

Close To Zero

The question is, Daniel repeats, his sleeves chalk-rolled, eyebrows raised to lighten a mood that risks veering academic, what are the chances? He writes heavily:

1,000,000. Two bullet holes in the blackwashed wood, extra zeroes, are puttied with chewing gum.

“Ten percent. No, fifty per cent!” guesses a small girl in front. Zaria, deliberately unserious until she knows the answer, then scorning the others’ dullness. Daniel looks out at the vague day, giving the reluctant boys a chance. He draws a rectangle. “Imagine ten million footballs in a swimming pool, eh? Every ball numbered, from one to ten million. Very big pool.” They laugh. He adds a diving board. Are there ten million of anything in this country besides flies? *Mefloquine may cause mild neuropsychiatric symptoms*, he recalls, *including dizziness and nightmares*. But what happened to him last week was not a hallucination, it was a deliberate insult to his skin and self.

“So look: pull a ball at random. What’s the chance it will have a number under one million?”

“Ten percent,” shouts the same girl. The class murmurs agreement.

“Correct. So what’s the chance a completely random number, the top of which has no limit, remember, will also be under a million?” Why are there no

women in his life? He's still young at thirty-two. Many in Freetown assume at first glance that he's a missionary or priest. When in his first months he saw his own reflection in a clean window, high red hair, soapy skin, he thought, *that man is far from home and a fool.*

"Ziro," he tells them. "The chance a truly random number will be less than a million, or a billion, is effectively zero." He leans on his desk, pushed to one side so that the students with poor eyesight can sit closer to the board.

"We're fooled by the scale we live in. I have ten fingers, a goat has four legs, my brother's nose has two nostrils." They laugh. The expectant and the skeptical stare back.

"Little numbers, human numbers. We live in a mathematically unusual place," he says, "close to zero."

Walking to Fredda's office with the attendance cards he scolds himself for his tendency to overcomplicate. He does it always with a rigor proportional to his respect for facts, those useless things in the long run, and his desire not to condescend. When he thought of the number four the first thing that occurred to him was not the legs on a goat or the Sierra Leone seasons but a Russian man the same age Daniel is now, sawing on his own arm next to a pile of refuse on a Canadian lawn. For the number one he sees a threatening white stripe, five days ago on his narrow bed.

He feeds and waters the classroom mice, closes the wooden gate and drives to the beach, past cigarette and beer stores, burnished heels, battlescarred Corollas. The beach is pungent with oil, walk-up bars, fry-fry kiosks. A brave soul swims in

the brown chop, impressing larking mates. Two thousand freed slaves disembarked here, cutting inland till they reached the great cotton tree. There is no board game in which the aim is to stand still. A *kolonko* once followed him half a mile down Lumley Beach. "Fifty tousan! Ah haf condom. Mistah wit nas yelo shirt, ah unbutton yu!"

At a beach stand selling sunglasses a man with a drooping eye offers to sell Daniel his own death certificate. He buys a folding knife with a black blade that says JEEP and clips it to his belt.

"*Ticha*, haw kin all ah know, all evert'ing under fada God, be ziro?" Lucee looks pained by the accusation, the further diminishment of her paltry circumstances. She's eighteen. Married, tall, polite, she stands on one foot in the office clutching her practice book. She wears that checkerboard shirt material, yellow, pink, green, of which it seems West Africa has an unending supply. She joined the class halfway through the term but the British charity funding the school sent uniforms only for September's enrolment. Lucee's husband worked construction near their home in Bo Town until he was robbed one night by a gang of Liberian refugees and began planning a move to the capital where there was a children's hospital, where his pregnant wife would be safe. The infant died, the plan stalled. Lucee carries her sorrows close. She became pregnant again. They never reached Freetown. Her husband found work in Waterloo repairing radios and adding rooms to structures charitable and shambolic.

"I don't mean *worthless*. Some math things are hard to understand. *Trangga*, eh?" Daniel has picked up some Krio but still feels self-conscious moving in and out of it. "When we study a difficult concept like infinity it's easy to make big mistakes." He's showing them a realm where common sense can't be relied upon, but who knows by what cruel facts these children's intuition is circumscribed?

Lucee shyly regards his books and magazines, the shelf with two framed pictures. "Ticha, ah don know abot dey big mistake." Clear of eye, her dark forehead smooth. "Ah het tu pikin." Two babies. She makes her fingers the width of an infant's open mouth. "Dis esmal nomba ah know."

Last Tuesday he walked to Murray Town after work, ate street food and studied faces, feeling pleasantly dislocated. He wandered home past Mardi Gras balustrades on swaying colonial hotels and climbed to his room. In the middle of his bed lay a sheet of lined paper torn from a notebook. Upon it, soaking through, was a wavering trail of glaucous white. His top sheet imprinted by two knees. He lifted the bed to check its hollow leg. His money was still there in its ampersand coil. Nothing in his room had been touched. Just the puddle of white in an exclamatory stripe. He smelled it. Went down to the red-dirt street and asked his landlady, *na udat bin kam?* She'd seen no one.

"Semen," he said the next day. "If you can believe it." His voice high and characterless, useless at outrage.

"You saved it?"

"Of course not. Should I have?"

His headmistress Fredda Siabanda shook her head. He sat in her office, a hut connected to the schoolroom by a walkway bordered with smooth shore stones. Donated toys dragged in a corner for the little ones: blocks and kittens.

"I was thinking some Sande thing? Like a ritual?"

"There is no such *ritual*." She laughed in a way that made him suspect she'd be telling this story to others. "Someone breaks in your room to *toss one off* on your bed?" Fredda had all the English expressions. She lowered her brow to examine his earnest face. "Danil, who has a key to your door?" Anyone with a shoulder, he told her, his pudding skin coloring. "No one comes by. Men or women." His stomach stammered; he needn't be so forthcoming. "You don't think it means something?" Surely it was a threat to his manhood. The sun slanted meanly across the makeshift playground. He felt like an undissolved solid.

"You pay your rent?"

"Of course, always, a day early."

"Any trade disputes? A scuffle beside your nice motocar?" *Only 562 miles of the country's roads are paved.*

"It's not that nice." But he knew not every parent was happy, not every student or merchant. Each transaction was a tug of war, a straight line with two ends. As he often did when threatened he thought of the number four.

The wheat-haired man who'd bought the house across the street from Daniel's family in Oshawa in 1979 was Russian and a bachelor, each thing in that Canadian suburb its own ripe strangeness. He was *Ivan* to Daniel's father before they'd

spoken, the way any casually encountered Irishman was *Paddy* – the Englishman’s habit of keeping the exotic in its place. The Russian found a job at the GM assembly plant and took his lunch to work in a zinc can the shape of a covered wagon. When firewood had replaced the fiberglass batts crowding Ivan’s parking overhang and his windows were curtained, Daniel’s father crossed the street to welcome him. They talked for an hour on the gently sloping lawn, his dad pointing to the new shopping center, to downtown and the lumberyard, the other man facing where he was told, considering deeply. He’d shaved off what little hair he showed up with. Daniel studied the Soviet Union in his Atlas and wondered, did the Russian know that in this country if he wanted to he could get a dog? When his father returned, arms folded against the arrival of evening, he mimicked the stranger’s accent: “This is true you say, Terry.” “I am only interest with work now, Terry.”

Braemore Mews was the town’s westmost development, four house styles leapfrogging for a mile between the concession roads with nothing beyond but fields of milkweed, snake grass and thistles. Daniel, on a long leash for a nine year old, had played in the frames of the unfinished houses, larking through basements, scattering the outlet-box blanks that littered the dolphin-colored floors like unstamped coins.

After the lawns were rolled into place the city had come in a yellow truck and planted a single elm in each yard. When Ivan returned from work each day he would leave his car door open and stride to his tree, slim as a bicycle handlebar, grasp it at shoulder height and shake it for a long minute in a wide circle. “Look at that mad bugger,” Daniel’s father would say, peering out their kitchen window.

One Saturday, Ivan caught Daniel investigating curious trash in a discarded cupboard drawer at the bottom of his drive. "Hello," he said, "you are Daniel." His blue dress shirt from a packet, with squares on the chest where no one had ironed it. "Dmitri," he offered. Daniel shook the large hand, his bicycle wavering between his knees. "You are outdoors boy?" He bent his arms to row and shoot. Daniel nodded. He'd walked across this man's living room ceiling. He had peed in his fireplace.

"Daniel, here is true thing." He knelt. "In woods – " Ivan/Dmitri swept his arm to indicate all of Canada, the green wildness beyond their yards – "need always something you eat..." He mimed picking crumbs from his palm. "Something will *cut*..." He sawed with four fingers on his wrist, then struck an imaginary match. "Something will burn. And something loud." Both red hands parenthesizing his mouth. "Eat, cut, burn, loud. Four." He raised his fingers in summary.

This advice had left the purple-afterimage dent that things at the dim edge of Daniel's childhood understanding often made. Years later, even in Africa, he would keep in the glove box of his car a trail knife in a blond leather sheath, waterproof matches in a chrome tube, a brass whistle from his father's Scouting days and an energy bar.

Daniel sits in a *poyo* bar on Wallace Johnson Street with Canada behind him to his left as he drinks and frets over the break-in. The local palm wine didn't appeal when he arrived two years ago feeling conspicuous and maldecided. Might Daniel be his students' Ivan, an exotic stranger washed clean of his innocence by travel?

It's January, when the cooling winds blow in from the Sahara. An umbrella stand by the door is filled with kapok cotton, burst pods trembling frantic white. He walked here from his apartment past churches and mosques, ochre buildings with *solja* helmets painted blue, holding plants in lookdown windows. Freetown's streets appear recently lifted from dust, as if this is a newborn country still searching for space on the ground.

A young woman passes the bar door, one breast visible inside the Y of her silky top. He steps out on the clamorous street to pretend not to look for her but she's gone so he buys fry fry and Fula bread from a woman with a hat folded like gift wrap, eggshell and gold. Back at his wine, he worries his hair over yesterday's impromptu curricular departure. He shouldn't have used those words, *close to zero*. Colonial arrogance. It was impressive without being instructive.

Today he summoned the oldest boy to the teachers' room. Ismael showed up in his Leone Stars football shirt, affecting a protective uninterest, his nervousness betrayed by quick sideways dives of the head like a cat trained to balance on a ball. Ismael lost his siblings in the Conflict, worked at the port for a year running food and cold drinks at the docks. He wants to be a ferry pilot.

The boy reserved his mouth, his goalie face, to defend himself the way he's no doubt been instructed by a captious parent. *Don let dat Canada man gif yu trangga*. Ismael examined the room. He'd been late to class for three days. "I just wanted to know if you had any questions. About school, or anything, really."

The boy measured the value and risk of his free kick. "Omos yu ol?"

"I'm thirty-two."

Ismael frowned. Daniel tried to see thirty-two through his eyes. The average life expectancy in *swit Salone* is forty-one. He felt appraised.

“Misef sixteen. Haf yu ol.” He smiled as if he’d beaten Daniel at something sporting.

At home, watching a James Bond with a two-by-four wedged under his doorknob, he tries to see his room, decorated with shells and unsent postcards, as a stranger might. Did a young couple steal in here for privacy, have sex and leave him a whimsical calling card? Perhaps the girl stripped for the boy, dancing with stroking hands on his spiral rug.

In the teacher’s room at lunch he checked Fredda’s cards for the day of last week’s incident. Sami, barely twelve, absent for a week. Muhamed Q, amateur magician and thief of milk cartons, gone somewhere without notice.

He made a list to settle his nerves.

- Had to talk to Lucee twice about unfinished work. Suggested she stay & work after class. Something else emerging beneath her shyness?

- Spoke to Sahr about paying attention. (Tuition still unpaid. Sahr’s mother sells mats on Freetown-Waterloo Rd.)

- Man on first floor never friendly. Sifts my trash for imagined valuables.

Confront?

If he can get a connection he might phone his parents: “Had a small break-in, probably looking for drugs.”

Four things: knife, matches, whistle, food.

Something hits his window. He peers through the blinds, hears *motokas* and jazz noise curling, sees dust looking for elsewhere to settle, moths with their lost-kite shadows, the plangent drone of the muezzin. He refuses to run to the police. This place should harden his skin, turn his loping height into authority. His nonchalance and strange color should make men pause, give women hot guesses to whisper.

He walks out to find a fortune teller near the court buildings. Her tin shed, barely the width of a car, smells of cooked red beans and herring *bongo*. Her sign reads: *Law Case, Job, Love!* The woman has laid colorful sheets and half a dozen pillows on the floor and taped hornbill and green pigeon feathers to the hot metal walls. Fat candles burn on a low table draped with a dishcloth. He starts with his name.

"Zainab," she says, taking his fingers. "Gladi fo mit yu. Usai yu komot, Danil?" Canada, he tells her. A poda-poda parks in the red dirt outside, its bumper painted with the motto God has No Poket in Trousa. In the Ahmadiyya school she attended, Zainab says, there also was a Canada man. He had a withered leg and played guitar. One night after a school day in which a classmate nearly drowned, she dreamed a new name and a Muslim tutelary spirit, half man, half snake. She gestures him to a thick pillow, takes his four thousand leone, wraps it in thin yellow paper and tucks it away. "God no poket," she says, "but he no nid."

He rubs his red hair as the shed pulses. "Who is following me? Do I need to protect myself?"

She lifts from a Tupperware bin a figure carved from a bedpost, a man in a tall hat with three thick grey nails hammered into his back. She holds the middle nail over the candle and places in front of Daniel a sheet of lined paper with a penciled circle divided in quadrants, each line swirling away in a pinwheel of Arabic calligraphy. She gives him pliers. "Pull out nail, drop et on da paypa."

The hot nail rolls, leaving a black-brown burn mark in the quartered circle. She examines paper and nail, nodding gravely. "Yu want me to save yu from *tifman*."

"Someone broke into my room. Not a *tifman*. He took nothing. He left... something."

She nods upward, a hiccup. She tells Daniel to sleep on the nail and obey his dreams. He picks it up, the nail in his hand as warm as the shed walls.

Adrift on his bed, he listens for a crash on the stairs, an accusation with his name. He's yielded to the ludicrous promise of an antifreeze jug of Black Booster and lies in a nude deathbed funk, his moist clothes across a chair under the window.

"I'm a dangerous man," he pronounces twenty minutes later, pillow-propped. A lorry passes, the window blinds wave in sympathy. "I have come from a faraway place." The foul liquor tells him he's strong, mysterious.

Something stirs on the floor as the breeze lays his blinds back down. He straightens his spine and hollers, "In na bush, yu nid *foh ting!* Ting *kut*; ting *bon*; ting *fo eet*; ting *holla!*" Resolve ripples above him like a canvas sail. Lowry, Greene, Kipling, the white man always comes to this. You bring the jungle what you know and then it teaches you.

The noise again from the floor. Not the breeze – there's someone in his room.

He blurs at the two-by-four: he has locked himself in. He looks for the black *Jeep* knife but it's clipped to his pants. He picks up the fortune teller's nail, counts to four and drops to his knees beside the bed.

Two eyes stare back from a dark face. "Come out," he shouts, then imagines a gun with rusted bullets. He jumps on the bed, inverts the antifreeze jug and sprays the foul liquor over the floor. "I have matches! Come out hands-first or I burn you up!"

"Ticha, no!" The boy who is half his age crawls out in his football jacket and short pants, dragging wet dust, clutching a cloth pouch. "Ahm Ismael!"

He swings the long nail to show he's irresponsibly deranged. "Empty the bag." The room is grievous with the smell of liquor and sweat. The boy fumbles out a half-eaten Benni cake, a flashlight and a folded sheet of paper.

"What's that? Open it!"

Ismael frowns but shows him the drawing: a chalk-white man with a raging phallus bending a dark girl over a bed. Black thread is sewn down the middle of the page between the figures. Daniel pulls on his shorts and stares at the boy's almond face. "For Christ sake, Ismael. I could have hurt you. What is this? Why did you come here?"

"Fo break yu tu op. Estrong magic." Ismael sits on the floor, his hands joined around his wet knees, mouth and eyes wide, breathing fast.

"Break who up?"

Daniel looks at the drawing. Ismael wipes his eye with the dry skin between his wrist and elbow. "Ah see yu wit Lucee t'ree time, et mek mi crazy." He came to his teacher's home last week, he says, to leave a warning note – *don't touch her body or I tell* – but picturing them on this bed, the girl's willing limbs, the confluence of misery and lust kindled an urge he'd been unable to control.

A swaying husk settles around Daniel's ears. "She's married," he says.

The boy looks earnestly up at his teacher. "Lucee's man, he wok in bilding tred, boku dangerous, anyt'ing 'appen." He leans forward in complicity. "We divvy her, mi an yu."

The suggestion of sharing a girl he wasn't even aware he was coveting stirs a desire hot and ancient in Daniel, something smelling of old blankets and second-hand paperbacks. The boy is sure he wants this. He forces his face to frown.

"Yu kill her usban fos," Ismael suggests with market practicality, pointing at the knife on Daniel's belt. "Lucee don need im." The boy puffs himself up. "He gif er tu dead baby. We gif er tu estrong one."

An hour later Daniel sits in the dark corner of a bar and orders poyo. He phones Ontario. His father predicted he'd come running home inside of six months *you mark my words*. But he's still here. And now he feels something akin to purpose, a nail rolling on a sheet of quartered paper.

He tells his father, take a picture of Ivan's place across the road. The Russian married three years ago in a civil ceremony, put his bed, blankets and pillows out for

the trash one day and was gone the next. "Text me the *foto*." He hears the Krio in his own voice.

Two girls not much older than his students flirt inside the bar door, selling butane lighters and a snake writhing in a drawstring sack. He wipes his face and boldly beckons. They whisper to each other as they approach. When his father's text arrives he will open it and show them the picture of Ivan's snow-covered tree, the tallest on the street. There's a story behind this, he'll promise the girls darkly. Sit down here beside me and I will tell you.

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