at me, and dragged Wongani away.

She will tell him now, I thought.

"Amama," I begged, "please do not tell Atata. It was just a ki..."

She stopped me with a slap, dropping her hoe. "Shut up!" She spat, "What do you know?"

Zaka khumi ndizithatu!" Only thirteen years old! "And those guava-sized breasts have given you false courage; a child is never too old for its mother. I will bend you the right way!" Amama marched off.

It turned out that there were worse things than the lash of Atata's leather.

The next morning, a wave of pain vibrated forward through my back and settled into a tight knot beneath my navel.

"What's wrong?" Amama asked, upon seeing my regular pauses between sweeping.

I clutched my stomach.

"Turn around."

When I did, Amama burst out in ululations, terrifying the chickens that had been pecking the ground. "Alalalalala!"

She yanked me into the hut and instructed me to unwrap the chitenge around my waist.

"Have you been with a man?" She was pacing, watching my eyes

"No," I said.

"Keep it that way. If a man touches you, you will get pregnant."

My mind wandered to Wongani. Soft in every place, me melting between her legs into something slippery and milky.

"No man will touch me."

"No more school either."

A drop of blood landed on the rough floor.

"What do you mean?" I thought she would let me take the Grade Seven exams, at least.

"Which grown woman have you seen going to school?"

"I am not grown, Amama!" I protested.

The walls began to close in on me.

She was ripping and folding my chitenge into neat squares. "And I don't want to see you climbing trees or running around pa nsaka."

"How am I supposed to pluck mangoes?"

“Any mango that is still in the tree is not yet ready to be eaten, but that leaking blood shows you are ripe. Soon, the mango will fall, and I have to make sure the right person is there

to pick it.” She handed me the pile of fabric and told me to place it between on my underwear, “Use one and change it every hour, then wash the soiled one.”

I nodded and watched her walk out.

After my first blood, Headman Amutengo came to talk to Atata, underneath the mango tree. They chatted until the sun stole their shade while I served them trays of roasted mice and gourds of chipumu—Atata’s favourite traditional beer.

The next evening, my marriage lessons started.

I learnt that the string of rainbow-coloured beads around my waist was for the wrinkly headman’s amusement and not for ‘shaping’ my midriff.

Learnt how to gyrate in bed to please my future husband.

How to shave his pubic hair, which I imagined, would be as grey as his head.

By keeping a mouthful of water and rocks without a spill, I learnt the importance of my silence in case he disciplined me with a beating.

At the end of the wet season, came the brittle cold and my wedding day.

I awoke, half wishing the thatched roof would collapse and crush me, the other half excited about my future. Headman Amutengo’s house was, after all, the only brick house in the village, with an indoor toilet. His wives didn’t go to the river with the rest of the women; his

children were the only ones in the whole village with shoes.

“Tamando,” Amama said, pushing open the creaky, metal door. “Kwacha. Uka.” It is morning. Wake up.

I groaned.

“As the youngest wife, you will need to rise early,” she said, pulling my blanket off. “The headman paid a good bride price for you.” Three heads of cattle to add to Atata’s dying herd.

“Yes, Amama.”

I strode into the yard and memorised my home.

A flock of chickens led by a sparsely feathered rooster. A dewy patch of grass. My parents’ hut to my left, appearing to stoop as they now did. Amama’s chigugu, with its stew of aromas: steamed pumpkin leaves, boiled maize. The ever-flourishing wild spinach next to the pit latrine.

I treaded softly towards the toilet behind my hut, but when I got there, I couldn’t enter—the familiar odours—urine, sweat, and faeces, turning acrid all of a sudden.

I careened instead to the field of overgrown, brown grass and took the long way out of the village. At first, hesitating over broken sticks and sharp pebbles, then lurching through the shrubs as though a hyena were chasing me, I finally stumbled into the maize field which led to our inswa cave. At last, I could breathe.

I sat on the rock and weighed my options.

Staring at the vast grasslands, I imagined the Great East Road on the other side, flirted with the thought of escaping to Malawi on the east, or west, towards the year-old capital, Lusaka. But, as quickly as the idea had come, it was replaced by the image of my mothers’ fate

if I ran away: she would be banished. So, I stayed glued to the rock until Wongani arrived.

“There you are!” she exclaimed. “Your mother has been looking all over for you!”

I let my eyes wash over the mane of midnight-black hair that framed her flawless face and for a moment, forgot my paralysing fear.

“Why?” I asked, fighting a flood of tears.

“Why?” she mocked, folding her arms.

I broke down.

“Hey,” she coaxed, kneeling, “it’s fine.”

“It’s not!”

“It’s okay, Tamando.”

“Come on, give me inswa,” she purred, kissing my tears. She traced

her fingers over my breasts, paused to feel my racing heart, and then placed my midnight-black nipple into her warm mouth.

“Let’s run away,” I said.

She groaned into my chest, ignoring me.

My breath quickened. “Let’s run away, Wongani. To the city. To Lusaka. Remember what the teacher said?”

She ran her fingers over my navel and into the sweaty patch between my legs, prodding the pea-sized bean amid a forest of curly, black hair.

“Wongani.” My voice reduced to a whisper.

One finger, two fingers, three.

“Wongani.”

The inswa spread to my fingertips, my back, my tongue and throat, coming out as a squeal I had been repressing since our first kiss.

Afterwards, we lay on the ground, watching the sun dip west, into the city, while our breathing calmed.

Wongani stood and dusted herself off.

“Where are you going?”

“Home, of course.”

“But we can leave, Wongani, the teacher said...”

“That girls don’t have to drop out of school in Grade Seven in Lusaka, I know.”

“Yes!” I cried.

“Don’t be stupid. Those are empty dreams for people like us,” she spat, darting her eyes this way and that, everywhere except at me.

“I know,” I said, gathering my clothes, “but, no one knows us there.”

“Exactly,” she answered, tying her chitenge tighter around her slim waist. “This is home.”

“We can try.”

“Where will we live?”

“I don’t...” My mouth dried up.

“What will we eat? You want us to be one of those women who paint their faces and wait for men in the street?”

“No.” My ears started to buzz.

“Then what?” She shrugged. “You take things too seriously, Tamando.” Her words sucked the air from my lungs. “If you want to be a disgrace to your family, that’s up to you. I’m going home.” The flurry in my tummy ceased.

She gave me her back and disappeared into the field.

Wongani’s way; turning the extraordinary into the mundane.

A flying termite zipped across my thigh.

I straightened my chitenge and turned west, into the setting sun. For the first time, I knew exactly what to do.