

# AZUBAH



*Chakanika bakha nkhuku siingatole.*

What a duck has failed to pick up a hen cannot pick up either.

—Chewa proverb

**The rhythm of our sisterhood is to call each other frequently enough that we never become strangers.**

so far, our system is flawless,

every few months, we swap gossip for a few minutes: *Have you heard Auntie Lu's third husband got their maid pregnant? Perfect cousin Mwape flunked out of law school and is calling himself a pastor! Enhe, yes, 10K Insta followers. His parents are telling everyone how Pastor is higher than Lawyer in the eyes of the Lord anyway.*

When our laughter simmers down, I ask how Azubah is doing, and Chisomo's answer is always "Mama is fine," which paves way for me to race through,

"Okay, I'll send some money for her groceries this weekend."

## OBLIGATIONS TO THE WOUNDED

One of us grows sleepy, a husband or child demands extra attention, and both of us promise-promise-promise, “Sis, I’ll call you, mailo,” only for the tomorrow to stretch into week after week of memes and thirty-second TikTok videos.

This time, Chisomo bypasses the “Uli bwa? How is the hubby? Na Gabby?” and dives straight into “Funso, Mama is really bad mwe. I think you need to come.”

“What do you mean, *she’s bad*?” My voice is doing an awful job of veiling the panic racing up my throat,

“Please, sis,” Chisomo says, “just come nga you can manage.”

Azubah’s madness has been brewing for a long time, but not to the extent of the madmen who loiter around Lusaka, lugging around trash like it is expensive luggage and howling family secrets into the night.

On past calls, Chisomo has called Azubah’s ailment forgetfulness. Only once has she sprinkled *dementia* into our conversation,

after that, nothing,

so, this murmured *bad*, I take as a rapid unwinding of Azubah’s mind, a sudden revelation of her rotten core,

and a siren blares red in my head,

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the last time Chisomo said someone was *bad*, she meant Grandpa had died.

In the background, Chisomo's son yells, "I've finished!" and she hangs up.

I'm left staring at the pixelated profile picture of my sister's dimpled smile,

*bad*: my mind churns the word, assigns it the meaning of Azubah lying depleted, reeking like stale life and Vaseline.

I last took Azubah's call six months ago, last clicked reply to her texts when?

I call my husband, voice not video, because I don't want David's pity-you look to make me cry,

"I mean, I already remit my Black Tax via Western Union with every paycheck." I know I'm whining, but holding it in feels like bile. "What will my presence in Zambia even do?" I say, "If anything, it will make more sense for her to come here, be seen by doctors in a hospital where she can be taken care of properly." Which is to say, in America, I've at least got the option of dropping her off at a sterile assisted-living facility,

David says "I hear you" in that way people do before they show that they are, in fact, not hearing you

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he says, "but, c'mon, you can't *not* go."

and what I notice is the missing *honey* at the end of his sentence,

"What about Gabby?" my last resort,

surely, my daughter is a good enough reason to stay put,

"Gabby? Oh, she'll be fine. My mom will pick her up from track practice. Mom won't mind."

I'm trying not to shout, trying to do what my Pilates instructor says to do in order to manipulate my mind to be calm, trying to keep my breath steady, sucking in big puffs of air, "Gabby needs her mother, David." It's just a statement, not an accusation, all the air in my lungs makes it so,

"Yeah, but she's your mother, Funso, and *she* needs you," he says,

the first defense of people who actually have mothers, as if the title of mother has no accompanying expectations like care and attention or not abandoning their children for drinking sprees, not moving out when their youngest is nine to live with a faceless father and then a revolving door of boyfriends, only to show up to their daughter's wedding over a decade later with scaly tears and a too-long hug,

"You're right," I hear myself say, my Zambian accent bubbling abruptly to the surface; I clear my throat, "She's my mother."

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David likes to be echoed, so, I know that's a smile behind the thawing in his voice, "Then it's settled," he says. "I'll book your ticket. Just tell me when you can get time off, yeah."

I can't speed-walk to the teachers' lounge fast enough, can't grab my thermos fast enough, can't swallow my coffee quick enough, to allow the world to be muffled by the fruit liqueur that I use instead of creamer.

Three weeks of fog float past until I'm sitting in this stuffy cubicle-cum-office-cum-consultation-room listening to a doctor saying,

"Mrs. Ashwood, your mother still has some of her long-term memories. They are just a bit fragmented": in that *I understand* tone salespeople use on infuriated customers demanding refunds they'll never get, what I hear is that Azubah's whole life is this sped-up movie, with someone else hogging the remote, arbitrarily clicking pause and letting her watch a still shot for a beat before hurtling her into another place and time.

"Pictures will help jog her memory," the doctor continues. "Think of this as you helping her find them. It will probably bring you two closer."

*Closer*—in a room surrounded by rusting cabinets stacked against the wall. The three of us are seated on creaking chairs arranged in a cramped semicircle, our knees a breath away from touching; a thin illu-

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sion of privacy is provided by one babyshit-yellow curtain to my right, but the whole time the doctor's voice is an octave above a whisper, fighting the squeaking tires, rattling medicine bottles, hesitant footsteps, and distant wailing spilling in from the hallway on the other side of the curtain.

I glance over at Azubah and force myself to smile at her,

she's fixated on a flyer for World Mental Health Day a nurse handed us while we waited for the doctor to come; Azubah is pressing an invisible crease out of the green ribbon embossed to the top of the paper and repeating every second word the doctor says,

the doctor's "You have pictures, right?"

becomes,

"have-right?" in Azubah's mouth,

I have *a* picture; it has lived as a bookmark in a journal I stole from Azubah's purse when I was eleven; journal and book have sat at the bottom of my purse for years,

I cut the doctor a look, "and what *exactly* will she remember?"

the doctor stops fingering her watch and sighs, "as I've explained to your sister already, your mother's condition is severe."

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I nod, “and?”

“all of my suggestions will greatly improve quality of life.” she nods at Azubah’s hands,

Azubah says, “Of-suggestions-greatly-quality-life.” and grins like a child proud of something they have done, even though it is stupid,

I say nothing,

the doctor coughs then says, “the Memantine will help her ability to perform daily functions,” while updating Azubah’s prescription; she hands the small paper to me,

I look at the illegible blue ink and don’t ask if she means that Azubah will stop mistaking the sink for the toilet or using the corner of her chitenge as toilet paper and trying to flush down two meters of fabric,

“the Donepezil will help her to interact with others.” she clips the pen back into the pocket of her scrubs,

she stands, draws the curtain open, and waves us out, and yells, “Next!” into the crowded hallway.

By the time we slump into the car, I can smell my sweat, the AC spits out dust motes and a warm breeze, but I suck in the air and start Chisomo’s car,

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I feel about ten again, trying but failing to comb my hair into a puff that will pass the smartness test at the school assembly, frustrated by every curl springing out of my head, wanting to chop off every stray strand out of my control.

Ten-year-old me shakily dials my big sister's number and groans into the phone when she says, "Yes, Funso, hi! How did it go? How is Mama?"

this brittle little laugh escapes my throat, "The good news for her is, she won't remember any of it. Fucking fantastic for her, isn't it? She gets to forget!"

"Funso, naiwe," my sister chides, "think how horrible this whole thing must be for Mama."

"For Mama, ehn?" I chuckle, "When you said she was bad, I thought she was—"

"God forbid! Do not even think about finishing that sentence."

"Then I'll say this, Chisomo. This isn't horrible enough if you ask me. Azubah can't remember a thing. A fucking fresh start for her, isn't it? Must be fucking nice! And what ab—"

"First of all, Funso, that is our mother you're talking about. You can't call her by her first name!"



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"I can call her whatever the fuck I want."

"And for goodness' sake, enough with the swearing. If you insist on using that kind of language, don't do it around Mama. This is not America."

and *there* it is,

where our rhythm ruptures and our affections stutter, this is why Chisomo and I don't send each other pictures of our homes anymore, because where I think I'm showing my sister the miracle of me growing a plant for the first time, she sees my car in the driveway and text back, "New ride? Must be nice," the sarcasm leaching from the screen,

I ease the car onto Great East Road, where traffic is crawling, there's a roadblock staged ahead with two battered drums, I dig into my purse, "take this kwacha for some Coca-Cola, officer," to the policeman, and steer on.

"Damn right, this isn't America!" I spit into the phone,

but where else could I drive without the tension in my fingers, with whiskey in my cup holder, confident that I won't end up in some dingy cell or painted onto a placard at a #Justice4Funso march?

guess there really is no place like home,

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Azubah doesn't notice the commotion, she's rolled down her window, is counting the approaching cars like she's reciting the two times tables all mixed up, she waves at a hawker weaving through traffic with a bucket of ripe mangoes balanced on her head, and says "ka mango for a kiss?"

I'm not sure if the hawker hears her, but she smiles and starts jogging toward us,

Azubah pouts her lips and tosses the woman a kiss,

I'm swatting down Azubah's arm, mouthing *sorry* at the hawker, and shaking my head when my sister says, "Yes, yes, we know, Funso. We know this is not your great America." in her mouth, *America* is given the shade of the puddles that have made a home of the tarmac on the road,

"That's what you want to fight about?" I scream, immediately annoyed with myself, we've been apart so long, I've forgotten my way around a fight with my sister,

"Stop it, Funso, naiwe. This—" Chisomo's voice splinters, apparently having trouble remembering our brawls as well. "This is rubbish."

"Agreed. Fu-cking rubbish, you can say *fuck*, big sister. Azubah would never do anything to you."

"Ah, you've started. I thought you came back to help me take care of Mama."

I reach for the open thermos in my cup holder and take a swig,

it's so much easier to be nice to my sister with an eight-hour difference between us, "I *am* helping," I say, "but you're babysitting her at the next appointment."

"You have only been here a week. This was your first hospital visit—"

"Enhe, and?"

"And you know I have to work and they will only see her during the week and my boss won't let me get time off. But you know what? It's okay. I'll take care of her. I always have anyway. Can you just do what the doctor said for now?"

"Fine."



so here I am now, trapped between the same peeling walls of our childhood bedroom, where I used to hide when Azubah wasn't in the mood to tolerate my face with anything less than a biting backhanded slap. Here, I'd practiced to near perfection how to endear myself to my

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mother by borrowing the softness in Chisomo's voice, waiting for Azubah to call me out.

Some of my Black Tax pays an old woman to polish the floors and sweep the cobwebs out of the corners once a week so that Azubah can still call this place home,

I'm the one holding the remote control to stop the film at the photo of us from that long-ago place,

Azubah blinks at it, then refocuses on a fly buzzing around the hot room: she smiles at it missing the open window and slamming head-first into the glass and says, "Sorry, baby, sorry," so tender I want to scoop the words from the air and make them mine.

Instead, I hold the picture between us,

in it, Azubah leans against the bark of the cedar that stood guard in the middle of my grandfather's yard, wearing what used to be her favorite puff-sleeved blouse, grinning at me out of a dog-eared snapshot of twenty-five years ago,

the nights I stayed up listening to the choir of owls, crickets, and dancing branches, I'd catch Azubah admiring her reflection in the cracked mirror that hung above the chest of drawers as she painted her face,

blackened, surprised eyebrows,

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cheeks the color of my tongue after licking too many cherry-flavored lollipops,

mouth, a blend of her blue eye shadow and crimson lipstick, which created the same exact purple as that puff-sleeved blouse,

the first time I remember her wearing it out in the sun was the morning of my confirmation Mass,

after all the confirmands had marched out and their parents tried to outdo each other with bouquets of wilting roses and gift baskets stuffed with bow-tied teddy bears, a set of beaming parents stopped us at the church steps,

the woman touched Azubah's shoulder and asked, "That lipstick is so pretty, *una igula ku?*" all the while looking from my empty arms to Azubah's face,

Azubah arched one round brow and said, "This?" pretending to try and remember, "Oh, just one of these *tuntembas* on the side of the road. Cheap things can be so beautiful sometimes,"

she tossed her head back, flashed the woman her *I use Colgate* smile because Azubah is God's favorite, and he had taken the time to arrange her teeth properly, instead of forgetting and leaving a lisp gap between the top and bottom rows like he'd done with mine,

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Azubah's smile crinkled her eyes and put her rainbow eyelids on display, she opened one eye and aimed her wink at the man,

"Oh!" the woman exclaimed, reaching for her husband's arm, nudging their child and rushing toward the crammed car park as if Azubah was this frightening peacock that would devour them,

to their retreating backs, Azubah cackled, like she was watching an episode of *Mr. Bean* on Saturday night TV,

that laugh, which is the texture of munkoyo perfectly brewed and chilled, I still can't re-create it, can never quite get the cadence right,

pride had swelled my chest so much I thought I'd pop,

if you'd asked me on those church steps what I wanted to be when I grew up, I'd have told you I wanted to grow out of my body into a woman who could look as magnificent as my mother did while telling that lie,

Azubah leans in to examine the picture again,

I can smell her now,

she gives me that gorgeous fucking smile,

and my heart grows feral at the sight of it,

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I feel robbed,

I came back here expecting Azubah to be like nothing worth wanting,

but no, she still smells like just-out-of-reach cocoa butter hugs,

I grab my drink and take a gulp,

nothing like whiskey to calm gate-crashing feelings,

I nudge her with “Mwaba ziba aba?” pointing first at her puff-sleeved younger self, then at my older sister, Chisomo, and then at me bulging between the two of them,

she squints at the picture, as she’s wont to doing when she thinks she’s the one being told a lie, like:

*No, Mama, I didn’t use your nail polish as watercolors.*

or

*I didn’t bury my new school shoes in the garden with the maize to avoid school.*

and

*Yes, I did bite Chisomo’s ear until it oozed red, but only because she said*

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*you are not my real mother. She told me that you bought me from Mwaiseni* (and I was afraid she might be telling the truth),

Azubah shifts a little and fixes her attention on me,

which instantly mutates the cushion beneath me from velvet to pins and needles, but that picture—us together—is my anchor, keeping my fingers from quivering too much.

She snatches her gaze away and hugs herself. “That is a picture!” she whisper-shouts,

I reach for the voice I used to use on my daughter when she was in kindergarten, gifting me pencil drawings labeled *Best Mom Ever!*

“Yes, this *is* a picture. Do you recognize these people in it?”

she grows visibly small as her gaze clouds over,

“Do you know who is in it?”

Azubah starts to shake her head, stops, beams, and says, “Girl!” then reaches over to caress the spot where a wilted petal had landed on the top of her shoe, seconds before the cameraman clicked,

something flickers in her eyes, and I almost think she remembers me using that flower as an excuse to touch her just after it landed in the folds of her skirt, a touch and “Let me help you, Mama,” traded for one



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more whiff of her because I knew that those nights Azubah whipped up color with lipstick and eye shadow, she first lathered her dewed skin with cocoa butter lotion and then spritzed her wrists and hair with perfume from a bottle shaped like the silhouette of a naked woman,

I've scoured CVS for that fragrance, but the attendants can't help me without a name and I can't describe the smell of a cuddle waiting for me at the edge of a nightmare on the mornings Chisomo and I awoke to her holding us like a treasure that was at risk of being stolen.

There wasn't enough time between the crouching cameraman saying "Ready?" and clicking the moment in place, for Azubah to push me away—

instead, she'd cupped her palms around my head, dug her fingernails into the flesh under my ears, turned me to the camera while she and Chisomo said, "Cheeeese!"

afterward, she slowly released my skin before she turned to navigate the pebbled pathway back into the house,

I let out a shrill howl until my grandfather, smoking on his rocking chair by the bougainvillea shrub that fenced our yard from the next, called me over, handed me a lollipop to stop the tears, and cradled me in his lap.

In the picture, Grandpa is reduced to a grainy point in the corner, just the tip of one of his shoes,

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if I close my eyes, there I am, sobbing into him while the cigarette smoke stings my nostrils,

Azubah gives the picture another look, this time, she's wearing her worry face, her bottom lip completely sucked into her mouth, gnawing it slowly,

hope flutters in my chest,

she should carry the burden of all these memories, not me,

"Azubah," she says carefully, "Uyu ni Azubah," she insists,

only she's pointing at me and not her,

I take another swig of my whiskey, drawl out the "No." I exhale and say, "You are Azubah."

thickness squeezes my throat, calling her Azubah to her face feels like I've been caught stealing a piece of meat from the pot,

she simply shakes her head, *no*, and repeats herself firmly, "*This is Azubah.*"

this part is like dealing with Gabby as a toddler, who would double down on everything she thought she knew; wearing two left sneakers, the zipper of her dress in the front, or pouring orange juice, not syrup, over her pancakes,

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a shaky “Mama?” slips out of me, followed by an even wobblier “why do you hate me?”

the voice is a distant me, kneeling to make eye contact with my daughter, pleading, “Why won’t you do what Momma says, Gabby?”

Azubah says, “I hate—” and drifts off,

my heart is raging in my ears,

“I hate you,” she says it all quiet, a smirk about her face,

my vision blurs, my mouth falls open, but the words will not form, so I fill it with what’s left of my whiskey and consider leaving, but the room starts to carousel,

this is when I understand that you can know a thing and still, it can be untrue.

In a distant memory, I can still hear Azubah calling Chisomo back into the house after lunch,

still smell the hot dough as she gives Chisomo the last chitumbuwa while I continue playing along the road,

I can feel my temples throb where she pulls my hair into a puff, vengeance seeping from her fingers,

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but to hear hatred stated so starkly,

the three words arranged so neatly, one after the other, is a fresh pain altogether,

for years, I used to confess this suspicion to Chisomo, whispering, "I know she hates me," but only after our bedroom light was switched off and I couldn't see what accompanied my sister's quiet response,

"Don't say that. Why would a mother despise her own child?" Chisomo would say,

foolishly, I still ask, "Why, Mama?" as if the answer will matter,

Azubah turns to face the wall,

an urge to hold her creeps over me, I want to soak in her smell,

I wish I had photos of those times she licked a finger and wiped a crust from my eye or said, "Well done," for passing number one at school, again,

I reach for her shoulder,

she shakes me off and aims to slap me,

I duck,

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"Why? Why do you hate me?"

"Liar!"

"Mama?"

she presses her hands to her ears and lets out a screech,

now Azubah's vocal cords do the same thing my grandfather's used to on the nights he had nightmares after Azubah left us,

for months, he sleep-walked while shouting her name, calling her a demon before passing out in the hallway,

Chisomo and I would find him splayed there when one of us needed to use the toilet, and we made a game of jumping over him just close enough that we almost landed on his hands,

"Azubah?" she says, nodding at the picture and then at me, the rage of moments ago is supplanted by a wanting look in her eyes,

my shoulders drop,

if I can answer to Marisol and Macey and Marcy at work, I can respond when my mother is calling me, even if it is by the wrong name,

"Ma," I say,

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she makes a 360, “Azubah has baby girl,” she says. “she loves baby girl,” and smiles again,

“Yes,” I say, wiping snot from my nose and scrambling for my phone, “That’s Gabby,” I’m showing Azubah my wallpaper on the screen, which is the only way she’s ever seen my daughter,

Azubah pinches her nose, shakes her head, says, “No, Gabby bad,” at Gabby circa 2014, holding a Doc McStuffins stuffy in her arm, grinning at the camera, when she was still mommy’s baby and loved watching me act out “Little Red.”

“No. This is Gabriella. My daughter, remember?”

“No!”

I scroll to a more recent one, Gabby sulking, with her arms folded across her chest, standing next to David at MSP airport. Because it makes me smile, this version of Gabby, upset that her mother is going away, even though she’s too grown for me to pick her clothes or plait her hair,

“He will hurt her also,” Azubah brings a finger to the screen but avoids touching it, like a hot stove,

“Gabby?” I say, flung back to the memory of me pointing out the name Gabriella to David, from a book of girl names my mother-in-law had gifted me for my bridal shower; he’d already rejected Chimwemwe and

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Temwani because who cared that those names meant joy, he didn't want anything too difficult for his family to say,

I set my phone aside, "Who *exactly* will hurt Gabriella?"

She picks up the picture, points to the shoe in the corner, "Gabriel," she says,

"Grandpa? Grandpa will hurt Gabriella?"

she nods,

I know what all the Google articles say, I'm supposed to look past Azubah's nonsense because everything is just a symptom of the disease, not her speaking, but I want to shake her until her brain lodges back into place,

I kiss my teeth, "You're doing this on fucking purpose, Azubah. Why would you say that?"

the memory of my grandfather curdles,

in this playback, it's just me leaping over him in the hallway, Chisomo is snoring softly in our room, Grandpa's eyes are mine, shock-wide with lashes that mostly curl downward instead of up, his nose, hooked and matching mine, makes all the "you look so much like your grandfather, Funso!" knock all the air out of me,

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"That girl on your phone," she ventures, "she is your baby, eh?"

"Yes. Yes!"

Azubah darts her eyes around the room,

"Who put her in you, that small baby?" she whispers. "Was it—was it, Gabriel? Did he make that?" she shuffles, starts to scratch her arms,

the memory sours and my grandfather is facing up at me, I'm stepping lightly now, trying not to disturb him,

"Stop it." It is supposed to be a confident instruction but emerges as a scream,

"He will enter her bedroom at night and plant one in her stomach," she says,

the scream again, "He raised us, you know? While you were gone, he collected our report cards—replaced worn shoes—fed us—everything. And you?"

then the tears come,

liquid words for:



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*While you were gone, Chisomo had to show me how to fold the cotton wool so I didn't bleed through when I walked home from school on my heavy days.*

and

*Do you know that Grandpa could never remember to replace the combs when the teeth broke off? Do you know this is why I still cut my hair?*

I jab a finger into her chest, "Where were you, Mama?"

but Azubah blinks and vanishes back into herself again,

there is that grab-your-man-off-the-church-steps smile pointed at me, her voice saying, "keep her safe, Azubah, don't let him near your baby," but her eyes are staring out as if into a splice of time only she can see,

here my memory scatters,

there is grandfather, there is Chisomo, there is Azubah, and there is me,

arms are everywhere, bodies pushing and recoiling,

all the articles say that I should empathize, that I should help her through her confusion with kindness and patience,

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nine-year-old me wants to bury my nose in her hair and tell her, "It will be okay."

"Sorry, baby," Azubah sobs, "sorry."

me? I say, fuck empathy, I lift my purse and walk out into the waiting sunlight,