

**Istraight Lendaba**

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## **Abstract**

My collection of stories describes the lives of ordinary black people living in post-apartheid South Africa, especially those living in the margins, and the compromises that poverty forces them to make. In such a world, virtue and vice are flip sides of the same coin. My stories search for hope in an environment which Ayi Kwei Armah describes as “so completely seized with danger and so many different kinds of loss.” My writing is inspired by Mozambican writer Luis Bernardo Honwana, South African writer Joel Matlou whose demotic stories gave voice to everyday life in the townships, and Cameroonian writer Werewere Liking’s as well as Brenda Fassie’s powerful representation of the subversive nature of African women.



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## **Stiff Pap and Jabula Soup**

He was a frail man with a nostalgic look in his eyes. His hands had multiples scars from years of hard labour in a factory on the other side of the hill. He never missed a day of work, until the day he left with a meagre severance package which got gobbled up in no time. It was hard enough to get a job in his youth, to find one at his age would be difficult. After endless attempts, he gave up.

He lived alone, like many. His home was situated not far from a stream of polluted water running down the valley. When the wind came down from the hill, it brought unpleasant odours and memories of his days in the factory. On such days he hung on the wall of the bridge, an old picture of himself wearing green overalls, black rubber boots and a white helmet. On rainy days, he searched his bags for an old silver box in which he kept another photograph of himself seated on a chair in a three piece pin-striped suit and a pair of homemade leather sandals. Standing next to him were four of his children, all barefoot. Their mother always refused to be photographed. He carried her picture in his head. His entire family was killed during the height of political violence.

He spent most nights looking up, marvelling at the stars. He woke up at the crack of dawn every day, to search for a way to stay alive. At the end of each day, he parked his trolley next to the wall and dug in his plastic bags for something to eat. Sometimes he shared his food with his neighbours.

“Can I offer you some of my chicken?” he said to the young man who came to visit.

“I will eat lamb stew later.”

Do you want me to light the heater for you?”

“No thank you, I am not that cold.”

Hunched on his legs, the young man looked up and asked him to tell him one of the stories of the land.

The old man cleared his throat. But before that, he took out a small bag of herbs from his ragged coat and rolled some of it slowly in a newspaper, licking it a few times to seal it well. He lit his zol by scratching a match stick against a round smooth rock.

He came back to lean against an amputated tree trunk. One long drag, followed by a coughing fit and a whizzing sound of air struggling to make a home in his chest. With his zol hanging from the corner of his lips, he clutched his chest with both hands, to lull the pain. To regain his breath, he sat down on a plastic crate with his back against the wall.

After a few more drags, he killed the zol with his fingers, revealing long uneven nails encrusted with filth. With the butt safely secured behind his ear, he leaned to the side to release a jet of saliva and cleared his throat.

“It was a few years before you were born,” he said to the young man. “They came to us in their numbers.

‘One man, one vote.  
Time to make history.  
A new day has come,  
the dawn of a new era,  
the time is now.’

When got up early in the morning, we were full of hope. We spent the day in the sun, snaking our way into the classroom in the primary school not too far from here. When we made the cross on the ballot paper, we dreamt of tilling the land for our children’s children. When we heard news of our victory, we were jubilant. Freedom is here today, we chanted. Thereafter, we went back home. In time, our hope dried up like mulberry leaves. The only thing that did not dry up was our dreams of freedom.

A few years later, they called on us again; to be counted. We cannot be counted, we are not sheep, we said. We have to count you to plan for your houses, they explained. This is an opportunity for you to meet your leaders, they said.

The idea of meeting a leader that we voted into power was enough inspiration to get up early in the morning to cover long distances on foot, to be counted. We responded to the call from all corners of our homeless world, all hands on deck behind old Checkers and OK trolleys. Our cracked, scaled soles were hard enough to resist cuts from broken beer bottles. Our bodies and faces were covered with scars, teeth broken during bouts of the struggle for food.



The leaders did not come. No one said anything. After all, we do not exist.

After the counting, we lined up for food. When we moved too close, they tried to stop breathing.

They gave us stiff pap and Jabula soup. Each counting officer was given a box of KFC Street Wise Two and chilli beans. Jabula Soup was given to us as a favour. It was meant to make us grateful for a hot meal. Over the years, we lost our appetite for the soup.”

This was the shorter version of one of the old man’s stories of the land. On some nights, when his stomach was full, the old man could narrate the longer version with vigour.

As if on cue, the young man got up to stretch his body. A fart escaped before he could say goodbye.

“Sies man”, the old man released a jet of saliva through a gap left by a rotten tooth that never made it to the dentist’s chair, “they eat the beans; you fart.”

The young man laughed and left.

“Don’t forget to close the door on your way out,” the old man said.

“Sure Madala.”

There was no door to close. Neither was there any heater, chicken or lamb stew.

**Ku Ruff**

He woke up late, as usual. His mother was doing laundry next to the toilet outside. When she saw him walk out of the door, she stood upright, one hand supporting her aching back muscles, the other holding his pair of socks, dripping with water.

“Ke gore ruri Kgotso ngwanaka, you are not prepared to get out of bed until the sun burns your buttocks ruri? How are you going to get a job when you don’t even make any effort to go and look for work like other men?”

Kgotso mumbled an answer before stepping in the toilet. Without washing his hands, he walked back to the kitchen. All the pots were on the stove, empty and clean. The bread bin, empty too. The only thing to eat was left-over spinach and pumpkin in the fridge.

“Is there nothing to eat in this house?” he asked his mother. His mother, hanging his underwear on the washing line, did not even look at him. He asked again, “Why is there no bread in this house?” She did not respond.

He went to her room to search for her purse. He then took out some money to go and buy bread at a Spaza nearby. With change, he bought himself two cigarettes.

Bra Solly, the Spaza shop owner, stared at him while he rung up the items. Kgotso shifted from foot to foot. He knew what was coming. He knew bra Solly’s story well. Everyone did. Even though he was retrenched, bra Solly decided that he was not going to fold his arms and expect his wife to support him.

“If I can’t help with big things in the house, I can’t expect her to buy me beer or cigarette,” he said to Kgotso. “A man must have self-respect my laaitie. Your mother sacrificed her life to make things better for you. Even now, she is still doing di-piece job. You can see that she is not well but look at her yard, full of vegetables. If you cannot find a job, do anything mchana. Even if it is for little money, is so’rite. Ek ken, things are not easy but one day an opportunity will come knocking. ”

Bra Solly loved his beer, but only when relaxing at home after work. He was well built, clean and proud. He kept fit by jogging and lifting homemade weights in the garage. He was a man of few words, gentle too. But once he got angry, he turned into a bull. Taxi drivers once struggled

to stop him when he caught someone trying to snatch a handbag from an old woman. The poor man lost his front tooth in a second. If he was not rescued, he would have lost a few more.

He was devoted to his children. There was a time when his wife went to study for a Diploma for a year. He took care of his children, two boys and one girl, without help. He taught the boys to cook, clean the house as well as wash and iron their uniforms.

The little girl was treated as a princess. But she too was not allowed to leave her toys lying around in the house. One day he came back home to find her on a chair washing the dishes. Half of the liquid soap had been poured in the water.

The only thing that he could not do for his children was to help with homework. He did not go far with his education.

Kgotso hung his head while bra Solly talked but as soon as he left the shop, he lifted it again. The older generation don't understand, Kgotso thought. They just don't see how much more difficult life is. All they will tell you is 'in my time'.

He slowed his gait as he walked past Rato and her friends chatting on the stoep in one of the houses. All of them were dressed in nighties and towels.

Their toddlers were playing nearby. One of them almost choked on something he picked up from the ground. The mothers jumped to the rescue. His mother spanked him. He howled for one second. With unwiped tears and mucus on his face, he crawled back to play with others. Kgotso watched the small boy, recalling his childhood. Within a few minutes he had hit another child, a girl. She hit back, with her teeth sunk in his scalp, almost swallowing his hair. Another cycle of howling. The mothers paused their conversation to spank both children. Thereafter, they returned to their chat about the weekend at the tavern and the fact that they were not interested in dating men who don't give them any money.

One of Rato's friends, Lolo, got up to demonstrate to them how her date slapped her across her face when she refused to have sex with him. "It serves you right," Rato said with laughter. "You thought it was easy for a stolen like you to drink six ya di Savannah for mahala. Jy's mal." The rest joined in the laughter.

Kgotso noticed Rato's grandmother in the shade on a wheelchair nearby. She was listening to the conversation in silence.

By the time he arrived home, Kgotso's stomach was growling. He prepared a breakfast of four fried eggs, tomato and onion gravy, atchaar, and eight slices of white bread. After eating, he looked around for a box of matches. When he could not find it, he went back to the door, "Mma, have you seen matches?" She told him to look in the top drawer of the cabinet. He carried his chair to the sunny side of the house and lit his cigarette. A few minutes later, he heard the sound of the gate. He looked up to see T Man walking towards him.

T Man was a guy that everyone hated to love, for their own security. Even though Kgotso disliked him, he could not get rid of him. Everyone who was once rescued by T Man from bullies was subjected to his habit of turning every opportunity into a pay-back session. Because many of the boys were afraid of him, they were more than willing to do odd jobs for him to support his addiction.

"Hola."

"Sure my outie."

Kgotso got up. Palms slapped against each other in the air. Middle fingers and thumbs snapped after having touched the blood of the other. He offered him a chair and a cigarette and went inside the house to get another chair for himself.

"Di ntshang?" T Man asked.

"Fokol. Net ek is blaen gebabi my bra." Kgotso started to yawn as he shifted his chair to avoid the glare of the sun. "I woke up with a pounding headache. Nkare ne ba mphetha ka hamora."

"Eish, go a nyewa my bra..." T Man responded while he carried his chair to the shade, away from Kgotso.

"Blaene...eish..."

"I came here last night. To collect the money you owe me. MaGriza said you left le bo Oupa, Waar was jy?" T Man asked.

"Wie?" Kgotso responded, avoiding eye contact.

"Ah ah, kgante ke bolela le mang? Waar was jy gister?" T Man asked.

"What do you mean?" Kgotso got up to stretch his arms, followed by a crackling sound of fingers accustomed to being snapped at random, and an artificial yawn.

"Haai, ek vra net..." T Man responded, suppressing a chuckle.

Kgotso went back to the house to get another cigarette. He came back to settle on his chair, an unlit cigarette dangling from one corner of the mouth, a matchstick from the other. He took a long time before lighting the cigarette, as if it was about to blow up. One scratch of a stick, followed by one long puff, and a frail trail of smoke out of his nostrils.

“Daai man gaan jou bliskem,” T Man said.

“Wie?”

“Hy gaan jou goed donner papa.”

“Wie?... Eintlik, what are you talking about?” Kgotso asked.

“Gas cylinders, that’s what I am talking about.”

Kgotso sat motionless on the chair. He understood the rules of the game that T Man was playing.

“Di gas cylinder boss,” T Man continued.

“Wat se gas cylinders?”

“Two of them, stolen from bra Solly’s workshop gister.”

“Ek ken niks ek,” Kgotso responded.

“Waar was jy?”

“Heeban, am I supposed to be reporting to you? You are not my boss,” Kgotso said, raising his voice slightly.

“Bosso ke mang,” T Man laughed. “First suspect. First exhibit.”

“What are you smoking?”

“Keep on pretending Mr. Pretender. You are the one who will be smoking when the heavyweight champion panelbeat daai domkop van jou... You can steal from anyone but not that one.”

T Man got up and punched a few jabs in the air whilst hopping from one foot to the other.

“Nxa, jy’s mal...” Kgotso dismissed him with his hand and turned away.

Still laughing, T Man moved closer and put his hand on Kgotso’s shoulder.

“A o re Two Clipper daar.”

“Heeban, wat gaan’an min jou? I have no money,” Kgotso looked up at him with irritation that was bordering on anxiety.

“Sharp...I will see you later my bra. Ek gaan bra Solly check.” T Man moved towards the gate.

“Eish, eish, eish...wag...eish...” Kgotso went inside the house and came back with a two hundred rand note.

“Ta my outie...take the cylinders back. Otherwise, die poppe sal jive.”

Kgotso went inside the house. T Man’s words unnerved him. He sat on his bed for a while with his head in his hands. Finally he rolled over and fell asleep. It was afternoon when he woke. T Man’s threat hung over him. He needed a cigarette badly. But first the cylinders. He went hunting for Oupa to ask him to help him carry them back to the workshop in the evening. Oupa had disappeared. Instinctively, Kgotso rushed to the place where they hid the cylinders. They were not there. He could still see the circles they had cut into the dirt. He kicked and scuffed his feet on the ground until the circles disappeared.

Kgotso tried to think what to do but all he could think of was T Man, his threats. The words crowded his brain. For a while, he walked the streets seeing nothing, hearing nothing. He woke up to the sound of a hooter at a busy crossing. Instead of running, he froze. One of the boys, the one who sold loose cigarettes at the crossing, grabbed him by the scruff of his neck and dragged him out of the way. He sat down on the pavement with his head cupped in his hands revealing thin legs covered with dust.

He searched his pockets for loose money to buy a cigarette. He bought two. Kgotso and the boy sat together smoking. He narrated his story to his rescuer. The story and the cigarette ended at the same time.

Kgotso left the boy sitting on the pavement with their stompies in front of him. He took a long walk back home. It was a hot afternoon and the streets seemed strangely empty. Even Rato and her friends were not in their usual position. Kgotso got home to find T Man waiting for him. He stood with his hands in his pockets. He clenched and unclenched his fists, flexing his fingers. He wanted more money. Kgotso had nothing. He started to mumble a story but T Man cut him off. He left with a threat.

Kgotso woke up in the middle of the night coughing. He pulled the blanket off and sat on the edge of the bed. The smell of gas filled the room. He rushed to the kitchen. They did not have a gas stove but still he felt like he had to check. He walked outside and let the fresh air flood his

lungs. Maybe he was dreaming. He went back to his room and opened the windows then climbed back into bed.

He woke up in the morning with a pounding headache. The smell of gas refused to go away. It seemed to follow him. He could smell it in his hair, on his clothes. It seemed to ooze out of his pores. After a bath and a change of clothes, he took a long walk.

It was even hotter than the previous day. The air was thick. Kgotso walked slowly. His head was still pounding, he was sweating and his eyes stung. The smell of gas followed him. It seemed to be getting stronger. To avoid the smell, he quickened his pace.

He walked aimlessly, until he ended up at bra Solly's Spaza. With a cigarette dangling from the corner of his mouth, he turned his pockets inside out, searching for matches. A few loose coins fell to the ground. He found one box with one stick in his back pocket. One scratch of a stick, he saw a flash. He started to run, flailing his arms. The fire swallowed him.



## Silence

She gave birth to nine children. Two of them died. She carried her pain on her shoulders like a hoe that she carried to the fields every day. She was the first one to wake up in the morning, the last one to go to bed at night. In her hands, time was shaped like putty. She cooked, cleaned the house, chopped the wood, tilled the land and fenced the fields.

She was the head of the household. No, she was not unmarried. Her husband only came home a few times a year. In his absence, his brother enforced the rules of the household on his behalf.

One of the rules forbade her from setting foot in the kraal, especially when she was menstruating. Sometimes when she only had porridge to serve the children, she defied the orders and milked the cows.

“Woman, what are you doing? Do you want the cows to miscarry their unborn calves? How many times must we tell you to keep away from the kraal?” her husband’s brother would say to her as he pulled her from the cow she was milking. A few drops of the milk spilled from the udder to the ground.

She wanted to ask him if he had ever seen the look in the eye of a hungry child. Instead, she fastened the cloth around her waist, carried the bucket and walked out. For all her years as a woman who was married to a man who was never there to protect her from her in-laws, she learnt to use silence as a weapon.

“How can I not milk the cows?” she thought. “He hardly sets foot in the kraal himself. And he expects me to serve him tea with milk every morning. These cows cannot milk themselves.”

She raised her children with the same force that she used to tame an ox. In her household the rule was that there is no chore reserved for boys or girls.

“As long as you have a mouth to eat, you must learn to cook. If you want water to drink or bath, you must carry it yourself. If your clothes get dirty, you must wash and iron them yourself. You cannot depend on other people for your own breath,” she used to say to her children and their cousins. She loved them all as her own. She was as generous with a hug as she was with a rod.

Boys and girls fetched water with 5 litre containers on their heads. Later, when she got older, she allowed them to carry bigger containers in wheelbarrows. She taught them to cook, clean and wash up. After dinner, she lit a few more candles in the room and sat silently on the floor, fixing holes in their clothes whilst listening to them discuss their homework around an old table covered with plastic.

“You must study hard,” she said. “The cows can die. Or they can be stolen. Sometimes the chief may chase you away from the land. Your knowledge is your inheritance. You take it with you wherever you go. No one can steal it.”

One of her proudest moments was when she won an award for producing the best crops from her fields. Even though she could not read or write the alphabet, she was not illiterate. She could read time by looking up at the evening star. She could also tell from the alignment of stars if there would be rain or drought. At full moon, she could be heard humming at the back of the kraal planting vegetables. She produced and preserved her own seeds.

“How can I just fold my arms and wait for someone to give me a bag of seeds when I don’t know where the seeds come from? Sometimes I think these strange diseases that you all suffer from come from the seeds,” she used to say to the young agricultural officers when they came round to deliver bags of seeds to the farmers.

When rains were good, she sold her surplus crops to buy school uniforms, clothes and shoes for her children at Christmas. If she did not have enough, the children only got one pair of black Bata Toughes, for Christmas and school. She always bought them a size bigger. To make them fit, she stuffed pieces of newspaper at the tip. She used to joke that if they eat too much during the holidays, the food will descend to their feet and they will expand in size before they go back to school.

One year, the drought was so bad that she had no money to care for her children. She tried to contact her husband. She could not locate him. His construction company was travelling around the country.

Faced with the reality of unhappy hungry children who had no uniforms and books at the beginning of the year, she did the unthinkable. She sold two of the cows without consulting the men of the household. Her husband’s brother summoned a council of elders to discipline her.

“You did not bring any cows with you when we married you,” one of the elders said. He lifted his walking stick in the air to punctuate his words. “You did not bring anything from your home. We left cows with your family. Now you are behaving like you are the one who gave us cows. The fact that your husband is not here does not mean you are a man.”

They were seated on chairs in a semi-circle in the shade of a Morula tree. She was in the sun, on the ground, her legs stretched in front of her, facing down. Once again, she defended herself with silence.

When school started, she bought uniform and shoes for her children. Instead of punishing her for breaking the law, nature rewarded her with abundant rains in the next ploughing season. Once again, her crops flourished. She made enough money to buy the children two pairs of shoes each; one for school, another for Sundays.

Many years later when she was frail and tired, she narrated her story to her grandchildren. “If I had another chance,” she said, “I would hold the knife at the sharp end again, just to make sure that my children get a good education.”

Holding the knife at the sharp end again and again came with its injuries. She suffered a stroke that left her paralysed on the left side. Watching her struggling with her speech, walking with a hump and a limp was a reminder that a woman holds the knife at the sharp end at her own risk.



## **Borrowed Time**

Two years had passed, no child. Elders were concerned that the bride price was for naught. She consulted two practitioners, a medical doctor and ngaka. She was fine, he was not, the two reports said.

If she had been the one with no seed, elders would have arranged for him to marry another wife. Now that he was the one with no seed, a solution would have been for her to marry a second husband. But that was not to be. "The world would come to an end," elders would say.

To solve her husband's problem, elders arranged that she should warm her bed for her husband's younger brother. Her husband took a trip to visit distant relatives far away.

She had no say in this. "Lebitla la mosadi ke bogadi," elder women said to her when she left her home. "You are now carrying your father's honour on your shoulders. Whatever you do or say will be a reflection of where you come from. You do not belong to us anymore."

She and her brother-in-law were not close. He lived far from home and was the kind that would greet and leave you in peace.

The first time that he came to spend the night she was bleeding, before her time. She remembered what her grandmother used to tell her. "A woman's body knows everything. If your mind tells you to sleep with a man and your heart says no but you do it, your womb will stop you. Why do you think a heart has the same shape as the womb?"

Her brother-in-law was very understanding. "Even if you were not bleeding, I was not going to touch you," he said. Instead, he spent the night, or part of it, asking her questions about her childhood.

She was raised by her grandmother. Her mother died when she was still small. She never met her father. She would have loved to have been a teacher. She enjoyed spending time with her nephews and nieces. They used to run after her and pull her skirt from different directions. They loved it when she fell to the ground, pretending to be dead. One would force her eyes open, the other would pretend to be a nurse and give her an injection on her bum; another would tickle her until she burst out with laughter. Then they would laugh and roll with her on the floor. Sometimes they played a school game. There was a nephew who always wanted to

play the role of teacher so that he could hit others with a stick. Her dream had always been to have a big family.

Even though her husband was not unkind to her, he was not pleasant either. He never called her by her name. He called her Mmagwe Batho, meaning mother of the nation. Sometimes she felt she was too young to be saddled with such a title. But her elders taught her that men appreciate women who show them respect. She never called him by his name either. She addressed him by his totem. Compared to other couples who were always at each other's throats, theirs was a good marriage. They never argued. They did not laugh much either.

The next time her brother in-law came to her room, she found a hundred reasons to keep going outside: to fill up a jug of water to drink, to make some tea, to check the washing line. The last time she just left without any explanation. She took her cellphone with her, to call her aunt. Her grandmother was too old to be bothered. In any case, what would she say to her? That she was about to make a baby?

By the time she returned, her brother-in-law had made himself comfortable in her bed. She paced up and down, folding and packing the laundry in the cupboard. He understood what was going on. He decided to sleep.

As soon as his breathing became slower and deeper, her body muscles relaxed a bit. When the time came for her to sleep, she crept in slowly, fully clothed. She curled up at the furthest edge of the bed. It was long after she had been counting his breaths that she fell asleep. In the morning when she woke up, he was already gone.

The following evening when he returned she was already in bed, in a night gown, fully covered by bed linen. As soon as she saw the door handle move, she turned to face the wall. He made himself comfortable on a chair and said his greetings. A lighthearted conversation about high temperatures and lack of rain continued without her looking at him even once.

After a while, he got up to undress. When she heard him take his clothes off, she shut her eyes tight. When he moved towards her bed, she bit her lower lip.

He got into bed, propped up his pillows, and continued to chat to her. Silence made her uncomfortable. So did light.

"Please switch off the light?"

He extended his hand to switch off the bedside lamp. A few objects fell to the floor. He leaned down to pick them up. She turned her head slightly to get a glimpse of his naked body, in the dark.

She was lying on her left side, facing the wall. She felt him move towards her, her right arm quivered. He felt it. Instead of enveloping her, he put his arm over her shoulder.

Later, he moved closer. No reaction from her. He spooned her and held her close. His manhood quivered. She felt it. Her shoulder muscles ached from tension. He continued to hold her close, in silence, until his manhood died a natural death.

“If I had a chance, I would take time to know you. Unfortunately, we are working on borrowed time,” he said.

In the middle of the night, she turned to face him. He opened his eyes and looked at her. She closed her eyes. He embraced her. She moved closer. He caressed her face with light strokes. She kept her eyes shut. He explored her body without moving too fast. She pressed her body against his. When he felt her readiness, he propped himself up on one elbow and asked: “Is it okay if I go on?” She had never been asked that question before.

From the time she was a little girl, she was conditioned that her needs came second compared to those of her brothers. As a woman, she was taught to initiate and sustain a man’s excitement. The idea of her own excitement did not exist.

He knew how to contain his excitement to ignite hers. He induced heightened pleasure by subtle caresses of the skin and delicate nibbling of body parts. He evoked in her a gush of lust she had never felt before. She felt bad about feeling good about wanting a man so bad. He knew what to say to her to make her lust for him even more. When he entered her, she held him tight. He took his time exploring the depth of her body. When she erupted, he whispered in her ear. She curled on her side and sobbed.

“Did I hurt you?”

She shook her head.

“Are you ok?”

She nodded.

Her husband never asked if she was okay. Out of shyness and respect that bordered on fear, she remained silent, praying that things will change.

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When she menstruated a month later, she secretly danced with joy. “Jehova, I married the wrong brother”, she whispered under her breath as soon as she saw him come into her room one evening. If it was not for borrowed time that snatched their joy like a thief, life would have been blissful. When the midwife confirmed her pregnancy three months later, a cloud of sadness descended upon her.

She was thinking about him on her way back home when she was almost bumped by a taxi. When her brother-in-law returned after having been away, he found her waiting for him. When he opened the door, she made immediate and direct eye contact with him. She held the gaze for a while. Without thinking, her hands moved to her tummy. He knew that his borrowed time was over.

He had decided that as soon as she fell pregnant, he would leave. He could not be near her without wanting to be with her. They made love, for the last time.

He made love to her as if it was the first time. She allowed herself to reach a depth that she never dreamt possible. When she came, her inner being was engulfed in a wave of convulsions that released a gush of fluid. To hide her embarrassment, she curled like a baby. He embraced her for a long time, in the dark, in silence. When he left the next morning, her eyes were red and swollen.

For the duration of her pregnancy, she was inattentive and forgetful. Everyone blamed it on her pregnancy. The condition continued even after her little girl was born. Her husband was happy, even though he would have wished for a boy.

For the next year, she tried her best to be a good wife to her husband who was less withdrawn than he was before the pregnancy. She also devoted herself to her baby who turned out to be a splitting image of her father. She even had the same birthmark behind her right ear. She poured her unspoken love for her child’s father on the child.

A year later, she agreed to meet him. They continued to see each other in secret.



## **A voice to die for**

He never met his mother. She did not have the guts to meet him. She gave her last breath when he took his first. His grandmother tried to raise him but she was too tired to live for him.

He never met his father either. His mother had only met his father once, in the heat of the moment. The only photograph he had of his father was his own reflection in the mirror. Green eyes and a dark skin make a queer combination.

He was raised by his aunt, in spite of his uncle's protests. She was forced to choose between him and her husband. She chose him without letting go of her husband. His uncle was disgusted with him. He never missed a chance to remind him that he was a product of an illicit liaison, whatever that means. "Even your mother did not love you. Your father did not even want to make you. You forced your way to earth and you want to force us to love you."

Each day, he took the verbal punches like a boxer desperate for the bell to ring. The thought of pouncing at his uncle like a wild cat crossed his mind more than once. Pavarotti was his saviour. He was the only man who could lull his uncle to stillness.

He loved his uncle's voice, in spite of his mean heart. I must have been mad from birth, he thought. How do you love the voice that insists you are the devil incarnate simply because you were conceived differently?

The conventional story is man meets woman, man and woman fall in love; they have sex and make babies and live happily ever after. His story is man meets woman for the first and only time in the darkness of the night, they exchange sex and money and go their separate ways. He went to school with a stamp on his forehead: illicit liaison. When the other kids started to tease him, he could not fault them for reading the writing on the forehead. Umlungu omnyama, eyes of a mamba or amper baas. All he did over the years was stamp these labels to his forehead as a seal of his identity, or fate.

When he turned fifteen he left home to live with a group of boys under the bridge. Smoking was not new to him. He had started in primary school when the boys bullied him. He wanted to belong. Learning to smoke was a form of protection. The bridge brigade was peaceful. They introduced him to substances that made the world a happy place.

Two years later, he found himself in a youth hostel. People there were illiterate. None of them could read any of the labels on his forehead. Instead, they stuck one that he had trouble getting used to: human being. Over time, old labels made room for the new and he settled in his new home and excelled in school. He sang in the choir, the first seed of his love for choral music was planted by an uncle whose voice he loved, in spite of his mean heart.

Many years later, he found himself behind bars for murder of not one but several men. He had developed a compulsion to muffle people's voices. He set out to hunt for his victims like a hunter goes out to hunt white lions. Before he could kill anyone, he needed to first hear them speak. The timbre of the potential prey's voice would determine if he was worthy of being strangled by his hands. He did not use any weapons. He loved human beings too much to cause them to bleed.

He went around bars and coffee shops scouting for lone rangers with whom he would start a conversation. Few people could resist a conversation with him, no matter how brief. If a prey possessed the voice to die for, he hid in a corner and waited patiently like a praying mantis. It did not matter how long it took to follow him, day and night, until he found the right time and place to pounce. Nothing and no one could stand in his way.

During the moment of the kill, his eyes changed to a shade of red. He first squeezed the throat hard, followed by gradual loosening of the grip when his prey stopped fighting, until he became limp in his hands. After disposing of the body, he went home to scrub his hands, until his skin threatened to peel off. The label on his forehead was a scab that hardened on the surface while it continued to bleed from the inside.

## **Tame the Tongue**

Father came to visit my mother. "I didn't know you had a daughter," he said. She told him that I had been living with my aunt and that I had passed matric but that she didn't know what to do because I didn't have a bursary.

Father said I could come and help with filing in his office. I worked there for two months. He was kind to me. He helped me to apply for a Diploma at a college not far from home. He also organised a bursary.

After I had left, Father started calling me. At first he said he wanted to check if I was settled. And then he called and called, sometimes at night. Sometimes he asked if I had money and I said yes. And then he sent me money even when I said I still had. One day he sent me many messages. I was in class. When I came out he called again. I said I was in class. He said ok. He said he was coming to visit me. I said ok.

He told me that he had booked into a hotel and I should meet him there. I asked if it was okay to bring my friend and he said no. I went to see him. We had lunch. He told me he would take care of me. He gave me pocket money and left.

After two weeks he called again. We met at another hotel. He said he loved me. I said I didn't want to disappoint my mother. I also said his wife would be very angry with me. He said they would not know because we were far away from home. He taught me to drink red wine. I did not like the taste. I mixed it with Fanta Grape. I spent the night with him.

A month later he came back, for a business meeting. I went to meet him. The parking lot was full of expensive cars. I didn't know the other names, I only knew BM and Mercedes. He left the key of the chalet for me at reception.

"Are you his daughter? You look like him," the receptionist said. I didn't say anything.

We spent the weekend together. When he left I was happy. He bought me nice things. He told me that he was going to buy a flat in town so that we could stay there when he was around. He also told me that he would give me anything I wanted as long as I belonged to no one else but him.

He bought a flat and he came to visit many times. He gave me the keys so that I could go there before he arrived in the evenings. The security guard at the gate used to look at me as if I was a plate of pap and wors spiced with chakalaka. I hated him.

Later in the year Father was transferred to another region, closer to his wife. He stopped calling. I was angry with him. The day he called I asked him, "What will you do if I date other men?" He said he would kill me. I decided I was not going to waste my feelings on him.

At the end of the year my friends wanted to organise a Pens Down party. I told them they could use *my* flat. After all, the owner had abandoned me. I bought food and drinks.

In the middle of the night there was a knock at the door. I was wearing a new pair of shorts and T-shirt. I was dancing with a guy who had been interested in me from high school. One of my friends opened the door and said: "Yes Madala, can we help you?" Everyone laughed. I looked in the direction of the door.

Father was wearing a tracksuit and a pair of tekkies. He marched in like a speed cop. He switched off the music. He told everyone to fokof. Yho, I did not know that Father could swear like that. If my mother would have heard me say those words, she would have told me to clean my mouth with a skrob brush. One of the boys tried to steal a bottle of Brandy on his way out. He left with a kick on his bony behind.

Thereafter, there was a long silence...

"Who is this little prick that you were dancing with?"

"He is not my boyfriend..." I was standing next to the door, ready to run.

"Answer my question you little..." he locked the door. "Did I not tell you that you belong to no one but me?"

"Yes you did."

"So what is all this rubbish that you are doing?"

"It is nothing...My friend said..."

"What do you mean nothing? Is this what you do when I am not here?"

"It's not like that. My friends asked for a place, I said they can come."

"Do you want me to tell your mother that you party with men in a flat in town and you also drink alcohol?"

How dare you, I thought, how dare you? "If you tell my mother, I tell your wife."

He slapped me across the face. The room started to go round and round. I closed my eyes and bit my lower lip. There was no tear that was going to leave my eyes. I opened my eyes, looked at him from head to toe, and looked outside.

"I have been married to my wife for years now," he said with a screeching voice. I closed my eyes, to reduce the splutter of his saliva on my face. "I have never laid a finger on her. Do you know why? Ehh, do you know why? She is a good woman, a woman of God. She listens to me. And here you are, wet behind your ears, living large in college because of the money I give you, and you think you can get away with cheating on me, just like that?"

"I said, he is not my boyfriend."

"And I am supposed to believe you. If the Security guy did not phone me who knows what could have happened?"

"Oh, I have been in prison all this time?" I rolled my eyes. "What else do you know? That I bring boys in here and ..." Another blow, bruised lip and a drop of blood on my white T-shirt.

He demanded all my cellphones. He locked me inside and left. I was too tired to worry about anything. The bed tried a round and round trick on me but I fell asleep in no time. The next morning I woke up with a heavy head. I dragged myself to the kitchen to make something to eat and went back to bed until I heard a key at the door.

He pulled the duvet and told me to bath and pack my bags. I did as I was told. I dressed in a fresh pair of shorts. He instructed me to wear a dress, like a decent woman. I did. No questions asked. Next there were a lot of questions about all the calls and messages on my phones. Once again, I answered all the questions.

Next came a lecture. Something like "I love you and I will take care of you...only if you listen to me. I don't take kindly to women who do not listen to their men." I wanted to say if you are my man where is the ring?

After an argument which I would not really call argument because I chose to remain silent, he drove me home. When he dropped me at my mother's, he told me that he would be coming to preach at our church the following week. He said he would see me soon. I took my bags and left.

Come Sunday, I decided not to go to church. My mother was not pleased: "Father is coming and Father has been good to you and you ought to show some respect and for goodness sake be grateful to the only man who has been there for you ever since your father died and you have changed ever since you went to that college of yours and I did not teach you to disrespect your elders and no you are not staying behind and and and..." I told her I was sick. It was not true. But it was not a lie either.

"My child, you have missed out, Father was in his element," my mother said when she returned. "I don't remember when last the church was packed like that. They had to fit extra chairs on the side. Even that did not help. There were people on their feet at the back. He preached about Taming the Tongue, James 3 verse 1-2: 'Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly. We all stumble in many ways...,' then he moved to verse 9 to 10 'With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in God's likeness. Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers, this should not be.'"

"Yeah right, "I said before I could stop myself.

Mother looked up, stunned, "What do you mean by that?"

"No Ma, I mean it's a powerful sermon."

In the afternoon, he sent messages which I ignored. Early evening, he came to see my mother and to enquire about my health. I put on my best set of manners and thanked him, in between my coughs, for coming. Thereafter, I went back to my room to chat with my friends.

When the time came to go back to college, I organised my own transport. All was well, except for one thing. He was the one who was supposed to sign for the release of funds for my bursary. Finally, I agreed to meet him.

"This year the bursar can only cover tuition, there isn't enough for residence," he said.

He asked me to live in the flat permanently. He showered me with gifts and said he was sorry and he loved me and could I give him another chance. At least he loved me, I thought. Who knows, maybe I might learn to love him, in time.

In no time he had moved in completely. When he was not with his wife or traveling, he dropped me off at school and picked me up. He got angry when I was late or when I did not answer the phone. When I was home with him, I switched off my phones.

The Security guy made extra money from spying on me when Father went on business trips. I also received a bonus every time I played the role of good woman. I knew that if I left, I would put my studies in trouble.

Little did we know that news had reached his wife! She too was working on a plan, waiting for the right time to act. It happened when Father was away for a weekend. I went to town to buy myself something to eat. I did not go for long. I was talking on the phone when I arrived back at the flat. I turned the key to discover that the door was not locked. I asked my friend to hang on and I checked the door again. It was not locked. I told her I would call her later.

Just after I had put the phone in my bag, the door was flung open. A mad woman was in the flat. How did she get in? Nobody knew.

“You little bitch, how long did you think it was going to take before I got to you? I knew from the beginning that you were after my man. Who knows, maybe this is a plan between you and your evil mother, to kill my husband, the same way that she killed your father? How much money have you and your ugly mother eaten from my husband?”

She punched and pulled me. I fought back. Her plan was to drag me inside, mine was to drag her outside. I held on to the door frame with one hand and one leg. I went for her, with my teeth, on her fat arm. She lost her grip and punched me on the head. I almost fell on my butt. I gained balance quickly and ran outside. She followed me. Boobs, up and down. Weave, flying all over. She caught up with me. She punched me. I ripped her ugly summer dress. She stopped, to cover herself. This was my chance to run. My bag was lying next to the door. I ran towards the door. She rushed to pick up a brick lying on the pavement. The security guard came running. I ran to hide behind him. He pulled me to the side. The brick landed on her windscreen. She closed her eyes and put her hands on her head. I grabbed my bag and ran.

I saw her pulling her hair out. In my head. I imagined her following me. Fast. I watched the shadow of my feet pounding on the road. Hard. I felt my heart thumping against my ribs. Loud.

Sweat droplets flooded my eyes. Yet, I continued to run. Far away from the voices in my head. Away from her and her husband. Away from my life with him. The books I left in the flat could be replaced. The clothes, I did not need. My college fees were paid up. I could survive on my own until end of the year.



## Kasi Crossings

“Eish, dis warm jong, le ntsha noga mo mosimeng,” a man waiting for the taxi says. “Wat se slange, daar’s mos nie slange hierso. Die’s mos n township. If you want to take snakes out of their holes, gaan platteland toe.”

“You people like complaining. It is winter, you complain. Summer, you complain. Hot, cold, same thing. December, you make noise, ke December boss. January, you complain, kgwedi e fela neng... Now where are these taxis? These taxi drivers, are they on strike again? Soon they will be raising their fare. Meantime, our pension stays the same. This government does not care for old people,” an old man nearby invites himself in the conversation.

“Ao, Mdala, you complain that we are complaining but you also complain,” says another bystander.

“Ek se grootman, a o re nkauza daar,” a young man screams across the road. The stranger stops to get a pack of cigarettes out of his pocket and the young man rushes across the road only to be stopped dead by a screeching sound of brakes and a driver’s hand stuck firmly on the hooter. “My laaitie, wat gat aan min jou?” “Eish, sorry my grootman, sorry,” he takes his hat off, rubbing his hands together. But this near-death experience does not stop him from flying across the road to get a cigarette.

“Hee wena, don’t forget to buy milk. And bring change. I am sick and tired of this habit of yours of keeping change to yourself,” a mother screams at her son from a house nearby. He does not even bother to respond. His focus is on the girl walking past in a pair of skinny jeans. “Eish, mabebeza, jy slaan my dood. O a ntlatsa blind.” She does not even look at him. “Mxm,” she hisses under her breath. “Eish, ja neh”, his mind gets lost in her body for a while until he remembers that he was on his way to the shop to buy milk.

“What is going on? Why are all these taxis full? Gape batho ba ba tla ‘o ngena. By the time a person gets to town, all the month end Pakistani specials will be finished,” a woman speaks to herself. A young man with a permanent happy face responds without an invitation to the conversation. “Don’t worry Mommy, s’ka wara Dimamzo...Ek se,” his attention is focused elsewhere. He runs to the window of a taxi that stopped for a passenger, “en nou, jakete?

Where is the money you promised me?" he stretches his palm towards the driver. "Wat se geld? Die' nyaope van julle gaan julle dood maak," and he drives off. "Fotsek, Nja...you think you better. Just because you are driving a Quantum? Fokof Satan," and he turns around to dance furiously to the music in his head.

## Love at a Funeral

Women like her don't like to serve tea in township funerals. That was the first thing that crossed his mind when his eyes met hers across a cloud of smoke at the back of the yard. She looked unnatural in her burial society uniform. Her mop of Peruvian hair was covered with a doek. He could tell from her pedicured toes that she was a woman of class. The whiff of expensive perfume that lingered after she walked past served as confirmation.

They were at the fireplace at the same time. She was there to fill up the big enamel teapot with boiling water. He was there to get hot water for his bath. His eyes popped, his lower lip slackened slightly; a water container made of a recycled one litre Monate atchaar bucket got lost in his hand somewhere between a size 30 drievot pot and a recycled 5 litre Plascon paint bucket.

Their eyes met and held for what seemed like ages, even though it was just a few seconds. He stretched his back to look at her walk away from the fire. She was shaped like ntlhwamakhura, an edible wasp that elders used to harvest in multitudes after heavy summer rains. She swayed her body from side to side like a duck. She knew he was looking.

His day had started in the early hours of the morning when he had gone with diphiri to show them the allocated ground so that they could start digging. Following that, his entire day was taken up by supervising the slaughter of the cow, safe-keeping of the meat, identifying a spot for men to cook the meat, putting up the tent and chairs across the street, co-ordinating with the priest about the programme for the burial, preparing for the arrival of his mother's body from the funeral undertakers and responding to questions from anyone and everyone with a question that needed to be answered.

It was only later in the night, when his mother's body was settled in her bedroom for the last time, and members of the church congregated for the night vigil, that he could take care of some of his needs; a bath, food, and a quiet moment alone. He did not mind that his body was aching. It helped him to focus less on his heart.

His father had died a few years earlier from inhaling dust underground. He worked for a long time in the mines. Apart from dust, his father's body was also full of alcohol. Time with him was always brief. When he died, he did not mourn him because he did not know him.

His mother was always present in his life, even when he was away at college. She worked as a domestic worker and supplemented her wages with sewing. A sewing machine was the alarm clock that woke him up in the morning when he was growing up.

His father spent more time with the other woman than his family, but he didn't once hear his mother say a bad thing about him. When he came home to die, she stopped working to take care of him. Afterwards, his pension money went to the other woman because she was married to him in community of property unlike his mother who was married customarily.

"When I took a vow before our elders that I would be a good wife no matter what, I meant it. I took care of my side of the promise. That is enough. Money is just like mist. It is here in the morning, gone during the day."

His mother never spoke about love. She never hugged him even once. But he knew that she loved him with all her heart. She could tell when he was happy. She could also tell when he was sad. Mothers always know.

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Months later, he met the woman again, at another funeral. He was leaning with one hand against a spade after they had filled the grave with soil. It was time for the family to put wreaths on the grave.

He looked up, and there she was, hiding behind a pair of designer sunglasses. Her perfectly styled hair was covered loosely with black lace. He could not see her eyes but he knew that she was looking at him. His heart missed a beat. He lowered his eyes to bring focus back to burying a body of a friend's friend six feet underground.

Later, he went looking for her three houses away from the home of the deceased. He found her in a circle of camp chairs with her friends enjoying the Wie-Sien-Ons vibe. She got up abruptly and almost ran to him. They almost hugged, but ended with a limp handshake. After a short but deep chat, they exchanged numbers. He did not want to stay long at the after-tears party because he was still full of his own tears. Besides, he did not drink alcohol.

By the time they went to the next funeral, they had already spent hours in the day and night talking to each other over the phone. He had even visited her a few times. Months later, she asked him to move in. He was reluctant.

“I cannot just up and go. As the only boy in the family, I am responsible for my mother’s house. I must first find a reliable person to live in the house.”

A burglary at his mother’s house was the least of his problems. He was unemployed. When his employers refused to give him long leave without pay, he resigned from his job to care for his mother. He sold his car to settle her medical bills.

“It is not like this is going to be permanent,” she said. “We can work something out. I will help to find you a job or something. In the meantime, you can use my other car if you need to get around town.”

The days, weeks and months after he moved in were glorious. Everyone at the office remarked that her cheeks were glowing. “Me? Glow?” She feigned ignorance. “My cheeks are pitch black, they don’t change colour. But hey, when you are sent off to work with a kiss and welcomed back home with another, you cannot *not* glow.”

During the day she sent him messages and asked about all sort of things. “How are you my love, what are you up to, why don’t you take a drive to spend some time with your friends, what do you want us to do tonight, this weekend?”

In a few months, the tone and content of the messages changed. “Where are you kganthe hee, does it take so long to do a job interview; are you out with those low-class, work-shy useless friends of yours?...ke neng ke go founela...call me when you get this message, nxa...”

Sometimes, when her friends came over, she would whip out several bank notes from her purse and sent him to buy drinks. “Buy something for yourself as well my love.”

Now and then, there were times of fury. He wanted to explode but he did not. Instead, he chose to hide behind a newspaper. There were times when he groaned to himself and screamed silently. When this did not stop the blood from rushing to his head, and very often it did not, his last resort was a long lone walk at night. Until the walk could save him no more.

“Why does it feel like you are the only one who counts in this relationship? Have you ever stopped for a minute to ask yourself about...Do you care about...Am I only here to serve your

needs? If it is that hard for you, don't you think it is double hard for me...do you really think I do not worry about this...do you ever consider my frustrations as a man who is failing in his role as a provider? Do you even know what I am going through?"

"Your tantrum does not contribute anything to the monthly instalment of the car you are driving... Ga o thibe patlha niks. You have been here the whole day, doing what? I am out there working my black ass off and you sit here doing nothing or driving around with my car chasing girls." The eruption rolled out endlessly like a tape, until she walked out of the room, but not before she dismissed him with a wave of her hand.

He decided that he was no longer going to use her car. He had saved a bit of money from what was left from the sale of his car. He bought himself an old van at a local auction and fixed it himself. He started a mini furniture removal and transport service. She, in turn, felt bad about having said mean things to him.

"I am not angry with you. I understand that you are pulling hard. Besides, I cannot be looking for a job forever. If no one hires me, I will hire myself," he said.

For some time, things were rosy again - for her. For him, it was different. His soul had a dent on its face. But he hid it well. Then the fights started again. It was no longer about the car. Neither was it about money. There was always something to yell about.

One night, he started to pack his clothes. She begged him to give the relationship another chance.

"I don't want to lose you,' she said to him from across the room, her mascara stained eyes fixed on him.

"This is not about losing me. It is about you finding yourself."

"I really want to make this work," she moved to him and buried her face in his chest.

He held her, in silence. He could feel the beating of her heart against his. His attention moved from the manicured garden outside to his aching back muscles. He took a deep breath and cleared his throat.

"Being with me doesn't have to be hard. Yes, I have my own shortcomings. I am working on them. You know how I feel about you. But I cannot love you more than you love yourself."

After a night of talking and sobbing, he stayed. But the cycle continued. It rolled like a wheel. There were times when he longed for silence, but her tongue sliced his heart into pieces. There were other times when he longed for words, but her silence ripped him apart.

One morning he got up and decided that it was enough. It was a normal morning with no fights in the night. He was not seeing anyone. He was not mad at anyone. He was as clear as the sky outside, without a cloud of doubt.

He broke the news to her in the morning before she left for work. She was quiet for a few seconds. Thereafter, silence was followed by a cloud burst.

“You have been plotting this all along akere? You have obviously been waiting for the right moment to pounce. Now that I have been promoted at work, you are so jealous, you cannot hold it in anymore. You can go if you want...just leave...now...why don't you go now...I am sick and tired of your insecurities. I am tired of men like you who are threatened by powerful women. You can go and find someone you can control. Not me? What do you want me to do? Beg you? And say what to you? Why don't you go now?”

She took her bag and a set of keys and walked out.

The only reason she went to work that day was because she had a series of meetings that she could not re-schedule. She called him in between meetings but his phone was off. She left several messages:

“We can work this out...please...this is a minor misunderstanding.”

“Please can we talk, come by this evening after work. Please...”

She came home to an empty house in the evening, hurled her bags to the couch, took off her shoes and dragged herself up the stairs to her bedroom. Her sleep was interrupted by the sound of a doorbell.

She flew down, two stairs at a time. She looked around for her keys - on the coffee table, in her bag, in the kitchen, on the carpet, under the cushions. When she found them hanging on a key holder mounted on the wall, she paused for a brief glance at her reflection in the mirror. After fixing one or two strands of hair, she took a deep breath and opened the door.

“Afternoon Madam, sorry to disturb.”

Her gardener was standing some distance from the door wringing his hat in his hands. He was wearing his blue paint stained overalls. His bicycle was leaning against the gate in the front of the yard.

Her heart tumbled to her belly. She suppressed an urge to scream. Without a greeting, she shuffled her feet back to the lounge and counted money from her purse. She came back and handed him a few R 100 notes.

He rushed up the stairs to receive the money with both hands, bending his left knee slightly.

“Thank you very much Madam.” He bowed and held his hands together. “God bless you Madam. Thank you very much. When can I come back Madam?”

“I will call you if I need you, Joseph.”

She shut the door behind her.



## Istraight Lendaba

“The messenger delivered the letter day before yesterday.” Dineo is standing at the kitchen sink. Her words are almost drowned by the sound of water from a tap.

“What letter?” Mpho asks without looking up. She is sitting on a reclined position on the couch, feet elevated, flipping through Destiny magazine.

“From his family. They are coming at the end of the month.”

“What?” Mpho gets up, swinging her legs swiftly, almost upsets her drink on the side table.

“Tell me everything.”

“What is there to tell?” Dineo laughs. She turns to look at her. “What do you want to know? Letter delivered, delegation coming, end of story.”

“Wow, congra my friend.” Mpho lolls her with a high five. “Now we are both going to be bo-Mrs. S’banibani. You better start practising your new signature.”

They are silent for a moment. Mpho moves over, invites her friend to sit next to her. “Yho, wena with all your qualifications, how much do you think they are going to ask?”

“That one, you know him. Do not be alarmed if he tells them that he is not selling anyone. Don’t be surprised if he asks for anything between 5 and 10 thousand rands.”

“WHAAT? I would never ever go for that price. N-E-V-E-R. Does your father not value you?”

“What has that got to do with the price of my breath?”

Mpho returns to her reclining position. “Oho, wena with this philosophy of yours. You are reading too many books, that’s your problem. Why don’t you just settle for a white guy once? Don’t you know that if they pay very little lobola for you, your man and in-laws will not respect you?”

“Says who?”

“Me.” Mpho turns. She touches Dineo’s arm. “I am speaking from experience. My in-laws know that they can’t just toss me around like a piece of nothing. Granted, there is some seriously hectic traditional stuff that I have to do as makoti but I am independent: own income, car, apartment, nton nton... Now why should someone get the benefits just like that, without working for them? What about the money that my parents spent on my education?”

“What about it? Was it a loan kganthe? Is someone supposed to pay them back for raising you? Isn't that what parenting is all about? In any case, our elders did not even exchange money.”

“I know, I know...” Mpho sits forward. “But how much does one cow cost now? You will be lucky to get one for five thousand rands. Most of them start from 6000 upwards. If your father ask for that kind of money, it means he is giving you away for one or two, o...aowa, out of order...mhmh, ke a gana, le ge ba re politically correct. Le gona, do you want them to bring cows to town? Unless if you want to downgrade and go back to lokshin. Even there, there is no kraal for...”

Dineo looks at her fingernails. She searches her bag for hand cream. Finally, she looks back up at Mpho. “Now tell me, how much did they ask for you, seeing that you feel so strongly about this?”

“I don't want to tell you the amount,” Mpho stretches a hand to reach her glass, takes a sip of wine. “But it was not cheap. That's why he has to work so hard shem. But at least he's paid a deposit.”

“Deposit? Aowa bathong. Depositi? Serious? What are you, bedroom suite?”

“Not bedroom suite, room divider,” Mpho says and they both laugh. “O ntshitse bonnyane, hao. He must show his commitment phela. You can't expect my parents to let go of me just like that, as if they are throwing me away.”

“Honestly, I don't get it...this thing ya go ntsha bonnyane... What are the terms of settlement?” Mpho clears her throat. “We are living together as you know. I had to put my foot down though. You have no idea how many times I reminded him to remind his parents about the letter and he always said, 'I will tell them.' Meantime, I am supposed to be *the* 'wife', you know what I mean.” She rests an elbow on a cushion and crosses her legs. “In the end I had to tell him straight. I said, it is either you get your act together or I am gone. That's when the letter came. Everything will be finalised once he settles everything.”

“Which is when? ... So are you girlfriend or wife, legally speaking?”

“Arrgh, don't complicate this with this English of yours,” says Mpho. “Ke mosadi wa hae. Period!”

“We are nobody’s property akere? But they must still pay a lot of money and even go into debt to marry us?”

Mpho gets up. Dineo watches her shuffle her feet to the kitchen for a refill. “You are missing the point...Girl bring forth, so that we may see what you are worth; the hen knows when it is morning, but she looks at the mouth of the cock ...do you want me to continue?”

“Haai suka, I know all those proverbs, “Dineo waves her hand. She leans back on the couch. Mpho smiles at her. “Wait until your elders speak to you on your wedding night dahling, you will make peace with reality.”

“Why do we even bother, working so hard, for what?” asks Dineo.

“We are changing the world, that’s what we are doing” Mpho says. “How many Mayors do you know who are women, mhm, how many CEOs, CFOs, MECs, Ministers, and Judges and so on? I don’t even want to talk about all the women in Parliament? How many? How many powerful women do you know personally wena?”

“But do we still need to be lobolad substantially?”

“Hell Yes!”

“So, if I become President of the country and my prospective partner parts with little lobola for me, does it mean I have no value?”

“Injalo,” says Mpho, “ayifuni ruler.”

**My Body Knows the Trouble I have Seen**

I have been on this road many times before. I know this very well, because the trouble told me so, that I must not be out driving at night following him around. I know what to do to stop but I cannot. The trouble gets worse if I defy its command.

Before I left home I took a shot of whisky and a bottle of red wine as my companion. I know that drinking and driving at night, snooping around looking for a man, could land me in trouble. I know that this has to stop, but I cannot stop. I know that this is eating my stomach from inside, but I cannot let go.

I drove around town, stopping at all the popular places, looking for his car. The last time I did this he saw me before I could see him. He raced back home to wait for me. And I lied about having been out with my friends, red lipstick and all, at midnight.

This time I borrowed my friend's car, just in case. I drove around until the early hours of the morning. No sign of him. I then parked on the side of the road next to Caltex Garage, just to be safe. If I was in my car, I would need to be discreet.

I drowned my trouble in a bottle. When I woke up, it was five in the morning. My trouble wanted out. I wobbled to the toilet and vomited until there was nothing left in my stomach. Vomiting was not enough. I wailed until there was nothing left in my heart. I then called my friend who came with her husband. They took me home.

When I arrived, he was sleeping peacefully. He did not go out looking for me. He did not ask where I was. That's when I knew. I was a junkie for love. I packed my bags. I wanted him to stop me. He didn't. I drove back to my mother's house. She was not happy to see me.

"Did he beat you up?"

"No."

"Did he stop giving you money?"

"No."

"Did he stop sleeping with you?"

"No."

"Did he tell you to leave?"

"No."

“So, why are you here?”

“Because he is away all the time.”

“So...what is wrong with that?”

“Ma, how do you stay in someone’s home when he is never there? He does not even answer the phone when I call him. And we stay in the same...”

“Listen to me carefully. Men don’t fall from trees. I repeat, men *do not* fall from trees. If you have one who buys you a car and gives you money and sleeps with you, you fight for him until he puts a ring on your finger. Do you hear me?”

“Yes.”

“Why are you driving your old car? Where is the car that he bought for you?”

“I left it.”

“You what? Why? Did he stop you from...”

“No he didn’t.”

“Jehova...what do you think you have been working for all along? What am I going to say to everybody? What about bo-makhelwane? What am I going to say in church? What are we going to eat?”

A week after I had left his home, I called him. “This number does not exist. Please dial carefully or consult directory.” The trouble returned with a vengeance. I drove out at night, to his block of flats, a can of Jack and Cola between my thighs.

I knocked on his door. No one answered. I tried my set of keys. There was a security door inside. The trouble descended to my pelvis, I felt an urgent urge to pee. I flew down the stairs, I asked for a bathroom from a neighbour who was hosting a few friends for dinner.

Everyone turned to look at me. Their silence almost ruptured my eardrums. I plonked myself on the toilet seat. My bladder only had a few drops of urine in it. I found a drop of blood on the toilet paper, in spite of the fact that it was not yet time. I sat on the seat for a while, breathing in with my nose, out with my mouth. When I left, their eyes dug holes on my back.

I drove back to my mother’s house, to stay. A week later, I went to buy groceries, his bank card was declined. A few hours later, my cellphone contract was terminated.

The trouble became a permanent feature in my life. Until I could finally let it go, I held it in my belly and rocked it like a baby.





## The Spear

Flora was different from the others. She never enquired about my whereabouts. I loved her for that. Yet, I felt uncomfortable that she did not seem to worry about where and with whom I was. Once, I asked her directly and she said she was not a police officer.

We had been together for two years. Three, I think. There were many others at the same time. I am a man, an African man. Real men don't die from being stabbed with one spear. The blood might not even come out because it might feel undermined.

I loved spending time with her. But she did not excite me as much as those who hunted me down, day and night. I got caught a few times. But I am a man. You cannot change culture. It is God's plan.

It was a surprise when I received a call from her.

"Where are you?" she asked. "Can you please come and spend the night?"

The timing was off. I had made another arrangement to spend the evening with Doreen.

"Of course, I will see you in a few hours," I said.

I called Doreen to cancel our arrangement. She went into a rage.

"Don't think that I am not aware that you are seeing other women." she said. I moved the phone away from my ear. "If you don't come tonight, forget about us."

I didn't take that seriously. There were many other threats before. Women can get as crazy and angry as they want. It's our culture. A man is like an axe, he can be borrowed by different women.

I did not even go home. Flora had cooked my favourite meal, beef stew and dumplings. We were seated on the floor on the other side of the coffee table, laughing over some of the jokes directed at honourable members of parliament. After the meal, she moved over to my side. I was not sure if it was the food or wine or great company, I felt warm inside. Later, she said she was not in the mood for sex.

"All I want is to spend the night cuddled in your arms," she said to me as she curled on my lap.

What a bloody waste of my time, I thought. I checked the time. If I played my cards well, I could still make it to Doreen.

“Didn’t it occur to you that I may have had other important appointments?”

“You mean other women?” she raised her head slightly, looking me straight in the eye.

“That’s an insult. What makes you think that all my appointments have something to do with women? Do you think I lack self-respect that much?”

“If being with me only means sex, you are welcome to go.” She got up to clear the dishes in the kitchen.

I walked towards her and grabbed her arm. She pulled back and told me to leave her alone. I slapped her across the face. It was the first time I hit her. The others I have beaten up many times, for all kinds of reasons. To be a real man, you must hit a woman for no reason and make her apologise for something that she has not done.

I was just about to drag her to her room when she looked at me with an expression that I had never seen before. She opened the door and asked me to leave.

Right at that moment, my phone vibrated. Playing with many women had taught me to keep my phone on silent mode, always. It was Jane. I met her at a community development forum three days earlier. I had forgotten that I asked her to meet me at Kasi Lounge. She had been waiting for more than an hour.

I flew to Doreen’s house. When I got closer, I called her on her mobile phone. She did not answer. Her door was locked. I heard giggles from her room. At first I thought that she was on the phone, until I heard a man’s voice laughing with her.

My heart tumbled down to my stomach. I took off my jacket and wiped my forehead with the back of my hand. I looked around to see if anyone was watching. One of her neighbours was removing laundry from the line. As soon as she saw me, she stopped. One arm carried a pile of laundry, the other arm was on her waist, supporting her abundant body.

I knocked on the door. The giggles stopped. I knocked again, harder. No response. I knocked with a fist, calling her name. By that time, the neighbour had been joined by her relatives.

I was just about to kick the door when she opened the window, half naked, wrapped in a towel.

“How can I help you?” she asked.

“Don’t you bloody ask me how can you help. Open this door before I kick it open,” I said with clenched teeth, trying hard not to scream.

Then I turned to the neighbours. “What the hell are you looking at?”

They burst out laughing. I felt drops of sweat trickling down my spine.

She closed the window. By then, my shirt was soaking wet.

After a few minutes, she opened the window and threw out my clothes in a small plastic bag. I leaned down to pick up the bag, my jacket fell to the ground. I almost trampled on it. I picked up both and stormed out. All eyes were on me. I couldn't recall anything about my walk from Doreen's place to mine. I did not even know how I crossed one of the busy intersections.

After one can of beer, I called Jane. Her phone was off. I scrolled down on my phone and called a few friends with benefits. No luck. I then called Mary. Her husband was home. They had decided to go for counseling to save their marriage. She told me to stop calling her.

I woke up in the middle of the night on the couch with a TV remote in my hand and empty cans of beer on the floor.



## Two Cocks on the Same Roof

Cotton shirt, white. Skin, black. Haircut. Bald. Shoulders, wide. Arms, muscles and veins. Body, tight. Below the belt, jeans. Feet, brown shoes. Size, time will tell.

She turned to find him staring at her from the corner of his eye. He tried to avert his eyes. Too slow. Now it was her turn. She looked without averting her eyes. Dark eyes. Mysterious. A bit of moustache. Full lips. He lifted a hand. Waved.

She laughed. Winked.

She turned to find her friend watching from a secluded corner on the other side of the room. They had bumped into each other earlier. Same hotel. Separate conferences. Now that they didn't live in the same city anymore, they did not see each other often. A light meal and a drink was a way to catch up.

"What just happened?" her friend asked.

She shrugged, tried to explain. Her friend cut her off, "Two fleeting moments – one in a foyer in the morning and another in a bar in the evening and you call that meeting someone."

"Call it speed dating," she said as she hugged her warmly.

During dinner she tried to focus on her friend but she kept thinking of him. Dark eyes. Full lips.

The one time she looked, he was no longer where she had seen him. She turned around, scanning the room. He had moved to the bar, joined by three friends.

After dinner she wrote a note on a fresh napkin and called the barman. "What is that guy drinking?"

He told her.

"Give him the same drink, with this note."

The barman grinned, crossed the room, poured the drink and handed him the napkin.

All four of the guys at the bar turned and looked, at the exact same time. He stood up, faced the girls, and bowed. He turned around to sit down again, facing the barman who was grinning and wiping the glass furiously.

"Jeez, you wicked woman," her friend said, laughing silently. She whipped out a cigarette.

"What?" She looked the other way.

The evening seemed endless. She went to the bathroom so that she could get a better look. She sat back in her chair. One long leg over the other. She relaxed until her friend said: "His friends are going...he is coming this way...mhmhmh, swag..."

She straightened her back. One leg crossed to the other side. Heart pounding.

"May I?" he stood upright with his hand on the back of the chair.

"Sure."

Her mouth dried up. Her bladder filled. Instantly. She changed position. One leg over the other. Stood up suddenly. Excused herself.

The voices that had been playing in her head since she laid eyes on him returned. Loud. Bold. Direct.

*Head Voice 1: Imagine that you are walking on a straight line. One foot in front of the other.*

She tried. To walk on a straight line. One foot in front of the other. As soon as she disappeared around the corner, she flew to the loo, one thigh stuck to the other. Thereafter, she took a long time washing her hands. And splashing her face with cold water, gathering courage to walk back.

By the time she made it to her table, her friend was gone. She sat down slowly, looking down. She searched her bag for a cigarette and struggled with a lighter. He took the lighter and lit her cigarette.

She thanked him, and offered him one.

"No thank you."

"Do you smoke?" she asked.

"Used to."

"Do you mind?"

"Go ahead."

*Head Voice 2: Good Lord, a woman is not supposed to smoke, especially if the man is not smoking.*

Just as she stopped shivering, barman brought two drinks.

"This round is on me," he said.

"Too many rounds already," she said.

They both laughed.

They sipped the drinks slowly. She sniffed. Scent of a man. She reached for her glass, he leaned forward, his hand over hers. She moved back. She felt like covering her face. She tugged her ear instead. By the end of the round, torsos were thrust forward, heads almost touching.

After some time, he whispered in her ear, "One for the road?"

"Coffee. Strong. Black. No sugar," she said. He raised one eyebrow but said nothing. He called the barman.

She finished the coffee and settled her bill.

"Shall we?" she said.

"Certainly." He got up, pulled her chair and held the jacket for her to wear.

*Head Voice 3: Where are you going with this guy? Jesus Christ, you hardly know this man. This man is a total stranger.*

When they got to her floor, she handed him the key. He opened the door, she waited outside. He pulled her in gently, closed the door with one leg while he nibbled on her mouth, her neck, her ears, in the dark.

She took off her shoes, flipped the light in the bathroom and turned the shower on. He followed and leaned against the door. Room temperature went up. Shower glass steamed up.

"Let's get dirty," she said.

Instead of joining her, he went into the room and switched on the TV.

A few minutes later, he joined her. He held her tight. She felt his breath on her neck. His hardness on her butt. His hands began to move like tentacles of an octopus. Following her body contours. He squeezed her nipples. One hand moved down, to her pussy. He knelt down to lick her clit. He took out his hand out of her pussy and gave her a finger to lick.

"This is how you taste," he said.

"So you like the taste of fish?" she asked.

"Trout with Sauvignon Blanc or Salmon with Chardonnay," he said.

He poured shower gel on her body and sponged and rinsed and kissed her. On her knees. She went down. She consumed him, in small bites -licking, nibbling, gently, slowly, just enough to give him a slight shiver along his spine. She felt his fingers in her hair, in her ears. He started

moving. Slow. Soft. Swift. Hard. He groaned and moaned, hissed and cursed. Just before he ruptured, he pulled out and sprayed her boobs with coconut milk.

Right at that moment, lights went out.

Dead silence. Except for the sound of water. He gave her his hand. She stood up slowly and pressed her back against the wall. She could hear his breathing. The voice raced through her head.

For a moment they both stood still. Then he moved, to turn the shower off. He handed her a towel to wipe her chest. Thereafter, she crossed her arms, forearms pressing against her breasts. Her confidence returned. "Damn, just when I was thinking of inviting dick to the party," she said.

"Who's dick?"

"The man of the house."

"Oh yeah, does he have legs?"

"No legs, no eyes, but very precise."

"Bring him on. Let's see if two cocks can crow on the same roof."

He followed her to her bedroom, in the dark.

When she woke up in the morning, he was still asleep. She stared at his face. She tried to remember his name, her mind went blank.

She got out of bed and packed her bags. She was a meticulous packer. She folded pants, shirts in a single movement. Just enough time for a quick shower and a rush for an early morning flight.

She left him a note: "You were sleeping peacefully, I did not want to wake you. Please drop my key at the reception. Enjoy the rest of your stay."

She shut the door softly.



## **Keeper of Secrets**

I used to walk a long distance to school every day. Alone. My mother was very sick. I had to rush home after school to take care of her. I did not attend Matric Dance. Nobody asked me. Even if they had, I did not have a nice dress to wear. I did not tell my mother about the dance. She would have been sad that she did not have money to buy the dress. I stopped mentioning the things that I needed for school.

I stopped telling her about a lot of things.

I did not tell her about the day a car stopped next to me. I was walking from school. The boys in the car offered me a lift. I said thank you, I was almost home.

One of the passengers, the one in the front seat, was a boy I knew from school. Everyone at school was afraid of him. Even the teachers. He once threatened to stab a teacher with a screwdriver. He asked me to get in the car. I refused. He told two of the guys to grab me. I tried to fight but I was not strong enough. They threw me in the back seat, one on either side.

Once in the car, they left me alone. With elbows hanging out of windows, they spoke about the power of car engines as if I was not there. The music was loud. After a while, the guy from school turned around and asked me: "So you think you are better than other girls?" I said no. I don't know why he said that. He once summoned me to come and meet him at the back of the library at school and I refused.

They drove to a scrapyard. I pleaded with them to let me go. They dragged me out of the car. I tried to fight them. One of them gave me a hot klap on my face. "If you want it hard, keep fighting. If you want it easy, do what we tell you to do," he said. I pleaded with them to leave me alone.

They pushed me to the ground behind an old car. One of them started to record a video with his cellphone. They stripped me naked. Two of them held my legs apart and one forced himself in me. By the time the third one entered me, I had stopped fighting.

Just as I thought I was going to die from pain, I heard a dog howling from a distance. Too tired and sore to cry myself, I let the dog howl for me. I closed my eyes and let the howl enter my belly. I felt it in my throat. The howl was the howl of hurt. It was the howl of bones, muscles,

fear, blood, pain, hair. The dog and I howled together. We shared our pain. It lifted its head and threw all its pain into the howl, pushed it outside. I lay and listened. I cried for it. Silently. I cried for myself.

When they left, one of them spat on me.

I slowly lifted myself. I put on my dress and panty. It hurt to stand but I told myself that I was strong. The only thought in my head was the dog. I found it half standing half sitting with its front leg caught in a wire. It was brown, with fleas around its sad eyes. I approached it slowly, promising that I would not cause it any harm. At first it growled at me. I kept a distance. Then I took a few steps forward, stopping repeatedly to see its reaction. I knelt down, at a distance. Two dark eyes were looking straight at me. My neck muscles started to quiver. I felt a drop of sweat at the base of my spine. I moved closer, on my knees. When it stopped growling, I extended my arms slowly towards its paw. It did not move, except for its sad eyes, which lifted and looked into me.

I was almost done unrolling the wire when it started to wag its tail. At first slowly, sweeping the ground, then faster. I managed to set it free. With the palm of my hand, I rubbed the paw which had been pierced by the wire. It licked my hand a few times and hopped away with three legs on the ground and one hanging. I stood there for a long time, watching it disappear up the hill. I then sat down in dead silence staring in the distance, my arms held tightly around my raised knees. I became conscious of drops of semen on my panty. I wanted to scream but my voice failed me. I went back on my knees, hugged my belly and bent forward. I cried until I had no tears left. There are no clinics for dogs where I live. There are no clinics for people either. My naked body went viral on Facebook. People clicked to see the whole picture. They made a lot of comments. I stopped going to school. I did not tell anybody, not even my mother. I told her that I would go back to school when she is well. I took care of her until her last day on earth. I never saw the dog again. I do not know if it had lived or died.

## **Secret Weapon**

Main Switch Operator. This was his nickname. He was a powerful man known for his ability to heal life threatening illnesses which could not be treated by white man's medicine. His grandfather was not just an herbalist; he was a diviner and custodian of the King's secrets.

He used to follow his grandfather carrying his bag of herbs and a stool made of carved wood and strips of cowhide. By the time his grandfather died, he could heal many diseases.

People travelled from all over the country to consult him for various health and wealth afflictions. It was not uncommon to find cars outside his yard in the middle of the night with occupants waiting to be first in line in the morning. At times he first went to check on his cattle and crops. On such days, he would only start to work after midday. By then, the yard could be mistaken for a big funeral.

Healing people's blood and bank accounts were amongst his powers. Another was his ability to use his powers for activities which had very little to do with health. Legend has it that he once turned himself into a baboon. In broad day light. At a taxi rank. Bystanders took pictures with their mobile phones. One even sent the picture to a newspaper which published an image with the headline, "Monkey Slaps a Queue Marshall at a Taxi Rank."

It was his powers to heal and kill that gave him a larger-than-life personality in spite of his physical stature. He was a small man. Not easy on the eye. But he was charming. Rumour had it that he was not well-endowed. Yet, the number of women who longed to lie on his mat could not be counted.

He used a special potion on women. He once used it on one of his concubines. She followed him everywhere. He had no option but to reverse the effects, with disastrous outcome.

Many men consulted him for Lala Vuka, to keep their members awake. When he heard about Viagra, he challenged the manufacturer to drink his potion once. "They will see a baboon's buttocks," he said, laughing until tears streamed down from his left eye. It was always the left eye that shed a tear. The right eye had long ago dried up, even when he cried. He only cried

when he was happy. No one had ever seen him sad, when sadness came, he disappeared in the forest.

The women consulted him for Lala Forever, to keep their philandering husbands' members sleeping. The effect was instant and long lasting. Even though it was designed for men, he used it on his wives, in small but regular doses.

He was married to four wives.

Wife No. 1 spent her time in the fields ploughing, weeding and harvesting. She too had some knowledge of herbs. She specialised in healing children's diseases. She once rescued another wife's toddler from death. She gave her a little herb which made her cough incessantly until she vomited. In no time, the toddler was running around outside.

No. 2 and 3 were a few years apart. One was lean with a frame perched on long legs. Her skin, dark and flawless and piercing eyes pulled upwards on the side of a head covered with a mob of curly hair.

The other was short and full bodied with calf muscles toned by years of walking up and down the hill. She once hit a boy with one punch, he landed on his bony behind, right in the middle of the river. From then on, no one dared touch her boobs, even as they lusted after her. Unlike No.2 who was famous for her loud laughter, No. 3 laughed softly, from her belly.

Once, they were bitter rivals, fighting for his attention, until the day they discovered other concubines, who also wished them dead. From then on they made peace with each other. They spent a lot of time together helping each other with household chores. If one was sick and it was her turn to cook for him, the other did it on her behalf. They shared secrets about anything and everything.

Sometimes, No. 3 asked No. 2 questions.

"Do you love sex?"

"What kind of question is that? Where have you heard of a woman loving sex?"

"Do you ever masturbate?"

“What’s that?”

“Okay, that’s my answer. Do you want me to show you?”

“From the expression on your face, my answer is no.”

“Why not?”

“Do I need to have a reason?”

“Fair enough....were you a virgin when you got married to him?”

“Yes.”

“Have you ever slept with anyone else?”

“Of course not.”

“So...you have never had the experience of a man going down on you?”

“Like how?”

“Sucking your thing?”

“Who would do such a thing?”

“Would you like to try?”

“Do you want me to be unfaithful to him? Why all these questions? What about you, were you a virgin when he married you? Everybody knows that you slept with other men before.”

“Not only men...”

“Hee? What? Now this is worse than I thought...I don’t understand why he married you, if you know what I mean.”

“It’s a long complicated story. Let’s just say my marriage was a pact between two men. My father was his father’s right hand man, he knew his secrets. One day his father crossed the line and my father threatened to spill the beans. I was offered as a glue that sealed my father’s lips

for good. He did not want to marry me. He thought I was damaged goods. But he had to do it, to save his father's honour."

No. 4 was the youngest and prettiest. He married her in his advanced age, to shut his eyes when he goes. She loved shopping. She also loved going on numerous holidays with her children, accompanied by her driver who also served as bodyguard.

One day, No. 2 overheard a conversation between No 4's children and hers.

"Does your uncle also sleep with your mum?"

"Which uncle?"

"Like my uncle, our driver."

"Does he sleep with your mother?"

"Sometimes, when we go on holiday. He does not wake up in my mother's room though. He always wakes up in his room."

"Are they married?"

"I don't know. Maybe they are half married. Is it possible for mothers to be married to many fathers?"

"I only know that it is possible for fathers to be married to many mothers."

No. 2 walked past, carrying a pile of laundry in her hands.

"Let's ask my mother."

No. 4 had always been condescending towards the other two. She was quick to remind them that she was the only legal wife in the compound.

"This is like a business," she once said to them. "You cannot say you are the owner of a business if you do not have a certificate. Look around you, everything in this compound has my name on it, even this chicken."

Nos. 2 and 3 did not take kindly to No. 4's attitude. News of her "half marriage" was just what they needed.

The next day, No. 2 went to knock on No. 4's door. She emerged dressed in a silk gown and a pair of slippers that nestled on her feet like kittens. She was holding a glass filled with a drink that matched her nail polish. A frail trail of cigarette smoke escaped from her lips.

"What do you want?"

"Can I come in?"

"Whatever it is that you want to tell me, why don't you say it here?"

"Your child and my child came to me yesterday...." No. 2 stopped for a while, relishing at the expected look on No. 4's face once she heard the news..."Your child asked me if it is possible for a mother to be married to many fathers."

"She is like that, you know that too."

"This is not one of her out of this world questions. It is very much based on what is happening here on earth."

"Will you get to the point and stop speaking in tongues."

"She wanted to know if you are half married to the driver because he spends time in your bed..."

Like a bolt of lightning, No. 2 was pulled into the house and a door was shut behind her. In no time, she was offered a chair.

"Can I offer you something to drink?"

"What you are drinking is fine."

No. 4 knew that they had her where they wanted. The only thing that could save her was to make a secret pact with them. It did not take long for consensus to be reached. Every time she went out, No. 4 bought them gifts that included a secret supply of the same drink that she loved.

For a while, they lived together as a happy family. Main Switch Operator was pleased to witness the power of his muti at work.

All was well, until the day No. 4 went to No.3's house to ask for remedy for her sickness. What she found did not help to alleviate her nausea.

"What are you doing? My God, are you two out of your mind? What are you are doing?"

They covered their naked bodies with a sheet. No. 2 buried her head under a pillow while No. 3 propped herself on one elbow to face her.

"Serves you right for barging in like this without knocking. You think you own us don't you? Why don't you join us, seeing that we eat the same piece of meat from the same pot?"

She banged the door and rushed outside, to vomit.

"God of the Israelites, what if she tells everyone?" No. 2 asked, still hiding under a pillow.

"If she does, she may as well as tell the whole story. We would all like to know the father of the child she is carrying in her belly!" No. 3 said.

A bout of giggles, followed by a stolen dose of Main Switch Operator's muti, downed with sips of red drink from the box.

They rolled towards each other, touching, stroking, tapping, licking and nibbling.

"If only he knew," No. 2 said with her eyes closed in between the kisses.

Another bout of giggling gave way to soft moans. They lost consciousness in each other's arms.



## Chest Pain

We had met a few times when he asked to join me. I was wiping my hands with a newspaper after having finished lunch of pap and morogo. He made himself comfortable on the rock next to me. He opened his skhaftin and offered me one of his chicken feet. I thanked him with a smile.

“If you love me back, I will give you the whole chicken.”

I told him I was going through a divorce.

“So, what? That’s the right time to have some fun-nyana. It will help you to forget your troubles.”

“The only thing on my mind is the children I left at home.”

“I can help you to take care of them.”

I told him he must try next door.

I got up to pick up my bag and a one litre bottle of Coke half filled with water and walked away. At first I thought he would stop with this thing of following me around. I wanted to tell him to fokof but I could not. He was close to the Foreman and he told him everything about the workers, most of it was just stories. I had to pretend I was a stupid. But I did not allow him to touch me. If he did, he would see his father.

After my first child, I could not find any job. I stayed at home to raise him and in no time, I was pregnant again. My husband left me for another woman who was expecting his child at the same time.

One day my friend phoned to tell me that her neighbour was looking for people. She got a tender to fix the roads before the elections. I jumped at the opportunity.

The pain of leaving my baby with my sick mother sat heavy inside me. When she told me that I must express milk every day because if I didn’t the milk will get full in my breasts and cause an abscess, I was listening with one ear. The other ear was listening to my other child who was lying on the floor kicking his feet in the air, begging me not to go. My mother gave me some herbs. “Boil this and drink it like tea every night. It will reduce the supply of milk,” she said.

With tears streaming down my face, I took my bags and left.

Three days later, my body was boiling and my breasts were hard and swollen. The slightest touch hurt. I tried soothing the pain by using a warm cloth. It seemed to make it worse. I could hear the pounding of my heart in my ears. I cried, alone in my shack. I cried because of pain, in my breasts, in my heart. I cried for my children. I cried for a man who married me when I was still young, a man who promised to take me back to school but never did. I cried for my mother whose husband left when we were small. I cried because she had warned me about focusing on my studies. Now here am I, raising two boys on my own without a certificate.

I went to Spaza to buy Grand Pa and I mixed it with my mother's herbal tea. Two of them, just like that. In the morning my head felt like it was hit by a truck. I rolled out of bed and took another Grand Pa. My body said, "sleep" but my head said, "work".

We stayed in one roomed shacks more than five kilometres from the main road. Some of them were built with blocks, others with rusted corrugated iron nailed to logs that we bought from a timber factory nearby. There was no running water, no electricity. Our only connection with electricity was the buzzing sound in the pylons that were transporting power to the factories. Even a clever Izinyoga could not come up with a plan to steal power from the cables.

To keep warm at night, I used to warm up water on my Primus Stove and fill a two litre bottle of Coke. After closing the lid tight, I would put it in my floor bed. Later, when I crawled into bed, I covered it with a towel and held it against my body, between my breasts. Afterwards, I unwrapped it and rolled it to the foot of the bed, to warm my feet. The warmth made me fold up like a child. With the same water, I brushed my teeth and cooked pap in the morning before I left for work.

The toilets were bad. In the field there was nothing. We had to use the bush to relieve ourselves. There were few of us women so we used to go in a group. Sometimes when other women were working far away from you, you would hold the urine until you saw one of them and then went together.

One day my bladder was so full I could not hold it anymore. I took my bag and the spade with me. You always had to take your bag with you. The spade I took in case I saw a snake. I had just finished passing urine and busy pulling up my pants when he appeared. He tried to touch me. I punched him so hard, he fell down.

He was busy counting the stars when I pulled my pants quickly and picked up the spade. I was about to chop him like grass when someone screamed and pulled me from behind. He must have stopped his urine in the middle because his zip was still open and his pants had drops of urine on them. When I looked down at his pants he closed his zip quickly.

I turned and walked away. Instead of going back to the road, I walked deeper in the bush. I found a spot next to a stream and I cried myself dry. I stayed there the whole afternoon. I did not care if the Foreman deducted money from my wages. Just before chaile time I walked back. My bag and spade were still lying there. I took them and joined the team. Everyone looked at me but they did not say anything.

He stopped following me but he did not stop making remarks when I walked past.

“You make me hungry like a packet of Russian and Chips.”

“The day I get you, you will call Mandela from the grave.”

I decided I was deaf, for the sake of my children. I only saw them once every two or three months. The woman who got the tender was greedy. She took the money and bought a big machine for herself and another one for her boyfriend who was the foreman. She paid us peanuts, but it was better than nothing.

Most of us stayed because we wanted to save money for Christmas time. To survive, we had to borrow money from Machonisa. The Pakistani shop in a nearby village also gave people mielie meal and seshebo on account. Some of the girls got money from sleeping with them. They came in the middle of the month when their grant money was finished. And then there was Spaza which sold more to drink than to eat. Other than Chibuku, they sold Milk Stout. Young men in the compound once threatened to go on a thirst strike to force the owner to also sell Castle and Black Label. The strike did not even last one day.

One weekend I got a call from home that my mother was sick. I did not have any money. I could not borrow from Machonisa because I still owed money from the previous month. I did not know what to do. One heart told me that I must just go. The other heart asked me, what will you do without money? So I just sat outside on the rock thinking of a plan.

I was just thinking of asking for money from him when I saw him coming towards me, holding two beers, one in each hand. He came to face me, three steps back, one to the left and two to the front. He almost fell on top of me.

“Marry me mogatja.” A loud burp, on my face. “You and I will get our own tender and our children will go to multiracial and speak English like Englishman,” he waved his arm in the air and some of the contents of the bottle spilled on me.

I wiped my face with the palm of my hand and told him my mother was sick and I needed money for the children.

“What did I tell you? Mhmm? I told you I will help you take care of...” Another four steps to the back, one step to the right, three to the front. “Come with me...” Arms in the air. I moved my face out of the way. “Come come to Mr. Man...I will give you...money money...”

His shack was a mess. Blankets piled like a tent on a mattress on the floor. Dirty socks playing hide and seek out of a pair of worn out boots next to the bed. Newspapers in a corner with dirty laundry. One jacket and a coat hanging from a strong nail in a wooden log. Empty Chibuku cartoons and beer bottles, dirty plates and pots.

“Welcome to my palace...” Another burp. He dropped the two bottles on a table made of wooden pellets covered with a white Old Buck Gin plastic tablecloth.

“Now, let’s get to business. I give you money, you give me.” Four rapid steps to the back. He held on to the door frame, shaking his head from side to side like an old man suffering from nerves.

Another five steps forward, towards me, licking his lower lips, arms outstretched, ready to squeeze my breasts. I blocked him with my arms. “Money first,” I said.

He pulled a Checkers out of a mattress and counted the money. R 500. I took it and put it in my bra.

With that out of the way, he was in a hurry to finish the other part of the business. I cleared the bed and told him to sit down. I then knelt in front of him. His hands were all over me. I asked him to take his shoes off. His toenails reminded me of the story of Tselane and the Giant.

“Do you mind if I take your shoes outside?” I asked.

“Anything you want my skat, just do it. If you want to take the table outside, just do it. This is your house mos.” I dropped the shoes and socks outside. I tried to stop breathing but it was not easy.

I took off his shirt and asked him to lie on his stomach.

“Haai khona, for what? You are the one who should be lying on your stomach.”

“I want to make it special for you,” I said. “Do you have Baby Oil?”

He cracked up laughing. “I am not a baby. I don’t have baby powder either. If you want oil, there is a bottle of fish oil under the table. And bring me that bottle on the table somaar.”

I opened a bottle of fish oil, poured a bit on my hands and rubbed his shoulders. When I rubbed his lower back, he started to move like a worm. He said I was tickling him. I waited for him to stop laughing and continued. The whole time, I tried to stop breathing.

“Eish, you remind me of that song, do you know it, Killing me slowly...” I told him it is softly and not slowly. He was not listening. He continued to sing, “Killing me slowly with this song killing me slo...” Silence.

I covered him with blankets and walked back to my shack. I phoned a taxi driver I knew from home to meet me the next day so that I could give him the money to take to my mother. I woke up very early, locked up my shack and went to the main road. I did not wait too long, an hour or so. The taxi came.

When I returned, he was camping not far from my shack, to make sure that I didn’t escape again. He saw me from the distance and came marching down the road. His shirt was not buttoned properly, revealing part of his round belly. One side of the collar was turned up and outward, the other was turned inwards. His bald head was shining in the sun. I closed my umbrella and waited for him under a tree.

“Bona mo wena...” he was about to call me names when I dismissed him with a wave of a hand.

“Haa wena, mxm, how can you?” I said to him, laughing.

“Hee wena, o ska tlo ...”

“I mean I am busy rubbing you, getting ready for you. And then one, two, three, you are snoring...”

“Eish, ne di mphethile blind...stage four loadshedding. Eish... Nou? ” He seemed to be sweating more in the shade than in the sun. I opened my umbrella and walked in front of him. He followed. I told him I had a stokvel to attend in the afternoon and how about he came to me in the evening.

“Sharp,” he said. “Let me go and sleep this headache off. Bliksem. Ek dink ke na le gala....I have got a lot of gall.” He laughed at his own joke.

Later in the evening he came back. The door was slightly open. He stuck his head inside. “Can I come in?” he asked.

“What’s the point?” I responded. “Even if I say no you will come in anyway.”

“I don’t come in, you give me my money back. End of story.”

I first gave him something to eat. He first swallowed a piece of meat in one go. Then he rolled a few balls of pap in his hand, dabbed it in gravy, swallowed, washed his hands and waited, like a vulture.

What the hell, I thought. I had not been serviced for some time anyway.

He took off my clothes and led me to my bed. I could not wait to eat him. I had not even started to taste him when he collapsed on me, snoring in no time. I was thinking of throwing him out of the window when I remembered that my shack does not have one.

I wiped myself with a waslap and went out to do my laundry.

## **One Day I will Return**

My name is Ruth. My friends call me Bobo. My real name is Matome. My surname is Matlala. Ke Mokone oa ntshidikgolo, motho a bo Ramaru a Mogoshi, Mogoshi a Mamatlala, motho wa rengo go loma ke nta a ruruge...people always get a skrik when I recite my family praise. Just because I live in this dingy pondokkie and I do what I do for a living, they think I am your regular Weekend Special.

Matome is a man's name. They gave me a man's name because they were afraid that I was not going to live. By giving me my grandfather's name, they were negotiating with his spirit for me to stay.

I am the only girl in the family. Two boys came before me, one after me. My first brother died in a taxi accident. He was already big; he finished school, as elders would say. He wanted to study law but my father asked him to work for a year and save money.

My second brother was stabbed to death in a tavern. That one did not even finish school. My father used to beat him up and shout at him but he got tired. "One day my heart is just going to keep quiet and I will rest for good and I will no longer worry about a phone call from hospital or police station or people at the tavern telling me to come and fetch my dog."

When the police came to our home the last time, my father knew that he was gone, even before they told him.

My third brother died a few days after he was born. They wanted a boy very badly. "A wife who gives her husband boys is a pride of the clan," elder women used to say to a new bride. The day I learnt about sex chromosomes in a biology class I wanted to protest but I left it alone.

Sometimes ignorance is useful. It protects us from reality in the same way that the sternum protects the heart.

He was born with a hole between his nose and mouth and he did not have the power to suck from my mother's breast. He was coughing all the time. My mother said the milk could not find its way to the stomach.

From then, my father stopped laughing. He only smiled when he spoke to me, but his eyes stopped dancing. My mother retreated into a shell. All she did was stare into nothingness. I

wanted to hug her but I was afraid that she might not hug me back because I was not a child. I was just a girl. To lose one boy is a tragedy, to lose three is a catastrophe. She left us, even though she was still with us.

After a while, my father took her away. He never really told me where she was going except to say "they will take better care of her." I wanted to hold her and cry but no one gave me the license to do so. My mother was strong, my father was strong, and I was supposed to be strong. "Be strong for Daddy," my father would say. That's when I learnt to hold my tears like a lake. He used to call me Angel. Sometimes he called me Makgoshi, which means queen or wife of a king. I loved Angel better. The wife of the chief at my grandmother's village was such a rude woman. Being married to a chief and going to church every Sunday failed to deliver her from a bitter heart. My father used to suffer from a fit of laughter every time I told him that the last thing I want was to share a name with that ugly woman. I loved it when he knelt down to my height and squashed the tip of my nose with his thumb and index finger.

He went away for some time. My mother's sister came to stay with me. She laughed when I told her that Auntie is a name that people use for old wrinkled women. She said it was okay to call her by name. She helped me with homework, she played games with me. Sometimes she made me laugh so hard that my intestines threatened to fall out.

When my father returned, even the smile was gone. My aunt did not leave. That made me very happy. But I felt guilty about being happy when my father was sad. I would do anything to hear his raucous laughter again. Am I a little devil, for even wishing that he could marry my mother's sister when my mother was still alive?

I hinted this to him one evening as I was trying to hide my shame behind a cloud of smoke coming out of his pipe. He took a drag and turned around to look at me with a slight squint. By then I was a big girl. He didn't have to kneel down to pinch my nose. He merely stretched his hand to reach me.

"Don't you know that my totem is tlhantlhagane, a scaly feathered finch? That little bird only mates with one partner for life. I miss her. A lot..." Another long drag, he held his breath for a few seconds before blowing out the smoke in neat concentric circles that reminded me of how I used to love making bubbles in the bath. "...but I have no reason to give up if she is still holding



on. She suffered in silence because she wanted to make me proud. She wanted to give me a boy, a man who will expand the family name...I am not even sure why this business of boys and expanding the family name is so important, even at the expense of her life, my life, our life..."

And he took another meditative drag looking out at what was a glorious sunset a while ago. When my mother left for real, everyone knew that it was only a matter of time before my father followed. When he left, I also left. He wanted me to be a doctor, "because you are clever my angel, you can make it." I suspect that he also wanted me to be the man of the house. I always felt that I needed to mother him, to protect him from his own pain. When a child dies, everyone comforts the mother. The father is left alone biting his teeth.

With the money that he left me, I went to medical school. I failed more than once, in spite of having been an A student all my life. Everyone was stunned, myself too. My friends blamed it on my drinking sprees. Once in a while a lecturer tried to get to the bottom of my trouble with no luck. Even my love for Chemistry failed to revive my drive.

When I fell apart, I found a home in the arms of a married man who was living large. He said he loved me so much that he was prepared to leave his wife for me. When he disappeared on me, he left me pregnant with countless pairs of shoes.

This pregnancy was not my first. The first one was after my boyfriend had forced himself on me, my very first time. I knew what was going on, but I did not have the courage to stop him. I did not want to disappoint my father. I went to a bespectacled private doctor with eyes that seemed to have seen enough. Without a single look at my face, he forced the mouth of my womb open with his ice-cold instruments. My body froze with pain, from the pelvis to the sole of my feet.

"There you go," he said. "Keep those legs closed for six weeks and take the medicine for 6 days."

My second pregnancy refused to go. I went to live with my aunt and her family for a year. After I had weaned my daughter from breastfeeding, I came back here, to look for a job.

And now this...

If I told you how many men spent the night in this back room, you wouldn't believe me. If I told you who they are, you would faint...serious...The more drunk, lazy and talkative they are, the

better. A few lame thrusts, it's over. In the morning they go back to their wives and children, and their well-oiled titles. The quiet sober ones are up to no good. They make you work hard for your money. I make enough to cover my rent, food and nice clothes. I save the rest for my daughter.

At first I could not take it. I had to learn to split my body into two parts, three actually – body, heart and soul. My body cannot be penetrated, even as it opens itself for all sizes and shapes. Giving my body is not that difficult, it is the kissing that makes me want to puke. Most times, my heart detaches itself from my body.

I have a few regulars. There is a Principal down the road. Sometimes he just comes for a chat and gives me a lot of money. If I need advice about something, I call him. He is not my boyfriend though. But we take care of each other. One day when I was sick, he took me to hospital and waited for me. He stayed the night with me and took me home in the morning. It was not the first time that he spent the night away from his wife.

I have a few police officers on my list. Some of them pretend that they are patrolling the area. They pretend to kick the door with their hand on the gun and end up in my room. They don't even take off their uniform. They just pull down the pants and do it quickly and go. If you get more than R 100.00 out of them you will be lucky. But at least they don't waste your time.

There is another man who comes month end. He does not like coming to my room. He asks that we meet in the bush when he returns from church. Just like the police, he does not take off his church uniform. All I do is lift my dress and go down on my knees on the cardboard. Sometimes I can feel the badge banging against my bare skin. He takes me quick and disappears like thunder. He gives me enough money sealed in an envelope.

There is a doctor on standby. Once, he took me to his flat where the other doctors stay. As soon as we arrived, the hospital called him to come and do an operation. He said I must wait for him, he left me watching TV. He came back running and pounced on me like a hungry lion. You would think that because he earns better he would pay me well.

There are some priests also. One of them is a big man in his church. One day he saw me come in the church. I was wearing a dress that revealed all my assets. I went to sit right in front, facing him. His skin colour changed to navy blue. He swallowed a glass of water in one go. He

then took out a white handkerchief to wipe his forehead. I don't even remember what he was preaching about. That day the service was very short. He disappeared to the room at the back of the church without blessing everyone at the door.

To survive in my work, I travel a lot in my head. Sometimes I visit my childhood. I like going there because I do not understand how I ended here. Sometimes I visit my aunt. She has got no clue about what I do for a living. "I am so proud of you for working so hard and sending money for your daughter." Other times I visit my parents. I don't take that journey often, it makes me want to weep, which makes it hard to work. A visit to my daughter is forbidden, I don't think I would come back.

One of these days, I am going to find the sluice gate and release all these tears, so that my daughter can live. After all, my grandfather's spirit has agreed to stay.



There are five of us. All able bodied with functional brains. We live in a city. Two of us are bonded by a union which first started as a physical attraction. Three are products of the union. We love spending time together, because we live in the same place. There are times when we run short of love. At that time, the notion of a home as a sanctuary seems unthinkable.

Sometimes, we visit extended family members during holidays. Family reunions always come at a time when my body is crying out for a reunion with itself. The thought of excusing myself from family reunions crossed my mind several times. There is no rule against a daughter in-law being absent from the reunion. The guilt is enough to enforce my presence, in spite of my fatigued body.

In preparation for the reunion comes the packing. Suddenly, the other four members suffer some form of disability. Their bodies and brains stop functioning. My nerves go on overdrive. My hot flushes too. No, I am not menopausal. I am not premenstrual either.

Four bags in total, one for the father, one for the boys, one for the girl and one for me. Toothbrushes, towels, washing rags for everyone, boxer shorts of different sizes, girl's and woman's underwear, t-shirts, shorts, pairs of denim, one formal shirt and a suit, one formal woman's dress, a scarf to cover my head, just in case I need it, pairs of formal shoes, sandals, sneakers, socks, and more clothes to change, depending on the number of days we will spend away from home. Sometimes I pack a pair of pants or shirt that the owner hates. Other times I forget to pack underwear. I only have one brain.

When I am done with packing the bags, food comes next. First I pack snacks for a three hour road trip. Then I write down a list of groceries and gifts to buy on the way for my extended family. Next, I work out a daily menu, in my head. I never know the number of people I will cook for at any given time. It is never a small number.

Men love the family reunion tradition. After bathing in the morning, (women prepare their baths), they sit in a circle under the shade wearing their well ironed short and T shirts and worn-out sandals, waiting to be served breakfast. In no time, breakfast is followed by beer.

Later, they drive out to visit their childhood friends. This includes catching up with old girlfriends with whom they went to school.

If you are lucky, they return with happy faces and loud conversations, on time. If you are unlucky, they come back drunk at a time when your body is threatening to go on strike after bouts of washing dishes and serving tea and biscuits to an endless stream of visitors. In the evenings they go out again. When they return, they demand supper. They nibble on the meat and leave the pap and vegetables intact. If women go out, it is often on errands. If they were to come home late, they would be called to order by elder women for being disrespectful.

It is not only the men who need to be taken care of. Children cause constant irritation fighting with their cousins. Mothers must be fair all the time. They smile, even when they are on the verge of murder. To keep their sanity, they consume alcohol, away from the glaring eye of elders who also have enough to drink.

Once in a while, after drinking a few bottles of Savanna in secret, one of the women fails to tie her tongue in the presence of elders. They pretend they are deaf, until the day of departure. The women are called to a meeting under the guise of trading valuable information on how to keep a marriage intact. Daughters in-law do not respond. Their brains have shifted to a return journey to a place where men run their own baths and prepare their own breakfast.

End of family reunions is marked by jubilation. Cousins hug, high fives fly in the air. Men are often not in a sober state to drive. Women are irritable and angry. Extended family's jokes and loud laughter flows as a cover up for the irritation. It is true what they say, family is everything. A discomfoting and burdensome sanctuary.

## **Memeza**

A group of boys are playing soccer on a dry patch of field which was a recreation park in its previous life. Like many other parks in the area, its life was short lived. Patches of lawn here and there, taps that no longer remember the taste of water, broken swings and Checkers everywhere. Not Checkers the shop, Checkers the plastic. Everyone refers to the park as skwaere, which means square, even though it is round.

On the other side of skwaere is a church packed to capacity with worshippers praying to the Lord to deliver them from violence. The preacher's voice is heard from a distance. The building is not that big but his voice is. He does not really need to use a loudspeaker, but he uses it anyway, just to make sure that his prayers are heard. You don't need to be in his physical presence to be a witness to his skillful theatrical performance. The congregation's animated Hallelujas help to transport him straight to heaven.

Not far off is a tavern. You can see by the state of chairs and tables that ne di ntsha. The speakers are still on the stoep. Koze Kuse on repeat, full blast. Outside the gate, two men with faces sculpted with lines of poverty are sleep talking. Their mouths, always dry, in spite of incessant drinking.

On the other side of the street is a police station. Quiet and dead as the night. If it was not for the Republic of South Africa's flag floating in the thick polluted air, you would not even look twice at the building. The only movement is at the funeral parlour a few blocks away, and at a liquor outlet on the other side.

Sunday morning, good for business. Car wash booming. Open pages of Sunday World and City Press here and there. A group of men are sitting in a circle at a chisanyama, all faced with a delicate mission of relieving setlamatlama by drinking the same stuff that caused the disease in the first place.

No sign of visible policing, not a single police car in sight. A week ago a group of dapper boys stoned with nyaope stormed the place and handcuffed the sleeping officer on duty and ran away with his gun, on foot. They have not been caught. The investigation is still continuing and a sizeable reward is offered to anyone with any useful information who can assist the detectives to apprehend these boys.

He came to her house last night. Her grandmother refused to open the door. Rumour has it that she is now in love with another boy on the other side of town. He waited outside in his car for the better part of the night and left.

He returns in the morning. Her grandmother has gone to church. Her uncle is sleeping off last night's alcohol in his shack at the back. Her children, two of them fathered by him, are playing outside.

He knocks on the door, "Eita, o grand? A re shaye round re tla boa."

She has no one to protect her.

"Mama o ya kae?" Her children asked as they approach the gate. "Ke a boa e s'khale", she says.

He first kisses her. "Baby where were you last night?" No answer. She knows from experience that whatever she says will be used against her. He asks again: "My love, I waited for you here last night, *where were you?*" Dead silence, except for the loud thumping of her heart.

A loving caress changes form. He grabs her hand and pulls her across the road. And then he drags her across the park. People stop to look, from a distance. They shake their heads and go away. Not looking back.

"Bana ba kajeno ruri, haaikhona," an old man says with a heavy heart and walks past. The boys notice the commotion. One of them grabs the ball and they all walk away, to watch from a safer distance.

Insults turn into a battalion of questions, followed by a slap which would have landed on her face if it was not for the swift movement of her hands. When slaps turn to fists, she mumbles something about last night's whereabouts, all the time protecting her face from what becomes an avalanche of blows.

The beating stops. He asks her to sit with him on the grass. He holds her hand. The questioning continues, gently and lovingly.

Watching him from the corner of her eye, she positions her other hand on her chest in a way that makes it easy to block his blows with the speed of lightning. When she finally tells the truth, that she is afraid of him, that she does not feel safe with him and that she cannot live with his violence anymore and yes she has met someone else, he pulls out a gun.



On her knees, she looks up to him like he is God. She begs for her life. From the distance, the preacher's prayer rises to its pitch. Koze Kuse reaches its peak.

“Ke a go rapela bathong. Ke kgopela tshwarelo, please...ntshwarele...what about the children...ntshwarele, ke a kgopela...please...”

He turns around to take a few steps away from her muttering unprintable expletives under his breath. One hand in his pocket, bulging like a gun. The other hand holding a gun, facing down. He turns around with a gust. A few blades of grass give way. She is huddled on the ground like a tortoise.

Still no visible policing from the police station. She lifts her head. And her voice. The air carries the scream across the park. She bends down, clutching onto her belly like a passionate lover. A few more muffled screams and more prayer, followed by a gun shot. The boys run in different directions. He floats to his car, pumps up his V8 engine machine and departs in a cloud of dust.

**Do Not Answer a Fool According to His Folly**

He is wearing a coat, seated on a high chair, swinging his legs, sucking a lollipop. Back and forth, from the chair to the window, looking outside for a split second, then back to the chair. Legs keep swinging, followed by a low hum, a tune under his breath. It sounds like a hymn.

Legs swinging in time. They swing slowly, come to a complete stop. He has stopped singing. He gets up. Back to the window, with the speed of lightning. Back to the chair. This time, his eyes are fixed in the direction of the door.

Good morning. Sshhh, listen. What is your name? I said listen you fool. He walks to the door, peers through the key hole of an open door. Back to the window, back to the chair, and a sharp whistle, announcing a state of alarm. What do they want these people? They fly all over me. *I believe I can fly, I believe I can touch the sky, I think about it every night and day...* Singing, punctuated with laughter.

What is your name? George. George who? Mjojana. Where are you? Ke teng wena o kae. I mean, do you know where you are? I am where I am. What day of the week is it? Today. Where do you come from? Cape Town. How did you get here? Walk. How is that possible? Like this...he gets up to demonstrate...like this, left right left right, walk. Where were you born? I was not born. How did you get here? I already told you, walking. No, I mean how did you get here, to earth? Ohhh, I came by airplane. Do you have a mother? Nope. Do you know who I am? You are my wife. Hao George...Who is George? You. I am not George. You said...I *said* Kenny. Kenny who? Majosi.

He leaps from the chair, paces up and down the room, closed fists, clenched teeth. I am going to kill him with my bare hands. Who? Moruti? Why? He wants to kill me and marry my wife. Oh, are you married? Who? You? I killed her. Who? My wife. Why? Just. Do you have any children? They are gone. Where? To their mother. You said you killed her. Yes. Did you also kill your children? Don't you know that the child of a snake is a snake?

I want to smoke. Do you have a cigarette? No. Ganja? No. Why? We are not allowed to smoke here. I don't need permission to smoke from anybody. I am the doctor. Give me that book, I want to write on it. A-n-y-o-n-e w-h-o i-s m-a-d m-u-s-t g-e-t i-n-j-e-c-t-i-o-n. Take this book; one injection, one boude. O pila byang shem. I am going to marry you. Hao Kenny...Who is

Kenny? You. I am not Kenny. Bathong, who are you now? Charlie Mingus. Oh, sorry. Sorry does not help. Sorry. I said, sorry does not help. Eish, sorry. Ah, ah, ah, and they say I am the one who is mad.

Do you know where you are? I am in church. How do you know that you are in church? Because I am God. Oh! Yes. Ok. Checkers. Laughter. There is a lion in the road, a fierce lion roaming the streets. He laughs loud as he punches the air with rapid light blows. Are you afraid of a lion? Yes. Don't worry, this is not Kruger National Park. Where are we then? In a zoo.

He rushes to the window, then flies to the door, looks through the key hole. Sshhh, wait...these people are dangerous. If they find me here, they will kill me. Even as I walk in the valley of death, I fear no moegoe...

753 Over! A closed fist on his mouth. 753 Over! You see, even my walkie talkie is blocked. They listen to everything, my phone, my dog, my radio...everything. They want to kill my wife and marry me...I want to smoke. I am going outside. Shem, are you afraid to stay here alone? He switches the light on. Do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will be back now now.

He walks out into the long corridor. The door on the other side is locked. He returns to the room, to his chair. He takes out the lollipop from his pocket, removes a big piece of lint stuck to it and begins to suck. Legs swinging on a high chair. This time he is not whistling. He is singing out loud. It is definitely a hymn. *Modimo ga le teng, hakuna mathata, hakuna mathata, Modimo ga le teng...*crescendo, followed by dead silence.

Did you hear their van stop outside? I told you they are following me. He flies to the window. Then crouches in a corner, covers his head with his coat. Don't worry, they are gone. Come out and sit on your chair. What? You want them to kill me. They killed me once. Still huddled in a corner, humming the same hymn, under his breath.

On his knees, looking up, hands together. Do not answer a fool according to his folly, or you will be like him yourself. What day of the week is it? You fool, I *said* Today. He squeezes his eyelids tight. God, may I please have a cigarette.

Come now, it is time to drink your medicine. I don't want to drink medicine. If you drink it, you will go home soon. I don't want to go home. Why? They will kill me. Who? I told you already. Come now, drink your medicine. I said I don't want to drink the medicine. I want to smoke.



## **Chief Mourner**

By the time he died, he was sleeping in another bed. It was not the first time. The first one, he shared with a teacher from his school. He was the Principal there. I was just housewife. The teacher got married to another man. He came back to me.

I praised God for answering my prayers. I had been praying ever since he left me. Everyone blamed me for his disappearance. They said it was because I was not educated. They said many things. When he came back people stopped blaming me. My children were happy. Even the women stopped gossiping about me. I could go where I wanted; no one was pointing any fingers at me anymore.

After that there were other beds. But he did not live with the women. The second one he moved in with was a student from the teacher's college. She came to do her practicals. She fell pregnant. He came back one day to tell me that he wanted to marry her. He said if I love him, I must say agree to be first wife.

I no longer wanted him. I did not care about what people said this time. If you are a wife, they say a lot of things about you. If you are a man, they say nothing. I told him he could go ahead, marry her. I had started my own business. I got a loan from Small Business Foundation. When you can pay for your own fridge and stove at a furniture shop, what do you need a man for?

I did not feel anything when he came to my door. I was surprised. Sometimes you change. Just like that. You don't know you have changed until you see a person who used to control your life. Even he was surprised that I did not beg him to stay. I could see it on his face. But he did not say anything.

I told him he can go and marry her and I don't want to be first wife. I am now married to my business, I said to him. He thought I was going to fight him for maintenance. I didn't want his money. The thing is, we like it when our husbands are at home. When they don't help us to support the children, we just keep quiet. We are afraid they will leave us. This time I was not afraid. It was not like I was now going to start running around asking for support for the children. I had been running around ever since they were born.

After a year, I got another loan. Before that, things were bad. Everyone was selling vegetables and you didn't make money. I gave up and stayed at home. The women I was working with came to my home to encourage me. They collected some money to help me pay back the loan. My business was now growing. I stopped selling vegetables at the taxi rank. I built a small Spaza shop not far from my home and I stocked groceries. And then I added the machine for airtime and electricity. The people from the shop taught me to use the machine. I was very happy. I told everyone that I can type on the computer.

My children were also happy. They no longer had to go to school without food. Even their clothes and shoes were not torn like before. I told myself I was going to buy a car one day. First, I went for a learner's license. I failed three times. After that I thought, ai, maybe I am not supposed to drive a car. My son said no mama, try again.

Tjo, every time a car comes from the other side, I feel my hands getting wet and I hold the wheel very tight. Sometimes the car just stops in the middle of the street and I can't breathe. But the teacher is very good. He does not make noise for me. He just tells me what to do.

The day I go for testing I think I am going to die. The traffic cop does not even look at me. When we drive in the street he is talking on the phone, just imagine. And I am thinking, what if the car just stops. Other drivers overtake me. They look at me funny because I am driving so slow.

When we come to the circle I make a big mistake. I don't wait for the other car, I just go in. The traffic cop says mosadi, you want to kill us. My heart beats hard but I hold on. When we get to the testing ground he just gets out of the car and I say, eish, I failed. I was feeling tired of trying again. Then we wait. They first call the ones who failed. I am ready to go and get my ID because in my heart I tell myself I failed. Then they call those who passed. And they call my name and I scream.

My children are very happy. They say to me you see mama we told you. And then I laugh and say to them, now I am going to start saving for my own skorokoro. My children make a braai for me and invite some of my friends.



Before, I never had time with my friends. After I got married, I cut them out of my life. Even when I was not busy, I always stayed at home because I did not want him to come back and find that I am not home. I wanted to be a real wife. Like my mother.

I was good with business. I saved money because my children want to go to college. They work very hard at school and in the afternoon they help in the shop. Sometimes when I go to funerals and community meetings over the weekend, they run the business. Now everybody respects me. They even elect me to be part of Community Policing Forum. They also ask me to speak to other women in church. Then business grows. I cook food and open a stall. People come to me for lunch. Others also tell me their problems and I give them advice.

One day he came asking for money. He was in trouble because he had eaten school money and they chased him away from work. Now he wanted me to help him. I told him to ask from his wife. He says I must not tell him rubbish because we are married in community of property. He made a lot of noise for me. I gave it to him. He came many times. One day he hit me. He said he paid lobola for me and even if I go to divorce court I belong to him.

I praise God when I get the phone call from the police that he died in a car accident. I am not supposed to be happy but I thank God for answering my prayers. My celebration does not last long. I learn he did not finish marrying the other woman. He did not finish paying lobola, he only paid a deposit and that was it. Now everyone says I am still the wife and because I am the chief mourner, he must come home for his last time on earth.

At first I say to everyone, over my dead body. Then elders call a meeting, even his relatives. They tell me I am still his wife and I must do the right thing. Where were they when he was treating me bad, coming and going, coming and going? Where were they? Now I must be a good wife and open my house for him? Of course the house is in his name but I am the one who is paying all the time. I say no to everybody. Even the elders. I am not afraid anymore. This thing of being a good woman only works when people want you to do something for them. It does not work when you need help. I told them that he must go to the smart and educated wife that he chose over me. Then my children beg me. Mama, please do it for us. And after some time, I say okay.

Now comes the business of sitting on a mattress. There, I say no. A big one. I am not going to sit on a mattress and pretend that I am sad or anything. I said yes to my children because I wanted them to say goodbye to their father properly. But I am not going to sit on a mattress like other widows. I sat for a long time on the mattress waiting for him to come back to me. Elders call another meeting but I still say no.

Some of my relatives say to me what is your problem, why don't you just sit on the mattress and pretend so that you can eat his pension money? One of my friends says I must just sit on the mattress and cover my face and sing Lefu la hao le a mphedisa. I tell them I don't care about his pension. Anyway, the money is not for me. It is for his children.

Before they bring his body in the house on Friday afternoon, the mortuary people came to make space for his coffin in the main bedroom. They hang a little curtain on a rail behind which the coffin will be. People are gathered outside and inside the house, singing Ruri le nkgapile pelo. I am in the main bedroom covered in a tjale, sitting on a chair.

For some time I do not cry. I just sit as if I am the one who is dead, looking at people coming and going. When the coffin comes in, I feel a big lump in my chest. I want to scream, but I hold it in. I stare at the empty mattress and cover my head, to hide my pain.

We bought the bed together when we moved into our first house. When we were in the furniture shop, he said he was test driving all the mattresses. He slept on them with his shoes on. I was very shy. He was my first love. He used to make a lot of jokes. I used to laugh a lot. Our child was conceived the day we slept on the mattress the first time.

He used to sleep on the right side of the bed, next to the door. He said it was the law of the jungle. "I am the man of the house. When enemies come in, I must protect you," he said. It was funny because once he was sleeping, a baby could cry and scream in his ear and he would still continue to snore.

After he left me to live with his educated wife, I put a big pillow on his side of the bed. For a very long time, I slept on my side of the mattress. Even in my sleep, I made space for him. One day, I just decided enough is enough. I started to sleep on his side of the bed. I was curled on his

side when I got the call from the police. I sat on the mattress with the phone in my hand, trembling. When we got married, I was so happy. Now here I was, sitting on the mattress listening to the policeman telling me about his death. Before his burial, I decided that I was not going to sit on it.

I said goodbye, my children said goodbye. But my life was not going to stand still with wearing black and sitting on a mattress. To me, he died a long time ago.



## **When the Cows Come Home**

From the distance, he looks like a painting. Motionless, sitting on a rock. Except for the frail trail of smoke rising out of his pipe, and the dogs flaring their nostrils lazily at his feet, time seems to stand still.

From west to east, the blue sky welcomes crisp shreds of amber. Soon, the dogs will stretch and yawn. They can read his thoughts. They know that soon, he will rise from the rock perched on the hill.

First comes the spitting, acute and accurate. Then the emptying of the pipe, followed by the long whistle and the cracking of the pipe.

Cows stop grazing, egrets take to the sky only to return to the hill. One egret, the one that is always on the back of the bull flies down to the ground and stands on one leg. A few others snack on the remaining ticks before they fly to their nests.

An indolent return of the herd to the kraal. Led by Voormeisie, as always, in spite of the African proverb, *tsa etelelwa ke e namagadi pele di wela ka lengope*.

Unlit pipe hanging from the side of the lips, walking stick in one hand, whip across the opposite shoulder, an empty water bottle tied to his waist with a string, two brown emaciated village dogs on either side, panting gently, leaving a trail of drips of saliva on the ground. All in a cloud of dust rising from the ground from which grass refuses to grow.



## **A Walk in a Voetpadtjie**

They walk toward each other shuffling their feet.

Ma Piti is slightly blind, Ma Jwanes slightly deaf.

“I was wondering who you are. I am asking myself who is this old lady?” says Ma Piti.

No answer.

She speaks again, louder. “Ka re dumelang. I was not sure if it was you. I asked myself who is this old lady, walking from side to side like a duck.”

Ma Jwanes recognises her. She flashes a smile that reveals a set of teeth that have cut through endless fibres of red meat. A few have fallen out. Some are loose. Yet, she has vowed never to stop eating red meat. She always starts with pap. In her wrinkled hands with protruding veins, she rolls it into a ball and dips it in gravy before she sticks it into her mouth. Meat is saved for last.

“Bathong, k’wena motho o? How are you? What were you saying?” asks Ma Jwanes.

“Ne kere I was not sure if it was you, old lady!”

Ma Jwanes takes out her handkerchief to wipe ageing eyes that weep at the slightest provocation. “You are the one who is old. Just look at you, I don’t need a walking stick to get around.”

They both laugh.

They are wearing sun hats and long pinafores bought from a trader who sells frocks at the local pension point. They are also wearing jerseys, in spite of a stream of sweat on their faces. Some buttons are missing, a few threads here and there, hanging loosely from bodies that no longer care about chest out and stomach in.

They are standing right in the middle of the road chatting. A cellphone rings. Ma Jwanes struggles to get it out of a crocheted pouch that hangs from her neck.

“I told her to change this button, she does not listen. This phone is too big.”

Just as she manages to pull the phone out, a driver stops behind them, waits for them to get out of the way. Ma Jwanes answers the phone, very loud. The driver grows tired of waiting and presses the hooter. Ma Piti releases a small cry and jumps to the side of the road, tripping on a loose rock. The walking stick helps her to maintain balance but the jolt unleashes a sense of urgency in her bladder. Without thinking, she rushes to the side of the road and disappears behind an Acacia shrub. She lifts up her skirt. With her legs spread slightly, she releases the tension. The only witness is a cow nearby. It lifts its head then returns to grazing, seemingly unimpressed by the old lady's thin stream of pee. The urine dries quickly on the hot soil. A slight indent in the ground is the only evidence.

Ma Jwanes has not even noticed her friend's disappearance. She is too busy fighting with the driver. She marches towards his window, threatening to smash his windscreen with her bare hands. "Hee wena, you want to kill us, jou vuil goed." The driver shakes his head. There is no point arguing with old women. He revs his engine and drives off.

"This one, you don't know him," Ma Piti is back at her friend's side. "Baie vorspot. One day, I climbed his taxi to town. The whole way, I was holding my heart in my hand. By the time I got there I said, Tankie Morena Modimo, if you see me in this taxi again, kill me. I would rather wait in the sun the whole day for another one. Not this one."

Ma Jwanes laughs. "And then wena, you go to the small house just like that?"

Ma Piti responds with a raucous laughter. "Mmawena, days are gone. These bodies are just shells. A small little pipip, the bladder goes. One day the heart will just stop. Ka Ntate ka Radipotsane. Haai khona." She takes off her cotton sun hat and folds it, to wipe her face. "Vedere, bophelo bo kae? How is everyone at home?"

"They are there, except for the old man. He has been having a stomach the whole week."

"That stomach is affecting a lot of people. They say it is something in the water. Now you think because we have water taps nearby our life will be better. Niks. We no longer carry buckets on our heads but we don't know what is in the water that we drink," says Ma Piti. She walks to the shade. Ma Jwanes follows her.



Ma Piti puts her cotton hat back on her head and takes a yellow duster out of her pocket to wipe her neck.

“Haai, life today is just plastic maan. Everything. Even the food. Right now it is school holidays and my house is full of grandchildren. Their mothers send them with lots of lekker kos. The whole day, open the fridge, close the fridge, press the TV, on and off, on and off. Nie lank, koko this, koko that. I say to them, hei lona, go back to your mothers now. Ek is moeg. They have got no ears wa nkutlwa! Mara they keep us busy shem.”

“Mang? Not me,” Ma Jwanes responds. “I tell their mothers straight. If you bring your children, bring them with aunty. We no longer have nails to do any work... Mhmmh...”

She digs in her pocket and finds her snuff. With her thumb and first finger, she nips a few granules and shoves it in her nose and takes a deep breath. Thereafter, she clears her throat, followed by a slight cough. “Have you heard about the death of Ma Malome’s son? They say he was shot at a taxi rank. What a waste. Just the other day, we went to a party for his graduation. It’s the good ones who are going. We are left le di rubbish tse tsa nyaope. Plastic life ruri. Now we have to spend another week preparing for another burial. We live for death now. Every weekend, a funeral. No time to rest.”

“Yes I heard. Haai, what can we say. It’s life. The brewing is tomorrow in the morning. If I don’t make it in the morning, I will join you in the evening. This heat makes my blood boil. I left in a rush in the morning and I forgot to drink the pills. Let me go home and have something to eat before I fall in the street. Greet them at home,” says Ma Jwanes, adjusting her sun hat.

“I will greet them. May the old man’s stomach return to its original place!”

Ma Jwanes walks away, past Spaza. Young men are perched on beer crates under the shade listening to Nathi’s Nomvula booming out of the speakers. One of them greets her, no response. He waves, she waves back and continues to walk, talking to herself.

“Haai, just look at them, almal oud. Even my face is better. The world is coming to an end, ka Morena. The only thing our children do these days is drink and drink and drink. Haai mara this government also, they make a lot of noise about job creation. They only create jobs for those at

the top. Not here. Sometimes we blame these children but what can they do here. Die arme skepsels. Argh, mara le bona! They cannot walk home. They drink until they wet their pants and they are carried with dikiriba. Nxa, and we are surprised that it doesn't rain anymore.”