Word Count: 2941

If It Wasn't for The Nights

I have buried my father every night for the last fifty-seven days. When I fall asleep, I see myself standing with my mother by his open grave. Baba is lying in his white casket, in the grey suit he wore to my graduation, his navy-blue tie askew like it always was. They begin to lower the casket into the ground, but it's still open. Mhamha, she is standing there in her Catholic Church uniform, a white dress, a white dhuku and the sky-blue cape of Chita chaMai Maria. She watches the casket descend, staring at Baba's lifeless body. I reach out to take her hand, but she pulls away, looks at me and says, "Charity, why aren't you here?"

Tonight's dream begins the same. But this time, it's Baba who speaks. "I wish you could have been here," he says. And suddenly his casket is shut. And as they lower it into the ground, I just know that this is the last time I will see my father.

Blind panic jerks me out of the dream as my mind flees the image of Baba's descending casket. I sit up. Slowly, my room comes into focus, and I remember. I am in Toronto, my fiancée, Tino, is lying next to me, gently snoring. And my father is dead.

I lie back down on the bed, waiting for my heart to slow down. It's been almost two months, but I still struggle to believe my Baba really died, snatched away by a massive heart attack. And I couldn't fly home, so I didn't even get to bury him.

I turn over onto my side to look at Tino as she sleeps. Her silk wrap is slipping off her head and a few braids are spilling out. I think about waking her, so I don't have to be alone. But even in her sleep, she looks exhausted, this love of mine. So, I decide to get up and find something to do in the kitchen. My mother's words are still ringing in my head: "Charity, why aren't you here?" They're words I wish she would say in real life. For in the real world, Mhamha hasn't spoken to me since the day Baba died. She said "the absolute shame" I brought upon the family finally killed him. And what is this shame? I am a lesbian, and I am going to marry

another Zimbabwean girl.

I knock before I open the door to let Tino's mother know I'm coming out. It's a silly thing to do, especially since it is 4 am and she's probably asleep. I did it the first day she arrived three months ago, and I can't stop now. I spent the first few days of her visit petrified, knocking before I left my own bedroom, waiting for the storm to break, waiting for this conservative woman to finally say what she really thought about her daughter marrying another woman. The blow-up never came. But I'm still waiting.

I sit down at the kitchen table and dial my mother's number. It rings and rings. I call again, and this time, it cuts out after the third ring. She doesn't want to speak to me. I get up and turn on the electric kettle. I hear Tino's mother shuffling behind the curtain that marks off the den where she's been sleeping. A week after she got here, Zimbabwe abruptly closed its borders because of the pandemic and her flight home was cancelled. I stare at the curtain, remembering the panic Tino and I felt when we realised Ma couldn't go home. The two of us hunched over the laptop at the kitchen table while Ma knitted serenely on the couch. We whispered urgently to each other as we searched every site we could find for a flight back to Harare, but they all told the same story: no way home.

I am still staring at the curtain when Ma suddenly pulls it back. "Are you making a cup of tea?" she says, adjusting the purple bonnet on her head as she pushes her large spectacles up her nose.

"Did I wake you, Ma?" I ask.

"Ma" is what she has grudgingly decided I will call her. It acknowledges that we will soon be family, but also recognises that I have as much familiarity with her as any random person on the side of the road showing her a bit of respect.

"No. I'm usually up this early praying," she replies.

My stomach clenches at the thought that she's heard me all the late nights I've cried into a cushion on the couch.

“What kind of tea are you making?” Ma asks and takes the chamomile tea bags out of my hand. “This isn’t real tea,” she says, shaking her head. And just like that, she takes over the ritual of making tea.

Ma tosses two bags of the precious Tanganda tea she brought with her into the Kango teapot, then pours hot water over them. After adding a half-cup of milk, she puts the teapot on the stove. She takes out two white mugs with sunflowers on them and carelessly places them on to the table. I want to tell her to be gentle with them. My Baba gave them to me on his sole trip to Toronto. But it feels ungrateful. For as she takes out some bread and begins to make peanut butter sandwiches, I realise that this is how I’ve always encountered her since the day my Baba died, standing in the kitchen making me food. I did not have much of an appetite the first week, so there had been endless cups of sweet, milky Tanganda tea. And when my appetite began to return, she tempted me with the food that my own mother made for me as a child. Thick cornmeal porridge with a big dollop of peanut butter, steaming mountains of sadza served with chicken feet, peanut butter rice with tender oxtail dripping with gravy. She would coax me out of bed in the late afternoon and make me sit at the kitchen table. Perched on the edge of her seat, she would watch me with careful eyes, clucking like a mother hen when I left food on the plate.

“How do you do it, Ma?” I ask.

“Do what?”

“Take care of me like this? Almost like I’m your daughter.”

“This is the easy part,” she says. “I might not understand the other stuff, but mothering—mothering I know how to do.” The “other stuff” is as close as she ever comes to saying “lesbian.”

Now, Ma neatly places four triangles of bread on my plate. Then she pours out the tea before she sits down. We sit in silence as I dutifully eat the bread. When I’m done, I stare at the table. As I always do after these meals from Ma, I feel compelled to share something about myself with her, as if I need to give her something in return for her kindness. I don’t want to tell her about how sad it makes me that my own mother has shut me out, when here is Tino’s

mother, even though she admits that she doesn't understand this "other stuff." I try to push the feeling down, but it's like water. The more you try to push it down, the more ways it finds to get out.

So, I tell her about the dreams. I tell her about how I bury my father every night. And in the telling, I recall details I had forgotten. How Baba appears different every night. Sometimes, he is the young man in his late twenties I only know from photographs, a young man, with a full head of hair and a bushy beard, cradling his first child, staring down in wonder at the limitless possibilities of the little being in his hands. Sometimes, he is the man in his forties, full of vitality, who used to run with me on Sundays to help me build endurance for my hockey games. And sometimes he is the Baba I saw the last time my parents welcomed me home four years ago, a man in his sixties, lighter, slower. Staring at the floor and silent as I announced I am a lesbian and Mhamha raged. And I tell Ma about how in the dream Mhamha always asks me why I'm not there. Sometimes there is anger in her eyes, sometimes confusion, sometimes worry, but always disappointment.

When I stop talking, Ma pauses before she responds. "And they happen every night?"

"Yes."

She furrows her brow and stares into the distance, tilting her head as she puzzles it out. "Have you talked to anyone about these dreams?" she says. "Have you told Tino? Or maybe your mother?"

"I don't want to worry Tino. She has enough on her plate."

"And your mother?"

"Mhamha isn't speaking to me right now." I try to say it in a deadpan manner, but my voice breaks on the last word. "She thinks it's the shame and disappointment of the 'other stuff that killed him."

Ma flexes her left hand awkwardly at the sound of her own words returned to her. She gets up and takes the empty plate and mugs to the sink. Then she turns and looks at me with a tea

towel in her hand.

"Sometimes us mothers," she says, "sometimes, we just need a little time to accept that our children's lives don't always match what we dreamed for them, you know."

"I do know," I say. "Being out here, it makes it easier make the distinction between who we want to be and who our parents want us to be. And I think at some point, I realised that if I was going to live the life I wanted, I had to be fine with the idea of being a disappointing daughter." She comes back to the table and sits down quietly. "And I get it, Ma. Sometimes the lives we end up living don't look at all like you imagined. But how could you expect our lives to be the same as yours when you sent us so far from home?"

"I don't know what to tell you," Ma says. Her hands are now wringing the tea cloth. I recognise the look on her face. It's the look she has whenever the conversation veers towards the "other stuff." As always, she tries to change the topic.

"But how are you doing," she says. "I mean, how are you handling your loss?"

"I feel so heavy, Ma," I sigh. "Like the weight of my grief is sitting on my limbs."

"Well, I don't know what else to say about your mum," she says. "But I'll tell you the best advice I ever got about grief. You have to find a way to get it out. Cry it out. Write it out. Paint it out. Just find a way to get it out."

I scratch at a small deformity on the table. "Ma," I say, "how did you get the grief out when Tino's dad died? What did you and Tino do then?"

She coughs and, for a second, I think that my question is too personal. But then she answers.

"We danced," she says.

"Danced?"

"I know it's strange," she says, "but Tino was only ten. And I could tell she was scared to talk about her dad because it made me sad. So, we listened to his favourite music to keep him close. Sometimes we laughed. Sometimes we cried. But always, we danced."

“What did you listen to?” I say.

“All the musicians he fell in love with when he was a university student. Bee Gees. Elton John. ABBA—”

“ABBA? Really?” I say. “My Baba loved ABBA. I remember one trip, Baba played his ABBA Gold cassette all the way from Harare to Nyanga. And when we got to the lodge, Mhamha took the cassette out of the car. I thought she was going to throw it away, but she put it in the radio inside and started dancing to “Voulez-Vous” and I joined in.” I chuckle. “Funny,” I say. “I haven’t thought about that memory in years. It’s hard to remember a time when my mother still smiled around me.” I sigh. “I can’t believe my own mother won’t speak to me.”

Ma opens her mouth, but no words come out.

“Ma,” I say, “why are you here? Why did you come?”

To my surprise, she smiles.

“You know, I’ve been waiting three months for one of you to ask me that,” she says. “You think I don’t notice, but I watch you and Tino tiptoeing around this place, holding your breath as if you’re waiting for me to blow up. You’re worried that at some point, I’m going to react like your mother, aren’t you?”

“I guess I just don’t understand how you can be here, living with us, and even taking care of me. You’re a church-going woman, Ma. This can’t be easy for you.”

She chuckles. “Like with so many things in the past year, I’m not really sure myself how I got here, Charity. I feel like Tino told me something, and she looked so terrified about how I might react that I said OK. It was the look she gave me when she told me she was moving to Canada, the look she gave me when she told me about… about the other stuff. And she was so surprised I said yes to the visit, that in her excitement, it all snowballed into something else. I signed up for two weeks so I could talk to my child about all these changes. Then a few days before I got on the plane, she told me the two of you weren’t just dating, but actually engaged and you were living together. And a week after I got here, I discovered I couldn’t go home. I

was stuck here. With you."

With those last words, she looks at me. I am suddenly aware of how silent the room is. Outside, I can hear cars rolling by as the early birds of Toronto begin to head out to work. But Ma and I continue to look at each other, and I wonder if she is feeling what I am feeling. We are in a moment that we may never get again, a moment that could only exist under these exact conditions, and we have this one chance to say things that might never feel sayable again. Who will take the chance first?

"There was no day," Ma says "when I decided I would accept my child's lifestyle. If anything, all I have been doing is postponing the decision. I just keep telling myself 'We'll see.' Anyway, even if I went crazy, and you made changes, what would be the point? You're grown women. You would just go back to living your lives the way you want the second I got on that plane home. So, I endure. When I spoke to the reverend's wife about Tino, Mai Mfundisi told me, "Choose love". Lord knows I've tried, but I am not going to lie to you, Charity. I have spent every moment of the past year wondering how this can possibly be my real life. How did this happen to me? But I have to accept, Charity. I have to accept because there's no one else. My parents, my siblings, my husband. They're all gone. Tino is all I have left. How can I walk away?"

Is this all there is for disappointing daughters? Resignation and begrudging acceptance?

The abyss of grief opens again and threatens to swallow me up, but I don't want to sink back in just yet.

"Let's put on some ABBA," I say.

Ma looks nervously towards the bedroom door, afraid of waking Tino, but I'm already pulling up "Voulez-Vous" on my phone and linking it to my Bluetooth speaker. At first, Ma just taps her foot and watches me whirl around, but as the chorus begins, I rush to her and pull her up on her feet. She looks at me bemusedly, but then begins to sway. Slowly, she begins to pick up the rhythm, and soon she is dancing almost as vigorously as I am, arms raised, hips swinging as her

feet slide on the beat. Watching her dance, I notice once again how much she looks like Tino: the way she tilts her head to the left when she dances, the deep dimple in her right cheek that appears when she smiles.

“Go, Ma. Go!” I say.

“Dancing like we did kwaMurambinda!” she says, with a twinkle in her eye.

And then it’s “Does Your Mother Know” and it’s “Mamma Mia” and we turn into dancing queens.

We dance. We sing. And when the song changes to “If It Wasn’t for the Nights,” we are suddenly holding hands as we sway. We continue to sing. And suddenly I am crying, and Ma is holding me. If it wasn’t for the nights…I sense Tino standing at our bedroom door. We must appear such a strange sight: Ma and me, the two of us clinging to each other. For now, Ma is crying too as she clasps me close. She presses me to her bosom in a way my mother hasn’t in a decade. She holds me tight, and I feel the wet warmth of her tears on my shoulder. While ABBA keep singing about these endless nights as we weep for the people we will never see again.