

The Intervention
by
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The first thing I did when we got to Leicester was ask Precious to use the bathroom. I did my business super quick, because I wanted them to think I'd only gone in for a long piss, and her loo had one of those inexplicable doors with frosted glass. I flushed, washed my hands, gave the room a blast of the good ol' Glade, checked the bowl for skid marks and got out of there.

Z and I had come down from Newcastle where we'd been slugging and whoring for a couple of days until the natives ran us out with pitchforks. He was a little off with me, because all the way down the M1 I'd stopped him every half mile or so for a pee—not my fault, I have a condition. The problem, as he put it, wasn't so much my non-stop pit stop requests, rather the fact that I refused to use the verges like a 'real man'. I admit, I was stoned and paranoid, but I'd heard this story from a mate about a bloke who had a mate who was answering nature on the verges when the ngonjos pulled up from nowhere, and get this, coz he was shaking it when they showed up, they did him for jerkin the gherkin, and had the poor sod put on the register.

"This is my gororo, Simba. Simba, meet Precious," Z said, using the exact same line he'd hit me with when introducing Sharon in Newcastle. Not that this knowledge was new to me, or that I didn't know of other girlfriends, but in that moment a wave of righteous indignation washed over me. But this never lasts long:

"Tafara nekukuzivai," I said the mystic words and clapped my hands, old school.

"Pleased to meet you too," Precious replied in English.

We repeated the ritual for Tamu and his girlfriend Sarah, Sylvia (Precious's mate), and some random Zimbo—a blazo in shorts whose name I can't quite remember. There was a lot of

clapping and repeating of the mystical words, until Precious's two daughters came in. I don't remember their names, but one was older and the other was younger than the older one, yes, I'm sure that's correct. The kids didn't speak Shona, so we were introduced in English, and check this out; I was "Uncle Simba". The little one said something stupid like, "Oh, Simba from the Lion King." I wanted to twist her ear nice and proper like my teachers did back in the day, but ended up explaining that Simba meant strength and my full name, Simbarashe, meant God's Strength, because names had to have meanings where we're from. Then again the rashe could be God or the king, so a more apt translation that keeps the ambiguity is "the Lord's strength." The kid just looked at me blankly like I was talking effing Zulu.

"Would you like something to drink?" Precious asked.

"Tea," Z said, and I gave him my wtf face.

"What about you, Simba?" she turned to me.

"I'll have a beer," I said.

"Are you sure you wouldn't like some tea first."

"Beer is my tea." My little joke fell flat. The blazo looked at me with contempt. I reckon he must have been one of those Pentecostal types.

Precious got me a Bud. I couldn't believe I'd gone through that mini aggro for a Bud. Give me a wife-beater or a Sam Adams if you wanna get into it like that. My dad was hitting Black Labels at eight in the morning when I was growing up, and he never missed a day at work in twenty five years. But I like to think that I drink for religious reasons, Biblical ones that is. And I'm not just talking about Jesus's first miracle, no man, Proverbs 31's the daddy, and I've got it all memorized, well, the important bits anyway:

Let beer be for those who are perishing,

wine for those who are in anguish!

Let them drink and forget their poverty

and remember their misery no more.

It's pretty plain to anyone with a rudimentary theological background that Liz, Phil, Charlie, Wills and my boy Harry, oh, and Kate and the baby too, are, by divine decree, advised to stay away from Noah's brew, and save it for us poor Third World immigrants.

Z asked for the channel to be flicked to the news. Precious stuck us on the BBC, but Z requested Al Jazeera instead. "Marevents are coming and it's the only channel I trust," he said. "The winds of change are coming to our nation, just you wait and see." We were hit with the Egyptian situation. I waited for it, Z was pro-Morsi and I was pro-coup, or was it the other way round? We'd spent so much time arguing about it until we became confused, but what I do know is that our positions on the issue were diametrically opposed and irreconcilable. He looked at me, gauging to see if I was going to say something. I held my peace and drank my crappy Bud.

"I used to think Egypt was such a nice country before all this madness happened," the blazo said.

"Nice? They ain't done nothing since the Pyramids," I replied.

"Do you always have to be so antagonistic?" Z said to me. "That's such a racist thing to say. I mean, how would you feel if someone said that our people hadn't done anything since Great Zimbabwe?"

“I wouldn’t feel nothing, because it’s the truth. We were the greatest empire in the world, but look at us now, we’re a nation of bums innit,” I replied, knowing this would goad him on.

“You’re a prick. Ah, sorry, mune vana.” Z threw the kids an apologetic glance. “Very sorry about the language.”

I fought to contain a snigger, tried to look injured even, and Z went on, “Wait until the election results, everything’s going to change, just you wait and see.”

The Egyptian thing just kept dragging on as they covered all the angles, the Islamic Brotherhood opinion, the Opposition opinion, the American opinion, the British opinion, the Arab League opinion, the UN opinion. Everyone had something to say about it. I zoned out, my eyes fixed on some indefinite point on the DVD collection next to the TV. There were photos on the wall of Precious and her kids, a social-work degree certificate from some third tier university, and an empty rectangular shadow which I think must have been occupied by her ex-husband’s picture. I wondered where he was and why he’d left. Maybe Z would leave her for the same reason.

Syria came on next and I felt a tinge of disappointment. In the last decade we’d shared the stage with Iraq and Afghanistan; now it seemed Zimbabwe couldn’t make the headlines if it tried. Perhaps the world had gotten tired of us with our crazy politicians and starving billionaires, topped off with an ultra-crap cricket team, the same worn out antics year in, year out; we’d gone the way of Big Brother 10.

I can’t quite remember what else we spoke about, zoned out as I was, but I can guarantee it would have been among several topics Zimbos always regurgitate when congregating—how much better things were back home than in the UK (insert canned laughter), white people

(racist bastards), Indians/ in some versions labelled Pakistanis (racist bastards), Nigerians/West Africans (racist bastards), when was the last time you went home? (answers vary), get rich quick schemes (that go nowhere), work (mostly care work and other such menial occupations), food (yes, the food was so much better back home... that is, when we had it). All I had to do was wear a slight smile on my face and nod along. Z looked like he was monitoring my behaviour and would chuck me out at the slightest provocation.

“Let’s not forget why we’re here, the young ones would like to present their story,” Precious announced, pointing at Tamu and Sarah.

“We are ready to listen,” the blazo said.

Israeli jets had encroached Syrian airspace.

“You’re right, that’s why we came,” said Cynthia.

This was outside the script. I was drinking too fast, as you do in boring company, my Bud was two thirds done. The blazo leaned forward and wore a grave face, the kind old biddies wore padare back in the day when we went kumakaya.

“Sarah, perhaps you’d like to begin and then we can hear from Tamu,” Z said, like he was in on the whole thing. I sat up, or sank back in my chair.

“We’ll help you in any way we can,” Precious said.

“Auntie, we’ve come to you ‘grown ups’ because our relationship is in trouble,” Sarah said with great dignity. The blazo nodded to signal they’d done the right thing. “You see, this ‘boy’ and I have been going out for eight years. We met in high school in Mazowe, and we have been together ever since. I came here first and worked hard, with my own hands, until I

raised enough money to buy him a ticket so that we could be together. I love him, but now I have doubts as to whether he sees a future for us.

“He promised to marry me three years ago and I’m still waiting. Every time I ask about it, he gets angry and defensive. He starts shouting things about money and work. But three years! Three whole years? He can afford to buy himself iPhones and videogames, but he says he can’t afford a wedding. I am tired. I can’t wait forever, eight years we’ve been together...”

She went on, and on, and on, and on, and on, reciting a litany of accusations against Tamu who sat stone faced with his arms folded across his chest. A couple of times he sighed, blowing out long breaths of exasperation.

“...because I can’t really see why if he is interested, he can’t at least begin to make an effort—”

“Will you *please* shut up,” Tamu finally said.

“See Auntie, see the way this ‘boy’ talks to me,” Sarah pointed at him, jabbing her finger in the air.

“You’ve been talking for so long, iPads, computer games, I can’t even remember what you started off saying. How can I respond when you keep talking? I need to say my side—”

“Iwe, don’t interrupt me, it’s still my turn to speak.”

“You can’t expect me to keep quiet when you’re talking nonsense. For one hour, everyone has had to sit and listen to your rubbish.”

“I haven’t been speaking for an hour.”

“Okay, okay, please, let’s try to be amicable,” Z said, holding up his hands. “You both love each other. I know that because you wouldn’t be here if you didn’t, so we have to find a way of talking nicely to each other and see how we can help you solve this problem.”

“I think we should hear Tamu’s side of the story, so we can better understand what is happening,” said Cynthia.

“That’s right,” said the blazo.

Tamu opened his mouth to speak, but that’s when we came on the news. Precious increased the volume on the TV. Tamu started saying something, or maybe he didn’t speak, rather he turned his attention to Al Jazeera like the rest of us had done. The reporter was black, with a Shona accent, holding a clipboard, and she stood in front of a large green tent with the words “POLLING STATION” written outside it. She spewed some chat about how the election had largely been peaceful and the results were coming soon. A crowd formed behind her, their necks craned, as they looked into the camera. We all held our breaths. The ticker on the bottom scrawled stuff about Egypt. The news reports which we’d followed in the previous weeks as they popped up sporadically on SKY, BBC, CNN, ITV, and Channel 4, all spoke about how Zimbabweans were going to vote for change in this election. This of course meant that the Opposition would win, a fact we were asked to take for granted. That was the only acceptable outcome for which the media had groomed us. I took a sip and checked out the expectant faces around me. A nervous twitch made the left side of Z’s mouth dance Gangnam Style.

The reporter’s lips were moving. I thought she was a very comely woman, like an early Renee Cox portrait, and then quickly corrected my sexist impulse. My beer was at critical. Was Precious going to offer a refill? I languished in my uncertainty, the future became a boot stamping on my face.

“Change is coming to Zimbabwe,” Z said.

“It’s been a long time coming,” said the blazo.

“As soon as our victory is confirmed, I’m packing my bags, leaving this goddamn country and going home,” Z went on.

Which side was I on again?

“Ndizvozvo, change is coming, I can feel it.” The blazo was swept along by Z’s optimism.

The reporter was saying something about the ZEC, and the SADC, and the AU, and the EU, and the UK, and the US, and the RSA, but she may not have mentioned some of these acronyms. The results were out. The Party had won. The Party had won. The Party had won. The Party had. The Party? I saw a joyful smile mixed in with relief on Z’s face, because the Party’s win was a victory for him too. He had an asylum claim pending with the Home Office and if the Opposition had won, he’d have been screwed. He quickly mastered himself and frowned, now wearing a new look, a cross between sorrow and anger.

“Those cheating bastards,” he shouted at the TV screen.

“I can’t believe it,” said the blazo. “It’s all lies. Why did they even contest the election when the playing field had not been mowed?”

“Levelled,” I said.

“What?” the blazo asked.

“The playing field had not being *levelled*,” I replied.

“By mowing,” he said.

I closed my eyes and felt it pushing in from the void as it so often did. It was a pressure from an unknown dimension, a place before thought where only feeling and emotion matter. It came to me often during moments of crisis. Sometimes it hit me while I slept, forcing me from my bed to my desk. It was the act of being taken over by something so deep within oneself that it could have been from outside oneself, a seismic force of such magnitude that I was thrust from my seat. My hands were thrown outwards as though I was on the cross, and then my voice cried out:

The children of Africa cry

Waa-waa-waa

When they should be laughing

Ki-ki-ki

Can you hear them, can you hear them.

Will you help them, will you help them.

The land of the fat hippopotamus

The home of the mighty Zambezi

The mystical ancestors

The wide African skies

The children of Africa cry

Waa-waa-waa

....

Out of me flowed a poetic response, a thermonuclear blast that left everyone stunned. Cynthia's mouth was wide open. Z blinked a couple of times. As it lifted, I felt naked and tired, so tired. I fell back onto my seat and tried to control my breathing. I reached into my pocket, took out a notebook and began to write the verse as I'd received it. My t-shirt felt clammy on my skin. Everyone was staring. Precious told the kids to go to bed.

“I’m sorry I didn’t tell you,” Z apologised, “Simba is a poet.”

“A poet?” someone said.

“I’m a member of the Zimbabwe Poets for Human Rights,” I said.

“What does that mean?” Precious asked. “Like, forgive my ignorance, but how can one be a *poet* for Human Rights. Does this mean that as a poet for Human Rights you’re not interested in love, landscapes, the stars, ordinary life?”

I was so exhausted from my poetic attack that I couldn’t formulate a full response for her. The problem with our school system is that it never imparted the appreciation of higher art for all but a handful. The best I could do to educate her was to say that Poetry for Human Rights was the highest form of art. I’m not sure she understood, but she nodded and quickly brought me another beer. I drank in silence, pondering the awesome meaning of my new verse.

I caught Sarah looking at me, and in that moment understood that she was a kindred spirit. There’s a sixth sense by which poetic souls become aware of one another. By poetic souls, I mean not only poets or readers of poetry, but those for whom poetry induces profound emotion and a heightened understanding of the world. Sarah had this soul, and the wide eyed look she gave me from across the room gave me strength and a renewed conviction in my mission here on earth.

“We’ve been cheated again, but we will never accept this result. The people will mobilise across the country,” Z said.

“Rise up, ye, mighty race!” I cried.

“The people will take to the streets. We refuse to live under this dictatorship any longer. If the Arabs can do it, so can we,” he said.

“Behold, the African Spring flowers,” I said, waving my Bud, spilling libation for the ancestors on Precious’s carpet.

“When we stand united like this, brothers, there’s no force in this world that can hold us,” the blazo said. “We will not accept this result.”

It was easy enough to say all these things ten thousand miles away from the epicentre. Nothing we said or did meant a fart, and that was the truth of it. I checked Twitter and Facebook on my phone to see what everyone else was saying about it all.

“How can we in the diaspora know what people back home are thinking, or who they voted for?” Tamu said in a quiet voice, as though asking himself.

Not one of us had an answer for him.

The net was abuzz and everyone had an opinion on the result. A lot of people were celebrating. Some of these were Zimbabwean, and a great many of those were just Africans who didn’t live in Zimbabwe. When I was a kid at the UZ (it was a different country then), I had an erection for Castro and Saddam, though, I’d never have wanted to live in their countries.

“Would anyone else like something to drink?” Precious asked.

“I’ll have a beer,” Z said, in a world-weary voice.

“Me too,” said the blazo. “I quit last year, but what’s the point?”

Cynthia asked for wine but got Lambrini instead. We nursed our drinks, staring at the TV, eager for more information. I got to thinking that Precious needed the wallpaper changed or

maybe the walls needed a lick of paint. The carpet needed washing. A cell phone rang, it might have been mine. No one answered it.

“I just need to know if he is going to do as he promised and marry me, or else I’ll move on. I can’t wait forever, I’m twenty five. This is not child’s play. Some of my friends, people who were junior to us in school, are already married and starting families of their own,” Sarah started up again. “Auntie, everyone here can see I am committed to this ‘boy’, if money is a problem he should just say so.”

“Ndezvekumanikidzana here?” Tamu replied, gruffly like.

“You see, you see the way he talks to me like I’m a rag. I’m tired, that’s it, it’s over, Auntie.”

Sarah got up, picked up her handbag which was on the dodgy carpet and made for the door. I almost forgot myself and made to rise, but Precious was up before me and blocked Sarah’s path using her considerable weight in a manner my skinny frame could only hope to approximate. She pleaded with her for a couple of minutes, saying certain things, the kind of things that calm people down when they’re seeing red. I don’t quite recall the exact words, but Precious said stuff about how one needs to be patient with men because deep down they are all spoilt little boys.

Tamu sort of sneered and stewed in his seat, making no attempt to keep Sarah from leaving. He looked like he was tired of the whole affair and had better things he’d rather have been doing with his time.

“I went through his phone, Auntie,” said Sarah, and Tamu sat up, attentive all of a sudden.

“You can’t believe the things I saw in there.”

“You went through my phone?” Tamu shouted.

“Yes, I did.”

“It’s my *personal* phone. Why would you do that? You see, this is why I don’t want to be with you. How can I be with someone who doesn’t trust me? My phone is private. That’s an infringement of my sovereignty. Arrgh.”

“Let’s calm down for a minute,” Z said. “I can see everyone is getting angry, so how about we all calm down and try to figure this thing out.”

“Uncle, how can I be calm after what this ‘boy’ has done?” said Sarah.

“You went through my bloody phone.”

“Let’s all just calm down like Uncle Z said,” said Cynthia. She looked maternal and concerned.

Sarah glared at Tamu who stared back defiantly.

In that moment, our complete and utter inadequacy to help this young couple became apparent to me. This thing, this intervention, that we were trying to do, was a sort of attempt to bring Shona, old school, ways of doing things to the UK, like we were Tetes and Sekurus, but we were found wanting. Z was a manwhore of the lowest kind, and the young couple would see this when one day, in the not so distant future, Precious would be crying with a mincemeat heart over how he dumped her suddenly, with no explanation. The blazo in the shorts and Cynthia were both sufficiently middle aged so they should have been married but they weren’t. I didn’t know what they were, divorced, widowed, single, whatever, but what I did know, looking at them, was that if neither of them could hold down a stable relationship, then they sure as hell shouldn’t have been playing marriage counsellors. And Precious, poor Precious was compromised, if only because of the poor judgement she demonstrated by going out with my gororo, Z.

For my own part, I never cast a single stone in this entire charade. I was consumed with overwhelming fury, seeing what Tamu was doing to this little princess. How could he sit there, chatting nonsense about his privacy, as she trailed the list of names from his phone:

“Tracy, Laura, Chloe, Sekai, Cynthia, Jade, Lucy, Susan, Miranda, Irene, Chido...” Sarah spilled out this litany, like she’d memorised the whole thing.

“You shouldn’t have gone through my bloody phone. You were looking for something, yeah, well, now you found it. I hope you’re happy,” Tamu said.

“Am I not a beautiful woman, am I not beautiful?” She turned to me, but before I could answer Tamu blurted out:

“That’s right, you forgot Sally and Michelle.”

“Come on, Tamu, you’re not helping here,” Z said.

I wanted to get up and sock the ‘boy’ on the speaker proper. Sarah was crying. The two other ladies embraced her, Precious in front and Cynthia behind her, so she was sandwiched, like they were protecting her from another blow. I could feel a tremor in my hands. I clenched and unclenched my fists, felt a dullness, the mist descending. I got up with my fists clenched and the next thing I felt was Z grab my arm.

“Let’s go for a smoke,” he said, as he led me out of the flat.

He hovered by me while I pinched out the seeds and rolled one. I searched in my pockets for a lighter, but couldn’t find one. Z offered me his. I lit up, took a drag, and began to cry. Man, I wept like a pussy.