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Her First

She had the first one the weekend Mukoma went to Mazvihwa and left us alone in the Glen View room for two reasons: she was too new to be taken to the village to meet Maiguru, and I had to stay in the city because a prophet told Mukoma that I would be bewitched if I went to the village, since this was the year of my O-Level exams. “Let him stay in the city until he finishes school,” the prophet told Mukoma, reminding him of my long illness in Form 2. Mukoma liked the idea of me staying in the city because he wanted me to watch his new wife while he was in the village with Maiguru, the senior wife.

On the first night after Mukoma left, I didn’t study. The woman and I lay down early, she on the bed, and I on the sofa on the opposite side of the room. But I could not sleep, no matter how hard I tried, because I was thinking about her. She shifted, and I looked in the direction of the bed through a worn part of my blanket. She had uncovered her face and was looking in my direction too, but she didn’t seem to notice that I was looking at her. Perhaps she was checking to see if I was asleep so she could sneak out. That’s what Mukoma had said to watch for: “You know how I met her. She’s a good woman now, but you never know when her old ways might come back.”

I knew she was naked in that bed. Just before she got into it, when I was about to walk out of the room as usual, she had said, “Babamunini, just cover your head, or close your eyes. You only should walk out when your brother is around.” I lay on the sofa, covered in my blanket, my eyes closed because I could have seen her through the thin blanket. Her nylon crackled and the bed springs squealed as she buried herself under the blankets.

“You can uncover yourself now and keep the light on to read if you want,” she said.

“I’m taking a break tonight,” I said.

“I would too. What’s he going to do? Come back from the village in the middle of the night and say read? Izvozvi handiti he is in the arms of his wife?” She went silent and lay looking at me with one- and-a-half eyes because her pillow pushed her cheek into the pit of her left eye, turning it into a slit, while the other eye looked at me intensely.

“It has nothing to do with Mukoma, but you know all work and no play—.”

“Made Sivindo a fool; I know,” she said, breaking into a laugh. That wasn’t the saying, but oh well.

I turned the lights off, told her good night and tried to sleep. But I knew she was naked in that bed and was perhaps still peering at me in the darkness. I pictured her in her recent past, leaving Kubatana bar with a man and going to his dark room, or creeping into Bonongwe forest and coming back to the bar thirty minutes later to be seen by another man. My heart beat faster at the thought of some hungry hands tearing off nylon and

She shifted again and I bit my lower lip to make the pain clear these dirty thoughts. Not good for a person of the Word. If she asked me to join her on the bed I would pretend not to have heard her; maybe I would just start snoring. But if she really asked me to climb in, I would lie with my back to her, fighting temptation—get thee behind me, Satan; then maybe she would strengthen her temptation by slowly letting her hand, but I was not supposed to think about such things. The prophets of my church would feast on me on Sunday if they so much as got a whiff of what had been on my mind. For a preacher—I was a junior deacon—to think like this was breaking not only my faith but also Mukoma’s trust. He had said,

“I’ll feel better to know that you are watching her for me.” Even if he didn’t think it was the church that made him trust me, Mukoma always bragged, “I trained him well. He knows not to mess up. Finish school first, women later, and that’s what he’s going to do.” Like that; no questions asked, no room for variables. No room even about the possibility that, alone with her like this, either she or I might think about something....

I listened to her breathing and remembered what she asked me once, “So does the church allow you to do anything at all?”

“Anything?” I had said.

“You know, anything...something,” she said, pointing on the ground...well, not the ground really. Mukoma had been in the room, so she seemed to want the question to be understood only by me. And I was shocked by what I understood in her question, and how I momentarily saw a flash of a naked body heaving, then I blinked sin away and said, “Oh, the church? I have an important role in it.”

I chose to show that I misunderstood the question, and she acknowledged that with a smile that allowed just enough front teeth to peep through pinched lips. That’s the first time I noticed her beauty, enhanced by the gap in her front teeth. She stood there as nothing else but pure woman, even empathetic in a way that made me think that she understood me better than Mukoma ever would. But then I had stiffened and found myself hating that she could try to understand me like that, new as she was. Nothing could stop me from following my Lord, not even her star-like smile, and her eyes full of promise, as if they had secrets only I was meant to know.

“You’re blessed. Young still, but already leading souls,” she had said.

“He’ll outgrow it one day,” Mukoma had said, “but it’s good for him now, so he can finish school.” We had abandoned the topic at that.

Then on another day, when we were alone, she asked if I had a girl friend, or if I knew what having a girlfriend meant. And I firmly told her no to the first part of the question and gave a strong yes to the second, spicing it with an “of course.” Come on, who didn’t know?

“Just asking. These things are important, and I ask because I care.”

That phrase of hers, I ask because I care...sometimes it made me wish I was Mukoma. But the right thing was to show her that the Word was more important than women, who would come once the time was right.

“Just trying my best to avoid the things of the flesh,” I said and she winked at me. But I went ahead and preached to her anyway. At the end she said, “You realize though that once in a while the earth must shake and the skies must rumble?” I liked how she said it and said, “Is that something from a book?”

“A book?” She started laughing. I joined her in the laughter.

Mukoma found us laughing, and as he entered the room, said, “There you go you two. You are getting along well, good.”

She was asleep now. I could hear her heavy breathing which threatened to grow into snoring. I kept thinking about her nakedness, even thought about how lucky those blankets were. Then I tried to think about something cleaner. The red edges of the bible, or a woman sleeping on the bed, but covered in white or red church robes, a prayerful Zion woman, prophesying in sleep. But my thoughts peeled the folds of those robes, exposed the nakedness to which the blankets clung. They must have been laughing at me now, those blankets, thinking, just get up here, man, and explore.

I let my mind drift to Mazvihwa, following the route Mukoma had taken that morning. When he got on the Masvingo Netara bus at Mbare, he slid open the small window on his side and in the din, shouted, “Remember what I told you, Mupfana!” I nodded and waved, and, and as the bus farted and puffed, he

waved a good-bye to his wife. As we were walking back to the Emergency Taxi rank for Glen View, she asked me what Mukoma had been talking about.

“Oh, you know, he was talking about the studying.” I lied.

“Oh, he really wants you to succeed, your brother,” she said, walking so close to me that her hips bumped against my waist and I felt a stir in my groin, but I said, “He does, yeah.”

“The funny thing though is you are the kind that does not need to be reminded always. If he had my cousin Ruvengo for a young brother he would just give up in one day.”

“Oh, how come?” I said.

“My uncle has tried everything, from beating to starving, and the boy can’t just get it, this thing of books. All he likes is playing soccer all day. Now he is into women, and he’s only fourteen!”

“We all come in different packages,” I said, as we struggled with others to get into an ET to Glen View. We both made it, and we sat silent the rest of the way.

By now Mukoma was somewhere in Mototi, having arrived before sunset. If he wasn’t at a beer gathering, as there were always plenty of those on weekends, or even at the small beer hall at Vazhure Growth Point, he was at home with Maiguru in the hut on stilts. The very same hut he slept in when he and Maiguru got married; or if they had not made it all the way to that hut, they were lying on the kitchen floor, on a reed mat, hungry hands fumbling in the dark. Maiguru’s hands. Maiguru who was probably just as naked as this woman here. Groping. Like you would expect her to do after three months of drought—that’s what people in the village called it, the drought of women whose husbands worked in the city and returned home every three, sometimes more, months. Women, once starved, the village used to whisper, would in such moments be grateful about the showers. And Mukoma was there now, doing what I, if I wasn’t such a coward, would be doing here. Why just lie here like a log, instead of coming outright and say, “Are you asleep?” She could say something like, “No, I am not. Are you?” I could then laugh, and she would laugh too, laugh so hard that she would sit up, forgetting that she was naked, and let the blankets fall, and continue to laugh louder, choking on that laughter, and then getting up to turn the lights on, still laughing so hard and I not saying anything, and she realizing I was laughing and loving the idea of her standing there in front of me naked, because my stare would be fixed on her, and maybe when the laughter died down it would be because she had ended on the sofa where I was and at that point we would....

I felt a shiver. She was snoring now, piercing my peace. I should already be dreaming too because the creature on the bed was nothing I could touch, much less think about. There was no way we could do what I was thinking about, not with what could happen: fists splitting skulls, rags of clothes thrown out of the door, a walk into the darkness, and the impenetrable strangeness of Harare, walking, ruining my life....

No, I could not think about the woman on the bed. The age difference would not permit. She had told me that although she looked young, she was thirty-two, almost fifteen years older than I was. She was ancient. But.... Mukoma had said that she had not had a baby yet, which meant that she was still intact.... These thoughts were not legal. The Sunday sermon, about reaping what’s between the legs of other people’s wives....death glaring you in the eye. No more of this nonsense between....my....; this couch. The village. The fumbling.... Mukoma heaving....

“You can turn on the lights if you want to read.” Her voice, husky with sleep, startled me, drew me out of encroaching sleep. I sat up, and then lay down again.

“I can’t read tonight,” I said. And I shook my head and pinched my thighs together and covered myself with the thin blanket.

“That’s right, but it sounds like you are not falling asleep,” she said.

“Oh, I will soon. Trust me,” I said, forcing a yawn.

She shifted again. Turning over, and for a moment she sounded like she had thrown the blanket off her body. I closed my eyes and imagined holy hands being laid on an ailing soul, but I ended thinking of her turning into something disgusting, a roach, a caterpillar, or even a slug. Thinking of her this way, either as an ailing soul needing salvation, or an insignificant creature, was bound to help my stiffness soften, and for sleep to capture me.

“Good night,” she said. “Try to sleep then. Remember tomorrow you are going with me to town.”

“I know,” I said looking through the cracks of my blanket. But I could not see anything, so I slowly peeled the blanket off my face. In the semi-darkness I could see that she was still covered in blankets. I sighed. Inaudibly. She began coughing, her body bouncing up and down. Just as I could picture it doing when she was with Mukoma, on those evenings they sent me to the shopping center and told me not to come back until after at least thirty minutes. Her coughing stopped, then it began again, brief bursts like little screams. The war between my legs started to rebuild, and I bit my lower lip hard to let my mind focus on the pain. Once again, I ended up thinking about unpleasant things. Rotten things streaming in like rats, a stench in the pit of my mind.

Thinking about her was wrong, so I snuggled and closed my eyes and told myself I was going to sleep. I even feigned some snoring, constantly batting my eyelids to stop my mind from wandering away again. Then the fire within started to die down, and I began to drift into that state between sleep and wakefulness, when you know you are awake but those who see you may think you are asleep.

“I can’t sleep, Babamunini,” she whispered, startling me.

I pretended not to have heard her.

“I said I can’t sleep,” she said, a little louder.

But I was sound asleep, so she left me alone. I heard the springs of the bed creak, then the thud of feet on the floor, and I held my breath. Then I heard her walk toward the door. I lifted the corner of my blanket. She had wrapped herself with a sheet. Completely covered, except her feet. She opened the door and closed it, but did not lock it, so I knew that she was only going to the toilet. Usually, if you listened hard you could hear her. I did not hear her this time. It would not be appropriate to try to hear her now. I covered myself fully before she returned so she would not think I had been awake. But then I wanted to wake up with a start, for her to think that she had just disturbed me.

The door opened and closed softly. She tiptoed toward the bed and climbed in with the least noise. The springs did not even scream this time under her weight. Shortly after, as I held my breath, she started to snore and I exhaled. As I listened to her snoring and the constant buzz of the Glen View night, I fought the revolution between my legs. I whispered another short prayer and concentrated on clean thoughts: in two weeks our church was going to Domboshava to fast for the rains, a weekend masowe characterized by non-stop singing and rib-snapping prayer.

Soon the revolution died.

And I was in Runde chasing something. Then I was being chased. But when I stopped running, I was in Glen View again, this time sitting in a mansion. I stood up though, when I heard a falling sound. I entered one of the bedrooms and found thousands of ants streaming out of the base of the bed. The ants became roaches, and I was running through the house opening cabinets but not finding bleach. I was looking for bleach, to scare whatever was in the house. Then I was in a big bed, sitting on the edges and spitting out little insects, which turned into vultures that stabbed the ground with their beaks, advancing towards me, and when I was spitting another mouthful of maggots, a light behind me dissolved and evaporated the vultures. And her sharp scream roused me from sleep.

I was drenched in sweat and at first I did not know where I was. I looked around in the darkness and noticed that I was still in the room, on the sofa, hearing her braying. I sprung up, staggered as I checked if I was dressed. I dove for the switch and turned the light on. She was on top of the blankets, naked still, but huddled, twisting, her mouth wide open. Now what was this all about, what was she trying to do? Tempt me with silly tricks? That body of hers, it was lighter than her face. She croaked and quivered, then broke into another scream. She lay on her side now, her back to me, but her head turned so that her face looked at the ceiling. Then she turned toward me and opened her mouth wider as another cry erupted from her. Her whole body started to shake. Everything shook, thighs, shoulders, her lips, but her eyes were closed, pinched together in pain. I wondered if I should turn the light off, but her bellowing deepened, causing me to swing around to face her.

Her eyes were now open but they looked at me with their whites. My heart started beating faster.

“Are you okay?” I asked, as I stepped forward, then back, when I drew too close to her naked body. For a moment her whole body went limp and it produced a loud fart.

I didn't know whether to touch her, to turn her flat on her back and feel her heartbeat. Something fast, I thought. Options: pray, like we do always at church, where nothing is difficult, or go straight for those first aid steps I learned in school. I moved closer to the bed, stamping my foot on the floor to see if that would make her stir, the sound of it. She did not move. My heart beat faster still, and I thought if something happened to her, if she died, I would be guilty somehow. All this, whatever it was, might be blamed on me.

She lay still, as I leaned over towards her chest, avoiding focusing on her breasts, which poured to her sides, as if they wanted to run away from each other. As I was about to lift one of them to feel her heartbeat, she quivered and let out another scream. I jumped backwards, but lurched forward again. She struggled to sit up, and her eyes opened, met mine, then dimmed. I waited. Her wrists were twisted, and she turned on her side, assuming the same position she had been in when I woke up to find her screaming. Perhaps she was dreaming.

I was about to turn off the light and return to my sofa when she swung around again to face me. Her body was jerking, and her left hand, whose fingers were twisted and looked broken, was trying to tell me something with an up and down movement, as if it was trying to show me something on the floor. I even looked on the floor but saw nothing, then I realized that it was moving in response to the tenseness of the upper part of her body. I looked at her face again, hoping that she would tell me what to do, because I was beginning to think that this might be some form of attack.

She bared her teeth, then stuck her tongue out and started drooling. The sight of it, the drooling, the tongue hanging on the side of her mouth—this was not like my new sister-in-law anymore. I tried to think fast. I had to do something. Pray for her. Or pour holy water on her face, the holy water I kept in my jacket pocket. If this was a demon it had no power in my presence. As if the demon in her had heard me, it twisted her head like it would snap it off her body.

That was it: I was diving in. I held her head in place and closed my eyes. I whispered a prayer as my hands shook. She struggled some more, then fell limp again. I opened my eyes, which met hers that were calmly looking at me. Then she looked at her nakedness and curled. I moved backwards. Watching her naked like this was not right. I should have covered her by now. The blankets were on the floor. Soon as I pulled them and was about to cover her, she started struggling again, turning to one side, then another, as if her whole body was telling me no, no, no.

I had to do whatever it took to stop this demon. At least to get her to stop the deep, rapid sounds she produced. If I let it continue, people would wonder what was going on and come knock on the door. I didn't want to be found looking at a naked woman. I thought of covering her mouth, and while the other

hand lay on her head as I prayed for the sudden stop of whatever had seized her. Then I noticed that she was frothing at the mouth, head twisted to the side and eyes now closed tight. I got down on my knees by the side of the bed, lay my hands on her shoulders and uttered another prayer, and all I managed to let out was a weak “Go away. Go away.” The prayer was interrupted by another sharp cry from her, as if she had been stabbed. I got up and found that she was lying on her side again, quivering. I pulled a blanket and covered her before she resisted.

The bellowing intensified, and I decided to help her to a sitting position, struggling to keep her body covered by the blanket. When she was almost sitting upright, she jerked forward like someone about to vomit, in the process pushing me so hard I staggered back to the couch, but I got up again to fight the forces of Satan. What I saw as I moved back to the bed made my skin crawl and for the first time I was afraid and considered bolting out of the room. Her face for a moment looked like it did not have a skin anymore, like it was just a screaming skeleton. As I was about to search for my bible, she twisted again vigorously and before I could jump towards the bed to prevent her from falling, she fell on the floor hard and went quiet and flat.

I remembered the water.

I took a jug of water and sprayed some water on her. The water was cold. At first she did not move. Then I poured more water on her, and she jerked up and said, “Hey! Stop that!”

I stopped as commanded. Then she sat up quickly, like one coming from a bad dream. She looked around and realized that she was naked. Our eyes met and she gave a weak smile, grabbed a blanket and covered herself. She sat there for a while, and I waited for an explanation. She slowly got up, went into the bed, and said, “Turn off the lights, Babamunini, and try to sleep.”

I did not react.

“Or you can study for the rest of the night if you want.” She then snuggled in the blankets, now fully covered. Soon, she was snoring....

I was roused from sleep by the squeal of the door as it opened. She was walking in, fully dressed.

“Rise and shine!” she said, as she raised her arms and I noticed that she had a grocery bag in her left hand.

“Good morning,” I said, avoiding eye contact with her, but she smiled and said, “You sleep like a log. I even tried to wake you up so you would run to the stores but I ended up going myself. Breakfast will be ready soon.”

“I’m sorry. I was just too tired I think,” I said.

“I don’t blame you. Long night.”

I hesitated.

“I understand. You don’t have to say anything. As far as we are concerned, nothing happened last night.”

“That’s right.”

“Scrambled or fried sunny-side up?”

“Scrambled, with a--.”

“Mish-mash of tomatoes, onions, carrots. I know that one,” she said, turning the stove on.

I got up and folded my blankets, then found a book to read. I went outside to give her more time and room to prepare breakfast. I could already smell the aroma of scrambled eggs and Tanganda tea. The night was still fresh in my mind, but the day was promising. Soon we would be leaving to go to town.