Walls of Fire

Chapter 1

Eyes closed, Zak saw orange flames and black smoke; eyes open, he saw only grey. Ducks on a lake, busying themselves in pale water edged by leaf-littered mud. Zak stood, his hands resting on a wooden rail, looking down. A brown rat scuttled past his shoes and stared at him as if it owned the place. Zak, the Reverend Zechariah Mutethia to give him his full title, shivered. He faced a cold, hard-edged city where all his certainties had deserted him, a city where he stood, bandaged hands on frosted timber, clothes stinking from the fire. '*Mashetani!*' His curse, a sneeze of a word, scurried the rat and ruffled the ducks. Another rat shimmied past and plopped into the water. It could swim, Zak could not. He let go of the railings and sat down hard on a bench. He held his head in his lacerated hands and thought about Yetunde.

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A few weeks ago, Zak was starting to settle in at Yetunde's house. Small windows, three storeys, huddled in a terrace for warmth, he assumed. The houses were called 'back-to-backs'. Her house was part of a small enclave, four streets stranded a short distance down from the main ranks. Slate roofs and brick walls covering the hillside, rows and rows of workers' houses for mills and factories that closed long ago. Stone cobbles were still visible where the tarmac of their road, Retford Street, was flaking at its edges.

Zak's room was at the top of the house, where the sloping roof had been lifted up, as if on a hinge, to make space for two rooms, his the smaller of the two. A single bed, a desk and a wardrobe with some drawers below, everything a

postgraduate student required. The double-glazed window looked north-west, the direction of the setting sun. An alarm clock was needed in this dark autumn, but not on the dawning of that day in Retford Street.

A splintering crash, then another, woke him from his recurring nightmare from the Rift Valley. Vigilant, heart pounding, his first instinct to go and investigate the noise. He started down the stairs, a towel round his waist. His thinking brain woke up by the time he reached the first floor. Should he go back and wake Thomas, in the other attic room? He heard voices below him, better to investigate. His slow descent towards the ground floor was noiseless. A blast of cold air met him, two men in uniform, barking instructions at him. His guts churned.

"Brothers," Zak said, raising one hand as if in blessing. "How are you? May I help?" He used the tone of voice developed for unruly congregations, only he could hear his heart drumming in his chest. The police back home were usually armed.

"Drugs raid, er, sir," the lead officer growled. Uncertainty crept into his voice. He took a step back, narrowly avoiding the toes of his colleague on the stair below. Their briefing was about three or four white males, smackheads, not a lone black with the body of an athlete and the voice of a priest. The officer carried on, orders were orders. "We have reason to believe that people in this property are dealing in Class A drugs. Get yourself into the front room and stay there while we search the house."

Two more policemen were waiting for Zak. One, with the authority of his stripes, said, "We can deal with this gentleman, what are you waiting for?"

"Are we sure this is the right house Sarge?"

The sergeant felt in his pocket, pulled out a piece of paper. “This is number … this is number …” He avoided eye contact with any members of his team. Zak watched him as the officer’s eyes came to rest on a gaudy red, green and gold tapestry above the fireplace: ‘*In God we Trust’.*

The officer scrutinised the paper once more. “Shit! It’s that new Polish girl on the desk, she writes her ones like sevens.”

Zak steadied himself with one hand on the wall. His breaths were coming too quickly but he calmed himself enough to say, “I am having some problems understanding why you are here, with so many officers, why this house no longer has a door?” Both his hands were at his sides, palms upwards, waiting for whatever the policeman had to offer.

The policeman stood, at ease, arms behind his back, “I apologise for the inconvenience, sir, and the door. It appears that we have the wrong address. Are you the owner?”

“No, it belongs to Mrs Yetunde Mbang.”

“Is she here?”

“No, she is working nights. You would know if she was here, my brother, you would certainly know.”

The other policemen had edged out of the doorway during the conversation. Zak heard them coughing in the street. The sergeant wrote down Zak’s details and produced a card from his pocket, handing it to Zak.

“Please advise Mrs… erm… Bang to phone this number when she gets back. She will be due some compensation for the inconvenience, and a new door. I do apologise.”

The sergeant was in the street before Zak realised that he did not know his name. Van doors slammed and vehicles set off with more haste than necessary. Zak shivered as the chill October air occupied the front room, a hint of diesel driving out the comforting smell of Yetunde's home. They must do something before she got back. He loped up the stairs, dressed swiftly, closed his door and took a deep breath.

"Thomas," he tapped on the door of his housemate's domain.

"I need your help, the door is broken." There was a long pause. Thomas's responses were always measured, sometimes in minutes, sometimes in hours or even days.

"I am coming."

Since his arrival, Zak had got used to the weariness in Thomas's voice, though on this occasion, at this hour, it was justified. Thomas was coming, that was a start. Zak felt the cold city air penetrating further up the stairs as he went down to survey the damage in more detail.

"Nice one," said the milkman, leaving a pint next door at number 5, where Mrs Henderson lived. He cocked his head in the direction of Zak.

Zak smiled back. It was refreshing that the people here just got on with a conversation, without the customary greetings, but it was also unnerving. There was no time to weigh up in what way the absence of door was 'nice' before the milkman turned his back to continue his rounds.

"That'll take some fixing. Yetunde's not going to be happy," the milkman added, half-turning in Zak's direction.

Zak shrugged and started to investigate the damaged wood with a finger. He was rewarded with the lancing pain of a splinter. He was still sucking the blood from his finger, trying not to curse, when Thomas appeared beside him.

"The police, I suppose," said Thomas.

Zak turned to look at his fellow tenant. The Ugandan was six inches shorter, but Zak felt that it was Thomas who looked down on him. Thomas wore a thick black sweater and sharp black trousers. He was slim enough for Zak to wonder about his health. His eyes gave little away, they made contact although always on Thomas's terms. If the eyes were windows of the soul, then his were like the darkened windows of a politician's four-by-four. There was a lumpy scar below his right eye.

"You must have heard, they could have raised the dead," Zak said.

Thomas shrugged, went to make some tea and switch on the radio in the kitchen. Their security had been breached, Yetunde's home defiled, but tea and Radio 2 were the opening rites of Thomas's day. Zak sat on the doorstep, shivering, stirring the sugar into his mug, brought to him without request or ceremony.

"I have a seminar at ten," Zak said, gazing across the road. The sound of the morning traffic on the main road three terraces away started to intrude, the fumes provoked a sneeze from Zak.

"She'll be back well before then," Thomas addressed his tea. He went to find the Yellow Pages. Zak showed him the card from the police. They had a desultory discussion about the pros and cons of calling the number, using the Yellow Pages or waiting for Yetunde's return. They did not have long to wait. A

rich contralto voice came round the corner at the top of the street. Thomas and Zak turned to face the music.

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Yetunde was usually the last of the night staff to leave the department. The others always had good reasons to get away, mostly to beat the worst of the morning rush. Yetunde did not drive. She could see the rooftops of her terrace from the maternity wards. The labour ward looked in on itself, set in the middle of an eight-storey block at the centre of one of the biggest hospitals in the country. Someone once said it was a soulless place, an allegation that was an affront to Yetunde. Her job was to make sure that all the women delivered safely on her nights, her mission was that, as far as possible, they knew that someone cared. She would pop in to each room, after the day staff had taken over, to wish each woman well. This morning she had spent an extra ten minutes with Kimberley Green, who could not be comforted.

Yetunde relished the ten minute walk, downhill, collecting her thoughts like clothes from a washing machine, putting them away in the drawers of her mind. The cool morning air woke her up. It would not be until she showered at home that she could get rid of the cloying smells of labour ward: sweat and blood, chlorhexidine and alcohol. One smell, the unmistakeable scent of new babies, she would be happy to bottle and keep forever, but the stench of a baby dead in the womb for days made Yetunde retch, even after all these years.

The unit was busier than she could ever remember. Autumns were always busy. The copulating population were careless at Christmas and New Year, bored during the long dark nights of January and February. Gestations later, October

2008 was breaking records for the number of deliveries. Some people said it was the influx of people from Eastern Europe and the asylum seekers who were to blame. Yetunde didn't mind, she liked to be kept busy, loved the challenge of leading her team and keeping it all together.

She thought of the young doctor who liked to be known as 'Dr Emma,' or just 'Emma' to the staff, an informal style preferred by this generation. It was Emma's third week of nights since she started in August, only the fifth night that her shifts had coincided with Sister Mbang's.

"Can you have a look at Beatrice in 6," Yetunde said. "She's been labouring for fourteen hours and has just reached second stage, but the babe's posterior."

Yetunde knew the protocols, the doctor must be informed. She had examined Beatrice, a first time mother from The Gambia. Beatrice was not tall and the baby was big but Yetunde knew, for she had examined countless women, that Beatrice's pelvis was more than adequate. She just needed time.

Emma assessed Beatrice, confirmed the position and wrote in the notes. Only then did she tell Yetunde what she thought – she would give Beatrice an hour of pushing, no more, then she would call the boss. He would be the one to decide whether to try rotational forceps or go straight for a Caesarian section.

Beatrice did not have her man or any other friend with her for the labour, but she did have a student midwife in attendance. Yetunde smiled as she saw the student engrossed in her task, mopping Beatrice's brow, holding her hand when the pains came.

Dr Emma busied herself with other things but kept one eye on the time and found reasons to drop in on the labouring duo more frequently than needed. The student bristled at these brief intrusions which broke up their rhythm.

Yetunde saw all this, but also Emma's taut face around the practiced smile, the sweat leaking into the armpits of her scrubs.

"Here's the good Dr Emma again," Yetunde said, as the slim figure reappeared. "You're getting the very best attention here Beatrice, you and your baby are going to be just fine."

The student listened for a trace of irony in Yetunde's voice, a glance that would show her that Emma was being subtly undermined, that this was another skirmish in the eternal rivalry between midwives and medics. There was none.

Emma raised her eyes from the charts and met Yetunde's. Sister Mbang's reassuring words were as much for her as they were for Beatrice. A shiver rippled through the doctor.

"I'll get someone to make you a cuppa," Yetunde said, with a brief glance at the clock above Emma's head.

The little drama played out much as Yetunde expected. Emma re-examined Beatrice and called the boss. The boss asked which sister was on duty, told Emma to check the baby's scalp pH and, assuming this was alright, Beatrice could have another half an hour of pushing before they intervened. While Emma was preparing to do the test, Beatrice produced a healthy four kilogram boy, the student achieved her first delivery, with Yetunde's hands over hers.

The rest of the night was hectic. Yetunde regretted that she had not been able to spend more time with Kimberley, so made up for it when everything else was finished.

Finally off duty and manoeuvring her broad frame round the vehicles in the car park, Yetunde was still trying to make sense of Kimberley's tragedy when Emma greeted her from the window of her little black car.

"Sister Mbang, thank you so much, for everything," Emma offered a wan smile.

Yetunde rewarded her with a big grin and a "No problem, you did well, we thank God," but was too preoccupied with thoughts of Kimberley to offer anything more.

Yetunde's route took her down past the staff residences and the hospital garage. Many folk were on their way in to work, most avoiding eye contact as they hurried in the opposite direction, focussed on their day ahead or still struggling to wake up.

Yetunde paused as she stepped outside the gate. At her feet were a collection of tab ends left by smokers, banned from indulging their addiction anywhere on hospital property. Yetunde lifted her eyes momentarily, as was her habit, to the university buildings on the skyline, in what she liked to think of as a Psalm 121 moment and then brought them to rest on the roof of the apostolic church. After Francis died in 1996 and there was enough money from his estate for a deposit, she had chosen the little house in Retford Street to be a peaceful haven, within walking distance of work and a hallelujah of church. Francis, her husband for 21 years, was never one for hallelujahs. Full of surprises until the end, his hepatoma was the last and worst of them.

Before he died, they always rented. In Britain, Francis was in a perpetual state of readiness to return home, his bags were packed on more than one occasion. He liked to have space. No, he had to have space, enough air to breathe. A big reception room, sofas round three sides, low tables for the drinks, somewhere to argue, to entertain and be entertained, a forum where ideas could fizz around, flourish or be forgotten. A study with a huge desk, the walls lined

with books, a reading lamp with a green shade, a glass of brandy. Her salary paid the bills. In his last year the ideas lolloped more than they fizzed, but they were always there.

When Yetunde moved into the house in Retford Street, it already had the attic extension and didn't need much else doing. It fitted her like a favourite wrapper. The mortgage was well within her means; the lodgers were for company. She kept the rents low and was careful about who she chose.

Dog-tired after her fifth and final night on duty, Yetunde could still enjoy praising the Lord as she turned into the short street of home. She stopped. What on earth was Zak, the new lodger from Kenya doing in the doorway, mug in hand? Thomas was there, talking with him. She forced her legs to move faster.

"What is the matter boys, do you have bad news?" Zak and Thomas looked at each other, as if trying to remember what the bad news might have been. Then she noticed the absence of her door.

"*Ki so le mi ibi bayi!* What happened?" shouted Yetunde.

"The police," Zak started.

"They took my door?"

"They broke your door. See, it is still here."

"That was very careless, what were they doing with it in the first place?"

"No, they meant to break it down, or at least, the one they meant to destroy was not your door, it was a case of mistaken identity, a mix-up, they left a card," Zak's words chased each other out of his mouth.

"Eeh?" Yetunde asked the sky, "They mistook the identity of a door, tell me how these people do that?" her voice tumbled down the octaves. She drew breath and sighed, motioning Zak and Thomas out of the way, her broad hips

occupying the threshold, defying the world to even think about crossing her borders.

"Tea?" offered Thomas.

"Coffee, black, strong, three sugars," replied Yetunde. "What in heaven's name do they think they're doing?" Yetunde asked the street.

"They were looking for drugs, they should have been at, " Zak lowered his voice to a stage whisper, "number 1. It was a handwriting error. They left a card."

"Is this my birthday?" Yetunde shrugged.

Thomas brought the coffee, Yetunde grasped it with both hands, ignoring the card offered by Zak.

"I have a suggestion to make," said Thomas.

"Eh, a suggestion – will a suggestion fill this gap?" gestured Yetunde.

"Look at the doors of your neighbours opposite, numbers two, four, six, and so on." Thomas pursued his cause, "What, Mrs Mbang, do you see?"

"I have no time for riddles Mr Sserioza. I see doors, lots of doors, all in their right and proper places, unmolested by the police."

"And what do you see in front of those doors?"

"What do I see? What do I see? I see so many things but I hear Thomas Sserioza asking me questions as if I was a child. I am old enough to be your mother."

"Each and every one of those doors has a metal grille in front of it," explained Thomas, holding his ground. "Some have straight metal bars, some have patterns, number eight even has a rose, possibly even a Yorkshire rose in its design. Most of them are hardly noticeable, you did not see them. Mama dear, I am thinking about your security, our security."

“You see security, Thomas, I see barriers. You want to build a fortress, I have built a welcome. We all know what it is like to feel shut out.”

“It is your house Mrs Mbang. Why bother with a door? Let everyone come,” Thomas used both arms to welcome the multitudes.

She was too tired for more verbal wrestling. Zak had backed further into the front room, resting one hand on the mantelpiece. Yetunde smiled at him.

“Reverend Mutethia, tell us your views before I hit this boy.”

“Sister and brother,” Zak smiled back, imitating his own preaching style. “We have an old saying, passed down by the generations from our ancestors. This is a saying worth repeating, one that has stood the test of time.”

“Eh-Eh, get on with it my reverend friend, or I will sleep before your sermon has even started,” chuckled Yetunde.

“We say that war among grasshoppers delights the crow,” said Zak.

“So what? They say in my…” Thomas paused, “what was ‘my’ place, that the weak warrior wearing sandals overcomes the brave warrior with a thorn in his foot.” He shrugged. “I don’t see the dusty ancestors having anything useful to say about this mess.”

“And I say that I need to get some rest,” yawned Yetunde. She bent down and lifted up one corner of the door, Zak took the other end and Thomas the remaining corner. The men looked at Yetunde. “In the garden,” she said.

They propped it lengthwise against the low wall between her house and Mrs Henderson’s at number 5.

“That will do for now,” said Yetunde, “I will phone Gilbert, who will fix me a new door. Zak will go to the university and Thomas, who can be a thorn and is right to be concerned for his security just now, will keep out of my way.”

Perhaps it was the caffeine, the delayed effects of the traumas of the last few hours, or the louder noises of the street filtering up the stairs unhindered by a door, but Yetunde was not sleeping. Thomas was probably right. Yetunde looked across at the photos of her boys on the wall. Taiwo, the sensible twin, a medical student destined for a glittering career but snuffed out by a lorry on the Lagos to Abeokuta road. Kehinde, who did not like barriers, an actor who revered Fela Kuti more than Soyinka, if Kehinde had made more use of barriers, he might still be alive.

How Francis would have loved to tell and retell the story of this intrusion by the police. She saw him holding court, creating the scene, drawing his listeners in as he acted out the parts in turn, embellishing the details, hinting at conspiracies, teasing his audience, making some far-fetched analogy with global politics, topping up his friends' glasses with Courvoisier, roaring with laughter.

"Oh my husband," Yetunde chuckled, "you are greatly missed."

She blew her nose, picked up her Bible and decided, not quite randomly, to read what the prophet Zechariah had to say. In the second chapter, she read that Zechariah had a dream about a young man who must have been some sort of quantity surveyor. He decided to measure Jerusalem, to find out how big it was. Another man showed up and told the first man to stop wasting his time because Jerusalem was going to be so large that it would be impossible to count the number of people and animals in it. The city would not need walls because God would be a wall of fire around it and its glory within. Doors were not mentioned.

Yetunde slept.