

Among the Believers

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TITI rolled from one end of the bed to the other. In a few hours, the streets outside would empty and a warm silence would embrace Matapi East. To the west, Paradise Hills lay like a crouching lion. People said the residents of Paradise Hills didn't need what the people of Matapi East called tower lights. All residents and owners of those mansions could afford their own lights for the gateposts. The city centre was further east. Titi wondered what made people sleep at the same time every day of the year. I-Man, his older brother, walked in softly, his hair freshly washed and shampooed. It was an indication that he was going 'out', as was usual. It was always like this on Friday evenings. Titi always wondered where 'out' was. The older boy opened his side of the wardrobe and pushed around a few things and began to walk out.

"Where exactly is 'out'?" Titi asked, after a moment's hesitation.

The older boy stood, knowing he had been ambushed. He rarely spoke. Only half his face was visible as his dreadlocks swung across his face in a heavy, black mass. How he reminded Titi of that crucifix beyond the altar in the Burning Bush Evangelical Fellowship church. Lately, he had even stopped shaving the beard. His sad, slow, steady eyes found the smaller boy lying on the bed, face up.

"Like what do people do out?" Titi added, as the bigger boy remained silent, watching him like Jesus examining in minute detail the soul of Judas; a victim of forces bigger than him. His eyes held no hostility, just a sad acceptance of the other.

"I-Man," I-Man started with a slight jerk of the shoulders. It struck Titi just how slim his brother was. Did his hair take all the food he ate? "Well, just hanging out with buddies and them. Anyway, what you know? Still in your nappies, but you will know at Jah-appointed time", he added. He always reminded Titi of some Old Testament prophet when he spoke like that. So calm and full of forgiveness for crimes unknown and perhaps uncommitted. He was a figure of torment who held onto his beliefs, so sure of his higher truth. Most people call him I-Man these days. Except Mother. She still called him Peter, his birth name.

"Can I come with you today?"

"You can't. Mum won't stand for it, you know that already." The older boy made as if to go out and then changed his mind, opened a drawer and pulled out one of his recently burnt CDs. He spun it deftly between thumb and forefinger and before it finished its dizzying journey, it was in his shirt pocket. Titi didn't need to look carefully to recognise it. The usual bright green, yellow and red that decorated most of I-Man's CDs.

"I want to come to the club. You once promised to take me there. I am a big man now."

“You can’t come because Mum will know. In any case they don’t allow kids like you on Friday night jams.”

“Is that Luciano African?”

“Yeah. He my people.”

“Is Kingston in Africa then?”

“No, Kingston is Babylon. But my people come to mother Africa soon.”

“Why do they want to come to Africa. Seems many Africans are going away already. Papa is gone already.”

“Coz when Jah come he gonna save the pure African. Babylon must fall but Africa live forever. Ethiopia shall stretch her arms unto God.”

“Mother says Babylon was destroyed a long time ago. Joshua’s horns did that a long time ago. Was it rebuilt?”

“It’s a new sort of place but you can’t understand that. Can’t you see this spiritual messenger’s black like me?”

“Black like me! I saw somebody with those words on somebody’s T-shirt yesterday. What do they mean?”

“You will know at Jah-appointed time. But Kingston is where brethren and sistren are right now and they prepare to go to Zion. Prophets live there. Luciano is a prophet of His Imperial Majesty.” He took out the CD. From where he lay, Titi looked at the sleeve again.

“But what is he looking at? Seems he’s looking at nothing.”

“Prophets do that. They read the signs. Sometimes the sign is in the sky, in the cloud, sometimes in the shift of the wind. Only they can read the signs. The signs of the times, for Jah-time is nigh.”

“Looks like that man, Lobengula in the chair Rhodes gave him. Our teacher showed us his picture on Monday. Do people still dress like that?”

“All prophets do that. They see the higher truth.”

“He doesn’t look like a prophet to me.”

“Prophets don’t all look the same. Your Mother’s Jeremiah went around in a loincloth and that other one...John...ate honey in the bush all the time.”

“Where does it say that?”

“You don’t read the book yourself, that’s why. You too small to understand the message anyway.”

“But mother doesn’t like Luciano and...”

“It’s the mission. All genuine prophets put up with that.”

“Where is Kingston exactly?”

“Near Montego Bay, where the Angel of Fire shall reveal himself.”

“We don’t have such names in Africa.”

“That’s because of what they did to us. Are you happy now?”

“You haven’t told me where Kingston is.”

“It’s next to Montego Bay,” I-Man said with a smile. It struck Titi how rarely his brother smiled. He seemed to be busy all the time, not with any work but with his own thoughts. I-Man said he had finished doing sinnerman’s work and had embarked on Jah-work. A narrow frown had etched itself down his forehead. He held the doorpost and looked back at the smaller boy, his head held to one side. “Jah’s angel will reveal himself and bring justice to the righteous.”

“It doesn’t say so in Mother’s Bible. It talks about Jerusalem. Is Jerusalem the same as heaven?”

“No, Jerusalem is Jezebel who has sinned against His Imperial Majesty. She was condemned. If your *fata*¹ was honest and righteous, he would have told you that long ago instead of repeating all those dead Latin verses before toothless, illiterate women. Does he tell you Latin is dead?”

“How can a language die? He speaks it all the time on Sundays.”

“He’s an oppressorman.”

“Mother doesn’t like what you are saying.”

“There are many things that Mother doesn’t like but I am a prophet too so I don’t expect to be liked.”

Titi giggled. “When did you become one?”

“Well, you people just have to turn away from your evil ways while you have time. When the Angel of Fire comes, there won’t be any time left. Jah fire gonna lift rasta higher and sinnerman gonna burn in Jah fire...”

Titi closed his eyes. He had heard that before from I-Man. When he opened his eyes, the older boy was gone.

The “blank screen” trick never worked at such times. He thought of his friend D.G., the one who claimed to know all the things about “life itself” as he called it. *Think of your mind as a blackboard, with all the Math homework and the Science things written on it and then take a duster and erase all of it. Before you know it, you will be asleep.* He erased everything from his mind. No luck. How does one become so black and not be African? I-Man wasn’t telling the truth. That Luciano wasn’t African although his hair looked like I-Man’s, all twisted and long. Would his teacher know? Mr. Chatima certainly knew but he wondered if he entertained such questions. Such questions had nothing to do with education. Kingston was not mentioned as one of the capital cities of African countries in the Friday quiz show they always held.

Perhaps mother would be back soon. He thought he heard members of her church singing one of their new songs. D.G. claimed the song had been created by his own mother’s church and then other people stole and used it. Whatever the case, his mother’s church, The Burning Bush Evangelical Fellowship, always sang it so well it made his eyes water.

The black part of the blackboard in his mind changed to red when he squeezed the eyelids together, and then grey. There, against the grey background, he saw the churchwomen dancing and swaying. Titi thought the women were always at their happiest when they sang such sad tear-jerking songs. It was in their eyes, as the words oozed from the very depths of their hearts. So sad, so very sad, and yet Titi sometimes saw a woman turn to her left or right to smile at her fellow singer, even as scenes of utmost wretchedness were being painted by those words. Words of sorrow, words of great sorrow and fleeting moments of joy. Sometimes a woman got the spirit and shook like a mango tree in high wind. Titi wondered why it almost made him cry against his will. Do tears have their own feelings? Why do they come out when one doesn’t want them to? Would D.G. know why? Titi doubted it. He shut his eyes fiercely to block the steady hum of the streets and thought he picked out the song:

Handina bakatwa, uta nemuseve²
Handina bakatwa, uta nemuseve
Handina bakatwa, uta nemuseve

Ndingori naJesu, Jesu chete
Ndingori naJesu, Jesu chete
Ndingori naJesu, Jesu chete

Handina mari kana selo
Handina mari kana selo

Handina mari kana selo

Ndingori naJesu, Jesu chete

Ndingori naJesu, Jesu chete

Ndingori naJesu, Jesu chete

Huya njiva ndikutume uende kunaBaba

Hurekure ane makuhwa

Dahwa anokotsira

Huya njiva ndikutume uende kunaBaba

Hurekure ane makuhwa

Dahwa anonokotsira

Kudenga kwakanaka kupinda pano pasi

Kudenga kwakanaka kupinda pano pasi

Kudenga kwakanaka kupinda pano pasi

Jesu, Jesu chete, Jesu chete...

The song made him miserable and very lonely. It ripped at his very entrails and laid them bare for him to see. It made him very quiet inside and sad. How could anybody be proud of not having money or a cell phone and still be happy? That powerlessness and wretchedness made the snakes in his stomach rear roar and spit out their nauseating juices. The snakes' juices made him dizzy inside. But was he hearing the song or just his ears playing games with him?

Tonight's prayer service was down Ruzawi Road, close to where D.G. and his mother lived. Mother said the sick woman there had been abandoned by her husband. No one knew where the man now lived but some people whispered that like so many other men, he had left the country itself. What is it to abandon? Why would any man abandon his wife and family? And what made a man abandon his own country even to stay in a strange land full of equally strange people? Perhaps I-Man knew but many of the things he said were things Mother didn't like to hear. For example that story of Jesus walking around in a loincloth. She said he it was blasphemous, a crime against God himself. That must be a big crime. Mother always told Titi that God would punish him if he asked foolish things. She said he would be burnt in a bad place where sinners were taken when they died. I-Man also said the same thing. Why then do they not seem to like each other? Mother says all sinners will be burnt to ashes on judgement day. She tells I-Man he's in danger of that fire too. Satan himself would do that with a pitchfork, his red horns and evil green eyes gleaming. But why is Satan so black? His black is not natural. But perhaps he is so black because he is so evil. But why does God let Satan burn down sinners? Does Satan work for God? Perhaps that is part of his own punishment himself, being so evil and black and failing to follow God's commands.

Burning people must be horrible. But how many times does a person die? The Minister at The Burning Bush Evangelical Fellowship church says the body is so evil that it can not

go to heaven. It goes into the ground and is buried there so only the spirit must go to heaven. Satan must burn the spirit only then. But how far is Heaven from where Satan does his business? Titi wished his brother was there to answer the question. But sometimes I-Man refuses to answer any questions, especially after quarrelling with mother. Or when he's in the spirit, as he says. Mother says I-Man's problem is that he thinks he is now the man of the house. Then he just lies down, headphones plugged in and listens to his music for hours. Or reads some of his books. But they are not schoolbooks. His books have nothing to do with education.

I-Man doesn't go to school now. He stopped going to school one misty morning. Father had already been gone for a long time. In fact Father has been away for so long Titi doesn't remember exactly what he looks like, even with the help of the still photo. I-Man just said he was running out of time to do the good work. Since then, he has been going to that place by Hunyani River when boys his age go to school, the secondary school. He says it's a church but people say people go there to smoke bad cigarettes. Cigarettes that make the room smell bad when he comes back sometime in the night. Peter says it's the weed of truth and wisdom, going back to the grave of Solomon of the good book. Some evenings there is a lot of drumming from down there.

Mother doesn't answer most of Titi's questions especially when she's busy with things of the house. She says Titi's questions are bothersome. A very big word, bothersome. It must mean he asks foolish questions, the way it troubles the tongue. Like that girl, Mandi, who sits opposite Titi in class. D.G. says he catches Mandi looking longingly at Titi sometimes but Titi doesn't believe it. Mandi is foolish because the whole class laughed at her when she asked Mr. Chatima what a "detractor" is. She is foolish because everybody hears that word on the radio everyday and examples of such are always given. It doesn't take much brains to see what a detractor is because every radio says who he is. Even a baby should know that. A detractor demonises otherwise peaceful people. Tony Blair in a country called Britain is the detractor because he is raising prices of bread and other things everyday. The radio says Tony Blair's country is cold and useless and therefore we shouldn't worry about what he says. Mandi is foolish not to know that. But nobody has beaten her to the number one position now since first grade. That means she has beaten everyone five times. But she is foolish anyway, like this Tony Blair who keeps demonising peaceful people.

Only the dogs made any noise at all now. Even the women had stopped their singing. A baby whimpered a little and the mother sang a gentle lullaby and then all was quiet again. But sleep completely deserted Titi. The blanket of sleep fell gently from the sky and enveloped Matapi East now. Titi rolled to I-Man's side of the bed. A small book lay on I-Man's pillow. It had very few pages. On the front cover, a very dark man stared out at him. Two feathers grew out of his embroidered hat. Below the picture was the title: *Garvey's Prophecy Come to Pass*. A strange title. Titi looked at the man's face. He didn't like the man's eyes. He seemed to stare into Titi's heart, knowing everything he was thinking, even about him. Was he one of I-Man's prophets? He put it down.

Where is I-Man now? And where exactly is Father? Mother always gave one answer: he is out of the country. At other times, she says, "He's in the Diaspora." Titi has seen the map of Africa but mother says his father is even further than the furthest countries of Africa. A place called Diaspora. Three boys in Titi's class say their fathers are in Britain. But what could they be looking for in a country ruled by a detractor? Titi was certain his own father would never stay in such a country. But wherever he is, it must be very far. But if the world is really round like Mr. Chatima says, then very far is the same as very near, not so? Did he look like his father? The picture of Mother and Father that used to sit besides the television has been removed now. It was a picture of Mother and Father on their wedding day, a very old picture too but well-maintained then.

I-Man sometimes said Titi did look like their father but Titi thought he said this only to silence him. I-Man rarely talks and he was surprised he had answered all those questions tonight. How nice it would be to look like his father and walk down Gairezi Avenue with him, hand in hand, all the way past the Green Grocery's at the corner of Gairezi and Musasa Street to the shops on a Saturday morning. Mandi sometimes manned her mother's vegetable market. It would be nice to walk past Mandi's stall with his father, pretending not to see Mandi at all and only slightly turning when he is almost past the stall to acknowledge her greeting. Then he would know if she really looked at him in class. He would look at the brown of her eye to see if it was true. And then return by the same spot with his father's newspaper stuck under his own armpit and a bag of groceries in the other, looking thoughtful and unconcerned about it all.

All the boys in his class wanted to be friends with him but only D.G. was anything like a friend. But Titi's mother didn't like D.G. and she always made it known when Titi brought him home for dinner some weekends. Nobody calls D.G. by his real name – Lazarus – but Titi's mother uses it so often when he is in her house that he looks miserable. Then she teases him, saying he looks like poor Lazarus of the Bible, begging at the gates. Then he loses all interest in Titi's DVDs and says his mother wants him at their house. Titi allowed D.G. to ride his bicycle. But it was the bicycle that made him very sad. It reminds him of Father because Mother says he said he would work hard to buy him one. Perhaps that's why he let D.G. ride it and got into trouble with Mother. Poor D.G. Such a small body and such a big voice. And a big head. The rude boys say his mother always has so many different men at her house that D.G. has trouble keeping up with his surname at any one time. Not his school surname but the home one. The surname he would use on radio if he wandered into a strange part of town beyond Paradise Hills and got lost.

Suddenly Titi heard his mother's voice humming a hymn as she opened the kitchen door. One of those that she could hum all day long on Saturdays as she did the laundry and other house chores. Soon she would be in the kitchen and check on him after eating her food. Sometimes she looked so sad Titi felt like crying himself. Crying for her so she would not cry anymore. Sometimes she would just sit on his bed and tell him about what the preacher had said that evening. It was usually the same thing said in many different ways: how the poor would inherit the Earth. Titi never answered or asked a question but he didn't mind her. On one or two occasions he had felt like asking her about inheriting

the Earth. D.G. says the preacher should be saying the poor will inherit whatever will be left of the Earth *after* the rich are done with taking what they want. But who can pay D.G. a serious mind? Mother says boys who have no fathers at all always get mixed up like that.

Did Father abandon Mother and us? Like the sick woman near Titi's house who got abandoned by her husband. What made women to be abandoned by their husbands? What exactly is it to abandon? It must be very bad. He wondered if he could ask Mother but she may not like the question. I-Man says one must have a clean heart to see Jah and not think about the troubles of this life. He says that's all one needed. "Just look up to the heavens and see Jah glory," he sometimes says. But he doesn't go to church with us on Sundays. He says he will not waste his energy doing sinnerman work because his big task lies ahead. One day Titi asked him when he seemed friendly, "Where is that?" "Beyond the grave, at the alter of the righteous ones," was his answer.

I-Man said father used to phone and after talking to mother, he would ask for I-Man and give him tasks to do around the house. Titi had never seen I-Man do any work around the house. The only time he had seen him carrying a hoe was when mother forced him to dig up beer bottles he had buried in one of her vegetable beds. I-Man was still attending school then, before he stopped going. Then everybody called him Peter. That incident, seen by our lodgers from the cottage window and other neighbours served as Peter's confirmation and baptism as a drinker. And smoker. Not long after, he said he no longer wanted to go to school because school was part of the Babylon system he was fighting.

Titi heard the slight shuffle of stockinged feet and knew Mother was now coming to his room. He stretched out, rolled on his side and closed his eyes, the way babies sometimes do. He had tried it before but it didn't always work. His Mother always woke him up when she wanted. Sometimes she just sat in the chair near the head of the bed until she was ready for her own bed. Titi could see her, not with his eyes but with his body's feelers, like a millipede. She sat at her customary place. Titi stretched out a little more and sighed deeply like a baby who has been asleep for hours, the sigh only taking it further into the mellow depths of the world of the half-dead. How did the preacher talk about inheriting the Earth today – or whatever will be left of it after the rich have taken what they want, he wondered, and almost smiled at D.G.'s sinful joke.

"Titi," Mother said after a while, "I have news from your father."

¹ Fata is a Shona version of Father, the Roman Catholic Church title. Any male leader of various other churches can also carry such a title.

² The song is a popular Zimbabwean gospel tune. The burden of this song is that a committed believer is not worried about material possessions, that Jesus Christ is all one needs in this life and beyond. It is for this reason that it is also very popular at funeral ceremonies in particular.