

I Dream of Kemet

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1

“I would like a small box of normal popcorn, please.”

Chawe stared up and down the front counter of the cinemas and could not see salted popcorn. All of the flavours were exotic, ranging from vinegar-through chutney-flavoured popcorn. In his mind, what he meant by “plain” was that he wanted slightly salted popcorn. He looked up at the man behind the counter and he had a blank stare on his face like a lost kitten.

“What do you mean by normal?” the man bellowed out, with a touch of frustration at Chawe’s request. Chawe suddenly realized at that moment that he was in Amsterdam and what passed for normal in his hometown of Johannesburg was not the same in Holland. He tried desperately to hold on to his tone of authority. After all, English was the man behind the counter’s second language and he would not use it to talk down to him with his strange Dutch accent, which sounded like he was reluctantly swallowing every word he spoke in English.

“Salt and vinegar, please. That will be all!”

“No problem at all, sir. Salt and vinegar it is.”

As the man handed him his small vinegar-and-salt-flavoured popcorn, he could not help but pass on a bit of advice to Chawe.

“I don’t know where you are from, but it sounds like America from your accent. You know it’s quite weird that a lot of Americans fly eight hours away from their own continent and still don’t realize that what passes for

normal in their country is not the same everywhere else. It's like they don't have an open mind that other societies think and do things differently."

Chawe took a moment to digest what the man behind the counter was saying. He thought about what his life story would sound like if it were told within ten seconds to the attendant behind the counter and decided nothing good would come of it. He had lived on three continents in less than a ten-year span due to his parents moving around, first for their studies to America and then Kenya for work and back to South Africa after apartheid ended.

He had tried to shake off the American accent over the years, but wherever he went people would accuse him of sounding like a Yankee. It was also one of the reasons he did not fit in in South Africa. It was like that saying, "once you leave home, you can never come back." With a bit of indignation that he had just been talked down to, he responded to the attendant in a mellow tone in order to show him that what he had just said and his observations had nothing to do with him.

"I am actually from South Africa and it's ten hours and not eight from Amsterdam. And, secondly, it's universally accepted that slightly salted popcorn is called 'normal'."

"Okay, Mr. from South Africa with a Yankee accent, sure it is."

The attendant looked beyond Chawe to the next customer in the line, which was a polite way to say he was finished with the conversation. Chawe stood there for a moment and quickly went over his life story again in his head and how he had landed up in Holland in Amsterdam, of all places, in order to find himself.

HE HAD LEFT his previous job as a researcher at Royal Swedish Post, one of the oldest post offices in the world, within the Schill Institute for Human Capital in Stockholm. For some reason, something had got into him that he

was not doing what he loved doing and he had to find meaning in his life that went beyond financial returns.

One day, he'd written a paragraph on his computer and printed it and taken the lift up to the sixth floor where the head of human resources had her office. He knocked on the door twice and waited for a response. The strangest thing about the HR director was that she did not have her own secretary and all of the directors on the sixth floor shared a common receptionist by the elevator entrance to the sixth floor. As he had been to her office on numerous occasions before, both for work and to socialize, the receptionist did not bother to ask him what his business with the HR director was. A couple of seconds after his second knock he was welcomed with a hug to the HR director's office.

“Chawe, what a pleasure to see you. You know, I had a dream about you last night and the things we are going to do to change the world together. You know, there is going to be a time in the future when companies no longer use accounting as the measure of value for companies and something else has to be created and that is where you and I come in. Mr Schill, the creator of the Royal Swedish Post intellectual capital navigator and intellectual capital valuations was just the beginning and there is a lot more that needs to happen.”

The HR director Stephanie was the only black director at Royal Swedish Post in a sea of Swedish directors whose names Chawe often could not pronounce or remember. Colour had been the basis for their relationship, in that there were only two black people working within the whole company. But something else was the reason for their friendship and it was not their one-night stand but rather her optimism and energy about the future. She was convinced that financial value was not the measure of a company's performance and that something new would emerge in the future. She was of the opinion that companies would measure their value according to the

human capital within the business and the potential of that human capital. Intellectual capital in Sweden was the buzz in the year 2000 and, working at Royal Swedish Post, Chawe was at the centre of it all, where a new matrix for intellectual and human capital had been created by a man named Mr. Schill. It was believed that this would soon replace company reports that used financial measurements and accounting and would lead to some kind of stakeholder report every year where financial valuations were a very small part of the reporting.

“Stephanie, I really believe in what you are doing and I know one day you will make one hell of a contribution to intellectual capital debates, but I think it’s time for me to get off this train.”

“Chawe, I thought you loved your job and what you are doing here.”

“I do love learning new things and new ways of doing things, but I don’t feel at the bottom of my soul that this is what I should be doing with my life. I have dreams of being an artist, a writer, a photographer – anything that would get my creative juices going. I love writing and I love taking pictures and I feel those two things would add a lot of value to my life if I was doing them as a vocation and not as a part-time activity.”

He handed her the piece of paper with the paragraph that he had written. As she glanced at it she took note of the fact that it was a very regretful letter of resignation and mildly apologetic to the company.

“Chawe, I don’t accept this at all. Please reconsider. You have a wonderful future here and your open mind is something the company values.”

“Stephanie, do you think I will get paid the remainder of my contract upon my resignation? There are a few things I would like to do, like looking for a photography or writing school somewhere in Europe.”

“Sure... Sure, Chawe. I mean, that should not be a problem but...”

Stephanie was sad that she was losing an asset in the company who understood her with her British way of doing and understanding things – neurotic and overly controlling.

Chawe did not trust himself enough to tell her about the voices of his ancestors, which he had heard at night telling him to follow his dreams. He had been having the intense dreams ever since he'd started working at Royal Swedish Post, but he felt it would be overkill to let Stephanie in on his private thoughts. He wanted to keep working there, but he could not deal with the voices and the endless sleepless nights. Although he loved his job, his sanity had taken a back seat since he had joined the company.

NOW, HE FOUND himself in front of a popcorn stand in Amsterdam, Holland, thinking about the day of his resignation from the company of his dreams, rather than about his life story and how it could be explained in ten seconds. As he moved away from the queue to allow the person behind him to place his order, he realized that he did not even remember how he had got to Amsterdam and landed up at this specific cinema, asking for normal popcorn.

He remembered that, the day he'd resigned, he had taken the train from Stockholm to Oslo, Norway, but for some reason he could only recollect some odd moments about his trip there. It was all a very confusing and convoluted void of a week for him. As he watched the people in the cinema looking down at their tickets and identifying the cinema showing the movie that they wanted to watch, he realized that he did not even have a movie ticket. It was just as well, as he was not in the mood to watch a movie with subtitles and in a foreign language for an entire two hours.

He took a seat on a solitary sofa at the side of the popcorn stand and tried to remember where his hotel was, whilst snacking on his vinegar-flavoured popcorn. All he remembered was that it was by the square behind the

Heineken Building, which would not be so difficult to find. After all, Amsterdam was not his final destination; it was a one-night stop over from where, the following day, he would take a train to Paris to go and see the photography school Speos, to which he had applied.

He collected his thoughts and slowly made his way to his hotel in the centre of Amsterdam. When he arrived at his hotel, he noticed that his popcorn was almost finished and realized that he could not remember any of the sights he had seen on the way to the hotel. He'd been so deep in thought that he'd forgotten for those few moments to be observant of his surroundings. "Damn, I wish I had not resigned from my job to chase a dream of being an artist!" As he entered his hotel lobby he had a thought about the book he wanted to write one day and suddenly became rather pensive and poetic.

BOOKS ARE NOT written, but rather they choose the author that they would like to write them. It is seldom that writing feels like work but rather a calling from our internal genius to make sense of the world and the silent spaces in between the noise. The abode of magic is within these silent spaces where logical sense takes a rear seat and the improbable becomes the corporeal world. It is in these spaces that magic thrives and wishes to express itself, not only to be seen but also to be lived and experienced. Those looking for magic often find it in the truest expression of their souls and hearts' longing.

Magic is to be found within those depths of ourselves that we keep hidden from the world and ourselves. It is to be found in the spaces where time ceases to exist, but is woven in the slow motion of the magical realm we sometimes call reality. It is in writing the words that represent magic that we often find that glimpse of ourselves we call potential. It is in these moments, where life meets altruism, that we talk of the hand of God

touching the things we do that represent our souls. Magic lies within that space of our hearts we call love. With writing comes magic and with magic comes meaning, followed by a desire for the soul's truest expression.

WHEN HE'D HAD his last piece of popcorn, he came out of his personal monologue and thought about those sacred photo's that he had dreamed of taking in unique spots around the world. He thought of the imaginary characters that would sit in front of his lens one day, posing for him in sacred spaces he had not yet imagined. Yes, risking it all and becoming an artist was the right decision and, for a minute, whilst chewing the last piece of popcorn, he did not regret leaving his corporate life to go on the difficult search for his life's calling. The resignation would be worth the journey he was about embark on.

“Those who lament about what could have been only do so because they can afford to live a life that is less than what they desired.” He considered for a minute where he had got that quote from and he suddenly realized that he had made it up, just as he was making up this new journey of self-discovery for himself. For Chawe, not following his dream had been like a slow, agonizing emotional death, which he was not prepared to suffer. Following his dreams and resigning from corporate life was the only direction he was prepared to endure. It would be on the road less travelled that he would find his potential and derive meaning from his life.

HIS EVENING AFTER the popcorn and walk started with a light, two-hour nap before getting up to shower and have dinner in his hotel. After dinner, he took a stroll through the red-light district, looking for an internet café to check his emails or a place where he could have a happy muffin. Whichever came first would be fine. He took in the sights of the red-light district and for the second time that evening he came across a black man who was being

denied a good time with a Russian-looking lady behind the window. Curiosity got the best of Chawe and he decided to ask the black man why he had been denied entry.

He walked up to the man with his arms at his sides, to show the man he was not a threat from, perhaps, some secret moral police of Amsterdam.

“Hey man, what happened? Is your money not good enough?”

The man seemed desperate to sow his wild oats with the woman of his choice and for him it was the blonde, blue-eyed Amazonian-looking Russian woman behind the window.

“Damnit, even the whores are racist in this town. It’s my accent; she caught wind of my accent and decided that my money was not good enough. First, the Muslims and now my being Nigerian is an issue and my money is not good enough.”

“Being Nigerian is an issue for hookers? Well, who knew?”

Chawe looked at the window framing the Russian Amazon and she looked inviting as all hell; even he could see why the Nigerian man was so stressed about being turned down.

“Are hookers scared of 419 scams as well?” Chawe blurted out without thinking about how that would be interpreted by the Nigerian man.

“What the hell is that supposed to mean? Damn Yankee. Are all Nigerians you know into 419 scams? In fact, before you heard my accent, I am sure I was just another guy you thought you could strike up a conversation with. What’s your problem, anyways?”

“Hey, man, relax. It was a bad joke. Anyways, I am from South Africa and not the US. Just lived there too long for my liking and I can’t shake off this accent.”

“You South Africans are part of the reason why I can’t be with the woman I choose to be on this strip. Your country messed us up, man, really did us in. Our reputation as a continent was messed up before you and now

with your AIDS you've ruined us, even with the whores in Europe. Damn it!"

Chawe was ashamed to be a South African at that point, realizing that South Africa had the highest rate of AIDS in probably the world and this had ruined the Nigerian man's chances of being with an exotic, Amazonian-looking Russian. He put his head down and avoided eye contact with the Nigerian man. He tried to ask him a question to ease the tension.

"Do they think all Africans have AIDS? That's really stupid!"

"Listen man, these girls are not out here charging for intellectual stimulation. They hear South Africa and AIDS on the news one day and for them it's all Africans. So, no cookie for me tonight. Now I have to find a second-rate hooker who will tolerate my black ass!"

"She does look inviting indeed. I am sorry about that 419 comment; that was not in good taste, man. My name is Chawe."

Chawe extended his right hand to greet the Nigerian man, who looked at his gesture for a while before deciding not to accept his hand.

"Listen, man, I am not into that shit. I came here for a woman and not a South African man looking to pick me up. Sod off!"

"Hey, man, relax. I said I was sorry... Let... Let me help you out... I... I will speak to her for you."

"How the hell is that going to help me? You're just as screwed as I am and would not get very far with her. Did you not say you are from South Africa anyways? Sod off!"

Chawe was now committed to helping the Nigerian man out because he had made such a mess up of his small talk about the 419 scams. He decided to take on the man's tone and see if that would perhaps get his attention.

"Sod off! No, you sod off, man! I may be South African but I don't bloody sound like it now, do I? Perhaps my accent can help you out?"

“How the heck is that? You think you waxing lyrical to her is going to help me out? She damn well does not want my black ass and how do you think you are going to change her mind? Man, sod off, for the last time, you bloody South African Yankee!”

The Nigerian man stood by the window of the Russian hooker for a while, staring at what could have been if it had not been for the South African AIDS pandemic. Chawe stood behind him for a couple of seconds before he decided to assist the Nigerian man anyway. He walked in front of him and blocked his view of the hooker whilst he knocked on her window to open her business door on the right-hand side of the window. She looked pissed off and tried to signal him with her hand to go away, but he just kept knocking on her window.

“You think pissing her off is going to help you? Just sod off!” The Nigerian was beyond livid.

After a while, the woman had had enough of Chawe’s persistence and walked over to her business door to tell him to piss off. She opened the door in a fit of anger and told him to sod off in Russian.

“Hello, mam, my name is Chawe and that over there is my friend Rasheed from Nigeria.”

She suddenly calmed down after she realized from his accent that he was from the US.

“Listen, I don’t give a shit who your friend is; I don’t mess with Africans. If the condom breaks, I am done for!”

Chawe decided to take a pragmatic position before trying to convince the lady about sleeping with his new friend Rasheed. His real name did not matter.

“Mam, don’t you use microbicides anyways, along with the condom? I am sure you are protected.”

The Russian Amazon begun to calm down and thought perhaps Chawe had been with other hookers before, since he knew a bit about their AIDS prevention mechanisms.

“Yes, I do, but still I don’t want to take a chance with some bloody African. Never that!”

“Mam, please let me explain to you. It’s not all African countries that have an AIDS pandemic, but more specifically South Africa and Botswana is where it is most prevalent. Now, my friend Rasheed standing over there is from Nigeria, which is more than a six-hour flight from South Africa and Botswana, on the other side of the continent. Africa is not one country, but fifty-four nations on one continent. If you don’t believe me, you can Google it yourself and you will find Africa has fifty-four countries and is not one country taking up a whole continent like Russia.

“Hold on a minute; I will be right back.”

She closed the door and closed the curtain to her window and was gone for all of five minutes. Then her door opened again and she came out with a face of resignation.

“Okay, your friend can come in, but no funny shit or I will have my husband in the back mess him up. I am working for my children and I don’t need stress in my job.”

The Nigerian, whose name had now become Rasheed, was more than enamoured by Chawe. He wanted to be friends with this convincing new person he had met. As he went into the hooker’s business room, he shouted out to Chawe, “Give me five minutes. I want to hang out with you for the night. You have made my night and I can’t thank you enough!”

“I will be here when you come out in two minutes!”

When Chawe looked around, he noticed that there was a happy muffin restaurant adjacent to the hooker’s business office and he decided to wait there for the Nigerian whose name had now become Rasheed. Chance

meetings, Chawe had learned, offered the greatest amount of room for growth and development and he thought that, although it was a bit difficult to become friendly with the Nigerian, he would give this chance meeting a chance at a new friendship.

He took a seat in the happy muffin restaurant, which was sparsely furnished with wooden tables and old school wooden chairs, which looked like they should be used in an outdoor barbecue. A brief look at the menu confirmed that there were conservative, medium and champion muffins on order. A beautiful buxom brunette Dutch girl with French braids came to take his order.

“Two champion muffins for me and my friend, who will arrive soon, please. But only bring them in ten minutes.”

The girl was a bit taken aback. “Sir, the muffins are very strong. Would you not like to start with our medium ones first and then move on to the champion ones?”

“I would, if I were planning to have more than one and in my case I will not. I can’t say the same for my new friend, who will join me in ten minutes, so please give us two champion ones.”

“Okay, sir. So you want them in ten minutes from now?”

“That’s correct; in ten minutes.”

In Amsterdam, Chawe felt very far away from his problems and his life issues and could not be freer. Walking the streets of somewhere new had a certain nostalgia about it and reminded him of lost moments in his life where life could have taken him in a different direction. He thought about the last year he had spent in Sweden and what he had learned. But, more than anything, he thought about the day he had spent in Norway, visiting an old friend Anna Brunger, whom he had only met on one occasion before. As he sat there, thinking about the meaning of life and where his would take

him and the new challenges he would face pursuing his dreams, the waiter arrived again with two muffins on hand.

“Sir, you said I should bring these in ten minutes and it has been twenty minutes now.”

“Has it really been twenty minutes?”

Chawe looked down at his watch and realized that it had actually been twenty-five minutes and a couple of seconds, give or take.

“Wow, how time flies, don’t you say.”

“Yes, it does, especially at a happy muffin restaurant. Are you sure you would like both of these muffins? They are rather strong.”

“Well, I was waiting for a new friend and I was not planning on having both.”

Chawe stood up and looked through the main window of the muffin restaurant across the street to see if his new friend had finished with the Russian Amazon. Her curtains had been retracted and she was now standing in front of her display window, waiting for another client. His Nigerian friend must have thought he had taken off and left him behind. He took a seat and looked at the buxom waitress and took a serious tone with her.

“If it’s not too much of a bother, please take them away. I will still, however, pay for both of them since I ordered them.”

“Sir, if you need someone to enjoy them with, I would not mind joining you for a bit on my tea break and sharing the other with you.”

She did not know what it was about Chawe, whether it was the clean, nerdish manner in which he was dressed or his respectful composure, that made her trust him. “You look like a decent guy in need of some company and I would not mind, really.”

“I would really like that. When did you say your tea break was, again?”

She smiled and took a seat at the table, across from Chawe.

“Well, it actually started about a minute ago. My name is Jansje.”

“Nice to meet you, Jansje. My name is Chawe.”

Chawe reached out his hand to Jansje and gave her a firm handshake, which only served to reinforce the trust she had placed in him by agreeing to share a happy muffin with him. This was the kindness of strangers that people often talked about experiencing on their travels.

“So, Mr Chawe, where are you from? Your accent says one thing, but your demeanour and dress code say something else.”

“Well, I am from South Africa – Johannesburg to be exact. Have you been there?”

“Oh, South Africa! I love South Africa, especially Cape Town. I went there last year and had an amazing time. The people are a bit cliquey, but it’s amazing there. But of course, I could not deal with the discrepancy between the rich and the poor.”

“Yeah, I think the divide between the rich and the poor affects everyone and is something that the country is trying to work through.”

“Well, at least, aside from having a beautiful country, you also have Nelson Mandela. That’s got to be good for something, right?”

“Yeah, I guess. He is a draw card for us. But I think, morally, we South Africans have a tough act to follow after Mandela is gone.”

“Yes, Mandela to me is like an angel. I mean, being able to forgive his enemies after twenty-seven years in prison; that is something only Christ would do. The people of Holland hold him in very high regard. You should be proud to be a South African.”

“Yes, of course. I am very proud that we as South Africans managed to produce someone like Mandela. He has been a rock in a murky world of race and class transformation in South Africa. I hope we can keep his legacy going long after he is gone.”

“So, Chawe, what do you do for a living? For my sins, I am a budding writer and I work here at this muffin restaurant so I can have the money to

write. I worked at a bank for five years and decided that it was not for me.”

“You would not say.”

Jansje looked at Chawe, rather intrigued, patiently waiting for him to share his story of why he was so far from home.

“Your facial expressions say to me that you have quite a story to share, Chawe?”

“Well, to tell you the truth, my parents are big industrialists back at home and I took a year away from home to work in Sweden. I wanted to travel Europe for a year, but still have a corporate job to build up my work experience before deciding to work at my parents’ train manufacturing company. You get it, right?”

“Yes, of course. I more than get it. I also took a gap year shortly after my university studies to travel in Asia, although I ended up spending most of my time in Thailand, working odd jobs.”

“Well, my plans kind of got derailed in the corporate gig and I decided last week that I wanted to be an artist. I have not decided yet if I want to be a writer or a photographer, and I am still figuring it out.”

“Welcome to the club. My parents told me that, in order to be a really good artist, one has to be a tortured soul who preferably indulges in a bit of excess, whether alcohol or drugs – or a bit of both, for good measure.”

“Well, then I guess this happy muffin place is a good start to my journey.”

“Yes, Chawe, that might be true, but I think you have the tortured soul thing down to an art form. When you walked in here, I could tell you had a story and that is what attracted me to you.”

Chawe took a moment to try and understand what Jansje meant by the word “attracted”. Perhaps it was perfectly fine for women to be this assertive in Holland. This was, however, the first time that he was getting picked up by a woman and he was not quite sure how to play the passive

role. He tried to think of a quick retort to gain back some ground, but he was at a loss for words.

“Chawe, listen. I finish tonight at about nine. If you want, we can go to a spoken word club and I can show you a bit of Amsterdam, if you have the time.”

“Sure, thanks, Jansje. I think that would be a great idea.”

He wrote down the name of his hotel and room number on a piece of paper and left the happy muffin place as sombrely as he had entered.

ON HIS WAY back to his hotel, Chawe imagined himself in small apartment in the South of France, writing the novel of his dreams with Jansje as his muse. The book would be the most riveting love story one had ever dreamt about, with a forbidden love. Something like Romeo and Juliet without the suicide and sordid ending. The book would go on to be a best-seller, and he would use the revenue to live out his life as a recluse, drinking fine wine and eating amazing home-baked bread and homemade cheese in some small village somewhere in Italy, with Jansje and their only child named Didier.

Chawe had heard of many people who had met only once and had decided to get married on the spot and went on to have deep and meaningful long relationships. But it was not until he'd met Jansje on this solitary evening that he thought this was something that was possible for him. He had an open mind, but at times could not tell where the limits of his open mind met the whimsical nature of his imagination. But, since he was in a foreign city and was starting the process of his self-discovery as an artist, he decided to throw caution to the wind and let the winds carry the sails of his thoughts.

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