
CAPE
TOWN
SUMMER
MWILA KESO

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“The holy book tells us the truth will set us free but in this world, I know different, this is a terrible truth. If you stand for the truth you will always stand alone.”

- Lucky Dube

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A woman is bleeding in my arms. With no health insurance or Medicaid, her first resort isn't the hospital, it's here. The Healing Centre for the Abused. That's pretty much how it goes. I am not South African. I don't speak Xhosa or Zulu, so I just listen to her cry, nod my head, and hold her hand. With a language barrier, a bloody cheek, and a bruised eye, I know she's one of the many helpless women with ruthlessly authoritarian husbands. She's limping too, so she was either trying to run away or fight back. I'm waiting for my boss to come to the main branch and register her with a first responder, but I don't want her to feel like I can't help her, so, despite my translator not being here, I gesture to her to close her eyes, while I hold her hand and hum Arabic scales, my go-to calmer when I don't really know what I'm dealing with. Her tears dry up as I rock her steadily. She's feeling better and better with every octave leap: we can both breathe now.

As she calms down, I look into her eyes and recognize that vulnerability. The paradoxical vulnerability of having to depend on someone to sustain your life, while they actively drive you closer to your grave. The vulnerability of being lost and not having anything or anyone. The vulnerability that activates my savior complex: *How can I help her not just through this healing journey, but also so she never has to go through this trauma again?* I want to reassure her, but, even at its height, my voice isn't tall enough to reach. That mutual vulnerability inspires our motto: "*I am Worthy."*

The Wholeful Healing program doesn't only utilize music, but also, dance and visual arts to encourage survivors to express themselves creatively. Financial literacy classes were later added, so that women could learn to function without depending on the income of their husbands. Wholeful Healing then partnered with Garden Beauty South Africa to educate survivors on skills they could use to start their own salons and generate enough income to provide for themselves and their children. The Wholeful Healing project continues to develop as women find the love and support that they so desperately seek and, slowly, learn to trust themselves again.

1: Cape Town

I've always had a crush on South Africa. I take every opportunity to be with my crush. Living in Cape Town has allowed me to engross myself in art, history, and culture, illuminating my Africanasity. I go to the Iziko Museum, the restaurants, and the outdoor cafes and feel the impacts of urbanization in the mother city. I even go on Tinder dates… and find out what it's like to date African men.

Every single day, to and from the Center, I meet two people who impact my life in ways I wouldn't otherwise experience. They are my Uber Drivers. Each one has a story. There is the Congolese refugee who migrated to South Africa not knowing a leak of English and then picked it up "on the streets." Now, he speaks faster than I do. And the Burundian migrant, who escaped not only his country, but also the pain of losing everything during the war. Then, there is the South African man from Eastern Cape, who feels just as foreign as I do in his own city. And I meet many other tired and beaten-up drivers. On our ride into and from the Township, they just need a little kindness and a friendly ear.

2: Inty Food

The school cafeteria is such a magical place. Everyone from the lost freshman to the president of the school gathers in one spot, at one time, to eat. Africans are eating Mexican food one day, and Mexicans are eating Chinese food the next. It's the one place on campus where class, race, origin, culture, as well as every other aspect of human identity is submerged and unveiled through the medium of food. Even if I created art in my major every day, the greatest form of art for me lay in my school's cafeteria.

When I got a break from cleaning tables, serving, or switching out beverages, I would go sit at a table and relax as if I belonged there. Students soon caught on to the fact that MK wanted to know about your life. Those cafeteria conversations widened my eyes each time… even when I didn't think they could get any wider.

As a first-time Michigander from Zambia, I suggested about a week into my job that we make dishes reflecting the diversity and cultures of our international students. Whether a student was from Lithuania or Canada, I advocated for their choice of at least one dish per semester. The chefs knew that, when I came into the kitchen with a printed sheet and an excited face, it was time to add a new dish to the menu. The kitchen staff felt just as much joy as I did seeing the smile on the Ghanaian student's face when she

recognized Jollof Rice on the hotline. Or hearing, "*Thank you, I felt at home today*," from the first-year Honduran guitar student. The service was not, for me, then, in cleaning the dishes or washing the tables, but in how we, as *"the Kitchen*," made each student feel.

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When I got accepted to Interlochen, I didn't know how I was going to pay for it. Out of an 80K tuition, I had 10K left, which was 2k shy of my family's annual income. So, with my academic and artistic schedule starting at 8:00 a.m. and ending at 6 p.m., I worked every day from 7:00 p.m. to 9:00 p.m. at night, cleaning the cafeteria, before returning to my dorm to do homework.

When other students found out about my work schedule, they would ask: "*How do you do it*?," incredulously. After continuous streaks of inner eye rolls and a multitude of deep breaths, I realized that very few people in that part of Michigan could understand a life null and void of choices. When your parents earn 2k above what your tuition is a year, of course you work after class to pay for it. When you can't afford to go home for breaks, of course you'll go for years without seeing your family. What choice does one have? What choice did I have? None. That was "just life."

3: Welcome to America

Journal Entry: August 23rd, 2024

The Atlanta Airport is so huge! What even is this? I'm so tired, stressed, and hungry. Also, who does this to a child? People's clumsiness can cost you more than they'll ever know. I'm so tired.

After a thirty-four-hour itinerary with Royal Dutch Airlines as a first-time, 16-year-old lone traveler, I arrived in the United States. Lost, anxious, hungry, and tired, I went through Customs with my little briefcase and travel folder exactly as the man at the American Embassy had handed it to me. I stood motionless as the Customs officer, who reminded me of my dad, scanned my papers keenly:

"*Why is this the one you have?*," he frowned slightly.

"*That was all the Embassy gave me*," I responded, squinting with tiredness.

I was quickly led to a room with a row of hard, black chairs and told to wait until my name was called. For four hours, while I missed my connecting flight, I sat in tense dread. Mexican and Somali asylum seekers surrounded me. I feared my fate… "*Am I getting deported*?"

"*There's no better way to say this little girl, the Embassy f*** you up. You have all*

the right student documentation, just the wrong Visa. They gave you a Visitor's Visa when they were supposed to give you a Student one."

I turned cold.

"*Now, this isn't your fault, sweetheart,"* he half-smiled. *"We'll get you where you need to be. But you can't leave the country until this is fixed, okay?*"

"*Does that mean I'm illegal?*," I asked.

"*No, sweetheart, it doesn't. The system recognizes you as a student now, so you're just fine. Except that immigration officers don't always have time to check the system, and, when you leave the country, what's in your passport is what verifies you to come back in*."

He later walked me to my gate, where I spent the night on the chairs of the Atlanta airport. I was very lucky to have had someone as gracious as he was to handle my Visa mix up. I heard later that another student was sent back..

4: Aunty

Morning arose, and it was time to catch my flight to Indiana, where I would spend a week before traveling to Interlochen. I was to stay with my Aunty Mwila (yes, we have the same name) and her friend Aunty Maggie, both Zambian immigrants. I landed at the airport and, with a huge sigh of relief, I hugged them as if they were able to relieve my seventy-two-hour state of confusion and anxiety. They spoke to each other and to me about their own fifty-six-hour trip to America, a challenge compounded by their fear of not being able to find a home so far away. I felt better and grateful for my own ability to be in the States as a student.

"*Mwila, wachenda shani?*" (How did you travel?), Aunty Maggie asked in my mother tongue, Bemba. "*Fintu cali icakosa!*," (What a challenge!), I expressively responded. Thereafter, I gave them a shortened version of my own travel experiences. On our way to my Aunt's home, we stopped at the Pancake House near the highway. My Aunty made the order, and, all of a sudden, her R's were more enunciated and her O's sounded like A's. She spoke, and I didn't feel the ease I had just felt. It was like she took a different form. While trying to comprehend what was going on, I caught sight of her car, and, glancing at her clothes, and her bags, reminded myself of her various accomplishments. I realized that that was what she had to do in order to survive as an immigrant. She HAD to take on two forms.

My Aunty had a Zambian accent she let out of the bag when she felt at home and an American accent for when she couldn't afford to feel so. I later understood that this is something a lot of immigrants had to do to build lives in America. I couldn't wrap my mind around the mental fatigue of mechanically switching between what was reflexive and authentic and what was calculated and risk-averse every time I opened my mouth. However, it wasn't long 'till I was convinced that I had to do the same thing. If I wanted to make it here, I couldn't speak like a Zambian. I understood what I had to do.

As a speaker of four languages, accents aren't hard for me to mimic, so I convinced myself that I was learning to speak American English. And, as good at it as I was, it exhausted me. "American English" was not my English. It was the English of the elite. It was my school in Traverse City, Michigan that gave me the vocabulary for what I did daily, "*Code-Switching.*" Colloquially defined as, "*the way we talk around White People*" so as "*to make the majority-power holders, White folks, comfortable*," it felt contrary to my humanity.

It was a long and dusty road to understanding why it was this way and what it meant for me and then, finally, how it affected me and the people I cared about. For the first year at Interlochen, Code Switching felt like the stigma of not being White, American, or middle-upper class. If I had to go back, I'd tell myself, "*Diversity should just be diversity. In its truest form, there's no standard culture to which one must acclimate. Everything and everyone just is. The right to 'comfortability' is an element of White Supremacy. It is not your responsibility to cater to anyone's comfort, despite your inclination to do so.*"

5: Suck it up!

Journal Entry: September, 1st 2022

I walked into Interlochen's gates today and was beautifully overwhelmed. This school is huge! I don't think I'll need the gym anymore. How does anyone go here? Will I like it? Are the boys cute? Everyone looks so bright and colorful. Everyone is so welcoming and smiley too. Will I fit in? Do I belong here? What If I left everything familiar to come to a place where I'll be alone? I didn't think America would be so green. Where are the skyscrapers? I'm kind of FREAKING OUT!!!! Should I freak out? I didn't see anyone who looks like me, is this going to be AISL all over again?

My family always asked me what I thought of America, the "*Glorious Land of Paradise*," "*The Land of the Free*," or "*Ku Calo,*" directly translating to the "*Fruit of the World*," and I never quite knew what to say. As much as I was in the U.S., I never quite was *in* the U.S.. I mean, I visited Chicago for a bit, Boston, Philadelphia, and Indiana, but I never, at any point, was fully engrossed in Americanness. I was engrossed in Interlochenness though, and it was transformational, in all its complex ways.

The biggest gift Interlochen Arts Academy gave me wasn't an artistic education, it was an artistic lens. Because of that atmosphere, I now see the world through art.

Everything from the lineup of the stars, to the synchronization of our footsteps, to the hibernation cycles of animals… Everything in this canvas of a world we occupy feels like art to me.

I was a Contemporary Music major at Interlochen. The major was designed to give us experience, so every performance was advertised to the larger Traverse City audience. We worked towards each concert like professionals in the business. As much as I loved my work, however, I didn't always love my job. I struggled vehemently the first semester, because I couldn't stand the repertoire. It was straight-up White Music, music that didn't resonate with me in any sense… Just to make sure I wasn't crazy, I talked to the only other Black girl in my major, Edili, who would soon become one of my closest friends.

"Girl, how do you sing these songs?," I asked.

"Girl, suck it up, this is how it is here."

I can't really articulate the feeling I had when I heard the words, *"suck it up."* In retrospect, it had to do with leaving my family, my culture, and a life I spent sixteen years building. I did all this to "*suck it up?*"

"*Hell NO!,"* I decided. That wasn't going to be my life. I wasn't going to just survive anymore in my last two years of school.

I emailed my instructor:

Dear Matthew,

I think you're doing such an amazing job as our instructor. I appreciate you. But, as a Black woman, I feel very overlooked by your choice of repertoire.

sincerely,

MK

Well, MK. Our system is very fair and just. We vote on songs that make the list. It's been this way for years.

Thanks for your note,

Matthew

Dear Matthew,

Thank you for your reply. I get where you're coming from, I do. But art is about culture, lifestyle, and resonation to me. It's about how a repertoire makes me feel as a performer before it's about anything else. And if you ask a predominantly White choir to vote on their choice of songs, who do you think is debilitated in the process?

Sincerely,

MK

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A very uncomfortably loud silence then stirred between us, but it was the good kind of uncomfortable, the change-eliciting discomfort. And that was when I first realized that I was unseen *not* because of willful blindness, but because of ignorance of blindness in the first place. We never voted on repertoire again.

6: Top 2

Top 30? Can I really win this?

I started my grade school at a Catholic school called Holy Cross Convent School. Catholic school is one thing, Catholic school in a Christian nation is another. Holy Cross was the epitome of a religious institution. We had mandatory masses every term, designated class time to prepare for these masses, and mandatory opening and closing prayers at all assemblies. We had nuns and "*Fathers*" for teachers, and their convent on our campus. In Zambia, Catholic schools and their "exemplary education" were what everyone strove to provide their children with at that time. I was privileged to have gone to Holy Cross and even went on a school trip to the UK in grade six.

There's very little about the trip I remember, except that I didn't enjoy myself. I mean, I loved seeing London and exploring a world I didn't know existed, but I had very low self-esteem. I was bullied a lot and I didn't know how to stand up for myself or that I was worthy of being stood up for. I was the ugly, skinny, nerdy kid everyone could push around, and it didn't stay within Zambia's borders.

My parents, especially my dad, were very strict about my grades. ECZ graded on a ranking system, and, if I wasn't number one, I "*failed*," according to him. It was at this school that I developed an unhealthy relationship with my grades that never quite

healed. But it really didn't matter where my mental health was, or whether or not I would spend days crying at the mere thought of failing, or that I was being bullied to traumatic lengths, I had to be at the top of my class. I had to be number one. And, see, that was always the case in every term test and exam. No one beat me until the standardized exam came around, and I experienced the first academic heartbreak of my life. On the bulletin board of my school's main hallway, the notice read: "Position 19—Mwila Keso." I couldn't wait to get back to my room to cry. I just felt tears running down my cheeks and stood there in disbelief.

Foolishly, I had expected that this school, seven hours away from my parents and their harshness, was going to heal me. I begged for boarding school, despite my mother's forebodings. It was at Ndola Girls National Technical Girls School that depression became my middle name…

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During my first days at Interlochen Arts Academy in Michigan, my roommate, Emily, expressed how she hated that we ONLY had three drawers and a twin-sized bunk bed. She hated how squeaky and small they were.

"*This dorm just sucks*," she said.

I truly couldn't help but smile.

"Aren't you mad we got this sucky dorm?" She asked.

"*At my previous boarding school, I shared a single bed with one other person and*

five bathrooms amongst one hundred girls--on a good day, I'd wait an hour to shower. So, no, this feels like heaven to me. But you're valid in your feelings, babe."

She smiled so remorsefully that a part of me felt for her. But that was truly my life at Ndola Girls. It didn't matter whether it was in the dead of winter, we'd stand in line and wait for a vacant shower to wash, not with the showerhead, because those never worked, but with a bucket of cold freezing water and the palms of our hands as the splashers. We also had what we called Morning Prep, a four a.m. study block created by the nuns who ran the school to punish us for being late to class. And, when we were late, they came to our dorms and whipped us with thornful branches. I still have scars.

I was bullied brutally. With no self-esteem, self-love, or sense of worthiness, everyone, including underclassmen, could throw their jabs at me, and I would do nothing but cry. I was so sad. I was sad about my lifestyle there. I was even sadder that I left home to be a part of this so-called Christian school. And, I was sad that no one wanted to be my friend. I was so sad, lost, and traumatized that I started bed-wetting at age thirteen. And it made everything, especially the bullying and the homesickness, far worse. I later found out that I'd been living with anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorder for years. I'm almost 100% certain it started at the school in question.

But, as was my custom, my grades anchored me. They were my only source of pleasure, so I couldn't possibly afford to have them bring me sadness. I buried my frayed mental health in the corners of my books. In a class of sixty-five, I always maintained my spot in the top three. Nothing else really mattered to me.

To say my classmates resented me for being such a try-hard would be understating and to their credit. I was not always humble about my grades and, looking back, I'd have been annoyed by myself too. But my grades were all I had. My classmates had friends, upperclassmen who took care of them, acceptance, and even a will to live. I had nothing but my grades. Until I didn't, for the second time, and then I made a change.

The Zambian school system works very similarly to the British system. We were colonized by them, so that's how a lot of the country runs. Zambia's educational process, ECZ, is very standardized-test centric. You have one cumulative exam in grade seven, which is supposed to be your qualifying exam to move on to secondary school. This three-part, sixty-question exam is supposed to test the previous three year's worth of learning, from grades five through seven. Then, you have another cumulative and standardized exam, structured very similarly to the grade seven exam, that's supposed to test two years' worth of grade eight and nine learning. To my standards, I fell to my demise, yet again, in that final test.

"*I need to change to a different kind of curriculum*," I told myself and, that summer, aired my concerns to my parents. At first, they brushed off my desire to change schools again. I'm sure they were thinking, "*We went through ECZ, our parents went through ECZ, their parents went through ECZ, so why can't you?"* And, as valid as this thought process may have been to them, I wasn't them, and I was willing to show them that.

I surfed the internet and asked everyone I thought would have any sort of information about how to switch curriculums. I was fixated on the IGCSE (another British system). I soon realized, however, that ECZ was the way it was because IGCSEs were that way. Neocolonialism had crept its way into my learning too. Then I found a curriculum called the International Baccalaureate (IB). My best friend at the time went to Pestalozzi Education Centre (PEC) nearby, where they were offering the IB for the first time. She wanted me to try it. I asked my parents if I could go, at least temporarily, while we looked for another school, and they were skeptical. I was relentless, though. I didn't want to go back to ECZ again under any circumstances. I didn't feel capable of returning to what I felt was a bastion of mental distress.

One thing I appreciate about my parents is the level of autonomy they've given me over my life, even when they disagree with my decisions. Whenever I have told them I want to do something radical, they haven't told me "no" straight away, even if they have felt like doing so. Instead, they hear me out, accommodate my persistence, and, almost always, relent. I believe that my parent's support has contributed greatly to the level of self-reliance I have developed. Even in my primary years, my parents did not tell me to do my homework, submit it, or even ask to see my report card. And, although this may have manifested into an unhealthy, over-independence, it has served me well. I wouldn't be writing this book without that ethic my parents instilled in me.

While attending Pestalozzi, I came across a photo of a brochure for the American International School of Lusaka and their scholarship offering. To this day, I still don't know how that brochure appeared in my photo album on my phone. I had run out of

storage and was belligerently cleaning out my photos, when I saw this forgotten screen shot. I researched the school and discovered that it was considered the best school in Zambia and the seventh-best International school in Africa!

I was elated. I found out that the school was hosting a tour for prospective applicants and asked my dad to take me. My dad, who didn't take my desire to change schools again seriously before, made a complete u-turn at the site of a class ratio of 7:1, a whole gymnasium and pool dedicated to athletics, a library with over five thousand books, and a campus composed of over fifty-six nationalities on a twenty-five-acre land.

To some, it might not seem like such a big deal, but, as someone who'd been in Zambian schools all their life, it felt like paradise. The average class size ratio at my previous boarding school was 65:1. We had plain dirt ground for the gym and our library only had twenty books circulating amongst over 1200 girls. I stared with amazement at the shiny floors, laptops, and exercise equipment.

On my tour, I learned that there would be over one-fifty applicants for just two slots. *"Just apply with hope,"* my dad said, all of a sudden supportive and eager for the opportunities the utopia he's seeing can render me. *"Apply like you're the only one and compete like there are a million others."* (That's what I told myself.)

I submitted my application consisting of essays and a math practical, two things I had no idea I'd need to get through this process. I got a call back for the top thirty. During the hour-long ride from my home to the American school, I researched the school's history, what their ethics and mission were, and how they functioned, in

preparation for the questions I assumed they'd ask me. I was so naive. I settled down among the other applicants to iPads being distributed.

"*What's going on?*," I asked my neighbor.

"*Map Testing*," he responded.

Apparently, an email had been sent out, explaining that we'd be taking standardized tests to get an accurate picture of our academic potential. I performed better in math than I did in English. It truly was an odd day.

Coming back from the bathroom break, all of a sudden, everyone was taking out souvenir-like objects. Unbeknownst to me, there was to be a "Show and Tell" too. I thought to myself, *"This scholarship is getting away." My* neighbor, utterly amazed at how clueless I was, showed me the message about what would transpire that day. It didn't matter that I didn't have a functional phone or a reliable internet to receive emails. "*It's now or never, Mwila*," I thought.

"*Mwila Keso*."

"*Today, I'm wearing the famous NIKE branded shirt, and it's really just a shirt to me. But, not too long ago, it meant so much more than it ever should have*," I started. "*It was 'Civilian Day,' and I walked into my class and saw every one of my classmates wearing NIKE shirts. I was confused and taken aback. I asked my classmates what was going on, and, it turns out, they had made a pact to wear their NIKE shirts that day. I had no functional phone or money to buy NIKE, so I went about my day feeling like a loser who didn't belong. But I was determined to fit in for their next NIKE show-off. I starved, deviating my lunch*

money towards my NIKE shirt. No amount of hunger was going to stop me from fitting in; my stomach and its feelings would just have to sit tight. I finally saved enough to buy the shirt and inquired keenly about when I was to wear it. And I finally did! And then, I walked into class, stared at everyone else and the shirt I worked relentlessly to buy, and felt nothing. I finally fit in, exactly how I wanted to, and I felt nothing. It was in my mournfulness of that feeling I had hoped to have that I realized that I felt nothing because the shirt I cared about so much meant nothing. I then decided to stop focusing on fitting in and start appreciating myself in all my imperfections, inadequacies, shortcomings, and beauty; my inwardness was all that mattered.

I got an acceptance call two weeks later. I, MWILA KESO, was accepted into the best school in the land!!!! And I was accepted with what I learned later was known as “a full-ride.”

7: I wasn't really taught…

"*Where did you learn how to advocate for yourself this way? How and where did you get so mature? You amaze me, Mwila,*" one of my teachers at AISL remarked. In responding, I had a very strong urge to credit my Zambian upbringing, being the firstborn of three siblings, or just the mere hustle of having to fight for the opportunities I wanted, but none of those factors, although a part of me, was pivotal in informing how I went about the world at that point in my life. My construction of this profound independence happened when I realized that I was a Black girl. I realized that, as a Black girl, the world didn't love me, so I had to love myself.

"I might as well go to school in an airplane at this point," I thought. I was thankful for my scholarship, till living in America showed me how much exactly I had to be thankful for. Zambia is extremely homogeneous. Almost everyone is Christian, Black, and of Zambian descent. The biggest differences are our ethnic groups and class (we'll talk about that later).

A part of me would sometimes wonder how emotionally and mentally unprepared I would have been if I had moved directly from the Zambia I grew up in to America's salad bowl and Interlochen's extreme liberality. That would have been the cause for a disastrous state of confusion.

Now, you might be wondering, didn't you move directly from Zambia to Interlochen? The answer truly is, "*yes, and no*."

I was in Zambia my whole life before moving to Michigan. Still, for the last two years at the American International School Of Lusaka, I was not entirely *in* Zambia. Nothing about where I spent seven hours every day, five days a week, said Zambia. AISL was a microcosm of International America, as much as they liked to deny it. My biggest cultural shock had to have been that, for the first time in my life, I felt Black. I always knew I wasn't White. But I remember contemplating with amazement that, "*I'm actually Black. I'm a Black woman."*

Five months ago, I was talking with a friend who is White, and he told me he never thinks about his race. Now, as much as I wouldn't want to be White, I'd love the privilege of not having to think about my race. Because I always am. If I see a cute guy, the first question that comes to mind is, "*Does he find dark skin attractive?"* When I walk into a meeting or interview, I'm intentional about smiling brightly enough to conceal the inherent aggressiveness that's perceived to come with my skin. When I'm thinking of countries I'd love to visit one day, I ask, "*are they 'Black-people-friendly?.'"*

But these aren't questions I've thought of all my life. They started when I realized I was Black. They started at AISL. Now, don't get me wrong, if I was given the chance to choose which race I'd be re-born into, I'd choose to be Black again in a heartbeat. There's so much beauty in having this golden melanin. But, I didn't realize I was Black through experiencing the beauty of it. I realized I was Black through experiencing the

challenges that came with it. Actualizing its beauty was a rocky journey that came much later… a journey I wouldn't wish on my worst enemy.

People at AISL treated me differently. I was not invited to parties, never quite welcomed in the White girls' spaces. I never got a date to the dances. And, yes, I didn't quite click with anybody. But, it was almost as if it was written in the stars. Despite trying with everybody, no one tried with me. My White counterparts who were just as new? They fit right in. Me, on the other hand? Apart from one other African girl from Ghana who enrolled a year after I did, I didn't have friends. I showed up to school feeling like my skin was a repellant to any form of pleasure. It wasn't long till I lost the bandwidth to care about overt oppression. I started to view and grieve this whole race thing from a systemic lens:

How was it that I, too, lived with parents who spoke two different languages, Bemba and Nyanja, but my European counterparts had so much academic leverage over me, in a supposed international curriculum, because the two languages their parents spoke were French and Spanish?... Why was I, a native to the continent of gold and minerals, in economic despair, while my European friends were flourishing in the worth of the pound, a currency based on gold but belonging to a continent that has none?... Why were my counterparts from England, learning, writing, and living in English, while I, a Zambian, couldn't as easily correlate my way of living to my native culture or language?... *Why would my European friends relate to the works we studied in literature class, written by Shakespeare or Homer, and I didn't even know people who looked like me could write literature worth studying*? All these questions seemed

ingrained in my existence. I soon realized the system wasn’t broken, it was working exactly how it was supposed to.

8: Sodom and Gomorrah

One of the highlights of living in Cape Town is my conversations with Uber Drivers. It's almost as if they all give me different chapters of the same book. 95% are immigrants. Very rarely do I have a native South African driver. There's one story told to me by a Burdundi driver named James that I still think about:

"*How long have you lived here*?" I asked.

"*Eighteen years*," he responded.

"*Do you like it?*" I asked.

"*No, I don't,*" he responded, "*This place is like Sodom and Gomorrah*."

I remember laughing so hard during our conversation that I had to intermittently nurse my core. But, it was also one of the most impactful conversations I had had so far. He told me he came to South Africa as a refugee and stayed because he had nowhere else to go. He didn't see himself building a life absent of starvation and impoverishment in Burundi, so he left without a college degree and didn't have the qualifications to get one once he arrived in South Africa. He couldn't speak English either. When I asked him if he could drive me to the Center, he looked at me like I was a mad woman: *Why do you like it here*? *They kill foreigners, their African brothers in the Townships. They kill each other. I never feel safe. Gangs and shooting everywhere. Sister, why would I like Sodom and Gomorrah*?"

He spoke with so much disdain when describing his dislike for the place I adored that I felt remorseful for asking my questions. But this was a motific theme in my conversations with Uber drivers. They weren't in South Africa because they liked it. They all would have much rather been home. Their choice was between an impoverished life or living in a war. That's why Xenophobia breaks my heart. The assumption that one can just "*go back to one's country*" is ludicrously inhuman.

As someone who lived away from their continent for almost three years, I know my heart was where I grew up, in the streets of Lusaka, eating Nshima, beef, and okra. I left Zambia because there was not the opportunity to do what I wanted to do with my life. Did I love living in America? Yes, I wouldn't trade my experience for anything in the world. But, God knows, it was really hard to LIKE it. If Zambia could have afforded me the access, worldview, potential compensation, expert training, and exposure, I would have taken it in a heartbeat. I felt the same about the American school where I spent two years. When you are feeling dreadful at the best school in the land, you don't have any other choices in that land. I quite literally had to leave the land to leave the school. I didn't stay at that school because I liked it. I stayed there because I had to. Before AISL, I had never been exposed to an expansive extracurricular activities program, an all-rounded curriculum, athletics, international and multicultural environments, second language acquisition classes, and amazing facilitators and teachers. Before AISL, school revolved around an eighty-minute lecture and a textbook of notes to read for the exam. So, of course I couldn't leave the American school. Every day, though, felt like a practice of delayed gratification. And, as character-buildingly positive as that sounds, it

was exhausting, joy-negating, and even depressing. But, that's the cost of being a Black girl. That's the cost of being poor. That's the cost of belonging to the bottom of societies' systemic hierarchies. I could not see any way out. Until I discovered Interlochen.

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South Africa is a beautiful country with beautiful people. I've never felt more at home. I, for one, would not describe it as Sodom and Gomorrah at all. But, the systems of Apartheid and White Supremacy have rained havoc on the lives of those they were intended to subjugate. The scarcity of resources, jobs, and education derail the lives of Black and Colored people in the former Apartheid segregationist structures, structures and societies that haven't received reparations in any form. That's why Township areas (what would otherwise be known as "*ghettos*") are filled with inhumane crime. That's why a foreign accent, look, or tongue make their inhabitants want to take a life. In cases where it is either oneself or the other person, it's almost impossible to not choose oneself.

South Africa also has high unemployment rates. There are many college graduates without jobs. Their economy is not the best. 18 South African rand to 1 U.S. dollar isn't an ideal economic situation. But, compared to a lot of other African countries? They have it much better. So much so that I've met people with at least twenty-five different African nationalities, all of whom are either seeking opportunity or utilizing it. However, the misconception that foreigners have it better than natives is

counterfactual. A refugee who has fled their country to be an Uber driver isn't "*having it better*." They merely have it better than they would have if they stayed home. I could have stayed in my Zambian school, but I probably would not have survived. At least not on the inside.

9: Happiness

"These women are so bright. How do they do it?" Never in my life had I thought I'd be working with survivors of abuse in any way. In my senior year of high school, I got rejected from every college. I had two choices: go home or do a gap year and try again. I plan to pursue a degree in African Studies and Psychology, so I started looking for ways to gain more practice before reapplying. I found a mediating company called Roots Interns that connected me to Mosaic, which refers to itself as an "*African Feminist, community-based, non-governmental organization*" in Cape Town, South Africa. A few weeks after arriving, my worldview had already changed: my heart ripped open and my soul was renewed.

When I entered my first support group meeting, I wasn't expecting to see bright smiles and receive warm hugs. I braced myself for tears and sadness. Although tears did eventually fall, that wasn't how this support group primarily functioned. I soon learned that these support groups were joy-eliciting safe havens for the survivors. The womens' lives outside of these spaces were far from joyous, so they harnessed the joy and comfort they found in each other. They did activities, from mood boards to ice breakers, with such enthusiasm that I wondered if I was in the right place.

"*You are welcome here*," Anathi said with a bright smile. Upon walking in, Anathi noticed my novelty and ran up to give me a big hug. "*You're welcome sisi*!" She filled my

heart with warmth. Throughout the support group, she steadfastly smiled at me. It's almost as if she made my comfort her responsibility, in a loving and warm way.

"*Let's describe our feelings with these emojis and share them*," the leading social worker said.

"*I'll start*," Anathi followed. "*I'm happy. I don't know why I'm happy, I just am. And I like being this way so I will stay this way*," she said. "*Nothing can steal my joy*." During the support group, I learned that Anathi was raped at eight years old, orphaned soon after, abused by the Uncles who were left with taking care of her, and later abused by the husband she married. She was single-handedly taking care of two kids with no job. She and her children depended entirely on a $50 grant per month. Their dad? He didn't care about her or his kids. She was all alone. Yet, she managed to be so happy that it was not only contagious, but comforting and gratifying to all those around her.

I would go on to call myself Anathi's friend. When she needed food, someone to care for her daughter, when she needed to cry, or when she just needed to know she was going to be okay, Anathi was mine as I was hers.

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A lot of people have a misconception that those who beg are being lazy. And, although I am not negating that possibility, it's far more complex and nuanced than not being willing to work. While I was at Interlochen, I worked two times over the recommended student limit of twenty hours a week to fund my project of going to South

Africa. Twenty hours was also my legal limit as a foreign national on a Student Visa. I couldn't get a job off campus without risking the revocation of my Visa, so I was stuck with twenty-hours at twelve dollars per hour. I couldn't possibly meet my target of $15,000 in two months, so I created a GoFundMe account. For two months, I crowdfunded in a country where the 600-student campus was my only place of familiarity. I eventually reached my goal, but it was far from easy. I would send over fifty emails a day to receive five donations on a good day and none at all very often. I put up fliers around my campus and at stores in Traverse City. I asked for help from every possible person. And, though the outcome was successful, the process brought torrents to my mental health. It would have been much more challenging if I didn't have a community. If it wasn't for my community, my fundraiser would have failed. I would be in Zambia. All this to say, it's not always as easy as just "*going to work*."

Anathi got married at fifteen, so, with an abusive husband, finishing high school was the least of her concerns. A high-school degree was given a lot of preference when applying for jobs, however, even to clean houses. Anathi also has two kids under five, so she couldn't commit to working full time without sacrificing what would basically be her entire pay to hire a sitter. Then, nepotism rates in Cape Town were high, so she had to compete with the people who had a sister or cousin already on the payroll. I could go on and on. Most of the women I met at the Center were in similar situations. So how could you possibly tell someone to "*just work harder?*"

The life of being in need is obtuse to many people, I get that. But, by no means should anyone think that people who beg actively make the choice not to work. The

systems of this world work to the detriment of the most vulnerable, and Capitalism plays a leading role. For those at the top of financial hierarchies, please remember that Capitalism was designed to have some people at the top and others at the bottom. So you're not only at the top because you work hard, you're also at the top because others are at the bottom.

10: Music School

Journal entry: Oct 22, 2022

I thought music was my life, but I don't think I even like it anymore. I don't know what's wrong with me or who I'm becoming. I don't know who I am without music, yet I don't know who I am when I'm immersed in it. Did I make a mistake?

My first year at Interlochen Arts Academy was challenging because I didn't know who I was as an artist. Before going to the Academy, I was sure that all I wanted to do with my life was to sing and be on stage. But I'd only ever been in choirs and sung duets, so being thrown into the solo world was, with the expectation of being baked, the biggest shock to my extreme naivete and inexperience with the world I was now in. The mic didn't feel as comfortable in my hand. I couldn't connect with the music. I couldn't connect with the people. And I dreaded my art.

It was at this point in my life that I started to distrust myself. I started asking myself questions like, *"How is it that, whenever you fall in love with a prospect and fight to attain the opportunity attached to it, you end up disliking it? How can you possibly love the stage your whole life and, the one time you're fully immersed in it, you can't stand it?"* I soon realized, however, that there was a very thin line between discomfort and the lack of passion, and I was standing on it. It was up to me to decipher my state.

Discomfort is truly what it was. I was uncomfortable with my novelty in a field where I thought I was experienced. I was uncomfortable with my art being flooded by Whiteness and not having space for my tint. I was uncomfortable with having to adjust to a new culture, school, and setting, while, simultaneously, trying to adjust to my art, a field I'd never thought I'd have to struggle with. And I was uncomfortable with having to reignite my passion for a discipline in which I could not afford to lose it. I sat in discomfort for damn near nine months, and it was far from easy. But, as is the case when we allow our feelings to simmer and take us on the journey they are meant to take us on, I came out triumphant. The last season of my first year is the one I hold most dear. I could lead our band, tell my story the way I wanted to tell it, and sing well while doing so.

In my second year at the Academy, I was ready to pick up exactly where I left off. But boy oh boy was I clueless. Everything had changed. The ensemble had a whole new band, a new instructor, and a different rehearsal dynamic. I felt like a new student again. "*Discomfort AGAIN?"* "*Yes*!" the universe responded. But that discomfort in the first year wasn't for nothing. The person I'd become gave me leverage. This time, I knew what kind of an artist I was. I knew what I wanted to work towards. I knew that my Blackness, despite its tint-ful nature in all-White spaces, was beautiful when I made it so. And I knew I was worthy of my place at the institution. This time, my discomfort was with accepting the change I didn't witness, the change that just flashed before my eyes. And the discomfort was in actualizing who I was amidst this change. As an artist, I made the active choice to use my art not just as entertainment, but as a vessel to tell stories.

What I would come to understand later is that the privileged world would refer to this approach as “Liberal propaganda.”

As a Black woman in a White world, it’s almost reflexive that I show up as the opposition, because that’s the entire make-up of my existence. How dare I be Black, right? How dare I tell my story without the majority feeling attacked? How dare I tell the stories of other natural opposers like me? How dare I challenge what is orthodox? My answer is, *“I’ll dare once, and dare again and again. For it is the conception of the stories of my life as antagonistic that’s inherently problematic, not my story.”* This is what I’ve intentionally dedicated my art to exemplifying: the humanity and invaluableness that Blackness and Womanhood add to society. The ethic of Black Women being just as human and just as harmless as other women are. I love the stage because I can educate without having to teach. Unfortunately for me, the last season of my second year led me to realizing that not everyone wants to be educated. I also found out that I was surrounded by such talented and exemplary artists that my voice might not be valued. And, because I ALWAYS had something to say, I felt like I was too loud.

No matter how much you love what you do, it’s challenging to derive the benefits of diversity when you’re at the bottom of the ladder. When your position in these hierarchies informs how you go about the world, it’s almost inevitable that your environment will oppose the space you take up. After all, how dare you?

I was tired of performing for big crowds, rehearsing to perfection, and trying to tell my authentic stories unauthentically. I wanted to form connections and heal with others through my art. That’s why, when choosing what I wanted to do to help out in the

Center in South Africa during my Gap Year, healing through music was my focus. With music as the context for healing, it was just art, tears, and the shared desire for love.

11: Nelson

Nelson, Madiba, Mandela--I'm in your land and I'm hearing different cries. When you said 'Freedom,' what did you really mean? I love you and all that you were. I have your poster looking at me right now. But even though I understand the compromises you had to make, was it worth sacrificing actual freedom? Did you have no other choice?

12: Voiceless Vindication

I was attending a support group for survivors in Khayelitsha one Wednesday when my ride told me he was going to be two hours late. I opted to take an Uber back home instead. For the first time in over a month of being in South Africa, my Uber driver was a South African native. I motioned to sit in the back of the Uber, and he quickly redirected me to take the front instead. He explained that Uber drivers can get killed or have their cars broken into or burnt when they are in the Townships. This is because the taxi drivers (the equivalent of the minibus drivers) find Ubers threateningly competitive to their businesses. So they have a history of handling the threats in violent ways. I was to sit in the front to not make it too obvious that I was an Uber passenger and he was an Uber driver. "*We should look like we are familiar*," he said. I made my way to the front seat. As we made a motion, he didn't seem like he was interested in the chats I often looked forward to, so I took out my Macbook to get some work done. "*It's clear you're not from here. It's not safe to do that,*" he warned, "*They could break the window and snatch your Macbook even while we are driving. I suggest you do that when we get out of the Township*."

Now, I'd been in Townships before. That was where I did most of my work with the survivors. It became very evident, very quickly, that poverty and victimhood had a direct correlation. And Townships are the most poverty-stricken places in Cape Town and South Africa in general. However, I'd never gone to or traveled from a Township

without my colleagues from MOSAIC. My colleagues would always tell me stories about how dangerous the Townships were. Still, I always felt safe around them. But the angst and fear that the driver, Emmanuel, elicited in me through his forebodings was unlike any I'd experienced. I quickly put down my Macbook and apologized. I followed with an explanation of not being from South Africa and being new to all the do's and don'ts.

"*So, where do you live*?," Emmanuel asked.

"*Gardens, City Center*," I responded.

"*Okay, that's why you don't understand how we operate here. That's a very different side of Cape Town*."

"*So where do you live*?," I asked.

"*Here in Khayelitsha*," he responded.

"*So how do the differences make you feel*?"

He sighed, and I could almost feel his rage.

"*You know, we think we have freedom, but we don't. South Africa is not free. We are in these positions because of Apartheid,*" he said.

I looked at him with an I'm-listening eye, and he went on to talk about the inequities in the country. He talked about how the schools in the Townships were underfunded and did very little for the Black people they served. He talked about how the businesses in the Townships have no growth potential because no one but the locals of those neighborhoods utilizes them, and, even still, locals usually want to escape the terror of the Townships when they can afford to do so. In turn, businesses either stagnate or

become loss engines. “*That’s why I don’t blame my brothers for how much crime they commit. As unfortunate as it is, how are they going to eat?”*

At this point in the conversation, we were driving past what is the most stunning part of Cape Town. It’s a highway close to Table Mountain where you can view the city’s skyscrapers, lights, and ocean. All of these amalgamate at one point to form jaw-dropping scenery. At least for the average person. But, in that moment, when we both looked through our windows, we shared a lens through which the beauty of that part of the city was galvanized by the ugliness of inequality. An ugliness that gruesomely pierced our hearts. As we both zoned back in, he started narrating a story of a time when he chauffeured tourists from Europe through the city:

> *And of course, they didn’t dare go to the townships*,” he prefaced. “*These tourists were nice people, and we had a friendly chat. But they said something that made me so upset that I wanted to drop them off and leave them stranded. They said that we have such a beautiful country and should be grateful for what Mandela did for us. I don’t know what came over me that day but I had to tell them off. I told them that Mandela didn’t do anything for us. Contrary to evidence from what you’ve segregated yourselves to seeing as tourists, Black people are not and have never been free in this country. When Mandela came out of prison, he urged us to reconcile with White people, but how do you reconcile with people who’ve never apologized? They never wanted to be forgiven. Even now, White people still stand on our necks, they have all the wealth. Mandela didn’t do what people think he did. He sold us out, and we are still paying his debts.*

I had never felt so seen in a conversation in which I didn't say a word. I felt so vindicated and validated by his lamentations that I couldn't help but purse my lips and give him my ear. Now, don't get me wrong, I don't hate Nelson Mandela. I truly do believe he was heroic for all he sacrificed for South Africa. I'm in the middle of reading *A Long Walk To Freedom* right now, and every chapter leaves me more and more in awe of who he was. But South Africa is far from free, and Black and colored South Africans are in the tightest bondage. In a country where White people make up only 13% of the population, they control 90% of the wealth. White monopoly capital is the governor of South Africa's economy and it permeates every sector of the country with unapologetic inequality. The best schools are White-led, the best neighborhoods are White-owned and occupied, the best infrastructure follows suit, and so on. Even in my work with survivors of sexual and domestic violence, very seldom had I attended to a White woman. I can confidently count the number on one hand. Why? When you're wealthy, your abuser doesn't have the same degree of financial leverage over you. And, even in the cases where White women were abused, most of them didn't need the help of a non-profit to support their healing. They could afford to pay for their care. They also had access to the type of education that leaves no stone unturned. They had been educated on their rights and were less likely to allow them to be violated as a result.

Such privileges are nothing but latent dreams for the majority of Black and Colored people. That's why Cape Town never appeared to me as this jaw-droppingly gorgeous mother-city of African gold and success. As stunning as it is to see, I had a

perspective that deepened my vigilance to see more than what meets the eye. And it was unfortunate to notice how people willfully kept away from the deep end.

13: The Beginning of the Wholeful Healing Journey

Not once in my plans did I think about being a teacher. I've always been a good speaker. I've always been compelling and intentional with my words. But I hadn't imagined that I would be useful outside of asking for donations and playing music with the Center's survivors. God had their own plans.

After I gave my first music healing session, I noticed the ease in the survivors' faces. I noticed the chromatic elements of music doing their thing. It was evident in how bright they looked, how reminiscent they stayed, and how at ease they became. But seeing them the next day, and the day after that, and then the day after that, showed me that these interventions, although helpful, were not having a lasting enough impact. These women were starving, leaving me with an empty stomach and going back home to an empty fridge. They lived in abject poverty and had little to no means of escaping it. To top it off, they didn't know their basic human rights, so anyone who could and would, violated and exploited them. It was almost as if their lives were designed to reverse the healing we were working to attain. I started asking questions like, "*How can we better their external conditions, so their internal goals can thrive? How can we create conducive environments for these interventions to be of sustenance in their lives? How can we heal them wholefully?"* And The Wholeful Healing Journey was born.

To support the survivors' financial healing, I created basic financial literacy classes and gave lessons like, "How to Start a Small Business." To equip them with the power that comes with knowledge, I developed a human rights class centered on informing them about their Constitutional rights as women and survivors. I created these classes on the principle that knowledge acquisition is one of the strongest ways we can take responsibility for our own healing. And, of course, there was my favorite class on music healing, in which music, dance, and the interweaving of movement and sound became our groundwork for growing together more whole.

Every day, I emphasized that we were on a cyclic journey of healing and that every station was pivotal in getting to our destination. The best part of this journey was that our hands were held tightly together all the way.

I had not taught before, let alone to an age group of 50-65 year-olds. But I went for it. Our first unit was on budgeting. No one had ever taught these women how to allocate their money. The concept of a budget changed their financial outlook. I saw how much power there was in teaching someone how to set aside money for needs and treat the money they set aside for wants like a second-class citizen, "*Give it the bare minimum until you have more to spare,*" I opined. The class instilled hope that the goal of financial freedom could be achieved, while giving the women the tools to get there.

The most powerful aspect however was that, for many of these survivors, financial freedom meant freedom from their abusers' financial bondage. The class wasn't only equipping them with ways of creating a savings account, it also was arming them with a way to set themselves free.

"*I'd never thought about money this way, and I can already see it changing my financial outlook*," Rozita said, after our lesson on the 50/30/20 budget.

"*I'm never spending money without understanding the category I'm spending on again,"* said Ntoshi, adding*, "and holding myself accountable for it*."

"*Sometimes all my money ends up in a sudden emergency, but now that I know to put aside money for emergencies with every pay cheque, I'll never have to explain to my kids why we suddenly don't have anything to eat*," said Nomzi.

Then, there was the first time I taught the Human Rights class. In all honesty, I didn't have much faith in the usefulness of this class. I thought, "*We all get basic human rights education, so how much more significant would what I have to offer be?*" I learned very quickly, though, that I was unaware of how little human rights knowledge survivors have. I was amazed to see the ways telling them that they had the right to a safe environment, protection, peace, health, and wellness put their situations into perspective for them.

"*When you're abused for so long, it starts to feel like it's a normal way of life. I didn't know that I was being denied my human rights*," Anathi said.

"*No one will violate my rights without a fight now because I know what they are!,"* Melanie exclaimed.

It was eye-opening and almost heartbreaking to know that women in their 50s and 60s were living without knowledge of their human rights. I later went on to find out that they were subjected to human rights violations not only by their abusers, but also, by their community leaders, employees, family members, and so on— all while not knowing to what to attribute the abjection they felt.

The lack of human rights knowledge among the working class is a huge problem in South Africa. The insouciance of the elite to exploit this innocent ignorance is an even bigger problem. But it was gratifying to see how much education could slow the motion of this cycle. Simply telling someone, “You are worthy of *all* your human rights,” could be their saving grace.

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With the beauty of theoretical empowerment came the ugliness of feasibility. “*So if you’ve always wanted to start a business, why haven’t you*,” I idealistically asked one of the survivors. The Women then explained to me that they had *all* tried to monetize their various talents, but the system was not designed for their success. Nomvuzi explained to me how she had created a smooth-running, table-filling business selling her handmade baby clothes in a “container” (an informal vending structure) right opposite her house. Three months down the line, a young man casually walked into her store and asked her for a “protection fee” of R2000 per month, twice more than her rental fee.

“*What’s a protection fee?*” I asked.

“*It’s money you pay so that your business can be protected from gang*s,” She responded.

“*And these gangs who collect payments, who do they protect you from*?,” I asked.

“*Themselves*,” she responded.

In awe and distress, I listened to five stories of the same nature from women in the same or even worse circumstances of bare survival.

"*Couldn't you just continue with the business and try to make as much profit as possible?,*" I asked.

"*When you add the electric fees, rent, and stalk fees, plus the demanded protection fee, you'll see that my profit would be nothing. That's why I closed it and started looking for a job. I ran my shop for a month, paid all my fees, and when I paid the protection fee, I didn't have anything to eat*," she responded.

I was having this conversation with these women while we were together in the sewing room where they were employed to work for R4500 ($200) a month. These were the moments in my job that made me feel defeated… when the systems I was up against had a whole army, and I only had a Whiteboard and a marker. These were women feeding at least three children, surviving on $200 a month, with no possibility of earning more. It was worse for those who left their husbands and were managing their households alone. I constantly battled the fear of their recidivism into the bondage of their abusers. It was demoralizing enough to feel like the systems were always ready to reverse the progress we made. It was even more challenging to feel like the women I served had the potential to return to much worse just to survive.

14: Zambian-American

Journal Entry: June 15th, 2024

I'm not American and I never will be. I don't wish to be either. But people think I am and treat me differently because of it. And I mean differently good. I'm not used to such systemic privilege. Now, I'm not complaining. It's just sad when my presence doesn't only elicit higher hierarchical treatment, but brings out inherent inferiority complexes in Africans just like me.

The first time I went to Capricorn, another Township in Cape Town, I went with a social worker, Ncumisa. We laughed the whole way there. With our guts hurting, we got to the destination and I asked if I could use the bathroom. She laughed at me almost pitifully.

"*You can't use the bathroom here*," she said.

"*Why not?,"* I asked.

She pointed at the bathroom in question and, silently, I nodded in compliance.

Now don't get me wrong, I am not a novice to non-waterborne toilets. During my early years in Lusaka, Zambia, I used them way more often than I'd like. We called them pit latrines. But this toilet wasn't a pit latrine, it was a toilet crafted creatively from the lack thereof. I would later find out that the residents of Capricorn designed toilets

composed of two buckets. The first bucket had a hole where one's remains would slide into another collecting bucket that supplemented sewage. After each day, they would empty the second bucket and water hose the first. These were the daily lives of some of the women I served. All while having been, or currently being, subjected to abuse. When did it end, you may be wondering? It didn't.

I had gone to Capricorn to conduct a community activism lesson with Ncumisa. We were teaching about human rights. Ncumisa focused on teaching the survivors what their rights were, and I focused on teaching them to affirm themselves in their rights. In partnership, our central lesson was that rights come with responsibilities, and one of your biggest responsibilities is to know, understand, and remind yourself of your rights.

Ncumisa, one who needed no introduction to the team, introduced me as, "*my friend from America.*" Immediately after she said this, eyes bulged and bodies shifted in awe and excitement of being amidst my American glory. It would have been hilarious if it wasn't so embarrassing. I rolled my eyes playfully at Ncumisa and rectified that I was from Zambia and had gone to school in America. Little did I know that this new information would not change anything. My association with the land of platinum gold and glory was premise enough to be exoticized and adored. They looked at me like I was their ticket out of there. If only they knew that their "*American savior*" was struggling to pay her Cape Town rent.

After I left Capricorn, I reminisced about the time when the bare mention of America would elicit in me this profound excitement and hope for a better life. Back before I got into Interlochen, I had dreams of being a performer, my own boss, and even

owning a record label. The central tenet of all my aspirations though was to be in America while achieving them. Because from afar, that's what America represented. The land where all dreams and aspirations were attainable.

Now, when I think of America, I think not only of the land of opportunity, but of a land where as a Black woman, I'm four times more likely to die from childbirth than the average White woman. I think of the impossible cost of living and working twenty a week after class. I think of the weight of waking up in a Black body in the predominantly White structures that are almost synonymous with America. I think of living in a country that constantly feels like a business.

As someone who has their origins in Zambia, you could expect me to feel at home in Zambia, right? Well, that couldn't be further from the truth. Seeing the overt effects of White Supremacy in America made me hypervigilant to the not-so-overt effects that are ingrained in Zambian culture and are masked as our own. There is nothing I find more unnerving than the presence of oppression amidst the collective insistence on oblivion. And, other than being my place of origin, that's verily what Zambia represents for me. Every time I go to see my family, it feels further and further from what a home should feel like. Not because I don't recognize it, quite the contrary, but because I don't recognize how the culture, social hierarchies, and expectations of being in Zambia make me feel. I'm an internal foreigner in my native land. Ignorance is so bliss.

15: Tinder

Journal Entry: June 30th, 2024

Oh Ghad, I'm gonna die alone.

I've only ever loved twice. The first time I was fourteen, in what I thought was love but was really abuse, with a nineteen-year-old man. We were together for two months, but I continued clinging on to him like a loose thread despite his insistence on showing and telling me that he didn't love me. He left me for his ex, but continued cheating on her with me for months. Although he hurt me in what felt like ways beyond repair, it was the best thing that could have happened to fifteen-year-old me. (I had eventually turned fifteen amidst the trainwreck that situation was.) After he left, I was in a position where I felt I had no one to love me, at a phase in my life where I thought a male's love was everything. And with no else around, I began to look in the mirror and seek unconditional love from the girl who stood in front of it. My journey to attaining self-love sparked an internal revolution that I gravely needed for the life I was going to live. My self-love would end up getting me through being Black for the first time with Eurocentric beauty standards as a prominent theme in the U.S.. It would help me cut off friends who weren't meant to be in my life in the first place. It would help me actualize goals and attain them healthily within my own rubric and metric of success. It would

eventually lead to my overarching life goal of inner peace, a goal that I still work towards, that will protect me from the people-pleasing, self-deprecating, and depression-enhancing ways I was living life. All this to say that, among all the things I'm grateful for, I am grateful for my first love. As tragic as it felt being with him, he taught me that the only love I NEED is my own, and that he, and everyone else who would take up his spot, had to be WANTS for there to be genuine LOVE, and not its evil twin, **CODEPENDENCY.**

I would later have little flings I conveniently refer to as "failed talking phases," but never love. Not until I met someone's boyfriend. We'll call him Micheal. I fell into a trance I'm still remembering as I write about him three years later. And don't get me wrong, I haven't been mini-home wrecking for three years. We don't speak for the eleven months of the year I'm not at home. It's an unspoken rule we don't break. It just hurts too much. For most of the year, he's always at the back of my mind. But, whenever I set foot in Zambia, he travels to the front and center of it. He eventually stops becoming a craving of the mind and fulfills the physical manifestation of what I desire after an, "*I'm back*," text exchange. But, along with the ascendance of my aircraft at Lusaka's airport, comes the ascendance of his existence to a figment of my mind. When it comes to Michael, I'm unsure about a lot of things. One thing I do know for sure is that my love for him will not die. It just needs to learn to quiet down when he's not around.

Another thing I'm sure of is that he showed me how I want to be loved. We all know needs as elements of this life we can't possibly live without. Romantic love is far

from one of them. But, as much of a want as that kind of love is, it manifests itself with its own needs to live and thrive, needs my lover has to cater to for them to be just that. And, with Michael, for the first time, I learned that I had needs I was living without. But, they weren't the needs of everyday, typical Mwila. They were the needs of a Mwila in love. It's a tragic thing to realize you have needs because they are not being met. But there's nothing more elating than realizing you have needs because they are being met in exceeding ways, and that beauty is what Micheal exposed me to. Yet a part of the beauty that came from our mutual love was obscured, because, as much as I was sure of who I was, I didn't know a thing about who I was when I was in love. If another beauty-eliciting Micheal were to come into my life, I promised myself that this would not be a hindrance. So, with a whole year ahead of me in South Africa, I set sail to understand who Mwila is when she's in love. How, you may ask? I downloaded Tinder.

Well, it's working out just as ludicrously as it sounds. The dating scene sucks to say the very least. Cape Town men don't have a grey. It's just Black or White. It's either they are super masculine, to the point where it exhausts me, or super **NOT,** to the point where *I* feel the need to grow some balls. And, because I wouldn't know what to do with them if they did grow, I decide to sit at home with my assigned genitalia.

I've had so many bad dates it's almost hilarious. I went on one date with a guy who asked me to pay for his Uber home. Now, hear me out. I'm not the type of female to shy away from helping a guy out if he's in need, just because he's a male. But that was our FIRST DATE, DAMMIT. *This generation of men are out here thinking they are the prize…ugh*. Let me focus. Another guy was so odd and problematic, he asked if he

could eat my face. Another guy wanted me to be his “therapist” and help him work through his “lack of self-love,” and I had to leave before my impulse to slap him turned into an action. Now, the Me of the U.S. and the Me of Zambia would probably be unopposed to helping a guy through his generational trauma and towards actualizing his self-love. But the I of Cape Town does that for survivors of abuse each day, who don’t only have trauma from their current or recent abusers, but also, from THEIR abusive parents or caregivers. And they are only getting help in their 50s and 60s. The last thing I ever want to do is be this person for a 20-something-year-old man who’s supposed to be my date. BULLSHIT!

Truthfully, I believe the biggest problem is who I am. My life hasn’t been experientially gracious. I’ve gone through quite a bit to tread the paths I’ve tread, and along these roads, I have seen and learned of worlds a lot of people don’t even know exist. My work with direct descendants of Apartheid doesn’t help this at all. I have a hypervigilance and hyper awareness of the shortfalls of the systems that a lot of people feel comfortable living in. I am unnerved by the oblivion of the majority, so I am unnerved by a lot of potential partners. It’s a long-winded way of saying, I am difficult. On top of that, I love the finer things of life and I love my men the same way. This automatically omits over 90%. I know, It’s settled, I’ll die alone. But, unlike a lot of people, I’m okay with that possibility because I am healed, whole, and content on my own. So yeah, getting to know who I am in love isn’t going very well.

16: The Dangers of a Single Story

I worked with exemplary women who went above and beyond what their trauma defined them as. Every survivor with whom I had the privilege of working embodied a level of strength and vulnerability I didn't even know was humanly possible. But, there are THREE ladies whose fighting strength and tenacity caught me off guard: Nomvuzi, Ntosh, and Rozita. Their drive for learning, growth, and empowerment was one of my biggest motivators when I felt defeated. When I couldn't keep going, the thought of not being with them on their journeys soldiered me on. Come what may, these women were so eager to learn and elevate themselves. All three of them worked together as seamstresses within the Center. Their efforts funded their wages, and boy did they sew the crap out of everything. They made everything from tote bags to jumpsuits to wedding dresses. They went through a few months of training and thereafter were employed. They happened to attain employment at a time when their small businesses couldn't stay afloat because of the rampant insistence on protection fees in their Townships.

Nomvuzi, one of the only survivors still married to her abuser, was the breadwinner of her five-person household, bringing home $200 a month. Not being able to handle the costs of divorce, she opted to stay with her husband despite the

mental exhaustion and torture their marriage caused her. During every support group, I watched her gleefully cheer for every woman who announced the finalization of her divorce from her husband. She was even happier for those who were able to take their husbands to court and win their domestic abuse cases. But, getting to know her gave me awareness of the envy that accompanied her smile. It became visually apparent to me that she wished she could do the same. With her daughter as her best friend, and her support group of sisters in the seamstress room championing her on, she came to work with a smile and went back home with laughter. And, even though it would eventually take a steep decline once her reality of a shared bed unveiled itself, the cycle would continue in ascendance the next morning.

When it came to my lessons, Nomvuzi was the type of woman who would send me updates every week about how much money she'd saved and how much she planned to invest and set aside for emergencies.

"*Mwila, I'm on the path to financial freedom*," she would assert. Insistent on perfecting her English skills, she'd read novels and articles, messaging me with questions and inquiries on the meanings of words. At some point, I had to teach her how to use her digital dictionary. Her zeal to learn and grow could not be tamed.

Then we have Ntosh. Ntosh was the epitome of kindness, but would be damned if you mistook it for weakness. Raising three boys on her own, with several failed businesses followed by days gone hungry and protection fee debt, she still managed to be a source of light in the group.

"*No one can steal my joy*," was her motto, and she lived by it vehemently. She was always cracking jokes and telling stories that would end in gut-churning laughter. Ntosh was the one who insisted that I teach English. "*I want to be able to communicate with everyone, my child*," (she called me her child a lot. They all did). She contended, "*Not being able to speak a language nicely can destroy your confidence, and I don't want that anymore.*" How can one possibly say no to that?

Ntosh would always come with an extra book and pen in case someone forgot theirs. "*Knowledge is power*," she would assert. "*See now, Ntoshi can budget. Me? Ntoshi! A budget*!" She would always find comedic and enlightening ways to communicate the importance of our lessons and what they produced. She wasn't only an invaluable asset to me, but also to her fellow survivors. She encouraged and fueled each one of us just by being herself.

Last but not least, we have the powerful and sweet, Rozita. Rozita gave the best affirmations on this planet. As my love language is Words of Affirmation, she had my heart. To stay in touch with me, Rozita created a group chat with all the women I taught and me. She named it with a star emoji. She would later explain that the star symbolized who I was to them. I came into their lives at a time when they needed me the most, and I had shown so much light on their lives that they thought of me as their night star. Rozita's affirmations grounded me. She was MY star.

She was a single mom of three, taking care of her kids, and her daughter's unexpected child all by herself. She was divorced for a while and freely mingled. She was one of the only few privileged to have attained awareness and healing. But, from

the start, Rozita had it rough. With an abusive dad, an emotionally neglectful and unavailable mom, and then two consecutively abusive husbands, it's almost as if violence was the theme of her life. Having spent nights on the streets as a child in the flight from her abusive dad, surrounded by her mom's insistence on being strong, not asking for help, and keeping family business under wraps, she relentlessly gave the love she craved but never had. Adamant on giving the warmest hugs, sharing the brightest smiles, and exuding wholesome warmth. Rozita's company had the power to heal another.

Through her story and many others alike, I would learn that most of my survivors grew up in abusive households and lacked the necessary nurture and love they needed to live healthily in this world. That's why they were attracted to the abusers with whom they found themselves. They had nobody to teach them what love should look like. And without healing, the cycles went on and on.

> "*You are opening our eyes, Mwila–with whatever you teach. Be it about how to save our money or about how we can gain healing through the arts of life, you are opening our eyes*," Rozita asserted.

That was Rozita's way of displaying growth. She would intentionally let me know about every lesson she was grateful for. *Thank you* was her prominent mode of communicating. If *Let Me Help You Help Me* was a person, it would be Rozita. That's how much she meant to me…

In Chimamanda Ngozi Odichie's Ted talk, "The Danger of a Single Story," she alludes to how dangerous a one-dimensional narrative could be. There's a reason why

it’s one of the most-watched TED Talks. We all can relate to it in a way. When there’s a perpetual emphasis on a monolithic component of a story, our minds are subject to thinking of the singularity that is emphasized as the whole story. I want to debunk the singularity attached to the lives of survivors with this book. These survivors are not their trauma. They live beyond their trauma. They don’t move about their lives with their heads down. Contrary to popular expectation, they are some of the happiest people I’ve met. Damnit, they make ME smile. Just like the healing journey they are on, they are whole people with layers deeper than their abuse, poverty, and disenfranchisement in society. They go to church and worship joyfully. They go to parties and hang out with friends. They enjoy the small joys of life like watching a flower in its bloom or taking their kids to school. They experience little annoyances like not understanding what’s stinking up their fridge or not understanding how time has just flown by. They are normal people, just like the rich White people. They love, they smile, and they are grateful. They find reasons to be. They are wholesome, layered people, just like you and me.

17: Biden

Journal Entry: July 25th, 2024

I actually thought I was over American politics, but I was so naive. Who runs away from America? She's everywhere. The good AND the bad–especially here.

Coming back from a day of the Wholeful Healing program with my class, I took an Uber home as usual. I said "*Hi*" and asked the driver what his name was and, in response, Massy asked if I was American. (With my somewhat American accent, In South Africa, I got asked that a lot.)

"*No, I just went to school there*," I responded.

"*I hate Biden, sister*," he abruptly stated.

"*So, you like Trump*?" I asked in utter confusion.

"*No, I don't like anyone, but I hate Biden. I'm supporting Trump because I hate Biden. I don't know what Trump will do in office, but I hate what Biden has done.*"

I was so confused. So confused that tranquility was my only reaction.

"*Sister, what Biden is doing to women and Children in Gaza, I can't support*," he passionately exclaimed.

Through holding space for him to speak, I eventually found out that he was a refugee from Rwanda who had fled a war that disproportionately endangered women and children. His strong feelings about Biden had nothing to do with who he was as a person–they had nothing to do with Biden at all. They, however, had everything to do with his experience in war, losing his family, friends, and countrymen and women through it. His whole argument about Biden being unqualified to run for President felt like a lamentation; a lamentation I was too empathetic towards to interject.

"*How do you supply weapons to murderers, sister, how*?" He rhetorically questioned.

At this point in the conversation, tears were rolling through his eyes, and I was just awe-struck. I'd never thought a war across the ocean could evoke so much unhealed trauma that a man would cry in front of a total stranger. He broke my heart.

As if the timing couldn't be more uncanny, the International radio station we just happened to be tuned into began to rumble about Biden losing the Black vote and Trump capitalizing on the White working class. And, in silence, I continued to look at him in an "I'm all ears" way.

"*So, sister, you hate Trump?*"

"*Yes, I hate his racism, his history of sexual violence, his insistence on divisive rhetoric–he's not a good leader*," I responded.

"*Sister, the only one I hate is the one who kills women and children, that's all,*" he contended.

I'm sure if Massey knew of the things Trump had done, he wouldn't support him either. But here was a man with nothing but emotional turmoil and unhealed trauma in relation to any kind of war and genocide. This was one of the only instances in which I was willing to listen to whatever he needed to share without defending my own position when it came to Trump. Through all of his yelling, condemning, and assertions, it was clear to me that these were part of a singular cry he needed to let out. I was glad my American accent catalyzed it.

That ride got me thinking about how geographics aren't just physically distancing, they can also be empathetically distancing. Growing up in Zambia, I knew there was chaos in Rwanda, Congo, Sudan, etc., but I had no deep empathy towards what was happening in those countries. And, as unfeeling that sounds, how could I possibly have had true empathy for a war I didn't understand?

My favorite definition of empathy is, "*the willingness to go on a journey of pain with the carrier of the pain.*" The world we live in requires us to exercise empathy to the highest degree, however, as much we can. It's inhumane to expect anyone to go through life's turmoil alone. It's only now that I'm growing older and actualizing the importance of humanism and the strength that lies in struggling interconnectedly, that I'm truly building empathy for the tragedies that don't directly affect me.

I want to listen, read, and learn about others to truly understand their lives. Regardless of how disenfranchised someone is in society, no singular person can embody all the systemic struggles of the world. I actively pursue knowledge about the struggles I don't have. I learn about them, acquaint myself with them, build empathy,

and go on the journey with whoever needs it, even if that means holding space for an Uber driver, who I let rant about the man I would have voted for had I been in an American life.

18: The Rainbow Academy

Journal Entry: June 19th, 2024

I'm probably gonna exhaust myself from overworking, but is it overworking if you love what you do? If it never feels like work? My students are about to teach me so much and I'm here for it all, chomi*!*

During my first few weeks in Cape Town, I lived in a guest house in the heart of the city. Although the shared bathroom was trying, it was such a lovely guest house filled with wonderful people. That's where I met Andre, a full-time magician and bright soul. I randomly said "*hi*" to him one time, and conversation erupted from that point. We bonded over our love for the Arts. He then told me about an academy called The Rainbow Academy. "*It's a non-profit school that has dedicated itself to providing an arts education to kids in the Townships who can't afford it. I know the CEO, Imke, I can connect you with her*," he said. All he had to say was "*arts*" and "*kids in the Townships*," and I was sold. Before I knew it, I was in Imke's office, pitching my idea for a class called, "Music for Activism." It was a class built on the foundational principle of healing through art.

"*I want to make sure the Rainbow Academy doesn't just have exemplary artists but has exemplary artists who have something to say*," I emphasized. Thereafter, for an hour on Thursday and ninety minutes on Friday, every Rainbow Academy student was an activist and musician.

My inability to stick to one project continuously challenges my ability to manage time. But I wanted to teach these young people. I wanted to learn about their experiences at the bottom of South Africa's societal hierarchies. And learn from them I did.

Although I was their teacher, I didn't identify myself as one, dismissing the "Miss Keso" and "Miss Mwila" formalities on the first day. "*I'm not a teacher, I'm a facilitator of learning*," I stated. *"I'm not here to impart knowledge to you. It might be different if this were a math or biology class, but this is an Arts class. That means it's a life class. And because you can't learn about life by focusing solely on one experience, we'll all learn from each other. That's what I'll facilitate*." It was important to me that everyone who was in my class wanted to be there. Activism isn't for everyone. When I first pitched my class, I assured everyone that, unlike all the other classes they took, my class was far from compulsory. They didn't have to take it by any means.

I planned my introductory lesson around the fallacy of Freedom. It served as a glimpse into what I was going to be teaching so students could choose whether they wanted to take it. With "Freedom" by Beyonce, and "Mickey Mouse Freedom" by Lucky Dube exemplifying what it meant to artistically cry out for true Freedom, and not just freedom from physical bondage, we dissected how we weren't truly free until we could

say what we thought without fear of retribution and make the changes we needed to make to improve our lives and the lives of others without fear of oppression. We discussed everything from economic corruption to the perpetuation of Apartheid norms within communities, keeping the question of attaining freedom as our pinnacle. After the first lesson, everyone signed up for the class.

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At my arts school in Michigan, I often felt very alone in my art. I remember discussing the repertoire for a concert whose theme was “Songs of Struggle and Resistance.” Most of my classmates did not have instantaneous ideas for the program, while I already had a whole list of possible songs on the top of my tongue without even taking time to think about it. I wondered what kind of lives they lived if they didn’t have to have a playlist of songs about breaking out of societies’ constricts for when they felt alone amidst the oppressive normalities of the world. But I had to remind myself, these were White, rich kids who knew very little about waking up to a world that antagonizes them in their very existence. They weren’t like me. They didn’t take up the space I did in the world, and they never will. Living a life of underprivilege is challenging. Being surrounded by oblivion to the systemic underprivilege that governs my and my peers’ lives is even more challenging.

That’s why I’d be lying if I said this class was only for my students. Every Thursday and Friday, I felt vindicated. I felt vindicated by how easily my students

identified the intersections between the oppressive systems stemming from slavery and Apartheid both in South Africa and America. I felt vindicated by my ability to talk about Blackness beyond an African context, within an African context. I felt vindicated by my students' enthusiasm and drive for acquisition of knowledge and understanding, be it through the readings I assigned or, on the days when we choreographed dances to songs of resistance, through the enthusiasm of their movement. I felt vindicated by the fact that I was contributing to equipping future artists with the tools to tell their stories. Every day, I was grateful for the students. Every day, the thought of this class healed me.

My goal was not only to teach about activism or activists and how music can be one of the strongest tools for communication there is, but also, to equip my students with a lens that enabled them to see oppression through systems and not just as a surface-level, one-time action. My goal was to teach them that Colorism isn't just about dark and light, it's rooted in White Supremacy. Sexism isn't just about male and female, it's rooted in the patriarchy. Police brutality isn't just about hatred for Black and Colored folk, it's about the Apartheid police training system that was never revised despite the abolishment of Apartheid—it was about the system of policing that started as slave catching. Poverty isn't just about greed and corruption, it's rooted in White Monopoly Capital. It's only when we truly understand the systems and how they relate and enable each other that we can abolish how and where they appear.

19: The Clash of the Class

Journal Entry: July 1st, 2024

I wonder what kind of a person I'd be if I were rich. I know everything I do is fueled by my upbringing of limitations; not having the liberty of choice because my financial situation limited my accessibility. I'm fueled to give because my every achievement can be accredited to someone's giving hand. Would I be a snob if I didn't know how it felt to lack? Is oblivion always the result of circumstantial confides?

Down and recovering from Cape Town's brutal allergy season, my friend, Abdul, decided to get me out of bed. I sat at Starbucks and decided to lift my spirits with a frappuccino, as Abdul was arriving fifteen minutes late.

After talking for a while, he decided he wanted to get pizza, so we walked to this pizza place whose name I can't remember. I don't eat pizza, so I watched him dig into every slice, his eating narrated by his long rampages about his life. I listened like the friend I was supposed to be. He eventually finished and, at about 9:00 pm, it was time for me to prepare for bed, and for us to go. As we headed for the door, two unhoused gentlemen approached us asking for leftovers. By the sight of their lips and eyes, they

had had very little to eat or drink, and leftovers wouldn't at all suffice. I went in and bought them a few boxes of pizza. I asked them to come in and sit, and, upon taking their seats, the cashier came over and basically kicked them out.

"*Why can't they sit here?*," I asked.

"*They know why*," she responded.

"*Ma'am, that isn't what I asked*," I said.

"*You know, these people come in and make our customers uncomfortable, so we don't allow them to sit inside*," she said.

"*And what do you mean by 'these people?*,'" I asked, bristling inside.

"*These people, the street people,*" she answered.

"*But they are paying customers, so what's the logic?*," I countered.

"*What you did is fine, buying food for them and all. But these people can't sit here*," she said.

At this point in the conversation, I'd taken on a disgruntled demeanor. And disgruntled I was indeed. In my head, I was like, "*We still use phrases like, 'these people' in 2024?*" I had to back up and remind myself that I wasn't in America, where that word had way more baggage than South Africans would know. Nevertheless, her insistence on using ostracizing language unnerved me.

"*So, even though I paid, they can't sit?*," I asked.

"*No, they can't,*" she responded.

"*May I please speak to your manager?*," I asked.

"*He's not here*," she responded, almost smirking.

As the two gentlemen walked out of the restaurant, I walked out with them. Between the two men was a young boy who couldn't have been older than fifteen. I sat down with him and asked him if he went to school.

"*No, I don't ma'am. I live on the streets,*" he responded.

I immediately realized how stupid my question was. How could he worry about math or science, or an academic credential, if he could barely eat? I took a quick retrospective trip to my childhood and realized what a privilege it was to even have had the chance to hate school as much as I did. I was bullied, I hated myself, my body, and my life in general, but I had food on the table and shoes on my feet and none of my basic needs were unmet. I was born into a situation I didn't choose, but it afforded me choices. On the other hand, he was born into a situation that rendered him choiceless. I wondered what this kid could do with an education, given the chance.

Deviating back to the here and now, I looked at the restaurant and wondered how much comfort both men would have found sitting with a little heat during this harsh winter, an escape from their tents on the roadside. I shook my head in helplessness at the realities I couldn't change. These were the times I felt defeated, and that defeat challenged my identity. I didn't quite sleep right that night.

Classism in South Africa is so common. It's normalized to the point where people looked at ME as crazy for speaking up in that restaurant. I even overheard a woman say, "*She's so dramatic*." Many South African scholars say that with the end of Apartheid, racism took on a new twin, classism, and they've been conquering South Africa together ever since. With an overwhelming majority of the poor being Black and

colored, South Africa is the most unequal society in the world. Living in Cape Town, I could see White monopoly capital everywhere. You have the suburban people and the township people, and, even though there's an in-between economically, very rarely do you see it reflected in people's behavior. Often, I felt like the middle-class were Upper-class wanna-be's and wanted no affiliation with the working class. As if the upper class weren't distant enough, the middle class's wannabe insistence on distancing themselves from the working class caused such a divide between what could have been a collaborative relationship that the working class reminded me of the American school in Zambia and feeling constantly left out. The dire need for dissociation of the Black and colored elite from the Black and colored working class was one of the saddest effects of classism.

Money is useful in meeting basic needs and providing one with a sufficient life, but, when it starts to get much bigger and broader than covering one's basic needs and wants, it can take on such an ugly front. Capitalism is even uglier once analyzed for what it truly is—an unequal financial system meant to keep some people at the top and others at the bottom. The upper class needs to understand that they are where they are because the lower class is where they are. That's how capitalism works. There have to be the poor, the beggars, the starving, and the unhoused for the upper class to fathom their lifestyles. That's why classism is the most ridiculous -ism there is. Why would you oppress your enablers?

20: Comfort Ride

On a Wednesday, when I was finished with my Wholeful Healing job, I planned a lunch and nails "*treat me*" day. Consequently, I decided to use Uber Comfort, instead of my usual, most economical Uber option, UberGo. James was my driver's name. The first White man to ever drive me around. I started by introducing myself, and the question followed: "*Are you American?*"

"*No, I'm not. I'm from Zambia. I just went to school there*," I responded.

"*Oh, so what are you doing here?*," he asked.

I explained that I initially came to South Africa to start a Music Healing program for survivors of sexual and domestic violence, but I ended up creating a program to address financial and civic education as well.

"That's amazing," he said.

He'd proceeded to tell me that he'd been to Chicago and New York, but he had yet to go to Michigan.

After asking him a few questions, I found out that he owned a business and had been passionate about capitalism since he was young. Oh, sorry, I meant Entrepreneurship. He went to the best university in Africa, The University Of Cape

Town, and never wanted to leave South Africa. He could if he wanted to though, he emphasized.

"So, why do you do Uber?," I asked, while amusedly gazing at his Range Rover.

"*I just get bored sometimes and I love meeting new people,*" he responded.

I then asked him which restaurants he recommended I try. He proceeded to give me a full list of recommendations and preferences. He also gave me some destination locations I could visit when I needed a day to myself. "*Sea Point, Table Mountain, Green Point—all gorgeous places to just enjoy the flow and beauty of the beach,*" he said.

Getting out of the Uber, it hit me that the conversation I just had didn't belong in the book of Uber chapters I'd compiled. It quite literally belonged nowhere near it. On a typical Uber trip, with my immigrant and/or working-class drivers in South Africa, I'd never ask for restaurant recommendations. We were too busy talking about Xenophobia, poverty, classism, racism, capitalism, and other systemic challenges. Whenever my drivers heard I had gone to school in America, they'd never tell me they'd visited before. Quite the contrary, they'd plead for me to take them with me when I went back. Their cries would almost always sound like, "*Sister, you know we are tired of suffering here. Life is hard. Take me to the land of the free*."

I wish they knew that the Land of the Free isn't actually Free.

I almost always got this tired, anguished, and exhausted tone from my drivers when I called UberGo. These were drivers working 7:00 a.m. to 11:00 p.m. shifts, all days of the week, continuously, whereas I just got out of a ride with someone who "*did it for fun*."

As I settled in my thoughts, I realized that, as bizarre as that encounter was, it was normal in the city of Cape Town, where the inequality is boisterous and vehement. Cape Town is the type of city that will have one public school using iPads, and, another, a few streets away, without enough textbooks. It's a city where you'll have a whole settlement of shacks and an adjacent neighborhood of beach houses at sea point that cost more to rent than a Black South African doctor's monthly pay. I could go on and on.

The Disparities between Black and White can be traced back to the Land Act of 1913, which gave White people 87% of the Land and the rest to colored and Black people. Then came independence and the abolishment of Apartheid. But the Land Act was never rectified. The typical Black household earns approximately 5% of a White household's income. Despite only making up 9% of the population, White South Africans, as of today, own 72% of the land and control 87% of the economy. The economic disparities are also evident in the quality of life in the cities and provinces predominantly occupied by White people. If you compare the Western Cape and the Northern Cape, you'd think you were in two different countries.

Why was I so passionate about understanding this inequality? It played an unfortunately huge part in the frightening levels of sexual violence I set out to combat each day. The truth is, when men who've been brought up under strict patriarchal norms

can't provide, they assert their masculinity in other ways. And, for South African men, it's evidently assertion through violence.

The women I worked with were economically dependent on their husbands, despite how very little their husbands made. They couldn't find work or were not given preference when they did find jobs, because of their linguistic limitations in White spaces. So, they stayed with their abusers because they had to eat. Most of my survivors had migrated from lower-income provinces like the Eastern Cape and the Northern Cape to look for jobs. They, in turn, would build shacks to be closer to their low-paying jobs or the jobs to which they aspired. They married men of the same backgrounds, who would abuse them unwaveringly, and they'd be left with nowhere else to go but the shack they shared with the violent father of their kids. Just about every single factor of the abuse could be traced back to economics, capitalism, patriarchy, and the racial inequalities in South Africa's economic structure.

It was almost like the American criminal justice system. The poor, who are often Black and Brown, are more likely to be caught up in crime, because they have substandard schools, their neighborhoods are impoverished and overpoliced, and there's an element of racial prejudice galvanizing these factors. When young Black and Brown people do get caught, they can't afford lawyers to fight for reasonable sentences or have their charges dropped. They thereafter get locked up and, even when they do get out, they are susceptible to recidivism, because no one wants to hire a convicted felon. The cycle continues. Class and race work hand in hand in a post-racially oppressive society. I, for one, needed to keep reminding myself that, as I have

conversations in my Uber Comfort rides about different parts of the world, my brothers and sisters are living in shacks in and would give anything for a hot meal.

21: Emmanuel

Journal Entry: June 29th, 2024

This guy is so pretty. Eisch. How does he look so good!? My obsession with pretty boys will be the death of me, mahn. I didn't know that being taken care of felt so good. Different good. How does one satisfy a desire you didn't even know existed?

I woke up to a message on Instagram one Friday, with a handle that clearly wasn't a real name.

"*I like what you're about, and you have a nice voice," the message read. "I'm always looking for ways to connect with other activists on Instagram, and, in just two weeks of being in Cape Town, I was ecstatic to connect with you."*

"*Thank you so much,*" I responded.

"*I'd actually like to have a conversation with you in person. When are you free?*," he followed.

"Sunday is fine," I said.

I would later find out that "they" was in fact a man named Emmanuel from Nigeria, an aspiring actor. I immediately raved at how cool this guy was.

Sunday came, and we agreed to meet at 5:00 p.m. I texted him and asked him where we were meeting at 4:30, and he responded at 5:10 p.m.. I was newly on my anti-bullsh** journey, so I told him that this was off-putting, and we were gonna have to find another time. I'm laughing as I write this part.

The following day, I went to an Expo at Cape Town's City Centre, and, upon seeing me, this Nigerian guy named Obodo decided I was going to be his date for the night. He was sweet, but a bit too much. Why are you tryna pronounce me as your wife when we just met? I was sure Obodo and I weren't going anywhere as soon as he started talking about his ex and how he was still heartbroken from their mutual agreement to leave each other. But I was enjoying the attention and the overflow of compliments, so why not give this guy a little bit of my time?

Obodo dragged me towards the end of the Expo, where performances were taking place, and, as we were getting situated in our spots, someone touched my hair. I turned around to see who it was, and Emmanuel revealed himself. *Oh Ghad!*

I don't know how I forgot that Obodo was by my side, but I did. And, before I knew it, Emmanuel and I were by the door talking about how crazy it was that we met at this place, laughing at how touristy we were on our own continent.

Emmanuel was way cuter than his pictures portrayed him to be, and I have an obsession with the finer things in life, so I found myself twirling my hair and smiling, "*Girl, get yourself together PLEASE!"* The next thing I knew, Emmanuel was pecking my cheek, and Obodo was staring at us in despair. It was only after I left the building that I realized I left Obodo hanging. I didn't even say goodbye.

For our rain check, we ended up going to Mama Africa, an inviting, Pan-African restaurant destination on Cape Town's renowned Long Street. Emmanuel did everything. He ordered me a ride from my house. He opened every single door. He made me feel beautiful, just by his very stare. He fed me and made sure I STAYED fed. And he held me in his arms like a gem.

That was my first real dating experience. Ever. He made it so worthwhile. I felt spoiled and adored. But, at the same time, it felt odd and unnatural to who I was. My dad raised me to fend for myself. Whenever I wanted luxuries, he would either tell me that he didn't have the money or to find the money on my own. So I knew that, aside from my needs, I had to fight for everything else. And, in complete honesty, I wouldn't rather have been raised any other way. My dad's values are the reason I'm tenacious and self-reliant. But I also recognize that my standards for self care and romantic love have been unhealthily low. Along with being raised to fend for myself, I also was raised to fend for my two brothers in whatever ways I could. Essentially, I was a second mum. I went through what my generation calls, Parentification. So I was almost always a caregiver. And caregiving was something I always knew how to do. I just never quite mastered or understood how to receive it. But, you know what the funniest thing is? I crave it.

Before my Cape Town journey, from every friend, family member, crush, etc., I hoped for reciprocity. In Cape Town, Emmanuel, put me on the other side. He showed me how much I desired what I didn't even know I lacked. I was Emmanuel's survivor for a night, and it felt so good! Eventually, I realized Emmanuel just wanted to be in my

pants, so we weren’t gonna go anywhere. I know. I was sad about our ending too. I told him how much he meant to me. He was probably just being himself, but he needed to know that he had a bigger impact than he could possibly comprehend. As someone big on self-care and refueling, I was refueled through a different and new gas station, and I enjoyed every minute of it.

22: Uncle Nana and Uncle Nsama

Journal Entry: May 29th, 2024

I miss my Uncles. I miss my willful big brothers. I wish they could see their niece in her element—doing her thing.

I grew up with my grandmother as my second mum and best friend. Every weekend, without fail, little Mwila was at her house making a ruckus. She gave me the love and warmth I so dearly craved, and so my gravitation to her was reflexive. Along with visiting her came visiting my two Uncles, Uncle Nana and Uncle Nsama, my mom's two younger brothers, who lived with their mum, my grandmother. My Uncle Nana was born in 1984, and my Uncle Nsama was born in 1987. But they didn't have the lives for their age one would expect them to have. Life didn't work in their favor.

My Uncle Nana didn't graduate high school and couldn't find a job after, and my Uncle Nsama was in the same shoes, except Uncle Nsama had a high school diploma. With my Uncle Nsama, my grandma tried to take him to college, but he spent the money

on his girl, and with my Uncle Nana, there wasn't much anyone could do without a high school diploma in Zambia so they let him be.

If anything, working with African men has taught me that an African man with no job is no good to himself, because he thinks he's no good to anyone else. Both my Uncles drowned the sorrows of their self-image in alcohol and weed. Their temporary highs, one at a time, got them through a life they didn't want anything to do with.

Uncle Nana was a peaceful man at heart. He avoided conflicts at all costs and didn't like to talk more than he needed to. He was only ever expressive when he was drunk. He developed liver cirrhosis from his profuse drinking habits. This didn't only bulge his belly on his 5'4 skinny body, but it permanently scarred it, physically at that. Uncle Nana developed body wounds that looked like the polar opposite of his complexion. Desperate to cover up, he always wore the longest jeans and long-sleeved t-shirts, no matter how hot it was. But, when the wounds plagued his face, he stopped trying. His liver was about to cost him his life, but my Uncle didn't stop drinking or smoking. He didn't think his life was worth preserving. He was determined to use whatever life he had in him to do as he pleased. He didn't like his life anyway, so why try?

My Uncle Nsama wasn't really my Uncle, as much as I called him that. He was very much the big brother I never had. We had such a warm relationship. We bonded over commonalities in interests and our sense of humor. We both loved good music, good food, and the finer things of life, even though we were both very broke. I'd watch movies with him all day, and the conversations we'd have would be the cherry on top of

every visit I made to my grandma's. This was a family member I didn't just love, I LIKED him. We liked each other. As I grew older, it became apparent to me that he swam in regret every day and fought relentlessly not to drown, but never quite won. My Uncle Nsama, being the last born, had the opportunities his siblings didn't have. With my mum and my aunty, his two elder sisters, out of the house during his high school years, my grandparents had the financial relief to take him to good schools. But good academic results weren't his forte. He was a star soccer player, but my grandad wanted him to focus on school, so he made my Uncle quit. When my Uncle talked about it, I could almost always tell that he regretted never resisting his father's authoritarianism. Being over thirty and incapable of moving out of his mother's house was his life's theme, and he hated it. He resorted to temporary modes of relief, one at a time. That was how he fought through a life that gave him no fighting power. Unlike my Uncle Nana, my Uncle Nsama wasn't completely hopeless. He tried and hustled for jobs he could do with every opportunity that arose. He just didn't have any luck. But, out of the two, if one of them was going to make it, we were confident that it was going to be Uncle Nsama.

Before leaving for the U.S. in 2022, my Uncle Nsama was sick. What started as Tuberculosis turned into kidney failure. Before we knew it, he was on a dialysis chair four days a week. My grandmother couldn't drive. She didn't have the kind of money for a cab either. So my parents were the ones to fill in the financial and transportation gaps when my Uncle needed his treatments. I remember getting home terribly late from school in the early days of his dialysis treatments because either my mum or dad had to wait for my Uncle and grandma to get done. For those who don't know, when someone

in the family is terribly sick, to the point where they can't go about life's tasks alone, it debilitates everyone in their familial proximity. My grandma, as my Uncle's primary caregiver, was at the front lines of this debilitation. She couldn't do anything without physically watching over my Uncle all the time. She couldn't leave the house, she stopped going to church, and she was always crying and worrying, so she lost a terrible amount of weight and she, too, was emotionally sick. If one didn't know any better, they'd think SHE was the sick one.

For over a year, My Uncle Nsama had a belly bigger than his whole body, was immobile, and had no will to keep going. He also became the opposite of the Uncle I had loved spending time with. He became so bitter and mad at the world that being around could elicit the same feelings for him. He was constantly yelling, he was verbally and physically abusive towards my grandma, and, overarchingly, just very unkind. I couldn't see myself watching a movie with him and enjoying it. Or having a conversation with him without it leaving me to tears, either because of how mean he was to me or how mean he became to himself. "*I'm a dead man walking, Mwila. Please don't stress me,*" he once responded, after I asked if I could make him food. I loved him so much, but I couldn't find it in me to like him anymore. There was just nothing to like at all.

Three months into my first semester at Interlochen, my Uncle Nsama passed away. Losing a loved one is sad. But losing a loved one and not being unable to attend the funeral…. They didn't livestream or video anything either, so for three days, I made a funeral service of my own. I grieved the death of my Uncle, along with who he was and who he could have been.

To this day, I deeply miss my Uncle. But I know I only miss who he was before he fell sick, not who he was before he died. I don't miss the bitter and cynical Uncle Nsama. But, even more significantly, I don't miss seeing him sick, defeated, angst-filled, void of life, immobile, unable to breathe, and on that dialysis chair. If I had to choose between getting him back and having him continue to live in sickness or not getting him back at all, I'd choose the latter. I wouldn't wish on him what he would never wish on himself.

The first time I went back to Zambia for summer break from Interlochen, I clumsily forgot to visit my Uncle Nana. It was the biggest regret of my visit. However, on my second visit, during spring break, I was determined to rectify my regrets. I went to see him at my grandmother's house in a part of Lusaka, Zambia, we call Chelstone. This was the first time I'd been at that house since my Uncle Nsama died, and I could feel him with every grain of my body. Uncle Nana greeted me by echoing his grievances about forgetting him during my last visit. Guilty and ashamed, I said nothing but another apology, when he was done voicing how he felt. He then proceeded to make fun of how much I'd grown into an "*unrecognizable woman*" and circled it back to the fact that he couldn't recognize me because I was a bad niece, who didn't care to visit him. Again, I pursed my lips and bowed my head in shame. "*I deserve all the jabs, please just throw them and let me know when you're done*," I said remorsefully.

But he eventually got over it, and we laughed it off. Before we knew it, we were making jokes about the ex-girlfriends he introduced to me and how lackluster of a babysitter he was when my mum left him with me.

We also talked about my Uncle Nsama, his late brother. Similar to Uncle Nsama and Uncle Nana's outcomes, they were incompatible siblings who never got along. They vehemently disliked each other. So much so that my mum told me Uncle Nana was concerningly absent during my Uncle Nsama's funeral. It was almost as if he didn't want to be there. I stayed away from commenting on their relationship. But the psychoanalytic in me had an internal diagnosis I only ever shared with my mom; Both of my Uncles didn't have anything going for them. No education past high school, no marketable skills in the impenetrable economy that governed Zambia, nothing to look forward to–nothing but their mother as their sole provider. But Uncle Nsama, who, unlike Uncle Nana, graduated high school and tried to go to college, always felt the need to dissociate from Uncle Nana's condition. He felt the need to show that he was proven, despite the fact they may have looked at bay. This need transcended across every interaction they had and didn't have. They were always competing, even though there was never a competition to begin with. Resentment permeated their relationship. And Uncle Nana, even in Uncle Nsama's death, made it clear to me that he seldom missed his brother. He expressed relief at his death. Before my Uncle Nsama got sick, Uncle Nsama and Uncle Nana's relationship was bad. But when Uncle Nsama got sick, their relationship lost all hope of existing. When Uncle Nsama got sick, he not only lost mobility and wellness, but he also lost any possible way he could prove he was better than Uncle Nana, and that made him more hateful and nasty towards his brother, and in turn, made Uncle Nana more Spiteful and hateful towards HIS brother. And the exacerbated hatred got to a point of no return. For Uncle Nana, it also wasn't easy to

see his mom get abused. He was unapologetically expressive of how glad he was that that chapter of their lives was over.

Without context, it may seem like my Uncle Nana was glad his brother was dead. But that couldn't be further from the complete story. He was glad he didn't have to deal with the unnecessary belittlement, abuse, pain, and the absence of peace, and he, too, was remiss at the fact that the presence of those attributes came with the presence of his brother.

"*Do you have a girlfriend now?*," I asked.

"*Mwila, who would want to date anyone who looks like this?*," he asked, while pointing at his wounds. And added, almost rhetorically, "*I try with girls, but they always leave me for guys with money.*"

And, in silence, we shared a grieving moment for the life he aspired to but could never have. I, leaving for the U.S. the next day, said my goodbyes and reassured him that, the next time I was home, we were gonna have the whole day together.

The next I heard about my Uncle Nana, I had relocated to Cape Town. It was through a message from my mum.

"*He's died*," it read.

Distraught, confused, flabbergasted—none of the adjectives in the book could truthfully describe how I felt.

"*What happened?*" I responded.

"*He went into hospital today and he gave up on us,*" she said.

It turns out that, along with Liver Cirrhosis, my Uncle suffered from heart failure, a condition I ashamedly didn't know he had. Again, I conducted a service for another of my Uncles alone, with no means of flying back home and burying him among the people he loved.

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Oftentimes, I think about how different my Uncles' lives would have been if they lived in a country like the USA. How different would they have been if they had something to call their own, even if it was just a job at Chick-fil-A?

When people in low-income, over-regulated economies talk about a hard life, this is exactly what they mean. In Zambia, I can't graduate high school and expect to have a job, no matter how low-paying. It's an anomaly. There are barely any rehabilitation centers for alcoholics or drug addicts either, so what if they lived in a place where the case was contrary? Would my Uncles still be alive? Would they have lived a life worth living?

23: Budgeting Anxiety

Journal Entry: 2nd August 2024

I knew my work would be hard, but I didn't know it would be this hard. It's like I go to battle with a marker and a whiteboard, and the survivors' circumstances come with rifles and a whole army. I teach concepts, but their inability to apply them makes me feel so useless sometimes. How is it like I can only do so much, and the 'so much' feels like nothing at all?

A month after our budgeting unit, I decided to have one-on-ones with the survivors and monitor their progress with their household budgets, and the Jimmy Joe fallacy proved itself to truly be a fallacy that day. Knowing isn't always half the battle. My anxieties in building the budgeting unit revealed themselves during our individualized meetings: how can I possibly teach women who simply don't make enough ($250/month) how to save?

‘ The first person I met with was Nomvuzi. I always knew Nomvuzi took care of her family and her late elder sisters' children. What I didn't know was that this added up to a

family size of eight. Out of her R4500 income, she spent R3000 on food alone. By the time she was catering to all her expenses for the month, she was in debt. I asked her to keep track of her expenditures for me, and I took a look at what she did. *HOW CAN SHE POSSIBLY SAVE?* I thought to myself in despair and distress. *HOW CAN I HELP YOU, NOM?*

"I see that when groceries finish, you're good at restocking. Can you see if you can limit this next month? Do you think you can improvise with the food you have left and wait till your next paycheck to restock?"

"*I have three boys, Mwila. All three are teenagers and they eat a lot. What will I tell them?,*" she responded.

"*Tell them the truth. Tell them that you simply don't have enough,*" I said.

Behind every struggling mother is the fear of failing her children. And sometimes, this manifests itself in potently unhealthy ways. Sometimes mothers go to extreme heights to please their children. They can't bear the emotional toll of saying no. Along with money management, I had to teach my survivors that, when they don't have, they simply don't have, and it's okay to let their kids know that.

Numvozi didn't have the option of downsizing her family. Her sister's kids wouldn't have anywhere to go. But she had the option of slowly downsizing her lifestyle, till she could get to a point where she had enough to buy a sewing machine and start generating extra income of her own.

"*Please cut the food costs to R2500 for this month and put R100 towards paying your debts and save R400 till next month. Then keep going*," I said.

"*Okay, my baby*," She asserted.

Nomvuzi is a fighter and a go-getter. Even with the little she earns, she finds ways to sell and earn a little more. She would travel an hour away from her house to buy socks from a wholesaler and retail them around her neighborhood. That's how she covered her kids' and her own transportation bill. The goal was now to buy a sewing machine through maximizing her profits as a retailer. But that also meant increasing her capital, and that also meant saving more. We had to map out how we were going to use every penny she had. We had to work, improvise, and stay disciplined. But with a go-getter like Nomvuzi, it was never as challenging as one would expect.

I then met with Rozita, my sunshine. Rozita is beautiful y'all–wholly beautiful at that. But she is so long-winded. Sometimes I had to rail her into the topic many more times than I had the willful bandwidth for. What started as a conversation about budgeting turned into her telling me how her daughter eloped with a man who got her pregnant and she had to travel to get her back to school and forcibly make her write her finals. But all this was pointing to the fact that she was now taking care of her daughter's kids with no financial support from either of the kids' parents. "*I don't know what to do. These are my grandkids and I love them, but they are very demanding, expensive to have, and expensive to feed, Mwila*," she lamented.

I had to explain to her that love for others doesn't have to relinquish you of the capacity to love yourself. There's a grey area between selfishness and selflessness, and it's the healthiest spot to occupy. On top of her daughters' kids, she had her own son to feed…. all on R4500 ($250) a month. It turns out her daughter was hiding her

kids from her boyfriend's mum, who didn't know they had children together. But, while Rozita's daughter was eating three meals a day, Rozita could barely make a meal a day for all the kids she had under her care. This, in turn, debilitated Rozita and her son. *"Please give your daughter back her kids, Rozita," I said, "You'll still be their grandmother.*"

I worked out a plan with Rozita that also encompassed being able to say no to the people to whom she felt she owed everything, her children being prime culprits. *"Let your saving towards financial freedom and the benefits they'll derive from it fuel you to say no. It's okay to teach your kids delayed gratification–no matter how hard it may feel,*" I said.

Food was Rozita's biggest expense too. She told me that sometimes she had to hide the more expensive food so she could limit how much her son, who was the biggest consumer of edible delights, devoured. And, as effective as that may seem, I warned her that it doesn't exactly teach him what the overarching inhibitions are here, which are finances. It doesn't teach him discipline or emphasize the importance of living within one's means either.

"*Leave the milk out. Leave the sugar and the little treats out as well. But tell him that what you buy on payday is all he gets for the month, and he has to make the most of it. Put your foot down and truly mean it when you tell him he's not going to get any more,*" I said.

She recognized the truth in the message I relayed to her.

Rozita has the goal of starting an upholstery business, and I have the goal of helping her save towards starting one. So, we mapped out a savings plan and it prioritized cutting her food expenditure, setting aside an appropriate and fixed amount for her wants that she could use for her and her son, setting boundaries and gentle strategies to inform her kids to do the same, and keeping her eye on the prize.

I then attended to Ntoshi. Ntoshi, among all the survivors, was one of the lucky ones on finance. She, unlike a lot of her counterparts, had support from her spouse to contribute to the household just as much as she did. She didn't have to worry about rent or taking her kids to school. But, Ntoshi's quality of living wasn't healthy, and her complacency in being provided for limited her progress. No child should be brought up in a shack with little to no resources for wellness, and Ntoshi fell prey to being complacent in this lifestyle. She spent all her extra money unaccountably and recklessly, and it took not only teaching her how to budget, but taking her out of her complacent shell, to see the importance of giving her kids and herself the life they deserved. With her savings, she too wanted to buy a sewing machine and make clothes to sell to the clientele she'd built over the years she'd been employed as a seamstress. But she wasn't saving or working towards her goals as efficiently as she was planning to, so we had to establish a map towards changing that. With Ntoshi, I thought a Multiple-Deposit interest account was the best way to work towards her getting that sewing machine. That way, with the extra money she had she could save in an interest-yielding account till she accumulated enough to buy the machine. She also had the liberty of putting aside a little money for emergencies, which I encouraged her to do.

Even though she, too, only earned R4500 a month (R250), the other women would have loved to be as responsibility-free as she comparatively was.

Then, we had Anathi. Anathi didn't have an income and lived off a R500($250) grant from the government every month, with one little girl on her back. She lived in a shack right outside of Cape Town and denied herself of water, electricity, and all other utility bills.

"*How do you relieve yourself?*"

"*I dig holes outside for me and the babies' nappies, or use the neighbor's bathroom when she allows me to,*" she said.

"*What do you do in the dark?*," I asked.

"*I use candles,*" she innocently asserted.

Anathi had a whole set of circumstances that were different from her counterparts. With her, we had to focus on getting her a job to generate an income. She told me she had been applying for jobs and not receiving callbacks, so we started looking for jobs that didn't require strong English skills, like housekeeping and domestic work. Then, we worked on perfecting her resume to emphasize the skill set she possessed that would be preferred in the domestic field.

I did the first one-on-one lesson a month into being in Cape Town, and it was the most exhausting and mentally taxing lesson I'd embarked on with the survivors. This was mostly because, a whole month after I taught the budgeting unit, I really thought I'd be doing the individualized lessons to track their progress and fill in some gaps. But all of them showed me that, not only were they not applying the skills I taught them, but

also, they were incapable of doing so. The heavy work would be to get them to a point where they could. The goal was not to teach them how to budget, as I naively thought. It made me feel like I was approaching everything wrongly. It was a failure that I had to reckon with.

While I lived in Zambia, I remember being frustrated at how all foreign investments went to South Africa. Everything from Oprah's school to retail clothing stores like H&M and Zara went to South Africa, and didn't bother with Zambia and other African countries. *That's why South Africa's much better off than us,* I thought. But, living in Cape Town helped me understand that philanthropists who invested weren't only doing so simply because it was Africa's strongest economy. They were investing in breaching the incomparable inequities that governed the country's make-up. In South Africa, there is extreme wealth that is unfathomable for a lot of Africans, but such is the case, if not more, with the poverty that makes its home in South Africa as well. White Monopoly Capital is prominently alive in South Africa's economic distribution and it's a significant contributing factor to the existence of extreme poverty in society.

I remember having a conversation with a Malawian Uber driver that stood out to me because he was one of the only foreigners I'd met who was brave enough to live in a Township—typical Xenophobia crime scenes. I can't for the life of me remember which Township he occupied, to be exact, but I remember us echoing our empathy for the living conditions of South Africans who lived in the informal settlements in the Townships. We didn't come from rich countries ourselves. Malawi and Zambia are two

of the poorest countries in the world, but we don't have neighborhoods predominantly composed of Shacks.

People who migrate from provinces like Eastern Cape and Northern Cape to live in major cities like Cape Town and Johannesburg, migrate because the quality of life in their provinces is drastically lower than that of life in these major cities. They can't find jobs or earn a living. It's to the point where a city like Cape Town has a quality of life rating of 8.8, and the Eastern Cape has one of 5.5. And, because they can't afford these cities' exorbitant rents or utilities once they move, they build a shack, where they bypass all the bills they can't pay, and the cycle goes on and on.

As much as Zambia isn't at all wealthy, the little wealth we have is distributed. Income inequality is still a problem, but it's not as huge of a problem as it is in South Africa, a country proven to be the most socio-economically unequal society in the world. With Whiteness equating to wealth and Blackness and Coloredness equating to poverty, there are economically routed problems that affect the poor every day. High rates of crime and low rates of protection in the Townships, poor quality of education, catastrophic and almost genocidal rates of sexual and domestic violence, unemployment, Xenophobia, and so on.

Working with survivors, I watched them navigate the everyday effects of these problems as part of their livelihoods. I remember holding classes and having to cut them short because it was getting dark and they were more likely to get shot moving across the Township at night. I remember having to Uber them home when sexual violence rates spiked on public transportation. I remember listening to stories about how gangs

disrupted their kids' learning in schools in ways that profoundly annexed productivity. I remember stories about how they had to endure abuse till they found jobs or secured grants from the government, before finally being able to secure a meal a day when they left their abusers. I remember all sorts of heartbreaking stories that were rooted in poverty and, even more rooted in the unequal distribution of wealth. Expropriation without compensation needs to stop being just a South African issue, and start being a global conversation. It wasn't enough to impose global sanctions on Apartheid social structures. These policies need to transcend to reach economic structures as well.

24: Short Shorts

Journal Entry: July 5, 2025

I have a hard time with ignorant Africans. I feel a peculiar kind of frustration when my people are willfully ignorant. Especially when they feel the need to enforce that ignorance as the standard.

Remember how I said my Music for Activism class vindicated me in my past experience? Well, it vindicated me in the present too. My students were the epitome of passion and inquisitiveness. They were the type to stay back for hours after class when they were enjoying the lesson so much. That said, the work we did could get heavy. I taught them about structured systems and how art can be used to raise awareness, challenge, and work to abolish ways the systems functioned oppressively. To lighten the emotional load, we had a thirty-minute dance slot on Fridays to choreograph to music composed for social change. We danced to everything from Kendrick Lamar to Beyonce to Lucky Dube to Miriam Makeba. The most uplifting part was that we worked together in creating our dances to express what we wanted our audiences to feel.

One Friday, during our "*Freedom. Are We Really Free?*" unit, I wanted us to work on choreographing to Beyonće's "*Freedom*," so I encouraged them to come in their most comfortable clothing and get ready to make chain-breaking moves. I, for one, arrived in my gym shorts and a sweatshirt, ready to engage in physically-demanding collective self expression. I arrived ready for class, only for the Principal to pull me aside.

"*Your shorts are too short, please go change,*" she said. "*I don't want you to be offended, it's just that I don't want the students getting any ideas,*" she concluded. As if I was responsible for their thoughts.

The thing with me is, I'm good at shutting my mouth in restraint of being disrespectful. I don't have a problem controlling what comes out of my mouth. What I have immense trouble with is controlling my facial expressions when I hear such bullsh**. The stench of it constricts my face in ways I haven't quite grasped how to police. So, as she was talking, even though I was quiet, she kept defending her claims of my shorts potentially eliciting wrong thoughts in male students, probably because my face did all the talking for me.

"*You know, I just want us to maintain a standard,*" she defended, "*You're an instructor, and it's easy for people to take this the wrong way.*"

I wasn't going to lie to her and tell her that I couldn't afford clothes, because I wasn't clothless. But, as anyone who travels understands, luggage allowances aren't very accommodating of a complete exercise wardrobe that'll cater to every occasion or activity on your stay. Being in Cape Town, the only movement-friendly clothing I had

were the shorts I used to work out in and the pair of sweatpants I used for the dance segment of the class that just happened to be too stained to wear that day. But, regardless of whether or not I had desired articles of clothing available, her stance toward my supposed provocation unnerved me to the point where I wanted to get away from her and the class altogether.

In retrospect, I think it unnerved me because I was working with people who had survived sexual violence and their clothing choice was never the problem. Working with survivors of sexual violence who were raped even though they were covered from head to toe with a hijab and culturally appropriate loose-fitting dresses, and having someone tell me my shorts had the potential to elicit inappropriate thoughts in male students was a perspective I found disturbing. I found it more disappointing that she felt comfortable airing said perspective in a managerial capacity. A rapist, pervert, or sexual assaulter is who they are regardless of what may appear to be a provocation.

I sat there and listened to her speak and unnecessarily justify her claims. After a long session of her talking with her mouth and me with my face, I reminded myself of where I was. Africa. There's so much about my continent that I love, but there's so much of it I don't. The ways in which White Supremacy has colonially masked and sustained itself as African infuriate me. Before Europeans colonized us, all we covered were our genitals. Some tribes didn't even cover their breasts. When the White man colonized us, he came with his prudish ideologies on the human body and demanded that we cover up parts that were never naked to us to begin with. This school Principal deluded herself to the point of concluding her admonishment by saying, "*We are African at the*

end of the day," as if covering up were inherently African and showing skin wasn't part of our heritage.

Unfortunately however, her misconceived outlook on dressing, as well as many other neocolonial structures in African society, were mistaken as African values by the people upon whom they were forced. The average African knows, but seldom understands, that she was colonized. Now, I'm not saying we should go back to dressing as we did in the times of Shaka Zulu because, at the end of the day, even I reckon that some colonial paradigms are here to stay. But shaming and blaming women and girls for the actions and thoughts of males, perverted themselves by the colonial, capitalist, patriarchal standards needs to stop. The monolithic standard of how a female should dress is inherently violent. Neocolonialism presents itself in numerous ways, and how women dress and what we've been conditioned to think of as revealing is one of them. Our bodies are not just sex tools. The over-sexualization of our bodies is rooted in what White Supremacy normalizes as what we can reveal and can't, in part enforced by a shame-driven religion in part by White women, in service of the Patriarchy, to prevent their husbands and sons from desiring our taboo bodies. My thighs are provocative because the White standard is for them to be covered up. This is also the case for my stomach, waist, back, and shoulders. But this type of thinking has no place in an African society, because our bodies have culturally never just been for sex. With the animal skin covering only our genitalia, we knew that the exposed parts of ourselves were sacred, and denoted our shared human-spiritual connection.

The collective ignorance around issues of Capitalism, Christianity, Colorism, and Homophobia, is one of the main reasons why I have such a hard time staying home for too long in Zambia. African complacency with neocolonial norms drains me to the point where one of my motivators, when fundraising to serve in Cape Town, was the fear of having to be in Zambia for a whole year. I keep visits home short and sweet for this very reason.

One of the reasons I wanted to experience life in South Africa is its political makeup and history. Unlike other African countries, South Africa suffered under Apartheid, which emphasized separatism and settler colonialism, as opposed to Imperial Colonialism. This means that, although they were also subjugated and discriminated against, South Africans, unlike a lot of other Africans, could keep their ethnic ties without domanial interference. White people in South Africa wanted inequity and to live separately from the races they tamed as inferior. That's why, even to this day, a gratifying amount of South African youth are aware of what's neocolonial and what's not. What's systematically oppressive and what is in need of change. South African youth are also extremely proud of their heritage. They speak their native tongues with such pride that it elicits joy. It's so refreshing to see this deviation from the insistence on assimilation I see in Zambia. Most middle-class Gen-Z's I know back in Zambia can't speak their native tongues and aspire to cultural standards of Whiteness.

South African youth know what's White Supremacy and what's native African. I think it's because, when your oppressor lives with you, it's easier to pinpoint their impact. This rebellion against White oppression is evident in protests like

RhodesMustFall, a movement to strike down structures of colonial monuments at institutions of higher education, specifically, statues of John Cecil Rhodes. Young South Africans are intent on making their mark as a generation dedicated to mental and economic emancipation. Despite historic alienation, they are proud of their heritage and culture in ways I can only dream of for Zambians.

That's why the confrontation with the school Principal was exasperating to me. I wasn't prepared to deal with an educated South African woman, one who graduated from the Department of African Music at The University Of Cape Town, fit-shaming me in advance of my class on Beyoncé.

25: Jennifer

Journal Entry: May 25th, 2024

Where would I be, what would I have done, what would have become of my life in the U.S. without who Jennifer was for me? A friend, a mom—and— everything.

For my second year at Interlochen, my biggest struggle was where to go over breaks. Over one break, I decided to go to Alabama to be with Dalitso, my friend, who's also my play mum from Zambia. I thought it would be such a good idea, but oh buoy was I wrong. Both Dalitso and her roommate had boyfriends in different time zones. Dalitso being from Zambia and her roommate being from Rwanda, both left their men back home. This meant they talked to them at odd hours of the night and morning. Because the long-distance situation was one the both of them were in, they had a mutual consensus that there was not an "*off limits*" time to phone calls. Be it 3:00 a.m. or 6:00 a.m., one of them was talking to her boyfriend. And it was fine. As a squatter in their shared room, my boyfriendlessness didn't matter. Even though their giggles, flirting, or sometimes arguing woke me up numerous times, it didn't matter. They weren't

being selfish. That was honestly just how they managed, and I wasn't about to throw off their balance as a guest. Lord knows I didn't have the right to say anything. But that didn't change the fact that I was sleep-deprived and exhausted after a few sleepless nights. One morning, I woke up to Dalitso talking to her boyfriend at 6 a.m. on the twin bed we shared. I just got up and walked straight to the bathroom to cry. I had nowhere else to go.

As president of the International Student Union, I was in charge of the planning and logistics of our events. This also meant that, should any communications need to be made to higher-ups, I was the one to do it. This time, I needed to speak to the Dean, Ms. Wesling, about an unrelated but urgent matter on behalf of another student. On what was the fourth day of the two-week Spring break, I dialed her number.

"*Hey MK, how are you doing*?," she asked.

Now, one thing about me is I don't ask how someone is doing if I don't care to know. Subconsciously, I take every "*How are you*?" as a genuine inquiry about how I am genuinely doing, even when the truth is contrary to the superficial exchange of pleasantries. So, when Jennifer asked how I was doing, I told her that, well, truth be told, I wasn't doing very well and explained the situation. She felt bad for me, I could tell, but we both knew there was nothing either of us could do. So we went ahead with my purpose for calling and left it at that.

To my surprise, I received a call back from Jennifer ten minutes later. I thought we concluded the matter, so I reluctantly picked up her call again as I was trying to fall back asleep. "*I can't stand you practically turning over and waking up on the floor," she*

said remorsefully. "I want you to fly in to stay with me." Ms. Wesling proceeded to send me $200 for emergencies and booked my flight for 6:00 a.m. the next morning.

"*What's your real name? I want to call you by your real name*," she insisted.

"*Mwila*," I said. "*It's pronounced, "Mw-ee-la*," I reiterated.

She waited for me at the airport and then took me to a Chipotle-like lunch spot. It was when we were talking that she showed me her hand and I gazed at it piercingly. She had written the pronunciation of my name on her hand. I was beyond flattered. As if flying me in wasn't enough, she wanted me to feel at home by calling me by my real name.

"*Thank you, Ms. Wesling*," I said with a smile.

"*Please call me Jennifer*," she insisted.

After lunch, we went to her house, and I met her mum and dad, Judy and Bill. From the first moment I met Judy, I knew I'd love her from how she hugged me. She gave me such a comforting embrace that I could feel the travel fatigue leave my body. She was so bright and so kind. She reminded me of my grandma. She also cooked and baked with so much love, you could taste it in every bite. She was the type to insist I ate all I could. Even when I told her I was full, she would slide more and more food my way. In another life, she'd be so African.

Bill, on the other hand, loved it when I sang. On my first dinner with Jennifer and her parents, Bill wanted me to sing "*Fly Me to the Moon*," and, as someone who's not Jazzy, I gave it my best shot. It turns out my best shot made the hoop, because I sang

the last note to him and he was in tears. I had to stop singing and tell him to stop crying. It was so humbling, regardless.

As I write this, I have such a bright smile on my face. When it was almost time to go back to school, Jennifer drove me to the grocery store to get some supplies and said, "*You fell into a pile of shit and you're coming out smelling like a rose*." Even though I laughed at this statement, no one's ever said anything more truthfully comforting to me. From the day I gazed at Jennifer's palm, she was my saving grace.

Every break, I didn't only have a house, I had a home, and she made sure of it. Even outside of being at her house, she took care of my needs. I remember when I went home for summer break, my mum asked me how much essentials like toothpaste and bathing soap cost in the U.S., and, for the life of me, I couldn't tell even if I wanted to. Ever since Jennifer adopted me, there were a lot of my needs that I didn't have to worry about. She would even pay me to wash her car sometimes… and she would overpay me. She knew I had an obsession with Häagen-Dazs ice cream and Starbucks coffee and she would randomly just leave packs of coffee or tubs of ice cream for me at the front desk of my dorm. For my senior year, she also made sure I had a fridge in my dorm room. How? I still don't know. When I needed a break from campus, I had dinners and lunches amidst the loving warmth of her house and family. And, when I needed a venue for my club parties and gatherings, she'd let me take fifteen or twenty people to her backyard hot tub. She took me to the point where I was on their Christmas card. She got me so many gifts and gift cards for Christmas that I still feel so loved when I stare at what she got me and what I got on her buck.

Being in the U.S. didn't only expose me to a new culture and a new place, it also put me in a new class. For the first time in my life, I belonged to the lowest socio-economic class, and it was difficult for me to navigate. But Jennifer made it so much easier. Without her, I don't think I would have made it…

Every day in Cape Town, I tried to be like Jennifer for the survivors. I didn't have the financial means or institutional power that Jennifer had, but I had the will to be their home. I tried to create a space that felt like a breather from the despair their lives caused them.

Sometimes, I'd treat them to cake and coffee or ice cream, depending on the weather and our moods. Or I'd take them into town or to one of the malls, like Waterfront. Some of the women, despite living in Cape Town all of their adult lives, had never even been to the Waterfront or adjacent nice places. They simply couldn't afford to think about going to places like Starbucks, Häagen-Dazs, Mug & Bean, and the Dairy Den—places I naively thought every South African knew. Like Jennifer did, it was important to me that I gave them a life I wished they could afford one day themselves. I fueled them, because Jennifer fueled me.

Jennifer taught me how kindness works cyclically. That's why I'm never hesitant to extend an act of kindness to someone. I know my kindness may cycle to someone who needs and deserves it. Just as Jennifer's kindness cycled to these survivors, people in way more dire, more poverty-stricken and sadder circumstances than I'd ever known.

Jennifer also taught me the power of vulnerability. When you're brought up to be a hyper independent caregiver like I was, asserting your needs and letting other people help you can be difficult. But Jennifer taught me that it's okay to let others know when times are tough, while not forgetting that people can only help you when they know what is going on, so it's okay to be vulnerable about that too.

26: Rethink my Time

The NGO for which I worked was established specifically for survivors of Sexual and Domestic Violence. Upon my arrival, they were celebrating thirty years of existence. The organization functioned like a well-oiled machine. I was impressed by its fluid operations. Everyone knew their jobs. Social workers, general workers, auxiliary social workers, first responders–every single part of the organization intersected cohesively with the other parts to create a synergistic support system for these women. And this was helpful, no doubt, when your job and part to play was well-defined. But the codified system didn't work out as advantageously, because my part was neither defined nor established. I was there to bring in new ideas and use the arts to promote healing.

Upon my arrival, my first month-long assignment was to observe the way the organization flowed so I could better analyze how artistic healing could fit into existing mental health initiatives. It was in my observation phase that I identified the necessity for additional instruction in economic and civic empowerment that later formed the idea for the Wholeful Healing Journey.

Working with the survivors and MOSAIC was a joy. It was devastating to see and hear what their lives were like, what they were subjected to daily, and their challenges from all sectors, but it was invigorating to see the women find camaraderie and strength

in a community where they were given the space to build. It was rewarding to hold a financial literacy class and see someone's outlook on money change and have them show you, a few weeks later, the money they had been saving. It was even more rewarding to hold a human rights class and civics awareness class and see the pride in the women's faces when they realized that they too could assert their rights.

My project manager had a "set-in-stone" leadership style, which clashed with the goals of opening up women's hearts through music and the arts. For a month, however, I remembered my friend's advice from Interlochen and I *"sucked it up*." "*I am here for the women*," I told myself repeatedly. Then she went on leave, and the creative programming and courses I created began to bear fruit.

After the program manager returned, I asked to meet with her to share updates on what has been done. I accidentally scheduled the meeting for the wrong day, so I texted her to apologize and ask for any available time to reschedule. Opening my DM's, I found a six-minute voice note telling me how ineffective I'd been in her absence and that I needed to "**rethink my time**" with the organization. Although she had not checked in about any update, she admonished: "*You can't do this, this is not a tuck shop!.*" (A tuckshop is the Southern African version of a mini-cafeteria.)

It turns out my program manager was responsible for overseeing every sector of the organization. She reported directly to the Director. This meant everyone had had a dose of her at some point, and, from their hushed comments, they didn't seem to enjoy it when they did.

Now, if you're in a position of privilege, you might be wondering, "*Why hasn't she been held to account?*" Well, it's because no one reported her. The culture of "*sucking it up*" and not holding leaders accountable because of fear is one that is prevalent within such hierarchical, top-down organizations. In a society where job scarcity is high, moreover, job security is all that matters. That's why the employees at the Centre just took her b.s.. It was almost as if it was an unspoken rule to just shut up at work and rant at home.

This was the culture in Zambia as well. Except in Zambia, it is even normal for bosses to yell and scream at their employees. Employees just have to "*put up with it*," because they can't afford to lose their jobs or be subjected to more hostility by confronting their boss. Had it not been for my experience in the workforce in the U.S., I would have been oblivious to how problematic such working conditions were. They would have been irritating, but I would have seen them as a normal part of being employed.

In retrospect, I remember being shocked at how kind people were in America. People in customer service, my hosts, people I'd just met on the street, my school's representatives, etc. displayed acts of Unsolicited generosity, uncompensated acts of kindness that weren't normal to me.

But, I guess when you're a cashier in Zambia with two kids and are only making $150 a month, you have a hard time being kind. I remember being on a bus from Lusaka's city center and, for three minutes straight, a lady yelled at the driver because he missed her stop. She would later go on to punctuate her tirade, "*ise benangu sitina*

fole, pa pita na one week," which loosely translated to, "*I haven't gotten paid, and it's been a week past my pay-day*." Sometimes, businesses don't generate enough to pay their workers on time. But there's a culture of worker exploitation in much of Zambia. It thrives because people in power know their employees have nowhere else to go. Luckily, I did.

27: Can I Please get a Hug?

During my first week in Cape Town, I met a girl named Pepsile in a salon. I said hi to her, and we hit it off pretty well. She seemed sweet, and I'm all for that energy. We exchanged numbers, and she promised to help ease my anxieties of being new to the city. We later made dinner plans and, although it was challenging to decide on a place, we settled for Mama Africa. (Emmanuel, funny enough, took me there after I'd already been with Pepsile.)

"*I hope you don't mind that I brought a friend,*" Pepsile said. "*The more the merrier,*" I smiled. Her friend, Thendo, started by scrolling through her phone, but, slowly, she got used to me. We ended up having a great time. I bonded with Pepsile and Thendo on many things. Like me, they weren't nightlife people. They were both intelligent, they were both single and open to mingling, and they liked to listen to music and have fun. Pepsile was sweet and jovial, and Thendo was more reserved. I was relieved that I'd made friends with them since it was my first few weeks of being in Cape Town. At dinner, we talked about possible trips we could take to see other countries. Zanzibar was the cheapest, hence, most doable, destination.

Two days after we hung out, however, Pepsile stopped responding to my texts. I tried to call her to no avail either. A week later, she came back, claiming to have gone

on a "*social media hiatus*." I understood. But the funny thing was, even after her so-called hiatus, this trend didn't detour.

When she finally chose to reach out and respond, prefacing her inquiry with apologies and excuses of being busy, we made plans to get dinner. Ten minutes before the agreed time, she canceled. Unlike facial restraint, I've mastered text restraint as well. I kept it cute and just said "*okay*." I was over it.

This was pretty much what my social life looked like in Cape Town. As a sociable introvert, I didn't have any problem meeting people and hitting it off. But the Cape-Townian culture of flaking and canceling turned me off to the point where I didn't have it in me to try and make any more friends. As someone content in my own company, there's so much about being by myself that makes me feel good. But I also value authentic and mutual relationships and the joy they elicit.

Being surrounded by survivors in their 40s and 50s had its wisdom-bestowing perks, but I needed to be reminded that I was only 19. I rarely felt so. My home life, paying electricity, grocery, water, and rent bills screamed adult. My work life, adult. Being texted and called for emergencies? Adult. Everything about my life seemed to categorize me as an adult. But it would have been so nice to have friends and experiences that could remind me I was only just officially entering that category.

And, as a physical touch fanatic, I also wanted hugs. Weeks could go by without getting a real one, and I felt lonely. The women I met my age were flaky, and the males just wanted to be in my pants. So, I felt oddly alone and touch-deprived, surrounded by people.

28: The Calass Foundation

Journal Entry: July 20th, 2024

This woman is the epitome of extraordinary. Women like her who've answered to a call bigger than their own selves are the ones I seek to emulate. I can't wait to learn from who she is.

After the Centre and I went our separate ways, I met with the women over the weekends. The Rainbow Academy let me use their space. It worked out so well, because we had two big rooms, one we used for meditation and art, and the other we used for financial literacy and English classes. As fulfilling as these classes were, I wanted to have a larger impact. So I emailed as many organizations as I could, and the Callas Foundation responded to me.

They told me to come to their offices, so I could speak to the head of the organization, Caroline Peters. During my talk with Caroline, I learned that she purposefully built the organization in the house she grew up in. "*There was no better way to answer my calling than to build my foundation at my foundation*," she said.

She gave me a glimpse into her trajectory thus far. She started out working in corporate, earning what would put her in the upper-middle class category. But she felt purposeless and unfulfilled. With kids and a family to feed, she quit her job and started volunteering at NGOs, where she realized it was her calling to work with survivors of sexual and domestic violence. She would eventually get a paying job, but the money was nothing in comparison to what she was earning before. "*I went from making R15,000 to R5000,*" she explained. But she said she ended up exactly where she was supposed to, helping the people she'd been called to help.

We talked about everything from the Eurocentricity of feminism to the beauty of Cape Town galvanizing its ugly inequality. She would later tell me that she doesn't believe that she's "*Colored*." "*I think it's ridiculous that we still adhere to the colonial constructs that were made to divide us,*" she argued. *"I am a Black Woman*."

Her stance on her identity was so interesting to me, particularly because I'd just been in the U.S., where biracial people were claiming their dual identities proudly, asserting that one didn't take away from the other. And then, I went to South Africa and mixed people, socially constructed during Apartheid as "*Colored*," were moving towards the opposite goal, affirming themselves in solidarity with their Blackness. Caroline was a force to be reckoned with. She did everything from speaking at U.N. conferences to lecturing in the U.S. at Rollins College in Florida. With every revelation, I was more and more inspired.

I did, however, find the Callas Foundation at a moment when they were having a very rough time. They had a Femicide (female-genocide) on their hands. One of their

survivors had just died. Her husband killed her. I was extremely sad and surprised to hear so, but my time in Cape Town doing this work would eventually take the “surprised” feeling away from such cases. It unfortunately happens a lot. South Africa isn’t only the rape capital of the world, it also has one of the highest global femicide rates. Every six hours, a woman dies at the hands of her partner. That’s three to four women EVERY DAY. Even more are sexually assaulted. At this point, it’s past a crisis, it’s a genocide. It’s the deliberate infliction of detriment on a particular group of people to make their living conditions unbearable. It’s a genocide against women. And people merely view these women as statistics. Women in South Africa aren’t just dying. They are killed by the multitudes EVERY DAY.

Unlike a lot of organizations, the Callas Foundation’s work didn’t stop when their survivors died. Not only were Caroline and her team in Court every day, opposing bail and meeting with lawyers, but they also were helping with funeral costs and planning.

“*We are African. I want to give her a dignified send-off. She deserves that at the very least,*” she said. The fact that Caroline prefaced this statement by saying, “*We are African*,” was so comforting and life-affirming at the same time. All I could do was smile and inwardly rejoice at the thought of working with her.

I was scheduled to meet with the psychologists the next day to assess how I could integrate music and art into their already existing therapeutic programming, but I woke up and couldn’t move. The monthly caught me off guard, and my cramps ached my entire body. I was almost crying in pain. I emailed Caroline and let her know that I couldn’t make it, but I was eager to reschedule. Turns out, I missed the window and I

wasn't going to get it back. After two weeks of politely asking when I could come back into the office again, Caroline let me know that their organization had been having a hard time recovering from the femicide, and they just couldn’t admit anyone new to the team right now. Bringing me up to speed would mean extra work for their limited number of psychologists, and they couldn’t afford to train me when they had children without a mother to care for.

I wonder what would have happened if I had attended that meeting. I wonder…

29: Nomvuzi

Journal Entry: Aug 9th, 2024

What if I hadn't come to Cape Town? Would things be better or worse for the lives I served? Would someone fill up my vacancy? Or would there even be a vacancy? I see my impact, but do my survivors and students feel it? Am I actually doing anything?

All the women I served lived lives I wouldn't wish on anyone. I was often on the brink of tears when we talked. But Nomvozi had to have it the worst. One day, in the middle of Cape Town's rainy winter, I dropped her a text, just to check on her. "*How are you, Nom*?" One thing the women knew was that, when I asked that question, I wanted to hear the truth. No matter how heavy they thought it was. Nom understood this, and she proceeded to tell me that she wasn't fine at all. Her house was flooded, because her roof was destroyed. Everything in her house was soaked. This was a two-bedroom house, accommodating eight people.

Nom lived with her husband and was still married to him, but this was primarily because neither of them could afford a divorce. Both are migrants from the Eastern Cape, living in government housing, and neither of them have anywhere else to go. She

once said to me that the most exhausting part of her life was sharing a bed with someone she despised.

It wasn't only rainy in Cape Town in July, it was cold. Cold to the point where it reminded me of Michigan. Nom desperately needed a heater, as the cold and wet surroundings weren't exactly compatible, so I desperately needed to take her one. I bought her a heater and a few supplies and set off to give them to her. But I struggled to secure an Uber, as would be expected. In Cape Town, the Townships are nicknamed "Locations" to denote their collective dangerous attributes.

Whenever I wanted to take supplies to one of the survivors in need, I'd struggle to find a driver who was okay with driving me to my destination, which, when it came to the survivors' houses, was always referred to as "Locations." Immediately, they'd see any of the "Locations," and they'd cancel. Sometimes, I'd have to try up to five times to find a driver willing to take me there. That's how bad it was.

I would eventually secure an Uber to go to Nom's house and what I saw made my heart drop. The house was completely flooded. My wide-leg pants were halfway soaked walking in the door. Her daughters, who typically slept on the floor, moved their beddings to her bedroom and shared the bed with their parents. This totaled up to six people on one bed. Her kids looked so sad. Everyone in the house just looked so exhausted and torn.

"*How much is it to fix your roof?*," I asked.

"*R4000 ($180)*," she responded.

This might not seem like a lot of money to many, but this was Nom's whole pay. Fixing her roof would mean she and her kids wouldn't eat for a whole month. On the other hand, she could barely pay her debts, let alone save for emergencies, so she had nowhere to start.

How can eight people possibly live in a flooded house for a whole season?

I'm not going to act like poverty and its fruits don't exist back home, cause they do. Unlike South Africa, poor people in Zambia don't even have the privilege of grants. But, before I left for the U.S., I was too enclosed in my middle-class bubble to ever be informed of other people's living conditions. I only became aware of financial privilege and its hierarchical accessibilities when I went to live in the U.S.. Being among the working class gave me a view from the very bottom of just how much easier life could have been. So the cries of the working class are the ones I now hear louder than I'd ever heard before. That's why it was so important to me that I didn't just have supplies or essentials to deliver to the women's houses when they needed something. I needed to show them that, despite how dangerous or unwelcoming their homes felt by capitalist standards, I was willing to be a part of their lives fully, not just in times of crisis. But my commitment to see them in the light of our shared humanity didn't take away the emotions that I felt. Seeing how they lived broke my heart. Seeing Nom and her kids live like that shattered me. *What if I hadn't come to Cape Town? What would she have done right now?* This was the most painful question.

I would end up helping her with her roof by giving her a portion of the fixing fee from the programming money I had raised in the U.S.. Together, we then drafted another budget plan to get her to a point where she could pay the rest. We also worked on buying her daughters a bed.

30: Afro Corner

Journal Entry: Aug 12, 2024

What you see is never really what you get, eh? The resilience of women will continually inspire me. It's funny how African culture can save you and ruin you at the same time. Why, as a people, do we normalize these practices?

One exciting part of going to Cape Town for me was finally being able to afford to get my hair done. A luxury I gave up for two years while living in the States. Though Cape Town hair isn't nearly as cheap as it is in Lusaka, it wasn't nearly as expensive for me as it would have been in the U.S.. Hair that would have cost me $100 in America cost me $50 in Cape Town. So Mama got her baddie on.

The nearest salon to me was called Afro Corner. The first time I went, I did bubble braids and, while I was paying for my hair, the owner of the salon asked me what my name was for the records.

"*Mw-ee-la,*" I said steadily, assuming he, like many South Africans, couldn't say it.

"*Where are you from, Mwila?*," he asked.

"*Zambia*," I said.

"*Oh really? My wife's from Zambia*," he replied, while motioning towards her.

"*Come here and meet your siste*r," he gestured towards his wife.

Whenever I was in the U.S. and I met another Zambian, I'd get so excited. It was to the point where I'd ask a random stranger for a hug just because they were Zambian. In South Africa, I would be excited nonetheless, but not to the same degree I felt in the U.S.. Probably because I didn't feel as detached from my people there as I did in America.

I said, "*Muli Shani*," which is Bemba for "How are you?," smiled, and then left. I probably was too distraught at the fact that Cape Town hair cost me twice as much as it would in Zambia to make too much conversation with the price makers.

I'd eventually go back to the salon for my next hairstyle and, this time, I was determined to get to know my Zambian sister a little more. It turns out she was born in Zambia and left for Congo when she was two. She moved to Cape Town to study medicine. She enrolled in English classes for a year with the hope of doing so. And then, suddenly, her dad died, and her dreams died there too.

Why didn't she just continue with school?, you may be wondering. Well, when her dad died, her dad's family took everything her dad owned. Land, money, clothes, businesses—they took everything. It's unfortunately very common among a lot of Africans, especially when the one person in the family who died was the financially stable one. She told me that, when her dad was still alive, they lived nice lives. She didn't lack for anything. But that changed in the blink of an eye. With the little her mum

had, she had to sacrifice for her younger siblings so that they could continue with school. Along with her dad went her dreams, and she had to actualize new ones.

She worked multiple jobs, from being a housekeeper, to a security guard, to a street vendor. Looking at how popular and busy her salon was, I would not have guessed the big boss of the salon was once a domestic worker. She expressed how she never saw herself building an enterprise that did as well as Afro Corner did, but her determination and her husband's saw them through.

I knew something was different about her when her workers called her "*mum*" instead of "*ma'am*." It was clear that she went out of her way to make them feel at home, a culture someone who's never been among the working class might not feel the need to cultivate. I was glad my Zambian sister told me her story. It puts things into perspective. The freedom and camaraderie in that salon were telling of a culture where everyone saw each other for who they were, not for what they did or how much money they made. That's probably why I gravitated towards the Afro Corner and didn't let anyone else touch my hair. It was gratifying to feel, while I sat in that chair, that I was a part of it.

31: “Men Too” Movement

Journal Entry: August 12th, 2024

It’s funny how oppressive systems created by groups of people with power can affect the very creators as well: White Supremacy, Christian Hegemony, The Patriarchy, etc. It’s funny how these systems are so inherently detrimental that they even subjugate those in the positions of power.

I took an Uber from Parklands to my studio in the City Center on a particularly dark and windy night. Because it was 10:00 p.m., I didn’t have the highest hopes for my ride, but it turns out, I was in for a surprise. As I usually do, I got into my Uber and said “*hello*” with a smile. My driver asked me what an American was doing in Cape Town. “*Oh, I’m well thanks for asking*,” I sarcastically replied. He laughed, and we greeted each other and made some casual conversation.

“*So, are you on vacation?*,” he asked.

“*No, quite the contrary. I came here to work with survivors of sexual and domestic violence*,” I replied.

"*Oh*," he paused. Then said, "*Have you ever worked with males?*"

"*No, I have not actually,*" I responded.

"Do you know why that is?," he asked.

"*Well, statistically, cases of males living with abuse are disproportionately much lower,*" I said.

He then explained that he acknowledged the fact that survivors of abuse were typically women, but he was the exception.

I was in a marriage for fifteen years, and my ex-wife used to hit me for a good chunk of those years. And, having been raised in a home where we were told never to hit women, whenever she hit me, I just walked away so she could cool down. Then, I'd come back and she'd act like nothing had happened.

I was shocked at what an unexpected personal detour this conversation had taken so quickly, but I was also humbled that he opened up to me. I asked him why he chose to handle the abuse the way he did, and he claimed to have no choice.

"*As a man, I'm supposed to have my house in order and maintain it as such. How was I going to look telling people that I, a man, a leader, couldn't lead in a way where my wife didn't fear hitting me?*," he asked. "*I was too ashamed. Also, I was much bigger than her–over a foot taller and much heavier. No one was going to believe me.*"

At this point, my mind shifted from listening to him as a person to listening to him as a victim of a system bigger than a single being, the Patriarchal system. I don't believe the Patriarchy was established to subjugate necessarily. I believe it was designed to ensure the fluidity of the family structure. One provides, and the other takes

care of the kids. One leads, and the other submits. However, my beef with the Patriarchy is how it gives responsibilities of “power” to the man, disempowering the woman by default. It’s specific about the need for men to appear as leaders, shot callers, holders of strength, holders of gentility, etc.. With the patriarchy, a man can’t be seen as a victim of abuse because he has the power, he “*lets*” her abuse him. No one can abuse the leader unless the leader “lets” it happen. And, of course, the problem is not with the abuser, it’s with him being a “*weak man who can’t lead.*” The weak man who can’t use his patriarchal power effectively. I just listened and hummed in agreement. I wanted him to know that I didn’t only want to know, I also appreciated him allowing me to be in the know.

> “*I didn’t even divorce her because of the abuse. I divorced her because she had an affair,*” he said.
>
> “*Why didn’t you divorce her because of the abuse?*,” I asked.
>
> “*Well, I come from a very family-oriented background, and I still hold family values dear. And, at the time, I didn’t want to be the laughingstock of the family you know? The only one who got a divorce. Everyone in my family was happily and successfully married, and I didn’t want to be the embarrassment,*” he continued.

This was a response I recognized all too well from the women I worked with. Through attending support groups, I would learn that shame, people pleasing, and a tarnished social image were motific fears in survivors’ forebodings when it came to leaving their abusers. It was such a shame.

How is it that people only learn how to love themselves later in life? How is it that one could get married, have kids, have grandkids, nieces, and nephews, and give all this love before learning how to give it to oneself? How do people derive from the happiness that comes from having kids, being married, and building a family, before they learn that they are responsible for their own happiness? How is it that one could dedicate their livelihood to protecting their kids and partners from anything and anyone harmful, without ever learning to protect their own peace? How is it that one can have a rich and lengthy hierarchy of people they intentionally give love to and care about, and unintentionally put themselves at the bottom of the very hierarchy? How could one go about their whole lives loving everybody but oneself?

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During my one-month Tinder flop, I met a guy who described himself as Selfless. My red flag radar immediately waved at sky-high levels because he clearly thought this was a good attribute. He glowed with so much pride saying how he was a nice guy who put others first and went out of his way to be nice to people. This sounds good in theory, but is detrimental in practice. Selfishness and Selflessness aren't Black and White. There's a healthy grey in between. You can think of, love, and give to others, while still

being cautious of leaving enough of yourself to thrive. One doesn't take away from the other. They healthily coincide. Unfortunately, very few people are lucky enough to be raised with this ethos, because either our parents never realize it, or they realize it when it's too late to instill it in their children. I see the repercussions from the lack of this ethos are exacerbated by the roles the patriarchy curates for women and men. When met are taught that their sole role is to provide for others, they don't necessarily include themselves. I grew up with a dad who'd make sure everyone in the house had something nice to wear for school, church, and/or work, but he would go years without buying himself anything. Not because he didn't have the money to, but because he felt it was better and more purposefully spent on the people he was supposed to provide for.

My mum also delved into what the patriarchy called for her to be, without grace or kindness to herself. After a long day of work, she didn't rest or recharge. She went straight to the kitchen to make us lunch for the next day. "*Motherhood knows no rest*" was the amplified message in our household. I saw my parents be who they were, and, unguided, I learned how to play in their roles. I see the "*Selfless*" culture in my siblings and friends, and I bet they learned it from their parents too.

But this imbalanced approach to loving people is unhealthy, and we need to start treating it as such. It starts with a dad who doesn't give to himself, then ends with a child who doesn't know when to leave an abusive man/woman, because he doesn't know that his love for her is just as important as his love for himself. We end up with adults who spend their whole lives in the interpersonal consciousness of a child.

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"*Why didn't you ever report your wife to authorities?*," I asked him.

"They were never going to believe me," he responded. "I also was just too ashamed. I'm a man, I can't be vulnerable like that with other men."

After my deliberate silence in fear of saying something invalidating, he explained how his ex-wife would later falsely accuse him of raping her, so, at a time when he could have been filing a case against her for abuse, he was trying to prove his innocence. He was thankful, however, that the judge saw through her and identified the holes in her story, saying to her, "*Listen here, woman, don't come here lying about being a victim of sexual violence when you haven't been, because there are women who come to this Court every day who have gone through this trauma, and you're giving them a bad name*." After hearing this, I was thankful for the judge too.

"*I'm writing a book,*" I said. *"May, I please write about this?*"

"*Oh, of course, of course*."

It's a damn shame I never got his name.

32: Richfield College

My story garnered some local attention, and I received an invitation to speak at Richfield College in Cape Town. At first, I wasn't sure my words belonged at a business school, but I decided to use this opportunity to talk about the lessons I had learned so far in South Africa and the reason I came in the first place:

I have a vendetta against heroism, I said*, because, as a concept, it's a far-fetched and difficult-to-attain acclamation that can only be bestowed on a person who has done extraordinary things. But, the truth is, we should all strive to be heroes in our daily lives, especially for the women around us. If there's anything my experience working with survivors has taught me, it's that women in need need more help than we realize. So, just be a hero. And, while doing so, remember you're not only a citizen of this country, you are a citizen of this world. It's your responsibility to make the problems of this world your business. We need to be each other's heroes.*

When I started looking for ways to be of service, I continued, *I found that my neighboring country, South Africa, was in the midst of a genocide, a female genocide. As hyperbolic as it may sound, when one woman is killed every six hours at the hands of her partner, and when over 53,800 women and girls are*

raped every year, that is the deliberate infliction of detriment–it is State-sactioned murder.

I ended my Women's Day speech by saying:

In conclusion, I wanna give a special shout-out to Black women, because I know holding the Intersection of being Black and being a Woman is like being Black twice. You are beautiful, you are worthy, and you are everything the world says you are not. Black women fuel everything I do. The feminist movement was not meant to include Black women, and the anti-racist movement was not intended to include Black women either. So we haven't only been historically marginalized by our oppressors, but also by the movements that were supposed to liberate us. I'm intentional about stating that I'm not a feminist, I'm a proud Afro-feminist. My work is to advance Black women–a group of women who have been deprived of a voice and a platform for too long. A group that's been left no choice but to speak out, even if you only hear their screams.

I received a standing ovation, for which I was taken aback. I guess I'd never thought of myself as a speaker. I thought of myself as many things: an Afro-Feminist, an activist, a scholar, an artist, a sister, a daughter, a friend, but not a speaker. The funny thing was, I had won awards for speaking at Youth in Government and at Model United Nations competitions in high school. In these competitions, however, I was speaking "as" someone, not necessarily as myself. Sharing my own story was liberating. I didn't have to "have a point." I *was* the point.

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I started speaking in church. I grew up Seventh Day Adventist. If you know anything about this Christian denomination, you know it's very community-engagement focused. Everyone from Age 6 to Age Infinity is catered to with a specific club and a coinciding program. From Age 6 to 10, I was in the Adventurer Club, and that was where my foundation for becoming an orator. I participated in everything from *Bible* debates to Poetry readings, to presentations on making religious-themed crafts. Then, as a Pathfinder, from age 10 to 15, I started to give presentations on whatever I was assigned by the club leaders. It got to the point where they would just let me choose the theme. I continued speaking at whatever academic institution I attended. At The American International School Of Lusaka and, especially, at Interlochen Center for the Arts, I was asked to speak countless times.

As I grow older, I'm realizing that liking something and being passionate about something are two different concepts. When you like something, you do it because you enjoy it. But when you're passionate about something, you do it even when you don't like it. I only truly began to grow a passion for speaking when I spoke about the experiences of women in South Africa. At Richfield College, young women came up to me after the speech and asked me what I thought about how they could help. I glowed inside.

Later, on the elevator, a young man asked me when I was going back home.

"*I don't quite know yet. I'm not done with my work here,*" I responded.

"*No, you should go home, sisi. They need more help there*," he would counter.

I then realized he took umbridge to me speaking about the genocide against women in his country. My heart sank as the elevator reached the ground floor.

It’s funny how financial privilege can distance a person from the struggles that come from being who you are if you are at the bottom of the social hierarchy. And good for those who don’t know what it means to be Black Woman in South Africa’s neocolonial, capitalist, White monopoly society. But it’s a despairing burden for those who have to carry it and it’s exacerbated by their wealthy brother and sister’s willful Oblivion. I find myself being madder at the Black elite than I am at Whiteness. I felt like retreating.

33: What do I want?

I met Shaun at his part-time job at Total Sports, and we later ran into each other again in the building where we both lived. I thought he was cute and calm, so, when he asked for my Instagram, I didn't hesitate. After two weeks of planning around my schedule and his student and part-time work obligations, we eventually took a walk to Häagen-Dazs on Kloof Street, where I would introduce him to my favorite cold desserts–Lemon and Raspberry sorbets!!

I had such a great time with Shaun. He was kind, a good listener, an interesting conversationalist, and warm company. He texted me the next day offering to cook for me, and, with my tiny kitchen that is not at all chef-conducive, I took him up on it with excitement. After the good meal he made me, I cuddled with him on the couch, while we watched All American amidst his confusion and my subsequent explanations of HBCU culture. These are the times when I feel more American than I should.

Being with Shaun after being with Emmanuel was definitely an adjustment. And "being" in the sense of getting to know him, not being together. Emmanuel was assertive. He didn't ask to kiss me, he just did. He also was very confident and sure of himself. He didn't need me to mother him, a trait I found refreshing despite being a novice to dating. Emmanuel was not a conversationalist either. It was very clear that he

liked to make out more than he liked to talk. Whereas with Shaun, all we did was talk. He was also conversely very cautious of my comfort levels–he didn't even dare to touch my hair without asking. He was very shy and, pretty clearly, still figuring himself out. Shaun was not the dominant type of male provider Emmanuel was. He was a student and Emmanuel was an established entrepreneur. But my confusion came when I had dated both and wasn't sure I liked either to the extent of wanting to commit to seeing them more exclusively.

My motive behind getting to know guys in Cape Town was to figure out what type of men I liked, but it started to feel like I didn't quite like anything. That my options were working to my detriment more than they were to my advantage, and that I wasn't going to achieve any clarity despite the array of guys who had potential to help me get there.

Growing up, I felt like a burden whenever I asked for help. So I've always looked at the lifestyle I desire and the things I want as my responsibilities. But, at the same time, I never got to be spoiled, so I paradoxically crave that kind of treatment. I dream of someone bringing me flowers or noticing what I liked and then surprising me by gifting it to me. But my problem is that I'll never ask for what I want. I don't really know how. And I also don't know how to receive the love I desire because no one has shown me how. Emmanuel understood this. He saw that, past my independence was a longing to not have to constantly be that way. Shaun didn't. On the other hand, Shaun saw me for who I was and what I aspired to be. I could tell his attraction to me was deeper than just physical desire, and it was an arousing way to be admired. He made me feel seen.

Emmanuel didn't. And of course, no one's perfect. I wasn't expecting anyone to be. But they both failed to meet my needs in ways that made me wonder if anyone could. I wondered if it was because I felt too connected to the larger world. The typical timeframe for people to embrace generative consciousness happens after retirement; that's when most people feel a responsibility to take up a guardianship role over the disenfranchised and devote themselves to helping others. But I took this on at an age when I hadn't even figured out how to help myself. The effects of this would eventually seep into my personal life. As If I hadn't been adultified my whole life, this time I did to myself. And, at times when I had to remind myself I was "**only 19**" and shouldn't have to have it all figured out, it took everything in me to not fall and burst into clarity-seeking tears. These were the times when I was confused.

34: DMH Global

While viewing Instagram stories with my head on my pillow and my mind in recline, I came across an ad for auditions at Camps Bay High School. "*Singers, actors, dancers, and models are welcome,*" it said. I had never been to a formal audition before and I missed being around the performance atmosphere of Interlochen, so I figured I'd try it out. Two days later, I took an Uber to Camps Bay High School and sat among over 100 talents, all seeking an opportunity to "*make it*." Settling in, the powers that be spoke about the profuse benefits of belonging to iPop Global. They claimed they could put successful auditioners in front of the "*best international agencies in Los Angeles*."

Sitting there and listening to them had to have been one of the most internally disorienting experiences I had had to date in Cape Town. I was so uncomfortable. Nothing felt right. I knew I didn't wanna perform any more right now, but I didn't know that the prospect of auditioning would unnerve me as much as it did. I tried to convince myself that I was *"just nervous*," but I wasn't a novice to nerves. I was just a novice to the feelings I had about auditioning. Fighting the urge to just walk away without taking my turn, I decided to volunteer to go first to get it over with. "*Look at you girl! Such a unique and beautiful look you have*," the auditioner said. I smiled and aimed to melt her heart with Nina Simone's "Feeling Good." "Beautiful, Beautiful, Beautiful," she said. The

next I heard from her was for a call back. "*You are a gorgeous singer with an amazing presence, and I want you to be a part of us,*" she gushed.

I would later find out that the training bill leading up to the agency auditions in Los Angeles was over $4000. It was a total scam. Before I could feel sorry for myself, I started to think of what a privilege it was to even know what my limitations were, to be exposed to the things I otherwise would not have been able to understand and to evaluate them for what they were. Whereas some of the women with whom I worked didn't even have the option of finishing high school, I had had the opportunity to attend one of the best performing arts schools in the world. I didn't want to perform right now, regardless. But the level of unnerve I felt at the audition wasn't just because of what I did or didn't want to do, but more so because of how incongruous it felt to my purpose at this time. Prepping to go to Los Angeles just wasn't what I was called to do. My calling was in service to the survivors and in their upliftment. My calling was prepping and helping *them*.

I believe that God speaks to me. I'm not affiliated with religion anymore, but I believe in God. It would be ridiculous not to. God has shown me marveling power, time and again, and, without fail, speaks to me in distinctly divine ways. I'm even at a point in my life where, whenever I identify directives from God, I just listen and abdicate. There were times when I would try to plead for things to go the way I thought they should, but I realize that God is not God to give me what I think I want. God is God to show me what is wanted from me.

My whole life, I've known I'm special. It's not an affirmation I've needed from anyone. God's constant guidance in my life, often manifested in redirection, has shown me that everything I am put through is to prepare me for who God wants me to be. God allowed me to endure the bullying, hardships, and heartbreaks of my early teens to finally emerge with an unconditional love for myself, one that I'd need while battling being Black and low-income for the first time. God let me endure the Black woman of low-income battle as well, so as to build empathy for the women who would later be my teachers and guides in the Wholeful Healing Journey. God introduced me to that hardship because one day, I would dedicate my life to easing it for others. And, as painful and demoralizing as it was to abdicate to God saying "no" to college when I first applied, had it not been a "*no*," I would have spent four years in a purposeless spiral, wasting money and resources I couldn't afford to lose–not knowing what I wanted to do and who I wanted to serve. God directing me in the way of survivors was directing me to myself—to the people and the causes I needed to have at the center of my goals as I studied. And now, as late as it is, I'm realizing that all I need to do is go where God's compass points. I know better than to think I know better. Relying on God's omnipotence is my superpower. Divine redirection has never taken me astray.

35: The Kingdom Of Eswatini

Journal entry: Tuesday, September 3rd, 2024

Am I dangerously bold or have I just mastered abdication? Where does my Spirit love to dwell and who does it love to help?

I have a TikTok account where I talk about issues I see in the world in various and eclectic ways. Sometimes, I'm sarcastic. Sometimes, I'm direct, and, other times, I'm just silly. Versatility is my thing. In one video, I decided to tell the story of the encounter I had with my Principal at the Rainbow Academy. The one who asked me to change my shorts. I went on a rant about her comment about being African. I expressed how it was bullsh** to make such a claim, when dressing in what she perceived as "*modest*" was co-opting a European, colonial paradigm. I asserted that my ancestors only covered their genitals.

Upon hearing my comments, one of my followers named Sabela commented on the video saying that she was from a Kingdom not too far from Cape Town called Eswatini, and that they had a ceremony called Umhlanga that celebrated the beauty of a woman's body. After looking it up, I found out that Umhlanga, (translating to "The

Reed Dance" ceremony), was an annual Swazi event that took place at the end of August or the beginning of September. In Eswatini, tens of thousands of unmarried and childless Swazi girls and women traveled from the various chiefdoms to the Ludzidzini Royal Village to participate in the eight day event, closing it with a dance of the various groups in the Kingdom's center arena.

I dm'd her, letting her know that I'd love to come to the ceremony and not only would she end up picking me up from the airport, but also she hosted me the first night in her house. She was so kind and such a badass. When Beyonće said, "*a Diva is a female version of a Hustler,*" she could have had Sabela in mind. Sabela owned several businesses and made it an aim to have the lifestyle she dreamed of.

"*My womb doesn't carry poverty and it never will,*" she said. She was very intentional about setting her standards and only dated men on her financial level.

"*What should I call you?*," I asked.

"*Mama is fine,*" she said and damn right acted like it.

She made sure I was comfortable, gave me food, made me coffee, gave me such a nice room, and opened her doors to me. To think I met her on TikTok was crazy.

People ask me why I do stuff like staying with strangers, and I usually don't know how to answer such questions. Not even I have a definitive answer. But, as I take steps on my spiritual journey, I find myself reconciling more and more with subjectivity and the innate discernment that are central tenets of my faith. When God has sent somebody into my life, I can feel it. They are supposed to be there. In times like this, it often presents itself in seamlessness. I wanted to go to Eswatini, but I didn't know how I'd pay

for it, and my second mother, Holly, sent me $500. Then, God sent me someone who'd be willing to host me for a night, so I could live within the $500 without struggle. Not to mention how convenient it was that I heard about the ceremony while I was already in Cape Town—a two-hour flight from the Kingdom of Eswatini. So, it was very spiritually clear to me that everything was aligned for me to go to the Kingdom and get a glimpse of what existed there that I so dearly needed to see. In turn, it was clear that Mama Sabela was meant to be a part of this experience. Nothing in my spirit affiliated her presence with the slightest danger.

As humans, especially women, we've been conditioned to assume the danger of people before we assume their safety. And yes, it's overwhelmingly necessary to be cautious with the nutcases of this world. But it's also necessary to strike a balance between precaution and leaving room to experience the goodness people have to give. My Eswatini trip reemphasized this virtue in my life.

On my second day, and, on the days following, thanks to my lovely mum, Holly, I stayed at a fancy hotel called the Hilton. I was scheduled to have a tour of the city before going to the ceremony, until my tour guide contacted me to tell me she didn't have a car anymore. She was the only one I could afford, so I was stuck at the hotel with no ride to the ceremony I traveled for. I did what I did best and kept myself company with my iPad and earphones in the hotel lobby, until I heard a man knocking at the door who couldn't possibly open it with everything he had in his hands. While I opened the door for him, he smiled that I was very kind and that he appreciated the gesture. Ten minutes later, he would come take a seat right across from me. I welcomed

him by removing one earphone from my ear, followed by a motion to go ahead and sit, after he asked if he could. Two hours into our subsequent conversation, I knew I was right across from a super cool hot shot, who single handedly was trying to build the University of Eswatini's first endowment fund. But this was also a man who would end up giving me a ride to the ceremony and back when he understood that I didn't have any means of getting there. Vulindlela was his name.

"*Do you have an Eswatini sim?*," he asked.

"No, I don't," I responded.

"*So how will I know when to come get you?*," he asked.

He answered his question by lending me his phone for three hours while I was at the ceremony and giving me a number to call his friend, who would let him know to come get me. THIS MAN GAVE ME HIS PHONE TO MAKE SURE I WAS ABLE TO SAFELY CALL HIM WHEN I WAS DONE. What better reminder did I need of the good in this world? To say I was overwhelmed at these doors of kindness that simply opened would be understating. He gave me his phone for two hours without question or hesitance, just so I could be safe. He didn't mind not having it for a while, as long as I called his contact when I was ready.

Now, I wouldn't recommend anyone take this risk. I tell my mum almost everything, but she will only learn about this kindness after reading this book, because she would freak out at the thought of me even contemplating getting a ride with a man I didn't know. But, like I said, my spirituality supersedes my common sense. It directs me to where and what I need to be, who to have in my life and who not to have. My spirits

have a way of letting me know too if they are agitated by a prospect. Sometimes, my stomach will churn, my heart will pace, or I will just feel uneasy around a person. And I've learned to listen and just completely abdicate my control to God.

Two complete strangers made my trip memorable and worthwhile. I don't have a lot of money, I didn't know anyone in the Kingdom, and I most certainly didn't know I'd be traveling there at all till a week before my departure date. God orchestrated that trip, and I just happened to be reading off of God's music score. With every day I live on this Earth, I do what I say I'm going to do *not* because I have grit or a profound achievement complex, but because I have been called to do it. The trip is an example of one of the things I was called to do.

36: Uber Detour

I think one of the most ridiculous questions I've been asked is, "*Where do you get the courage to travel?.*" Of course modern traveling can be uncomfortable, but it's more because of those plane seats than anything else. Traveling has been made easy by instant connectivity. Flights are easy to book. Ubers at the airport and everywhere else are easy to get. Hotels, Airbnbs, and tourist destination reservations are easy to make. But this isn't the case in Eswatini. Immediately upon arriving, I understood why they called it, "The Kingdom." It wasn't industrialized at all. Although having to hire a private taxi, as opposed to an Uber, was a challenge, it too was a blessing in disguise.

Jackson was my "hotel Shuttle driver," and I would ride with him just about anywhere.

"Do you like Eswatini?," I asked.

"*Yes, it's my home,*" he responded. "*Where else would I feel so much peace?*

But, as with every place, there are some things I don't like of course," he said.

"*And what would those be?*," I asked.

"*There's no money in this country. All the money belongs to the upper class, and*

the rest of us live in poverty. There's no in-between," he bemoaned. "*The King and his rich comrades are the only ones who enjoy a life worth living here. The majority of us live in poverty.*"

"Oh, what's poverty like here?," I asked.

"*My sister, I grew up in Swati poverty, and no one can tell you about it better than I can. I grew up in a poor neighborhood, but we were the poorest among the poor. We watched TV through our neighbors' window,*" he said. "*Sometimes I cry just thinking about how hard my childhood was.*"

"*How do you feel now that you're a dad?*," I asked.

"*You know, my childhood fuels me to give my kids what I didn't have. I didn't have anything. But even more, now that I'm a parent, I feel pity for my parents. I can't imagine how my parents felt when raising us in those conditions. I didn't even have shoes growing up. I either had torn, holey ones or I walked barefoot,*" he said.

He would go on to explain that his mom worked as a cleaner for a middle-class family, right across the way from where he grew up.

"*Sometimes, they would send my mom home with rotten bread in the name of being good people, and she had no choice but to accept it, because she wanted to be called back for work the next day,*" he said.

"*My children, please just eat around the rotten parts. I don't have money today,*" his mum would say.

"*Where's your mum now?*," I asked.

"*My mum is still very much alive, and, every Christmas, my siblings and I spend a week with her,*" he said with a smile.

He would later go on to explain how his mum would count down the days to spending time with them over Christmas and cry each time she saw them, because her kids were living "*so fine*."

> *"My mum, every year, will touch our cars in disbelief, one car at a time, screaming and crying, in awe of how well her children are doing. She would have never thought the kids she raised eating around the rotten parts of the bread would have their own cars and houses. The way we grew up, hunger doesn't bother me at all. Sometimes I don't even notice it. I spent nights hungry. I had to get used to it. It got to a point where I'd have to teach myself to forget that I was hungry*."

Amid his recollections, my mind wandered to America and the economic disparity between the two. Poverty in African countries looks like a shack instead of a house, hungry nights and days, and lacking essential needs. Some people make as low as $25 a month and call themselves employed. And yes, the costs of living are different, but in Kenya, South Africa, Zambia, and Eswatini, $25 a month is not enough to get by.

There's a level of poverty in Africa I don't think even the poor in the developed world could understand. The childhood that Jackson alluded to was the childhood that the children of the survivors with whom I worked experienced as well.

37: Short Shorts Repeat

My biggest motivator to go to Eswatini was my yearning to not just read about, but to be immersed in what I'd been researching so curiously for a while. I'd been delving into pre-colonial African history and culture as a student of my own people, particularly their approaches to clothing, the hypersexualization of Africans, the different skin colors, and the sacredness of the woman's body in African religions. In my research, I found that, before colonialism, my ancestors didn't cover their upper bodies. There was no need to. Bodies weren't solely sex tools. They were my ancestors' reminder of the common spirituality we shared. And that's what the Umhlanga Traditional Ceremony (Reed Dance) represented for me, an opportunity to see the glory of the body as a spiritual vessel for myself. Boobs uncovered, thighs uncovered, with nothing but Swati and Zulu jewelry decorating arms and torsos, all illuminating our Africanisity.

In my dressing-up-to-show-out routine on the morning of the ceremony, I wore my shortest shorts, denim this time, and a t-shirt. It wasn't to rebel against what was orthodox. It was to fit in with my girls who were drastically more uncovered. In eager anticipation, I left the hotel with my tour guide to witness what, in my mind, felt like the pearly gates of all that was African, sacred, and pure, and to say my expectations were

met would be too modest of a statement. There were 50,000 girls at the stadium in groups of 50, give or take, gracing the dance floor with their unisonic strides. Each group after the other, in what looked like ascending order of age at first, then a blend at the end, dancing to traditional, celebratory songs in such familial cohesion that one would think all group members were sisters. And don't even get me started on how they looked, because that beauty in itself was jaw-dropping. I learned that Africans will dress up even when the concept is not to be dressed. There was so much color, blend, and elegant uniformity in these womens' costumes. Each group had patterns and colors that were unique to their tribe, just as it was for their choreography and ceremonious song choice. Yet a collective pride and joy were the feelings that transcended the individual groups. It was the pride, the smiles, the camaraderie; it was the effortlessness of their harmonies and the precision of their unisonic flow…. the whole thing was sublime.

I went around the stadium like the tourist I was, trying to witness the dances from every angle, and, just when I thought It couldn't get any better, I was proven wrong. I ran into a pretty boy who wanted to give me a cow as Lobola (Dowry). I took a picture with him, because he was too pretty for me to say no to the cow. I WANTED THE COW!

When all fifty groups finally danced for the King, they created a formation around the arena, leaving no space unfilled. I went up the adjacent hill to see the view of the formation from the top. I'd never quite seen anything so messily synchronized. The color coordination within the groups and how they all fit together when visually interlinked through this bird's eye perspective was truly a masterpiece. The sounds of Zulu and

Swati songs being sung all together underscored the awe with which I witnessed the ceremony.

With every harmony, ululation, and chorus, with every expression, "*Ngiti-yawo lalala, Ngitiye-lala,"* my heart just melted, again and again. The smiles, the joy, the groove in the routines, everything just "ATE," as my generation would say.

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As much as the Umhlanga ceremony was an experience of a lifetime for me, and filled my cup to unimaginable heights, every jaw-dropping emotion I experienced was intersected with a layer of dismay. Immediately after I stepped foot into the arena where the ceremony took place, a soldier approached my tour guide, speaking Swati while gesturing at me.

"*What did he say?*," I asked.

"*He said to cover up, because you're a lady,*" she responded.

I wasn't just confused, I was bewildered. *How is it that I'm standing right opposite women with their boobs out, and my shorts and FULL shirt are a problem in this context?* In many other cases, I wouldn't care. But, this time, I had convinced myself that I was going to celebrate the female body for all that it wholesomely was, extolling all it symbolized. I wasn't prepared to be confronted with the paradigm of occidentally-constructed modesty and hypersexualization of women in attendance at a

ceremony that inherently rejected it. My mouth must have been open for a whole minute after my tour guide translated what the soldier said.

I thus attended the ceremony not only wrapped in a "*chitenge*" (an African-print wrapper skirt). It was disheartening to know that the ceremony was merely a token of what was and not what still is. It was even more heartbreaking that Swatis are so entrenched in what is to live in the beauty of what was. *How do I grapple with that? The beauty of precolonial Africa is right in front of you for the taking, yet you insist on inhabiting colonialism? And surely, decolonization is more than just making an initial choice, it's an intentional, continuous journey. How is it that people can just act like there's no choice to be made, when they are right in the middle of a crossroads?* It was unsettling to witness something so wonderful and then realize that it was merely a simulacrum of a culture that is no longer truly upheld.

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Moving to the West, and then associating with my continent in any form,is refreshing in a lot of ways. The food tastes even better, the love feels even stronger, the air feels even fresher, and the soil feels even richer. But it also makes me feel like a guest in my own home country, and certainly not like the kind of guest who's always welcome. Now, I'm not kicked out at doorsteps. Quite to the contrary. I actually experience an even *warmer* welcome because of my American-leaning accent and mannerisms. Rather, I feel like an unwelcome guest because who I've become is

foreign to what is. I never feel like Mwila the Zambian. I feel like Mwila, the girl from Zambia. When you're aware, other people's myopic vision can be jarring, isolatedly so.

I went to a book festival in Cape Town over one weekend, and one of the poets, whose name I can't remember, broke down colonization in such an insightful way. She said that colonialism is the process of colonization, but coloniality is what colonialism leaves over. It stuck out to me, because it gave me the explanation for how my people could fight against colonialism, but, at the same time, be complacent and even be proponents of coloniality. The isolation of resisting coloniality amidst those who propel it forward while claiming to be a part of a supposedly "free" land is the most discouraging part of being a participant in the process of decolonization. It's even more emotionally perilous when you feel alone in your quest to understand the origins of your culture. These were feelings I was hoping not to have to feel in the Kingdom Eswatini. But I felt them even more intensely, because, unlike in Zambia and South Africa, the blindness in Eswatini was willful. What could be was right in front of them, practiced, celebrated, and orchestrated by the people themselves, but they refused to see the beauty of the ceremony for what it was. The beauty of what could have been a culture was just a token, and tokenized by its potential practitioners. I can't remember a time before that night that I cried so hard about a problem so much much bigger than myself.

38: A Zambian with American Privilege

My scholarship to the American International School Of Lusaka (AISL) changed my life. When giving people a back story about how and who I am, it starts at AISL. That was where my life took a pivot, and my entire journey was altered to forge a completely different path, curating a completely different person, and indisputably for the better and to a point that I thought was attainable.

On my first day at AISL I walked into my Individuals and Societies class, MYP's version of integrated social science, to find a tall White man with an intimidating, no-nonsense demeanor, named Mr. Cruickshank. He would stare around the class for minutes on end, and then call it to a reprimanding order, after the excitement of my counterparts, who had missed seeing each other during summer break, had died down.

"*Okay, folks, let's reconvene here*," he said.

He then gazed around the room and expressed utter exhaustion at how many we were.

"*Why is this class so big?*," he asked, rhetorically.

I looked around in utter confusion.

"*Twenty-eight is too many students to be in one class,*" he continued.

It was then that I understood that I was in for a hell of a ride. I had just come from a school of sixty students in a classroom being the norm, and now, what felt like such a

breather to me felt like a chokehold for, not only the teacher, but also, for everyone else in the class. This was the ur scenario for what would become typical ubiquitous during my time at AISL and in my association with everything American beyond; what was paradise to me was often the complete opposite for everyone else.

While in the U.S., there was a lot of talk about the “Immigrant Mentality,” high-achieving hustlers looking for a better life and making the most of every opportunity that came their way. But I like to call that mentality the “Gratitude Mentality.”

At Interlochen, I worked as a housekeeper over the summer to stay afloat throughout the year, and my American friends, who needed the money almost as much as I did, looked at me like I was nuts. In all fairness, I wouldn’t do that job in my home country either, but for reasons other than the nature of housekeeping. I wouldn’t do that job back home because of how little it pays. Back home, such jobs paid $200 a month at the most, whereas, in the U.S., with my $12 an hour dollars and hour wage, I made $800 every two weeks. Now, even though I was cleaning toilets and scrubbing floors, why wouldn’t I take the opportunity to earn in two weeks what someone with a MastersM degree back home makes in a month of work? I was grateful for the opportunity to work and earn an amount of a paycheck I didn’t imagine was possible, so I worked till I couldn’t any longer. It didn’t matter what I was doing, because I was grateful for the magnitude of the check at the end. I carried that Gratitude Mentality with me wherever I went.

As compelling as the circumstances that led to my outlook were, it still was a disorienting feeling like no one understood the way in which I saw the world, because

no one understood a different world… no one understood my world… and no one understood *me*. It was in the midst of these experiences that I realized what a fighting spirit I had. And, although it has served me tremendously, sometimes this fighting spirit can become unnecessarily combative. For a time, I was defensive, because I felt I had to be so. Even when people who loved me offered me loving and well-meaning advice, my instantaneous reflex wasn't to let it sit and think about it. My reflex was to prove that I was right and knew exactly what I was doing. Now that I've graduated from these American bubbles, I'm realizing that I developed this demeanor as a coping mechanism. The detour my life took marked the beginning of me feeling that I constantly had to prove myself worthy, even to myself. And, unfortunately for people who loved me, this need to be validated transcended to spaces and with people who already accepted me and didn't need me to be any more than I already was. Even in spaces where I consciously felt like I could just be, I had my guard up because that was the norm in my life. Proving myself became such a reflex that I wasn't just constantly doing it, I was constantly looking to do it too. It's almost as if, the more I did it, regardless of where, the more I felt like I was "enough" for the rich, for the White, for the blond and blue-eyed, for my endless crushes who only liked Latinas, for my teachers who didn't understand how my Zambian background informed my writing and perspective, and for myself, for the girl who needed to prove herself to herself more than she needed to do so for it for anybody else.

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I talk to my fellow Interlochen alumni right now online, and they tell me how “cool” they thought I was at school. And I’m taken aback. Me? Cool? Me? The girl who always had a broom and a towel in her hand in the cafeteria while everyone was hanging out with their friends? Me? Cool? The girl who was confused about social cues and everything American? Me? Cool? The girl who couldn’t afford a flight for breaks and needed help from the school’s emergency funds? Me? Cool? The girl who never quite belonged no matter how many cultural inclusion clubs she created or leadership advocacy positions she held. It’s almost as if my internal struggles were so big and loud that they overshadowed my external triumphs. My internal invalidations invariably superseded my external affirmations.

39: The Students become the Masters

One fine Friday, at the Rainbow Academy, my students and I found ourselves talking about expropriation without compensation. For Indigenous South Africans, this means reclaiming the land that was stolen from them without any compensation paid to its current inhabitants. This is important because South Africa's land contributes significantly to the economy from which Indigenous South-Africans have been excluded. 8% of South Africa's White population control over 79% of the economy. Abolishing Apartheid gave South Africans political freedom, but not economic freedom–and not the freedoms that were stipulated in what is known as the Freedom Charter.

I brought up Nelson Mandela, and my students got mad. "*That sell-out*," they said, and I sat silent in fascination. They aired their grievances about the situation they were in: Shacks, Poverty and Education-less, because Mandela compromised to the detriment of Native South Africans.

"*What good is the right to vote, if we can't afford to miss work to go to the polling station?*," one student asked.

"What good is the right to work amongst the White elite, if we can't afford the education necessary for the jobs?," another asked.

Trying to conceal my pride, I reminded my students that colonial minds have been wired to think in binaries, but that is not how life works; there's more grey than there is Black and White.

"*Nelson Mandela resisted release six times because the conditions of his release were that he ceased the movement against Apartheid*," I reminded them.

"*Who told you that?*," One student erupted.

"I'm reading Nelson Mandela's book right now, A Long Walk To Freedom*, and it doesn't get any clearer than that,*" I responded.

"*I disagree,*" he countered. "*You have to ask yourself: Who published that book? What did they want the public to think? I can't believe anything there!*"

For a second, I was scared I was educating my students to be extremists, but then, I remembered that they were doing exactly what I taught them to do, to question till they got answers. Four months prior, these young people didn't know what activism was. They didn't understand how singers, dancers, or actors could possibly be activists. Now, all of a sudden, they were questioning the do-and-do-not-knows. They were teaching ME!

Being an educator is interesting. It's how you can feel, but never explicitly say, who will and will not benefit from the hours you spend at the front of the class. It's how I know who cares and who doesn't, but teach like everyone does. I chose to tell my students that I was not a teacher and never will be. Classrooms were designed so we could learn from each other. I was simply a facilitator of that learning. And, as rewarding as this mode of teaching was, it was also a very vulnerable and sometimes difficult way

to gain knowledge–especially about subjects as heavy and political as the fallout from Apartheid in South Africa. I wouldn't have had it any other way, but I know some of my students felt differently. I could tell. But still, I facilitated the class like I couldn't.

I realized that facilitating my students' learning transcended any prepared content, it extended to facilitating comfort in discomfort, cultivating listening skills, embracing collaboration, and fostering a spirit of teamwork. In that class, we were more than just students and a teacher, we were artists pioneering social change and learning from our community–a community composed of the disenfranchised–how to fight for change in the most impactful ways. My students taught me this when they weren't afraid to show me a mirror. I was their student far more often than I realized.

40: What Does God Mean to Us?

I received two calls today from the women I serve, Lameez and Lydia. I picked up their calls, knowing they needed something and knowing it would take them at least ten minutes to gather the courage to tell me what that something was, not because they felt like they couldn't tell me, they had many times before, but because they were ashamed to be in need, a shame I saw all too prevalently for me to not notice it in these women.

Lameez started her plea after asking me how my work, school and life were going, by telling me how her children were losing so much weight that she felt helpless. Lameez is a single mum with four children, the last of them being a toddler with special needs. Every day, she would go out to look for absolutely ANYTHING to do, from washing underwear, to house-cleaning, to taking care of other people's children, while she left her thirteen-year old with her toddler. But I always knew that, when Lameez called, she'd reached a point of distress and truly needed a helping hand. At that moment, she and her kids hadn't eaten in days.

Lydia, on the other hand, only had one Bright and Beautiful daughter, but she would correct me if she heard me say this, because she sees me as her own. According to her, she now has two kids, and I'm proudly her eldest. Every morning, I wake up to a

text from Lydia telling me to shine "*bright and bold*," punctuated with an, "*I love you, MK. You bring so much light into my world*."

But, today, she didn't text, she called me, with a stutter coating each word, and said, "*MK, my baby, I haven't been able to feed my daughter, your sister, for two days now and I need your help. No one's calling me to clean or cook for them and I don't know what to do anymore.*" I asked her what she needed and she listed the essentials, veggies, rice, and fruits and beans, and concluded by saying, "*If you can, my baby, please get us some chicken. We haven't had any meat for a while*."

I didn't have enough money to get *myself* going today, let alone Lameez and Lydia's families, so, in the midst of me feeling shattered and defeated, I told them to wait until I had my finances figured out, and then I could help them. And they both responded with something along the lines of, "*God will keep me and the kid(s) going until you can help us out*."

Even when I asked Lameez and Lydia how they were doing, way before we could even talk about their circumstances, they both said, "*I'm surviving by the Grace of God.*" Lydia is very Christian and Lameez is very Muslim. Lydia is the type of woman to go to church three times a week, and Lameez will cut a call short to continue her five-times-a-day prayer thread. And, every time I hear what they go through, I'm left wondering where in the world they got their strength to hold on.

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I always knew poverty existed, but I only understood its impacts when I started working in service to these women. I grew up in a middle-class family, so, although I didn't have all my wants, I had my needs met. I was introduced to the struggles of the working-class once I moved to the U.S., but, even then, I was guaranteed food on my table, a roof over my head and even a hot shower. I never worried about survival. Working with survivors gave me a glimpse of what it's like to live in constant fear of starving to death. They say money doesn't make you happy, but the lack thereof can definitely deprive one of happiness. But Lameez and Lydia, among the many other survivors in their shoes, stayed sane because they abdicated to God's sovereignty.

> "*I'm hungry, my kids don't eat, and I can't give them food, but God will see me through. I'm God's child,*" Lameez would say when she called me.
>
> "*MK, you're a Godsend. You are my answered prayer, my baby,*" Lydia would remind me.

] I have a complicated relationship with religion. Its roots in colonialism and the weaponization of religion in service to the patriarchy rub me the wrong way. Religion's insistence on abiding by a set of rules, despite the evolution of cultures and lifestyles, also throws me off. And, every time I listen to women who have this unshakable relationship with religion, and an insufferable relationship with life, I'm left wondering if my skepticisms about God are a privilege in and of themselves. I've been so privileged

in this life that I have the ability to question their only source of hope. That anchor, for me, in many ways, is not coming from the need to survive, but from wanting to live my life in peace, a want that is necessary for a happy life, but not necessary for survival.

Funny enough, I also talked to my biological mum today. I was helping her with her speaking, because, according to her, "*I'm the best speaker she knows.*" My mum's adulations made me reminiscent of my childhood, and down the memory lane she took me on, I realized that I owed a lot of who I am today to my foundations in the church. My parents both grew up Seventh-Day Adventist and made that faith a central tenet of their home. Every Friday's sunset, in respect of the Sabbath, we were all required to turn off the TV, the Playstation, and any other "*ungodly*" form of entertainment, to focus on honoring God. We didn't eat pork, animals that chewed their own cud, or pierce our ears (I'm still not pierced, actually). My upbringing was the epitome of conservatism. But, I'd be damned if anyone from the outside looking in thought we didn't have fun. Unlike school, everything I did with my church friends made up the best moments of my childhood. From age 6-10, I was in a youth group called Adventist Adventurers. There, I learned how to speak and present to a large audience. Every Adventurer Day, I had a mic, speaking to over 500 people about God's loving nature. It was also in this club that my love for singing was nurtured and encouraged. "*You are God's Chosen One,*" was one of my favorites. At ten years old, I graduated from Adventurer and moved up to Pathfinder, and the skills I had acquired before were strengthened. Here, I was nurtured into a female tenor, gliding through those low-notes like they were made for me. Here, I also was weaned off sharing presentations pre-written by adults, and given the leeway

to author and edit my own work. My teachers, who we called Leaders, led me to a point where I could lead myself. And my speaking abilities bloomed. Unlike in Adventurer Club, in Pathfinder, I developed a love for marching Drills. So much so that I didn't only march, I also choreographed, with a spirit and confidence that won me accolades and awards. Aside from recognition and praise, drills gave me a leader's eye. It wasn't only my job to make sure my students understood their drills and how to execute them, but it was also my job to make sure I directed them in a way that was understandable. I had to assess and understand each and every one of my squad member's strengths and weaknesses, and write directions that would make each and every one of them shine, while leaving enough room for an appropriate challenge that would make them look like the stars they were on the field.

Now, there are many aspects of the extreme conservative environment in which I grew up that I have left behind along with my childhood. I have so much trauma and baggage from that church that the very thought of belonging to one now anxiously drowns my soul. But, there's no denying how much my foundation in the youth clubs of Adventurer and Pathfinder influenced who I am today. I owe so much of who I've become to my church. That was probably why I held onto it relentlessly. It gave that confused, lost, ugly, skinny, and unloved child a sense of purpose and belonging. I needed to feel like I was loved and wanted somewhere. Like Lameez and Lydia, I needed a sense of sovereignty. A sense of hope in knowing that my childhood was as sad for a reason, and I found that in the church and structure of organized religion. To

my childhood Mwila, there was a gratifying peace in the organization of life by Seventh-Day Adventism.

Lydia and Lameez are examples of just how South Africa's poverty crisis rains havoc on the lives of many families. Don't get me wrong, there's poverty everywhere. But South Africa's dire poverty, one heavily influenced by the color of one's skin, is the type of poverty that reflects Apartheid's gruesome reality. The poverty cycle of those who were deprived of opportunities and deliberately left on the sidelines of prosperity in this country is still revolving very confidently today. But, when we put the systemic issues aside, I want my reader to know that PEOPLE are dying and suffering, and that these people, like them, are humans, with human obligations, feelings, and families. This book isn't just for readers who belong to developed nations either. Even I, with roots stemming from a country as underdeveloped as Zambia, grew up oblivious to the struggles of the working-class in South Africa. But oblivion is not a way to live. There is too much money and too much privilege in the world for people like Lydia and Lameez, Anathi, Nomzi, Ntosh, Nomvuzi, Melanie, and Rozita to have nothing else but prayer to lean on.