

Last Minute Grooming

By Chaltone Tshabangu

Sit down Lulu, sit down. What time is it? Good. *Thixo*¹! You *have* been busy this morning, eh? Now, what have you done since daybreak? No, don't tell me. *I* will tell you. You woke up at third cock-crow and made a fire in the kitchen. You heated bathing water for the children, swept the kitchen and washed the plates. That is good, daughter of my mother, except for one thing; those plates should have been washed yesterday. Hen-roaches must be forced to lug their shiny brown suitcases elsewhere. I must state the obvious, even if you dislike it – that saying about cleanliness and godliness? *Thiixoxo*, where would we be without stating the obvious?

Sit up straight, Lulu! *Ah!* A *decent* woman sits like this; legs tucked beneath her like so, or legs stretched out before her, thus. Always *covered*. And never, *never* sit on a stool in the presence of men. Mother must be getting old.

If you must sit on a chair, sit nicely, don't squat or perch as if you are negotiating the hole of a pit-latrine, or sit as if there are thorns between your thighs. Do it! Now! Yes, like that. What is the use of a wife who sits as if she wants to trap the sun with her nether parts?

Right. You swept the yard, at the same time prepared porridge for the children. You bathed the children, dressed them up for school, watched them eat and saw them off. Good. Then you went to the river to collect water. How many buckets did you bring? Three? Not bad, but not enough to fill up the drum. Anyway, you heated bathing water for father, went to the bush to collect firewood and now, you are preparing breakfast for everyone. Admirable, daughter of my mother. Admirable. Except for one other thing; I never saw you, and I have been watching you closely. I never saw you wash either your face or, *Jehova ka Shadreck lo Misheck lo Abednigo*², your hands! You do right to squirm. I saw you go behind a bush. I don't know what you did there. You know what you did there. *Thiixo!* *Everything* is important, child of my mother; when to bath, *how* to bath, how often as well as changing your knicker and so forth. Hmm?

And, *mntaka S'gugude*³, do something about your fingernails, child of S'gugude! *Yeyi!*⁴ You have been digging up roots or what? Look, that body of yours must be treated with respect, girl. And nobody else will do that better than yourself! Don't treat your body with contempt, child. What use is reckless attention? *Thix'!* Treat it with respect and you will be amazed at what it will do for you. Hmm?

Yet I must warn you, mother's child, it will not be easy. Yes, there will be long, sweet moments. You smile. Yes, smile. Keep smiling, sis. But, there will be long, terrible days too.

Everybody hates dirt, I think. Well, except for Vundla, who enjoys his home and wife in spite of what we both know. That woman is what is called *inuku*⁵, a lazy-bones. Don't laugh. I could say *isinyefu*⁶, a slut, but that would be too severe. Besides, she is good hearted. *Nkazana*, God does not give you everything, young girl. But the point is be...? Yes. Be clean. As clean as? There's my girl! No woman has a cleaner *size nine* cooking pot.

Men detest badly cooked food. So do I. So do you. Do that and your food will get cold on the table. Ever heard the *indaba*, the tale called 'The Slammed Door'? Perhaps not. Never mind. If you like talking, and I know you do, teach yourself to listen and consider your views. Nag him if you will, but at the right time, at the proper setting. *Yes, there is a time for everything, even for nagging!* It does get things done you know, sometimes. Overdo it, he will walk out of the house, *the door is likely to be slammed* and you may earn yourself tingling ears and a swollen upper lip. Besides, you never know what he might bring back; another beating or worse.

In marriage, winning isn't everything. Besides, you *can* win, quietly, *every time*, without being like the pee of a drunkard about it. Always remember that. As for friends, well, you are a married woman now. Some friends are like Joel's boots, which stink worse when he's wearing them. Other friends are like honey - sweet to the tongue but the stomach can only take this much before it brings up what you ate during *that* drought. And yet others are like your own shadow - they will stay peacefully with you and you will

never tire of them. Need I say more? He will get you what you need, if he can, but there is nothing, absolutely nothing to waste.

In fact, it will do you well to conserve, conserve, conserve, for that is life. Use your hands. I don't think that your ambition is limited to being a mere 'goal-keeper'. Be as independent as decorum allows and he will respect you more.

Oh, another thing, his relatives are your relatives. You will treat them no differently from your own. But, I have no fears for you in that respect.

You know him, he likes his beer. Be glad that he does not *smoke*. Ever been kissed by a combination of *masese*⁷ millet beer and *Shamrock* tobacco? Remember Joe, my Joe Hee hee. *Thixo!* Don't ask. However, remember; you can't win everything.

As for bedroom matters, I have nothing to say but this; be clean. Each man takes to his bed with relish, unless he is sick or something is distracting him. Can be very energetic too, even by the standards of your age. Hee hee. You have been taught how to handle a man – I bet there is no better teacher than Aunty Eliza. Yes? Take it from me, the most ridiculous things that Aunty Eliza taught you are the most important! Hee hee. Now, that is a powerful tool you have there, sister.

But you cannot use it to hold him at ransom. *Weeeeell*, maybe once, but at your own risk. Oh, I suggest that you take a dish of water, towel and soap. Never mind any

peculiarities, as long as they don't hurt you, or demean you. But, each man his madness. Have fun, that is what sex is all about. Hee hee hee.

Lulu, I suppose you are still... intact? What are you laughing at? I am serious! *Of course* it is important! Well, not *very* important I should think, but it has its advantages. What's that you said? Oh, I don't know, but it is important, somehow. It reflects well on our family, does it not?

The important thing, my sister - children. All marriages need children... *everybody* needs children. Even God needs children, I think. If there is anything God believes in, it is children. Children, they are the only viable faith! I hope you understand. Life! Aaah!

Come here. Come outside with me. Look at all this, this parched selfish land that gives us sustenance grudgingly. Yet, is it that it is selfish? Is it that it is entirely barren? Completely inadequate for our dreams? No. Never! Why? Because we have grown up on inadequacy.

We have grown strong on pain and pain has become something else, which we embrace with a smiling fortitude. Look at the sky above us, these trees and burnt grasses... this is home. All these things around us are prayer. Over there, the graves of our fathers, those mountains and the scorched river beds - our home, our prayer. We address our lives the same manner we address our ancestors; with prayer, with ancient

resonances which the elements understand. All these things pray along with us.

Winds blow and in a while, dust settles. There is a meaning in all these things; there is a meaning in what we seek to achieve. The occasional storm, laughter, pain, suffering, joy... joy... We lay our fears and tears at the feet of the most feared god... especially us, women, you and I. We are the lips, the tongue, the very mouth that fashions the words to move men and persuade gods. We are prayer. Like this land that brings forth, though grudgingly, we women must also bring forth, abundantly.

I pray that that prayer becomes the stuff on which your children, *our* children, will grow strong upon. Inhale with me, is this not fresh air? We make it fresh by our laughter, women laughter.

We make this horrible land beautiful for our husbands, our parents, our children and even for those who have gone before us. So, sister, in making your man happy, you will also be making *us* happy and our prayer all the purer and certain to obtain blessings. We must seek happiness, for it will not come to us all the time.

Remember, even the juiciest mopani caterpillar has thorns. One day you will have children and one day, perhaps, you will be different. We must change, but it is our responsibility to let dogs eat their own vomit and not to help them lap it up. What I am trying to say... what am I saying? I am *not* trying, I am *telling* you this; one day there will be hate between us. It is to be expected. But it cannot be allowed to overshadow what we seek to do here. No matter what happens, I shall remain your sister. S'khova

is a good man... in fact, he is far better than most men we know, certainly better than that gambling boyfriend of yours whose major kick was *njug*. Yes yes you parted ways with that crook a long time ago but he lived for *njuga*⁸ – those card-games - anyway. And, I wonder how you managed to hold him off for so long, he must have been an insistent type that one. What was his name by the way? *Almost?* Almost what? Hee hee!

I know your man; he is a good man. His mother, well, you know her. His sisters, now. His sisters are mean, venous bats who will not hesitate to criticize and condemn. Don't mind them. Their families broke down nineteen-long-ago, when animals could speak. Anyway, I will be there to help you.

Hand me that cup of water. Thanks. I talk too much eh? Daughter of my mother, I am glad of what you have decided to do. I am particularly grateful because it is you Lulu, and not somebody else, not any of our sisters but you. Thank you.

So, get ready woman, today you will meet your husband, my husband. *Our* husband. Hurry up, *Thixx!* You don't want to keep your husband waiting do you?

What if you what? Fail to have children? Sister, we will crawl beneath that bridge when we get to it. Move it, girl!

All words in italics are from the Ndebele language.

¹ *Thixo*: God.

² *Jehova ka Shadreck lo Misheck lo Abednigo*: God of Shadreck, Misheck and Abednigo

³ *Mntaka S'gugude*: child of S'gugude

⁴ *Yeyi!*: an exclamation of surprise or dismay

⁵ *Inuku*: very lazy, dirty person

⁶ *Isinyefu*: worse than *inuku*

⁷ *Masese*: opaque millet beer

⁸ *Njuga*: game of cards where bets are placed