ESSAY

Early Morning Stroll

by Ketina Muringaniza



"Kalter Herbstabend 15 x 15 cm 2018" by Heiko Mattausch, www.heiko-mattausch.de, @heikomattausch

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Everyone had gone to bed late the previous night. Kudakwashe, my son, had just returned from a research trip and the whole family had assembled together. It was a night full of explosive peals of laughter and uncontrollable rollicking, as ambiguous jokes were shared. Despite the fact that he had been involved in a near fatal accident, our family was celebrating his narrow escape.

Kudakwashe and his research partner had miraculously survived the car accident without any serious injuries. Their truck had been saved from any real damage to be safely, cautiously driven from Binga, near the Zambezi River, to Gweru after completing their research. He had joked about how they had all come out heavily covered in white dust, spitting out sand; all looking like disguised Malawian *gure* dancers! Just like eerie ghosts! Indeed, he was trying to lighten the shock by making fun of the accident. We all ended up rollicking with tears of laughter, despite the gravity of the issue. One might wonder why a family should be so jovially and enjoy such stimulating entertainment at the expense of such a fatal accident. The truck had spun several times, uprooting various trees and displacing large stone boulders in its way. It was a relief that no one had been seriously hurt or lost his life. Something more fatal could have happened. They could have all perished — my son, his co-researcher, and the local guides accompanying them. Having your beloved one die so far away from home, in the middle of nowhere in such a rural area, would have caused a lot of unmentionable problems. The truck, despite the gravity of the accident, came out damaged but not totally beyond normal use. They had managed to return home safely. When they arrived, we had hardly noticed the damage until later when we were told about the accident. Maybe, it was because they had arrived at night and everyone was relieved that they had returned safely, during a period when fatal road accidents had become daily nightmares.

The truck had skidded and swerved on a sandy stretch of land. What had saved it from severe damage as it uprooted trees, dug out and displaced the huge boulders in its way? We all attributed their survival and that of their truck to the grace of God, the Almighty. After the accident, they spoke often of His power. They had been heavily shaken, alright! But they managed to dust themselves off, spit out the swallowed sand, take photos of the scene for the eventual police report. Being so far away in that remote area, they knew the cops would not be coming. They then inspected the damage to their car, switched it on, revved it, tried to drive it and, relieved, drove off to continue with their research. Yes! It was indeed a relief to have him safe at home without any serious injuries but alive and kicking. Who wouldn’t rejoice in such a situation?

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That night I could not sleep well, meditating and suffering from the thought of what could have been. I took my computer and tried to do something that could lure me to sleep, since I usually enjoyed midnight creative writing. But nothing took my fancy. The next morning, nobody stirred except for Takudzwa, whose six o'clock alarm for taking his medication, had forced me to wake him up. He got up reluctantly, swallowed his prescribed pills, and dashed back to bed. Not used to being a late riser, I got out of bed with the sole intention of taking my usual early morning walk, but cowered back! It was just too cold outside! I snuggled back under my cosy blankets, but I could not stay long in bed. I was restless despite the book I tried to read. I browsed through, but no words registered in my mind. Nothing made any sense! I was too agitated to concentrate! A few minutes later, I left the blankets and made up my bed. I made myself a cup of tea and sat down on a sofa to listen to the early morning news; but still nothing caught my attention. The television screen was just a combination of pictures and figures! I ventured outside to refresh myself before I sat down behind my computer to work. I needed something to get me past my mental block.

What a shock I received!

There was a hazy, thick mist all around me that partially impaired my vision. Dark, threatening clouds promised heavy rain. It was freezing cold! The bristling wind gave me goose bumps! The frozen ground gave my barefoot skin a shock! I rushed back to put on a pair of warm winter shoes and a warmer winter jacket. I was undeterred by the intimidating weather! I really needed something to remove the matted cobwebs in my mind. Something to tickle and revive my dormant mind into its active, vigorous creative state once again.

I left the door unlocked, partially closed, with the intention of not venturing far in such gloomy weather. Hesitantly, I started my walk only to find myself beginning to enjoy the cold breeze. I paddled along the pot-holed avenue, evading them as I zigzagged to and from towards the open space. It was full of very tall grass and overgrown thorny bushes. Indeed, it had become an ideal place for hidden thieves to carry out their illicit deals.

I shuddered in fear as I imagined myself being attacked. Thieves aside, the overgrown thicket could also be good cover for a fully grown rhinoceros or even a young elephant. Despite the fact that it was already after nine in the morning, there wasn't a soul around except for one lonesome figure. I saw him as I neared the main dust road that goes from On-The-Run to Riverside suburb. He had his hands tucked into his jumper, trudging on miserably. *Maybe it's because it's a national holiday — which one is it again?* I mumbled to myself. So many holidays were being announced! Due to my suspicious mind and over imagination, I hardly trusted strangers. I wanted to walk even further, even all the way to Riverside, but his presence deterred me. I had left the door unlocked at home! Everyone, in

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the house, was still enjoying his sleep under those warm, lulling blankets. I reluctantly retraced my footsteps, afraid of unwelcome intruders looking to snatch valuables. Thefts had become common news stories recently, thieves breaking in in the dead of night, or during the day, when people least expected it.

As I retraced my steps, I wondered if I could capture that chilly morning on paper! Indeed, the mental block had been wiped away as I cherished the idea of writing about that morning's glory. Yet as I quickly tried to organize my thoughts on my mental piece of paper, I found my mind being diverted to a nasty experience I had once had on those very same grounds.

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Gweru is well-known for its extreme winter spells. In Athlone, our house was on the fringes of open stretches of land. The one on the northern side had overgrown into an uncontrollable thicket while the other on the eastern side was a stretch of wetland, along which a stream feeding the Gweru river, passed by about 150 metres from our house. Even in the dry season, when a pipe burst — which happened regularly — that stream would fill up, occasionally flooding its banks to the point of blocking crossing pedestrians, taking a shortcut between Riverside and Athlone. During winter, strong, biting breezes blew into our house directly from that area for there were no houses after ours to shield us. In winter, it was not surprising to wake up and find all the grass and crops sparkling white, covered with thin ice crystals like the manna the Israelites would pick every morning for food. This was manna with a difference, however, because it left all vegetation in its wake lifeless, limp, and messy. Yes, completely soft, a dirty green mess after the thawing of the white frost. How heart-rending that had felt to me then!

During my first year living in Athlone in Gweru, I had planted an early crop of tomatoes and a late maize crop, soon after harvesting a good crop of maize. What a bumper harvest that crop was promising to be! Towards the end of May, most of the tomatoes had already grown to the size of bull mangoes, promising to grow even bigger although still in the tender stage. Everyone envied that captivatingly productive crop, but I was simply wishing Gweru's cold spells would hold off, giving the fruit two more weeks to mature so that I could pick out the mature ones and pack them in boxes to ripen. It was hardly a week later when the dreadful frost attacked my treasured tomato crop.

Every morning my first port of call was always the surrounding grounds as I went out for a stroll or took a walk in the garden whose greenness always incited my creative tastes. That morning's stroll had gone awry as a white fluffy blanket covered all of the grounds that met my eyes — including the amazing tomato crop. That scene, typical of Gweru, turned my

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highly anticipated early morning stroll into intense mourning; as I mentally calculated my losses. *Oh my God, not the half hectare of the once-eye-catching evergreen plot!* It was hard to internalize that I had lost everything. I blinked two or three times, before really accepting what lay before me. My heart pulsated with uncontrollable pain and lamentation!

As I walked onto the field, my hearing was shocked by the cracking sound of the solid ice slates which stung my barefooted feet. I was instantly hit with a numbing coldness, my toes turning into stinging raw stubs. I groaned in acute pain as I retraced my footsteps back to the house.

So engrossed in the shocking scenery in front of me had I been, that I only came back to reality, when I stumbled over the heralding kitchen doorstep behind me; only to fall back on my rear.

"Oh! My God!" I yelled as my rear and calves came into contact with the frozen tile floor. That highly anticipated early morning stroll had turned into a nightmare! The temperature had been way below freezing! What a nasty calamity it had been! For only after leaving the house had I realized that I was inadequately dressed! I had been mesmerized by that most unexpected scene I had never seen in my life! That was Gweru at its worst! Was it a surprise then that the late Paul Matavire, nicknamed Doctor Love, had sung so emotionally about the stinging weather of Gweru? Gweru's erratic weather could actually send one to one`s death bed prematurely, if one happened to be caught in its wake unprepared.

I put on warm clothing and rushed outside with my hosepipe to wash the ice slates before they completely destroyed the white-covered crop. What a futile move! At first the water, having been frozen in the spout, wouldn't run. I poured boiling water over the tap. I was relieved when it started flowing! I began watering the miserable tomatoes earnestly, but the field was too big to water it all in that chilling weather. Behind me, I noted that all the watered tomato plants and their fruits had become a residue of blackish soft mess indicating the whole crop had been completely damaged beyond repair. I then left the stretch of soiled tomatoes to try to restore the adjacent green maize crop. As I watered the dilapidated maize, I noticed that as the white fluff disappeared, the leaves and stalks had instantly changed from rich dark green to a pale white. In frustrated despair, I realized the mess I was in! How stupid I had been to ignore the warnings of the locals, who had been here much longer than I!

What a nasty shock my nephew-in-law witnessed when he came out of the house! He had jerked in surprise when he saw me, nearly in tears and staring at the spoilt crop. I do not know for how long I had poured stinging cold water on lifeless frozen stumps, in my once cherished 'Garden of Eden,' disregarding how frozen I was through and through. The only thing I had been aware of had been the burning pain inside me. That pain, throbbing

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persistently, had sent my hypertension soaring to uncontrollable heights!

My nephew-in-law Jonah, seeing the sorry sight in front of him, had turned off the water and whisked the hosepipe from my ice-cold fingers. He ordered me to go back inside and take a hot bath! I just stood in pole-axed wonder! I allowed him to drag me indoors in my mental freeze! I couldn't comprehend what had actually happened. What a heart rending calamity! I had learned the hard reality of life in the weirdest way! I filled a bathtub with hot water then immersed myself in it. *Oh!* The chilblains I suffered from thereafter were hard to explain! I ended up with tears streaming down my cheeks for quite some time, failing dismally to handle both the towel and soap slab! With painful, numb stubs of fingers, I left the bathroom to fling myself into bed after turning on the heater, blowing on my fingers to ease the pain. That pain eased gradually as the heat diffused throughout the room. What a way for a new resident to learn what Gweru could do!

When my sons woke up, they too had not been spared. They had to scrap out the ice slates from their cars` window panes. As they tried to start their cars to go to work, they had to pour boiling water into carburettors for them to start. One of the cars failed to even cough as a sign to promise success. All attempts to start it failed, until they connected electrical jumpers to the battery of an already idling car constantly being revved. After several tries, the car eventually sputtered to life. I looked at them through the glass pane I had cleared solemnly afraid to venture outside again. I had been grounded by the frost.

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As I returned home from my early morning stroll, I went straight to my garden. From that previous awful winter experience, I had learned which crops to grow in winter without risking unnecessary heartache. Like everybody else, I was now growing king onions, peas, carrots, green peppers, okra, *tsunga* and cabbages. I had tried broccoli and cauliflower but failed. What a different scenery this was from that dramatic early morning stroll spoilt by the frost.

During this particular stroll, I had discovered a way to revive the dormant creative talent that had gone to sleep that chilly morning. Yes, revitalizing walks — in addition to meditation, exercising, driving, swimming, or running — help the mind create and review. Indeed, some of the scenes I sometimes come across prove to be treasure troves of inspiring places, ideas, and plots. The same can be said for that chilly morning. This work is its outcome. Both pleasant and nasty experiences can jerk a blocked mind out of its haze.

When I analyse what inspires me most when creating, I realize that the people around me become springs full of incidences and ideas. They inspire themes and plots as I observe

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mannerisms, speech styles, clothing, and little accessories like earrings, bangles, jewellery — their zodiac rings, moonstones, evil-eye pendants. Defining features like sharp or snub noses, dimples, receded hairlines and pronounced jaw lines bring life and add layers to my characters, as I develop them in the writing process. Some unique features like overgrown goitre, dreadlocks, scars, and their interesting behaviour jotted down can be treasures for future use. Such perceptive ears I have developed, honed my skills of eavesdropping on any interesting conversation around me. This opens up new channels and avenues when recalled while creating similar scenes and situations. Thus, dialogues become more authentic, lively, and realistic when plotted into befitting creations. In fact, all articles and artefacts I encounter, interesting scenes, situations, and events, provide great inspiration.

Yes! I have found the trick to keep going despite all the odds. Inspiration at last.

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