

IN A TOWN CALLED HARMONY

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Abstract

A novella of crime and suspense set in the townships surrounding the mining town of Welkom. Two friends, both ex-miners, start a welding business only to see it fail because of interference by corrupt officials. To make ends meet, they are drawn into the world of illegal gold-mining, working with criminals who employ 'zama-zamas': desperate foreign nationals who are prepared to live and work in the abandoned mine tunnels underground. The friends make money, but the dark practices of illegal mining put a strain on their relationship, their values, and their family ties.

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Mokwena Mokwena is a man of the world. He loves his sweet waters. His three-roomed brick house is a hive of activity on weekends. He owns a soccer club that uses his backyard as the clubhouse. He calls his team MYT – “Mokwena Young Tigers”. He is not into church but when things are bad he turns to God and the gods for guidance.

Before the birds of Kutloanong, a place of harmony, start to sing their Sunday morning chorus, he whispers to his sleeping son: “Sefako, let’s go visit our elders.”

“Father, did you hear about the killing of a miner three Sundays ago?” his son asks while pushing the wheelbarrow.

“Yes I knew him. We worked together at Shaft 4 at Goldfields a few years ago. Spencer Molatedi. The new thugs in this town no longer have respect for life.”

“I hear he was killed on this same road to the graveyard, early on Sunday morning.” Perhaps his father would abandon this ominous journey, thought Sefako.

“Son, should we now fear to do the things we have to do? These tsotsis can’t be allowed to take over our streets. We have to live our lives. I still don’t know why Spencer walked alone to the graveyard that morning. It’s never safe to do so. His two sons now have a duty to find those killers and bring them to the community.” He stops for a short break, lights a cigarette.

“That’ll be the best way to honour the memory of their father.”

“Is that why you always bring me along to the graveyard Father? To help you fight the thugs if they dared to attack you?”

“To teach you to be a man Sefako. To teach you about your roots. To teach you how to honour those who came before us, those who watch over us. We have a spade and a fork to defend ourselves against the thugs, but when we clean and pray at the graves of our ancestors we protect our hopes and dreams.”

The hour long walk to the graveyard situated right at the eastern edge of the township takes them through an open grazing field where scattered trees stand exposed to the elements. Most of the trees have been cut down to be used as firewood, and also to remove hiding places for thugs.

In the daytime, boys from the community bring their dogs here to hunt for rabbits. Mokwena agrees that in the day the place does not feel as ominous, but the sun isn't up yet so he feels uneasy, knowing that his stocky build won't deter thugs. But he has to believe in his own assurance to his son that everything – life and thugs and everything else, is in the hands of the gods.

They pick up round stones just before they enter the graveyard gate.

“Make sure you choose seven stones Son.”

“Are we only visiting seven graves today?”

“Yes, I'd like us to stay longer at father's grave today. We'll visit the others another time.”

The visit starts at his grandmother's grave. Only a few old ornaments remain. A metal sheet that bears her name is the only real sign that she lies beneath the earth. She died in the early 1930s. Sefako takes the spade from the wheelbarrow and starts chopping the weed that has covered the grave.

“It's a shame for Grandmother to be covered in a bush of thorns like this. None of your uncles or cousins visits her,” says Mokwena, shaking his head as he helps his son. “We are the only ones who always have to clean.”

Once the grave is neat, father and son kneel to face the east.

“Grandmother Maria, it's me Mokwena, your grandson, who has come to visit. I have your great-grandson with me, Sefako. We woke up this morning longing for your presence. We have come to give our greetings. We don't have much to ask this morning, except to pray for your continued protection over our family. Sefako here is doing well in his studies. His sister, Taemane, is finishing matric this year. One day MaMokwena and I would like to see both of them at university. It's only through your mediation with the great God that this will be possible. Continue speaking for us grandmother,” he concludes. He then asks Sefako to recite the Lord's Prayer.

They each take a stone, spit on it and reverently lay it on the grave.

“We leave a piece of us with you Grandmother, remember us, may your spirit and God bless us,” they recite the greeting as they move to the next grave.

They walk carefully in the narrow paths, wary of stepping on graves, lest they attract bad luck by offending other people's gods.

They cannot help but pass by the famous Motlounge grave on their way to their Mokwena family graveyard.

The Motlounge family erected the biggest marble tombstone the township had ever seen. An enlarged black and white picture of their patriarch, their great-grandfather, was displayed just below the marble elephant tusk headstone. It was always enchanting to view the golden lines on the edges of the marble and the shining diamond decoration on the elephant-shaped tombstone head. The marble was imported from Italy according to those who knew. It had taken a long time to create just the right look, the township rumour mill asserted. The day it was unveiled, the entire township of Kutloanong came to a standstill.

Mokwena remembered that the Motlounge family had cooked up a veritable feast of traditional bread, rice, beef and mutton stew, salads and a variety of steamed vegetables for everyone who came. There was no shortage of ginger beer, spirits and fancy alcohol the evening after the funeral. That day the men and women sang to the loud music system with the biggest speakers they had ever seen. The music belted out "Melodi Ya Lla" by Mahlathini and the Mahotella Queens as well as Brenda Fassie's "Weekend Special" dominated the air. It was the first ever tombstone unveiling to be turned into a township feast.

The Motlounge family business empire was started by the great Tlou Motlounge who was buried in that magnificent shrine. The empire still boasts a bottle store, a funeral parlour and a brothel in town. The family were rumoured also to be the first beneficiaries of the Goldfields community mining partnership. No one understood the details and how it worked, but the four Motlounge brothers obviously did. Even famous soccer players and TV actors from Johannesburg attended the unveiling.

Now everyone walks past this tombstone, with thoughts of their own, which they add to the township legend of this important man and his family.

"One day when I finish my university studies, I'll also erect tombstones for all our loved ones buried here," Sefako promises as he pushes the wheelbarrow behind his father.

They finally arrive at the gravesite where father Mokwena rests. A waist high fence surrounds the grave. Mokwena Mokwena built it himself to help the rest of the family easily locate their most important gravesite amongst the thousands of graves and tombstones of Kutloanong. It is ten years since his father passed away.

Mokwena takes out another cigarette.

“Father, is smoking allowed inside the graveyard? Granny told me that the graveyard is as sacred as the church.”

“Right Son, this place is holy,” Mokwena replies as he puts it back into his jacket pocket. Sefako sees his father’s hands are shaking.

The grave in the enclosure is still tidy from the last cleaning. Mokwena reaches into his pocket; he pulls out a small sachet of coarse sea salt and sprinkles it on the grave.

“May the gods of Bakwena banish all weeds and evil spirits,” he chants and bows down to kneel. “Father, it is I, Mokwena Mokwena and your grandson Sefako,” his voice starts to quiver. “We thank you, as a family, for watching over us and protecting us from disease and our enemies. We thank you for putting food on our table. Father, before you passed on you told me that the ancestors had big plans for our family. I believe that, but I’m not yet sure what the plans are. Reveal them to me.”

Mokwena takes a long pause; tears stream down his face. Sefako glances at his father, he realises that he is witnessing his father in a rare moment of vulnerability. He stays on his knees and keeps his eyes closed until his father starts again with his prayer.

“Nothing is working father. Nothing. I have tried my best. Others keep prospering, but we, the children of Mokwena, do not seem to see success. When will it rain upon us, father?”

As they visit the next five graves of the Mokwena clan, uncles and aunts, he asks for direction in life, blessings for children in their schoolwork and future plans, success for his soccer club, marital peace and most importantly, the success of his business venture. He asks again and again for direction in life.

Once they have seen all the graves they want to visit, they head back home. The morning sun is coming out. They do not greet or stop to talk to anyone; there is no chatter between the two of them. They first have to wash away their uncleanliness from being at the place of the dead before they can return to normal life. They stand at the gate and wait for MaMokwena to bring them cleansing water to wash their hands before they enter the yard.

She comes out with a bowl of water with pieces of aloe clearly visible floating on top. MaMokwena does not grow the aloe in her yard. She plucks it from the next door garden of MaSkosana whenever she needs to. Mokwena and Sefako wash their hands,

wrists, and the exposed flesh up to their elbows. They wash the spade, fork and the wheelbarrow with the rest of the aloe water.

The Mokwenas and Skosanas are not only neighbours; they have been friends for over thirty years. They built their three-roomed houses almost at the same time and pace, it took them several years. They both planned to buy their first cars in the near future, possibly at the same time. That would be considered their highest achievement.

The Mokwenas are a younger family. Their daughter, Taemane, is not only finishing high school, but she plans to study further, and eleven-year-old Sefako is doing very well at school – a source of pride for his father, while Skosana has a married son and daughter, and a grandson who was almost the age of Sefako.

Sefako adores his dad while Taemane has constant fights with him, although she adores her mother.

Skosana's family is more religious. He is the leader and priest of his backyard congregation – when his welding overalls are off, that is. It is a lively African Apostolic Church congregation that holds its services regularly on Sunday mornings and once a month on Saturday nights. The sound of beating drums, chiming bells and the bellowing voices of worshippers as they swing around the special pole, a holy pillar, in the middle of the shack is a disruption that Mokwena and his family endure regularly.

The one vice that Skosana has is his cigarettes. He has made a rule in his church that men are allowed to smoke but can never drink alcohol. "The Bible is silent on the question of smoking," he preaches. His thirty-member congregation has faith in his wisdom, they call him Prophet. He does not particularly like sports, but just as Mokwena tolerates his church, Skosana has to live with Mokwena's rascals who park their bicycles in his yard as they came to the 'clubhouse' to prepare for the next game. Skosana occasionally goes to watch their games. He does not complain either about the noise from next door, about the rowdy parties that spill over late into the night when the mighty Mokwena Young Tigers win a match.

MaMokwena and MaSkosana have also developed a deep friendship over time. They are always standing across the fence, chatting and enjoying conversations about "who knows what". They laugh together; they lend and borrow each other dishes, cups of cooking oil, salt and sugar containers and spices. MaMokwena works as a store supervisor in town while MaSkosana is a housewife. MaSkosana always keeps an eye on

MaMokwena's kids when they come back from school and also keeps a mental record of any movements that happen during the day. She always has a detailed report for MaMokwena about any irregularity that takes place in her yard.

The Mokwena kids are not so happy with MaSkosana's many biased reports, especially those that have landed them in trouble. She seems to only have an eye for the mishaps, while nothing good is ever reported back to their mom. She is deeply rooted in the faith of the Apostles. Simplicity in dress is her theme. Even her traditional outfits, where there is room for flair, are all brown or grey. She deeply fears Skosana. She hardly ventures outside and would never be seen wearing pants or make-up like MaMokwena, who like her husband, loves beautiful clothing and any modern pleasure their money can buy.

Mokwena remembers vividly the day his father died.

Sefako was only a child when it all happened, he must have been about five or six. Even Sefako remembers with some clarity that time when his elderly grandpa succumbed to death. He remembers the sadness it brought to his father, how his father mourned and was not himself for the following few years.

Granny, as most in the community referred to her, was the sicklier of the two. Before she became weak from old age, their home was the December school holiday destination for the entire Mokwena clan. She would slaughter a pig during the winter holidays.

“I’ll take you back fatter and healthier than when your mother last saw you, when she let you come visit me,” she would say proudly. The children loved her fried bacon, but hated the smelly body lotion she made with the excess pig fat. She made sure that every morning all the kids woke up, cleaned the house and the yard and had a bath. Then she would check if they oiled their skins, keeping them moist, with her special lotion.

Once, the young Sefako, in a hurry to join the donkey ride game in the field, applied the pig fat ointment without washing himself. Granny saw him cheating, from a distance. She gave him a whipping with the sole of her sandal and ordered him to bath. She came to oil his body herself. He smelled the entire day from the thick ointment she spread generously on his body. The kids teased him, blaming the presence of every housefly they saw on his pungency – like rotten eggs.

During summer holidays, she slaughtered a sheep for her seven sons and their children. She brewed ginger beer for the young and sorghum beer for their parents. The kids loved her ginger beer especially with jam biscuits.

Her garden was a great source of all manner of leafy vegetables and fruit trees. Her favourite veggies were the cabbage and spinach which the kids disliked. But the peach and mulberry trees were everyone’s favourite. In December and January the kids would shake the trees while Granny and Grandpa were not watching and pretend to be innocently picking the ‘fallen’ fruit. On one occasion Granny saw them, made them pick all the fruit

and she took it from them to make jam. They did not dislike the jam, which took a long time to make, but they would rather have eaten their bounty right there and then.

The children's ultimate favourite remained the sugarcane stalks that stood in the middle of Granny's garden. They would, undetected by their granny, sneak into the garden, break a stalk, chew the cane and suck from it the sweet juice. Thereafter they would pretend to be weeding and sprucing up the garden in order to get rid of the debris. Once she warned them that she had counted the sugarcane stalks after realising that they were diminishing and that put a temporary halt to the pillage.

Grandpa would sit with his leather whip under his mulberry tree, watching over the black grapes that the children also loved to steal even before they were fully mature. He sat on his rocking chair, with his *mokorotlo* – Basotho hat – almost covering his face, confusing the kids about whether he is awake or asleep. The kids feared the leathery sjambok – *sephadi* – dangling from his shoulder at all times, but in the evenings they would sit around him to hear the stories of how he fought gallantly for the white man during the great South African War – about how he started off carrying supplies, and was then promoted to taking care of horses and sending messages. Later he was one of the few blacks that were allowed to carry an actual gun alongside the English. "I fought like a trained soldier after observing the trained soldiers," he said. He talked of it as his biggest accomplishment. He also told stories of how he later became a successful medicine man after the war.

He looked healthy for his ripe old age of eighty, and still had the strength to take long walks into the veld to pick wild herbs and bulbs from which he made muti. He searched for lengana, a wild plant with a spicy aroma, which he used to heal wounds and relieve stress. He told of how he hunted porcupines for their spikes, which he used for traditional decoration as well as to bleed patients to leak out evil spirits. Granny was admitted to hospital regularly. Mokwena did not know exactly what the problem was, but Dr Morake, the township's only doctor, spoke about her weak heart and general ageing. Each member of the family took turns to visit her and wish her well.

Mokwena remembered that time too. He remembered the early morning call.

"Come home. Death has struck, brother."

Mokwena recognised the sobbing voice of his eldest brother, Mojaki, who only called him for important matters such as this one. It was about four in the morning.

Mokwena did not care what his mine bosses would say. He asked his neighbour, long-time friend and mine colleague Skosana, to simply let his employers know that he had a sudden bereavement at home, and that he would report back to duty once all was under control. He knew Gerrit, his shift boss, would go berserk as usual. "How many close relatives do you people have?" he would scream. Mokwena's sudden absence might well earn him a warning for absconding from duty, but he had more important things to worry about than Gerrit losing his temper.

Mokwena woke his wife: "The family needs us."

They hurried to his father's house. Buses and trucks were already buzzing in the streets of the township, providing the necessary lighting for those walking on foot in several directions on a weekday morning. Several cars were already parked outside the house, with Dr Morake's Mercedes Benz closest to the front gate. MaMokwena could not hold back the tears. She tightened the blanket around her waist and the doek on her head. She reached for the handkerchief in her handbag to cover her face.

"What happened, Sister, oh what has befallen us?" MaMokwena did not expect an immediate answer from MaMojaki, they were both in tears, and they simply embraced, holding on to each other, their crying rising louder.

"Come this way Brother," Mojaki called Mokwena to the main bedroom. He put his bulky right arm around him. They both sobbed in low tones, in the manner of men, keeping it under control.

"I received the call earlier this morning," Mojaki sighed as they walked slowly together into the bedroom. "I rushed to Dr Morake's home for help, but it was too late."

On the bed lay a lifeless body, ravaged by age. Mokwena's knees weakened, but his brother clutched his waist, held him up, he had anticipated this.

"Father, oh no, Father!" Mokwena screamed as threw his body in anguish against his brother's.

"The great crocodile has finally succumbed; the deep waters have finally swallowed his spirit. Be strong now all you young men," said old Madala, a close friend from next door. He had been the first one on the scene and now sat closest to the bed. "We will never understand the ways of God and the gods. They take those whom they love, and they do so in their own time."

Mokwena composed himself, still held up by Mojaki's strong arms.

“Your father joked with me last week, before he gave me medicine. He said I needed to slaughter more regularly for the gods as they seem to have forgotten about me despite all my sicknesses,” old Madala continued as tears ran down his sad toothless face.

“How is mother?” Mokwena asked as he turned to his brother, Mojaki.

“I saw her yesterday afternoon at the hospital,” said Dr Morake who had overheard the question as he stood alongside the bed. “She was in good spirits but she is still too weak to come home. I suggest that all you Mokwena men meet as a family later today and decide how you will break the news to her. But now, gentlemen, if you’ll excuse me,” he slowly retreated from the room, “I’d like to go home to get ready for work. I’ll also check with the hospital to find out if the ambulance will still make it since we called it a few hours ago.”

“Thank you, doctor, for doing your best to save our father’s life,” deferred Mojaki. It was hours later that the ambulance arrived, long after the morning sun had broken.

“A mortuary van would have been more appropriate,” said Mokwena, annoyed with the paramedics.

“We are very sorry sir to have arrived so late. We only have one ambulance van and one mortuary van for the entire region. The mortuary van is currently out of service,” said the senior medic, wearing a red uniform with frayed cuffs, too short in the leg for him.

“It seems they don’t have proper uniforms either,” muttered a cynical Mokwena.

After they removed the old man’s body, it was time for the men to leave the house and for the women to take over the bedroom and the house to begin the week-long mourning period. During this time, Mokwena and the men would have to arrange the funeral, obtain the death certificate, secure a grave from the municipality, buy the coffin, find the beasts to slaughter erect a tent and notify friends and relatives across the country. Grandpa Mokwena fortunately owned a set of tents. He had a huge dusty white tent for weddings, a grey one for ancestral feasts and a black one for funerals. He also had a collection of black three-legged pots.

“We only have to hire chairs for the funeral,” Mokwena discussed with Mojaki.

In the afternoon the three brothers agreed that all of them should pay their sick mother a visit and break the news of her husband’s death.

“Who is ready to tell Mother?” Mokwena asked his brothers as they sat in adjacent seats in the bus to the hospital in town.

“Should we even tell her, she is already in such pain,” answered Jonase, the youngest brother of the family. His voice came out frightened. Jonase was their mother’s favourite. He was taller than his older brothers, lighter in complexion and considered himself to be the most handsome. He would not want to bring her sad news.

“We have to tell her, we can’t bury her husband of sixty years without letting her know,” answered Mojaki.

“So who will do it? You, Mokwena, or you Mojaki?” Jonase asked.

“I’ll do it, I’ll tell our mother that father is no longer with us,” Mokwena vowed with tears gathering in his eyes. Neither of the brothers opposed this.

“I hate the smell of hospitals,” said Jonase as they entered through the swing doors. “When we were younger and white people still had their separate wards in this hospital, this deathly smell never existed,” he continued. “Back then, people had a fighting chance when they were admitted to this hospital, but nowadays, they just come here to die.”

“Don’t say that Jonase, Mother is getting good treatment here and Dr Morake is doing his best to take care of her, even under the circumstances,” answered Mojaki, restoring some order.

The matron greeted the three brothers: “Dumelang Bakwena, I see the whole clan is here today, your mother is a lucky old woman,” she clucked. “She’s been moved to Ward C, she’s much better today, but she’s still not ready to go home as yet, a few more days at the hospital will be good for her heart.”

“Dumela Matron,” said Mojaki. “It’s us who come here with heavy hearts. Earlier today our father took his journey to the gods. We need to break the news to our mother.”

“Oh no, I’ve not heard the sad news Bakwena. Good Father of Light! He was still so strong for his age!” The matron was shaken, she covered her face with her palms and sighed. “We share your pain. I’ll pass by later in the evening to pay my respects. Please break the news gently to your mother.”

As Mokwena entered the ward, he saw his mother propped up against pillows. She was still awake. She lay in a bed at the far side of the ward, staring out the window, but turned, having heard her sons enter.

“Ah my children! I’m a blessed old lady today. Where are my grandchildren and my daughters-in-law? You should have dragged your lazy father with you. He never comes to

visit me! The day he gets sick, I'll also come once in a blue moon to visit him," she spoke light-heartedly.

"Even in your sickbed you're still fiery as ever, be gentle to your heart," said Mojaki with a forced smile.

"So tell me boys, what's wrong? This is the first time you have visited me all at once. I'm still your mother after all, something must be wrong! Did Dr Morake tell you my days are numbered or what?"

There was silence in the room.

"Don't just look at me with sad faces, tell me the truth boys," she said as she inspected them as she was prone to do, with her penetrating eyes, those eyes which saw straight through to her boys' souls.

"Mother, Father, this morning...," stuttered Mokwena.

"I don't hear you Mokwena, speak up."

"Mother," Mojaki took over, he took her hand to prepare her for the news, "what Mokwena is trying to say is that Father passed away this morning. Dr Morake suspects he had a massive heart attack."

She rested her head back on the pillow. Before the boys could object, she pulled her upper body up and swivelled from her bed and both feet stood on the hospital floor. She shouted, "Nurse, Matron, my family needs me. If you don't discharge me I'll discharge myself."

Mojaki and Jonase rushed to prevent her from staggering to the ground, but there was a steely tone to her voice.

"I'm fine my boys. Take me home."

Somehow the news of her husband's death gave her new strength.

"While I'm still alive, no one will mourn my husband without me."

The mood changed as Grandmother arrived at the Mokwena household. Hierarchy was restored and decorum was reinstated. Any of the daughters-in-law that wore pants rushed back to their homes to change into dresses, like dignified women. Maiden names were dropped and only the names that Grandmother had given to her daughters-in-law when they married into her family were used. They had received these names as reminders that each of them owed her at least one grandson to preserve the Bakwena name.

“MaSefako, somebody needs to start the fire,” she would shout from her mourning mattress to Mokwena’s wife. “MaJakobo, somebody needs to boil water,” she would instruct Mojaki’s wife, whose first son was named Jakobo.

“Being a *makoti*, a daughter-in-law, and a slave is one and the same thing. Why didn’t my mother warn me?” MaMokwena whispered to the others before she grudgingly started making a fire at the crack of dawn. All the Mokwena sons knew that their wives shared a dislike of their mother-in-law, yet her sons revered her.

As ritual would have it, every hour after sunrise, a new visitor would come to pay their last respects. Those that came during breakfast time were served mabele, brown wheat porridge, sprinkled with sugar, with the rest of the family. Those that came after breakfast were served tea and homemade biscuits. Spinach or cabbage was cooked for every lunch. Ginger beer and biscuits were served after lunch. Chicken and porridge was served to the men at sunset before the church singers came to mourn with the family for an hour every night. This went on for many days before the burial took place.

Even though the old Mokwena was a traditional healer, the local Methodist Church welcomed him and even anointed him “Elder” for life. He was a renowned preacher of the Word and somehow found harmony between ancestral worship and the Church.

“Jesus leads us to God our Father. Our ancestors lead us to the Father too,” was his legendary prayer. His sons and grandchildren learned that there are many gods and that different men worship different types of gods. Those who wished to worship ancestors exclusively, according to him, did not know the full truth, and nor did those who worshipped God only. This philosophy was not fully endorsed by the local Methodist Church minister, Reverend Wessels, but he never openly opposed old Mokwena, preferring to make alliances with the popular traditional healer.

Reverend Wessels, or Moruti Wessels as the community referred to him, was great friends with Grandfather Mokwena. He came to give prayers every night in the week of mourning. He had learnt over his twenty-five years of ministry in this township that speaking against ancestors will only serve to alienate the community and its influential men from his church. He was even known for attending ancestral feasts on Sunday mornings before the church service and of course this ensured he was a popular minister.

He further endeared himself to the locals through his mastery of the Sesotho language. This especially, led him to become the only white man who lived in the township

who had survived the political upheavals that had happened over the years. The locals protected him – they called him “our white man.”

“Death, oh Death,” he preached boisterously to the sombre group in attendance, church members, neighbours and family, “like a thief in the night you came and stole our father. Death you shall be defeated some day! While we wait for our victory in Jesus over Death someday, we are comforted because our beloved father is resting in the bosom of Abraham.”

“Amen!”

“Beloved, tomorrow, as you all know, we’ll be honouring our healer, our father, Elder Mokwena. We will watch over his body from seven at night on to the deep of Saturday morning, to bid him farewell,” he paused to wipe sweat off his wrinkled forehead before continuing in crisp Sesotho. “The Mokwena family bids you farewell tonight, let us meet again at the night vigil. Walk home safely, be careful of the night scum. Men, protect your women. May the Spirit of the Lord and the spirit of Bakwena watch over you.”

“Jesus is the Alpha, Jesus is the OMEGA!” they sang the chorus repeatedly as they walked back to their homes through the moonlit streets of Kutloanong Township.

In Kutloanong, a funeral has six distinct parts; the preparation, the Friday night vigil, the home farewell session on Saturday morning, the church service, the graveyard session and the “after-tears” session which lasts until Sunday morning.

During the preparation, Mokwena and his brothers informed all the family members and friends, near and far, about the passing away of their beloved father. Messages were relayed to the remote parts of the country through travelling friends and sometimes via the police. The preparations determine how big a funeral it going to be. The more people the deceased person knows, the bigger the funeral will be. Small funerals are a shame.

Those, like Mokwena, who do not attend church regularly, or do not at least make an appearance during Easter or Christmas, and those who do not pay their annual church offerings are left in deep trouble. They are destined to have a funeral without a man of the

cloth like Moruti Wessels and worse, they can forget about a church service. Another shame. Fortunately this was not the case with the Mokwena's father.

The families of those who pass away while not attending church either rent a pastor or appeal to some non-denominational minister, usually some un-established charismatic novice, to conduct the service at home before the procession heads straight to the graveyard. It is an embarrassing when this happens, but it is better than no pastor at all. Paying the church offering, at least ensure a decent funeral. Death is a serious matter, especially for the elderly and for mine workers, many of whom die very young.

At the night vigil, there is a slot for the caregiver of the deceased, especially the caregiver of one who has died after a long illness. The caregiver or simply "nurse", is the one who has the task of relating the journey of the deceased from the moment they were first diagnosed as 'sick' until death. The mourners listen attentively to this speech; it brings them some kind of closure.

Dr Shepherd Morake ran the only medical practice in the township. He tended to give the speeches at most funerals because he was usually the one who had the full health record of most locals. He also understood the value of free marketing. Patients shared their deepest fears and joys with him especially when they thought they were about to die. Inevitably, he knew some of their deep dark secrets. He had been known to sometimes disclose embarrassing information about his dead patients; so families had to ask him not to mention certain things.

Dr Morake had studied at Natal University, and was the first doctor to come out of the township. He was one of the wealthiest locals, second only to the mayor and his politician friends. He drove the only E-class Mercedes Benz in the township. If he had the time, or depending on the size of the funeral, Dr Morake would usually speak before the preaching started at the night vigil, or he simply got his slot at the church service the following day. At the night vigil he got more freedom and time to speak.

He was short in stature, but his name towered above most men's in the township. He had a way of lifting his chin when he spoke, it gave him authority. He sported a grey beard, but he was not that old. It must have been due to his wisdom. When he spoke, everyone kept quiet, even the usually theatrical family members who competed for attention near the coffin under the tent. Dr Morake's words were never wasted.

At the funeral of Mokwena's father the doctor as usual was holding forth in his polished English accent. "Once again," he rumbles in his authoritative voice, "we have been robbed of one of our own, through a chronic disease." Mokwena and many others don't understand all the words Dr Morake uses, but all are impressed and intimidated by his tone and authority. "When I first diagnosed the deceased with an elevated systemic arterial blood pressure about five years ago, I got to spend time with him while I continuously managed his condition through observation and various medical prescriptions. A few months ago he was evidently showing symptoms of hypertensive encephalopathy which could not be reversed due to the patient's small and ageing blood vessels."

The Mokwenas and the mourners look bewildered, they are concerned about this complicated thing that Dr Morake is talking about, perhaps they too need to go and see him next Monday, just in case. Those that pretend to understand the sophisticated language keep oo-ing and aa-ing from the back.

"Oh! Poor father!" Mokwena exclaims softly during one of the doctor's numerous animated pauses, imagining how painful the moment of death had been for his aged father.

Skosana, Mokwena's colleague and neighbour, looks as if he is in meditation as Dr Morake paces about in front of the mourners. Skosana becomes more nervous about the closing prayer which he has been asked to offer once Dr Morake has left the front. He must be at his best. Although Skosana regularly offers public prayers at his church, after the doctor's show he is nervous to utter a word, even just a simple prayer.

A woman from the church starts to chant a funeral hymn; she senses that the doctor is going to deliver the last harrowing detail of the deceased's life on earth. The mourners join the hum. Dr Morake takes a step forward, for maximum impact.

"When the family called me to see the deceased, he had suffered what we call a severe myocardial infarction, unfortunately there was nothing that either science or even I could do, God had taken away that which he had given to us."

The Mokwena women become hysterical at this point, allowing their sorrow to crescendo. The wailing gets louder.

"Damn you *myocardial*, damn you *hypertense* for taking away our loved one," one of the older folks can be heard cursing.

“Do you know why you’re sitting on that chair?”

“No sir, I don’t.”

“Is your name Mokwena Mokwena?”

“Yes sir. That’s my name.”

“I’m Captain Mosima.”

“Yes, I know who you are.” Captain Mosima of the South African Police Service’s Gold and Diamond squad, a law unto himself, it was said.

“I’m not here to waste your time Mokwena. Please don’t waste mine. Tell me everything you know about the missing welding equipment at the Goldfields warehouse.”

“I know nothing about it, sir, Captain.”

“What have you heard about it then? We know the rumour mill’s rolling, what have you heard? I’ve got a long day ahead, Mokwena.”

Captain David Mosima turns the rotating chair to face Mokwena. Their eyes meet for the first time. Mokwena notices the Captain’s thick black moustache is peppered by a number of grey strands, the darkened lips purse. A fellow heavy smoker, he reckons.

A plainclothes police officer stands behind the seated Mokwena, guarding the closed door. His gun is clearly visible in the holster strapped to his waist. The mine manager’s office is a damp container with grey painted steel walls. The only light that permeates the room comes from the small single window which is shut. The wooden table where Mokwena’s clutched hands are resting is the same one used on payday for the piles of fortnightly wages. Today is not payday. Gerrit Meyer uncharacteristically stands outside, calling out his workers’ names as they individually get ushered into the office to be questioned by the boisterous captain.

“Sir, all I know is what the men have been saying for the last few days.”

“And what’s that?” Mosima leans towards Mokwena, his red eyes flashing.

“All I heard is that welding equipment is missing from storage sir, and that it’s rumoured to be an inside job.”

“And do you swear you had nothing to do with it?”

“I know nothing about it Captain.”

“And you swear that my men who are currently searching your home as we speak will find nothing that belongs to Goldfields,” he grins wryly. “Mokwena, I have ears and eyes all over the township. I’ll be watching you.”

He leans back and orders the detective to usher out Mokwena and call the next miner in, before he turns the chair to face away from the door.

“The cops came sniffing around at work,” Mokwena speaks in hushed tones to the two young men. “I hope you two are being careful.” The three men stand next to one another, facing the Mokwena Young Tigers lads as they run around the field during their physical training session. Mokwena pretends to paying full attention to his boys, while covertly speaking to his visitors. He does not want to be seen talking to them directly, in case Captain Mosima is watching from a distance.

“Hey wena Ace, pick up your pace! Why are you slower than the rest of the team today,” Mokwena shouts at one of his lads as he talks to the two men, Zazu and Speedy, both dressed in leather black jackets and caps.

“Don’t worry Bra KK,” Zazu calls him by his nickname. Bra for big brother. It’s a sign of respect, like Bra Hugh Masekela, the famous jazz trumpeter from Soweto, he’s street smart and revered for it. Mokwena liked the reference.

“Ja niks worries,” says Zazu. “The stuff is safe and the cops won’t ever find it. You must just be calm. You know nothing about all this. Only when the dust settles will you have to come and take your stuff. But in the meantime Bra KK, you have to give us our money for the job, then you can organise for the goods to be delivered to your place of choice later.”

“Relax guys, it’s still too early to talk about payments, let’s wait for the cops to calm down, then I come see the goods for myself at your hiding place and then make the first payment before delivery...Good work Ace, good work,” he yells at the boys on the field, “All of you raise the pace now, lap five of ten, come on!”

“Uh uh, Bra KK,” Zazu, “we need payment, we’ve done our part, and you do yours now. We did not go through the trouble for nothing Uncle.”

“If you delay with our payment we’ll have no choice but to take more drastic measures,” Speedy jumps in.

“Hey guys, this job wouldn’t have been possible without me and you know that,” fumes Mokwena, but he still manages to look like he is paying his team his undivided attention. “The least you can do is to give me time to organise the money. And you Speedy, what is with the threats sonny?”

“Look Bra KK, we want the first payment, make it half the amount, the rest you’ll pay when your business starts taking off. You have until the end of this month. We have families to feed too. Don’t force us to be ugly!”

The men leave, giving the team the thumbs up as if they are ordinary spectators watching and supporting MYT at their practice session.

Mokwena walks home knowing that if he cannot raise the cash to secure the stolen merchandise, his dream will crumble. The darkness of the streets pales in comparison to the hopelessness he feels inside. He opens the gate as he arrives at home and he sees the paraffin light is still on.

Sefako opens the door for him. His son’s brow is furrowed with concern. He whispers, “Father, father, the police were here looking for you, asking questions. Captain David Mosima...”

MaMokwena screams from the bedroom which is adjacent to the small kitchen.

“Sefako, get to bed.”

“You better listen to your mother, Son. There’s no need to worry, everything is fine.”

Mokwena closes the bedroom door and looks his wife in the eye.

“What happened today?” she asks. “What did Mosima want? Tell me the truth Mokwena. Tell me the whole truth. Why are the police looking for stolen goods from you?”

“Calm down my wife.”

“Are you hiding something from me Mokwena?”

Mokwena puts his bag down and sits on the bed.

MaMokwena has seen this look before; a mix of anguish and guilt, when Mokwena confessed about an affair a few years into their marriage.

He stares down at his boots, he lowers his voice. “Listen to me my wife. I did what I needed to do as the head of this household. I have dreams for this family.”

MaMokwena is astonished, but she knows she has to contain her anger at this point. Besides, she does not want the children to hear this conversation.

“Mokwena, why did you not tell me that the police have been at your workplace questioning everyone about stolen equipment? Is that why you’ve been going to Sheila’s even during the week and hiding at the soccer fields? I’m not a child Mokwena, I have to know?”

“I need to venture on my own, be a master of my destiny. I arranged to buy welding equipment to start my own company, our company.” He hears the lie slip from his mouth.

“What have you done?”

“How was I to know the equipment was stolen?”

“And now must you pay? Is that the problem?”

“Yes,” he feels the relief. She knows the truth, but not the whole truth.

“Did you ever think that perhaps we could get a loan, had you shared your dream with me before this mess perhaps I could have asked my side of the family to loan us some money to buy the machines, Mokwena, from a dealer. Now that the police are hovering over us like we’re criminals, they won’t be too keen.”

“The machines are way too expensive, you think I would not have thought of that MaMokwena? They have extra machines at Goldfields. The police have been speaking to every man at work. We are always suspects in this place. Last year when welding mining equipment was stolen at Shaft 2, we at Shaft 4 were interrogated by the police as if we were thieves. This is nothing new. I’ll sort it out. All is under control. He does not suspect me specifically. They’re searching everyone’s house.”

“Where are the machines now?” MaMokwena asks.

“At a safe place with the guys. I don’t know where the place is.”

She shakes her head.

Mokwena does not want to worry his wife. He does not want to make things worse. He says nothing more. All he can think of is relieving his tension at Sheila’s, a bottle of beer cooling his feverish thoughts.

“So Mokwena, what would you do if you were Gerrit?” Skosana stares out the bus window.

On both sides of the roads there are brown mine dumps, piles of debris that from a distance children and visitors mistake for the mountain ranges of Lesotho. They have a permanent presence in the flat landscape of Northern Free State. The dumps are dry and dusty heaps of mine waste that stay greyish white through all seasons. No one will be able to remove them even long after the mining companies are gone.

“The problem is that the mines give very little back to the people of this place Skosana. All we get are mine dumps, dust, low pay and constant body searches, no wonder there is always theft,” Mokwena retorts.

“So are you saying Gerrit should not have authorised the search? That the thieves that are destroying our jobs are right to steal the equipment we need to do our jobs?” Skosana turns to look at Mokwena, who sits next to him, looking firmly ahead.

“You misunderstand me Skosana. All I’m saying is that I can see why some people steal from the mine, because they’re treated badly, paid badly. They see the mine bosses drive home in big cars, and see them go off on holidays, send their kids to expensive schools in Cape Town and Natal...and what do we get, tell me?”

“We earn enough to live on Mokwena. We must be content with what the Lord gives us,” Skosana tries to convince Mokwena.

“Enough? Why do they need so much? Why is this *little* enough for us?”

“I don’t have answers Mokwena, but the truth is that Gerrit is right to get the police involved, the thieves could be anywhere. How would you feel if you lost your job because of the theft?”

“I’m already thinking about life after Goldfields, have been for a while now.”

Skosana starts braying, but he soon realises that Mokwena’s look of determination does not fade.

“It’s been a long day I know. Let us not run ahead of ourselves. It’s not the first time we are being questioned by the police, and it won’t be the last. One can’t just quit so easily.”

“Again you misunderstand me, Skosana. I’ve been thinking about this for some time.” He stands up as they approach the first bus stop.

“Please tell my wife that I’m safe. I’ll see you in the morning on the way to work.” Mokwena hops off before Skosana can ask another question.

He walks hurriedly into the shebeen, Sheila's Inn.

He has a mission to accomplish tonight. Even during the week the miners, now cleaned up, fill up the place. He stands at the door and looks around. He finds the two young men he is looking for, Zazu and Speedy, and walks to their table.

Sheila comes to greet him before he settles down as she does to all her important clients. Sheila is a free spirit. She is twice divorced, has three daughters from three different men. Her shebeen does not sell traditional beer and only allows adults. It is seen to be an exclusive place of entertainment in Kutloanong, just the way she wants it.

"I don't waste time with cheapskates, at Sheila's we entertain those who can afford quality," is her the well-known line. Her security guard denies entry to those who do not qualify. Dress code and style are important for entry. The smarter your dress, the better the chances of being allowed in Sheila's Inn.

She is disliked by many women, including MaMokwena. They consider her poison, a man-eater, but she considers herself a businesswoman. Her shebeen operates only at night, on weekends and on special occasions. She sells the best liquor in town, even the police hang out at her watering hole, despite the fact that she has no permit to operate a shebeen.

"Hello KK, it's always wonderful to see you sweetie. What can Queen Sheila do for you tonight? A massage perhaps? You look exhausted. Ag shame my lovey what's wrong?" Mokwena's mind is elsewhere, not even Sheila's usual playful flirtations distract him from his deep thoughts.

"Oh hello Sheila, yes my dear, please give me a double," Mokwena sighs. He does not even make eye contact with Sheila. He looks at the two younger men sitting in front of him.

"Bring me a double," Mokwena sighs. "You know we don't welcome unemployed chancers, I don't want you to have babalaas and get fired by Gerrit. You sure?"

"Double, please Sheila."

Mokwena does not greet the men. He pulls out a chair. "I've got half of the money, where are my machines?" He does not intend to spend too much time with them. The jazz

music is loud enough for the men to have a private conversation as they lean into each other.

“Bra KK, now you are talking, we had almost given up on you after the chat at the soccer field!” says Zazu who has a quart in his hand and a cigarette stompie hanging at the corner of his lips. “On Sunday morning we’ll bring the stuff to your house. Remember we’ll be watching how your business grows. We’ll give some leeway, alright? The rest of our money comes to us as soon as you make your first sale,” Zazu turns away to join the dance floor.

“Zazu, not so quick!” Mokwena calls to him. “I want to at least see the stuff tonight.”

“You don’t trust us Bra KK,” Speedy laughs at him.

“Relax, we are in this together,” Zazu jumps in. “Tonight Speedy and I’ll have a little bit of fun, and then we’ll think about how we can bring you over to see the stuff. Trust me, Uncle.”

“I insist. If I don’t get to see the stuff, you don’t get the money.”

“Bra KK, the place is far.” Zazu is visibly irritated.

“But the night is young, I have all the time.” Mokwena downs his vodka. “I want to see what I’m buying, it’s only fair.”

They walk for half an hour away from the township centre into the informal settlements on the outskirts. The streets are dark and Mokwena struggles to keep pace with the young men. Speedy walks ahead and he cannot stop cursing for being out in the night while the party at Sheila’s is still raging.

As they arrive Zazu unlocks the shack door and switches on a torch. The shack is full to the roof with all manner of stolen mining equipment, household electrical appliances and clothing.

“There’s your welding machine old timer, we even got some welding rods, leather gloves, and overalls for you. We know what we are doing,” boasts Speedy as Zazu moves the torch light around the room. “Are you happy now?”

Before Mokwena answers a voice shouts from behind. “Police. Do not move. If you move, I shoot.”

Mokwena freezes. Zazu instinctively drops the torch and tries to escape the light. Speedy lunges forward to the window across the room. His short legs kick out the window

glass and his small frame slips through the hole as if he has rehearsed this many times before.

“Don’t let him get away there at the back. Bring him back here, dead or alive.”

Mokwena recognises Captain Mosima’s angry voice.

In the dark night there is running, shouting.

He hears two gunshots. The detective comes back cursing.

“We got the dog, Captain.”

Zazu is trapped against a wall. This time the police shine torchlight in his eyes.

“See what happens when you try to escape justice? Your friend is dead.” Captain Mosima barks. To his junior officer he instructs, “Wrap the body and throw him at the back of the van before the neighbours come out in their numbers,” he smiles. “I know exactly what to do with this pig.”

Mosima smirks, looking down at the spot-lit Zazu. Mosima handcuffs him, kicks him in the stomach and throws him into the back of the yellow police van, shouts, “Thanks, Mokwena.”

Zazu gets his breath back, keeps yelling; “Bra KK, what goes around comes around, Speedy, Speedy! You KK, after all we did for you? It’s a small world broer, we’ll come for you. Your daughter, your son, your wife, we’re coming for them.”

Mokwena senses a harrowing chill down his spine. He is filled with guilt and fear. He does not respond. He looks away, avoids eye contact with Zazu. Captain Mosima’s plan has worked. But it did not include a killing.

“Play along you pig,” Mosima struggles to get Zazu in the van. “This township needs less of your kind. You’re going straight to hell like your little midget friend. He thought he could outrun a bullet?” Mosima’s face bears a fierce grin, his gun is still in his hand.

Zazu’s stubbornness disappears instantly. Fear overcomes him. Mosima kicks him again, sending him to the ground. He screams, panicking, hoping someone will intervene. It is bitterly dark.

Two more gunshots.

Then silence.

Mokwena slumps on to his buttocks. He can’t stop himself from crying. He never prays, but he has to pray. What he has seen tonight is the stuff that only takes place maybe in Johannesburg. Not in front of his eyes.

“Take this one too.” Mosima instructs the two cops.

They drag the body up and throw it at the back of the van.

Even in that dark Kutloanong night, Mokwena could see the horror in Zazu and Speedy’s young faces. No hardened criminals, not yet, just stupid boys doing his bidding.

Mosima walks up to him and yanks him up.

“Well done KK. The community is safer without those two. You people just don’t know what it takes to deal with these murderous thugs every day,” he tries to calm Mokwena down.

“They did not deserve to die,” Mokwena mumbles as he battles the tears. “The plan was for me to lead you to where the stolen goods were stored,” he insists, “you already knew who the thieves were Captain. Why did you not tell me you intended to...to shoot them?” he asks Mosima.

“Mokwena, do you think men like Spencer Molatedi get brutally killed by angels? Men like Spencer are good people, but they get killed when all they want to do is to live an honest life, visit their forefathers’ graves early on Sunday morning. These young pigs attack them for no reason and murder them.”

Mokwena remembers Spencer Molatedi’s death and his unsolved murder case. The possibility that Zazu and Speedy may have killed him, as Mosima suggests, allows him to feel better to know that Mosima’s brutal actions, together with his men, seem justifiable.

“When you told me that they were threatening you, I knew we were dealing with serious criminals, killers. You just didn’t know. These same dead animals at the back of that police van were responsible for taking the lives of men like Spencer, leaving us with orphans and widows. It could have been you that night KK, it could have been me! You should be happy seeing how we deal with the scum. Come let me drive you home.”

Mosima holsters his gun and gets into his police car.

Mokwena fears to take the front seat. He sits at the back, even though there are only two people in the car.

They both keep silent.

Mosima picks up the microphone and gives instructions for police to be dispatched to the scene. He says something about two dead gunmen who tried to attack the police, and that the crime scene is to be secured. Mokwena does not understand it all but he

hears the altered account of what just happened. He resigns himself to the fact that these are men of the law.

Mokwena now regrets the moment he confessed to Mosima. Confessed to having organised for the equipment to be stolen. Confessed that the boys, his boys, had brazenly come to the soccer field and in broad daylight threatened him.

His head is pounding, his head aches in a way he has never experienced before as he thinks of the young dead men.

“You did the right thing, Mokwena,” says Mosima. “Never doubt that, Kutloanong needs more men like you,” he stops the car a few streets before Mokwena’s home. “Now you listen to me carefully Mokwena. You will get to keep the machines you need. Twenty-five percent of your business will belong to me. See it as a form of security. I’ll come at the end of every month to see how things are going. Go ahead and pursue your dreams. Get off here, go home, sleep and forget about what you saw. No one will ever ask you about tonight. It’s over.”

Mokwena is unsure what the implications of all this are, but he trusts Mosima. He believes every word he says. He wishes he had never involved the young men in his plans. He wishes he had never planned the theft. He wishes the boys had not turned greedy and forceful. He now wishes that he had not agreed to Mosima’s plan as he walks back from the ill-timed confession. “I had no choice. It was either jail or they were going to harm me,” he convinces himself.

“I’m thinking of starting a business, a welding company,” says Mokwena without raising his head as he tucks into his plate of mala-mogodu and steam bread.

Skosana keeps eating his delicacy - it must never be allowed to get cold. This allows him room to avoid showing his lack of excitement at yet another new idea from his friend.

“I tell you Skosana, the two of us are the only welders with real experience in this township; it will be much easier to build burglar doors and security gates for homes and schools than working underground, competing with rats and earthworms. And of course we can make some good money, lots of it. An honest living,” Mokwena tries harder to excite Skosana.

“Why don’t we just stay where we are Mokwena, we’re doing just fine working here at Goldfields, besides, you know all these township schools and council buildings only give business to the mayor’s son. And he does a reasonably good job anyway,” says Skosana in resignation.

“Ag, that bloated buffalo can’t weld to save his fat belly,” says Mokwena. “He sub-contracts everything to people who can barely do the job. It’s a disgrace.”

“I don’t know my friend, what if the business fails?” Skosana says as he picks the last piece of the sheep’s tripe in the bowl.

Mokwena tries again to persuade Skosana: “We can negotiate with better sub-contractors; they’ll make more money working with us, those fat-cats pay horribly I heard.” As they walk back home Mokwena starts thinking of a different way to sell his idea to Skosana. “How does an eagle learn to fly? Surely at some point it has to take that first step from the nest, to stand right at the edge of a rocky mountain and take to the skies in faith.” Mokwena refuses to let Skosana’s lack of interest disrupt his dream. “This is a good dream to dream Skosana, even you know it in your heart.”

As they head to the soccer pitch, Skosana asks Mokwena to watch the Young Tigers battle it out with a team from Kroonstad, the Maokeng Heroes. “How do you know that this is the right path to take, Mokwena?”

“If we don’t try, we’ll never know. I have this feeling that the time is right. If you don’t join me, I’m going ahead.” Mokwena makes his intentions clear, and challenges Skosana, who is still reluctant.

“Today we are going to meet a man among men. Moremi from Kroonstad. He’s not a man who has wasted his time working for the white man all his life. He took his chances and today we all revere him. If we doubt, we’ll never be like Moremi.”

“Drop it, won’t you?” says Skosana.

The Maokeng Heroes, the players and the coaching staff, arrive in Kutloanong in two minibus taxis. The minibuses are fully branded with the team’s logo. Mokwena walks over to the bus to meet the owner of the team, Mr Moremi, who despite his legendary wealth, is humble enough to travel in the same taxi with the young lads. He owns a chain of supermarkets and a bottle store in Maokeng. A tycoon of note and a man of the people. Mokwena has always dreamt of meeting him in person. As the host today, he gets to spend the afternoon with him before the match begins later in the afternoon.

“Honourable Moremi, how are you doing sir? The people of Kutloanong are privileged to have you in our backyard.” Mokwena reaches out his hand to greet the great man. Moremi is now old, wears a leather cowboy hat. His Heroes tracksuit top stretches over a protruding belly. But he is still energetic for a seventy-something-year-old. He shakes Mokwena’s hand firmly and gives him a hug. He also extends his hand to Skosana who stands beside Mokwena.

“Today we are going to teach you a football lesson but we are also going to win the hearts of your township Mokwena.” Both men laugh heartily. “We’ve heard a lot about your Young Tigers, unfortunately today they are going to experience what it’s like to play against provincial champs.” Mokwena feels somewhat intimidated but he knows his lads are fully prepared.

“While the boys are getting themselves ready and we wait for things to start, could I have the honour of taking you to our premier watering hole for you to appreciate Kutloanong even more fully?” Mokwena offers.

“How can I say no to that? Jump into the kombi with me and direct me to this special place.”

Moremi’s driver takes the three men on a slow drive down the dusty streets of the township. Soccer lovers whistle and scream when they see the Heroes kombi. Word gets around that the champion visitors are in town. The soccer pitch will start to fill up quickly, thinks Mokwena and directs the driver to Sheila’s Inn.

Sheila is at her best, with pearls on her ears and neck. The make-up on her face is immaculate, the glistening turquoise eye-shadow is matched to her short dress and her nails glimmer with polish. She comes out to meet the men at the entrance. She gives Mokwena the warm hug he is used to whenever he brings guests on weekends.

“Good day KK darling!” She never dares to touch Skosana, just a smile in his direction will do. Skosana is only there because Mokwena dragged him to spend time with Moremi. He never sets foot in a shebeen. She waits to be introduced.

“Ntate Moremi, meet the Queen of Kutloanong, Sheila. Isn’t she beautiful?”

“Stop with your nonsense now KK, have you already been drinking. Ntate Moremi, we have heard about you. You inspire us township businesspeople to aim higher at all times. I’m honoured to have you at Sheila’s.”

Moremi's eyes are fixed on Sheila's dazzling looks as she speaks. His smile is wide as her charm bamboozles the old man. Sheila wastes no time, kisses his check and warmly hugs him. Moremi squeezes her tightly for a brief moment.

"Can I buy Sheila's Inn and take it to Maokeng with me after this? We have nothing that comes close to this over there!" he flatters her. Everyone chuckles. Sheila leads them to a semi-private corner reserved for special guests.

"Sheila reminds me of my first wife. Beautiful but also a wonderful business mind. I was a just farm boy, and when I went to the town looking for a job, I met her in town and I knew she was special. We started our first shebeen all because of her vision. Before we knew it we had a bottle store and supermarkets. She died twenty five years from the day I met her, giving birth to our fifth child; we were in our late forties. To this day I still remember her. I see her spirit in Sheila. Thank you Mokwena, for bringing me to this wonderful place! Let's drink to success. My boys are still whipping your Tigers later today don't forget."

They all laugh and drink. Skosana sticks to his soft drink. The sound of jazz music fills the room, the sounds of Black Moses and Kippie Moeketsi, just the kind of music to mellow Moremi further.

"Time for the game is nearing gentlemen. Let's go," Skosana says abruptly.

It is indeed time to go, but for Skosana it is also a way to get out of the drinking hole of sin.

"Your friend cuts our fun so short Mokwena!" Moremi laughs. He insists on leaving Sheila with a huge tip despite Mokwena's insisting on paying for the drinks.

"Dear darling Moremi, do call on me anytime when you need quality entertainment even at one of your taverns at home. I'll come show your people how to take care of important men like yourself," Sheila brags as she slips her generous tip into her bra.

When the two club owners arrive in Moremi's Heroes mini-bus, the gathered crowd erupts into a frenzy, supporters whistle and shout, a fan in full Maokeng Heroes regalia blows his kudu horn announcing: "The legend is here. Ntate Moremi, father of our Heroes." In full view of everyone, the man with the kudu horn runs onto the pitch and takes out a white cloth, he unties a knot and pours out a brownish substance. Two local men run after him shouting; "*Moloi, moloi!*" The kudu horn man runs off the pitch and sits

amongst the Maokeng fans and shouts back at his chasers, "Leave me alone, if I'm a witch, where is your own muthi." The Maokeng supporters chase the local men away, laughing.

The Mokwena Young Tigers supporters feel offended that the bussed in supporters from far are shouting louder than them. When Mokwena opens his door to walk down to his chair under an umbrella manned by Sefako, the locals burst into a song;

We are the Young Tigers of Mokwena

Roar we roar, cowards run

Kutloanong make way for your sons

There is an enemy at the gate

Our Young Tigers will roar

Roar we roar, cowards run

Mokwena is filled with pride. When they play with local opposition the affection from the supporters is hardly this huge. Sefako and other young local supporters earlier collected coal ash from the township women and applied it to the soccer pitch lines to make them visible. The referee is Mokotjo, a school teacher from Bothaville, who is well known for his love of soccer rules and discipline. Moremi has insisted that a neutral referee be invited for this game.

The teams enter the dusty pitch. The Heroes are well kitted-out, far better than Mokwena's lads. The soccer boots are shining and the studs as prominent as full cows' udders. After Mokotjo inspects the lines he calls the two captains to determine which team starts on which side of the pitch. He tosses the coin in the air. The crowd goes silent. He catches the coin, slaps it in his palm. He looks at both captains. Agonising seconds later the referee points to the Heroes captain. The Heroes have won the toss. The Maokeng crowd claps and blows their kudu horn.

It's considered a bad omen for the hosts to lose the toss.

"Come on boys, forget all about the silly superstitions. Focus on your game," Mokwena knows it is important to encourage the lads not to lose motivation. Moremi sits on the other side of the pitch facing directly in the direction of Mokwena. He is calm, hardly uttering a word throughout all the proceedings.

Goal! Heroes lead. Moremi shows emotion for the first time since the game started. He claps and smiles, but remains on his chair. Mokwena on the other side of the pitch is furious: "Ace, focus my laaitie. Don't be intimidated by these cheese boys. This is your home ground. Come on!"

Towards the end of first half, Modise the Young Tigers goalkeeper, commits a foul on the line of his eighteen-yard box. A Heroes player clutches his knee and shouts for attention. Mokotjo runs to see if the foul was committed outside or inside the box as well as to determine the damage. Disco, the tempestuous Young Tigers defender says something to Mokotjo. He stops and shows him a yellow card. The local crowd shouts and whistles in protest. "Hey *wena* Mokotjo! This is not your Sub-A classroom, these are not your schoolchildren, it's a soccer ground damn it! Stop with your unnecessary cards before you ruin the match," someone shouts.

Ace runs to stop Disco from upsetting the referee further. Mokotjo calls for first aid. The crowd awaits his decision on the goalkeeper's tackle. He points to the penalty spot. He shows Modise a red card. The Young Tigers now lose their keeper and concede a penalty. The gods must be angry. Mokwena sacrifices a striker to replace the goalkeeper. Meantime, the medical team, if they can be called that with their ragged box of supplies, pour water on the Heroes striker's knee. He stands up. A complete recovery. A miracle.

Disco is livid but Ace keeps him in check.

The same striker who clutched his *broken* knee a minute ago takes the penalty. He scores. The whistle goes for half time.

"Wake up Tigers. Wake up. Ace where are you in the middle of the pitch? Disco, are you here for a fist fight or for a football battle? This community is not here to be embarrassed. These people are here in their hundreds to support you, they are here to see victory. We are one man down, two goals down, but we have the entire township behind us. Go back in there and give them your best." The intensity of Mokwena's appeal spurs his boys on.

They start the second half with a heightened sense of urgency. However, the lone striker, Gunman, battles to find scoring opportunities. The song breaks out again. Roar Tigers roar!! The boys gather more courage. Disco makes a long pass to Ace. The song fades. Aaaaccee! Aaaace. They roar. He dribbles past two Heroes defenders and makes a

pass to Gunman who taps it in. Gunman! Gunman! Gunman! They chant. Moremi sits expressionless.

Skosana shouts, not far from where Mokwena sits: "Do it again Ace. Their backline is sleeping." The crowd laughs. But the Young Tigers are still lagging behind. Mokwena makes another replacement, this time strengthening the attack. Heroes are focussing on Ace, tackling him roughly. He needs a decoy to give Ace space to keep doing what he's doing. It works. Sputla, the new middle fielder, a nippy player, creates all sorts of trouble for the visitors with his forward runs. Time is fast running out. Sputla makes a run on the left, he makes a cross, Gunman jumps, a Heroes defender elbows him mid-air, he comes crashing down. "Penalty!" the crowd screams. Mokotjo runs to the scene. He blows his whistle. It's an indirect free-kick. Mokwena jumps from his seat, "Robbery, this is daylight robbery," he shouts as he runs towards the referee. The crowd invades the pitch.

Pandemonium!

Skosana runs to protect the referee. He pleads for calm. The players beg for calm too. Mokwena walks back to his seat. The referee should give Mokwena a red card. But emotions run too high. He sticks to his decision. Sputla takes the kick. He looks for Gunman, he connects, but the keeper saves. Mokotjo indicate five extra minutes. The Heroes fans start singing, the kudu horn blares. Victory is within reach.

But now it is Tigers that are attacking. Sputla makes another signature run. He passes to Ace. The crowd responds; Aaaace, Aaaace. He realises the Heroes goalkeeper is off his line. He lobs an adventurous shot. Goal!

The earth is in tremor. Kutloanong is accustomed to tremors from mining activity, but this time it is the crowd stamping feet.

The Heroes players start shouting at each other for the mistake. For the first time Moremi stands up. "Discipline boys. Fight for one another. This is a battle against them, not against each other," he shouts.

Gunman picks up the ball from behind the Heroes goalkeeper. He wants a quick restart. The linesman puts up an index finger. Mokotjo looks at his watch, he agrees. One minute to go. He blows the whistle to restart the game. Gunman passes to Sputla, he passes the ball back to Disco, the crowd shouts impatiently, "Forward Sputla, go forward." The Heroes attackers put Disco under pressure, he passes back to the goalkeeper, but the ball gets intercepted. Panic strikes. The crowd goes silent. Moremi stands up. It is a one-on-

one situation. The striker takes a curling shot around the keeper. His fingers make the slightest of touches. The Maokeng crowd erupts. The ball hits the side post and Disco has cleared it. The keeper is well beaten but the post saved his blushes. Mokotjo looks at his watch. A few seconds remain. Ace picks up the clearance and makes a long pass to Sputla, who makes a penetrating run from the left. Gunman calls for the ball. Sputla makes the pass. Ace is now behind Gunman who heels the ball back to him, fooling the Heroes defence who expected him to make a shot. The keeper goes off balance. Ace awaits the ball. "Shoot, shoot," Kutloanong roars. Third goal. Winning goal.

Never had such drama been witnessed before. Mokotjo blows his whistle three times. It's over. Mokwena's Young Tigers have won the epic match.

"Roar Tigers roar! Cowards run. We rule the Free State."

Another morning comes, another walk to catch the bus to Goldfields Shaft 4. It is early, groups of mine-workers walk together singing songs of men.

Father ran away from the village

Father left Grandfather's cows running in the field

Father heard about gold

I am still digging for gold

Where is my gold, my father's gold

The cold and thick air of winter complements the melody to their humming tunes. They walk with purpose, sticks in their hands, blankets wrapped around their shoulders. Some are wearing blue while others have chosen green overalls; their black gumboots make a uniform stomping noise as they step rhythmically on the dusty streets. They walk like trained soldiers to war, some are whistling, some shouting their totems, there is an unmistakable air of unity that defies the bitter cold of this dark winter morning.

"I don't like the fact that Gerrit's son is now the team leader," Mokwena protests as the men finally settle into the mini-bus.

"Didn't the pikinini only start about six months ago?" asks one of the men.

“Oh yah, klein baas can’t even operate a drilling machine,” adds another, “I doubt if he even knows why we’re underground.”

As usual Skosana settles into a seat next to Mokwena. He looks ahead as he speaks: “Hold on men, I heard that Gerrit’s son has an engineering degree from university. They teach computers and all sorts of new things over there, not simple gold digging like we’ve been doing for decades; he is the future of Goldfields.”

“Computers? Get lost man, since when do blasting rocks and shovelling require typing skills Skosana?” The men laugh at Mokwena’s retort.

“I hear computers do more than typing...” Skosana tries to defend himself.

“Like what, drill a rock? What can computers do in the belly of the earth?”

Mokwena ridicules Skosana who gives up as he is unable to argue further.

“But when will our children be like their children?” another man asks.

“Like I told you the other day,” Mokwena whispers to Skosana, “we should quit and start our own businesses, just like Moremi. That’s the only way.”

After work they follow the same routine back home. They are exhausted. They share stories of mishaps and injuries. They each get off at their various bus stops. It takes many of them a half an hour to walk to their homes along the gravel roads. On a dark winter night like this there is safety in numbers. Townships, especially mining towns are full of life, but also intrigue and danger. Those who start or knock off work when it is still dark live with the constant threat of being attacked either by thugs or police. But the men have learnt how to survive.

They are aware that they are the economic backbone of this town. When they come back from their hard labour underground, seeking no man’s gold, they spend their wages at the local shebeen. Some do send a portion of their wages back home. For many of them, Kutloanong is not their home. Some hail from Lesotho, others from Mozambique, some from Zimbabwe, others from Zambia and some from as far as Malawi. They have come to eke out a life in this small township. They have to do what men have to do.

Once the animated songs of the mine workers fade, as they leave early or arrive late, sounds of buses and taxis fill the air. They whistle, they shout, calling on the locals to wake up and catch a ride to town, Odendaalsrus where many work as maids and gardeners. Some work as messengers, mechanics and street hawkers. The lucky ones, if

they at least advanced to high school, work as bank tellers, post office clerks, they work as salesmen at town furniture shops and clothing retailers.

Mokwena and Skosana occupy a privileged position in this crowd. Mokwena was born in the farm called Marantha outside of Odendaalsrus. He considers Kutloanong his place of birth and this is because Marantha does not exist anymore; all its inhabitants were forcibly removed and relocated by the government to the township while he was still young. Skosana comes from the rural border village near Matatiele. He came to Kutloanong after he met MaSkosana, who was also from Marantha. Both men could at least qualify for municipal houses. The other foreign men live in backyard shacks or squatter camps.

It is a typical day, the men are returning from the mine and the group gets smaller as each one leaves to enter his shack. As Mokwena and Skosana come closer to their block, they say their farewells to their fellow workers. They see the police van parked at the corner of their home street. A tall man stands next to the door of the yellow van, he's smoking a pipe. Mokwena instantly recognises Captain Mosima.

"Skosana, I'll see you later."

"What's the police here for, Mokwena?"

"Something to do with one of the Young Tigers boys," Mokwena lies, as the Captain comes forward.

"Your boys have made the township proud my friend. Well done. I've always known you are an asset to this community."

"Thank you, Captain."

"Everything is now ready," Mosima says once Skosana is out of earshot. "Your goods will be delivered. It is time you start operating the business. It's time to leave the mines and work for yourself."

Mokwena is joyful. He would have preferred to own his business completely, but circumstances dictate that he gives Captain Mosima the promised twenty-five percent.

5

“I want to thank all of you for coming from early on in the morning until now. Today the Bakwena ancestors are smiling from the heavens, and it’s all because you came. We pray and hope that they have accepted our sacrifice,” announces Mokwena as the ancestral ceremony begins.

Mokwena has had a few calabashes of MaMokwena’s delightful traditional beer. She has insisted that he does the thanksgiving before he is completely incoherent from the alcohol.

“Today my family dedicates our new van to the gods, but more importantly, we want to thank our ancestors for the prosperity they have granted us and the support that the community has given to us over the last two years. I want to let you know that your sons do not have to go work at the mines to seek fortunes; they need to start working for themselves. Then they’ll also be like me – businessmen. When I started M&M Engineering, I never thought it would grow so rapidly. Today I look around Kutloanong and I see the work of my hands and I’m proud. We pray for future success.”

An old woman starts a song of celebration, another starts clapping hands, two men standing among the crowd break into a traditional male dance. Each man holds a stick and a blanket in each hand, they enter into a mock fight, the women start ululating, the feast kicks into a high gear.

“MaMokwena please feed the people,” Mokwena calls for more beer and food to flow.

He has slaughtered a beast and a whole delivery van of vegetables was offloaded earlier in the week. “We have not seen such a feast in many years. It comes second only to the Motlounge ancestral feasts,” says the woman who is dishing up the food, traditional food fit for ancestors – porridge, steam bread, steamed pumpkin and green beans, lots of meat and *bojwala* – traditional beer.

MaMokwena goes to bed with a joyful heart, but there is something bothering her. Mokwena is already snoring but she wakes him up nevertheless. “Why didn’t the Skosanas come to our feast today?”

Mokwena has no answer, he turns his back and tries to go back to sleep. But MaMokwena will not let him.

“I don’t know, my wife. You know we invited them. I expected them to be there. I will find out tomorrow when I see him. Since I left the mine we don’t talk as often.”

“Do you think they are growing jealous of our success?” she probes.

“Perhaps they are. But I tried to convince Skosana to join the venture when I started. He refused. He has no right to be envious of our new car and our home extensions. I worked hard to add the three rooms and the garage to our house. He made a choice to be content with his three rooms.”

“You are right Ntate. They made their choice.”

Mokwena is ever aware of how he got his riches. Every night he sleeps with the secret of the two dead boys. With time it is getting easier. He sleeps better. On some bad nights he sees Zazu’s dead face. Blood seeping. He remembers Speedy, the screams, the violent gun fire, the bullets riddling his body. He has not even shared this dark secret with MaMokwena. He prefers to go to the grave with this part of his life, no matter how haunting it may be. Sefako and Taemane would not be able to handle the truth about their father’s rise to success. Taemane already does not get along with her father. This would certainly destroy whatever respect she still has for him. Besides, he did not plan or carry out the murder of those two. Mosima did. I am not guilty, he reassures himself.

The consolation is that he is on good terms with Captain Mosima who will keep the secret safe. Mokwena also does not share with his wife that he receives heavily “discounted” welding rods, flat bar and square tubing from Sechaba, the manager of Goldfields Engineering, the sister company of Goldfields Mining. This keeps his running costs very low and he makes higher than normal profits as he charges his customers the real price of the goods. Sechaba is an alcoholic. All Mokwena has to do to keep him happy is to hand over a bottle of brandy and Sechaba then diverts a portion of Goldfields Engineering’s steel material to Mokwena, who meets him at night to offload the goods before they get to the company. He has started to drink and smoke more. MaMokwena thinks it is because of access to more money, but he knows nothing soothes a troubled mind like a good night at Sheila’s.

The morning after the feast, before Mokwena starts washing his new red van, he walks across to see if all is well with Skosana and his family.

“Greetings buurman, we missed you yesterday. Is it your church rules that prohibited you from partaking in ancestral worship?” he asks light-heartedly. Skosana’s church embraces ancestral worship.

Skosana laughs. He offers no apology but proceeds to start a new discussion.

“We need to talk about more important things. I have decided to revisit our discussion about leaving the mines.”

Mokwena is startled as Skosana breaks this news.

“Ah finally you see the light! The mine will never help you buy a car, extend your house, and furnish it. Only when you work for yourself will you have enough money to afford the things you want.”

“I was hoping you would still open your arms to consider my request buurman,” Skosana tosses the word back at Mokwena.

He realises that Skosana has made up his mind. He needs some time to think about whether he requires him as his employee or partner. Mokwena’s welding business has experienced a massive boom in the last two years. All the schools, businesses and households in Kutloanong require burglar proofing due to the rise in criminal activity. Captain Mosima has been very helpful identifying businesses and households that have been burgled. Once he arrives on any robbery scene, he instructs the victims to go to Mokwena to install burglar proofing. Mokwena is happy to share a quarter of his business with him. He pays Mosima on time. But they keep their business relationship very private.

Households are starting to give him headaches as individuals pay more slowly. However, the big frontier for him was to break into the municipal tender space. He had been wondering how to get into that space, so that bigger money would come his way. But Fats Sephiri, the town mayor, only allows people with political connections to access municipal tenders. This bothers Mokwena and Mosima. It threatens the growth of their business.

Mokwena reports to his wife: “Guess what? Skosana wants to quit Goldfields!”

“You don’t say Ntate! So he’s finally seen the light,” they laugh.

“You see, it was jealousy after all that made them boycott our feast!” MaMokwena asserts.

“Well Mama, let’s not speculate, but I can’t rule it out,” Mokwena smiles.

“So what are you going to do about his proposal?”

“The future does not look too clear, if we manage to win a big contract from the municipality, then a partnership can work. However if things stay the way they are, then I will have to pay him as the work comes. It’s a risk he must consider. Running a business is hard.”

“You always said Skosana was a great welder and a hard worker. He has been working at the mines for a very long time. I agree with you Ntate,” MaMokwena approved. “Take him on.”

Mosima is not too happy with Skosana around.

“Are you sure this old prophet can be trusted KK?”

“He’s an old friend. Don’t worry, I can manage him.”

“You better make sure that he is able to handle being a businessman. And I prefer not to deal with him directly. I will only meet with you away from the workshop.”

Mokwena agrees.

A few months after joining Mokwena, business is doing well and Skosana is happy that he’s finally left the mine. Even though he had hoped to get a share of the business, he is still making more than he made at Goldfields. The working hours are better, he is relieved not to have to weld underground. Captain Mosima is still coming every month to collect his share of the business. “I always knew you had a business mind,” he says to Mokwena.

The five primary schools and the three high schools in the townships prove to be the biggest customers for Mokwena and Skosana. Mokwena entertains the school principals at Sheila’s on the weekends to strengthen the business ties while the principals give him more work to provide burglar proofing and fencing for sections of the schools. Sheila gets big tips, the principals get assurances that their favourite ‘boys’ will play for Mokwena Young Tigers. And more work comes the way of M&M Engineering.

Dr Morake meets with Skosana in town.

“The hospital requires fencing and burglar proofing. We are looking for people to help. You and Mokwena are the two people I know who can do this well.”

“Indeed, Doctor let me and buurman come visit the hospital, take some measurements and let you know how much it will cost.”

Skosana knows this is the break he’s been waiting for. The hospital is a major contract and if they get awarded, he could finally negotiate with Mokwena to get a share of the business.

Mokwena, impressed that Skosana is starting to show signs of being a businessman, agrees to share profits with him. The hospital job is the biggest contract of the year. Dr Morake helps them fill in all the papers and convince the head of the hospital to use M&M Engineering for even more burglar proofing for the nurses quarters.

Skosana finally replaces the shack in his backyard with a brick structure. Finally the congregation can worship in a proper structure. His dream of buying his own van is fast becoming a reality. He wants to move faster.

“Buurman, who supplies us with steel?”

“Why do you ask?” Mokwena snaps at Skosana.

“I see you have to fetch the material, why can’t they deliver it? That would free both of us and allow us to complete the welding quicker.”

“Delivery charges are too high, they add fifty percent.”

Skosana is not happy with the answer, however, he is not involved with that side of the business so he lets it go.

“I hear that the council is looking for a welding company to secure all the government buildings in the entire Northern Free State. This could be the biggest contract, which will keep us in business for a long time,” Skosana tells Mokwena, he has heard this news from one of his congregants.

They soon get onto the work of trying to secure the business. They both understand the significance of winning this business. They work hard to fill in the tender documents, obtain pricing from various suppliers. Their track record stands them in great stead. They hope that even if they do not win the entire contract that they will at least get a portion. But they battle with finding contacts within the council to influence. Their lack of political

connections worries Mokwena. They know that big council-run tenders always end up in the pockets of those linked to politicians.

“Fats was once an approachable man,” Skosana says dejectedly.

“We actually grew up together in Marantha, went to school together at Thusanong Primary School. But that was a long time ago. Now he is too important to even make a quarter of an hour available to chat to me, KK, the owner of the top soccer club that represents his town,” fumes Mokwena.

“We stand no chance without his support. I wish our skills and not who we know would earn us the business,” and as was his habit, Skosana looked heavenward and put his trust in the law and God. What choice was there?

Months later, Mokwena vents to Skosana. “I can’t believe the contract rigging can be so blatant!” when it is revealed that a new company, complete novices, Amandla Engineering, has won the most lucrative welding business the town council has ever awarded.

“What the hell can we do?”

“Nothing, my friend! Nothing at all. The council is powerful. We can go to court but this will only cost more money, and they have council money to hire powerful lawyers from Johannesburg,” Mosima concludes.

Time passes. The pressure becomes more pronounced. Mokwena’s daughter, Taemane, has finished matric and is studying for an education diploma at Qwa-qwa. He needs money to pay the fees. It is getting tougher and new work is not coming in. He had pinned his hopes on the government contract. Sefako was now in matric. Skosana is also for the first time starting to feel the pinch.

Mokwena continues to drown his sorrows at Sheila’s while he contemplates the next move for M&M Engineering. The soccer team is still doing well, which gives him some solace. But MaMokwena complains about the late midweek nights. She also does not understand why Mokwena won’t reconcile with their daughter. Every time Taemane calls, she only speaks to her mother. But Mokwena still loves her and provides for her.

“She will grow up, get married and then understand the pressures of parenthood,” he says to MaMokwena every time the issue comes up.

Tonight he comes home and complains bitterly: "Business has slowed down Mama."

"But that is not the end of the world Ntate. We must be grateful for what the last three years have provided. We have no debts. Taemane is doing well. Sefako is getting A's. You don't have to drink yourself to death over slowing business."

"What do I tell the men? They have families to feed."

"Tell them the truth. Tell them you will call on them when a big deal comes through," she advises him.

Mokwena knows how hard it will be to break the news to the six men he employs. But he knows he cannot keep paying them from his fast depleting savings.

Skosana still has savings. This is the money he had been saving to buy a car. But he is delaying the purchase to see if M&M Engineering will survive the drought.

"They tell me that Amandla Engineering is owned by mayor Fats Sephiri's son," says Mosima.

"But that's against the law." Skosana is surprised.

"Well, clearly not when you are the law. Fats is the mayor, he does what he wants."

"So what's going to happen now, buurman?"

"We are doomed," laments Mokwena.

Later that day Mokwena meets with Mosima at his house. Mokwena sees no sign that the captain is feeling any financial pressures. His family is having a party in their backyard. Meat and liquor are laid on the table.

"It's my wife's birthday today KK. Come, share the moment with us," Mosima is shirtless, he has a sun hat on, his gun hangs at the waist. Mokwena sees other men, strangers to him, sitting in the house, drinking. If they are policemen, they must be from another town as he knows all the local officers.

"KK, when one door closes in life, if you look hard, you'll see that another opens."

"What do you mean," Mosima asks.

"There is a way out of this situation."

“What do you have in mind?”

“Well KK, it’s nothing too complicated. But this time I need your friend Skosana directly involved. We need more hands and everyone will be rewarded handsomely. I will come see you two tomorrow at the workshop in the afternoon.”

This is music in Mokwena’s ears. But without the details he cannot be overly excited.

“For now, I want you to relax, grab some meat off the table, some pap and gravy and some great spirits. Come join the men in the house and forget about problems. This is the kind of life I want to introduce you to,” Mosima laughs loudly.

The following morning Mokwena meets Skosana at the workshop. He wonders how to introduce Mosima into the equation. Honesty is the only way. If Skosana objects, it would be his call. “I met Mosima yesterday.”

“The police captain?” Skosana is confused.

Mokwena knows that the time has come to explain Mosima’s real role in the business.

“Mosima has an interest in our business; he has always been a partner, a silent one.”

“I don’t like secrets.”

“He helped me start the business.”

“How did he help you? He’s a policeman and you are a welder! What does he know about this business?” Skosana interjects.

“Give me a chance to explain. To cut a long story short, I led him to the thieves that had stolen the equipment from the mine, then he repaid me by letting me keep the machines and I gave him a share of the business.” That’s all the truth Mokwena reveals. He won’t tell him about Zazu and Speedy, or about Sechaba and the welding material stolen from Goldfields Engineering.

Skosana takes a deep breath and looks up, as if asking help from God.

“You do realise that you have now dragged me into your murky arrangements by not telling me all these things right at the beginning? Now my hands are as dirty as yours?”

“Dirty, from what? You’ve done nothing wrong.”

“The machines we use are stolen Mokwena. That’s wrong.”

“Ag relax. It’s been three years, it’s all forgotten now. No one cares about the thieves or the equipment. Today your house is bigger. You’re about to buy a car. You should be thankful and not point fingers at me.”

“That’s a choice you should have afforded me right at the start of all this.”

“Exactly how did you think I acquired all these expensive machines, Skosana?”

“I never thought you were a thief.”

“Does that make you a saint then? Will you then go and return all the money to Gerrit and the mine and demolish your new temple built from the proceeds of *theft*?”

“All what I’m saying is that I expected you to be honest. Am I being a saint for asking you to be honest?”

“We are men, Skosana. We live under difficult conditions. You and I stand no chance of making a success of anything if we are to be honest.”

“Give me a choice to decide for myself. Now I’m inheriting the guilt of your choices.”

Mokwena feels vindicated for not revealing everything to Skosana. His reaction to a quarter of the story is proof that he would not be able to handle more.

“Well you have a choice now, Skosana. Mosima is coming to propose a business deal of some sort. He wants both of us involved. I don’t know what it’s all about. Choose if you are in or go home. I’m open to discuss it with him. You decide for yourself.”

Skosana stands up angrily. He storms out the room and stands outside the workshop and smokes a cigarette. “What are we becoming?” he wonders.

6

The workshop is quiet. The usual sounds of steel grinding and the white smoke of welding rods have all but vanished. No smell of fresh paint decorating steel gates. The well has dried up.

Mokwena walks up to the fence where Skosana is chain smoking. He needs to know whether he is still with him, he cannot force him.

“Did you see the new gates that they installed at the entrance of the town hall?” he starts the conversation.

“Yah the ugly green gates by Amandla? Not only are they ugly, they look weak. They’ll break very soon. And they’ll come running to us to fix them,” Skosana consoles himself. “I see they’ve started working at the post office as well. Perhaps we should try to approach Fats once again and rather ask him to hire us to do some of the work.”

“We tried that option already. We can’t beg endlessly. He clearly does not want to work with us. Besides, I’ve quit working under other men. First it was Gerrit, then Gerrit’s son who knew nothing, now after all what we have achieved, we go and humiliate ourselves working for a politician crook who can’t install a proper gate? I won’t be a slave for greedy politicians.”

“But you’re the one who always says we need to work smart, make friends in high places, why can’t we admit defeat?”

“Because Fats...he stands for everything that is wrong with this place, Skosana. Thieves in high places, destroying hard working people like us. This community put him up there to make things better, not to enrich his family. Soon he won’t be able to walk, his big stomach is already too heavy, but he still takes everything! I can’t work for him Skosana. You are free to do so alone.”

“I’m not planning to leave you Mokwena. We come a long way. What must we do now?”

“Mosima said he has an idea, let’s give him a chance to explain it, we then should take time to think about it. I saw the man and his associates yesterday. They are doing very well.”

"So you'd rather work for Mosima, a crooked policeman, yet Fats, a crooked politician, you won't touch?"

"Skosana, Mosima wants us to partner, Fats wants us to be his slaves. There's a big difference."

"Okay Mokwena, you never give up do you. I'll listen to Mosima's proposal."

Mokwena has a feeling that Mosima's business proposal is going to require more compromises to be made. But he trusts the captain. The last three years doing business with him went well. He kept their secrets.

But his inability to pay for Taemane's college fees is troubling him. Taemane has never forgiven him since their fight while she was still at high school. It was a fight about Mokwena's affair that she discovered. Even after Mokwena had reconciled with her mother, she just refuses to treat him with respect like she used to. The last time they spoke was when she left for college. Since then, she only speaks to her mother, and never comes to visit.

When he arrives home he finds MaMokwena in tears. He forgets about his troubles.

"What is wrong Mama?"

"It's Taemane."

"Is it about the college fees again. I told you to tell her that I'll sort out something before they start with their exams. I'm on the verge of something..."

"No Ntate, it is more serious than that. Her boyfriend died."

"She had a boyfriend? I expected her to be focussing on her studies?"

"He died of sudden renal failure. She's inconsolable."

Mokwena softens: "Maybe she should come home."

"She refuses. She says she won't come back to live with us. I've tried to explain to her that I've forgiven you, but it does not help that both of you won't reconcile," cries MaMokwena.

"I repeat, I don't owe my daughter an apology. She is a child. Yes I made a mockery of our family, that girlfriend of mine was young enough to be Taemane's age I know, I

regret that she got exposed to adult problems then. But we have moved on. She needs to get over herself.”

“Both of you are too stubborn, I told her so on the phone!” she screams.

“What if she is pregnant now?”

“What do you want me to do Mokwena?”

He walks away to the bedroom to sleep. This crisis has come at the worst time.

Mokwena remembers the morning his second child, Sefako, was born. He walked to his mother’s house. The day he quit his job, he spent the morning at his mother’s house, as he did the day he got his first contract. She is now very old and sickly, but she is still his pillar of strength. He needs her. He is uncertain why he needs to see his mother this morning, but it’s something he has to do. The drive on the gravel township roads is comforting. He knows this road, he knows the way home.

He swerves to avoid hitting chickens and a black stray cat. He is centred and relaxed.

“Makoti tells me that your business is having difficulties? Is that why you hardly come to visit?” she teases.

“Never Ma! I’m just busy trying to make sure that we stay afloat.”

“She also tells me you come home late these days. Surely no one needs welding services at night? Are you drinking heavily again, Son?”

“No Ma. When you are a businessman you have to entertain your customers.”

“So what brings you here this morning?”

“Nothing Ma, just missing you. Am I not allowed to visit my own mother?”

“What’s bothering you Son?” she looks him in the eye.

He feels like a five year-old who stole sugar but neglected to wipe the lips.

“Ma, something big is going to happen but I can’t exactly say what it is. It’s business. Success. Prosperity. I feel like Pa is watching over me, leading me to the life that I’ve never had. It’s going to be good for the entire Mokwena clan.”

“And I guess you came all this way to tell me the good news, is it Son?” she starts sipping her mug of coffee. She takes a pause. Then she takes out her handkerchief and starts taking her snuff.

“If you feel so strongly about your big moment, you don’t need my permission Son, you are a man now. Our heart knows what is good and what is wrong. Every one of us needs to listen to the guidance of the whispering voice of *Tlatlamatjholo*, the God of all gods. What does your heart tell you?”

Mokwena finally realises why he is here this Friday morning. He is going against his conscience, his mind is troubled. He thinks by talking it out with his mother he will somehow get a different insight. All his mother does is to direct him back to his own conscience. He realises at this moment that he has gone against his conscience too many times to stop now. He will go ahead. Too many things rest on today’s events. He has to finish what he started. He feels emboldened. He realises that he needs to be alert and take care of himself. He is going to swim with the crocodiles; he had better be one too. This is the clarity he needed. He has found it.

Before he stands up and bids farewell to his mother, determined to do what he has to do, he informs her about Taemane.

“Ma, your granddaughter is having some emotional issues at college.”

“What emotional problems?”

“Her boyfriend suddenly passed away. I did not even know she had a boyfriend all this time. So she is struggling. But I think she’ll be fine. Her mother is also taking strain about the fact that I have not reconciled with Taemane after that problem we had.”

“When dealing with children, sometimes you have to be the adult and apologise. You are missing out on the last stages of her being your daughter, before she becomes somebody’s wife. Swallow your pride, Son, and apologise while you have this chance.”

“I’ll think about it Ma. Let me run.”

“Thank you for visiting.”

“You don’t have to thank me, Mother. Bye.” He kisses her on the forehead. She still has the warmth of old, just like when she was younger.

“Word on the street is that Taemane is very sick. Those who have seen her say she looks sick,” Mokwena inquires.

“She told me she fell sick recently but that she is getting better. I told you about it already, Ntate.”

“I think we should go and visit her to see for ourselves. Well, some people are even spreading the rumour that she’s got the latest disease.”

“Rubbish! People always spread nasty rumours, they’re all jealous of Taemane. She’s lost weight because of the grief she’s going through. Now they are jumping to conclusions. People of this township have nothing better to do but spread lies.”

“But, do you know if she has tested herself? I find it strange that this young boyfriend of hers suddenly died of bad kidneys!” Mokwena wonders loudly as he sits on the porch looking towards the muddy township street.

“What are you trying to say Mokwena? When did you become a doctor? Or has your fight with her also made you her enemy?” MaMokwena snorts.

“We’re trying to bury the dark past between us, the reason I had a fight with her that day was not to protect that girl from Taemane, it was just to warn my only daughter that she should stay away from adults’ business. She did not have to cause a scene in town.”

“Well, you should have thought about this possibility when you were publicly showing off your affections for that loose girl.”

“I thought we had buried this MaMokwena. This discussion stops now,” he stands up and walks about. He lights up a cigarette, content that his point has been made and his past reburied.

MaMokwena has witnessed the destructive power of the HIV-virus in the small mining town before. But she has taught her daughter well. Besides, Taemane’s boyfriend, she was told, was a fine young man who did not even look sick before he died like those other AIDS sufferers she saw regularly at the clinic where she used to volunteer. God gave him bad kidneys and that was his lot in life.

“Your sister is very sick at college. We are going to see her. You take care of yourself tonight. Lock the house, study your books. There’s plenty food in the house. We’ll see you in the morning,” MaMokwena tells her son.

“I think it’s a good idea to bring her granny with. She has a way with Taemane.”

“We don’t have time Mokwena.”

“It won’t take long, I promise.”

Mokwena drives faster, he does not even light up a cigarette. The rumours he has heard about his daughter fill his mind. MaMokwena is crying, the conversation she had the other day with her husband fills her mind. She wonders also if the township rumours are true. He stops the car and jumps out to fetch Grandmother. It feels like ages waiting for Grandmother to walk to the back seat of the car, aided by her walking stick.

“*Dumela makoti*. I heard. Let’s pray that things are not as bad as they sound.”

“I’m hoping so Mother,” MaMokwena answers.

It’s a three-hour drive to Qwa-qwa. Mokwena drives fast, in two and half hours they arrive at Bonamelo Teacher Training College. The receptionist at Student Admin gives them directions to the student residence.

The two women get out of the car and head towards the room. MaMokwena runs towards the front door, stops at the gate and looks back at him sitting in the car.

“Be the adult and step out of that car Mokwena.” He does not argue. No one argues with her when she is emotional like this.

MaMokwena is not ready for what awaits her as she enters into the bedroom. A pungent smell fills the air. “Taemane my child, oh dear Heavenly Father!” she blurts out as she rushes to the bedside. Taemane’s eyes are swollen, gums bleeding, her skin falling off and blankets heavily soiled.

“Why didn’t you call me sooner? Why have they not taken you to see a doctor at least?” Mother and daughter cry.

“She has not eaten for days,” murmurs Grandmother as she observes Taemane struggling to do anything on her thin frame.

“Help us carry her to the communal bathroom,” Granny commands.

Mokwena picks her up with his two hands from the bed like a mother cradling her newborn in her arms. He looks into her eyes, seeing rusty emptiness. But as he looks deeper, she wells up with tears, helpless. “I’m sorry baby, for everything,” he says. Tears roll down her malnourished face. She closes her eyes so she does not have to look into his any longer.

“I forgive you Daddy,” she whispers feebly.

“We are going to take care of you. Be strong.”

MaMokwena and Granny bathe her and pick up her belongings.

“She needs to be hospitalised urgently,” Mokwena argues.

“I’m not leaving my daughter behind in Qwa-qwa. We are taking her to Odendaalsrus Hospital where I can be next to her,” MaMokwena insists.

Mokwena packs her belongings into the back of the van. He takes the spare blankets in her bedroom and lays her at the back of the van. MaMokwena sits with her at the back.

Mokwena sits in front with Granny. He drives off even faster. In just over two hours they arrive in Odendaalsrus and Taemane is admitted under the care of Dr Morake.

Mosima looks like he is in a hurry. He invites both Mokwena and Skosana to his car parked outside.

“I’m sure you gentlemen can do with a fresher environment. Let us drive to town to grab some food and talk.” Both men do not hesitate. Besides, there is nothing to do at the workshop.

“Mosima, we could just go to Sheila’s to have some mala-mogodu and steam bread, why drive all the way to town,” Mokwena quips.

“Gentlemen, when one is about to discuss important matters, the place has to be perfect.” Skosana is left uneasy, but he needs to be part of the discussions this time around. Mokwena is used to Mosima’s ways, and he knows he is safe with the police captain.

They stop at Dorego’s Fish and Chips in town, a safe place to discuss anything. With only white people roaming around, it would be easy to spot anyone from the township who could be a threat. The men follow Mosima’s lead and sit at the corner table inside.

The men order, the waitress arrives to lay their table, and then brings chips, Russian sausages, bread rolls and cans of Coke. The smell of vinegar on fried chips and the garlic of the sausage overpower the men’s senses for a brief moment. They start tucking into the food while their minds run wild wondering about Mosima’s new plans.

Mosima’s piercing eyes rove around to assess whether any stranger could possibly be paying attention. Once he has satisfied himself he reaches into his jacket pocket, takes

out a round plastic container and places it on the table. Mosima and Skosana recognise it as a container typically used for snuff. He opens the lid and invites the men to look inside while his eyes continue to rove above their heads just in case.

Mokwena holds the container and the stone it contains in his palm. A half refined gold nugget. Skosana reaches out to touch it. They have worked at the mine long enough to know what real gold feels and looks like.

“Now gentlemen,” says Mosima, plucking it back and sealing the container once again, “it’s about time you start thinking big. You’re not young anymore. As you can see, no one, including your politicians, will be taking care of you, as they are busy taking care of themselves. There’s gold in this place, gold that our parents and you have been toiling to get out of the ground for very long. There are men who come from all over the continent to take it back to their homes while you have your hands stretched out begging to share the crumbs from the master’s table.”

Skosana panics. He stands up.

“Forgive me Captain, but I don’t want to be a part of this, it looks like this conversation is leading us to breaking the law.”

“Keep your voice down,” says Mosima.

“I will not be part of it.”

Skosana remembers when he was still at the mine, how the police arrested many illegal miners and how many died plying their illegal trade. He never thought he would ever be part of such a world. After all, he is a priest and prophet; this could destroy the one thing his life is all about.

“Sit down, old man, sit down. Mokwena, I thought you prepared your friend,” Mosima fumes.

“Skosana, you promised to at least listen. Captain here has not finished his story,” Mokwena awkwardly tries to control the embarrassing situation.

“Well, I don’t have time for cowards. Besides, you are already part of a business that has benefitted immensely from the proceeds of crime. Your conscience did not reject the nice things it afforded you.” Mosima becomes forceful. “I’m a man of the law. I can arrest you now if I want. Don’t start with me.”

Intimidated, Skosana looks at Mokwena. Surely his friend cannot be agreeable to such blatant criminality?

“You still haven’t explained how we can help, Captain?” Mokwena asks.

“Now this is how a smart man thinks Mokwena. The plan here is simple, as I told you; there are already rats that are doing the work of digging up the gold. There are already men, big important men who work for big organisations that are waiting for the gold. What’s lacking is men who go in-between.”

“You have lost me. In between where, how?” asks a confused Mokwena.

“There are brave men who must buy the gold from the rats, and bring it safely to the buyers who don’t want to get involved on the ground. These same men also have an opportunity to sell basic necessities to the rats to keep them alive, food, water, tools and other things men away from families require. This can be done at extremely healthy profits.”

“Necessities such as alcohol, drugs and prostitutes,” a disinterested Skosana adds.

“Skosana you said the Bible is silent when it comes to cigarettes, surely selling other human beings food water and cigarettes cannot be a sin.”

Skosana drops his head and holds his cheeks with his two hands.

“I can see how we make money from selling goods to the men underground, what happens to the gold?” Mokwena asks.

“This is where both of you men should thank your God and gods that I chose you. You and I will buy the gold from the rats at low prices and sell it to the big men at very good prices. In this way we keep our hands clean all the time, somebody else does the digging, and somebody else ultimately takes the gold, we simply stand in the middle, reaping the rewards of the gold that has been stolen from us for many years. I chose you because we have built trust over the last few years. Now it’s time we take our friendship to a greater height. In this way we’ll all retire comfortably.”

Mokwena is excited about this idea. He can already see how he is going to raise money for Taemane’s college fees, Sefako’s university fees in the near future and most important, tombstones for his ancestors. However, he knows that Skosana is going to be a problem. He decides that he will do it alone if need be.

The men finish their meal. Mosima only speaks directly to Mokwena throughout the meal and ignores Skosana. This irritates Skosana. He eats very little of the food.

“Skosana, we did not have lunch, why aren’t you eating?” asks Mokwena.

“I don’t eat pork, they make everything in the same oil here.”

Mokwena does not make an issue out of it, he remembers clearly many times on payday when he and Skosana bought the same fish and chips from Dorego's.

Mosima drives them back to the workshop.

"I don't like Mosima's attitude to the illegal miners. How can one man call another a rat? It's important what you call a man, because that is how you treat him. Is he going to treat us like rats too?"

"They call them Zama zama in the community, do you prefer that label? A name is just a name."

"What does that make us then, former rats? No man will call me a rat!"

"We have never been illegal miners Skosana. He does not call all miners rats, just the illegal miners, the Zama zamas. We are businessmen, we are neither rats nor Zama zamas." Mokwena continues, "I'm going with the proposal, how about you?"

"No. I won't."

"Think about the car you want to buy, the future. I don't want you to be jealous when I buy my second car and my children become successful."

"I've never been jealous of your success. Life is not all about material things."

"Well, money has built you a church; it certainly built me a better house and gave me a car."

Skosana goes home to think about this. He does not discuss it with his wife.

Later that evening he calls Mokwena over the fence.

"Buurman. If we do this, we can't do it forever. We do several transactions and get out. Mosima can find other people. Once we pay off the things we need, we should leave."

"I agree with you. Does this mean you are in?"

"I also have one more request, I will handle the food supply part of the business while you handle the tools, explosives and alcohol and entertainment supplies."

"I don't have a problem with that," answers the energised Mokwena. "We must both handle the gold; that is where the heart of this business is. Otherwise Mosima will rob us," Mokwena clarifies. "I've also been thinking. We must insist that we share everything equally."

Skosana agrees.

"The only challenge with this business is to be invisible," says Mokwena.

"How do we become invisible?"

“We do not let our families know about this new business and we operate at night,” says Mokwena.

“Sooner or later they’ll start realising that we are out at night more often and we don’t do any welding at all,” argues Skosana.

“That is why we are going to keep the workshop operating as normal. And then, we are going to inform our families that we won a piece of the huge tender at the mine that requires us to work at night occasionally. There will be no questions, especially once we start bringing home more money.”

“This is not like welding, in this business the stakes are high, the returns are very high too,” says Mosima as he orientates the men about the operations of the business on the first night. They park under a deserted mine office carport. They have brought along food and water supplies packed in the van. Two men soon arrive. They focus their eyes on Skosana and Mokwena before greeting Captain Mosima.

“These are the new men who will be taking care of all your needs as of tonight. They are men of integrity.” The men nod and proceed to inspect the goods. They load the food into their wheelbarrows. The first man hands over a pile of R100 notes to Mosima. The second man hands them a list of more goods to be bought. They leave quickly. It looks very easy.

“Who used to do this before us Mosima?” asks Skosana.

“Two young men from Bloemfontein,” Mosima answers, as he counts the money.

“Where are they now?” Mokwena asks.

“Young people are too ambitious. In this business patience is important. One got too greedy and was caught at a roadblock after he did not pay the mine security for the explosives. He is currently serving a fifteen year term. The other one, well, the other one was killed after he got caught up in the gun battle with the rats. He took their money and failed to deliver the women he had promised to bring them. This happened last week.”

Mosima finishes counting the money. He takes half and gives the other half to the two men to share.

“Mosima, we thought about how we should share the proceeds. If this is a partnership, we should all share equally. In this way no one feels like they more important or less important.”

“Well, I’m not opposed. This is the last time I come with you here. I have a job to do. Tonight I will take the half and next Friday we all split the money equally going into the future. It’s now your job to find all the goods in this list and deliver them at this same spot, at this same hour. I’ll meet you on Thursday at the workshop for further instructions.”

Mosima closes the discussion and drives off in his police car and the men follow him. The mine roads are familiar to them.

“This is the easiest money we have made since we started working for ourselves Skosana. This is what we usually make in a busy fortnight of welding.”

“Did you hear about the fate of the two men from Bloemfontein? Mosima doesn’t feel at all responsible for their misfortune!” says the horrified Skosana.

“As long as we are not greedy, we have a safe future, we have each other. We will survive this,” Mokwena says enthusiastically.

“I can’t wait for the day we leave this business.”

“We have just begun. Look at the money we’ve made. I still can’t believe that we could have sold the goods we bought from a shop for up to ten times. Imagine when we start delivering more frequently, especially other items that are more expensive like alcohol and women.”

“This business is dirty. What the men are doing down there is illegal. Supplying them with goods is also illegal. Not only is it dangerous, we could also end up dead like those Bloemfontein boys.”

“I can think of many things I will do with this money. Some of these shafts are abandoned Goldfields because the gold left there is too small for their operations. What these men are doing is simply picking up the crumbs that the rich men don’t want. They are being painted as illegal but they are keeping many families that could be starving alive.”

“What about their safety?”

“Well, all of us are taking risks to earn a living.”

Skosana remains worried. But he too needs the money. He prays a lot to God about it. Mokwena simply goes to Sheila’s to forget all about it.

On Thursday Mosima arrives at the workshop, he is in a hurry and not in his usual police car. "Tomorrow evening is not going to be just a normal delivery day like last week. It's pickup day. The men have a product, and I need you to handle it with great care."

The men are unsure of the implications of all this. So Mosima explains further: "It means you have to bring them alcohol and a few women as well. But more importantly, you need to go down the mine to meet their leader, accept the gold and hand over the cash," Mosima hands an envelope of cash to Mokwena. It is the agreed amount.

"Do not mess this up gentlemen. Bring the gold back here to the workshop by midnight and I'll meet you here again. Then we'll discuss further what happens to the product."

The men can't believe that things are developing so quickly. As Mosima leaves the workshop he stops at the door to say one last thing.

"There is a man at G-Hostel, Sdumo Vilakazi, he sells guns and women. You need to meet with him before you go to the mine tomorrow. He knows the women the rats prefer."

Skosana and Mokwena are stunned. Mosima leaves in a hurry.

"You will handle the women and guns. I really can't," says Skosana.

"It's not like I've done this before. I'm willing to handle this though."

The hostels are situated at the outskirts of the neighbouring Thabong Township. G-hostel is notorious for housing all manner of criminals. The place is dirty, windows are broken, patched with newspapers and cardboard boxes. The paint work has peeled and the walls layered with graffiti. The public toilets do not work and the working taps are constantly dripping water. Fights break out regularly. The police do not even bother coming to search the place for stolen goods. Occasionally the army has to come to look for criminals. Men sit outside their rooms; some play their musical instruments, makeshift guitars, radios playing all manner of radio stations. At night the place looks dark. There are noises of parties that can be heard from a distance, but the absence of electricity makes it look dangerous. Women and children are not allowed, only men who work at the mines live here. However prostitutes somehow find their way into G-hostel.

"Is it safe to go into the hostel so late at night Mokwena?"

"Sdumo would never agree to see us during the day, we have no choice."

"It's not safe to leave the car here, I think I should stay behind."

Mokwena parks his van outside the hostel. Skosana remains in the car to watch over it. Mokwena walks to the gate.

"I'm here to see Sdumo Vilakazi."

"If I were you I would never mention that name again," warns the drunk man at the gate. Mokwena ignores him and moves through the gate. He is surprised to see women in the hostel.

"Are you looking to buy, handsome?"

Mokwena turns in the direction of the female voice. The woman stands in front of a door to a hostel room. Even though it is dark, Mokwena can see she is almost naked and has a cigarette in her hand. She moves into the room.

"You know where to find me."

As the door closes, Mokwena sees a tall man with dark sunglasses who has been hiding behind the open door. His face is expressionless. Mokwena hesitates; he needs to ask somebody where to find Sdumo. After a pause, Mokwena decides to approach the man.

"I'm not looking to buy..."

"Then don't waste my time old timer. Do I look like I want to have a chat with you if you are not here to do business? Get out of my sight, I have a business to run."

"I just want to know where to go to meet Sdumo."

"What exactly makes you think you are the type of person he would even want to meet?"

Mokwena walks away from the man and proceeds to walk deeper into the hostel. He sees many other women drinking and dancing in different rooms. In one of the noisy rooms he hears men shouting and drinking. He decides to walk in; he hopes that somebody in the tavern can help him.

"*O batla ini lo muntu,*" one of the revellers shouts in broken Sesotho, asking what he's doing at G-hostel.

"*Ke kleva ya se lokshen, hamba wena,*" another drunken voice shouts from behind the table filled with beer bottles, meaning that he's not welcome as a non-miner.

"Gentlemen all I need is a little help, I'm here to see Sdumo Vilakazi."

Several men sitting on the table swiftly stand up and leave the room. There is silence for a moment.

“Uphuma eplasini yakuphi wena? You come here shouting nonsense,” screams a man in a foreign accent, accusing him of being an ignorant village boy. Before Mokwena reacts a man climbs over the table and leaps towards him. He holds him by his throat and threatens to smash his head. *“Are you a cop?”*

“No I’m not!”

Before the crazy man unleashes his anger on Mokwena, the man with dark sunglasses, raises his hand: *“Leave the man alone.”*

“Why does he come here looking for Professor? What is he? A thug from the township or a policeman?”

Two men take Mokwena out of the room and instruct the revellers to pretend nothing has happened. Mokwena’s face drips with sweat. The two men pull him further into a dark corner and the one with the sunglasses pulls out a gun. He points it in Mokwena’s face.

“Who sent you here?” he asks. He has multiple scars in his face. He is missing two front teeth.

“I’m a businessman. I’m here to do business with Mister Vilakazi, not to cause any trouble,” Mokwena musters all the calm and courage he can under the circumstances.

The man pulls away his gun.

“What is your name and what is your business.”

“I’m Mokwena Mokwena. I own MYT, Mokwena Young Tigers, from Kutloanong. I’m now into mining, gold mining. Mister Vilakazi is expecting me.”

“Yoh! Sorry Bra KK. Hola my broer. Eish now I see you,” he removes his glasses. *“I know your team. Groot man, ek is baie sorry.”* Mokwena can’t believe that was all he needed to say.

“Hey wena laaitie, go tell the men that Professor has an important visitor. Phakisa, gou, gou,” the toothless enforcer orders his friend.

“Bra KK, my laaitie o dlala for MYT. Big team bra KK. You know him, Disco. Nna ke bra ya hae, I’m Sporo Motale.”

“Disco Motale. Yes I know the boy. Amazing defender. I’m organising trials for him to play in Joburg,” Mokwena lies. It makes him feel calmer and he guesses it will make his new friend feel more comfortable around him.

“That boy reminds me of my younger days Bra KK. Please help him to become a better man than me Bra KK,” the gun wielding Sporo says getting emotional.

“It’s safe, Bra KK can come in to see Prof.” The two men walk side by side with Mokwena, leading him through the end of the hostel. Sporo opens the door and walks into the room ahead of Mokwena. The other man waits outside.

“*Sure daar*, Sporo. You may leave.” Mokwena looks around the room and he is amazed to see such a wonderfully furnished room at the mostly dilapidated G-hostel. Sdumo Vilakazi is clearly a man of means.

“What is a soccer man doing at a mine hostel in the middle of the night?” asks the very relaxed Sdumo.

“I have it on good authority that you are a man that can help me with the problem I have.”

“Who told you about me?” asks Sdumo looking concerned.

“The captain,” Mokwena hesitates.

“I’ll tell Mosima that our secrets are safe with you Mokwena. I love working with men like you. So how can I help?”

“My friend and I will be going down the mine tomorrow to meet with the Zama zama, we need to bring them women and get guns, guns to protect ourselves.”

“Things like these cost a lot of money KK, I need half of the money upfront and the rest after I deliver.”

“Half after you deliver. The rest once we have happy customers. Look at it as a long term partnership Mister Vilakazi.”

“Just call me Professor. Well, KK you are a well-known man in this community, a son of the soil, a pride of this mining community, do not make me hunt for you for my money. You bring it here just like you came here.”

“I’d never do such a thing Sdumo, er, Professor.”

“Meet one of my men at the old warehouse at lunchtime behind the koppie at Riebeeckstad. They’ll show you how to use guns and you will decide what you prefer. Then another man will meet you at night to deliver our beautiful girls for your men. I expect all of them back after they do their job KK. Once they leave G-hostel, they are your responsibility. I want them all back.”

“That’ll be no problem Professor.”

“I hope so too, the underground is an unpredictable place.”

Mokwena leaves the meeting feeling powerful. Talking to Sdumo Vilakazi, Professor, made him feel like he was starting to become part of a powerful underworld, a world of money where men are their own masters. In this world, no politician, even the powerful Fats Sephiri, can determine his fate.

The drive to the warehouse at the Riebeeckstad koppie is quiet. Skosana smokes more than usual, Mokwena keeps thinking about his mother’s words. As they approach the warehouse, Skosana asks: “Once we have the guns, do we keep them forever?”

“I reckon for as long as we are in this business.”

“Will we ever be able to quit?”

“Who knows Skosana, who knows? But once we get what we want, we must get out of it,” Mokwena sighs.

Skosana hates everything about this business. The lies, working with crooks, guns, prostitutes, but he needs the money.

Skosana stops at the gate. A young man wearing a black cap comes to open it. He directs the men into the building. It is a workshop, just like Mokwena’s welding shop, but ten times bigger. There are men working, welding, painting and loading goods into vans. Mokwena instantly recognised the man from G-hostel, Disco Motale’s brother, Sporo.

“Sporo, son of Motale, we meet again. Meet my partner and friend, Skosana.”

“Sure Bra KK. We know your friend. He was sitting in the car the night you came to meet the Professor. Our guys went to check him out, just in case he was your getaway car. *Hy is ‘n goeie bra, die man van God.*”

“Follow me *bo-grootman*,” he leads the way.

Mokwena wonders what else Professor and his men know about him. He wonders if they have been following him since he last spoke to him. Or could it be that Mosima told them about them. Do they possibly know about Zazu and Speedy? He wonders if his family would be safe should things go sour. He cannot find answers to these questions; it is too late to wonder.

Sporo opens the steel door at the end of the room, Mokwena sees Professor. There is a collection of guns on the table.

“Which ones do you like gentlemen?”

Skosana and Mokwena have never seen guns before. Skosana hesitates to even touch the weapons, Mokwena acts like a professional.

“Which one is the easiest to use?” he asks.

“It’s all about taste. Take a few and follow the men outside, try them and pick.”

“This side gentlemen we have shotguns, in the middle we have pistols and handguns, on the other side we have machine guns. These are for big wars, for personal protection in the mines. As you indicated, let us not waste time with shotguns and machine guns. Let’s look at the pistols and handguns.”

Mokwena is attracted to a white double action revolver. Skosana chooses a semi-automatic pistol.

“Remember, there is no right or wrong choice, it is about which baby you fall in love with. Now let’s take them for a test drive.”

They leave the room and head into the makeshift shooting range.

The men take shots at makeshift black and white targets towards the koppie. Their ears are covered by noise stoppers. Professor’s men laugh at them as they hopelessly miss the targets. After about an hour of practise shooting they return back to the meeting room. They settle on their original choices.

“You always need a spare just in case. One to leave at home, or in the car. Another to carry on you.” They each take two.

“You’ll have four women to take with you. Based on my knowledge of the shaft you are visiting tonight, they should be enough,” says Professor with contentment in his face. The men cannot argue with him, they have no idea what it takes to satisfy the men below the ground.

“We agreed to have only a half of the money to be paid upfront the last time we spoke. There’s a slight change of plans. The women will carry some extra parcels which they’ll sell to the men. You’ll have no share in those proceeds. Only Professor will benefit. Now you go and bring me my money back. All the best,” Professor stands up and turns his back on the men, a signal for them to leave.

“Before we go Professor. Can we see the women?” Mokwena dares him.

“So you don’t trust me now?”

“No Professor, it’s just that I need to know that I’ll have everything ready tonight.”

“Bring the girls,” he barks to his men. He is irritated that Mokwena does not take his word. They parade the four women. Mokwena recognises two of them from G-Hostel.

Skosana is disgusted.

“See you all tonight ladies,” Mokwena waves them goodbye.

Professor’s man walks them to the car. They give him half the money. He counts it and signals them to go. Mokwena revs his van and drives off.

“I never thought at my age I would be walking around with an unlicensed firearm,” Skosana says.

“Nor did I. Let’s hope it does not become a lifestyle.”

Mokwena and Skosana arrive home. They sit in Mokwena’s dining room. They put their four guns on the table and sit back.

“Go and get some rest Skosana. Tonight is set to be the night our lives change for the better.”

“Or the night we lose ourselves.”

“We’ve got this far Skosana. We can’t doubt our goals and hard work now.”

Skosana takes a seat and ponders.

“Illegal gold, guns, prostitutes, and who knows what’s in the parcels? Is this the success we want?”

Mokwena takes a long thoughtful pause before he responds.

“Would you rather be Fats Sephiri’s servant or your own boss?”

“Well, not a seller of prostitution.”

“Every man pays a price for his success, Skosana. Let’s just pay our dues and close this chapter for good.”

“You sound certain that we’ll close this chapter without consequences, how do you know?”

“Look at Captain Mosima, look at Fats Sephiri, look at Sdumo Vilakazi. They are successful. They don’t doubt themselves. We need to be brave if we want to rise to their level.”

Mokwena walks his friend out the house. On their way out they meet Sefako in the kitchen, cleaning the floor.

“Why aren’t you at school, young man?”

“It’s school holidays today, Papa.”

Mokwena wonders if his son possibly overheard their conversation or saw the guns. He is a big boy now, completing matric. Mokwena expects great things. Sefako has decided to study medicine in Cape Town. Mokwena is immensely proud. He has told Dr Morake about his son’s ambition to follow in his footsteps.

7

Next day, Friday, when the sun sets, Mokwena and Skosana are restless. Skosana stands next to his front gate smoking, while Mokwena gulps down some Smirnoff.

“I hope you’re not planning to grind steel and weld tonight,” MaMokwena chirps.

“Nothing wrong with a single tot before a big night.”

“Remind me again what you are doing tonight?”

“Why do I have to explain my work every time I have to go MaMokwena, are you jealous Mama?” Mokwena pulls his charm.

“It’s just that it’s never one thing, like it used to be in the past.”

“Things are going to change for this family. I have this feeling that...”

“...that your moment has arrived. Papa you have been saying this for years now.

The team has failed to turn professional, the workshop seems to have grown smaller with time, you are now back to working nights like back during the Goldfields days. Stop putting pressure on yourself, the family loves you and you have done us all proud.”

“Other men have made it since we got freedom. Why not me and my family?”

Mokwena protests.

“At what cost? I don’t want to live in this house that you have built for us alone with you working yourself to death all over the country.”

There is a knock on the door. “Dumela MaMokwena, how is the family doing?”

“*Dumela Ntate Skosana*. We are doing fine. I just see you men are working awkward hours...”

“*Buurman*, it’s time to get on the road. Mama, we’ll finish this discussion some other time,” Mokwena interjects.

They drive to the workshop where all the goods were kept. They load the van carefully, cover everything and hide the guns under the seats.

They arrive at the agreed place to pick up the women from Professor’s men.

“This is simple. We give you the girls. You bring back the girls,” says Sporo.

The girls have done this before. Mokwena can see two of them are already high on something. They are women of the night; this is just a job to them. This makes Mokwena feel no emotional burden. They are not being forced. They have made their choices in life.

They load the young women into the back of the van, just as meticulously as they load their goods. There is no difference.

“The first step of the mission is accomplished, we have everything Mosima asked us to bring the men, now all we need to do is to exchange it for the rich man’s rock,” Mokwena says excitedly.

Mokwena drives off into the night. No shining stars in the heavens. They feel every bump of the dirt road. He wants all of a sudden to turn back. He wants to start his life afresh. But it’s too late for any of that. He does not want to share his fears and doubts with Skosana. He knows that he may agree with him to abandon this mission. So he listens to the radio. They are playing The Temptations – Soul to Soul. Mokwena and Skosana do not understand the words, but there is something about the song, a sadness of a kind.

After they pass the deserted mine shaft, towards the end of the tarred road, they see flashing lights. They soon realise that there is a police roadblock a few hundred meters ahead. Mokwena slams on the breaks.

“You can’t stop now Mokwena, they’ve already seen us,” says Skosana. One of the girls screams: “Let us jump off here, those policemen hate us!”

“You shut up *magosha*, do you want them to come hunting you with their dogs in the night? Do you want a bullet in your head? Then shut up and keep quiet.”

“Do you have a plan Mokwena, do you have a plan?”

“I’m just going to keep calm and keep driving. We don’t have anything illegal except the guns that are hidden under the seats. Let’s hope they don’t search us.”

A policeman waves them off the road.

“Driver’s license please *Ntate*.” Mokwena reaches into the cubbyhole and pulls out his papers. Another tall policeman walks around the car, his torch flashing into the car. He whispers to the one who was inspecting the papers. Suddenly he loses interest in Mokwena’s papers. He goes to the back of the van to look at what his colleague found. They both come back to the front of the car, one on each side of the passenger doors. Now they are a lot more hostile.

“Step out of the car *banna*,” the policeman with the torch shouts.

“What are we going to do Mokwena?”

Mokwena opens his door and raises his hands. Skosana follows, defeated.

“There must be a misunderstanding Constable, we can explain everything.”

“We don’t need your explanation; we just need to search your car. That’s all.”

Mokwena keeps calm, he hopes that they won’t go underneath the seats where all the guns are hidden.

Just as the policemen start to search, another voice of more authority shouts from the dark.

“Constable. I’ll handle this one. Thank you very much.”

“We are about to start Captain, just give us a few minutes.”

“Constable, I have just given you an order.”

“Yes, sir,” both the men say reluctantly and leave.

“Mosima, where have you been all this time? We almost went to jail,” says an exasperated Skosana.

“Remain calm. The young constable can almost hear you. Do you have all the things that the rats asked for?”

“Yes we do,” answers Mokwena.

“Remember that you may not leave the women underground with those beasts.”

“So are we supposed to stay underground and watch?” Skosana protests. Mosima ignores him.

“On your way back, use the alternative route, the gravel road. My men won’t bother you that side. I’ll meet you in the morning at the workshop. There are occasional robbers along that road. But I’ll send one of my men to comb the area before you pass by, be careful with the gold.”

The men go back into the car and continue their journey.

“Enjoy the church trip. Pray for us,” Captain Mosima waves and shouts as the men make their way. Skosana hoots at the rest of the policemen manning the roadblock as the car passes their flashing blue lights. Both men know that they have just faced the most dangerous moment of their lives. Skosana holds his face in his palms. It dawns on them how dangerous this business is.

When they arrive at the shaft, Mokwena reaches under the car seat and pulls out the two guns. He loads the revolver with bullets, one at a time, just as he was taught by

Professor's men. Skosana slowly takes out the magazine and cocks the gun. Suddenly they realise that they are ready to be killers. Mokwena drives into the old building where they met the men the first time with Mosima.

"Be ready to defend yourself should there be a need," mutters Mokwena.

"I pray to God that it never gets to that point. Those who live by the sword, die by it."

Four men appear from a distance, pushing three wheelbarrows. They are dirty and look malnourished. Their leader greets Mokwena and Skosana. As he asks them whether everything is fine, his speech is interrupted by a sharp, barking cough. He frequently spits gunk to the ground as he speaks. Mokwena is grateful it is dark so they can't see the sputum. Skosana sees a gun hanging on the man's waist, hidden only by the torn T-shirt he is wearing. Three of the men go to the back of the van and open the door.

"Beautiful girls, coming to visit us again," shouts the first man with a coarse voice.

"*Voetsek, jou vuilgoed, I'm not here for your smelly armpits,*" scoffs one of the women.

"I like your stubbornness; you may just be mine tonight," he laughs.

"Load the goods and take them to the shaft and stop wasting time with the women," the leader barks at them.

Once all the goods are loaded Skosana locks the car and the leader of the men walks ahead to lead the way to the shaft.

"I'm aware that you men are doing this for the first time. I must say your work so far is on the spot. When we get underground, the boss will come to meet you, I hope you are not in a hurry because when I came up they were still doing the final touches to the product. He has every intention to deliver the goods, now that you have also delivered."

The men enter through a hole and are hoisted down the shaft through a complex network of pulleys, ropes and a makeshift lift. Both men have been underground before, but they had always used proper mine lifts, not ropes. Mokwena feels dizzy just looking down the shaft and the many suspended ropes which look unsteady. He hates the smell of the men who are tying them with the ropes. He wonders if these men are just setting them up in a trap.

The makeshift lighting barely makes the tunnels visible, the abandoned Goldfields machinery is still visible but safety protocols are no longer observed. As they reach the

underground they realise how big this operation is. There are hundreds of young men, all looking like ghosts. They carry pickaxes, sledgehammers, lights and cutting torches. A few have *makarapa* (mining headgear) on, presumably these are *indunas* (group leaders). Most do not – a minor rockfall would simply snuff the life out of them. Even fewer have gumboots on or mouth covers. This means that they inhale all the harmful dust and chemical-laden air. No wonder they are coughing so badly outside. As special guests, Skosana and Mokwena are provided with *makarapas* with lights, gumboots and blue overalls. They quickly recognise these as the goods they supplied the first time they delivered. Their female companions are only given gumboots to protect their feet. Before Skosana can demand that they too be at least given *makarapas*, Mokwena whispers sternly into his ear, “This is not our world, the girls are here to work, and the sooner they are done the better. Do not upset anyone. We’ll all get out alive.” Mokwena wonders who the clients of the four women will be. There are already throngs of men circling and eyeing them like hyenas before a violent feed.

“Skosana, have your gun ready. Our own families are waiting for us, we are coming out of this place alive, gold in hand, with the women we brought.”

It is stuffy and hot, and dust fills up the place. Several men are coughing through their mouth covers, but they keep working. The ones that are resting sit around small fires to cook.

Mokwena sees a man digging a small hole in the ground and relieving himself in a corner not too far from the main group of men around a fire. He covers up the mess afterwards. All the team leaders, including the young man who led them underground communicate through walkie-talkies. “Boss they are here, they are here boss. Over,” they hear him shout into the walkie-talkie several times. He looks back at Mokwena and Skosana and assures them that their host will soon arrive.

“What’s his name,” Mokwena inquires from the young man.

“Killer. Baas Killer. All the men you see in this shaft report to him,” he replies.

“How long have you been working for Killer?”

“Since they closed the mine...about two years ago. Baas Killer restored our pride. I could not go back to Mozambique empty-handed. Now I go back every six months with enough money to sustain my entire homestead, something I could never do while they still employed us. Now I have fifty men working under me,” he says with a measure of pride.

“Is Killer always here?”

The young man laughs at Mokwena, exposing his brown teeth.

“Baas Killer is the big man here. He only comes here once every week to check on us, to deliver our salaries and messages from home.”

A tall beefy man appears behind a steel door. He looks clean and well taken care of, like a man who should not even be underground. Three men with long guns flank him. He is loud, shouting instructions in all languages. As soon as the Zama zamas hear him approach every man picks up his tool and starts working, even the man who was relieving himself.

“We are here to create futures for our children. If you don’t want to work, the door is open.”

He takes one look at Mokwena and Skosana. “Come this way,” signalling with his head for them to come to his direction. Mokwena signals the women to follow. His handshake is firm, his palm huge and moist.

“There’s a great demand for gold in the black market. There are many buyers that come here looking for our produce. All the men you are seeing in this place are not here to mess around, they are here to create wealth and independence for themselves.”

He takes his *makarapa* off to wipe the sweat on his forehead. He offers the men cigarettes, Skosana accepts. The room is hot and Mokwena can see lots of gas cylinders and torches. He realises that this is a makeshift smelting room. Killer has not let the men speak as yet.

“My men spend all their time digging and blasting rocks. It’s a dangerous job, very dangerous. Once they are done, they crush these rocks with their hands. It’s heavy work. They do it because the rewards are great. They are here to get ahead in life.”

He pulls up two chairs for the men and leaves the women standing. His three armed guards secure the steel door.

“In this room, gentlemen, we smelt the ore. It takes ten to fourteen weeks to produce this,” he pulls out a lump of gold the size of a grown man’s fist and leaves it on the table while he puffs up smoke from his cigarette.

“Everyone in this business takes huge risks, everyone in this room is a business person in search of high returns.” He looks in the direction of the women, grins, and then starts giggling like a little boy, leaving Mokwena and Skosana confused.

“Before the two gentlemen state their offer, beautiful ladies, please take me to heaven,” he leans backwards on his chair and relaxes.

The women open their handbags and pull out plastic bags of cocaine and marijuana. Like clockwork, one of the armed guards inspects the contents and gives a positive signal to Killer.

“Drugs were not part of the deal,” fumes Mokwena.

“But this is Professor’s part of the deal, not yours, the women come with the drugs,” Killer reminds him.

He pulls out a case of cash and gives each woman her portion.

“And now, what is this Killer?” chirps one of the women. “Where is the money for today’s services?”

“Let’s talk about that after you have delivered the services,” Killer dismisses her.

“Hey Killer, no cash, no services. The rules have always been the same. Pay! Don’t you dare take chances with me, I’m not a newcomer.” She stands her ground. Killer concedes and pays the women.

“Eight men. Two rounds each.”

“No ways, then double up the payment Killer. This covers for only one round per client.”

“Greedy bitch,” Killer hands the rest of the money.

“Now, one of the men will take you to another room where you will work.”

“The women don’t leave our sight. That is our deal with Professor,” protests Skosana.

“No problem, you may follow them and enjoy the viewing,” Killer laughs again. Skosana understands the implications, the two men suddenly feel powerless. They let the women go away on the guarantee from Killer that they’ll be back.

“While the women are still finishing up, allow me the honour to walk you around the business, seeing as you are now supporters of this great work,” gloats a now relaxed Killer. The men have no choice, even though Mokwena just wants to get out of the place. But he has to play along, look comfortable and unintimidated. Killer leads the men around several small groups of organised Zama zama diggers.

“We have underground committees and subcommittees that regulate the behaviour of our men. They maintain discipline and order and make rules about penalties

for unwarranted behaviour. Theft and violence are not tolerated,” blurts out Killer, suddenly looking serious again.

Mokwena wonders what type of penalties Killer is thinking of, but that would not be the right question to ask. He quietly nods.

“These men you are seeing here are very skilled. They know where to dig and blast for good rock and sand. It is important for everyone to cooperate with the team leader, especially where blasting is involved.”

Mokwena decides to join in the conversation and asks: “When I used to work underground, there were lots of accidents. What happens to the injured ones?”

“Oh of course, we also have injuries. It all depends.” The men wonder what Killer means. “We currently have a badly injured man on the other side. Let’s go check on him.” They find the man still bleeding, he has lost his leg. His face is pale. The man taking care of him is crying. Killer looks at the crying man. The crying man shakes his head and looks Killer in the eye with resignation. He cries louder and walks away from the badly injured man.

Killer takes out his gun and shoots him in the head. Mokwena remembers Zazu. But he cannot show weakness.

“The only reason I did that is because the man is going to die anyhow. It would be very difficult to take him up in that state to the hospital. The men understand the rules of mining with us. I would never kill a man who stands a chance of surviving.” Skosana is disgusted. He vomits while Killer is calmly explaining why he killed the man.

Mokwena looks around and realises just how his and Skosana’s work of supplying various goods is critical to the underground operations. Once the Zama zama team leader has identified the rock that contains high quality ore to be blasted, the blasting team works quickly to prepare the explosives and evacuates the rest of the men. Once the blasting has taken place, the Zama zamas work methodically to collect the rock fragments and dark sand particles and fill them into bags.

Mokwena realises that the men who do this task are the younger ones who probably have the least experience. They work hard but each has a goal in mind; a huge payday at the end of the contract. Another team of Zama zamas take the bags of rock fragments and sand and crush it further with hammers into a fine powder. Once this is successfully done, the Zama zamas start mixing this fine powder with mercury and water, then spin it in metal containers for a lengthy period of time.

Mokwena sees another group of men wearing overalls with rubbery chest covers. Killer points to these men and says: "These are doctors of the business, when you look at them you would think that they are performing surgery," he laughs with contentment. "These men help separate the soil from the real stuff." As they pass the corner with lots of water buckets, where the 'doctors' work from, Mokwena realises that the mercury clings to the ore at the bottom of the buckets while the floating soil is filtered out. The 'doctors' then take mercury ore residue; place it on a cotton cloth and twist it tightly to take out the mercury, leaving small amounts of a sugar bean-sized silver ball. Then the man with a cutting torch, a dark and tall West African man puts this silver ball into a steel smelting pot and patiently burns it for a long time.

"Now after smelting, we cool it down and then apply this white magic salt to convert what looks like silver into the gold that we are all here for, the majestic shining queen of all metals."

They walk back to Killer's office.

"Now to the most important reason you are here," Killer looks at the men.

"The gold. Yes indeed," Mokwena places the bag of cash on the table. Killer signals the guard to start counting and allows Mokwena and Skosana to examine the rock. The shirtless Killer looks at the guard counting the money for confirmation that all is in order. Mokwena observes several old wounds and stitches on his chest and wonders how many battles Killer has been in. Killer has a habit of swiftly moving his hands towards his back, as if he is practising to reach for the gun that hangs on his back. This makes Mokwena nervous. He keeps wondering what would happen if Killer decides for some reason to pull out the gun. But he does his best to keep calm.

Killer's hands make another trip to his back, firmly holding the gun.

"We have the full amount," says the guard. Killer releases his grip on the gun and Mokwena sees the tension on his bulging arm muscles loosen.

"Just pick all the money up and go guard the women. Bring them safe when they are done," Killer barks at him. After he closes the metal door on his way out, Killer picks up the bag of money and all the drugs and locks them in his safe.

Mokwena carefully picks up the gold stone, even though he is in a hurry to leave. "Hand me the cutting torch. I need to check if what you are giving me is real." This annoys

Killer. "You think we are sitting here underground doing nothing but producing fake gold?" Killer howls at the men for daring to test his gold.

"Just like you counted our money, give me the torch and let me test your gold. If you don't want me to, then we call this deal off right now," Mokwena says sternly. For the first time he realises that he has some power and Killer hates it.

"Get him the torch," he barks. His dark face shines with sweat. His breathing is audible. Skosana wonders why Mokwena is being difficult now. They could be gone now. But instead they wait for the gas torch to arrive.

"Switch it on," Mokwena instructs them. They do. He directs the gas torch light towards the stone. He heats a portion of it and slowly they can see it starting to turn from silver to gold.

"Good. Where is your measuring scale Killer?" Mokwena feels powerful as he orders the men around. They bring it. He measures his brick.

"Good. All good," he wraps it up and puts it in his bag.

It is time to go, the women appear from the hidden chamber, chatting loudly after doing their work. Mokwena is relieved all four of them are there, he just wants to go back to the surface. A different man, a young guard, comes to escort them back to the makeshift elevator. Skosana goes first, and then the women follow.

It is early in the morning, the sun has not risen. Mokwena has his gold in the bag. The women at the back of the van are noisy and rowdy from their work and drugs.

“It must be that white powder they sell to the miners,” Skosana says. They take a back route to the township to avoid police detection. It is a bumpy gravel road, but safe.

“We did it Skosana!” Mokwena sighs.

“The world is for the brave.” Skosana keeps quiet and focuses on the road.

It is a silence of grudging consent.

“It is a dangerous game we just played. I’m now sitting in the car full of defiled prostitutes, still snorting illegal powder, carrying illegal guns and gold. How long before something goes wrong?” Skosana mumbles.

“The difference between us and rich men like Fats and Professor is that we let our hearts get in the way of making fortunes. Do you think Fats ever wonders about the poor that he is depriving of a livelihood, the small businessmen that he is destroying through his greed? Professor is king of an underworld that we never knew existed, he is revered by all in the Free State.”

Skosana has no answer.

They drop the women at a taxi rank.

“Prophet Skosana, don’t you want to take me home! I can relieve your stress,” the four women roar with laughter as Skosana looks stunned and incensed. Mokwena drives off. Skosana is now upset that one of these girls has identified him. This coming Sunday he will instruct his congregation never to believe malicious rumours from prostitutes.

“We won’t be able to sustain this lie for too long from our families, soon somebody will break the news to them,” says a concerned Skosana. “But what will telling them achieve? I say we first sell the gold, the money will make all doubts disappear.”

Mokwena steps out of the car and bids farewell to Skosana.

“See you later buurman.”

Day is about break.

“Where are you off to so early? You barely slept?”

“I just need to fetch Skosana and go to the workshop. There is an urgent business matter we need to look after.”

“You forgot your overall bag at home yesterday, how did you manage to work last night?”

“There’s spare ones at the project site. I need to go.”

“You should bring them home next time so I can wash them, I know how much you hate dirty overalls.”

“Yes Mama, I will. I’ve got to go.”

Mokwena picks up the bag with the treasure and jumps into his car. He hoots for Skosana who comes out of his house and climbs in. MaMokwena stands in front of the house, looking at the car as it drives off.

“This is not my Mokwena,” she whispers to herself. MaSkosana is busy sweeping her yard. After the greetings, MaSkosana asks her to come over for a quick cup of tea.

“This new contract that they have is driving them crazy. The hours are odd. But at least the money is better. The church is grateful as the prophet now has more time and resources,” says MaSkosana. MaMokwena brings a tray with cups of tea.

“I’m very concerned,” MaMokwena interrupts.

“Why?” she asks as she sips her cup of tea.

“Mokwena is always in a hurry to go somewhere; all he talks about is money and he hardly talks about his actual work.”

“I’ve also noticed a few changes in *Ntate* Skosana. This morning he was very reserved, like he was deep in thought all the time, but I just thought that he is overly tired after a long shift at the project.”

“There is something different, I swear, there is something they are not sharing with us.”

At the workshop, Mokwena looks through the window and sees a long waving antennae and a blue light. SOUTH AFRICAN POLICE. A shiver goes down his spine for a moment. A tall dark figure clad in blue uniform steps out. His heart stops pounding. He opens the door.

“*Dumela* Captain. The uniform suits you.”

Mosima is looking more formal than other days. He looks like he is in the middle of his work. “*Dumelang bontate*, I don’t have time to waste. Show me the gold.”

“What’s with the hurry, this is the day of victory, we have finally made it, everything went well last night,” Skosana says with a reserved smile as Mokwena opens the bag to take out the stone of shining gold. Mosima inspects it and looks at the men.

“Well done. But we don’t have time. Our buyers are waiting for us in Bloemfontein. Jump into the car and let us meet them before they depart for Johannesburg.”

“Bring your guns,” he commands them. Mosima drives fast. As they leave Kutloanong, he looks at the men and sniggers: “You men are not dressed for the part. You have to dress for success, that’s the only way men with money will consider doing business with you. We’ll stop in Welkom to get some decent suits.”

En route to Welkom they pass a poultry farm. “HARCOS FARM”.

Mosima makes small talk: “One day men like you will be big enough to own huge farms of your own, not just small welding workshops in a township.”

“It takes patience and hard work to reach the level of Mr Harcos,” Skosana adds. “The very things that we have,” says Mokwena. “You need business connections to succeed at this level. Friends in high places. Friends with money and power.”

The men have never really heard such wisdom before. They concur. They pass the koppie at Riebeeckstad. “Did Professor’s men take you behind the koppie for your shooting instructions?”

“Do you mean to say that the police know about the warehouse?” Skosana asks, looking very intrigued.

“There is little that the police don’t know that takes place in this place. Professor knows we know, but like a wise businessman, he has me, a powerful friend in high places.” They arrive at the shops situated close to the huge Mannies taxi rank. Suddenly the men start looking around, wondering if any of the miners they met underground could perchance be at the taxi rank. “There’s a Jewish shop that my soccer boys tell me has the most amazing Brentwood pants and Moccasin shoes. Should we try it?”

Skosana chooses a dark brown suit.

“This I can use later on when I go to provincial church conferences,” he says smugly. Mokwena chooses a striped navy blue suite with a hat and a blue tie. He looks in the full

length mirror. He forces a smile. He wonders how he will be remembered when he is gone. As a crook, a family man or a community man? He's not sure.

"This says Mokwena has arrived, dressed for success," he says with a playful smile.

"Now this is what I'm talking about," Mosima pays for the men's new fancy clothes. He switches on the siren and the blue lights to demand right of way from all the taxis and cars. "Bloemfontein is very far," he reminds everyone.

Bloemfontein is a huge town, much bigger than Welkom or Kroonstad. The men marvel aloud at the tall buildings and wide streets. Every time they see something that surprises them they ask Mosima with an eagerness to learn.

"Well, wait until you get to Johannesburg," is Mosima's answer to them.

"There are traffic lights, unlike the circles that the men are used to in Welkom. They see double lane roads, they marvel. They are impressed at the ease with which Mosima navigates the town.

"Would you be able to drive us out of this town, Mosima?"

"You should see me driving me in and out of Johannesburg," is his cocky response.

They stop at the Thabure City Hotel. He drives the car into the hotel's underground parking.

They walk up to the lift, Mosima presses a button and the two men step in. Skosana tightens his body as the lift takes off, Mokwena gets a brief dizzy spell. Even though they have seen lifts and escalators on TV, this first experience is still a little awkward.

"You should have warned us about this lift Mosima. Had I had food in my stomach, it would be all over the floor," jokes Mokwena as he holds on tight to the inside elevator rail. Meanwhile Mosima looks at himself in the mirror; he puts on his police cap, and straightens his captain's badge. He lifts his chest and when the lift stops he steps out, his shining black shoes leading the way. The men follow him. A big balding white man approaches them. Mokwena feels a sharp bolt of terror rise up in his stomach. Jail, he thinks. The giant smiles and reaches out his hand.

"Goeie more David. Hoe gaan dit met die Kaptein vandag."

"Ah Johan, ek is baie goed man."

"Private room?" he asks Mosima. He nods. "Piet!" he shouts. An elderly black man wearing a red undercoat, white shirt and black pants comes hurriedly.

“Baas Johan?” He replies politely. “*Kaptein Mosima is hier.*” Piet does not ask any further questions. He knows what to do. He leads them up the stairs and walks them through a corridor. They get to a room. On the door is written: “BUSINESS LOUNGE – PRIVATE”. Piet signals that they can go in.

“Can I bring you anything to drink gentlemen?”

Mosima asks for whisky. To be safe Mokwena asks for the same thing. Skosana asks for Coca Cola, after realising that one can ask Piet for anything. Mokwena walks towards the window, to the food table. But he is more intrigued by the view of the city from the hotel. He calls Skosana to be his witness. Bloemfontein stretches endlessly and the buildings are of different shapes and sizes. It is beautiful. Just like on TV. They look on towards the huge artificial water spring where many people are gathered to feed pigeons.

“When I was a young boy, we hunted for pigeons to eat them, in big cities people feed them,” mutters Skosana. “It looks beautiful though.”

After Piet brings their drinks, the men sit around the big black table to drink and rest.

“This is where important people meet, gentlemen, where big business takes place,” boasts Mosima as he realises that the men are still looking around. The hotel’s white walls and beautiful chandelier add to the beauty of the room. The leather seats are soft and comfortable and the carpet is thick and bouncy.

“Today you are going to get the biggest payday of your lives. I need you to look calm. I will do the talking and you watch. Greet the big men with a firm handshake. This is not Kutloanong. If the men sense you are inexperienced, they’ll take their business elsewhere.”

“So what exactly should we do Mosima?”

“Behave like tough mining businessmen. You were down there in the mine, you know how life is like down there, they have not been there, so you have an advantage. This morning don’t talk much, just present your product, be stern, I’ll do the rest.”

The men are nervous, but do not question Mosima further.

Two men walk in. “Good afternoon my brothers,” greets the podgy one. Right away his West African accent and charisma fills the room.

“The boss is on his way.”

After the podgy man gives them a lecture about how the boss is a serious man who is very busy, two other men in black suits arrive, one holding a handbag, while another keeps looking around. Then a Chinese man with a cigarette at the corner of his mouth enters the room.

“My brothers, the boss is here. Can we see your goods,” commands the podgy one. Mokwena moves his hand to reach for the gold in his bag but before he completes the movement, Mosima interrupts.

“My brothers, the men I’m with are tough miners. They live and breathe what they do, they go underground to find the gold. They know what they do very well. That is why I work with them and no one else. Let’s show them some respect. They could not come all the way here if they did not have the product in the right size.”

The boss whispers into the ear of one of his bodyguards and blows a ball of smoke. The bodyguard then whispers to the podgy negotiator: “The boss says it’s okay, he trusts your men. Let’s talk about the price.”

Mosima makes an offer which the boss rejects. Mosima takes his cap off, tossing it on the table. The stars on it become obvious.

“I’ll leave this table if you men are not serious about doing business. There are many buyers out there,” Mosima pushes a hard bargain. The podgy man explains the situation to his boss. The boss stands up and looks Mokwena in the eye, moving his attention away from Mosima.

“If you walk away, none of my people in Joburg will buy from you,” he says.

“We won’t be robbed in broad daylight. We stand by Mosima’s offer,” says Mokwena sternly.

“Who is the boss among the three of you, who is the boss?” the Chinese man shouts. Before Mosima can take over, Mokwena raises his voice: “This is business. Our business. All three of us. The more important question is whether you are you buying or not.”

Mosima sits back, realising that Mokwena is standing his ground. The boss again gives an instruction to his men.

The men on the other side of the table take out a small bottle with some liquid to start testing the gold. Another takes out a sophisticated weighing scale. After a while, they look at the boss and give him a nod.

The podgy one smiles. "We have a deal." He hands the money over. Skosana reaches out and starts counting it. He has never seen so much money. Once he has satisfied himself, he looks at both Mokwena and Mosima with approval.

Mokwena feels powerful. He has just spoken tough to an intimidating underground kingpin and he prevailed. He takes out the gold stone and hands it over. Mokwena takes his hat off and wipes the sweat off his forehead. He shakes the hand of the boss.

"You are a tough negotiator my friend. I have a challenge for you. My buyers are impressed with the quality of the Free State gold, promise me that you will always deliver this good stuff."

"Indeed! Shall we meet again, same place soon?" Mokwena asks with a wide smile.

"The last Friday of next month."

"That will not be a problem my brother," Mokwena commits, feeling even more powerful. They eat, drink and shake hands. The Chinese man tells him to call him Mr Lu. He leaves with the gold. The men head back to Kutloanong with their money.

"Mokwena, you did well today. You stood up to Mr Lu!" Mosima gives a rare smile. "Now that you men know how things are done, from now onwards, you will be coming without me."

"That is not a problem Mosima. It is a good thing if you are not involved all the time. We will run the business and we will keep you informed all the time," Mokwena agrees.

It is late in the afternoon when the men arrive from Bloemfontein. They stop at the workshop and share the money equally.

"So I guess we look forward to the end of next month, Mr Promises?" Mosima mocks Mokwena for hastily promising their customer gold.

"We'll make a plan, we can always make a plan," says Mokwena proudly. The men laugh at the spontaneous bravery of Mokwena during the negotiations. After congratulating themselves for a job well done, Mosima drops the two men at the workshop.

"We did it. I cannot believe it!" the overjoyed Mokwena says to Skosana. "What are you going to do with your money?"

"Finally buy the van. Extend the house some more, replace the old sofas in the lounge, buy more pews for the church, and save some for the rainy days. My congregation

has been praying for money to improve the church, God has now finally blessed us through me. You, what's your plan?"

"Well, I need to pay college fees for Taemane. I also need erect a tombstone for my father and grandmother. My mother is also very old, I need to save money for that time. Sefako now tells me he wants to become a doctor. I would have loved him to become an Engineer like Gerrit's pikinini." The men laugh. "The soccer team also needs a new kit. Slowly we will become like Maokeng Heroes. It motivates the young boys so much when they run onto the field in a new kit. We are going to conquer the provincial league once they don the new kit. One day one of these boys will make it to play for Pirates," he smiles to himself.

"Why would you want any of these boys to waste their talents at Pirates. Aim higher KK. Chiefs is the only worthy destination for our talented young boys," the men chuckle loudly.

"Don't start with Pirates versus Chiefs now."

"But I hear the university fees are very high, you think you'll afford it?" Skosana asks.

"Well, Sefako tells me there are these things called bursaries that the municipality and the mine gives to high-achieving students. He claims that will pay for the bulk of the fees, but I still need to pay for his living expenses. That's still expensive, but if we keep growing our business, money won't be a problem."

"I wish my children also did well at school like Sefako. But it's too late for them. Keep encouraging him. But do you trust the municipality to award a bursary to your son? You are not a politician nor related to one."

Mokwena sighs.

"I've not spoken to the young man about that. I don't want to discourage him. Everyone knows that these bursaries all end up with the politicians and their relatives, no matter how undeserving."

"It's not enough that they are already so rich, but they snatch the little available for us," Skosana adds.

"That's why we have to make sure that we keep Mr Lu happy with a steady supply. Then we won't need to rely on the mercy of the corrupt Fats Sephiri and his hyenas."

"You make it sound simple KK, this is a lot of work and besides, we break the law every time we get involved."

“All it means is that we have to be careful,” Mokwena answers.

“How is Taemane doing?”

“*Buurman*, that’s one thing in my life that is not coming right.” Mokwena lowers his voice. His emotion shows on his face.

“Well KK, you are still her father, young women are very difficult. That is why I decided to never disclose to my family, you remember the story...”

“Yah, about your other son with that church lady, Esther, from Bultfontein.”

“Yes. I still go to see them once in a while, but she is married now to one of the local church elders, he does not know the child was fathered by me. It was a moment of weakness, but there was no need to let my family know. The boy is ten years now, what is painful is that he does not know that I’m his father. But I can live with that, it would break my church if it became common knowledge.”

“You were lucky that the woman kept quiet about it all, she is a smart woman. Now look, everything is fine, you are both married and each has a good family life. That is what mature people do.”

“You were not so lucky with your *makhwapheni*, KK?”

Mokwena gives a short embarrassed giggle. “Yah I was not so lucky. Alcohol is the problem. I shouldn’t have spent all that time at Sheila’s kissing her in front of everyone. Word got out. Those loud mouth drunkards can’t keep quiet about other people’s issues. At least you church people are more discreet about these things.” They share a hearty laugh. They are talking together in a way they have not done for years, sharing secrets and fears.

“We have been through a lot together.”

“Hey don’t say that. The one year I was preaching at our mid-year conference. After I came down from the pulpit, one of the women in church just from nowhere mentioned in passing that Esther’s son was a spitting image of mine. My tummy almost exploded with fear. I made sure I never came close to that lady ever again. How can she raise such issues ten years later!”

“Tell me Skosana, did you cut ties with Esther completely since you say you still go to Bultfontein now and then?” Mokwena is at the fridge taking out a can of beer.

Skosana sighs. “Bring me a Coke please.” He opens it and drinks deep.

“KK, this stays between you and me. Esther and I are still together. Not like before of course, but we still meet once a month or so, I’m the district prophet and as the elder’s wife she comes to most of the district meetings, we see each other. But she is a woman of integrity. She knows how to respect my wife and family and I do the same. We meet secretly, but we are aware that we are not so young and our families are important to preserve. We will always be soul mates.”

“I need to join your church soon buurman,” says Mokwena jokingly. “Since I got caught I try to stay away from trouble, but it is hard when you drink and you are popular like me. But I won’t forget that moment when my daughter made a scene in town that people even today still remember. It was embarrassing, since then I vowed never ever to cheat and drink. My wife would kill me if I ever made that mistake.”

Skosana laughs.

“Yes I do remember that scene. Taemane has always been a feisty child. According to my wife, she met your *makhwapheni* at the taxi rank in town and confronted her. What I hear is that they both went at each other’s throats like cats. Taemane even threw her groceries on the main road, telling her that it was all her father’s money!”

“Hey buurman, don’t even remind me of that. The whole township was there and the story just spread like cholera. At funerals, soccer matches and shebeens, everyone was just talking about Bra KK’s daughter and girlfriend’s cat fight. Funnily enough, more women still came to me, women like bad boys.”

“A big lesson for you is that you should stay away from young women.”

“Absolutely, I should follow the prophet’s wisdom. Play with your age mates. Look how well Esther treats you.”

“Hey KK, I’ve never told anyone this story. Please don’t disappoint me now. Even when you are drunk don’t you dare mention it, even in your dreams.”

“I think I need to pray for you Skosana.”

They laugh again. He promises to keep silent.

“I never imagined I’d one day drive my own car,” Skosana quips, admiring his new van as he washes it, the same make and model as Mokwena’s.

“Our hard work is paying off my friend.”

“The negotiations in the last two meetings with Lu have been smooth. I love men who keep their word,” Skosana adds.

“Mosima tells me that two of Lu’s men were arrested at the border for possession of gold. Lu is becoming worried that maybe the police are watching him.”

“What is he going to do now? Slow down a little bit?”

“Men like Lu will never slow down Skosana. Money has a way of keeping one wanting its sweet smell. We will no longer meet him at the hotel in Bloemfontein, Lu thinks maybe someone alerted the police about our presence the last three times we have been there. Mosima says we also need to be careful.”

“Perhaps we should stop, Mokwena, don’t you think?”

“We are very small compared to the other men in this business Skosana. Men like Professor and Lu...”

“And what about Captain Mosima? Do you trust him so much that he won’t sacrifice us should things turn sour?”

“*Buurman*, I think you are starting to be a coward. Just look at your life today, even Gerrit would die of envy if he saw that we drive better cars than his. We did not get here through cowardice,” Mokwena makes light of the situation.

“So what does Lu suggest we do? Surely we have to be more careful now?”

“This time we meet him at his farm in Parys. We take your car, the red colour is different to my white van. In this way if there is anyone looking, they will not be able to easily recognise us.”

“KK, is Mosima happy with this arrangement, will we be safe at the farm?”

“He trusts Lu.”

Two security guards open the heavy brown steel gate.

"Bontate!" Skosana greets the gatekeepers. They do not smile.

"We are here to see Mr Lu," Mokwena breaks the ice.

"Please come out of the car?" one of the gatekeepers asks firmly.

They search the car. They find two guns. The one man playfully caresses Mokwena's revolver.

"We will keep these for you. You won't need them today," says the gatekeeper firmly.

"Who do you think you are? Leave our guns alone," Skosana explodes. He lunges towards the man. But Mokwena shouts from behind him.

"Buurman, they are just doing their job. Security, we are friends of Mr Lu. We are here for a meeting. Give us our guns back."

"This is private property. My job is to ensure the safety of everyone in this place. Mr Lu is in his office. Friends don't need to carry guns to a meeting."

Skosana pulls the car away leaving a cloud of dust behind. They drive on a bumpy gravel road that leads to Lu's office. They see several farmworkers looking after livestock; fattened cows, sheep and goats and chickens. As far as the eye can see, the valleys are covered with green lush fields of mielies. Tractors and irrigation lines are visible.

"Drive slower buurman," Mokwena admonishes Skosana.

"How dare they disrespect us like this. Lu must explain," barks Skosana.

A huge white house appears as the gravel road winds down. As they drive into the yard, a young man opens the front gate. Lu stands at the door, and waves at the men with a big smile.

"Tell your men to give us our guns back," Skosana says.

"No greetings? How was the drive from the land of gold?" he diverts their attention. Lu speaks perfect Sesotho. The men are pleasantly surprised because in their last few meetings, he only spoke in English.

"We are doing fine Mr Lu, what a beautiful farm you have here. I never thought you were a farmer," Mokwena plays along.

"Please come in and let's have a drink and do some business," Lu leads the men into his office and hands out cigars and whisky to the men. Mokwena pours out the whisky for himself and gulps it quickly. He smiles.

“Your security men treated us without respect at the gate, searching the car and taking our guns. This is not acceptable,” Skosana complains.

“You know, the men are given instructions and they just do as they are told, especially when they meet new people. My apologies.” He calls out the young lad who opened the gate and asks him to inform the security guard to deliver the goods that belonged to the gentlemen who just drove in.

“Peace, are we happy now gentlemen?” Lu asks.

“Indeed Mr Lu, no problem.”

The security man arrives and takes out a bag containing the guns.

“I was just doing as instructed sir.”

“No problem, you are excused,” Lu releases the man. They exchange the gold for money as usual. They drink and Skosana finally picks a cigar and starts to smoke. Lu walks them behind his property and shows them a beautiful lake that streams through the farm. He boasts of the fish that he catches in the lake.

“We heard about your men that were arrested at the border. Are you not afraid that they will reveal your secrets?” Mokwena inquires.

“I have already been in contact with some people I know – politicians. There will be no problems at all. These guys were careless and stingy and did not make proper arrangements with the border people. Greed. Never be greedy in this business. Pay everyone that needs to be paid accordingly, and there will never be issues. When my father left China to settle in Lesotho, he taught all of us, his sons, to be loyal. When the farming business declined in Lesotho, he ventured into diamonds and livestock. Today my brothers and I are successful businessmen.”

“Is that where you learnt to speak Sesotho?”

“Yes. My father made us all learn Sesotho; my brother and I decided to come to Free State to explore the mining business. Our father already knew many people in the diamond business in Lesotho so it proved to be easy to get started.”

“But how did you manage to buy a farm in South Africa as a foreign Asian?” Mokwena asks.

“Money can buy a man anything in this world, if you pay the right people, you can open doors to an unimaginable life.” Lu looks at his watch and gets ready to walk the men back to their car. “Gentlemen, I hope to see you soon with more gold next month.”

“You can count on us.” This time Skosana answers. The men laugh as he usually never speaks about the next transaction, always leaving it to Mokwena to make promises.

They leave Lu’s farm with their money. “Sefako would like to see Durban before he goes to study at Natal next year. I think our families would love to spend time there and see the ocean for the first time in our lives.”

“That sounds like a great idea. It will hopefully make our wives relax about the money we are bringing, and I can bring a lot of sea water back to my church to sell.”

When the men arrive back in Kutloanong they meet Mosima and give him his share of the money.

“*Heita Bra KK,*” greets a young man with a cap and denims. He is already drunk. Mokwena struggles to make out his face in the darkly lit shebeen hall.

“Disco! What are you doing at Sheila’s so late on a Friday night boy? We have a game on Saturday for goodness sake. I’m taking you home now.” Mokwena scolds him as he gets ready to grab him by the arm to take him home.

“Hey you two, don’t even think of leaving as yet. Don’t you pretend like you don’t owe me for the drinks and food.”

Mokwena reaches for his pocket. “Here is some money, Sheila, is that all that he owes you?”

Sheila counts the money. She then opens her black notebook of debt which she keeps in her apron pocket.

“Not a chance, Disco has a bill that has been climbing up for this whole year. His brother, Sporo came to settle a portion of it when he came back from the mines last month.”

Mokwena approaches Sheila to hear her better. He shakes his head upon hearing Sheila’s verdict.

“He is such a talented boy. All this time I was not aware he is drinking so much. He is an important part of MYT. It’s fine, I’ll settle it.”

“Eish Bra KK, be careful ausi Sheila likes exaggerating things. She just likes to see me in trouble,” Disco protests sheepishly.

“It’s fine now, let’s go young man.”

Disco and Mokwena head to the car.

“I’m sorry Bra KK.”

“You can’t squander your future like this my laaitie. We spoke about how you are going to use your soccer talent to escape your family hardships. You of all people know how Sporo blew a chance to go play in Johannesburg. Your grandmother has put her hopes in you Son.”

Disco weeps.

“Bra KK, things are hard at home.”

“Why haven’t you asked me for help Disco?”

“I dropped out of school two months ago Bra KK. I’m currently looking for a job.”

“No Son, you should complete matric.”

“I will restart schooling next year Bra KK, I need a job. I, I...”

“Disco, what Son?”

“I impregnated my girlfriend Bra KK, I need a job to support the child.”

Mokwena sighs.

“This is why I haven’t told you Bra KK, no one can help me out of this mess.”

“No Son, don’t run ahead of yourself. Maybe there is something we can do.”

“Bra KK, Sporo told me that you are running some business at the mines. He said perhaps you can arrange something for me.”

Mokwena thinks hard about this. It catches him by surprise that Disco has some idea about the work that he is involved in through Sporo Motale.

“No my laaitie. You are too young to get involved in such jobs. You are destined for greater things. I see you playing for one of the big Soweto clubs. Go sleep, we have a game tomorrow.”

“Are you out of your mind Mokwena? How can you expose this young man to the world of illegal mining?”

“He is unemployed, he needs some money. He won’t be there forever. Besides, I don’t intend for him to be spending months underground like the rest of the men. He’ll only be spending a day or two doing the easier tasks. I’ll arrange with Killer.”

“Oh and when he comes back he’ll be telling all the other boys about our involvement. How can this even be a plan?” a baffled Skosana asks. “If only you paid attention buurman! Sporo has already let him in on the secret, the best way to keep him quiet is if we take him under our wing. He will make money in the process and he will still be available to play for MYT. I am trying hard to send him to trials in Johannesburg with one of the big clubs. Soon he’ll be gone from Kutloanong. Trust me on this one.”

Skosana is uneasy, but he consoles himself with the fact that Mokwena and Disco have a relationship that he may never understand.

Just as planned, Mokwena arrives just after sunset at the workshop. Disco arrives shortly afterwards.

“I have made arrangements with Killer that you will only work in the kitchen helping to cook for the men. You will not do any hard labour and you will stay away from the mining. You will only go underground for two weeks and then come back up. None of your teammates must know about this piece job. People like your brother and all of us will be left in big trouble if too many people hear about this. Do you understand Disco?”

“Thank you so much Bra KK for giving me this opportunity to make some money and keeping me in the team. If the guys ask me why I’ve been missing training what shall I say?”

“You tell them you had urgent family matters to attend to in Bothaville at one of your relatives. And I will confirm the story. No one must be left suspicious.”

They both get into the van and Mokwena drives to the shaft. As the van approaches the gravel road to the mine shaft, Mokwena is relieved that there is no roadblock. He hates the tension it always creates whenever the policemen are there asking too many questions, especially when Mosima is not around. He also has to always worry about what the innocent newcomers could say when the police put pressure on them. It is dark when the van arrives at the shaft entrance. Mokwena and the nervous Disco jump off and start walking towards the entrance. The skinny and dusty man walks towards them.

“Gentlemen!” he shouts.

“Ready for action,” Mokwena responds.

“Follow me and walk softly,” he instructs them.

“The young man here will be spending two weeks working in your kitchen. I’ll come in about two weeks to fetch him.”

“Baas Killer has already explained everything to me sir,” responds the dusty skinny man. He also hands over a list of goods they require.

“Disco, take care of yourself, I’ll see you in two weeks.”

The following morning Mokwena and Skosana meet and speak over the fence.

“Would you have allowed your son to go down that shaft?”

“Don’t ask me questions that have no answers, my son is too young to work in a mine. I don’t know.” Mokwena is not impressed as he answers Skosana.

“We have been down there before; you saw how dangerous it is. The fights between the gangs, the fumes, the heat, Killer...”

“Exactly what are you trying to say Skosana? That I should have just ignored the young man’s plea for help?”

“*Buurman*, I’m just saying that, that this is too risky.”

“Well, I’m tired of worrying Skosana, so far things are fine. Pray that they stay the same. Our load of goods is due in two weeks. They need gas cylinders, mercury, alcohol, women, lots of water and bread,” Mokwena moves attention away from Skosana’s concerns.

Two weeks later, as usual, Mokwena and Skosana deliver the goods as expected. They meet Killer who is going underground to supervise the final stages of the operation. “How is Disco doing?”

“I’m told he’s too soft. But at least he has the youthful stamina to work for longer periods. So the work has been going well, but I need to push everyone very hard tonight and tomorrow morning so I can finish the work earlier. Disco has been dreaming about going home, I know.”

“I was hoping that you’d bring him up tonight, we have a big match in a week and I’d promised to take him home tonight.”

“Not to worry. When I come back up tomorrow I’ll bring the kitchen boy with me. I’ll drop him at G-Hostel by his brother tomorrow after the shift,” says Killer as he pays the men for the goods they brought him.

Mokwena looks at Skosana with a smug grin. His plan is working out.

A siren goes off. It is in the middle of the night. The sharp blue lights of the police van light up the street, turning the dark night of Kutloanong into a bright blue morning. The van is parked right in front of both Mokwena and Skosana's adjacent homes. The two men jump off their beds. Captain Mosima stands outside the police van speaking into the radio. He does not have his police cap on. They walk towards him, he switches the siren off. Mokwena wonders why Captain Mosima would create the unnecessary attention like this. "Hurry up gentlemen. Jump in and let's go?"

"Mosima, what on earth is going on and do you have to create so much attention?"

"Gents, there has been a fire at the shaft. Heavy smoke can still be seen coming out the shaft. We fear the worst. We need to go meet with Professor at his home now."

In no time they arrive at Professor's home. It is the first time that they've ever come to Professor's real home. The house is huge, the biggest house in the Riebeeckstad suburb by far, bigger than all the white people's houses. The gate is opened by a security guard, just like when one goes to a very important place. The driveway to the parking lot is lined with lights and trees. The glass door opens and the men go in, led by the captain. They are led up the stairs to a room that seems like the office of the president of a country. Everything is wooden and shiny. Professor walks in, covered in a dark blue night coat.

"My men have just told me about the fire at the mine. All they see is smoke coming out the shaft exit. They say they can't even go in to rescue the men."

"No word from Killer?" inquires Mosima.

"Not at this moment. But that one is a survivor, he has survived worse problems in the past, I expect him to have been the first to escape. He always works closest to the exit."

"What does all this mean?" asks a shocked Skosana.

Professor looks at him with a stern look as he breaks the news.

"Accidents and death are part and parcel of this business. At worst some of the workers could be burnt to death, others possibly poisoned by the dangerous gases. This does happen sometimes. But we always encourage the men to be careful."

"What do we do now?" Mokwena inquires.

The security guard suddenly barges in. Professor looks incensed. "Can't you see I'm in the middle of a meeting?"

"Prof, I have Killer at the door. He wants to see you."

"Did you check if he is being followed?"

"He is clear sir."

"Send him up here."

The men wait in anticipation.

"Are you ok, Killer?" screams Professor.

Killer limps painfully up the stairs. His forehead and left hand are heavily bandaged and big reddish brown marks are clearly visible, indicating that the wounds are still fresh.

He leans on the door after he closes it, refusing to sit down. With his right hand he holds a bag which he pushed onto the shiny mahogany study table where the four men are sitting.

"I've got the gold, all of it," he speaks slowly, confident but clearly in pain. Professor reaches out and grabs the bag.

"But I lost a lot of the men." There's silence.

"I'm amongst the few who were underground who survived apart from the lifters. It all happened so fast. It must have been a faulty gas cylinder in the kitchen that started a series of blasts. Before I knew it, there was fire and chaos, rocks were falling and men were getting trapped. Some men were on fire, I had to put down a few severely burnt ones before I was hoisted up by the lifters."

"And Disco...?" Mokwena asks.

"Disco was in the kitchen waiting for me, very close to where I think the explosions started, I went back for him but there was a huge fire in there. There was nothing I could do. I decided to just grab the gold and money from the safe and left."

"Well done Killer, we need more men like you," Professor looks content. He shouts an instruction for the driver to take Killer to see a doctor.

"Drive him to the private practice in Kroonstad. Killer, after they patch you up, go straight to Johannesburg until I instruct you to come back. The men will bring your personal items later. Go and stay below the radar out there in Hillbrow!"

Skosana hangs his head. Mokwena tries to keep a brave face.

“Gentlemen, the provincial and national police heads are going to be descending on this place as of this morning. As the general public gets to hear about this tragedy, many questions are going to be asked. I’ll not be in full control of the police work. I therefore suggest that you go and clear out of your places anything that could link you to the Zama zama activities, none of you should meet to communicate in any way. None of you should even call or visit me. I’ll do my best to keep you clear. Professor, keep an eye on Killer, if necessary, remove him from the picture.”

Mosima stands up and takes the bag of gold from Professor’s hand.

“It’ll be safer with me.”

None of the men argue.

Mosima drops the two men at the edges of the township. This is his way of cutting his connection with them already. The men have no choice but to walk back to their homes.

It is now early in the morning, a time for men to walk to work. The birds are chirping, but the melody is lost to both men. The summer morning air is fresh, but it cannot calm the men’s spirits down. A group of men with blue overalls pass them; they are singing songs of men. The sweetness of their tune only reminds Mokwena and Skosana of their simple days. This morning stands as judgement.

“We killed Disco and the rest of those men, Mokwena. We sent them to their death.” Skosana’s voice quivers, a sharp pain pierces through his throat down to his heart. Mokwena does not respond.

“We should have abandoned this business a while ago.”

Mokwena still refuses to respond.

“We’ll have to apologise to the parents of all the young men and to God,” Skosana concludes.

Mokwena stops.

“Whatever decision you make regarding your guilt will involve too many people. Don’t you dare make things worse than they really are Skosana, I beg you.”

“Or else what Mokwena? Will you also eliminate me?”

“Do not be foolish Skosana. We cannot let the story of our lives end this way. Be strong, we need time to figure out what to do.”

“This is not a story, this is reality. We killed Disco and a whole lot of innocent lives, we are monsters.”

“It was an accident.”

“Explain that to their parents and relatives then.”

“Don’t be foolish Skosana. Too many dangerous people are involved. Let’s go home and think of a way.”

“Another plan from you? Another plan...?”

“There is no need to panic now Skosana, we have enough problems in our hands,” Mokwena concludes the discussion

They arrive at their respective homes.

“Skosana, you are a stronger man than you look right now. Our wives only need to know that the police came to talk us about a robbery at our workshop. Otherwise everything is fine,” says Mokwena who is now calmer.

“No more lies Mokwena, I’m tired of the lies.”

Mokwena enters through his gate and opens the front door. Everyone is still asleep, but he cannot go to bed. He sits on the sofa and reaches out for his whisky. He lights up a cigarette and starts to drink. He wonders if the end has come. The possibility of Disco’s death sinks his heart. He wonders if it was all worth it.

Sefako wakes up and walks to where his father is sitting.

“Father, the University of Natal sent a letter yesterday.”

“Oh what does it say Son,” he asks without looking into his son’s face.

“I have been accepted into medical school. I am going to be a doctor,” says a beaming Sefako. He realises that his father’s mind is elsewhere. He had hoped to make him proud.

“Well done Son. Well done. I’m proud of you. Both your mother and I are proud of you.”

“Thank you Father. Is everything fine,” probes Sefako.

“Are you proud of me,” Mokwena asks his puzzled son. He looks at him for the first time since they started talking. His face has a heavy countenance, as if the burden of the whole world has been thrust onto his shoulders.

“Yes Father I am, but why do you ask?”

“Nothing Son, nothing,” Mokwena looks away. “I have a thought. We have not visited your grandpa in a long while. Could you fetch the spade and fork. I think we should go and visit him.”

Sefako wants to ask more questions, but he does not. He does as his father asks.

“Mama, we are going to the graveyard. Please be ready for us when we come back,” Mokwena speaks to his wife who is still in bed.

The drive to the graveyard should be quicker by car, but the absence of roads delays the drive. Sefako prefers the drive. He never liked pushing the wheelbarrow through the gravel road as one was at the mercy of weather conditions. During rainy seasons the mud made the wheelbarrow heavy and difficult to push, in winter the cold froze his hands, in summer he had to worry about all manner of crawling animals which he disliked.

“Things are not always what they look like from the outside Son. When you are a doctor one day, always remember that,” Mokwena says to his son as he drives on the uneven road to the graveyard. “Sometimes we wish for things, good things, but we neglect to find out what it really costs to attain them.”

Mokwena stops the car next to the gate. They pick a stone each. Besides a few people who are already leaving the graveyard, it is peaceful. They clean the grave, and Mokwena scatters the sea salt over the grave. They kneel eastward and Mokwena stammers as he prays:

“Father, your grandson and I, are here today,” his voice quivers. “We thank you for your many blessings, plenty of food on our table. You showed us the way as your children and today Sefako is about to enter into a new life, to be a doctor. You’ve kept Taemane alive and business has been booming. But no one could have foreseen what took place last night...”

Mokwena takes a pause. He wipes tears from his face. Sefako takes a quick glance at him. His suspicions were right about his father not being fine as he claims.

“Forgive me father. There’s nothing we can do now, what happened has happened. Help me to know how to live with the results of my ambitions. Amen.”

He does not stand up immediately from the kneeling position.

“What happened last night father?”

“It is my cross to bear Son.”

When they arrive home MaMokwena comes out with aloe water.

“What were the police looking for last night? Why did you and Skosana go with them? Is there trouble we need to know about?”

“Nothing you should worry about Mama. There was an attempt to rob the workshop but all is fine now.”

She is not happy with the response. But Mokwena is not in the mood for long discussions.

“Did you hear about the tragedy at the old mine? They say on the radio that scores of illegal miners are dead after an accident. Families are being asked to come to identify the dead,” she asks.

Mokwena keeps silent.