

# **Her Mother's Home**

By Ruvimbo Stephanie Mureriwa

“Mama Ariko,” she called out, agape in the face of a nearly forgotten figure.

More people gathered, emerging from behind the house where they had intended to spend the day oblivious to what was returning to them and what new things were finding their way HOME.

Various kaleidoscopic patterns decorating raggedy Zambia cloths hid the women’s scaly legs - all shapes, sizes and colors. Raw blades firmly gripped by their deformed makeshift handles and knives still in hand. The aroma carried from the cooking hut was tainted by the smell of smoke bringing back memories of their saddest and most joyous occasions. At par with this combination of smells was the distinct scent of the natural air of this place. Moist soil and wet grass in the middle of Rhodesia. Was there something to be said of this air by the people returning? Did they remember it and its stories? Better yet, were there compelling comparisons they could make between here and there? The scent of Chirumanzu squaring up against the scent of the rest of the world.

The growing crowd stood beneath the burning Chirumanzu sun. It had been gifted this time of day as it always was. The sun - not even as she opened her umbrella to be shaded from it - was not part of the endless things that consumed Mama Chiedza’s thoughts on her way home. The sun was forever showing up even without conscious thought of its presence. It was not until Mama Chiedza stood on the hillock that overlooked home that she finally understood and truly appreciated the effortless view and how the sun fit so flawlessly into it.

Home was the Gono homestead.

You passed many invisible things along the leveled dust road that led to and away from Chirumanzu to get there. Everything in Chirumanzu was hidden. The coil metal fences along the roadside - meant to keep strangers out and animals in - were far away from the houses they trapped. The closest grocers were Uncle Edmin’s creation run by his second of three wives - each of whom chosen for ‘her gift,’ he would say. Mama Esther’s gift was what you would imagine it took to run the self-titled ‘Gono Grocers’ - a catchy name born of simple thought. It was a place that could tell many stories.

Wild grass, pit latrines, houses and a kraal could be reached after passing a forest of maize enticing one to get lost in it. It was mid-March 1968 so the time of

prosperous crops had passed. Only a field of dried out, crumbling maize stocks remained; remnants of the steady crop they once were. The shriveled crops cleared the usually obstructed view from home to the rest of the homestead. Looking at Mama Chiedza now she too bore a similar tail. Once a beautiful teenage girl with an intricate Zambia cloth - purples and blues the standouts amongst neutral tones - wrapped above her well seated breasts allowing the fragrant air of home to move into this makeshift cover and against her skin as she played in the field of maize. Now she was returning home, hands weighted down by the things she had collected when she was away. Mama Chiedza was unsure of which she preferred earlier as she stood on that hillock before withering life. Being seen coming or not? Not that she cared enough to act on one - to hide - and against the other - being seen. Some of the women had seen her coming. The overgrown crowd she now stood before had begun to form then.

Mama Neta was the one who called out to Mama Ariko. She called for her again seeing as no one else could find their words. All these people and their unknowingly fluid stares searched for confirmation that Mama Chiedza was real - 'but Mama Chiedza could not be real.' Mama Chiedza was here - 'but Mama Chiedza could not possibly be here.'

"Who is that?" one of the two girls who came out of the house with Imma when she finally made her appearance asked. She was younger than the other girl who herself appeared too young to so openly ask questions. Had it been another time, a swift gaze over the forward girl and a sucking of the teeth would have been a sufficient warning. Better yet the girl would have kept her questions for later when the women would move into small, well trusted clicks, to debunk the events of the day. If by chance you missed out on said sessions, no worry, today's happenings would be replayed many times, for many months to come, far and wide, with new interpretations that spoke of hidden gestures, unspoken words and people who had unfortunately missed the day Azaniya returned home.

"Isn't that your daughter Mama Ariko?" Mama Neta took Imma's hands to share in whatever emotions she was meant to feel in that moment. "Imma," she called her by her first name - like a secret between the two of them - "Isn't that Azaniya?"

‘Azaniya.’

While other women of the time followed generic manuals when choosing their children’s names - names of the faith (Ruth, Samuel, Paul), names from culture (Tendai, Rumbidzai, Tariro) - Imma - whose name declared but failed to make whole her destiny - when the meaning of names once meant so much to her, had named her daughter a name of promise. No matter where or when Azaniya ended up in this world it was said she would always be ‘heard by God’.

Had God heard Azaniya when she was away?

Everyone in the crowd who knew some part of the first ACT of Azaniya’s story held back tears.

Mama Neta released her hold on Imma seeing that there was something happening between mother and daughter.

“Come closer,” was how Mama Neta asked Azaniya to come and meet her mother. It was Imma who could not hold herself back and ran over to wrap her arms around her daughter for a long-awaited embrace. The flesh of my flesh - the blood of Imma’s blood. There were apologies on both parts; Azaniya for disappearing as a lagging day turned into night, Imma for not knowing her daughter would run away. There were congratulations in honor of them making it back to one another after so long. There was warmth, unintended tears and hesitant smiles that could form now that they both carried lighter loads.

Imma slowly released her daughter to grip her shoulders and look at her face. Azaniya was beautiful just as Imma was and as Imma had been told her mother had been. It was a pleasant surprise knowing the years Imma had taken from this world and the burdens Azaniya had found away from home did little to take away from that beauty.

Imma was taken aback by the sensation of her fingers being touched. She was still holding onto Azaniya and assumed she had just imagined it. She might have forgotten about the feeling had she not caught Azaniya’s expression - all the blood drawn from it. Imma took tiny steps around her daughter who stood immovable. She was surprised to find a beautiful face - her mother’s, hers, her daughter’s - on a chubby baby girl carried on Azaniya’s back whom everyone else had missed. It was a miracle the baby had been so quiet. It was love at first sight. The baby begun laughing wildly and to her fullest content while Azaniya did not inquire about her

excitement. Azaniya still stood steady when Imma's heavy stare fell on her. She could not look at her mother. Imma recalled but would not bring up the stories of men creating elaborate schemes to trap our daughters. Bechuanaland or Zambia. Independence from the British. Work. In the name of freedom. Around the time Azaniya disappeared there had been plenty of stories she would not bring up. She would not ask Azaniya with whom she had been or why she had left. She would not ask for the name of the white father of the child on Azaniya's back.

Imma's stare melted away. She kissed Azaniya on the cheek alleviating her daughter's worries and allowing Azaniya's lungs to take in air again. Azaniya closed her eyes for another embrace savoring a kind of love she had surely missed. Imma returned to the baby girl who Azaniya called Chiedza and planted her lips against each one of Chiedza's plump, ambiguous cheeks.

Everyone wanted to see Chiedza. They would be surprised and smile now, then tell all sorts of egregious stories later. Their stories would spread like wildfire. This child would be attached to the names of plenty of men and plenty of sinful actions.

Azaniya planted her knees in the soil before her mother. There were many expressions of wonder. Whispers and assumptions said this was the part where she begged for her mother's shelter again.

"Hello Mama," Azaniya looked up at Imma and clapped her hands creating a hollow sound to offer with her greeting.

"Hello my daughter."

Imma moved to help Azaniya back to her feet.

Azaniya went around the crowd greeting the people she had returned home to.

Her lagging steps were a tell-tale sign of hesitation as she walked into the house. Her weight had lessened. One of the girls had taken her bags to the room, the other was holding Chiedza. This new place, unfamiliar smiles and whispers beneath breaths would be the best indicator of whether or not a baby was fussy. Azaniya's eyes moved from wall to wall. She listened for sounds. Imma slid her palm over Azaniya's back to offer her daughter as much comfort as she could before slipping into a story. It was one of both sorrow and relief. The sorrow had led the Gono men to a funeral in Gweru. The relief was a temporary consolation. It

was early in the day now and the men were expected to return home before night fell. Azaniya would take the temporary relief for as long as it served her.

Azaniya's room was now someone else's so she took the room at the end of the corridor where old, mismatched furniture was kept.

"I will unpack it myself later," Azaniya announced seeing the girl who had carried her bags in about to unpack them.

She was Tendai. She said the other girl was Chipo. Tendai was the brave one who asked all the questions. She was tall, slim and dark. While that was not a particularly unique description somewhere like here, Azaniya noticed the combination earlier but could now see it more clearly - Tendai looked so much like someone else.

"Mama talked about you all the time," Tendai confessed before leaving Azaniya be.

Now that Azaniya was home she finally allowed her body to succumb to its fatigue. It was hot outside - approaching the middle of the day - and yet Azaniya dreamt. In this world between wakefulness and heaven Azaniya watched herself the day she left Chirumanzu in the middle seat of a truck she had no choice but to put her faith in because how often did God send a vehicle that far off the main road? Azaniya relived the heat between bodies, the consequence of an escape planned in December before the rains appeared. The result of being sandwiched between two faceless men; one white, the other black, both not much older than her.

A few hours later Imma snuck into their room. Chiedza was sound asleep revisiting the peaceful entity who existed somewhere far away from this world she had entered 11 months ago. Chiedza's breaths were exaggerated - but normal for a child her age - almost seeming too great for her little body. The sounds could be mistaken for a harsh wind about a sea Imma had never seen, only heard of from the people who came to and then left Chirumanzu. Who would Chiedza become? - she wondered.

Imma held onto Azaniya's scent. She smelt of other places, other feelings and pain. Imma stroked her daughter's hair gently, an embrace reserved for quiet moments such as this before commencing a winding ritual of praise and tears. There had been so many tears shed in wait of Azaniya's return. Imma had not

dreamt of Azaniya all these years so her faith that Azaniya was still living persisted. Even as a child everyone Imma knew who passed had come to her dreams the night before they died to say goodbye. Imma dreamt of fish every time the Gono name multiplied. The heirs of her father who had passed without meeting any of his grandchildren. Was he somewhere seeing this Imma wondered? It was here that Imma made plans. Azaniya would return to school. She would be someone in spite of everything.

“And we will baptize baby,” just as Imma had baptized her children and Father Bellomy had baptized her. Imma knew that in spite of the pieces of faith Azaniya had lost when her father died and when Ariko was left behind to tend to his father’s home, despite the parts of her light she had lost out there in the world, Azaniya would let her mother introduce her daughter to the Lord hopeful this time around he would do better by allowing Chiedza to live up to her name. Imma intended to be her daughter’s shield. Once the men returned she would dissuade their persistence in wanting to know where Chiedza had come from. She was her father’s eldest daughter; she would use what little power that entailed to protect her blood.

“Mama Chiedza,” Imma called out to her daughter. There were so many promises made. Imma hummed a praise hymn before leaving Azaniya thankful that they would once again have time.

Azaniya woke a few hours later when day was threatening to end. Chiedza was not where she had been laid to sleep on the bed beside her yet Azaniya was not worried. This was home so her baby was in safe hands.

Azaniya bathed near one of the boulders behind the house that concealed her from prying eyes whilst revealing her nakedness to the Kraal. She was clean and all dressed up as though she was going somewhere special when she walked into the living room to find Tendai shelling nuts while watching over Chiedza chasing and being chased by imaginary creations innocence had gifted her. Tendai was all too willing to take her leave, preferring to laugh with friends while working. Azaniya sat on one of the sofas and watched her daughter. Baby Chiedza crawled towards her mother wearing a weightless smile, completely oblivious to the tassels of obligation to her being handed over. Neither did she know the world might one day be at her feet. Chiedza appeared to be moving to meet the embrace of her

mother, but she never arrived. She took a detour led by an imaginary friend. Chiedza existed in pure joy while Azaniya picked up the bag Tendai had not noticed her carry into the living room. When she retrieved her bag from her room Azaniya decided against writing a letter to Imma to offer up any explanation for her actions. Imma was visiting a friend a few plots away in the opposite direction to the Harare-Masvingo-Beitbridge highway. Chipu was in the kitchen. There were other people in the house who would tend to Chiedza once she became fussy. She had already become the light of the house so often people would stop by to play with her. Chiedza's movements were becoming staggered as tiredness caught up to her.

Azaniya threw her bag over her shoulder then she set up a space on the carpet for the baby to sleep. It was not long before she was certain Chiedza was lost in her dreams and would not cry when she left her.

Azaniya was halfway between '**Her Mother's Home**' and Mama Esther's shops when she refused to look back.