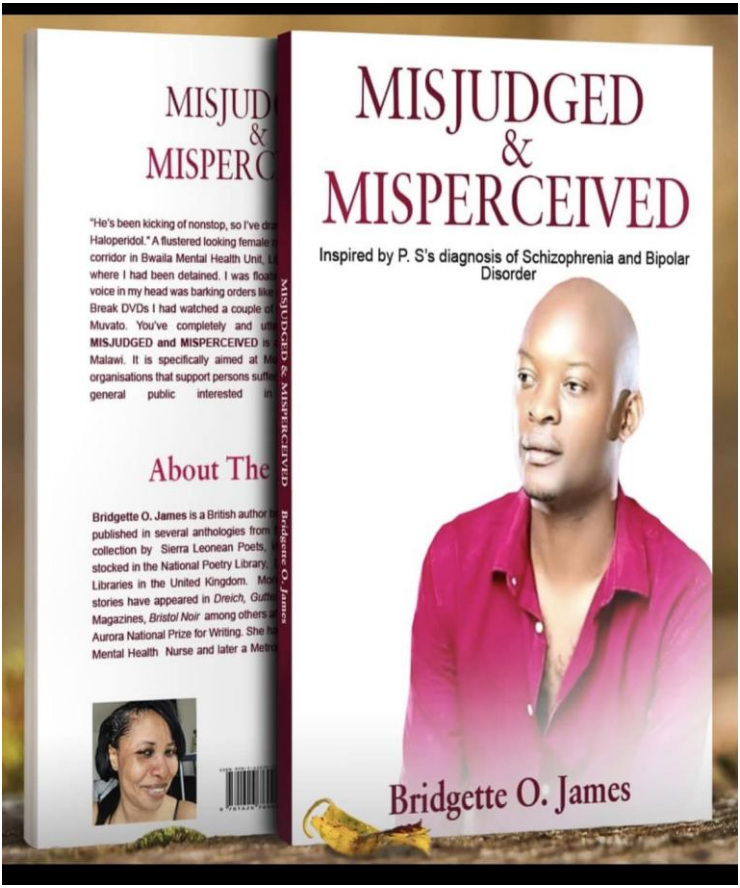
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&
MISPERCEIVED
Inspired by P. S's diagnosis of Schizophrenia and Bipolar Disorder
Bridgette O. James
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Bridgette O. James
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Bridgette O. James is a British author
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Inspired by P. S's diagnoses of Schizophrenia and Bipolar Disorder.

Bee James

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DISCLAIMER

Opinions expressed by the authors about Health Care Facilities in Malawi are subjective and solely theirs. No affiliation is held with any political parties and the book aims to normalise perceptions about people with serious mental disorders. Consent was given by the unnamed patient and his guardian to incorporate actual events with the aim of fostering the drive to normalise mental health conditions in his home country.

Having Schizophrenia does not automatically make you weird or dangerous and most misconceptions in African society are borne out of ignorance.

Acknowledgements

The writer wishes to thank the unnamed patient for bravely telling his story and keeping all Zoom appointments so as to facilitate the smooth running of the project.

A special thank you goes out to his uncle for providing the gentleman with bed and board and the amenities to be able to access the internet to speak with the writer.

Additionally, putting the book together would have been impossible without perusing the research available online which was painstakingly conducted by Mental Health Practitioners on the ground in Malawi.

Foreword

Childhood Schizophrenia and a word about Mental Health.

There is a dearth of knowledge of the magnitude of psychiatric disorders in sub-Saharan Africa and in Malawi, in particular, due to a lack of robust research. The situation is even worse for childhood psychiatric disorders like schizophrenia. A community study done on the collective prevalence of common mental disorders among children and adolescents in the commercial city of Blantyre found a prevalence of about 7%. Studies indicate that childhood-onset schizophrenia (COS) is rare, affecting about 0.4% children globally. However, this may not be a true reflection because in clinical practice, even in research, the process of diagnosing COS is characterised by challenges because its symptoms can be confusing with other common childhood mental and developmental disorders like Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD).

Treatment of COS follows the same biopsychosocial model as in all mental health disorders to ensure that there is a holistic care. Biologically or medically, the main treatment line is the use of medications called anti-psychotics. Psychologically, there are different interventions which aim at challenging negative thoughts, increasing self-confidence, preventing harm, controlling unwanted behaviours associated with the condition like aggression, agitation, and social withdrawal. The common psychological approach used in schizophrenia is called Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT).

Malawians' impressions or opinions about mental health until recently, have been negative. These perceptions are among other things, influenced by culture and most importantly, the history of the practice of mental health in Malawi. Historically, mental health practice in Malawi originated at the **Zomba Maximum Prison** where a wing called **Zomba Lunatic Asylum** was established to take care of prisoners who were seen to have developed psychiatric conditions. Psychiatric disorders like schizophrenia were thus, perceived as diseases of prisoners and outcasts of society. Furthermore, culturally, those suffering from mental disorders were thought to be demon-possessed and thus, were ill-treated and discriminated against. Given that Malawians, especially those in the rural communities,

associate mental disorders with spirituality, this affects their health-seeking behaviour and pathway to care.

To make provision for the care of persons with mental disorders like schizophrenia, Malawi has legislation in the form of an Act called the **Malawi Mental Treatment Act**. Unfortunately, the Act is way too old as it was enacted in 1959 and got amended in 1968. The implication of having an old Act like this is that some provisions may not resonate well with the way of life in recent times for example, as of 2023, suicide was a criminal offence and any person found to have attempted suicide could be prosecuted. This is contrary to current international practice where suicide is no longer a criminal offence. The good news is that there are plans to replace the archaic legislation with a new one and this process has been initiated with the development of a new **Mental Health Policy (2021).** However, the process has been too slow because, this new policy, replaces another policy of 2000-04, which failed to see the enactment of a new **Mental Health Act**.

Dr. Precious Makiyi
Child and Adolescent Mental Health Specialist
MSc CAMH, MBBS
Malawi, April 2023.

Contents

Preface

Misjudged and Misperceived is an explosive nonfiction story based on the traumatic experiences of a 27-year-old anonymous gentleman, using the pseudonym Mavuto, who was diagnosed with Early Onset Schizophrenia aged fifteen. Though his identity is hidden, the plot contains real life occurrences used as the lens through which the writer who studied Mental Health Nursing at Greenwich University, London in 1999, examines factors that prevented early intervention and delayed Mavuto's diagnosis, purporting the argument early intervention *could* have improved Mavuto's quality of life. The intriguing narrative unravels a shocking tale about superstitious beliefs in witchcraft, a lack of education about mental illnesses and a disruptive childhood.

Mavuto as the main protagonist, is not without his flaws and tells his story in the first-person narrative through recorded Zoom interviews, emails, WhatsApp conversations and text messages with Bridgette James after meeting her online on her Facebook platform, **Ella's Home of Creative Writing**, when he was

longlisted in a regional writing competition, about the alcohol addiction which precipitated his illness.

Before a judgemental conclusion is made that alcohol use induced a schizoaffective disorder, the story reveals a family history of mental disorders with a jaw-dropping revelation about Mavuto's close relatives' mental health issues. The narrative aims to debunk popular myths and clarify misconceptions in sub-Saharan Africa about people living with serious mental health conditions such as Bipolar Disorder and Schizophrenia. The reader is invited to connect the dots between undiagnosed neurological conditions, lifestyle factors, socioeconomic deprivation, and poor mental health in sub-Saharan Africa and so (mis) perceptions of the causative factors of lifelong mental disorders are challenged.

The plot, threaded by Mavuto's quest to explore contributory factors to his diagnoses, ends with a celebration of his achievements, despite the long-term prognosis of Schizophrenia. We admire his resourcefulness, humanity, and resilience to remain treatment compliant, in spite of the challenges encountered, acquiring prescribed medication in his country at times. Overall, we are left in awe of how skilfully he utilises his coping

mechanism: creative writing to combat the stigma of a mental disability.

The author of Misjudged and Misperceived, Bridgette James is a British writer born in Sierra Leone. She has been published in several anthologies from 1995 to date. Her 2022 collection by Sierra Leoneans Poets, **What the Seashell Said to Me**, is available in the National Poetry Library, London and held in Legal Deposit Libraires in the UK. More recently, her poems and short stories have appeared in **Dreich, Gutter, the Fib Review; Wildfire Words** Magazines, **Bristol Noir** among others and she was longlisted for the 2022 **Aurora National Prize for Writing**. She is a graduate in English Literature, Mental Health Nursing, Social Policy, and Criminology. She has studied at various universities in the United Kingdom/UK, including University of Surrey, Greenwich University and The Open University. She has worked as an NHS Registered Mental Health Nurse and more recently, a Metropolitan Police Special Constable. She lives in England with her son.

Chapter One

EVERY PATIENT HAS A BACKSTORY

"What precipitated your mental illness?"
The bespectacled, lanky Psychiatrist inquired, leaning back in his wooden armchair, staring unblinkingly at my expressionless face as I sat opposite him on the other side of the oblong desk in the consulting room at Neno District Hospital on Wednesday 8 March 2023. It was the first time in my twenty-seven years of life I had been asked to explore contributory factors to my diagnoses of Bipolar Disorder and Childhood Schizophrenia.
He raised his eyebrows in a questioning stare.
"Never thought about it Mavuto?"
Tap, tap, tap, tap, tap, tap.

His thin fingers hit the keypad of his brand-new *Partners in Health* assigned laptop as he typed up the notes from my clinical review without

looking down, surveying me with an unwavering look.
"I had never thought about it!" A moment of pensive reflection.

Walking the 1.5 mile back to my Uncle Chifundo's house in Boma, Neno, I kept mauling over the duty psychiatrist's Dr Buteo's questions. My thoughts still ruminating, I lay back on the springy mattress on my wooden double bed, fish out my Techno smartphone from the side pocket of my jeans and googled *preceptory factors Schizophrenia*.

A list of articles came up, clouding the entire phone screen with medical jargon I could not decipher. One italicised heading was legible enough to resonate with me: *disruptive childhood and early onset of Schizophrenia*. I suddenly realised the impact of my backstory on how my life had panned out as I began to itemize what was amiss from early childhood. Any depiction of my earliest memories will revolve around episodes in which my mother was present. I remember how I used to have arguments that culminated in loud outbursts with her from as early as 2005.

"We're always moving from pillar to post."

I can recall arguing in an aggressive tone of voice in Chichewa with my mum. She had just disclosed over a bowl of *Nsima* that she had been offered an adult nursing role elsewhere in Lilongwe having stepped down from the one she had at the unit in Likuni Hospital, the place she had worked at from around 1999 to 2005. I had interjected with:
"I really want to stay in *here* this time," heatedly.
"I've made friends at *Chiyambi* Private School."
I emphasized the adverb *here* to reiterate my point. I was barely ten and in the last year of primary school but had thrown persistent tantrums well past the age of two. I was sitting at my usual spot eating, which was the rectangular wooden dining table, a luxurious item of furniture considering the standard of living in our built-up area of Lilongwe in 2005.

My mum, standing beside me at the table had kept her head lowered; she knew how to win an argument with me and was putting into practise her *silence is golden* principle.
"You'll make new ones Mavuto."
She coaxed softly after about ten minutes of silence, pouring another generous amount of *Nsima* into the yellow plastic bowl in front of me, all the while avoiding my angry stare. She sighed, shook her head in exasperation and headed off towards the arched doorway leading to our miniscule kitchen. I could

still overhear her mumbling crossly above the noise of tap water running.

My mum did not splash out on western clothing as she used to have her hair plaited by a hairdresser friend of hers and wear affordable, traditional clothes so all she was trying desperately to do was earn a few more Kwachas to buy essentials commodities like the milk she had poured to the brim into my porridge bowl. It was obvious from her countenance she was displeased at my audacity to even complain about relocating to yet another part of Lilongwe.

"More milk?"

She called out from the kitchen; I could see her arms moving in a ferocious manner as she rubbed the metal scouring pad over the saucepan, she had cooked the meal in, on the small electric cooker purchased the previous Christmas.

"Stop trying to change the topic mum." I shouted back.

I was not going to let a delicious bowl of milky porridge distract me from making an irrelevant point.

"I'm not my dear. Once we move to Salima to you'll love it there."

She carried on, back towards me; her tall, slender frame bent over the zinc kitchen sink.

She tried to dress up Salima, a district in the central region like a birthday present in order to cajole me into agreeing to move. My opinion was immaterial I thought unhappily, drifting off into a daydream as I turned my head towards the other direction to watch my half-sisters Ulemu and Chimwemwe skipping on the veranda, which was overlooked by gigantic green trees with protruding branches stretching like enormous arms over the roof of our bungalow. I was observing them through our off-white net curtains that were not long enough to cover the entire length of the window frames of the wide-open window of our tiny living room; we lived in one of the nursing quarters assigned to staff with multiple children.

There was a school friend of theirs visiting that afternoon, Dalito, another Ngoni girl. It seemed to me back then their friend was mainly there to referee the game or help Chimwemwe - the youngest child in the blended family in 2005 - hold the other handle while Ulemu jumped rhythmically, over the thin vinyl wire with the skill of an acrobat. Ulemu, born in 2001 was a force to reckon with. I can remember her shouting instructions as they played about how to turn the rope, so it did not entrap her skinny legs. Indoors I let the argument with my

mum die a death as the last thing I wanted was for her to relay the gore details to my stepdad on his return home from work driving for his employers.

One constant feature in my backstory is how many times the word, *moving* comes up. I was born in Songani, Zomba but had spent most of my childhood in dense rural villages in Lilongwe by 2008 before moving back to built-up residential areas. I remember living in a tranquil, picturesque farmland as well, all the while my mother Annie strove hard to afford a lifestyle for us on her meagre Nursing wage. My fallouts with her were initially over how frequently she changed employers. I could not distinguish between whether she got dismissed from her workplace or left for greener pastures out of her own accord. I was too young to tell.

Before my diagnosis I was the carefree Ngoni lad who played hopscotch with my best mate Aubrey whom I had known all my life since primary school days in Lilongwe. We pranked teachers and understood each other's body language. In class one day in 2006, I remember getting bored and gesticulating to Aubrey to get him to drop an object on the hard cement floor and startle the teacher. My twin from another mother, he felt my stare but glared at me probably because his intuition told him

I was going to start laughing at the Maths teacher's futile attempt at explaining how to solve the equation on the board. Aubrey had turned over a new leaf to mark a milestone: his tenth birthday and was going to start behaving in class. I chuckled as I thought about how impractical his resolution would be given, we were still bosom buddies.

The only hiatus in our friendship occurred during the years my family moved away to Salima district, Southern Malawi. Fortunately, we had returned in 2006; my stepdad was a driver for *Pinchard* Foundation and had been spotted driving his boss's car a Toyota Prados, with half-opened windows, to call attention to his family - squashed together on the backseat, while he artfully dodged potholes on the tarmacked roads in Lilongwe.

Word soon filtered back to Aubrey's family still living in their mud brick house with a thatched roof; we had reconnected after meeting by chance along the dirt road behind my family's new rented bungalow and remained almost inseparable from then onwards until I moved away again. Running along the stony road the locals used to access a lake that fed off the Sombani River in which almost all the children in my village swam in on sunny afternoons topless; the world seemed to have

everything to offer me. We were soon chatting about how we used to play tag in between diving under the shallow water and remerging breathless.
"Remember how I all-ways beat you at tag?"
Aubrey had boasted spitting out water from the lake he had swallowed in between syllables.

"Caught you; you're IT,"
Aubrey had shouted ferociously on the day he was now reliving when we were either eight or nine, tugging at my red shorts as we played *tag,* I vividly recalled. He had pushed over my slender frame good naturedly and I had fallen sideways into the slippery mud.
"You jumped on me when I wasn't paying attention."
In reminiscence, in the years that preceded my diagnosis I was quite an energetic little boy- unlike the drastic change now at twenty-seven after taking antipsychotics since the age of fifteen- I am overwhelmed by fatigue most days. Back then despite at aged eight being a tiny bit shorter than my best mate Aubrey, I had soon sprouted a couple of inches by age ten making us almost the same height; equally lively and verbose.

As we played in a carefree manner that day, I had bluffed, trying to dismiss Aubrey's win with the

excuse that he had caught me unawares before I began racing him again like a wild puppy around the muddy field while our other friends Dalitso and Sekani looked on, bemusedly.
"Mavuto is right behind you!" Yelled eight year old Dalitso whose favourite I obviously was back then, springing up and down in excitement the moment Aubrey, nicknamed the Malawian Cheetah speedily raced towards me again.

We relocated soon after that memorable day. Mum had set her eyes on a new horizon. My friendship with Aubrey cooled. To augment my distress, I had to change schools to one in our local area. There was a brief point in my childhood when I was also placed in the custody of my Uncle Chifundo in Area 18 Lilongwe and sent to an outstanding private school: Good Shepherd International School which is in Area 3. In hindsight my schooling was interrupted so many times over the years I struggle to accurately list all the institutions I had attended by the time I turned fifteen when my Schizophrenic symptoms manifested. Harvest Temple nursery, Chisamba Local Education Agency School, St John's Catholic Secondary School, Crazmatic High School, and the aforementioned Good Shepherd International High School were among public funded or private

institutions where I sat my bum on hard benches in order to gain an education, one of the mandatory requirements for school-age children in Malawi.

Once we even rented a single storey concrete house from a Yoa landlord and, in those days, I suppose I was quite lucky to have my own bedroom, albeit not much bigger than a match box with walls badly in need of a fresh coat of paint. Life was not a bed of roses; however, it was somehow chaotic; we changed addresses an excessive number of times and I briefly found myself once more in Likuni town in Lilongwe where my mother was born before moving back to another part of Lilongwe. I think that was during the period when mother was still friendly with Diana our maternal grandmother and wanted our grandma to help her raise us so my mum could do night shifts. I do not think my stepdad's driving job allowed him much needed family time. Either that or he was a Ngoni traditionalist who delegated babysitting roles to the women in our family.

To other people in our tribe and neighbours in the vicinity our family, was seen as middleclass. Mother's innate values meant as her first born she expected me to set a bright example, putting undue pressure on me. She had two sides to her personality

because she also fussed over me and was my main carer throughout my primary school days. I vaguely remember her cuddling me once and explaining how my biological father, Willard Singeh Phiri had abandoned us both when I was a toddler.

"Perhaps he did not love me, his first child enough to stay in the picture".
I had come to my own incorrect conclusion. In actual fact he had cheated with a Ngoni woman looking back now and unexpectedly married another lady no one knew about, an even younger girlfriend. It was around that time that a cantankerous gentleman, Zikomo, who smoked expensive cigarettes arrived on the scene, only to stay long enough to become a constant feature in our lives, dropping by and loitering for ages on the veranda until after sunset to "discuss the news on *Times Radio Station* with my mum."

I was too naive to comprehend why he had to come over so often to discuss the news headlines until the term "stepdad" was introduced into my vocabulary by garrulous aunt, Melissa, mum's friend from church.
"If your mum marries him in church, you might have to adopt his surname; he'll be your stepdad."

Was her emphatic pronouncement one day while trekking the 2 kilometre walk home from primary; *Chiyambi* Private School, after she had picked me up, shaking her head vigorously so the pigtail into which her neat cornrows were tied bounced too. She had obviously overheard one of my mum's brothers, uncle Chifundo and mother gossiping about her new relationship.

My mother had a maternal instinct and had wanted children. So, had given birth to my two stepsisters Ulemu and Chimwemwe by her second husband, Zikomo. I was astonished to learn about the existence of other half sisters who I met in my early twenties. Tawona, Yankho and Tamalda lived miles away with my biological father Pa Phiri and only came into my life after mother died of a haemorrhagic stroke in 2016 in a Partners in Hope Hospital in Lilongwe; they turned up for the vigil. Apart from Ulemu and Chimwemwe my new stepbrothers Chiyembekezo and Mphatso were the only other significant members of our household, growing up. Funnily, I remember being described as the most argumentative one in the entire family, however.

"Definitely the most argumentative of all my children; he has a bit of a temper on him," the classic

phrase utilised by my mum Annie to introduce me to visitors.

Shy and fumbling for words was how I felt when put on the spot and was disappointed my family perceived me quite differently from whom I really was. I guess the inability to relay my true feelings to my relatives provides a plausible explanation why I was hesitant to open up to anyone in my close-knit family about hearing voices until I could no longer hide my psychosis. I did not even have the nerve to confide in my mum that a group of young lads playing *tag* in the field behind the kiosk where we once lived had been talking about *Kachasu*.

While some of the memories of my life are now faint, due to the trauma of a mental illness, oddly, I can remember incidents like these with photographic detail. Around age seven or eight I was playing in a massive field which was a hideout for all the boys in Linkangala between the ages of eight and thirteen. I remember talking with friends there one day and hearing gossip about another child, Onani having drunk *Kachasu* - a local beverage brewed from maize - and being seen falling over laughing, unstoppably.
"*Kachasu*."

I pondered in my mind how its effects might have caused Onani to fall over in fits of laughter. At the juncture I had not tried it yet and having been strictly warned off alcohol by my mother the stalwart, Annie Mwale, after our stepdad used to come home slurring and cussing at President Mutharika in foul-mouthed expletives, I did not fathom how I would ever consider touching the noxious substance.

"I don't ever want to hear you've been drinking when you grow up. I did not raise a drunkard."

Her words had rung in my ears like a symptom of tinnitus. Before my mother's demise at the tender age of forty-seven, she fervently tried to instil good ethics in me and reiterated the importance of her Christian faith. Church was a regular occurrence on Sundays. Paradoxically, her faith in the Presbyterian God coexisted with her faith in the ability of witch doctors to perceive what was happening in the spiritual realm. My two siblings and I would trot the 1-kilometre distance to a red brick building with a thatched roof in our new part of Lilongwe in 2006, file in through the narrow wooden door -it served as both the entrance and the exit – to pray and sing English hymns at mum's insistence. In times of crisis such as when my behaviour worsened, she would consult a witch

doctor, a Malawian traditional healer to establish the root cause of her misfortune. Nonetheless, her devout Christian beliefs and the stern house rules my stepdad introduced were other reasons I was frightened to disclose anything to my mum!

In fact, very soon after their marriage my least favourite member of my blended family became my stepdad, Zikomo whose mere presence in our mediocre home having relocated again filled me with fear and trepidation. Even with Aunt Melissa's longwinded explanation I could never understand why my mother had remarried or furthermore, chosen to marry a stocky, bearded fellow whom I have always considered an unnecessary adjunct to our family. I must hasten to stress that I got on like a house on fire with his children; the ones that often stayed over on unwelcomed visits in our three-bedroom bungalow though, soon after he and my mother tied the knot in Church. Our Presbyterian Church of Central Africa in the early 2000s used to be another small, grim looking, multipurpose building serving as a venue for christenings, weddings, jumble sales and my mother's surprise wedding in 2000.

Zikomo's baggage did not only consist of my stepbrothers, he had produced in quick succession

after a few years of marriage to his ex-wife, Asante - a *Tumbaka* woman whom I never met- but his temper that he sneaked in into our home. In my innocence I could only picture Asante through the expletives Mr Zikomo Nkhoma described her with. I was pretty sure even in those early years she was not as bad as he tried to portray her, so as to prevent my mum getting jealous.

In hindsight fear of my stepdad might be another reason I have never spoken to any of my siblings, step, or half about the day in class when I heard our dead grandfather instructing me to get up and walk out of school. I could never find the right words to articulate my experiences, petrified word might get back to my stepdad.

"Mavuto is a mouse; he's always hiding away in corners."

He used to say mockingly on the few occasions I sat out with the family for lunch on the veranda in our bungalow in western Lilongwe surrounded by statuesque Orchid trees and flamboyant hibiscuses.

"Come out of your room a bit more; fresh air is good for you."

Usually uttered in the most pretentious manner as if my stepdad, Zikomo gave two hoots about how I fared. His separation from mum years later after an epic argument left me breathing a sigh of relief.

To make matters worse, his effect lingered long after his exit from our lives until the onset of puberty in 2010, resulting in the self-conscious bearded teenager I had morphed into increasingly isolating myself from family members, emerging from my bedroom only to sneak out of the front door to bars, locally known as *shebeens* to drink with my peers. The opinion they held differed from how I was seen by other children; they considered me boisterous and outgoing.

I remember another period in life, was I eight or nine? A good few warm days were spent outdoors frolicking in the hot sunshine, playing tag with some other boys, avoiding my stepfather. I was skinny with short, curly hair, indistinguishable from other boys from the Ngoni tribe in my village. Incidentally, the Ngoni people in Southern Africa are the descendants of the indomitable Zulu warriors and I have always perceived myself as strong and courageous. Little did I know I would spend most of my teenage years battling an organic mental illness which would test my courage and strength of character right to the base of my inherited Deoxyribonucleic acid.

Prior to receiving an explanation about my illness, I constantly berated my mum for reasons why my temperament was so glaringly different from everyone else's in my immediate family. I had a nagging feeling there was more to my backstory than my mum was telling me. While kudos should be given to her for her marathon efforts in ensuring we had a good quality of life, ate a meal every day and attended school in clean cotton uniform, she was one of those overprotective parents who in a bid to shield me offered no explanation whatsoever for why I had so many emotional outbursts as a child. She merely branded them, "childish tantrums" and dismissed any signs of a mental illness which were slowly emerging perhaps hoping I would outgrow them. It might sound a bit weird but from as early as age ten or eleven I felt deep within myself there was something going on in my head and that my behaviour could be attributed to an undiagnosed cause.

In retrospect I might have been suffering from an undiagnosed neurological disorder such as Autism Spectrum Disorder, Aspergers Syndrome or even Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder/ADHD. During my early childhood in Lilongwe, I was never diagnosed with any neurological disorders, or taken for a psychological

evaluation by my mother, a qualified nurse. She always reported to my uncles how I behaved differently from my brothers and sisters. I myself have recollections of picking up fragile objects such as ceramic plates, throwing them around our modest home, breaking them as they smashed against interior walls.

One scorching afternoon, a few months after my twelfth birthday I can recall with precision my mother summoning me while I was playing exuberantly outside in our compound in Likoni with some other children around my age in the area where we then lived. She motioned to the space on the ground beside her indicating that I should sit down.

"Come help me cut up some cow meat," she muttered, in a soft tone of voice.

My mum was generally soft spoken and quite docile before the emergence of my stepfather in our lives and could not assemble the jigsaw pieces to figure how her biological son could be so boisterous. I sat down head palpitating; remaining almost immobile in the eerie silence which ensued, waiting to hear what she had to say. I was scared and I think I must have been trying to process in my mind, why she had beckoned to me, interrupting my game of

hopscotch. I knew my mother like the back of my hand. I could sense something was troubling her.

After what seemed like an eternity, she began explaining in her mother tongue how I was about to be told a secret. I nodded my head and swallowed, nerves making the lump in my throat feel like a plum was stuck inside my vocal chords.

"My son I want you to listen to me intently," she said in Chichewa.

I've been to see a witch doctor," she added, her dark brown eyes glued to my face in a worrying stare.

"He's disclosed something shocking."

My mum was rocking back and forth in pent-up anger at this point.

"He's only gone and revealed that my mum Diana, your grandmother is a WITCH; and all the hardship I've faced raising you is her *bloody* fault."

My mouth fell open in amazement. Besides my mother, my beloved Nan Diana Kamanga was the sweetest Ngoni lady I knew. Incredible how a witch doctor could portray her as a witch; the mere thought was bizarre even to me a child!

Chapter Two

"HAVE SOME KACHASU."

Several weeks after her revelation had left me gobsmacked, my mum at my insistence reluctantly asked my stepdad who was still in the picture, to drive us in his employer's recently acquired Hilux car to Area 21: Chilinde township in Lilongwe to visit my grandma. I wanted to look my Nan Diana squarely in the eye and see for myself how she could be a witch. As the car swerved around the bend on the bumpy hilltop road, leading to her unpaved driveway I sat on the padded backseat next to Ulemu and Chimwemwe pondering over how I would muster up the courage to broach the subject with my grandmother. I lacked the tenacity and strength of character to ask her the million-dollar question: "Why would *you* inflict a curse on me and make me *row* with my mother, *your* own flesh and blood?"

"There it is, there it is".

Chimwemwe squealed in delight. Grandma's single storey cement house with a corrugated iron roof was clearly visible through the windscreen of my stepdad's car. Flinging the door wide open my siblings and I disembarked *en masse,* and I ran excitedly behind Ulemu up the dirt path that served as a makeshift driveway while my parents took their time getting out of the car.

Merely setting eyes on my petite grandmother, sitting in her old rocking chair, grey roots peeping from underneath her head scarf filled me with warmth. The thought of her bewitching anyone was inconceivable. My sisters and I rushed up to give her a hug.

Nan Diana typically had boiled sweets in a glass jar on her white centre table or a saucepan of freshly cooked *Nsima* made with succulent meat, a variety of ground vegetables and tasty kidney beans. She was rich enough to own a refrigerator so a large bottle of Thobwa had already been poured in a decorated tumbler in readiness for my stepdad, Zikomo. I can still visualize the look of thunder on my mother, Annie's face when she plunged through the door, my stepfather who lived in her shadow, in tow, looking a bit tensed.

"Don't eat any food she offers you until she has explained why Pa Maseko had a vision and saw her floating in another realm."

Were the shocking words my mother uttered, anger clouding her solemn face and darkening her eyes.

"The Ngoni witch doctors are never wrong."

My mum continued venting, standing arms akimbo, her knee-length floral traditional dress skimming her thighs, she was that tall! Torn by what the sorcerer had said, mother's eyes were now welling up with tears, her stare fixed on my Nan's face suspiciously. My grandmother was taken aback by the accusations. I think she was going to try to defend herself, protesting her innocence and swearing to the Lord Jesus, but my mother interjected before she could finish her sentence.

"I spent good money for Maseko to *see* who was casting spells on us…look how…look how angry Mavuto gets over nothing."

My mum was working herself up into frenzy relaying the witch doctor's revelations. Listening to her while chewing on a mouthful of *Nsima*, I was baffled. Gut-wrenching how mother could get so frustrated trying to prove a point based on a stranger's fables. However, the belief in elderly women being witches is embedded in Malawian

traditions and looking back my doting Nan may have just the witch doctor's scapegoat.

The remainder of the visit was quite awkward, and I anticipated the rift between my grandmother and my mum started after that incident. Among the Mwale children my mother and my Nan had the most fractious relationship. The majority of my mother's family already considered us to be the poorest and here was my parent unbelievably making an unfavourable situation worse by declaring her own flesh and blood was in fact a witch. I suppose my enduring challenging behaviour which was starting to raise concern had to be attributed to a curse as was typical in some traditional sectors of Malawi. I still had bouts of anger over trivial issues like being asked to help out with house chores and a superstitious mind might have easily attributed that to an unnatural phenomenon rather than a neurological cause.

My mother's belief in the power of witch doctors marred our relationships with several of our relatives. It may have contributed to her separation from my stepfather in 2003; either that or he was just a *bad* man; I have been relayed several conflicting stories why my stepdad up sticks and left when I as a teenager needed a male authoritarian figure in life

the most, I have thought from day one: "there was a secret they were not telling us the kids, to protect us."

"I'm on my own again."
My mother sounded inconsolable in a conversation with her older brother Chifundo Godwe. It was Christmas 2003 and Uncle Chifundo had commuted in his 1996 Mazda all the way from the centre of Lilongwe with my cousins Nzeru who was eleven and his only daughter, Mayiso, nine, to Likuni to hand-deliver Christmas presents for his nieces and nephews. Ingrained in us Ngonis is the practise of extended families gathering at a relative's house on special occasions. My mother's other brothers, Uncles Harrison, Dennis, and Solomon were going to join us on New Year's Day at my Nan's house in Lilongwe. Incidentally, my mum had made peace with my grandmother Diana again.

Christmas 2003 was not dissimilar to other festive celebrations; we had a home cooked meal consisting of *Mkhwami* a dish made of de-veined pumpkin leaves chopped into miniscule portions; my mother Annie's speciality, *mandasi* a delicacy akin to doughnuts and soft drinks brewed in Malawi which my sisters, stepbrothers and I would sip nosily through multi-coloured straws my parents

bought in the shops up in the urban areas. What ruined our festivities was the unpredictable departure of Mr Zikomo Nkhoma my stepfather following his break-up with my mother.

My uncle had scarcely entered our sparsely decorated living room when my mother threw her arms up in the air and began to holler.

"Aye aye..." My mum was whacking her chest with the palm of her right hand.

Her bosom was heaving up and down with the ferociousness of her sighs. In between her wailing her brother was trying to decipher why his brother-in-law had left her.

"He's ruined my life."

Uncle nodded wordlessly; it was hard to get a word in edgeways when my mother was off on a rant. As my mum wailed, tapping her head with either palm, hinting how Zikomo branded her quarrelsome and she had long been fed up with his drinking, I eavesdropped on their conversation scuffing my face with Christmas food and reminiscing about the late-night rows between mum and my stepdad I used to hear through the thin walls of our rented properties.

"Might peace and serenity return now?" I wondered.

My stepfather's untimely exit coincided with the period around 2003 or 2004 when I began to distance myself from my mother, isolating in my bedroom and confiding in my schoolmates a bit more. I changed facially during puberty in addition to becoming more secretive and introverted. A stubborn moustache grew as if fertilized. My jawline was more prominent, my voice deepened, and I was suddenly taller than all my playmates. An interest in pretty, curvaceous girls in the village where I lived surpassed the need to confide in mum that I had been saving up my allowance to buy *Kachasu*.

The frequent change of educational institutions continued all the way up to my fifteenth year on earth; in early 2007, I was living in a residential part in Thyolo District trying my utmost to pass tests by attending lessons in order to proceed to the final year in secondary. My mother Annie had found another job in Likuni Hospital, and I was sent parking off to St John's Catholic boarding school in area 36 Lilongwe. My tenure there was brief; I remember not long after being shown around the premises of St John's I was standing in the assembly hall in another school: Berelin Private Secondary in Thyolo, a form three pupil. A memorable point in my life was my tenure at this School from 2007 to 2009; not because of the bevy of luscious girls for

instance Alinafe, (arguably the most stunningly beautiful Ngoni girl I had ever set eyes on up until then), quite the opposite. Berelin school is instead underlined in red as I jot down notes for this manuscript as the first place where I went off the rails.

Renowned for exquisite girls, or to be more precise puberty hormones had heightened my interest in the opposite sex and female schoolmates seemed exquisitely beautiful. I met my first girlfriend on their premises. I noticed Alinafe who later stole my heart aged fourteen, when I borrowed her rubber one day during an Art lesson.

"You can't draw without an eraser new boy."

She had stated bemused. She had been observing me scrubbing out a 3D image of the Thyolo landscape with the palm of my hand.

"New boy, hey" I liked my nickname. To her credit, I had not long been at that school anyway.

"What's your name new student?"

One up from new boy. She oozed sarcasm and respect. I turned sideways to look at her properly and it was the eureka moment; as I basked in the aura of her chocolate brown skin, high cheek bones and huge eyes, shrouded by, long eye lashes I felt butterflies in my stomach. She caught me staring-

Malawian girls have a sixth sense- she blushed; her cheeks seemed rosier.
"Mavuto." I replied mesmerised.

Indeed, the first semblance of romance emanated from our first meeting. Our relationship consisted of long conversations about other pupils and the only physical contact was a peek on her cheek under a large tree behind an old structure the teachers called their staff room. It was the only place we could have privacy. Our romance soon fiddled out. I think Alinafe must have realised she as out of my league or was psychic and could foretell I would soon be inflicted with a lifelong mental illness and was definitely not boyfriend material back then.

I had never heard about Thyolo district, north of the Shire River in southern Malawi before my family had upped sticks once more and relocated there. Mother had announced she had been offered the highest paying job in her lifetime in the locality.
"At their renowned Hospital," to quote her verbatim.
Baffling as I thought her job years before then at Mua Mission Hospital Dedza, was the most lucrative one she apparently, had, had. All I remember was that I seemed to have arrived home from school in April 2007, to find her sorting out my belongings in

readiness for the moving truck she had spent hundreds of Kwachas to hire to transport me to Berelin Secondary in Thyolo from Lilongwe. I did not have that many worldly possessions, though again there was a small box room in the back of our rented bungalow I could claim as mine whereas the girls shared the second of the three rooms. I was going to a distant village on my own, off the beaten track; my mum and siblings would be relocating to a remote part in Salima.

In my country, parents dispatching children off to faraway places to further their education is a common occurrence. The controversial subject of the likely contribution of my unstable childhood to the early onset of my illness has never been debated with my relatives. I have read how a disruptive childhood has an adverse effect on one's mental health. My testimony will underscore that the absence of my parents in my life while I stayed in boarding school left me without much needed parental guidance. A considerable period of my teenage years was spent in the confines of hostels in numerous Schools. My younger sisters were boarders as well. In 2008 mum was now living at yet another location: Mikute village in Salima district so she could do shifts and not have a nagging teenager to worry about; in her absence I was dipping into my

pocket money and experimenting with *Kachasu*, *Ntonjani, Chibuku* and *Chikokeyani*, locally brewed Beers in Thyolo.

I loathed my new school with the passion Romeo had for Juliet. Some days I would cry incessantly wishing I would be sent back home. I pretended to have stomach ache one Thursday. The Principal Mr Langasi, face as sour as a plum, released me temporarily so I could go back home to mum in Salima, but she had to work, and I was soon dispatched back with hugs and kisses the same week. I am in no way, shape or form trying to make excuses for why I began using alcohol or visiting *Kachasu shebeens* with my pocket money. I acknowledge the contribution of substance misuse to the exacerbation of my mental disorder. In hindsight I am looking for plausible reasons why I took solace in Beers and spirits. In laying the premises for a depiction of an alcohol-dependent teenager, I feel one must attribute some blame to the absence of parents in my day-to-day life, the easy availability of *Kachusu* in rural areas in Malawi and the commonly held belief that drinking it is cool.

"Dormitory number seven is at the far end of the corridor."

I had disembarked from the lorry Mum had hired to move my stuff to Berelin Private School in Thyolo. An officious if scruffy looking Boarding Home Head explained, thighs and buttocks wobbling in front of me as he led the way down the narrow walkway between the archaic buildings in my newest school. On his right he indicated were the classrooms; the three hostels were to his left. His broad shoulders obstructed my view of the end of the path he was pointing at while his dark suit looked like he had not ironed it; probably in the rush to make it to school on time for the 07:30 AM start. Right from that very moment I felt a feeling of foreboding creeping over me. I knew I was not going to like my new school. The intuition intensified upon now meeting Emmanuel Langesi the principal who doubled up as the house master in charge of the wellbeing and pastoral care of the unruly boys in Berelin Secondary.

"Yours is *Emirate* Hostel, the huge building with the brown door and chrome handle."
Precise instructions given without the hint of a smile as we veered off the paved walkway unto the verge rusted by the hot Malawian sun. The untidy looking Head pushed a rusty key into my outstretched hand, pausing opposite what appeared more like a derelict colonial structure erected in the 1980s than a large,

welcoming hostel shared by thirty or more students. I was flabbergasted. "What was my mother thinking?"

I turned the key in the stiff lock and found myself in an open-plan living area; I had caught another male student by surprise. He pulled up his trousers in annoyance. He was changing out of his school Physical Education tunic in the corner by his bed facing the door. His cold stare penetrated my cerebellum.

"Knock." He hissed with the venom of an African cobra.

"Sorry."

Fumbling for an excuse, I timidly edged forward towards the only empty bed in the opposite end of the cluttered room a few yards from *the startled boy*, wedging my way between the scattered items of clothing and books on the floor. The atmosphere stank of perspiration. Teenage boys filled up every nook and cranny in the stuffy room. I had never seen so many students in one dormitory in my life! "How was I going to fit in?" Not to mention the scathing look that signalled the wrath of the angry lad on my back eyeing me up suspiciously as I made my way to my bed space, awkwardly pulling the weather-beaten leather suitcase mum had lent me, trying

hard to avoid pulling the stuff on the cement floor along with the swivelling wheels.

"What's in there? Designer clothes?" He hissed.

I knew better than to allow him to cajole me into having a spat on my first day there.

"Just pairs of trousers, school uniform and some provisions." My reply was laced with fake charm to appease him. "I'm Mavuto Pemphero Phiri. Who're you please?"

Added, after careful consideration, hoping it might change his first impressions of me.

"Pompey the Great?" He sneered, roaring in forced laughter. "He's a celebrity guys. Berlin school has its first famous student." He looks around to see if his audience is listening.

"You won't need Gucci or Hugo Boss clothes here Pompey. Learn to knock and ask, 'Can I come in?' Before entering and you'd be fine." There was a chorus of laughter.

I soon got to know the chatterbox as the school bully, or rather by his real name, Mayeso as I settled into life in the lodging quarters of the village school. If the conduct of the students was disruptive by worse was the state of the school facilities. I had to self-consciously negotiate my way from the building we slept in, to the derelict outside latrines in a rundown red brick building with doors one

could not lock from inside. Embarrassed, I felt painfully aware the other boys would escort me with their inquisitive stares along the overgrown path to the smelly toilets whenever nature called. The unsecured doors left me constantly feeling worried someone might walk in on me hovering over the pit in the ground, school trousers around my ankles.

"Mr Langasi is never going to have those stinky cesspits he calls latrines refurbished."

Mayeso's little group of teenage followers who had roped me in too a few weeks after my arrival, were huddled together gossiping among themselves after the school day finished at 4.30 pm.

"They *weren't* stinky before a certain person joined us." Mayeso had accused.

"Maybe it's up to this individual to do something to force Mr Langasi's hand."

Mayeso continued speaking in codes; his fat legs dangling inches from the cement floor as he sat on his unmade bed, scoffing biscuits from his provisions his rich parents had dropped off the previous weekend. My heart skipped a beat. What was he suggesting? The group smirked mimicking Mayeso's gestures, sucking up to him as usual.

"Yeah, this school definitely has the worst latrines," piped in Festus Niyeranda, the skinniest in the

group and the most desperate to please the bully, Mayeso.

"Mr Langasi has been promising to build modern flushable toilets and fix the bolt on the f-ing doors for ages."

He was showing off by using a swear word to demonstrate his flagrant disregard for strict Berelin school rules -on paper, never enforced- forbidding profanity.

Coughing as he inhaled biscuit crumbs unintentionally, Mayeso sneered.

"New boy should give him a nice reminder by trashing them." He whacked his biscuit tin shut. I jumped, frightened, observing him from the sanctuary of my bed, several yards away from his. I knew full well this was an attempt to entice me into obeying his next instructions given as a veiled threat.

"Someone better come with me to kick the hinges of the wooden doors on the girls' latrines," a scathing look in my direction.

"Or perhaps drop pebbles down the pits. Mr Langasi cannot run a school without essential facilities. Not in Malawi."

Mayeso 's extensive knowledge of the laws of the land left us in awe of him. I was sweating and could feel drops of it oozing down the back of my leg unto

my crumpled bed covers. Here were the orders for me to tail along as his apprentice.

It was here I first cowered under peer pressure. Glancing in a surreptitious manner over his left shoulder towards my bed, Mayeso the true master of the Boarding home spat out:
"You Mavuto. You're coming with me later to break the water pipes. They're corroded anyway and the damn latrines should have been knocked down in the 1970s".

The humongous sign on the school notice board was handwritten and five or six students had gathered in front of the cracked see-through glass reading it.
"We can't use the latrines today; they were vandalised last night."
Sekani revealed. She was the most brilliant at English and pronounced 'vandalised' with a put-on English accent to show she knew the meaning of the verb. I crept up towards the group assembled on the narrow hallway and bent forward squinting as I tried to read the lines on the piece of white printer paper stuck to the board with a metal drawing pin.
"I heard the boys in *Emirate* Hostel threw stones down the pit and yanked off the latrine seats." Sakini

gossiped, clapping her hands for emphasis, "aye, trouble".
"Who would want to do *such* a thing?" Another girl demanded.
I backed away from the lively group. "Cat got your tongue?" I thought to myself.

Mr Langasi either had a premonition or a little snitch had reported the troublemakers. About a week after the incident, I found myself in the principal's stuffy office in the line-up of students including an obstinate Mayeso, he had paraded to be court martialled. I listened to his chastisement; hopelessness engulfing me. I was embarrassed and wondered how my mother would have reacted if she heard about my despicable conduct. Mr Langasi warned us he might expel "the whole bally lot of us," if there was a recurrence of vandalism. "Toilet facilities were essential." "Village schools in Malawi were already underfunded, private ones not excluded and here were we, destroying the facilities paid for by hardworking parents." He thundered in harsh tones.

I vaguely remember similar incidents at Berelin under the influence of Mayeso. It was this one which precipitated a conversation about getting back at Mr Langasi and our parents by exploring the

night life in the local area. Well night is an exaggeration and used here to infer late evenings before the Boarding home curfew of 8pm when students were meant to be back on school premises.

"It's my birthday on Wednesday guys."

Mayeso had exclaimed snacking on *Zitumbuwa,* a homemade puffy pasty stuffed with fried Bananas, from a plastic Tupperware container his mum had dropped off. His parents appeared to live a luxurious lifestyle in Blantyre according to Mayeso's boastful descriptions of his dad's government-assigned Nissan vehicle and I often wondered about their justification for sending him off to an isolated rural area in Thyolo.

"My grandmother has given me money to treat myself to *Nsima* with *Chambo."*

He announced, chest pumped up in pride. "We could have some *Kachusu* too."

He must have glanced in my direction, or I thought he did. By this time, I had grown accustomed to his terrorising stares.

"Mavuto can try *kachasu* for the first time. He's a *kachasu* virgin." Ripples of laughter from his sycophantic gang of teenage lads.

At soon to be fourteen Mayeso was still a minor but underage drinking was not regulated at the time in Thyolo. Like a sheep led to the slaughter I went along with him the following Saturday for a belated

birthday celebration, desperate to fit in, into his circle and impress the girls later with ear tingling tales about our lawlessness, behind our parents' backs. In reminisce, I was led hook, line, and sinker down a path of addiction. I later read in a Malawian Newspaper how *Kachasu,* a sugary beer made from fermented maize husks, openly brewed in enormous drums, and boiled over charcoal fires, contained ethanol and methanol in the vapour that was distilled through a contraption of pipes attached to the sides of the large drum into old bottles. In fact, I was oblivious of how unhygienic the bottles which looked like they had been in use since the world was created were!

We celebrated his birthday at the Bvumbwe Trading Centre, a distance of around a hundred yards from our school, exploring the new stores which were springing up everywhere in the early 2000s in Malawi. Deciding we preferred the allure of a pastel-coloured two storey building the equivalent of a village pub, we filled in like tin soldiers to check out what it had to offer nosey thirteen and fourteen-year-olds. 'Upstairs to the bar,' an inviting signage greeted us, no identity cards requested though. Youngsters in Thyolo were free to indulge in the pleasure *reserved* in Blantyre and Lilongwe for adults who had reached the legal drinking age. My first

alcoholic liquor was the infamous frothy *Kachasu* with uncountable bubbles overflowing from the narrow neck of a recycled sprite bottle unto the counter of the dusty wooden bar. Mayeso, Festus, Nathan, Upendo, Thokozile and the rest of the gang I hung out with all sipped generously from its rim, passing the bottle around.

The owner of the *shebeen* a guy with missing teeth was grinning and asking us if we liked his homemade brew. My thirteen and fourteen-year-old school friends and I were the youngest in the group of drinkers but as long as we had enough kwachas to pay for our beer no questions were asked by the *Kachasu* sellers. I began to look forward to evenings after school and weekends when I would lean against the wooden panelled bar under the conspicuous 'happy days' Chichewa sign dangling from a metal chain above my head. Mesmerizing labels of alcoholic spirits I could not pronounce lined the bar shelves. I would gulp down my drink, daydreaming about the tempting bottles after bottles of liquor in bright pigment I had not *yet* tried.

A bossy fellow tried to read my friends and I the riot act one Saturday as I savoured the sweat taste of *Kachasu,* giving us dirty looks and inferring we should not be drinking "blah blah blah". We did

not pay much attention to him at all. Intoxicated punters singing pop songs out of tune along with the blaring radio or older men swearing and spilling juices tales about sleeping with women behind their wives backs were far more interesting to us than a pensioner admonishing us about the potential harm of underage drinking to our mental state and liver. His chastisement through slurred speech was ironical, I used to think; pot calling kettle black, he was frail and unkempt looking having drunk *Kachasu* all his life I assumed, sarcastically. At least I was thirteen and the world was my oyster.

By age 14, *Kachusu* bars had become my hideout. I recall consuming huge amounts of alcohol in village bars while away at Boarding school and had sampled different *Chibuku* brews, a variety of imported beers, et cetera. I even saved up to start buying 350 millilitres bottles of wine. I had morphed into a rebellious teenager. I had no knowledge of my predisposition to mental illness or of the familiar link to schizophrenia, otherwise I do not think I would have ever touched alcohol.

A conversation with a psychiatrist much later in life was what shed light on the genetic link **to Schizophrenia** and how lifestyle factors could exacerbate the symptoms. My drinking habit soon

spiralled out of control. From standing outside thatched huts in the villages in Thyolo, gulping down beer in the evenings after school, I soon felt confident enough to toss back small bottles of the Malawian equivalent to hardcore liquor such as whisky.

My mood altered too; I was irritable at school and could not focus on lessons. I was doing well and passing especially in English my favourite subject, I could have excelled academically had I not been consuming such huge amounts of alcohol after school. I could not calculate litres back then, but I was well and truly an alcoholic by the time I turned fourteen. The Berelin school administration knew students were indulging in illegal drinking however no actions were taken against us. In their defence I comported myself well in class save for nodding off or putting off the other students with beer breath at lunch time. Weekdays were boring; I should have been more attentive rather I sat in class hardly concentrating on agriculture or technical drawing lessons or other subjects. Mayeso, the ringleader and I ironically had morphed into best buddies and my bad reputation had spread with the speed of an African bushfire.

"Miles away, are you?" Alinafe had approached me and perched on the low cement wall in the playground, watching a group of boys playing football. I blushed, flattered Alinafe was still speaking to me. All the thirteen and fourteen-year-old lads fancied her. At assembly she stood taller than other girls in form three but was oblivious to how stunning she was.

"Where do you and Mayeso go after school?" She inquired in an inquisitive manner.

"Were we the subject of playground gossip now?" A fleeting thought runs through my mind.

I could not muster up the courage to tell her. Maybe she already knew my drinking habit was out of control and was setting a trap.

"Just for a stroll to the market." I lied.

Sharper than a pencil, she did not seem convinced; she was the only student who once beat me at English tests, so she was clever! Tilting her graceful neck at an angle she peered sideways at me as chickens do.

"Hmm. That's not what the girls in my dormitory said."

"Oops." I thought, unsure how to defend myself. I did not want to put her off me; a battalion of teenage boys would have killed to get her attention.

"No, seriously." My voice sounded unconvincing even in my ears.

"If you keep drinking the way I hear you are," she paused head down, twiddling with a blade of grass gone from green to brown in the scorching sun, "you'll going to wound up struggling with your exams."
Alinafe's prediction was to come true years later, but the preceptory factor to not doing well at school was not alcohol use. Unbeknown to me I had a predisposition to Schizophrenia which would manifest later that year.

During my final year at Berelin Private School, my mother's rose-tinted glasses were to fall with a thud off her face one weekend I stayed over. I had rushed indoors breezily greeted Ulemu and Chimwemwe sitting on a two-seater cane chair in the tiny living room in our latest rented accommodation and was heading for my bedroom at the speed of lightning.
"What's that smell coming from him?"

Ulemu must have asked. She was either very nosey or suffered from hyperosmia, an increased sensitivity to odours. Nonetheless, her observation pricked my mother's ears from the kitchen where she was occupied with cooking *Nsima.* She rotated to face us, a quizzical expression on her face.

"What Ulemu, can you smell a dead rodent?" Mother had reported seeing tropical mice scurrying behind the outdated skirting boards in our home in Salima to our Indian landlord in Blantyre. Ulemu nodded her head vigorously.
"From him." Accusatory finger pointed at me. "He's been drinking again mummy." She had grassed up on me the previous half-term holidays.
"Lord, Mavuto? Mavuto?" Was she praying or telling me off? My mother was walking towards me, face screwed up in anger. I knew the game was up.

A thorough dressing down ensued, Biblical quotations coming out at rocket speed from my Presbyterian mother's lips.
"God would punish me."
"I might end up in hell."
"I was sinful."
"What a waste of space I was, spending her hard-earned nursing salary on a teenage tearaway, digging an early grave for himself with his illegal drinking."

So was my untimely exit from the confines of Berelin School following a few choice words in English and Chichewa for our useless Principal from my irate mother. She swore to God Almighty she would supervise me herself. She would see how I

was going to get hold of alcoholic beverages under her constant watch. I was frogmarched out without even completing secondary school. I cannot fathom how the school authorities could have been so lackadaisical and I blame them for not being able to move on to year four.

Chapter Three

AUDITORY AND VISUAL HALLUCINATIONS

I still had high hopes of sitting the International General Certificate of Secondary Education/IGCSE, especially because I was so good at English Language. By contrast my wayward behaviour at school was the subject matter mum was more preoccupied with! Grounded by her and kept under lock and key like a recaptured fugitive, I had to devise a way to have wine. I was fifteen and mum, my siblings and I were in Salima; at the time mother still worked in Salima district nursing patients at Senga Bay Baptist Hospital. Salima is a lakeshore district, housing the infamous Senge Bay and sandy beaches; I loved it there.

Renowned for its cool seaside breeze, the summer of 2009 in Salima contrary to expectations is, inscribed in bold in my head for excruciating headaches which left me hot and flustered. I did not

start hearing voices until this period in my life. The voices were precipitated by an increase in alcohol intake. Late one afternoon in 2010, I was sitting at home, sulking in my bedroom, a melancholic teenager craving wine and *Kachasu,* the now forbidden fruits. Suddenly I had a eureka moment. While I was at Berelin, Mayeso had casually mentioned a concoction he had made from tea leaves and yeast his mum had in her kitchen cupboard. I had listened in fascination as he disclosed the formula for tea wine.

"Goodness me I could make my own wine."

"Did such a thing exist?" I had queried when Mr. Know-it-all Mayeso had elucidated how his nocturnal experiments were successful in turning him into a little connoisseur. It was an exaggeration, but I decided to try making my homemade wine too.

I took *Okadas or* motorcycles utilised as taxis everywhere; and I still do nowadays; owing to my disability I have not been able to earn enough to learn to drive. Moreover, I am not *au fait* with the legislation on people with Schizophrenia and Bipolar Disorder driving in Malawi. My Uncle Chifundo also gives me a lift occasionally.

I hopped on the passenger seat of an Okada driver's motorcycle one day in April 2010 into the

market for a ride after school. The concept of mis selling has a local interpretation here; I purchased tea leaves from a market trader boasting she sold the *best* tea farmed in Malawi. Safely back indoors, to ensure I had privacy, I had barricaded myself in our kitchen to experiment with wine making, to be scientifically accurate, only a brew made from tea leaves, water, and Illovo sugar - a local brand- boiled at high temperatures over a small electric cooker. I had started brewing my own wine! Anxious not to get found out by my parent following her stark warning about the consequences of drinking wine and potential harm it might inflict on my kidneys and liver, I had left the mixture to ferment at night at the back of one of the kitchen cupboard having mixed yeast into it so it would become an intoxicant.

It is early in the morning, a lithe, shadowy figure tip toes barefoot into the kitchen at the back of their rented property in Salima. He pushes open the chipped wooden door, slides in discretely through the gap and heads for the food cupboard over the worktop where his mother grinds vegetables. The figure reaches out with ample precision to grab the cupboard door handle but nearly jumps out of his skin in fright when a voice emanating from probably an adult says: "It's not there Mavuto, I've binned it."

My psychic mum had found out! She was in the kitchen crouching behind the sacs of maize; I would have never looked for her there. She switched on the light, illuminating the guilty expression on my face; petrified I was speechless. She could not hide her venom this time. She was at the end of her tether. She was going to report me to her brothers. She was a lone parent, and I needed a male figure to keep me on the straight and narrow. She had run out of options to get me to stop drinking. I was naughty.
"Sorry mum," an apology contrarily poured fuel into an inferno, inflaming her further. She continued yelling. Any reference to God might appease her, I was thinking on my feet in a bid to calm her down.
"I want to start living a righteous life, mum," muttered with quivering lips, and: "it's not as strong as *Kachasu* Mum."
A look of disapproval greeted my nonsensical argument. "I said *no* more alcohol in this house. That's what I said Mavuto. It's irrelevant whether it's a less potent liquor or not. No more drinking, full stop."

Prevented from going to *Shebeens* or unregulated bars in the village, I had no option but to give up drinking straightaway. Mum was searching high and low for a day school, from Philipina, St John's Catholic to Berelin I had, had my

fair share of lenient schools and shown education authorities were perhaps not all dependable. I was too immature to understand the consequences of abstaining from alcohol after an excessive intake over a prolonged period of time. In fact, until much later in life I had no knowledge of how many litres were safe to drink per week. *Shebeens* were very sociable places were they not? I had received unsolicited advice albeit given by inebriated men, on who to vote for when I reached the legal age and warned to shy away from politicians "cut out of the same cloth as President Bingu Mutharika by all means."

Ulemu's thirteenth birthday was a few weeks away and were looking forward to it. Nothing was supposed to mar the celebrations. I had not drunk alcohol in two days and was on my way to becoming teetotal after I was forced to detox at home. Crunched up like a discarded tissue paper in the far corner of the veranda, it was one of those rare occasions when I was outdoors relaxing, listening to Ulemu chatting to Chimwemwe about having her hair straightened with a hot comb. Without any warning at all, my body began to do strange things like shake on its own accord. It felt nauseous and cold. I crouched over a bit more to warm myself up, hugging my legs with my arms. Why was I cold on

a day the sun had its hat on? My limbs were shaking uncontrollably. I had a sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach I was seriously unwell, a kind of gut instinct.

"Mum, He's trembling!" Ulemu interrupted her conversation with our little sister, her eyes dart in my direction, a concerned expression on her face. I was. I had tremors. Not only were my teeth rattling, but my whole body was also shivering. Frightened, I burst into tears. Ulemu came up to me, peering into my eyes then scanning me from head to toe.

"Mum, his eyes are white too." Vociferously shouted; I bet Ulemu's epiglottis were visible through the wide gap in her parted lips.

"Mum he's crying." She was giving a running commentary.

Our mother came running out of the red brick bungalow looking distressed, arms raised in the air, hyperventilating. She rushed up to me, shook me gently, repeating my name several times, inquiring if I was okay. I told her I felt feverish. She touched my head with her palm, said I felt clammy. Panicked a bit more, then half pushed me have guided me back indoors. A cup of lukewarm water did not help. I was not dehydrated. It could not be Malaria as I did not have a temperature. I suspect that was the *genesis* of my mental health issues, but she was looking for

a physical cause. She gave me some Aspirin and more water and asked me to go lay down.

I must have drifted off to sleep. A male voice woke me up.

"It is because he's stopped drinking, and his body is now craving alcohol."

Was my Uncle Chifundo's explanation after mum brought him up to date with my shenanigans on her very first Mobile phone. He had driven in his Mazda to our house after work; he was a civil servant.

"It happens to people who were drinking large quantities of alcohol and stop without preparing their body."

The existence of a phenomenon known as Alcohol Withdrawal Syndrome/AWS was news to me. My relatives were discussing among themselves, and my uncle left after verifying I was not going to go off to the world beyond that day. I drank loads of warm water, ate *Nsima* and slept. I survived.

My first presentation was attributed to Alcohol Withdrawal Symptoms and as I had recovered within the space of hours, nothing more was thought of it. My head was on fire, however. We had a DVD player back then and I was sitting on our only recliner under a patterned sheet, watching American films on the small DVD player my aunt

Glitter Phiri -the only relative on my dad's side who kept in touch- had shipped over from Scotland, as a house-warming present for us. Out of nowhere, a man started speaking to me in Chichewa. He was my maternal grandfather; he had died a decade before I was even conceived. He was trying to say something, but his words were jumbled up. An argument breaks out in my head between him and some other people- my cousins or maybe my aunts- there was a racket going on and I could hear them distinctly.
"Alcohol Withdrawal Syndrome is really awful," I thought, shaking my head vigorously. How clueless I was!

Voices heard by people with schizophrenia are in actual fact their own voices caused by a phenomenon termed subvocal speech something we all experience according to Dr Sternberg buttressing Louis Gould's (a psychiatrist who investigated this phenomenon in the 1950s) theory. It is more pronounced in sufferers with my condition due to an inability to recognise our own voices in our heads. I thought people were speaking in my head though. The voices were authoritative, commanding me to do things. I would hear different speakers in tandem which was very confusing. Then insomnia

would set in. I would lie in bed awake for ages without an iota of sleep.

Looking back, I see how my excessive alcohol intake had been erroneously blamed for the advent of psychosis. An argument has been projected in psychiatry about how alcohol withdrawal symptoms can mask psychosis. I am not going to debate on the medical cause of my shivers and shakes, because I was not taken to hospital to be evaluated. I have always held a strong conviction deep within me that I no longer felt like my usual self from 2010 onwards. I was overwhelmed by persistent headaches; in addition, I became even more withdrawn and began to want my own space more so isolated myself in my room. I would stay in there alone listening to Rhythm and Blues, popular songs, electronic dance music or Hip Hop. Teenagers notoriously like their own space but unless my family yelled for me to come out at meal times, I do not think I would have interacted much with them at home from late 2009 to early 2011. My relatives have fed back how a marked difference started to emerge in how I reacted to them.

Little things began to irritate me at home. The arguments with mum returned with a vengeance. I wanted to go out and drink but was not allowed to.

Changes in mood and behaviour are features of my disorder, often mistaken for unsociable conduct. Doctors Pompili and Fiorillo writing in the Psychiatric times in 2015 have discredited the stereotypical portrayal of individuals living with Schizophrenia in the media as violent and aggressive. Apart from fallouts with my mother in the past I think I am generally mild-mannered. I am a quiet person by nature and when my symptoms manifested, I became almost reclusive, staying in my bedroom after school, watching DVDs if we had power supply. I turn twenty eight on May 15, unlike people in my age group, birthdays are just ordinary days to me. I have never gone clubbing in my life. After I was stopped from hanging out in our local bars at age fourteen, I cannot recall going to that many social events. Mental Health professionals sum these up as negative symptoms people with Schizophrenia may experience.

In 2010, I began to self-neglect too, another negative symptom, resulting in arguments. When I bothered to attend to my hygiene, I would wind up members of my household by going into the only bathroom we had on the premises and staying in there forever (we were lucky to have indoor facilities), run the tap for ages, without taking a bath. Utilities are expensive in Malawi when they are

available, and my behaviour did not go down well with my mother at all. I did not realise I was taking so long in the bathroom due to the onset of Schizophrenia.

There is an ongoing debate over treating these early symptoms. Marshall and Rathbone have enthused how proponents advocating for improved treatment for those afflicted by the disorder Schizophrenia, have put forward a convincing argument for early intervention. Intervening early enough when prodromal symptoms emerge ameliorates the quality of life for people with Schizophrenia. Timely psychological and medical interventions may reduce the severity of symptoms experienced in the long term. Early Intervention Teams have been set up in the United Kingdom for example. I should have been taken in for an assessment by a mental health professional. Early help includes screening for a diagnosis and prescribing therapeutic remedies if required in the form of medication or psychological interventions. I had counselling later on in 2020 (from Saint John of God's Hospitaller, a private Mental Health Care Provider) but it was post-diagnosis.

Treated by mother with homely remedies, it consequently meant, I was unsure what was wrong. "What was the plausible cause of restlessness

creeping over me?" I wondered, standing in the school halls of Parachute Battalion, Salima -a different institution I had been placed in - seeing my mother had sussed me out and discovered an education was not the only precious commodity I had looted from the vaults of Malawian Secondary Schools. To be precise it was not just agitation I was plagued with; even more bothersome were the hostile voices which intensified during the period leading up to my final secondary school exams at Parachute. I was meant to sit the Malawian Secondary School Certificate of Education/MSCE, and my symptoms were most likely stress induced. After complaining to my late mother who was still a Nurse at Senga-Bay Baptist Hospital in Salima of the incessant voices in my head ordering me verbatim to, "hit that guy" if I walked past random people or instructing me to comply with strange requests, she decided something had to be done to evict the uninvited tenants from my head. She gave me a selection of pills, but I have forgotten what they were because as mentioned I was not sure what was wrong with me or why I was taking them.

One afternoon, I could swear my belt laying on the linoleum on my bedroom floor was a snake! It was evident I was seeing things that other family members were not. In psychiatry they are called

visual hallucinations or perceptual disturbances occurring in the brain of individuals with Schizophrenia. I now realise this was another indicator of psychosis, an acute state of my condition when my sense of self, perceptions, and thoughts are altered. My psychiatrist here in Neno thinks I should have been commenced on antipsychotics from this point.

I was not. It built up until a volcano erupted spewing vile lava in the form of a scary episode at my new school, Parachute Battalion. Sitting in class one day listening to a Biology teacher elaborating on the anatomy of our intestines, out of the blue I felt sweat pouring down my armpits. I dismissed it as perspiration brought on by the tropical heat. School finished and I sought solace in my room back home; an unanticipated throbbing headache came on. I laid down on the bed without the covers to cool down, crying my eyes out. Laying down offered no respite.

Anxious, I began to fret, again my stomach muscles clenched involuntarily in fear. I too, as mum was, began to obsess about my health. "Was heart disease a likely explanation for my physical symptoms?" In spite of my inner turmoil, I could not verbalize my feelings to anyone. I had not drunk alcohol in weeks and the excruciating headaches

were not from a hangover. Connoughton and Wand conducted a qualitative research in the united States in 2017 and established a higher prevalence of tension headaches in people with Schizophrenia in comparison with the rest of the general population.

Frustrated by the change in my personality mother took it upon herself to find a traditional cure rather than invest precious time in exploring the source through the medical route; hence even then I was not taken to hospital. Scholarly research has argued how the use of traditional medicine might be a barrier preventing Malawians from accessing westernized forms of treatment despite the availability of free mental health care funded by the state and private organisations. Simwaka et al (2014) estimated a startling percentage of the population rely on traditional medicine to treat mental health problems.

Mum was planning a surprise move behind the scenes having accepted our predicament was caused by a conflict with a disgruntled relative: she had a fully-fledged, love-hate relationship with Nan Diana.

"Right, you're coming with me."

It was a Friday after school once in 2010 and the hustle and bustle in our living room was not because

we were getting ready for the start of the weekend but rather to get me into a car being driven by a colleague of mother's for a lift into the city of Lilongwe whether I wished to accompany them or not.

We navigated our way through the busy weekend traffic here, driving past Chinsapo, with my mother's friend honking at everything from peddlers to school children crossing the road. "Finally!" Mother breathed a sigh of relief on spotting the road sign saying: Likuni. We were dropped off at a junction; the rest of the road was inaccessible to motor vehicles. Mother beckoned with her hand for me to follow; she led the way down a stony path lined with flowers, shrubs, and fruit trees on both sides. We headed right down to a shabby structure built of mud bricks. She peeked through the doorway; I could see a dirt floor from where I was standing.
"What were we doing here?" My teenage mind was searching for answers.

Inside, the traditional healer's grim house was dark and sparsely furnished except for some cheap looking Ngoni carvings and wooden masks of Chewa traditional Gods. An old gentlemen sitting cross legged on a raffia mat, made eye contact with

us. He was expecting his new clients. Sceptical, I was not under the same illusion as my mum that he would in any shape or form cure the shakes, my craving for alcohol or stop my ancestors quarrelling in my head.

My eyes wandered off to his calabashes in which he had a concoction of local herbs used for medicinal purposes. Unlabelled bottles of potions were in a darkened corner to his left of the room. His powers were instantaneously switched on the minute we entered, and he had a vision, could discern an omen from our aura; we had "serious problems". Our misfortunes increased tenfold when Mum asked the fee for "a one-off consultation to seek a cure for *Misala* or madness please?" A longwinded speech ensued in Chichewa.

"I sense an elderly woman in the family with dubious intentions."

"Your son's condition is *rare* and the plants and roots I need to make the portion are not grown in Likuni or anywhere near Chinsapo instead are transported *all the way* from Limbe in Blantyre in government long haul lorries."

"I will have to purchase them from market sellers at extortionate prices; therefore, it would cost madam about k5000 for a bottle of herbs for *Misala."*

Fast forward to late 2010; I had settled into my new school; I was in addition drinking generous quantities of the pricey strong mixture the Ngoni herbalist had given us to ward off my grandmother's curse and heal my mind. The spirits had not been exorcised because I experienced a psychotic episode in 2010 while I was sitting in the hall taking my MSCE geography exam. Malawian summer season is quite different from the European one, I presume. It starts sometime in September and ends in October, but the heat stays well into the rainy season.

It was excruciatingly hot in the large, dimly lit Examination Hall in the Parachute Battalion Secondary School that September day in 2010; the rusty planes of the overheated fans rotating in a noisy fashion were not effective in diffusing our summer heat. I had been allocated a wobbly desk in the centre row right underneath the swirling fan. I dabbed drops of perspiration off my sweaty forehead with my bare left hand and gripped my biro firmly with the right one. I had always passed my exams and my teachers in my end of year report would comment on how intelligent I was. I had high hopes of one day attaining a degree in Business Management and working as a Financial adviser in the swanky Lilongwe City Council building.

My head was bowed in concentration scrutinising the multiple choice answers.

"You're a Central Intelligence Agency investigator now, you need to get up and leave for your next assignment. You're running late".

The stern male voice in my head leered at me audibly enough in my mother tongue, for me to swing around in a panic and glance furtively at Limbani the fifteen year-old boy who was sitting behind me in the hall.

My classmate remained stoic, his elbows resting lightly on the chipped wooden desk and brown eyes fixed on the invigilator, a tall, mathematics teacher standing in the aisle between our row and the students to our right. Mr Lawrence Chiphwanya was very strict. I fondly remember how he liked us referring to him by his full name and his endless stories about his studies abroad in South Africa. Abroad to him was the South African University where he had attained his Bachelor's Degree in Mathematics.

Limbani did not appear to have heard the voice speaking. I thought puzzled. As I sat pondering a realisation suddenly dawned on me that I was the only one hearing my maternal grandfather giving me instructions in Chichewa

again but this time I was not sure if he was actually speaking in person or not.

"Are you going to leave or not, Mavuto?"

He inquired in a loud tone. I shook my head to dismiss his voice. Limbani saw me shaking my head and misunderstood my reaction for a prank to provoke his reaction and join in, in disrupting the exam. We both hated geography. He had no idea I was experiencing an internal turmoil. Limbani grimaced when I swerved my neck to look at him again. Forcing a jovial countenance as the speakers in my head kept giving me instructions, I willed myself to ignore the command hallucinations, pleading with my brain to concentrate on the exam paper in front of me.

"Mavuto. I just asked you a question, wake up. What did you have for breakfast? Stop daydreaming."

Mr Chiphwanya teased, tying to decipher why I was not attempting to fill out the question paper. I was one of the cleverest students who had joined the institution and he expected me to excel. My memory is a bit fuzzy several years down the line, recounting this incident, however, I most have somehow existed the hall and flung my identity card/ID on ground in the school compound. I vaguely recollect walking out the gates and not completing the

geography exam, leaving the school, and walking the few hundred yards back to the residential facility my mum had rented. No one else was home when I let myself in to query my actions. I may have fallen asleep or watched DVDs on the portable DVD player, aunty Glitter Phiri had gifted us. Someone was shaking my right shoulder to rouse me from sleep. I opened my eyes to a person leaning over me, calling my name. She had a familiar voice.

"Mavuto, when did you arrive from school?"

My mother was astonished to find the house door open and me curled up in bed under the cotton bedcovers. She was holding a plastic card dangling from a lanyard. It had a striking resemblance to my photo ID.

"Where had she located it?" I was perplexed.

"Chibamba found your ID on the roadside a few hours ago. He recognised your face and handed it over to me when I was walking past his stall just now."

Chibamba was the nosiest cigarette trader on the road leading up to our residence but was good-natured and meant no harm.

"Why aren't you at school?"

My mother's voice had gone up an octave. It was often the penultimate stage before she exploded into a rage. Her eyes pierced through my sleepy pupils. Rolling over I sat up on the bed and words came out

of my mouth but somehow, I cannot remember being coherent. I must have explained that I was hearing distressing voices and could not concentrate on the MSCE. However indecipherable the excuse sufficed. My mother whacked her chest, scurried off to grab her mobile phone and pleaded with one of her brothers to, "come here right now." She then frantically dialled her nursing colleague's number at the hospital she worked at. I heard her say, "ambulance."

Mum made arrangements to take me to hospital in Lilongwe. Again, my memory is blurry, but I think, we tried various hospitals including Bwaila, 24 hours Clinic and Kamuzu Central Hospital for a check-up, but I was not admitted. I was seen and assessed at the 24 hours Clinic; a private medical facility where a psychiatrist of theirs prescribed medication. I was not booked in as an inpatient. I seemed to have gone back to Salima later that week and assessed at Likuni Mission Hospital. They had a Mental Health Clinic which was affiliated to St John's. I was ushered into a tiny bedroom with a hard mattress and asked to lie down. My next recollections are of being injected with some kind of tranquilising, medication and falling into deep sleep.

Following my dramatic exit from the Examination Hall again my schooling went through a hiatus. From this period onwards my mental health began to affect my ability to perform academically. Mum needed a shoulder to cry on and the visions of the witch doctor were insufficient in deterring her from seeking solace in her mother's house. I was taken to my Nan Diana's in Lilongwe. To be honest it was a blessing in disguise. I loved my grandmother, a retired school teacher who was very good at relating to a sick teenager like me.

My family were up to their necks with worry now it was crystal clear there was something wrong with my head. I stayed home with my grandmother for a while until another school was found. I was taking medication, carrying out everyday activities, and outwardly appeared normal. On intuition even in the absence of a diagnosis I knew I was ill.

Late 2011; I immersed myself in *Prison Break*. During term time I would attend school then rush back home if there was no power outage, hibernate in my bedroom and watch my heroes Dominic Purcell and Wentworth Miller. My delusions about working for the CIA persisted. My relatives must have had an indication what was wrong with me. I had a close relative on my mother's side who had,

had a mental disorder. He passed away before I was born but his condition meant there had been a biological relative with a serious mental illness. The exact date my family began to suspect I too had Schizophrenia is unclear. I had been taken to hospital back in 2010 after walking out of the exam hall but had not been admitted. That was in 2010. I was offered medication, but I did not know its name. My medication compliance was poor. In fact, I came off it later in 2011 when mum took me away to Ntchisi to live with her for a bit.

A high point in 2011 was school! Attending school distracted me and I soon made friends in the new one I joined: Crazmatic High in Area 24 Lilongwe. A form four student, I revised English, mathematics, biology, agriculture, Chichewa, geography, social and development studies, physical science, and Bible knowledge. I was celebrating passing my MSCE exams, I had 3 instead of the required 4 credits, however I had passed. I still suffered with delusional thinking; in moments of quiet contemplation my sights were set on fulfilling my mission.

A detailed explanation is required because by mission, I mean a sense of realisation had also grown on me that I was a Central Intelligent Agent/CIA

and was going to be dispatched imminently. Nowadays, I can distinguish between delusional beliefs and reality but could not in 2010. Delusions or unrealistic opinions can manifest as unproven ideologies or convictions people with schizophrenia hold. My belief grew because I was spending a considerable length of time on my own watching an American crime series *Prison Break* on DVDs.

Chapter Four

"MAY THE LORD HEAL YOUR MIND"

201I, Christmas was approaching I was still at my Nan's in Lilongwe. My family had by now resorted to at least giving me my psychotropic medication prescribed at the 24 Hours clinic but mixed them with the medicine man's herbs. Nevertheless, the constant headaches had neither eased nor had the voices disappeared. My Nan had one last trick up her sleeve; we had not been to see a Faith Healer yet. Leticia one of the church ministers had been a family friend of my grandmother Diana since *time immemorial* and I could not recall a time in my childhood when Leticia was not around. My grandmother a fundamentalist, had raised all her children in the Presbyterian Church. Nan had devised an elaborate plan: we were going to do spiritual warfare.

Malawians have a tradition of dressing smartly on Sundays. Having donned my Sunday

best, a shirt worn by one of my uncles, discarded in the 1980s into a mangled pile inside an old chest of drawers in my grandmother's house and his old stripy pair of trousers, I was ready to accompany Nan Diana to church. The short distance from her driveway to the small single storey building badly in need of renovation was utilised by grandma, clutching her brown leather Bible in her hand, to remind me of how God performs miracles.

"Mavuto, believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be healed."

My Nan must have memorised those lines by heart, the amount of times she used them! I on the other hand would have tried all remedies offered to have a sound mind. I still heard hostile voices asking me to do "bad things." Nan promised Jesus would take away negative thoughts. All I needed was faith. I was fifteen and had loads of faith, in her, my grandmother. She had a lifelong friend: a Faith Healer called Leticia. I do not know if *Leticia* was her birth name or if she adopted an African American name the more engrossed Leticia got into her born-again beliefs. She had all the gossip about revivals, men of God healing the sick in the United States and adored Evangelist Billy Graham. Leticia was going to pray for me at hers after service, minister God's word and "bless my spirit."

4pm. I was at Leticia's and I gazing sheepishly into her half-opened, deep brown eyes as she prayed fervently in Chichewa. Leticia's huge faith was only surpassed by her voluptuous breasts, presently juggling from left to right as she bounced up and down in her tiny living room speaking in tongues. Her God was multilingual.

"Banish all the demons, lord, anoint him with this holy water."

Caught up the moment of excitement she was shaking with such vigour her plaits shook on their own accord. She whispered the last word, "water," with her eyes wide-open at this point. A side glance in the direction of the plastic cup of water she had filled earlier on from the kitchen tap followed. At her nonverbal cue, I muttered, "Amen", dragging out the last syllable; her prayer a kind of inspiration for me to start believing God would heal me from the curse my grandmother might have inadvertently inflicted on me. "

If it had been attributed to an evil source, my mental illness must have a spiritual cure," I thought back then.

My faith was unshakeable. Leticia must be right; God *will* heal me. I had become a devout Christian since moving in with my Nan and had now begun to have heated arguments with my mother over her trips to Witch doctors. During a telephone call to

check on my welfare I told her it was a blatant sin. Visualising mum going to hell over her beliefs in sorcery was hurtful.

Leticia was now coming back from the spiritual realm and the water on her plastic centre table had been anointed and should be drunk. I reached out to take the cup she was offering me, her chest rising and falling with the divine force of the Holy Spirit. Hand wobbly, I sipped the water showing off impeccable manners in the Church Minister's presence. Malawian tap water seemed to have miraculously lost the taste of chlorine. A huge sip, the sanctified water would be ingested by my tummy before saturating in my veins to heal my mind. Pressing the white plastic rim of the cup on my face, so that it left a ring around my upper lip and cheeks, I gulped down the liquid. I wanted all of God's anointing, there and then.

"You've received God's blessings, Mavuto. Oh, I can FEEL Jesus's presence in the room."
Leticia announced, rotating her arms so her shoulders vibrated. She had, had a vision; the Holy Spirit was present in the room with us. She revealed, looming in an angelic manner about two feet across from me in the narrow living room in her property where she had crammed in the Trinity. In any case

she always managed to squeeze about a dozen "believers" in there for fellowship. That Sunday, the room felt smaller; perhaps because I could hear her breathing audibly or because I felt my heart enlarging in God's presence, with the hope that the stigma of being mentally ill would disappear along with grandfather's voice in my head.

Attending church became a regular occurrence. Having repented all my sins, I was now a born-again Christian becoming more and more entrenched in the things of God. Leticia would intercede on my behalf in prayer sessions and back at my Nan's I would study scripture verses to distract myself. I was led to believe praying would alleviate the symptoms of my mental disorder.
"His blood cleanses." Leticia had reminded me. "What a friend we have in Jesus. Take it to the Lord in prayer." She would sing at our regular meetups.

Several months down the line I decided a child of God made whole by his son's death no longer needed to take the medication I had been prescribed on planet earth by the team at the 24 hours Clinic in Chilinde. The costs of acquiring them were rising too if the tablets were unavailable from pharmacies at government hospitals, then my Nan or uncles might have to purchase them from Mayfair

Pharmacy or other private suppliers. Leticia, the prayer warrior was battling the 'demons' that caused negative thoughts and mental illnesses anyway: a much more cost-effective remedy.

My motto was now onwards and upwards and so my new year's resolution in January 2012 was to pursue a higher education course in Namitete, Lilongwe. I was now intrigued by cars, living in the capital city therefore it was no wonder I chose to study for an Advanced Diploma in Motor Vehicle Mechanics when I enrolled at Namitete Technical College a few weeks later. The first hurdle I encountered however was my inability to pass the physical fitness test. Lacking manpower, I was too weak to work with heavy mechanical objects like estate cars and Lorries. Vehicle Mechanics was an occupation which involved jerking up cars, maintaining heavy engines and carrying hefty tyres to-and-fro. Albeit I was determined to succeed and gave the course a shot.

College life seemed promising; I was a good-looking fifteen year old Ngoni lad, with a full head of hair - before I went bald in my mid-twenties - and girls were beginning to look covertly as I swaggered past while pretending to be doing other things. To my uttermost surprise, Dalitso a childhood friend

from Salima in 2006 had moved to Lilongwe as well to study at Namitete.

"Oh my God, it's not you, Mavuto?" a very pretty girl carrying a plate of *Nsima* exclaimed as she nudged other students to get out of her way along the narrow walkway connecting the classrooms in the small brick buildings.

Dazzled by her beauty, I stammered, "Wow, Dalitso."

I was relieved to see a familiar face among the hundreds of students on the massive campus at Namitete. We found a quiet, secluded spot behind one of the hostel buildings and chatted for ages about what we had both been up to; giggling over memories about the games her, Aubrey and I played in the mud in Salima. We laughed at her transformation into an immaculate well-dressed fifteen year old. I was impressed by her course of choice: Administrative Studies. I showed her which hostel I was living in; she vowed to stop by.

"Life was good," I thought, enjoying a brief period of independence from living at home with my mother or grandmother. Remarkable is the fact that during the early part of the year, from around January to May 2012, the auditory hallucinations ceased. In a bid to fit in with my peers at college and Dalitso whom I had not yet told about my mental

illness, I joined in with social activities on campus. Furthermore, having long decided medication was surplus to requirement; I had stopped taking them and had almost forgotten about the voices I used to hear the previous year.

Term one flew past, I enjoyed reading the new subjects and learning about cooling fluids, spark ignition, lubricating and exhaust systems and had made friends. The start of term two sometime in March heralded in a more hectic period, the timetable was busier, and my Motor Mechanics course was physically demanding. On the bright side the bedrooms at Namitete were cleaner and more spacious than those at Berelin Boarding School.

While in my shared room on campus one afternoon in May revising my notes and waiting for the next lecture to commence at 2pm, I started feeling restless.
"You've completely abandoned your mission!" A voice pinged in head, sounding vexed. "Worthless CIA agent you are, Mavuto."

I sat up with the speed of a bullet. Scanning every nook and cranny of the room, none of my other three roommates were in. I leapt from the

upper deck of the bunk bed, stepping on each rung of the ladder hastily to go and explore where this person was hiding who was speaking to me. The room was empty. I confirmed with a cold shiver down my spine I was on my own. Hesitant to believe the voices had returned, I breezed out of my allocated room and walked past all thirteen of the rest, staring closely at the doors on my left to make sure no one was there speaking to me. All the doors were shut.

"Why don't you move in with us?" My grandfather asked in my head.

"No, you'd be better off with us," a lady contradicted. She said she was a cousin of mine.

I leaned on a supporting pillar in the long walkway outside my hostel, tensing up in fright. "What was happening?" I thought Leticia and I had got rid of these voices through prayer.

Rushing back to my room, I snatched up my belongings, T-shirts, jeans, my grandmother had bought; smartphone, box of provisions, stuffing them in a holdall. I was done at Namitete and going home to my Nan's. I headed outside the iron gates, through the throng of students loitering in the yard, making my way out the iron gates, determinedly.

Nan Diana rang my mum to notify her I had begun feeling ill again; the headaches had returned

but today my heart was rushing much faster than before. While she was speaking, I somehow remember violently lashing out, knocking over items of furniture in her tiny bungalow. I wanted to speak, but my speech was impaired, and I was sounding incoherent even in my own mind. I was thinking paranoid thoughts such as grandmother must be responsible for my mother and her kids being the poorest compared to all her siblings, I had to enact my revenge; she had to pay for what she had done to us.

Next episode which springs to mind. I had left grandma's. I am outside mum's house.

"What're you doing here?" Mum roared. "You're meant to be in college."

I had blown up all my allowance on commuting via Okadas and taxis to Lumbadzi in Lilongwe and had firmly knocked on the door of her new address. She was getting ready for a late shift and was in her blue nursing uniform.

"Mavuto Pemphero Phiri?"

Whenever my mother said my full name trouble was brewing. I stumbled into her living room and deposited my stuff on the tiled floor.

"Mum, I had people arguing in my head again." I said dejectedly.

"What're you talking about? She either did not want to believe her ears or was going deaf.
"I've started hearing voices in my head again mum."
My mum spun on her heels and with her back towards me spat out in anger: "We'd have to go back to the witch doctor."
I gave her a dirty look. "No. I don't think so."
She rotated on an axis to look me squarely in the eye. There was a tension in the room as I continued arguing with mum. Her point was valid, while waiting for God to stop the voices she wanted me to try another potion of the traditional healer's herbal drink.
"It's sinful mum."
"What do you mean by no? You're not getting any better Mavuto are you?" Unfathomable! The mere thought of my mother refusing to seek treatment from a health care professional instead suggesting dosing me up again on the traditional medicine the witch doctors had given her to calm me down.
"Mum, "I retorted in annoyance. "I've told you it's against God's word to use those herbalists. You seem to want to force your own lifestyle on me."
She fell silent, embarrassed. "I'm only trying to help you, my love." She sighed; frustrated at my noncompliance. "The herbs *do* work Mavuto. Malawians have always used traditionally medicine

and we have some very good Ngoni portions by the way."
I looked at her, her dark brown eyes filling up with tears, knowing she had lost the argument.

Chapter Five

INSIDE BWAILA HOSPITAL

Another significant occurrence that comes to mind was how after moving back in with mum in Lumbadzi, a rural area near Dowa, in central Malawi, the psychosis returned, and my symptoms were more florid. I had auditory hallucinations and delusions; I believed I was a CIA Agent. My uncles have helped jog my memory by relaying most of what I now describe.

I was on a road and heard a person speaking in a panicked tone of voice.
"Mavuto, stop running for goodness sake."
Uncle Chifundo yelled at the top of his lungs as he chased me along the footpath on the m1 that fed off Lumbadzi. I hastily navigated my way across the tarmac road, diving headfirst into the grass verge opposite on my right to escape from him, listening all the while to the man in my head telling me I needed to get to Lilongwe to take up my assignment

as a Central Intelligence Agency Investigator without delay. It was unrealistic to think that I would run all 56 kilometres from Dowa to Lilongwe aged sixteen, but at five foot five inches tall I was willing to try anything physically possible to obey what I now know are command hallucinations.

I fervently believed what the voice was saying and did not think it illogical that at sixteen I was going to be recruited as a CIA agent in Malawi. These command hallucinations as shown had started round about the time I used to immerse myself in American DVDs and the drama series *Prison Break* was an obsession of mine from 2005 onwards. Incredibly, I could have sworn Lincoln Burrows, and I were kinsmen. I believed I had been selected by CIA bosses to avenge the wrong committed against him - he had been sentenced to death for a crime he did not commit. I was going to take up the role of a CIA agent to prove Lincoln's innocence. I, Mavuto, a Malawian who had not even yet applied for his first passport, such irrational beliefs could only be explained by one thing-psychosis.

I was fluctuating between reality and a deluded state and catching up with me on the footpath, Uncle Chifundo hunched over placing his

hands on his knees gasping for breath. His patterned shirt had become undone where a button had popped off exposing his protruding stomach. Grabbing my left trouser leg, torn by a sharp blade of grass, my uncle stared me down, angrily. I must have kicked him off in retaliation.

"Where the f… are you going to?" He asked in exasperation.

Pointing at the road, he heaved a sigh, "You could get run over by an articulated lorry. This is the major road used by traffic heading to Dowa, you imp."

I recognised the voice coming from behind Uncle Chifundo, which had startled me. It was my mum's. She had run half the distance and jogged the rest from our house in Lumbadzi still wearing her flip flops.

"We have to take him to hospital," she bellowed, raising her hands, and interlocking her fingers to rest both palms on her multi-coloured her head scarf, the way she did when stressed.

"Mavuto, come back indoors with us please," she pleaded. "I don't know why you're behaving so strangely." Hands lowered now were resting on either side of her waist; face scrunched up in worry. With that she circumvented my uncle who was standing over me; and coming towards me made as if she was going to grab my hand to stand me up. I leapt up in a flash; I felt like I had superhuman

strength. Squaring up to my mum, I made a fist and punched her straight in the nose.
"Oh my God, he's hit me. Chifundo, the boy's hit me, Chifundo, Chifundo did you see that?" A look of disbelief replaced her worried expression.
Tears filled my mum's eyes. I was so disassociated from my feelings that I did not even cuddle her or apologise. My reasoning was off, thoughts distorted.

I did not try to critically analyse the logic behind what my grandfather whom I had never met; he was long deceased before I was even conceived was telling me. Years later I am more compos mentis and now familiar with medial jargon like auditory hallucinations and realise it would have been nigh impossible for me at fourteen to be recruited as a CIA Agent. To begin with I am a born and bred Malawian from Zomba district; I had never set foot outside the country or worked for any law Enforcement organisation.

By the time I accessed treatment from mental health professionals I was already psychotic, and my family could no longer manage my presentation at home. I up to the point of admission was still clueless what my symptoms were a sign of. The unfriendly voice was telling me to hasten on and embark on my CIA mission to redress the injustice

done to Lincoln Burrows by the American Authorities and overturn his death sentence; I could not determine if my thoughts were logical or not. But the reason I had l punched my mum on the roadside was because she tried to get me to go back home after I attempted to run away to Lilongwe or Blantyre.

I had been manhandled into a vehicle owned by Mother's employers with a *Blessings Hospital Lumbadzi* logo on a side panel and was being driven somewhere. A cord had been fastened around my limbs. In fact, both my hands and legs were restricted and there was a rope tied tightly around them. The vehicle was driving fast along a main road. Nothing made sense. I was listening to my mum's brother speaking but his words were registering in a brain unable to decipher any sense out of what it was hearing. I felt like I was going through a tunnel and a force was pulling me towards them.

My mind was fluctuating between states; a whole group of us had disembarked outside Bwaila Mental Unit in May 2012. My mind was leaving my body. I could have been hitting out at mum and her two brothers trying to restrain me as we got out of the car. I was shivering, or was I not? It was winter

here. Next recollection was of me on an uncomfortable hospital bed. A person with a soft intonation whispered: "You're in Kamuzu Central Psychiatric Ward Mavuto," leaning over me. She might have been a nurse, pretty; afro hair tied up in a bun.
I might have drifted off into a daze or I might not have. I was in hospital not in the CIA Headquarters Washington DC. Why was I in a psychiatric unit? My thoughts were jumbled.

I was back in our world but floating between reality and a trance-like state. I stared wide-eyed at the bearded gentleman in off white, creased scrubs, sat in the only velvet armchair in the strange room I had been ushered into. It was the clinical room in the Mental Health Wing in Bwaila Asylum. His questions were registering but my psychotic brain was refusing to decipher any sense of what he was asking. My mind was blurry. I was slumped over in a hard, straight back plastic chair across his wooden desk, with my late mum, Annie sitting next to me, breathing heavily. She was gesticulating and waving things around- her hands. No. She was either wriggling her hands or clutching the plastic arms of the chair. She instantly took over and started responding to the psychiatrist's Spanish inquisition.

An eternity passes. I appeared in another area of the ward. A lady in blue - could have been another staff nurse - was mumbling to my uncle, was my mother looking upset?

"He's been kicking off nonstop, so I've drawn up 5 millilitres of intramuscular Haloperidol."

The flustered looking female nurse announced, racing down the corridor in Kamuzu ward, Bwaila Mental Health Unit, Lilongwe. My eyes wildly darted towards her hand; her efforts to conceal a syringe under a flimsy paper towel in a kidney dish had been futile. I floated away into another realm; her light blue uniform causing the nerves in my prefrontal cortex to twitch ten to a dozen. I was experiencing a migraine and the voice in my head was barking orders like a siren blaring in one of the Prison Break DVDs I had watched a couple of days before.

"Who?" a person asked.

It might have been a male colleague of hers. Their voices sounded faraway; interspersed by a familiar tone of voice repeating my name claiming to be my mum. My thoughts were distorted, and I could not distinguish between actual occurrences and imagined ones.

"I've been assigned a mission by the CIA".

I muttered over and over under my breath, intrusive thoughts making it impossible to process the

unintelligible speech from those hovering over me as I laid on the hard mattress in the ward. I might have fallen asleep or into a stupor.

"What's today's date?"

The female nurse doublechecking my personal details and the date.

"June 13th, 2012," again the guy, in an American accent.

I was the Agent assigned to get Wentworth Miller and Dominic Purcell released from *Juliet Prison* Chicago. I was an investigator in a scene in Prison Break but weirdly people around me were speaking in Chichewa.

She had a needle in either her left or right hand. The needle magnified into a gigantic one, bigger than her head.

"He's hallucinating".

The male staff bent over me, concerned, examining my face. His breath smelled of cigars. Cigars were in Prison Break. He was in Prison Break.

"Let me OUT, Let Me OUT for f... k sake."

I was ranting and rolling around; the ropes had been loosened, limbs catching anything in my way, hospital staff, my uncle, my mum, the bed rails.

"We'd have to restrain him. He's becoming violent and aggressive."

An American commented in Chichewa. They were rolling me into the prone position, A prick in my buttock. I blacked out.

I remember waking up hours later. Yes, I was in Psychiatric Unit in Bwaila Hospital, a secondary health facility in Lilongwe District, feeling rather drowsy with an excruciating headache. My first inpatient admission under the Malawian Mental Treatment Act of 1948, was to its psychiatric unit from May to June 2012. Bwaila in Lilongwe is a grim looking building, erected under British colonial rule; its facilities had been in existence since the 1930's. Much of what I am about to describe were relayed to me by Uncles Solomon and Chifundo, my mum's brothers who were present during my admission and visited almost on a daily basis. When I graced its old dormitories with my presence in 2012, It was *the* main hub operating as a district government institution for the locality but in actual fact, I could tell from their dialects spoken, other patients came for further afield, hailing from villages with limited mental health resources.

I was informed by Uncle Chifundo and my mum before she passed how I attacked staff when I arrived as they tried to take me into the ward. For my safety I was initially taken into the women's

section because their staff were concerned it was too risky to admit me in an all-male ward. Male patients might have retaliated if I punched them. I was put in isolation in their seclusion room on my first day.

Staffing levels at Bwaila have reportedly, always been overstretched. There are known reports of patients trying to escape by climbing over the brick well fence, taking advantage of the scarcity of nursing staff. Tongue-in-the-cheek, the latter appeared to be very skilled in various aspects of nursing, namely giving agitated patients intravenous medication, but had very little time to do recreational activities like music or Art groups with us. But to their credit I did not see anyone trying to break out while I was there, however I can testify about the cruelty of security staff who used to beat psychotic patients with plastic clubs when they were heightened and lashing out at other detainees on the unit. The reaction of some of the guards was extreme in my opinion and perhaps the qualified staff should have intervened to stop us getting beaten.

My mental state improved on medication over the next twenty days I stayed in hospital. I familiarised myself with the ward. I was treated with mainly first generation antipsychotics, namely:

Amitriptyline, Carbamazepine and Chlorpromazine orally and got given Haloperidol by injection if Fluphenazine was not in stock. I have never liked needles. Homesick, I had no idea when or if I would be allowed to leave the facility. As for the other 13 or 14 male patients ranging from about twelve to thirty-five years old while each of us had their own bed, we were not nursed in separate dormitories. We were all bundled together like tinned sardines in one huge stinky fourteen-bed unit with hardly any windows. I vaguely recall hitting them back when older males slapped or kicked me unprovoked. I survived my stay there, thank goodness!

I hated it on Kamuzu ward. It was depressing. The only leisure activity was a brisk escorted walk around the courtyard. Worse still, as already indicated the initial period of my admission was spent in a seclusion room with doors fortified with steel bars no different from police cells I have seen in films. The toilet was a tiny, smelly hole in one corner of the dimly lit room. Whenever I was involved in a fight I would be led straight back off to seclusion. I was only trying to defend myself from aggressive patients. I felt degraded. Schizophrenia seemed the worse condition to suffer from in Malawi. No one ever inquired about my emotional

state or reassured me I would eventually get discharged.
Patients were scratching their heads a lot. "Head lice;" a buzz word among us, heard along the corridors and out in the yard. I did not want to be plagued with Pediculosis under any circumstances! I might have even hallucinated about lice. I could hardly change into clean clothes, a horrible situation for a teenager who was now well enough to care about their looks and hygiene to find themself in. I was admitted in winter time, so the other inmates were not really bathing. One bathroom in the male dormitory was what we all used if you were lucky to find it empty. The stench of body odour must have risen to high heaven.

Food was scarce too; famished patients were eating leftovers out of rubbish bins in the communal area. Once I improved, I was moved by compassion to share some of my meal, paid from by my uncles- *Nsima* with vegetables or beef stew and eggs – with some of them.

By now the realisation that I had been detained in a mental health institution had left me feeling embarrassed. Kamuzu ward was not suitable for a sixteen-year-old. I was confined in a locked hospital alongside much older patients. I cannot list

on one hand the number of times I had a one-to-one session with a nurse, if ever! The observation by Mercy Mkandawire, founder of the youth organisation iMind in 2022 to the Guardian reporter, Charles Pensulo is indeed accurate. Although I was taken to a mental health institution at sixteen against my will, services for individuals my age should endeavour to be "youth-friendly" in order to encourage young people to access mental health treatment from them and not be afraid of being branded insane.

The dark ages ended the instance my mental improved. My perception of reality became more logical. The deluded belief about working for the CIA went away. Some residual symptoms like slight paranoia remained. I could distinguish between what the voices were saying and real people speaking.

June 14, 2012. The illusive duty psychiatrist had arrived. I was sitting in the communal area of Kamuzu Ward eating *Nsima* and eavesdropping on the music from a small transistor radio the straight-faced nurse watching us like a hawk was listening to rap music on. A much more attractive-looking nurse with a clip board sashays into the communal area and begins to call out names.

"Mavuto Pemphero Phiri." There was no mistaking it. "Come into the ward round."

Ward round I had come to learn were a weekly meeting to discuss the presentation of patients, review their medication or discharge them back into the community. There were so few psychiatrists at Bwaila Hospital so perhaps if I was reassessed earlier than June 14, I might have been released sooner. The office slash nursing station at the end of a long corridor in the quieter part of the noisy ward I was escorted to, resembled a makeshift cubicle. I was ecstatic to see a gentleman in a white suit who pointed towards a plastic chair opposite his desk. The pretty nurse enters and sits down. She feeds back on my progress. I was socially appropriate, concordant with mediation; I had shown empathy towards another patient by sharing my *Nsima;* I had not been observed responding to voices or laughing incongruously. Her jargon was incomprehensible but the phrase the psychiatrist mouths with an affectation was clearly decipherable.

"Mavuto, you've done well. You can leave. Your mum can take you back home tonight when she comes to visit."

Chapter Six

YOU HAVE SOMETHING CALLED BIPOLAR DISORDER

First week in January 2013; I was laying down at home. Endless days and months had been spent resting on the settee at mum's new place of residence in Kawale 2, northern Lilongwe since discharge back in June 2012. I could not go back to Namitete until mum was satisfied, I had recuperated enough to be on my merry way. On the positive side the illness which had plagued me since 2010 now had a name: Schizophrenia. Schizophrenia was historically categorised into different types; but mine was not typified. I had been administered medication to stabilise my mental state at Bwaila Hospital and taking them became an integral part of my daily routine.

The grandiose delusions subsided; I was now Mavuto, a sixteen year old boy who had "to make an effort to try and finish college." I really missed

socialising with my friends but utilised the convalescence period to search up the new jargon medical staff had been using; I developed a better understanding of my condition while of course, still watched my favourite Sitcom; *Prison Break* on DVDs. By January 15th I had begun to feel like my old self before the symptoms emerged and my parent decided my health had been sufficiently restored for me to go back to campus.

Back at Namitete in 2013 I rather unwillingly had to switch to another course: Rural and Community Development. I felt disappointed in myself, listening to the head lecturer telling me the minimum requirement of the **Association of Business Managers and Administrators/**ABMA board was 4 credits on MSCE whereas I only had three so could not continue with Motor Mechanics. On the other hand, it was too tedious for me anyway. Additionally, I had missed out on six months of schooling. Be that as it may, I soon caught up with my classmates, passed all the tests and the more I saturated my mind with my course work, the less I worried about my health.

A new gadget had entered my life, a smartphone. Mum had splashed out the little savings she had on a get-well soon present for me, a

Huawei G6066 mobile phone. I could surf the internet and download rap or rhythm and blues music from internet streaming sites. Dalito and I exchanged mobile phone numbers and were speaking on the telephone! A new feeling of euphoria had replaced the hallucinations and with the new spring in my step I was starting to think I could conquer the obstacles I had dealt with in the past. Besides, I would post random Facebook updates or change statuses several times a day. I found myself getting overexcited if new friends added me on Social Media. A new rush meant there were days when I would just keep talking to my roommates. I could not understand why I felt so elated. I had ambitious plans to become a rapper or writer. I began working on my talents. Rap music was the in-thing amongst students at Namitete College.

I heard in the grapevine a certain Mr Willard Singeh Phiri wanted to reconnect with the son he once conceived. He had been given my mobile phone number by a cousin who was a mutual friend of his daughter and me. My phone rang one afternoon between lectures; my biological dad was on his way to Namitete campus, "would I please meet him outside the gates?" I wanted another parent to support me and had heard rumours my

stepfamily was living a luxurious lifestyle. In the current economic climate, dad had been married a starling four times; he was high-profile and worked for the Tobacco Control Commission /TCC having studied agriculture. Stories had filtered through about how he had risen to the enviable role of regional Manager for the south. In addition, he was reportedly an expert on trading high quality tobacco produced here, on Limbe Auction floors for thousands of United States dollars. A cash-injection into my life in 2014 would have helped combat the hardship mum endured. Of all the people in the world I would wholeheartedly, agree to meet impromptu he was top of the list.
"Sure," I had learned to send messages on my new device.

"Your mum made it impossible to see you Mavuto."
His lines in our 'Who's the daddy?' opening sequence were *so* cliched. Scrutinising his face with a frown on mine, I searched for proof he was actually my biological father. There were plenty. I was the mirror image of him. How could he not have bothered to reach out to me earlier? I had his head shape, his enormous eyes shrouded by long black

eyelashes, skin tone, and incredibly when he spoke, I swear it was like an older version of me speaking.

The atmosphere between us for starters, was awkward but we were soon chatting freely. There were a host of issues he had to clarify which I had waited until I was sixteen to ask. Dad, sitting on the driver's seat of his Isuzu KB250; was gesticulating and spreading out his hands, as he elaborated how he had tried to remain in touch with me; Mum and I were constantly moving. Glancing sideways at him I sneered on the other side of my face as he was attempting to play the role of the dependable parent. To make amends he was soon driving me off to the trading centre, splashing kwachas on groceries for College and pledging to ring me later when he dropped me back on campus. He kept his promise this time.

It was half-term and over the weekend back home with mum I relayed my encounter with my father. Mum had a separate issue on her mind: money. Incidentally I had brought all my possessions with me for safekeeping as students did. She laboriously explained how expensive private school fees were in Malawi. "Extortionate to be honest." At the time, my mum was in a low-paid job: nursing; so, she would not in a million years be able

to continue to afford to pay for my examination and tuition fees. She had three children in school now, Ulemu, Chimwemwe and me. I listened with a knot in my stomach, anticipating her next remark. She apologised but I could no longer carry on at Namitete. This was the last semester she could afford on her nursing salary. Compounded by the fact mother was beginning to have headaches and there were no guarantees she would ever scoop a win at *Premier Loto*, (our own lottery), the curtains fell, and I never went back to Namitete.

Months passed; in 2015 another institution was found. Our new home was in the district of Ntchisi; mum had taken up a role at the main government Hospital. She could not afford the tertiary college fees, so it was back to Boarding schools for me in the meantime; secondary schools in Malawi are not fussy about an upper age limit, hence I was placed at Philipina Memorial School in Lilongwe. Full of exuberance, I was more active on Facebook since joining in 2010; I added old acquaintances: Muyeso, Nathan and Felix from Berelin School; most days spent listening to music, scrolling on my phone, adding more virtual friends. Moreover, I was ecstatic to be able to happily relate

to other teenagers from a two-parent household because Mr Willard Phiri had been messaging me.

Bad luck was lurking round the corner; in 2016 mother's headaches worsened. My mother had morphed into the antithesis of me, her physical health had begun to deteriorate. She was still working but struggled to do long shifts. Word reached me through a Facebook message from Ulemu a secondary school student at this stage, how mother's health had plummeted.

Philipina dormitories housed up to fourteen students each and I was relaxing on my single bed one day in 2016 when I received a message from Uncle Chifundo saying mother had had a stroke, I should go home, and see her. A commotion erupted. I gathered all my accoutrement, my heart palpitating, and boarded a bike from school to the nearby taxi rank. All throughout the long arduous journey in the white Toyota my head was swimming above the Yvonne Chaka Chaka song blaring on the car radio. If harm befell my mother, it might signal the end of all the love and affection I once enjoyed. Mother had become very religious in the years preceding her demise; something was troubling her deeply which she never revealed to me. She was preoccupied but secretive about her health and had

not gone for a check-up preferring to congregate with other 'born-again believers' at a prophet's house in Ntchisi rather than receiving contemporary medicine.

An old rusty sign on two metal poles read: NTCHISI District. We had arrived at my destination. I remember paying the fare feeling detached from my surroundings and without even *negotiating a bargain* with a Malawian taxi driver! Mum was renting one of the bungalows in the compound of the District Hospital. Ulemu shaking like a leaf let me. She brought me up to speed. Mother had not gone in to work for days as she was quite poorly. I trailed behind Ulemu as she motioned towards a door which was ajar: mum's bedroom. The curtains were drawn to shut out the bright rays of the sun, but a shocking sight awaited me when my eyes adjusted to the dim light. Generally lively and vivacious, mum's massive weight-loss rendered her almost unrecognisable. I gasped, gripped her hand, kneeling by her bedside. Her loving stare indicated she was pleased to see me, she could speak, but at a slower rate. I later discovered that owing to motor impairment she could not mobilise unaided.

I had the same intuition from 2010 but it was tingled with apprehensiveness. Lacking the skill set Ulemu possessed, I let her ring relatives and friends to get help in the weeks after mum fell ill. We need not have bothered. Mother had belatedly accepted Jesus as her Lord and Saviour and had a supportive network of religious women who like Leticia were faith healers. I manned up in a confrontation with them as her health deteriorated and suggested Uncle Chifundo drove us and mum to Nan Diana's. The latter's contentious relationship endued until mum's passing, despite my grandmother's willingness to provide personal care for mum, she was reluctant to stay there.

Spoon-fed fictitious stories by the witch doctor, the suspicion my grandma might secretly be responsible for her ailment and bad luck was ingrained into mum's thought process. In mother's belief system, healing could be achieved through fervent prayers or consumption of herbal portions, rather than treatment in hospitals, incredible, seeing she was a trained nurse. She wished to go to "her friend instead." If witches had inflicted their spell, then her friend's prayers might banish their curse.

Concerns were raised by the family over the standard of care mum who struggled to walk or move her limbs would receive at the lady from a Pentecostal church's house who used to come over to pray for her to recover. We were right to be worried; a few days after mum sort solace at her friend's, word reached us Mum had been rushed to Partners in Hope Hospital Lilongwe. I was unable to get to her quick enough; sadly, I would never see my mother alive again; she passed away forty-eight hours after she was clocked in. Her passing hit me for six. 28th March 2016 is entrenched in my memory as the day I nearly gave up all hope. Having been on a high for the past three and half years, the world as I had known it was now crushing in on me.

Her funeral was well attended, unbelievably, her second husband my infamous stepfather, Zikomo had resurfaced. He was on the receiving end of my half-sisters' scathing stares at the Virgil. I could not fathom why. He was being blamed for mum's illness. There was a secret I had not been let in on. My dad and his offspring were what captured *my* attention. While my sisters, Ulemu and Chimwemwe were going to be skirted off to their dad's, whose responsibility was I going to become at twenty one diagnosed as schizophrenic?

Articulating the whirlwind of emotions, I felt is no easy task; grief laden, I spent our tribe's designated mourning period worrying about the impact losing mum would cause. I was maintained on regular antipsychotics which were not always available in state-run pharmacies so a relative had to pay for my private prescription. The Church of Central Africa Presbyterian/ CCAP reverend's sermon had not resonated well with me, as my faith had been tested by mum's untimely call to her maker at 47. On the plus side, I had not heard the slightest murmur from my grandfather on route to the burial site in Lilongwe driving in the hearse, in the funeral procession which incidentally was next to his. The voices had gone!

Extreme stress replaced low moods. Grandma Diana took me in temporarily. The most fitting description for Nan Diana is a safety net. She had borne the burden of caring for me in the intermittent periods when mother was unable to. She was getting older anyway, almost a pensioner she did not have enough money to buy my clothes, groceries, tablets, or foot the cost of my depot injection if she needed to pay.

"Time for a plan of action." I cannot remember which of her sons - my uncles – brought up the topic.

Over a telephone conversation the subject of moving in with my biological father in Blantyre was raised. I am not going to start slagging of all the women my dad slept with or make excuses for isolating myself in my assigned bedroom at my dad's house. But trying to fit in with his children Bomani and Chikandino was akin to climbing the steep, Mulanje Mountain, not only barefoot but on an empty stomach. A twenty-one-year old brother with a different personality had just been smuggled into their once comfy home, perhaps they felt life had dealt them a hard blow. Father had six children in total by three wives, Bomani, Chikandino, Fatsani, Pilirani, and a set of twins: Temalda a girl and her brother Thoko. I had to adjust to living with them.

Dad took me under his ward, stepping into mum's shoes with great diligence. Well, briefly. My school grades were too mediocre for a child of his. I was re-enrolled at North Pact, at their Kanjedza Campus in trendy Blantyre. If he had solved my academic problems, he had not scraped the surface of my difficulty socialising with my new family or alleviated my low mood which had come back. Plan B was not sustainable. Fair play to him, dad had given me lectures on, "coming out of my room, and at least make the effort to talk to my stepsiblings."

Trying as hard as I could to socialise, staying in a crowded living room left me overwhelmed hence I carried on isolating myself. I increasingly became left out of their conversations, and family games. I had a smartphone: the centre of my universe. Dad was worried my negative thoughts were festering and preventing me from getting over the shock of mum's death. Granted the last straw that broke the camel's back was a disagreement between him and his girlfriend -he had separated from his fourth wife – I heard from others that he and his new lover had a "complicated relationship".

My father had scarcely driven off for work at the Tobacco Control Commission when I collected my belongings and made a hasty exit out of his fortified steel gates. Resting my head on my pillow back at Nan's house later that evening I felt relived. I was back in grandmother's care in early 2017 and it was her turn to find a school for me. Dad's frantic texts dampened the enthusiasm I had felt during our short-lived friendship.

"I have paid for private psychiatric care; you associated with *the Joneses* for a year in an outstanding school."

His text messages were read at Nan's house after I had accepted on introspection, I made it difficult for

my stepfamily to get on with me by being so withdrawn.

While staying at Nan Ethel's it was back to rubbing shoulders with the less privileged students at a Community school: Chiwoko Day Secondary School. I was simultaneously doing distance learning with *Alison* and obtained a Diploma in Social media strategy. Finally, I attained 4 MSCE credits and progressed to Lilongwe Technical College to study Journalism and Media Studies. Lilongwe College can boast of attracting the most alluring girls in the country or I might have been blinded by the elation that lasts throughout the manic stage of Bipolar.

I added more friends from College on Facebook and downloaded the Tinder Dating application. I was ready to find love. Internet dating seemed the most plausible way to chat up ladies behind the protective screen of my phone. Charmaine lived in Dedza; we never met in person but flirted online. There were other sexy girls on WhatsApp groups too, I discovered. I rekindled a friendship with Alinafe online in 2022 and we dated for months. I had linked up with old school friends from past Secondaries on Facebook and created a Tinder profile.

Scrolling through the profiles of Malawian girls on Tinder my attention had been instantly drawn to Alinafe's. Dedza was down south, miles away from where I lived in Lilongwe. Alinafe's Tinder profile picture was an enhanced portrait, but I instantly recognised her, and I thought the filters made her look quite hot. Her yellow stripy blouse was unbuttoned to reveal the top of her cleavage. She had matured nicely with huge, eye-catching, breasts. I double clicked on the photo to enlarge it and chuckled under my breath. I still fancied her. I wanted a girlfriend but was not sure how she might react if I disclosed, I had been detained at Bwaila, scared of being judged or characterised as violent.

"Will she still want me?" Only one way to find out. I typed a brief cryptic text message in the chat box: "Hey, how're you?"

Unsure if what her response might be, I hit the send icon, sweating.

Two blue ticks appear on the chat feed. She had read it.

"Hi" she texts back. "No way it's you. How're you doing?" She had not forgotten me.

"I'm all good." Typed back in quick succession.

I scrolled up the screen and selected the view profile option. She had a gallery of saucy photos of herself in a short skirt at the beach; so, alluring.

"Stunning photos." "Compos Mentis guys should say that right?" I thought.
"Thanks."
She texted back with a thank you clasped hands emoji. I had always *really* liked her. "She was messaging me her interest might not have waned." I thought, hopes up.
"I'm in Lilongwe at my grandmother's. I see you'd soon be starting at my college too."
The entire phone screen fills up with a lengthy reply interspersed with emojis. Alinafe was on Tinder looking for "a serious relationship". I *liked* the sound of that. She indicated I could call her. Things *were* moving fast. I thought how easy it was to pull heron Social Media and not have to meet up in a night club or explain my problems over a meal in a packed restaurant. I could be as flirtatious as I wished online.

She had blossomed into a beautiful woman and speaking to her soon became the highlight of my day. Alinafe always had a good head on her shoulders and was responsible too at 20 years of age. She had begun studying Journalism in my college in Lilongwe, and we now had similar interests. She was still naïve and sweet and as the friendship flowered, I summed up the courage to ask her to be my girl. There was something I had to tell her first.

Alinafe's surprised reaction to me saying I had been admitted to Bwaila hospital and treated for psychosis left me bemused. She found it almost incredulous that a "normal, handsome guy like me like me had been *mad*." She asked about me drinking *Kachasu* at Berelin but "fancied me loads." Her revelation had come after a night of wild lovemaking in my allocated bedroom in Lilongwe one weekend at my Nan's Diana's house – grandmother had dozed off to the land of nod - I cradled Alinafe's voluptuous breasts, stroking her naked figure in the dark under the floral bedcovers. Her brown nipples reacted to my caress, standing up like hills. Lifting her soft thigh with mine, I spread her legs wide open and gently glided my erect member inside her, enjoying how moist she was. We were rocking back and forth for an eternity until she exclaimed in the throes of passion. Gasping for breath I crashed backwards onto the springy mattress in exhaustion. Her joyous laughter signalled I had won her heart.

"Being in love left *so* good." I theorised.
I was not thought-disordered at the time and had not relapsed for years. Things soon soured with Alinafe; she had been demanding money for everyday items; I was an unemployed student. A mere coincidence

that she started blanking me on campus, stopped coming over to see me, picking my WhatsApp calls or responding to voice notes; she got too preoccupied with her coursework. Maybe I just did not float her boat.

I was on campus at Lilongwe College. My cousin Augustus's text made no sense I reread it a dozen times. Dad and I were estranged having got on each other's nerves when I lived under his hospices in Blantyre. I tossed my handset on the bed and lowering my head, cradled it in my hands. I rubbed my eyes and peered at the phone screen again.

"Uncle has hanged himself."

Unmistakably that was what the message said. For a moment I reflected on how my family had been on the receiving end of bad luck and how it came in threes.

The latest misfortune had come after Mum passed suddenly and Uncle Solomon had been diagnosed with Schizophrenia. Uncle Solomon my deceased mother's brother had been convinced by no other than myself to start taking psychotropic medication. He had been reluctant to, despite exhibiting psychotic symptoms from as far back as 2015, five years after my own diagnosis. Unlike me, Uncle Solomon had not been consuming alcohol at all prior to his diagnosis. He had been observed

muttering incoherently to himself for years, becoming quite violent as time progressed and provoking fights with other people. It came to a crescendo when Uncle devised his own humorous but unintelligible coded dialect to communicate with us and we could not understand what he was saying. Initially my family were in denial about the cause of his symptoms, thinking it was a demonic attack. A lot of people here believe a mental illness is caused by witchcraft.

My phone pings again with a notification sound, bringing me back to the present moment.
"Can you make your way to Mtileni village?" Augustus had texted via WhatsApp.
An uncle had taken his own life and Augustus was not telling me which one.
"Had Uncle Solomon taken his life because he had been unable to live with the stigma?"
I unbuttoned my pyjamas top and pulled out a clean shirt from underneath the layers of clothing neatly packed in the suitcase I brought with me. It had been my beloved mother's. I smiled thinking of how she has been given it by Nan Diana. I hurriedly put on my day clothes all the while ruminating on the WhatsApp message.

I was just going to scroll quickly through my Facebook feed to see if any of my sisters or cousins had disclosed the identity of the relative who had committed suicide, when my drooping gaze alighted on a link which had been shared by a College friend of mine who wanted to know if the Malawian Daily newspaper caption was true.
"*Tobacco Commissioner Limbe Divisional Manager Willard Singeh Phiri commits suicide in Kasungu*." I dropped my phone in shock and collapsed backwards unto the bed.

Thursday afternoon: I am conscious, awake, and laying on my bed on campus. My Techno phone is beside me; the message icon indicates I had eighteen unread messages. I jolt back up as my memory clears slightly. I was half dressed anyway; I slipped my only pair of trainers on. Mtendere, a roommate walked into the shared dormitory whistling a Notorious B.I.G tune grinning like a Cheshire Cat. His dad was picking him up for the weekend he said. "Dad." The word rang a bell. My memory came flooding back. Mine was dead. I had to dash to Mtileni. I brushed past a taken aback Mtendere who had come to discuss a rap tune I was going to duet on with him.

"Why in God's name had my dad taken his own life at 64? His future had seemed so promising. He would even have received social security when he retired as an employee who paid into the National Pension Scheme."

My brain was going to explode with trying to process the news. Hailing an Okada on the main road round the bend off of m1 road, I swung my legs clad in jeans over the bumpy passenger seat behind the sour-faced biker.

"Taxi depot please." I was in a hurry.

Sitting in the passenger seat of the taxi, I was contemplating on the factors which could have pre-empted father's suicide. Writing in 2021, Banda et al, observed that a significant amount of males in Malawi end their own lives often as a direct consequence of life's stressors, such as socioeconomic problems. The COVID-19 lockdown the previous year had seen an exponential rise in suicide rates in the country in comparison with death by suicide rates in neighbouring countries. Banda et al's research into self-injurious behaviuor with the intent of ending one's life centred around the inability of Malawian men to cope with financial pressures.

"In my dad's case the cause was definitely not a shortage of money. He held a managerial post in a company!"

Say dad even wanted to seek help for depression in our country where would he had sought counselling from, a private mental health care provider? Banda et al (2021) further expounded on the scarcity of psychiatrists in Malawi, laminating the disproportionate ratio of clinical staff in comparison with citizens who have mental health crises. In a patriarchal African culture where our men do not want to be perceived as weak-willed, Malawian men might be too ashamed to own up to having mental health issues. The short time I had known him, father had seemed like a proud man.

Lost in thoughts, I remember disembarking from the white and yellow taxi at the junction, behind a kiosk where the lane forked into two halves: down one way were the well-distanced bungalows, one of which father had rented, and the other unpaved half led to mud huts where poorer Mtileni villagers lived in humble dwellings.

Life was so unpredictable. My intrusive thoughts had returned. Mum gone, dad: dead. To my credit I was responsible enough to know the importance of treatment compliance in the community after their demise so had commuted on an Okada to a government hospital to be reassessed and given top-up medication. My relatives were

indisposed so could not accompany me. I had begun to have severe fluctuating moods. Nan Diana had asked her son Uncle Chifundo who now worked as a District Commissioner in Neno to become my guardian. Before heading to Neno, I had gone to Blantyre for a reassessment by the psychiatrist. Another bombshell had just been dropped. I was sitting in his cream painted, cluttered office at the Queen Elizabeth Central Hospital, a Public health facility in Blantyre.

"Your symptoms are caused by a mood disorder young man."

The doctor had pronounced, top half only visible from across his desk littered with untidy paper files stacked nearly as high as his head, which he kept nodding to emphasis his words. I had only graced their facilities to get a repeat prescription for Amitriptyline, Haloperidol and Chlorpromazine. As per state legislation any new patient in their catchment area wanting powerful antipsychotics needed to have a thorough physical examination and mental state assessment and the results would constitute part of case notes inputted into their Electronic Medical Records System. In response to the doctor's barrage of questions, I had spilled out as if on autocue how my mood was extremely low. I

felt depressed and hopeless, not just as a consequence of grief but for some inexplicable reason I could not pinpoint.

Rightly so my mood had plummeted after my mum's major illness and death within such a short space of time. One minute she was around, showering me with affection and insisting I drank herbs to stop the voices and reduce my agitation, the next minute she had died. My biological dad had taken up the mantle to assist me financially until he committed suicide in 2021. My dad, Willard Singeh Phiri had hanged himself after finding out that his fiancé was cheating on him.

To mitigate the loss, staff at the Tobacco Commission Industry had paid out dad's gratuities to his immediate family, meaning I as his first born son was awarded three hundred thousand kwachas.

"I have a windfall coming." I casually remarked to Mtendere; strolling alongside me on Mchinji road away from Namitete college, on our way to the makeshift car park where the Okadas waited for passengers.
"The company my dad used to work for has sent me a cheque. It's at my grandma's," a revelation made with the momentum of pressured speech.

Mtendere gave me a sly look out of the corner of his eye, and we walked in step on the grass verge that served as a footpath. He tossed his head to shake off the drops of drizzling rain, gave me another quick peep sideways and probed: "do you still want me to record that rap song professionally?"
I smiled slightly, keeping my eye on the road in front of us to avoid bumping into pedestrians. He was referencing a rap song in Chichewa we had composed.

The Okada drivers had caught sight of us, and one had started beckoning with his hands. Students were their regular passengers, and they could spot us from a mile off. Mtendere was referencing an earlier conversation we had, had in the dormitory about going to a private studio in Blantyre to record the song as a duet together. We might then upload it to a streaming website; my singing voice was not as good as I had hoped so Mtendere had suggested he sang while I polished off the lyrics. I greeted an Okada driver in a red T-shirt. "*Moni*." Meaning hi in our language.
Only one pillion could board at a time. I had to come up with a response quickly before parting company with Mtendere. I had not really thought the proposal though.

"Yeah…yeah okay."
My thoughts were racing; a symptom I later learned can be attributed to Bipolar Disorder. Three hundred thousand Malawian Kwachas was a lot of money at my age and maybe I was going to be a millionaire one day after all.
"Yeah. You can do that. My lyrics are exceptionally good too."
Neither of us had done any music lessons. Mtendere said something about lending him the money to pay for the audio recording sessions and photographs for marketing. I must have nodded in agreement as I hopped on the back seat behind the fresh-faced rider.

I cannot explain logically how I ended up giving Mtendere a three hundred thousand Kwacha loan. Coming up with logical explanations will be too time consuming. I just know a week after my dad's benefits were cashed at the busy counter of the National Bank of Malawi in Blantyre, a grinning Mtendere was thanking me and blessing all my ancestors and predicting how our song, might make it to the top 40 on Malanke Music Station in Lilongwe.

Observing me closely the psychiatrist asked if I ever made decisions on the spur of the moment?

How was my mood on a scale of one to ten? If it fluctuated? Did I take risks? Was I sensible with money or was I a spendthrift? I could not articulate my answers well enough. I sat there dejected. I knew I had no money left; our Chichewa rap tune had flopped; smooth-talking Mtendere had no definitive date when he would be able to afford a repayment and to make matters worse, I was a penniless orphan. My world had crashed. The doctor was rambling about manic and depressed phases as he went on to enunciate the diagnostic criteria for a condition, he said was Bipolar Disorder, the only phrase which registered in mind was: "I'll commence you on 20mg Fluoxetine, an antidepressant, today."

Chapter Seven

A BURDEN ON MY FAMILY AND THE BURDEN OF SIDE EFFECTS

Wednesday April 10, 2023; today is the last day of the task I assigned myself: to pensively sort through what contributed to my mental disorder. I may have come up with some plausible explanations; I might discuss them at my review today. I have deduced that a variety of environmental, lifestyle, genetic, and psychological factors combined may have caused childhood Schizophrenia in my case. All along I had *no* reason to hide my diagnosis or feel it was my fault I developed it.

Immersed in deep thoughts, I walked briskly up the paved T397 road, past Neno Girls Secondary to my left; the road makes a slight curve at the bend. There is a verge on the righthand side, and I was using it as a footpath. I stopped to catch my breath,

adjusted my Bluetooth headphones, turned up the volume on my Techno handset and carried on listening to my downloaded rap music. The sound of birds chirping overhead filtered through my headphones, above the soft volume of the music; it lifted my mood. In another ten yards, I passed Neno Police Station to my right. I continued purposefully on the 35-minute walk, straight ahead. The road stretched in front of me, and I began to feel tired, but I reminded myself that exercise is rejuvenating. My mental health nurse keeps reiterating its benefits. I would have been languishing indoors on my own otherwise, browsing Social Media sites or listening to Afro beats.

I caught up with a lady possibly a market trader, she was chatting in Chichewa at decibels loud enough to revibrate in my ears, on her old Nokia handset about how the prices of commodities were sky rocketing; I turned up my music. She noticed another pedestrian and spread her lips in a friendly smile. I adjusted my gait trying to walk normally. Talkative lady blanked, I hurried on, mustering up strength. In the distance I caught the glimpse of a building. I veered left towards the paved driveway; the white sign stuck to brick wall on the triangular-shaped porch has black lettering

which reads: Neno District Hospital. A familiar sight nowadays.

I have arrived for my four-weekly intramuscular Flupentixol Decanoate injection: I have been taking it since 2012. I navigated my way into the entrance avoiding the parked motorcycles cluttering the entrance. Inside the waiting room was heaving with people. Patients were sitting in the cement-blocked sitting area, looking stressed. I spotted an empty space on one of the wooden benches and hurriedly squatted my bottom before it was taken by someone else. I prepared to wait another half an hour to be called in by a friendly nurse to receive my depot.

Being maintained on powerful antipsychotics has taken its toll on my body, although I have vowed to remain concordant with my prescribed medication as the last thing I want to endure, is another relapse. A percentage of the costs of antipsychotics have always been footed by immediate family members as evidenced. If I stopped taking medication my mental state may deteriorate. Moving around so much up till the age of 22, I have lived in remote areas in districts in Malawi where mental health care was not free of charge. I have demonstrated how on occasions my

out-of-stock antipsychotic drugs had to be sourced from private pharmacies instead. My Uncle Chifundo used to pay for a monthly package at Saint John of God, a private hospital in Lilongwe, which included counselling and medical treatment from 2018 to 2021, until the care package rose to an unaffordable K7,000 per month.

"I am just double checking you're registered disabled and in receipt of state benefits".
I smiled over the phone during a WhatsApp phone call at the remark by a British woman stated matter-of-factly. I had entered her writing competition and she had assumed having read my submission that I was registered disabled due to my diagnosis. Acceptably mental health services here are much more efficient in comparison with other sub-Saharan countries, having said that, no state benefits apart from free public health care in some areas, are in place in my country. Although disability in the Malawi Disability Act, 2012 incorporates a mental condition that impairs social interaction and hinders one's ability to behave like a 'normal' citizen, legislation which put into place the Disability Trust Fund ironically, does not stretch far enough to encompass fiscal benefits such as the provision of social security.

The Act is pretentious in stating how people would be offered *tools* to enable a *rehabilitation* back into 'normal' life when community mental health care is absent in Malawi. No psychiatric nurses ever come into my home, instead I go to hospital premises for treatment. The first impediment persons with schizophrenia might encounter is being able to meet the disability criteria here. I am not even seen as a vulnerable adult. Disability is largely conceptualised as limitations on mobility or physical functioning and the definition does not incorporate lifelong mental disorders.

"Pardon?" she inquired, thinking she probably misheard my response. I had not replied in the affirmative as she expected, much to her surprise.

"There're no such benefits here," I informed her.

In fact, it was her comment that made me realise that my diagnosis was of a long-term condition that meant there were periods in my teenage years where it had incapacitated me.

Another glaringly obvious problem with my care is despite scholastic research showing patients benefit from a therapeutic relationship with mental health staff familiar with their case history, I have lost count of the number of psychiatrists I have met due to the frequent change of medical personnel when I visit hospitals; I estimate I must have met

more than ten of them. I agree with objective view I have moved around Malawi a lot and sometimes accessed private treatment.

An explanation can be provided by underscoring how responsibility for providing Mental Health care in my country is shared between the state and a nongovernmental organisation /NGO called Partners in Health. There is a collaborative effort with the local authorities in some districts namely Neno and Lilongwe where I have received care to provide holistic Mental Health treatment to vulnerable patients such as I in regional hospitals. Without doubt we are lucky in Neno to receive continuing care for serious mental health disorders from the international organisation, Partners in Health.

Psychotropic drugs are prescribed for my condition because people with Schizophrenia may have an imbalance of levels of neurotransmitters such as dopamine or serotonin. Our perception of reality may become altered, impairing our thought processes, and resulting in hallucinations when our levels of serotonin drop. Hence why Schizophrenia is a neurological disorder.

It affects the way my brain functions and has caused language disturbances. I have difficulty producing speech or pronouncing words sometimes. I *can* speak but listening to me observers have when this occurs commented I sound slurred. It may lead people to wrongly conclude I am drunk, but I have abstained from alcohol since 2010. Slurred or slower speech is also a side effect of antipsychotic mediations. De Boer et al (2020), discuss the hypothesis that antipsychotics impair the delivery of speech because they affect production of the chemical, dopamine which plays a vital role in speech regulation.

Older generation antipsychotics like Haloperidol which I used to take may cause undesirable side effects like movement disorders. I think my posture has been affected over the years I have been maintained on antipsychotics, although my current psychiatrist says it is a hallucinatory belief and physically there is nothing preventing me from walking straight. Once the therapeutic effects of my depot start to wear off, I might feel an imbalance with the way I walk causing me to lean to one side. In the past a prodromal or early warning sign preceding my relapse, would be me misinterpreting people's innocent reactions for sinister ones. I used to get quite paranoid over how

conspicuously I walk. If I was out for a stroll in Blantyre when I lived with my dad, I used to be suspicious of passers-by staring at me, thinking once I was out of sight, they might start making fun of my gait.

In addition, my gait made me so self-conscious and embarrassed I quit my jobs as a front office porter and door man at Crown Hotel. I later gave up on my freelance trainee reporter role at Mladho Radio Station in 2022 -the longest period of employment to date - a job I really enjoyed. If it was not for troubling emotions, I would have stayed on! Some family members have accused me of being lazy because I do not have a paid job and have ostracised me due to a lack of understanding about my condition.

To make matters worse I left my job as a cleaner at the houses of Parliament in Lilongwe later in 2022 after an astonishing three weeks, because I was ashamed of the way I walk. I became fixated on how people looked at me and believed they were aware of my posture. I am now much better and can differentiate between paranoid beliefs associated with Schizophrenia and reality. I have overcome them and continue to interact well with friends I met online and at my workplace, where I volunteer as a

Communications Officer with a local Charity. I hope to secure paid employment in the future.

With auditory hallucinations, I have been taught distraction techniques to use like listening to music or browsing Social Media Sites if they resurface. I always have my headphones with me. I mostly hear voices advising me to make bad decisions: to verbally abuse people, physically attack others or steal. A certain psychiatrist during an appointment in Blantyre revealed how everyone, "with or without your condition at times have negative intrusive thoughts. You either choose to act on them or you don't. I suggest you try your best to ignore them, despite how hard that is." I have learnt to ignore negative intrusive thoughts as advised.

I have encountered prejudice from a few people in society mainly due to the misconception that all people with Schizophrenia were once drug addicts. Therefore, substance abuse is assumed to have contributed to my mental disorder. I hasten to stress my aversion to risk taking; I have neither dabbled in illicit substances namely Indian hemp or *Chamba* nor injected my body with heroin. In my case the onset of a serious mental disorder was not synonymous with drug abuse. I get routinely screened for HIV in particular, as per the health

policy here, especially when I change localities and Mental health Teams.

Following my registration at Neno District Hospital, I had blood tests and a thorough physical assessment to check my weight. I do not however get regular liver and kidney function tests, a requirement in the United Kingdom for patients on Carbamazepine. I have *no* blood borne diseases. My disorder is not the consequence of bad behaviour, instead I probably should explore the genetic link on my mother's side of the family. I now know I have two close relatives believed to have Schizophrenia.

This line of thought may have pre-empted the psychiatrist's query at my last medical review during which he inquired about my understanding of what might have triggered my mental disorder. I write that last sentence hesitantly because even some members of my family warned me never to disclose to anyone I had it, for fear of how Malawian society might misjudge me.

The stigma associated with Schizophrenia has prevented me from speaking out in the past. I harbour self-doubts and insecurities especially around women. To date, I have had two relationships; a sexual one with Alinafe, the student

but as schizophrenia has knocked my confidence, I much prefer speaking to females on line from the safety of my own home. I met another lady, Charmaine on a WhatsApp group, and we had a brief virtual, platonic relationship; never met up in person. I can relate appropriately to females. Not all people with Schizophrenia lack social skills.

I had an intimate, physical relationship with Alinafe. Antipsychotics can cause erectile dysfunction but, in my case, I was able to maintain a healthy sexual relationship with my girlfriend. I had not developed fatigue yet and had no foreknowledge of how tiredness a side effect of Flupentixol would debilitate my life. I have difficulties waking up in the morning and I am almost so exhausted every day I am unable to execute certain tasks other people take for granted. I started experiencing signs of the syndrome earlier on in life, but I believed it became more pronounced in 2022. People with schizophrenia often feel lethargic; in my case I started feeling extremely tired after school around age sixteen after I was diagnosed. At first, I thought that I was just bone lazy but after an evaluation I discovered it was probably a side effect; it has left me being deemed incompetent, especially after being unable to complete my degree in Business Management with

the University of The People, a free online learning institution.

I was told that the only treatment I can have will be a change in medication. To be honest I am on fewer medication now compared to the big list of drugs I was discharged from Bwaila hospital on. My mental health team here advised that I could have a reduction of the dose in order to enable me to be more active during the day. I experience diurnal sedation. My daily routine involves me waking up and walking to my employer's office in Neno, a stone's throw from Uncle Chifundo's house and volunteering for a few hours; the moment my head touches the pillow back indoors, I would doze off, sleeping like a log. To alleviate this, my team suggested I take my oral medication, Carbamazepine at night before going to bed rather than in the morning.

Explaining why psychiatric medications cause fatigue, Dr Chris Aiken elucidates online in the *Psychiatric Times* journal how the original goal of antipsychotics in the 1950s was tranquillisation because people with Schizophrenia might periodically display agitated behaviour or be physically aggressive towards care givers.

Concurrent with extreme tiredness is the dreaded weight gain another side effect. For someone who was nearly skeletal, on my last assessment at Neno District Hospital I was alarmed to see my weight had shot up to 81 Kilogrammes due to increased appetite, lack of motivation and depleted energy levels; I do not do much exercise except for walking around Boma where I live.

I may want to work out in the gymnasium like others in my age bracket, but extreme low mood associated with Bipolar Disorder has worsened my symptoms. I am not as bad as in 2016 when a diagnosis was made but still get bouts of depression regularly. Not being in paid employment and lacking the ability to buy things for myself for example clothing, groceries and electrical items has left me as a bloke with a serious inferiority complex. I receive allowances from the Charity I work for occasionally but not enough to sustain myself on. I have lived in the care of others nearly all my life.

A smartly dressed nurse came out of the clinical room in Neno District Hospital and ticked off names on her brown clipboard officiously with her black pen. She was running the mental health clinic today, Wednesday. She looked around the waiting room and sighed in exasperation seeing the

queue of seated patients waiting; scrutinised her list and said audibly:

"Mr Mav... Mavuto Pemphero Phiri please?"

Finally, my turn. Not a long wait at all; smiling like the cat that got the cream, I bolted out of my seat feeling the eyes of other patients linger on my back all the way down the busy corridor to the white door on our left. I skimmed my right hand over my front shirt pocket to ensure I had brought along my Health Passport, a requirement of the Ministry of Health.

"I'm Lorata." Once the door closed behind us the nurse with high cheek bones and braids introduced herself. "I only joined the mental health team last month so don't think we've met?

"No." I agreed politely, speech a bit slurred. I would have remembered seeing her hourglass figure.

She went up to the overhead cupboard on the far end of the treatment room, yanked open the door, plasters and packets of syringes greeted my stare. She selected a small syringe, a disposable Polypropylene tray and turned to smile at me, as I stood by the door.

"Sit down Mahvatoh."

She pronounced my name with a Zambian accent then asked me to confirm my date of birth. Nervous as usual, I sat down on a wooden chair, anticipating

her interrogation about my mental state and evidence of side effects before administering my long-acting injection. Lerato humming a Bemba song as she retrieved a box of Flupentixol Decanoate from the white counter beside the refrigerator.

"I took it out of the fridge five minutes ago," she was smiling again. "Do you know how many milligrams you get?" She was double checking to see if I was still compliant with my prescribed medication or whether or not I might protest and give her an excuse to scribble, "negative symptoms have returned," in her nursing notes after my consultation.

"Erm…40 milligrams?" Questioning tone of voice. I was not going to fall for the bait.

Nodding attentively, Lorata calculated her conversion out loud. "20 milligrams to a mil that equates to two mils."

I watched as she attached a 2.5 inches needle to the five mils syringe; withdrew forty milligrams of liquid from the glass bottle containing Flupentixol, then holding up the syringe in the light flicked it gently with her gloved finger to dispel any air bubble in the mixture.

"You're not scared of needles are you my dear?"

"She must have passed nursing school in Lusaka with flying colours; such good bedside manners." A humorous observation as I unbuttoned my cotton

shirt, exposing my left upper arm in readiness. Lorata grinned like a Cheshire cat. She was impressed by her cooperative patient; I could tell.
"Oh, well prepared, Mahvatoh." She rubbed my arm with an antiseptic cleaning wipe.
"Sharp scratch coming up, please try and not flinch."
She hit my arm horizontally with the needle and pumped the depot into my deltoid muscle, counting under her breath before she pulled out the needle and applied a small pink plaster to prevent me bleeding onto my shirt. I pulled my shirt back over my shoulder,
"I'd probably see you on the ninth of May Mavahtoh. Please wait to see the duty psychiatrist before you leave the hospital."
Lorata cocked her head to one side, smiling and exposing flawless white teeth.
"I hope it'll her next time," my lustful mind wanders off.

Basking in the sweetness of the deodorant emanating from the armpit of her nursing uniform filling the clinical room with a tantalising aroma as she waved goodbye, I head back through the door she had unlocked, to go into the now crowded waiting room. Poised to stay put for the required twenty minutes so their medical staff could assess

my reaction to the drug and catch up with the psychiatrist, I logged onto Tinder on my smartphone and searched up local girls. A young woman called Alinafe is suggested by Tinder algorithms; we are quite similar. Overcoming my surprise, I swiped right, I have not found a lucrative job yet, but I composed a brief message and hit the send icon.
"Hey, are you still looking for a serious relationship?"

"Muvato Pemphero Phiri?"
I was admiring Alinafe's shapely figure in her Tinder profile photographs when the voice called out my name. At least this Zambian psychiatrist had not mispronounced it. Looking up, I recognised slender Dr Buteo, poking his head, through the doorway of the clinical room on the ground floor, arm resting on the white, wooden door jamb.
"Come in please."
I sprang up like a jack in the box toy. Ushering me into his office and pulling back his armchair, Dr Buteo started to speak as he sits back down. I interrupt brining with excitement.
"I've got the answer to your question at my last review." I informed him, smiling. "I now know what triggered my mental illness.

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