Love Interrupted (Short Story Anthology)

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RENEILWE MALATJI

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Abstract

This collection of stories focuses on struggles between black South African men and women. Several of the stories explore how the rise of the affluent and powerful black woman is redefining relationships. Other stories in the collection describe women who do not know how to free themselves from their subservient role, or do not want to. Issues of interracial relations between blacks and whites in contemporary South Africa also feature in most of the stories.

Academic Supervisor: Professor Laurence Wright

Artistic Supervisor: Paul Mason

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TOTAL WORD COUNT= 62,438

Angela

“It’s a girl,” said the gynaecologist, smiling and lifting up the baby for the mother to see. The maternity nurse stepped back. Her overgrown jelly-like tummy trembled with each step. She poked the other nurse with her latex gloved hand, leaving a red blood mark on her green apron-like uniform.

“Mh! Mh! Mh!” The nurse said, unable to hold it in.

Having exchanged questioning looks, their eyes rested on the child as if they were looking at an alien. It was a normal delivery and both mother and child were healthy with no complications.

The doctor put the child on Mpho’s chest with the umbilical cord still connected to the mother. She then tried to raise her head in an attempt to embrace her bundle of joy and confusion. Let’s just say it was not love at first sight.

“Eh!” she garbled moving her head back to the flat white pillow.

“This is not my baby!” Mpho screamed at the gynaecologist who was now standing next to her husband. The gynaecologist, an elderly white man gave the nurses a sharp look, jolting them out of their heightened inquisitiveness. He ignored Mpho’s comment. He took utensils out of the steel trolley and gave them to the nurses to hold.

“Doctor this is not my baby,” repeated Mpho with veins standing out on her neck. She held the baby, looked at her eyes, and laid it back on her chest. She looked away focusing on the Marula tree leaves outside the small hospital window.

The gynaecologist then took off his soiled gloves. He then stepped again back to the headboard where Mpho’s husband, Matome Mpe, stood motionless like an Egyptian mummy. The doctor‘s green eyes then looked straight into Mpho’s brown ones. He was still holding the two gloves in one hand when he said,

“It came out of you.”

He looked at the Matome, shook his grey head.

The two black nurses stood still with eyes rolling from baby to husband and then to the mother.

Matome Mpe, Mpho's husband, was sweating as if he was the one who had just given birth. "Are you really the father?" one of the nurses asked impulsively. Matome nodded with streams of sweat flowing all over his face and neck. He then fell to the ground. It was understandable. Most African men just cannot take the heat of the delivery room. That is the reason a lot of them never go in there when their wives deliver babies.

An hour later, Mpho's parents arrived at the Polokwane Medi-Clinic Hospital. Matome had been resuscitated and was now sitting on a chair next to the bed. Mpho's mother, a short, bubbly light-skinned woman in her late fifties, who was a retired nurse, went straight to the small transparent plastic court. She examined the baby with a grandmotherly fussiness to check if it was well and healthy. Her gloomy eyes almost burst when she saw the baby's eyes. For a few seconds she was speechless and motionless. She then called her husband who was still standing next to the door, holding a bunch of pink carnations in one hand and a copy of True Love magazine in the other.

"Hlabirwa, come closer and see miracles," she said to her husband, calling him with his clan praise name.

"This is my grandmother in person; she has come back to life. This child looks exactly like her, look at the forehead, the eyes. Yaah neh! Things do happen," said Mpho's mother. "This child has taken everything from my side of the family. Look at that straight English nose."

When no one responded, she said "Matome, did Mpho ever tell you that my grandmother was coloured? Her father was a real white man. That gene is back in the family."

"Yes *nana* (baby), *wena ke wena yo mobotse* (you are beautiful). Here, Matome hold her. God has blessed us. We are so happy. She is an angel. Let papa hold you, my girl," said Mpho's mother, handing over the child onto Matome's lap. At that moment Mpho finally decided on a name, Angela. Holding the child seemed to intensify Matome's dark complexion. His smile looked out of place. It was the kind of smile that most people displayed when it is expected from them to smile.

A minute later he gave the child back to its mother.

“You must feed her, she must be hungry,” he said in a nervous tone.

The ward nurse stood there watching them like she was watching Alien 3.

“Nurse you can go. We will call you if we need anything,” said Mpho’s mother, banging the door after her, as if she owned the hospital room.

From that day on sharks and crocodiles lived inside Mpho, eating her up every day. Everyone who came to see the baby couldn’t help but be astonished. Most people nicknamed the child Happy Sindani. This was the name of a young coloured boy in Johannesburg who was in the media because of paternity issues. Happy claimed a certain prominent white business man, whom his mother worked for as a domestic worker, to be his biological father. The man denied the possibility of him being the father. And the whole thing became media frenzy.

Mpho avoided moving around with the child because of people’s reactions. Mpho and her husband were the ideal middle class family, the ‘black diamonds’ as they are called in South Africa. The new middle class that mushroomed after the African National Congress took over the Apartheid government. They were characterised by conspicuous consumption symbols, nice houses, expensive cars and expensive gadgets; such as Apple laptops, iPads and fancy cell phones.

Mpho and Matome were the good on paper couple. The birth of this child posed a threat to what they stood for. Mpho decided to continue with her life as if everything was normal but the sharks and crocodiles would not leave her alone. Some nights she would see them vividly pulling, biting and eating her baby girl, in a dream.

When the child turned four months old, Mpho and her husband held a big Baptism party for their daughter which was also meant to flaunt the new member of their faultless family.

All their relatives were there, including Mpho’s aunt Mmaphuti. A traditional lunch with delicacies such as *mogodu* (insides of a cow) and *dikgwatla* (cow feet) was prepared for the guests. All kinds of alcohol and non-alcoholic drinks were served, including Rakgadi Mmaphuti’s gingerbeer.

Aunt Mmaphuti was well known for what she called a ‘killer’ ginger beer and verbal diarrhoea. She had overfed and bloated opinions about everyone and everything in the family.

She knew exactly where it hurts in everyone and had made a hobby out of reminding them of these origins. Years of being a top class *shebeen* owner in Seshego Township had given her insight into troubled souls. I guess this must have come from the conversations she held daily with drunken teachers, lawyers and doctors.

Rakgadi Mmaphuti's *shebeen*, which was in her home, was strictly for the middle-aged, educated and prosperous. Often you would find her chasing adolescents and the uneducated away before they even got inside her gate.

"What do you want? Who told you I am selling alcohol here? I don't. Go… Go… Go…," she would scream like a crazy person to scare away those that she felt were not fit for her high class four-roomed *shebeen*.

Her affection for the affluent was reciprocated. They loved drinking at her place. Most times you'd find them squashed in every space of the small living room. They would be discussing issues such as education and politics. Knowing very little about the topics did not restrain Mmaphuti from becoming part of the clever conversations. She threw in a word or two with her struggling sentences and incomprehensible but confident English. Her 'devil may care' attitude let her get away with almost anything.

"Yes! Correct. Thabo Mbeki is a difficulty man," she said, proud to have been able to contribute something.

At times she would be helpful in solving difficult and secret issues in the family. She helped people to face things that they were afraid to confront. Most of the time, her shenanigans were destructive before becoming helpful. People fought and spent years not talking because of her disclosures. Nevertheless most people in the family still confided and enjoyed gossiping with her. There was a side of her that always drew people towards her. You would never miss her in any family occasion. Invited or not, she would be there.

Everyone loved her ginger beer and they always took their turns at the drum to have a glass or two. She always sat outside in front of the kitchen with a jug, calling everyone to come and have a taste. She secretly mixed a nip or two of whisky into the drum at intervals and thereafter declared that the party would never be boring.

She offered everyone a glass, especially those that she knew did not drink, as well as children. Thereafter she would be commenting on how merrily the children were playing – crediting it to the ginger beer. Or saying, look at so and so – she says she doesn't like alcohol, but look at her! She came here five times for the ginger beer.

After taking many-many sips herself, she would end up deserting the drum to mingle and reveal many-many other family secrets. Nevertheless she never drank enough to confuse her excellent faculties.

Mpho was carrying dirty dishes into the kitchen when she bumped into her in the dining room.

"Oh! My favourite niece! Where have you been? I have been looking for you everywhere?" She said.

"Rakgadi Mmaphuti, how are you? I have been looking for you too. But this time I am not drinking your ginger beer. You know I am still breast feeding," said Mpho.

"Rubbish! That ginger beer is good for your child. It will make her intelligent."

"No! No! No!" said Mpho.

"You know nothing. Your mother drank a lot of it when she was breastfeeding you. See how you turned out, clever."

Mpho laughed and said. "I know you are joking. I cannot drink alcohol when breastfeeding."

"Anyway! I have been meaning to talk to you about that. Come! Let's go to the bedroom."

"Rakgadi, you want to teach me how to breastfeed. This is my second child, believe you me, I know how it's done."

Mpho's aunt grabbed the dirty dishes from her hands and placed them on the side board. She took her hand and dragged her towards the bedroom. She staggered, balancing her one hand on the walls. She smelled like she was the brewery herself. In the bedroom she closed the door and asked Mpho to sit on the bed where the child was sleeping soundly. She took the baby's white satin blanket off and said,

“Haa! Tell me! Where did you get this child? Green marble eyes! This one the father is a white man, not even a coloured, *lekgowa* (a white man) or my name is not Mmaphuti. This child can’t be Matome’s, with that ‘navy-blue’ complexion of his. No!” She was then silent for a few second examining the sleeping child.

“Unless it is Jesus Christ’s Second Coming,” she added. Mpho was caught off guard and did not know what to say.

“How did you find a *Lekgowa* my girl? You are so bold. You.... *mhhh*.... can babysit a lion’s litter.”

“You are drunk. You should stop drinking. It makes you paranoid. Leave me and my child alone. You are jealous because your children are not married and now you think you can destroy my marriage,” said Mpho, now holding her baby who was awake and crying bitterly. It was if the baby heard the conversation.

“Get out! You bring in evil spirits to my baby. Get out!” said Mpho, pushing her outside the room with all the strength of her left while carrying the child with her right. She started feeling the sharks and the crocodiles tearing her insides.

Two years later Mpho’s marriage ended. Reasons unrelated to the child were mentioned for the divorce. The air in their house had always been filled with thoughts and things to say that remained unsaid even after the divorce. Matome was the kind of man who refused or lacked the ability to see the dark side of people and things. He interpreted life in the simplest form. His mental and emotional response was that of a child. But child-like in an uninteresting way. He never entertained negative thoughts even when they evaded the bare back of his anxious mind. He preferred to always go with the flow of things.

The real romance between them died when Angela was born. What remained was the fact that they were now just a habit to each other. On the other hand Mpho always felt like she was carrying his life. She felt like it was a routine to love him – in the same way that cleaning the house or doing washing was. Incompatibility and irreconcilable differences were amongst the grounds mentioned in court. When the maintenance claim was done Mpho only claimed for their first child only. Matome had never confronted her on the paternity of Angela. Even with the divorce Matome went with the flow never contesting anything.

It was not until after the divorce that her sister, Linda, casually confronted her about the child's paternity over a bottle of Chardonnay. They were both tipsy when Linda finally got the courage to start the subject.

"Mpho, I am worried that if you die today from an accident or something sudden and some white man comes here and claim to be 'Angela,s dad', our father is going to finally get a chance to use his gun."

Mpho, a bit drunk, laughed her lungs out.

"And all he ever did since he bought it five years ago was to polish it. I am sure he won't think twice if he gets the opportunity to shoot. He will shoot to kill," she said.

Linda took advantage of the atmosphere and asked, "Who is he and where can I find him? Maybe I'll shoot him before dad does," she said. They laughed.

"*Hee*! You mean Schoeman? I don't know. Maybe he is a hobo somewhere. I have not seen him since I stopped working at the Modikwe mine. He probably is still working there," said Mpho talking between mouthfuls and swallows of wine.

"So he works at the mine? We must locate him. He must support the child," said Linda.

This conversation paved the way for Dawie Schoeman and Mpho to meet again. Conversations between the two of them lead to a paternity test being done that confirmed him as the father. Dawie was not as shocked as Mpho expected he would be. All he demanded was to see the child.

A week later they waited in a restaurant for Linda to bring the child. Mpho thought it might be confusing for her other daughter who was eight years old, if they met at her house. She felt like a heavy load was off her. She was tired of explaining to the world and its mistress why her daughter looked the way she did. Now things were out in the open. Everyone would now know that Dawie Schoeman is the father.

Just yesterday, when Angela came back from crèche, she asked her if she was white or black. A question she never expected and did not know how to answer. Fortunately Linda, who stayed with them quickly responded and told the child that she was both, a little bit white and a little bit black. The response seemed to have satisfied the three year old girl.

“God has a sense of humour,” said Dawie, “My wife and I have been trying to have a child for fifteen years. We have consulted every specialist in the country and we even tried in vitro many times but all that did not work. I have prayed for a child everyday and I thought he had turned a deaf ear or lost my address. Wow, and this is how he responds.”

“Your ways are not his ways,” said Mpho. They sat at the Ocean Basket Restaurant sharing a meal over a bottle of red wine. Like they did four years ago – the night Angela was conceived. Her mind wandered back to that night when they shared many-many bottles of red wine. She wanted to think of it as the night of passion but it was not. It was a night of drunkenness that resulted in a love child. This happened after they had become close friends when they were working at Modikwe mine. He was good company and she enjoyed his ability to turn anything into a joke. He made her laugh even at the time when things did not go so well in her marriage.

She reflected on the night they had gone out for drinks. It was not a planned thing, they never anticipated that the night would end the way it did, with them in a hotel room. He was her boss and they were both very drunk. What she recalled is that there were no fireworks – otherwise she would have remembered or gone for more. In fact it was a disaster. Up to today she can’t figure out what happened to the condom. On Dawie the condom seemed to be oversized, dangling from all sides. She still could not believes a child, a life emanated from all that.

“Did you tell your parents that they now have a granddaughter,” Mpho asked.

“My parents are dead. They would have not accepted a coloured granddaughter. Even now they must be turning and tossing in their graves.”

“Oh, here they come,” said Mpho.

Dawie jumped from his chair and didn’t know what to do. He wanted to embrace the child but could not. Mpho said, “Angela, come closer, this is your real dad. Say hello.” Dawie reached out for a hand shake. The small girl just looked at him for a few seconds and turned away from them.

They ran after her but when she looked back and saw Dawie, she screamed at the top of her voice as if she had just seen a ghost. She then said “*Mama ke a mo tshaba* (I am afraid of

him).” Even though Dawie did not understand Sepedi he backed off. Then the child stopped crying. “Mama, I want to go home.” It was her first close encounter with a white adult male.

Drama Queens and Kings

“I am sorry we are fully booked for the night,” said the lady who appeared to be the restaurant manager before we even reached the restaurant door. By the time we got to the front door she was already waiting with the ‘there is no way you are coming in’ look. You did not have to be psychic to know that we were up for a performance. She held her one hand on the tip of the door frame and the other on her waist. Insects were brooding to themselves around the lamp above her head.

“But madam, we have booked a table for nine which was confirmed earlier today,” my brother Tebogo responded.

“We have no booked tables here,” said the middle-aged white woman dressed in tight black pants and a white top. She wore her nose on her forehead. Her tetchy face revealed contours lines on the side of her forehead which became even deeper when she talked. Her collarbones protruded sharply like knife blades. She spoke in a loud voice as if we were standing a kilometer away.

The coastal wind blew hard and cold on our black ears. The ocean was pleasantly audible and the air felt fresh. Even though the autumn sun had already vanished into the mysterious skies one could feel the living sea was just a stone’s throw away.

“But madam someone confirmed our booking and directed us on the phone five minutes ago,” said Tebogo, whose tone was now as irritable as hers.

“I told you we don’t have any tables available. There is nothing I can do” she said. She then released her hand from the door framed and peeped inside; indirectly alerting us that she had to go back inside. We were completely taken aback and caught off guard. We had never anticipated this rejection after the joyful day that we had experienced in the City of Saints mingling with high profile intellectuals during the graduation ceremony.

When we got out of the Toyota Kombi that my brother hired at the Port Elizabeth airport, I thought I saw people peeping from the restaurant windows. I simply dismissed the weird gesture as naughty children playing. The kombi resembled one of the notorious township minibus taxis. Our cheerful chatting and laughter must have unintentionally announced our

arrival. It had been a while since anyone had graduated in my family and this celebration ignited extreme excitement.

“Is this the only Links Restaurant in Port Alfred, madam?” Tebogo asked again.

“Yes!” she said.

“Maybe you might want to check somewhere because I am sure we have a table booked for nine people here,” said Tebogo, dialling his personal assistant’s number on his cellphone.

My seventeen year old son, Mohale, who stood next to one of the restaurant’s front windows said: “Eh, *malome* (uncle), I see there is a table with nine chairs with a reserved sticker inside.”

Tebogo was now on the phone with his personal assistant Anna-Marie. She is an efficient sixty two year-old white lady who had become more of a family member to all of us than his employee. She was the one who organised everything: the flights, the hotel and restaurant bookings. She had phoned me earlier in the day to wish me a pleasant day. She had been working for my brother for ten years. The most wonderful white person I have ever met.

“Hello

boss is everything fine?” said Anna-Marie. She had told him on the phone, an hour earlier, all the bookings were confirmed.

“Anna-Marie, we are at Links Restaurant and there is a very touchy lady here telling us we don’t have a booking,” said Tebogo.

“Impossible! That is nonsense. Give her that phone,” said Anna-Marie.

We never got to hear the conversation between Anna-Marie and the skinny lady because she immediately took the phone and disappeared inside, leaving us standing at the door.

She returned a few minutes later with a smile befitting a toothpaste advert.

“Sorry, there has been a misunderstanding. Your table is ready. Follow me,”

“Uncle, I told you there was a table reserved,” said my son.

We walked in, one by one, through the narrow door. The scrawny lady stood next to the door the same way air hostesses do when you board into a flight. Her nose was now in its right space and she kept on smiling at everyone, though no one smiled back.

“Your attire is different, very nice” she said when I went in.

When my mother came in she also commented on her lavender suit.

“I like your outfit; it really looks good on you.”

“Flattery will get you everywhere,” my mother said, marching in without looking at her. We all burst into laughter.

According to Anna-Marie, this was one of the classiest restaurants in Port Alfred. I wondered why. The space was so closely packed inside that our chairs touched those of tables next to ours.

It looked like it had been a residential house which was converted to a business. The off-white walls made it appear even duller. By the time we got settled at the long table, it was seven thirty in the evening and already dark. Maybe during the day there is a beautiful view of the sea, I thought.

Inside, we became a spectacle without staging a performance. All the other tables were occupied by white people. They tossed and turned from their comfortable seats just to get a glimpse of us. The same kind of look that I believe those who had seen aliens must have displayed at the time. It seemed like they’d never seen black people before.

Fifteen minutes passed before anyone gave us any attention. A younger white girl, who might have been in her early twenties, dumped a pile of menus on our table. My sister Kgaugelo distributed them to everyone. The menus were big and leather-bound as a book. Another fifteen minutes passed and still no service. The young girl who left the menus said while passing our table without even looking at us, “I’ll be with you soon, we are very busy today.”

Now it was my brother’s nose that was misplaced. His face told me everything. I learned later from his girlfriend, Maseapo, that he is normally not this tolerant in such situation.

“If we were in Johannesburg, you would have seen a scene. He can be very theatrical, he is a drama king. He would have staged a ballet on this table top, I tell you. Maybe he just didn’t want to spoil your day,” Maseapo told me later at the hotel.

Kgaugelo and Maseapo proclaimed that they preferred the Pan Africanist approach to such issues. As my eyes fiddled around, I discovered that the restaurant was not even full; there were about four other empty tables.

“I think we are being punished for our past sins,’ I said jokingly.

“Or the sins of our ancestors,” said Molatelo, a friend of mine who was also graduating..

“They will serve us eventually. Let’s just sit here and be ‘*darkies*’ like they think they know us,” said Kgaugelo.

“What? I don’t think it is a good idea? What if they serve us at ten? I am diabetic I can’t wait that long. I have already taken my insulin shot,” said my mother.

“No, *Mma*, don’t worry if we can ignore the bad treatment and behave like we are having a good time, they will all leave. Let’s just be loud and make them walk out. We will have the place to ourselves,” said Maseapo.

“I don’t want a scene on my sister’s big day,” said Tebogo.

“These are the English. They are not big on scenes. They were taught before they were born how to be polite. They are not like the Afrikaners. They would rather march out quietly to make a statement,” said Kgaugelo.

“Why don’t we do the same?” I said.

“Yes! Let’s go. They are treating us like charity cases,” agreed my mother.

“No! If you do that, you are giving them what they want,” said Kgaugelo.

“It’s no longer about them; we just want to have a peaceful decent dinner. Maybe we should settle for the buffet at the Fish River Hotel,” said Tebogo, now calling hotel. It was situated twenty kilometres away along the coastal garden route to East London. On the phone they assured Tebogo that their buffet was on.

“We have enough food to feed our tribe,” said the lady who answered the phone.

We all marched out the same way we came in without a word or a whinge. Kgaugelo and Maseapo remained seated, craving a bit of drama. They eventually backed away because of lack of support. When they too, finally walked out, the skinny lady came to them and asked with a mischievous twinkle in her eye, “is there something wrong?” They just looked at her in the same way that you would look at someone who had not had a bath for two weeks and marched out silently. As they walked out an elderly grey-haired head white man stood up from one of the tables and opened the door for them.

“Is this place too white for you?” said the grey haired man.

My son, who was standing next to the door at the time, said “no comment.”

The Fish River Sun buffet automatically became our Plan b.

“What if the situation is worse at the hotel?” said my friend Mpho, who had come all the way from Limpopo Province for my graduation.

“We shall have to cross that river with or without a bridge,” said my mother.

The restaurant incident did not disturb the jovial mood in our hired Toyota Kombi, which now resembled a township taxi in the real sense. Everyone was laughing and talking at the same time.

My son in the front passenger seat kept on stretching his hand the way taxi drivers do when they demand taxi fare.

“*A e tle ka disiti,* Bring the money seat by seat with the change sorted,” said my son imitating the harsh tone of most South African township taxis drivers. Those who were in the back seat also screamed imitating older passengers.

“Hey! *Wena* taxi driver, slow down man. Our children are still young. We don’t want to die in an accident.”

“Hey mama! If you want control go buy yourself a car. This taxi is mine. I will drive it the way I want,” Tebogo said.

Everyone said something that reminded us of how it was to travel in a township taxi.

We did not feel the twenty kilos stretch to the hotel at all. Everyone was laughing all the way. I chuckled until my stomach was unbearably painful.

The topic then went back to what happened at Links Restaurant.

“I knew something was not right when I saw the name of the restaurant. Link should just remain a pharmacy store as we know it. It’s not a good name for a place where people must eat. Probably their food couldn’t have been nice. This whole thing must be God’s way of saving our taste buds from a disgusting experience,” said my mother. Everyone laughed.

“*Mma,* its Links not Link,” said my son.

“You denied me and Maseapo the opportunity to show you our ability to make white people vanish. If we had stayed a little bit longer, you would have seen us in action,” said Kgaugelo.

“Yaa! They need to vanish back to Europe or better into the sea,” said my mother.

“No! *Mma* not all of them are bad,” said my son, “I have many friends at school who are white and good. When you talk like that you are now behaving like the Links woman.”

“Don’t remind me of that racist demagogue. *Mxe!* That cocky thin psychopath! She belongs in the ocean with sharks. I have had more than enough racist drama this week.

After this outburst all kinds of racist stories came out.

My friend Mpho told us of a specific racist story that happened in a Johannesburg restaurant. A white waiter wrote darkies on an invoice instead of writing the table number or the name of the one of the customers. This was the only table occupied by blacks in the restaurant. Thereafter the place reeked even though nothing was rotten. And all hell broke loose. The whole thing ended in court ignominy in which the darkies were suing the restaurant for racism.

I also had had my share of racism earlier in the week when a white cashier at a book store stopped processing my payment for the books I had purchased and went to help two white ladies who had just come in. I staged a screaming match until she refrained and came back to finish my transaction. I think I saw a trace of remorse in her eyes thereafter. But then that could have just been a figment of my imagination. In my short life I have learned that at times acts of racism are not deliberate. They are just a bad habit perpetuated by our

subconscious mind, which was fed rubbish in our youth. I decided not to mention my incident as now everyone was competing to tell their own stories.

“Let me tell you what happened to me earlier this week at the Game Store parking lot in Polokwane.” said my mother.

My mother was about to park her car when an Opel Astra simultaneously went in on the parking space next to hers. The Astra parked very close to the left border of the parking space, leaving little space for her to open the driver’s door. When she opened her door it touched the Astra a little bit. She then pulled it back and negotiated her ‘big mamma’ body out of the car. The man who was driving the Astra did not make any effort to reverse and park appropriately. She felt that she was too much in a good mood to really make an issue out of the whole thing.

The lady on the passenger seat was an elderly slender white woman. She was able to slide her small figure effortlessly without having to fully open the door. Her door did not touch the Mercedes. My mother examined the area where the door touched their car just to make sure there was no dent or a mark.

She then felt the need be kind and apologised.

“I am sorry to have touched your car.” my mother said politely.

“Yes you should be sorry. People like you don’t belong in a car. You should be jumping up and down on trees,” said the white woman crossing the street with the old man. They disappeared into Game Stores.

My mother told us that she was shocked by the unexpected rude response. She could not collect her wits immediately. She felt gears grinding and screaming in her head. Something that felt like a stinking piece of rotten pork blocked her throat, preventing her from hitting back. She then decided to go into Game Stores to hunt for the couple so that she could give them a proper response. It took her anger ten minutes to be galvanized into action.

I was not the one in the wrong there. They parked wrongly and I apologized for touching their car and yet she tells me that I don’t belong in a car. She must be mad. These were my mother’s thoughts as she rushed through the Game Store rows, tracking them as if they were criminals. The more she thought about the woman’s words, the more heated she became.

She finally bumped into them at the turn-off to the fifth row. The man was pushing a trolley with two huge bags of dog food. She told us that she could feel blood flowing in her fists and legs. She was ready to take a boxing match if need be. We all chuckled.

She told us that she felt her strong rural upbringing emerging and overshadowing her suburban sophistication. The same rage that had propelled her in her youth to fight with boys when they herded cattle and goats in Motupa Village. All of sudden she forgot her position in church as the leading prayer woman and pulled the white lady with her grey jersey from the back.

“Hey you! Can you repeat what you said outside, slowly?” my mother said. The white woman gave her one look and pulled herself from the grip. She and her husband rushed rapidly towards the door where the security guards were standing. My mother followed them screaming. As she spoke her voice grew forceful with every word with her forefinger stabbing in the air.

“What do you mean I don’t belong in a car? I want you to know I belong in a car, a better car. The only thing you will ever see jumping on trees is your grandchildren, not me. Why don’t you go back to Europe were you came from and leave us in peace.”

At that time everyone in the shop turned to see what was going on. Some youngsters walked behind my mother cheering.

“Mama, Give it to them. They are disrespectful these people.”

I could imagine how intimidating my mother’s powerful loud voice must have been because she told us that the couple left their trolley at the entrance without paying. They never even reported her to either the manager (who must have been white) or the black security dudes at the entrance.

“I taught them a good lesson. I know they will never tell a black person to go jump on trees ever again,” said my mother proudly. I wondered if that was true. It’s possible that she had planted more hatred. I have grown to realise that any act of racism is like sowing a seed of more hatred on a fertile ground.

We listened quietly when she narrated this story. She was so worked up – it was as if she was still at that scene. Raw anger busted from her big round eyes. My son kept on reminding her that not all white people are like that.

“Mma, I have many good white friends at school. Don’t be fooled to think that all white people hate black people,” he persisted.

This story disturbed me long after that day. It was sixteen years after democracy and yet South Africans were still resentful, tense and bitter towards each other. They were still at each other’s necks. When will it ever end? Will there ever be reconciliation? Maybe, with the younger generations things will be different. I could see it in my son‘s eyes that he really believed in what he told his grandmother. But as for the rest of us, we were all closet pessimists. We all laughed but no one really commented on the story.

At Fish River Sun, the manager was also white. She gave us a table and allocated us a waitress right away even though the meal was a buffet. Ten minutes later the charming restaurant manager came back to our table and said, “You guys look like you are celebrating. What’s the occasion?”

“She was graduating today,” Tebogo said pointing at me.

“Oh, no wonder you are looking so unique in your striking traditional attire,” she said looking at me.

She called one of the waitresses and whispered something into her ear. Two minutes later we were given two bottles of champagne in ice buckets for free. We stayed in the restaurant, chatting, laughing and drinking until all the other customers had departed. When she turned up at our table again to check on us, we panicked. We were embarrassed thinking that we have overstayed our welcome.

“You can sit in here as long as you want. We are closing the kitchen. If you need anything you must get it now,” she said.

When the bar closed she went out of her way to organise drinks orders for the rest of the night. They were brought to us in big silver buckets of ice.

“I must say,” announced Tebogo, “that the ‘Links experience’ should not be classified as a race issue. Here we are twenty kilometres away and treated very differently by a white

person. This should tell us something. Maybe it's about being backward. You know, behind times Yaa! Living in the past. Like a rural person from Limpopo would behave on their first week in Jozi. "Give it time," said Tebogo, "things will work better, people will change."

Despite these words, and even in our drunkenness, we could not curb our cynicism. No one spoke: our eyes said it all.

Love Interrupted

Life was different in Modjadji village from Nobody Village where I come from. The role of a wife was basically traditional. In this village, being a *makoti*, daughter-in-law, was as good as being a domestic worker. There was even a song that they sing when they welcome you as *makoti*. It says *mmatswale tlogela dipitsa, mong wa tsona o fihlil* – mother -in-law stop doing household chores; the person responsible for them has arrived.

As *makoti* I was instructed by my mother-in-law to address everyone in the family and all relatives in the plural. The same way Julius Caesar addressed himself as we, us, our and so on. If someone asked me where my mother-in-law was I had to say 'they' went to the shop". The same went for everyone related to my husband Leshata, including children. When I shared this with a colleague at work she said,

"My dear it is not only the family and relatives, also their dogs, cats, goats and cows."

Nobody really cared about the fact that I was pregnant. I had to do the cleaning, cooking and washing for all of them. It was a back-breaking life. My eyes were always lustreless and exhausted.

I was willing to go with the flow and be a good *makoti*. Well, *khethile! Khethile*! If you have chosen a situation, you have to stick to it. If this was the price I had to pay for being with the husband I love so much, let it be. I was fortunate to even have a husband. Most women were struggling to acquire a man to marry them. Their children were raised fatherless. I should be counting my blessings, I thought.

Little did I know that addressing my in-laws in the plural and doing household chores was to be the least of my troubles. I was always exhausted from having to go to work then coming back home to chores. My swollen feet and stomach cramps did not help.

It is often said that most women marry men that resemble their fathers in character and physical attributes. With me the only thing my dad and husband Leshata had in common was their height. My father was a dignified, humble gentleman. He was the kind of man who always made sure that his family had everything they needed.

“I don’t want my children to suffer the way I did,” he would say with a sullen face, as if we were a literal extension of him. I never heard him raise his voice at my mom let alone lay a hand on her. If they ever fought it might have been behind the closed door of their bedroom.

When I met my husband I expected him to be of my father’s calibre. It was when I was doing my final year at the University of Limpopo. He was already working as a teacher. We met in a queue at Standard Bank. He charmed the wits out of me.

Three months later I was two months pregnant. Although I had misgivings about the unplanned pregnancy, he was happy about it. When I told him the news he wasted no time to making the necessary arrangements. It all started with a letter from his family to my family, informing them of the lobola delegation that would be visiting them on the second Saturday of October. Normally it would have been okay just to inform them that I was pregnant and pay what was called the damage fee. He insisted on paying the damage fee and the lobola all at once.

My parents were a bit sceptical about the whole thing. My father reminding me that marriage was a big step and urged me to wait and get to know him better.

“It all happened too quickly. It’s just too soon. You have only known him for three months, my girl,” said my father.

“It won’t help her to wait, the calabash is broken already. She must hurry up to marry otherwise she will be a ‘*lefetwa*’ (spinster). Who is going to marry her with another man’s child? She will grow within the marriage. We will support her,” said my mother.

By the end of the year he had already organised me a teaching post at the primary school in his home village. It was a feeder school for the secondary school that he was teaching in.

I went straight from University to *bogadi*, my in-law’s home. We shared a four-roomed house with his mother and three younger brothers. His older four sisters were all married and now living with their husbands. It was a very uncomfortable situation as we had only two bedrooms, one for his mother and the other for us, the newlyweds. His brothers slept in the kitchen on foam mattresses. One of the boys was still at school while the other two stayed at home.

I convinced my husband to build us our own house. With the twins coming we needed more space. Leshata bought the idea and told me that building a house in the village was not as complicated as in urban areas. There was enough space in his mother's yard. He told me that we wouldn't even need an architectural plan. He just took a stick to draw lines on the ground and showed the builder how big the rooms should be. The only important thing was that it should be a structure that looked exactly like his principal Moloto's house.

In the ninth month of my pregnancy I requested my husband to take me to my parent's home as it was becoming more and more difficult for me to cope with the household chores. I had already started with maternity leave.

"My dear, when you come back with the twins, the house will be finished," said Leshata.

"I will be happy," I said. He had already supervised the erection of the foundation and we had bought all the materials necessary.

It was tradition that when you give birth to a first born, you have to go to your parents' place so that your mother can help you with the baby. My mother-in-law accepted gracefully.

"Yes, it's her mother who must teach her how to handle her first baby. She can go, it's our tradition," she said, planting deposits of snuff into her nostrils with her head bent backwards. I sat opposite her on an old rickety chair around the shaky kitchen table. Leshata was standing next to the new Defy stove. I stared at her as she wiped the black fluids running down her nose with a grey handkerchief. She spoke as if without her permission I could never go.

Already my mother-in-law and I had had several embarrassing episodes. On Saturdays Leshata would stop me from waking up early, saying I needed some rest. We would lie in bed until nine or even ten in the morning. I would hear my mother-in-law waking the boys in the kitchen at seven, shouting so that I would know she was addressing me.

"Wake up, wake up, what type of people sleeps until this time? You enjoy the sunrays caressing your buttocks hee? This is not a hotel… even at a hotel people are up…. going for breakfast." Thereafter I would smell cooked porridge, *morogo* and pumpkin leaves being cooked. Then there would be a knock on our bedroom door.

“Leshata! I have something for you, my son,” she said. My husband would jump up, put his gown on and open the door.

“What is wrong mother? We are still resting,”

“*Nxa!* I thought you might be hungry, my son. I brought you some porridge and *morogo*. Here! Take! That school that she is putting you through does not even have a pause. Take, my son. I don’t want you to die of hunger.”

My husband came back in with a calabash filled with porridge, dished in neat artistic layers and a yellow enamel plate almost overflowing with *morogo*.

“Leshata, did you hear that? Your mom is insulting me,” I said, running out of breath with tears running down my swollen cheeks. I looked at myself in the mirror of the dressing table. I could not recognise my ballooned face. The pregnancy had transformed me. My light complexion was gone. I was charcoal dark and my neck and breasts were scaly. I had to sleep with my upper body raised by continental pillows. I had never been pregnant, but I knew that the weight I was carrying was abnormal. I thought about the washing that I had soaked the previous night and all the other things that needed to be done.

“Don’t worry about my mom. She is like that. I think its old age. Let’s eat. Mh! This looks delicious. You will get used to her. After all I married you, not her. You don’t need to feel guilty. It’s me who said you should rest. Don’t worry my dear, just relax,” he said.

At home, my mother’s tears could have filled a plastic bag when I told her about the situation at my new home.

“My girl, with the twins, that system of making you their domestic worker just won’t work. It’s just not on. They think you are a grader. I will find you a domestic worker.”

That was to be the cause of my first real fight with my husband. He said he did not believe in domestic workers. He commanded me to take her back.

“My mother is good with children. You won’t have a problem with the twins.”

I refused. He then volunteered to buy a washing machine to assist me. I still refused. The twins were a twenty-four seven job. When the one was awake the other was asleep. All tasks were doubled. My mother-in-law did love children. She was good with them. But still I

needed a domestic worker. For weeks my husband shut down. The domestic servant issue drifted us apart with him only responding to me in ‘yes’ and ‘no’s when I tried to engage him. Whenever I seemed disconnected from Leshata my mother-in-law was friendlier to me. The domestic worker stayed. After a while he accepted her presence, then my mother-in-law shut down! If she found us laughing together she gave us an irritated look.

She had now moved permanently with us into our new house. It was a beautiful house, with modern finishing touches. We erected a borehole and attached pipes that led into the house, making ours one of the few houses in Modjadji village that had a functional bathroom and a sink in the kitchen. But we still used the outside toilet as the one inside was not yet properly connected. We had three bedrooms, a study, and a living room, a kitchen with a big pantry, dining room and two garages with green painted doors matching the green roof tiles.

My mother-in-law helped with the babies. She changed nappies and even washed them herself (disposable nappies were not popular then). Her helping us meant being with her twenty eight hours a day. She insisted on sleeping with me to help with the babies at night. She was the kind of person who washed her body seriously once a week. Otherwise she used about two litres of water in a small bowel to rinse her face daily. Whenever she entered a room her perfume arrived first. It was a mixture of rotten fish, snuff and some things I could not work out. I was happy when she brought a foam mattress in. At least I was no longer going to share the bed with her. Leshata had to sleep in the other bedroom. That too, I was told, was tradition.

We were always so busy that I hardly had time for my husband. That is when the coming home late started happening. On some occasions I did not even hear him return. Most of the time, he came back drunk. Every time my husband came into our bedroom to see the babies, my mother-in- law would run back in, if she was not already in the room. I did not understand this. She would sit there until he left.

When the girls were three months old I asked her to go back to her bedroom in the old four-roomed house, declaring that I was now strong enough to cope with the twins.

“Mama, it is now better because they sleep through the night, only waking up for milk,” I said to her in a humble way.

“No my girl. For as long as you are breastfeeding, I sleep in here,” she said adamantly.

“Why?” I asked.

“It’s our tradition. You can’t sleep with your husband until you stop breastfeeding. Otherwise you will kill the babies,” she said.

“What!” I said. I knew they were expecting me to breastfeed until the twins were at least two. I really did not mind as I knew the breast milk was good for them. Most women in the village breastfed until the children were four or five years old. The child would go and play; then come back and call out loud,

“Mama! Where are you? Come, I want the breasts.”

That evening I waited for my husband. He came back at three in the morning. It was pointless to talk to him as he was very drunk. In the morning I told him to tell his mother that I don’t need her services. She can go to her own room. After a long struggle she eventually left. She decided to permanently withdraw all the services she had rendered.

That was the beginning of ‘Clash of the Titans 2’. From that day on we became the mouse and the cat. When the twins turned one I was pregnant again. I gave birth to a son. Even then my mother-in-law refused to be involved. When I returned from hospital, Leshata was thrilled that it was a boy. Out of excitement he called his mother to come and welcome the new member of the family.

“This one, *Mma*, is going to keep our surname alive,” he said, handing over the baby to her. She looked at the baby quietly for a few seconds with her forehead folded and torso bent backwards.

“Mh! He does not look like you. Mh! This one is ugly – like a *lekwerekwere (*a foreigner) with a big nose,” she said, laughing diabolically. The child cried as if it had heard what she‘d said.

I took the child from her roughly, registering my disapproval of her comment.

“What did I do now? I pity you my son, you have married a mad woman. I hope this madness does not pass over to the children. She can go to hell; I have a right to make whatever comments. This child *is* my grandson isn't he? She must tell me if it is not yours. I told you I don’t like coming into your house. She chased me out when the twins were young,” she said

to Leshata, who did not respond. He took the Sowetan newspaper that was on the coffee table and read it as if nothing was going on.

“I see the madness has passed over to you too. I am talking to you and you just read that useless paper. Let me go to my house. I don’t even understand why I was called here. I have more important things to do in my house. Who knows? If I stay longer this madness might catch me too. *Mxe*!”

My mother-in-law’s histrionics was no longer a big deal. I was now almost used to it.

After my son turned two I gave birth to another daughter. My mother-in-law often gossiped with the woman next door, saying -

“What can you tell her? My *makoti*, haa! Haa! She knows everything. She is educated. She went to University, *Ke tsebinki*. She knows it all but yet she makes babies like an illiterate mad person. Ha! Ha! Ha! – like a rat.”

In four years I had given birth to four children. It was hectic raising three toddlers and a newborn. Even with the domestic worker it was still chaotic. When my mother heard that my mother-in-law was not supporting me with the babies, she sent over her sister. My aunt, who was a cripple, arrived a week later to assist me. Her left leg was shorter than the right one. When she walked it was as if she was going to fall. She was remarkable with all the children. She had never married and did not have children of her own.

She was a humble person, respectful and cheerful. She tried very hard to get along with my mother-in-law, but her efforts achieved nothing. My mother-in-law remained cold to her. It was difficult for her to ignore my aunt because everyone loved her. So infectious was her happiness that people responded with spontaneous smiles when she greeted them. Even the lady next door, who was my mother-in-law’s gossiping comrade and drinking mate, loved her.

The tension between me and my mother-in-law now exceeded that between the Titans. Every time I walked out through the kitchen door, I would find her seated under the Marula tree weaving her mats. When she heard my footsteps approaching she would pause and gather as much saliva as possible in her mouth. When I come into sight she would spit. The spit would land two metres away, followed by a sucking sound from her mouth. In African culture

people spit if they see something filthy or if there is a disgusting smell. That morning I walked softly towards the kitchen door so that she could not calculate my footsteps. I assembled as much saliva as I could while still in the house, and this time I spat first as she was still marshalling her own saliva. And from that day on she did not spit in that way again.

After the birth of my children I gained weight, especially on my stomach. I was careful not to wear clothes that were tight because they showed my pot belly and love handles. One Saturday we were going to attend a wedding at Kgapane Township, next to the town of Duiwelskloof. I was all dressed up. Even Leshata, who normally didn't compliment me, observed that I looked my best.

When we walked out of the house our neighbour was hanging her laundry on the washing line, which was close to our yard. My mother-in-law sat under the avocado tree, where Leshata 's Toyota Cressida parked. She was eating avocadoes, sprinkling them with salt from a steel side-plate when she saw us coming. She then called out to her friend, as if she had not seen her for months,

"Hey *MmaTlou*, how are you?" My stomach cramped. I knew her well enough to know a scene was coming.

"I am okay! Just busy! Have lots of washing. These children, they change clothes as if they have hired a servant. You know we used to wear a dress for a week or two before…" said the neighbour, with her hands moving up and down the line. My mother-in-law swiftly interrupted her,

"You know what *MmaTlou*? Me! When I was a young woman and I dressed up to go somewhere, you could never tell that I had given birth to eight children. My waist and curves remained where God intended them to be. My tummy was as flat as that of a fresh virgin. You would have not struggled to tell the difference between my back and front," she said, raising her voice with every sentence, laughing like someone who had lost her mind. The next door woman did not laugh or respond.

"Your mom is provoking me. Did you hear that? She is referring to my *mokhaba*. One day I will forget who she is," I said to my husband as we drove out.

“Don’t worry about my mother. It’s old age. You know how she is,” said Leshata. If I had been given a rand for every time Leshata gave this excuse I would have been rich.

Raising my four children became my second job. If I was not at work I was breastfeeding or washing nappies or making bottles. It was a miracle that I was not talking baby language full-time. I had little time for myself, let alone my husband. He was also not very child-friendly. He could not stand the crying. He always shouted at the twins and toddler as if they were adults. He spent most of his free time away from home only to come back drunk late at night when we were all asleep. He would take his plate out the microwave, eat and doze off on the couch.

The following morning he would scream at the twins as they chased each other around the couch.

“Hey! Shut up man! Can’t you see I am sleeping?” The twins would be quiet for a while before resuming their play. One sunny Sunday morning while I was readying the baby and my son for church, I heard my one of the twins screaming. The domestic worker had finished preparing the twins and was making breakfast for all of us. I jumped and ran into the living room with only my petticoat on to find my husband towing the twins with his right hand. He unfastened his belt with his left hand, dragging them into the guest bedroom.

“*Hey wena*! Are you mad? These are children, for God’s sake,” I screamed at him, trying to pull his hand off the children. His grip was strong.

“Hey! Get out. I am disciplining these rats of yours. I want to teach them how to be respectful. Get out of my way or else I will teach you too,” he said. I saw such fury and hatred in his eyes. I felt like I was looking at the devil himself. He pushed me with his left hand and laid my babies on the bed as if they were carcasses in a butchery waiting to be sliced. He lashed them with his belt.

“When I tell you to be silent you must keep quiet!” he shouted. Their pink church dresses flung up, half covering their small faces. The matching panties with frills made their little stick legs to appear even thinner.

“Please! *Papa*! Stop! I will never talk again. I will never in my life talk papa. I won’t do it again.” I tried to pull him off. He turned and hit me on the face with the buckled side of the belt and pushed me outside.

I went back inside again and this time my two year old son was clinging to my dress. Leshata was now holding the belt in such a way that the buckle was hitting my twins. Their screams killed something in me.

“*Mma* stop him! Please stop him!”

“Are you mad? Do you want to kill them?” I screamed.

“Yaa! You are the one who spoiled them; I want to teach them good manners while they are still little. I thought I told you to get out,” he said, turning the belt on me again. It felt like I was in a movie or a dream in which I could wake up and it would all be a joke. We all cried: me, my son and the domestic worker, who was shocked to her core, standing by the door holding the baby. Moraba, my two year old son, loosened his hands from my dress. He started hitting his dad’s legs with his small fists, also biting him with his milk teeth. It was only then that he stopped and shouted.

“Take this thing of yours before I ‘*donner’* it too,” he said. Moraba continued biting him and hitting him with his small fists. The twins escaped from the bed and ran out to their grandmother’s house. It was to be the first such episode of violence in our house. I felt like I was a swimmer in a very turbulent sea.

I cried the whole day. We did not attend church. My twins remained in their room the whole day, traumatised. The older one could not walk properly because of the bruises. I could not believe that any sane human being could have done that to children. *Eish*! I married a madman, I thought.

When I called his mother to come and see what her son has done to my children she said, “Yes, he has to teach them manners while they are still young.”

Something in me changed that day. I shut down to him completely. I did not know what else to do. For me a divorce or a separation was not even an option, though it was clear that I was married to a borderline case. Having beaten the twins he drove off and was swallowed by the

village, not bothering to return that night. When I went to work the following morning he had not returned.

Thereafter, the little connection between us was cut dead. We rarely fought openly or talked to each other. My soul was no longer in it. He came and went as he pleased. At times he would go for the whole week without coming back. The children were happier when he was away. I felt at peace.

For years we only fought silent wars. One night he had forgotten to take his set of the house keys. I knew that when he hooted at two in the morning from the gate. I had told myself that I was not going to open it when I heard the clicking sound of the gate opening. I peeped through the bathroom window and saw his mother with a blanket wrapped on her waist unlocking the gate. Few minutes later there was a knock in the front door, then on the kitchen door and then on our bedroom window.

“Anna! Anna! Open the door. Where do you think I am going to sleep? Open up! This is my house you have no right to lock me outside,” he said.

I sat on the bed without responding. If he thinks I am going to feed his late night habits… he will have to think twice, I thought. I knew that if I opened the door I would be setting a precedent. One of the twins had woken up and came into my room.

“Mama, someone is knocking,” she said.

“Shshhhh, go and sleep,” I said. I walked her back to their bedroom. He must have knocked for more than an hour. His mother also joined him and they cursed me together. She called me all kinds of things – a mad person, daughter of a wicked witch, a bitch – but I remained quiet and kept the lights off. I discovered the following day that he had slept in his car. The twins were now nine years old and in the morning they unlocked the front door. To my amazement he did not say anything or shout as usual. He came in and prepared himself for going to work as if nothing happened.

“Who do you think you are? You lock my son outside of his own yard and house. You should be ashamed of yourself. Sis! I am sure this behaviour comes from your bewitching mother. I am sure she also locked your father outside. This is my own child whom I carried for nine months. If he sleeps out again you will know me. I don’t think you do,” said my

mother-in-law the, pausing only to spit. As usual I did not respond. She called me every despicable thing she could think of. I waited for her to finish. When she didn't finish I interrupted her, telling her I was late for work. She spat again. That morning her spit could have filled a beer glass.

My husband spent hardly any time at home. The few times the children encountered him in the mornings, they would tiptoe through the house, careful not to make a sound. Even our dogs were afraid of him. They too were happier when he was not there.

When Leshata went out through the front door the dogs would cower in the back yard, and when he came in through the backdoor they would hide next door. They liked playing or just hanging around with my son in the living room. We always knew when his car was arriving because the dogs would rush out as if something chased them. My son would pick up his toys and move to his room. Leshata once found the dogs in the living area and kicked them so hard I swear I heard bones breaking. Even his brothers refrained from playing music at full blast when he was at home.

Everyone had reservations about him, except his mother. When she was drunk she reminded everyone that her son was highly educated and that she carried him alone for nine months.

"A teacher, yes a teacher, came out of me. If there was school in my time I would have been a teacher too. This boy has my brains," she always said with pride.

Most Sunday afternoons he bought her a crate of Black Label *magolistos* (750ml bottles) and drank with her and the woman from next door. You would hear them laughing and talking at the same time. On Easter Sunday he only stayed with them for an hour and off he went in his car. I greeted my mother-in-law and her friend on my way to hang the kitchen cloth on the washing line. I was surprised when she returned my greeting without saying something offensive. It must be the alcohol, I thought. I was still smiling when I passed them on my way back into the house.

"*Mma Moraba*, there is something I have been meaning to ask you for a long time," she said drunkenly. I knew there and then that a bomb was coming. I was not in the mood, I was exhausted. I wanted to just run into the kitchen, but I could not.

“Tell me,” she said enthusiastically, "what happened to that cripple relative of yours. I miss seeing her limping around with the children on her back. Anyway, I am glad she went away because I was afraid for my grand children. I had to watch her all the time to make sure she did not fall with them on her back. Ha! Ha! Ha!” The neighbour never laughed. She only gulped the beer from the mayonnaise bottle she used as a glass.

My mother in-law knew very well that my crippled aunt had died of an asthma attack a year before. She had even attended the funeral. I could not understand how she could have been a subject for amusement even in a drunken state. I felt an unusual sensation around my neck, in my chest, then in my eyes which were now dripping. When the feeling got to my hands I reached for the mop which was hanging on the wall next to the kitchen door. When the mop landed on her head the first thing to reach the floor was the beer bottle, then her. The crate she was seated on followed. I held the mop with my two hands and hit her with all my strength non-stop. Her clothes now covered her face, exposing the layers of clothing underneath the overall she wore. Her underwear, greyish cycling shorts, could be seen clearly. She was as helpless as my twins the day Leshata had lashed them. My head spun and I became angrier. I knew then what temporary insanity meant.

“*Joo! Joo!* Someone help. This daughter of a wicked witch is killing me. *Joo! Joo*!” she screamed. I did not stop until her youngest son came out and pulled me away. The woman from next door did not attempt to stop me.

“If you make a joke about my late aunt again I will kill you and I am not joking,” I said, walking into the kitchen.

“Aunty leave her. She is drunk,” said my brother-in-law. In the house I felt my heart in my mouth. I could not breathe nor talk, but cried continually – not because she had offended me, but because I could not recognise myself. I had just behaved like my husband.

Leshata came home earlier that day. When his mother heard his car she ran to meet him at the gate. He parked the car there next to the gate. They rushed into her house. I knew that I was the subject of their discussion. He only came into the house at about ten in the evening. He was surprised to find me drinking tea in the kitchen. Normally this time I would be asleep. He took out his dinner from the microwave and took a seat opposite me at the kitchen table. I

tried to read anger from his face, but there was nothing. Though his face appeared emotionless, there was a gentle sorrow in the lines across his forehead.

The toilet in the house was still not connected. We all used the pit toilet outside. In the night we kept buckets in our bedrooms for doing the number one. The buckets were emptied in the mornings, washed and left in the sun until evening. The only time that anyone would use the pit toilet at night was for doing the number two. Then you took the torch and walked to the pit toilet about thirty meters from the house.

Following the violent scene with Leshata's mother I had experienced stomach cramps which later complicated into painful diarrhea. I felt like I was now being punished for hitting an old lady with a mop. I woke up several times from about eleven o'clock, running out with a toilet roll in one hand and the torch in the other. My long blue night gown swept the leaves and dry grass along the thin path to the toilet. Snakes were not strangers to the same path, so I kept my torch close to the ground just to make sure I didn't step on one. In the toilet I checked every corner, even inside the seat, just to make sure that there were no snakes.

At about one in the morning I woke once more. It seemed the hide-and-seek game with the snakes was going to go on for the whole night. My stomach felt like lightning was striking it from the inside.

I was worried about the interrupted sleep because the next day was a working day. After this last painful visit to the pit latrine I walked back to my kitchen door. It was locked.

I sat on the front door step for about fifteen minutes, not bothering to knock. It was obvious what was going on. After another fifteen minutes I went to the twin's bedroom window. I knew they didn't wake easily. I knocked softly. Luckily the older one's bed was next to the window. She opened the curtain.

"It's *Mma*, don't be afraid," I said softly. She opened the window and I told her to walk quietly to the living room and open the front door. I then hurriedly back to the front of the house. My daughter had managed to open the main door but was battling to unlock the security door. I heard Leshata's voice.

"What are you doing? If you open that door I will kill you. I want her to know how it feels to sleep outside." He took the keys from my daughter. He looked at me through the pillars of the

security door for about a second, then laughed, closed the door on my face and locked it. I sat on the rusting iron-mesh chair on the veranda. It was cold. Small drips of rain began to wet the dry soil. Could this rain have not waited until tomorrow or any other day? I am being punished for real, I thought. Then my thoughts came to a full stop for a few seconds.

After a while I found myself worrying about the fact that I had run out of toilet paper. Where was I going to sleep? Plan A would be to wake my mother-in-law. Given yesterday's drama that was mission impossible. If only she had a heart I would have tried. Plan B was to go and sleep at the neighbours. I knew he wouldn't open even if I'd brought Mandela to plead with him. It would be very disturbing to sleep at the neighbours with my runny tummy. Their toilet was full and they were temporarily using ours until they could build another one, which could be years later.

I was thinking all this while performing another business in the pit toilet. I must have sat there for more than an hour – I did not mind the mind-blowing stench. It was warmer than the veranda. But I finally grew tired of the stench and emerged. Lightning cut fiery lines through the sky and the fuming rain splashed in torrents. I got wet just running from the toilet to the kitchen door, almost slipping into the pool of muddy water next to it.

The yard felt unfamiliar that night. The trees that cast shadows over the yard during the day now appeared to be abnormally crammed together. Mangoes seemed to have grown on avocado trees and litchis on mango trees. The smell of mangoes was everywhere.

"The damn rain," I cursed it.

There was still about five hours till daylight. I definitely couldn't survive until morning in these wet clothes. I cursed the rain again, finding myself angrier with it than I was with Leshata and his mother. Why did I get married? I found my mother's words running in my mind like spikes in empty tins.

"My girl! You must know that to sustain marriage as a woman, you need a certain level of stupidity."

It was the small hours of the morning. I thought about how disgusting marriage was. It was like living in a world where it was midnight all the time. These were things I never reflected on when I was not locked out. Then I thought about my children and my heart warmed up. I

knew that my daughter was not going to sleep knowing I was outside. I went back to her window and tapped softly. She opened again. This time I brought my mother-in-law's bench. I climbed on it and squeezed myself through the open window into my house like a thief in front of my nine year old twins. My hair and gown were wet. They wanted to talk.

"Shsh!" I said, taking off the gown.

In my bedroom I found Leshata snoring. I deliberately switched my drier on just to wake him. I exaggerated every sound I made just to irritate him. He then stopped snoring but did not open his eyes. I knew he was awake. Ten minutes later I slept.

Every oncoming event in my house made the previous one seem like a picnic. Drama happened so frequently it became normality. My children grew up with it as part of their daily bread. In the midst of it all my husband and I drifted still further apart. He continued to come and go as he pleased. The times he returned he was, as usual, very drunk. We were now used to it. He would hoot at the gate. It was no longer about him having lost or forgotten to take his set of keys. He was just too lazy or lame to open the gate. His mom or the younger brothers woke up to open for him.

He always managed to announce his coming back time to our inquisitive neighbours with his wailing bell. And yet they never complained about the noise. Maybe their husbands were also coming back late. I wished we were living in the suburbs. If it we were staying in suburbs, the 'bell thing' could have not lasted. The white people or the enlightened 'black diamonds' would have not permitted it.

Usually, he would try to unlock the house, a difficult mission given his drunkenness. Then he would come in singing self-composed songs. The one that irritated me the most was the one he sang in the Sepedi language which said that everyone loves money. The twins were now sixteen. He then woke one of them and instructed her to bring him his food.

"What's with the long face? I am the head of this family whether you like it or not. My food must be warmed up," he said. My daughter would then heat his food in the microwave and put it on the living room table for him and go back to sleep. He would then eat maybe a piece of meat and then start ranting.

"You cook rubbish. What is this? I know how to cook. I won't eat this rubbish."

Then I would listen to his staggering movements in the kitchen. He would drop a packet of frozen meat into a big pot, pour water in, place it on the stove and boil it with the packaging still on. Then he would return to the living room, still singing his songs. On some days he played his Zion Church DVDs and sang and danced to them until he fell asleep on the sofa. I would wake up, switch off the stove and lights and place a blanket on him. This was the story of my marriage. It was the same on most of the weekends he bothered to come back home. We were happier if he slept God only knows where.

The battle between father and son started the day when Moraba, then two years old, bit him on his legs when he was hitting the twins. My son did not take what his father was giving us lying down. He planned and plotted against his deeds. He dismantled the DVD player just to prevent him from playing it at night.

My husband was a very superstitious man who believed in African magic and witchcraft. He also believed in the power of the ancestors. One Saturday while he was still staging his 'you cook rubbish drama' my son sneaked out through the kitchen door with a white sheet in his hand. He wore the sheet over his body and knocked on the living room window when his father was still singing his derogatory songs. This time he had just bought himself a guitar and he was playing it.

"Who is knocking on my window? I will kill them," he said in his drunken voice. He then pulled the curtain and saw in the dark a white figure. He closed the curtain and screamed like a mad person.

"A ghost! There is a ghost," he screamed.

He ran into our bedroom and tried to wake me up.

"Anna! Wake up! There is a ghost,' he said.

"*Hey wena*! Leave me alone. There are no ghosts in this house. Are you crazy?" I said, pulling the covers over my head.

He went back to the living room and my son knocked again. I woke up and looked outside through the bathroom window and saw the white figure. I knew it had to be Moraba. He had told me that he had a plan to stop his father from waking us up. He danced and spread his hand in all directions inside the white sheet. The white figure moved like an amoeba. It really

looked like a ghost when it assumed the different shapes. I laughed and went back straight to bed. My husband came to bed two minutes later. He smelled like the beer hall, but then I was used to the smell. The ghost had sobered him up. He shook me and when I raised my head he said,

"*Mma Moraba*! I am not lying. There is a ghost outside."

"Really! Where?" I said.

"Everywhere, it is a white ghost and it is everywhere," he said.

"Maybe the ancestors were just visiting," I said.

"Why would they visit?" he said.

"I don't know. Maybe they are not satisfied with something. You should have gone out. Maybe they would have told you what they are not satisfied with," I said.

It was weird, it had been so long since we had had a conversation. That night when I swerved to change my sleeping position I found his hand wrapped around my body. I knew then that he was really shaken to his core. The following day at five in the morning he and his mom drove to Chikundu village near the Punda Maria Kruger National Park gate. Chikundu village, which was 200 kilometres away from our home, was well known for having powerful *inyangas* who were from Mozambique. They went to consult an *inyanga* about the ghost. I was never told details and outcome of the consultation but the 'you cook rubbish' drama stopped.

A new trend started: not coming back home at all. The twins and Moraba were now at tertiary institutions. The last born was boarding at a private secondary school.

Leshata did not only leave us but had taken all his salary to wherever he was staying. I later heard that he was staying with a woman who was almost half his age who had four children (not his). This woman was unemployed. I figured that he felt his financial services, and all his other services, were most needed there or were better off there.

I did all I had to do to put the children through school. It became very difficult when the twins were in their final year and Moraba was in the middle of his second year at Wits University. I realised during the second term that I was not going to be able to pay for the

three of them. I decided to negotiate with Moraba to come back home and take a break for six months. He would resume his studies the following year when the twins had completed their engineering degree. It had now been years since his father was swallowed by the village, never to be seen in his own yard.

The one thing positive about my husband's moving out was that my relationship with my mother-in-law improved. I was no longer the daughter of a wicked witch. The title was taken by Leshata's new woman. I was told that when my mother-in-law was drunk she went to the woman's house and staged a drama which included calling her the daughter of a wicked witch.

"You are an uneducated bitch, who has stolen my son from his family. I carried him for nine months alone," she said. "If he can die in that shack you call a home, I will make sure you cook him and eat him because you are eating all his money now."

My mother-in-law offered her meager pension money to help with the pocket money for the children. I refused to take it but she always gave them something secretly when they went back to school.

Moraba decided to come back a month before the time he was due to return. He had decided to take issues up with his dad, as usual. He investigated and discovered where his father was staying and went for him. Unfortunately he did not find him. He left a hot note telling him that he needed to see him urgently.

The following day when I was having my morning tea before going to work, the kitchen door opened and Leshata blasted in like a storm, primed for a fight. He looked shockingly thin with unkempt hair. His clothes were so poorly maintained that their former colour had faded to dullness. He smelled of cigarettes and dissatisfaction. He started screaming without even greeting me.

"Where is he? Who does he think he is? He thinks he is a man now and he can go about this whole village looking for me," said Leshata.

"Are you going mad? What are you talking about Leshata?"

“Why didn’t I think of this? You are the one behind it all. Where is he?’ he said walking through the passage that led to the bedrooms. A few seconds later they met in the passage, father and son.

“Hey wena? Who do you think you are? You run around the whole village hunting me like I am a criminal.” Leshata said.

“I am your son. I have every right to look for you. I want money for my school fees.”

“Why didn’t you tell your mother instead of hunting me like I am your animal? I am here to warn you. You must stop this rubbish of hunting for me.’ he said.

“Or what? My mother can’t afford to pay for all of us. I am told that I have to stay home for six months in the village doing nothing when you are alive and working,’ said my son.

“I don’t have money. What do you want me to do, kill myself? I don’t have money,’ said Leshata, raising his voice even louder when he said the word money.

I was looking at them still sitting in the kitchen table. By the time I stood up my son had bumped my husband into the wall pummelling him with hard fists non-stop on his head, face and everywhere. It was if he was at work on a punching bag. The boy was far stronger. When my husband attempted to hit back his fists fell lamely. Alcohol had finished him.

The next thing my husband was on the ground with blood pouring from his face and the boy was still kicking him. I screamed, begging him to stop. The more I screamed the harder he kicked. I grabbed him from the back. Leshata was also begging him to stop. He promised he would get him the money.

“Anna stop him, this boy will kill me,” Leshata screamed.

“*Ngwanaka* stop. Please I beg you,” I said. My son now turned his anger on me.

“Don’t stop me otherwise I’ll beat both of you. You are not the one who has to sit here for six months doing nothing when he is using his money to feed all the whores in this world. That is why he is like this because you don’t do anything. You just leave him.”

I screamed, “*Joo, nna mmawe*!” That’s when he stopped and he was now crying too.

“I want that money by Monday or else I’ll come and fix you again there where you are staying,’

He then went out through the front door. I helped my husband to stand and advised him to try African bank. They can get a loan which would be deposited into his bank account in a day or two.

“How much is needed?” he asked.

“If you can bring 5000 rands, it will help,”

“Okay,” he said humbly with his eyes protruding in an abnormal way.

The following day he brought the five thousand rands. I was watching TV with my son when he came in. He put the envelope on the table without a word and walked out.

“I am leaving tomorrow; I want you to start considering moving back home. When I come for the winter vacation I must find you here. If I don’t I will come for you again, there where you are staying, and I will hit you with all the people you are living with,” said my son.

“That’s enough; you don’t talk to your father like that. I will throw you out of my house,” I said, but my husband was already gone by then. I realised then that I had not only married a madman, I had also given birth to one.

A week later my husband came back home. I was not fully convinced that it was because of my son’s command. I suspected that things may not have been as cosy as they used to be at his other home.

This time it was just the two of us in our house. With the children at school I was prepared to work on the marriage. Marriage! Was it worth all the trouble, I thought. I needed to stick to my marriage vows. What else could I do really? No man would marry me with four children. Single life did not seem appealing because people just don’t respect women who are not married.

Leshata and I both carried a lot of pain. I dealt with it by playing the fool. That made things worse. He had drowned his pain in alcohol. It would seem the pain had now learned how to swim. We both then found the church as a way to heal. I was not sure whether it was a crutch

or opium for our pains. He stopped drinking. I no longer had to maintain stupidity to make my marriage work. The church stopped him from being abusive.

All I banked this re-birth of my marriage on was hope and faith.

Lebo's story: 1. A Young Girl's Dream Interrupted

The fact that Lebo was born into a poverty-stricken family did not hold her back from reaching out for the cheesier part of life. She never met her real father. She was conceived when her mother was fifteen years old. She was then raised by her grandparents while her mother worked as a domestic worker in the Nelspruit suburbs.

Lebo had always been a dreamer. She had always believed that she was not meant for a mediocre kind of life. Her mother, the first born, was conceived when Lebo's grandmother was thirteen. At that time she worked as a kitchen girl on a farm outside Sabie. She too had not known her real father and was raised by a step father who was a man from Malawi. Even though Lebo's mother was coloured and different from her siblings, her step-father raised her as if she was his own child. He moved the family from Sabie Township to Mandelaville informal settlement outside Hazyview, where he worked as a gardener at Sanbonani Lodge. They all lived in a three roomed shack with her two uncles and aunt.

Every day after school she went to her teacher's home to help with household chores and the baby. She was eight years old but could do all chores, including cooking. At teacher Mangena's home she got to enjoy luxuries such as sitting on a real sofa and watching television. She got to eat the 'Sunday food' every day. It was a surprise to her that people could eat vegetables and meat every day.

For Lebo to enjoy these things she did every chore given to her with utmost perfection. Teacher acknowledged that she was better and faster than the domestic worker whom she was paying. When the baby was with Lebo Teacher would forget that there was a baby in the house only to be reminded by giggles. This also earned her a chance to sleep over sometimes. Her grandmother did not have any problem with the arrangement. In fact she went around boasting to everyone.

"Lebo is now teacher Mangena's child. She is there all the time. My grand child is living like a white man there. Did you know they eat meat everyday in that house? Maybe they will take her to the big school when she finishes matric," said the proud grandmother.

At Teacher's house, Lebo got her first taste of the high life. She marvelled at the toilet and the taps in the house. Having to use toilet paper instead of newspaper was an unimagined

luxury for her. The few times that she went home the whole family would sit around the fire listening to her without swallowing any saliva.

“The toilet is in the house. You just go, close the door and do your thing,” said Lebo.

“What! In the house! What happens when you do the number two? You are lying…No! Not in the house…what about the smell,” asked her uncle who was two years older than her. They all laughed.

“Even number two, you do it in the house. There is a small well inside. You pull a lever and the water comes down and cleans the number two out of the toilet. It is not like the pit toilet where everything stays there and smells throughout. They even have a perfume in the toilet in case there is a small smell.”

Most of all she loved sleeping on the soft bed with the smooth and shiny sheets and blankets. She could not believe the softness. She was used to sleeping on the ground at home on weaved mats with her thin grey blanket. When teacher was not there, she would act as if the house was hers and walked around imitating teacher’s movements and way of speaking, lacing every sentence with an English word.

Most nights Lebo lay awake fantasizing about her future. In her vision her house would have another one on top – like the one in *The bold and the beautiful* soapie. She visualized it having a swimming pool. She saw herself as a business lady with lots of money walking around in high heels giving orders. She fell asleep to these fantasies and at times they crossed over to her dreams. Sometimes she would see herself in a dream laughing and having lunch with the people she saw on television. Then she would be woken up by a mosquito or her aunt’s leg crossing over hers. She would be so angry to be taken away from the world she felt she belonged to.

After she turned twelve she visited her mother at her work place in Nelspruit. The first thing that startled her was the dog house which was next to her mother’s cottage. A dog with a house - this is insane, she thought. The dog’s blanket looked exactly like her grey blanket back at home, only it was thicker and newer.

After helping her mother to pack groceries, Lebo picked up a grocery slip. She counted the money spent on Dog-more, cat food, tinned pet food and Bob Martin tablets. These cost more

than they spent on groceries at home. The big black fridge was unbelievable to her. The first thing I will buy when I get rich is a fridge like this one, she thought. She wondered why the white people were so thin when there was so much food in the house. She asked her mother.

“It’s that red wine that they drink with their food. Madam says it eats up all the food and make them thin,” said Lebo’s mother. Being an alcohol virgin herself Lebo was not impressed. She hated alcohol. She had never known anyone who drank to be responsible. Many other things impressed her. The flat screen television and the cable decoder were some of the wonders she saw in the big house.

The house was the type she owned in her fantasies. It was big with two other houses on top of the ground one. The house had huge windows with wooden frames, but there were no curtain in most of the rooms. They did not have the bridal dress-like voile that teacher had in every room. Instead in some of the rooms they had some grass-like panels hanging like curtains. One had to use strings to open them and close them. After a while she also learned how to open them. Whenever she got a chance she kept on pulling the strings, fascinated when they opened and closed.

Her mother was shocked by how much she knew about house work and cooking. She made lasagne and Greek salad. The white family were impressed and preferred her cooking. When she was done cleaning she would run around with a towel and pantyhose, rubbing all the mirrors and shiny surfaces to perfection. Her mother made her wear one of her overalls with a matching head scarf. The spinach coloured overall hung loose. She looked like a stick in it.

She had her mother’s peach complexion but her hair was not as fluffy as hers. Her beautifully crafted braids protruded a little bit from the scarf. Her big round eyes were accentuated by her long eyelashes. Even in the ugly oversized overall her beauty could not be concealed. The madam once told her that she was pretty.

“You are like a white person dipped in chocolate,” said the madam.

Everytime Lebo heard the madam’s car coming, she would run to the garage with her overall sweeping the ground. Then she would stand by the car licking her forefinger shyly while she waited for them to get out. With her ready-smile she carried their bags or whatever they had brought with them into the house.

“Oh shame! Maria must stop making you wear that thing,” said the madam. Lebo thought that it was weird that they all called her mother by her first name. In her village it was rare to find adults called by their first names. It was regarded as disrespectful. They would rather call you by your child’s name – like *MmagoLebo* or *PapagoLebo*.

One thing that hurt her the most was how their two sons, one her age and the other a year older, never talked to her. They treated her as if she was invisible. They will one day wish they had befriended me, she thought. When she cooked meals for them she was at times tempted to spit saliva into them to get revenge. Every now and then they would come to the servant’s quarters after hours and shouted from outside without knocking.

“Maria!”

“Yes, what will I does for you?” Her mother said mixing her tenses.

“Did you wash my black takkies? I can’t find them in my room.” Her mother would then hurry up back into the main house to look for them. Lebo was surprised at how dependent the boys were. When I am rich I am not going to let my children be this spoiled, she thought.

When her mother came back she said, “*Mma,* me, when I am rich my children won’t be like these boys. They don’t even know how to wash their own underwear.”

“Dream on my girl. Your children will wash underwear because there will be no one to wash them for them. You will never be rich. If it was that easy we will all be rich. These people did not start now to be rich. Their grandparents’ grandparents were also rich. And *wena*, who was ever been rich in your family? You are going to follow the same road as me and your grandmother. You can’t escape it. The sooner you accept the better. I am just happy that you are not lazy; you know the white man’s work. Your children won’t die of hunger.”

“Never compare me to you… I am not you… I am going to have a business. You will see I am going to be rich like them,” Lebo told her mother.

“Ha! Ha! Ha!” her mother laughed hysterically. From that day on she stopped sharing her ambition with her mother. In the evening when they were in the servant’s quarters she preferred that they watched television instead of talking. My mother can never see things the way I do, that is why she is poor, Lebo thought. The cottage was very comfortable – better than her grandmother’s shack. There was a bath with a shower at the top and hot water.

There was a two plate stove with an oven and a grocery cabinet at the corner. There was a light that had a big rod that rotated and produced fresh air. This was something that was not there in teacher's house. And on the far corner there were boxes.

Lebo's mom collected all kinds of things that the white people threw away – ice cream containers, mayonnaise bottles, almost finished tooth paste, magazines and so on. Lebo felt pity for her mother. She understood that this was the result of never having had much. It creates an inability to let go of things even when they are useless.

On another box there was a tray where she dried all the left over bread and rolls. Whenever she went home she took along with her boxes full of dried bread cut in the shapes of rusks. For a week then the family would have a break from eating porridge in the mornings with their tea.

Lebo was at her happiest on the nights when her mother disappeared. She would go out after watching *Generations* on television as if she was going for a walk and then come back in the morning at five. The day Lebo had arrived her mother introduced her to Uncle Peter, who was the gardener next door. She wondered if her disappearance had something to do with him.

Many things fascinated her at her mother's work. In those two weeks she learned a lot about the high life. Until then she had daydreamed of having a business but had no idea what type of business. The white family's gardener, Olwethu, who came once a week, told her that the boss was an engineer and he owned a construction company. He also told her that they owned trucks that transported thing to faraway places. The gardener also worked at the boss's business office. There and then she decided that this would be the business she was going to have. Olwethu also told her that the boss was making a lot of money. She wondered why Boss could not build her mom a three roomed house. That would cost him nothing, he had lots of money, she thought. Lebo wondered if the white family knew they were staying in a shack. Her mother had worked for them for eleven years but boss and madam they don't even know where she stayed.

One weekend during her visit the white family went away. She walked around in the main house giving instructions to invisible servants, acting as if she had bought the house and she was the madam. She kissed an imaginary husband.

"Hello darling. Mxa! How was your day darling? I love you," she then turned and took a glass from the shelf and said,

"Maria, this glass is not sparkling. Come, go wash it again."

She walked as if she was wearing high heels, poking the top of cabinets with her finger.

"Hey, you have not dusted. What is this?"

She then stood in front of the mirror on the patio and watched herself talking like the madam. She was fascinated by the madam's behaviour. It resembled that of the people she saw on TV. They kissed and always said I love you openly. It surprised Lebo because in her village the only people who kissed openly were the 'good for nothing' drunk girls at the tavern. Even with those, it was not that common. She practically lived with teacher and her husband, but she had never seen the two kissing or saying I love you to each other. It would seem that her mother had her madam's ways.

"I love you my girl," she would say after a conversation with Lebo on the phone. For a while it disturbed her a lot. She thought her mother could be dying or something. It was such a relief to finally understand where it came from.

Lebo lived in a world of her own. She lived for tomorrow. Before she went back home the madam gave her five hundred rands and clothes that she no longer wore. She was very happy. It was the first time that she had earned money and it felt great. All she thought was that it was the beginning – she would earn a lot more.

Everyone was happy to see her when she returned home.

"Ah Lebo, working for *lekgowa* for just two weeks and now you look like them. *Bona*, you are more yellow than when you left," they teased her at home. She could not wait see Teacher. After telling everyone the Nelspruit stories she went to teacher's house in town.

"Look at you. You have gained weight. As if we don't feed you here. My children missed you a lot," said teacher. She laughed and told teacher everything.

"I now know how to make cheese, mushroom and white sauce. I know how to bake carrot and black forest cake; and also many types of muffin. Tomorrow I will bake the carrot cake for your children. I bought the ingredients with the money I earned," Lebo said. Teacher was

happy to see her but irritated by the fact that Lebo now seemed to think she knew more than her.

“Eish, you came at the right time; there are some clothes that need to be washed. Check the basket in the bathroom,” she said. Lebo was quick to pick up her distaste and refrained from showing her the new clothes. Lebo had a sensitivity that was always attuned.

She navigated her way into comfort through her smile and hard work. For her to remain enjoying what the affluent can offer she excelled in housework and cheerfulness. When she was fifteen this earned her an invitation to live with Teacher’s sister Sindi.

“I like this girl. She is effective and clever. She can help me with the children when I am on call. I can find her a school,” said Sindi when she visited Teacher from Johannesburg.

After informing Lebo’s grandmother, Sindi took Lebo with her back to her home the same weekend. Sindi and her husband were both doctors. Although Lebo missed home a lot she was okay in Johannesburg. Things became complicated a year after her arrival. She was now ripe with hips, a tight beautiful behind and neat well poised breasts. There was a lovely rhythm in her hips that made her skirt swell out and sway around her as she walked.

At home although a lot of the boys in the village tried their luck with her she was never interested. She did not have the time to spare as she was always at teacher’s house. She knew that if she pursued boys her dream of being rich would evaporate like frost when the sun came out. She would fall pregnant and go to work full-time as a domestic worker. She saw boys as a complete waste of time. Teacher also told her that there would be plenty of time for boys when she had finished school and became a teacher. She told her that she will meet a perfect husband like hers. Lebo never discussed her dream to be in the construction business with teacher.

One time when she visited her mother, boss asked her what she wanted to do when she had finished school. She told him that she wanted to own a construction business. Boss did not say anything, but laughed hysterically and called out his wife.

“Honey! Listen to this. Mary wants to be in the construction business.”

“She had better work hard. Maybe someday wishes will indeed be horses,” she said, laughing. They had given her a new name. Madam said the name Lebo confused her and it was difficult to remember. She decided to call her Mary.

“Mary, the construction business woman,” said Boss sarcastically, shaking his head.

Lebo was taken aback. She did not understand all the mockery but she knew something was not right with their response. From that day on she decided to keep her dreams to herself.

In Johannesburg she worked hard to please, as usual. This time, her ready-smile was misread by her new boss, Lucky Mabuza, Sindi’s husband. Sindi and Lucky were often on call on the same days and sometimes on different days. Lebo hero-worshipped both of them. They gave her hope. Looking at them and all that they had she knew it was possible to be successful. She looked up to Lucky even more because he also came from a poor family in Kwa-Zulu Natal, just like her. On the nights that Sindi worked she would serve Lucky supper. Then she bathed the children and put them to bed.

“Lebo! Lebo!” Lucky called her one night from the living room. It was quiet in the house. She ran to him.

“*Buti* Lucky,” she said with her ready radiant smile.

“Please make me some tea.”

“Rooibos or Five Roses?” Lebo asked.

“ No, chamomile. You'll see it. It's got chamomile written on it,” said Lucky.

“Okay.”

Lebo was already in her black satin pyjamas and the morning gown that Madam had given her. She brought the tea in a white pot with fresh warm milk and white sugar in a white bowl. It was all neatly tucked in a tray covered with a white cloth with everything spotlessly clean. She knelt down and put the tray on the glass coffee table in front of him. Lucky looked at her and noticed again how pretty and perfect she looked. There was a devil and an angel in him. The devil told him he could fulfil his selfish needs with the young girl and that no one would ever find out. The angel said you love your wife, you can’t do that. The angel also told him that he was not the kind of man that could take advantage of a sixteen year old. The two

continued to live together in him, fighting and he could feel that the angel was getting weaker.

All he thought about most of the time was Lebo. At times he had seen himself touching her in his dreams. He could sense she was a virgin. He had never tasted a virgin before. He fantasized about touching her perfect breasts and being the first man to get into her. The urge took him over like a black tide. His thing grew stronger from just imagining. As she knelt in front of him, transferring things from the tray to the table, he could see her breasts from the gap between the buttons of her pyjama top. He lost control of his body. Betrayed he felt things he did not want to feel. He could smell the perfume of her body lotion. He wanted to lick her everywhere.

He stood up and went to the loo. In the toilet he prayed, repeating "Don't lead me into temptation. Don't lead me into temptation. Please God, don't lead me into temptation."
I am not an animal, he thought. I can fight this – I am stronger than it – I can't be controlled by my libido! These statements swung in his brain like a merry-go-round. He went back to the living room. He phoned his wife. He told her he loved her. He felt like he was convincing himself. Then another thought entered his mind. I must bring Lebo back to the living room, sit with her, and get used to her. It's the only way to fight this urge. I am stronger than it.

"Lebo! Lebo!" He called out aloud. She answered from the kitchen,

"*Buti* Lucky,"

"Are you busy?"

"No *buti*. Do you want me to do something for you?" replied Lebo smiling innocently. The words 'can I sleep with you' lingered in his head, even though he could never say such a thing to any woman – not even a prostitute. He respected women.

"Sit down," he said. She sat down. She thought maybe she had done something wrong. She did not even dream he could be attracted to her. In her opinion people like him would never find poor people like her attractive – not when he had a wife who was a doctor. One day is one day. When I am rich I would date men like him. Who knows? Maybe, even better than him, she thought. She looked at him with question mark eyes.

"Did I do something wrong *buti?"* she asked.

“No my girl, I just wanted to talk to you,” said Lucky. She was happy because she also wanted to ask him more questions about how he managed to redeem himself from the poverty that he was born into. He asked her what she wanted to do after she had completed Grade 12. She looked into his eyes and she saw compassion. This is person that can understand my dreams, she thought. She told him everything and he seemed impressed. For the first time someone believed she could do it.

“You can be anything you want to be. What you need is education,” he said. He told her that she had to focus mostly on the commerce stream. Then she asked him how he managed to study at university. He told her about bursaries and grants that he got. He also told her that the government had provided grants to help young people to start their own businesses. He opened his laptop and went through Umsombomvu and the Kula trust websites with her. It was the first time she had touched a computer. Even though she was not operating it she read the information and he showed her the buttons for scrolling. She felt important. She caressed the buttons like they were a new born baby. After a while he asked her if she had a boyfriend or had ever had one.

“I think boys will spoil my future. I will have a boyfriend when I am done with school and starting my business,” she said with a serious face.

“That is why I am asking you, I wanted to warn you about them. They are dangerous. When you are here you are safe. But when you are at home you must look after yourself.”

That night they both did not sleep. Lucky spent the whole night masturbating. Since Lebo had come to Johannesburg it had been very hard for her to fantasize the way she always did while she was at home. It could be because there was more work in Sindi’s house. She was always tired when she went to sleep. Or it could be the fact that there were no mosquitoes here and the bed was comfortable. That night she laid awake thinking about all the information *buti* Lucky had given her. And her heart was warmed by the fact that he believed in her dreams. She developed a soft spot for him.

This was how their friendship started. Lucky always looked forward to the nights when his wife worked. He no longer scheduled night shift work hours the same as hers. He would come back home wait for Lebo to take the children to sleep and then they would have their chat. She had become his best friend. They talked for hours. She listened most of the time. He

liked the fact that she was sincerely impressed by everything he told her. He knew most women pretended to be for many reasons. She was a breath of fresh air for him. Unlike the so-called empowered women she was not complicated. They drank chamomile tea together. Some days he would bring a few beers and drink them while she drank the chamomile. The most frustrating thing about their friendship was that it diminished when Sindi was there.

The hero-worshipping grew stronger with each day they spent talking. There is a thin line between admiration and attraction. She also developed feeling which she almost successfully suppressed. She saw him as a redeemer...the most knowledgeable man she had ever met. She thought he was even cleverer than her mother's boss. Lucky's mother had been a domestic worker.

"My mother worked for white people her whole life but died poor. The family she worked for did not even come to her funeral," he revealed to her.

They shared jokes about the white people their mothers had worked for. He too worked as a gardener for his mother's bosses. Lebo concealed the new feeling she felt for *buti* Lucky. She remained very respectful to his wife who was abusive and rude to her all the time. She was so different from Teacher. She worked her like a slave. The children were very young and all it meant was that Lucky was her only friend. At times they would go for weeks without their talk. She always held on to the previous one. At times he would stand next to her on the kitchen sink rinsing his favourite coffee mug in the morning. When he turned their sides touched. She felt a thrill which she could not understand.

On a night when Sindi was on call, Lucky came home drunk after hanging with friends at the Market Theatre. He poured himself more whisky in the kitchen and went straight to Lebo's room. He told her all the things he wanted to say to. He promised her that he would help her achieve her dreams because he loved her. He would redeem her from her poverty. He made all promises that every man that wanted sex could make. He dangled the future in order to get what he wanted.

Drunk as he was, he stated his case in a dignified way. There was something academic even in the way he said her eyes were beautiful. He had a way of making a woman feel like an ancient and knowledgeable queen of love. He quoted Shakespeare and poets she had never

heard of. That night the devil in him won their battle. They slept in Lebo's room. His round and ripe belly, a blatant sign of middle age indulgence, spread all over the single-bed.

Lucky did not last a minute in her and it was all over. He did not know whether to blame the alcohol or overexcitement. Lebo did not even know that it had been disastrous. She did not know how it was supposed to have been, it was her first time. He promised her that it was going to be better the next time. In the morning she watched him sleeping with his mouth open snoring. She then woke him up to go to his room as Sindi would be coming back anytime and the children might wake up.

In the morning when he drove to work he felt like he had conquered Mount Everest. All he knew is that he felt good. He did not know how this whole thing would run but he knew he could not abandon her. That was the beginning of their affair which ran like that for three years.

Most mornings he waited for Sindi to leave in the morning and then had an hour with Lebo before going to work. He was obsessed. Lebo was puzzled by his unchanged behaviour when Sindi was around. He did not pretend to be natural. He was natural as if nothing else was going on. Lebo too, moved through the whirling impression without falter. She underwent intense and tingling betrayal. Everything that she thought of as love was put away. Her affection for Lucky ballooned and wrapped her skin. Yet it also tormented her that she was taking the caresses and closeness that belonged by law, to another woman.

Lucky, devoured by passion, became incredibly possessive, allowing her to only go home when they went to visit his in-laws in Hazyview. Even then he would sneak out to check if she was at her grand-mothers. He would bring groceries for Lebo's family - a bribe they took so well. He brought more than they were able to buy for themselves. Amongst other things there would be fresh bread, something they ate not more than ten times in a year. Although Lebo's grandmother received him warmly she would say,

"This man thinks I was born yesterday, I can see what he is up to. You must be careful. If the wife finds out she will kill you with her bare hands or *muti*."

"What are you talking about *koko* (grandmother)? That man is my boss," Lebo said.

“I am not an idiot. Anyway who knows, maybe he will take you to big school when you finish matric.”

Lucky was a lucky man who had his cake and ate it. One September morning when Lebo was in matric, Lucky received a text message from her telling him that she had not had her periods for four months. He phoned her back.

“Why did you wait for so long to tell me?” he said.

He could not concentrate at work and excused himself and went home immediately. He would examine her and if indeed she was four or five months pregnant he would be able to detect without a pregnancy test. Lebo had just been disillusioned about him. He was no longer paying a lot of attention to her. She was not happy at all. Her fantasies now seemed far-fetched. She was eighteen and was in love with a man that could never be hers.

“I will arrange for you to get an abortion at Mary Stopes Clinic,” he said.

“I will never have an abortion, my mother never aborted me at fifteen and I won’t abort a child,” Lebo said.

“That is because when your mother conceived you abortion was illegal,” he said, “You know you can’t keep that child. What about your dreams? This child will ruin your future; you will end up a domestic worker like your mother and grandmother.”

She was disappointed. She wanted him to be happy and say he would support her with the child. Now she doubted him. He had known her innocence and traded on it to get what he wanted. He told her that if his wife ever found out it would be the end of her!

“You can look forward to a life of washing dishes and cleaning shit inside other people’s toilet,” he said.

She refused to have the abortion and he didn’t touch her again. She told Sindi a boy from home was the father. Lucky tortured her by flaunting his love for his wife. On Saturdays he would shout for her to bring them coffee and breakfast in bed. She would find them snuggling. She missed her grandmother’s three-roomed shack. When she returned home in December she found the new four – roomed house her mother had been building was completed.

She was angry with him and herself. She felt tempted to spill the beans, but refrained from doing so. She feared the pregnancy might be the end of her dream. No, I will not let it be, she thought. She buried herself in books, preparing for her Matric exams. After the exams she went home for good. She avoided Teacher because of guilt and shame.

When she told her grandmother about the pregnancy and Lucky's reaction she said,

"I am happy you did not kill the baby. If he does not want to be involved leave him. Don't force him. The child will grow. It would not be the first child to be rejected. Look at you; you didn't die from not having a father. You are now a full woman."

Lebo passed matric and gave birth to a baby boy on New Year's Day. She then found a job as a lawyer's receptionist. To her grandmother and her mother this was the best job. They praised God with so many words, thanking him for elevating their daughter who had been abandoned by the father of her child.

"God is better than witches," said Lebo's grandmother.

As for Lebo, the job was a bridge to her dream. At the practice, when it was not busy, she spent her time daydreaming and researching the construction business.

One day my dream will happen. One day is one day, she thought.

Lebo's Story: 2 it's My Turn to Eat

It was no longer necessary to be a cheerleader, chef, maid and whore to people who couldn't care less about her. Her whole life she had felt like she was walking in waist-high sand, as if she was dreaming the right dreams at the wrong time and having a blind date with the future. Now it was the right time. Lebo did not have to swallow things.

Her grandmother always said to everyone, "My granddaughter is richer than the white people. When I go with her to do shopping she pays with a small yellow card and they give her everything we have bought. She told me she is going to buy her mother's boss's house. Hey God is really better than witches. Look, she has built us such a big house with a tile roof. You can't hear the rain from inside the house, really it is a miracle."

She went on and on telling neighbours, teachers and everyone that mattered to her, or anyone who would listen.

"I am afraid that people will bewitch her. You know when she buys groceries she buys in boxes – as if she wants to put the shop out of business. She even stopped her mother from working," Lebo's grandmother would say with signs of distress on her face.

Few villagers were really impressed while most of them were aghast. Many questions were aroused. The educated, mostly nurses and teachers, would ask if she ever finished her tertiary education. Most people in the laid-back rural settlement of Mandelaville simply asked where she was getting the money from, insinuating that it might be illegally. Others would watch out for her car when she came to visit her grandmother and requested her to hire their children or connect them to whatever she was doing.

"The cows must graze heading home. You can't eat out there alone. You must not forget those you grew up with," they would say. Wealth is revered in the poor villages. Lebo had turned from a young woman who used to do her teacher's laundry just to get a decent meal to a god in the eyes of the villagers. She now had many cars, graders, tractors and trucks.

Every now and then she brought with her a grader to come and re-gravel the road to her grandmother's place. She said the road was not good for her new Volvo. Children and adults

gathered around her cars when she came to the village to attend funerals and other important happenings. Some would ask her about her business. A young girl or boy would ask,

"*Aus* Lebo how is the construction business? I am also interested in it. Can you give me tips on how I can do it?"

"If anyone comes to you and says they want to put you in the construction business, you must run. It is not easy. You work like a slave," Lebo normally responded.

She never missed occasions where she knew her former teachers would be present. She loved the look in their eyes when they saw her. Every time she arrived in a different car. At times she would hire a Mercedes Benz just to arrive in a car they did not know.

She loved it when one of the male teachers would comment, "That is a big machine, young girl. It is for old men like me. But you know teaching; the government does not pay much. I will probably buy it with my pension money."

"That is why I never wanted to be a teacher because I like nice things," said Lebo.

She appreciated the fact that she did not have to survive by flattering the vanity of mankind. The wealth had also earned her insensitivity and verbal diarrhoea. Most people in the village gradually distanced themselves from her, sensing her world to be disturbingly distant from theirs. That is because she spoke to most of them as if they had no feelings, revealing their weaknesses in front of everyone. And because she had money people laughed it off as if it was nothing.

Lebo's mother was now married to Uncle Peter, her gardener boyfriend. She had three other children. Lebo bought her a six roomed house at Shatale Township where she lived with her family. She also purchased a van for them. She advised them to sell fruits and vegetables to hawkers in the township. Her mother and her husband worshipped the ground she walked on. When she came to visit them they all jumped around to make sure they got all the things she liked. These were simple things like fat cakes from the market, chicken feet with sour porridge and Fanta orange. Lebo's stepfather used to be abusive to her mother when he was drunk but after he got the van he never laid his hands on her. Lebo paid a driving school to teach him how to drive. He was now a successful fruit hawker in the township, having worked as a gardener his whole life.

“I am the first in my family to have a car,” he boasted.

Lebo liked him because he provided a father figure for her. She felt she was like all her friends in Nelspruit who always talked about their fathers.

Three years earlier she had enrolled for the Seda Learnership, a government initiative to empower the previously disadvantaged to own construction companies. They were trained for six months and given small contracts for a year before being emancipated to do their own thing. From the group of thirty trainees she was the only one who was doing well. With most of the contractors, Seda had to intervene to save them from bankruptcy. When they received initial payments for their first jobs a lot of them became extravagant. They bought cars and rented houses in town instead of paying bills and saving for the next project. Many of them fell into new habits of eating out and entertaining friends. They also spent a lot on designer clothing. The next thing they could not even pay their workers and ended up doing shabby construction work on the project given to them.

Lebo was fortunate because when she started the business she had been approached by her mother’s boss who proposed they work together. His business was not doing well because construction jobs were now being allocated in accordance with BEE (black economic empowerment) policies. White males were classified as previously advantaged. Lebo knew that she would be somewhere someday, but she had never imagined he would be at her mercy. It took her a week to respond to his request. She consulted an *inyanga* and her priest. They both assured her that it was a good move because the white man was experienced. They warned her never to waiver her right to the finances over to him. She agreed to do business, provided he sold her his house if they made profit of five million each. The deal was sealed. Lebo brought in the lawyer she used to work for as a receptionist to draw up a contract.

From there on Lebo was not only hero-worshipped by the people from her home village, but also the family her mother worked for, whose house she used to clean during her holiday visits. Their two boys who never used to talk to her were now able to sit at a dinner table and attempt small talk with her. In the past they had treated her as if she was invisible. She told them they were having it easy studying in their mother tongue at Stellenbosch University.

“If I could learn in my mother tongue I could finish a four year degree in two,” she would say.

Now their study fees come from my deals and they are warming up to me, she said to herself. When she took in their father he was deep in debt and going down. To have Mr Piet de Kock as a silent partner proved to be a wise business decision. He handled most things – the admin work, marketing and the construction itself. Lebo handled recruitment of staff, the finances and also showed her face when necessary for site inspections and government meetings. Piet was a qualified engineer and knew a lot more about business management. He coached her on all that had to be done and on which tenders were available. She would use her charm or even pay the *tshotsho* (kickback) to secure them. They were a good team. Money flowed in and, unlike with most inexperienced black contractors, the jobs were well done. The de Kock family now regarded Lebo as one of them.

“Lebo is my god-sent daughter. We work well together,” said Piet when people asked questions on how they came to be so close. He was always animated when he mentioned this, as though he needed to prove his open-mindedness to himself. It was important for his survival not to project himself as the kind of white person that saw black people as idiots. For every deal, they went fifty-fifty. In less than two years they had both profited more than eight million each. Lebo had earned herself a good reputation and an award from the Department of Transport.

In Nelspruit city, which was an hour’s drive from her home village, she was not the only rich young person. Her grandmother agreed with her that it was the best place to stay, even though their reasons were not the same. Lebo thought it was good for business and her grandmother was happy that they wouldn’t bewitch her there because they didn’t know her poor background.

The psychological scars of her childhood suffering remained with Lebo. They haunted her, denying her complete happiness and peace. She still had an incurably low self esteem. Her life mostly revolved around proving a point, especially to those who undermined her in the past and those who still attempted to do so.

I have to discipline those who look down upon me by showing them that they are nothing, she often said to herself. The fact that she did not have tertiary education did not make it easy for her. In Nelspruit most people were highly educated and at times in social setups they would hold those clever conversations about politics and economics. She did not participate for fear of appearing stupid. She just over-smiled and nodded a lot. To avoid being looked

down upon she had told all her new friends that she was an engineer by profession. At times she believed that some people who were jealous of her always initiated these conversations to make her feel excluded. She told Piet and asked him how she could overcome this problem, especially because she still misused tenses when she spoke English. She desperately wanted to fit in. Piet, who also was not a first language speaker of English, understood. He organised the woman who used to tutor his boys when they were at secondary school to give her lessons, and advised her to read newspapers and books.

Having purchased Piet's house she felt the need to flaunt it – to show how far she had come. She hired an interior decorator (a friend of Piet) who recommended repainting the house in fashionable earth colours. A good painter, Mr Gous (another of Piet's connections) was contracted to do the job. She spent two hundred thousand rands on new furniture. She transformed the kitchen and changed the cabinets from oak to black with a grey marble finish. She also bought a black double door frost-free fridge.

After all was set up she decided to host a roof-wetting party. She invited everyone that mattered, especially those she had felt under-esteemed her. The servants' rooms were almost the size of a normal house. Lebo was the kind of person that acknowledged the humanity of those who serve her. Her helpers were well provided for.

She was heartened by the looks in people's eyes when they came in. She had hired a caterer (also from Piet's hive) to do all the cooking and serving. She had bought her domestic worker a new maid suit. The garden boy looked like a prisoner in his brand new orange work suit.

"You must keep the house neat even when the visitors are here. I don't want to see spilt wine or empty glasses or dirt in the garden."

The garden was immaculate, as was the big pool which was at the foot of the small hill next to the house. The palm leaves in the garden were shining as if someone had put Vaseline on them. Piet's wife brought flowers, glasses, plates and tablecloth. She arranged them prettily through the endless living area.

Some of the rooms in the house were furnished in such a way that there was not a trace of personality in them. The furniture in the bedrooms reminded one of an over made up face. Although one could see that the furniture in the living area was expensive, it had the spiritlessness of an office.

Lebo's huge bedroom had several doors opening to a Jacuzzi, steam room, study, gym and a walk-in wardrobe. The furniture was designed and made according to her specifications – dark wood laced with marble finishing. The bed was big and round with special designer bedding. Despite this, Lebo preferred sleeping on the floor most days.

The guests were already arriving when Piet and his son came in with all the alcohol for the day. He had bought only the most expensive; Johnny Walker Blue Label, Moet Champaign and boxes of other stuff. Even though Lebo ate only traditional food and consumed no alcohol, she made sure that her guests chewed and drank the finest.

Despite being a committed opponent of organised eating she had instructed the caterer to arrange serving points and tables inside and outside the house. She was the kind of person that ate pap and meat for breakfast directly from the pot and cornflakes in the evening in a salad bowl.

On the entrance patio guests were welcomed with glasses of rum and sherry and all kinds of *hors d'oeuvres*. Everyone was surprised and impressed that it seemed to be white people managing the party. Even though some guests displayed sarcastic and condescending smiles, most of them were generous with praise. I will show them, they think they are educated. I will teach them a thing or two, she said to herself.

Although the educated intimidated Lebo, she believed that proximity to them made her educated. There were doctors, lawyers, engineers, politicians, you name it. Nelspruit and its mistresses were there. Almost a hundred and fifty people filled her house and yard. They were in the pool house, on the hilltop gazebos, on the plant-decorated balconies and verandas. Piet and his sons helped to grill the meat outside. Disdain was written on the boys' faces. They tried very hard to hide it. They knew better than to show it. It would be like biting the finger with which their mother fed them with.

Most of the guests were dumbfounded. Her relatives were shocked when Piet later took some of them to sleep on his farm in his guest house.

"Lebo, the *inyanga* that you consult with is strong – otherwise there is no way that a white man can be this kind to blacks – allow you to sleep in his blankets. I don't think you

consulted a South African *inyanga*, they can't do this. It had to be a Mozambican or Zimbabwean," said Lebo's stepfather, "I worked for white people for many years. I know them very well. They never behave like this."

"*Papa*, don't say such things. My pastor is here. I pray. I don't do *inyangas*," Lebo whispered in his ear. Lebo had invited a few people from her village – her relatives and her teacher. She walked buoyantly in and out of the house wearing a happily expectant expression. Her mission to please and impress was accomplished.

It was a clear summer's day and the sun spilled its yellow into all the rooms through the big wooden window frames and balconies. Lebo hoped this light spilled into her guests' hearts too.

"Did you see them, I have knocked them below the belt. No one will ever undermine me," she said to her domestic worker.

Lebo's learned friends curbed their sophisticated cynicism and resentment until they were drunk from the whisky and wine. They had grouped themselves in the upstairs living room which had a bar and a spacious balcony. They owned the place. Anyone who was not in their league could not last two minutes in there. Most of them had no tolerance for cerebral lightweights – excluding Lebo who was an exception to that rule. If you were not educated you would get a headache from listening to them throwing big English words about as if the language belonged to them. The rest of the guests were mesmerised by their surroundings.

Lebo's erudite friends acknowledged the household luxuries with a pinch of pepper.

"Yaa! Although it might be considered stylish to be served by whites, it does not feel sensible," said Ntombi, a socialite business woman.

"I agree. She could have given the business to her fellow blacks who really need jobs," said Joe Zulu, a manager of the Riverside Mall who was known for his fondness for radical rhetoric. One would have expected him to be on Lebo's side as he and his family had been staying in Lebo's townhouse for five months, but had yet to pay a cent for rent. Lebo came in when the topic of houses featured in Top Billing television programme cropped up. Ntombi highlighted that taste is important when you decorate a house. She pointed out that some people naturally did not have taste.

“Who needs taste when you can pay someone with taste to decorate for you? If you have money you will have taste. After all taste without money is useless,” said Lebo.

“Lebo, I like your furniture. It is exclusive; you just need to add a little colour. The beige and brown are too dull for me,” said Ntombi, launching a thinly veiled personal attack.

“Then it’s a good thing you don’t live here. You can do colour in your own house,” said Lebo unleashing a little of her rural skill at retaliation.

“You know what! Colour is good. It brings warmth into the room. Put in a little orange, lime or turquoise you’ll see what difference it brings,” insisted Ntombi. Lebo felt leadenness in her chest. I am being undermined here, in my own house, she thought. She decided to ignore her, but Ntombi persisted. The filter mechanism between her brain and mouth was defiantly misfiring. The others could tell that she was crossing a line and did not attempt to rescue her.

“Do you sometimes watch Top Billing? If you watch it you will understand what I mean. Try also to buy magazines like House and Leisure and Garden and Home,” reiterated Ntombi.

“Look Ntombi, I invited you here to come and rejoice with me. I did not know that you would come to criticise my decor,” said Lebo.

“No Lebo, don’t take it bad. We would not be good friends if we don’t offer good advice,” said Ntombi in the same tone Lebo used with people in the village. She knew and understood that tone very well, and it enraged her.

“Ntombi, I’m afraid you will have to leave. I was under the impression I had invited friends and I don’t think you are one of them. And don’t forget about the money you owe me which you ignored paying back. I want it by month end.” More than half of them in the room owed Lebo something and she looked at them with special intent, notably at Joe.

Her eyes tracked theirs, and she left the room. Ntombi wanted to rally support but was disowned like the prodigal son. People changed the topic. Despite feeling dropped like a hot potato, she stood firm. Ten minutes later Lebo’s step father and step uncle - both of whom would have killed for Lebo – approached Ntombi.

“*Sesi!* I think it would be best if you leave now peacefully before we show you how we deal with jealous people like you in our village,” said Lebo’s uncle. The others continued with their conversations as if nothing was happening. Ntombi reached for her bag. Her white jump

suit was flowered by drips of the red wine. She walked out without any good byes. She might have attempted bad byes if there were such a thing. She met Lebo in the kitchen. She wanted to apologise or clear the air.

“Lebo, I am sorry,” she said.

“*Sesi*, Don’t waste our time. Get out,” said Lebo’s domestic worker.

“Hey you *straat meisie*, can’t you see I am not your type? I am talking to Lebo, not you,” said Ntombi.

“Ntombi, I don’t want to talk to a piece of rubbish like you. You heard her, get out,” said Lebo.

The domestic worker and Lebo pushed her outside. All hell broke loose – most of it from Ntombi’s mouth.

“You call me rubbish but the real rubbish is you bitch. I don’t sleep with white people to get rich. Look at you, you are just a white man’ grader. Nothing else, stupid bitch!” shouted Ntombi.

She was now being carried like an eighty kilogram bag of mealie-meal. They threw her outside the gate where her car was parked. Everyone was now watching the drama from the balconies and patios.

“Lebo! You don’t know me. You will pay for this. You illiterate bitch,” she howled volcanically.

Ntombi was not the kind of person who took things lying down. She was well connected in Nelspruit. She did all she could to drag Lebo’s name into the sewer. She had taken pictures during the party and she immediately forwarded them to a journalist working for the Lowvelder (a local newspaper). She released information about Lebo fronting for white men who were making a fortune which they didn’t deserve through her.

Even after the party, on which she had spent fifty thousand rands for catering and alcohol. Lebo felt insecure.

On Tuesday early in the morning she received a call from Joe telling her to buy the Lowvelder. She could sense a scandal in the air. She almost fainted when she read the article,

knowing it was Ntombi's doing. Without delay she went to her *inyanga* whom she instructed to make Ntombi go nuts. The *inyanga* gave her some ash-like concoction to go and spread in her yard.

She decided to go and see her grandmother that afternoon. On the way there she checked on her friend whom she used to work with at the lawyer's office.

"Lebo I am happy you came. A woman called Ntombi came here asking questions about you," said Lebo's friend.

"She is crazy that one. She is trying to destroy me."

Her friend told her that Ntombi has been spreading bad rumours about her in the village.

"She goes about telling people that *wena* you are having an affair with an old white man. She said that all the things you claim are yours belong to the white man. She has told people that you use your buttocks to get riches."

When Lebo left the surgery she cried bitterly in the car. She could not understand why her own people were not happy about her success. When she told her grandmother that they said she uses her buttocks to get riches her grandmother replied,

"They must leave you alone my child. No one is stopping them to use their own buttocks. If their buttocks can't work for them it is not your fault. You can't be blamed if their buttocks are not nice," said her grandmother.

That day Lebo realised what a huge task it was to keep everyone impressed. She also realised that the civilised world was not as fancy as it seemed on the surface. It was narrow, stifling and full of petty prejudice. She now started dreaming new dreams. She gave up on being a social giant and withdrew into herself. Her new dream was to go back to school. To become an engineer she knew Piet would help her. She daydreamed and saw herself in a white lab coat at Wits University.

She had spread the *inyanga's* mixture on her gate and garden. Months later when she had forgotten about their feud, Joe told her that Ntombi had been admitted at Weskoppies mental hospital.

She wondered what had really worked – her prayers or the *inyanga's* concoction. Now no one dared take the risk of undermining her.

Lebo had become a replica of the inner demons she had struggled against. The door to her dream-world stood ajar some time, and then shut tight.

The vicious circle

I am not sure why I agreed when Adichie invited me to go for a picnic at a nature reserve next to Port Alfred with him and his Norwegian friend. A combination of my friend Adichie, a Nigerian PHD student at Rhodes and his friend Peter, a professor in the Sociology Department were more than I could handle at a time. It was impossible for those two to get out of their academic mode.

It was a clear November Sunday with the sun blazing its full warm rays. Adichie and Peter sat in the front seat of the Toyota Conquest while I sat on the back with Peter's two children. I was quiet most of the trip. My silence made them edgy because they knew me to be chatty.

"Are you fine?" asked Adichie.

"I am fine. Don't mind me I am just a little bit exhausted," I said.

The truth was that I was intimidated by the two academics' seriousness and lack of humour. I was afraid that spending a lot of time with them would make me lose my ability to laugh. Nothing would be more painful to me than that. Laughter is all I have. My humour is an essential pressure valve. It's the language of my soul. I was not in the mood to fight intellectual wars. Nor was I in the right gear for being embarrassed and humiliated because of my ignorance and lack of exposure since the pair had little tolerance for intellectual lightweights. They eloquently contested one another from different point of view even on what they agreed upon. It was a real battle of wits.

Since I came to Rhodes University I had learned to refrain as much as possible from academics when I wanted to enjoy myself and unwind. I find it hard to relax while discussing theories and philosophies. I prefer conversations that are not too clever and would rather leave the theories for the lecture halls. I had just submitted my final essay and my head was still rattling as if there were nails and tins in it. My brain needed a break from academia. I preferred uninhibited simple conversations which most illiterates excel in. I would have preferred to go and unwind in Joza Township.

I sat there with the five year old twins, a girl and a boy. Their father kept on checking them through the rear mirror and talking to them in the Norwegian language. They were born in

South Africa and had only visited Norway during holidays. Peter bragged to us about how he had single handedly taught them his home language. Every now and then he paused from his clever talk with Adichie to say something to the children.

I found myself envying the twins. I wished I could go back to my childhood and have a father that was this attentive. Or that I could go back to my youth and reconceive my two boys with a man this caring. I later discovered that he was separated from his Xhosa wife and the children were now living with him full time. I wondered about what could have caused the split. If I could have a man who cared about children this much I would never leave him, I thought.

I became lost in my thoughts tapping into my memory museum, leaving the two men engaging in their intellectual gymnastics. Apathy and passiveness overcame me. My mind was coiled into a dangerous state of being wrapped in my own trouble and misery. As we drove down the green mountains that separated Grahamstown and the Reserve I explored the dark tracks of my life. I felt a disgusting bitterness welling in my mouth. I thought of my father and my children's father. I hated them. I wondered if it was possible to think straight about things when you hate so much.

My younger son who was fifteen once ran away from home to look for his father. He hitch hiked to Thohoyandou, where his father lived. He went straight to the police station where his father worked and asked for him. He did not even know what his father looked like as the last time he saw him was when he was a year old. They told him that he was on leave and would be available in two days. My son did not push to find out his father's home as he was afraid that his new wife might not like him. He roamed around the town for those two days, sleeping in the grave yard. In the meantime I was looking for him everywhere and I had filed a missing person's case in Polokwane where we stayed.

On the third day he met his father for the first time. My son was amazed by how much he looked like him. Luvhengo then took my son to Kentucky and bought him a streetwise two, a burger and coke. They sat and he ate. The boy was happy to have met him and had all kinds of ambitions about their newly found relationship. He said brokenly, picking up one of the chicken bones.

“I want to come and stay with you. I am tired of my mother’s husband calling us luckless and fatherless bastards.” He told his father everything including the fact that my husband was abusive and not contributing much financially in our home, which belonged to me. Luvhengo listened attentively. He remained silent for some time. When it was his turn to respond he said, “Look son, I am happy for you to have hunted me down. It is a good thing that we now know each other. You see life is more complicated than you think. I am a clerk at the police station, I earn very little. I am not as rich as your mother who is educated.”

He paused again and looked at the boy with his eyes almost closed.

“Look at you; you are wearing clothes that I cannot afford even for myself. Nike shoes… a Puma t-shirt...and look at your jeans…Soviet. I know how much those things cost. You probably go to a private school. What I am telling you is that as much as I might want to you to live with me I could never afford you. I have another wife with five children. Our house has two bedrooms, you see.” He paused for a second and focused his eyes on the chicken as if a solution can come from it.

“You see, another thing is that my wife fought a lot with your mother years ago; I don’t think she will accept you. I am sorry but you have to go back to your mother. Life with her is much better than what I can offer. She is a good mother. Give me her number let’s call her. Does she know you came here?” he said without an expressionless face. He wringed his nose and rubbed it between the index and the thumb. The boy stopped eating and looked at him with eyes full of dismay. Red hot needles of embarrassment prickled him everywhere. Luvhengo then took out his cell phone from his jacket.

“Hello Mapula. It’s me Luvhengo. I am with Gamza here. He said he hitch hiked..,” Luvhengo said.

“What? Where?” I said interrupting him. He then ran out of airtime and I had to call him back.

“You must come and fetch him. I told him you are a good mother,” said Luvhengo. I was so annoyed with him for rejecting my son like that. I was not shocked because he had never cared enough to even contribute a cent towards bringing up the two boys. I never even bothered to take him to the maintenance court.

When I collected Gamza I told him to come to the Caltex Garage. I had warned him not to bring his father along as I might kill him. He could not even make a plan to bring his son back home. In the car my son was mute. I also did not say anything. I could see the pain and fire in his black eyes. His small oval face looked frail. I left him alone with his thoughts. I wondered what he was thinking. My pain was much more. It was like a thousand fires lit inside of me. It was a cloudy day. Large silver clouds drifted slowly across the deep blue sky, now and then, obscuring the sun. I hated cloudy days. It was a grey sky day when Luvhengo left me with two kids for a younger woman. It was a hazy day when my recent husband hit me and called my sons bastards.

Days later, after all the anger had subsided, I appreciated the fact that Luvhengo had been upfront with my son. I recalled the incident of Mumsey‘s son who also went looking for his father. The boy found out that his father was in fact a well to do someone; or rather he gave the boy that impression. He promised the boy heaven and earth – amongst other things, a play station, a bicycle, new clothes and to take him out of the government school so that he could go to a private school like his step brother.

Mumsey warned the boy not to be excited as his father was the most unreliable person she has ever known. The boy chose to believe him. They had set a date on which they were going to meet to buy all those things. The man did not come nor bother to postpone. From that day on he avoided the boy’s calls. When he used the public phone he dropped the phone as soon as he heard the young boy’s voice. One late afternoon on a Tuesday, Mumsy came back from work tired. She opened the garage door to park her Toyota Tass only to find her worst nightmare. Her son was hanging from the garage’s gutter less roof.

I talked to my son and told him that it was not the end of the world. I assured him that the rejection does not define who he is and it is not his fault. It could only define him if he allows it. I told him that there were many great men who grew up with absent fathers. I told him the story of Walter Sisulu. Sisulu’s father, a white man whom his mother worked for as a domestic worker, died denying that he was his father. And look how successful Sisulu had become. He is now a world known icon that fought for South African democracy. His face lightened up and he said, “Mom don’t worry… I am fine… I understand.” A heavy load was off my shoulder.

“Don’t go and do anything stupid – like committing suicide without discussing it with me first,” I said and he laughed.

A month after that incident, my husband urged me to give him money to install a sophisticated music system in the car that I had bought for him. When I refused he shouted at me calling me a selfish bitch. He at his full volume told me that he had done me a favour by marrying me with my two bastards as no man would have. He was so loud and I was sure that my sons were listening. It was a cloudy Saturday. I decided to go to the office and work to distract myself from the menace.

That day my two sons, fifteen and seventeen years old, decided it was time to discipline my husband. They knew he hated loud music and played it anyway. When he came downstairs he was screaming at them as usual telling them that they should go and live with their father because they are disturbing his peace. Normally my sons would have kept quiet and lowered the volume. He was shocked when Gamza said,

“If you want your peace why don’t you go and buy yourself a house. Like all normal men. This is our home. You found us staying here. You must adjust to our ways or go to wherever you came here from.”

“If it was up to us, you would not be living in this house. We are just putting up with you because we have no choice,’ said Rudzani, the older one.

“What?” My husband responded in a jolt.

“We are sick and tired of your verbal abuse day in and day out in this house, as if it’s yours. Go and lament in your own house and abuse your own children if you have them,” the boy added.

“Are you talking to me? You don’t know me. I will…” he said trying to punch Rudzani with his fat fist. My older son came from his back side and stroked him with his baseball bat. He realised then that they were stronger than he imagined. At that moment they attacked him jointly overpowering him. Fear overcame him. Side tables and vases fell as he headed for the front door. He then called me from down the street to come back home immediately. I found him sitting on the customer chairs at the car wash next to the Sasol garage trembling with

anger. On seeing me he immediately erupted like a volcano taking no notice of customers and the car wash staff.

“I can’t live with those savages any more. I am going. You can call me when they are no longer there. Maybe I might still be available,” he said in a loud tone.

“What do you want me to do? I can’t kill them; they are my children. You are the one who turned them into monsters. They learned violence from you,” I said.

“Then you must sleep with them. I am going,” he said.

“Where would you go,” I asked, sincerely concerned.

“Don’t ask me questions?” he said.

“Okay,” I said quietly.

I was tired of him treating me like he was my trophy. I was drained by his verbal abuse. I was full to the brim with his irresponsibility and sense of entitlement. We had been married for two years and fortunately it was out of community of property. The wisest decision I have ever taken decision with regard to him. I insisted on it regardless of his dissuasion since I had a lot more to lose.

After leaving, he did not call and neither did I. I realised how happier my sons were without him in the house. I resented myself for putting them through a fatherless childhood and imposing a useless husband on them. There and then I decided it was time for new start...a divorce and a change of career. That is why I ended up at Rhodes University.

I enrolled my sons at St Andrews College in Grahamstown. It was one of the best schools in the country. The small town turned out to be a different environment. People were not defined by their marital status like in Limpopo.

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“A penny for your thoughts,” said Adichie.

“Nothing,” I said.

The park was beautiful. Up at the gate there was a view point where one could see the river circling the mountains like a necklace. I now understood why it was called Water’s Meeting.

The reflection of the trees made the river water green. I could have stood there for hours. We drove down rocky gravel road to the river. There was a picnic spot with wooden tables and benches and a braai area. The Norwegian changed the twins into their swimming costumes. He then served them the *padkos* biscuits, juice and apples. In my world, men who do what he did for their children were scarce as an Indian policeman in Polokwane.

The river water was crystal clear. He jumped in and floated with the girl on his back holding the boy in front. It was a perfect picture of fatherhood. I watched them while sitting on the concrete bridge-like structure that crossed through the river with my feet in the water drooling with envy. I couldn't believe I was jealous of five year olds. I tried to entertain myself by counting tad poles in the water. I stirred them with a stick and was amused when they ran in different directions. Adichie sat a talking distance from me reading City Press newspaper.

"Is he sure this water is safe. Are we sure they don't have crocodiles here?" said Adichie and I laughed.

"They would have written a warning if there was such," I said.

Adichie was a short middle-aged man who always over-emphasised what he said as if you were not going to believe him. Everyone acquainted with Adichie knew that he couldn't have a conversation with any South African without comparing this country to Nigeria. With him it was always, in Nigeria we don't do this or we do things like this. He was always upfront with the fact that he was an associate professor at a Nigerian University and that he did his other PhD in the USA. When I first met him, I thought he was weird. But by then I had grown used to him to an extent that I had stopped judging him at all. I just appreciated the fact that for a change I had someone my age to talk to. My phone rang and it was my mom.

"It must be a boyfriend you were talking to – for the whole forty minutes," said Adichie. I laughed and said, "It's my mom, you know, updating me on the latest goat (scoop)," I told him.

"You know I have noticed that you black South Africans always talk about your mothers. Most of you never talk about your fathers. Why?" he said. I felt very transparent when he said that. I felt like he was reading my mind. I veiled my feelings and tried to distract him with a loud laugh.

"Adichie are you always measuring whom South Africans are talking about in your conversations with them? I think the second PhD is driving you mad. Too much book is not good for you," I said. I knew what was coming. This was a sensitive topic for me. I feared conversations about fathers the way most people feared dentists. I knew that men lacked the sensitivity to say the truth with care. I felt broken glasses crashing in my stomach. I knew there was nothing he can say that would dispel the fatherhood fog in my head.

I had become painfully aware that most of those who grew up with fathers present are excruciatingly unsympathetic and insensitive to fatherless scenario. Most of the time they are the ones who sew the seed of insecurity to the fatherless. They would never understand what it's like. Their small insights gave them great vanity. They simply see themselves as being superior. One gentleman who was pursuing me once said on our first date that most people who were not raised by their fathers are not normal. "They always have some kind of madness," he said. I never disputed his cheap philosophy. Although I dismissed it as vague statements without any shred of evidence, there was never a second date. Everything he said thereafter sounded stupid. I simply switched off. I was not ready to venture into this topic with Adichie. But he persisted.

"You know what I am talking about; you know most men here abandon their children. In Nigeria, that never happens at all."

"Really?" I said.

"Yes, it is an embarrassing situation. Do you know a bird beats most South African black men in looking after its youth? And it does not even have a job," he said. I forged a laugh and saw him examining my face. I knew then that he might have picked my distress.

"You know this thing started when people were migrant workers coming home twice in a year. Those boys who grew up under those conditions were never taught by anyone how to be a father. Fatherhood is a learned behaviour," said Adichie.

The most painful thing was the fact that he was right. There was very little evidence of enchanting father and child relationship (blacks) in South Africa. There is little or no evidence of such in our films, our music and even our media.

After partaking in Peter's hobby of long walks in the forest we were finally back in the car on our way back to Grahamstown. Adichie and I did not enjoy the walks as much as Peter and his twins. Adichie kept on hinting that it might not be safe as lions and leopards might have crossed from local game farms to look for food. In the car again I left the two men to their mental aerobics. This time Adichie was defending Africa.

"Africa is at the butt of every international joke. You Europeans should stay in your countries. Leave us to live our own lives the way we know best," said Adichie.

"You say Africa this, Africa that and to think there would have never been Africa if we had not come and created it and even name it for you," said Peter. I was amused by the way Adichie was not offended by the statement.

As the two men were busy throwing word missiles to each other I switched myself off from the conversation. My mind leaped back to my 'father incident' five years back, when I met my dad for the first time. I had accepted that he was not part of our life and I did not think much of him. It is almost difficult to miss a stranger. I missed the idea of having a biological father, but not him. My step father had raised us well. Unfortunately, it was not the same for my brother. He was obsessed with meeting him.

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I had driven my mother and brother to a place called Mtititi on a mission to find my father. The village is in the middle of nowhere, next to the Kruger National Punda Maria gate. We drove through the heat on the bad gravel road until we finally arrived. The first building we saw in Mtititi was a four-classroom school and then the many r*ondawels* (thatch roof mud hut). The undersized houses dotted throughout the flat terrain. The rhythm of the village was slow-paced. We got lost. The women who directed us took a quarter of an hour greeting us. They laid out their whole lineage to us as if it was the most important thing in the world. They were also eager to share titbits of village gossip with us.

The mud huts gave the rural settlement an ashen look. The August winds were wild and spread dust everywhere. Everyone's face was made up with brown mascara of dust.

"Your father did me a favour by leaving me. Imagine! I would still be stuck in this place rotting like an overripe tomato," said my mom, laughing.

“I would have never studied to become a teacher. You, Tshepo, would be minding some chief’s cattle for no salary. Look at this place, there is nothing. Where would one get a job here? It’s far from everything.”

My dad, who had worked in Johannesburg most of his life, was now back in his home village. He had abandoned my mom and us there and went to live in Johannesburg. For many years he never came back home until my mom packed her belongings (including us) and left.

We finally arrived. The yard was big, like most rural yards. They had planted corn in the back. I saw three goats tied with a long rope to the shrubs towards the left side of the stand. A small thatch hut without a window stood in the heart of the yard. A hanging dirty cloth served as a door. A short adult would have to bend to enter the hut. I was shocked to the core by these appalling living conditions. Then there was the three roomed house recklessly built from grey block bricks. The windows had no glass but a sheet of the corrugated iron permanently covered the window space.

A slender elderly woman dressed in a brown oversized overall dress met us at the small gate. She directed us into the three-roomed house. Walking close to her I felt the smell of the sun coming from her emaciated body. Inside, the air was stifling. Excruciating cough sounds could be heard from another room. The white garden chairs were toppled against another to prevent it from sliding and making people fall. There was a dirt coloured wooden bench and a small rickety table at the corner. A box that served as cabinets could be seen beneath the table. The floor was rough, greasy and dirty. The intolerable stench in the room and the heat made it impossible to sit in there. My mother looked at me and shook her head.

“Please, can we sit outside in the shade? The heat in the house makes my blood pressure rise,” she said. The woman looked older than my mother.

“It must be the wife,” whispered my mother as we walked out.

After a while, a man came out of the three roomed house. He walked slowly towards us. He wore a torn old pair of jeans and a grey shirt that showed at its hems that it used to be black in its heyday. His complexion was dark, but like his shirt, one could see traces of a lighter skin tone in the inside of his arms. He had an odd way of walking as if a small private wind was pushing him from the back. The shining sun was now concealed by patches of dark clouds. It seemed like it was going to rain.

So this is my father, I thought. I was not impressed at all. The whole thing did not feel real. I felt like I was in a movie.

It was obvious that my brother felt different. My brother stood up from the bench and remained standing until the man sat next to him on the bench. His eyes were filled with tears. I wondered if it was tears of joy or something else. His life was in chaos. He was fired from his job at Ackermans clothing store because of drunkenness. I was now supporting him and his family financially.

I felt nothing for my father. All of a sudden I thought the whole venture was a complete waste of time. I was only fascinated by how much the man looked like my brother. I wondered if he too was not destined for the same route of irresponsibility.

“Mokope, how are you?” the man said to my mother. His smile exposed his front missing teeth. His eyes glistened into a dull murkiness, as if he was going to sleep.

“I am fine, I have brought your children,” she said. I could not understand why she did not seem to be angry at him. Maybe it was because she had moved on, got married and found happiness with my step father.

He stood up and shook our hands. I felt a rough scratching when he touched my hand that send a cold chill down my spine. I hated myself for being so unmoved but I just could not help it. His wrecked appearance made it seems like he had already paid for even his future sins, I thought.

“You are now grown up. The last time I saw you were just babies,” the man said.

We just looked at him and kept quiet. I wanted to ask him why he did not come to see us for all those years. It was pointless, I thought. It wouldn’t change anything. Not even the price of bread. My eyes moved to the goats that were grazing. She could not understand why they had to be tied to the trees. I wondered how I would have felt if I was one of them.

Maybe I am a goat, I thought. I was also tied to men who cared less about me. I understood clearly how the goats felt.

My mind was brought back by my mother’s riotous voice when she said,

“They are both working now. Mapula is a manager in government. They now have their own children,” said my mother. My mother was one of those people that never mentioned her children’s failures to anyone. She did not say a word about my brother’s dismissal from work. She viewed us as an extension of herself and our failure became hers too. When I went through a divorce, it was as if it’s my mother who was being divorced. Sometimes I felt like her pain was worse than mine. I felt pity for her.

“Mmh! A manager! That is good. My girl, maybe you can buy your old daddy a small Nissan Champ van so that I can sell tomatoes in the village. I have a licence; I was a truck driver in Joburg,”

Wow! He believes he deserves a van from me, I said to myself. Something snapped in me and I started hustling them about leaving.

“I have work to do in the office,” I said

I regretted the whole exercise. It felt futile. I was even more irritated when my brother hugged him. The opprobrium left me cold.

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The memories of my father still chafed as our car drove into Grahamstown. Peter dropped Adichie and me at the Spur restaurant. Adichie had offered to buy me supper.

“You are very quiet,” Adichie said while we were waiting for our steaks.

“No I was just thinking about what you said,” I told him.

“We can’t blame these men for not being involved with their children,” said Adichie.

“Why?”

“Because like I said earlier, love is a learned thing, it is through the love of a father that you learn how to be a father. Their fathers were never there; they were working in Johannesburg in the mines. So this thing has become a vicious circle,” he said.

“Someone must punch a hole in it. Things cannot continue like this. Men don’t even have guilt when they have fathered children and are not responsible for them. It is the most normal

and acceptable thing in black communities. I respect the white brothers for seeing things differently," I said dispassionately.

"I don't know. You are the writer. Maybe you can create awareness and make people start debating about solutions. I don't know but if you South Africans don't do anything you will end up with a very angry youth. The signs are already there. Take for instance, this ANC youth league President Julius Malema. I don't think he was raised with a father present."

I was chewing my steak when he said that. One more bite and it tasted like a face cloth. I struggled to swallow but eventually it went through. I looked at Adichie and faked a smile again.

"You know what; I am going to take a doggy bag. I will eat later. Thank you so much," I said.

I was never the same after that conversation with Adichie. I saw things from a different angle. I felt my anger subsiding but not diminishing. An urge to forgive my father ignited like a wild fire on a windy day. I felt a nip of pity for him. It was hopeful that one day all my hatred would subside or maybe vanish like clouds when the sun comes out. I felt a release. It had been very painful and exhausting to hate him. Maybe I would one day also forgive my ex-husbands.

The things we do for love

Masilu came home at midnight that Friday. He was drunk and struggled to drive his BMW up the steep driveway. He decided to push the accelerator down all the way so that the car could maintain power up the hill. When he reached the top of the driveway, his foot was still on the accelerator. The car smashed through the garage door into the two cars that were parked in there, pushing the black Toyota Corolla through the wall that separated the garage and the kitchen. When his BMW came to a standstill he climbed out and walked towards the front door. By the time he reached the veranda he thought it was his bedroom. He took off his clothes and lay down on the floor in his underwear.

Mosima woke with a start, but assumed that it must be her husband Masilu arriving. His coming home late was no longer an issue. It was something she was used to. She turned over and went back to sleep. He had his own key and his food was in the oven in case he was hungry.

A loud banging sound woke her up again. It felt like the house was being demolished.

“An earthquake? No it can’t be,” she thought. She could hear movements, which meant her children were also up. She jumped out of bed and grabbed her night gown and cell phone. She found her three boys standing in the passage. Mohale, the oldest at fourteen, was holding his baseball bat.

“Mom, what was that sound?” he asked.

“Go into your room. It’s nothing, don’t panic,” she said, trying very hard to hide her own fear.

“Where is Papa?” said the youngest, who was eight.

“I’ll be back now-now,” she said, closing the door and heading for the stairs. Her cell phone rang. It was their driver, Moses, phoning from the servants’ quarters at the back.

“It’s Mohale’s father, he has smashed the garage. Come down.”

She ran fast down the stairs, almost stumbling after missing a step. Downstairs she found the Black Toyota Corolla in the kitchen. Bricks and chunks of cement everywhere. Her glass-top stove was in pieces.

“Mhhh!” she said quietly. She ran through the living area and could see Moses through the glass front door outside, his forefingers pointing down.

She opened the door to see her husband lying in his briefs. His clothes were piled on the cane sofa.

“Is he dead? What is wrong?” she asked with her hand on her mouth.

“I found him here. I don’t think he is dead. He is breathing. I think he is drunk,” said the driver.

She cried out loud, “*Joo nna mmawe*! Who took his clothes off?”

“I don’t know. I found him like this.” It was noticeable that he was not dead as he was now snoring loudly.

“I am going to check on the boys. Carry him into the guest room.”

The guest room was downstairs. She did not want the children to see him like this. She put the boys back to sleep, assuring them that all was well. Then she came back downstairs. Moses was still waiting for her in the living room.

“Moses, I am calling the police. Maybe people were chasing him,” Mosima said.

“No ma’am. I think you should wait for him to wake up. If you are afraid I will stay here and guard the place, but we can’t call the police when he is still this drunk.”

“Okay, it’s fine, go back to sleep. I will call you if something happens.”

Mosima was a woman with a subdued air. There was a majesty and purposefulness about her even under these circumstances. She walked outside with Moses and stopped at the garage to assess the damage. She decided to call Phuti, Masilu’s cousin, the only person who was not afraid of him. Everyone around Masilu depended financially on him. No one else, including his mother, was brave enough to tell him when he faltered.

“I think your cousin is bewitched, he drove into the house and we found him naked on the veranda. I am telling you his girlfriends are bewitching him. They want me to leave,” Mosima said, crying.

“He was just drunk. Don’t frustrate yourself with that cheap psychology. Just thank God he was not harmed. As for the property, that you can always replace,” Phuti said.

“He needs help. This cannot be normal.”

“Get some sleep. I will come over and talk to him tomorrow,” Phuti said.

The following afternoon Phuti came to check on them. Masilu sat there on the veranda step, a glass of iced water next to him. His face was hidden between his legs. He did not raise it when Phuti sat next to him.

“I knew you were coming. I knew she had called you. Maybe I should put you on my employee’s payroll, the family social worker,” he said with his face still concealed.

Phuti said nothing and just sat there admiring their garden and the view of Duiwelskloof dam down the valley. How can people that are living in heaven, here on earth, be this unhappy? She thought.

He then raised his head. He looked at her with bloodshot eyes.

“I hope you are not coming here to preach to me. I am going to tell you exactly what I told her. This is my problem, and no one else’s,” he said.

Phuti still did not say anything. She looked back at him, shook her head and smiled. Then she moved her eyes back to the scenic contours of the mountains in the distance. She behaved as though she had not heard what he’d said. She looked at him again as if he was not important. This made him angry. Mosima came out the front door. Her eyes were also red. She had been crying when she called Phuti around midnight, she was still crying when Phuti called her in the morning, and she must have been crying just before she came onto the veranda.

“Can I use your car to fetch the children from school? You know our cars…,” she said.

“*Yaa* sure” Phuti replied, handing her the keys.

“Why don’t you call Moses? He can fetch them in the Nevara. I am not comfortable with my kids being fetched in that old scrap.”

Mosima stopped, startled, but ignored him and started the Nissan van which was not a scrap at all. Phuti knew that he wanted to make her angry so as to divert her attention from the issue at hand.

“Look! You know what! My accident is my personal issue; I will deal with it in my own time in my own way. I am not a small boy. I don’t like being reprimanded,” he said.

Phuti said nothing. This time she did not even look at him.

“*Bona*! Yes, last night I came home drunk, in my BMW, hit my garage door and wall, and again I hit my Audi Q7, which hit my Corolla and broke my kitchen wall. These are my things…my cars …my house. I worked hard for them alone. I don’t understand how you or Mosima can have anything to do with it.” There was a deep silence and he then added, “I want you to understand me clearly. I didn’t kill anybody or harm anything that belongs to anyone else. It’s my problem and I know how to solve it.”

Phuti burst into laughter.

“That idiot wife of mine wanted to call the police. What does she know? She does not even know how much all these things cost me,” he said arrogantly, now laughing too.

“Tell me, what did you smoke last night?” Phuti asked him.

“What do you mean? I was just drunk.”

“It can’t be alcohol. Whatever it is, it’s still in your system. I can detect from the things you are saying that you can’t be on your own.” Phuti paused and looked into his eyes for a second, “You are definitely not yourself. Whatever it is you have taken, ditch it and try something else because really it doesn’t go well with you. It deranges your brain.”

He kept quiet.

“And by the way, don’t worry about me preaching to you. I will need the stuff you smoked to be able to come to your level. You seem to forget that you are no longer a village boy. You are a public figure and you need to protect your image. Or else you can kiss that job of yours good bye. Where have you seen a Minister of Public Works behaving like this?” she said.

“Don’t patronise me. You know I don’t do any drugs.”

“I am not trying to patronise you. Not that I care if I do. The only thing I care about is that you should apologise to that poor wife who made a stupid decision to stay with a mad person like you for the rest of her life. She is a nice girl. She does not need this rubbish,” she said.

“God is my witness I don’t take drugs,” Masilu swore.

“You know I am not only talking about the drugs. The bevy of scandals you are busy collecting like they were accolades will one day come to haunt you like a deceased witchdoctor. You are frustrating that sweet girl who is trying so hard to keep a decent home for you.”

“Does she pay you to say such nice things about her? You don’t know her well. Anyway, just don’t forget who your real relative is – me, not her.”

As he said this Mosima was returning down the big driveway towards them. She parked in front of them, almost crashing into the huge pot plant with an English rose. Phuti greeted the three boys and said her goodbyes. She noticed that their faces were a bit gloomy.

When she reversed she heard him saying to Mosima, “She thinks she is Margaret Thatcher. She will never get married if she keeps on thinking that she can bully everyone the way she does. Who does she think she is? She knows nothing about marriage.”

Phuti knew this to be an attempt to appease his wife.

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She returned the next day and this time Masilu was more balanced. “Eish,” he lamented, before she said anything, “I have burned the eggs, big time. She is not talking to me. Every time she looks at me she cries. Advise me, how can I make things right. Maybe I must buy her a new car - a Mercedes. I know she loves it,” he pouted.

“What happened?” Phuti asked.

“My last memory was at Peter Mawasha’s place, holding a glass of Johnny Walker Blue. The rest I can’t tell you. I don’t even recall driving home,” he said.

“You need to apologise to her. If alcohol has that kind of effect on you, give it up. You will drive her mad. You need to get your act together. This lifestyle of yours of girlfriends and parties is just not on for a politician like you. It is disgusting. You live like a character out of a Chinua Achebe novel. These people will eat you alive, this is South Africa. You are all over this place with girlfriends. And yaa! What is this that I hear that you go everywhere with that whore that works at the municipality? I have heard she was also in Durban when you took your family for a holiday,” Phuti said. He laughed hysterically.

“Since when did you become a gossip-monger? Where did you get those stupid stories?” He said.

“They are not rumours. That girl goes around boasting to everyone about it. What is a person with such a high portfolio doing with that thing? If you really had to cheat, couldn’t you have done it with mature women? Like those ladies from parliament, they can be discreet. And save your wife the humiliation that this stupid girl is putting her through,” Phuti said.

“You are judging me because you know nothing. At least I have one girlfriend, most of those guys in cabinet have more. The president has four wives and a girlfriend in every province. No, not province, in every town. It is African culture. This is how our grandfathers used to live.”

“Yes, but in your grandfather’s time there was no HIV/AIDS.”

She saw no point in pursuing the topic. It was too depressing for her. She felt pity for his wife who was at that time attending a meeting at the children’s school. Even though she was living in lavish comfort, Phuti did not envy her. She knew she could have not survived in such a marriage.

“I have to go. I have an appointment with someone,” she said to him.

“If it’s a potential husband, tell him I said he must hurry up and marry you. You are not getting any younger.”

“After the crap that you have just told me I prefer to stay single. I will marry in my next life when I am a pigeon or a locust.”

Later that day Phuti could not keep Masilu’s words out of her mind. She thought about Mosima and all she was going through. Was it ever going to end?

Indeed, Masilu felt no remorse. He had sneaked his girlfriend into the same hotel in Durban where he was staying with his wife and children. She was in a room on the floor beneath theirs. Every morning he would dispatch the family with Moses to go shopping, sightseeing and swimming while he snuggled for hours with his girlfriend - probably drinking Jonny Walker Blue Whisky and smoking marijuana in her room.

“I like the fact that when I am with you I can be me. I don’t have to be appropriate,” he told his girlfriend.

He had told Mosima that he was having meetings with KwaZulu Natal politicians.

“You work yourself too much. You need a break too, you know,” said unsuspecting Mosima.

“I must work hard for us to afford coming to places like this,” Masilu replied.

Mosima saw a young woman every morning at breakfast, sitting alone. It was not hard to notice her because they and she were the only blacks in the restaurant. On their third morning Mosima greeted her while they were waiting for their omelettes at the buffet. She asked her where she was from.

“Joburg,” she said.

“Are you here on business or vacation,” she asked in a kind tone. “Business,” the young woman answered with her eyes focused on the chef who was busy frying the omelettes. Mosima had wanted to ask her what type of business but was discouraged by her brisk answers. Instead she asked her to join her family. The woman refused politely, giving an excuse of having to rush somewhere. There was something cunning in her eyes, Mosima thought. She did not strike her as the business-type. She seemed like someone content to do little but eat and dress well.

“Maybe tomorrow,” the woman responded with a semi-smile.

Masilu watched them anxiously from the family table, wondering what in the world they could be talking about. Mosima admired how young and fresh she looked. The girl somehow reminded her of herself in her heyday before she married Masilu.

She was beautiful; with large, luminous eyes that lent to her face a wonderful expression of innocent friendliness. Her straight shiny black hair was combed into a wave that curled up around her neck.

“Who is that woman? Do you know her?” asked Masilu.

“*Eish*, that poor woman, she is always alone at breakfast. I invited her to join us and she said maybe tomorrow,” said Mosima.

“You must be careful with strangers. This place is not Limpopo. You can’t go about trusting people you don’t know. It could be a journalist or a spy. You need to be discreet. You are a big man’s wife,” he said and then buried himself in his newspaper. He almost laughed. He was fascinated by her naivety. Later he joked about it with his girlfriend over a glass of whisky.

“My, dear I see you have married a *modjadji* (rural girl),” she said, shrieking and cackling with laughter.

Two weeks after they returned home Mosima received a phone call from a male stranger telling her about the Durban girl. The person told her that the girl’s fiancé had committed suicide after she left him for Masilu. He also revealed that the girl was with them at the hotel in Durban on a different floor. At first Mosima did not buy the story until the image of the girl at breakfast re-entered her mind. This became a hard pill for her to swallow.

When she tried to discuss the issue with Phuti, she advised her that the person who phoned must have been sent by that woman.

“That stick without a soul,” said Mosima.

“It must be a strategy to get you to quarrel with your husband - maybe even get you out of the picture.”

“I will never leave my husband over some cheap *tickiline*. I don’t think she loves him. She’s only in it for the money,” said Mosima.

Phuti could see fear in Mosima’s eyes. She had spoken so loud that Phuti realised she wanted to convince herself more than anyone else. She was scared and did not know what to do. Two months later Masilu was hardly ever at home. They saw him every two weeks. The male

stranger phoned again, telling Mosima he had bought the girl a town house in Tzaneen's Aqua Park suburb overlooking Tzaneen Dam. After this phone call Mosima hired someone to investigate. The information revealed how much he had spent on the property and furniture he bought her. Without delay Mosima drove to the estate.

Phuti had advised her to consult a lawyer and get her evicted from the house and then sue her for adultery. She thought about it and decided that it would be a complete waste of time as he might buy her another one. Talking to the girl woman-to-woman made a lot more sense. She decided to wait for the girl outside the complex. Mosima then stopped her when she drove out. The girl parked her VW Polo alongside Mosima's Audi Q7. They stood next to each other, sandwiched by their cars. They were wearing identical black pants (both presents from Masilu after his return from a work trip in Dubai). They each had expensive bronze coloured hair extensions, and sized each other up before engaging.

"I came here to talk to you woman-to-woman about my husband. In case you have amnesia I want to remind you that he is married to me and he has three boys who are still growing and need him. You can't keep on making him stay away from his home. God will punish you because that is cruel."

"You see, from a woman's point I understand your position. But I think you are talking to the wrong person," she said.

"What do you mean you are the wrong person? I know everything," Mosima said, raising her voice.

"You see, the thing is I can't help you with anything. I love him too. We will have to share him. Otherwise you will have to put a chain on him. You know, like a dog…"

Their heated exchange of words became a spectacle. Domestic workers and gardeners passing by gasped audibly as they witnessed the two tackling each other. The girl had not finished her demeaning speech before Mosima pushed her against the passenger window of her car. She kicked the young woman until she fell to the ground. Then she jumped on her, squatting on top of her in such a way that the girl's hands were locked beneath Mosima's feet. She boxed her face like it was a punching bag. The girl's legs shook up and down like those of a fitting epileptic.

"*Joo nna mmawe*!" the girl screamed. After several blows to her face she said, "Please stop, you are hurting me. Stop! Please! I will leave Masilu. I will never see him again."

When the security men at the gate finally separated them blood was flowing from the girl's nose and mouth, matching her red top.

"If I hear that you are seeing him again I am going to kill you. I am not joking," Mosima said, starting her car. From there she went straight to Phuti's house. Phuti was shocked to hear she fought with the girl. She wanted to tell her that it was the lowest thing to do, but she didn't. She knew it would be like putting salt in a wound. Before they sat in the living room Mosima's domestic worker called and told her that the police were looking for her.

"That sticks without a soul. It thinks it is wonderful. It thinks it is special," Mosima said. "And it has the nerve to call the police. Sis!' she spat.

"You know that they will arrest you if they find you. You need to act on it. Let me call Masilu. He created this mess. He must see how to finish it," Phuti said. She picked up her cellphone.

"Hello, I am with your wife here."

"Yaa! I know what happened. How can she be so stupid?"

"She learned from the best - you. Anyway, the Tzaneen police are looking for her. If you don't deal with it you will be in the headlines of all newspapers tomorrow."

"I have already done the damage control. She has cancelled the case." he said.

"Talk to Mosima," Phuti said. He dropped the phone.

That night he did not come back home. The relationship with the girl didn't end. It was now an open secret. She had been elevated to the status of an official deputy wife. Mosima began to feel she was being punished by God – a kind of payback for having snatched Masilu from his fiancé many years ago when they were young. So now the chicken had come back home to crow. Although she sensed she could, and should, no longer live with him, she knew she would never divorce him. It was an unbearable contradiction.

She buried herself in church activities. This afforded her the space to reflect and analyse her position. The few times Masilu came back home she treated him like royalty, as if all was

well. This irritated him. Without the church she would have crashed or experienced a nervous breakdown. Or she would have sedated herself with all kinds of antidepressants and sleeping pills. Some people chose alcohol, but she used the church as her crutch.

Though her marriage was in the doldrums, the church helped her to see her problems through rose-tinted glasses. It was a form of strategic self-delusion. In the church she made an effort not to demonize her husband. After all, he was the father of her children. Though her marriage seemed to be hurtling backwards, she saw it progressing. The future was plausible.

A year later the girl was found dead in her apartment. Rumour had it that two unidentified men broke in and shot her pregnant tummy and pretty face. People speculated about who might have killed her, but even today – five years later – there was no evidence. No one was arrested.

A little later, Masilu resigned from his post when he discovered that he was being investigated for fraud. He was clever enough to see that his political path was strewn with people with whom he had crossed swords, marginalised and lobbied against. He got out before they crushed him completely. For a while his stories were scoops in most newspapers. He negotiated his way out and the president sent him to Malaysia as an Ambassador for South Africa. He took Mosima and the children and they started a new life.

Take back the Lobola

I grudgingly drove my mom, a retired teacher, to Marishane for the funeral of her priest's mother. I hated the fact that every time I visited her I instantly became her driver. Instead of spending quality time bonding with her I would spend the whole weekend being her unsolicited chauffeur. I had to unwillingly drive her to funerals, weddings, shopping, and church, or to visit her bevy of friends.

I cannot deny that at times, some of these occasions turned out to be interesting and I ended up enjoying myself. Like last month when I drove her to a wedding of the priest's daughter Makau, to a gentleman called Mofeti at the Ranch Hotel.

Everything was perfect at that wedding; almost too good to be true. I remember the groom telling everyone that he had saved enough money to bring any musician from anywhere in the world to come and sing for them at the wedding.

"My wife said it had to be Luther Vandross. She wanted no one else but him. I tried several tricks to bring him back from the dead and, fortunately, one of them actually worked and he is here straight from heaven to sing for my beautiful wife," said the groom.

Then the lighting of the venue went off, leaving only the dim glow of the candles. Suddenly Luther appeared on stage, as tall and handsome as we knew him when he was alive. It was a DVD played through a data projector on a white cloth that covered the whole stage. It was so real, as if he was indeed there. Tears fell from my eyes when his velvet voice sang *Always and Forever*. It was indeed a fairy tale wedding. The wedding made most single people wish they could get married.

I remember wondering why I had never met a man like Mofeti. Why I was not married? Why had I never a wedding like this? I asked myself.

*

Marishane village in Limpopo is one of those villages that defied all the conventions of what a village is supposed to be, yet it is one. The village is situated a hundred kilometres from Polokwane along the main road that goes to a small town known as Groblersdal.

I decided not to be part of the funeral proceedings as I did not know the deceased old lady and was not that close to the priest's family. The truth is that I hated the endless speeches. Everyone said the same things about the deceased. The situation was even worse if the deceased was an elderly person. The event swarmed with representatives who had to give speeches. Individuals representing neighbours, the royal house, grand children, children, in-laws, church, the burial society and friends would narrate endless pointless stories about the late. In some cases even a representative of the undertaker had to give a speech.

I decided to try to locate an old friend of mine, Ivy, who got married to a local guy some years back and relocated to this village. Marishane village looked a lot more like an urban township. It was the only village I knew with tarred roads running through it. Unlike in most rural settlements, there were no shacks or lousy housing structures. Most of the houses were huge and modern. Eventually, at a small café at the four-way stop near the dusty soccer field a young boy directed me to Ivy's house.

I could not believe the house Ivy lived in. It was big; a mansion with a yard that could have been two hectares enclosed by high milky white walls with a roof that reminded me of a sculpted hedge. The house was painted in a lime colour. On the one side, next to the pool, there was a thatched entertainment house built of rocks. She said it was the part of the house that belonged to her husband. He had designed and furnished it himself. Inside there was a bar, lounge, study and bathroom. Animal sculptures and prints dominated the interior.

Ivy was very pleased to see me, even though this was just a popcorn visit.

"My old good friend!" She shrieked excitedly.

By noon, while we were still enjoying the 'catch-up chat' my mother sent me a 'please call me' text message. I knew it meant that the funeral was over. It was time to collect her. Ivy instructed her domestic worker to prepare meat for a braai and champagne.

"You can't leave now, when I haven't seen you for so many years," said Ivy.

"But I will come and visit nicely and spend the whole weekend with you. This is the old lady's trip,"

"I am going with you to fetch her. We are all going to have a braai here before you guys leave," she insisted.

“My friend, do you really want to spend a Saturday afternoon with an old lady? We won’t be free to talk about our stuff,” I said.

“If that is what it cost to spend little bit more time with you, that is fine. I don’t mind your mom, in fact it would be nice to see her too,” said ivy.

Twenty minutes later we were all seated in the thatched lounge enjoying the mixed grill prepared for us over another bottle of champagne. It was a pleasant reunion and my mother seemed very comfortable. Ivy, a teacher with a natural sense of humour entertained us with uproarious stories from her school.

“Mama you know learners these days are out of control. Our strict principal in his attempt at discipline closed the gate for late comers’ yesterday morning. *Eish*! The naughty group hard-pressed the gate until it pushed the principal. *Mxe*! It was most unfortunate as he was wearing his favourite black suit which he told everyone was an expensive brand and was bought by his engineer son. He then became one with the dusty ground,” said Ivy giggling.

“I am glad I am retired now. That would have killed me. I told them that without the rod we can’t get these children right. This thing of calling the parents to discipline children does not work in villages. The parents just don’t come,” said my mother.

“*Hee*! My principal sometimes defies the law out of frustration and uses his *sjambok*,” Ivy said.

“Really? That is a crime *mos*,”

“*Theetsa*! He no longer uses it that often. Last week he chased two grade nine girls (late comers) with the cane. They ran and hid at the corner outside their classroom. When he eventually erupted he found them bending down with their spinach coloured uniform dresses almost covering their heads. They had decided to scare him away by showing him their buttocks. When he came face to face with their fresh smooth dark buttocks he ran away screaming. The unexpected shock overwhelmed him. He just could not use his cane. When he reached the staff room he was still astounded.

‘*Sis*! These kids! They don’t even wear panties. They wear *ntepa* (a traditional gear with only a string at the back), he said with utter disgust. After the principal left the staffroom one

naughty male teacher said, '*eh*! The principal actually had a chance to size up the g-strings' everyone laughed.

The conversation went on and on about lazy teachers and naughty secondary school learners until we ended up talking about the funeral.

"Mama, did you know the old lady that died?" Ivy asked my mother.

"Yes I did, I am very close with Reverend Mashatile's family." my mom said.

"I know the old lady; I have always seen her in church. Ag sham she was a very vibrant *magogo* always very active," said Ivy.

"Yaa, I was with her when we were called to a family meeting at the priest's home two weeks back," said my mom.

" Mma, How come I do not know that you are related to the priest – to even attend their family meetings?" I said jokingly.

"I was part of the delegation that negotiated and received *lobola* when his daughter, Makau got married," she said.

"Oh yes, *mxe*, you told me! I had forgotten – I drove you to the wedding reception," I recalled.

"It was the most romantic wedding I have ever attended. I remember I was not keen to accompany you but ended enjoying myself."

"The *lobola* negotiation also went very smoothly. We asked for twenty thousand rands but they paid double the amount."

"Wow! That is a lot of money. What does the husband do?" asked Ivy.

"He is an engineer and I understand he also owns a consulting business," said my

mother. "Mhh! Some people are lucky. And the girl?" I enquired.

"She is a lawyer," said my mom.

"Mhh, nice," Ivy said.

“Not so nice. There is trouble in paradise. That is why the *lobola* delegation was called to another meeting.”

“ So soon, that wedding was last month *mos*,” I said.

I wondered what could have gone wrong with that perfect couple. I remember feeling envious at their wedding. I also felt bitter because it made me feel like my life was wrong.

“I should not be talking about this. It’s a family secret. But the truth is that the marriage was called off. *Moruti* asked us to take back the *lobola*,” said my mother.

“What?” Ivy and I said simultaneously.

Handing back the lobola was an uncommon thing in our culture. In fact we both did not know anyone who had ever experienced it. In most cases l*obola* would be paid back to the husband’s family only if the wife was at fault – for example, if she had been caught cheating or conceived a child that was not the husbands? Even in those cases it was a rare occasion where the *lobola* was returned. Most of the time people just did not take it back. In many cases the money was no longer even there and they could not afford to pay it back.

The only case where this almost happened was that of my friend Mmatau in the early eighties. Her father bumped into her husband who was having a romantic meal with a girlfriend in a restaurant, having left Mmatau and the children at home. The old man got so angry that instead of confronting him he took out his cheque book and wrote him a cheque for the amount he paid for *lobola*. Mmatau’s husband never cashed the cheque. Both her husband and father never told her the story. She heard about it more than ten years later.

Ivy and I were very curious. We used all our charm to probe my mother to tell us more about this intriguing lobola story.

“No I can’t, It’s a sensitive thing, it’s a family thing and I don’t want to betray the faith they have in me,” said my mother.

“But we are also family. It will be like just sharing with your two daughters so that they must never make the same mistake. We won’t tell anyone. We just want to learn from the incident,” I said

"*Eh Mma*, it's true; we have to learn from the elders and to be wise with life's issues," winked Ivy, supporting me.

We finally persuaded my mother to tell us. Apparently the couple dated for less than a year before the wedding. This guy told the girl that he was sure that she was the one and therefore he wanted to do things right.

"You are a priest's daughter and I think we need to do things the right way, the Christian way. I am going to follow all the proper channels to do right by you," said Mofeti.

"What do you mean?" the priest's daughter asked?

"The only time I am going to make love to you is when you are my wife officially. That will be after we have been blessed by a priest in church. I want us to have a perfect life. If we do things the way God wants them, he will bless our marriage," said Mofeti leaning forward to kiss her forehead.

Makau, at 29, could not believe her luck. She had been dating men who played hide-and-seek when it came to commitment. Here was a man who was affluent and who wanted to make her his wife. I have been sleeping with Mickey Mouses who didn't think I was good enough to marry, she thought. Yes, she would wait and do things the right way this time. It all made sense. He spoiled her rotten, treated her like a goddess. He was a breath of fresh air, after dating guys who were unreliable and with whom you had to climb over a roof and scream naked to get their attention and respect. With this guy everything just flowed. She did not have the usual feeling she had had in previous relationships that always made her feel as if she was trying to stop the rain. So this is how true love is, she thought. If I had known I would not have wasted my time with those nobodies. I should have just waited for this Prince Charming, she reflected.

All seemed well until fifth week after the wedding. They were now living together in Mofeti's house in Polokwane. That Friday night she did not sleep. She walked up and down their big Tuscan double storey house the whole night. All of a sudden all the fancy furniture did not seem as stylish as she thought. Upstairs in their bedroom she watched him sleeping like a baby and felt something inside of her that wanted to strangle him. All the love she ever felt had disappeared. She decided then that she could not stay with him under those

conditions. The following morning she packed her bags and went back to her father's house. At six in the morning she was hooting outside the parent's gate.

The priest's house was in the same yard as the Lutheran church. No fence or wall divided the church from the house. In fact the house was so close that you could listen to the sermon while drinking tea in the kitchen. Whether you went to church or not in that house, you would hear the sermon. Her father came out, wearing his off-white pyjamas and a blue morning gown, to open the rusty gate. His forehead stiffened when he saw his only daughter. His white head with its uncombed afro looked like someone had poured mealie meal on it. He unlocked the big pad lock while two thin malnourished dogs ran around the BMW, as if the car itself was an invader.

"*Sesi*, *goreng*, why wake us up so early," he whined.

Hearing her father's voice made her cry out aloud, like someone who had just been told that her husband died in a car crash. She drove into the yard and stopped in front of the gate. Her father opened the passenger door of the vehicle and joined her in the car.

Her head was on the steering wheel.

"Sesi! What is wrong? Where is *mokgonyana*?"

"I left him at home. *Papa go padile*. This marriage can't work," she said. Minibus taxis and people were already passing by the gate to the taxi rank which was not far from the church yard.

"What do you mean? Come let's go and talk in the church, passersby will wonder what is going on." He led her from the car to the church. Inside they sat in the front next to each other.

"I have a feeling what you are going to tell me is bigger than me but let us pray for God to give us strength to deal with it. His eyes had turned red and his face was pale like an unclaimed corpse at a government mortuary. This was his little girl, his only girl and his last born. He stood up and walked around, then stopped at the pulpit and prayed as if the church was full.

"Lord I invite you into my family. I urge you to protect this family especially my little girl and keep all evil spirits away from us. Be with this child of mine. Whatever problem she

might be having, l leave it in your hands. In the name of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit, Amen."

He walked back to where his daughter was sitting. She was no longer crying aloud, but tears were running down her cheeks.

"Papa, I cannot go on with him. It's not working,"

"What are you talking about?"

"My husband, Papa I can't go on with him. I tried but I cannot," she said. The priest turned towards her and looked straight into her eyes.

"Don't worry my girl. God is always on our side. Nothing beats the power of God. Whatever it is it will be solved in the name of Jesus,"

"*Papa* it can't be solved. Even God can't fix this."

"Makau, have you killed someone. You are scaring me" said her father almost trembling.

"Papa that man. E*ish!* I don't know how to say this," she said ringing her hands.

"Tell me, my girl. You know you can tell me anything."

"Papa, a go berekegi ka dikobong. He can't perform in bed."

"What?"

She cried aloud again.

"He is fine with all other things but the bedroom. Since the first time I met him he has never done anything. Before the wedding he said that he wanted to marry me first but now it's been five weeks since the wedding and still, Papa, nothing is going on and he does not want to talk about it."

"What do you mean… he does not do anything?

"Papa what do you want me to say? There is nothing going on."

"Mh! Mh! *Ke mathata*! This is a big-big problem *sesi*. You can't live like that my child. No, no, no, you are right this won't work. There is no way you can live like that. Eh! Don't worry

I'll call the *lobola* delegation. I haven't touched his money. We can arrange for the *lobola* to be taken back. No young woman can live like that if she is married. If this man can't perform now immediately after the wedding he will never be able to perform. What will happen when you are forty or fifty? He is young now. Mhmh! No! I see your point. This would mean that you, my girl, must run around searching for what he can't give you. Not with my daughter. We will give him his money back."

My mother told us about how the *lobola* delegation tried to convince the priest that maybe they should first try and seek medical help, like recommend a urologist or the Men's Clinic, but the priest kept on saying, "my daughter is not a toy. She is human. She deserves a real man, a real husband. I am not going to allow them to play my girl like a skipping rope. It will be a cold day in hell before I allow my daughter to be put through that. They knew he had a problem. That is why they doubled the *lobola*."

Indeed, the delegation went ahead and took the *lobola* money back, and then the marriage was dissolved amicably.

"Mma were you part of the people that took the money back?" I asked my mother.

"No! No! No! I excused myself, telling them that I am going to see my eye specialist in Pretoria. I could not do it, it was just too painful. But the priest told me they went on with it."

"I could never do something like that. If it was me I would have just given some other reason like he doesn't buy groceries or he doesn't pay bills. I would never humiliate someone like that. They embarrassed the whole family," I said.

"Things have changed this day my friend. I can't even imagine having that kind of conversation with my dad. I can't. The words would never be able to come out of my mouth. I don't know, maybe my mom. And, Jesus, this man is a priest but he did not want to even explore other options," said Ivy.

"I still think it's weird that we are discussing this thing with my mom," I said.

"That is why I did not want to tell you the story," she said. We all kept quiet for a while then she said, "You are human before you are a priest. Maybe he just wanted what was best for his daughter, like everyone else."

"And what's best is sex only, *Mma*?" I said.

“If sex is good it constitutes ten percent of a relationship’s health. But if it’s bad or not happening it constitutes ninety percent,” said my mom. We all laughed.

“For a man like that one I would have stayed. I am sure we would have eventually found a way to solve the problem. Whatever happened to soul mates and divine love? I mean those are the words they both used at their wedding,” I said.

“So this girl was definitely not a virgin, she knew how sex is supposed to be. What was the problem *gabotse botse*? Was it because it was too small or is it erectile dysfunction? Or is there absolutely nothing there?” said Ivy and we laughed.

“Nobody knows. We were not told. This is not the kind of question you can ask,” replied my mother.

“You see, I believe in the old African traditional marriage when girls were married when they were still virgins. They did not know any sex and had nothing to compare their husband to. Whatever the husband offered was perfect,” I said and both my mother and Ivy laughed.

“You don’t mean that,” said Ivy

We went on and on about the topic. I could not stop thinking that this man couldn’t be the only one with that kind of problem. Now, if even priests do not offer support for this, what are we saying? It now dawned on me that Christianity and God were courteous formalities that people have learned to enjoy with mental and emotional detachment.

Does it mean those who are sexually challenged are not worth being loved? I could not help imagining that in some marriages this situation might be prevailing and people are living a normal life despite the test. I was surprised by how people tend to be unsympathetic about a situation like this one. These people have sons. How can they be sure that they are not swimming in the same pond? I really felt pity for Mofeti. I tried to imagine how I would feel if I had to walk a mile in his shoes? It would have killed me. I became conscious that the real battlefield on earth is people and their treatment of each other.

The weekend ended and I went back to my normal life in Nelspruit. Two weeks later my mom phoned me and told me that Mofeti had committed suicide before the divorce had been finalized. He hanged himself on his veranda and was found by the domestic worker.

I wondered how the priest must have felt.

Bridal Shower

Where I come from in Polokwane, Limpopo Province, bridal showers are called kitchen parties. It is an occasion, where old and young women gather and socialize in the name of the bride to be. All they do basically is eat, talk and open presents. There are no dress codes.

The conversations are led by the older married women. They were regarded as the most qualified to give advice on what to expect from marriage and how married women are supposed to carry themselves. You could be a relationship guru, a therapist or whatever but if you were not married you did not qualify for this prestigious position.

Marriage is not a mattress; a man is the head of the family; the best way to a man's heart is through his stomach; a man is an axe at times he must be borrowed; and so on and so on. These were the common things said in these oestrogen dominated parties.

Well as a single person who had no prospect of a forthcoming wedding, I refrained from attending most of these *Apartheid*- like (discriminatory) events. I have always felt out of place and bored and nauseatingly irritated by the 'I wonder when is she going to get married looks from the married comrades and the prospective brides. They practically owned the party and connived to make outspoken spinsters like me feel out of place.

As a result of that I winced when I heard that my sister Katlego was to have a bridal shower. I painfully anticipated that it was going to be one of those charades.

The invitation card, which was posted via email, raised my eyebrows and made me suspect that this one was going to be different. There was a picture of a sexy woman wearing a g-string and bra with a circus hat holding a whip. On the very fancy lavender invitation it was also indicated that the dress code was to be something purple and sexy. This was to be the first bridal shower in our family and my sister Kgaugelo volunteered to host it at her home in Centurion in Gauteng. Katlego's friends who were also based in Gauteng chipped in to help with the organising.

My sister Katlego is the last born child in our family and her wedding was a very big deal. There had been a series of needless revels and festivities. The lobola celebrations were as

good as a wedding. There had been a big shindig at my home with a marquee, speeches and many cheer leading relatives, friends and uninvited guests.

I remember vividly how proud my uncle looked when he gave a speech. He was dressed in his brand new light brown suit which still had its Carducci brand label attached on the rim of the right hand. He thanked the groom's family for marrying into our family. He further embarrassed the heaven out of all the family females by telling everyone that the women in Katlego's family on both maternal and paternal sides rarely got married.

Indeed it was true. My mom was the only one who got married. All my aunts from both sides were single. Kgaugelo and I and all my female cousins were still single. I resented his referring to this fact because most of us were single by choice.

"The Mamashelas (Katlego's in-laws) have blessed this family by marrying our beautiful doctor daughter Katlego. We have given you real pure gold." he said.

Then there was another big white tent celebration at Thabang's (the groom) parent's home to welcome the new makoti (daughter- in- law). Preceding that were two other small occasions before the lobola celebrations where many *Mokokoroshi* chickens lost their lives. That was when they came introduce themselves and when they came to negotiate the lobola price.

And then there was the bridal shower that was preceded by Thabang's bachelor party. At long last it was the two-day wedding celebrations. Day one – there was the church, finger lunch at the bride's home, a reception at the Makopane City Hall, an 'after party' at Morula lodge. Day two was a traditional wedding party at the groom's home with all kinds of presents for the older members of both families. The groom's uncles scored coats and walking sticks while the aunts were given blankets and seshweshwe dresses. We also received a whole goat carcass and a drum of traditional beer. The different occasions were sponsored and organised by different members of the two families.

Katlego and Thabang's wedding celebrations had very little to do with them. If you ask me I think everyone else in their families tried to fulfil some abandoned dream through it.

Katlego didn't even want a wedding but had to have one because we all wanted it. She preferred to rather to spend her money on a holiday to Dubai or some exotic destination. I

suspect they would both have been disowned by their families if they did not have the wedding celebrations.

Katlego and Thabang have so much in common. They were born in the same year, have the same initials, and are both doctors. Katlego's mother-in-law calls them 'my twins' because they also look so much alike, light skinned with high cheekbones on their oval face. They also had big round eyes that looked like they can jump out of their sockets anytime. They are both last born with four siblings. They both lost brothers in car accidents and their parents, who had all been teachers, were all retired. Their parents' homes were almost identical, located in town with identical sitting room sofa sets. Well, I can go on and on. All their siblings were professionals and single. In both families this wedding celebration was the first. Katlego's in- laws had compiled a four hundred people guest list and we had a two hundred one.

"There is no way we can bring it down. We have many close relatives," said Katlego's father-in-law.

I would rather not mention the battles that revolved on the finalising the guest list and events that led to us having a two day wedding. Then I would have to narrate until the cows come home. Katlego and Thabang wanted only one hundred guests wedding but ended up with a five hundred guest list. Everyone had their own conception of how this wedding was supposed to be. But of all the celebrations, the bridal shower left a lasting impression on me.

I drove with my friend Judy in her grey Porsche Carera to attend this occasion in Centurion. On our way as we drove to Centurion we took pleasure in watching different species of summer flowers that enlivened the margins of the N1 highway. Judy is one of those lucky girls who married into money and did not have to work. She left her job as an Information Technology Systems Analyst and became the most over-qualified housewife I know with a master's degree in Information Technology.

For Judy, the most strenuous decision of the day is which car to take her kids to school in, or whether to let the driver take them to school, or deciding on what the domestic worker should cook for the day. The only setback in her life was a husband who was always away on business trips. When she complained he told her that it was the price she had to pay for the lavish lifestyle which I doubt she could have traded for an ordinary life.

The normally three to four hour trip to Centurion from Polokwane took us two hours in the fancy car. She wore a pair of jeans with a tiny lilac sleeveless top and I leggings with lavender top. We thought we understood the briefing very well.

When we arrived at Kgaugelo's place, most of the guests were already there. The fancy cars parked outside her yard extended to the outside of her neighbour's yards. At the gate there was red tape, the same type the police use when there has been an accident.

'*Danger: No Man Zone'* was written on it

Kgaugelo's lives in a Thatchfield Golf Complex where upper middle-class of Centurions are entombed. Tuscan double storeys houses could be seen everywhere in this complex. Most of the time there was no one outside or even on the streets except for the domestic workers and the gardeners. I wondered if these people ever walked those streets.

We went inside. Judy strutted in the front with her fifty thousand rands Louis Vuitton bag swinging on her left shoulder. The guests were drinking, chatting and laughing. We were made conspicuous by our dress code. We were overdressed while everyone else was underdressed.

The girls were dressed in real sexy things. I have never seen anything like it. They were in what Hollywood movies called 'numbers'. I felt like a *PlaasJaapy (*rural person*)* - like a real Jane comes to Joburg case. People were g-strings with bras, small waist length nighties, gozzards, braziers, laced up corsets, maid's uniforms with whips and sjamboks and handcuffs. One girl with a very big behind, who was wearing only a g-string said,

"Ladies, which part of sexy didn't you get?" They all laughed at us.

"*Ngwana mma* (my sister) you must slip into something naughty. That's the idea today. Get out of your Limpopo boxes and join in," said Kgaugelo.

"I am not running around naked even if you pay me. Forget it. I am not as young as you girls," I protested.

"I will wear a pair of bermudas, it's the best I can do," said Judy.

"Where's Katlego?" I asked.

“She is on her way here; she does not know anything about the party. Makobo lured her away for the whole day, it is a surprise,” Kgaugelo told us in her bedroom.

Then we heard voices shouting from the living room.

“It must be her. Let’s go.”

The screaming crowd of about thirty women was already out at the gate,

“Surprise, surprise!” everyone yelled.

I saw Katlego’s big eyes protruding even more – like marbles. She was dumbfounded. She kept on hitting softly Makobo.

“You *skelm*!” she said, and then she continued hitting her friends one by one and said, “You are all crooks. Why didn’t you tell me?”

Her friends Tshepo and Tshepiso wooed her to the bedroom. A mauve camiknickers was ready waiting for her to wear.

“They have hired a stripper” Mmabatho, Kgaugelo’s friend, whispered into my ear.

“What?”I whispered back.

“You’ll see. We are going to have fun. I can’t wait for the stripper show to begin,” said Mmabatho.

A stripper, she must be joking. There is no way. Those were television things, I thought.

It all started with the food. Kgaugelo and Katlego’s friends had prepared an African cuisine consisting of *mogodu, tini*, oxtail, chicken and cow feet, mopani worms, *chakalaka* and *pap*.

“You better eat now ladies, because once we get started there won’t be time for food,” said Kgaugelo wiggling her bare bum at the guests.

Kgaugelo’s living room extended into the dining room creating enough space. The purple set of sofas and lavender curtains matched the corky outfits.

“Ladies! *Shhh*! Hey can I borrow your ears? Listen, eh no one is allowed to take pictures but you can download your personal photos from me. We are trying to avoid a situation where we may find half naked pictures of us circulating illegally,” said Kgaugelo.

We then moved to a hilarious naughty game in which people had to ask Katlego questions.

What is your G spot? Tell us about your first time. Was he good? How was your first time with Thabang? These were Mmabatho‘s questions. She shrieked and cracked with laughter whenever Katlego withheld a response.

“She must dance for us,” said Mmabatho.

I almost froze at some of her question. They tried to uncover things that I believed should not be said. This was unacceptable, I thought. Little did I know that this were just the showing shots, the real performances were yet to come.

I asked her who her dream man was and she said Barack Obama. Almost everyone asked something except for Katlego’s sister-in-law, Judy and Makobo. They just laughed.

I thought the game was despicably naughty until we got to the second activity. The dining room table was decorated with matching fancy underwear. I assumed they were presents until we got to the presentation.

I discovered soon enough that the lingerie was not presents but were for sale. She gave us a short presentation on prices and how to wear them.

“Girls, you have to buy Katlego some of these. She will need them to keep her man interested. And to keep him from the vultures that are out there, wearing this,” the presentation lady joked.

The show went on and this time she took out gadgets from a black refuse bag.

“These are a must have for all women, especially Katlego who is getting married,”

She took them out one by one and explained how they are used – switching them on and off. I had no idea what they were. I stood up from my chair at the back to get a full frontal view.

“Times have changed, today as a married woman one needs to play around with your man – using these things. Gone are the days of missionary acts. If you don’t make it interesting you won’t keep him at home,” she said.

She went on and on. It was about sex...when, how and how often it should be done. Among other gadgets she displayed different types and sizes of dildos. There was the smaller one

which she called *Billy* and the bigger one whom she called *Vuyo*. There were other bizarre safe to eat toys, such as edible underwear, oils and creams.

She probed for questions and inputs. And there were questions alright. The girls wanted to know more.

“Do I need to pluck the vibrator or can work on its own?” asked Judy.

“Ha! Ha! Ha! Hell no. You’ll need batteries,” she said expressing amusement.

“What if my man is always available? Do I still need Billy and Vuyo?” said Tshepo.

“Sweetness, he might be always there but there will be times when he would be tired or going through something. Then it becomes very handy. You’ve got to know how to introduce it to him,” interrupted Mmabatho.

“Yes that is true. You must be careful how you introduce it. It is of utmost importance that it be the right size,” said the presentation lady.

“What do you mean by ‘the right size?” One of the girls asked.

“Did you see how big Vuyo is. Don’t bring him if your man is smaller.” Mmabatho said as if she was teaching student doctors about organ transplants. The girls fell on each other laughing.

She also added that there were other types of vibrators: egg-shaped vibrators that women keep inside and use a remote control to switch on and off.

“Imagine getting a climax anywhere anytime. Mh! Imagine driving and you’re stuck in traffic and you just press and enjoy life – nice and easy. You just keep it inside all day and press the remote whenever you feel like it,” Mmabatho added, giggling like a primary schoolgirl who had seen a penis by chance.

I stood there with my hands folded on my big breast. I said nothing but could not close my mouth. My hand was on my mouth all the time. I could not even think about asking questions. I have never been in a situation in which people showed off things this private and being so open about it. I came from a different era and world where such things like this were a taboo. I did not even know how to feel.

“Are you sure this woman is not a prostitute,” I whispered to Judy.

I was taken aback when Kgaugelo allowed two men in. They passed through the crowded living area and were directed into the kitchen. The white one looked twenty something years old and the coloured middle-aged. The two men did not seem moved by the sexy attires. I figured that they might be the strippers mentioned by Mmabatho.

The sex gadgets lady concluded her presentation and gave out business cards. “Anyone who is interested in ordering anything can talk to me later. Remember ladies, to a man, you are as good as what you wear inside. I also give individual coaching sessions,” she said. Most of the guests bought underwear as presents for the bride-to-be.

I saw the white guy disappear into one of the bedrooms. We were then given snacks to munch. Despite the house tunes playing and the girls chatting, there was not much going on. I went into the kitchen and poured myself a double whisky. I had a feeling I was going to need it. Judy, who had been drinking juice all along, now decided to go for a cider.

Tshepiso, Katlego’s friend and the coloured guy were busy on the laptop. I only realised much later that they were working on the music compilation for the night. It was my first time to see music being played from a computer that was connected to home theatre speakers.

“You guys are late. You were supposed to be here at eight,” said Tshepiso.

“We had another show in Waterkloof and there was an accident on the N14 which obstructed the traffic blocking our way here.”

Everyone was now murmuring about strippers.

“Do you think he will get completely naked?” Judy asked with a mischievous twinkle in her eye.

“Who?” I asked.

“The stripper,” Judy said rolling her eyes.

“I don’t think he will. How can he? Naked! No way! I don’t think so, it would not be decent,” I said.

“We’ll see.”

Tshepiso singled out a chair and put it in front of the TV and instructed Katlego to sit on it. She sat there in her camiknickers facing all of us. We watched her like she was a plasma TV set. She really looked sexy. It was not the conservative Katlego that I knew.

She was not much of a drinker but I saw a glass of vodka in her hands.

Generally she was a shy person but on this day, that side of her vanished like clouds when the sunshine visits the earth.

She kept on changing her sitting position flaunting her new outfit. At some stage she kneeled on the chair, showing us her whole back with her bum half naked.

"If your patients could see you in that position, I am sure they would heal immediately," Judy joked.

"You must mean the male ones."

"The female's conditions would complicate from the thought of their husbands being treated by you." Tshepiso said.

"Fortunately I am getting married. My white gold ring will cool them off," Katlego laughed.

The music started: a fast tune called *'I like the way you move'*. I knew the song from the cell phone network Vodacom advert; with that naked pot bellied cartoon *meerkat* dancing like his life depended on it.

The white guy entered the living room dancing like he was on stage in front of six thousand people. He now looked different in military green shorts and a purple muscle top. His six-pack could be seen inside the top. It reminded me of a Nestle chocolate bar, well proportioned into little compartments.

He appeared taller than when he arrived. His brown hair was now tied in a neat ponytail. He danced in front of Katlego as if it was just the two of them in the room and they had something going on between the two of them. His moves were like those of a guy trying to entice a girl he met in a night club. He danced swinging his waist to the left, to the right, in circles as if he had no muscles.

He looked at her with bedroom eye as if she was the only other person on earth.

Then he moved his hands softly up and down her flawless face. He progressed moving closer and closer to her, wiggling his waist up and down and sideways. Then his hands shifted to her shoulders, to her hips and legs. Then he did the unthinkable. He moved his lower body in circles touching her bare stomach with his thing. She closed her eyes and screamed.

"*JOO NNA MMAWE!"*

The guy went on and on ignoring her shocked reaction. The guests had moved from the sofas and dining room table and were now circling around Katlego's chair. Everyone was jeering, "*Joo! Joo!"*

Tshepiso jumped up and down with her hands stretched out the way James Brown does in his shows. No one remained seated. Those who could not see jumped on the sofas. The excitement raved burning fire.

The stripper was very sexy. He took out a chiffon scarf which he also used to caress Katlego's body. He ran it all over her. Embarrassment and shock overwhelmed Katlego. She covered her face with her hands all that time.

She shrieked and closed her eyes, holding back as much as she could. The shouting became louder and louder. Listening to the screams, it was not easy to figure out whether people were in danger or whether they were having fun. Kgaugelo had informed her neighbours about the party but the noise drove them from out of their houses. In no time people were crowded at the gate wondering what was going on. The squeals grew thunderous and ear-splitting. The stripper's moves became even more seductive.

The stripper moved from Katlego and picked others. He seemed to know the right people, firstly he chose Mmabatho. They danced like they were both strippers. It was as if they had rehearsed together. Their lower bodies moved from left to right and up and down. They swung their bodies simultaneously moving to a lower level.

Then he stopped and took off his trousers and remained in his g-string underwear, his tight behind shaped like big fists. It was fascinating to look at him from every angle. The front of his g-string looked full and all eyes were just there. He kept on dancing and shaking what his mama gave him. He wiggled, swinging his lower body in circles. The girls' yells were now piercing. Judy and Makobo were breathing heavily next to me and I kept on saying,

"*Ke mehlolo*. This is crazy."

I had thought that I would have to die before I saw things like this. He then pulled a young girl from the audience. She was one of the sexiest. She was wearing a small black night dress trimmed in red on the hem. Her night slip was waist-high and see-through, and inside she wore a matching g-string panty, also a see-through. She was practically naked. She took off his top while they danced. I was now afraid of what might happen.

They danced almost lying down literally on top of each other but not touching each other or the ground. They both balanced their bodies with one hand and feet on the ground. They were dancing as if they were upright and looked like two people in the act of sex. The yelling never stopped. Everyone's eyes were animated and glued to the dancers.

The sexy girl stepped down and the stripper kept on dancing. He still had the chiffon scarf and moved it all over his body. No one ever sat down the whole time.

He then took off his underwear and people were now jumping up and down and everyone yelling at the top of their voices. We still could not see his thing because he covered it with his scarf. He moved the scarf from side to side and allowed us to see millimetres of his thing. Everyone was now dying with anticipation and they moved closer and closer to him. He hardly had the space to dance as everyone surrounded him. Tshepiso moved everyone backwards.

Mbabatho said, "Ladies be patient. You will see what you want to see."

"I want to touch him" said Katlego's sister-in-law who, was now jumping up and down next to me. She surprised me because I know her to be very quiet and reserved. She pushed her way through and touched one of the stripper's bums. She came back screaming, looking delighted.

The stripper removed the scarf for a second. There it was. Then the screams were at their utmost limits. "We want to see again," said Judy, and everyone joined in. "We want more! We want more!" Everyone chanted like they were on a service delivery protest march. The stripper kept on dancing. Three minutes later he lifted the scarf again. And then the show was over. It took thirty minutes but it felt like it had lasted for only two minutes. It ended when everyone was still in the heat of it.

Judy would not accept it was all over. Makobo confronted Kgaugelo there in front of everyone, “I know you are full of surprises and tricks. But today you have outdone yourself.” Questions began to flow to the organisers.

”Where did you find him? How much does he cost?”

The coloured guy, who was still leaning on the kitchen counter, was happy to answer all the questions. He gave out business cards.

“We also do individual shows which are R300 for ten minutes, if you like we can do them now for anyone who’s interested,” he said.

The show that we had just seen had cost R2000 for thirty minutes. Kgaugelo then said,

“No private shows in my house. Those who are into private shows should consider the privacy of their own homes.”

“Ladies are we really letting him go, how about another show?” said Judy, putting 500 rand on the table. “Pitch in ladies, thirty more minutes.”

Another R2000 was collected and the show went on. The girls were even crazier than before. At the end of it I found Judy and Makobo asking the coloured guy if it was possible to call him to come and perform in Limpopo. Later I saw Judy and the stripper chatting both of them scrolling something on their cell phones.

‘Ladies, where there’s money we go. We can even perform in Ghana for you, as long as you have the bucks.”

I could not breathe, I felt like my asthma has been triggered. Although my whole being was shocked and utterly surprised, I realised and accepted that times have really changed and that I come from a different age and time. The kitchen party that I am used to no longer seemed relevant. I imagined the whole lot of them listening to some old lady telling them clichés like ‘A man is an axe. He must be borrowed.’ They belonged to a generation straining to break the old conventions.

I imagined them unwrapping gifts: glass and tea sets (which they definitely did not need as they were all affluent). No, that would never rock them. It just would not. On our way back to Limpopo Judy and I were cruising at a very low speed. Most of the way she was giggling

with someone who called her several time. “You want to come to Limpopo next week?” she said with a chuckle. She then told the person on the other side of the line that it was not a good idea. Then she laughed again. “I will invite you when there is a bridal shower. She then laughed again. “You want to visit me personally. Hahaha!” The conversation went on and on until we approached the Manthole Traffic Control area and she saw traffic cops. I will phone you later. I could not help noticing a mischievous glint in her eye. I wondered what could have been going on.

My perfect husband

A man cheating on his wife in our community does not make headlines. That is because it is as normal as taking a bath in the morning. In most cases the girlfriend automatically assumes the status of deputy wife. The community accepts her as the official *nyatsi* even though the man did not marry her. She can even conceive two or more children with the man and he may even provide a house for them. Then she would be accepted by the man's family especially the parents and siblings. Any woman who leaves her husband because of a *nyatsi* is considered to be an idiot.

"Where does she think she can get a man who does not cheat? All men cheat, it's in their nature." This was always said in our township.

The more affluent a man is, the more women he would have. The chances of finding a man who does not have a *nyatsi* were as slim as winning the lotto. Men now feel even more justified because even President Zuma has four wives and possibly a higher number of *nyatsis*. It is simply accepted as African culture. Some women had tried to take it up with their mothers-in-law and all they got was - "he is better, he has only one *nyatsi*. His father had five *nyatsis*. And look! I am still here. You just have to live with it. Be grateful that he is still supporting the family."

Nevertheless, you would still get a few men that were honest and true to their wives. When a man is like that it is assumed that he is just clever.

"There is no way he cannot have a girlfriend. He just knows how to hide his things," they would say. A wife to such a man was considered fortunate and privileged for not knowing. Most women knew their husbands' nyatsis. Some women fought tooth-and-nail with the *nyatsis* but those who did not were considered to be well-mannered and mature. Most women lived with the pain of sharing their men and family resources with these *nyatsis*.

I was one of the few lucky women in Sibasa Township. My husband Mashudu was a decent man. There were no official or unofficial *nyatsis*. He was a devoted father and husband. He had never been unfaithful even in thoughts. He was a tall man with a slim figure who always preferred to dress in his formal attire all the time. Be it Monday at work or Saturday while reading the newspaper on the veranda, he would be immaculate.

He was a man who had personal dignity, rectitude, humility, and common sense…a man of monkish self-discipline and dedication. My bond with Mashudu was as sturdy as two intertwined trees with joined roots.

Mashudu was respected by everyone in our community. Most women regarded him as a role model. If they could, they would trade-in their adulterous husbands for him. A man that loved his wife in an honest way was considered as being fifty years ahead of his time by women.

"You are the luckiest woman in the world. If all these men were like Mashudu this world would be a better place," my female colleagues often commented when they saw him dropping me off at work.

Mashudu was the kind of man that always come home everyday immediately after work. He was also a sober-minded man who took neither alcohol nor cigarettes. If he was not at home I always knew exactly where he was. We went everywhere together; shopping, church, funerals and weddings. People called us the finger and nail couple. Up to now I couldn't even drive because he took me everywhere I wanted to go.

I was a teacher at Sibasa Primary School and Mashudu was the Education Circuit Office Manager at the Sibasa Circuit Office. We always had a lot to chat about. Every morning he dropped me at work before heading for his office, which was five minutes away.

He was a church elder at the Mbilwi Lutheran church and was also the chairman of the building committee. In our house we all went to church every Sunday. After the sermon, my husband always walked to the pulpit holding the black announcements notebook close to his chest. My husband loved things written and documented. He then would lay the book open on the pulpit and button up his jacket. It was as though he would not be able to read if it remained unfastened. After clearing his voice he would lace every announcement with a mini speech taking three times the time it would have taken to read the announcement. People would listen attentively because his voice had an insistent command to it. Then when he was done he would start a chorus in his tenor, urging the congregation with his hands to join him while he danced his way to his seat.

After church his humble and soft voice greeted everyone offering the aged and disabled a lift home. His readymade disarming smile displayed his pure white perfect teeth.

On our way to work on a showery Friday morning, a year ago he told me he was invited by the department to go to Pretoria to attend the Outcome Based Education Workshop that Sunday. The workshop was to commence on Monday morning and would continue until Friday late. He told me that he had planned to visit his uncle in Mapetla Township, Soweto on the next Saturday and would be home a week later.

My husband is the kind of man who hates food cooked by people he does not know. It was difficult to even get him to a restaurant when we went shopping at the bigger town of Makhado. He always doubted the hygiene of such places.

Mashudu loved simple traditional food. I decided to prepare provisions for him to take on the trip. I bought two live *Mokokoroshi* chickens and slaughtered them. I then removed their feathers and cleaned their insides. Sunday morning I woke up at four to boil them because they always took forever to cook. He was to leave at eight in the morning. When the chickens were ready I fried them in their own fat so that they would stay fresh for days. I also prepared *mutuku* porridge which was his favourite and it was known to last for three to four days without a fridge.

A whole cake tin of *mutuku* and two full chickens and a bowl of *moroho* would last him, I thought. I knew he would probably not like the food they cook for them at the hotel. I served him his favourite breakfast of *mutuku* and fried chicken insides. Mashudu was a porridge man who never ate rice or bread. He licked his fingers after eating his meal with his bare hands. He then washed his hands in the blue enamel basin which I placed on his much-loved chair.

“No one can cooks ‘mala’ like you do my dear wife. This was a wonderful meal,” said Mashudu, drying his hands with the clean yellow kitchen cloth.

My two sons carried his bags and the provisions into our grey Toyota Corolla. I watched him through our mesh wire fence as he drove away with a feeling of misgiving I could not explain.

“Don’t forget to find out if they can keep the food in the fridge for you,” these were my last words as he drove off.

Monday afternoon I went to the choir practice at our church as usual. My heart almost skipped a beat when I saw Mashudu's twin brother Ntakuseni. His tall figure with a falling stomach blocked the door. All of a sudden I could not sing. It was as if something was stuck in my thought. For a while I continued to hum the song. Then I recalled that Mashudu had not phoned the previous night to tell me that he had arrived safely. I was not worried about him because he was the kind of man that never cared for cell phones. Most of the time, he forgot it in the car. Without much further ado, I stepped away from the inquisitive eyes of the singing choir and hurried to where Ntakuseni was standing. His eyes looked gloomy. He took my hand and directed me to the car. I had panicked and left without saying goodbye to the choir members.

"*Ah, khotsimuhulu*," I greeted him, "why are you here? Is there a problem?" I said, expecting the worst.

"We shall talk at home; Mashudu is waiting for you there. My mother and father are also there," he said.

"What is wrong? Is everything okay? Is Mashudu okay?" I asked.

"Mashudu is fine but there is a big problem. Don't worry because it's a solvable one. Only you can solve it. We will talk at home," said Ntakuseng.

The five minutes' drive home felt like forever. I knew my brother-in-law well enough not to probe him any further. I knew he was not going to tell me upfront. When we finally arrived at home he almost bumped into a neighbour's son who was playing soccer with my two sons in the yard.

We walked straight to the main bedroom. I could still hear the playing boy's voices when we came to the door. Inside I found my mother and father-in-law together with Mashudu. They were sitting on the kitchen chairs and Mashudu on the bed. His eyes were red and his ready-made smile was gone. He was still wearing yesterday's clothes. His black trousers and white shirt looked soiled. When I came in, his eyes fell to the carpet. I could feel heavy words and thoughts in the air even before anyone said anything.

I knelt down on my knees, clasped my hands together, and bowed my head down to greet my in-laws appropriately.

"*Aah*!" I said still kneeling.

"*Aah*!" said my mother-in-law.

"*Ndaah!*" Said my father-in-law.

"*Khotsi a* Tshiandze, why are you back so soon?" I said. I then raised my head but remained seated on the carpet. They all looked down. I had to look down because as a daughter-in-law it would have been rude to look my in-laws straight in the eyes.

"Tell her what happened," said my father-in-law to Mashudu.

"My dear wife," he said, with his voice trembling.

"What is wrong?" I asked. He looked down again and breathed heavily in and out.

"This is the most difficult thing I have ever had to ask from you but there is no other way," Mashudu said.

"There has been a terrible accident; our car is a write-off," he continued. For a while I kept quite. That is why his clothes are like that, I thought. The air was still heavy.

"Well we must thank God. A car is nothing. We will have another one," I said. He then kept quiet. The silence in the room was deafening. You could hear a feather falling.

"There is more. Tell her," said my mother-in-law.

"Someone else was in the car," said Mashudu, "she died unfortunately."

The silence returned with everyone facing down.

"A she?" I asked.

"Yes. Mark Mulaudzi's wife, Matodzi," said my father-in-law.

"The accident happened last night just before the Kranskop toll gate. We were hit by a truck whose brakes had failed." said Mashudu.

"I see," I said sombrely.

There was silence again. I was now confused. I wanted to ask questions. Matodzi Mulaudzi is a nurse. Where could she have been going to? Could it be he gave her a lift? My in-laws and my husband avoided my eyes. I kept quiet and waited – hoping to get some answers.

“The major dilemma is that Mark and his family up to now have not been informed. Mashudu is the only person who has this information other than the Warmbad police. He promised them that he would inform the family in person as we are all family friends. So he cannot go there alone to report this to the family. It won’t look good.” said my father-in-law.

“I see,” I said.

“It will look bad if they are told that it was just the two of them in the car. Mark might be suspicious or angry. You know how people are. They might interpret it negatively and Mashudu might be in trouble or, worse, they may even kill or bewitch him. My dear sister, you know how the Venda people are,” said Ntakuseni.

I felt hot and cold at the same time like someone who was having hot flushes. It was then that I understood what was going on. There was nothing neat and tidy about my husband. “So we will all accompany him to the Mulaudzi home. The story is that you were with them in the car. It’s the only way we can get out of this whole thing,” said my father-in-law as if we had all been part of what had happened. The disturbing and sad part was that they were not even negotiating with me. I was simply given instructions on what I had to do.

“I need time to think about this,” I said.

“There is no time to think. This is a matter of life and death. A person is in the mortuary and her family is not informed. We must go now before this whole thing turns into a mess,” said Ntakuseni.

“Okay, I need a minute with my husband,” I said, “Mashudu, can we talk in the other bedroom.” I then walked out and he followed me into the children’s room. I closed the door.

“There is no other way. We have to go together,” said Mashudu.

“I need the truth before I get myself involved in your muddle. Was she your…” I said. Before I completed asking the question Mashudu said, “It’s like that. It was a big mistake. I am sorry.” Before I could internalise what he had said they all came into the room without knocking.

“Let’s try and solve this issue, *mazwale.* The other things we will fix later. You need to protect your family, for your children’s sake,’ said my father-in-law.

*

I went with their plan. It did not feel as if I had a choice. I watched my husband lie to Mark. I watched Mark crying like a little baby for his wife. It was sad. We were all close family friends. All of a sudden the story Mashudu told felt convincing, even to me. That is how effective the lies were – that we met her at the taxi rank where she was to board her taxi to Johannesburg and offered her a lift. I discovered when we were there that Matodzi had been off duty for that whole week. She had decided to go and moonlight at a Private Hospital in Johannesburg to make extra money.

Matodzi was buried the following Saturday, survived by her husband and five children, the last born were two year old twins. On the surface I looked as cool as a cucumber. I was not sure if I would be able to sustain the act. I did not want to look as much of a fool as I felt inside. I felt like an innocent mouse that had built its nest near a slowly erupting volcano.

I was so bitter about the whole thing that when I looked at Matodzi’s twins in the church’s front row, I thought they looked like Mashudu. Ntakuseni’s wife who was seated next to me did not make it any easier. She kept on pointing at the two small girls to me. “You see those two girls in the front row wearing the identical velvet dresses? Look at them carefully – can you see them? They are Matodzi’s last born twins. Look there next to the lady with a green hat,” said Ntakuseng’s wife nagging the spice out of me.

My husband had attended workshops once a month. I discovered that Matodzi always worked the night shift which gave her two free weeks a month. She used one week every month to moon light at Morningside private hospital in Gauteng. This posed many-many questions that remain unanswered to date. Ntakuseng’s wife was the one who mined and gave me this information. She found all this very amusing. Ntakuseng had an official nyatsi whom she knew very well. She also knew the *nyatsi* twin boys. She was glad to welcome me into the league of wives officially cheated on. She was happy to have me swimming in the same boat.

After we had informed the family about the death, my husband refused to talk about the issue. Pursuing the topic was as pointless as using sign language in the dark. He continued with life as if nothing happened. We went back to our perfect married life and he continued to drop me off at work every morning and we went to church every Sunday. The only thing that changed was my friendship with Mark.

We kept in touch.

The threat

“God, let it be a ghost,” I prayed when I opened my eyes and saw a slim figure standing next to my bedroom door. It was five in the morning on Friday, the fifth of May, on a farm located half way between Nelspruit and White River in Mpumalanga. “She is here,” the young man spoke softly, after realizing that I was awake, creating an impression that there were many people coming for me. At that moment I was not terrified at all. I jumped from the bed and shouted “Hey!” at the top of my voice, thinking I would scare him away. Another slim figure appeared.

It was then that it became clear what was happening. It was not a ghost. I wished it was. They were young, maybe in their early twenties, skinny and soiled as if they have been walking on a dusty road. One of them was wearing a cap in such a way that his face was obscured and the other one had bloodshot red eyes. “What do you want?” I asked, boldly approaching them. They pushed me aggressively, practically throwing me on the bed, pressing my face to the other side of the bed. I kept fighting to push my face to their side.

One of them took out a gun and the other one was carrying a knife from my kitchen. When I saw the gun all my resistance crumbled, I realised that I could get killed. At that time I became the most cooperative victim you have ever heard of and followed all instructions given.

“Could it be that they want to rape me?” I wondered. I decided to find out from them directly. “Are you guys intending to rape me?” I asked in the most polite and humble voice. I felt at the time that if that was their intention then I will let them do it – without fighting back – to avoid a violent rape.

“We are not here to play games; we are here on a job,” the guy with the gun said in the Swazi language. Being a Pedi-speaking person, I was not aware I could speak the language so well until that morning.

“Guys, if you are not going to rape me, I see no point in attacking me. You can see there is no one else here and the alarm is not working, there is no danger for you. Just take whatever you want and leave,” I pleaded with them. “We want money, where is the money?” said the guy with bloodshot eyes rubbing the gun against my face. I took out my handbag and gave them

all the money I had (about R300). I also led them to the other bedroom and revealed another R200 that was in the closet. “This is all the money I have,” I said apologetically.

I kept on engaging them in conversation as they carried my belongings from all the rooms to the kitchen door. The guy with the knife was carrying items in one hand and holding me with the other. They carried whatever they thought valuable and piled it at the kitchen door. They really appeared to be on a job, rushing up and down the house.

“Hey guys, I know life is tough, there are no jobs. That is the reason you’re on this job.” I said, engaging them in small talk. They just stared at me, looking amazed. I kept on chatting and asking questions, “Where do you come from? You guys seem like nice people,” I said as we were rushing in and out of the kitchen.

After a while I asked the guy who was holding my hand if he could let me go for a while because I needed to smoke. The guy with the gun was so furious when he found me alone in the kitchen smoking.

“Are you crazy, how you can leave her alone? She will press panic buttons and we will get shit,” he said.

When we were in the living room the guy holding my hand examined my hi-fi speakers.

“Are they working?” he asked, pointing at them. When I confirmed that they were, he said “Mm, they will look nice in my room.” He then disconnected them and added them to the rest of the stuff in the kitchen.

I was still not that terrified; it felt like I was acting in a movie. The only thing that seemed real was the eyes of the guy with the gun; something in them just convinced me that if I made one mistake he would kill me. They collected whatever they perceived as valuable but also left items that were worth taking. The microwave, computer, digital camera and leather jackets – all that stuff was right in front of their eyes. That made me realise that they were also panicking. They only had an hour before daybreak.

The most painful part for me was when I realised that they were planning to transport the stuff with my car. When it was time for them to leave, they could not find the house and car keys. As they were carrying things, the guy with the gun had placed the keys and my cell phone in the side pocket of his trousers and had forgotten about them. He kept on emptying

his front and back pockets. I helped them to look for the keys, though I knew exactly where they were. I was thankful that they weren't able to take my Nissan van.

I suggested I would open the kitchen door for them. It led to a garden flat attached to the house. That way they would use the flat-let exit to go out. I gave them the spare keys for my Alfa Romeo because the car had a tracking device. They were running out of time and the smaller car meant they could not carry everything.

All the time we were relating well, until the guy with the gun decided they must tie me up. They were taken aback when I refused. "There is no way you are going to leave me tied up on a farm. Rather shoot me with that gun if you wish."

I suggested that they should lock me up in one of the bedrooms untied and leave with the key. "But this woman did not give us any problems," said the guy who held my hand. "Let's lock her up untied."

"Be careful with my car, it has a tracker, if you keep it for long they will find you," I said to them as they rushed out. I thought that might scare them and compel them to abandon the car sooner.

"Did you hear that? *Uthi le motor iya tracker*!' panicked the guy with the knife.

Five minutes later, at seven minutes after six, I was out of the house after managing to break the door down and called the police from my neighbour's house.

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I thought my encounter with the criminals was a once off thing. Little did I know that it was just the beginning of a long and painful journey. Nevertheless, I considered myself lucky because of the attention I received from the men of the law. In South Africa most people who experience crime whine that the police don't really help them. Enough has been said about the police being inadequate. But I experienced the opposite with the White River Police. Fifteen minutes after my cry for help three police vehicles came into my yard: the inspectors, dog unit and the finger print guys.

Thirty minutes later about eight cars were crammed in my yard. Black and white police officers roamed all over the place, most of them in uniform and others plain clothes. I appreciated their presence, which distracted me from the trauma of the incident. They were

all shocked by my calmness. They kept asking each other as if I was not there, “Is she the lady that was robbed?” They were everywhere; they had taken over my house and my yard, asking all kinds of questions.

After writing down a statement the fingerprint guy asked me to show him where he could get their finger prints. A tall pitch-black man appeared to be in charge of the fingerprint team. His eyes, mouth, nose and ears were all larger than big. His voice was authoritative and instructive, “Lady, if you can’t recall where they touched, you make my job difficult,” he said. He managed to make me feel like a child being reprimanded by a headmaster.

At that time my thoughts were just floating around. I remember imagining what he might look like when he was angry, how animated those big features would become. I was convinced that if someone owed me money and I took him along to collect, the sight of him would definitely inspire them to pay without any excuses and hesitations.

He eventually found the fingerprints on a fridge. The guy with the gun had pushed fridge on their way out. Suddenly the fingerprint officer’s face lit up – the first time I saw an expression.

“This is a good one,” he said with a smirk. His smile looked like a grin, a lot like someone battling to swallow steel wool. “We got him,” he said, putting black powder on the fridge. I never imagined that taking fingerprints at a crime scene would be so complicated. He kept on talking to me while he proceeded with his job.

“What language do you speak?” he asked in the same way a traffic cop would ask for a driver’s licence.

“Sepedi,” I replied.

“Why do we torture ourselves trying to speak the Queen’s language? I can speak Sepedi. I am from Bushbuckridge,” he said with his face beaming.

“I am sure they thought it was a white person staying here, otherwise they would have not dispatched so many cars. I am surprised they did not send a helicopter,” he murmured, turning from the fridge making sure no one else was listening.

“Ha! Ha!” he laughed.

“You must be the only black person living in this forest. Why did you choose to stay in such an isolated area?” he asked.

“Ha! Ha!”

This time I was not sure if he was laughing at me or whoever dispatches cars from the White River Police Station.

I was now feeling irritated and chose not to respond, but he continued laughing and joking about the issue. A colleague of his took pictures of the finger prints and him standing next to them. Then I had to sign some papers which had the finger prints pasted on them. The last police car left at about eleven am. From that day the White River police patrolled the main road at night and at times they would go to the extent of driving into the farm to check if all was well. Inspector Gobbler, who was the investigating officer, popped in every now and then to update me on the development of the case.

I thought I was okay and was very grateful that the criminals had not raped nor harmed me. But Saturday and Sunday passed and I just could not sleep at night. Whenever I closed my eyes, they reappeared in my dreams, knocking at my bedroom window, informing me that they were back. On Monday morning I was the first patient to arrive at my General Practitioner’s surgery.

“I am not prescribing sleeping pills for you. You need a psychologist,” said the doctor.

“I am going to be fine. I just need them for a few days and doctor please… no psychologist…I am not crazy… I have only been robbed,” I said. “Going to see a psychologist won’t work for me. It is so self-indulgent; it’s for bored rich people. I’ll be fine doc.”

Dr Otto Mcacwa, who is also a good friend of mine, was not impressed by what I said. He insisted on giving me a sick note for the day, which I had to submit at work. He phoned a psychologist and booked an appointment for the following day. He also arranged that I get my medical certificate from the psychologist.

The only reason I went to see the psychologist was to secure the sick note. Things took a different turn there and I was shocked by the outcome of the first session. The man knew

exactly how I felt and what I was still going to feel and why. That was something I didn't expect at all, educated as I am.

"For you to recover you need to intensify the security systems in and around your house," said the psychologist.

"The reason why you don't sleep is because you still feel unsafe."

Three days after the robbery the criminals were arrested. They were traced through their finger prints. The guy with the gun was actually a dangerous criminal wanted for murder. Most of my things were recovered, including my car and the speakers.

I was tired of all the bureaucracy and wanted my life to go back to normal. I now knew all the procedures that one goes through after being robbed. It was the fifth day after the farm attack and I had spent the day with another branch of police called something 'car unit'. They dealt with retrieving stolen cars. Identifying my car was a tiresome event with all kinds of documentation needed. It was also a process in which engine numbers were inspected. After all those procedures I had to go back to the police station to fill in another form in Grobler's office. It had been a long day. I was pissed and tired when I walked into Inspector Grobler's office which he shared with his colleague Joubert.

Grobler's desk faced the door while Joubert's almost formed a T shape, extending to the window. Next to the door were three chairs for visitors. The third chair was almost hidden next to Joubert's desk in the corner of the room. When I walked in, Joubert was standing next to Grobler' desk and they appeared to be discussing a document. I walked straight into both of them. When they saw me they reacted the way I would have if I'd seen a ghost. I was too exhausted to even entertain their response or let it bother me.

"How are you madam," they said simultaneously and looked at each other. Then their eyes moved to the chair next to the window and immediately rolled back to me again.

"I need the forms, I want to get it over with," I said. Grobler handed them to me quietly. They continued to look at me in an unusual way. I perused the form while moving to sit on the chair closest to the door, and this time their eyes were on the other person in the room. My eyes turned in the same direction. I could not believe it, there he was – the guy who had held

the gun to my head five days ago! His torso was bent to the extent that his face was almost on the ground. He reminded me of a chicken made wet by the rain, dripping and helpless.

“Wow! It’s him,” I said looking at them. They both nodded without saying a word.

He was handcuffed. I pushed aside the middle chair that separated me from him and stood firmly in front of him.

He kept his face down. My exhaustion diminished and was replaced by intense anger. He still faced the ground.

“Hey, why are you not looking at me? Look at me!” I said, as he lifted his head, stared at me, and dropped his face again.

“You thought you were clever the other day and now you can’t even look at me. *Hee? Hee*?” I said, raising my voice. I moved backwards. I did not know what to say or do and when he did not respond I felt humiliated. The two officers stood next to the desk, staring frozenly. I felt the urge to inflict some kind of pain. I looked around for an object to throw at him and was tempted to push Joubert‘s desk on top of him with all its files and papers. I instinctively regained my senses and recalled that I was in a Police Station.

“What did I do to you? Who sent you to my house? Do you know me?” I bombarded him with questions so loudly that other officers from nearby offices came out to see what was happening.

“You have blundered boy,” I said, “I am not a white man, I am going to deal with you the African way,” I shouted.

“You can release him now. I care less” I said, looking at the cops.

“I went to Zimbabwe to consult my *inyanga* (traditional healer). He told me that you won’t live for long, you and everyone you sold my stuff to. You messed up with the wrong person this time. They should just release you to enjoy your last days,” I said passionately on my way out, still holding the form, pushing my way through those who were standing at the door. I was literally mad for a few minutes.

“I will bring the form tomorrow inspector; I have had enough shit for one day.”

I was taken aback and surprised that I was capable of acting like that. The reason I threatened him with witchcraft was because I knew most black people in Mpumalanga believed in it.

Somehow I knew it would disturb his spirit. I thought that for what I had gone through I was justified to act in that way, yet it did not make me feel better at all.

A week later I came face to face with the other culprit in an identity parade. I thought it was going to be like in the movies where there is glass between you and the suspects and they cannot see you. I had to identify him out of ten pairs of criminals' eyes piercing through me as if I was the bad guy. They looked at me with eyes which said, "If I come out of here I'll come for you." That was scary and I am still traumatised. Sometimes I see those faces in people I meet on the streets.

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Three years passed before the case was heard in a court of law. They were denied bail because of their other cases. My witchcraft threat fell on fertile ground. I have never believed in witchcraft my whole life. It was just a lousy threat. I never consulted any traditional healer, but apparently my poor victims believed me. The guy who bought my TV from them died mysteriously – a headache and he was gone. Then one of the culprits got sick in prison and died.

Grobler and Joubert made a special trip to my house to come and inform me about the deaths and they wanted to know specifically what I had done. They were fascinated by the whole fiasco. The court staff summoned me during recess and the interpreter asked me which *inyanga* I had consulted.

"*Eish, sesi, inyanga ya khu istrongo, na loyu uzo shona*, (your traditional healer is a strong one, even this one will die)," he said gazing at me with admiration.

"Where do you come from?" I just walked away smiling. I never bothered to explain myself, because I knew they would not believe me.

When I eventually faced the remaining culprit in court he had already spent three years in prison. I felt that was enough punishment for the crime, but unfortunately it was not up to me. My anger had diminished; I felt nothing but pity for him. The case had been remanded three times and when eventually it was held, he still could not look at me. He differed with his

lawyer (provided by Legal Aid) who stepped down and he decided to defend himself. I don't know much about the law, but I gathered that he did not do well. I did not attend the sentencing, but when I left the court it was clear that for my case, the minimum sentence would be 15 years in jail. I wondered what led him to this kind of life and concluded that something must have gone terribly wrong in his upbringing. It was sad, no family member or friend of his attended the court proceedings. It made me wonder if he would have turned out differently if he was born in a supportive and caring family.

But I couldn't halt the feeling of remorse in me. He looked thinner and pale, with the same demeanour as his friend and colleague, weeks before he died.

A million dollars in Grahamstown

One wise man from the West said that the human species can survive without other things other than human affection. I took this notion very lightly because all my life I have existed in crowded environment, such that human affection always existed without me making any extreme effort. It was when I decided, at the ripe age of forty, to go and study at an institution that was 1500 kilometres from home that I realised that human affection was not always as readily available as I thought. I had spent four months basically alone, with only arctic relations with the erudite as my only source of warmth. It was like living in a graveyard.

I then met someone and agreed to go on a date on a Saturday afternoon. I was thirty minutes late. He waited for me at Raglan road next to the Chinese shop. It was early on a Saturday evening and it was my first date in Grahamstown. The slightly nippy autumn weather had taken its toll. I had guarded myself with a caramel cashmere coat with grey fur.

I was not sure if I was really interested. I had so many exasperations with my academic life. I felt that if I did not get a distraction I was going to go barmy. I was not going to instantly get involved. I was there to check him out – get to know him. He lived in the township and was extremely handsome. He had the 'gravy train' deportment. He was not an academic – so I regarded him as a breath of fresh air.

At forty six, he was the right candidate, six years older than me and implausibly single. He was tall with a handsome physique and was always decently dressed. His bronze skin was flawlessly smooth, as if it was licked by some magical creature every day. He had a long face with chiselled features.

I had met him at the Municipality when I was researching for an assignment. He seemed to know everyone there. Everyone knew his name. Although he seemed to have a vague profession he projected himself as someone important. He always referred to his busy schedule. I detected a glaze of unoriginality in all he said, as if he had a dire need to impress. Maybe it's just my usual cynical analytic self, I thought.

"My job is very hectic. Last week I flew to Durban. Three weeks ago I was attending a meeting in Bloemfontein and on Wednesday I am attending a cabinet meeting in Cape Town. I never spend the whole week here in Grahamstown. The Mayor and the Municipal Manager

always prefer to travel with me because I advise them on very important political issues," he said.

When I was in my apartment preparing myself for the date, my mind leapt to my conversation with Tebello and Jenny the previous night. We were attending a class party hosted by our lecturer Denise, the American lady.

Other than the lecturer, Tebello and I were the only 'golden oldies' (over forty) at the party. We secured an obscured corner in the kitchen. Jenny, the lecturer's friend, joined us.

Our tête-à-tête chatting about our children automatically leaped to a chinwag about men. It did not take us long for us to realize that we were all single and looking. Tebello revealed to us that she almost found Mr Right that week.

"Where?" We simultaneously enquired.

"Here in Grahamstown," she said.

"Really?" Jenny asked

"*Eish*! It's a long story," said Tebello.

She told us that a friend of hers, a psychologist at Fort England mental hospital, came to her apartment to inform her that she had found her a perfect boyfriend who was going to marry her. The friend said that the guy was single and in his fifties and was from her work place. Tebello told us that she was very excited and assumed that it was a colleague – probably a doctor or a psychologist.

"I thought that God finally found my address. My prayers were being answered. I wanted to meet him without delay. Can you guess what happened?" said Tebello chocking with laughter.

"Okay! You met him. You liked him. He liked you too and you all lived happily after," I said.

Jenny and I were more inquisitive than ever.

"Well, to cut the long story short – the man was a mental case at the hospital. Apparently he lost his mind after the sudden death of his wife. He never recovered. My friend wanted me to

go out with the mad man," Tebello said. We all laughed, even though I did not think it was funny.

"But maybe if he can have a new wife he will be fine," I said.

"Okay. No problem. I will tell my friend to arrange a meeting for you. You can be the new miracle cure wife,' Tebello said.

"Looking for a man, at our age, here in Grahamstown, is like trying to find a million dollars," said Jenny with a poignant tone.

"Speak for yourself, I think there are good men that we can go out with here," I said.

"You definitely haven't lived here long enough to know what I mean," Jenny said.

As I drove to where my date was waiting for me, I thought a lot about Jenny's words. "A million dollars." I could not tell my two friends yesterday that I had just spotted my million dollars in Grahamstown. I had to be sure first if it was for real. I wondered what could have happened to Jenny for her to arrive at such a hopeless conclusion. It was clear that she had given up on any prospect of ever finding a man in Grahamstown. I eventually concluded that it must be 'a white thing' which did not apply to us blacks. It couldn't be her personality because she was an adorable sweet lady. As I was still reminiscing, my cell phone rang. It was him, 'my million dollars'. Something in me wished he had grown impatient of waiting and left.

I recall then that he had not mentioned where he was taking me. I hated myself for having not asked. His friend's white van was parked like an abandoned car outside the Chinese shop. It was already pitch dark and Raglan Street looked deserted. There were no pedestrians passing like there normally were during the day. I parked behind them.

"Let's follow him," he said as he climbed into the passenger seat of my car. I drove all the way behind the friend's car having no idea where we were heading to. We stopped at his friend's house. I remained open-minded about his undisclosed plan for the night. Every now and then in the car our eyes met accidentally and we both smiled. I longed for a signal – anything that could signify security. There was none. His smile was cold and scarce – like it was remote controlled by a parsimonious person.

“I am glad you came. I was not sure you were going to make it,” he said searching for the button to adjust the seat as his long legs were uncomfortably touching the dashboard. After spending half an hour at his friend's home we left.

I was now driving again on the busy township road. The young and old, the drunk and sober, donkeys, cats and dogs, speeding minibus taxis and donkey carts competed for space on the narrow road. I opened the window and could feel the dust. He directed me to a house in the Joza section. I still did not ask about the ‘map’ for the night. I took everything as an opportunity to know him better by letting him be himself. We ended up at an old dilapidated four-roomed residence. From inside, the house seemed like a three roomed dwelling but I discovered later that there was another bedroom outside.

We found many people in the small home. He simply introduced me as his friend Mapula. I found it strangely disturbing to think that I was not going to be the only occupant in his world.

There was an uncomfortable enthusiasm when we walked in, which disturbed me. I was received as if people had known me for years. The two men who, later turned out to be my date’s contracted friends, were drinking peppermint liqueur.

I was then bombarded with all kind of questions. Where do you come from? Where do you work? Where do you stay? And so on.

“She is from Rhodes,” my date said. The statement seemed to have answered all the questions.

“Mh!,” said the middle aged woman who sat on the single couch. Everyone turned to look at me, even the girl who sat behind the sofas came out. Theirs were eyes of admiration. I felt like I was Paris Hilton – famous for nothing. We hung around there for half an hour.

When my date eventually excused us and told them that we were going somewhere, they all walked us out. I have never had people that impressed about me. I realized that they were even more impressed with my vehicle more than me. They surrounded my ordinary Toyota Conquest as if it was an exclusive car, a Rolls Royce or a Porsche.

Thereafter we went to meet a friend of his at a tavern. He mentioned that this friend was politically connected.

“We have to go there because this friend of mine is going to buy us drinks,” he said.

The friend did not come and he suggested that we should go to my place.

“I will buy meat and drinks. We can go and cook it at your place. I will call my friend to come and collect me later,” he said.

His presence warmed the small bachelor apartment at the postgraduate village. He spiced and grilled the meat while I cooked the pap. We ate, listened to music, danced and ended up spending the night together. After the long drought of human affection I felt like the sun was sleeping in the apartment.

I was pleased even though his lovemaking was self-fulfilling. Everything revolved around him. He never tried hard to please more than himself. I don’t think he even pleased himself maximally. I did not know what to make of it. I consoled myself by assuming that he would learn gradually with time.

I could not help thinking about my friend Tebello who always told me that handsome men don’t make good sex partners. She alleged that they were narcissists who only cared about themselves. She believed that the uglier ones tried a lot harder. Tebello also maintained that a man’s behaviour in bed is a reflection of his personality and what he will become in a relationship. If he is selfish it is most unlikely that he would be generous and considerate in the relationships. I thought it was all crab psychology founded on unproven notions. This relationship was going to work. I felt like I could do to him what spring does to flowers – what summer does to fruit trees.

By now I had given him a nick name which he seemed to like. I called him MD, short for million dollars. He never asked me what it meant or why I called him that. He must have thought it is short for managing director. He always told me that when the mining projects that he was facilitating kicked-off he was going to be the MD.

The morning after when he woke up he found me already working on my laptop. He asked me if it was okay for him to take a bath. He stayed in the bathroom for two hours. When I went in to use the loo I found him dancing like a five year old in the shower.

“This was the nicest bath I have had in a long time. You know we don’t have water in the township,” he said to me rubbing his body once more with the Radox shower gel.

“Where did you buy this thing? It smells so nice,” he said.

“Clicks, it has a feminine smell. You will smell like a woman the whole day,”

I saw vulnerability in his eyes. They were the eyes of a small boy. He continued dancing around the shower. I wondered how a man who flew to all locations in the country with the mayor could be this fascinated by a lousy shower.

After bathing he washed last night‘s dishes. This was new to me. I was used to dating affluent men who would never do dishes even if their lives dependent on it. Maybe this was not so bad – maybe this could be a true breath of fresh air? After all, I was 40. Maybe this was the time to try something different.

Later, when we were having our breakfast, which he made, I asked him questions about his liberation movement Azapo, which he said he served all his life. He did not tell me much but mentioned that he had been a political prisoner several times in Johannesburg. He seemed to enjoy talking about the mining project more.

I got to know that he was never married officially. He had four children with four different women, two of whom were conceived at the same time. I was not surprised as it had become a habit for most black men in his age bracket to boast about the number of kids they have. They flaunted children (even when they did not support them) the same way most people do with University qualifications. I got to know that he lived in his late parents’ home (the four roomed house in Joza) with his sick brother and his fifteen year old son. He never asked me ask me anything about myself – not even what I was doing at the University.

Whilst we talked, the conversation never flowed. I listened most of the time. I kept on interrupting him when his Xhosa-flavoured English was not comprehensible. At times I just let it pass and try to figure out what he could be saying. With the limited vocabulary between us there was not much to be said. There were no discussions on the relationship great expectations and ground rules.

“I am serious; I have been looking for someone I can settle with. I don’t know you that well but I see a potential in you. If we are to be together, will you be able to adapt to the Xhosa culture?” he said. I wondered how easy that would just be. I again looked into his eyes for a

signal – some robot that would give me a green light indicating that he was sincere. I found nothing.

“I don’t know,” I said.

After he left I reflected on my philosophy on love. Maybe this is the time to redefine it, I thought. Maybe it’s time for change – time to revisit my standards and criteria for evaluating suitable men. Maybe I have missed out on a lot by being fussy and analytic. For once maybe I need to lay back and be spontaneous. If I get into trouble I will take it as an adventure.

In our subsequent meetings it was clear without anyone having said it that the relationship was on. Although I was extremely busy at the University I made time to see him for an hour or two daily. Within a week he had introduced me to all his relatives and friends. The first two weeks were almost perfect. We met for meals, his place or in town. We laughed, talked and kissed… the way new lovers do. But still something in me just would not release the butterflies in my stomach. I didn’t introduce him to anyone - not even Tebello. I wanted to wait – to be sure.

I was impressed but also taken aback by the fact that his house, small and bare as it was, was exceptionally clean. The plain floors were always shiny and the few items spotless with shiny surfaces. One could hardly believe that only males stayed there. I hoped his personality was as neat and tidy as the small house. This was a plus for him as my place was never that neat. Most of the time, I had to jump over papers and clothes to find my way. At times he cleaned up acknowledging that he understood that studying while working part time could be strenuous and that I had no time.

It was on the third week that our cosy love story began to rattle. It was on a Wednesday at about ten in the morning when suddenly my cell phone ran aloud. I jumped immediately and switched it off out of embarrassment on my way out of the library. I had forgotten to put it on silence and now the librarian assistants and students looked at me as if I was a naughty toddler. It was him, Mr MD. I went out and buzzed him with my last sixty cents airtime. He phoned me back.

“Hello! *Ukuphi* (where are you)?” he said. Always when he called me on the cell phone our conversations were always hurried and straight to the point. It irritated me. I thought it was unromantic but I never complained. Maybe he is saving airtime, I thought.

“I am in the library,” I said.

“Are you not having classes today?’ he said.

“At eleven,” I said also adopting his business-like mode.

“Until when?”

“Five.”

“Okay. Give me your car. I need to go somewhere urgently,” he said as if he was borrowing a nail clipper.

“What?” I repeated, if I had heard him right. He repeated the exact words.

“I am afraid I won’t be able to do that,” I said with a soft voice.

“Why?” he said raising his voice louder.

“My sweetness, I can buy you a car but I would never lend anyone my car, not even my mother,” I said.

“Why? Please it is a serious issue. It’s about the mining project,” he said.

“Listen, can’t I drive you there during lunch or after five?” I said. He then put the phone down. Well maybe his air time is finished, I thought. I developed an instant headache.

After I knocked off from class I phoned him and he did not take my calls.

I called him the following day and he sounded fine. That week we only spoke on the phone – no meals or kisses. I had seen him every day since our first date and now it felt like I was being punished for not giving him the car. I have seen such things going wrong with my friends and I told myself I would never allow myself to experience such dramas. It's either the guy has the accident whilst drunk, and then she discovers he doesn't even have a license, or he disappears with the car only to be back whenever he feels like it. Or worse they use the car to impress other women or even to commit crimes.

I did not see him until late on Friday afternoon when he asked me to come and pick him up. He spent the weekend at my place. I tried again to explain to him why I couldn’t give him my car. I even created a story that the car belonged to an ex-boyfriend who gave it to me under

the conditions that it must not be driven by anyone else. He gave me a frosty look and a smiled a little less deep than the usual. A few minutes later he said,

“Don’t worry because I am going to buy a car soon. I have saved about fifty thousand rands towards that. So relax madam, I don’t need your car,” he said. I was relieved to at least detect a sense of pride.

“It’s just that it was an emergency. But normally I don’t have a problem with transport. I have access to my brother’s Volkswagen Jetta. He allows me to use it any time,” he said.

That night when we went to sleep there was no action on the bed. Normally I sleep in his hands but that night he chose to face the wall. The fact that my bed was small did not help him at all because our bodies still touched. In the morning he woke up and took the usual long bath again. I made him breakfast and dropped him at The Monument, where he was attending a seminar. I then went into town to do my minor Saturday shopping. An hour later he called.

“Hello, *ukuphi*?” he said.

“I am still in town,” I said.

“Good. Listen, at lunch I am coming with my cousin who is also attending the meeting. He wants to meet you,” he said. I was always humbled and seduced by how he liked showing me off. With my “ex”s it took years before any introductions were made.

“Okay, that’s fine. Must I prepare something to eat?” I asked him.

“No, they have catering here. Bye.” Two minutes later the cell phone rang again.

“*Mamela* (listen) my dear, buy Jameson whisky for us. I will give you the money at lunch. We just want to get a shot before going for the afternoon session,” he said and dropped the phone. I did not know how to react to the request. I did know him that well. What if he does not give me the money? I decided to give him the benefit of the doubt and went to the bottle store. When I discovered that Jameson whisky costed R290 I changed my mind and decided not to buy it. This man does not even have a toilet inside his house but he drinks alcohol this expensive, I thought. I drink cheap dry red wine costing R25 and there was no way I could take the risk of spending so much for alcohol even for the sake of love.

When they came to my apartment after lunch, his cousin did not even get out of the red Volkswagen Citi Golf. He came in alone hoping to collect the whisky. When I told him that I did not buy it, he said nothing and just left slamming the door on his way out. That day he did not come back as he initially said he would, or even phone to say he was no longer coming. I took it as a blessing in disguise because I had lots of assignments. I realized that he was gradually becoming an assignment too.

Monday, Tuesday passed and he did not call. I also kept my silence. I was also too overwhelmed by school work to even worry about him. On Wednesday around lunch time he called. We met in town. I waited for him in the car next to the CNA bookstore.

“Are you having classes this afternoon?” he asked.

“No, Prof is not around today. He has postponed his class to Friday.” I said.

“I need a favour, can you take me to my son’s school?” he said.

The school was at the coloured township, ten minutes drive. I did not mind because I felt if it’s for a child it is a good cause. He told me that they had suspended his son until he came to the school to discuss his son’s performance with the teachers. It was May and they had being calling him since the beginning of the year. He had always sent his younger sister, who had also dropped out of the same school. He had always sent his younger sister who also dropped out of the same school. He wanted to go in with me but I preferred to wait in the car. Apparently his son had not being doing any class work and homework. He defied teachers and went to school whenever he felt like it.

MD was very upset when he came out. We parked outside the schoolyard for sometime as he told me what transpired.

“They were shocked that it was my child. You know they respect me a lot. The problem is that I travel frequently, with the mining project, one week I am in Joburg or Cape Town or Durban. I am always away.” he said. I had been with him for about four weeks and I had never heard him saying he was going somewhere.

“Where is the boy’s mother?’ I asked.

“She is married and staying in Cape Town,” he said. I felt pity for him. I went home with him and offered to help with the child. I was a teacher by profession and homework was my thing.

I checked the boy's books and most of them only had one or two exercises that were done three months ago. I agreed with the boy on a schedule where I will monitor him daily and help him to get his work up to date. Mr MD just sat on the sofa watching sports on TV while we worked on the dining room table with no interest to helping whatsoever.

The following Friday Grahamstown's blue skies dispensed their tears down the whole day. It was not raining cats and dogs but lions and leopards. At about ten in the morning the '*Ukuphi* call' rang and he wanted to know if I had classes.

"Yes, I am going to be occupied until five in the afternoon," I said.

"I need a favour, there is something extremely urgent. Can you give me your car?" he said. This disturbed me a lot. Is this man an idiot? I asked myself.

"What?" I said with a loud voice hoping it will embarrass or discourage him. No he repeated what he said as if it was the most normal right thing.

"*Bona*! Look! I thought we had settled this. I can't give you the car. This car belongs to my ex-boyfriend and I promised that I will never let anyone drive it," I lied.

"But he is not here. He won't know," he said.

"It's not about him knowing, it's just not appropriate. I will never do it."

This time I dropped the phone first. Why am I even lying? Why do I feel guilty when it's my car? Why does he feel so entitled to it? We discussed this. I told him I can't give him the car. What am I dealing with here? Does he have no pride – the so-called male pride? And I thought I had seen it all.

That Friday he did not call or visit. This time I was worried and that evening I called. He was drunk and playing very loud music when I tried to talk to him. I missed him. What exactly was I missing? I thought. I could not answer the question. I focused on my assignments. It was the last week of the term and there was a lot to finalize.

On Saturday morning I received another '*ukuphi* call'. No, this was the 'I need a favour call'. These were very so common. I cringed every time I received a call from him. If fact they were not even calls anymore. It was a 'please call' cell phone text message. Then I would phone him, only to be asked for a favour. One night he had texted at midnight asking me to

collect him from a friend's place in town, where he had been drinking. I stupidly woke up and went to collect him. The following day it was another 'please call' and when I called he said,

"Give me your email address. Someone is going to send me information about the mine project."

"No! I can't do that. I would rather help you set up your own," I declined kindly.

The word 'give me' had become his favourite. He used it so casually, like he did not know an alternative way of asking. That anguished me. And the word 'thank you' did not exist in his vocabulary. I was not sure if I might have encouraged this behaviour in some way. At times I would cook food or buy food and eat with him, his brother and his son. I am from Limpopo and we have a proverb that says that, 'Food is the dirt of the mouth'. It means when you give people food you don't lose anything. Could this have sent the signal that prompted him to believe he was entitled to everything I might have?

I later concluded that this 'give me' kind of vocabulary might be a 'Grahamstown thing' because even beggars here, always said, "Give me two rands," it in an arrogant tone.

Limpopo and Gauteng beggars always said humbly, "Good morning madam. May I please have two rands. I need to buy bread. I am hungry."

Even though his favours and demands were not substantial (by my standards), they were endless. If I told you about all of them I would have to narrate until the cows come home. It was as if he sensed that I was not going to hang around forever and therefore he must get as much as he can from me before I disappear. I was not as worried about his string-pulling as I was by the fact that it did not embarrass him to ask for so many favours.

At one stage I was in the chemist. He texted and I responded as usual. This time he said he had forgotten to buy cell phone airtime for his son. He wanted me to buy it and text the pin number. I was scheduled to meet the boy later. I bought the air time. Five minutes later the phone rang again.

"Can you phone me back now? I don't have airtime," he said. I called again. My being in the pharmacy inspired him to be creative.

“I am not feeling well today. I have stomach cramps and my sugar is high. My rheumatism has started again; my hands are shaking. I also have a terrible head-ache,” he said.

“Did you see a doctor?” I said.

“No.”

“How do you know it’s those things – maybe it’s just ‘*babalase*’ (hang over),” I said.

“Well I don’t know,’ he said ending our conversation. Three minutes later a text message came through with a list of medication that he wanted me to buy for him. I laughed to myself and ignored the list. It was clear that we came from different world. In my family, both maternal and paternal, there was not a single man that depended on a woman. They preferred to be providers. Even when they were down and out it would be difficult for a woman to assist them. I have never dated a man who was comfortable with endless favours from a woman. This was new.

That afternoon when I dropped his son home, I found him watching soccer with his two friends. These friends were always at his house. They were drinking, talking and laughing loudly. The one friend irritated me to the core. He had a sinister grin and a patronising look. Unlike MD who was always neat and stylishly dressed, he wore the same ragged clothes every day. He had a sense of someone who carried his poverty status with relentless pride. He was the kind of person whose look left you feeling like you are behaving like a fool. He always laughed in a crude way even when there was nothing funny. Disgusting foam came out from the sides of his lips every time he opened his mouth. I tried my best to understand their contracted prosaic friendship. Even though I never verbally expressed what I really thought, it must have been written all over my face. The two friends never tried to engage me beyond unrealistically cheerful greetings. But I got a feeling that whenever I came they went out of their way to be even louder.

I needed to check MD’s son’s books to see if he had done the work we agreed on. While I waited for the boy to bring his hard covers from his room I sat next to the dining table. Mr MD stood up from where he sat on the sofas with his friends and came to me. He had a catalogue in his hand. This was a catalogue for Lewis furniture shop that they normally delivered from door to door weekly.

“We need a micro wave, a proper stove, toaster and electric kettle in the house. I want you to help me choose from the catalogue,” he said.

“Electric appliances are overpriced in black market furniture shops. You can get them at 40% less at Game stores,” I said. He smiled and said there were no Game stores in Grahamstown. I did not understand why I was being told about appliances. Even though I did not want to accept, it had become obvious that his, was a world of gain and greed.

Fortunately the boy came back and I ignored the topic and browsed through his books. He went back to his bickering friends and soccer. Ten minutes later he was back disturbing us, right in the middle of a discussion. He hugged me from behind the chair and smiled. I had grown afraid of his smile. He was the kind of person who seldom smiled. He was so handsome that he did not need to smile. When he smiled, there was an ‘I need a favour’ issue in the pipeline.

“You guys are working hard, I must reward you,” he said and was seconded by his foam-mouth friend. “Yes! I am buying them supper. My dear what will you want to eat?” he said.

“Anything is fine,” I said.

“Okay, right, give me your car keys. I’ll go buy at Pick and Pay. I will be back now,” he said, loud enough for everyone in the room to hear. His two friends and his son raised their heads to see how I was going to react.

“He is not going to Port Elizabeth. He is just buying from Pick and Pay,” said the foam-mouth friend.

Something in the way they looked at me made me feel trapped. I gave him the keys and out he went. I regretted the decision the minute I handed them to him. Suddenly I just could not concentrate nor continue with his son. I was angry with myself more than him. I could not understand why really I gave him the keys.

I just sat there with my hands on my face. The thirty minutes he took was like two days for me. I was so angry. I did not even eat the food. He came back with a plastic of food in one hand and a six-pack of beers in the other hand.

“Thanks for the beer my friend. My throat was beginning to dry up,” said the foam-mouth friend.

I decided to leave immediately. That night he abandoned his contracted friends and decided to go with me. He was in a good mood. I was still angry. When we got to the apartment I went straight to my laptop. I switched on the TV for him and worked on my assignments until five in the morning. He kept waking up after every hour or two asking if I was not coming to bed. I just looked at him and told him that I had to work.

I was woken by him at noon talking on his cell phone. He was directing someone to my place. He asked them to call him when they got to the main gate.

“I am coming now,” he said to the guy when he phoned from the gate.

He turned to me and said, “I am meeting someone for a few minutes. It’s about the mining project,” he said. I nodded without saying a word.

“Give me the car keys,” he said.

“What did you say?” I said jumping from inside the covers. He was sitting on the floral cane chair putting his socks on.

“I am just going to the gate. Will be back now, now,” he said.

“No! The gate is just two minutes walk. Why don’t you just walk there?” I said.

“I can’t walk in this complex without you. I don’t stay here, remember. The security officers will think I am a burglar,” he said.

“Oh but you can drive in here without me. No!” I said.

His eyes wandered everywhere as if he was looking for the key. I could now see anger building up in his eyes.

“*Ujani wena* (what kind of person are you),” he said, “Why are you intimidating this relationship,” he said in very loud tone. It sounded strange, as if he was talking about a protest march. I was now sure that my neighbours and security officials could hear him. He looked at me and repeated the statement.

“If you think you are frustrating me, this is nothing. I have been tried and tested by many women before you,” he said collecting his few items. He then banged my door on his way out.

Again I was too exhausted to worry. I had too much school work to afford time to worry about him. He knew I had promised to come and assist him his son that afternoon. I phoned the boy around midday told him to expect me around seven in the evening. He told me that his father had been drinking since he came back and had hit him.

That evening when I arrived, I found Mr MD with his contracted friends drinking beers and watching soccer. The house smelled of home cooked chicken. I went in and greeted them. They responded with the normal enthusiasm that I was always received with. I sat down and explained that I had an appointment with the boy.

“He is not well today; I have just given him headache pills now. He must be sleeping,” he said. A girl emerged from the kitchen. She could have been in her early twenties. She did not greet me or even look at me. She wore a pair of jeans which revealed her well framed curves. The muscle top revealed her flat stomach and perfect young breasts.

“I need to schedule another appointment with him,” I said. Mr MD stood up and went out to the boy’s outside room. I followed him as he went through the kitchen door. The girl followed me but ended up in the kitchen, keeping herself busy on the two plate hotplate stove. When I turned to look at her, she rolled her eyes sizing me up.

“For how long has he been sleeping?” I asked. When the boy heard my voice he unlocked his bedroom door and came out.

Mr MD went back into the house, leaving the kitchen door open. While we were still chatting, the girl in the kitchen peeped and then banged the door when closing it. The move gave me and the boy privacy. I almost cried when he came out with his face swollen and his eyes red. He told me that his father hit him because he was out when he came back.

He confessed to me that he wanted to live with his mother but the problem was that his mother’s husband did not want him. I told him that he would have to arrange with his dad to allow him to come to campus for the home work sessions as I wouldn’t be coming to his home again. He cried. It was as if he had lost a mother.

I went back to the living room and bid my farewells and then left. The girl who was chatting and laughing with the foamed-mouth friend stood up and went into the kitchen again. Her

perfectly rounded buttocks rolled rhythmically as she walked and I watched all the men's eyes drooling.

MD followed me to the car. He stood a metre away from my window and smiled. It was a different smile, not the 'I need a favour' one. The smile then disappeared from his face as if someone switched it off. Then I saw in his eyes, an expressionless stare so blank that it was almost hostile. I opened the car window and asked, "Is that girl your girlfriend?"

"Why are you asking me such a question?' he said.

"Thank you," I said then switched my car radio on and drove away gracefully. I tried to curb and divert the anger I felt. Pain lit the sides of my face. I was burning inside. I was very angry, not very much with him as I was with myself.

I remembered my friend Tebello's words, "A shack will always be a shack – even if you try to put paint on it or dress it up with fancy furniture and curtains. Whatever angle you look at it from, it will never be a mansion." Even after realizing that I was pursuing a shack I kept on looking at it as if it was a mansion. I could never say I was seduced or mislead – this person had consistently shown me who he was. I just consistently refused to believe him. After meeting the girl I now understood why the house had always been that clean.

A situation of another woman in a relationship is always irritably painful – even if you did not love the man.

My heart ached. My mind said you should be relieved. Finding love in that relationship was like trying to mine fire in the Antarctic. A piece of me could not help feeling guilty. Maybe I treated him as a fragment of what I should be dating? I closed my lap top as I could not concentrate. I went to see Tebello.

"I told you never to try too much. Some of these men are just not worth the trouble," urged Tebello.

"What do you mean? Everyone deserve to be loved Tebello," I said.

"That man is messed up and badly brought up. He does not deserve you. And he knew it. When a person realizes they don't deserve you and you fall for them anyway, they lose respect for you. They think you are a fool. They know if they were you, they would never settle for someone like themselves," theorised Tebello, as usual.

“He had had a rough childhood. His father died when he was eight. Maybe no one taught him how to be a man,” I said.

“Hey! My friend! You are not a Psychology. So in a relationship you must be a girlfriend not a therapist. You are not qualified to fix people. That fool was going to mess you up…bury you alive. I know his type. This is how it starts when people end up being abused by men,” sermonized Tebello.

I had to find a way to make peace with it. I needed to look at it from different perspectives. I told myself he was what I needed at that time. He was one of the people who arrived at the airport of my love life, where all my life acquaintances had come and gone without any lasting impact on my destination.

I was then contacted by his son’s mother urging me to continue helping her son. She also offered to pay for my services. She told me her story with MD. It was worse.

“The truth is that he is not capable of staying with only one woman. That is the reason why I left. It was that and his violent nature. You were lucky he has not laid a hand on you as yet but I am sure it would have eventually got there.”

Weeks later my million dollar man came to see me, dangling a “you are the best thing that had ever happened to me’ carrot. I did not buy it. He went on and on about how sorry he was and that the girl was not his girlfriend. He thought if he could make me jealous I could love him more. The truth was that our value systems were not the same. If he had shown a pinch of kindness maybe I could have considered going back. Up until today when he gets drunk he calls me. When we meet in town I smile, in a kind way. With time my anger and guilt subsided and I accepted him as part of my history. I also learned that as much as we, the human species cannot survive without human affection; we also can’t also survive on thin love.

Toy Boy

My first meeting with Vusi was weird. I was still asleep one morning when I heard a persistent knock on my door. It was early, and no one knew my new address, I thought. Oh, maybe it's my new neighbour. I pulled the curtain aside and saw a male figure standing by the front door. Mhh? Not too shabby, I thought. I grabbed my red morning gown and rushed to the door.

A tall fine-looking Xhosa man was standing there when I opened. "*Hi, u phlile,*" he greeted kindly. "Sorry for waking you up. I am your new *makhelwani*. That is my cottage," he said pointing to the front door of the small rectangular white structure next to my cottage. The garden flat faced south, almost making an L with mine.

"Where do you work?" he asked. I was taken aback because I thought people first established identity before occupation. So it was true what Jenny had said about today's men, I thought.

"They want to know where you work before they take interest in your name. If you don't work or have a lousy vague job, then there was no need to know your name," Jenny always joked.

I invited him in but he refused, telling me that he was on his way to work. We stood at the door talking for about twenty minutes. I discovered that he was working for the engineering department of Makana Municipality. He did not tell me specifics but he had studied at the Walter Sisulu University of Technology in East London. He was originally from a village next to Umtata.

"Are you married?" was his next question. This was a question I always reflected upon before I answered. The reasons why it was asked would determine the answer I would give. Yes, it always protected me from all kinds of vultures – those who viewed being single as a weakness and a fertile ground for demoralising and exploitation. He did not strike me as that type of scavenger.

"No, I am not married. I have a very stable relationship with a very good man at home in Limpopo," I said.

“I am still single and looking. Don’t you have friends that you can hook me up with?” he said.

“You must be joking; my friends are way older than you. A nice young guy like you should be able to do better than that,” I said.

“No! In fact I prefer older women. I love older women. The young ones are trouble. You must introduce me to your friends. Tell them I am looking for a steady girlfriend,” he said humbly, but smiling. He had small Chinese eyes. They almost completely closed when he smiled.

“Mmhh! I am not a ‘let’s fix people up’ kind of person.”

“Okay we will talk next time. You have to introduce me to your friends,” he insisted.

“Bye bye,” I said.

I watched him through the glass pane as he made his way to his car.

I remember thinking that this was too much for me to chew before breakfast. This was justs the start of a slapstick drama. All of a sudden I could not go back to sleep. I found myself thinking about Robert Frost’s line, ‘Good fences makes good neighbours’. I googled and read it again on my laptop. I sensed that I might need to keep properly maintained fences between me and this good-looking young neighbour of mine.

Most people bring a cake or fruit basket to meet a new neighbour. The initial conversations are normally introductions and a background check. Most people at this point will display their unsurpassed good behaviour. No! Not my new neighbour Vusi.

One thing I have always being lucky with is having good neighbours. Although I believe in ‘good fences’ between neighbours I have always struggled to maintain them. The friendlier the fellow citizen, the weaker the fence would be. When people told horror stories about their neighbours I would just be shocked because I had never been that unlucky. Although this might be perceived as digressing I can't resist telling you about my friend, Themba. He certainly had his fair share of calamity with a neighbour.

A new black woman had moved in next door. Themba and his wife were excited. For years they had been the only darkies staying in West-End suburb in Nelspruit. So he was relieved to see black people moving in next door.

Themba and his wife, with a cake-tin full of freshly baked muffins, went to welcome them the following day. After all the normal introductions they revealed that they had moved from the nearby Lekasi Township which was about thirty kilometres from Nelspruit. Themba told the lady, who was a single mother and an empowered woman working in government, that they were happy to have her as a neighbour.

“At least now there is someone we can have an afternoon tea with, unlike the white people who are uptight and keep to themselves,” said Themba. The lady interrupted him immediately pointing out that the ‘tea issue’ was the key reason why she left the township. She was blatantly upfront in telling them that she preferred privacy and uptightness, like the white people. Thereafter Themba and his wife excused themselves. From that moment they never had any form of conversation ever. A few weeks later she erected a tall wall that made it impossible for them to even see each other.

After the day Vusi introduced himself I avoided him. My gut told me that he was trouble. In Sepedi they say the avoid smoke inhalation you have to stay away from it. That did not curb my curiosity about him. I soon discovered that in fact Vusi was a very controversial man. Almost every day he had different female guests. A fancy car in the parking lot and soft female voices would announce the visits. The journalist and writer in me could not ignore these queer activities.

Women of all shapes and forms visited my neighbour daily. They were thin, fat, old, young, ugly, beautiful, tall, and short. They all had a demeanour of people who were affluent. That could be detected from the conspicuous consumption symbols they carried. Their cars also came in different makes and shapes. They were without exception, all expensive. These women came at different times. Some spent the night, whilst others left around midnight or earlier. The ones that fascinated me the most were those that came during the day, particularly at lunch-time. I would see them tiptoeing like teenagers in their high heels and power suits.

Two weeks passed without our paths crossing. At times he would stand outside my door and shout.

“Hi madam! How are you?” and then I would respond without opening the door or even peeping through the window. Then I would hear his footsteps moving towards his cottage.

On a particular Friday, my neighbour came back and found me enjoying my meal with a glass of red wine, sitting on the front door step. It was not yet dark. In the Eastern Cape the sun sets just before eight in the evening during the month of February.

“Hey! Long time. You always hide yourself in that cottage. It’s nice to finally see you,” he said smiling and looking at me with a naughty twinkle in his eye. I felt uneasy. I was wearing a very short skirt which I would have never worn for an audience, especially of his calibre. I continued eating my meal, eyes fixed on the food.

“I am not hiding myself. I am just working. I have a lot on my plate,” I said defensively.

“Whatever,” he said, walking towards his cottage

He came out, this time wearing only his underwear. He held a bucket in one and a few pegs on the other hand. He walked past me, smiling, straight to the washing line. His upper body was the shape of a body builder and his behind looked like a boxer’s fists clasped. His underwear was the type with a pouch and it looked full. I was mortified for even noticing. If the whole pageant was staged to seduce me it was a non-starter, I thought. Does this guy not know that women are never stimulated by a naked man?

For me, a girl from the bush province of Limpopo, walking half naked was inexcusably inappropriate. Maybe like many other things that I did not know, this was fashionable modern behaviour, I contemplated.

“Mmhh! The air is nice here. These cottages are very hot inside,” he said after he was done standing next to me. He then pulled the garden bench from the lawn and put it right next me. I could not help noticing how well built he was, like a rugby player. I looked at him with questioning eyes.

“You look surprised, what’s wrong?” He said.

“Surprised! Oh no! I am not surprised. Why would I be surprised?” I said, with a tone loaded with sarcasm.

He grinned.

“Don’t you think I am too old to be charmed by your nakedness?” I said casually. He laughed again and said,

“You know when I am at home I don’t like wearing clothes. Even this underwear is just too much for me,” he said, standing up from the bench.

“Please don’t take it off. I have seen enough of you. Just go… go get some clothes,” I said, distressed.

“What do you take me for? I could never seduce you. I am a decent person,” he said.

“When am I going to meet your friends from the University?” He said.

“My friends are white,” I said.

“I have never tasted a white thing. Seriously, you need to introduce me,” he said with enthusiasm.

“Well I would never fix you up with even my enemies,” I said to him. He laughed and asked,

“Why?” in a musical tone.

“You seem to have many women. In three weeks I have seen more than ten different women park their extravagant cars on our driveway and I swear they left the following day. Why would I introduce my friends to someone with so many women?” I said, looking straight into his eyes. He laughed. I was taken aback because I had expected him to be embarrassed.

“So you are watching me like a hawk,” he said.

“No! Why would I do that? I just cannot close my eyes because your women are coming in.”

“So you saw the cars! My women drive powerful cars. I like powerful women,” he said, animated.

“So why do you need my friends if you have powerful women?” I said.

“No! Nothing is serious with them. I want someone I can have a serious relationship with,” he said.

“What makes you think my friends qualify in that category when you have never met them? Anyway what type of woman qualifies as serious with you, if I may ask? ” I said. He was then quiet for a few seconds.

“That is a difficult one. Well, she must be powerful, good looking and not very flamboyant,’ he said.

“I see,” I said.

“Did you see the charcoal Alfa Romeo on Tuesday? It’s a more recent model than yours. It’s a nice car. *Hee*? She lives in PE. Damn she is a full house – a real full package”

“What is a full house,” I asked.

“She is coming tomorrow; I will introduce her to you. You’ll see what I mean. She is a powerful machine that comes with all the extras,” he said. While I was still trying to assimilate what he was saying he changed the subject.

“Tell me about you. You said you have an embassy in Limpopo.”

“An embassy?”

“Yaa! A serious boyfriend.”

“Well my life is not as colourful as yours. He is neither a full package nor a full house. No gripping stuff. Tell me more about your PE full house with extras.”

“You know this town is boring. You must set up another embassy here. Just for entertainment, otherwise you will be bored to death. I can introduce you to some nice guys,” he suggested.

“Boredom is my thing. It’s actually a good thing for me. It gives me time for my studies. Relationships are like a Masters degree …a lot of work. I am not clever enough to handle two Masters’ degrees simultaneously.”

“It does not have to be a relationship. Just a roll on, something to balance you.”

“There is no such a thing as a fling. Some of us can’t have flings. We get attached. I don’t do flings and never will.”

“Never say never.”

“I am forty two years old and I know exactly what I mean by never. Anyway I have to go back to my studies. Thank you, this was a refreshing conversation.”

“No man! It’s Friday, you must take a break.’

“Good night.” I said, going inside and closing the door.

“Okay, *ke*,” he said, still sitting on the bench.

The following day I bumped into Vusi and one of his ‘power houses’ at Pick and Pay supermarket. They were buying cooked food. I was dishing out the tired-looking leafy vegetables when I heard his voice.

“Hello neighbour,” he greeted.

“Hi guys,” I said with an exaggerated smile. He introduced her. I immediately noticed that it was the PE ‘full package’ when I saw the Alfa Romeo key dangling in Vusi’s hands. I could not figure out what the full house meant by just looking at her. She had a full-figured body. She was neither beautiful nor ugly, just an ordinary middle-aged woman who could have been twenty years older than him. I used my polished skills at small talk to try to engage her. Although she had the confidence of someone rich, she was a humble woman with an amiable smile.

The following week my car refused to start – something about the computer box. That resulted in me walking the four kilometres to and from campus daily. When Vusi heard this he offered me a lift every day. Travelling together helped get to know him better. Our conversations revolved around him and his many women. I was amused about the way it was a status symbol for him to have them.

On a Tuesday he brought a very loud one home. That day there was no car, which was unusual. I normally didn’t hear much from his cabin, even when these women were there. That night I could hear everything this woman was saying. In the morning when we drove out I was surprised and disappointed. It had become my hobby to observe the fancy cars. He

was quiet that morning. So I decided to break the ice by asking him about his flavour of the day.

“My friend, yesterday you brought a different blend to your normal taste. This one is not a full package…no fancy car,” I said. He looked at me almost choking with laughter.

“*Eish*! A typical Xhosa woman… very loud.”

“If I could understood Xhosa I would be telling you what you guys were talking about. I could hear everything loud and clear,” I said.

“*Eish*! She is from the township. She is not my type. I don’t like loud women. She talks too much. At tea-time I am taking her back. She will never see me again,” he said.

“Are you dumping her…just for talking too much? *Ag* shame,” I said.

“*Eish*! Another thing is that I have to go and fetch her from the township and take her back. It’s a lot of work. I don’t have that time.”

The same afternoon when we returned Vusi was restless again. He kept on dialling his cell phone and was not getting any response.

“Nxa! You know this girl is fucking with me,” he said, looking quite disturbed. “She is not answering my phones.”

“Which one?” I asked.

“The East London one, the Volvo one,” he said, “let me try her with your phone. I have to talk to her. I am worried. The whole week she has not been answering my calls. I don’t understand what’s going on,” he said.

I gave him the phone, but there was still no response.

“Where is she working? Maybe she is under a lot of job pressure,” I said, trying to cheer him up.

“No! But she always gets back to me,” he said, hitting the dashboard with his fist.

I continued probing to try and get more information about the Volvo woman. I discovered that he had spent a weekend with her at the Fish River Sun two weeks back and ever since

she had not been taking nor returning his calls. He told me that he and Miss Volvo had had a thing going on for two years now. He said he liked her because she was not as demanding of his attention as the others. They always met once in a while. She was also very generous. She paid for all their escapades and had always bailed him out when he had financial challenges. I also learned that she was a Municipal Manager in East London.

“She helps me with serious things like rent or car instalment. She is my Minister of Finance,” he said. “You know *Makhi*, I love powerful women. I like it like when we are in a bar and I don’t have money, and she takes over, takes out her gold card and pay for everything.” He spoke with the passion that I have seen most people display when they talk about their jobs. I listened without saying a word.

“Most Xhosa men are afraid of powerful women, but I am not. In fact they fascinate me. They turn me on. I am good at getting them hooked on me,” he said and then paused for a minute. His eyes were wider than normal and his voice was louder and deeper

“I have dated different types of successful women: doctors, members of parliament, business women both single and married,” he said with his lower lip extended in a boastful way.

“How do you charm them?” I asked him.

“I just have a way with women. They love me. I have what they need and they have what I need. Introduce me to any successful women, the most disciplined or a devoted wife, I tell you, anyone, and I will bring her down. She will sleep with me.” I sat there wondering how someone could be so sure of himself.

“I now want a big political figure, a minister or a premier. I know I will get one. It’s just a matter of time. This time you won’t just see the fancy cars on our parking lot, you’ll also see security officers,” he said laughing.

Without thinking I found myself asking him, “Why?”

“For fun. Just to prove to myself that I can. Yaah! Maybe they can create opportunities for me. You know like connect me to tenders in construction or supply something. I can do that. I also want to eat too like *bo*Julius Malema.”

I was tempted to judge him aloud. To tell him about selling his soul and all that psychology that my values are based on. I could not see this mentality of his being sustainable. Even if it

could be, I knew it would kill something inside him. But that is, of course, my cheap psychology. Maybe I should allow him to learn his own lessons.

It was clear that he was not a gigolo. His intentions with these women were not to destroy them completely but to get a small piece of their cheese. It is a difficult time for men in South Africa. Affirmative action is not making it easier for them. Government and even the corporate sector are hiring and investing in women. Men are getting fewer opportunities; hence some of them charm women and use them to access opportunities. In a woman's magazine, men who used women in this way were nicknamed 'femigators'.

"But tell me; are these powerful women that you are dating now connecting you to any tenders?" I asked.

"Not yet. It's in the pipeline. But you know most of them make my life easier in one way or another," he said.

"You know most people say that about their mothers. But then I guess you are not most people. Do you really think your life would be that difficult without them?" I asked. My face might have said more than my words because he kept quiet for a while and then replied -

"You don't know anything about being born poor. I can see you are from a middle class family. All your siblings and parents are independent and affluent."

He rattled on –

"You don't have a clue about how it is to struggle. You think you know this life. I look after myself and everyone in my family. I am the one who pays for my siblings' school and University fees. I am not only a source of bread but also the source of the table we put the bread on. You would never know what it's like. You see, I can't date young girls. You know how they are these days. They want money and they want to go out on dates. Everything is money, money and I can't afford it. If I take that route I won't be able to maintain my family. I could never be happy if my family is starving."

"Well, not all young girls are like that, some are very understanding,' I said.

"Not those that I attract,"

“Maybe you attract those because you think all young girls are like that.” His cell phone rang and his face lit. It was the Volvo lady. He did not even ask why she had not been answering his calls.

“Hello my love. Thank you for phoning. I miss you so much. I am sitting here alone and bored,” he said, as if I was now invisible. There was a pause before he said -

“I don’t have money for petrol, otherwise you know your wish is my command.”

I reflected on the issues we had discussed. I wondered if he was using these women or they were using him. My friend Jenny told me earlier that day that successful women have evolved; they are cleverer than in the past. She said it used to be easy for gigolos to rob them of their hard-earned money. These days she said women just dangle a steak and men run after them, thinking they will get a piece.

You would drive their powerful cars in exchange for company and sex. These women did not wish to empower the poor men, yet promised them opportunities and tenders. They disposed them like torn pantyhose when they found more appealing victims. I felt pity for Vusi. I hoped it wasn't like that with him.

I regarded him as a good neighbour, even though he never took out the garbage on Thursdays. I took out mine and his because I hated the smell. He never really bothered me. I shared my supper with him on days that I cooked a decent meal. When I had friends visiting he would always bring us a bottle of champagne. It turned out that my friends were not his type. They were not full packages, or they were also looking for full packages. He tried approaching a few of them but never got lucky. Maybe it was because I had told them about him and his full packages.

After two weeks my car was repaired. At times I avoided him because I thought he was not stimulating enough for me. He hardly ever talked about his work. On days when I did not want to talk about affairs and relationship stuff I smiled and greeted him and acted very busy and preoccupied. With time he could tell when I was not in a chatty mood. As for him, he was never moody or offensive.

On one cold June night around midnight I heard scratching noises on my door. It scared me and I called him on his cell phone. He phoned the security company. When the Hi-Tec

Security guards arrived we both went outside only to discover that it was a small dog curling on the door. We did not know whose dog it was. After the security officials left we remained standing outside. It was two in the morning. He was alone that night, no girlfriend. A rare occasion.

“How do you cope with this cold without a boyfriend?” he said. It was one of those days when I did not want to talk.

“I have a heater and an electrical blanket. They are warmer than any boyfriend,” I said, locking the butler door.

“No man! You need a boyfriend, a real human heater. You need to have someone. When is your boyfriend coming? He probably has a roll on too, a human blanket for winter,” he insisted, looking at me through the butler door. I felt violated, which was license for me to be rude -

“Listen, I am fine, I am not a baboon. You know baboons like sex. They do it daily, exchanging partners. They can have sex the whole day because they don’t have to be productive. Their food grows on trees. Some people are like baboons, all they do is sex, sex, sex as if one day they will fill a tank with it or receive an award for doing it often. All they think about is sex, sex, sex all the time. Damn sex!”

By the time I had completed my tirade he was in his cottage. I felt bad for being that harsh but he had provoked me. He made me feel as if the fact that I was not having sex daily was a crime, or it meant that I was abnormal. For some time there were no more ‘full package’ conversations. Even his women-traffic slowed down a little. The Alfa Romeo lady became a regular.

I thought I had wished Vusi and his ways away until one rainy Thursday night two weeks later. It was the National Arts Festival time. The small monumental town beamed with millions of ‘arty’ patriots coming to take pleasure in the festivities. I came back at about eleven in the evening after attending a show performed by my homeboy, the jazz artist Selaelo Selota.

I unlocked the main gate and then the smaller gate that led to our bachelor flats. My cell phone rang as I was battling with the old rusty padlock.

“Hello Makhi. Is it you opening the gate?” It was Vusi.

“Yes.”

“Can you please come into my flat? I want to tell you something.”

That was strange. It had been five months since we had been neighbours and I had never been into his flat. I decided to go in. Inside he offered me beer. After I’d had one I asked,

“What is it that you wanted to tell me?”

“I wanted to ask you to sleep in here tonight,” he said in a tone that one might use to borrow a pen.

“What?”

“No, don’t get me wrong. I just need company. We won’t do anything – just for company. I feel a little bit lonely tonight,’ he said in a tone of a young boy asking to sleep with his parents. I laughed at him.

“What is wrong? Can’t you sleep alone?”

“I swear, we won’t do anything,” he pleaded. I noticed then that he was a bit intoxicated. In the bin next to the fridge there were two bottles of wine.

“The last time someone pulled that trick on me it was twenty two years ago when I was nineteen. Why don’t you call your ‘many women’ to come and sleep with you?” I said, heading for the door.

“You know, I had my doubts, but now I am convinced that you are a borderline case.”

I then grabbed one more beer from the table and walked out. I was not angry though. The whole thing was a joke. Even though I could never sleep with him I was flattered by the fact that he found me attractive enough to sleep with. He was about fifteen years my junior and incredibly handsome. I’ve still got it, I said to myself. I did not even want to entertain the reality I knew very well – that he was so messed up and would be attracted to anything in a skirt.

Well, as I lay there on my bed I could not help but fantasize how it would have been. My mind was playing tricks on me. I really did not want to think such thoughts. It was crazy. If I

had never discovered the word self-respect I could have pursued him as an adventure – the same way his 'full packages' must have experienced him. I would hate myself, I thought.

The following day he was so embarrassed that he could not even look me straight in the eyes. When I locked the main gate before heading for the university, a short man with a curry complexion and a falling stomach approached me. He came out from a Volkswagen Jetta. I had seen that car several times parked on the street adjacent to the next door yard.

"Hello *Sisi*," said the man coldly.

"Hello," I said. Although a bit tense, his eyes were too relaxed for him to be judged a thug.

"Can I ask you something? I won't take much of your time," he said with a deep Xhosa accent.

He asked me who lived in the yard. He also asked me about a woman called Thembi whom I said I didn't know. It was only when he mentioned the charcoal Alfa Romeo that I realised who he was talking about. Nevertheless, I decided to stick to my story – that I did not know her and I was really not good with cars and would not know if I had seen a charcoal Alfa Romeo. I was embarrassed when the man said,

"How can you not know an Alfa Romeo when you are driving one?"

"*Eish*! I am late for an appointment with my supervisor," I said, and disappeared into my car.

My day was so busy that I entirely forgot about this incident till later that evening. I heard the sound of a breaking window. I peeped through the window and saw two men holding Vusi and a third one striking his Corsa van with a wheel spanner. I quickly ran to the scene. When I got there the two men were still holding him, but now the third one, the man with the curry complexion man was hitting him with the wheel spanner. He moaned like a baby. It was like I was watching *The Godfather*. For once I wished we were living in the township. Help would have come instantly. Here in the suburbs, no one came out. I was the only spectator.

"Makhi, these people are going to kill me," he said when he saw me.

"Who do you think you are?" said the curry complexion man. "This thing sleeps with my wife. Do you know how much lobola I paid for her? You think you can just have her for free.

I'm going to kill this dog,' he said, taking out a small gun from the inside pocket of his jacket. I moved towards him and pleaded -

"Sir! Please! Please! He is just a careless boy. Please *papa* he has learned his lesson. Please! I beg you don't mess your life up because of him! He has learned. He won't do it again. I beg you. Please!" I said kneeling between him and Vusi. He paused and looked at me.

"Please *papa*! Please! Forgive him! He did not know what he was doing," I said with tears now coming from my eyes. I was not Vusi's biggest fan but the thought of him murdered did not go down well.

"She did not tell me that she was married. I did not know. I am sorry," Vusi said in the humblest voice.

"*Voetsek*! Keep quiet you fucking fool," said the curry complexion man, while one of the two men kicked Vusi in the mafia style.

"You must thank this woman. Otherwise I would have castrated you and burned your testicles in your face. If you want to stay alive, keep away from my woman."

'Let's go,' he said. The other two men threw Vusi on the 'Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow' bush that was next to the gate.

"I am calling the police," I said helping, him out of the shrub.

"No! No police. *Eish*! I think he broke my knee with that wheel spanner," said Vusi. He could not walk.

"You will have to take me to the hospital," he said.

I phoned my classmate Charles to come and help me carry him. His car was smashed. When I saw him at the hospital I could hardly recognise his face. I discovered that the PE lady's husband, having suspected his wife was having an affair, had trailed her movements for some time. The incident shocked Vusi to his core. He stayed in hospital for three days. He moved out from the garden cabin and rented a small house in the township.

Our friendship faded. I bumped into him a few times in supermarkets. I did not know what had really become of him. A year after the 'curry-complexion man incident' he sent me an

email announcing that he was getting married to the ‘loud girl’ from the township. He asked me to give a speech at his wedding.

* * *