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Pain by any other name

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(unedited script as submitted by the author)

Lusaka Intercity Bus Terminus is filled with the usual noise and endless chatter this morning, hawkers interact with people waiting for their buses and the smell of different foods permeates the air around me. On a normal day, I would have slowed down to enjoy my surroundings but today isn't a normal day, so I hike the duffel bag I'm carrying higher onto my shoulder and continue walking with purposeful steps to the Power Tools Bus Counter.

"Ah bosses, mulipo?" A short man wearing a black and yellow Power Tools uniform waves me forward to move to the front of the queue.

"Tilipo, muli che?" I ask him. I don't recognize him, but I recognize the man standing next to him.

"Sorry to hear about Brian, I went to school with him mu Primary." The man I recognized says to me, "I'm Matildah's younger brother."

His familiar features now ring a bell; he looks exactly like his sister who was my senior in secondary school. "Thank you, man." I say to him. "I know it's late, but I need a seat on your next available bus." I see the two men give each other a look and the guy I recognized nods to the other man.

"Okay." The man says to me simply.

"Thank you." I say quietly to them and as a prayer to God. I hurriedly take out my wallet from one of my pockets.

He hands me a ticket and points me towards a yellow and black bus that has started boarding people. I hand him the exact amount for the ticket and shove my wallet back into my pocket.

"Travel well my man; I will come by the house sometime tomorrow night." The man whose name I've just remembered says to me.

"Thanks, Chisanga." I say to him. As I turn away from the long queue, I hear the beginning of an argument "So ife takuli ama tickets? We came here before that man..." I tune the rest of it off as I hand my ticket over to the man standing by a drum near the parked bus.

“Enjoy your trip.” My brain registers him saying to me as he hands me my ticket back.

Immediately my body touches the seat I shut my eyes for some much-needed peace and quiet.

I don't open my eyes even as I feel a body settle down in the seat next to me. The sleepless night I had soon catches up with me and I let the tiredness guide me into a deep sleep.

I'm woken up by a gentle tap on my shoulder; my eyes open and meet the curious eyes of the source of the tapping.

Hi, do you need a drink or something to eat?" The woman says to me shyly.

"We are in Kabwe, this heat is too much, I can get you a drink and some water." She continues on not bothering to get my answer as she rises from her seat.

I stretch out my long legs and silently rise from my seat following behind her. Joining her in the queue at the rest stop, I notice the red rims under her eyes and the way she is dressed, looks like I'm not the only one having a hard day.

"I'm Sitali, by the way." She says to me as we move closer to each other to let a person pass from the front of the queue.

"I'm Marlon, thank you for waking me up." I say to her as a smile appears on her sad looking face.

There is silence between us now. The two waters, cokes and pack of chips and chicken we order are called up to the counter and I silently pull out my wallet and pay for the food. She doesn't say anything to me as I hand her one of the take away bags. We walk in companionable silence back to the bus.

"Where are you travelling to?" I ask Sitali and a look of what looks like fear comes into her eyes. I notice that she is eating on auto pilot. Not really tasting the food or savouring it, she just needs something in her stomach.

"Ndola." She simply says to me. Her one-word answer lets me know that the chatty mood she was in is gone. So, I go back to eating my food.

We finish our food and I see her take out headsets from the bag on her lap. I settle back down into my seat and continue with the sleep I was interrupted from earlier. What seems like a few minutes later, I feel a vibration against my leg and pick up the duffel bag I placed on the floor next to me when I remember I had placed my phone in there with my essentials.

"Hello?" I say into the phone as soon as I accept the incoming call.

"Where are you now?" My Father's voice says on the other side of the line. His voice sounds different to me, it sounds small.

"Hi Dad, approaching Kapiri, do I need to do anything or get anything before I get home." I ask him.

“Later on, your sister’s flight gets here at 19 hours; you can pick her up, for now just concentrate on coming home, safe trip son.” He replies and cuts the phone.

I don’t put my phone away and chose to answer the several text messages

I have on iMessenger and Whatsapp. One text message catches my eye and I immediately start replying back to it.

“You don’t force a woman who has lost her husband and found out he died with another woman in his car when he was supposed to be home with her to sit on a mattress she doesn’t want to sit on.” I reply back to my Father’s sister.

From last night, the older women in my Family had been arguing with my brother’s widow over her refusal to seat on the mattress that widows are supposed to sit on throughout the funeral. She has chosen to sit outside the house with her family surrounding her. I didn’t see how it was a big issue.

I switch the phone off and throw it back into the duffel bag. As I settle back to sleep, I hear my seat mate clear her throat.

“I lost my sister yesterday.” I hear her quietly say to me.

“This is the longest I have gone without crying, I think a part of me knows I have to be strong for my mother and sisters, I’m the eldest now.” she adds on sadly.

The grief I’m feeling is similar to her grief but the words get stuck in my throat and I choose to share my own grief with her.

“I lost my older brother yesterday too in Ndola, it was a road accident, we didn’t talk to each other for months before yesterday, so I’m feeling guilty mixed in with grief, I actually hated the guy to be honest, I couldn’t stand to be in the same room with him anymore.” I tell Sitali with shame in my tone. “But he was my brother still you know? I just wish that we had fixed our relationship before his accident.” My admission takes me by surprise; letting out my feelings to a stranger nonetheless has never been my style.

“I guess what I was trying to say to you is that I understand how you are feeling.” I say to her as I see her wipe away a few tears that are running down her face.

I fish out a hanky from one of my pockets and hand it to her. She keeps wiping away as more tears fall down her round shaped face. I brush away a few of my own tears as we seat here, two strangers mourning the loss of our siblings together.

Sitali turns away from me when her tears stop, and she settles into her chairs headrest and closes her eyes. I do the same and fall asleep a few minutes after closing my eyes.

“Ba Ndola your stop is here!” is the next thing I hear, I stretch out my numb limbs and meet the eyes of Sitali, at least we both got some sleep before facing our families.

“Where in Ndola are you going to?” I ask Sitali as she stands to gather her belongings.

“Home is in Pamodzi, near the first station where buses stop when coming from town.” She says to me. “My cousin is picking me up.” She continues, answering my not yet asked question.

“Okay, I’m also going to Pamodzi but grew up in Masala,” I say to her.

“Pamodzi born and bred over here.” Sitali replies with a short laugh.

Her laugh though filled with sadness brings some relief to my troubled soul. I walk behind her, and I have an argument with myself whether it’s right to ask for her number in this moment. Would she get the wrong notion about me? I want to continue talking with her even after we leave this bus. Coming from the same hometown and living in the same town would make for a good friendship. “That’s not the only reason” a voice says to me.

My train of thought is cut short when as soon as we step off the last step of the bus, Sitali is enveloped into the arms of a huge man who is openly sobbing and effectively blocking me and the people behind me.

Between the sobs, the man utters a few phrases in Lozi that I don’t understand. Sitali whispers back something to him in Lozi and he ends the bone crushing embrace he has her in.

Sitali turns to me and says “Sorry for your loss Marlon and it was nice meeting and talking to you.” The big man next to me turns to me as she addresses me.

“You are Marlon Njovu?” The man asks me with surprise in his eyes wet eyes.

“Yes I am,” I reluctantly answer him, not sure how he knows my full name.

He looks at Sitali then back at me. “Hmmm, it really is a small world.” He says to me.

“Do we know each other from somewhere?” I ask him. Not really sure of where I met him as I try to rack my brain for his face but come up empty.

“No, I knew your brother Brian; we worked together ku Stan Chart.” He replies.

I nod my head in understanding. His statement reminds me to pass by the bank before I leave for Lusaka to collect Brian’s belongings from his office. The man I talked to earlier this morning who introduced me as his boss told me his things were safe for now but to pick them up within a week. Of course, without telling me I knew what that meant, a replacement would be taking up his office by the beginning of the next week. People have already moved on I think to myself bitterly.

“We should get going Ba Mukela.” Sitali impatiently says to her cousin. She waves in my direction and I weakly wave back.

“Marlo?” I hear a familiar voice call out as I watch Sitali’s retreating figure until she disappears into the crowd.

I turn around and I’m met by the face of my Mother’s immediate older sister. I walk to where she is standing and envelope her small body in a hug.

“You are growing thinner and thinner in that your Lusaka, you should find a wife to feed you.” She teasingly says to me.

“Hi Auntie Patricia, I took after you.” I say back to her with the same teasing tone she used. She lets out a boisterous laugh and pinches one of my arms.

“Good to see you baby.” She says to me as she takes the arm she has just pinched and leads me to her packed BMW.

We enter the car and my aunt lays her head against the headrest and closes her eyes. I know then that she has a lot on her mind, and we won’t leave this place until she shares some part of it with me.

“I loved your brother God knows I did, but the confusion and embarrassment he has brought to us makes me want to wake him up and

kill him myself." She says as she looks directly into my eyes. I have never seen her angry before and I keep quiet as she continues her thoughts.

"Your other aunties don't agree with my stance, but Mary has been through enough and I won't allow them to force her to mourn someone who had continued to embarrass and torture her until his dying breath." She says sadly.

There is silence as she starts the engine of the car. "I want you to be prepared to deal with the family, you father can't control his sisters I'm sorry to say but you need to put your foot down for us to bury your brother with some dignity." She says to me as she drives onto the main road.

I grab my phone to let my sister know that I have arrived safely. I switch the phone back on and I see a text message from the Aunt I texted earlier. 'It's about respecting the dead and doing her duty as his WIFE, we shouldn't disrespect the dead it is un-African.' The text reads... I let out a chuckle and Auntie Patricia turns her eyes off the road to me for a second.

"What's funny?" She asks.

"Auntie Dinah has been trying to get me to talk some sense into Mary, since she thinks we are that close or that I can control a grown adult's righteous anger." I reply.

"Hope you told her to get out of here." She says to me as she lets out peals of laughter. I laugh with her until we both have tears in our eyes. Beyoncé's voice stops our bout of laughter as Auntie Patricia's phone signals an incoming call.

"Hello? Slow down Candy, I can't hear what you are saying." She says to her daughter.

"Who is doing what? Where are you baby, calm down, I'm 5 minutes away from where you are, you do this, stand by the side of the road near where you are. Ok, yes I'm with him, we'll be there soon." She cuts the call and shakes her head from side to side.

"Miserable old women." She mutters to herself.

"Your aunties had the bright idea to go to the funeral house of the woman who died in the car with your brother." The disgust is unmistakable in her tone.

"What?" I say to her with disbelief. Before I can process everything she has said to me, the car comes to a stop and my cousin Candy, climbs into

the backseat.

“The house is just down this same chi road.” She says to her mother. “Hi Ba Marlon, iye sorry mwandi, I didn’t know who else to call, I thought we were going to get food for tomorrow but instead we ended up coming here.” She says, turning to me.

“Who did you come with?” I manage to get out.

“I came with Auntie Dinah and Tila, Bamake Chipo, and Ba Gertrude.” She says to me with frustration colouring the names she mentions.

Amongst the names she says to me are two of my Father’s sisters, a cousin and a niece to my Mother.

Auntie Patricia parks the car near Auntie Dinah’s Toyota Corolla outside an open black gate. We hear the commotion before we step out of the car. We both turn to Candy at the same time and say the same words. “Stay in the car.” My Aunt smile at me as Candy nods her head looking more than happy to stay behind.

We step into the big yard of the house and hear the shouting before we see where it is coming from.

“Mother of a prostitute, why are you crying?” I hear Auntie Tila’s raised voice say.

“This is not how we do things ladies; we are mourning too, please respect us ka.” A male familiar voice says.

We walk by the mourners, some seated in a tent and some gathered at the entrance of the house. I hear the quiet murmur of displeasure amongst them as some whisper in Bemba and Lozi. Auntie Patricia leads the way in front of me and a scuffle stops our footsteps.

My cousin Gertrude has her head locked underneath the armpit of a huge man and I’m left speechless when I see who the man is. Mukela, Sitali’s cousin is dragging Gertrude out of the house by her hair. Behind him are Auntie Tila and Dinah who are hitting him to let Gertrude go.

A gun shot stops all the arguing and fighting and causes some people to run back into the house. My seat mate from my journey from Lusaka to Ndola is holding a pistol in her hands.

“Get out of my Father’s property.” She snarls. She looks at me and I know when I look into her eyes that she knows who I am, and she has

known from the moment I told her my name.

Mukela discards Gertrude like a useless piece of paper onto the ground and I see my Aunties and cousin scurry away without a word.

“Respect the dead ka Auntie Dinah?” I sarcastically ask Auntie Dinah as she passes by me. The look she shots me has no effect on me.

“You should be ashamed of yourselves...” I hear Auntie Patricia say to them as she follows them out of the gate. “I’m sorry for this,” I say to Mukela, Sitali and a young woman whom I presume to be Sitali’s sister.

“Please just leave.” Sitali says to me as I hear quiet weeping coming from inside the house.

I want to say more but I obey their wishes and turn back to walk to where my Aunt is waiting. The Toyota is gone already and let out sigh of relief at this. As soon as I enter the car, Auntie Patricia drives off.

I grab my phone and head to the media sites that have reported my brother’s accident. I go to the first one and click on it.

“Kapiri accident claims two victims” the headline reads. “A 42-year-old man, Brian Njovu and 38-year-old woman Rachel Imasiku both of Pamodzi, Ndola are the victims of”

I stop reading the article when I realize I saw a name embroidered inside a baby’s hat in my Brothers car last Christmas. I asked about it, but he told me it belonged to his daughter and a tailor got the names wrong. The name on it was “Nseko Imasiku Njovu.” My brain screams the meaning of that incidence and what I have just read.

I drop my phone into my hands and numbly stare ahead.