Bringing Us Back

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

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by

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ABSTRACT:

My thesis takes the form of a collection of short stories set mostly in Zimbabwe and South Africa under the current political, social and economic climate. The themes I explore include forced migrations, identity, family disintegration and destitution. I use non-linear narration inspired by my reading of Dambudzo Marechera and Lidia Yuknavitch's use of photographic imagery, in *Black Sunlight* and *The Small Backs of Children* respectively, to heighten my thematic concerns. The poetry in their language also serves as a source of inspiration, as does the graphic imagery used by Ayi Kwei Armah. In addition, I draw on the fragmented form used by Deepak Unnikrishnan to explore migration in his collection, *Temporary People* and Miljenko Jergovic's investigation of violence and displacement in *Sarajevo Marlboro*.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

NKULULEKO

The paramedics are late as usual. An hour has already lapsed since someone, a little too late, picked up the phone and called someone. An hour long enough for someone, or something, to actually die. No one has bothered to call the police. They are unwelcome and quite frankly, of no use here. They too would come late if they come at all. And this is what Tracy Chapman is singing from behind Fatima's closed door. Music does not stop playing here. Certainly not because of one woman's tragedy. It continues booming from behind closed doors in diverse genres, from Kwaito and House to American pop and gangster rap, Naija sounds, Zim dancehall and every other music identifying the different nationalities homed here in Nkululeko. Life does not stop either, it goes on, brewing its own tragedies that commence with either a careful arrangement of white powder into neat lines; screams and sounds of smashing things from behind a neighbour's door; getting mixed up with a gang, or just merely walking home from work as early as seven PM. Tragedies that end with a long wait for the paramedics.

Zama can hear herself breathe. She wonders if her mother too can hear it too. The heaviness of her breathing. The fear she carries. The walls of these flats are too thin. Paper thin. They allow for too much intrusion into peoples' personal spaces. From her mother's all-night prayers to Ejikeme's regular please for Azikiwe to keep it down; her suppressed screams swallowed by the thunder of Azikiwe's over powering voice, to too much of Thandi's insatiable appetite. Her disturbing moans and groans, over the squeaky mattress, even more disturbing given Ikeni's revelation of his and Plaakie's relationship. For a person so bent on keeping his sexuality a secret, Plaakie had gotten involved with the one person in Nkululeko's small LGBT community who was infamous for his inability to keep a secret. In what was a lament on how his long-term secret lover was planning on leaving this damned place, preferably with him, and seeking asylum in Canada, Ikeni had unwittingly exposed his lover's identity when he moaned about how he did not want to leave *home* or lose Plaakie when he was finally ready to leave Thandi. 'But why should we be driven out?' Ikeni had continued without noticing his blunder. He had already left his original home in Kenya and had found home in South Africa and was not ready to attempt making home of yet another foreign place.

Now Thandi's absence makes the walls thinner. Makes Ejikeme's suppressed pleas more audible. Zama wonders if her loneliness and silence breathes through the walls audible enough

for her neighbours to hear. If they do, they induce indifference because no one, apart from her mother's friends, the Ejikemes and the Fatimas, bother to exchange a mere greeting with her. What all the others exchange are stolen glances. Glances that always inspire her self-righteous mother to spew out smug remarks like, 'See how they look at you? Can't you dress like a normal girl? You so pretty maan. Any man would marry you.' She stops to think that she is a replica of her mother. Her mother even more beautiful yet no man had bothered to marry her. Not even the man who impregnated her. Must be the bible. Must have driven him away.

She hears the music playing from Thandi and Plaakie' flat. Thandi's absence has, for a change, given way to a much welcome sound. The calmer recital of Tupac Shakur's *Life goes on*. It creates the perfect soundtrack to this constant childhood memory that has revisited her in her sacred and quiet space. It wears an oversized t-shirt, baggy pants and large headphones. It carries with it a skate board and backpack everywhere it goes. She cannot put a face or name to it, but she remembers the side looks and the closed, slanted and stretched lips that followed each account of how that weird girl from Block B, had died. The short illness; the accident in the bath tub; the severe headache: all different accounts but none mentioning the 'S' word or the slits on her writs. More like when someone dies of AIDS and it is much easier to say that he or she died of pneumonia, meningitis or TB but nothing close to that tabooed 'A' word. She remembers the hushed speculations; Ejikeme's 'maybe it was the drugs' or her mother's, '…or that demonic music they listen to these days,' or Fatima's '…or too much guilt from that wretched lifestyle of hers', a speculation that numbed her mother. Now Zama wonders what they would say of her, if she chose the way out that the girl in the oversized t-shirt, baggy pants and large headphones from her childhood had chosen. Would they blame it on the music? Would they blame it on the drugs that she has never taken? Would they blame it on the recent 'incident' that no one has dared to talk about despite the nearing of the trial date? Or would they blame it on her too; her and her wretched lifestyle?

She numbs the thoughts and glares at the unopen pregnancy test above the toilet tank. She rips open the test and then unbuckles her belt. She unzips her jeans and lowers them and her boxers just above her knees. This action creates a flashback in her head that all the free therapy has not quite flushed out. She brushes the flashback aside by concentrating more on her immediate action. She lowers her body into a squatting position and tries to squeeze some urine out from her arid bladder. Nothing comes. Instead she feels a warm thickness swelling up within

her labia. She excitedly pokes herself with her index finger in anticipation of scooping out that particular redness that she loathes. Despite her hatred of it, she longs for that red to stain her boxers. To stitch her back and abdomen with pain. To bruise her thighs and corrode her flesh like acid. Anything but pregnancy. She looks at her finger but what it has scooped out is not red but rather that other white uncomfortable thickness that she cannot seem to rid herself of. She rubs the white thickness onto the corner of her Chicago Bulls sweater and reverts to summoning urine into the Camphor Cream container that she holds, just below that one vice that God gave her that made men detect how or whom she ought to love. The one vice that invited an unjustified forced entry into her soul for daring to love differently and beyond the norm.

She is cautious this time not to attempt to pee directly onto the stick and risk another blank result and having to wait for the next day to buy another. It was dumb of her, after the first blank result to buy just one pregnancy test. She cringes her face, pushes down her belly muscles, putting pressure on her bladder and releases a few droplets of urine.

When she has collected enough, she takes the pregnancy test, uncaps it and dips it into the urine for two seconds before replacing the cap and returning the stick onto the toilet tank. She waits. The pregnancy test says wait for three minutes but she does not have enough patience for the suspense. She has come to know that three minutes is too long a time. Long enough to be pulled into an alley a block away from home, have a knife pressed against your chin, your shorts and underwear pulled down, unwelcome body parts shoved into your sacred space, and your body rocked back and forth, slammed hard against the concrete wall of Hot Bread Bakery and Confessionary where you, the only girl amongst a bunch of boys from the block had your first taste of cigarette, a week later -- your first drag of marijuana. And in that very same narrow alleyway where you first kissed a girl, your first taste of boy -- of man -- is forced between your quivering thighs all in just three minutes. Long enough to pin point your attacker in an identity parade, to be forced to look at him once more, absorb his face, and positively confirm that he was indeed your attacker. Confirm that he is the right person as if you could not positively identify a being that you have known all your life, even in your sleep. A being that has sat on the stoop of the grocery store playing table soccer or drinking dry gin or bear from khaki grocery bags with the boys while you, in your childhood days, ran in to buy bread and milk and ice lollies or chappies and still visited to buy bread and milk and twenty pack cigarettes and chappies in your young adult life.

She waits for the lapse of those three minutes. In silence. A silence distorted by the noises on the other side of the wall from Ejikeme and Azikiwe's apartment. She wonders why she stays with him? She does not bother to think why no one calls the police, but it bothers her that no one tries to intervene. Like her mother says, or used to say, when they used to talk, 'you can't interfere with domestic affairs. She must make the choice herself.'

The three minutes lapse and Zama slowly reaches out for the test. The world stands still and her body shakes. A sense of fear settles in her chest. She has known fear; but none like this. She recalls the near-death fear. The edge of an okapi against her chin fear. The sound of the buckling of her belt kind of fear. The sensing of her underwear being lowered to her knees kind of fear. She does not recall when the fear ended but she vividly recalls the replacement of the fear with a crippling weakness at the realization of the violation that she was being subjected to. The weakening sensation of moist lips sucking her neck and the heat of a vile breath grunting: 'You love it; don't you? You love it. I bet your little girlfriend can't give it to you like this.' The weakening effect of waiting for the results of an HIV test. But all that fear and weakness differs from the now fear and the now weakness that the cross sign reflected on the test conjures in her knees.

She sits in the bathroom for a while. And when she finally decides to walk out, her mother awaits her at the door. She dumps the test in her mother's open palms and goes to sit down. She senses her mother's silence. Her search for kind words. She senses that she does not know what to say. Since her return from hospital, her mother no longer openly laments about her wishes to have a grandchild birthed by her only daughter. Or her wishes for a wedding. She just smiles at her and speaks to her in a gentle voice, condescending in its gentleness. And now, having internalised the results of the test, she says: 'The bible says…' But Zama does not care for what the Bible says.

'I have made up my mind,' she lets her mother know. But her mother responds with a few instant bible verses. Zama decides whether to sing along to Tracy Chapman's, 'bang bang bang...shoot him down' coming out of Fatima's room or with Tupac's 'what you gonna do when you get out of jail…' Her mother's rhetoric about children being a gift from God -- two wrongs not making a right -- fly above her head as she decides to finish Tupac's lines from Plaakie and Thandi's apartment, 'I'm gonna buy me a gun -- Then what's next? -- Food and Sex -- house parties in the projects -- We going all night…' When the hook comes to an end, as if on cue,

Tracy too has stopped singing about banging and shooting him down, and the silenced noise from Fatima and Plaakie's' apartment gives way to the commotion in Ejikeme's apartment. At this point her mother is saying something about giving life and taking away life.

Zama abruptly rises from the sofa. 'Is this the kind of world you want me to bring a child into?' She walks towards the doors and her mother follows her pleading for her to wait. Zama opens the door and storms out leaving it ajar. Three steps from her door and she is in front of Ejikeme's door banging it and demanding for Azikiwe to open it.

'Zama wait. What are you doing? Leave it alone. It's none of our businesses.'

'That's exactly the problem Ma. It's nobody's business'.

'Let's talk about it in the house.'

'Now you wanna talk.'

She ignores her mother and continues banging against Ejikeme's door. The door opens and Azikiwe, without a word to Zama, pushes himself past her and walks away. When she walks in, she notes two large suitcases and Ejikeme's handbags. Ejikeme crawls on the floor reaching for her one sandal that has fallen off her feet. Zama walks towards her, picks the sandal and lowers herself before her, helping her sit up.

'You're bleeding Eji'.

Ejikeme chuckles, 'I am always bleeding my dear. But not anymore. Help me to my bags before he comes back.'

'No Eji. I mean under your dress. You're bleeding.'

'What?' Ejikeme lowers her head and notices the blood staining her skirt. She lifts her skirt towards her bulging belly and notices blood tricking down her thigh.

'Did he hurt my baby? My baby is okay right? Somebody please call an ambulance.'

When Zama raises her head, she notices her mother and few other tenants of Nkululeko Heights standing at the door, watching them from a safe distance.

'Don't just stand there. You heard her, call a freaking ambulance.'

An hour later no paramedics have yet arrived when Zama eventually decides to knock on Plaakie's door and wait a whole minute before her knock cuts through his loud music and he opens the door. He has no problem with driving Ejikeme to the hospital, but he makes it clear that his bakkie must be fuelled up first.

On the drive home from the hospital, Zama rubs her own belly, her thoughts fixated on the Ejikeme's sobs and pleas for God not to let her lose her baby. Plaakie does not say a word throughout the drive. In their years of being neighbours, she has never spoken to him before, apart from the corridor head nods, but from his rowdy escapades with Thandi, she does not quite picture him the quiet type. Feeling the necessity to break the monotonous silence, Zama voices the thoughts that have been running in her head. 'Ikeni says, this is our home and we cannot be pushed away.' She chuckles and then looks into Plaakie' face. 'But I cannot let this place do this to me or my baby Plaakie.' Although it is Plaakie that she is staring at, it is the image of a buttered Ejikeme screaming for her baby that idles in her head when she says this. Plaakie does not say a thing and rather looks unsettled by the mention of the name Ikeni.

'What is Canada like? How does this asylum thing work?'

'What?' Plaakie loses control of the steering wheel swerving the car briefly before he manages to regain control.

Zama notes the impact of the unintended revelation of her knowledge of his secret and cowers in her seat. As if by some tacit mutual agreement, no word is spoken to the other for the rest of the drive until they arrive at Nkululeko Heights and Zama reaches her mother's doorstep. Plaakie eventually speaks: 'You would make a great mother!'

'What?'

'You called it your baby... and the way that you were with Eji... you would make a great mother.'

Plaakie opens his door, three steps away from Zama's door and disappears into his apartment. Zama smiles and opens her door. The sight of her mother still awake, awaiting her, makes her immediately forget Plaakie. All she can think of are Kangaroos and Cricket. This is all that she knows of Canada. But something in her head says no -- wait -- what you have in mind is Australia. She knows nothing of Canada actually. But she just knows enough of Nkululeko to want to leave. But in her head, Ikeni's voice against the backdrop Kenyan folk music, still says, 'But why should we be driven out.'

LIONESS

She arranges the whites in a neat pile. The reds and the blues that are likely to run - she puts them aside in their own pile. Colour coordinated. Just the way her granny likes it. She knows her colours too well. You do not graduate from Grade R to Grade One easily if you do not know your colours, or the alphabet. A, B, C, D, E up to Z. You must know your numbers. One to ten. But she can count to twenty, even to thirty. She could count to forty too if thirty-three was not difficult to say.

The jeans have been also placed in their own pile. The laundry basket is now empty and she cannot think of anything else to do to help her granny. Her granny does not allow her to touch the water. She only allows her to help sort the clothes. She notices that the pile with the baby's cloths has not been separated by colour.

'Look Gogo, it looks like my t-shirt,' she smiles at the pink t-shirt in her hand. A pink t-shit with an image of Barbie, with long blond hair, a slim face and sparkling eyes.

'Eish, and my mummy loves me. She will bring me another t-shirt like this one when she comes. And beautiful clothes and shoes too. Isn't it Gogo? Isn't it?'

'Yes, she will my grandchild.'

Her granny's response does not sound convincing so she probes, 'She will come wont she?'

'I don't know my child.'

'Isn't it, it is now December, so she must come' After all, this is the only time they come; she has often heard her granny say to her friends. And even though her mother did not come the previous December, or the December before that; this is the time when all the others come, as her granny says: 'in drunken December, with their nice clothes, gold teeth and Carvelas, and their Njiva accents and tongues that call plates izitsha (instead of imiganu) and rain imvula (instead of izulu) and expect our gods to still hear them when the pray when our gods cannot even understand the foreign language that has taken over their tongues…In drunken December with their GP number plated cars, spinning in the locations narrow dirt roads,' causing her granny to scream, 'Ma-Sibanda! Suka em'ngwaqweni. Zizaku tshaya imotha zeGoli.' Screaming

for her to get out of the road because the speeding cars from the city of gold would knock the life out of her.

Her granny calls her ma-Sibanda. But that is neither her name nor her surname. Her name is Suku. Sukoluhle. But Gogo loves to call her Ma-Sibanda. That is when she is not calling her 'my grandchild' or 'my child.' She uses these terms interchangeably as if she forgets sometimes whether she is her grandmother or her mother. But even if the old woman is not her mother, the little girl loves her dearly because she folds her in large and warm arms when she is scared of the dark or when she has a bad dream. And when she is sad or when she cries when she has been hurt, her granny is the only one there to lift her to her lap and assure her that everything will be alright. She tells her not to cry. To be strong. After all, she is a conqueror.

Uma-Sibanda, Mdawini,
Umanqoba.
Wena oqine njenge nsimbi
Nina lamaqhawe lezi nkosi,
Wena uhlakaniphe ukudhlula lamadoda,
Wena oyi silwane.
Wena onqoba lapho okwehlula abanye

Because, she likes it when her granny chants these words to her, she does not mind being called Ma-Sibanda, even if it is neither her name nor surname.

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Her granny bends and picks up the pile of whites to throw into the foamy water. When she rises, she rests her hand on her back and exhales as if already exhausted before she has even commenced with the laundry. The little girl notices this and says, 'Why does Dreadi not buy a washing machine?'

'I don't know my grandchild. Perhaps he does not have money.'

'He has it. All the nice things in his house. And he is always buying beer.'

‘That does not mean he has money.’

The girl continues to motivate why she thinks Dreadi has money but her granny’s energy does not match hers, so her granny concludes her argument with a declaration that he will buy a washing machine soon.

When her granny finishes Dreadi’s laundry at around mid-morning Dreadi’s wife has made breakfast. The little girl looks at her granny for approval before she accepts the plate and the cup that she has been handed. Dreadi’s wife is a serious looking woman. She does not look like she smiles a lot or laughs a lot like Dreadi does. So, it is hard to tell whether one can trust her. But her granny sitting down for the breakfast that has been set on a table is all the approval that the little girl needs to eat in these people’s home.

When breakfast is over, her granny asks Dreadi’s wife if she could leave the little girl with her for a few hours. She has other laundry to do in Mzilikazi. Now the little girl sits quietly in Dreadi’s house. She calls him Dreadi, because he is a Rasta. She does not know his name, has never bothered about his name and is content with calling him Dreadi, despite granny having repeatedly stressed that he is now ‘Seka ma-Ndlo.’ At first, she is scared of remaining alone with Dreadi’s wife, but soon, she relaxes as she gets to play with the Dreadi’s baby, ma-Ndlo and her toys while Dreadi’s wife is typing on her laptop. She looks serious, like she does not want to be disturbed. Later when Dreadi’s wife stops with the typing, she goes out to bring in the dry laundry for ironing. It is now afternoon and Dreadi’s wife does the ironing herself. Her granny says she is stingy. Her granny always gets more money from Dreadi when his wife is not there because she will even iron the clothes and even clean the house and do the dishes.

The wife starts by ironing the baby’s clothes while the little girl watches. When she picks up the pink Barbie t-shit, the little girl’s face lights up.

‘Me too, I have a t-shirt like that. My mummy bought it for me.’ She tells Dreadi’s wife the story of the origins of her Barbie t-shirt. There is so much passion in her eyes. She does not know the story of Barbie, if there is a story, or who Barbie is, but she can read the Barbie print on her T-shirt and she loves the t-shirt because she, like all the other little girls at school, has a Barbie something. Some have Barbie satchels, some Barbie dresses and shoes and even pencils. She has a t-shit and matching pink pants that came from her mummy. It is her favourite possession despite the set having grown smaller and despite its pink colour and the Barbie print having succumbed to the wrath of her granny’s many washes.

While Dreadi's wife continues with the ironing, the little girl watches cartoons with the baby. Cartoons she has never seen before because Dreadi has DSTV, although he does not have a washing machine. They watch many cartoons and she even watches a cartoon with the Barbie from her t-shirt, 'Look, look', she calls out to Dreadi's wife forgetting that she is not her grandmother.

'Look, it is the Barbie from my t-shirt. And she is so beautiful'. Then she lets Dreadi's wife know of how much her mummy loves her. That her mummy loves her so much, she will buy her another t-shirt because her granny says the one she has is now too small for her and does not let her wear it when they go visiting or to church. That it is December and her mummy will be coming with nice clothes and nice things for her because her mummy loves her. Dreadi's wife just smiles as if amazed by this narration without saying much but a few 'wows' and 'really', and 'that's nice'. She does not stop with her ironing when she says this. She however glances at the girl now and then throughout her narration, while maintaining the smile on her face and the little girl decides that perhaps she is not a scary person after all.

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The sun has set and the little girl worries when her granny has still not returned. It has grown dark outside and the darkness is visible through the dining room windows. The little girl makes subtle remarks about her granny being late, but Dreadi's wife assures her that her granny will be there soon. She is now done with the ironing and has even prepared supper. The little girl accepts a plate of food from Dreadi's wife. She is not feeling that hungry but she accepts it just to be polite. She now likes Dreadi's wife and she does not want to disappoint her. Plus, Dreadi's wife's food looks delicious and she would like to taste it. She dips a fork into the spaghetti she has been dished out and eats a mouthful. She does not eat much thereafter. She does not like the long strips of green and red and yellow peppers, or the strips of peas or the carrots. So, she only eats the strips of chicken and plays with the spaghetti just as Dreadi's daughter does, putting one string of spaghetti between her lips and pulling the spaghetti into her mouth the way one would sip juice with a straw.

Dreadi comes home in the middle of supper. The first thing he does is kiss his wife on the cheek, then his daughter on the forehead before saying 'hi' to the little girl. He does not play

with her or make fun of her missing teeth as he usually does. Perhaps it is because his wife and daughter are there. Dreadi does not look as happy as he usually does. Dread disappears with his wife to the bedroom. When they come out now, his wife looks sad. They both sit on the couch. Both quiet. The music playing low in the background.

In the awkward silence, the little girl wishes to go home. She wants to ask about her granny but the quietness in the room is intimidating. A knock at the door puts a smile on the little girl's face. 'Finally, Gogo has come'.

But it is not her granny at the door. It is her aunty. Another one of Gogo's daughters; her mother's sister. She is with her husband. The little girl is nonetheless excited to see her aunt. 'Did Gogo send you to fetch me? Is she now home?' But the aunty does not seem as excited to see her. She is unhappy about something. The just arrived aunty and her husband disappear into the kitchen with Dreadi and his wife. They are gone for a few minutes and she begins to feel uncomfortable being left alone in Dreadi's big dining room. She needs an excuse to be in the kitchen with the adults. She has lost interest in playing with her food but the baby seems to be still enjoying spreading hers all over her feeding chair. And this becomes a perfect excuse.

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The talking in the kitchen is strange. Everyone talks in low voices. Aunty does not talk in her usual high-pitched voice. Dreadi's voice is softer than his everyday husky voice, and his wife is just silent. They talk almost in whispers. Audible enough whispers. She hears whispers about a car, whispers about it speeding off and not even stopping. Whispers about GP number plates. When she pushes the door into the kitchen, the talking ceases. No one's eyes meet hers and the atmosphere tells her that children are not welcome here. She thanks no one in particular for the food and places the plate on the sink and walks out forgetting to report that the baby has messed up everywhere.

Not long after, it is time to go but it does not feel right to leave Dreadi's house without Gogo when she came with Gogo. So she asks, 'Why did you not come with Gogo? Is it because it is now dark? Why did she not come to get me herself before it was dark? Did she work till late? She never works until its dark. We always go home before it is dark.'

No one offers a response. They walk out of Dreadi's flat. She, her aunty and her aunty's husband. Out in the dark. Walking in the dark to the taxis frightens her. Usually, at this time, they would already be in bed, her granny telling her a story or two. She clings on to her uncle's arm. His hand is cold and offers no comfort, not even when he carries her into his arms. She is still scared. But now being in her uncle's arms, her face directly faces her aunty's face. The first thing that she notices is the striking resemblance between her aunty and her grandmother, unlike her mother who took after her late grandfather. Glaring at her aunt's face, she hears her granny voice, vividly, as if she is amongst them, 'Do not fear my child. Kuzolunga. Qina'- All will be fine. Be strong. After all…

Ungu ma-Sibanda, Mdawini,
Umanqoba.
Wena oqine njenge nsimbi
Nina lamaqhawe lezi nkosi,
Wena uhlakaniphe ukudhlula lamadoda,
Wena oyi silwane.
Wena onqoba lapho okwehlula abanye

She smiles as the voice disappears somewhere within, for in her granny's voice, she is re-assured that there is nothing to fear for she is a lioness, uma-Sibanda, and that everything will be all right.

SMASHING TOMATOES

'Tomatoes: dollar– dollar. Onions: fifty cents. Green pepper: dollar – dollar.'
Her eyes dart about her surroundings. It is just after three and she has not yet set up her stall. Has been loitering about the bus terminal and the sidewalks all day with her box of stock and her baby on the back. Studying the movement. The pedestrians. A watchful eye on the human traffic clustering the terminal. On the lookout for the municipal police. Ready to scatter into alleys. There has been too much municipal movement of late. Blue suited men. Sky blue pants and tucked in sky blue shirts. Black belts. Matching shoes. Matching sjamboks. All black. The sjamboks too. Sjamboks fit for dispersing illegal vendors and hawkers regardless of their age, or sex or build. Sjamboks that send youthful lads swiftly into motion, dodging and darting in-between bodies crowding Fifth Avenue's bus terminal and pavements. Sjamboks that lift heavily bodied women from their zambias, up to their feet with the little of their stock that they can clutch in their hands as they trot away into the nearest alleys.

But no one can stop her from being here. No one can stop them from being here. No matter how many times they come with their sjamboks. They are ready to move. To be up on their feet and be swallowed by the crowds. To disappear into alleys or risk being thrown into municipal vans. But no one wants to be chucked into those vans. No one wants to part with even a meagre dollar in fines. No one wants their wares to be confiscated. So she is learning to be swift in her movement and has conceived a means of scooping her wares in one go. But it is difficult when one must first strap their baby on the back and also scoop their displayed wares quick enough. It requires skill. Art. Practise. To quickly throw your baby on the back, wrap your zambia strong around him to prevent him from falling, grab all four edges of the zambia on which all your wares are displayed and then lift the bagged vegetables off ground. Because this abrupt motion smashes the tomatoes, she figures that she must display them separately in a box easy to carry when hell breaks loose. A box she can carry in one hand while saddling the rest of her wares in the other hand and her baby on her back when she flees.

With this idea in mind, she is here again. Despite the previous day's raid and her narrow escape, she is here. Ready to try out her latest escape plan should – or rather – when the need arises. She is here. With the rest of the population that is not in jobs or schools or across borders. She is here. With the pick pockets – the con artists – the dice players – the fruit and vegetable

vendors – the second hand clothing traders – the belts, leather and cell phone accessories sellers – the airtime, sweets, freezits and cigarette peddlers – and everyone else who has something or anything to sell. She is here. All defiantly selling whatever there is to sell. And now – just after three – when the municipality's presence is no longer visible, for the first time in the day, they begin to assemble their stalls. She too begins to assemble hers. First, she unstraps her baby from her back. Places him safely in an empty tomato box. The baby is so tiny that it is swallowed by the box. Then she arranges her tomatoes in another box. She arranges her green peppers, her onions, and her potatoes on her zambia, all in neat rows. In pyramid shaped piles. All with prices. One dollar for the tomatoes, fifty cents for the onions, one dollar for the green peppers. Two dollars for the potatoes. Lastly, she arranges a few bunches of chaumolia and sprinkles water over them. She keeps a cautious eye on the streets while she does this. Even when she finally sits, her hands and feet are ready to get into motion.

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The city is rogue infested. Pavements and sidewalks clustered with illegal vendors. Vendors of pirated and stolen products. Vendors of fruit and vegetables that bury the city in filth. Vendors everywhere like a carpet of cockroaches. Nowhere for pedestrians to move freely without stepping on a vendor's wares or foot. 'We cannot have a nation of vendors,' the minister says. 'Illegal vendors,' she says. 'They have taken over our cities and we need to take our city back,' she says. 'We have set up vending bays and every vendor must have a vending licence and they must apply for these bays,' she says. 'They must get off the streets – they have seven days to go,' she says.

She says these words with such conviction and passion that he is convinced of his role in this noble mission. He wears his uniform with pride. Tucks in his sky-blue shirt into his sky-blue pants and wears his black belt with matching black shoes and carries his black sjambok and does his job diligently as the Minister requires. He conceives the importance of his job. To keep the city clean by all means. Despite the low salary. Despite the questions. Despite the rumours about what happens to the confiscated fruits and vegetables and other wares that are never returned to the owners – as if there is anything wrong with sometimes subsidising one's salary with a few helpings from the confiscated loot. Despite the allegations of municipal officials reselling the confiscated wares or secretly selling them back to the vendors. Despite it all, he executes his

mandate with vim. Carries his black sjambok and does his job diligently as the Minister requires. Sends the vendors scattering off when he whips his sjambok into the concrete slabs. Does not see himself whipping any of the vendors but loves the intimidating effect of the whip; the sound of it on concrete.

Day seven has arrived and they have ignored the ultimatum. To leave or be forcibly removed. He wears his sky-blue shirt, his sky-blue pants, his black belt, and his matching black shoes, polished. He has no need for his black sjambok today. Today they take out the big guns. The Municipal trucks to crush, smash, and destroy all that is on the streets in non-demarcated areas. No filth will be left on the streets.

He feels the power of the beast that he is commanding when he turns the steering wheel into Fifth Avenue. Feels its power when he sounds his hooter, signalling for vendors to get out of the way. The unsuspecting crowd on Fifth scatters like cockroaches on his approach. A rush of adrenalin awakens his body and shakes it with the movement of the truck as it scoops vender's wares off the ground, into its front loader, throws the wares into the rear of the truck and drives over the other displayed wares, stopping ahead to scoop more wares. Fruits and vegetables are crushed. Tomatoes smashed open and flattened into patches of red paste. Vendors and pedestrians scatter. Those with stalls further ahead rush to pick up, pull away, scoop, and drag their wares away from the path of the approaching truck. A woman rushes to pick up one of her two boxes and secures it within her left arm. With her right hand, she grabs the four corners of the zambia on which her vegetables are displayed and rushes to toss the box and the vegetables, now bagged into the zambia into a nearby alley out of the way of the approaching truck. She rushes back to her stall for the remaining box. But the truck is now already too near. The woman rushes towards the box attempting to beat the truck to it, screaming for it to stop. But the driver does not listen and he does not stop. He proceeds. Driven by the beast that he is in control of.

Too close to the box. The woman wails: 'Stop!'
Other vendors scream and signal for him to stop. The hysteria startles him. But he is already too close to stop. The wheels of his beast are already driving over the wares on the stall immediately before the hysterical woman's stall. And these stalls are small. The left wheel is already rolling over the box at the woman's stall – flattening it before he manages to bring the truck to a halt.

Vendors and pedestrians now stand in front of the halted truck, their mouths wide open glaring at the wailing woman crawling under the truck. Amid the commotion and his confusion, his first instinct is to disembark the truck and investigate the object of everyone's attention. But bloody eyes meet him and agitated hands grip him the moment he steps out. A slap lands on his face – a punch below his eye – multiple kicks about his body – fists pounding his back, *all for just smashing bloody tomatoes*. He struggles to set himself free – he screams – apologises – pleads. But no one listens and no one stops. Their hands are hungry – feet angry.

He falls to the ground. Instinctively, he attempts to crawl under the truck for protection, but the sight that grips his eye draws him into inaction. He does not feel the pull of his legs and the dragging of his body from under the truck or the rough concrete scraping skin off his face and limbs. His has become numb and surrenders to the mob as he absorbs the sight of the wailing mother in front of a box of splattered guts and red and cracked bones.

EXODUS

Beit Bridge is hot with evil intent. You do not open the windows; the air that blows inside is hot. You fan yourself with your bare hands or a book and are glad when the Quantum stops for recess. You will run to wash your face, that is, if there is water in the bathrooms at the recess point. If not, you will have to wash your face at the border, in your case, at the first recess point after you cross the border, probably in Musina. You will wash your face there despite the warnings in almost every public toilet in Musina which read: 'Wash your hands only, do not wash your face or your body or clothes in the basins.' You know who these warnings are directed at, just as you know who is being addressed by the notices in the toilets at the South African border post which read: 'Use tissue only. No cloths or Zim dollars.' You will however still wash your face. Maybe even brush your teeth and wipe your armpits.

You do not find any water at this recess point, so you cannot wash your face and do not even attempt to use the lavatory in its unusable state. You hold it in, reserve it for later, after you cross the border. When you return to the Quantum, the driver instructs you and a few others, not to get into the Quantum, but to get into a Mazda 326. He tells you to leave your luggage in the Quantum, but says you can take your handbags. There is nothing suspicious about the instructions, so you comply.

The 326 leaves the recess point but does not take the main road that leads to the border. It takes a detour and you travel into a part of Beit Bridge that you are unfamiliar with. You become suspicious but do not say a thing. The Mazda turns into a gravel road and travels a distance into a bushy area. Your heart starts to pound. This is not what you signed up for. You tremble, and soon decide to give your fear a voice. 'Where are we going?'

'Where the others are?' The driver responds.

'What others when those we left Bulawayo with remained behind?'

The driver does not respond and the deeper you drive into the bush, the more you worry. A picture forms in your mind and panic starts to build. You try to protest, to insist on going back. But the driver does not entertain you. No one bothers to respond to you or to say anything to put you at ease. The other four passengers, with whom you are tightly squeezed at the back of the car, all look at you like you are mad. Like, did she not know how this is done; like this one is

going to be trouble; like, can't we just leave here. Even the two sharing the passenger's seat in front turn their heads to see the face of the protesting one.

The car arrives at a house in the middle of the bushy area and you are all instructed to exit. Everyone disembarks but you refuse. 'Take me back,' you say. 'I am going back with you. Take me back to where you took me from.'

'Woman, I am doing my job. My job is to bring you here and I am going back in a different direction. So get out.'

When you refuse to get out, he drags you, clasping you in his arms, wrestling you to prevent you from trying to open the doors. He pushes you to the ground, jumps into the car. You rise to your feet, rush to his window, grab the door handle. The two of you wrestle to open it. But because you are a female; less strong, he manages to open the door, slide himself into the seat and pull shut the door behind him. You stare at his sweaty face through the glass. Despite your frustration and anger, you are smart enough not to follow your impulses when they urge you to maintain your grip on the door. You let go as he starts the car, just before he drives off.

As if deliberately, you are left to choke in the dust left behind by the 326. You notice the combination of shocked and humoured eyes of the other six passengers. Their eyes suggest that you should be embarrassed but you are not. There is no space for embarrassment here – only anger. Immense anger. You feel entitled to the anger, so the anger settles into the space that embarrassment ought to have occupied, and you vent, to no one in particular, about how you did not pay your money for this. Despite your anger, you follow the group into the bush. They seem to know where they are going so you follow them as you fear remaining behind alone. You walk a short distance and you stop behind a huge rock where you find a larger group of people sitting. Your group joins them, and you too are compelled to join.

Still enraged, you take a seat behind the rock and immediately pull out your cell phone. You go to the list of recent calls and dial the number listed as 'Babe'. The phone does not ring. A voice in your ear says: 'the number you have dialled is not available at the moment, please try again later.' You dial the number three more times. The last attempt goes straight to voicemail. Indifferent to the presence of dozens of strangers, you break into tears.

You leave a choked voice message that says: 'Baby; those people of yours drove us into a bush and dumped us there. Now they are gone and none of them is here. Please call me when

you get this.' The women around you shush you off and whisper for you to lower your voice. Even in their lowered voices, you easily pick up the Zuluness in their speech.

Babe does not immediately call back. You sit with your rage for almost two hours. It has grown dark. You listen to the silence around you. There are over twenty of you and no one speaks. No one moves, unless to go and relieve themselves behind a rock not too far out of sight. With the frequency of these nature calls, the pressure on your bladder exerted by the contents you had saved to empty after crossing the border gives in, forcing you to participate in this indecency.

You resume with your sitting and waiting. In silence. The silence induces fear. You are both too annoyed and too scared to ask what you are waiting for or why you are here. But the way everyone sits, patiently, seemingly unfazed, implies that there is nothing abnormal about their being here - them, sitting in the dark, in silence, behind huge rocks as if hiding, below the indigo sky, unable to speak, mosquitoes feasting on their blood.

You are startled by the sudden ringing of your phone, breaking the monotonous silence. The name 'Babe' flashes on the screen. Before you answer, a male voice murmurs; 'switch off that phone you idiot, you'll get us caught.' You, quite frankly, do not mind being caught. You actually wish to get caught. Being caught just might be the safest thing that could happen to you. Emboldened by both fear and the weakening effect of your powerlessness, you leave the phone to ring and bark back at him, loud enough for all others to hear:

'You are the idiot. I do not care if we get caught. I did not choose to be here and you cannot stop me from using my phone.'

You revert to your phone. It is flashing the low battery sign but you still feel the need to first vent before telling Babe of your dilemma. You say, 'I have not even been gone for long and already you are switching off your phone on me. I have been calling and calling and you are only returning my call now?'

You do not wait for Babe to explain to you about the power cuts and his battery running flat. You proceed to repeat the message you had left on his voicemail about these people dumping you in the bush. You say, 'Now they are gone and none of them is here. What if something happens to me Babe? I am not crossing any river. They rather leave me here.'

Your battery dies out and the phone switches off. You hear murmurs around you about how mad you are and how you would get everyone in trouble. They are all in the same language.

Not quite Zulu and not really Ndebele. You want to tell them all to shut up with their borrowed dialects; pretending to be Zulus amongst themselves and while they are still in their own country. But you remember Babe's words one day when he said, 'How different are we from them? We predominantly speak in English.' So you leave it and merely tell them to leave you alone. Your rage is justified. You paid them your money. The murmuring voices say, they too paid their money. The same amount as yours. But you do not care about them or their money. You care about your money and what you were told it would do for you. The faces around you look at you like: she is just a spoilt brat; like: she thinks she is special; like: did she really not know what she was getting herself into. But you do not care because you do not know them and they do not know you and you.

Another smaller group emerges from the dark and joins you. Finally, two men from the newly arrived group summon you into movement. Everyone rises and starts to walk. One of the men tells you to move with the least noise as possible. You ask the men where you are going. They ask you where you were going when you left home. You say, 'but they told me that we will not cross the river.' They assure you that indeed there will be no river crossing. They tell you that the river is full and no one would embark on such a suicidal and primitive mission, and besides, they do not work like that.

You are not satisfied with this response. 'But they said that we would drive smoothly pass the border gates without us even getting out of the car. Now this. This is not what I paid for.'

They say, 'Who is they? Who amongst us did you give your money to?'

You are left without a response. Neither of these two men are the man in whose large hands you had hesitantly surrendered your money nor the man, who upon seeing you walk past Selbourne Hotel, touted 'his' services and had convincingly assured you of your safe conveyance and arrival. None of them is here to meet your rage. Even the driver of the Quantum you left Bulawayo with is not here. Even the people you left your Quantum with when you were transferred into 326 are lost somewhere in the crowd. You do not remember their faces so you cannot even stick close to them. You had not bothered to memorise their faces.

The men say, 'You have a choice. Either remain here or continue silently with us without risking everyone being caught.' You sense the darkness that surrounds you and the choice is obvious. So you tag along with the rest.

You walk. You walk and walk. You walk like you have never walked before. You walk in a single file on a narrow path. Thick shrubs surround you. You walk fast paced and without a pause. Prickly leaves and twigs brushing against your bare shoulders and legs. Sharp pebbles penetrating through the soles of your Converse All-Stars. You walk with no words spoken amongst you. It is as if there is a secret code barring speech. The only sound there is that of your obedient feet ferrying you to an uncertain destination. The sound of your heavy breathing. Occasionally there is a sound of movement within the thick shrubs that causes you all to halt, in complete silence, at the signal of the men in command, before they signal you to move again with minimal noise.

The discreetness at which you are expected to move summons fears. Your feet are now in pain, but fear commands you to tread on. Fear and the whisper of your leader, 'walk faster.' You increase your pace. You almost run but the leader says not to run. So you just walk faster. It is though you are fleeing some imminent danger. Some war, rebels or something. But there is no war where you are coming from. No rebels or genocide. The trail that you leave behind is not drenched in blood either. Just fear. Lots of fear and not knowing what the immediate future holds. A different kind of war where casualties are not numerated by body counts but by a different kind of death. A death nonetheless. Hence here you are: in pitch darkness, marching like Israelites on an exodus out of Egypt, led by some self-appointed Moseses. Moseses who have no power to split the seas or ward off your unknown and probably non-existent pursuers.

It startles you when one of the Moseses orders you to stop and instructs all the men to pick up as many big stones as they can. The path has grown wider. The Moses instructs the women to walk in pairs. Orders the rock armed men to walk besides the paired woman. Are we anticipating an attack, you wonder? It is more fear than wonder. You fear death and worse: rape. You see your story in the paper or worse, yourself on Special Assignment, your eyes covered with a black strip, telling of your gang rape ordeal at the hands of the infamous magumaguma. You think of your colleagues. Your boss. Your parents, who would just die if they knew where you were. What would they say if they read of you in the papers? Gang raped and massacred by magumaguma, or swallowed by crocodiles, or drowned in the Limpopo River where four were reported to have drowned over the festive season.

The other Moses directs a man walking beside you to hand over the little girl that he is carrying to a woman so that his hands are free should the need to use the stones arise. The man

asks you to carry the child. Hoping that a good deed will earn you God's favour should hell breaks loose, you take the toddler into your arms. You carry the child and instantly feel her unbearable weight. You none the less try to increase your pace so that you are not amongst the few trotting behind.

After a short walking distance, the child starts to slip off your grip and you have to push her up with your hip to prevent her from falling. Her weight drains and slows you down. Plus the child reeks of urine. Matured urine. You even feel the drying moisture of her tracksuit pants. She must have urinated on herself. It must be the fear. What child of her age would fail to drop her panties and urinate in a vast bush where grown men and women have been unzipping their pants and crouching behind rocks to relieve themselves without the decency of moving to a more secluded area? Here, where all dignity is lost. And all kindness too. You regret having agreed to carry the child at the thought of a Magumaguma catching up with you now that you are trotting behind. You think, where is its mother?

You frown as the child almost slips from your waist again and she sinks her foot into your crotch to maintain her grip. You feel the pain of her boot in your crotch so you push her leg aside, harshly. She strengthens her grip around your neck and presses her foot hard against you once more to prevent herself from falling. You pinch her leg and push it aside once more. The child does not cry. It is definitely fear. You are shocked by your own meanness. You had no idea that fear induced such cruelty. A few hours earlier, while walking through Centenary Park, arm in arm with your Babe, this kid would have been so adorable. Now she is just a heavy beast exposing you to the risk of being attacked by some Magumaguma.

You think, yah: this is suffering. You look around and note a couple of mothers and even men with children and they seem to move at ease. Following the Moseses with no question. Everyone seems content with the way they are being ferried across the border. No one complains. But you wonder what their excuse is. Even after having been mugged of your handbag, with your passport inside just a day before your scheduled return, you would not have been here voluntarily. Who voluntarily subjects themselves and their children to such? In fact, who in 2013 does not have a passport? You think, if one can afford one thousand five hundred rand for this, then surely one can afford a measly five hundred rand to properly apply for a passport.

One Moses comes to you and orders you to walk faster.

‘How can I walk fast, this child of it is heavy,’ you grumble.

The Moses takes the child away from you much to your relief, and probably the child's relief too. You rush on ahead to ensure that you are in the safety of the middle of the pack. You walk and do not look back. You think of the woman from the bible who got turned into a pillar of salt, and you are tempted to look back. But fear, not of being turned into a pillar of salt, but fear of something less factious but more plausible like the sight of a Magumaguma charging towards you, forces you to only look ahead and to pray hard.

When you reach some sort of flat rock, one Moses commands you to stop. You are told to sit and remain silent. You reckon that these Moses are sensitive after all; they recognise our need to stop and rest. But you do not wish to stop. You wish to continue with the march and reach your destination. You have been walking for what seems to be hours and you do not even seem to be nearing where ever it is that we are heading. But you are not resting here per ser. You are merely stopping so the Moseses can take a few of you and proceed with them while the rest of you wait for your turn. One Moses counts: ‘one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight: you come with me.’ The eight, plus the Moses walk ahead and soon disappear. The Moses returns alone after a very long passage of time. He collects the next batch of people: one, two, three, four, five, six, seven and you are the eighth. You follow him.

You walk and then climb a steep slope. Then you see yourselves walking along a rail way line with your bodies bent. From the railway line where you are walking you can see the bridge and pedestrians walking over the bridge towards the South African boarder gate. On the other side of the bridge is heavy traffic and more pedestrians squeezing themselves past the slow moving and rather jammed traffic. It looks like an evacuation scene from Independence Day or any such movie, just without the panic or urgency of a people fleeing an alien attack, the end of the world or some such movie like thing.

You walk and try not to look sideways. But your eyes slip towards the other side and spot a few of the pedestrians pointing at your troop, some with their cell-phones directed towards you with little lights flashing. You remove your scarf from your neck and throw it above your head to conceal your dreadlocks and as much of your face as possible. But this does not take away the effect of the feeling that someone who knows you could still identify you from your posture. The walk across the rail line seems longer than the walk from the Zimbabwean border gates to the South African gates. So you are gratified when the rail walking ends in a downward concrete

paved pathway leading into a bushy path. You are even much gratified to learn that the rail walking has not only taken you past the Zimbabwean side but you have left the river somewhere behind and there will be no literal river crossing or crocodiles to encounter. You continue walking until the path leads you to a security check point. There you find immigration officials. They talk with your Moses. One of the officials counts you with his fingers.

'Eight,' he says. He stretches out his hand and your Moses gives him a thin folded bundle of South African Rand notes.

You resume with the walking again until you reach an area where the first group of eight is awaiting you. There you sit and wait with them. You are told, once more, to arm yourselves with stones and to sit closely together. The Moses leaves you and returns in the direction that you had come. When he returns again after a lengthy time of absence, he is with another group of eight. He disappears one last time and returns with the last group. When you are all congregated he commands you all to get up and resume with the walking.

You walk again and walk. You think that if you were to ever tell of this exodus, the story would be pregnant with monotonous walking. Tiring walking. You walk and walk until you start sleep walking. You walk until the sky sheds its darkness off into dawn. And with all that bush walking, you finally see a patch of tarred road ahead. There is joy in your heart but one Moses says, 'Do not get too close to the road. You must not be seen.' He says you must maintain your silence. A Quantum will come around to collect you. You see the Moses make a call. You all wait, siting on rocks, behind trees and shrubs, hidden from the road. In silence until a woman's baby cries.

The child is just but an infant. The Moseses are annoyed. One of them whispers harshly, 'You, keep your child silent.' As if the child senses the hostility in Moses' voice, the child wails even louder. Perhaps in fear. The mother looks younger than you are. You feel sorry for her. You do not know much about babies but its frailty suggests that it is a few weeks old. The mother looks like she too wants to cry when she says: 'Hadi kunyarara mwana wacho uyu.' She says this as if the baby is not hers: 'the baby of it does not want to stop crying.' The woman's biggest offense is having spoken in Shona. Now the Moses says in Ndebele: 'AmaShona ayahlupha– Shonas are a problem. Where was she going with such a small child in the first place? On top of that she is a pay forward. Now we are going to get caught because of a crying baby when we have already arrived.' The other Moses says: 'Vele ayabe esiya ngaphi amaShona? Angithi

sababalekela lelizwe labo– In any event where are these Shonas going? Isn't it we not run away from them and their country?'

He continues, 'Now they are following us when they cannot even speak Ndebele. We speak their Shona. But they cannot speak Ndebele. How will they learn Zulu? They will be the ones to be attached first when xenophobia begins again.'

Your tongue itches to say something in defence of your mother's tribe, the way it always itches when remarks like these are made by people of your father's tribe. But you say nothing, just as you always say nothing. But now, you are more worried about been caught as the baby is now crying hysterically as if the Moses's insult was expressly directed to it.

The one Moses says, 'You mother, breast feed that child of yours.'

The mother complies. The child instantly stops crying, much to your relief.

Finally a Quantum comes to collect you. It collects the first batch of people and you are amongst the first. Because the mother and her child are a 'pay forwards', she is left behind with the remaining few. The Quantum leaves you back at the garage next to the border gate.

There you find the other Quantum you left Bulawayo in, awaiting you with angry passengers who seemingly did not know what they had, for hours, been waiting for.

They look at you with agitated eyes. But after the night you have had, you do not care. Not even when you note the dust round your converse shoes and the dirt that has accumulated around the legs of your Guess jeans. In your natural environment, you would not be caught dead in a state like this. But you see the little urine rigging girl from last night, playing with her doll. Already forgotten of your ordeal. She sees you and smiles at you. You smile back. Then you laugh. A chuckle rather.

You chuckle because it is a great relief to have made it here. And tomorrow, you will walk amongst your colleagues. Walk into the High Court building with confidence as if there is nothing illegal about you. And you will engage in the filing of pleadings and notices in the registrar's office and from the High Court, you will steal some work time to go to that big interview, at that bigger law firm, that you could not afford to miss while waiting for a new passport. And by the end of the day, this whole exodus will be long forgotten while you await the outcome of the interview and of cause, a call from home that your new passport is ready for collection.

You, and the few you came with, join the other passengers and you are given passports to hold on to for the rest of the journey. The passport you are given belongs to a three-year-old boy. You immediately doze off when the Quantum takes off and only wake up to a voice that demands a passport. You raise your head to meet the face of a uniformed man peering through your window. You note that you are at a roadblock. The man says: 'Msadi, why you pretend to be sleeping. Do you not have passport? Are you border-jumper?'

Still in your just-woken-up stupor, you fail to respond.

'Can you not talk?'

You hand him 'your' passport and cross your fingers hard, speechless. But under your breath, you curse. You curse at goddam Easter and for having chosen to go home when you had an interview coming up just after the Easer holidays – a time when everyone travels home – and everyone returns in troops – and every goddam immigration official is on the road, either trying to fatten their pockets or trying to be the employee of the month. You stop the cursing when he hands you back your passport and demands the next passenger's passport. When he has gone through all the passenger's passports, he goes to the driver's window. The driver slides him a folded note from his wallet. You return to your sleep as the Quantum drives off.

You are awakened again at the next roadblock. You are asked to open your passports. Your passport is once more scrutinised and given back to you without a question. The driver takes another note from his wallet, slides it into the official's hand and the Quantum drives away.

You are wide awake when you approach the third roadblock and wonder, when will these roadblocks end. But you do not panic. The driver, however, says 'Shit. It's an army roadblock.' You study the roadblock and note the many men and women packed in a large deportation truck. Some sitting down in rows along the roadside, hiding their faces from oncoming traffic. You ponder on the meaning of the driver's reaction as one of the soldiers' signals for your Quantum to stop. The quantum stops. You look at the driver. He has sweat beads on his forehead. He rests his elbows on the steering wheel and momentarily buries his face in his hands. He wipes the sweat off his face and takes a deep breath. Hesitantly, he opens the door and steps out of the vehicle. His wallet, with enough money inside, remains on his seat and his palms are empty.

CONNECTED

Yesterday

Bestie: *Omg! 12 msgs Bibs.* *20:32*

Bestie: *This is some serious phone bombing.* *20:33*

Bestie: *We haven't forgotten u.* *20:34*

Bestie: *Cell is just on silent. Sorry.* *20:35*

BFF: *Enjoying yr selves?* *20:36*

Bestie: *Omg Bibs, U hv no idea wht u mcing out on.* *20:37*

BFF: ☹☹☹ *20.38*

BFF: *Tel me abt it. Hvng so mch fun u even 4got abt me.* ☹ *20:38*

Bestie: *Lol. U so dramatic. U'll always be my Bff. Got da pics I sent?* *20:39*

Bestie: *Mst c the interior of ths sexy beast.* *20:40*

Bestie: *Top billing thngz* *20:40*

BFF: *Wow...so divine. I h8t my dad.* ☹☹☹ *20:41*

BFF: *Wait. R those my ruby earrings Angel is wearing. The ones she swore she gave me back.* *20:41*

Bestie: *Lol. She says no.* *20:42*

BFF: *Liar. Wil kil hr wn i see u guys 2 moro.* *20:42*

Bestie: *Kkkk.* *20:43*

BFF: *Ya'll living it up. Real Champaign. Swiss chocolate.* *20:43*

Bestie: *YOLO!!! You Only Live Once* *20:44*

BFF: *My parents clearly don' get that. But i see why it's easy to forget yr bestie.* *20:45*

Bestie: *Kkkk. Didn't forget you. Was wting for coast to be clear.* *20:45*

BFF: *Wht coast. Whr u now?* *20:46*

Bestie: *Still in limo. We going to pick up "more frnds".* *20:46*

BFF: *Hmm... new frnds. Makes sense now.* ☹☹☹ *20:47*

Bestie*: Lmao. Sulking dsn't suit you. Ddn't have chance to take out my*

secret cell. These guys are such fossils. So ancient. *20:48*

BFF: *Hw old?* *20:48*

Bestie: *Angel's bf is 25. Other looks 30 smthing, like yo brotha.* *20:49*

BFF: *Lol. Really ancient.* *20:49*

Bestie: *Tld you. They tk away our cells wn we got in ride. Said 'kids' these days don't knw hw to have fun wt out their cells So like my dad. Had to 'surrender' our cells 'to access to this A- lister party'.* *20:51*

BFF: *So u gave em yr phon. Jst like dat?* *20:51*

Bestie: *Crystal refused to give em hers, so they left hr. So lame hey. So i gave em mine. But thanks to my backup bff exclusive secret cell. I'm connected.* *20:53*

BFF: *But dats weird. Y wld they take your phons. Whts so A-Lister abt ths party. Aint u worried?* *20:54*

Bestie: *Nt really. My dad does dat all the tym when we go on holiday. But u knw dat. M' used to it.* *20:55*

BFF: *But dats yr dad. U don't knw ths guys.* *20:55*

Bestie: *Its Angel's bf and his cousin.* *20:55*

BFF: *But we don knw em.* *20:56*

Bestie: *Angel knws em. It's hr bf and hs czn. Her bf. His cousin. And we knw Angel mos. Wts da big deal?* *20:57*

BFF: *It's just weird.* *20:57*

Bestie: *Don't worry abt dat. We still connected aint we. You knw I neva leave my backup.* *20:58*

BFF: *Kkkk. Of coz. Years of practice.* *20:58*

Bestie: *Can't touch this.* *20:59*

Bestie: *But its a bit lonli here without you. Angels 'busy' with her new Bffs. Not even talkin much to me.* *20:59*

BFF: *Shame. Wish i was there. Seriously h8t my dad though. 8pm curfew on matric dance night.* *21:00*

Bestie: *Understand. Just feel out of place.* *21:00*

BFF*: Don stress. U'll feel better at the party.*

Bestie: *If we get there. Only 2 hrs left before my curfew and we still driving to these frnds. And Angel and i must still rush back to school hall and act like we never left before dad comes to collect us.* *21:01*

BFF: *U'll be there soon and u'll be telling me hw much fun u having. Even if its jus for an hour. And Im so gonna mis out.* *21:02*

Bestie: *Don't worry. I'll kp you updated. You can go through every moment of tonight with me as if you here.* *21:02*

BFF: *But its not the same. Like xxx with a rubber.* *21:03*

Bestie: *Kkkk* *21:03*

Bestie: *Think we've arrived. We slowing down.* *21:04*

Bestie: *Let me hide cell. Chat l8r.* *21:04*

BFF: *U see; worse than xxx with a rubber.* *21:05*

Bestie: *Kkkkk* *21:05*

Today

Bestie: *63 msgs! WTF.* *03:05*

Bestie: *Y you phone bombing me. Whts da 911?* *03.06*

BFF: *Oh. Shit. U ok?* *03:06*

Bestie*: Ya.* *03:07*

Bestie: *Just tired.* *03:08*

Bestie: *Y?* *03:09*

BFF: *Y? Evry ones worried abt u.* *03:10*

Bestie: *Y?* *03.10*

BFF: *63 msgs. The missed calls. No response.* *03:11*

Bestie: *Sorry. cell still on silent. Was sleepin.* *03.12*

Bestie*: Knocked out.* *03: 13*

Bestie: *Drnk too much.* *03:14*

Bestie: *Don even knw hw I got home.* *03:14*

BFF*: Wt u talking abt. Everyone' looking for you. Whr u. Did u rd my msgs.* *03:14*

Bestie: *63 msgs? Lol.* *03:15*

Bestie: *I just wok up.* *03:16*

Bestie: *M in bed.* *03:17*

Bestie: *Whoz looking 4 me?* *03:18*

BFF: *Y u typing so slow. In bed where?* *03:18*

Bestie: *Bed. Home.* *03.18*

Bestie: *M tired. Chat tomorrow.* *03:19*

BFF: *Seriously Pearl. Whr the fuck r u. They looking for u @ home. Angel's parents too. Rd my earlier txts* *03:19*

BFF: *Check your freaking whats-apps.* *03:20*

BFF*: R u still thr?* *03: 23*

Bestie: *Fuck!* *03:25*

Bestie: *My dad's gonna kill me.* *03:25*

Bestie: *Must o been so drunk. I thnk I passed out @ da party* *03:26*

Bestie: *And its past 3am. I'm so dead.* *03:27*

BFF: *R u serious Pearl? Both of u? That drunk?* *03:27*

BFF: *You with Angel right?* *03:28*

Bestie: *Yeah, she's passed out too. Weird.* *03:29*

BFF: *U'll have to call yr dad right now.* *03:29*

Bestie*: No; he'll kill me.* *03:30*

BFF: *Everyone's worried abt u guys.* *03:30*

Bestie: *I knw. I jst can't call him. I'll ask Angel's bf or someone to drop us off.* *03:31*

Bestie: *Fuck. da room is locked.* *03:32*

BFF: *Wht room.* *03:32*

Bestie*: Whr we sleeping.* *03:32*

BFF: *Y.* *03:33*

Bestie: *Don't knw.* *03:33*

BFF: *Who u with.* *03:33*

Bestie: *Angel and 2 other girls. All passed out. And da freaking door is not opening. No key* *03:35*

BFF: *Dats weird.* *03:35*

BFF: *So Y's da door locked.* *03:36*

Bestie: *Fuck Bibie. I don't knw. I'm tryna think.* *03:36*

BFF*:* *K. Did they give you back yr cells.* *03:37*

Bestie: *Dont remember.* *03:37*

Bestie: *Dont see my purse.* *03:39*

BFF: *Whr r u. The area.* *03:40*

Bestie: *Don't knw.* *03:42*

BFF: *Wht do u knw Pearl. And Angie?* *03:42*

Bestie*: She's not waking up.* *03:43*

BFF: *Wake her.* *03:43*

Bestie: *Been tryn. The other girls aint waking up either.* *03:44*

Bestie: *They all sleeping weird* *03:44*

Bestie: *Like they seriously passed out.* *03:45*

BFF: *Send me a picture.* *03:45*

BFF: *F* Angel, they look dead.* *03:46*

Bestie*: They not. Don't say that.* *03:46*

BFF: *Check their pulse* *03:47*

Bestie: *Stop it Bibie. You freaking me out* *03:47*

Bestie*: And Y is the freaking door locked* *03:47*

BFF: *Can't you call out to someone.* *03:48*

Bestie*: I've been doing tht. No one's responding. It's like no one is here. Its very quiet. Im kind of scared* *03:49*

BFF: *Maybe you shld call your dad* *03:49*

Bestie: *No, I cant. He cant come here, he'll kill me.* *03:49*

BFF: *Seriously Pearl?* *03:50*

BFF: *I'm getting my dad. Sumting is not right.* *03:50*

Bestie*: No, he'll call my dad. Wait.* *03:50*

BFF: *No Pearl. I'm getting my dad.* *03:51*

Bestie: *Wait* *03:51*

BFF: *I hear someone coming* *03:52*

Bestie: *Just hide your phone. Just in case...* *03:52*

#

Bestie: *Bibie* *19:53*

Bestie: *Help me Bibie. They are taking us sumwhr.* *19:54*

Bestie*: In a truck.* *19:56*

Bestie: *Its Angels bf & his czn & 2 other men* *19:56*

Bestie: *Bibie I'm scared.* *19:59*

BFF: *Pearl!* *19:59*

BFF: *Is that you?* *20:09*

BFF*: Are you there?* *20:10*

BFF: *Its daddy.* *20:10*

BFF: *Are u getting our messeges?* *20:11*

Bestie: *Daddy. I'm sorry.* *20:11*

BFF: *Are you okay baby?* *20:11*

Bestie: *Im scared. They taking us sumwhr in a truck.* *20:12*

BFF: *Where are you?* *20:12*

Bestie: *In a truck* *20:13*

Bestie*: Moving truck.* *20:13*

BFF*: It okay love don't panic* *20:14*

Bestie: *Can you tell where you are. Road signs. Anything.* *20:14*

BFF: *Don't know* *20:14*

Bestie: *Truck is moving.* *20:15*

BFF: *No windows. Just one through to driver's seat* *20:16*

BFF: *Who are you with* *20:16*

Bestie*: Other girls, abt 8. Just us at back of truck.* *20:17*

BFF*: And Angel?* *20:18*

Bestie*: They took her. She wouldn't wake up.* *20:18*

BFF*: Do you have a picture of her boyfriend or anyone from the party?* *20:19*

Bestie*: No. Just of us in their limo.* *20:20*

BFF:*Okay, can you send me that.* *20:21*

BFF: *If you can, please take another picture of where you are.* *20:23*

Bestie: *K.* *20:23*

BFF: *Just be careful.* *20:23*

Bestie: *Got it.* *20:26*

BFF: *Don't panic love.* *20:27*

BFF: *Everything will be fine.* *20:28*

Bestie: *Dad, I thnk they saw me.* *20:29*

Bestie: *Truck is slowing down.* *20:29*

BFF: *Don't panic love. Hide the phone.* *20:29*

BFF: *Pearl. What's happening?* *20:30*

BFF: *Pearl!* *20:31*

ESCAPING THE FLAMES

Ingredients:

Anger.

The right amount of Anger.

Talk rudely back to the uniformed officers. *He does not really have to deserve it. His uniform is enough justification.*

Let them see your anger. Let them know that you know your rights. That you refuse to be harassed by yet another man. Uniformed or not. That not every foreigner in the country is illegal. That they will not have a single cent of yours. Say it loud enough for those passing by to hear. To attract a crowd. For those secretly recording on their cell-phones to capture your every word. To depict the corruption.

Maintain your rage. Do not try to be the sensible woman that you are when the officers stick the passport in your face and say, 'Man, are you telling us that this is your passport. Are you telling us that you are a man disguised as a woman?'

When the masculine image on the passport hits your eyes, and a folded document you recognise falls out, making you realise that it is not yours, do not panic.

Do not calm down either. Maintain your rage. Go crazy. Vent about how tired you are of men using you, abusing you, feign insanity. Anything. *Just to save face.*

Let them drag you into the police van. Shut you in. Drive you away from the on looking crowd. And from the safety of the police van, let it settle in.

The confusion. The Fear.

Calm down.

Let us start from the beginning.

Right from the top.

#

Ingredients:

Anger. *The right amount of Anger. Lots of anger.* Check!

Passport. *On your person. Inside bra. Intact.* Check!

Home Affairs phone number. *Deportation or immigration department.* Check!

Bottle of wine? *Okay. Scrap that out. Not enough for return ticket home. Anger is spirit enough. High enough. Perfect intoxication.*

Ingredients complete.

Do not dust the house. *House? Chuckle.*

Do not dust the shack? Remove the spider webs and cobs in sight. Sweep the floor. Wash the dishes next to the bed, in between the bed and the paraffin stove next to the twenty litre barrels of water. It will be hard to ignore the dishes with the cockroaches crawling in and out. But do not touch anything. Focus.

Lift the tattered mattress.

Balance the mattress edge on your head and allow your hands to scan the base.

Ignore the pornographic magazines.

Pick up the receipts. Study them. The price. Purchase items. Dates.

You do not have a child between the ages of three to six months. He has never had a chicken schnitzel, a sea food platter, or a Don Pedro. You have every right to be angry. Besides, what baby shoes costs that ridiculous price? What food and drink cost the price of your bus ticket home?

Ignore the lotto tickets. The porn mags.

They are not really dirty you know.

Pick one, if you so desire. Smell its gloss. Its newness.

Do not look at its price, or consider that you saw warm winter shoes for Boy-boy at the same price. Or that for three magazines you have spotted, you could throw in a complete two-piece tracksuit set and even a warn coat.

Do not consider that. Absorb the beauty and art of nudity. Its aesthetics.

Now open a page. No; there is nothing wrong. Go ahead. Open.

But first, remove the mattress edge from you head. Allow it to drop back on the base.

Relax your neck. Sit comfortably. *Or as comfortable as possible on the less prickly potion of the bed.*

Do not consider the discomfort of the prickly three-quarter bed mattress or look around the one roomed shack or consider the years that he has been here and what he has *(or does not have)*

to show for it. Ignore the fifth and do not compare it with the descent home you have built and maintained back home. Focus on the mag.

The gloss. The scent. The flawless woman on the cover. Her skin. *Do not touch yours or dare to compare. You would only disappoint yourself.*

Now open.

Let not the fast pump of your heat intimidate you. Do not close the mag. Proceed to the next page, and the next. Take your time to absorb the women. All of that woman in each woman. Bare and exposed.

Note how they touch themselves. How they touch the men.

The men. Oh, the men.

The muscles. All that man in each man. Divinity. Absorb it all.

Listen to your body *(not your heart beat).* Respond to its urges. Touch yourself. It's okay.

Wise decision: do lock the door.

Lie flat on your back.

Lift your skirt high. Part your legs.

Revert to touching yourself. Imagine. Glance at the mag once more. All that man. Revert to touching. Gentle. Feel your wet. Relax your temple - your shoulders - your abdomen – your feet. Imagine harder. Touch deeper. Move your body. Moan (*it's okay too*). Increase the pressure. Go faster. Deeper. Moan. Louder. Faster. Faster. Scream.

Relax.

Wipe your hands against the inner of your skit.

Rest.

Drop your skirt. Cover yourself.

No; there is nothing to be ashamed of. Nothing at all.

And no; he has never taken you there before.

Remember he has always been number one in his class. Number one in math. In science. In everything. He always reminds you. It makes sense that he is always first to sprint to the finish line, leaving you sagging behind and with no option but to abandon the race. But now you know: you can finish the race on your own. Nothing to be ashamed of.

At this point, do not listen to your body. Do not fall asleep. The time on your watch is right. You do not have much time. Not to rest your body from the overnight trip from home. Not

to rest your feet from your impulsive escapade since your morning arrival from the other side of the Limpopo River into this god forsaken country that swallows the husbands who left home.

Wake yourself up.

Return the mag under the mattress. Try to remember the exact position of where it was.

Revert to looking for what you were really looking for.

The picture of the girl. Not quite what you're are looking for but pick it.

You did not have enough time to look at her. Now stare at her face. The pretty face. Flawless too. Sibongile. The 14-year-old slut, in her school uniform. Very short. *The uniform, not her.*

Study her face. Absorb it. Curse God for such beauty. Such youth. His unfairness.

You should have stabbed her in the face. Left real permanent scars. The few scratches that you left on her face did not do justice to the real damage you intended. You should have poured boiling cooking oil *or acid* on the slut, just as the women from the Sunday newspaper did to her husband's mistress.

Allow your rage to take over. You are only human. Woman even.

But remember: you are still mother. And you really can't be that from behind prison walls.

Discard the photograph. Do not bother to return it to exactly where you took it from.

Ignore the panel beater invoices. The traffic fines.

Aah, bingo, the plastic folder.

Open it.

Ignore the CVs. The certified copies of your marriage certificate, I.D, passport, degree certificate, engineering certificate, all his certificates, ignore them.

And do not compare the number of his certificates to your only two. Soon you will complete night school and if you pass you will have an O Level certificate to add to your birth and marriage certificates.

His new I.D book, passport, permanent residence permit folded into his passport; … *Triple bingo*... take them all.

Take them all. Attach them to your person. Inside your bra. Intact.

Throw the plastic folder back. Try and fix everything back in position.

Replace the mattress neatly back on the base.

Sit a bit to catch your breath.

Move some of the things stuffed in the right side of your bra to the left to even your bust. Button your jersey so that the bulge in your bust does not show.

Relax.

Do not look at the spider webs. Or the dirty dishes. You do not know how long there have been there or who ate from them?

Fine, if you really must: engage in your wifely duties. Go on, wash the slimy dishes. Remove the mould from leftover food. Throw away the take away containers. Dust the spider webs, destroy their eggs. Sweep the floor. Even cook.

Buy some onions and tomatoes next door. Look for the match box. Sit on the edge of the bed. Switch on the paraffin stove. Fry the onion and tomatoes with the fish oil that you bought on your last visit. Throw in the only available food in the house, the tin of canned beef that you left on your last visit.

Do not cook the maize meal as yet. He loves his food hot. Switch off the paraffin stove. Choke in its smoke. The perks of wifeliness.

Sit and wait. Control your heartbeat.

Allow the dark to grow around. Do not light the candle yet. Sit in the dark. In the silence. Meditate to the absence of sound and light. To the serenity of nothingness.

Do not jump up when the sound of motor car draws near the shack and the flash lights brighten the room. Stand up calmly, light the candle. Switch on the paraffin stove. Put the pot of water to boil. Sit on the bed. Calmly, like a good wife.

Allow him to come in.

Do not debate on whether to let him speak first or whether you speak first. Do the wifely thing. Greet him. Do not debate whether to refer to him as husband or John or father of Boy-boy or just father. Good evening will be adequate.

His few seconds in the house and his lack of response to your greeting is enough to determine his mood. Get to the point.

Ask him for bus fair to return home. To the children you left only yesterday. Nothing more. Avoid eye contact. Eyes on the floor. *The wifely thing.*

And when he ignores your request, raises his voice and questions what you were doing in Zone 4, keep your eyes to the ground. Wifely.

And when he asks you, who you think you are or how you could ambush that girl from school, and attack her the way you did. Stay calm. Do not respond. Eyes to the ground: good wife like.

But stay alert. Be ready to duck when he raises his voice even louder and says, 'I am talking to you' and then kicks the paraffin stove towards you. *Face it, you are no Sibongile. With what you have work it, you really cannot afford facial burns or scars.*

Therefore, be thankful to God that the water that you were meant to cook a meal for your husband, good wifely like, is moderately hot and has not started to boil.

The good wife crap; cut it off. Allow your anger to manifest. Ignore the toppled pot, the stove, the paraffin, the flame that has started on the corner of the blanket – ignore it all.

Let him know how fed up you are. Show him that you too can raise your voice. This time: establish eye contact. Look him in the eyes. Ignore the flame growing bigger from the corner of your eye. Tell him as it is. Put him in his place. Offload.

Dare him to strike you as he threatens.

Dare him to touch you.

See him see your anger. See him retreat and react to the flames. *As if he is only seeing them now.* See him flip the burning mattress aside. Hercules like. See him blame you for the flames. Accuse you of coming all the way from home to destroy his life. To burn down his house.

House? *Chuckle.*

See him rummage through the documents on the base. See him pull his plastic folder with his collection of certificates. See him ignore the baby clothing and expensive food receipts. The glossy porn mags. See him walk past you. Out of the house. Slamming the door behind as if he wants you to burn down with the house. See him outside through the window. See his silhouette disappear in his car. Hear his car drive away. See the bed burn. Soon the fire will spread to the curtains, the suitcases under the bed, the mealie meal, everywhere.

Do not let go of the anger as yet. Remember the Home Affairs phone number. Deportation or immigration department. Dig into your bra. Pull out his identity book. Throw it in the flames. The passport. In the flames. Do not even bother to check if the passport you are throwing in the fire is indeed his. Just throw it in.

Walk to the door. Take nothing.

You have all you need attached to your person.

Open the door. Walk out. Slam the door behind; *just as he did.* Let it burn.

POISON

'There is poison in that syringe.'

'Not today Ma. Gimmie your hand.'

'No!'

'M' really exhausted. Just gimmie your hand'

'The Nigerians are back.'

'They not Nigerians. They from Ivory Coast. Stay away from that window. Haven't you caused enough trouble?'

'They are back and already little boys and girls are trickling in and out.'

'It's an internet cafe. What do you expect? Your hand.'

'It's a front. Our country has gone to the dogs. They even have the police in their pockets.'

'The police had no reason to keep them in custody. They found nothing in the shop. You should be happy that no one knows that you were behind this. Come...'

'Have you not seen those kids? How dead they look hanging around that place all day. Their eyes white. Lips cracked and grey. Life sucked out of their limbs. They have created zombies of our children.'

'They have only been here for two months. Those kids have been loitering around, stoned as hell way before they moved in. We created our own zombies. Look at your son.'

'They fed that poison to him.'

'How when they only just moved in.'

'It may not have been these Nigerians, but it was one of them. Whether they from Congo or Ivory Coast. Zimbabwe or Mozambique. They made him like this. All of them. They are everywhere. All over the neighbourhood. The city. They have turned this country into little Africa and their problems and dirty drugs are all dumped here. On our children.

'Whatever you say Ma. Can we get over with this?'

'No.'

'Why are you being so difficult? First you refused to eat; now this?'

'Has your brother eaten?'

‘What?’

‘Has your brother eaten?’

‘I’m sure he has.’

‘How can you be so sure?’

‘He is a grown man. If he is hungry, he will eat.’

‘Eat what?’

‘I don’t know. Food. Whatever it is that they eat.’

‘How do you expect me to eat when one of my children is starving?’

‘You know what Ma; I really don’t care. It’s past eleven already and I have a 6 AM shift in the morning...Gimmie that...What the hell; you freezing.’

‘Let go of me. I’m fine.’

‘Mom, this room is burning with that heater on and that thick blanket but you literally freezing. You not okay. Take your shot and let me put you into bed.’

‘I said I will not take that poison.’

‘It’s not poison; it’s for your sugar.’

‘I’m still not taking it.

‘Fine. Let me take you to bed then.’

‘So you can inject me in my asleep. I know what you do to me when I’m asleep.’

‘Everything I do is for your own good.’

‘I do not need it. You cannot transfer someone’s blood into my veins.’

‘What?’

‘It is ungodly to ingest someone’s blood. To take in their life. Their spirit and transfer it into your own body. Who knows what diseases you might ingest? What spirits lie in that syringe? Look at what you have done to my hand. All these injection marks. My hand is rotting. You want to kill me.’

‘Your hand is okay. You have been to the station, haven’t you? I told you to stay away from that place. Do you know what those crazies do to stubborn old women like you? They will mug you. Rape you even, rip off your clothes and force themselves your wrinkled old body…’

‘Stop it!’

‘Yes Ma. They will take turns with you, discard their filth inside of you and dump your naked body in the alley like what they did with that old woman from Sunnyside who was in the papers last week.’

‘Stop it!’

‘Or they will just kill you. Just for the fun of it. In broad day light…’

‘Stop it!’

‘In front of on-lookers and no one will stop them. Just for the next high, toss your body on the rail line and wait from the next train to come and run over your cold body and no one will give a damn.’

‘Stop it!’

‘Is that what you want Ma? Your own spot in the paper? For the world to see your naked body on the front page?’

‘Stop it. Just stop. Why are you so hateful?’

‘No Ma, you stop. I’m sick of this. You hopping from taxi to taxi like some hopeless junkie, cutting across the city just to get to that god forsaken place’.

‘I had to see him. I needed to.’

‘And you have seen him. What now. What good has come out of it when you such a mess? You’re freezing in this blazing heat. You refusing to eat and now you will not even take your shot. I can’t go through this every time you decide to go gallivanting around the city looking for a grown man who does not want to be found.’

‘He is my son’

‘I’m going to bed.’

‘He is cold.’

‘I’m going to bed Ma.’

‘He is freezing Bernie. The concrete is too cold. The small blanket I took him is too thin. It will not help him tonight. Neither will the fire. He is freezing internally. His body is rejecting that bad blood. He needs to come back home. Bring him home’.

‘I’m going to say this for the last time. He knows his way home. If he is cold, he can bring himself home. He has a room waiting for him. Warm blankets. Food. Everything. When he is ready to come home – and ready to stay – he will make his way back.’

‘Help him. You’re a doctor.’

‘I’m not a doctor. I’m a paramedic.’

‘What’s the difference?’

‘I cannot help him if he does not want to be helped. If he needs help, he knows where to get it. I have done my best.’

‘You have not brought him home.’

#

‘Patient unresponsive – severe hypothermia– core temperature: thirty degrees–Patient has multiple syringe scars. Veins damaged. No warming fluid administered.’

‘Start ventilation.’

‘Monitors on. Oxygen mask intact.’

‘Proceed...Temperature now?’

‘Thirty-two degrees’

‘Good. I’ll take it from here. Clear for...’

Oliphant; are you okay? Oliphant... Bernice. Must I take over?’

‘No, its fine. I got this.’

‘Are you sure?’ You look like you’ve seen a ghost.’

‘I got this. Clear for CPR. Two hundred volts: - clear...Three hundred volts: clear.

‘Shit– flat liner’.

‘Five hundred volts: clear...Six hundred. Clear!’

‘Oliphant!’

‘Clear!’

‘Oliphant.’

‘I said clear. Give him another shot. Six hundred volts.’

‘He is gone.’

‘Give him another freaking shot!’

‘It is too late Bernice. We tried our best. Time of death: 8:16AM. Bernice...’

‘He just looks so much like him.’

‘Bernice!’

‘Ha!’

‘Are you okay?’

‘Oh sorry; I just...Time of death?’

‘08:16 .’

‘08:16.’

‘Yes. Sad; isn’t it. So young. Third one this month. And they all look the same.’

‘Yeah. Aah…can you just take over. Look through his things. See if you can find some sort of identification. Maybe trace his family.’

‘Are you sure you are fine Bernice?’

‘Yah. There is just something…someone I need to take care of. I’ll get someone to cover my shift’.

THE ROARING ENGINE MAN

I feared that I would die in my sleep. Consumed by this heaviness that pounded against my chest, threatening to kick my heart out of its place. A pounding borne of accumulating agitation, aggravated by the sound of the running engine outside the yard. A sound I endured nightly, nibbling on my flesh and eating through the innocence of the night like a disease infested rodent. Gyrating to its prolonged grumble were my intestines, cringing and creating permanent knots of anger. Grateful for the cover of darkness, I allowed the tears that were flooding my eyes to run down my cheeks and settle on my lips with a tingling sensation that reminded me of the need to leave.

I lay silent in my bed and listened to the icy sound of chains being carefully emancipated from the grip of the padlock around the gate, giving way to a calculated entrance into the yard. Always, with the sound of the opening gate, the sound of the roaring engine subsided as the vehicle drove away creating a void that would be shortly filled with the footsteps that my ears followed from the gate to the kitchen door. The footsteps were now in the house. As the sound of the wooden soles of platform shoes on wooden tiles grew louder towards my bedroom door, I pulled the blanket over my head. I shut my eyes, pressing my eyelids into my eyeballs and maintained the grip as I heard my door opening, the switching on of the light and it being switched off a few seconds later. I only relaxed my eyes to the sound of my door finally closing. This was a daily routine that mother observed religiously. From leaving my room, you would hear her footsteps heading towards Xoli's room, the sound of his bedroom door opening and closing, her footsteps making their way to the kitchen followed by the sound of the boiling kettle; then the sound of the cutlery draw opening and closing; a spoon dancing in a ceramic mug before mother's footsteps could be heard once more, this time walking past my room making way for the sound of her bedroom door opening and closing, restoring the natural order of the night. A serene silence weaving promises of peaceful and undisturbed nights that the idea of leaving carried.

When morning came, to avoid an encounter with mother, I stayed in bed and waited for her set of footsteps to leave the house. An encounter with her was however unavoidable as she waltzed into my room while I was still lying in bed with my head covered and dictated a few instructions before leaving the house. My next encounter with her was not as convenient as the morning's encounter. I was forced to face her, hopefully for the last time in my life. I stood in her office, close to her but unable to look at her. My eyes remained affixed on the president's neatly framed portrait that hung above the door of her office staring back at me as though to declare its permanence. I did not look at her at all, not even when she gave me the money. I did not thank her for the money either. I would have, but knowledge of its source forced me to instead walk away without a word. Knowledge of it source made it feel like what I was holding in my hand was a disease, weakening my wrist and finger joints. Crippling me and silencing the rebellion that threatened to explode within me – just like the repressed rebellion of the masses that I had encountered earlier when I stopped at Nkandla General Trading Store before I made my way to mother's office. Masses that queued outside the store. Over hundreds of ordinary men and woman who seemed to have accepted their quandary as a normal form of existence.

They wore their sun burnt faces like ancient masks. Masks composed of an intense subject matter that, on the face of it, told of a long wait for something more potent than whatever they were queuing for. Some stood in silence. Some smoked. Some chatted and laughed lightly exposing teeth greened by the over-consumed covo and chaumilia, their sweaty armpits concocting a unified odour: a defiled scent of a poverty common to the majority. Their eyes sucked me in, branding me an outsider as I walked passed them towards the entrance of the store. Parked outside the store was a familiar looking 4x4 Toyota Land-cruiser, which I assumed belonged to the owner of the store. The doors of the store were closed and two security guards manned the entrance. They studied me with suspicion as I approached.

'You, what do you want here?' one of the guards growled.

'Go back to the queue.'

'I am not on the queue. I am looking for the owner of the store.' I replied. But the security guard was not trying to hear what I was saying. With the arrogance of the public servants I encountered at mother's work who assumed some godly role in the exercise of their duties to the public, he dismissed me and insisted that I went and joined the queue. When I did not move and continued elaborating on the reason for my presence, the guards became physical. I hated my

mother for this. From the queues for basic commodities that you walked past in the city, I had come to realize that security guards were becoming more like police officers; aggressive in the exercise of the temporary authority they had over the queuing masses. I, however, was not intimidated by the security guards even as they pushed me away from the entrance. There was nothing they could do to me even with their button sticks, which happened to be their only weapons and form of protection even while on night duty. I knew my rights. But, unfortunately for me, the guard's aggression triggered a reaction from the masses. They started shouting in my direction: 'Yah…she must go back to the queue – She thinks she's special with that skimpy skirt of hers – We have been here all day – we slept on this queue – who does she think she is…'

Unlike the guards, the jeering crowd was more intimidating. These types of queues occasionally turned violent and I did not want to give this crowd the motive, especially when I had no interest in whatever it is that they were queuing for and in fact had no reason to queue for anything. We had enough of the scarce food stuffs stored in our unused fourth bedroom. From mealie meal to sugar, rice, cooking oil, flour, anything you could think of. We even had petrol that my mother sold even though she had no car of her own.

'I do not want to buy anything,' I snapped. 'I am only here to see the owner of the store. He is expecting me. Monica sent me.' It felt awkward saying out my mother's name to strangers, but my mother had told me to inform who ever I found at the store that I had been sent by Monica. Without a word said to the other, one of the security guards, opened the door and led me into the store muttering, 'You should have said so.'

The interior of the store was dull. The excitement that I had as a child, whenever Xoli and I entered the very same store to buy packets of Willard's crackerjacks and Supercools on sunny days, no longer existed. The first aisle of the store where we rushed to pull our favourite tomato source flavoured crackerjacks amongst many other assorted flavours and brands of chips and snacks, before we hopped off to the Supercool freezers, was now a sorrowful site of corroded zinc shelves scarcely occupied by packets of dried fish and soya beans ground into chunks. Other shelves were just empty. A number of 10 kilograms bags of mealie-meal were piled on the floor. In the store were two men, their clothes whitened by the mealie meal that they had been handling. One of them was counting the bags while the other watched.

''How many bags did you say are left in the storeroom?'

'Twenty-two bags.'

‘Twenty-two! Do they include my sister’s three bags?’

‘I had put only one bag for her; did she pay for two more?’

‘I will pay for the extra bags. This will leave seventy-six bags. I think we can open the doors now. Just remove those two bags first.’

The watching man dragged two bags out of the backdoor of the store.

I was led into an office inside the store where I found a large man waiting for me. The man was ugly. He had a huge belly that threatened to pop out of his tucked-in Pringo Shirt. Everything about him was large: his body, his eyes, his nose and his lips. When he opened his mouth to speak, the mask that God had carved him out for a face expanded as though to swallow me in.

‘Simangaliso!’ the man said, with what I assume was meant to be a smile. He knew my name. I was not pleased. I had not met this man before but his presence had a familiar thwarting effect on my body. I thought of the car that was parked outside his store and wondered if he was the man that brought my mother home every night.

‘My mother sent me here,’ I felt the need to inform him that I was not there on my own accord.

‘I have been expecting you. Take a seat my child.’ He brushed his hand against my shoulder. The hairs on my neck rose. I felt a sickening swarming up of blood within my muscles like the crawling of insects within my body. I went weak with hate. I never once thought myself capable of harbouring such destructive a vice but with the passage of time, I came to realize that hate was like a viral infection that entered one’s body undetected and laid dormant until woken by some imbalance in the immune system. I had unknowingly acquired some kind of viral infection; herpes perhaps. And I was not sure if it was him referring to me as his child or him actually touching me that had aggravated and roused the herpes in me from its dormant state. Whatever it was, the infection was rapidly spreading within body.

‘You are as beautiful as your mother.’

I did not respond. The men went behind the neatly polished desk and opened the bottom drawer. From it, he produced a thick khaki envelop which he handed over to me.

‘Give this to your mother and tell her to call me.’

I took the khaki envelop and rose from the chair with the intention of leaving. The man however asked me to wait. He came from behind his desk and led me out of his office. I followed him as

if there was something else that he still had to give me. We walked out of the store towards the car parked outside with the eyes of the on-looking crowd glued on us. The man offered to give me a lift as he got into the car. I declined the offer. The man started his car and allowed it to stall while he tried to convince me to accept his offer. I felt the ground shake where I stood as the car went off in a rumble. Its gyrating sound was unique and all too familiar. My herpes worsened into a paralyzing state. My skin itched and I failed to move. This surely was the same torturous noise that I endured every night when my mother came home.

'Okay then, do not forget to tell your mother to call me.'

I beckoned from the car and walked away sensing the venturous stares on me stronger than before. Stares that said, 'we also know of the Roaring Engine Man'. The crowd's attention on me was, however, short-lived as the doors of the store were finally opened sending the crowd that a second earlier, had their eyes glued on me, stampeding into the store, disregarding the queue that they had protectively maintained for over hours.

#

I handed the khaki envelop to my mother and from it, she produced a bundle of one hundred South African Rand notes and counted one thousand Rands into my hands. She insisted that I immediately go and register for the IT course that she had insisted on me taking while I waited my varsity admission at the University of Zimbabwe where she also insisted I would go. I took the money and walked out of her office without acknowledging her instructions or saying a single word. I dialled a number that I had received from my boyfriend, Mthabisi, and asked the man who answered the phone if they had space for one extra person on their following day's scheduled trip. He responded in the affirmative. My plans were in motion. I walked past the collage where I was supposed to register for the IT course and reluctantly took a fifteen-minute walk to Mthabisi's house in the suburbs. Ever since he had been one of the four upper-six students at our collage to be shortlisted for the Greenwich Scholarship to study for an undergraduate science degree at the Greenwich Science Institute in Ireland, he had become one of those people whom I was not so enthusiastic about seeing.

I found him lifting weights in his father's garage. The scene looked choreographed: him, shirtless and sweaty when he knew beforehand that I was coming. After our embracing and I

suffering the discomfort of having my nose trapped between his sweaty armpits, the stickiness of his biceps rubbing against my face and smudging my makeup, Mthabisi led me into the house. I followed behind him, stressing to him that I could not stay long. I actually did not want to stay long as I really had no desire of seeing him in the first place. He had however promised me some pocket money for my trip although he had no idea about the permanency of the 'small vacation' that I had told him about. This therefore meant that I had to endure the usual monotony that followed: browsing through his XXL and The Source Magazines and sitting through music videos we had repeatedly watched before he started kissing and fondling me.

From the way that Mthabisi cupped my breasts in his palms, squeezed and caressed them gently while his lips sucked mine hungrily, I could tell where this was heading. So when Mthabisi's hand moved from my breasts and slid under my skirt, I pulled myself away from him. Before, his touch conjured a weakness in my knees that often made me overlook my cardinal rule about no sex without a condom, particularly when he breathed against my skin, thoe words 'I promise: I will not cum inside you.' It was not a matter of trust. There was something in those words, when whispered right; in the right assertive manly voice, that just made your body ache and scream, 'take me now: raw'. It was the same with the last ex-boyfriend I had slept with. But of late, with the frequency of the presence of the Roaring Engine Man at our house, I had lost interest in sex and at this point, in particular, I could not tolerate the mere thought of it, more especially after the Roaring Engine Man had finally acquired a face. The idea of sex now came with a sickening image of an ugly potbellied ogre on top of my mother. I therefore warded off Mthabisi's advances with a lie about me being on my periods.

'God... I'll miss your body when I'm gone,' he said, reluctantly backing off. I rolled my eyes annoyed by his going-away talk. He noticed my annoyance and typically having misread it, he went on about how he would actually miss more than just my body, how he would miss me in particular and how he would get a part time job just so he could send me a plane ticket to come and visit him when he was gone. I rolled my eyes more, and despite my desire to reserve my comments, I found myself telling him that it would need more than just a part time job for him to get me a plane ticket.

I added: 'Besides, you know what they say about counting your chickens before they hatch. You do not know who you are up against or how the interviews will turn out?'

‘Don’t worry about me babe, I am confident about this one babe. I’m pretty sure that one of those scholarships is mine.’

I felt my heart swell up at Mthabisi’s confidence. His excitement only salted my open wounds. I straightened my skirt and decided to leave content with my decision not to tell him everything about my plans. He did not deserve to know what was happening in my life. After all, all he cared about, and ever spoke about, was the damned scholarship. It did not matter to him that I had not been shortlisted for the scholarship despite him knowing how desperately I needed it. I had grown to hate home so much, such that the possibility of getting one of the two scholarships had raised my hopes. Getting the scholarship became my sole ambition and a ticket to getting away from home. So when Mthabisi, in the first week of December, received a letter informing him that he had been shortlisted, I spent the whole of December waiting on the postman, listening out for the squeaking sound of bicycle wheels and the ringing of his bell hoping that he too would bring me a similar letter. But when January came and the date of the interviews and selection of the successful two candidates drew near, reality sunk in forcing me to accept that I indeed had not been shortlisted despite me being the top student in our class. I thus resorted to plan B, leaving home and going to live with my father. There, I would probably enrol for undergraduate degree or some course; get a part time job or something. Anything other than going to a local university where I knew for certain that my mother would continue being responsible for my fees and upkeep, and my mother technically meant the Roaring Engine Man and his khaki envelops. There was no joy in knowing that it wasn’t your mother’s meagre salary as public prosecutor or how hard she worked, but how hard she was worked, that afforded you what many considered a comfortable life and kept you in a private college that still had lecturers reporting for duty when the rest of the country’s educators had abandoned their jobs for greener pastures out of the country. It was for this reason that I chose to follow my father even though I had not heard from him in over two months.

#

After leaving Mthabisi’s place, I headed home and immediately began packing. When I was done, without having supper, I retired to bed earlier than usual. I would have loved to have one last supper with Xoli, but as usual, he was out with the boys’, doing whatever it is that boys

do at night before their mothers come home with their lovers. And as usual, Ma-Nyoni having gone home, I was home alone drowning in the void of the spaciousness of our house. Falling asleep had become difficult of late, knowing too well that sleep would soon be interrupted. Indeed, just when I had started dreaming of flight, the usual trembling sound of a stalling vehicle outside our yard shook me out of my attempted slumber. No matter how many times I heard this sound, each time, the continuous grumble of that engine had the effect of live rounds of ammunition fired from an automatic machine gun as if on slow motion. The unnerving sound shook the ground where I lay, threatening to create a dent for the earth to swallow me beneath its surface and bury me under the mass of the vehicle's heavy engine where I would die of suffocation and not be remembered. Not even by my mother; she, whom I once adored as that little girl on that black and white photograph, stylishly resting her hand on her undeveloped hip and blowing a kiss to the camera, emulating her mother's eighties Kodak moment pose probably copied from a Marylyn Monroe poster or a poster of some other similar blonde. She was capable of no fault back then. Back then when her flawless beauty and elegance was an object of my childhood pride. Back then when she smelt of citrus and roses, before the smell of petrol overpowered her natural body odour.

I looked at the time on my cell phone, 12:43am. Exactly thirty-two minutes had lapsed with that vehicle idling outside before my mother decided to eventually get into the house. She never spoke that long with my father on the phone. In fact, whenever they spoke, all they did was fight. My father would say something from the other end of the line and my mother would bark back, loud enough for the neighbours to hear, about how the money he sent was never enough. She would say things like, 'How far do you think two thousand Rands will take us? It will not even last a month. And I have to wait for three to four months before I receive more money from you.' Sometimes she would scream the familiar chorus that I had heard for many years, even before I began my secondary schooling, a chorus she screamed sometimes between sobs, 'for how many years should I stay here alone with these children. You said you were coming this month, what has changed now. Are you telling me everyone who comes back home has papers?'

The crying however seemed to stop with the frequency of the roaring engine outside our house. And I always wondered what they spoke about in that car for thirty to forty-five minutes. I always wondered why they never finished talking about whatever they were talking about wherever they would have been the whole evening and instead chose to continue their

conversation outside the gate with that heavy engine waking the whole neighbourhood as if deliberately attempting to alert every one of the wrongfulness of its presence at our house at that particular time of the night.

But my mother did not really seem to care about what the neighbourhood had to say. She made this clear one day when three of her friends spoke to her about the rumours that were circulating about her in the neighbourhood. Ma-Moyo, Mai-Mfundisi and Na-Manka, with whom my mother attended church, had summoned my mother for what was meant to be a private conference in her bedroom one Sunday after church. Our helper, Ma-Nyoni and I and had been watching television when suddenly my mother began shouting from her bedroom.

'Ma-Moyo,' she said. 'Have I ever come to your house to question you about where that one-eyed son of yours gets that money he flashes around the shebeens? And you Na-Manka do I ever poke my nose into your business or question you about that daughter of yours and what she does in the avenues at night?'

I did not hear any response from either Ma-Moyo or Na-Manka. But Mai-Mfundisi exploded, when my mother said to her; 'And you, you and your high morals. Have I or anyone ever questioned you about your husband's death? Who has ever just dies in their sleep, just like that, a healthy pastor for that matter?'

'Iwe Monica, what exactly are you implying? Are you accusing me of killing my husband?'

'Amelia, you know whatever you did to your husband. But my point is: no-one questions you about it because it is no-one's business. So stay out of my business: all of you.'

An exchange of heavy words ensued between my mother and Mai Mfundisi while the other two women tried to intervene. My mother kicked the three women out of our house and even escorted them to the gate while still exchanging bitter words with Mai-Mfundisi. There, the squabble continued attracting the attention of our neighbours and people passing by. I stayed indoors, glued on my seat, praying for the crazy women to part ways. Ma-Nyoni had joined my mother at the gate and I could hear her pleading with her to ignore Mai-Mfundisi and return into the house. Eventually the noise died out and Ma-Nyoni escorted my mother back into the house.

I, overly embarrassed and with heaviness on my chest, could not help but question my mother why she had taken the argument to the gate instead of resolving everything in her bedroom where the squabble had started.

'...that way, not everyone would know about your shady affairs,' I added.

'My shady affairs?' My mother exploded. 'So you, my own daughter, are now teaming up with the whole of Gwabalanda to spread rumours about me. You, my own daughter!'

'Well, if that noisy car did not come here every night waking up the entire neighbourhood, maybe there would be no rumours to spread.'

Despite my anger, which equally matched hers, I had withheld the words that I actually wanted to say to her, which were: 'If you respected my father enough and did not bring your boyfriends here, maybe the neighbours would respect you too and not have any rumours to spread about you.'

My mother must have read my mind for she immediately slapped me hard across the face. After that day and that slap, I was unable to look at my mother in the face again or spend five minutes in the same room with her or even have a conversation with her. Never before, had she laid a hand or Xoli, and although her slap was painful, the pain I felt was not from her slap, but from the words that followed.

'Do you think your father loves you?' she shouted. 'He has not sent a single cent in over four months. Four months. What does he think you have been eating? He would rather be eaten by South African women than spend money on his children. And he is not the first. Many men are being eaten. They go and never come back. If they come back, they only come back for the families' they left behind to bury then'.

I wiped off specks of saliva that landed on my face as my mother shouted. I wished she would get out of my way and allow me to escape to my room and lock myself inside. But she stood in the middle of the passage blocking the way from the dining room to our bedrooms.

'But you think you father if different,' she continued. If he was different; If he loved you; he would have done what real man are doing in Joburg is doing. He would have sent for you. With the way the economy is, no man who truly loves his family goes away and leaves it behind and alone for all these years. Twelve years. Twelve years raising you alone. Without a man. And he has not even come home in four years. What kind of marriage is that? What normal woman would tolerate that? And do you think your father has been without a woman for all these years. No normal man would stay without a woman for more than three months….'

Unable to withstand the pressure, I rushed to the bathroom and locked myself inside. I could still hear my mother venting from outside the door. Twenty minutes lapsed and she was still shouting. Although I had my hands tightly pressed against my ears, I heard all that she had to say: things that I wished I had not heard. She accused my father of cheating on her for years and of him kicking her out the last time she had gone to visit him three years ago. She even accused him of having another family and of not caring about us anymore. 'A perfect little family; what else would he want back here in Zimbabwe,' she had said.

My mother had a way of manipulating the truth so I refused to believe the bitter words that came out of her mouth. I had not seen anything to validate her allegations. All I had seen and heard was her late comings and the dreaded noise that she brought with home for the past two years. The dreaded noise that I could not tell my father about. Already, my father's departure from the country had caused a rift between my parents and I did not want to give him any cause for considering the 'D' word that every child hates to even think of.

Hearing the engines' continuous grumble outside our house for the sixth day after the incident with my mother; the opening of the gate after the Roaring Engine Man eventually drove off; the footsteps from the gate, into the house, into my room, out of my room and into Xoli's room; the sounds of lights going on and off; the kettle boiling; cutlery drawer opening; the spoon dancing in the coffee mug and the sound of my mother's bedroom door opening, I knew for certain that that things were not going to change and that I was making the right decision. The time to leave had indeed come.

#

When morning came, I waited for my mother to leave for work. I made a point of having breakfast with my brother once more. I ate a bit of Ma-Nyoni's bacon and eggs but, like everything else made in my mother's kitchen, I could not stomach it. I could no longer keep anything down. My nose carried a nauseating scent of petrol affecting the taste of everything I tried to eat. Xoli on the other hand seemed not to be affected by anything. He enjoyed his meal and I thought of how much I would miss him, as I watched him lick the bacon oil off his hands. After he left for school, I left home under the pretext of going to pay for my registration for the IT course. I waited for Ma-Nyoni to start doing the laundry before I snuck my large travelling bag out of the house. I took a deep breath, opened the gate and left the house that I had all my

life known as home. That house had become what Marechera called a 'house of hunger'. In it there was a hunger. A hunger born of resentment; of loneliness and of longing. A hunger that could not be fulfilled by the bacon and eggs we had for breakfast. And with all the food stuffs we stored in the house together with the reeking petrol that doused the house with its pungent smell, threatening to explode the rottenness of the house to the ground, the hunger persisted and leaving was my way of escaping it.

By two o'clock in the afternoon, we had left Bulawayo. I had in my position, one thousand five hundred and ninety-five Rands. After having paid the one thousand five hundred Rands that I was charged for my transportation, all I had left was only ninety-five Rands. At six in the evening, we arrived at the border. We did not encounter any problems at either the Zimbabwean or the South African border posts. The driver, who was referred to as Seka-Mandlo by the other driver he was travelling with, instructed those of us who did not have passports to remain in the taxi at both borders. Although I had a passport, my passport had no VISA and obtaining one would have been a long, strenuous and demanding process, for which I had inadequate funds and no patience to embark on. Beyond that, I planned on being in South Africa indefinitely and a VISA would have placed restrictions on my stay, restrictions which I would have inevitably violated and I did not want to blemish my passport, knowing how difficult it was to get one.

Half of the passengers remained in the taxi while the other half was instructed to go and join the lengthy queue outside the immigration hall to have their passports stamped. At both border posts, we drove out of the gates easily, with the hundred Rand notes being inserted into the passports that were handed over to border officials who in term slid the notes from the passports into their pockets. And just like that, we were in South Africa without any crossing of crocodile infested rivers or walking in bushes and risking being raped or robbed as many told of their border jumping encounters. This, for me, was testament that I was meant to be here.

#

The sharp outburst of hooting alerted me of my new surroundings: I was no longer in Bulawayo. The activity of the streets of Johannesburg Central told of a mad rush: a chase of cash and dreams. Everything about the city was attentive. The brisk movement of feet, hands and bodies brushing one out of the way, seemed to suggest that life here was as such: a stamping and

pushing aside of others to get ahead. We had arrived in Johannesburg at six in the morning and already the city was more alive than Lobengula Street on Christmas Eve. Chinese, Nigerian and Somalian owned shops were already open and street vendors had already set up shop.

Commuters, who spoke different languages and dialects, eagerly rushed about the city. Amid the Joburg frenzy, the infiltration of foreigners and varying cultures was readily noticeable, creating a distinctly African phenomenon. It was exciting and scary at the same time, such that I held on tight to my handbag as I walked the streets.

Being in South Africa for the first time, I did not know where I was going. All I had was my father's home address that I had copied from my mother's old phone book. The address was in a place called Nomzamo Park in Alexander. Seka-Mandlo had requested that the driver, with whom he had taken turns to drive, take me to the taxi rank where I would find taxis to where I was going. We walked past a telephone booth and I suddenly thought of the mother I had fled from. Despite the tensions between us, I knew that she, by virtue of me not having slept at home, was worried about me and my conscience dictated that I call home. I was not ready to talk to her yet so I went back to the booth and dialled Xoli's number. For a person I thought would be worried about my whereabouts, my brother was overly excited. In an elated voice, he asked me where I was and without waiting for a response or even asking if I was okay, eagerly demanded that I immediately returned home.

'Ma has been trying to get a hold of you since yesterday afternoon. She has your letter,' he added.

Xoli continued speaking, unnecessarily repeating things he had already said until the ten Rand worth of coins that I had thrown in the telephone booth were used up and I got disconnected without getting a chance to ask him what letter he was referring to. The mention of a letter had however caught my attention. I frantically dug into my purse and took out some more coins. I redialled Xoli's number but my mother answered his phone. Although she was a lot calmer than Xoli, I felt a strain in her voice that I refused to identify as pain. I could tell that she had not slept and from her voice, I could also tell that she was relieved to hear from me. She asked where I was. Annoyed by her repeated enquiries about my safety when all I wanted to hear about was the letter and, secondly, out of my anger towards her, I lied and said that I was at a friend's house. I suspected that she knew that I was lying. This was confirmed when she called me back on the telephone after my coins ran out and my call got disconnected again. For some

reason, she did not insist on knowing the truth about my whereabouts. She instead went ahead and spoke about the letter.

According to my mother, she had gone to the post office at lunchtime the previous day to collect a parcel. While there, she had been handed all other letters bearing our home address and among these letters was a registered letter, which, according to the post office, had been lying there uncollected, for weeks. Noticing the foreign stamps on the letter, my mother, remembering my scholarship, immediately opened it. The letter turned out to be from the Greenwich Science Institute notifying me that I been shortlisted for the interview.

'The interview is this Monday,' my mother said in a soft voice that I thought she had long lost. As though she already knew exactly where I was, she asked if I had enough money to return home. Not wanting her to view me as an irresponsible teenager who made rash decisions without thinking of the consequences, I said 'yes.' She asked me again, twice, if I was sure, and like Peter had denied Christ three times, I, three times, said 'yes' when all I had left was roughly fifty Rands. It was only after I got off the phone with her that I realised how irresponsible my lie was.

With the unexpected twist of fate, my plans, immediately changed. The interviews being on Monday and it being a Saturday, with the same passion that I had wanted to leave home, I was now desperate to return. And if I had had enough money, I would have immediately returned home. My only option at that point, was to get to my father as fast as I could, ask for some money and return home immediately. I wondered how I would approach him and what he would think of me. He surely would understand, I convinced myself. He was my father after all.

Although I was grateful to have someone take me to the taxi rank, my walk there was unpleasant. While the thought of how to return home nibbled on my brain, the driver pestered me nonstop with his tactless love proposals, indifferent to my disinterest in him. Sox was what he said his name was. Annoyed by his insistence that I take his number, since I had told him I did not have a South African number yet, I gave him my phone and allowed him to enter his digits.

'We are going back tomorrow. Call me later so we can meet for a drink or two,' he said, licking his lips. As disgusting as his innuendo was, I suddenly had a reason not to delete his number, as soon as he was out of sight. He and Seka-Mandlo were my ticket back home. All I had to do was get to my father and get enough money to return home, probably the same amount I had paid to get here.

I boarded a taxi travelling to Orlando West and eventually found myself at Nomzamo Park. Nomzamo Park, my spirits sank. The Sandton homes and Johannesburg malls I had heard of; the neat high rising buildings; the impressive road system and flyovers we had drove past as we entered Johannesburg had all created an impression of a city that differed greatly from what Nomzamo Park showcased. The area was an informal settlement comprised mostly of wood and zinc shacks. A stream of questions flooded my mind: Did my father live here? Did all those Zimbabweans who sent money home and filled cross boarder trailers with groceries and furniture live in settlements like these? Was this the 'eGoli' that Ma-Nyoni spoke of with pride when she said with flair; 'useGoli umntanami: my child is in the city of gold'?

From where I had disembarked, I saw a water queue similar to those that sprouted in many locations in Bulawayo. The only difference was that here water was collected from what seemed to be a communal tap whereas in Bulawayo, while most houses had tap water, water was collected from large Jojo tanks that were temporarily brought in at certain times of the week, as relief when there was no water for prolonged periods. I walked towards the queuing women and, after having greeted them in Ndebele, which I spoke in what I assumed was a Zulu accent, requested directions to the house number 2675. After a few seconds of discussing amongst themselves and agreeing that the place I was looking for was close to a certain Ma-Dlamini's house, the women pointed me towards the direction I was to take, clarifying, where to turn and which milestones to look out for. I surveyed the area, looking in the direction the women had pointed me, in hopes of seeing concrete houses beautiful as the ones we had driven past earlier but all I saw was a vast area of zinc and wooden makeshift of houses. Like the sun, children were already out and were playing around the structures they obviously considered their homes. They were healthy looking children who bore no visible signs of poverty. Their appearances suggested that they were well fed and that their bodies and clothes were washed regularly. This was home to them and living in wooden and tin zinc houses was normal to them. I wondered if I could eventually come to accept such a place as home. Having lived in a big house all my life, would I eventually grow content with living in a makeshift home that had no running water or an inbuilt bathroom?

Unlike the homestead adjacent to it, number 2675 was unfenced. It had no number on it either but the mere fact that it was between number 2674 and 2676 logically meant that this was the place I was looking for. I wished I was wrong. Compared to the two adjacent homesteads,

number 2675 was unkempt. It clearly had not been swept in days and the garden was dry and lifeless. I stood staring at the unfenced homestead with butterflies in my belly, suddenly considering a number of things I had not, but should have considered before I left Bulawayo. What if I did not find him? I had not heard from him in over a month and my attempts to reach him to date him about the scholarship and my change of plans had been fruitless. The phone number that he used merely beeped repeatedly every time that I called it. I also wondered how he would receive me and if he would be happy to see me? It had been over four years since he had seen me. Would he recognize me?

I studied the homestead. It looked like a two-roomed shack from the outside. I could not imagine myself living in a place like that. I consoled myself with the thought that I did not necessarily have to live in such a place as I had, after all, been shortlisted for the interview. Suddenly, a new thought came to my mind: what if he did not have the one-thousand, five hundred Rand I needed to return home. As a person who lived in a place like this, it was possible that he might not have that kind of money. I grew weary. The homestead had a sombre mood and again I wondered if I was at the right place. There after all were two little boys who chased each other noisily around the shack in a manner that suggested that they were home. At that moment, a lean woman came out of the shack and screamed something at the playing boys who immediately stopped running about. Her demeanour also communicated that she too was home and I was totally convinced that I was at the wrong place. As the woman turned to return into the shack, she noticed my presence and shouted a greeting towards me before asking if she could be of any assistance to me. I was compelled to approach her.

Having entered the yard, I noticed that the woman was sickly and although her face had shrunken, evidently by disease, it bore traces of youth and beauty that refused to be eroded by her ailment. I estimated, from her appearance, that she was between 22 and 24 years old, two to four years older than me. She bore a striking resemblance to one of the little boys who now played around the yard with little bricks they pushed around as toy cars. One of the boys, who appeared to be about five years old, reminded me of Xoli, the way he mischievously drove his brick car and smashed it against the other disapproving little boy's brick, nonchalantly laughing out loud, the edges of his lips curving in the manner Xoli's lips curved when he laughed.

'He has your father's smile,' my mother often said of Xoli in happier times.

After returning her greetings I shot straight to the point and told her what I was looking for.

‘Your father,’ the woman exclaimed. ‘John, I told you to stop making noise. I swear I will beat you up if you wake your father,’ the woman suddenly switched her attention from me, shouting at the little boy who was laughing uncontrollably at the other boy whose brick he had just smashed into two and was now crying.

‘This son of mine is highly annoying sometimes. Are you sure you have the right address?’

Before I could respond, the woman’s phone rang and she immediately answered it and walked to the back of the shack as she spoke, while signalling to me to wait.

‘Bra Zakes, you got my message,’ the woman shouted making me wonder why she had even bothered to go behind the shack.

‘Yes, three hundred Rands Bra Zakes, only three hundred,’ she continued.

‘I know he hasn’t returned that five hundred, but we will return it as soon as he starts working again... Yes, yes I understand, but you are the only friend he still has. The others, they don’t answer our calls. They don’t even visit anymore.’

There was a pause and then the woman shouted gain, ‘even two hundred will be okay. We have no food left in the house, nothing at all Please Bra Zakes, you are my last hope’.

I was nervous. This was a sensitive conversation that I wished I did not have to overhear.

‘Oh thank you very much. Thank you so-so much. We will see you then when you come. God bless you.’

The woman concluded her call and for some reason, I felt uneasy when she returned from behind the shack pushing her cell-phone into the pocket of the oversized jersey she wore on a hot summer morning.

‘What did you say your father’s name was by the way?’

‘John Moyo.’

‘No. There is no John Moyo here. I do not know anyone by that name either. This is the Moyana residence. The man of this house, my husband, is Johannes Moyana. He is unfortunately not well at the moment. He could have helped you. He is from Zimbabe too. You are from Zimbabe, right? I can hear from the way you talk.’

‘Yes I am from Zimbabwe,’ I responded stressing the ‘w’ in the pronunciation of the word. Although part of me was relieved that I had not found my father at this shack, I was concerned about my return home, more than I was concerned about his whereabouts even though my returning home depended on finding him. My body grew weak as I wondered where my father

could be. Number 2675 Nomzamo Park was the address that had been entered as my father's address in my mother's address book: had I copied it wrongly?

At second glance at the homestead, I was convinced that I had gotten the wrong address. It did not make sense that my father, a man who had a huge house that many envied in Gwabalanda, could live in a place like this. Even before my mother extended our house, the original two-bedroom house my father had built as the manager of Monarch, Zimbabwe, before he left for South Africa, was something admirable on its own. Calling my mother to confirm my father's address was something I was reluctant to do. However, having assessed the situation I realised that I had no other choice so I swallowed my pride. With roughly thirty South African Rands left in my wallet, I had to use the little money I had sparingly. I thought of asking to use the woman's cell-phone to at least send a message to my mother, but remembering the woman's telephonic conversation, I figured that she probably did not have enough airtime. I therefore asked her where I could find the nearest telephone booth. She pointed me towards a shack which she said was a spaza shop.

'There are Zimbabens who stay there too. Maybe they know your father.'

I sensed the woman's pity towards me and her desire to help. At this point I wanted to cry. Being pitied by a woman, whom I, a few minutes earlier, had pitied, drained the little strength I had left in me. The weight of my bag weakened my left shoulder and dragged my already sunken spirits to the ground. I fought back the tears that clouded my eyes as I stepped into the scorching sunlight. Its searing rays burnt the residues of my dying hopes just as it had probably burnt the hopes and dreams of the residences of this informal settlement, most of whom, I came to realise, were foreigners who had left their homes in search for greener pastures.

The possibility of not finding my father and failing to return home in time for my interview made me resent having left home. The resentment was however nothing like my resentment towards my mother. It was her who had pushed me away. Her and that Roaring Engine Man. And because of them, there was a likelihood of me missing what was probably the most important interview of my life. I had just walked a considerable distance away from the sickly woman's shack when I heard someone call out my name. I had not told the woman my name and the chances of someone identifying me in that place were slim so I assumed the voice was in my head and continued walking.

‘Simanga,’ I heard the voice again much clearer. I turned around to investigate its source but could not recognize the man who stood at the doorstep of the shack. Next to him stood the woman and between them was the mischievous little boy picking his nose. The three of them painted a portrait of a complete family: mother, child and father, something I do not recall ever having, as it was always my mother alone with Xoli and I and no father in the picture. Seeing the threesome standing together, I recalled my mother’s bitter words: ‘A perfect little family; what else would he want back here in Zimbabwe?’ Brushing my mother’s words out of my head, I walked back towards the shack.

As I drew closer to the shack, I could see the man’s face but could still not recognise him. ‘Simangaliso, you have grown so much,’ the man said. I feigned a smile as I searched the features of his ashen face and withered body for an identity. A sudden and familiar crawling of insects within my body weakened my muscles as I studied the man. It was a thwarting feeling that I had felt only in the presence of the Roaring Engine Man, yet he was nowhere within the vicinity. Maybe the Roaring Engine Man was not the cause of the disease that had eaten through the fabric of the relationship I had treasured: the very disease that was destroying my family. He was just an opportunistic infection: more like herpes. From the man’s eyes, tears rolled down his skeletal face and rested on the corner of his smiling inflamed lips while his fragile hands pulled up to his waist the saggy pants that threatened to fall if he let go of his grip. Tears that I had suppressed came rushing down my face as I recognised the smile affixed on the man’s face. Xoli did indeed have our father’s smile.

THE LOVE STORY

In the decades of the Great Exodus hundreds migrated from the Land to other parts of the world, fleeing the tyranny of the ruling monarchy, the Government that had ascended the throne after overthrowing the Land's colonial rulers. The Government comprised of the Royal Family and Elite, whom, together plundered the Land's riches and gold, while the Children of the Land lived in hunger and poverty. Kingship within the Government was passed on from one member of the Royal Family to another and with each change of power, often to a less capable ruler, the living conditions of the Children of the Land worsened, while the increase in taxes imposed on the Children of the Land maintained the riches of the Royal Family and the Elite. Demands for better living conditions fell on deaf ears and attempts to challenge the Government were viciously crushed, leaving inhabitants of the Land with no option but to seek a better life elsewhere. Towards the end of the 21st century, after decades of migration, millions had fled the Land. Those who fled became known in the history of the Land as the Leavers while those who stayed were known as the Stayers.

The Leavers settled in foreign lands and while a few returned, the majority stayed and did not set foot back onto the Land, not even to bury their dead. And as their feet took root in foreign lands, the Leavers soon forgot about the Land and those they had left behind. So, the Stayers were left alone to bury their dead and to face the worsening conditions in the Land. As living conditions worsened in the Land, a spirit of revolt mounted amongst the Stayers. Spurned by this, the Leavers rekindled their interest in the Land and began to exert pressure – if only from afar. Various attempts to topple the Government were made - each unsuccessful. The Government was just too strong for the Children of the Land. But, as fate would have it, things were not well in the Government. With each change of power amongst the members of the Royal Family, plots were hatched among the Elite who foresaw the possibility of never usurping the throne in their life time for as long as the Royal family continued to exist. Taking advantage of the mounting anger of the Stayers and the pressure from outside from Leavers, the Elite colluded with the leaders of the various revolutionary movements that emerged amongst the Stayers and the Leavers and this gave birth to the Great Revolt which finally toppled the Royal Family.

With the fall of the Royal Family, Leavers flocked back into the Land in their numbers. The Elite were quick to secretly pose questions to the Stayers. Why had the Leavers returned? What had they returned for when they had left for decades? To reap what those who had stayed had sewn? To take over the leadership positions that those who had stayed had created. To take over their jobs with their foreign qualifications. The Stayers pondered the Elite's questions and soon these questions became their own. Just when it was expected that the Children of the Land would finally live in prosperity under their own democratic leadership, a new tension threatened to again divide the Land.

The Stayers were adamant not to let the Leavers return with their borrowed tongues and pale skins – their melanin faded and pigmentation lost from straying too far from the source of the light and their noses grown pointy from trying too hard to assimilate into what was foreign to them. They didn't want them to take over what they, the Stayers had rebuilt from the ruins that the Leavers had fled. They demanded that the Leavers leave. There was no place in the new Land for them. The Leavers refused. They too were Children of the Land. They too had fought against The Government and helped topple it. The Stayers laughed. What wars are fought with hash-tags on social media? Behind barriers of cell phone screens? Through placards and picketing outside embassy buildings from the safety of borders and with seas separating you from the reality of the bloodshed on the ground? The Stayers insisted that it was they who were arrested and brutalised, they who disappeared, they who died in hospital corridors unattended, they who suffered the hunger, they who buried their dead alone, when those who had left were too far to come and bury their own. The Leavers were quick to respond. Was it not the money we sent that kept those who had stayed alive? Was it not the medication we sent? The food? The Stayers laughed again. It was an insult that it should be insinuated that they would not have survived or taken back the Land without the meagre and sporadic handouts of the Leavers.

Words were thrown back and forth until words alone were not enough. A band of newly arrived Leavers was attacked by unknown assailants and not long after, a handful of Leavers lodged a counter attack on the Stayers, capturing and annexing certain sectors of the Land that were previously occupied by Stayers. Further attacks and counter attacks ensued between the two factions and soon the Land was in the grips of a Civil War.

Over years of continued tensions, the Leavers came to occupy almost half of the Land while the Stayers occupied the other half. There were still other areas of the Land that were equally occupied by both Leavers and Stayers, such as the Khami Dyke. The District was the political and economic centre of the Land and the one sector of the Land that neither the Leavers nor the Stayers had control over. It was here that the House of the District was situated; the house that was once occupied by the Royal Family. For their role in bringing down the Ruling Family, the Elite had been allowed to temporally occupy the House of the District. But with the passage of time, the Elite now controlled the whole District as self-appointed trustees and interim Administrators of the affairs of the Land. The Elite, in their minority occupied the largest portions of the District. They further controlled the Land's law enforcement unit, the Elite Forces.

With the divide between Stayers and Leavers, mixings amongst the two factions were unusual and were even frowned at by leaders and elders from both factions who viewed the other as the enemy. Only one group within the Land, known as the Factionless, refused the divisions into factions. This group comprised a scattering of adolescents and a few elders, some descendants of the Stayers and other descendants of the Leavers, who collectively refused to identify themselves as either being Stayers or Leavers, instead choosing to identify themselves merely as Children of the Land. The Elite foresaw that should the Factionless manage to heal the rift that cut the Land in two, their power would be threatened. Elite Forces were therefore deployed to eradicate and splinter the Factionless. The Factionless thus became outlaws and criminals within the very Land they sought to unify.

Amid the conflict, Soothsayers spoke of a much more potent war still to come. A war of the Gods against all the Children of the Land – Leavers and Stayers alike. A war that would bring about the wrath of the Gods: Sodom and Gomorrah-like. Noah's floods like wrath. But no one listened to the Soothsayers. Not even when the earth shook, awakening the Fire Gods from over a century of slumber and causing dormant volcanoes to erupt, viciously spewing lava over the Land and burning settlements along the Khami Dyke with wild fires, killing and injuring a hand full of both Leavers and Stayers. In the wake of the flames, many were displaced and forced to relocate to the District, the Land's capital and largest sector. The mass relocations to the District

exerted too much pressure on its resources and fresh tensions arose amongst the Stayers and Leavers.

The Soothsayers spoke of worse things still to come from the Gods. Volcanic eruptions were only the beginning. Its fires had already eaten into parts of the Land and if the two factions continued the onslaught against each other, all elements: fire, earth, wind and water – would align, bringing forth the final war of Armageddon which would destroy Humankind. Only the birth of a child; the Chosen One, would save the Land from complete self-destruction. The child would unite the Children of the Land and its blood would cleanse the Land restoring peace and tranquillity. But once more; no one took the Soothsayers seriously. With the many children being born in the Land; what would be special about this one that they spoke of, the people asked. But later, when news of the conception of an inter-faction child began to spread through the Land, the Elite, who had previously not been bothered by the Soothsayer's prophecies, became alert. Elite Forces were deployed, issuing out a warrant of arrest for the child's parents. Apart from worrying about the Elite forces and the warrant of arrest, there were also Leavers and Stayers to worry about as both groups were riled by one of their own having the child of their enemy. A child of both bloods had never been heard of in the Land and both Factions believed that the birth of such a child is what would truly anger the Gods. The child's parents were thus forced into hiding. A manhunt for them began and soon the parents were apprehended just after the birth of their child.

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Ngiyabuya raised her head from Maunga's lap. Its lightness was dizzying, threatening to drop her weight back on Maunga. She rested her head against his arm. Her trembling hands on her belly. On feeling its flatness, she opened her mouth to ask about the baby. But her throat felt as if it had a thorn stuck in it. To allow for the passage of a word or two, she forced out a cough. She pressed her hand against her chest to suppress the pain that came with the cough and attempted to clear her throat again before she called out for the baby. Maunga's hand caressing her arm was not the response that she desired. It did not fill the emptiness in her arms or the hollowness in her belly. She opened her eyes for the first time since she awoke, her eyelids flipping against the darkness of her surroundings and the sudden images that flashed on her retina. Images of the midwife, handing her the baby with a smile that said, 'it's a girl' – the mark

on the baby's forehead – the Oracle taking the baby from her bosom – her bringing her back bathed and clothed and demanding that they left immediately – the Elite Forces at the midwife's door – the baby being ripped out of her arms.

'My baby,' she whimpered through the flashes. When her eyes adjusted to the darkness and she saw where she was, she crawled to the iron bars of the cell where they were being held. She shook them, demanding that they be let out and she given their baby. Her weakness did not allow her protest to go far. She dropped to the floor and sobbed. Maunga walked to her and helped her to her feet. She looked up at his face and met his eyes. They looked like life had been sucked out of them. Those were still the same eyes that glowed with her reflection when they had first met three years earlier at the Khami Dyke. When she, having defied her parent's instructions, had just arrived in the Land with a band of Leavers eager to settle in the Land, despite its ongoing civil war. She, like many other descendants of Leavers, was setting foot on the Land for the first time in her twenty-four years of life.

At the time of her arrival, the Land had just suffered volcanic eruptions that had left the Khami Dyke, the connecting city to the District, trapped under crusts of cooling lava flow.

The Land, dark and smelling of burning, was a cluster of blackness with liquid flames trapped underneath its glowing embers protruding through cracks of blackened molten rock. The fading heat reflected in the eyes the other new arrivals. Their eyes, robbed of the fire they possessed prior to their departure for the Land, glared at each other, enquiring whether they, at this point, should turn back. But for Ngiyabuya, this was a point of no return. She was finally home, and she felt it. She had thus decided to stay and help with searching for survivors, attending to the injured and assisting those who settlements had been charred and brought down to rubble. This gave her a sense of belonging and a much-needed sense of being of service, as if to redress the inherited guilt of her elders having abandoned the Land when it needed its descendants the most.

In the midst of this, she met Maunga, together with a band of young men and women had arrived from the District to attend to the injured. Maunga and his companions were different from the two groups of aid that arrived first. The first group only aided those who, more like Maunga, had dark thick skin and flat noses. She soon came to learn that they were the Stayers.

The second group aided those whom like herself had lighter skin and pointy noses. These, as she also came to learn, were the Leavers. Maunga and his group however, aided both factions regardless of their features. Ngiyabuya soon came to learn that Maunga and his group were members of the Factionless that she had read about in her research on the Land prior to her departure from the foreign land afar that held her parent's hostage.

Ngiyabuya had been warned beforehand of the animosity between the Stayers and the Leavers and had thus resolved to keep to her kind. Meeting Maunga had however, changed this. The way that he spoke of the Factionless and their role in unifying the Land. How he spoke of the anger of the Gods at the wars between the Children of the Land. The way Maunga spoke passionately about the Land and how he dedicated his life to the cause of the Factionless, she believed once that he was the Chosen One that prophecy told of. The saviour child, Jesus Christ-like, sent by the gods to save the Land from its inhabitants. The Jesus whose second coming had been long awaited, for years, decades, centuries and even millennia before her time.

Ngiyabuya studied Maunga's face searching in his eyes to see if there was still that passion and hopefulness that they always carried. But his look was blank and did not offer the assurances that she sought.

'How long will they keep us here? When will they give me back my child?' she said to the blank look on his face.

Maunga looked aside. She could see his brokenness and his powerlessness. For the first time in the years that they had met, he had no answer to questions that she had posed to him. She sensed his fear. A fear that had always been alien to him, from the time when he asked her to spend time with him after their first encounter in the Khami Dyke and remained even when their relationship developed and they expressed their love openly, even when they were reproached and faced public slurs from both factions. Even when she discovered that she was pregnant after she met the Oracle for the first time on that mercilessly hot day. The day was still vivid in her memory. Even here. Even now. She could remember the heat, the taste, the craving for fig fruit that consumed her. That day, she had worn a long flurry skirt that allowed enough air circulation and a training bra leaving the rest of her belly exposed – she remembered its fullness, its hunger. And how the elderly woman had pulled her closer as she walked passed her at the vegetable

market. How the same woman had taken off her scarf exposing her greyed hairs and insisted that Ngiyabuya cover her belly. She wrapped the scarf around Ngiyabuya's belly, caressed it and then said, 'The child is not safe. Come and see me when you have carried it to term.' She then dug into the pocket of her dress and handed Ngiyabuya a mound of earth that she took from a folded paper.

'Here, eat this, it will cure the cravings.' Confused by the woman's actions and particularly her knowledge of her cravings, Ngiyabuya reached for the earth and broke a piece against her tongue. The earth melted into her mouth, the fresh scent of summer rains on fertile soil nestling around her nose, inviting her to grace her tongue with yet another piece.

They later discovered that the woman was an Oracle and that Ngiyabuya was indeed pregnant. However, Maunga had still shown no fear when they faced threats on their lives and demands that the pregnancy be terminated when the pregnancy began to show. Not even when the warrant of arrest was issued against them or in their entire time of hiding. Not even when the Oracle, in a subsequent encounter, reminded them of the Prophecy of the Chosen One and alerted them that the child was believed to be the Chosen One; that, whether the child was indeed the or not, it being of two bloods would unify the land and such unity paused a threat to the status quo hence certain sectors of the Land that thrived on the continued divide did not want the birth of such a child. All suddenly made sense to them, yet still Maunga showed no signs of fear and became her rock in her time of anxiety. But now when the wrath of men appeared more powerful than that of the Gods, all that she could feel from his silence was immense fear.

'Was Uhuru here?' she tried to summon a different response other than silence.

'Yes'

'I thought I heard her voice in my sleep. What did she say?' Maunga reverted to his silence keeping his gaze hidden from her. 'Did you ask her to speak to your parents? Your father, he is a leader of the Stayers. Can't he not get us out of here?'

'She already met with my father,' Maunga finally answered in a low voice with his face still turned away from Ngiyabuya. 'The Stayers do not have any power. They gave away too

much away to the Elite in exchange for their assistance in fighting the Leavers. There is nothing that my parents can do.'

'My parents. They have influential friends amongst the Leavers. They can get us out of here.'

'Uhuru contacted them. But neither the Leavers nor the Stayers have power. It is all in the hands of the Elite. No one saw this coming. The Leavers are also receiving aid from the Elite this whole time and they too gave away too much of their power. The Elite are running the show. They have already determined our fate'.

But Maunga could not bring himself to share with his lover what their fate was. He kept his face hidden from her and reverted to his silence. But it was not long that Ngiyabuya learnt of their fate. A public execution of the child was to be held and both parents were to be banished from the Land afterwards. This was according to one member of the Elite Forces who seemingly took joy in telling them what their fate was when he came to give them some water.

'The Sayers have always said by blood the Land was won. By blood this Land would be saved. The child is unique. It is of both bloods. Perhaps it is indeed the chosen one. Perhaps this is the child's destiny. To be born to die to save humanity', Maunga spoke to the bars of the prison cell.

'Why do you speak of her as if she is not our own? Prophesy does not speak of a child of both bloods. So why does this Jesus have to be my child? Did the Oracle not say that our child was protected? Did we not follow the Oracle's instructions? Did we not travel halfway across the Land to Mountain Valley for our cleansing and to Orange Spring to get the special ointment for the child's ointment, my belly heavy and threatening to pop? All for what? For it to all end like this?'

'I do not know. I am just trying to make sense of this all. But perhaps a miracle will happen. Perhaps something to save us all.'

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In the evening of the third day of their arrest, the two were taken to town square where the Elite had called upon the whole public, regardless of fiction to be present. The moon was full when the two lovers were brought before the public. The High Priest of the Elite presided on the gathering. He confirmed what the couple's fate was.

'We must rid and cleanse the Land of such acts of immorality. A child of both bloods is an abomination,' he said.

At this point, the Oracle appeared and took centre stage: 'Says who,' she said. 'Was the same also not said of their love? What harm did their love bring? At what point did we become separate as children of the Land. At what point did we become so divided that we cannot carry children from the other faction. We have not always been this divided. Before these divisions, we were one. And if we were to look deeply, most of us will be found to be of both bloods.'

Members of the Elite Forces appeared from amongst the crowd and apprehended the Oracle. She however continued talking, raising her voice louder as they pulled her away from the arena: 'In all our years of war and conflict. The Children of the Land never spilled a child's blood or allowed such to happen. A child's blood has always been sacred. Why spill it now? This would surely anger the gods.'

When they could no longer see the Oracle, the gathering looked at the child's parents and then at each other before looking to the Priest. Silence suspended the scene only for a moment, then the Priest instead ordered that the child be brought to him. There was commotion in the arena. The crowd whispered amongst each other. From amongst the crowd, Ngiyabuya's mother, who had just arrived in the Land, loudly pleaded for the child to be allowed to live. She was soon joined in her plea by Maunga's mother and other women in their mist. The women looked to their faction leaders and pleaded with them, no longer bothered by the fact that this child had half the blood of another faction. Having half the blood of their faction made the child one of their own and that half was enough to desire no harm for the child. In fact, it was a child, no different from those that they had carried was enough to just keep the child alive, they said. But their faction leaders could say nothing, do nothing.

A woman appeared with the child in her arms and laid her on a table before the Priest bringing the commotion to an end. On the table lay a machete. Ngiyabuya, with the little energy

that she had, screamed for her child to be given back to her. Ignoring her, the Priest picked the child up by one leg and raised it to the sky as if making an offering to the gods. Like a murderous rebel, he drew the machete with the other hand.

'Let this be a lesson to all children of the Land. This will not be tolerated'.

Ngiyabuya did not close her eyes. She kept them open, hoping for a miracle to happen. She kept her eyes open hoping to see the ground curve in and swallow the machete yielding priest or a bolt of lightning striking him down. Whatever miracle the gods intended to perform, it had to happen now, because the Priest had raised his sword high. Without a blink, Ngiyabuya saw the sword swipe through the child, between its parted legs in one clean strike. There was no caving in of the ground, no earth opening to swallow the Priest. No bolt of lightning. Nothing. Not even a cry from the wide-eyed child. Just the weight of the one side of the child, half its body dropping to the ground, landing with its halved head on the concrete of the Town Square. The other half of the child's body remained in the raised arm of the Priest. One leg raised up, one arm dangling and one eye wide open, blood dripping from the clean slice that left no gut or intestine dangling. No one made a sound. No one screamed. Mother stood there red eyed and motionless unable to allow herself to weep in shock. Maunga too stood there motionless and speechless. Only after the Priest threw the halved body to its mother, sending it landing before her feet, did the mother come back to life.

She collapsed to her knees, picked up the one half and tried to tuck the spewing parts of the child back into the half of its belly. She held that half against her bosom sobbing as she crawled towards the centre of the arena where the other half of the child had fallen.

Seeing this, Maunga walked towards the centre and carried the other half of the child to its mother's arms. The mother pieced the two halves together, tucking in the protruding innards, her hands bloody. She pressed them hard against her bosom. No one said a word. They watched and sobbed with the couple as Father knelt next to Mother embracing her and their halved child. The two with their halved daughter became one as if in an act to piece their child together. But to Ngiyabuya, the child no longer felt like her child. It did not feel the way it felt when she first held her just when it was born.

Failing to feel the warmth and the connection that she needed from the child in her arms, the mother discarded both halves of the child into its father's arms before she rose to her feet screaming that the child was not hers. She, hysterically ripping off her clothes, demanded that she be given back her child. Maunga handed over the child to his mother and tried to contain Ngiyabuya but she was out of control, surging with an energy that was not expected of a woman, especially not one who, not so long ago was weakened by hunger and the strain of childbirth.

Maunga's mother held the child sobbing. Ngiyabuya's mother moved closer to her and handed her head wrap to cover the child with. With the child wrapped together, both its grandmothers stood together, the one embracing the other with their grandchild between them.

Ngiyabuya on the other hand, had violently pushed Maunga away when he had tried to hold her and calm her down. She continued ripping off her clothes until her upper body was bare. With her dress ripped open, and no milking bra, she sunk her fingers deep into her chest, in the middle of her breasts, and tore herself open, releasing the wind in her. Her wind escaped with such turmoil, violently pushing, grabbing and tossing everything and everyone in the vicinity. Now everyone was screaming, dropping to the ground and finding objects to hold on to avoid being swept away. Maunga, having witnessed his lover tear herself apart from her chest rushed back to her, fiercely resisting the force of her wind and held her in his arms. He pulled her with all her wind to his chest and tried to hold her in within himself. With her back pressed against his body, he felt the wind of her violently rupturing her body and pieces of her body exploding against his, flying away into destructive wind circling around the Town Square. Soon his arms felt empty as the motion of the wind around the Town Square receded leaving no signs Ngiyabuya, but just fallen and bleeding bodies, amongst uprooted trees, poles, lamp posts and shattered glass from shops close to the Town Square.

With the heaviness of the void left by his lover, Maunga dropped to the ground, denting it. With his chest pushed out, he threw his hands in the air in a scream so fierce that it shook the earth, causing it to crack and split violently, swallowing him and all within his immediate vicinity. His screams of agony could still be heard from beneath the ground together with the screams of the others around. The earth continued to shake violently with its splitting and caving in spreading from the Town Square, all over the District and beyond.

When morning came, half of the District had been destroyed. Many had died. The House of the District had been destroyed too, along with all of members of the Elite who had gathered there for an urgent meeting after leaving the Town Square subsequent to the execution of the child. None of them survived, including the Priest. The majority of the leaders from the two factions had died too, along with many of those who had attended the execution. Only a few survived.

The Survivors, still traumatised had gathered enough strength to search for more Survivors, Leavers and Stayers alike. While awaiting aid from less affected and non-affected sectors of the Land, some Survivors attended to the injured while others rounded up the dead, attempted to identify them and cleared their bodies from the Town Square and every other public space around the District.

Amongst the dead, the bodies of both Maunga's mother and Ngiyabuya's mother were found, one on top of the other with Maunga's mother shielding the dead child with her body while Ngiyabuya's mother shielded Maunga's mother. At this sight, for the first time in decades, the Children of the Land mourned together and consoled each other with no consideration of each other's factions.

The following day, when the dead bodies were being prepared for burial, the Midwife who was washing the executed child noted that the child had no mark on her forehead. This could not have been the child that she had delivered; Maunga and Ngiyabuya's baby. It was indeed the child who had been executed and it bore the stitches to prove this. But the child could not have been the one that she had delivered as it had a mark on her forehead that could not be washed away by water or soap when she had bathed her before handing her back to the Oracle. She however kept her thoughts to herself and handed the child over for its special burial.

Whether the child was Maunga and Ngiyabuya's lovechild or not, it is said that death of the child was the last straw for the Gods. The Gods, in their act of anger annexed Ngiyabuya's body causing her violent outburst at the slaughter of the child. Maunga too, in his outburst was said to have been possessed. Through their passion and rage, the Gods destroyed the Land for those who survived to live and rebuild with love and unity. And that children, is how we rebuilt the Land.

BRINGING US BACK

She leaves enough breathing space between herself and the inmate ahead of her but the warden screams: move – no gaps in between. She moves one step forward and cannot move any further. She already smells the breast milk from the inmate in front of her. Strands of her recently unbraided and dandruff infested hairs are dangling too close to her face. The inmate behind her liberally fills the gap behind and she can feel the heat of her breath against her neck, absorbing into her skin. She moves aside, a little out of the queue.

'Straight line ladies.'

She squeezes herself back into the queue. Finally, she is first line. She receives her evening ration and finds an isolated spot to place her food tray. No one ever joins her and she does not bother to join any of the little groupings. She glares at the food in silence. She is accustomed to her own silence. It allows her to hear the whispers around her.

'Fifteen years – It's true; she told me herself, he comes very time she is on kitchen duty – Attempted murder; threw boiling oil at her husband's mistress – Five million; not five thousand, five million in her pocket; she's very rich.'

She holds the whispers in her head. Cradles them. Savours them for later when the nights get too lonely.

#

The women speak of death. They speak of it in the way that neighbours and distant relations speak of a death that has not befallen them. A death that is not theirs to bear. They say:

'It caught them off guard – When they had not even a penny to their name. – Were they not with a society?'

Their voices, from somewhere behind her, whispering against the sound of tar and motion, amongst the twitter of crickets and other night things. She closes her eyes and attempts sleep. But sleep does not come easy when you are on the road, far from home, seated in an upright position squashed between two beings as equally heavy bodied as you. And when your mission and the circumstances of your travel make it difficult for you to sleep. When your ears are drawn to conversations that you would rather not overhear.

‘They had stopped sending: her boys – Could not keep up with the payments. This life is hard when you are old –You will birth lots of children – Bring every single one of them up singlehandedly but not a single one of them will take care of you. And you will still bury them all. One by one.’

‘But people must just learn to come back when they start feeling hot – Before they are terminal – But they never come – They only come back in coffins – A dead body is more expensive than a breathing one – These parlours are making a killing. My nephew works for one of these new ones. They are here every week, business is booming. But you can never afford them on your own. A person must just join a society really. Otherwise – They will just burn us all.’

The words burn her ears. She keeps her neck stiff, resisting the temptation to turn her head and steal a glance at the faces of the whispering two. She opens her eyes and meets the darkness of the road ahead. It complements the speech that saturates the stuffy bus.

‘Our bodies shall remain in government morgues uncollected – buried like paupers or burnt in government crematoriums to create more space for unclaimed bodies – mass cremations. And then you will have confused ghosts hovering around our families unable to be appeased because you do not know which of the mixed-up spirits seeking to be brought home belongs to your kin. They shall scatter our ashes in sewages –Where else would they scatter us? – Their beaches like people do on TV? We have already polluted their waters with our dirty fleeing feet and bones of those of us who drowned and could not be found. Besides; who wants to be discarded in water. I do not trust water. Water has been unkind to us throughout history. It either kills us through deprivation or merciless flooding. Look at us, many years with no rain. The soil dry... dry... dry. And suddenly there is this Dineo. None stop rains, cities flooding. Tsholotsho 2001 all over again. You do still remember Tsholotsho? Gwayi woke up angry and we woke up to water everywhere – livestock and crops destroyed – People dead – houses swept away. We had to run to the mountains for safety. Water never loved us – since the days of Noah – There too many unsettled spirits trapped under these waters – why would one want to be buried in water?’

Finally, the familiar sound of rapidly strum guitar strings numbs the voices of the whispering two. The acoustics arrest her ears and calm her unsettled spirit before the voice of a young man rushes in a fervent Ndebele chant, listing his clan names, boastful of his origins, proclaiming himself a descendent of the Ngwenyama tribe, inhabitants of most futile rural plains

– sacred lands and mountains that shelter the spirits of their gods and rivers that flow perennially. The praises are soon replaced by a sharp erratic whistle. The whistling brings back the boys from their day of herding cattle. He is amongst them. A shy rural boy who is soon to grow into a man who will leave the nest only returning home once a year to pay homage to the land of his birth.

The whistling gives way to melodic wailing as the man gets into a song pleading for his lover to wait for him; he is making his way from the city of gold; digging himself out of the tunnels of its dark mines. Leaving it all behind for the open plains of the country side where he can breathe fresh country air, right next to his beloved. The song then breaks into a choral hook sung in Ndebele. As the hook repeats, the words and harmonies of the song settle into the empty spaces within her, lift her spirit from its confused space, sending it soaring against the rising mountains of kwaShambe overlooking Nyenye River. Deep within the Shambe Valleys where she ferries with her his spirit.

The music brings him home, like a long-awaited lover. And she smiles as she watches him polishing his brown shoes. The shine he produces attempts to match the glow of the gold chain that rests on his hairy chest and the sparkle of the two gold teeth standing out from a neat raw of white. She does not quite understand the gold teeth, but the shine of his brown and gold nicely complement his cream suit and the brownish viscose shirt that he wears tucked into his cream pants and held together with a leather brown belt. He sings along to this very song as he attempts to bring more shine out of his shoe. He, as if he is the young man in the song, abandons his polished shoe and brings his cupped hands to his chest. He pulls words out of his chest and hands them over, in open palms, to no one in particular. He picks up the second already shining shoe and polishes it again with a grin on his face.

'You see Ma; these boys are the future of Mbaqanga. They hit.' He laughs and says, 'Do hear these boys? Do you hear how they hit the guitar?'

She tries to remember who he had said 'these boys' were, but the sound of his laughter fixes her mind on something more potent: the laughter itself. She smiles. The sound of his laughter and the Mbaqanga glide smoothly along the open road. No talk of death or societies. Just the music taking him home. Carrying the spirits of those gone before him. Those in waiting, in transition to join those gone ahead. Those left behind to mourn over those recently left in hopeful prayers that those gone before them will welcome their recently departed.

His laughter fades and all that is left is the music. Mbaqanga. Music of leaving and the music of returning. Music that is memory to the touch of a loved one. A sound track to love sustained between distant spaces. An elegy to love lost between borders. The solitude that weighs down on one's chest when the tarred road down Selbourne leaves behind the Suburbs, flies over Kezington, and passes Esigodini leaving all that is familiar and friendly behind, with its remnant packaged in plastic bags with a handful of sweet potatoes, madumbes, ground nuts, matemba, maputi, Cerevita, two litre bottles of Mazoe Orange Crush, and of cause the lunch boxes of umgqutshu served with boiled road runner thighs and drumsticks and road runner broth, with no onions nor tomatoes, authentic in its homely savoury scent and flavour, savouring the taste of all that familiar and friendly. The music is that sour and offish taste of the familiar and friendly that you must leave because it's unfriendly and too familiar. The stale taste grows stronger in the mouth when the road advances into Gwanda road, past Gwanda Hotel, the dusty cement town of Colleen Bawn, West Nicolson drawing near, letting you know that home is stretching further away and Beit Bridge and beyond draws near, its dirge to distant love summoning you into its coldly foreign arms. But when you travel this road in the reverse direction, with boxes of KFC and Coca Cola two litre bottles and fresh bread, and many imported wares heavy on the trailers wheeled behind the bus home, as the road wheels itself to Mbaqanga and Maskandi music, the music becomes home. That soundtrack to love sustained.

It carries that homely feeling that lets you know you are home. That you belong. That you have crossed the demarcation line, that you need not speak in lowered voices, or conceal your Rs, or roll your tongues into complacent Ls, or readjust your dialect, or monitor how you articulate in fear of an attentive ear quick to detect the anomaly in your vocabulary, the abstract of your ascent. That it is okay to walk with no passport like apartheid travel passes attached to your person. That it is okay to sleep with both eyes closed with no fear of a night raid. And everyone in the bus seems to trust these assurances from the music. She notes the silence in the bus and allows the melodies of the music to finally lull her into welcome sleep after recent preceding nights of sleeplessness.

#

The night departs with the magic of the music. The sound of morning is quietened by the sound of motion. But the feel of its breeze penetrates the bus as the break of dawn brings the city of Kings, where Lobengula built his capital, into view. Home is calling. One more bus to the homestead, and she will have accomplished what she set out to do.

The bus slows down and comes to a halt. That unfriendly and too familiar creeps in. In this instance, it wears the face of the law, clad in civil servant uniforms, hostile greys, booted feet.

Instructions: 'Get out of the bus. Passports in hand.'

Murmurs: 'Why? – Even on home soil? – Are we not home?'

Amongst these murmurs from the passengers, she hears the voices of the whispering two from the previous night.

'Open the page with today's entry stamp.'

'What for – Can one ever be illegally home?'

'Luggage out of the bus. Each person stand beside your luggage.'

'Is this now an inland border – What do they want now?'

'Open your bags!'

'Have we not done this already – Why must they harass us like this?'

'Declaration forms in hand.'

'What – Are they now immigration control? – They just money – When will all this end?'

'Whose bag is this?'

The murmurs stop. All eyes divert to a seemingly abandoned large green and white tshangani bag.

'Parents; did we not say each person must stand beside their luggage. All of their luggage. Whose bag is this?'

Silence.

'Driver. Open this bag.'

Driver impatiently walks to the bag, grumbling at his passengers about them delaying him and how he would not hesitate to leave the bag behind should no one claim the bag. He unzips the bag with a frown on his face and steps aside.

'Open it.'

Driver parts the opening of the bag and pulls aside a folded towel and jersey neatly layered at the top of the bag. He moves aside again. Frown still in position. The law digs its hands deeper into the bag, tossing aside more neatly folded clothing items. Its hand lingers a little longer in the bag, it pulls something. Darts its head backwards abruptly. Releases its hand from the bag and step aside. Calmly. It beckons for its colleagues. More of the law draw close to the bag for inspection. The same reaction. An abrupt darting of the head backwards followed by a calm backing away from the bag.

'Driver! Whose bag is this?'

'Parents, whose bag is this?' Driver relays the question back to his passengers before he takes a step closer to the bag for a peep at what bothers the law. Abruptly, his head and upper body darts back. Immediately after his head jerks forward, dropping to his chest. He dashes off to a nearby tree with his hands covering his mouth to stop the volcano erupting from his lips from spewing onto the faces of the law too close to him. All eyes are on Driver. Then the bag. A few passengers are brave enough to attempt to move closer to the bag for a peep, but the law wards them off.

'Whose bag is this?'

Silence. Not a single murmur. Not even from the whispering two.

'Driver. I will ask you once more: whose bag is this.'

Driver has his elbows on his knees, body bent, head downcast, still recouping for breath. His hands drip vomit.

'This bus has been arrested. All of you are coming with us. Put your bags back in the bus.'

The murmuring resumes. There is movement as each passenger drags their bags into the luggage compartment of the bus. She stands still. Clutching her hand bag. Awaiting instruction, perhaps a signal from other passenger to get back into the bus.

'Woman. Where is your luggage? Is this all you have.'

She does not talk.

'Woman; Do you not speak? Driver; does this woman not speak?'

Silence. Driver is seemingly paralysed. Seemingly lost his speech too. Now seated under a tree flanked by the law. Driver 2, who has been missing in action, emerges from the passengers.

'Yes Mother. Where is your luggage? I remember you from the rank.'

Silence, ‘No maan! I remember you. You had a bag. The weight of your luggage was above the limit and you could not pay for the excess weight. You pleaded for me to waive the excess fee. Said the last cent you had was for a bus to the homestead. Where is your luggage Mama?’

Silence.

‘Does she not speak? Are you sure she had a bag?’

‘M’ sure officer. Whoever returns with just a handbag? She had a bag at the rank. A heavy bag. Where is your bag Mama?’

She maintains her silence.

#

She maintains it still even when she hears the whispers. The speculation about why she is in here. Even when the whispers brand her a witch. She maintains her silence. And she regrets nothing for she accomplished her mission. She brought him home. Accompanied by Mbaqanga and Maskandi assuring him of his belonging amongst his fathers and forefathers before him. Amongst those who bear his totems and know his clan names. She brought him back for his flesh to be returned to the soil that holds his umbilical cord. Even if it was in pieces. And when the whispers die off at night, she sees him at peace.