



Mai Lily's Promise

By Emmanuel Sigauke

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Editor's Note

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It happened behind Chinendoro Primary School. Mukoma had agreed to meet his ex-wife, Mai Lily, to schedule another meeting at which they would discuss their daughter's custody. After the meeting, Mukoma, Jakove, and I would return to Kubatana bar while Mai Lily, who was a prostitute again, would go to a different bar. The meeting was not supposed to end the way it did. Mukoma had asked us to come along as witnesses, I with a notebook and pen to write down everything, Jakove with his pairs of eyes and ears. Mukoma had arranged the meeting at night for he didn't want Mai Tariro, his current wife, to know that he was meeting with a prostitute.

Mai Lily was already there when we arrived. She stood with her hand against the fence, swinging her foot impatiently. Mukoma slowed down, extended his arms sideways and said, "Let me handle this, gentleman." Then, he advanced slowly, leaving us standing within earshot. The meeting started surprisingly well. They asked each other about their health, talked about the year's delayed rains, and the likelihood of another drought. Then the conversation settled back on their life after marriage, and I took out my notebook. As soon as Mukoma mentioned their daughter, Mai Lily stepped outside of what could be mistaken as intimate space and said, "You've no business asking about her. Who do you think you are, standing here like you and I have something in common?"

I wanted to shout, "You *have* something in common, which is why you're here," but I didn't want to meddle in Mukoma's business.

"So you're finally telling me I'm not her father?" Mukoma said, his voice shaking.

"You're the father, but that doesn't make her your daughter," she shouted. "Get that into you thick skull!"

Jakove and I moved closer and waited. I closed the notebook.

Mai Lily rested her hands on her waist like one posing for a photo. Mukoma glanced at us, but when he turned to her, he laughed and stepped closer. He looked quite turned on, his arms extended, but she pushed him hard. So hard she staggered with the effort. Of course, Mukoma, being twice bigger than she, did not stir.

"What's this?" he said, pointing at the space he could have gained contact with her. "All I want to know is how she's doing."

"Why do you care? Aren't you happy with your new whore anymore?" She pushed him again. "Get lost!" Then she started walking away, the stamp of her feet signaling the end of the meeting. Mukoma wouldn't let her leave him standing there like an idiot. Even Mai Lily had to have known this because as she walked, the tilt of her shoulders seemed to say, "Stop me if you can."

He grabbed her shoulders, pulled her, and looked at her face intently, but she shook herself free and hit him in the stomach with her elbow. He glanced at us, stiffened, and then slapped her on the face, like in old times. He then held both her arms up and thrust himself forward as if he was going to kiss her, but Mai Lily leaned sideways and kicked him on

the shin. He released her, glanced at us again, and then sent a fist toward her face, which she dodged. She turned as if she was about to run but swung back and, before Mukoma released another blow, she dropped to her knees, as if her legs had suddenly disappeared under her. She brought her hands to Mukoma's crotch and we heard the familiar whisper of an opening zipper. Jakove said, "Oh, oh, oh, lucky man!" and looked away, but I tugged his hand and whispered, "Not even close to that." I had just remembered Mai Lily's promise from two years earlier. I didn't know whether I should intervene. I looked at Jakove for guidance, but he was still facing away, only turning when Mukoma groaned.

Mukoma was in pain. He twisted his waist, thrust his shaking legs backwards, but Mai Lily clung on with her teeth. Why didn't he just push her head? But no, that would hurt more. How about just strike her with his massive fists? Pinch her, strangle her, or bite her somewhere. He bent forward instead, and kneed her on the chin, but he groaned louder. She disengaged with a scream, then gripped his left hand and stuck his index finger in her mouth; then closed her eyes and started chewing.

"Fuck!" Mukoma cried, his voice registering pain. He glanced at us and said, "Don't just stand there!"

That's when Jakove and I jumped into action. I grabbed her collar from behind and pulled, while Jakove hit her head with a fist. He wrung his hand as if he had struck a rock and looked on the ground, but not finding what he wanted, removed his shoe and whacked her on the head with it. She didn't relent. Jakove removed the other shoe and hit her with both, to no avail. I pulled and pulled; then I fell on my back under her soft mass. She felt the sudden erection and slapped me across the face. The sting of the slaps was nothing compared to her fist that landed on my right eye. Mukoma and Jakove kicked her, and when they missed, they kicked me. They wrenched her off me and she fell on her back, but before they touched her again, she sprung up, spat and sped away. I rose and was about to sprint after her, but Jakove said, "She's not worth it."

A few people had gathered, watching us and drawing closer. "*Sva-a!*" Jakove shoed them away like birds.

We focused our attention to Mukoma, who was still groaning and cursing.

"Leave the finger alone!" he said to Jakove. "Check the main area. I can't feel a thing down there."

Jakove got to work, like a doctor, while I tore a piece of my shirt to bandage the finger, which was bleeding. When I touched it, Mukoma said, "Careful there; she will regret the day she was born." And I believed that; she had gone too far. With the way my eye stung, I too wanted to make her pay.

Jakove looked up and said, "The goods are in order, comrade." Then he started laughing, shaking his head, perhaps trying to imagine what Mai Lily had been trying to do. I knew what she had meant to do, so I didn't mind that she had just slapped me a couple of times.

Mukoma started limping towards Five Avenue, but he suddenly stopped and said, "You sure there's no damage?" he said. "It feels like there is something."

I was wondering why he wasn't just checking himself. But Jakove seemed willing to help him.

"No there's nothing big," Jakove said, "just a warning—a little cut." He resumed laughing. "That woman has become a monster."

"She is a hyena," I said, but Mukoma shot me a warning glance, and I closed my mouth. The way things looked already, we had a long night ahead of us.

As I prepared for the longest of nights, I couldn't help but think about how simple the beginning of Mai Lily and Mukoma's drama had been, that Saturday afternoon when Mukoma had brought her home and said, "I present to you a new maiguru." And indeed, my new sister-in-law stood by his side smiling, ready to shake my hand. City woman, light complexioned and voluptuous. They had met in Kubatana Bar, with the help of Jakove, who had known from a bar in Glen Norah. Mukoma and the new woman's relationship had bloomed into marriage within two weeks after he introduced her to me. She had told him that her uncle was a polygamist, so being a second wife didn't bother her, as long as she stayed in the city while the other woman remained in the village. If Maiguru MaMoyo, the senior wife, wanted to meet her, she would have to be the one travelling to the city but not staying longer than three days. I had been surprised to see that Mukoma was allowing this new woman to dictate terms, something I had never known him to allow. He had even looked at me and said, "City women, I tell you." I had nodded in agreement to what I didn't understand and shook his hand in congratulations.

The two wives met after two months. Maiguru MaMoyo arrived on a Sunday unannounced and surprised us by telling Mukoma that she would not return home alone. If the other wife wanted to live in town, she too wanted to live in town. As for the crops back home...oh well, they would take care of themselves. She said all this in her smiling, soft-spoken way; then she ululated in celebration when she noticed her co-wife's bulging belly. Mukoma sat grinning while the junior wife rolled her eyes. I was thumping through *The Sound and the Fury*, a set book for my literature course.

Maiguru MaMoyo asked when the junior was planning to start preparing dinner, and, to my surprise, the junior sprung up and started fumbling with the dishes, but soon discovered that meat, salt, and vegetables were needed.

She was about to go by herself to buy these things when Mukoma offered to go with her. I could see the plan was to leave Maiguru with me, to put her at ease, to talk to her, to make distract her even. What impressed me though was that he ran back into the house and planted a kiss on Maiguru MaMoyo's mouth.

Soon after they left, Maiguru MaMoyo pointed at the door and said, "So I see your works."

"Just trying our best," I said, hoping she would laugh, but she averted her eyes to her palms, twisted-lip expression on her face.

Since my joke hadn't worked, I changed the subject to something she would care about, something serious: "How is the maize plot this year?" I

said. "The one with the two anthills?"

"Babamunini, just shut up, okay?" she said and looked away.

That was definitely an interesting word choice, coming from her. I sunk deeper into the sofa and stayed still. When her shoulders started quivering I grabbed my book, and sat listening to her sobs. Even though she was talking and laughing again by the time her husband and his wife returned, I knew that the little party we had that evening didn't mean a thing to her. It meant zilch to the new wife either because within a week, the whole neighborhood of 40th Crescent would crowd at our house, watching not a fight of fists, not a scratching and mauling-off of skirts and petticoats, but a contest of words, big boulders that the two wives threw at each other while I stood between them holding my chin. When Mukoma arrived from work, the crowd disappeared, and that night the two women received their first lesson about living together. He made them apologize to each other, first reprimanding Maiguru for not knowing better, as senior wife.

After the long talk, Mukoma asked me to come outside with him.

"How come you let them fight in public?" he asked.

"I didn't think they were fighting," I said. "They were just talking."

"Like that, thinking: 'Ha, the wives of my brother are just talking.'" He raised his voice. "And you call yourself educated?"

"They were not loud most of the time," I said.

Mukoma sighed and said, "You can't let them talk to each other the way they were. Distract them; put on some music or something." He paced about like he was getting angry, then he came to a halt, and started shaking his head in advance disapproval of my future indiscretions.

I told him I would do my best, and then we went back inside, where we found his wives cooking together and talking like nothing had happened. Dinner was consumed amidst laughter that night.

The following morning my brother's wives woke up early to do the house chores; one swept the yard while the other cleaned the house, arranging furniture and polishing the floor. By the time I dressed up for school, they had already finished and were laughing over hot, steaming cups of tea and thickly buttered slices of bread.

"Tomorrow I will show you how to make fat cooks," said the senior wife.

"You don't say!" said the junior. "You know how to do all that?"

"I'm the best. Ask Babamunini here."

"True Babamunini?"

"You will be converted," I said.

I started greeting them, but Maiguru MaMoyo stopped me: "No, Little Husband, we greet you, not the other way round." She then looked at her companion and said, "Huh *mainini*, shouldn't we be the ones saying

good morning to him first?"

"You greet him then," the junior wife said and dropped her eyes to her cup of tea.

A cloud of confusion drifted across Maiguru MaMoyo's face; then the junior wife looked up and burst out laughing. She raised her hand for a mid-air clap with the senior wife's hand and said, "Look at him! He gets confused easily, this husband of ours." They continued laughing their fresh, morning-tea laughter. The greetings never really commenced, so I ate my breakfast in silence; then I left for school.

"Serous, you didn't see anything wrong down there?" Mukoma asked Jakove.

"*Nada*. There isn't even blood." He paused and said, "Except, of course...."

"What?" said Mukoma, coming to a sudden in the middle of the pathway.

"The little tooth mark. Other than that, you're ok, man," said Jakove, who started walking away. "Your daughter's mother is crazy."

"She'll pay for this. You know me," Mukoma said. He started to limp along.

"Do you feel any pain still?" Jakove asked. "Because that's the main concern—internal injury."

"Well, no," said Mukoma, trying to walk straight, but he suddenly stopped, bent, held his knee and listened. "This is killing me," he said, pointing at his finger with another finger of the same hand. The cloth was dark with blood.

"Fati can go fix a taxi for us," said Jakove, looking at me.

"You're not suggesting the hospital, are you?" asked Mukoma.

"There's no other way. Look at the blood."

"We can't have them ask me what happened. Giving reports and all that; that's silly."

"Just say it was a dog," Jakove said. "Right, Fati?"

"It was a dog," I said. "She's a dog."

Mukoma eyeballed me and said, "You don't call my women dogs, understand?"

But Jakove shot him an eye, as if in warning, and said, "That's not the kind of nonsense we want to hear now. The woman is a dog; worse than a dog."

"So we stick to which story?" I said. "Dog or person?"

Mukoma shook his head and said, "It doesn't matter, stick to the dog story. I'll fix the whore later."

I couldn't believe that Mukoma was struggling with the pain caused by a woman he had once tamed, but she had always fought back. I was surprised even, that he was visibly in pain.

The first time he had beaten her was three weeks after Maiguru MaMoyo arrived from the village. It turned out to be a long night of watching and struggling to stop the fight, which is what it had become—a fight of husband and wife—along Five Avenue, all the way to Glen View 1. Mukoma had joked that motherhood would improve Mai Lily better than beer-halls, and she asked him what he was talking about.

"Well, you didn't laugh as much when I met you, did you?" he said. "Sithole men bring smiles to their women." He winked at Maiguru MaMoyo.

"More like scowls," the new wife said. "Or shall I say old age? Look at her. She is younger than me but see how worn out she looks."

Maiguru MaMoyo sprung up and pointed a shaking finger at her and said, "Mahure munonetsa!" Then she clicked her tongue to show her disgust for prostitutes and sat down so suddenly I wondered why she had stood up.

"Shut up, you childless, rat-eating idiot!" said the junior wife, showing the mischievous grin of one who knew she had scored a point. She then widened her grin, as if she was ready to cash in on her accumulated points.

When Maiguru MaMoyo leaped towards her, she sprung up and welcomed her with ready fists. I jumped and planted myself between them, but Mukoma pointed at me with his beer bottle and said, "Sit down, buddy." I removed myself from between his wives and they locked arms like cows locking horns. They struggled for a moment in their indecisive embrace. When they saw their approaching husband, they disengaged and waited, as if each hoped the husband would side with her.

Mukoma dashed to Maiguru MaMoyo and slapped her, and she immediately returned to her seat. When he slapped the junior wife, she showed him a fist. Mukoma slapped her again, and she covered her face with her hands and stopped resisting. Mukoma walked back to his seat, opened another beer, and belched. He was now looking at the floor, as if he wanted to focus on listening to what his wives were going to say next.

The junior wife made as if she was going to charge at Mukoma; then she turned, snatched her purse, and stormed out of the house. After a while, Mukoma told me to check if she was outside.

"You know she's outside," interjected Maiguru, who surprised us by rushing outside, and coming back looking worried. "You angered her," she said, looking at Mukoma. "Not good for someone that pregnant."

"*You* angered her!" Mukoma retorted, pointing at her with the bottle.

"We need to go after her," she said. "It's not right for her to be out there"

alone.”

Soon, we were outside, husband and wife exiting the fence through the front gate and I through the back. We converged on Five Avenue where we found her waving down cars. We ran and caught up with her, but she continued to march on as if she had not seen us.

“And now where do you think you are going?” Mukoma said, trying to block her way. I expected him to slap her; just a slap, nothing more, but he only raised his voice and said, “I’ll lose my patience. You hear me!”

“Mainini, return home,” Maiguru MaMoyo pleaded. “This can be talked over.”

The junior wife ignored her, continued marching. I was worried she would slip and fall on her stomach. I opened my mouth to say something but she gave me a dirty look. Then Mukoma grabbed her elbow and kicked her, a weak, warning kick. She staggered to the edge of the road, then before she fell she swung around and struck Mukoma in the stomach with her fist.

“*Iyavozve!* Are we fighting now?” shouted Maiguru MaMoyo.

“I’m going to kill her, watch this!” shouted Mukoma, who released a punch that she dodged.

Cars honked, but the two continued to struggle; weaving in and out of the road center, as if they owned the road. Although he was angry, I could still see a softness in Mukoma; he was trying to avoid beating up his wife. The wife, on the other hand, was raging still, ready to throw a punch, unrelenting as she continued to walk towards where her husband didn’t want her to go. We all didn’t want to be out here, to be in this drama strangers in passing vehicles saw. I could imagine people laughing at us, calling us names.

I drew closer to the fighters. Just as I arrived, she managed to push Mukoma hard enough that he slipped and fell in the tall grass by the road. But soon he sprung up and chased after her. He pulled her to the side of the road and they continued to struggle, ignoring our pleading.

Shortly, we reached Jakove’s house, and as if he had been expecting us, he ran out and told them to stop acting like fools. Although they continued to grumble and curse, they listened as Jakove lectured them on the importance getting along.

The wife tilted her head and said, addressing Jakove, “So this is what you told me was a real gentleman? What a waste of time.”

Jakove shook his head and said, “I did my job; the rest is up to you two.”

“What are they talking about?” Maiguru MaMoyo asked me.

“I have no idea,” I said. I knew, but Maiguru MaMoyo was not supposed to know these details.

The new wife stood up and, while pointing between Mukoma’s legs, said, “I will chop it off one day.” Then she marched off without turning.

“Let her go,” Jakove said. “You know the anger of a pregnant woman;

she will be fine.”

Indeed, when we arrived at home that night, she was sound asleep.

I returned with the cab and found them standing on the side of the street, Five Avenue. Jakove stood in the light, while Mukoma hid in the shadow of a hedge, which made sense. He couldn't risk being seen by someone who knew his current wife; and the spot they stood wasn't very far from our home.

I jumped out to open room for Mukoma in the front seat, but Jakove said, “He gets to sit in the back where there is more room. I will sit with him. You sit there and direct the driver.”

“Gomo or Parirenyatwa?” I asked, looking at Mukoma.

“Gomo, of course. Don't act like you haven't gone to Emergency,” he said, and I sat there thinking, “I'm not the one with a crazy whore.” But such thoughts would never see the light of day as spoken words, so, looking at the driver, I said, “Gomo, muchairi.”

The driver said, “Who is sick?”

“Just drive,” shouted Jakove, as he sat in the back. “That's your job, right?”

“I also have to know why I'm taking people to hospitals.”

“And those people don't pay you to drive?” said Jakove, breathing heavily.

“Not if they die on the way,” said the driver.

“Just take us to Gomo, please,” I said. “It's nothing big.”

The Emergency Room was crowded, but what I didn't know was how long it would take Mukoma to be seen by a doctor. Jakove shook his head and said, “I don't see anyone being helped soon here.” He was right; this was the kind of waiting in which you needed to come prepared to stay overnight, and part of the following day without being seen. I had not brought a book to read, and I had lost my notebook in the scuffle, so the waiting would be tortuous.

We waited for while with Mukoma, hoping that perhaps the line would move some, but it didn't. It was as if all these injured people here had their hope in just sitting with others in the same predicament, as if that the basis of their treatment. I wouldn't even think of coming to this place even if I got injured badly. No way I would subject myself to wait and wait, with no idea of when I would be checked in.

Around one-thirty in the morning, Jakove suggested that we leave Mukoma and plan to come back after work, if needed in the evening. Mukoma was agreeable, but he warned me against saying too much when I got home. I wanted to know what I was allowed to say, out of everything that had happened. He shook his head, as if to show disappointment on my not knowing what to say. But then he looked at Jakove, to indicate to me that if I needed assistance he was there to

help. Of course, I was going to lie to Mai Tari, his wife.

As we left the hospital, Jakove said, "Think like a man." He paused, as if he wanted to make sure no one heard us. "It was a dog. If she insists on finding out more, come up with more lies. You're educated, man."

"I'm educated enough to know that lying always will not get us anywhere."

"But is this the first time you have lied for your brother?"

"Could it be possible that, perhaps, I'm tired of lying?"

"You can be tired all you want, but that doesn't mean that you should stop. We all lie."

Usually, I would have been gratified by his explanation, and would have stiffened up to face a wife whose husband expected me to lie, but as we climbed into an empty taxi, I found myself hating not only the idea of husbands lying to wives, but also of wives who pretended they didn't know their husbands lied.

Emmanuel Sigauke grew up in Zimbabwe where he started writing at the age of thirteen. He has resided in California for more than sixteen years. There he teaches college English and is active in the Sacramento literary scene. His work has appeared in different anthologies. He is the co-editor of the annual fiction anthology, *African Roar* and is also the founding editor of *Munyori Literary Journal*.

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