

**SEND
HER
BACK**

AND OTHER STORIES

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MUNASHE KASEKE



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FIRST EDITION

For immigrants
For women
For people of color

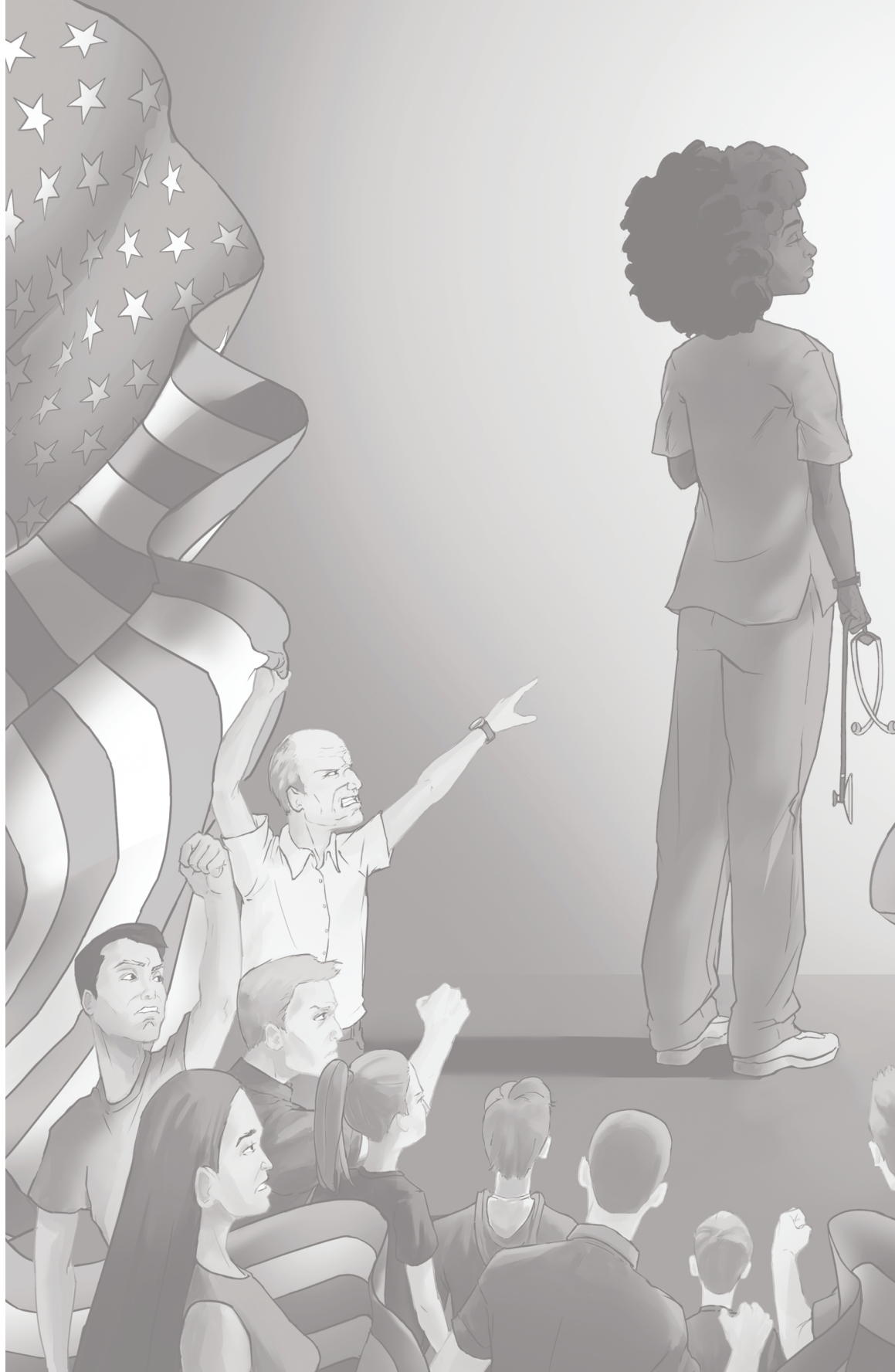
*“Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!”*

— Emma Lazarus 1883

Excerpt of poem at the base of Statue of Liberty

CONTENTS

When Zimbabwe Fell For Wyoming	3
Send Her Back	10
Return To The Land Of Giant Suns	23
The Collector of Degrees	34
Tsoro	43
Unseen	54
Ghost Of My Mother	70
Noon	81
Torture In Minnesota	93
Globe-Trotter	99
Imported Husband	111
Not So Micro	123
It's So Much More Complicated When You Love Him	129
Dear Aunt Vimbai	139
The Zimbabwean Dream	172
An Ostrich Partnership	182
From the Author	191



When Zimbabwe Fell For Wyoming

He looked like a beautiful alien, with his translucent blue eyes that turned gray on cloudy days. When he wore his artichoke-colored hoodie that had clearly seen too many washes, they turned green. Each time we met, I gazed into them first, curious what color would stare back into mine. My boring dark brown eyes remained as loyal as the sunrise, held no surprises, and vowed allegiance to the state of their birth.

“I need some sun,” he’d say, looking at his fluorescent white skin. I couldn’t disagree more. It was his paleness that was most ravishing. When we held hands, our fingers interlocked; the pattern of alternating black and white digits was arresting. His skin always felt delicate, as though it were naked. I imagined that if you peeled my black coat off, I’d look like him underneath. I touched him with the utmost care, watching in fascination whenever it turned blue from a bruise, light peach after the sun’s tan, or red and flaky after a burn.

“I’ll never kiss a white girl again. Why date someone with bird lips when I can have all this?” he’d say and bite my lower lip. Closing my eyes, I felt his kisses in my stomach, in the hairs of my body, in my toes that carried my body weight as I stretched my neck to meet his lips.

I kept him entertained with stories of Shona culture. Everything from naked witches roaming the night to safari game drives at twilight. I promised to take him to stand before the mighty Victoria Falls, to show him the southern hemisphere sky, which, of course, is much prettier than the American sky.

We talked on the phone for hours on end, late into witching hours, without a care for the responsibilities of the jobs that awaited us after the sun was born anew. I cooked him sadza, taught him to eat with his hands, made him kale sautéed in peanut butter, scrumptious beef curry stews, and introduced him to black Rooibos tea brewed with a dash of steamed milk and honey.

“Zimbabwean,” he whispered after introducing me to his co-workers. He was an engineering manager at an autonomous vehicle Silicon Valley startup. “It sounds so exotic. When we get married, perhaps I can get a Zimbabwean passport and tell people I’m African American,” he joked, squeezing my cold hand as we walked down Castro Street, its trees strewn in string lights creating a halo effect on the evening. I playfully shoved his hand away and rolled my eyes. He pulled me in and planted a kiss on my forehead. I smiled, placing a reciprocal kiss on his cheek.

“I can’t believe you cook,” he’d say. “In all my visions of a perfect woman, I never imagined that my future wife could cook. Who cooks in America in our generation?” I knew that just about everyone in Zimbabwe cooked; I wasn’t that unique. I’d smile sheepishly as he took a bite, eyes shut, savoring every morsel, asking for seconds if any remained.

Four weeks after our first date, we were in proactive premarital counseling, emotions blossoming, the reinforced walls that guarded

my heart crumbling. We hadn't decided on a ring yet. He believed diamonds were a scam.

"List things you don't like about each other, things that drive you crazy about the other person, big or small," the counselor said to all the giddy couples in the room. As the chatter swirled around us, we looked at each other bewildered, genuinely unable to come up with a single thing. We held hands, and his lips grazed my cheek. "We're going to have it so much easier than everyone else here," he said. I giggled in agreement.

He asked me to go to Wyoming to meet his family over Memorial Day weekend. It was ninety degrees. I struggled to remember their names, the skinny redhead in an overflowing blue dress with eyes that matched his on a sunny day. The ever-smiling, almost identical blondes, save for the fact that one had curly hair, the other straight. The buff older brothers in checkered shirts, their wives. The spirited toddlers running around. The large black dog that wouldn't stop licking my toes. The family friend. The parents.

Faded photographs hung on the walls, displaying younger, happier versions of themselves. I noticed a sibling in all the pictures was missing on this day.

After a day of people coming in and out and the unbearable humidity that caused my pores to cry and my hair to rebel, I was disoriented.

"A work emergency came up," he announced, entering the living room. "I need to fly back to California." I quietly let out a sigh of relief.

He turned to me and looked me in the eyes. "But maybe you stay so my family can get to know you better?" My eyes grew wide. Excitement filled the room, a chorus "please" drawn out for effect. I shut my mouth, which I realized was hanging open, swallowed hard, and nodded.

After he left, I sat in the living room, surrounded by ten sets of eyes. Will you settle in Zimbabwe after you get married? I want to

have a relationship with my grandkids—you can't move there. Did you know he went through a depression not too long ago? Do you know he doesn't want a big wedding, he'll probably make you elope? Do you know he hates scents?

Don't wear perfume around him. He's incredibly close with a female friend who has lived with us for the last five years. She's a single mom, and he's a father figure to her daughter, buys her books and kites all the time.

As the questions rained, my heart began rebuilding the walls that had crumbled so easily. Who was this man? I didn't have the answers to most of their questions.

He picked me up from the airport, excited. "I was reading something about Shona culture, and I learned a new word today," he said.

Though frazzled by his family's interrogation, when I was met with hazel eyes, a hue I'd yet to see, I left my trepidation at the airport. With eyes like that, we could work through anything. My heart shimmied, amazed at how keen he was to learn my tongue. We drove down Highway 280, undulating green hills dotted with large, envy-evoking homes peeking through the trees on one side, the Coastal Mountain Range, with fog crowning its peaks, and Upper Crystal Springs Reservoir shimmering in the tangerine sunset on the other. He grabbed my hand and placed it on his thigh, where it sat until we arrived at my place.

Rooraa was the word he'd learned in my absence.

"I get to buy you from your family! How much do you think you're worth?" he asked nejinja, excited.

"You're not quite buying me," I explained. "It's a gift of gratitude that you give to my family. Kind of the same way a man here buys an expensive engagement ring for his fiancé. It's just that instead of the expensive gift coming to me and sitting on my finger, it goes to my family."

He laughed. "Spin it however you wish—I'm buying your ass," he

said as he kissed my lips. I looked into his now gray eyes and smiled, shaking my head as I felt my bones echo from his touch.

That evening, I lay my head on his chest with its fine silky hairs, some blond, some brown, others even red. He stroked my black curls as I listened to his heartbeat. Determined to uproot the seeds of apprehension, I began unraveling the scroll of questions that had been presented to me in Wyoming.

“Kids?” I asked.

“It’s a big deal to bring a soul into the world. That’s something we can discuss after we’re married.”

“Money?”

I learned that he had bad credit and fifty-five thousand dollars in college debt, which he’d stopped repaying, he hadn’t filed his taxes in two years, and he’d “invested” thirty thousand dollars, his life savings, in a political betting site.

It’s not that I wanted kids or was against marrying anyone with debt, though I had none. It’s just that I had grown up seeing poverty first-hand. To me, life was never kind; you had to fight in life to stand a chance. In my world, you figured out what life should look like ten years beforehand so you could attempt to prepare for its cruelty. His nonchalant, we’ll figure everything out as it happens approach terrified me, struck me as irresponsible, especially for someone eight years older. Never mind that I had come to the US alone in my early twenties, yet I suddenly seemed to be lightyears ahead of him.

“I like that you’re not the regular kind of black,” he announced two weeks later. “African Americans are never objective. They won’t consider the facts about police shootings, for example.”

Then, “I’m not a feminist. They’re crazy.”

Three months later, I could write a book about the things I didn’t like about him. That artichoke hoodie that turned his eyes green was too dilapidated. He stopped taking me out to eat, saying that he preferred my cooking. I felt like a Netflix and chill girl. I hated that

he watched shows with so much nudity and sex without flinching. Having been raised in conservative Zimbabwean circles, I couldn't believe it would be okay for husbands to stare at other women's naked bodies, even if they were acting out a story. Plus, he didn't worship; he told my deeply spiritual self. I found myself constantly thinking, "uyu ndiwo unonzi muyedzo, mashiripiti chaiwo." – The relationship felt like a cruel joke. As though someone was researching my fondest pet peeves and constantly feeding him lines.

"When do I get to meet your family?" he asked. In my culture, parents meet a boyfriend on the day of roora. Before that, they don't even want to hear as much as a suggestion of dating. I tried to explain this, but he thought I was equivocating.

"Well, then give me a roora date," he demanded. I couldn't, unsure I wanted to marry him.

We fought, doors banged, phone numbers blocked, Instagram accounts unfollowed. Then I received an email detailing his undying love for me, describing all the things that made him giddy when he first met me, reminding me of how intoxicating we'd found each other to be. He reminded me that all couples fight; we could get through this if we didn't give up. A few hours later, there was a knock on my door. Dark blue eyes that matched his shirt stared back at me. Everything I'd felt in our early days flooded back. I rushed into my beautiful alien's arms. We kissed until we cried.

I was ready to work it all out that evening, leave with a twelve-step plan on how we were going to resolve everything. I suggested we go out to eat at a nice restaurant in Santana Row.

"May you cook instead? Let's stay in and find something to watch," he countered, flipping through the channels. He paused on a news station. "I hate these liberals, calling themselves progressives," he asserted.

"Can we go somewhere and spend time talking about our issues

instead of society's ills?" I replied, ignoring his words but not the feeling of his left hand caressing my thigh.

"It's too exhausting. Not everything needs to be planned," he replied as he continued flipping.

Mukomana wacho aiita kunge chirahwe - I couldn't tell, was he a jerk or simply American? Was this mere cultural difference? Frustration welled up within me again, and within a few weeks, the cycle began anew. Blocked numbers, passionate apologetic emails, knocks on my door, kisses, and repeat; round and round, for two years. I finally told him to never come to my door again, or I'd call the police. I stopped responding to his emails, marked them as spam. It's been five months since the last one. Every morning, the first thing I do is check my spam, but all I get are notifications of money I just won.

Send Her Back

I pull to the side of the road, peering into my rearview mirror, and hold my breath. No sudden movements, I remind myself. Hues of blue flash in the dark, red alternates. A loud ring accompanies the lights as they draw closer. I squeeze my steering wheel, the assault on my ears ceases, and the lights rest behind me. A pale white officer, his skin a blunt contrast to mine, approaches. I turn my head, and our eyes lock.

Agitated, he knocks on the window, gesturing for me to roll it down. I blink out of my stupor, obeying with a quivering hand. I should've known to do this without command.

He asks for my license. I request permission to look in my glove compartment. Following a nod, papers scatter, middle compartments open, my eyes itch, and I clench my teeth. I know it's not there; I don't have a license, yet search I continue, murmuring a prayer under my breath.

"What's your name?" the officer's voice pierces through the suburban silence.

“Vimbiso Nyamukundwa.”

He raises his eyebrows, frowns, then shakes his head as if to say that’s not acceptable.

“Where are you going this late?”

I’m on my way back home from work at the nursing home, but if I tell him I have a job, I might end up with two infractions; I’m not supposed to hold a job. I pause in silence. He gapes at me with large bulging eyes, and I notice a large black mole on his left cheek. I could swear I’ve seen him before.

“I...I’m not up to anything. I’m just...just driving,” I stutter, quickly glancing at the time on the dashboard - 12:34am.

He laughs.

He takes a few steps back towards his fellow officer, positioned by the trunk of my car.

“I bet she’s from one of them shit holes,” the questioning officer says to his counterpart.

He walks back to me and asks where I am from.

“Zimbabwe,” I respond shakily. In my head, I think, Ndaibva. Yafira pano – I’m done for.

He winks at his mate. “Can I see your papers?” he asks with a satisfied grin.

My stomach ties itself into a lasso. I gulp and tell him that I don’t have them with me. He signals to his friend, and I stare at the badge on his chest that has long been the subject of my nightmares.

“You’ll have to come with us,” he says.

He opens the driver’s door and orders me out. I rise, my hands in the air. My face slams onto the car roof; his hand on my neck is too tight; I flinch. The officer orders me to put my hands behind my back; I don’t, too stunned to move. He shoves them down and cuffs my wrists; the metal is ice cold.

“Move, shit hole!” he says as he drags me into their car.

“Call Karl, tell him I picked up another one for him. He’ll need

to come to the station right away. I can't hold her for long," he says to his colleague.

The seat is comfortable, but its black leather sends chills down my toes. A steel wire fence separates me from the officers in the front. I've imagined this scene countless times over the last nine years. Finally, a physical representation of my caged existence has manifested. Streetlights perforate the dark of night. I can't go back; things were starting to come together; I'd finally been accepted into medical school. I must fight. I listen to the officers' excited chatter about helping ICE clean up the town as we speed off.

• • •

A WEEK AFTER THE arrest, my lawyer pays me a visit, or at least that's what Esi says he is. He is so tall that he needs to lower his head to enter my apartment. He removes his marron leather shoes with tiny holes on the pointed tip, placing them next to my well-worn sneakers and sandals.

Walking past my open-plan kitchen, he stretches himself out on the single brown couch in the living room; his gray elbows are a clear sign that he has neglected to apply lotion. It reminds me of my Munya and I'm strangely comforted by it. My eyes fixate on the tear on the armrest. I meant to mend it after picking it up from the street but never got around to it. As the lawyer rests his arm over it, I'm ashamed of its shoddiness.

After the arrest, I was met by two ICE officers at the police station. I was charged with being deportable, and a bond was set. Esi, my Ghanaian roommate, paid it as soon as she found out. A Notice To Appear (NTA) was handed to me three days later, and a court date (Master Calendar Hearing) was scheduled two weeks out.

"You shouldn't have said anything! They can't detain you," Esi had lectured.

"And why were you being a saint? It's just a job! Your shift doesn't end that late. Now, if it were me, that woman would suffer, I tell you.

I get deported because of her? Oh God help her!” she said, pacing up and down the room, flicking her fingers above her head.

A resident had slipped, injuring her pelvis. She became anxious and delirious, so I stayed longer to calm her, and now I was paying for it. I shake my head.

“That’s not helpful, Esi. It doesn’t change what happened. Besides, nobody forced me to stay,” I responded.

Esi always had an opinion about everything I did or did not do, much to my appreciation. When I couldn’t figure out how I was going to get a job after coming to the U.S. on a tourist visa, she arranged the job at the nursing home, assuring me they would pay me in cash because much of the town’s population was aging, yet all the young adults were leaving for Dallas or Austin, for flashier jobs where they fiddled on computers all day, for late nights in bars, drinking colorful cocktails and bobbing their heads to rap and house music. Where they could attend live theater shows or try Thai food. In this town, Esi had assured me, they just needed young people willing to do all the manual labor jobs that their own youth eschewed.

It was Esi who invited me to move in with her, splitting rent so I wouldn’t have to put my name on the lease or pay the full price of an apartment. It was Esi who supported my dream to apply to medical school, suggesting that I request a transcript of my University of Zimbabwe Biology degree. After all, Zimbabwe’s education system was modeled after the British as a former colony, making it easier for American schools to understand the credit conversion. It was Esi who “covered” my shifts at work while I spent long days at the library studying for my MCATs, assuring me that the old people at that home wouldn’t know the difference between two Black, African women. It was Esi who told me that there was no federal law that prohibits the admission of undocumented immigrants to U.S. universities; I could use my Zimbabwean passport and birth certificate. Some states even allow undocumented students to pay in-state tuition rates under

certain conditions. And though I didn't know how I was going to afford California rent, let alone the full cost of medical school, with Esi whispering in my ear, nothing felt impossible.

I'm startled by the lawyer's cough. I face him eagerly.

"I've done this many times for people from all over the world," he assures me, mistaking the shame my face carries for consternation over my deportation case. "No need to worry." From his thick accent, I can tell he is West African, though I cannot place his exact country of origin. Knowing that he's a black African immigrant like me eases my fear.

I grab the pen and paper I had set on my kitchen counter in anticipation of his visit and sit on the floor. "It's going to cost three thousand dollars," he says with a straight face.

At that, I squint and fold my fingers into fists, digging my nails into the palms of my hands nervously. I can't afford that. He reads the expression on my face correctly this time. I consider appealing to him like a brother. If any lawyer is going to sympathize with me, it's this guy. Do I begin by telling him how much I make and how hard I work, or do I lead with the desperate state of my country? I open my mouth, but before I can get the first word out, he speaks.

"I can leave if that's too expensive for you," he says as he lifts himself from the couch. "I have a family to feed as well."

"No. It's no problem," I lie. "I will work extra shifts, earn some overtime, find extra work," I add, more to reassure myself than him. A sense of betrayal sweeps over me; isn't he too an African immigrant?

He stares me down, then reclaims his seat. Chewing on my pen, I ask him what I'll need to get started. He asks for my MDC membership card.

I shake my head, confused. The MDC is the main opposition party to the ruling ZANU-PF in Zimbabwe. I am not a member of either.

"You need to apply for asylum. This way, your case will be adjourned for an individual hearing, a full hearing. The judge schedules

only a few cases a day for individual hearings, which buys us time. We need to convince USCIS that your life and your husband's are in danger from ZANU thugs because you're an activist who have been denouncing the ruling regime. We need proof you are MDC."

I sense hope rising once more. I'm sure I can pay someone in Zimbabwe to get me a membership card. I smile at his genius and repeatedly nod as I fail to find my words.

"Your husband is in Zimbabwe, right? Hire someone to knock a few of his teeth out, give him a stern beating, break something. Have him go to a hospital in Harare and get medical records detailing the trauma. Get some pictures of his injuries, too, and send all this to me," he says as he casually wipes off a drop of sweat that sprouts on his forehead.

I laugh but quickly realize he is serious. Watching new sweat drops form on his forehead, I apologize for not having air conditioning in this Texas heat.

"Is there any other way?" I ask as fear and hopelessness creep back in. He hushes me, refuting the unspoken objections he knows I have to the details of his plan. As he chatters on about why this is the most effective way, I can tell that he certainly has done this before.

"I need the documents and a fifty percent down payment by Friday," he says as he makes his way to the door. "You don't have much time to appeal."

As he walks out, I close my eyes and count the days till Friday. Five, I say to myself and take a deep breath, staring at the phone that has become synonymous with my husband. Nowadays, when I think of Munya, I no longer see his face, or recall his scent, or how the caress of fingers feels—no, when I think of him, I see my white iPhone 5 with its cracked screen. How can I ask this of him?

I left Zimbabwe at age thirty, a university graduate who had been working as a secondary school teacher in Bulawayo for five years. Munya and I were married for a year when I left, delirious for each

other, with dreams of big jobs, a big home, a big family, big paychecks, big vacations, big...happiness. We were smart, hardworking and all we needed was a chance, a fully functioning economy to pour our youthful years into. Our determination, zeal, and discipline would make us effortlessly rise in comparison to our peers. With Zimbabwe ailing, our government paychecks had begun to dwindle until they stopped coming entirely despite us still being expected to show up and teach. It was at this point that we decided our dreams would fizzle and be buried in the graveyard of our economy. We were better than that; we weren't just going to take it! I would move to the U.S., find a well-paying job in a lab somewhere, put my experience to good use, then sponsor Munya to follow a year later, but the U.S. immigration system scoffed. And with each year that passed after my tourist visa expired, rendering me undocumented, our hopes shrank; we found a new type of dream graveyard.

By Wednesday, I've gathered enough courage to call Munya. He answers on my fifth attempt, prevented from doing so sooner by the fact that I kept hanging up after the first ring. I fiddle with the letter in my hand, and take in the voices of his neighbor's young children chattering on his end. "I will be able to bring you here soon. Someday we can have our own," I explain without prompting, swallowing back the guilt. It's never far from my mind that I just celebrated my thirty-ninth birthday, and the window for me to give my husband's offspring a legacy to carry his name is closing.

"No hurry, my wife, I understand," he responds calmly. "It's better you stay in America and work; send money for us to finish building our own home. I'm trying, but it's hard."

Munya hasn't been able to hold a job since being laid off from his administrative job at Lever Brothers in 2010 which he got after we left our teaching jobs. Zimbabwe's unemployment and inflation continue to soar. I can't go back. Not only does Munya rely on me, but his parents, his siblings, my parents, my siblings, my grandmother, and

my nieces also depend on me for groceries, clothes, and school fees. Not only that, I contemplated *ndinonyarirepi* – what will people say?

I appreciate his patience with me. Though it's been nine years since we've seen each other, he never pushes me to return home as other men whose wives sought refuge overseas do. Our arrangement thus far has worked. Though I haven't been able to give him the son he'd always wanted after my miscarriage back in Harare in 2010, he patiently awaits our reunion. At times, I wonder if he is so patient because he already has a smallhouse and with whom he perhaps has secret primary school-aged children, and the money I'm sending is truly for his smallhouse's makeup and latest fashion and the children he would never confess to fathering with her.

"Mudiwa, I received a deportation order a few days ago," I say as I stare at the notes I took when I met with my lawyer. In the center of the page, "\$3000" is inscribed in large letters. I circled it four times and underlined it twice. I have traced each character over and over again in dark blue ink; the ink is leaking onto the back of the page, the paper almost torn along the characters.

Munya's voice sinks, rife with concern. We sit in silence. The kettle I had set on the stove for tea starts to whistle, startling me. I rush to pick it up but tip it over, scorching my hand. I groan and tell Munya that I just gravely burned myself.

"No! You cannot return! What about my money?" he says with a loud yet shattering voice.

Did he hear what I just told him about my hand? Is there no concern for my well-being? Does he think I want to return empty-handed? Give up a decade of life lost toiling in the US for the sake of our future? Does he care about my emotional state at all?

The burden his voice carries is stifling. It sounds like a burden for his welfare, not mine. Though he doesn't say it, I know he is worried that without my monthly remittances, there is no hope for a blissful future. I wonder if U.S. dollar bills are all he sees now when he tries

to picture me, or perhaps a Western Union logo. Annoyed by his lack of concern, I find the courage to share the lawyer's request.

"I can apply for asylum. If I can make a case that I was a member of the MDC and it's politically dangerous for me to come back, I might stand a chance to stay. If I'm granted asylum, then you too could join me."

He doesn't respond. I know that he, like me, is not sure that any of this will work. We had previously tried to have him apply for a visa to study in the U.S., but his application was denied because I am undocumented.

"You... You will need to hire some people to beat you up, break something, knock out a few front teeth, then report to the hospital that you were assaulted and get some medical records for proof," I continue, my hand searing, the rest of me completely numb. You would...."

His voice bursts through the phone, a baritone that seems foreign, from a distant memory. "Now you have lost your mind, woman! You think because you make more money than me, you can tell me what to do? Nonsense! If you want me to move on, just say so. If you want to find a reason to move on, just do so! Don't get me murdered in the name of papers. What kind of witchcraft are you practicing now that requires the teeth of a husband as an ingredient? I have been quiet all these years—but I know you could've been sending more money. You're living the high life over there. I see you in a different fancy outfit each time you send a picture. I see you getting fat, those cheeks blowing up over the years of good living. I hear you whisper when I call you, and you're at work. You're hiding me because you're ashamed. You lie and say you want my children when you will be barren soon. Vimbisio, you take me for a fool, promising I will come soon, yet you said you're starting school again..."

I drop my phone as he lets the deluge of everything he has wanted to say over the last decade out. The frustration he has felt, the anger wrapped in niceties, oozes out. I sense an odd sense of relief.

The guilt I've carried, the shame, the frustration I've wanted him to express is finally here. We are having a real conversation, laying bare our true emotions. I sense him again, not the shell of a human I've been interacting with for years. Not the puppet that simply says please and thank you to conversations revolving around how many U.S. dollars are needed. For the first time in almost a decade, I sense the passion in him, an awakening. Perhaps there's a chance that our love can return.

I gasp for air, realizing I had neglected to breathe. I feel dizzy and hang up, turn my phone off, pretending my battery is dead.

• • •

“LEAVE HIM! IT'S BEEN too long. Besides, you need to be saving for Cali,” Esi shouts when I tell her about our conversation. But before getting accepted into medical school, I felt like I was failing at everything. See, my life at thirty-nine looks nothing like I dreamed it would. Everything feels fickle, my world rickety, my identity shifting, ever so capricious. Something about still being married, still trying to make it work, despite the distance and challenges, makes me feel like I'm still “winning” at something. This is the one thing on the “Vimbiso At Forty” vision board that I crafted right before leaving for the U.S. that holds true, and forty is seventeen days away. Perhaps a “Vimbiso At Forty-One”, living in California, and a physician in training, might make a different choice.

I know after my conversation with Munya that asylum isn't an option. In frail optimism, I tell myself that there is another way. I will find a way to remain in the U.S.; my work will not be in vain. I will find a way to bring my husband to join me. I will find a way to feed my family. Perhaps I can convince the U.S. government that I am otherwise a law-abiding citizen. I work hard caring for its citizens—their parents and grandparents, their veterans, and the sick. Each day I bathe the residents, change diapers, feed them, and offer conversation and company when their own kids are too busy with

their lives to care. I am the residents' constant companion until their families can schedule an hour over the weekend to visit with fake smiles and patronizing loud voices as if the residents can't be understood. I see them in condescending voices, lecturing their elders as though wisdom diminishes with age. If only they took as much time as I did to be invested. Do you want to know about a people? Watch how they treat the vulnerable, if they care nothing for their own blood, locking them up in homes because they are too busy for their own mother and father, what then do you expect them to do with a stranger, a foreigner like me, with skin this black?

I retreat to my room, take a nap and wake up feeling more rested, hopeful, and ready to consider the possibility of continuing my journey. I lift the large white envelope on the kitchen counter and read my medical school acceptance letter once more. I will figure this out. If the American people knew my sacrifices, how smart I am, how I'm going to be the best cardiologist there ever was, and how I'm willing to work in remote rural towns where they are in need of specialists, surely, they would be merciful. They would understand. As the sun sinks beyond the horizon that evening, I pick up my phone and fidget with it. I turn to the Twitter app for distraction. The first video I see is of a formidable white crowd chanting, "Send Her Back! Send Her Back!" The face of a woman, black like me, comes up. I read she's from the same continent as me; she's an American citizen now, a congresswoman.

Instantly, I feel a pounding on my head, right above my left temple. I feel as though I've just been dipped in a bucket of ice water. If she's not accepted, not welcome, what hope do I have? I should stop watching and put my phone away, yet I follow the rabbit hole to President Donald Trump's page. My scrolling leads me to a tweet he posted four weeks ago.

"Next week, ICE will begin the process of removing the millions of illegal aliens who have illicitly found their way into the United States..."

The tears I have fought since the arrest flood my cheeks. Lowering myself to the floor, I wrap myself in the fetal position and sob myself to sleep, the acceptance letter clutched on my bosom.

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A LOUD KNOCK LANDS on my door. I jump in fright.

“There’s no time to recoil, sis. It’ll be fine. Chin up. Go get that paper!” Esi yells as she leaves for work.

I want to scream that she’s wrong this time but instead decide that if I’m going to return, I may as well not be empty-handed, so I get up and ready myself for work.

Mrs. Jones is the first resident I’m scheduled to bathe and feed. I have developed an aversion toward her. Her pelvis and anxiety cost me my future. Her grandchildren are scheduled to visit. I wheel her into the lobby, recalling Esi’s words about retribution if my case is denied. The wheelchair squeaks on the maple floors. I shake off the thought. I’m better than that.

In the lobby is a man with bulging eyes and a large black mole on his left cheek standing with the grandchildren. I gasp. The cop! They can’t be here to get me already; what about the Master Calendar Hearing? He tilts his head, raises his eyebrows, frowns then shakes his head.

Three children, all no older than six, rush toward us and embrace Mrs. Jones. The youngest, confused, lifts her arms, gesturing for me to pick her up. I’m not sure what to do. She begins to cry, and her older brother tells me that she likes being held. Keeping my eyes on the cop, I slowly lift the child, my heart racing.

The cop shifts uncomfortably, his gaze unrelenting.

“No hugs from you, my son?” Mrs. Jones says to him. He pauses, then slowly walks over, planting a kiss on her cheek.

“I was going to leave the kids but.... It’s an emergency! I need to return at the end of the day but...” he says as he tinkers nervously with the set of keys in his jean pocket.

“Hurry along. We’re in great hands with Vimbiso over here,” Mrs. Jones says as she reaches for my hand.

He stares at his youngest in my arms, her head resting comfortably on my shit hole shoulder.