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Edward Chinhanhu

Our Christmas Reunion

The day was December 24th, and Selby was coming home. I'd done well at school, the rains had been excellent and, to top it all, Selby was coming home. Nothing, absolutely nothing in this world could beat the sweet, joyful anticipation that filled my soul at my big brother's homecoming, and, of course, the prospects of a bountiful harvest. He had already sent the money to buy a goat for Christmas, and I had obliged by selecting a huge one that, on this penultimate day itself, I was busy skinning on the veranda of a disused old shed.

You see, we were poor peasants, and my ageing mother and I had lived deep in the sequestered, mountainous village of Matida for as long as my mother's memory could stretch, tilling the hard, rocky ground whose yield seemed to dwindle year after year. Father had long since drowned in the nearby Mutorahuku, drunk as ever, after a heated quarrel with mother. After father's death mother wore no other colour but black, and I had vowed never to touch alcohol for as long as I lived. Now, at eighteen, I was still resolute about that. When father died, Selby had just completed Form Three at one of those now defunct, hastily constructed, under-funded secondary schools built at independence and generically called "upper-tops". This one had been taken over by a group of zealous Catholic missionaries and nuns. I was three or four then.

We were the only children in the family and the bond between us was stronger than that of any two siblings who had ever walked the earth, despite the wide gap in our ages. I worshipped the ground Selby walked on. From the tender age of two, I would accompany him everywhere he went, and that included school, sometimes. With my thumb firmly stuck in my mouth, I would spend the day with his class, ignoring the discouraging comments and innocuous jokes from his mates and teachers.

Today, however, when I look back on the embarrassment I might have caused him, I feel like sinking into the ground with shame.

But Selby didn't seem to mind. We would go fishing together, we mended mother's fence together, we watered the garden together, bathed in the Mutorahuku together, fetched water, ate from the same plate, played, sang, laughed and cried together, my big brother and I. We slept between the same blankets, which I inevitably soiled from time to time.

And then he went to London. Ah, but more about that later.

First, here is an incident that sticks vividly in my mind and which I believe has a symbiotic relationship with the tale I want to tell. It was around midday and, having fallen out with my regular playmates, I decided to wander along the Mutorahuku. About three hundred metres downstream I changed course and made a sudden turn towards the nearby school grounds. I could see people there, and I hoped Selby would be among them.

I emptied my pockets of the pebbles I'd picked up on my excursion along the river, my mind vaguely trying to cook up an excuse for my unexpected appearance at school. Soon, panting for breath, I was in the playground, where a few dozen people either sprawled on the turf perusing books, or milled about enjoying the June sun. To the left, near the football goalposts, was a knot of six or seven boys, apparently engrossed in something I was too far away to see.

My eyes scanned the playground for my brother and, failing to see him anywhere else, I made for the standing group. About thirty metres away, I spotted him. His back was towards me. I ran again, and soon was upon them. Playfully, I tugged at Selby's shorts, and he turned.

"He-e-y!" he exclaimed gleefully, bending down and throwing a loose arm around my neck. "Howzeta m'face?" We went through our own greeting rigmarole – touching fingers and thumbs, rather too quickly, I thought. Selby once again swung his arm around my neck, pulled me to him, and then returned his attention to whatever it was he was discussing with his friends. Gently, I squeezed my body between him and another boy to see what it was that could take Selby's attention from me.

At the centre of the circle stood a boy, bright-eyed, with an unmistakably mischievous mouth. He held a shaved stick in one hand and a rolled-up plastic tube (it looked like a balloon to me) in another. He was explaining something to the group, who all were laughing, clapping and shaking hands. The boy rolled the plastic tube up the stick.

"You see," he was saying, "You do it carefully, slowly – or better still, you make her roll it up. Make her. . ."

Suddenly a female voice broke in, "What do you think you're doing, boys?"

Every head turned, and fear-filled eyes rested on a short, plump, bespectacled woman in Catholic regalia. She had a cane in one hand.

Quickly, the circle dissolved, and the boys leaped out of the cane's reach. The boy who held the plastic-wrapped stick tried to shake off the plastic, at the same time trying to flee. After three quick shakes it came off, but instead of falling to the ground it flew onto my chest and stuck there.

Gripped with fear, I jumped and screamed, using my fingers to try and toss it off. While engaged in this frantic effort, rough hands seized me. This threw me into a deeper, frenzied panic.

"Whose child is this?" shrieked the woman, her face horrified.

No one answered. Selby had moved a short distance away and was watching from there.

"I said whose child is this," she repeated shrilly.

Again Selby did not answer.

She pulled me towards a piece of paper lying on the grass and, to protect her hands, used it to pick the plastic off my shirt.

"The owner of this child will have to follow me to the headmaster's office. That's where he will pick him up."

With that she swung me around and force-marched me towards the school buildings. I cried, but she took no heed.

Then Selby was upon us.

"Madame," he said in his usual polite tone, "he's my young brother."

She stopped walking, still holding me firmly by the shoulder, and looked directly into Selby's eyes.

"You!" she spat, "you're a prefect aren't you? And you bring such filthy things into our school?"

"No, Madame Sister . . ."

"Do you know that this is a clean Catholic school, a godly, holy institution?" She was beside herself with rage. "I can't let this pass," she continued, sinking her knuckles into my collarbone as she pulled me along.

Selby fell in step with us.

"No, Madame Sister. Do not drag him. I'll carry him to the office myself."

But the woman wouldn't listen.

Selby's proximity pacified me somewhat, and I did not resist. My crying too subsided. Still, I couldn't make sense of anything. We reached the door to the headmaster's office and blew in like a hurricane.

"Headmaster . . ." she panted.

But there was no one in. She swung around, and zoomed out again, pulling me with her. We went past one classroom, and another, then we saw the headmaster in the third, teaching a class. He was a grey-haired man with a kindly, fatherly look. Again we barged in.

"Headmaster," said the nun, "can you believe this? Look! Just look at how . . ."

The rest of her words were drowned out by stifled bursts of laughter from the class because, as she ranted, she dangled the plastic in the air,

and it swung to and fro like a tired pendulum. The headmaster looked on stonily, unblinking. He looked from the nun to me, and finally, almost inaudibly he said, "Follow me." We all followed him to the office, the nun bringing up the rear. Once inside, the headmaster looked at Selby, his eyes boring into him.

"Is that thing yours?" he asked.

"No, Sir," Selby answered.

"Liar!" shouted the nun, pointing a shaking finger at him.

"It's not mine, Sir. Somebody picked it up on the playing field."

"Who?"

"I cannot remember. We were playing on the field, and . . ."

"Go and call your parents," ordered the headmaster, sitting down.

"Please, Sir. I only have my mother. She's sick and she cannot . . ."

"Then we will have to expel you from school. This is a very serious offence. The authorities will simply not let it pass. Either you call your mother here and we talk to her, or you have to withdraw. No exams."

Selby had no option but to call mother to school. I wasn't privy to what followed, but what I clearly remember, even to this day, is my mother crying her heart and eyes out. For days she did not eat. Nor did Selby.

They were still bent on expelling Selby, and for five days he did not attend school. Later, however, the headmaster relented and allowed him back. He was punished and lost his position as prefect. For a long time he was viewed with suspicion by the nuns and brothers who ran the school, as well as by other students, but he never gave his friends away. They secretly admired and praised him. I know this because they came to prepare for their exams at our house at night. I knew that I was somehow to blame for my brother's misery, and that had I not been on the grounds that day Selby would have escaped the nun and everything brought upon him. But he never mentioned this. He still loved me as he had before.

He passed his Form Four well enough, and proceeded to a different school for his A-Levels, on a generous scholarship from a local tea company. He passed these with glee, and everyone – teachers, sisters, friends, priests – all came to our dilapidated home to congratulate him, his past wrongs totally forgotten.

And then he went to London.

I cannot describe in enough detail how his departure affected me. I had no idea of journeys and distances, and London might as well have been a kilometre or two away, but the fact that Selby was going somewhere without me gnawed at the very roots of my soul. When he did not come home that first evening, I felt like my world had crumbled all around me.

I sobbed the whole night, and on countless others after it. It was a month before I eventually accepted the letters he wrote every week, and agreed to look at the photographs he sent us. Mother read the letters to me with hilarious, exaggerated elaborations. With time, I treasured these letters the way Jews treasured their early scriptural writings. They were the only bond now between Selby and me. I pored over them till I could identify each of them by a smudge, or a folded corner, a peculiar crease or stain, and could recite all that they said, sentence by sentence, without looking or reading. Mother chastised me for carrying them to school, but still I managed to sneak one or two in my pocket from time to time to show my friends.

When Selby returned from London, he secured a big job with a bank in Harare, and for the past two years had been working there. Of course, he did come home from time to time, but not as often as we all wanted. He paid my fees at a good boarding school, and built two new houses to expand our homestead. Life was comfortable. The love we had for each other did not change, only matured and grew less selfish (especially on my part). Selby was more than a brother to me, and more than a son to my mother now. He was our refuge, our father and lifeline, the umbilical cord that sustained our livelihood. And this was going to be our first Real Christmas with him since his return from London. I was excited, I was ecstatic, I could have touched the sky with joy. I hummed a tune under my breath as I skinned the big goat.

On that morning the rain poured incessantly, pounding the saturated earth with heavy droplets, each like the fist of a bully. There was water and mud everywhere, and the local folk revelled in it. No amount of rain, however, could deter me from meeting my brother at the bus station. When I heard the groaning and grunting of the bus as it climbed the ascent of "pagomba", I covered the carcass of the goat with sheets of plastic, placed a big dish on top and covered my head with an old yellow fertiliser container. I shouted to my mother that the bus had come, and not knowing that I still held the knife in my bloody hands, plunged into the rain. I only noticed the knife and my blood-soaked hands halfway on the journey, and cleaned them in puddles of water that collected on the road. I hid the knife in the back pocket of my khaki shorts.

I turned a corner onto the main road and, sure enough, the bus was already there at the station, a hundred metres away. There was a sizeable crowd, and much excited jumping and skipping and embracing. Shouts of laughter could be heard from quite a distance away.

When I arrived, I did not see Selby among the disembarked passengers.

With my heart beating fast, I looked frantically here and there, in front of the bus and behind it – twice. For some stupid reason, I even looked under the bus, but of course my brother wasn't there, and no one had seen him. Stinging tears began to well up in my eyes. The bus conductor hit the door of the bus with a clenched fist, signalling its departure, and slowly it moved out of our station.

Then a bell rang, and I heard someone shout, "There is somebody disembarking!" Despite my tears, I craned my neck and peered through the windows and door of the packed bus. A familiar figure was slowly making his way towards the exit, squeezing through the small spaces created for him by the noisy standing passengers, and pieces of luggage piled on the floor of the bus. As the figure drew nearer to the door, he became less and less like Selby.

With some effort and a little help from the conductor, he landed on terra firma. I came up close to him. No, he wasn't my brother Selby.

Too dark, too thin.

Yet it was him. Even before the flashy smile came, I knew it was Selby alright, my dear brother Selby. But what had happened? Instead of asking him that question, I threw myself at him, perhaps with half an intention of covering him up. We staggered a bit in the mud, but regained our balance and held each other tightly, our eyes closed, floating in space for a while.

When we released each other, I realised that the rain had stopped, and quite a crowd had gathered around us. People were peering unashamedly into my brother's face with questioning eyes. Some even hazarded the question, "Is this Selby? Really?" But my brother, with an effort that showed bravery, his eyes still shining, said, "I'm not well, Tawanda." The crowd must have understood, for slowly they turned away, but not without stealing glances at him and whispering in undertones.

We started for home. He had no luggage and, under the circumstances, I did not ask for or expect any. His walk was slow and laboured, and from time to time we stopped so that he might regain his breath. I will never forget the precious quality of that walk home. I felt very close to my brother on that day and our intimacy was a consummation of all we had ever shared.

Eventually we came to the shed where I had been skinning the goat. I cast my eyes towards the dish, and was surprised to see it flipped open, and the plastic sheets scattered all over the veranda, and even out in the mud. Then I saw dogs, quite a pack of them, tearing huge chunks of the goat meat, and running all over the place. I stood rooted, too shocked to

move. I then lifted one of the plastic sheets. A heavy, dark cloud of flies rose into the air, buzzing around our faces. I looked up to my brother, but he seemed not to notice anything.

"The goat, it's been eaten," I tried to explain, but his mind was obviously preoccupied. Then slowly he turned to me and said, "Tawanda, do you know anything about AIDS?"

Then I understood, but was so stunned that even the hardest blow could not have achieved a more paralyzing effect. I looked up at him, I couldn't speak. Suddenly I felt weak, and the world began to go round and round before my eyes. I fell down in a heap on the muddy ground. When I came to, I found that I was in my mother's bed, with my aunts and uncles about me. Mother wasn't there, nor was Selby.

"Your mother has gone out to the river to look for some medicine for your brother," my uncle said.

"How is that?" I asked, the energy beginning to flow back into my body.

They explained to me that my mother had become frantic at the sight of Selby. Filled with fright, she had bolted from the house, saying she knew where to find the medicine to cure what ailed her son.

Without spending words and time, let me say straight out that none of us ever saw my mother again. We walked the length and breadth of the now mighty Mutorahuku, searching and searching, but to no avail. There were no forests nearby, so we confined our search to the river. Where did we not seek, and who did not come? Even her distant relatives, some of whom we had not met but only heard of, came from various corners of the country to help in the search. There was quite a crowd at our homestead, and the rain having ceased, large fires were lit throughout the long nights. I was treated with unusual kindness throughout this whole period, though strange glances were cast at me. I also often stumbled upon unpalatable conversations about my family, but I steeled myself against it all. The deepest pain I suffered was that of being kept away from my brother as he lay quietly in his bed. His health had suddenly worsened after mother's disappearance, and he could neither eat nor drink.

So Christmas Day passed unnoticed and uncelebrated. On the 29th of December, my aunt whispered to me that my brother was in deep pain and had softly breathed my name. Upon request, I was allowed to enter his room, and hold his hand.

After about twenty minutes, my uncle said, "He's gone," and told me to release his hand.