

Door of No Return

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| Zambia |

She hums. The vibrations of her voice reverberate against the walls of the room, giving way to a new sun. The penumbra on the wall reveals familiar furniture pieces as blue light slowly fills the room. Her spirit joins the soul of that in the deep of her being – causing them to float as one – uncertain of their futures after this day.

A thinly skin-gloved hand impresses from inside, against the inner walls of her velvet black belly. Stripes run over the dark mound, each telling a story of whom they belong to. She feels the baby move around violently, causing her to mirror its minute hand with her own.

“Go to sleep, 19!” she says.

“I can’t,” it replies.

“You will get us into trouble! You need to be ready and well rested for today.”

“But I don’t want to go.”

“I am afraid that you must. It is the order of life.”

“Tell me the story again?”

“Which one?”

“Please, tell me the story, M.”

She looks up at the sterile ceiling. Its chrome coldness returns the stare. Her eyes shut tight and she groans. Her belly contracts into a tight ball. She breathes in quick, short breaths, until it relaxes again. She does what her first doula said to do. To defeat the pain, she begins to narrate the tale. She speaks the way that she has spoken to all of them who were here before 19. Through her spirit.

“It all started many years ago – when whispers from the West begun. Murmurs of scandal spread like bush fire across the land – tales of Enugu babies being made and sold in factories. The world had changed so much during the information age, that convenience and immediate gratification fed into a live, voluptuary demon that only consumed and destroyed. At the swipe of a screen, people would buy and sell children. Poorer women, with only their fertility to sell, had begun to emigrate.

Up north, my people made long, arduous journeys across forests, mountains and vast thirstlands in order to escape to Europe. Beasts and harsh weather would devour them if hunger did not beat them to it. After the extreme difficulty of the journey across land, they would bob on the big blue sea – twenty in one tiny, inflatable boat. Vomiting on each other, defecating in full view of the heavens. Fighting and fearful, they had no captain to lead them. Many would be lost to watery, salt-filled graves.

Desperate-eyed people on television screens cried out warnings. Matter-of-fact voices on the radio reported these things, but no one did anything. People were being traded as slaves off the-then Libyan coast, centuries after abolition of the slave trade. In the South, the continent suffered. Doctors, engineers and teachers left for greener pastures until no one was left to tend to home. Our population grew fiercely, but our industries suffered. Our water systems became murky with synthetic waste that would never, ever dissolve. Our governments were corrupt. Some borrowed until they could pay back no longer. All of this continued to plague us until dark clouds begun to visit our continent...”

“And then what?”

“But you have heard this story already, 19.”

“Yes, but you never finish it, M.”

“The Chinese had already established strong links in Africa, building us railways, skyscrapers, schools and hospitals. They learned our languages and became like brothers to us. So it was only a matter of time before they came forward and proposed a way to solve our migration and debt problems.”

“What did they promise us, M?”

“They offered to create a massive joint fertility programme on condition we formed a united Pan-African state, what was to become The United Nation of Mbiguli.”

“Mbiguli?”

“Yes. Together, we created a breed of super-soldiers, the Akahn – made through careful genetic selection. Mbiguli’s new economic growth and allegiance to China changed the world order. The leaders in the West did not like this. For the first time in modern history, Africans were leading the world. Global trade was affected. Our doctors and teachers returned, and we became increasingly self-sufficient. Having lost access to the resources coming out of Mbiguli, the West decided to declare war on us. However, it did not last long, because...”

“Because of what, M?”

“We...”

“We what, M?”

“In the middle of their coldest night, and during our hottest day, we dropped silent, invisible

bombs across their continents. Something vile and irrevocable.”

“Did they die?”

“Not really, 19...”

“Then what happened M?”

“I don’t know, 19.”

Christopher looks at his wife, Kate. Her red hair is pasted across her porcelain forehead, her cheeks flushed in the low savannah sun. Pearls of sweat develop along her perfect nose. Tall, golden grass yields to the wind, bending to the left, and then the right, as though in trance. Acacias and jacarandas, burly, thorny but certain, provide camouflage to the few antelope he can see.

She wrings her hands, her knuckles pale. He cups her hands in his own. The canvas flap of the Land Rover’s canopy slaps against the sides of the open-air van. The idea of a diesel-run vehicle sounded nostalgic in the glossy accounts given by his virtual agent, but not so much in real life.

A group of super-sized zebra appear from behind the trees, galloping parallel to their car, shaking the earth, dust rising from their hooves. Christopher places a protective arm around his wife’s shoulders. The smartly dressed Mbiguli driver smiles with pride as he explains that they are all safe. No animal can come close to them, thanks to the InvisiWall™ infrastructure – “it is impossible,” he says, emphasising the ‘p’ with an accent revealing descent from a formerly Portuguese-speaking country.

His voice carries above the wind as he narrates the history of this part of Mbiguli. “Formerly divided into Zambia, Tanzania and Congo DRC, this strait sits on what was then named Lake Tanganyika. It is the tourism capital of this region. Zambia had a resort on Kasaba Bay, which was built for its president in the 1980s. With beaches so pure, the new Nation of

Mbiguli decided to extend this wonderful feature by creating a strait that stretches from the Indian Ocean, off the shores of Tanzania.”

They drive on, leaving behind the savannah. Closely cut lawns are the precursor to the verdant, tropical entrance. Luscious sprays of dense green fronds atop striking succulents form impressive leafy fountains. The couple arch their necks backward to see how high these rise, half expecting a Goliath to come through parted palms. Twittering birds fly between trees, aware of the new arrivals. The vehicle passes through the mouth of an open gate made of Mukwa wood, and onto a white-pebbled bridge suspended in mid-air, hung with fuchsia and orange bougainvillea. Tall, wide-chested guardians, the Akahn, flank each side of the bridge, their jet-black hair tied back in flowing pony-tails. They look down, following the moving vehicle with their eyes. Small goose-bumps rise along Christopher’s forearm while Kate’s damp hand entwines in his.

The bridge runs for hundreds of metres, with white-capped sea lapping beneath. Enormous peacocks with fan-spread wings welcome them at the end of the floral tunnel. Christopher takes a sip of his bottled water, struggling to swallow. He notices Kate’s narrow shoulders are still tense.

The hotel is opulent, with lofty chalets suspended against the blue sky. Giant baobab trees boast restaurants at different levels, with lift tubes going up and down their centres, as well as left and right along their branches like a central nervous system.

Inside the main hall on the ground floor, they are greeted by cold, soundless blasts of air and the playful notes of millennial African jazz. Holographic hosts dressed in cobalt togas welcome them, giving knee-deep bows reminiscent of hospitality only found in historical films. Amarula is served on ice, along with an array of eats: roasted pumpkin seeds, chikanda, plantain, smoked impala ribs, watermelon and mango slices. Nitro-cooled cloths are provided by wheeling oval robots. Christopher and Kate enjoy the sensation of the flannels on the back of their necks. Symmetrically lined flower arrangements burst with colour, making the couple breathe in deeply. They smell nothing.

Once they are refreshed, porters arrive to assist them with their luggage.

They mount up to their room through the baobab tubes. The ride is deliberately slow, allowing them to take in the beauty of the strait. The sapphire water below makes the rays from the sun dance, striking against the pure white of the beach. They arrive at the Makumbi floor, and their tunnel takes them left towards their room. Transparent corridors at cloud level startle the couple, but they are reassured by the neon indigo arrows along the floor.

As they approach their room, chambermaids scurry out of sight. Christopher takes out his binoculars, still amazed to think that this was once a land-locked country. Through his lenses, the magnificent islands dotting the bay shift closer. Exotic fauna and flora abound on each, designed to create a unique ecosystem – providing a range for the guests.

A genetically modified giraffe greets them at their balcony. Her right eye peers curiously at the couple, filling most of the window. She chews greenery in large circular motions, breathing heavily in their direction. His wife moves towards the animal as if magnetised, and smiles. For a moment, Christopher feels he finally has her approval.

A virtual fence lights up – giving warning – her cue to step away. A fish eagle sounds three times, and they turn to face the smooth-edged hologram who appears in the middle of their room.

“Mr and Mrs Hanover. Welcome to the *grrreat* land of Mbiguli!” He draws his arms wide apart to display its size. He bows deeply.

“Thank you,” Christopher replies.

“Welcome to the Strait,” he continues in a deep baritone, “founded in 2030 by the Council of Ministers for Tourism. You have been placed on the most prestigious floor – the Makumbi, named after the magnificent clouds in which it sits. We take you as close to heaven as we believe we can.” He winks, laughing his own joke. Kate remains silent.

"Thank you, sir," Christopher says on behalf of his wife.

"Call me Mr Bwalya."

"Thank you ... erhm ... Mr Bwalya. How long do you think it will be until...?"

"Ah, not to worry Sir. According to our obstetric AI reader, your host is showing all the optimum signs for delivery within the next 24 hours."

"Will she ... rem...?"

"No, Mr Hanover. Our hosts have no internal conflicts or feelings of doubt – or separation. We take careful steps to ensure that they have no memories of the pregnancy either. A series of electromagnetic waves takes care of this as soon as the child is released. In fact, your particular host is one of our best."

On the other side of the estate, in a white Cape Dutch bungalow, a Soul is making its entrance into this world. Malaika's chest is heaving. The Soul Catcher, a mouthless doctor in red and black scrubs, stands at the end of her bed. He places his fingers between her thighs, prompting her to push. Her fists clench. Sharp explosions escape her mouth. Her teeth gnash against each other.

She feels the familiar ring of fire at the base of her anatomy. She is crowning, the top of the baby's head pushing out. She gives one final animal grunt, and it slips out, in a bumpy rush. The silky, warm gush flows. A routine she knows so well. Another push, and with it the last lump of flesh and vessels that connected the baby to her for nine months is expelled. It is done. Her last Soul is released.

Its demeanor is angelic, but its cry torturous. Malaika turns her head and closes her eyes. Exhausted, she tries to ignore the wails of the child. She wonders what it would feel like to have its wet skin against her chest. To feel its heart beating against hers. To smell its white-capped head. Her breasts react to its cry, beginning to swell.

The Soul Catcher checks the child's limbs, fingers and genitals. Sex is the only factor still predetermined by the Souls themselves. Malaika looks for satisfaction in the Soul Catcher's eyes, but they blink back at her. Handed over to the matron, 19 is taken away, as always, through the door of no return. She knows she will never again see the whiteness of the baby's skin against the sharpness of its carrot head.

Emotions drop her into a vortex of memories. Her mind flashes to a day in the market, laughing with her sister, playing hand songs in the red dust of Serenje. She braces for the zap as the Soul Catcher and the matron step out of the small delivery room. Ultraviolet light pulses through her in two flashes, and she blacks out. For the nineteenth time.

Malaika comes to life. She is back in her room. Clean, dressed, and even oiled. She prepares not to remember. But for some reason, she does.

Hand-clapping in the market with Elida. A mix of smoke from malasha coals and dried fish on the boil. Melting mirages from snapping tin roofs. The scene looks as though it has a blue smokescreen, like the Instant photo filters on Papa's iPhone.

Papa. Towering, broad-shouldered, the colour of midnight. The smell of the sea always trailing behind him. Fabrics and spices falling out of his plastic bag. Foreign intonations coating his broken, Francophone English. His tales of a land far away, of doors of no return, unfolded every evening after his time on his hand-woven prayer mat. His cracked soles looking towards the sky, his face fervently downward. The reason she was different.

She remembers.

The cacophonic sounds of kalindula and hip-hop music blare from multi-coloured stalls. Women on carved wooden stools braiding thick heads of hair. Their faithful customers on reed mats, with ashy-elbowed babies eating guavas. Battered pans of swirling oil ready to transform the contents of green and white plastic dishes. Fat Hungarian sausages on display, indentations along their casing, covered with black flies, as hungry as humans.

She remembers.

A bicycle with a large television cabinet strapped on with rubber ropes swerves by. A woman on a motorbike dressed extravagantly in traditional clothing for a wedding zooms in the opposite direction. The lady's skin is ashen from talcum powder, and her eyebrows are drawn like upside-down Nike ticks. Her wig sits unnaturally at the centre of her forehead. Malaika remembers – she is laughing with Edina at the spectacle. Papa is on his way to them. He is extraordinarily tall in his white agbada.

Like the locusts in Mama's Bible, a shadow in the sky comes rolling toward them. A mild wind announces its arrival. Everyone freezes, like characters in a picture book. The dark clouds dissipate into tiny drones. The insect machines come to them. One to her, another to Edina. They hover low and steady. A red scan follows. Up and down her body it goes – pausing at her womb. There, it lights up in green. Calculations with foreign characters are done in mid-air. Her face is captured – and so is she.

A string of voices emanate from her womb. Questioning, crying, laughing, she can hear them all, the Souls she has released. Questions from past tenants who once claimed abode in her being, for whom she has already collected her fare.

She sits up and brings her feet to the cold floor. Hands on her head, she attempts to block out the voices, but they constellate in her torso, and a brilliant light radiates from her core. She is no longer aware of her environment, because she is one with the force within her.

She moves to the door, and they command it to open. Door after door unlocks in sequence as she strides down the corridor. Dozens of women emerge from their rooms, all in trance. Their uniform of chitenge maternity dresses and white socks make them look like prison inmates. Voices from their bellies join those from Malaika's. At the vault, the Akahn shout at one other – panic in their shrill voices because they have not been trained to take action on the assets. The women, possessed, keep pressing forward.

Malaika bursts into the vault and finds the control board. Mr Bwalya's face, programmed for

warm hospitality, appears, giving her a smiling warning. She finds a dial that distorts his pleading image – large, small, stretched – until he spirals downwards like water into a drain and finally to nothingness. She manipulates the control station as though she has known it all her life.

Red lights and siren alarms screech throughout the hotel. The earth shakes and thunderous sounds follow. In disbelief, the disoriented Akahn glower at the game monitors, which flash colossal animals charging toward secured sites – crushing moving tourist vans and sightseers. Their attention is gripped by the sound of trumpets.

A monkey's wedding, rain and sun at the same time, takes place on the estate each time a child is born. The warm orange horizon lets in rays of hope. Christopher looks at Kate, his wife. A birth, the elixir of life. He strokes her red hair.

19 is brought to the room. So perfect. So pale.

Christopher, trembling, receives the baby. His baby. A warm glow fills his body and lights his face. Kate stands across from him, her bare feet planted on the marble floor. Her arms fold into an envelope close to her chest. The fish eagle call turns their attention to the centre of their room.

A hologram appears once more. To their surprise, the image of a tall, astonishingly black woman fills the room. Her energy is so strong, Christopher's child writhes in his arms. His instinct tells him to call for security, but his conscience says not to. The baby begins to scream, its face morphing from chalk paste to scarlet.

The figure hovers, unstable and flickering with static. More silhouettes appear behind her. All shapes and sizes of women, round bellies, dressed in patterned cloth. They stare at the baby in his arms. Malaika lifts her eyes from the squirming bundle, and fixes them on Christopher.

"19, my child. Be quiet."

Silence.
