



**WHEN
IT'S
YOUR
TURN
FOR
MIDNIGHT**

BLESSING MUSARIRI

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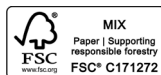
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PROLOGUE

IF anyone ever says to you, ‘Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can never hurt me,’ tell them to come see me. This works in the playground when you’re five and someone says your hair is like the coily thing used to scrub pots. But when it’s your own mother’s words that rip your life down the middle, like a page from a magazine, then you think – bones can mend. Words kill.

I don’t mind that my mother named me Chianti, I mind that no one ever gets it right. People say *chee-anty* instead of *kee-anty*, so I’m known as *chee-ah* for short. It’s been a losing battle since day one. I only fight it when I feel excess aggravation inside.

When I was little and I would cry, Mama used to set an alarm clock and say, ‘You have two minutes – when that alarm rings, wrap it up.’ There was an implied threat, but I

never found out what might happen – I always followed the instruction. After that, I stopped crying altogether. Mama once said to her mother – Ambuya Precious – ‘Chianti’s tears are gold, Mama, extremely precious and rare, they don’t come for nothing.’ She may have regretted training me that well, because she had a hard time figuring me out. Except for when I was angry and those unshed tears turned into words. When I’m angry my words are lava and they even burn me.

About three weeks ago, a steady stream of lava rained from my heart. A deep cavern opened and I couldn’t control the hot things that escaped. After the eruption, I didn’t say another word to Mama. I packed my bags and hitch-hiked from Harare to Ambuya’s in Mutare. Ambuya did not scold me for risking my life – after all, I could have been abducted and assaulted, murdered for body parts in evil magic, or simply disappeared to some unnamed fate. She opened the front door and said, ‘There’s no one to cook and clean after you. Think carefully before you take another step.’

I took one step, then another, dragging my bag behind me. ‘Close the door after you,’ she said.



ONE

MUTARE feels like another country. The blue shimmer in the distance fools me into believing the sea is soon after the mountains, but it's the beginning of Mozambique over there and the coastline is many miles away. Ambuya lives in a cul-de-sac at the top of a hill. Her three besties, Gogos Stella, Tapera and Ropa, are her neighbours. It's quiet here. In Harare, we live in a gated complex, but once you leave, it's loud and bustling. Mutare is chilled, even the busy parts; there aren't enough people to make it crazy. Ambuya and the gogos have extensive yards — almost a world to themselves. Standing on the balcony of my room, I watch the sun rise over the treetops and crest the mountain. I imagine I'm on an exotic holiday and never have to leave.

I thought Ambuya would come to wake me, the way Sisi Taku does at home, but there's no knock at my door, no

smell of oats, no sound of Taren and Tisha. I once took a picture of them lurching about like sleepy orangutangs and they laughed and laughed and laughed. That day, Tisha's hair was sticking up every which way because she'd refused to have it plaited. Tisha is nine, and tender-headed to the end of all days. You only have to hold a comb and she will have anxiety. When I'm in a good mood I'll do her hair, and she doesn't fight me. She says I'm gentle. Taren, on the other hand, is a total diva – she frowns and scowls, gives incessant directions, keeps reaching up to feel how it's going and holds a mirror to her face every five seconds. She's thirteen, going on twenty-five, and Mama says I'm going on fifty.

Despite what she said, Ambuya has put food on the table consistently since I've been here. She has otherwise left me alone and it's been a blessing. She goes in and out of the house, I hear her car start up several times a day – she's a real busy body. But today is different. When I walk into the sunny kitchen, Ambuya is sitting at the table peering over her rhinestone specs at a tablet in her hands. There's a cup of tea next to her, a plate of peeled, boiled sweet potatoes and samosas. I'm no longer surprised at my grandmother's strange food combinations.

'Ahh, you're awake. Good morning, Queen Elizabeth,' she says. My period of grace is over.

'Good morning, Ambuya,' I say, 'how did you sleep?'

'I slept well if you slept well.'

Duly I reply, 'I slept well.'

From the moment I stopped talking to Mama, I was in the deep end of weariness. I literally die at night and resurrect in the morning. I don't even dream.

I haven't told Ambuya why I came, but she'll have an idea it's trouble with Mama. They are not best of friends and Mama won't come looking for me here. Taren would have told her where I was going. She's no snitch, but she's not about other people's problems either; she's got enough of her own.

Ambuya indicates the place set near her chair. I sit down and pull the teapot toward me. It's milky Rooboos, brewed the way I like it. I reach for a samosa and Ambuya makes a steeple for her chin with her fingers and watches me chew. She's nothing like what a grandmother called Ambuya should look like. She's wearing sporty sweats in a chartreuse colour and has a multi-coloured head tie around a light-brown twist-out style. She's tall and fit and looks like she could go a few rounds in a boxing ring.

'I guess you'd better tell me what happened. Taren has been flooding my phone with texts, but none of them say anything useful.'

'Did you know?' I ask. I'm not ready to jump into the story yet. I have to fetch it from the recent archives in my brain and there's no intern to send. I don't want to go myself.

'Know what, my dear?'

Ambuya was an ambassador, so she always hedges her bets.

'You know what I'm talking about.'

'How could I possibly know? I understand this has to do with your mother, but it could be any number of things.'

'And Tinashe.'

At this, she raises one heavily filled-in eyebrow.

'Tinashe?'

'Yes, Tinashe,' I reply.

She lifts her tea cup and takes a sip, cuts a disc of sweet potato in half and pops it in her mouth.

'You'd better just tell me.'



We shouldn't have joked.

We were sitting at the dining table doing our homework. It had been a rough few days. Mama and Baba had been getting into it all week. I used to wonder what they liked about each other. Mama is a singer and Baba is a financial something or other – and she is too much for him to handle. Mama had come home late from a gig and the next day, Baba did the same. Mama lost her cool and threw stuff at him. The night before had been quite wild. I was looking at a mark on the corner of the table, where a flying pot had chipped the wood, and said, 'God must have been lazy to

do his homework when he put Mama and Baba together, because eish!

Taren laughed. 'Tell me about it! How did they even make us? They're like a snot-shooting sneeze and poopy fart all at once – bad combination.' It took me a minute to picture it and when I did, I laughed and laughed until I farted by mistake, and then Taren and Tisha laughed until one drooled over her book and the other fell off her chair. Taren can be rude, but she's also funny which means trouble.

In my mind, that joke marked a shift in our cosmos that made our lives change gear.



'It was just a joke,' Ambuya said, wiping tears from her cheeks. 'You kids are funny, but completely out of order. Don't tell me that's what got everyone in such a fury.'

I sigh from the beginning of my soul and tears prick the corners of my eyes. I don't want to cry. I blink them away.

'No,' I say, 'that came a few days later.'

Mama is never, ever, ever on time and it drives us crazy. I've been campaigning for a car for my sixteenth birthday – I'll be able to get my driving licence then. We're so traumatised by Mama's chronic lateness that I don't even care if it's not a cool car, as long as it works. We all need this.

'Ambuya, it's stressful to always be running to class in the morning. It ruins your whole day. We arrive when the register's been called and homework's been handed in. We get manual labour and have to pick litter during break. Why do they punish us? It's not our fault. They should punish Mama.'

'Why don't you go to school with your father?'

'We'd have to leave at 5:30 in the morning when he goes to the gym and we'd be too early.'

'Hmmm,' is all Ambuya says.



We were imagining being in a car, going where we needed to. Mama and Baba were in the house. I sat behind the wheel. Taren and Tisha settled in, one in the passenger seat, the other behind me. I adjusted the seat and the mirror and turned the key in the ignition for the radio to come on. But I turned it too far and the car shot forward. We went into Baba's Range Rover with a tremendous jolt and a sickening crunch. Mouths open, we stared at each other before Tisha squealed and scrambled out. Me and Taren, we panicked and did the same, dashing to the bottom of the garden. We hid behind the peach tree and the rose bushes, shaking like tambourines at a hippie festival. Mama and Baba came out to see what the hullabaloo was about. They walked around

the cars, Baba running an agitated hand over his head. He looked in our direction, as if he could see through the leaves and branches, and shouted, 'Taren!' Next to me, Taren was shaking herself into death. She was breathing like she'd run ten miles, then her eyes rolled up and she fainted. Tisha's arms were around my neck like a garrote as she scrambled up my back, her skinny knees digging into my kidneys. I wished I could have fainted – I didn't blame Taren, she was already on her last warning for her fire-fighting stint in the laundry room the week before. They should have just named her Trouble and quit being surprised by her antics. I stood, Tisha still on me, and said, 'Taren's fainted, Baba, we need a doctor!' Ridiculous, yes. What else could I say? I wanted to cry, but what would have been the use?



TWO

IF I never talk about what came next, maybe things can return the way they were? Maybe we can forget about it? After almost sixteen years, how can one short sentence cause such devastation?

The sun shining on the table makes me wonder what the time is. I haven't had my phone on much since I arrived. Taren keeps texting, asking if I am mad at her. She doesn't get it, that I don't want to talk. There's too much going on. Ambuya doesn't say things just to say them. If she's got nothing of any use to you, she keeps her peace and gets on with her life. I can deal with this.

'So! You have the accident with the car, Taren faints, you're in big trouble. I know your parents, what was the punishment?'

'That's the thing,' I say. 'What happened was worse than any punishment.'

Ambuya sips her tea. I finally have to give words to it. I need to search for them, put them in order, test them. I clear my throat because there's a road-block. At this point, check-points are necessary – words are dangerous things, they cannot be let out at will.

'Um...' I clear my throat again. 'Uh umm...'



Taren didn't pass out for long. By the time Mama reached us, she was coming round. Baba stayed at the top of the garden, fuming.

'It wasn't Taren,' I said, 'it was an accident. I didn't mean to do it.' Mama was half-carrying Taren, and Tisha had a death-grip on my hand. None of us had ever seen Baba that mad and it was actually frightening. He grabbed my arm and dragged me to the cars.

'Look what you did! Do you have any idea how much these cost? Or what could have happened? You might have hurt yourselves.'

I remember thinking he wasn't as worried about that as his precious car. He shook me. He could have shaken me until my brain fell out, if only it would have changed what came next.

'You leave her alone,' Mama shouted. 'Don't touch her, she's not your child!'

Everything stopped in that moment. Baba let me go like I was a hot thing off the stove. The silence should have ended the world. I was suspended in a bubble without understanding, only knowing that what I'd heard was the sound of something irreparable breaking.



'Oh Tamara!' Ambuya sits back with her hand across her mouth and shakes her head.

'We liked to sit in the car so we wouldn't hear them shouting. We'd play music and pretend we were on a road trip. That we were far away.'

My tea had gone cold while I was talking. I take a sip, though it's as if nothing can get past my throat.

'He said it again and again – "What did you say?" and she stood there, like she was telling him we were driving to the shops – "She's not your child, don't touch her." Ambuya, even in hell they don't know the true meaning of "All hell broke loose." Or maybe they're used to it down there, so it's not as shocking as when it happens in your own yard. Usually it's Mama who's the crazy one, but this time it was him – should I still call him Baba?'

I wait for Ambuya to give me guidance, but she says nothing. The sun cutting a strip across her face brings my

attention to her eyes which are hazel, like mine. At least it's definite she's my grandmother; we have the same birthmark on the inside of our left elbow, too.

I don't notice that the silence has stretched until Ambuya prompts me.

'What happened next?'

'He dived for Mama, as if he was diving into a pool, and grabbed her by the throat. She was screaming and hitting him. Tisha grabbed his leg and Taren was trying to pull him away. Then Mukoma Ben came running, he'd been watering the vegetables — he was still holding the hosepipe. He started spraying everyone, saying, "Hey! Hey! Hey!" Sisi came running out of the house and stood there with her hands around her head, saying, "Maiwee, maiwee kani don't kill her, boss please!" Then she tried to grab Tisha, but got caught in the crossfire. I'm not sure if it was the whack she got or because she's generally dramatic, but she fell — her body dropped and they all tumbled to the ground.

I was a statue. I stood there watching and then I began to laugh. I was in pain from laughing. Tears were leaking from my eyes and I fell against the wall holding my stomach. Then I choked on spit and coughed until I vomited. It was a mess.'

We sit in silence. The sounds outside drift in through the windows, an insect buzzing, birds twittering, sprinklers, a dog barking and the faraway noise of cars on the main road. The words I gathered together are finished. I feel as if I have

been sitting with Ambuya for half a life, narrating an absurd vaudevillian production.

Finally, Ambuya sighs, gets up from her chair, places her hands around my face and kisses me. Her scent lingers – fresh and light.

‘Come,’ she says, ‘we’ve got work to do.’

