**The non-Tswana housemaid**

She is in the space allotted for maids in these types of houses. A black woman is hanging clothes to dry on a line in a sunny backyard. I walk towards her with my cup of coffee and greet her in Setswana. It's embarrassing because it's already late morning, and I just woke up in this large, quiet house. I should explain to her that I slept late because I was tired after yesterday's long flight. However, she needs to ask who I am. I am a *lekgoa,* a White woman, which makes me a legitimate resident of the house she cleans. She vigorously shakes each wet clothing item, places it neatly on the cloth line, and flashes a large smile responding to my Tswana greetings. Then, she replies in English, "Good morning, Mma." Without stopping her work, she says, “You speak Setswana better than me, Mma.” I look at her, puzzled. "I'm from Zimbabwe," she explains. "I came to this country almost ten years ago, but my language is not so good." We continued our small talk of self-introductions in that backyard while she walked in and out of the house, bringing more wet clothes, squeezing, and hanging them to dry. I sip on my coffee, grateful to have someone to talk to.

Upon waking up in this unfamiliar house, I navigated a labyrinth of rooms and hallways that eventually led me to a central, circular, octagonal space. This windowless area was designed for meditation and was surrounded by several bedrooms. The living room boasted lavish, albeit tacky, glass and chrome furnishings. At the same time, the dining area was dominated by a large and imposing black glass table, separated from the kitchen by a high counter and four plush chairs. Small, dimly lit passageways connected each bedroom to the shared living spaces.

I brushed my teeth in the bathroom adjacent to my bedroom. The sole window in this dark bathroom is obstructed by a dense, sturdy iron mesh, presumably for security purposes. Numerous cracks mar the bathtub's surface, and the faucets emit a constant drip. The mirrors are coated in a layer of filth.

This is my first time reserving an Airbnb in Gaborone, the capital. In the past, I have ventured straight to "my village," where I conducted ethnographic research in the early 1980s. This time, I am eager to expand my horizons and document my experiences of Botswana's

contemporary urban life.

The person who facilitated my Airbnb reservation was a gracious Tswana man. He generously offered to collect me from the airport, and upon learning that I had rented a car, which I picked up at the airport, he insisted on accompanying me to the property due to its tricky location. I'm grateful for his recommendation since I felt uneasy about driving on unfamiliar roads after the long flight. While I had no trouble navigating rural areas, I was anxious about navigating through the bustling city of Gaborone.

I liked his warm demeanor and welcoming smile. He introduced himself using a nickname commonly used by his foreign friends. I demanded to know his full Tswana name. he giggled good-heartedly and said that his Tswana name can be challenging to pronounce for people like me. I learned that he teaches English literature at a local high school. He responded patiently to my inquiries about the place I rented, saying that the home we were headed to was owned by an American man who had established an NGO in Gaborone. When the owner visits, he stays in one of the bedrooms, while the Tswana teacher oversees the Airbnb hosting work in exchange for a discounted rate on another room. I had many more questions, but I was exhausted. With tired eyes, I trailed his old pickup in my rental car.

This morning, he was nowhere to be found. I discovered I was the only one at home until I bumped into the maid outside by the clothesline. We had a delightful chat, during which I mentioned that I would be staying in the house for only a few days. When she inquired about my proficiency in Setswana, I spoke about my previous trips to Botswana since the early 1980s. I told her that I was originally from Israel.

I was grateful for her attentive ear and couldn't help but feel apologetic for taking up so much of her time. She reassured me that she, too, "loves to talk." She was a woman who made one feel trust. Her confidence was evident in how she carried herself, and her attire was a refreshing departure from the usual uniform of her profession. She wore a lovely sky-blue knee-length skirt that perfectly complemented her shapely figure, paired with a simple yet elegant black blouse. She sported a pair of pink flip-flops to complete the look. After finishing the laundry, I asked her if she wanted a cup of black Turkish coffee I had brought from home. However, she declined my offer and requested "bush tea" with plenty of sugar. She sat beside me at the sleek glass table and asked: why had I journeyed to Botswana? Her eyes lit up when I told her I write people's stories, that I am interested in people’s lives.

"May I share my story with you?" she asks with eagerness and then adds with a slight giggle of embarrassment, "It may be difficult to hear. Would you be willing to write it down for me?" I assured her that I was genuinely interested in listening to her story and not afraid of the challenges it may present. She looked at me as I readied myself with my laptop and affirms, "I know for a fact that you are a strong woman." I return her gaze with a smile and reply, "You strike me as a strong woman yourself." I watch her. What was that about me being a strong woman? I wondered. I feel that I am watched. That she is studying me. She takes her time before

she begins her story, her demeanor emanates a sense of unwavering self-assurance and drive. "So, my dear. you are from Zimbabwe?" I open.

“Yes,” she says softly. “You know our president is a crazy man, and the situation is so very bad. That is why we had to leave our country. My husband came here first by himself. We have some relatives who settled in Botswana, and they called on him. And then I came over. I had to wait for my passport. And then we sent for our two boys.”

As she speaks, her eyes well up with tears. "My husband," she says, "he's not the man he used to be. He drinks too much, and when he comes home, he just sleeps. If I didn't work, our children would go hungry.” She pauses to take a deep breath, sipping her bush tea before continuing. I could see that she was lost in her painful memories. "Before we came here, he was different. He was loving and kind, always preparing my bath water and cooking for me,” she reminisces. "You see, I was young and beautiful then; he was 15 years my senior. He did everything to win my heart, and when I became pregnant with his child, I fell deeply in love with him. He was a good man, and he loved me more than anything."

As I listen to her story, she watches me closely, searching for any sign of judgment. I offer her my full attention and assure her that her words are important to me. Glancing away from my computer, I wait patiently for her to share more. She continues. "When I arrived in this country, things began to change. My husband started drinking heavily, spending all his money at the local arcade. We fought constantly, yelling, and screaming, while my children went hungry. He is useless," she concludes firmly, bitterly.

During her challenging early years, she discovered Jeso (Jesus) and became a regular attendee of a spiritual church. Her deep involvement led to her selection for specialized training by the Church to become a *moruti* teacher-preacher. As she began to preach, she gained the respect of those around her and emerged as a leader. These accomplishments brought her immense happiness. But She felt ashamed of her husband's habit of drinking and behaving in an un-Christian manner, especially while she was at work or attending Church. At one point, her husband's unacceptable conduct led her to decide to divorce him. They proceeded to the Tswana customary court, commonly referred to as the *kgotla*, where the elders convened to adjudicate their matter.

I noted that I had attended many *Kgotla* [traditional court] proceedings but had never seen non-Tswana people in such a setting. She patiently listened to my interruption and assured me that the Tswana elders didn't mind if one spoke Setswana. In fact, they had provided her and her husband with a translator.

When the elders heard her desire to end her marriage, they requested her husband's input. Her husband cunningly manipulated the situation by professing his immense love for his wife. His only "fault" was asking for a baby girl since they already have two boys. He appealed to the Tswana elders, claiming his wife was depriving him of this request. "These men," she said bitterly, "listened to him and not to me. They sent us home. This is how I was forced to have the third pregnancy.” She was silent for a long while, looking at her hands, scrubbing an invisible dirt. "But then it turned out to be a boy, not the girl he wanted, so he did not care about this child. He did not look at him or hold him, and he went back to drinking."

"After my baby was born," she said, "I was so depressed. I was thinking seriously of killing myself. We were fighting, fighting all the time. I decided to leave him without waiting for divorce. I went to live in another part of town. I found a small room near The Episcopal Fire Church, and I prayed a lot."

She stopped her monologue. Her eyes watched me write on my laptop, assessing the impression of her story on me. I asked if, at that point, she became more involved with church activities. She replied with a deep conviction: “I needed religion to connect to my soul.”

I asked what she meant by "connecting to her soul." She said: "I was lost. You see. My soul was crashed. I found peace in that corner of the back of the Church. I cooked, cleaned, earned a living, and spent the rest of my time helping with church activities. And it somehow worked. Little by little. I became more calm. I became more strong in my religion. But, you know, my friend, I still need to become stronger.

But then someone from my old neighborhood saw me in my Church and told me that my kids were running hungry on the street. So I went back. I discovered that he sold the few items we had in the house to buy his drink and that my kids were naked and begging for food on the street. The one who was going to school was not in school anymore. I did not want to live with him anymore. I struggled to get a new place so I could have my kids with me. But he soon came after me, saying he regrets his actions. I knew he did not change. And still, I decided to take him back because our Church says I must not divorce him. I should only pray for him. I tried. And I prayed. But it was terrible. We fought over everything. And after a while, I did not want to live at all. Two years ago, I felt something new. I could free him."

"What do you mean by "free him," I asked.

She pointed to a book lying on the glass table in front of us, "I thought of him like this book, like he was not a human being, just a thing.”

“You mean you had no more expectations from him?" I tried to use my words to understand her statement.

"Yes, you understand me. I did not look at him. I got myself busy, busy, busy all the time. I worked cleaning two houses, three houses, and four houses each day, and when I came back home with food I bought with that money, I cooked for my kids, and then I just took the bible and read. I ignored him. Drinking, not drinking, sleeping, not sleeping, I did not care. And yes, we stopped fighting. I was learning to become a *moruti* (a preacher). It could have been a good job. They give you a paid house and everything. But because of this useless man, they stopped me from becoming a moruti. I could not do anything with this man."

She fell quiet. I wondered if her drinking husband still lives with her. But I felt that if she chose not to mention him in her story, I should not pry into her pain.

"And what about your son? Did you say he is in his 20s now?" I asked her.

"Oh, my son…" she took a deep breath. "Do you think he can help me? Unfortunately, he can't. The truth is he will never get a job here in this town even if he graduated Form 5 from high school." I looked at her, baffled. “Really? Why not? Because he is not Tswana? They discriminate against him?”

"You did not know that?" she laughed bitterly at my ignorance.

"They have all these roadblocks, and they get us off the bus saying, "All you non-Tswana people get off the bus to show your papers." Oh, my son will never get a job here. They, the *Batswana*, they have no jobs. And until this man in my country [Mugabe] dies, we can do nothing. The situation back home is even worse."

I thanked her for sharing her story. I knew I might not see her again and I wanted to help her. I felt awkward paying for one's story, but I knew how hard this woman works and how much she needs this money. I returned to my room and reemerged with a bill of 100 Rand, telling her I intended to speak to the American man who owns this house and ask if he might increase her pay. She was speechless. She grabbed my hand, holding it with both hands as she detailed how she intended to use this unexpected gift of money. Embarrassed, I escaped to my bedroom to get ready to go out to explore the neighborhood. When I was prepared to leave the house, she was gone. The clean, ironed clothes were placed in nice piles on the black glass of the dining room table.