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### **14 May 2003**

On 14 May, I visited home after a couple of months of intensive studying as I was preparing for my June exams. I dropped at Vingula bus depot in the range hours of 2-3 p.m. From there, I went straight to a tree behind some buildings towards the east to hire a bicycle. (There are so many bicycles there which are hired by people).

I was then cycled home but before we reached home, we passed through Abiti Yasin's home; since his home is on the way as we are heading home from the trading centre. As I was passing there, I saw Beauty, Abiti Yasin's third born daughter who was staying with her father since she was young.

Since I was being cycled and I saw no-one whom I could ask about her I went home but with something on my mind which I wanted to know about. All what I wanted was to ask Abiti Yasin why Beauty was staying with her since she was with her father since her birth. But before I proceed, let me expand who Abiti Yasin is and why I had interest on asking about all these.

Abiti Yasin is a middle aged woman in her late twenties and she happens to be our neighbour. It is alleged by our parents that I (Michael) and her were born in the same month of February 1974. And since I was five, we developed a friendship between her and myself as my agemate.

In her whole life, Abiti Yasin got married only once but she happens to have 3 living children and 2 who passed away. She got two children from her only marriage but the rest are only living as a result of sexual affairs with men.

Now whenever I and Abiti Yasin meet, we discuss different stories ranging from her affairs down to financial problems. In short, I can say that Abiti Yasin is a promiscuous girl who has so many boyfriends.

After I was dropped home by the cyclist, I then decided to go back to the trading centre after I had finished chatting with my grandmother, this time, leisurely. When I was passing by Abiti Yasin's home, I only saw Abiti Yasin's mother who was shelling maize on her veranda. As I was passing, I just said to her "[Has] your sister come to help you with chores?" The mother while smiling said "Yes, but as you can see, she is not even showing interest to come and help me with this work here." During that time, the girl was busy playing with her fellow kids.

\*Traditionally, a granddaughter is regarded as a young sister to a grandmother like a grandson is regarded as a young brother to a grandfather.\*

As I was approaching Vingula Traditional Court I saw Abiti Yasin coming with Sarah, her best friend. Sarah is a widow whose husband died of a disease which people think was AIDS. Before being married to that teacher, Sarah had been going as far as Mangochi boma with men. She was a prostitute before she got married and now after being widowed, she has gone back to her former trade.

When I came close to where these people were, I stopped and started chatting with them. The first thing to ask was about Beauty, which was stuck in my mind. I asked "Has Beauty come for good or she will go back?" and before she answered that first question, I asked "When did she come?"

In her response I was told that it was her father who came to leave her there since the stepmother with whom she was staying with passed away and father was thinking of going to South Africa to look for

employment. After explaining all these to me, I joked to her saying "Why can't you negotiate with him so that he should marry you?"

After this question it's when I heard something worth writing: "Have you seen him here he is working these days?" Abiti WALA asked before she proceeded.

I said "NO" then she went on "I can't dare do that. He has developed full symptoms of AIDS, you remember he had protruding buttocks as a woman?"

I said "Yes, I remember" she went on "those buttocks are gone. His hair is not as healthy as it was and even his shoulders are like hangers, no, I can't do that Michael."

Without knowing what the reaction would be, I jokingly suggested "Why can't you be using condoms..." she cut me short before I finished "Using condoms in marriage? She asked.

I said "Yes" and before Abiti Yasin continued, Sarah interrupted "Don't you know that condoms are causing diseases?"

"Diseases?" I asked. "What kind of disease is that?"

"It is causing impotence in men. When you use condoms for a long time, you become impotent. Even these other methods of family planning like injections, it has also the same problem, men are becoming impotent." When Sarah was saying all these, Abiti Yasin was also putting in some comments but I showed no interest.

The only time when I got interested is when she said, "many women are no longer interested in family planning methods because their husbands are not performing the way they used to do. You see when you are using these methods, a man can not have sex with his wife twice or thrice as they used to do. It's only once."

I wanted to know more from these girls and I asked both of them if what they were saying was really true or they just wanted to pass time by talking all these.

Abiti Yasin challenged me, "Try Michael, you will see." She continued "I can not do such a silly decision to get married with him, he is gone but I am only thankful to him that he gave me a daughter." I then finally asked her a question as I was about to start riding the bicycle "Don't you want to negotiate because he has developed AIDS signs?" "No, not that, it's only that I am satisfied with what I am doing," she said as she [was] heading to her home. I didn't know what she meant when she said that, but I guess may be she meant she was satisfied with prostitution, may be.

On the same day, when I reached the trading centre, I met with Baidon Lakison, a carpenter by profession who told me that his wife has a new baby girl. I congratulated him and I asked "how many are they now?"

"Four" he replied.

"All girls?" I asked.

"Yes," and I don't know when God will bless us with a baby boy.

I then said "Keep on trying," and we all laughed. After that I promised him that I will come to his home the following day to see the new baby.

After finishing what I wanted to do in the trading centre, I went back home. It was dark by this time and when I arrived at home, I found all my two Aunts back from where they had been, since I did not see them when I came. When they saw me, they cheerfully said "all, we have a visitor today!" I said yes as I was leaning the bicycle against a fence and before I took a seat I asked about where they had been.

They all responded by asking me a question "Didn't your granny tell you where we had been?" And before I could answer, they again asked whether she told me about their whereabouts or not.

Granny just said "we had a lot of business to discuss and I forgot about that."

Hearing about this response coming from an old woman all the people who were there burst into laughter, then my elder Aunt started telling me where they went. She told me that she was at a funeral. "We were at Abiti Useni's funeral. She has been laid to rest today."

"Had she been sick?" I asked.

"Yes, ooh, she has been sick for almost a year now."

"Is it?" I asked again and Aunt responded and I continued to ask what she was suffering from.

Both of them were quiet for a while and my elder Aunt continued, "She has died of AIDS, from Dickson."

I didn't understand what she meant and I reacted in the way to make her say more. I just said "Eehh?"

She then continued saying that Abiti Useni has died of AIDS from Mr. Dickson, a Clinical Officer at Vingula Clinic.

In fact, I know Mr. Dickson myself, not as a friend but as a clinic officer of our clinic but I didn't know that Mr. Dickson has AIDS; I then continued asked her. "Has Mr. Dickson contracted AIDS?"

Before responding, my Aunt asked me a question as well. "Don't you know, did you see that sick woman there at his house?"

"Yes I did," I replied "then what do you think was the woman suffering from?" She continued. "I don't know," I said and Aunt said to me, "that was AIDS, she finally died of diarrhea."

Whenever I was passing by Mr. Dickson's house, I used to see that woman either warming herself on the sun or sitting on her veranda. She indeed [was] sick and I did not know that she was Mr. Dickson's wife until that day when my Aunt was telling me about that story. She went on saying that during that time that Mr. Dickson's wife was sick, he was going out with Abiti Useni. The first to die was the wife and a couple of months later, Abiti Useni followed. She further said that even people at the funeral talked about that, saying that Abiti Useni has died of AIDS. After saying all these, we came back to our own business, greeting me and they all asked about how my schooling was and it told them everything.

On the following morning, as promised, I went to see my friends' daughter. I found the man busy making a display cabinet and the wife was away to a bore hole. I joined the husband. In fact, he wanted to stop doing his work but I insisted that he should continue and we will be chatting while he is doing that job. Later the wife came and greeted me. I then told her that I had been told by my friend that there was a "newcomer" here. The woman smiled and went into the house and came out with the daughter. She gave me where I got seated and the woman left to continue with her chores.

As we were chatting, I joked to him (Baidon) saying that since they have a new baby, he will renew his affair with his former girlfriend during the abstinence period. But before he could say 'yes' or 'no' he started by saying "do you think I [will] repeat doing that mistake? I was only lucky that I realized that quickly but had it been not for that, I could have infected my wife as well."

"What happened?" I asked him, this time – with keen interest to know more.

He then started to tell me that during his third born daughter's abstinence period, he went out and slept with a woman. She was not his girlfriend, no, but it was a matter of hit and run and he did not even think of

using a condom. A week later, he realized that he had his sperms coming out, soiling his underwear. "And since I have some knowledge of these sexual diseases, I realized that it was CHIZONONO and I did not bother to tell anyone. All what I did was, I went to Ernie's shop and bought some medicine. A week later, it was gone.

\*CHIZONONO is gonorrhoea\*

"What medicine is that which you bought?"I asked him.

"I have forgotten its name but they were capsules, red and yellow in colour,"he said.

"So, you got healed without your wife knowing that you had contracted a disease?"

"Yes, she did not know, and I don't know what could have happened if she knew."

"You think she could have been furious?"I asked.

"No doubt about that Michael, you know once a couple has a baby, all what is expected is for the couple to look after the baby properly. Now if the husband is promiscuous, he is accused of trying to kill the baby because he is sleeping with other women. That's why I was afraid."

"You said killing a baby?"I asked because I did not exactly know what he meant. But before he could explain, Mr. Nyasa came to ask if his sofa set was finished or not. They both left the place and went into the store room, where finished furniture is stored. When they came back, they started talking about some other issues and I did not have a chance of getting the response from the question I asked. Mr. Nyasa dominated, all what he was saying were praises of the carpenter saying that he makes good furniture I then left the place.

## **16 May 2003**

On 16 May 2003, I decided to leave home for Blantyre, going back to school. I left at 9 in the morning and I was lucky that on that day I did not stay long at the bus depot 40 minutes later I boarded a minibus which was not as fast as most minibuses are.

Normally, it only takes 1 hour and a few minutes to reach Zomba, but on that particular day, it was three solid hours. It was a very boring and tiresome journey. I got seated next to the driver with another man on my left. In fact, we were two passengers in front. And when the minibus reached Matawale, a township at the outskirts of Zomba town about 10 km away from the boma, two men signaled for the minibus to stop. It stopped and the two men jumped in. The first man, who as tall as I am (Professor Watkins know how tall I am, about 1.7m), light in complexion, put on a jacket, black in colour which looked like it had been soiled by vomiting jumped in to be followed by the second man who also put on a tattered jacket who looked like a guardian to the first man because he was the one who helped the first man get into the minibus by holding his hand, the same way a baby is helped when walking. I did not know where they were going neither did the driver know but I had a guess in my mind that they were going to the hospital because the first man who was light in complexion looked sick.

When we reached Zomba bus depot, there were a lot of people who were going to Blantyre and these two men, as my guess was were going to the hospital, just a few kilometers past Zomba market as we are heading to Blantyre.

Now the conductor here wanted to use business arithmetic. He wanted to drop the two people and give them K20 fare for two to reach at the hospital and take those people who were going to Blantyre who would pay K120 each.

That was the time when things got out of hand. When the people were told to come out of the bus, the second person who looked like a guardian did not have problems, he only pleaded with the conductor to

feel sorry for him since he was with the patient. When he saw that the conductor was in a non-negotiable mood, he then told the other man who looked sick to drop out. All this time, the man looked unconcerned, but when he was told by the conductor to drop down, it's when everyone who was in the minibus burst into laughter instead of feeling sorry for him for what he said. "If you want me to come out of this minibus, take me back to where you found me otherwise I am not coming out." At first people thought he would step down easily but they later realized that he meant it when he refused to step down. "I am not coming out, I have told you."

This time the man who sat with me in the front said "You know sick people are always stubborn, they don't take advice." And the driver put in his comment, "Yes especially if it is TB and AIDS. Patients of these two diseases are very difficult to look after. And as you can see him, it can either be AIDS or TB that he is suffering from. I have my in-law at home, my sister's husband who is suffering from the same disease (he did not say whether AIDS or TB) but he is giving problems. He knows that I am a driver and my job involves traveling a lot such that I don't have enough time to go and pay him a visit. But whenever I go, I am accused of not paying him a visit as if I am doing that deliberately, these people are very difficult," he concluded.

All this time, the conductor was busy persuading the man to come out so that he should take those people who were going to Blantyre.

After seeing that the conductor was failing to convince the man, the driver angrily dropped down off the bus and went straight to where the man was and grabbed [him] by his hand. With the approach that the driver did, people knew that he wanted to remove him by force but people pleaded with him and he softened and pleaded with the man and instead of giving them K20 back, the driver increased the amount to K50. This time the man accepted, but when he dropped down, the man said to the conductor. "You're a human being as I am and you will also experience the same situation, we shall see," the man concluded and this time, the bus has already started off.

There was a very hot debate in bus whereby other people accused the driver and the conductor for not feeling sorry to the person who was going to the hospital while others supported the two by saying that they did good by giving them money for transport and that there was nothing wrong that the two did. Most women accused the two, while men supported them. I don't know why women were so sympathetic but as the debate was still on, a young lady putting on [wearing] a jeans pair of trousers and spectacles joined the conversation and said "Hey, what wrong do you think these two have committed? eeh? Didn't you see them giving money to those people? Do you want this minibus to collapse? After all you know that these are arriving from Mangochi, do you want to tell me that they haven't been meeting with people of that kind. Just leave it!"

The woman was speaking in top of her voice so that everyone was quiet and the driver murmured "Eee, atsikana otopa" – Chichewa Literal meaning "tired girls" an expression which means that women who have been meeting hard times. Most of the times, this refers to prostitutes who move around during the night. After the woman has said all these, everyone switched to his or her own attention because no-one really talked about that.

## **26 May 2003**

It was a very hot Monday afternoon though it was during May, when normally the weather is cool. It was on the 26<sup>th</sup> May 2003, when we got seated in the classroom, room 11, waiting for the lecture to come.

I used to sit at the back of the classroom with my other four friends namely; Noel Lipipa, Ganizani Mwale, Michael Banda and Elias. I didn't know [Elias's] surname because most people used to call him by that name. It was a 1 o'clock lecture but the lecturer did not come up to 20 minutes before two o'clock. But before the lecturer came, we were discussing different issues but our sitting plan at the back was short of one person, Elias. No-one knew about his whereabouts until Ganizani asked; "is Elias still at the hostel?" "No," I replied because I had seen him earlier going to the shop: PTC. I don't know what he wanted to buy, I concluded.

Before we finished talking about him we saw him coming in, his shirt unbuttoned, holding an exercise book which he was waving to act like a fan. As he was approaching at the back of the classroom, where we got seated, he was just smiling. Noel suggested that he was drunk, but before anyone of us could put a comment, he was already on his seat.

"Hallo guys," he said as he was taking a seat.

"Where have you been?" Noel asked a bit surprised because Elias behaved strangely on that day. He looked very excited and no-body knew what could have been the news that was keeping him in such a jovial mood.

"You can't believe guys, I have been tested negative. Now you will see how serious I will be with my studies since I now know that my future is clean...."

"Where?" Ganizani asked and Elias continued saying that he went to MACRO, a VCT Centre which is based in Blantyre to get tested for HIV and he was happy that he was tested negative. "Let me see the certificate?" I requested but every one of us were surprised with the response he gave.

"No, they no-longer give in certificates in fact my certificate is there but its not given to individuals because other people used those certificates to deceive others."

"What do you mean?" I still asked then he continued saying that in the past they used to give certificates but other people, say who knew were positive used to buy those certificates in order to win a scholarship or many others used the same certificate to deceive a girl so that he/she should be regarded as negative. Now to avoid that, that's why they have decided to switch to that system. Noel then congratulated Elias for testing negative but I and Ganizani did not say anything because to me, I did not believe in what Elias was saying and I had no time to argue while there in the classroom because by that time the lecturer was already in.

But when we came out of the classroom, Ganizani said to me "Michael, do you believe in what Elias has told us?" I did not quickly remember what exactly was Ganizani referring to because that was three hours later and we had been having discussions on different issues.

I then asked him "believe in what?", then Ganizani reminded me; "that at MACRO, they are no longer issuing certificates?"

"NO," I said, "and that's why I did not say much while in the classroom, but may be it's true because I have never gone there. Have you ever gone there yourself?" I asked him.

"No," he replied, I then assured him that let's hope what he told us was true.

"May be," he said while heading to the reception to check the students magazine.

#### **4 June 2003**

On 4<sup>th</sup> June at around 9:43 a.m., when we got seated outside COMESA Hall waiting for the commencement of ACCA exams at 11:00, a certain girl, slim and brown in complexion came where we got seated while coughing. I did not know anyone whom I sat with, but it seems the girl knew the guys.

(You know ACCA uses cluster system in its exams and people from different colleges use COMESA HALL as their exam centre)

As she was also taking a seat, she said "but I should get tested." I don't know whether she was talking to herself or she was talking to the group.

Then one man among the group said "why bother, don't you know that you're already infected?"The whole group burst into laughter while others were whistling. I thought the girl would get annoyed but I was surprised to see the girl laughing as well. It's when I knew that the girl knew the guys.

She then continued "do you know what I want to get tested for?"

"Never mind whether it is Asthma or BP but you shouldn't bother yourself because in the process of testing you these diseases, you will be disappointed to know that you're positive as well.

"You will be surprised, I got tested for HIV in January and I was tested negative. This time around, I wanted to get tested for TB because my cough has stayed long."

"So?"the very same asked.

"So what?"the girl also queried. "Don't you know that TB is AIDS and AIDS is TB?"

The girl kept quite because she was attending to her cellular which beeped, I thought for an incoming message, and instead, a certain young man who looked very smart because he put on a white shirt and red neck tie with a black pair of trousers said to his fellow friend "Is that you who is saying that?"

"Whats wrong, don't you know about that? Ask Dr. Felix Salamponi, he will tell you."

(Dr. Felix is the one who is heading TB project here in Malawi.)

"No, TB is another disease and AIDS is another disease as well, you are those people who are discouraging people out there to get tested for TB thinking that once they test positive for TB then they have AIDS." This time, I saw the seriousness of this young man; that it was no longer a mere chat, but he was serious. "That's bad,"he concluded.

This time the girl who had started the conversation had already left looking for a telephone to make a call. She said the message that she received was a request for her to call that person. "Why can't you just use your cell?" The man who teased her as being positive asked while smiling.

"Asking a question while you already have the answer. I don't have units here. Is that okay with you?"the girl concluded while smiling as well.

"Ooh yours is just receiver?"He continued. "You are right,"the girl went.

When the girl had left, the very same man who was very talkative among the group whom I guess drunk a little bit of beer because of his noise said, "Guys - do you know that there is a medicine man in Blantyre at the roundabout who has charms for girls?"

"Charms for girls?"This time, it was another young man who asked. He stayed quite for a long time and all of a sudden, he seemed to be interested with this talk. He put on [wore] a pair of jeans short, a white t-shirt written "Anti-corruption Beware"and a pair of slippers.

"Yes a charm that when you're given, no girl can say no to you whenever you propose. Even girls, they use the very same charm to lure boys so that they should propose them."

"How did you know?"he asked.

"I was in a minibus a certain day and as we were passing the place, we got surprised that there were a lot of people who gathered that and someone in the minibus started narrating that story."

Then it was the smart man who joined the conversation again. This time, he started by shaking his head in disbelief. "But are there still some people who on their free time, get busy thinking of women? Even if you

get that charm what for? You get the charm, you propose a girl and get AIDS, what is the point? After all, girls these days not need to use charms. They are everywhere looking for men,"he concluded.

I smiled after hearing the response and I wanted to join the conversation but I did not know where to start from. As some other people were still discussing the very same story, we heard the invigilator's voice [ask] "can we please get in and take your seats based on the numbers that you have?"

This was the time for the exams to start and the story ended in suspense like that because at that particular time, everyone's mind was focused on the impending exams.