

THIS IS A LOVE STORY – LELO MARY THEBE

Story of Self

“When will you ever go running again?” asked Rebecca.

“Still looking for routes,” I say in one of our meetings, looking around the room as if I will find new running routes in Rebecca’s tiny beautiful house.

She has been asking me this question for the past five months. Five months since the body of a young woman was found along the Grand Canal of Tullamore. #SheWasJustOutForARun and #SheWasJustWalkingHome trending on social media for weeks, enraging catalogues of women harrassed, harmed and worse. But Rebecca wants me to lace up my trainers again and be.

When I met Rebecca at the Mayo General Hospital I was running two to three times a week. I was her Carer, and we started a conversation about the novel she was reading by Liz Martin, called Still Standing: an Irishwoman’s Story of HIV and Hope. I was curious how Liz Martin survived the discrimination and stigma that comes with being diagnosed with HIV/AIDS, and curious about this woman who was interested in that story. I was also drawn to Rebecca’s warmth and her beautiful smile, and every day that I was in the hospital, I would check in on her.

Our conversations moved from culture to food and love, reflecting our different perspectives, hers, of a middle-aged white Irish woman, mine, of a younger Black woman transplanted from Zimbabwe. Beautiful how our lives were different yet the same, both born and raised in the rural setting, sourcing our food from the garden and our milk from the cows.

As an asylum seeker or migrant, the fear over making friends and building relationships in Ireland is nerve wracking. You feel you’re just never going to fit in. People talk about integrating into a new culture or a new society, but they rarely talk about *how* you do that, it’s not just about being somewhere long enough – you need to be out there, and you need people to meet you halfway, to share things with you as well as be curious about who you are. Not with the kinds of questions that barely disguise clichéd assumptions -- real curiosity, like the kind I would have about Rebecca and the world that made her. Rebecca has definitely taught me things about Irish life and ways that I can’t just read about on the internet. The simple lives of Irish people, how the Famine and Catholic Religion affected their lives through the generations. Elderly men and women who never married or had children, affected by religion.

“There is no stupid question here,” Rebecca always says. Having faced racism from patients before, I wanted to know how Rebecca felt about being cared for by a Black person. She said she was glad to have a Carer next to her, the colour of my skin didn’t matter.

As an asylum seeker, I want to bring the good and the skills I have, to share myself, but the need to belong is human (settled, middle-aged white Irish women want this, too, I promise). Rebecca also learned about Zimbabwean culture, as I played “Lovemore Majaivana,” a uMoya wami song about Bulawayo, the city that I come from, we laugh and cry through the stories and lessons of our lives. When I am talking to Rebecca, there’s no judgement or need to change my accent. The joy of being heard and seen, just as I am, is immensely satisfying.

Story of Us

Rebecca asks about my running. I tell her how, if I want to run 10k, my morning runs would take me through the farms and small back roads of my village. I tell her I have been followed while running. I

have the seen the same car, same men, stalking me, offering twenty Euros to show them a good time. In this village everyone knows everyone, and nothing happens without the village knowing. These men are known for doing this, and we are all too afraid to speak about them. One of the tougher truths about Irish village life: what everyone knows is swept under the carpet because they are someone's uncle, father or brother. Maybe this is true of other tightly-knit places, people turning a survival mechanism into a way of life: we always protect our own. This, too, is a kind of belonging, but one based in fear. Rebecca can't do anything about my struggle, but she listens, and she doesn't get defensive. This "Say Nothing" pattern is a twisting up of Irish culture, a wound that needs healing.

Women face threats like these everywhere – in some cases, extreme levels of threat on the basis of gender can be the reason to seek asylum. For us, there are layers and layers of threat to put you on edge and make it hard to socialise. The moment you mention that you are living in direct provision, someone will feel the need to ask why you are in Ireland, and you'll find yourself explaining your whole life story to a stranger who doesn't even understand fully what a refugee is, but really, they're only listening in order to judge and tell you why don't you go back to your country. It's a big deal when someone truly listens openly and without an agenda.

To even have this kind of friendship, however, you need to pass through an invisible border, one that separates life inside and life outside of direct provision. Direct provision separates us from the Irish community, and we're kept in the dark about how the society around us works. When you go out of the centre, you can feel people whispering. Often, they are only seeing a hungry Black child begging for food. In actuality, we have left everything, our sense of self, to protect ourselves and our children, to get and give them a fighting chance in life. Our education, careers and whole lives are reduced to this alienating status of asylum seeker.

Story of now.

In the news we read now that the plan to end direct provision by 2024 is being abandoned because of pressures on the system due to the war in Ukraine, that the government needs time. But this is a ruse. Migration will not stop, wars are ongoing, climate change is happening. But let's not talk about this like it's something new. People will always move around and make new relations. As a human community, we have to learn how to welcome the differences that intersect with our lives. Regular people like Rebecca who are able to listen to understand show me it's possible. If regular people can be creative and curious in their personal relationships with migrants and asylum seekers, why can't government officials be creative and curious by including us from the beginning of decisions that will affect our lives?

We can talk about inclusion but if there is no action towards ending these barriers that separate have been created we have not started the work. Friendships with people like Rebecca remind me that in my becoming Irish, I should not be required, encouraged, or even tempted to lose or diminish my culture, my accent, or my Blackness. And our children who are born here, or who will grow up here, this is their Ireland, too. We cannot protect them all their lives but we can end direct provision, as the government promised, ending this system that makes us both invisible from the community and hypervisible when we're in it. Hasn't Irishness always contained worlds inside it? The people who have come over the centuries. The people who have left, that huge Irish diaspora that's larger than the population of those living on this island? Why would we not dream that Irishness can mean us, too?