Connecting the dots...

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When destiny takes over, nothing can stand in one's way...

The year we spent in Chitungwiza with our mother, who had immersed herself in hustling in order to fend for her children, in the wake of the collapse of her marriage to husband, Steven, was both exciting and painful. We were excited, because we had missed staying with our loving mother, after three years of the brutality of stepmother Bertha, following the breakdown of her union with our father. My brother and I failed to make it in our grade seven examinations.

Due to our poor results in the exams, we were unable to secure places for Form One at a secondary school in Chitungwiza. The other available option was to go to Highfield Community School or St Peter's Kubatana, both of which were in Highfield, which would mean bus fare for two people five days a week from Chitungwiza to Highfield, the money for which was hard to come by.

Why Highfield Community and St Peter's Kubatana? Because back then, we had a two tier education system made up of F1 and F2 schools. F1 schools were for the academically endowed, while F2 schools were for those like us with lesser academic talents, so they could still go to school and acquire vocational skills such as carpentry, plumbing, bricklaying and others. Highfield Community and St Peter's Kubatana were some of the F2 schools we had in the country. However, even if we were to have been accepted at either of these two schools, the fees for the two of us was way more than my mother could afford, having hobbled along for a year paying our primary school fees at Farai Primary School.

When Father asked to take us back, our mother must have accepted the offer with a heavy heart. My father on the other hand, must have thought he would be gaining more hands to help him with his communal farming project, given the fields he had been allocated at his new home in Chiduku, and it would not cost him a penny for labour. Johanes was fifteen, Thomas was ten and I was thirteen. While Thomas' contribution could not be considered to account for much, Johanes and I could cover substantial ground and make our efforts count, which was the case, when I look back.

I couldn't blame our teacher, Mr Dzomba, for our miserable showing in the grade seven examinations, as I can attest to the professional approach he took in dispensing of his duties. Neither can I pass the buck to the school whose approach to learning was beyond reproach. Having said that, I think, the pressures at home weighed heavily on our shoulders as well as the change of schools a year before our final exams.

There was a brighter side though, to my days at Farai Primary School in Chitungwiza and I look back at them with nostalgia. I made life-long friends, a good number of whom I am still in contact with to this day.

The high-flier in our class was definitely Humphrey Mukwereza, who sadly died in Botswana at the beginning of 2021, may his dear soul rest in eternal peace. I had the honour and privilege of providing repatriation services to bring Humphrey's remains from Botswana for burial at home. During the funeral arrangements, I got to meet his beautiful wife, Isabel and wonderful son, Panashe, who looks exactly like him.

Humphrey seemed to know everything under the sun, making him Mr Dzomba's favourite pupil. After completing his primary education at Farai, he proceeded to Nyatsime College where he did his 'O' levels before going to Morgen High to complete his A Levels, after which, he joined Standard Chartered Bank as a management trainee. Humphrey would rise through the ranks, becoming CEO of Standard Chartered Bank in the Gambia, before he was promoted to Chief Operating Officer (COO) for Standard Chartered Bank Africa, a position he held up to the time of his death. I was fortunate to have met him after our school days and we continued from where we had left off, as friends.

Breathing down Humphrey's neck was an equally talented girl, Anna-Mary Duri, another of our teacher's most-liked pupils. Humphrey and Anna-Mary were a cut above the rest of us, and their stellar performances were hard acts to follow.

Mr Dzomba's sister, Tracy, was also my classmate but even so, there was not a single day where our teacher showed any bias towards her, which deepened my respect for him.

Among the familiar faces to emerge from our class was the exceptionally gifted, Abraham Madondo, who was the school's most inspiring soccer player. Abraham would break into the Premier Soccer League later on in his life, playing for iBosso iBosso, as Highlanders Football Club is affectionately known amongst its legion of supporters across the country. Football ran through the veins of his family.

His father used to play for Chibuku Football Club, which was owned by Max Heinrich, a colonist who rose to fame after launching his "Shake Shake" opaque beer made with sorghum in Northern Rhodesia, now Zambia, in the 1950s. After the brew gained popularity, Max was motivated to take the brand into Nyasaland (Malawi) and Southern Rhodesia (Zimbabwe), where he established his brewery close to Victor Cohen's Cone Textiles in Chitungwiza industrial area.

It is a matter of fact, that the name Chibuku, was derived from Max's habit of recording orders from his clients in a little pocket diary (book), which the locals prefixed with "Chi" in the vernacular language, to give it an adulterated Shona name "Chibuku" or "The" book.

Abraham's uncle David, had also made his name in the domestic league, while playing for Dynamos Football Club, whose grudge matches with Chibuku Shumba FC were your typical clash of the titans.

Born on the 17th of October 1964, a few months after I had been ushered into this world in March of the same year, my age-mate would be part of Highlanders FC's Class of 1986 which swept up nearly every trophy to be played for. His teammates included the likes of David Phiri, Titus Majola, Tito Paketh, Ronnie Jowa, Peter Nkomo, and Nqobizitha Maenzanise.

So successful was Abraham at his craft that he was featured in Lovemore Tshuma, aka the legendary Lovemore Majaivana's tribute song to Highlanders, titled "Tshilamoya" where the Jit crooner gushed, "Yen uAbbie Madondo kalamathambo wayedlala njani bhora engalamathambo", in praise of his ball artistry, sophistication and fluidity while on the field of play.

My best friend at school was Rickson Mujuru, who is now in the field of information technology (IT) at the Postal and Telecommunications Regulatory Authority, famously known by its acronym, POTRAZ.

Ricky and I lived in the same neighbourhood and would go to school together on most days. We were also the tiniest boys in our class and I was only too happy to have him around me as someone with whom I shared a lot in common, especially the height part.

Another of my friends was David Karonga, who was the son of Mr Karonga who owned Joseph and Son (Private) Limited - the first black-owned funeral services provider in the country, which used to operate along Beatrice Road, now Simon Mazorodze Road.

Initially, David didn't want us to know that his father was in the end-of-life industry for fear of being ostracised. In those days, any association with the dead, even remotely, was considered a taboo and an act of sorcery. With time, what David thought was his best kept secret became the talk of town.

His worst fears were confirmed when even those in his inner circle started distancing themselves from him in case they would be painted with the same brush. I, however, was one of those who chose to stand by him. I can't say it was due to being enlightened; I simply found David to be another innocent soul who, like all of us, deserved a support structure built around family and friends.

Because I had made many friends within the neighbourhood, I was sad to leave them behind, when heading for the village. Also, I didn't know what the future had in store for me and my brothers. Here we were, leaving the bright lights of the city to stay with our father, who had since moved in with his new wife, Victoria Mataranyika (nee Mutizamhepo).

Given the trauma we had gone through for three years under the watchful eye of our step-mother, Bertha, we had to take a leap of faith. We hoped that the skills we had acquired from our pastoral-like life of moving from one place to another, the key being the adage, "when in Rome, do as the Romans do", had prepared us to adapt to any situation.

After my father and his new bride, Victoria, had been banished from Gwangwara Village in Rukweza, they had sought refuge with his maternal relatives in Chiduku Tribal Trust Lands, my grandmother, Sophia's home village.

The Tribal Trust Lands were a creation of the Tribal Trust Lands Act of 1965, introduced by the colonial regime to change the name of the native reserves and create trustees for the land in order to give themselves total control over the indigenes. The high population densities in these tribal trust lands made them degraded "homelands", with very little commercial value, if any.

When my father moved to Chiduku, his maternal uncle, Wilson Chifuri, who was the village head, allocated him a piece of land. He proceeded to put up structures that did little to hide the fact that he was now unemployed. There were three thatched huts at his compound, being our new step-mother's kitchen, their bedroom and a granary (hozi) where the previous year's harvest was kept.

When the day came to leave Chitungwiza for Chiduku Tribal Trust Lands, the tension in our room as we once again packed our bags, the three of us – Johanes, Thomas and I – was so thick you could cut it with a knife. But the die had been cast; as soon as my father showed up, we were on our way to Chiduku.

My father arrived in a borrowed car, perhaps to send a message to our mother that all was well. He took us to a house in Tsanzaguru Township in Rusape, where we put up for the night. Ironically, it was the construction of Tsanzaguru Township that had led to the displacement of my father's former in-laws (the Musasas) from Bvumbe Village where the then slick and handsome-looking, Steven, had stolen the heart of our mother.

Little did we know that we were to receive a baptism of fire in this historical and emotive suburb, before we had even set foot in Chiduku.

At around about eight in the evening, there was a ferocious knock on the door. When my father opened the door to allow our unanticipated guests in, we would soon realise that these were no ordinary visitors. They were guerrilla fighters with rifles strapped on their shoulders, whose mission was to get the occupants of the house to attend an all-night vigil or pungwe, on the outskirts of the township, which we did.

These vigils were all-night community gatherings where the boisterous liberation war fighters would entertain the masses or 'povo', indoctrinating them about their mission to free fellow black countrymen from the yolk of colonialism.

The term 'povo' is quite common in Portuguese-speaking nations, where it refers to common people, especially the oppressed. Because of Rhodesia's fraternal ties with neighbouring Mozambique where some of our liberation war fighters received training and launched their attacks from, the freedom fighters popularised the word povo back home in order to develop and entrench political consciousness on the masses.

These vigils owed their existence to Mao Zedong, founder of the Chinese Communist Party whose defining war philosophy was that the guerrillas must move amongst the people as fish swim in the water. This was meant to endear them with the masses, while making their support base impenetrable.

The vigils were also lively events where the masses would temporarily drown their sorrows and their fears of the tyrannical Ian Smith regime through singing revolutionary songs while dancing all-night-long. This offered some form of therapy during those uncertain times.

To guard against surprise attacks by the Rhodesian forces which would endanger lives, vanaMukoma (big brothers) – as we used to call the guerrilla fighters – would send vanaMujibha (male collaborators) and vanaChimbwido (female collaborators) on spying missions. Any sign of danger would be swiftly communicated to the commanders to disperse the crowd and ensure the safe return of their guests to their homes.

It was not always the case that these vigils would end well. Because traitors were everywhere, including in unlikely places, there were cases when the vigils would come under attack from the Rhodesian forces, resulting in bloodshed, although this was rare. In most cases, the Rhodesian forces would ignore the gatherings to avoid situations whereby the masses could be caught in the crossfire, which would turn into a public relations disaster internationally.

Whenever that happened, all hell would break loose the next day as Ian Smith's uniformed men would descend on the targeted communities like a tonne of bricks, moving from one house to the other to extract information on the whereabouts of the guerrilla fighters. Their methods of interrogation included torture, beatings and incarcerations for long hours, if not days.

As we were being led to the pungwe, it was these unfortunate incidents that were weighing heavily on my mind. Upon our arrival, we would find that almost everyone from the neighbourhood who had been found at home that night, had been rounded up to attend the gathering. There were lots of people seated on the ground in a circle, with a fire in the middle.

They were all singing liberation war songs at the top of their voices. We joined in the singing, which lasted for about an hour. As we were singing, under the guidance of instructors, we noticed other comrades were still busy bringing in more people to attend. Once they were satisfied that they had rounded everyone up, they started educating us about why they were fighting in the war.

We were warned that they were against those who aided and abetted Ian Smith's regime such as the police and those who were conscripted into the Rhodesian army. The list also included District Administrators (DAs) who had gained notoriety for being the eyes and ears of the brutal Ian Smith regime. The DAs were also loathed for enforcing unpopular policies such as mitero (taxes) and chibharo (forced labour).

To set an example, a man was identified from the crowd and commanded to stand and come up to the front. His name was a Mr Machakaire whom we were told had been working for the government as a DA, which classified him as a sell-out. He was ordered to lie down on his stomach, after which he was thoroughly sjambokked, with our singing drowning his cries and pleas for mercy.

As the beating continued, I remember hearing gunshots in the nearby Tsanzaguru Mountain, resulting in the gathering scattering in all directions. We all went running back to our houses, and only God knows what became of Mr Machakaire.

In no time, the whole township would be ablaze with gunfire which lit the night sky as the Rhodesian forces exchanged fire with the comrades well into the dead of the night. We woke up the next day to see groups of soldiers patrolling the area. My father decided that we would leave early for Chiduku to avoid the risk of travelling late given that there were many roadblocks along the way and also that there was a six am to six pm curfew. We were happy that we were in Tsanzaguru only for the night.

Although my father's sister, Calista, who hooked him up with our mother, lived in a village across the river from Tsanzaguru Township and along the way to Chiduku, he would choose not to pass through her place. While we felt it was not our place to inquire into his reasons, deep down we were convinced that his divorce to our mother, Mabel, had made him a black sheep in the family, on his paternal side.

The journey to Chiduku was usually a nightmare. The most notorious roadblock on that road was the one at Chiwetu where there was a camp for the Rhodesian forces. On that day, we went past the checkpoint without much trouble, past Mavudzi and on to Chiduku. When we got to the dip-tank, popularly known as padhibhi, we would find out that there had been an exchange of gunfire between the ZANLA and the Rhodesian forces the night before and there had been several casualties from both sides. Most of the dead were still on site, covered with blankets.

The atmosphere in the village was tense, with very little movement. This is how we were welcomed in Chiduku – a war zone which was to be our home, far away from our mother and the safety and comfort that we were used to in Chitungwiza.

We finally arrived at our destination, a new homestead that our father had built with his new wife. The granary (hozi) was to double up as our bedroom, where we had to learn to co-exist with crop-eating insects that, if not controlled using pesticides, would devour harvests and cause sleepless nights since they are mostly active at night.

This was the first time we would come face-to-face with our new step-mother, Victoria. She was of slim build and light in complexion compared to her predecessor, Bertha Mlambo. She was also pretty for her age and must have been a smashing beauty in her teenage years. After formal introductions, she talked us through a few housekeeping rules, including the do's and don'ts.

We got along reasonably well with Victoria, who, to our relief, did not resort to beatings in cases where we had disputes; her weapon of choice, was to deprive us of food. But even when we did have our differences, we still found time to have small talk with her, especially by the fireside in the evenings, while she prepared supper.

We soon developed coping mechanisms to make use of our time when we were not working the fields. I specialised in catching mice and birds, while Johanes became a good fisherman providing us all with the much needed protein in our meals. Victoria would prepare sadza, while either Johanes or myself prepared the catch of the day for cooking. Chiduku back then had forests where we could pick lots of wild fruits, making sure we didn't go hungry even on days we crossed paths with Victoria, but the best days in the house were when we caught mice, birds or fish, which we brought to the house to share.

Victoria liked to tell stories while she cooked and as we ate supper. During these fireside chats, she would disclose to us how she had met our father back in their youth in Nyanga, becoming an item. She would explain that their courtship had been disrupted when Father moved back to Gwangwara village in Rukweza. Getting married to Father second time around was like a childhood dream for both of them. She told us that after our father had moved from Nyanga, she had gone on to get married, albeit reluctantly, to another man with whom she had a son named Richard, before being widowed on his death. Father called her by a pet name Mai Richard, while his was, Baba va Fungai, as if Fungai was his first child.

Being deprived of food was not new to us as we had gone through it all before and we quickly established relationships with the Chinyamas who were more than happy to provide us with food when in need. The Chinyamas were relatives of our grandmother, Sophia. Her brother Sekuru Madzvimbo and his wife Mbuya Esthma lived close by.

Their married sons, Divas and David also lived not far from us. It was to them that we turned for supplementary feeding in times when we had trouble getting food at home.

Mbuya Esthma was always gracious and welcoming feeding us with corn-meal made out of zviyo (finger millet) and muriwo wemhodzi unedovi (pumpkin leaves with peanut butter), which was my favourite. Mbuya Mai Tawanda wife of Sekuru Divas and Mbuya Mai Gibson, wife of Sekuru David, were amazing also.

We soon made friends with boys of our age. One of them was Bright Dzuda of the Simboti totem who was living in Chiduku with his maternal relatives the Mukotekwas. Bright now works as a teacher at St George's College in Harare. Other families we admired were, the Chidangwaras also called Mufandaedza, Mukotekwas, Chakawas, Mukungwas Mupamhangas and the Mutandawaris.

While our first encounter with the liberation war fighters sent chills down our spines, we soon got used to hobnobbing with them during pungwes where we sang liberation songs through the night. We called it morari, meaning morale-boosting sessions or gatherings that were convened by the comrades to cheer up their supporters, the villagers. It was fun.

We were indoctrinated into the cause of the war and were happy to be part of it even at that young age. The comrades liked us a lot as young boys. The older boys would go with the comrades and be gone for days as well as the older girls. One of the older girls, a chimbwido, Perpetua Chifuri – aunt to my father – would date one of the comrades. The relationship sustained right up to independence, after which they got married.

The comrades had a liking for the Sunganakas also called Mashayamombe, whose house was by the Danhamombe mountain range. David Chinyama, son of Sekuru Madzvimbo, was married to Estery Mashayamombe. Her father Ben was a good farmer and had many cattle. Each time the comrades were in the area, he would slaughter some for them. He also supplied them with milk.

When information filtered to the Rhodesian forces that Ben Mashayamombe's homestead was the place used mostly as a base for the comrades, they would come one day by day to burn all their houses leaving them to face the elements of nature without the cover and shelter of their houses.

My father also had a good relationship with the comrades. Each time there was a group of them deployed from Mozambique they would have access to the big cache of blankets we kept at our house. On their return to Mozambique or when they had to move to a different area, they kept their blankets at our house. Each time they left, Father would instruct us to wash them in boiling water so we could rid them of the bedbugs and lice that would infest them.

Sometime in December 1978, my father and our step-mother left for the capital city, together with my two brothers, leaving me at home alone. At nightfall, I would walk through the maize field to collect my uncle, Wilson Chifuri Jnr, to come with me and keep me company. One evening, as I was on my way to collect him, I bumped into a battalion of Rhodesian forces who were doing their patrols. I was fortunate to get onto the footpath at the same time as the one leading the battalion was also getting there, as opposed to them having heard movement in the distance. I froze with fear. They all gathered around me, demanding to know where the comrades were and why I was out at that time of the evening, when I knew there was a curfew, amongst other, vexing questions. After they were satisfied that I posed no harm to them, being a mere fourteen year-old boy, they let me go.

Unbeknown to them, we had loads of blankets for the comrades at our house which we kept each time they were out on different missions. It was a close shave, which left my father shaken after I broke the news to him on their return.

Time moved quickly from the time we moved from Chitungwiza to Chiduku and in 1979, it was almost two years since my father had last been employed. Johanes had perfected the art of fishing, catching fish each time he went out fishing. Together with his friends they would go to the nearby Ruzawi River which was their favourite hunting ground. On some occasions, they would team up to go fishing in Mucheke River where they would catch more and bigger fish.

I became good at my craft, catching mice and birds. There were many wild fruits to keep us healthy, but somehow I was restless. I liked good things, including new clothes, which we hadn't had for over a year and a half.

In Highfield where we lived with Mainini Bertha I had mastered the art of selling oranges at Gwanzura Stadium earning small commissions. In Chitungwiza where we lived with Mom, there was a vibrant economy where we had cash on our hands all the time from selling eggs on the streets of Chitungwiza or collecting cash from Mother's customers at construction sites. I had been accustomed to having cash in my hands at an early age. In Chiduku all that was gone as the only game in town was catching mice and trapping birds, both of which generated no cash. I decided to look for a job herding cattle so I could earn a wage, which I thought would solve my problem of buying myself new clothes and possibly even save enough to get married one day.

At fifteen, I was beginning to look at girls my age, thinking about which one I could choose to be my wife when the time came for me to get married. Like most boys of our time and age, I built castles in the air even. Sekuru David had three beautiful sisters-in-law, daughters of Sekuru Ben Mashayamombe, Jennifer, Janet and Jesman. I liked Janet who was closer to me in age. The Chidangwara family had a number of girl children also, whom I eyed, just in case I didn't make it with the Mashayamombe girls. I was becoming an insurance person, hedging my bets, long before I got to learn about insurance and risk management.

After making enquiries and letting a number of people know I was on the look-out for a job herding cattle, I would be hired as a herd boy by the Chikudos also called Ushewokunze on the 1st of July 1979 with a starting wage of seven dollars per month, Pastor Ushewokunze payed my wages.

The opportunity to work and earn an income, my own for that matter, even when it was a pittance, when I look back at it with the benefit of hindsight, was attractive to me. I thought by working and earning, I stood a good chance of being my own man. I was convinced that the two were the critical factors I needed to lay the groundwork for me to one day start a family and have the ability to look after it. What I didn't know as I started work on that morning of the 1st of July 1979 was that destiny had silently taken over and that I wouldn't last in that job for a long time.