Smitha

***Smitha***

 ***Tatenda Jirira***

Wish it was just my lousy dream but the constant wailing of the doorbell was more real than I thought. Why on earth would someone wake at this time of the night? My head was still heavy and so was my body and someone was busy having fun with the doorbell. it took a great deal of energy to finally roll open my lousy weary eyes which were more than shocked that it was already morning. I never recalled sleeping. it was never planned as evidenced by the haphazard arrangement of my items meant to be safely packed in. the laptop was squatting pretty dangerous on the floor waiting for me to put its soul at rest. At least, my pinned papers could hide behind the fact that there was no coffee to spoil them. My pen was a different story (I had no idea where it was).

Twisting and turning, I managed to roll out my bed. I sat on the edge wondering why I was awake in the first place.

Alias the bell went again, this time with great alarming ferocity and irritation. Why can’t someone understand that it’s a Saturday and some of us actually used that day to get over the week day stress by sleeping?

Grabbing the robe and throwing it on me, I staggered past the door into the passage. The television was obviously alive. I was not surprised to see Smitha sitting in akimbo a couple of inches from the television. No one really needed to tell me that she was watching cartoons.

“Good morning Dad, you told me that I should not answer the doorbell in case a stranger comes and get me.” I was partially stunned. My so called pathetic parenting skills coming back to haunt me: she won’t get the door. At least she is a good listener and learner not what I can say for myself when I was 5 years.

I finally reached the door which had never stopped its annoying wailing. How Smitha was able to hear her cartoons with the wailing of the doorbell was a great mystery. I was expecting maybe the landlady on her reminder alert of the rent or some neighbour with a broken tape as if I could even fix my own tape. Instead I got some unexpected visitors who never waited for me to speak.

“Finally, he answers the door,” Mrs Sarah Clan actually heaved a sigh of relief theatrically leaning on her tall beefy husband before turning to him, “‘was about to call the cops.”

“Calling the cops! “ Mr Calvin Clan added sarcastically “I was thinking on the lines of breaking the door…”

I looked at the two folks playing in front of me. What on earth are they even doing here? I was already drowning in their presence. “Morning” was all I could manage.

“Morning to you too Sonny boy,” Mr Clan gave me what was supposed to be a friendly slap on my shoulder but in reality it was an assault. Did he just call me Sonny boy? This huge fellow was already making my Saturday look like a Monday. He continued, “What are doing looking like a washed up monk on such a beautiful morning. Where are you going to get those beautiful ladies when you are all cooped up in here …?”

“Stop it honey, you never know maybe there is a girl in there…” This was enough humiliation for one day.

“Can I help you two fellows?” I was quite sure that the answer was never going to impress me.

“Actually we the one who want to help you” Sarah came closer and whisper “is there a girl in your house?” someway in the midst; I actually heard a giggle before an explosion rich in laughter.

“Yeah, my kid who happens to be a girl …”

“You’re a funny lad,” Cal added on giving me one of his friendly slaps on my shoulder before the two of them stormed into the apartment without being invited. Out of the mist emerged Gail as she entered into my apartment. This was disaster, I was now official going to have my messed up house being broadcasted in the whole school.

“Your house a pretty good mess,” Sarah was already passing a compliment. What do you expect when you practically wake someone at ... I had no idea what the time was and I was really shocked that the time was just after 7. (I had thought it was 5)

“It looks like we came on time.” Sarah was not done.

“On time? Should I be scared?” both of them burst into annoying laughs before stopping when Smitha was now standing in front of them smiling.

“Good morning welcome to our humble home although it not yet clean. Don’t worry, Daddy and I will clean it?” I smiled at her. She was one thing in my life which I think I was doing right.

“Oh my Merl,” she acted surprised.”You never mentioned anything about having a child at such a tender age.” did she just call me Merl? How on earth did she know that in the first place?

“What your name, dear?” She was tapping her nose much to Smitha’s delight.

“Smitha Harris, ma’am,” she turned to me whispering, “Dad can I have some cereals?” apparently she was not low enough to evade the ever alert Sarah.

“It looks like we came at the right moment, the house is a mess, your kid is hungry and you look -” Cal paused while scanning me, “-like hell. You have been drinking?”

“Yeah, coffee! What are you guys doing here early in the morning dragging poor Gail with you?” Was I saying poor Gail, the one who arranged for me to sit on glue on my chair or the one who put a toad in my desk drawer, the mastermind of the pranks in my class? Frankly I wanted them to just leave me alone.

“Listen Sonny boy,” that was great, she calls me Merl while he calls me Sonny boy and that was not all. Another friendly slap cum assault followed on my left shoulder. So much trying to deal with the pain that I only managed to catch a glimpse of “… that is why she came here.”

“Come again?” why was she again?

“She is here to apologize for giving you hell in your class and undermining your value as a teacher. To make up for everything, she is your slave today.”

“Come again?” was I dreaming? Was Gail here to apologize when she had sworn to never do that? Was this the Gail that I knew? I stared at Cal before shifting my focus on Gail before repeating, “Come again?”

“Mr Harris,” this was the first words emanating from Gail’s mouth. “I am so sorry that I give a hard time and that is why I am volunteering to clean the house and do what needs to be done.” She never volunteered but forced.

Cal and Gail were staring at me balefully while Sarah was busy touring the house while Smitha was hungry. “Well …”

“Great, no objection means we have a general consensus,” Sarah rushed to Gail, “Honey be a good girl and don’t let mom down.” with that the two odd couples disappeared leaving the door open.

Before I could even close the door, Cal emerged and slapped a $100 on my hand, “In case you need to order in.” before disappearing. Fortunately he remembered how to close the door. I stared at Gail before shifting my gaze on Smitha. Smitha was hungry while Gail was waiting for her task which was hard to believe.

“You want some cereals Smitha?” I was more concerned with what Gail was going to do. To my surprise, she actually volunteered to make the cereals and disappeared into the kitchen. Smitha has returned to her cartoons after I had demanded her to wash her face. Just as she came back, that was when Gail emerged with two bowls, one for me and the other for Smitha.

“And yours?”

“I ate a couple of minutes ago.”

“Ok. If there is anything you need, just shout or knock or even annoy me if I’m still dead.” in other words do not disturb me unless Smitha is in danger. With that, I stormed to my room and went into the second phase of dozing.

This time it was not the doorbell that managed to release me from the clutches of sleep but it was the ever annoying cell phone. The tone was annoying too. (I had deliberately put it like that as annoying tones easily get your attention unlike those that are nice.) I never bother to check who it was or else I would just hang it up.

“Merl, don’t tell me you still asleep. Com on man it’s 9 and the sun is really great…”

“What do you want?” I was now only a few seconds from hanging up the cell phone. Somehow I knew what he wanted. “If you want me to be your wingman, forget it!”

“Come on Merl, she can be the one and you never know her friend can be the one for you too…” why do I even bother with this fellow? This was always his statement over and over again but in two weeks, he searching for another one. I felt pity for the poor lady who was Arch’s prey.

“Listen man, I’m not going and that is a fact and -” I had to rid of him “I think the line is breaking up.” The dead line signalled the end of the conversation although he was not going to end there. Why he kept insisting on me was a mystery when I was really bad at that. He was right though, I had to get up and make myself presentable in case he shows up on my door.

I had never been a fan of bathing. If was not the wrath of my mother over that issue in my childhood, it would have a different story altogether. It took only 20 minutes to be prepared for this ritual and only 5 minutes of performing this necessary ritual.

The house was a whole different than it was at 7. It was now clean, smart and even cosy too. Gail had shocked me. For a moment, I had thought that she was going to give a hard time or play silly pranks at me. She had even prepared breakfast for me. No one had prepared breakfast for me in years except my mom. It was even good too. Smitha had even changed into her pink outfit bought by her grandma. It made her look like a princess.

With Gail here, maybe it was not a bad idea to get for at most an hour to enjoy the day. As if I had a wishing wand, the doorbell went off in its ever annoying tone. Somehow I was not surprised that it was Archie.

It was not his real name. He was called Daniel Toronto but he preferred people calling him Archie. Why he chose that name is anyone’s guess. He was the first person I had known since I settled in Richforte, 3 months ago. He actually helped me to settle in. I always wondered how the female nurses worked along with a male pervert nurse. A tall medium built fellow who was more worried about his looks. He always made sure that he was spotting a nice haircut and that it was shiny along with his clean face. Although he always defended himself using his job, I knew that it was all about the ladies. He was slightly two years than me.

He immediately stormed to the kitchen and made himself comfortable on my plate.

“This food is great but what can I say, every food you make is good but this one is the best ever.”

“Thank you, sir.” Gail smile had already covered her face. Archie looked horrified seeing Gail in my house. Almost everyone knew Gail and her Parents. They were the untouchables. Gail was always in trouble while everyone was afraid of pissing off her father, an ex-Marine with a terrible history of a short temper. In other words, he looked quite scary and he was a monster inside and out. Archie once had a run with him and it left a dent on his ego.

“And what is she doing her? Hope you know what you doing or else Mr Clan going to come with his clan with a club …” it was accompanied by him waving an imaginary club.

“Relax,” She handed me another plate and I dished for myself, “they the one who actually dropped her off. Don’t ask me why because it’s a long story.”

Although he was partially relieved, somehow I felt the fear inside him. I could also feel his edge to persuade me to be his wingman but Smitha and Gail on the table were restraining him. It was only after they gone to the kitchen when he suddenly burst, “Listen I promise you that her friend is pretty not some ugly fish.”

I was going but I wanted to see how this meant to him. He spent more than 10 minutes telling about the friend who seemed to be my type as if he knew my type. I was actually having fun with this guy. He almost touched the ceiling when I finally agreed constantly saying “you won’t regret this.” On the contrary, I was already regretting it. Although when it came to Gail, I had trust issues, I was quite eager to see Archie’s the one. Why I always bothered with this pathetic exercise was anyone’s guess. I was not eager to find one myself but somehow I hoped to stumble upon one.

Gail promised me to be good girl, a promise which did not really settle properly in my heart. Somehow I had to trust her. Archie was already impatient constantly reminding me that he was supposed to “meet” them at around 12. (Most of the time, meeting them met bumping into them by accident.)

He was driving his black Aston Martins. He loved the car more than his dates. To him, the car will never let him down and when it’s down, it can be fixed unlike a person who can get all moody. There I had to endure the constant description of the one like I had never heard before. From his description, one would assume that we were talking about the flawless Barbie doll models. Most of the times, he was near to that description but sometimes the beauty of someone depends with the viewer as well as the angle you are looking at.

We got at the shopping mall at exactly 12 and there I was following him to the end. Although he was talking about the friend, somehow I was more worried about Smitha. That gutty feeling of leaving behind her with the top chef of the Cheekville was eating me up, had I made a bad call? Somehow I was already regretting coming here in the first place. I should have asked Abe to watch over them. Abe was my next door neighbour who was quite friendly to the kids. A 20 something young lady, who usually spent most of her time at time at home. God knew what she really did in the house. Archie allows thought that she had a crush on me as she would even volunteer to look after Smitha for free.

“Hey man, are we still together?” he was waving his hand right in my face and it was annoying. I lightly brushed it away. “So where are your ladies, I need to get it over with.”

“Merl, quit daydreaming or you will mess it up,” he got my attention. “She is seated at the bench opposite to the lake and your date is the walking to the bench.” My date, was he even serious? He was already pacing off to the bench while I slowly followed. Although he had described her friend for me a thousand times, I barely remembered anything. He was going to kill me when I mess it up.

“Ladies,” he was already at the bench while I was pacing behind.

“Archie, what are doing here?” ‘My date’ was now seated right beside Archie’ I had even forgotten her name too. All I remembered was that she worked in the same hospital.

“Here you are, you like disappeared before ... good day to you ladies.” He gripped on my left shoulder which was still sore from Cal’s assault as well as banging on the bathroom door. He introduced me as usually as Merl not Merlin and my date was Beth something. That was the easy part, getting Beth from Liv was the hard part, I thought.

All was going on smoothly for him off course. As events turned out, Beth was in the deal and either been bribed by Archie. She was too easy and even introduced the idea of me and her going to the mall and buying some stuff.

“Do you see the two of them turning into a couple?” she was pretty stolid as if she had not said the words. “Come on Merl, I work with him and you his friend. We both knew him.” She had stopped to stare at me. Why was she asking when she knew the truth?

“I don’t know but this time, he seems like he means it.” I was lying.

“You got to be kidding me, listen he follows almost anything in skirts and at times leaves a trail of destruction behind.” I was impressed; this guy was leaving behind a legacy for his future kids.

“Wow, you seem to really know him but you let him off with your friend unless you were paid.” I had touched a spot as evidenced by the silence. The silence was now killing me. “So he did bribe you, what did he bribe you with?”

“Let’s just say he did me a great favour which I will always be grateful for and what’s your excuse?” for a moment I had thought that she was going to use the silence treatment on me. She was seated on one of the bench which was at the end of the park away from the sight of those two.

“Well,” I sat beside her, “I needed to get out.” She gave me one stare as if she wanted me to continue. That was the truth. “He never needed to bribe.”

“Oh” she was not convinced. From there emerged a long real chat about work, likes and the stuff. She was quite open or she was lying. She was called Elizabeth Brown, a 21 yrs. old junior medical practitioner at the Richforte Hospital. She seemed to be having a really great time in the 6 months, she had been in there. She was somehow pretty, pale and blond. She was well composed and seemed like someone with a clear direction of where she was heading. I could not help admire her a while. Somehow in the midst, I got carried away by the admiration that she had to click me on my head.

“What was that for?” it was irksome. “Why is that I got the feeling that you aren’t listening?” she was right and I had to defend myself.

“I was just wondering why on earth are female doctors are pretty and intelligent. Look at my work, ‘m surrounded by seemingly ordinary ladies except a few.” What was I saying?

“Are you hitting on me?” No. She was no way near my type and my heart beat was perfectly normal. Before I could even answer back, my phone went on. I was beginning to think that it was dead or I had left it at home. Surprisingly it was Abe.

“Been trying to knock on the door but the din is too much. Can you please reduce your volume before some of the neighbours call the cops?” She was straight to the point. What was she talking about?

“Din is too much? Listen I’m in the Avenues right now ...” I was cut short.

“So who is the party freak at your apartment holding this seemingly wild party?” There was a party at my apartment!

“What!” Fury was already building up. “I’m coming right now!”

I threw it in my pocket with an angry force. “Is everything ok?” Beth inquired.

“It was nice knowing you but something came up. Tell Archie I will text him.” I was already pacing away from her trying to piece together what Abe had told me. I was gone for less than an hour and there was already a wild fiasco. There was a party at my place and it only meant that Gail was involved in this. Why had I told her that I was going to come in the evening? Why had I even left her there in the first place?

Maybe Abe was lying but she had no reason to lie in the first place. So indulged in rage, I never picked up any details of the trip except that I took a taxi.

The noise was great even when one was outside. Inside, it was like a show. No one picked me up as I opened the door. I had expected to see a bunch of teenagers but it was a whole lot scary. Some of them had the nerve to ask me where they can get from weed from. This was too much and I had to end this. No one had noticed me getting to the speakers and plucking the plugs out.

Every one froze.” Get the hell out of my house before I call the cops!” No one moved.

“Fine, have it your way,” I reached out for my pocket and suddenly there was a great commotion for the door. They must have been really afraid of the police. It took more than 10 minutes for the crowd to disappear leaving me alone. Gail emerged from the door prettified and ready to defend herself. I was quick “You get ready, I’m calling your lousy parents and where is Smitha?”

Come to think of it, I had not seen her since I got back. Several devilish notions raged in my mind and there were so bad for me to retain them. I was never great at my conclusion. She had better have a straight answer or else there was going to be war.

Sometimes fury is a bad thing as it tends to blinds us from the obvious. It rides people to do the unspeakable without checking first the surrounding. Smitha had been right behind me all this time somehow overwhelmed by the rare burst of high level fury. I had tried to hide that from her at all cost. It was only Gail’s stare at my side which made me realise that I was about to prosecute her over nothing.

“She was at the next door.” She proudly announced it. I hoped that she would proudly explain to her parents what the mob was doing in my house. I had enough of her for one day so I was never going to ask her that. Smitha looked fine and remarkably bubbly with the ice cream covered lips with such a chill. She was now mimicking what I was doing when I told people to buzz of. For a moment, my anger melted away as a wink was covering my face. At least I learnt a lesson that certain people have got strips which are only removed by only a really complicated and expensive surgery. This simply meant that this was the last time Gail never sets foot on this place.

It took only a couple of minutes for her parents to collect her. Their once cheerful character seemed to have to be robbed by some unfortunate event. It was never about Gail but it was their problem, not mine. They know their daughter was a holy terror at times and they had got used to it. Not mine.

I followed them to the door with the pure intentions of closing the door eavesdropping was never part of the plan.

“What’s the hell is wrong with that lady? Doesn’t she know that it is our divine right too?” Cal was raving with fury. Pity on the guy who accidentally bumps into him hope he had the best medical care.

“Don’t worry, she will come around and it isn’t her decision to make. Stop whining for Christ’ sake, you will end up looking like my granny.” She seemed to be mocking which somehow worked before they disappeared to their dungeon.

A slow and calculated turn revealed the mess which the bunch of hooligans had left behind. As cloaked with fury that I had never picked the new loathly organisation put in place. It was meant to be a Saturday in which I relax and try to deal with a few of my irregular class work. Now I have to deal with this mess alone unless Smitha volunteers which she always does.

From the onset, I knew that cleaning on my own was going to eat up all of my weekend. Weariness, anger and even laziness had built inside me. The mere sight of the mess made me sick and I was not going to torture Smitha for my mistake. There was always one person who was allows willing to do things for me. Talk of a hypnotised woman who is willing to do anything for me just because she had a crush on me. It was never right to use her like that but she seemed like she liked it even though she was aware of the fact that I would never date ever. I was never a big fan at the moment of love, it screwed me once but I could make an exception.

True to my word, Abe was right on the job asking for no compensation in return. For my part, I did what I always do even with Archie: pretend like I’m helping even though she did most of the work. What was in me that drove was a mystery. I was neither smart nor handsome. Some described me as stubborn hard-core conservative of personality. I liked what I liked, hated what I hated and the rest were invisible to me.

“Hey I think we almost done here.” It was not yet over but I was done using her for today.

“You sure because I still see dirt in your kitchen,” she had edged forward to close for comfort. I could even smell her lavender hairspray. She was really desperate for a man. One day I think she might molest me if she continues these up close advance.

“Off course we done,” I edged towards the door. “Don’t worry about the rest of the stuff. You go and prepare for tomorrow’s church service.” Somehow it worked and she left without fuzz. At least, the lounge looked fine and Smitha could torture herself with cartoons while I cleaned the kitchen and prepared supper.

Sunday’s setup was almost the same. Smitha was a big church lover while I always had a hard time concentrating in church. It would usually result in me dozing off or worse daydreaming. To avoid it all, Abe “coincidentally” happened to be a Catholic like me and she was always happy to tag her along. What she told the congestion or what they thought was a mist; I could get through it all. For the last 3 weeks, she had been happy to do this job while I stayed behind and enjoy my Sunday at home even Archie happens to pass which he usually does. Today was different, he never showed up.

“Mr Harris,” the quiet and calm class was quite rare for me especially on a Monday except during a test which I always gave to my class when I’m too lazy to teach. I was never one of the best at the school. How I had even got the job was still a mystery. One moment no school wanted me because of my lack of experience, substandard results and my beautiful dark past and the next thing I’m getting a call from a school I have never heard of nor applied to. Mom saw this as a second chance in life, to start someway. In reality, I neither liked teaching nor was I good at it but if it meant freedom from this world mentally and financially I was never letting it go. Even the fact that it was a Catholic school never deterred me.

“Mr Harris,” some orderly looking lad from the middle school, I think, repeated himself.

“I heard you the first time. What’s up?” “Mr October wants to see you sir. He said it is urgent.”

A nod was enough to dismiss him as I reluctantly wheeled myself to his den.

Mr Octen October was the head, principal, president you name it. It was his vision, work and money which gave rise to the Octen School. It was not the only one as he had several primary and elementary schools all over Richforte and the country. Although he preferred the Octen School, he made sure that all the other schools received the same treatment as well as having a Catholic atmosphere. Word was that he was a priest in waiting before something tragic came up, he fall in love. Nevertheless he never lost his faith and religion which was said to guide his every move. It was just word. Being called to his office was like being sentenced to court, he hardly dealt with the teachers leaving it in the hands of the so called "school head”, Mrs Sage a nice lady. When he was to see you, Sage would have washed her hands and passes the baton to him. Mostly it meant a painful lecture, suspension or dismissal. He had never seen Mr October but he was a legend of the school.

Somehow I was not a nervous rack although I could smell trouble in the air. The question was what I have done this that really deserved his urgent attention. Only he could tell me what I have done. A soft knock was enough to allowed admission.

He looked serene. His bald head was staring at me as he seemed to be focused on the papers on the table. His office was huge, cosy and modern. Well equipped with the state of the arts office chairs, sofa as well as a plasma television. The desk seemed dear and foreign. Although he was seated, the jacket stocked on his chair seemed cosy.

He signalled me to take a seat without a word without lifting his head. Slowly and theatrically he lifted his face. I already hated him. He looked middle-aged probably in his early 50s. He stared at me, “So you the infamous Harris?”

Questions like this usually do not require an answer unless you want to provoke the boss.

“Let’s cut to the chase, you know why I called you?” “Nope!”

He leaned forward leaving losing his gaze. “Fair enough, let’s say you’re in real trouble. You are officially the worst teacher I have ever seen. Your class results are pathetic a disgrace to this school. Even some of the students are saying you extremely lazy …”

He went on with my rundown with the senior teacher as well as my stubborn amongst other stuff. The list became extra-ordinary long that I failed to keep up and eventually lost concentration.

“Yeah, yeah, yeah,” I stopped him stunning him. ”I get it. I’m a very bad man and currently on top of the “to be fired” list. I get it so what now, I pack my stuff and leave?” I had no idea what had got into me and his gaze tightly focused on me.

“You start to sound like your mother. She is way too hard-headed and knows how to sneak out of trouble. That made her special” I did never like where it was heading. He had definitely caught my attention.

“You're sleeping with her?” “Nope I’m happily married with kids too.” He lifted his hand to reveal a marriage ring.

“You said that she was specially. How special was she to you?” fury was slowly creeping inside me ready to tear him apart.

“Look your resume was not bad but your past not good. No one was prepared to employ an ex-con convicted of rape…” I had no idea what got into me as I leapt over the desk and shoved hard off his chair knocking of some of the papers and stuff on the table,” I NEVER RAPED HER!”

As if conscious caught me, I knelt beside him apologizing for my action. He was ok although rustled. “I never raped her, DNA proved it and she confessed! What more do I have to do to convince everyone?”

“How about you control your temper.” He rose and went on,” your mom begged me to take you in despite your history. After she had to do for you to here, don’t disappoint her. Consider this your first warning.” He was soft when he pulled some papers from the drawer which I prompted signed and left the office. I was surprised by the mob of eavesdroppers who had accumulated at the door.

The flight up the stairs was extremely heinous. The visit to the October’s office, first warning and to top it off Abe had taken Smitha when I asked her not to. She was not even answering her cell phone. Before heading home, I marched to her apartment knocking quite hard on the door. She appeared almost instantly frowning closing the door,

“What’s the hell is wrong with you? You're scaring my parents!”

“Abe when are you going to get the message, I’m not into you and abducting my kid aren’t going to help.” I toned down my voice wondering why I was taking my anger on her, “You could have called or texted instead of giving me a heart attack”

She smiled to herself and lifted my chin,” listen she’s home safe and sound but I never picked her up. You ok?” “Oh am truly sorry, I thought you … never mind greet your parents for me.” She nodded as she closed the door.

How the hell picked up my kid? Maybe she came on her own. A very delicious smell welcomed me as I opened the door. That was why I hated Mondays as I was now faced with another nightmare.

“Well you sure knock out late. No wonder why Smitha looks like those skinny bone model you really adore. You’re trying to kill her and where were you?” barely less than 10 seconds and she was on my case.

“How are you mom, how was your trip which you take in great secrecy.” I had ignored her question not ready for another fight. She was not done yet, “where were you? What if something had happened to Smitha? You no good with her are you?” this was enough.

“You see mom, I always picked up at exactly 4p.m each day and when I went there she had already taken by a stranger who had bribed the junior coz I’m the only person allowed to take her. I looked like a fool when I called all the city morons capable of such a feat. I even went to the cops who opened a case of a missing child only to find that my mother who picked her.” What was saying, she was my mom capable of anything no matter what and there was no point in me throwing a fit.

My chest was heavy calming down,” sorry ma, I had a really bad day and next time, it would not hurt to call first.” Like she would ever listen to me anyway.

 It was the first time; i noticed that she was wearing a pink apron (i had no idea that i possessed even one). This was a sign that she was a bad mood. She was a cook but when she wears an apron, she was in a bid to remove some stress through cooking and mostly it was delicious. She smiled to her as she instructed me to change. Like a kid, i complied needing some me time before dinner which i was never looking forward to.

“Heard you got a written warning and almost beat up the principal.” Dinner time was meant to be a moment of nourishment, peace and some form of sanity but this one was heading the opposite direction. She balefully goggled at me expecting a response which was not forthcoming. The food was way too delicious to be interrupted by her.

“This single parent not really working out well for you, how about you date someone or in the future get married...” where on earth had she unearthed such an idea from the salon?

 “You seem like you got someone in mind?” something was up. This was not the first time she had brought up this idea. The main reason was that she had allowed me to take Smitha if only I find “someone to help me” in other words a person who had the natural instinct of this task. Unfortunately at that time, any non-affirmative answer was never the best one in this case so I kinda posted a blank cheque to her. As usual there was someone who she had hand-picked for this task.

“Like you ever agree on me on that.” She was quite cynical stuffing me. I wanted to start my defence but somehow restrained as it was always a losing battle. She was not done yet.

“Listen, not everyone is not like Sam” she took a retort while downsizing her full mouth. “Think of it, I never liked her but you had this stubborn that got you fried in prison.” I was too hungry to even want to have a heated debate on something she was right in the first place. I was a real inexperienced hothead maniac trying to find some footing in this so called civilized world. Unfortunately I announced myself with a big bang that was the start of the end for me. She stood by me all that moment as I lost my dignity and face to almost everyone who seemed to matter to me.

Why was even angry that she got me this job when she had promised to let me stand up on my own. Somehow as strangely as I never admitted it, I kind of needed her the same way I needed Smitha.

Somehow she either read my mind or was too tired or stressed to even want to fright me.

“Merlin, you the only son I have and I want you to turn up way better than me in many ways. Got yourself a real job which you have, take good care of Smitha which are doing surprising well, be with someone and be someone in life. The rest of the stuff will largely depend on what you like and what you prevail to be the right thing as well as how scarify you prepared to endure.”

A smile naturally popped up on my face. “Thank you.”

“Now unless you’re a homo or secretly a priest, go out there and look for someone or I start looking for one myself and you ain’t gonna like it.” Just like the weather outside she shifted towards Smitha as if I was not there.

“Why am I even here?” I was inside the clothing store which only sold top notch items which were way expensive and out of my reach. Somehow Mom had dragged me to it despite her full knowledge of how incredibly small my pocket was. “Why am I even here, Mom?”

She was holding some pretty mean looking pink shirt in front of me. “Have you ever looked at your wardrobe, it like some poor sad hermit died in there when it is meant to look like some professional teacher?” “I thought you were talking about sacrificing the other day.”

“Not a full sacrifice unless you planning to be a martyr which I don’t see in you. How on earth are you going to attract someone when you look like a homeless hobbit?” “But I can’t afford …” “Shut up and try these on!”

She was really persuasive or I was still scared of her. Besides these were really A-one stuff fit for the king. The urge to take a peek at the price tag was inviting but the fear of me refusing on such an opportunity was overwhelming too. I somehow took my time in the change room trying not to damage these clothes.

“You took your time?” was the greeting that she gave as soon as I stepped out of the room. “Well, I had to be careful not to mess these up…”

“Merlin?” some pretty impressive feminine voice shattered the ordinary barrier. I dared turning around to face her as she was remarkably familiar but it was too late as she was already in my wake.

“Well been thinking maybe I don’t fit into your type since you ditched me that other day and never bothered to call or text me as you never bothered to ask for my number. Maybe you forgot about me entirely.” I knew she meant well but the timing was incredible right in front of my mom and Smitha. The fact that I had forgotten her name made it even worse. Mom came to the rescue as she whispered in a real loud tone

“Merlin,” she was actually smiling, “How come you never bothered to mention that fact that you’re seeing someone.” I could see blushes covering her face. “An introduction would be more appropriate at this moment.” It would if I could remember her name. Why did she had to appear at such an occasion? Unfortunately for me and her, mom talked her into introducing herself and in an instant, they were deeply invested in some tropical feminine stuff which were hard to be grasped by my inferior intellectual mind.

“See you tomorrow,” with that she disappeared from the horizon from which she had appeared from in the first place. No one bothered to tell me what the real occasion tomorrow was nor had I the guts to even ask.

She never pitched at work nor she did she attempt to call me or text not that she had my number in the first place. That was great. It was not like she was not pretty and stuff but doctors were not my thing and also I could smell Archie in her. Archie was my pal but dating one of his ex or allegedly ex was not one of my morals. There has to exist something in order for me to overstep it and unfortunately the first time I saw her, I felt nothing.

Having Mom around for this short time was great as the house had this wonderful aroma emerging from the kitchen. Normally something was up but sometimes I would be too hungry to really care.

“You better change. Looking like some washed tramp is a recipe for a nice displacement.” She was still in her funny pink apron which seemed to been picked from some hyper store.

“Why?” I had already opened the fridge to extract some fruit juice which had no memory of even buying. A quick snap startled me to the extent of quenching the thirst of the ground spirits with the juice. “Mom?”

“I don’t recall teaching you to drink directly from the bottle…” “I wasn’t…”

“Know you Merl especially with your unique talent of never admitting something in your entire life. Besides our guest would be here in about 10 minutes and you still …” she took a deep breath and gave me a grizzly stare, “You still here?” she was the boss even though I had no idea who the guest was nor why he or she was that important to have me change. All I wanted to do was to eat, sleep and have some happy dream, the thought of entertaining Mom’s guest was one irksome task which I was inching to abort.

“I’m impressed Mom, you been here less than a week and you already having guest. “ I was now entering the kitchen which was bubbling with the mesmerising aroma of the expertly crafted Mom’s delicate Chicken roast with something secret ingredient in it. “Wow this guest of yours must really be some important person for you to really go overboard with all this. The last time you went like this was when …” I was now going overboard into the untrodden lagoon and my mouth was quick to the rescue.

She paused while holding a crystal bowl which I had no idea existed in this house. “Is that even mine?” I was trying to change the mood. She must have noticed my action as she lifted the bowl which had some pudding or jelly in it. “Yeah, I gave it to you when you came here but by the looks of things you either forget about it or you had no idea how to use in the first place. Would you mind making the table?”

“Hie Dad,” this was the first time I had seen Smitha today. Since Mom arrived, she had been completely absorbed with her. She was wearing something which I never recalled buying a black dress with a mixture of white, red and blue dots. “Dad look what Granma bought me today.”

She was really quite filled with bliss as she paraded her new dress mimicking those slim thin models who really needed to get into rehab in order for them to start eating and look a little human. It was only the doorbell that stopped this parade as she dashed to attend to it.

She seemed quite bubbly somehow looking forward to the guest just like Mom. My last inquiry of the identity of the mysterious guest bared no fruit as she was quite confident that she told me. The voice seemed too familiar and I followed Smitha to the door. A shock welcomed me as I came face to face with Archie’s workmate who was supposing to my date when I bailed out on her if only I could remember her name.

She was not shocked to see me. “Hie Merlin, your little sis looks cute in that nice dress.” I wanted to say something but my mouth was really numb. “Are you going to invite me or what?” “Hie what you doing here?” “Your mother invited me.” “My mother invited you here?”

 Mom came to the rescue and dragged her in. “You’re just on time, Beth. Come in and make yourself at home. I will be with you in a moment.” I quickly directed Smitha to Beth as I followed Mom to the kitchen. It was now pretty obvious why she was here and I need Mom to confirm it.

“Mom are you match-making me with her?” “Someone has to do something. Listen it’s not I want you to marry her right away unless there is something already going on…” “For starters, I barely know her or even her name... does she even know why she’s here?” the long pause gave me the answer I needed.

Instead of an answer. I got cushioned back to the dinner table where the drama was about to begin.

“Hie sorry ‘m late,” her quick kiss on the cheek further apologized as she made herself on the chair opposite mine. The restaurant was nice, cosy and elegant. It was bubbling with elegant rich, famous and glamourous citizens. Where glamourous people hang out usually turn out to be dear. Although I always insist on paying the bill, she would always beat me to the punch. The issue of power dynamics were always at play. She was a young doctor who earned a lot of money and really loved her job and there was me a dude who hates his job who earned him enough to get by.

What she really saw in me was a great mystery which was not eager to solve especially during a lunch break. I already on a lot on my plate; Verona and Smitha as well as my mom. Now I have not told her that Smitha was my daughter not whatever she thought. She had never gave the chance as she was the one who came up with the idea of her being my niece. She had even laughed off the idea of her being my daughter. Now Verona on the other hand was something else threatening to take from me the one thing that make sense in my life and even had the audacity to say that …

“You okay?” “Yeah just work stuff driving me crazy.” She gave me one of those scary telepathic stare. It was like she was reading my mind. “What?”

“Merl, these past few days you been …”she shrugged her shoulders as the word which she wanted to say was vulgar “… or maybe I’m reading too much.” She leaned forward and signalled for the waiter before ordering something in some alien language or I was having a hard time paying attention to what she was saying.

“I think I got bad and good news for your friend about that DNA testing. Well apparently the two samples you gave me had nothing in common…” “Like not related at all?” “Something along that nature.”

This had just confirmed my worst nightmare. Smitha was not my child and she had been messing around behind my back for the entire time. I don’t not really have a problem raising her even if she was not my biological child but Verona had some leverage all this time on how she was going to gain full custody over her.

“And the good news?” she further leaned forward almost whispered, “first of all, you must know that I might get fired over what I did,” she retorted before continuing, “I think I may have found the father of the girl.”

This had definitely aroused my attention and the question that arose was whether I was prepared to know who the father was and how I would feel when I see him. “Do I know him?”

“Off course you know him,” the enthusiasm in her voice scared me making me not want to know who it was. She went on, “I wasn’t surprised though especially with his playboy nature. He was bound to at least have dropped one on the road.”

“Who are you talking about?” just tell me, guessing have never been my great strength.

“Your buddy Archie…”

This impaled my heart which was now under intense pressure and pain as Jack Frost froze my body. It was like a train ran over twice before it malfunctioned on top of me. I thought it was going when my heart leaps from its socket and smashing the ribcage.

“Archie? How on earth did you get his sample?” “It was by mistake actually. I had his blood because he wanted to check his CD4 count and I kind of switched his sample thinking it was the one you gave before I realised that I had made error before I started all over…”

To be frank with her, I was not really interested in how his sample got mixed up in the first place. I was more worried that I was going to either have a stroke or pass out. Archie having a child would not shock me at all but fathering Verona’s child was like a death sentence. It only meant one thing he had been messing around with her even when he knew that… just the thought of made me sick. Almost instantaneously my appetite disappeared as rage filled me.

“Listen I got to go,” I slowly rose up trying to think of my next step. “Will call you later.” I quickly dashed off trying as much as possible to ignore her surprised inquires.

How I got to her office was a miracle. Through rage and fits, I had not felt the stairs to the fifth floor. Her office was just two blocks from the restaurant which I was with Liv but it involved crossing two extremely busy roads which were not hard to miss. I had even ignored lift which was taking too long and opted for the stairs. The receptionist was stunned as I shot past her straight into Verona office. I had no idea whether she was in although I had seen her car outside. I could hear the receptionist gasping behind me trying to stop me as I stormed into her office.

She was there already probably on some important call so it seemed. She was not at all surprised by my pretence as she calmly beckoned off her receptionist who was really terrified that I had got in without any authorisation from Verona. She calmly hung up the phone and motioned me to sit down. I was already pacing in her office not really sure what to say. At this moment, anything was possible even murder.

“Merlin stop whining around before you knock yourself over. Now how can I help you?”

“Did you even have a slight hint of affection towards me?” I quickly banged on her desk before settling down replying myself. “No you didn’t, you put me in prison for some cooked up crime. For five years I thought I had found the one when actually you were screwing my best friend…”

“Oh,” there was an element of surprise, “How did you … did he tell you that?” “Does it matter, what I ever did to you that was so bad that you chose to destroy by messing with me, imprisoning me and ensuring that no one really employ me…”

“Give me a break Merl. Did you ever think that I was going to have a future with you? You had nothing that made wanna stay with, you’re not handsome, had no real brain, had no future, no swag, no hint of sporting ability, NOTHING! Six years you are a low level teacher who I heard was one of the worst teacher at your school patiently waiting to be fired and going back to Mama while I’m soon to be the vice President of a multi-million firm.

Now Merlin you are a nice guy and I’m going to be a little generous to you.” She was enjoying the spotlight as she was leaning backwards on her supposing cosy dear armchair. I was too messed up to even want to answer her. She went on,

“I know neither of us like going to court. So give me full custody of Smitha when I go to Canada in a month and even reward you for the good fostering of her up to now. That way you would still have your dignity and some cash to appease your doctor girlfriend who is on the verge of dumping you.

Or Smitha is not the only thing I’m going to take from you. I did before and this time you will be left with nothing.” At this moment, she resembled a powerful Italian mafia boss and she was scaring me.

“I think I will take the third one which states that you get nothing from me.” That was not me and I had no idea of how I was going to manage this impossible mission. Her smile was still terrifying.

“I wouldn’t trust Archie around my girlfriend if I were you especially when he knows where she lives and you don’t. Here” she scribbled a note. “Be there at around 6pm and tell me whether you really have a future with her too. Don’t say I never watched your back.”

Whether she meant it or not, this was the cue to butt off unless I wanted to be in the hands of the police. How on earth did she even know I was going with someone and a doctor be exact and the fact that I had no idea where she even lived. This was a clear indication that I was not really serious with her in the first place. Maybe she was right. Liv was too good to be true or Verona was busy messing around with my head like she always did. Although I tried to shrug off the accusation levied on Archie, there was still some doubt in all this, if he had been able to mess around with Verona, what was stopping him from going to Liv. There used to date each other, work together, Archie is wealthier, smarter, handsome and almost everything that I was not.

The walk back to the restaurant where I had left the car was the hardest and so was the next two hours with these kids when my mind was filled with the suspense and the hate towards Archie. If Verona was right, I had no ideas how I was going to face him again or even Liv. I never really owned a car but it was Mom’s. She had come with it and offered it to me to use while she was still around.

She had been with me for the last two months and there was no sign of her returning back. It did not bug me nevertheless, having her around was more of a blessing especially when it came to Smitha. These two were officially inseparable and there was always order in the house. She didn’t even mind when I told her that I was going to be a little bit late. Telling her that I was seeing someone was too early and inappropriate especially when I was sure whether this was going to last or not.

The Engrave Flats were one of the most rated ones in the Town. I rarely came here even when Archie used to live here. Living in this side of town was quite expensive and mostly those with well-off jobs were the ones found in here and this included doctors, lawyers and some born lucky. There was even a carpark just beside the flat.

This was like a mini hotel with about five floors in it. I glanced towards the paper which Verona had scribbled for me.