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Heroes of Our Time

I HAD TO TAKE OFF, because I did not trust myself not to change my mind. I was fat and out of shape. Even at the best of times I had never been one for running, because I considered it an undignifying exercise. But this was not the time for preserving dignity.

The squatter camp—like the rest of the squalid rebirth of Zimbabwe in the roar of history at the turn of the century—was a disorderly site forever sprawling downhill. It seemed impossible to escape. With each stride the township that I was trying to reach seemed to float farther away.

I knew the township well. I had grown up there. We were the *povo*, and it seemed inconceivable back then that another social rung could materialize beneath the dirt on which our feet were planted. I knew little about the squatter camp and had never been there before. Now the camp was an extension of the township and had twice been bulldozed by local authorities not so long ago. It always returned bigger, with greater desperation, its people more disqualified from regular society than before.

Instead of the usual streets and avenues in rectangular form, that staple of town planners, the camp's main artery was a rough, stony path that was wide enough for a car and meandered all over. Sometimes it took a sharp turn when some squatting personage decided to build a cluster of corrugated-iron houses in its way.

When I could no longer go on I lost the strength to restrain myself. I started laughing my head off because I was beginning to fear that if I continued without release something terrible was going to happen to me, though I was not sure what. People continued to walk past, paying no attention. As if they were used to all manner of cracked people here.

Turning around, I saw behind me in the distance a plume of smoke coming from the house that I'd just fled. The boys' \$85,000 car was ablaze and they were being forced, hands and feet tied, to watch the spectacle. One of the *povo* had decided that, since honest toil and thrift—cardinal rites for worshippers of the money-god—were alien

to the boys, he'd set them off on the right path with a sacrifice on their behalf. After that, he'd move on to more important things.

I WAS BACK in my home country, taking a break from New York City because that place was beginning to make me feel as if I'd misplaced my soul.

I shuffled through the squatter camp. The armpits of my jacket were soaked and the skin on the insides of my thighs, rubbing against each other as always, was raw.

I walked in the direction of the marshy stretch of land separating the camp from the township. Gum trees had been planted there to drain the place and make it less of a public health hazard, but now half the plantation had been chopped down for firewood and a stream of glorious raw sewage flowed through the area.

I had lost Sharai two hours back, at the funeral where she abandoned me with the boys. This trip back home was the first time I had seen her in years. A couple of days before the funeral the Moyo brothers had asked her to come to their stepsister's funeral.

As if it was an invitation to a tea party, she laughed. We had a soaring, catch-up conversation about school days and how back then the Moyo brothers and their posse would never waste a glance on any of us. For over a year now one of the twin brothers had been trying to get into Sharai's knickers and would not take no for an answer, never mind that he had dozens of girls throwing their knickers at him every day.

Sharai had not wanted to go but, now that I had arrived, she decided it would be a good laugh if I accompanied her. The Moyo brothers could always be relied on to provide spectacle: they could never be trusted to step out into the world clothed every morning. There was always the prospect of one day being able to say, I was there when . . .

Initially I was not sold on Sharai's idea. I had no desire to come into contact with the Moyo boys again and had refused repeated Facebook requests to be friends. I had not forgotten how the twins made fun of the fact that the only reason I was at the same school as them was that my uncle was a janitor there. The school laborers' children and dependents were exempt from paying school fees, and I was one of them.

After their very public excesses, and with enemies circling their VIP mother, the Moyo boys were only one public scandal away from disaster, Sharai said. War vets, hugely influential in the ruling ZANU

PF party, were already calling for the boys' mother to resign from the cabinet, and her children's distasteful public displays of wealth were giving her enemies another stick to beat her with. If she can't even control her children, how can she control the most ill-disciplined ministry in government?

The boys' relationship with their mother had recently taken a knock over their insistence on attending their stepsister's funeral, to which they'd invited Sharai. Their father had died in a car crash last year, and their mother did not want them to go rushing to honor a woman who was likely a gold digger posing as a stepsister and had only emerged after the death of the boys' father. But matters of blood have a way of drawing unexpected responses out of people. Or maybe the notion of a stepsister lost and found satisfied a need in the peculiar psychology of people so impoverished that money was the only thing they had in their lives. In a country where fifteen billion USD of diamond money can mysteriously vanish from government coffers, you can end up with a new kind of person.

Emerging from the gum trees, I was home and dry. I took a pot-holed street in the direction of my aunt and uncle's house. I felt unburdened. I was buzzing with a newfound confidence: I even believed myself capable of a dozen cartwheels, topped off with a backflip, like Nani after scoring a goal.

WHEN I LIFTED my head to look around one more time, the funeral had descended into disarray. A humble man in a bin man's attire had taken over and was turning the whole funeral upside down. Speech delivered, he disappeared along with the little girl who had been hanging onto his trousers throughout.

There were all kinds of mourners: from sincere, God-fearing folk and the type that is drawn by a morbid curiosity right up to the township foxes, with good antennae for a free lunch. Before this assorted gathering, the Moyo brothers had been cast into a state of confused, inarticulate contrition. It was not their style.

You would have been forgiven for thinking earlier that the Moyo boys and their groupies had come to the funeral just to stream it live on Facebook or something. They and their entourage, a restless noisy lot, had arrived in hip style. To see them roll in was to witness a flock of birds land on a tree just before sunset: mock disputes, genuine squabbles, and the mindless chatter of boys in baseball caps with barely

clothed girls. Now some of these hangers were slinking away to wait at the car park.

Because my mind started wandering, I had missed the beginning of the drama. Sharai had to bring me up to speed. The coffin had been about to be lowered into the grave when the man, holding the hand of the little girl, pushed his way from the back of the crowd of mourners. He looked like any of the *povo* who had been stepping forward to pour their hearts out about the deceased. His opening line had been spot on, even the impassioned, Pentecostal manner with which his finger kept stabbing the air to point down at the coffin: "I know this woman and I'm going to tell you the truth!"

All three Moyo brothers were still pointing their phones at the man, before it sank in that his impromptu speech was not an effusion of sorrow over their stepsister.

Finishing his ultimatum with a despotic hand gesture, the man turned around, whisked the little girl off the ground, and threw her onto his back. Then he stepped off. He was out of the cemetery before anyone could formulate a clear thought. Finding him in the sprawling squatter camp where he was supposed to live was going to be fun.

THE MOYO BROTHERS had never had to handle ultimatums before. Certainly not from someone in a pair of municipality overalls with their reflective straps around legs and arms. Not from the *povo*.

When I switched on my phone, a WhatsApp message from a number I did not recognize appeared. I felt ashamed to be looking at the photo. Sharai made a face at me.

Since returning home, I had seen plenty of images like this one. Images that speak to the grinding poverty in sub-Saharan Africa. But this one was in a category of its own: the camera zoomed in on an unsuspecting young woman's posterior as she bent down to drink water from a standpipe. She could have been one of our township girls. A good chunk of her dress was missing, as if she had rescued it from a termite nest; half her bum and knickers were exposed and the caption above the image read, "If you want to show us everything in the end, keep voting for ZANU PF thieves."

I'd lost count of the number of times I'd received the same image that day. Earlier in the morning the Moyo brothers, after learning from Sharai that I was back, had added me to their WhatsApp group, The Boys. They shared the image shortly after, and at first I wasn't sure how

to read that, since their mother was a top member of the ZANU PF, our ruling party.

“Put that thing away, please,” Sharai said. I slipped the phone into my breast pocket and folded my arms.

The boys, they were rudderless. I wondered if this was what the terror-struck villagers of Gwata looked like when they got pranked by a squad of bored soldiers. The soldiers, bayonets ready, are said to have frogmarched unsuspecting peasants to what looked like a convincing site of slaughter and informed the villagers that anyone who could put on a convincing dancing display would be free to walk away.

Turns out terror strips one of psychological complexity, and dancing becomes impossible. It was as if the boys had been ordered to dance in the crosshairs of a dozen AK-47 rifles.

The twins, Tanaka and Tawanda, carried faces struck blank with terror. They had arrived wearing what is now their signature sartorial style, ever since they launched as a rap duo: identical watermelon-pink suits and designer smoking pipes. They had managed to pull off the Congolese *sapeurs* style, though under present circumstances such looks invoked the absurd. Mercifully, no one was asking for a selfie with them.

Two men had started shoveling earth into the grave, mourners were already dispersing, and the three Moyo boys were still rooted to the spot. Even the simple task of putting one foot in front of the other had become complicated: Tawanda managed to trip and would have planted his face on the dusty earth had his brothers not caught him.

“At last the boys are beginning to understand,” Sharai said. She and I had also thought that the dead sister’s only child, a young man in his twenties, would step forward to support his uncles, since he was the root of all this, but he was nowhere to be seen. Sharai saw the look of horror on his face when the aggrieved man appeared. His words—“I know this woman and I’m going to tell you the truth! I know her well, I know she carried a dark, gnarled heart!”—had settled into something of a refrain. By the time they did, the young man had vanished.

A few years back the man’s daughter fell pregnant by the dead woman’s son. As per custom, the girl’s family ordered the girl to pack her bags and go to the young man’s family. It was expected that the young man’s family would return with the girl to formally start righting wrongs. But the boy’s mother would have none of that. She would

not even allow the girl into the house and instead left her to spend the night on the doorstep. Early in the morning she opened the door to empty a jug of urine on the girl's head.

In the middle of all the chaos and confusion, Sharai felt free to impersonate the man: "To have your daughter spend the night on the doorstep while a big woman is in the house, busy pissing into a jug all night so she can humiliate her? I can only conclude that after God had finished making all the beautiful plants and creatures on earth, he was left with an evil lump of clay which he threw into a pit, only for Satan to find it and make the black mamba, the toad, other evil creatures. And this woman!" Sharai jabbed the air with her finger. "Worse still, she and her son contributed nothing toward the care of this child! Not one red cent!"

Sharai's gesticulation did not go unnoticed: Melusi, the eldest of the boys, gave us a greasy look, as if he had been lip-reading Sharai, who now without missing a beat waved at Melusi. She had dropped her performance right before the moment the Moyo brothers' nemesis, grim and looking for terrible words, turned his head to address them directly: "You have until sunset to find me or else all of you and your family will, one by one, start falling like flies!"

He was disappointed, he said, that their stepsister had died before he had sorted her out. If it was possible he would pursue her to Gehenna, where she had gone, and finish her off there!

He concluded with an injunction directed at the mourners in general: no food was to be touched until this matter had been resolved, or else!

They believed in science, the boys, and not the black magic with which their new enemy was threatening their entire family. But it was clear they also knew that black magic works even if you don't believe in it. They didn't want to die, had put away their smartphones and stood dazed, like a trio that had just stumbled out of a cave unsure if they were the vampires or the victims.

Sharai and I were about to slip away when one of the twins, Tawanda, cast his gaze in our direction and made eye contact. His face lit up. I could not just turn and walk away.

"Should we go and hold their hands as per custom?" I asked Sharai. Her eyeballs bulged out of their sockets; she turned on her heel and started walking away. I nearly followed her impulsively, but instead stepped forward in the direction of the boys.

Tawanda threw himself around my neck. He seemed relieved to have something else to shift his attention to. His twin brother joined in the hugfest. We had not seen each other in years.

There was genuine affection in their hugs, which surprised me. I expressed my sympathies over their stepsister, and even Melusi seemed more positively disposed toward me now. One remark led to another, and the next. We started walking. I had expected that once we got to their car, I would make my excuse and go my own way.

MELUSI WAS DRIVING, Takura was in the passenger seat, and Tawanda was beside me in the back seat. What remained of the brothers' entourage was in a seven-seater van whose driver briefly hung his head out of the window to talk to Melusi about leading the way. The elderly lady we'd just been speaking to had been herded into the van. She was sat next to the van driver, looking like a convict in spite of her Anglican Church uniform. She knew where the boys' nemesis lived. She had given copious directions that none of us could quite follow. Then the boys begged and paid her to come with us. These boys drop coins, so went their reputation. That's why they were loved.

Before going to our nemesis, we had to go fetch another man—someone who was old enough to look believable as a family elder, someone who could be the go-between. The man was not related to the boys, which was unheard of. But the boys never did normal.

As soon as we started rolling, the boys and I started reminiscing about school days. They were less tense talking about anything other than the current situation. The fact of me having spent all these years as a cab driver, instead of styling it up in a glamorous New York office, fell out of me unbidden. At this revelation, the boys were silent. They exchanged looks. Then they burst out laughing.

“You should come to Bay Ridge one day and see me,” I said as they lolled all over the car in fits. “You know those overworked migrant drivers you see in the small hours, crashed on a couch in the cab company restroom, dreaming under the flicker of a flatscreen TV pouring out fake Peruvian music? That's me, bro!”

“Now you have to drive us, man!” Tawanda cried. “Melusi let him drive! We must be driven by a New York taxi driver today! We have to!”

I was hoping Melusi would disregard his brothers, but he brought the vehicle to a halt on the side of an open drain and leapt out of the driver's seat.

I hadn't even put on the seat belt before Takura slapped a wad of notes on my thigh.

"Here, *chibhanzi* for you!" he said triumphantly. Like bank robbers, the boys were incapable of demonstrating affection in any other way but through money.

"Don't just stare at me like that, *ive shaz!* A thousand USD. That's a fair number, no? Or are you now one of those old people who are embarrassed by money?" Takura laughed.

A thousand USD was ridiculously generous, unless they were expecting me to be their driver until I returned to New York. I left the money untouched on my lap and started driving.

"Maybe you guys should write a new rap number: 'Bankrupt Yourself or Die Trying!' Looks like that's what you're angling for!" I said.

"That will break the Internet!" said Tawanda. He started tapping the idea into a notebook on his phone.

Their car was the most retro thing I'd ever been in, let alone driven.

"A taxi driver from Trumpland driving me an me niggaz in ma Cadillac! That's a wicked lyric, right?" Tawanda laughed. Their music career and celebrity status were things they bought for themselves with the money that their father made from the Marange diamond rush, before he perished in a car crash. Sharai had told me that the boys paid their groupies to play their music on Spotify to help them break into the charts.

Soon enough "Taxi Driver from Trumpland" had evolved into a rhyme of some sort.

"You guys going to wipe the floor with that man who ruined your sister's funeral," I said. They had paid me handsomely to chauffeur them around for maybe an hour. And money does strange things sometimes. For a thousand dollars an hour one feels obliged to add bells and whistles to the customer experience. Do a bit of emotional labor, maybe. So, if they could not persuade the old dude who was earmarked for the role of go-between, we laughed over the possibility of me stepping up to the plate. After all, our nemesis was only a bin man! A *mabhini!*

"He probably isn't even employed by the city council and instead stole that waste collection uniform he was wearing," I added.

"Who cares if you don't look like an elderly uncle?" Takura said.

"Yeah, I've got the best words ever!" I exclaimed. "Nobody knows a *mabhini* better than I do!" The twins slumped sideways with laughter.

“You guys are easy to please,” I observed. I remembered them as just spoiled, charmless brats, boys whose family used to be fairly comfortable, not wealthy. That was before they became certain of their place in the world.

The supposed go-between was also supposed to be a traditional healer. By the time we got to his address, I’d heard enough about him to know that he was only a healer in the way Idi Amin was “Lord of All the Beasts of the Earth and Fishes of the Seas and Conqueror of the British Empire in Africa in General and Uganda in Particular.”

He was sporting a Boston Red Sox cap, beat-up Converse All Star sneakers on his feet, and it was obvious he had clocked quite some mileage on planet Earth and required a walking stick to aid him along.

You’d think that this fraud and the money-flashing boys were perfectly matched, but even to him their money did not talk but yelled obscenities. He thought himself above them and took offense at the notion that the boys could step into his yard, lift him off his chair, and cart him off to wherever they pleased for a few pieces of silver.

“You must think me a lightweight,” he said indignantly, waving a hand to signal that the meeting was over.

Now the boys started bidding against themselves, progressively raising the money offer from fifty dollars to five hundred, on condition that, if he was interested in the money, he dressed up respectfully.

“You can’t lure me with peanuts like a rat!” the man said.

It soon became apparent that it was not the money that the old man found unattractive but the circumstances of the task: they were ripe for someone’s head to be hacked to pieces with an axe in broad daylight. I must have been the only one who knew that the boys were walking right into an elephant trap.

In the car the boys were speechless. The lady who was going to lead us to our nemesis’s place had given back their money and left without explanation. At least she had scribbled a rudimentary map with directions to *mabhini’s* home before walking away. I waited for the boys to gather themselves before I started the engine. The driver of the van followed us.

“Listen, I can do this, if you want me to.”

“Do what?” Melusi’s tone was always hostile.

“I’m only trying to help.”

I did not even know why I was doing this. Maybe I did not know myself well enough. Maybe I was just an idiot, but whichever it was,

I was untouched by fear. I'd never bought into all that spiel about the heart having its reasons of which reason does not know. And this was not the time for introspection.

The boys' tempers were fraying. It did not help that they'd all given up on the task of navigation, and I was having to drive and navigate as we entered the squatter camp. They were shouting at me every time I took a wrong turn. It is here when I thought, *Fuck, what am I even doing with these people?* I became aware of a sensation; it was as if I had allowed my heart to be taken far out of myself by the boys. I had to steady myself by remembering that some animals survive without a heart. Jellyfish, flatworms, and most microscopic primitive animals. They were thriving all over the planet.

"Listen, I can do this, if you want me to," I offered. "I can talk to the man for you guys if you want."

For about a minute, no one said a word.

"Sorry, that's a stupid thing to say. I take that back."

"No, no. It could work!" Takura brightened up.

"No, I don't think it will work. Think about it. You need someone with gravitas. That man is unlikely to take me seriously and may even feel insulted you sent me."

"Think outside the box, man! Think like a music promoter. You're our promoter!" Tawanda too had pivoted from bad-tempered anxiety to tremendous enthusiasm.

"You mean I should behave as if I'm unscrupulously negotiating a gig for you?"

Takura giggled.

Melusi, who had been silent, said, "I think it's a stupid idea."

"Why is it stupid?" Takura sounded hurt.

"Are you mad?"

"Okay, give us your better idea then, Einstein." said Takura.

No answer from Melusi.

"I'll talk to the man myself, then," Melusi said after a period of silence.

"Really? Just like that? You, Melusi, walking up to the man's front door and saying, 'Let's talk?'" Tawanda clapped his hands satirically.

"That would be disrespecting the man, Melusi. Try that and you'll stagger out of his hovel with an axe sticking out of your head," I said.

Now the boys started cracking jokes about the whole thing, as if it were an abstract problem and they were mere observers.

“Why are we terrified by this *mabhini*?” said Melusi. “It’s not our problem that the man did not get on with our sister. Why are we so bothered by this bullshit?”

“That’s the spirit, bro!” cried Tawanda. Melusi was starting to talk as if a gun had materialized in his pocket.

“What about your mother?” I reminded them. “Are you sure this will not turn into a PR issue for her, if you guys don’t kill it off right now?”

That boy fell silent. No one said a thing for a while.

By the time we had located our nemesis’s home, a plan had already taken shape.

“I will go out alone first, to introduce myself to the big man. I am going to be African American. If our enemy can be forced to speak English instead of Shona, we’ve won the first round. The risk is not small, but the rewards are great if all works out.” I reiterated the plan.

The boys had bought into the idea though they were terrified by the stakes. They understood that the strategy was to maneuver the big man onto cultural territory that he was not confident about.

“That’s the weakness of the *povo*,” I said. “The same Zimbabwean who speaks Shona becomes an entirely different person when he speaks English—he will even walk differently when speaking English.

“We Zimbabweans are terminally inclined to be more forgiving toward a foreigner than one of our own. That’s why our history is marked with incidents of us being cleaned up by foreigners who come here and are allowed to operate outside our cultural regimes, which impose all manner of ridiculous obligations on us. Next thing we know, the foreign dude has helped himself to the land and gold deposits, and no one can figure out how it happened.”

The boys listened in silence. They were racked with nerves. I was going to keep the big man captive in an unfamiliar orbit, close all escape routes for the duration of the negotiations, and make him sign onto our terms, I promised.

“But if he escapes, be prepared for your expensive trousers to rip in abrupt flight!” I said, but no one was paying attention anymore. They’d already pulled out from somewhere a bottle of Ace of Spades Armand de Brignac champagne. It was a Jay-Z favorite. The boys looked touchingly vulnerable trying to steady their nerves with alcohol. I wondered if any of the boys had ever imagined delivering the most sensitive parts of their anatomy into my hand like this.

“You,” I said to Tawanda.

“I’ve got a name!” he exploded. “Why you suddenly started calling us You this, You that? What’s that all about?”

“Sorry,” I said.

“Let’s go through the plan one more time,” Takura said. “So what are you going to do?”

“You talking to me?” I finger-jabbed my chest. I expected that they’d get it that my patience had limits.

“Who else, potato face?” Tawanda barked.

“Well, how many times do you guys want me to repeat it?”

“Just one more time, please,” Takura pleaded.

“Okay. I’m going to go in there, keep fucking *mabhini* captive in the English-speaking domain. And then, when I get bored, let him escape into his Shonahood. Then he can come out and ram a pineapple, crown-end first, into your reprobate asses!”

A couple of beats passed before they burst out laughing.

“Now listen up. Seriously now. The other option is to offer the man one ballpark figure to take care of everything. More money than his ass has ever seen in his lifetime. I don’t expect him to immediately understand the offer. He’ll probably be like the Sioux Indian chief to whom the notion that European settlers wanted to buy his people’s land seemed so ludicrous that he and his people had to ask the prospective buyers if they wanted to buy the sky as well. But once *mabhini* and I are on the same wavelength, I expect a very fast attitude adjustment. The rest should be easy, and you guys will soon be on your way to your sister’s house to start partying with the mourners, right?”

Now they started to talk about food. They had placed a huge order with a catering company to feed the mourners. Maybe they had become conscious of their hunger, but under the circumstances, it was hard to understand their behavior.

They’re supposed to have adrenaline coursing through their blood vessels, FFS. *What is wrong with them?* I thought. This was the cue I needed to step out of the car.

I SLAMMED THE DOOR behind me and tried not to overthink. I felt myself slip into the primal rush of blind impulse. My game face was on; I’d entered the zone. With each breath, I felt acutely aware of every bodily sensation. I was present and inhabiting the moment to the maximum. It was as if parts of my brain that I had never used before

had sprung to life. I was at last effortlessly extraordinary.

By the shack was a young woman who must have been the unfortunate daughter who had pee poured on her head. She was accompanied by the little girl that *mabhini* had brought to the funeral.

“Yes, I’ve come to see the old man,” I said, after she asked if she could help.

The young woman’s father sat on a bench, chatting to two other men under a tree. He got up and disappeared into the house as soon as he saw me. His two friends followed him, as did his daughter. I was left standing in the yard with just the little girl, who continued to look up at me with bright-eyed curiosity.

Another woman, perhaps the pee victim’s mother, emerged from the shack. She said I should take a seat on the bench and wait. Then she dragged the little girl into the house.

A minute later, the little girl was back: there, peeking out of the corner of the house, a small face. Missing teeth. A winning smile.

“I can see you,” I said.

“No, you can’t!”

“Yes I can!”

She came out into the open now, the hem of her dress lifted over her head.

“I still can see you!”

“I’m a bat now!”

“But I can still see you!”

“But it’s nighttime. You can’t see at night!”

“I can still see a bat at night.”

“Do you know many things that move at night?”

“Yes.”

“Name three.”

“A car, a bicycle, and a train.”

“No! No! No!”

“Well, why don’t you name them?”

“Bats! Rats! And, and. . . *sekuni!*”

“Your grandfather? Really? What does he do when he’s moving at night?”

“I don’t know! Ask him!”

Our nemesis moved at night. This was supposed to be significant, I was sure, but I could not think how. I feared for the boys, though not because of the man. I was scared for the boys because of the thing that

my heart now craved. I liked where I was, sensing a rare sort of uncertainty, the sort that only ever appears when everything and anything is possible. I had not felt like this in a very long time.

“Look, this is Mary!” the little girl said, pointing to one of the hens inside a coop. She’ll never be able to eat Mary, I immediately knew. Eating an animal that you’ve named? Who does that?