

CHAPTER 1

Onai Moyo awakened unwillingly from her slumber to the irritating sound of a dog barking continuously in the distance. The racket escalated to an agitated pitch that seemed to grow closer as it grew louder. More dogs in the neighbourhood joined in: barking, yelping and growling. The noise was raucous and broke the stillness of night. Onai felt a spasm of apprehension. This sort of commotion often meant that gangs of *matsotsi* eHarare were out prowling through the ramshackle labyrinth of Jo'burg Lines where she lived with her family.

Her right arm felt like a dead-weight beneath her despite a spasm of sharp pins and needles. She turned over with drowsy indolence and wiggled her fingers to ease her discomfort. Circulation returned in a rush and for a moment the prickling sensation intensified. She opened her eyes. Thin shafts of orange light from the tower light filtered effortlessly through the leaves of the mango tree just outside her window and through the frayed curtain of her bedroom, throwing peculiar shapes on the wall that seemed to cavort in a synchronised manner. *Mimvuri*, happy shadows ... she thought sleepily, closing her eyes in an attempt to go back to sleep. She failed.

As she became more alert, she thought again with a sinking feeling that her husband had not yet come home. The absence of loud snores and a pleasant freedom from the stench of alcohol-infused breath told their own story. But still she strained her sleep-heavy eyes in the gloom and reached a tentative arm across the bed. She made contact with nothing, which confirmed her anxiety. Where was he?

At that moment, the rickety metal gate standing a few metres from her bedroom window creaked in a characteristic manner. So he's finally back, she thought with irritation as she fumbled for her wristwatch on the battered cardboard box next to her bed. The upside-down container had staunchly served as her dressing table for almost a year, weathering bedroom conflicts by her side. As she peered at her watch and struggled to make out the time, she heard muted voices and the

padding of stealthy footsteps. Tossing her threadbare blanket aside, she stood up.

Cautiously, she drew the curtain sideways a fraction, and out of the corner of her eye caught a flurry of movement. Two figures crept past the mango tree and disappeared into the shadows towards the kitchen door. So, tonight, they were the burglars' chosen ones! Her heart knocked painfully against her rib cage. The sound transmitted itself to her ears in a subdued, pulsing beat.

'God help me please,' she offered a heartfelt prayer. She knew how daring burglars ordered people to remain quietly in bed while they ransacked their homes. With the new breed of malicious intruders, assault was no longer a remote possibility. She was certain, moreover, that her loudest screams would not coerce her neighbours out of the safety and comfort of their homes. Nobody in their right mind would risk their lives by coming to her aid. Not at this time of night. So, apart from her children, she was well and truly alone.

She swore under her breath at her absent husband. '*Uripiko nbai Gari?* Where are you Gari?' Her mind sharp with fear, she realised that she had just a few minutes to spirit her children to relative safety. She moved silently and instinctively through the darkness into her daughters' bedroom. Sixteen-year-old Ruva and fifteen-year-old Rita were both awake, which was a relief, though not surprising given the clamour that the dogs were still making. She half-dragged them out of bed and shoved them into her bedroom. Ignoring their surprised questions, she hissed at them to be quiet. Exchanging confused glances, they obeyed. She then tiptoed into her son's tiny bedroom next to the kitchen. Amazingly, ten-year-old Fari was fast asleep. She placed her hand over his mouth and gently woke him up. Clearly startled by this intrusion, he struggled and hit out before he heard her reassuring whispers. Mother and son moved quickly into the main bedroom.

The family huddled in a tense, quivering group in the corner of their sanctuary. Profound fear hung over them as they listened to the muffled sounds and imagined their home being desecrated. Rita, the neediest of Onai's children, leaned closer towards her and sought out her

hand with a trembling, clammy palm. Onai took the shaky hand in a firm grip and drew the terrified girl closer.

She closed her eyes and thought about their black and white television, by far their most prized possession. It stood with imposing presence on a wrought-iron stand, easily dominating their poky sitting room. Without seeing it, she knew that it had gone. 'Maybe it will be the only thing they get away with because it's so heavy,' she dared to hope. She wondered if the burglars had knives. Or a gun. The idea made her shudder. She circled her arms around Rita and drew some comfort from the softness and warmth of the young girl's body. Again she swore at her husband for leaving them so defenceless.

After what felt like the longest ten minutes of Onai's life, the faint noises quietened down and the back door closed with a barely perceptible click. Next, the gate creaked and sighed. A flood of relief washed over her and the tension in her body slackened. The intruders had left. Rising from her crouching position, she groped for the light switch and pulled hard on the string. The sudden brightness was almost like a physical blow. Fari looked dazed. Rita was shaking violently. Ruva's mutinous face showed a fiery but impotent anger. Onai felt a moment of self-reproach. She could not protect her children from the life they were destined to live.

As if on cue, the family moved silently and resolutely into the sitting room. Their television which had withstood the ravages of time had gone. *Sekutamba chaiko*. Just like that. Rita and Fari perched on the edge of the old armchair, wordless still. The silent disappointment on their faces only added to Onai's sense of despondency. Of course, she would never be able to replace the set. Not in a lifetime. Without doubt, they would miss their weekly highlight, the Nigerian Movies of the Week which provided an intriguing concoction of Christianity and witchcraft. Nor would their evenings be the same without the suspense of a *Studio 263* episode. Thankfully, their black Supersonic stereo still stood on a woven reed mat in the corner. She lifted it off the floor and placed it carefully on the wrought-iron stand. '*Pabva gondo pagara zizi*,' she mused, somewhat inappropriately, then dismissed the thought. For

that elevated position, the stereo was surely a poor replacement.

For a room that had just been burgled, everything else looked startlingly normal. Not that there was anything else that would have stirred the burglars' interest. The noticeably small room was further dwarfed by four shabby blue armchairs, well past their prime. The wobbly wooden table stood where it had always stood, right at the centre of the room, looking as lopsided as ever.

Onai's eyes moved up the blue, streaked wall. Her two picture frames, embellished in gaudy imitation gold, still hung on either side of the cheerfully corpulent Humpty Dumpty clock. 'Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall ...' her thoughts wandered, seeking escape and remembering of all things, Fari's favourite rhyme. She stopped herself irritably. The clock appeared to be smiling at her, eyes twinkling, features seemingly alight with joy. She removed her gaze from the illusion of its happiness.

Ruva whirled round to glare at her. '*Amai*, where is *baba*? Look at the time. It's three o'clock, *Amai*! He should have been here to protect us. Why isn't he here?' she railed, her soft adolescent features contorted by resentful anger.

Onai looked at her and flinched from the intensity of her rage. '*Mwanangu*, just like you, I don't know where he is. We're safe now. Let's go back to sleep, *vanangu*,' she said in a mother's calm, gentle voice. Inside, she was seething. For a moment, she felt an irresistible urge to slap her daughter really hard, but with no small effort she suppressed it. She thought of uttering some belittling remarks about Gari, but again she restrained herself. She would never admit openly to her children that their father was a blatantly irresponsible man. What purpose would it serve, except to further erode the flimsy fabric of Gari's relationship with his children?

Tactfully, she ignored the increasingly familiar look of condemnation on Ruva's face and shepherded her offspring back to bed. She checked the lock on the back kitchen door and was dismayed to find it badly broken. Getting it fixed would cost no less than five hundred thousand dollars. *Veduwe, nhamo haibvi pane imve chokwadi* ... poverty bred even greater poverty. There wasn't much more that the pittance she grossed

as a vegetable vendor could accommodate.

Resignedly, she tried to hold the broken lock together with a piece of thick wire. It did not work. She tried harder. The wire dug into the roughened skin of her palms. Finally, she managed to hold the door at a slightly crooked slant. The twisted wire offered no protection. She shut her eyes tightly and drew in a slow, deep breath, bravely willing herself free of another cloud of misery which was threatening to suffocate her.

Fortunately, the barking dogs had quietened their rowdy chorus. The swift transition to tranquillity was a bit strange, but comforting all the same. Maybe the burglars had retired to bed, well pleased with their spoils for the night. Maybe they had shifted to more lucrative targets. Whatever the case, Onai did not really care. The fact that they had gone offered a welcome reprieve. She slipped back into the familiarity of her bed but found no further solace. The sheets had become very cold and sleep would not come. She lay on her back and shivered as she stared vacantly at the bleak, corrugated, asbestos sheets which roofed the house. She rolled and turned, restless and unable to get comfortable. At last, curling up into a tight foetal position, she lost herself in a muddle of sad thoughts.

Gari was not an easy man to live with. Over the years, she had worn herself out just trying to conceal proof of his violence. As a model of perseverance, nobody could have done better than she had. If and when she failed, it was never for want of trying. Despite this, she did know that her endless, effusive explanations no longer convinced her neighbours. Her episodic facial bruising and blackened eyes had ceased to be material for speculation because they all knew precisely what was happening. However, the cocoon of pretence that she had woven around herself had become her armour. It was the one thing which held the frail vestiges of her dignity securely in place. There was nothing else she thought she could do. She was, after all, only a woman. How could she fight against fate?

Only recently, her daughter, Ruva had tried to talk to her about how the situation caused her distress. Onai had skilfully steered the conver-

sation to less precarious ground. She had made it clear to her daughter that discussing her father was taboo. And anyway, what could one discuss with a mere sixteen-year-old about the delicate intricacies of love and marriage to an obnoxious man?

She thought of Katy, the one woman in her life who deserved to be called her *sahwira*, her best friend. Just the previous day, Katy had said to her, 'Onai, I just cannot understand why you don't want to leave Gari. Do you want us to take you out of this house in a coffin? Huh? *Asi chii nbai?* Why are you holding on?'

'For my children, of course. Please let me be, Katy. Gari will change. He's just going through a difficult time at work. There's a rumour that the company may move to South Africa because it's losing money here. I know he'll change as soon as things get better for him,' Onai had said, trying to breathe conviction into the words as she spoke them.

Katy had laughed. It had been a high-pitched, mirthless sound of disbelief. 'The rumours about the Cola Drinks Company only started last month. Gari has been like this for years and years. You have to stop making excuses for him,' she had replied firmly, her husky voice rising with annoyance, while expressions of irritation, compassion and tenderness flitted across her face in quick succession. Onai had chosen not to answer. Katy had broken the awkward silence with a different approach, 'You deserve better than this, *sahwira*. What about your self-respect? Have you lost that as well, Onai?'

'If what I'm doing for my children shows that I have no self-respect; then, yes, I've lost it – or maybe I did so when I decided to become a mother,' she had responded stubbornly, unsure of what exactly her friend had meant.

Katy's rejoinder had been sharp and sarcastic. '*Mashura chainwo!* I can't believe what you are saying. If you want to do something for your children, why not leave Gari and remove them from this mess? What do you think this is doing to them?'

Onai had responded with a deliberate, dismissive shrug. Within, she had been silently begging her friend to reassure her that she was doing the right thing for her children. But predictably, Katy had given up and

left in an ostentatious sulk. Onai knew she would be back and it would be as if they had never argued. The little dents in affection and small rifts between them never went beyond transient inconveniences. But despite being such good friends, she did not really expect Katy to understand her position. Their lives were different, and their upbringing even more so.

The knowledge that her mother did understand was a constant source of comfort. MaMusara's own marriage to Onai's late father had been very troubled. But she had stayed for the sake of her children and because marriage was not something that one could just walk away from. 'Once you get in, you stay. *Kugomera uripo chaiko mwanangu* ... no matter how hard it gets. Always remember that a woman cannot raise a good family without a man by her side,' MaMusara had declared, obviously keen to instil similar values in her daughter.

Onai had listened attentively, acknowledging that if her mother had left her father, she might have ended up living on the streets with her two young brothers, reduced to a life of begging and petty crime. Or worse. So, in the same manner, she stayed and felt extremely proud that she was able to do so for her children. This was the essence of a true African woman ... perseverance in the face of all hardship, especially for the children. One always stayed for them.

For the third time that night, the gate creaked and moaned. Onai's reverie was instantly broken. She got up with weary acceptance. Peeping out from behind the threadbare curtain, she chastised herself for not switching off the light earlier. Whoever was out there would probably notice her shadowy outline against the window. Gari's large frame lurched into view and staggered towards the front door. His trench coat caught on a protruding branch of the mango tree. He lost his footing and stumbled against the shack housing their sole lodger. He cursed loudly and rattled the front door, clearly annoyed at finding it locked. Surely he can't have lost his key again, Onai thought to herself and sighed miserably.

'Mai Ruva! Open the door, woman! *Iwe mukadzi iwe!*' he bellowed in an angry voice. Fearing that he would awaken her children or disturb

the neighbours, she obeyed immediately. There was no need to expose everyone so openly to her marital disharmony. Gari loomed in the doorway and walked into the cramped sitting room with an unsteady gait. He brought with him the heavy odour of stale beer and a whiff of a nauseatingly sweet perfume. The nicotine-stained fingers of his right hand were curled possessively around the slender neck of a brown bottle of Castle beer.

She looked at him incredulously, taking in his crumpled clothes. The front of his shirt was emblazoned with bright red smudges. Lipstick! Her heart contracted painfully. His zip was undone and the edge of his shirt was offensively sticking out of the fly. She did not have to think too hard to imagine what he had been up to. His shoes were encrusted with what looked suspiciously like a thick layer of vomit. And Fari would have the thankless task of cleaning the shoes in the morning!

Imi, baba vaRuva! Where have you been? Do you know that we were burgled?’ she asked him, her face burning with resentment. Gari gave her a brief, glazed look and swayed drunkenly. He placed the beer bottle on the table with surprising care. Struggling out of his trench coat, he threw himself clumsily onto her favourite armchair. It creaked in protest beneath his weight. His face was a spectacle of incomprehension. He looked like a contemptible caricature of the man she had fallen in love with all those years ago whose memory now held the surreal quality of a dream. He gave a complacent burp and stared at her again through bleary, red-rimmed eyes.

Onai shook her head, disgusted and angry, aware that in this state, she would not be able to get through to him. His brain was lost somewhere inaccessible, in a foggy faraway place. She trembled with the rage that was bubbling within her and felt her self-control slipping away, a dull pounding setting off behind her eyes. She leaned on the wall. It’s solid coolness steadied her and seemed to ease the throbbing in her head.

‘I said we were burgled, *baba vaRuva*. They took your precious TV. Get this into your thick head,’ she said with intentional carelessness. There was more silence and yet another vacant stare. She detected

something on the whites of his eyes, a tinge of yellow that she had never noticed before. It gave him an odd, rather sickly look which only added to her mounting repulsion. 'Damn you straight to hell *baba vaRuva. KuGebena chaiko,*' she cursed him heatedly, trying to goad him into a response, temporarily overlooking the fact that she might provoke him into a very public fight. Still, his unfocused eyes stared through her and past her. She might as well have been invisible. Shrugging with a sudden nonchalance, she gave up and walked back into the bedroom. There was nothing to be gained by trying to talk to him. It was so much wiser to try to get some sleep. He reeled into the bedroom after her and rasped through drooling lips, 'You bitch! Where is my TV?'

So, finally, his mind had registered something in the real world? The joy of pleasant surprises ... *mashura chainwo!* Onai bristled and glowered at him. 'I told you, the burglars took it,' she said in a low, urgent voice, now desperate to minimise the noise.

'Liar! What burglars are you talking about? You think you can fool me, don't you? I say no! I am the one with the brains, not you. You gave my TV to your boyfriends. You whore! *Uri bure!*' he slurred through thick lips, his bloodshot eyes gleaming triumphantly.

Onai felt dispirited and fatigued. If the situation was not so ludicrously sad, she would have liked a good laugh. But this was not the way things were going. More annoyance, yes, and maybe a few tears as well. But, at the very least, she would not get any sleep. She knew the routine well enough. Once the matter of her imaginary indiscretions came up, there was always hell to pay. Fortunately, the more drunk he was, the less likely he would be able to inflict serious injury upon her. But still there would be no sleep and that was a real nuisance. She badly needed a rest because she had to get up early to collect her fruit and vegetable orders for the market. She could certainly do without this.

He hovered threateningly at the edge of the bed and continued slobbering, 'You liar! I'm going to teach you a lesson ... a really good lesson. Do you hear?' He shook his hairy fist for emphasis, and with astonishing vigour for one so obviously drunk. She stared back at him,

greatly annoyed, but confident and unafraid. There was hardly anything he could do to her in that pathetic state. His burly physique and an inborn penchant for aggression were the only advantages he had over her. In contrast to him, she was totally in control, very clear-headed and agile.

He took a drunken lunge at her with a clenched fist. A surge of fear crushed her earlier confidence. She quickly backed away and cowered against the wall. His fist caught her directly over the right eye. She registered a multitude of glittering stars and tried without success to scramble off the bed.

He grabbed her nightdress and tugged hard. She lost her balance and fell headlong. The floor rose swiftly to meet her and her brow made exquisitely painful contact with the concrete door-stop's sharp edge. Blood poured out of a deep cut above her left eye. She screamed and curled herself up in pain.

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Ruva rushed into the bedroom and took in the scene. Her mother lay on the floor, a stream of blood-stained tears ran between her fingers as she held them protectively over her face. Ruva's alarmed gaze shifted to her father. He was lying at an angle across the bed, already blissfully lost in a drunken slumber. His mouth open, he was discharging thunderous snores and his feet were dangling carelessly over her mother's curled form. Her eyes filled with bitter tears. Her heart ached, and a hopeless pain filled her chest.

She dropped to her knees next to her mother and shook her shoulder tentatively. '*Amai*, are you all right?' she asked. '*Amai*?' her voice shook. There was no answer, apart from a few pathetic moans and a subtle movement of the head, which could have been a nod, Ruva was not sure. She stood up slowly.

Clearly, her mother needed to get to hospital. Getting an ambulance out would be time-consuming and probably impossible. Because of the fuel shortages, the local service had become unreliable. The running joke was that if you called an ambulance, it would take a couple of days to crawl to your house, and by the time it arrived, you might just have

taken your last breath. Laugh as people might, the reality of the situation was that some lives had been lost through such delays. The more reliable, modernised Medical Air Rescue Service required a cash payment upfront. Ruva knew that her mother did not have the cash.

Maiguru, *mai* Faith was her only hope of getting her mother to hospital. If *maiguru* could not do so, she would at least let her use the phone. Once again, Ruva found herself disregarding her safety and sprinting into the wintry darkness, up 50th Street and around the corner into 49th Street.

Anger and despair burned inside her, as they always did after the fights. Anger with her father for his violence, anger with her mother for allowing the situation to continue, and despair because there was absolutely nothing she could do about it, except sprint up the street to *maiguru's* house after each fight, shrouded by darkness, hounded by imaginary shadows, and fearing for her own safety. So familiar was the route that she could have run it with her eyes closed. She climbed over the low fence into *maiguru's* yard and banged hard on the door.

Katy stirred into unwilling consciousness and strained her ears. She thought she heard banging on the front door, then she recognised Ruva's voice calling out her name. She gave a heavy sigh and sat up with reluctant apathy. Her husband snored softly and made a movement with his right hand, but continued sleeping. She pushed the bedclothes aside and pulled a dress over her head. Her bare feet made contact with the cold, cemented floor. An involuntary tremor coursed through her body.

She flung the front door open to find her friend's panicky daughter on the doorstep. She knew instantly that Gari had been at it again. With a flash of annoyance, she wondered what it would take to make Onai accept that she had to leave Gari.

'Sorry to wake you up, *maiguru*! *Amai* is hurt. I think ... I think she has to go to hospital. Please, *maiguru*, help me,' Ruva snivelled almost incoherently through a flood of distressed tears.

Katy knew right away that it was serious. There was no time to be indecisive. 'Get her ready. I'm coming shortly,' she said firmly to the

distraught girl and went back into the bedroom.

John was already sitting up in bed, looking groggy and annoyed. 'Don't tell me it's Onai and Gari again?' he said in a voice thick with sleep.

'Sorry, *mudiva*. Yes, it's Onai and Gari again,' Katy replied, feeling too drained to rush robustly to her friend's defence as she usually did. A strong desire to crawl back into bed enticed her. But she merely sat down at the edge of the bed and cupped her right jaw with her hand. No, she could not creep back into bed. Her *sabwira* needed her. She looked up and held John's eyes hopefully.

'Well, this time I'm not going out there to stop their fighting. They are adults. Let them solve their own problems,' John spoke abruptly and disengaged his eyes from her expectant gaze. Drawing the soft duvet tightly around his body, he turned over and faced the wall in an explicitly dismissive gesture.

'I think this is serious, John. Ruva said Onai is hurt. She needs to get to hospital.' Her response was grave.

'*Saka?* So what?' John grunted and laughed without cheer. He rolled over and faced her. 'Am I now supposed to provide an ambulance service for Onai? Why can't Gari take his own wife to hospital or call an ambulance for her? Why me?' he asked unnecessarily. The reasons were obvious to both of them.

Katy sighed and supported her head with both hands, her right foot tapping restlessly on the cold floor, while a nerve on the right side of her face twitched. Her husky voice rose in pleading tones. 'Please listen to me. You know that Gari will not take Onai to hospital. You also know that the ambulance service is unreliable. Onai has nobody else who can help her except us. Ruva is a very sensible girl. She wouldn't have called us if it wasn't serious. Please, *mudiva*, will you?' she begged, her voice now shaky. She was close to tears.

The imminent tears did it. John gave in, but without enthusiasm. He heaved an irritable sigh and got out of bed. Very slowly. 'All right. Get her out to our gate. I'm not coming with you to her house. If I come face to face with Gari, I tell you, I'll lose my temper and beat him up,'

he said gruffly. Katy grabbed a jersey and made a hasty exit before her husband changed his mind.

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John finished dressing hurriedly, his mind running a mental tirade against Onai and Gari. Taking Onai to hospital would be a reckless misuse of his hard-earned petrol. As a cross-border haulage truck driver, he was often away from home. On this occasion, he had wasted three of his five leave days in a long queue in Harare city centre, just to get a measly fifteen litres of petrol. Now he would have to waste it on Onai! Still upset, he reversed his car out to the gate where the women were waiting under the harsh glare of a tower light. Onai was a shivering bundle emitting low, piteous moans. One side of her beautiful face was horribly swollen. Her normally flawless, dark skin was marred by bruising and swelling. A blood-stained piece of mutton cloth was tied crudely across her forehead. As he helped her into the car, John felt no compassion at all. He had been through this too many times before. Obviously, she did not have the self-esteem to value her own life. What a waste of such a beautiful woman ... what a terrible waste, he thought to himself.

Turning to Ruva, he said, 'You're going to school in a few hours, aren't you?' She nodded mutely and trembled in the biting chill of early morning air, her arms overlaid with goose pimples.

'We'll take care of your mother. Go back home,' he ordered brusquely. She looked at him with big apprehensive eyes, obviously reluctant to leave. Katy took her arm and elbowed her towards the corner into 50th Street. Then she climbed into the car and sat on the back seat with Onai, holding her in an embrace. The two women were silent as John drove them to the hospital. The car's headlights were out of focus and most of the tower lights were faulty, at best giving off flickers of inadequate light. As a result, the vehicle kept dropping into out-sized pot-holes that John would have otherwise avoided. The twenty-five-year old Datsun 120Y jerked, spluttered and coughed as they left Mbare and drove towards Beatrice Road.

Two buses, which had been involved in an accident near the broad-

casting corporation complex the previous evening, still stood abandoned, encroaching dangerously into the road. John swore and tried to negotiate his way round them. Brakes squealed loudly as he came to a halt at red traffic lights. Suddenly, three men materialised out of the darkness and started hitting the car. They shouted noisy obscenities and tried to wrench the doors open. The two women huddled together and stifled frightened screams.

John panicked and tried to spring the car into motion. His right foot pushed the wrong pedal. The car jerked and stalled to a complete stop. He finally managed to re-start the engine and took off just as one of the thugs picked up a large stone and threw it at his window. The stone missed its target but skimmed noisily over the boot. The car struggled up the steep incline towards the hospital, threatening to stall more than once. There was no other sound apart from Onai's soft whimpering. John made a silent vow. This was the last time he would ever do this.

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When they arrived at Casualty, one of the night nurses led Onai to a stark little room, which was dimly-lit and extremely cold. 'You're very lucky. You won't have to wait very long because we have enough doctors covering tonight's shift. And that, my dear, is very unusual,' the nurse said cheerfully and beamed a smile at the wounded woman.

Onai gave a slight nod, unwilling to make any effort to talk. Speech would only worsen the pain threatening to tear her skull apart. The nurse made her comfortable on an examination couch. With deft movements of her soft hands, she checked Onai's pulse, blood pressure and temperature. She gave another bright smile. 'All normal my dear. The doctor will be with you shortly,' she said, before leaving the room.

Onai lay on the examination couch, shivering violently as she waited for the doctor. Her face throbbed and her head pulsed with waves of pain. She tried to block it out by closing her eyes, but unable to bear the sudden feeling of being alone in the dark world of her misery, she re-opened them immediately.

After a short while, a tired-looking doctor came in and mumbled an introduction that she did not grasp. He was a dour little man who wore

wrinkled scrubs. His eyes were red and puffy. One side of his face was covered in a graphic cobweb of sleep marks. He took a brief medical history from her. In her mind, Onai formulated some careful responses to avoid implicating Gari. 'I walked into a door ...' she started, then stopped because the pain had become unbearable.

The doctor fidgeted with his pen and looked at her impatiently. 'Go on. I don't have all night,' he said abruptly, his face creasing into a frown. In disjointed sentences, Onai explained how she had accidentally hit her head against the bedroom door in the darkness, while looking for a light switch.

The doctor gave her a look that told her he didn't believe her, but he did not probe further. He shook his head in a distracted manner and wrote something on a card. During the examination, a black stethoscope dangling from his front pocket swung worryingly close to Onai. He ignored it. His gruff manner hinted at a deep longing to hurry to bed. After he had finished his speedy examination, he said, 'You will have to be admitted to hospital because you need observation for your head injury. I will suture the cut on your forehead and request a skull X-ray.'

'Thank you, *chiremba*,' Onai mumbled with a heady sense of relief. The hospital stay would be a welcome break from the demands of her life, as well as from Gari's abuse. Maybe just for one day she would savour sweet freedom and enjoy a carefree existence. Just for one day she'd be able to surrender herself to the care and ministrations of others. Strong feelings of maternal guilt forced her to block out thoughts of her children. For was she not abandoning them?

The doctor laid out a suture pack and called a nurse to assist him. 'There is no local anaesthetic,' the nurse explained to Onai. 'So you have to bear with us. I will hold your hand'.

Onai nodded, unprepared for the agony that followed. She moaned and bit back a scream as the needle cut into the skin on her forehead. Her head jerked involuntarily. The instrument in the doctor's hand slipped and dropped to the floor with a loud clatter. He cursed.

'*Shingai Amai. Shingai.* It will be over before you know it,' the young

nurse held her hand and encouraged her to endure the supposedly short procedure. She was wrong. Onai cried silent tears and kept rigidly still, trying hard not to offend the doctor who seemed to think that she was being difficult. Finally, the procedure was over. She almost howled with relief. She accepted some tablets from the nurse and took them immediately, gulping down some water through a tight throat.

Katy and John wheeled her to the ward on a rickety wheelchair. It creaked and wobbled along a dim corridor, and round the corner towards a lift which took them up to Female Surgical Ward. In the lift, Onai had the strangest feeling of being in a coffin, so bare and desolate-looking it was, with walls that were rusting in parts and the paint peeling. She closed her eyes and leaned backwards, gripping the arm-rests on the wheelchair. She was happy to arrive in the ward.

As Katy and John turned to leave, Onai gripped Katy's hand. She opened her mouth to speak. Her jaws felt heavy and stiff. She croaked, 'I'm so sorry for getting you out like this. I'm sorry that we were attacked. But thank you very much my friend. *Ndatenda sabwira*. I don't know what I would do without you.'

Katy replied soothingly, 'Onai, don't worry about anything. Just concentrate on getting better. I will ring the hospital tomorrow morning to check how you are doing. I can't come back today because John returns to South Africa this evening. I have to pack for him. That flighty daughter of mine is visiting this afternoon as well.'

Onai observed a subtle flicker of pride in her friend's eyes as she made reference to her daughter. Faith had left high school with excellent grades. She had gone straight to university. Which mother would not take pride in a daughter who was studying for a degree in law? Stifling a rush of envy, she cleared her throat and swallowed. It still hurt. 'Please tell the children not to worry about visiting me after school. It won't be easy for them to get transport here and back home.'

'I will do that, *sabwira*,' Katy replied and gave her a quick hug. Onai's heart brimmed with gratitude. However, she had a disquieting intuition that Katy's patience was bound to wear out eventually. It was just a matter of time. She had no idea who she would turn to when that fear

became a reality. Her mother lived in another world. The kind of support which she offered kept Onai sane, but she needed so much more. She needed Katy for the practicalities of surviving life with Gari. And for surviving life in Mbare. She would be lost without her friend.

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Dawn was breaking as they drove back to Mbare, darkness easing into daylight. Already, the roads were lined with people making an early start to work. For most, the prevailing transport problems, coupled with inability to pay the ever-increasing fares, meant an hour or more walking to work.

‘How many times must I point out something so obvious? Your friend must leave Gari. One day he’ll do something really serious,’ John said. ‘Like killing her,’ he added gravely.

Katy attempted a laugh. It rang out, shrill and artificial. ‘Don’t be so pessimistic John! Nobody is going to kill anyone.’ She was not willing to admit yet again that she shared exactly the same concerns. Onai’s predicament was now a well-debated and well-worn topic. There was absolutely nothing new to say.

He made a slight movement with his shoulders. ‘I hope I won’t be saying *takambozvita* one of these days.’ His voice was heavy with cynicism.

‘Don’t worry. I will talk to her again soon. The biggest problem is that she explains away everything that Gari does. I am not sure why. I suspect she loves him,’ she replied, wondering if at last she had stumbled upon the most logical explanation for Onai’s attitude. Nothing else seemed to make sense.

He frowned and raised his eyebrows. ‘Really? To me, the idea of anyone loving Gari is absurd. *Asi*, I’m not a woman. Even at the best of times, women can be very irrational. Well, maybe except you, *mudiwa*.’ Suddenly, he inclined his head towards her. His face broke into a smile.

Katy exhaled with relief. The tension was broken. She said thoughtfully, ‘If only there was a way for Onai to earn enough money to buy a house of her own and take care of her children ... I’m sure she would leave him.’

He cast another sideways glance at her and laughed. ‘Be serious, Katy.

This is Zimbabwe. A poor woman will always be a poor woman. *Hazvichinje!* After a moment of contemplative silence he continued, 'Onai will never own a house. She is an unemployed dressmaker who works as a vegetable vendor. How can you even imagine that she could buy a house? Where would she get the money from?' Katy stared back at him and did not answer. He was right. The notion of Onai ever owning a house was ridiculous.

'And by the way, that was the last time. Can you imagine what would have happened if those thugs had managed to open the doors? *Taifaka?* We could have died,' he said quietly, as if suddenly overcome by the wonder of realisation.

She looked away, partly blaming herself. Yes, it was time she had a serious talk with her friend. In the past, she'd tended to be almost overly cautious and fearful of exposing the secret place where Onai kept her deepest emotions hidden. Next time, she'd have to be more direct. Brutally direct. It was time for things to change before the violence spiralled into something worse. Soon it might be too late for anything to change. As Onai's *sabwira*, she had to do better. Onai deserved better.

The rest of their drive back to Mbare was made in complete silence.