

2020 KALEMBA
short story prize
kalemba-shortstory-prize.com

If It Ain't Broke

Rhodisa Mwale

I had finally achieved blissful contentment! It was a delicately calculated measure of 'WTF' with a generous helping of 'who gives a shit', taken as often as needed to offset my downward spiral to insanity. I reckon in the last few years, I'd lost about two-thirds of my intellect and a hundred percent of my optimism. Funny thing is, it was the happiest I had been in years. In recent years, mind you. I was of the unwavering belief that I wasn't this much of a mess a decade ago.

But I was getting better, thanks to the bag of prescription medication in my nightstand and Dr Theo. Thank you, Dr.

Dr Theo assured me, in a stern, noncommittal tone, that the world wasn't out to get me and that my children weren't monsters sent to torment me. He scribbled a prescription and shuffled me out his offices of as fast as he could that I felt rejected. Had it come to this? Even a man I paid to listen wasn't interested anymore. It was time to find a new doctor.

I squinted at the name of the new mood stabilizer he'd prescribed, I noticed his scrawl was beyond legible but quickly reminded myself that Dr Theo would never do anything to sabotage me as I exited the building.

I hugged my purse tighter on instinct as I stepped out onto the crowded sidewalk. Street hawkers flanked both sides of Cairo road in numbers, adding more chaos than character to the Lusaka CBD, a stark contrast to the tranquillity inside Dr Theo's clinic. I took a deep breath, calculated the distance between my current location and the nearest pharmacy and plunged into the swaying crowd.

Half an hour later, I stood at the cosmetics counter of the pharmacy my prescription filled, ready to treat myself. I was in the mood for something risqué, and if Henry dared to ask the price of the perfume, I'd just point out the cost of his latest purchase. I'm certain he had just blown our savings on some fancy new gadget or phone, one can never keep up with his electronic fetish. That conversation should be enough to shut him up.

I stood, instead of contemplating my purchase, imagining the millions of ways in which I could torture my husband. I was that woman now. The one who spent all her free time plotting sadist acts. I wouldn't be at all surprised if a crow or an evil cat someday materialized on my doorstep or kitchen table during my morning tea. I did my best plotting when Henry's sited across from me obliviously flipping through his phone, not even sparing a glance at the monsters we call our children as they fought over one thing or the other.

So, yeah. I was a practicing member of the plotter's club now. I've come to accept it more or less, I think the drugs help.

I imagined someone calling my name. Wait. There it was again. Someone was definitely calling out to me. "Nasilele." A voice said from behind me. I tensed and turned. Not to seem rude, I smiled at the stranger who was beaming at me. She was at least a head taller than me. I wondered how much of that was heel height but successfully kept my gaze from her by sweeping to her feet. Besides, there was enough information in front of me to scrutinize. She was at least two shades darker than me. But oh, her cool Grace Jones mocha deep skin tone was to die for. She kept her plum-coloured lips parted, and her face was just the picture of glee. A glee which I wish I could share but no, I don't think I knew this woman standing before me.

"I'm sure you don't remember me. How could you? It's been years."

Clearly years enough to give me amnesia. She laughed, I gawked. She pushed a lock of some very expensive looking extensions (perhaps Indian or Peruvian or of that exotic persuasion) off her face and continued her explanation.

"We went to secondary school together. I kind of dropped out." She made a curved gesture over her abdomen, which looked way too flat for someone who'd had a baby as a matter of fact. I should know because mine looked like something was hibernating in there.

"Secondary school?" I wrinkled my brow and zip, nada, nothing. I gotta tell you, scrunching one's face up really does nothing to enhance the power of recall.

"Tina Mvula?" She offered, suddenly not sounding too sure that her name would trigger a memory or any recollection of her.

But oh boy, did it ever. Holy cow! Tina Mvula. Our very own Miss Train-wreck. The girl who's blood should have had an alcohol percentage label, someone whose grades were miraculously below zero. She looked amazing for someone who should be a hobo. I hid my hands in an exaggerated gesture of shock to conceal the deplorable state of my nails. I hadn't had a manicure since I stopped working. Henry didn't object to beauty treatments. Not outrightly, anyway. Henry wasn't the kind of husband to object to anything using his words. He protested through eyebrow raises, grunts and grimaces that made me feel guilty for wasting money on such 'trivial matters'.

"Yeah. How have you been?"

"Great." I widened my paper smile enough to show teeth. Liar, liar, pants on fire, sang my heart. "And you? How's the baby? Silly me, it can't still be a baby." I laughed and hated myself for the way my tone came across.

"Funny story that." She gave her hair another flick. I envied her perfectly manicured hands and the makeup on her face.

I'd stopped buying make up the day I'd come home to a crime scene. My eldest, who was three at the time had a friend come over to play, they somehow snuck into my room, and painted themselves, their clothes and my beddings and walls. Oh, those beautiful walls I lamented and wept! It could easily have been an 'oh how cute' moment, but due to the price of the said makeup, it ended up being a 'God, please give me the strength to not beat these kids into yesterday' kind of moment.

Anyways, now all I use is baby powder. Just enough to look sane. Although, I have been tempted to try the joker face or the pantomime. I figure my outside should reflect my insides. Crazy up here, a riot out there.

"I didn't have the baby. Well, I did, but I don't anymore. It's complicated. What about you? Did you get to be that world-famous scientist you always wanted to be?"

I gestured to all of myself. "Do I look like one?"

Her gaze swept me in an instant and left me feeling bare. "I have no idea what one looks like. What happened? You were overflowing with ambition."

What happened? One could call it a series of unfortunate events if one was trying to dodge blame and take responsibility. It can more accurately be described as a series of increasingly poor decisions, it was never just one particular thing. It was me trying to fix but successfully destroying one aspect of my life and future one at a time. Different reasons for different circumstances until one day, I found myself buying prescription mood stabilizers and talking to a successful version of the least likely to succeed awardee. And yes, I know they are antidepressants, but I'd rather call them mood stabilizers. So shoot me.

"It's complicated." My paper smile crumbled like papier-mâché in water.

"So I guess we are just two gals with complicated life stories. Have a drink with me and tell me all about it?"

I didn't know her that well. I hadn't seen her in years, but since Dr Theo had been as helpful as a hunk of wood at our session, I could use a listening ear. Besides my issues were about as unique as the storyline of any odd telenovela, the cast is different. Still, at some point, you realize it's the same shit all over again in a loop.

I censored my story, I couldn't do it. I couldn't bare my soul to a complete stranger. Phew! I was not insane yet! Take that circling paranoia! But I think my short bio gave her enough information.

"Wow. I am touched. You chose love and a family, which is honorable." Her voice was so sickly sweet I wanted to punch her in the mouth, but there was a sincerity to it.

"I grew up is all. I used to be filled with such delusions of grandeur, but I'm happy now, contented, which is good." I said and wished my coke would turn into whiskey. Perhaps a grown-up drink wasn't such a bad idea after all.

"To be honest until a year ago, I was in a very similar place. Married, raising a family, living paycheck to paycheck. I hated it. Sometimes I'd watch my husband sleep and wish I could smother him with a pillow."

Way too frank Tina was. Sure, I was glad to know that I'm not the only maniac in matrimony but who admits having homicidal thoughts involving their spouse? "Yeah?"

"Hmm." She nodded solemnly. "It was terrible, and unlike you, I had no education and no prospects. I will admit that I think my husband loved me, he did try. I don't really know, I don't remember that man. But I was miserable that much I know."

"What happened?"

"Remember that weird kid from across town? He used to hang out with some of the boys from class, Gideon."

Gideon? I probed my brain, and an image of a dopey kid in a black and white uniform flashed. "Yes! Gideon! He was so weird. So weird."

"He's some kind of physicist or computer scientist or something like that. I don't know." She passed me a card from her purse.

Gideon Ntibini, developer, NOW technology was the text printed in bold black letters on a silver card. His contact information was on the back with the phrase, ask us about our RESET system.

"I met him a year ago. I was in a really dark place. We had a few drinks, and he told me about this new thing he was working on. A computer program called reset." My nod urged her on.

"It was some super-secret project, and he only takes referrals. He said he could help me change everything. I was skeptical at first but considering my only option at that moment was swallowing a bottle of weed killer, I heard him out."

She leaned closer and glanced around nervously before she continued. "I met him at his home. He had this computer and some VR helmet of some kind. He plugged me in. Nasilele I relived and reset my life in that machine. It was as if my older, wiser mind relived the turning points of my life. I made better choices. I didn't get pregnant. I went to law school. I even landed a job at a prestigious firm. It was the best few hours of my life. I saw my life as it could have been. I was more than a little upset at Gideon when he came to get me later, though. He had tormented me. He showed me a life I could have had. Of course,

he just looked at me with that sly smug smirk on his face and told me I'd thank him when I got home."

"And?"

Tina produced a tablet from her purse. After a few taps and swipes, she placed it in front of me. I stared at the scanned document, unable to believe my eyes. A degree. Tina Mvula, Bachelor of Laws-Distinction.

"This is my company ID." She put the little rectangle on the screen. "Right now, I am studying towards my master's degree, and I am on track to make partner at my firm. I have no children, and I am engaged to the most wonderful man.

It must be some sort of scam, to which effect she tells me some bonkers story, gets me to pay her some consultation fee upfront and disappears into the earth or thin air. I was no dope.

My grey matter may have atrophied over the years. Still, I knew there was no formula in the parameters of science that made it possible to change your past. Time travel was impossible. And whatever it was wasn't even attempting to call itself time travel. It was bananas! So why did I wish it were true? When I looked at the man I loved and the children, I think I love, why I wished there was a delete button. And why did I keep the business card?

Gideon had an evil genius look about him and not just because of his enormous mad scientist glasses. I had prescription lenses too. God damn, I was a walking disaster! One gets uneasy ideas though about some dude who lives in a warehouse way out in the Industrial area. I wanted to bolt the minute he let me in.

I should have been reassured that he'd requested payment after the procedure. Logic demanded it, but what if it wasn't about the money? He could be a serial killer or something. Oh God, Henry didn't know I was here, no one did.

I shuffled in after him, silently, gripping my bag for dear life. He said very little. Tina had called ahead and informed him that I might be coming. He apologized for the mess in a room that looked like a sci-

fi movie set. I'm not certain how it was possible to keep tidy a room with masses of cable going into things and coming out of things.

I think my first breath came when he gave me a ten-page release contract to sign. Paperwork, legal jargon and whatnot. Something I couldn't understand. He walked me through the possible side effects of his invention. He requested a verbal agreement in addition to my many, many signatures.

He helped me buckle into the repurposed dental chair. My conscience battled with logic. Desire with morality. Could it be said that the thing I was about to attempt was unselfish? Did it matter that it wasn't? Did I care? Did I really hate my life this much?

Sure, my life wasn't perfect, or good. But I had Henry, the kids. Not every moment was bleak and filled with despair. There were good times too. Laughter and genuine happiness.

Oh, God!

This was a mistake. I had to stop this. I had to get out. I shifted in the chair, ready to unclasp the buckle. I felt the bulge of the pills in my pocket and froze.

The machine whirred to life.