

***Kaffirmeid* and other Stories**

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by

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Abstract

These stories are about people's experiences in relationships and how they overcome and resolve problems with their partners.

Some explore myths and unexplained occurrences that raise many questions.

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Butterfly Collar

As if propelled by magic, the butterfly collar comes undone and flies off *ouma*'s neck. It flies higher and higher. It lands on the branch of a tall eucalyptus tree nearby.

“Look what you have done Morwesi? How will I get it back? Tell that boy to go up and get my collar.” *Ouma* says.

Ouma had come home from the Thursday women's church service to find my sister Morwesi and Trevor, the boy from school, kissing. She had been upset enough to utter a swear word. Until that moment, *Ouma* had never issued a foul or harsh word while wearing her sacred church clothes.

Ouma's eyes widen as her feet rise from the ground. She looks like a yogi floating in meditation. There is nothing to break her fall. She goes up to the high branch. Finally she stops at the tree and rescues the church collar. Still suspended, she puts the Butterfly collar back on.

“Look she is flying!” says *mma* Serobe, our neighbour.

More people gather around our yard. They watch with hands over their mouths when they see a big woman flying like a feather.

Ouma descends slowly and lands where she had been standing before the butterfly collar flew off her.

“*Boloi*. Witchcraft!” exclaims Mmokwa. “The chief will know about it”. *I can't believe I ever trusted that woman. Who knows, maybe she has been poisoning me too.* 'He thinks.

“Mmokwa, did you call me a witch? I will show you a witch!” *Ouma* grabs Mmokwa by the collar of his shirt.

Her own collar shifts to one side and she lets go of Mmokwa.

“*O tla se bona!* I'm not afraid of you.” Mmokwa, frees himself from her grip and walks away.

“*Ke tla bona eng* Mmokwa? I don't scare easily. Do whatever you want”. *Ouma* tells him.

“My grandfather was a healer. He knew how to make people like you disappear. I will show you.” He storms off.

“You think you can make me disappear? Go ahead and try it. I will wait for that to happen. I was not born yesterday. Empty words don't scare me”. Shouts *Ouma*.

Mmokwa is a regular drinker of a traditional brew known as *khadi*. Every day he sits in the circle of *khadi* drinkers and keeps his 5 litre bottle close to him. Like everyone else, he believes that witches can steal a man's soul or poison him when he is not looking. That is why he doesn't eat food from other villagers' homes, except for one.

"You boys, you don't know how to live," Mmokwa says as he smacks his tongue after taking a swig from his bottle. "I have met important people in my life *monna*. You know, the soldiers did not have any past times then. They used to patrol the areas where they needed to work and then they would sit in the barracks and wait for instructions from the commanders. Now, I had a friend then. His name was Paul. He wanted to learn to speak our language so that he could hear what the local people were talking about. I taught him a few phrases and games. They didn't know that they could earn money by gambling among themselves. I taught them to roll dice and play *morabaraba*. You remember they say that a black man always has a plan? Well, that's true. I used to win most of the games. They didn't notice that I had tricks up my sleeve. They just thought that I am streetwise." Mmokwa wipes his lips with satisfaction.

"Really?" someone asks.

"*Banna*, I have to go. There is a special woman waiting for me. She is preparing lamb stew and steamed bread. You know, since my wife Meitjie died, I don't get to enjoy mouth-watering meals. My daughter just boils the meat and adds salt. She does not have the patience to fry the meat and even add some special herbs." Mmokwa says.

As usual, the fellow-*khadi* drinkers look at him and shake their heads.

Sometimes one of them will say "Why don't you marry her? The two of you behave like teenagers as it is. And I should tell you *monna*, nothing beats a home-cooked meal. If Mmadiepetsana is that good, then you should marry her. Look at Nelson Mandela. He remarried at the age of 73. You are still strong and you can marry the woman who makes you happy."

"What? No. No *monna*. We are enjoying our golden years now. Mandela is a rich man. He can afford to buy presents for women. I only have my livestock. There is nothing golden about our generation. Instead, we walk around with aches and pains." Mmokwa would respond.

"Mmokwa, they call it the golden age because we don't have to wake up and go to work or worry about children we live our lives the way we want to". His friend tells him.

Mmokwa visits *ouma* all the time. They usually sit in the *voorhuis* and chat for hours. I try to listen in on their conversation but I never hear much.

They look into each other's eyes and laugh till the tears roll down their wrinkled cheeks.

When they are not having their secret discussions, Mmokwa sits on the home-made light blue bench in the kitchen and sips his *khadi*. "You know Mmadiepetsana, you are a good woman. I always eat lamb meat at home, but it never tastes as good as yours. Your steamed bread always makes my stomach ask for more. Tell me woman, how do you do it?"

"Aw Mmokwa, you know I don't add oil to the meat. I just let it cook in its own fat. And the steamed bread recipe is my secret," *Ouma* replies.

"I will get that secret one day. Just wait."

This is why many people were surprised to have heard Mmokwa call his friend a witch.

He spends most of the time at her home. Why does he call her a witch? they wonder.

The village of Vaalboshhoek is small and people always know about what is happening. Those who had seen or heard about *ouma* levitating come closer to the house. They think something else is going to happen and wait in anticipation. But *ouma* looks fine. She doesn't faint or fly.

She is calm as she looks at the few people who are still lurking, "All of you, get away! Do you think this is a circus? **Get away!**"

They shuffle away.

Some of the neighbours look at *ouma* with eyes that are full of questions. They want to know how she managed to fly, but she gives them one look and they hurry out of the yard. *Ouma* looks at Morwesi with her grey eyebrows shaking.

"Morwesi, do you see what you have done? Now, all these nosy people are calling me a witch. Morwesi, what do I have to do for you to listen to me? Last month, you were running around with a man old enough to be your father. Now I find you kissing the principal's son in public?"

"I am sorry *ouma*. I didn't mean to upset you. We thought you were coming back late from church. We were not kissing in public. Trevor was holding my hand. We were just talking."

"*Ngwanyana ke wena*, are you talking back at me? Do you think you are too old to be disciplined? I will get my *shambok* and you will tell it the truth. I found that boy trying to swallow your face? Do you call that talking?" *ouma* asks.

"He was giving me a love bite. It was not a kiss," replies Morwesi.

“Shut up! You disgraced me in front of the entire village. Being sixteen doesn’t give you a license to disrespect adults and our culture”.

“I’m sorry *ouma*.”

Chief Modise is like a mayor in our village. There is no municipal office in Vaalboshoek, so, his mansion towers over the village. Very few villagers have entered his home and they tell everyone about the beauty of his house.

The chief often encourages villagers to plant vegetable gardens so that they have enough to eat even though they do not have jobs. This is the lesson that the chief got from *ouma*.

Today chief Modise is surprised to hear that the most respected member of the community is a witch. “Did you see her fly?” he asks.

“Yes *kgosi*. I was walking by her house and I saw her up in the sky. At first, I thought I was seeing ‘things’. She retrieved her church collar from the highest tree branch and then descended.”

“Mmokwa, I don’t have time for stories. Where have you ever heard of a flying person? Anyway, I will get to the bottom of this. The only advice I can give you is that you should not allow a simple thing like a flying piece of cloth destroy the friendship that has lasted for so many years?” says Chief Modise.

“*Nnyaa rra*. I spent all my life fighting off witches. They come in different ways and I have managed to keep them out of my life. That is why I am still alive and strong. I’m eighty years old. I trusted Mmadiepetsana, but she has let me down.”

“That woman is humble and respectful. She is always willing to help others. I have learned a lot from her and I have never doubted her commitment to this community. Ask her to come and see me” says the chief.

Angry that the chief has sent him back to Mmadiepetsana’s home, Mmokwa greets her reluctantly. “*Dumela* Mmadiepetsana.”

“What do you want? Did you bring your lightning to strike me with?” asks *ouma*

“No, no, chief Modise wants to see you,” Mmokwa says.

“Fine. I will see him tomorrow,” says *Ouma* as she turns her back to him.

“You surprised us all this afternoon. I know I said some things that I shouldn’t have said. I don’t normally strike people with lightning. I was just shocked to see you fly like a bird. I’m too old for these magic tricks,” says Mmokwa.

“Mmokwa, I don’t know what happened this afternoon and I don’t have to explain anything to you. I just hate it when people accuse others of evil things. I am telling you now, right here, I am not a witch.”

“Stop please. I hear you. I am sorry for accusing you of witchcraft.” Replies Mmokwa.

“That makes no difference. The whole village already knows that I’m a witch. What kind of man are you Mmokwa? Sometimes you are worse than these gossipmongers.”

“I’m sorry” says Mmokwa, and leaves.

At the communal tap Morwesi waits her turn. Women with babies on their backs look at her and say nothing. *‘Ouma’s flying is going to get us into trouble. What will happen to our family now?’* She thinks. That is what small communities are like. When a member of the family does something, it is believed that the whole family is like that.

“We were wondering how long it would take your grandmother to do tricks. I know you city people are witches. And you always say village women are the witches. Now tell us Morwesi, how did your grandmother fly up so high? I saw her with both my eyes and she flew like a feather. In broad daylight! A big woman like her is not supposed to fly. Tell us, is she hiding the witches’ broom under those church clothes?” asks one of the women.

“I don’t know what happened. I didn’t know that she could fly either” says Morwesi.

“We always knew that there was something about that woman. She never comes to our houses and she does not brew the traditional brew either. How can a person stay in a village and not learn to brew beer? Tell your grandmother we are watching her,” says another woman.

Morwesi fills up the bucket and heads home.

While walking, she thinks about Trevor. He is the most handsome boy at school. He dresses in expensive clothes from Truworths and other expensive shops that are only found in big towns. Most boys look up to him because he wears expensive labels like Daniel Hechter t-shirts and jeans. Many boys dream of owning clothing items with those labels but their parents cannot

afford to buy them. Besides the boys, many girls want to get his attention. Now, Trevor chose the girl from an ordinary family. He did not choose the girl who wears georgette blouses to school. Morwesi could not believe her luck when Trevor offered to walk her home that day. She could not stop the smile on her face. She was happy and knew that she was always going to be happy because she found the man of her dreams.

As she feels the weight of the water bucket on her head, she wonders if she has lost the love of her life.

Back at home, she knocks on the main bedroom door and peers in. “*Ouma* is not in her room. Where did she go?” she is frantic.

“She is gone. She took her small checked blanket and wrapped it around her waist. Maybe she went to see the chief,” I reply.

“Naledi, it is getting dark outside and you let *ouma* go alone? Which way did she go?”

I point in the general direction where there are footpaths that lead out of the village.

”*Ouma* has never been to the forest. You know that she is afraid of snakes and creepy crawlies. We have to find her. I shouldn’t have come home with Trevor. Now I have lost the only person who cared about me,” says Morwesi.

That night we wait in the kitchen for our grandmother to return.

“Naledi, you know good prayers that can help with *ouma*’s safe return. Can you please pray for her to come back to us?” says Morwesi.

I take out my rosary and begin to recite a prayer: “Oh Hail Mary, full of grace. The Lord is with thee, Blessed art thou amongst women and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus Mary Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death. Amen.”

We fall asleep at around one in the morning. Morwesi wakes up after a short while.

“Did you hear that?” she asks.

“*Jislaaik!* What now? I am tired. ”

“Take the blankets to the shanty outside” says Morwesi.

“What?”

“Naledi, this is a small village and people know about everything that happens around here. Do you remember that old woman who stayed in the corner house next to the shop? Yes, they said she was a witch and they burnt down her house.”

In the morning I hear voices outside the corrugated iron shanty.

Ouma is back. I think.

When I go outside to check, I find people are running to the main house with buckets full of water and sand. There is smoke billowing from the *voorhuis* door. Neighbours are helping to put out the fire and *mma* Serobe shoves something deep inside her apron pocket. She looks around to see if anyone has seen her and then continues to give people instructions.

“It is a paraffin bomb,” someone shouts.

The curtains in the *voorhuis* are gone. The plastic table cloth is burnt. The picture of *Ouma*’s great-great grandfather is intact. At the back of it, the name Arnoldus Dutch is scrawled.

That night, the full moon guides *ouma*. She sees an image of a mother nursing a baby on the moon and she walks on. The picture of mother and child on the moon calms her down and she walks, hoping to see the face of the woman who led her away from her home. She is at peace as she walks on. There is not much to eat, but her body is still strong.

She falls asleep when the cock sounds the first wake-up call.

Rradipitse, the richest man from Vaaltein village, rides his horse cart to one of his biggest cow pens in *ga* Mmadiepetsana. On his way, he sees her in church clothes sleeping peacefully. It is normal for people to walk from one village to the other. He halts his horse cart and takes a closer look. She is snoring and there is a smile on her face.

“*Dumela mma.* Can we help?” he asks.

Nothing happens.

Rradipitse shakes her gently and she wakes with a start.

“*Dumela rra*. Is there a problem?” she asks.

“No, no, *mma*, I saw you sleeping and wanted to see if there is anything I can do for you. I have a horse cart over there. Can I take you to a village nearby?” he offers.

“Thank you *rra*. What is this place? Are we still in Vaalboshhoek?” asks *ouma*.

“No *mma*, Vaalboshhoek is far from here. How did you get here?” asks Rradipitse.

“I walked. I wanted to get away from all those nosy people.”

“There are houses nearby. I can leave you there to rest. I will come back tomorrow to give you a lift back to Vaalboshhoek. I am from Vaaltein. I passed your village on my way here.”

“Thank you *rra*, I’m worried about the kids that I left at home. Now, I’m too far from home. I will see them when I get back”.

“You are the one” says Rradipitse.

“The one?” asks *ouma*.

“On my way here, I passed a group of men searching for a lost woman. I didn’t ask them anything but I heard one of them talking about church clothes. I think they were looking for you.”

“The chief must have sent them. We can go now.”

They travel the short distance into the village. The kids who have been playing with home-made balls see the donkey cart and sing with excitement. “The queen is here, the queen is here!”

Rradipitse looks at *ouma* and says, “Are you the queen?”

“I don’t think so.”

The medicine man of Ga-Mmadipetsana, *rre* Mabilo hears the commotion outside his hut. He takes his horse tail and goes to investigate. Putting a hand over his forehead to shield his eyes from the morning light, he sees her the way she had appeared in his dreams. He smiles, revealing tobacco-stained teeth.

“*Dumela kgosigadi*. We have been waiting for you.” He taps his pipe on the stone nearby.

Ouma is confused to hear this man referring to her as *kgosigadi*. She alights from the horse cart with the help of *Rradipitse*. She greets man.

“*Dumela rra*. I didn’t know that I’m the queen. I live in *Vaalboshhoek*. I was walking in the forest and I must have lost track of time.”

“You finally came. I’m *Mabilo*, the medicine man. There is a prophecy that has been running for many years. It is about the queen who will change the lives of people of this village. Our ancestors never fail us. Here you are. It is a big day for our village. I wonder if you remember the plague of locusts some years ago? Well, the prophesy was made then and we knew that we had to wait for you to save our village. I’m happy that you are here.”

“I am *Mmadiepetsana*.”

“That’s right. You are the one. Our village name is *Ga-Mmadiepetsana* and the bones have been telling us about you for many years” *Mabilo* says with a satisfied smile.

Ouma did not ask any more questions. The villagers had accepted her and it was clear that they were not going to let her go back to her village.

“I will stay here for a while. Maybe they will realize that I am not a real queen”. *Ouma* says as she cuts a piece of fruit in her compound. Something told her that she would not be staying in that village for long. After spending a few months in *Ga-Mmadiepetsana*, she started to worry about something. The one thing that worried her was the recurring dream. She often dreamt of a ceremony of a woman who was being crowned. In the dream, *ouma* was trying to touch the beautiful crown but she never had the chance to do so. As she got close to the crown, it vanished. The dream ended the same way every time. Sometimes, she wished that she could talk to someone about the recurring dream. She wanted to know what the dream meant.

One afternoon while she was reading a Bible, *ouma* hears someone at the door of her compound. “*Kgosigadi*, are you there? *Kgosigadi*, can I come in?” Came the voice from outside.

“*Tsena rre Mabilo*”. Replies *ouma*.

“*Dumela Kgosigadi*. I have a message to come and see you”. Says the medicine man as he sits on the lambskin rug.

“*Ke a utlwa rra*. What do you mean you mean *rra*? Are you sure you were sent to come and see me? Do you know what you are supposed to do?” asks *ouma*.

“*Ijaa!* That is a tough one. The ancestors told me to come and see you. They did not tell me why I had to see you”.

“I am fine *rra*. Now that you are here, you might help me to interpret the dream that I have been having”. Says *ouma*.

“*Kgosigadi*, dreams are a way of communication between the ancestors and those who are alive. Sometimes, the ancestors warn us through dreams.

With *ouma* gone, Vaalboshhoek becomes like a ghost town. The villagers are losing interest in tending their vegetable gardens. There is no one to give them advice on how to get rid of the locusts that are eating the plants. Every day, someone comes to ask if *ouma* is not back yet.

Mmokwa comes to our home to check if *ouma* is not back yet. He always looks like he does not believe us when we tell him that we don't know where *ouma* is.

Morwesi does not like Mmokwa much. She snaps at him when he asks about *ouma*. “Rre Mmokwa, you made *ouma* to leave her home. You told her that she is a witch. Why do you keep coming to the house of a witch? Right now, we have lost the only parent who cares about us. You caused all of this. What more do you want from us? Do you think we are hiding *ouma* in a kist?”

“*Hee ngwana ke wena*, why are you so rude? You are the one who caused all the trouble. I take you as part of my family. And I am not happy that your grandmother is gone. I am leaving now. I will come to check again tomorrow”.

When Mmokwa leaves our home, he goes to his fellow *khadi*-drinkers where he drinks his *khadi* and plays dice or cards. These days, he looks sad. The small bottle of clubman that he keeps in the inside of his jacket pocket, is not enough to make him happy. His friends know better but to ask him about his ‘special woman’.

When he is not out visiting with his friends, Mmokwa sits on his porch smoking from his pipe.

With *ouma* gone, Morwesi looks sad most of the time.

The secret

Mourners were sitting in a white tent while women in *seshweshwe* dresses carried trays of refreshments to new arrivals. Children were running around happily, oblivious to the situation. Most of them were glad to be out of their homes where they were instructed to do chores.

The teenagers busied themselves with blackberries, tablets, androids and other electronic gadgets. One of them would occasionally dash to the house to recharge a gadget. They carried squeeze bottles and it didn't need a scientist to tell what was in those bottles. When the bottles felt lighter, they dashed to their cars or their parents' cars for a refill.

In the bedroom, 73 year old Seyanokeng was seated on a mattress on the floor, with a thick blanket over her shoulders. Mourners went into the deceased's bedroom at intervals to offer condolences.

A storm was brewing inside someone's body. 51 year-old Kedisaletse had just found out that the deceased was her father. She had known the 83 year-old man all her life. She and her older sister often spent school holidays at his house. Back then he had a perfect little family.

The home of the deceased could not accommodate all the relatives from out of town, so some stayed with the neighbours. Funerals are seen as a community affair. That way, neighbours help each other out when needed.

Moipone, who is Kedisaletse's mother, was sitting in a room with her younger sister. She was telling her younger sister about what Tsholofelo did to her. With some luck, Kedisaletse overheard the conversation. As she listened, she felt faint. It was as if the floor had opened up and was ready to swallow her up. Her knees failed to carry. She leaned against the wall and waited for the dizzy spell to subside. When she was strong enough, she opened the door and barged in. Her mother and aunt were frazzled. They looked at each other and did not say anything.

Kedisaletse shot a murderous look at her mother; "I cannot believe you let him die without telling me that he was my father. Do you know how painful it is to live not knowing who your father is? I have been floating like a leaf that doesn't belong to a branch. Do you know how miserable I have been all these years? Now, I will remain miserable for the rest of my life".

"Stop making this about you Kedi! Do you know how difficult it is to keep the secret? I was ashamed to say anything because we were raised by the same family. Things were different then. Listen, I know who my mother is, but I don't know my father. I lived the rest of my life not

knowing who my father is. I will never know him. We stayed in a home with many children. The older ones took care of us. Tsholofelo was like my older brother. I used to do whatever he asked me to. I didn't understand things then. Everything happened so fast. You should be grateful that you know who your father is". Said Kedisaletse's mother.

"I don't care if I am a product of incest or not. Do you know how difficult it is to grow up wondering what your father looks like? My life was hell throughout school. I used to listen to children talking about their fathers but, I couldn't. You destroyed me and you destroyed my life! Come to think of it, you really loved him. I used to watch you at family gatherings. The two of you often had private chats when no one was looking. Did he know that he was my father?"

"What? No, he didn't. When my mother discovered that I was pregnant with his child, she arranged for me to move in with other relatives. I had no choice but to keep the secret," replied Kedisaletse's mother.

"Well, the secret is 51 years-old now. I'm going to pay tribute to him. His kids are my half-brother and sister. From now on, they will know that I am their sibling. As the eldest child, I should receive bigger inheritance. That should cover for the emotional pain that I suffered all these years," Kedisaletse said.

"Do you want to hurt his family even more?"

Kedisaletse walked out of the room engulfed in uncontrollable rage. *There has to be a way to make them acknowledge my existence. It is not like I want the inheritance or anything. I need them to know that we are related.*

As she crossed the road to go the home of the deceased, she saw headlights flashing. She needed to be distracted from what she had heard from her mother. She walked towards the car and her steps quickened when she saw the face of the person behind the steering wheel.

"Sylvester? Sylvester Mogakwe? I can't believe it" she said, and they hugged. He kissed her lightly on the lips. "What are you doing here? You are not their relative are you? I mean, if you were, we would have met at other family gatherings. The elders in my family have been dying as if they made a pact to die around the same time. I'm not complaining, they all lived full lives. The nauseating thing about death is that you discover secrets when the person is dead. What brings you to this *dorpie*?" asked Kedisaletse.

"He was my father. I can't believe that they kept the secret from me for so long," said Sylvester.

“What? That can’t be true. I thought you were the principal’s son. Sylvester, do you remember that we nearly became lovers in high school? And now, I find out that you are my half-brother?”

“Half-brother? Was he your father too? I am angry. I could kill someone right now. They only told me about him this morning. I decided to come and see what he looked like”. Said Sylvester.

“I found out by accident. He and my mother are related and they grew up in the same house. I was conceived under the roof of her relatives. Everyone felt that it was shameful for my mother to be pregnant. That’s why I was kept a secret”. Said Kedisaletse.

“Damn! I thought I was getting a raw deal here, but you are worse off than me. The man I’ve known to be my REAL father is actually my grandfather. What do we do now?” he asked.

“Not much. We just have to get on with our lives. We can’t bring him back from the dead. He has lived his life and we should do the same,” said Kedisaletse.

The grave swallowed his coffin on the day of the funeral while Kedisaletse and Sylvester held hands. They just watched as Tsholofelo’s real family threw handfuls of red earth on his coffin.

The one thing about grieving for the loved one is that it goes on for as long as you live. Kedisaletse discovered the identity of her father when it was too late. The only thing that she was left with was to mourn his passing. The mourning continued for months on end. The inner pain that she had endured had different strands. Some days she felt like she would stop breathing because of the heartache. Other times it was bearable.

She couldn’t talk to anyone about her pain because she thought that they would not understand why she was hurting so much. The only person that could understand this pain was Sylvester. As if he sensed her loneliness, he paid her a visit. They sat on the balcony of her flat and watched the stars.

“I wonder if he is one of the stars” said Kedisaletse.

“No idea. I guess we have to wait for our turn. Then we will know for sure. I still wish I knew more about him”. replied Sylvester.

“You are lucky you had the love of a father when you were growing up. I didn’t. I always looked at him and thought that he was a crazy bastard. The one thing that I can say about him is that he

had a foul mouth. He used to swear like a drunken sailor. I was always shocked to hear him swear because he was a priest. Priests are not allowed to use foul language. Are they?"

"No Kedisaletse, you are the lucky one. You knew about his madness. You know how he laughed and what he sounded like."

"*Ja*, what more can we do." Kedisaletse said as she prepared to live with the emptiness.

"Look at that star. It is the brightest and looks closer too. Do you think he is watching over us?" asked Sylvester.

"Sylvester, I think you need to dash your whiskey with something else. That's not a star. It is a plane."

If Miracles Happened...

Angela leans on the balcony of Chezntemba night club, to light a *spliff*. This is one of the few places where she can smoke a *joint* and enjoy a drink. Her eyes dart to the car guards who run at lightning speed to park cars belonging to good tippers. The others keep an eye on revellers who are likely to drop valuables because they have had too much to drink.

A voice interrupts her train of thought.

“Excuse me ma’am, may I use your light?”

Her body tenses up. She would recognize that guttural voice from anywhere. *‘The owner of this voice is not supposed to be in a nightclub. Now, what does he want?’* She wonders.

“Angela, may have a light?” The man scratches his clean-shaven head.

“Pastor Karlos, what are you doing here?”

“Please, don’t say my name. The others will know that I’m still in this country. Look, I didn’t mean to play with your head. I’m a qualified GP. I couldn’t get a job. When I met you, I had just arrived in your country. I was the under-study of someone from my clan, the Igbo. I...I... Can I have a light please?”

“So, you think I didn’t deserve to know the truth one and a half years ago? What about my money?” she asks.

“Angela, you got your revenge. This won’t heal.” He points at his face.

“You didn’t tell me that you could double up as a chair, did you? I attacked a chair that night, not you”.

The pastor lights the cigarette and looks everywhere but her face. *This is a first, ‘the pastor commands so much confidence and authority at the church, but now he looks like a freshly-hatched bird that can barely fly. What happened to him?’* She thinks,

Angela knows that it is wrong to harbour a grudge, but she cannot help herself. She won’t stop until she gets her revenge. She looks in his eyes and he looks away. It as if her eyes are burning a hole inside him.

“Thank you for the light.” He hesitates for a bit and goes to the other part of the balcony.

She looks after him and stops the rage that is building up inside her. On the other hand, she knows that it was partly her fault that she got conned. One thing about con artists is that they pay

close attention to their potential prey or prospective clients. Then they capitalize on your weakness or uncertainty.

Eighteen months earlier Angela had gone to the 24- hour church across the street. She had half-hoped to get the miracle that some people talked about. What startled her was the furniture in the church. The congregation sat on garden chairs. When someone with a large body mass sat there, anything could happen. There was nothing that confirmed that the place was a real church. The podium looked portable and could be carried out at any time. Looking at all of this, she was reminded about the overnight businesses in Johannesburg's city centre. Some people hired offices for a period of time to make money whatever way they thought would work for them and when they were happy with their work they disappeared without any warning. The business people who commonly did this were the money launderers or pyramid scheme experts. The congregation sang in languages she didn't understand and the sermon was conducted in the same languages. Some women looked at her with eyes that said 'you will never belong in this club.' She could have gone across the street for a drink from her favourite joint, but she resisted.

The church service finally ended. Angela's bottom hurt from sitting for too long on the plastic chair. The congregation members greeted each other with exaggerated politeness and they seemed to share a secret. She didn't want to become part of the secret, so she headed for the exit from the church.

The congregants looked at each other as if they shared a secret. The clean-shaven man in the robe, extended a hand to greet her.

"Angela, I'm Pastor Karlos. You did well to come."

"Thank you. Will you help me?"asked Angela.

"You need to believe that you can be healed. My prayers won't work if you have doubts. I can get rid of whatever is blocking your success. Come and see me tomorrow," said Pastor Karlos.

Angela avoided going to that church for three more weeks, but relented when the pastor's phone calls persisted.

Pastor Karlos was convincing when he talked about his visions. He told her that some jealous people had put darkness in her life and that was why she was not as successful as her peers. He managed to get her to believe that she was bewitched and that he had the ability to remove

darkness from her body. She believed these stories when she was with the pastor, but when she was on her own she became sceptical. *'How can one man have so much power?'* she asked herself over and over again.

Sometimes he grew agitated and told her that her life would never be okay because she didn't believe him. Well, he was right. She found it hard to believe he could do all the stuff he claimed he could do. But, despite these doubts, she agreed to let him 'heal' her.

"We need to cleanse you as soon as possible. But first you need to buy stuff for the cleansing. Bring an unused dagger, black cloth, coconut, olive oil and perfume. I will give you the name of the perfume. If you can't find it, I will buy it. And like I told you before, you have to pay R6000.00 upfront so that God can open up all the blockages. Don't worry about the money. You will get some of it back," Pastor Karlos assured her.

Angela's pension pay-out from her former employer had just come through. There were many debts to pay and now the pastor wanted her to pay R6000.00? Something didn't sound right about it, but the pastor had told her that some people had paid up to R50 000 for their miracles. He said that in order to be successful you need to 'sacrifice' something.

On the 28th of December that year, Angela received three letters from different companies, inviting her for job interviews. She was excited that after being unemployed for only six months, she had a chance to go back into the game. Her heart nearly bled when she thought about the money she had paid for a miracle. She didn't need a miracle. She was educated and in a special skill bracket. People always wanted to hire Social Workers with extensive experience.

The cleansing ritual began on new year's eve. She was alone in the church and it terrified her to be left in such a big building with no security around.

"Anoint yourself with the olive oil the way I showed you. Then don't take a bath for two days. The olive oil will extract poison from your body. I have also marked passages from the Bible for you to read," Pastor Karlos told her over the phone.

"No bath for two days? Pastor, do you know the discomfort that I will have to put up with?" Angela protested.

"Listen woman, this is a spiritual ritual. Just stay in the church and pray. I am in Mahikeng and will see you in five days".

Angela was sceptical about what she puts on her body. First of all, she didn't like the smell of olive oil and she was not about to put that on her body.

At around 8pm, she was overwhelmed with fatigue. It was too early to go to bed. Her attempts to fight fatigue proved futile, but she managed to remain awake.

As if by magic, Pastor Karlos appeared in the church. *This is strange. Why did he tell me that he is in Mahikeng only to appear like this from nowhere?* she wonders.

The Pastor straightened the books on the makeshift altar. He walked towards Angela and spread his arms as if to hug a long lost friend. Then he disappeared as mysteriously as he had appeared. Then she noticed something - *This chair was not here when I came in. Where did it come from? There are no wooden chairs in this church.* She carried the chair to a corner, but later found it back on the same spot.

Not knowing what to do, she took out the dagger and carved an X on the chair. There was moisture on the part she had carved. Seeing that the chair wanted to remain there, she decided to sit at a different spot away from it.

She sat on the light sponge mattress and eventually fell into an uneasy sleep. In her sleep, a nightmare made her entire body shiver. She saw a beast with a long broad tail, slithering towards her. The beast was not a snake, but it moved on its belly. There were no feet on it either. It was large, with teeth as big as a crocodile's. It approached her and sprayed water all over her. She tried to run away, but it pinned down her legs down by its rectangular thorny tail. The water sprayed all over her and she was about to suffocate.

When the beast finally retreated, the river from its mouth ceased to flow. It disappeared with lightning speed and Angela woke with a start only to find that both her clothes and the church were still dry.

The dream reminded her of her near-death experience when she was six years old. Her elder sister had pushed her into a shallow swimming pool. Not knowing how to swim, she had fought the water with her hands and feet and didn't drown. She feared the sight of a pool or a river from that moment onwards.

Looking around, she felt the large building breathing eerily. She dropped the Bible and headed for the one place she knew she would feel safe – the Chezntemba nightclub.

In the nightclub now the mood is festive as she orders a drink. She casts a brief glance as Pastor Karlos sitting at his table on the balcony. As she takes a sip, she feels the weight on her shoulders, as if someone is sitting on her back. She closes her eyes and the image of Pastor

Karlos appears again from nowhere. She opens her eyes and he is still sitting at the nearby table watching her. She is happy that the alcohol will take its course soon.

She recalls returning to the church six weeks following the failed cleansing ritual and the mystery chair. That time someone else was conducting the service, and she had noticed Pastor Karlos sitting among the congregation.

I love my job

I walk to the kitchen whistling a tune from Liquideep's new album. *I will buy this album as soon as I get my salary.* There is so much that needs to be done this week. I make a mental list of things I need to get before Ms Modise travels to India.

My employer's house is on a small hilltop in Observatory and you can see the whole of Johannesburg from her balcony at night. She does not have kids and sometimes her nieces and nephews come to visit.

As I open the door, a flying coffee mug misses me by inches because I duck just on time. She is standing there looking like she is ready to explode like an over-ripe watermelon. I try to enter the kitchen but a sugar pot and its contents stop me in my tracks. "I have to clean that. What did I..."

My eye settles on her lime dressing gown. Her erect nipples peer through her lacy night dress. I wish I could touch them.

"Ms Modise, what did I....." Another cup flies towards my face and I get out of its way.

Her shrill voice comes out from another planet - "bloody traitor!" Do I look stupid to you? Do you think I don't know what goes on in my home when I am not around? *O letekatse* Victor. I don't know why I trusted you in the first place. Jesus Christ! Why do I always allow men to break my heart? You are nothing! Get out of my face youyou...

"But, what did I do?" I ask.

"I found government condoms and strands of fake hair in the guest bedroom. How cheap can you get? Did you think I wouldn't find out? Victor, am I not good enough for you? Why didn't you take that slut to the cottage instead? My house is not a whorehouse. Take your crap and leave my property. No man will ever take advantage of me again. Out! out!". She screams.

I have never been referred to as a prostitute. Her words sliced my intestines like a sharp blade. I had to come clean. "I'm sorry Ms Modise, I didn't sleep in your guest bedroom. I only clean the place. I respect your home like any other. Please let me explain".

"Explanations won't save you. Get your things and leave". She shoots a murderous look at me.

"My friend, Thabang slept there. He promised to clean up after him. I forgot to check the room after he left. I know it was wrong for me to let them sleep in your guest bedroom, but we were out until the early hours of the day. He was too drunk to go to his flat".

“Save the lies for someone who will believe you. You cannot be trusted. Get off my property or I will call the police”. Her face is grey with anger.

The thing about some women is that they react without knowing the facts. It is clear that she blames me for something but is not giving me the chance to defend myself or explain. I used to think that educated and successful people don't lose their temper until they hear both sides of the story. I guess I was wrong. If she had told me why she is so angry with me, I would explain.

I walk disconsolately to my childhood friend Thabang's studio. We moved to Johannesburg around the same time. He has a BA degree and sometimes likes to show off his level of education.

He speaks in an exaggerated English accent when people he perceive to be educated, come to collect their orders or for measurements. The accent doesn't do much for him because you can still pick up his heavy Sesotho Free State province accent. He makes me cringe when he brings out the accent.

We were in the same class from primary to high school. We were also members of the debating committee throughout our school life.

In high school, Thabang used to throw around big English terms. The words were often used inappropriately and the students used to applaud without knowing that he used them to impress them and the teachers. Teachers who knew these words would raise eyebrows and smile. The girls loved him because they thought that his perceived intelligence would rub off on them.

I entered Thabang's studio and walk to the other corner to wait for him to conclude business with his client. His roaming eye lands on me and he smiles his Colgate smile. The client says his goodbye and Thabang hurries towards me. He is wearing a long lime robe that is usually worn by the Nigerian elite. I have seen president Obasanjo of Nigeria wearing one. He flaps the arms as if they do not belong there.

“*Ekse ntwana*, where are we going to party today? Thabang asks. “*Wag 'n bietjie my maat*, you look like you are carrying the troubles of the entire world on your shoulders.”

“*Ei joe*, you are the problem. My boss found something in her bedroom. She was ready to kill me. You should have seen all the stuff that she threw at me. You know that an angry woman never misses a target. I tell you *joe*, she was ready to kill me. You messed up *jong*. I need that job. I need that job man”.

Thabang clears his throat unnecessarily and looks down. “That’s impossible. There is now way that she could have found anything. I know I was out of it that night, but I made sure that everything was in place when I left in the morning. She can’t fire you. I mean... I mean you have rights. Besides, you are an all-rounder. You do the garden and double up as a domestic worker. She will be crazy to let you go. Give her time to cool off and call her.”

”That’s easy for you to say. You didn’t see her. She was like a wounded lion fighting for its cub. There is no cooling off from that kind of anger”.

“Okay *joe*. Listen, if she doesn’t take you back, you can go the traditional route. Anything is possible here in Jozi. Don’t worry.” Thabang suggests.

“The traditional route?” I ask.

“Yes, you can get your job back the traditional way. You know, soften her up and stuff. I mean... you’re black and she’s black.” He chews thoughtfully at a matchstick.

“*Hey monna*, stop your riddles. Just tell me what to do. You know how I struggled to get this job. How will I pay for my sisters’ school fees?”

Thabang’s eyes dance like he is about to share a state secret with me. “There’s a herbal shop in Kotze street. I can take you there if you like. I hear that they can get a convicted criminal off. Everyone speaks highly of him. Afterwards we can go to Moulin Rouge for a strip show. I have always wanted to do that.”

“What! Do you want me to poison my boss?” My head spins in disbelief.

Thabang smiles patiently. “Ah come on. People do this all the time. Stop being a goody-two-shoes. It is for your own good.”

“I... don’t think so. Look, let’s try Moulin Rouge first. You know we don’t believe in ‘quick-fixes’. My mother taught me to pray when I have problems. I will pray. You know that short-cut stuff has a way of back-firing. What if I get caught? She will never forgive me.”

The Moulin Rouge doesn't look inviting from outside. It is nearly dilapidated like many buildings in Hillbrow. My attention is caught by the decor as we step inside. The reception counter is spotless and the woman who is manning it looks professional. The air-conditioned room competes for attention with ladies who are dressed in super-mini dresses and skirts. These ladies look like they wear these dresses for a particular reason. Any item they wear has to come off in a few seconds when necessary.

My mind replays the morning encounter like a fast and furious movie. I can't believe that I have lost her friendship and trust because of my reckless friend. I look at my cellular phone for the umpteenth time to check if she hasn't called me. I thought she could have cooled off by now and realised that I am not the one who slept with a woman in the guest bedroom.

I look at Thabang and he looks like a king in his private room. "I have always wanted to do this."

A girl in a mini skirt passes close to Thabang and her lips curve into a smile. Women of different shapes and sizes are walking around looking bored. Some are chewing gum recklessly.

One tall and dark woman looks at me with large confident eyes. She tosses her weave this way and that. Her luscious lips are covered in lipstick. "I am Candy," she offers her hand.

"Victor." I take her limp bony hand into my large one. I don't want to squeeze those brittle fingers.

"Do you want to have some fun Victor? I can make you happy. I can make your day unforgettable. You look stressed and I have the tonic for stress. So, what do you say?"

Her artificial eye-lashes flutter. They look like they don't belong to her beautiful eyes. Her strawberry lips look like she could kiss a man into a stupor. Candy looks deep into my eyes. Her eyes look like they can undress me on the spot. I have always wondered how some women manage to have that kind of effect on men. They seem to possess some kind of magic that stirs everything inside a man.

"Fun? No. No fun for me. We are here for the show," I reply.

"Come on dude, why watch when you can have me to yourself? Besides, the strip show only starts in the afternoon. Nobody watches so early. What? Are you a virgin? Stop being so stiff man. I can make you happy." She reveals a perfect set of white teeth..

My cellular phone vibrates and startles me and I press the button.

“Victor, look, we need to talk about what happened. I have meetings all day. Can you pop in tomorrow? In fact, the job is still yours. You can come back whenever you want. I have to explain something to you,” says Ms Modise.

“Thank you, I will come tomorrow” I reply.

She hesitates before disconnecting the call.

Come to think of it, I spend too much time with my boss. I do everything that she requires. I am always there for her and I thought our relationship was based on mutual respect. I didn't know that she could be so nasty. She behaves like she owns me. I mean, it is not like she has married me or anything. I earn my salary and the extra service that I provide, is supposed to put us on an equal footing. She cannot treat me like a sex slave. I didn't ask for it. She is the one who initiated everything. I just wanted to earn a living. I just hate the uncertainty. I don't remember us ever talking about being in a relationship. I see myself as an employee who goes the extra mile for his employer.' The least she can do is reward me by treating me with respect. She is not supposed to behave like she owns me. Does she own me? No damn way! We are all beneficiaries in this arrangement. I was just happy to get my job back. It will be uncomfortable at first. She said hurtful things to me I don't know if I will be as free with her like I used to be.

I moved to Johannesburg over three years ago. My dream was to find a job as a chef or some form of training, but I did not succeed. There was too much competition and many qualified people struggled to find jobs. Another option was to go back to Thaba-Nchu and continue to do odd gardening jobs. This option didn't appeal to me much. I needed a regular income. Gardening jobs are fun and flexible, but I could not rely on the little salary that I was getting. All the young people were moving to Johannesburg. Some were getting great opportunities and the others settled for what they could get.

Realising that I was competing with well qualified job-seekers, I decided to look for a job as a gardener. I used to work as one when I was in Thaba-Nchu and I was good at it. As there are not many residential areas in the city centre, I decided to try my luck in the suburbs. I went to Observatory and the first house I went to was my lucky charm. A tall ebony woman with bongo locks and dressed in a Nike tracksuit opened the door. Her face was pleasant, but doubt set in when my eyes met hers. Her body was well-sculpted. She could be either a marathon-runner or a regular gym member. Her dark red lips curved into a pleasant smile and she greeted me in Sesotho.

My knees knocked inside my pants and I thought my vocal cords would be paralysed by her beauty. I couldn't blabber nonsense in front of a beautiful woman. I hadn't been paying much attention to women because the ones back home were only interested in men who had money. I didn't fall into that category. I greeted her in the same language. This warmed me inside because many people from my hometown, who worked in Johannesburg, would return to their homes speaking isiZulu. It was great to hear someone speak Sesotho so well.

"So, where do you come from Victor? Do you know anything about gardening?" asked Ms Modise as she switched on the kettle.

"I have basic knowledge about gardening ma'am. I also read books on the subject" I replied, thinking that I had blown my chances of getting a job.

"*Hm*, that is good. Do you have other skills?" Her face softened into a smile.

"Skills? Uhm, I can cook and I can keep the house clean. I had to learn all of that because I am the first born child in the family. My mother had to work and I am the one who took care of my siblings".

"The job is yours" said Ms Modise.

"Thank you, thank you very much ma'am." I smiled.

She told me there was a cottage at the back that needed a lot of work, but that I could stay in it if I liked. She added that she invited colleagues for meals from time to time and that she might need me to help out with that.

"But I need to see that you can cook and clean first". Her eyes were teasing.

For the three years that I worked for Ms Modise, everything was fine. There was mutual respect and I wanted things to stay that way for as long as I was in Joburg. Besides being a domestic worker and gardener, I had given her foot massages and she liked it when I ran my dreadlocks on her skin. We have had many stolen and special moments together, and sometimes it seemed she got jealous when I went out with my friend. It was not like we have been lovers or anything. I provided a service where needed.

One night during one of our 'stolen massage moments,' Ms Modise told me that she would make me Mr Modise. She had had too much to drink that night and I was not sure if she was planning to propose marriage or not. I had heard that some women in Johannesburg sometimes gave their

boyfriends money so that they could pay *lobola* to the girl's parents. This happened when the man did not earn as much money as the woman did.

I didn't know if I would ever become one of those men. To be honest, I had grown so attached to my boss and sometimes when her male colleagues visited her I used to feel like they were more than colleagues. I used to be upset just watching her chatting to her colleagues. I often called myself to order, thinking I was fortunate enough to have her as a boss and that I should not take anything for granted. It is indeed difficult to tell whether a successful woman is genuinely interested in a less successful man. I had intelligent conversations with her and sometimes she raised her eyebrows when I showed off some of my knowledge.

On the following afternoon, I walked to my boss' home. I didn't have all my belongings with me. I had to play it safe. I had a backpack with a few of my belongings in it. I had to make sure not to upset her in any way. There papers and plastics that were trapped on the wall. I made a mental note to clean the front of the yard as soon as I got my job back. That yard is my pride and I like to see things the same way I left them. Besides being invited back to the house, I still thought that I might be out of a job. I had contact details for a place at Arts on Main. One restaurant was looking for a scullery. I didn't mind washing dishes for a while. I was willing to use that as a stepping stone to realise my dream of becoming a chef. In the past, i was too relaxed. I didn't think that I would be kicked out like a dog one day.

As of Thabang, I have to make sure that he doesn't cause more trouble for me.

She may have seen me approaching the front door. I was about to knock when the door opened. Ms Modise was standing there in her tracksuit and a beautiful smile.

"I have a proposition for you," She says.

"Proposition? What proposition?" I ask.

"Move into the house and let's see what happens next".

Well, that threw me off. I don't know what changed her mind about me. Sharing the same space with a person can be tricky. I made a mental note to be careful when I'm around the boss.

Talking from the grave- *the dream*

Some people believe that the dead have a way of connecting with people who are alive. Not everyone believes in this.

Gaoretelelwe is one of the people who does not believe in the myths, but he had a recurring dream. In the dream:

The mourners gasped as Gaoretelelwe stumbled and nearly fell into a newly dug grave. He cursed under his breath and made his way to the other gravesite where he was to address the mourners. “The Leepile family would like to thank you all for your support and being our pillar of strength during this trying time. Our deceased mother will rest in peace knowing that many people cared for her family. Please join us at the family home for refreshments”.

All those who witnessed Gaoretelelwe fall into the empty grave, began to talk animatedly in low tones. Some men reached out to him, careful not to fall into the gaping grave. It is a well-known fact or myth that when a person falls into an open grave, that signifies that he or she will die soon. Many people especially elders, are careful when they are at the gravesite. People believe that the spirits of the dead roam the graveyard looking for culprits.

Grave-diggers do their work with utmost respect and they always make sure that no accidents happen while they are digging the grave. They all know that when you fall into an open grave, you live with the dark cloud of death hovering over your life. Now, everyone was surprised to see the city man not concerned or shocked when he fell into an open grave.

Gaoretelelwe turned and missed a step again. He managed to get composure and did not notice that he was walking right into another open grave. His heart almost missed a beat as he landed inside a freshly dug grave. “Jesus Christ, can’t a person walk without by tripped by an open grave?” he said as the startled mourners looked on.

One of the mourners said. “Your grandmother wants to take you along.” Gaoretelelwe did not hear that part. He was shaking visibly. He reached for a cigarette and lit one, forgetting that he was still in a cemetery.

Mourners were visibly shocked. He walked on, then stumbled and fell into another grave! This time the priest and other men helped him out. “Son, the dead are trying to tell you something” proclaimed the priest.

“You know pastor, I am sick and tired of hearing about the dead. I have had enough of this graveyard. You people should make this bigger so that there is enough space between the graves. I just want to go home and clean up”. Said Gaoretelelwe . “I can’t even get a cigarette out here!” he shouted and walked to his car. His wife, Keabetswe followed carefully as she tried to keep her high-heeled shoes for getting dust. “Honey, what happened back there? You seemed unsteady. Did you have anything to drink?”

“Shut up woman. What do you take me for? Do you think I can have a drink at six in the morning? You know that the funeral started early and I couldn’t have had a drink even if I wanted to. Woman, don’t dare start with me. I’m not the one who takes beer for breakfast”. Gaoretelelwe exploded.

“Aw papa, I’m not fighting. I’m just worried about what happened back there. They say it is a bad omen when you fall into an open grave”. Keneilwe replied in a conciliatory tone.

“I should have stayed away from that funeral. That witch has it in for me. If she thinks that I will curl up and die then she has another think coming. She told me not to go to her funeral and I bet all those accidents were her way of telling me to stay away. Well, I here I am. Her tricks won’t work on me. I’m glad she is dead. At least I don’t have to deal with her nonsense. She was a control freak and wanted everyone to follow her instructions. She failed to live up to her dreams when she was younger and she wanted to live out her dreams through us. My life would have been better if I was not related to her. She is dead now and won’t touch me. Besides, I don’t believe in these myths”. He opened the cubby hole and found a packet of cigarettes.

“Don’t worry papa. You are the only one who is highly educated and successful in the family. did you say that mama Leepile, your granny, forbade you to go to her funeral? That is shocking. What did you do to upset her? Anyway, it is over now. She is gone and we have to respect the dead. I think you should have stayed home”. Keabetswe told her husband who was smoking a cigarette with a shaky hand.

“*Hee* man, that is nonsense. We had a disagreement and she told me not to go to her funeral. I didn’t think that she would die so soon after our fight. Anyway, who forbids anyone to go to a funeral? That is madness! Come, let us go home. I have had enough open graves to last me a lifetime.” Gaoretelelwe started his car. Keabetswe sat next to him with a worried look.

“Check under your seat, there should be a bottle of whiskey and some juice. Pour me some. I want to wipe this day out of my life” Gaoretelelwe told his wife.

“But I thought we are still going to the funeral home.”

Gaoretelelwe gave his wife a murderous look. “Woman, shut up and give me a drink!”

“I am done with this family and their witchcraft. I am driving straight to my house. It will be too soon if I ever see them again.”

Keabetswe poured the drink despite knowing it was the wrong thing to do. .

Gaoretelelwe gulped it down and demanded another.

“Honey, you are driving. You can’t have so much to drink” protested Keabetswe.

“Hey, listen to me, you are not the one who fell into two empty graves. I have had enough of graves. Now stop preaching and give me that drink.” He accelerated the car.

“Ok, I will give it to you, but please slow down. We are in a residential area.”

“I don’t care. I will drive as I like.” He grabbed the second drink and swallowed it one swig.

“Another one!”

A police car slowed down next to them and asked them to pull over.

“Good heavens! Can my day get worse than this?” he exclaimed as he opened the driver’s door.

“Hello sir. May I have your license please? You skipped a red robot. You are endangering lives of other road users.” The policeman wrote down the car registration and waited .

“Do you know who I am? I own this village! You will not tell me that I missed a robot. I drive the way I like.” He burped and nearly fell.

The officer fetched a breathalyser and asked him to breathe into it.

“What? Are you mad? Look man, I have had a day from hell. All I want is to go home and rest. My grandmother is dead for chrissake!” He got back into his car.

The policeman opened the car door gently and said “Mr Leepile sir, you are under arrest”.

“Do you know who I am? I will make sure that you never work anywhere in this country. This is harassment. I’m a law-abiding citizen. I will not let you arrest me for nonsense. I am a respected member of this village. I will show!”

“We know who you are mr Leepile. We just want to do our work. You have to come with us to the police station sir. You are the one who introduced zero tolerance in the police department.

You told us to put all law-breakers behind bars. You broke the law sir and you have to come with us". Said the scrawny policeman.

By then, curious people who were passing nearby, were slowing down to listen to the conversation. Someone took pictures.

"Hee monna, nobody embarrasses me and gets away with it. You will regret this. No member of the family will ever get a job in this village. No one is going to be arrested here. Go on. Go and look for real criminals in taverns and leave me in peace. This is an order. Do you hear me?" Gaoretelelwe fumed.

The policeman hesitated for a moment. He didn't know whether to tackle this tall man or drive away. But then, he conceded defeat. He walked to the police van and sat there contemplated his next move.

Gaoretelelwe shifted uncomfortably in his bed. his nightclothes were covered in sweat. He touched himself and was happy that he was alive. The dream worried him. It was like watching a movie on the big screen. He was confused. *This can't be. Was that a dream? We buried my grandmother ten years ago. Why did I dream about her funeral?* He wondered.

He got up to go and make some tea. He wondered about the dream. Everything was so clear. "How could I have a dream that is so clear?" He asked himself.

Don't eat my books

It was just after the Christmas holidays and everyone was waiting for the matric results. I was also waiting for my results. My nerves just couldn't take the suspense. I studied hard to ensure that I get good results. There were days where I felt confident that I would make it, but other days were bleak and I had nightmares about my results. My biggest fear was to repeat a class. I had never repeated a class and somehow, I thought that I would make it to tertiary without ever failing a class at school. Relatives were also curious to see my results. They often asked me about the results. This increased my anxiety and the pressure. Looking back to that time, I feel that as a bursary recipient, I had to confirm that the funder did not make a mistake by funding my studies. Anyway, I could not tell my family about my biggest fears. With all that commotion going on inside me, I put up a brave face even though I had weak moments.

As the only one in my immediate family to go to school until matric, I felt the pressure on me. What happened afterwards, I cannot remember.

According to my mother and elder sister I went berserk one evening. Apparently, I was fighting shadows and screaming my lungs out. They told me that I howled insults at them. My sister said I screamed out over a thousand swearwords without repeating a single one.

An ambulance was called and the men struggled to restrain me. They drove to the Baragwanath hospital where they kept me isolated.

Seeing that my brain had masked off the incidents of that day, I accepted whatever I was told by my family. What I do remember is that as I waited for my matric results I sometimes forgot to breathe. I could not tell anyone my fears for fear of being accused of not having paid attention to my school work.

After my mental breakdown I was kept in the hospital for what seemed like eternity. The doctors pumped me with tablets and injections on the worst days. When I asked them why I was being given so much medication, they just told me that it was for my own good. I hated taking all that medication. I felt like it was my body and I had the right to know what I was being treated for.

I was eventually discharged from the hospital. What happened at home, left a lot to be desired. Everyone was suddenly tiptoeing around me and they tried hard not to upset me. The one thing that they were not aware of is that the tiptoeing frustrated me. Why couldn't they treat me like a normal person. I mean, it is not like I am mad or anything. Nonetheless, I bottled up those emotions and hoped that I would get the chance to tell them that they didn't have to tiptoe around me. After all, I felt fine. They didn't have to search for the 'right things' to say when they were around me. Like in many families, the relatives heard about the hospital episode. Now, being

unable to conceal their curiosity, they came to visit. I know that it was not out of concern for my well-being. They just wanted to see how mad I was.

As of my mother, I realised that my hospitalization unsettled her. At times, when I was not looking, I would feel her staring at me. Who knows, maybe she was searching for the madness bug. She may have been right. No parent wants to have a mad child. It would have been good if she discussed her fears with my father, but I don't think she did. Instead, I endured the most frustrating moments when she over-reacted when I made jokes. It was written all over her face that she thought that I had been attacked by the 'episode'. The truth is that there were no more episodes. I was fine after being overloaded with tablets that gave me indigestion. I still believed that it was a case of mistaken identity. They had misdiagnosed and mistreated me. I felt fine but everyone around me saw a lunatic. I on the other hand, felt like they were the lunatics. This is based on their reactions when they saw me reading a book. They tried to keep me from my books and I could not explain to them that books were and are the only thing that was keeping me sane. During those years, there were many people who were sent to mental institutions for mental breakdown. Apparently, most of those people were either too intelligent or were well-educated. I guess that is what happens when you don't have a matriculant in the family.

One night, I overheard my mother talking on the phone: "this matric thing is driving her mad. She has been in hospital for three days and I don't know if she is healed. I was thinking of going the traditional route. What if she loses it again and kills us all? Florrie, I am telling you. This person is so strong. The two ambulance men who took her to hospital could not restrain her. She was stronger than both of them. I think she has been bewitched".

I did not hear the other part of the conversation but then I heard my mother say "Ja, that is good. Please tell me when that man from Kroonstad comes so that he can work on her."

I drifted off to sleep wondering what my mother and her friend were plotting. I decided to focus on my matric results. They would be released on the following day. I woke up at three in the morning to get some water. My mother followed me to the kitchen; "You can't go on like this. You need to get some sleep. It is ok if you don't pass your matric. You won't be the first one to fail."

"Yes ma, I am not worried about the results. I had a *nagmerrie*. I just need water to take the tablets from the hospital." I told my mother.

She hovered around the kitchen. I don't think she was doing anything important. I saw a rat on the floor. I picked it up with its tail and threw it in the dustbin. My mother was still watching me.

“Let’s have some Milo with hot milk. It will help you relax. I have some of those Marshmallows that you like too. You can have them with your Milo.” My mother went to her bedroom.

I dashed to the dustbin and retrieved the dead rat. I placed it on a dustpan and poured methylated spirits on it. I opened the kitchen door, put the dustpan down and set it alight. My mother came to the kitchen and looked around. “What is that smell?” She asked.

“Nothing,” I replied.

My mother opened the kitchen door and screamed and jumped on top of the nearby chair. The burning rat flew past the chair and her screaming was amplified. She was shaking like a leaf. I suppressed the laughter that threatened to explode inside me. I could not believe that such a large woman could be so agile. The fact that she climbed a chair made me wonder. This strong woman has never showed any fear.

I remember one day, some thugs tried to grab her bag while we were walking in the township. As a young girl then, I was scared witless. I thought that the thug was going to kill us right there. I held on to my mother’s hand and she looked the thug deep in the eye and said; “you *tsotsis* are lazy. Do you think you can take my money just like that? I will kill you with my bare hands. The thug tried to grab my mother’s handbag but she had a tight grip on it. The man brandished a blunt-looking knife but my mother was unfazed. She dared the thug to stab her. For a moment, there was confusion on the face of the thug and my mother hit him with the back of her hand. The thug fell to the ground dizzied. He stood up and ran away as if he was being chased by bunch of township dogs. From that day onwards, I boasted about how strong my mother was. I also made sure that I did not get on the wrong side of her. Everyone knows that my mother is brave and would never walk away from a fright. That is the truth that I knew when I was growing up.

Now, looking at her shaking like a leaf, surprised me. That is the one side of her that I had never witnessed.

“Ben! Ben, look what your child has done”. My mother called out to my father. She was not going to leave her ‘safe spot.

My father shuffled out of the bedroom fastening the over-sized pink dressing gown. He looked questioningly at my mother who was pointing towards the bookshelf with a shaking finger. I suppressed the laughter. I had never seen both my parents like that.” *Where is the video recorder when you need it.* I thought to myself.

Lazily, my father took the broom that was nearby and ran it under the bookshelf. “It is not dead”. He said with a calm voice. The thing is not burning. It is just the flame on its fur. It won’t die.”

“What? You have to get it out. It will burn my house down”. My mother shrieked. She remained on the chair and was trying to cover her bare legs with my father’s ill-fitting dressing gown. Her massive hips created a big gap in the gown. I watched her as one plastic curl fell from her hair. She picked it up and threw a murderous look towards me.

“*Nunu*, it’s ok. You can get off from the chair now. The rat won’t come out. There are too many books there too. You can’t spend the whole morning on that chair. Get your Milo and we will wait for the shops to open. The results are coming out today remember?” My father smiled weakly.

My mother got off the chair and looked at me again. “Let’s go to the filling station to get the paper now before she burns down my house”. She went to her bedroom and came back wearing her day clothes with keys to the *bakkie* in her hand. My father took the keys and went out. I stayed in the kitchen and laughed until tears ran on my cheeks. I could not go back to sleep. I had to wait for my matric results. I sat on the couch and lazily paged through an old magazine. The events of that morning were running through my head. I wished I could call a friend and tell her about the drama in my home.

It is a good thing that a speed dial was not in operation during those days. Otherwise, my mother would have called the ambulance to come and take me to the hospital. I must say, I was surprised that she didn’t call them on that day. The reason for my surprise is that since I was discharged from the hospital, she had been on edge. She watched me like a hawk. I was even excluded from cooking duties. I forgot meat on the stove one afternoon and I found it burning when I returned. That was an honest mistake but my mother didn’t see it that way. She thought that I wanted to burn down her precious house. Can you imagine living with the dark cloud of madness in your life? Well, I was subjected to that life.

I waited for my parents to come back with the newspaper so that I can see the results. The waiting suffocated me and I was out of breath for a moment. Suddenly, there was some scratching coming from the bookshelf. I did not bother to look. The scratching continued and it irritated me. I took the broom and hit the bookshelf. The scratching stopped. I went back to reading my magazine and my parents finally came back.

“Your name is in the paper.” My mother flung the paper towards me. I opened and checked the sections and finally spotted my name. My mother was right. I got the exemption! The one thing that worried me is that neither of my parents said anything about me having passed the big exams. Anyway, it was time for me to work on the next surprise for my family. A good man offered to pay for my tertiary education. I had the acceptance letter from the university and I had not told my parents about it. Maybe it was a good thing. My mother would blow a gasket if she knew that I planned to go to university.

Well, what do you know? I was going to be the first person in my immediate family, to go to university. Now, I was going to sit back and look at their reaction when they learned that I was going to university. I know that my mother would have wanted me to be a secretary at some company, but I hated to typed endless documents. The truth is, I hate routine!

Now that the news about my matric results faded into oblivion, I fell back into the routine of living under the same roof as the people who were convinced that I’m a nutcase.

The rat whose fur I dozed with methylated spirits, reappeared. It was the bravest rat I have ever seen.

Kaffirmeid

This morning, the *dorpie* of Riverton is still asleep as I enter the cemetery. I'm the only one visiting the dead. While kneeling down at *ouma*'s headstone, I feel a shadow disappearing in between the tombstone from the corner of my eye. I could swear that there was nobody when I walked in. Maybe it is a tomb-raider. They know that people bring goodies for the dead, so they help themselves to them.

At the cemetery, I tell *ouma* about my promotion at work and the crush I have on my boss. His hair is plaited into a beautiful singlet He is everything that a woman could want. My conversation is interrupted by a shadow that darkens *ouma*'s headstone. It is too late for me to escape.

Suddenly, a large hand covers my mouth. There is no time to do anything. I remain still and wait for a slap or anything. Nothing happens. Instead, the attacker's other hand touch my bra-less breast. *He is looking for a fight*, I tell myself. Then, I get it. That unmistakable smell! I would recognise it from anywhere. He tries to push me further to the ground, but my hands grip *ouma*'s headstone. He tries to kick my hands off the headstone but I hold on. There is hesitation for a split second as he looks around. I remain still and wait for his next move. His hand leaves my mouth for a moment. I scream my lungs out. He slaps me across the face before covering my mouth again. My half-open mouth takes in his pinkie and I bite with all my might.

As my teeth dig deeper into his finger, he screams. "*Eina! Jy byt my jou gemors.*"

The birds that have been singing and building nests at the nearby trees watch in horror as the assailant tries to push me to the ground. The dogs that were barking from a distance fall silent too. I resolve to bite this hand as hard as I can. I don't care if I break a tooth or not.

He manages to rip his hand from my mouth and his shadow vanishes among the nearby tombs.

"*Jou gat.*" I scream. My body gets paralysed at the sight of the bloody bitten finger that falls on my lap. '*Shit!*

My empty stomach churns at the ghastly sight. *What on earth?* The dirty brown sock is lying nearby.

By now, all the functions of my body feel accelerated and locked at the same time. I look around to see if anyone has witnessed the incident. There is no one around. The pins and needles cripple my legs momentarily because I've been pinned on the same spot for a while. I touch the finger and it feels like a newly hatched bird in my hand. *There is no way I will allow him to get it sewn back.* He started it.

Riverton is getting rough. I used to come to come here without fearing anything. Now someone attacks me in the cemetery? What happened to respect for the dead?

I rinse my mouth at a nearby tap. The water does not wash out the taste of Lifebuoy from his hand and now the scent of his blood assaults my nostrils.

Baile, *ouma's* neighbour, is over thirty and still lives with his parents. He does not have friends of his age. His mother cooks and does his laundry for him. He is a casual employee at the Riverton post office. Nobody knows if he has a girlfriend or not. Some people say that he nearly became an albino because of his sandy hair and light complexion. Baile wears clothes that are bought by his mother from the jumble sale. Sometimes, he wears hand-knitted jerseys that are either too big or too small. He does not talk much, but there is always something sinister in his eyes.

When he is not sitting on the *stoep*, he goes to funerals and weddings with his mother. He sits with men, drinking the traditional brew.

Every other day, Baile stands in front of his mud-hut backroom with a piece of broken mirror, shaving his sandy beard using foam from Lifebuoy soap. He doesn't use Old Spice like the other men. Lifebuoy is strong and its smell stays on the body for a long time.

My elder sister notices the blood-splattered t-shirt and skirt when I come through the gate. As always, a dishtowel hangs over her shoulder.

"What happened? I thought you were visiting the dead. Did you fight a ghost? Where did that blood come from?" she asks without much interest.

"It is just a nosebleed." I reply.

"Tell me *Kaffirmeid* I won't bite" she says.

Hearing the name *Kaffirmeid* aggravates me. The pent-up anger threatens to burst my arteries. She has no right to call me that. My late *oupa* is the only person who was allowed to call me *Kaffirmeid*. I accepted the name because he made it sound like he was calling me 'Princess.'

“I will slap that name out of your mouth. I told you it’s nothing. Why don’t you mind your business? *Ek skop jou stikkend.*”

“*Hei votsek!*” just try it.” She is ready to pounce.

“Touch me *en jy sal jou ma sien,*” I scream.

“*Jy’ s steeds maal.* If you show me my mother, you will see yours too.” She slaps my arm to prove a point.

“*Hey los my uit!*”

The salty and rusty taste of his blood in my mouth is pervasive. My mouth foams and all I need to do is to vomit. I struggle to keep it in the mouth because it will raise suspicions at home.

Next to *ouma’s* neatly made-up bed, there is a sewing kit. On opening the box, I find a small empty tin and slip the pinkie in it. The good thing is that the assailant is not a lizard. His bitten finger won’t grow back.

I brush my mouth but cannot get the taste of his blood out. *I will never eat meat again.*

Later on, Baile, sits on the *stoep* with a heavily bandaged hand. He is wearing a sling made out of his mother’s black pantyhose. And his eyes poke holes in my back and bum while I carry out the household chores. There is a mask of rage crossed with unadulterated terror about him.

I carry on with my chores and wait for his mother to come for the pinkie. My only fear is that the incident might create a rift between the two families. Baile’s mother has known my late grandmother for a long time. They are more like relatives. They share whatever they can.

That evening, the smell of the fried ox liver brings back the taste of the blood. I fly to the outdoor pit lavatory and everyone hears what happens there. When I’m done, I brush my teeth for the umpteenth time and join them in the kitchen. I ignore the knowing looks and continued with my pap and milk dinner.

For a while, I wait for anyone to say something about ‘my condition’, but nobody is brave to ask. Their eyes focus on my breast and belly when I take a bath or get dressed.

Ten days after the attack, I leave Riverton for Klerksdorp where I live and work. He has all the time to come and demand his pinkie, but he doesn't. I dig a grave and bury it. Burying the finger does not ease the anger and hatred that I feel towards the attacker. I spend days wondering if he will ever ask me for his finger but he doesn't. Even when I go home for holidays, Baile looks at me as if he wants to say something.

Waiting for the *kufar*

The multi-coloured woven thin belt that is commonly known as *intambo*, feels warm around Lucas' waist. That means no harm will come to him. The belt acts as a thermometer that gauges the presence or level of danger.

He peeps out the window of their rented back room to look at the setting sun. They will drive to her girlfriend's home in Klipspruit West when the time is right.

His beautiful young girlfriend, Safia clears the queen bed of clothes and unnecessary things. She worries about Lucas' safety. Her father's words echo in her head. "*don't bring that kufar to my house again. You'll be sorry if you do. You are a Muslim girl and should marry a good Muslim man. Have you forgotten the lessons from the Kur'an? Brother Hamid wants to marry you.*"

Safia brushes an involuntary tear from her cheek and looks at the man standing by the window. She loves him even though her father calls him a non-believer (*kufar*). Throughout her teenage and early adult life, she wanted to be married. She wanted to have children with the man that she loves and now that she found him, she was angry that her mother didn't like her man. Unfortunately, in life, things don't always work out the way you want them to. It was on her 23rd birthday when she had an argument with her mother. "Safia, you are a woman now. It is time for you to have your own family. I know that you help us with requirements for the house when you can. Brother Hamid wants to take you as his second wife. You know him and he loves you very much. Don't give me the answer now. Go and think about it and let me know. The brother will provide well for you. Did you see his house in Lenasia?" Bibi had smiled.

"What? Ma are you serious? The man is old enough to be my grandfather. He is even older than you. Do you think I can marry him? These are modern times ma. You don't go around arranging marriages for people. Women can choose the partners that they want to spend the rest of their lives with. I will not marry him". Safia had replied.

"Listen young lady, this is my house and you will do as you are told. If you don't like it, then, leave". Said Bibi.

Safia did not waste any time. She threw a few of her belongings in a bag and left.

She takes his warm hand and places it to her heart.

"We don't have to go there today. It is *Juma*. Maybe my father got back-up from the *Masjied*. No one knows what my father plans to do. He is a quiet man but when he says he doesn't want something, he means it."

“I’m not afraid. We will get your stuff and no one will touch me.”

“Always stubborn!” she throws up her hands in defeat.

“Baby, it is not yet time for me to die. Your father will wait a million years before he can touch me!”

“You are nuts! He can get someone to beat you up.”

“I’m not afraid.”

It is on times like these when Safia wishes she had some magic to make people listen to her advice.

She loves Lucas and is not about to dump him because her mother thinks he is the wrong man for her, She is not bothered by her mother’s theory.

Back in Klipspruit West, men in *kurtas* stand in front of house number 37. They watch the main road intently. Underneath each man’s *kurta*, there is an assortment of weapons such as *bobbejan* spanner, butcher knives, *pangas*, switchblades, 9mm para and one scorpion that under Safia’s father’s white *kurta*.

Some of the men say silent *dua*’s. The leader has a *subha* (Prayer beads) wrapped around his hand. His name is Hamid and he towers over most brothers. His eyes are bloodshot and look like they can only be cleaned by drops of fresh milk in them.

Inside house number 37, the kitchen has the aroma of cinnamon, garlic-ginger and other spices. Fatima chops vegetables and steals glances at the men through the kitchen window. She is cooking lamb *breyani* with her mother’s biggest pot. She also makes *roti* for those who might need seconds. The lovely aroma of the spices did not make her smile like she usually does. Suddenly, a cloud of worry quiver over her head. *I wish I could persuade them to stay away from this house.* She thinks.

Earlier on, Fatima had called Safia, her elder sister to tell her about their father’s plan.

“They are waiting for you. I think they want to beat Lucas up. Don’t come in today. They are camping outside the yard.” Fatima said in a half-whisper.

“I know. Papa doesn’t want me to marry a *kufar*. Girl, I’m tired of being told what to do. I love Lucas and he loves me. When I converted to their religion, I didn’t think that it will take away my individuality. Now, we live like prisoners. We are coming to get my clothes. We will fight if we have to.” Safia had told her terrified sister.

“Look, things are bad. Lucas can’t fight these men. They have weapons and they won’t stop until they see his last drop of blood soaking the soil. They mean business. Wait for the dust to settle.”

“No ways. I’ve been obedient for too long. I’ll show them a thing or two. I’m twenty five years old. I know what I want. They can’t force me to become the second wife to some grey-haired man who is a chain-smoker.”

“What! Do they want you to marry Hamid. That’s gross!”

“They will find a husband for you soon. Good luck. Save some *breyani* for me. I’ll see you later.”

Fatima wishes that she could help her older sister somehow. Even though they are not the best of friends, she doesn’t want anyone to harm her.

Bibi, their mother, puts final touches to the wedding dress that she has been sewing all week. She listened in on the conversation between her two daughters.

Safia has always been her mother’s favourite child. She is beautiful and used to be obedient. Now, as her mother sits on the over-stuffed maroon sofa, she wonders if she will ever get her daughter’s affection and respect again.

On the other hand, there is too much anger harboured in her chest but she decided to keep it there.

She turns the TV off when she hears the *azan* (call for prayer). They look at each other and wonder if the men will abandon their posts to come into the house for *maghrib*.

The men take turns to go into the bathroom for ablution. When they are done, they go into the spare bedroom perform *maghrib*.

“He is here.” Fatima says when she sees the red Golf parking in front of the flat.

“He WILL get what he wants. I told him never to set foot near my daughter.” Bibi says as she looks out the window.

Lucas doesn't notice the cursory look that comes from aunty Bibi. His eyes sweep the area for possible danger.

When he is satisfied, he looks up and waves at his future mother-in-law. Bibi's fiery eyes carry waves of hatred. For a moment, she wonders if she is doing the right thing. But then, feels strong because her eldest and favourite daughter will not marry the *kufar*. It is just a matter of time...

Inside the house, Safia looks at her mother for a moment. “*Asalaamualaikum*,” she greets.

“Hmmm,” replies Bibi.

“Mommy, I'm here for my stuff. We are going to Durban for the weekend. Lucas has booked us into a hotel. You should speak to him sometime. He is a good person.” Safia smiles.

“Good person my foot! I don't like that boy. He is too old for you. Why can't you date someone your age. I don't know what you see in him. He will get you pregnant and leave you. I know his type.”

“Mommy, Lucas loves me and I love him.”

“Safia, forget about that rubbish and come back home. Your father wants to talk to you.” Says Bibi.

“I'll call him later ma. We are busy now”.

“This is what I'm talking about. He stole you from us. Do you think that he will be able to provide for? You are the only one who has a regular income there. The only thing that he does is to run around telling people to go on strike. He claims to represent the workers but he doesn't have a job himself. He can't look after himself. What will happen when you fall pregnant? Will he take care of his child? You know, we are trying hard to live a better life. We follow the *Kuran's* instructions and you want to destroy that foundation. We are striving towards a pure life and you just want to soil it. How selfish can you be? That is not the way we raised you. You were supposed to do better than this. Tell that rascal never to come here again.”

“Mommy, I'm going now.” Safia runs to the car and gets in.

“You see, I told you that nothing will happen to me. I'm right next to you.” Lucas smiles.

“Lucas, we have to get out of here. They are praying and will be done soon.”

The relaxed Lucas gets out of his car. He saunters to the two cars that are parked opposite the house and puts stones behind the front wheel of each car. When he is done, he feels the *intambo* around his waist.

Back at his car, he looks at the window where Bibi had been standing. She is still there. Lucas waves with an exaggerated nod. He remains in the car and watches the front door.

The heir

Frank's whole body was aching and he never felt so alone. Spending most of his time with his drunken friends, he had not been home for months. Now, lying on a hospital bed, he thought of his beautiful wife Esther.

Looking at the stump where his leg used to be, he winced from the never-ending pain. He had never thought that he would become physically disabled one day. Now, in his hour of need, his friends had deserted him. His only hope was his family, the wife he had rejected when she failed to bear him sons. How could she know that it was his feeling of failure that had driven them apart? That he could no longer face the cruel reality that she was achieving more than he was? He shuddered when he thought back to that fateful night when one of his drunken friends suggested that they should all go to a *shebeen* in his station wagon.

The car radio was loud as they drove through the narrow streets of the township, some of them singing along. At a stop street, their driver tried to steer the car away from a truck that was hurtling towards them, but he was too drunk to do so. There was a screeching of tyres and a tremendous crash. Frank still heard it in his head. Their driver died instantly. All the passengers were seriously injured. Frank suffered the worst because he was seated in the front seat. His mangled body was rushed to hospital where he was in a coma for two days. When he finally came to, he was confused. The nurses told him what happened, but he tried to force it out of his mind, thinking instead of how Esther had looked when first they met.

It was five years ago. As the painkillers kicked in, he regained that time. A time before his feelings of guilt and failure had taken hold. The hospital faded into a dim blur as the colour and magic of the past returned...

They were living in Jan Kempdorp. Esther was a matron at the local hospital where Frank worked as a clerk. He loved her the minute he set eyes on her, but did not have the courage to tell her because of his position at work. Esther was a well-respected medical executive; he was a lowly-paid clerk. She was also different from the other matrons he had dealt with. She had a slim body

and was stunning in the uniform with its pleated pants. Everyone liked and respected her. She was friendly and caring. When Frank first entered her office, she was seated behind an oak desk with everything neatly in its place. The office smelled of fresh flowers.

"How are you Esther?"

"Hi Frankie, I'm well and you?" She smiled, sensing his uncertainty.

"Not bad."

After a moment's silence she asked, "Are you here for those files?"

"Y-yes we need to update them. Some people want medical treatment for free. We need to send out statements." He replied without taking his eyes off her.

As she opened the cabinet, he added hesitantly; "Esther, would you like to have a drink with me sometime?"

Looking up, she said "Yeah, sure. Let me know when you are ready."

"Good, thanks." His face lit up.

Unable to believe his luck, he walked briskly to the administration block whistling his favourite tune. "Hey Phil, you are not going to believe my luck". He seated himself on the desk. "She said 'yes', I just can't believe how easy it was."

"I told you a long time ago to talk to the lady but you were too chicken to make the move," Phil laughed.

"I'm going to make her happy. Watch me!"

As always, the My Love is Free shebeen on the corner of Mohapi Street was a hive of activity. Teachers from the local schools were unwinding with the aid of expensive liquor. It didn't matter if they had money or not. Most of them were accustomed to drinking and then paying later. There were off-duty policemen with super-shiny shoes and spotlessly clean khaki shirts. Frank

looked at his faded white shirt that often required invisible mending. It was his best shirt but he felt small when he looked at the clothes of the policemen. Uncertain, he sat at the table closest to the bar. He was disappointed when he did not find her as they had agreed. Looking at his watch, he realized that he was early for the appointment.

Moments later, she walked into the shebeen, looking taller than everyone. There was an air of confidence about her. Her high-heeled pencil sandals click-clacked as she walked towards the table. "You look beautiful as always. Can I get you something to drink?" he asked nervously.

"Yes please, orange juice."

He stood by the bar and his mouth watered as he looked at beer bottles that were sweating because they were ice-cold. He could use a refreshing beer.

Frank placed the drinks carefully on the plastic tablecloth.

"You wanted a beer but you didn't buy it." She looked him in the eye.

"Beer! No. I don't drink often. I'm fine with Coke." he lied unconvincingly.

Frank felt convinced that they would get along very well. "Please join my brother and me for supper tomorrow,." he almost pleaded.

"Sounds great. I have always wanted to be waited on by men." She smiled.

His face beamed with excitement when he saw his younger brother, Shadrack.

"We are going to have a guest for dinner tomorrow. Esther is joining us."

Shadrack was bewildered: "What! Are you crazy? The woman is from a rich family. What is she going to think of us? You know that rich people don't eat from poor people's homes."

"Relax brother, the lady is human. She will accept whatever we offer."

“*Haai*, she will laugh at us” said Shadrack.

“Wait and see. I met her at My love is Free and she didn’t have a problem.”

The evening was a success, but it ended quickly.

They had been going out together for a year when Frank proposed marriage to her. She accepted gladly, but her parents were opposed to the marriage. This was due to his occupation and family background. But she felt that Frank could make her happy and they went ahead with the wedding arrangements despite the objections.

They moved to shantytown which is the area where low-income group live. Their neighbour, was *mma* Molapo, a *sangoma* . Some initiates lived with her. At first, Esther couldn’t stand the noise of the drums which sounded during ungodly hours and at any time of the day.

She could afford to buy a house in the upmarket area where it is quieter, but, her husband could only afford a bond to buy in this area. The couple was blessed with a baby girl a year after their wedding. Frank was obsessed with having a son and he did not conceal his feelings of disappointment when his wife gave birth to a girl. He became increasingly distant and irritable.

Esther had never felt so helpless and alone: she desperately wanted to please her husband, but he had become a virtual stranger.

Falling pregnant for the second time, she prayed daily that she would be able to give a son to her husband. She walked to her neighbour’s home to ask for advice regarding her problem. *Mma*

Molapo gave her ash mixed with something that tasted salty. “You won’t go wrong with this one.” She had told her.

When little Lisa was born, something seemed to snap inside Frank. He began to drink liquor heavily, staying away for days on end.

Esther then stopped trying to please her ungrateful husband who treated her like a slave, instructing her to stay at home and look after the kids.

As her husband into a monster, she decided she had to do something to ensure that her children are cared for. It was not easy bringing up two children on a clerk's salary, especially when most of it was spent on cheap booze. One Friday, Frank staggered into the house, demanding money. She only had R10.00 which she was saving to buy milk for the baby. Although she handed him the money, he demanded more.

He swore at her and, for the first time in their married life, he beat her. It wouldn't be the last time she was forced to cower from him. From that day on the beatings and abuse did not stop. Only one good memory lingered.

Frank had arrived at the house with a freshly ironed shirt, holding a bar of chocolate. “You are beautiful. You know that.” He had kissed her.

That night, as they lay together after making love, she had felt a tremendous surge of hope. But he quickly slipped back to his drunken friends and bad ways.

Desperate for more money to feed the children, Esther started to sell home-made beer. Although it was against the law, she was forced to do it in order to survive. Her contempt for Frank grew.

Not only had he deserted her, she was also driven to running illegal business to support her family. She had been a respected matron, a woman who did her work with love and care.

Now she had to hide behind locked doors, fearing a raid. The heavy smell of yeast made her feel ill. As the beer brewed in the kitchen, its smell crept to every corner of the house.

Some mornings she would double up with nausea, not wanting to face the bubbling pots on the stove. She also felt her body changing. Months of suffering had worn deep lines on her face and she knew that she had gained weight. She longed to have a man's arms around her again, but she was embarrassed about the shape she was in. She felt fat and unattractive. One cold Friday evening, he staggered into the house with his friends. Swearing at her, he slapped her across the face and she fell to the floor.

She reached for an axe handle which they kept in the corner and hit him. She was about to strike again when the screams of her daughters stopped her. They were terrified. Esther ignored them, wanting to hurt Frank as much as she could. She dropped the axe handle beside her husband who was bleeding profusely and took the children to bed. Frank stumbled out the door. Esther despaired. To cope, she wrote a letter to Frank which she knew he would never receive.

It read: "I did not realize that by agreeing to have a drink with you on that very first day, I was building a living hell for myself. The worst part of it was when you led me to the altar, I was convinced that I had made the right decision, only to find that I was horribly wrong. Having you in my life has destroyed my sense of justice. I feel inferior and uncertain. The more I give, the more feel I am not giving enough. I'd hoped to be the perfect wife, but instead I feel like an old piece of furniture which is only there because the owner feels reluctant to get rid of it.

Deep down in her heart, Esther knew that Frank could not handle the fact that she was more successful than he was.

She wanted the best for her children and, if they could not have a father, at least they could be proud of their mother. That terrible night with Frank faded in her memory but she still wondered where he was.

Months later she heard a knock at the door. An icy hand of fear clutched her heart.

Two policemen were standing there when she opened.

“There was an accident. He is asking for you,” said the cop.

She was simultaneously enraged and heart-broken.

She thanked the policemen and closed the door behind them.

Gloria, one of her regular customers had overheard the conversation.

She made Esther sit down and looked her in the eye. "Are you going to take him back?"

"Gloria, right now, I'm in such a dilemma, my mind is racing. Esther turned to look at her daughters who were sitting on the carpet. "But my babies need a real father, not a man who can't bear the fact that he has daughters." Esther took some trouble getting ready to visit the hospital. Some trousers, which she made only a few weeks ago, were tight-fitting. She then decided to wear a loose-fitting dress.

As soon as she walked into the ward, Frank struggled to speak. "Please forgive me", he muttered. He looked totally helpless and broken.

"Take it easy Frankie." She took his hand. The doctors told me that you needed some rest. We will talk about other things when you are better". Standing there, looking at him, it was not easy for him to make a decision. There was not much to talk about: This man who used to be her husband was a stranger.

Gloria visited her. "Esther, you have suffered a lot. I wouldn't want to see you go through that pain all over again. Don't be too soft-hearted. Think about what you have endured for the past years. Is it worth taking a risk?"

Somehow, Esther knew that her friend was right.

She had been feeling ever more run down than usual over the past few weeks and made an appointment to see her doctor. Maybe a tonic would help her to think through the problem of Frank. A few days later, she bundled her daughters into the old station wagon car and drove to the hospital. The little girls were dressed in outfits she had sewn for them. On the way, they were very excited, but as they walked towards the building, they became quiet. They did not know what to expect from their father.

Looking at their father's bandaged face and pained smile, the little ones clambered onto his bed. He held out his arms to hug them. They smiled as they snuggled closer to him.

"Frank", Esther said, smoothing folds on her dress. "I have something to tell you."

Frank's eyes fell. His wife had never looked so beautiful: she was obviously happy in her new life and did not need him back in it. Yet he wished he could sweep her off her feet like he had done before he turned into a monster, but he was powerless.

"Frank," Esther whispered, "we're going to have a baby. My doctor told me yesterday that I'm three months pregnant."

Frank's eyes filled with tears.

He reached the bedside table and picked up a small box. He had been preparing for this moment. "Esther, will you marry me... again?" he asked shakily, taking out the cheap ring that meant so much to him. For some reason Esther felt that the tears which had been falling like rain would stop forever...

Soap on the floor

Residents of White City in Soweto were surprised to see the bark of trees adorned in lime, orange, yellow and purple cloths. These cloths served to direct people to house number 992C. In the middle of the yard a large white wall stood, making all the other houses look small.

Mma Lopang lived at house number 992C White City Jabavu. She had been a single parent all her life and had three grown daughters who had not married. She had often dreamt about being mother to a bride one day. Now, she would be able to chat to her neighbours with pride. Her daughter's wedding would be the talk of town for a long time to come. She walked tall and did very little in the kitchen. Women from her savings club were cooking and all she needed to do was get ready and make sure that her daughter Masello got to the church on time. *Mma* Lopang didn't pay much attention to the bride.

In the next room, Masello stared blankly at the white wall. She was oblivious to the noise outside. Women sang as more well-wishers came to number 992C. The letters from the Deneyville Maximum Security Prison were scattered on the bed and she read the poems that he sent while he was in prison. There were also birthday cards and Christmas cards. There was a beautiful picture of him standing with his niece and nephew. All these things had attracted Masello to this stranger. As pen pals they had set their relationship in motion.

She had committed herself to marrying Elvis Abrahams and was about to do so, despite the fact that she had experienced some serious doubts a few days earlier. As she sat now staring at the white wall her doubts grew, but there was no turning back. The door opened and *mma* Lopang walked in grinning from ear to ear.

“What's with the tears? You will spoil the make-up. What bride cries on her wedding day? I'm not returning the *lobola*. I finally got the chance to buy myself a farm for retirement and you won't destroy that chance by refusing to marry Elvis. He is a nice and honest man and all you have to do is to please him. He is not like these *veil poppe* who get girls pregnant and then run away. Do you remember what happened with Sam? He got you pregnant and denied paternity. It is a good thing that his bastard child died.”

“I want to make a difference in people's lives I can't do that when I'm a wife. He was just a pen pal when he was in prison. Everyone advised me to stop writing to him but I didn't listen. He sounded mature, intelligent and he always said the right things to me. We were both lonely and we comforted each other. He didn't display any schizophrenic tendencies then. I made a mistake to let him call me and ... Besides, I thought I would never meet him.”

“The man has money and is ready to make you his wife. He wouldn’t have proposed if he didn’t care.”

“Ma, I don’t know anything about him. He refuses to tell me why he was in jail in the first place. I didn’t agree to be his lover. We were just pen-pals. I don’t even know where he got the money to pay for all this. He gets angry when I ask him about his past.”

“*Ngwanaka*, don’t insult God by wanting to know the colour of your husband’s underpants. My instinct tells me that he is a good man. Elvis may be from jail but he doesn’t behave like the animals running around causing trouble after being released. Embrace your blessing.”

Mma Lopang cast a disapproving glance at her daughter. “Get ready. They are waiting for you in the tent.”

My mother always sees good in people, thought Masello.

After the ceremony, the newly-weds check into to the Michaelangelo Hotel in Sandton.

Masello takes a shower after a long day of unnecessary ceremony. She is almost happy to be on her own. While the water soothes her tired body, Elvis joins her. They shower in silence. The bar of soap slips from his hand and lands next to her big toe. She bends down to pick it up. Her buttocks feel his erection. It is like a blind snake trying to find a hiding place in a hurry. He pushes her further down and she feels him entering the ‘wrong’ part of her body. The pain is excruciating as he positions himself. He slithers insidiously into the wrong place. Not knowing what to do, she remains in the same position as pain and pleasure blend. His hips gyrate with intensity His hands clutch her hips and he grunts with his eyes shut tight.

When he is done, he opens the tap and washes the spot where he has entered her. His arms pull her up gently and envelop her. Her back is on his chest and she hopes that he will turn her around and kiss her passionately. He doesn’t. He rinses the soap from his body and leaves her.

Alone in the shower, Masello’s thoughts go in many directions. *That’s why I didn’t want to get married*, she thinks. She has heard about different ways of making love but didn’t know t she would experience any of these in her lifetime. The water blanket warms her tortured body and she cries hard bitter tears. At last, she dries herself with the towel and wonders if her bottom will remain painful for the whole night.

“*Kom nou. Wat vat jy so lank?*” asks Elvis.

She joins him in bed.

As in the shower, he turns her so that her back is against his chest. His hands feel warm and protective around her and her body cries out for something special. There is a pot bubbling inside her but the bubbles are trapped because they didn't make love the way she needs it.

"That was the best shower ever. We should do it all the time," he says as he lights a cigar.

Her body is disappointed because his arms are no longer enveloping her. Elsewhere, her body part is throbbing for his attention. She takes his free hand and guides it to where she needs him. His hand remains there for a while. *I wish he could explore this* she thinks. He removes his hand awhile and then places back there again.

She falls into an uneasy sleep while his hand keeps her safe.

Most nights after sex, she positions his hand where she really needs him. He obliges, but his manhood never finds its way there. She wants him there so badly. During her most desperate nights, she waits for him to fall asleep so that she can pleasure herself. Her fingers explore and implore and finally make her convulse and scream with ecstasy. *How hard can it be for a man to have proper sex with his wife?*

Other nights, her disappointment brings out uncontrollable sobs and his arms cradle her. "*Dis oraait sonskyn. Moenie huil nie.*" He says in a sleepy caramel voice.

She always waits for him to ask why she is so sad, but he never asks.

Every day, she watches his well-sculpted body with longing while he takes a shower. The large black spider tattoo always looks like it is smiling at her. His body exudes strength and sex appeal. The home-made tattoos stir something pleasant deep inside her. The pain of yearning for him to make love to her feels like a whiplash on bare skin. Her eyes take in the beauty of his body as he applies lotion and she helps to apply some on his back and hard-to-reach areas. Her fingers caress his athletic thighs and she stops knowing that nothing good will ever come. Her hands linger on as they come into contact with his body. The softness of her breast touches his body but he doesn't seem to notice it. *If only he knew how much she wanted him to make love to her and not the other stuff.*

Today, one of his deals came through. He tells her with his beautiful 'I love you' kind of smile.

"We're raking in the big bucks babe. Now I can afford to take you to Mauritius for our honeymoon. We need to get out of here so that you can be happy for a change."

“Elvis, you know I don’t swim. The water hates me. Going to Mauritius will kill me. Can’t we go somewhere else? Let’s go to Denmark. There is a rich people’s suburb called Whiskey Belt in Copenhagen. We can drink good whiskey for a week.” says Masello.

“No man, Denmark is cold now. Let’s do Mauritius. That reminds me, we are going out tonight. There is this nightclub that plays great music. Are you ready?” says Elvis.

“*Ja*” she replies.

At the Sankayi Nightclub she notices men looking at her husband. It is as if he is a candy-man or something like that. The attention makes Masello to feel out of place and wonders if it was worth her while to accompany her husband to the nightclub. As it is, they hardly attend events as a couple. The two of them move in different social circles. As she makes her way to the bar to get shooters, a man with a neat ponytail and dressed in white jeans and a pink shirt asks Elvis for a light. They exchange knowing looks loaded with sexual tension. Masello understands these types of messages. The ponytail man whispers something into Elvis’ ear before rejoining his group. At this moment she remembers how he shaved the hairs around her anal opening with his penis. She has given him everything but it seems like her pain is not enough for him. He wants a young stud.

How do you ask your husband if he is attracted to another man? Masello wonders

Back at home, Elvis is still in a jovial mood. He dances *lang arm* with her and while she is enjoying the warmth of his body and cinnamon spicy aftershave, he whips out a switchblade and slashes her skirt and thong in two halves. The cold blade paralyses her for a moment. When the clothes are gone, he does what he usually does. She must have had many shooters they had because she sleeps through the pain and finds herself in bed next to him the following morning. He lies next to her snoring softly, his hand resting lazily on her belly.

She feels brave enough to ask the question: “Elvis are you attracted to men?”

“What? Don’t be silly. I married you didn’t I?”

“You looked cosy with the guy in the white jeans at the club.”

Ag skat. Hou op met daai nonsense. Jy’s myne. I love only you.” He kisses her lips.

Surprisingly, her question does not turn a small fuse into an inferno. Her heart tells her that things will come out in the open one day.

Later that evening, the bottle of Glenfiddich whiskey on the coffee table is emptying rapidly. The TV is on and Salif Keita's *Afrika*, is playing. Elvis drops the towel from his waist and begins to dance. His hips gyrate and his member takes the opposite direction. Masello's hilarious laughter is coupled with happy and sad tears. She yearns to be loved and to feel like a woman. His body contorts like a snake as he tries to imitate the dance moves. The both laugh at his inability to get the moves right. He doubles up with laughter and dives onto the king size bed. His warm moist lips find hers and they linger. The kiss opens up emotions. Right there, she wishes he could do more than kiss her on the lips. She wants him to give her love bites and suck her breasts and nibble her belly button as he makes his way to the right spot, but he doesn't. Her hope is growing false day by day. . When there is four or six shots of whiskey left in the decanter, he lowers himself to the bedroom floor and begin to do push-ups, bicep curls and other complicated exercises which only a sober person can do. His wife always watches with admiration.

Other times, he spends hours looking angry and grunting like a madman when he gets a call that doesn't carry good news for him. Their big house on Rothesaye Avenue in Craighall Park cannot take away the pain that she endures in their bedroom.

The only person who knows about her injuries is Doctor Mukadam, her physician.

"Masello, you need to talk to your husband. This is going to destroy your body. You have torn tissues and they may cause bacteria or viruses. Tell him to stop. He is not giving your body the chance to heal. This makes a fruitful ground for bacteria to spread throughout your body."

"Doctor, he tells me that he owns me. I'm afraid to tell him that it hurts. I can't talk to him about anything. He is hostile. I don't feel like a wife as it is,." says Masello.

"I can refer you counselling if you want. The only problem is that you will have to go with your husband. He is putting your health at risk. Buy adult diapers to cushion the chaffing. You will to end up with perforation in the colon" says Doctor Mukadam.

"Adult diapers doctor? I'm young. Who will see me with adult diapers?" asks Masello.

"They will cushion you against the discomfort. Try them and you will feel the difference." says the doctor.

When she had started consulting Doctor Mukadam, a young physician from Congo, she felt free when undressing in front of him. On one occasion he said to her: "Masello, your man doesn't know what he's got."

"What do you mean?" she asked.

“Your body. You have a beautiful body and your man is a fool not to claim it. What kind of a man is he?”

“*Eish* doctor, don’t remind me.”

That is when she began to see the lust in the doctor’s eye. The way he looked at her breasts and his gentle touches on her bare shoulders were not those of a concerned doctor. .

This attention assured her that there is nothing wrong with her body.

On her bad days, she used to wish that the doctor could show more interest in her. Unfortunately, he was married and looked like the one-woman type.

Having no alternative, Masello buys and uses the adult diapers. Her body often tenses up when she sees small clots of blood on the diapers. It has been over six months since she got married and she has never experienced the joy of climaxing simultaneously with her husband.

Ten months after the wedding, Masello paces the kitchen with her arms folded. Her bloodshot eyes itch from lack of sleep. She brushes an irritating tear with the back of her hand. Any moment Elvis will come in through the kitchen door ...

Her mind races back to the scene she had witnessed the night before. “*How did I come to trust a double adaptor? I mean...he declares his undying love for me when he can. He has to have me before I go out on my own. I know that we have never had ‘proper’ sex since we got married. I will teach him never to fuck with my mind again,*” she says aloud.

The tip of her nose has beads of sweat on it. Her chest heaves up and down and she wants to haul insults at this man. She wants to hurt him for all the times he has hurt her.

Elvis saunters in. He is doing something on his phone. He looks up for a moment and continues what he was doing.

“Did you think you could get away with it?” she throws a menacing look at him.

“*Wat is dit nou?*”

“I saw you and Tyrone in our living room last night. You didn’t bother to close the curtains.”

“*Hei, hei, hou jou bek.* I’m still your husband. How can you disrespect me like that? *Jy’t fokol gesien nie. Moenie lieg nie!* You *mus respek* me. You hear what I’m telling you? You were at a

party last night and I watched a movie with my mate, Tyrone. Why are you angry?" A streak of guilt crosses his eyes.

"Jy's die een om te praat. I saw you watching a movie with your dick inside Tyrone se gat. Hoe vuil kan jy wees? You did the same thing to me before I left for the party. Is jy gek?" Masello positions the tea towel on the handles of the urn.

"What are you doing?" he asks

"You might as well lose that. You don't want to use it the right way." She looks him in the eye.

"Hou op of ek sal jou skop jou. Wat is dit? Is jy mal

Masello empties contents from the urn on his manhood.

"Jou teef! You burned me," he screams as he struggles out of his trousers. "You burned me you witch!"

She approaches her husband menacingly and throws the remainder of the toxic liquid on his exposed genitals. His face is masked with fear. His hands shake as he struggles to pull his trousers up. Laughter tickles her throat but she manages to maintain a straight face.

Jy't my gebrand jou kaffir!" Elvis Abrahams runs out of the spacious kitchen dressed in his shorts and clutching his privates.

It is a long way to the gate. He doesn't get into his BMW Z3 and drive away. Instead, he jumps over the side gate and heads towards the Craighall Park police station.

Masello holds the empty urn, dips a finger in and looks at the husband who is fleeing like a lunatic on fire.

A flasher in Kerk Street

a parktown prawn saunters on the brick of a in the location of Ikhutseng. Something is weighing heavily on the fifty-something year old Amos. All he wants is to walk away from repairing leaking corrugated sheet roof-tops, metal baths and buckets.

His greying beard, tall and slim frame, concealed the darkness that is only witnessed by teenage girls in his area. His wife Mavis, is the priest of the Apostolic Church that is housed in their yard. Most of the days, Mavis is not aware of her husband's activities. She knows that he always comes home after wandering in the streets of the township.

Pene and her friends get out of their hiding places. They scattered in all directions when a man in a long grey winter coat, walked up to them and flashed his genitals. "He's gone." Pene calls out to friends who were still hiding.

At the corner of Kerk and Mocumi Streets, Amos opens the passenger door of a light Blue Valiant. 41 GL and gets in. The woman on the driver's side, is spotting a pitch black afro and her beautiful condensed milk skin colour lights up the dark car. She smiles and puts the car into drive mode. She dodges potholes as they make their way out of the township. The township gradually fade away as the car gains speed. In the main tarred road, they breathe a sigh of relief because the drive will be smooth. "You are tired of being here." She says.

Amos nods and they drive on. He wants to savour the aroma of lavender that is soothing the heat inside the car.

Back in Kerk Street, Mavis and her two sisters look for Amos in the yard and in the streets. They can't walk fat enough because of their weight. Mavis suffers from Elephantiasis. She is past obese. Most people in the township say that the church water makes her big. Her siblings are the same. They mop their faces with handkerchiefs after walking short distances. Their breathing is also raspy but they walk on. It is after ten in the evening and he has to go to bed. They walk down Kerk Street looking for him. They open the door of the Anglican Church to see if he is not sleeping on one of the benches. They are greeted by the echo that gives them chills. "Amos! Amos!" they call. When they don't get a response, they open the door of the Baptist church and look on the benches and repeat the drill. No luck. They go to the AM E church and all the other

churches but he is nowhere to be found. Finally, they call off the search hoping to continue the next day.

As they wobble back home, Mavis says a silent prayer for the safe return of her husband. They are not like a couple. Amos sleeps in the guest bedroom. He does that to escape his wife's snoring and grunting. As of Mavis, she knows that she cannot lose Amos. He has hidden healing powers. He prays for the church water in big drums and many church members swear by the water. They believe that it heals their arthritis, bronchitis, heart problems and many other ailments. "Why can't the water heal Mavis?" some sceptics will ask. They dare not say it in her face. No one wants to suffer the wrath of her tongue lashing.

All along, residents of Ikhutseng, believed that Mavis is the one with the 'healing' powers. That's why they flock to her home every night for a secret church service and a drink of water. It is called *kereke ya sephiri* ('secret' church) because congregants are forbidden to talk to anyone about the activities of the church.

Mavis goes to bed with a heavy heart. In her entire adult life, she has never thought that her heart would ache so much out of longing for her useless husband. 'Useless' that's what she calls him when she is mad at him. Now that he is gone, she feels the emptiness and hopes for a miracle. She hopes that her husband will be home when she wakes up the following morning.

When the first cock crows, she wakes up to prepare prayers. She lights seven white candles and places them on the altar. She takes the holy water and sprinkles it in their house, calling Amos' name with every sprinkle. She does this over and over again. When she is done, she kneels before the altar with candles. She instructs each candle to do something for her. That's the practice that she learned from her apostolic priest father. He used to call it 'forcing God to listen to prayers.'

This morning, she is sending secret messages through the candles. But, the candle wax melts away without giving her solace. Their flames don't flutter the way they do when Amos prays in front of them. They don't have images that they usually have either. She lights seven new candles. There is a tin of *doepa* in her drawer. She takes it out and burns it too. The putrid smoke fills the room. Satisfied that the candles are secured on the candle holders, she walks out of the room.

A freshly hatched chick is splattered on the veranda. She takes the dead bird to the rubbish pile on the side of the house. As she turns to go back to the house, she sees it. Her husband's favourite shirt covered in dust. Her face lights up. *'He is not very far from home. He will come for his favourite breakfast.* She thinks.

Back in her prayer room, one candle tips sideways and the plastic table cloth, catches fire. The fire spreads to the newspapers in the corner and it slowly ravages the contents of the room. No one knows what is happening in the 'holy' room. They only become aware when the smoke spreads into the other rooms. *"Vutha! Vutha!"* Mavis' sister shouts.

Mavis struggles back to the house where members of her family are running to the house with bucketsful of water and sand. The fire ravages her holy place, the altar, and everything that she uses for healing people. They manage to douse the fire. The odd thing is that it only burned the one side of the prayer room. The other parts are not touched by the mysterious flame.

The girls in Kerk Street hear about the disappearance of Amos and giggle excitedly. They would be free to walk in the streets without fearing the flasher. Amos is a sneaky man. When his wife is not looking, he walks around Kerk Street following girls around. He watches from a nearby corner when they skip rope, play ball and other games. Sometimes, the girls jump and show off their underwear. This always makes Amos to walk away from wherever he is sitting.

Days after Amos' disappearance, a passerby finds him next to the railway line. His trousers is torn and he looks weak.

The other woman

Carol liked intelligent men who also had style. Ernest was just the person, but his height was not appealing to her, he was too short. She interpreted his determination as arrogance. Carol and Ernest were teachers at a private school in Fordsburg. For months, often asked her out and she always turned him down.

He lived in a one bed-roomed flat in Joubert Park. His wife was in Lesotho with their two children.

"I just don't feel comfortable being the 'other woman.' I need a man of my own.

"Come on Carol, my wife is not around. She will never find out about us. Now, just have a good time and forget about other people."

"That is so easy for you to say. Your life is complete. You have children and a wife. What do I have? Nothing." Ernest pulled her gently towards him and then kissed her on the cheek. They went to the cinema walking hand in hand, and when they met his younger sister he let go of her hand.

"Prudence, meet my good friend Carol. Carol, this is my younger sister." The two ladies shook hands awkwardly and then Prudence muttered something to her brother before turning to leave. She waved at Carol. "This is exactly what I was talking about. A person cannot be free when they are with you. You seem to think that it is fun to be the other woman. Ernest, I cannot go ahead with this. It is destroying me. Let us stop this before it goes too far."

"You are overreacting my dear, nothing will happen. My sister does not suspect anything.

Please try to relax. This is our time and we will have a good time". These two lovebirds spent most of their free time together and Carol was beginning to feel that she had won his heart.

One morning when he came to work, he seemed particularly worried. He took her arm.

"My wife and kids are back. She said that they would be here for a couple of days. This means that I will be seeing less of you except when we are at work."

"I knew this would happen. What the hell do you think I am? Do I have to watch while you become a responsible father and a husband? I told you that it would not work out and you insisted. Carol ran out of the classroom. She felt betrayed and humiliated.

On the following morning, Ernest paid her a visit.

"Carol, please give me a chance. I really love you. You have made a difference in my life. Let us be together for as long as it takes." There was a glint of honesty in his eyes and she was tempted to believe him.

"You know as well as I do that I am just one of the spare tyres which are stored in the garage. This will never work."

Carol hoped that he would come back for them but he did not. She wanted to throw them into a waste bin but she could not bring herself to do that. Her heart was longing for someone who would be special. She did not want to share a man. That was the beginning of stolen moments. Sometimes, she wanted to ask him out for a drink but then changed her mind, knowing that he would not be able to get away. Being plunged into loneliness, Carol tried to have affairs but she could not get someone who was as caring as Ernest. Being unable to do that, she ended up jumping from one lover to another. She began to depend on alcohol.

There was never a day which passed without her drinking. There were times during which Ernest promised to come over to her place and never turned up. This often messed up her plans but she kept on hoping that he would come back to her. One night, he asked her to book at one hotel for the two of them. She did it with her own money and she was happy that at least she was going to spend the night with him. After taking a bath at the hotel, she waited for hours for him to turn up.

He told her that he could not make it because his wife had taken ill.

"This is driving me out of my mind. Why don't we end the whole thing because there is no use. You made me fall in love with you and now, I am always your second priority. I can't do this anymore."

"Please be patient my dear. Things will work out for us. I cannot live without you. I need you more than you think I do. This is just a temporary setback. You'll be fine." He told her.

"Do you really expect me to believe that crap? I am tired of 'stolen moments and quickies'. I need a man of my own." She stormed out of the room.

Carol was studying for a teachers' degree on part time basis. When she passed all her subjects in her first year, she was ecstatic and she wanted someone to share her joy with her. Her spirits were dampened when she could not get hold of him.

One Friday night Carol went to watch a movie alone. After the movie, she went to Milky Lane in Hillbrow. She ordered an ice cream with nuts sprinkled on top. On her way to the taxi rank, two men approached her. One of them offered her a lift. She refused to take the lift. Before she could do anything else, the same man pressed a gun to her neck. The cold metal against her skin made her shiver. She shook even more when she thought of dying at the hands of those thugs.

"Now listen to me you little witch, you are coming with us or you will die." The deadly tone of that voice propelled her forward and get into the Station Wagon that was parked nearby.

The car reeked of marijuana and some smell which she could not identify. They drove off slowly, chatting as if she was not there. She thought of jumping out of the moving car but she knew that she would get shot. There was only one thing that she had to do. Prayer. She prayed for a long time. She asked God for protection and strength to fight the thugs. The car parked at a remote area and one of them ripped off her clothes. Carol never stopped to pray. She felt him hard on her as he entered roughly. Suddenly, a bright light appeared from somewhere. "Hold it

right there". The voice on the loudspeaker came up. The man jumped and pulled up his pants. Carol remained where she was.

Her body was limp and she just could not believe that the ordeal was over. The two men wanted to run away but then noticed that they were surrounded. The Station Wagon which they were driving was stolen from some delivery company. The tracking device on the car had made it possible for the cops to find it. As the cops handcuffed the men, Carol wished that they would be locked away to rot in jail. One policeman helped her up and they drove her home. She cried uncontrollably as she washed herself. She felt dirty and miserable. Right that minute, she needed to talk to the man who claimed to be in love with her. She hoped that he would be there for her.

When he came to see her on the following day, it was a brief visit. She could not stop the tears which were rolling down her cheeks. When he left, she was afraid of what might happen to her. It was during that time that she began to make obscene calls to his flat.

She retreated into a shell.

She often told herself that the actual rape did not take place.

Ernest slowly faded out of her life.

If I can't have you...

For years, she had hoped that things would work out for the best. She was convinced that her husband didn't love her.

That morning, Alice stood next to the bed watching him sleep. *What makes such a decent man experiment with adultery?* She wondered.

It took her two months to come up with a solution to her troubled life. She vowed that if she could not have her man to herself, nobody else would. The 9mm gun felt heavy in her hand and she knew that there was not much time to waste. There was a letter written to her family stating her reasons for killing. Her children would not suffer because she had invested money for their education. They had been married for ten years and everything went on smoothly until they hired somebody to help them with the house and the children.

Their helper was young and charming. She always got people to do things her way. Alice realized that her husband was under the spell of this young country girl. What was important to her was to prevent disaster, but things did not work out. Alice and Steve met on the campus of Vista University in Soweto. It was during her first year of study, when the SRC called for a general meeting. She saw him, and from that day onwards, she knew that he was the man of her dreams. Steve was the vice president of the SRC and, as he called the students to order, his eyes rested on her.

The meeting seemed to take forever. She waited in anticipation. There had been a number of young men in campus who proposed to her but none was as special as the stranger standing in front of them.

It was during the beginning of the second semester and somehow, she wondered how it happened that she did not meet him in the beginning of the year. She did not attend the meetings often at campus, but now that she met him, she had every reason to be there at all times. After the meeting, she almost jumped with joy when she heard his voice behind her. It seemed like a dream but she knew that it was real. "Hi, do you mind if I join you?"

Trying hard to conceal the excitement, she began, "No, not really."

Offering to shake hands .I'm Steven. Is it your first year on campus?"

"I'm Alice and yes, this is my first year. Tell me, is it that obvious that I'm a first year student?"

With an embarrassed smile he said, "no, don't take it that bad. I'm asking you that question because I don't remember seeing you around the campus. Now tell me Alice, where do you live?"

"In Eldorado Park", she replied.

"Wait a minute, do you want to tell me that you are coloured? Well, I think that you make the most beautiful one I've ever laid my eyes on. You are also well-mannered".

"Am I supposed to take that as a compliment? To be honest, I think that my step -father might have shared some coloured blood with me because he is one". They both laughed. I love your heavy Afrikaans accent. It gives you away", he smiled teasingly.

"Yeah, I just cannot wish it away. I grew up in some town where our language was dominated by Afrikaans. Come to think of it, I love the language."

That day opened doors for them, they became good friends and spent most of their spare time together. Their common interests also drew them closer to one another. Steven was originally from Durban and was renting a backroom in Pimville (Soweto). He was a second year B.Comm student while Alice was doing a four year Education degree.

After the year-end exams, Steve invited her to his home. His parents were well off. They owned a chain of supermarkets in Umlazi and some taxis.

Steve proposed marriage to her while they were in Durban. With an abundance of love which she felt for him, she did not hesitate to give him an answer which was positive. She wanted to spend the rest of her life loving Steve. Alice's mother was surprised when she learned that her daughter was engaged. She knew her to be someone who wanted to achieve her goals before she committed herself. Although the news came to her as a shock, she did not stop her daughter from doing what she wanted to do. As a wedding present from Steve's parents, the

young couple was given a house and one supermarket. Steve hired somebody to manage the business while they were at university.

A year after their marriage, Alice fell pregnant. Fortunately, she managed to write her year-end exams before giving birth to a bouncing little girl. Both Steve and Alice's parents were happy to become grandparents. When the baby was a year old, Alice fell pregnant again. This time, she gave birth to male twins. Steve was a proud father who was also supportive. His mother offered to look after the children when they were older in order to enable Alice to complete her studies. Steve failed his major courses twice and then decided to drop out of university. He spent most of his time at the supermarket. His wife completed her degree at the University of Johannesburg.

At first, Steve did not seem to be bothered by her success. Alice had been working at the university of Natal when her life was plunged into turmoil. Steve decided that they should get a helper of his choice. Alice did not like the idea because her mother-in-law was looking well after the kids. He brought in somebody to live in their home despite his wife's protests. That person was young and attractive. She was not the type of person who could be entrusted with children. Alice knew that an ideal helper or child-minder should be mature and older. For the first time in her married life, she compromised. She accepted Angeline in order to please her husband.

The more she tried to work out differences in her home, that is the more it fell apart. Steve had stopped caring for her. He had become a stranger. He was fond of Angeline.

Alice noticed that they were having an affair. She often toyed with the idea of asking her husband if he was cheating on her, but she was afraid of what his response would be. Angeline did not look after the kids as it was planned originally. Instead, she worked at the supermarket where Steve spent most of his time. One night when he came home, Alice looked at him for a while. "Steve, can I ask you a question?"

"Go ahead honey, tell me what is bothering you", he replied uninterested.

"I do not mean to be jealous or anything, but I think that Angeline has a crush on you. One other thing is that you have been neglecting me lately. Does this mean that what we had together is over?"

"Alice, stop being jealous", he barked at her. If you are tired of being my wife, just say so. Why should you accuse me? Why can't you trust me woman? Look, if you have had it, the door is open. You can pack what is yours and leave me in peace. What do you take me for? Do you think that seeing that you are a graduate you are better than me? You may have a good job my girl, but you must know that I made you and I can break you within a split of a second. I can snap your little life like a twig. As far as I am concerned, you are nothing". He left the room banging the door behind him.

Alice was more shocked than surprised at what her husband had said to her.

It was hard for her to believe that she just heard what he said to her. That innocent question turned Steve into more of a stranger.

He began to take liquor heavily and there were nights during which he hardly bothered to come home. One afternoon when she came back from the campus, she found Angeline in Steve's arms. Her worst fear had become a reality. She watched helplessly as her life crumbled under her feet. There was a knot in her stomach. She could hardly utter a word. With tears blinding her, she ran out of the house. The faster she ran, was the more she saw them in her mind's eye. The screeching tyres brought her to her senses. She was in the middle of the road and had narrowly escaped being run over.

"You stupid woman, are you crazy? What the hell do you want in the middle of the road? Do you want to kill yourself?" The driver of the car screamed at her as he took off. She was left petrified. Suddenly, her pain and bad experienced flooded her whole being. Slowly and confidently, she walked over to the local chemist. She bought some pills and headed home. When she was in the safety of the guest room, she took the swallowed the contents of the bottle. She waited as the pain took its toll inside her body. It felt as if her intestines were being sliced with a sharp knife. She doubled up in pain. She awoke on the following day to find herself in a strange. At first, she thought that she was in heaven.

The reality dawned on her when she saw her sister-in-law. "How are you feeling today Alice? You gave me a fright. I want you to promise that you will never do it again".

Alice stared.

She was bitter. Suddenly, she thought of her husband. Filled with hatred, she vowed to do a better job in the further. Three days later, she was discharged from the hospital. Not in a

single day did Steve come to visit her. She could not believe that she had lost the man who had meant so much to her. On reaching home, she noticed that Angeline was no longer staying in the servants' quarters. She had moved into the house. Alice felt like a stranger in her own home.

Feeling dejected, she decided to confront her husband about the changes which were made in the house. Alice was broken because her suicide attempt had failed.

She did not expect to find so many changes. The pain which cut through her heart like a sharp knife was when Steve ignored her when she asked him about the changes in their home. Every step of recovery which Alice took, was heavier than she could handle it. Migraine became her constant companion. One afternoon, Alice went to see some boys at the scrap-yard. They often offered to sell stolen goods to people. "I want a gun". She surprised them. With their eyes dancing suspiciously, the boys asked her if she was setting them up.

It took Alice a while to convince them that she really needed that piece.

It was during the Good Friday week and the children were at her in-laws for holidays. The housekeeper was also away.

Alice had given up the hope of ever getting her relationship on a sound footing. She revised her plan in her mind and was happy that it would take away her misery.

It was on Friday at 5.30am. Alice left the bed and went over to the dressing table. For a minute, she looked at her reflection on the mirror. "Lord, what have I done to deserve this punishment?"

She took the pistol out of her handbag and walked over to her husband's side. She looked at him with fiery eyes. He was even snoring. Before pulling the trigger, she said a short prayer. The first bullet went through his head shattering his skull. The second one tore open his rib cage.

He muttered a feeble "help."

My dream wedding

The clouds and the sun were playing *black maipatile* one Saturday morning. *Black maipatile* is a game that children like to play. Some hide and the others seek.

This game worried the women who were preparing meals for the guests. The large three-legged iron pots were cooking on the open fire in the back yard. And the more proactive women threw coarse salt into the fire to stop the rain from spoiling an important day.

Thato, the 13 year old boy, had assured the women that it would not rain that day, but when they saw the clouds gathering they thought that his prediction was wrong. The boy hovered around the women saying; “Don’t worry *bo-mma*, it will not rain. I am sure of that. The sun and clouds are just playing a hide and seek. Carry on, everything will be fine”.

The women trusted his intuition. After all, he was the ‘special one’. He saw things that no one else could see. Thato was an unofficial advisor for weddings and other ceremonies. Nobody wants their celebrations to be spoiled by the rain.

The hide and seek game between the sun and the clouds, went on for a while. The women finally relaxed when they realised that it was just a game. They concentrated on the ox livers that they were cooking for the in-laws and the kidneys that were being fried for the relatives of the bride.

There were also jokers who never missed a party, funeral or wedding. They seemed to know about every place that was serving free food and alcohol. The one thing that they never did was to go to the graveyard, but they were always seen with platefuls of food before all the mourners got served. These jokers were members of the community who spent days and nights patronising the drinking holes. They moved from one *shebeen* to the next, asking people to buy them alcohol. When they didn’t get money, they would join tables where there was a lot of beer on display. They knew that the drinkers would feel ashamed about drinking on their own.

Moipone, a councillor of Ikhutseng township, had worked hard for years to make sure that members of her community received basic services. The whole location had sanitation and there were parks for young children to play.

With her as councillor fewer people complained about service delivery.

Moipone often felt emptiness deep inside her. She was married in court to Edward and they had been married for over thirty years. All she ever wanted was to walk down the aisle. She had tried to do it several times but there was always something messing up her plans. Now she planned ahead of time to make her lifelong dream a reality.

A week before the wedding, Moipone was worried about her husband's attitude. It felt like he didn't want to be a part of the celebration. Arrangements for the wedding, were taking up most of her time and she didn't see her husband slip away from her. There was something else that that was keeping her busy. "I can't believe that we are finally having your white wedding," Edward smiled at his wife.

"What do you mean by **your** white wedding? Don't you want it too? Asked Moipone.

"*Mogatsaka* (my wife) don't forget that I was married to that lying cheat for six months. I have had my turn. There's nothing to it. It doesn't matter if I go through that again or not. I want you to be happy. That's all. Besides, the whole thing is just a waste of money if you ask me. But, you are paying for it all. We are like friends who share a bed".

"Edward, I am not the one who stays up till the early hours of the morning. You spend hours watching porn and you have the nerve to talk to me about lack of intimacy in our relationship? What about all the 'boys' night-out' that extend to the early hours of the morning? We can cancel the whole thing if you want. It will save me money. I can't believe that you are telling me all this a week before the ceremony!"

"Let's do it. Your mother will be happy to see her favourite daughter walking down the aisle. I love you and I look forward to renewing our vows."

"I hope you mean that. So long as you don't feel I'm forcing you to do this. I have to meet with some of my colleagues. We'll chat some more when I come back."

On the wedding day Moipone sat with the matron of honour in the bridal suite. "Are you sure you are ready for this my friend?" asked Nthabiseng..

"Girl, I have waited all my life for this day. Marrying at the magistrate's court doesn't cut it for me. I want to be the centre of attraction. I need pampering. I want to feel like 'the' queen. My kids don't like the idea, but it is my money, my house, my rules." Moipone told her friend with a playful smile dancing on her lips.

"Well, I believe you are ready to become the centre of attraction. Are you sure you don't need some champagne to take the edge off?" asked Nthabiseng.

"No my friend. There will be plenty of time to do that after the formal ceremony. For now, just do the make-up and the hair". Moipone patted her face. She was sweaty and was wondering if the sweat was not going to mess her new white dress. Her dress was a plain white, straight cut and it fitted her perfectly.

"Okay, here we go. You know, I am envious of you. I never met my 'Mr Right' and here you are, marrying your dream man at the age of sixty. I wish you many more years of happy marriage my friend," Nthabiseng said as she applied a foundation on her friend's face.

Some people got bored and went outside to smoke or drink 'juice' from unlabelled bottles. The only thing that gave them away was the exaggerated effort to walk straight even though they knew that they felt like staggering. Their faces were unnecessarily serious. The mint sweets that they were sucking just brought out the smell of booze.

Again the priest asked "Does anyone object to the union of these two people?"

Silence followed and the scratching of a chair made the entire congregation turn in the same direction.

"*Eintlik*, pastor, I object to this marriage. I know this sounds strange, but I need to tell you that this woman stole my heart. I can't let her do this," said the woman in a beige suit and dark sunglasses.

"Listen to me MISTER, I object to being referred to as a pastor. I am a priest! I studied theology for five years and passed with flying colours. I'm an ordained priest. Don't ever call me pastor. Now, why don't you want these two people to get married?" *Moruti* Motlhabani asked.

"No way pastor. I am a lady and I love THAT woman. I will not sit here and watch her make the mistake of a lifetime. She loves me and I love her".

"I've had enough of this nonsense! Firstly a hobo objects to the marriage and now this man-woman objects. Oh God, What have I done to deserve this? Listen to me young lady, things like these are not allowed in my community. Women don't have sex with other women. What can you offer this woman that she does not already have?" asked the priest.

"*Moruti* Motlhabani, you don't understand sir, women can marry other women. It is in the constitution of this country and I love this woman and my conscience won't allow me to let her take the vows.

"I don't care about the damn constitution. This woman has been living as a common law wife with this man for over twenty years and that should count for something. I will not entertain lesbian tendencies. Now sit down and shut up. Is there anyone who genuinely objects to the union of these two people?" the priest asked again.

After a brief pause a thin, well-dressed woman raised her hand.

Are you a lesbian too? What are you objecting to?" the priest asked.

"No, *moruti*. My name is Tiisetso. That man is my lover. He promised to marry me three years ago. I am still waiting for him to pay the *lobola*. He told me that he is in a loveless relationship. He loves me."

"Is this true? Did you promise to marry her?" Moipone asked her husband.

“You are the one to talk. You have skeletons in your closet. Now, I can see why you don’t spend time with me and the kids. It is because you run around with lesbians. Don’t expect me to explain anything”; said Edward.

“So, it is true! I can’t believe this. I worked all my life to ensure that you have everything that you need and this? I will.....

“*Ek se ’moruti*. I am hungry man, you said this won’t take long,” a loud baritone voice came from somewhere

Moruti looked down and tried to push something behind the podium. He knelt down and said something inaudible.

“*Thokolosi!Thokolosi!*” someone shouted.

“No, no, please forgive me for the interruption. We will continue with the service. There is nothing in this hall.” said *Moruti* Motlhabane. He cast a warning look behind the podium and cleared his throat.

Ek is honger!” the voice came up again. People looked around, but they did not see anything.

The priest ignored the voice and opened the Bible. The noise behind the podium persisted. It looked like it was being pushed by something. People watched and waited.

The pianist played a song for a few seconds and people watched in horror as the podium moved from one side to the other. The more curious ones went closer to the stage to investigate. Nobody saw anything, but when the podium fell on the side, people panicked.

They ran out of the hall through different exits.

On Good Friday

It was Palm Sunday when Violet went to the Anglican Church in Baker Street in Berea.

A handsome priest was conducting the service. He seemed to tower over the congregation. His neatly-trimmed moustache and silver rimmed spectacles made him irresistible. Violet missed most of the sermon because she was daydreaming about the body that was covered by the priest's cloak.

He was different from all the priests that Violet knew. *Marrying a priest won't be such a bad idea after all.* She thought.

Going to church that day, marked the beginning of something out of this world. She smiled to herself as she saw the priest in her mind's eye. There was something bewitching about him. She was convinced that priests were saints. They don't hurt people whom they love and care about. To begin the healing process, she had to fall in love with that man. He had to love her.

"Karen, I am so glad that I attended mass today, there was this priest who took my breath away."

He is young, intelligent and good-looking. I will make sure to attend the church service on Sundays." Violet smiled.

"I thought you did not want anything to do with men."

"Forget what I said. Now, I have a mission to accomplish. I have to win the heart of that priest. He is the one for me."

"Well, if your mind is made up there is nothing that I can do. What will happen if the priest is married?" Karen asked her friend who seemed to be in wonderland.

"Well, I will be the 'other woman'. I need that man. You could have seen him. He is worth killing for. His cologne touched my nostrils and I could tell that he was a modern priest who is also outgoing. He also looked at me for a split of a second and I felt like I was in seventh heaven. My God, I'm in love with a priest

Files were placed alphabetically and there were some more books and writing material. The computer on its stand looked new. “You must be doing a lot of work at home,” she said as she joined him in the kitchen. He looked super-sexy with the apron on.

“I hope that you don’t mind me wearing this.” He pointed to the apron.

“I like what I see.” Her eyes darted to the apron.

“Not bad at all.”

She remained silent while her heart beat fast and she was afraid that he might hear it beating. She had braced herself for a big fight to gain his love, but now it appeared she had it, and would do

The invitation to lunch opened doors for Violet. Anthony showered her with love and when he proposed to her, she accepted gladly. They were blessed with twins on the second year of their marriage and Anthony was as supportive as ever. When the twins were a year old, Violet fell pregnant again. To their surprise, she gave birth to another set of twins.

But things fall apart. The centre cannot hold. Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world. These words- from a poem by Yeats that she had studied for her matric - kept resonating in her head. ‘Anthony seemed withdrawn and deep in thought. “I am afraid of losing you,” he had told her one night.

“Anthony, I am your wife. There is no way that you can lose me.”

Violet was working on a business project that took too much of her time. She worked long hours. Whenever she promised him they would go out together something connected to the project cropped up.

Anthony was moving away from her slowly and seemed depressed. What used to be a perfect marriage had turned into something else. One night, Anthony said “We have not been intimate for two and a half months.” That is not normal. What do I have to do and how long will this go on?” He slipped out of the bed covers and went to sleep in the guest room. Violet took his words lightly, thinking she would be able to fix whatever had gone wrong. She fell asleep almost immediately.

In the morning, Anthony came into the bedroom and wanted to make love to her. When he was turned down, something snapped inside him. He slapped her across the face and began to lay into her with his fists. With bewildered screams she ran out of the house wearing her night clothes. That did not stop him. He ran after her and dragged her back into the house. His eyes were red with fury and death was staring her right in the face. She managed to escape his grip and then ran to the guest room. She locked herself inside and called the police. Anthony banged on the door, threatening to break it down if she did not open.

A neighbour heard her terrified screams and phoned the police. Fortunately, they were in the same area and when the call came in through the radio, they rushed over to the scene of the crime. Anthony was kicking at the door when the police dragged him away and handcuffed him. Violet whose face was swollen, was taken to hospital. X-rays revealed that she had two broken ribs. Two days later she was discharged from the hospital. On being asked if she wanted to lay charges against her husband, she said no.

“Violet, this is becoming dangerous. Once a man starts to beat you up, it becomes a habit. You have to do something about it. Do you want to become one of the many victims of domestic abuse?”

“Karen my friend, I understand your concerns. I think that Anthony is truly sorry for what he did. He promised that he would never do it again. I believe him. He is a good father and I don’t doubt him. We will work out our differences and things will return to normal”. Karen was not convinced that things would change. She looked at her friend with pained eyes. “My dear, I wish you knew what you are doing to yourself. Anyway, if this is what you want, then there is nothing that I can do. I wish you the best of luck”. She shrugged as she got ready to leave.

“Yeah, I think I will need a lot of that”. Violet smiled at her friend as she walked her to the door.

As the days passed, Violet began to think about what her friend had said. Things turned out the way Karen had predicted them. The beatings continued and Violet was afraid to tell anyone about it. She kept on hoping that it would stop before she got killed. One morning after Anthony had kicked her like a football, she walked out of their home. Her mind was made up.

“I won’t say that I told you so.” Karen said as she wiped her friend’s face. She was wondering as to what made women to stand so much pain even though they were aware that the situation was getting out of control.

Days passed and Violet stayed at her friend’s place. It was not easy for her to accept defeat. One way or the other, she would retaliate. It was late in the afternoon when Violet let herself into their home. As she walked into the bedroom, she heard the shuffling of feet in the house. She went to take a look but was blinded by a blow in her face. What followed was a nightmare. Two thugs who were in the house raped her and beat her up. A neighbour who saw the thugs leaving the house hurriedly called the police. Anthony was gripped by shock when he saw the police van in front of his house.

He rushed over and the officer called him to his side. “Are you the owner of the house sir?”

“Yes, yes, is there something wrong?” he asked nervously.

“Sit down please.” The officer continued. “Your wife was raped and beaten up. She must have walked into the house while they were robbing it. Now, she is in hospital. Do you want to go into the house to see what was stolen? I can drive you to the hospital if you want.”

“Take me to the hospital. I need to see my wife,” he told the officer.

He was asked to wait for a while. The doctors were still treating her for shock and the injuries. When he was finally allowed into the ward, he could not stop the tears from flowing. He looked at her. Her head was bandaged and her face was swollen. “My God, Violet, I will get the bastards who did this to you. I promise.” He held her hand as he tried to fight back the tears. For an hour he stood beside her. When the doctor asked him to leave, he refused. “I won’t leave her alone. She needs me.”

The Bet

“Naledi, I have never been so humiliated in my life. I work hard to keep the fires burning but you go out and do this. Do you know how humiliating it is to get a call from school and be told that your child has done something wrong?” Ms Moeletsi brushed off a lock of fake hair from her cheek “Do you want to make me the laughing stock of this township? And why did you bring it all into my house?”

“Mama, I was going to return everything to the school. It’s just that...”

“Naledi, you stole a laptop! What do you say about the stationery? Why should I believe anything that comes out of your mouth? Do I look like a fool? What games are you playing? What the hell is wrong with you?”

“Mama, give me the chance to explain. I”

“There is nothing that you can tell me that will make me believe that you did not steal from school. Now I have to go to school tomorrow and lose valuable hours of work”.

“This is what I’m talking about. Work always comes first. I never get the chance to talk to you. You are always busy mama”.

“So, is this what is about? You humiliate me and then tell me that you don’t get the chance to talk to me? Listen to me my girl, I hope they give you the harshest punishment. I’m done with you! I ‘ll not be held to ransom by a child. Naledi, come back here! I am talking to you. Get back here! You pick up this horrible behaviour from those *vuil poppe!*”

Naledi took her backpack from her room and stormed out of the living room

Ipopeng was one of the best high schools in the small township of Pampierstadt. The school always produced the best results at the end of the year. Naledi and Patricia were students who had been exemplary since they had started at the school three years ago. Like any other school, Ipopeng had its fair share of delinquents. The culprits were usually older boys who were stuck in one grade – the ones who struggled to learn and were always caught doing something wrong. They also bullied other children and disrupted classes when the teachers were not around. The girls were the reliable ones. From Grade 10 to 12 they were always the top students. The district inspector usually threatened to expel the delinquents from the school but this had never happened.

“Naledi and Patricia did that?” said Andy Smith. “No *Meneer*, there must be a mistake. Those are my top students. They are well-mannered and I trust them. They come from stable families and... what would make them steal from the school? I’m not saying they are perfect. I just can’t believe that they could do something like this. Where are they now?”

Andy was the English and History teacher. He was a smart-looking man and often wore white suits to school. One wondered how he managed to keep these suits clean. The streets of Pampierstadt were dusty and it was difficult enough to keep school shoes shiny. Many students carried small cloths in their school bags which they used to dust their shoes. Naledi was one of Andy's favourite students. She wrote the best assignments and Andy often encouraged her to read literature. During school functions, Naledi and her friend, Matshepo, sometimes even Patricia, recite poems for the audience.

"Andy, I know that you trust these kids," said the principal, *meneer*... ? "But they broke the law. I found the laptop stashed away in Naledi's garage. The stationery was there too."

"You know *meneer*, a teenager is half-child and half-adult. There is no telling what they'll do next. They don't know what they are at this age." *Meneer* Victor told him. All the teachers at school called each other *meneer* all the time but used names only during formal situations or when they were sending a school child to another teacher.

Andy left the room. He was talking to himself and gesturing like a mad person as he walked to the staffroom. Something did not sound right. Could it be that the other kids had set a trap for Patricia and Naledi?

The parents of the two students were waiting in the outer-office with their kids. As a trusted student, Naledi had keys to the stationery room and other offices. That is why it was easy for her to do what they did.

"Ms Moeletsi and Mrs Maseko, I don't know what to say. These two are role models for other students and I wonder what got into them. This is out of character." Andy shook hands with the two women.

"*Meneer*, do you know how long this will take? I have to get to work." Naledi's mother checked at her watch, took out a small mirror and looked at her reflection. She touched up her lipstick and paced a little, showing off her shapely legs in her high-heeled shoes.

Naledi watched her flash smile at her reflection. She hated it when her mother behaved like a love-sick puppy in the presence of Andy. She was tired of her trying to make a move on a teacher who clearly had no interest in women.

"The principal should be with you shortly," Andy replied with unseeing eyes.

Sitting there, Naledi's mother thought about all the sacrifices she has made for her children.

"Every penny I earn goes to giving you a good education, Naledi, and you do this to me?"

"That's not true ma. You don't spend a cent on my school fees. The church pays for everything. And I was going to return it. I just didn't get the chance to take it back. That's all. The laptop doesn't even work. I had a deal with those boys Ma. They said I am teacher Andy's bright-eyed girl and they dared me to steal the laptop. I was not going to keep it."

“I don’t care about your silly games. You stole from school and I have to clean up your mess. You are lucky that Andy is a good teacher. He persuaded the principal not to lay a charge of theft against you. What am I going to do with you? And, what on earth are you doing hanging out with those lazy boys? They are not focussed on their school work. They are just passing time”.

“Those boys care about me. They are gentle and they are...

“Don’t say a word to me! Since when do you make friends with worthless people? You are an A student and you must befriend people who are intelligent and not thugs.”

“Those thugs care about me. Mama, if you spent more time with your children, this would not have happened. I wish my father was here”.

The principal, Mr Letebele finally came out of his office.

Mr Letebele looked at Naledi with eyes full of concern. The one thing about being the best performing student was that when you put a foot wrong, it felt like you had killed the president. That is how Naledi felt when she looked and the principal before lowering her eyes to her palms. Sometimes, she wanted to be like any other child. She wanted to be the child who got treated like they were invisible.

He indicated to the parents and Andy to join him. The two students remained outside.

Naledi looked thoughtfully at her hands and said: “I hope he won’t suspend us from school.”

“*Ja*. I hope so too. We should have remembered to return the stuff sooner. Now who knows what the adults are up to now.....”

“Patricia, we have learned our lesson. That is what we should tell them when they call us in,” Naledi told her friend.

The adults spent what seemed like an eternity in the principal’s office. The parents finally came out of the office and they sat with their children. They did not say anything for a while.

“I will deal with you two later. Go to class.” The principal told them.