



SIDE BABIES

Contemporary Women In Africa

ZAINAB OMAKI

First published by Bahati Books in 2016

www.bahatibooks.com

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Cover design by Rutendo Kamupira

The Great Unlearning

The first thing they teach you is how to be somebody else. It starts from the moment you're born. You're pulled out into the world to be peered at and analyzed. Oh, you're beautiful. Oh, you look just like every other baby, except for that birthmark on your leg. No, that birth mark is all you. They examine your ears carefully to tell whether you will remain as light as you are now or whether as time passes you fade into being another brown girl. Pretty, yes, but it's still too bad you won't stay fair. They pass you around to the people who came to witness this every day miracle and they, in turn, look into your small face and declare that you will own the world. This girl right here has the spirit of a thousand spirits, she will do the things that others can't. She won't fail or give up, she will be amazing. And you will believe them because they are only saying the things that you know yourself to be true.

For a few years you will continue to bask in that first glow. You will learn to crawl and they will be amazed. You'll take your first steps and they will capture the moment on camera forever. You will speak and everyone will fall silent in awe at the sound of your voice. You will suddenly be old enough to go to school and it will break their hearts because, as much as it's nice to be free of you for a few hours every day, they will still see you as the baby they held in the hospital while their mothers, aunts and virtually every female relative brought food, Milo and Peak milk- the liquid kind, not powder. Because really, what is a birth without Milo and liquid Peak milk?

But time will pass and you will gradually lose your shiny veneer. You will become less the miracle of life and more the responsibility that needs to be molded into a model citizen.

Their intentions are good, no doubt. No one wants to be the parent of the child who ends up in the newspaper with a sensational headline and picture of you being paraded (fresh meat) so the police can convince the entire country they're doing their jobs, and news hungry reporters have something to fill a quota. No. That is not your destiny. That's not what the Lord told them while they were praying preemptively for a baby. The Lord told them you will be a Ruth among a sea of Tinas and Emilys. But first, for that to happen, you have to know the basics.

There are the universally agreed upon things - the things guaranteed to keep you from becoming the much feared criminal. You must not lie. Not even a white lie. Not even stretching the truth. Not even to protect yourself. Not even because you are scared that telling the truth will result in a beating- a real one, not spankings that T.V. children seem to dread but looks more like a love pat to you. You must not hit or harm or maim no matter how much you might want to. You must not take things that do not belong to you. You must work for things and, not just work: *workhard*. You mustn't covet because coveting is the first step to falling into sin. You see all those no good gold diggers? Those girls with shiny, short clothes and too much make-up who always seem to be looking for a 'generous' man and who actually believe in pseudo-prostitution where this 'generous' man is entitled to bend them over whichever way he wants because he paid his dues (usually before, not after the deed. Every good business woman knows that payment comes before service)? Well, that's how they became that way. They coveted, so you must not covet.

Once you learn the basics, they move into deeper waters. And here is where the lines blur. You see, they begin to teach you about things like respect. The problem with this is that they do not really mean respect. They mean deference, laced with fear. This is not respect born out of high regard or courtesy or civility or humanity. It is respect that says your elders are always right even when they are wrong. It is respect that says that in relationships between grown men of one standing and other grown men (sometimes even younger) of another, higher

standing, the first grown man will refer to himself as 'boy' - as in 'Your boy, Douglas' - without feeling that there is something demeaning about this. It is respect that says if, one day, you forget to go out of your way to collect your boss' bags as he passes you in the halls, he will conclude that you are disrespectful. It is the respect that has one person standing tall and the other person bending over so far that they can almost see their toes, just waiting for the day they're in the position to be the one everyone says, 'ran kadade': *may you live long*. They will teach you this respect and you will learn it, and soon as you do you do, you will start to feel less than in the presence of people who you think are better than you, and more than in the presence of people you think you are better than. Worst of all, you will forget yourself.

They will also teach you shame, both implied and direct, because they are trying to teach you decency. In trying to tell you that you must not walk around with the important bits hanging out, they will teach you that there is something dirty about those important bits. Is that a hint of the fact that you have breasts under that dress? *Cover it up! Cover it up! For God's sake, cover it up!*

In a wide range of scenarios, ranging anywhere from being out at certain times listening to a certain type of music, to what you wear, your mother will begin sentences with, "good girls don't..." implying that if you even think about doing something or you are unsure why you shouldn't be doing something, then you're bad and shame on you. They will teach you to be ashamed of how you think. Why on earth can't you be like everyone else? Why do you have to have ideas like that? Why aren't you more street savvy? Why do you want the things that you want, when really this is what you should want? They will say this so many times that eventually you'll convince yourself that maybe you're the one in the wrong. Maybe, when you're older you should be grateful that the guy over there likes you. This might be your only chance. You shouldn't be offended when you tell him no, you don't like him and no, you don't

have a boyfriend -yet he insists that there must be some guy somewhere giving you the eye because what other reason could there be for you not jumping on his offer? Shame on you.

Somewhere in your adolescence you come to understand the value in fear. The time your favourite aunt visits and brings you a gift, your family will give it the side eye and once she's gone they will tell you to be wary about accepting things from people. You never know, after all, what they've attached to them. You see a cute top, they see the instrument that your dark-hearted aunt will use to leech away everything good you will become in the future. The good thing about this is that now you have an alibi. If you never amount to anything in your life, it really isn't your fault. Didn't they see you wear the top that one time?

They drill it into you- life is hard and the world is difficult and people will hurt you if you give them a chance. So manage your expectations now, dear child, learn to be disillusioned before the world does it for you. Say to yourself and others that 'people are wicked' and that 'all men are the same' and that you 'have to be realistic', because you all know that realistic is code for living in disbelief while deep down in your core you secretly hope that you're wrong.

From your circle of friends you learn a different type of fear. You learn to be guarded, to not say what you're thinking and definitely not to share what you're feeling, in case it is not the right way to feel. You edit yourself out of conversations and insert your opinions when you believe they are acceptable. You learn to censor yourself out of your life.

Because they're thorough they will pump you full of their values, values that are usually dependent on when and where they are from and what they believe. Because you are you and they are them, this means that you become a good grade getting, ambition having, good (shamed) girl. But really, you've looked around and you've seen it happen with your friends too. They become what the people who came before them are. If the people before them are devout (and really, who in Nigeria isn't?) then they will trudge the prayer warrior path. Is it the

devil that keeps making those flies keep coming back and makes that black bird cross their path while they're driving down the highway? Die! Die! Die! Die! If the people before them are aspiring scholars then they are academics - or they try to be at least- and things like good grammar are important. They must be careful though, otherwise in their future lies many, many times when they will begin speeches with 'All protocols observed' and 'I must say' while they're speaking to someone. On the off chance that the people before them are musical, so are they. What does it matter that they can't sing and have nothing to sing about? People do it all the time. They watch Sound City regularly - they've seen them do it.

Despite all of this, you manage to escape with an inkling of hope, with that feeling of invincibility that says that you have not yet learnt to fail. School was easy. You've never been the most popular but you've always had the type of friends you link arms with while you walk. You are a bumper sticker girl. You know, the type who is conditioned to believe that tomorrow is a better day and this too shall pass. And it does pass and pass and pass, over and again, trickling into an endless loop of similar days.

Soon, you're standing with your mother, father and brothers, dressed in a long, navy blue and gold gown, and a flat topped graduation cap, while the photographer your father hired takes the pictures. There is a general air of merriment, the emotional equivalent of 'we're done, bitches!' and you're glad for it because it masks how terrified you really are. This is what all the lessons have been about. This is what they have been preparing you for. This is the time you're supposed to step out, dip your toes into the world and discover whether or not the lessons took hold. So you do, you venture forth. You manage to get your first job - a terrible-paying position as an 'Assistant Something'. Getting it wasn't quite as easy as you thought it would be and it definitely isn't really what you want to be doing, but you can't complain. After all, they warned you, remember? Manage your expectations.

This new wasteland comes with things you hadn't expected. It comes with you being poor all the time, overwhelmed all the time, tired all the time (why didn't someone warn you about Mondays?). And most of all, you are scared all of the time. You are scared that this is all your life will ever be and that despite all the time they spent building you – this fully formed adult, this adult is still not enough. She is not the smartest, she is not the prettiest, she is not the most original. Even worse, her shoulders are too wide, her nose is too big and she sounds weird when she talks. How have you never noticed these things before? Why on earth did no one ever tell you this before? It's on the tip of your tongue to ask your friends these things, but you never do. Doing so, you know, would be admitting that there is some validity to how you feel and you're scared of that too (at what point did you become so fearful of everything?). The truth is, though, that you should be afraid, because the voice in your head is right. The look people have on their faces when they scope out your body and how the clothes hang weirdly on it, is right. The tone in your friends and family's voices when you tell them this idea you have and it's not amazing but they're trying to be polite, is right. You are not enough and you never will be. You are also not indestructible. In fact, at this very moment, there is a distinct possibility that you are already crumbling.
