

THE DRIVERS SECRET

A NOVELLA BY

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FOR MY THREE GRANDPARENTS

1

Life is a game of dominoes, a never ending cycle of cause and effect. It starts after you are born, during the formative years. But most people are not even aware when the game begins. Mine started when my parents decided that a thirteen year old boy should experience boarding school. Two school terms after shipping me off, they died, within a month of each other. They might still be alive if I had not met *her*. I learned a valuable life lesson then. Sometimes, it is best to not share secrets with loved ones. Now, just over two decades later, I had no idea that the most critical round of the game had begun.

The call came in as my workmate and regular lunchtime companion, Nawa Liato and I, rushed through the parking lot towards my 2011 white single cab Toyota Hilux Raider. We had just enjoyed a leisurely meal of Kudu meat stew, Chibwabwa and Nshima from our favourite cafe in the Two Seventeen area of Livingstone. Popular with locals and tourists alike, the place had a reputation for its ambience and decent food. We must have been a sight to see. Two corporate types with our pointy leather shoes hitting the concrete like our feet had caught fire. Or rather, I must have looked a sight. Nawa did not seem concerned that we had exceeded our lunch break by an hour as he lagged casually behind me. A vibration in my front shirt pocket stopped me in my tracks. I fished out my cell phone and swiped right at the unknown number. "This is Kalubwa," I said.

"Hello Mr Kalubwa, I'll be in Livingstone later today and want to meet you."

"I'm in the office right now until late."

"See you soon."

I slid the phone back into my pocket, wondering what *he* wanted. Since when did my opinion count in scheduling our meetings? The office had just reopened after a three week Christmas holiday. Did *he* have to make an appearance so soon? Nawa had reached the car while I hang back to take the call. He had his back against the van, elbows propped up on the tailgate, one hand lifting a newly lit cigarette to his lips for a drag. His Sunday best work apparel conflicted with the disarming gap toothed smile that often preceded a stream of less than sane anecdotes. I walked past his lanky frame, my mouth turned down in disgust at the smell of smoke. He stamped out the cigarette and joined me in the car. We worked for Omega Construction where I did accounting in the finance department and he was a human resources officer. On the ride back to work, Nawa narrated how he spent his Christmas break. "I tried out the devils pool last week," he said.

"Are you mad? That place is dangerous. People have dropped to their deaths from there."

"Why is everything forbidden with you? Smoking. Drinking. Adventure. You're too young to be this boring, no wonder your poor wife runs away once a month."

With my jaw clenched, "She travels for business."

"Live a little, you don't have to always be so guarded. Who made you like this? Two years of friendship and I still don't get it." He shook his head, made a sound with his lips and teeth, and dropped his gaze to the touch screen phone in his lap. Unlike most colleagues, I could stomach his company outside working hours. But the five year age gap and difference in personality

caused an occasional undercurrent of tension between us. Sometimes we would drift apart, not speaking for a few weeks for no reason at all. In those times I wondered how we ever stayed friends. The answer always remained the same. I could count on him almost as much as I could count on myself. My mind wandered to my own holiday, if you could even call it that. At the beginning of December I had been looking forward to the Christmas break. Visions of sleeping in, gardening and endless gaming had kept me going through a demanding last quarter of our financial year. However, on Christmas Eve my father in law, Lubinda Mundale, arrived unannounced. He had gained even more weight since the last time I had seen him. But the size of his belly paled in comparison to that of his condescending attitude. He waddled around the house, arms flailing by his side like the oars of a boat. I spent the next five days pretending to enjoy his company and biting back rude responses. Culture forbade me from standing up to him. Now on the first day back at work, I could have slaved in the office for a month to never see him again.

The well-appointed offices of Omega Construction occupied a rehabilitated colonial era house located in the two seventeen residential area. Not far from the cafe. The company had purchased and remodelled it to be a showcase of their expertise. From the outside the Cape style charm of the house stayed maintained with the occasional coat of white paint. Inside, the building had polished wood floors, chrome and frosted glass partitioned offices, modern lighting and high end electronics. I parked under the gazebo that indicated my position, Senior Accountant, and we walked into the air conditioned front space where Ivwananji the plump secretary sat at her desk flipping through a file. She smiled up at us, "How many horses did my two favourite giants eat today?"

Nawa rolled his eyes dramatically at the stale joke which she had been telling for months since we had first invited her to have lunch with us. The joke referenced our height more than our appetite in my opinion.

"Mr K there is a guest in your office," she said.

I left the two of them bantering and made a mental note to reprimand her for letting someone into my office. What if they stole something? I popped a breath mint into my mouth and pushed the door. Inside, I came face to face with *him*, sitting in my black swivel chair, sausage like fingers spread out on my mahogany table and gold chain shining from a barrel of a neck. *He* was Martin Moyo Junior, middle aged son of the Zimbabwean owner of Omega. The fact that the prolific father was still alive and in charge of the company did not stop Martin Junior from acting like he reigned supreme over it. His claim to fame seemed to be that of an overgrown rich kid with no qualifications or aspirations of his own. He had a particular affinity for the Livingstone office where he bullied the staff and treated it like his own theme park.

He raised his brow and his baritone boomed at me, "So much for finding you in your office."

"I'm usually here long after everyone has gone home and deserve a long lunch now and then."

"Of course you do. Please sit down."

I did as told.

"Every man has goals...Dreams. Mine is to escape my father's shadow. I assume yours is to finish building your flats, become your own boss. Why the face? I make it a point to know my employees," he said.

"I don't work for you,"

“We have something in common. Both of us are held back by Omega. You work long hours for a paltry salary and-”

“My salary is not paltry,”

“It could be better. So much so you would finish building in a month and still have change for other investments. There are Chinese investors willing to put one billion Kwacha into this place, but not with our current revenue and accounts receivable. I need you to prepare separate books for them. Then when the money comes we’ll split a quarter of it between us and put another quarter where it will double so fast nobody will ever know what we did.” He folded his hands behind his head and sat back with a self satisfied grin spread across his face. I wanted to laugh at his foolishness. No wonder his father gave him no leverage in the company. I stood up, “Get out. You don’t even know what you’re talking about.”

His eyes bulged and he gave a phony look of shock. “Had a feeling you would say that.” He opened a drawer in my desk and slid two sheets of paper across the table, “Have a look.”

I picked them up and recognized a copy of a cheque made out to a floor tile supplier and signed by me. The second cheque, also made out to the same supplier had a smaller amount on it. I did not recognize it. I looked at him, “What’s this?”

“Double cheques, with more where those came from.”

“I didn’t do this.”

He chuckled, “Of course you didn’t.” He pulled out another document and stretched across the table to hand it to me. “Sign that agreement relinquishing all benefits if you quit and the cheques disappear. Go along with my plan and they disappear. It’s a win-win.”

I could feel my earlobes warming. The heat spread up each ear and down my neck. With a clenched jaw and stiff movements I stood up and yanked a pen from the desk. I had every intention of signing the document and barging out of the room, but to my surprise my hand lingered over the paper for seven long seconds.

“I would think about it too. You have until tomorrow morning at eight thirty,” he said with a cheerful tone. He got up and left me to stew in my shame. I stood like that, hunched over the desk with my fists digging into the wood until my ankles complained. My wife Sepo always said one can’t trust a man who wears jewellery, aside from a wedding band and watch. That theory had just been proven right. She had travelled to Lusaka with Lubinda when he left and wouldn’t be back for another day. This gave me enough freedom to go home and think about all the ways a whole lot of illegal money could change my life. Martin had not lied. My desire to become financially independent now surpassed that of becoming a father, and my salary, though not paltry, limited the speed with which I could reach my goal. After lying in bed wracking my mind for hours, I drifted off into a light slumber. The two options I faced continued to play tug of war in my head long after I had slept.

2

I woke up just as the sun's rays made their way through the cracks in the curtains. The light of day made me realize that the long night of consideration had not been necessary. I knew what had to be done.

We lived in a three bed roomed open plan home, situated along Lusaka road in a gated community a thirteen minute drive from Livingstone. Twenty identical semidetached houses lined the gravel streets in a shade of green that failed in its attempts to blend in with the natural environment. Though fifteen years old, the homes had been finished in a tasteful manner that saved them from looking dated. Lubinda owned the estate. He also had multiple real estate spread across the country and an emerald mine in Lufwanyama. Three years ago when we moved to Livingstone he had insisted we take up residence there. Nothing wrong with a rent free house from your father in law, or so I thought at the time. Now more than anything I had to leave the man's house.

Freshly showered and fed, I left home at nine, a full hour and a half later than my usual time. I pulled into my spot in the parking lot at Omega and hummed my way to my office fully expecting to find Martin's stocky form behind my desk. I didn't. Nawa had stuck a note on my door to see him the moment I arrived. I let myself into his open office and sat down. "You summoned," I asked. He avoided eye contact and handed me an official looking envelope then sat back in his chair, rotating a pen with one hand. I ripped it open. Heart racing I read through the letter of dismissal.

"The Operations Manager wanted to give it to you personally," he said.

"Where is he?"

"Left with Martin thirty minutes ago for an emergency meeting in Harare. Why you late?"

"I wanted to prove to Martin that he can't bully me," I said before narrating the events of the previous afternoon. With each word, disbelief and reality dawned on me, leaving a sickening empty feeling in my stomach.

"Sorry my guy, you've been played," he said. "The GM doesn't want you around until he gets back from Zimbabwe."

"They can't do this. I didn't do anything."

"They actually can. The employment contract you signed when you started has a clause which allows the company to test your viability for the job anytime and anyway."

"So Martin is a..."

He nodded, "It seems. And so slick with it I would never have guessed." He slid a copy of the contract over to me. He had underlined the clause in question. I picked it up. Read it. Remembered how three years ago I had studied it and scoffed at the same section that now complicated my life. I had assured myself that I would pass any test. No doubt. My virtue and honesty could not be matched. But now the underlined words seemed to be laughing at me. The feeling in my stomach deepened and hollowed, twisting and stretching at the same time. I stood

up and walked back to my office like a weary man. There were no personal mementos or trophies displayed, just a collection of black pens, power banks and external hard drives spread out in the drawers. I packed them in a plastic and made my way out to my car. Better to leave before I became the topic of discussion. I sat behind the wheel for a long time with no plan of what to do next, my mind a bevy of thoughts. One of my hands balled into a fist. I opened my mouth and knocked my teeth with the knuckles. Like a woodpecker. A bad habit my wife despised. It had been with me since childhood and usually reared its head when I became anxious. Could the emergency meeting be about me? Yes. Martin and the other higher ups had gathered around a table in Harare to laugh about how they had tricked Kalubwa Kalubwa into losing his job. A burst of panic gripped my heart and I grabbed my phone to type frantically. Then I sat back to wait for a response.

Half an hour later I pulled up behind an auto repair shop next to the Museum in the middle of town. Large full length windows spanned the width of three of its four walls. They let in light and allowed passer-by's a glimpse at the displayed auto mechanics in the showroom. Behind it, the shop had an area designated for servicing vehicles. I parked the Hilux next to a man who stood smoking a stub and walked out towards him, a lone middle aged Indian with a craggy face and clouds of snowy hair unfazed by the windy day. The smoke floating from the cigarette hanging from his lips warmer than the reception he gave me.

"Are you Mr Kapoor?" I asked.

"Yes."

"We spoke on the phone. You asked me to meet you here."

He nodded at my Raider. "Is that it?" The Zambian and Indian sides of him seemed to be fighting for dominance of his accent. I nodded back, a sombre expression on my face. He led the way over to it and motioned for the keys with his hand. I slid into the passenger seat and watched him rev the engine a few times. Then he put the car into gear and eased it onto Akapelwa Street. The silent test drive took us up the road to the roundabout near Batoka hospital. With the cigarette still firmly between his lips, he steered the car a few times round the circle before going back down Akapelwa to the auto shop where we stood in silence while the car got a full service. Kapoor's demeanour thawed when the service finished and he realized the condition of the car. I even became worthy of a half-smile.

"I don't trust Facebook adverts but I'm glad I took a chance on yours. It's worth more than you asked for," he said.

"Must be your lucky day."

"And your unlucky one my friend."

We jumped into the car and he counted out K60 000 from a small travelling bag. For some reason I decided to trust him, took the money and stuffed it into my laptop bag without recounting it. He looked at me strangely and asked if he could give me a lift. I declined. Got out and watched my beloved Hilux speed off and disappear around a corner, a feeling of incomplete accomplishment glazed over my heart. I walked along the main street of town. Shoulders hung. No destination in mind. Every car horn and passer-by made me aware of the small fortune tucked in the bag swinging from my shoulder. For the first time I felt unsafe in sleepy Livingstone. I had lost my job and could not afford to lose that money to. It would help cushion Sepo and I financially until I got back on my feet because our savings had been used on building the still incomplete flats. I booked a taxi home and stashed the laptop bag at the back of a

wardrobe in the bedroom we had turned into an office. The money would be deposited into the bank at a later date. I played video games as I awaited her arrival. Silently I prayed she did not have a spare key for the wardrobe with my secret. She had left her car parked at the airport and wouldn't need to be picked up when she landed. We had things to talk about when she got home, least of all what had happened at work.

I had dozed off on the couch, a game pad between my knees when Sepo's finger poked my shoulder. She smelled of all the Nivea products she used, mellow and inviting. Her scent wafted up my nostrils before my eyes opened and focused on her standing before me. Ebony skin disappeared in parts beneath a maroon terry cloth robe wrapped around her small frame.

"Wasn't expecting to find you," she said.

"Are you cured?"

"Sarcasm is not the best way to welcome your wife home."

"What do you expect after the way you left? I found us a good gynaecologist but the minute 'daddy' says he can get you a better one you run off with him without discussing it with me."

She sat next to me and pulled at the fibres on her robe with one hand and held her head with the other, "He only wants the best for us. We've had this talk for three months, can't you let it go?"

"How does trying to one up all my actions, and treating me like shit translate to wanting the best for us? Maybe you but not us. You're never on my side when it comes to him and you tell him everything that happens in this house."

"If you weren't always working I wouldn't have to confide in him so much."

So she wanted to turn the tables on me. As usual she had taken Lubinda's side and refused to address how her actions affected me. I ignored the remark, stood up and went to bed early. I had wanted to argue but the desire to do so left out when her voice remained calm. It's true I spent too much time at Omega; worked late Monday to Saturday and brought my work home every evening. But I had no other way of dealing with three miscarriages. Before they happened Lubinda had been a great father in law. But with each termination, two layers of the mister nice guy persona got stripped away, almost like he blamed me for what kept on happening. Sepo dealt with the losses by becoming a needy daddy's girl, a far cry from the independent career woman I married. When we met nine years ago she had been a third year banking student at the Copperbelt University in Kitwe where I worked. We got married the weekend after her graduation. She immediately found a job in a bank so we put starting a family on hold until her one year as the underpaid and overworked intern had passed. But thereafter she took on the role of underpaid and overworked banker. In the end her pregnancies failed to keep up with the pace of her work life. Omega poached me shortly after the second miscarriage. We both agreed that a new town was just what we needed. When we moved Lubinda insisted she should not find a job until she had carried a baby to term; fat chance, she suffered a third miscarriage a year later. Our marriage had not been the same since.

A familiar sound of metal clanging roused me from my sleep in the morning. The other side of the bed hadn't been slept in. An occurrence that had began sometime during the past year and now happened at least once a week. She cited falling asleep in front of the television as the

reason. But I had never known her to be a television junkie. I hurled myself out of bed, unable to recall what time I had stripped down to my grey boxers and made my way out of the bedroom towards the metallic din. The ceramic tiles planted frozen kisses on the bottom of my bare feet, and I sneezed. I made my way past the sitting room and through the flapping curtains in front of the sliding door that led out to the stone tiled patio. When she saw me, a sweaty Sepo made an abrupt stop mid cycle on our rusty old exercise bike. Her petite frame looked even smaller with her straddled atop the machine. After ignoring her the previous night I now had to ask her for a favour. The realization was not appealing.

“May I use your car today?”

“Where is yours?”

“Got impounded yesterday. Had an accident.”

She jumped off the exercise bike, “What happened?”

“Nothing serious. I hit into a car coming back from Kazungula. Nobody was hurt.”

“Oh my God why didn’t you tell me yesterday? No wonder you were grumpy. I have errands to do in town so I’ll drop you at work.”

“It’s ok I’ll get a taxi.”

“Don’t be silly,” she said, and gave my elbow an awkward rub before disappearing into the house. Leaving me to question why I had just lied to my wife. I did not know but it felt like the most natural thing. My subconscious probably knew that if I told her, she would tell Lubinda. I did not need him to have another reason to ridicule me. Now I had to survive her taking me to where my presence was not welcome. An hour later we set off for town in Sepo’s red 2015 Toyota Corolla le, with her behind the wheel. The stifled conversation about her visit to the gynaecologist in Lusaka waned as we neared town because of the less than enthusiastic responses I offered. My heart did a few laps around my chest as she navigated the car closer to the office premises. And I felt the beginnings of cardiac arrest when the gateman did a double take as the car rolled in past the gates.

“Looks like he’s seen death,” she joked. I gulped in response. She parked under the gazebo which miraculously still indicated my position, or former position. I got out of the car and watched in horror as the gateman rushed over to where I stood with the laptop bag in my hands. With all my heart I willed for Sepo to zoom off. She did. Just as the gateman’s serious face stepped up to look at mine.

“Sir you have to leave. Right now,” he said.

“I need to see Nawa.”

“He isn’t in. Wait for him outside the gate.”

How did this man go from saluting me in with a smile to treating me like a suspect? He must have gotten the memo about the OM not wanting me around. An unnecessary precaution since I was not disgruntled enough to cause trouble. I walked out in time to see Nawa’s beige 2001 Toyota Spacio rolling in and out of the pot holes in the street. He parked next to me and stepped out, dressed sharply as always. Upon hearing my reason for being there, he let out a roar of laughter. The fact that I had failed to tell my wife any truth tickled him uncontrollably. He suggested I spend the day at his place perfecting a confession. With no other option, I took his car and drove to his place in Dambwa North Extension, a budding mid-cost area where new houses popped up everyday. He rented a small, no frills elephant coloured house with white burglar bars. Set right at the back of a wire fenced yard, it consisted of two bedrooms, a bathroom, kitchen and sitting room. I opened the gate, parked the car under the only tree and entered the house. Sat on the edge of a frayed armchair I browsed channels on the flat screen TV

mounted to the wall until I got bored. A hopeless need to move got me back into the car and I headed out of town towards the Mosi-Oa-Tunya Falls.

Nawa's words haunted me. Maybe my life had become too ordered and I needed some excitement. I decided to quench the sudden craving for adrenaline by plunging into the devils pool myself but a rainstorm erupted when I reached the falls and halted my mission. Heading back to town I got stopped by a guard at the gate of the Zambezi Hotel, a high end resort set on the banks of the Zambezi River with its own private entrance to the falls. Figuring something was wrong with the car, I stopped. He opened the front passenger door to let in the rain and a slim young woman I hadn't noticed standing behind him. Dressed in an all black ensemble, she settled into her seat in a flurry of movements. Water droplets from her clothes, hair and skin flew about and landed on the interior and me as she waved at the guard and shut the door.

"Sorry for the flood," she said, "How much to town?"

"What do you usually pay?"

"Fifty."

I nodded and concentrated on the fog ahead. Fancy that. One day of unemployment and I was already getting mistaken for a taxi driver. It had to be Nawa's car, not my appearance. After a short silence she turned on the car radio and sang along, on key, to a rap song by Chef 187. I sat stiffly with both hands on the steering wheel. The CD turned out to be a compilation and the Chef songs spewed out the speakers, with my passenger bobbing along to the beat. As the karaoke session became more intense I found a fist turned microphone thrust in my face. I gave her a quick glance. Her still wet hair had adhered itself to her head in uneven ruffles and tufts. The expectant smile on her face seemed unaware of how uncomfortable I found this invasion of my personal space. She couldn't have been more than sixteen years old. I wondered why she was not at school.

"Come on. I saw you nodding your head," she said.

To my surprise I smiled and joined in. When we got to town she directed me to a house near the central business district which I always passed on my way to work. The eye catching canary yellow house had an awkward height, as if the builders intended to make a double storey house but stopped halfway through the last storey. A dark green reed mat fence and metal gate of the same colour allowed only the top of the house and trees to be seen. The sneak peek still promised that the rest of it would be special. I pulled up in front of the gate. Put the car in park. The girl thrust one arm inside her black handbag, moved it around and pulled out a creased fifty Kwacha note.

"It's ok," I said.

"So that I pay with my number right? I don't think so." She threw the money in my lap and flew out the car without a backward glance. It never ceased to amaze me how typical teenagers could be. I watched her press the intercom and slip through the gate bemused by how fast our camaraderie had collapsed. Oh well, I now had extra change for petrol. Then I remembered I did not have a car anymore. My stomach grumbled, indicating lunch time. I used the fifty kwacha to get a greasy take away from a fast food restaurant and lunched at my plot. Work on the four H shaped brick shells had been on hold but would continue over the weekend. Save for two mounds of building sand, the place was bare. Everything had been packed up in the make shift corrugated iron shed in the front left corner. I parked the car next to the shed which had originally been intended to be accommodation for the site hand and his family. But he lived really close to the plot so it became a store house. After wolfing down the food, I took a nap. For the second time that day a loud sound roused me from sleep. Loud tapping on the car window in my dream turned out to be my phone ringing. Nawa wanted his car. I picked him up from work

then he took me home where I found Sepo sprawled out on the couch, engrossed in a home renovation show. She looked every bit the bored housewife, dressed in my old clothes with her hair unkempt. I remained standing as she addressed me.

“Did you get your car back,” she asked.

“No. The man I bashed is angry because some of his goats got injured... He wants compensation.”

“Goats?”

“A few fell out of his van when I hit him. So I gave him the Hilux so he wouldn’t sue.”

She dropped her legs from the couch, “That makes no sense. You love that car and goats are not expensive, you could have paid him off. This isn’t a movie Kalubwa, Zambians don’t sue carelessly.”

“He was really mad.”

Her look of disbelief escorted me out of the room. I knew how ridiculous it sounded but I couldn’t bring myself to confess. What I needed was time to clear my mind, figure out what my next move would be and apply for a new job. Then, maybe, when the dust had settled I would tell her the truth.

3

For the remainder of the week I faked a running stomach to get out of leaving the house. Locked up in the office, multiple Google tabs open, searching on Go Zambia Jobs for anything that paid decent money. One day, I called my uncle Charles, dad's young brother, the only other living person who knew the truth behind their deaths. He grew up in my parent's house. At the time of their deaths he had just graduated from university. He quickly found a job and supported me until I finished high school. We had not spoken in half a year. Neither of us tried to keep in touch. He worked at the head office of the Zambia Electrical Supply Company where he had some weight. I figured he might be able to pull some strings for me. His effeminate voice came on the line. "My boy, long time. How are you?"

"I'm looking for a new job uncle. Omega is draining and not taking me anywhere."

"You didn't get fired did you?"

I laughed, "No."

"Lubinda and I tried to warn you about these private companies. You see now? Let me make some calls."

I had always been able to depend on him despite us not having a close relationship. We could have years of no communication but it would not be awkward when we reconnected. I loved that about him. A glimmer of hope flickered in my mind when the call ended. But until that flicker turned into a roaring fiery job, I had to deal with Sepo. She could not believe how a workaholic could miss even one day of work. On the first day of my 'illness' she brought me her go to medicinal concoction for upset stomachs. A vile mixture of flour, water, salt and sugar which I hid in the home office fridge. On days I had a genuine tummy ache I struggled to drink it. I was not committed enough to my lie to try now.

The days flew by. I ignored a few calls from Nawa and anticipated the weekend when the roofers would begin work on the flats. I still had the money hidden in the wardrobe. So far it had remained undisturbed. On Saturday morning Sepo insisted on accompanying me to the plot. Usually I liked to go alone but she had not been there in a while so I agreed. Not like she left me with a choice. The men had gathered around a pot of tea on a log fire with buns in their hands when we got there. Misheck, the caretaker, came over to greet us. He smelt of day old sweat, halitosis and loyalty. His button up floral print cotton shirt had been left open, revealing a chiselled black chest that made me immensely aware of my expanding waist line.

"Boss I found you here fast asleep on Tuesday afternoon. Knock knock knock on the window. Nothing! You drive a Spacio now?" asked Misheck.

Sepo eyed me, her arms folded across her chest, head tilted. Misheck stood there with his big smile, unaware of what he had just done. I faked a phone call to flee the scene. The two of them remained talking but I avoided Misheck the duration of the visit. An hour later we left the men hammering concrete tiles on to the rafters. Out of guilt, I took Sepo for lunch at her favourite

Indian restaurant, The Golden Leaf. We sat out on the terrace next to the big leaf shaped fountain, with the bubbling water providing a calming ambience. I expected a barrage of questions but she didn't say much. Nothing at all to do with Misheck had said. In a rare role reversal, she went to bed early when we got home and I stayed up late playing wrestling. The next morning I woke up gripped by a real stomach upset. Following a vicious and painful session in the bathroom, I remembered the flour concoction stashed in the fridge. I flew out the bedroom to get it and downed the lot in two gulps. Disgust and relief hit me at the same time, the latter stronger than the former. The smell of pan cake batter frying carried itself to my nostrils and led me to the kitchen. A peek round the corner showed Sepo flipping pancakes at the stove with her back to me. I snuck in trying to hide the mug behind my back. She didn't turn around until I had rinsed it and was leaning casually against the sink.

"It must be doing you bad if you're finally drinking my elixir," she said.

"Do you have eyes in the back of your head? You know me too well."

"And never forget that. Why did you risk eating Indian yesterday? Did you forget what it does to you?"

"Did it for my beautiful wife."

She flashed a small unconvinced smile then dished the pancakes on two plates with a side serving of apricot jam. We ate in silence at the breakfast bar before she left for church. I sat the service out, as I had been doing for months. Neither of us had been an enthusiastic church goer to begin with. But lately she had become a faithful member of the United Church of Zambia and been trying to get me to be as staunch as she. For once she did not nag me about missing church. I knew that eventually we had to sit down and iron out the tension between us. When the new job came that would be my next priority.

After the weekend I went back to the charade of still having a job. I got up each morning, dressed for the office and came back at night. Sepo let me use her car and I spent my days at Nawa's, sending out my CV with frantic urgency. Hoping that Zambian employers had truly embraced the digital age and would read applications sent by email. He could not get over my fear of revealing the truth and laughed each time he saw me. Three days in, I got bored with sitting around doing nothing all day. I went to pick up some groceries from the supermarket, as a token of appreciation for Nawa's hospitality. On my way there I remembered the young woman who had mistaken me for a taxi driver. Out of curiosity I stopped the car next to a puffy eyed nurse in uniform who looked like she could use two more hours of sleep. She hesitated before hopping into the backseat, she seemed unsure about entering an unregistered taxi.

"Where to," I asked.

"General Hospital. Is this a lift or am I paying?"

"You're paying."

After that initial induction, I wanted more. Nothing like some easy money to get a man excited. By mid-afternoon I had made three hundred and twenty Kwacha. Most of the customers I picked seemed hesitant about entering a pirate taxi. I decided to do it again the next day but wear a blue smart shirt to look like all the other taxi drivers in the land. A week later, on my way home following a hectic day of ferrying passengers, I got a call from Nawa. I put the phone on loud speaker.

"Came home twice today, didn't find you. Are you cheating on Sepo," he asked.

"Nope. Got a side business."

“What?”

“Transporting people. It’s hard though since this car doesn’t scream taxi.”

He laughed, “You should start hanging out at SKM. I’ve seen pirate operators and legit taxi drivers working in peace there... What’s your real plan? When do you tell your wife the truth?”

“If all goes well she won’t have to know anything. I have great credentials and should get a call back in a month at the latest.”

“You’ll drive people around till then?”

“Why not,” I said, “It’s not forever.” As I parked the corolla in the carport at home I thought about SKM. A bar cum carwash I had passed by countless times in the heart of the Elaine Brittle residential area, right next to the market. I had been inside once looking for Nawa, and did not understand why he would voluntarily choose to go to such a place. It had never appealed to me as a potential chill spot. It looked more like a haven for hardened taxi drivers, local delinquents and men with nothing to do. Could I go there and not feel out of place? Only a visit would answer that.

4

Wearing casual again," said Sepo.

"I'm working in the field today," I said.

"For a corporate worker you've had too many casual days over the past two months."

And what a long two months it had been. Sepo the nag had come out in full force, questioning most of my actions. I did not even blame her. I had been acting shady. None of my job applications had yielded any results. Even Uncle Charles blue ticked my messages. I walked out of the house, Sepo right behind me, still talking.

"And I want my car back. What happened to getting yourself a new one?"

I opened the car, lifted one leg in, one hand on top of the roof, "You sit at home all day watching TV. What do you need a car for? You take your diet more seriously than our marriage so why not walk when you need to go anywhere?"

She did not respond, just watched me from the door with silent fury in her eyes. The 'I want my car back' song had been on her lips for a month. According to my reasoning, I bought the car for her and could use it anytime. Initially the morning drives to town were hard on me. Every day I headed to the unwelcome reality of life as a taxi driver. Ironically I enjoyed living a double life, even found it exciting. Just wished the second life could be something else.

My morning routine involved leaving home and going to Nawa's to change attires and exchange cars. I kept a pair of blue shirts at his house that his maid laundered for me. He had also been kind enough to let me register his Spacio as a taxi. It even got the mandatory purple stripe painted around the body of the car. Nawa had been very understanding of the situation and had been using the corolla without complaint. After changing into my drivers' uniform that morning I left for the Post Office. When none of my online job applications had been responded to, I took to sending physical letter twice a week. So far that too had proved to be fruitless.

At the Post Office, I handed in a few brown A4 envelopes to the personnel at the expedited mail service counter. I strolled to the door of the large hall of a building, almost tripping on a dislodged floor tile. Outside, I stood on the wide flight of steps that looked out onto the parking lot. People rushed along in different directions and various vendors set up their stalls. I watched a fruit vendor wheel his cart through the parking lot and position it right next to the Spacio. He polished and rearranged the fruit until a woman with worn rubber slippers, a citenge wrapped round her waist and an untidy scarf tied to her head stepped up to him. She bought some fruit then walked round to the driver's side and peeked into the open window. Sensing business I ran over and spoke to her in Nyanja.

"You need a lift?"

“Yes. How much to Ngwenya?” she asked

“Twenty five.”

We packed her purchase, six watermelons and a bunch of bananas into the boat and started off to Ngwenya, one of the poorer neighbourhoods in Livingstone, it had people milling the narrow, untarred roads at all hours of the day and night. Most houses had two or one bedroom, an outside bathroom and a minimum occupancy of seven people. The car bumped and humped its way through the pot holes as she directed me to her house. She told me to stop outside a yard with a shrub fence. I popped open the boot and we carried the fruit in to the front door. The yard had been swept thoroughly. Void of any loose soil, it was impossible for a shoe to mark its print. I stood by the door with my hands in my pockets as she took the fruit in.

“Thank you,” she said when all the fruit had been put in the house.

I nodded, hands still in my pockets.

“I don’t have enough to give you but there is a way I can pay if you follow me to the bedroom.

The proposition hit me like a fly swatter. In what felt like one leap, I jumped into the car and sped off, nearly forgetting the caution needed on the poor roads. When I got back to the tarred roads I drove around aimlessly. Not willing to pick another crazy person, I ignored everyone who hailed me down, until I saw two young women. The one in the short white dress and straw sun hat hugged her friend goodbye when I stopped by the side of the road. She got in, buckled into the front passenger seat, gave me directions and plugged her ears with headsets. When I pulled up at a yellow house I eyed my passenger sideways as she counted out coins on her palm.

“I’ve brought you here before,” I said.

“Oh.”

“Found you drenched outside Zambezi Hotel, you sang the whole way. Refused a free ride.”

Her head snapped up at me, “What happened to your nice smell and nice clothes? You look so dirty. And what’s with the afro and beard?”

“You caught me on a good day.”

“Plus, you’re now so thin.” she dropped the coins back into her purse and pulled out a hundred Kwacha note. “Keep the change. Looks like you need it.” Just like the first time, she threw the note on my lap and ran out the car. I picked up the money, wondering why she behaved so strangely. She had not even reached the gate before she turned around, came back to the car and lowered her head to my window, “What are you doing later,” she asked

“Nothing. Why?”

She laughed, “Don’t look so suspicious. I need a ride to work at fourteen hours.”

“Where is work?”

“Zambezi Hotel.”

“Ok.”

With four hours to kill, I set a target and got busy picking up people all over town. Then I lunched at SKM. In spite of my initial misgivings, the place had become a second home. Sometimes it felt like I was getting in the way of Nawa’s maid. She did not outright say it but her actions reeked of passive aggression. So when business became slow as it did at certain times of the day, I preferred to be at SKM playing pool. Many a passionate debate about football and politics had occurred between me and the other men who frequented the place. It could also be credited for the extreme casual attire I now sported. I picked up the girl as planned, and took her back home in the evening. Over the next week I found out her name, Thokozile Mvula, but everyone called her Thoko, and became her designated driver. One evening as I dropped her off at her home, she turned to me before exiting the vehicle.

“Even though you don’t care about your appearance anymore, you look good for your age. I can still see the skin that’s ageing well,” she said.

“And what’s my age?”

“Saw your reg yesterday, thought people that age should have wrinkles.”

“Ha-ha-ha. I’m not that old. According to the government I’m still a youth. My wife makes me moisturize and use special anti ageing creams a lot. She’s tried to get me on the exercise train but it’s not for me.”

“You should thank her.”

“I will.”

From there I went straight to the Golden Leaf Restaurant to order Sepo’s favourite Indian meal, none for me this time. Things had been even more strained between us. The blame fell on my shoulders and Thoko’s words reminded me of some of the ways Sepo made my life better. Who didn’t want to look better than their age? Takeaway bought, I exchanged cars and went home. Not before Nawa berated me about the horrible smell the food had left in his car. My stomach lurched at the sight that greeted me in the driveway. Lubinda and his daughter stood ogling a shiny grey 2015 Nissan Terrano, like a pair of proud fishermen with a prize winning catch. Not again, I thought. How hard was it to inform people before you went halfway across the country to see them? I stepped out, plastic of food in hand, and walked up to the duo.

“How do you like your wife’s new car son? Better than that second hand one you bought her eh? Hop in, she’s about to take it for a spin,” said Lubinda in his ‘I’m the king of the castle’ way.

The food in my hand must have become rotten from the strength of the feeling that coursed through my body in that moment. No one would ever know though. I quickly discarded the package in the refuse bin next to the car port then turned my attention back to Lubinda, “Welcome dad. It’s always good to see you.”

“Isn’t she a beauty? The car, not my Sepo,”

She frowned, “Daddy I am a beauty. Was that Indian you threw?”

“No. Some rotten food Nawa left in the car last week. It’s nice but I didn’t know she needed a new one?”

“I understand you’ve been hogging hers. So I decided to help you both. She won’t nag you anymore and you’ll be a better man for it. Are we going or not?” Lubinda asked.

I shook my head, “Sorry. Have to prepare for a crucial meeting tomorrow.”

Sepo avoided my attempts at eye contact and they left without a second try to convince me to follow. It had to be a cruel joke, if not then he had reached a whole new low. More importantly, how deep had her involvement in this purchase been? Feeling defeated I went in and took a shower, hoping to cool down. But my ears still felt warm when I came out. I retreated to the office which had become my new sanctuary. With no new jobs to apply for online, I sat down to play online scrabble instead. Forty minutes into my game they returned. The car alarm activated when they got out and the sound grated on my ears. I abandoned my game and listened to the sounds of the two of them engrossed in their conversation. Pots, pans and cabinet doors banged over the sound of laughter. Hearty smells of food cooking floated to my nose. Steel utensils clinked against china ware. Then the voices moved outside to the patio and the house became still again. It had been two hours since their return and my presence had evidently not been missed.

5

The next morning Lubinda's cologne wafted throughout the house, manly and well to do. Each whiff I took only ballooned my dislike of him. During breakfast, he informed me that I wouldn't find him in the evening. Hallelujah.

"Rushing for a meeting with my partners at the mine, you know Zambian emeralds are the best in the world," he said between mouthfuls of bread, "When you're done slaving for the Zimbabweans, come work with me. Make some real money."

"I'll think about it."

"By the way I like this new unshaven, scruffy look of yours. You'll fit right in with the labourers." He laughed at the sorry excuse of a joke. So hard, I felt two wet spots land on my cheek. I smiled politely, excused myself and walked out. For the first time ever, I considered leaving Sepo. The money from selling my car was dwindling. It had been used to pay the builders, supplement my meagre taxi earnings and fund Sepo's now monthly trips to the gynaecologist in Lusaka. She insisted on flying to and fro as well as a sufficient shopping allowance. With this new unforgiveable stunt of letting Lubinda buy her a car, who knew what she would make him do when the money ran out and I was well and truly broke. I gave myself three weeks to finally come clean, and braced myself for the consequences.

Following Lubinda's visit, I moved out of the master bedroom and into the guest room. The move spurred by my frustration with my wife. I saw no point in staying there when I spent most nights alone because she still slept in front of the television. For a few hours during the day I would leave home and be somehow happy. But each time I returned and found the shiny new Terrano in the car port, my blood boiled. Curiously during this period, the short snatches of time spent with Thoko became the highlight of my days. She worked shifts and even though I had other clients, I adjusted my schedule to always be available to pick her up. One evening I arrived at the hotel to get her and parked in the car park. After a long wait, the guard who had flagged me down at the hotel gate the first time I met her, tapped on my window. I opened the door but remained in the car. His face looked grim, eyes furrowed. "Big man, there is a problem with Thokozile," he said.

"What is it?"

"One of the maids heard her screaming inside a guest's room. We've been knocking but no answer."

I jumped out of the car and banged the door shut, "Let's go."

We followed a footpath in silence, an unspoken urgency speeding us on. The path led to stand alone chalets hidden from the main building by strategic trees and shrubs. A middle aged

woman in a cleaner's uniform emerged from the shadows of a tree right outside one chalet. Her face was lit up by the street lights lining the path and fluorescent tubes in the trees.

"This is Chimuka," said the guard "And he is Thoko's driver."

"A man just left the room. I have a master key card," said Chimuka. She led the way up the stone steps to the wooden deck of the chalet and tapped a key card on the door to open it. I gently pulled her back and entered the room first, heart pounding, contemplating what I would find inside. By my sides, two firmly balled fists concurrently fought the urge to bring their knuckles up to my teeth. I found myself inside a bright room where rustic and lavish combined with a modern flair to make an impressive lounge and kitchenette. My two companions joined me in the empty room. We moved towards a single open door along the back wall and piled into the bedroom. On the floor, wearing nothing but a t-shirt and her back up against the bed, Thoko looked ashen. Her legs spread out before her in a defeated manner and forehead shiny from swelling. The guard and I faced away as Chimuka pulled a sheet from the bed to cover her with. Before we could turn back to the scene of the crime a pot-bellied Asian man dressed in khaki shorts and a matching shirt burst into the room. Eyes wide, he looked at us accusingly.

"What the hell is happening here," he asked.

"Did you hurt her," I said.

"All of you get out," he took a step forward. "This little whore is a liar. She deserves whatever she gets."

Thoko cowered further into Chimuka who had crouched down to cuddle her. Then in a crisp steady voice she said, "He raped me."

An unrestrained fire ignited in me then. Even as my fist flew through the air for the first punch I knew the rage had been building up long before that moment. With the element of surprise in my favour I gave the Asian man two swift blows to the head and one to the side of his torso. He tumbled to the ground and my foot took over, kicking his gut and groin till a firm hand pulled me by the arm. I stopped and surveyed the groaning mess of a man on the floor. Thoko rushed over to me and I scooped her, bed sheet and all into my arms and carried her out of there. Chimuka, who had remained gathering Thoko's things found me loading her into the backseat. I got the clothes, handbag and shoes, put them in the car and drove off. The guard seemed to have stayed back because I didn't see him by the gate. He had an obvious crush on Thoko and I hoped he had not remained in the chalet to finish off what I had started.

I took Thoko home, gave her my number to call in case of anything. She left in silence and hobbled through the gate into her yard. My heart went out with her and I wished there was more I could do to comfort her. A few minutes late I parked outside Nawa's gate and noticed a small group of people gathered around a braai stand in his yard. One of three unknown cars had afro pop music blaring out of its open boot and doors. I opened the gate, braced myself and drove in. Not wanting to greet a bunch of strangers, I plastered my phone to my ear and ducked into the house, engrossed in a fake conversation. Nawa caught me sneaking into the spare bedroom. Eyes wide with intoxication and staggering, he came at me with arms held open. In his drunken state, he convinced me to stay for a bite to eat. Better than going home to be ignored by the wife. He adhered himself to my side the entire time, berating how little he saw of me. I made it home two hours later than usual. The Terrano shone in the moonlight. I parked behind it and walked towards the house, resisting an urge to scratch the body with my car keys as I passed by. Sepo's voice floated into the house from the patio.

"He is home now daddy, let me find out where he was"

"Can't even work late without daddy knowing right," I shouted from inside the house.

"Well at least you're talking to me now," she hollered back.

If we kept this up we would soon find ourselves in dysfunctional territory. Like many times before, I didn't bother to answer, but went straight to bed. My mind was on Thoko. She needed time to herself but I hoped to hear from her soon.

The following days brought no news from Thoko, and without her number I could not check up on her. I did however hear from my uncle Charles. He called me as I stopped to fill up at a petrol station.

"Hello uncle," I said.

"My boy, I have good news. There will be interviews at Head Office the Monday after next week. I've told the human resource people that the job is yours so come geared to be selected."

"What's the position?"

"Entry level to the payroll. But with me on your side you'll get promoted soon."

"Thank you so much. I will travel two days before."

I shivered with relief after that phone call, in a way that made me want to fly out the car and twirl the petrol attendant. Said attendant tapped on my window with my change in his hand, looking like he had been born bored and never experienced any excitement. He would not appreciate getting twirled by an ecstatic cab driver. Celebratory plans on hold I left the petrol station in a happy daze, comprehending the end of this terrible phase in my life. I could give Nawa back his car. Stop the double life. Tomorrow I could sleep in with no worries, knowing that in two weeks' time I would be back in the corporate world, and how I had missed it, that place of long hours and smart wear. One hand stayed on the steering wheel as the fingers of the other touched my hair. Uncut and unkempt for more than two months, I now itched to shave it all off. I had to be careful though not to rouse Sepo's suspicion; all in good time.

I steered the car slowly past the yellow house. Something I had been doing once each day, hoping to catch a glimpse of her. So far, all attempts had been futile. My stalking got interrupted by another phone call.

"Mr Incredible."

"Who's this," I asked.

"So you save and forget them huh," she laughed, "has it been that long? I need a ride. Please."

"Coincidentally I'm right outside your house."

"Seriously?"

"Very serious." I turned around at the next lay-bye and found Thoko exiting the gate. She looked happier than I had ever seen her as she breezed over to the car. Like the events of the other night had been my own nightmare.

"Not dressed for work," I asked.

"I'm off today, and craving pizza! Let's go to Debonairs."

"Sure thing."

"Thank you for saving me that night – let me finish. I know you think I'm a child but I turned twenty one that day you found me." her voice broke a bit, "He overheard me on the phone complaining to my friend about my dad not wishing me a happy birthday again. Dad has been really cold to mom and I for a year now, hasn't been to see us and took my car and brother away... the Chinese guy knew English and invited me for a drink in his room. It's wrong I know, and we shouldn't mingle with guests but it was my birthday, and daddy issues are real."

A few tears rolled down both of her cheeks. I parked the car haphazardly outside Debonairs, nearly knocking down a stop sign, and tried to hug her. She shied away from me and wiped her tears.

“Not to be rude but I really hate pity. I brought you here to buy you a thank you pizza. You were great that night and I like you. You’re the cool big brother I never had,” she said.

I smiled, “Let your big brother buy you a belated birthday gift instead.”

I slid out my wallet and handed her three one hundred Kwacha notes. “Can you call a friend to join you?” I have to work.”

“Thanks bro. With all this money I can invite more than one friend.”

“Some of it needs to take you back home my dear ‘sis’.”

“Hmm. You know my family secret. What’s yours? How did you go from the snazzy guy I met to this?”

“Next question.”

“Are you free next Saturday? Need you to take me for a gala dinner at work. You should even buy a ticket and join me.”

“We’ll see,” I said, “Might be out of town next weekend.”

“Ok.” She got out. I left her talking excitedly into her phone. Probably calling all her friends for a pizza party, and made my way to Nawa’s house. For someone who had been so elated barely an hour ago I felt quite crestfallen. Now that I knew her age I felt an odd attraction, even over protection for her. She admitted to feeling the connection too. But at twenty one she was too young for me, and to make matters worse she saw me just as a brother. Put in the brother zone. I did not think I could face her again.

I spent the next few days in a state of euphoria, counting down the days until my trip to Lusaka, wondering how I managed the months that had befallen me. The lively young woman from the yellow house had been quiet since I had last seen her and I missed her. I saw no need to continue ferrying people and sat out the work hours on Nawa’s couch, snoozing. The first enjoyable sleep I had had in months. I hoped Sepo wouldn’t insist on moving to Lusaka with me when the job became finalized. But that was unlikely.

Two days before the gala I cracked. Decided to travel for the interview on Sunday instead of Saturday and called Tamika to inform her that I would take her. Like a good brother. That’s how I found myself in the Corolla late on Saturday afternoon, speeding towards Nawa’s house. I found him home alone playing chess. We exchanged a short greeting before I slipped into the bathroom. After the bath I went out to the car and brought in a small travelling bag which had my clothes. My actions piqued Nawa’s curiosity. The house was small enough for him to hear everything I did. I had barely finished ironing when he barged into the spare bedroom and stood there watching me.

“I don’t like feeling left out,” he said.

“There’s a gala at the Zambezi Hotel. Want to come?”

“Since when do you attend such things?” He turned to lock the door and dropped the key inside the front part of his boxers, “New haircut and dressing sensibly again. All of a sudden just like that? You’re not leaving until I know the truth.”

I chuckled at the insane move then kept quiet. I had to confide in my friend but the words failed my tongue. He sat down on the floor and watched me dress up. When I finished I sat on the bed and spoke.

“I met a girl. But she isn’t the reason for my hair cut. I have an interview on Monday at ZESCO head office.”

"The great, righteous Kalubwa? Don't give me that crap about a new job. Who's the girl? When do I meet her? Does she know you're married? I knew you couldn't last without a side chick. Knew it."

"Calm down and get that stupid smile off your face. I'm not cheating. Yet. She is twenty one and brother zoned me."

"You do give off a paedophile vibe," he said with a serious face.

"I know she is too young but by next week I will be working in Lusaka. I have to see her one last time. And my marriage is pretty much over. My Bapongoshi bought my wife a car because I've been using hers. Didn't even tell me. Just brought the thing home and she didn't object. For me that was the last straw."

"I've always wondered why you've never found your own house since he treats you like shit. Where you live is far and your Omega pay check was decent. You could have had a really nice place here in town."

"Greed my guy. Who doesn't like a rent and utility free house? I'm sure it made me weak in his eyes." I picked up my phone from the bed, "I have to go get my girl up. By next week Sepo and her dear daddy won't be my problem."

"Ait man. Nail that interview. But you suck for hiding all this from me. I must revenge."

I made sure I had my dinner ticket and left Nawa's place. Thoko did not know that I had bought one. She would be surprised, hopefully pleasantly. My chat with Nawa made me realize that my attraction to her had opened my eyes to the rut that was my marriage. I couldn't wait to start my new job in Lusaka. At Thoko's I sent her a message announcing my arrival. When she came out of the yard, the last rays of light as the sun set were just enough for her to scrutinize me and the corolla. She clapped her hands with glee, "You're back from the dead! You look so good... and the red car... Don't care if you stole it or borrowed it, but never take it back?"

A woman significantly older than her came out of the yard and disturbed my laughter and her excitement. Both women had dressed up for the event but the older woman wore her elegance like a second skin. She was poised and striking. Not the kind of woman you missed in a room. They entered the car and Thoko introduced the woman as her mother and me as her driver. She had a dark complexion like her daughter but a curvier body than her daughter's boyish figure. Throughout the introduction the woman held my gaze in the rear view mirror, recognition dancing across her face, the same recognition that stirred in my gut. We drove in silence, the ladies playing on their phones. At the front of the hotel, the ladies dropped out and I promised to join them shortly. I sat in the car for an hour after that, weighed down by the thoughts and questions that buzzed through my brain. Feeling suffocated I stepped out, hoping the air would clear my head and stop the adrenaline cursing through my veins. Out of nowhere the woman materialized before me. I almost jumped. Her face was unsmiling.

"Looking a little startled Kalubwa," she said. That voice. Firmer, more mature and colder than it had been all those years ago still possessed the power to render me speechless. My eyes dipped to the left corner of her mouth. It twisted and contorted downward with every syllable she uttered. That did not stop her words from being crisp and dagger like.

"Funny thing is," she continued, "I'm certain Thoko said her taxi driver would pick us up. Didn't expect a dapper man who got groomed for the occasion in a red car. Since when are taxi's red?"

"She's twenty one," I asked.

"And a few months. Looks to me that this was supposed to be a date. Are you sleeping with my daughter?"

My hand flew to my face and rubbed my eyes, “Kutemwa it’s not what you think. How could I have known?”

“You’ve never bothered to look for your own child, she looks just like you yet you’re blind to the fact you foolish man.” She slapped me then. A hard sting that burned my face up. With my mouth agape, I hopped back into the car, hands trembling on the steering wheel.

“Coward,” she screamed, before hurling a ball of spit at my face through the open window. I sped off then. Positive my trembling hands would cause me to crash the car.

6

I found myself in the car at the crack of dawn. My whole body ached from the uncomfortable night in the driver's seat, my brain tired and numb. I didn't care what Sepo would make of my sleeping in the driveway or the new clean shaven look. I stumbled into the house, had a bath and packed a bag, told her I had a business trip and left. Unmoved by the incredulous look I left plastered on her face. I needed to get far from Livingstone really fast. Before driving off I called a taxi driver from SKM and gave him Thoko's number with instructions to take her to work when she needed. Then I blocked her number.

Three hours later I arrived in Monze, a dusty over crowded village halfway between Livingstone and Lusaka. My body needed a nap and Lusaka was three hours away. I figured if I slept for a few hours I could drive at night and still make it for the interview the next day so I checked into the first decent looking hotel I saw. Possessed by an alien instinct, I found a liquor store, bought four bottles of whiskey and went back to my room. There I stripped off everything and sat on the bed. Remote in one hand and bottle in the other, I took my first swig of alcohol in more than a decade and fixed my eyes on the world events unfolding on the news channel.

That is the last thing I remembered.

7

Sepo walked into our bedroom, holding a small tray with a bowl and yawning. She set the tray on the bedside table next to me then sat herself down at the foot of the bed. Eyes fixed on her I propped myself up on a pillow. Her face looked heavy, like she had been crying or had not slept for many days. When she spoke, her voice sounded even more forlorn than her face looked.

“Some porridge for you,” she said, with her eyes cast down to her hands folded on her lap, “The doctor said two days would make a difference, and you seem fine to me. So I’m going to Lusaka. Today. We need time apart coz you’ve been dishonest about your job and I can’t stay one more day in the same house with you... you never wanted to talk to me before so don’t say anything now. I’ll be back when I feel ready to face you.”

I tried to open my mouth again but the lack of moisture held my tongue up against its roof. Sepo read my mind, stood up and handed me a glass of water from the bedside table then disappeared into the adjoining bathroom. I gulped it all in four mouthfuls. My body still felt dehydrated from the alcohol poisoning. I needed more water but turned my attention to the bowl of porridge instead, ate it slowly, savouring each mouthful. This was the first time since I woke up in a hospital bed three days ago that my mind felt clear enough to decipher the words uttered to me. I had spent two nights in the Monze Mission hospital before Nawa, accompanied by Sepo, had driven me back home to Livingstone. Now this pile of bricks had been placed on my shoulders. She knew the truth. I should have felt relieved; the hard work had been done for me. But I did not. Something else in my conscience kept trying to surface but the throbbing in my head overpowered it. I ate the last spoon of porridge, laid back on the pillows behind me and soon drifted into a fitful sleep where a woman kept slapping my face. The last slap brought me right back to reality, and the events of the night of the gala dinner piled back into my memory. I bolted upright, heart pounding. I had to hold my head in both hands until the dizzy spell past. When I calmed down, I mustered up some strength and went to the kitchen for more water. A quick check around the house revealed that Sepo had left. The corolla stood alone in the carport. I took a bath, swallowed some pain killers and left the estate, destination yellow house.

The guard recognised me but wouldn’t let me in. He scowled at me through my window and repeated his words, “Miss Thoko she is gone.”

“It’s her mother I want. Please tell her that Mr Kalubwa needs to see her urgently.”

He spoke covertly into a two way radio then pushed the gate open for me. The stones that filled the driveway crunched beneath the tyres as I pulled in. I stepped out of the car and the guard led me up a path to the wide glass front door set in a dark Mukwa wood door frame, polished to perfection, with matching Mukwa door knobs. Even the windows had Mukwa frames. The green garden had been lovingly adorned with trees and plants. The Guard left me standing outside the door with a stern, “Wait here.” before he disappeared round a corner of the great house. Not long after, Kutemwa came to the door looking like a Stepford wife. She opened

the door and led me in as if my being there was the most normal thing. We walked over ivory tiles, past African artwork on white walls, into a closed sitting room with brown leather couches. She sat down in one and I dropped myself into the one across from her. She, calm and poised, looked straight at me. While I had my fingers interlocked under my chin, elbows on my thighs and eyes downcast. We sat like that for a long minute, until her firm voice ripped through the silence.

“Surely you didn’t come here to sit and eye the floor.”

I inhaled deeply, “Need you to know that nothing happened between me and Thoko. But I thought about it, and if you hadn’t been there that day something may have.”

“I won’t judge your marital status. But why is a grown man in his mid-thirties preying on such a young girl?”

“My life is a mess. I lost my job in January and I’ve been driving people around to make ends meet. I kept it from my wife believing I’d get a new job soon. Didn’t happen.” I stood up and started pacing, “The day after I met you I locked myself up in a hotel room in Monze and downed three bottles of whiskey. I don’t drink, I’m sure I didn’t want to die, but I don’t know why I did it... the staff found me nearly drowned in my own puke and unconscious the next day. They called my wife, now she knows bout the job and left me today.”

“So you came running to me after she left you,” she spat.

“I came for closure. When I told my parents about the baby, mum’s BP shot up and she died on the spot. Dad followed a month later. I was a child; I didn’t know how to fix anything. Still don’t.”

“That explains nothing. You’ve had all these years to find her. There is social media now.”

“I’m sorry, that’s all I have,” I said. I sat down again and really observed her for the first time. This was not the fresh face I had known all those years ago. It was drawn to the centre in a permanent scowl, in the manner of one who had pondered in injustice for more years than necessary. I wondered where the bend in the corner of her mouth had come from.

“Does your wife know about Thoko?”

“Nobody does. Except an uncle of mine.”

“Do you have children?”

I shook my head.

“You’re not the only one who has problems. I’ve seen you staring at my mouth. I had a stroke a year ago. Hubby moved to Lufwanyama almost immediately. Only came back for my son in December and hasn’t been ever since. Doesn’t even check up on us.”

We sat down in silence for a long time after that. I stood up first and left my numbers, “I’d like to come back. Maybe you could show me baby pictures and tell me more about her.”

The next two visits to the yellow house had a more amiable tone. Kutemwa regaled me with all the stories from her pregnancy, the baby years and beyond. I learned a lot about Thoko. On each drive back home I whispered the words ‘my daughter’ to myself over and over again, relishing the new feeling of pride and immense love they welled up in me. By the fifth visit Kutemwa and I had become the best of friends. We had outgrown the childhood attraction to each other and fell into an easy friendship. I went there that day expecting to hear more about my daughter’s formative years. Kutemwa had been careful to only invite me at times when Thoko was at work. She led me to the back of the house to an outdoor bamboo and thatch bar. We sat at the counter, a pitcher of cold Munkoyo in front of us. It had been brewed strong and each sip hit the back of my throat with a sharp clap, just how I liked it.

“Can’t believe we’ve been living in the same town all these years,” I said.

“Not really. Hubby brought me here after the stroke. This house used to be a guest house; he fell in love and bought it. When he wants something, nobody can stop him. He thought recuperating in the tourist capital would do me good...I’m fine now but was away from work so long they gave my job away.”

I took another sip from my glass.

“I’ve decided to leave him,” she continued. “I want to start afresh in a new country. We have a joint account with enough money for me to disappear to Nairobi, Mauritius or Gaborone. Maybe start a business or work as a nurse again. And the best part is I’ll give you some of the loot, not because I still want you... I just feel like you’ve lived a limited life and need a fresh start too. Plus I want you to get your act together so that you can look after her when I’m gone. So I will take ten million and give you one million.”

I turned to face her, my eyes squinting in confusion. This mad older woman still had the same cunning tongue that had talked me into a relationship with her as a boy. She could not be serious.

“You’re joking,” I said.

“Not in the least. Suzyo was born to make money and if I take ten million Kwacha, he will make it back in a year or less. He doesn’t talk to us now but still supports our lifestyle in every way.”

“You would dump your children and rob your own husband? I’m positive you contributed little if anything at all to the mountain of cash in that account,” I cried.

“Soon to be ex husband. Once I disappear I won’t be married. He deserves it and I deserve a second life away from them. Eventually I will reach out to them when they are old enough to not be controlled by their father... Think about how a million Kwacha could change your life. He will never know you had anything to do with it.”

“How did you become so cold? It’s wrong. I have to go.”

“Listen to me. Suzyo and Thoko have always been close. She wanted to study mining or metallurgy at CBU and he promised her an internship at his mine. Then he just switched off. Seldom answers her calls and has been silent on her moving that side, instead he took her brother whose only interest is becoming a rapper. And that abandonment has affected her. Badly... Your daughter sells her body to guests at the hotel. The man whose money you don’t want to take is to blame! There was a case where she even stole from one of the men she services. I am afraid to think of how she still has her job. It can’t be just luck.. Live a little my love. I strike a week from tomorrow so you don’t have much time to think about it.”

“That makes me want nothing to do with him.”

I drove home fast, with images of the Asian man who had allegedly raped Thoko flashing before my eyes. What had really happened that night? Had Thoko lied about the rape? What bad karma had I attracted for all this drama to be unfolding in my life? Now my ex wanted me to ‘live a little’ and accept a criminal gift. More like a charity than a gift. But I needed that money. I had missed the interview at ZESCO and could not bring myself to explain and apologise to Uncle Charles. I also could not go back to driving a taxi. Not after the relief I felt when I thought that life had come to an end. I hated to admit that I needed Suzyo’s money. How else would I provide a better life for my daughter what with her own mother ditching her? I only needed a bit more money to finish my flats and once that was done I would be set, and better off. I had to think of the greater good. Later that night I sent her a text message, “I’m in.” I would take it as a gift from a friend. A much needed gift that had come at the perfect time.

We met only once after that text, at Mukuni park in town, choosing a secluded bench under a tree. We took on our roles without discussion, she the mastermind, and me the silent

accomplice. She decided we would leave by bus the next morning because the bank only had a branch in Lusaka. They already knew of her intentions. We arrived in Lusaka after an uneventful journey and booked into a small hotel near the hustle and bustle of the Inter City bus terminal, separate rooms of course. The hotel had no charm and everything in my sparse room seemed to be on its last legs. She insisted on it because she didn't want to meet any of her husband's associates. With nothing to talk about, we stayed in our respective rooms for the night. I couldn't believe that I had only hours until I got back on my own two feet. Early the next day she knocked on my door. Up since before sunrise, I immediately let her in. She stood awkwardly by the door and fidgeted with the envelope in her hands.

"Today's the day. Are you ready to become a millionaire," she asked.

"You should know that I'm only doing this for Thoko."

"I'm happy we met. For so long I hated you but now I have closure. We both do. Thank you for trusting me enough to come with me, I needed the moral support." She walked up to where I stood in the middle of the room and placed the envelope in my hands. "I've already paid for the rooms. Here's my passport and key card. Keep them until I get back from the bank." She kissed me, on the mouth. Not long or awkward, and not sexual in any way. Then she spun around and left.

I lay down on the bed, awaiting her return, unable to think of anything else. The minutes turned into hours. At some point I ordered breakfast to the room but didn't touch it. I ignored my stomach's hunger protests. All my body wanted to do was lie on my back and wait for Kutemwa with my cheque, or bag, or whatever form she would bring the money in. When dusk fell and the room darkened, my heart sank. I knew she would not be coming back. I stood up then. Body sore from the monotonous position it had been subjected to all day. I moved to the dressing table, picked up the envelope she had given me and made my way out the door to her room. The room mirrored mine. She had not made the bed and a few of her cosmetics had been lined up neatly on the dressing table. A medium sized Gucci suitcase stood on the floor near the foot of the bed. I threw the suitcase on the bed and unzipped it with one harsh movement, my ears wincing at the sound. I sifted through the contents, looking for nothing in particular. Two changes of clothes. Two pairs of shoes, one flat, and one heeled some underwear and a thick novel. In a separate compartment I retrieved a white A4 envelope with the inscription Anji Lemye. It had a national registration card, birth certificate, drivers licence, school qualifications and even a few reference letters. All of them had Kutemwa's picture but the name Anji Lemye.

A made up name for a new beginning

But why had she not returned for her things? Unless she had never intended to come back and planted the envelope for me to find and think something had happened to her. I shook the thoughts out my head and instead grasped for rationale. I put back the contents of the suitcase, locked up and retreated to my own room. There I grabbed my phone and called her number. Off. Seven tries later and the mobile subscriber was still outside the coverage area. I scribbled a goodbye note on the back of a receipt, gathered my things and left the note in her room with her passport. It was dark and cold outside but people and cars still lined the road as I made the short walk to Inter City. I found a night bus about to leave for Livingstone and settled in for the long ride back. For now I needed my mind to be blank. Hopefully a course of action would somehow reveal itself to me.

I smelt the Nivea before my eyes opened. As the sleep lifted, I tried to focus on the face of the warm body lying still next to me but the pitch blackness would not allow it. The hot air from her nose warmed my face and brought me to full consciousness. A hint of a foreign smell tainted the usually pure smell of Nivea. I couldn't put my finger on it so I let it go. But the smell lingered in my nose. I stretched and yawned.

"Baby are you awake?"

She hadn't called me baby in ages.

I'm sorry for disrespecting you so much. I've left the Terrano with daddy. Don't need it anymore. All I need is you. May you please forgive me? I still love you so much and we can find a way even if you don't have a job. Just us, without dad's help. I've already sent out applications."

I found myself saying, "I made mistakes too and I'm sorry for lying to you... For not confiding in you and turning my back on you."

"I forgive you."

"What would you do if I told you I have one more secret?"

"I'd kill the bitch." She giggled and wriggled her toes on my feet.

"I'm serious."

"All remaining secrets will be shared tomorrow. Not tonight. It's been too long and I've missed you"

We made love that night for the first time in countless months. Like two strangers. And it was good. Just like it had been in the early years, before everything came crashing down. So good I dreamt of my parents, the first time in years. In the dream I presented them with a newly built house. They didn't say anything but beamed with pride. The very pride I had longed for all my life. I introduced them to Tamika; they smiled, and then floated off into the sky.

8

The morning after the dream I woke up feeling the most assured I had in a while. I made Sepo breakfast in bed and there we stayed until lunch. Laughing and reminiscing. All thoughts of divulging dirty secrets forgotten. As if the universe agreed with my feelings, I received a text message that Kutemwas phone was on. Curiosity got the better of me. It embraced me like a long lost friend and refused to let go. I slipped out the house through the patio door as Sepo prepared lunch. I assured myself that it was only because Kutemwa was my child's mother. I moved away from the house into the wooded area behind it. Feeling secluded, I dialed her number. On the third ring an empty, barely audible female voice answered.

"Hello."

"So you change your name and your voice too? It's me you don't have to pretend," I said.

"Mr Kalubwa? It's Thoko." Her voice was devoid of its usual joy.

"I'm glad it's you."

"Really? You've ignored my calls since you ditched us at the gala so how are you glad? Only to find out that you've gone behind my back and started seeing my mother? I saw you two arguing at the gala dinner and the guard told me you visited her a lot,"

"Please hear me out"

"Whatever you have to say doesn't matter. She is dead. Dad took her to Siavonga for a romantic getaway to apologize. They had an accident on the way."

"What? When?"

Her voice broke and her answer was a whisper, "Two days ago."

"I was with her two days ago. Where are you?"

"Lusaka."

"I'm coming to see you."

"Don't." She hung up before I could respond. I forced myself to breathe, shook my head until it hurt. Sepo couldn't see me like this. I ran through the woods, my shoes snapping twigs. Back at home I got the car keys from our bedroom. I rubbed my chest with one fist in an attempt to calm down my heart. In the kitchen Sepo washed plates at the sink. I hugged her from behind. "Nawa wants to use the car. I'll be right back."

"Why can't he come and get it. You always let people bully you baby." She turned to me, "And you look like you licked the inside of someone's ear."

I flashed a wide smile, kissed her cheek and left.

When I got to town I called Nawa.

"I was just talking about you," he said, his voice raised over the sound of loud chatter and music.

"Where are you?"

"The cafe."

I found him at a table in the beer garden with a half eaten plate of chips and a small unmarked glass bottle as his only companions.

"Who were you discussing me with," I asked as I sat down.

"A friend."

"Order a plate for me; I need to use the toilet." I went to the men's room, vomited, and then washed my face. When I felt my nerves calm down I went back out. At the table my plate had not yet been brought. I eyed the little glass bottle on the table. Half the size of a Fanta bottle, I could see an amber liquid through the clear glass.

"I've also been keeping things from you. I'm moving to Botswana. Got a job in Francistown." He shook the little bottle, "Want some celebratory drink?"

"Congratulations. Better pay? I hate alcohol but the way my day is going I need a mug."

"You sure? After Monze? I've been giving you space but you need to tell me what happened."

"Believe me that's why I'm here."

With his lips pursed and a bemused expression on his face, he reached into his pocket and brought out a shot glass, then poured a healthy helping of the amber liquid into it. I reached over and picked the shot glass. Our eyes met as I lifted it to my lips. Something flickered in his and made me put the glass down before it reached my mouth. He pitied me. His eyes could not hide it even if he had never said it out loud. Like my daughter, I too did not like pity. I decided to wait for my food before drowning my sorrows. A few tables away a short muscular man in a black t-shirt stood up. He had a bald head with a black and white goatee and had been staring at me since I had entered. Now it seemed he was making his way over to us, I wondered what it could be about. The man waltzed past our table without another glance at me. How strange. Then it hit me, faintly at first, but enough to jolt my memory. Five seconds ticked by as my brain registered the smell. The same one that had lingered all over Sepo the night she had returned. I jumped from the table and chased after him, through the front of the cafe and into the corridor outside. People walked passed me from left and right but I couldn't see him. He had vanished.

The call came in as I moved through the parking lot, panting, and searching high and low for a short man in a black t-shirt. I swiped right to answer the unknown number.

"I don't know how you knew me but you will never catch me. What kind of dumb fuck steals from the man who raised his child? You're a weak man for listening to my stupid wife. I know everything by the way. I found out last year that she lied to me about Tamika being mine and I know what you two tried to do. She paid the price for her betrayal. You're next." His voice was loud, emotional and raw.

"Suzyo? How do you know my wife?"

"I know everything about you. Don't even try getting comfortable around anyone you know coz you don't know how I'll strike. That little bottle Nawa had came from me and if I blinked and didn't catch you sipping some of it, you'll be dead before the day ends. Kutemwa was already a sitting duck when you met her and now you've joined the club."

"Where's Tamika? Please spare her," I pleaded.

"No matter what that's my daughter. Stay away from her you sick paedophile."

The call left me feeling like the wind had been knocked out of my gut. Too many things in my body had gone into turbo; heart rate, blood rate, perspiration rate. I could not take it. I forced my feet to move. Somehow one foot moved in front of the other until I found myself back in the beer garden. The table was empty. No Nawa in sight. Not even the damned small bottle of poison. Poison only if Suzyo was right. But Nawa had been such a supportive friend. So it couldn't be true. In a haze I ran out and drove to Dambwa North and found his gate wide open. A peep through the windows revealed an empty house with no curtains. I punched a window so hard it broke and left me bleeding. Thoko. I did not care about a bleeding hand I needed to find my daughter. I tried her number and her mother's, both off. I rinsed my hand at the outside tap, took off my shirt and wrapped it around my hand. All the while thinking, how could Nawa try to kill me? What had been in it for him?

Like a mad man I drove home, bare-chested with glazed eyes and blood splatter all over me. Surely Sepo could not be trying to kill me too. How had she gotten his smell all over her? What if I did not find her either. The tyres of the Corolla screeched to an ear piercing halt outside our house. I had not been gone that long; she had to still be there. Closing the car door did not concern me as I leaped out of the car and ran into the house, leaving the front door open too. I found her on the couch, looking serene with her feet tucked under her. She eyed me curiously when I stumbled into the sitting room. Then she waved a hand in a circular motion in my direction. "Whatever is going on with you must wait because I have good news." She stood up and smiled at me. A great big happy smile, "Our problems are all solved baby and we are RICH!"

I did not move. Just stood there watching, waiting, in silence. She came up to me and wrapped both arms around my neck, a smile still playing on her lips. I could not read her eyes yet. But I knew she had to be involved. Lubinda too definitely played a part. He had a mine in Lufwanyama just like Suzyo, they definitely knew each other.

"A wealthy relative of Dad's just died and left us TEN. MILLION. KWACHA. Can you believe it? There is also an extra one million that we have to give to a charity of our choice." She looked into my eyes and her words *'I'd kill the bitch'* echoed in my mind.

THE END

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

I have had a life long love affair with books and stories. At the age of eleven a work mate of my Fathers moved to Israel.

Back then post cards were still a big thing and he sent us a few from his new home. Inspired by the wonderful pictures of the arid land with flat roofed buildings I tried to pen my first novel, a story of a pre-teen Zambian girl who moves to Israel and is overwhelmed by culture shock. Anyone who has written a novel will tell you how important research is.

Beyond the post cards I had no means of research and failed to finish my book. Over the years I started but never completed many more stories. In 2014 I got an idea for a book. Three years and six rewrites later, here we are. I hope you enjoyed The Drivers Secret.