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Binary

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(unedited script as submitted by the author)

My heart was booked by a punishing desire for a strange and brilliant girl, when I went to boarding school. An elite institution, named after the country's first president's father, academic performance was paramount, entrance was by selection only. Guys came in from all around the country, each one a conquering hero at the grade nine exams, arriving for the final three years of formal education as if it were a kind of nation-wide play-off. And me, though I had been the best at my school, few had heard of it, and I turned up with some of the lowest marks in the history of the academy. And so, chastened, I was quiet with shame when my new friends talked about who scored what, the numbers soaring into the lofty high five-hundreds, near perfection wrought implausibly by girls and boys who breathed and bathed just as I did. A boy in my dorm, short with a long neck like a meerkat, cheap soap, little English – later, in grade twelve, a hard drinker – five hundred and ninety-four points.

Others, it was known, had scored full marks in more than one subject. And then there was Imo. The account of her spoils came down the corridors like a river that had burst its banks, five hundred and ninety-nine points. Hearing this, like a blackened charcoal monger at a dusty tavern swearing to the television that he would one day visit Old Trafford, I vowed that I would somehow gain Imo's love and respect.

On the first day in the math's class, nothing was taught. Instead we were asked a question. What do you get when you add the numbers one to ten? Without delay there were hands up all around, everyone seemed to know but me. Fifty-five. And adding the numbers one to a hundred? Now there was some delay, and quiet scribbling in notebooks, but soon there were hands up again. Five thousand and fifty. But then another question. Numbers one to a thousand? This time there was a collective gasp of despair and murmuring. The anguish I saw on my classmates faces led me to believe that some great punishment lay in wait for us, should we not solve the riddle. Only the meerkat from my dorm was scribbling away.

And the math's teacher, migrant spawn of India that he was, stooped with age and browned to the tips by nicotine, he seemed to me a monster half-lion and half-bird. He stood up and came over to see what the meerkat was scribbling, walking with some difficulty, hobbling almost, his shabby leather shoes scratching the concrete floor as if they were claws. Wrong. The Meerkat was squashed. I thought we were damned. But then a hand went up at the front. It was Imo. She had it. Five hundred thousand and five hundred. Joyful smiles of wonder spread across the room. The spell was broken, the pattern clear. To ten thousand? This time many hands. Correct. To a million? Even I could follow, now. And then, strangely, as if he were a fool, the old man smiled.

And yet, I failed to score a single mark on the first math's test. My friends were shocked. Could I not solve even the first question? But to me it all seemed a mix of wholly unfamiliar tasks. Finding the products of algebraic sums, and the sums of products, and many other inventions besides, each of them ensnaring me as if I had fallen into a dozen traps all at once. In any case, I had been gradually losing touch by the day, and the result did not surprise me. But to the school, this was incredible. Our class, Ten Green, which had more souls scoring full marks than any other in many subjects, Imo among them naturally, also had the only zero, which in the eyes of many seemed to count for more. It was as if a sovereign chief, for all his strong sons, had lost favour, once he sired a hunchback among his choice royal wives. The infamy of the affair went as far as the attention of the head master, who at his Monday address to the assembly wondered if perhaps the fissures of incompetence that had preceded the crumbling of the economy of our nation state had also begun to show in the student body of one of its finest schools. And so, by the following assembly, Ten Green had been demoted to the back row. And in the dining hall we were served our food last. And to my classmates feeling betrayed, and to others pushing their advantage, my name became Zero. And so how would I ever make an impression on Imo, when I was a literal non-entity? And yet somehow, out of the depths of my despair and shame, I found hope by resolving to make Imo, the very measure of my disgrace, my beacon and loadstar, setting out to mimic her habits, and establishing for myself a religion with which to marvel at her brilliance.

I began to study at all hours. This is what Imo used to do, writing out exercises in her carefully kept notebooks in her neat handwriting, three

columns a page. No walk to the tuck-shop over break, no standing around talking to classmates when the teacher was out, and no sleeping before midnight according to the girls who shared a room with her. And yet we all studied a great deal, because that was what the school was about. Our formal study hours, prep times they were called, went right across the timetable, afternoons and evenings, including weekends. But the grade twelves, those in the year of the great and final assessment, went beyond this, like old monks at prayer, holding vigil over their books in the prep rooms after bed-time tea. But mere humans, they faltered as often as not, and many were conquered by sleep, their heads drooping, their desks now stiff beds, and most returned to the dorms before long, resigned to their pending damnation. And yet Imo, a grade ten, beat them, ever the last to turn out the lights, always the first to turn them on again an hour before breakfast, her bed forsaken and tidy, her books cradled and worn. As for me, the Zero, imitating this regiment, it was an agony. By night I stumbled through my studies, and by day I dosed through countless classes, my head a heavy pendulum, visited constantly by a just retribution for the violation of nature's law.

I tried keeping to myself, for Imo seemed to have no friends. Where other girls had the habit of pairing up, happy in each other's talk, walking past the boys' dormitory arm-in-arm to and from class every weekday, deaf to the taunts thrown at them from the windows, Imo walked quietly on her own, the windows eerily silent. It was as if she were somehow always going through the inner most chamber of the temple that Herod would rebuild, insulated from the outside world by thick holy walls. But it was difficult for me to resist the crowd, and I found myself laughing at the jokes in the dining hall and humming along with the boys singing in the showers, and more than once calling out rudely to girls walking past our windows to my shame. Without my full concentration I behaved as if I were an idle porter at the market place, exposed to vice on all sides.

But soon, all too soon, this world came crashing down. One Monday evening, a horde of grade eleven students burst into our prep room, dozens of them, shouting and whistling, slapping the desks with their palms, pacing up and down the room every which way, agitated as if a gadfly stung them. Scared, a girl in our class burst into tears at her desk, and a boy, who had stood up in protest, was bundled out of the room and ruffed up. And then one of them – known for his love of samp, he was called

Sampo-Rambo – began his speech.

"Are you the g-tens, the unicellular amoebas, the primitive g-tenipitihecans, the lazy bottom feeders who until this very morning have been eating samp at the dining hall at leisure as if you were mango-worms, while we, even though we are superior to you in our sentience, more advanced in all subjects – from molar chemistry to differential equations – we have been slashing in the fields and toiling in the toilets? Are you the ones who have just now been enjoying even though you are stupid, while we have been suffering even though we are intelligent? Don't you know that here a captain is greater than a headmaster at any other school? But now the hour has come. Now is the time of your recompense. Now you must learn respect. This one crying and that one outside being disciplined are proof enough of your insolence. Ten Green you are booked for the rest of the week."

The grade elevens had begun their campaign to become captains. The ambitious ones, self-nominated, they demonstrated their leadership by barging into classrooms during prep, making impromptu speeches, and freely inventing charges with which to coerce their fellow students into cleaning duties. This was the system. The current captains, and the rest of the grade twelves along with them, retire from non-academic duties, turning their full attention to their studies. It worked this way, because for all the school's prestige there were hardly any employees besides the teaching staff and the kitchen staff, and the school doubled as a labour camp, relying on the captains to push students to do the cleaning in return for better rations of food and rooms of their own in the dorms. But with the grade twelves busy at their studies, and us the grade tens arriving late – delayed, in fact, by the lengthy time it took to process the national grade nine results – cleaning the dormitories, the ablution blocks, and maintaining the school's extensive grounds had until now fallen on the grade elevens alone.

But by custom the grace period expired at the end of the rainy season, when this burden shifted to the grade tens. It was its own history lesson. The Israelites turn Babylonians, and Judah becomes Rome.

We were booked that evening, every grade ten class was, and we would be booked again and again for a great many evenings to come. When a class was booked, the names of its members were handed over and

apportioned among the captains, and each class member had to report to a captain in the dormitory to do all manner of chores that same night, from mopping floors to cleaning the toilets, the boys at their dorms, the girls at theirs. But there were no brooms, nor mops, nor brushes, and we had to assemble them ourselves from whatever we could find, stripping the garden hedges like goats, and scavenging in the surrounding neighbourhood's trash heaps like dogs. We were made to produce the means of our own perdition. And we were booked during the day too. The new captains would stand on the path between the dorms and the classrooms at a roadblock and harry us, looking for transgressions. Late for class, tie skew? Booked. Shoes not polished, shirt not clean?

Booked. We hated those road blocks as much as Nelson Mandela hated his passbook. And in the boys' dorms at least, those who dodged were dragged from their beds in the middle of the night and sorted out. A girl in our year went home, and a boy walked out of the school in the middle of the day, talking to the trees. During those many long nights, with an imagination fed by this experience, I thought about the countless many inmates of Stalin's gulags, and the malnourished prisoners of war who built bridges for the Japanese in the jungle, and all the activists detained in the nations of South America who had dug their own graves before the firing squad.

On another evening Sampo-Rambo returned and went a little further than his usual speech of insults and bookings. After charging into our prep room with his cabal, and making a noise, he called out Imo by her name.

"What is one over zero?" he asked her.

"It is not possible," she said.

"Is that so? In that case carry your desk to the front of the class and stand on it," he said, and she did this. Then he called me to the front and commanded me to crouch and sit on the floor under her desk, which I did.

"Now, Imo" he said, "You are one on top, and Zero is below, and so it is possible to have one over zero. You lied. That is why I'm booking the whole class. Ten Green you are booked."

The class laughed at this, even though it meant another night of graft. But Imo rushed to her desk and buried her head in her arms.

But with time my marks improved. Despite all the bookings, my hands

hardening from the chores, I kept studying. And in Literature I had some success, when I scored a 'B' in a test on Achebe's Things Fall Apart, the best in the class. But there was much suspicion about the subject, that it did not concern real knowledge. After all, we were scored in letters, and not numbers. And yet for Imo, it seemed to matter, because she came to talk to me one evening before we settled down for prep.

"Did you memorize the book?" she asked, looking up at me, her eyes watching like search lights passing over a shipwreck at the bottom of the sea.

"No," I said, "I don't have a good memory."

"Then how did you know the answers?"

"I didn't," I said. "But I read it again and again, until I knew how it felt to be Okonkwo."

"Oh," she said, "you are strange. It's just a story."

I do not know what she thought of me that day, whether she used the word 'strange' with derision or admiration. But she must have been affected by the conversation, because with the next book, The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born, she scored the only 'A'. But for me, talking to her the first time felt like a deification. For a moment, it seemed as though the whole universe were spinning around us at a great speed, while we stood still in a great white light, even though we were standing in the semi-darkness of the corridor outside the prep room. And when she turned away, I fell from heaven like a meteorite burning through the atmosphere, this earth's tender skin.

In grade eleven, Imo nominated herself as a captain and she was like no other candidate before on the campaign trail. Though she put on a clean white shirt every day, and tidied up her hair, making speeches and inventing arbitrary bookings against the grade tens, all the while more exact, and tireless in her pursuit of deserters, so that soon the school had become smarter than it had been when the first president visited many years before, she also expanded the campaign, by moving against grade elevens as well, her own peers, and her competing candidates had to do the same, to keep up, making us the first grade elevens to continue with the school's chores, though less intensely than before. But one morning, late for class, having overslept, dazed by a string of late nights, she stopped

me at the roadblock and booked me, and saw to it that I did my punishment cutting the grass around the neglected football field, overgrown and wild. Slashing at the bush in anger under the hot son, my passion came to rest there as if it were a course of hot molten rock flowing into the sea.

Imo was appointed as a captain, but she did not make head girl, and so she quit altogether, returning to her quiet bookish ways. And at the grade twelve exams, Imo came first in all subjects at the school, and the country. My results were good, second only to Imo in Literature. I went to a university in South Africa, and studied further, becoming an academic who writes about some books, and teaches other books, though I have kept in touch with some of my old friends.

Recently, I went to a conference in Germany, where Imo lives now, and I sought her out, and met up with her. She was genuinely excited to see me, and she took me out to lunch. She was talkative, and ordered food and drinks in fluent German, and she looked sharp in her stylish clothes. We talked about the old times naturally and laughed about my Zero and her stalled career as a captain, while that white light began to enfold us once again. And I told her about the feelings I used to have for her, which seemed a surprise to her. But because it was a short lunch – it was a busy time of the year for her and she had to rush – she asked me to call her back later that evening. And yet I didn't.

My visit had been enough to let me understand that the division between us would always remain beyond measure. And so, even though I would have liked to show her all that I had learnt in my studies and gaze longer at all that the she had become, I knew that it would never be possible.