Red Dirt Paths

Tani Arness

I remember it was Bernard who sauntered up behind me in Harare and began to walk me across town to my hotel, warning, "Tani, this street is not safe. I know a guy who robs people here."

And I remember, as usual when I walked with my students or black friends in the city, a policeman (seeing a white American and a notorious street kid) came up and asked Bernard for I.D., and then asked me, "Do you know this person?"

"Yes."

"How well do you know him?"

"I am his teacher."

"Oh. Well, be careful."

Bernard didn't complain. He joked, afterward, saying in his local Shona language, "Man do not bother me, this woman belongs to me." The feminist in me bristled at such sexism yet took solace in the idea that Bernard was different from many of the Shona men in that he, at least, understood enough about American women to bother to laugh at his "joke." After being in the bush where men offered to pay seven *mombes* [cows] for me as a second wife, Bernard was refreshing.

Bernard Chakwanda, my student, arrived at Ponesai Vanhu Junior School, a rural boarding school for "street kids," located near Shamva, Zimbabwe, on the 14th day of a hot, dry August in 1995. His hair clean cut, and his pants and shoes washed but torn, he told me it was his birthday. . . . Only years later do I begin to see how it was there, in the midst of Africa's bush, Africa's red soil and acacia trees, mango trees, political corruption, bare running feet, and plastic bag footballs, in the midst of women's ululations, gyrating

dances, and field-work songs, that I, young and idealistic, started to learn what loving a person or a place can and cannot mean. That sometimes the stakes are high. That you must love a person before you can try to understand him. And that understanding is secondary. That understanding a person may be part of his tragedy as well as not understanding him may be.

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Before I had any understanding of Zimbabwe, I felt like one of the guys among my students. I learned how to combat boredom in the bush, to make air guns out of hollowed branches or play games of tossing stones into cow pies, I learned how to eat properly with my hands, how to cook *sadza* and how to say, "Hey punk, be quiet" in local Shona language slang. I was obsessed; I was with my students before school, in classes, in study halls, in evening programs, on weekend programs. We sang together, danced together, hiked through the bush together. I was inspired! And Bernard latched onto whatever it was that I had to give (love, distraction, American mementos . . .), and I latched onto his need for it.

In Zimbabwe, my role as teacher was not confined to the classroom. In fact, in many ways the classroom seemed peripheral. I was in a faraway exotic place, and I was thrilled by the baboons, by my students and their exuberant song and dance. At the same time, I was compelled by the tragedies there. I was a naive foreigner, and I think this made it easier to love the people and the place. I was craving "more," and Zimbabwe had plenty of that.

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Bernard, like the other students, chose to leave the capitol city of Harare, to leave the hustle and bustle of tall buildings, four-lane paved city streets, fast food restaurants, tourists, and cinemas. They were promised three meals a day in the simple cement dormitories of our rural school, and some chose to bus the three hours north to live and take classes amidst the red dirt paths, wheat and corn fields, ox-carts, and thatch-roofed huts of the bush. However, when these boys (there were very few girls) left the city, they did not leave the social system that they as "street kids" had there.

Bernard was an accepted ringleader. He was older and strikingly handsome, with a charming, bright white smile and a commanding posture, a sort of wiry strut that the other boys held a safe respect for. Bernard controlled the mood. One day, in science class, one of the younger students kept talking and goofing around as I was speaking. Bernard was in the mood to learn that day, or in the mood to impress. I was asking the student

to be quiet for the third time when Bernard quietly arose from his seat, picked up the young boy, desk and all, carried him outside the classroom, and shut the door.

Bernard also had a unique ability to show his vulnerability. He told me how his parents both died before he could ever remember their faces. He told me how his relatives beat him and his younger brother Mischek, and gave them all the chores to do: "I was 12 years old and my life was becoming too difficult. I was the only kid getting up at five A.M. to plow and garden until I was 20–30 minutes late to school. After school I was herding cattle, 18 cattle, 6 goats, and 4 donkeys. Remember there is no friendship between these animals, in fact the donkey will run away."

He told me about how he escaped to begin living in the city center: "I remembered a pastor had once told me, 'God will bless you if you are praying and coming every Sunday.' I talked to him and began to think of my whole story from the time my father died and I started to cry without answering anything for a long time. I went to church for six months, but nothing changed. My relatives beat me for telling the priest my problems. One day, it was Christmas Day but the same as all the days, I ran away from home."

What I liked best about Bernard was the way in which he refused to give up on trying to find answers to life's biggest questions. He told me, "To have some problems in life doesn't mean you are the one who doesn't know how to make your life easy," and, "No one can make someone do bad things." He asked me questions that felt important to my life: "Why did you come here?" He asked the kind of questions that make you think about the world in a bigger way, and he waited for answers. He was one of the people that continued to think about meaning even when everything pushed that away. He asked me in the middle of a Tuesday afternoon, "Tani, what do you think is the most important thing in life?" I had to think hard for him.

But Bernard also knew when to stop. We could be sitting on the dry, red ditches, me pondering the future or him pondering his past, or both of us confused by our lack of solution, when Bernard would decide the conversation was too heavy. He'd hop up and wrap his arms across his chest (the posture of his famous "mummy dance"), humming, with a very serious face, the reggae music he barely bent and swayed to. He'd say, "Aaaah, *iwe* (hey you), come on, *Shamwari* (friend). What are you doing here sitting like this and talking about nonsense?"

Bernard spent hours one weekend penciling a 15-page eruption onto cheap brown notebook paper. I read his story several times and imagined

Bernard asleep in Harare with his young brother under a flattened cardboard box. I imagined they knew the police might arrest them. They knew the good entrances to the street sewers where they could hide. They knew which boys might try to steal from them while they slept and which boys would never dare. They would have had the dollars that they earned from watching cars tucked away in the waistbands of their shorts. Perhaps they sauntered up to women bragging or flattering in hopes of finding a wife. Perhaps they went to rich houses and applied for jobs as gardeners. Perhaps they contemplated going back to their village or had long conversations about why so many difficulties. Perhaps they slept in drunken stupors and didn't have to think of anything until morning came and they were hungry.

Bernard wrote, "We [he and Mischek] started to know that we did something wrong to our ancestors or our spirit mediums because we were suffering. . . . Sometimes I slept on shop verandahs and while I was sleeping some shop owners would come during the night and pour water on top of the cardboard boxes that we used as blankets. Some people would make fires in the bins. I am not a Christian but some of those times I would think for sure God is there. . . . The way I was living at this time was a very dangerous lifestyle. I was sniffing glue . . . I was smoking cigarettes and *mbange* (marijuana) and drinking beer. You know it's easy to do these things when you are suffering."

In the story of his life, Bernard wrote as if no one was to blame, though I don't think he, nor I, could really let go of that angry feeling. I began to learn about the ordinary cogs of our lives that go unnoticed, the words from strangers, the daily chores, the daily meals, the clothes we put on in the morning, the places where we sleep, the places we walk to, the people that we meet, the things (jobs, education, pens, birthday cards) that people give us and the things (land, houses, families, traditions) that are taken away. I was learning about how circumstances help make us who we are.

Perhaps it was Bernard's suffering that made Bernard seem, at times, like more than one person. Bernard could have a polite and sincere demeanor, a manipulative angry ranting, a dry humor, or some kind of egotistical cross between them. He showed up many mornings at my door to walk with me. He often shared food from his plate at lunch. But then he could launch into long, angry monologues.

"Tani, why is it that my paper says 'good' and his paper says 'very good'? Is my paper not 'very good' also? You know I do not need you to tell me

anything. I am my own man. I have overcome every thing in my life and I will take care of my own life no matter what comes. To tell you the truth, I am not afraid to die. I am afraid of no man. You can do what you have to do and I also will do what I have to do."

Or, "I have struggled, Tani, and you do not know what I am talking about. Am I supposed to look the other way when Golden [another student] looks at me like I have eaten something off his plate? I can tell you now, I am not afraid to die. I depend on no man."

He would generally return later and pretend to apologize with some statement like, "I can see that you think I am a bad boy. But let me tell you now that I am your friend and I will not let a person like Golden stand in the way of a friendship. That man is no problem to me. If he wants to see me angry then let me tell you he will see it, but I am not worried about such a person."

Maybe I wanted to think of myself as helping this poor, angry "street kid." But, I spent long afternoons listening to Bernard. I tried to make peace in situations that were perhaps far bigger than my small words and understanding. The routine usually meant that I just sat while Bernard ranted. Sometimes I would sigh and say, "Bernard, you're a good person, but you need to let it go. Nobody wants to fight with you."

One afternoon, I was sitting with my students in the back of a truck waiting to catch a ride to a nearby dirt field for a soccer game when one of my students said to me, "I'm going to get me an American *baby.*"

I looked and him and replied, "Not talking like that you're not."

"*Iwe,* what do you mean?"

"I mean, *mupfana* [kid or punk], that most American women don't like it when strange men call them *baby.*"

"Aaahhh, why not?"

"Because it does not give them respect. American women believe that they are equal to men."

"Ah! *Iwe!* That is impossible."

The shock at such statements always surprised me.

"No it's not impossible. Why can't women be equal to men?"

"Aaah, Tani, maybe in your culture such a thing can happen, but not in our Shona culture."

"Yeah, but in America women are different; for instance we can have as many husbands as we choose."

All of the boys were shocked by this, and he exclaimed, "Aaah. No, Tani, that is impossible. *Ndiudze chokwadi* [tell me the truth]."

I pretended to be baffled, asking, "What? It is a different culture. In Zimbabwe men have as many wives as they want and in America women have as many husbands as they want."

My students just scolded me playfully. "Ah. Tani. *Ndiudze chokwadi.*"

And I smiled and shrugged and we continued to stand in the back of the truck, the wind in our faces, the sun on our backs—our own thoughts in our own minds—agreeing not to understand each other, agreeing to enjoy this moment.

Toward the end of my six months in Zimbabwe, Bernard invited me to take a bus, five hours, with him to meet his relatives. I was a little worried that people might wrongly assume that Bernard and I were romantically involved, especially in the more traditional rural area where we were going. But, Bernard assured me that his family would understand that Americans had different customs and that they would not expect anything to come of this visit.

As we stepped off the bus in Mhondoro, I absorbed a dusty horizon of yellow thatched roofs sprinkled around clusters of boulders and shade where laundry hung still in the dry heat. I glanced around to see women carrying buckets of water balanced on their heads, men poking their heads around the cement walls of the beer hall, children running barefoot along narrow paths, and even wandering goats, all looking over to see the *murungu* (white person). Neighbors stopped by to introduce themselves. The pastor from the nearby church gathered the family for a long prayer meeting in the kitchen hut. I listened to the foreign syllables of prayer as my eyes watered mercilessly from the cooking fire's smoke. (Bernard, who had slyly excused himself, was sleeping peacefully in a nearby flat). I tried to help his older "sister" (actually an aunt or cousin or half-sister) cook, and his two young "sisters" ran around all day fetching water for us and sugar for the tea and mats to sit on.

After hearing about how Bernard's family had not wanted Bernard and had beaten him as a child, it seemed strange that they were now treating him with so much respect. I was observing the ways in which people go along with things.

Bernard walked me around the area, showing the paths to the nearby dam and paths to the beer hall. I sat on the ground and played stone games

in the dirt with the children while Bernard sat inside the hut and talked with the men of his family. Later he told me that he refused the *mbange* (marijuana) they offered because "I know that you do not like to see me too high." In the afternoon, the youngest sister, whom I had been playing with all day, warmed water for me and offered to bathe me. We stood behind a grass screen and she scrubbed my back with soap and warm water and helped me to rinse my hair. I liked the inherent intimacy of the village—the touch of stone, the smell of grass, the angles of light.

The first night when all the family disappeared into respective flats and huts, Bernard showed me to my bed, which was a mat on the floor next to the bed where he would sleep. In traditional Shona culture, it is seen as a challenge to men's authority when a woman, for instance, sits higher than a man in the kitchen hut. If women are sitting on the bench in the kitchen hut and a man walks in, the women will move to the floor and the man will sit on the bench. I was shocked by our co-ed arrangement, but listened while Bernard assured me that his family put us in the same room because they wanted me to feel comfortable and that they knew that Americans would not think twice about such an arrangement between friends. Either trusting Bernard or just naïve or unsure of what else I could do at that point, I agreed and we both fell quickly asleep.

On the second day, Bernard's family teased lightly about building a hut for me and teaching me Shona so that I could move there and teach at the local primary school. I began to think that I had made some gross oversights; by that night, when Bernard started making advances in the dark, I was sure that I had.

"Tani, *Shamwari,* just come up here and lie by me, please."

"*Iwe,* Benny, no, you are my student."

"Don't worry, my friend, nobody will know. Don't you care about me? Are you shy? What if I wasn't your student?"

"Benny, I care about you as a friend. Please just go to sleep."

The whispered conversation was long and circular, and not without longing, but Bernard's idea was thwarted. The next morning we were awoken at five A.M. by the sound of the approaching bus rattling down the dirt road. I felt exhausted from having argued with Bernard for so long, stupid for not having expected that, and guilty for having heard Bernard's intimate pleas. One of the hardest things in Zimbabwe was the guilt of not understanding; I wanted to understand people and motivations but struggled for a context even to understand the simple actions of every day. I had come to Zimbabwe wanting to "give" to the world, and every day I questioned

whether I was actually doing harm. Sometimes I couldn't even understand whether to feel loved or hated. I climbed on the old rattling bus and rode back to the city; Bernard and I both accepted the status quo, went back to our accepted roles, continued to be friends.

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I had to return home from Zimbabwe before I was ready to leave and I was angry at my expired work visa, and angry at my own country: "For god's sake you can't even talk to a real human being on the telephone!" I yelled as I developed my pictures of Zimbabwe and wrote letters to my students and had dreams of Africa. I had a dream that Bernard and I were talking together on the ferryboat from my hometown to Seattle. I dreamt that I couldn't believe he was there and he couldn't understand what I was making a big deal about. I sent pictures to Bernard of snow. I got a letter back from Bernard saying that he was coming to the United States and that he would send me his new address.

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Bernard was not a long letter writer so I was dying to know his story, and called all of my connections in the world of African volunteers before piecing together that a group of Americans that had gone to work in Zimbabwe after my group had left had met Bernard; one 20-year-old Mormon girl, Sarah, had met Bernard and fallen in love. She went back to Harare to study at the university and they moved in together. She (the same girl who, before her trip, professed religious reasons for not drinking caffeine) got pregnant. She wrote home to her mother with the news, and her mother, a strict Mormon, flew immediately to Harare and demanded that the two of them get married. Of course this is just what I heard. The only *fact* I had was a photo of a young pregnant white American in a dress with flowers and a young black African both looking to the side at a camera and grinning. I wrote back, "Congratulations!" but was appalled, asking myself, Who is this girl? What is she thinking? Bernard is an African street kid. He's got issues.

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The first time I saw Bernard, after Africa, was in Seattle. I followed Sarah's directions, scribbled onto a paper bag, and pulled into the driveway of a nice, two-story house, cute, with green trim and Christmas lights. Sarah's mother greeted me warmly and led me up the stairs to Sarah's childhood

bedroom, now decked out with a double bed, stacked with photo albums, next to a baby's crib and diaper changing station. I was anxious to hear what Bernard thought of the United States. I wondered if he considered this a lucky break. I was expecting Sarah to be young and incredibly foolish. I was anxious to see what kind of girl would marry Bernard.

I was happily surprised to find that Sarah was an intelligent, down-to-earth young woman. She did most of the talking while Bernard lay on the bed holding his daughter, Libby. I asked Sarah how it felt, all these new changes, and she told me that it wasn't a perfect situation but they were making the best of it. She did not complain and she did not idealize. Sensible. She was getting ready to go back to school to get a teaching degree. She helped Bernard find his first job. She laughed at President Robert Mugabe and read the UN reports on Africa; at the age of 21, she had run marathons and played piano concerts. I liked her.

When she suggested that Bernard and I go out for a hike and catch up, we did. Once alone in the midst of green moss, the moist smell of Washington soil, rotting tree stumps, and evergreens, Bernard returned to his talkative old self: "Tani, I did not plan for this to happen. I was not ready to be a father. Sarah told me she was on the pill. I feel like I am trapped in a box."

My heart sank. I was hoping that this would be a good thing for Bernard, but he seemed to be in shock, switching from roaming free with his friends in Harare to the chores of a Mormon, suburban household, from a respected leader on the streets to a belittled construction laborer.

He continued, as if relieved to finally speak, "I do not complain to wash dishes or vacuum because I know that in America men will do these things, but aaah, to tell you the truth, Tani, Sarah's family, they are not respecting me. You know what they are doing, *Shamwari,* is not good for me. They want me to go to church where everyone will not like me because I do not want to be Mormon. And her sister, she has said she will share the car with us but then every day she is saying that she needs the car and we are left with nothing. I don't know, maybe these people think I am just a street kid but they are saying one thing and doing another."

Sarah was trying to get him to stop smoking; he had no friends and watched TV all day. Sarah, with I believe the best of intentions and motivation, was opening checking accounts for them and taking care of many details, but Bernard looked powerless.

I wondered about the clash in family structures since traditional Zimbabwean families are very interdependent and hierarchical, bound to

help each other while giving the oldest sons more respect and privilege in the family, while American families strive for equal participation and yet tend to rest on the assumption that each individual ultimately must "look out for number one." I found myself trying to mediate between two worlds, negotiate outsiders and insiders, question assumptions about the forces acting on us that we cannot see.

"Bernard, I don't know what to say. Do you have any money if you wanted to go back to Zimbabwe?"

"No, Tani, you see this is the problem, I have nothing here."

I couldn't see many options for Bernard either. "Well, have you told Sarah how you feel?"

"Aaah, Tani she does not understand me in the ways that you do."

Pause.

"Well, Benny, maybe you can just try and make it work. Maybe you can find a way to be happy here for now."

I do not remember from that day any romantic tension. I do not remember sympathy. Though both of those things could have been between us. I do remember a sense of need lingering in the winter cold. I remember wishing I could fill that need. I did not know if that meant I loved Bernard. I never said so if I did. I don't know if he loved Sarah either. He did not say so at the time, though he told me she was a "good woman."

A week after that day, I met Benny in Seattle to tour the Christmas season highlights before I left town. I have a picture of us riding side by side on the carousel in downtown Seattle on that day. We are both smiling.

At the end of that day, we sat in my car waiting for his bus to come and take him back to his new suburban life. We sat in a moment between worlds. I waited to go back to my new teaching job in a small Eskimo village of Alaska. He waited to return to his new family life with electric garage doors, sidewalks, and wall-to-wall carpeting. We both sat holding separate memories of faraway pasts as we had cut ourselves loose to look for better futures.

"*Iwe Shamwari* [Hey you, friend], what do you want to tell me?"

"Benny, what are you talking about?"

"I want to tell you something."

"What is it, Ben?"

"Aaaah, but Tani, I think there is something you want to say to me first."

I remember he looked at me like he wanted to confess something. I looked at him like he was beautiful and yet somehow broken. Neither of

us was comfortable in the silence, knowing that something important was missing, that important things were yet to come. At this exact moment we were equal, though, sadly, I don't think we could ever fully trust each other. Was this love, or the need for it? I worried about whether he had made the right choice in leaving his homeland, or if it was his fate to be here; I questioned the role of "home" in our lives. I began to think that Bernard had gotten himself into the middle of a course of events that could not be turned back.

We sat quietly, shaking our heads, magnifying the drizzle of the rain, the gray interior of my small Ford Escort reflecting the gray of Seattle's December skies, a monotonous yet expansive condition.

Over the next two years, Bernard held fairly steady jobs and brought in enough money to get by while Sarah worked on her education program. Bernard was enjoying the opportunity to strut his new, stylish Tommy Hilfiger clothes and Buju Banton CD's. They regularly sent money home to Bernard's younger brother Misheck. I visited them as often as I could and began to admire how they were pulling things together to make this work; I slept on their couch and heard them tickling and teasing in their bedroom. As Sarah told me their future plans, their dreams fed my dreams and held my cynicism at bay. I began to think maybe we all really could have the best of both worlds: the exuberance, the spirit, and the power of tradition and the beautiful minimalism of rural Zimbabwean land and culture, along with the distinctly middle-class "haves" opportunity to go where we want and do what we want—the privilege of education, money, and vast arrays of choices.

"We're thinking we'll live in Harare where Bernard could get a job as a driver or something and I could teach and we could buy just one of those middle-class houses, you know, not those rich ones in the white suburbs but maybe like Hatfield or something . . ." Sarah would say.

I'd pipe in, "Oooh, that'd be so great. I could come and teach at the International School with you and we could be neighbors . . ."

I began to learn about the job of pulling pieces together and I thought maybe it all made sense; maybe it was as simple as moving forward into second chances. And at the same time, my friends (other African volunteers) and I wondered aloud how long this marriage would last. One girl who had known Sarah for a long time said very insightfully, "It will last as long as Sarah wants it to last."

That statement rang in my ears and stayed with me like a bad omen for Bernard. It echoed—entitlement, power. That year, things started to fall apart. Bernard would call me and say, "Tani, Sarah has been stealing our money."

"Bernard, what are you talking about?"

"Tani, I know that you like Sarah and she has done many good things for me, but as you know, I have been working long hours, and even overtime, you know, and I always give my check to Sarah and she deposits it, as I am saving up to go to visit Zimbabwe; and now today Sarah is telling me that we have no money, but when I ask her then where has that money gone, she cannot answer me. And I know for a fact, Tani, that last month I had over a thousand dollars saved in that account. And then, Tani, I think that Sarah is talking to her family about me, so I get angry and I tell her, OK, this is it, you know, just give me my papers and I can just take care of my own matters, then she starts to tell me shit about how she cannot find my papers. But, Tani, I know that I gave her my papers to put in her box, so now I am getting very angry."

I would try to mediate: "Bernard, maybe try talking to Sarah again?"

Or sometimes Sarah would call me and say, "Tani, Bernard's going crazy, can you talk to him?"

Bernard would get on the phone, "Hullo."

"Bernard, what's going on?"

"Tani, Sarah is lying to me. . . ." And he would go into long denunciations about how Sarah had tricked him. One particular time, Bernard had gone into his tirade about how he didn't need anybody and he could die, with such vehemence that he said, "And if I die, I will take Libby [their daughter] with me, she will not live the kind of life that I have lived."

"Bernard, you can't say things like that. In this country that is considered a crime, a death threat. You can be arrested for saying that."

But Bernard was angry and desperate for a sense of power in a powerless situation, saying, "Tani, I don't care anymore. I will do what I have to do . . ."

I suggested he leave the house until he calmed down. Sarah later told me that he did leave, but not until he had threatened her to the point where she was scared and called the police. The police picked him up walking, unsuspecting, down a neighborhood street. Sarah had to go through a lot of lawyers to get her charges dropped in time for Bernard to get out of jail

and use the plane ticket that he'd been saving up for for two years, to visit Zimbabwe. Sarah promised the prosecutors that Bernard would not be back. She told me that maybe she had overreacted, that Bernard had not actually *done* anything. She packed bags for him with his most stylish new clothes to show off back home; she picked him up from the jail on a Monday night and drove him straight to his flight at Sea-Tac Airport.

Sarah's vulnerability at those times brought me closer to her. I knew that Bernard was probably in the wrong and I knew that somehow he still felt bigger in my heart's sadness than she did. But I felt a growing connection to Sarah as she began to show me the soft and hard spaces of watching your love fall apart. She seemed to encompass a certain faith that held her together even as she and Bernard must have burst across each other's nighttime dreams like flames across impending darkness.

Bernard arrived back in Zimbabwe with less than two hundred dollars, and started gifting his American goods to expectant friends and relatives. He stayed in a youth hostel and paraded as a success story. He called Sarah collect numerous times to insist that he was sorry and desperate not to lose her and Libby, the "best things in his life."

And then Bernard returned "home" to Seattle, and began taking drugs with street kids on Capitol Hill and getting phone calls from Rasta girlfriends. Trust was disappearing. I imagine Sarah sitting home long, angry nights and Bernard back in the streets smoking weed, hanging out, earning respect in his old ways, yet now torn in a whole new direction, calling home at four A.M. guilt-ridden with sorries. When Sarah called me, I wanted to provide some passage of understanding, but all I had was a telephone. In frustration, Sarah confided, "Tani, it's so weird, it's like he's reverted to being a street kid again."

Bernard eventually called to tell me Sarah wanted a separation.

Sarah seemed cooperative as Bernard found an apartment for himself. I thought, maybe this is it, a peaceful separation. But for Bernard, at least, the tension was still mounting.

Looking back, I still don't know what my role was in all of this. It seems we were all just trying to be happy, fulfilled. Maybe we all understood something about circumstances that get in the way. We could all see the injustice of Americans showing up in Zimbabwe with more in their backpacks than many will own in their lives, or of people walking by in Seattle and jeering at Sarah, "What are you doin' with that nigger?" Definitely we didn't understand enough about how one gets in one's own way. I don't think Bernard could see how his own pain kept creeping in, just waiting for some little thing to trigger his rage. Perhaps some things even triggered delusions. I know that sometimes I got tired of listening to Bernard but I was never guilted into listening to him; I was compelled.

I have often felt compelled to love people who make it hard to love them. Perhaps it is that severed umbilical cord, that difficult childhood that does not allow a child to feel loved, that cuts people like Bernard to fly away into a world that hovers ahead like a head wind. I see people, like Bernard and Sarah and myself, moving over oceans and continents, and I think everyone must find "home" somewhere. Bernard and Sarah and I all wanted people to stop having to wander in the streets, to find refuge and to feel loved and worthwhile and to be happy.

I cannot claim to understand all the forms of love. But I think that Sarah *loved* Bernard. And I think maybe Bernard was too busy fighting his battles to absorb that love. I don't know if Bernard really feels loved by anyone or if he really feels love for anyone. Perhaps Bernard felt thankful to Sarah, or jealous of her, or trapped by her, or admiration for her, fear of her, or love. Who can name the many emotions that must have passed between all three of us? I do think that in some way Sarah and I both still *love* Bernard as I like to believe he still *loves* both of us. If I were feeling more cynical, I might say that we were all just using each other.

After Bernard moved out, he and Sarah tried to remain "friends" and work together as a family. It was a balancing act of sharing cars and babysitting . . . until one night Sarah, again, called the police on Bernard. After Sarah called me, I imagined the standoff she described. Bernard posturing aggressively in the doorway. Sarah trying to calm the baby down, both of them in tears. The Buju Banton CD left on in the background. Bernard's cigarette smoke lingering over his rambling threats and scared, darting eyes: "Sarah! I don't know what you are trying to do! I cannot trust anyone, so if you want to see me angry I will show you. Why are you are trying to trick me?!"

"Bernard, I don't know what you're talking about. All of our papers are right here in this box. You need to just calm down."

"You know, Sarah, I can just burn all of your papers if you are going to hide the truth from me (lighter flicking in his hand). I am not afraid. I can even burn the house or myself or Libby."

I supported Sarah's decision to call the police. I felt that safety came first. We didn't know if Bernard had come to his breaking point; we didn't know if he was dangerous.

Weeks later, within minutes of Bernard's release from jail, Sarah's phone was ringing off the hook with Bernard's calls. Bernard was out on parole under condition of a restraining order. I don't know how many times Sarah listened to his answering machine messages before she picked up her phone. But I can imagine Bernard was desperate and afraid, begging her to forgive him. She told me that he explained how someone in jail had taught him how to kill himself with a long knife. Bernard was shifting gears. Sarah was nervous, or maybe terrified.

Sarah called the police and set up a sting operation in a parking lot. When Bernard showed up, the police did too. They chased him down, and when they arrested him, he was carrying an eight-inch knife. Bernard went back to jail with a one-year sentence. He wanted to die. He spent two weeks in the mental ward.

I was not there for any of this. Like I was not there for most of Bernard's life. My connection with this friend of mine was a series of questions that had embedded themselves deep into my heart by this time. I wanted to understand this relationship, and the course of Bernard's life. I wanted to understand how we love someone whom we can't understand. I went about my daily life, infused with persistent images of Bernard running for his life through some nondescript alley in Seattle, infused with images of jail psychiatrists prescribing bottles of pills to a man (not a "kid") who was just trying to find his way, a man who had been hurt so many times already and who was at his breaking point. I was angry at the world for not letting in Bernard's "happy ending." But I also knew that it was not that easy, that whatever was causing Bernard to make these terrible choices was very deep-rooted. And I had to accept that Bernard was unable to look at what he needed to, that some people in the same circumstances as Bernard

might have resolved more of their problems, and some might have resolved less.

Once again, as in Zimbabwe with the tragic lives of children living on the streets, the roots of tragedy were invisible to me. I could only guess at what abuse Bernard must've received to make him so desperate: maybe the beatings of his aunts and uncles, or the humiliation and fear of shop vendors and policemen harassing him, the begging for food and water, the men that tried to lure young street boys into their homes for sexual favors, or . . . I thought about the long list of tragedies, the violence, drugs, desperate cries for help, the depression, fear, and loneliness, that comes from not knowing. Yet I wanted to believe that Bernard's spirit would eventually just hurdle over all of this. I wrote to Bernard in jail and told him to call collect any time.

Sarah told me later she must have inherited her mother's desire to "save" people; she thought if she just gave Bernard a chance to get out of his situation then his warm heart would win over. She thought now that Bernard would be better off back in Zimbabwe where at least he knows people and the system. I wished it were that easy. I wished that what I called "Bernard's survival of the fittest instinct," the fighting instinct learned by fending for himself on the streets for years, could be replaced with the safety and love we are supposed to find at "home." I wished that Bernard would be fine if he went back to Zimbabwe. But I couldn't help but look at everyone involved and think that damage had been done. I wanted to blame international policy and the system of haves and have-nots, poverty, the naiveté of myself or Sarah, the neglect and coldness of Bernard's family, or Bernard's refusal to take responsibility for himself. But I couldn't believe that Bernard was not a good person, or that Sarah wasn't or that I wasn't. I couldn't find the roots of accountability. Sometimes I light candles for Bernard and I feel sorry. Is it true that everything happens for a reason? Is anyone better off for this? Is this what someone needed to learn? Or is it just the changing ways of life, the unlucky way that things fall apart?

Bernard is still in jail. I think it is odd that I, too, feel trapped by this situation. When I sent Bernard 30 dollars for the jail commissary, he wrote back that he had bought pencils and tablets and was beginning his book. Perhaps wrongly, that gave me hope. I wanted to think of my friend with hope. I

wanted to think of him gathering all of the brush strokes of his life together and having something meaningful, even beautiful, appear in the end.

Bernard often writes me letters telling me that I am the best friend that he has and that he trusts me more than anyone and doesn't know how he can repay me for all I've done for him . . . I write him back loving words meant to strengthen.

Recently, Sarah and I sent Bernard's young brother, Mischek, school fees. He was looking for Bernard and struggling to get money. Mischek ended up writing an e-mail to his brother Bernard and asking Sarah to mail it. Sarah sent it to me, and I mailed it to Bernard.

Bernard is furious with me now. He says I have broken the no-contact order and put him in the "middle of a situation." He says that he never asked me to get in the middle, and he never asked me, or Sarah, to send money to his brother. He says he depends on no one and that I am his best friend and he doesn't understand how I could betray him like this . . . It doesn't make any sense to me. It is irrational and it is the side of Bernard that is hard to love, maybe crazy. I wonder if he is on drugs. I know that he has been pushed too far. I read his raging letter, and I think back to his tirades delivered on the red dirt paths leading to the school in Zimbabwe. I think about how far both of us have come, and something feels very wrong. I think about international aid programs and the paternalism they are accused of. I think of how Bernard had recently taken to telling me that I am like a Mum to him. I think, was it the American arrogance of trying to "help" Bernard that helped cripple him? Does the motivation of love make it all OK?

As I write this I think back to Bernard's ideas about the problems in life. I picture Ponesai Vanhu Junior School, and I wonder, what if he had made other choices? What if I had? What if Sarah had? I see myself now in another city, in another room for rent, again trying to find a home and be happy. Somehow I have not brought tragedy on myself. Deep inside me, I know that Bernard deserves no less. And yet I know that he is, ultimately, the only one who can save himself, his dreams, who he was meant to be. I remember the final words of Bernard's autobiography: "My last words are these. Maybe you will think I'm lying or that I'm trying to make you feel sorry, but that's not it. I am going to take this story with me until I die and then

I will know that at this time it was like this & at this time like this. . . . Then I can go on from there. I am not going to be too rich or respected, but I will be in the middle. That's just how life is. If you are at a place like this, you should have to know what caused you to be there, no matter what."

I imagine Bernard now at this place in his life, and I imagine there isn't even an outdoor facility there in the midst of downtown commuters in high heels and ties; I hope that Bernard gets the opportunity, at least, to look out of his small jail window and see the beautiful gray waters of Puget Sound. Then I remember that those waters may not be beautiful at all to my friend from the African savanna. In fact those cold gray clouds and salt waters may be the very same as those gray prison walls, keeping him far from himself, from home, from love. I want to say that I am sorry for all people who were born and yet were never held lovingly within their home. I want to admit that I no longer want to listen to the crazy anger of Bernard, who is smart and capable and warm, and that I have not replied to his last letter. But I also want to say that I never want to forget those who have found themselves backed into a corner. I want to believe that I will not give up on love, even when the sky is filled dark with anger. But then I have to admit that I don't know what it means to love. Is love being felt through gray prison walls, or from a faraway friend who does nothing?

Bernard would be angry reading this. He would look for facts that I got wrong. Maybe he would be angry that I was talking about him behind his back. Maybe he would want to die from remembering too much. Or maybe he would listen and understand how the world deprived him, and also how the world tried to love him. Bernard is strong and smart and loving and a fighter, and he is tired. I write this because I fear that we all will never understand each other, and will never understand that there is love between us as we are all so very human. I write this because people in my life have been driven over the edge. I write this because my friend, Bernard Chakwanda, is in the King County Jail on 500 5th Avenue on a tall hill in downtown Seattle, and I think that every person in this world must try to understand what has caused him to be there.