

# Cousin Sister

Salawu Olajide

May 8, 2025



## COUSIN SISTER

WRITTEN BY EMELDA NYARADZAI GWITIMAH

When we last went to Mother's rural home in Gutu in the early months of 1997, the river still flowed, the buses still ran on time, our money still had value and I still cared about my family. I still cared about her. No, not Mother. *Her*. No two people were closer than me and Her. They raised us together like brother and sister. I was only one week older than her. I was fiercely competitive with Her – the rainmaker's wife, my cousin sister.

You see, no one else in the world says that, but we do. My Mother's Sister's child is my sister. We only added 'cousin' so our white employers didn't think our parents were those types of Blacks: the ones with multiple children. Our parents weren't. I have no other siblings. My cousin sister had one – a twin sister who She ate in the womb, or so Sekuru and the village whisperers had told me in confidence. I believe them now.

Our grandfather, Sekuru Hungwe, who'd lucked upon a mining claim from his former boss, left the mine and its traces of gold to M. Hungwe that April. It was a claim from the legendary Tredgold family, whose name was plastered on buildings across the country, but whose faces no one knew. Tredgold Mine, our grandfather's treasure, was a fenced off little lot near Zvavahera in Gutu. The goronga that runs beside my grandfather's homestead starts at Tredgold Mine and snakes its way all the way to the Mission. A series of deep gulleys, the main crevasse of the goronga was not as wide then, as it is now. The violent inconsistent rain has carved this divider between Her and my homestead, dividing our family, our community, our hearts. When we were growing up, it rained so hard that the gulleys started to stretch. The day they read Sekuru's will, there was hail.

*Tredgold Mine, I leave in its entirety to M. Hungwe.*

My name is Munesu Hungwe. She: Mary Hungwe. We'd taken our mothers' surname. She looked like Her father. I looked like my Mother, or as most contested, I looked like Sekuru. When we

gathered that day as his words were read, I expected Her to understand. I am a *man* – he meant to leave it all to *me*, because, I am a man.

Except She fought, and made the rainmaker stop the rain.

\*\*\*

When we got there, Mother and I, She'd already started cooking, my Cousin Sister. Big dollops of rain whacked the sides of the kitchen hut as she scooped giant spoons of sadza into a heap in the blue steel dish.

"Did you travel well?" She asked, squinting as She wiped sweat from Her brow.

"Yes sisi," I said, and flinched as the first stones rattled the windows. Those who'd been huddled outside sought shelter.

Mkoma Jakobo entered first. Jakoboe was Sekuru's lovechild but we all had to pretend he was simply the lifelong herdboys, helping with the dwindling herd. He clapped his hollowed palms in the traditional way. Behind Mkoma came the rainmaker – brother-cousin-in-law, Her portly husband, his bald head bowed so as not to make eye contact with my mother. Grandmother slunk in, a husk of the woman who'd terrorized us as children. The headman, Sabhuku, followed her, no doubt looking at the behind we all knew he'd been secretly touching for thirty years. We loved Sekuru, but none had ever dared to tell him the public secret. We respected secrets. We respected peace. Sabhuku clutched a yellowing lined paper, slightly burnt at one edge and roughly torn from an exercise book on the other. When all were seated, the rhythmic clapping began.

One. Two. Three.

The claps in the hail. My, how it rained.

"Pamusoroi!" Sabhuku called for our attention. She covered the sadza, and sat facing me across the fire, as we'd done as children. Sabhuku did all the greetings, all protocol observed, then unfolded the paper and read from it.

*Tredgold Mine, I leave in its entirety to M. Hungwe.*

Ululation from Her. The rainmaker clapped. Mkoma Jakobo and I looked at each other.

"Pamusoroi?" came Mother's quiet voice, "But the older M. Hungwe is Munesu. He is the owner of the claim."

There was silence, until She started to cackle. Hail Mary, without grace!

My cousin sister, drunk with joy, quizzed my mother with no shame, "Is that it, Maiguru? Is that why you had a child with Sekuru, so that your son could get the mine? Mashura!"

Grandmother wailed as the thunder clapped outside. Mother fainted as the hail cracked a window. Sabhuku stamped his cane up and down in disgust as the wind ripped a corner of thatch off the hut. Mkoma Jakobo just shook his head as the lightning lit up the sky.

I tasted bile and swallowed it back.

My cousin sister looked me in the eye as she spilled the public secret and let it poison the air. I am my grandfather's son.

"Do we want a product of shame to own the mine?" she continued.

Her confidence as She revealed the bitter truth was what killed me. She was cruel; no longer the sister I'd grown up with. She'd been the one to keep all my secrets, but now She kept no such loyalty. I knew She was not the same when She'd married a man who they said had been taken by mermaids as a child; a man who spoke in his sleep to things we could not see; who brought rainy weather whenever he visited. Even then, in April after the harvest, when the soil was cracked and the clouds had gone he moved the seasons, and made the ravines even deeper.

"Why would you defend this abomination, and soil the name of the first Black mine owner here? If you even dare try to fight us, it will never rain here again," Her husband, the rainmaker thundered.

The words cut me up like the goronga that cut the earth alongside the homestead in Zvavahera.

I should have listened. Instead, broke and unemployed, I went to Court.

I'd returned to Gutu from the diamond mines of Botswana, hands scraped and soul hollowed, not with gems but with silence, only to stand at the edge of a different excavation; the reading of my grandfather's Will, where the past was unearthed like bones beneath a forgotten house. Little had I known that the political and economic climate had changed in 1997, and that the Zimbabwean dollar would fall and the only cases that would win were not as scandalous as mine. Between 1997 and the year 2000, my solicitor and I made claims, until pro bono could be sustained no more. I lost it all trying to fight them, the rainmaker and my cousin sister. Her children now own my wealth.

Mother died. Grandmother too. Mkoma Jakobo crossed over into Mozambique. The rainmaker is alive, but no longer looks to the skies for anyone but himself.

I last saw them in 2007, when Her eldest took a wife, and all came from all over Gutu to see the Tredgold wedding as they called it, and they ate and danced and forgot there was a famine, and forgot that the mine was actually mine.

When I last went to Zvavahera, the river was dead dry. The goronga had widened. The buses had no petrol so the jagged dust roads were rocky and empty. My money had lost all value and I stopped caring. My tears stopped flowing. I stood at the fence uncompensated, my grandfather's son. All I did was stare at Her over the fence, the rainmaker's wife, my cousin sister.

---

**Emelda Gwitimah** is a fiction alum of the Vermont College of Fine Arts (VCFA). Her work has appeared in *Lolwe*, *LounLoun*, the *Edmonton Capital City Anthology*, *The Willowherb Review*, *The Doubleback Review*, and twice in the *Intwasa* short story anthology in her beloved hometown, Bulawayo. You can follow her on X @bellaemelda.