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Don't Forget to Remember

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The screen of the phone turned on. The light from the screen illuminated the early morning darkness of the room.

The screen of the phone faded to black, taking the room with it. The darkness comfortably settled back into the room.

Despite it being almost 06:00hrs in November in Southern Africa, the heavy rains that poured all night for the first time that rainy season, still cast their heavy dark clouds, and, as such, it was an unusually dark morning.

But to Fitz, every morning of every day felt unusually dark, every morning since—

Fitz pressed the side key of his phone with his thumb and the screen of the phone went on again, illuminating the room again.

His eyes were wide open. He had been awake for a while. The thoughts were getting louder again until they were halted in their tracks by the light from the screen of the phone.

Over the past several months, it had become a ritual for him to countdown the clock until the alarm rang. He always wondered to himself why he kept the alarm set when, without exception, he was awake before the alarm rang.

Again, the screen slowly faded to black, and the room swiftly followed. The silence of the morning after a heavy downpour was unmistakable. That was, he thought to himself, the irony of the season, a season that was meant to be sprawling with birth and rebirth. As the

heavens watered the earth, and the earth gave birth to abundance following a summer that scorched everything, food was always abundant and, in essence, the mud that came along with the season was welcomed as the delicacies that the season brought with it heavily outweighed the nuisance of muddy shoes and a flooded Kulima Tower Bus Station in Lusaka; delicacies like Inswa.

But amid all that sprawling life, death. It was the constant symbiote that both birth and rebirth needed, the silence that enveloped that

morning and the heaviness which Fitz could not explain. He could not explain why he focused on it and not on the abundance of life that was birthed.

He thought he heard that familiar sound. He closed his eyes and allowed the sound to be more resonant. He almost allowed himself to think of smiling as the sound came ever closer, barely a whisper in his right ear. In the early days, even as everything else was as what dreams would come, the sound had initially annoyed the living hell out of him – it was high pitched and nasally – but through the years, he had become so accustomed to it that, in that dead silence of a morning that was supposed to yield life, he longed to hear it again.

The watch turned to 06:00:00 and the alarm began to ring. Fitz watched his phone as the alarm sounded. It echoed loudly throughout the quiet house. I guess that's one of the benefits of living alone, you can let the alarm ring for as long as you want, he thought.

Two minutes later, the alarm snoozed itself and the room fell quiet again. The silence, again, enveloped everything. Fitz closed his eyes to take it in, to embody it, to let it become a part of him. After all, this was where he thought he deserved to be.

He sat up on the right side of the bed, his feet touching the cold tiled floor. He enjoyed this morning ritual of his bare touching the cold surface of the floor for the first time; the floor sent a jolt shooting up his spine, raising the hairs on his body. To him, this was better than coffee.

The alarm blared again in the empty house. He picked up the phone and dismissed the alarm.

The notifications bar on the phone showed that he had several messages from various apps. He picked up spectacles from the bedside table and put them on. He dropped down the bar and went through the notifications. Of the numerous notifications, the ones from a dating app caught his eye. The dull yellow hearts beside the various lines of notification from the app let him know that several women were waiting to match with him. This delighted him. A whisper of a smile formed on his face.

You have 1 new like. See who likes you. 

Every time Fitz saw that dull yellow heart signalling potential matches on the dating app, he always felt an overwhelming and sudden sensation of happiness, alertness, focus, and motivation, accompanied by relief. And, despite a substantial number of these matches amounting to nothing, simply knowing that out there, of all the people that were available on the most popular dating app around, these women wanted to match with him. That was a rush, which he understood; it was the excitement of the intent to connect, the potential of what was yet to come, and the promise of what was yet bred by familiarity. But relief, that he could not explain.

Fitz was not a classically good-looking man, but neither was he ugly either. But at 37 years old and standing at 171 centimetres and weighing 96 kilograms, which made him overweight by over 20 kilograms for this height, he carried his weight well, so much so that an old ex-girlfriend affectionately and in the quiet moments when the two of them were one and nothing existed outside their union at that moment, called him Teddy Bear. He thought she called him Teddy Bear because of how much he loved to cuddle. Fitz gave great hugs; his late Grandmother always told him as she snuggled him tighter.

But his old ex-girlfriend called Fitz Winnie-the-Pooh because his rotund stomach reminded her of Winnie-the-Pooh, and she could not call him Winnie-the-Pooh. When she was growing up, she very much liked that yellow anthropomorphic teddy, and even as an adult, she adored it as it was inexorably intertwined with the very few memories she had of her father; him watching Winnie-the-Pooh with her as she ate porridge.

Fitz clicked on one of the lines of notifications from the dating app and the app opened.

It took him to the starred page of the app which showed every woman who wanted to match with him. There were 12 suitors. The whisper of a smile was turning into a murmur of it.

He scrolled through the profiles, not clicking on any of them but merely glancing at them.

Her profile picture caught his eye. Fitz stopped scrolling and stared at her picture. She wore a flowery spotted green bikini, and a light flowery peach sarong tied around her stomach,

with the front part of the sarong left open to show her long, brown legs sprawling into yellow beach slippers. She was standing in front of a swimming pool whose blue water, and the blue of the lake behind her in the distance, made the brown of her skin explode into perfection on the bright sunny day under which she basked.

Even though the large, grey-brim sun hut, with dark blue linings, and the large rectangular sunglasses hide most of her face, Fitz could not but behold her smile: her lips parted, her pearly white teeth showing. He was transfixed.

He read her name and age:

Martha, 23.

The name and age were only two of the four things that were visible before clicking on the profile for more details, apart from the profile picture and the word 'new' to show that it was a new potential match. Fitz wondered, if he stayed on the app long enough, would the 'new' change to 'old' as the app would begin matching him with women with whom he had previously matched? He shuddered at the thought, feeling a sense of revulsion for the app that he had not felt before – he felt dirty.

Her smile brought him back. He clicked on her profile. There were two other pictures on her profile, another picture of her seated wearing the same bikini and a third of her fully clothed in ripped tight-fitting blue jeans and a flowery blouse. Even an unsophisticated man with a bland sense of fashion like Fitz could see that she had a type when it came to clothing.

He scrolled back to the first picture, that smile got him again: the carefree joy radiating on her face and her pearly whites revealing a truth that he knew he would never feel again, happiness.

He closed his eyes and the memories of when he was last happy drowned his thoughts. Distant echoes of that familiar sound he almost allowed himself to hear earlier abounded. But even those were too painful. Despite his desperation of wanting to hear it, needing to hear it, he could not allow himself to face it because facing it would tear him apart, opening him to a reality he was not ready to face.

Fitz opened his eyes and her face was all he saw. There she was.

He scrolled down and read her biography.

Martha, 23

Lives in Lusaka

Woman

4KM away

A warmth washed over him knowing that she was so close.

He continued reading.

Am a very straight forward and a down to earth person 🥰❤️ and don't match with me if you're not on your profile 😞🙏👉 not cheap but I know my worthy 🙌

"Not cheap but I know my worthy," he winced, repeating the phrase under his breath.

The grammar and punctuation were atrocious. Oh my God! His thoughts reviled.

On any other day, that would have been a deal breaker. Fitz was not a prude when it came to grammar and punctuation, but the proper use of prose was a habit of his work, thus, as is more often than not, one's work ends up seeping into one's life.

She's so beautiful though, he reminded himself and the grammatical and punctuation misgivings were nothing more than the cost modern society bore for living in a world in which nearly all intimate conversations were had through text messages.

The murmur of a smile on Fitz's face was christening his cheeks so nicely that one could not be blamed if they mistook it for a full smile.

From reading her short biography, he knew exactly what he would say in his first message.

Fitz clicked a lime green coloured heart emoji and the app matched them. A light blue menu appeared announcing that Fitz had matched with Martha and encouraged him to send her a message. He clicked the menu bar, the inbox opened and he typed the message he was eager to send her. He pressed enter.

FITZ

I promise I look like my profile, when I shave that is but I haven't.
shaved coz it's no-shave November 🙄

Stretching as he exhaled heavily, he cracked his neck and placed the phone and spectacles on the bedside table.

He walked to the bathroom in his bedroom. He closed the door behind him and the sound of running could be heard echoing throughout the quiet house.

Fitz entered his office and closed the door behind him. He threw his notebook and phone on his desk. He sat in the chair behind his desk and sank deep in it, pulling a lever beneath it so that it reclined all the way back. He exhaled heavily. What a fucking shit show of a day, he thought.

The good thing about his position was that even though he was not in a senior management position, his portfolio as Information, Education and Communications Officer – he winced every time he said his full title, he found it pretentious and overly long – was such that he was entitled to an office all to himself, a private quarter in which clients would be free to engage with him without the restriction that an officer at his level would have in a pool office.

Well, that was what he argued when he requested to take up the unoccupied office. But he rightly knew that Management gave him the

office to appease him after he was passed over for a senior officer position during the restructuring of the organisation.

After the meeting he had just had, Fitz did not care how he came about having an office to himself. He was just glad he had a space to himself so that he could, for the briefest of moments and before the reality he had forced into creation during the meeting came crashing down, just exhale; with no prying eyes, just a brief moment of him breathing.

Besides, as far as appeasements went, this was quite adequate, he reasoned. It was complete with large corner-to-corner and floor-to-ceiling windows which showed a view of Lusaka City in the background. It had a couch and a dark brown teak Space Executive Desk; it was truly quite pleasant to behold. This indeed had truly sucked some of the venom from his being passed over. And both parties knew that accepting the office meant accepting that he would never rise higher than where he currently was.

He exhaled and accepted that his fate was sealed. It was over.

He sat back up and picked up his phone. The moment he held it in his hand, that familiar chime rang and the phone vibrated. He was hoping it was her. Everything in him was screaming it was her.

He opened the app. It was her. It was the first response since the morning text message he had sent.

MARTHA

Lol 😂

How are you doing

It was not the big reaction he thought he would get, but, at least, he got a "LOL" and an 😂 emoji; it must be a good sign. He decided to push on.

FITZ

I'm good, Martha, especially now that the heat has broken
Eh it was too hot, as if we were being roasted in hell

He paused and waited, phone in hand. He just sent another joke. Would she bite? Would she think it was too tacky? His mind was racing.

The bubble flickered. She was typing. He held his breath.

MARTHA

Oh yah I see

Eish! His thoughts exclaimed. He knew he had crashed and burned hard.

He got up from his desk and walked to the large glass windows. He stared outside for a moment. It was almost lunchtime and the foot traffic out of the building had increased as people went out for lunch.

He thought of what to say next. He decided to go all in. Then he began to type.

FITZ

Coz it was making people crazy
My pastor even preached that we were being roasted coz of the sins in
Lusaka. And I was like, "I thought it was global warming." Imagine,
basantamfya mu church sure eh (the chased me out of church)

He paused and waited. If this failed, then he would have struck out completely. He would do what he always did, unmatched her and try and shoot his shot with the next match.

Shoot your shot, he recoiled as he said that to himself. He always found it too pretentious even for him.

A heart appeared against the second, third, and last lines of text messages he had sent. She liked the messages.

MARTHA

Uuuuhm lol ba pastor also 😂😂😂
Oho yah

That was all Fitz needed and he typed away.

FITZ

What sins Martha hmm
Are you the one making Lusaka hot 🔥😳👉👉👉

MARTHA

How lol 😂

FITZ

Haha maybe you are sinning too much
You tell me ah ah

He paused. Thought about the next line. He knew what he wanted to say. But should he?

Fitz joined the dating app a month ago. It had been six months since his last relationship imploded and, at the time of his joining the app, he reasoned that it would be a good distraction for him as he processed the past failures of his relationships.

When the app was first launched, it was marketed as a dating app, with its instantly catchy 'swipe right' tagline quickly polarising the zeitgeist. But an app based on swiping right on a face of those one wanted to connect with quickly devolved into an app where people who matched could hookup.

People still used the dating app to find legitimate relationships and connections, but the majority simply used it for random and momentary liaisons. Let's not sugarcoat it, it's an app for lots of anonymous one-night stands, he remembered his best friend telling him when he introduced him to the app.

Fitz convinced himself that the physical intimacy he would find from random liaisons would satiate any longing inside of him for a relationship until he was ready to date again. But he knew that he would never be ready to date again because dating again would mean opening up to someone, something that he was not willing to do. So, the app sufficed.

Fitz had a specific routine on the app: get in, drop a joke or two, and if the response was favourable, arrange a meeting.

Staring at the last line of text message he had sent and knowing what had to come next, he still hesitated. But why the hesitation? He questioned himself.

He made up his mind.

FITZ

That's why you don't even want me to see you *hmm*

He pressed enter. He watched the screen of the phone. No bubbles. He waited.

The screen went black.

He walked back to his desk, threw the phone on his table, and slumped into his chair, reclining it to its limit. He exhaled deeply.

That all-familiar chime rang, and the phone vibrated.

Fitz sat up and hastily picked up the phone, pressed the side key button and unlocked it with his thumbprint. He clicked on the dating app, went to the inbox, and there was her reply.

It was a simple, elegant line of unpunctuated text.

MARTHA

Come see me

To Fitz, that was the most beautiful line of text he had ever seen. He smiled and sighed with relief, sinking back into his chair and swivelling around happily as it sank in that he was going to fuck Martha.

It sank in. He was going to fuck Martha. He was going to fuck her after a few exchanged texts.

And it finally sank in. It was just a hookup for her too.

Fitz looked up from his desktop computer and the sun was setting. The view from his office was spectacular in the evening. It's a good way to make someone work longer hours, he smiled to himself, watching the sunset over FINDECO House, Zambia's tallest building.

Seeing that building in the far distance, lit up by the orange of the setting sun, roused in him hope that tomorrow he would try again but the difference would be that he would succeed that time around.

He picked up his phone and opened the dating app. He had not replied to her message.

He had gotten lost in the repercussions of the meeting he had earlier in the day. Thus, like he had done on countless occasions when reality became unbearable, he had buried himself inside his work and this was the first time he was coming up for air. And, coming up for air meant texting her back.

How would he start? He pondered.

He typed, deleted, typed again, and deleted again.

He exhaled slowly and typed one more time. He pressed enter.

FITZ

Fuck, how did I miss that reply?!

Where's home?

The bubbles were immediate. He could not help himself but chuckle out loud in surprise. It is what it is, he thought to himself, allowing himself to enjoy the ride. Don't overthink it, he told himself.

His thoughts wandered back to earlier that day in the morning when he saw her profile picture and allowed himself to dream: to dream of her, of his intent for her; of the possibility that lay wait in the promise of what could be. He recalled the joy she saw in her that radiated more intensely than anything he had experienced in a very long time. He recalled allowing himself to dream of the woman in the picture whom he had never met.

The text appeared from her on his screen.

MARTHA

Lol 😂

Fitz smiled. Was that their thing, the 'LOL' and 😂 ?
He let himself dream.

MARTHA

Chilenje near *engine filling station*

FITZ

I know that feeling station
Where Hungry Lion is, right
Can I come see you tonight?

He hesitated. Am I being too rush? He debated.

The red heart appeared next to each of the three lines of text, including the line, "can I come see you tonight?"

The bubble popped up.

She was replying.

He was smiling.

It felt perfect.

MARTHA

Around what time if it's tonight?

FITZ

What time would be good for you?

MARTHA

Even now

FITZ

OK I'm coming
So I come *pa* Engen

MARTHA

Alright

Yes

FITZ

What's your number?

MARTHA

090 842 1953

20 minutes had gone by since Fitz arrived at Engen Filling Station in Chilenje. The place was abuzz with activity. A Hungry Lion Restaurant had recently been opened at the service station and, as the trend had shown for Zambia's most popular fast-food restaurant, wherever a Hungry Lion Restaurant opened, the masses followed.

The sun had fully set but the Filling Station was well-lit all around. Fitz sat in his car and, from a distance, watched individuals, families, and groups with excited kids shuffle in and out of the restaurant. The sight of how Zambians got excited over Hungry Lion chicken kept Fitz

so amused so much so that he did not notice Martha staring at him stare at Hungry Lion loving Zambians.

Fitz noticed her from the corner of his eye. A big broad smile littered his face. It was pointless hiding it. His smiling made Martha smile. She motioned him to get out of the car.

Before Fitz could say anything, Martha embraced him, her hands over his shoulders, his around her waist. Her scent was light, soft, sweet, and flowery, with notes of jasmine; exactly how he knew she would smell.

Fitz had held on to Martha for too long. His body reacted to being that close to her. He quickly pulled back. He wanted to hide how his body had reacted to her being in his arms. He hoped she had not noticed. But the smile on her face let him know that she had felt him on her in the embrace.

"*Hmm,*" Martha said, raising her eyebrow playfully.

Fitz embarrassingly chuckled. He cleared his throat and said, "hi."

"Hi," Martha replied.

"Do you want to get in the car?"

"OK," Martha paused. "You are not going to open my door or something like that?"

Martha chuckled.

Fitz laughed along with her, his thoughts racing, should I? "Coz, you look like the type who opens doors for the *ladies,*" Martha said walking to the passenger side of the car.

The drive from Engen Filling Station to his home in Chalala off Shantumbu Road was mostly quiet with intermittent and nervous small talk from him. Music softly played in the background. He remembered asking her how she was and her replying, "I'm OK, but I'm not OK, you know?"

He could not remember what he said in response, but he was positive he mumbled something, accompanied by a nervous chuckle. Why was he so nervous? He thought to himself.

He had had this experience enough times over the past month and, as they always told him, practice made perfect. But that night, that night as well have been his first time.

Relax, he repeated to himself, exhaling as he opened the door to his bedroom and led her in, closing the door behind them in his quiet house.

She sat on his bed. He offered her something to drink but she did not want anything.

He sat next to her.

Their lips touched and his world exploded. His heartbeat faster, her breath she withheld. Her lips were soft and silky, his were warm and tasted sweet from the tea he had drunk before he left the office. She tasted like a promise fulfilled.

He guided her and laid on her back. Her legs dangled on the side of the bed. His right arm supported him up. Her tongue entered his mouth. His right arm trembled.

She wore a long blue denim shirt that went up to her upper thighs. From as much as he could tell, only her underwear was beneath the denim. He unbuttoned her with his left hand – 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 buttons, he had reached her naval – his right arm kept him up, and his tongue searched the depth of her soul.

She did not wear a brassiere underneath the denim; her breasts, firm, and alert, were freed. His lips found her right nipple and his left hand her left. Her entire breast fit perfectly in the palm of his left hand.

His tongue found her left nipple and his left hand strayed over her flat stomach to her–

Her hand caught his right above her underwear and stopped him. She pulled away from the kiss.

"Where are you going?"

He playfully smiled.

"But I told you, I'm not OK."

He inched up. "You are not feeling too well?"

She gave him a look. And he knew exactly what she meant.

"Oh," he said, as he sat up. "That's what you meant."

She sat up next to him, buttoning her denim. "I'm OK, but I'm not OK," she said, her tone mockingly playful.

He chuckled. "I get it now."

Nothing was going to happen between them; he finally knew that she had already known before he sent the first joke early that morning.

He stared at her. He could not but stare at her. She was so beautiful. He felt lucky just to be close to her.

She buttoned 3. He could still see her breasts.

"You have perfect breasts."

She looked at them. "These small things ayi? *Hmm* as if I haven't even been pregnant before."

That came out of nowhere, Fitz thought. Nothing about Martha gave anything away that she had a child.

"You have a kid? Your breasts don't look like you have breastfed a day in your life."

"No," Martha said. She did not say it with sadness, she merely factually stated it.

"I'm so sorry," was all that Fitz could say.

"It happens," Martha said and went quiet.

Fitz's eyes never left her face. Martha met his gaze.

"Sometimes, pain hits you so much that when you think you can't take more pain, coz you think, "if I get any more pain, I'll just die," but then life just piles on more and more..." Martha trailed off.

Fitz's gaze never left her face.

"But there's a moment in the maze of all that madness when you discover that you are stronger than you thought."

Martha looked back at him. Fitz was very quiet and still. Then she looked away.

Martha continued talking. Her tone of voice remained even, neither choked by sadness nor anger, she was merely recounting what she went through.

“Last year, I lost my boyfriend. It was...,” Martha thought, then chuckled, “shit, it’s been a year already coz he passed in November.”

Martha looked at him for a while then looked away. In the intervals that she did not speak, the entire house was still.

“I comforted myself that at least he left me pregnant, but then this year in February, I lost the baby.”

Martha looked at Fitz again and tried to smile at him. That was when he saw it. The hidden pain behind the wall. She knew he had seen it and she stopped faking the smile. If she continued smiling, she knew the dam that held back everything would break.

Fitz reached across to hold her. Martha refused.

“Trust me, it’s more for me than you,” Fitz said, his right arm outstretched inviting her in for an embrace.

Martha went in for the hug and he held her, both of Fitz's arms wrapped around her so tightly he could hear her beating heart. It thumped along fast.

Fitz laid Martha down, her head never leaving his chest.

In that silence and stillness, they lay in each other’s arms. Two strangers holding on to each other tightly to fend off the world, enveloped by the weight of what Martha had just shared.

Fitz’s thoughts wandered to what Martha said, to her loss, to her pain. Loss, we all go through it and deal with it in our ways, he thought, I guess this is her way of dealing with it.

Fitz was holding Martha tight so that he could imbue her with his strength for her not to need him to be her strength. He could not be her strength, he told himself, because he would fail her when she needed him the most. So, he needed her to be her own strength.

But Fitz knew he would have to face it. Like Martha did.

Fitz closed his eyes and let himself hear the sound again. He could hear it clearly as the last day he heard it, annoying, high-pitched and nasally.

Martha held him tighter. Fitz broke down and wept. She knew she needed to hold him tight. So, he held him with all her might.

And it finally sank in for Martha, that was what she saw in Fitz's eyes on his profile picture on the dating app, he needed someone to hold him so that he would not break when he broke down. And breaking down he needed to. She held him tighter, nestled in, and his head never leaving his chest.