



SHE

Mpimanyeto Mashimbye

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To the flower and the girl in the garden.

“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was formless and empty and darkness covered the deep waters. And the spirit of God was hovering above the surface of the waters. Then God said “let there be light” and there was light. And God saw that the light was good. Then he separated the light from the darkness. God called the light “day” and the darkness “night”. And evening passed and morning came, marking the first day.

Then God said “let there be a space between the waters, to separate the waters of the heavens from the waters of the earth”. And that is what happened. God made this space to separate the waters of the earth from the waters of the heavens. God called this space “sky”. And evening passed and morning came, marking the second day.

Then God said, “Let the waters beneath the sky flow together into one place, so dry ground may appear”. And that is what happened. God called the dry ground “land” and the waters “seas”. And God saw that it was good. Then God said “let the land sprout with vegetation- every sort of seed bearing-plant and every kind of seed bearing-fruit. These seeds will then produce the plants and trees from which they came”. And that is what happened. The land produced vegetation-all sorts of seed-bearing plants, and trees with seed-bearing fruit. Their seeds produced plants and trees of the same kind. And God saw that it was good. And evening passed and morning came, marking the third day.

Then God said, “Let lights appear in the sky to separate the day from the night. Let them mark off the seasons, days and years. Let these lights in the sky shine down on the earth”. And that is what happened. God made two great lights- the larger one to govern the day, and the smaller one to govern the night. He also made the stars. God set these lights in the sky to light the earth, to govern the day and night, and to separate the light from the darkness. And God saw that it was good. And evening passed and morning came, marking the fourth day.

Then God said, “Let the waters swarm with fish and other life. Let the skies be filled with birds of every kind”. So God created great sea creatures and every living thing that scurries and swims in the water, and every sort of bird- each producing offspring of the same kind. And God saw that it was good. Then God blessed them, saying, “Be fruitful and multiply. Let the fish fill the seas and let the birds multiply on the earth”. And evening passed and morning came, marking the fifth day. Then God said, “Let the earth produce every sort of animal, each producing offspring of the same kind-livestock, small animals that scurry along the ground, and wild animals”. And that is what happened. God made all sorts of wild animals, livestock, and small animals, each able to produce offspring of the same kind. And God saw that it was good. Then God said, “Let us make human beings, in our image, to be like us. They will reign over the fish in the sea, the birds in the sky, the livestock, all the wild animals

on the earth, and the small animals that scurry along the ground”. So God created human beings in his own image. In the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. Then God blessed them and said, “Be fruitful and multiply. Fill the earth and govern it. Reign over the fish in the sea, the birds in the sky and the animals that scurry along the ground”. Then God said, “Look! I have given you every seed-bearing plant throughout the earth and all the fruit trees for your food. And I have given every green plant as food for all the wild animals, the birds in the sky, and the small animals that scurry along the ground- everything that has life”. And that is what happened. Then God looked over all he had made, and he saw that it was very good! And evening passed and morning came, marking the sixth day...”

- Genesis 1:1-31

I have lived many lives and even more years. I have been praised, celebrated, enslaved, degraded and forgotten. I have bathed in the purest of waters, dressed in fine silks, and worn more gold some days than most men see in their lifetimes. I have gone days without a drop to drink, lived under the stars comforted by the soil and kept warm by the grass. I have spent days without eating. I have drank from the murky puddles left behind when the kings discarded their waste. The sound of my feet is familiar to all the continents of the earth. The smell of my breath has filled the air since the days of Adam. My eyes saw the life of Methuselah conceived then extinguished and I swam in all the great seas before Jesus set foot upon them. They say that I am beautiful. I do not know how much truth there might be to this, because beautiful things don't get banished from heaven. I have had many names, so many that my real name no longer carries any significant value to me. You may call me what you like.

I have been among humans for over four thousand years now. I have watched them create and destroy civilizations in what to me seems like a heartbeat. There have been some among them who I have admired. In some of them I have seen glimpses of home. But even the purest among them; kind, nurturing, honest and almost loyal, have in time given in to their predisposition to the darkness that beckons them. Yes, even the purest and youngest have buried deep in their eyes an emptiness that makes them susceptible to evil.

All human settlements smell the same; I cannot stand the smell of the paper they use for trade. I lived as a recluse on and off for many centuries but it is frustratingly entertaining to watch them live as they create purpose for their existence where there is none. For the time being I have settled in Polokwane; a midsized city in the north of South Africa with the qualities of a town. I certainly had bigger settlements to choose from but the smaller towns and cities have always been a little harder to dislike than the rest. I have many well maintained accounts with all major banks in the country and can afford to live wherever I'd like to but for the time being I am, at least in human terms, homeless.

Biccard Street at rush hour. I watch as they all commute in growling metal carriages that run without horses. They are quite smart, these humans. I focus my eyes on the rhythm of the traffic lights. I can hear them green, they whisper amber and they cry red. I spend a lot of days here. A stationary road sign that the people have come to know and use as a land mark. Right between palm Sentrum and the Catholic Church, you can find me, likely to stand longer than them both. Some of the humans still walk, I watch them too. Walking in all directions, crossing all the streets, some humans still remember why they were given legs and feet. A girl with plaited hair

walks past me sobbing, everyone keeps walking and nobody says a thing. She looks down the one-way street, watching the cars and their drivers roll by in the fading heat. She pulls up her blue socks and fastens her neck tie. Nice and neat. She spots a car, about three to four growls away. A distracted driver ploughing up the street, but she sees him and will be okay. With my eyes locked on her (though she is unaware), she takes one large, shocking leap and cringes with fear. My eyes still on her fixed, she prepares to meet the bright eyes of the sparking white jeep. Quicker than most, I move to catch her before she hits the grill and bonnet. Now across the street I place her gently on the pavement. All in time for a beautiful sunset.

The temperatures were dropping as the sun fell into the earth in the distance. She showed no signs that would have convinced me she would wake any time soon. I decided that perhaps it would be best if I took her with me. Surely something sinister would have befallen her had I left her there and having, for reasons unknown, saved her life it only made sense that I play steward until she roused from her slumber. In my arms I carried her. In my arms I felt her warmth. In my arms, that night, she rested beneath my broken wing.

In the days of creation, heaven was a beautiful place. A world of light, pureness and all that is good. The other angels and I marvelled at the hands of the Father as they waded the seas into creation and raised life from the soil seamlessly. On the sixth day, the day the Lord created man, the energy in heaven shifted. Many of my brothers and sisters were upset and confused. They felt replaced. They felt that they would now have to compete for the Father's attention and affections. Before the seeds of sin came to fruition on earth, the angel's sin of envy was born. All those who envied the humans were cast out of heaven and sent off to live among one another in a prison made by His own hands. I was not so much envious of the humans as I was curious about them. I had questions. I never sought to undermine the authority of the Creator. However, I craved but a pinch of the understanding that drove Him to creating these imperfect creatures. My intentions were misread and I too was cast out of heaven, but unlike my fallen brethren, I was not sentenced to live in hell counting to six hundred and sixty-six and feeding tongues of fire with my flesh for eternity while staring at the bright wings of my past and former glory in hell. No. My days would be spent trapped among the humans. Unable to understand them, unable to love them, unable to die. My hell is a shared space filled with people who can never convince me that I am not alone.

"Am I in heaven?" She was staring at the sky with a blank expression on her face. I chose not to answer her. She would figure it out for herself soon enough. "Am I in heaven?" she repeated

in the same tone without moving a muscle on her face. “Do you feel like you’re in heaven?” I responded indifferently. “I don’t know, what is it supposed to feel like? My mother said it’s supposed to feel like peace and sound like laughter is the only spoken language” She had my attention. Not much of it, but a fair amount. I turned my upside down sitting bucket to face her. “Do you feel anything like that kind of peace right now?” her body still hadn’t moved and her eyes only blinked. She glanced at me to get a good look at who she was speaking to. “My mother said that’s how it would feel. But in truth I can’t expect her to know much of a place she has never been to. Just because she has an idea of what she would like heaven to be, that hardly makes it any more likely to be as she envisioned it. Maybe I am in heaven. Maybe the earth and heaven are more alike than the Good Book leads us to believe. Both mediocre sides to the same mediocre coin. The only difference being the length one must live in such a state of mediocrity. Yes, maybe that is heaven. Am I in heaven?” she insisted on getting a direct answer out of me as though I somehow owed it to her. Her entitled tone made my skin burn with rage. She forgets her place. The little patience I had wore thin. “Perhaps you are, perhaps you aren’t. Perhaps you’re in hell. Have you considered that? Would I not make a good devil? Do you wish to see my fangs, claws and horns? Is that what your mother told you the devil would look like?” I smiled. “Who’s to say that hell isn’t a paradise they don’t want you to strive for? A land of desire and satisfaction with no repercussion? Sounds plausible to me” She tilted her head away from me. “I didn’t get to ask her about the devil and hell before she passed away. She would probably have painted hell in a more negative light. Am I in heaven?” I had met thousands of depressed and generally unhappy people before her. Many musicians, writers and all manner of artists drowning their sorrows in booze and opioids. Spending money just as fast as they made it until they burned themselves out leaving nothing but ash where they once had talent. But none of them were anything like her. How did she get this way? She was like a rose in a graveyard placed carefully on a tombstone wasting away. Alive and thirsty with equal parts ready to die and starving to live. She was not the first to lose a parent and definitely not the last, so how did she become so cold? There was no light or darkness in her. No good or evil. No tears in her eyes when she spoke of her loss. No rage or hatred of God. I found myself speaking to an empty hole in the ground uncertain of whether it were to be used as a large landfill to re-nourish the soil or as a mass grave to hide the corpses of ungodly deeds. This child was broken. She seemed to merely exist. No potential for anything in particular. I had to be careful of what I said to her. I’ve always avoided having conversations about heaven with the humans. Even during the few lifetimes I spent as a nun or priestess. “I cannot be certain of

where you are or where you want to be, but I know that I am nowhere near heaven and for the time being, you happen to be with me”.

The sun was beginning to get warmer. The concrete mattress she slept on became too hot to remain on any longer. She rose to her feet, dispelling my brief belief that her earlier lack of motion was due to an obscure onset of paralysis after her incident the previous day. She took a good look around, trying to figure out where we were. “This is Webster Street, just outside of the city centre. It’s a safe place to spend the night when you haven’t a home or any possessions to lose”. She continued to look around as though she hadn’t heard me. There was something about her that roused my curiosity. Everything was a puzzle with her. I could see her trying to piece together her surroundings and trying desperately not to let it show. I asked her if she wished to return to her home and get back to her life and school. “There must be someone out there searching for you. A mother. A father, perhaps a brother or sister. Where are you from? I’ll take you home myself.” She refused and told me that there was nothing to go back to. Seeing how obstinate she was about not returning home I resorted to getting simple answers out of her. Slowly working my way towards understanding her behaviour. “What is your name?” I asked her. “Palesa” she muffled, staring at the ground. Seeing that she was in no way interested in answering my questions or continuing with our conversation now that she had gotten the answer to her question, I left her to entertain her thoughts until she felt like speaking again. The thought of leaving her to fend for herself was appealing to me. Being patient and nurturing was not in my nature. If as an angel it ever was, it was cast out of me the day my time in that eternal place ended. “Be gone! Be Gone! This is no place for you” my spirit shouted, exorcising that pitiful patience.

I stood up to leave. Deliberately, my body language showed her that I was not intent on taking her with me. “Before I was born,” she started “my mother met a man. He was everything she wanted. Smart, funny, caring, and he brought her beautiful bouquets of fine flowers whenever he would see her. He was a teacher, she was studying to be a nurse at the time. He had a way with words. She fell in love with him quickly and blindly, as young women often do. After a few months she became unnerved by details of their relationship. In the months since they started seeing each other he had never given any specific details about where he lived. Only a general location was given when she would ask. They would see each other only within three hours of the end of each schooling day if they saw one another during the week and only after dark on the weekends and never on Sundays. Being no fool she took it upon herself to find out what he had been hiding from her and why. Asking after him at the school under the guise of

a young mother looking to admit her son to the school she discovered he was a married man. A man with a wife and two children. When everyone in the community found out they thought she had known about his family all along. Her family was disgusted and ashamed. Her father was a hard man. He never failed to punish anything he deemed ill behaviour. There were strict rules and anyone who knowingly broke them deserved no forgiveness. He believed every act that lacked goodness was bathed in darkness and every such action deserved to be met with fitting consequences, and as the self-appointed sole architect of consequence in the family, he disowned her. His word was law and she was cast out to fend for herself. Labelled a whore by her own father. Never to become a nurse. Never to taste absolution. But she had more than just herself to worry about. She didn't know it yet, but she was pregnant. By the time she learned she was carrying a child she was working as a cashier at a super market in town. Barely making enough to support herself, she now had to worry about being a single parent without a family's support. She thought about returning home for help, but if they outcast her for the affair before learning of the pregnancy, there was no way they would welcome her with open arms now. She struggled on her own and a few months later she gave birth to me. For as long as I can remember it has always been just the two of us. She used to tell me that she was lucky to have me. 'Without you I would have been all alone' she would say. Never telling me why we were alone, not that I ever asked. Not that I ever wanted to know. She kept me happy and I never felt the need to have anyone else. We were everything to each other. A few years ago she fell ill. Cancer (Ironically matching her star sign). She told me everything would be fine. That she would be fine. She lied to me. She had to. While she still had the strength, she tried reaching out to her family but nobody cared enough to help or offer to take care of me for her. Some said she brought this on herself and that this was God's will. Some simply refused, fearing that they might face the same isolation she lived with. This was around the time that she decided to tell me everything that had happened before I was born. Everything I have told you. She didn't last much longer after that. Her condition deteriorated and she died... and then I was alone, like she had been before me. Our neighbours took me in but I couldn't stop thinking about how her family had rejected her and forced her to live and die alone. If they wanted nothing to do with her in this life then she must be alone in the next. She must be waiting for me there. Like she waited when she found out she was pregnant. She needs me and I need her. We're supposed to be together" she wept. That day I didn't go about my usual routine of staring at traffic lights and studying the people. That day I comforted this child. Something inside of me failed to be indifferent to her. She had my sympathy. I know a thing or two about being rejected and alienated by would-be family. Lord knows I do. I decided I would protect her until I found

someone she could trust and then I would leave this place and move on to another small town. I had spent enough time here. Too much time, in fact.

Understandably, Palesa wasn't quick to trust anyone. There was no kindness that went unscrutinised. No good deed that was void of ulterior motives. Looking back at it now, it's a miracle she was able to trust me at all. Finding someone she connected with would not be easy. Being no more trusting than she was, I took her with me everywhere I went. There was no telling whether or not she might try hurting herself if I wasn't watching. I taught her everything I knew about living on the streets of Polokwane. I introduced her to all the characters she needed to know to feel safe. I introduced her to many people. Street merchants and the homeless alike, but naturally she had a favourite. Isaac, the man in Marshal Street selling beautiful bouquets to motorists passing by. He was always smiling and always ready to laugh and share his laugh. We saw him at least twice a week. Whenever he saw us he addressed her first. "Dipalesa!" he would call out. He liked her name. Every time we saw him he would take a single flower from one of his bouquets, cut most of the stem off and hand it to her "this one is for your hair. It will look like you have two faces. Two blooming flowers sharing a single stem". It was a different kind of flower each time. Sometimes a lily, sometimes a sunflower. Sometimes a carnation, sometimes a tulip. Always a flower. Never the same flower twice in a row. "I like the man with all the flowers. He's always so happy".

Palesa had never really known what it was like to exist in a community that interacted with her. It was clear in how quiet she would get around anyone apart from me, sometimes even going so far as hiding behind me. Never making eye contact. But in time she began to appreciate having familiar faces greet her with a smile and treat her like she mattered to the world and had a place in it. Although it was a tiresome exercise for me, growing closer to them all was good for her and I couldn't help but think that perhaps they would continue to care for her if I left without a word.

Before I knew it, it had been an entire year since the day I found her. The year had no effect on me but I could see it all over her. Her face was drifting gently out of childhood into the delicate beauty of womanhood. Her breasts were firm and her thighs filled out slightly. I had never spent this much time around a growing person. It was like watching a seed slowly shoot out of the soil. It seemed as though she would be a completely different person in a few years and I, I would be the same as I've always been. And I wasn't sure I wanted to be that person anymore.

Remembering the date, Palesa spoke to me in a cold tone. A tone I hadn't heard in months. "Aunty"- that's what she called me. I never gave her an actual name to address me by. "Why did you save me? That day in town. The day I jumped in front of that car. Why did you save me?" I choked on the answer. I didn't really remember deciding to save her let alone why. In that moment, my body seemed to have had a will of its own. But she wanted an answer, and whether I had a real answer or not, I had to search for one that she would be willing to accept. I tried not to meet her coldness with my own as my nature was compelling me to. "Palesa," I started "I saved you because I thought you were in trouble and I was the only one who could help". "Do you love me?" she asked. "I do" I answered. Uncertain of what my own definition of love really was. "As much as my mother did?" That question wasn't fair to either of us. She already knew the answer, but I gave it to her anyway. "Nobody can ever love you the way she did." There was a brief silence. I acted again without thinking and held her hand adding "but nobody can ever love you as I do either". I believed I was out of the woods with that response and that it would pull her back away from her undying pain. "If you love me," she continued, "please let me die. That's all I really want. I walk past windows and see more and more of my mother in my reflection every single day. She has dead gardens in her eyes. The smell of daisies on her breath is all but gone and she's never smiling. She's always alone. Let me go and be with her. Set me free". I was willing to condone many things; her indifference to the world, her entitled way of asking questions and her horrible habit of indulging in self-pity but not her suicide. "Do you think your mother would want you to die? Don't you think it was enough that she died before her time? You're a fool if you think your death will change anything" I scolded. "But what kind of life is this? Fine, maybe you're right. Maybe she doesn't want me to die, but she sure as hell wouldn't want me living on the streets with a woman who doesn't trust anyone enough to give them her name or share anything that is undoubtedly true and never allows herself to show any form of human vulnerability. Don't pretend you know what's best for me. If you could figure out what was best for you then maybe you wouldn't be homeless. Stop being selfish and let me die." We didn't share many words after that. I looked at her as I had looked at her on the very same day a year ago and though I knew the whole of her story I knew nothing of her pain and the time I spent with her had changed nothing. In a few moments she readied herself to leave. Without a word she began to walk. Disappearing and reappearing between the street lights. And I just watched.

In some ways I couldn't deny that there may have been some truth in what she had said. Perhaps I had been selfish. Perhaps that's why I didn't understand why I kept her alive. That day, when

the Jeep hurled towards her. She was going to do something I can never do. No matter how great my suffering, pain and misery may become. I will never have the power to make it stop. It will never end. I will live and be forgotten, be forgotten and live. Over and over again with a race I can never truly understand. Perhaps I couldn't stand to watch her do what I hadn't the luxury of doing. Perhaps she was right about me. I thought again about how quickly she was growing and how it wouldn't be long before she realised that I was trapped outside of time. I had to let her go. At least this way the decision was her own. "Goodnight, Palesa" I whispered into the wind behind her. "Goodnight, little flower" I whispered into the wind before me.

"Aunty! Come quick, aunty!" I heard Isaac calling in a panic running in my direction early a few mornings later. I hadn't moved about much since Palesa left. "What is it Isaac?" I answered indifferently. Out of breath, he spoke in short bursts. "Outside the catholic church...blood on the floor...I was going..." I put my hand on his shoulder to calm him down and in the most gentle tone I could summon I asked him to tell me what happened. He caught his breath. "I was passing through town on my way to my spot in Marshal. I saw..." he swallowed with great effort and continued. "I saw a large crowd and many bright lights. I went to go see what everyone was looking at. There was a girl on the floor, they hadn't moved her yet and I don't know if she is alive. They wouldn't tell us. I forced my way through the crowd recognising the white rose in her hair now red with blood. It was one of my own. Cut by my own hand and handed to one. I prayed I was mistaken but I knew what I saw. It was her. It was Palesa" I left Isaac behind and ran straight to the church. He called after me to say more but I had all I needed to know to send me off. I arrived at the church soon enough but there were no bright lights or sirens. She was gone. There were still a few people loitering and talking about what had happened. "Where is she? Where is the girl? The one who was run over here?" I screamed hysterically at no one specific making sure they all heard me. I looked about waiting for an answer before screaming the same words again. They tried telling me to relax; wasting time I didn't have. I had to tell them she was my daughter to get answers out of them. "They took her to the provincial hospital. She was in bad shape" a useful one among them finally shared. A man offered to take me there and we left immediately. Upon arriving I hardly waited for the car to stop before jumping out making my way towards the answers to my questions. I rushed into the building. The smell of the disinfected surfaces all around filled me with a horror I had never known. I cared about her. I feared for her. I may have even loved her. She had to live. I needed her to.

They operated to stabilise her condition for hours. I sat on the floor hugging my knees thinking about all the time I have spent on earth. All the time I have wasted living only for myself. I came into this world with the assumption that I was innately superior to them. For millennia I lived with this belief. How foolish I am. How foolish I have been. Perhaps my long lifespan and inability to die have kept me from growing and blossoming through the crises of mortality that they wake up to and live with every day of their lives. Humans are imperfect, but the imperfection they are born with decreases over time. In time humans learn and adapt. And with much less time than I, they grow and develop at a rate almost unimaginable to the likes of me. Perhaps this is what the Father saw in them. The potential for growth and change. The potential for us to somehow learn from them. Perhaps in his perfection he craved the joy of honing a skill from nothing. The gratification of moving from strength to strength unaware of one's limits. Chasing endlessly towards a finite infinity. Maybe that is the lesson. I have been blind to it all along but man has come so far in my time. Every fallen civilization, every failure of the past, gave rise to something greater than what existed before. It has happened countless times before and it is a pattern I am likely to see again and again. From Egyptian tyranny to Roman rule and beyond. But what of my own growth? I suppose that in all my time it is only natural that I reach a point where it is no longer enough to live for myself. I think I reached this point long ago, but in my arrogance I ignored the signs. I have never in any way been a parent or had any relatives to nurture before Palesa. There's a certain sense of fulfilment that comes with living to rear another. I have felt it. I have tasted it. A certain sense of 'I am alive and the world is a different place for it, regardless of what may come next'.

They sent me through to see her. She was in a coma. The bruises, scratches, stitches and bandages all over her body made me cringe. I wept and for the first time in over four thousand years, I prayed. I prayed a long drawn out prayer with open faucets at my eyes. A prayer admitting to my own folly. A prayer of humility and penitence. My life has been lived. I have had far more time than I deserve. But this child. This pure and innocent life twisted by grief. Hers was barely lived and here she lay before me facing death. I begged and pleaded until my cheeks were grey with dry tears. Even offering my own life to save hers. No voice answered me. No hint of the divine met me with open arms. There was only silence. The same silence I have known since Adam was born. That same silence now accompanied by the beep of a heart monitor and the scent of disinfected surfaces all around. But maybe He will answer me another day. Maybe tomorrow He will rouse her. And maybe when she wakes I will tell her the story of a forgotten angel. An angel once beautiful in heaven and loved for her dark skin, banished

to live on earth. An angel celebrated, praised, enslaved, degraded and forgotten. An angel who drifted slowly towards a darkness where hardly anything grows and just about everything dies. An angel who waited four thousand years to meet just one person and how it was scripted to be from the very beginning. A person who shoved her into the light where her wilted petals were given new life and her bent stem straightened by hope. Maybe. Maybe when she wakes I will tell her the story of an angel named Zahra.