

Mr Chilombo's Wife

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Mrs Chilombo awakes. Her husband turns to his side of the bed with a grunt and a smacking of his lips. She stretches, her toes blindly tapping the concrete floor until they find warmth in her slippers. Outside, a lone rooster laments the fading darkness. Mrs Chilombo wraps a chitenje around her waist and ambles to the kitchen. Out of the water reserves she draws a pail's worth for the morning's wash. As she exits the back door, a fly-ridden dog of simple breed nips at her ankles. "Ah! *Choka iwe!*" she says. Get away. The creature scurries. At the fireplace, she plonks the pail down, then strikes a match. There's smoke. Coughing. Tiny flares. Flames.

A ladle of gold spills over the horizon and spreads out in a gradient. Mrs Chilombo expands her chest in awe. The higher up she looks, the fainter the colours become until the heavens are awash with apricot. Chauta—the great bow in the sky—will never cease to amaze her. He is the giver *and* the taker of all things. She closes her eyes to recite a quick prayer for the child who was stillborn. Born still. The child of no name who was constantly called to her mind.

Breakfast. A husband should be fed. Cassava is chopped and boiled. Plastic cups are washed, cleaned, and then set on the dining table with bread, jam, and margarine (in case he is not happy with *chinangwa*). With a broom that keeps saying *shhh!-shhh!* she sweeps the veranda in silence. She mops the floor until it gleams. She dusts the sofa, the chairs, the windows, and the most beloved item in the house: the bookshelf. It's crammed with African literature; her husband is an English teacher at Malowena CDSS—the community day secondary school. After she clears the workbooks he'd brought home for marking, she lays out his outfit for the day.

"Mwadzuka bwanji, akaz'anga," his husky voice calls from the bedroom. Good morning, my wife.

"Water is ready," she answers.

When he returns, the flowery scent of Geisha soap follows him to the breakfast table. He looks untidy. She dusts his shoulders and tweaks his crooked tie with the professional distance of a barber; avoiding eye contact while taking great pride in the work. They eat in silence. As expected, the cassava is ignored.

As soon as the husband leaves, Mrs Chilombo makes mandasi, dunking balls of batter into sizzling oil until crisp, then laying them out on old newspapers. As the fat soaks out of them, she peels back the faces of John Chilembwe and Kamuzu Banda to sum up yesterday's earnings. Each ndasi sells for one hundred kwacha. Yesterday she managed two baskets; more than her husband makes in a day. Though she considers the business temporary, she works tooth and nail at it. What she dreams of is an office job. She isn't as academic as her husband, but she isn't a housewife either. She has a Malawi School Certificate of Education and a junior diploma in information and communications technology. Her previous job was a cashier at a Chinese goods shop. Her boss was a pervert; ogling her buttocks all over the shop floor. Madam—the boss's wife—had no choice but to accuse her of stealing. Upon hearing the allegations, her husband commented, "*Tsk!* You see? It's much better for women to stay at home."

Mrs Chilombo is a pretty woman of twenty-seven with sparkling eyes and a youthful essence. Lately, though, her health has been suffering. Weight loss. Dizzy spells. Cramps. It started shortly after her child was

born still. She would wake up in the night with a hacksaw running its teeth across her belly. Sometimes blood would drool down her thighs unexpectedly. But over time, the pain migrated over to her head; as if something in her skull was on the verge of imploding. She downplayed the illness to her husband. “Ah! Koma bola lelo,” she would say. Better today. In fact, things were slowly getting worse. In Malawi it’s almost commonplace for people to die suddenly. As though death were a hidden pothole on the tarmac of life. “*Did you hear?*” people whisper, “*Mr (or Mrs) So-and-so has died. Mhn! Completely out of the blue. And they seemed so healthy.*” Only when it’s too late do the doctors find a cause. Most of the time they point at blood pressure.

Mrs Cholombo had been diagnosed with a headache. Her blood pressure is normal, her blood count average. She can’t afford an “oscopy” of any sort in a country that only has a handful of machines and intensive care units. Her doctor—who was too busy attending those with clear ailments—was quick to prescribe a drug she could barely pronounce: diclofenac. “An auntie farmatory,” she heard him say. It helped relieve her pain in the beginning, but it didn’t cure her sickness. Mayi-a-Thoko—a buxom sixty-year-old widow who was also her next-door neighbour—advised her to seek out a witch doctor. “I know someone who’ll fix this curse of yours,” she said haughtily, her forehead pinching out tiny sausages. “Someone who hates you—and is probably satanic—has done the *ufiti* on you. That’s why these headaches persist. It’s also the reason your child was a stillborn.”

Mid-morning Mrs Chiolombo arrives at the marketplace balancing a woven basket of mandasi on her head. As she lays her pastries out, her head begins to pound. At first she thinks it’s the heat; so she finds shade beneath an umbrella. But soon, all the noise from the buyers, the hawkers, the cars, and shopkeepers make her headache so unbearable that the ground beneath her shakes. Her stomach wobbles. She sips mahewu for energy, but while looking in her purse finds she has run out of anti-inflammatory tablets. She asks Mayi-a-Thoko to tend to her business while she goes to the pharmacy. She is in the queue with thumping temples when the pressure exceeds the limit. Her eyes peel back. Teeth clench. The room spins. People stare. She falls.

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Mrs Chilombo arrives home at midnight, a silver moon glimmering in the sky like a tossed coin. Apart from the coos of an owl, the place is dead quiet. As she steps onto the veranda, the scrawny dog who's normally nipping at her ankles is thinking. The door of the house is ajar, and a faint yellow light flickers from within. The dog growls. "Choka iwe!" she says. It turns his head away, and lays its muzzle down, but it doesn't flee.

"Amun'anga," she says, entering the living room. "I have been ringing you all afternoon. Why didn't you pick up?" Her index finger rocks forward and back at him, saying, "One of these days you are going—"

Her husband doesn't even turn to face her. With knots in her belly she approaches him. "Husband?" she whispers. His body language is very aggressive, as though something terrible—like a hyena—had gotten hold of his soul. Only half of his face is well lit, and on the dark side, a sinister eye shimmers. The house is filthy. And it reeks of alcohol. The radio is on.

"Well?" she says to the man in shorts and a wife-beater.

He doesn't respond.

"What did I do now?"

Her husband is notoriously antagonistic and jealous. Everyone in the village knows. Even the little boys who play with wire cars mock the way he loses his temper in public, wagging a finger at his wife. Once, he didn't speak to her for a fortnight because she had "giggled" with another man for too long. She considered divorcing him, but her mother—who had died not long ago—was her only living family member. Where else could she go? His excuse for the behaviour was old age. The years had made him more irritable, he said. The truth is: he was afraid of younger men.

"You think I've been prostituting myself, is that it?" Mrs Chilombo says.

He grunts, tucking a brown bottle of green into his lips.

"What's wrong with you, husband?"

He doesn't answer.

Throughout their marriage, she had never seen him drunk, let alone sipping beer. Now here he is in chiaroscuro, zonked out of his mind.

"Who are you?" his eyes seem to say, yet his mouth is so tight it might

as well be sewn up.

“Say something for goodness’ sake,” she cries hysterically. “You’re scaring me.”

At this point, his knees begin to tremble, like someone sweating the fever of malaria out of their system. He rocks back and forth against the sofa while swinging his head from side to side.

“Fine! You want to know why I’m late?” she says, warm tears gathering. “The truth is: I’m sick! I’m physically—emotionally—mentally—I’m sick! You know how I started the day? With a prayer! For us to find peace; to talk and to *laugh* like we used to. It was me who carried that child. It was in *my* belly—and yet, through your silence, and your inability to express *any* emotion, you’ve filled me with this . . . this—guilt! Instead of consoling me. You have shunned the memory of our dead son and I . . . I *hate* you for that . . .”

Her husband stops shivering, so he takes another swig.

Mrs Chilombo dries her cheeks with the back of her hand. “I fainted at the market today. You didn’t even pick up!”

His head turns.

“Don’t look at me like that . . . *I called you*. Several times.”

“*Hmmft!*” he grumbles.

“I can’t even tell you how I got home. That’s God’s honest truth! All I know is that I was at the pharmacy to pick up some pills for my headache when I saw something: a child—one or two years old—crawling on the main road. Nobody seemed to notice, or care. So I rushed to pick up the infant when my mind just . . . switched off. I don’t know what happened.”

Her husband is so tense, he shatters the beer bottle in his hand. Blood oozes down his fingers to the floor.

“Eh-eh! Bwanji kodi?” she yells, both hands shaking above her head like antennae. She runs to collect a bandage from a shoebox beneath the kitchen sink, but her hands are so jittery she fails to open the cabinet. Her husband staggers into the room with a candle. He reaches past her and collects the box himself, leaving wet marks everywhere.

“Why are you tormenting me?” she asks.

For the first time, he speaks: “*Ayiyaiyai*,” then he continues to ignore her. He grabs a mop and heads back to the living room. Alone in the

moonlight, Mrs Chilombo weeps. Her husband returns with shards of glass, which he chucks into the bin. He stands before her—arms akimbo—shaking his head. He sighs, turns, and walks out. She trails behind him like a duckling to its mother, into the bedroom, where he forms a crater on the edge of the bed. She leans against the doorframe, arms folded, while he flicks through the photo album of their wedding day. “Fine!” she says. “If you’re going to ignore me, I’ll do the same.”

In the bathroom, Mrs Chilombo’s heart skips when she sees a naked woman in the mirror. She crosses her arms over her breasts, then leans in, timidly, toward the reflection. How did she become so exposed? Her head thumps. She is overwhelmed with emotion. In her mind, she sees a child crossing a road. She can’t make out a face, but the child is naked—and bloody, streaking the tarmac with what looks like watermelon pulp. She hears the loud sound of an oncoming truck. There are screams, and yells, and then: blackness.

My husband will never know how I died, she thinks. He had once told her: “Sometimes I feel you are already living in the next world.” She understands his aloofness is not from malice but because she is already on the other side. What *mean* things she has been thinking about him. She searches for a pencil, to explain that she merely lost her mind, and that she didn’t kill herself. But reality refuses contact. And besides, what would she say? That she was chasing a ghost? A no-name child crawling on the tarmac?

She remembers fighting death in an ambulance. She remembers silence at the mortuary. Being dressed and made up for her funeral. Her husband weeping. Most of all, she remembers how full of hope the sun seemed on the day they lowered her white casket and covered it with dust. She hears the hymns, and the preaching of her favourite verse: Romans 14:8. “If we live, we live for the Lord; and if we die, we die for the Lord. So, whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord.”

Gloria, you died, she admits.

In the candlelit bedroom, her husband nurses a bandaged hand, occasionally hissing with pain. Outside, their simple dog yells at the night owl. The wind blows.

“I will go back,” Mrs Chilombo whispers to her husband.

“Where?” he looks at her.

“To my grave.”

Mrs Chilombo and her husband sit on their marital bed with their backs against the wall. A gulf of silence as wide as the universe divides them. “Husband,” she says, as though he can hear her, “I’ve been foolish. I couldn’t let go of the dead. And I couldn’t let go of the living.” She laughs inwardly, trying to figure out what it all means. “I’m sorry. Tomorrow, take me to where I’m buried. I will wait there with our child. And our ancestors. No one should ever be alone. Not even the dead.”

Her husband says nothing, so Mrs Chilombo shuts her eyes and sleeps.

