

Change

By Irene Sabatini

Irene Sabatini is the author of "*The Boy Next Door - A Novel*", published in the US by Little, Brown & Co in 2009 and in the UK by Sceptre in 2010.

The novel won the 2010 Orange Award for New Writers.

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All characters in this story are fictitious and any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental

Finally, she came out with it.

We met on the internet, she said.

Before I could digest this calamity she gushed, Oh Trinity, I really love him to bits; and daddy really really likes him; daddy took him on a tour, Magwegwe, Thorngrove, Pelendaba; he met all the relatives, Uncle Choice, Auntie Dani- even Auntie Petras thinks he is just wonderful... and so on and so forth, love and happiness sparking and crackling all along the telephone lines.

I was beyond stunned.

Perversely, her words kept springing and frolicking in my head as a merry little pop tune...

Oh, oh yeah... she loves the internet man, to bits; she really, really loves, this internet man, to bits, yeah, yeah, yeah.... (and was this truly my dear, cherished sister pouring out such whiter-than-white words, so already infected by the internet bugger, oh how little time it had all taken, how had it come to this)...*and oh, daddy, really, really loves him...tooooo.*

Well, I'm happy for you, I graciously squeezed out just as the line went dead, the time for the pre-paid Afri-call card up.

I held onto the phone a bit longer as if it would steady me from the tidal wave of shock (love); I dialled Ben's number to pass the glad tidings on but received the automaton of a lady telling me something gruffly in Swiss German. I let go of the phone and poured myself a glass of wine. No, that wouldn't do, I

needed company. I put on Mtukudzi. No, no not a ballad in this moment of need. Maybe Juluka. Something hoppy, snappy. No, no. I needed to see real people. Real, breathing people with real skins, bodies, real voices. People I could actually see and, if I was of a mind to, touch. I put on some decent clothes and walked round the corner to Café du Soleil. It was just past two o'clock and the lunch time crew of UN staffers with their dangling laminated name tags slung over their necks was long gone. Three pigeons were having a fine time with the chunks of bread that lay scattered about. The tables were still cluttered with fondue pots and the smell of all that caked cheese was nauseating. The one time I had tried to eat fondue I had gagged on the bread and cheese and had to delicately spit the entire masticated mess out in front of our Swiss hosts. But, being out here in the chill air would do to clear my head. I ordered a double espresso.

Whither Zimbabwe?

Oh Whither Zimbabwe, indeed.

I laid out the facts before me.

I tried ever so hard to be positive, enthusiastic.

I sipped my double espresso.

The facts (as I understood them to be)...

My timid, little sister, Solace, has met a man on the internet.

This internet man had come scuttling out from Bournemouth to declare his undying love for her and to ask her to marry him.

My dear sister had jumped up in ecstasy, into his arms, squeaked yes, yes please.

The internet man had, with my sister, in the time honoured fashion, toodled off to Bulawayo, practised some form of black magic (probably googled) that had stripped my usually hyper critical father of any sense (*Internet, no problem my daughter, no problem at all, we are very forward looking people, we Ndebeles...*)

Delighted, daddy, without an ever so much as a *how many hours do you spend on this internet, young man and oh, let me just take a look at your passport, any I.D card...* had briskly accepted the internet man as his future son-in-law.

Daddy takes said man lovingly in hand to show him the unsung glories of Magwegwe Township, shows him the one bedroomed dwelling where his young family were lodgers for several years, further up to Thorngrove where the young family rents a two bedroomed brick house from the municipal council and no doubt shows the internet man the exact spot by the stream where young Solace almost drowns (internet man looks to the heavens and thanks the African Gods for saving his then unknown African internet love) and- what was there in Pelendaba- oh, yes, Uncle Jonas, Daddy's colourful Apostles of God brother and his brood smothered in their flowing white virginal robes. And then, of course, all the aunts and little mothers from the far-flung corners of Matabeleland had swept right in, come to see for themselves the man who was proposing to their cherished, little daughter, and one could only hope that they had behaved and

had not dropped clangers of hints about costumes from overseas and wigs and necklaces and anything else that entered the collective imagination.

The facts.

I sip on my double espresso.

How was all this possible?

Still Waters Run Deep.

You just never know.

How still these waters had been then. Not a single tiny ripple; never in a thousand, million years would I have guessed that beneath the calm, cool exterior of my treasured sister, that deep down in those fathomless depths raged torrents of, of... e-love!?

"E" love?

In Zimbabwe?

Once, when channel hopping, I had caught snatches of a T.V reality show where couples that had been 'seeing each other' over the internet finally 'saw' each other over a weekend. The tears, the dramas, *are these sad people for real, what a load of rubbish, switch it off, move on.*

Another sip of coffee.

And anyway, as far as I knew, Solace didn't have a computer at home, so where exactly had this internet romance taken place. During office hours? Somehow, I couldn't imagine Solace typing sweet nothings in her M.D's private secretary's office at the GMB, in between writing orders for maize. So where? An

internet café? An internet café in Harare? Of course they must exist. Harare was a modern, bustling city full of singles wanting to conduct internet romances. Right. Where? Where? I took my mind on a virtual tour of Harare Central Business District. By Eastgate? No, nothing I could think of. Well, how about Fife Street Mall then? There must be a place there. Weren't they just about to open a computer place upstairs when we left? So, my dear little sister sitting among other like minded persons after a long hard day at work, a terrible commute, typing, typing sweet....well.

This was obviously just another Zimbabwean mutation.

Yet another 'just look at what's happening back home now' that I had to get my head round.

The former African success story, the multiracial, reconciliation miracle, the bread basket led by a ruler of intellect and good sense had in a matter of five bewildering years mutated into the white bashing, gay bashing, Blair bashing, Bush taunting, hyperinflation breaker of all records, rule of no law, basket case whose wild flights of fancy quite often graced the pages of the exorbitantly priced English papers available from the newsagent across the road.

My Afri-call card had clocked up the wild extravagancies.

Guess what, a whole chicken is now three million dollars.

Three million dollars!

A thigh you can get for two hundred and fifty thousand. Just one. But that's if you're lucky and can even find this thigh in the whole of Bulawayo.

But, daddy, how much is three million dollars in real money?

Oh, I think fifty cents of a dollar, even less probably. But call us back in fifteen minutes, we'll have new forex figures from The Vapostoris and the price of that chicken will have gone up by a whopping two hundred percent no doubt.

Are you fine...?

Don't worry about us. We are back to the days of our youth. It's these new youngsters who do not know how to use their hands who are suffering.

And so on it went.

But still.

Internet dating?

Maybe among Rhodies (and even this it was hard to imagine, such rural diehards resorting to such technological feats) but a properly brought up African young woman who owned her own garden flat in The Avenues and who was gainfully employed and even had an African boss who coveted her but treated her with great dignity once he had been duly and vigorously apprised by Solace of the grave dangers inherent in upsetting a full blooded Ndebele father.

A water engineer from Bournemouth.

What the heck was a water engineer?

A job for Google (oh, if only she had got round to telling me his name).

I seemed to be the only voice of reason. The sensible, responsible elder sister many thousands of miles away who had not been so wilfully seduced by the free-for-all Western lifestyle that she had abandoned her Africanness now

trying single-handedly to knock some sense back into the heads of her extended family who, no doubt, had become the unwitting victims of: the vagrancies of Millennium Bugs; the forced ingestion of World Bank bitter pills; the land invasions; the endless ecstasy and despair following elections; the super duper inflation...

Decent black Zimbabweans girls do not meet men in internet chat rooms.

It was not possible.

But hadn't Ben and I caused scandal in our own way.

Once upon a time...

But he's a Shona!

But she's a Ndebele!

It was a musical chorus in the grand tradition of African storytelling; it was the continual call back, the refrain, the echo.

But oh my child he's a Shona!

But oh my child she's a Ndebele!

Oh oh our dear daughter

Oh oh our favoured son

Do not do this thing

We beg you, we beg you, we beg you...

We who have nurtured and carried you....

Yes, but at least we had met properly. Through friends. At university. Actually, at a dance in the Medical Hall of Residence. I was the guest of a

Seychellese student, Maurice, who was giving me French lessons, and just happened to be room-mates with the pretentious prat standing to the right of one of the loud speakers still wearing his lab coat, stethoscope hanging out from the top pocket. How I hated him on sight. Typical! Yes, yes we know that you are a doctor. Good for you. Yippee! And then it turned out that the said prat was in fact part of the little skit that the good doctors were putting on, taking the mickey out of their well earned image as aloof, arrogant and condescending members of the student body who would never be caught anywhere near a Student Union General Assembly meeting, never mind marching against imperialist forces. He was hilarious-with his dead-pan delivery-as the ultra studious and humourless Doctor Brain-Dread. Maurice introduced us after the show (lab coat now discarded to reveal a very fine body and, what more, a medical student with some kind of fashion sense!). I congratulated him on his performance and he, in turn, on the article I had written for the newly launched (and short lived) woman's magazine (*Arise!*) in campus. Wow, a doctor-in-waiting who actually read anything besides journals and charts and who had opinions about wider issues. We started seeing a bit more of each other and, between our two schedules, a meeting at the reception desk at Parirenyatwa constituted 'a date.' A trip to Victoria Falls over a Heroes week-end (he had managed to swap hospital duties with another student) where we romantically slept under the stars at the Municipal camping site and dined at Wimpeys sealed the romantic adventure, for the esteemed doctor was consequently called upon to apply his expertise in

the treatment of his 'revolutionary, feminist firebrand' for a bout of malaria. His expert hands and his gentle bedside manner convinced the firebrand that he was most definitely 'The One'. And, five years later, the medical student now a doctor-in-residence had popped the question and she had said yes and this was then swiftly followed by the fun part.

Meet the Relatives!!!

Oh how they trilled.

But she's Ndebele!

But he's Shona!

The words were sung gloriously at each and every opportunity accompanied with dramatic facial expressions and hand gestures (just in case the point was missed)...

Oh oh our son...

Oh oh our daughter...

Do not do this thing...

We beg you we beg you we beg you...tra la la la...

And we, (respectfully) pled guilty to the crime of deftly turning two sets of ears away from the 'Voices of the Elders'; we forged on but oh how the virulent verbal arson doubled, trebled, quadrupled, oh how skilfully it was railed against these new breed of young people. Aunts and uncles, little mothers, little fathers, descended; cluster bombs of timeless wisdom were flung and

scattered about with such great relish and theatrical fanfare. Chests pounded, tears and even some fainting spells for good measure.

As called upon we opened our eyes, ears. We looked, listened. We heard. And tried to see the error of our ways.

These Ndebeles are very lazy. Look at you; you are already as thin as anything because of living alone. Do you think a Ndebele will feed a Shona man properly (Amai G who, in her youth, was rumoured to have stopped a raging bull dead in its tracks by the sheer power of her bosom)?

Shonas! Do you want to hear about Shonas, child. Sit! Let me tell you. Forewarned is forearmed. They will eat you alive. Just like that. That boy's mother will make your life hell. Hell, I tell you. You know, Shona boys, they are not married to you. Forget it. It is their mothers. Their mothers! Be warned (Mama R known to her daughter-in-law as Mama Tormenter-Par-Excellence).

Ndebeles are spineless. Look at their fat Lobengula, giving away the country just like that for a few beads.

Shonas are gossip mongerers of the worst kind.

Dearest brother, our beloved son, these Ndebele girls are so loose. You do not know where she has been. Are you sure that she has not been impregnated down there in Bulawayo and is trying to trap a successful person like you. The most beautiful girls are Shona girls. Are you blind? Have all those shiny buildings in Harare blinded you. Listen, I tell you, Amai T has just a girl in mind, you should just see this musikana, she is a real

tsvarakadenga. Clean, only eighteen and under a very auspicious totem. How can this chisikana even compete, look how short it is, what can such a girl produce.

You are not only marrying him, our daughter. You are marrying his mother, as the sun rises in the sky, this is the truth. Do you want to hear about Shona mothers? Sit, sit. Let us who are experienced in the ways of the world and the Shona mentality tell you. She will make your life a hell on earth. A hell on earth. She will curse you (Mama R again, on a treasured recurring theme).

The Shonas will never accept you.

The Ndebeles will never accept you.

They are too proud.

They are too proud.

She cannot speak Shona!

He cannot speak Ndebele! (Never mind that my own Ndebele was virtually non-existent, and the little of it that did exist had been mutilated beyond repair by my gregarious addition of 'i' in front of any English noun to Ndebelize it; my father was to blame for this because of his enforced 'English is Best' Home Policy coupled with the strict 'English Only Allowed' at the Convent School).

What language are you talking to each other? English? English!

This is what happens with too much education. The young lose their way.

And when all else failed the 'wrath of the ancestral spirits' was called forth by both sides.

The Spirits of the Ndebele people.

The Spirits of the Shona people.

The Ancestors of the Ndebele people.

The Ancestors of the Shona people.

You will have no children.

You will bear only girls.

Your children will be deformed.

And, of course, all that bloody history was solemnly spread out before us. Ndebeles slaughtering Shonas. Shonas slaughtering Ndebeles.

We were doomed. But we prevailed. We were steadfast. In love. And we made our Great Escape, Our Getaway care of the WHO.

Four blissful years of serenity.

Relatives kept skilfully at bay. Far far away. Over the mountains. Over the seas.

No, Amai, it is not wise for you to come and visit, it is very very cold here. Just yesterday a workmate's cousin, recently arrived from Zambia passed away from pneumonia. Yes, we shall bring back many many costumes and two bras. Yes, yes, size forty-six.

No, no Mama, the plane ride is very tiresome. You have not heard of this thing called Deep Vein Thrombosis? It is an aeroplane sickness that attacks the blood in the legs. You come out from the plane and in less than one hour you are the late.

Yes, through wile and trickery we had fashioned a charmed life in a banker's, watchmaker's haven.



When Ben came home he had news of his own. He had a mission to Zimbabwe and I was quite welcome to tag along. He gave me that look of his which said he knew that I would be on yet another rescue mission of my own.

At least we would not be going back empty handed. My lovely bump would ensure a warm welcome from all sides. Finally, it had happened! The Ndebele girl was impregnated.

I abandoned Ben in Harare and sped over (care of the special ration of fuel from the Diplomats' Depot) to Bulawayo. One day of Ambuyas, Amais and the imminent arrival of his mother from Ruwa had propelled me on my way. I knew I was being rude but I promised Ben I would make up for it when I came back by being a very dutiful daughter-in-law and going with his mother to give thanks to the ancestral spirits.

When I arrived the love birds had (conveniently) taken themselves off to Victoria Falls and would be back the next day. Good! I would begin my interrogations without hindrance. But all I could get out of dearest daddy was what a fine upstanding young man he was which made me want to immediately take daddy's temperature and harbour fears that not only had the World Bank's Economic Structural Adjustment Package, also known as: Extra Suffering for African Peoples, been an unmitigated economic disaster but it had also taken a

severe psychological toll on previously wise and all knowing Ndebele Patriarchs. And all mummy was truly interested in was my bump and dragging me into town to pick out pastel shades for knitting bonnets and mittens. I would have to use stealth. I went into the guest room. There seemed not a trace of him. The lumpy bed was neatly made. I ducked my head under it. Nothing. I went over to the window and- ah ha! - there on the sill was a receipt from King's Jewellers in Harare for an engagement ring. There were so many zeroes in the price my head spun with trying to convert it into real money and I still couldn't manage. *O Wither Zimbabwe!* I decided that this receipt was further incriminating evidence against him. Why had he left it there? Obviously, for someone (me) to find. Look, how much I care, he was declaring boldly. Look, how much I paid he had the cheek to go on. Virtuosity in his Virtuality. Well, I, for one, was not fooled. The day of reckoning was nigh. Tomorrow, all would be laid bare. I was ready.

And here, before me, was the most beautiful black man I had ever seen.

And the most beautiful black man I had ever seen opened his beautiful black mouth and breathed out the most beautiful Ndebele I had ever heard.

It is a great pleasure to meet you at last, my future sister (all of it kindly translated by my mother).

I felt my mouth gape, failed to close it.

What was this?

What had happened to the pasty, Bournemouth, water engineer?

Surely this was not him. Surely not.

But yes. The African Diaspora in all its ironic magnificence. There it stood before me.

I looked at Solace. Her eyes were fixed on the beautiful black man.

Well....

How did you meet? I asked my sister again when we were alone in her room. I told you, she said, on the internet. You can't have, I said. The internet is full of weirdoes, creeps. Thanks, she said. I don't mean you, Solace. I didn't mean me, she said. Why can't you just be happy for me.

Throughout dinner, which was held ceremoniously in the hot, windowless dining-room as opposed to in front of the T.V in the airy lounge, I watched daddy in his element as he laughed and gesticulated and regaled the internet man who had been given the place of honour at the other end of the table directly facing the man of the house. A son, at last, I could positively feel my father vibrate with joy. A true Ndebele son! And I watched and marvelled as the new heir to the throne, beautifully ensconced in his mahogany chair, worked his magic: how he smiled beatifically at the traditional Ndebele feast before him; how he raised his soulful eyes at his soon-to-be bride who quivered and shimmered in her turquoise gown; how he made soothing noises at the glittering (shiny, gold-plated jewellery courtesy of the sales in Geneva) and suddenly very

girly mother-of-the-bride who an hour earlier while preparing the dinner had been giggling about the 'umkwenyana' and whether he would find the dobi to his liking. And all of this interspersed with the lively exchanges with his equal, the father-of-the-bride, who seemed to find any utterance from the upstanding young man a thing of great delight. Only once, a flicker of interest at the sister of the bride- now relegated with her bump to the outer regions of the banquet table- when mummy remarked why I was not eating the relish and, looking down at my plate, I saw that I had made little balls of sadza around the meat and gravy and that I had been popping these into my mouth like peppermint drops. As they bantered back and forth how tempted I was to burst out with something highly inappropriate, something like, so, you beautiful Ndebele man, does your mother know of this modern way of yours of finding a good Ndebele woman. Or still, so does this modern way of matchmaking include or exclude the payment of lobola. But I turned to look at my sister, and there she sat, in thrall. I ate my dinner quietly.

I did not see Solace until late next evening. I had gone to her room to declare defeat and to wish her all the happiness a good Ndebele man would bring her. I found her sitting on her bed looking at her hands. Solace, I said. She was so lost in her thoughts she did not hear me. Solace, I said, stepping into the room. She looked up. Her eyes were shiny and red. Solace, what's wrong? I sat down next to her. This will make you happy, she said. She clasped her fingers tightly and I

noticed then that she was not wearing the engagement ring. What, Solace? What's wrong? He has a child, she said. A child. The tears were falling now. She was angrily wiping her nose. I'm so stupid, stupid! You were right. What was I thinking? I took her hand. Solace, I said, listen. A man in his forties is bound to have some history. A child, that's not too bad. She looked at me, confusion all over her face but I could tell that my words revived a fragile hope, a future. He should have told me, she cried. He should have told me. I bit back the first words that came instinctively to my lips: what, over the internet? What about the mother? I asked her instead. He's not in touch with her, she snapped. That's what he says, she added quietly. How can I ever trust him? I don't know him. I'm so foolish. You were right, Trinity.

I searched myself and decided at that moment that Ben would forgive me. Solace, I said, if I tell you something will you promise to keep it a secret. What? She asked. Just promise. Yes, yes, I promise. I took a deep breath. This baby, I said, touching my bump, it's not really Ben's. Trinity! cried Solace, the shock almost forcing her up from the bed. Shush, I said, dragging her down. Ben is infertile. We did all the tests. The likely cause, childhood mumps. Anyway, I went on quickly, we went to a clinic and got a donor. Solace was looking at me as though I was a creature from Mars or Deep Space Nine. A donor, she whispered. Yes. Artificial insemination. She mouthed the two words after me. *Artificial insemination*. I could read her thoughts. No, we have never met him. He is a black

man. Between twenty-five and thirty-five years old. He's a post-graduate student. That's all we know. At least that's what the clinic said. He could be anyone though. Solace looked at me for a while, absorbing everything in, these new realities. She then took my hand, gave it a squeeze. Like an internet date, she said at last. It took a moment for me to realise what she meant. The unknown. The anyone. The any possibilities. Any outcome. The newness of it. The adventure of it. Yes, I said. Like an internet date.

We were silent in the room. I shook my head dramatically. Aya, I said, The Wonders of Modern Technology. We both burst out laughing at this, one of our father's most favoured expressions.