

TENDAI HUCHU

*The Maestro,
the Magistrate &
the Mathematician*

A NOVEL

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EDINBURGH

There was a knock on the door of the last house on Craigmillar Castle Road. The tat came before the rat, though the a-tat remained in pretty much the same place, producing a distorted, yet familiar sound, but then Alfonso Pfukuto, the knocker, was an ambiguous man. Nothing was quite what it seemed.

Alfonso waited a moment, whistling *Fishers of Men*, his favourite ditty, and then pressed his ear against the door before bending down and pushing the flap on the letter box open and shouting, "I know you're in there. It's me." He fidgeted, sighed, paced, knocked again and waited. Once, he'd been a welcome visitor. If they didn't want to see him now, let them tell him to his face. He was a shameless man.

The sky overhead was a brilliant blue. The weather held the muddle of spring: one day, dark clouds and summer warmth, the next bright and bitterly cold. His fingers turned white. He hopped about to keep warm, blowing on his hands.

Finally, picking up his white plastic bag, he walked round the back to the kitchen, stepping over a rake that lay buried in the overgrown grass. The Magistrate was at the sink, washing dishes. Alfonso knocked on the window, startling the older man who pointed to the back door.

"I thought no one was going to let me in," he said, trying not to sound resentful. He leapt in quickly. "It's freezing out there and I have come up with a new theory. You know why these people colonised us, right? It's the cold, it drives a man mad, so, when they came to Africa and saw us lounging in the sun, it drove them absolutely berserk."

"As always, your theories continue to astonish." The Magistrate let out a sigh.

"Big game today, Magistrate. I told you those two would be in the Cup Final."

"I don't recall you saying so."

The Magistrate

“I’m sure I did. Remember, last time I was here. I really did, honest.”

The Magistrate turned back to his dishes. Alfonso looked at him, desperate to make conversation. Fussing about, he switched the kettle on, fiddled with the toaster and then walked over to the sink. A short man, he stood just shy of the Magistrate’s shoulder.

“Is there something you want to tell me?” the Magistrate asked, feeling his space invaded.

“Who me? Oh, no. What would a man like me have to tell a man like you?” Alfonso spoke in rapid bursts. “I was just thinking how nice it is for us to hang out like this. I feel right at home.” He looked up at the Magistrate like a small child.

The Magistrate grunted and looked down at Alfonso’s expectant face, and what a face it was, like a meerkat, complete with whiskers.

Alfonso reached into his plastic bag and brought out a bottle of own brand whisky.

“Only the best for you, Magistrate.” He handed the bottle over. “Some of us can’t handle this strong stuff. Too rich, too distilled. Back home we used to drink Seven Days, home brew chaiyo.”

Deserting the drying up, the Magistrate poured himself a double on the rocks while Alfonso opened a can of Stella. “To the motherland.” He raised his glass and, in that gesture, the Magistrate instantly recalled his days at college, the burning rhetoric, fiery speeches, pan-African sentimentality. Then, everything was possible. What had happened to those young men, his peers? The grand ideas debated on campuses and in bars had vanished. Nothing remained but shadows, distant memories echoing in the dark crevices of the mind, conjured up now and again by a simple toast or some grand gesture. The age of possibility was over.

“Was it something I said?” Alfonso asked, looking at his sad face.

“No, nothing, nothing at all. Shall we go in the living room?”

Chenai was lying on the sofa, absorbed by gyrating, near naked babes performing around a hunk lounging on a deckchair. They wiggled their bottoms and flashed their big breasts at the man who sang so fast the Magistrate couldn’t understand the content of his lyrics, save for the word ‘bitches’, which he repeated at intervals with great vehemence.

“So, this is what the kids are listening to these days.” Alfonso reached into his coat pocket.

“I’m not a kid anymore. I’m fifteen.” Chenai rolled her eyes.

Music forms memories. The Magistrate, who was often transported back to some point in the past when he heard a familiar tune, shuddered to think that Chenai's memories would be formed by this soulless, commercial music. Alfonso picked up the remote and changed the channel.

"Hey, I was watching that," Chenai said, sitting up.

Alfonso tossed a Kit Kat to her. "It's time for football."

"But I'm watching my music, pal."

"Show some courtesy, he is our guest. And, don't call him 'pal', call him Babamudiki Alfonso. Okay?" The Magistrate felt his daughter had been here too long. Already her speech had a slight Scottish inflexion, those rolling Rs, the coarse tongue, guttural Gs.

"Uncle Alfonso," Chenai compromised. Babamudiki – uncle. Equivalent? Baba – Father. Baba-mudiki – Little-father. Baba-mukuru – Older-father. That was on the paternal side. The uncles on the maternal side all held the title Sekuru, equivalent to grandfather, indicating an elevated status. So many fine intricacies woven in these blood ties that the young did not care to learn. In Shona culture, relationships were everything. The Magistrate held a register of relations, far and near, in his mind. He stayed abreast of births and deaths in the family, each one representing a slight shifting of his position within it.

Chenai bit a chunk off her chocolate bar. She picked up *Harare North*, which lay on the glass-topped coffee table and opened the first page. The prematch commentary had begun. Andy Gray and Richard Keys were debating the relative merits of the Liverpool and Chelsea formations.

"Chelsea have a problem on the left," said Alfonso.

"I know. I can hear them too." Alfonso annoyed the Magistrate when he regurgitated the commentary or lines from the *Sun* as if they were his original thoughts.

"Who are you supporting today?"

"Liverpool, the same team I support every week. I've been with them since Bruce Grobbelaar, the days of Rush and Barnes. I could never switch."

"You see, that's where you and I differ. I support the winning team. Last year I was with Arsenal all the way. Before that it was Man U. This way I'm never disappointed. I don't understand this business of heartbreak and anguish over a couple of men kicking a ball."

The Magistrate

“Then why do you come here every week?” The Magistrate felt his blood pressure rising.

“Because you have Sky. I’m building a mansion back home, in Kuwadzana. Did I tell you that? Of course I did. Window level, that’s where I am now. These things take money. I can’t afford the sports channels like you. I don’t even pay my TV licence.”

The Magistrate shook his head at the honest skinflint who so openly admitted leeching on him.

“Dad, if this guy cannae be bovered to learn proper English, why did he write a novel?” Chenai slapped *Harare North* back on the table. The Magistrate didn’t have an answer. He’d seen the book in Waterstone’s in Cameron Toll, whilst perusing legal texts, and had bought it on a whim. He couldn’t get into it either. It appeared to have been written to deliberately turn the English language inside out. He wondered how the book had ever got published. He wasn’t one for fiction anyway. A serious man concerned himself with facts, newspapers, journals, textbooks and the occasional biography, especially if the subject was an influential figure in law or politics.

A sharp whistle sounded from the kitchen as the kettle boiled.

“Would you like a cup of tea?” the Magistrate asked Alfonso.

“Oh no, I’m drinking my beer.” Why, then, did you switch the kettle on, the Magistrate felt like asking, irritated. The referee’s whistle blew and the crowd roared. Alfonso kept pointing out the obvious, yelling, “Did you see that?” like an excited teenager whenever there was a near miss, and always queried offside decisions, even against slow-motion camera replays with computer generated lines showing the positioning of the defence against the straying attacker.

How could a man be so capable of challenging incontrovertible evidence put right in front of his eyes, the Magistrate wondered. The referees could be forgiven, they made decisions in real time against a fast-flowing game, but Alfonso refuted the replays from multiple angles. Worse still, from time to time he would look at the Magistrate, with his little eyes, seeking affirmation. He’d seen this in his courtroom. The defendant, usually a thief, overwhelmed by the evidence against him, still refused to plead guilty, only to catch a heavier term because of his specious mindset. The defendant would square his shoulders, look into the distance beyond the Magistrate with the self-righteous air of a martyr, occasionally shaking his head reproachfully at the irresistible testimony; and when the judgment was

returned against him, he, with a shocked air, would turn to the gallery as if appealing to the public against some grave injustice.

“I’ll be in the kitchen, cooking.” The Magistrate excused himself.

“But the game’s still on,” Alfonso said. “Tell the girl to do it.”

“I go to school. Mum goes to work. Dad disnae do anything. That’s why he has to do the housework.” Chenai gave Alfonso a wicked stare.

Just as the Magistrate rose to leave, a goal was scored. Liverpool was down. He went to the kitchen without waiting for the replay. Alfonso’s voice followed him. “Did you see that, did you see that?”

It was strange that of all the things the Magistrate missed, his golfing buddies, his family, the sunshine, wide-open spaces, it was the maid he missed most of all. That quiet woman in her starched uniform, humming as she worked in the background, almost invisible to them. Mai Chenai had never been satisfied with her. The food was never cooked well enough. The house was never clean enough. The maid had a thankless job but she never grumbled. Looking back he’d never given it a moment’s thought. The house was a woman’s domain. Now he found himself questioning the conditions under which the maid had worked for him. The first time this had occurred was when he was bent over, brush in hand, cleaning the toilet bowl. In his entire life, he’d never imagined himself carrying out such a humiliating task. The maid, though, never complained. She did the laundry, walked Chenai to school, worked all day, and only got one day off in seven (a day off which could be revoked on a whim). Why did I never question this before – an injustice in my own house, yet there I was dispensing justice every day while I kept a virtual slave in my own house? How could this have seemed normal?

He sliced the greens. The can opener was broken so he had to use a knife to open the tinned tomatoes. He had bought hupfu from the Zimbabwean shop in Gorgie that sold exotic meats, Mazoe and little portions of heaven that reminded him of home. Thank goodness for hupfu. He put all these ingredients on the faux granite countertop and studied them as if they were the roots of some complex legal conundrum.

Cooking was a complicated business. Sometimes he watched the wrinkled chef on TV, shouting and swearing, all the while making the preparations look effortless. How could the simple maid have done this with such ease? Worse, the Magistrate somehow had to extract taste out

The Magistrate

of bland British ingredients. He prepared the sadza. Ravakukwata, the boiling mix, leapt out of the pot, stinging his arms. It looked like a white volcano, active and dangerous. Rising steam filled the room, painting itself a thin film on the window. He worked on the beef, which he mixed with veg in the wok, adding a light mix of spices, stirring, smelling the rich aroma as it wafted around the kitchen.

“Zviri kunhuwirira,” Alfonso called out from the living room.

He heard the sound of footsteps on laminated flooring upstairs. His wife was up. He imagined her reaching down and picking up her gown from the floor. After all these years, she still slept naked. The thought made him smile. He opened the sadza pot, added more hupfu, and stirred. The trick lay in squashing any lumps against the side of the pot. Heaven forbid he should end up with mbodza. He added more hupfu until it thickened and became sadza gobvu. Nhete was not for connoisseurs like him. He let the mixture simmer, listening to the hiss of escaping steam. One should never rush sadza. At this stage, the TV chef would call for a commercial break.

He could hear the faint splash of bath water upstairs. He arranged four plates and prepared to dish up his meal. The wrinkly chef was tough on presentation. Half the taste lies in the presentation, in how enticing the food looks. In the cartoon, something else he’d never have dreamt of watching back in the day, the rat wins the critic over by giving him ratatouille, a little taste of home. The Magistrate had become the anthropomorphic rat conjuring a minor miracle with each portion he put on the plate. The sadza lay on the top half of the plate, plain white and a sharp contrast to the red, green and brown of the stew and veg. Soup ran along the plate, meeting the base of the sadza.

“Goooaal,” shouted Alfonso. “Two – nil! Your team’s as good as finished. It’s over, I’m telling you. The fat lady is singing.”

The Magistrate picked up two plates and returned to the living room. Alfonso clapped his hands. Chenai took hers with a quick, “Cheers, Dad.” He collected his own plate and joined them.

“You’re a fantastic cook, Magistrate,” said Alfonso.

“We should call you Jamie,” Chenai said.

“I think it’s all due to your profession. This is my theory, you were supposed to weigh facts, sieve out the kernels of truth through the rubble of falsehood. What better training is there for cooking? None. They call these ‘transferable skills’.” Alfonso smiled importantly. He loved postulating his little theories and, at the drop of a hat, would

expound the improbable and claim it was biblical truth. The Magistrate felt torn between accepting the compliment and pointing out its ridiculousness. He reserved judgment.

The sound of stairs creaking and sighing as one foot followed the other preceded Mai Chenai, who walked into the room graceful, in spite of her blue tunic.

“Aika, Alfonso, you are here.” Her familiar tone bothered the Magistrate. Back home he would have been Babamudiki or VaPfukuto at the very least. This western business of calling people by their first names riled him. He reasoned it was the consequence of an individualistic culture, as though everyone had simply sprung up from nowhere. Some utopian ideal of equality – calling Her Majesty, Liz! The Shona way, the right way, stressed the nature of the relationship. The individual was the product of a community and had to be placed in relation to the next man. It was the glue that held them together, giving each value.

She sat next to her daughter, away from the two men. The Magistrate went to the kitchen and brought her supper – or was it breakfast? He watched as she took a small portion of sadza, rolled it gently in the palm of her hand and dipped it in the stew. Her lips parted. He watched her chew, admiring the soft line of her jaw, the tenderness of her face. He observed the fleeting bulge on her long neck as she swallowed, then she turned to him with a smile.

“Baba Chenai, murume mukuru anobika mbodza so. I’ll have to get a takeaway to eat at work.” She rose, kissed Chenai on the forehead, and left the room. The Magistrate realised that those were the only words she’d said to him all week.

The bedroom was a misty blue from the morning light. The Magistrate yawned as he stretched his back. He checked the time on the radio clock. He was only vaguely aware that it was a weekday. Days rolled by in purposeless succession. He rose, felt the cool floor under his feet and shuffled to the toilet. His face was wrinkled from too much sleep, eyes puffy and red. He washed his face, shaved and combed his moustache. A face he seemed only vaguely to remember stared back at him from the mirror. He took his medication with water straight from the tap.

“Dad, hurry.” Chenai pounded on the door. “I cannae hold it in, Dad.”

The Magistrate

“Good morning to you too,” he said. She pushed past him. “I feel so loved.”

“I love you, Dad,” she replied mechanically from behind the closed door.

The Magistrate returned to the bedroom and began making the bed. First, he smoothed the bottom sheet. Mai Chenai loved to complain if it wasn't straight when she came in. This was their routine. He would make the bed for her in the morning and in the evening he would find it perfectly made as if it hadn't been slept in, as if they were trying to erase each other's presence. They were becoming strangers who, except for the subtle scent of sleep that clung to the sheets and hid in the pillows, never shared a bed. On Mai Chenai's days off the Magistrate watched television until the early hours and slept on the couch downstairs. If he used the small, third bedroom, Chenai would know something was wrong, though he wondered if she hadn't already noticed.

“Dad, we've run out of sugar, again,” Chenai called from downstairs.

“Tell your mum later.”

What could he say? That he'd get it? He hardly had a penny to his name. When the gas beeped, or, God forbid, the electric ran out, he had to wait for Mai Chenai to sort it out. It was not meant to be like this. The shame sat somewhere in his gut, looping round his intestines, a dull ache that was with him every minute of every day. In the time of his father, whom he'd never known, a man's role was clearly defined. He was the provider. Nothing else was required of him. He had no duty towards his kids, save for the occasional moral correction – by the belt. The Magistrate imagined the past a simpler time, free from the overwhelming complexity of modern life.

He left the house and walked down the road, past the robots and the light early-morning traffic. He went past the police station into the residential area. Through one window he saw a family sat at the breakfast table. Further along, a commuter anxiously watched an AA man in a fluorescent jacket fiddle with his engine. The morning air was cool and fresh. The Magistrate filled his lungs as he walked slowly down the road, round the bend, then along the fence through which he could see his daughter's school. He could not remember when he had

begun taking these morning walks. They had become a timeless, comforting ritual.

He found he could clear his mind when walking. It was as though the act of perambulation was complemented by a mental wandering, so he could be in two, or more, places at the same time. His physical being tied to geography and the rules of physics, his mental side free to wander far and wide, to traverse through the past, present and future, free from limits, except the scope of his own imagination.

He turned into Duddingston Village, walking along the pavement beside a narrow cobblestoned road. The cars parked on the side of the road meant only a single lane was free for traffic to pass through. To his left was the old stone wall, a little taller than a man. Quaint Georgian cottages stood to his right. The houses in Craigmillar were modern, brightly coloured yellow, blue or lime green. They did not possess the weathered, timeworn look of the village. They did not have its charm or the same sense of being rooted in the city, eternal, indelible. He walked past the Kirk, built of the same grey stone as the cottages and the wall, the past stealing its way into the present.

He crossed the road and walked onto the gravel and grass that led to the loch. A woman with a shawl wrapped round her shoulders was feeding the ducks and swans with bread. They swarmed round her, quacking and scurrying about. The water was a broken mirror of undulating waves lapping the shore. The conifers and heathers caught the morning rays as dew melted off their leaves. The woman's face was serene. She gave the Magistrate a light nod. They often met here, sharing the space, never once speaking as though voices would have shattered the morning's peace.

On the horizon, the sun was an icy orb hidden behind a thin veil of wispy white clouds. The Magistrate looked straight at it for a few seconds, its power lost in the stratosphere. With a bit of glue and feathers, he could touch it. He'd never have dared look the Bindura sun straight in the face like that. It came to him that each place had its own little sun, different from anywhere else. In Edinburgh the sun was this cold disc, distant, vague, powerless. For much of the year it was hidden behind grey clouds and, when it did come out in its brilliance, it felt awkward, alien. Here the North Wind reigned. In Bindura, the sun was all-powerful and magnificent. The air shimmered there, tar melted and buckled. People walked with beads of sweat rolling down their backs. Yet, even in this small town, there were two suns. In the low density

The Magistrate

suburbs the sun was wondrous, a joyful gift of warmth and light, but one had only to cross Chipindura Road from the east or Chipadze Road from the north into the high density suburbs to find the sun fierce and angry. There it assailed the residents, wilted the few patches of grass, stripped everything bare, revealing brown, cracked earth. If the sun infused life's essence into the low density suburbs, in the townships it drained this very same essence away.

When he thought about home, the Magistrate often looked to Arthur's Seat. He left the loch, tracking back up the road. The gorse gripping the sides of the hill was the bright yellow of the Bindura sun. The plants were strong, aggressive, making a niche on the bare sides of the hill. There was a hill in Bindura too, right in the middle of the town. It was made of granite that had formed deep in the bowels of the earth, patiently waiting until wind and rain had, slowly, over many millennia, stripped the soil off and left the hill high above everything else. Arthur's Seat was a volcanic creation. Magma had pushed violently up from the belly of the earth, sculpting itself by sheer will.

Funny, the Magistrate thought, how old geography lessons hidden in the grey lesions of the mind crawled back to the surface after so long. He thought of the hours spent cramming useless information about the limestone regions of England. Stalagmites and stalactites. Igneous, metamorphic and sedimentary rocks. The rock cycle. Weathering. Different types of rain formation – the latter, he supposed, was always useful in Scotland. Crammed notes forced in by the master's cane came flooding back. What was Chenai learning? Computers? Media Studies? Things were much more straightforward back then.

The traffic grew heavier. He could hear the drone of engines creeping along the road. He descended the slope to the other face of the hill. A man on a bicycle was holding up the traffic and a long tailback formed behind him. The white dome of Dynamic Earth appeared behind the foliage. No wonder I've been thinking about geography, he thought. He put his hands in his pockets to keep warm.

The Magistrate's daily circumambulation of Arthur's Seat meant that he would not see Mai Chenai. Morning encounters when she was tired from the night shift were best avoided. High above, on Radical Road, early walkers scaled the summit. For all his love of the park, the Magistrate disliked its roads. He was happy with the footpaths, worn over the centuries. But the tarred road, the brute imposition of man's

will on nature, was not something he found pleasing. A thing of beauty like this should not have been tamed thus.

The parliament appeared to his left and opposite it stood Holyroodhouse, another of Her Majesty's palaces. The restored parliament with nationalistic leanings right next to the English monarch's residence. And along from it, blocks of low rent council flats. A tumultuous history and the contradictions of modern Scotland side by side. Yet, somehow, it all worked.

His eyes were drawn to the green spaces, the lawns ahead. A woman was being dragged along by a black mastiff on a long lead.

"Princess, stop," she said. "Stop right now, Princess."

What a name for a dog! What a choice of pet for a woman who, in all likelihood, lived in one of the flats nearby. He checked his watch. It was only a little after eight. In the early afternoon he liked to watch the *Dog Whisperer*. There were a few daytime programmes that he watched religiously, *Columbo*, *Murder She Wrote*, *Countdown*, *Judge Judy* and *Poirot* formed the rest of his selection, which was only occasionally broken by cookery programmes. Of all the shows he'd watched, none gave him the same insight into the insanity of western society as the *Dog Whisperer*.

The woman pulled on the leash, but the dog was too powerful, forcing her to take giant strides to keep up. Coming in the opposite direction, a man and his whippet walked side by side in perfect harmony. "Calm, submissive state" was what Cesar Millan would have called it. The ideal relationship between man and dog. Before he could begin to appreciate the show, the Magistrate had had to get his head round the fact that 'these people' lived indoors with their dogs. When Cesar went round saying that he rehabilitated dogs, and trained people, it made perfect sense. Anyone who lived indoors with a filthy animal clearly needed help.

The show's format was always the same. A distraught dog owner, usually a woman – occasionally with a partner whose dislike of the dog could never quite be expressed in front of the camera, except, that is, by cold stares, or the resigned shaking of the head – would speak about Fifi, or Bubu, or Coco whom she loved as much as life itself, but who was driving her to distraction.

Cesar Millan, the Third Worlder, the Mexican, would be called in. He was a small man, with perfect white teeth and a ridiculously well groomed beard. He would arrive smiling, always smiling, and sit down

The Magistrate

with the family. While they explained their problem, Cesar listened patiently, observing the dog and sometimes pushing it off his couch if it tried to sit with him uninvited. His diagnoses were usually simple. The dog was a pack animal that shouldn't be treated as a child, but treated as... well, a dog.

Cesar would then work with the dog, master him, and correct the problem. He would teach the owner correct body postures and subtle ways of understanding their dog's mind. His method was psychological, an attempt to restore balance. The dog, unused to discipline, would revolt. Cesar would poke it in the ribs, or click his fingers, point and say, "tsh." The animal would resist, sulk, go mental, but Cesar would not relent. Some of the battles were of mythic proportions, like Jacob and the angel. No matter how long it took, Cesar pressed on, until finally, as if by magic, the dog succumbed. The tail would go down, the animal would relax into the "calm, submissive state", and only then would Cesar, the stern master, show it affection.

Almost always his prescription involved the need for more exercise. The episode would conclude with smiling, grateful dog owners whose lives had been turned around, and who now kept their animals in a "calm, submissive state". A shot of Cesar walking in the wilderness, holding a shepherd's staff, surrounded by his own happy, peaceful pack of dogs faded with the credits. The same format, week in, week out, and the Magistrate could not get enough of it.

The silver birches, bared of their leaves, stood like skeletons on parade by the pond on the Meadowbank side of the city. The giant struts of the stadium and sports centre loomed over the locale. The Magistrate saw a red kite, which he mistook for an eagle, soaring in the sky. He breathed faster from the exertion of the walk and felt better for it. His calves throbbed a little as he walked up the incline. The ruins of St Anthony's stood below him and, when he looked down onto Holyrood, he could just make out the ruined abbey adjacent to the palace.

The Magistrate's vision skimmed over the roofs of the city. Cranes in the west looked like brontosauri feeding off the rooftops. The houses were tiny, like dolls' houses huddling together from the cold. The Restalrig high-rises brutally punctured the cityscape, and he swept over Leith to Granton, where flats fractured the skyline. In between the extremes, a hundred church spires stood out. From this point he could take in most of the city and, beyond, the Forth, calm and grey. On a day

The Magistrate

like this he could even see across to Fife. The Magistrate felt like a colossus striding over the narrow world. Everywhere he turned the view was breathtaking. Right then the saudade hit him pretty bad and, for a moment, he could see Bindura, the low prospect, the giant mine chimneys in the distance, but the memory was like a flicker from an old videotape that had been dubbed over. He could only hold the image in his mind for a brief second before it vanished into the mist hovering over the Forth.

Farai opens his eyes, sits up and swings his legs off the bed. The red LCD on his radio clock tells him it's 06:01:23, meaning he's 1 minute and 23 seconds late. He doesn't use an alarm, his body knows when to rise and right now it's telling him he needs to pee. He rubs his eyes and yawns.

Eminem, Malcolm X, and Adam Smith (no relation to Ian) look down on him from the posters on the wall. He steps on layers of white printed paper with black ink lettering, numbers, symbols and words from his inkjet. Around the bed are various thick textbooks. The papers feel smooth under his bare feet as he walks across the room and opens the curtains. His bladder screams out. He ignores it. He'll go in his own time.

He goes to the living room and says good morning to Mr Majeika, who is hopping around in his hutch. Mr Majeika is one of those unoriginal rabbits trying to imitate dairy cows. Farai opens the hutch and strokes his black and white fur. 'Your bedding needs changing, Mr Majeika. Fancy a bit of lettuce, just to get you started today? It's good for you, coz you're getting fat, *shasha*.'

Mr Majeika wiggles his whiskers in reply and observes Farai lazily.

Farai gets himself a glass of water and a few leaves of lettuce for Mr Majeika. He turns on the TV, switches it, via remote, from the live reality TV feed of housemates in the Big Brother house to Bloomberg. The Nasdaq is ↑, the Dow's ↑, FTSE's ↑, so life is good. He fires up his Vaio FE550G. He thinks about how it'd have been great to buy defense shares before the war. Raytheon's ↑, doing great with all those Tomahawks flying across the desert, lighting up Iraq.

He checks his uni email account, 43 unread messages, and it's only Monday, before the start of the business day. Most of it is junk. He logs off and goes on zse.co.zw. The connection is slow. The screen blinks

The Mathematician

like he's on dial-up. He taps his fingers on the keyboard, trying to absorb the news on TV, making sense of the red, silver and green data stream running at the bottom of the screen. The ZSE page is down.

'Fuck's sake,' he says, leans back in the chair and picks up the landline. He dials out international – direct, *spare no expense when it's business*. It's the AIMS where the fun stuff happens.

'Hello.'

'Dad, it's Farai, how's Mwana doing?'

'I'm *fine*, your mum's fine too, so is the dog and your little sisters, thanks for asking, Comrade Fatso.'

'Sorry, Dad, I haven't had my coffee yet. I'm still booting up.'

'Mwana's dead, I told you to get out of nickel ages ago.'

'Commodity prices keep going up, China's insatiable, they can't get enough of the stuff. How come Mwana's underperforming?'

'I'm in Zimplats, and we're doing alright. Really positive policies on PGMs, so Hartley or whatever they call it now is looking great, but everyone else in the industry is struggling. Gono's hoarding all their forex and swapping it with Mickey Mouse money so they can't function. They're gonna sink. Do you want me to get you out?'

'No, I'm in this for the long haul. They've got good proven reserves and their PGMs will be coming online soon. They've got eggs in quite a few baskets.'

'It's your money, little bull, but I say quit while you're slightly behind. No one ever quits while they're ahead.'

'I'll talk to you later, Dad,' he says, hangs up and sighs.

Mr Majeika chews his lettuce, barely making a crunching sound as he watches the news from his hutch. Farai takes a sip of water and flicks over to CNN. Recycled footage: green, night vision clips of videogame-like explosions. It looks beautiful on the Sony widescreen plasma TV. He can almost feel the heat from the blast and taste the chemical smoke pluming in the air. The commentary uses words like, 'surgical strikes', 'collateral damage', 'weapons of mass destruction', and when the footage changes to armor-plated Humvees and Abrams, he knows for sure he should have bought into defense.

He goes to the bathroom, takes a long piss, and showers. He comes back out, towel wrapped around his body and knocks on Brian's bedroom door.

'Wakey, wakey,' he shouts.

Brian replies with a torrent of abuse about his mum's genitalia and wholly unfounded assertions about her sex life.

'I love you too,' Farai says, and goes back to the living room.

Water streams down from his short Afro onto his back. He can't be arsed to use a hair drier. He moisturizes, using L'Oréal for men, because he's worth it. His stomach grumbles; he won't eat till midday though. He wants to have full mastery of his body, of every thought and emotion that comes from it.

'Why the fuck do you have to fucking wake me up so fucking early in the fucking morning when I've fucking told you before to fucking leave me the fuck alone?' says Brian, voice slurring, breath reeking of last night's bender.

'Dude, you have a stiffy,' Farai replies. 'Don't point it my way!'

Brian takes a look at the bulge in his boxers and raises his eyebrows.

'It's *not* aimed at you. It's just a morning glory, perfectly natural, nothing suspicious there.'

'Didn't you get lucky last night?'

'Would I have this affliction if I had?'

'What happened? I set you up with that Filipino chick, and you looked like you knew what you were doing. Please tell me you at least got her number.'

Brian sits beside him and uses a cushion to cover his flagpole. Some Arabic women in black are running across the screen, wailing, raising their hands to the heavens and beating themselves on the head. The voice-over states that laser-guided missiles are accurate to within a few centimeters though the occasional 'collateral damage' is inevitable.

'Listen,' says Farai as images of charred Iraqis fill the screen, 'you're walking around with a loaded gun. It's unhealthy for a young, healthy male such as yourself to live like this. A man must allow for a maximum of 4 weeks between sexual intercourse. Look at this. These guys are on 6 month rotations, they're not getting laid and that's why atrocities happen. After 4 weeks of no action, blood flows away from the brain, and there's *way* too much testosterone in the body wreaking havoc in the amygdala. You carry on like this, mate, and you're a danger not only to yourself, but to society at large.'

A loud, very human cry comes from one of the bedrooms. Brian moves quickly to see what's up. Farai shrugs and flips the channel to Al Jazeera where he is met with even more distraught Arabs. He decides

The Mathematician

it's all too depressing and logs on to hi5 to see if he's got any new messages. As the page is loading, he flicks to a half-finished chess game against his laptop. It bores him, he's playing at level 10, the highest level, and the AI can't keep up with him. Its gigabytes of processing power don't match up to his integrated organic circuitry.

'Farai, can you come and give me a hand here?' Brian calls out.

'I'm busy,' he replies.

'Come on, man, this is serious.'

Farai gets up, tightens the towel round his waist, and walks down the dim corridor to the last bedroom on the right. The pong of stale man-sweat hits him. Brian's standing at the door. A naked, skeletal figure lies on the bed, staring up at the ceiling. At intervals he moans. This is their friend, Scott. Farai opens the window. Fresh air rushes in from outside.

'Dude, what the hell do you think you're doing? We've got neighbors. This is a respectable area, they'll *skeem* we're killing a goat in here or something.'

'She didn't text me back,' Scott groans.

'Would you like something to drink, tea, coffee, water, anything?' asks Brian.

'My life's *over*. She hates me.'

They stand awkwardly around their naked friend, not quite knowing what to do. Brian fetches a glass of orange juice and gives it to Scott. Farai can't begin to understand why someone would go crazy like this over some piece of ass. He paces around the room, picking up dirty clothes and putting them into the laundry bag, an activity that hardly makes a dent on the mess.

'She totally hates me.'

'That's chicks, man. They promise you the moon and all you get is a tiny little star, like this.' Farai indicates a tiny little gap between his index finger and thumb.

'Everything's fucked.'

'Do you mind putting something on, coz, no offense, but your naked ass and his stiffy are kinda freaking me out here.' Farai laughs at his own joke.

Scott lies there, immobile. His eyes bother Farai, pupils dilated, the whites, red and bloody. He knows the story though, Scott has spent the last week psychotexting his ex, C, trying to win her back with romantic declarations, freaky poems, and not-so-subtle emotional blackmail

about how life isn't worth living without her. The chick was hot, no doubt. Farai remembers her – great tits, curvy ass, cliché Coca-Cola bottle body, smart, funny, and quick as a whip. A classy *tsvarakadenga*. He knew it would never last with his mate Scott. The chick had standards, yo.

'You're calling her too often. You're giving her too much power over you, bro. You gotta hang back and wait until she wants you. Guaranteed she's gonna come crawling back. Straight-up homies like us are hard to come by in this city.'

'You think so?'

'Would I be saying it, if I didn't think it?' Farai feigns offense. 'Now get up your rasclut, you've got work this morning, haven't you?'

'I'm calling in sick.'

'You can't. You owe me, like, 2 months' rent already.'

'The wealth of the sinner is stored up for the righteous.'

'What the *fuck* does that mean?'

'Proverbs 13 verse 22,' says Scott, and covers his head with a pillow.

Brian and Farai return to the living room, to the soft monotone sound of traffic picking up on Commercial Street. Through the window, Farai can see the river and a bit of the docks in the distance. He likes living in Sandport, by the water, especially at this point where the Water of Leith empties into the sea. There are great pubs and restaurants a short walking distance away. Everything a student could want.

'We need to find, like, some serious mental help for Scott. I don't dig this vibe he's got going on,' says Brian.

'Well, Florence—'

'I've told you before, don't call me that.' Brian raises his voice.

'Aren't we touchy this morning? See what I told you about all that testosterone in your bloodstream.'

'Look, Farai, this dude's acting all mental and we need to get it sorted, otherwise who knows what he might do?'

'Weren't you telling us just last week that some of the psychiatric models they use have no relevance to African people? Or have you changed your mind now and you want to see our friend's brilliant brain warped by mind altering chemical concoctions your quacks are always so quick to prescribe?'

The Mathematician

‘You’re twisting my words like you always do. You saw him. This guy’s having some sort of breakdown. He needs professional help.’

‘All he needs is a couple of shots of Sambuca to get his head straight. Can you do that for him?’

‘That’s the last thing he needs.’

‘You’re the nurse and I’m the doctor, comprende?’

‘You’re doing a PhD in economics, that doesn’t make you a physician.’ Brian frowns.

‘Just give him the damn Sambuca and give Mr Majeika a hit too. He likes that on a Monday morning, fires him up for the week ahead,’ Farai says, turns impatiently and goes to his room to get dressed. He’s already wasted too many of his precious morning minutes on this palaver. He wears a pair of Cavallis jeans, a cheap pair of Internationals (Bata) and a white cotton stretch dress shirt (M&S), on top of which he wears his black deconstructed overcoat (Religion). He slips on the Patek Philippe his father bought him when he turned 17. Then, he collects his keys and leaves the flat, but not before grabbing the handmade woollen scarf on the coat hanger, a gift from grandma.

Farai’s caught up in what passes for congestion in Edinburgh, seat laid back so his arms have to stretch to reach the steering wheel, gangster style, listening to Radio 4 – *Thought for the Day*. His car, a black PT Cruiser, which he bought because it looks like a monster, is fully equipped with a custom Kenwood KDC-X993 complete with subwoofer that gives the voice on the radio extra kick. The 22 cruises by in the bus lane. A woman in the green Corsa in front chats on her cell phone and uses the rear-view mirror to check her lipstick.

‘They don’t have congestion in Saudi Arabia,’ he mutters to himself.

The vicar talks in a flat voice, pondering the mystery of God’s will and the war. Using tortuous logic, he explains how war may be the ultimate proof that God wants us to have everlasting peace. The lights turn green and Farai begins to move again, slowly creeping up towards North Bridge.

The Scotsman, a red sandstone Edwardian building, looms up ahead. His wipers squeak against the windscreen because it is raining ever so lightly. The fuel gauge flashes red. He can never seem to

remember to top up. The last time he ran out was on the M8 to Glasgow and the RAC hit him a £90 charge.

Traffic is clogged up on Nicolson Street and he has to navigate his way through an obstacle course of orange traffic cones. There aren't any workmen on the closed-up section of the road, that's just the way it is. Black soot covers the grey walls of the old buildings. He turns right after Surgeons' Hall to find parking at the mosque.

'*Asalaam Alaykum,*' the bearded dude/car park attendant says, as Farai lowers his window.

'*Wa 'Alaykum Asalaam,* to you. And no, Salman, I'm not converting this week. I already told you guys that I'll only convert if you guarantee me 1 free meal a day from The Mosque Kitchen.' Salman laughs and waves him through to a free spot.

The mosque, a gift from the Saudis, is a blocky solid building, fusing Islamic architecture with a baronial style that blends in with the stocky, gothic architecture of the rest of the city. Farai walks round it to Potterow where the minaret stands.

He crosses the road and walks through the university buildings, on to Bristo Square, and from there down to George IV Bridge. This takes him past Medina, Doctors, Frankenstein's and a number of other pubs and clubs he's trawled through on wild nights with his boys. A car hoots as he crosses the next street. He doesn't look. It's a reckless stunt and, reaching the other side, he congratulates himself on being the first black man to cross over Candlemaker Row against such odds. He thinks, *It's so easy to make yourself the first black man at anything. The first black man at this university, the first black doctor in such a hospital, the first black person to take a dump in a formerly all-white toilet in Joburg.* To his mind, there's something silly about the cult of 'the first black ___' and anyone who calls themselves that deserves to be patted on the head and given a biscuit. Perhaps it served a purpose in the colonial era, but for Farai, a child of the revolution who comes from a dominant majority, it's just bullshit.

He walks into the Elephant House where he's the first black man to buy coffee that morning.

'The usual?' the girl at the counter asks. She wears a little apron that turns Farai on.

'Quadruple espresso every time,' he replies with a smile. She lingers, holds his gaze, as if she wants him to say something else.

The Mathematician

Every Monday morning he frequents this rather quaint café – of which there are many in Edinburgh – which became famous when some woman wrote a children’s book about wizards and inexplicably became a billionaire. In reality, there is nothing particularly special about the venue except for its bizarre collection of elephant statuettes. It’s not particularly clean and has rather dreary terracotta walls.

He avoids the empty tables and goes to the one by the window, where an old man wearing a trilby is sitting alone, sipping green tea, a copy of the *Telegraph* on the table.

‘It seems rather busy today. I hope you don’t mind if I sit with you?’ Farai pulls up a chair.

The old man offers a brief incredulous look. A ‘humph’ that escapes from his throat is his only sound of protest. Eyeing Farai warily, he takes a sip of tea.

He has a sharp, beak-like nose and bright eyes behind a pair of spectacles. He maintains an aggrieved air under Farai’s glare. The waitron serves Farai’s espresso in a medium sized mug, placing it carefully on the table.

‘Will that be all? The muffins are great today,’ she says.

‘Thank you, but I have to watch my figure,’ Farai replies, his eyes never leaving the old man.

He smells the bitter aroma coming from his black brew. It almost knocks him back, the true sign of a good, strong coffee. 2 middle-aged professional women sit at a nearby table. A bony woman, with a pale face and dark rings around her eyes, stares into space, looking down periodically to jot something in a ring binder notebook. A man with a backpack on the table listens to his iPod. Farai’s attention remains intensely focused on the old man.

At last the old man breaks.

‘Miserable weather we’re having, don’t you think?’ the old man remarks in a thin voice.

Farai shrugs. He could have given a few stock responses; it’s not as if he doesn’t know the ritual exchanges about the weather.

‘When you reach a certain age,’ the old man sips his tea and continues, ‘and you have a bit of arthritis in the joints, and you wake up in the middle of the night, 10 maybe 20 times just to spend a penny, then yes, the rain can make you a little miserable.’

‘I think you should stop drinking so much tea. It’s a diuretic. The upside is the anti-oxidants will get rid of those pesky free radicals,

which are eating you up as we speak. But, no, honestly, I don't have to worry about old age. There's a short life expectancy where I'm from.'

'Then I feel sorry for you. There's nothing better than hearing the sound of your grandchildren playing in the garden. What's your name by the way?'

'Rumplestilskin,' Farai says, and the old man laughs. They are two strangers and meet here every Monday morning, following the same ritual, staring each other down until one of them speaks. Last winter, they had an epic encounter lasting 2 hours. Finally it was Farai who broke. It's a pointless exercise, but I they enjoy. And they still don't know each other's names.

Farai takes a sip of his coffee, which tastes like tar and is therefore exquisite. He sighs and feels sleepy.

'Are you teaching today?'

'The uni uses its postgrads like slave labor. The first-years are spoilt, clueless little twats. How on earth did they pass their Highers if they haven't mastered basic stats? And so, I wind up with them, on zero pay.'

'In my day you just went to work and made your way up the ranks. Today, graduates who don't know anything are given all the top jobs. Nothing beats experience, if you ask me.'

Farai begins to enjoy himself. They are moaning now. Moaning is an essential ritual here, and a learnt art. One must find at least half a dozen things to complain about before breakfast.

He takes in the view of the castle and the rooftops over the Grassmarket through the smudged windows of the café. 2 blonde girls wearing identical pink jumpers walk in, giggling. Their loud voices pierce the tranquillity of the room. The statues of the elephants that line the café, in the corners and on the banisters, give them frozen, reproving stares. The younger of the 2 fidgets as if she's on a sugar rush.

'I once saw Alexander McCall Smith here.' Her voice carries across the room.

'Isn't that him over there?' Blondie2 speaks in a staged whisper.

The pale writer in the corner puts down her pad and looks at Farai and his companion. There's a sly smile on the old man's face. He seems amused at being mistaken for a celebrity, even more so when everyone in the room is stealing glances their way. Farai scowls at the blondes whose conversation stops. He leans forward.

The Mathematician

‘Are you some type of pervert, picking up young girls under the pretense of being someone you are not?’ he asks. That’d make sense in a café in which the male toilets are full of graffiti from Harry Potter fans expressing their love for the author.

‘What’s it to you if I am?’

‘Aren’t you giving them a raw deal? No offense, but old folks all look the same, and if they’re gonna roll with an old guy then they’ll want the genuine article.’

‘In our heads, we’re all celebrities.’

‘The way I see it—’

‘Have you ever read his novels?’

‘I’m a serious man. I don’t read novels. They’re a waste of time. The last one I tried was Don Quixote, which was forced on me in my lit class in high school. I didn’t even bother; I just bought the video and even that was boring. I thought, *sod this for a game of marbles*. In the end, I dropped the subject. Give me numbers, \$, £, symbols.’

The old man rises up slowly, deliberately adjusts his tweed jacket, allowing everyone in the room to take a nice long look at him. He places a £2 coin on the table, which Farai pockets.

‘Oh, you are a rascal. See you same time next week,’ he says as he leaves.

Farai watches a woman near the counter ask if she may have a photograph taken with his erstwhile companion and grins as the old man obliges. He picks up the *Telegraph*, scans the familiar diet of war stories, crime and scandals. He notices an article in the sports pages passionately advocating an international boycott of Zimbabwean cricket. Farai considers making a scene and accusing the waitron of watering down his espresso, but decides he doesn’t have the energy, and so takes out his wallet and retrieves a £5 note that he leaves under the mug. He winks at the waitron as he makes his way out to class.