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Ndaba **SIBANDA**

Office Drama

The pain screamed, stinging into her heart like a hot knife through butter...

If Mrs. Vithikazi Nhlaba had never considered herself a jealous wife, she certainly made herself one after darting into the Human Resources Manager's office only—Good Heavens—to find Miss Simo Mahlangu, the usually calm and shy company secretary, sniggering and posturing below the very nose of Mr. Sinothi Nhlaba.

Long ago when Mrs. Nhlaba was a young wife, and had verbal bouts and tiffs with her husband over his lateness, her rustic aunt once said to her, "Don't raise eyebrows yet. Hold your peace. You're a woman who works hard like an ant bear. He can't afford to lose you if he has an ounce of brains in his head. Not maggots or termites. By the same token, you can't seek to kill a snake whilst it's still in its hole, lest there's no snake at all in the first place. Call to mind, our wise elders advised us against holding the flying ant by its head lest it flies off!" They also said: "what is horny cannot be hidden (forever). The truth will come out."

Mrs. Vithikazi Nhlaba respected her aunt, but her head was inundated with countless ideas and unanswered questions. Did her aunt board the bus all the way from EMaguswini to preach such an impossible gospel? Today, I'm travelling to Bulawayo to tell Vithikazi to be subservient to her husband. I might be rural, old

and uneducated but I know how to handle wayward men. Did she ever give thought to what she was saying? For starters, was it humanly possible and easy not to be suspicious when one partner's concentration had clearly been swayed away? How could her aunt advise her to hold her peace in the face of such a shift? Was that shift not as bad as an act of betrayal? So she was expected to swallow up such nonsense unquestioningly because she worked like an ant bear? What if indeed he had maggots or termites for brains?

If her aunt put herself in her shoes for just a few days would she stand his strange behavior? After all, was she not her maternal aunt? Don't raise eyebrows. Hold your peace. How can peace be held when wars of disquiet are being waged against one? Was her husband not slipping away from her bit by bit? How could she not raise eyebrows when he was coming home late every night? And as if that were not enough headache on its own, without an explanation or word of greeting he would slump on the couch and sleep soundly? Was his seemingly blissful snoring from the living room not her series of nightmares? Did her aunt have any idea how emotionally disconcerting the whole experience was? How could the unenviable journey of wondering where her husband had been and what he had he been up to be an easy or peaceful one?

Hold your peace? Really? What peace? Did her aunt know that she was worried to death about his safety and wellbeing? For example, what if street thugs pounced on him at night, how would she live with herself and her self-denial? What if he had found omakhwapheni with whom he was spending the better part of the night, and were as usual, feeding him with food spiced with shovels and shovels of their zwanamina in a bid to crown him their toyboy? Hold your peace? Still? Queries and thoughts assailed her mind, her peace, her days and nights. Maybe she was paranoid. Maybe she wanted to be practical. Was it her little cock-eyed illusions and delusions that the man she loved dearly was coming home late night in night out? When her aunt, who to her best knowledge had been single since time immemorial, finally left for EMaguswini after a week's stay, Mrs. Nhlaba decided to seek further advice and guidance from a number of diverse spiritual sources.

"Do you know what kind of things dogs eat?" the man in a stuffy and small hut with an herbal air to it asked.

"I'm looking for a solution to my husband's truancy. Now I'm wondering: what have dogs and what they eat have to do with this problem?" queried Mrs. Nhlaba, trying to suppress a strong wave of impatience.

"Everything. You and I know that it has absolutely everything to do with those domestic animals. Madam. Men are..."

"Oh no, not that antiquated stereotypical stuff about men and dogs! "She found herself interjecting.

"But this is a fact of life, even our elders acknowledged that correlation, that comparison."

"Please, not all men are like that. For example, I've friends, relatives and neighbours whose husbands and boyfriends are consistently loving, faithful and well-behaved. Stop making dangerous comparisons, outmoded assumptions and conclusions."

"I thought we're talking specifically about your husband's actions, not about the lifestyles and behaviours of your friends, relatives or neighbours. I receive and attend to a lot of people from different walks of life every day. I know what I'm talking about. The last time I checked how most of men behaved, the results were the same. Men are..."The man wearing some awe-inspiring traditional regalia was in the process of defending his theory in a defiant, bold and boastful fashion when Mrs. Nhlaba interrupted him.

"Look, man, this is the 20th century. Rise from the dead and start to live again. Get a life and wake up. I can clearly see that your view of the modern world is retrogressive. It's reeling under a sick, old, parochial and patriarchal ego. You need help because you're a patient languishing from a terrible chronic ignorance.

Let me tell you this for free: you've another think coming if you're entertaining any single idea of ever convincing me that men are nothing else but dogs in disguise. You know what that's called? It's a lame, lousy and loud excuse for lacking true manly qualities. Last week I wasted my precious money and time funding the trip of my pastoral aunt from EMaguswini all the way to Bulawayo, hoping she would help me deal with my man's delinquency in a mature, fresh and fair manner. Alas, it wasn't to be. Upon arriving, guess what, she categorically told me not to raise eyebrows, but to hold my peace. What audacity. What impetuosity. As if that were not enough joke, you've seen it fit to waste my cash and time. I've just paid a consultation fee here only to hear you harp on a silly and archaic connection between men and dogs. How does that solve my problem?" She questioned rhetorically as she stormed out of the circular mud-walled, grass-thatched room, whose herbal odor had given her nostrils something to contend with. The traditionalist was startled by Mrs. Nhlaba's unceremonious departure.

Undeterred, she sought the services of fortunetellers and traditional doctors like she was possessed, like they held the key to her happiness. It was as if they held the epicenter of her life and future in their concoctions, in their invocations, in their pronouncements and in their rituals, and even on their horizons and crystal balls.

"What's your husband's favourite food?" asked one female herbalist.

"He relishes isitshwala with okra or isitshwala with beef stew."

"Great! Then I've a panacea to your quagmire."

"What're you going to do?"

"Actually, the remedy lies with what you'll have to do."

"Really?"

"Yes. You should claim your husband back with your hands."

"How, doctor? Follow him like a shadow, and then drag him back home?"

"No. It's simpler than that. Your urine, saliva and lizards' tails will do the trick."

"You just need to follow the short procedures and prescriptions, and the man will rush back and fall at your feet, begging for forgiveness and love. The die will be cast. Don't you want to be her irresistible queen again?"

"Yes, I do. Mmm ...but my bodily excretions like urine and all.. ngeke bantu! Honestly, my belief system, my conscience ...both don't allow me to..."

"Madam, this is not about your religion. This is about finding a solution to your problem."

She left in a huff.

One day one confident and flamboyant prophet gave her what he called his never-failing anointed seawater, and vowed that in the next two days, Sinothi Nhlaba would be back in her warm arms as soon as he had knocked off from work.

It was not to be. In essence in the following two days, Mr. Nhlaba bettered his past record of lateness by arriving home after 2:00 a.m. and 3:00 a.m. respectively. Mrs. Nhlaba's anxiety reached boiling points. She would dig into Mr. Nhlaba's pockets and briefcase with the hope of stumbling on some evidence to link it with his sluggishness to be home. There was no mark of feminine touch on his face, no sign of lipstick, except for his lazy eyes that rolled in their sockets each time he arrived.

It soon turned out that Mr. Nhlaba's unpunctuality was none other than the crazy result of his newly-found love—BEER. However, that day when she caught sight of Miss Mahlangu seeking to draw the attention of her husband like a magnet would a drawing pin, her aunt's words speared through her head before disappearing into obsolescence. She concluded that Miss Mahlangu's intentions were far from being venial. She was a 'devious temptress' playing her devilish cards in a dangerous fashion. Nothing more, nothing less.

As for Miss Mahlangu, she was comfortable and free in her garments. In her thinking, some 'nosey, crazy and judgmental' rank marshals, drivers and touts at

Egodini Emergency Taxi Terminus, or at any other part of an African city who had gone to the extent of tearing off skimpy dresses worn by 'fashion-conscious' ladies were a mere joke, not a deterrent. According to her, whether those ladies left little to imagination was no big deal. She claimed to be her own master when it came to choosing what clothes to wear. She was no stranger to insults hurled at her on the streets.

One Monday morning when she was alighting from a city cab, a tipsy emergency taxi tout had remarked, "You're like a twin cab limousine cruising to a palace, girl. Submarine maybe. A loaded bazooka doesn't come any close to this. A top jet-fighter! Yeah!! I've not been to any airport in the world, but I think you fly beyond the furthest clouds, you cruise at 130 000 feet... whatever! Assets, is your middle name. If you were sweets, you would be a packet of chocolate. If you were a TV set, you would be that big plasma; I mean a big flat screen. If you were music, you would be an LP, not a 7-single disc. No! And if you were a bed, you would not be a double one. You would be a queen bed! I want to crown you my beautiful big bumblebee baby. My beautiful queen. Tell me, how do I become the king caretaker of that beautiful wealth eh? Please make me rich!"

That morning she decided to cough out her anger on the man.

"Nx! Who are you talking to, hopeless, mannerless drunkard?"

"Obvious, to you big beautiful queen. How can you ask whether the goat is female or male when its back is facing you, baby?"

"Get the hell out of my sight. You must be a mentally sick dirty daydreamer. A walking dead thing. I'm not you type. Ok? Fuck off, maan! A piece of discarded, smelly and tattered cloth!"

"Take it easy. Easy. You're right 101 percent. I'm sick. I have amatheketheke in my veins, in my body. Once I remove them, and get umvunsankunzi from ikhehla from edladleni, I swear I will be grand and back for you. Shame. There will be thunder without rain! Hehehehe, I'm Mr. Mkhonto, for your own information. That's my nickname. I can sense a beautiful lady from a distance. Suppose you're on the fiftieth floor, coming down in an elevator for queens and beauties and I'm on the first floor, I can tell with my eyes closed that you're landing down, girl. That's me! My heart's hooter is blowing and going: LOVE HELP ME, LOVE HOLD ONTO ME, LOVE FLY WITH MEEE PLEASEEEEE!!! I can feel your presence like a good computer detecting a WIFI router. That's me! In fact, I've a special love wireless extender in my body that makes me see you from afar! There's a good connection between you and me. Listen to your heart now. Love has no type, no class, no size because it is blind. Do you catch me there? I think you were born for me, and that you're my kind of cow, you know. Don't say I am a piece of tattered cloth. I am helpful. I help drivers and commuters. I am connected. You don't know that if you become my queen you will have free rides every day because I know all the kombi drivers here. You will have fresh eggs, cheese, steak, macimbi, pies, pizza, ox-tails and tongues of fat cattle, legs and wings of proper chickens from the rural areas and all the choice meat you can dream and think of every day. Not the tasteless chicks you see around here. Maybe you talk like a high class official yet you chew vegetables every day like a rabbit. That will be a thing of the past. I know all the butcher men in the city centre. Let's not talk about my job. Let us talk about our future. Let me oil my engine... Sting. Sting. You will see. Boom! Explosions. Boom! Explosions. Mngci. mngci..."

Her claim as a fighter for her rights, though not completely immune from street obscenities-- coupled with her dress code was a bold statement about yearning for a certain feminine freedom, dignity and expression. Of course, many a careless and salivating man had used her skimpy dress code as a scapegoat to feel the immensity, elasticity and gentleness of her ample backside. No surprise, then, that she had hurled some unscrupulous men to the courts of law or rained scorching slaps and fists upon them.

When Mrs. Nhlaba unceremoniously walked into her husband's office, to her shock and surprise, Miss Mahlangu was strategically bent over a small cabinet file, her sky-blue mini-dress revealing a filmy multi-coloured undergarment that left little to the imagination. Mr. Nhlaba considered himself as being physiologically normal. No matter how he tried to look away from Miss Mahlangu's backside, he found his rather dizzy glances falling on her, the whole sight playing a game of electricity with his unsuspecting hormones. His body was interiorly battling with a certain tempting chemistry he loved to hate. In SiNdebele, they say eyes are so insatiable they cannot be served with enough food, meaning that even if one told himself to look away from something or someone, more often than not, curious eyes tend to be stubborn and misleading. As hard as he tried to look away, his gaze riveted to Miss Mahlangu when Mrs. Nhlaba lurked about like a cornered snake.

Mr. Nhlaba's wife was not prone to being at the centre of various office imbroglios, but she felt obliged to act on what she considered to be her husband's secretary seductive ploy and antics. She had to nip such wayward behaviour in the bud, or else she would remain holding to a little feather when the bird had slipped through her clasped hands. The way her husband's eyes seemed to feast on Miss Mahlangu backside made Mrs. Nhlaba insecure and suspicious.

Mrs. Nhlaba used to have a big frame when she was a child. In her twenties, because of the constant hype about the beauty of a slender body promoted and propounded by glossy magazine lifestyle editors and several local and international tabloids, she jumped into a dieting regime. Her daily gym sessions worked wonders as she shed kilos and kilos over a period of six months until she was a lean young beauty. She met her husband Sinothi at the Luveve Gym Trim Centre, who would later shower praises upon her. Then when they started dating, he called her his SSPP, an acronym for Sweet Slender Portable Possession.

"What the heck do you think you're doing, Simo?"

"I'm doing my work?"

"Naked?"

"Your eyes must be deceiving you!"

"Don't be silly, what are you trying to achieve?"

"To meet today's aims and objectives in the most efficient and effective way."

"Do those aims include showing off your extra-large bums right under the nose of my husband?"

"I'm doing my work, please respect that."

"Nonsense! Mannerless slut, get your damn lazy ass off this office!"

"Have you forgotten that I work here, and that I don't report to you? Please don't push me too far!"

Mr. Nhlaba who had been following the heated exchange of words between the two ladies with interest, suddenly found himself saying, "Please Simo, excuse us." Though his voice had authority, it was devoid of any tinge of harshness or anger. His wife continued to stand in the doorway with her arms crossed over her chest.

Miss Mahlangu looked at him with exaggerated disbelief. She took a cursory look at Mrs. Nhlaba before forcing out a little unhurried cough. As if she were pausing and pondering, she strolled in a wearisome-couldn't-care-less attitude towards her handbag which rested on a small three-legged wooden circular table. She picked it up and then made a leisurely turn. All that acting and dilly-dallying seemed like ages in the eyes and mind of Mrs. Nhlaba. In fact, her blood pressure rose. Her heart seemed to be on the verge of bursting. For a while she was inarticulate with rage. As the drama unfolded, she turned her body into some kind of blockade. She told herself that she would discipline Simo in a way she would not forget for the rest of her life. How could she have the nerve to cat-walk in her husband's august office!

"Vithikazi! Vithikazi! Stop causing a scene here!" bellowed Mr. Nhlaba. He rose unsteadily from his comfortable rocking arm-chair. Like a concerned fireman trying to put out a raging fire, he raced towards the two ladies. They stood there glowering at each other like two world heavyweight boxers sizing up each other before a crucial match. He wedged himself in between them. Mrs. Nhlaba tried to get around him and attempted to land a scathing punch on the oval face of Miss Mahlangu. But her husband took hold of her arm, and pushed her away.

"So you are protecting your girl with oversized bums, eh?"

"So, this war is about my big backside? Shame on you jealous old woman. Why don't you get your little twin tennis balls surgically boosted? Surgeons can add some flesh!" Miss Mahlangu retorted.

"Shut up, big bitch with gigantic bums!" Vithikazi snapped.

"I thought Bible-carrying grandmamas don't stoop so low as to use such vulgarities!"

"Sinothi I'll skin your idiotic lady of the night today!" Vithikazi tried pushing her husband out of her way, to no avail.

As Vithikazi was busy seething with anger—Miss Mahlangu sauntered away, for an early lunch break, putting the whole ordeal behind herself. For now.

Glossary:

Amatheketheke: bodily impurities.

Edladleni: a slang term for home or the village.

Ikhehla: an old man.

Isitshwala: a stiff dumpling made from corn or grain.

Maan: a bastardized word used to emphasize something.

Mkhonto: a spear.

Mngci: a way of swearing.

Macimbi: mopani worms (considered a delicacy in Zimbabwe and South Africa).

Ngeke bantu: No ways, people.

Nx!: an expression of disgust or disapproval.

Omakhwapheni: literally meaning "those who hide under the armpits", these are side chicks or secret lovers.

Umvunsankunzi: literally meaning "that which wakes up the bull", this refers to an aphrodisiac, usually a traditional herbal concoction.

Zwanamina: literally meaning "taste me", these are man-stupefying concoctions.

Bioprofile of the author: Ndaba Sibanda is a Zimbabwean-born writer. He hails from Bulawayo, Zimbabwe's second largest city. In 2005 he authored an epic, *Love O'clock*. He has since contributed to twenty-two published books including such international anthologies as *Poems For Haiti*, *A South African anthology*, *Snippets*, *Voices Of Peace*, *Black Communion*, *Ripples of Love*, *It's Time*, *Lost Coast Review*, *Summer 2014: Vol. 5, No. 3*, *Christmas Anthology by Longleaf(2013)*, *On the Rusk Issue Three (Volume 3)*, *Emanations: Foray into Forever*, *World Healing ~ World Peace Volume 1: a poetry anthology (World Healing ~ World Peace 2014) (Volume 1)*, *Metaphor: Modern and Contemporary Poetry (Volume 1)*, *East Coast Literary Review: Spring Edition 2014* and *Eccentric Press Poetry Anthology (Volume 1): Omni Diversitas Portmanteau Volume 2(2014)*, , and *52 Loves(2015)*, *O Anthology (2015)* and *Crossing Lines Anthology(2015)*, *Pamplmouse Volumes 1 and 2(2015)* and *No Achilles(2015)*. Ndaba's poems, essays and short stories have been featured in many and various journals and magazines like: *The Piker Press*,

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