Tintjournal

Short Story

Watching and Praying

by Ethel Maqeda

She was making maqebelengwana when they came. Four men and a young woman. Sihle knew two of the men, but that wouldn't make a difference.

It could have been months, weeks, days even, but she had decided to continue making maqebelengwana as if it was all the same. The effort that went into it made the days go quicker. She'd read somewhere that one is always nearer to serenity by never standing still or words to that effect. Besides, making maqebelengwana also meant they didn't starve. She made enough money to keep the children fed and clothed, and the rent paid.

No one else was standing still. Not even the families that had lost their homes in Operation Murambatsvina. Not even they, who were sure that one day someone would come to announce that they were still squatters, that their shacks were illegal, and they must move on. When they dared ask where they should move to, they would be told, 'back where you came from.'

Many families living on the outskirts of Dulivhadzimu Township had come from Bulawayo and Masvingo. After the government ordered the destruction of their homes, they had no choice. Some had heard that Beitbridge was the best place for waiting-without-waiting, although the townships there had not been spared. It was close enough to South Africa to hope that a mad dash across the border or a frantic swim across the Limpopo could be possible if things got too desperate. It was also not so far away from home to make it too difficult to return, should things improve.

It didn't take long for the displaced families to realise that the government considered them tsvina, 'rubbish,' to be moved from place to place without any due regard. The colonial regime had done the same. That had stopped because people were prepared to take up arms. Memories of that war lived on in the children's fathers, mothers, and grandparents. These children, the born-frees', were not ready for that sort battle, so they took on a frenetic and vigilant waiting. Even those who hadn't lost their homes and livelihoods. It was unspoken but generally agreed upon and encouraged. There was none of the hopeless lethargy you

sometimes observe among the defeated. A few young people even dared to wear t-shirts emblazoned with 'waiting for ? to croak' and a picture of a giant green frog sitting in the center beneath the words. The nods and smiles from people walking past them meant everyone knew what name to insert in the blank space.

People rebuilt their shacks as soon as the bulldozers' hum died. They helped new arrivals build shelters; the children went to school, and everybody went about the business of living. Some people crossed the border in the morning. They hoped to disappear in Musina and make it to Johannesburg, only to be caught by the South African Police before they'd made it out of Musina. They'd be back across the border in the evening. Still, they had to be doing something while they waited, even if it was crossing the border in the morning to be back on the Zimbabwean side by sunset.

Sihle didn't know how to make maqebelengwana when she came to Beitbridge, although she'd loved them growing up. She loved it when her grandma used to visit because her grandma made the best maqebelengwana. Now she made batches of them every day but couldn't eat them. She'd become very good at it, her fingers quick and precise, the way MaSibanda, her neighbour, taught her. But, it wasn't the same anymore.

'You have to sell something', she said. 'Many men who work in the offices at the border will want to buy food from a beautiful woman'.

Sihle had tried to protest and explain that she was only waiting for word about her husband and would not be stopping in Beitbridge long, but MaSibanda persisted.

'What will you say to your little ones when they come to you crying for food?', MaSibanda said, reaching for a bowl from a shelf. 'It's easy, you'll see. She continued, carefully measuring some mealie-meal and some flour before adding warm water to the mixture. 'You scoop small portions of the dough with the tips of your fingers, like so'. MaSibanda laid the dough in the hollow of her cupped palm and then cupped her right hand sideways over it to roll the dough into bite-sized balls, which she laid in rows on a tray.

'Precision is the secret. You can't have the balls in all different shapes and sizes. Doesn't look good on the plate, and they won't cook evenly'.

Sihle liked the look of the rows on the tray – all neat and even. The dough stuck to her fingers, but the flour stopped the balls from crumbling. They also needed to stick to the pot's base and sides. That made them light and crisp.

MaSibanda was right; the men loved her food. Maqebelengwana are like bread and sadza in one; she was young and new.

It was an unseasonably chilly and breezy September evening when they finally came. Beitbridge is usually drought-ridden in September ? the days dry, relentlessly sweltering, and the sky extraordinarily cobalt. But the evening they came for her was moody with heavy, dark clouds.

She had been in Beitbridge for nearly a year and was beginning to take root. She'd made friends and enemies, taken a lover and established a regular client base — a family of sorts. Yet, on this day when America was 'seeking approval' to act against Syria, and Somali militants had terrorised people at a shopping mall in Nairobi ? a woman taken away by armed men in the failing light of Beitbridge would not make the news; any news. Beitbridge has always been like that; people come and go.

Patches of white dough matted her hair. It was also on the children's faces where she had tried to wipe their faces clean with her pinafore skirt before ushering them to MaSibanda. 'To my friend- in Kwekwe, please', she whispered. The children didn't move. The neighbour had to haul them by the wrists. 'Come, children,' the neighbour said, trying not to look into Sihle's eyes. She didn't know where they were taking her. People never know usually, and whoever is taken is never seen again. 'I will also call your mother,' the neighbour said. They both knew that that was not possible. Sihle's mother was dead and had been gone a long time. But that is what people say to a neighbour who will die a horrible death and whose grave nobody will ever find. They don't want to remind each other that friends' phone numbers have never been exchanged. The 'please' says, 'everything else is a lie, but please make sure the children are alright'.

Sihle could have left and moved to a different town long before they came for her. The opportunity had presented itself when Parama closed his bakery, vowing never to ever bake bread again, and offered to take Sihle away. Parama had taken over running the bakery from his father a few years prior, part of a cluster of shops that served the township. Parama, the father, had opened the bakery during the Liberation War and kept it running all through the troubles of the eighties before retiring to his rural home in the eastern highlands. Parama, the son, had always thought he should wake up to the smell of something else other than baking bread. This he had confided to Sihle during their first night together.

Sihle believed there were two kinds of Zimbabweans – those who carried the weight of the crumbling country on their shoulders so the stain of it showed on their faces and the others who retained childlike joviality, hoping that their laughter would stick all the broken shards of the nation together. Parama was the first kind. He hadn’t been much of a looker before the furrows started forming on his broad forehead, but when he could bring himself to smile, and his eyes softened, she could see the boy he must have been. Sihle found his romantic entreaties charming but she knew she couldn't be with a man whose solution to problems was to flee. Where would they run to when trouble found them? The country was aflame, trouble would soon find them wherever they went.

'I will love the children like they were my own, and I will love you and you alone, always', he'd pleaded. 'Let me take you away from this God-forsaken place'.

She knew that you couldn't hold a man to promises uttered in the heat of passion. She told Parama she couldn't, consoling herself that some things had to be done right. She was still a married woman. Even though her mum had been dead for a long time, she was somewhat troubled by not doing things right and imagined her mother's voice threatening her with the wrath of God. She also knew that moving to another city would only delay matters. The best course of action was to look the beast in the eyes and then fight or retreat as appropriate, not sneak away and hide.

She was a beautiful woman, but a man couldn't wait forever. Parama had put up with government price controls and sold bread for next to no profit, *propping up the regime.* The frequent sporadic raids he couldn't cope with anymore, he said.

Green Bombers were the worst ? young, twitchy, and singularly vicious. No one could remember how they had become an 'official' militia, but they were a permanent reality all across the country with the confident authority that comes with false entitlement. They made no pretense that a crime had been committed before terrorising people ? they just burst in, and took what they wanted, which was always everything. At least the police tried intimidation first, getting angry only if the shelves were empty. Not even the shopkeepers' or bakers' explanations that their militia ‘colleagues’ had already taken everything would stop the torture. They then demanded to know why there was no bread or drinks if the owners were running a legitimate business.

'We'll have to look at all the papers,' they'd say. 'We need to look at everything and see what sort of business you are running here; otherwise, how do you explain the bakery with no bread?'

The War Vets, veterans of the Liberation War of the '70s, were unsure what they wanted. Whether there was bread or not, there was hell to pay. All they knew was that they were entitled to whatever they wanted or whatever was available. If nothing was available, people had to be beaten up. Sometimes they wanted to use the front of the shop as a place to sit and drink beer confiscated from the bottle store down the road. Then they would demand the owner of whichever shop they chose to cook them sadza and beef stew. They had fought the British, liberated the country, and deserved to be cared for by those they liberated.

Like everyone else, Parama tried to apologise. No, he didn't have any bread, buns, or cake because the goods had already been taken and yes, sorry that he was lazy. Yes, that too was an embarrassment to those who fought and liberated the country through sweat and blood.

One morning they turned up and demanded Parama start baking bread while they waited. His employees had to serve them free drinks and sing liberation war songs to entertain them while Parama ran around trying to buy enough flour. They stayed an hour, only leaving when Parama managed to buy some bread from the market vendors who had brought it across the border. Then, they trashed the shop and left. Parama knew they would be back. They would terrorise the market stallholders for a few days and then work their way back to the bottle store and him. He must leave, go somewhere else, Harare, Mutare even or Machipanda at the border with Mozambique and wanted her and the children to be part of his fresh start.

'You would never have to work so hard again. I'd protect you'. Sihle didn't want to be unkind, to remind him that he couldn't even protect himself and that there were War Vets and Green Bombers everywhere, but she only told him thanks, but she couldn't. Well, he was leaving, with or without her. Enough was enough.

Not long after, he hired a lorry and left. He piled all his possessions onto it and left, vowing never to set foot in this god-forsaken place again; and taking Ellen, the butcher's wife, with him. Everyone had known about that, too; even Ellen's husband had known. Sihle had known too. No one could blame Ellen; some even envied her. They admired the way she walked elegantly to the lorry, holding up her hand to be hoisted onto the passenger seat and straightening her skirt before sitting down. She just stared straight ahead, ignoring the people gathered to watch. Parama avoided Sihle's eyes.

He had tried.

She could have left then. She didn't. She had promised Tawona. She couldn’t go with Parama even if it would have been her best decision in a long time.

"I will be here when you come back; when they let you go,” she'd said with tears in her eyes.

Then, she had loved easily, loved too much, loved love and believed in forever. Tawona had held her tight, told her that things would be alright, that a better Zimbabwe was worth fighting for, for their children and their children's children. He was her freedom fighter, and she was proud. They had met at university. He was a beautiful boy with a cheeky smile; she was a shy twenty-year-old who'd never had a boyfriend unless you counted the encounter in the school greenhouse when she was doing Form 2. She could never remember his name, but she had allowed the boy to stick his tongue down her throat while squeezing her breasts until they were bruised. He was the most handsome boy she’d ever seen. She had also believed that was love, bruised breasts and all.

She couldn't remember precisely when her promise to Tawona had turned to resentment, a chain around her ankles. Some days the bitterness almost consumed her, especially when she

would feed the kids, ready them for bed, and sit down with her mobile phone to juice up. She resented the way he sounded preoccupied, resented it when he was cheery and resented it the most when he professed his undying love. All Sihle could think was that the world outside had spent all the love she could give, yet she also worried that he might come back and she would not be there. That he would be hungry and tired but that there would be no food waiting. Besides, she wanted to tell him how difficult it had been without him, how she had had to sell herself to keep the children alive. Then she would leave him, telling him she didn't love him anymore, maybe had never loved him. She had loved the look of confidence, the revolutionary zeal burning in his eyes, his ease with words, and the way he laughed with his head thrown back and his eyes closed. She'd loved the way he loved the struggle, the way he believed that only he could deliver a 'New Zimbabwe' for the children even as he seemed not to notice their thinning frames. But she had started to question why the revolution loved hunger, why they should fight for democracy on empty stomachs. Unpaid work for the common good started to look less heroic the thinner the children got. She'd also forgiven the other woman in their relationship, the ones that just threw themselves at him. 'You know what it's like,' he'd say.

Now she just didn't want him. But wanted to be there when they let him go.

Then they came for her.

She heard their Santana screech to a halt outside just as she was rolling ball number thirty. The regular orders required forty — a spoonful of beef stew and four balls, two dollars.

Maqebelengwana were what kept the children alive ? that and the fact that the soldiers had a base near the border post, and the customs employees and truck drivers waiting for border clearance needed her. It was evident in the feverish looks on their faces when they came to her in the night. Perhaps she should have left the first time one of them approached her, a sheepish smile on his lips. Or maybe the first time one of them refused to pay, calling her a dirty whore, and what would she do about it? She should have left when Parama offered or walked across the border. Just walked across the border and disappeared into the golden jungle of Jozi, the land of everyone's dreams. But disappearing with two little children is not

easy, and they needed to eat, so she bore it, hoping and begging she'd be paid.

In return, her wares were never confiscated; she might get a bag of groceries from one of them, or one of them might beg that she stop seeing anyone else. 'I'll look after you, pay your rent' ? a kind of love, she liked to tell herself. Cheap, tacky, unstable, but much more than an incarcerated husband could provide. At first, she thought it would be easy. She thought the encounters would be quick, breezy, even somewhat romantic. That's how it used to be when she was younger. She recalled a time when she could fall in love easily, sometimes twice or thrice a week. She had paid her way through college. But, with her mum and her wrath of God long gone, Sihle thought it would be different.

She tried, but all she could think of were the pimples and the malodorous sweaty armpits. Sometimes she focused on what she would buy with the money if one of them were particularly generous. The little red dress with yellow butterfly patterns in the window in Edgar's on the main street for the girl, and a watch, decorated with a cartoon figure on both the face and wristband for the boy. Then she would ponder, somewhat fondly, a kind of love. After all, the body didn't know the difference between a lover's kick, a husband's fist or a customer's slap.

No, it wasn't a raid. But, yes, she needed to come with them. Some questions to answer at the station. Did She know Tawona? What was he in for? No, she didn't need to bring anything.

As they bundled her into the car, Sihle wondered what would happen to the children. She hoped her neighbour would take them to an orphanage; they were too young to survive on the streets, way too young to start deciding what kind of waiting was best for them. She found herself thinking about the song she used to sing with her brothers and sisters at Sunday school back in Kwekwe when she was a little girl. "Rindai munamate, Ishe vanouya!" Watch and pray, the Lord commandeth; watch and pray, 'twill not be long,' they used to sing. 'Watch and pray, nor leave our post of duty, till we hear the bridegroom's voice,' they would belt it out, heads thrown back but entirely out of tune, sometimes in English, other times in Shona, until it was time for divine service.

She was only eight; the song always had the opposite effect. She always sang it too joyfully and animatedly to the irritation of Miss Khona, the Sunday school teacher. Miss Khona wanted the children to reflect upon their sins. She wanted them to repent, for they did not know the day or time, 'especially you, Sihle, always disrespecting the sanctuary of the Lord with all that giggling and whispering.' She would take on such a sombre tone and severe face that Sihle found herself singing forte to muffle the giggles. Sihle wished she could tell Miss Khona that she hadn't committed any sin. She didn't see how the son of God could appear everywhere, in India and Zomba and New York all at the same time? This could only happen if everyone, including the millions and billions dead since the beginning of time, gathered together to wait, which they couldn't since no one knew the date and time. But Miss Khona cried too easily, so they sang on. Sihle was glad she had not heeded the call and wasted time watching and praying. The bridegroom was a long way away yet. There was still a lot of living, loving, hating, fighting, and winning to be done before it was time to watch and pray.

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