TIES THAT BIND

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

MASTER OF ARTS (CREATIVE WRITING)

of

RHODES UNIVERSITY

by

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November 2011

Abstract: This collection of short stories about contemporary black South African women reveals their hopes and anxieties, and explores their relationships with themselves, their families, and the people around them. It sets out to challenge stereotypes about black women being browbeaten in a country riddled by poverty and disease by portraying women successfully forging their identities in society.

Contents

The Road

Amanda pushes her chest out, straightens her back and takes a deep breath. She holds it in a little longer, takes a step forward and nudges herself up the hill.

She is reminded of her favourite house track, *Stomach in, Chest out*. It had been her pick-me-up; an infectious song she played on blue Mondays, which weren't always confined to the first day of the working week. The inane lyrics would have amused her a few days ago but she has little energy to laugh. She needs to muster all her strength for the hill.

Amanda can hardly recognise herself these days. The wild waist-length hair extensions have been shortened so they can fit under her *doek*. A respectable woman always covers her hair, she remembers being told *emabhasweni*. Even if the hair is entirely not mine? she wanted to ask. She had also been tempted to ask if the older women had conspired to buy irons and frying pans. How many electric irons did a fledgling household need?

Her mother's friends, neighbours and auntsat the women's gathering had said pretty much the same things to the young bride during *iziyalo*: *"*You must always put God first, never underestimate the power of prayer and submit to your husband. He is the head of the family, and you are the neck. Remember that, and you will have a long and happy marriage," Sis Bee had said.

Yes, but break the neck and the head is nothing but a two kilogram mass of bone, fat and water, she'd thought.

Sitting quietly on a grass mat and not once looking up at the speakers, it was her first bitter lesson at submission. The guests had mistaken her sobs of frustration for a sincere display of respect and a sign that they had gotten through to her. Given a chance, she would have told them that she was marrying for love and not because she wanted to play second fiddle to anyone. But she had been expected only to listen, not to participate. She had been warned that raising her voice was not an option.

"You have shown us that you are soft-spoken and humble. We don't want that to change. We don't want to hear from Thozamile that you have been speaking at the top of your

voice, howling. The neighbours should never know what you sound like," the elders had said when Thozamile had introduced her to them.

"We expect you to listen and to take guidance from him. Outside people will say things about this family. Listen to your husband, not them. Feel at home. We are not strangers. You're one of us now."

Their words had come at Amanda from different directions on that hot day in December of the year before. She had held on with her palm flat to the mat, afraid that she might simply keel over.

"Oh, *unembeko nobuntu umntwana kaTshawekazi*!" they had sang. She had doubted the humility to which they referred.

Sweat trickles down the side of her face. Her scalp, moist under the dome of her *doek*, itches as the sun beats down on her head. Putting her hand under the *doek* to scratch would surely unravel it so she dares not.

It had taken the better part of the morning to get it right, and she had called Sis Thobeka to help.

"*Thixo, oomakoti banamhlanje*!" the older woman had mocked. "They can't even get a simple thing like tying *iqhiya* right."

She pats her head furiously instead but it brings little relief.

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She curses herself for wearing slip-on sandals for her trip to her husband's village. The leather strap cuts between her toes and the flapping sound they make whenever she takes a step only heightens her irritation. Her feet don't look like her own – they are caked with dust and have taken on a shade darker than the rest of her body – all within a morning of being out in the sun.

Thozi had made fun of her. "Look at these feet. You'd swear they had never stepped on rocks and thorns. I used to walk 3km, barefoot, to get to school. And these knees! I bet they've never knelt on a hard floor to clean."

“Thank goodness for mops,” she’d said sheepishly. Fridays afternoons spent polishing the classroom floor with polish they’d made from candles and paraffin didn’t seem to matter then because she knew he would throw water on her argument. They had been foolish enough then to run and slide on the newly polished floor with their navy blue socks to bring out the shine so revered by the teachers.

Used to wearing pants, she shuffles uncomfortably in her long se*shoeshoe* print skirt, which she constantly pulls up with her hand to prevent herself from tripping.

Though she had risen early so she could avoid travelling in the scorching heat, she had been delayed. She had not believed in African time until that morning. She had taken a taxi to King, and then travelled by *impempe* to Alice. Though the *mpempe* to her village had been empty when she arrived, some passengers were forced out because some of the seats were reserved. “We all know this vehicle doesn’t leave the station without MamTolo. *Sisi*, until you have your own car please put your bag on your lap, for surely MamTolo will come with a lot more bags.”

Until then she had laughed at the stories she had heard about the idiosyncrasies of *abantu basezilalini*, who never seemed to be in a hurry. “It’s pointless. Here you hurry up and wait,” she’d been told.

The “NO HEAVYWEIGHTS IN THE FRONT SEAT” bumper sticker didn’t seem to worry MamTolo. One could say she was well-fed. With her and the driver Makhasi in front, there was no space for anyone else. They were so close that Makhasi’s left hand brushed against her thigh whenever he changed gears. Cramped at the back with her knees rubbing against the woman sitting across her, Amanda was relieved that the *mpempe* could finally leave the station after waiting for more than one hour for regulars like MamTolo.

She laughed heartily at another bumper sticker that boldly declared: “ONLY A SUFFER KNOWS THE FEELING”. She was the only one who got it, judging by the puzzled faces staring back at her.

“*Kutheni na makoti wahleka wedwa*? What’s tickling you?” an older woman asked.

For a few minutes she forgot about the pins and needles in her feet. She couldn't even stretch her legs out because there was hardly space on the floor. It was stacked with ten kilogram bags of rice, flour, samp, beans and mealie-meal. Amanda was relieved she did not have to travel with such heavy things. Thozamile would bring similar provisions in the evening in their 4x4.

"You can't come all the way from the city empty handed! What will the neighbours say?" her mother-in-law had made it clear the first time she came to the homestead. Amanda had given Thozamile a list of things to buy at Weirs. He laughed when he read "olive oil" on her list.

"What happened to good old fish oil? Where have you seen *amagwinya* fried in olive oil? *Hayi kodwa,* love," he said shaking his head.

Spending her leave at the village had been his idea. "It will help you grow and build character," he had said. She had said annoyed: "You mean I have to prove I am not a ghetto snob? That I'm not a spoilt brat from the township?"

Her upbringing and education were bones of contention during the *lobola* negotiations. Her uncles had felt that the bride price should be higher because she had a Master's degree. "What is the point of having all those degrees," Thozi's mother had asked, "if she can't even cook a decent meal? Everyone knows that all the flavour in the chicken is in the skin, and here she is expecting us to have tasteless meat, and to eat green leaves like we're goats!"

It became clear to her then that nothing she did would ever be good enough for Ntomboxolo Sixishe. If she wants to kill herself, who am I to stop her, she'd thought every time she prepared supper during that week she spent at their townhouse in Beacon Bay. She indulged her gluttonous appetite for fried chicken, potato salad drenched in mayonnaise, Russians for breakfast, cream buns and cans of condensed milk for her tea.

"It's funny that your mother always complains about my food yet she leaves nothing for the dogs," she'd said to Thozi.

"That's my mother you're talking about. She is who is she is," was his curt reply.

Long before she'd met her in-laws Amanda knew that her marriage to Thozi was not going to be easy. She had never thought of settling down until she met him.

"It seems you've finally been tamed, *choma*," said her best friend Nonku when she'd announced her engagement. The longevity of their relationship had surprised her friends, who had initially given it "six weeks, max". They were together for eight months before Thozi asked her to marry him. She had considered him arrogant at first, and he found her "a bit wild".

"You seduced me, I couldn't resist," he would say.

"I was doing my bit for humanity. It would have been a sin to let two of the ugliest people at the party go on to have children together."

At nearly 2m tall, Thozi was the tallest person Amanda had ever met and he towered over her 1,7m frame.

"I've had it with short men. I have to think of the kids – save them from a lifetime of ridicule," she would laugh.

They'd met at Nonku's party. She had introduced Amanda to Phila, Thozi's girlfriend at the time. Nonku and Phila worked in the same building and were friends. Amanda had been immediately attracted to Thozi and it didn't seem to bother her that he'd been there with another woman.

"I simply forgot Phila was there," she would later tell Nonku. Though they had not said much to each other by the time everyone at the party was going home, Amanda could feel his eyes following her everywhere she went.

"Girl, I don't know what came over you! Walking up to a man in front of his woman and giving him a hug like that? You know Phila wanted nothing to do with me after your little stunt? She still gives me the evil eye."

Nonku liked reminding her she was the reason they'd met. After that meeting Thozamile was a like a man possessed. "I begged Nonku to give me your number but she refused. I had no choice but to come looking for you where you worked."

Still, it had taken Thozamile a week to build up the courage to call Amanda. Getting her contact details had been a mission, one he'd become obsessed with since the party. Nonku had finally relented and told him where Amanda worked. He had looked up the company on the internet and had finally called the switchboard. He did not give her space to say no; then again, he hadn't thought she would.

"We met at Nonku's party last week. I'll be at your offices in a few minutes. What's your direct line? I'll call you when I am outside," he had demanded.

She had not given him a second thought until that call and though she was taken aback by his boldness, she was not offended by it. It was a refreshing change from men who found her intimidating and who could not stand her candour. She was impressed that he had gone to such lengths to find her, and had not immediately asked her for her cell number. He struck her as someone who was ambitious, and who would also work hard at getting what he wanted.

She had restricted their meeting at the parking lot because she was on deadline. "It seems you've forgotten that you're not a free agent. I don't want to be labelled a Jezebel."

He came again the following day to ask her out to dinner but she refused. "I don't go out during the week unless it is work related."

He'd surprised her later that night by turning up at her house with a lamb shank and vegetables.

"I hope you haven't had supper… if you have, you can have this for lunch at work tomorrow," he had said, not waiting for her to invite him in. He did not wait for her reply but had put the packet down on the floor and bent down to kiss her, lifting her gently with his hand on her waist.

"You may be too much for one, but you're not enough for two. I'm not big on sharing." He had dumped Phila afterwards.

"Restrain yourself," he'd said when she nearly ripped off his clothes three nights later. He had folded his pants and shirt neatly and piled them on a chair instead.

“I don’t normally do this,” he’d said afterwards.

“What? Sex? You, my friend, were definitely not a virgin,” she’d laughed.

“Be serious. I would have loved for us to wait, maybe a few months, before doing this.”

He started introducing her to his friends as “Madame Speaker” or “The First Lady” after that.

She was surprised by how quickly and how often he ended up at her flat after work; usually with meaty stews, rice, pap or samp, grilled lamb chops with vegetables or fish. “Left to your own devices you would eat Provita, cheese and wine gums the whole day, every day. Lord knows when last you had a decent meal.”

“At least you know I like being fed. I have no time to sweat over a stove. I can offer wine, maybe a shot of vodka? Or like you pointed out, cheese and crackers. They’re always ready.”

“*Icherie yam yinkonkxa*. Remember the taxi sticker? ‘GIRLS USED TO COOK LIKE THEIR MOTHERS, NOWADAYS THEY DRINK LIKE THEIR FATHERS.’”

It had taken her two months to warm to the idea of getting married. “You know it feels right. Why wouldn’t you want to do it?” he persisted.

“As long as you know that I don’t do breakfast and you don’t expect me to wash and iron your shirts. I have no aspirations to be a domestic goddess.”

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After what seemed an eternity in the *mpempe* she alighted at the sign pointing to Nompumelelo Clinic. The road on the two kilometre stretch was rocky and steep. She took in the fresh air and marvelled at the daisies growing on the side of the road and the pristine blue of the sky. Good energy in, bad energy out, she chanted as she trudged up the hill. That will have to be my mantra in the Sixishe household for the next few days. Don’t, not even once, lose your cool, she reminded herself. It would take a new way of thinking to survive in Ntomboxolo Sixishe’s territory.

She was not surprised when she found her mother-in-law sitting under a peach tree in front of the homestead. She cut a matronly figure in her denim apron over a blue cotton dress and a straw hat over a brown *doek*. A plastic tumbler and a glass jug filled with ginger beer sat on a small table in front of her. She held a branchin her right hand, with which she swatted flies. She put her whisk down when Amanda approached.

"*Molo, Mama. Unjani ngempilo*?"

The older woman remained rooted to her seat. Amanda stopped herself from getting closer and stretched out her right hand. She imagined her mother-in-law squirming at her customary hugs and kisses.

"*Oh, siyabulela makoti. Noko iNkosi isasigcinile. Siyavuya ude wafika*."

She swallowed hard and brushed off the realisation that Mam' Sixishe had not asked her how she was.

"I will go put my things away, please excuse me Mama."

"A cup of tea, with milk, would be nice. *Andikaphungi imin' yonke*! It's best you get started on supper. Many people will drop by to see *umakoti* from the big city."

Amanda put her bag in Thozi's room – the one with his old bookshelf and files – and walked to the kitchen. An old Welcome Dover dominated the room. A single bulb hung from the ceiling and a wooden table with buckets and basins stood where a sink might have been. She was relieved to find the water bucket full of clear, pristine water. She filled the electric kettle and opened the fridge. It was empty. She found a jug of milk in one of the cupboards. It was thick and rancid, and dropped into the cup with a bouncy blob. She laid the china with English roses on a tray and dropped a *rooibos* teabag in the matching teapot. She took a deep breath. A simple cup of tea, she can't fault me on that. It's not my fault there is no milk, she assured herself.

Good energy in, bad energy out, she murmured as she stepped out of the kitchen, balancing the tray with its rattling contents between her shaking hands.

Glitter Period

“I wish we’d shot more photos as a family,” says Gogo as we go through a trove of yellowed paper in the wooden trunk.

“I have only one picture of your grandfather Elias left. It’s a small one from his Book of Life. I had to hide it from his brothers, you know. They all wanted to keep it. I’ll take it out and show you after supper.”

The collection of bank books, pink immunisation cards, birth certificates and school reports summarises some of the milestones of Gogo’s three children. My father, Sizwe, had always claimed that he came first every year in his class at school.

“Except in June when I was in Standard 5 did someone unseat me from my throne,” he would boast whenever I didn’t come home with an A. “And that was only because she was repeating. A second year in Standard 5 was really a holiday for her! I swore then I would never be beaten by a woman.”

I didn’t always believe him but now I had proof. I didn’t wish to see the smug look on his face when he would surely serve me a big slice of humble pie. “Ha, I told you! Show me love.” He would put his hands in his pocket when he said that and close his eyes, waiting expectantly for me to plant a kiss on his cheek.

“Thank God for digital and cellphone cameras. I can’t imagine what life was like without them. I can scan some photos at work if you’d like.”

“We’ll sort them out properly tomorrow. *Phofu*, how long are you staying? Some of them are yours,” she says handing me a flip-through plastic file so old that the pages have slits on the sides where small grains of gold seep out.

“You liked those shiny stars then. I’d find them on everything you touched. I don’t know how many times I had to go to work with these shiny things on my neck and hair.”

“Glitter, Gogo, not stars. It’s called glitter… Oh. My. Word. I can’t believe you kept these!”

“Oh, OK. But that’s what you called it – stars – and it was good enough for all of us! There were things about your star phase that I’d rather forget. I’m glad your father got over *isiphithiphithi sakhe* then. For a smart man he made very bad choices.”

I put the file aside and leave it on the dining room table. “I’ll look at it before I go to sleep.”

With Gogo tucked away in bed I run my fingers through the smooth pages of the file. A woman with thick flowing hair and radiant red rouge on fleshy lips featured prominently in the drawings. Before my glitter period, it had just been Gogo, Aunt Lindi, Malum’ Thula, Spha, Zweli and I. But for a while this had changed.

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She looked like the life-sized dolls I saw at Woolworths whenever Aunt Lindi and I went to town to buy my Christmas or winter clothes.

But her hair wasn’t straight or yellow. It was brownish – like someone had sprinkled gold dust on it – and it twisted like the thick fibres of a mop and cascaded all the way to her waist.

Tall, with skin the colour of Gogo’s coffee – with more milk than coffee – she was the most unusual and most beautiful woman I had ever seen.

Gogo said she was “*umlungu*”.

“*Hawu, Nkosi yam*! Your father has brought us a white woman!” she cried and brought her hand to her forehead like she did whenever she complained of a headache.

We stood at the front door – my gogo Nelisiwe, Aunt Lindi, my cousins Zweli, Spha and I – our eyes glued to the vision ahead of us. My uncle Thula was still in his room at the back of the house.

Though he spent most of the morning in his room “getting ready for our special guest” he had not finished by midday. He had woken up early to iron his pink BEE shirt in the kitchen. I could hear him whistling happily all the way from Gogo’s room the moment I woke up. The merry tune had surprised me. We were not allowed to whistle indoors.

“It’s only people who have nothing to do who whistle. Doing something properly requires total concentration. The devil finds work for idle thoughts,” Gogo would say. Malum’ Thula had polished his black kick-and-*bhoboza* shoes the night before.

But Gogo wasn’t nearly as excited as Malum’ Thula. She seemed sad, like when she did the church’s books. She had sat on the edge of her giant bed that morning; her maroon Good News Bible open on her lap. She didn’t reply when I said “*Molo* Gogo”. I got back on the bed and touched the back of her neck.

“I hope Sizwe knows what he’s doing,” she murmured over and over.

She didn’t even notice that I had risen and gone to the bathroom to wee without being told. She didn’t even turn when she heard the flushing of the toilet and the gushing of the water as I opened the tap to brush my teeth.

She was glued to the same spot when I came out of her bathroom. I tugged at her blue nightie.

“See Gogo, I’ve already brushed my teeth. You didn’t even have to remind me. I’m a big girl now.”

She looked at me for a long time and then picked me up as if she had something very important to tell me and held me to her chest. She smelled of Vicks. She picked on imaginary fluff between the cornrows that Aunt Lindi had plaited a few days before. I wasn’t allowed to scratch though it itched. I also wasn’t allowed to complain about the headaches, though it felt as if I had an elastic band stretched tightly over my head. There couldn’t have been any fluff because Gogo brushed my hair every night and covered it with pantyhose before putting me to bed.

“Promise me you’ll always be good.”

I pulled back and smiled.

“I’ve brushed my teeth… See?”

“And you must do it every night. Even when I’m not around to remind you, otherwise your teeth will rot and they will fall out one by one.”

“Now can I go play with Zweli and Spha?”

“Yes,” she hissed. Slowly she released her tight grip on my arm. “What are you going to show your father when he comes?”

“I drew something for him yesterday. It’s in my school bag.”

“Good. You and your cousins must get ready for breakfast.”

Gogo was quiet at breakfast. She didn’t yell when Spha slurped her milk. She held her mug of coffee in her hands, as if her fingers were frozen stiff. But we were all in our nighties, which stuck to our backs with sweat.

Malum’ Thula – who didn’t usually join us for breakfast – couldn’t stop talking. Dollops of oats would stop right in front of his mouth without actually going in.

“Can you imagine what she… what her connections could do for me? One day, soon, I’ll be famous. One day is one day I tell you!”

He got up from his chair and spun around. Gogo just looked at him, shaking her head.

“Don’t forget us when you’re famous. Send us money for airtime,” Aunt Lindi piped in, giggling at Malume’s fantasies.

“*Ubhut’ omkhulu* has done well. My big brother has done the whole family proud. Don’t you think so Mama?”

“I can’t wait to see *Bhuti*. He’s always spoiling us with *braais* and we haven’t had *braaivleis* in a long time,” said Aunt Lindi dreamily.

“You have never been so excited about Sizwe coming home. You may be disappointed, you know,” said Gogo sharply. She cleared the table before Malum’ Thula had finished his oats and took the dishes to the sink outside though Aunt Lindi usually did it. Auntie shrugged her shoulders and looked at Malume. “*Hay’ andazi nami*,” said Malume.

I stuck gold and silver stars on the drawing I had done for Tata; most of which, to Gogo’s annoyance, ended on the floor. She faffed around. She rearranged the table and our outfits when Papa called to say he had just passed KwaNosandi – about 30 minutes away.

“I don’t want your toys lying around. Go wash your hands and lay off my white tablecloth!” commanded Gogo.

Malum’ Thula checked his shoes, wiped the tips with old pantyhose and dashed to his room. Aunt Lindi added more ice to the jug, which already glistened with beads of sweat. It left wet patches on the table. Gogo rearranged the mangoes in the fruit bowl and brought more apples from the kitchen.

Aunt Lindi took the bread from the oven.

“I bet they’ll be hungry after such a long drive. Luckily, nothing says ‘welcome’ quite like freshly baked bread. No one – no matter where they come from – can resist the smell of a loaf straight from the oven,” beamed Aunt Lindi.

Not sure what we were allowed to do, Spha and Zweli sat on the floor in the lounge biting their nails. I kneeled on the sofa closest to the window, my eyes fixed on the street and the gate. I had not seen my father since Christmas.

I was the first to spot my father’s car. I recognised its long black snout, which reminded me of the moist black nose of a dog, peering at the gate. Loud and rhythmic hooting followed. It sounded like a wedding. I jumped and squealed: “Tata!”

He got out of the car, smiling and waving at us standing at the front door because no one dared to move. Our eyes followed him as he walked to the passenger side to open the door. Silver-grey painted toenails peered out of her bronze sandals. Her long arm glowed against her white shirt as she flicked her long hair behind her ear. Her long denim skirt covered long legs and a thin gold strap adorned her ankle.

“*Yho*, she looks really smart,” smiled Aunt Lindi. Tata grabbed the woman’s hand and walked towards us, smiling from ear to ear.

Gogo’s shoulders stiffened as the smiling woman reached out to shake her hand.

“This, *Ma*, is the woman I want to grow old with. *Ngumakoti wenu lo, kudala nimlindile.* I told you about Khethiwe… Khethi, my love. This is the woman who gave me life – and she’s always quick to remind that she can still take it whenever she wishes,” he chuckled.

She cusped Gogo's hand in hers and then extended her arms around Gogo in embrace.

"I am so happy to finally meet you."

Aunt Lindi had her arm stretched out but she only smiled in her direction and nodded at Aunt Lindi and Spha and Zweli. Instead she came for me, her eyes on me as I clung to my father, my arms wrapped around his thick neck. My uncle rushed in, fixing his gold cufflinks.

"I'm sorry I wasn't here to welcome you, Bhuti. And you *Nkosazana*…," gasped my uncle, his hand reaching out to shake her hand.

But her gaze remained fixed on me. She spoke again once my father had put me down.

"You must be Zimbali. I have been looking forward to meeting you most of all," she said planting on my lips a kiss that was sweet and sticky like toffee.

Then she greeted my uncle and aunt. It was the first time that a grown-up had ever greeted me like that, ahead of the big people in the family. Strangers would normally wave at Spha, Zweli and I. "How old are you? Are you at school yet? What grade? My, you've grown! *Wawusama ngenja* the last I saw you," they would chime if you were lucky to get more than a nod in your direction. Then they would forget you were there.

Home felt different when Khethi was there. Spha and Zweli would just smile when she spoke to them. She stumbled when she spoke isiXhosa. Spha and Zweli would mumble incoherently, making sounds in their throats as if they were gargling.

"She should try to *thetha*. I refuse to speak English in my own home," said Gogo.

Malum' Thula leaped at the chance to show that he too could speak "the language of business". He also tried getting a minute alone with her to convince her introduce him to his favourite DJ.

"I just need a few minutes with him. He'll see that this proposal I have will revolutionise the music industry in Mzantsi!"

"I don't think you quite understand. These things are not as easy as you think," she would say before sneaking off to the kitchen or bedroom or wherever she had to be.

“Oh shame, my poor woman. That’s my younger brother for you,” Papa would shrug. “Always dreaming of fame and big money.”

Papa would call Malum’ Thula aside. “You can’t keep following my woman around. Don’t you think you should find your own? Before Mama starts worrying.”

Then off they would go in the old red Nissan *bakkie* that the brothers always used to get vegetables and meat, and sometimes building materials in town. Papa would buy beer for his friends and neighbours who popped in unannounced upon seeing his car parked in the yard.

“We also heard that you are not alone,” they’d say bringing a smile to my father’s mouth. At this Gogo would call Khethi to bring a tray of cold drink or pieces of meat or scones that Aunt Lindi helped her to bake.

A battle would ensue over whose meals were better tasting. Gogo would storm off when we chewed the bones of Khethi’s grilled chicken.

“It’s better than the stuff they sell at Nando’s – healthier too,” my father would say licking his fingers.

Gogo made sure that there was plenty to keep Khethi occupied – and far away from my father’s admiring glances. She disapproved of her “bringing Delilah and *The Bold* into our Christian home”.

“The woman has no shame. Doing that in my house – in front of the children too,” she said when Zweli asked if Khethi would have a baby after he saw her putting her tongue in my father’s mouth.

“Mistress at school says we must never, ever do that,” said Zweli. “She said playing with girls made us boys weak.”

I, on the other hand, followed our visitor around. She indulged me by letting me play with her hair. It was better than plaiting my dolls’ hair because it didn’t come out in clumps leaving gaping holes on the scalp. She would spritz her perfume in my bellybutton. I loved the cool stinging sensation of it and the fragrance that would last the whole day.

“Sit with me for a few minutes,” she would say, pouring Stoney Ginger Beer in a mug so Gogo wouldn’t find out what I was drinking. But the drink would tickle my nose and make me sneeze. “We should remember to drink it with a straw next time,” she would wink.

Spha, Zweli and I weren’t allowed to have fizzy drinks because Gogo said they would make our stomachs rumble with lots of air. And we weren’t allowed to let out air because she said it was indecent.

Khethi would call me to the kitchen to help her find and pack things in the cupboard because Gogo was picky about where the utensils, the pots and the plates were kept. Being new to Gogo’s system she needed someone to remind her, and I felt special that she had picked me.

“Gogo doesn’t have to know. Besides, we don’t drink it every day,*nhe*?” she would say putting the ginger beer back in the fridge.

I would smile and nod my head.

She kept a small radio in the kitchen and would occasionally break into fits of laughter, laughing at something the DJ had said or an item on the news. It was a loud sort of laughter; like some of the *Popeye* I watched. No one in our family had ever laughed like that before. She would sometimes laugh so hard that she would put her hand on her stomach and wipe the tears with the corner of her pinafore. I too would laugh because I had never heard anyone laugh the way she did.

One day Gogo came into the kitchen while we were giggling and shook her head.

“I don’t know what you think you can teach her laughing like that! Like some *straatmeid*. Do you wish to wake this home’s sleeping shades? I’m happy Elias isn’t here to see this!”

I didn’t know what a *straatmeid* was but I didn’t like the sound of it or the way that Gogo’s mouth curled when she said it. She shooed me out of the kitchen.

“Papa, what’s a *staaimeid*?”

“What?”

I had to repeat the word a few times before Papa could understand what I was talking about.

I walked in on Gogo talking to my Aunt Lindi a few days after that.

“I don’t know what your brother was thinking, bringing a woman like that into our home. For a smart man he really made a mistake with her. I knew nothing good could come out of a woman with hair like that! Probably smokes too.”

“Not everyone with hair like hers smokes dagga, Ma,” defended Aunt Lindi.

“I feel sorry for you,” she said when she saw me standing at the door “because you are going to live with that woman.”

The thought had never occurred to me until then. Thinking about it excited me. Papa had often said that he wanted me to live with him. “I need to find you a mother first.” My mother had died when I was born. My other granny lived far away at a nursing home because she was too sick to look after me. She didn’t remember me when we went to see her and cried when Gogo said I was Nana’s child. It was the first time that Papa had brought anyone who could be my mother.

“Really, Gogo?” I asked, maybe too excitedly.

“*Mnxim*,” said Gogo and then walked out. Aunt Lindi merely shrugged and shook her head.

Gogo seemed happier again when Papa and Khethi prepared to return to Joburg. I asked him when he would return with Khethi.

“Soon, I promise. Maybe next time you will come with us. Spha and Zweli can visit, if your Aunt Lindi agrees.”

Months rolled by slowly but Papa didn’t come with Khethi. Papa said she had missed home and decided to go back.

“We thank you, great God for the mercy you showed Sizwe, even if he doesn’t see it,” prayed Gogo holding her Bible to her chest.

Khethi had featured in many of my drawings after that visits – her long hair splendid in yellow or glimmering in glitter.

“Don’t forget to include your Gogo next time,” Gogo would say, the sides of her mouth drooping before putting away the drawings in a plastic folder.

Of Snakes and Diamonds

“Get up. You were whimpering again.” His hands are rough on my shoulders. “I may as well wake up. Be at work early for a change.”

We haven’t said much to each other since he came back from Brazil.

“Is it morning already?” is all I manage before he gets out of bed.

Sitting up on the bed, I wrap my arms around my shoulders. His side of the bed is clearly marked by the outline of his body on the sheets. I roll over. The space between his side and mine is cold. I roll over again to get closer to where he was. Only his faint scent remains.

I wish I hadn’t dismissed the wisdom of the magazines I buy every month. There’s nothing tighter than a pair of spoons lying snugly together, one said, under the headline: “What does the way you sleep together say about your relationship?” I roll back to my side of the bed and wait for upbeat humming from the bathroom – the O’Jays’s *For the Love of Money* – to reach my ears before slithering back under the covers. I pull the blankets over my face and wait for silence.

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“It was different. But the tie was still there. It was the same beautiful green; but there were no hands pulling it tighter around my neck. It changed into a snake this time. Its dance reminded me of those downcast flute playing Indians with turbans in cartoons. Do you remember those who charm a cobra out of a pot?”

Bright green with bold gold stripes, the tie had hung loosely like a serpent down my neck. The lopsided V raised its head to perform a slow rhythmic dance in front of my face. My eyes widened as its mouth opened, exposing a pair of gleaming fangs aiming for my neck.

“It’s strange indeed, *choma*. Are you sure you don’t want to see someone?”

“I don’t know if I should worry. They’re just dreams after all.”

“I think you know what they could mean. Maybe you should seriously consider letting go.”

I am always amazed by Stera's attentiveness. She has heard many similar accounts of my dreams and fears, yet she gasps and interjects in all the right places. She dedicates her tea break at work just to listen. "Call at 10h15 sharp," her SMS reads each time mine asks: "Do you have a few minutes?"

We always end the conversation with her promising to "come over for sundowners, soon".

"The bar and cellar are always stocked. I can't wait!"

***

It was at the same table, a few months ago, that I told her for the first time about the dreams. She had popped in on her way home. I wasn't expecting him until late at night so I looked forward to a bit of long overdue *skinder*. The evening was balmy so I slipped chardonnay into an ice bucket right after hanging up.

The coffee was cold by the time I remembered I had a cup to finish. It left a sticky, bitter and sweet taste in my mouth. I threw its remains down the sink, and brought out two glasses from the bar.

"I thought you'd be outside, enjoying the sunset in the garden. I don't know why you guys bothered with a garden which probably costs a fortune to maintain! I won't even mention the pool. *Oodarkiekodwa*…"

She stood near the open window and nudged herself forward by craning her neck and raising her right leg. "Look at that! Smell the roses, okay, gardenia…" she said.

I imagined vibrations forming in the air around us with the booming of her voice. It had been a long time since anyone had been that loud in the kitchen, or in any of the rooms in the house. Laughter rarely reverberated between these walls.

"*Ja*, *ja*. We be black. We wouldn't jump in even if our lives depended on it!"

"It's good to hear you joke again."

"It is, *nhe*? Sit. I chilled some wine. The fish will be ready soon."

“I can’t remember the last time I had a home cooked meal. Thanks, my friend,” she said winking at me.

I thought the smells coming from the oven, fused with wine and laughter, would make me giddy.

“I hope you’ll enjoy it. I cook because I have to eat or because I need something to do these days. You know eating alone is not fun.”

I couldn’t tell her how thrilling it was having someone salivating at that table. Unlike the dining room, there wasn’t the domineering antique table with its stout chairs to remind me of my dinners for one. Eating in front of the TV felt gluttonous and mind numbing. She couldn’t have imagined how elevated I felt perched on one of the twin stools in the kitchen.

“*Kanti* where is hubby, my friend? He sported *inteshe* like a true BEE the last I saw him. He seemed well fed. So do you, *chomie*.” I couldn’t help but laugh as her slim fingers outlined the curves of my hips.

“If indeed he is well fed, he’s not getting his meals here…”

I couldn’t tell her that it probably wasn’t just meals that he got outside these walls; that I had once overheard him on the phone: “What man would resist you?” I had stared long and hard in the mirror, my face blurred and wishing away the folds on my waist. There was nothing endearing about love handles despite their name. I couldn’t bring myself to tell her how invisible it had made me feel to hear it.

“Is that why you’re wearing your ring on a chain?

My hand shot up to the stone dangling on the gold necklace.

I can’t say when exactly our relationship changed. It was already different, and maybe even strained by the time he left for Brazil. It had gone pear-shaped by the time he came back.

***

I thought nothing of it the first time I heard the message. It was an easy mistake to make. Dr Dashaan had many patients; and my husband and I had not consulted the old doc recently. I had a mop of hair to dry before rushing out to get lunch.

The air from the dryer cut through the hair food and seared my scalp. My poor husband burning up in Brazil with stuffy government people in suits!

My mind drifted to the streets of Rio teeming with writhing bodies of women, splendid in bejewelled nipple caps and feather boas.

“The programme is packed as you saw. I doubt we’ll even have time to check the Carnival,” he had said stuffing the travel size body lotion and toothpaste in a clear plastic bag.

There was no hiding my disappointment. If he noticed he didn’t show it. I’d have jumped at the chance of travelling overseas with my husband – seeing new places, catching new smells and sounds with him at my side. As crude as it sounded when he sang it, I yearned for the closeness of *amathe nolwimi* – tongue and saliva – of his favourite song. I longed to hear it and believe it was possible again.

“Maybe next time,” he had said closing the zip of his red Cellini suitcase.

But Merle from Dr Dashaan’s office had called again the next day.

“I need to know when you and Mr Grootboom will be coming to fetch your test results. I left messages for you both yesterday.”

“I was sure you’d made a mistake. We got our cholesterol results about two weeks ago.”

“I have it here in the diary and in the system, Ma’am. Mr and Mrs Grootboom it says…” I could hear the tapping of the keyboard and the ruffle from the turning of pages from my end of the line.

“What are the results for? The kind of test, I mean. And when were they done? I haven’t been to your office in about two, three weeks… and neither has my husb…”

“The tests were done on February 27… When can you and Mr Grootboom come in?”

I hung up without saying goodbye. I had a million questions she couldn’t possibly answer; and she had sounded so sure. The profiles she’d read from our files had corresponded with mine and Ndyebo’s. Surely they wouldn’t be so careless as to label blood samples incorrectly? Why would there be two blood samples? Mr and Mrs Grootboom, she said. The

only other Mrs Grootboom had been dead for about six years; and Ndyebo was his mother's only son among four daughters.

I later got an email from Ndyebo: "Conference going well. I am fine. I hope you're ok."

It felt as if my tongue had been cut out. I wanted to curse and scream but nothing came out. I checked my BlackBerry every five minutes for the red flashing light but nothing more came. I tossed and turned in our bed. Sleep came with echoes of Merle's voice and more dreams.

I didn't know what I was looking for but I searched anyway, turning his jacket and trouser pockets inside out. I found the keys to our safe in one of his pockets. I didn't even know that it had moved from the hollowed out book in the shelf. I opened it and nothing seemed amiss.

Contracts, policy and insurance documents and receipts to some of our big purchases over the years filled two brown manila envelopes. On the corner was the box from Hill's Decadent which had my wedding ring. Opening it released a flood of memories. But then a crumpled receipt from Sparkling Silver – a tickey line jewellery shop – dated April 23, a week after he'd proposed, intensified my anger and frustration.

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Indeed there was nothing where the ring was meant to be. I couldn't even feel the tell-tale ridge anymore. I stepped down from the stool, checked the fish on the grill then took out two plates.

The ring was never meant for the type of work that I was now accustomed to doing.

"What kind of work do you do, Ma'am?"

The assistant at Hill's Decadent had been at pains to explain the different types of stones on display and the exclusivity of their designs.

"You want something more hardwearing if you work a lot with your hands. You lose some of the shine if you need to wash your hands all the time or if you work with harsh chemicals."

Ndyebo was smug that morning, like that time he bought the Audi R8 ahead of his friends who had had their share of government tenders. He no longer hooted at his friends in

traffic. He would stick his hand out of the sunroof and wave, the big smile on his face breaking his rotund face into two uneven spheres.

“Money is not an issue. Show me what you got, my good man. Only the best will do for my baby,” he said, his voice booming in the luminescent room with its dangling chandeliers and arctic white walls.

His choices clashed with mine. He was interested in brash, flashy, in-your-face pieces. While I wasn’t looking for anything plain, I wanted something whose beauty was understated.

“Another choice would be to have our rings, including mine, exclusively designed. I know someone who could put me in touch with one of the best in the industry. I could arrange it when I’m in Joburg again in a few weeks,” he said, his hands gliding up and down my neck.

“Babe! Surely, that isn’t necessary? We must still have enough for the *lobola* and the wedding!”

I was too besotted with all that glittered to take in Richard’s lecture on what was hardwearing and what was not. I never imagined that I would ever take the ring off or lose that connection with him. Then it was a symbol of not only a new, shared life but also continuity. Our love had a beginning but no end. The band embodied romance, chivalry, the security that comes with being the chosen one and posterity.

I had told him on the day that we’d gone on a search for the ring: “I want to grow old with you. I want our children to look at us and know that true love is possible. I want my ring to be a symbol of that; something that will outlive our marriage. I want it to be a legacy for our children. Just imagine, baby, if our future son… imagine Xhanti asking for his love’s hand with the same ring. We can’t do that with a fake, baby. Fake is cute, but it doesn’t last, baby.”

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I shook my head – really to shake myself out of my reverie than to answer Stera’s question.

“*Yhu*! You have no idea how relieved I am about that! But tell me, my friend, don’t you miss going to work?”

“I never imagined that I would, but I do, sort of.”

I couldn’t tell her to tell her of my dread at attending industry dinners. I couldn’t admit that my heart beat faster at the thought of being in a room full of people with expectations and opinions about not only the value of Brent crude and gold – but the strength of partnerships – corporate and personal. Being in their presence filled me with anxiety and dread’ though once I had been one of them. She didn’t know that I felt so out of the game that I retreated to this kitchen for the comfort of moist banana loaf, malva pudding and scones with cream and strawberry jam rather than dealing with their type.

***

The fangs stare hard at me even in my wakefulness. I retreat to the kitchen to avoid the yellow serpentine eyes following me around. I run my fingers over the knots on my neck, which I imagine untangling under the pressure of my fingertips. They rest momentarily on the clasp holding the necklace together before releasing. The three rocks are lacklustre on the granite surface of the kitchen table. I leave the ring on his side of the bed as I make my way out of his castle. The lightness in my neck shoots all the way to my head, making me feel giddy as if my feet are about to leave the ground.

"I feel sorry for you girls. You're too easy," she says refilling her glass. "You give men everything on a plate! In my day, our men used to work and not just for money. They'd put in hard work to win a woman's heart. *Ndiyanixelela*… I wish I had kept some of the letters I used to get," she adds winking at me.

Sizeka can't contain herself. "*Utsho na mama*? But what can we do, really?" She gives me a quizzical look as if to say: 'Is this is the same woman you bitch about every day?'

As far as she is concerned my mother and I have never had a kind word to say to each other. This is the first time that I have brought a friend home and I don't want to regret it.

I am too numb to laugh. I can't recognise the woman sitting across Sizeka and I on the balcony. A tremor runs through my back and my arms, leaving a trail of gooseflesh. There's something unassuming about my mother in the grey tracksuit pants and yellow oversized "Woman on the Move" T-shirt. Her big toe peeps out from one of her socks.

"You'd swear she was the mother! Do you see the way she looks at me?" she gulps the rest of the cocktail. Sucking on the sliver of lime from the glass she pulls a face. Is it the lime or is she mocking me? I can't tell.

"How's about a refill for mumsy?" she says in an accent I don't recognise and taps her glass.

On the way to the kitchen I hear my mother and my best friend laughing as if they have sipped virgin cocktails on the balcony all their lives.

Just how many stages of metamorphosis can a single woman go through? Her transformations have never been straightforward. She could skip some stages and repeat others if she wanted.

"I'm my own person," she would yell whenever she felt cornered. "I'm not going to be what you want me to be."

She had refused to bow down to my Gogo's traditionalist rod. She wore pants and wasn't shy to drink Esprit and Cinzano in Gogo's presence. Hoping that my father would see the

folly of being with a "typical *mntwan' elokishi*", she pretended not to notice many of my mother's shortcomings until I was born.

My birth was the start of The Great Rift. I was born out of wedlock. It was a great embarrassment to my father's family because my mother simply refused to get married.

"I have no one to speak for me. Both my parents died before I finished school."

"And your uncles and aunts? Any grandparents?"

"I don't trust them. Let's leave it at that," she told my father's family when they wanted to send a delegation to ask for her hand.

After months of wrangling the elders simply gave up. "Young people have their own way of doing things that is beyond us."

My Gogo was most offended and would not come to my father's house because she didn't approve of my parents' living arrangements. She also could not come to terms with my mother's refusal to be made an honest woman.

"The woman simply has no sense of decency!"

Gogo therefore kept her distance; not because she wanted to, but out of principle.

"I don't want people to think that I approve of *ihlazo elinje*," she had said. "Unlike you, I care what people say about my family."

Daddy and Mama didn't get married until the year I turned eight. Daddy was also promoted, which meant that his responsibilities grew and he spent more time on the road. Legend has it that she woke up one morning and declared: "It's time" and demanded a white dress with a veil for the wedding.

"It nearly killed your grandmother. She said getting married in a white gown would be an insult to chastity and all that was good and pure in the world," Mama once told me.

She eventually wore a cream two-piece suit and a wide hat with a veil that covered her eyes to the magistrates' court. Naturally, my Gogo was not invited. Instead, two of my father's colleagues were called in as witnesses.

She took on the role of wife with a newfound zeal that was foreign to my father and threatening to Gogo. She was convinced that Mama had bewitched my father and was intent on killing the entire family, starting with her, by a heart attack induced by one of her theatrics.

Beyond Gogo's wildest expectations Mama became master cook and baker; and took pride in a small vegetable garden. It was always lush with butternut, spinach, beetroot, carrots and beans. She also grew chillies and garlic, which was unheard of *elokishini yethu*. She stopped short of keeping patterns from Living & Loving magazine and knitting woolly scarves, beanies and "those dreadful jerseys". "Maybe when I'm old and missing a few teeth and have lost all sense of style."

But Gogo was still not convinced. "My son has already been taken in by her sorcery. I won't fall for it. How else do you explain him having a wife who smokes and is not ashamed to sit at the same table with her husband to drink?"

My mother had a penchant for slim Vogue cigarettes. She would wake up in the morning, prepare coffee for my father when he was at home, put her favourite director's chair under the peach tree and smoke her first cigarette for the day – even in the coldest winters.

"Everyone has their vice," she would say. "And I need to collect my thoughts first thing in the morning."

She also put away her starched white uniform and epaulettes, opting to look after her household.

"Didn't you and your mother say 'For once be a mother and wife'? I'm doing exactly that!"

My father had no choice but to stay away for longer periods as the only person responsible for all the expenses of the household.

"Maybe you should consider a little sister or brother for Lhilhi? It must be lonely for her," offered my Gogo. "It'll also keep her mother's hands full."

My father had refused, to my Gogo's shock and disappointment. "We haven't spoken about having more children. Besides, we can't afford it."

She wasn't interested in having more children, but other people's children were never far from her mind. She would walk with me to school every morning and bring my lunch without fail at 11 o'clock. During these times she would also chat with the women who sold *vetkoek*, chicken heads and feet and slices of French polony wrapped in greasy old newspapers outside the school gates. She also spoke to the teachers at school to find out their food preferences.

Soon she was kneading dough for big *vetkoek* stuffed with mincemeat, scones for the teacher's tea and cleaning *maasbanker* fish – the scales of which would sometimes cling to her neck – for their lunch breaks. These would come wrapped in foil and wax paper, nestled in a basket she carried inside the school premises. Word of her sandwiches, fried fish and savoury *vetkoek* – considered gourmet by township standards – spread. Teachers from other schools, clerks, nurses and factory workers came knocking on her door.

"My own mother, uBhelekazi, hustled all her short life. She kept chickens and sold their eggs. We'd have to scrub the chickens feet clean and smear them with Vaseline before they were sold at the market. They roamed the yard but we would only eat chicken on special days like Christmas and Good Friday."

My mother's clientele expanded to men crippled by *babalaza* who swore that her *vetkoek* and mince with a hint of freshly chopped chillies from her garden could revive the most ravaged man from a debilitating hangover. She also included *smiley*, which she got for next to nothing at the abattoir, for variety. They would queue before I left for school on Monday morning before rushing to the train station *en route* to their places of work in town. The unemployed would bring their beers – for *ukuqabula* – and end up staying for most of the morning. They would demand more food, which Mama didn't have a problem supplying as long as they paid. She would chase them out just in time for the arrival of the after-school crowd, not that it helped. They would either come back or fall asleep in the benches outside.

Mama had already made a name for herself – Sis Dodi or Dodz by those more brazen – by the time Daddy got wind of her roaring business. He wasn't too happy about it, especially after hearing from Gogo that some of the men used the backyard for *ukuqabula*, with some

even coming in the middle of the week. “No self-respect I tell you! How do you explain someone guzzling beers at noon, on a Monday *nangona*?” she sneered.

“I’m not running a shebeen. They have Thiza’s for that. My customers are well-behaved,” Mama had explained to my father when he came home for the first time a month after the business had picked up.

In between running the household and the business she had little time to look after me or help with my homework. I was at first bewildered by the people who came to our home daily. The women would strike up long conversations with my mother in the kitchen. I found their easy laughter comforting and Mama would let me sit in the kitchen with them. If I was lucky she would give me a teaspoon of Cremora or sugar to suck, or a sip of sweet milky tea from the saucer so it wouldn’t burn. They would also call before the end of the month – hard times in our township – to ask for a cup of mealie-meal, a cup of rice or a bunch of spinach from her garden. If a note came, usually written in elegant cursive writing, she would deliver the “parcel” herself and not ask when she could expect reimbursement.

I got used to the men’s merriment outside and learnt some of the songs they used to sing solely by hearing them over and over again. I didn’t know then the trouble this would cause in my family.

***

Mama had been resolute in her refusal when Gran had first suggested it. “I just need to find a rhythm, that’s all. She stays with me.”

Daddy agreed with Gogo. “If you are as busy as you say you are then letting Lihle stay with Ma may not be so bad. She lives close enough to visit every other day and she doesn’t have to change schools.”

Though I didn’t fully understand what was happening I could sense that I had been thrown in the middle. I felt that I was being pulled from different directions. Knowing how stubborn Mama could be, Daddy and Gogo let her have her way.

She worked hard, waking up very early in the morning to cook and prepare orders. She cut orders from the after school crowd yet this seemed to have created more demand for her

menu. Changes took shape with the additional income from her small business. She bought a new bedroom suite, a new kitchen scheme and new blankets for Gogo. She also extended the rooms in the house to include an indoor toilet and bathroom. Gogo had been forced to keep quiet when she saw the changes that Mama's business had made. She called for a celebratory dinner to thank God for his mercies and for blessings her children.

"I don't want any fights with Ma. I'd like a quiet and uneventful lunch at home. I hope that isn't much to ask," said Daddy before kissing Mama on the forehead. Mama nodded and tied the plastic bags with spinach and beetroot. She then fixed her *doek* and shooed me out of the kitchen and locked up. Her patrons had been informed the day before that the shop would be closed for business due to a family engagement.

Mama wasted no time and boiled the beetroot for the salad as soon as we arrived at Gogo's house. Daddy went into the dining room and read the papers. Gogo reached for the biscuit tin on top of the cupboard and took out a handful of Quality Street chocolates. "Come, let's sit outside *mzukulu*. Show Gogo what you've learnt at school."

I drew letters and figures on the ground. For every letter I got right Gogo would applaud and reward me with a sweet. I stuffed the wrappers in my pocket in preparation for a new game I wanted to show Gogo.

"What is the game called *mzukulu*? Will you show Gogo how it's done?"

"I haven't played it with anyone yet."

"What's it called?"

"We can call it Dodz"

"Dodz? What kind of name is that?"

"Play along Gogo!"

"Ok. What do I need to do?"

"You sit there. I'll knock and give you money."

I enacted for Gogo what I would see when the men came for their regmaker. Gogo would play Dodz.

“Dodz, baby! Dodz! Bring a *smiley*, *tu*? *Ingathi ndiye ngamandla phezolo*!”

I gave Gogo the notes and she “handed over” the smiley on a plate.

“You always know which spot to hit, don’t you Dodz?”

Glug, glug, glug.

“What are you doing now?”

“I’m drinking my beer, silly! Gogo, play along!”

“How many beers are you supposed to drink?”

“Lots.”

Glug, glug, glug.

“Now why are you walking like that? Why are you bumping on walls?”

It was then that I started singing as I had heard so many of the patrons do.

“*Into yam ndiyayithanda*/*Nokub’ isel’ utywala*/*lyandisebenzela*, *ndincanywa yiyo*” I staggered around, pretending I was Bra Solly.

Gogo stood up and clapped loudly, a big smile plastered on her face.

“I’m going to call Mama and Tata so you can also sing for them. Will you do that for them *mzukulu*?”

“Samuel, come quick! You too, Dorothea!”

Proud that I had made Gogo so happy I beamed as Daddy and Mama stood next to Gogo.

“Show them, Lhilhi. Show them Dodz. Sing that song you just sang for Gogo.”

Feeling a little shy, I hesitated, but Gogo egged me by smiling and nodding. Gogo interrupted me as I belted out “*Into yam ndiyathanda*”.

“No, *mzukulu*. That’s not where your game starts.”

I was determined to put on a good show for Daddy and Mama but I was a bit unsettled by Gogo’s attention which seemed focused on Mama. I handed over the paper money to Gogo who still wouldn’t take her eyes off my mother. So I sang louder than when it was just Gogo I was performing for, slurring my words more and bumping into Daddy and Mama, hoping that they would play along. I saw Mama’s hand move to her mouth.

“I’m going to stop now. No one is playing along.” I sat down on the floor not caring to fix my dress.

Mama looked at me, looked at Gogo and then looked at me again. Her eyebrows crept closer together. Daddy just looked at Mama, his chest getting bigger and then smaller, bigger and then smaller. Mama and Daddy stared at Gogo and said nothing.

“Didn’t they like the song, Gogo? Why didn’t they clap? Tell them how much you loved it Gogo! Tell them!”

“Thank you, *mntwanam*,” Daddy finally said before storming back inside the house. Mama ran into the house. “My beetroot is burning.”

Daddy got the quiet lunch he had prayed for. Gogo didn’t say anything to Mama for the rest of the afternoon, neither did Daddy.

***

I got used to waking up to Gogo’s favourite morning prayer services on the radio. Gogo walked me to school and Mama would bring my lunch at 11 o’clock. I learnt to do without the teaspoons of Cremora when Gogo had her afternoon tea. I had to go play outside whenever Gogo had visitors. Gogo collected patterns from Living & Loving and bought balls and balls of wool. She sold her doilies, placemats and scarves to other grannies at church. I would return the jeans that Mama bought for me unworn. My legs would itch at having something so close to the body.

Mama banned alcohol on the premises but continued selling her *vetkoek* and fish. She bought land and opened CHOICES WINE & DINE, whose popularity seemed to grow every

year. I found it strange that Mama could be kind to other people but could not get along with Gogo.

I returned home when Gogo died the year I was in Standard 10. Daddy opened the house to tenants instead of selling it because he wanted to keep it in the family. I missed the quietness of Gogo's house and grew anxious to leave home.

With the success of her businesses Mama had developed a taste for expensive clothes and jewellery. She especially liked pearls.

"They are not as crass as gold. Where's the fun in looking like everyone else?" she would say. Though she quit Vogue, she would drink half a glass of Chateau Libertas at supper. "Doctors say it's good for the heart," she would say shrugging her shoulders. I, on the other hand, had become averse to all types of alcohol and looked down on those who drank it. There was no avoiding her as she insisted on everyone being home for supper, so we could have family time.

My prayers of escape were answered when I received a letter of acceptance from university. She cried on the day I left because I insisted on taking a bus instead of driving with her and Daddy.

"You can come home whenever you want. Be your own person, no matter what," she said. Daddy said I should make the family proud. "Honour the memory of your grandmother. We don't want to hear stories about you."

I went home twice that year; only because the university rented out the residences during the longer midyear and yearend holidays. I could swing whichever way I wanted without feeling I was in the middle of a tug-of-war.

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Though only half full the glass jug feels heavy in my hand. My right hand slides through the handle. I hold the jug by the neck with my left hand and walk out to the balcony.

"Thank you," they chorus as I refill my mother's glass.

“I think I know what you mean, Ma. No class whatsoever! You’ll find a man on the side of a busy road, urinating next to his Mercedes Benz. A Benz, Ma! Have you ever seen such a thing?”

“And you are going to swoon all over that guy and his car the minute he parks outside your res!”

I have never known Sizeka to notice men driving Mercedes Benz before nor to have an opinion on them. The conversation goes over my head, and I sink into the wicker chair. Is this the same sorcery that Gogo talked about?

“You must be getting hungry, I know I am,” she says looking at Sizeka. “How about getting us all something to eat?” she asks, directing her gaze at me. I look back at her while collecting my thoughts. It seems unfair that she should dominate every aspect of my life. I feel my blood rushing to my cheeks.

“I think Sizeka should go home if she is hungry.”

“Lhilhi, what are you saying?”

“Sizeka should go. Or I’ll go. For once it shouldn’t be about you!” I storm out, leaving them sweeping their jaws from the floor.

For People like Us

Orange coloured the sky as I left the office and headed home. Usually a calming sight after a busy day, it sent a tingle of electricity down my back. I stopped for a moment to stretch my arms and to stop them from shaking before hurrying to the taxi rank across the road.

It had been one of those gracious days in July that leave one with hope that the warmth of spring was on the way. The warming rays of the sun had smoothed out frowns on faces and ironed shrivelled bodies. My fellow commuters had returned the favour by leaving the doors and windows of the taxi open, allowing a breeze to waft in, drying the sweat that had glued my thermal spencer to my back. But like the warmth of such days, the feeling of contentment and warmth in the taxi was fragile.

I expected the usual SMS from my aunt asking “How far?” A year had passed but she still felt uneasy about letting me work out in my chosen field. Flying back to the nest and being within range her eagle-like eye did little to allay her fears. Again and again she would warn me about not “exposing myself”. “It’s a hostile world out there, especially for people like us. I don’t want anything to happen to you.” I had taken to SMSing her when I reached work to reassure her that I had arrived safely. She wouldn’t rest until she had me at home for supper in the evenings.

The driver sat meditatively, his thick gold bedecked fingers on the rosary that should have been hanging on the neck of the rearview mirror. A dog-eared Bible on the dashboard greeted passengers sitting at the back.

Behind him a woman with a smooth egg-like face cuddled an equally cherubic, curly haired baby cocooned in a pink blanket. A woman in a black beret, thick glasses and a grey Pick n Pay jersey stared ahead at the vendors selling boiled eggs, loose cigarettes and rat poison. A boy in a blue blazer and big fluffy earphones sat next to me. His black backpack, from which he took out a notebook with a Life Orientation sticker, was tattooed with outlandish figures in white Tippex. A map of Africa with the words “Africa Unite – Bob Marley” stood out as the only figure in the kaleidoscope I could make out.

The silence in the taxi was broken by a woman with a blonde wig wearing a pinstriped suit standing at the door. A manicured hand rested guardedly on the laptop bag hanging on her shoulder. She spoke loudly in English.

“Excuse me! Excuse me, driver. How many people sit at the back?”

“Two. *Khwela sisi, sihambe*.”

“Can you tell him to scoot to the corner?” she said pointing to a man, probably a construction worker, in mud-caked blue overalls. “I kinda need a clean place to sit. Dry-cleaning is expensive.”

“*Mnxim*! I also don’t want to sit next to a cheese-girl. *Voetsek*, *fokken* snob!” shouted the construction worker and waved his calloused hands in the air.

The woman squeezed herself in, putting the laptop bag between her and the construction worker. He took his pink Tupperware container and his helmet from the seat and put them on his lap.

“Her father is white, you know, but he speaks fluent Zulu,” said the buxom mother loudly to no one in particular. The attention immediately turned to her and the gurgling baby in her arms. “Her father comes from Durban. His first language is Zulu. He speaks it like those Africans in the farms, then Afrikaans and then English.” Her outbursts were met with incoherent grunts.

“This one,” she said kissing the tip of the child’s nose and turning to the bespectacled woman next to her, “This one is a very clever baby. Aren’t you, Callie? Every morning she watches Takalani Sesame. And every time she claps and laughs when they sing all those songs in Zulu. I ask her ‘do you even understand what they’re singing?’ and she just laughs. She cries when someone switches off the TV or changes the channel.”

The woman stared blankly at the mother and gently squeezed the baby’s cheek. She returned the gesture with a burp which sent curdled milk down her chest.

“Close the door! Fares to the front,” shouted the driver and adjusted the rearview mirror before sliding the rosary down its neck.

***

The gentle humming of the engine rocked me gently to a drowsiness that had evaded me for months. I was careful not to lean on the window though there wasn't the usual "YOUR PERM IS NICE BUT NOT ON MY WINDOWS" sticker. Upsetting the driver wasn't on my mind. There was no disputing who was boss. The blurring of speakers at different points above our heads shook me out of my stupor. The constant ticking of the keyboard, together with the howls of the lead singer, buzzed in my ears. "*uJesu unobubele ngam*" on repeat, drowned out other thoughts in my mind. I allowed myself to get lost in my surroundings and the cacophony around me.

His cellphone rang, prompting him to turn down the volume a notch; though the croaking couldn't have lasted longer than a few seconds.

"*Hayi*, some people. They don't even wait for the phone to ring, yet they still expect you to call them back".

The heavily made woman in the passenger smiled at him, revealing a gold tooth.

"I can drive from here to Cape Town any day listening to this music. I live on it. It heals me. And this," he said pointing to the Bible on the dashboard. "I carry it everywhere. I stop anywhere, anytime to dip into this book, whenever I feel the need."

"I feel the same when I listen to Lusanda. The only one I don't feel is Hlengiwe Mhlaba."

"*Yithi uyadlala*! I love Hlengiwe. You must listen to Dwala Lam. If that one doesn't move you, then try Rock of Ages and my favourite, Uyalalela."

The vehicle sped along trying to beat an orange robot before it turned red but there were already pedestrians crossing the street.

"Is this the same forest that was called '*Ungangen' kodwa awubuy'i*? I've heard stories of people who went in to the forest and never came back."

"Oh *sisi*, *maan*! That's the stuff of legends!" he laughed, looking out the window. The forest was thick and verdant, looking like endless rows of broccoli heads.

“The forest has gone smaller now. The white man came with his saws, and then our people discovered that there was nothing to it. Parts of it disappear every day, piece by piece. It’ll be gone in six, seven years. Mark my words. The government would have built houses for *abantu bethu*.”

“They should build schools, shopping centres and clinics, too. It’s not right that our children walk kilometres only to learn under a tree.”

“*Uyichanile, sisi*! I grew up in this area, near Nontyatyambo. I know what you’re talking about. My father owned goats and a few cattle. The only animals I didn’t like were horses and dogs. I don’t have regard for horses, even now. *Izinja kezona andifun’ nozibona.* It’s bound to stink wherever there are dogs. You wash them and they still stink. *Akukh’ nto enuka ingathi yinj’ emanzi*!”

“*Utsho na bhuti*? I take it you don’t have dogs where you live now?”

“*Ewe tyhini*! Those things stink. *Zifana nje namakwerekwere*! Just like I would never have a dog in my home, I would never give a lift to *ikwerekwere*!”

I felt the hairs at the back of my neck stand on end. A sharp pain pierced my chest and all before me seemed foggy. My eyes darted around me until they landed on the margin of the schoolboy’s notebook, on “THE FANTASTIC FOUR” written in orange ink. The boy remained oblivious to my stares, his ears under the fluffy headphones. The construction worker nodded, pounding his right foot on the floor.

“If I notice I have *igrigamba* in the car, even if I’m already on the road I stop. ‘I am no longer going where I said I was going. Don’t worry about paying’, I tell them.”

“I wonder *yazi bhuti*, why those people don’t seem to like water. I don’t know what it is about our people from up north, but it seems that even their women don’t like to wash.”

“I used to think the Ethiopians were better until I picked up two women in Knysna. It was already getting dark and I didn’t realise *ngamakwerekwere* when I stopped the car.”

“What did you do? Did you throw them out?”

“I drove with them until Wilderness. I couldn’t leave them on the side of the road because it was already dark. But they made me angry because they fell asleep the moment they got in. I had a blanket at the back and they covered themselves with it.”

“*Yazi bhuti*, you’re a good man. You still managed to be kind to them. I don’t know if I would have done the same.”

“I was determined to drive all the way past Wilderness but after dropping them I couldn’t get their smell out. I couldn’t open the windows because it was so cold. I eventually stopped and slept at a lodge. I was tempted to burn or throw away the blanket. I left it outside overnight.”

“They almost ruined your trip, *mos*. Shame, *bhuti*. I don’t know what I would have done, *ndinukiselwengabantu endingabaziyo* in my own car! At least you didn’t leave them on the side of the road. God will bless you for your kindness toward them.”

“Kindness is wasted on those people. They turn on you the minute your back is turned. If you don’t know just how cruel they can be, ask me. I’ll tell you.”

THE FANTASTIC FOUR. THE FANTASTIC FOUR. THE FANTASTIC FOUR.

I fixed my eyes on the words once again. Yet their words and pictures came flooding back.

“How do they do that, Mama? I want superpowers too!”

I focused on my son’s voice and his squeals at the superheroes’ powers. Mister Fantastic. Invisible Woman. The Thing. Human Torch.

The Human Torch was Mpumi’s favourite.

“Can a person burn forever, Mama? Can they burn and burn like the bush in the Bible? We must watch the film again!”

I closed my eyes tightly and tried to block the image from my mind. It had been a year but it was clear as if it had happened in front of me. I could see his arms moving wildly about like a windmill. The newspapers had called the movement “flailing”. I had not heard the word before. A policeman hovered over his smouldering body with a fire extinguisher.

“We watched as the shack burned. He couldn’t go out. Themba’s father said that was how dogs died and that my father would be next.”

I resorted to taking the children’s pictures home. There wasn’t room on the walls at the centre anymore. They had started to blend into each other like photo negatives. Balls of fire in orange crayons, bottles of petrol on the ground, bodies lying in pools of blood and mama, daddy, brother and sister carrying suitcases, their paths in green leading nowhere.

They competed with the sheets strung haphazardly on strings of pantyhose in the halls. Though they didn’t say it, I could hear the women lament: “We won’t be going to church or dinner after this. What’s the point, really? Not when my husband is dead and another woman is wearing my shoes, my gold rings and necklaces.”

They hardly said anything to me. With their legs stretched out in front of them, they stared at the walls. I brought the children more paper from the scrap at work, and more crayons. “STOP WAR” the pictures read. On the cold black and white tiles they knelt daily, drawing stick men and women in green wax crayon.

The eyes of the figures followed me home long before I decided to take them to my flat. Sometimes the eyes seemed hollow when I tried to look through them, as if I were looking at a deep black pit with no end. At times I saw anger and flames. The women plaited each other’s hair, weaving tight, intricate patterns even on the shortest peppercorn curls.

“Come this side,” Mainini had said. “The people here are more understanding.” I came hoping to leave it all behind.

“What did they do to you, *bhuti*?”

“*Basebenzis’ amayeza abantu*. And their *muti* is so strong. They use it for evil, the work of Satan. My own sister married one of them. My own sister, can you believe it? She paid for her stubbornness. She paid with her life.”

“What happened to her?”

“You know she was stubborn. She was not the type to listen to anyone. I told my father the moment she left for Nigeria that he must not expect her to return. *Nangoku*, when her body

returned from Nigeria the fly machine that brought her was grounded at OR for eight hours. For eight hours no one was allowed to come close to the fly machine and no one would tell us why."

"Ngumhlola wanton' lo undixelela wona? What was the problem?"

"We waited and eventually the body was handed to us. My father, in his old age, didn't know what was happening. Her body had cuts all over. Her own husband had used her corpse to bring drugs into the country! Where have you ever heard of such a thing?"

"Oh, *Nkosi yam*!"

"Their post-mortem didn't say what happened to her. They wanted us to believe that she had just died, nje. Just like that. I insisted on another post-mortem. It revealed she was poisoned. My own sister, poisoned, probably by her own husband and her lifeless body used for drugs! I warned my father such a thing would happen but he allowed her to do what she wanted."

"And you still get women like her," sneered the construction worker at the back. "You still get women like her, running after these *grigambas* so they can have the latest cellphones and fake hair."

"It's not my fault that you can't afford class," she shot back.

"*Sies*, man! Those things crawl into South Africa, dodging electric fences and then work for peanuts. I stayed years without work just because *amangamla* think *oodarkiebaseMzantsi* are too expensive. 'All you know is talk, talk, talk and strike, strike, strike' they tell us!"

The boy turned the page and for a moment he searched around like he had woken up from a dream before removing his earphones.

"What do you say, *suster*? You've been too quiet… *Suster*!"

"I think he's talking to you," the boy said, tapping me on the shoulder.

"So, driver *nawe Sisi*. You don't mind people from Swaziland and Lesotho? They're not South Africans either."

“What are you saying?” the driver shot back, eyeing me in his mirror.

“Let me make an example. There are people here, in this town who have been here for many years. I had a friend at school. Her surname was Banda. Her family came from Malawi. She lived among amaXhosa and could only speak their language. Many people didn’t know any better….”

Just then my phone my phone rang.

“*Ndeyipi Mainini*, *uribho*? I’m fine, Mainini. I’ll be in King in 10 minutes.

The woman in front turned as soon as she heard me speaking in another language. I watched in the rearview mirror as the driver scowled. His jaw dropped.

“*Rha*, *siesmaan*! *Kanti sihamba nomnye wabo apha*? One of them in my own car?”

“I honestly thought you would have sniffed me out a long time ago. Seeing that you can smell a foreigner a mile away.”

“How did you get into my car? You… you….”

The driver slammed the brakes hard, which sent the plastic bags and the woman’s laptop bag scuttling to the floor.

“You’ll pay if anything happens to my laptop!”

Mainini’s warning ran in my ears. “Be careful. The world is hostile to people like me and you.”

The boy looked around nervously and put his earphones inside the bag. The baby started wailing. I imagined the tears cooling his ruddy cheeks.

“What did you say to him? Now you’re upsetting my baby. Don’t cry, Callie.” The mother started humming loudly next to the baby’s ear but she wouldn’t stop.

“*Ngumhlola*! I should have known!” cried the construction worker behind me, throwing his hands in the air. “There’s no running away from these people!”

“It’s getting dark. Some of us have children and homes to get to!” screamed the woman in the grey Pick n Pay jersey, her voice breaking out of the cacophony. “So what if she is a foreigner? Jesus, *maan*!”

I clutched my handbag and sat transfixed to the seat, awaiting the driver’s next step. At that point I didn’t know what shocked me more – the reaction of the taxi driver or of the woman who had seemed so removed from everything that had happened before. I realised then that what mattered to everyone in the taxi was getting home.

The driver adjusted his mirror again and addressed me calmly. His words came out slowly and measured.

“Please step out of my vehicle. I will not be held responsible for whatever happens to you.”

I breathed in slowly and cleared my voice.

“The only thing you are going to do is to leave me at the taxi rank in King William’s Town. You didn’t let me inside your vehicle on the basis of my nationality. I had nothing to do with what happened to your sister. It was sad and unfortunate. My agreement with you was that I would pay, and you would leave me where you said this vehicle was headed. I have paid but I’m nowhere near the rank. We all want to go home. Now please make sure we all do, thank you.”

He adjusted his mirror again and started the engine without saying a word.

“I guess you’re now going to tell me that the customer comes first and is always right?” He barked to no one in particular. He shot me a look that said I would not be welcome in his taxi again. I made a mental note of his face, though I didn’t think I would forget it. The silence that followed was broken by the barking of the speakers again. I sent Mainini a message. “Home in 10 minutes.” The thought did little to unnerve me; I still had to walk home.

The clouds had gathered by the time we trundled into the dark tunnel of the taxi rank. I looked around me and said a silent prayer before stepping out into the darkness. I held on tightly to my handbag as I waited for the red pedestrian light to turn green.

Ever Expanding Universe

The shatter of porcelain against the fridge door broke the silence. A scream that had my heart pounding in my throat followed.

“Linda! Help!”

“Nick? What’s he doing here?” I wondered aloud.

I hadn’t expected Nicholas in the house. Yet what could have happened to warrant such a scream? I jumped out the bath with foam still at the back of my neck. Water dripped down my thighs and soaked the pink slippers that I had left on the mat next to the tub.

I stepped over the shards of the English rose cup – the last of a set from my great aunt Cordelia in Cape Town. I had served my in-laws tea in those cups during many meetings to “iron out my issues” with Nick.

Nick’s cellphone was on the sofa, flashing at the unread messages. The TV was on but muted, and the front door had been left wide open. Nick’s Jetta was parked in front of the garage and the gate, too, was open.

I wrapped the towel tighter around my body as I approached the black bars of the gate. I prayed that the Zion church groups would not walk past and see an old woman in a state of near-nakedness. There was no way to tell which way Nick and Thando had gone so I went back inside the house and closed the front door.

I picked the shards of porcelain off the floor and swept the tiny powder-like pieces. I couldn’t bring myself to throw them in the bin. I left them on the old rusty dustpan.

Nick returned as I was getting dressed. He didn’t flinch at the sight of my half naked body. He seemed flustered. He clutched a nail clipper with a hooked file.

“Why didn’t you come when I called?”

“I was in the bath. There was no one by the time I came out.”

“I could have died, you know. He has said before that a corpse would come out of this house, and today it nearly did.”

“Where is he? Where did he go?”

“He ran towards Lindela squatter camp. I’ve already called the police.”

“Ok… I’ll be with you as soon as I finish here.”

I covered my hair with an old tartan scarf. Though he had left six years ago Nick was still my husband, even if it was only on paper. He was staring at the mute TV, tapping his fingers on the arm of the sofa when I found him in the lounge.

“I’m shocked that the police haven’t arrived! What has this town come to?”

I went to the kitchen and took milk in a plastic bottle from the silver metallic fridge. The fridge was dimpled from dainty porcelain cups and other missiles hurled at it in recent years. I poured nearly half the contents of the milk container into a pot. I popped two teabags inside and looked on as it brewed, happy at the distraction. I lost count of the number of teaspoons of brown sugar I added to his cup of tea.

“Tea. Just the way you like it.” I put the tea in front of him.

His knuckles popped at the pressure of his thumb on them. He poured tea into a saucer and slurped. I wrapped my hands around my cup, the warmth thawing the ice in my veins.

“I don’t know if we should involve the police. You know their presence aggravates him even more. We both know he’s no criminal.”

“He charged at me with a metal pole. I was shocked because he seemed fine when I came. He even asked how I was.”

Nick had run towards Sugars, a popular tavern in the neighbourhood. "You know *amadoda* tried to pacify Thando and to pry the weapon from him, but he ran. You should have seen him, going wild like a man possessed. And everyone on the street scattered everywhere.” The owner had given Nick his cellphone to call the police.

“You know he’s not himself when he does that. It breaks my heart each time they shove him in the van, handcuffed,” I pleaded.

“It’s from your side of the family that he gets this, you know.”

He finished his tea and left.

I was relieved, even proud, when I heard that Thando had saved himself the indignity of being hurled into the back of a police van. One of the nurses at the ward had called.

“He buzzed at the gate. The security guard recognised him from the last time and let him in. ‘I’m admitting myself,’ he said. He walked straight to an empty bed and slept.”

***

He no longer hoots at the gate while waiting for me to come out. He comes into the house through the front door. He even greets nowadays – his customary “Molweni”, though I am always alone – finds its way out of his moustached lips more often.

Today he walked past me in the kitchen and out the backdoor to the garden. Finding it overgrown with weeds he asked, shaking his head: “Doesn’t Mlu come to do the garden anymore? It’s a disgrace that a once verdant garden could be reduced to that!”

“Where do you think I find the time to chase after Mlu? It’s because of you that he can make such outrageous demands. He expects me to pay him and feed him three times a day and still give him money for cigarettes. *Rha*!”

I bit my tongue to avoid an argument and continued packing provisions – Cornish hen, spinach, potatoes, spaghetti bolognaise and two litres of Ceres juice in the green Pick n Pay bag. I don’t have the energy to fight Nick anymore.

“We’re going to have to stop in King to buy whole wheat bread and fruit. I couldn’t get any at the shops.”

“It’s nice being you, *nhe*? You just make demands, *nje*,” he says shoving his hands deeper into the pockets of his thick leather jacket.

He keeps his hands in his pockets and his head under a beret to hide an expanding bald spot and the clawing arthritic fingers.

“*Kanti,* when were you actually planning on going to see him? What was that about going there more often to see him? Just what are you prepared to do for Thando?”

With Thando's food packed I go to my room to put on my jacket and shoes and to comb my hair. I can hear the *qwash qwash* of his brown suede shoes on the cold tiles as he follows silently behind me. He stands near the door and grabs the pile of letters – mostly bank and cellphone statements – on the bedside table. In the kitchen he rips the envelopes open with a steak knife he takes out of the second drawer. I am surprised he remembers where things are.

I pat my hair and brush fluff off my sleeves and look at myself in the mirror before I leave the room. Chin up, I say to myself and say a silent prayer as I close the door.

He stops in Berlin, not at the greasy BP garage but at the butchery. He returns with two parcels wrapped in wax paper. He unwraps one before starting the car.

"The spicy biltong is for Thando," he says before scooping a handful of shredded biltong into his mouth.

We drive in silence; just the gentle humming of the engine and the rustling of the Daily Dispatch with each page I turn as a sit in the back seat. We stop over again in King William's Town to buy bread, Granny Smith apples, a small tub of margarine and the latest Sports Illustrated – all the while going through a list of things in my head that Thando said at the last visit that he didn't want.

"At least they still maintain the grounds. Other than that, Fort Hare isn't what it used to be," he says while driving past the university. With that his finger goes for the CD button, breaking the silence and unleashing a cacophony of screeching trumpets and horns.

The green lawns of the university take me back to hot January days sitting under the shade of the trees during registration week. The queues seemed to grow longer in the three years we drove down to the university.

"Ah, Jwara! *Ndiyavuy' ukubona*. Come in. I'll get someone to call him," greets the nurse at the gate, grabbing Nick's hand and leading him away. Sour and rancid, the alcohol on his breath hits my nostrils.

I stand in front of the locked gate, my eyes on the notice – "THIS GATE MUST BE LOCKED AT ALL TIMES" – stuck on the face-bricked wall with thick black tape.

A man comes in and leads me to the visitors' room where Thando is already waiting. I clear my throat and flex my fingers before going in.

"You haven't come to see me in four weeks."

There is no hiding my guilt. I slouch in the plastic garden chair and ask him how he is. I bite on my hangnails and wait for his reply. The skin around the cuticles becomes inflamed. I flatten the piece of skin with my thumb and wait for the pain to surge and my ears to flush.

I am not surprised by the words that come out of his mouth; they seem to ooze out of him with limited movement to his face.

"When are you going to get me out of this place? Talk to the doctors here; you just need to tell them I am ready to go and I'll be out of here. I have been in this place for nearly a year now. How do you expect me to get better in a place like this?"

He speaks softly and slowly, like a child who has been roused from sleep. I can almost see him rubbing his eyes with the back of his hands. I blink and lift my eyes to him but instead his hands reach out for one of the navy Tupperware containers on the small wooden table in the centre of the room.

A buxom nurse walks in and hands me a register to sign.

"For our records, and to monitor the progress of our patients. Are you comfortable? Would you like more chairs?"

I reckon she asked out of habit. There are five chairs and only the two of us in the room. Tiny spiders – which have made themselves at home on the legs of the garden chair he is sitting on – crawl on his arms and back.

Insects seem to be the only creatures that thrive in the place. Shiny black ants had scuttled out of cracks on the ground outside the ward and ambled up the legs of my pants as I walked in. The air dries my eyes and nostrils. I reach for my tub of Vaseline and shove blobs of the jelly up my nose.

"Did you bring bananas? You must bring lots of bananas. And maybe peanut butter. The portions of food here are really small."

“Haven’t you had lunch, *kanti*?”

I check the time on my cellphone – 13:42. Lunch would have been served at noon, or 12:30 at the latest.

“Aren’t you listening? I said the portions in this place are small. I keep telling you to leave money for bread and to bring lots of bananas so I can have something to eat after supper. You know we eat supper at 4pm, like prisoners. By six o’clock I am hungry again.”

“You said you didn’t want bananas the last time I came. Remember you said you didn’t like how they felt in your mouth when you chewed them?”

“I know exactly what I said to you! I keep telling you I don’t like fatty food and I don’t want to eat meat. Rastas must be on to something. Have you ever seen a Rasta in this place? I am sick and tired of being shunted between hospitals. Can you imagine nine months, almost ten, in this fucking place?”

Spaghetti hangs from the corners of his mouth as he speaks.

“I’m no schizo. I hear *amawethu* speaking to me. But they don’t speak to me in isiXhosa. They speak some language that sounds like isiZulu. My birth certificate says I was born in East London. Why would they speak to me *ngesiZulu* if I was born where you say I was? Why won’t you tell me the truth about where I was born? They tell me I was born somewhere else. Johannesburg, sometimes Bloemfontein. Tell me now – where was I born? There’s no disputing *amawethu*.”

“You were born at Frere Hospital, East London. I was there, remember.”

He rummages through the plastic bags again, tossing the bag of apples, biltong and packet of sultanas aside. He takes a drumstick from the Tupperware. As if on cue, a face presses on the window.

“T-do, *m’fethu*! Will you leave some meat for us too, T-do?”

“Go away Dini! I said I would give you money for cigarettes. I haven’t forgotten!”

Another comes to the window, and then another, until the window resembles the display window of a furniture shop in town on the day of the derby.

“Will you bring us food too, *mama kaT-do*? When you come to see Thando again, you will bring us something too, *nhe*?”

I avoid their eyes and bite my nails again.

Irritated, he gets up to close the curtain.

“You won’t forget, *nhe,mama kaT-do*?”

Their voices echo in my head. I can feel their eyes boring through the brown floral curtain.

I wonder if he does the same when other families come to visit. I close my eyes tightly to blur the image before it grows bigger in my head. He is too proud. He would never allow himself to do that, I reason with myself. There’s still the old Thando in him left. I tilt my head back and swallow. My thoughts are interrupted by the ruffling of paper and plastic.

“Rather give them the apples. There isn’t enough meat here for everyone. Even the biltong won’t be enough for all of them.”

“They don’t get visitors. I buy cigarettes for them or BB when I have money. Those who work in the kitchen steal bread for us to eat at night. You must leave something.”

His lips glisten against the ashy pallor of his face and arms.

I promise to leave enough money for bread and cigarettes with the nurses and to come back the following week.

“You still don’t want to get me out of this place?”

He leaves before I can answer.

***

I find Nick in the car, sitting in silence.

“Did he eat the biltong? The nurse said he seemed happier this week – chatting and playing cards with the others.”

“Why don’t you go in and find out for yourself?”

“You know his behaviour changes when he sees me. You’ve seen how aggressive he gets. Maybe when he’s better…. The nurse asked for my advice. He wants legal advice – his son was killed in PE. The family is suspicious….”

I turn up the volume of the radio, drowning his voice. I swallow hard, shutting off tears threatening from the corners of my eyes. Men in light blue flannel pants and shirts look on as the car trundles out of the barb-wired yard. One waves absentmindedly as we drive past.

I focus on each instrument – piano, trumpets, saxophones, cymbals and drums – and marvel at the balance of all them going at the same time. If only such perfect harmony could be achieved in every aspect of life.

“Alright then,” he says as the car later nudges into the driveway and I grab the green bag from the back seat. “I’ll be on my way. *Nisale kakuhle*.” I get out and from the corner of my eye I see swirls of dust rise up as he speeds off.

Except the humming of the fridge, the house is silent. Images from the hospital run themselves in my mind as I put the Tupperware containers in the sink. It scares me that my only son doesn’t remember episodes from his life that he has lost sense of who he is.

From the back of my wardrobe I fish out a photo album. I take out photos of Thando as a toddler and put them aside. A smiling baby with dimples, he was a favourite with shop-owners who took pictures of him to advertise specials in their shops. He looked athletic in his Bakers Mini Cricket kit. He looked proud in his academic gown and cap during his graduation.

One by one I put them up, covering the dimples on the fridge. This is what I want to remember of my son.

Floating Feeling

The betrayal of The Knights had been a bitter pill for Sindiswa to swallow but she was determined to let it pass through her system, like a body ridding itself of toxins. She contended with their taunts which rang in her head incessantly, like a scratched CD.

The breathing exercises recommended by the therapist helped, but only during the day when she ran the risk of lashing out at those unlucky enough to be around her. She couldn't help the pangs of guilt whenever she thought back on her outbursts – brought on by someone sneezing in her direction or perhaps offering a piece of bubble gum, or someone not returning a magazine that had been borrowed – but everyone seemed oblivious to them most of the time.

She would inhale deeply while clenching her fists, and then slowly release them, breathing out. She'd imagined the anger, which sometimes threatened to knock her off her feet, travelling like currents from her toes to somewhere deep in her belly, and then to her outstretched fingers. The tips would glow a deep red as if sparks would jump out of them. The relief from the technique was often short lived. It was more to keep the peace and to stop her from being "disruptive", as the therapist had once called her, and a nuisance.

"Alienating the people around you won't help. At one point you are going to have to leave the safety of this shell that you keep retreating into and be a positive force to your colleagues here," the woman had said. But once she was gone the anger would change shape and stalk her again.

It would finally catch up with her and attack at night when the lights and the TV in the communal lounge had been switched off, and only the high pitched croaking of the crickets and the wails of the cats could be heard.

The Knights' words echoed in Sindiswa's mind as she stared at the ceiling. They taunted her over and over. Flushing them out once they had started seemed futile, so she would go back to counting, starting with the one directly above her nose. She would then move anticlockwise until they all appeared to fade into one giant mushroom on the ceiling.

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One, two, three, she started. She lost count before reaching 60, as she usually did. The shapes above her head looked like the mushrooms that sprouted under trees after rain. The sight was eerily comforting, though it would have made her skin crawl a few weeks before. Anything in clusters – from moth eggs on the door to brass thumb tacks arranged in a circle on the notice board – would have brought that urge to purge to her throat. Often she had been overwhelmed by it, but it was now a battle she was determined to win.

It had become easier on such nights to imagine that the dry blots on the ceiling were sheep; sheep whose wool had been so severely sheared that they looked as if a white tight fitting sheet had been thrown over the bones. Ghastly as the image had first seemed, it had grown more palatable with each passing day.

Without turning her head, she reached for the roll of toilet paper on the table next to the bed. She popped a strip into her mouth and wet it through before hurling it at the ceiling. It stuck to the surface with a slight *thwack* which had been magnified by the quiet of the night. It reminded her of happier times with The Knights – Kgomotso, Portia, Morgan and herself – celebrated with the opening of a bottle of "JC Le Rocks".

"No one likes a party pooper," they had said before breaking into *Groover's Prayer* as if she wasn't there. The cork had popped then, sending a wave of pink foam down Kgomotso's chest. The jet had also left red drops on the cream walls. She had forgiven them then. Champagne stains wore off with a little soap and time.

Sindiswa had also sung a verse of the same song over and over in her head. The situation had called for a prayer of preservation as she felt herself unravel.

"*Thixo ndicel' ungandithathi ndisasemncinci/Hay' kumnand' ukuphila/Hay' kumnand' emhlabeni.*"

Her thoughts were interrupted by the switching off of the light. Suddenly the room went dark and she wished she could switch off the voices in her head as easily as they had extinguished the light. She resumed her counting and waited for that floating feeling to come.

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Little burst of happiness with every bite – that was how she had described the high. She never thought that she would have to explain it to anyone. It had seemed so patently obvious. Her happiest moments had always involved the people who mattered to her and usually some kind of confectionery.

Hadn't the most memorable weddings been those where guests couldn't see the people sitting across from them because of the meat towering on the platters between them? Didn't they stay long after the DJ had stopped playing because they couldn't move from where they had collapsed; in the same spot where they had crammed that last piece of *braai* meat and *boerewors*? Few people remembered beyond their sated stomachs and the bottles floating in basins filled with blocks of ice water.

Tucked in a Skechers sneakers box, Sindiswa had kept every wrapper of every chocolate that she had been given at the university, right from the Holey Moleys from her friend Chantal – the first person with whom she had struck a conversation at the snaking queues at registration. She had a good feeling about her the moment she gave her a warm Wilson's Toffee from her shirt pocket.

"The black ones are my favourite. Have one," Chantal had said while battling the sticky toffee in her mouth. "You look like someone who appreciates a good toffee – one of life's pleasures!" Her chipped tooth must have given it away.

Indeed they had enjoyed toffee, noodles on good days, baked beans on toast and bowls of Morvite or Weetbix on cold nights when they had to sit up the whole night to study.

The coolness of Mint Crisp in her mouth still reminded her of Q. The faint taste of mint on his tongue and teeth despite never eating sweets stayed with her long after they had kissed for the first time. It contrasted with the warmth and smoothness of butter she imagined his skin would feel like, and his hair which smelled of cocoa butter. She had always imagined how it would feel to touch it and how he slept at night with his spiky locks. It wasn't long before she was tickled by his hair on her bare back, and confirmed that the rest of his lithe body smelled and tasted like the buttery goodness of Eet-Sum-Mors.

"This is more than a crush. I want to lose my virginity to you," he had said. What reasons did she have not to believe someone so beautiful?

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The room had been cold. The smell of bleach had emphasised the sterility of the whiteness of the walls, floor and the sheets. Rough on the skin, the blue blankets had added little warmth to the room illuminated by the single light bulb. Her eyes had felt dry, and each time she blinked it'd sounded as if a page of a great book was being turned. Her cheeks had felt as if they had been glued to the pillow was soaked with tears. Though uncomfortable, lying on her stomach had allowed her to hold on to the bars of the headboard. She'd held on tightly and bit her tongue to keep the room from spinning. She'd wished she had learnt the trick much earlier in life.

Years earlier she had had no memory of how she got home. She could tell by the plush yellow pillows around her that she had somehow ended up in her mother's bed. Like she always did when she was ill, her mother had prepared orange flavoured Lucozade for her. She had burst into tears when she saw her dusty feet on her mother's white duvet cover.

"Don't cry," her mother had said, reaching out for tissues on the antique dressing table.

"I wanted to get off the merry-go-round but it was too fast, and I was too dizzy. They were all laughing at me."

Her neighbour, Bra Mnce, had found her in the deserted playground, crouched on the ground, pink bits of polony plastered on her T-shirt like semi-precious jewellery, and her face and legs covered in dust. The tears had left clear paths on her cheeks.

It wasn't Bra Mnce's pimply face staring at an older Sindiswa this time, holding on to the bars of the cold and rough bed. It took her several seconds to recognise Musa's tall frame towering over her from the side of the bed because his face, appeared to stretch and contort in front of her.

"They told me you've been here for at least two hours now, that you're not feeling well," Musa said. "Do you want me to pray for you, Miss Sikwebu?"

"I didn't want anyone to see me like this," she said before the tears came again. "I don't want anyone seeing me like this. I don't want them to think I did this on purpose."

The prayer had only reminded her how low she had sunk. Minutes before Musa arrived she'd repeated the verse over and over: "*Thixo ndicel' ungandithathi ndisasemncinci/Hay' kumnand' ukuphila/Hay' kumnand' emhlabeni.*"

The significance of the song was different this time. It was more than a *Groover's Prayer*. It was plea to God to let her live.

It had seemed innocent, like all acts of betrayal. She had walked into the communal office looking forward to a productive day to make up for the lacklustre weekend. She had found Kgomotso, Portia and Morgan congregated around the round table, eating muffins and drinking coffee. There had always been room for her at the table since they "colonised" it. Others in the office gave it a wide berth. She could tell by the doodles on the table where each of The Knights sat. The stains on the cream surface told her what they'd had for breakfast or lunch.

"This is not exactly my ideal remedy for a hangover, but hey, beggars can't be choosers, right? Especially when they're still waiting for payday," Morgan had said to the amusement of The Knights.

Other than the crunchy texture of the muffins, nothing had appeared amiss.

"What got into you this weekend? You've never baked for us before," Sindiswa had asked Kgomotso.

"The muffin mix has been in my cupboard for a while. I didn't drink this weekend so I had a lot of time on my hands," he had replied. "I ate most of them yesterday, but the last batch got burned a little."

"Well, how shall I put this without hurting your feelings? *Hayi kabi nhe*? But please don't quit your day job!"

The Knights had broken into laughter at that. They had gotten on with the work they had to do, leaving her alone to deal with the crossed signals her mind and body seemed to be exchanging. While thoughts rushed in her mind as if someone had rewound and fast-forwarded an old video, time seemed to be taking too long;so much that it felt like some parts of her life had gone missing, leaving wide gaps.

The gulfs had started to show in the office as well as she withdrew inside her shell and grew wary of The Knights and those around her.

“Does she really expect us to think that she didn’t know what was in those muffins? That she has never heard of space muffins?” they’d whispered. “She takes herself too seriously. No one likes a party pooper,” some said.

After that Monday one seat remained vacant on the round table as the taste of the things she had loved grew sour. Sindiswa refused to put anything in her mouth that she had not prepared herself. Her favourite dishes lost their flavour and her body wilted.

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The stranger’s arrival – marked by a loud clang and a flood of light – has shattered the tranquillity of the ward. But it has also dulled the voices in Sindiswa’s head.

The sister stands tentatively at the door.

“I don’t imagine you came here to check on me, so do what you came to do and get out of here,” Sindiswa mumbles.

“Do you have something to say? If you do, then let me hear it,” is the sister’s stern reply.

A stench hits her nostrils and threatens to knock her out as she peeks at the door. She holds on to the bars on the side of her bed to still the stirring in her gut and the swirling in her head.

“*Uxolo bethuna*. I didn’t mean to wake you,” the voice says. The woman puts her canvas bag on the floor and pulls a white handkerchief from her breast. Unblemished, it stands out from her shabby vagabond look and the wild nest that is her hair.

A bandage sprouts like a giant mushroom on the side of her head. The collar and sleeves of her corduroy jacket glisten with grease. She wipes her forehead and blows her nose before shoving the handkerchief back in her bosom. She shuffles to the only vacant bed in the cubicle, right across Sindiswa’s.

“*Ha-a*! *Ungakh’ ulinge! Usincede* please, not while you look and smell like that!” the sister hollers as the woman makes her way to the white sheets. “You can put your bag in the

locker so long, but those clothes will have to go. I don't know how any self-respecting woman could stink the way you do," says the sister. She leaves the light on. "She's coming back, so there's no point switching off the light."

The woman lowers her eyes, takes the towel and Lifebuoy from the sister and shuffles out of the ward to the bathroom. The sister covers her nose and mouth with the pink terry cloth gown with the name of the hospital.

"Take your time in the shower. You can wash your hair in the morning, but please use this as a *doek*. We don't want you leaving your grease on the pillow," she says giving her a torn pyjama top.

Sindiswa's eyes hurt under the bright light. She pulls the blankets over her head and wills that illusive floating feeling to come - anything to take away the new woman's stare and her foul presence.

She bites her tongue and swallows hard, pushing the contents of her stomach down her throat.

What happened to her? How low could she have sunk to look and smell the way she does, she wonders. The woman tiptoes into the room and hangs her wet handkerchief on the side of the locker. Her nails are neat and a healthy shade of pink.

"Sorry to wake you, *sisi*. Do you have Vaseline?" She dabs some on her lips and a little in her nostrils. "For the draught," she says before getting into the covers.

With a loud clang from the outside, the room goes dark again. Sindiswa listens to the woman's breathing until she can sync it with her own.

In the morning the woman introduces herself as Cwenga. She mulls over the irony of the woman's name as they tuck into their oats and peanut butter sandwiches. Cwenga - clear, still, pristine, like a pool of water.

She holds back from asking what had brought her into the hospital in her former state in the middle of the night. It feels as if she is talking to a different woman.

“I’ve never believed what I’ve been told about hospitals. You know people go on about cats on the roof at night. Some said the cats walk into the wards to take away the spirits of old people and babies.”

“I guess one gets used to hospitals. I spent a lot of time in them when I was young.”

“I slept like a log, for the first time in months, until I was woken up by your crying and kicking in the night.”

“Really?”

“I got the feeling you were very angry. You kept banging your fists on the sheets. I didn’t want to wake you. You obviously have things you need to deal with.”

“I guess that’s why I’m here.”

“You need to do more. More of a physical act, to help with what your mind is going through.”

She chews on Cwenga’s words that morning. *Umqombothi* at home seems the most unlikely choice; she doesn’t have to appease the ancestors. Her father had helped her with that earlier in the year when he’d presided over the ceremony.

“You need to pay homage not only to God, but also *kwabaphantsi*. They have looked after you since we buried your umbilical cord, here,” he had said pointing to the sacred place.

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The fog in her head clears as she stands under the stream of water in the dark cubicle of the shower. The smell of the sea comes to her before the image of her mother in black leggings and an oversized T-shirt.

“You’re too young for this,” her mother had said filling the bottles with salt water.

On the second week of January every year until she finished school, the family would trek to the beach.

“Why can’t we go on New Year’s Day, like everyone else?” Sindiswa would ask.

“Like you say, everyone goes at that time. And they do all sorts of things. Some throw bottles and plastic bags in the water. We go later to give the sea time and space to clean itself – to vomit all that filth again,” her mother had said.

Though her ritual was confined to the beach, her parents’ would start when they got home. They would gulp cups of sea water before regurgitating what they had consumed that day.

“You need to help your body clean itself,” her father would say. “Especially after all that junk we eat at Christmas.”

Her mother would help her peel off her lime and navy swimming costume, exposing her sores and all the places where the mosquitoes and fleas had feasted.

She would then sit down on the sand with Sindiswa and they would wait for the next big wave to wash over them.

“Remember to close your eyes and to hold your breath. Get ready, it’s coming!” her mother would shout over the wind and the crashing of the waves.

The wave would come, threatening to suck them back into the belly of the ocean. They would both laugh while waiting for the next wave.

“Did you feel it, Mama? Did you feel the sand shift beneath us?”

The water has gone cold, bringing her back to the wet concrete under her feet. It is clear to her what she needs to do. God has answered her prayer and it is now up to her to heed the call of the waves and to clear her body and mind of their poison.

Pilgrim

“I wonder if he’ll actually do it. I wouldn’t hold my breath if I were you.”

It didn’t surprise me that my mother was sceptical. This was Zorro we were talking about.

“If he came right now and said the lawn was green I’d quickly run outside to check,” Mama had once said. “I don’t want him to break your heart, *sana lwam,* that’s all.”

And many times he had broken it. Mama had other reasons not to trust anything that came out of his mouth.

Once when I was seven he promised to take me to the cinema to see *The Lion King*. I waited the whole day. I refused to eat or to go play outside because I had worn my favourite white jeans and pink Bubblegummers for the occasion.

“You can’t still be angry,” he said when he came the following weekend. I was standing defiantly at the door with my arms folded, not wanting him to come in. “I am sorry. Please forgive me? I have something better than a film to show you.” He had my favourite blue candy floss and we drove to the airport to see airplanes landing and taking off.

“One day I’ll buy you a ticket and we’ll fly up to Cape Town for a holiday,” he said as I sucked on the candy floss until it got sticky and hard and cut the roof of my mouth. “You’ll love it. You get sweets and that juice with a straw that you like on the aeroplane. I bet you didn’t know that, did you?”

That was my life with Zorro. We were always plotting and making plans. And I learnt that plans could change at any time. Hope for the best but expect the worst, that way you’re never disappointed, Mama used to say. I understood that when I got older.

“If he comes, the world must be coming to an end. This could be it,” said Mama pulling the blankets over her head to drown out her giggles. “Maybe I should make peace with my maker. *Ndiginy’ uYesu nam*.”

Unlike Mama, I had reason to believe that he would come.

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The phone rings just as I fill the kettle for my morning Java.

“We’re still on,*nhe*?” It is more a statement than a question. It doesn’t sound like the Zorro of my childhood. I can hear the urgency in his voice, which he quells with a nervous chuckle. “I’ll be there in five minutes. Get ready.”

This is different from our dates when I was a child. I can sense from his voice that this is something he needs to do. “It’s something I should have done a long time ago. I’m not getting any younger!” he had said the first time I asked.

It is also different from our date a few weeks before when he first told me about his plans. At the end of that night I felt that we had both crossed a threshold in our relationship.

“I know what you’re thinking. You don’t expect someone like me to believe in miracles. Not after all the things that I’ve done,” he had said, filling his glass with wine.

I was stunned when he had called to set up a meeting. I hadn’t seen him in three months and never before had our conversations taken such as a serious turn.

I was about to put up my hand to order a cordial when he poured for me a glass from his bottle. He slid the glass of the purplish red liquid across the table.

“I know you drink alcohol or have at least dabbled in it. Don’t tell me you’ve never heard of a Screaming Orgasm and Sex on the Beach! I’m not that old,” he said smiling and turning his head sideways like an owl. “It’s not as if I’m going to tell your mother.”

Mama would have not approved. I nearly choked and spilled the wine all over my white shirt without it ever touching my lips at the thought of her trademark scowl. “*Ag*, go on! I won’t tell your mother.” He chuckled and winked at me.

I dropped my guard a little.

“I guess you won’t mind if I order a double vodka and lime after this?” I shot back, winking at him and tentatively taking a sip. “I never thought I’d see the day.”

“What?”

“You are actually drinking red wine. You know for a long time I thought one needed a few drops of Amstel on the meat to *braai* it? My friends thought I was an alcoholic because of you!”

“I don’t drink as much as I used to. My doctor says a glass of red wine and a beer now and then won’t hurt.”

“Is it just about your health? You were talking about miracles not so long ago.”

“Have I been a bad father? Maybe I shouldn’t even ask considering the way I treated you and your mother.”

“You were OK. I guess you’re OK, even now. I didn't know any better, did I?”

His gaze dropped and I regretted the way it came out almost immediately.

“That came out wrong… What I meant was…”

“You don’t have to explain. I know. A lot has happened that has made me look back at some of the things I’ve done.”

“Whoa! What happened? Has talk of the world coming to an end got to you too?”

“No! I don’t believe in that nonsense. I don’t know if all that has happened recently could be called miraculous. I just don’t know what to call it, but it made me look at the world differently…”

It had started with dreams about his father Leonard, directing him towards a path that led to a forest, he said.

“I didn’t want to go because the tall trees in the forest were known to house owls. Their hooting used to frighten us when we were children. Not even the bravest of men would go into the forest after dark.”

The dreams stopped the day he picked up *ikrwala* on the road. The young man’s cellphone must have slipped out of his pocket because he found it on the seat of the car.

“Not one to pry, I agonised over going through the contacts in the cellphone. In the end I decided I had no choice. I had waited hours for the phone to ring, but nothing happened.”

When he eventually called “Mama *wam*” listed on the phone, a young man answered.

“Something kept coming up. I’m glad I didn’t blacklist the phone,” the young man had sighed and thanked him.

They arranged to meet the following day but the young man called to say he won’t be able to meet him as an unexpected tragedy had befallen his family.

“I don’t mind. I can drop it at your house.”

The house was a pink RDP house on the other side of the township. “I recognised the young man by the cap and jacket that he was wearing the day before. He didn’t have the ochre on his face so I could see his face clearly for the first time, he recalled.

“There was dignity I had not seen in a long time in the way that he carried himself. Even in the heat he wouldn’t take the jacket off. That set him apart from the others who were also moving sofas and beds out of the house.”

"'*Bhuti* passed away this morning. He sat up for the first time in weeks to tell me that he had dreamed of meeting someone he felt he knew from long ago. He went back to sleep and didn’t wake up,'" the young man had told Zorro.

“He showed me a picture of his brother that they wished to have published on the funeral notices page in the newspaper. He had the same nose and the same brown eyes as my father. His curly eyebrows, which looked like millipedes, joined at the centre, right above the nose. They reminded me of someone I knew a long time ago.”

He took a sip from his glass of wine and stared at the wall behind me. He blinked a few times before continuing.

"'Is this your brother? Where are your parents? I’d like to see them, to offer my condolences,'" he had asked the young man.

"'It’s always been us and our mother.'"

He led Zorro to a room where a bigger photo of the young man who had died hung on the wall. Two women sat on the floor. One spoke. ‘We hope God will be with our sister through this difficult period.’

“I recognised her unibrow as she lifted her eyes from the bare mattress on which she sat.”

‘*Mntwana wamaHlubi*! What is this ghost you have brought in front of me?’ she had screamed. ‘Why now? Where were you all these years I suffered?’

“The men outside came into the room then. I couldn’t stand the sight of her quivering body as she wept. I stole a glance at the photo on the wall and left. I looked for his photo in the paper every day but I never saw it.

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I am left with little time for coffee and choosing the right handbag. But on remembering how long the services took when I was a child and my pangs of hunger while waiting anxiously for the priest to conclude his sermon, choosing a matching handbag doesn’t seem so important.

“I thought you said you were ready?” he said. His eyes peered over the round glasses on his nose. He stood at the door, his arms akimbo. “I can’t be late on my first day.”

I grab my bag and a cardigan on my way out. I feel underdressed in my skirt and sandals at the sight of him. He has put a lot of effort to his outfit – taking care to polish his Crockett & Jones until everything he walks past is reflected on the nose of his shoes.

“Did you bring a Bible?” he asks as we reverse out of the driveway.

“I’ve never had one. I thought you would have bought one for your big day,” I tease.

He smiles, showing his big teeth yellowed by years of John Player Specials.

“I’ll buy two Bibles, an English one and a Xhosa one too, and a hymn book next week when I get paid,” he says looking apologetically at me. “Thanks for agreeing to come. It shouldn’t take longer than two hours.”

He switches off the radio as we get closer to the church.

“Didn’t you go to church in Cape Town? You know your grandfather used to preach when he lived in Langa?”

I smile and shake my head. "*Ja*, you told me about *Tam'khulu*. And Dabs never lets us forget."

"*Sisi* is right, you know. I see what she meant all this time. It's not right for a family to forget where they come from. Were you baptised?"

"*Hayi bo*, Tata! You're asking me? I doubt."

"You're right. I don't think you were. But don't worry. We will change all of that this year," he says pulling hard at the handbrake. "You didn't even notice that I didn't light up in the car. I haven't smoked in months."

There are more cars parked outside than inside the church yard. Mothers with babies strapped on their back congregate outside, perching delicately on heels so high they look like they are standing on stilts.

"We can park outside. I don't want problems getting out in case more cars park inside." He leaves the car outside the house of an old friend. "We used to play rugby together. I'm sure he won't mind."

He strides to the gate, reminding me of when I used to run after him while trying to cross the street in town. The droning of the cars revving their engines would frighten me. I was convinced they would take off any minute and I could imagine the sound of my crushing bones as they drove over my body lying flat on the ground. Even then he didn't hold my hand.

"Don't look at me! Look at the robots and the cars around you. One day you will have to do this on your own. Hurry!" he would shout over the din of last-Saturday-of-the-month traffic as we rushed to get to Allied Bank before 11am.

"It shouldn't take more than two hours, right? You're not going anywhere today?" he says picking at imaginary scabs on his lips. "What's two hours in a day? We should be out of here by 11am. I can still change into my Bermuda shorts, read the Sunday papers and still have time for a beer," he winks as we walk to the door.

“Who are you trying to convince, me or you?” I murmur under my breath. He is too far ahead to have heard. Even now I can’t catch up. He is already at the door the moment I lift up my eyes. A middle aged usher, in a tweed jacket too hot for the January heat, eagerly receives him.

“Please show us where to sit. We are new. I am here with my daughter,” he turns and points at me. The women behind me stare at us and then look at each other before walking past the usher to the front.

I want to run back to the car and not come out until after the service. He has exposed us. “There’s nothing they love more at church than to name and shame,” Mama had warned. “Why do you think they insist that you have to go to right in front to tithe?”

He stands at the door, waving at me to come forward.

I had hoped to remain anonymous, invisible even, among the women in red long sleeved blouses and black skirts and the men in black suits and black ties.

“Welcome brother. Welcome daughter. You’re most welcome. I’ll show you where to sit,” the usher says too enthusiastically for my liking, as if welcoming the exiled prodigal son home.

I am slightly offended at being labelled new at the church, even though my last visit was in the year I turned nine. Then it was *iigush’ ezigusheni, iibokw’ ezibokweni*. Now men and women sit on the pews next to each other. The man in the pew in front of ours shoos his infant daughter to sleep in between hymns.

The unsmiling faces on the stained glass windows still frighten me as they did when I was a child. They reminded me of the opening sequence of *Ingqumbo Yeminyanya* – *The Wrath of the Ancestors* – and the horror of Religious Studies in primary school.

“There’s a big fire in hell for those who didn’t go to church on Sunday. Satan will *braai* them one by one, picking at them with his fork. He won’t stop until their skin peels off and their bones burn into ash,” Miss Lutshaba would prophesy every Monday. It didn’t seem fair that my neighbours who went to church on Saturday would also be *braaied*.

I pray that the sermon will not be about damnation and the frying and turning of sinners in the great griddle deep in the belly of the earth.

“It’s hot,” he whispers wiping sweat streaming down his temples but dares not take off his jacket. “And I don’t even have a *babalaza*.” His shirt collar is stuck to his neck. He fans his large face with a handkerchief. His eyes follow me around. He gets up when I do and sits only when I have already settled on the wooden bench.

“Look, even Byron is here,” he whispers. “We used to drink together. What does he know about church?” he chuckles, looking relieved for the first time.

The overzealous usher returns to give him a hymn covered in brown paper and a clear plastic cover, a piece of paper and a pen. He presses the paper on the hymn book and writes his name in clear capital letters and gives it to me. The usher looks on, his big eyes boring in on me as my hand shifts and starts on the white paper.

He holds the hymnbook in his hands, putting it down on the pew when the congregation arises and their voices meld with that of the choir. The woman to my right takes the book from the pew and turns to the psalm sung by the congregation. She smiles reassuringly and gives it to him. His voice booms out in a deep, melodious and buzzing bass.

My eyes pop open at hearing his name through the static of the microphone, right after the death notices and funerals.

“I thought my eyes were deceiving me, but no…” the tall man in front announces, his eyes searching the faces in the flock.

“It gives me great pleasure to welcome this man to this hallowed temple. *Kaloku u*Sir Nazo, as we used to call him, was one of my favourites – having taught me English and being my rugby coach in Standard 8. Sir Zolile Nazo is here with his daughter, Zodwa. Please welcome them *bantu bakaThixo*. Sir Nazo, please stand up.”

“Shine!” vibrates the walls of the church as they wave, hands in the air. A woman’s shrill ululation cuts through the congregation’s jubilation and hallelujahs.

“I could count the men in the choir in one hand. It’s embarrassing, really. Next week, I tell you… I’m going to sign up,” he says as we drive out on to the road leading home.

“Ha! You don’t even know the songs! You think you can do better?”

“*Ewe, tyhini!*” he says breaking into guttural laughter. “You don’t know I can sing? Many have said I sound just like my father. The hymns are coming back to me now… I am not a hopeless case, you know. I grew up in the church. I told you your grandfather used to preach,” he says as we drive into the shopping centre.

“That I have to see! I just need to get a few things. You can get the papers. I’ll meet you back here in about 30 minutes.”

I find him skimming through the Sunday broadsheets and tabloids a while later. We drive silently, bobbing our heads to the melodies of the “Sunday soul sounds” on the radio.

“That wasn’t so bad. Look, you’re at home and it’s not even one o’clock. I’ll pick up you up same time next week,” he says as I collect my plastic bags from the back seat.

I give him the Gospel Glory paper bag. I don’t wait for him to open it.

“So you don’t have to suffer next week. Next Sunday, you’re on your way.”

Iron Sole

Nezisa is awake before Ali has revved his old E20 out of his driveway. Her thoughts about the neatly folded letter, hidden in the exercise book in her handbag, weigh so heavily on her body that she can't get up from her bed-on-bricks.

She had penned it on her bed, overwhelmed by foreboding. The feelings would creep up on her on the way home. She'd spat on the window of the taxi at the sight of a black cat on the pavement, to the annoyance of the taxi driver. Earlier in the week she'd scolded Thembelani – something she had not done since he was a young child – for mimicking an owl that had perched on the street light outside their yard.

"Why didn't you throw stones and chase it away?"

"*Hayi bo, Makazi*! Just the other day you said you were over your silly superstitions. You said you knew better."

Nezisa had collected big clods from the garden to take care of the ominous owl herself. She'd stood below the street lamp with its flamingo neck, ready to attack but the bird had flown away. She'd sprinkled a packet of Cerebos salt around the yard but the hairs at the back of her neck still wouldn't rest, so she took to her exercise book. She had completed her first letter to tell him how much she appreciated his help and how she hoped he would again find the happiness he had enjoyed with his kids.

A frantic call from Florence eventually forces her out of bed, and the exercise book with the letter out of her handbag. For the first time in months she packs only her wallet and work clothes.

***

He'd smiled at her across the table, revealing long rabbit teeth.

"See? That wasn't so hard. You're going to sign cheques if you carry on like this!"

"Me? Never! You're just saying…."

"*Sizobona*!" His long and skinny arms had moved stiffly about in a jig but he looked as if he were trying to stay afloat. "Did you ever think you'd be doing this?"

She'd looked at the mess of papers on the dining room table.

"No…"

"Well, there! You can go make tea for us. Flo left some biscuits out for me. I believe we have something to celebrate, don't you?" His hand had come to rest on his right knee.

A smile had been cemented on her face as she packed the stubby pencil, loose pages and exercise book into the transparent sleeve. She had put the packet inside a plastic bag, the logo of which had long faded with repeated folding, before filling the hollow inside of her glossy purple patent leather handbag.

"Mr Eric," she'd said, putting her bag on the table and stretching her arms before her.

"No!" he'd shaken his head. "Not until I've had my tea."

"Okay." She'd pretended to be offended.

He'd reminded her of her nephew Thembelani. The lanky boy would refuse to get out of bed on cold days, not wanting to go to school. He, too, would fold his arms across his chest. Oh how she'd wished she could stay cross at him with his drooping lip and full cheeks!

"You can't make me!" he would cry. But she'd known exactly how to change his mind. The threat of the black kettle on the back of his neck always sent him bolting out of the door. Not that he thought his aunt would ever hurt him. The freeze outside would have him dashing back inside. The black kettle would be back on the Primus stove and its contents in the round orange basin on the floor.

"Ok, I'll go today. But you can't make me go if it's cold again tomorrow," he would mumble, the foam of the red Lifebuoy bar whitening his face.

The water in the sink had gone cold. Orange grease floated on top. The boy next door was already playing his loud music, which sounded like the screeching of blades at a slaughterhouse. Florence would be home soon. Running the cold water that came out of

the hot water tap, she had filled the kettle. Florence, or Madam as she preferred being called, wouldn't have approved.

"There's no point filling the kettle if you're making just one cup of tea, Nezisa. Not when I'm the only one paying for everything here."

While waiting for the water to boil, Nezisa had set the cup on a tray and taken out the brown sugar basin instead of the container with the little white pills. She'd run a finger on the white letters of the green, blue and gold box. The words "Cedarberg Mountains" and "completely herbal" had flowed out of her tongue in a way unlike before. It amazed her that the letter "C" could take on different shapes in her mouth – that she almost had to bite her tongue when saying "Cedarberg", but had to open her mouth to say "completely". Her face had swollen with pride at her recognition of the differences. She had smiled at her reflection on the stainless steel kettle.

"I won't tell Florence if you don't," she'd said, throwing teaspoons of sugar inside the cup. "But I figured this called for real sugar, not medicine. Pity I can't join you. I still have to tidy the kitchen."

"And the biscuits?" he'd shouted. "Afternoon tea alone is no fun, you know!" he'd added, but she'd already gone down the stairs to the kitchen

"Madam didn't leave any biscuits. I'll make it up to you tomorrow. I promise." Her voice had drifted up from the kitchen. It stunned her how quickly she had taken to shouting when speaking to Eric from the rooms on the lower floor. It was inconceivable in her home.

***

Thembelani could always tell the time in the morning by listening to Nezisa's movements around the house. His aunt always wore thick socks and was always careful not to bump into furniture but there were things that could not be avoided; like the striking of a match and the *juku-juku* of the Primus stove and the whiff of paraffin.

"It's still early. Go back to sleep," she would say.

But he would pull the blankets up to his chin, close his eyes and listen. Lying in while Nezisa bustled about boiling water for washing and tea and their morning porridge seemed selfish, yet he knew that his aunt would never allow him to help.

“This kitchen may be too big for one, but it’s not big enough for two,” she would chase him away.

Thembelani is surprised to hear the patter of his aunt’s feet next door before the roar of Ali’s taxi – which leaves at 05:30 without fail.

“I need to be at work early today,” she says though he has not opened his mouth. “But it doesn’t mean you have to be up. You can have bread and tea before you go to school. Porridge will be too cold by the time you leave.”

Nezisa doesn’t at first recognise the heart beating in her throat as her own as she rushes to the train station, eager to beat Mamosia’s regulars. The vendor is at her spot every morning, tending to the oil babbling inside the sooty pot.

“*Mehl’ amadala*! I was starting to think my food wasn’t good enough for you anymore.” She stretches the dough between her fingers before dropping balls into the hot cauldron.

“*Soze*! I’ve been busy. You know, *mos*.”

Oil splatters on her yellow and red dotted apron, leaving tiny dark stains. “I never learn. Just yesterday it got me here.” A red blister on her cheek marks the spot. “Almost hit my eye. One of these days I tell you….” Streaks of dough cake her cuticles and her knuckles.

“Shame. *Askies,* Mamosia.”

“*Hayi*! But can I do, *vele*? We are looking for members for the society if you’d like to join. We meet on Sundays after church.”

“We’ll talk. I really need to rush.”

The classified pages of an old newspaper drain the excess oil from the *vetkoek* before Mamosia packs them in a clear sandwich bag.

“Don’t!”

Mamosia tilts her head to look at her. A ridge forms between her thin pencil-drawn eyebrows.

"*Askies*, Ma. I didn't mean to shout. Please don't close the plastic. I want them crispy when I get to work."

In the taxi the aroma from her bag gnaws a hole in her stomach – where the sour sorghum porridge she had cooked for Thembelani since he was a child – would have been. The woman next to her hands the fare over to Nezisa as soon as she settles on the patched seats, and dozes off. It is not long before sonorous snores come out of her gaping mouth.

***

"I've never been so happy to see you! Oh, Nezi, you're a lifesaver!" Florence screams from the balcony as Nezisa waits for the electric gate to open.

"Good morning, Madam," is all she manages as she watches Florence run down the stairs to her car, already parked outside the garage.

"I overslept. Will you fix Eric's breakfast? I didn't have time. He likes his eggs boiled, and sometimes a little fruit. I should knock off early today to prepare supper."

"She left. Just like that. Not even a little biscuit to break the fast," Eric declares gloomily without taking his eyes off the mute TV screen. His fingers whirl around his knee ball – an action Nezisa has come to associate with changes in his mood.

Last night's dishes fill both sinks and greet Nezisa as she walks into the kitchen. She searches the cupboard for his favourite mug, the one with the dead cockroach printed inside. It had frightened her so much the first time she saw it that she had almost dropped it.

"I'd have been shattered, you know. My students gave me that mug," he had said, holding it in his hands as one would a chick that had fallen from its nest. "Ag, I miss the little brats!"

She fishes out the prized mug among the plates and pots in the sink. Its inside is yellow with years of coffee and tea stains. She has made a mental note to soak it in a bleach solution to restore it to its former glory. While waiting for the water to boil she scrubs the mug with a

scourer and a dab of Handy Andy. She rinses it with warm water until she can't feel the slimy grease on her fingers.

"Are you making tea? Will you also fix a little something, you know, to break the fast? Please, *maan*!" he shouts from the lounge.

"Patience, Mr Eric! Patience…"

"It's just that …"

"I know, I know. Good things come to those who wait… you taught me that, remember?"

With the tea and *vetkoek* assembled on the tray she goes up the stairs. Though she's managed to keep the excitement off her face, her hands betray her.

"Why do I get the feeling breakfast is going to be extraordinary? I smell something I haven't had in ages!" he says, smacking his lips. He turns to watch her as she puts the tray on the dining room table and strokes his stomach.

"What did I tell you about patience?"

She pulls him up from the sofa. He hooks his elbow in hers and they amble to the dining table where their spread awaits. She takes care not to rush him. He winces from the strain of pulling his right leg off the ground.

"What do we have here?" His eyes widen at the tray in front of him. "You were right about good things…" he says, licking his lips once again while Nezisa draws a chair for him.

"You once mentioned you liked *atchar*. Sorry I couldn't get any."

"Now what did I do to deserve this?"

He breaks one *vetkoek* ball in half before scraping the soft and chewy inside. His fingers and lips glisten. He stuffs the second *vetkoek* with a stumpy slice of French polony.

"Do you know what my kids used to call this?"

His guffaws fill the room. She joins in the laughter before she has heard the answer.

"Those brats! They used to kill me with laughter." She swallows and waits for his answer.

“A Zulu burger! Can you believe the nerve of those brats? Huh?” He slaps his lap repeatedly, leaving dark smudges on his khaki chinos. “A Zulu burger! *Thiza*! I don’t know how they came up with that!”

“Do you miss them? Do you miss teaching, I mean?”

“I guess a part of me still does…. Why am I the only one eating?”

“Go on. I live with my nephew so I eat *vetkoek* quite often. I bought them for you, to thank you.”

“It’s no trouble, really. I didn’t know I still had it. You still have a chance to make something of yourself, you know.”

“You’ve made me excited about learning again. I wish my mother hadn’t given up on me so easily. You know they said I was too old to be in the same class with the younger children? They said I would teach them bad things.”

They sit in silence. She watches Eric relish every mouthful.

“You know you sometimes remind me of my nephew, Thembelani. He eats quietly, like you.” She rips a *vetkoek* in half and moulds the inside into a round ball which she pops into her mouth. “When he was younger I’d ask him to show me all the things that he was learning at school. His teachers would often say he was very clever, that he grasped things very quickly.”

“Is that how you learnt? You could read and write a little when we started.”

“That was really to remind myself. I felt I was forgetting things with each year that I was at home.”

She finishes her *vetkoek* and wipes her mouth with the back of her hand.

“Your tea is getting cold.”

“I don’t see the sugar basin.”

“It’s back to your little pills again. Madam already thinks I take sugar home. She says she drinks coffee at work. ”

“I guess *amagwinya* and polony and sweet tea for breakfast was asking for a little too much, *nhe*?”

“Let me get started on the dishes. I’m sure there’s quite a lot for me to do today.”

“Oh, I almost forgot.” He takes out a yellow piece of paper from his pocket. “Your to-do list from Florence. Do you want me to go through it with you?”

“I think I’ll manage. If I have any problems I’ll come to you.”

“You know me… I’m always here. I’m not going anywhere.”

“I know.” She clears the dishes and heads for the kitchen.

“Nezisa? Before you go…”

“Yes? Yes, Mr Eric.”

“Thank you. The *vetkoek* were a real treat. Thank you for reminding me of life beyond these walls.”

She smiles and turns away from him.

***

“I don’t know what’s wrong with him.” Florence throws her hands in the air. “He keeps telling me to go.”

Nezisa has never seen Florence without her hair. Madam appears to have shrunk overnight, making her look like a lollipop, she muses. Her hair reminds Nezisa of a half-eaten mealie cob. She isn’t sure where to focus. Eric looks like a snail hiding in its shell on the king-sized bed, while Florence paces in her pantyhose, her black wig on the antique dressing table.

“What should I do with him, Nezisa? Tell me!”

“What happened?”

“He didn’t say much at supper. And he slept earlier than usual.”

“Where does it hurt, Mr Eric?”

“Oh, please! He’s no child, though that has never stopped him from behaving like one.”

“Yes, Florence, I’m not a child. I’m your husband. And I told you to go. Leave me now.”

Florence attends to her wig. Nezisa slips out of the room feeling she has seen far more than she is supposed to.

***

It is lunch time when Eric agrees to come up to eat. His breath is hot and fetid. “Don’t bother opening the curtains or cleaning here. I want to sleep again.”

At the sight of Eric’s legs sticking out of his boxer shirts she feels for the second time that she’s been exposed to something she shouldn’t have. Yet a curious inclination to look overcomes her as Eric sits up to put on his black orthopaedic shoe and brace. With his shrivelled right leg, his body looks unbalanced, like the lopsided arms of a scale.

“You can stop staring.” The depth of his voice startles her and she shifts her gaze like someone who’s been caught in a lie. “There’s nothing ghoulish about me. I was also born with ten fingers and ten toes. Isn’t that what you women pray for when you bring life into the world?”

“Will you make it up on your own? I’ll see to lunch.”

“I usually manage, even when you’re not here. So why wouldn’t I today?”

His acerbic tone confuses Nezisa. Bitterly she reckons that’s how things ought to be between servant and master. We are not friends after all, she reminds herself. As she dishes lunch – pap, spinach and boiled ox tongue – she can’t shake off the feeling that something has shifted in his soul.

A single plate on the table waits for him when he goes up to eat.

“Call if you need anything.”

“Sit. Bring your plate so we can eat.”

Only the clinking of steel is heard between them.

“My mood has nothing to do with you, by the way.”

“Madam said you were quiet when she got home.”

“Yesterday got me thinking, that’s all. And some of the thoughts aren’t good.”

He cuts the tongue into small cubes, which he pushes around his plate. A long time passes before they speak.

“Why don’t you go back to teaching? You say you miss your students… I can sense it too.”

“It’s been too long now, too long since I’ve been out of it.”

“You’re only as old as you feel. At least that’s what I’ve heard.”

“It doesn’t matter. Times have changed too, even the kids are not the same.”

“That doesn’t mean you would enjoy it less.”

“The students had nothing to do with why I left. I know people say that kids can be cruel, but the adults can be worse.”

“Mr Eric?”

“It happened a few years ago. Florence was away, and I invited a few friends – we taught together at the same school. We sat in the garage – Jeff, Ben, Thabo and I. The guys downed their beer and whisky. But you know me, I’m a simple guy. I stuck with my Klippies.”

She forgets about the food before her once he starts with his story.

“It was the usual. School. Soccer. The guys, of course, complained endlessly about their wives.” He chuckles and pops a piece of tongue in his mouth.

“’You’ve never been with any woman other than that brute?’ They burst out laughing. I told them I was perfectly happy with my wife. You know *mos*, rather the devil you know than the devil you don’t.”

“We drank more than we ate, in this same garage,” he points down to stress the proximity of the garage. “It seemed the manly thing, and maybe the practical thing to do. I didn’t want Flo to come back to stained carpets reeking of *imbiza*!”

“I finished a straight on my own, and naturally, *ndatipa*. I fell asleep right there in the garage – on one of the sofas.”

He brings his hand to his mouth, and at this Nezisa fetches a tall glass of water. He sips, and for a few seconds stares blankly ahead of him.

“And you know what the bastards did? They took off my leg and left it outside. Then they left, locking me inside the garage. It must have been 4am when I finally woke up. I could sense the minute I opened my eyes that something was amiss. It was too quiet, and I felt lighter, but not in a good way.”

She drinks from his glass of water, bringing his attention back to her again.

“I looked around the room and I wanted to cry. A grown man, yes. But I tell you, I wanted to cry. I had to get out of the garage to get to the bathroom inside the house. I dropped to the floor and got on my knees. I crawled, on my knees. Like a baby, I crawled. I hadn’t even made it to the door when my bowels gave in. I shat myself, right there. I could point to you now, the exact spot. Florence found me crying. A wet, filthy, stinking mess."

“Shame, Mr Eric. Those people weren’t your friends!”

“So now you see? It wasn’t the kids who made me leave. No. I felt I couldn’t trust them anymore. I applied at other schools, but they weren’t obligated in those days to hire a retard teacher!”

“Don’t call yourself that! I won’t allow you. You taught me, a grown woman. My own mother gave up on me, but not you!”

“That’s how I ended up here, where you found me with Florence. She’s spoilt me. She still makes sure I’ve bathed and dressed by time she leaves for work. She’s endeavoured to make me comfortable. It’s endearing, but at times it reminds me that I’m special.”

“You are special, Mr Eric.”

“You’re a kind woman, Nezisa.”

“I’m just appalled that someone could be that cruel to you. To you, of all people!”

“Yesterday you made me remember all these things. You thought kids were cruel! Grown men are the worst!” His eyes grow misty. “The kids called me Robocop. I didn’t mind because they were open about it. It made me feel normal. Those kids made me feel human.”

He wipes his moist eyes with the back of his hand.

“Being educated isn’t everything, you know. There are things they don’t teach you at school. Always remember that. I dreamt of being a ballroom dancer when I was young. But they told me I had two left feet – they were right of course,” he chuckles. “So I asked them what I could do if I couldn’t dance. They shook their heads and said: ‘The streets are for people like you to beg.’ I decided then I would never let anyone decide my fate…. Please, take me back. I’m so tired.”

No amount of cajoling lifts his mood as he withdraws more into his own head, preferring to bury himself under the blankets with the curtains in the room drawn. Nezisa catches a whiff of sweet and sour in his breath when she tries to entice him out of bed for lunch.

“Do you mind coming a little earlier to work, Nezi? At least he says a few words to you. I can’t even get him up to have breakfast.”

She makes more trips to Mamosia before leaving for work. He eats the *vetkoek*, the French polony and the smoked *snoek* she brings but with less relish. The food does little to cheer him up. She feels him slipping away with each day that passes. They roll into weeks. It becomes more difficult to pry him out of the darkness of his mood and he doesn’t allow her to draw the curtains to let the light in. Florence has become more dependent on her.

“He responds better to you. He says nothing when I speak to him. He just stares into nothing.”

***

Nothing will come of it; she consoles herself on the way to work. The signs meant nothing; just silly superstitions as Thembelani called them. Yet she is filled with regret at not doing anything with the letter. Maybe, just maybe, it will lift his spirit to know how much he is appreciated. There will be time to give it to him.

Nezisa is struck by Florence's bloodshot eyes as she sits alone at the dining table.

"Madam, what happened?"

"I thought he was coming out of his gloom, you know. He spoke – he actually said a few words and I was so sure that he was coming back. He told me about a dream he had had in the afternoon. 'You know how silly we dream when sleeping during the day' he said. He said he was sitting with us – yes, you were in the dream – under the shade of a big tree. He said we were eating something I'd never heard of… he said we were eating Zulu burgers. Do you know them?"

Florence straightens the cloth covering the table. She doesn't wait for me to answer.

"We had supper, and he said it was the best he ever had. He turned to face the window when I woke. 'Open the curtains will you, Flo?' he said as I got up to shower. And that was that. I found him still staring at the window."

A Show of Hands

Though she knew that nothing good could ever come out of Thandi's mouth, Doreen had expected more courtesy, given the time and the distance. Brisk and gruff, the older woman's voice had cut through the waves and grated her ears.

"*Kanti wena ubuya nini*? Seems you've forgotten you have a home."

"Are you well, Aunt Thandi?" She had regretted the enthusiasm in her voice as soon as she said it.

"If I say I'm not, what are you are going to do? You weren't a doctor the last time I checked."

It had hit her then that "mellowing with age" didn't apply to everyone, and she felt herself being sucked in again. She wanted to kick herself for allowing herself to feel small. Though she was older, Thandi's tone still cut deep.

Thandi was known in her old neighbourhood as Rhamba; a name which according to legend, she had given herself. Though it sparked terror in those who feared all creatures reptilian, Thandi had preferred it to the more respectful "Auntie" or "Mama" by which the younger generation had to address their elders.

"Auntie is that woman who cleans your house, and Mama is the woman who pays her," she would bark. Doreen had put down to vanity Aunt Thandi's refusal to be thus addressed. No one in her mother's circle seemed to want to grow old. "*Kugug' othandayo*," they would chirp among themselves.

It had seemed impossible when she was a child, but it dawned on her then that old age had caught up not only with Thandi, but with her mother as well.

"I can't tell you how she is because she won't let me inside the house. I started worrying after noticing that she wasn't even collecting letters from her letterbox."

She had known then that she had to go.

The house was in a state worse than she had imagined it might be. Blackjacks tugged at her knees and cobwebs covered the slot of the letterbox.

But the biggest shock lay beyond the front door of house Number 92.

***

Doreen held her breath as her mother fished her hands out from beneath her blankets. Monica reached for Doreen's left hand and enfolded it in hers. Monica's hands were red and warm. Three calluses at the base of her fingers stuck out like anthills. The rest of the palms were smooth. They looked as if they had been stretched and then ironed out; removing whatever creases and wrinkles would have been brought on by old age.

Doreen could see the older woman's eyes widen as Monica brought her hands to her younger face. As she touched Doreen's face, feeling its reality, Monica stared into her eyes for a long time, as if she were studying them. Her old eyes seemed frozen in time, as though she had forgotten to blink. Doreen felt her eyes welling up. She had forgotten the warmth of Monica's fingers.

"*Ag*, don't start. I'm not dead yet," chuckled Monica, breaking the spell. Her voice had grown rough and coarse. She spoke as if she wanted to spit something out. Doreen sniffled again, tilted her head back and swallowed hard.

"That's not what I was thinking."

"What day is it anyway? I haven't heard the municipal truck driving past in a long time. It used to wake me up every Wednesday."

"It's Friday. You missed the big royal wedding – William and Kate. I tried to wake you. I thought you'd enjoy it."

"I hope Kate, whoever her name, didn't spoil it by snivelling all over the place," she said propping up a pillow behind her. "I can't remember the last time I was at a wedding."

It was nearly impossible to tell the time of the day inside Monica's room. The heavy brown curtains were always drawn and a lamp on the mahogany chest of drawers burnt day and night. Big and round gold-plated glasses sat next to a small stack of Reader's Digest

magazines – the top one dated April 1995 – on a butler's tray next to her bed. The magazines competed for space with a box of Hylife white tissues, a tall yellow plastic tumbler and packets of pills.

"Now that I missed the big wedding, what other entertainment do you have lined up?"

"I don't know. You always said TV was a waste of time."

"A glass of bubbly would be nice."

Doreen's eyes bulged and her hand went for the yellow tumbler on the side of the bed. "You can't be seri…"

"Oh lighten up! You were always frigid, even when you were a child." She broke into a fit of laughter.

"Oh Mother, you can't say things like that."

"I thought you would lighten up as you got older."

Doreen sipped from the tumbler.

"Can you blame me, with a mother like you?"

"Can't you forget for five minutes?"

Doreen didn't reply, but avoided looking directly at her mother. Instead, she focused on her own hands, specifically her nails. She fought the urge to bring her nails to her mouth. She hadn't done it since arriving at her mother's house a week ago. They had grown, and with her natural white tips they looked French manicured.

Monica looked at her daughter and then looked at her own nails. They were short and neat and a light shade of pink. "Do you have Cutex? I can't remember the last time I painted my nails."

"I'll check my bag. I'll be back."

Her old room with the three quarter beds had changed little since the time she'd left. It felt as if the furniture, like her mother, had shrunk. She bumped into both beds and the oak

dressing table. She felt like a clumsy giant that had been catapulted into some kind of *Smallville* where she towered over everything.

We stop growing at a certain age. I couldn't have grown taller, she thought. She never understood why her mother had insisted on two beds for her room when she was an only child and they hardly had visitors because of her mother's "anti-social" tendencies.

"I don't like people. They come into your space, rearrange your things and your house and then they forget that they have to leave," she would say.

She opened the dresser and took out a brown leather bag. She rummaged through sets of keys, a diary, and wallet before taking out an old green cosmetic bag. It had a big nail clipper, a scrunchie for her hair, mascara, lipstick, a small tub of Vaseline and two bottles of nail polish in different shades of pink. She stared at the two bottles but in the end decided to take both to her mother's room. It hadn't escaped her how similar to her mother she had evolved yet she pushed the thought out of her mind.

She found Monica lying on her back with her eyes closed. The old woman opened them but didn't move as Doreen held out the bottles to her.

"Sorry, I only have pink – well, different shades – but pink nonetheless. Choose."

"It doesn't matter. Pick one for me."

Though she thought her mother would prefer the less girly "Pink Nude", she opted for the one named "English Rose" – in the spirit of the royal wedding, she imagined.

Monica turned to her side and placed both hands on the edge of her bed. Doreen pulled out sheets of tissue from the box next to the bed and spread them on the bed, before leaning in front of her mother. She gently lifted her hands and laid them on the tissue. She rolled the bottle slowly between her palms.

She had always secretly envied her mother's long fingers and shapely nails. They consistently looked a healthy pink compared to her bluish grey tone and dark brown cuticles. Monica would sit in the sun to manicure them on her days off, while sipping from a mug of dry white wine.

“What I drink and when I drink it is nobody’s business. I know a few people who could do with a dash of vodka or gin in their orange juice. Too uptight I tell you!”

She would cut, trim, file, buff and then paint them until they glistened in the afternoon sun. It was her Saturday afternoon ritual – just after taking out the last load of washing and hanging it to dry. It would end late at night after her scented bubble bath when she would dab Vaseline on her hands and then pull socks or gloves on them.

As a teenager Doreen was often overwhelmed and irritated by her mother’s vanity. “I don’t see why I have to wear my worries on my face,” she would declare proudly.

She was constantly surprised by the amount of time she dedicated to her face and body every day. “Not everything in life is about you, or how you look,” she burst out once when she was 14. She was angry that her mother had bought the same pants that she’d wanted. She had kept the Edgars Club magazine in her bedroom and Monica had promised to buy them.

“I just knew the minute I saw them that they would look better on me. Be grateful I saved you the embarrassment. Imagine, an amoeba like you,” she cackled, checking herself in the mirror in the tight hipster fit pants, her hands on her hips.

“I can fit in the same clothes I did before I had you,” Monica often reminded Doreen. “The same clothes you have on won’t fit this time next year.”

Doreen had been the first of her friends to wear a bra when she was in Standard 5. She hid her weight in oversized T-shirts and long cycling pants and never left the house unless she really needed to. She hated the surly remarks of Monica’s friends and colleagues whenever they met.

“She must take after her father. She looks nothing like you, Mon.”

Their glee would be cut short by her standard response.

“Thank goodness for small mercies.”

“She has none of your charm either.”

“I hope it’s just a phase; teenage hormones. I hope I wasn’t so grumpy when I was her age,” was all Monica would say in her defence.

She always hoped she would say more. She hoped she would tell them that she had been at the top of her class since she was in primary school and how she locked herself in the bathroom and cried when her Standard 7 report came with a C symbol for Afrikaans.

“She got a dictionary and would study it for hours until she performed better than the Afrikaans speaking children in her class,” she had hoped her mother would say.

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“I used to think you had the most beautiful hands I had ever seen. Remember how I used to collect cheese rind and pretend I had long nails?”

“You were so cute then.”

“I wanted to look like you, you know.”

“Then you grew up and you started to hate me. You turned out better than me, actually.”

Doreen smiled. She knelt on the floor in front of her mother’s bed and rolled the bottle between her palms before twisting it open. The sharp smell of the nail polish filled the room. She was careful not to smudge.

“Your hands have always reminded me of your father, especially your nails.”

Doreen kept quiet, formulating a response in her head. But she knew that her emotions would fail her, reducing her to the wounded teenager of old.

“Why? Why now?”

“What do you mean ‘why now’?”

“I figured you never wanted to talk about him so I stopped asking.”

“We’re both older now. I guess we can both handle it.”

“I’m not sure I want to know anymore.”

“I know I’ve never said anything about him. I didn’t like thinking about him. That doesn’t mean I didn’t think about him. I thought about him every time I saw your hands.” She paused and looked at her daughter’s eyes.

“Oh, he wouldn’t let me forget! His hands were soft – like he had never worked a day in his life. They weren’t as small as yours though. He used Blue Butter on his hands, you know. He’d dab a little on his lips and then some on his hands. But it seemed I could never get mine as soft as his, no matter what I tried.”

“What was his name and what . . . did he do with these big soft hands of his?”

“This was exactly what I wanted to avoid. I didn’t want you to think you should expect some big reveal. It was never meant to be some confessional.”

“Is he still alive? Does he know about me?”

“I sent him a photo of you after you were born. I included an address but he never replied and the letter was not sent back.”

“Is that why you always hated me?”

“I never hated you. How could I hate my own flesh and blood?”

“I always had the feeling you didn’t like me much, even though I was your daughter.”

“What makes you say that?”

“You hardly had anything nice to say to me. You were always telling me I should be dead.”

***

It was one of those few occasions when Monica had volunteered to help Doreen with her hair. It was rough and unyielding to combs and relaxers. While sitting on a sofa in front of the TV Monica would ply the scalp with Blue Magic hair food, bought especially for uncontrollable hair from Ghanaian hairdressers, and comb it while it was still damp. She would then divide it into neat rows from front to back and weave it into neat and tight cornrows.

There would be little conversation, apart from the odd instruction – Look up! Stop fidgeting! Turn your head and look that way! Doreen would wait for the torture to end while biting her nails. She would bring her hands close to her face before picking on one to attack.

“Let me see your hands,” Monica had said. “Are they always this cold?”

“Well… *Ja*…”

“With hands so cold and nails that colour, you should be dead.”

***

“You never had anything nice to say to me. No matter what I did. It sort of confirmed that you never wanted me anyway, though I was your only child.”

“It was not a nice thing to say, I realise that now. In a way I was jealous. You were talented, clever and ambitious. You didn’t have to rely on your looks alone to get what you wanted in life. The thing about your hands… Well, that was directed at your father. I expended so much energy trying to forget him but I couldn’t. He was around, all the time. I just had to look at your hands and be reminded of him.”

“Ok, let’s get on with the manicure, before I start crying.” Doreen gently pulled Monica’s old hands and gently placed them on her lap.

“Ooh, some things never change!” they both laughed.

Doreen was surprised by the easiness in which they had laughed together. She didn’t remember her and Monica doing it before. It felt a little strange but not entirely uncomfortable, like her first taste of red wine. It had tasted bitter at first but she had grown to like the taste that had remained on her tongue and the sourness on the side of her mouth. She had known then that she would try it again. “I know you were never one for visitors… ”

“What now?”

“As I was saying, before I was rudely interrupted… I know you don’t like visitors, but I think we should invite Rhamba over for lunch. I wouldn’t have come were it not for her, you know. I think she’s been worried about you.”

“I thought you didn’t like her?”

“She still scares me to be honest. But I think I could handle her with you here. I’m dying to hear what you have to say about ageing now.”

Monica took Doreen’s hands in hers and kissed them.

“Well, here!” Doreen said, taking her cellphone out of her pocket. “You call her. I’m not ready for her yet!”

“I’m glad she got you to come. Maybe it’s good that she still scares you!”

They laughed and Doreen was glad.

Bitten

They call it *kwanyam' ayipheli kuphel' amaziny' endoda* because no one comes out of Johannesburg unscathed. I had no illusions about the trappings of the city when I first arrived but I was also determined to come out with all my teeth intact.

Though not one to reveal the chinks in her armour, my mother prayed and fasted an entire week before I left.

"Oh, *Thixo onamandla*! May she never slip out of your all-seeing eye. Lead her not into temptation," she bellowed every night before getting into bed.

I felt the rush for a buck the moment I stepped out of the cavernous bus terminal. It was feral. It was brash. And I was soon to find out that it spared no one. All were fair game. It accosted me as I neared the women on yellow buckets. They sat on the yellow sunflower oil containers with their skirts riding up, exposing dimpled thighs and a web of varicose veins. They brandished combs and broken mirrors. They were oblivious to the stagnant and murky water next to them. They leapt as I got closer.

"Come, *sisi*. Give us a chance to make you look beautiful," they called between brutal assaults of pink watermelon flavoured Chappies. "Let us plait your hair."

I didn't stop but I cast my eyes on the photos of different hairstyles pasted on their cardboard boxes. I didn't stop the second, the third or fourth time I walked past. If they were disappointed, they never showed it. They would egg me on each time I passed, and I would imagine them licking their lips and salivating at the sight of my thick virgin Afro.

"Joburg is so different from what you're used to in PE *naseMonti*, nhe? You're going to have to learn to walk faster here! *Kuyasheshwa*!" Mom'ncinci had said. She was already on the other side of the street by the time I looked up. She tapped her right foot anxiously as I waited for the taxis to slow down. They had little patience for pedestrians, even those on zebra crossings.

Life had been pleasant at The Dale, where Mom'ncinci rented a townhouse for her daughters Lee and Penny. It was an opportunity to get to know my sisters better. They called me Nerine, the name that our father Teddy had given me because I had taken after

my mother, and inherited her dark complexion and unruly black hair. It was perfect. Teddy's daughters together, finally, under one roof and looking out for each other *eGoli*.

I should have known that something that beautiful couldn't last, not in this city.

"*Ndicel' iroom, sisi*. I need it by the end of the month. One of Lee's cousins is moving to Joburg. Surely you understand?" Mom'ncinci had announced. Her voice sounded cold even from a thousand kilometres away in Bhisho. Lee and Penny had just shrugged their shoulders when I mentioned that I would be moving out.

"I don't know what you expected from that Brooke! Did you think she was going to treat you the same as her own children? Did you honestly think she cared that you too were Theodore's daughter?" I wasn't entirely surprised by my mother's reaction but I expected more sympathy. She had hated that I would be living in Mom'ncinci's house yet I had no other family in Joburg.

Mom'ncinci would forever be the woman who cheated her out of *umendo,* and maybe even love. She had also denied her the satisfaction of graduating at the top of her class. She made me feel that I had chosen my father Teddyover her by moving to Joburg.

"First it was Theodore going to Joburg to raise money for *lobola*, now you!" she had cried, clapping her hands in disbelief. "I guess I shouldn't expect you to come back."

"How about Cape Town, *ke*? It's just as far if getting away from here, all this, is what you really want." She had even resorted to blackmail but I could not be moved. "You're my only child. I will surely die a slow, painful death if you go."

I turned to the women on the yellow buckets after I found myself homeless. But it wasn't a new hairstyle that I needed, though it would have lifted my mood.

"May I leave my bag with you? I'll come fetch it in a few hours." I asked after a greeting met with single nods.

"Straight back, R50. Also do dread, R100. Nice dread if you want," replied one tugging my hair, the other two eyeing my suitcase

“Next time. Now,” I said pointing at the ground. “Please look,” I said pointing at my eyes. “After my bag,” pointing at the suitcase at my feet. “I go work. Back one o’clock.”

“Straight back. Nice cornrow. Cheap.”

Dejected, I pulled the suitcase and headed for the taxi rank. There was no avoiding the stares and the gossip that were sure to follow at work. There was no hiding in a newsroom.

“What does she take us for? Did she think we were just going to keep her things when she has never given us business?” I heard their cackles as I left.

***

“I started off with a VW Beetle when I got my licence at 19. I moved to BMW matchboxes. Now I say the older, the better,” he said. “Vintage, of course, always looks better with a cherrie on the passenger seat.”

I ignored the comment. The two men polishing the cars grinned, both exposing expansive fish gaps and purplish gums.

“I can take you for a spin if you like, just around the block. It’s such a beautiful day.” He spun like the game show hosts of old in their sequined suits. “You haven’t lived until you’ve cruised in one of these babies.”

“Deadlines,” I replied tapping my wrist. “Maybe some other time.” I didn’t want to burn any bridges. “You must have a good relationship with your sources. They must think of only you when they have a cracking story to tell,” my boss had said.

“We must meet again. Not just for work.” He took out a business card from his shirt pocket. My eyes fell on BOSS embroidered in navy on his chest. His name was Khumo, and true to his name, wealth had never before looked so refined.

We met again a few days after the interview. I had left my notebook behind. He had mastered the art of wooing. He was attentive and considerate. He paid for the spread that was our lunch, though he hardly touched his plate. I devoured the prawns and stopped short of polishing off his oysters. It was tastier than Christmas. I had expected the pinch but I thought it would come much later.

“You must never be too shy to ask. There is so much a man like me can do for you.” With my mouth full and a sated belly all I could do was nod.

Though embarrassed about the state of my flat, I invited him for coffee. It seemed the grown up thing to do. His visits became frequent. He didn’t seem to mind the damp on the walls and the musty smell.

He was slowly sucking me in. I gave in on a cold evening in July. I had become jaded with the routine of our meetings yet I would await the call to announce his arrival every Thursday.

“I won’t hear it. I want to, ok? So let me.” Never been before had it been said with such fervour that I couldn’t find the words to say no. I shook my head but he grabbed my hand and pressed the notes on my palm. His hands were firm and felt dry as an envelope.

I hadn’t meant to sound clingy when I asked: “Is that all we are about?”

I had harboured no illusions about our relationship but the exchange had reduced it to a mere transaction.

“I insist. Buy something nice.” I felt uneasy following his eyes around the room.

He went for his pants, which were hanging neatly over the back of the chair. His shirt had ended up on the floor with its hollow arms outstretched.

He had put on his underwear, green briefs with yellow polka dots; Calvin Klein emblazoned in thick letters on the waist.

“You coughed up a lot of money for such ugly underwear,” I laughed burying my face with one of the pillows on his side of the bed.

His face broke into a smile. “*Ja*, hey? My wife bought these overseas. She travels quite a lot, you know, marketing stuff.”

“She… well, both of you, have lousy taste.” The mention of his wife no longer dug a pit in my belly.

I buried my head under the duvet and fished out the notes he had given me earlier. They were crumpled in a hard jagged lump. I put them on the table next to the bed.

“My little soldiers are always wasted on you. They always end up on the floor and then they’re flushed down the toilet,” he said disappearing into the bathroom.

He returned with a wad of toilet paper in which to bury the condom lying prostrate on the floor.

Goose pimples spread on my naked thighs and arms as my feet touch the tiled floor. I rummaged for my bra and panties through the heap of clothes on the floor like the scavengers I saw at a dump site near Diepkloof.

My nipples grew hard and itchy with the cold and felt as if they were about to burst. I put the bra on. My face flushed at the sight of it. The cups could barely contain my breasts and the underwire poked, making them look squashed. The effect would have been sexy had it not seemed so forced.

I was aware of his eyes following my movements so I kept mine on the floor. I went through the pile again looking for a vest and pants to cover my nakedness. As he put on his pants I looked at his portly stomach, which gave him a roundish shape despite his firm arms. Conscious of my eyes on him, he sucked it in.

“Don’t laugh. I haven’t been to the gym in a while. With the new baby and the business, I can’t seem to find the time… Leave that, come here.”

“No... I’m cold.”

He pulled me up and kissed me on the forehead.

“I meant what I said. I want you to get something nice. I know you can take care of yourself. Allow me to treat you a little.”

I took the money from the side table and put in my bra. It brought a smile to his face and soothed the lines on his face. I liked to imagine that he smiled more when he was with me. He lifted me up to the bed and covered me with his jacket and sat on the edge as he tied his shoelaces.

“What do you do here? I mean when you’re alone and not at work?”

“I’m at work most of the time. There’s a lot to keep me busy here, to keep me out of trouble.”

“What exactly? You don’t even have a TV. I could get you one, you know. And DSTV, it wouldn’t be any trouble. It must get lonely.”

“Not really. I’m used to it. Please don’t. I have more than enough to keep me busy. As you can see,I have shelves of books. Work and reading keep me busy.”

I was surprised by his sudden interest in my life. He had never asked me about what I did outside work. Such details had never seemed important. And I never asked him things about his life. The little I knew about him he shared voluntarily, out of respect for me, he said.

“I believe in being open. That should show you how much you mean to me.”

He never avoided his wife’s phone calls when he was with me. He respected her too I guess. They were happy as far as I knew. He never missed birthdays and anniversaries, he said, and he had witnessed all his three daughters’ milestones. There were no irreconcilable differences

“I want a son. A little Khumo. We’ll call him Junior.”

I didn’t count the money until after he had left. R1000 in R200 notes.

I spent my lunch hour going from shop to shop, looking for something to buy. It felt strange having money to spend on things I didn’t urgently need like bread, toothpaste and toilet paper. The things that caught my eye, such as some colour changing scented pebbles, seemed frivolous and overpriced. I returned to the office empty handed and pushed the money to the back of my mind.

He called when I was on the bus home.

“Baby, what have you done to me? Why do I miss you so much? I even miss the birthmark on your shoulder. I want to kiss it again. I know it’s been two days but it feels like months!”

I didn’t know what to say so I kept quiet while trying to register the urgency in his voice. Something about it made me uncomfortable. I wanted to hang up but I couldn’t bring

myself to be rude to him. He had called me and regardless of what had happened between us he was still my elder.

“Baby, are you still there? I’m not far from your place. Can I come?”

“I’m not at home.”

“I know. I’ll wait.”

There was little warmth in his kisses. They were wet and feverish, his tongue bruising and intrusive. His hands were clumsy like those of a schoolboy, all over my body. It will be over soon, I told myself.

He suddenly stopped. He closed his eyes and clenched his fists. His chest heaved as he controlled his breathing.

“I was expecting something more… sensual, more flattering.” The underwire on my bra had popped out again, like a cockroach that appears only when there are visitors.

“Huh?”

“I thought we had agreed?” His nostrils flared and his chest heaved as he paced his breathing. “I thought we agreed that you would get something nice? Don’t you appreciate the things I do for you?”

The glow of his eyes and his shaking hands brought mist to my eyes and lump hardness to my throat.

“I couldn’t decide what to get. So many beautiful things, you know. I didn’t want to disappoint you.” I was surprised by how easily the lie came.

“I like sheer, soft fabrics. Like the stuff at La Senza.”

A flurry of apologetic SMSes followed. I ignored them. I worried about being a participant in the charade. I arrived at work early the next day to call him and to avoid prying ears.

“I may have been a little forceful. I understand that. What we have means a lot to me,” he said without giving me a chance to say what I had wanted.

“You seem to forget you have a wife.”

“That doesn’t mean I can’t love you too.”

“Yes. Right…”

“I can still come to see you, right?”

“No. That’s not such a good idea.”

“You really mean it, hey? Fine, I’ll back off, but only because I respect you. Call me if you ever need anything. Anything. You must never feel shy because there’s nothing I wouldn’t do for you.”

“Thank you. I’ll keep that in mind.”

I still couldn’t bring myself to say no to him but I had no intention to call. I stood under the shower when I got home until the water ran cold. I prayed with each drop that went down the drain that I would forget about him and all that had attracted me to him.

***

It wasn’t until I saw her that I felt I could put the thought of him behind me.

I had walked past her at first, like so many people had probably done that morning. I had no time for a forgotten old woman. There were so many of them in Joburg. They all looked the same. They wore the same pained expression, black Tomy plimsoles and a tartan blanket on their shoulders. I had to submit my CV at the municipal offices in Braamfontein.

An altercation with a security guard and a burly shopkeeper stopped me in my tracks when I walked past The Curry Muncher in Park Station again that morning.

“What’s this old woman’s problem? I’ve been telling her to move from here. This is not some faraway village,” the security guard had snapped. He kept his right hand firmly on his baton. He paced proudly, like a peacock.

“Tell this woman she can’t sit here the whole day. She’s chasing away my customers. *Aikona Mama. Hamba*,” barked the shopkeeper, wiping sweat from his glistening face with a serviette.

“And I have been telling you, and your equally rude boss, that I am waiting for my daughter.”

She sat on a crate in front of the pie and *samoosa* shop clutching a Bible and a hymn book. Her small reading glasses and wrinkled hands reminded me of my grandmother. She never got a chance to wear her *mbhaco* to my graduation. She died just before I wrote my final exams.

Yho, uMaGogo uhectic, I remember thinking. She had stood her ground and had done it without shouting and stooping to their level. Judging by the pained expression on her face when I first walked by, I had expected her to cower at the two men who circled her like vultures. They had the impatience of those who had been chewed and spat out by the city.

“She won’t bother you again. I am here now, Mama. We can go.” I grabbed her striped bag and with her dragging her small suitcase, we walked out of the dark underbelly of the long distance terminal. “Don’t worry Makhulu. I don’t live far. We’ll be there in no time.” For a short woman in her 70s she was surprisingly quick. She only stopped briefly to marvel at the big Universal Church on Plein Street and clutched my hand as we crossed to join Eloff Street. Wasn’t she warned that in this city you trusted no one?

“*iGoli* has changed so much since the last time I was here. It’s so fast! Taxi drivers just zoom past. They won’t even wait for an old woman to cross the street. Is it necessary for all the shops to have big speakers? And this *doof doof* music!”

She didn’t ask where we were going and only smiled when we were greeted by my smelly All Stars and pyjamas at the door of my tiny matchbox. My face would have turned tomato red if I weren’t so dark.

“*Hayi*, young people are the same everywhere you go!”

“Please excuse the mess. I didn’t have enough time to tidy up this morning.” I directed her to the sofa next to window as I picked up my duvet from the floor and spread it on my sagging mattress.

While I boiled water for tea, Makhulu Nomaka told me she had gotten off a City to City bus at 6am from King Williams Town.

“I called Thobeka many times but a voice on the phone kept telling me to leave a message. I ran out of airtime and couldn’t call anymore.”

I was embarrassed I couldn’t offer her a proper breakfast after her long trip. My fridge was empty, except for a half a loaf of brown bread and a bottle of apricot jam. We had to settle for a jam session just like my varsity days.

“You don’t mind black tea, *nhe* Makhulu? I am still waiting for payment for an article I wrote for a newspaper overseas. I hope the jam in the bread will make up for the sugar. I ran out yesterday.”

“You know jam was a treat when I was a child. We would have it at Christmas,” and at that moment she sounded just like my grandmother when she spoke of the anticipation of marmalade jam on warm bread and the feast that would start in the morning right after watching the dance of the early Christmas morning sun.

She closed her eyes and said a short prayer before we tucked into our jam sandwiches. I felt better after she said that. She seemed genuinely happy. I was relieved she hadn’t expected more or better. I had felt so exposed by the empty fridge and the skeletal flat with its damp walls. It saddened me to think that I couldn’t yet go home with bales of “can’t-get” linen, shoes and bags, all the way from *eRhawutini*. But I also felt better about what I had even if it wasn’t much.

“God bless you, *mzukulwana*. I don’t know what would have happened to me had you not come. Do you know a prison called Sun City? Thobeka said she worked there.”

She hummed *Ndikhokele O Yehova* – a hymn I had not heard since my grandmother died - as we walked to the Bree Street taxi rank to catch a taxi to Sun City.

Her dog-eared Gideon bible stared back at me from my bed when I returned to my flat. She had held on so tightly to it when I first noticed her that I ran my finger down the spine and the smooth delicate pages.

On the inside cover she had written:

"*Mzukulwana*… Your kindness will not go unnoticed. Your prayers will be answered. It is just a matter of time. Trust in Him and He will not forsake you. You looked after me the best way you knew how. I will never forget that and neither will God."

I smiled for the first time in months. Johannesburg had not chewed and spat me out. My teeth were still intact.

MA CREATIVE WRITING PORTFOLIO

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

MASTER OF ARTS (CREATIVE WRITING)

of

RHODES UNIVERSITY

by

NAMHLA TSHISELA

November 2011

February 13, 2011

Robert Berold

My choice of books for this exercise will not come as a surprise to anyone who has had to hear about my former life. Most have been written by journalists. I was fascinated to read what other people who have done the work that I had done had written.

People in my former life have an insatiable, if not morbid, curiosity about other people. They want to know what they had for supper and what they think about before they go to sleep. I like to think that for writers should have the same curiosity to appeal to as many readers as they can.

Journalists also hope to persuade their readers to look at things that they may not have given a second thought and regard them in another light, and maybe inspire the odd "a ha!" moment, like Oprah, while they are at it.

Someday, I also hope to be able to do what David Cohen has done in *People who have Stolen from Me*. Cohen elevates writing about crime in the post-apartheid South Africa by including ordinary but interesting real-life characters and generous doses of humour.

I could sense Cohen's fascination about his subjects. It shows in the "trivial" detail that he adds to his writing; such as a person's "size eleven boot". Writing as an outsider who has been invited in, he is, as he writes, "not immune to the extraordinary events unfolding on a daily basis". And these are the kind of things that I like reading about, and will hopefully write.

In *The Good Women of China* Xinran writes compassionately without being sentimental about the different women that she encountered through her radio show. They are not one-dimensional and beautifully illustrate the complexity of their lives and the society they live in. I also got to know their fears and desires.

Much has been written about life in South African townships. Books such as Postcards from Soweto by Mokone Molete have used humour to show another light to life in the townships under apartheid. In Native Nostalgia Jacob Dlamini uses his own experiences to add more about what has been written about townships by trying to explain why residents relate the way they do to their communities.

Both Ivan Vladislavic and Ayi Kwei Armah in *The Restless Supermarket* and *The Beautyful Ones are Not Yet Born* show that fiction does not have to be divorced from the history of a place. Both books depict the end of an era. The Restless Supermarket depicts Hillbrow in a manner that is completely

different to how I remember it, while The Beautyful Ones are Not Yet Born tells of another side of Ghana's independence that we do not often hear about it.

All these books appeal to my fascination of how people "on the other side" live and what can be drawn from their experiences, thoughts, fears, insecurities and desires.

February 20, 2011

Robert Berold

Like any good Mosotho woman worth her *seanamarena* Frans Pule has not given up on her son bringing home a *makoti* and one day filling her home with the chatter and laughter of grandchildren.

She has cajoled, begged and even threatened her only son, Thabiso, to bring a woman – any woman - home.

"I used to be very fussy about the type of woman I wanted for him. I would be happy even if he came home with a one-eyed tickey line with a penchant for *mbamba* (cheap homebrewed alcohol)."

At 41, Thabiso is a late bloomer. It is difficult to understand his misfortune, if one may call it that, with women. Though short, he is lean with a body unlike most men his age. The words "yum" and "dark chocolate" often come up when the township women "kospotong" survey his goods.

"It's a pity none of us have ever had a taste," they would chorus and then break out in fits of laughter.

"I just don't know what is wrong with this boy. God didn't give him all of his good looks so he could spend his days with me in this tiny matchbox. It's a shame to let his father's good genes go to waste," complains the old woman.

At this Thabiso just rolls his eyes and smiles at his mother. His son's reluctance has made her more determined to smooth the path for Thabiso when he eventually "stops being a seshumane".

Frans travels 300km every day by bus between Siyabuswa and Pretoria in Gauteng. She "hires out" tickets to her fellow commuters and makes a tidy profit from her ingenious scheme.

"His friends already have three, four children and have taken on wives. When his turn comes I should have saved enough money for him to pay lobola for his bride. The little extra money I get from selling sweets and chips has helped me pay off my bedroom suite and will help renovate my house."

Unlike Pule, I am not at all surprised that his son has not made any efforts to fly out of the nest. By the township's standards Frans's house is comfortable and well kept. As Frans keeps pointing out, it is the only house "on the street with roses and lilies".

Though Thabiso could be regarded as a "snag" – a sensitive new age guy because he cleans, cooks and irons his own shirts, being a mummy's boy stains him. Frans's interference in his affairs would make most women change their minds.

By the time Pule arrives from her exhausting trips from Pretoria, Frans would have already prepared "isishebo" and vegetables for their evening meal.

Having raised someone close to being the model son, it is no wonder then that Frans feels somehow cheated and would not wish the same fate on her son.

"You must choose wisely in life. I could have married any men I wanted... I was 19 with full breasts, a small waist and beautiful hips. Frans's father was a good man but he didn't leave us with much."

Travelling between two provinces every day would seem a small price to pay to see her wishes being fulfilled.

She has stamped her authority on the bus, and with hardly as much effort as she puts to finding his son a wife. On the bus, she is the queen bee and everything happens around her.

Passengers swarm around her and do things for her and not because she forces them. They want to. "We've known Mama Frans for years," that's all they say as way of explanation. And that is good enough for them.

The majesty of Frans Pule becomes evident the minute she steps into the bus that travels between Pretoria and Siyabuswa. Unlike most she gets away with murder – something that does not seem to bother the driver and commuters.

Yet there is nothing threatening or overtly seductive about Mama Frans. She ties her doek in front – in that manner that screams "plaasjapie" and wears a pinafore over her dress. At 66, she is old and wrinkly and rather mousy.

She has monopoly on what is sold on the bus – despite the bold "NO HAWKERS ALLOWED" – and runs a mini spaza shop with chips, sweet, ice lollies and drinking yoghurt. In fact, she has full view of the sign from her throne right at front of the bus. No one dares sit on the seat in front before she does. Passengers would rather stand than sit on Queen Frans's throne.

"I have travelled this route for more than 20 years with most of the people here. They know me," she beams.

While balancing precociously as the bus trundles along the pothole ridden road the spassengers stream to the front to her seat and as if to make an offering to some deity, drop coins on an old bank bag perched on her lap in exchange for a few peppermint and menthol sweets.

Frans seems to have also colonized Pretoria's Marabastad market and bus station. She can leave her wares – bags of chips, ice lollies and packets of sweets – at any of the hawkers' stands and no one would touch them.

Even belligerent taxi drivers fuss over Frans, offering her steaming and frothy mugs of tea and plates of scones. She relishes the attention.

"It reminds me of the old days when men used to queue, offering to put cattle in my father's kraal. men were still men then. They could *shela* and they still valued cattle over money. It's a pity I can't say the same for my only son," she says getting into the bus.

What happened next...

Thabiso finds it difficult, if not impossible, to say no to his mother. It is probably because she has a strength about her – not entirely overbearing – but it is still there. He can count the number of times that his mother has said no to him in all his 40-odd years in one hand.

He is driven by an insatiable urge to please his mother that knows no bounds.

"Mama made sure that I never lacked for anything. The words 'I can't' did not feature in her vocabulary. She has never disappointed me so I could never do that to her."

Thabiso can also count the number of serious relationships he has heard with women in one hand.

"You can say I have not been so lucky when it comes to women and love. I have not met the right one."

He is not immune from gossip in the town and has had to fend rumours that he did not have a woman in his life because he was gay.

The men prefer not to drink with him in case people in the community get the wrong idea.

"Siyabuswa is a small township. People know each other and it is easy for news – good or bad – to spread like wild fire.

"I have always believed that the right woman will come to me, or at least be shown to me. Until then I am bidding my time. Besides, it is only women who have to worry about when to have children. His age has not stopped him from having more children," he says.

His mother will not let go of her mission of finding Thabiso a woman – "any woman". One afternoon his mother brings a woman from her church and invites her to have supper – pap, beans, cubed butternut with a generous dose of sugar and cinnamon, morogo and beef stew – with them.

"You can't come to supper looking like that. We have a special visitor today. Please change into a better shirt," Frans stops Thabiso in his tracks as he comes into the warm kitchen with its old but reliable coal stove.

It is odd seeing another woman who is not her mother seating on the kitchen table with its white lace tablecloth. She barely lifts her head to Thabiso's "dumela ausi" and instead taps her long nails, painted a garish yellow with black tips, impatiently on the table.

They eat their food in silence, with their guest merely pushing hers around the plate with a fork. Frans leaves the two at the table to "give you time to chat and to change into something more comfortable".

"Your mother is nice but you are not what I am looking for. I am looking for someone a little more, how shall I put it? A little more upmarket... Your mother was right. You are hot and you look like you could do with a little fun," she says adjusting her cowl neck top, exposing the top of her breasts.

"Isfebe esifana nawe? Not even if you were the last woman on earth!"

Thabiso does not leave his room until the following morning. For the first time in maybe three years, Frans the front door of her house locked when she returns in the evening. He has also neglected preparing the evening meal. Frans boils two eggs from her fridge and makes herself a cup of tea, which she consumes in front of the TV.

She is startled by the sound of a key rattling on the door while catching up with the Generations gang later that evening. Without so much as a "dumela mme", Frans storms into the small lounge and charges at his mother.

"From now on, stay out of my business. My relationship with women has nothing to do with you."

He is surprised by his own tone of voice and looks at his mother for a long a time. It is like mother and son have both gone mute.

"Ho lokele ngwana ka," is all Frans manages to say. At that he leaves for his room without another word to his shocked mother.

The following he takes his paint brushes to town and a typed CV and a certified copy of his driver's license in a brown envelope under his arm. He returns at the same time as his mother, and in silence they prepare the evening meal. Frans does not ask him where he has been but her chest swells with pride when she sees his old Converse takkies caked with paint.

Though it's hard work, Thabiso doesn't mind breaking rocks at various construction sites. The men he works with don't judge him and don't mind sitting with him during their lunch breaks. He also does the odd painting job on weekends.

He starts saving money for a building with a separate entrance on the side of his mother's house.

It is while returning from one of painting jobs that he helps a woman with a toddler on her back carry a large suitcase to the house next door.

"Thank you ntate," she wipes sweat from her brow.

He is struck by her poise and the manner in which she addressed him. Not even the children on his street ever called him ntate.

"It looks like you are coming to Siyabuswa to stay, with a big suitcase like that," he says.

Under normal circumstances he would not have approached any woman looking and smelling the way he did but she did not seem fazed by his torn and paint stained clothes.

"I hope to start a new life here with my son. I don't wish to go back to the life my son and I lived. I trust that with God has steered me into happiness by bringing me here."

He wishes he will see the woman again but does not say this to her. Later than night he finds himself thinking about the almost lyrical way in which she spoke Sesotho and the ease in which the word "ntate" flowed out of her lips.

It was a week later that he saw the woman again; this time sitting under the fig tree in his mother's garden.

"I never got to thank you for helping me carry my things the other day. I had walked a long way because the taxi driver refused to drop me at the right place when I told him I didn't have a cellphone number to give him because I didn't have a phone."

He excuses himself to shower and comes back looking and smelling fresher. He is surprised that her mother's guest is still around.

Mmabatho comes to see his mother once a week to help her with their laundry. Once every week Thabiso arrives home to a bale of neatly folded clothes on his bed and the smell of lavender permeating the cozy flat with a vinyl floor.

On one of his visits to Mmabatho he brings her a small bunch of lilies from his mother's garden and a small wire car for her son. He soaks in the boy's squeals and he beams when he says "ke a leboga ntate". He thinks about this the whole night, and the look on Mmabatho's face as she watched her son making circles that looked like the figures eight outside her shack.

One day Thabiso receives a call from the municipality. It had been more than six months since he submitting his CV. The municipality is looking for a driver who has had a license for more than three years. Thabiso happily accepts the new job because it is more stable, the pay is better and there are more benefits.

He buys more bricks, sand and cements and within three months at his new job he has added another bedroom, a bathroom and a small kitchen to his flat.

For the first time in nearly a year Frans Pule finds her son in her kitchen putting the final touches to an evening meal.

"Sit down, please Mama. I have something important to tell you. I have asked Mmabatho to move in with me. I will raise her son as my own and I want to take Pule as his last name. I have asked Malume Bereng to send a delegation to Mmabatho's home in Thaba Nchu."

At this Frans smiles. "Ke thabile ngwana ka. Mmabatho is a fine woman. I could not have asked for a better makoti."

February 27, 2011

Paul Mason

The oath

YOU ARE NEXT! Sprayed with red paint, the writing on my prefabricated wall was impossible to miss.

"Soon they will get tired and stop what they are doing and we will be able to return to work. Surely some of them still live by the oath? Be glad that Sello and Lesedi are with their grandmother and are not here to see this."

My words to my friend Masechaba now seemed hollow and contrived. Her home was petrol bombed two days ago.

"Is this the price you pay for living and breathing the oath for nearly 20 years?" she had cried.

It all seemed so unreal. Petrol bombs were things we read about in newspapers and saw in the news on TV. People didn't just come home from work to find that they were all of a sudden homeless – not in our township.

Only a few of us had openly defied the union's order to leave patients – no matter their condition – at their beds to force the government to take notice.

"Maybe they will hear our cries when their mothers, brothers and sisters also suffer. We can't work for peanuts comrades! We are not monkeys," the unionist had said.

The paint on my wall was a warning that they would 'smoke out the rats' as promised. It doesn't matter that the rats are old and too weary to fight, I confided in Masechaba over the phone, who had since decided to join her mother and children in Rustenburg.

"Sello and Lesedi are my life. Who look after them if anything happened to me? Mme is too old," Masechaba had asked before packing her bags.

Things had started to change in our ward even days before the strike. Some of us had suggested lunch time pickets so that the hospital could remain open to patients during the day but this was dismissed as too soft an approach.

"Let the high flyers in government look after the sick if they really care for their welfare. We also need looking after," the dissidents had said.

Colleagues spoke about "making the government listen" during our tea breaks instead of tikoloshes they had read about in the Daily Sun and the cheap and tasteless décor at so-and-so's wedding.

Seeing what was also happening at other hospitals made me believe that the world had really gone mad. I felt so helpless.I put on a brave face but I couldn't bring myself to tell Nthato about the writing on my wall. He had heard that the strike had also reached small inconsequential places like ours; places you couldn't even find on a map. Someone had also told him about what happened to Masechaba.

"You shouldn't be alone at home at a time like this. I can come home for a few weeks," Nthato had suggested but I couldn't ask him to leave his job to fuss over an old woman like me, even if the old woman was his mother. Still I slept fully dressed with the lights on.

Reluctantly I donned my red union shirt this morning. I thought my skin would break out in a rash, like the body rejecting an organ after a transplant.

"Look, the rat has finally let the comfort of her hole," cried out one of the shop stewards, shoving me to the front of the gate. "Khululeka gogo (relax old woman). You're one of us now," they cackled.

And that, for me, was the last straw.

I took a taxi to work this morning, for the first time in 25 years, just after the announcement on radio that private hospitals would admit patients from public hospitals. They are going to need all the help they can get. If that makes me a rat, so be it. Rats always look after their young.

March 1

Makoti

She pushed her chest out, straightened her back and took a deep breath. With a single swift step she purposefully nudged herself up the hill.

Ghetto snob my ass! I'll show them what I'm made of. There was no way of avoiding the sun. Because of everything she was carrying there was no way she could raise one of her hands to her forehead, as if looking over some horizon. The sun was merciless, and it felt like it delivering blows, blowing as if its pounding heat would leave hollow tunnels on her face.

Going to the village had been husband's idea. It will be good fot you, it will teach you the value of hard work. What he of course meant was: "It'd stop them from talking about you behind your back. It'd stop them from saying 'even with all that education she can't make a fire to make a simple cup of tea for her mother-in-law'. It'd stop from looking at her knees and being amazed by how smooth they are, without the black marks that mean she could clean the floor on her knees, that her hands had felt the lumpy warmth and smoothness of fresh cow dung between her fingers.

It meant she would not embarrass him, because it was no secret that they preferred him to marry "one of us", someone who stretch a can of pilchard to feed eight people and could cook a decent pot of pap.

It embarrassed him that his wife couldn't cook any of the meals that he grew up on. The food he associated with poverty – plants gathered in the wild that some regarded as weeds – that he now craved.

It embarrassed him that she had never worked a single day in a field; that she had never pulled out weeds with her bare hands and that she had never woken up before dawn to break the soil with a hoe until the clumps crumbled like a lump of sugar in your hands.

And so she pulled up her skirt and put more effort in her steps. She tried not think about the layers of dust that had settled and found a home on her feet. She would stick to her decision not to impose herself on her in-laws. She would become one of them for the few weeks at the homestead. She would show them her determination to learn. She would show she wasn't afraid of hard work. She would show them she could adapt to any situation. She would show she was a willow tree; that she

could bend but not be broken by storms. She would show them she was raised well and that being brought up in a home where she had her own room did not make her soft. She would show them that she too could stand the heat in the kitchen, that she could do without clear running water gushing from a tap, that her eyes and nose could get used to the smoke that warmed up the mud kitchen at the corner of the homestead. She would show them that the smoke in her clothes did not bother her much.

She would not give them the satisfaction of seeing her panting as she made her way up the hill. She would keep on walking and close her mouth so not to breathe through her nose. She would do all this with her back straight and chin up.

March 6

Anton Krueger

The Lucky Packet Ring (monologue)

LUCKY PACKET RING

CHARACTERS

ZINTLE: A 31-year-old professional woman, about to get married to her lover of five years Camagu.

SETTING

It is Thursday night and Zintle sits alone in the kitchen of an upmarket townhouse in Johannesburg.

Scene One

The light falls on a woman sitting alone on a table in the kitchen. A half full bottle of whisky is on the table as well as a big white mug with red dots. The room is silent and the chirping of crickets can be heard from far away.

ZINTLE: Mnxim! After all these years, all I'm worthy to him is a shitty little cubic zirconia! Not white gold; and he knows I love white gold. Not a diamond is a forever, forever, forever, foreeevvvveerrrr... (*singing*). But a shitty little... (*Pauses*).

Of all things! A diamonique, not a real diamond! Rha! (*turning her head to the side faking a spit*). May as well have fished it out of a lucky packet.

Tell me, who, in this day and age, in bloody 2011, still wears yellow gold and diamonique? Huh?

After all that we've been through; doesn't even have the nerve to ask me what I want. Just shoves the bloody thing on my finger (sliding it up and down her ring finger). Didn't even bother making sure it'd fit. No... No "How about something like this Ma'am? Not too big and flashy but not too small. And your fingers are so dainty... Don't worry about the size, we'll resize for you at no extra cost!" (*makes her voice more effeminate*)

(*Pauses*)

(*She pours more whisky into her coffee, swivels it around and takes a big gulp. She closes her eyes tightly and smacks her lips*)

I waited a looooong time for this, and in the end all it came down to was: "Love? We've known each other for a while now... Marriage, surely is the next step?" (*deepens her voice*)

After all these years, I waited. Waited for him to come back overseas. Waited for him to get that big government job. Waited for him to get the big car and three bedroom townhouse. And this is all I have to show for it (*stares at the ring*)

I'll get my own ring if that's what it takes! Not a bloody diamonique.

(*She gets up, takes off the ring and leaves it on the table next to the whisky and the unfinished mug of coffee*)

The lights switch off.

ENDS

March 6, 2011

Anton Krueger

The sweet deal (dialogue with Liz Gowans)

Sean is a narcissistic 17-year-old. He has been trying to call Mel(inda) but she isn't answering her cell. He fancies her and is pretty sure she fancies him too. Most girls do. He thinks she must be avoiding him but doesn't know why. Desperate, he calls her at home and her 10-year-old brother, Kevin, picks up. Sean knows Kevin, and as far as he's concerned he's just a cheeky little fat kid.

Kevin is smart. He has underlying insecurities that feed his obsession with food. But he knows how to manipulate people to his advantage.

The telephone conversation goes like this:

Kevin: Hello?

Sean: Kevin...dude, howzit. Is Mel there?

Kevin: Dunno, depends... who's that?

Sean: It's Sean, dude. Let me speak to Mel. Is she there?

Kevin: Um... (chewing gum) Let me check... (calls out) Mel, are you here? (pause) Um.. No, I don't think so.. She's not here.

Sean: Where is she? Why isn't she picking up her cell?

Kevin: I dunno... are you the one who tried to kiss her, or are you the one who can't take a hint?

Sean: Hey? What? Nooo! *Who* tried to kiss her?

Kevin: I dunno....Can't keep up. I thought it was you.

Sean: No, man, it wasn't me. What did she say?

Kevin: I dunno. I just thought...

Sean: No, dude. Why did you say that? I never did anything. Who's kissing her? What are you talking about?

Kevin: I dunno. I just thought I heard her say something...

Sean: What? What did you hear? Tell me, Kev.

Kevin: Mmm, I dunno...

Sean: Ag, Kevin, stop being a little shit, man. We know each other. Talk to me. What did she say?

Kevin: Mmm, I think I have to go now...

Sean: No, listen, don't hang up. I'll make it worth your while, hey. Do you want sweets or something? Just tell me what she said.

(pause)

Kevin: What kind of sweets?

Sean: Ag, anything you like, dude. What do you want?

Kevin: Umm. I dunno...

Sean: Hey, you're pissing me off now. Just tell me, man. Tell me what she said.

Kevin: Mmm. I really like those white Easter eggs with the chocolate on the inside. You know which ones I mean?

Sean: Ja, fine, whatever...

Kevin: No, actually, I changed my mind. I want some fizzers,... ooor, actually, maybe both. How much you going to buy me, anyway?

Sean: Listen, I'll get you whatever you want, dude.

Kevin: You know what I really like?! I haven't had some donuts for, like, for aaages!

Sean: (sarcastically) Oh, what, you mean like since yesterday, or something? Anyway, aren't you supposed to be, like, on a diet or something?

Kevin: Nooo (evasive). Anyway, the doctor said I could eat anything I like. And I like donuts.

Sean: Ja, don't think that's what he meant, hey. You can't keep eating all that shit all the time, dude. You carry on, and one day they'll be lifting you out of your bedroom window with a crane.

Kevin: Whoa! Cool! I'll be, like, famous. Maybe I'll make it onto Ripleys...

Sean: You know what, you're sick little puppy, aren't you? Are you going to tell me now, or what?

Kevin: Hey, you're not the boss of me!

Sean: Come off it, Kevin. I'll get you the sweets, dude. Just spill it.

Kevin: So, do you, like, want to kiss my sister?

Sean: No! What makes you say that? We're just friends, man.

Kevin: 'Cos she says she thinks you like her.

Sean: Hey? What did she say about that? I never said that.

Kevin: Ag, I dunno. (pause) I really like those donuts with the jam on the inside... and lots of sugar on the outside.

Sean: OK, listen, I'm getting a bit tired of this now. I'm coming 'round to your place. I'll see you outside in ten minutes and we can sort things out, OK?

Kevin: OK (hangs up)

They meet outside. Kevin puts out his hand.

Kevin: So? gimme..

Sean: No, dude, We need to walk to the shop and you can get what you want.

They walk to the shop down the road, the corner café, and buy sweets. They sit on a bench in the park next door.

Sean: So what were you talking about before? What did Mel say about me?

Kevin: Nothing, really, just that you were like all over her, (talking with his mouth full), like some kinda psycho freak.

Sean: What! That's crap, dude. She was all over me, and she knows it.

Kevin: She thinks you're a bit weird.

Sean: Don't string me lies now. You expect me to believe that?

Kevin: I'm just saying what I heard. (shrugs) I'm just saying...

Sean: So who did she say that to? Who was she talking to, anyway?

Kevin: I dunno. (chewing noisily) How am I supposed to know? She was on the phone.

Sean: So how do you know she's talking about me?

Kevin: (rolls his eyes) 'Cos she said you name, dumbo, who else would she be talking about? And she said you're the only guy she knows who still wears eyeliner... Like it's soooo 2000 & late... and lame, and stuff like that...

Sean: What?! Where does she get that from? Besides, I don't know where she gets this idea that I like her, anyway.

Kevin: I dunno... (he's losing interest, more concerned with stuffing his face at this point)

Sean: (starts ranting a bit) No, man, who does she think she is anyway? It thought we were friends. I never said I liked her. She needs to get her head out of her own bum. I never said I liked her. Who does she think she is? (pause) Besides, I've already got a girl, and she's much prettier than her anyway. (pause) You can tell her that.

Kevin: (shrugs, not really listening anymore) Mm.. maybe you should tell her...

Sean: No way! I'm not talking to that bitch anymore.

He takes a piece of paper out of his satchel, and scribbles a note:

Yo Mel

I dunno where u got da idea that I liked u. ur not my type, and i thought we cud be fwends. I have met sum1 & shez prettier.

Sean: Here, you can give her this.

Kevin: (shrugs, disinterested) OK. (takes the note)

Sean gets up and walks away. Shortly afterwards, Kevin gets up and walks in the opposite direction. He drops his sweet wrappers in the nearest bin. The note slips out of his hand, the wind catches it and it floats away.

March 13, 2011

Mzi Mahola

Terrence

He preens and pouts;

Gold dust on his ebony temple,

Cherry red on his lips,

As the sun sets on Biermann Avenue.

Up and down

Up, then down.

He struts; arms akimbo,

Ashy legs jutting out of his stonewashed tasseled shorts.

Egged on by wolf whistles

From the windows of taxis whooshing past,

Women snapping furiously on their cellphones,

He floats on an island.

Morning comes,

And he finds himself

Waiting anxiously,

Perched on his red bench.

Lipstick smudged,

He pleads: "My friend, ngicel' amacoins"

Tanning

He stares at me;

Behind gold rimmed compound eyes.

His blue turban a staircase to righteousness,

His face taut,

Only his lips move.

I fan myself with my hat.

He says,

"It's the melanin, my sister.

We both have it,

But it's the dead animals you eat,

Their fat frying in your body,

Making you overheat".

His bony fingers move deftly on a piece of cowhide.

I suck my tummy in,

And roll away.

65

The chicks flew out of the nest.

Sound bounces off the walls,

The house feels big and hollow,

And she can't find pots

Small enough for dinners for one.

She now spends mornings

Hunched over,

Sweeping the bronze flakes of mulberry leaves.

From noon they invade,

Their presence marked by purple blots on the ground.

Voetsek!

She hollers,

And they scurry like leaves in the wind.

March 18

Class Act

I hate high school. Really, I do. And I haven't even been there a week but already I can't wait 'til I get out.

It's not only because everyone expects me to be able to speak Afrikaans, but I hate everything about the school. It's worse now that my classmates have started calling me Sister Mary Clarence.

Just the other day Aunt Connie came to visit after her checkup at the hospital. I had not seen her since I was small because she had lived in Joburg and had come home only a few times – first for makhulu's funeral and then for Malum' Enoch's when I was in Standard 2.

Sitting on my sister's bed in our room, Aunt Connie asked: "Ukwatele ni?" Obviously, I didn't know what she was talking about.

"What do you mean, aunty?"

"You're starting at a Coloured school next week but you don't know how to speak Afrikaans? Uqumbele ntoni ke? Why do you look so upset?

"I am not angry. I'm just quiet, that's all."

I didn't understand why she didn't say that in the first place because no one here speaks like that. Maybe that's how they speak in Joburg. Ukwatile – the word doesn't even sound like Afrikaans to me. It only clicked later that the Afrikaans word she was talking about was "kwaad".

Still in her uniform; a maroon skirt and white blouse, mama came in and sat on my bed, facing Aunt Connie.

"Your aunt says she was a fashion designer eRhawutini. Why don't you ask her to fix your uniform? I have to work this weekend so I won't be able to do it."

Since my Aunt Connie came back from Joburg she has been taking measurements and material from my other aunts and some of Mama's friends to turn them into curtains, suits and dresses in her flat in King. The room where she supposedly works from and where the sewing machine alleged is is always locked. It has been months since she came back and her tummy has grown bigger – I keep thinking it is going to hit the floor – but not a single dress or a drop of curtain has come out of her design studio.

As usual when Aunt Connie visits, Mama has taken out more material from her kist. Some of the material is bright and colourful and was brought from Nigeria by my Aunt Nozi on her yearly trip to visit her husband. I last saw my uncle George the year I turned nine. That was three years ago. I wonder if he still has an Afro? He used to wear long dresses and gold rings on three of his fingers on each hand. I wonder why he hasn't come to visit my aunt in so many years? He didn't even come when my aunt had a big the operation and couldn't even go to work.

Mama takes the material out of the kist in May when she airs the blankets just before it gets cold. She lays the material on the bed. "This would make a nice suit. I don't have anything to wear at funerals these days," she says or "Maybe I'll keep this for you when you get older. You need a beautiful dress for church and special occasions." After the show, she then folds them again and puts a mothball on each of the four corners of the kist though the white balls always make her sneeze. She used to collect patterns for dresses, skirts and blouses from Living and Loving but these line the bottom of the kist now. She hardly takes them out. I sometimes think she has forgotten about them.

My uniform had been on the floor of Mama's wardrobe in the black plastic bag from Ciskei Uniforms for a week. The navy blue V-neck jersey, shirts, socks and tie had already been washed except for the powder blue tunic. Mama always insists we wash new clothes first before wearing them for the first time. "It takes out the new smell, besides, you never know where they have been," she always says. "You can't wash the tunic until I have fixed the hem. You said you wanted it shorter, nhe? Then I'll iron it so it looks straight."

That was a week ago. I wanted a skirt instead of a tunic but Mama insisted on one that was one size too big.

"You are still growing. I don't want to have to buy another tunic when you're in Standard 7 or 8. Uniforms are too expensive these days. You are still going to grow breasts."

"Let me see the uniform. And bring cotton and a needle," Aunt Connie said. She shifted uncomfortably on the bed. It's good that she wears long dresses. I get embarrassed when she sits with her legs open and she does it all the time. I rummage for the tools amid surgical blades, bandages, cotton wool and boxes of Elastoplast in Mama's dressing table drawer.

Sitting on Mama's bed facing the light from the window I put the end of thread in my mouth to wet it. I squint my eyes while pushing the end into the hook of the needle, waiting for it to go through. I try at least three times before it catches, sliding through the eye of the needle. Aunt Connie has to see how much cotton she is going to need before putting the cotton between her teeth to break it.

Because Mama wears spectacles I have done this many times so that she could sew loose buttons on Tata's shirts.

"Here it is," I said laying out the blue tunic on my chest.

"It looks long. Put it on so I can see how it looks on you. I need to know exactly how short you want to be. Did you bring the cotton and thread?"

I take out the needle and thread from my shorts' pocket and give them to Aunt Connie before putting on the tunic.

"Why did you bring white cotton? Don't you have cotton the same colour as the tunic?"

"There is only white and black."

"I can't do it if you don't have cotton that's the same colour. The white is going to stick out if I do it by hand."

I could have asked my sister Ayanda but she was in Alice for the weekend. She had to submit her applications at the university because she applied late and Mama had to work.

***

I've had a terrible time at school this week. My classmates are rude and make a lot of noise. Dino brought a small battery operated radio to school and played it in class. Our English teacher Mr Sauls couldn't get the class to keep quiet during the last period so he took his briefcase from the cupboard, put it on his desk and laid his head on it.

There are at least 10 repeaters in class. Some, like Renato, have failed Standard 6 three times. He made us – the freshers - stand in front of the blackboard while he surveyed our uniform. "The tunic should be a respectable length. At least three fingers above the knee," he said pacing up and down, all the while pinching his nose. With a piece of chalk in his hand he turned, and pointed at me. "Tell me, us Sister Mary Clarence, what's your excuse? This is not a convent."

The class's laughter sounded like thunder in my ears and I could feel my head spinning. I looked at myself in the mirror when I got home. Indeed I looked like the nuns in the film Sister Act. I asked Mama again but she said she was busy and would fix it over the weekend. Ayanda is back from Alice. She's lucky she finished school. No one wears uniform at university. I told her how embarrassed I was and my classmates' taunts. I also told her that Aunt Connie had refused to fix with white cotton.

"Ok, I'll try but don't come crying to me if the white cotton shows." I left her to it, made a sandwich and started working on my Maths homework. An hour later she was done and had washed the tunic. "It'll be dry by the time we have supper. I'll even iron it for you."

I put my tunic on my uniform this morning determined not to look like a nun. Ayanda had altered the tunic to look shorter than Renato's three fingers shit length. "You look nice, even if I say so myself," said Ayanda admiring her handiwork. I got gooseflesh on my thighs the moment I stepped out of the house into the morning chill. Flip, I could see my thighs and knocked knees – and so could everyone else.

"Whoa, Sister Mary has undergone a makeover! Who knew she had nice legs," said Renato behind me while we were changing periods on our way to Mr Patel's class for Geography. Next thing I know, I catch him below the staircase looking under my skirt as I was going up the stairs. "Nice yellow bloomers," he hissed as we left Mr Patel's class. "You're still Sister Mary under all that."

"Girl, umgobo ongaka. Why the big hem? Irhali emhlophe ke yona iyaphi? Where do all the white tracks lead?" said snooty Khanyisa Peter when I bumped into her at break, breaking into a fit of laughter. "Amadolo amnyama ke wona asisathethi ngawo." I won't even mention the black knees. Your mama must invest in a mop."

I have never been so humiliated in my life! All in one day! The boys make fun of me, and so do the girls. I don't think the school would even allow me to wear the same grey pants as the boys. Besides, my mother will freak. She made it clear she won't spend more money on my uniform. Maybe I should just accept that I am Sister Mary Clarence. At least no one cared what colour panties she wore.

March 20, 2011

Brian Walter

Brother Bear

If you were to see us today, you would swear Sizwe and I have always hated each other. We fight all the time. We have not spoken in nearly two years. 'Strue! I'm not sure screaming "Get out of my way!" and "Sod off!" when we bump into each other in the bathroom or passage counts as conversation. And that's when we are being nice to each other. Now we are not even screaming at each other, so there's no talking at all!

He pisses me off most of the time. If he weren't so tall and stronger than me I swear I would have killed him by now. I have thought about it about a million times already. If I could decide on the best way to put me out of this miserable existence with him I would have done it a loooong time ago. It would have to be long and torturous. I want him to suffer and feel all the pain and humiliation he has put me through.

But I am only 14. I don't want to spend the rest of my life in jail. I am too young and too cute. I have seen what happens to cute people in jail. I have seen *Sleepers* three times and that film convinced me that convicts and the warders in jail are a nasty bunch. I have never heard of jails for girls my age. For my sake I hope there aren't any.

There was a time when Sizwe and I got along. Sizwe was five years old when I was born. Until I came along, he was the centre of Mama's universe. Maybe he is even now. The family album is full of pictures of him holding me. I was a big baby, with big cheeks and sausage arms and legs - a cuter and of course smaller, version of the Michelin man. I was probably too heavy for him but he would hold me anyway. "He probably thought you were a big teddy bear. Look at how you treat each other now," Mama used to say shaking her head. "He would remember you were a baby when I had to change your nappy. 'She stinks' he would say pinching his nose. Patience even took a picture of him pinching his nose." It's true. There is a photo of Sizwe pinching his nose.

I followed my brother everywhere. He would let me play with his cars though I wasn't allowed to play with his three Volvos. He would quickly close the door if I caught peeing in the bathroom. My favourite time with him however was supper time. It was our time to plot how we could get more meat. "Remember to keep the bones and leave a little meat and marrow on them. And be on the lookout for pieces of string," he would whisper so Mama and Tata couldn't hear.

"Can I bring cotton? I saw where Mama put it after she finished fixing the loose button on your shirt." I asked him when we took our plates to the kitchen.

"No, it's not strong enough. We need something that can stand the weight of the bones."

"How about wool?"

"No, it breaks easily."

"How about the washing line?"

"That's too rough. We don't want anything that will hurt your neck when you sleep. If it's too tight it will you make you bleed and the meat bird doesn't like blood."

"How does the meat bird look? How come I haven't seen him?"

"He is very small. He comes out only at night to make more meat, but only if you leave him a big bone with a little bit meat on. You must wear the bone like a necklace around your neck when you go to sleep."

"What kind of meat will he leave us?"

"A big piece of chicken if you leave him a big chicken bone and beef if you leave a big bone with bone marrow from a cow. You understand?"

"Do you think Mama wants more meat? Maybe we should tell her."

"You can't tell her. The meat bird only visits kids. Now go wash."

"Ok."

I would leave him in the kitchen clearing up before washing the dishes. I would sometimes forget to look for string. When I did, he would reject it. He always had an excuse. After what could have been many months of looking for string and leaving pieces of meat on my plate for the meat bird, I caught Sizwe sucking on the bone marrow and cleaning the meat off the bones. I was shocked. Alerted by a scream, Mama rushed out of the bathroom to the kitchen. She almost tripped.

"Sizwe is eating the marrow and meat I left for the meat bird. Now I won't get the meat."

"Oh, sana lwam! (Oh, my baby!) You fell for that old trick? Sizwe lied to you. The only thing you were going to get in the morning was an army of ants. Stop crying."

He brought me a green Fizzer and two black Wilsons from school the following day. I took the peace offering after he promised to build me a swing. And then we were friends again. True to his word, he came home from school one day with a long and thick rope. He climbed up the big guava tree in the garden looking for the strongest branch. He then tied the rope along two sides and placed a thick

piece of cardboard and an old sheet for me to sit on. "Hop on if you want to touch the sky," he said. "Hold on tight." It was exhilarating! With my brother pushing me on that swing I thought I could touch the sky.

That was then. Now all we do is fight.

I practically ran out of class today, rushing home to catch the final episode of Popular. Since they moved Dawson's Creek to Sunday – at the same time that my father watches the news on another channel – Popular is the only thing on TV worth watching these days.

But I have to literally book my place in front of the TV before Sizwe comes home from school. He thinks he can push me around because he is older. Mama and Tata let him get away with opening the M-Net TV guide and the Reader's Digest before they have even seen them. He then hides them in his room, and has the nerve to scream and shout if I find them and take them out. "I don't appreciate people taking my things out of my room," he will scream all the way from his room down the passage to the kitchen.

Since the milking incident last week Mama decided that whoever came first had first choice to watch whatever they wanted on TV. He had arrived home while I was watching Biker Mice from Mars and changed channels, as usual.

"Hey! I'm still watching here."

He ignored me, as usual and took the remote control with him to his room.

"He Asanda! Ndizokuqhekeza ukuba ukhe watshintsh' ichannel. (I'll crack your skull if you dare switch channels). You get home at half past two and all you do is watch *oopopeye*."

He had changed into his grey track pants when he came back and I had changed the channels manually. Using the remote, he pressed the up and down buttons instead of hitting the channel he wanted. I knew he would just use the remote control if I tried to change the channels manually, long before I could flip open the flap with all the little buttons. So I charged at him. I hoped I would catch him off guard because he always expected at me to walk away. He quickly stood and shot up his hand, like I have seen basketball players do in the movies.

He often boasts about being the tallest person at home.

"That explains why it's impossible for positive and negative to attract," I would say. It pissed him off every time I said that because he would sense I was insulting him but the laws of physics were beyond him. Shame, soccer, rugby and bullying were the only things he understood.

Huffing and puffing I jumped like some kind of lunatic but I couldn't get my hands on the remote. It didn't help that he was also slapping me on the face with his free hand. Fighting back tears I stopped and stared at him. A smug smile came into his face. Then I tugged. I reached down and grabbed his penis and pulled down. Hard. I tugged like I was pulling those old flush toilets with the chain we had when I was small. His eyes bulged, like they were going to pop out of their sockets. His face contorted, like he had swallowed something bitter.

"Ndizokusenga!" (I will milk you like a cow) I cried. The remote control fell to the floor with a clank, spilling batteries out of its tummy.

"Asanda has no respect. He forgets that I am older than her and after the June holidays she will have to call me bhuti. Just ask her what she did earlier," he squealed at Mom later. I pretended I had no idea what he was talking about. I think Mom was too tired to care because she didn't ask.

He has left me alone for the past few days, walking straight to his room whenever he finds me watching TV in the lounge. He usually tiptoes to the lounge long after my parents have slept to watch music videos on TV.

There is no telling when Sizwe will be back to his usual shitty self so I am not taking any chances. I am keeping out of his way. The house is quieter now. I think Mama and Tata are enjoying the silence. I don't miss the fighting and the screaming. Honestly, I miss my big brother. I miss the guy I used to scheme with in the kitchen, plotting about filling our stomachs with more meat. I wonder if he will ever forgive me for yanking his chain like that. I'm not happy I did but I had to defend myself.

Things will probably get worse from here. In a few months he will go away to bush school and come back a different person. No longer just my big irritating brother. He will come back a man. I won't be allowed to fight back. I won't be allowed to call him "Seis" like I did when I was little. He will be like junior man of the house when my father is not around. He can dish out punishment if he sees the need for it. I will have to call him Bhuti.

Maybe he will come back a changed Sizwe. Who knows?

But for now I still wish we could have those fun days back. I will forget that I plotted to kill him. I wish he could let me play with his cars again. I wish we could go on a string hunt for the meat bird, together. I wish he could push me on that swing again. Maybe one day, when we get over our hormonal impulses, we will find a rope strong enough to hold us now that we are older; a rope that will hold our weight as we fly up to the sky. The guava tree still stands.

Stringing along

Brian Walter (Assignment 2)

I push my left hand deeper in my pocket with each step I take. Two fingers slide right through a hole in the nylon lining of my green coat, which was bought to match my green tunic, jersey and socks. The pocket has always seemed like a black hole where pencils and small five cents coins disappeared.

My fingers feel stiff and heavy as I tighten the grip of the handle of my brown plastic briefcase. I imagine the ball of red wool rolling aimlessly inside the case in different directions until it twists into a series of that cannot be untangled – like the hair on Medusa head. Slowly I make my way toward the school gate just before the eight o'clock bell.

The school grounds look foreign in winter. The sun is not as bright as it is in summer and it looks like I am looking at it through bronze coloured cellophane. The grass has been burnt to keep it short. Though I am happy I don't have to worry about tripping when I run because of the smooth soles of my Toughees school shoes, I miss the soft green grass. Though the blades of grass look hard; they feel brittle and snap easily under the soles of my shoes.

The teachers leave the classrooms open during the long break so we can eat inside. But even the classroom looks different. The desks and chairs no longer stand in neat rows but have been joined together, dividing the class in small groups. "Now they don't have to sit so far from each other. It's warmer," I heard Miss Jikazana explain to Miss Omkhulu (Principal) Voyi. The room does feel warmer. It's not just the door and the windows that have been slammed shut. It is sitting so close to each other that I can't stretch my arms without my elbows threatening to gouge someone's eye.

Miss Jikazana picks a yellow ball of wool under her desk and holds it up for the class to see. She fishes out a crocheting needle from the pocket of her black leather jacket. She utters eight words that signal the start of my misery: "I expect neat stitches from all of you." My arms feel heavy and my lower lip droops at the disappointment that my red wool is not a tangled mess and my crocheting needle has not disappeared into a black hole. I close my eyes and wish for the warmth of spring.

March 27

Joan Metelerkamp

My Parkie angel

I didn't believe in human angels until I met Nomaka Tshibase.

I kept the gift she left for me on my bed. She had held onto it so dearly the first time I saw her that I would treasure it as long as I live.

"Your kindness, my child, will not go unnoticed. Your prayers will be answered, it's just a matter of time," she said before kissing me on the lips and shooing me away. She insisted on walking through the prison gates alone.

Meeting here seems to have broken the spell of bad luck I had. I can't explain it, but I believe I got my dream job because of her. I don't have to worry about whether I will have enough money for food and taxi fare anymore; and it feels great.

I had walked past her at first, like so many people had probably done that morning. I had no time for forgotten old women. There were so many of them in Joburg. They all looked the same. They wore the same pained expression, black Tomy plimsoles and a tartan blanket on their shoulders. I had to submit my CV at the municipal offices in Braamfontein.

An altercation with a security guard and a burly shopkeeper stopped me in my tracks when I walked past The Curry Muncher in Park Station again that morning.

"What's this old woman's problem? I've been telling her to move from here. This is not some faraway village."

"Tell this woman she can't sit here the whole day. She's chasing away my customers. *Aikona Mama. Hamba.*"

"And I have been telling you, and your equally rude boss that I am waiting for my daughter."

She sat on a crate in front of the pie and samoosa shop, clutching a Bible and a hymn book. Her small reading glasses and wrinkled hands reminded me of my grandmother. She never got a chance to wear her *mbhaco* to my graduation. She died just before I wrote my final exams at UJ.

"She won't bother you again. I am here now, Mama. We can go." I grabbed her striped Shangaan bag and with her dragging her small suitcase, we walked out of the dark underbelly of the long distance terminal.

"Don't worry Makhulu. I don't live far. We'll be there in no time." For a short woman in her 70s she was surprisingly quick. She only stopped briefly to marvel at the big Universal Church on Plein Street and clutched my hand as we crossed to join Eloff Street.

"The city has changed so much since the last time I was here. Taxi drivers just zoom past. They won't even wait for an old woman to cross the street. Is it necessary for all the shops to have big speakers for all this doof doof music?"

She didn't ask where we were going and only smiled when we were greeted by my smelly All Stars and pyjamas at the door of my tiny matchbox. My face would have turned tomato red if I wasn't so dark.

"Hayi, young people are the same everywhere you go!"

"Please excuse the mess. I didn't have enough time to tidy up this morning." I directed her to the sofa next to window as I picked up my duvet from the floor and spread it on my sagging mattress.

While I boiled water for tea, Makhulu Nomaka told me she had got off a City to City bus at 6am from King Williams Town.

"I called Thobeka many times but a voice on the phone kept telling me to leave a message. I ran out of airtime and couldn't call anymore."

I felt bad I couldn't offer her a proper breakfast after her long trip. My fridge was empty, except for a half a loaf of brown bread and a bottle of apricot jam. We had to settle for a jam session just like my varsity days.

"You don't mind black tea, nhe makhulu? I am still waiting for payment for an article I wrote for a newspaper overseas. I hope the jam in the bread will make up for the sugar. I ran out yesterday."

She closed her eyes and said a short prayer before we tucked into our jam sandwiches.

"God bless you, mzukulwana. I don't know what would have happened to me had you not come. Do you know a prison called Sun City? Thobeka said she worked there."

She hummed Ndikhokele O Yehova – a hymn I had not heard since my grandmother died as we walked to the Bree Street taxi rank to catch a taxi to Sun City.

I read the note she wrote on the dog eared Gideon bible she left for me whenever I feel down. "Trust in Him and He will not forsake you. You looked after me the best way you knew how. I will never forget that and neither will God."

April 3

Book report

Robert Berold

There are certain books that readers feel honoured to have on their bookshelves. It gives them so much satisfaction to boast about having them because of the confidence they have that one day they will be regarded as classics.

It is not just Jane Austen or Charles Dickens anymore. For me it was Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. I had read her two novels – Half a Yellow Sun and Purple Hibiscus before buying her collection of short stories. I was excited when I saw The Thing Around Your Neck at Bargain Books in East London.

At R60, the price was just right for a broke and recently unemployed person. I bought it without reading the blurb. I didn't need anyone telling me. I knew I was going to love it. Imagine my dismay at the counter when the sales assistant didn't even bat an eyelid. I expected some kind of reaction. Something like: "Great choice Ma'am. She is such a brilliant writer." I expected more from someone who was surrounded by books for at least six hours in their day. This was the same author that Chinua Achebe had lauded for being blessed with the ancient art of storytelling.

After getting over the shock, I delved into it with the smug satisfaction of someone who knew something that the assistant didn't. I savoured each of the stories in the collection. I admired and envied her use of simple storytelling and strong characters who seemed so ordinary and real. I admired her ability to make every subject and character she wrote about seem beautiful. She brought writing alive making it more than just a talent or a skill. She made it a beautiful form of art.

It doesn't happen often that I am compelled to finish reading a book in one seating. The last time it happened was about two years ago when I read Khaled Hosseini's A Thousand Splendid Suns. I was curious to see what all the hype was about after reading and hearing so much about the author of The Kite Runner and its screenplay adaptation.

Fast forward to 2011. I picked up K. Sello Duiker's Thirteen Cents on a Monday afternoon. I was looking for something fresh – something that would blow me away. There was something about the book that would not go away. It had left an indelible mark on me a month before. I had started reading the book at a bookshop while waiting for my partner. I had read about 15 pages when he waltzed in the shop, late. I shooed him away. It didn't really matter that I had waited so long for him.

I wanted to finish the chapter I was on. I was engrossed by the main character – a scrawny street kid of 13 in Cape Town. I burst out laughing at something he says to a much older and wealthy client: "I can come anytime. I was waiting for you." It invited strange looks from other customers, mostly white women reading about herbs and gardening – who were probably going to pay for the books that they were reading.

I wasn't laughing when I picked (I still couldn't pay for it) it up again a month later at the library. I was miserable. I came so close to crying many times but I didn't put it down. I was desperate to forget about being lonely and broke in Grahamstown. I finished it while wishing that I could one day write so convincingly about subjects I saw every day but knew so little about. By the time I read the last line I was too tired to think about my own misery and fell into a deep sleep.

Then it was off to Uganda, on a matatu sucking in on the sights, sounds and people. I had access to the gossip and goings on of the country's rural villages and cities and the horrors of the war. The experience of reading Moses Isegawa's Abyssinian Chronicles was thrilling – it felt uncensored and had just the right dose of vulgarity not to push me over the edge. I knew it was going to something different the moment I turned to the first page. I had last seen a list of characters on the Shakespearean plays I had read in high school and university. The strangeness of one of the names of the characters gave a taste of things to come. What kind of a person would one be with the unfortunate name of Padlock?

It took me more than two weeks to finish the book. I kept stalling. I was determined to finish it but I didn't want to get to the end so quickly. I would read a few pages before going to sleep and a few pages again before I got out of bed in the morning. Alas, all good things must come to an end.

After a while of spying at Muzenga, his mother and all his cronies at school and being an accomplice on his many adventures, I grew tired. I grew tired of having to listen to his grandstanding all the time. I grew tired of not having a sense of where the narrative was going. I wanted there to be some sense of direction. I grew tired of just going along for the ride. I wanted the same exhilaration of being in a new environment and new experiences as before. I realised that I like Muzenga better when he was younger because he seemed to have a sense of purpose. I grew anxious to finish it so I could put it behind me. Maybe I was hoping that toward the end it would redeem itself. I felt that the author should have known when to stop. He tried to cram too many experiences in just 500 pages. It made me realise the importance of planning in writing and detaching oneself from the experience to avoid being clouded by one's own biases. I was reminded of the slogan of gambling adverts on TV – winners know when to stop. I wish someone could have told Moses Isegawa.

April 3

Paul Wessels

Assignment 1

I have never been afraid of hospitals. When I was younger, my friends used to tell me horror stories about cats trawling hospital grounds at night.

"They make strange sounds the whole night. They sometimes walk on the roofs and look at sleeping patients through sleeping windows because nurses never close the curtains."

I didn't really mind them. I spent the first few years of my life in hospitals.

I was once admitted for about two weeks when I was 11 years old. I had some procedure done on my nose. I was too happy to miss school. I didn't even mind being woken up early to take a bath. My bed would be made when I got back from the bathroom and the nurses would still insist I go back to sleep. I couldn't imagine my mother making my bed and telling me to go back to sleep even if I was sick!

"You're going to get bedsores from sleeping the whole blooming day," she would have said and my dad would have pitched in with his usual: "How can you sleep in this heat? You're missing out on everything else in the world." And I was brought breakfast, lunch and dinner in bed. Even then I was delighted when I was eventually discharged. I missed sleeping in my own bed and not having so many sick people around me all the time.

The thought of all my meals served in bed made the idea of a hospital stay more palatable this time around. I don't cook much. Hospital food, when you are a bachelor, beats eating oodles of noodles while anxiously waiting for payday. Having flown off the coop years ago and being a lone ranger, I can get away with not making my bed every day, the trail of dirty socks everywhere in my pad and leaving the toilet seat up.

It didn't occur to me that I would be fed these lovely meals through some kind of a straw. These contraptions made the most irritating sounds. It sounded like I was drawing something stuck in a drain each time I sucked in my liquid breakfast.

My stomach had started bleeding after a reaction to anti-inflammatory medication I was taking. My stomach wouldn't take solids. I forced it though because I couldn't stand the thought of eating puréed food. But I was stuck with something worse than puréed food. Half the time I didn't know what the hells I was slurping through that straw. Everything just looked like dirty dish water. No jelly and custard after some bland skinless chicken and a handful of peas that scattered all over the plate. But I didn't really care because I wasn't missing the World Cup action. My bed faced the TV and a nurse would come in and prop up my pillows every five minutes. It didn't matter that the nurse had thick ankles and a network of varicose veins.

There had been some pretty sick people in the ward in the past few days. Some poor sod had his left leg amputated. The dangers of unchecked diabetes, the nurses would warn us.

"Yes Paul. If you don't get off your butt to exercise and stop eating pizza and hot wings it will happen to you too." I felt sorry for the oke. Man, did he cry! Every day it was the same shit. "Oh God, make it go away! I can't take it anymore!" If he wasn't crying for God or his mother or some other woman we didn't care to know, he was talking in his sleep.

We were all relieved when they eventually wheeled him to a private ward. "Now I can wank in peace," said Brad, the guy next to me.

But worse was to come. At exactly eight minutes after midnight – yes, I checked – we were woken up by the arrival of a new patient. I was up the minute Sister Stumpy switched on the light, flooding the ward in brightness that made it look like Loftus.

I smelled him long before I could see him. He reeked like he had crawled out of a sewer. I thought his stench would never leave my nostrils. It felt like someone had shat right in front of the TV in my lounge. A huge bandage made him look like something out of Wacko's Thriller video.

We all turned to look at him but he couldn't even look at us.

"Someone get him out of here," and a scream came out of from somewhere in the room. It took me a few seconds to realise that it had come from me.

Sister Stumpy gave him towels and dragged him out of the ward. He came back 15 minutes later smelling like he had rolled himself in a field of baby powder. It's amazing what a shower and a bit of baby oil can do. Hail JZ!

He was outside by the time I went out for my morning smoke, wrapped in a blue gown. He was grateful for the cigarette. He closed his eyes and kept the smoke in for a very long time and then slowly breathed out. "Thanks, man. My name is Sam."

Assignment 2

Had anyone told me about the dangers of Brufen, I would have never touched the stuff. I would have slugged it out, and opted for meditation as a remedy for my blinding migraines. But no, jack shit is written about it. Even the piece of paper in the box doesn't say much. Like I would know what a gastro-peptic laceration – or whatever they call it on the pack – like I would know what that is.

I have since read up stuff on the drug. Did you know it was launched more than forty years ago as a treatment for rheumatoid arthritis – what you and I would call bones? The stuff hits the joints and on really bad days, like when it is really cold, it could have you pinned to your bed, unable to move. It is used in some countries for the treatment of adult acne.

I have new found respect for the drug since it landed me in hospital last year. At the same time as the Soccer World Cup, can you imagine? Did you feel it? It was here. All I, on the other hand, was a pain on the left side of my stomach. At first I thought it was my appendix. I am a man. There was no way I was going to let a little thing like a vermiform appendix floor me. I wasn't going to let something with no proven function in the human body get to me. What kind of men would going to a doctor for every little thing made me? If I had the right medical aid, I probably would have gone.

I sat at home, pretended to be doing more than just watching the soccer and continued having pizza and beer everyday for breakfast and supper. What about lunch you may ask? Well, that stuff is for people with time on their hands. Like a lion, I sleep during the day so there is no such thing as lunch, especially when breakfast is at 11.30am. Eat, shit, watch the soccer, sleep, drink more beer and sleep again – that was my 2010 winter routine. I liked it that way. I couldn't have asked for a better to spend the winter. It was freaking cold. Really now. What else was there to do when it was so fucking cold. I couldn't exactly go out to play golf.

I was popping Brufen like they were going out of fashion. They helped with the blinding headaches I woke up with, thanks to my everyday babalaas. Little did I know the stuff would land me in hospital.

Anyway, there I was at the hospital on June 18. They said my stomach was bleeding – something about the lining being chowed by the pills I was taking. I didn't want to believe it.

But the worst thing about being at the hospital at the time was definitely this other guy who was admitted while I was already there for three days. The nurses would switch on the lights every time someone knew was admitted into the ward. It didn't matter what time it was. On the lights would go. Had I been drinking I wouldn't have cared. I was sober the whole time I was there and I badly wanted a drink. I wanted to get out of there. It didn't make things easier that the nurse looked llike something that could be used to bully children to eat their vegetables. Thick ankles and varicose veins are not exactly the sexiest things in the world. This guy came and OMG did he stink! God I was annoyed. The fuck stank. He looked and smelled like he had spent his life in a dump. He looked and smelled like pigs had shat all over him all his life. He came looking sorry for himself. "Dude, get the fuck out of here, I almost said to him". I wanted nothing more than the dude to go so I could get back to sleep. Talk about an assault of the senses.

Luckily for me, and the rest of the poor people whose slumber was so rudely interrupted, the nurses gave him a towel and soap. He came back 30 minutes later – I was surprised the hospital had water the following day. I imagined it would have taken every drop of water in the city to take the stink out of him. He smiled as we all looked at him. No doubt he could sense we were annoyed. I was happy to go back to sleep. I was also happy that I didn't have to smell the dude anymore.

Assignment 3

Words can never fully describe the stench. I had never imagined anything, let alone a human being, could smell so bad.

Yet there he was in his all his shitty glory; smelling like some kind of mutant that had just swam out of Grahamstown's sewers. Had there been any plants or fish in the room, I am sure they would have died the moment he stepped in polluting the air.

The giant bandage on his head looked like a humungous mushroom had sprouted on the side of his head. Spots of blood were barely visible from the grime in his shredded shirt and corduroy pants. His shoes looked like masses of bricks caked with mud.

"What now? What the fuck?" and "Oh, shit man!" came out of from different corners in the ward.

"Come now, gentlemen. Where are your manners?" said Sister Mandy. "That's no way to greet a *camarada*."

"You mean 'It' over there?" I mumbled under my breath.

"Did you say something Paul?"

I just looked at her, and then It next to her.

I pulled up the sheet and bed spread over my head. But this made it worse. It created some kind of Dutch oven. It felt like my own body heat had trapped the stink inside the covers and I found myself panting for breath. I had no choice but to come out for air.

He. It. Whatever, cowered under the glare of seven pairs of steely serpentine eyes. His eyes shifted uncomfortably from the floor to the empty bed next to the window and to the four corners of the ward.

"Here, get yourself cleaned up," said Sister Mandy tossing him towels, a Lifebuoy and those hospital gowns. "You can put your, uhm, clothes... what's left of them, in the bin just outside the bathroom. I'm sure you have no use for them anymore. You can put these on when you're done. Don't worry about your bum sticking out. Nothing we haven't seen before."

I pulled the bedspread over my face again the moment they stepped out.

"No point switching the light off, boys. He's coming back in a few minutes. Be nice."

I closed my eyes real tight from under the blankets and willed sleep to come back.

I had been in hospital for nearly two weeks. Big man I thought I was I didn't see a doctor until it was too late. I had ignored the pain and the gnawing in my stomach for weeks, thinking it would go away. It wasn't until it floored me that I sought help. I dropped the cup

of tea I had just made when a pain shot up from somewhere in my body. My knees gave in and I fell on the shards of porcelain on the floor. I remained on the floor until my neighbour Kevin came for his payday-is-so-far-cigarette maybe 20 minutes later.

"Ja, nhe. Sure you feel better after that shower. You definitely look better," tweeted Sister Mandy. I had never been so grateful to Lifebuoy until that moment.

I looked up and there he was. His eyes met mine. He opened his mouth in greeting but nothing came out. A broken tooth and pink gums peered out. He had a small scar on his nose, like something had just taken a bite. He waved sheepishly instead and shuffled to the bed.

"Don't worry. I'm the only one allowed to look at your arse. On this shift anyway."

He sat up on the bed and Sister Mandy followed him with a tray full of solutions and needles.

"You're not afraid of needles, hey? Now if I can find a vein I'll be out of your way. You're going to need a lot more than Manto's garlic and beetroot before you can feel better in the morning," she chuckled.

The room went dark and I could breathe again.

"Good night boys! Mama Mandy is here if you need anything. If you don't sleep I don't sleep. And that makes for a grumpy Mandy. We don't want that hey?"

"Night," came a reply in the dark. There was no guessing who said it. Bloody fresher. He'll learn.

Revised assignment (4)

I don't think I will look any prettier when I finally leave this place. Of course there will be those who will compliment my lighter complexion: "Yhu, ntombi! Unecom-com. Ingathi awutshiswa ngamalanga" but it will be because of all the time I have been spending indoors, not because I feel healthier.

I am supposed to be getting some much needed R&R, but I get no sleep. Three days into my admission here, I still can't get used to the sounds and the smells of this place. I close my

eyes and all I see are these white walls. Beeps from hissing machines flash in the dark causing a constant cloud of soft light. I am not used to hearing so many people breathing in and out in their sleep.

Nandi, the woman next to me talks in her sleep. It's the same thing every night. Just as I am about to drift off her whimpers keep me awake. It always looks like she is trying to reach out to something, or maybe someone. Then she'll sit up, and breathing heavily she will look around her and then go back to sleep. I doubt she realises I am here, staring at her. Even when she is awake she looks like she is not all here.

Last night though it was something else. It was just before Nandi could be overwhelmed by some strange phenomenon in her sleep; that moment I feel light and I imagine I am floating away. A loud clang and a wave of light flooded in. Sister Dywili stood at the door as if she wasn't sure whether to go in or not.

"I don't imagine you came here to check on us, so do what you came to do and get out of here," I mumbled. "Do you have something to say? If you do, then let me hear it." was her stern reply. We called her Inkanyamba behind her back because she could wreak havoc and destruction if she wanted.

A whiff of something I still haven't found the words to describe hit my nostrils. I couldn't pick up one particular smell. It was musty. It was something out of a burst sewer in Duncan Village. It was a heap of disposable nappies stewing in the sun on the side of the road on a hot day.

"Uxolo bethuna. I didn't mean to wake you up," the voice said. She put her Pick n Pay on the floor and fished out a handkerchief from her breast. The neatly folded handkerchief was white and surprisingly clean. It stood in stark contrast with her shabby bergie look. A spider and all sorts of nasty creatures could have crawled out of her hair. A huge bandage looked like a big mushroom sprouting out of the side of her head. The collar and cuff of her corduroy jacket shone with grease. She could have hidden a R5 coin in the calluses on her ankles. She wiped her forehead, blew her nose and scrunched the handkerchief before shoving it back in her bra. She shuffled to the only empty bed in the ward, right across mine. But before she could sit on the white sheets

"Ha-ah! Ungakh' ulinge! Usincede please, not while you look and smell like that! You can put your bag in the locker so long but those clothes will have to go. I don't know how any self-respecting woman could allow herself to stink like you do," said Inkanyamba. The dragon lady left the light on. "She's coming back, so there's no point switching off the light."

The woman lowered her eyes, took the towel and Lifebuoy and shuffled out of the ward. Inkanyamba followed her to the bathroom. She carried a pink terry cloth gown with the letters CMH at the back and a long piece of flannel cloth. "Take your time in the shower. You can wash your hair in the morning, but please use this as a doek. We don't want you leaving your grease on the pillow."

My eyes hurt under the harsh light. I pulled the blankets over my head and willed sleep to come. I kept wondering about what the woman could have gone through to end up looking the way she did. She walked back in a few minutes later. She had washed her handkerchief and hung it on the side of the locker. Her nails were cut short and a healthy shade of pink. "Sorry to wake you sisi. Do you have Vaseline?" She dabbed some on her lips and a little in her nostrils. "For the draught," she said and got inside the covers. With a loud clang the room went dark. I listened to the hissing of the machines and waited for that floating feeling to come.

April 8

Kwere

I have travelled this route many times but I am always amazed by the new things I discover every time I drive past. It always feels as if Mother Nature is constantly replenishing herself with each makeover, and the results are always out of this world. I can look at these lush forests that always remind of overgrown heads of broccoli every day and never get tired.

I have longed for home and being with my family for a long time now. I wish I could take these images of these verdant forests with me to marvel at whenever I want. Yet the concept of home still eludes me. Home is where the heart is... or is it home is where the hut is? Is home with my mother or with my father? My aunt was anxious to see me too judging by the ferocity with which she SMSed. "How far?" she would text, the messages coming every 30 minutes or so. I kept reassuring her that I would call just before arriving in King and would give her ample time to fetch me.

I was careful not to lean on the window. Though there wasn't the ubiquitous "YOUR PERM IS NICE BUT NOT ON MY WINDOWS" sticker in the Condor, it had become an unwritten rule that all users of buses and taxis had come to know and adhered to without much persuasion.

I didn't wish to upset the driver who impressed on us who was boss by putting speakers at different points in the vehicle and pumping the latest Ncandweni album loud enough to wake the dead.

The constant ticking of the keyboard mingled with the howls of the lead singer buzzed in my ears. "uJesu unobubele ngam" drowned out other thoughts in my mind. I allowed myself to get lost in my surroundings and the cacophony around me.

The driver would turn the volume down a notch to chat to the woman on the passenger seat. The woman looked splendid in different shades of purple in her nails and eyelids; and a purple shirt and camisole underneath.

I had been nothing more than an observer on the trip. I had nothing else to do but to listen to the conversation in front.

"I can drive from King to Cape Town any day listening to this music. It does something to my soul. It lifts me up when I feel down. That's why I carry this important book with me all the time," he said pointing to an isiXhosa Bible on the dashboard. "I stop anywhere, anytime to dip into this book whenever I feel the need."

"I feel the same when I listen to Lusanda. The only one I don't feel is Hlengiwe Mhlaba."

"I love Hlengiwe. You must listen to (check what her most popular songs are)

"Is this the same forest that was called Unganen' kodwa awubuyi? True to the name, I have heard stories of people who went in to the forest and never came back."

"That's the stuff of legends! The forest has gone smaller now. People have gone in to it and parts of it disappear little by little. It will be gone in six, seven years. The government would have built houses for abantu bethu.

"I grew up in this area, near Qawukeni. My father owned goats and a few cattle. The only animals I didn't like were horses and dogs. I still don't have regard for horses, even now. Izinja kezona andifun' nozibona. It's bound to stink wherever there are dogs. You wash them and they still stink. Akukh' nto enuka ingathi yinj' emanzi!"

"Utsho na bhuti? I take it you don't have dogs where you live now?"

"Ewe tyhini! Those things stink. Zifana nje namakwerekwere! I would never give a lift to them. If I notice after they have gotten in the car I stop and tell them that I am no longer going where I said I was going. 'Don't worry about paying' I tell them."

"I wonder yazi bhuti, why those people don't seem to like water."

"I don't know what it is about people up north, but it seems that even their women don't like to wash."

"I used to think the Ethiopians were better until I picked up two women in Knysna. It was already getting dark and I didn't realise ngamakwerekwere when I stopped the car."

"What did you do? Did you throw them out?"

"I drove with them until Wilderness. I couldn't leave them on the side of the road because it was already dark. But they made me angry because they fell asleep the moment they got in. I had a blanket at the back and they covered themselves with it."

"I was determined to drive all the way past Wilderness but after dropping them I couldn't get their smell out. I couldn't open the windows because it was so cold. I eventually stopped and slept at a lodge. I was tempted to burn or throw away the blanket. I left it outside overnight."

"Yhu! They almost ruined your trip, shame bhuti. I don't know what I would have done, ndinukiselwe ngabantu endingabaziyo in my own car! At least you didn't leave them on the side of the road. God will bless you for your kindness toward them."

"Kindness is wasted on those people because they turn on you the minute your back is turned. If you don't know just how cruel they can be, ask me. I'll tell you."

"What did they do to you?"

"Basebenzis' imithi abantu. And their muti is so strong. They use it for evil, the work of Satan. My own sister married one of them. My own sister, can you believe it? She paid for her stubbornness, with her own slife."

"What happened to her?"

"You know she was stubborn. She was not the type to listen to anyone. I told my father the moment she left for Nigeria that he mustn't expect her to return. Nangoku, when her body returned from Nigeria the fly machine that brought her was grounded at OR for eight hours. For eight hours no one was allowed to come close to the fly machine and no one would tell us why."

"Ngumhlola wanton lo undixelela wona? What was the problem?"

"We waited and eventually the body was handed to us. My father, in his old age, didn't know what was happening. Her body had cuts all over. Her own husband had used her corpse to bring drugs into the country. Where have you ever heard of such a thing?"

"Oh Nkosi yam! What killed her?"

"Their post-mortem didn't say what happened to her. They wanted us to believe that she had just *nje*. Just like that. I insisted on another post-mortem. It revealed she was poisoned. My own sister, poisoned, probably by her own husband and her lifeless body used for drugs. I warned my father such a thing would happen but he allowed her to do what she wanted."

It was at this point that I felt like coming in and being part of the conversation.

"I have been listening all this time, sorry bethuna. I don't mean just to butt in. lilusizi ellibali lakho bhuti. But what would you do if you found out someone you knew, and maybe even liked was foreigner?"

"Andinabudlelwane nababantu. Whatever relations I had with them started and ended with my sister."

"Let me make an example. There are people here in the Eastern Cape, who have been here for many years. I had a friend in primary school, her surname was Banda. Her family came from Malawi. She lived among amaXhosa and could only speak their language. Many people didn't know any better..."

Just then my phone my phone rang.

"Ndeyipi mainini, uribho? I'll be in King in 10 minutes. (GET SHONA TRANSLATION)"

The woman in purple turned as soon as she heard me speaking in another language. I watched from the rear view mirror as the driver scowled. His jaw dropped.

"Rha, sies man! Kanti sihamba nomnye wabo apha? In my own car?"

"I honestly thought you would have sniffed me out a long time ago. Seeing that you can smell a foreigner a mile away."

"How did you get into my car? You... you..."

"My father is Shona and my mother a Xhosa, just like you. I spent the first ten years of my life in Zimbabwe, where my mother had studied. I have lived here for nearly 20 years. So, what does that make me?"

"You can chase me out of your precious vehicle. You don't take money from foreigners so for the first time in my life I can say I travelled from PE to King for free. Ndiyabulela."

He was still too shocked to speak. I jumped out at the next robot. I knew where my home was.

April 9

Gut feeling

The fennel seeds floated in the water before settling at the bottom of the cup. Deli took a sip. The infusion smelled like liquorice. It reminded her of father Bra Steve, who used to chew long strips of liquorice while driving long distance. He would let the strips hang over his mouth while he chewed and then slowly suck them in – like one relishing spaghetti but without the mess. She had never liked the bitter after taste at the back of her throat each time she tried to go through a packet of Liquorice Allsorts without first removing the black part.

It was partly because of her father that she was sipping on fennel seed tea while waiting for Monde, her boyfriend of three months. But she was doing it for Monde. He had taken to "dropping in to check you" late at night, announcing his presence when he was already at the gate. "You know I can't sleep if I don't get a kiss. Hawu, baby. Aren't you happy to see me?"

He would leave early the following morning to grab a change of clothing at his place before dashing off to work.

"Don't forget to brush your teeth," she would say before opening the gate for him while standing at the door. She had toyed with the idea of buying a toothbrush for him – one similar to hers but a different colour – that would send out the message that she was single but not available to anyone who used her bathroom.

"Will call you later babe. Maybe I should try leaving early next time? You know traffic to Midrand is a nightmare this time of the morning."

The early mornings seemed to have little effect on her. Waking up an hour before own alarm went off made her tired, but she managed what her colleagues called a "glow".

"We know what you got up to last night," they chirped whenever she yawned or tried to stifle one. They would gather around her desk and try to pry the details of Monde's visit out of her. "Maybe at lunch... but only if you're nice to me."

The click-clack of her fingers on the keyboard and the humming of her laptop were suddenly drowned out by the guttural gurgling of a diesel engine at the gate. She waited for him to announce his arrival at the gate before picking up the remote control.

"It's always nice to see you," he said the moment he stepped out of the cold, and laid his lips on her forehead.

"Are you going to make tea?"

"I was just trying out something new. You can taste, but I doubt you'll like it."

He sipped. "Interesting. But it's not for me. What's that stuff at the bottom?"

"Fennel seeds. It's supposed to make me stop farting so much."

"You need it more than I do then babe. Passing air is not decent."

When he said it the first time she had not been able to control it. They were both reading the Sunday papers at the balcony. She laughed so hard at what a politician was quoted as saying that it just ripped out. Bbbbrrrrrr.... It sounded like a balloon losing air. He scowled.

"Excuse me."

"You must never do that again. It's indecent, especially for a woman."

"I said I was sorry."

Since then she was careful not to do it in front of him; running to the bathroom whenever she felt her stomach about to blow up. She avoided some of her favourite foods and she would find herself craving stir-fries with lots of cabbage and broccoli, lentils on flatbread and three-bean salad. But the condition proved difficult to manage, especially a few days before her period. Avoiding trigger foods did nothing to improve her tempestuous gut.

She sometimes wondered whether they would ever find that level of intimacy so often written about in True Love and Cosmopolitan. "You know he's the one when he laughs off your stink bombs and still finds you sexy with your hairy legs and armpits."

In the middle of the night she is woken up by a persistent tap on her shoulder. She ignores it first, imagining she is dreaming but the taps become heavy blows. A deep voice buzzes in her ears but it sounds like a distant echo. When she finally pries her eyes open she sees round balls of white staring at her. She rubs her eyes and then tugs at the sheet and wipes Monde's shower on her face.

"Wake up Deli! For Christ's sake, wake up!"

"What... What's wrong?"

"I thought you said that vile drink you had earlier was for flatulence? You've been at it the whole night!"

"I can't always help what happens when I am asleep!"

"Can't you hold it in 'til morning? Or at least let it go in the bathroom?"

"You're telling me it doesn't happen to you?"

"As a matter of fact, no."

"Your shit probably doesn't smell too."

"I've told you before it's indecent. I don't know how you can carry on doing it."

Bra Steve had warned her people like Monde. "It's natural, ntombi. Nothing to be ashamed of. Even the Queen does. Don't ever trust people who think such things are beyond them – the type who think their own shit smells of roses."

She looked at the time on her cellphone – 02:47am. "You know there's less traffic – actually there's none – going to Midrand this time of the morning."

"Are you throwing me out?"

She put on her gown and scrambled for the remote control for the gate amid the pants, T-shirts and underwear on the chair next to the bed. She threw his pants and shirt at him and watched him dressing, all the while keeping an eye on the clock.

"You're delaying the struggle bhuti."

"I'll call you later. Maybe your stomach will have settled?" He leaned over to kiss her on the forehead.

"Don't bother. And don't bother checking on me tonight. Or the night after."

April 10

Silke Heiss

Homey. Lover. Friend.

All the feelings I had for Siyanda came flooding back the minute I saw him at the graveyard. I was surprised by how much I remembered about him. I hated myself for being sentimental. Surely all those things didn't matter now? They were dead and buried – just like we buried Boniswa Njoli yesterday.

I had not seen him in three years yet little about him had changed. He was late as usual and had missed the service at the church. He towered over most people under the tent so I spotted him from a distance. I could see his jaw moving rhythmically sideways. He would pop a Stimorol in his mouth whenever he was nervous. He looked suave in his dark aviator glasses and black suit. He knew Bonnie better than most people there but he didn't come forward to *galela umhlaba* as her coffin was lowered to the ground.

Bonnie's family had arranged a room for all of Bonnie's friends to eat so there was no avoiding him. I recognised a few from varsity. Some were people that Bonnie had grown up with. Bonnie's cousins went in and out of the room handing out bottles of cold drink and spoons. Siyanda was the first person to spot me as I stood at the door scanning the room for a place to sit. Our eyes met.

"Hey Tee! Come sit here," he called out from across the room. He got up from the bench he was sitting on and tapped his right foot as I walked over to him. The plate felt heavy in my hand and I thought my knees were going to give in. I felt my eyes welling up and my heart beating in my throat. The room was packed and Bonnie's cousins had to bring in crates because there weren't enough chairs.

I forced a smile. We hugged. It was awkward.

"Hey Siya. Long time, hey? How have you been?"

"Ja, man. It's been a minute. I've been good. Wena?"

I sat down quickly and he took a long sip from his bottle of Coke.

"What's with darkies and beetroot salad? It's there at weddings and Sunday lunches. No occasion is the same without it."

"Ha, that's a first... and rich coming from you! You used to crave the stuff in varsity... women and your funny cravings."

We both laughed.

"Ja, nhe... You still remember that? Bonnie used to bring me a bottle whenever she went home for the weekend." It was strange talking about Bonnie in the past tense, and with Siyanda of all people.

"Did you keep in touch with her after varsity?"

"Other than the odd chain email, not really. Things were never the same after what went down."

I was pissed off by his reply – I wished he had realised that he didn't need to do me any favours. Our relationship had taken a knock after I discovered her after-nine dealings. We had seen each other a few times after I left varsity and we'd email each other once in a while but it was out of courtesy really.

I dashed to my car as soon as the formalities were over and after saying goodbye to Bonnie's mother. It was parked at a neighbour's yard. Siyanda and a few others had parked on pavements. They stood outside their cars with the boots - which were packed with cooler boxes – open.

"Tee! Do you want to join us for drinks later?"

"You mean for after tears? It's not really my scene."

"Where are you going?"

"I'd rather chill at home. You can drop by if you like."

He came. He brought along his whisky and Savannahs; and because my hormones were already getting up to their old tricks I stuck to a single glass of red wine followed by endless cups of rooibos. He spoke about our mutual friends and some of the marketing campaigns he worked on since joining Unilever. He steered clear from Bonnie. I was never one to let things slide so I shot from the hip, or the ducking and diving would have gone on the whole night. His fidgeting was also driving me up the wall. I wasn't expecting a confession, but I wanted him to level with me.

"Are you ever going to tell me what happened between you and Bonnie?"

"You know... We had a thing."

"We had a thing too."

"But you always thought I was a doos."

"Ja, but I can see nothing's changed."

"I really liked you..."

"Sure you liked me. You liked me enough to sleep with my friend."

"Well, that happened and I couldn't change it then. Just like I couldn't change it now."

I lost it then. My ears burnt as blood rushed to my face. I leapt out of my seat and tried to punch him but my arms felt heavy and foreign. They felt as if they weren't mine and they didn't quite fit. For the second time that day I felt my eyes welling up.

I could have kicked myself. It felt as if my own body had betrayed me. I had waited a long time for that moment and had rehearsed the scene many times in my head. But all I could manage was: "Fuck off. And stay out of my life."

He took his alcohol and left.

The floodgates burst the second my head hit the pillow. The effect wasn't nearly as cathartic as I would have wanted it to be. I was still angry at the way I reacted. And I hated thinking that he would have still thought I cared – that I came out so weak.

I woke up glad that I didn't drink too much last night. A hangover on top of all that had happened would have been too much to handle. But I wished I had tidied up after he left last. The glasses we were drinking from were still on the table. I could still see his finger prints on the whisky glass and a whiff of his fragrance still lingered in the air.

A little water and a drop of Sunlight and the smudges on the glass disappeared. It's a pity that some things are not that easy to erase.

April 13

Doreen held her breath as her mother fished out her hands from her blankets, reached out for her left hand and enfolded it in hers. Monica's hands were red and warm. Three calluses at the base of her fingers stuck out like anthills. The rest of the palms were smooth. They looked like they had been stretched and then ironed out; removing whatever creases and wrinkles would have been brought on by old age.

Doreen could see the older woman's eyes widen as she brought her hands to her face. She stared at them for a long time, as if she was studying them. It was as if her eyes had frozen in time and she had forgotten to blink. Doreen felt her eyes welling up and sniffled. She forgot about the warmth of her fingers.

"Ag, don't start. I'm not dead yet," said Monica. Her voice had grown rough and coarse. She spoke as if she wanted to spit something out. Doreen sniffled again, tilted her head back and swallowed hard.

"That's not what I was thinking."

"What day is it anyway? I haven't heard the municipal truck driving past in a long time. It used to wake me up every Wednesday."

"It's Friday. You missed the big royal wedding – William and Kate. I tried to wake you. I thought you'd enjoy it."

"I hope Kate, whoever her name, didn't spoil it by snivelling all over the place," she said propping up a pillow behind her. "I can't remember the last time I was at a wedding."

It was nearly impossible to tell the time of the day inside Monica's room. The heavy brown curtains were always drawn and a study lamp perched on a mahogany chest of drawers burnt day and night. Big and round gold-plated glasses sat next to a small stack of Reader's Digest magazines – the top dated April 1995 – on a butler's tray next to her bed. The magazines competed for space with a box of Hylux white tissues, a tall yellow plastic tumbler and packets of pills.

"Now that I missed the big wedding of... what's her name, what other entertainment do you have lined up?"

"I don't know. You always said TV was a waste of time."

"A glass of bubbly would be nice."

Doreen's eyes bulged and her hand went for the yellow tumbler on the side of the bed. "You can't be seri..."

"Oh lighten up! You were always frigid, even when you were a child." She broke into a fit of laughter. "'Oh Mother, you can't say things like that.' I thought you would lighten up as you got older."

"Can you blame me, with a mother like you?"

"Can't you forget for five minutes?"

Doreen didn't reply but avoided looking at her mother. She focused on her hands, specifically her nails. She fought the urge to bring her nails to her mouth. She hadn't since she arrived at her mother's house a week ago. They had grown, and with her white tips they looked French manicured.

Monica looked at her daughter and then looked at her own nails. They were short and neat and a light shade of pink. "Do you have Cutex? I can't remember the last time I painted my nails."

"I'll check my bag. I'll be back."

Her old room with the three quarter beds had changed little since the time she left. It felt as if the furniture, like her mother, had shrunk. She bumped into both beds and the oak dressing table. She felt like a clumsy giant and that she had been catapulted into some kind of Smallville where she towered over everything.

"We stop growing at a certain age. I couldn't have grown taller..." she thought. She nerve understood why her mother had insisted on two beds for her room when she was an only child and they hardly had visitors because of her mother's "anti-social" tendencies. "I don't like people. They come into space, rearrange your things and your house and then they forget that they have to leave," she would say.

She opened the dresser and took out a brown leather bag. She rummaged through sets of keys, a diary, a notebook and wallet before fishing an old green cosmetic bag. It housed a big nail clipper, a scrunchy for her hair, mascara, lipstick, a small tub of Vaseline and two bottles of nail polish in different shades of pink. She stared at the two bottles but in the end decided to take both to her mother's dungeon.

She found Monica lying on her back with her eyes closed. She opened them but didn't move as Doreen held out the bottles to her.

"Sorry, I only have pink – well, different shades – but pink nonetheless. Choose."

"It doesn't matter. Pick one for me."

Though she thought her mother would prefer the less girly "Pink Nude" she opted for the one named "English Rose" – in the spirit of the royal wedding she imagined.

Monica turned to her side and placed both hands on the edge of her bed. Doreen pulled out sheets of tissue from the box next to the bed and spread them on the bed, before leaning in front of her mother. She gently lifted hers hands and laid them on the tissue. She then rolled the bottle slowly between her palms – shaking it resulted in air bubbles which would cause clumping if applied – she had read in True Love or Cosmo.

She had always envied her mother's long fingers and shapely nails. They always looked a healthy pink compared to her bluish grey tone and dark brown cuticles. Monica would sit in the sun on her days off with dry white wine in a mug.

"What I drink and when I drink it is nobody's business. I know a few people who could do with a dash of vodka or gin in their morning orange juice. Too uptight I tell you!"

She would cut, trim, file, buff and then paint until they glistened in the afternoon sun. It was her Saturday afternoon ritual – just after taking out the last load of washing and hanging it to dry. It would end late at night after her scented bubble bath when she would dab Vaseline on her hands and put socks or gloves on her hands.

As a teenager Doreen was often overwhelmed and irritated by her mother's vanity. "I don't see why I have to wear my worries on my face."

She was constantly surprised by the amount she dedicated to her face and body every day. "Not everything in life is about you, or how you look," she burst out once when she was 14. She was angry that her mother had bought the same pants that she wanted. She kept the Edgars club magazine in her bed and Monica had promised to buy them.

"I knew they would look better on me. Be grateful I saved you the embarrassment. Imagine, an amoeba like you," she cackled, checking herself in the mirror in the tight hipster fit pants, her hands on her waist.

She hated her friends and colleagues' remarks whenever they were together.

"She must take after her father. She looks nothing like you, Mon."

Their glee would be cut short by her standard response.

"Thank goodness for small mercies."

"She has none of your charm either."

"I hope it's just a phase; hormones. I hope I wasn't so grumpy when I was her age," was all Monica would say in her defence. She always hoped she would say more. She hoped she would tell them that she had been at the top of her class since she was in primary school and how she locked herself in the bathroom and cried when her Standard 7 report came with a C symbol for Afrikaans.

"She got a dictionary and would study it for hours until she performed better than the Afrikaans speaking children in her class," she hoped her mother would say.

"I used to think you had the most beautiful hands I had seen. Remember how I used to collect cheese rind and pretend I had long nails?"

"You were so cute then."

"I wanted to look like you, you know."

"Then you grew up and you started to hate me. You turned out better than me actually."

Doreen smiled. She knelt on the floor in front of her mother's bed and rolled the bottle between her palms before twisting it open. The sharp smell of acetone filled the room. She was careful not to smudge.

"Your hands have always reminded me of your father. Especially your nails."

Doreen kept quiet.

"Why? Why now?"

"What do you mean why now?"

"I figured you never wanted to talk about him so I stopped asking."

"We're both old now. I guess we can both handle it."

"I'm not sure I want to know."

"I know I've never said anything about him. I didn't like thinking about him. I would think about him whenever I saw your hands. They were soft – like he had never worked a day in his life. They weren't as small as yours though. He would use Zambuk on his hands you know. Rub a little on his lips and dab a little on his hands and rub them like he was freezing cold."

"What was his name and what did he do with these big soft hands of his?"

"This was exactly what I wanted to avoid. I didn't want you to think you should expect some big reveal. It was never meant to be some confessional."

"Is he still alive? Does he know about me?"

"I sent him a photo of you after you were born. I included an address but he never replied and the letter was not sent back."

"Is that why you always hated me?"

"I never hated you. How could I hate my own flesh and blood?"

"I always had the feeling you didn't like me much, even though I was your daughter."

"What makes you say that?"

"You hardly had anything nice to say to me. You were always telling me I should be dead."

It was one of those few occasions when Monica had volunteered to help Doreen with her hair. It was rough and unyielding to combs and relaxers. While sitting on a sofa in front of the TV Monica ply the scalp of her Blue Magic hair food and comb it while it was still damp. She would then divide it into neat rows from front to back and weave it into neat and tight cornrows. There would be little conversation, apart from the odd instruction – look up! Stop fidgeting! Turn your head and look that way! Doreen would wait for the torture to end while biting her nails. She would bring her hands close to hear before picking on one to attack.

"Let me see your hands," Monica said. "Are they always this cold?"

"Well... Ja.."

"You should be dead."

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"You never had anything nice to say to me. No matter what I did. It sort of confirmed that you never wanted me anyway, though I was your only child."

"It was not a nice thing to say. I realise that now. In a way I was jealous. You were talented, clever and ambitious. You didn't have to rely on your looks alone to get what you wanted in life. Your

hands... that was directed at your father. I expended so much energy trying to forget but I couldn't. He was around, all the time. I just had to look at your hands and be reminded of him."

April 17, 2011

Robert Berold

The hand that gives

Can you believe the nerve of some people? I had just sat down for supper – grilled pork chops – youknow I had been craving meat the whole day at work and I could hardly concentrate; I could just smell them in the air. Jessus man, I felt like I had been in that office for 47 years – longer than Mandela on the island I tell you.

I had just sat down in front of the TV – those chops man, they turned out better than I imagined. I had a sweet potatoes on the side; boiled just for a few minutes with their skin on and a handful of peas – I can't stand the stuff but the doctor said I must try to have all the right colours in my food so I eat peas though they smell funny and they roll around the plate and I can't catch them whether I eat with a spoon or fork. I always eat them last and I end up picking them one by one with my hands.

I sit down on the table with my pork chops, the freakin' peas, sweet potatoes, and a bit of coleslaw left over from my Kentucky dinner last night and I am just about to change channels 'cos I know from that McCain chop-chop advert that it is 6:27and time for Sewende Laan. I can already hear the doo-doo-tu in my head when this knocks comes at the door. I freeze with the remote in my hand. My mouth cracks open a bit and I can feel the spit oozing out at the corner so I close my mouth and I listen. I want to be sure I heard right. Who in their right mind comes to visit this time? Didn't their parents tell them it's wrong to visit when the curtains have been drawn and the lamps lit?

I stand there over my food and I hear this bastard scream: Vincent man open up I know you is there, I just want to ask you something real quick. I ask: Can't it wait, I am going to see you mos on tomorrow on the train. No Vincent man I won't be long I just sommer want to ask you something quick-quick man and what's that smell coming out of your flat? I ask him are you here for the smell or do you have something to ask me? I feel bad man so I put the remote down, switch to SABC2 and I open the door and he says Jessus man, Vincent what took you so long have you forgotten who your neighbours are? I see you are watching Sewende Laan – you're no better than my ouma, hey. You know her eyes are bad but she still watches the stuff. It looks like you were about to have a feast here so how about a happie for your neighbour? Blessed is the hand that gives says the Good Book.

He looks at me straight in the eye and I get up to get a side plate but by the time I comeback he has already helped himself to my pork chop! I tell you man I have never been so woes! I dropped the plate and sommer told him to fokof. Can you believe he got up and took the rest of the meat with

him. I was so woes that I couldn't even watch the rest of Sewende Laan. The blerry nerve! And I swore that was the last time I open the door for anyone at supper time.

Glitter-ring Zee – assignment 2

There we were trawling the shops at Hemingways. I hooked my arm in his and leaned on his shoulder as we strolled from shop to shop. People – mostly middle aged women and their husbands – stared. I pretended not to notice.

I would have preferred something more exclusive though. Definitely something that said designer and less American Swiss or little tourist shop at the airport. But we were in East London and had to make do with what it had to offer.

There was no mistaking who I was. I was the First Lady, his government. I was Madame Speaker. Yeah, baby. And I looked the part. I looked hot in my brown Steve Madden shoes, crisp white shirt and A-line skirt. I topped the outfit with pearls. There was no way I was going to dress down for this. I didn't want those skanky shop assistants to think that I was one of them or that we couldn't afford the ring.

I had treated my dear husband-to-be to breakfast at Gourmet – a classy restaurant at the beach front. I had fruit salad and coffee. "Love, you know you can't have sausage and bacon– doctor's orders. I don't have to remind you about your cholesterol," I said.I was the attentive caring wife already. I let him have an avocado, poached eggs and toast. He spoke about "expanding myself" into business. "I think consulting is the way to go, baby. Consult the same people I work for. They pay good money to let so-called-experts to tell them what they know already." I didn't criticise. I acted interested. I asked questions. I encouraged. "That's fantastic love. I know you'd be great."

He seemed confused when I brought it up. He changed his mind when he saw how I hurt I was – that saying it hurt me more than it hurt him. I had to think long and hard about how to break the news to him. I didn't want to smash his ego.

I was angry and disappointed when he gave me the ring but I had to calm down. I sat down and thought about it. I realised that leaving the ring on the kitchen table was not the best idea. I didn't want him to think I was rejecting him when in fact I was rejecting the monstrosity the lucky packet ring represented. So I took the ring and put it back in its box and left it on the side of the bed. I was already asleep when he came home, which worked out better because I didn't want him to think that this was a confrontation. I woke him up in the morning with kisses on his eyelids and forehead.

"Wake up, baby. I missed you last night."

"O madoda! My woman misses me."

I told him how much I loved him. "I want to grow old with you. I want to have your babies. I want our children to look at us and know that true love is possible. I want my ring to be a symbol of that. Something that will outlive our marriage. I want it to be a legacy for our children. Just imagine, baby, if our future son... if Xhanti asked for his love's hand with the same ring. Just imagine if Xhanti passed the ring on to his son and so on. We can't do that with a cubic zirconia baby. It's cute. But cute doesn't last baby."

Leaving a legacy appealed to him so he said: "Only the best for my baby... and my baby's babies."

So off we went on Friday. We went into shops that were named after actual people – Desmond Diamonds, Collins Finery and Robert Bell. They had been in the family for years. They were brightly lit – maybe it was the diamonds – and had an antique charm about them. I knew the moment I walked into Hills Decadent Diamonds that I would find The One there. There she was – more beautiful than I could have imagined. Three perfect diamonds on white gold. "Please remember Ma'am that this design is exclusive to Hill's Decadent. You won't find anyone else in the country with the same ring," sang the assistant. It was music to my ears. "We will resize the ring for you at no extra cost. You have such small and beautiful fingers."

That's how we found Kimberly – Kimmy for short. I walked out feeling I had found my new best friend.

Mxolisi Nyezwa

The space between us

"You haven't come to see me in four weeks."

There is no hiding my guilt. I slouch in the plastic garden chair and ask him how he is. I bite on my hangnails and wait for his reply. The skin around the cuticles becomes inflamed. I flatten the piece of skin with my thumb and wait for the pain to surge and my ears to flush.

I am not surprised by the words that come out of his mouth; which seem to ooze out of him with limited movement to his face.

"When are you going to get me out of this place? Talk to the doctors here; you just need to tell them I am ready to go and I'll be out of here. I have been in this place for nearly a year now. How do you expect me to get better in a place like this?"

He speaks softly and slowly, like a child who has been roused from sleep. I can almost see him rubbing his eyes with the back of his hands. I blink and lift my eyes to him but instead his hands reach out for one of the navy Tupperware containers on the small wooden table in the centre of the room.

A buxom nurse walks in and hands me a register to sign.

"For our records. And to monitor the progress of our patients. Are you comfortable? Would you like more chairs?"

I reckon she asked out of habit. There are five chairs and only the two of us in the room. Tiny spiders – which have made themselves at home on the legs of the garden chair he is seating on - crawl on his arms and back.

Insects seem to be the only creatures that thrive in the place. Shiny black ants scuttled out of cracks on the ground outside the ward and ambled up the legs of my pants as I walked in. The air dries my eyes and nostrils. I reach for my tub of Vaseline and shove blobs of the jelly up my nose.

"Did you bring bananas? You must bring lots of bananas. And maybe peanut butter. The portions of food here are really small."

"Haven't you had lunch *kanti*?"

I check the time on my cellphone – 13: 42. Lunch would have been served at noon or 12:30 the latest.

"Aren't you listening? I said the portions in this place are small. I keep telling you to leave money for bread and to bring lots of bananas so I can have something to eat for supper. You know we eat supper at 4pm like prisoners. By six I am hungry again."

"You said you didn't want bananas the last time I was here. You said you didn't like how they felt in your mouth when you chewed them."

"I know exactly what I said to you! I keep telling you I don't like fatty food and I don't want to eat meat. Rastas must be on to something. Have you ever seen a Rasta in this place? I am sick and tired of being shunted between hospitals. Can you imagine nine months, almost ten, in this fucking place?"

Spaghetti hangs from the corners of his mouth as he speaks.

"I'm no schizo. I hear *amawethu* speaking to me. But they don't speak to me in isiXhosa. They speak some language that sounds like isiZulu. My birth certificate says I was born in East London. But why won't you tell me the truth about where I was born? They tell me I was born somewhere else. Johannesburg, sometimes Bloemfontein. Tell me now – where was I born? There's no disputing *amawethu*."

"You were born at Frere Hospital, East London. I was there."

He rummages through the plastic bags again, tossing the bag of apples, biltong and packet of sultanas aside. He takes out a drumstick from the Tupperware. As if on cue, a face presses on the window.

"Will you leave some meat for us too Biza?"

"Go away Dino! I said I would give you money for cigarettes. I haven't forgotten!"

Another comes to the window and then another until the window resembles the display window of a furniture shop in town on the day of the derby.

"Will you bring us food too mama kaBiza? When you come to see Biza again you will bring us something too *nhe*?"

I avoid their eyes and bite my nails again.

Irritated, he gets up to close the curtain.

"You won't forget nhe mama kaBiza?"

Their voices echo in my head. I can feel their eyes boring through the brown floral curtain.

I wonder if he does the same when other families come to visit. He is too proud. He would never allow himself to do that, I console myself. I tilt my head back and swallow.

"Rather give them the apples. There isn't enough meat here for everyone. Even the fruit won't be enough for all of them."

"They don't get visitors. I buy cigarettes for them or BB when I have money. Those who work in the kitchen steal bread for us to eat at night."

His lips glisten against the ashy pallor of his face and arms.

I promise to leave enough money for bread and cigarettes with the nurses and to come back the following week.

"You still don't want to get me out of this place?"

He leaves before I can answer.

May 8, 2011

Hazel Crampton

The magic of love

Though dark and small, the windowless consulting room was surprisingly clean. The smell of tobacco lingered in the air. I was greeted by a "WELLCOME" embroidered in bold green on a white cloth nailed to the door. I left my shoes outside.

A long brown curtain strung on old pantyhose divided the room. Cans and glass bottles lined the shelves on the wall. Dr Mukisa sat on a grass mat and brandished a whisk. He wore a leopard print vest and khaki pants.

I stood glued to the ground in front of his mat. My eyes wandered and finally rested on the black blobs floating in yellowish liquid in one of the bottles. Perhaps sensing my trepidation, he pointed his whisk at the floor. I interpreted his signal as an order to sit.

He snorted snuff into his nostrils and waved his whisk at imaginary flies buzzing around his ears. He sneezed into a white handkerchief and shook his rusty locks. He spoke after I put three R10 notes on the lid of a Sunbeam tin on the floor between us.

"Young man like you. Must be a woman or job. I am right?"

"It's a woman Baba."

He went behind the curtain and returned with a small mirror and water in a 2litre Coke bottle. He waved his whisk over the bottle and muttered something in a language I had never heard before. His ritual done, he ordered me to drink. The water was tepid, salty and sweet. He looked on and nodded as I gulped mouthfuls. I loosened my belt and shifted uncomfortably and awaited his treatment. He ordered me to blow on each side of the mirror three times, then say what I wanted.

"I want her to come back. I want to be the only one who can make her happy." I stopped myself from saying more. I had been warned against saying too much to men like Dr Mukisa. "You must have faith and let them work their magic," I was told.

He put more snuff in his nostrils and made a big show of sneezing into his stained handkerchief, grunting and clearing his throat.

"The wise ones heard you."

He disappeared behind the curtain again and I could hear the ruffling of paper and the clinking of metal.

"Here is my herbs to help you same time. Doctor is challenging all problems will be solved; bring back lost lovers 30mins and bind using solokho bheka mina ngedwa – to love you alone, dream and think about you. 100% guarantee. If not happy come back after eight days."

He ordered me to get up and pressed something wrapped in old newspaper in the palm of my hand.

"Only for you to see. You wash every day and night. Understand?"

He ushered me out.

I saw her on my way home, standing under a bus shelter. I slowed down. Leaning across, I rolled down the window.

"I am going home. I can give you a lift if you like."

"You can't keep doing this. I told you I wanted nothing to do with you anymore."

To avoid the stares from the people around her, I drove off. I fingered Dr Mukisa's parcel in my shirt pocket while waiting at a robot. I ran a bath when I got home and sprinkled the herbs and tree bark in the water. I slept peacefully that night, for the first time in weeks.

The past few weeks had been rough. She ignored my calls. She wouldn't even answer private numbers. I resorted to calling her on the landline at work. She would hang up the minute she realised it was me. A few times she started singing while I was still talking. I pleaded. I threatened. But nothing I said or did changed her mind.

She sent an email the following day and asked to meet at McDonald's near her office. I washed my face in the basin in the bathroom and asked for hand lotion from one of the ladies in the office before going out to meet her. I was surprised that Dr Mukisa's magic seemed to be working already.

"Thank you for coming," she smiled as I sat down. I was blown away by her tone. It reminded me of the joy in the first few months of our relationship. Though I hadn't meant to, the words just came out: "I missed you."

The smiled faded from her lips.

"OK. It seems there is no nice way of doing this. You need to love and respect yourself first. That stunt you pulled at the bus shelter in front of my colleagues, not on. It can't happen again. Understand? You can't keep embarrassing me like that."

I was back at Dr Mukisa's dark room before the eight days. He seemed to recognise me from the last visit.

"Oh... young man with lady problem? She come back, but short time neh? Double the offering and I help you with super strong herbs. Same time!"

I dropped three R20 notes in the Sunbeam lid and waited.

May 8

Hazel Crampton

We never really die

NguThompson ehleli. She is the living image of Thompson. I heard this many times when I was a child.

I had satellite dishes for ears. My ears seemed to grow faster than the rest of my body. "You can pick up news from far away," friends and family would tease. "Just like Thompson. Look at him, he is the living image of Tatomkhulu Thompson.

I was always curious of Thompson. I imagined I was a smaller version of great grandfather Thompson though I had never seen him.

It was only when I was about 13 that I actually saw Thompson. My mother and aunt discovered old letters and documents buried in a trunk at their birthplace in Cala in the Trasnkei. There was a photo of the legendary Thompson; tall, lanky and proud in a suit and velskoene.

"Now you see what we were talking about all this time?" asked my mother and her sisters almost in unison.

His face was lean but not bony and his long ears seemed almost ornamental. They reminded me of pictures from old National Geographic magazines of tribesmen who stretched their earlobes with round disks.

The discovery inspired my mother and aunts to action. Early the next morning we set out looking for uncle Paulie. My uncle was infamous in the village for his love of Klippies – but without Coke – and the rudest swear words. We found him nursing a babalaas at one of the houses where a cow had been slaughtered the previous day.

"It's a little late for you don't you think? This is time for the big men in the village, when we drink the last dregs of mqombothi in the barrels."

"You must come home and act like a man. You have responsibilities waiting for you."

He grumbled but he had no choice but to do what he was told. He listened to my mother because she was older than him though he was the nkulu – the only surviving son of the home.

That was how we came to clearing weeds in the plot where Thompson, my great grandmother and my grandparents were buried. My mother and aunts saved money and four tombstones were erected that Easter.

"At times we forget that our forebears live within us, that their blood runs in the veins. We neglect the places where we laid them to rest, forgetting that they too like comfortable homes and being surrounded by beautiful things," said my mother the day we unveiled the tombstones.

May 15

Robert Berold

The first story I read by Liesl Jobson was about a woman who couldn't convince her husband to buy toilet paper in a colour other than pink or yellow. Because I couldn't get my head around a man who insisted that toilet paper match the tiles and other accessories in the bathroom, I quickly forgot about the book. Of course the story wasn't just about toilet paper, but it was soon buried under files of assignments in my hard drive.

I came across Liesl Jobson again while going through literary journals at the NELM this week. I didn't immediately recognise her as the toilet paper story writer. I enjoyed "Greetings" – a story published in the 2007 edition of Botsotso. It was about a woman with an eating disorder who finds ingenious ways of evading her husband's constant monitoring of her feeding habits and lies through her weekly therapy sessions.

This story and another – "What Goes Around, Comes Around" by Mongi Maphipha were the only two that stuck out and I could remember when I returned to the museum the following day. I was disappointed that there was nothing else by Mongi Maphipha in the NELM database. The story, about a man who seduces and eventually rapes his stepdaughter, appeared to be the only one he had ever published. A Google search also yielded very little; other than that he worked in the retail industry as a sales consultant.

Liesl Jobson on the other hand, featured prominently on the Internet and in other journals such as New Contrast, which had published volumes of her poems. A recognised flash fiction writer, her flash fiction book "100 Papers", which features the toilet paper story titled "Shopping List", was published in 2008 by Botsotso.

I was surprised to learn that she had also worked as a communication officer for the South African Police Service. I was more surprised that no one in the service had thought of using her writing skills to train the police in writing simple, comprehensible statements. The only things they got right at the time that I worked as a journalist were court dates and if they were lucky, the charges against the accused.

My electronic copy of her flash fiction book came in handy because I could read more of her stories, including "Shopping List", which I liked this time. I enjoyed her stories because they were short and not a labour to read – a reviewer wrote that one could start reading a flash fiction story and finish it

while enjoying a smoke. I also enjoyed that they revolved around relationships in different homes and were tasty snippets of different cultures in South Africa. Some were funny and others tragic.

A reviewer said "100 Papers" contained "deeply South African flashes of life, seconds of inspired clarity breaking through the commonplace... all created from finely considered observations. The 100 papers contain a seed of quiet optimism."

Based on the little that I have read by Jobson I am inclined to believe what she has said about writing poetry may also apply to her flash fiction work. "A poem usually nudges me on waking, arriving as a vague bodily experience, some rolling in my gut, a discontented neck or yearning in my wrists. The drama of dailiness starts this visceral encounter and a clutter of words fills a page."

The two stories I read in Botsotso convinced me that I could submit work for the publication. It was more user-friendly than the other journals. It remained true to its ethos of publishing material "about the varied cultures and life experiences of people in South Africa as expressed in many languages spoken and written in our country".

The two stories were completely different but they seemed to fit perfectly in the magazine. I also liked that it could publish material by someone who was recognised such as Liesl Jobson and an unknown like Mongi Maphipha in the same edition. I couldn't help noticing that the same writers appear in most of the journals. Arja Salafranca, Vonani Bila and Kobus Moolman appeared regularly. It gave me the impression that it could give someone liked me who has never published before, a chance. I also liked its neat layout – it made it seem unpretentious. It was not "in-your-face" like Itch, which felt more like a graphic design magazine with its bold and bright visuals.

I didn't enjoy reading through the pre-2006 editions of Kotaz. The 2006 edition featuring Zimbabwean writers stood out. It was put together well. It made me look forward to reading more works by Southern African writers. I will look out for Stanley Makuwe in the future. Kotaz also appealed because of its mix of English and isiXhosa writing. It

I also enjoyed reading Wordsetc. I liked that one could get it at bookshops. I had seen it before at Exclusive Books and and Xarra Books. I enjoyed the focus on South African women fiction writers in the August 2008 edition. I liked that its magazine format. One could read it in the same way that one reads a magazine. It didn't feel that one should be interested in a particular culture (for example Ons Klyntjie would appeal to the punk generation). It wasn't immediately clear whether it would accept submissions from writers who had not yet published.

Though not on the list I would also submit short stories to Drum magazine. It published short stories submitted by its readers every month, although they tend to be about romantic relationships. The exposure could be good for a writer who is starting out.

EXCERPTS FROM REFLECTIVE JOURNAL

February 14

It feels a bit strange. I still can't get used to it. It feels like I have been programmed. Writing anything beyond 800 words is daunting. I am finding that there are differences between reporting and writing. My brain gets tired and every inch of my being screams that I am writing fluff! Anything longer than that feels contrived. I am also wondering how Frans Pule – based on a woman I did a story on a long time – will transform. In essence, I have to make things up about her, using what I remember from the interview. I wish I hadn't left my old notebooks behind.

February 17

I haven't enjoyed short stories as much as I have Chimamanda Adichie Ngozi's "The thing around your neck". I admire her style of writing. I enjoyed her two previous books as well, mostly because they gave me a glimpse of times and places I would not have known about.

Her stories, which are very good, are told simply. That's what makes her writing sooooo beautiful for me. She doesn't try to be funny or clever. The people feel real, like the type of people that you would end up with in a queue or a taxi. Her characters are accessible. They either reminded me of someone I knew or someone I had heard about.

They made me think about the different types of people I could encounter if I just struck up more conversations with different people and the type of stories that I could pick if I just listened more. They didn't feel like they were made up. I wonder how much imagination, as opposed to fact, went into them.

February 18

The journalist in me just won't shut up hey? What a long intro, I thought while reading the first page of the first story in Dos Passos's trilogy USA. It's a pity I couldn't bring myself to read more than two pages. The book came highly recommended.

My feedback session wasn't so bad. I expected worse. I felt like I had made a mess of Frans Pule. I am also still not used to having my work scrutinized and criticized. At least the criticism is constructive. I appreciated it because I felt stuck with Frans Pule, my long suffering character. Something told me I had to continue to reveal a little more about her son, but I thought it was safer to stick to the brief.

But now I have to introduce Frans's son Thabiso to the mix. What kind of wife I must give him? How do you link characters? How do you link them to others and the things that happen around them? What kind of wife must I give him? Should she live up to his mother's standards? Should the mother and wife get along? Should Thabiso get a wife at all?

I have to make the piece longer, twice as long as the 1000 or so words... yho, that's a first!

February 26

Yesterday's feedback session was the best so far. I was so much more confident in what I had written. It was easier for me to write that piece of flash fiction. My training as a journalist definitely helped. Though I went over the 300 word limit, it was compact and told the story well. I still battle with dialogue for the characters I create though, and it showed. The group felt that the dialogue sounded like quotes in a newspaper article and they weren't coherent. The fact that I put them together after writing the story may also have had something to do with.

I am still enjoying Abyssinian Chronicles. I hope to finish it this week. It's the best book I have read so far. Though they have nothing obvious in common, it reminded me of Zadie Smith's White Teeth. I wonder why?

March 1

I spent the morning with Liz. From about 11am we brain stormed about out characters for the dialogue four our next assignment. I was a little nervous about it when given the assignment because I know that writing dialogues was one of my weak points. The dialogue I had submitted for the previous assignment sounded like journalistic quotes, someone in class remarked. I have to admit they were right. Having written the story first, it was difficult for me to write a dialogue separately. This was also partly because the story I wrote had so few characters, so having a separate dialogue was going to be a bit tricky. The characters - two boys aged 10 and 17, were not people I had contact with on a daily basis. Getting into their minds, letting them speak and giving insight into their characters was not easy. They were also white. We both had to imagine what would matter to them and what they were to speak about, were they to come together. The situation that Liz suggested gave us a way in; and only then did we manage to piece together what they would talk about and the type of vibe that would make their conversation. After about two hours, we had a draft, which we agreed we would work on the following day. The exercise made me realise that I would not only deal with matters relating to black women in my age group. I realised then that I would have to write about people who were foreign to me as well, and maybe imagine situations that I would not normally find myself.

March 2

I have been scouring the internet, trying to get an idea of what tweens and teens like and what they do. I did not get much in terms of what they speak about, and how they speak. My part of the dialogue just sounds a bit harsh, maybe too abrasive. We still have time to tweak it here and there, so I am not really worried about it. I think we have a good idea of what our characters are like, based I must admit, on a generalised understanding of what they would talk about, characters we have seen in films, music and magazine, a little on our own experiences and what we know about relatives and others. It was great working with someone; having someone to bounce off ideas with.

As for my dialogue?

That was quite fun to write, though I worried that it sounded like I was overgeneralising. It was fun putting my snob cap on. I just hope that it sounds credible, because my character does sound a bit over the top. She is not as sensible as I would be.

March 8

I don't have a poem yet but I resolved when I woke up this morning, to be extra vigilant in looking for images that I can use in my poems. The plan, therefore, is not only to look at striking images but also sounds, words, feelings, touch, anything really I can put on paper. I am getting frustrated. I even have a book I got from Songeziwe with some old poems I remember from high school. I spent some time at a park, just watching people going by and reading a magazine. I also jotted down a few of the images that I saw, but nothing really struck me as awesome or out of the ordinary. I had a brief but interesting conversation with Rastafarians. I am not sure how I can use that in a poem. I have also read a few poems on the net. Working with image is easier said than done.

March 13

I spent a lot of time reading my three poems. It felt like I had exhausted them and I did not change them much. I find editing my own work rather frustrating and reading it over and over again is quite painful. I punctuated them as was suggested, but I really couldn't see beyond what I had written. Even that was tricky. I had to consult some sources on the net; trying to see which punctuation marks do what and how they would work. I don't know how they would work but I tried.

March 15

I had an interesting two hours of supervision today. I was so tired by the time I was through but I was happy. Paul asked some difficult questions. It is often difficult to say why I like what I do. Most of the time I cannot. It's easier to say you like something because it is funny – just about everyone can be touched or can relate to humour. Some books can be boring or sad but something will make me keep on reading. Good writing takes me somewhere I have never been – not just a physical space but to thoughts, ideas, emotions that I couldn't imagine. It carries you through, no matter the number of pages. Paul also suggested some books; mostly short stories but non-fiction as well. One book was about poetry. He suggested that I could apply to other forms of writing. I still find his suggestion of writing badly to overcome the fear to write a bit strange. It makes sense somehow. I guess the pressure to write well the first time still overwhelms me. Secretary Namhla is proving difficult to kill. Who should I pick for my supervisor?

March 16

I have come to realize that writing, sometimes, can be like navigating a ship or driving a car. The thing being written needs to be steered in the desired direction. It is not always good to let yourself as the driver to be taken over. I don't feel like I am going anywhere with the story I started. The plan was to go with a "secondary" memory I had while in class. It came after the original one – which I felt would be tricky to write about. Three pages into what I have written so far it has morphed into something else. It feels like I have tried to cram too much into this one little story. I am not really sure what I am trying to say. I have an idea, but it is becoming hard to articulate. But from the stories that I have read it has become clear that the conclusion can be left open. Some of the stories don't even seem to have a conclusion. They leave the reader guessing, wondering at all the possibilities and the possible ending. I also noticed a tendency to read the stories of writers I had heard of before, like Chimamanda Adichie Ngozi in the Granta collection. I don't think I have found someone who writes short stories as well...

March 21

I finally plucked up the courage to read Mzi Mahola's feedback on the poems I wrote. I expected the worst – poetry is not my scene. I appreciate the suggestions he made. The stylistics of it require being able to recite it, and I still cringe at the thought of reading my work out loud, especially in front of an audience – no matter how small. I am also not certain I should invest a lot of time on something I don't feel I shall be taking forward. I can always apply the suggestions to what I shall be working on for the final project – which is short stories. I found little joy or satisfaction in writing poetry. It was just frustrating.

Joan Metelerkamp spoke a lot about authority in writing and shutting out some of the voices in the head. Reminded me of Secretary Namhla. This however could make writing so much more personal because writing about something you know becomes much easier, and better. You don't want to be too obvious though. Maybe I should have some kind of disclaimer like: ANY SIMILARITY TO REAL LIFE CHARACTERS OR SITUATION IS PURELY COINCIDENTAL.

April 21

I am re-reading some stories from The Thing Around Your Neck. I am still enjoying the stories. I enjoyed Chinua Achebe's No Longer at Ease last week. It was over too soon. But it was punchy. Every encounter with a different character added a layer to the story. And these layers come together in the end. Throughout there is a hint, a tease of what is to come. The story starts at the end and then flashes back. You know what the end is going to be, but you read anyway because getting there is so intriguing. In both books there are no happy endings. Just like in life.

May 4

I started reading Julia Cameron's The Complete Artist's Way after it was suggested by Brian Walters. Cameron regards writing as a spiritual exercise. I have never looked at it that way. I don't know if I see it that way. Right now it's some sort of adventure – a way for me so determine what I am capable of. It's like a year-long Survivor immunity challenge. I have no idea what I am going to do once I finish the course. I don't know whether I will keep writing. If I do I don't know what I will write.

After reading a few pages of Cameron's book I realise that I am trapped in the same thing I was running away from when I left journalism. Writing is a very personal (and in some instances, political) exercise. You can't distance who you are or your being from it. It is taxing physically and emotionally – at least for me. As a writer you expose parts of yourself to your readers. Even if these aspects are not entirely true (for example, fantasies and things that are based or influenced by real experiences), the reader is most likely to pin them on you. There is very little separation of fact from fiction where they are concerned. They sometimes can't separate the creation from the creator. That's one of the things that make me reluctant to write because most of what I have written has been influenced by my own experiences.

I hit on what I thought would be a lucky find – a page full of traditional healer and quack adverts in a tabloid newspaper. I found most of them hilarious! I didn't know that people could actually sell themselves like that. What was probably more shocking was the thought that there were people who believed the things written in those ads. They just didn't appeal to me – not in the way that

they were intended anyway. They were more outrageous than the pamphlet that Hazel gave us in class. The pamphlet had more medical stuff – not that I could believe any of the treatment that was spoken about. It was amazing that so many of the "ailments" that these quacks claimed to be capable of healing had to with love – muti to bring back a lover, muti to ensure that your lover only has eyes for you. They were also about breast and penis enlargers – all to make people more appealing. No wonder so many books – whether non-fiction or fairy tales – always have romance. I always try to avoid romance because at times it just kills a story, especially if it feels forced. But I guess like the pamphlet Hazel gave us and the ads in the newspaper, love and romance clearly show the complexities of human beings and their interaction with each other. They show desires, frustrations and aspirations. They can expose people to situations that they would have never imagined. They are tests of strength and character. They create links where there would have been none. They expose emotions. Maybe that's why writers find their pull so irresistible.

May 5

I was nervous about my meeting with Brian the whole week. I felt better afterwards though because it made me realise that I had actually started on my big project. It makes it slightly less daunting. I still have to go through the same stories I had sent Brian and edit them. He has made suggestions. I was amazed by his interpretation of some of the stories. He saw significance in things that I didn't. For example in my Makoti story, he saw the Welcome Dover coal stove as a symbol of traditional values, while I had put it in the story because it was what I remembered of homes in the villages. The symbolism behind it was not intentional. This made me realise that it would be impossible to correctly predict what stories mean to readers. An attentive reader will not only read (and maybe even enjoy) the story for the simple narrative but will also find significance for it in other areas of their lives. Maybe that is the spirituality that Julia Cameron writes about?

May 9

It is amazing just how many literary magazines and journals there are in SA. I had heard of only one before joining the course – Wordsetc. I wrote a reviewer of Fred Khumalo's book Seven Steps to Heaven for the publisher and editor Phakama Mbonambi – because we worked in the same building. I had seen only two editions of the magazine – the inaugural and the one focusing on women writers in Southern Africa.

I considered myself a reader before coming to the course. I collected a number of books from my undergraduate days and the reviews I did at Sowetan. But after today's class I realised just how little I knew about what was there in writing in South Africa. The landscape in South Africa seems a

members only club. You have to have stuff published in the journals to know about them. How do you get published if you don't know anything about what is there? It's a pity that they can't be found in supermarkets and shops like magazines and newspapers. They would reach more people that way.

May 13

The first story I read by Liesl Jobson was about a woman who couldn't convince her husband to buy toilet paper in a colour other than pink or yellow. Because I couldn't get my head around a man who insisted that toilet paper match the tiles and other accessories in the bathroom, I quickly forgot about the book. Of course the story wasn't just about toilet paper, but it was soon buried under files of assignments in my hard drive.

I came across Liesl Jobson again while going through literary journals at the NELM this week. I didn't immediately recognise her as the toilet paper story writer. I enjoyed "Greetings" – a story published in the 2007 edition of Botsotso. It was about a woman with an eating disorder who finds ingenious ways of evading her husband's constant monitoring of her feeding habits and lies through her weekly therapy sessions.

This story and another – "What Goes Around, Comes Around" by Mongi Maphipha were the only two that stuck out and I could remember when I returned to the museum the following day. I was disappointed that there was nothing else by Mongi Maphipha in the NELM database. The story, about a man who seduces and eventually rapes his stepdaughter, appeared to be the only one he had ever published. A Google search also yielded very little; other than that he worked in the retail industry as a sales consultant.

Liesl Jobson on the other hand, featured prominently on the Internet and in other journals such as New Contrast, which had published volumes of her poems. A recognised flash fiction writer, her flash fiction book "100 Papers", which features the toilet paper story titled "Shopping List", was published in 2008 by Botsotso.

I was surprised to learn that she had also worked as a communication officer for the South African Police Service. I was more surprised that no one in the service had thought of using her writing skills to train the police in writing simple, comprehensible statements. The only things they got right at the time that I worked as a journalist were court dates and if they were lucky, the charges against the accused.

My electronic copy of her flash fiction book came in handy because I could read more of her stories, including "Shopping List", which I liked this time. I enjoyed her stories because they were short and not a labour to read – a reviewer wrote that one could start reading a flash fiction story and finish it while enjoying a smoke. I also enjoyed that they revolved around relationships in different homes and were tasty snippets of different cultures in South Africa. Some were funny and others tragic.

A reviewer said "100 Papers" contained "deeply South African flashes of life, seconds of inspired clarity breaking through the commonplace... all created from finely considered observations. The 100 papers contain a seed of quiet optimism."

Based on the little that I have read by Jobson I am inclined to believe what she has said about writing poetry may also apply to her flash fiction work. "A poem usually nudges me on waking, arriving as a vague bodily experience, some rolling in my gut, a discontented neck or yearning in my wrists. The drama of dailiness starts this visceral encounter and a clutter of words fills a page."

The two stories I read in Botsotso convinced me that I could submit work for the publication. It was more user-friendly than the other journals. It remained true to its ethos of publishing material "about the varied cultures and life experiences of people in South Africa as expressed in many languages spoken and written in our country".

The two stories were completely different but they seemed to fit perfectly in the magazine. I also liked that it could publish material by someone who was recognised such as Liesl Jobson and an unknown like Mongi Maphipha in the same edition. I couldn't help noticing that the same writers appear in most of the journals. Arja Salafranca, Vonani Bila and Kobus Moolman appeared regularly. It gave me the impression that it could give someone liked me who has never published before, a chance. I also liked its neat layout – it made it seem unpretentious. It was not "in-your-face" like Itch, which felt more like a graphic design magazine with its bold and bright visuals.

I didn't enjoy reading through the pre-2006 editions of Kotaz. The 2006 edition featuring Zimbabwean writers stood out. It was put together well. It made me look forward to reading more works by Southern African writers. I will look out for Stanley Makuwe in the future. Kotaz also appealed because of its mix of English and isiXhosa writing. It

I also enjoyed reading Wordsetc. I liked that one could get it at bookshops. I had seen it before at Exclusive Books and and Xarra Books. I enjoyed the focus on South African women fiction writers in the August 2008 edition. I liked that its magazine format. One could read it in the same way that one reads a magazine. It didn't feel that one should be interested in a particular culture (for example

Ons Klyntjie would appeal to the punk generation). It wasn't immediately clear whether it would accept submissions from writers who had not yet published.

Though not on the list, I would also submit short stories to Drum magazine. It publishes short stories submitted by its readers every month, although they tend to be about romantic relationships. The exposure could be good for a writer who is starting out.

May 17

It seems writers struggle with the "inspirational" part of writing more than technical issues – that's if the number of inspirational books are anything to go by. Wallace Stegner's On Teaching and Writing Fiction covers some of the issues that Cameron looks, though without the writing exercises. A book on writing for stage and films (The Dramatic Writer's Companion by Will Dunne) provides insights on improving the dramatic arts, though these can be applied to fiction writing. I like the fact that it is divided into chapters and each looks at certain categories so that one doesn't need to read the whole book. I wish though that there were books on editing, because I rely mostly on instinct to edit stories.

May 19

Liesl Jobson said she was driven to write by an irrepressible physical urge to put words on paper. She said: "A poem usually nudges me on waking, arriving as a vague bodily experience, some rolling in my gut, a discontented neck or yearning in my wrists. The drama of dailiness starts this visceral encounter and a clutter of words fills a page."

She is lucky. The "nudge" does not come to me every day, though I wish it would. I spend most of the time that I should be writing deliberating, sifting through folders in my brain, trying to pick memories that I would like to see on a page.

I am always looking for an image, something someone said, an incident or a feeling to incite that urge. These are the things that I like to write about. When any of these things come, they haunt my thoughts and daily experiences until I decide to write them down. And then they usually take on a life of their own. I therefore regard writing as an act of submission.

I think of these and thoughts, much like Julia Cameron, in symbolic terms. She writes in the *The Complete Artist's Way*: "The language of art is image, symbol... The artist's language is a sensual one, a language of felt experience..." (2007: 36)

It is difficult for me to write out of my own experiences; which makes writing an extremely personal experience. This probably explains why it is such an effort to get started. Cameron says avoidance is an act of resistance and a "fear of intimacy".

"Often in troubled relationships we settle into an avoidance pattern with our significant others. We don't want to hear what they are thinking because it just might hurt..." (2007: 35).

Cameron has made me realise that confrontation instead of avoidance is key; that it actually frees the writer from the censor within. She writes: "It is probable that these self-disclosures, frightening though they are, will lead to the building of a real relationship, one in which the participants are free to be who they are and to become what they wish. The possibility is what makes the risks of self-disclosure and true intimacy profitable." (2007: 35).

Once the censor and the avoidance have been dealt with, a sense of release usually follows. This does not mean that what follows is "smooth sailing". There are usually strong winds, a few icebergs and veering off the track.

Wallace Stegner and Ursula Le Guin warn against the dangers of the writer acting as a mouthpiece for a character instead of letting them speak for themselves. Stegner in *Wallace Stegner: On Teaching and Writing Fiction* advises: "Stay out of the story; pick a point of view and (especially in the short story) stay with it. Nobody has less right in your story than yourself."

This is especially true when the writer has to separate themselves from the character and the situation they have created. It becomes essential to follow the true progression of the story and this should not be guided or even determined by the writer's emotion.

Stegner adds: "Don't show off in your style. The writing should match the character and the situation." (2002: 94).

Le Guin reiterates in *Steering the Craft: Exercises and Discussions on Story Writing for the Lone Navigator or the Mutinous Crew*: "Writers may need conscious practice in writing voices that aren't their own; they may in fact, resist... Perhaps one way to begin practicing it

would be to listen to people on the bus, in the supermarket, in the waiting room... and try to remember and write down their talk later, as a private exercise in fidelity to real voice" (1998: 121-122).

And when I am guided by emotions or a personal experience it becomes difficult to let this unfold in a story that is coherent and follows a narrative. This sometimes results in a story that does not seem to be going anywhere.

Stegner says: "A beginning writer may have trouble finding his real situation – he may have only clues, characters, a place, an atmosphere, the haunting association of ideas in his mind. In a novel he may even be able to grope for the situation through his first chapters, but in a short story the situation must be located at once, for even more than a novel, a short story must start off running, must begin on a rolling slope, as near the end as possible" (2002: 92).

Drawing believable characters who are true to their situations is another challenge that I have faced in writing for this course. My stories tend to be concentrated on what is happening at the moment – whether it is in the characters' heads or an experience. I would like to be able to paint a more rounded picture – one that takes into account what is happening around the characters at that particular moment, and also what has happened before. I would like to be able to draw on the characters' living environment in the story. This is important as it gives the reader the impression that the writer has authority on what they are writing about.

In *The Dramatic Writer's Companion: Tools to Develop Characters, Cause Scenes, and Build Stories* Will Dunne writes: "No matter what kind of world you create, it is important to know the rules of the game, that is, what the world is and how it operates. To some degree, every world has its own power structure, its own culture and language, its own values and expectations, its own customs and logic. All these elements affect how characters see things, behave and express themselves." (2009: 211).

These elements to which Dunne refers are crucial to any story. They give the characters more body and give context to the events, making them more believable.

Dunne reiterates: "You can find the world of your story through your characters. As you flesh them out and make decisions about their home life, social life and work life, you begin to define the context for story events." (2009: 211).

I realise that these are challenges that I am likely to face on a daily basis, with each story that I write. The lessons imparted by these writers are good to remember every time I sit down to write.

Books

Cameron, J. 2007. The Complete Artist's Way: Creativity as a Spiritual Practice. Tarcher, Penguin

Dunne, W. 2009. The Dramatic Writer's Companion: Tools to Develop Characters, Cause Scenes, and Build Stories. University of Chicago Press

Le Guin, UK. 1998. Steering the Craft: Exercises and Discussions on Story Writing for the Lone Navigator or Mutinous Crew. The Eighth Mountain Press

Stegner, Lynn (ed). 2002. Wallace Stegner on Writing and Teaching Fiction. Penguin Books

June 12

Nezisa

Her heart gallops in her chest as she approaches. Palms sweating, she wipes her hands on the side of her hips before dipping her right hand in her jeans pocket. The plastic feels smooth and being so close to her body, doesn't feel as cool as she had hoped. The familiar flushing of the cheeks and the heaviness of the limbs return as she waits behind the white line.

Put the card in the slot with the side with the big letters facing up, she chants while tapping her right foot. Her big toe, painted red, peeps out of her tan wedged shoes. Dial the four numbers – like you would on a cellphone or tickey-box – that are most similar to the house number on the front wall – 8692 – and then press the green button. If you're not sure of what's going on press the red button and ask the security guard for help.

She replays the instructions in her head, visualises her small fingers moving deftly on the metallic surface and hears their beeps in her head.

Burly and hairy, a man in cargo shorts and sandals appears behind the booth, waking her up from her trance. His bloodshot eyes scan her, slowly parading her body like a laser beam. They move from her wedged shoes to the fine hairs of her stomach peering just below her navel to her yellow golf shirt. She smiles sheepishly as the man licks his lips, his eyes fixed on her navel.

His eyes move to the path in front of him leading to the parking lot when she clears her throat and puts her right hand in her pocket, the tips of her fingers fishing out the blue-green rectangular card.

It feels as if a big ghetto blaster speaker is thumping in her throat as she punches the number on the metallic keyboard. Her fingers feel slippery, as if she has been counting the bronze and brownish coins that her older brother used to collect in an old mayonnaise bottle.

She puts her index finger in her mouth as she waits for the machine to process her request. The smell remains on her fingers and she can almost imagine how it would feel on her tongue. She turns her back on the vibrating machine once it has spewed out the little piece of paper that she must give her nephew.

"It's all the same – Greek to me," she murmurs and leaves.

"I hope there is enough money left. This should cover our groceries for the week and the money you need for the trip. Maphelo promised to deposit more money next Friday," she says handing over the receipt and the card to Odwa.

"I'll write a list of all the things we need in the house. We can go to Shoprite tomorrow after school."

"How much do you need for your school trip? That money I withdrew should cover it."

"It's R30 – for the bus to take us to the museum. I'll pay it in tomorrow. I'll also need money for *umphako* when we go there. But we can buy those closer to the trip. We are only going in two weeks."

He puts the R10 and R20 notes in a hidden pocket in his black Power backpack.

"*Enkosi sisi*. How did it go at the machine? I'm sorry I couldn't help today"

"You know I struggled a little bit. But your instructions helped. Pity I can't write them down."

"It'll get better, you'll see."

Tower strength

His manners have improved. He no longer hoots at the gate while waiting for me to come out. He comes into the house through the front door. He even greets nowadays – his customary "Molweni" though I am always alone – finds its way out of his moustached lips more often.

Today he walked past me in the kitchen and out the backdoor to the garden. Finding it overgrown with weeds he asked, shaking his head: "Doesn't Themba come to do the garden anymore? It's a disgrace that a once verdant garden could be reduced to look like that."

"Where do you think I find the time to chase after Themba? It's because of you that he can make such outrageous demands. He expects me to pay him and feed him three times a day and give him cigarettes. Rha!"

I hold back to avoid an argument and continue packing provisions – Cornish hen, spinach, potatoes, spaghetti bolognaise and two litres of Ceres juice – in the green bag. I don't have the energy to fight Nick anymore.

"We're going to have to stop at King to buy whole wheat bread and fruit. I couldn't get any at the shops."

"You must think that my car runs on water. You give me very little notice and then you still demand we make all these stops yet you can't even give me money for petrol!" he says taking his hands out of his thick leather jacket.

He keeps his hands in his pockets and his head under a beret nowadays – all to hide that bald spot and the clawing arthritic fingers – old age creeping in.

"*Kanti* when were you actually planning on going to see him? What was that about going there more often to see him? Just what are you prepared to do for Sibongile?"

With Thando's food packed I go to my room to put on my jacket and shoes and to comb my hair. I can hear the *qwash qwash* of his brown suede shoes on the cold tiles as he follows silently behind me. He stands near the door and grabs the pile of letters – mostly bank and cellphone statements – on the bedside table.

I dare not lift my eyes to mirror as the comb goes through it and my hair back and as it tightens and then stretches at the roots with each push back. In the kitchen he rips the envelopes open with a steak knife he fishes out of the second drawer. I am surprised he remembers where things are.

I pat my hair and brush off fluff on my sleeves – more out of habit – and look at myself in the mirror before I leave the room. Chin up, I say to myself and say a silent prayer as I close the door.

He stops over at Berlin; not at the greasy BP garage but at Berlin Butchery. The R150 I gave him remains untouched in one of the cup holders. He returns with two parcels wrapped in paper. He unwraps one before starting the car.

"The spicy biltong is for Sibongile," he says before scooping a handful of shredded biltong into his mouth.

We drive in silence; just the gentle humming of the engine and the rustling of the Daily Dispatch with each page I turn in the back seat between us. We stop over again at King Williams Town to buy bread, Granny Smith apples, a small tub of margarine and the latest Sports Illustrated – all the while going through a list of things that Sibongile said he didn't want at the last visit.

"At least they still maintain the grounds. Other than that, Fort hare isn't what it used to be," he says while passing through the university. With that his finger goes for the CD button; breaking the silence and unleashing a cacophony of screeching trumpets and horns.

The green lawns of the university transport me to hot January days sitting under the shade of the oak trees in the immaculate gardens during registration. The queues seemed to grow longer each of the three years we sojourned to the university town.

"Ah, Jwara! Ndiyavuy' ukubona. Come in. I'll get someone to call him," greets the nurse at the gate, grabbing Nick's hand and leading him away.

I stand in front of the locked gate, my eyes on the notice – "THIS GATE MUST BE LOCKED AT ALL TIMES" – stuck on the face-bricked wall with thick black masking tape.

A woman comes in and leads me to the visitors' room where Sibongile is already waiting. I clear my throat and flex my fingers before going in.

"You haven't come to see me in four weeks."

There is no hiding my guilt. I slouch in the plastic garden chair and ask him how he is. I bite on my hangnails and wait for his reply. The skin around the cuticles becomes inflamed. I flatten the piece of skin with my thumb and wait for the pain to surge and my ears to flush.

I am not surprised by the words that come out of his mouth; which seem to ooze out of him with limited movement to his face.

"When are you going to get me out of this place? Talk to the doctors here; you just need to tell them I am ready to go and I'll be out of here. I have been in this place for nearly a year now. How do you expect me to get better in a place like this?"

He speaks softly and slowly, like a child who has been roused from sleep. I can almost see him rubbing his eyes with the back of his hands. I blink and lift my eyes to him but instead his hands reach out for one of the navy Tupperware containers on the small wooden table in the centre of the room.

A buxom nurse walks in and hands me a register to sign.

"For our records. And to monitor the progress of our patients. Are you comfortable? Would you like more chairs?"

I reckon she asked out of habit. There are five chairs and only the two of us in the room. Tiny spiders – which have made themselves at home on the legs of the garden chair he is seating on - crawl on his arms and back.

Insects seem to be the only creatures that thrive in the place. Shiny black ants scuttled out of cracks on the ground outside the ward and ambled up the legs of my pants as I walked in. The air dries my eyes and nostrils. I reach for my tub of Vaseline and shove blobs of the jelly up my nose.

"Did you bring bananas? You must bring lots of bananas. And maybe peanut butter. The portions of food here are really small."

"Haven't you had lunch *kanti*?"

I check the time on my cellphone – 13: 42. Lunch would have been served at noon or 12:30 the latest.

"Aren't you listening? I said the portions in this place are small. I keep telling you to leave money for bread and to bring lots of bananas so I can have something to eat for supper. You know we eat supper at 4pm like prisoners. By six I am hungry again."

"You said you didn't want bananas the last time I was here. You said you didn't like how they felt in your mouth when you chewed them."

"I know exactly what I said to you! I keep telling you I don't like fatty food and I don't want to eat meat. Rastas must be on to something. Have you ever seen a Rasta in this place? I am sick and tired

of being shunted between hospitals. Can you imagine nine months, almost ten, in this fucking place?"

Spaghetti hangs from the corners of his mouth as he speaks.

"I'm no schizo. I hear *amawethu* speaking to me. But they don't speak to me in isiXhosa. They speak some language that sounds like isiZulu. My birth certificate says I was born in East London. But why won't you tell me the truth about where I was born? They tell me I was born somewhere else. Johannesburg, sometimes Bloemfontein. Tell me now – where was I born? There's no disputing *amawethu*."

"You were born at Frere Hospital, East London. I was there."

He rummages through the plastic bags again, tossing the bag of apples, biltong and packet of sultanas aside. He takes out a drumstick from the Tupperware. As if on cue, a face presses on the window.

"Will you leave some meat for us too Biza?"

"Go away Dino! I said I would give you money for cigarettes. I haven't forgotten!"

Another comes to the window and then another until the window resembles the display window of a furniture shop in town on the day of the derby.

"Will you bring us food too *mama kaBiza*? When you come to see Biza again you will bring us something too *nhe*?"

I avoid their eyes and bite my nails again.

Irritated, he gets up to close the curtain.

"You won't forget nhe mama kaBiza?"

Their voices echo in my head. I can feel their eyes boring through the brown floral curtain.

I wonder if he does the same when other families come to visit. He is too proud. He would never allow himself to do that, I console myself. I tilt my head back and swallow.

"Rather give them the apples. There isn't enough meat here for everyone. Even the fruit won't be enough for all of them."

"They don't get visitors. I buy cigarettes for them or BB when I have money. Those who work in the kitchen steal bread for us to eat at night."

His lips glisten against the ashy pallor of his face and arms.

I promise to leave enough money for bread and cigarettes with the nurses and to come back the following week.

"You still don't want to get me out of this place?"

He leaves before I can answer.

I find Nick in the car, sitting in silence.

"Did he eat the biltong? The nurse said he seemed happier this week – chatting and playing cards with the others."

"Why don't you go in and find out for yourself?"

"You know his behaviour changes when he sees me – becomes aggressive. Maybe when he's better... The nurse asked for my advice. He wants legal advice – his son was killed in PE. The family is suspicious..."

I turn up the volume of the radio, drowning his voice. I swallow hard, shutting off tears threatening from the corners of my eyes. Men in light blue flannel pants and shirts look on as the car trundles out of the barb-wired yard.

"Alright then," he says as the car nudges into the driveway and I grab the green bag from the backseat. "I'll be on my way. *Nisale kakuhle*."

I get out and from the corner of my eye I see swirls of dust rise up as he speeds off.

Mellow yellow

She looked like the life-sized dolls I saw at Woolworths whenever Aunt Lindi and I went to Nelspruit to buy my Christmas or winter clothes.

But her hair wasn't straight or yellow. It was brownish – like someone had sprinkled gold dust on it – and it twisted like the thick fibres of a mop and cascaded all the way to her waist.

Tall with skin the colour of Gogo's coffee – "with more milk than coffee" – she was the most unusual and most beautiful woman I had ever seen.

Gogo said she was "*umlungu*".

"Hawu Nkosi yam! Your father has brought us a white woman!" she cried and brought her hand to her forehead.

We stood at the front door – my gogo Nelisiwe, Aunt Lindi and my cousins Zweli, Spha and I – our eyes glued to the vision ahead of us. My uncle Thula was still in his room at the back of the house.

Though he spent most of the morning in his room "getting ready for our special guest" he had not finished by midday.

He had woken up early to iron his pink BEE shirt in the kitchen. I could hear him whistling happily all the way from Gogo's room the moment I woke up. He had polished his black kick-and-bhoboza shoes the night before.

But Gogo wasn't nearly as excited as Malum' Thula. She sat on the edge of her giant bed that morning; her pink mouthed Bible open on her lap. My "Sawubona Gogo" fell on deaf ears.

"I hope Tibonelo knows what he's doing," she murmured over and over.

She didn't even notice that I had risen and gone to the bathroom to wee without being told. She didn't even turn when she heard the flushing of the toilet and the gushing of the water as I opened the tap to brush my teeth.

She was glued to the same spot when I came out of her bathroom. I tugged at her blue nightie.

"See Gogo, I've already brushed my teeth. You didn't even have to remind me. I'm a big girl now."

She looked at me for a long time and then picked me up and held me to her chest. She smelled of Vicks. She picked on imaginary fluff on my wispy hair.

"Promise me you'll always be good."

I pulled back and smiled.

"I've brushed my teeth... See?"

"And you must do it every night. Even when I'm not around to remind you, otherwise your teeth will rot."

"Now can I go play with Zweli and Spha?"

"Yes," she hissed. Slowly she released her tight grip on my arm. "What are you going to show your father when he comes?"

"I drew something for him yesterday. It's in my bag."

"Good. You and your cousins must be ready for breakfast."

She was quiet at breakfast. She didn't yell when Spha slurped her milk. She held her mug of coffee in her hands, as if her fingers were frozen stiff. But we were all in our nighties; which stuck to our backs with sweat.

Malum' Thula, who didn't usually join us for breakfast – couldn't stop talking. Dollops of oats would stop right in front of his mouth without actually going in.

"Can you imagine what she... what her connections could do for me? One day, soon, I'll be famous. One day is one day I tell you!"

He got up from his chair and spun around. Gogo just looked at him, shaking his head."

"Don't forget us when you're famous. Send us money for airtime," Aunt Lindi piped in, giggling at Malume's fantasies.

"Ubhuti omkhulu has done well. My big brother has done the whole family proud. Don't you think so Mama?"

I sprinkled glitter on the drawing I had done for my father; which to Gogo's annoyance, ended on the floor. We faffed around; rearranging the table and our outfits when Papa called to say he had just passed KaNyamazane – about 30 minutes away.

"I don't want your toys lying around. Go wash your hands and lay off my white tablecloth!" commanded Gogo.

Malum' Thula checked his shoes, wiped the tips with old pantyhose and dashed to his room. Aunt Lindi added more ice to the jug, which was already sweating on the table. Gogo rearranged the mangoes in the fruit bowl and brought more litchis from the kitchen.

Aunt Lindi took out the bread from the oven.

"Nothing says 'welcome' quite like freshly baked bread. No one – no matter where they come – can resist the smell of a loaf straight from the oven," beamed aunt Lindi.

Not sure what we were allowed to do, Spha and Zweli sat on the floor in the lounge biting their nails. I kneeled on the sofa closest to the window – my eyes fixed on the street and the gate.

I was the first to spot my father's car – its long snout peering at the gate. I jumped and squealed: "Papa!"

He got out of the car, smiling and waving at us standing at the front door because no one dared to move. Our eyes followed him as he walked to the passenger side to open the door. Silver painted toenails peered out of her bronze sandals. Her long arm glowed against her white shirt as she flicked her long hair behind her ear. He grabbed her hand and walked towards us, smiling from ear to ear.

Gogo's shoulders stiffened as the woman reached out to shake her hand.

"This, ma, is the woman I want to grow old with. I told you about Khethiwe... Khethi, love. This is the woman who gave me life – and she can still take it whenever she wishes."

She cusped Gogo's hand in hers and then extended her arms around Gogo in embrace.

"I am so happy to finally meet you."

He came for me next. She looked on as I clung to my father, my arms around his thick neck. My uncle rushed in, fixing his gold cufflinks.

"I'm sorry I wasn't here to welcome you Bafo. And you Nkosazana...," gasped mu uncle, his hand reaching out to shake her hand.

Her gaze remained fixed on me. She spoke once my father had put me down.

"You must be Mbalenhle. I have been looking forward to meet you most of all," she said planting a kiss that was sweet and sticky like toffee on my lips.

Then she greeted my uncle and aunt. It was the first time that a grown-up had singled me out and acknowledged me before my elders.

Her visit brought new energy to our home. Malum' Thula tried getting a minute alone with her to convince her introduce him to his favourite DJ.

"I just need a few minutes with him. He'll see that this proposal I have will revolutionise the music industry in Mzansi!"

"I don't think you quite understand. These things are not as easy as you think," she would say before sneaking off to the kitchen or bedroom or wherever she had to be. Papa spent his days in town getting supplies in town or meeting friends.

A battle ensued over whose meals were better tasting. Gogo would storm off when we chewed the bones of Khethi's grilled chicken.

"It's better than the stuff they sell at Nando's – healthier too," my father would say.

Gogo made sure that there was plenty to keep Khethi occupied – and far away from my father's admiring glances. She disapproved of her "bringing Brooke and The Bold into a Christian home".

"The woman has no shame. Doing that in my house – in front of the children too," she said when Zweli asked if Khethi would have a baby after she putting her tongue in my father's mouth.

I, on the other hand, followed our visitor around. She indulged me by letting me play with her hair. It was better than plaiting my dolls' hair because it didn't come out in clumps leaving gaping holes on the scalp. She would spritz her perfume in my bellybutton. I loved the cool stinging sensation of it and the fragrance that would last the whole day.

"Sit with me for a few minutes," she would say, pouring Stoney Ginger Beer in a mug so Gogo wouldn't find out what I was drinking.

Spha, Zweli and I weren't allowed to have fizzy drinks because Gogo said they would consume our stomachs with lots of air. And she considered letting out air indecent.

She would call me to the kitchen to help her find and pack things in the cupboard because Gogo was picky about the utensils, the pots and the plates were kept. Being new to Gogo's system she needed me to remind her.

"Gogo doesn't have to know. Besides, we don't drink it every day nhe?"

I would smile and nod my head.

She kept a small radio in the kitchen and would occasionally break into fits of laughter. It was a loud sort of laughter; like some of the *Popeye* I watched. She would sometimes laugh so hard that she would put her hand on her stomach and wipe the tears with the corner of her pinafore. I too would laugh because I had never heard anyone laugh the way she did.

One day Gogo came into the kitchen while we were giggling and shook her head.

"I don't know what you think you can teach her laughing like that. Like some straatmeid."

I didn't know what a straatmeid was but it didn't like the sound of it or the way that Gogo's mouth curled when she said it. She shooed me out of the kitchen.

I walked in on her talking to my Aunt Lindi a few days after that.

"I don't know what your brother was thinking, bringing a woman like that into our home. I knew nothing good could come out of a woman with hair like that! Probably smokes too."

"Not everyone with her like hers smokes dagga, ma," defended aunt Lindi.

"I feel sorry for you," she said when she saw me standing at the door "because you are going to live with that woman."

The thought had never occurred to me but it scared and excited me to think about it.

"Really, Gogo?" I asked maybe too excitedly.

Gogo seemed happier again as Papa and Khethi prepared to return to Joburg. I asked him when he would return with Khethi.

"Soon, I promise. Maybe next time you will come with us. Spha and Zweli can visit, if your aunt Lindi agrees."

Khethi featured in many of my drawings after that – her long hair splendid in yellow.

"Don't forget your Gogo next time," Gogo would say, the sides of her mouth drooping before putting away the drawings in a plastic folder.

The Clarity of Dreams

The tie – bright green with bold gold stripes – hangs loosely like a serpent down my neck. The lopsided V raises its head to perform a slow rhythmic dance right in front of my eyes. My eyes widen as the mouth opens, exposing a set of gleaming fangs aiming for my neck.

"Get up. You were whimpering in your sleep... It's probably one of your dreams again," he says. His hands are rough on my shoulders. "I may as well get up. Be at work early for a change."

"Is it morning already?" is all I manage to say before he gets out of bed.

Sitting up on the bed, I wrap my arms around my shoulders and push them up to relieve some of the tension on my neck. I wait for the upbeat humming from the bathroom – to the O'Jays's *For the Love of Money* – to reach my ears before slithering under the covers. I pull the blankets over my face and wait for the silence to come.

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"It was different this time. But the tie was still there. It was the same beautiful green; but minus the hands pulling it tighter around my neck. It changed into a snake this time. Its dance reminded me of those downcast Indians with turbans in cartoons. You remember those who seduce a cobra out of a pot?"

"Strange indeed. Are you sure you don't want to see someone about these dreams?"

"I'm not sure if I should worry. They're just dreams after all."

"I think you know what they could mean. Maybe you should seriously consider letting go."

I am always amazed by Stera's attentiveness. She has heard many similar accounts of my dreams, yet she gasps and interjects in all the right places. She dedicates her tea break at work just to listen. Call at 10h15 sharp, her SMS reads each time mine asks: "Do you have a few minutes?"

We always end the conversation with her promising to "come over for sundowners, soon".

"The bar and cellar are always stocked. Can't wait."

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It was in the same table a few months ago, that I told her for the first time about the dreams. She had popped in on her way home. I wasn't expecting him until late at night so I looked forward to a

bit of long overdue *skinder*. The evening was balmy so I quickly put some chardonnay in an ice bucket right after hanging up.

The coffee was cold by the time I remembered I had a cup to finish. It left a sticky, bitter and sweet taste in my mouth. I threw its remains down the sink, and brought out two glasses from the bar.

"I thought you'd be outside, enjoying the sunset in the garden. I don't know why you guys bothered with a garden which probably costs a fortune to maintain. I won't even mention the pool. *Oodarkie kodwa...*"

I imagined vibrations forming in the air around us with the booming of her voice. It had been a long time since anyone had been that loud in the kitchen, or in any of the rooms in the house for that matter. Laughter rarely reverberated in these walls.

"Ja, ja. We be black. We wouldn't jump in even if our lives depended on it!"

"It's good to hear you joke again."

"It is, nhe? Sit. I chilled some wine. The fish will be ready soon."

"I can't remember the last time I had a home cooked meal. Thanks, my friend," she said winking at me.

I feared the smells coming from the oven, fused with wine and laughter, would make me giddy.

"I hope you'll enjoy it. I cook because I have to eat or because I need something to do these days. You know eating alone is not fun."

I couldn't tell her how intoxicating it was having someone, practically salivating at that table. Unlike the dining room, there wasn't the domineering antique table with stout chairs to remind me of my dinners for one. Eating in front of the TV felt gluttonous and mind numbing. She couldn't have imagined how elevated I felt perched on one of the twin stools in the kitchen.

"*Kanti* where is hubby my friend? He spotted *inteshe* – like a true BEE the last I saw him. He seemed well fed. So do you, my friend."

"If indeed he is well fed, he's not getting his meals here..."

"Is that why you now wear you ring on a chain?

Indeed there was nothing where the ring was meant to be. I couldn't even feel the tell-tale ridge anymore. I stepped down from the stool, and checked the fish on the grill.

The ring was never meant for the type of work that I was now accustomed to doing.

"What kind of work do you do, Ma'am?" the assistant at Hill's Decadent had been at pains to explain the different types of stones on display and the exclusivity of their designs.

"You would want something more hardwearing, if you work a lot with your hands because you lose some of the shine if you need to wash your hands all the time or work with harsh chemicals."

I was too besotted with all that glittered to take in his lecture on what was hardwearing and what was not. I never imagined that I would ever need to take it off – that I would lose the connection with him. Then it was a symbol of not only a new shared life, but also continuity. Our love had a beginning but no end. The band embodied romance, chivalry, the security that comes with being the chosen one and posterity. That was why I was hurt when he had chosen a cubic zirconia to ask me to marry him.

I had told him on the day that we had gone on a search for the ring: "I want to grow old with you. I want to have your babies. I want our children to look at us and know that true love is possible. I want my ring to be a symbol of that; something that will outlive our marriage. I want it to be a legacy for our children. Just imagine, baby, if our future son... if Xhanti asked for his love's hand with the same ring. Just imagine if Xhanti passed the ring on to his son. We can't do that with a cubic zirconia baby. It's cute. But cute doesn't last baby."

Even that fantasy of posterity was put on hold – just as I waited a long time for the splendour of the ring to come.

I shook my head – really to shake myself out of my reverie than to answer Stera's question.

"Yhu! You have no idea how relieved I am to hear that! But tell me, my friend, don't you miss going to work?"

"I never imagined that I would, but I do, sort of"

I didn't have the temerity to tell her of my dread at attending industry dinners with Thabo. That my heart beat faster at the thought of being in a room full of people with expectations and opinions about not only the value of brent crude and gold – but the strength of partnerships – corporate and personal. Being in the presence filled me with anxiety and dread; though once I had been one of them. She didn't know that I felt so out of the game that I retreated to this kitchen, rather than to deal with their type.

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The fangs stare hard at me even in my awake state. My neck feels stiff, as if dragging my whole body down. The dull ache slowly diminishes as I run my fingers along the rings of my neck until they deftly snap the clasp holding the necklace together. The three rocks seem dull and impotent on the granite surface of the kitchen table. I leave the ring on the side of his bed as I make my out of his castle. The lightness in my neck shoots all the way to my head, making me feel giddy as if my feet are about to leave the ground.

The lure of Joburg

I have held on to this old Gideon since I got it. It's one of the three things I'd save if my house caught fire that entertainment journalists love to ask about. Many though would never associate me with it. That's because I spend most of my time combing the classifieds of newspapers. Yet I take it with me wherever I go. Its significance is not so much about what it contains; it's about the person who gave it to me. It also reminds me of my roots in this city.

It was the callousness of the women – not the hustle and bustle that I had heard so much about – that struck me as I resurfaced from the underbelly of Park Station on my first morning in Jozi. They sat on yellow buckets with their skirts riding up, exposing dimpled thighs and a network of varicose veins. They brandished combs and broken mirrors; and were oblivious to the deluge of murky brown water streaming next to their legs.

"Come, sisi. Give us a chance to make you look beautiful," they would call between brutal assaults of pink watermelon flavoured Chappies. "Let us plait your hair."

I didn't stop then but I cast my eyes on the photos of different hairstyles pasted on their cardboard boxes. I didn't stop the second, the third or fourth time I walked past. If they were discouraged, they never showed it. They would egg me on each time I passed, and I would imagine them licking their lips and salivating at the sight of my thick virgin Afro.

"Joburg is so different from what you're used to in PE *naseMonti*, nhe? You're going to have to learn to walk faster here!" Mom'ncinci had said on that day. By the time I looked up she had already crossed to the other side of the street. She tapped her right foot anxiously as I waited for the taxis to slow down. They showed little regard for pedestrians, even those on the zebra crossing.

Those yellow buckets became my beacon. I felt lost on rainy days when the women sought shelter elsewhere. It would take a few seconds for the smog in my mind – for it was always thick and dark – to clear and realise that I had not alighted at the wrong place.

Life had been pleasant in Winchester Hills, where Mom'ncinci rented a townhouse for her daughters Lee and Penny. I lived with them when I arrived in the city. It was an opportunity to get to know my sisters better. They called me Nerine, the name that our father Teddy had given me because I had taken after my mother, and inherited her unruly black hair. Our living costs were split equally among ourselves. That was until they decided – I never knew who exactly – they had had enough.

I knew exactly where to go the day that Momncinci asked for her room back at her Winchester Hills townhouse. Not that we were friends. I imagined that we had made some kind of connection as our eyes met from time to time.

"Ndicel' iroom, sisi. I need it by the end of the month. One of Lee's cousins is moving to Joburg. Surely you understand?" Momncinci had announced. Her voice sounded cold even from a thousand kilometres away in Bhisho. Lee and Penny had just shrugged their shoulders when I mentioned that I would be moving out.

"I don't know what you expected from that *Brooke*. Did you think she was going to treat you the same way as her own children? Did you honestly think she cared that you too were Theodore's daughter?" I wasn't entirely surprised by my mother's reaction but I expected more sympathy.

She called her my father's wife Brooke. I guess she never forgave her and she still thought of her as the woman who cheated her out of *umendo* and denied her the chance of graduating at the top of her class. She made me feel that I had chosen my father Teddy, even after his death, over her by deciding to move to Joburg.

"First it was Theodore going to Joburg to raise enough money for lobola, now you!" she had cried, clapping her hands in disbelief. "I guess I shouldn't expect you to come back."

It was to the women sitting on the yellow buckets that I turned to after I was rendered homeless. But it wasn't a new hairstyle that I needed, though it would have lifted my mood.

"May I leave my bag with you? I'll come fetch it in a few hours." I asked after a greeting met with single nods.

"Straight back, R50. Also do dread, R100. Nice dread if you want," replied one tugging my hair, the other two eyeing my suitcase

"Next time. Now," I said pointing at the ground. "Please look," I said pointing at my eyes. "After my bag," pointing at the suitcase at my feet. "I go work. Back one o'clock."

"Straight back. Nice cornrow. Cheap."

Dejected I pulled the suitcase and headed for the taxi rank. There was no avoiding the stares and the gossip that were sure to follow at work. There was no hiding in a newsroom.

"What does she take us for? Did she think we were just going to keep her things when she has never given us business?" I heard them.

Church with daddy

"I am curious to see whether it will really happen."

I am not surprised that my mother, who has just arrived home from a 12-hour shift, is sceptical.

"If it does, surely the world is coming to an end," she snaps, pulling the blankets over her head.

The phone rings just as I fill the kettle for my morning Java.

"We're still, on nhe?" It's more a statement than an answer, yet he chuckles nervously. "I'll be there in five minutes. Get ready."

This leaves me with little time to drink coffee, have bread and choose the right handbag. But on remembering how long the services took and my pangs of hunger when I was younger, choosing the most fashionable handbag doesn't seem so important.

"I thought you said you were ready?" he says looking at me behind his glasses, standing at the door with his arms akimbo. "I can't be late on my first day."

I grab the same bag I have been carrying the whole week and a cardigan on my way out – in case I need to look decent. He has put a lot of effort to his outfit – taking care to polish his Crockett & Jones until they gleam. Seeing him now, the women he worked with at Manpower would be impressed.

"Did you bring a Bible?" he asks as he reverses out of the driveway.

"I have never had one. I thought you would have bought one in preparation for your big day," I tease.

He smiles, showing his big teeth yellowed by years of John Player Specials.

"I will buy two Bibles – an English one and a Xhosa one – and a hymn book next week when I get paid. Thanks for agreeing to come. It shouldn't take longer than two hours."

He switches off the radio as we get near the church.

"Did you go to church in Cape Town? You know your grandfather used to preach when he lived in Langa?"

There are more cars parked outside than in the church yard. Mothers strap their babies tight on their backs while balancing on stilt-like heels.

"We can park outside. I don't want problems getting out in case more cars park inside." He leaves the car outside the house of an old friend. "We used to play rugby together. I'm sure he won't mind."

He strides to the gate – reminding me of when I used to run after him while trying to cross the street in town. The droning of the cars revving their engines would make me scared. I was convinced they would take off any minute and I could imagine the sound of my bones crashing as they drove past while my body laid flat on the road. Even then he didn't hold my hand.

"Don't look at me! Look at the robots and the cars around you. One day you will have to do this on your own. Hurry!" he would shout amid the din of last Saturday of the month traffic.

"It shouldn't take more than two hours, right? What's two hours in a day? I can change into my Bermuda shorts, read the Sunday papers and still have time for a beer," he winks at me as we walk to the door.

"Who are you trying to convince, me or you?" I murmur under my breath. He is too far to have heard me. He is already at the door, where a middle aged usher in a tweed jacket too hot for the January heat, eagerly receives him.

"Please show us where to sit. We are new. I am here with my daughter."

I want to run back to the car and not come out until after the service. I had hoped to remain anonymous – invisible even – among the women in red long sleeved blouses and black skirts and the men in black suits and black ties.

He stands at the door, waving at me to come forward.

"Welcome brother. Welcome daughter. You're most welcome. I'll show you where to sit," the usher says too enthusiastically for my liking.

Technically, I am not new to the church, even though my last visit was in the year I turned nine. Then it was *iigush' ezigusheni, iibokw' ezibokweni*. Now men and women sit on the pews next to each other. The man in the pew in front of ours shoos his infant daughter to sleep in between hymns.

"It's hot," he says, wiping sweat streaming down his temples but dares not take off his jacket. His shirt collar is soaked and sticks to his neck. He fans his large face with the handkerchief. He stares at me and smiles.

"Look, even Byron is here," he whispers. "We used to drink together. What does he know about church?" he chuckles, looking relieved for the first time today.

The overzealous usher comes, hands him a hymn covered in brown paper and a clear plastic cover, a piece of paper and a pen. He presses the paper on the hymn book and writes his name in clear capital letters and gives it to me. The usher looks on, his big eyes boring in on me as my hand shifts and starts on the white paper.

He holds the hymn book in his hands, putting it down on the pew when the congregation arises as their voices meld with that of the choir. The woman to my right takes the dog-eared book from the pew, paging to the psalm sung by the congregation. She smiles reassuringly and gives it to him. His voice booms out in a deep, melodious and buzzing bass.

My eyes pop open at hearing his name through the static of the microphone, right after the death notices and funerals.

"I thought my eyes were deceiving me, but no..." the tall man in front announces, his eyes searching the faces in the flock. "It gives me great pleasure to welcome this man to this hallowed temple. *Kaloku* Sir Nazo, as we used to call him, was one of my favourites – having taught me English and being my rugby coach in Standard 8. Sir Zolile Nazo is here with his daughter, Zodwa. Please welcome them *bantu bakaThixo*. Sir Nazo, Please stand up."

"Shine!" vibrates the walls of the church as we wave. A woman's shrill ululation cuts through the congregation's mantra.

"I could count the men in the choir in one hand. It's embarrassing. Next week... I'm going to sign up," he says as we drive out on to the road leading home.

"Ha! You don't even know the songs! You think you can do better?"

"*Ewe, tyhini!*" he says breaking into a guttural laughter. "You don't know I can sing? Some of the hymns are coming back to me now... I am not a hopeless case, you know. I grew up in the church. I told you your grandfather used to preach," he says as we drive into the new shopping centre.

"That I have to see! I just need to get a few things. You can get the papers. I'll meet you back here in about 20 minutes."

I find him skimming through the Sunday broadsheets and tabloids a few minutes later. We drive silently, bobbing our heads to the melodies of the "Sunday soul sounds" on the radio.

"That wasn't so bad. Look, you're at home by noon. I'll pick up you up same time next week," he says as I collect my plastic bags from the back seat.

I give him the CUM Books paper bag. I don't wait for him to open it.

"So you don't have to suffer next week. Next Sunday, you're on your way."

June 8

I have been working on the Mellow Yellow story. It came about from thinking about the shift that happens in families when a new addition comes along. New additions don't always happen through births. This has to do with the nature of families nowadays.

Getting married is not only about acquiring a mother-in-law. Most women instantly become (step) mothers without ever giving birth. The change is not only felt by the woman coming into a new family, but the children and everyone in that household. I imagined what it would be like for a young child to be introduced to her "new mother". I tried imagining the changes in her environment that having a new mother would involve. I can't say if it realistically came out that way.

But I also got a little frustrated while writing it. It started sounding like another story I had written about a makoti psyching herself up for time in her husband's home.

There were instances where the two sounded very similar, such as when they both meet their respective mothers-in-law for the first time. But after reading both stories after finishing Mellow Yellow, I realised that they were indeed similar in some instances but they were also different.

I felt that the Mellow Yellow would be the more "innocent" version, while the makoti would be more "experience" (a la Blake).

I have also been worrying whether I should keep to writing shorter stories. I think I did well earlier in the year with my rather short stories. Few went over 1000 words. I tend to get frustrated when I think I am rambling and my stories go on a bit longer than what I am used to.

Thinking back about some of the stories I have done, I get the impression that the characters are in some kind of transition – even if that transition is not long term. They seem to be moving towards something (if they aren't already in the middle of it).

I am leaning towards this as not only as a subject or theme for my stories but maybe even a title. Is it premature to be thinking along these lines?

July 5

My first meeting with Brian after a rather long absence went better than I expected. We spoke about structure again.

I was happy to hear that my use of the flashback technique had improved. I need to brush up continuity though. I started my story (about a woman who was once happily married but has been plagued by nightmares of a snake) with two characters chatting in the kitchen while the host was preparing supper. Yet by the end of the story there is no mention of them ever eating the meal.

Brian made me realise how important it is to be consistent in storytelling. It shows that the writer is paying attention. It also shows that the narrative is moving, not static. It makes it seem more than just two people talking. It's a bit like having just two characters talking in a movie. People fidget. They get distracted by things going on around them. There is always something going on, even if it's just a fly buzzing in the room. They are bound to say or do something about the fly. These kinds of things may seem insignificant but they do a lot in setting time and place, and say quite a lot about the characters in the story.

Brian also taught me a technique related to continuity. It helps to imagine that the story is happening in "actual" time or as it would happen in a play or a movie. It helps to show how the build-up from a number of events whether in chronological order or in flashbacks. He says I also need to work on introducing an incident – that defining moment that shows change for the better or for the worse.

July 8

I spent the day working on the snake dream story again. I would really like to finish it and move on to something else. There are technical issues that I spoke to Brian about that I would need to remember when I work on other stories in the future. I realise I have to have the same critical eye that I have on other writers' works of fiction and on films if I want my stories to be believable to the reader.

There are times when "creative licence" just doesn't apply. I wouldn't expect, for instance, a PA to call to tell my partner to fetch his HIV test results. She would be bound by her obligation to protect both our confidentiality. I have to be more aware of how things happen in real life situations. I'm glad that Brian pointed it out.

August 17

I've been reading Gabriel Okara's The Voice. Brian and I spoke about hurling a group of people in a situation to not only document how they respond but to also gauge the rules and norms of society

that they are entrenched in. He recommended I study the chapter of the people in the boat to see how I can apply the same technique to the Kwere story.

Before it was just a piece of a conversation I had heard in a taxi. It had scared to me to realise just how prejudiced people really are. It also had me thinking about some of the power dynamics at play in a confined environment like a taxi where the taxi driver, not the passenger is king.

Okara makes it look so easy in his introduction of the different characters. He doesn't go about describing them at length yet their characteristics make sense regarding where the story is at that moment and where it is going.

I tried doing something similar by thinking about the sort of people who would travel by taxi. I thought about their professions and what they would be wearing. As a result I'm not sure how much of the original conversation I should keep. It's something I get emotional about, but I don't want the story to come out as a sermon or to make tedious to write and read.

September 1

There was an old joke in the newsroom that was aimed at the sub-editors. There were some we called "choppers". They were notorious for chopping stories at the bottom if they couldn't fit into the pages that they were allocated. Choppers were not popular with reporters and the news editor wasn't very fond of them either.

Choppers were devoted to the inverted pyramid structure of the story. Everything that was important to the story had to be in the first few paragraphs. They had little regard for anything else that fell below a certain threshold. But sadly, there were more choppers than sub-editors.

I have come to appreciate the role of the few sub-editors we had in the newsroom. They didn't check only spelling and grammatical errors in the copy, but they also helped to make articles sound that much better. They would either come to you or call you to their desk and ask: "Is this what you meant? What do you say we change that to this? Don't you think it sounds better?"

Editing is a never-ending process. It means reading, correcting and re-writing over and over. Brian said I would come to enjoy it, but so far it hasn't happened. I seem to pick mistakes every time I read my stories. As torturous reading my own writing is, spotting mistakes that shouldn't be there makes it worse. It makes me wish I had my own sub-editor in the brain, who can edit sentences before they hit the page, for surely that would make the process less strenuous.

Having someone to guide me through the project makes it that much more bearable. As much as writing is a solitary pursuit (for me), having someone to look at it during the process is a great help. It's great having someone to ask: "Is it what you meant? How about you try this instead?"

September 14

I had a hard time deciding the title of the collection. I admit that I had Chimamanda Adichie's "The Thing around your Neck" at the back of my mind the whole time I was thinking about what to call the book. I felt the "choke" invoked by Adichie's title was something that rang through in some of the characters in my stories. But I also thought about the ties – whether pleasant or not, that they had with some of the people in their lives. At the end they were also committing to certain things by changing things in their lives.

Though I had read the stories in Adichie's collection a few times, I avoided reading them again while I was writing because I didn't want to feel I was copying her style. But the book made me realise that I didn't have to look for anything overtly mysterious or dramatic to tell a story. Looking at families and the people around me could also be sufficient.

September 26

I was relieved after I submitted the first draft of the final project. It made me realise just how far I had come with the stories that I had written. So many had started out as just ideas with which I had toyed around. I never imagined that I would come up with such a collection.

Some of them were really quite short when I started, and I thought I'd have to have twice as many for me to even come close to the minimum number of words required. There were times when I ran out of ideas as i got closer to the deadline yet going through old stories inspired by sparking new ideas and directions. I was amazed by how much I could do by asking myself some questions such as: "Where did this all start? What could have possibly led the character to the situation she finds herself in?"

Playing around in my head with different scenarios helped, especially looking for what Brian and I had spoken about on a number of times – the incident. I had to; quite literally, put myself in the characters' shoes to be able to gauge how they would not only react to an incident but to also be able to measure the impact that it would have in their lives.

It was also a realisation of what it means to create. The world is really your oyster when you write stories. As much as I can be driven by the story that is forming my head, it is up to me to channel it. It is up to me to explore the possibilities it go.

It has also shown me that I don't have to write everything at once. Stories can build up to something. It's not often that they would just present themselves just like that. They are also a series of events, coincidences and symbols that can make sense later on. It's like putting together the pieces of a puzzle. I have realised that I can weigh stories with one another. Finding something plausible enough to make them gel, is however, a challenge. But I've seen it can be done. It shouldn't be too obvious to your reader that the stories were written separately and then "married" together. I was able to do this with "An Ever Expanding Universe", "No Place for People like Us" and "Bitten by Jozi". They all had characters from previous stories but I managed to develop them into stories for this collection.

September 30

I think I am obsessed with dysfunctional families. How else would I explain the characters in the stories I have written so far?

I am fixated with absent fathers, despotic grandmothers and brides.

I wonder why?

I am not about to get married. I was raised in a household with both parents, my grandparents either died before I was born or I have a vague memory of them.

I know a bit about absent fathers though. I don't have to look far for someone whose father made a run for it when they were young. It's a pattern that seems to repeat itself through generations. Isn't that what stories are about?

The same themes appear in stories all the time – it's probably why we can relate to books and films set in the past. Brian and I have spoken at length about this. We are always drawn to romances, love triangles, good versus evil and rivals. These stories come in different packages. He always tells me that no one else would be able to tell the stories that I can.

It makes me think that I am re-writing the same stories but Brian doesn't seem too concerned about it. It is reassuring in a way. Is it not one-dimensional to make all the men in a collection of short stories despicable human beings who seem beyond redemption? The only good guy I can think of is Thozamile in On the Road story. One can't help but feel sorry for him – he's in love with a woman who seems so determined to assert herself that she easily comes across as rude.

October 12

I was recently asked to write a tribute by a widow of a friend. She wants to put together a collection of his newspaper columns. I avoided the task for a few weeks but my memories of him kept coming back to me just about every day.

I had also been thinking of a story that would come before the last one in the collection. I'd toyed with the idea of an illiterate woman before but it didn't quite work out. I also wanted a man alongside her. I wanted a positive man who would stand out by being an inspiration unlike all the other unsavoury male characters in the collection. That was partly why I gave him a disability. I wanted him to be vulnerable and not have an air of invincibility.

I knew it was going to be difficult to write the story because of my personal investment. I was basing a character on someone I liked but I realised he couldn't be perfect. He had to be human because I wasn't setting out to write a eulogy. I wanted someone caring yet temperamental, also to make him stand out from the person I had based the character Eric on.

November 4

I got scared when something about "self-hating black writers" dropped into my inbox recently. Though I have not published I am starting to think of myself as a writer. I had not thought about the politics of being a black writer, a female writer nogal, until now.

Author and commentator Sandile Memela wrote: "One cannot be convinced that today's published black writers are doing justice when it comes to redefining the existential meaning of black lives, experience, history and hopes."

Is this the kind of criticism and interrogation I will go through the day I get published? It's enough to have any fledgling writer hiding under a rock for the rest of their lives!

Though he was writing about writers who allegedly "rubbish" the government and their gains after apartheid, the same labels could befall writers who don't write about the government at all.

Will my collection go through a similar style of interrogation by whoever marks it? Will my stories be judged on the basis of being "black enough"? Do their names and even the way they speak reflect this? Will the experiences of the characters make sense to them? Is there a homogenous black experience that should be in works of fiction?

Is it fair to place the burden on artists to "the carriers of a nation's soul" and to be on the "cutting edge of pricking the conscience" of South Africa as Memela writes in another article? Now I am really afraid.

November 6

I came across Bessie Head's The Cardinals a while ago and I didn't get around to reading it until recently. It is regarded as Head's first long piece. It's also the only book she based in South Africa and it was published after her death.

I wonder if she would have been proud of it had she seen it in print. I haven't finished reading it; probably because I put it down and I don't want to pick it up again. I feel the same about my writing. I write something and once I feel I have finished it, I don't want to look at it again. I cringe at the thought of someone reading what I have written. I cringe whenever I read something I have written. When I manage to do so, I want to do it in the fastest possible time. I usually berate myself for grammatical errors I feel I should have spotted myself.

I relate to The Cardinals in many ways. I get the sense that Head turned inward for inspiration to write the novel. I couldn't help but draw similarities between her life story and the main character Mouse. She, like Mouse, was abandoned when she was a child and she went on to become a reporter for a newspaper.

I, too, have drawn on my own experiences for the stories in my collection. I have used stories I have heard from friends, family members and even complete strangers. I have stolen their words, characteristics and their quirks. Sometimes the characters and stories are too close to the people I know. At times my imagination went into overdrive, creating scenarios that were radically different from what prompted me to write in the first place.

It is a scary feeling, I must admit. It reminds me of The Best Man – a film about a man whose book is published before he attends the wedding of his best friend. His friends hide the book from the groom because it contains an act of betrayal he didn't know about. But he reads the book the day before his wedding and the revelation threatens his relationship with his soon-to-be bride and the bond he shared with all his friends.

It is one of those things I can't help thinking about. I am pretty sure I wouldn't want any of the people closest to me to read some of the things I have written.

Back to The Cardinals.

Bessie Head's characters in the novel tend to be "talking heads" – something Brian warned me repeatedly about when I started out.

Sixty pages into the novel I can't help finding it amateurish – something I now can say maybe a bit harsh and maybe unfair because someone may say the same about the writing I have done. It is a bitter reminder of all the debut novels I bashed in reviews I wrote over the years. Talk about karma!

November 10

I didn't expect to find any gems in The Cardinals. I was surprised I read it through to the end. I wanted to find out whether the main character Mouse discovers that Johnny is her biological father.

I didn't expect to find practical writing tips smack bang in the middle. I found myself saying: a-ha, I hear you.

In one of the scenes, Johnny leaves a note akin to a writing manual for Mouse. He writes about the importance of writing short sentences: "Long, involved diatribes and obscure meanings confuse and bore the mind. The longer a sentence is, the harder it is to grasp. Study the good cartoonist closely. He conveys the essence of life in a few short strokes. He amuses too. It must be the same with the writer. His greatest fear should be that of boring himself and his readers."

I couldn't agree more. I have noticed I tend to mess up the writing when my sentences are too long. It becomes more difficult to read and to make sense of them later. Shorter sentences are also punchier. They are easier to understand and read better if you read aloud.

It's something we all think about as writers. I think the first step would be avoiding things that bore you generally. I believe the writer's fascination about a subject is most of the time reflected on the way they write about it.

"[Writing] can only have its appeal if it is life that excites, fascinates and moves you. Writing is the interpretation of life through words."

Margaret Daymond writes in the introduction that a writer should be like Bessie Head by being a "good judge of their own writing. She could stand back from what she was attempting, looking at it quizzically as often as affectionately."

In a letter Head wrote about the act of creation (referring to a character who seemed to appear in most of her writing whenever she needed to say something): "One day it's going to backfire. I know it. Imagination is something I distrust profoundly and the way I have created this man out of air, shocks me in a terrible way, in my reasonable moments."

I hope I will never get to the point where I mistrust my imagination.