

Prelude

"I'M NOT MY mother, aunty, I will never be like her!"

"Of course you aren't, you are your father's daughter, that's why you are here being dramatic,"

What the fuck does she mean that's why I'm here? This is my house, she's the one that's *here*.

And how dare she likens me to my father?

"Seriously mntaka Mbambeni, I don't understand why you didn't call me, you let things go this far? And now you are here, crashing like a helicopter, expecting all of us to jump and..."

Again, I didn't ask her or anyone for anything! She decided to come here, and she has the audacity to blame me for everything.

What I have been saying to her, to them, is that I'm done. Mqhele knows I am, I've told him this every day since that night he tried that shit with me again.

MESS

He thinks I'm angry, but that's not it, anger comes and goes, it dissolves. I was angry once, very angry but now I'm bitter, and bitterness lasts forever, as long as I embrace and justify it, it will stay with me.

"I'm not saying you should stay with him if you don't want him anymore Mahlomu, what I'm saying is, don't act in a way that will get you killed. Learn from your mother..."

Urgh! My mother kept up a charade for a whole 23 years, and I'm the only one who didn't know, even Lethu figured it out.

My mother, yes Thembeke, thought she was toughening me up by always treating me differently from Langa and Lethu. She smothered and pampered them, but me, she treated me like I was an adult from when I was still a child. She let me get married at 23, she ululated and dressed up for my wedding.

I never told her anything about how things were between me and Mqhele because I thought she wouldn't understand, that her having a perfect husband like my father, she wouldn't. My first thought was she'd force me to leave him, or judge me for forgiving him and staying after the first time he beat me.

And come to think of it, maybe I was right to think that, because she isn't here, she hasn't been here since Mqhele left this house.

I'm not saying that I don't love Mqhele anymore, I'm saying that I don't want him, love or no love.

And my aunt here thinks she call tell me about possible death? Does she even know how many deaths I've seen since I met this man?

I never asked him to leave this house, he was the one who packed a suitcase and left. He said he needed to clear his head. Clear his head from me? Imagine! As if anyone in this family has a clear head.

He left because he couldn't touch me anymore, that I know for sure.

One little possibility that I slept with another man, and that goes to his head? So much that his penis can't even get hard for me?

He's mad, after all the things I have forgiven him for, that was all it took for him to completely detach from me?

He came to his senses three weeks later and showed up at our doorstep with his suitcases. But I sent him back where he came from.

Mqhele leaves.

I had never looked at it that way until the day I stood on the front porch of this house and watched him pull a suitcase to the car.

I let him leave and told his children baba was away working. They believed me, because they don't know Mqhele, they know baba. They don't know how many times he has done this.

I had never seen it that way because in all the times he had left before, he had left because of the shit he had done.

Of course there were other things that had already messed him up, including finding out that half of him was buried under a tree and that I had betrayed the family in an effort to protect it. Oh and that thing of his own brother pointing a gun to his head.

He leaves, and I stay to make sure he comes back home to the one thing that makes him happy and content.

And that thing is me.

"Mqhele can fuck off aunty,"

"Yes he can fuck off my child, but can he fuck off in a way that won't put you in danger? Seeing as you say he has beaten you up before,"

It was never my intention to tell her about the beatings, but I got so angry when she wouldn't understand why all of this was happening, so I blurted it out.

"Mahlomu, the important thing here is that you walk out of this marriage with your children. And for that to happen you need to be smart,"

Yeses my aunt doesn't know me!

I have not been in this family for almost two decades for nothing. They will never take my children away from me, that they know. In fact, I will leave with the ones I found here, they know that very well.

"And money, do you have money saved?" she asks.

I have my own money, and yes I have money saved. If she knew me at all she'd know that I'm the one who gathered all the women in this family and told them I had been stashing money in places since the day I found out Mqhele had cheated on me. I advised them to do the same, except Zandile of course because she thinks Nkosana is one of Jesus's disciples.

"I have my own money aunty. And why are you asking about money? I haven't spoken about divorce. I said I don't want him, not now, not ever. If I take things to court I'll walk away with half of this family's wealth, and I don't want to go

there,”

I'd sit down and talk to her with the respect I've always afforded her, but no, not when she's made me this angry. She was the one person I trusted to tell me I'm right, to promise me nobody will touch me as long as she's alive. That's what she's always been to me, my aunt who'd grab a bush knife and say: "Let's go get them,"

"I'm not changing my mind aunty..."

"I'm not asking you to..." she says, goes to the kitchen and comes back with dumpie of Castle Lite. It's Mqhele's beer, one of the four bottles he left in the fridge four months ago.

She sits back down, feet on the coffee table. She's nearing her pension age but she can still open a bottle of beer with her teeth like it's a scarce skill.

"So, Mahlomu, when you say you could walk away with half of this family's wealth, what exactly do you mean?"

My phone rings, again. It's my mother this time, before her it was Zandile, there was Sbani and Gaba before that and whoever else has called since early this morning.

I'm not going to answer, because I'm pretty sure it's about yet another stunt Mqhele has pulled, I just hope he didn't go to extremes and tried to kill himself this time.

They would have called my aunt if they knew she was here, or not, because her ancient phone is off and she forgot the charger.

I might as well switch this phone of mine off.

"I asked you a question,"

I'm not going to answer her. I didn't come into this family thinking I was going to leave one day, that's why I invested in

making it what it is today.

"I'm not going to divorce him aunty,"

I'm not going to take Mqhele through anything that involves going to court, anything where he will have to sign his biggest achievement, which is his wife and children, away. If anything will set him off to the edge of all edges, it is that.

"I won't divorce him, but we are not going to get back together. He can move on with his life and I will move on with mine, that's..."

"Woouoo stop right there mntanami, move on with your life to where? With who?"

What happened to my aunt? The MaDladla I know would be here telling me to pack my bags and leave this house.

"Mami?"

Jizas! How are these children here? I changed the gate remotes, I changed the door locks, how are they inside my house?

They were here two days ago, asking me what Mqhele did to me for us to end up here. They may think they are men now but they must never think they can disrespect me like that. I sent them packing.

"Mami, everyone has been here, they said you didn't answer your phone, they had to turn around at the gate. Hello gogo," -Sbani, I guess he's just noticed my aunt sitting there drinking beer like she's in a shebeen.

Yes, I changed the locks with the intention of getting exactly that type of result.

And yet here they are...

Why do they look so drained?

“Baba is gone mami,” Lwandle says.

He has been gone for months, with not even a phone call to say where he is.

“He is a grown man, he’ll come back when...”

“He’s gone mami. He’s dead,” Sbani.

I’m quiet because I raised these kids to always tell the truth. They can lie to anyone if they want, but they know never to lie to me.

“He died early this morning. Baba and Bab’Mpande will take his body to Mbuba,” Lwandle.

He is not dead, not him. He wouldn’t.

“What happened?” my aunt asks.

“Accident,” Lwandle.

Why are his eyes teary? He’s not dead, he can’t be dead.

... ☺ ...

You wrap a scarf around your head, not a hat, a scarf that goes around and around until not even one of your hair strings is showing. And then...you put on a dress, one that goes all the way down to your ankles. It doesn’t have to be long sleeved, as long as it covers your shoulders and at least your whole upper arm. And then...you take another scarf and tie it across your upper body, vertical but not straight because it has to run from your left shoulder and all the way down to your right hip.

You walk around like that until the day arrives, but in between, you think and plan and delegate and explain things

to people who come to stare at you sitting on that mattress. They sing and pray, and then you give them food. Others leave but some stay, because they know you need them to be here, whether you know them or not. You worry about the older kids and envy the little ones who have no clue what is going on. You want to be them, because the pain that is death doesn't reach them.

I've done this twice, but it feels like I've been doing it all my life. At this moment, I'm not sure which was more painful, doing this for Mvelo those years ago or now, doing this for someone who can never be dead to me.

I haven't cried at all.

I have done what I needed to do, got in the car and came here, to this place I haven't been to in months. A home, a place that humbles and defines all of us.

Nkosana and Zandile live here now with their goats and cows and spinach and graves.

I told Mqhele that day they buried bones, I said to him: "When you go to that rondavel to do whatever you'll be doing, don't forget about Naledi's baby, don't forget about Gugu's two, don't forget about the one we lost...speak of them too,"

He looked at me like I was trying to hurt his feelings. But I wasn't. We were already at a bad place. I didn't know what he was thinking or feeling and he wasn't sure if I had betrayed him or not. We didn't talk about what happened after I left him with a gun pointed to his head.

And now, months later, I'm going to sit on the mattress for his blood, again, because Zandile, the person who should

rightfully be sitting there, won't do it.

I haven't seen any of them, I came straight here to this rondavel to change to official mourning gear, but we did speak on the phone.

I know he's here.

It's crazy because for all these years, I would turn around to see him behind me, not knowing how long he's been there. But now, I can feel him, it must be that I haven't seen him in a long time.

He came to the house, they came with him because no matter how much I don't want him, I will never keep his children away from him.

I locked myself in the bedroom every time he was in the house.

And how did they let him come in here on his own?

He won't speak, that I know. He will stand there and watch me.

And that he does, until I turn around and look at him.

He looks different. His hair started greying last year and I don't understand why he has let it grow, beard too.

I know he went to live with Nqoba, but Gugu came back and now I'm not sure where he is staying.

"Are we going to buy a cow or use one of Nkosana's?" I ask.

It's Tuesday today, we must bury him on Saturday. When a man dies a cow must be slaughtered, that's a rule, or culture or custom...I don't know because this is the first time we are burying one of them.

"Hlomu,"

There is a way that only he can say my name, like he has his own meaning for it. Like he can never ever live without saying it.

That used to make my heart skip a bit, but not anymore.

"Xolie will go look for a casket tomorrow. Nokthula and Zakithi will go with her," I say.

"Mahlomu,"

He must stop this calling my name thing, we have a funeral to arrange.

"Did you speak to Nkosana? Are they going to be able to get him here soon enough? It takes longer when it's an accident, police statements and all of that..."

These are the things he should be concerned about.

"My brother is dead Hlomu, he is dead,"

His voice is breaking, he's going to cry. No, he's already crying.

I want to hold him, press his face on my bosom and brush his head while he weeps and assure him that I'm here, as always.

But I'm not here, I will never ever be here again, not for him.

I leave him on his knees, weeping.

The mattress is in the main house, it's waiting for me to sit on it.

MqoqiwoKuhle

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NQOBA LOOKED AT both of us as we walked in, and asked: "What's going on?"

He was always going to be the one to notice something was wrong, because that's always been his thing, sensing auras and speaking on it.

I could have told him that I pointed a gun at Mqhele's forehead and that I'd have shot him if he'd given me a reason to.

He would have freaked out and gotten mad. It's taboo: we don't point guns at each other.

I could have told him that after I lowered the gun and buckled it back on my waist, we both got in my car and drove in silence. We stopped at the Engen garage in Greytown, filled up the car, and stood outside the convenience store to smoke, in silence.

I could have told him that when we were done, Mqhele tapped my shoulder and said, "Let's go home, ntwana." And then we drove back to Mbuba, in complete silence

throughout the trip.

But I didn't say anything. We walked past Nqoba and straight to the rondavel, where impepho was placed on two enamel plates. They had been waiting for us to return before the man from Margate started. He looked at me funny when I walked in and I know why.

We sat down on the floor, all of us and our children, big and little, including the twins we had only met the day before. The wives weren't there – they were straining utshwala somewhere – but they knew exactly what was happening.

Nkosana spoke to our grandfather Thulula – yes, the man who traded his own life for his wife's happiness, for our father and for us to exist, even though he knew the sacrifice would come at a cost.

The man from Margate said we had to tie isbopho and inyanda together again. That's why Nkosana and Mhlaba spoke to Thulula together, and that's why there were two plates of impepho, one for Sbopho and another for Nyanda.

When they were done speaking to ghosts, they emptied both plates into one bowl. That's what the man from Margate told them to do, while some of the children were trying not to choke from the smoke, except Sisekelo and Langa, who sat calmly and quietly through it all.

We took the bones of the people we know nothing about, newborns and adults, and we dug holes and buried them and marked their graves. They had no names but we know they had our eyes and Thulula's blood. Then we all threw the soil into the graves, covered them and walked away.

We could have gone back to the main house, gathered around the table and ate the feast while the children ran around. I could have watched my brothers put their arms around their wives' waists and Mpande doting on his newfound children.

But that didn't happen, because as much as that whole process was meant to mark an end to who we have been all our lives, it came with new things. Things like delinquent wives and new children.

We went back to the rondavel where the man was still waiting for us with a pack of razors. He started with the kids. The youngest ones cried because, well, imagine a razor cutting the skin on the top of your head. Mabutho wanted to know why—he wasn't going to stand in front of that man and let his skin be cut for a reason he did not know. We had to force him.

The man said normally he'd have taken us to a river, with a goat, where we'd have washed with umswani and intelezi. But we did all of that inside the rondavel, pots of utshwala brewing at the centre, surrounding insika.

When we were done, he wanted to leave immediately.

We called the driver.

Never once did he tell us if we were now good people, or if we'd ever kill anyone again.

But we, again, woke up to the rondavel in flames. We let it burn, never even tried to put the fire out.

In the morning we gathered some of the ashes, dug up one more grave and put them in. That was our mother and father's grave. That's what the man told us to do when he

left. He knew that rondavel was going to burn down with all utshwala and goat meat.

Nkosana named Mpande's children Bayede and Madlozi, names fitting a time where they walked into our lives. We would have slaughtered a goat for them but we still had to go to wherever their mother was from, and pay damages.

It was over. A new beginning for us. No children dying before they are born. I had counted: the one, Mqhele, killed himself; the one twin, Naledi, lost; the two that Gugu lost; Sbani's twins; and Mvelo.

We should have seen there was something wrong, but then again, a lot of things had been wrong all our lives so we handled it all and moved on like we always did. But after that night, even I felt different. I was ready to donate my guns to whoever wanted them.

Sbani was getting ready to go to rehab the following day. Lwandle was ... nobody really knew what his plans were but Nkosana was starting to soften up on him; he was ready to promote him from rank duty to an open-plan desk at Sbopho Logistics' offices.

It was great: Mqhele was obsessing over Hlomu again; Gugu was still around; Nkosana and Zandile were talking about buying a farm and leaving Joburg; Mpande was talking about putting his children in school.

And me. I was just there. I had nothing to go to or continue from, now that I was a good man.

We had lived the same life, me and my brothers, but along the way they were building and acquiring things while I floated in between, being there for whoever needed me,

whenever they needed me. Loving my brother's wife.

... ☺ ...

I slept that night, something I didn't usually do, and when the sun came up I went straight to the main house to make coffee. And there she was, standing, just standing, with her back against the long cupboard.

It wasn't like her. Hlomu sleeps.

I regretted walking into that kitchen there and then, because for as long as I'd known her, awkward moments were something that didn't exist between us. We'd always had chemistry: that was why we had things that had stayed between us.

"I'm going to make everyone breakfast," she said, with a low sigh. But she wasn't doing anything, and I figured she'd needed to leave that bed, that was why she'd woken up so early, if she'd slept at all.

"How is he?" I asked.

It had been three days, and to everyone they looked like their normal selves, clinging to each other like they always did.

"He's fine," she said, turning away from me and opening the fridge.

She looked suspicious, but she also looked intact, so I was relieved. Mqhele had promised never to lay a hand on her again; he'd wept and sworn on his children's lives that he'd never hit her again. And, besides, the demons that had been sitting on all our shoulders were gone now, and we weren't

going to have the urge to harm anyone going forward. It was a strange thing to feel and believe.

"I understand," I said. I was lying. I didn't. I still don't understand why she slept with that man.

"You understand what?" She still wasn't looking at me, but I knew she knew exactly what I was talking about.

"Hlomu, I'm saying that ..."

"I don't want to talk about it, Mqoqi. And thank you," she said, opening the cupboard and pulling out five cans of baked beans.

I felt that 'thank you', I knew she meant it and I knew what she was thanking me for.

... ☺ ...

I did not see Mqhele at all after that. I avoided him. And in the evening I went straight to my rondavel, tossed and turned until 3am.

I came to the realisation that I had nothing, nobody. I knew I couldn't stay, that it was time for me to go, again.

The bike had been sitting in the garage, behind a car, for a while. That car was left in Mbuba for Mhlaba to use whenever he needed to go somewhere, but he couldn't go anywhere, because, according to government records, he was still in prison.

I could have started the bike there in the yard and ridden off but I didn't want to make a noise so I pushed it all the way to the gate, opened it slightly, and pushed it out. I was not sure where I was going, but I knew I'd figure it out. I always

do.

The first time I'd left, I was just a boy. I had no money and no bike then. I'd hitchhiked and ended up under a bridge, cold and hungry, but free. And I'd found Gabby, but I couldn't go to her now.

The second time I'd disappeared, I wasn't a child any more.

I knew that when my brothers woke up a couple of hours later, they'd know I was gone. And then they would have to make up yet another lie to their wives about where I was and why.

... ☺ ...

Now I'm sitting here, still not sure what possessed me to come to this motherfucking township, where clearly people have no respect for the dead. It's a parade of big hats and designer suits by those who are here just for the sake of being seen.

But it's tears and tissues for the old woman and the big woman sitting on the front bench. The little girl in the black dress with the pink bow on her head has been fidgeting throughout, leaning more on the old woman's arm than she does on her mother's.

I came here for her, the mother. There's sadness on her face but I see relief too.

Who would have thought that I, Mqoqi, would end up at the funeral of this man? He'd died a week after I left his bedside at that hospice, with no clue about the shit he'd left behind.

I'm here because I'm curious, and maybe even a little bitter, about how a man so insignificant could push me as far as this idiot lying in that coffin did, so far gone that I was ready to shoot my own brother if he dared harm the woman he loves with his life and more.

I know her name is Lahliwe, and I know they hate her here. She has a blanket over her shoulders but I don't believe her cries at all. That man had been dead for a long time; he was still breathing and talking, but are you still a man if you can't even lift your hand?

Mkhize was ... nothing, really. If I hadn't found that SMS I wouldn't even have remembered I'd once almost given him a backhand slap at a mall years ago. But I don't start things unless I plan to finish them, and I wanted to see him go down into the grave.

I have to keep the sunglasses and hat on because the last thing I want is someone recognising me.

The eulogy is read out by a teenage girl who speaks the same English as those kids of ours, tongue rolling and nasals shut. She calls him "malume", says she looked up to him because he was intelligent.

I see. He was highly educated: the list of degrees and accomplishments is proof. And with all that, he was still stupid enough to do what he did.

"Sorry," this woman says, squeezing herself into the small space between me and the person closest to me on this bench.

This is why I don't go to church. It's a place where you can't not be nice. People do all kinds of evil things for six days straight, then come to these places on the seventh day

to act holy.

I fold my arms and squeeze my knees together so I can shrink myself enough to make her comfortable.

She smells nice, fresh. I'd sit here and happily inhale her scent if the brim of her big black hat wasn't scratching my cheek every time she moved her shoulders.

On her phone screen is a picture of two children, a girl and a little boy. I'm still admiring their cuteness when she taps on the WhatsApp app and pulls the phone close to her face.

That's it, then. It's back to the speeches. Now it's a man speaking on behalf of colleagues. Mkhize was a successful accountant. It would mean something to me, and maybe even some respect for him, but the fact is, accountants work for me, and I don't even have a post-matric certificate, not even from those dodgy unregistered colleges in the Joburg CBD.

I tried to get a degree years ago but there were cash heists to be done and the art of stealing doesn't really afford one the opportunity to finish an exam paper before shooting up a cash van and walking away with bags filled with millions.

No. Not this.

I sat at the back of this church because I didn't want to be seen, but more than that, because I didn't want anyone crying next to me. This part of the church is supposed to be accommodating people who are here because they have nowhere else to be. This sniffing and snorting and tears ... I'm not here for that.

The old lady sitting on the bench in front of us turns and

hands her a tissue. She cries harder – not loud, just intense grief that's making me very uncomfortable. I notice her hands are shaking, probably because she's suppressing her sobs. What she wants to do is wail, maybe even roll on the floor with her arms outstretched, like some women do at funerals.

The only person I ever cried for uncontrollably, rolled on the floor and punched the wall for, was Mvelo. But I did all of that when I was alone, because we don't do that. And it's not even about us being emotionless men, it's about us understanding that we don't have the right to do that, because we've killed so many people, we should not be rolling on floors and punching walls when other people kill us.

She's back on WhatsApp, still sniffing, her eyes red.

People at the front are getting up to view the body and leave money in the plate. I have no desire to see Mkhize's dead body.

"Are you sure you want to go there?" I ask her, when she gets up and almost falls into my lap.

She looks at me, balancing her hand on my knee, clearly irritated by my question.

I should have kept my mouth shut because now she's looking at me with that look only women can give you, before they tell you shit. That's one of the strangest things about women: they can do a whole lot of things while crying, including running their mouths and being extremely rude while at it.

"If your giraffe legs weren't blocking the way, this wouldn't have happened. Now move! I don't even know you," she says.

I'm dragging my giraffe legs out of here. I have places to
be.

2

“SO, WHO IS going to start talking?”

Twelve bottles. Twelve. Among them four 25-year-old Old Rip Van Winkle bottles I had shipped here, all the way here from the US.

They are all still quiet. Twelve minutes since I sat down here and they stood over there, leaning against the wall, some with hands in pockets and others with arms folded.

None of them have realised how far this can go.

“The problem here is ning’jwayela amasimba,” I say.

They can gasp all they want, the fact of the matter is, nobody is leaving this room until I know who I will make bleed tonight.

I opened this club three years ago. My brothers were against it, said we had enough shit going on in the transport business, we didn’t need to be fighting for turf with white mafia and deadly Nigerians. But the taxi business was never a thing I wanted to do with my life. It’s a place where you always end up having to kill someone, whether you are up

to it or not.

I entered the nightclub business because of that, and yet here I am ...

"I'm not going to fire anyone ..."

They look relieved.

"I'm going to kill someone."

Now they're shocked.

"It was Xavier, boss. He did it," someone blurts out.

It's the boy I met at Harem late last year. He took our orders, brought us exactly what we asked for, and at the end of the night brought an accurate bill, all without a notepad in his hand. I found him the next morning and offered him a job here.

"Tell me exactly what happened," I say.

He looks at Xavier. I look at him. He's the snitch. He must finish what he started.

"Bonolo, I'm talking to you. Where is my stock?"

Xavier clears his throat. Clearly, he has come to his senses, but he keeps his hands in his pockets and looks down, quietly. I see I'll be taking him on a bike ride after this.

"He lent the bottles to his brother, boss. His brother wanted to get some tender so he had to entertain some politicians. So they came here and Xavier took out the bottles and pretended that his brother paid for them. So they drank them and they smoked the cigars, the ones you said must never be touched. They also used the VIP Lounge for free. Xavier said his brother would replace the bottles within a week, and we all believed him."

"When you say 'we', who are you talking about?" There

are twenty-three people here.

"Xavier, me, and them," he says, pointing at the two brothers with the beards. I know they are brothers but I don't know which one is older.

Great.

"The rest of you can go. We open in twenty minutes. The four of you: where is my stock?"

Bonolo must think I'm keeping him here because he is the singing bird, but no, he was as much in it as them. They'll probably rough him up when I'm gone but he's the only one keeping his job, because every business needs a snitch.

"You can sit," I say.

They don't move. Okay. I move to sit on the two-seater couch. They move to squeeze themselves together on another two-seater couch across from me.

"I hired all of you to run this place. I pay you money nobody can ever pay you in this business, and instead you steal from me? You think because I don't come here, I won't know? Xavier?"

If I were him, I'd be sitting very close to the door. He knows exactly how much those bottles cost, because he's been in this business for years. That's why I hired him.

"My brother will replace them ..."

"Your brother doesn't have shit. And he's not getting that tender."

"We'll make a plan," he says and folds his arms.

What plan? This kid is trying to test me. "You stole from me, Xavier."

He leans forward and looks at me. "But, Mqoqi, what

happens here at Blazer stays here, you said it yourself. I've done things for you. I'm sure something as simple as three bottles of expensive bourbon can't come between us."

I see where he's going with this: le'shlama thinks we are friends.

"You can go, Bonolo. Go to work. The two of you: fuck off. You're fired. Xavier, stay here: we need to talk."

He has crossed the line. I don't owe anyone shit, not in this life. I don't care what they've done for me: as long as I paid them to do it, they have no right to blackmail me. Yes, I've let cocaine flow freely here now and then – wrong and shady, yes, but good and pure cocaine can't be an issue when people are out there sniffing that trashy shit they call ntash. Besides, I only allow it in the VIP Lounge, where people pay real money.

I opened this club here in Witbank for a reason: it's an hour away from Gauteng but it's in another province, a "drive past" province to get anywhere in this country. During the day it could be an office building, but at night, the top floor comes alive.

"Are you threatening me, Xavier?"

He shakes his head, but his eyes are giving me a clear answer.

"So what are you saying?"

"I'm saying that the frequent-client list is stored in my iCloud, and that it's not always the Instagram slay queens who walk in here and straight to the VIP Lounge. Some of them are from that boarding school down the road. You can't really tell when they are covered in make-up and wearing

long weaves but I'm sure their parents could still recognise them in videos."

What the fuck is he talking about? No underage girls are allowed here, that's the number-one rule.

"We've had some young men, too, and I'm sure these old men who come here for privacy don't want all of that stuff creeping up to the surface."

Is he crazy? Who does he think he's talking to?

"You said to let some things slide, so we let some things slide," he says and shrugs.

"And you have videos and pictures, Xavier?"

He nods, satisfied with himself.

I see. Now I have no choice but to kill him, and then close this club down, and then call Mpande to hack him and wipe everything out, but that's if he'll agree because apparently he doesn't do these things any more, he has kids.

"Do you understand that now I'm gonna have to kill you?"

Xavier laughs. Clearly, he doesn't.

Honestly, I've had a hectic two months, too hectic, with Mzizi starting shit, telling us we have problems we didn't know existed. If it weren't for what Phakeme did, we would never have pursued any of that stuff.

Sisekelo is turning 14 soon, and he is a strange child, a child of fires and ghosts.

The man from Margate said Sbani and Lwandle, and it's not that they don't have their own flaws, he said they went past that age without any troubles because Hlomu "had them under her skirts", whatever that means. He spoke of Hlomu like she was a thing that we could never be without. My

brothers believed him; they looked at how everything was easy after she came into our lives. Yes, we still went and did the things we did before her, but we did them knowing we had her to go back home to. She was home, she has been from the beginning, but she was home to me before she was home to Mqhele and maybe that's why I don't regret almost shooting him.

And now, soon after we did all those things that were supposed to make us never ever find killing people easy, Xavier is happening, and I'm pretty sure engaging with him further is a total waste of my time.

"Let's take a ride."

I'm just saying that. I know he's not just going to follow me out the back door and hop on the bike with me. I can't even shoot him dead here because it's still early and the club is still quiet. In fact, I can't do anything to him, not here, not now.

But I can beat the shit out of him and then leave him to bleed it out ...

"Happy birthday!" she shouts, then stops, her mouth open.

What makes people just open doors and enter rooms without knocking? And it's not my fucking birthday. And I told her to come after 9pm.

"What's going on?" she asks.

Yerrrr ... "Nothing. I was just helping him up. Go back to work."

Xavier gets up quickly and rushes out of the room.

She has three balloons, a thing in a box wrapped in shiny

navy paper and a book. On the balloons it's written "Happy Birthday". It's not my fucking birthday. My birthday was a month ago.

She hands me the box and lets the balloons fly all the way up and stay there, stuck on the ceiling board.

"That guy didn't look happy. What were you doing to him?"

She's always asking questions, this one. "Nothing." I'm telling the truth: I was still just talking to him.

"My birthday was a month ago, you know."

I know she knows. She never forgets my birthday and I never forget hers. In fact, I get anxiety whenever it approaches because I'm always scared I'll forget it. Last year I bought her one of those little Mercedes Benzes because she said once that it was her dream car. I didn't see or choose the car; I found out what colour it was through a picture she sent me on WhatsApp after she tried to call me about eight times when it was delivered to her office. I was in a meeting all day.

I do things for her, but it's not because I love her, I know I don't. It's probably because I have nobody to do things for.

"Open it," she says, indicating the box with her eyes. She always looks excited.

The box is heavy. How she was able to carry it all the way here, I don't know. It's a coffee machine, a Breville Barista Express Espresso Machine, the one that's been sold out for months.

"Where did you find it?"

"I have my ways," she says, impressed with herself.

I'm not the jump-for-joy type but I'm happy. She makes

me happy. And when she's done making me happy, she psychoanalyses me, claims I have two personalities. She says I'm a thug who reads books.

"It's only 7.45pm." Does she care? I doubt it.

"First of all, Mqoqi, you didn't tell me you were in town. I had to hear it from one of your staff members."

Yes, the girl at the entrance, the one who puts everything on social media. She knows not to put anything about me there, and I would've called her into order for telling people – "Boss is here, we can't breathe" – but I had to address the issue of the alcohol thieves, a bigger problem. An even bigger problem is that this one here saw it and called me, and now she's here with balloons and birthday gifts.

"I haven't seen you in three months," she says.

I haven't seen anyone I'm not related to in three months, unless I had to.

"I had to take care of some things. How are you? Come here. You look beautiful, as always."

She smiles. It doesn't take a lot to get a smile out of this one. Unlike Thobi. My brothers still don't know about Thobi, and even if they did, they'd call her "one of my women".

"Why didn't you tell me you were here?"

Yerrrr ... I'm just passing through. "I thought you were in Durban. Don't you have a big case you're working on?"

She rolls her eyes. Why do women always do that? What does it even mean?

She throws herself on the couch and lies back, ankles crossed on the armrest. She looks at me and smiles that smile of hers, black gums and all. Girls who look like her almost

always have a deep voice.

I love looking at her. She's beautiful in a weird type of way, a way that only I can see and understand. And it's not just her black gums and scissor legs, it's her big brain and mean streak.

Years ago she tried to blackmail me, that's how I met her.

"I like you in a suit. It makes you look, I don't know, safer. It's those hoodies that you wear all the time that I don't like. There's just something about the way you look when you're in them ..."

I laugh. She also makes me laugh.

The only reason I wore a suit today was because I knew I was going to have to mingle with guests here. My clubs don't allow anyone in hoodies and sneakers in, so I wasn't going to show up wearing those.

"Where have you been, Mqoqi? I haven't seen you, not even in the tabloids, for months. Of course, you're always there for fuck-boy reasons, but ..."

It embarrasses me that at my age I still have the fuck-boy label attached to my name.

"What case are you working on now?"

I know that face, and I know she knows I don't want to talk about where I've been. I admire how she always knows when to back down.

"Okay, so first of all, I'm short staffed because, you know ..." she says and raises her arms. "But I have this case of this woman who wants me to dig up dirt on her husband. She doesn't want to divorce him, but she wants to have something on him and she wants him to know that she does, so that she

can do whatever she wants while still married to him.”

“Why?”

“The guy is a big shot, a very successful construction-company owner. I’m sure you know him but I won’t tell you his name.”

She never does give me names. I respect that about her.

“So this guy, his company got a R113-million tender from a parastatal. And you know how he got it?”

It’s not a lot of money to make your wife want to blackmail you, but ... “We all know that you have to bribe someone to get a tender, you don’t just get it because your books are in order and you’re known for delivering. So this guy, the person who was going to make sure he got the tender, didn’t want money. Guess what he wanted?”

I can guess. It happens.

“So the husband told the wife about it, because, you know, R113 million is not little money. And the wife agreed, went on a weekend getaway with the man, and the tender issue was settled and confirmed.”

It happens.

“And you know what, Mqoqi? You always give me that look when I tell you men are dumb. This wife we’re talking about is 29 and the husband is 51. He left his first wife for her, first tender he got, and he was looking for a bright young thing. He married the first one who paid attention to him and now they live in Waterkloof and drive big cars.

“So he got the tender, yes, but the problem is what secured it didn’t end on that weekend away. *Moghel* and the guy are still fucking and he doesn’t know. Now she wants

to have something on him, so that if or when he finds out and decides to divorce her, she can say, give me this much money or I talk, and it's easy to talk these days, you put stuff on Twitter and that's it."

This old guy is in shit.

"I haven't found anything yet except for the usual politics stuff that can easily be blown off. But I'm going to find something, and I'm going to make sure it's dirty, because what kind of man asks his wife to sleep with another man just so he can get rich? I don't blame Se—" She stops before it slips.

"But she also—" I try to chip in, but she knows exactly where I'm about to go and cuts me off.

"It's his fault."

And I know she's about to go on and on about how much the wife is justified and call her a queen and if I push further she's going to start telling me about how we men see women as nothing but talking vaginas. And a few hours from now I'll be sweating all over her. That's why she's here.

The door opens slightly. It's Bonolo. "Boss, your brother has just parked outside."

How the hell did they find me? She knows she must leave, through the back door.

"Anyway, besides the birthday thing, I came here to tell you that your favourite girl is at it again. Amanda, or whatever she calls herself these days. She's very smart. I admire her. She comes back stronger each time," she says, kissing me on the lips while grabbing my penis. Then she leaves.

... ☺ ...

Great. Mpande, followed by Mhlaba. I thought we'd agreed to keep Mhlaba in Mbuba because his status still says "incarcerated".

And when the hell did Nkangala come back?

3

"IT SMELLS LIKE a woman in here," Mhlaba says, sniffing the air.

"How do you know what women smell like, wena, a whole fourteen years ushay'indlwabu?"

He laughs, because that's what Mhlaba always does.

Yes, he went to jail for me, but that was for only five years. Whatever he stayed in jail for after that had nothing to do with me.

But it really does smell like a woman in here: Sthembile's perfume.

"You had a birthday party?" Mhlaba again. The balloons are still up there on the ceiling and the box is still on the desk. I'm going to ignore him because I know he doesn't know when my birthday is.

Mpande hasn't said anything stupid, or anything at all, and the fact that he's brought Nkangala with him means something serious has brought him here. I won't ask him how he found me this time, because my brother can find a

coin in the ocean.

"Macingwane, go grab a drink," he says to Nkangala.

Mhlaba follows him out.

"I see we've forgiven Nkangala," I say as I watch him settle down on the same spot Xavier had been sitting. The plan was always that Nkangala follow Gugu around while she was away trying to find whatever she was looking for. But he got too close to her, and he knew he had to run after that.

"He's okay," he says, waving a hand dismissively. The leg bouncing has started. He always does this when he's frustrated.

"How are the boys?" I'm going to keep asking him questions until he gets to the point where he talks. I know how to handle him. "Are they staying with Zandile?"

He's bouncing both legs now. The problem with Mpande is you can't even offer him a beer or a cigarette or zol. That's why he is so complicated.

"Where is Mqhele?"

"He's staying at Nqoba's house now."

What? Mqhele has left his house? Mqhele would never leave Hlomu. He'd never go to bed without her or their children under his roof. I thought I'd fixed that Sandile thing. Now what is this?

"Why? When did that—?"

He raises his hand to stop me.

"I didn't come here for that, ndoda. You're the last person I'd come to with women problems, you know that," he says.

Women problems, yes, because nobody ever really takes Mpande's women problems seriously. If he survived Gwen,

he can survive any woman. So the fact that he went as far as tracking me down just to talk about "women problems" is strange. The bouncing legs make it even more worrying. It's been his thing since he was about 15 and it annoys the hell out of all of us. It got worse when Zandile went to jail. He'd sit quietly, biting his nails. But he stopped the nail-biting thing - we made him stop, because what kind of man bites his nails?

We'd have a whole conversation with him present in the room but he'd hear not a single word. Mqhele kept trying to make him try smoking, but he wouldn't.

Nkosana had a better plan. He took him to Crown Mines on a quiet Sunday and gave him a gun. He said to him, "Empty it." That's been Mpande's stress reliever since he was 16, firing guns at shooting ranges, yet he's never shot anyone dead. Strange.

Years ago, I took it upon myself to figure out what's wrong with him. They call it anxiety, I found that out in a book I read whose title I can't remember.

"I want Thando to stay, but I love Ndoni," he says.

So that's why he's here. He shouldn't have come to me, not when he's like this. I don't know this Mpande, the one who gets stuck between two women. I know the Mpande who, like me, can have them all at once.

"I have to think about my children, and that means Thando in my life, in my house. All the shit she did doesn't matter now. What matters is my kids. I'm not going to have them growing up with a mother here and a stepmother there."

We don't do that; it has never worked with us. We keep our offspring and their bearers under one roof because we

can't have the Nkosana mess again. That having been said, I'm not the person he should have come to with this. Sambulo, maybe, yes.

"What does Thando say?" I ask.

"She's not going anywhere without the kids. She's their mother. They don't know me."

He's always had a soft spot for that Thando girl. The Mpande I know wouldn't be here, thinking about her feelings and wants, when she deliberately hid his kids from him.

"What does Ndoni say?"

He sighs, but at least the leg bouncing has stopped, which means he's getting calmer, and that's because he's talking and I'm here in front of him, listening.

"Ndoni thinks Thando is nothing to worry about. She thinks nothing has changed, that Thando will disappear, and Hlomu or Zandile will take care of the kids while she and I continue with our relationship as it is."

I'm not surprised. That sounds exactly like Ndoni. She's been in this family for two years but she still thinks it's just her and Mpande in the relationship. The problem with that girl is that she doesn't know shit about anything here. She thinks just because her father is our person, she can make the rules.

"Make a choice, ndoda. It's up to you." That's all I have to offer. I have nothing else. Because issues like these are not the type of stuff Mpande and I have had to worry ourselves about. We've always been carefree asshole idiots. We do what we want to do, when we want and how we want. That's the best thing about having many siblings older than you: you're

always considered young, even after you reach 35. It makes it easier when you're a millionaire before you turn 30.

"Are you done?"

It's Mhlaba. I'm not sure if we're done but I told Mpande what I think. Besides, he's a grown man; he should be able to figure it out.

"Now we need to talk about important things. Not this ... thing you two are discussing because ... ntwana, you have two women, you want both of them for different reasons, so keep both of them. Umfazi uyasetshenzwa, athambe. I can take you to a man I know," he says as he sits next to Mpande.

We're many things but witchcraft, nope, that's not our thing. Ngcobo always says the same thing Mhlaba just said, that a man having one woman is the worst form of self-torture. But then again, it's Ngcobo.

"How are you, ntwana? What are you doing here? Ulalaphi? You left Mbuba like a ghost, in the middle of the night. What's wrong with you? You've been gone for a whole two months."

Again, why is he here?

"I'm a grown man, Mhlaba. I'm not going to explain myself to you."

I see the switch in his face, the one that Nqoba also has. They're similar; too similar. They laugh a lot but you always have to look in their eyes to know exactly where you are with them.

He leans forward, elbows on his thighs, a habit we all have.

"I'm not here for your little-boy problems. The two of you don't want to grow up, I can see that. Obafo are dealing with

their own shit, wives running off and all," he says, as if it's nothing.

So now he's the one keeping us in line?

"When was the last time you heard anything about Mahlubi?" he asks.

I look at Mpande. He has his face in his hands. Why are we discussing Mahlubi?

"I'm asking both of you."

Mpande shakes his head. The last time I saw Mahlubi or his brother Mthunzi was the morning after the robbery that landed Mhlaba in jail. Look, we were just kids, me 18 and Mthunzi 19, and it wasn't like we had not done robberies before, it's just that we decided to do that one without our brothers.

Mthunzi's girlfriend was a waiter at some Chinese restaurant in some dingy corner there in Weltevreden Park. She said the Chinese didn't put money in the bank, they kept it in the flat they lived in, above the restaurant. It was going to be easy, except she didn't specify where exactly in the flat they stashed the money. We spent three hours in that flat, a whole three hours, with three Chinese people tied to chairs. They neither spoke nor understood English, so maybe they did try to tell us where the money was, we just didn't understand. Our guns weren't even real because our brothers didn't let us walk around carrying guns.

We left the flat with only R1 800 we found in the man's wallet, but not before Mthunzi beat the man so bad I heard he went blind in one eye. Of course, we found Mahlubi waiting for us when we arrived at Mthunzi's rented backroom in

Betrans. As to how we thought we could organise and pull off a robbery on our own, without him knowing, I still do not understand. But we were just boys, and boys that age thrive on stupidity.

He didn't ask questions, he just locked the door and went wild, beating us with a hosepipe. He knew exactly where we'd been and what we'd done. But I wasn't going to be battered by any man unless it was Nkosana, and I fought my way out of that room and ran for my life.

Mahlubi never told my brothers about that robbery. They still would never have known had Mhlaba not walked into that same Chinese restaurant five years later to buy I don't know what because there was no way he was there for the food. The next thing he knew he was being picked up by the police, handcuffed and put in a van.

He doesn't talk much about what happened after that but the one-eyed Chinese man testified in court that he was definitely the man who'd tortured his family. But he won that case, he could have walked free that day, but he had to go on yet another trial because they had already charged him with a cash heist he knew nothing about. In the end he got five years, and the Chinese family went back to their country. Apparently they had been robbed five times after us, and all those other robbers stole thousands from them.

My brothers got that call from Mhlaba years later, and two weeks later we became celebrities – the worst thing to ever happen to us. The fame was annoying but it was nothing compared to the fear of people recognising us and pointing us out for whatever crimes they'd witnessed us committing.

We had to start paying some cops.

After all these years, what does Mahlubi want? It can't be revenge.

"Why are you asking about Mahlubi?"

I'm probably the only one who doesn't already know.

"He was spotted in Mpumalanga, but he's disappeared again. He went for sdudla's sister,"

This idiot! But Mpande calls him to order before I do.

"You can't call Qhawe's wife sdudla, Mhlaba. Don't do that. Her name is Naledi."

"Which sister?"

"Lesedi." Mpande.

Every time I hear her name, my balls freeze. Every time I see her, I feel like she sees right through me.

"He wouldn't," I say. Because he knows not to test Qhawe like that, not to test all of us.

"What I'm trying to tell you is, you need to come back home. This gallivanting thing you're doing will get you killed. You're a sitting duck. The Bhunganes will come for you once they find out you're alone somewhere."

I hear Mhlaba but I don't think Mahlubi cares about me. It's Mqhele he'll go for if his plan is to get revenge.

"He's right," Mpande says. He's been too quiet. "And things are shit back home. Mqhele is fucked up. He just showed up at Nqoba's house with a suitcase and he's been there since. We don't let him go to his house alone to see the kids because you know him. Nkosana took all his guns. This whole thing about his dead twin messed him up real bad."

It's not the twin thing, it's the Sandile thing, which nobody

else knows about except me and him.

“I’ll be back home tomorrow.”

I know Mpande has doubts, but he gets up to leave anyway.

Mhlaba has done what he came here to do. He’s leaving it all up to me. “I’m driving. I can’t trust you to drive when you’re this stressed. Nkangala must be drunk by now.”

“You don’t have a driver’s licence, Mhlaba, you have an active prison number. That’s why we only travel with you at night, using back roads.” Mpande.

Under normal circumstances, it would have been a funny joke.

I walk them out through the back door.

... ♡ ...

The club is already buzzing, but I’m not going out there, not tonight. Xavier must thank his ancestors. I have a hotel room and a woman waiting for me. And in the morning, I know exactly where I need to go.

Mahlubi will find me when he does. Right now, I need to fix what is broken.

Lakliwe

1

THERE ARE MANY ways of fighting back. I know three.

You sharpen your nails and claw the life out of them; you kill them with kindness; or you die and let grief and guilt haunt them to the core.

It doesn't matter that you get to a point where you no longer know who you are fighting and why, or that you are fighting the wrong people. You keep clawing and scowling because you'd rather be the monster than the victim.

I clawed the life out of my husband bit by bit throughout the five years of our marriage. His revenge was dying and leaving me like this. It's his fault that I'm here, in this place where, of all the ways they could test me, they chose to make me share a room with Marieke.

I knew when she walked in here with that fok-nee-man hairstyle that she was probably from Brakpan or Boksburg and I had to hide my purse. She's nice, though, that type of nice that white people are to black people when other white people look down on them.

The first thing I asked her, after she'd unpacked all her stuff into the wardrobe, was why she was here.

"My mistake was falling in love with Jaco. First it was weed and the next thing I knew I was on cocaine, and other things," she said. Jaco is her boyfriend. She talks about him all the time, and although she blames him for turning her into a junkie, I know she's strongly attached to him. I can see it in her eyes. "So my parents went to find me in Hillbrow and dragged me here," she said.

She wanted to tell me more about Jaco and how her father chased him down the streets of that Sodom-and-gomorra called Hillbrow, but I had my own things to worry about. Besides, I don't want to hear anything about Hillbrow. Years ago I exited that place on foot, at high speed, wearing nothing but a bra and leggings, on a night I'd rather not talk about.

Now I'm here because apparently I have been overcome with grief and I can't function. Or maybe, like Sandile once told me, I'm bitter and angry and wounded, and I need help. I'm a 32-year-old widow and I didn't even see it coming until I was sitting on the other side of the table listening to the doctor tell me, "It's really bad, Mrs Mkhize."

Before that, my husband had complained about a headache that kept coming and going, and then he'd be dizzy and sleepy all the time. I put my foot down and forced him into the car when he woke up one morning with trembling hands and bloodshot eyes. From then on it was downhill.

The doctor said it was already stage four. I didn't believe it at first because, first of all, the man wasn't even 40 yet and he wasn't the dumb type, so how could he have not known that

there was something wrong with his balls?

We hadn't had sex in a year and I was happy because, honestly, I didn't want to. The last time I'd lain on my back and fake-moaned, it took eight minutes. After that I did what I did every time, I went to the bathroom and pretended I was wiping myself clean. When I got back into bed, I kissed him and told him he was the best.

It wasn't always eight minutes, you know. In the first two years of our relationship, it was steamy. We were horny goats.

We tried chemotherapy but he couldn't handle it. He gave up too quickly and too easily, and on the day he held my hand and told me to look for a hospice, I looked at my daughter and realised I had failed her again. I'd married Sandile for her and nothing else. I believe it was the same with him. I think that if I hadn't gotten pregnant, we would've gone our separate ways.

Before I pinned him down, my company had been a service provider to him. I loved that he was educated and that he dressed well, but I wasn't planning on sleeping with him, not until I bumped into him at the Bushfire Festival, casual and drunk. I was still in my 20s then, carefree and obsessed with proving I was a sexual being, to myself and whomever believed women had to reserve their vaginas for men who would decide they were worthy of their surname.

He recognised me immediately.

He and his crew were sleeping at a guesthouse. My friends and I had gone with the cheaper option of sleeping in the tents within the venue. I didn't sleep in the tent that night. I left with him and had the best sex I'd ever had in my life.

MESS

I swore to my friends when I returned the next morning that it was a once-off thing, but then that man's penis was wizardry. That's probably why his genitals killed him in the end.

Our thing continued when we went back to Durban and silly me got pregnant along the way. I was shocked when he asked me to marry him, and most of my friends tried to convince me otherwise, but I wasn't going to let my child grow up without her father. Nope, I wasn't going to let the cycle continue.

His mother didn't like me. She seemed to have a bad feeling about me from the beginning. And when he was dying, I knew the worst was coming. They tried to take the house and the cars and everything we owned. But as I said, my husband was smart: he left a will which even I haven't yet seen, two months after he died.

They tried to make me wear a black dress and black panties for a whole year, but I said no, because Sandile was not about that life. They looked at me funny when I laughed and they didn't understand why I wanted to go back to my house and my job a week after we buried him.

They didn't understand. Nobody can ever understand how it feels to wake up every morning knowing that death is imminent, to watch someone deteriorate to bones covered in skin, and wonder if this isn't the last time you wash his face and apply lotion on his feet.

I started grieving for Sandile the day he spoke of a hospice, and that was months before he took his last breath. I told him I loved him every day he lay on that bed, because maybe that

was what he needed to hear so he could go in peace. But I said it looking down at my hands, because I knew, I knew that I was trying to convince myself more than I was trying to convince him.

I cried at his funeral. I wailed and banged on his coffin with both my fists and screamed "Why?" Why did he choose to die on me when he was the only one who could live with me?

And when I was done causing a scene and left that graveyard, I walked away even angrier. When anger hadn't done anything for me two weeks ago, I called my doctor friend. She didn't ask questions, she just wrote me a referral letter to come here for twenty-one days. She said it was what I needed, and she said it politely, with her hand on top of mine. Her eyes were begging me to say yes.

Emazolweni Spiritual Healing Centre, that's what it's called, which is why I don't understand why Marieke is here instead of in rehab.

I've known her for only five days but she's already told me all her family's shady history.

"My Pa once beat me to a pulp with a sjambok and fists and kicks. I turned green, Lals. I was green all over my body. I was 12. Ma made me stay inside the house for a whole week. She said the worst thing that could happen was if the neighbours saw me looking like that," she told me on the second day.

"You know hoekom, Lals?" she asked.

How could I possibly know?

"Pa is a big thing in church. Ma has to protect his image."

The way she spoke about her father was confusing because she didn't even seem angry about it. There was still that tone of endearment, even on the following days when she told me how he owned six guns and made her little brother polish them often. All the information she shares is volunteered.

I never ask and I never say anything about my own life because, really, what's there to share? I have no shithead father. I have a beautiful daughter, and my husband prepared me for life after his death, financially if not emotionally.

... ☺ ...

I know she's back in the room when I hear shuffling and humming. I open the bathroom door before she bangs on it and shouts that irritating "Lals" thing. Nobody calls me that. I've always been called Lale because I insist on it.

I know that today is one of those days when her anxiety is on steroids.

"What are you looking for?"

She's searched every shelf and opened every cupboard in this room.

"My lighter. Where is it?" We're not allowed to keep anything flammable because some of us here are crazier than others. "I came here with a lighter. They took my weed but not my lighter. I hid it." She sounds desperate. "I have a joint," she says, waving a single loose joint in my face.

Shembe! Wherever she got it, I don't know. But I point at the top of the cupboard because that's where I hid her little pink lighter.

"You're a star, Lals!" she says and opens the balcony door.

If she gets caught we'll both be punished for this, but I've lived with Marieke long enough to know she isn't interested in shedding her addiction. She just wants to do her twenty-one days and get out of here. My guess is her first stop will be Hillbrow, to look for Jaco and continue where they left off.

"Where on earth did you get that?" I ask.

She's finished smoking half of it and stashed the rest under the small mat on the balcony. "Some guy. He arrived last night. Tall, with weird eyes, but at least he's useful," she says and sprays air freshener all over herself.

She hasn't showered in two days and I won't even ask.

We have to be at the Aura Room in ten minutes. Marieke loves going to those sessions because she gets to do her favourite thing – talking. I never know what to say because my being here is a sham anyway. I'm fine and, honestly, I'm not crazy like all these people here.

We enter when everyone is already seated in a circle. There are two empty chairs next to each other. Good, because the white girl is high, and if anyone finds out, I'll be in trouble too.

"There's my weed guy," she says, pointing at some guy who looks like he'd rather be anywhere else than here. If he didn't look so familiar I wouldn't pay any attention to him, but actually I know who he is. I just don't know which one he is.

Senzi walks in just as I beg Marieke to compose herself.

It always gets quiet when Senzi walks in, like everyone expects her to miraculously speak their madness away. She's

a therapist and all she does is make us "share". She says the first step to healing is accepting you have a problem. But I'm just here to get a break from my mother-in-law and the rest of my husband's family, so every time I'm asked to share, I tell them about Sandile and how I'm struggling to live without him.

Marieke always makes that funny face when I speak, because she doesn't believe I'm telling the truth. She says if I was, I'd talk about him like she talks about Jaco.

Anyway, Senzi asks the two new people, including the weed guy, to introduce themselves. I'm not interested in the first one: he's just another weak ass who hasn't gotten over his divorce three years later.

The weed guy is who I'm interested in. He's wearing a hoodie and he keeps pulling the two strings together, making the hood cover half his face and wrinkle his forehead. Senzi has to ask him twice to stand up and introduce himself.

"My name is Mqoqiwohuhle."

"Hi, Mqoqiwohuhle," we all say in unison. It's a rule here. Apparently it's supposed to make him feel welcome and comfortable.

He clears his throat and looks at Senzi.

"Why are you here, Mqoqi?" Senzi.

Oh, she knows him. I also want to know.

He takes a deep sigh before he speaks. "I almost shot my brother. I'm here because I don't regret it, so I figured that maybe there's something wrong with me."

Senzi nods and moves on to the next person, Manqoba, who's here because he lies and believes his own lies. He still

lies, even in these sessions.

I would have loved to hear more from the weed guy and why he isn't in jail for trying to shoot someone in the first place, but it's Monday, and on Mondays Senzi never goes deep. She always looks like she has her own problems to deal with, which frustrates the crap out of Marieke, because it robs her of the opportunity to talk about why all her problems stem from not being hugged as a child.

I skip dinner again because I need to talk to my daughter on Skype before 7pm. If I'm not in front of the computer ten minutes early, my sister-in-law tells me she's already sleeping. And if I try to argue, my mother-in-law's face appears on the screen to tell me how I abandoned my own child to go on holiday somewhere.

"Sandile didn't work tirelessly all his life for this. If he was still alive, his child wouldn't be going through all this nonsense," she said two days ago.

I would have sworn at her if I trusted her enough with my daughter, but Zothile is 5 years old and I'm not sure if she'd tell me if she was being abused.

... (♥) ...

Marieke walks in with her new friend just as I log off and unplug the computer. We aren't allowed to have people in our rooms after 8pm, but here they are.

They both walk past me to the balcony and I watch her through the glass door pulling that half-joint from under the mat. They both laugh as the guy makes himself comfortable

on the balcony floor. There are four chairs and a table, but he sits on the floor and pulls his knees up to his chest.

"Lals, come join us," Marieke shouts from outside.

I pretend I don't hear her and go lock myself in the bedroom. I can't afford to do what she does because I need to do this and get out of here in record time, with a letter that clearly states I can function properly at work.

See, I work with clients who I need to be strong to deal with, and my boss won't allow me to deal with them until she's sure that I'm not emotionally vulnerable.

I remember Sandile was one of those. I saw the look on his face when I was introduced as part of the team that would be working on his case. He looked at my boss, then he looked at me and said, "This should be easy." His statement was followed by a smile.

We knew what he meant. We'd had a lot of those before, men thinking our job is easy because we can always just flash our boobs or open our legs to get information.

I gave my boss a look and she knew I wanted to get out of there. But that wasn't really an option, now, was it? I looked Sandile in the eye as I introduced myself, and he looked me in the eye too, and shook my hand.

He said there was woman, and he needed to get her out of a situation. I asked him what he needed from us, and he said just names and places.

I asked him why he wanted to get the woman out of the situation, and why he was willing to pay money for it. He said the woman could be carrying his child.

I asked him who the woman was. He told me and I gasped.

Later I told my boss I couldn't do it, that there were people in South Africa that you just didn't mess with. But my boss is always ahead, in everything. She said, "We're looking into the Wolmarans heist that was never solved."

I knew about the heist. Now and again it popped up in the news, and I found it fascinating that it had been years since it had happened and yet nobody had a clue who'd one it. I mean, how do people steal R93 million, kill someone while at it, and get away with it? Just like that?

I told my boss that it could be dangerous to even pursue that thing, but she's always been that type, the daring type. That's why she owns a private-investigator firm.

I was just an administrator then, filing data, printing documents and taking minutes in debriefing meetings. I'd been filing data our foot-soldiers kept collecting on the case when Sandile called to say he didn't need our services any more. He was sure it wasn't his child, he said in the email.

But we were close, very close, to cracking a case that the police had failed dismally to solve. I'd read every document that landed on my desk and I knew that it was all beyond coincidence. There was no way.

But another case landed on my desk soon after that, and I had no choice but to shed my obsession with the Zulu family.

When I met Sandile in Swaziland a year had passed and he never even mentioned it.

Now here I am, with one of the people I spent months trying to bring down sitting on the floor of my balcony, smoking weed.

If Sandile were here and I told him this, maybe he'd go

back there. He hated those people.

I hear a knock and I immediately assume Marieke is done with her escapades and wants to throw herself on the bed now. I drag myself to the door, knowing it's going to be a long night of her talking about Jaco. But it isn't her. It's the weed guy.

"Eyi uyasinda lomlungu wakho," he says.

What does he mean she's heavy? That girl is as thin as spaghetti! Even her hair is thin!

He's carried her halfway into the room, and if he wasn't here, I'd leave her sleeping on the floor because, really, I haven't had a peaceful night in five days. But I don't want to be that person so I hold her arms while he holds her legs and we carry her to her bed.

I expect him to leave immediately but he doesn't. Instead, he sits at the edge of Marieke's bed and looks across at me.

"You brought your own linen?" he asks.

This is rather invasive but, yes, I brought my own linen. "I have this thing about—"

"You have this thing about not wanting to use things that other people have used? A bit snobbish, don't you think?" he says.

Why is he cutting me off? Also, I have never been accused of being a snob. I came from the wrecks and he doesn't know anything about me.

"The white girl just wants a hug from her daddy, but you - why are you here?" he asks.

Again, invasive.

"My husband died and I'm not coping," I say before I can

stop myself.

"So? People die. Did you think he was going to live forever?"

"No, but I thought he was going to live long enough."

He looks straight at me and rubs his hands together. "Nobody lives long enough. There'd be no space to stand on the ground if anybody lived long enough," he says.

I guess it's true what they say about ganja-heads: they become deep when they are high.

"I have a 5-year-old daughter and I would have loved for her to have her father all her life."

I'm being honest. I'm not sure if I would have stayed married to Sandile all my life but he would have been Zothile's father all her life.

"So why are you here?"

Didn't I just tell him why?

"You look like you're coping very well to me," he says.

Condescending, isn't he? Okay, that's it! "Losing a husband isn't as hectic as almost killing your own brother, so, yes, I'm more relaxed because my conscience is clear."

He does that thing of pulling the two ropes of his hoodie together. His forehead wrinkles but his eyes remain as big as they were. Maybe I shouldn't have said anything about his brother. We're not supposed to use the stuff said in the Aura Room against each other. Senzi would be furious if she found out.

"My brother has always had my back," he says.

"And yet you almost killed him?"

Why am I continuing with this? And why have I not told

this guy to leave?

"Yes, I did." He's stopped that thing with his hoodie and I'm glad because it was damn irritating.

"And you don't regret it?"

He nods and lies back, resting his head on Marieke's bum like it's a pillow. "Don't get me wrong: I love my brother. I'd kill for him. I'd kill all of you for him because that's how he raised me: to be loyal and to act when I have to."

I don't understand what that means, but I can't even explain that to him because he hasn't taken his eyes off me since he said those words. Never in the five days I have been here have I wished for Marieke to be wide awake and irritating me more than I do now. She brought this guy here, she must make him leave.

"See this?" he says, pulling his hoodie down and pointing at a scar on his shoulder.

I nod - because I'm stupid, and instead of running out of this room screaming, "I'm letting a man I know isn't really harmless show me his scars!"

"I got this scar from a broken window. I was 11. My brothers left us, me and my two younger brothers, with a woman called MaZulu. She was supposed to be family because we shared a surname with her. They paid her to live with us in her shack because we were too young to live at the men's hostel, but you know what she did?"

I shake my head, because really, how the hell could I know?

"She rented us out to fat men."

Huh?

"Yes, fat men. They were fat because they couldn't enter rich people's houses through windows. They needed two thin young boys to do that for them. I'd break the window and enter first, and my younger brother would come in after me and deactivate the alarm. To this day I still don't know how he did it. He was 8 years old. Once inside, we'd unlock all doors so the fat men could come in and steal whatever they wanted."

I'd squirm if I wasn't me, but rich people weren't exactly my favourite people when I was growing up, so I'm far from the point where I find something wrong with what the fat men did.

"My brother, the one I almost killed. Do you know what he did when he found out?"

I shake my head, because again, how could I possibly know?

"They found the fat men. I was 14 then. All four of my elder brothers, they found the fat men and they made them sit on chairs, together with MaZulu. Nkosana has this thing of slitting throats, him and Qhawe, they like doing that. Mqhele is a different story altogether; he doesn't have a specific thing but when he has decided you are gone, you are gone."

I know all these names – they came up in the Wolmaransstad investigation documents. But there were other names too. I couldn't link the Zulu brothers to the heist but something told me they were there too.

"The fat men were easy, but MaZulu ..." he says. "MaZulu cried like our mother cried when they were burning her alive. I can still hear her. To this day, I can still hear her."

Okay, now I don't know what he's talking about. I know nothing about his mother.

"That's why a decision was made on that night that women, no matter what they do, should be left alone. We couldn't sleep for days after that."

I'm lost now, but I don't dare ask him to stop talking because nobody is this open about their crimes, not unless they are about to die.

"I couldn't stay after that. I ran away, disappeared for months, and to be honest I never thought I'd come back," he says and goes back to rubbing his hands together.

As much as I didn't want his weed-head here earlier, this is the most fascinating story I have ever heard, and I believe this is the first and last time he'll ever tell it to anyone. The part I don't understand is why he is telling it to me.

He's gone quiet and I can't have that. "So where did you go?" I ask.

"Away. To the world," he says and sighs.

I've always tried to stay away from men like him, all my life, because I know what their presence does to my clitoris, but this one's force is strong.

"They found me. Can you believe they looked for me until they found me?"

He's left Marieke's bum alone and he's sitting up straight now, looking at me like I should be surprised that his brothers looked for him the whole time. "I came back because, Lals—"

"Please don't call me that. My name is Lale."

"Okay. I came back to find my younger brother a different person. Some woman with big breasts and hips had done

that to him, changed him and made him mad like me.”

“You aren’t mad.”

“You don’t know me,” he says.

He’s right, I don’t.

“If I had been there, that woman would not have touched him.”

I wait to hear what was done to the brother, but instead of telling me, he rubs his hands together again. “Her name was Carol and I never met her.”

Well ...

“I failed at this loyalty thing. I always have failed at it.”

He goes back to where he was, his head on Marieke’s bum, and he doesn’t look like he’s going to tell me more about Carol. But a bigger thing has been worrying me.

“So why did you want to kill your brother?”

He looks at me longer that I’m comfortable with, and everything I learned on my job and in school of life escapes me and I look away from him.

“Because I can’t be loyal, that’s why,” he says.

This man is the complex type. I’ve already figured that out.

He looks at his watch and stands up.

I don’t want him to leave, I want him to tell me everything.

“This white girl is messed up,” he says, looking down at Marieke snoring on the bed. And then he leaves.

What the hell just happened here?

2

"LALS, WHY ARE you 32 and have only one child?"

Lord! "Why are you 25, a junkie and in a mental institution, Marieke?"

She looks at me. "It's not a mental institution, it's a healing centre. There's a difference, Lals," she snaps.

Yerrrr ... This is the first time I've thrown her rocks back at her since she walked in here with those bell-bottom pants. Honestly, I've been patient with her this whole time because I thought twenty-one days was a short time, but now, judging by everything that has happened in just six days, if I don't start acting crazy, I'll drown in this shit.

"I was just asking, dear. My mom already had four kids by the time she was 25," she says.

Well, I'm not her mom. At 25 I wasn't looking away as the man I was sleeping with beat my children black and blue. At 25 I was doing whatever I wanted to do. I had a great job and I was good at it. I had no plans of settling down with a man who would die and leave me not knowing what to do with

myself.

"Are you okay?" she asks.

Yes, I'm okay. I've been okay all my life. I was okay when my supper was just one slice of bread and tea with no milk. I was still okay later in life when I threw food away because there wasn't enough space for it in my fridge.

"You know Aura Room is early today, right? You can talk about it there, vent out to strangers and all that. It will make you feel better Lals."

I'm not really sure why I'm in such a bad mood. Yes, it took me a while to fall asleep last night because all the things the weed guy said had triggered me. I kept thinking about all the times my grandmother turned me into an unpaid nanny and how my mother's siblings didn't think I deserved even a pair of school shoes for all the trouble. They had babies, dumped them at my grandmother's house, and went back to make more.

My grandmother was a cold woman. I don't think she was born that way. Maybe it was life and her own experiences that made her that way. She'd carry nobody's child on her back, not even the ones who came out of her own daughters' wombs. The ones who came from her son's testicles were even worse off: she wouldn't even look at them.

I was the eldest grandchild. My mother had me when she was 17, and I tell you now that she didn't care about the shame she brought on the family. She left me with her mother and went on to be even more shameless in pursuing her dreams of becoming a TV star.

Grandmother retaliated by detaching herself from every

offspring her children reproduced. "Lahliwe!" she'd shout every time one of them cried or if they were fighting or hungry. I had to feed and bathe them in the morning, and by the time I got to school I'd be shit tired and annoyed, and if anyone dared try me, I'd beat them like I would have beaten my mother and her sisters and my uncle and my grandmother if I'd had the power.

Kids at school were scared of me. They looked down if they came across me in the corridors because something as simple as eye contact could push me to asking for an after-school fight.

I had friends, three of them, who followed me around all day but I always knew they were walking on eggs, and that if they had a choice they would not be friends with me. They were the first to call me Lale; I made them call me that. It was a name I gave myself, some kind of a shortening for Lahliwe, a name my grandmother gave me because my father denied me. It simply means "reject", an unwanted thing that was never supposed to exist. I never embraced it and I never understood how my mother allowed it to be written on my birth certificate, but she was just a child, a child who made a mistake, and that mistake was me.

I told Sandile about it once and he said those people, my former schoolmates, probably didn't even remember all the things I did to them. He said they probably wouldn't recognise me if we met today. I believed him, because he could say anything and it would be believable.

I was a good person when I met him. Things changed along the way, yes, but I had convinced myself that I had

forgiven my grandmother and I had met enough bitter people in my adult life for me to believe my life wasn't as bad as I thought it was. And now here I am, calm and tolerant of a girl who knows nothing about how far I have come to end up in a mental institution for something as simple as a man dying on me.

The Aura Room is full today. Senzi is already here and she looks more alive than she did yesterday.

"You don't look too good today," she says to me.

What is she doing? She never looks at me first. She always looks at the more troubled ones and asks them to speak first.

"That frown on your face says you have something bothering you," she says.

I didn't even realise I was frowning. I look around the room for the weed guy but he isn't here. Great. He triggered me with his stories last night and decided not to show up today.

"I think I pissed her off," Marieke says.

I know that if she could, Senzi would roll her eyes.

"I'm serious. I asked her why she had only one child and she snapped at me."

I give her a look, but ghel probably doesn't even understand the look, so I tell the whole room that today is my daughter's preschool graduation, and I'm going to miss it because I'm here. I'm lying. She's only 5.

"Remember, you are doing this for her. A happy mother is a great mother. And happiness cannot happen unless you are mentally and spiritually healthy," Senzi says.

I'm tired of hearing this buddhist bullshit, I really am.

There is also a man who saw a truck ram into his wife's car just as she was about to drive across an intersection to pick him up at the gym. Their two kids were in the car, too, and they all died. The whole thing happened eight years ago but he talks about it like it's happening now.

The door opens and Marieke barges in. She goes straight to the balcony. What's she so anxious about this time?

"Did he come here?"

I shrug because I don't know who she's talking about.

"The guy, Lals. Did he come here?"

"No, nobody came here."

"His door is locked. Do you think he left?"

Honestly, I wouldn't know. We aren't allowed to leave the premises: it would be considered escaping.

It must be that she wants weed from the guy, because the only time I've seen her this desperate was on the day she arrived, when she wouldn't sit down, and she tossed and turned all night. She was up and about by 5am, singing in the kitchen and irritating me with the sound of a boiling kettle. She'd already told me she was a recovering drug addict, so I expected strange behaviour from her, and I wasn't going to wake up that early to reprimand her because, really, my English data depletes at 6pm and reloads again at 8am.

I knew living with her was going to be a problem so as soon as the first session for the day was done, I went to the admissions officer and asked to be put in a different room.

"May I ask why?" she said.

The answer to that didn't come to me immediately so I just frowned and scratched my arm.

"With all due respect, Mrs Mkhize, we don't take kindly to racism in this institution. We pair residents according to what we think they can do for each other."

I doubted there was anything Marieke could do for me but I was stuck on the fact that she was accusing me of being racist.

"I can read your face. I know what you are thinking," she said.

I left that office having achieved nothing except the dreadful knowledge that I was stuck with a young girl who chose Hillbrow over the privilege she was born with because she thought life would hug her there.

"He promised to give me a bottle of vodka yesterday, and now he's disappeared on me," she says, like I should also be flabbergasted by a stranger's empty promises.

"Did you ever try to get Thembi back?" I ask. This has been bothering me all day.

"No. He sold her to the Chinese people in Bruma. I knew I'd never get her back after that."

Huh?

"Chinese people eat dogs, Lals, don't you know that?"

Wow! I could freak out and slap her for this but I have bigger plans. I know exactly where I want to take this conversation. "Don't you miss her? I mean, your uncle gave her to you for your birthday, he must have loved you very much."

She holds her coffee cup close to her mouth and blows air into it. She never drinks it with milk, and every time she finishes a cup she starts that leg-shaking thing.

"How did your husband die, Lals?"

How did Sandile die? He chose death when he could have fought harder, that's what he did! "Cancer." It doesn't resonate with how I feel but it's the simplest answer.

"Was he old?"

"No, he was still fairly young."

I don't like talking about my husband's last days and last decisions.

"Oom Willem is still alive. His penis hasn't killed him and I think that's unfair."

Oh, I see. Now I understand.

"How old were you when it started?"

She rolls her eyes and puts her coffee cup down on the table. "No, silly, it wasn't me. It was my elder brother. I walked in on them, or him, once, but they didn't see me."

Yoh! "And what did you do?"

She looks at me like I've lost my mind. "Nothing," she says.

What?

"Yes, Lals. Nothing. What was I supposed to do? Go to the police so they would take it to the newspapers?"

Is this girl serious? "Tell your parents, at least?"

She stands up and goes to put the coffee mug in the sink. "Why would I do that? That's the problem with you people, the whole world knows your shit because you are always in newspapers and stuff. That's why the whole world thinks you are savages."

You people? Oh, fuck, no!

There's a knock, and she rushes to the door. Great. The

demon is back, and he has two bottles of vodka hidden under his jacket. If security here paid any attention at all they would have been suspicious seeing someone wearing a jacket in Upington, but I guess ...

"Where were you?" Marieke.

"I've known you for two days and now you're behaving like I'm married to you?"

Okay, that's harsh!

"No, I'm married to the vodka," she says and snatches one bottle from his hand.

Tough girl, but I still need to check her about that "you people" thing because when I leave this place I want to go home, not to jail.

She's pouring the vodka into a glass and I'm just standing there. So is the guy, and it is strange that he's looking at me like we've just met.

"Don't look at her like that. Her husband is dead and she's angry at him, and the whole world. She has this bitterness thing about her, and unresolved anger issues, from her childhood, I think. Or is it men?" Marieke says and hands the guy a glass half full of vodka, mixed with nothing.

Wow. I'm not bitter or angry. Why would I be? I've survived the worst in life, I'm still here, still standing, and everyone I have ever had to survive is either dead or out of my life.

The guy looks at me and smiles. What is he smiling about?

He doesn't follow Marieke out to the balcony and she doesn't seem to care. She has her vodka and she's happy.

He pulls out a chair and sits down, his glass of vodka on



MESS

the table. "The least they could have done was put you in a place with two bedrooms," he says.

I asked for that too when I went to the admissions office, but the lady said no. "Do you stay alone in yours?" I ask him.

"Yes."

I thought that wasn't allowed. Crazy people can't stay alone; they are a risk to themselves.

"They wouldn't let me have a single room – something about me and her needing each other," I say. I still don't understand why I would need Marieke for anything, but I guess she needs me because if I weren't here she wouldn't have anyone to annoy.

"So how did you convince them to give you your own space?" I ask him. Not that I still have hopes that I'll get my way here, but I hate it when other people are treated better than me: it takes me back to my childhood, to why I was a bully growing up.

"I have money. Most of the time that's all it takes."

I see. "Interesting, though, that with all the money you have, you're still a troubled little boy who is struggling to move on from things that happened a long time ago." I just can't seem to hold my tongue when it comes to this guy. He does that to me.

Maybe I *am* a bitter woman. Maybe I'm obsessed with hurting people back. I mean, all my cousin did was not invite me to her birthday party because her mother, whom I almost manhandled at a family function, was going to be there. I haven't spoken to my cousin since because, really, how could she choose her useless mother over me, when I am the one

who fed and carried her on my back when she was a baby? In turn, I didn't invite her to my wedding but she showed up anyway.

I don't like the way this guy is looking at me right now.

"You don't know anything about me ... and what happened a long time ago."

He's right, I don't. But I spent months filing dirt on his family and although his name didn't come up often, his brother Sambulo became a person of interest. I found out Sambulo was in hospital when he first met his wife and I found out he had been shot. A taxi-violence thing, they said.

I found out weeks later that the man involved in the shooting was killed just two days after. I took that information back to Sandile and he was happy. He said there was clearly a connection, that the woman he was trying to save would definitely leave her husband and that family when she found out. He was sure. But that information was not enough, that's what my boss said. It never got to the woman, and Sandile surely decided not to use it after he found out the child wasn't his.

At that time I didn't know I'd end up married to him.

"What are you thinking about?" he asks.

Sigh. Can't I be quiet for just two minutes? I ignore him because I don't like it when people play mind games with me. My husband just died, so I'm allowed to be weird.

"Why did you almost kill your brother, Mqoqi?"

He taps on the empty glass in front of him, but he doesn't take his eyes off me. "Why did you let your husband die?"

What? "My husband had cancer." What does he mean I

let him die? "It was his decision to stop chemotherapy. He decided to go to the hospice. He was an adult, I couldn't—"

Wait! Why am I being so defensive? I don't owe this guy any explanation and—

"Men don't take such decisions, not when they have a woman in their life. You could have said no and he would never have gone to the hospice."

Oh! The fuckery! "I was respecting his decision."

"His decision meant he didn't love you."

What the fuck?

"If he did, he would have chosen to live, for you and for your daughter. That's why you're here, isn't it?"

I don't like this guy now. I don't care if Sandile loved me or not, the fact of the matter is, he was mine.

He asks if he should pour me a vodka and I say no, I haven't touched alcohol since I got pregnant with my daughter.

I used to drink gin and tonic before that. A bottle lasted me for only two days. But I lived alone then, in my quiet apartment in Pinetown. I could do anything then. I could call my friend with benefits and he would come and we'd have sex, and I'd wake him up at 3am and tell him to leave. And if I felt emotionally vulnerable, I'd call my ex Ntuthuko and he'd come running, thinking I needed him. I'd have sex with him, steamy sex, and when we were done, I'd throw things at him, swear and scream at him until he ran out of the apartment. It's funny how he kept coming back, how he kept believing things would get better between us.

When I was 21 and away at the police-force training, he slept with my cousin, but he didn't know that I knew. He

thought my anger stemmed from the fact that he'd held my hand through an abortion when I was 16.

Guilt. It is nothing but weakness, and as long as it has you, you aren't shit in this life.

I catch him staring at me again.

"One minute," he says.

I frown because I'm lost.

"You've been quiet for one minute this time."

Okay. "I asked you a question, Mqoqi."

He taps on the glass in front of him again and looks at me briefly. I swear, if I'd met him eight years ago I would have found all of this arousing. "Your husband slept with my brother's wife, long before there was you."

Interesting. "I know, but I still don't understand why you'd want to kill him because his wife slept with Sandile."

Why does he look shocked?

"He told you?"

I shake my head.

"How do you know?"

Mnx!

"Eyi wena! How do you know?"

Why is he up on his feet now?

"I asked you a question!"

I don't like the look on his face. I glance at the bedroom door and I know I won't make it there before he catches me. The main door is locked. The balcony sliding door is open but we are on the second floor.

"Marieke!" I scream.

She runs in with a half-empty bottle of vodka held up and

aimed.

I haven't taken my eyes off him and he hasn't taken his off me.

He looks at Marieke and slowly he sits back down on the chair.

"What's happening?" she asks, the bottle still held up and ready to strike this man if I even dare say he did something to me. But I'm not about that life. I came here to heal emotional scars I'm not even sure I have.

"I have to go to the grief session now, I didn't want to leave your friend alone here." I don't even go to the bedroom to get my notebook. I leave the room as fast as I can.

It doesn't occur to me that I've left my roommate alone with an angry man until I'm sitting down, waiting for the rest of the group to arrive and join the circle. But nothing says I should go back there either. Marieke is a tough girl. If she wasn't, she'd have died a long time ago.

3

IT'S WEIRD THAT the person who is supposed to help and guide us through our grieving and healing process, has never lost a loved one. But she has a PhD in whatever, and her main thing is that we should always know that those who are dead are not suffering any more, so we should be happy for them and let them go. But that sounds like something you'd find in the bible, not in a textbook.

This one is a hippie, too. She wears those long dresses and black boots all the time. Sometimes her hair has things hanging in it, and she speaks in a very low voice.

I find Senzi's sessions more useful than these, and if I had a choice I'd go to meditation instead. But this one is compulsory. As long as I get a good report in this, I'll be able to get my life back as it was before things fell apart.

We hear her double clap and we know she's ready to begin.

"You know what that means, right?" she says, pointing at an empty chair across from me.

I don't.

"That we have a new member," Yolanda says. She's happy and active today. Some days she looks like she's ready to murder all of us. Her story is that she lost her sister – apparently her sister went missing and her family still thinks she's out there somewhere, but Yolanda insists that she is dead and she knows who killed her.

From what I've heard, she's been here four times, and she doesn't even have to have a doctor's referral any more – she just shows up and they admit her. She looks like she's my age and we speak the same language, but I've never tried to reach out to her. She seems really, really depressed and I do not want to be drained.

The PhD keeps looking at her watch, then the door, then the empty chair. We're already ten minutes late starting, and if we continue sitting here like this, some of these people will start biting their nails and scratching themselves if they don't downright start screaming and jumping out the windows.

When he walks in, she takes a deep sigh and points him to the chair across from me.

Oh, I'll be damned!

"Nice of you to finally join us," she says, smiling.

But he doesn't smile back. Instead he scans the room. His eyes go through everyone except me.

I don't care.

I make myself comfortable on my chair and worry about what story I'll have to exaggerate today. Should I tell them I think about Sandile all the time? That I desperately miss him and that I wish he would show up in a dream or something? I'm not sure if any of the things I've said here have been

believed at all.

"A heart of stone you have, my child," my mother said to me the last time I saw her. She also said, "If anything, please give me credit for not aborting you." But she was stupid, because if she had aborted me, I would not know about it, and so I would not care because I wouldn't even exist.

I keep glancing at Mqoqi, but he isn't interested in me. He looks at Yolanda more than he looks at anyone else.

"Ms April, would you like to start?"

I suddenly feel very tired because Pumza tires me the moment she opens her mouth. She cries more than she speaks. Every day there's a new thing.

"I dreamt of my dad last night. Today is Wednesday, so my dad and I would be watching TV together tonight if he was still here"

My dad this, my dad that. He's dead. Your dad is dead. I wish someone would say this to her and save us from her. I'm not even a psychologist but I diagnosed her the first time I listened to her speak. She's that type who holds on to grief so that they don't have to face reality.

I catch the last bit of what she says because I just did what I always do, switch off.

"Yolanda, how are you feeling today? Would you like to share with the room?" PhD asks.

But Yolanda shakes her head and looks away. She has her arms crossed on her chest and she's bouncing her leg. I thought today was going to be one of those days when she is super-cheerful.

"Okay, new member, would you like to introduce

yourself?"

Sigh.

He nods and looks up at the ceiling, like he's thinking hard about how we will receive him.

"My name is Mqoqiwokuhle. I've lost so many people in my life I don't even know where to start."

PhD still has that ridiculous smile stuck on her face. "Start with the one who made you come here," she says.

He looks down at his feet. "I don't know. There's been a lot. My son. But the worst was when I almost lost my brother. Some girl tried to kill him and I let her go," he says and starts that thing of rubbing his hands together.

"What do you mean you let her go?"

He widens his eyes as he stares at PhD. "I mean I let her go. I had her in front of me, I could have done anything I wanted to her, but I let her go."

Okay, this is intense now.

"Is she not in jail?"

His eyes are still wide. "No, she's around, still trying to fuck my life up." With that, he stands up and leaves the room. I think this guy is crazier than all these people in this institution. And worse, he seems to do as he pleases.

It's quiet for a while before PhD starts talking again. She apologises for what just happened but I don't think she owes anyone an apology.

People have shut down so we disperse before the two hours are over. I just want to go to my room and sleep, that's all I want, and I'll make sure I lock all doors and close all windows because things are becoming creepy here, and this

place is in the middle of nowhere.

I find Marieke passed out on her bed. She's finished what was left of the vodka and if she hadn't come through for me earlier today, I swear I'd empty a jug of cold water on her face. But I turn her to lie on her stomach so she doesn't choke on her own vomit if her stomach decides somewhere along the night to spill out what she's filled it with.

I'm going to skip dinner again.

... ☺ ...

"Lals!"

Why are her hands on my chest?

"Lals, wake up!"

Why, oh why, Marieke? I rub my eyes and kick the duvet off me. "What's happening?" I ask.

She's standing over me with her hands on her hips. She looks worried. "You were screaming in your sleep. What's wrong with you?"

What? I was sleeping peacefully before she woke me.

"Fok, Lals! I thought you were dying. You were breathing like something was sitting on your chest."

Why can't I remember anything about that?

"I'm going to get you a glass of water," she says and leaves the bedroom.

Why don't I remember having a bad dream? It's 5am and the sun is already out.

She comes back with the water, still looking freaked out, like nightmares aren't a normal thing. "Fok, nee, man

Lals, you should have heard yourself. It's like someone was strangling you."

Okay, I'm not comfortable with this. Knowing Marieke, she's going to talk about this all day and she's going to be pestering me with questions. I'm going to take a walk. I didn't bring my training sneakers, which have been sitting in my wardrobe for five years because I abandoned gym that long ago, but I've always found walking barefoot calming. I put my foot down when she insists on coming with me, besides, since when does she take walks unless she's going to scout for weed or alcohol all over these buildings?

It's not too hot yet but the air is already starting to sting on my skin. I'm not going to the gardens – the grass is still wet so I'll just walk around the buildings and hope none of the insomniacs spot me and ask to join me.

Block A is reserved for males. It's always quiet. I rush past it and find myself in the quad of Block B, the building that houses a lot of people who don't want anyone to know they are here, celebrities mostly.

There are a few windows already open in Block C but no people in sight, except the lady with burn scars on her face. She's having a smoke – the irony! She waves and I immediately decide it would be best for me to take this walk behind the buildings instead. I don't wave back, and she'll probably tell everyone I'm a bitch, but who is she going to tell? Those people with self-inflicted cuts on their arms and wrists that she hangs out with?

I know what Marieke would say if she heard me saying this about those depressed people: she'd say I lack empathy

and have buried anger issues, that I'm mean because I want to detach myself from people who are brave enough to admit and accept they have a problem, unlike me. But I swear I'm not angry/ I just see things as they are and I detest weakness.

Fuck! Why would anyone leave a shoe lying around like this? I did say these people—

Oh shit!

She's lying face down and her one leg is twisted. She's not breathing.

Should I touch her?

I touch her. Her foot is cold. She's dressed in jeans and an ankara peplum top. She has one shoe on.

What the hell happened here?

I look up and there's only one window open, high up on the fifth floor.

What now?

By the time I reach reception I'm breathing through my mouth.

"There's a girl there," I say while trying to catch my breath.

The security guard looks at me strangely, like I'm scaring him or something.

"There's a girl, over there, behind Block C. I think she's dead."

He says nothing to me, but takes a few steps and press the button on the wall. It flashes red immediately and I assume that means everyone is about to go haywire and run to Block C. Instead four men run in and ask me to calm down.

"In which room are you staying in Block C, mem?" one asks.

Ghra! "I'm in Block A. The dead woman is behind Block C."

Why are they not treating this like a crisis?

"I see. Do you know the type of meds you are on, mem?"

Yah neh, I'm not on any meds, and I see what's happening now. I breathe in and try to compose myself, because that's what my life has become. "Please, just go check," I say.

The security guard nods while the others escort me back to my room.

I didn't come here to discover dead bodies! That, I didn't come here for!

Marieke is fast asleep. I think about waking her but no, she might just start a riot if I do.

It takes about forty 40 minutes before security starts knocking on doors, telling everyone to gather in the dining hall.

I dig my nails into Marieke's leg to wake her.

"What's happening?"

Great, she's heard all the noise and commotion.

"Put some pants on, and a bra, we have to go to the dining hall."

She puts on the same tracksuit pants she's been wearing for the past two days and follows me out.

The dining hall is already buzzing. Some people are still in robes and slippers. I spot Mqoqi leaning against a wall in the corner, in a different hoodie today. He doesn't see me and, honestly, I don't know where we stand, so I find space far away from him.

A grey-haired man is standing at the front. I forget his

name but he is the big boss here. He waits until the head-of-security guy whispers something to him before he starts speaking.

“Residents of Emazolweni Spiritual Healing.”

Oh! The formality!

“We have had an unfortunate incident this morning.”

It goes dead quiet.

“One of us unfortunately has committed suicide. She jumped from her room through the window. We suspect it happened late last night but we have informed the police ...”

It's rowdy all over again. This is the one place where people come to stop themselves from committing suicide, and yet here we are...

“The body of Yolanda, as some of you know her, was discovered by one of our residents whom we will be arranging counselling for. We ask that you ...”

I'm not interested in anything further. I leave the hall just as people start asking each other who discovered the body. They could have just left that part out: I don't want all attention on me and, worse, they might decide I'm traumatised and add another twenty-one days to my stay here.

I didn't see the dead woman's face, which is why I didn't realise it was Yolanda. And besides, those were not the clothes she'd been wearing at the grief session. She must have changed before she jumped because, you know, sometimes people want to look their best when they leave this earth. Asking why she did it would be stupid. She had more reasons to want to die than to want to live, just like most people here.

I'm ready to go shower when I hear the door open. It must

be Marieke ... but the person is quiet, so surely it isn't her.

There's a soft knock on the bedroom door. I'm wrapped in a bath towel and I don't want anyone coming in here.

"Can I come in?"

It's a man's voice.

"No!"

I put a dress on quickly and rush to the door. In my mind I'm thinking it's one of the staff, here to tell me the cops have arrived and they want to take my statement, but no, it's this guy.

"What do you want?"

Okay, I didn't mean to say that out loud ... but ... what does he want?

"Just wanted to check if you're okay. I just heard you found the body."

"Yeah, I did. I was taking a walk and the next thing ..." I say and shrug.

"So what are you going to do now?"

Well, I don't know. "Take a shower, go to breakfast, and probably make a statement when the police get here."

I haven't figured out if his being here is out of sympathy or curiosity. His face is not telling me anything.

"Okay, go shower, I'll wait for you here," he says.

And how is it that he is already dressed and looking like he's fresh and showered this early?

I lock the bedroom door, and the bathroom door. He already raised his voice at me last night and I'm stupid enough to talk to him after that.

The last time I wore make-up was the day I left my house

to come here, when I flew to little Upington Airport and found a driver waiting there for me. I've been looking like hell since then, but the eyebrows, nope, I don't compromise on them: let my face be crusty but my eyebrows will be shaped, every day.

He's sitting on the same chair, with his elbows on the table. Marieke is still not here.

"Rather put on some pants. That dress won't work."

What? I look down at my dress and back at him.

"Pants, and closed shoes," he says, and scrolls through his phone.

I'm not doing that. "I'm going to breakfast."

He puts the phone down and looks at me from head to toe. "Okay, fine, but know that everyone is waiting to see the woman who discovered the dead body. I wish you nothing but a great experience."

Urgh! No, man! I'm still not changing my clothes, though, who does he think he is? But also ... "I think I'll skip breakfast."

Why is there a look of satisfaction on his face?

"We can get breakfast somewhere else. Come with me," he says.

There is no "somewhere else". We are in the middle of nowhere.

He stands up, and I follow him to the door. This is why my life has been so tough: I do stupid things, and this is one of them.

We're going behind our block. Yes, Lale, follow him, follow the man you don't know behind buildings because

that's who you are, that's why you find dead bodies and that's why you are in a mental institution.

Now this is weird! A bike?

"We're going riding through the desert," he says.

He's excited. I'm confused as to how we are going to get past gate security. But we are not going that way. He's pushing the bike towards the garden and I'm following him, because I'm crazy. We are deep in the high trees when he kicks what looks like fallen branches off.

Fascinating! This guy has been here three days. When did he cut a hole in the fence and hide it with branches?

I help him push the bike out, then watch him go out through the same hole, and then he holds my hand as I go out after him. Why am I still in on this again?

He hands me a helmet and tells me to hold on to him. I shake my head, because I'm not getting on a bike with a short dress on. I've never even been on a bike before.

"I told you to put on pants."

Mnxm!

He puts the helmet over my head.

"And you?"

"Don't worry," he says and pulls the strings of his hoodie together.

This is dangerous. Getting on a bike without a helmet on is suicide, but, I have a helmet on and I don't like him, so ...

The sound of this thing is enough to make me deaf, but I climb on it anyway and wrap my arms around his waist. It's been a while since I've held a man like this, and this one's shoulders are broad. He smells like cigarettes and weed and

expensive perfume. Sandile smelt of one perfume, all day, every day. I never bothered to check what the name of his perfume was.

I got to know most things about him when he was sick, when I had to take leave from work and sit by his side in hospital all day. The first time I saw his vomit was on the second day of his chemo. I had to bathe him after that and put his pyjamas on because he flatly refused to wear that hospital-gown thing.

I found out his blood type by scanning through his hospital file. He had had an operation when he was a teenager to remove gallstones; I didn't know that.

I watched him waste away, but he still smiled. His body was weak but his mind was strong.

He wanted his funeral service to be back home in KwaMakhutha, not in Hillcrest where we lived.

I told his mother that, after I had accepted that he wasn't coming back home alive. She looked at me and asked why I was talking about burials, unless I wanted her son to die. I never mentioned it after that, but they came with his uncles and took his body from the hospice.

They did go past our house with it, but just for ten minutes before the hearse took it to a funeral parlour in KwaMakhutha.

I was already sitting on a mattress at his mother's house by then. I wasn't allowed to plan anything or leave the mattress, and I knew by the way people were whispering that the worst was yet to come.

I press my face harder into this man's back when the

sand starts stinging my thighs and legs. Tell me why I didn't change into pants again?

We are deep in the Kgalagadi now. The car drove through here when I was going to Emazolweni. There weren't any people on the road, just as there aren't people now, and if I was the smart woman that everybody claims I am, I'd be back at Emazolweni giving a statement to the police right now instead of being here.

He turns left onto yet another deserted gravel road, and I hold on to him tighter as the bike goes faster.

We stop outside a shack – yes, a shack standing alone in the middle of nowhere. A tiny man with nothing but dry animal skin covering his balls comes to greet us.

“Do you know Khoi-san people?”

Of course I do, everybody knows about Khoi-san people, it's the only believable thing white people put in the history books we read in school.

I don't get what the Khoi-san man says but they shake hands and we are led to the shack. There are no chairs and tables here, just things lining the walls that look like they are home made.

He grabs two packets of biltong and two bottles of Coke. “Kudu,” the Khoi-san man says.

I'm not eating kudu; what the hell is that, anyway? What I want is some fried eggs and bacon, maybe even an omelette or stuffed croissants. But surely I'm not getting any of that in this shack!

I grab two packets of dried fruit and two jars of fig jam, and walk out. I'm not paying for dry breakfast in a shack – he

must pay.

I ask myself what his plan is when he walks out of the shack-store with his biltong and Coke.

I'm ready to go, but he goes and sits on a rock under a tree. Oh well, what's a girl to do? I sit next to him and start nibbling on the dried fruit.

"Must be nice eating food you didn't pay for," he says.

Wow. "Didn't you say you have a lot of money?"

He laughs.

Actually, this is the first time I've seen him laugh since the day I met him.

He eats the biltong like it's something to be eaten on an empty stomach. I won't ask for it because I don't even know what animal a kudu is.

There are so many things we could talk about, like that episode last night and that thing of him storming out of the grief session yesterday. But we are sitting in silence, eating things that are probably not even SABS approved.

"You're not going to counselling for that dead-body thing, are you?" he asks.

I'm not. "I don't need it."

He looks at me, and I know he believes me. "I know, but they are going to make you."

"Nobody can make me do anything, Mqoqi. Nobody."

We go back to being silent - me, because I really don't need that counselling thing; and him, I don't know why. He has moments, which is funny because he counts my moments and tells me how long I've been quiet for.

"Did you know Ama ... Yolanda?" he asks.

"Not really. Just from that one session we did together. I found her a bit complicated, like she was one of those people who could only be healed by death."

He raises his eyebrows. Did I sound insensitive? But he doesn't say anything more.

Maybe if I had reached out to her she wouldn't have killed herself. Maybe all she needed was a friend, someone she could talk to about insignificant things like how to shape eyebrows and slimming teas. Really, I could have distracted her from the deep stuff and I wouldn't have had to do it in English. I wonder where she was from and why she wouldn't let go of her sister.

"One minute," he says.

Oh, not this shit again! "I was thinking about Yolanda."

"What about her?"

"That maybe if I had reached out to her she would have found peace and chosen to live."

He shakes his head. "Peace is not a thing you find, Lale."

What does he mean?

"Peace is something you are born with, but people take it away from you and they are never willing to give it back. Is that why you hate people, Lale?" he asks.

What is he talking about? "I don't hate people."

He throws the empty biltong packet to the ground and stands up. I follow him, because that's what I do, I follow men I don't really know to where they are going, and when I'm done with them, I want to hurt them. It's funny how none of them ever want to hurt me back.

... (v) ...

We re-enter Emazolweni through the same hole in the fence and my heart starts beating fast because I know what awaits me here, and it's Marieke that I dread more than anything.

We leave the bike where we found it.

There are two police cars parked outside reception. My heart is pounding because as much as I passed the police training and wore that constable uniform for a year, I don't really want to be on the other side of things. The girl killed herself; why shouldn't it end there? What's the use of making a statement? Everybody in this place is on the verge of doing what she did, we all know that.

"They are in my room." I know this because I just saw one of them standing outside our door and I know I don't want to talk to them.

I follow him to behind Block A and B, and up the fire escape to Block C. Why the hell is he in Block C? This place is for the really hectic people.

We enter through the balcony, and suddenly I feel like I'm back at Etshelihle Primary School in Clermont where other kids had lunch boxes and I didn't have any. This guy's room is twice the size of mine, and I'm sharing mine with a crazy girl. He even has a dining room and couches. It's a freakin' complete townhouse!

"Would you like something to drink?"

He has a fridge! Lord, this guy has a fridge, and all we have is a tray with damn sachets of coffee and sugar and powdered milk! I don't answer him, because I'm angry.

I go straight to the fridge and pull out a chocolate cake. He must think I'm going to cut a slice but, no, I pull out a fork from his drawer full of spoons and forks and knives and fancy shit, and I sit down on his stupid couch with the whole cake on my lap.

"You can eat all of it. Cake is not really my thing."

Bloody snob!

He has all the DStv channels, and we don't even have a TV!

Yazi, my husband left me money and the first thing I'll do when I get out of here is buy myself whatever I want, I don't care what his family says. I'll go to Bali, even, and take pictures in bikinis and dance with squinty-eyed Asian men.

"You look upset."

Ghra! "No, I'm not upset, I just haven't seen a TV in a while." It's only been seven days and I didn't really care about it until now.

After flipping through channels, I find what I really want. It reminds me of work and home and the peeling leather couch Sandile wouldn't let me throw away because it was the first thing he bought when he started working. I could watch this show all day and it amazes me each time how the killer is always the most unlikely one.

"*Beauty Queen Murders*? Is that even a thing?" he asks.

And what's that he has in that cup? It smells really nice.

"You'd be surprised at how psychopathic men can be," I say.

He laughs. Why? This is people's real lives. It probably happens here, too, it's just that we have so many of these

DUDU BUSANI-DUBE

gruesome things going on that we can't fit all of them in one news bulletin.

"I've never understood why these things exist in the first place," he says.

What things? I give him an inquiring look.

"These beauty-contest things. What are they about? The face? The body? The intelligence? I don't know."

Spoken like a true man who doesn't have to worry about how he looks.

"Pretty much all of it. I used to enter them when I was in high school."

He looks at me like he doesn't believe me.

"I'm serious. But I never won, I was always the second princess. At least I got a box of chocolates and a plastic red rose each time."

He laughs. I've realised he only laughs when there's a reason to laugh at me, not at what I say.

"The light-skinned girls always won, even if they were fatter or shorter than me. The only thing I ever won was Miss Lovely Legs."

Honestly, that bothered me, but I'm grown now and suddenly being dark like me is an in thing. They call it "melanin on fleek" now.

"You were more beautiful than all of them, that I know," he says.

Why is he so serious all of a sudden? I know I'm beautiful, I've always known that. It's other people who didn't think I was. My mother knew that, too, about herself, that's why she thought she could be a TV star, and she did partly

succeed because I saw her shaking Karabo Moroka's hand on *Generations* while giving her a file once. That was back in the '90s. There was also a time when she was in an Omo washing-powder advert. My grandmother would switch off the TV every time it came on.

"What are you drinking?" I ask, because I'm not going to dwell on the fact that he thinks I'm beautiful, I already know that.

"Coffee."

Coffee doesn't smell that good, not the type Marieke drinks four times a day.

"Yirgacheffe beans from Ethiopia, with cinnamon and honey."

Oh, we are there now?

"I get the beans delivered every four months."

We are definitely there.

"Did you just frown?" he asks.

Yes I just did, I didn't mean for him to see it, though.

"It's funny how people judge you without even knowing where you came from," he says.

Not that I was judging him, but why can't he have Ricoffy like the rest of us? Why does his have to come all the way from Ethiopia? I can't wait to cash out all of Sandile's money and start doing stuff like this, flying coffee in from Ethiopia.

"Lale?"

Yes?

"Don't judge me, by coffee of all things."

He's right, I don't know him well enough to judge him, but still, who gets their coffee flown all the way from East

Africa?

My beauty-queen show is over so I switch the channel to 157. *Ufelani* is on. I don't like this show; it makes me cringe. I hate it even more because the men they talk about kill themselves too, and they never get to be punished for what they do.

He's never watched this show, I know because he is confused right now. I won't bother explaining it to him.

"This is hectic stuff," he says.

I thought he was the daredevil type. Another story about a man killing a woman because she doesn't want him any more shouldn't be "hectic" to him. "You've never watched it?"

He shakes his head.

Now that we are buddies I might just ask him if I can take his TV and decoder to my room with me when I leave. It's not like he needs it.

"I read more than I watch TV," he says.

Strange coming from a man like him. His roots are at the taxi rank, that I know.

"Why aren't you married?" I've been meaning to ask. I expect him to say something stupid, but he doesn't.

"Because men never marry a woman they don't love."
How? "I'm not sure I loved my husband at all."

"But you are a woman, and women always see the bigger picture. He probably loved you more than you loved him."

Two days ago he told me my husband chose to die on me because he didn't love me, and now he's saying the opposite?

I never bothered to really, really try finding out what

Sandile was about, but I knew that as long I was there, life was comfortable. We did all the things married people do. We built our family, accumulated assets and showed up for each other.

I looked at other men, some of them longer than I should have, but I always went home to him. He probably did the same, and he always came home to me because that's what you do after you make vows, you go home and you make children and you invest money and take out life cover and funeral plans, and you hope that the person you made the vows with will be there until the day you die.

Mqoqi here, with all the money and the luxuries he has, he doesn't have that one person, that one person you call when you have a puncture even if they are in a different country and have no power to help you. I wonder if he knows how that feels, the feeling of knowing your back is covered, whether it is physically or emotionally. He probably doesn't.

"Do you have siblings?" he asks.

"No. My mother didn't have kids after me. Even I was a mistake. She left me with my grandmother, and by the time she realised I was all she had, it was too late."

"Do you hate her for that?"

I do. "It's too late for me and her."

"But do you hate her?"

Why is he insisting on this question? "I did well without her." I'm too honest with this guy, and it bothers me. I've never even told my mother that I hate her for choosing her dreams over me, and yet here I am telling this man.

"You're too old to be harbouring hate, Lale. Let it go. The

people who hurt you don't even remember it."

I feel like right now he is talking more about himself than he is about me. I know exactly who hurt me and I will not let them forget it. "It's easy for you to say, Mqoqi."

"No, it isn't. Everyone who's ever hurt me is six feet under," he says and stands up.

The kind of shit he just said tickles my clit, and I know I'm not leaving this place, not tonight. I switch the channel again because right now I'd rather watch the Kardashians saying "like" before each thing they say than stress myself with the realities of life.

I wonder what happened to the cops and if I'll get into trouble for disappearing. I wonder what Marieke said to them and if this whole thing hasn't freaked her out. I'm going to miss the grief session today because I'm not leaving this room. Mqoqi's microwave is making a loud sound and I know he has food here because he has a fridge.

This is the best I've felt since I arrived at Emazolweni and maybe this is the healing I need, sitting here and deciding I'm going to have sex with a man I don't know only two months after my husband died. I don't care if he acts like nothing happened between us tomorrow morning. I don't care if he never talks to me again or if he leaves this place and never comes back. He makes me feel like the Lale I was before I had unprotected sex and found myself standing in front of a priest making vows I partly stuck to until death did us part.

"I've defrosted chicken thighs. See how you make them."

He's mad! "I'm not cooking for you," I say.

"I'm not hungry, but what are you going to eat? Because I

know you're not leaving."

Sigh. I should be back in KwaNdengezi loitering around my mother-in-law's yard with my head bowed, covered in black clothes from panties to headscarf, but here I am, grilling chicken in a man's house.

My mother wouldn't mind. She'd find it liberal, because she's that type of woman, the one who lit up a cigarette in front of my dead husband's uncles and told them no daughter of hers was going to dress in black for a whole year. She told them that whole black-clothes thing isn't even black culture. I had never taken her side in anything, even when I knew she was right, but on that day I was glad to be the daughter of an insolent.

It's funny how, growing up, whenever people wanted to insult me, her name always came up, whether it was family members or random neighbours.

"You are just like your mother," they'd say.

"What did you expect? She's Phumzile's daughter," my uncle said when my grandmother informed him I had not slept at home one night. That was the night I had sex and got pregnant at 16. I had an abortion before the neighbours realised I was pregnant, far, far away from Clermont where I was already gaining a reputation of being "easy".

But I'm not that girl any more. Now I have a five-bedroom house with a swimming pool and a luxury car, and I fixed grandmother's house just to show her... Now every time they see me, they know I have done better than their useless children. Now they ask me if I can hook their children up with jobs and I say, "Give me their CV, I'll see what I can do,"

when I know I won't even bother.

Bitterness is justified until you look at yourself and realise that you don't love anyone, that you aren't sure if you even love yourself, so you channel what's left of your love to the person who came out of your vagina because you have no choice but to love them.

"There are veggies in the fridge," he shouts from the couch.

First of all, what kind of black man, from KwaZulu-Natal nogal, calls vegetables "veggies"? Snobs. Money does that: it turns men from the wrecks into materialistic snobs, not because they want to, but because they change themselves to forget their past.

The "veggies" are a packet of cauliflower and broccoli stashed somewhere at the back of the fridge. I throw them in the microwave, still in the plastic packet.

If I wasn't hungry and cops weren't loitering around all over Emazolweni looking for me to make a statement, I wouldn't be doing this.

But Lahliwe, babe, who are you fooling? You know very well who you are. You find your worth in whether men can resist you or not. And you find your fun in whether they can let you go after you break them or not. That's why you are here, babe.

The chicken must be ready – it's been 45 minutes of the microwave ranting and raving. The broccoli and cauliflower are ready too, so I dish a plate for myself and sit down at the kitchen table.

He said he wasn't hungry, didn't he? Besides, I'm not

going to serve him. I didn't even serve my own husband until he couldn't feed himself.

"That looks nice," he says.

No, it doesn't.

He sits on a chair across from me and starts picking stuff off my plate with his fingers. That's bad manners; even my ghetto-ass from Clermont knows that.

I look at him sitting across me with his big eyes and pitch-black skin and long fingers and wonder why, after everything that's happened in the past three days, and how, with all the things I know about his family, I'm not even an ounce afraid of him.

He gets up and goes to dish more food for himself after he's eaten half of what's on my plate. I won't remind him that he said he wasn't hungry because I don't want him to kick me out of here. This place of his is warm and homely. It smells of expensive coffee and a man, a man who towers over everything and smells like a man, not that weak nonsense Sandile was in our home.

I put the dirty plate in the sink and wait for him to say something, but he doesn't. He throws his in there too and goes back to where he was sitting.

Why are men so slow, though? I go to stand in front of him. "I want to have sex with you," I say.

Why does he look shocked? Did he not say he knew I wasn't going to leave?

"Why?" he asks.

What kind of stupid question is that? I want an orgasm, I want to be touched and caressed and filled, that's why I want

to have sex.

He looks away, grabs the remote and starts flipping through channels.

What kind of man is this? I could just strip naked and see how long his moral charade will last, but the “she’s Phumzile’s child” thing still stops me from going for what I want now and again in my adult life.

“Aren’t you supposed to be mourning your husband?”

I know he didn’t know my husband, and I know he doesn’t care about his ghost. So why this? “He’s dead. Whether I mourn him or not will not bring him back. Are you scared I’ll give you bad luck?”

He laughs.

Why is he laughing?

He pats the empty side of the couch and tells me to sit down. I do as he says, but only because he asks me nicely.

“You are a beautiful, attractive woman. But I didn’t come here for you.”

I didn’t come here for him either, but still, what’s his point?

He puts one arm around me and continues searching the channels. I have not stayed in this room this long for this, but I make myself comfortable anyway because as much as men are shit – and they *are* shit – there is something about their chests and their firm arms that make a woman want to curl herself in on them and inhale their shit, which usually smells like good perfume and dangerous masculinity.

God created men to test us. He made them taller and uglier and somewhat heartless, and then he sat back and said to women, “I made you smarter. Now let me see if your

smartness can help you survive your love for animalistic behaviour.”

... ☺ ...

I have to pee.

My bladder is sitting heavy on my vagina and it won't let me go back to sleep.

I'm on a bed, not my single bed next to snoring Marieke, a big bed with soft sheets and a black duvet cover.

I'm alone and I want to pee. This room is dark. Where am I?

Oh, I remember. I'm a hoe!

At least I'm fully dressed and I still have my panties on and I'm dry down there.

There's no bathroom in this bedroom, just a bed and clothes lying on the floor.

I know where the bathroom is. What I don't know is where this man in whose room I slept is – but who cares? I need to pee, as in, now!

The door is closed but not locked. I pull it open slightly and I hear voices. It must be people looking for me, staff or security guards or someone.

I'm not getting out of here! But my bladder is pushing harder and harder and squeezing my thighs together is not helping any more. Morning pee is the work of the devil, I tell you!

If someone sees me I'll be in trouble.

I open the door a bit wider and peep. Nope, those are not

security guards.

I need a bucket, a cup, something!
There are people cutting grass behind this building, so I can't even crouch on the balcony and let my pee rain on them. Everybody knows I'm a widow and they think I come with a dark cloud, as if married men aren't supposed to die. Now imagine how much they'd freak out if my pee touched them.

I sit on the bed and squeeze my thighs tighter.

No, fuck this! I'm getting out of here!

I wave shyly as I rush to the bathroom, past the many people sitting all over the place. I lock the door as quickly as I can. I saw many of them but I couldn't tell which one was Mqoqi among them.

I flush the toilet when I sit on it because that trick always works - pee while it flushes, so nobody hears the sound of your urine. The relief!

I'm done by the time the toilet water stops running.

Now, how do I get out of here? It will be nothing but a walk of shame!

"Four days. You've been here only four days, bafo," I hear someone say.

"It's not what you think, Nqoba," another says. I assume it's Mqoqi trying to explain the woman who just tiptoed from his bedroom to the bathroom.

I flush the toilet again and hope they won't think I was doing a number two, because that would be even more embarrassing than sleeping with their brother in a mental institution, only four days after he arrived.

"Do you even know her name?" someone asks.

"I told you, it's not what it looks like," he says again, and this time he sounds rather irritated.

I know what it looks like. I slept in a man's room, a man who the whole of South Africa knows is a fuck-boy, and now his family is here, and judging by how he is trying to defend himself, they too know his fuck-boy ways very well.

But I have bigger problems, so I open the bathroom door with my head held high. I take that walk of shame back to the bedroom with my eyes looking at nothing and nobody but the walls.

The dumb bitch in me says maybe I can jump over the balcony and run to my room. But I'd probably break my legs or die, so the smart bitch in me opens the door and does yet another walk of shame, past these people and out.

I take a deep sigh and lean against the door the moment I close it. I inhale the stinging Upington air.

"So she was calling herself Yolanda now?" I hear someone ask from inside.

Why are they so loud?

It's just men, men who all look like him and sound like him. They must think I'm some random girl he found in the dining hall and convinced to come with him to his room. They must think I'm cheap, but that would be just them, because in all the religiously immoral things I have done in my life – and I have done a lot of those – never have I thought of myself as cheap. Besides, is there a price tag for being a woman? Are we for sale or something?

I rush down the stairs with hope that nobody will see

me creeping my long pitch-black legs from here to Block A. Great! The lady with burn scars is in the corridor again, smoking. She waves. I look away.

By the time I get to my door I'm already having palpitations. Imagine what my mother-in-law would say if she heard about this. She'd probably accuse me of killing my husband.

"Lals, what the fuck?"

Yeah, she's awake, already in the kitchen, making coffee.

"I thought you were dead," she says.

I just want to take a bath and change into different clothes, maybe a long skirt and long-sleeved top. Hell, even the ninja outfit my in-laws wanted me to wear is an option right now!

"Everybody was looking for you. Even the cops came here, Lals. Where were you?"

"I lost track of time. I needed to get away." I'm lying. I don't even know when I fell asleep, and when that damn biker fuck-boy carried me to his bed is still a mystery.

I ignore Marieke when she asks me to sit down. I know she wants to tell me about how hectic things were yesterday when people were looking for me. "Fok, Lals, they wanted to call your family but I told them you hate even your own mother, that even your own daughter doesn't know you are here."

Now I regret telling her all that stuff. My daughter is 5. If I told her I was going to the moon she'd believe me.

I slam and lock the door when Marieke tries to follow me into the bathroom.

This place was supposed to heal me. It was supposed

to be twenty-one days of healing and enlightenment and whoooooosaaaaaa... But no!

My programme for the day says I have Senzi, a spiritual healing session and meditation, but all I want to do is sleep and hide.

When I come out of the bathroom I find Marieke sitting on her bed waiting for me. I have no choice but to get naked in front of her as I apply shea butter all over my body.

"Seriously Lals, I thought you were dead. You are the most unstable person I have ever met in my life, and I have been to four institutions already."

Four institutions and yet she's still this fucked up?

I put on a long black dress, the one Sandile always assumed I was mad at him when I wore.

"Where did you sleep last night?"

Shembe! I don't answer her, because no matter what answer I give, it will be followed by another question. Right now, I wonder what those men I woke up to find gathered in Mqoqi's room are saying about me. They probably think I slept with him, and I would have if he hadn't rejected me.

I want breakfast, greasy breakfast with bacon and eggs and onions with tomato chutney, but we never get that here. They say a healthy body means a healthy mind, so they feed us poached eggs and leaves. I'm going to breakfast anyway. After the embarrassment I had in front of many men this morning, walking into the dining hall with crazies looking at me is nothing.

Marieke follows me. I know it's not that she's hungry, she just wants to pester me with questions.

DUDU BUSANI-DUBE

"Don't worry, I have your back," she says.

Yeah, right! But maybe I should believe her: she did, a day ago, walk in with a bottle aimed at her weed dealer when I screamed her name.

My eyes search all over the dining hall for Mqoqi, but he isn't there.

I eat the stupid poached eggs and mushrooms with rye bread, and wonder if I'll ever again be the Lale I was many years ago.

I look up. Senzi is standing in front of us.

"Where were you last night?"

Sigh. "I needed some space. I kept seeing Yolanda lying there, dead, and I just couldn't ... I needed space, Senzi."

She of all people should know these things. But she's also a professional so she must know I'm bullshitting her.

"I'll see you at the session in an hour," she says. She doesn't wait for me to say yes before she leaves.

I'm not going there. I'm going to sleep all day.

"Let's go," someone whispers to me. The hand on my shoulder is firm and heavy. "Let's go," he says again, not whispering this time.

I push my plate away and stand up. I don't know what he wants or where we are going but I stand up and follow him.

"Take the things you can fit in your pockets only. I'll wait for you here," he says.

I grab my handbag. Everything is in it – my ID, my marriage certificate, my husband's death certificate and my daughter's birth certificate. I grab one dress and tie it over my

MESS

shoulders with its sleeves, and leave the room.

A normal person would ask what this is about, but I'm not a normal person, I'm Lahliwe Mkhize, a better and less harmful version of Lahliwe Zondi.

I was still Lahliwe Zondi when I made the biggest mistake of my life.

4

THIS WILL NOT last.

The staff at Emazolweni will call my family. The police still want a statement from me. And, of course, at some point I will have to go home, because I have a daughter and nothing in this world is more important than her.

This is a beautiful house, a bit too dark for my liking but it's still beautiful.

Who knew that I, Lale, would hold on to a man, on a bike, for six hours?

He rode like a maniac. I don't even know where he got the second helmet but he rode like we were running from something or someone.

If you asked me why I had stood up and followed him when he asked me to, I wouldn't know what to tell you. But I'm here now, and I don't regret it because maybe this is what I need after five years and four months of not being who I am.

I married Sandile when I was five months pregnant but

MESS

most guests at the wedding didn't even know I was pregnant. There were more people from his family than there were from mine. It's not that I don't have a big family, it's just that I didn't invite most of them.

"When was the last time you were here?" I ask.

He's opened all the windows.

"A month ago," he says.

I'm not shocked. The stuffy smell is all the proof I need. There are five bedrooms. There's even an indoor pool and a study with books filling a bookshelf from floor to ceiling.

A few days ago, this guy was breaking all the rules, supplying weed and vodka and sneaking out through holes in fences. Now how is he this guy with books and study desks?

But now that I'm an escapee, I can't sink deeper than I already have. I need to go home and fix my life. I'm even thinking of selling my house and moving to a small town where nobody knows me and I can start afresh.

"You can sleep there," he says, pointing to a door on the left down the passage.

"Why are we here, Mqoqi?" This is something I should have asked when we left Emazolweni.

"We had to leave."

But why? Why is he always so cagey? "I don't know what you are talking about. All I know is that I want to go home," I say.

Why is he frowning at me? "We have a few things to settle before you go anywhere."

I don't even really know this guy. But it's night time and I don't know anyone in Gauteng. I will sleep in this house,

DUDU BUSANI-DUBE

but tomorrow I'm going home. Emazolweni is not an option any more. I was there nine days and yet I still didn't think twice about leaving with a man I don't know? That means they didn't help me with anything.

Another bed with black linen and black curtains? This guy is not colourful at all. But it's a queen-size bed and I haven't felt this comfortable in a long time.

I close the window and jump on the bed like a little kid. I don't know why. Maybe I'm happy.

The last time I was sure I was happy was about fourteen years ago. We had just passed matric, me and my then best friend Mabongi. We had decided early that year that we were done with our dysfunctional families, that as soon as we finished school, we were going to pack our bags and move to another province.

I was going to be a model; I'm dark and tall. Mabongi had been Miss Sithengile High School; she was light, and she had hips and dimples. Of course, she wasn't going to be a commercial model, her type doesn't cut it there, but men salivated over her looks and she knew how to make them useful without them even touching her.

We had a great plan: dream big but be willing to start small. We agreed that getting a job at a fast-food restaurant wouldn't be hard.

We were never homeless in Spruitview. When we arrived, our backroom awaited us. It had a bed, a stove and a couple of cupboards. We were happy. We were hopeful and we had our youth and beauty and naivety as our protection.

I did get a job, but not at a fast-food restaurant; I mopped

floors at a petrol garage.

Mabongi was a step ahead of me, as she had always been. She decided soon enough that Spruitview wasn't exactly Joburg, and she went to find the real Joburg. I was still saving money for a proper model photoshoot when she came home one night and told me she had found me a job.

"It pays ten times more than what you make sweeping floors," she said.

The next morning we took a taxi to Joburg.

Six days later I was running down the streets of Hillbrow in leggings and a bra, barefoot. Mabongi was among the men chasing me.

I got away, and that was the last time I saw her.

... ♡ ...

"Hi,"

Yeah. Hi. This madness is over. I'm going home today.

"It's 11 am," he says.

So what? I jump off the bed and grab my pants and T-shirt.

"We're taking a ride," he says.

I hope it's a ride to the airport or bus station because those are the only places I plan to go from here.

He's ready and waiting for me when I come out of the bathroom, like he can't wait for me to get out of his house.

"I just want to get a flight ticket and leave."

He doesn't respond, but I follow him out of the house anyway, to his bike, and I don't resist when he hands me the helmet. There are cars in this garage too. I wonder if he ever

drives them.

I hold on tight to him, laying my head on his broad back and marvelling at his firm abs. This is nothing like the Kgalagadi. It's not just us here; there are too many cars, and he is weaving through them with the bike. I don't know Joburg that well any more, so I'm not even sure if we are going to the airport.

We aren't. I know this because we are now on quiet streets between houses.

I want to ask when he takes off my helmet, but maybe that isn't such a good idea since I don't know where I am.

"We're going in," he says.

In where, bhuti? There are not even people around here, just old houses, some of them looking like they have been abandoned.

I follow him anyway, with the helmet held close to my chest because as much as life has taught me things, I keep testing its limits.

The door isn't locked, which is weird because it doesn't look like there's someone inside.

"Stand here," he says, and leaves me standing still like a statue in the kitchen.

I know he is searching the house because I hear doors opening, and I know I should run when I hear a woman screaming. But I don't run. I stand there frozen until he reappears dragging a woman behind him. She's so skinny, her cheekbones are sticking out and her eyes look hollow.

It's only when he drags her past me and our eyes meet that I realise who she is. But I don't call out her name because, of

all things, this is the last thing I expected.

I'm still holding the helmet close to my chest and I know I should be doing something right now. I was once a cop, I once took an oath. But I'm so shocked I stand still when he pushes her into the dilapidated sofa in front of us.

I don't think she recognises me. I don't think she is aware of anything except that there are a man and a woman in the room.

"I don't work any more," she says.

I look at Mqoqi. He indicates her with his head. I'm not sure what he's trying to do here but this is not the Mabongi I knew. She isn't the feisty girl who lived on the edge and took life head on.

"Mabongi?" I want her to look at me, at least. "Let's go home. I'll take you back home."

I don't know why I'm saying this. There's no home. Everyone is dead. Her grandmother and aunt are dead, and her brother is in prison. She doesn't know this. I know because the neighbours called me looking for her when her aunt died.

Her grandmother's house back in Clermont is now a nest for whoonga boys.

"Lale?"

Oh, she recognises me.

"What are you doing here?" she asks. She looks like she's in pain, like even opening her mouth to speak is excruciating.

I don't know why I was brought here, so ... "I'll take you home. You can come and live with me. I have a big house, I got married, I have a child ..."

She looks away from me. I don't know if that is guilt or resentment I see on her face.

I've been angry at her for many years, but it's all gone now. I want to save her. "Mabongi ..."

"Leave!" she says.

I know that tone. She was always one who could switch very quickly. Me, everyone knew I had a dark streak and I was consistent. Mabongi was the one, always laughing and bubbly, but oh, dear lord, when she switched!

"I said get out, Lahliwe!"

I feel Mqoqi tapping my shoulder.

I leave, but I will come back for her. She must still remember the dreams we had, it's just that she tried to make hers come true quicker, at my expense.

I still wonder what Mqoqi wanted to achieve by bringing me here, and I won't ask how he knew about her.

My heart is beating fast. I just want to go to the airport and get as far away from this person as possible. I know that's not happening when we stop in front of a gate and it opens. There are cars here, a lot of cars.

I want to run, but when I look behind me, the gate is already closing.

"Take that thing off and let's go inside."

Yooooo ...

"Sisi, take that thing off and compose yourself. It's my children's party, I don't want you scaring my kids."

Whaaat? "Where are we?"

Of all the things I need to ask, this is the only thing my

mouth can utter.

"Glen Austin. Now, come on. I've never introduced a decent girl to my family before," he says, and smiles.

How is this happening to me right now?

"I want to go home, Mqoqi."

He's not listening to me. He is just pulling me by my hand towards this gigantic house. All I have on is a short Go East dress and the same sandals I was wearing yesterday. At least my eyebrows are shaped.

We hear the noise before we see the people. Someone is standing in front of us. It's the woman, the one Sandile tried to save. She has a knife in her hand. I guess it's for cutting the cake but after everything I have been through, anything is possible.

"Where the hell have you been, Mqoqi?" she asks.

Why does she sound so angry?

"And who is this?" she asks, looking at me like I'm taking up too much of her space.

Mqoqi hasn't taken his eyes off her. "This is Lale."

That's all he's going to say about me?

The woman looks at me again, but I can tell by the look on her face that I'm not welcome. She sighs and walks on. "This is too much," I hear her mutter.

Meeting her in person is a bit overwhelming. I read so much about her; in fact, I stalked her anywhere and everywhere that long time ago, and I did get the feeling that she wasn't the smiley adorable face that she always seems to be in pictures. The least she could have done was smile and shake my hand ...

"Don't worry, she's not as bad as she seems. You'll get used to her," Mqoqi says.

I have no plans of getting used to anyone or anything. I duck when a little boy runs past me holding up a sword. It's a plastic one, yes, but why does he look like he's ready to cut someone with it?

"Sbopho!" Mqoqi shouts and grabs him before he plunges the sword into another little boy's head.

"He drank my Oros, baba!"

Why is this kid so mad?

I stand and watch as Mqoqi tries to preside over the Oros trial. I don't know where to go. There are too many people here, kids running all over the place, and things flying and floating, and food all over. I'm glad I have only one child.

This back yard is beautiful. There's even a Japanese garden. I must find a quiet place to sit and call someone – my boss, maybe, because I have no one to call in my family. I'd call Marieke but she probably thinks I'm dead, like she always does.

Why is this man staring at me?

"It's nice to see you again," he says.

Why does he have that smirk on his face? I know he's one of the men I saw in Mqoqi's room yesterday morning because he's wearing the same jacket. He looks exactly like him, but he's a bit older.

"Where can I get a taxi to Durban?" I ask.

Why am I asking him this? How did these words come out of my mouth?

He smiles, shakes his head and walks away.

My boss's phone is off. If there's one person who can get me out of here, it's her.

I call my mom but she doesn't answer. I haven't spoken to her since a few days after Sandile's funeral. I'm sure she'll be shocked to see my missed call.

"Would you like some food?"

Huh?

It's a woman. She has a plate with four drumsticks, three pizza slices and about six meat kebabs, a tower of food. She's casually dressed, like me, and by the look of things, as tired as I am.

"No, thank you, I'm full." I haven't eaten at all today. "Whose party is this?" I ask.

I know it's a child's party because there are kids all over.

"Mpande's children. And it's not even their birthday, just a thing because he found them."

Oh. I know which one Mpande is: he comes after Mqoqi, and he's always in the media for all the wrong reasons.

"Nobody knew they existed until, like, two months ago, and now there's a party."

Shembe! Emazolweni doesn't sound bad at all right now. Even my in-laws are better than this.

"And he wonders why I'm never going to marry him," she says.

I feel like maybe she needs to talk, although what she's doing right now is venting. I feel like she's frustrated and that's why she has this tower-plate, which she's not even attending to.

"I need to get out of here." Why am I so reckless? I don't

even know who this girl is.

"You and me both, babe. Are you sure you don't want a drumstick?"

No, I don't want a drumstick, but I see Mqoqi over there and I can tell those women talking to him are not happy.

"See those two over there?" this one says. She's so forthcoming with information, I guess we are in the same position. "We haven't seen him in two months. He disappeared. Apparently it's his thing. His brothers found him in some small town yesterday. See that woman talking to him?"

I nod.

"That's Zandile. She is Nkosana's wife and she's probably giving Mqoqi a piece of her mind. She has a soft spot for Mpande, and no matter what he does, she takes his side."

Okay, girl, I'm here for you. Keep talking.

"And that one, the one with braids, her name is Hlomu, and her husband is currently missing in action. He left and none of us know what's happening, which is strange because she owns this family."

Cicicici ... Now I think I can have a drumstick or two.

"That's Nqoba over there," she says, pointing at another guy. It's the guy with the same jacket as yesterday.

"Is he family too?" I ask. Of course, I know he is Mqoqi's brother; it's obvious.

"Yes, he's the second-eldest. His wife left him. Apparently one of their scivvies, or should I call them spies, disappeared round about the same time she left, and it's a problem."

Why is she stopping now?

"By the way, who are you?"

She's only asking me this now?

"I'm one of the caterers," I lie and grab a drumstick.

What a mess of a family this is. And I love mess ...

The sword boy is back, trying to hack yet another boy, and this one doesn't look like him. I see one of Mqoqi's brothers running to break up the fight and I wonder why they don't just confiscate the sword and put the kid in time out.

"Ndoni, Mpande is looking for you."

She's standing in front of us. She has a weave on and she's thick, really thick. She doesn't even look at me.

"What does he want, Naledi?"

I know by the look on her face that she's irritated by this question.

"He wants to make a speech, and he wants you next to him."

I'm beginning to think Ndoni here has more serious problems than me. She gets up and follows the thick woman.

I sit still because I'm the caterer and the man who brought me here isn't exactly paying attention to me.

Slowly everyone gathers around, including all the kids, while I chew on the slice of pizza and wonder how, with my street cred and misdemeanour, I'm sitting here not knowing what to do next.

I sit back and watch the party continue.

I know Ndoni isn't those twin boys' mother; she doesn't even like them.

And I wonder what happened to the mother.

5

I'VE JUST LANDED at King Shaka, and I have only one thing on my mind: to grab my daughter and run. But she's at that place that I don't want to go to, and I know I have a lot to explain, including where I was between Friday and today.

I know Emazolweni called them looking for me, and I know news of my disappearance is being discussed on the family WhatsApp group because I ignored my sister-in-law's calls for two days.

But now I'm here, and I have other important things to do, like going to Momentum to sign for my money, going to Sanlam to sign for that R1.3-million life cover I took out for Sandile, packing everything I can fit into my car, including my daughter, and disappearing.

What I do with the house, I will figure out later.

Mqoqi wasn't the asshole he had been when we left that party. He seemed rather sad, and when I insisted on leaving, he didn't say anything dodgy. Instead, he let me use his laptop to buy a ticket, and I was on the first flight out of Joburg this

morning.

He drove me to the airport – not the motorbike-riding thing; he drove me in a car – and before I said goodbye, he told me he needed to go see his brother immediately. I assumed that was the brother he'd almost killed, because he seemed anxious, but I was glad to be getting away from his psycho ass so I didn't ask any more questions.

I did feel my stomach turn when the landing announcement was made, but I'm here now and everything is familiar – from the humidity to how people greet, everything is as I know it.

I'm going to resign from my job; my boss will just have to forgive me. I have money, and if I move to some one-horse-town, I'll have nothing to spend it on except school fees for my daughter and a place to stay. It could last me for years. I could even study through Unisa, study criminology maybe, the one thing I have wanted to do since I was a child.

I request an Uber, and hope it won't be a Nhlaka playing Gqom music and wearing flops and a white vest who accepts my trip request, because I tell you, taking an Uber in Durban is an extreme sport. Luckily, it's a Bhekithemba. He does look at me funny when I sit in the back but he isn't trying to make conversation with me, and he's playing gospel music, so at least I know he knows Jesus.

I'm going from my house straight to my mother-in-law's house, and if I'm going to survive her, I must start thinking about things that will put me in a bad mood now.

Maybe I'll come back here, I don't know. This is my home. We bought this house because we could. It has five

bedrooms. One was ours and another our daughter's. The others remained empty, and we never talked about whether they'd ever belong to anyone. We never talked about having more kids and we never talked about where we'd be in five or ten years.

Ours was an unconventional marriage, one where we left space for anything.

His clothes are still here. Suits and ties and cufflinks. He loved wearing shorts and Jack Parcells when he didn't have to be formal. They are all still here.

Our big wedding portrait is still hanging on the wall and Zothile's baby pictures are still all over the house.

We named her Zothile, or he named her Zothile, because he wanted her to be that, a humble human. She's only a year and a few months younger than Niya, the child he desperately wanted to be his, and not because she would have made his life better in any way, but because it would have meant him winning a pissing contest against a man he thought he was better than.

There were times where I thought maybe Hlomu was the love of his life. The way he looked at pictures of her made me think that, sometimes, but the way he smirked and shook his head while doing it told a different story.

See, I knew Sandile, that's why I couldn't get myself to love him. He was exactly like me, bitter and angry and vengeful.

The pettiest things keep us awake at night. It gets worse when we are surrounded by people like us: they make us feel like we belong, like there's nothing wrong with us.

I'm going to have to find a school for Zothile wherever I go

from here. They will ask me why she left her old school and I will have to come up with some lie because I won't even have a letter from Emazolweni to justify why I need a new start. But I pack her clothes and toys in the boot anyway because this isn't even a lot. I've been through worse than this.

I wonder what she'll say when she sees me. I've never been away from her this long, and she doesn't understand that she'll never see her father again.

Hillcrest to KwaNdengezi is quite far, but although I have dedicated this drive to thinking, I haven't come up with anything except that I'm not leaving that township house without my daughter.

I get that feeling I always get when I enter a township: too many people, too many of them watching you and your car like maybe you shouldn't be there.

I used to be them, only those people who drove around Clermont in their fancy cars made me so mad that I swore I'd be better than them one day. But that's not how things turned out. Yes, I have a big car, but that's not how these people look at me. I see pity in their eyes, like they are happier than me in their backrooms and with their dodgy eyebrows.

My mother-in-law is just like them. I took it upon myself to make Sandile rebuild her little house and even pay for an en-suite bathroom but no, she still doesn't appreciate me. She still thinks her son could have done better than me.

She is no different from my grandmother.

... (♥) ...

"Mah," she shouts.

I'm standing right here, on the doorstep, in front of her. Why is she calling out for her mother?

I see her face, with her doek and black scarf over her shoulders, as it was the morning after we buried Sandile.

"Magoti."

That's all she says, like she doesn't know why I'm here.

"We were worried about you. Are you fine?" she asks.

Obviously, I'm intact. I'm here, aren't I?

She pushes her daughter aside and tells me to come inside.

All I want to see is my daughter, not her and my husband's sister obviously judging me for wearing a dress above the knee and letting my hair get some air. But I don't see Zothile anywhere, and this house is too quiet.

"Sit down, my child. We were so worried about you," she says.

I'm just worried about my daughter. Where is she?

"Zothile is fine. They took her but she will be back."

They took her? Who took her?

"No, don't worry, magoti. It's just that when they were informed you had disappeared they were concerned, so they thought it would be better to talk to you first before—"

Ooh, no! Not my child!

"Where is she?"

"With the social workers. She's in a safe place."

Social workers? Who does that?

MESS

"Everybody was calling us. They said you weren't well, Lale, that you found a dead body and then you disappeared. Are you okay?"

It's the sister this time. She's just like her mother!

"I just want my daughter!"

Why are they looking at me like that? Did they think she was going to live here forever? They are mad! Both of them! All of them!

"We don't want to call the police this time. Please stay calm. Zo is happy here. She's even gained weight and she laughs more."

This is why this woman still lives here! This is why she hasn't found herself a man and got married and left her mother's house! She wants to stay here and control everything! She is far older than me and yet she's always hanging on to her mother's skirts. I should have convinced Sandile to cut them off. I should have made him never to come visit them! Ever!

"Magoti?"

She's always called me that! Like I don't have a name or something!

"I told the social workers everything. I didn't want to but I had to. When I heard you had disappeared from that place I had to call them because I didn't know what you'd come here and do next. Given your history ..." She stops and adjusts the scarf on her shoulders. "Sandile said you needed help. He said I must never give up on you, but he said I must always know that my grandchild comes first, before you and your troubles."

What is she talking about? She's the bad one. She's the one

who's always hated me. I want my child!

"Mah, I'm calling the police! Now!"

Calling the police on me? Sister-in-laws are from hell, all of them!

"No, wait. Sandile would not have wanted—"

"Where was Sandile when she broke your windows and doors with bricks? She could have killed you! I've had to put my life on hold for you and Zothile because of her!"

Why is she bringing that up? Yes, I lost it and smashed things, but my husband fixed the house, didn't he? Besides, I had every reason to. I just wanted him to come out and talk to me. What kind of man runs to his mother's house every time he has a fight with his wife? It's not like I was going to kill him or anything. I threw stuff at him, that was all. And like a coward he got in his car and drove to his mother's house

"You are not getting her, not until you get help."

This is my child! She doesn't know me! I will get her, and I will get her today.

I saved his numbers as "never answer" because I thought I'd never answer his calls, if he ever called. But now I'm SMSing him.

"Mqoqi, they don't want to give me my child."

Sent.

"Send me the location."

I do as he says.

6

"YOUR HUSBAND HAD two protection orders against you?"

I'd explain things to him if I wasn't mad about the fact that we are in the car driving back to Hillcrest without my daughter. I'm not going to talk to him about that protection-order thing. I didn't make him come all the way here to dissect my life and judge me. I called him because I needed him and I trusted him to put those people on that bike of his and drop them on the street.

But he came in a car, a four-wheeled Uber thing that he couldn't use to harm those people. And when he arrived, after hours of me sitting in that house, waiting and picturing how it was all going to go down, he called telling me to come outside. He told me my daughter was safe, and that the social workers were going to bring her back to my mother-in-law, but only after I leave.

But I can't accept that. Zothile is the only thing I have in this life. I would never harm her. I'd die for her.

"You haven't answered me."

Sigh. What's there to answer? He already knows, that's why he asked.

"Are you going to get my child back for me, Mqoqi?"

"I was, and I still can, but not until you tell me the truth."

Which truth? Does he even know how many truths I have to tell? The only truth here is that, with all my faults, and I have many, I would never hurt my child.

Sandile was just a man, like all other men. I had no obligation to protect him. It was his decision to marry me and his decision alone. He was a smart man, even on his death bed he was still smart. Yes, there were occasions where he looked at me with fear in his eyes, where he walked out of the house backwards, with Zothile clasped on his back, screaming "Mama, no!" but he always came back to me eventually.

"Why did you resign from the police force?"

Oh, wow. He's going to bring that up? Now? "Where are you going with this?"

"I believe in protecting children, that's where I'm going with this," he says.

"Oh, now you are a good citizen. How did you know about Mabongi?"

He takes a deep breath. "She sold you to drug dealers in Hillbrow for R10 000, and when you ran away, she had to pay that debt with her soul."

I don't know what he means by her having to pay a debt, all I know is that I wasn't going to fly to Brazil with drugs shoved up my ass. The least Mabongi could have done was

ask me before she made promises to crazy drug dealers. I was just an 18-year-old girl, for crying out loud. And if I'd tried I would have been caught because, really, a teenage girl going to Brazil for vacation? Who would have believed that?

I ran to the nearest police station. There I found a man who was nice at first, but later tried to make me do things for him.

The nice thing was that he got me into the police force. I don't know, he spoke to people and I was driven to Pretoria to start training. I had never wanted to be a police officer but it was better than running the streets of Hillbrow.

"You are the type," he said when he congratulated me after my graduation. "One of them likes his girls tall, dark and with long legs – the supermodel types like you."

That was all he said, with a smile.

I tried to get myself stationed as far away from Gauteng as possible, but people with power are not that easy to double-cross. So I found myself stationed in Mondeor, at the charge office, certifying documents and opening petty cases. He was my boss there, the commissioner everybody feared and respected.

I was always looking for a way out, always applying for scholarships and jobs. But none of them were exactly looking for a woman who could handle a gun and was thoroughly trained to slap anyone unconscious. It didn't help that the people at the top knew why Strijdom had me there. He was a troubled man, a man with an obsession so extreme that the matter how much people begged him to let it go, he wouldn't.

He always claimed that some police officers in our station

were on some rich family's payroll. "I need you to get some training first, know how things work around here, know who is who, and who is paying them," he'd say at all those private meetings we had.

I never knew what he was talking about but I knew the day would come when I'd have to pay the debt I owed him for what he'd given me. So, basically, I was a spy with a rank and blue uniform.

I stuck it out at the charge office in the hope that maybe one day, soon enough, I'd get an opportunity to go out and chase real criminals. But one night a man was brought in for drinking and driving. They parked his fancy car right in front of the charge-office door. I had to take him to the cell. There was no need for a male officer because he was so sloshed he couldn't even walk without being assisted.

I followed procedure like I'd been taught. I walked him, handcuffed, down the dark passage, and opened the cell for him. I asked him politely to go inside but he started talking and talking, asking me if I knew who he was and why I thought I had the right to arrest him.

"If you'd gone to school, you wouldn't be here doing a matric job," he said.

I smashed his head once against the wall and he stopped talking.

The next morning he was dead and the bosses were talking about an inquiry. His family was there too with some arrogant lawyer. The press statement said he fell and hit his head and died. Luckily his extreme alcohol levels had been recorded before they brought him to us.

MESS

Two weeks later Strijdom died. He shot himself in the head.

I resigned at the end of that month. I had to go because the man who took over Strijdom's position kept calling me to his office to interrogate me about files I knew nothing about. I packed my shit and went back to Durban.

And Mqoqi here thinks he can bring that up and link it to why those people won't give me my daughter? How?

He follows me inside the house and I smell Sandile's scent as I walk in. When I left this morning I thought I was never coming back, but now I switch the lights on and inhale the familiarity of all of it, including the times I wished I lived alone and he could feel it.

"Nice house," Mqoqi says.

There's nothing nice about it without my daughter.

"Stop doing that!"

Why is he shouting at me?

"Stop with the pacing and breathing. It's making me anxious."

"You are not going to tell me what to do, Mqoqi! You don't know me!"

I don't want to do this, not in front of this man, but everything, all of it, brought me here, to this point: the father who denied me, the mother who abandoned me, the grandmother who used me, and the men who always wanted something from me. Mqoqi must be one of those men because, really, why else would he be here?

I'll show him who I am! "Sandile is dead," I say.

He knows that, but saying it makes it more real because

as much as I wished death upon him sometimes, he was the only person I could count on to tolerate me. And why is Mqoqi looking at me like that?

"I know. You wanted him to die, didn't you?"

He's mad. I didn't want him to die, especially now that he is really dead. Why does he keep assuming this nonsense?

"Stop with that pacing and come here," he says.

I don't want to go to him, I want to throw things at him, I want to hurt him, and I want him to be scared of me and yet stay here and try to make me love him. I want him to be patient with me, to try and fix me, to be tolerant with me and, despite my craziness, to see me as a delicate woman who wants nothing more than to be fucked into a state of weakness and vulnerability. But he has already passed on that opportunity. He thinks I'm crazy and dangerous, like the rest of them do. He thinks my child needs to be protected from me, like my husband did and my in-laws do.

"Do you know why we left Emazolweni?"

How could I possibly know? I listened to him and climbed on his bike because as much as I know who I am, sometimes I have doubts, and so I want to dig deeper and deeper.

"You and Amanda, or Yolanda or whatever she called herself, were technically one person," he says.

Yolanda? The broken girl who threw herself out the window? What the hell is he talking about? "Yolanda was crazy."

"And so are you," he says.

He's wrong. I would never kill myself. I have never even thought about it. I have so much to live for, especially now.

And why is he coming to me?

I try to get away from him, but there's only the dining-room wall, nothing else for me to get away to.

"I know women like you, Lale, and I can't stay away from them, that's my problem."

What is he talking about?

"I love women like you. They don't curl up and cry, they blow up, they scratch like cats, they strike like snakes and they fight. I like women who fight."

I can smell his breath warm on my face. I want to push him off me but my thing of hyper-masculinity and animalistic behaviour that has always been my weakness won't let me. So I pull him closer to me and hold on to him tight.

"I know what you want," he whispers in my ear.

"Then give it to me," I whisper back.

I know he has doubts, I can feel it, because maybe he has a conscience, although he is a mess like me. I know what he is thinking, that I'm someone's wife, worst of all, a dead someone.

For a moment I think he's going to come to his senses and leave me standing here, but he doesn't. He cups my face in his hands and looks into my eyes.

"I didn't go to Emazolweni for you," he says.

Who did he go there for, then? I also didn't go there for him.

There's something about tall men. I'm taller than most men, that's why I intimidate them. But this one, when I look at him I have to raise my head and eyes, and there's something about a man having to drop his eyes to look into yours. And

ya'll know my clit dances for this one.

"Why do you cut your hair short?" he asks, kissing my neck.

Because I like it this way.

"You should do braids."

I don't like braids.

Why are men's hands always so warm? And why is he turning me around? He runs his hands down my back and cups my bums like they are balls or something. I want to turn back and look at him, but he's on his knees, kissing my buttocks and running his hands down my legs while at it.

It's been a long time since I've been touched anywhere, and this gives me tingles and sends my blood rushing all over my body. I'm wet, and that means whatever power I had is gone. I just want him inside me, now. But I don't tell him that. I let him get up and push me all the way to the bedroom.

I smell Sandile the moment I walk in, his weak spirit and his fear of me. I smell it and something in me feels bad.

"This is my husband's bed," I say as he throws me on it and pulls down my panties.

"He's dead," he says, like it isn't something he should respect, like he doesn't even fear his ghost or respect his legacy.

But why am I questioning Mqoqi's morals? I'm the one lying on my back with my legs open and hoping he will use his tongue before his penis.

He does. Where on earth did he learn to do this? I've never felt anything like it.

I grab his golf-shirt collar and pull him up. I haven't done

this in a while and I have no time for theatrics, I want to feel him inside me, now.

"Where's your patience?" he whispers as his whole body lands on top of mine.

I'm still dressed but I have no time to get naked. I want to be filled up, to be touched and grabbed and grinded and turned over and over by a man. I want him to enter me from all angles, to pound me until I can't scream his name any more. I want to feel things I feel when I don't attach feelings to men.

Where is he going now?

I watch him pick up his pants from the floor, pull out his wallet and come back with a condom. At least he can think.

I feel my mind disconnecting from my body when he rests his on top of me again. I open my legs wider and close my eyes, but he flips me to lie on my stomach instead and pushes himself in from behind.

I try to turn my head to look at him but his hand is on my neck. I lie still and listen to him breathing in my ear while my lower body loses its life.

He isn't gentle. He isn't taking his time and he isn't kissing me anywhere, and that's a problem, because that's what I want. I push up my torso and pull up my knees.

He knows. He pounds harder and faster until I shout his name and clench the sheets in my hands. My toes don't curl. My teeth clench and my body trembles.

I fall back onto my stomach and stretch my fingers.

He pulls out and goes straight to the bathroom.

Our wedding picture is on the pedestal, me smiling and

Sandile looking at me, also smiling.

I hear the toilet flush and water running.

“Your husband’s towel is still hanging on the rail. I used his shower gel to wash my hands,” he says, throwing himself on the bed next to me.

I don’t answer him. I keep staring at Sandile’s smile instead, and wondering why he was always so gentle when we made love. Didn’t he know me? How could he live with me, share a bed with me for so many years, and still know nothing about who I am?

“He is dead,” he says, turning the picture face-down.

He’s right.

I turn away from him, pull my dress down and stare at the wall ahead. So many things are battling each other in my head. Marieke appears but I quickly get rid of her. Mabongi comes, and I wonder if she’ll still be alive when I go back for her.

“Do you have any books here?” he asks.

Wow. Sandile read a lot. He loved biographies and historical novels. His books are still all in the dining room. I must donate them, or keep them for Zothile. I’ll see.

“He did read, and he left his books everywhere. I had to pick them up and store them in the sideboard because—”

He’s up on his feet before I finish talking, leaving the bedroom and closing the door behind him. I take it he isn’t interested in my life before this.

Maybe I should shower, or repent, or cry my eyeballs out, I don’t know.

He’s left the toilet seat up and my husband’s shower gel on

the sink. At least he flushed the condom away.

I take a cold shower. I'm not sure exactly what I'm trying to clean myself of – the guilt I never thought I'd feel or the demon in me that just won't let me behave like a normal woman.

"You look fresh," he says when he sees me coming down the passage.

He's sitting on the rocking single couch, the one that only Sandile sat on, and he has his feet on the coffee table, reading *Eight Days In September* and drinking coffee.

"Mqoqi, you have to go."

I don't want him here. This is my husband's house.

"Go where?"

What the fuck does he mean? "I don't know! Just leave! This is my house and I want you to leave!"

He looks up at me briefly and goes back to the book, sipping his coffee, with his feet still on the coffee table.

He doesn't know me! I grab a vase from the side table and empty the dry flowers onto the floor. "I said leave, Mqoqi!"

Why is he so relaxed? I'm going to smash this vase in his face if he doesn't get up now and leave!

"If you dare throw that vase at me, I'll drag you upstairs and push you out the window."

I don't take kindly to threats. He catches the vase before it lands in his face.

I'm trying to find another thing to hit him with when he grabs me by the arm and throws me on the couch. I try to break free from his knee pressing into my stomach.

"I'm not Sandile. If you ever try that shit with me again, I

will skin you alive," he says.

I look into his eyes and I know he is serious. What have I gotten myself into?

"Now, go back upstairs and sleep. I have a book to read," he says.

When I left the SAPS, I should have taken the service gun with me. I have achieved nothing today, absolutely nothing. I should never have asked for his help. He is a crazy man who needs help, and I brought him here.

"You can't tell me what to do."

"I can do whatever I want to do. Now go to sleep," he says.

I need to call my boss, but it's already 12am and I have already slept with a crazy man before my husband's body even turned into a skeleton.

... ☺ ...

I have grey curtains for a reason – to keep the sun out of my bedroom – so why is the light burning my eyes? And what is that smell?

Morning pee is torturing me again.

"When you're done, grab whatever you can and let's go."

Shembe! This man is still here? "Why are you smoking in my bedroom?"

"Because you don't have a balcony. What kind of bedroom doesn't have a balcony?"

I need to pee, that's my priority right now. A man who won't leave my house is something I will deal with afterwards.

My vagina feels a bit different, probably because last

night it did something it hadn't done in a long time. I'm over regretting what I did. It happened and I can't change it, but I can decide how I live my life going forward.

This house is still a trigger. Everything in it reminds me of the five years I spent trying to be someone I'm not. So I've decided today I'm going to work to see my boss. I will tell her everything that's happened and I hope she can get me out of this fast-fast.

I find him still standing next to the open window, curtains wide open. But at least he is done smoking, although the stench of nicotine is still strong.

"Pack a few bags and let's go," he says.

Not this again! I have things to do today and none of them involve him. "I'm not going anywhere with you, Mqoqi. You're crazy."

Why is he raising his eyebrows at me? There's no way he doesn't know that threatening a woman in her own house and pressing your knee into her stomach is crazy behaviour.

"I got your daughter. Do you want to stay here or do you want her?"

Huh? "Where is she?"

"Pack some bags and let's go. I have a life to go back to."

I know she's here because I can hear cartoons blasting from the sitting room. I want to go to her!

"Pack!"

I'm probably out of my mind right now but I frantically throw things into a suitcase like a crazy woman. I just want to see my daughter, that's all I want, and if that means following this man to wherever he's taking me, again, that's what I'm

going to do.

I pack whatever I can fit into her pink-and-blue Knomo suitcase and drag both of them down the stairs.

I haven't even showered.

My baby is lying on the couch, fast asleep. Her hair is plaited. Who did that?

"Did you drug her?" I ask.

He shakes his head and his eyes say he is judging me for even thinking that. "No. She's a child. They sleep when they are bored," he says.

I want to grab her and squeeze her tight. I want to talk to her and kiss her and tell her how much I missed her. But she doesn't open her eyes even after I pick her up. I don't know these clothes she's wearing and she is heavier than I remember. She's grown an inch since I last saw her.

I had always fed her good and healthy food in small portions, because I don't want her to be fat like my mother-in-law and sister-in-law. I want her life to be easier.

"Let's go," he says.

Why is he so impatient? I look around the house again, with my daughter in my arms. I don't care if I'll ever come back here or not.

I sit with her on the back seat and kiss her forehead. Mqoqi drives out of the gate and I don't look back. I'm leaving everything behind, my house, my car, my life, and I don't know where I'm going.

I hold my Zothile tight and choose to trust a man who has shown me time and time again how unstable he is. When did I become this stupid?

7

“MAMA, WHY ARE these houses circles?”

“Because they built them like that,” I say.

Her questions are innocent, but mine are not. Why the heck am I in a village? With round houses and neighbours so far away they won't even hear me if I scream? And who is this man? Why is he dressed like he's still living in the '90s?

“Nasho ke ukuthi senifikile.”

Lord! He's said this about six times.

Mqoqi left us here and went to I don't know where. He just dropped us and drove out the gate.

We found this man in this house and he just sat in front of us and looked at us like we are potplants. I'm holding Zothile close to me. I don't want to take any risks.

The first thing I noticed when we drove inside the gate were the fresh graves next to the big tree. How are there so many fresh graves in one yard?

“Hhayi, nasho ke,” he says again. He looks exactly like Mqoqi: a bit older, but he is him and his brothers.

Before Sandile, before Zothile, I feared these people as much as I found them fascinating. What I never thought would happen was this, today, me sitting in front of one of them and not even knowing which one he is. And why hasn't he stood up and gone somewhere, at least?

"Where is Mqoqi?" I ask.

I know he can see the frustration in my eyes, but I have a feeling he's been told to guard us, as if there is a possibility of us running anywhere.

"He'll be back," he says.

When we left Hillcrest with Mqoqi I thought that maybe we were driving to his house in Joburg, that now that he was as deep in this as I am, he was going to make a plan for me and Zothile to run as far away as we could. But no, we are sitting in a big house in a rural area – the same house I read about in newspapers years ago. A woman and a child died here, but that was a long time ago. And now there are fresh graves?

I should have stayed in Emazolweni, I really should have.

I switched my phone off as soon as we got on the highway. It had already started ringing, flashing numbers I did not recognise. I know it was probably my in-laws or social workers but I keep telling myself that this is my child, and I have every right to be with her.

She's only 5 but she's seen many things. She's seen me do many things and yet she's never not loved me. No matter what I do, she still comes and curls herself into my arms. Trust, they call it. Trust only a child can have in their mother. They say your child, no matter how old they are, can still

smell your breastmilk if you hold them close to your chest.

I can't say the same about my mother, not that she's ever held me close to her chest.

"The baby must be hungry," this man says.

"I'm not a baby, I'm five."

I give her a look. I've been telling her since she could talk never to talk to strangers.

"There's food in the kitchen." The man again.

I'm hungry and I know Zothile is also hungry, but I feel like staying here on this couch and not letting her go is safer. For some odd reason I trust Mqoqi, and I'm not moving until he gets back here.

So we sit still and wait, the man clearing his throat now and again, and me picturing the mayhem that must be going on back in Durban.

There's a car parking in the yard. Great, he's back. But that's not his car I see through the window, and this is not him standing in front of us. This man has a beard and hair that's a mixture of grey and black. It's weird because he isn't even that old.

He looks at us, and then at the man, and then at us again. He leaves without saying a word.

I don't know who he is but I know by those eyes that he is one of them. I know all the names, and who comes after who, but like most people in the world I cannot tell which one is which.

"I'll be back," the man says.

I see them through the window following each other in the yard. They are going to one of the round houses and this

is a great opportunity for me to creep to the kitchen and make food. There's a lot of stuff in the fridge but no cooked food. At least there's cheese and polony, and bread in the bread bin.

"Mama, Gogo said you were in hospital."

Ayi! That woman! "I was, but I'm back now."

"But she said you'd only come back after schools close, and schools haven't closed yet. She said you'd be better when you come back and we'd go home after that," she says.

Why would that woman have such a conversation with my daughter? I don't know, but I know it's making me mad right now.

I hand her the polony-and-cheese sandwich and take a deep breath, because that's what Senzi told me to do whenever I feel my blood boiling.

"This is not home, Mama," she says.

I breathe in and out, in and out ... "This is uncle Mqoqi's house. We are visiting him," I say.

She doesn't look happy. "Are you going to chase him with a knife like you did baba?" she asks, taking a bite of her sandwich.

How does she even remember that? She was only 3 when it happened. "No, Mqoqi is not like baba, and baba is gone. You'll never see him again."

She needs to know this so she doesn't keep bringing him up. I'm trying to start a new life, one that's totally different from the one we lived. By the time she is 8 she would have forgotten everything about where we come from; three years is enough time.

"Mama, but aunty said—"

"Eat your sandwich!"

She looks down and bites into the sandwich with fear in her eyes.

I do this and then I regret it seconds later. She shouldn't have to see this side of me, that's why everyone is trying to keep her away from me. But I won't allow that: nobody can love her like I do.

The man is back, and I wonder where he bought Cerruti jeans and that mercerised golf shirt because I'm pretty sure they aren't even in stores any more. There's a way he looks at me that makes me uncomfortable.

"So which one are you?" I ask.

I see a smirk on his face. "I'm Mhlaba. Mqoqi doesn't bring girls here. In fact, nobody brings girls here unless they are their wives. So who are you?"

"I'm Lale, but I'm not his girl."

Well, after last night I'm not even sure what I am to him. But I asked for the sex so maybe he is wondering the same thing.

"So whose child is this?" he asks.

"My husband's. He died recently."

Why does he look so horrified?

"We've just cleansed ourselves of bad luck, and Mqoqi is bringing us more," he says and shakes his head.

I look at Zothile. She's just there eating her sandwich and she's not paying attention to this conversation. Good. I wouldn't want her to hear this. She's already freaked out.

I hear voices approaching and I hope it's Mqoqi because I need to get out of here.

"Mabhebeza," the man called Mhlaba says to the woman who has just walked in with Mqoqi.

She looks at him and I immediately know she doesn't want to be anywhere near him. "Mqoqi! Keep him away from me," she says.

"Bafo," he says. I know that look on his face, which says "go away", but this man's eyes are on her, like she's something he wants to look at all his life.

The woman looks at me, and then at my daughter, and I know it's not a pleasant look.

"What have you done this time, Mqoqi?" she asks.

I hate it when people look at me like she's looking at me - like I'm a problem that's about to complicate their lives. Ntuthuko looked at me like this when I arrived at his res pregnant.

"Nokthula, please. I just need you to be here for a few days, at least until I come back." Mqoqi.

Where is he going? He's not going to leave us here!

"As long as you keep your jailbird brother away from me, Mqoqi. I'm tired of him," she says.

Jailbird? Well, he does look like he lived on a starch diet for a long time.

"Nokthula mabhebeza, why are you like this? I want love you and spoil you."

Sigh! Mqoqi must not even think about leaving me here with these people. This Nokthula woman obviously hates this Mhlaba, and none of them even know how I got here.

I look at Mqoqi and he isn't looking at me.

"Come here, nana," the Nokthula woman says, opening

her arms to my daughter.

She runs to her like she is a safe place, safer than me.
"Mqoqi, Mqhele is here. I'm sure you saw his car outside,"
the Mhlaba person says. He says it like it's a serious and bad
thing.

"But that's Nkosana's car." Mqoqi.

"Well, Mqhele came with it, and he's fucked up."
Mqhele is the one who's married to that woman who
fucked my husband. He looked different.

"I'm fucked up?" he asks.

I didn't see him standing there in the kitchen doorway.
Nobody did. That beard and hair make him look rather ...
what can I say ... insane. There's something about his presence
that's unsettling. I grab Zothile from Nokthula and hold her
close to my chest because I don't like what I'm feeling right
now. It makes me want to get out of here even more.

"Bafo." Mqoqi.

"Who are these people?" Mqhele.

"They are just here for a few days. It's complicated." Mqoqi.

Why does everyone look so uncomfortable with Mqhele's
presence? Even Mhlaba and this Nokthula woman? I should
have just stayed in my house! That's what I should have
done! I didn't ask to be here. Technically, I was kidnapped,
although I voluntarily got in that car. The truth is, I'm not
even sure why I keep listening to Mqoqi and following him
around. It must be that thing of me not being able to be a
normal person. He says jump and I silently decide how high
before I jump.

But it ends here, today, in this house. And if I have to walk

through this village to find a taxi somewhere, I will. Things are just getting weirder and weirder, and I'm not about to be part of this insanity.

"Mqoqi, I want to go," I say.

He isn't looking at me, just at his bearded brother, and I don't understand why he looks so anxious. They haven't taken their eyes off each other, and now I remember this one almost killed that one.

Yehheni Shembe! Why am I still in this room?

I'm distracted by Zothile trying to wriggle out of my arms. She wants to go to Nokthula; she's reaching her arms out to her. I try to hold on to her but she starts crying and Nokthula grabs her from me.

The staring contest hasn't stopped, but I'm more interested in Mqoqi's body language than I am in his brother. It's clear they haven't talked about what happened.

Nokthula looks at Mhlaba and I know by the way he moves his eyes that he's telling her to leave the room. She rushes out with Zothile, and the smart girl in me says follow her, but I'd have to walk past Mqoqi and Mhlaba and that bearded man who looks deadly right now.

"This woman is wearing a ring. Are you fucking people's wives now, Mqoqi?" Mqhele.

How is this about me now? He doesn't even know me. And why is Mqoqi quiet? Why isn't he denying it? What kind of a man is this who can't lie with a straight face?

I've given up on thinking about exiting this place so I'm just going to stand here and lean on the cabinetry, so that if I have pull open a drawer and grab a knife to defend myself,

I can easily do so.

These men are brothers. Every time you see them in the media they are laughing and looking like nothing can come between them. So what is this now?

"Let's sit down and talk about this," says Mhlaba.

Nobody is paying attention to him, really. The only help he has been is that he is standing in the middle of the kitchen, between them.

Mqhele moves forward and Mqoqi moves a few steps back. Mhlaba is pushed aside.

The first punch, in the stomach, and second one, in the face, and the two slaps after that don't move Mqoqi. He's still standing exactly where he was when his brother reached him.

I run to the door. It's locked and there's no key. When did Mqhele lock it?

"Hit me back, Mqoqi," he says.

"No!" He's bleeding from the nose.

The punches start coming again, but Mqoqi doesn't move. He's not even trying to cover his face.

"I said hit me back! Fight like a man!"

He doesn't.

When is Mhlaba going to stop standing there and start doing something?

This is too much. I put my hands over my eyes when he starts strangling him while pressing him against the wall.

Why isn't he fighting back? He's going to get killed!

I want to intervene, to save the man who brought me here, but Mhlaba is standing between everything. "I'm a former cop," I hiss at him.

"Yeah, and I've just come out of jail. Let them talk."

Talk?

"He's going to kill him," I say.

"He wouldn't," he responds.

The blood that's all over here is making me dizzy. Mqoqi hasn't thrown a single punch, not even a push-back, and they are the same build and height.

It's only when Mqoqi lands on the floor that Mqhele stops. Strangely, he sits down next to him, and they both lean against the cupboard, side by side.

Now I really want to get out of here but I'm scared to ask for the key.

Mhlaba is relaxed – too relaxed. I'm still leaning against the door, watching them sit next to each other quietly, Mqoqi bleeding and Mqhele's jaw tight. I feel like they don't really care about me being here, that whatever just happened is far deeper than I could ever imagine. I feel invisible and unimportant, like after this they could just tell me to go back to wherever I came from, and move on with their lives.

"You must go home," Mqoqi says.

I know he is not talking to me because he isn't looking at me.

Silence.

"I'm sorry I pointed a gun at you, but I had no choice."

Mqoqi again.

"I know," Mqhele says.

He knows? After all of this madness, he knows?

"Where have you been all along?"

Oh, so now they are having a conversation like one didn't

just batter the other into deformity?

"I had to attend to Amanda. She was back at it again."

"I told you she was never going to let it go."

"I know, bafo. I went there to talk to her, and we did talk. She smiled at me, and then she just walked to the window and jumped."

Clearly I'm the only one confused by all of this. Mhlaba looks rather relieved and happy that they are sitting like this and talking after everything that just happened.

Mqhele gets up, goes to the sink and comes back with a wet dishcloth. He hands it to Mqoqi and goes back to sitting beside him. "Place this over on forehead. It will help," he says.

Wow! I remember how I did the same to Sandile every time after we had our brawls. I'd hand him ice wrapped in a dishcloth and he'd put it on his forehead.

Every time one of those things happened, he'd try to convince me to get help. He'd say, "It's either you get admitted somewhere or you confront the people who hurt you." I'd cry and curl myself up on the floor, and he'd feel bad and pick me up and put me in bed. The next morning and for days after that I'd be on my best behaviour, even for months, sometimes, and then something would happen and I'd be triggered and we'd be back there again.

I abused Sandile. Yes, I admit it. I was the monster in that marriage and he was the victim. To tell you the truth, he never did anything bad to me. He was always a gentleman who had my back and loved and protected me, but he never took time to know me before he made me his wife, that was the problem. We are truly who we are to the people who love

us, and if they commit to us without really getting to know us, they suffer the consequences.

I'm looking at these men sitting in front of me, and I know they love each other deeply, yet they can't hide who they are from each other, so one batters the other, and the other takes the violence because maybe he knows his brother better than anyone, maybe he feels it is his duty to help him heal.

There's a certain type of hurt, the hurt I inflicted on my husband and my daughter, the hurt I have inflicted on people around me – it's the hurt that people who love you keep coming back for, over and over again, and it is sick, sick to the core.

Women understand this pain better than anyone, because sometimes we wire ourselves to believe our worth is determined by whether we are chosen or not. We work ourselves into mules for men who don't see us, because our greatest emotional achievement would be them realising we are better, them realising they love us more than all those other women. We spend our days waiting for that moment to come, working on it to become a reality, and if we succeed and it comes, we realise that the work doesn't end there, that we have to work harder to keep women who think like us away.

It's an unending battle, one that our grandmothers and mothers engaged in. It doesn't take a lot, really, just one same lie our grandfathers and fathers have been telling for centuries, and we keep believing it. It's not that we are stupid, because women possess intelligence like no other, it's that we like winning. We hide it behind our beautiful smile and

delicate skin and soft eyes. Our weapon is our fragility and our strong mind, and we know how to use both.

Men aren't as smart as us. They are weak mentally and emotionally; that's why they make each other bleed like savages. But with them it ends when they see blood. With my grandmother, it never ended. She had three children with a man who left her to marry another woman. The man never chose her, even after she gave him legacy.

If she was still alive, I'd sit her down and tell her there was no need for her to be bitter and cold because of that, that no woman has ever died from not being chosen by a man. I'd tell her how being chosen is sometimes the worst thing that can happen to a woman. But I don't think she ever loved me, so I close my eyes and try hard to get her out of my mind.

I didn't realise I had become the centre of attention. Why are they all looking at me? I look at Mqoqi and I know that if he wasn't bleeding and swollen right now, he'd tell me how long I've been quiet and lost in thought.

"Her name is Lale," he says. "I brought her here to confirm what I've been telling you all along: Mkhize never touched Hlomu."

Oh, now he can lie with a straight face? Now that it's deformed and bleeding? Also, he's been doing all this stuff just to get me here so I can lie to his brother for him? I feel used. But maybe this is my ticket out of here, so ...

"Sandile was my husband. He wasn't fond of you but I can assure you that he never touched your wife." I lie too.

There, that's it, I'm free now.

"And you brought her here, to Mbuba?" Mqhele.

Mqoqi starts popping his knuckles, and I know that means he's frustrated. "Amanda sent her an email."

Why does this Amanda keep coming up? And I haven't checked my emails in a week.

"She was at that place for her." Mqoqi again.

I'm clearly lost but I'm pretty sure I have done what I was brought here to do. Now I want to leave. But they are just sitting there, quiet.

"You must go home, Mqhele, go back to your wife and children," Mqoqi says, and it sounds like begging.

"No," Mqhele says.

Oh, well. I did my part.

8

I TRIED TO request an Uber and even Taxify but nothing came up, because I'm in Mbuba and nobody knows where the fuck that is.

See, I don't have one of these places with round houses to call home. I don't even know where my family came from because my grandmother wasn't about that life. Kids from our neighbourhood would go to "emafamu" during school holidays but we'd stay put in Clermont because we didn't have that option.

Why are people obsessed with roots, anyway? It's not like they make you a better person. If anything, they take you back to where you came from, and remind you of how much you had to fight to get out of there.

Clermont isn't exactly like other townships around Durban. There isn't proper structure there. People erect houses wherever there is open space, and people from other townships like KwaMashu and eMlazi call it skomplazi because of that. They forget that they were put where they

are by white people who wanted to keep them as far away from town and the beach as possible.

"Kasi lami," they say with pride.

People from Umlazi are well known for stealing, and people from KwaMashu are famous for being murderers. Yet they still have the audacity to search for what they think is below them. It's messed up, all of it.

Even Marieke, a drug addict who showers only three times a week, thinks she can call us "you people".

If I had stayed at Emazolweni, I would have eventually told her. I would have told her that "we people" know. That our grandmothers were domestic workers and that when they came home, they told. I would have said to her, "Marieke, we know. That you people have spent centuries working on your public relations, that you work really hard and spend a lot of money to put stuff on TV that makes you look good, that you keep your shame away from the media, doesn't mean we don't know. We know, Marieke. Our grandmothers nursed and breastfed you. They fed you from their brown breasts, and they saw. No, they didn't hear it from others; they saw it themselves. That's why you are here, Marieke. You are weak. You couldn't protect your people's image. Your fathers beat your mothers black and blue, and they abused you, their own flesh and blood, and your mothers kept quiet about it because ya'll would rather die than have anyone know you go through the same shit black people go through."

I know how she would have looked at me, and I know her leg would have been shaking, and that she would have not wanted anything more than drugs to make all my words go

away at that moment.

But maybe not, because as much as I'm a bad person, I have limits. I know Marieke doesn't know how it feels to be hungry, to be cold and to have nothing. So I know she doesn't know what degradation is and, honestly, as much as she annoyed me most of the time, I had never wanted her to be worse than she already was.

I knew I was better than her the moment she entered that room. She knew it too, but she wasn't raised to accept that, so she kept her head high and poked at my faults any time she could.

I'm not saying I'm perfect, because judging by all the choices I have made in the past week, I'm not even close to that. But maybe I am where I'm supposed to be, so I'll roll with it until I find the satisfaction that I have been looking for, or someone to love me with all my flaws and lies and instabilities.

Perhaps it's someone like me that I need, someone as wounded and unstable and in a state of not giving a fuck as I am.

Mqoqi is that. He fucked me and attached no emotions to me afterwards.

I fucked him, and yet I'm still desperate to leave this place and start a new life without him.

I know he is here when I feel the urge to shake my leg and scratch my head.

"Is she sleeping?" he asks.

I don't turn to look at him because I feel like I don't know him any more. "Nokthula was here," I say instead.

“She is good with kids,” he says.

Is that supposed to make me happy? Where was he all along, anyway? And we still need to talk about that thing with his brother. How could he just stand and let that happen? In front of me? It’s clear he doesn’t give a shit about me, because if he did, his ego would have forced him to fight back.

What kind of a man chooses to be loyal to his brother, to his family, even when he is facing death? Who loves and respects another person that much? It sounds rather more dangerous than deep.

“She threatened me,” I say. Well, “threaten” is an exaggeration but she did warn me not to cause trouble.

“Well, then, don’t mess with her.”

Wow. I expected him to get mad and call her to order, to defend my honour.

“Soon you will understand my family better,” he says.

I don’t think I’m interested in doing that. I have my own issues to understand better, and yet I’m still here two days later. I have dire problems, including that I escaped from a mental institution and kidnapped my own child.

His left eye is still swollen and it’s weird how he’s not even concerned about that. But I am, and I’m done with weak men. I don’t find them attractive at all.

“I can’t believe you let him beat you up like that.”

He moves when I try to touch his face. I’m just trying to comfort him. I’m trying to help him get through this.

“We’ve talked about it. It’s over,” he says.

What does he mean? It’s over how? “But—”

“Like I told you, you will understand us soon enough. He

had to beat someone, and I'd rather that someone be me than Hlomu."

What does he mean? His brother loves Hlomu. Every woman I know wishes their men would look at them like he looks at Hlomu in those pictures.

"It's over now. And don't worry, your mother-in-law called off the cops. You can keep Zothile," he says.

She always does that: does the good things to make me look bad. She's always saving me from trouble, hiding things from the extended family, singing my praises to them and persuading Sandile to go back to me, even after I had told him my life would be better if he was dead.

I always apologised afterwards and tried to be a good wife. But there was always that something, and I guess he knew it wasn't about him, that's why he tolerated me.

"Mqoqi, you can't keep me here. I want to leave."

There's a part of me that feels like he's tired of all of this, a part that says he doesn't want me here any more and he's tired of explaining me to his people. He pulls out keys from his hoodie jacket pocket and hands them to me. They are his car keys and it doesn't make sense because I'd expect him to drive me home, back to my house where I left my own car and life.

"You want to leave? Here, take your daughter and go home."

I don't take the keys. I don't know why but my hand just won't move to meet his.

He looks at me long enough for me to look away and he puts the keys back in his pocket.

I don't know what just happened here but I know it's not right, not when I'm supposed to be wearing black clothes, not when termites haven't even started eating Sandile's casket underground. A disgrace, my grandmother would probably say. My mother-in-law would think the same thing if she knew what I was up to.

"She's Phumzile's child, what did you expect?" I know that's what my uncle will say when he finds out I've done the opposite of what is acceptable, of what is perceived as normal behaviour from a woman who left her home with a kist and a veil over her head.

I'm not going to lie and say I have chosen Mqoqi over my reputation and possible demonisation by people I share blood with, but I'm going to be truthful and tell you that I've chosen myself, and the desire to see how far he can take me. The only thing I can think about right now is complete darkness, a place I won't be able to crawl out of if I keep going deeper and deeper down. I see even death.

I look at Zothile sleeping peacefully on the bed. I notice he's looking at her too and I'm not sure why, but he must understand that she's the only thing I have to live for. He has over twenty people that I know he'd live and die for, including Hlomu, but I stand up and cover Zothile's head with the light blanket anyway, and I unzip my dress, not because he needs me, but because I need a man to make me feel something.

That man is him because he is here, now, but it's not *him* that I need, it's broad shoulders and big arms. It's someone taller than me, a voice that is deeper than mine to whisper things in my ear, press his body on mine and take on my

body like I'm glass that could break any time, like I'm fragile and helpless.

He kisses my back and caresses my buttocks like they are a piece of art. He turns me to face him and looks into my eyes. He kisses me, wraps his arms around me and hold me like he loves me.

I return all of it to him. And when he places me on the floor and inserts his finger inside me while he breathes on my face, I let him. Because I need him, I let him. I open my legs wide and let him enter me. I hold him tighter as he goes deeper inside me, pulls himself out and enters me again and again and again. Because sometimes all a woman needs is that feeling, that out-of-body experience that takes only four seconds but runs through your every vein.

I hold on tight, careful not to scream out loud because I shouldn't be doing this here, not with my daughter sleeping in the same room.

He started gentle and slow. I guess then it was about him, but now he isn't gentle and I don't want him to be. He is pouring out his frustrations and I'm receiving them because I have my own frustrations too, and a man pounding on top of me makes me feel like I don't have to deal with them, like his power and domination and masculinity will suck them out of me.

I don't let him turn me on my stomach this time. I resist, because I want to be here with him, I want him to look at me, I want him to know that he isn't fucking me, that we are fucking each other and I want it as much as he does. But he is a big man. A tall black man with an above-average penis, and

DUDU BUSANI-DUBE

energy and anger and total disrespect for any woman lying with her thighs open under him.

I know that, and I have a love-hate relationship with men who have no feelings but still possess emotional power. It's crazy, I know, I want men in my life to have power but I don't want them to know they have it, because mntase, give a man power and he will destroy everything he comes across.

I look him in the eye and push him off. I know he's confused, so I lie on my side, raise my one leg and grab his penis. He knows what I want, but it's not up to him. I push it inside me myself and hold on tight to his one arm as it cups my breast while the other does things to my clit.

This is not right! My husband is dead! My daughter is on the bed! He is inside me!

He puts his hand over my mouth when I can't take it any more.

"Sshhhhhh. Don't make noise," he whispers.

How does he expect me to keep quiet?

"Are you good?" he whispers again.

"Deeper," I say.

He turns me and I'm lying on my back again with him on top of me, his hand over my mouth. I breathe in and let my body loose. I'm back to being vulnerable and needy. His moaning and groaning on top of me is all I want to hear.

I just have to wire myself into that place where my mind doesn't wander to places that make me angry and sad. I need to stay in this moment so it stays connected to my body long enough to take me to the four seconds I'm doing all of this for.

I know he's almost there when he groans louder so I hold him tighter and press my eyes shut. I come before he does, and I didn't even have to squeeze my thighs together.

... (S) ...

I can't get myself to lay my head on his chest. I don't want to.

I want him to leave. I want to throw things at him, to hit him or grab a knife and stab him until I have his blood all over me. I want to look him in the eye and tell him he ain't shit, that I'd still be fine even if he was dead.

I watch him as he puts his track pants and hoodie back on, and wonder why I keep taking my clothes off for him, why my legs keep opening for him, when I know very well I don't want to be anywhere near him.

"Get up and put your clothes back on before she wakes up," he says, and leaves me lying on the floor.

There is no love lost between us. I know this by the way he looks at me after we fuck. He takes what he thinks is for him to take, and I receive what I think is for me to receive.

My baby is still sleeping, peaceful and innocent, like she is never going to grow up and find out that life is nothing but a minimum of sixty years of manoeuvrings. She'll know soon enough that once you pass the age of not understanding what's going on, then comes the time of trying to be accepted, to be loved and seen and chosen and celebrated. She will spend most of her life seeking validation and success and wealth, and if she is one of *those*, she will work herself into a mule to build her name so that she will be remembered after

she dies. She will want to be called the first black ... the first woman ... the first African.

If she is anything like her father, all of those things will happen, and then she will get old and sick and she will die, and none of that will matter because she'll be dead. And when she arrives at wherever souls go after they leave the body, she will have no stories to tell fellow ghosts. That's when she'll realise that she never did anything, that her body boarded aeroplanes that flew over lands and oceans, that her feet stepped on many soils around the world, but that they left nothing and came back with nothing except pictures.

But she could be a happy girl who will want for nothing, a smart and beautiful woman who will carry the burden of not wanting to disappoint me. And maybe, if I'm really good, she will never have to test herself enough to break bad and drown in herself, find her way up and drown again, and surface and drown, and surface and so on and so forth...

She won't grow up to be like my grandmother, who was angry and bitter and hateful for as long as I can remember, until the last year of her life, when she'd wake up at the crack of dawn to catch the morning air. She walked barefoot on the grass and said the morning dew was the purest and freshest thing she had ever experienced. She ate more and laughed more.

She came to my house once. She adored Sandile and loved Zothile like she was the best thing the world had ever given to her, yet she still loathed me. She told me, during that rare occasion where we were in a room together and actually talked, "You are angry at yourself, nobody but yourself."

I took a deep breath and said to her, "I got myself this far, after everything you put me through. I got out and I got myself this far."

She looked at me and smiled that smile that parted her lips but hardened her eyes. "The world is not kind to soft women. I had to make you tough."

I stormed out of that room there and then, because it hit me at that exact moment that I was her, that she had made me exactly like her. And then she died weeks later.

I cried at her funeral, harder than her own children and my cousins, because I had not only lost a woman I despised, I had also lost my source of bitterness, or at least one of them.

I don't remember the exact moment I decided she was to blame for everything. Was it when she refused to let me go to the reed dance when all the other girls in my class were going? Because, as she said it, "This one is not a virgin any more." I was 11 and I had never even kissed a boy. The word spread and suddenly all the boys claimed to have slept with me, boys I had never even spoken to.

I hit one of them into a blue-eye and two teeth on the ground when he tried to drag me to an abandoned house once. But that didn't help change my reputation as the neighbourhood hoe, it just stopped those boys from saying it out loud or trying me ...

"Mama?"

Huh?

"Baba said I must come get her," she says.

She's looking at Zothile, still sleeping peacefully.

"She's sleeping!"

DUDU BUSANI-DUBE

Why am I snapping at a child? Why on earth is she calling me mama?

Oh, I remember, Sandile desperately wanted her to be his. She must be about 8 because she's already lost her baby teeth and her two big front teeth have grown in. She looks exactly like Mqoqi and the rest of them.

"You can't wake her, sweetie. Let her sleep. She'll come play with you after she wakes up." I'm smiling now and trying really hard to sound like a "mama".

But she looks unfazed, like she can see through me. "Where's her baba?"

Really? "He's dead."

Why did I just say that? Why am I trying to traumatise a child?

"You put him in a hole?"

Yerrrr "Yes, people go to the hole when they die."

Improper, Lale! Totally improper! Also, why is she the only child here? I know she didn't come here with her father yesterday.

"Baba put bones in a hole. I couldn't walk, and then he put bones in a hole and I could walk again," she says, and she's serious.

What kind of witchcraft is this child talking about? I expect her to go back where she came from, but instead she sits on the bed with her feet dangling.

"She's going to be my best friend forever. Baba said you are never going to leave, both of you."

Shembe!!

9

MQOQI IS A beautiful man, but a man who has nothing.

A man who loves women like me, the ones who don't kill with kindness or revenge with death. He loves that I sharpen my nails and claw. I get him and maybe he too gets me. He's not trying to fix me.

I love his eyes and his brokenness. I love that, as much as he tries, he knows at the back of his mind that he doesn't fit in this family. He is a middle child that got lost in the madness – but where exactly is the middle when there are eight of you, countless children and wives who control everything?

He said to me when we left Mbuba, "Sell your house. Let it all go and come with me. I'll love Zothile like my own child and we will build a family together."

I know he immediately regretted saying it. It sounded to me like a man settling, a man who couldn't have the woman he loved, so he settles for whatever stands in front of him. It also sounded like a man wanting to save me, something like that Cinderella and Snow White bullshit where a kiss b

DUDU BUSANI-DUBE

prince leads to a happily ever after.

But Mqoqi is no prince. He is the epitome of the type of men I have been trying to avoid all of my life, the volcanoes and sometimes shady characters that I know didn't get to where they are by being good citizens. The ones who internalise things and hold on to them forever, until they eventually plunge into depression and fight back by killing themselves, leaving you with guilt and grief.

Sandile was an accountant. He was a different kind of smart from Mqoqi, and yet two years into our marriage I dreaded his touch and my mind wandered off to my problems and unhappy places whenever his penis filled my vagina.

I'm bad, I know, and accept that. I'm a mess and I find broken men attractive. I take my clothes off for them and I let them continue where their forefathers and grandfathers left off. They aren't as bad as their forefathers and grandfathers and white men were any more, but I know they wish we were the same as our foremothers and grandmothers, that we weren't testing them with our feminism and obsession with proving we are as human as they are.

They wish we would focus on being beautiful for them, and still be strong for the preservation of the human race as they want it, and understand that we were put on this earth for nothing other than the excruciating pain we go through pushing humans out of our bodies through a tiny hole, and accepting that those tiny humans belong to them more than they belong to us. We give them their surnames and we hope they look like them so that there isn't any paternity doubt.

And when there's doubt or they decide they don't want to be part of it, we are left to fend for ourselves, to raise their humans all by ourselves until they grow up and go out to look for their surnames.

My uncle did that: he went to look for his father because he wanted his children to carry his rightful surname. It didn't work out well, so here we are, the third generation of my grandmother's maiden name and nobody has died from it. But my uncle will never accept that. He frowns when somebody calls him by the Zondi clan name, because Zondi is not his surname; it's not even his mother's surname, it's his grandmother's maiden name.

They say these things shouldn't matter to us women because we are born to be given away anyway. But that's something we have to earn, that being-given-away thing. You have to be good enough for a man to want to take you, and after he does, it's your job to make sure he doesn't return you to sender.

Mqoqi here wants to do that: he wants to take me and own me.

"Stop doing that."

"Doing what?"

"Shaking your leg. It's distracting."

I wasn't shaking my leg.

"Zothile will be fine. They'll take care of her, and Niya is also there," he says.

I was against us leaving her in Mbuba with all those people but she's happy. She's been happy since she woke up and found another child to play with. I never asked where

the other kids were.

"Just pack all the stuff you want to take with you in boxes. The truck will be here tomorrow morning."

I'm still not sure about this. His promise was to let me and my daughter stay in one of his houses for free until I figure out my next move. I said no at first because, seriously, I'm not destitute, I have my money waiting for me and I have my house. But I've accepted his offer. I said to him, I need to be away from everything and everyone, but I'm not going to sell my house. I'll probably go back after a few months when I can think straight.

But first I must do this. I've never been inside this building before but I remember how fascinating it was to see it from a taxi on those rare occasions my uncle took me to town along with his kids when I was a child, or their designated nanny, to be precise. He only brought me along so I could look after his children but he always bought me a dress or two, as some kind of a salary, I think.

"You're twenty minutes early," he says.

I get out of the car anyway. I'll wait at reception until my appointment at 11am.

"I'll pick you up from your house at 6pm," he says, raising his eyebrows at me as if I might disappear on him while his family has my child.

I check my handbag again. Great, I have all the documents they told me to bring.

I'm nervous because this feels too final, like this is the last thing I'll ever do that involves Sandile. Like cashing in the money he saved to ensure I have a good life after he is gone is

putting soil on top of him all over again.

The reception is empty and the landline phone is ringing non-stop. I still have fifteen minutes to kill, so I go to the left where people keep appearing with chips and drinks.

I find a corner table after I buy myself a scone and a cup of coffee: a black Americana. It reminds me of Marieke, and I wonder if they got her a new roommate because living alone will kill her.

And then I remember I have to delete Sandile's Facebook account. He wasn't exactly a committed Facebook user but even now, over two months after he died, people are still tagging him with their RIPs and weeping-face emojis.

I go through all the messages and wonder how all these people even know him and why they are crying if they've only found out about his death now. If he was important to them, they would have checked on him and they would have known he was dying before he died.

Actually, this is annoying me. I'm deleting his account now. I try "Zothile" first but it says wrong password. I try my name: same thing. Even his mother's name is not the password. Well ...

It's almost 11am and I make my way to where the woman at the reception directs me.

"You can sit here, Mrs Mkhize."

I know I must sit, but I'm still standing because I don't understand what my mother-in-law and these other people are doing here.

"You can sit on this side if there's a problem?" He's pointing me to the empty side of the boardroom table, and

first of all, why are we in a boardroom? I expected to go into an office and sign documents and get out.

I sit because I don't have a choice, across from my mother-in-law and the people next to her.

The guy has a pile of papers in front of him and he looks nervous.

I have no doubt he told Sandile's mother about our appointment, that's why she is here. About the other people, I'm just going to ignore them until someone tells me exactly what's going on.

He clears his throat before he starts talking. "Mrs Mkhize."

"Lale!" I say.

He looks at Sandile's mother, and back at the paper in his hand. "Lahliwe, this is your husband's will," he says, waving the paper in the air.

I already know what my husband had, he was open with me. I just have to sign for the life-cover and those little insurance policies.

"By virtue of being a spouse, fifty per cent of the house is yours. The other fifty per cent will be shared among his three children."

Three children? "What three children?" I ask.

"Yes. Olwethu Mkhize, eight years old. Zothile Mkhize, five years old, Sandile-Junior Mkhize, three years old."

Three years old? What the fuck? I look at my mother-in-law. She's looking straight at me. The woman sitting next to her too, what's that smirk on her face? There's another woman next to her, old enough to be her mother.

I need water! No, I need a gun! "Mah, what's going on?"

I ask.

She totally ignores me and looks at that woman.

"The life cover: the one for R3 million is split between his children. His employer will pay for all the children's education until they are 21. You get both cars and half of his pension. The rest goes to his mother and his children. The house in Ballito goes to his other two children. Their mother is the custodian until they are 21. The house in Midrand goes to your daughter. You are the custodian until she is 21."

He had a house in Midrand? Who the hell was I married to?

"Sandile didn't have other children except Zothile." Why am I even saying this?

"They are right outside. Do you want to see them?"

Why the hell is this bitch even talking? I don't know her! And why is she sitting so close to Sandile's mother?

This old bitch! She knows her! She knows all of this!

The Sandile I knew would never have done this to me! There's something wrong here. They must have done something; they must have colluded against me. These children they are talking about are not Sandile's, never! When and how? A three year old? A child younger than Zothile? He had a child during our marriage? How?

"This is what the will says, Mrs Mkhize. Everything else you will have to sort out as a family. My job ends here. Here are the documents you all need to sign."

I'm not signing anything! These women don't know me!

"Mrs Mkhize, please sit down."

Yeyi! Sit down for what? Obviously I'm a fool here!

Obviously these people have been making a fool of me all this time – all of them, including that stupid boring dog I married!

Senzi said to breathe in and breathe out ... and breathe in and think about happy places and ...

Fuck that hippie bullshit! These people are testing me!

“Mah, did you know about this?”

I'm asking her nicely, because I was raised to respect my elders, although they have, time and time again, proven to have no respect for me.

She looks at this woman sitting next to her. Why is she looking at her?

“It doesn't matter now. We must respect Sandile's last wishes and move on.”

Ooh, Lord!

“Magoti, calm down please ...”

I will kill all of them! I will gouge their eyes out and burn them alive! I will kill those children too!

I see the two kids sitting at reception as two security guards drag me out of the building. They look exactly like Zothile, exactly like Sandile; the little boy even has his birthmark above the right eye. He must have seen the hate in my eyes because he is crying and calling for his mama.

I left Sandile's mother on the floor and I hope her high-high kills her today. That shit baby-mama, I hope that jug of iced water I threw at her broke all her teeth.

10

CR SWART, THAT'S what we still call it. Long after it was changed to Durban Central Police Station, that's what we still called it, as if we didn't want to let go of our oppressors, no matter what they did to us and how long they had been dead.

If I had listened to the security guards and calmed down, they would not have called the police on me, and I would not have ended up here, in a police cell with my perfect eyebrows and R2 000 handbag.

I can make a phonecall. That's what the police officers told me two hours after I stopped swearing at them. But that was four hours ago. I want to, but there's something about being alone here that makes me want to drag this thing out even longer. Leaving will mean having to go out to face the reality that things I thought could never happen to me, are happening to me.

I never understood how women would not know that their men were cheating on them. I mean, the signs are always there. Today I am one of them, and I can't even punish

my husband because he is dead.

“Sisi, sik’phakele noma uyahamba?”

Yerrrr ... I’m now being offered prison food. It’s already 8pm.

Nobody has pressed charges, but they still won’t let me walk out of here without someone coming to sign me out. They must have been told something about me, that I’m already a mental case or something.

“Can I have my phone back, please?”

“No, you can use our landline phone,” the cop says.

I know this is not police procedure. None of this is procedure. I can’t be kept here if nobody has opened a case against me.

But I know cops well enough. “Okay, I’ll make the call.” How is it that I’m on this side of life? “I need my phone – I need to get the number.”

They all look at me and I know they’ve been talking about me and what I did. They are done judging me and I know I’m probably the subject of the night-shift WhatsApp group.

I get my phone, probably because I don’t look like a criminal. I scroll past Mqoqi’s number. It’s funny because when I left the cell he was the person I planned to call.

But Mqoqi isn’t what I need right now. He doesn’t have a soft spot for me and he doesn’t owe me. He’ll blame me for all of this.

It rings twice and he answers. As to why anyone would answer a landline number at 8.15pm, I don’t know.

“Ntuthuko, it’s me.”

“Lale?”

He still says my name the way he did when we were young and dumb.

"I need you to come get me, please."

"Get you from where?"

"The police station. CR Swart. They won't release me."

I know that panic in his voice and I know he's going to drop everything and come to my rescue. I am Rapunzel, poking her head out of a small window, waiting for a man to come and rescue her, a man who himself needs rescuing.

Mqoqi is probably still waiting for me outside my house, or should I say half my house?¹⁰

... ☺ ...

"You have your own place now?"

"I've lived here for three years," he answers.

Oh. This is hardly an improvement on the backroom at his mother's house, considering it's still Clermont, but I guess independence is also progress, and it isn't a bad thing if your options are limited.

"You can sit," he says, pointing me to the bed.

I sit and watch him take off his sneakers and throw them on top of the wardrobe. He used to do the same with his school shoes when we were teenagers. He'd then lock the door and close the windows, and we would spoon over a box of Topper Creams and Coo-ee soft drink.

He'd talk a lot about the future. His dreams were big and they were all going to come true. I'd listen quietly with a smitten smile on my face, but I never said anything about my

own dreams because I didn't have many of those. His were going to come true: I knew that because he was smart and driven; he was decisive and he saw the world as a kind place despite everything his life lacked, and it lacked a lot.

His big family's only source of income was rent money collected from tenants who rented the many backrooms in the yard. That yard used to be so crowded that nobody even noticed me coming in and out of his one-room in school uniform.

Before his uncle left and he moved into that room, he'd slept on the kitchen floor with his cousins and brothers. That's why it took us so long to have sex.

We started dating when I was 14 and he 15. It's always a thing with unloved kids: they get into this relationship thing young because they are always looking for someone to love them, to see them and to take them away from their reality. I could have looked for that love in someone twice my age, like Mabongi did, but I'm glad I chose Ntuthuko, because at least I wasn't just a tight vagina he wanted to play with. He waited until I thought I was ready.

Mabongi had a boyfriend when she was 12. I always thought it was because she was so pretty and she was tired of many boys hounding her, so she chose one to keep the others away. But no, that wasn't the case. She needed food and a bra because her boobs came too early.

Anyway, me and Ntuthuko, we were just kids but we were in love and we were going to be together forever and ever.

The first time we had sex we were both ready. I think I wanted it more than he did. It was in December. I was going

into matric the following year and he was going to study mechanical engineering at the University of Zululand. I wanted us to have sex before he left.

I remember being naked only on my lower body, him climbing on top of me, me feeling a sharp pain and him bouncing on top of me seven times, letting out a loud roar and then it was over.

I saw him off in January. By mid-February I could barely stay awake in class.

Mabongi saw it first. She kissed one of her boyfriends into giving her money and we bought the pregnancy test and that was it, my life was over.

Ntuthuko didn't come home after I told him. He sent me money to take a taxi to Empangeni and I slept at his student res that night. He seemed different, like he had grown much in just two months. I looked different, a bit lighter, and I was getting fat.

We didn't have sex or spoon. I slept on the single bed at his res and he slept on the floor.

He had already sat me down and told me having a baby was not an option. I remembered his dreams and how he was destined for great things, and how I was going to benefit from those great things too, because I was going to be with him forever and ever.

We were at Ngwelezane hospital by 6am the next day: me, him and an elderly woman. I was 17, and they were not going to do an abortion without a parent's consent. That woman posed as my aunt because my mother was "dead". I don't even know where Ntuthuko got her and how much he paid her

but I know he used his TEFSA money – they call it NFSAS now. I got the feeling it wasn't the woman's first time doing that for some teenagers.

I was given two pills and we stopped by the shops to get pads before going back to res. By the afternoon I was starting to worry because nothing was happening.

The pains came at night. I cried and moaned and groaned and curled. He held my hand through all of it. I dropped that foetus thing in the communal toilets just after 3am. And then I cried myself to sleep.

When I woke up at midday he was sitting in a chair, waiting to give me food.

I wasn't hungry. I took a shower and told him to accompany me to the taxi rank. I couldn't look him in the eye.

Everything was different – him, me, the world, the sky, the air ... I didn't feel like a child any more, but I knew I also didn't want to be a mother. I had made the right decision and I didn't regret it. I regretted the fact that I felt like an adult and it wasn't a good feeling.

He tried. I didn't. By the time he came home for holidays there was already Mjay, who stole cars for a living and was almost my uncle's age. He didn't bother me much with wanting sex, he just wanted me to sit on the front seat of his VR6 and drive around Clermont in my school uniform so everyone would know I was his. He called me "mnyamana wami" and teased me about how I needed to eat more so I could be a "Pakistan".

One of his friends once called me Grace Jones. I didn't know who that was but they both laughed so I figured it was

a joke. I laughed with them because that's what you do when your man's friends are around, you make sure you are polite because his image is important.

"I'm joking. You are prettier than most dindis," the friend said. They laughed even harder.

I still didn't know who Grace Jones was when Mjay's straight girlfriend found us parked at Top Rank eating fried chips. She didn't ask questions, she came for my face first. Mjay ran and left us there.

They are married now, him and that girlfriend, but I hear she is still beating up schoolgirls all over Clermont to this day.

Ntuthuko and I never got back together, but I heard about his graduation long after Mabongi and I left for Joburg. I heard he had not found a job and was still living in that same backroom a year later, and how he was always seen going somewhere with a brown envelope to submit his CV.

We reconnected when I moved back to Durban but by then he was the Ntuthuko I know now, a meter-taxi driver with a degree and graduation pictures hanging on the wall.

We never talk about his life and struggles, or even mine.

"Why didn't you want me to drive you to your house?" he asks.

Why? Because I don't want to go there. Because I need to be with him, because I think he loves me. It's not because there is a crazy man parked there and he is probably still trying to call me while my phone is in flight mode.

"Are you going to go home?" he asks.

Why would I? "For what?"

"I don't know - to see your aunts and cousins? Your family?"

Again, for what? Home is ten minutes away from here, but I'm not going there. "Can I sleep here tonight?"

What's with the hostility? And why isn't he sitting down? He's been giving me one-word answers since he signed me out of the police station.

I saw one cop pulling him aside and speaking to him in a low voice. He kept nodding and he's been hostile since then.

"I have to start another shift at 12am."

Educated people don't start shifts at 12am. The normal me would tell him that but I know how sensitive the subject is. He already feels like the whole of Clermont is laughing at him, that the car thieves and neighbours whose sons are languishing in jail are looking at him and thinking "What did his education do for him? He's still here, still no better."

My heart breaks for him because I know how much he sacrificed to get out of here. He even participated in killing his own child just so he wouldn't be that guy who lives in a backroom in Clermont all his life, yet here we are. Soon he'll be out of the youth bracket and it will be even harder for him to find a job, that's if he's still looking for one.

"I need someone to talk to, Ntuthuko."

"And that someone is me? Shouldn't you be somewhere mourning in black clothes instead of here?"

Not him too. "Sandile wasn't the man I thought he was."

He finally sits on the bed, but far from me, like he doesn't want to breathe the same air as me. Sometimes I'm not sure when it comes to this one: it could be that he resents me, or

the fact that he can't scrub me off his skin. It might be the guilt, or that I remind him of a time when he was hopeful, when life was beautiful and dreams were possible.

I've never told him what it took for me to get out of Clermont because it feels good knowing that he believes I worked hard for everything I have. Not that I didn't, but had I been him, it would have been harder.

"I'm listening," he says.

I'll tell him everything, and then I'll leave because I know he can't help me with anything. He's just one of those people you offload things on, and leave them feeling bad because they have no power to fix them. He isn't like Mqoqi. Mqoqi fixes things, in his own twisted way.

"Sandile had two children I didn't know about, one of them while we were married."

He nods, like he isn't surprised.

"I found out today, through his will. His mother brought that whore with her, along with those kids. Can you believe that?"

He shrugs. He isn't surprised or bothered, I can see it in his eyes.

"He betrayed me. In all those years he was busy with that woman. I don't even understand when he slept with her because he came home every night."

Why isn't he saying anything? He's supposed to be comforting me, not looking at me like I'm crazy.

"Probably at the same time you were fucking me."

What? I only slept with him three times while I was married, and it was when Sandile had run off to his mother

DUDU BUSANI-DUBE

again. "Why are you like this, Ntuthuko?"

"Because I'm tired, Lale. I'm tired of you. I'm tired of this life and this place and I'm tired of working my ass off for nothing. I'm tired of not sleeping at night just so I can eat and clothe myself. I'm tired of driving prostitutes to rich men who probably never even finished high school. I'm tired of being decent and good in the hope that this life will be good to me one day and give me my big break. I hate it! I hate people like you, Lale, and ..."

Hhaybo! What did I do?

He takes a deep breath and looks up at the ceiling.

I've never seen him like this. He's never used the word "hate" and my name in the same sentence. I mean, what is this?

"Do you know that my mother died?"

I do, my cousin told me. But I couldn't go to the funeral because Sandile surprised me with a holiday to Bali.

"I didn't even have enough money to bury her. The neighbours put money together for the coffin."

I'm sure they did, and afterwards they sat and discussed him over tea and scones. I know this because my cousin called me to say how smart I was to leave his broke ass. But she was wrong. She doesn't know how much his broke ass does for my sanity.

"Why didn't you call me, Ntuthuko?"

He frowns. "When have I ever called you for anything? Giving is not your thing, Lale. You take, that's all you do, like you're doing now – taking my time and space because your husband has children. The world is supposed to stop now

because your husband has children?"

Okay, now he's starting to piss me off. I didn't come here to be judged, least of all by him in this stupid box he calls a home. I don't even know what I'm doing here. "Thanks for your time. I'll never bother you again," I say, standing up and grabbing my handbag.

Even getting to the door is an extreme sport here in this tiny box with an ancient wardrobe and broken tiles on the floor.

"Where are you going?"

What does he care?

"Sit down. It's 11:30pm and I'm not driving you anywhere."

I sit back down, because I know better than to strut the streets of Fenen in heels in the middle of the night. This place has always been dangerous, even with people you know, because they are angry at people like me. They are angrier at me than they are at the ANC and its unfulfilled promises.

More than two decades later, they have proper roads but no cars to drive, the freedom to say whatever they want to say but no money to send their children to school. My cousins get excited towards the end of the month because they get to collect "their money" for giving birth to children they cannot feed. R420! They get excited over motherfucking R420! I spend that on one meal and a glass of wine at a restaurant on a random Saturday.

But then again, they have not been through what I have been through in this life. They would rather live on R420 than trek to Joburg and be chased half-naked down the streets by drug traffickers, or be here paying for their sins.

When I woke up this morning, I was sure my life would be great going forward.

His phone rings. It's one of those old Samsungs with an annoying ringtone. He goes outside to answer it and I'm left wondering what he meant when he said he was tired of this life.

I get it: he's been unlucky. Most people have been unlucky in this life but isn't waking up in the morning alive and healthy enough luck? Even if you are hungry and poor, shouldn't you be thankful?

He comes back just as I throw my panties on the floor. He looks at me lying stark naked on his bed, briefly, and immediately looks away. My breasts have always been too small, which often makes me insecure about being naked around a man, but not him, never him.

He pulls a small blanket out of the wardrobe and throws it at me. "Cover yourself," he says.

I cover just my chest and sit up. He knows what I want, and he's never denied me before.

"That was my boss. I don't have to do the midnight shift tonight," he says, like he needs to explain who he was on the phone with.

Speaking of bosses, I have to see mine soon. I'm sure she already knows about my escape but I really have to talk to her about how I can't access my emails and about my laptop screen going blank on the day I left Emazolweni.

And now that all the money I thought was mine has to be shared among four people, I might have to go back to work.

I keep trying to erase the picture of that little boy from my

mind but it just won't go away. I don't care about that little girl – I'm sure he had her before he met me, but what I don't understand is why he never told me about her. He must have left that woman for me. That's why she slept with him and got pregnant, knowing very well that he had a wife. It was her revenge. I blame her. I don't blame my husband. He was vulnerable and she took advantage of the situation.

He probably went to her after I chased him with a knife or threw a pot at him. It's funny how I never used those pots to cook. I honestly forgot about them until I needed a weapon.

"What are you doing?"

Why is he pushing the bed against the wall?

"I'm creating space on the floor."

"Why?"

"I'll sleep on the floor," he says.

Wow. It's not like I was planning to climb on top of him in his sleep. I let him be, because I've had it with his attitude today.

I know I won't fall asleep tonight. I might as well switch my phone on. It's SMS after SMS, beep after beep. I know most of them are Mqoqi's voice messages. The last one was at 11pm – he waited that long?

There's one from my mother-in-law saying we need to talk.

There's another one, an SMS from a number I don't know.

Hi dear. We didn't get a chance to talk. I just want to let you know that I'll be contesting the will and challenging the validity of your marriage. Sandile paid lobola for me, we had umembeso too, before you came

in the picture and that is a marriage recognised by law. I'm sure you saw Junior, and that should tell you that we were still together. He supported us throughout. He paid for everything until the day he died. The only reason he stayed with you was to protect his daughter. He feared you'd harm her if he left you. I have SMS messages and voicenotes to confirm it, his own words.

... ☺ ...

I've read this message fifty times if not more, and I still don't get how this is happening to me. I lived with a man, tolerated mediocre sex, cooked for him when I was in a good mood, wore this ring with pride, and that whole time he was talking about me to some woman? And even getting her pregnant while at it? Noooooo!

And that "Hi dear"? We all know people say that when they are talking down to you.

Challenging the validity of my marriage? Me? Me who had a big white wedding at a golf estate in a R23 000 dress and a R250-per-guest buffet?

Me who bathed and fed a dying man, sat by his hospital bed and held his hand until he took his last breath. Where was she? Where was she when he chose to die? Why was I the one who had to sign consent forms for everything? I sat on a mattress and sang along to dreadful Lutheran church songs for six whole days. Look down, makoti, keep the blanket over your shoulders, cover your head, you are grieving, they said.

Izinja!

"Take a left," I say.

"We are going right. Hillcrest is that way."

Ohhhhh hhayi! "Take a left, Ntuthuko. We are going to eManzimtoti Cemetery."

He turns left, because he knows me.

I did not sleep at all last night and when he opened his eyes this morning, he looked up from the floor to find me sitting on the bed staring down at him. It was 5am and I was ready to go. But he had to shower and put on clean, ironed clothes. He's always been like that, respectful of himself.

There are too many people on this earth and they are always rushing like they are going to find something better wherever they are going. You'd swear they don't have problems. Even if they do, I doubt theirs are as stupid as mine.

On the highway there are cars, big cars whizzing by in the fast lane, passing little Picantos and Yarises with "L" signs in the back windows. I can't help staring at the young lady driving beside us, hunched over the steering wheel of some little Kia car with her eyes fixed on the road. It must be her first car. It must be that she's just started working, and if she's smart, she won't seek a man to add to her achievements.

I have not responded to the SMSes and I will not. The thoughts in my mind right now are murderous and they aren't just about that woman, they are about her children too.

We arrive at the cemetery just after 8am. I sit quietly as Ntuthuko explains to the stubborn security guard that he is delivering a widow who desperately wants to see her husband's grave.

"It's very tough for her mfethu. She cried all night," he says.

He's lying. When did he learn to lie?

There's a fresh grave next to it, the soil still moist and red; the funeral must have been last weekend. Sandile's grave already has a tombstone. That was my doing. I wasn't short of money so I wasn't going to leave him like that, with just red soil on top of him and no proper identification.

"Give me your spanner, and the spare wheel."

Why does he look confused? I want what I want.

"Ntuthuko, the spanner and the spare wheel!"

"What are you going to do with them?"

I don't have time for this! I take the spare wheel out of the car myself and carry it on top of my head all the way to Sandile's tombstone. I turn around to see him behind me with the spanner. Good!

"You can go back to the car."

He doesn't move. Well then, he's welcome to be a spectator.

I swear the plan was to come here, sit on this grave and talk to this man's ghost about all his bullshit. I was going to tell him he's trash, and I was going to tell him that not wearing black clothes for him was the best decision I have ever made in my life. I was going to cuss him, cry, and leave him alone for good. But he's a dog! A dog that's not worth my words or tears or respect! He's not even worth this tombstone! I should have had him cremated and flushed his ashes down the toilet!

If I had a shovel right now, I'd dig him out and cut his head from his body. But I have a spanner and a tyre, so I'm going to vandalise this tombstone to the ground and spit on

whatever is left of it. I throw the tyre on the tombstone and try to break the granite with the spanner, but it's still intact, and I'm mad that even in death Sandile cannot be destroyed.

"Lale!"

"No! Leave me alone!"

"What are you doing?"

"He's a dog, Ntuthuko! He's a fucking dog! He did this on purpose! All of this, he did it to spite me! Let me go!"

He holds me tight, so tight I can't move. "Calm down, he's gone," he whispers in my ear.

It's strange how I always feel safe in his arms, like nothing and nobody can touch me when I'm here. Being in his arms still feels the same way it did when we were young and hopeful, when we thought we could control our destiny with nothing but love and dreams.

"Get in the car," he says.

I listen.

I have not achieved anything by coming here, but I know I will never come back. I am done. I'm letting Sandile go and I owe him nothing.

... ☺ ...

"Are you coming in?"

"No, I have to start working. I've already lost two hours," he says.

I see. He must be thinking I plan to strip him naked and beg him to bed me.

We sit quietly for minutes. I'm dreading going inside this

house because I know it won't feel like home any more. And I can't even sell it because it's now at the centre of a legal dispute. I thought I was smart, I thought I was in control of everything, but now I feel stupid, like nothing makes sense any more.

"Are you going to come back tonight?" I ask.

I know I should be getting out of his car right now, but I can't, I can't let go of him.

"No. I have to work a double shift today because I'm flying to Joburg for a job interview in two days," he says.

Flying? Can he even afford a ticket?

He knows I'm lost.

"It's some transport company. I got the call yesterday afternoon. I don't even remember applying for the job but it must be those recruitment agencies that still have my CV. It must be a good company too because they are paying for my flights."

I hear him, but I do feel sorry for him because who is going to hire a 33-year-old man with no work experience except driving people around?

I stand outside my gate and watch him drive away. If you asked me why I called him to rescue me in the first place, I wouldn't know what to tell you, but I do feel a bit better, because that's what Ntuthuko does for me: he reminds me who I am and what I am, and sometimes that's all I need.

Now I must get in my car, drive to that place with round houses to get Zothile, and come back here. Then I'm not leaving this house. If that woman wants to take me on, I'm ready for her.

There are dirty dishes in my sink.

“Did you sleep with him?”

Oh, hell, no! He broke into my house! He’s sitting on that same single couch, with a book in his hand, a steaming cup of coffee, and feet on the coffee table.

I want to ask, but I’m really just exhausted and defeated. And why is he wearing Sandile’s night robe?

“Mqoqi, I don’t know how you got into my house, and to tell you the truth I don’t even care. Right now, I just need a shower and to drive to Mbuba to get my daughter. Thank you for everything, whatever it is that I should be thankful for. I’m done with you and I need you to leave.”

He hasn’t even looked up at me and I don’t understand how I haven’t lost it because this is the last thing I expected. Clearly he broke into my house and made himself comfortable. The part I don’t understand is why he won’t just leave me alone.

“Zothile is fine. She’s in Joburg now and she is already calling Hlomu ‘mami.’”

I will strangle a bitch to death!

“Are you going to pack your stuff or should I pack it for you?” he asks.

He must think I’m one of his hoes! I’m not packing shit!

He shrugs and says, “Your mother-in-law is taking you to court for custody of Zothile, and to be honest I don’t blame her. So are you coming with me or not?”

Again, I find myself on the bike, a helmet on my head and my arms around his waist. I don’t know what happened to the car we came in yesterday but I know I’m making yet another stupid mistake.

DUDU BUSANI-DUBE

When did I become so helpless?
Oh, I know, when I left Emazolweni, and the same way I
nodded to Strijdom's instructions at a mere promise that he
was going to fix all my problems.

11

THE SUMMONSES WERE delivered to my workplace today, one set from that woman and another from my mother-in-law.

My boss didn't sign for them – she told that sheriff to go away. She was more shocked by the fact that I'm in Joburg than that people are dragging me to court.

Zothile likes it here. She loves standing on the balcony and looking down two floors.

She talks a lot about Niya and mami and how the boys are always breaking things and getting in trouble. Sometimes she asks when we are going to see “gogo” and when we are going back home. I ignore her, not because she annoys me, but because I don't have the answers.

We've been here for two weeks, in this townhouse owned by a man I shouldn't even be dealing with. But for my daughter I'll do anything, even if it means fleeing to another country. I know they have a lot of things to use against me: they will say I'm temperamental and violent. They'll have a

list of things I did to Sandile. They'll bring up the fact that I abandoned my daughter after her father died. Hell, they might even bring up the Emazolweni-escape thing and how I threatened to kill and assaulted my mother-in-law and my husband's mistress just two weeks ago.

I know I can't hide forever. Soon they will find me and who knows where I will end up?

Mqoqi comes almost every day to check on us. Zothile adores him, probably because he brings her nice things and keeps promising to take her to see Niya. But I'm still not sure whether I should be thankful to him or not, because I know there is no way he is doing all this out of the goodness of his heart.

Last week I sat him down and demanded answers. I had spent the night Googling "Mandisa Zulu brothers" but all I'd found was that she was a long-term girlfriend of one of them and that she had killed herself.

She became a person of interest to me after I moved in here and found a paper scribbled with her name and surname on the top drawer of the pedestal in the main bedroom. She was already dead when Sandile came to us, but I remember how her death made headlines.

Mqoqi didn't give me any answers except that they don't know why she chose to die. But I know why people choose to die: they get to a point where they can't take it any more. It's never just about one thing, it's about a load of things they keep collecting along the way, which is weird because most of them choose to die when their lives seem to be going great to the outside world.

"Mama, someone is knocking."

Mqoqi never knocks; he has his own keys. I sit still because something tells me I shouldn't open the door. The knocking persists and I know whoever the person is, they know I'm inside.

"Lale?" I hear a woman's voice say from outside.

"It's mami! Open! Open the door, mama!"

She even knows her voice now?

I open. I have no reason not to. They follow each other in, all four of them, including the thick one, the slim one with oval eyes and the extremely pretty one. They don't even greet me.

"Do you have wine?" she asks.

It's the one who got me into this shit! How can such a pretty woman be so controversial?

I don't have wine, I have Tanqueray and a twelve-pack of tonic. I point her to the top cupboards and the fridge.

"This will do," she says. She's already holding the bottle of gin and is pulling a can of tonic from the fridge.

I didn't like the way Zothile jumped into her arms when she came in, but I'm not about to be petty. Also, how did they find me?

The thick one is the first to sit down on the couch and look all serious. The pretty one hasn't said anything, and Hlomu asks if I have lemons and mint leaves. I only have lemons.

I tell Zothile to go to the bedroom. He face says she wants to stay but my face says don't test me, child, and she knows this face so she goes.

I make myself comfortable on the ottoman across from

them. I'd be frank and ask them what they want but the reality is, I'm a charity case right now, and them being here is freaking me out.

"Would you like something to drink?" I ask. Why am I even asking this? If they did, they would have gone straight to the fridge, that's what Hlomu did.

Zandile and Naledi look at each other.

Now I'm stressed.

"Do you have a lawyer dear?" Naledi.

"Dear"? This is not going to end well. "I'm looking for one," I say.

Hlomu is halfway through that glass of gin and tonic. I get her, I really do. Everybody thinks she is at a perfect place but I know that no woman at a perfect place would do what she did, to a man like hers.

"Can you afford a lawyer?" Zandile.

What does that have to do with them? "I don't know. I'm waiting for three of them to get back to me. I'm not sure how much they are going to cost."

I did speak to three lawyers last week. The first one sounded like she thought I was stupid to even think I could fight this. The second one said she had dealt with many cases like mine, but advised me to go for mediation. The third one sounded like she could do with therapy herself, and I liked her. She told me, "These bitches do this all the time. All we need is a married female judge and this will all be over."

There's a phone ringing. it's Naledi's. She looks at the screen and rejects the call. It rings again a few seconds later. She switches it off this time.

Hlomu raises her eyebrows at her.

"I'll call him back," Naledi says dismissively.

Another phone rings. It's Zandile's this time. She looks at it and throws it in her handbag without answering.

Hlomu doesn't even look at hers when it rings.

I'd ask them why they are ignoring calls but we aren't exactly at that place yet.

Then mine starts ringing, blasting out Zonke's "Feelings". It's a number I don't know.

"Don't answer it!" Naledi says.

I've already answered it.

"Lale?"

It's a man. "Give the phone to my wife," he says.

I'm not sure who I'm talking to and who his wife is, but I hand the phone to Naledi because she's sitting across from me. She snatches it from my hand like I'm irritating her. She doesn't even say hello. "We will call you back," she says and disconnects the call.

She doesn't tell the others who it was. Also, why is Mqoqi giving my number to his brothers?

Hlomu is on her second glass, and judging by how she doesn't even have lipstick on, this is not how she planned to spend her Saturday morning.

"Peter will handle this thing." Zandile.

Who is Peter now?

"Let her have the house and whatever else she wants. In fact, give her everything. You won't be needing any of it." Xolie.

First of all, why did Mqoqi tell his family my business?

Then, she says it like it should be that simple, like my husband's dodgy ways are something I should just move on from. Well, he's dead and I can't do anything to him now, but I'll be damned if I just walk away from this without a fight.

"Or we could just murder her. It's your choice," Hlomu says and laughs. It must be the gin talking.

"Hlomu!" Zandile.

They think this is all a joke, I see.

"What? Moghel is not going anywhere." Hlomu.

I feel like they are here to fix things, to handle me because clearly I'm now a "situation". And what does Hlomu mean about me not going anywhere? I'm here because I need to figure things out, and after that I'm going back to my life, fucked up as it is.

I've been thinking about those two kids and how I won't tell Zothile that she has siblings. If someone decides to tell her, then that will be their problem, because I will never let my child anywhere near them, or her grandmother near her again. They will all meet on Khumbulekhaya after I'm dead and that's it.

"Why are you here?" I ask. It's not even that I'm thinking out loud. No, I really want to know why they are here and why they think they have the right to interrogate me.

"Why are *you* here, Lale?" Naledi.

She seems to be the most hostile among them. I don't know why.

"Mqoqi brought me here."

I see Hlomu raising her eyebrows.

"Mqoqi has a tendency to bring problems, and they come

in the form of women. He likes them a bit ... I don't know ... off the radar. And, sweetie, it's not even about fixing them. He loves mess, and by the look of things you are very messy." Xolie.

Wow! I've just been insulted by a woman who blinks a hundred times in one second.

It's clear now what they are here for: they want to know what I am about and they want to protect what they have been protecting since they found these men. But Mqoqi doesn't need to be protected. I think people need to be protected from him, rather.

I need to fix my own life and move the fuck on. I have no intention of staying with Mqoqi and I have no time to be caught up in this "ride or die" space. I did that with the man I was married to and look where it landed me.

But if I'm going to be stuck with this family, like Hlomu claims I am, she is the person I'm going to have to keep close. She stands up and goes to the kitchen. I take it she's going to pour herself another glass. I follow her.

"Don't worry, I know my way around this place," she says when she sees me standing behind her.

I thought this was Mqoqi's house and that nobody lived here. Now I'm confused.

"Hlomu, are you here to help me or to get rid of me?" I'm standing really close to her because I don't want the others to hear.

She pours herself a glass of water and stands leaning on the sink. Why is she so unfazed? "It depends."

"On what?"

She doesn't answer me. Instead she starts walking away. I'm not having that! "I lied for you, Hlomu"

Yes! There it is, the reaction I've been looking for. It disappears very quickly, just as I'm about to gloat on the fact that I have her. She turns and starts walking away again.

"I know about Wolmaransstad."

She turns to look at me again, but clearly this time she doesn't know what I'm talking about. I expect her to ask but she doesn't. She goes back to sit on the single couch and crosses her legs.

Now I'm dreading going back to join them. What I followed Hlomu to this kitchen for hasn't changed anything. She can't be threatened, least of all by me. Now I'm just here wondering when they are going to get up and leave me still wondering why they were here.

When I run out of things to pretend I'm busy with in the kitchen, I give up and go back to the lounge, ready to tell them to leave. I find Naledi already on her feet. She says something about having to be there for her sister. I know I'm not meant to be part of this conversation but I pay attention anyway.

"He would have turned 42 this year so it's a big thing. She will never let go. I really wish she would. It's like she wants to be a grieving widow all her life. Now we have to drive all the way to the spot where he died and watch her cry." She says it like it irritates her, but you can tell it comes from a painful place.

Whoever she is talking about is the total opposite of me. Whatever grief I had over Sandile's death ended the day I

found out he was going around fathering children with a ring on his finger. But I might as well make myself useful here. "I lost my husband too. It can be really hard," I say.

I don't think they are sympathetic. I can just see it in Zandile's body language.

"Your husband wasn't gunned down two weeks after your wedding." Naledi.

Now she's being insensitive! And I don't even know how to respond to her.

They are all on their feet, handbags hanging off their arms, and I'm glad because all I can think about right now is how I'm going to scream at Mqoqi and how he is going to just listen and be calm about everything. He does that: treats me like I'm crazy and then fucks me like he's crazy.

I told him everything about what happened on that day of Sandile's will, and he just helped me pack my stuff and we came here. Maybe he loves me. Or maybe, like they say, he loves mess.

"Qhawe is downstairs," Naledi says.

That's it. I don't want drama in this house. They must all leave! Now!

"Why?" asks Zandile.

"He's coming with me to Wolmaransstad. You know how he is," she says and heads for the door.

I'm ready to close the door behind them but Hlomu is standing still in the lounge. Her face is not what it was like when she walked in here, when she looked at me like I was a joke and gulped alcohol while her "sister-wives" interrogated me. I know she wants me to explain, but I won't. She must

figure it out like I did.

There's someone behind me. I know because her eyes have left me. I turn around to see two of them. Mqoqi is in a hoodie. The other one, in the white shirt, doesn't look too happy to see me. It's Mqhele, I think, or maybe not, because he doesn't have a beard and his hair isn't grey.

Hlomu walks out the door without saying a word to them.

Now it's just the three of us and I've figured it's not Mqhele because he wouldn't let his wife just leave like that.

He looks at Mqoqi and says, "I can't lose Naledi, bafo. I can't lose my wife and children. This is the third time you're bringing this type of shit into our lives. I don't care how you do it, just deal with it."

With that, he leaves.

12

MQOQI ONCE SAID to me, "I failed at this loyalty thing. I have always failed at it."

I didn't know him much then. He was just that weed guy at a mental institution.

I asked him, on that day we left Fourways after his brother told him to 'deal with it', if we were running away. He didn't answer me, he just drove and drove until we got here.

He personally unpacked Zothile's clothes into the wardrobe, and later left the house to burn the car. Yes, he burned the car we came here in, and he didn't explain why.

He bought another one the next day. A new phone, too, with a new number.

It's funny, though, because instead of complaining, I should be happy. Everything I planned to do going forward, is exactly what is happening now.

I wanted to start over in a new town, a small town where nobody knows me or cares to know me. The only difference is that I pictured it being just me and Zothile, not with a man

who sometimes locks himself in a room and buries himself in a book or at a computer keyboard all night.

I can't say nobody knows him here. Perhaps that is why he never leaves the house but I'm happy that nobody knows me here, that's why I feel free. That's why it was easy to get Zothile into a good school and that's why I haven't even attempted getting a job or anything else to keep myself busy.

That woman won the case. My marriage was declared invalid and I was left with nothing except what Zothile inherited. But what she doesn't know, what she and those two children of hers and that rotten mother-in-law of mine don't know, is that I got my money.

Yes, I cashed in on Sandile's death. If he hadn't died of natural causes, I would have had to answer a lot of questions before they paid out the R1.4 million. They would have assumed I killed him, considering how he had protection orders against me and stuff ... forgetting that he always came back to our bed still.

Considering where we live now, that is a lot of money, more so because we have nothing to spend it on.

Nobody looks like us here, nobody speaks our language and nobody speaks to us.

I asked Mqoqi as we were unpacking, "Why Concordia? How did you choose this place?"

He said, "This was the first house I bought. I've always wanted to disappear."

Who buys a house in a small town in the Northern Cape? For what?

It was clear he had lived in this house before, because he

came with only one bag. The rest of the stuff he's using was already here.

If I didn't know better, I'd say he hates his family, but I know that's impossible because he has pictures of all of them lining these walls.

Concordia is, well, the last place I would have settled in. I would have rather gotten myself a house by the sea in Cape Town, with racist neighbours, but R1.4 million cannot get one a house in Cape Town, not even a bachelor flat, so here I am ...

And no, it's not because I'm desperate and poor by elite Cape Town standards that I'm here, it's that Mqoqi is a better planner than me. He always has a place for us to go when it's time to disappear.

I have, a few times, assumed that he chose me over his family because I've never heard him call them or talk about them, but then again, I don't want to get too confident about this thing that the two of us have.

Zothile hates her new school. She says the kids look at her and point at her but none of them want to play with her.

Mqoqi said let's put her in a township school but I said no, she's going to that school where they don't really want her, but have to take her because it's the new South Africa and Mandela said ...

She says she doesn't understand when the teacher speaks. I say she'll learn and understand eventually because that's how you raise a girl. You know she can't fight physically so you raise her to fight with her brain.

So every morning I put her in her blue shorts and blue hat,

and drop her off at the gate of that building where everyone looks past me.

This morning was the first time since we arrived here that Mqoqi insisted on driving her to school. She was excited. She loves him dearly and they have a connection that even I cannot explain.

The daily routine is that I drop her off at school and come back home to Mqoqi, the guy who brews his own coffee and sleeps during the day, never at night.

We have never stopped having sex. I want it, he wants it, so we do it.

He never tells me what he's always typing on that keyboard and I've never told him why I follow him around.

He thinks I have no choice, that he is doing me favours ...

"We can stay here forever, you know, stay here until we are old and grey," he says.

It's 12pm, his normal waking-up time.

"We don't belong here," I say.

He does that thing of looking at me like I'm a sticker or a tattoo that he'll never be able to wash off.

"Where do we belong?" he asks.

That's a good question, but I have no answer to it. We clearly don't belong with each other. It's been months and we still haven't decided what we are.

"You have your family. They will come looking for you like they always do."

He shakes his head. "Not this time, Lale."

How does he know?

"I don't want them to find me," he says.

MESS

I really do wish I could fully understand him. "What happened to you, Mqoqi? Who hurt you?"

There's that look on his face, the one that says he doesn't owe me his life story, but also, he knows that right now I'm all he has, so he sits down on the concrete garden bench next to me. "Nothing happened to me," he says and sips his coffee.

We both know that's a lie, or maybe not. Maybe some people are just the way they are. Nothing has to happen to them for them to turn into who they become. Maybe that's just my thing: things happened to me and made me like this. That's what I live by.

I've gotten used to inhaling second-hand smoke, sometimes even weed. I don't think he enjoys smoking, though; I think he can't do without it.

"I've always wanted to be an individual," he says.

I'm lost so I wait.

"You know, just ... just to be me and not be defined by my family or the taxi industry or money or ..." He stops, pulls and puffs.

I'm not understanding this. I thought he was proud of who he is.

"You know, Lale, if I had a choice I would never have gone into the taxi business. Well, there weren't many career choices available to us besides crime and taxis, but I would have tried hard enough. As a kid, despite growing up the way we did, I always had dreams, and they were far from where Nkosana was taking us, Nkosana and Nqoba and Mqhele, because they've always determined where we go. We are like ... I don't know how to describe it, like a pack of wolves.

It's like if one of us were to drop and die, we wouldn't know how to live going forward, and so we've done a lot of things, unimaginable things, to protect that."

Wow.

"But, Mqoqi, isn't that what everybody longs for? A family that has your back no matter what?"

He shakes his head, but doesn't say anything until he finishes the cigarette. "Have you ever stood in front of someone you know, had a conversation with them, but the look on their faces says they aren't sure which one you are? You have a woman but you know that if she found your brother in your house wearing your clothes, she'd jump and kiss him, thinking it's you ..."

Look, we all know this family is unique in a very strange way, but I'm sure I'd know Mqoqi from the rest ...

"Sometimes it feels like I don't have an identity, like there is no Mqoqi without the rest of the Zulus."

I don't believe that.

"I was going to marry young, you know. That was my plan. And I was going to move far away and start a life with a woman and have kids, and I was going to name them myself, not Nkosana. I was going to keep her away from the business and everything that who we are comes with, just to avoid her turning out like ..." He stops.

I can't imagine him married with kids. I mean, he's a renowned fuck-boy with fast bikes and nightclubs. I also didn't know he owned three nightclubs until he told me about it last week.

"So what stopped you from doing all that?" I ask.

He looks at me. "The woman I was supposed to marry and have children with and grow old and grey with – I couldn't leave her behind and I couldn't take her with me either."

I see. I don't want to know who that woman was, because I love him. He doesn't know it but I want to grow old and grey with him. That is what has changed since we moved into this house. But I know I can't. It would never work between us. Besides, do I even know how to love? My history says I don't, especially not a complicated man like this one, a man who fights back.

This house is small compared to both our previous homes. We all, the three of us, bump into each other every time and everywhere in this house. We eat together because we have to do it while watching TV – there is no lounge table or an extra room where anyone can go to find peace. It's our bedroom, Zothile's bedroom and that other bedroom that Mqoqi uses as an office, the one he spends nights and half the days in. But the yard is big, so at least Zothile has freedom to run and jump.

"So is this it? You plan to stay here for the rest of your life? You're not going to find what you're looking for here. You can't hide forever. Sooner or later your brothers will come and take you home."

"They won't," he says.

He sounds so sure, yet his face doesn't say he's worried or hurt by it.

"You know, I took care of Amanda. She lived here, in this house, and I tried, I really tried to help her."

Amanda was Yolanda, the person he went to Emazolweni

for, but I still don't believe he didn't know about me being there. I think I was the "other" issue he needed to deal with.

"She jumped. I didn't push her," he says.

He must have noticed the look on my face.

How weird is it that I was the one who found her dead body?

Apparently she had dirt on them, hectic things that would have ended them, and she had it all in the email she sent to me. It was things I would have easily understood because, like Mqoqi once told me, we were the same person, Strijdom's persons.

I never read that email because Mqoqi here and his brothers crashed my laptop.

I'd tell him that I probably would never have done anything with it, even though there was once a time when I would have jumped at it, when I was so obsessed with them that if I was a writer I would have written a great crime thriller about a group of rural uneducated brothers who stole R93 million and got away with it. And then they rose high on the social-status ladder. They were a dream, the envy of all men and the weakness of all women.

But still, I would have mentioned that if you looked hard enough, you would have noticed that deep down they were just boys who sometimes wished they were like the rest of us, that there were things they had hoped money and status would erase and replace with peace and happiness.

But we all know that's not how it works ...

"Why did you try to help her, Mqoqi? Was it because you cared, or was it that you needed to do something you knew

your brothers would hate you for doing?" It's that. It must be that. There is no other sound explanation for it.

He shrugs and says: "Probably a bit of both."

I should have been a psychologist, or a mind reader, because I know this one is beyond textbook methods of understanding humans.

"The woman you spoke about, the one who stood in the way of you doing what you wanted to do with your life? Do you still love her?"

He lights another cigarette. In five minutes I'm going to have to leave this bench to go fetch my daughter from school, and I will leave with a clear understanding of what this thing he and I have. It is nothing. He loves whoever that woman he is talking about is, and I'm just here because I'm another woman he needs to save so he can feel better about himself, feel like he is nothing like his brothers, that he is better than who everyone thinks he is.

He grabs me by my wrist when I stand up. "At first my attraction to you was fuelled by the wrongness of you. But now I think I don't need you to be fucked up and angry for me to see you. I think we can do this," he says.

I want to say something, but I can't. I can't admit that I love him, especially not now when the rage inside me is building. The last man who claimed to love me, even though I never really believed him, lied to me for five years.

Suddenly I feel like grabbing this potplant and smashing it in his face. But he is not Sandile, or Ntuthuko, or every other man who has ever tried to love me. He is the one that I love back.

"I have to fetch Zothile from school," I say and leave. I know that when I return, he will be in his office with the door locked. He'll come out to entertain Zothile for a while, and have dinner with us, and then I'll only see him again tomorrow around midday.

... ☺ ...

"Mommy, my teacher asked me where you work. Where do you work, mommy?"

I can't wait for her to grow out of the curious phase. "I don't have to work for now."

"Okay. I told her that baba is dead, but I have a new daddy. Uncle Mqoqi is my new daddy."

Another mistake I made was not explaining things to her. I never wanted her to get too attached to Mqoqi, just like I never planned to fall in love with him.

"Mqoqi is not your daddy, Zo"

"But he loves me."

Sigh. "I know."

"And he loves you, mommy. He's your boyfriend, right?"

Wow. I don't answer her, because then I'm going to have to explain what he is to me and, honestly, I don't know.

He said, "We can do this," and that was a red flag. It sounded like something arranged, like we had to settle for each other because we could handle each other. There's that, and the fact that I'm not exactly sure what I want from him, or from life as a whole.

This child! She runs out of the car and leaves her backpack

behind again. One of these days I will do to her what my grandmother did to me – beat her until her ass is so swollen she can't even sit. But these days you get arrested for doing that stuff.

These kids of today, they tell. They tell their teachers who seemingly have the police and social workers on speed-dial. Imagine if that had been the case with us! All our parents would have ended up in jail!

“Zo, Mqoqi is busy. He will come out when he's done.”

She ignores me and keeps banging on the door.

It's not that I'm happy he is ignoring her, it's that I don't want him to come out because then we are going to have to address the “we can do this” thing. We've crossed that line that protected both of us from ourselves. It was okay when we lived in oblivion, in unspoken words and undeclared feelings.

I hear the key turning and I know it's about to get messy, because he always comes out for Zothile. He picks her up and carries her on his back down the passage and all the way out the door.

He smiles for her, laughs with her, and he talks with her – not to her, with her.

“My tooth wants to come out,” she says.

I didn't know that. She's turning 6 next week.

“This one,” she says, opening her mouth wide and pointing at it.

He looks at it, touches it and tells her not to pull it out, to let it come out on its own.

Sometimes, when I watch him doing this kind of stuff with

Zothile, it makes me want to stick around, to give her the daddy moments on a bench facing the garden of a suburban house. I tried to give her that with Sandile but sometimes I made him bleed.

“Zo, it’s time for homework.”

Homework is colouring in apples and oranges, which she does with much dedication and passion. It’s beautiful to watch. The smile on her face when I look at it and tell her she has done great is even more beautiful, because there is nothing more beautiful than a child’s trust in you, the knowledge that even though they have reservations about you, that even though their instinct tells them to be cautious and expect anything as far as you are concerned, the majority of their being believes you don’t mean to harm them.

Children forget, and as a result they forgive by default. It’s just sad that I was not one of those children.

I could take Zothile anywhere, and as long as I’m there with her, she will adjust and find happiness in that moment, no matter how bad it is. That is why I can never let anyone take her away from me.

But still, she must know that this guy is not her father.

“Let’s have another child,” he says.

I laugh because ... surely he’s joking? Wow. He isn’t. His face says so.

“Mqoqi, I’m not your solution to whatever it is that you are trying to fix with your life.”

I’ve known him for four months and already he wants to make me his baby-mama? Nope, not me. I don’t care that he’s the only man who has been able to break the walls I built

around me. In fact, this is making me mad.

"I'm not your revenge. You are not going to use me to piss off your brothers, Mqoqi. I never asked for this, to be here with you. I have my own plans for my life and I won't allow you to—"

"All you had to say was no. I'm not interested in your rantings, not today." With that he stands up and leaves me sitting, still boiling inside.

I want a screaming match! I don't want him to walk away from me, I want him to demand this baby from me, to look me in the eye and tell me I'm not going anywhere. I follow him down the passage to that room he always locks himself in.

"Of all people, Mqoqi, of all people, why did you choose me? Me, Sandile's wife...?"

"Is that all you are, Lale? Sandile's wife? That's what defines you?"

He must stop with the mind games.

"I never gave a shit about your husband. And what is this revenge you are talking about? I'd never choose you over my family. Don't ever think I did."

He moves before my cellphone reaches him. It crashes into the wall and falls to the floor. I have nothing else on me to throw at him, so I charge at him with my fists clenched. I'm going to fucking kill him today!

He grabs me by my upper arms before my nails reach his face. I fight to free myself, because that's what I've been doing all my life, fighting to free myself from everything, from me more often than not.

But he is tall and he is tough.
So I scream and squirm and cuss.

“Mama, no!”

I’m sure I’ve been hearing these words since I started screaming, but I’m only hearing clearly now.

It’s Zo, screaming from behind Mqoqi. She has her arms wrapped around his leg and her face pressed against it. Why is she holding on to him? She should be holding on to me. I’m the one she should trust, not him.

I know this scene very well. I’ve lived it many times, except before, her screams were never enough to make me stop.

I retreat and leave the room, and leave the house and leave the yard.

Except for barking dogs and an empty street and high fences, there is nothing here for me to go to, no Ntuthuko, no work and no mother-in-law to call and swear at for opening her house to a man who always ran to her when he should have been at home handling what he committed himself to.

And so I walk, down the street past a man watering his garden, and past a low fence where I spot two teenagers smoking cigarettes behind the house; it’s clear they have respect for their parents. I walk fast, like I did over there in Clermont each time I stormed out of my grandmother’s house and tried to escape my reality. Except then, a long time ago, I was trying to run away from things that just wouldn’t leave my mind, and now, I’m trying to figure out why my own child would cling to Mqoqi instead of me.

A man is supposed to follow you when you storm out, but Mqoqi won’t do that. He’s not that type of man. Besides, he

knows I will come back.

And now I'm here, still walking to nowhere and thinking about how easy and secure my life would be if I took him up on his suggestion. Imagine, if I had a child with him, I would be set forever. I would never have to worry or work a day in my life.

But then again, this is what landed me in that Sandile mess – my quest for security and comfort.

I don't want another child. Even the one I have wasn't planned.

The house is quiet. That means Zothile is either sleeping or hiding under the bed. She did that the few times Sandile didn't leave the house after I had attacked him. For her to come out, we would have to both kneel next to the bed and beg her. She never came out for just me or just him.

I feel bad, and I'm going straight to her bedroom to beg.

"She's sleeping," he shouts from the lounge.

I was hoping he had locked himself in that room again. But no, he is here, in the lounge, his feet on the coffee table with a book in his hand: *A Thousand Splendid Hills*.

I go and check on her anyway. She's fast asleep. I will explain things to her in the morning. She'll be hurt but the sooner she knows that you don't always get what you want in life, the better.

"Mqoqi."

He doesn't look up at me. I'm tempted to snatch that book out of his hands.

"I'm leaving. We are leaving tomorrow."

He looks up at me briefly and his eyes go back to the

book. He must think I'm bluffing, but I'm not. I've made the decision and that's it. I'm sure we can find a bus to anywhere, as long as it is out of this town and out of this province.

... (♥) ...

"Lale."

What does he want? I'm done packing all of Zothile's things. The two big suitcases on the bed are for my clothes, and that's it, we will be out of here. The first suitcase is almost full. The second one sits empty on the bed.

"Please stay with me."

His "please" doesn't deter me. I'm leaving.

"You're the only thing I have right now."

Still not good enough.

"I'm not a *thing*, Mqoqi, I'm a person, and I don't need you. Do you understand that? I don't need you to drag me across the country and have me stuck in situations that have nothing to do with me. I'm not your *thing* or ..."

I'm getting very angry.

"I haven't had suicidal thoughts lately," he says.

Suicidal thoughts? Why would he have suicidal thoughts?

"I haven't tried to kill myself since ..." He stops.

If I didn't know better, I'd believe this was one of his mind games, but I know him enough to know he's not that desperate to keep me. And so I watch him walk all the way around the bed and sit down. "I don't talk to women, I don't tell them anything," he says.

I sit on the bed, ready and willing to listen. This is me

again, betraying my gut feeling. I'd ask him why he is telling me this but ...

"Do you want to know who I am?" he asks.

I zip the empty suitcase closed, put my feet up on the bed and sit with my back against the headboard. Yes, I want to know who he is.

"I've tried to kill myself four times. I was 19 the first time. Mpande found me. They pumped the pills out of my stomach at the hospital."

This doesn't sound like him at all. "Why? What was the reason?"

"I don't remember."

Surely that can't be true. People don't just wake up one morning and decide they want to die, and later forget why they took that decision.

"But I remember why I parked my car at Bree and walked onto the Mandela Bridge at 2am when I was 22. I was going to jump. I stood there watching the road below, waiting for a truck to approach so I could jump and let it run me over."

It doesn't make sense. "Why were you so desperate to die?"

"I was tired."

"Tired of what?"

"Of living."

Sigh. "Mqoqi, if you are going to open up to me, you're going to have to do better than this. I'm here and I'm listening, so talk!"

He sighs and moves to sit on the bed with me, his back also against the headboard.

“You know – and I have never told anybody this – I was a student that year. I’d applied at university the previous year and got accepted. I was studying part-time and nobody knew about it, not even Mpande. I was doing really great. I was enjoying it. Two days before my last exam, in the second semester, we were at Nkosana’s house talking about doing our last job. We already had money and we had businesses that we knew would sustain us. That job was going to set us up for life, and actually it did. It was Mqhele’s idea ...” He stops.

I have so many questions but I’ll hold them in and wait for him to continue.

“It was his idea that we stop after that heist. He was ready to marry Hlomu and he didn’t want her to know anything about who we were. Saying no was not an option because family comes first. So I missed the exam, and I was angry, Lale, very angry throughout that drive to the North West. My brothers think I shot that man because I thought he was pulling out a gun ...” Again, he stops.

I could wait for him but ... “So why did you shoot him?”

“I was angry. I should have been in class, writing an exam, but there I was, pulling off a cash heist. Nobody was supposed to die, you know. It wasn’t supposed to get bloody. All our jobs were always clean because we always had inside people. We had three inside men on that heist, the driver, one security and the man monitoring the cash van from the office. I shot the security guy. I knew him. We all knew him. We had done a job with him before and that was his last one. He had just gotten married and he was going to resign and

start a business. He had his life planned out.”

He isn't a bad person ... He isn't a bad person, Lale ... I keep repeating this in my head.

“Where was this heist?”

“North West. Wolmaransstad. It was the biggest and the last we did.”

I'm quiet because I don't know what to say, but I'd be lying if I said I didn't see this coming. I guess I've always known that they were there.

So that is why he won't let me go. It's because he knows I know, because I'm the only one he can talk to about this thing, these things ... because it's a lot.

“Your name didn't come up at all,” I say.

I expect him to be shocked, but he isn't. He lights a cigarette, the third one since we started this conversation.

“Yes, Gaba made sure of that. But you must learn to let things go, Lale. Sthembile keeps saying that's the problem with you, that you are too curious and too invested ...”

Wait! Sthembile? There's no way ...

“You have to understand how far we'd go. If you are going to be with me, you have to understand that nothing is a coincidence. Where do you think I got your password?”

Wow. I can't believe the one person I trusted the most in this life is their puppet – the boss I admired and respected.

“So everything was a scam? The whole investigation? Is that why she hired me? Was it you?”

“I didn't even know you until I found out your husband fucked my brother's wife,” he says.

We are back at that again. Why does it bother him so

much? I feel like he's angrier about it than his brother. Oh, wait, his brother believes it never happened. Mqoqi is the only one who knows it did.

"We know her from way back," he says. And I'm sure that's all he's going to say.

And now I feel like she sabotaged that investigation, she delayed it until that child Sandile thought was his, was born.

"Don't look so shocked. That is how these things work. If we didn't have people, people everywhere, my family would not exist any more. We'd all be dead, all of us," he says.

I doubt anyone would have the *liver* to try them but hey, I'm not there, I'm more interested in how this conversation started. "Do they know? Your brothers? Do they know about you trying to kill yourself and all that stuff?"

"Yes, and I think that's why Mpande never leaves my side. But the wives don't know. They must never know."

Well, I know ...

"Do you think you can keep me alive? That's all I ask of you, to take me away from everything," he says.

I'm not following ...

"Help me," he says.

How? I'm a mess myself ... "I'll try," I say, placing my hand on his cheek. It's the most affectionate thing I have ever done to him.

"I love you," I say, and I know immediately that saying it was a mistake.

He doesn't say it back.

Mqoqiwokuhle

1

"WHERE DID YOU tell her you were going this time?"

I didn't tell her anything. She never asks. "Out."

"Out where? Surely if you're going to be gone all day and half the night, she should be curious?" she says.

"She isn't. She understands the boundaries."

"And you want to spend your life with this woman? It won't work if you think you're entitled to boundaries. Those don't work in this set-up you want to have."

She calls it a set-up, me wanting to create a space where I can exist individually, a place where I am Mqoqi first before I am a Zulu brother or whatever the fuck that shit that comes with being Sbopho's son has turned me into. She calls that a set-up, as if I would go through all this trouble roping myself into a situation with a woman I know I should never have messed with in the first place. All of this for a "set-up"?

"It's not a set-up," I say.

She laughs. She always laughs in situations that need her to be pulling her face and making sense.

She said to me once, and I was just an angry and dangerous teenage boy, "You need laughter in your life, Mqoqi. You are a lost boy. You've been to places boys your age have never been to."

I did not understand what she meant then, and I was, like she said, just a boy. A boy who cried sometimes.

"Remember the first time you came to me? What did I tell you?"

I never "came" to her. She found me one night. I was 14, standing over her bed, watching her sleep. I had been in that house three times before, first to steal, and the two other times to watch her sleep. That night she opened her eyes and looked up at me. She should have screamed. That's what women do when they wake up to see a man too tall and too black standing over them in the dark. But she didn't open her mouth at all. I turned to walk away. "Why are you here?" she asked, just as I pulled open the bedroom door.

I stopped for a second, tempted to tell her, but I've never been one to explain myself to anyone. Besides, jail was not where I was trying to end up. So I closed that door and tiptoed down the stairs.

I saw the blue and red lights outside just as I was reaching for the sliding-door handle. I had broken into that house unarmed, and I regretted it right at that moment. The police car was parked outside the gate but I could see their shadows all over the yard, sneaking around trying to find a way in.

It was interesting how the police moved differently in that area. Where I had come from, they would drive in with sirens screaming, guns in hand, and they were always ready

to shoot anything that moved.

I grabbed a knife from the first shelf in the kitchen and ran up the stairs. She was up, wearing a night robe over her satin pyjamas.

"They won't harm you if you don't harm me," she said. But she had no idea. They were going to rough me up before taking me to jail, that I knew, but it was either she was that ignorant or she was lying to me.

"I didn't come here to harm you," I said, but I was lying because I had thought about strangling her in her sleep many times. I just couldn't get myself to do it.

Her calmness was confusing me.

They were inside the house now. I could hear their footsteps on the stairs.

"Put that knife away," she instructed.

I did. It was a bad idea, I knew, but I did because I wasn't going to confront guns with a kitchen knife. I dropped it on the floor, and she kicked it under the bed just as three policemen kicked open the door and barged in with pistols aimed.

I raised my arms, but they all still jumped me and pinned me to the floor, a boot on my neck. I was taller than all of them. I could have fought them.

"He's just a kid," I heard her say to them.

Yes, I was technically a kid, but I was also a professional criminal. I had broken into more houses than the times I had raised my hand in a classroom.

"Are you okay, mam? Are you not harmed? We received a call from your neighbour about a man in your yard fiddling

with your sliding door," one policeman said, his boot still on my neck.

"He lives here," she lied. I wondered why.

I felt the boot loosening on my neck. "Your neighbour said you are a single woman living alone ...?"

"He's my assistant," she lied again.

I didn't even know what an assistant was, but I looked up at the policeman with newfound confidence.

"Are you sure, mam?"

"Do I look harmed to you?" she snapped.

One of the cops was pacing about the bedroom, checking closets and pulling open curtains, looking for something. He didn't find anything, so he slowly walked to stand in front of her. "What is a young boy doing in your bedroom in the middle of the night? What exactly is your relationship with him?"

I knew by the look in his eyes where the whole thing was going.

"What are you insinuating? He works for me in the darkroom. He ran up here to check on me when he saw you sneaking all over my yard. Also, how did you get into my house?"

She could lie with such poise and firmness. But I still couldn't understand why she was lying for me.

I was ready for them to leave, but they didn't, not before they asked me for my name and age, and where I came from, and, and, and ... Every answer I gave them was a lie.

She followed them downstairs to lock the doors, leaving me sitting on the bedroom floor with my chin resting on my

knees. I spent those few minutes trying to make up a story about why I was in her house – any story except the truth.

“Come down here,” she shouted from downstairs.

My first thought was to jump out the bedroom window, vault the fence and run down the street to the bridge I was squatting under, where I would grab my backpack then hitchhike to the next town. But instead I stood up and went down to the kitchen. I stood next to the long oak table, not sure whether to sit or run out the door.

She took out a grilled chicken out of the microwave. “I don’t have bread,” she said, placing the plate on the table. “Sit.”

She didn’t ask me if I was hungry, but clearly she could tell.

I had so many questions I needed to ask, so many things I needed to tell her.

As she watched me eat that chicken like it was the first time I’d seen food in my life, I wondered if she’d regret protecting me from the police if I told her I had been there two years prior when the fat men tied her up and stole whatever was worth something in her house. Usually, the men would instruct us to go outside and hide in the car after we’d done our work. They didn’t want us to see what they did to the people in the house, and maybe that was good for us, especially for Mpande, because he was still too young to understand the true implications of what we were doing. But that night, two years ago, I had wandered to the backroom while the fat men were rummaging through a bedroom looking for a box they had been informed was full

of expensive jewellery. The backroom door was locked, but I was an expert, so it took me seconds to get in.

"You can take your time. The chicken is not going anywhere," she said with a light laugh.

I knew she had been staring at me the whole time; I could feel her eyes. I took the last bite of the drumstick and pushed the plate away. I had eaten half the chicken, and I could still eat more.

"Do you want something to drink?"

I didn't.

"I wasn't going to do anything to you," I said.

She flipped her hair back and removed the plate from the table, putting it on top of the microwave. "I know," she said.

How?

"You have questions, don't you?"

I didn't answer her. But I did have a lot of questions.

"They didn't hurt me. There wasn't enough time for that. They took whatever they could, some of the most valuable things to me, priceless things, which they probably sold for peanuts. But I'm grateful they didn't kill me. I'm over that now. I've healed and moved on."

I wanted to run, because how did she know I was worried about what those men had done to her?

"It is you that I have not moved on from," she said.

I stood up and looked at the door, wondering if it was locked and, if so, how long it would take to kick it down and sprint out.

"The darkroom gallery has cameras. I saw you. I still have the footage. What I didn't know was that you'd come back.

"You've gotten really tall in just two years."

She knew.

"Why? Why do you have pictures of my parents, Gabby?"

If it had been just my father, I would have understood. He was famous for many things. He still is, even now, decades after his demise. If anything, we have kept his legacy and reputation alive. We became who he was. What I didn't understand though was why she had pictures of my mother - more and bigger pictures. In them she looked nothing like I remembered her: she wasn't smiling like she used to do for us. In one picture, the one where she was wearing a green T-shirt and a red beret, carrying one of us on her hip, there was intensity in her eyes, something I had never seen in her. She was pregnant in that picture.

"I'm a photographer," she said.

I wanted those pictures. I wanted all of them. She had no right to them. I could have stolen all of them, and every time I broke into that house, that was the plan. But I'd end up in her bedroom because those pictures meant nothing unless I knew the story behind them.

"Why my parents? Why my mother?"

The truth is I was there for my mother. My father I didn't care much about.

"Because she was the one a story needed to be told about. Compared to her, your father was a saint. What's your name?"

"Mqoqi," I said dismissively, not interested in that she claimed to know me but still couldn't figure out which one I was.

"That is you she's carrying in the largest picture. You had

just turned one and I thought she was already pregnant with the one that comes after you. I took that picture outside a clinic in Sobantu. I was hiding in the car because if she had seen me she'd have had me killed. She went there every two weeks, on different days, because that's how smart she was. She always had you and that big baby bag with her. But she wasn't really pregnant. She had guns stuffed in that fake belly and a bomb in that baby bag."

In my head, as I listened to her, I was counting all the lies I was sure she was telling me. My mother had been stuck in a situation with my father: she had loved him too much, enough to stand by him through anything. There was no way she was the one driving the whole thing. "But mama wasn't like that. Sbopho was the one who—"

"Sbopho did what Nomafu told him to do," she said.

It was almost morning and I wanted more than anything to get out of that house and go home, wherever that was.

"I know that when they died things were different – they had gone rogue – but your mother was fighting for a good cause, through blood and dead bodies, yes, but that is what South Africa was in the '80s. It was either that or you wouldn't be sitting here with me today."

It still didn't make sense. My mother was rarely mentioned in all the things I had read about my father. She was the wife who'd bore him many children and died with him when the time came.

We have looked for her in every woman we have loved. My brothers have married the ones that come close to her. All of them have unknowingly proved themselves.

I didn't know that when I sat across from Gabby that morning, because I was just a boy, but as I grew into a man I understood better.

She never gave me those pictures and I never asked for them. I stayed in her house, read her books and stared at my mother and father's pictures every day for two months, until Nqoba and Nkosana knocked on the front door one Thursday afternoon and took me back where I had run from.

I never told them about the photos, or what Gabby knew and why I was so attached to her. I kept it all to myself because it is my thing, the story I own by myself.

And now I'm here, again, because she, Gabby, is the one person I know that they don't. I have run to her many times, and every time I leave I'm always sure I'll never come back. But here I am now, not a kid or young man any more, but a grown man who hasn't achieved anything except money and power.

"Are you trying to get back at Mqhele? Is that what you're trying to do with all this?" she asks.

I could never try to hurt Mqhele. "I think I love Lale. It's insane, considering that she's nothing like the women we allow into our family, but I think I love her."

She taps her fingers on the table and I can't help noticing how crooked they are now. She's gotten so old, so wrinkled, but her hair is still too long and too curly. "You always love the wrong ones, don't you?"

I nod. It's my curse.

"Marry her," she says.

I will never be able to go back home if I do.

2

“YOU DISAPPEAR FOR two days and come back here uzong’nyela.”

That’s another thing about Lale: she cusses like a girl who grew up in a shebeen fending off bum spansks from drunk men.

“My husband’s bones haven’t even turned white and you are here talking nonsense. Who do you think I am, Mqqqi? What are you trying to do? Pin me down and get me stuck here so you can go off to iy’febe any time you want? I don’t need you. You aren’t doing me any favours. I have my own money.”

She keeps bringing up this own-money thing and it’s annoying because I know she has R1.4 million, and that’s hardly money. And I know she’s acting this way because she said she loved me and I didn’t say it back. I’ve never uttered those words to a woman, and I won’t start with her.

“We could create a good and stable home for Zothile.” I’m lying. I want to create a good home for us, for me and her and

Zothile and our future children. I just hope they don't come with loose screws like her. The smallest things set her off, and if I push her harder she starts throwing things and coming at me with those satanic nails she does herself.

The first time she charged at me I thought that maybe it was the stress making her crazy. But I've realised over time that it's who she is, a stray cat who has only ever dealt with men who have never had to fight in their lives. Trying to throw vases at me and shit? I'd slap her once and she'd faint. If I punched her, she'd end up in a coma. Yerrrr!

"I was expecting a yes or a no, not inhlamba."

"Inhlamba is what you'll get if you come at me with nonsense."

Clearly, the cat hasn't had its milk today. This is the point where I shake my head and walk away from her – another thing that always sets her off.

"Why would I just marry you, Mqoqi? Do I look stupid to you? I'm not your property ..."

She's following me down the passage, spitting fire as usual. I'd slam the door in her face but I don't want her burning my house down. She follows me, and now she's talking with her hands, her eyes darting all over the room. She's looking for something to throw but I put everything capable of causing head injuries at the top of the bookshelf. She's tall but not tall enough, and it's frustrating her.

"Do you want to take a walk? Cool off a little bit?"

The cat comes flying, fast like lightning. I grab her by the wrists and pin her against the wall with my body pressed on hers.

"Stop treating me like a stupid girl, Mqoqi!"

She's many things but stupid is not one of them. I'm waiting for her to breathe it out. She'll wriggle under me until she gets tired, her tight fists will loosen and her nose will stop twitching. That's how it always goes, for about four minutes. I'm counting down in my head ...

"I will never marry you, Mqoqi, not you, not another man, as long as I live."

"Why?"

"I did it once and it was for the wrong reasons. The only reason Sandile married me was because he wanted me close. He wanted to keep me where he could see me so he could protect his child. He loved somebody else."

What she does not understand is that a man can love two women equally, even four. "So what does that have to do with me, Lale? And I'm tired of you always bringing up your dead husband in every situation. He's dead, gone. He doesn't care."

I'd be less harsh if that rotting corpse was someone worth my time and energy, but it was Mkhize; why the fuck is he still lingering over us? I'm even willing to raise his child as my own. And, in all honesty, she is the one I love more than this crazy cat. She is the one I'd shoot people for. If I never have children of my own, everything I own will go to her when I die. I told Gabby this and she thought it was still me trying to mess with my brothers.

"That's why I'm here, isn't it? You want to piss Sandile off?"

How the hell am I trying to piss off a ghost? "You're here because I want you here. Now, it's fine if you don't want to get

married, I can't force you, but I really want you to stay with me." I guess I'll settle for a "set-up", then.

"I said I loved you and you said nothing," she says.

We are still on that? "You've never struck me as the type that needs affirmation. I'm shocked by this," I say.

What I really want to say, though, is that women have put me through pain. I always knew where I stood with the ones who loved me because I'm Mqoqi Zulu, so that was okay. Amanda was supposed to be different: she came at a time where I was ready to settle for anyone my family didn't mind having around. I started at zero with her, and by the time she pulled that shit I was almost at thirty per cent of love and tolerance. I could stomach her.

Of all of them, it is Hlomu who has hurt me the most, how she looked at me like I was her child, how she treated my always being there for her with total disregard, like I owed her the love and loyalty and protection. I felt that she looked past me. Surely she should have remembered that I saw her first, I loved her first? But even when, after years of torturing me by being what Gabby says my mother was, I finally decided to be truthful with her, she still looked past me.

I doubt she ever sits and wonders how things would have been had she ended up with me instead of Mqhele. I would never have laid a hand on her – not her and not any woman alive. I would have taken her away from everything. She would never have had to dodge bullets or bury children or crash cars because I cheated on her.

I told her how I felt about her, and the only thing she was concerned about was Mqhele and how my love for her would

destroy the family she had built and kept together all these years. There were so many times I wished she'd wake up one morning, pack her bags and leave, just so maybe Mqhele would wake up and realise her world doesn't revolve around him.

Gabby says I'm bitter but it's not like I *want* my brother's wife to be the only woman I love, the love of my life. It's a painful thing to live with.

"Everyone needs affirmation, Mqoqi. Do I not deserve to be loved?"

She's calm now, and I know she's about to start behaving like a real girl, tears and snot and all that. Her vulnerability is a new thing. It started when we moved into this house. I didn't know it existed before, but when it started I knew exactly what it meant, because once a woman starts showing you all sides of her, it means feelings have been caught and she's about to start making demands without spelling them out loud. She'll control you with how she moves, how she looks at you, and the crying. The crying is the worst.

I can't say to her, "I don't love you," because she'll pack and leave. And I can't say, "I love you," because she'll expect me to *love* her.

"It's time to fetch Zothile from school," I say. I untangle myself from her and move to my desk. I need to write. It's the only thing that helps me detach from the mess that is my real life.

She knows I'm being elusive. She pushes the laptop screen down and sits on the desk, facing me.

"We're done talking, Lale." I'm in another place now, a

place where I want to be alone and outside my body.

"Are you chasing me out?" she asks, and pushes the laptop to the far end of the desk.

I've fucked her many times on top of this desk, on her back, on her stomach, and a couple of times with her one foot on the floor and the other around my waist.

I always want to laugh at her hopeless efforts at being seductive, and I would do so out loud if she wasn't a ticking time bomb. Fact is, with that height and those horse legs, she's not exactly temptress material. But once I touch her, once my hand feels her skin, that's when my sanity leaves me acting like a fool.

This wiggling and slithering she's been doing is not doing anything to my dick. It must stop now. I don't want to see her. I want to smell her wetness and dip my fingers in it. "Come here." I pull her down onto my lap. "Sit here."

She sits facing me with her thighs wide open, arms wrapped around my neck. The only time she obeys my instructions is when she wants my dick.

She buries her face in my neck and does that thing of hers of multiple tap kisses and soft bites.

"Why are you wearing leggings in my house?" I whisper in her ear.

She giggles and nibbles my ear. "Because you know how to take them off." She's still giggling.

She knows I never want to see her already naked. I want to unwrap what I'm about to devour, run my hands over her skin and get it warm myself.

I'm not exactly a boobies man – maybe I would be if they

all came in one size and shape; it's the part of a woman's body I don't care to explore – but the waist, that's where I dig my fingers in.

Lale's waist could as well be an extension of her chest, but there's a demonic place between her bum cheek and where her thighs begin that makes me stupid. A woman with such minimal curves shouldn't have places that make a man's dick spin like mine does when I touch it. She knows what happens to me when I go there, so she pushes her waist back and lets me slide my hand inside her leggings. I start by caressing, but it gets too much too quickly, so now I'm grabbing and squeezing. I doesn't help that she's kissing me from lips to neck and back to lips ...

I push my finger inside her from behind. This is what I love about women with small bums: you can fuck them from any angle without having to turn them around. She's already wet; she's been wet for a while. I push my finger in deeper. She pushes her bum back further and stands on her toes, and I know she wants me to finger-fuck her deeper, so I push my thumb into her hole and press her clit with three fingers.

She hisses my name and that, that is all it takes for me to want to push her off me and lay her on top of the desk, on her back. Fuck her while looking in her eyes to remind her why she keeps following me wherever I go. But I've run out of condoms so she can grab and suck my dick all she wants but it's not going inside her today. I want to make her pregnant, but I don't want to be sneaky about it.

"What are you doing?" she hisses.

"Smelling you," I say, my fingers at my nostrils.

She grabs my hand and forces it back inside her, from the front this time. She hasn't given up trying pull my dick out of my sweatpants, but I won't let her have it, not today.

"Why aren't you giving me what I want?" she whines.

I push two fingers in and she squirms, but she's back to fighting with my sweatpants again and I know fingers won't do. I push her off me and drop her on the desk, flat on her stomach with horse-legs dangling. Tongue inside her hole, teeth on clit, and that's all it takes for her legs to shake and her nails to claw on the brown wood. I'm tempted to stick a finger in her asshole but she almost punched me the one time I tried because she's not one of Brenda's girls ... a story for another day.

I'm still erect and raging, and the humble thing for her to do would be to blow me until I come in her face, but no, she's pulling up her leggings and leaving to pick up the child she's suddenly remembered she has.

Oh, well. Roxy from Pornhub will do, then.

3

BRENDA WAS THE woman Nqoba took me to after I rode my bike into Centurion Dam on a random Sunday afternoon.

I had tried to die three times before that, and each of those times I had thought and planned and decided hours prior. But on that Centurion occasion, it came to me as I was riding down Lenchen Avenue. I was happy and content one minute, and then in a split second it all came at once: the realisation that I was nothing, I had nothing, I had done nothing right, my life was shit, everything I owned I did not deserve. I was a lie. People who thought highly of me were soon going to find out and cast me out. The kids my brothers had given me to love more than anything in this world would find out I wasn't worthy of their love and run from me.

It was that, all of that coming down on me like a nuclear bomb, that stopped me from turning on to John Vorster to join the highway. I rode straight on. I could see the bridge ahead but I swerved to the left a few metres short of it, pressing on that bike straight to the water. It was a Kawasaki

Ninja H2R, the cheapest thing I owned with wheels.

I must have let go of the handlebars because when I woke up I was dry. My bike was being pulled out of the water by some men with ass-cracks looking back at me. I swear I heard someone say "akafile lomuntu" while trying to turn me on my side. It was a man wearing construction gear, holding my helmet in one hand and pointing down at me with the other. I'm not sure what happened to him after that but then I recognised a paramedic uniform and I knew I was still alive. I had wanted to die in that swift moment but when I realised I had not succeeded – again – I was relieved.

My brothers told their wives I was handling some taxi-route business down in KZN while I had needles stuck in my arm at Dr Masetla's little room at that house in Haarties. They had to keep me there so no one would know I had tried to end it all. Had it not been for the injuries and blood on my face, those people at the scene would have easily recognised me and I'd have been front-page news.

Nkosana didn't come to see me, but I healed, like I always do – like I always did after he put his hands on me when we were younger. Of all of us, I'm the one whose skin his fists has bruised the most. And, no, it isn't out of all of us; me, Mpande and Ntsika are the only ones he ever "punished". His kids were next when he couldn't touch us any more.

I have never doubted that Nkosana loves me like he loves everyone he shares blood with. It is that he has never understood me. I never toed the line he drew for all of us – or was it Sbopho who drew that line? What pissed Nkosana off the most about me when I was a kid was my ability to cry, to

leave, to object, to stray.

I had strayed again, and I knew it hurt him. He wanted me to recover because he cared about me, but he wasn't going to come and stand over my recovery bed to shout and cuss me for trying to take myself away from him, because he didn't know how to do that. Without his violence, Nkosana is powerless. Without this isibopho that he has kept pleated and tied together since he was 17, he would die.

I was his biggest failure. So Nqoba, in his own bizarre way, took it upon himself to get my weak-ass help.

It wasn't the first time my brothers had tried to help me. That was when I was about 11, and he and Qhawe decided I needed ukuqiniswa isende because the sight of red meat made me shake and puke. What kind of man doesn't eat meat? A man who can't stand the sight of blood? They were worried because chicken isn't real meat and I had never tasted fish in my life.

I was not allowed inside Denver men's hostel; I was still too young. But they snuck me in early one morning and took me to the back of the buildings where men who sold inhloko slaughtered and skinned a cow and numerous sheep. They made me watch. And it wasn't just my brothers who forced me to watch: all the slaughterers and skinners had been briefed about my presence, me, a boy who feared blood and meat, and how he had to be turned into a man.

Gabby said they meant well, that this was stuff that happens when boys are left to raise themselves and each other. Everything they did to me, she said, came from a good place.

I must have puked about five times while holding back tears and clenching my fists to stop my body from shaking. They hung the sheep heads on poles to let them bleed out before customers came to collect them. What was left of the meat was cut up and sold to a number of men who made a living selling food to hostel dwellers and taxi drivers. The blood was left to be swallowed by the soil.

My brothers were satisfied when, at noon, we sat among grown men picking pieces of meat from a large piece of flat wood that looked like it had once been part of a door. I ate two pieces of meat. I could still smell the blood. It was then that I decided never to tell anyone about my fear of heights, because my brothers would have taken me to the roof of Ponte City and made me look down.

“Senike nabhebha bafana?” one of the men asked, looking at all three of us. I knew what he was asking but I was 11 years old and didn’t know what sex was supposed to make me feel. I was getting morning erections, and girls had started to be less annoying to me, but I hadn’t yet pictured them naked.

Nqoba was older; Qhawe is five years and a few months older than me. Both my brothers said yes, and that was met with nods of approval from the men.

“Kuhle ke, isidoda sihlala ekhanda, bese sigcina sikuhlanyisa.” That was what one of the men said: a man must release or else the load will make him crazy.

It was also grown men who told me that once girls grow breasts they are good to go, that growing breasts was the same as the morning erections I was having, a sign that they were transitioning into women and that everything they’d

do after that would be meant to impress me so that I'd want them. Apparently, according to what I had heard, once they grew breasts, they started looking at us boys differently. They bathed more often, did their hair and wore shorter clothes so we'd see their thighs and want them. It made sense to my little-boy mind because the girl who lived two shacks away from ours had changed since she grew breasts.

Gog'MaZulu had said to me that I should stop playing with her because she was sleeping with her uncle. She was 12. She had run to our shack crying one morning, saying she was bleeding from down there, and Gog'MaZulu hadn't been very sympathetic. Instead, she'd told her that her body was now ready to get pregnant if she didn't stop lying.

She told her that they, she and the other women, had done all they could for her. They had taken her to that place with social workers, and every time she had denied that her uncle was doing the things everyone knew he was doing to her. I had heard Gog'MaZulu muttering under her breath that she wished someone would kill the uncle, but nobody was going to do that; everyone was scared of him because he was a traditional healer.

The girl died two years later pushing a baby out of her stomach in that same shack. The uncle went to jail but not for a long time. And when he came back, it was Gog'MaZulu he came to confront first. That she had made a statement to the police was what made the man threaten to turn her into a cripple with his muthi.

From then on Gog'MaZulu spoke of nothing but her pending journey to a wheelchair. But Nkosana came through

for her: he told the uncle to leave her alone or he'd die.

Gog'MaZulu didn't end up in a wheelchair. She was still walking on her own two feet when my brothers killed her.

Anyway, from that day on, the day at the hostel when I started eating red meat and decided that maybe my weakness and frustrations stemmed from the fact that I had not released, I started thinking about girls naked. I saw them, all of them, in my class and the ones I still played with in the squatter camp, they were all naked to me. I was just waiting for them to grow breasts so they'd start wanting me.

On that same night of breasts and red meat, Nqoba and Qhawe walked me back to the squatter camp after Mqhele had almost punched their teeth out for doing what they did to me. He, Mqhele, was always the one I ran to, crying, whenever my brothers did something to me. I could always count on him to protect and fight for me. I still can, even now, in my adult life.

Gog'MaZulu made them food, and once they left, she made me and Mpande go to sleep so that when the fat men came to fetch us late at night, we would not be tired. Sambulo was also living with us but he had another job; he never told us what it was.

I released into a body for the first time when I was 14, under a bridge. It was inside a girl who had run away from home and asked to join me under the bridge because she was scared. I let her sleep next to me and gave her my bomber jacket for the cold. She didn't say no when I touched her and she didn't move at all when I was inside her, but she cried afterwards. In the morning she said she was going to look for

a public toilet in the city so she could bath, and that was the last time I saw her. She left with my bomber jacket. She must have been about 13.

I told Gabby about it, and she seemed angry at me.

Anyway, I was just a boy then. I'm a man now, and if I bumped into her today I'd apologise. That's if I recognised her.

Brenda had the same look of anger Gabby had when she asked me how I'd lost my virginity and I told her the truth. Brenda was a hooker, but a therapist kind of hooker who used rather unconventional ways to help men release their suppressed anger.

But my anger has never been suppressed. My brothers know that. Amanda knew that. Even Thobi knows that. It is the reason I shoot people and can't tell women I love them.

That's what Brenda said to me after she had three women with different breast sizes have their way with me, on their knees begging me to spank and cane them. She said men did that a lot, men with problems they couldn't talk about. She said they came to her because they couldn't hit the women in their lives. "So they come here to be violent to the women who like the pain, women who don't take it personally. In fact, these girls here like it. They are aroused by being powerless and weak under a man," Brenda said.

I had long concluded that she was crazy, that something must have happened to her. I doubted those women would let anyone hit them if they didn't have kids to feed.

"All men are violent, my boy. It's just that some are strong enough to suppress it."

She called me "my boy" a lot, which was annoying because she wasn't even old enough to be my mother.

I had my own room in that mansion, right in the middle of Waterkloof in Pretoria, and I knew Nqoba had paid big money for me to be there. It was girls everywhere, girls of all races and sizes, with titties always on display. Maybe that's why breasts don't move me. I could have them whenever I wanted. But I didn't want them, not when they were tied to chairs and being whipped by top politicians and respected businessmen who preached morals in public.

Brenda used to say to me, each time I looked shocked by who walked in and what they did, "Nobody has one life, my boy. People have fantasies, and some are brave and rich enough to live theirs out. If these men didn't have this place, if they didn't have me and my girls, they wouldn't be able to hold down the happy homes they have, wives and children and all that. They come here to be who they wish they could be, and then when they are done and happy, they go back to be who society wants them to be."

Some of them came for the young men but that was done at the far end of the house. I never went there. It wasn't something I wanted to see.

I had known about Nqoba's dark alleyways for a long time but what was happening in Brenda's house seemed extreme even for him.

I lasted two weeks there, and when I went back home, Hlomu had become thicker than I'd last seen her. I knew she was pregnant the moment I saw her. Finally, the one thing

she had wanted for five years.

To my own surprise I wasn't angry or hurt. I was just glad that she had finally gotten what she wanted, and that Mqhele would have no reason to continue sleeping with that other girl. He blamed it on frustration, said Hlomu was always dragging him to doctors and stuff. He wanted a space where it wasn't baby this and baby that.

I'm a man, so I understood where he was coming from, but it wasn't worth the risk; he knew that too. We were all very much aware of Hlomu's dark streak and unpredictable nature, so we were going to do everything we could to make sure she didn't find out.

Hlomu's pregnancy made me better, happy even. I was looking forward to the babies and I was hoping one of them would be a girl. That is probably why I went crazy when those amateur criminals hijacked her.

Then came the fame, that Lerato girl writing shit about me in a newspaper, and soon afterwards, the revelation that a man who was a brother we never knew was languishing in jail for a crime I'd committed with the Bhunganes, a robbery my brothers knew nothing about until that day we sat across from Mhlaba in a prison building. Nkosana looked me in the eye and said I could kill myself if I wanted to, that he didn't care any more.

But he did care because he went and found the two Bhunganes we knew were still alive somewhere. And now the other three have since resurfaced, thanks to Ndoni's father.

I'd say it's because of me again but I've said those words so many times there's really no need to point it out any more.

DUDU BUSANI-DUBE

It's a Mqoqi shit-show again, and I have no plans of dealing with it this time.

4

“DO YOU HAVE mommy issues?”

I should have stayed locked in the office. I'd come to the kitchen for a cup of coffee and what do I find? The cat nested on top of the table, looking deadly. I know she's trying to start something so screw coffee, I'm grabbing a beer.

“I'm asking because ...” She looks up and sighs. “Why else would you be sleeping with a crusty old white woman who looks like she lives in a treehouse?”

I turn to look at her, not because I'm shocked by what she's just said but because I know who she is talking about. She's just perfectly described Gabby. I don't say anything because I'm lost for words.

“So we came here for her, to this desert province, so you could be close to her? I know, Mqoqi, I know that she moved here to retire. So you drove from here all the way to the Karoo just to lick a wrinkled vagina?”

Yerrrr, this woman! I might as well roll a joint too because I'm going to need to be high for this.

“Oh, now you are mute?” She jumps off the table and comes to stand in front of me, her hands on her hips. “It is your audacity that shocks me, Mqoqi. Where do you even find the bravery to take her clothes off? To see what? What is wrong with you?”

As to how she came to these conclusions, I do not know.

“What are you talking about?” I ask. I’d really like her to start from the beginning and tell me how on earth she found out about Gabby, and why, of all things, the first thing she assumed was that I’m sleeping with her. Just the thought of it makes me cringe!

“I’m talking about your sugar-mama, the one you went to fuck for a whole two days in the Karoo, and then came back here talking nonsense about wanting me to marry you. I know, Mqoqi. I saw the messages on your phone.”

“You went through my phone?” How? When? I have never left my phone anywhere near her. What is wrong with this woman? When I asked her to help me not kill myself, I didn’t mean she should torment me.

“I can’t believe I’ve been letting you kiss me with that mouth. All along I’ve been swallowing senior-citizen pussy juice and—”

The things she says! When does she think them up? “Lale, we were fine when you went to sleep last night. What the heck happened between then and now? What have you been doing all day?”

It’s 12.14pm and she’s still in pyjamas. I’m confused because she went to drop Zothile off at school, and if she went there looking like this, it means the crazy graph is high

up today. What makes it even more interesting is that her eyebrows are perfect.

"I've been sitting here on this table waiting for your shady ass to wake up. All along I thought you were chasing iy'febe ey'ncane but no, you are a Ben-10 ..."

That's it! I'm going.

"No, no, no. Not this time, Mqoqi. You're not going to do that. I have her numbers. If you won't talk to me, I'll talk to her."

What? "You can't do that!" Who am I kidding? She'd definitely do that. In fact, she'll drive to the Karoo if she can't get her on the phone. "Lale, you are invading my privacy here. What I do with my life has nothing to do with you. And when did you go through my phone?"

She raises her eyebrows and tilts her head. "Privacy? Must be nice, bhuti. Also, I don't have to have your phone in my hand to go through it. You've been invading my privacy since the day I met you, so please ..." she says, and does that "talk to the hand"-gesture thing. For a woman who is in no way delicate or feminine, she does the girl-gone-mad thing very well.

"So you are spying on me?"

"That's not the point, Mqoqi. The point here is I want to know who Gabby Ramwell is and why you'd go to her house. No, actually, I know who she is, which is why I don't understand what you see in a woman who photographs birds and shit! What I want to know is who she is to you."

I have had many women in my life but so far Lale is the most challenging. "I'm not ready to tell you about that part

of my life. It's too complex. Can you respect that until I'm ready, please?"

She's looking at me with narrowed eyes. "Who is Number 493 and why do you keep sending them money?"

That's it! I'm out of here.

"Is it a he or a she? Why do you have them saved on your phone like that? Why not their name?"

She's following me down the passage, shouting all these questions. I'm going to stay in this office all day. I'm not going back there. I must change my phone and my number too because ...

Sigh. I find myself laughing because it's fucked up that I love this cat. She's toxic as fuck and calling her unstable would be an understatement. Imagine how much shit she'd start if I walked in with her at a family dinner, a ring on her finger and stuff.

I hate to say it but maybe she's what I've been waiting for all my fucked-up life.

5

IT WAS BETTER when she was too short to reach the door handle, which I intentionally placed high up. Now she just stands on her toes and lets herself in.

Another fight with her mother, I assume, because, again, she lost her hat at school. She comes to me for peace because she knows I never reprimand her for anything. She rests her elbow on the desk and her palm on her cheek.

Her mother's personality and complexion, her father's eyes and ears and everything. She's a combination of two people, one I wanted to kill and another I want to love.

"How was school?" I ask.

She rolls her eyes. She's 6. how is she already behaving like a mean teenage girl?

"I need you to help me write a letter. My teacher says my spelling is bad, so I want you to help me because I want this letter to be serious," she says.

Okay. I hope we aren't at the stage where we are writing letters to boys yet because ...

"I need my money. It's been eight days and my money isn't here yet so I want an explanation."

"Someone owes you money?" I don't understand. We never give her money ...

"Yes. The tooth fairy. Everyone in my class got their money and I'm the only one who didn't get anything. I check the shoe every day and there's nothing."

I'm lost.

"I want to write in the letter that it's not fair. Yes, I lose my hats and my socks at school sometimes, but that has nothing to do with her. Besides, if she doesn't pay me, my teeth won't grow back."

What the hell is happening?

"I'm going to big school next year and I can't go there with no front teeth. The other kids will laugh at me. Here is what I want to put in the letter ..."

I told Lale that we should put this kid in a township school. If she had listened to me I wouldn't be here, confused like this.

She hands me a piece of paper with all the words she wants put in the letter. The spelling is bad but I can make out what she is trying to say.

Hey lady. I've already given you two teeth, and they are important because they are top teeth. The one tooth at the bottom is already loose and you still haven't paid me. Soon you will owe me for three and I don't know if you have enough money to afford to pay me since you pay so many people a year. Michael has lost only one and yet you've already paid him. I'm not saying I'm

important but at least be fair.

This is rather aggressive.

"You must say at the bottom, 'From Zothile Mkhize. A quick response will be appreciated.'"

Kubi! I'm instructed to print the letter and give it to her.

She leaves me Googling 'tooth fairy' because I don't know what the hell that is. Oh I see, it's another insult to children's intelligence, same as Santa Claus and the Easter Bunny. It's all the same, really. Every nation has its own tokoloshe, but they want to make us feel like Santa Claus isn't the same thing as a tokoloshe.

"How much does the tooth fairy pay for one tooth?" I ask Google.

I don't get a straight answer, probably because it's universal stupidity and nobody really knows how, or why it started. But they say it's good for children's innocence; it makes them believe in a magical world.

I can't imagine Sbopho or Nomafu putting money in a shoe to protect my innocence. I don't even remember the day I lost my first tooth.

Dear Zothile ...

I write "Mkhize" and delete it fast. I just struggle to identify her as that idiot's child. She's mine now.

I did not forget about you. It's just that so many people lost their teeth at the same time and the rule is I pay in alphabetical order. Seeing as your name starts with a Z, I had not reached your shoe yet. Here is your money for the two teeth. Let me know when the bottom one

falls out. It might take a while but I promise you will get your money. Also, you are important, very, very important. And your spelling is pretty good. What do you want to be when you grow up? I guess you're going to be something big, you sound like it.

From me, the tooth fairy.

I'd include an address, just to make it look real, but that little girl would probably force me to drive her to the tooth fairy's house to get answers.

I'll slip the letter and the money in the shoe after she goes to sleep. Now I have to get back to work.

I haven't received any money from Sbopho Logistics since I left, so I guess I've been taken off the payroll. It must have been Qhawe's idea. He's the one that takes this work thing too seriously, as if that company doesn't make millions in one day. Surely they must know that cutting me off won't drive me into poverty. These are the same guys who drink and smoke cigars in my nightclubs.

They were against me going into that business. Mqhele said we had enough enemies in the transport industry, we didn't need to be moving onto turf occupied mostly by white mafia and deadly Nigerians. But I wasn't going to be told what to do, and I'm definitely not scared of any mafia or Nigerian.

The rules are no drugs and no underage girls in my clubs, but who knows what those people I employ are up to in my absence. Mpande would be checking things out for me if he wasn't so obsessed with his newfound children.

When I left, that was all he cared about. He hates their mother and he wants Ndoni to mother them, but we all

know she won't do that. The only reason Ndoni is still there is because her father must know that we have his daughter after that stunt he pulled, even after we went and did what he wanted us to do, digging up bones and shit.

I know that maybe it was something we needed to do to stop the kids from, like us, becoming versions of Sbopho. But it got too complicated. Too many things that should have been left buried came to the surface.

That man in Margate talked too much for my liking.

"Food is in the pots," she says, peeping through the door.

Oh, she cooked? That means the crazy graph has lowered because since yesterday she'd been frowning and scowling at me about that Gabby thing. Imagine! She only cooks when she wants to, I guess to remind me that she isn't here for that type of stuff.

I want to say thank you but she's gone.

The computer screen is staring back at me, with the same three words I wrote two hours ago. It's chapter thirty of the book I've been writing since I was 23. It's not that I don't know what to say. It's that I don't know where to start.

... ♡ ...

I slipped the letter and the two R100 notes into the shoe when I went to the kitchen to make coffee at 2am in the morning. I took the teeth and put them on my top shelf.

I'm sure she found the money in the morning before she went to school but she wasn't going to come and tell me about it because she knows not to wake me up. And I didn't get a

debriefing when I saw her this afternoon: she was too busy, sitting at the table writing something on a piece of paper. I tried to bother her with that "how was school?" thing but, as always, she rolled her eyes.

It's 1am, and I'm still one page into chapter thirty. It's Sambulo I struggle the most to write about. I need another joint to open my mind. I now have to hide my weed behind the TV stand in this house because Lale has started accusing me of being a drug addict.

There's a shoe on the coffee table. It's the tooth-fairy shoe. I guess she put it here to save the tooth fairy the trouble of going to the broom cupboard to find it.

Inside there is a tooth and a note.

Dear tooth fairy

My bottom tooth came out this morning. I know it was too soon after you paid me but I don't mind waiting this time, especially because you paid me too much money for the two, well, at least that's what the kids in my class said. I don't know how much R200 is and if I can buy many things with it but it's paper so I know it's a lot.

Thank you for saying my spelling is good. I asked uncle Mqoqi to help me write you the letter because my teacher always says my spelling is bad. Uncle Mqoqi is my mom's boyfriend and we live with him, but I don't know if I can call him baba. My mom hasn't said I can. I guess it's because my real baba is dead. But I want to call him baba. Do you think I should ask him first or

just do it? I want to but I'm scared because mom used to chase my real baba with a knife and a pot one time. She's only hit uncle Mqoqi once and I don't want her to hit him again. Maybe she will if I start calling him baba, that's why I'm scared.

I miss gogo and aunty a lot. I haven't seen them in a long time. Do you think they have forgotten about me? If you go to their house too, please tell them I live here now. Also, you must pay me more for this tooth. Bottom teeth cost more money because they take longer to grow back.

I'm sorry if my first letter was not nice to you but I was feeling like you were being unfair.

From me, Zothile.

I didn't see this one coming, not at all. What has Lale done to this child? She's only 6! I had to read this thing three times to make out what she was saying because the spelling is a disaster and she can't stay in the lines.

Now I'm reading it again because it evokes almost every emotion I'm capable of feeling. I want her to call me baba. That would make me happy.

Dear Zothile

Your teeth are dropping too fast, but I think it's better to pay you now before another one comes out. I don't want to wait too long this time.

I think uncle Mqoqi will be happy to hear you call him baba. I think he loves you very much. When people

DUDU BUSANI-DUBE

love you they help you with your spelling. Your mom wasn't hitting uncle Mqoqi, they were just playing. They both love you very much. I know because I come to your house a lot to check your shoe for new teeth.

Your gogo and aunty will talk to you soon. They haven't forgotten about you. It's just that they were busy with some things.

Also, your first letter was perfect, you were right to write it to me. Do not ever apologise for telling people exactly how you feel, even if they don't like it. It's called honesty and you should always have it.

Again, you are important, very very important. Always remember that.

From me, the tooth fairy.

I slip the note inside the shoe, with R20 notes making up R300 this time.

6

IT'S BEEN TWO weeks and she still hasn't called me baba. I've been waiting, hoping.

She also hasn't said anything about the tooth fairy and the letters between them. I guess I'm going to have to wait until her next tooth comes out before I know why she's still scared to call me baba.

I haven't had any hectic fights with her mother lately. I have avoided it. So I guess whatever it is, it has nothing to do with her.

I tried to have sex with Lale when I got into bed this morning but she pushed me off and reminded me that I'm sleeping with an old woman. It's funny because when she is the one who wants it, she spreads her legs on my face and sucks my dick like it's a lollipop.

I'd explain the Gabby thing to her, but I don't want her thinking she can make me do things. I've opened up to her enough already, and it's not even about the things I told her at Emazolweni – those I told her because I really needed to

talk, otherwise I'd have jumped out of a window.

If anyone needed to be at that place, it was me and her. We were crazier than all those people in that place, it's just that we weren't ready to be there, not ready to confront who we are.

Lale is made up of only two things: fighting and defending herself. There's nothing in between, no knowledge of who she is beyond people who have hurt her and those she has hurt.

I, on the other hand, am holding on to what I could have been had I had choices.

We are two empty people, that's why we are floating together, me trying to settle for her and her trying to protect herself from it all.

I'd tell her why I'm writing my life story, and why it's so difficult for it to be just about me, but she wouldn't understand. Even my brothers wouldn't understand.

I read that thing Lerato wrote before I dealt with her. I read it and I laughed because she didn't know shit about us. It read like a dumb movie, pieces of this here and there, that never really came together to form the truth. I wondered why she thought she could publish that and have people read it.

The only thing that came close to the truth was the stuff about the Ngqulungas, which she made out to be a big thing, when, in fact, we really didn't even give a shit about them. They were just those people who annoyed us enough for us to end up killing them. We really had no plans of doing so, not Bheki and not Gwaza. We ignored them until we couldn't any more.

I burned it after reading because it wasn't worth the paper

it was printed on, but the lightness of it was enough to make me believe for a moment that we weren't as bad as we thought we were. That's why I rode to Hlomu's house that night. I knew Mqhele wasn't home and, honestly, I didn't go there to confess my love to her. It's just that Hlomu has always been a safe place.

Zandile is great and all but she lacks that thing. Her shoulders don't look warm.

Xolie is a different story altogether: I never know what to say to her but, like all of them, I'd jump in front of a moving train to protect her.

Naledi? That one doesn't know shit about anything, and Qhawe wants it to stay that way. She thinks Qhawe is the voice of reason, when Qhawe is actually the master of getting rid of problems. We used to joke that he is a sweeper: you tell him there's someone standing in our way, he says, don't even ask them to move, sweep them out of the way. And then he goes and plants his herbs and eat his organic foods like he doesn't spill people's brains with a "helicopter" here and there.

Had Naledi's father not gotten rid of her ex, Qhawe would have done it himself. We worked so hard cleaning up that old man's clumsiness. Every time I saw him I wanted to ask him what he was thinking. But apparently he is an elderly version of Mike Tyson, and you can't even hit him back, so I kept my mouth shut and ate that horrible pap and meat those Tswana people always feed us when we are there.

It's Gugu I've always admired, for leaving, more than anything. Because it can't be easy loving a man like Nqoba,

a man so damaged. Of all of us, Nqoba is the one who wears his heart on his sleeve, which is a problem, because no man should have such a characteristic. That type of personality is meant for women, not men. It becomes overwhelming for them and they end up expressing their dark side more than the good side.

I've always wondered if Nqoba feels like me sometimes. He is a genius. Had our lives been different, he would have been something great. I write about him a lot in this book.

"Mqoqi, I'm going to Zo's school."

"It's only 1pm. School is not out yet."

"I know, but they called and said I should come immediately."

I get that feeling in my stomach. Something bad must have happened to her. "I'll go with you."

"No. They asked me to come alone," she says and leaves immediately.

I'm losing my mind because I know for sure that this can't be good. She's 6. She doesn't play any sport and there's no way she's in trouble for something. She's a good girl, and she's a girl ... girls don't do shit like getting into fights. That stuff is what the likes of Msebe and Langa and all those kids of ours are made of.

If we weren't so wealthy, none of those boys would be allowed at any school. Every second week one of them does some crazy shit and the parents are called to school. Whoever isn't busy on that day has to go, and it's not even a problem because the teachers can't tell us apart, but it's even a bigger problem that they can't tell *them* apart, so they never

know which one to expel. It's an even bigger problem that they don't snitch on each other.

Lale is not answering her phone. Now I'm even more worried.

... (♥) ...

It's 7pm and they are still not back.

I've been calling and calling. I can't even drive to the school because we have only one car, the one she left in.

I could call Mpande to track her but I don't want him tracking me instead.

I call her again. It's now on voicemail.

All their stuff is still here so it can't be that she left or ran away or ...

The school's phone rings unanswered.

If they were in hospital, she would have called me by now. I never leave this house.

I've driven Zothile to school only once. I've never been to any parent-teacher meeting so I don't know any kids in her class or their parents.

I've been going out into the yard, out onto the street, hoping to see the car approaching, but nothing. I'm losing my mind now.

There's a knock. It's not a soft knock but I run to the door because maybe ...

"Are you Mqoqi Zulu?"

It's cops. If they tell me something happened to Zothile, I will die.

... ☺ ...

"So you are not the child's father?"

I've answered this question about six times, to three different people. I started with a simple "no" and then ended up explaining that I was actually the stepfather. But then they wouldn't accept that because I'm not married to her mother.

Where the hell is Lale, anyway? And why am I here? Arrested for I don't know what ...

The cop who led me out of my house in handcuffs is the one interrogating me now. "Where are they? Where are Lale and Zothile?" I ask.

He looks at me, and then at the scribbled paper in his hand. "The child's statement says she got the money from the tooth fairy. The mother's statement says she doesn't know anything about that, so that leaves you ..."

I'm here because Zothile brought money to school? They haven't even told me what I'm being arrested for. "I was just playing around with her."

He raises his eyebrows. "And you gave her R500 to play with her? A child? A 6-year-old?"

Okay, maybe that was too much money but it's not like she knew what to do with it.

"The mother is a widow. Is that what you do, Mr Zulu? Target grieving widows with little girls and drag them to a small town so you can have them trapped and have your way with the child?"

I'm lost.

"I think uncle Mqoqi will be happy to hear you call him baba. I think he loves you very much. When people love you they help you with your spelling.' He is reading this from one of the papers in front of him. "The mother says the child spends a lot of time with you in your office, and that the door is always closed."

"Yes, because—"

He raises his hand to stop me. "The child says here that you come to her room in the middle of the night."

"Yes, I check on her because she gets nightmares when she sleeps on her back, so I go in there to turn her to her side."

"Oh, so you touch her? Because that is what it says here, that you enter her bedroom and remove the blanket. It also says here that you took off her clothes once. She went to bed in pyjamas and woke up wearing only her panties."

"Is that what she said? She was drenched in sweat. Her mother had let her go to bed without checking what she was wearing. I took her pyjamas off because—"

"That's not what it sounds like here ..."

I know where this is going now, and I cannot believe it. Lale must come here and tell them that I'd never do anything like that. I'd never touch a child.

"And then you went ahead and paid the child R500, a whole R500 so the child could call you daddy."

He makes it sound so dirty.

"That was an innocent—"

"Yeah, yeah. That's what all paedophiles say, that it was innocent. They make a child trust them, believe they love

them so that it can be easy for them ...”

Of all the crimes I have committed in my life, and I have committed many atrocities, this is the one I would never even think about committing. If this man was accusing me of anything, anything but this, I would have walked out of here by now. But I'm still here, shocked and scared like a little boy, because I don't understand how this is even happening. Where is Lale?

“Did she say I touched her?”

“It doesn't matter what she said. She's six years old and clearly she doesn't understand what is happening. She thinks it's love.”

“I never touched her, I swear.”

“They all say that,” he says, stands up, and leaves.

What the fuck is happening to me? Where the hell is Lale?

7

THE FIRST TIME I slept in a police holding cell was when I was caught ... no, snitched on for selling weed.

The next morning I was home and Nkosana was beating the crap out of me. I didn't even have to appear in court. Everything disappeared overnight, including the man who snitched on me.

The second time made me a celebrity.

Now here I am, sitting in the dock waiting for the magistrate to come and decide what happens next. I don't know a single person in this town, and where do I even begin looking for a lawyer? The jail thing doesn't scare me. What makes my stomach turn is what I have been charged with.

Child molestation. The most inhumane and disgusting thing a man could ever do.

All I need is Lale to come here and explain that I would never do such a thing.

The prosecutor says all the proof is there, but I don't see how me loving a child and pretending to be something that

doesn't exist just to make her happy is proof of anything.

"Please tell the accused not to do that." It's the prosecutor, talking to the court orderly.

He leans over and says, "Pull the hoodie down and stop pulling those strings. This is a court of law."

There are people sitting behind me in the gallery. I don't know any of them. It's a good thing I let my hair and beard grow because otherwise someone would have recognised me by now and it would be a circus. But that's the least of my worries. My biggest worry is that maybe Lale believes I did something to Zothile. She wouldn't, would she?

"All rise!"

I rise. I know how this works. I sit back down after the magistrate sits.

It takes ten minutes. They need to confirm my address. I have no legal representation. So we're done here.

They are taking me to Springbok Prison. I'm officially an awaiting-trial prisoner, accused number one.

I put my hoodie back on and look down as I take the stairs back to the court holding cells.

"Mfwethu, I need you to get me a lawyer," I say to the court orderly as he is about to lock me in.

He's not taking me seriously, I can see that.

"Find me the most expensive lawyer. I'm sure there's one in this court building. I'll give you R100 000 if you do that for me."

Now he's interested. He nods and locks the door.

... ☺ ...

The drive to Springbok takes about thirty minutes. I still have my Rolex on my wrist. I know the drill: once I get there I'm going to have to take it off.

I'm sitting in the back of a police van wondering how the fuck I ended up in this mess. These people have no clue who I am. To them, I'm just another criminal, which technically I have been all my life, but this ... this thing I am being accused of right now ... it is worse than any crime I have ever committed.

The prison is in the middle of nowhere and, unlike at Sun City, I don't expect to see anyone I know. They don't take my clothes but they do take my watch and sneaker-laces.

"You walk in there with this thing, they will eat you for lunch," the booking warder says as he puts my watch in a plastic bag, together with my laces and cell phone, which ran out of battery last night and has been off since.

Honestly, I'm surprised that nobody has figured out who I am, my name being written in front of them and all.

"I need to make a call," I say.

I'm surprised when he agrees, because from the magistrate to the court orderly, the police who transport you to the prison and the warders who book you in, nobody is ever nice to paedophiles. The torment starts the moment you are handcuffed, and goes all the way to the prisoners you are made to share a cell with. I know they already know, and that they have already decided how my first night here will end.

The warder hands me a landline phone and says I have five minutes.

I could call Peter - he'd drop everything to come here

and sort this out. I could call one of my brothers and they'd definitely get me out of here. But in the end I decide to call Lale. She answers just as I'm about to give up and put the phone down.

"Lale, they've taken me to prison. Why would they even think I'd do such a thing? You have to come here and tell them—"

She starts wailing. I don't understand.

"Where are you? Why am I being accused of this? I would never—"

She disconnects. I'm left listening to a buzzing sound in my ear.

My next date is in six days. I'm now being taken to an empty room to be searched. I'm led down a smelly corridor to the last cell on the right. There must be about forty men here and only twenty double-bunks, if I counted correctly.

I feel like that scared little boy at the men's hostel watching blood oozing out of a sheep's neck all over again. The smell is the same: men, sweat, blood, anger, testosterone and violence ... violence and death, even.

If I don't get out of here by tomorrow morning, I will die.

I scan the room, my eyes meeting some of the men's, and I immediately know they've been waiting for me. My height doesn't intimidate them. They don't know anything about my money or the power I have far away from here.

I find a corner and stand with my arms folded, because in this place you don't sit. They must never find you in a position where you can't throw a punch. I can fight; that's the

one thing I have known how to do all my life. If I die tonight, none of the wounds I'll die from will be on my back. I will die with some of them, even if it's just two.

They let me be and continue doing what they were doing when I was pushed in, but I know it's all an act. Qhawe told me everything about prison. He said you don't sleep for the first three nights and you must always have something to bargain with. I have nothing, not even a pack of cigarettes, because those cops wouldn't let me go to my office before they handcuffed me. I would promise them money but there's really no use for it in here, and that's if they even believe me if I tell them I have enough money to buy this prison in the first place.

I also won't start explaining that I'm actually innocent, that I never touched the child, because it really doesn't matter here. Some of them have been here, awaiting trial, for over a year. That's how it works.

It would be easier if I understood the language they are speaking, but Afrikaans is the one language you can't learn at a taxi rank and the streets of Joburg.

One of the few guys with no tattoos has been staring at my sneakers for too long and I know he's trying to figure me out. I have four tattoos, and they are all on my arms. Maybe that will work in my favour: at least they show I can stand pain.

I will stand here, in this corner, for the whole night if I have to. I have slept under bridges, I have killed men with their eyes looking into mine. I am Nomafu's son.

DUDU BUSANI-DUBE

A cold hand over my mouth and a tight grip pulling my arms back are nothing compared to the knife going repeatedly into my thighs.

They aren't trying to kill me, that I know for sure, because otherwise he would have gouged that knife into my heart by now. The stabs in my thighs are continuous but not deep. I can feel them. It's my blood they want to see, not my dead body lying on the floor.

I'm still trying to kick and free myself, though. Screaming for help is not an option. Men don't scream for help. They fight to the death with their teeth clenched and voice held in their throat. I fight until I can't move my legs any more and I know that this is it, I'm dying tonight.

I've always wanted to take my own life, die on my own terms, in my own time. But it's clear now that I'll never get what I want in this life. I never have been able to.

I feel my mind separating from my body and I know it's over.

I stop. For the first time in my life, I stop fighting before I win.

I'm dead. It's happening for real this time and I don't have my brothers to stop me.

8

THERE'S AN EMPTY bed next to me, and next to it there is a man with no legs. And in front of me there is a woman with long thick braids and an almost-flat chest.

I used to beg Thobi to do these braids and I'm not understanding why I notice this woman's flat chest because I've never cared if women had enough breasts or not.

She touches my feet, pinches my big toe, and I wince.

"Whew!" she says.

I don't know where I am and why I have a needle in my arm.

"They messed you up real bad. I stopped counting the stitches," she says.

Nothing about her face says this is something she hasn't seen before.

"Your court date was yesterday, but don't worry, you're going back there for your bail application on Thursday."

"Court date" triggers my memory. I'm still in jail, but I'm not dead.

I look at the man lying on the other bed, lying there like he'll never have to move again.

"Don't worry about him; he lives here. He came here like this because even without legs, you men can still kill us," she says.

I want her to explain to me how I'm still alive and how long I've been here. I don't care about the legless man and what he did. "Was I in a coma?" I ask.

She writes something down in that file she has in her hands and squeezes the plastic bulb connected to my arm. "No, no coma for you. I had to keep drugging you into deep sleep because on top of everything, you are a hallucinatory ..."

"How long have I been here?"

"Six days. Seven if you count today."

A whole week?

"They tried to kill me."

"No, they weren't trying to kill you. The stab wounds are too shallow ..."

I remember now, I tried to fight off six men and two of them were holding my arms.

"Don't worry, they won't kill you here. It's when you are sentenced and sent to real prison that it gets deadly. It happens often to child rapists, unless you settle for being someone's bitch."

I'm not a child rapist!

"Looks like we're going to have to wheel you to court because your lawyer has been here every day. He says he's ready for the bail application."

My lawyer?

She refills the drip, writes something in the file, and leaves before I can ask who that lawyer is, or even her name.

I'm not feeling any pain but my legs feel heavy. I don't know what day it is today and if Thursday is near or far.

I need to get out of here!

A metal tray is put next to my bed by a man in prison uniform. I've been in hospital before but two slices of brown bread and soup with floating peas was not what I was served. And besides, it's not like I can move, let alone reach the tray.

"Seven days? You're weak man, too weak. He said he won't come to see you, but you'll get the message. That's what he said," the tray man whispers before he wheels off to the man with no legs.

I have no idea what or who he is talking about, and I won't even try to reach for that shit food. I press on the needle in my arm and pull it out slowly and discreetly. I have no plans of falling into deep sleep again.

My lawyer is a man with a long beard. He says his name is Faizel. He says he will invoice me for all the days he has come here for me. I know he knows who I am. He says he can get me bail but I can't leave the province. He tells me there is no evidence that I penetrated the child.

That word "penetrate" makes me cringe.

"But even using a finger now is considered rape. You didn't take any pictures, did you? Because that would complicate things ..."

That's it! I need to call Peter! Now!

"The child was taken away by social workers. Apparently

the mother is also a nutcase. I'm telling you now that it doesn't look good. Those tooth-fairy letters don't look too good. You two are fucked-up people and the government is never going to let any child anywhere near you. But bail looks promising. Let's get you that and see what we can do going forward."

He talks too much and too fast. He must be the lawyer that court orderly got me, the court orderly I now officially owe R100 000.

"We have two days. I confirmed that the house in Concordia belongs to you, so you can live there for the duration of the trial. I can't promise you that this will stay here, confined to this little town forever, and that the media won't find out, but for now let's get you out of here before these savages kill you, okay?"

It would be a little bit okay if I wasn't confined to a hospital bed, helpless.

"Can you call my family lawyer, Peter—?"

"Jurisdiction, my man. That Peter you are talking about doesn't have jurisdiction here. I'm the main man here – your only hope. Now, try not to get killed in the next two days. I'll get you out of here."

"Where is Lale?" I'm asking because I know she wouldn't let Zothile be taken just like that, no matter what she believes I did. She lives for that child.

"Who is Lale? Oh, you mean the mother? I don't know. Nobody knows. She lost her mind, apparently, which is good for you because it means she won't be in court to testify," he says.

This is all fucked up. "I didn't do anything to the child,

Faizel." I'm calling him by his name because as much as he shocks me, as much as all of this is shocking, he is the only person I have to get me out of here alive at this point.

"It doesn't matter, Zulu. I'm your lawyer. My job is to get you out of here, whether you are guilty or not."

He leaves stapled papers on the night stand. They're invoices, R20 000 for each day he's been here. But it doesn't matter: R120 000 and whatever I'll have to pay him for today and tomorrow is nothing to me. What matters the most is that my name is cleared.

I watch him leave, with his used-to-be-white shirt trying to cover most of his bulging-over-the-pants stomach, and I wonder if he is capable of doing all the things he's promised.

I'm tired, and I know I can't keep myself awake for long.

... (v) ...

I refused to be brought here in a wheelchair. Standing up is excruciating but I am willing to endure the pain because I refuse to be helpless.

I have not gathered enough strength to look at the stitches in my thighs, but the nurse said they are healing.

I have watched many knives cutting through people's skin but at least those people died; they were not left to live and see the mutilations. Personally, I can never put a knife through anyone's skin because fresh blood is not a thing I like seeing. I prefer shooting a bullet and looking away afterwards.

Faizel is here. He looks confident but so does the prosecutor. There are no people sitting in the gallery today.

"You are lucky because the victim in your case is a child, so this ..." he waves his hand in the air, "these proceedings are closed to the public, even the trial. Your name will not be revealed to the public because, you know, that would automatically reveal the identity of the child. Apparently, she talked about you a lot to her classmates. She told her deskmate about that night you took her clothes off and the deskmate told the teacher. That's going to be a big thing, a big problem, know that—"

I'm still stuck on the part where he said I'm lucky. How am I lucky? "Did she say I touched her? Did those words come out of her mouth or is everybody just assuming—"

"Now, let's get you bail." He cuts me off, as if I didn't just ask him a question, as if my whole life doesn't depend on the answer to this one question.

This is where he should brief me on what he is going to argue to secure me this bail he is so confident about. But the magistrate is here and we have to rise.

The prosecutor is opposing the bail application on the grounds that I have a lot of money, a private jet even, and that would make it easy for me to skip the country. I have no plans of skipping the country, though, or even the Northern Cape, until my name is cleared.

Faizel argues that the fact that I have all these businesses and that pretty much everyone in this country knows me means it would be difficult for me to flee without being recognised and caught. He hasn't said anything about me actually being innocent in all this, that this is just a misunderstanding.

The prosecutor says I have connections everywhere, and money everywhere. She's right. I have money in offshore accounts.

Faizel says I am a good citizen, that I have donated money to schools and destitute children and women-empowerment things. I don't know anything about that. Hlomu takes money from the family and does those things. I've never really cared what they are.

The prosecutor says but I'm a flight risk, and I know people in high places.

Faizel says if I wanted to run, I would have run by now.

I want to raise my hand and tell the magistrate that I shouldn't even be here, but I know that's not how it works.

The prosecutor says me going out there would compromise the safety of the child, and the mother.

Faizel says the mother has disappeared and the child is safely in the care of the state.

The magistrate asks about the mother's whereabouts. The prosecutor says she isn't sure, but that the child had to be taken away from her.

Faizel says the mother is a questionable character, and it's possible that she is framing me.

I don't want it to go there. I know Lale has nothing to do with this whole thing.

Faizel says I have a right to bail, that nothing proves I'm a flight risk, and that there isn't enough evidence against me.

I want to ask if they have tested Zothile to confirm that something was done to her, but I'm not allowed to speak, and I'm afraid that if they say yes, I will have to pay someone

to get me out of here and find whoever did something to her and kill them.

After a to-and-fro that seems to last forever, I'm granted bail. R50 000, the magistrate says. Faizel is happy to pay it from his own pocket. He is also happy to drive me home and stand behind me as I sit at my office desk and transfer the R50 000 into his account.

He then hands me a piece of paper with the court orderly's banking details. I pay my debt.

This is where I should call my brothers for help, but no, I managed nine days in prison, almost dying, and getting out, on my own. All I have to do now is find Lale and explain things. Maybe we can all go back to the way we were.

I'm charging my phone. There will definitely be a message or missed calls from her.

"We must discuss how we are going to play this, because I must be honest with you, it doesn't look good. There is so much on the system about this child, including how she ended up here. The way things look, you and her mother kidnapped her from Durban," Faizel says.

I didn't kidnap her. Yes, I used my connections to ensure she was given back to her mother, but I didn't walk in there and grab her and run.

"I love that child like she is my own, Faizel."

"Forget that. Nobody will believe it. Now, let's start with the mother. What was the nature of your relationship with her?"

What was the nature of my relationship with Lale? We lived together and had sex and talked and fought, and now

she's gone and I'm in deep shit. I don't even know how she left because my car is still here, parked in the garage.

I'm on my fourth cigarette since we left court. Faizel is on his sixth.

"We were trying to build a life here, together, the three of us."

"Build a life? Here in Concordia? Nobody comes here to start something. People come here to end something. It looks to me like you are running from something."

I don't think this is how it works. Being interrogated by your own lawyer is not how it works. I want him to leave now. I need to take my painkillers and drag my legs to the bedroom to sleep. I'll deal with whatever needs to be dealt with tomorrow.

He leaves only when I lie back in the chair and close my eyes.

I don't have any messages or missed calls from Lale, just frantic voicemails from Gabby.