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### **I'm Sorry, Darling**

Statement of Purpose:

My short story highlights the challenges that immigrants from Africa face in North America. It involves a family of three that has moved to Canada in search of greener pastures. The family faces huge challenges; the husband has problems getting a job that is commensurate with his qualifications; lack of friends, relatives and companionship; and raising a kid in a different cultural milieu. The husband works long hours and is depressed—so is the wife. Due to stress, the wife is hospitalized. Hospitalization of the wife helps the husband to see how much his wife is going through.

### **I'm Sorry, Darling**

My dear wife, Shingi, was admitted to the hospital so they could monitor her blood pressure, which was alarmingly high. We had been happily married for six years and she had never been diagnosed with high blood pressure before. If anything, I considered myself to be the true candidate for this disorder. I was under tremendous pressure since we moved to Canada a year ago. Immigrating to Canada was my idea, and to be honest, she had been against it from the start. She argued that we were doing fairly well where we were in Zimbabwe. We had a beautiful house in a well-respected suburb; we were both professionals; we had loving family and friends; and above all, we were happily married. But I had been relentlessly headstrong about this issue, and she had finally succumbed to my wish.

After we arrived in Canada I engaged in a fruitless job hunt for almost a year. Every interview ended exactly the same way: "Mr Mhanyi, your qualifications are very impressive, but you lack Canadian experience." I was fed up with these remarks. During my last interview, I asked the interviewing panel three questions: how on earth they could expect me to have Canadian experience when I had only recently emigrated to Canada; how I could get the much-needed Canadian experience without being employed; and which Canadian college or university could offer me the Canadian experience I apparently lacked? No one had answers for me.

In the meantime, in order to put food on the table, I did menial jobs, which varied on a daily basis, depending on what was available through the employment agencies. These jobs were so menial that I even kept them a secret from my wife. I often cleaned washrooms; cleaned sidewalks; lifted boxes in warehouses... None of this could compare with the job I had back home: I had been the Human Resources Manager for a large corporation. I imagined myself back home, chairing meetings for my divisions and contributing positively to the running of a large organization. I felt that I was a somebody there, but here I was a nobody. The wages I was getting were paltry. I guessed that the employment agencies shortchanged us. I had to work a 16-hour day to even get a salary I could begin to call reasonable. So considering what I was going through, I thought it would be more likely for me to wind up in the hospital rather than my wife. I thought she was fortunate: all she had to do was stay at home and play with our son, Mufaro, while I worked hard to take care of them both.

But now my wife was in hospital and our two-and half-year-old son, Mufaro, was left in my care. Our first day alone started off well, with me doing some household chores while he was sound

asleep. I swept the house, mopped the floor, emptied the garbage, cleaned the washroom, washed the dishes, put them in the kitchen cabinet, cleaned the stove and did the laundry! I thought to myself: 'Is this what my dear wife goes through each day? She must be made of sterner stuff!' I thought that back home she had constant help—we'd had a live-in maid, and relatives visited on a regular basis, and whenever they visited they would help out.

I remembered that I had yet another job interview the following day. I then rummaged through the clothes in the laundry basket to decide which shirt to put on. Not that I have many shirts. I was used to my wife doing all this for me—choosing which shirt I should wear and ironing it for me. I realized just how much I depended on her. In the end, I picked the white shirt, and tried ironing it. I say "tried" because I was trying to figure out how to do the ironing. I wished there was a manual or that I had learnt how to iron from my wife. This made me realize that I never helped Shingi with any of these chores. In an effort not to feel too guilty, I reminded myself that in my culture there was a clear demarcation of duties: men's and women's. "That is our culture," I said to myself. Laundry, ironing, changing diapers, taking care of children, and cleaning the house are typical women's chores. I remembered that if a man was seen doing these chores he was considered weird. In fact, people would suspect the wife of using some love potion so that she could "control" her husband. "This idea of men having to do such chores is alien to us," I told myself.

However, these were just mere thoughts. I had a more imminent problem: I could not figure out how to iron my shirt. In the midst of my thoughts I drifted towards the couch and decided to take a rest. "After all, I had been on my feet since early morning," I comforted myself. As I sat there, I wondered who would take care of Mufaro the following day when I attended yet another job interview. I really wished that I was back home. Raising a child is a shared responsibility. I remembered that in our language we have a saying to that effect: "It takes a whole village to raise a child." I could have easily asked my neighbor to take care of Mufaro while I attend the interview, but here in Canada, we hardly exchanged greetings with our neighbors.

Actually, if we were back home, the moment Shingi was hospitalized a female relative would have come to my rescue. She would have stayed with us in order to help take care of Mufaro, myself, and the household chores. I remember sometime back, when we had no child yet, Shingi came down with flu. Her mother came and stayed with us for three weeks—to nurse her and help take care of the household chores. At this moment of great *need*, here in Canada, there was no one to turn to. It was then that I realized just how lonely I was—no—how lonely *we* were.

Regarding the job interview, I told myself that I had two options only: find a baby-sitter or forget about the interview. In fact, I found the latter option more appealing. "Is it really worth the effort? Is the interview not going to end in exactly the same way as the others?" I thought to myself. However, I managed to convince myself that without trying, I would never have a chance to make it. I remembered a line in one of the poems I learnt at elementary school: "Try, try, try, again, if at first; NO, if at the tenth time you do not succeed try, try, try, again..."

At the inception of my recital of the poem, I caught the smell of burning cloth. I remembered that I had been trying to iron my shirt. I jumped off the couch, went to the ironing board, picked up the iron, and there was a big hole on the back of my shirt. I had scorched my favorite shirt—no—my only decent shirt! I cursed as I unplugged the iron. While I was putting the iron down, I heard Mufaro coming down the stairs. I met him halfway up the staircase, and took him to the bedroom. I removed his pajamas, and bathed him. In my attempt to give him fresh clothes, I realized that I did not know how to change a diaper. In fact, it was Mufaro who alerted me to it: "No daddy, mommy do dis." He was telling me that I was not doing it the right way—the way mom does it. I had to read the instructions on how to change diapers. Finally, I got it right, and gave him a fresh diaper, fresh clothes, and we headed for the kitchen.

After preparing breakfast for him, we sat down at table. Instead of having his breakfast, Mufaro wanted to watch television, go to the washroom, play with his toys, ride his bicycle, teach me new songs, watch what was happening outside... I did not understand why he liked to do the opposite

of what was prevailing at any given time. I realized how little I knew—if anything—about children, including my own son! This also made me realize that I could not even remember when we last had a meal together as a family. Each day I left for work when Mufaro was sound asleep and most of the time came back when he was dead asleep again. I found myself cursing once more, “Damn Canada!” Anyway, I eventually managed to persuade him to eat, and I triumphed.

After breakfast I did the dishes, then took a bath and changed into fresh clothes. It was time to take Mufaro to the baby clinic for his appointment. He was to be immunized against Hepatitis B. Outside, a thick layer of snow had accumulated, and I could not push Mufaro in his stroller. I carried him in my arms all the way to the clinic. At the clinic, we reported to the reception and waited in the waiting area. There was a play area for kids, with all sorts of toys. Mufaro did not like any of that. He preferred to wander around, trying to discover his new environment. I tried to restrain him; chasing him along the corridor. He actually liked it more when I ran after him. To him, we were playing a game! He did all this while completely oblivious to his imminent suffering. As we played this “game,” I realized how much I already missed my wife. I was not sure whether I missed her because I loved her or because she would be doing all this instead of me, or both. My thoughts were interrupted by the receptionist calling out: “Mufaro Mudzingwa.” Much to my relief, the receptionist ushered us to the consultation room. The doctor came in and the little guy got his shot of Hepatitis B. The poor guy screamed out louder than an ear-splitting tantrum. I did not even know how to comfort him. I told him: “It is okay. The doctor is being cruel in order to be kind.”

That done, we passed through the grocery and greengrocery shops, replenishing our resources. We bought milk, orange juice, vegetables, fruits, and candy for the little guy. The falling snow intensified. I put the food into the backpack after taking out the umbrella, then I opened the umbrella up, carried Mufaro in one arm, held the umbrella in the other, and rushed home.

We got back home at 11 o'clock and had two hours before the next hospital visiting time. For the next 30 minutes, Mufaro decided what game we would play, how we played it, and for how long. I obliged. In an effort to take my mind away from all that was going on around me, I played the games with a lot more gusto than the initiator of these games. When Mufaro started asking for one cookie after another, I knew it was time for lunch. I prepared macaroni, mince, and cheese. I should say I boiled macaroni and mince together and later sprinkled cheese on top. The word “prepare” gives the impression of making a proper meal. I realized that there is no single day that I had helped my wife prepare a meal. Anyway, we sat at table and had our lunch.

In the middle of our lunch, Mufaro announced, “dhodho.” He had soiled himself, and he wanted a diaper change, and he wanted it right away! Diaper changing is one of the chores I really hated, but I had no choice. I gave Mufaro a diaper change and felt that I could not continue with my lunch anymore—if I did, I knew I would throw up. I just wondered how women do that: in between meals they can have a diaper change and continue with their meals as if nothing has happened. I supervised Mufaro eating his lunch. Suddenly, I was overcome with severe abdominal cramps, and I rushed upstairs to the toilet to answer nature's call.

I heard Mufaro climb upstairs, and for a moment, I thought he was following me. But instead, his footsteps turned toward the bedroom. I heard movements in and out of the bedroom and sounds of unidentified objects flying down the stairway. I pleaded, yelled and threatened him to stop whatever he was doing, but to no avail. After a few minutes, the crashing and thumping sounds stopped. I thought I had triumphed. I heard him heading downstairs, and thought he wanted to continue playing with his trains. Little did I know that he had other plans.

I suddenly heard the thudding of books, and the crumbling and shredding of paper.

“Mufaro, stop that! What are you doing?” I hollered.

“Daddy book!” he responded coolly.

He continued with the task he had set for himself. I wished I could momentarily postpone the pressing task at hand and attend to him. However, the more he continued with the un-shelving

and shredding of books, the more I felt the pressure to relieve myself. I tried threatening; I tried pleading; but all was in vain. The more I shouted, the more enthusiastically he pursued his new vocation. I decided that all I could do was to focus my energies on my immediate undertaking. At long last there was silence, and I thought he had come to his senses. All of a sudden, I heard odd shearing sounds that I could not quite identify. These sounds went on for a few minutes and abruptly died out. The next thing I heard was the opening of the refrigerator door, and I knew that a new game was about to begin. I heard the clattering of objects, and again I demanded Mufaro to stop whatever he was doing. His response was disarming, "Daddy ogat," for "Daddy yoghurt."

When my ordeal was finally over, I opened the washroom door and realized what the flying objects had been: they were clothes removed from the closet and thrown down the stairs. He must have enjoyed seeing the bright colored sails wafting down the staircase. I followed the trail of clothes downstairs into the living room to face what he'd done in there. The living room floor was littered with the remains of books and their shredded pages. The shearing sounds I had heard was the couch being sliced with a letter opener. The stuffing, released from imprisonment, now littered the floor like a cotton crop.

But where was Mufaro? As I opened the door to the kitchen, a heat wave hit me right in the face. The source of the heat was unmistakable; the oven and all four plates of the stove were red-hot. I did not need rocket science to know how my son had reached the knobs of the stove. The open oven door said it all—he had climbed on the oven door to reach them. But now, even getting to the stove presented a challenge since the contents of the refrigerator were now all over the floor. A river of milk, juice, yoghurt, ice-cream and water flowed across the kitchen floor between mountains of crushed vegetables and heaps of condiments. I reached for the stove and switched it off.

Suddenly, I became aware that I had not seen Mufaro. I turned to the open refrigerator, and for a moment, I froze. Mufaro was lying on one of the shelves in the refrigerator! While I appreciated that he had probably gotten used to the cold weather of Canada, I hadn't realized he had fallen in love with the cold to that extent! I negotiated my way through the mess and retrieved him out of the refrigerator. He looked more of a madman than a two-and-half-year-old; he had smeared yoghurt and tomatoes all over himself, and was stark naked.

After all this had sunk in and my sense of smell began to function normally again, I caught a foul smell. I asked Mufaro to pinpoint its source. He smiled, innocently pointed to a pot on the floor, and replied, "Pot Daddy." He had relieved himself in the pot, placing his diaper nicely alongside. While I was still trying to make sense of everything, he began to shiver, and like a good daddy, I took him upstairs to give him a warm bath. As I bathed him, I thought how much my wife went through each day. She had to put up with the relentless antics of this little rascal. Furthermore, she had no one to turn to: no extended family, friends, or even acquaintances. I was hardly ever at home, and even when I was, I was inaccessible. I had retreated into a cocoon. I couldn't even remember when we last had a husband and wife talk, or when I had taken my wife and child out for dinner, or just for a stroll in the park. More importantly, I didn't know when I had last fulfilled my conjugal obligations. I now understood why she was in the hospital. I was better off: I had made "friends" out there with people in the outside world who were pretty much in the same predicament as me. We would chat, and at times we even laughed about our situation. My wife had no such outlet. It suddenly dawned on me that for both of us, the Canadian dream was just that: a dream.

After dressing Mufaro in warm clothing, I could not wait until we got to the hospital so that I could talk to my wife. I picked up the phone and called my dear wife.

"Shingie, darling," I said in a somber voice, "I understand what you are going through. I'm really, really, sorry, darling. I should have listened to what you said. You were right; immigrating to Canada was not so great an idea."

"Cally, darling," she responded very coolly, "I hope you got a glimpse of the world that I live in since we immigrated to Canada." I just broke down in tears.

