

Brothers and Sisters

By Joe Ruzvidzo

Once upon a certain day, in a certain teapot-shaped nation, in a certain royal city about five hundred kilometres south-west of the capital, a certain brother stood atop a certain stage and surveyed the crowd rather uncertainly.

His lack of certainty was not in the purpose for being on stage; Brother was so confident in his skills that he barely noticed what he was doing. He was so certain of his task that muscle memory had kicked in a long time ago, and his mind was presently seized with other matters.

See, Brother was so experienced that he had long ago created a simple system, and it had always held him in good stead. Every time he got on a stage, he divided the crowd into sections demarcated using the aisles to mark out each area.

Once his sections were decided on, he would find one person in each section of each crowd, the one he called his booster. That was the one person who was a little too loud and craving attention, and this was the person he would use throughout his work. As things went along, Brother would look from section to section, make eye contact with and smile at his booster.

Often, the reaction was immediate, as boosters loved nothing more than attention from stages they knew they could never themselves occupy; they'd get an immediate burst of energy, and in turn hype up everyone around them.

But on this certain day, Brother could tell that something was wrong; there were no boosters anywhere. He had searched and searched, and everywhere he looked were cold stares from dead eyes. One old lady, a blue whale in a peacock-feathered hat she should have known better than to wear this side of a race track, had even scowled at him. And she wasn't the only one. A certain widow, for whom Brother had never shown anything but support and affection, had nearly run him over in the car park earlier in the same car he had washed countless times.

All this hostility confused Brother immensely, because ladies never scowled at him, least of all try to run him over. He could tease them, flirt with them, hurt and disappoint them, but the one thing they never did was scowl. It was at this point that Brother realised that something was terribly, horribly, dreadfully, mysteriously and infectiously wrong.

Something terrible was afoot, and Brother knew exactly what had happened – the old rumour mill had been grinding again.

From his vantage point, he could see that someone was missing from the front row; someone whose customary seat nobody had dared to fill. Her absence was like an open wound on the gathering's body, as if some malicious force had taken a sharp object and gouged out a vital organ and left a gaping hole for everyone to gape into.

Brother felt her absence more keenly than anyone else – she was, after all, his girlfriend. Shrugging his left shoulder to make himself more comfortable, Brother tried to remember the first time he had met her, but couldn't. He did recall the first time they'd spoken, and everything since had been a whirlwind.

It was a certain Sunday, and Brother was travelling home for lunch. Being new in town, he had gotten completely lost and missed his stop in the *kombi*. Seeing his agitation, a certain Sister had taken pity on him and asked him where he was trying to get to. After a halting explanation, she had walked him off the bus and all the way home, giving him a tour of the neighbourhood and the history of the area.

They had been inseparable from that moment on, much to the consternation of her older sister and brother-in-law, who were currently tasked with her welfare; the strange Brother from the North was spending more and more time with their little Sister, taking her to the cinema and bringing her home later at night. Even her studies at the local polytechnic had suffered, which was of concern to the principal who also doubled as a church elder and family friend.

The entire situation had eventually caused a panic in Sister's much respected family, and had led to a most uncomfortable conversation with the rather bombastic patriarch.

Of course, being lectured did not go down well with Sister, who was in that most rebellious and self-aware stage of her life. Having grown up under the heavy thumb of an ultra-religious family, she was just now beginning to glimpse her own future at a faraway university, out of reach of the crippling moral absolutes she had been raised to observe.

A subtle shift in the air woke Brother from his reverie. Looking to his right, he was met with another glower, this time from his band leader. He had almost missed a chord change, and the deacon had been pounding his keys extra hard to get Brother's attention.

Shifting the guitar pick to his palm, his hand flashed down and adjusted his volume knob ever so slightly. With his guitar turned down low, he took a moment to get his bearings – the song was almost over, and it was almost time to get the band off stage so the week's sermon could begin. Brother had been dreading this moment.

From the moment Sister had been hospitalised mid-week, things had been especially chilly around the church building; now that it was public information that she was recovering from an abortion, things would certainly take a turn for the worse. Brother was just glad she was okay, even though she had taken the drastic action without his knowledge.

The song wound to a close, and Brother placed his guitar on the stand to the rear of the stage, picked up his Bible and filed to his seat in the auditorium. When Sister's dad began his weekly sermon in a much louder boom than usual, Brother was certain this day was going to end very badly.