

# **My Crazy Character**

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degree of

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by

**Lungile Sojini**

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## Abstract

My thesis is a metafictional novella. I am interested in fictionalising the processes that writers use when they sit down to plan, write and publish novels.

Metafiction interests me because it breaks from the traditional way of writing fiction, particularly with regards to the appearance of the author in the fictional world created.

Devin Gibbons's metafictional story (titled *A Short Story*), in the anthology of innovative writing, *30 Under 30*, was my inspiration for developing the metafictional approach to novella length.

Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground*, Chief Fagunwa's *Forest of a Thousand Daemons*, and Charles Bukowski's autobiographical *Ham on Rye*, have for varying reasons, all influenced this writing.

*Nigga, don't check for me 'less you've got checks for me –*

21 Savage

*I find this story a bit of a bore because it is too simple. It lacks creativity –*

A reader – off the record!

I give my old character a call. He picks up the phone and says: ‘Who’s this?’

I give him my name, and start telling him who I be and what me do and... but he stops me right there. I think he remembers me... he has to.

He says: ‘Dude, are you still alive? And, are you still on your quest to write the next great African novel?’

My character remembers me more than I remember myself, it seems. When you become so predictable – and everyone knows what you be about – you start having doubts about this “writing thing”.

‘Listen, man,’ I say. ‘I don’t even know what to write about these days. I even think about quitting.’

I want to trigger him, but he doesn’t bite; he doesn’t say anything. I can feel him inhaling, even over the phone.

‘Do you still smoke?’ I ask; a crazy habit I must have given him in his prior life. ‘Why don’t you stop? You know it’s bad for your health.’

‘You know I had to be accepted. Socially-accepted,’ he says. ‘I’ve always wanted to stop. But the damage’s already done, you know. If it’s about my health, we can talk. But if it’s about your African novel hallucinations, I really don’t wanna talk to you. You used me. And, you cannot simply write a good novel without taking care of your characters. You didn’t take the time to know me, explore me. You dumped me abruptly.’

I try to think of this character again, who he really was and what he was about. I don’t remember such a cocky character.

I possibly can’t keep track of all the novel ideas and characters I dumped in the process of not knowing what I want on *this* “next great African novel”. My mind’s not an Excel spreadsheet.

It’s all good for a character to want me to put them in a character bible, but doing that might be jailing the character in a prison I’ll never be able to get them out of. The trick – which I favour most, but lets me down mostly – is just taking the character and rushing them through the novel.

All the planning, dense character bibles – all that crazy shit – can be distractions that’ll make one not write the novel after all.

‘For old times’ sake,’ I beg him. I can see I’m losing here.

‘This might be the chance we’ve always been waiting for,’ I continue. ‘Our chance to shine. Our chance to finally redefine the African novel.’

I say this without even believing myself. What is an African novel, anyway? Is there such a thing?

‘I don’t trust you,’ my character says. ‘All you care about is the money.’

I’m shocked, startled, but I let him continue:

‘You don’t care what people think of us. Remember, when you’re gone, we’ll be here, our names forever etched in these pages. But tell me, what will you do differently in this “African novel” of yours? One thing for sure, I’m not gonna help you degrade Africans. I’m not gonna be part and parcel of a story that’s full of clichés, let alone be the starring in it. What are you gonna do differently?’

Questions like this rile me. If somebody wants to do something for you, they should just do it. What are the questions for? But, hey, it’s me looking for a character here – not my character looking for a novelist. So, don’t you go judging me for capitulating.

You know how it is – you’re writing a cover letter (aka selling yourself or lying on paper), you tell your potential boss that you’re a hard worker, that you’ll go the extra mile, and that you’re a fast learner – all that bullshit you hear yourself say.

‘Okay,’ I say, finally. ‘I’ll portray Africa in a positive light. No negative stuff.’

On hearing this, my character says they like what they hear.

‘So are you in?’ I say. ‘Cause, it’s gonna be a hell of a task to go the “Africa rising” way. Will people believe my story? Will they believe you? Will they believe us?’

So, we talk some more. I give him my ideas. Tell him how the industry’s changed – how it might finally allow a nigga to break in. He listens to my crap. Encouraged by my own crap, I give him more crap. It feels good. We’ll change the African literary landscape, I tell him. But, in the end, he says: ‘I’ll think about it some more. Will let you know.’

What’s there to think about when you’ve an opportunity to change the African novel? People or characters can be stupid. If somebody calls me up, and says let’s write an African masterpiece, my answer is, Yes, let’s do it. Let’s fucking write the African novel – to hell with everything else.

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It’s day one. Now that he’s agreed to be a lead character in the novel, we fight over many things that don’t concern him or the readers. But I oblige him and listen to his silly concerns. I even do it in front of the readers. Why not? We can delete the crazy parts later on when this book goes for editing. Right now, we write drunk and edit probably some years after this.

The first fight is about his name. He says: ‘Why do you give me that clichéd name? Do you want everyone to know my race just by hearing my name?’

‘I don’t have time to waste thinking of a name you’ll find unclichéd,’ I’m blunt about it. ‘If you don’t like the name, you’ll have to deal with it, man. Cause, here’s the thing: I’m more interested in getting the story right than naming you right. People read stories, not names – not that you’d understand, anyway.’

Hearing this, he threatens to be “bland and boring” when the story comes out.

‘I’ll be so bland and boring. Your readers won’t find me interesting and the publishers will reject you,’ he says, adding that I was nicer when I first contacted him to do the story after years w/out contact.

‘You can be bland and boring all you want,’ I say. ‘But, if you threaten my readers, I’ll have to do something drastic with you. You and the publishers are bullshit. I care not what you think. In fact, you can go sleep together, for all I care.’

‘So, who’s gonna publish me since you’re becoming aggressive for no reason?’ he says.

I think he’s getting ahead of himself. But, again, I oblige him.

‘Publishers don’t publish characters. They publish stories and authors, not opinionated characters,’ I say. ‘But, if you really have to be nosy about it, here’s what I think.’

I then give him a lengthy lowdown. You have to.

This makes the character furious.

‘Why don’t you publish in the States?’ he says.

I tell him I know no American publishers.

He thinks for a while and gives me a list: Random House, HarperCollins and Simon & Schuster.

‘Americans don’t write English like we write here in Africa,’ I say. That’s the response I can think of. I’m not even sure it relates to my character’s worries.

‘You clearly haven’t read Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie or Teju Cole all this time we’ve been apart, have you?’ he says.

I shake my head, no.

‘How come you know about these authors?’ I say, not really trusting this character of mine.

‘I think I’m Ifemelu’s cousin brother,’ he says. ‘In fact, I believe I am related to her.’

‘Who’s Ifemelu?’ I ask.

‘It’s Chimamanda Adichie’s most famous character,’ my character says.

This is preposterous, I think. ‘This can’t be,’ I say.

‘What can’t be?’ he says.

‘You being Ifemelu’s cousin brother,’ I say.

‘Why can’t I be Ifemelu’s cousin?’ he asks.

‘Dude, Adichie is from Nigeria. And you, you come from Alex, Johannesburg, *eMzansi*,’ I say.

‘I only come from Alex coz you created me to come from there,’ he says. ‘But, Mr. Author, don’t be cheap: are you trying to tell me a South African cannot be cousins with a Nigerian? You disappoint me, Mr. Author. I thought you had improved your game from last time. That’s why I came on-board against my best judgment. You better up your game, Mr. Author. Otherwise, no character will want to be associated with you going forward.’

I’m deflated. Maybe my character has a point. I’m scared to say anything, but this being my story, I have to have the last word.

I decide to humour him. ‘Your story or backstory is kinda interesting, I have to admit,’ I say. ‘But, if you’re not careful, one of these days, you’ll claim to be the husband of the “Mother of the World”.’

I laugh as I say this. Mother of the World’s husband is that guy who goes by the name Jesus.

‘For all I know, I might be related to that person,’ my character says. ‘But, no. I’m not gonna lie. You’re not gonna hear me saying I’m somebody’s husband. Please don’t get me married to anybody in this novel. I kinda like my freedom.’

I grant him his wish. I won’t marry him – or get him married, that is. But, something tells me I should make this character of mine go through hell. Who the heck does he think he is, questioning me? And you know, *mos*, what they say about putting your characters through some deep shit? I kinda like how that sounds.

As I debate this in my head, my character throws a question my way.

‘Are we also gonna be in ebook form?’ he says.

‘Why? You like fame, don’t you?’ I say, forgetting that I should marry him sometime in the future. ‘You want to be online, too? You’re really ambitious, aren’t you?’

‘Look. We can be read all over the world,’ he says. ‘China. US. England. Brazil. Cameroon. Canada.’

‘If we’re done, can we end day one?’ I say.

‘Do you have to be abrupt and end the second chapter like this?’ he says. ‘I’m kinda enjoying myself.’

‘Right now, I’m pushing for the next great African novel. You know that. I don’t need no mistake,’ I tell him.

I don’t know if I’m answering right, but hey...

Day one over, we make time for the next meeting. I go home. I tell him to take care of himself. I don't wanna be casting again. On the agenda is going through story development and fleshing out that goddamn story.

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My character's not a rich guy. I don't blame him. Being a character in a novel isn't a great job. Real actors do way better. But on the day we meet to talk about the development of this manuscript, my character has hustled a few cents to allow us a couple of beers. I fetch him at his place. We make our way to the tavern.

This is *ubuntu* in action, I think. But this pales in comparison to the surprise my character has for me.

He hands me some typed papers. I innocently take them from his hands. I read a couple of lines. They don't interest me that much.

'Tell me what you think,' he says, eagerly. 'Please be brutally honest with me.'

As I read on, I realize it's a freaking manuscript.

'You can't be serious,' I say, really shocked. 'How do you expect me to read your manuscript when I'm busy with mine? For God's sake, we're at the beginning.'

'Which one? The one I'm in?' he says.

'Obviously, the one I headhunted you for,' I say.

'Forget that one,' he says. 'Don't you see what I'm doing here? If yours fails, we can use mine. So what do you think? Please be honest as you can. Don't spare my feelings. I need the cold, hard truth. If my writing's bad, I need to hear it.'

I can't think of anything appropriate to say. This is like hiring someone to come work for you and have them go and start their own company and ask you to give them the know-how to run their business.

'You'll have to give me some time,' I say. 'It's quite a lot of stuff you've written here.'

It's one thing being a budding writer, and another having a character who's a budding writer as well.

'Thanks, my man,' he says. 'I trust you to be brutally honest with me.'

We agree to part ways, but not before he says: 'Do you, by any chance, have a cigarette for me? I used all my girlfriend's money for the beers.'

'I don't smoke,' I say. 'And, now that the roles have changed, and now that I'm working for you – as you're working for me – you shouldn't be asking me for favours.'

'Don't sweat it,' he says. 'I'll pay you when I'm rich and famous.'

I want to laugh, but I don't.

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'What's the secret to happiness?' my character asks when we meet at the tavern in his hood.

Without much thinking, I say: 'Be with someone who fucking loves you and loves fucking you.'

'Great stuff,' he says. 'Can I use that in my book?'

'What?' I feel cheated. 'You're writing a book?'

'I thought we talked about this the other day,' he says.

'I thought you were kidding,' I say. 'You really can't be going ahead with this nonsense. You don't become a writer overnight, you know. Do you think I just woke up one day and crowned myself a writer? And, if you're gonna use my own words to build your own story, I don't want to be part of this. I don't go around talking about myself. I'm a private person.'

'I'll write it like pure fiction. All lies,' he says. 'Nobody will know you're in it.'

'But what I've just told you about love is truth,' I say, feeling doubly cheated.

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The next time we meet, my character has tissue in his nose. But he can't stop giggling. It's puzzling, not to say worrying. Characters can be bitches sometimes.

'What's the matter with you?' I say.

'It's the first time I've had a nosebleed,' he says. 'And I'm celebrating.'

'This is the part where my readers gonna skip,' I say. 'The boring part. Where nothing is happening. Just us plodding. They skip, I blame you.'

It's a threat.

'That'll be a first,' he says.

'What'll be a first?' I ask.

'Novelists blaming their characters for bad, skippable writing,' he says. 'Usually, writers blame poor marketing. And they blame readers, not characters. Writers always stick with their characters.'

'Fuck stickability,' I want to say but I don't.

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I'm introduced to a potential character while I'm having dinner with an associate. This character – or potential character – wastes no time, telling me that she wants to be involved in the literature industry.

No doubt, rumours are flying that *L. Sojini*, the “pop novelist”, is in town.

I'm looking good: I cut my beard, but I let the hair go wild. I even got a few quid in my pocket – bank card, actually. I'm feeling good, you can imagine. I'm new in town, and besides the writing for school and the papers, I really haven't gotten down to writing my usual stuff. You know, the stuff that gets people talking. The stuff that blows fellow writers out the water. The good stuff. The stuff that'd make you wanna hate me and me remind you that I actually don't give a fuck. The stuff that I leave for Africa.

Being new in town, and my pen itching to ink and run wild on paper and in my mind, the thing is to mentally absorb the place. I stay at the Gavin Relly Postgraduate Village.

I pass through the National Arts Festival building every day. Something tells me my characters will get the honour I've never had: to appear as themselves, to appear as I want them to appear, in the stages of that humungous building. I hear it's modelled after a ship.

Every time I walk to class, I pass the Settlers Monument. Going downhill, I can see Makhanda in all its glory. I look left, I look right. I look down. I've memorised the places. I know all the buildings. The Journ. Department. The Drama Department. The Fine Arts Department. The Bantu Stephen Biko Building. NELM and the school. Even the locations, I see them every morning. Too bad, I'll be here for only a year. But, like I said, I've memorised the places. They're a map in my eyes and mind. I can put them on paper for a murder, drama or thriller. But I probably won't. And I digress. Maybe it's the wine.

‘What is your previous experience?’ I ask the lady character.

The character doesn't look prominent otherwise she'd have popped up in my radar already. True to my guess, she says she's got no experience.

‘I'm willing to work my way up,’ she tells me.

It's a pity, I think. Here you have a dozen TV studios, a thousand theatre stages, and a couple of white schools where acting is probably a compulsory subject, and you have people without acting experience. It's crazy.

I take more of the wine.

‘Literature is a lengthy process,’ I say. ‘If I'm to cast you in a novel, I'd have to dedicate a whole lot of time working with you, discovering who you are, what makes you tick, all that. I have to work with you for a duration of 60, 000 words and the whole thing might not come together. It's a huge gamble. To be honest, my hands are quiet tied up. I've this school thing. I'm dabbling in playwriting. And the character for my novel thesis is driving me up the wall.’

‘Can you take a chance on me?’ the character begs.

‘I’m always open to new ideas,’ I say.

God knows, I’ll give anybody the time they don’t even deserve cause I believe in everybody’s freedom of expression. I can even laugh at someone’s stale jokes and listen to their sob story – cause you know what? Bloody me doesn’t want to offend anybody. Only bad writers should be offended reading this.

‘Like I said,’ I continue. ‘This literature thing can be a soul searching experience. I don’t think new, untested characters are up to the task no matter how sincerely they profess their commitment. This is all a gamble. Are you sure you’re up for that? Look, don’t think it’s all champagne and roses in the literary world. For example, you might convince me that I make you be in love with a hunk supermodel in the story, but back home, you’ll have to deal with your own ordinary hubby. This can be too emotional for some characters, you know. I think it’s one of the main reason authors write one-hit novels. Cause their characters were shitty enough to be captivating. A real character is used in one novel, the next, the next and the next. A franchise, you see. *Fast and Furious*. James Bond. And your ego’ll be hurt, you know. You’ll compare yourself with real-life characters like Lizzie Bennett, Tambu, Esch and Zandile “the resolute” etcetera, etcetera. Are you up for it? Please don’t take these concerns lightly.’

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‘So who’s your favourite character in my book?’ my character says the next time we meet. ‘Who do you like? I got a lot of cool characters, you know.’

It’s good to be in conversation with a character you know, no matter how shitty their mind works.

‘Tell me. Are you challenging me?’ I say. ‘Do you think you’re a better writer than me?’

‘Oh, I don’t want to hurt your feelings,’ my character says. ‘Why don’t you let your readers decide?’

‘You can’t expect me to introduce you to my readers,’ I say. ‘You hustle for your own readers. I hustle mine.’

‘Ah, dude, are you jealous of me?’ he says. ‘I won’t judge, you know. You like that chick with a fat ass, don’t you?’

‘That’s sexist,’ I say. ‘And me jealous? Are you out of your mind?’

‘Since when did you become a feminist? And, don’t lecture me on sexism. I know you like a good curvalicious, African booty.’

‘I hate to admit it, but you’re right,’ I say. ‘But you promise to keep this between the two of us, right?’

‘Chill, man,’ he assures me. ‘Don’t stress yourself over the #MeToo movement. Life’s too short for stressing.’

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‘I’ve got this lady I want you to meet,’ I tell my character during our story development meeting.

We are at his place; and, no, I don’t really have a specific or believable role for this lady character, except that I just wanna slot her in for the experience, you know.

‘Is she pretty?’ my character says. ‘I think I’m already interested.’

‘The question you should be asking is: has she got experience?’ I say. ‘You and I have worked together in the past. Her, I don’t know. I’m hesitant to appoint new staff, you know. And you’ll have to be mindful of your womanizing ways.’

‘Is she gonna have an equal role with me in the story?’

‘The times demand it,’ I say.

‘Scratch that, I’m no longer interested,’ my character says. ‘I’m old-fashioned. She has to know who the man is.’

‘Your home philosophy is not needed in this instance,’ I tell him. ‘You have to be professional. No staring at her like she’s some kind of object for more than five seconds, you hear?’

‘You’re turning into a dictator,’ he says.

‘We can’t afford the wrath of woke feminists,’ I say.

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We were just having a conversation, me and my character. ‘Cause we weren’t gonna put it (the conversation), in the book, we let loose our guards. We were not worried about the readers at all. It was a conversation between the staff when the customer is not in sight.

‘It’s a relief not to worry about the African novel,’ my character says, enjoying his glass of wine, his legs resting on the writing-table.

‘I’m afraid I agree with you, there,’ I say, bringing my glass closer to his. ‘We shouldn’t live for our novels. Our novels should live for us.’

‘Cheers,’ my character says, smiling at the clinking of the glasses. ‘You know you’re the most insightful chap I know when you like and you’ve got your mind on something right.’

I shake my head in agreement.

‘Same goes for you,’ I say. ‘But we should enjoy it while this break lasts. We have to get back to the African novel as soon as possible. We don’t wanna lose the momentum, you know. You don’t wanna lose the heat. A novel should be baked fresh.’

‘No, doubt,’ my character says. ‘I’m raring to go after this. But how about we forget about work for a bit? Enjoy ourselves, you know. Take things easy. Enjoy the music.’

‘Great idea,’ I say and our conversation drifts into areas we’re not gonna put into this book.

As a writer sometimes you just have to hold back. You can write a memoir or autobiography and bare your soul out, put your life and history and thoughts on paper, but there are things you keep to yourself. Things only God knows. Things you'll only reveal or discuss in your one-on-one conversation with God when the time comes.

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*I future travel. I'm a famous writer, but I'm dead. And I'm in heaven. It's my first day.*

*The person in front of me, an American, is saying:*

*'Please take these guns away. I don't need them anymore.'*

*He's a soldier. I don't like it. When we're in heaven, are we gonna be placed randomly, with people from different races (foreigners)?*

'Wake up, wake up, snap out of it,' I hear my character say. 'You're dreaming. Get back to real life.'

'I was famous,' I say. 'Why did you wake me up, buddy?'

'Listen, man. You just dozed off while I went to buy some smokes at the *spaza* shop. Let's continue,' he says.

Right, I remember – we paused going through the drafts when my character remembered he needed some cigarettes.

He circles the part we should pay more attention to.

'Why do you have a white character in the book? I thought we were going all African for our African novel?' he says.

It's just a small part, I realize. I must have inserted it the time he roused me from my dream. I'm feeling cranky, so I snap at him.

'There's no pleasing you,' I say. 'You say I should paint a positive Africa. So I chose to portray Americans as the bloodthirsty ones. The savages. Brutes, you see.'

'But war is universal,' my character says. 'We also have wars here in Africa. Don't you think we should add that in the book? But I'm glad we caught that early in the book.'

'We still gonna edit the damn book,' I say. 'Let's focus on the story first. The first draft. Revisions later, mate.'

'Cool,' he says. 'So who's gonna edit the book? I've got a connection. Someone who's pliable, like a dirty politician, you know.'

He stops and laughs.

'You're enjoying yourself, aren't you?' I say.

Characters should enjoy being in a book, but not enjoy it more than the author, I think.

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For a story I want to use in the future – not the one you’re reading now – I create a black man as one of the characters. Sometimes you get so tired of one character that you dream of others.

Intending to shock my future readers, I also create – as a character – a white man who’s never seen a black person before. The white character will or won’t be real or might never really have seen a black person before. I’m quite undecided. Believability is the last thing on my mind right now.

When I’m about to end that story – no, not this one, remember – I will feel my characters becoming nervous. They will, of course, be entranced by the fame of being written about. Eventually, they won’t want to exit the page like this future story is some kind of a play. They’ll group together and rebel against me, the author.

I’ll hear them say – and you’ll hear them, too, say, when you’ve read that story:

‘Let’s work together and fight this monster.’

The “monster” being me, aye!

‘What? Just because some author conjured us up we must now learn to live together? That’s absurd. He’s not gonna pay us or even give us some recognition when he’s published in journals and all those fucked up anthologies.’

I’ll marvel at what my characters say to each other. In my head, my thoughts will run thus:

*They don’t even care that I’m around and that I’m listening. They can’t even wait until I’m done with the story and they’re all alone and I’m away. This is crazy. What will my readers – I mean you – think of me? You’d think I was some weak writer controlled by his own creations. If the characters were in my shoes, would they allow me to run away with the plot?*

As the author – the owner of the characters (them being my fictional slaves) – I’ll definitely have to have the last word. I will have to give them a lecture, a good talking-to. A good haranguing.

‘You black and white characters, you matter much,’ I will say. ‘In my short story, your lifespan’s but a sneeze. Just a blink. But other writers will use you more – for novels, dissertations and everything under the sun. So whether you like it or not, you have to learn to work together. This is not the purpose of my short story. I’ve no interest that you work together. But some readers expect you to be blood and skin, but like I said, this is not my part. I’d hate though that you mess up my story. If you can’t work together, at least don’t do it in my story. This is a sacred place, my sanctuary. All I want you to do, for my story, that is, is to be better characters. At least pretend to. Nobody’s gonna blame you for it.’

That said, my characters will really think about it. I’ll start feeling better as I lay down the rules.

But, you know what? I'll feel kinda sad leaving this future-story unwritten. It'll be more like a goodbye. I'll probably never write this story. The characters will forever remain in my head.

I'll write a thousand more stories with well-rounded characters much better than the one I won't write. This will be sad for the readers who'll actually believe I'll change my mind and get back to writing the story. When I die, they should put an exercise book and pen in my coffin. I might write a story or two – or finish the ones I've already started – only after shopping for groceries, you see.

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I must say sometimes, if not most of the times, I'm appalled by the manners of my character. When we meet at his place for our next story development, he's chewing but he won't stop talking. How does one do two things at the same time? I tell him to decide which of the two things is important – to talk or chew. If talking is important, and he wants us to get down to business, he must stop that nonsense, I tell him.

'I won't close my mouth when I'm chewing,' he says.

'Are you doing this on purpose to sabotage my story?' I say.

'If you still want me in your story, you have to take me as I am. I'm tired of acting a character,' he says.

I laugh and I laugh hard – not because it's funny, but absurd.

I have to use him, even if that means taking up with his crap, I tell myself. But my senses come to me. They whisper in my head:

'Remember who your target audience is. They're the middle-class folks who think manners are everything. Remember that when you want to listen to this character and include him in your book. And, if you do decide to take the risk, and employ someone without manners to amuse these middle-class folks – our main customers – they'll take you to task for depicting black people as uncultured people. As your senses, that was just my two cents' worth words of caution. You decide, cause at the end of the day, who's gonna receive the backlash? I won't be there when your book won't sell. Think hard, Mr.'

What do you do when your senses talk sense into you? Of course, you listen. You take note. You have to when sense makes sense.

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My character is moving or walking in a strange kinda way. That's how I find him when I visit his place for our story development.

'What's up, man? Are you okay?' I say.

'It's my balls,' he says. 'Massively swollen, but that's not the problem. They're hurting me big time.'

‘Why? What happened?’ I say.

‘My girl – no, make it my ex. She got me last night,’ he says. ‘She got me big time.’

‘What? She caught you cheating?’ I say.

‘No, man. I broke up with her. Told her I wasn't good for her. Girls don't know what they want. I was saving her from me disappointing her. Now, this is what I get?’

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This is unbelievable. My character asks me to do the dishes next time I'm at his place. I have to rebel.

‘You're kidding, right?’ I say.

This is probably what happens when you're so desperate to make your dream work, when you're desperate for your dreams to come true. You start getting into shitty deals. You hunt someone who has the potential or resources to change your life. At first, they promise to help. And then *jiki-jiki*, they use your desperateness to do silly things like make you wash their dishes.

This is not what I envisioned when I made that call to ask for his help in *this* great African novel. Or make it an anti-novel.

When I'm wiping the dishes, a woman comes out from my character's bathroom, kisses him and says: ‘Gotta go. Don't forget to fetch the child, will you?’

He says nothing.

When she's gone, I wanna know: ‘Who was that?’

‘Nobody important,’ he says.

‘Your latest girlfriend, is that it? So quick?’ I say. ‘And what was she talking about you going to fetch a kid?’

‘She's a single mother, you know. She's got a daughter. I'm a stepdad now,’ he says.

‘Not only a stepdad,’ I say. ‘You're the housedaddy as well.’

‘What's that supposed to mean?’ he says.

‘Look. You do the dishes, look after the house and fetch the kid,’ I say.

‘It's only temporary,’ he says.

‘Do you actually believe that?’ I say.

‘Come on, you help with the dishes, I help with your novel. It's only fair.’

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I knock at my character's door. Nobody comes out. Strange. Then, someone angrily storms out. It's my character's stepdaughter.

‘Come back! I'm not done with you!’ my character shouts.

‘I’m not going to wear those cheap shoes!’ the stepkid shouts back.

All the time I’m watching. I say nothing. I’ll have my time. I watch my character throw the shoes at the kid, one by one. I’m sure he’s aiming at the head. He misses twice.

‘Don’t come back without wearing those shoes, you piece of *kak!*’ he shouts.

‘Ah, dude, how can you use that language?’ I say. ‘What’s up? What’s wrong?’

‘She’s an ungrateful prick, she and her mother,’ he says.

‘What happened?’ I ask.

‘I buy her new shoes with my hard-earned cash, my last cent, and she won’t wear them.’

‘Why, what’s wrong? She doesn’t like them?’

‘She says she won’t go around wearing *fong kong* shoes for her friends to laugh at.’

‘*Eish,*’ I say. ‘Status, hey. I can empathise. You should have talked to her first, maybe.’

‘How did I know she’s a stickler for fashion labels?’

‘It’s all they look for these days.’

‘I thought she wouldn’t notice.’

‘Kids these days are smart. It’s the first thing they look at,’ I say. ‘But if you don’t mind, we should talk about today’s writing.’

‘I don’t think I’m in the mood after this,’ my character says.

I let it go. We just chill and watch reruns.

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When I see him the next morning, he’s in another tense conversation, this time with his girlfriend.

‘Are you sure she didn’t come home yesterday?’ the girlfriend asks.

‘I’ve been telling you “no” all morning and night,’ my character’s defensive. ‘Maybe she slept at a friend’s.’

‘She never sleeps away from home,’ the girlfriend says.

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‘How about you hook me up with a storyline that allows me to smack my naughty woman around?’ my character asks one afternoon, me and him chilling over drinks.

‘I don’t feel comfortable with that,’ I say.

‘What? You’re scared of the #MeToo movement?’ he says. ‘How are you gonna move copies? I want to beat my girl like she’s a snake in the house? Man up, dude. Women are trash.’

‘I don’t think we should include *that* in the book,’ I say.

‘That’s censorship,’ my character says. ‘No African country is without its proud, unashamed, women-beaters.’

‘I don’t like the weed you’re smoking these days,’ I say.

‘I don’t like it, too,’ he says. ‘It’s not like the weed of old. We, men, deserve something stronger. Something to knock us out and show us the path to a glorious future.’

‘I don’t think we should be having this conversation.’

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I get home. I think about a lot of things. I write my diary and I write *this* book. And, I think. I think about feminists taking over. I think maybe I’m not man enough. I think about this woman I should have fucked, but I didn’t.

I think about Ntsiki Mazwai. What would she say? She’s a feminist. We tend to adore feminists. But my love for feminists is waning each day that goes by. This is a matter of race also. The whites have one over us, so we are glad that we have one over black women, right?

As I think about everything, her sister’s (Thandiswa), favourite of mine (*Ingoma*), plays on my YouTube playlist. At some point, I dance to it, while I dish myself some rice and baked beans.

After the little dancing is done, I switch back to some thinking. I go down memory lane. I think of sometime last year when Thandiswa held a women-only concert. I remember pitching a feature on this to the Business Day, them refusing to take the pitch. It’s cruel when they don’t take your pitch. What do they say you’re gonna eat?

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Slowly, I become my character’s slave. He sends me to fetch his stepkid. What can I do? The novel has to be written, so I play the cool uncle, even though in my real life, I’ve no relationships with my real life nephews or nieces. But, hey, this story – novel, thesis or novella – was never about me. It’s just a frame story. I’m more like Nick Carraway in *The Great Gatsby*: my story don’t matter much, although I’m probably lying. Why should you care about a character who has never lived over a real one?

‘Tell me, *malume*, is it nice to be a writer?’ she says. ‘My stepdad says you’re writing a book together, and he’s also writing one. Maybe I should write one myself. I’ve always written some stuff in my notebook.’

‘He’s your father, not stepdad,’ I correct the young one.

As for her dad co-authoring the book with me? No... not really. As we can all see, I’m the one sweating over the lines and all that shit that makes a novel. Her dad writing his... yes; maybe. But *ours* is me author, producer – everything – him, just tagging along cause authors, no matter how cool or learned they are, they need sleazy characters. Think of Achebe. Salinger. King. Tutuola. Amazing authors. But what’s king? Character, of course. Her dad.

I want to tell her that there's no money in writing, that it's a shit job, especially here in Africa. It's not a job at all. I want to tell her, but I don't. Who am I to tell you that Santa Clause is not Santa Clause?

Wanna be a writer? That's fucked up shit. Be prepared to go hungry, work at a car wash and live in a shack. Now that might not be your version of Africa. Frankly, I should give a damn. But at least that's been part of my life.

'There's nothing as wonderful as being a writer,' I say, and I want to mean it. 'The greatest feeling in the world. But nobody's gonna take you seriously, my dear, if you don't type up those notebooks.'

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I'm glad that my character has broken up with one of his girlfriends. We have more time to work on the story now. I even do the dishes now. Willingly and gladly so. I don't want to lose him to some hot Cleopatra or sexy Rihanna. But things don't stay this way for long. One day I'm doing the dishes, and his girl appears and kisses him goodbye.

'You guys are back together?' I say.

'No, she's back with me. Not I with her. Her with I. Big difference, if you ask me.'

'Ah, well, what I want to ask is this: why do women come back to you, knowing you'll purposefully break their hearts. Answer me that,' I say.

'Nature, really,' he says. 'Just as human bodies cling to heat, so will women be attracted by hot men.'

'I hope this won't affect our work,' I say. 'We been going at it slowly over the months now. We don't wanna lose momentum.'

'Relax, don't you know people write better when they're in love?' he says.

'You're the one in love,' I say. 'And I'm the one doing the hard work. I think up storylines, come with the snazzy lines and have to do this day in, day out, and even do it when I'm uninspired and I'm feeling like the African novel is running away from me.'

'Take it easy, dude,' my character says. 'My role is as important. I front your novel, don't I? I'm the face of it, ain't I? Unless you want to scrap out my parts and be left with your autobiographical sobbings. Tell you one thing, you're not that great a writer to have your own autobiography, you see. Just stick to this: autobiography with a bit of fiction in. We're in this together. I'll pick you up when you're down just like you do me at times.'

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'So Zahara cannot finish a bottle of wine without crying and running to the media?' my character says when our timelines (Facebook, Twitter – everywhere) are flooded with breaking celeb gossip.

'She's my favourite singer,' I say. 'You've no right to speak of her like that. She must be in deep trouble, you know. This industry is tough.'

She really is one of my faves. I like her when she sings that when everyone's gone, she'll remain behind with her guitar. She also collaborates with Ladysmith Black Mambazo on a song I love: *Rise Again*. Then there's that Mzwakhe Mbuli collabo where they just smash it. I'm a sucker for songs on Mandela. But my fave gotta be by white boy, Johnny Clegg. Uncle, to you. Me and him, we're friends. But, I don't expect you to believe everything I say, especially when I start name-dropping.

'Dude, there will be no holy cows if you want this book to work,' my character says. 'We can't talk about some people and ignore some hot news just because it's our favourite celebs.'

'Wait until you're a musician, and you'll see how hard it is,' I say.

'Well, they should give me a record contract and I'll never be broke again,' my character says.

'You think a recording deal will change your financial standing in one swoop?' I say.

'Why not?' my character says. 'Isn't that what you're also hoping from this "African novel" of yours – that it'll make you a star and rich beyond your wildest dreams? And be richer than Aliko Dangote?'

I'm not sure how I should answer, so I say nothing.

We go through our timelines for this celeb-trouble *schadenfreude*. We scroll until our thumbs hurt and we can't laugh anymore. It's sad but funny at the same time.

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So, we go through the book. We're looking for some glaring mistakes or flaws. We're not looking for structural issues or grammar. No. Just the stuff a schoolchild can spot from afar. The stuff that would embarrass our smart asses. The stuff that would make you go buy James Patterson and ditch African writing, and have me accuse you of self-hate.

'By now we should have gotten me a name,' my character says.

He's right. Sometimes you go deep into the novel without having a name for your main character or character. Sometimes you put an "X" – the proper name'll come later. In the last complete manuscript before this, I had this challenge. I didn't know what to call my characters. The seven-year-old kid (he's eight this year), didn't start life as "Vusi". When I look at previous drafts, I see I had named him "Zweli" at first. But "Zweli" sounded old. But naming him "Vusi" is also lazy on my part, cause I think I have two previous manuscripts from way back, where I had a young kid named "Vusi" as well. But it doesn't matter, does it? The second character – Vusi's 60-year-old uncle – I named him "Uncle Sbu". Now, I don't think there are uncles who go by the name "Sbu". It's kinda funny – that on its own. But I'm proud of how I named Uncle Sbu. I mean, I have more names *I have* for him. His birth name is "Lewatle". His work name – having started working in the days of apartheid – is "Oceanus". But his mates call him "Sbuda".

'Ah, well,' I say without much thinking on my part. 'Why not "*Ma*-character"? Or "*Ma*-cassette"?'

‘Those are generic names,’ my character says. ‘How about I also give you a name? *Malambane* would suit you just fine. I mean, writers are famous for being broke and hungry.’

‘Nice try, my mate,’ I say. ‘I’ll always be *L. Sojini*. And, hey, I’m not playing a character in this book. I’m playing myself, geddit? I’m not a character; I’m the real thing!’

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After we’re done with the story development for the day for my book, my character tells me he’s dreamed up the title of his own book.

‘Interesting,’ I say. ‘I’d love to know what you thought.’

‘It’s a simple title, really, but powerful,’ he says. ‘My book will be called *I Don't Remember*. Don't laugh.’

‘No, I won't laugh,’ I say. ‘Interesting title, though. But don't you think you should have gone for *I Remember*?’

‘No,’ my character says. ‘Anybody can do that. I want something simple, yet unique. Anybody can write about what they remember, but can everyone write about what they don't remember?’

‘What, for example, can one not remember? How can one write what they don't remember?’

‘Here’s an example: can you remember flying?’

‘I’ve no wings, man,’ I say.

‘See. Can you remember having a million in your bank account?’

‘Ah, in the future, I'll remember. For now, I don't.’

‘See. *This* book's important on multiple levels. It doesn't resort to the past. It's a forward-looking document, thinking of it. No obsession with the past, history and all that shit.’

‘That’s something Yeezy would say,’ I say, me forever referencing pop culture.

‘You see, Yeezy changed the rap game,’ my character says. ‘I'll change the African literary landscape with this kind of shit.’

‘Conflict of interest,’ I say.

‘What? You think my book might do better than yours? I see no conflict of interest there. Relax, buddy. I'll dedicate my book to you. The dedication will read: To *L. Sojini*... the man who forever dreamed to be the greatest of them all. How do you like that?’

‘You’re speaking to my ego right now,’ I say. ‘If I didn't know better, I'd say I'm even tempted to drop this African novel shit and help you with this *I Don't Remember*, “forward-looking” fiction of yours.’

‘Spirit!’ my character says. ‘You see, me and you, are one thing. Same goals but different ways of doing things. You’re my brother from another mother! Goddamnit!’

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On a cool morning, I bring books by various African writers, so as to get the feeling what the African novel should look or read like, if there's such a thing. My character has a question for me.

'Why do you only bring writing from Southern Africa? Is there no writing coming from East and West Africa and North Africa?' he says.

'What do I know?' I say honestly.

You know, sometimes as a writer, you act or pretend not to know things, but there are those rare times (like this one, for example), where you truly don't know.

'Like you, I wish I knew why that's the case,' I say. 'Do you think it has to do with the British taking the southern parts of Africa? That's possible. I'd take it southern African literature is in British libraries. The French surely have North Africa and whatnot. I might be wrong. I might be right. I don't know. I should care, you –'

'No, that's okay,' my character says. 'Let's get on with today's work. I wouldn't want this discussion ending in colonialism debates. Which book should we start with?'

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So, my character is busy fixing (or mending) the pots, cooking pap and chicken. His girlfriend is not around. He dips the spoon in the pot, takes it back to his mouth and then he looks for something in the cupboard.

'Damn it!' he exclaims.

'What's wrong now?' I say.

I look around. The TV's still on – as well as the lights. What could be wrong?

'The salt's finished,' he says.

'Just give me the money. I'll go buy it at the *spaza* shop,' I say (if I'm deep in the dishes, I might as well be an errand boy for my character).

'Those guys are damn expensive. I'd rather wait until tomorrow and buy at Spar or Shoprite,' his stingy ass says. 'What must we do now?'

'Well, why *ungaceli kumakelwane*?' I say.

'*Mina no-makhelwane asithethisani, uyazi*,' he says.

'*Haibo!*' I say. '*Kwenze njani or kwenzekantoni* between you and your *mheza? Nenzanantoni?*'

'*Ibali lide, s'bari*,' he says.

'*Manje, kungcono silale singatyanga?*' I say.

'Stupid of me,' he says. 'There's sauce and mayonnaise in the fridge. There's gotta be salt in the sauce and the mayonnaise.'

O, the meal's delicious. The chicken be damned.

‘Master chef, hey,’ I say. ‘You sure do your thing, buddy. This is the best chicken I’ve ever tasted. My readers won’t believe this.’

‘You know, *ukukhula emadladleni nomagriza*. You become a top chef,’ my character beams.

‘*Hayi, uyayishay’into yakho, ntwana*. Salute!’ I say licking the plate clean.

You cannot talk about or write an African novel without conjuring up scenes of the plate licked clean. Maybe they also do it in Brazil or Australia, I don’t know. But, I know it here from here Africa.

‘As long as you’re enjoying yourself, buddy. When you’re here, you must get the good stuff, you know. You must eat and grow fat and tall. You must lie on the floor unable to move or get up. This is our pozie, goddamnit,’ he says. ‘But, remember the dishes will be waiting. No mistakes there.’

‘Ah, don’t worry about that. You know I always do them without even eating here,’ I say.

‘I trust you. You’re good with the dishes,’ he says. ‘I mean, I’m grateful for this meeting, you know. Even if we don’t go to write masterpieces, at least we got to know each other.’

‘Ah, dude, don’t speak like one of us is about to die, man,’ I say. ‘Or, like we’re about to be parted.’

‘Brothers to the end,’ he says. ‘Here’s an idea. Since you’re good with the dishes and I with the cooking, why don’t we start a restaurant?’

‘Well, you’ll have to know to cook more stuff than just chicken, you know,’ I say, not really sold on the idea.

It’s one thing enjoying your character’s cooking; another, opening a restaurant with them. Some things you just don’t do.

Anyway, I’ve worked at restaurants in the past, you know. They’re great places for one to learn about how the other people live, the whites, I guess. The first restaurant I worked at was Cape Town Fish Market in Pretoria, Silver Lakes. I remember those shirts with light-blue and white stripes – the aprons. It always amused me why a restaurant in Pretoria would call itself “Cape Town Fish Market”. But that was the charm, I guess. We learned about calamari there. I’d never heard of the stuff. I never knew the stuff existed. “Squid heads”, the other name for calamari. There was *Tepanyaki*.

There was working for tips. Competing for tables. A lot of wrong orders and lots of learning. Sauvignon Blanc. All that shit. When I got there, I’m sure I was naïve and ignorant of the world as a new-born or saint. I don’t think restaurants are great money makers. Sure, one wants to open a restaurant, but why not KFC?

These proper joints... you have to keep the fish in life-sized refrigerators. You have to light oil lamps for the customers.

Another restaurant I worked at, and made little to no money, but had a blast, was The Greek Easy in Faerie Glen. I’m reminded of the guy whose money I ran away with as I write these words. Now, there are a couple of people I’ve run away with their money, but that’s me digressing. Where were we? Oh, The Greek Easy. I remember the *spanakorizo*, the meatballs,

and, oh, that little joint introduced me to some cool, old tunes by the Rolling Stones and Pink Floyd. *I can't get no satisfaction; Hey, teacher, leave those kids alone!* Ah, those were the days! Young, crazy and foolish. Now, I'll talk about one more restaurant I worked at and cook up some more fanciful tales of me and my character. I mean, this might be fun for me (reminiscing about the old times), but, as a writer, you're always worried whether you're not boring your readers. But, since we've conspired that this is not a boring novel – not by any stretch – we'll plod along, me assured that my self-indulgent digressions are just as interesting and novel-like or novelish, if you will.

Fired from almost all the restaurants I worked at, I found myself at Silver Lakes's Fairways Restaurant, also in Pretoria. Now, I felt like Nick Carraway felt in *The Great Gatsby* when he crossed from the lousy side of his neighbourhood to the richer and more glamorous side of Tim Buchanan and Jay Gatsby. Here I was. Staying in my shack in Nelmapius, Pretoria, but working at a fancy restaurant, everyday passing through golf courses.

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I like my tea to have four spoons of sugar. I've always loved sweet things as a kid. I remember naughty me putting sugar between slices of bread.

My character's different. He goes for two. People are different. What can I say?

'I don't want to die of diabetes,' he says when I ask him about it.

I don't understand people who don't like sweet things, just like people who drink don't understand why I don't like sour drinks.

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Me and my character make notes of parts our readers should skip in this book. We imagine our diligent reader (with a university degree; we don't know which), will come into this book wanting to read every line, word, even full stop. They'll want to analyse every line and every little thing.

'We don't want that kind of reader,' my character says.

'If the goal is to alienate the reader, then we're winning, but it'll give them enough excuse not to read the book, saying it's a badly written novel,' I say, as if the author chooses their reader.

'We need readers with thick skins,' my character says. 'Saying it's a bad book is no excuse not to read the book. We're working here, aren't we?'

'Damn right. Hell yeah, we're busting our asses and straining our necks,' I say. 'But we're the laziest writers to ever live God's earth. The reader is lucky that we've even had more than one draft, otherwise, the novel would be full of errors and typos. The damn thing would be an unreadable mess. Do you think the reader should skip these parts as well?'

'How about we publish first and ask them which parts to skip? Or which parts they enjoyed skipping. Cause, let's face it, the joy of reading a book is to skip the bad parts, isn't it? The parts the writer wrote in the toilet while uninspired. I mean, whoever came up with the idea that a book should be written in full?'

‘Well, you’re right, but I guess the thinking is that: if I bought the book with my money, then I might read all of it, including the preface and copyright page. But, here’s an idea: why don’t we collect all the skippable parts and compile them into one book?’

‘They’ll still skip parts of a skippable book, and we would have succeeded. I love it,’ my character says.

He always agrees with me. Mostly. Loveliest feeling in the world. On the same level with heaven and sex. And money, if we really have to.

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*Play the music, John Mayer... B. B King is watching you from heaven.*

‘Are you talking to yourself?’ my character says when he walks in and finds me getting hooked on some white music.

I close my exercise book.

‘Wait a minute,’ he says. ‘Don’t tell me you’re gonna put that in the novel. That’ll be in bad taste, you know. The good or crazy parts belong to me. You can’t put your thoughts into the narrative.’

‘Says who?’ I say. ‘*Here*, they tell me I can write the novel the way I want to. So, like it or not, you and I are in a mutant novel, if you get what I mean – a literary piece of soup – but real work of art. You should be glad I chose ya.’

‘I’m not so sure,’ he says.

‘Come closer,’ I say. ‘Here’s what Mr. Mayer says.’

Here, I grab him closer to my PC, so he can look at the John Mayer lyrics where I got them highlighted.

*And when you trust your television*

*What you get is what you got*

*Cause when they own the information, oh*

*They can bend it all they want.*

‘So, you and I – cause we own the fucking novel – we’re gonna bend it all we want,’ I say. ‘Now, isn’t that what you want, buddy? Do you wanna be just a lame character in some lame novel, where the novelist doesn’t have some fucking guts? Where the novelist is a fucking wimp? No, dude, I know you want better. I know you got ambitions. I know you’re one of those kinda sky’s no limit kinda guy. Don’t tell me I’m wrong. Don’t tell me you’re here just for the paycheck.’

‘What about your readers (our readers)?’ he says.

‘What about my readers?’ me-says.

‘Don’t you care about them?’ he says.

‘Most of the times, I care,’ I say. ‘But, there are times I don’t give a fuck. I know you, yourself, are writing a shit book, but whenever you wanna do anything serious, you shouldn’t be scared by literature – you should hold it by the nuts until it squirms. Or by its body. Shake it until all its coins pop out and drop to the street. *Smuck* it in the face. Remind it that’s a small boy, that it must get some experience before it has the right to speak to you – or grow some balls. Teach it to have respect for elders. Make it scream in pain. How you do that? See, *this* pen – you gotta twist it the way only you can. Move it across like you don’t give a damn. Make it cave to your desires. Cause bad literature stinks. It’s repulsive – an ugly thing to look at – a thing to be thrown out, perhaps with last week’s garbage. Again, when readers read your work, they should feel like they’ve been *smucked*, not by your hand, but by the lines on the page.’

‘You’re clearly on some tight drug. I envy you, big dawg. What you’re smoking is next level shit. I wanna get my hands on it,’ he says.

‘Sometimes, you just get pumped up naturally, you know. No need for fucking drugs. Just you and your brain gelling,’ I say. ‘But, it’s a nice concert B.B. King had with John Mayer, you know.’

‘I thought blues was black men’s music,’ he says.

‘My character so racist, isn’t he?’ I say.

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‘What you’re busy with? Have you abandoned the project?’ my character calls me when I don’t go see him for a couple of weeks.

I don’t even feel like it’s weeks. Days, I feel. That’s how the way of literature goes: you start out pumped up but lose some gas along the way. It’s sad, but liberating at times.

‘I’m busy with another project,’ I tell him.

‘You should come over and talk about it, don’t you think?’ he says.

‘It’s a non-fiction gig,’ I say. ‘But, I’ll come see you as soon as I get a chance.’

‘Oh, you’re back writing for the papers?’ he says.

‘Just a new online publication. No big deal,’ I say.

‘So what’s the story?’ he says.

It’s about the *Kings of Colour*, I tell him.

‘Interesting story,’ I say, adding: ‘It’s about Congolese guys who live in abject poverty but dress like kings. Women, as well. *La Sape*, they call them. Here, they’d be the *skhothanes*. Anyway, I’ll also be able to use the material for our novel. They can’t pay me peanuts and not expect me to use that shit in my own novel. This is as close as we’re turning this story into a real African novel – a masterpiece, you see. Once I’m done with the Congo Dandies, I’ll probably pitch to go to more countries like Tanzania. We gotta make Africa our bitch, you know.’

‘I get the idea,’ my character says. ‘But we don’t know any French, do we?’

‘We’ll cross the bridge when we get to it, mate,’ I say. ‘For now, let me work on getting the draft. You know how my thoughts are all over the place in my first draft. I’ll keep you in the loop.’

I end the call.

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I show my character a list of names of the graphic designers who’re gonna design our book cover. We have to pick one.

‘Are the graphic designers from *eKasi*?’ he says.

‘Why, do you have a problem with graphic designers from the ghetto?’ I say. ‘Don’t you think they can do a good job?’

‘You said it,’ he says.

‘Ah, no, man. We’re not doing stereotypes here. As a matter of fact, they’re not just from any ghetto,’ I say. ‘They’re from Mombasa in Kenya.’

‘We’re truly becoming an African novel day by day, I’m impressed,’ my character says.

‘What do you take me for?’ I say, with a bit of pride, you know. Contrary to popular belief, Africa is not a country. It’s a freaking continent.

‘But next time, you’re looking for some African *Kasi* to team up with, please let me know,’ my character says.

‘Why’s that?’ I say.

‘The guys in Tanzania are notorious for taking other people’s songs and making them their own,’ he says, and he’s right.

‘Oh, you mean, the *Idibala* fiasco?’ he says.

‘Yeah, man, they ripped King Monada’s gem, and, poor guy didn’t get shit for his efforts,’ I say, adding that they wouldn’t, however, be able to clone or pirate my book like they do music.

‘All I’m saying is: be careful. Anyway, where did you get these Mombasa guys?’ my character says.

‘Online. How else?’ I say. ‘Freelance websites. And we’re gonna pay them for cheap online, too,’ I tell him.

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Over beer, my character tells me he’s gonna vote EFF. Whether in real or fictitious life, it’s good to change scenery.

I’m not sure, however, what triggers my character to want to vote the red berets. Maybe, it’s the red posters with the forever-smiling and shiny Julius.

‘Why not?’ I ask. ‘I see nothing stopping you. You’re a young man but not a kid. Use your brains, dude.’

‘I thought you were gonna try to convince me to vote otherwise,’ he says.

‘Dude, I’m an author, not a politician. Have you ever seen me canvassing for votes?’ I ask. ‘While they’re busy pandering the masses for votes, I’m pondering as to how I can get those masses to read my books. Who they vote for is none of my business. But which author they choose over me gives me sleepless nights. So, you can understand why I’m not interested in politics. I’d rather be talking plots, marketing, characters, storylines and all that shit.’

‘Nah, I get you,’ he says. ‘I guess who I vote for is my business and mine alone.’

‘Glad you get the picture, mate,’ I say, closing the chapter.

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So, I’m banging my head to Billy Ray Cyrus and Lil Nas X’s “Old Town Road”.

My character says to me: ‘So, a lame-ass young rapper slams a lousy verse onto a country tune and the track becomes a hit and goes global? I’m amazed. Where’s Nipsey Hussle when you need him the most?’

‘Are you trying to say country and trap don’t mix?’ I say. ‘What world are you leaving in?’

‘It’s like Dolly Parton and 2Pac had a baby and Madonna and Lil Wayne had a baby,’ he says. ‘And those two babies grew up, met and had a love child. It’s awful.’

‘What,’ I say. ‘Are you trying to say it’s only celebrities’ children that are supposed to become celebrities and musicians?’

‘You know the joke which says if Auto-Tune would go out of business, many musicians would retire? I also think the world would be a better place without computer music.’

‘I’m not sure I agree or understand,’ I say. ‘Anyway, I think we’ve done enough for the day. We surely can’t put fresh ideas into the novel if we’re tired. I suggest we go rest and resume tomorrow. This discussion about music, while fun and interesting, will get us nowhere. I’m tired.’

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So, my character comes to me at four in the morning. This is strange.

I’m like: ‘I’ve never seen you this dedicated. But, I’m glad. I couldn’t sleep myself.’

‘Man, we should go through the book – and remove all the bad parts,’ he says. ‘The ANC is burning books.’

‘Dude,’ I say. ‘The ANC is gonna apologize. Don’t fret. They’ll come do some damage control. ANC doesn’t do that shit. They don’t stand for that shit. They don’t burn books. No, not their style.’

‘*Eh*, but the white people are running scared,’ he says. ‘Even the author himself, he must be hiding somewhere, scared for his privileged ass. Have you ever seen a white man run for his life? It’s one crazy picture.’

‘Well, what does he think attacking such powerful people?’ I say. ‘This is Africa. Formerly colonized. Africans don’t want to see their politicians attacked. It’s alright in Britain, not here.’

‘You mean we love our politicians dirty and corrupt?’ he says.

‘What, I mean is this: why do they write racy stuff? Is it to get sales and antagonize people?’ I say. ‘Do they have to paint blacks in a negative light just to make bestsellers and have something to be proud about? I’m confused.’

‘Ah, well, it’s the truth. Somebody’s gotta expose it.’

‘But you still want us to censor the book, don’t you?’

‘I’m just thinking about our safety, that’s all.’

‘Relax, man. We’ll cosy up to the ANC. We’ll even say they’re the greatest. The cleanest in town.’

‘Please do. We need them. We need their heavy purse, as well.’

‘Listen, man,’ I say. ‘I don’t condone censorship. Here’s what we’ll do. If we have to be critical of the ANC, we’ll do that in just one page, so those against such can only tear one page and not have to rip the whole book apart or burn it, you know. How does that sound?’

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So, I buy my character a rose for the good work done thus far. To be honest, I bought it for other reasons; sometimes you have to bring a little bit of truth in fiction, you know. I mean, how can I buy my character a rose? Crazy, right?

Anyway, if you can disregard the previous two to three lines, I’m quite happy to note that I have about 8,500 words and the manuscript is moving well. Slowly, but surely, as they say. But sometimes quite fast. I don’t want to spend more than a year writing a novel, you know – a metafictional story at that. No doubt, this is progress. One day, we’ll have 50 or 60,000 and we won’t even believe that we started on the wrong foot, me and my character. We won’t believe that at some stage this was just some idea – unnamed, un-thought of and non-existent – just a figment of our (my) imagination. This is good work – work to be celebrated.

‘What you do,’ I tell him. ‘You cut it at the tip, and put in water to keep it alive.’

‘Thanks dude,’ he says. ‘Is it gonna grow?’

‘No, dude. If you want it to grow, you should buy a rose tree,’ I say. ‘This isn’t gonna grow. It’s not meant to grow.’

‘Then keep it to yourself, man. People gonna think we’re gay.’

‘What people are you talking about?’ I say.

‘The readers,’ my character says.

‘Dude, you gotta give our readers a bit of credit, you know. You can’t treat or think of them as homophobes. If you don’t care about them, I do. I write for them. They’re my customers. Anyway, I was at a poetry reading this afternoon,’ I say.

‘And you didn’t even think of inviting me?’ he says.

‘You’re not a poet,’ I say.

‘Nor are you,’ he says. ‘You’ve never published any poetry as far as I recall. Poetry is not your thing.’

‘Unlike you, I dabble in it or used to,’ I say. ‘I didn’t think you’d be interested. I was bored so I thought I would go there.’

‘You might have been bored, but I might have been interested,’ he says.

‘I’ll think of you next time.’

‘So, you got that rose idea from the poetry reading? How sweet.’

‘No, man. When you’re a poet, you don’t only have to dream about roses, you know. You have to touch them, smell them and take care of them, that’s what the lady from the flower shop – let’s call her “X” – says. Water them every day, she says.’

‘Tell me you got her number,’ he says.

‘That would be creepy, you know,’ I say. ‘You gotta take your time to know a lady, you know. Make her fall in love with you gradually, you know. Not rush things.’

‘Poets make for lousy lovers, you know,’ my character says. ‘Look at me: I’m no poet but I’m an expert on love issues. A million roses won’t you make you a great lover, you know.’

‘You have a right to your own opinions, mate,’ I say. ‘Just as people collect stamps – some books, some vinyl, this thing of collecting flowers is my new hobby. I’ll learn as much as I can.’

‘Alright, flower boy!’

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So, my weighted speed rope arrives. I show it to my character.

‘The game starts now,’ I say. ‘I have to whip my body into shape. I don’t want to be flabby like Zakes Mda.’

‘He’s not gonna like that,’ my character says.

‘Well, people whose names I don’t mention in this book will be angry with me,’ I say. ‘What’s more, Zakes Mda will not burn my books. He’s not that kinda guy. He’s always against book censorship, you know. According to me, he’s all for stretching freedom of speech. I tell you what – he’ll actually be like: buy a thousand copy of that motherfucker’s book.’

‘That’s a crazy, shameless way to plug yourself,’ my character says. ‘Sleazy way of marketing your book.’

Looking at the word count on the bottom left corner of my monitor, I see I’ve 9, 021 words so far – not bad, ahe!

‘This is my book, forget the African great novel bullshit. I can make this novel into one giant advertising piece, if I want to. I can turn it into a “buy my book” billboard, if I want to. Watch me.’

\*\*\*

‘If our readers read our lines from right to left, should we call them crazy?’ my character says as we’ve got printouts of our manuscript on the table.

We wanna look at the damn thing from all angles. We’re at the operation table. Nothing is gonna come out the way everything is right now, so goes the illusion.

‘On the contrary,’ I say. ‘Enlightened is what they are. I’m sure you can, in one hand – count in the whole country – people who can go from right to left. But let me rewrite that opening line by going out of the quotation marks. Do you mind?’

‘No, go ahead,’ my character gives me permission, not that I need it. ‘Quotation marks can be a prison sometimes. Go ahead, rewrite that line, mate.’

Cool.

*?crazy them call we should left to right from lines our read readers our fi.*

*How's that? ... are you still there?*

‘Oh, are you back?’ my character says.

‘Ya, it's me.’

‘I thought you were still addressing the reader,’ he says.

‘You know what I’d want in my second or third death?’ I say. ‘I want them to say that that kid – that African kid – that black/brown kid – not only broke the fourth wall, that he broke out of quotation marks as well. Are there writers doing that in the world? Give me China, give me Brazil, give me Argentina. Is there any brave motherfucker as me? Is there any brave motherfucker worth reading other than me? Give me what. Give me what. Don't give me shit. If you want real writing come to Africa, but don't make a mistake of going to anybody but me.’

‘That was one helluva marketing speech,’ my character should want to say, but I won't make him say it.

I won't give you that satisfaction, reader. Damn it. I should not be writing this novel. These days they make products which they lock away for a thousand years. Only you folks reading this from a thousand years from now will be able to see these products. Turns out those of us living now aren't too good to have those products. But that's a bullshit idea. In a thousand years you'll be like: oh, aren't we lucky? Those guys from a thousand years ago couldn't use this. But it's fucked up, I say. They're pandering to people they've never seen: you; neglecting us.

Anyway, I cannot even keep count how many times I digressed in this chapter. *dsrawkcab daeR*. No, man, I don't even know what I want to say or write. I'm confused. I have to stop somewhere. What does Stephen King do or what did Dambudzo Marechera do when they got

to this stage? Or the Bible writers. Man, look how confused and out of depth I am writing this short work. And other people had to write tomes. Let's end the chapter, reader. Let's end the chapter. Which line from the previous two did you skip? Okay. Let's go to the next chapter. In fact, I'll give you permission: skip the next chapter. In fact, skip the whole book. I'm very nervous about the last few lines. I might delete them. I'm thinking of deleting them now. But let's keep them. Let me go have a life, quarrel with people, make money. Sleep. Eat. Go to the toilet. Read. Listen to Passenger. I don't know if it'll be days or weeks (but definitely not months), when I, with my imaginary character, of course, come back to this and remove the jarring parts.

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I find my character reading a book on writing a novel.

'So, you want to know how to write a novel by reading a how-to?' I say.

He thinks this over. Puts the book down. Puffs his cigarette. I feel good when it's a Peter Stuyvesant.

'Okay, you tell me how I should learn to write a novel,' he says, desperately.

'You can never write a novel by reading a how-to or by being told how to,' I say. 'You write by writing. But, if you really have to learn from a book, learn the structure or the hero's journey. Everything else is bullshit no matter who says it.'

'In other words, you don't know how to tell to write a novel?' he says.

'That's more like what I've been trying to say,' I say. 'A novel is you, not what anybody says.'

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I find my character in an irritable mood when I meet him at his place. We have to go through the previous week's writings. But he tells me he's got a headache – a motherfucker of a headache, he says.

I tell him we have to work anyway. We have to calculate the parts our readers might be tempted to skip. In my notebook, I label this part of the novel-writing "The Poetics of Skippology".

We'll get back to those parts – "The Poetics of Skippology"; which is, I guess, another way of saying this is God's word. No changing the bad, skippable parts, no face lifting them.

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I am late for our get together. My excuse? I had some work at home. And I had to arrange a TV press interview for him.

'There's something we have to talk about,' he says when we meet.

I'm always happy to listen to the other party, especially if it's my character, so I lend him my ears.

‘We should have talked about this in the beginning,’ he says. ‘I thought you’d self-correct, but the more this thing happens, the more I have to talk about it.’

‘I’m all ears,’ I say, really anxious.

‘It’s obvious that you’re not a morning person. You always arrive late for our meetings,’ he says.

‘True,’ I say. I’m in no mood to quarrel. ‘I’m no morning person. That’s not who I am.’

‘And that affects me real bad. You should try coming early, you know.’

‘I can’t help it,’ I say. ‘I’m more juiced up in the afternoon or late at night. That’s when I’m pumped up to work. You’ll just have to deal with it. Remember, you’re here for me. Not I for you.’

‘Next time, you’ll be telling me you can only write when you’re inspired,’ he says.

‘Yeah, man,’ I say. ‘I can’t write any other way. Only when I’m in the mood and I’m inspired.’

‘Don’t you think we should treat this as work?’ he says.

‘Never. You should never treat this as work,’ I say. ‘Haven’t you heard of the saying: do something you love, and you’ll never have to work a day in your life?’

‘Spare me the cliché,’ he says.

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Song of the day:

Enrique Iglesias's song *Hero* will make one romantic and weepy. But, today's song of the day will make you want to be alive again. It will make you wanna pick up your mic or guitar and got on stage, except you're no musician.

Anyway, this song takes me back to 2012, I think. At the time, I don't think I liked Pitbull that much. Now, I do. Not a lot, though. Just one song or two. You can't love a person you used to hate a lot. That is: love them, but don't forget you hated them.

If ever novels were allowed to suggest a song of the day, and you needed some high octane stuff, I would highly recommend this:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=klk8QPcfFYQ>

Enjoy

(Note to self: it's a bad sign when you start including YouTube links in a novel.)

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‘Some of the things you say about me in the book are not true,’ my character says as we wait for the new character to finally make her appearance.

I'm in a foul mood. I'm not interested in quibbles. And I can see, by the way my character's holding the manuscript, and scratching some stuff, that he wants to have a go at me.

'Well, all of the stuff in the manuscript about me, for instance, is true,' I say. 'Of course, it's natural to want to find out what's really true and what's not from reading in between the lines, but you'll only succeed in frustrating yourself if you set yourself on that path. If we start looking for truths and untruths, we'll never finish this goddamned novel, buddy. Let's just keep going.'

'But, we can't lie to our readers, can we?' he says.

'Certainly, we *can*,' I say. 'That's what we're paid to do or, at least, are hoping to be paid for. Remember, we're not fact-checkers. We can spellcheck here and there, but we're not fact-checkers or journalists. That's not our shit. Not our plate or cup of tea. We're warriors or mafias.'

'But you're a journo,' he says.

'Hey, *wena*,' I say. 'Just because I have one or two articles in the papers does not mean I'm a journo. I'm a regular Joe. Regular Lungile, if you will. But *L. Sojini* for you. But, if this is really important for you, why don't I let you take over the manuscript and continue the story?'

I really mean this. Illusion: when you begin a novel, you want to master it. Truth: as you go along, you get tired. You know you're a shit writer. You get tired of the novel. Sometimes you go for weeks without opening the word processor, punching the keys – the space bar with your forefinger or thumb when you're really angry. You get tired of hitting the backspace button when you typed a letter in error or you thought some line was cool and then you realise your readers won't like you for it, so you fucking delete the line. You know you want to be honest as you can, but a line that your readers don't know you deleted, will never harm them, you tell yourself. When you read to edit the damn thing, later on, you don't even remember that there were lines you removed. The text will look like it came directly from God or one of the saints – straight from their mouth.

So, you never master the goddamn thing, is what I'm saying. It masters you. Look at me now. I'm trying to describe how I fucking punch the keys on my laptop. Thank God, I have a laptop. Had I been a writer back in the typewriter days, the thing would have come out with a million deleted lines. But, here, I digress again. Let me go back to this line of not mastering the goddamn thing. I'm in repetition mode now (the mode I love the most).

You never master the goddamn novel. It masters you. You start out wanting to write an African masterpiece, then you get caught up in describing you punching the goddamned laptop like it did you something wrong. But you get to let loose some steam. I mean, you have on your freaking Bluetooth speaker Gary Clark Jr singing: "If trouble was money, I swear I'd be a millionaire. Worry, worry, baby, I've had worries on my mind" What's not to love about life, I ask?

I mean, however you tackle it, the novel moves along, doesn't it? It might not be what you set out to do. But, if you're looking for the story arc or that shit, here's the thing: each day, being

different – and, you – adding some fucked up lines when inspiration decides, the thing – even if not in straight lines – moves along. It does. The word count is the thing. The story another – but the last thing. People don't read stories. They read words.

'Are you still there? I think our visitor is finally here,' my character rouses me from my reverie.

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When the meeting's over, and my character's coming from accompanying the chick, he says to me: 'That was one hot bomb. I want us to rewrite the novel. I want you to remove that part where you talk about you calling me and you offering me this character job.'

'Have you a better first line?' I ask. 'Something more memorable, perhaps. Something that will send our readers into a frenzy. Ecstasy maybe.'

'Dude, I want me and the lady to be present from the first scene, you see. I want you to present me as kissing her from the first word. The first line should be flames. Fire. Our readers want love. They want desire. They want a man who's just too powerful for women to resist. A hunk of a character, if you will. They want an African lover.'

'That will be like rewriting history,' I say. 'Erasing it, mate. This character is new. She wasn't there when I began this novel. She wasn't in my mind then. I began with you in mind. I tailored this novel to your characteristics. We don't know if the lady will come back. She might find some employment somewhere. She might ditch us.'

'Why then did you decide to introduce her to me? Why did you put her in the story?' my character asks.

'She's just here for the experience so she can put this on her CV,' I say. 'I have no major role for her.'

'She can be my lover, my African queen,' he suggests.

'Of course – and your love relationships are not my concern – but the main guy here is you. The story revolves around you. Unless you want me to ditch this story and write a novel where she's the main character and you're now the junior character?'

'That's not what I'm saying,' he says.

'I didn't think so,' I say smiling. 'If that's okay with you, my mind is a bit tired, there's no electricity here (my laptop will die soon, and I have some stuff to read) – why don't we continue this some other time when my mind's fresher and I got snazzy lines for you to say? I mean, that's enough for the day. It's progress. Tomorrow's another day. Novels aren't written in a single day, you know.'

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Cause, Facebook "cares" about me, today it reminds that on the 25<sup>th</sup> of April, 2014 (five years ago, can you believe it?), I was dreaming about this:

*When I grow up I want to be a tourist. See places, you know. Take mighty pictures. Dine in cool spots. With a beautiful dame by my side, though.*

*That's when I grow up. We can sing all day long. And like Snoop Dogg says, play in the sheets. We don't [have] go out to the mall.*

*And my job, apart from being a full time tourist, is to write one article per month for a popular magazine. Then I become popular myself!*

*Stuff of dreams!*

I smile to myself. My character sees me smiling.

'Everything okay?' he says. 'You seem to be in a superior mood today.'

'Nothing major,' I say. 'Should we get to work?'

'Definitely,' he says. 'I need to go somewhere important after this.'

'Okay?' I say.

Talk about character freedom.

\*\*\*

So we give an anonymous online critic our manuscript so he can give us an unbiased assessment of our work so far. True to our suspicions, he doesn't understand our work. He asks why we don't write a "proper story". I tell him to go fuck him or herself. He wants a proper story, she should go to a traditional author. You get those by the millions. But deep inside, I tell myself I should improve my craft.

My character is quiet and moody. He doesn't take criticism well, poor guy.

'Aren't you gonna say something?' I say.

Criticism is a delicate process. It breaks you, you know. I empathize with him.

'You can say something phony,' I say. 'Anything. Doesn't matter what. Give it to the sucker.'

'I'll give that a pass,' he says.

I've never seen him (my character), down like this.

'*Hawu*, you just gonna let it pass?' I ask. 'It helps to defend your work there and then otherwise you'll be uselessly debating it with yourself in your head forever. It doesn't matter

what you say. As long as you say something. Even if it's wrong or stupid. Out with it. Have the motherfucker hear what you have in mind.'

'I won't give him the satisfaction of a response,' my character says.

'Why's that?' I ask.

Me and my character differ on major issues. At least he's independent from who I am, I console myself. He's not slave to my thoughts. I like that. He's not a yes-man or yes-character.

'You know, there's this old west proverb which says "Never approach a bull from the front, a horse from the rear or a fool from any direction." I'll ignore his ignorance,' he says.

Smart saying, I say. Really profound words. But my take, really, is: approach a fool from whatever side. Attack him from whichever side he shows his ass from. I don't care. I don't give a damn, neither should my character.

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'Don't you think that's a bit harsh?' My character asks when I tell him I'm keeping the paragraph I talk shit and "expose" the ANC.

'A spade is a spade. We should call it that, not a spoon,' I say. 'If they're corrupt, that's that. Someone should have the guts and balls to say it.'

'I'm not so sure,' he says. '*Phela*, this is the ruling party we're talking about. The party of the people.'

'Dude, if they are the party of the people, they should act like it,' I say, adding: 'Look what's happening in KZN. Don't you see the houses exploding because of the flooding? 51 dead.'

'Don't tell me you blame the ANC for the floods and deaths,' he says.

\*\*\*

'Why don't you want to start the novel with me kissing the new character?' my character persists.

'I don't write about love,' I say. 'I write humour. I want people to laugh, not fall in love.'

'*Hayi, L. Sojini*,' he says. 'Can't you do it as a special favour for a friend? Make me a hero in a love story. An African hero. An African lover. Please, mate. It's always been a dream of mine.'

'You mean fake it?' I say.

'Nobody'll know.'

‘My readers know me. They'll know it the minute I'm giving them a forced, fake love story,’ I say.

‘This is your chance,’ he says.

‘A chance for what?’ I ask.

‘To become a poet,’ he says.

‘So, you want me to be a poet when it suits you? Forget it. It's hard to fake it. I can't do it.’

‘I'm begging you, please. How hard can it be, channelling your inner Shakespeare or E. L. James?’

‘Dude, remember we're writing an African novel here.’

‘But, you, yourself, reference artists like John Mayer and Enrique Iglesias. Last time I checked, those weren't African artists.’

‘It's easy. Who says we'll keep those parts? As far as I'm aware, we'll remove them. And as much one wants an experimental novel with a crazy character and your autobiography and diary – a mish-mash – one has to be realistic and stop dreaming and get back to writing a real novel,’ I say.

‘Then, why not include this love story of mine at the beginning? We can always remove it, which I will highly doubt. I believe this time you can even outdo and out-write yourself.’

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Now, it's a great character that makes you want to write a good/great book. So, in this state, I turn up the radio on my PC. Channel 94-1 is playing the Chainsmokers and 5 Seconds of Summer. Now, I love 5 Seconds. I like them when they sing/say:

*She looks so perfect, standing there – in my American Apparel underwear. I'm so down.*

Now, I laugh cause Dov Charney – AA's founder – is a controversial figure when it comes to his love interests.

I'm not sure I'm gonna love The Chainsmokers' track with 5 Seconds of Summer. I don't even care. All I'm grateful for is that I can use them to add a few more lines to the story.

\*\*\*

When it comes to me judging my own writing – on how great it is – this is what I tell myself when I'm in the process of writing: it's not the best, but it's not the worst either. And then I ask myself: what's wrong with being a middling author? You don't have to be a great writer to enjoy success, I tell myself. It's this level of cockiness, which I bring to my writing process, that makes me pompous and not care whether my actual work corresponds. God

knows it's tough being cocky and a good novelist at the same time. For me, that is. I can never know about other writers. I know me; me know me.

Let me show you something I did just now – I read that first question, realizing I had forgotten to add “author” between “middling” and the question mark, I had to insert “author” – but that, too was a dilemma: should I put “writer” or “author”? realizing the second line contains “writer”, I thought ‘let me spice things up’. Synonyms, hey. Anyhow, I then put my cursor on “middling” – being the first time I’m using this word, I wanted to know if I was using it right. Here are the synonyms that came up:

- *Usual*
- *Typical*
- *Ordinary*
- *Average*
- *Run-of-the-mill*
- *Moderate*
- *Medium*
- *Adequate*

When in doubt, why not use that in your favour, relying on Microsoft Word to add to your growing word count? Being the best and being original is overrated. Which is probably a lie. If you listen to me, and you’re a writer, you’ll be in trouble. Most of the time, I say things I don’t mean.

My favourite off the synonym list is “run-of-the-mill” – I mean why not be that kinda novelist and enjoy yourself still? Life is too short wanting to be original or being the best, aight? Anyway, let’s look at “adequate” – your novel (well, in my case), it has to be adequate. Again, if you’re a writer (the target market for this book), don’t get into the habit of listening to me. I’m a fiction writer. Non-fiction is not my stuff. You’ll get lost if you’re not careful. I wrote this novel cause I don’t know how to write novels.

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‘I’m thinking of getting a nose-ring,’ my character says.

‘I’m not your parent. You shouldn’t be asking me for permission,’ I say.

‘But, aren’t your readers – our readers, I mean – be pissed with a male character who’s nose-ringed?’

‘As far as I’m concerned, that thing is out of fashion,’ I say. ‘They’ll just nod their heads and say: “Look at this crazy character. *Ufun’ukuzenza* fresh.’”

So, the next day, my character comes sporting a nose ring.

‘Really?’ I say.

‘You said you had no problem,’ he says.

‘Next thing you’re gonna do is show up with a tattoo.’

‘I have a nice one on my butt,’ he says, asking: ‘You wanna see it?’

‘Too gross for words,’ I reply, disgusted.

‘Actually, I got your name on it,’ he says.

‘Dude, I have to see it,’ I say, curious now.

“‘Too gross for words”, you said.’

‘It's different,’ I say.

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I like the women who rap and do the skits on Dr Dre’s album. There was no social media then. There was no this thing of calling men “trash”. I see Nicki Minaj and the likes, but I wish Dre had more of those ladies.

Let’s look at some of the lines that fascinate me.<sup>1</sup> That voice from that bitch, Ms. Roq:

*Peeped all the stash drop and exchange of the dough  
Lurkin through the turf, thinkin' how much it's worth  
Give 'em chase to the crib and yo he properly laced  
Stepped out the car, put my steel, to the side of his face*

***Murder is the fuckin Case, rob this nigga and shake  
The fuckin spot cause in a few it's gon' be crawlin with cops!  
Who's the bad bitch now, you crept on, paid the piper  
Who'd've thought a sexy bitch could be a murderous sniper  
Detrimental to your health, should've learned yo' lesson  
But it's too late nigga bye-bye, better count yo' blessings  
I been watchin you watchin me, yeah you ballin***

*Was, nigga now you finger fucked and steady fallin*

***A thug wit no love, but bitch niggas die fast  
Thug niggas die young - oh what you thought you would last?  
Blast two shots to the dome, slide back to the pad  
And jack my nigga off, til his dick get soft  
Resume the wifey boo shit, cause yo my man don't know***

*That his bitch is straight ill, servin ass with po'-po'*

That’s gotta be one of my favourite rap albums. Oh, the women – their voices, their lyrics and skits. And I tried, in the past, to search online who Ms. Roq was. Couldn’t get anything on her. I bet she’s a bitch grandmother now.

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<sup>1</sup> Murder Ink – Dr. Dre featuring Ms. Roq and Hittman from the album 2001

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My character comes to me drunk one day.

‘I don’t think this novel is working,’ he tells me, the bluntest he’s ever been with me.

‘Why do you have to tell me this when you’re drunk?’ I say. ‘Can’t you come another time, when you’re sober and thinking straight?’

‘No, I have to say it now,’ he says, adding: ‘When I’m drunk, I’m closer to the truth.’

The closest to the truth, huh?

This what I tell him: ‘And when you’re this drunk, you’re closer to getting your ass kicked?’

‘Kicked? By who? You?’ he says, cocking his fists. ‘Let’s go for it, buddy. You and me. One on one. I smell blood today. Somebody is gonna sleep in hospital tonight. I don’t know who. Come for it, buddy!’

‘You’re not gonna blame me for this, are you?’ I say.

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We sit to talk about the best way to end the book. What better place to sit and discuss the ending of a novel than at some cheap place in town that sells some good samp and beef?

‘Please don’t kill me off,’ my character begs. ‘I’m enjoying myself.’

‘I betcha,’ I say. ‘No character has ever been given freedom like you. I mean it’s like you work at Google.’

The lady in the apron brings a small dish with warm water in it. She hands us a dry dishcloth after we’re done washing our hands and she returns to the kitchen, leaving us to discuss our novel.

‘To be honest, I feel like I work for my uncle,’ he says. ‘Sometimes I come drunk, say the wildest shit, but you never ditch me.’

‘But at some point, we’ll have to wrap up the first draft,’ I say.

‘I bet the readers are enjoying themselves,’ he says.

‘Ah, well,’ I say. ‘Think of it this way: if this was a short story, not a novel, how would it end?’

‘By one of us getting a book deal, I guess,’ he says.

‘Right,’ I say. ‘Except we haven’t sent this book to the publishers.’

‘Why? Why not?’ my character says. ‘Let’s send it now. We’ll tell them it’s work in progress.’

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My character comes to me and says: ‘Do you know Zakes Mda?’

My character has a poor memory, hasn’t he? Wasn’t it the other day I was talking crap about the famous writer?

I say: ‘Yes, I know the guy. We went to school together.’

‘Great,’ my character says. ‘Do you know the lovely lady in his latest novel?’

‘Sure do,’ I say.

‘Can you ask him to give me her number?’

I give my character Bra Zakes Mda’s number. ‘Call him yourself,’ I say. ‘But don’t give it to anybody else.’

‘Thanks, bro,’ my character says.

‘No sweat,’ I say. ‘Anything for my character. Anything for them to perform better on the page.’

‘One more thing, bro,’ my character says.

‘Yes?’

‘Sorry man, I know you’re busy. But what kind of a person was he at school?’

‘Bra Zakes, you mean?’

‘Sure, bro,’ I say, scratching my head.

Being a liar or a dreamer are traits of a decent novelist.

‘I don’t think he’d like me telling his story, you know,’ I make an excuse.

‘I’ll keep it just between the two of us. I won’t tell anybody,’ he says.

So I tell my character what kind of a person Zakes Mda was in high school. My character bursts out laughing.

‘This is hilarious,’ he says.

‘It’s hilarious to me also,’ I say, the lies.

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One of my character's friends (some lousy graphic designer, I take it), comes to me and says:

'My buddy, outchea, tells me you're writing a book. Can I help you create the cover?'

I think of the deal I have with the graphic designers in Mombasa. It's the great African novel, remember?

I say to him: 'Dude, I'm not even done with the first draft of the book, yet you want to help with the cover. What if I don't finish the story? What if I don't finish it?'

'Why start something you can't or won't finish?' my character comes inside out from smoking. 'That don't sound right to me. You're gonna finish the novel,' and, then, addressing his graphic designer friend: 'Don't listen to him, man. You'll go mad if you take him seriously. He'll finish the goddamned thing. He has to. We've come a long way. Don't listen to his crazy ass.'

'Ah, well,' I make an around-turn. 'We previously thought of using some graphic designers online. Then we thought we might design it ourselves, to save some money, you see. But, I'll definitely consider you going forward. That's if I do get to complete the damn novel. Or first draft, if you will.'

I have to save face. My character can be on point sometimes.

'Okay,' my character's friend says. 'But, as soon as you're done with the first draft, please consider me doing some stuff for you. *Ama*-Africa should support each other, you know. And when it comes to cover work, you need to choose wisely, you know. The cover is the face of the book. Ugly covers make readers shun the story and characters. I won't allow you to sabotage your chances of being read and loved.'

'I appreciate that,' I say, adding the question: 'What covers have you in mind, though?'

He shows me the covers he has for inspiration. I'm impressed. I start regretting having to make the deal with guys in Mombasa. My character's friend seems to know his stuff.

\*\*\*

I'm in a chipper mood, so I tell my character: 'Don't you want me to tell you how to write poetry?'

He refuses.

'Oh, no,' he says. 'I'm not thinking of getting into poetry. But, if I ever do decide to get into it, you're the last person I'd want to take poetry lessons from.'

'It's easy,' I press on. 'You envelop your meanings in the thesaurus. You write inscrutable shit. You torture your readers into submission.'

'I feel tortured, already,' he says. 'I submit!'

‘Well, I haven’t started yet,’ I say. ‘But if you submit so easily, you’ll never achieve true greatness.’

‘I get enough pussy as it is – more than,’ he says. ‘Being a great poet will just be a useless badge. I’m good. Being a super-awesome poet is a useless add-on. A pointless achievement, if you ask me. The ladies love me as I am. They won’t allow verse and poetry taking me away from their sweet arms and soft embrace. They love me so much to see tortured in that way. I cannot betray them in that way. God will never forgive me.’

\*\*\*

This is interesting, what I see happening in front of me. She kisses him and says: ‘Goodbye Daddy Rabbit!’

‘What?’ I say to myself.

‘Don’t write yourselves to death,’ she says, leaving.

‘Right,’ I say.

When we’re left alone, I ask him about this. ‘So your new name is “Daddy Rabbit”?’

He wants to downplay it.

‘Nothing important,’ he says. ‘Just a pet name.’

‘You must be really in love this time,’ I say.

‘Oh, no, she’s the one in love,’ my character says. ‘Love produces some kinda exciting and electrifying chemicals in the body for the female species.’

‘I hear you, Daddy Rabbit,’ I say.

‘Oh, no, it’s just for lovers, you know, the pet name,’ he says.

‘Okay,’ I say. ‘How about we get into today’s writing?’

‘Sounds good to me,’ he says, and we get the ball rolling.

The only way to chip at a novel is bit by bit, through the emotions. One day we’ll have a mountain. One day we’ll have something to be proud of, not just talk. One day we’ll have something for our blood, sweat and tears.

\*\*\*

So, me and my character, we’re weeding out clichés from our book just like a man tends his garden.

‘Let’s also remove those parts where you introduce me and start a new chapter. It sounds redundant and repetitious,’ he advises, moving his lips sideways. ‘You’re always saying “[so]

me and my character” – is there no way you can lead the reader into the story or chapter without repeating that lame opener over and over again?”

‘That would mean us rewriting the entire novel, and having the reader reread it from scratch. I’m not sure we’ve that time,’ I say.

‘There are a lot of “buts” in this novel,’ he says next. ‘I think we should let that go as well.’

‘I don’t think so,’ I say. ‘That would leave the book stylistically flat. A “but” might sound ridiculous and flat to you, but what if “but” was a style some readers are drawn to?’

‘I find this exercise ridiculous,’ he says. ‘I give you tips yet you find fault in all of them. I came into this project so we could give our readers a story and prose they’ll love. Not resort to clichés and repetitions. You and I can do better than this pedantic writing. You and I are supposed to be wordsmiths. We should build and reimagine the African novel.’

‘We’re way deep into the novel, buddy,’ I say. ‘No turning back.’

‘What does that mean? I’d be damned if this means we’re no longer have our hearts in it.’

‘I hate to admit it, but I’m not as enthusiastic as I was when I started the novel,’ I say. ‘I don’t know what I was getting myself into.’

‘And you dragged me into it.’

‘I’m sorry, but who knows? Maybe tomorrow will be different. Maybe the enthusiasm, passion or whatever, will be back. For now, I’m just carrying on cause I don’t want to disappoint the reader, you know. But, let’s continue. Sometimes the best writing gets done when there’s no enthusiasm or passion at all. Enthusiasm and passion are unreliable at times. Drudgery and pain gets the work done. Nobody will notice the lack of passion or enthusiasm.’

\*\*\*

‘There’s nothing worse than having a terrible *babalaas* and a nagging girlfriend at the same time,’ my character says when we meet for the day’s work.

‘You’re clearly in a bad mood. What happened?’ I say.

‘Argh, *nie*, let’s leave it,’ he says. ‘Let’s get working.’

‘No ways, buddy,’ I say. ‘I don’t want you coming into this without solving your issues, mate. If you’re not right with yourself, you’ll affect my writing. I don’t want that.’

‘You don’t think we should cancel and do this tomorrow, perhaps?’ he says.

‘Not a chance,’ I say. ‘Here’s the solution. You let it all out. That’s what’s gonna happen. Remember my speech about drudgery and pain? Let’s get moving.’

\*\*\*

She tells me I look different from what they see out there. I'm thinking: do I look awful? She says I look unapproachable and serious like I don't wanna talk. I like to think of myself as funny; approachable. But, hey, you learn about yourself from what other people say and see.

Well, I give her two books: *Catcher in the Rye* (you know the author) and *Bare* (Jackie Phamotse). I ask her: what's stressing you? She laughs and says she's stressed, but she won't tell me about it. I mean people read novels when stressed. Even novelists read novels when in some shit. When they're good, they read the papers and advertising material.

It's been a horrible week. Didn't make it for the publishing competition. Sent an angry email which I regretted, but I told them: *take my story off your site*. I was also close to being a playwright, but they pulled back: they decided not to include my play in their programme. I was livid. But, a day later, which is today, I'm like: fuck it. Who cares? I'm still a fucking playwright.

And *this* other girl, she said these stinging words: 'Boy, you irritate me. Stop coming here.'

That put me in a funk.

I went and saw a psychologist yesterday, my first time ever. I asked her: 'Do you find me unattractive?' She said no, you look good. She's white. Ha, ha, ha!

But, here I am, being a brat... two good things happened: The Centre for the Book says they received my *Uncle Sbu* manuscript. Good. Happy. This made up for me losing that writing competition.

Then I hosted my first show on radio this week. It was nerve-wracking. I didn't know what I was doing, but it's better to be failing at something than winning at nothing. Makes me fired up to think that the lady's rejection came when I had to go on radio later that evening. How awful. How sickening. How maddening.

Rejection and failure signify the end and beginning. From now, I can use that negativity to write some of my best shit.

\*\*\*

So, I talk to my character, I tell him this: 'Shit's about to get interesting now. Fuck rejection. Me and you, we'll pull through, just like the day I fucking gave you a call to get started on this bitch.'

'I haven't seen you in such a mood,' he says.

'Well, well,' I say. 'People gotta move cause I gotta work.'

\*\*\*

'I was sitting in class yesterday. Nobody understood my poems,' I tell my character, laughing.

'Were you laughing also during the class?' he says.

‘No, man,’ I say. ‘It was tense. You’ll also feel like this whenever you present your writing to people. You’ll be anxious – anxious as to what will people say. But I’m laughing now. Why should people understand you? Psychiatry rooms are full of people who cry that people don’t understand them. Don’t write to be understood. Be inscrutable. Be an enigma. Don’t open yourself to the world. Nobody gives a fuck about you, so why give a fuck about other people?’

‘Deeply profound,’ my character says. ‘I don’t think I’m that strong. I’m a people pleaser, you know.’

‘You’ll get tired like I did, trying to write stuff that makes people laugh or think I’m cool,’ I say. ‘I only need a few guys to understand me.’

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I’m whistling to a lovely jam by Rudeboy (*Reason with Me*), as I dust the books in my pozie.

There’s Kafka, Bukowski, Phamotse, Salinger, Beckett, Wilde, Plato. There are also my brown exercise books (manuscripts I handwrite my diaries in).

I feel much better. That’s my real character – when I’m in the fuck-the-world, fuck-the-universe mood. When I don’t care what nobody thinks – when me uses anger to freaking punch the freaking keys on the laptop. That mood you can never buy in the shop. That mood or mojo your favourite novelist doesn’t have. That mood your favourite novelist wanna steal. That mood your favourite novelist hates me for. That mood... yeah, yeah, yeah... that mood. I’d be damned!

At least when it comes to novel-writing, I try to be understandable. This is my turf, my territory.

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‘Who are we gonna dedicate this novel to?’ my character says.

I dedicated my first novel to my father. The second one I think that will be published is dedicated to my sister and two of my cousins. To be honest, though, it’s dedicated to one person: my sister. My cousins are there just to make the numbers. One hopes they don’t read *this* part, cause come what will, I’m never gonna remove it from my book. When will a book get finished if we keep deleting parts?

‘I don’t know, man,’ I say. ‘Since it’s the great African novel, why not dedicate it to Lamming?’

‘Who’s that? Or who was that?’ my character says.

‘You don’t know your history, do you?’ I say. ‘Bob Marley would be furious with you. Anyway, George Lamming was this Barbados guy. He taught all over the world, you know. Port of Spain. Australia. The US. Africa – Tanzania.’

\*\*\*

‘Imagine if this novel was not just a first draft. Don’t you think it would be a fresh read?’ my character asks me on one of our book edits.

‘You mean it’s gonna be different when published?’ I say, not really wanting an answer. ‘It’ll be us, just cleaner.’

‘Sometimes when I look at the shit we’ve done, I’m actually proud of the raw stuff, you know,’ he says. ‘I think we should even leave the mistakes, bad grammar and uninspired parts.’

‘Even the spelling?’ I say.

‘Even the spelling,’ he says. ‘Why not eat that money? We can drink it rather than make some cheap-ass editor rich with our pennies.’

‘That appeals to my snobby nature, man,’ I say. ‘But, then, we won’t have these meetings. So, I suggest we try and be as professional as we can. This is our reputation we’re writing. But, hey, if there’s an error or two here and there and a misspelling or two now and then, that’s some hobby for an overzealous mistake spotter.’

‘I bet that even beats playing crossword,’ he says.

‘This is one of those special days,’ I say. ‘We got our mojo back. This is the *L. Sojini* I know. This is the *me* I know.’

‘Yeah, hey,’ he says. ‘We’re on a roll today. We should keep this part when we’re doing the edits, especially this part. No messing with this part, come what will. This one is for keeps.’

‘We’re on steroids,’ I agree. ‘But in my experience, the parts you say you’ll keep when you write a novel are the ones you usually leave out at the end of the book. But, do remind me when the final editing day comes. Who knows? We might just keep this part.’

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Now That You Asked, This is How to Write a Novel...

Be born black. African black, I mean. Don’t be those guys who be like *my parents are African, but I was born in the West*. However, you must still write in English – forget your native/indigenous language. Speak and write mostly in English – it’s the superior language. God be damned and worshipped.

Ask for the darkest skin you can ever get. The blacker the berry, the sweeter the...

Waste the most important years dreaming and concocting silly business ideas.

Spend one year getting an MA in Creative Writing.

Believe in yourself and your writing. Don't be dismissive of bestselling or published novels you think that are mediocre.

Write for the press.

Take all the shit you've ever written – burn it in the trash can and start feeling good.

Start hating a few of your friends and family.

Write a pseudo-monograph titled *How to Write a Novel*. Memorize that monograph. Follow its advice to the last bit.

Leave your home. Go with all your handwritten manuscripts. Remove all the autobiographical parts.

Feel good and worthy.

Have sex. Spend the whole week in bed – each day, be more depressed than the previous day.

Buy yourself a skipping rope.

Diss Zakes Mda in your novel. (But feel bad when you reread the previous chapters during the editing of the novel: legends are not supposed to be spoken thus).

Think about what work you'll get after the MA.

Tell yourself you're better than Fred Khumalo.

Put WhatsApp on your phone. Collect the funny WhatsApp messages and memes. Give those messages to your main character.

Become a loan shark.

Enter a writer's competition online. Ask strangers to vote for you online. Feel like a dirty beggar when you do it. Feel lousy when you lose the competition. Send the organizers an angry email. Feel bad about it. Allow some time to pass. Feel proud about not feeling bad about that angry email any more.

Don't bath every day.

Read the Business Day – only the editions where your articles appear in. The rest you can read them at the library or on PressReader.

Snub literary journals. Talk shit to editors and publishers. Feel proud you can stand up to them. Make them depressed. Make them feel jealous. Prove that they're inadequate and that you actually are a motherfucker who believes in himself – or a motherfucker who doesn't believe in any fucking shit.

Feel that the journey to writing hasn't even started.

Unfollow friends and family on Facebook.

Feel sorry for the beggars. Give them something – pennies, peanuts and nothing is okay.

Steal a phone. Pick it up, actually.

Watch *Game of Thrones* – that's where real writing is. Everything else is bullshit and uninspiring.

Go for 1, 000 jumps on that jumping rope.

Attend poetry readings. Hate them.

Call your grandmother. Steal her crazy jokes. Tell the world they're yours.

Type your handwritten manuscripts.

Read Bukowski. Don't copy his style. Copy his obsession with childhood.

Wish you had learnt Greek or French.

Download the Wi-Fi. Put it on your computer and all your phones. Join Netflix – but cancel after 30 days – even before that. Watch Kevin Spacey break the fourth wall.

Check the meaning of the word “ecstasy”. Make it the theme of your next book.

Delete the current book you're writing. Start afresh.

Buy a rose.

Unfollow ppl on Twitter. Ditch your allegiance to feminists.

Choose one song they must play when you're dead. It has to be *Wake Me Up When September Ends*. Otherwise, choose not to die.

Print copies of your short stories.

Start a magazine.

Start a website.

Write when you're tired; not write when you're inspired. (When you think you're fresh and inspired, you'll write the worst shit of your life. When you're tired and uninspired, you'll write the best shit of your life.)

Change your sexual orientation. Lust after men.

Buy a bottle of wine. Invite a famous singer to come drink it with you. Get drunk. Feel worthless. Feel stupid.

Watch the IPL. Say funny things about the losing team.

Apply for a Creative Writing PhD.

Write a shitty academic novel. Research it so good it doesn't feel bad.

Stay at home. Hate work.

Watch the Springboks beat the English to lift the Rugby World Cup.

Use all I've said to really scribe that African novel. Have a few people read it – even if it's only you.

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When I get to my character's place, I see that he's involved in one of his fights.

'I hope you become so poor that you die,' I hear him say when I arrive.

'That's not a right thing to say,' I say when her woman is gone.

‘I don’t want to see that bitch ever again,’ he says. ‘I liked her, but I don’t think she’s worth my liking. A complete nuisance. Waste of time and energy. Who does she think is – God?’

‘She’s hot. She probably thinks she’s Cleopatra or Rihanna?’

‘A hundred Cleopatras and Rihannas wouldn’t move me.’

‘For real?’

‘Man, I have a hundred Cleopatras and Rihannas fighting over me. Anyway, what’s your obsession with Cleopatra and Rihanna? Are you studying Egyptology now?’

‘Rihanna is from Barbados.’

‘Obviously, if we remove Rihanna, we’re left with Cleopatra.’

‘I’d rather we get into today’s writing, you know. After that, there’ll be plenty of time talking about the most beautiful women in history. We can even add the Kardashians in there.’

‘Sounds good to me. Where are we today? It would be refreshing to get my mind off that crazy woman.’

\*\*\*

When you get closer to 20, 000 words, there’s no turning back. You’ll hear me say to myself:

‘*Uyabona manje; kuyanyiwa ngoku!*’

And, here’s the thingy: I’m working on three scripts: this one is at 17,321 now. And, I’m also writing another one. Different style, different character. It’s the sequel to *Uncle Sbu* (I sent the *Uncle Sbu* to the National Library. They’ll give me a grant to publish it).

The sequel has the working title *Uncle Sbu 2019*. It has 18,644 words for now.

The third is easy to write. I’m not writing it, actually: I’m typing the stuff I’d already handwritten in my myriad notebooks. How many words do we have there? I’ll open the word document now... okay, it has 37,206 words. These three works and the other stuff I do – I’m also doing radio now... and, then, there’s the reflection journal and assignments – means I’ll have written and typed a hundred thousand words. But that’s minor. I’m sure some people do more than me. But, then, I’m happy that I do more than some. I mean, there are some people who’re not even writing. And there are people who’ve never written anything. That’s sad. When a bummer like me, with less interesting stories and flawed style and no pliant grammar, is churning out words after words, story after story, shouldn’t we shake our heads

and be mad at those with more interesting stories, but for the life of us, don't know that a pen has to dance on paper?

Anyway, I'll struggle editing my diaries. But, I guess I'll print them as they are. I'll read them on my deathbed... to remind myself of the shit I've gone through.

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My character tells me next time we must write a novel without typos, grammatical errors; a novel where we don't have to go back and forth editing.

'It feels like we're writing one novel three times,' he says. 'Next time we should try a novel without typos, grammatical errors and all this editing.'

'You mean a novel with a plot?' I say.

'Yeah, that would save us time,' he says. 'Check our current M.O.: we write the novel, go through these development meetings and we still have to edit the damn thing. Like I was saying, we should swing this axe once. And, swing it smart.'

'I get your concerns, but I'm not that kind of novelist, you know,' I say. 'My writing has to come out weird first. Then I have to make the weird parts stick like they were meant to be together. I can't help it; it's who I am. It's not the quickest way, I know. But at least, I don't do a lot of rewrites. I'm lazy like you when it comes to rewrites.'

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*When I hear talk of culture I reach for my gun –  
Attributed to Goering*

Can I create a story where I create a Marxist organization that comes to me and says: we want anarchy?

'We want anarchy please,' I'll make them say.

This "fake" Marxist organization will inspire a real Marxist organization to come to me and say: 'We want anarchy.'

I'll say: 'Did you read my novel, you goddamned Marxists?'

'Every word of it,' the Marxist organization will truthfully say. 'But on rereading it, we skipped many skippable parts, you see.'

‘I want a million dollars,’ I’ll say. ‘Plus put me on the T-shirts like Che Guevara. Can you do that? A million dollars and my crazy ass or face on T-shirts like Che Guevara. And I’ll give you anarchy. You want anarchy, right?’

Of course, you’ll know there was no Marxist organization, to begin with. But fear not, brothers or comrades, anarchy is there. The mere fact that you can’t see it means it’s everywhere. You can look to the left, right – and even out of the window, and behind your back.

I’ll create *this* story and hide it somewhere in *this* novel. But my character will see it and, pointing to the hidden chapter, say: ‘Bastard, you wrote a story and I wasn’t in it? What’s this?’

‘Cause, you – reader – love me more than you love my character, you’ll say this for me: ‘Ah, dude, snap out of it. Are you a jealous character?’

My character will be mad at you and angrily say: ‘Hey, reader, watch it! Do you wanna start something? Do you wanna start a fight?’

I’ll watch you gather your courage and cock your fists and say: ‘Bring it on, buddy. Bring it on, sucker. You think I’d buy a book and not be able to fight you? Come here, you sucker. I’ll show you your maker.’

I’ll laugh at you, reader, and ask: ‘Why do you allow me to play with your emotions? Why do you allow me to hypnotize you?’

You’ll be defensive as hell and look sideways to see if there’s no-one watching you. You might close the book as if someone caught you reading *Fifty Shades of Grey*.

I won’t let you answer as to why you allow me to play with your emotions. Cause I’ve really no idea. And I’m too lazy to think. I just wanna write and be read by Marxists. Not because they’re the most perfect people in the world. Well, they try. It sounds sexy to be read and loved by Marxists. I want them to carry Fanon and my books when they burn the universities and countries, and when they march for better working conditions and salary increases. Well, the university they definitely must burn – but only after I’ve gotten my degree. The country they must burn after they’ve wired my money to Switzerland. I’ll let some blonde babe summarize me a summary of Fanon. And I’ll ask her: ‘Are you racist, hot babe?’

She’ll say: ‘No, sir, I’m not in the habit of being a racist to people I admire. You’re too rich for me to be a racist snob. I’ll leave that -ism for somebody else, sir, not you. You’re the most perfect black person, I know. The most perfect. You’re not even black, sir. You’re *L. Sojini*.’

But, I digress. Comrades and sisters, my question was: why do you allow me to play with your emotions?

I was too lazy to think, but either way, your answer is here. It came to that: you enjoy being characters in the book. Raise your hands if you’re enjoying the book. Yeah, go ahead. No tricks here. I want to hypnotize you again.

Imagine you're reading my book and I'm there with you. It's the four of us. My character, me, the blonde babe and you. ("Blonde bitch", if you're in a superior mood). And – the four of us, remember – we've burned the country, not the university 'cause our sisters still have to come here. We are drinking some cool cocktails I cannot even begin to name because I don't know any of that shit. But, all I know, is we're getting tipsy and we're really enjoying ourselves. We're far away from poverty. Imagine that. We're in paradise. And the movie won't end. Just imagine, man. It's like heaven twice over. Three times, if you bought the book and you read the whole of it. You see, there's a special place in Switzerland and heaven for my African brothers and sisters who read my novels without missing a comma or any of that shit.

I'm easily hypnotizing you, but don't worry, I'm hypnotizing myself in the process. But, goddamn it, why do you allow me to hypnotize you? Why do you allow a lousy writer to hypnotize you? Sure, you're smarter than that.

Okay, since you've awakened from the dream, I want to address writers reading this book. And when I say "writers", I'm also talking about you, reader (everybody is a writer)... but, goddamn it... there you are... sleeping again. What's wrong with you? Can I not write in front of your lousy eyes and not have you sleep? Do novels do this to you? Can't a writer write their novel without the reader falling asleep on the page? Good Lord, am I gonna be a writer who's gonna be known for putting readers to sleep?

Methinks this is where mind control begins. *They* want me to believe I'm writing a novel. I also want to believe I'm writing a novel. You want to believe you're reading a novel. If you believe you're reading one, then I can't really help you, reader. And, who am I to stop you from believing it? It's a free world. You can believe whatever stuff you wanna believe in. It's all good for business or culture. The two go together, don't they? The business of culture, if you wanna be snobby or dense about it. That's why if you're a fan of mine you shouldn't read Truman Capote or any of those shitty writers I hate.

Anyway, my point to writers: the way to hypnotize your readers is to give them just a little bit of the good stuff. Of course, they're paying but tease them. Lecture done. Let me think. Where was I? Oh, the three (or four) of us with the blonde babe. We're lying on the beach. She (the blonde babe/bitch), says: 'Did you rob a bank?'

'Cause you own the book you're reading (or having borrowed it, we really don't discriminate), we'll let you talk to the blonde babe – you can say anything, if you want to... even crap... we have the money. Even some racist shit. Why have money and not talk crap? Or, why not write crap, when you don't have the money?

'No, we burned the country, but we saved the uni–' we'll hear you say.

'O! You, brave men,' the blonde babe (bitch), will say and plant a soft kiss on your forehead.

Don't you love that, dear reader – a golden kiss softly planted on your forehead? You'll look at us guiltily, but you'll be enjoying every minute of it, you bastard. You'll be asking yourself why you've never been a character in many cool novels like *this*.

Me and my character will look at you and smile back at you, you slimy bastard. You, sleazeball.

‘Viva anarchy,’ we’ll say, and ask each other: ‘Where are the Marxists?’

You’ll get tired or will want to freeze the moment and ask us to end the chapter. This will be too much for you, your head spinning, ‘cause you’ve never been in a novel before and ‘cause you didn’t expect that there are writers who hit the novel like this.

‘Even without tying the concepts?’ my character will ask, enjoying himself also.

‘You guys have been doing it all along, not following all the rules of literature,’ you’ll say. ‘So, why start now? Let’s end the chapter. This is too much for me, I must say.’

‘If you’re tired, you can skip *this* part,’ my character will say.

‘This is one of the best chapters in the book,’ I’ll fume, knowing I’m right but also aware of the fact that there are some untidy parts. ‘I will not allow the reader to skip. If he skips this part, he must know me and him are over. If he skips or closes the book, he mustn’t read it again or ever recommend it to a friend. It’s not his job to tell us where and when to end the chapter. We’ll ramble on for as long as we want. This is our goddamned novel. My character, the blonde character and you, the reader-character, are my characters. The only real person in this novel is me. Even the reader has become character. He’s one of us now, but he won’t tell us when to stop or end the goddamned chapter. Either he sticks with us or the relationship is over. He must not read our other books.’

‘That’s blackmail,’ my character will say. And you’ll agree, bastard.

I’ll frown when I see you partnering with my character.

‘Goddamn it, you’re right: It’s blackmail,’ I will say.

How can I put you in the story and then have you quit on us, reader? For all the shit in this book, the racism, discrimination and unclean desires, you’re complicit. You’re not as clean as you think, goddamnit. You’re as crooked as the author. In fact, you’ve been judging us when we should be the ones judging you. How cool is that? I never want to live in a world where there are double standards.

‘But, we have to hold the reader’s attention, not bore his ass,’ my character will act all innocent.

‘You’re right,’ I’ll say. ‘If the reader can please rest for a while, I’ll want his ass in the next chapter. Let’s meet there, reader.’

Are you still reading? Go to the next page, I said. Next page, damn it.

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When my character gets to me, I’m snoring like a pig – like ten tractors, he later tells me.

‘Why look at me like that?’ I say, catching myself.

‘You snore real bad. Like a pig, man,’ he says.

‘No, man. I don’t snore,’ I say. ‘Was I really snoring? Like a pig, *nogal?*’

‘Like ten tractors, I dare say,’ my character says.

‘I don’t like that figure of speech,’ I say.

‘Then you don’t like the truth,’ he says. ‘Anyway, that’s a first.’

‘What’s a first?’ I say.

‘A writer who cannot deal with the truth or take rough words on the chin? That’s unbelievable.’

‘What happened to you sugar-coating words? What happened to you appealing to my ego?’ I say. ‘Don’t you know I like the truth better when it doesn’t sound like it?’

‘The downside to that is you’ll never act,’ he says. ‘You’ll be enthralled by the glittering and sweet lies while the damage is being done. The truth is necessary even if it sounds awful.’

‘Okay, so what’s up? I think we can use such poetry to write a novel rather than bore the reader with pseudo-philosophy.’

‘That’s right. I had some ideas we can throw into the novel. I mean we can bark all we want and have our golden words dissolve into the air. I agree with you; I say we put them in the goddamned novel. Have you got your pen ready?’

‘As always; let’s get going. Where should we start? Let’s hear those ideas that got you here.’

‘Right. Thinking of it, since this day shows signs of greatness, we should celebrate after this. What you say?’

‘What’s my name, goddamnit? And, say it twice!’

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‘There’s vomit in the bathroom,’ I say when I get to my character’s place and he’s in bed.

‘I was probably drunk. Last night was hectic. A night to remember. I’m lucky and happy to be alive,’ he says, adding: ‘Still drunk, though. The *babalaas* still got me. But did you clean it up? What’s the time?’

‘What was that?’ I say. ‘I can do a million things for you, not wipe your vomit, as well.’

‘Please man,’ he says.

Is he crazy?

‘No ways I’m doing that,’ I shout.

‘Dude, you’re my right-hand man, aren’t you?’

True that. But right-hand men don’t go around wiping each other’s vomit, do they? I don’t know what to think. There are things you do for a mate, and some you can’t even begin to think of.

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We go to a reading.<sup>2</sup> My character starts waving at the people.

‘Shake hands,’ I advise. ‘You don’t want people to think you’re out of touch.’

‘I’d rather be out of touch,’ he says. ‘But I’m not touching anybody’s hands, especially women who I don’t know and have never met. Who knows what they do with their vaginas, anuses and all that shit? This is a disgusting picture, I know. But one day, you’re touching your periods, and the next you’re shaking hands with a world-famous African writer? No ways, I’m touching women.’

‘That’s sexist,’ I say. ‘And there goes us losing our female readership.’

‘Dude, everybody touches themselves, their shit,’ my character says. ‘If we’re gonna write a raw, real novel, we need to be honest.’

‘We’re cutting this part out of the book,’ I promise him.

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<sup>2</sup> I should consider removing this part. But... and, you know when a writer starts using a “but”, they don’t mean what they’re saying. They’re undecided as hell. Nervous. But, hey, nervousness never wrote no novel.

I'm undecided about it. It's hard to write about sexuality.

I'm currently reading Sony Lab'ou Tansi. He handles sex and sexuality in a grown-up manner. My attempt is real shitty, but that's a start. And Sony Lab'ou Tansi is awesome. He writes a whole book (slim by the way), with a female protagonist or narrator in it. How awesome can one get? And to think I didn't know of the dude until now. That's crazy.

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In the middle of the novel... somewhere – (some parts of the book never come out where you put them), my character has signed a contract. He's signed a contract with the department of space. No, he'll not be an astronaut – just a member onboard. This is a way of saying my character is no longer mine. He no longer deals with me. I feel sad. I've watched many characters leave, but have never seen love like this.

'I never thought our story could end like this,' he says from space.

'Dude, are you really there in space?' I say.

I cannot believe a black man is in space.

'Okay, let's play-act. How does it feel like to walk in space?' I continue. 'Let's hit the reader senseless. They won't mind a little bit of fiction.'

'It's normal, mam. I don't get what all the fuss is about. Space is normal,' he says. 'But let me tell you what's really unsettling: I'm developing real human flesh.'

True. When he's come back to earth, he's metamorphosed into a real human being.

The officials, now that he's half-popular, fix for him some special papers. They even give him a name. But because he's special, they give him a list he can choose from. I don't know but he picks John.

'Why John?' I ask.

'Being human takes a lot to get used to it,' he says. 'I'll change it, if I don't I like it. I'll use it for the next three months. What's that book you're holding?'

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My character says his aunt's sick so he won't be coming to work. I don't wanna be a nasty novelist or employer, so I let it slide. I say *ok, do what you have to do. Go where you have to go and don't come where you don't have to come.*

'Thanks, man,' he says. 'I'll make up for it.'

The next time, not long after this, he says his aunt who was sick is now dead. And he'll need a week away from work or the novel. I'm sceptical, but I say okay. He'll soon run out of sick and dead aunts.

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I present my character with a poetry anthology.

He looks at it once and says: 'That's Pablo Neruda.'

'Yeah, I want you to learn something about writing and humility,' I say.

'From a poet. You can't be serious.'

'Who or what says you can't learn from poets?' I say.

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You know, when you look at your old writing – style and grammar – and you don't see any change, you're almost pushed into this zone where you feel that it has changed from what you were writing when you were a kid. This has the capability of throwing you off, be put off by your own writing, but, thinking of it, does it really matter if your style hasn't changed? I mean, why not be happy that you're still writing? Cause, at the end of the day, it's the matter that matters – material that matters, I mean. You don't wanna torture yourself over writing that hasn't changed. Be happy at the manuscripts that pile on. Yeah, hey? The stuff we writers tell ourselves. Crazy. Ha, ha, ha! Crazy but true.

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I share my concerns about the novel with my character.

'I don't think this is truly an African novel,' I say. 'Something doesn't gel.'

'Why's that?' he asks.

‘Look, there’s no person suffering, no sick person, no wars – no nothing. Is this how a true African novel should look or sound like?’ I say. ‘To quote Binyavanga Wainaina, I want to, “write a big African novel that changes African writing and stands for Africa”. That’s what I wanna do.’

‘Well, if that’s your aim, I think you’ve already missed the mark,’ my character says. ‘Just look at our novel. It’s a mish-mash of everything. White lyrics here and there. I don’t think it’s in contention for the “big African novel”. But does it really have to be a big novel?’

I cannot believe this. I’ve never seen my character in such a thoughtful mood.

‘You’re right. You’ve got some good points, there. I’m inspired, you know,’ I say, really admiring his mind and thoughts (he’s starting to sound like me). ‘Why can’t it just be a minor African novel? What’s wrong with that? Does everything out of Africa have to be great? Don’t you think Africa is saddled by expectations of greatness? Why not just write a novel for the fun of it? I owe you big time.’

‘Don’t sweat it, man,’ he says. ‘But, if you’re gonna quote Binyavanga Wainaina, we should at least triple check the manuscript to see if we, at one point, didn’t diss him.’

That’s my problem, again he’s right. I’ve got this tendency to diss writers and publishers. I was looking at my diary some time ago and I see that I was dissing Blackbird books. Then, readers of this novel will know I have already dissed Zakes Mda. I diss everybody. It’s not something that I really like and do a lot, but, hey I won’t scratch my book cause someone might be offended. No, *mukoma*, we’re dissing everybody. This is my attention-seeking novel, I can’t help it. I can’t shy away from dragging the top names of African literature in the mud. It feels so good – so naughty good. I’ll keep this part in all future edits. The only time I might remove it is when the book goes for the second edition and the readers have notified us of all our mistakes, errors and sheer stupidity. I mean, they can just post on Twitter, and say our book sucks and reeks of attention-seeking. Then I’ll ask them (probably not), which writer is not seeking attention? Even the Gospel writers, as saintly their motivations were or might have been, they wanted somebody’s attention. Me, as a man of the world – secular as hell – I’m gonna attention-seek with only a little bit of shame.

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So for today’s session, I bring a couple of books on sexual assault. *Khwezi* by Redi Thlabi. *Rape: A South African Nightmare*. Pumla Dineo Gqola. *What We Talk About When We Talk About Rape*. Sohaila Abdulali.

‘Are we gonna introduce a rape storyline?’ my character says.

‘Not really, but now that you’re gonna be a superstar, you should familiarize yourself with these issues,’ I say. ‘This issue has affected current and past stars. Tyson was in the dock for this. Tupac also.’

‘Well, I’m no rapper or rapist,’ he fumes.

‘But you’re a man, aren’t you?’ I say.

He shakes his head once.

‘The worst thing that can ever happen to a star on the rise is end in the cell for a crime they didn’t commit,’ I say. ‘The message here is: don’t rape, but don’t give them excuse to say you did when you didn’t.’

‘I might as well observe the Billy Graham rule,’ he says.

‘That’s a step in the right direction,’ I say.

‘Who says I wasn’t being sarcastic? Who says I was being real?’

‘Well, I don’t care whether you’re being sarcastic or what, but we don’t need no cases. Period.’

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I’m coaching my character on what to say when the press asks him silly questions, thinking they’re the smartest brains on literature and literariness.

‘So, what will I say when they ask me about which book I’m modelled on?’ he says.

‘Tell them we modelled you on Fyodor Dostoevsky’s *Notes from Underground*,’ I say.

‘I’m not convinced myself. I’m not sure I can believe that. Journalists should be sceptical. If I was a journo, I wouldn’t believe that,’ he says.

‘You’re speaking in parables,’ I say. ‘Plain language, please.’

‘What I’m trying to say is: you haven’t read *Underground*. If you did, it’s only a chapter,’ he says.

‘What’s wrong with reading only the first chapter of a book and claim it inspired you? I see nothing wrong with that,’ I say, adding: ‘It’s actually a good thing I didn’t read all of *Underground*, you know. People will think I ripped his ass off – ideas, I mean. But, even If I

ripped his ass off, nobody in their right senses would come to me and accuse me of plagiarism. Why's that? I'll tell you why: Dostoevsky's bones must be rotting somewhere. His books, I'm sure, have lost copyright. We can actually rip him more often than we can. So, relax man. We're original – or close to originality, I'd like to think.'

'Sounds good to me,' he says. 'Now, let's try that again. Ask me that question again. I think I'll believe it this time.'

'You better believe it, mate. It's for your own good.'

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'There's no sex in this book,' my character fumes, as he furiously pages through the manuscript.

'There's gotta be sex somewhere between the lines,' I say, paging through the draft myself.

'No man,' my character says. 'Sex should be inside the sheets. Real sheets. Not sheets on the page. There's no sex here. This story makes me a virgin, technically.'

True: there's no sex in the book. How can there be sex in the book when there's no women in the writer's life? When the author is terrible with women characters. How can there be sex when the author thinks he's a baby compared to Sony Lab'ou Tansi? I mean you read *The Seven Solitudes of Lorsa Lopez*, and he's got a whole book narrated by a woman. The main character, too, is female. As a writer, you can write a million novels, but you'll never achieve that.

I mean I cannot write women characters, and I think I'm actually cool with that. Shamefully proud of the fact. Who said/says writers like me should be pros at writing female characters?

'Listen, man,' I knock some sense into my guy. 'Writers are not the same. And, this, I'm taking from the Xhosas when they say *imizi ayifani*. That is to say: not all houses are the same: some are poor, some are rich.'

Needless to say, there are good writers and terrible ones.

Our characters have to deal with it.

'Don't tell me about Xhosa. I know Xhosa,' he says.

'You do?'

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There are many unfinished chapters and sentences in the book, my character tells me. I look at one chapter. I try to make sense of it, but, hey, I can't remember what I wanted to say. Even if I do, I don't think I still want to talk about it. You can't expect me to feel strongly

today about something I felt strongly months ago. Bullshit. Crap. I'm contemporary. I go with the flow. What matters is now. Fuck the past. We don't live there. We live in the now.

'It doesn't matter,' I say. 'Let's leave it like that. I probably wasn't serious the time I first composed those lines and chapters. I don't know what crazy shit I was on back then. I don't know what was going on in my mind. I come up with crazy ideas sometimes. I think I'll push them through. An illusion, really. With fleeting ideas like that that seem so real, you just give them time. A couple of months, really. Your mind will be sober then. The illusions have a way of dissolving themselves. You really don't have to do much, you know. Sit down. Relax. Spend a day doing nothing or some months doing something. Why worry about an idea you had yesterday when you can just forget it today, I mean? Tomorrow is another day, mate. We'll dream better dreams then. Bigger dreams. Unreachable, crazy dreams. But, first, you have to kill the bigger dreams from yesterday. How can you achieve bigger dreams when you can't kill even bigger dreams? The bigger the dream you want to achieve, the bigger the dream you have to kill. Never get into the habit of having bigger dreams if you can't kill gigantic dreams. Anything I'm saying make sense? Let's leave those unfinished sentences and chapters. The ones we're focussing now are much bigger. They have our attention now. Tomorrow they won't. Tomorrow, we'll have forgotten about them. Why pay them more attention when they are destined to the bin of the mind? Why work on them like crazy today when tomorrow there are bigger and newer trends? Chapters and sentences that think too much are awful.'

My character protests. 'The readers will notice. They'll feel cheated.'

But, I write the novel. I own the novel. I say that like it's a bank, car or millions I own. Either way, my character can protest all he wants. But, I really have to push the novel without having many people send their suggestions my way or without having a character fucking tell me how I should write my novel. The damn thing has my name it. That should mean or say something to the reader. They have to enjoy a bit of my over-explaining cause I'll soon tire of making rewrites. The last time I promised myself I wouldn't change anything. But, for a novel oscillating between the amateur and premium, this is what you pay for. More rewrites when the author doesn't want to – when the author is up at three in the morning. When the author is drunk on blues and African-American Gospel. Why not?

'You're wrong,' I say. 'The readers never notice. And I'm the one feeling cheated: writing stuff I no longer want to talk about.'

'That's a huge gamble,' my character says.

'It's life,' I say. 'We write novels to have fun, not sweat whether the chapter has a beginning, middle and end. Fuck that shit.'

'Somebody's in a foul mood,' he says.

'Or, in the zone, if you will. It's up to you, really. I can never force these things on you.'

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My character comes to my pozie and says he couldn't sleep: he has some fresh ideas, and those ideas have to be put somewhere in the goddamned novel, I take it. Now, don't get me

wrong: I like it when my characters spoonfeed me. I like to have the best ideas without having to dig for them myself. Talk about your character spoiling you. Rotten, aye! But, when they give you too much stuff, I start worrying. In the end, they'll start thinking *this* is their book or goddamned novel, which isn't true, you know, reader. So, I cut them and sometimes tell them, No.

'You're gonna be sorry for this,' he says.

Really? I doubt this. I mean, in the making of a novel there are many ideas that we writers – the top writers, ahem – discard. It's the nature of the business. It's the nature of the beast. One idea doesn't make a novel.

'Dude, one "bright" idea that doesn't make it into the manuscript does not mean it's the end of the novel,' I say, thinking about the horrible instance of losing work that's on a memory stick.

This happened to me last year with *Uncle Sbu*. I have this part where one of my characters, Vusi, goes to a Thandiswa Mazwai concert wearing female clothing. The kid's caught and returns home.

But that part is missing from the manuscript I sent to the National Library for publication. I shouldn't be sad, but what makes me sore – thanks, Holden – is that I really wanted that part. Now, the memory stick (and I hate that word or phrase "memory stick"), decides to get lost. Boy, I shouldn't be mad at the fucking stick. I should be mad at the motherfucker who picked it up. It has to be a dude (ladies might cheat, but they don't steal).

Anyway, I love digressing. One lady, from my reading, said that when I read from my other short story (and I was just looking for an excuse to include that in here).

She wrote, and I quote:

'Nobody digresses the way you do. You have a way with narrating that is really cool.'

Now, reader, is this true? I seduced you to be alone. It's only you and me. I'll do something special. I'll start again: I seduced you to be alone. It's only *You* and *Me*. We could hop into the bedroom and make love – but we do it here on-page. Do you think I have a way of narrating that's cool? Well, I'm half and half on that one. I wouldn't write if I didn't think so. But, to be honest, there are times when I doubt my own work, especially when I print this out and make notes and corrections with my pen. But, doubt is a motherfucker, isn't it? If the narration sounds cool, if it looks cool, and if both the reader and author want it to be cool, then it's cool. Period. No question about it unless we have haters who gatecrashed in our novel. Those motherfuckers should be sent to jail or thrown into the sea, you decide what's to be done with our haters, won't you, reader? I trust your judgement. I wouldn't have you read my novel if you were a jerk and didn't love the cream of African literature. I mean, we'll maliciously let the haters read. After reading, then reader you decide what's to be done: the nearest jail or the sea? If it's a jail, then don't forget to throw away the keys. Well, no doubt – because corruption is rife – they might escape prison, I don't know. I don't care, but our efforts will be wasted, but I really don't care. Cause, if you said our haters would be thrown into the sea, then they have no way of escaping. Cause, I tell you what: Behemoth, that sea monster, awaits their arrival. Choose wisely, reader. Behemoth or prison.

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To increase our word count dramatically, we think of removing the dashes between words. This is a cool trick to double one word.

‘This feels so good, us cheating our readers,’ my character says.

‘Ah, well, we won’t be there when they read this,’ I say. ‘And, even if they find out we short-changed them, it won’t be us they blame. They have themselves to blame for being hoodwinked by a cool cover. And you know well, I’m a bad graphic designer.’

‘Thinking of it,’ my character says. ‘Why don’t we forget those designer chaps in Mombasa and do our own designing? I mean, we can save some few cents that way.’

‘Hey, *wena*, don’t you know slapping a cool cover is one of the best ways to hypnotize the reader? The buyer, I mean,’ I say, thinking that our cool cover should fall out when the book is in the hands of that borrower and loaner of books who knows not what the door of a bookshop looks like.

‘Anyway,’ I add. ‘We promised that graphic designer friend of yours he’ll get the job.’

‘Yeah, hey. I had forgotten. Hope he doesn’t charge us much. We’re friends.’

‘You’ve never owned a taxi, have you?’ I say.

‘Where’s this going?’

‘You know those stickers which say “Even if you know me, you still have to pay!”?’

‘Oh, yeah. That’s Africa for you,’ my character says. ‘What made you think of that?’

‘Well, since it’s an African novel, we sorta have to make it sound more African, hey? I’m under the impression: if it sounds like Africa, if it looks like Africa, if it reads like Africa, then it’s an African novel.’

‘I guess you’re right. But, things changing, and Uber taking over, are these crazy-ass stickers gonna be lost to us? Thinking of it, why not use that sticker as inspiration for our cover?’

‘Well, I’m not sold on that,’ I say. ‘Our book sounds African enough. We shouldn’t go for an overkill or oversell. We’ve done that already. Let’s not worry about the cover now. The time is coming.’

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‘If our reader is racist, should they close the book right on this page and stop reading?’ my character says.

Where this is coming from, I don’t know. I never meant my novel to be political.

‘I don’t think that’ll happen,’ I say. ‘I think racists don’t even know they are racists. Even if they knew, isn’t it their money that bought this book? So, racists should finish this book: our job is to keep them happy. Pander to their prejudices, I guess.’

‘And not try to change their racist attitudes?’

‘I never write to change the world,’ I say.

‘But, you can change a racist’s mind.’

‘You said it.’

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We're listening to one of our favourite rapper's albums, struggling to catch a word or two. The Americans – African-Americans, I should say – how do they expect us to catch up on their dope lyrics when they rap so fast?

‘There's something about hunger and poverty that makes the artist produce real art,’ I say.

‘No doubt about that,’ my character says.

‘There’ll never be another great album like this,’ I conclude.

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### The Ideal Reader (Why pen a chapter when a poem will do?)

Co-written with Big Daddy Rabbit

- Our ideal reader should brush their teeth before they open our book.
- Our ideal reader should have breakfast before opening these pages of ours.
- Our ideal reader should greet neighbours (Big Daddy Rabbit says this goes to those with shitty neighbours, too).
- Our ideal reader should read a paragraph of our book, make love while that paragraph is in their head, and they should read another paragraph after sex.
- Our ideal reader should name their child after one of the characters in this book. I don’t mind that character being me.
- Our ideal reader should not complain to us when their kid turns out to be a no-gooder.
- Our ideal reader should be overweight (if they're not, at least they should have plans to pile on that weight).

- Our ideal reader should have a fancy car and a boatload of slay queens.
- Our ideal reader should distrust politics and hate the government. Most of the hate – the real, all-consuming, dangerous hate – should be reserved for the president.
- Our ideal reader should expect the government to buy them a copy of this book.
- Our ideal reader should be a loud-mouthed gossip.
- Our ideal reader should have a Twitter account.
- Our ideal reader should be black.
- Our ideal reader should know that returning a book to the reader who actually bought it, earns them points with us.
- Our ideal reader should clean the toilet without having to be asked.
- Our ideal reader should speak more than one language (English and your African language don't count).
- Our ideal reader should tear one page they like the least from this book.
- Our ideal reader should spread lies about us (but if we get to hear you, we'll hunt you down and kill you).
- Our ideal reader should pay back the money he owes his neighbour.
- Our ideal reader should not live in the location.
- Our ideal reader should wear a Steve Biko T-shirt.
- Our ideal reader should wear an EFF beret.
- Our ideal reader should have an ANC T-shirt (but that T-shirt should have Cyril Ramaphosa on it).
- Our ideal reader should have a T-shirt with Mnangagwa and Mugabe on it.
- Our ideal reader should have their favourite writer's cell phone number. (This ideal, or idealism, is currently under consideration. It was initially created when the authors were drunk on something).
- Our ideal reader's name should be known to us, the authors. (Something fishy with this ideal/idealism; something doesn't sound right at all).

We hit a writer's block.

'When are we gonna come out?' my character asks.

'I don't know,' I say. 'I have a feeling I will like being in this writer's block for longer than I should.'

'Ah, dude, we shouldn't get used to it. Our writing muscles will atrophy,' he says.

'Dude, forget that shit,' I say. 'What happened to us just enjoying life? What happened to us saying we shouldn't live for our novels? What happened to us saying our novels should live for us? Relax, dude. The sky isn't gonna fall if we stay in this block for longer. We'll come out even stronger from this writer's block. We'll come out titans. Warriors. Something will come up. If we started a goddamned novel, we'll finish it somehow. One word or zero word at a time.'

'I guess you're right, but what are we gonna do now that we're not writing?' he says.

'We can sleep all day, I guess,' I say. 'Eat, see our women and write some non-fiction.'

'And, poetry also?'

'Oh, no. Don't go to poetry when you're stuck in your fiction. You'll write the worst poetry of your life. Don't do that. Stick to non-fiction. Radio scripts, normal grocery lists and online to-do lists. Nothing that will make you think of plots, twists and all that shit. Watch TV also. Sit back, relax. You think we can do that?'

'It would be a challenge,' my character says. 'I feel like this weakens our will to write. Have we gone soft? Are we going soft? It's scary. I don't wanna stay in this zone forever.'

I really have no answers. Maybe he's right. Flash fiction is another option when you have writer's block, you know... and, that line is just because I have to write something: I actually don't like flash fiction. Someone said I should look to Charles Baudelaire's *Paris Spleen*. Maybe that person wanted me to be inspired by Baudelaire. But, I objected to that advice internally. I told myself and those around me that I actually write like Kafka. Ah, well, maybe not quite. But, it helps to have these dreams or illusions, if that makes anyone happy. I never want to be compared to any writer, legend or not, but if that were to happen – and it will happen again – I want to be compared to Kafka. Kafka, aye...

Turns out, I really don't have writer's block. Turns out, I just got out of it (if for a while, from writing the above pages). I guess it helps to talk to people. I was talking to a friend yesterday. He asked what I was reading. I told him I read Sony Lab'ou Tansi. He said he had read Lab'ou Tansi, but not *The Seven Solitudes of Lorsa Lopez*, which I did. I also told him I read Charles Bukowski's *Ham on Rye*. Then I started a fire when I told him that I also read some Kafka... and I went on telling him about what I was telling you earlier on (about me wanting to be compared to Kafka). And, he told me, I had come full circle. Turns out there was a point in my life where I was against this friend of mine, telling him that he blabbered too much about Kafka. I don't remember anything about that. I really don't. It's like an event that happened in a world I don't remember being an inhabitant of.

Anyway, my train of thought got cut somewhere where I wanted to talk about getting out of a writer's block.

What you do, after you call people and telling them about Kafka, this is what you do: you listen to *Breakfast at Tiffany's*. After that, you go to John Mayer's *Gravity*. After *Gravity*, you go to Enrique Iglesias's *I Like How It Feels*. As a matter of fact, you don't have to do any of that. YouTube will do all of that for you. Algorithm, algorithm, work your magic. And, don't forget those annoying ads, unless it's Danny Devito.

All you do is keep writing cause nobody is gonna do it for you. It's crazy, I know. But that's the life. That's the *shizmanding*. Anyway, my last word to get out of this writer's block: tell yourself you're gonna do something else, but when you sit at your computer, don't start with what you set out you do. That way, my friend, or reader, is how you get out of a writer's block, if only for a while. But, trust me, your shit is never gonna be nice cause you never know whether you're writing non-fiction or fiction. Either way, you have text for the critics. Something to keep them busy while they try to decipher or compare you to Kafka.

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So, while we're recovering from writer's block or the last days of it, my character gives me his *manu* to edit.

'Do you think my edits will be good?' I say, concerned.

'Why not?' He says. 'You're a writer, *mos*?'

'Of course,' I say. 'But, me and you are good friends. Brothers. I'm likely to let you get away with murder. But, let's cut *this* line. It doesn't belong *here*. Who do you think is gonna read *this*? Where did you learn to write? This is scandalous.'

'I was hoping this was gonna be one of the parts my readers skip,' he says.

'Tough luck,' I say, thinking: what if that's the part they're gonna start with? What if that's the part that sells or breaks your novel? What if that's the *shizmanding* your readers will judge you by? I mean, every page should be like a slab of gold or real paper money. Don't put boring parts, expecting that your readers will skip. Unless, of course, you secretly come to me and I teach you where to slot boring parts, you risk ruining your name, fame and all that *shizmanding*.

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'If ever you become tired of being in an African novel which never seems to go nowhere but revolves around its lousy self, you can always tell me, you know. I have a plan,' I tell my character, 'I'm thinking metatheatrically now. I want to loan you to some theatre in some European country. They do that in soccer, you know.'

It's an inexplicable day when novelists take inspiration from sport and soccer.

'You're thinking of prostituting me, aren't you? I should have known from the start that you'd soon get tired of me and want me out. That's a heartless thing, dude,' he says.

'Can you blame me? I mean, can you blame the author for wanting his main character to get some real character schooling?' I say. 'Cause, I feel you actors, nowadays, jump straight into the hot pan, which is the novel without some experience or real depth. I want you to graduate, you know. Get some fresh new ideas, you know (not the old tired, stale novels where the only fresh thing is the repetition of the phrase "you know". I'm thinking of loaning you to the ideas of the master playwright himself, Bertolt Brecht.'

'I'd rather play for the lowest leagues in the Bundesliga,' he says.

'Great, I see you're warming up to the idea. Germany is a great country. Nthikeng Mohlele has some characters there, Germany. I see no reason why you shouldn't hide there for a while. It's a good place to exile you while we think of a way to get you out of the writer's block.'

'Are you taking a swipe at the guy?'

'If I took swipes at Zakes Mda, I should take swipes at all of them, don't you think?'

'Okay, then. I take it, I don't need a passport. You'll create a visaless trip for me?'

'But, I'll make you loads and loads of fake money,' I say. 'I want you to follow the journey Nthikeng Mohlele takes his character in Germany, in your spare time, though.'

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I receive a postcard. Odd. It says "Postcard from Berlin". I read it. It says:

*Dear xxxxxxxxxxxx*

*Your readers know I'm not in Berlin. But that's all in their heads. For, if I'm not in Berlin, what do they call this beautiful building in front of me? Isn't it the Berliner Philharmonie? Isn't it where I'm going tonight to see Michael Wollny and his mates?*

*Yours*

*Your character*

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I speak to my character on Skype. I don't wanna break up via postcard.

'I'm thinking of cutting this novel now,' I say. 'It's driving me nuts. It's not what I imagined when I started. I guess I didn't know what I was in for. I wanted to create a novel where the characters are real. Now I'm searching online, and I hear that metafiction or metadrama was done so the audience could not be swayed into believing the shitty plots they were being made witness to. I've done the complete opposite here. I feel like I've created something my readers will believe. How can I convince them this is fake? Fake fiction? Do I sound crazy? Should I stop?' I say.

‘No, go ahead,’ he says. ‘That’s real character development there. I like it, really. It’s you that need to learn who you are, not the readers. The readers are on their own. If they believe this shit, then fuck them. You, mate, you’re doing a good job.’

‘I like how that sounds, but you don’t mean it, I know,’ I say.

When people say you’re doing great, be very worried. They usually mean the opposite. When, for example, people say you write good shit, go back to the drawing board, writer. They never mean it. When people say you’re reading a great book, look at them with one eye closed. Shake your head. Doubt their very words or brains or state of mind. They don’t know what they’re saying. If they do, they definitely don’t mean it... now, I forgot the line I wanted to write next... you see, this shit of having a good line, but then you get a torrent of them just piling up. It’s bullshit... now, what’s that line? Think, think, writer. Now, that’s how a novel is written, fellas: you forget the best lines half the time and jot down the shitty ones most of the time. I’m laughing when I write that last line. A laugh that your fucking heart hears. Like your heart is pumping for joy. Ecstasy... now, isn’t that line back? It should come. Where is it? stop... [spacebar]... [enter] ...

Your thumb hits the “spacebar”. And, your forefinger hits “enter”. Now, don’t ever come to me asking me how a novel is written. If you’re rich, I’ll charge you; if you’re not, well... what can be charged from [delete].

Oh... yeah... I should return to my character. Fuck that stream of consciousness. I love *this*. I left it when my character says I wanna dump him.

‘Dude, you cannot do that,’ he says. ‘You can’t quit on me while I’m in a foreign city. I’m enjoying the fake money. But, it’s not gonna last me forever. At least, make me come home. Then you can dump me.’

Okay, let me pause, and address you, reader: I got out of character and went on a rant, talking about people saying what they don’t mean. It might have slightly jarred you. But only slightly. You can return your money if you can honestly say you weren’t hypnotised by that rant. Then, crazy me, took you off that rant. Then I put “fake” words in my character’s mouth... yeah, when I use quotation marks, as in “fake”, you’d think God himself put them... what I wanted to achieve, though, by calling my character back, having remembered my line, was to put you back into the hypnosis. I thought it wasn’t gonna work. But it worked. It fucking worked. This novel is not written by a writer. It’s written by a magician. The devil himself. You can throw the book in the fire now.

But, you can’t really help it. You’re a sucker for a good story, especially one that sucks you in, even though it, at times, whips you on the face like a little child, you follow? Is it the wind? Is it the magic? I don’t know myself. I don’t claim to know shit. But, here, I go again digressing.

Now, let me address you again. Let’s say you’ve just started reading this novel at this line, here’s what I want to say: you read a lot of crap, don’t you? You justify a lot of crap, don’t you? It’s confession time. Repetition time, actually: you’re a sucker for a good story. But mostly, you tolerate crap.

Now, I'm in a tight spot. This has been really a good chapter... I'm at a loss as to how I can close it – not just close it, but close it really well. Can I hypnotize you some more? I can't leave you hanging, can I?

'No,' I hear you say. 'Come on, we know you can do better, writer. Give it a go. Try something new. Why not bring back your character? Bring him back. Show us what you're made of, writer.'

It's good when your readers cheer you on. What greater feeling can author hope to have in this world?

\*\*\*

When my character comes back to the country, I ask him: 'How was your working holiday in Germany? The land of BMW.'

'Since I never left or went anywhere,' he says. 'I quickly forced myself to ditch the good life and immerse myself in the teachings of Karl Marx.'<sup>3</sup>

'I'm of the fact that Karl Marx had dangerous ideas for the society. But if you learned something, I'm happy. What is to be done now?' I say.

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'There are a couple of shitty sentences in here,' I say to my character. 'We'll have to work on this chapter for the whole day.'

My character doesn't like the sound of "whole day". I wouldn't, either, if I was the character and he, the author. God knows how lazy I am. Sad that I sound proud about being lazy.

'No reader will notice. I almost didn't notice it myself. Let's leave it like that,' he says.

'That's sleazy and dishonourable,' I say. 'A disservice to African writing. But, we've been doing it all day, so why not? Let's leave it like that. I don't feel like going through this the whole day, myself.'

'That's my man,' he says.

'Our reader won't like us for this.'

'If we're not in the mood, we're not in the mood.'

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<sup>3</sup> Note to think about but ignore when I'm editing: link this part with that part you talk about Marxists giving you a million dollars and painting your face on cheap T-shirts like with Che Guevara.

‘If my character says it, then it must be right. Be grateful: I won’t allow this every day. We’re at work.’

\*\*\*

‘The lawyer has time to waste asking what happened 20 years ago. What’s more, he’s talking like the minister is his little sister or his dog. I cannot take this. I cannot be disrespected like that,’ my character is appalled by how the hotshot lawyer is taking on the corrupt minister.

‘They’re not disrespecting you, now, are they? You’re not the minister. You are not corrupt, are you?’

‘I’m black,’ he says.

‘Where is this going?’

‘Black authorities have to be treated with respect even if they’re suspected of misdemeanours,’ he says.

‘When did corruption become a misdemeanour?’ I say.

\*\*\*

My character comes to me and says he’s got a snazzy line we should include in the book.

Normally, as a writer, you want to say all the snazzy lines so that readers can think that you’re a cool writer – the coolest writer to descend from heaven and torment the earth. But having written so many words so far in this novel, and you, having read so many pages against your good judgment, you now know that I’m a lousy hack. Originality was never my strongest part, I give you that. Sustaining a crappy novel like this was always gonna be difficult – but, hey, the damn thing has to be written – crappy or not. You and I, of course, might be under the illusion that it’s the best thing after Kafka, Shakespeare or Achebe. But, I digress. My point is: as a writer, you soon run out of snazzy lines, so whattado when your character is working for you?

‘Try that again,’ I say, perhaps a little jealous of his cool snazzy line.

You don’t want your readers to fall in love with your character alone. You want them to fall in love with you, too. Perhaps, you alone. Jealous is a thing in fiction, you know.

‘That’s an unbelievable line,’ I say. ‘But who’s gonna believe that shit?’

‘Ever since I dumped being a method character, I no longer care what readers think,’ he says.

‘Are you crazy?’ I snap. ‘You want readers to throw this book away, unread or half-read? Think again, mate.’

\*\*\*

My character comes to me, singing “The reader is King. We are his servants...” Blah, blah, blah!

‘How much does *this* king pay?’ I say. ‘A million? Now, why am I poor?’

‘Is it all about the money?’ he says.

‘What is it about, then?’ I say.

‘Isn’t about changing the world or the African literary landscape?’

‘You really believe that?’

‘Isn’t that what got us together?’

‘Well, that might have got us together, but that’s not what keeps us together. Let’s just enjoy the goddamned novel. Forget the reader. He’s no queen – or king. That’s just some crazy-ass rhetoric for sloganeers or writers run out of ideas.’

‘You really know how to burst someone’s bubble.’

‘If that’s the way to change the world, one burst bubble at a time, then I’m all the more hopeful.’

\*\*\*

Me and my character, we’re not at his place or mine. We’re nowhere, really. Where? We don’t know. It could be me and him sitting on the sofa side by side, or us sitting at a table opposite each other. But, like I said, we’ve no clue exactly where we are. All we know is we’re there – somewhere. And we’re having fun writing a shitty novel. We can’t be bothered conjuring fake places of where we’re not just to please the reader. All I know is I’m here typing the damn thing. The character is not even in my mind. He’s not even here. He doth not assist me pile these lines atop each other – physically that is. I just call him when I need to. But he follows me everywhere I go. Be I in the toilet, in class. Anywhere/everywhere. The good thing is that I never dream about him. Maybe, I should.

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‘Do you think everyone can be a writer?’ my character says when he comes over – this time to my place. No, actually, I go to his place.

‘Don’t you think it’s too late into the book or novel to be asking that question?’ I say. ‘Do you want our readers to dump us when they’ve been with us thus far?’

‘I don’t, man,’ he says.

‘Well, can everyone be a writer? That’s a good question,’ I say. ‘If we haven’t given the impression that anyone can write a novel by reading this, then we haven’t done our job. Then we’ve done an awful job. Anyway, if our readers can do better than us, then they should and must. I mean, yeah, they can. What’s hard about writing a novel? Easier said than done,

right? Well, they'll learn when they start and see that it's hard but doable. Doable, really. In fact, it's easier to write a novel than talk about it. All those words you wasted complaining about poor service, you could have turned them into a masterpiece. Those people you hate, you could have turned them into believable fictional characters. Why not? But, let me get back to the question: can everyone be a writer? Well, if they write worse than this, then they shouldn't write. But if they're friends of mine, then I'll read their crap – guaranteed. But if they do write crap, here's a word of warning: they shouldn't say I inspired them. However, if they write bestsellers, they're welcome to dedicate those masterpieces to me. How's that?

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Everyone makes typos. Not us: my reader and I, we welcome them. They save us from the editing agony (why write a novel when you have to edit it again?). We should be embarrassed when you show us a typo – of course, we will. But, I'd like you to spot them when we're in bad moods, so we can say this to you: 'You, snob. Looking for typos in other people's books. Have you nothing better to do? Isn't the story good enough for you? When are you gonna write your own book? And, did you buy this book for the story or for the commas?'

'Ha, ha, ha!' my character laughs.

I continue: 'When are these error-spotters gonna give me their book so I can spot their own typos? So I can accuse them of being semi-illiterate hacks? No, don't look at me. It's "semiliterate", I know. But who cares? (read: who knows? Chances are that no readers could spot that).

\*\*\*

Me and my character, we haven't been published, but we talk as if our book is already in your hands or in a million homes around the world, read by everybody, including the homeless hobo.

No, this book – with a shiny cover, unless you're bought it ten years from now, in a second-hand bookstore at that, or maybe you just got it from a dear friend with no intention of returning it – is still a manuscript.

But this doesn't stop me from saying: 'We have changed the African literary landscape, buddy.'

'You can say that again,' he says.

'Who cares even if we're not published?' I add.

'I've never seen you being on point like that.'

'If it's crap we wrote, they can unpublish us, right?'

My character laughs. I follow suit.

'We're crazy chaps, aren't we?' I say.

‘I heard crazy is the new normal,’ he says and we choke with laughter.

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‘Let’s write another novel,’ my character says. ‘One that’ll make our readers understand this one.’

‘A companion novel, you mean?’ I say.

‘Exactly,’ he says. ‘In that one, we’ll be careful so as not to confuse our readers.’

‘It’s nice that you care about our readers,’ I say. ‘But, I’m worried I’ll have to cast again. I don’t want to be accused of cronyism or nepotism.’

‘You mean you’ll look for a new character from scratch?’ he says. ‘That’s a tedious process. So, what are my chances if I start again? Is it possible that I might not get the role? We’ve come a long way for you to ditch me like that. Sure, our relationship counts for something.’

‘Relax,’ I say. ‘It’s just a front. I already know who I want.’

‘Reason why you and I are brothers to the end!’

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It’s pretty sick: I’m rewriting this part from memory. This is the second time now I’m doing this. I don’t know why I have been so absent-minded that I accidentally deleted the notes I typed on my PC.

But, here goes:

‘We haven’t killed any characters in this book,’ my character says as we go through the manuscript.

‘Whoever came up with the rule of killing one’s characters?’ I say. ‘I mean, you create characters because you love them. Now some old guy or woman you don’t know says *kill them!* There’s something fishy about that. Are novels written like that elsewhere? Makes me wanna puke? Why kill your darlings? It’s a tragedy of Shakespearean level.’

I’m not sold on that idea, as much as I should be deleting stuff by mistake and having to punch my laptop again. But, hey, I got Passenger on my Bluetooth speaker. I love this cover of *Fast Car* that he does.

Anyway, I digress. It’s good to be writing again. I’m not in the habit of killing my characters. But, hey, I take inspiration wherever it decides to show its lousy ass from. It doesn’t matter whether you’re hating or loving – just as long as the fuckers give you an excuse for writing.

‘Basically, our novel being a two-hander, who do you suggest I kill?’ I ask my character. ‘You can’t expect me to start a book and kill myself.’

‘Well, you can’t also call me up to murder me,’ he says. ‘We need each other, brother.’

'I thought as much.'

\*\*\*

So, me and my character we have no idea what to write about at this stage. We do have an inkling: I'm thinking divorce, maybe.

So, I say to him: 'Let's look in today's paper. The first thing we see, we talk about. Voila, it's about divorce.'

'No, the main story here is corruption, not divorce,' he corrects me.

And he's right, I have to admit.

'You're right,' I say. 'I concocted this thing about divorce, but you're also wrong,' I add.

'Wrong? How?' he says.

'There's no newspaper here,' I say. 'And, don't go arguing with me cause you're not there either.'

At this, he says nothing. In fact, I'll close this chapter without giving him a chance to say anything. That's the perks of writing a novel. You can write whatever you want and end the chapter however you want. And, since there are suckers of symbolism lurking somewhere in these pages, claiming to be our friends, I'll add this: the perks of being a novelist are not dissimilar to the perks of being a dictator – you can change the constitution however you want. Extend presidential terms.

Now, that we've satisfied our friends, the suckers of symbolism, we can proceed to the next chapter.

\*\*\*

Bullshit writing you'll see by people showering praise on it. Bad writing? People always talk about it. They can't say no to it. They love it. Until you have the swashbuckling novelist – the “pop novelist” – and everything breaks asunder. You have to be gangster, you know, when you write novels like this... well, what kind of writing do you expect when I'm high on The Rolling Stones, King Monada and Kings of Leon? What kind of shit do you expect when I'm scoffing on peanuts and raisins?

Well, from time to time, literature deserves a guy who isn't scared of it. But, it's not a guy thing, fellas. I'm reading *The Golden Notebook*. Do you see how she moves from one POV to another? I mean she was writing in the sixties and before that. I'm talking Doris Lessing here. She's metafictional as hell. Well, this novel is probably similar to hers. Remotely, that is.

*Deliver us from bad writing*, should be the reader's prayer (“mantra” sounds mystical; the joys of revising!). If writers live to that mantra, there'll be more good writing in the world, not that people actually need or read it. Just imagine writing a masterpiece and no one reading it. Just imagine innovating literature, yet no critic or commentator can put their finger on your innovation.

Crazy. Crazy. Crazy. Lessing also had this worry, I gather. That people worried more about the socialism and feminism to be had in her work, but what about the structure, she asked. Why don't you remark on that, she asked. In fact, I've put a two-liner review on Goodreads. It says: 'The energy of the author, innovation and knowledge is unmatched. With different styles – and to some extent, genres – employed, *The Golden Notebook* should appeal to all sorts of readers.'

\*\*\*

'Do you reckon we should know the difference between usage and grammar?' my character says. 'Perhaps, that might make us look smart and sophisticated. We might even win awards.'

'An award for grammar? You must be kidding,' I say. 'I like our book rugged, cause, here's the thing: once we get ourselves hooked on grammar, we'll be expected to know and employ proper style – all that nitpicky stuff. Stuff that shouldn't get in the way of a novel that wants and has to be written.'

'I wasn't actually up to the task, you know. Thank heavens.'

'Oh, so you were testing me?'

I hate people who test me, you know. I'm a straight-up fellow. Say what you want, and if I can, I'll do that for you. Don't come by the corner. I hate that shit. Be real with me, cause I'm the realest person I know.

\*\*\*

My character comes to me when we're about to finish the first draft of the novel. He says: 'I want to get married.'

I think of the incidents in his life and his womanizing ways.

'I've spent some good months with you,' I say. 'But, I feel like I don't know who the hell you are or what you be about. Here, you are: womanizing like the devil himself, yet you want to get married. I'm stunned. Shocked.'

'It's character development,' he says. 'Should I explain it to you?'

'That's a complete U-turn. I cannot believe or allow that,' I say. 'But, if you really want marriage, how about we tackle that in the coming book, the one after this?'

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I tell my character: 'Let's go buy books.'

He hesitates: 'Are we rich yet?'

'No, the cheap books,' I say.

'Let's go,' he says.

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‘On this day, we went to the moon,’ my character says.

‘The Americans, you mean?’ I say. ‘They’re the ones who went to the moon, not us.’

‘Yah,’ he says. ‘What the Americans do, they also do for us. If the Americans went to the moon, then we also went there.’

‘And if they didn’t go to the moon and faked the landing, then we did the same, didn’t we?’ I say.

‘You’re twisting the logic there,’ he says.

‘Really?’ I say.

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I’m going through my other email account, and I come across this email from about nine years ago (It’s a nice-sounding rejection letter, so I’ll slot it in here):

*Dear Lungile*

*Thank you for submitting your manuscript to Kwela Books. Sadly we cannot offer publication of Emzana.*

*Kwela Books is a small imprint and only publishes between twelve and fifteen titles per year. As a result we have to be extremely discerning in our publication choices. While it is clear you have a great deal of passion for your writing and for conjuring up the experiences of ordinary South Africans, Emzana is sadly not yet ready for publication.*

*There is a tremendous energy to your writing, which is on occasion reminiscent of the vibrancy of performance poetry. However, in order for your reader to follow what is happening in the story and crucially, to keep that reader’s attention, you need to impose some of the conventional techniques of narrative and plot development on your manuscript. From the opening page of Emzana it seems as though the narrator ‘runs away with himself’, and sense is often sacrificed to a nearly incoherent stream-of-consciousness. Stream-of-consciousness is quite a difficult style to get right. Despite its simulation of free-flowing thought, it in fact requires a great degree of discipline from a writer, in order to balance thought or reminiscing and action, and so not lose the reader.*

*Awkward grammatical constructions and incorrect language usage makes it even harder to follow the plot-line of Emzana. Two sentences from the opening pages illustrate these issues:*

*“Finally the spotlight shifts away from me since Madala is drawn in an affray with the woman caught up in an endeavor intended at liberating me from the devil himself. The crowdies pass by as if they hanker verifying if I am dead yet”*

*and*

*“A formal name for places like us is informal settlements – maybe its the fact that our mothers know nada about family planning – its Rica there its what, what over there – mayhem versus maelstrom all you give birth to is perplex amalgams – that’s if you don’t use protection but then you have your own choice, free of charge whether you in clinic, school so when . . . don’t say this bloke never told you so. Okay, okay! I will refrain from pitying my own self.”*

*Reading your writing aloud, either to yourself, or to a listener, is an excellent way of making sure that your writing is lucid. A further suggestion, to concentrate on plot-development, is to break the manuscript down into chapters and make an outline of exactly what is going to or needs to happen in each chapter. In the present manuscript there are no chapter divisions, which also makes it rather hard going for the reader.*

*Lungile, please don't be put off by the length of or criticism in this assessment. While Emzana is not at present suitable for our list at Kwela, we think that you show promise, and encourage you to hone your writing skills, perhaps by going back and reworking this manuscript, or by trying your hand at a new project. As you will know, good writing requires a good deal of rewriting – and just as crucially, lots of reading. You may want to look at Kgebetli Moele's Room 207 and Book of the Dead, Niq Mhlongo's Dog Eat Dog and After Tears, and Diale Tlholwe's Ancient Rites, all published by Kwela Books. We wish you all the best with your future creative endeavours.*

*With kind regards,*

*Ester*

I don't remember reading that email – sure, I must have read it. I think I must have been heartbroken by that. Reading it nine years later, I'm like: how could I have read lots of books when I was 19? Where was I gonna get money to buy all those books? What did I know about rewriting? But, I'm actually happy that at least they saw something in the story – at least it wasn't a form rejection (I never realized it at the time). But, rejections no matter what shape, form or colour they come in, always leave a bitter taste in your mouth.

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'Sometimes I feel like we're writing the Daily Sun, not a novel,' my character says.

'That's an insult,' I say. 'Even if it's coming from you, I feel insulted. You should know me better than that, mate. How can you say something like that?'

I worry. Aren't we intellectuals or don't we come across as such? At least we should give our readers the illusion or façade of intellectualism.

'At least we should come across as intellectuals,' I say.

'What does it help? A tabloid novel is a tabloid novel,' he says.

'Well, I think of myself as a pop novelist, so I really don't care,' I say. 'And, boy, that hurts.'

'We should be ashamed,' he says. 'Our readers deserve better. And, the truth is the truth.'

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'So have you finally decided what you're gonna write next after this novel?' my character asks after our editing session.

'Well, I don't know whose idea it was, but I'm under the illusion that I'm supposed to write a companion novel to this one,' I say. 'Some more fiction to help readers understand *this* current fiction.'

'That'll be tricky,' he says. 'I'm not discouraging you, but why don't we let the non-fiction guys do it? Let's give our critics something to do.'

'No, they should try to decode this novel after the companion novel. Meaning that they will have to wait for some time,' I say. 'We don't owe them anything. In fact, we should take a swipe at them. I should be angry at the lousy critics for mistakenly deleting some of the parts

in this novel – I should be mad at them for having to retype when I should be doing more important stuff.’

‘That’s unlike you. You don’t consider a novel important?’ he says.

‘Well, the novel shouldn’t be more important than it should be,’ I say. ‘I shouldn’t be cracking my head and having sleepless nights about what I should write. A novel should just flow out of the fingers, you know. I don’t like a novel that I have to write for years. You forget; you lose momentum and all that crap. You have to start from scratch, or at least start from where you remember. A novel should be written in a day, if not a week. Perhaps, we should try a novel like that in the future.’

‘I hear you,’ he says. ‘But you’re skirting around the question, getting into the technicalities, mate. I’m more interested in the topic you’ll be covering or uncovering next.’

‘I cannot see that much into the future,’ I say. ‘All I can say, though, is that it’ll depend on what the readers or critics say. Say they love this shit, then we might do a sequel, bringing in more characters. For all I know, this is bullshit dreaming. What I do know, since I’m concurrently writing *Uncle Sbu* “book two”, I’ll be writing the third one after this. It helps to write a book whose characters you already know, you know. You don’t have to dream up stuff. No, sir. You just continue stuff. Push harder, push further. Throw in a backstory that was never there when you’re inspired. Create a new yarn that links with something you wrote a year back to complicate the story and vex yourself and your readers. That’s how people understand stories, you know. You create more of what they know. Link back an old story with a new one that seems connected. That’s what storytelling is all about. I surrender. If you ask a writer who’s trying to finish a novel that should be long-finished, you’ll get long-winded and vexing answers even if he’s talking to himself. You’ll just nod your head like a good character or reader, yeah?’

‘Yeah,’ he says, nodding his head like he’s supposed to; like a good character.

It’s nice to be in control. It’s nice to create your own world – where it’s just you and your character – and your reader, being a lover of things and yarns, peeks in to see what’s happening. But we won’t show him the behind the scenes. He’s had too much of that.

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I doubt if I should put *this part here*, but if you’re reading it, it means my word count was against me. You must remember *this* novel or anti-novel is my thesis or anti-thesis for my MA in Creative Writing here at Rhodes University. How self-referential can one get? I know I’m writing a novel and I know you’re reading me – well I’m half right: I know I’m writing a novel. However, I can never be sure if you’ll read me since this book has still to be published. There are many things I’ll never know, I guess. One day I’m writing a novel; on another day it’s a book; on another, it’s a thesis. Anyway, I digress. Where I was going with this part of the novel is, as part of my MA, I had to go to some kids in the location to read them from my other novel. And the kids humbled me. I read them from a story of mine called *Uncle Sbu*.

And the kids, like I said, humbled me. They said it was boring.<sup>4</sup> I didn't read from *My Crazy Character* – cause, to be honest, I think adults will even have problems reading this. I chose *Uncle Sbu* because there's a small character there called Vusi, whom I thought they would resonate with. But, clearly, they couldn't find the humour. Which brings me to an important question, reader: is my fiction divorced from reality? For example, the kid in my story never does what the kids do in real life. When I read my story and engaged with the kids, the teacher had to plead with them to be quiet, and one student had earphones in his ears. Like I said, I was humbled.

Because I think it's funny that they didn't find my story funny, I will include some parts of what they said:

'I do not like it because there's no humour. It's trying so hard to be funny, but is not. But it's fine. Maybe it gets better and better.'

'The story doesn't tell us more about the context. For example [sic] the story or the situation isn't elaborated further.'

Now, do I agree with those statements? I'll dismiss them, laugh at them – but that doesn't take the sting off. It's never nice when people don't like your writing. You want them to say: 'Your story rocks. The best thing since Shakespeare or Achebe.' But, as you can see, it's a long way to the top. It's not easy fighting these behemoths. And, though I don't write like Shakespeare or Achebe, I don't think they write like me.

Anyway, let me be fair and reproduce some of the statements in my favour:

'I love your creative writing – informal writing, having your own rules, expressing your imagination which obviously is going to be different. Not everyone will love the work, but it's okay. We all got different styles. Jumping into action is never easy, so good work.'

"I like the way you just describe the setting as you go because you didn't have a whole page describing it."

'I really like that you are honest to yourself.'

Now, that's good for the ego, isn't it? I mean, isn't it the purpose of writing a novel – so people can judge and like you? If you don't like what they say, you brush them to the side. If they say what you like – and brush your ego real nice – you go write another novel. You read again, and ultimately die (die a happy man, at least, knowing people love your writing).

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<sup>4</sup> But hold your laughs and jeers, there. I have in my inbox an email from Victoria Girls' High School. The black guys say I suck. Let's see what the white folks have to say about my humour. They might just dig my ghetto fiction.

Update: It was really awesome going to VG, as they call it. I did some reading there, and the responses were quite awesome.

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We wonder how our reader is gonna read our book, say they decide to buy it (please buy it. I really have no reason to say this... but please do...). Will they look at the cover first, read the first page, close it, go to the blurb, read something and then make their mind believe that they'll read the damn whole thing? Or, they'll be distracted by music. How will they be sitting? Will they be hungry when they read *this*? Me and my character don't want to be read by people when they're hungry. We don't want to be read when people's tummies are full either. While we're undecided about that, we prefer to be read by fat cats, though. Cause, here's the thing: does one want to find their novel in a shack or a politician's mansion? I want the freaking president reading this. Or, at least the president should buy it for his ministers. If your president doesn't give you this as a gift; then, that country is no country. Here's the chain. This book will be bought by the president (I have no way to verify this), but he'll buy it, then he will give it to his pretty mistress, if he has one (I'd rather be read by a pretty mistress. If you're ugly and reading this, here's the thing: there are times you're pretty, and you know it. This is one of those times you're pretty, so continue reading my book. You can even go the whole week without makeup and looking into a mirror. Better yet, have an unlimited supply of my books so you can feel pretty all the time). Anyway, the pretty mistress will not even read this novel. They'll just be happy that they have a copy. So they'll give it to you, the cool boyfriend. How will you read it? I've no clue, but you want to speculate, don't you? Somebody bought this book, so the author has to sweat, right? I know you, guys. You never want someone to have it easy, hey. The author has to be smarter than Shakespeare to be great.

Okay, you'll read it this way... you'll be like: *This is the coolest author ever. The new [insert your favourite author here]*.

So, for this brief period, while I hypnotize you, I'm your favourite author. Or worst. I can't go wrong giving you two options, right? But, nobody really cares about that shit, you know. Buy our book, read the cover, the first chapter, or the last chapter – don't skip this one, Skipper (otherwise you skip one of the worst parts of the novel) – and read the blurb (read whatever part... it's your money... or somebody's else... government money while they should be buying school books). Ahem, I digress.

Buy the book, read enough pages to hold a phony conversation over beer or creative writing class. Make the smartest remark. Tell the smart guys with all those smart degrees that they don't understand the importance of this text. Defend me. Fight for me, Fighter.

I'll take a risk: I'll just summarise what I said up there (I feel like I can it say better. I also feel like you weren't listening. Feel free to skip *this* part): Ok...how you read this book matters to me and my character. See, we care. In fact, we care too much. We care where you got the money to buy this book. Did you steal it? No, don't say it was given to you by a friend. Say you bought it, how much did you buy it? Okay, if you checked the price on the front page, my character says you should be forgiven. You are one of us. Next time we're in town, holler at us, let's enjoy a beer. You might be a character in our next book. We'll definitely love you to tag along on our future exciting adventures. Ladies and gentlemen, Marxists and capitalists, you have been reading *My Crazy Character*. (Good way to end a book, hey?) My name is...

'Wait,' my character wants to have the last word. 'Are we really at the end of the book?'

‘Dude, you had the whole book to speak. What more can you want? I’m not Ken Follett, you know.’ I say.

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So, I tell my character the novel is over.

‘Thanks for being with me for these couple of months,’ I tell him. ‘I don’t know how I would have fared without you.’

‘So, this is it?’ he says. ‘I must say I’m gonna miss you. I’m glad you thought of me. It’s been a rough but fun ride. I can’t believe we’ve finished writing the goddamned novel.’

‘I’m not even sure the readers even believe that they’re finished reading the novel.’ I say. ‘But, we’re gonna keep in contact, aren’t we? I mean, I’ve got you on Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter. Everywhere.’

‘And number as well,’ he says. ‘Let’s keep in touch, man. Maybe when you’ve got something new. A short story. Anything. Or an essay. Or maybe you want to test out an idea. You can give me a call.’

‘Definitely, man,’ I say. ‘It’s been a pleasure.’

Goodbyes are never easy, hey?

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I’ve two or three pages of this novel left. Not because I want to write or add anything to it. No; a novel is only a good idea when you start. A few months in, and the reality has set in, you really have no reason to continue writing. You’ve got no one to please, no point to prove. There you are: you thought you could write a proper novel – the next African masterpiece. Yeah, that’s the dream, the illusion, the prison. But, after a few awful chapters, you know you’re supposed to be flipping burgers somewhere – “flipping burgers” being whatever that could be done except writing. So, you pad along. You ditch the illusion of threading a sensible piece (they don’t teach novel writing in kindergarten).

I mean, you ask yourself: where did you get the courage or delusion to write crap about you and your crazy character? If you could, you probably would, delete the damn thing and unwrite your madness. If you could.

But, hey, when you have the word count to take care of, you’ll ditch the precious notions of what real writing is – or what a proper novel looks or reads like. A novel is a novel cause it’s got some words on it. That’s all. Words. And crap. And more crap. Let’s not be precious about it.

I mean, what’s the point of creating a perfect novel when your readers aren’t even interested in that shit? When I’m feeling lazy, and a Grahamstown year is feeling like four, I start wishing I had chosen to write poetry instead of this. But, when I read around, I’m appalled and awed at the same time – different times, I mean. You have an Argentine Spanish writer Cesar Aira. He starts his novel *The Seamstress and the Wind* really well. But does he sustain

it? He's bogged down by the story. When guys drop the ball like that, you feel energised once more to proceed with your ramblings. A novel like *this* – the one we're finishing together, reader – needs to be written.

But, no, I won't be that mean, dear reader. I'll leave you with some hallucinations.

This is what happens: I accidentally call my character. I must be stressed, or getting older. I don't know. But I dial his number.

'Hey,' he says. 'Long time since we chatted. Thought of your next novel, yet? Tell me something, man. I've been sitting here at home, rotting out of boredom. I need some adventure and adrenaline in my body. And, I saw that crazy review, hey. Makes me sick. Guys don't know great African literature even if it was in their goddamned hands.'

'You know what I'm gonna write next?' I say. 'I'm gonna write a novel in which one or some of my readers come to me and say that they want to be in the story. Beg me, actually. But, since this is really the end of our novella, how about I address the reader outside the confines of dialogue and quotation marks?'

Fuck quotation marks, fuck dialogue. I know I do dialogue well, but I also do *this* well. The first-person. I'm not that bad at it, hey? No, never. *L.Sojini* isn't bad with the first-person at all. He's bonkers. Never try him.

Anyway, reader, I want us to end our novella. Like they do on TV (or, at least, like they used to), I'll tell you what I'll do next after *this*. *Here's* what I'll do: I'm contemplating a story called *The Reader*. In *The Reader*, some smart folks who've heard or read about my book, will come to me and say they want to be featured in my book.

I'll be like: 'Are you, guys, for real? This is fiction. I make all this shit up.'

And, they'll be like: 'We don't care. We want in.'

Except that I'm not really sure I'll carry on with the idea. What I do know, though, is that next time I write a novel, it'll have a clear setting, a couple of characters and some real plot and all that shit. But, then again, it's all good to have such plans now; who knows what'll transpire the time I actually sit down to write another story? And, if this is really the end, then it's been a good or productive year. One I will always remember, for the good, and – we can never escape it – the bad.

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We take to the stage; people ask us fun questions. Some really awful questions, too.

'So, does your character do everything you tell him?' I get asked by *this* young lady.

'I guess when we started, he was yes-man all the time,' I say.

'Not true,' my character says with a smile.

‘Look at him now,’ I say. ‘I didn’t tell him what to say. So, I guess, as the time went on, he got more comfortable.’

‘What made you want to work with him?’ I also get asked.

‘When you have a new novel, you have to create a new character from scratch,’ I say. ‘That takes a whole lot of thinking, which I probably don’t have time for. You want a novel, not characters. It’s more romantic writing novels than creating characters, especially characters who think they know better than the author. I guess this is my roundabout way of saying I was lazy to create somebody new. I mean, why create a new character when I could just use an old character? I mean, why let him remain in obscurity when at some stage you spent your precious time conjuring him from the sky? Writers should use old characters, and not be obsessed with creating new characters, you know.’

A follow-up question from an observant journo, I think: ‘Since this is a debut novel, I was just wondering if this old character from an old novel wasn’t a gimmick?’

‘Ah, well,’ I say. ‘Caught red-handed there. This is not my first novel, you’re right. But you’re also a character in my book; how’s that? I just created you a few seconds ago for this chapter alone. Writers should be obsessed with creating new characters, not use old boring characters.’

A laugh from the audience.

‘But, to be honest, don’t trust half of the things you read in this book. That would just be awful,’ I add.

‘A risqué question here,’ one lady says. ‘You sure I must ask?’

‘Sure. Go ahead,’ I say. ‘I won’t write you out of the novel for speaking your mind or expressing your unique identity.’

‘Did you ever think of sleeping with your character?’

I shake my head. ‘You don’t wanna answer that?’ I ask my character.

He launches straight into the question.

‘You see...’

‘What’s your advice to aspiring writers?’

‘Well, I’m loath to give advice,’ I say. ‘I’m not a motivational speaker or writer. But since you asked, here goes: Don’t write crap. Well, that doesn’t say much, really, does it? Let’s try again: imagine if your reader only has a single page to read from your novel. Think, or ask: are they gonna like it? Long story short, don’t think in terms of the whole story; think of the current page. Maybe my character wants to add something.’

‘Just one simple thing,’ my character says. ‘Have a cool writer! I was lucky I got one!’

Applause!

Thanks for reading *this* novel. I enjoyed writing it.