

Christopher MLALAZI

Broken Wings

A butterfly overtook Nozitha from behind, swooshing past her right ear, its path erratic on wobbly red and yellow wings, as if it was the first time for it to unravel them. She transferred the handbag to her right shoulder and quickened her pace, her eyes fixed on the butterfly, and chanting in a voice so low and so sad that the sky sighed a gust of wind across her gaunt face;

*'Borrow me your wings O Butterfly
Mother and grandmother are waiting for me
And home is near if only I could sky
High with them over the trees*

Focusing on the butterfly made her forget the sinewy red dust path, whose sight as it receded into the distance through the stunted thorn bushes sometimes drained her body of energy, as it reminded her of the still longer journey ahead. The butterfly veered off the path, which leapt into her focus again. A donkey brayed in the distance, then dogs barked sharply, and a female voice, faint and hollow, called out something to her right she could not make out.

She had been walking for the past hour now, headed west, the blistering sun on her back, and sweat covered her face. In another hour and a half she would be home. She wondered how grandfather was managing there.

To her left, and down wind of her, a thick cloud of smoke spiralled an undecipherable journey towards the empty sky, but she had no eyes for it, only her dust covered bare feet as they kept flashing in front of her face as they ate the path.

Old Siziba sits statue still on the edge of the bed, his hands clasped on his lap. A sun beam streams in through a thin patch of the thatch roofing, bathing his feet in gold. The cuffs of his khakhi trousers are frayed, and his feet, dirty, the skin cracking, are both swollen.

On the bed lies his wife, maDewa, covered in a grey blanket. His eyes are fixed on her face, which is an ashy green-black.

The fetid smell of human waste pervades the circular room. It comes from the floor, where lies his daughter, Sihle, also covered in a threadbare blanket, this one brown in colour. The blanket is almost flat, as if there is no one underneath it. His granddaughter, poor little Nozitha, will see to her when she comes back from the clinic, because, well, he was also not in such good health - just as he used to be not so long ago. It had been better when his wife was still strong, then she could attend to Sihle all day long, but not since six months ago, when she had also been struck ill, and could not even raise her little finger to help herself- let alone open her mouth to eat – Jesus!

At eighty two, Siziba's back is stooped, his face heavily lined, and his lower jaw hangs down in a perpetual look of half shock, revealing black toothless gums.

Although it is hot in the room, he is dressed in an old red polo-necked jersey, its neck sagging around his spindly neck, with the wool of the right shoulder unravelling.

‘Mh!’ grunts the old man, and he claps his hands softly once, just as Sihle coughs weakly, once, twice, as if it’s somebody else coughing far away deep inside her, somebody with a big blood-laced bubbly pain in the lungs.

‘Mh!’ Siziba grunts again, hawks and swallows phlegm.

The track had now been Nozitha’s constant companion for the past six months she had been going to the clinic alone. And today the new nurse, just like that horrible man Sibiya of the food ration, had strongly warned her that next time she came without an adult she would not serve her, because the law did not allow thirteen-year old kids to collect drugs. And with Sibiya it was the card. That card! Nozitha had told her that grandfather was not feeling well to come this far, his back and legs were now worse, and they did not have a scotch cart - or even donkeys to pull it - for him to use, but the nurse had snapped at her not to speak back – ‘I am not your mother!’ she had said. ‘And next time tell her to get up and come herself like other patients otherwise there will be no drugs for her and your grandmother! I was not there when she was being careless!’

Siziba shifts his feet on the dust floor, his face grimaced into bitter lines. His eyes are on his wife’s face. How could this happen to her too? An old woman like this? *Isalukazi!* Impossible! The nurses at the clinic said that it must have been because she had been washing her ill daughter’s open sores without gloves, but what did they know? Siziba knew better. Somebody in the village had bewitched his family, just so that they could get rich from it - the witches! Whoever it was, he didn’t know yet but as soon as his back, especially his legs, got better, he was going to go far and find out. He wasn’t called Francis Siziba for nothing. *Hayikhona!* And once he found out – *basopa!* I swear by Khohliwe, my departed mother’s name - I will get you *mthakathi*.

He stands up, slowly, and, one foot after the other, and grunting at each step, hobbles to the crumbling mud wall of the hut, where hangs an ex-British military greatcoat from a nail. It is a moulding brown in colour, and as ancient as the few remaining tendrils of white hair on his head. He had inherited it from his grandfather almost half a century back, who had fought in Egypt with the Allies during the great war of *amaJelimana*, and actually rode on a camel and sailed on the Indian Ocean in a gun ship, something which had brought much pride to the Siziba clan in the village.

He reaches into the left inner pocket of the jacket, and removes a ruling party card. He holds it in front of his eyes, in the manner of those with only a tiny grain of their sight still remaining, seems to satisfy himself it is what he is expecting to see, mumbles softly, and then he returns it back into the pocket again. He limps back to the bed, one hand balanced on his hip, the other on the wall. He reaches it, and sits down in his former place, his hands on his lap. He wonders how far Nozitha is from the kraal now, since she had left so early in the morning, when it was still dark outside, just as the first cocks crowed, and the early birds twittered dreamily, and now it was mid-morning. He hoped she was now nearer home.

Nozitha pulled sharply at her dress as a low thorn tree snagged at the skirt from the side of the track. The dress was oversized, it had once belonged to her mother, and the bulk of it was collected at her waist where she had tied it with a shredded tie she had been given by grandfather for that employment. The handbag, which carried

the drugs, belonged to her grandmother, and it was made of once cream-colored synthetic material, which was now peeling off.

And in the afternoon she had to also gone to the school to collect the drought relief food - a packet of Kapenta fish, a small bottle of cooking oil, and a 5 kg packet of mealie meal and sugar beans. The school was an hour away from home, headed further south.

Siziba stands up, and leans over the emaciated body on the bed. He grasps it by the shoulders, and heaves. Nozitha's former school teacher, who sometimes visited, and always insisted that Nozitha should come back to school, said they had to keep turning them over, for to lie on one side for a long time created sores. Most of the times the old man did this with the assistance of Nozitha, both of them pushing and pulling hard with their also frail bodies, but since she was not here right now, he had better try to do something. A man is not supposed to be weak, just like a baby.

His jaw tightens, and he pushes harder. But he can not move the body. It is too heavy for him. MaDewa's eyes, the sockets hollow, are fixed on his. It seems as if she is looking at him from their younger years, when they had first met at Renkini long distance bus terminus in the city, where she had been selling chunks of termite hill soil, the ones that pregnant mothers liked to melt on their tongues, and homemade scouring powder, and him rat poison. Those had been the days. Not this – not this – this nonsense! And the spirits had given them one child, Sihle. When she was two years old, they had decided to relocate from the city to the rural areas where they hoped to 'make it,' because the city seemed to be too complicated for them, and there was too much sin in it.

MaDewa's lower lip is red raw, and her body grass thin under the blanket. He pushes again - his feet suddenly skid on the floor, and he falls across the bed, his forehead knocking with a loud painful sounding thud on hers. He curses, straightens, and looks down at her, rubbing his forehead, tears in his eyes. Her eyes have rolled up, showing the whites, and there is no movement from her chest.

Nozitha thought about the card. Last month, she had gone to the school without it, because grandfather had misplaced it and could not find it. In the school football ground had been a long queue of the village's starving, a heart breaking motley of the old and young.

The food was being given from a lorry by the village's party supremos, Sibiya, who checked the cards, a woman, maNdlovu, who kept the register, and Abisha, who handed out the ration.

Nozitha had stood in the queue, and, finally, when her turn came, Sibiya had looked at her, frowning.

'We don't want children here. How many times have I said this? Where is your grandfather?' he knew her family, and the illnesses at home, as he was a neighbour, but a neighbour who did not visit.

'He is not feeling well,' Nozitha had replied in a weak voice, her fingers crossed behind her back.

'That troublesome old man!' Sibiya had half cursed. 'I know he is pretending.' He had seemed to hesitate for a moment, and then had asked. 'Where is it?' He had held his hand at her. 'Some people are defecting, and they are going to pay if they don't know.' His lips had curled in a sneer. 'The dogs. This country will never be a colony again. Not as long as I live.'

Nozitha had shrugged her thin shoulders. 'Grandfather can't find it, but he said I must tell you he is still a supporter, and will never change.' Grandfather

had particularly stressed that to her before she had left home. Abisha had been looking at her, his eyes filled with sympathy. 'He said viva,' she had added, punching the air with a little fist. And grandfather had also made her wear his old party t-shirt, which hung to her ankles, for effect. The t-shirt had the picture of the local MP on its front, a fat-faced man, jowls hanging, as if he was also capable of a bark.

Sibiya had clicked his tongue in disgust. 'Your grandfather thinks we are playing.' He had roughly pushed her out of the queue, making her stumble. 'Next!' he had called out, and taken the proffered card from an old woman behind Nozitha who was leaning heavily on a walking stick, her face blank with hunger-induced fatigue. A walking corpse.

Eyes glistening with tears, Nozitha had stood by the side of the queue, and watched the pile of rations getting smaller and smaller in the back of the lorry. When only one person was left, an old sickly man who moved forward on his knees in the queue, dragging a walking stick, Nozitha had turned around and, her step heavy, walked away, headed home.

Halfway there, Abisha had appeared out of the thorn bushes in front of her. Surprised – how had he got ahead of her, for she had left him at the lorry? - Nozitha had, in respect, stepped out of the path to let him pass. But Abisha had stood in her way. He had smiled at her, and taken a small bottle of cooking oil out of his right overall trouser pocket, and a small packet of sugar beans from the other pocket.

He had a long and weak face, and wore a straw hat aslant, which was tied under his chin with an elastic band. He had held the cooking oil at her.

'Take sisi,' he had said to her, smiling. A globule of clear snot peeped from his left nostril.

Nozitha did not hesitate. She had taken the cooking oil. 'Thank you baba,' she had said, curtsying politely.

'If you come next month when we return,' he had continued. 'You will get more than the others, you are such a good girl, and you deserve even more.'

Nozitha had just smiled.

'I am a good man to good people.' Abisha had said. 'It's only that people underrate me.' He had put his right hand on her bony shoulder, in a fatherly way. 'I especially like you because you are not weak, and you treat yourself like a woman, somebody thrice your age.' Abisha had continued. 'Look at what you are doing at home. How is your mother now?' He had asked, his hand gently massaging her shoulder.

'She is not well,' Nozitha had replied in a sad voice, and then sniffed. Abisha had also sniffed wetly.

He had drawn her closer, and his hands had gone around her shoulders, and he had patted her back. 'Don't cry, child.' His voice had become angry. 'Where is God then tell me you who believe when people as young as this girl have to suffer like this?' He had paused. Crickets trilled incessantly all around them, the blazing sun glared, and the sparse tufts of dry grass crackled from the heat. Then he had continued. 'And your grandmother?'

'She is also not well.' Nozitha's voice had grown smaller.

'Your grandfather?'

'Him too.' It was barely a whisper.

'Shame my dear girl,' he was now holding her close, their bodies almost touching. Her head reached up to his chest. 'But don't worry, we are there for

you. I promise you this day I will assist you to the best of my ability, after all, you have nobody else.'

He had removed his hand from around her shoulders, took out a twenty thousand dollar note from his back overall pocket, and pressed it into her hand. She had taken it. He was such a kind man.

'Let me show you something else,' he had whispered to her. She had looked at his face. His eyes were half hooded, and the snot had returned to his nose. 'But we mustn't be seen.' His voice had a tremble now, faint.

He had taken her by the hand, and led her out of the path, and behind some bushes. There, he had ... he had... it had been so painful... but she had gritted her teeth, and held her breath, wishing away the pain by imagining the runny waste of her mothers stomach that she threw into the bushes behind the hut everyday. She also imagined splashing it all on Abisha's face, especially that Sibiya. Finally, it was over. He had wiped the blood from her with one of his holed socks, dug a hole in the ground and buried it there. All the time, he had not taken off his straw hat.

A grey pigeon, its tail fringed in white, flew past her against the sky, the beat of its wings a musical whirr, and headed in the direction of her home.

*Dove O Dove
Fly fast to grandfather
Help him in the search O dove
And find the card quickly
Because I know you can do it
For today is the day of the food again
Please O my beautiful friend-
And it is given by snakes that bite.*

And in the late afternoon, after returning from the school with the food – if the lorry came – she had to go and collect water from the borehole, a thirty minutes walk away. The well behind the homestead had long dried, because of the hot sun. She had collected enough firewood yesterday, and that was going to last them for two or so days at the most, so she had no problem with that today.

Finally, she rounded a small hill and espied grandfather's kraal, a single derelict hut with a fast eroding wall that threatened to keel over anytime should a strong wind dare blow. It was built beside a looming baobab tree that rose mightily into the blue sky, seeming to challenge it with its bare branches of fingers to stop playing the fool and bring succour to the village. There was no fence around the hut, but just a few moth eaten logs to show that there once had been one.

There is an abrasive tearing sound from the direction of the floor, just as Siziba clutches at his left breast, and folds onto his knees on the floor, his mouth pursed, and his eyes screwed shut in pain. The smell of human waste has intensified. The old man is still for a moment, and then he wilts across the body on the floor. Its eyes are also rolled up, showing the whites. He is frothing at the mouth. The sun beam has climbed on to the bed, and now bathes the stomach of the figure under the blanket. A fly darts across the beam, and another one. The old man's body twitches thrice in quick succession, and is still.

There is a cough outside the door. It opens, and bright light streams into the hut. First, her shadow, then, Nozitha, walks in – and into a swarm of furiously buzzing

flies. Her first thoughts are of her mother's stomach, that she has to clean her. And today she had been lucky to get plastic gloves with the TB drugs at the clinic, even though the new nurse had been so grouchy.

She gasps as she sees her grandfather lying sprawled over her mother on the floor – a bizarre sight. A bottle green fly settles on her mother's open left eye, and the handbag thuds to the floor. She looks at the bed, quickly, sees her grandmother's open mouth, and a fly exiting from it. Her face seems to swell, then convulses, and a thin anguished scream tears through the hut.
