



'I danced because I knew that if I didn't they would kill me'

From the bank trader to the white landowner, the soldier to the policeman, ordinary Zimbabweans tell their stories

Violet, 19

Occupation Domestic worker

Interviewed in Johannesburg, South Africa

We were a poor family, but we had fields, so we could farm. When my father was still here, we never went to bed hungry. And then, around 2000, when I was 10, he got involved with the Movement for Democratic Change [MDC, the leading opposition party in Zimbabwe].

During that time, Zanu-PF youths would come. They would have been told the names of all MDC troublemakers and would head to their houses. A lot of people just disappeared. They came to take my father while we were sleeping.

My father stayed at the hospital for one week and never recovered. He came home in the morning, in a donkey cart. His legs were covered in wounds and he couldn't even walk any more. He was coughing up blood. He died in the afternoon.

My sister was three or four. I was 10. About two months after my dad died, the Zanu-PF youths came and asked where my mother was. I told them I didn't know. Some other people came at

night while she was sleeping and knocked on the door. I said she wasn't in. They slapped me twice and said they would return the next morning.

My mum said she was going to go back to her own home, in Mozambique. She said she'd look for a place to live and then come back for us. She left that night. She did not even pack any things.

After our mother left, it was just the two of us. Some of our neighbours looked after us and gave us food. Then teachers told us to come and live at the school for the time being.

Our neighbours felt pity for us when the cyclone came. It rained for three weeks. Our house started to collapse, so they moved us. Then a donor came and built us a new house. They found someone to take care of us and give us food every month.

Our mum came back from Mozambique in 2005. I wasn't there when she arrived, but my sister was. She did not believe the woman was our mum, because she did not remember her. She started telling her our mother had gone and left us, and that we thought she had died. My mum started crying and saying she thought we had died.»

‘As a soldier, you learn that if you don’t kill, you’ll be killed. It became a circus. The only way to defend yourself was to attack’

I was 14 and my sister was seven or eight. We started farming cotton and bought two cows, and things improved at home. Then our mum fell ill with cholera. She died in March 2006. The cows and everything the donor had given us were taken away by our uncles. When the schools reopened, I didn’t go. Instead, I sent my sister, and I worked in the fields. Then a woman showed up claiming to be our aunt. She took good care of us.

In Zimbabwe, things had become really difficult, and I decided that if I came to South Africa I could support my sister better. I left in August 2008 and stayed in a Methodist church in Johannesburg. I got a job doing housework, and then a woman named Tulu came to the church in her car with a Zimbabwean boy called Blessing. He told us there was a job and they needed girls who had computing skills. He said, “It’s nice work.”

He chose six of us and Tulu came to pick us up in her car and we all went to a place called Westgate. When we arrived she gave us panties. They had lied. They wanted to make us do porno. They said they wanted girls with good bodies.

Selling my naked body on the internet really bothered me and I left very soon. Now I have a job taking care of a South African person’s children. My sister is still living in the house the donor built for us, with the woman who claims to be our mum’s younger sister. I send her money.

At times, when I think of what I’ve been through, I cry. Life is painful. I sometimes think Zanu-PF was responsible. If they had not beaten up my father, he wouldn’t have died then, and I would never have come here. But maybe he would have died anyway, from illness, like my mum. I should be in school with my family taking care of me. But instead I have to take care of another child by working here for money.

Aaron, 30

Occupation Former soldier in the Zimbabwe National Army

Interviewed in Musina, Zimbabwe

Let’s say it’s a Friday night, around 10pm. You get to this bar. Usually on such missions, you prepare yourself - maybe a barbed-wire belt; some guys use a rifle butt. The moment we kick open the door, the patrons are terrified. One of you goes to talk with the owner, the rest ask the patrons to bring out their belongings, especially money, cell phones, everything. Then you say, “Single ladies to this side, married ladies to that side.” Same for the men. They fall into their groups, and you ask the married women, “Where is your husband? Is he in the bar?” Sometimes, if she picks out her husband, you stand both of them there. Then you check their ages. For myself, I respect people who are old. With the old ones, I tried to persuade the others to let them go. The rest you make dance.

They’re singing, dancing, jumping. Remember, when people are scared and terrified, they can’t dance even though they know how to. So you sit there and drink their beer and make them do it.

And then, let’s say you find out an MDC member is there, and he has a cell phone and been recording what we’ve been doing. He has to suffer double. He has to receive some beatings. We make some of them get naked - we’re more interested in the women - then we mop the floor with their clothes.

The process lasts about an hour and a half. Time to let them go. You say, “When we count to three, we want you out.” You open a small door for them all to go out at the same time. Always some people get stuck, others injure themselves running away.

My dream was to be a soldier. As far as I knew, a soldier was a servant of the nation, not of a certain political party. There’s this video game I played

too much when I was growing up. I judged [the army] from what those beautiful soldiers were doing - rescuing people, saving lives, doing good things for the community.

I started in the army in 1998, at 19, and left last year. From 1998 to 2002, I was in Congo, fighting. At the beginning I enjoyed it. It was almost like watching a movie. But when I saw its implications - the casualties and everything - I started to think, no, this is bad. I became a corporal in 2007. I was a noncommissioned officer, and to get a higher rank you have to be active in politics, in Zanu-PF. But I’ve always hated politics. People have been suffering just because of these politics.

In 2008, around the elections, crowd control was a big problem. As a soldier, you learn that if you don’t kill, you will be killed. It became a circus. The only way to defend yourself was to attack. People were told that if they didn’t vote for Mugabe, Zanu-PF was going to find out and war was going to erupt. So the people must decide: which vote will help us? Meaning, if you vote MDC, there’s going to be war. I voted for Zanu because I knew what would happen if I voted for MDC.

What made me leave was that I was worried what would happen if they discovered my family’s involvement in the MDC. My family is strongly MDC, so it became a threat to me. I resigned in December 2008 and came to South Africa. I don’t blame South Africans for the way they treat us. If you visit a house where the parents pay too much attention to the visitors, what happens to the children? That is what’s happening here. South Africa has its own problems. We Zimbabweans, how many are we? Close to three million here? How can South Africa handle this? We failed to look after our own country, now we’re here. Can we blame others for what we’ve done to ourselves? »

'They used sticks, rubber batons, everything. They cut my genitals to pieces. I tried to fight back, but lost consciousness'

Zenzele, 46

Occupation Former police officer and teacher

Interviewed in Vancouver, Canada

I miss the wide open spaces, the bush, the forest. I grew up in Bulawayo, in what we called the western suburbs, where only blacks lived. But my childhood was OK - no shortages of food or jobs.

When Mugabe came to power, in 1980, things were pretty good. The Zimbabwean dollar was still strong. But he ran down the country, bit by bit.

After secondary education, I became a teacher in the rural areas. Soldiers would make us sing during the night. They called it an "all-night party". If you didn't go, they would find you. At the meetings, they would say, "You must sing praises to Robert Mugabe." They'd hold their rifles and dance and jump. I danced because if I didn't, they would kill me.

After the meeting, the soldiers would take all the girls who were old enough to have sex, and rape them. Some were my students. They would come into the class the next day and fall asleep because they'd been abused the whole night.

I joined the police in 1987. I was sick of being at the mercy of these so-called security forces. In the police, no one was going to harass me. I worked in Rusape from 1988 to 1998. I met my wife there. Rusape is a big farming area. I was there when the farm takeovers started. I knew some of the white farmers. Their land was given to Mugabe's supporters. We were told to do nothing about it.

In 1998 I left Rusape and went to Bulawayo. Those were the days when a newspaper called the Daily News was still being published. The police were prohibited from reading it because it was anti-government. I used to buy it in the city, hide it in my underpants, read it and then give it to friends.

Morgan Tsvangirai appeared on the political

scene before the constitutional referendum in 2000. Mugabe wanted to turn Zimbabwe into a one-party state, but people said no. At every constituency Mugabe lost, a reign of terror followed.

I started to feel the country was ruined. Things got very expensive and inflation grew. In 2002, there was a vote. Every policeman was told to vote for Zanu-PF. But I said I was sick, and at the civilian polling station I voted for the MDC.

I resigned, but soon after I was visited by officers. I was so angry, I beat them. The next night, I was walking home when four of them jumped me and stuffed a cloth into my mouth. They used sticks, rubber batons, everything. They cut my genitals to pieces. I tried to fight back, but lost consciousness.

I don't know how these guys knew I was still alive, but they came to the hospital and told the doctors not to treat me. The nurses only gave me painkillers. After two days, I discharged myself.

I left for South Africa in December 2004, during the night, through a window. It took me time to get treatment. My first surgery cost a lot of money. Some people teamed up and paid for it. The doctor who saw me was horrified, and did reconstructive surgery. He told me, "Of course, you will never be the same again."

I've had two surgeries since I came to Canada. It functions normally now. It doesn't hurt any more.

What makes me sad is that people in Zimbabwe think suffering is normal. Children never enjoy their childhood. They are busy going hungry, foraging for food and learning the tricks of survival.

Mugabe is old now, and when he dies his party will disintegrate. Right now, they are riding a tiger. When they try to get off, the tiger will eat them. The riders are Mugabe and his henchmen, the tiger is the people of Zimbabwe. You cannot hold a nation in bondage for such a long time.

George, 42

Occupation Former landowner, now land manager

Interviewed in Rural Zimbabwe, on a farm

My father came from South Africa. He came to Zimbabwe - then Rhodesia - to start a new life. So I was born in Rhodesia under the white government, and brought up on a tobacco farm. In some ways, we were very English. We had servants. I'd go down to breakfast, and there would be eggs and bacon. When you've lived like that and it gets stolen from you, it's a shock.

I was 14 when the war ended. I was sent away to boarding school. I didn't do very well. When I finished, I went to work on a stud farm in South Africa and then to England for about a year. I became a labourer, but I was still thinking like I was a rich farmer. I spent all the money on drink.

I went back to work for my old man again. The difference was my brother had taken a degree in agriculture, and he started treating me like I was under him, so I went to find my own job. I worked 13 years as a manager on different farms. Then my father died of leukaemia and we inherited the family farm. Whenever we made money, we put it back into the farm, and after 30 years it was a top-class operation. Then, just before 2000, the vibe suddenly changed.

During the first wave of attacks on commercial farms, this one guy got pulled by his nose through his own house. Then came the first attack on our land. We couldn't defend ourselves. The police and army were backing them.

The second time they came, we got word. My strategy was to agree with everything they said and show no fear. This disarmed them. I had to swallow my pride to keep my family safe. I didn't give into everything they wanted. And so began a year of negotiation and humiliation. I got used »

‘After the beating, I had to leave my job. There was talk of a blacklist. A friend told me they were looking for me again’

to being pushed around, and sticks and weapons being thrust in my face.

My brother’s compound got burned down three times. He was very brave. One day, he was out planting coffee when some guys surrounded him. They slashed him from across the top of the cheekbone and his nose was gone. He got his face cut off, he got his face sewn up, and he went back out there. By then, things were even worse. Some people ended up having graves dug outside their houses.

At the end of 2002 was the final invasion. I was watching rugby. The kids were playing in the garden. There were about 10 cops and 10 war veterans, all with guns. Then I knew it was really happening. I ended up selling my tobacco crop. But as far as all my equipment, my tractors - everything had to be left there. I still had 150 people at my farm, and when we left everyone started crying.

We went to Cape Town first, and ended up on a farm in Mozambique. It was hard. We all had malaria continually. We lived in a tent. Eventually I realised it was time to come home. There was a smattering of white farmers holding on, and some people had already started leasing their own farms back from the blacks.

I found a farm, owned by a black man who wanted me to go into a partnership with his eldest son. We immediately hit it off. I enjoy being in his company, he makes me laugh, and we have found a way of working side by side. He even gave us his house to live in.

I still wouldn’t change any part of my life right now. We seem to have got through it all and become a really close family. I have recovered from the bitterness towards the people who took our farm. The people on the ground know that both blacks and whites were hurt in the land invasions.

Bernard, 28

Occupation Former banker, now a day labourer
Interviewed in Musina, South Africa

I was born in the Eastern Highlands of Zimbabwe, in Mutare. My father was the production manager of a carpentry company. He had quite a lot of opportunities. My family was middle class.

I had a pretty normal childhood. I played a lot of soccer, hung out with my friends. When it came to schoolwork, I was serious. I wanted to be a pilot or an engineer, but my father had a financial background, so in 2000 I studied accounting, management, business.

That was the time of the first parliamentary elections, when the MDC was gaining ground. People were afraid of being known as part of those people, but at that time I was beginning to drink quite a lot, so I didn’t care much about anything. And I believed in speaking up. Things weren’t going right in the country. So I went to one of their meetings. That was the first time I got arrested. We were locked in cells for about two days, but we were never taken to court. They would beat you and say you were being troublemakers.

When I was released, my mother couldn’t speak she was crying so much. My father shook with anger. There were rumours I was being sought. So they suggested I move to Botswana for a while.

When I came back, it was time to get a job. I worked as a real estate agent, and I was also continuing my studies at the open university for my undergraduate degree. Then, in 2006, I was hired by a financial holding company in Harare. I became a bank officer. In 2008 I made a small fortune in foreign currency dealings - temporarily. Almost everyone in the bank was doing it.

The inflation rate went wild, wild, wild. And Zanu-PF would phone and say, “Governor, we

need US\$100,000”, and they would just print all night! So I did make a bit of a fortune dealing. It didn’t last. I was still with MDC. I still believed in change. But for now I had to survive, right?

That year, 2008, was the turning point. We were at a rally at a stadium. This was the year Morgan [Tsvangari] challenged Mugabe in the elections. We were on our way home when we were surrounded by about 15 men. They beat us and took us back to their base. There they made us sing revolutionary songs. They tied us together and beat us for about three hours. Somehow we managed to escape. I went to the hospital, then the issue was reported to the police, but they didn’t take any action.

After the beating, I had to leave my job. There was talk in the neighbourhood of a blacklist. A friend I used to drink with told me that those guys were looking for me again. I had to leave.

I’ve been in South Africa for only six months, and I’m still trying to settle. I work on the construction of sheds. It’s embarrassing. Sometimes, when I’m in town working, I see people from home. They aren’t used to seeing me do such work. At the moment I’m trying to refocus. I’m planning to move to Cape Town. I’d like to make some money before I go back home and pursue my studies again.

I’ve caused my family some deep, deep problems. Being the only son, I often feel like I’ve failed them. But here I do a lot of talking with friends from the party. I feel that we have to be people who stick to values. And I believe we deserve better leadership. I believe we are the type of people who should be given a chance. ●

These are edited extracts from *Hope Deferred: Narratives Of Zimbabwean Lives*, edited by Peter Orner and Annie Holmes, published by McSweeney’s.