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Prologue

NELLY PAGE

Nelly Page Zulu, national bestselling author. That's what the world knows me as. The Beloved Mashenge and Sabatha The Begetter are my greatest achievements, my success. I'm a psychologist by profession, but writing is my first love. As far as the world knows, my life is perfect and I am married to the most "amazing" man. Bhekifa Zulu and together we have four beautiful children, they are refreshingly smart and funny. They are the reason I haven't left this man. Our lives were perfect until his family happened.

My journey to hell and back began a few years ago, Bhekifa and I had good times together. But like a storm, the devil showed up and he came to stay. Bhekifa was a humbled being, but there were red flags of possessiveness, and one day his desire to control became dark after lies from his family circulated. Tainting my name and image in the eyes of the man who once looked at me like I was the only woman ever to exist.

After twelve years of marriage, I knew something was wrong. The man I had married, was no longer the romantic person I

had fallen in love with. The bouquets of roses were replaced by belittling insults, manipulation and heaps of blame. He prohibited me from doing anything that he disapproved of. A sense of fear was evoked and threats of punishments were said. Was I overreacting? Was I in the wrong? Was I acting crazy? It came to that point where I questioned myself.

One time when I walked into the bullet-ridden halls of my home, I didn't know I would meet a merciless man whose intentions were to inflict pain and fear in me. That day he had gone to see his mother, if only I had known he would come home with the devil strapped on his back.

His eyes told a tale of nothing but hate, after I had refused to bow down as per his request. Bhekifa's anger took an unexpected turn.

"You have ruined the family name

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my dignity." He said, looking down at me after his fist threw me to the hard cold floor. "I told you to bow, didn't I?"

He gripped a hold of my cheeks and told me to shut up when I tried to practice my back chatting skills. Bhekifa woke up the next morning with a mouth full of apologies and faults, faults that had my name on them. He blamed me for putting his

hands on me, he said I wouldn't listen to him and he didn't want the neighbours to hear us arguing. The fist was to shut me up, with a bruised lip I accepted the man's apology like any battered wife would. That was the first hit.

Bhekifa became ruthless with time and it broke my heart that he would believe his family over me, his wife, the mother of his children. My children were still young and needed their father, I couldn't break their family apart. Believe me, I had so many reasons to be selfish and walk away, but their innocent faces compelled me to stay and fight for my marriage. Fight for their rights to have a present father, however the more I stayed with him, the more it destroyed my self-esteem.

Bhekifa's family poisoned him against me, I still believed in him and was convinced that he wanted to change. I dragged him to counselling on days he wasn't a monster, the sun would shine in our lives, but the dark cloud lurked in the corners of our home.

My life is a very dark tale of betrayal, lust and revenge.

1

NELLY PAGE

Me: Done.

I say closing my laptop, it took me longer than expected to type today's chapter. My readers are very demanding, I love them regardless. Writing on Facebook is a hobby I enjoy, I do it during my spare time. I love getting into people's minds, it's an interesting thing to do. You would be amazed by how readable people are and through that I create imaginary characters in my head. The fun part about this is penning them down. 'Ndabuko Her Yardner' is my current love, she's doing great, better than 'Ngcwethi Her Warrior' actually.

Bhekifa: I thought you would never finish.

Bhekifa says, jumping into bed. He's ready for bed and wearing those boxers I hate. Bhekifa is too hairy, I think he's a descendant of Shembe. He has the bushy hair and the beard to prove it, he is not the best looking man in the world, but he takes my breath away. He really is not that bad, my children are proof of that.

Me: What are you wearing?

I ask, he's annoyed by the question as usual.

Bhekifa: Not again Nelly, It's too hot today. I can't go to bed wearing long pants.

Same story every night, I end up winning.

Me: So I'm not allowed to get a good night's rest? You know how your legs irritate my skin Bhekifa and you don't want to shave them.

Bhekifa: Haibo, mfazi. Men don't shave their legs.

Says who?

Me: I beg to differ, my eyes need rest and I have a lot of work tomorrow. I can't sleep with your hairy legs brushing against me.

He knows this too well.

Bhekifa: This is not what they meant when they said umshado akuyona ijele. My wife is a bully, you should wear the long pants and let's see if you'll be able to sleep throughout the night. (Marriage is not a jail sentence.)

I expected him to say that, he's a man after all and they are not as smart as they want us to think.

Bhekifa: I am not going to sleep in long pants, it's hot.

Bhekifa clarifies, pushing back against the headboard.

Me: Oh, so I should suffer? Aren't you being unfair?

I'm winning this fight, I see it.

Me: No babakhe.

He loves it when I call him that, you should see the smile on his face.

Bhekifa: "Let's hear the complaint."

I know this man just mentally rolled his eyes at me.

Me: You promised to be my protector, right? So you have to protect me from the heatwave and make sure I sleep like a queen.

My dramatics come out to play. He accepts the kiss I plant on his cheek with a smile.

Bhekifa: Why did I marry a writer? Fine, I'm going to change, but first I want some good loving.

I'm wrapped in his arms, giggling like an idiot. I hate it when he kisses my neck, Bhekifa always seems to do the opposite of what I expect from him.

Me: Not there Bhekifa.

I whine, shutting the curve of my neck with my shoulder.

Bhekifa: Eish Nelly, must you ruin the mood again? He grunts and he's right. This is a norm I am used to, neck kisses put me off.

Me: You know I hate that.

Bhekifa: Yeah. What else don't you hate?

He whispers silently, this man I'm married to is quick to annoyance.

Me: Why did you stop?

I want him to continue. Bhekifa shifts when I try to touch him, the man is too short tempered for my liking. Sometimes I wonder how I fell in love with him, yet I can't imagine my life without him. The sound of his phone ringing takes his attention away from me.

Me: Who is it?

I think I have an idea, the only person who calls my husband at this time of the night.

Bhekifa: My mother.

He answers, bringing the phone to his ear. Bhekifa knows I hate it when he answers her calls during our time. You would think the old woman has cameras installed in this room and the second my husband starts touching me

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his phone rings. Old people should be sleeping at this time. The only reason she's still awake is to irritate me, I just know it. I let him leave the room, that's right, he doesn't speak to her with me present. I have a feeling I am the main topic of those conversations.

CHERYL ZIKHALI

What I hate more than taking two taxis to work is traffic, every day I spend about two hours commuting from the south to the north where my job is located. I hate that place too, I hate my life, I hate everything and everyone. Yes, you guessed it. I am miserable.

The only thing that keeps me going are my two children, or else I would have given up on everything. They are the reason I settled for that lousy job. No one looks forward to cleaning toilets and offices every day, I work for the biggest engineering company in South Africa and that means I am surrounded by snobs who walk with their noses held high and use them to speak English. You should see them with their shiny suits, polished shoes. Rich people think the world belongs to them.

Life was not always miserable for me, I was loved by an incredible man. He was everything I had ever asked for, we had two babies together and life was a bliss. Fate though cast an evil eye on my life, like a jealous neighbour, it took my husband from me. He left home one morning and never came back, a car accident claimed his life. I was left to raise my children alone, with no money coming in. I saw that as a punishment for being a housewife.

I had to start everything from scratch, job hunting and transferring my kids from private schools to public schools.

Me: "Pinky, I'm cleaning this floor today."

I announce to my colleague, pushing the bucket down the hall. The third floor doesn't have a lot of offices which lessens my work, I'll be done by lunch time. There is another reason why I choose this floor, the office at the far end corner. I walk in and Mr. Zulu's fragrance greets me. He is the reason I'm always lurking around the third floor, everything in here is so manly. From the big picture of Bafana Bafana on the wall to the old brown leather couch near the window. I walk around admiring the place and possibly dreaming of a life with him where I bring him lunch to work. Sitting on his chair makes it feel so real.

“Having fun?”

He’s here, Cheryl you’re in trouble. Slowly I stand and fix myself before turning to face him. He’s leaning on the door post with his arms across his chest.

Me: I’m sorry, I was cleaning.

Mr. Zulu: The chair?

Me: Yes, it had gathered dust and I thought-

Mr: You thought sitting on my chair would remove the dust.

It’s not that big of a deal.

Me: Excuse me.

I walk past him, taking quick steps.

Mr. Zulu: Hey, I didn’t say leave. I was merely asking why you like sitting on my chair. Are you after my position Ms?

Me: Even if I was, I wouldn’t qualify. So relax Mr. Zulu your job is safe.

He scratches the back of his head and releases a low laugh.

Mr. Zulu: You’re a bold one, what’s your name?

Me: Cheryl.

My answer is quick.

Mr. Zulu: Cheryl, I would appreciate it if you would do your work and stay away from my things.

Me: With all due respect Mr. Zulu, I have no interest in your things. There is nothing special about you. Just like you, I am here to work and would appreciate it if you would stay out of my way while I work. Your salary might be bigger than mine, but at the end of the day we're both trying to make a living.

My mouth has a life of its own, it will surely get me into trouble one day. Mr. Zulu laughs with his eyes and his lips dance to the sound of my words.

Mr. Zulu: You really are bold Cheryl.

Me: I am merely standing up for myself sir, excuse me, I have toilets to clean.

I grab my bucket and walk out, crush or no crush. No man will disrespect me.

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To be continued

2

NELLY PAGE.

I can't help but smile back at my personal assistant Buhle as I walk into my office building. I don't know a day when she's not smiling, her smile stretches further as I approach her desk.

Buhle: Your coffee is on the table, you have an 8 o'clock."

She hands me a newspaper and points at an elderly white woman seated on the single couch in the waiting area.

Me: What's her case?

Buhle: Another battered wife who refuses to get her husband locked up.

Me: Argh, and I thought I would have the morning off.

Dealing with these kind of women is depressing, it could be that I see myself in them.

Me: Thank you Buhle, how is your son?

Buhle is a new mother, she just came back from maternity leave.

Buhle: He's beautiful and growing, I can't get over how much he looks just like his father.

There is a way she glows when she speaks about that mysterious man, they are not married, but she says she has hope.

Me: Trust me that is the ultimate betrayal, to carry a child for nine months and have it come out looking like its father.

Her smile turns into a laugh, I must have made a joke, but I'm speaking from experience. My sons look like their father, Ayanda is the one who pitied me and took my features. My baby girl is her mother's daughter, looks just like me.

Buhle: I don't mind, deep down I wanted him to look like his father. The last thing I want is to take the father of my baby to uTatakho for a DNA test.

That's funny, I thought she had one man in her life. Why else would she think of taking him to a show where two men are fighting over a child?

Me: Let me get to work sweetie, that poor woman must be wondering what's keeping me.

The smile again.

Buhle: Good luck.

She's laughs at me, Buhle knows just how hard being a psychologist is. Listening to people's problems can be draining sometimes.

-CHERYL ZIKHALI.

I would like to think I have a hand in this misery that's hovering over my life, to talk to a senior the way I did with Mr. Zulu will get me in trouble. I might lose this stupid job. Where will I begin to look for another one? This country is not kind to its citizens, with unemployment laughing in our faces, I will be lucky to get another job in the next ten years. I make it to the second floor where Pinky is located, don't be fooled by her loud singing. She hates her job just as much.

Me: Hey, I'll take over from here. You go and finish up on the third floor.

Judging by the look on her face she is not happy with me, but I know how to get my way.

Pinky: Your favourite floor, you mean? Isn't that where your dreams take place?

Me: Can we joke later when I have had breakfast? I'm not in the mood right now Pinky.

Pinky: Did you let your mouth run again?

Pinky thinks I'm an inconsiderate bitter woman who does not regard people's feelings. Maybe I am bitter, the world took so much from me and I can never get it back, no matter how much I wish for it.

Me: Maybe I did, rich people want us to roll a red a carpet for them each time they walk past. I'm not going to do that, my husband was once a manager. We had enough--"

Pinky: Your husband is dead Chez and it's no one's fault except that drunk driver. You can't punish everyone for his death.

Me: Woah Pinky! When did you become a counsellor? I think you're better off mopping floors.

My husband is a very sensitive topic, one I would like to avoid whenever I can. Rolling her eyes at me, Pinky continues with her mopping. I will have to beg her now and make a few empty promises just to have her exchange floors with me. I'm sure Mr. Zulu would have forgotten about that incident by lunch time.

Me: You know Mr. Zulu is forward, he's a handsome forward man.

There's a chair in this office too, it's not as comfortable as the one I was seated on earlier, but it will do. Pinky is not happy about my laziness, I smile at her in return.

Me: He asked me not to touch his things. How am I going to clean the office without touching his things?

Pinky: You were sitting on his chair again, weren't you?

Me: Is it my fault that I dream of being a CEO?

She finds my question rather funny, I should be a comedian.

Pinky: The only thing you dream about is sitting on Mr. Zulu's lap.

Pinky says, grabbing the bucket of water. She knows too much, I should learn to keep my mouth shut or else she will get me in trouble.

Me: Well if I won't be a CEO, why not sit on the CEO's lap?

I said it, I should be a comedian. She is laughing again.

-BHEKIFA ZULU.

It is said that time slows down when you're counting the minutes, for me that's not the case, it flies. I couldn't wait for 5pm and the moment the clock struck five, I ran out of the

office like I was never coming back. The road to Rivonia has become so familiar that I never pay too much attention to it when driving there after work

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it's where my happy place is. My phone rings and the caller Id drops my mood just a little bit, I will have to cook up stories about my location.

Me: Mamakhe.

God knows I love my wife, life without her seems impossible. I love how she takes care of me as her man and has given me my rightful place in her life and our children's lives. I'm not perfect and I've hurt my wife countless times. Although the sweetest person I have ever known, Nelly's insecurities force her along the paths of stubbornness and lead me to act and raise a hand on her, only to wake up the next day with regrets.

Nelly: Dinner at our favourite restaurant at 8pm, I already made reservations.

I'm not really a last minute guy and my wife knows this too well, yet she goes and does things that piss me off.

Me: You should've told me this morning Nelly, I'm going to see my mother right now and you know I can't cancel.

Lies are easy to tell when you have years of experience.

Nelly: Oh, okay. What is it that you do with your mother every Thursday night Bhekifa? You should be home with your family.

This is from the woman who wants us to go out to dinner and leave the kids at home. I don't know what she wants from me.

Me: Being married doesn't mean I have to turn my back on my mother.

Nelly: Yes I know that, but your wife and kids should come first.

I don't believe in women raising their voices at men.

Me: What will I do when I get home? The children hardly notice that I am there, with those gadgets they have I doubt my presence is needed.

Nelly: I know baba, but am I wrong for asking my husband to avail himself for his family?

I think I should end this call before both of us end up saying things we will regret.

Me: Don't dish up for me, I'll eat at my mother's house and don't wait up please.

I hear her sigh over the phone.

Nelly: Okay, I love you.

Me: Yeah me too.

I hang up before she speaks further, my phone beeps instantly. It's a text that puts a smile on my face.

'Radisson Blu Hotel, room 105. Just in case you have forgotten your way. Hurry Mageba, I'm getting impatient.'

-SABELO ZULU.

"Wena Sabelo."

This is what happens when you live in your mother's house with your wife and kids. She nags and nags, I can't do anything right in Mariam Zulu's eyes. Bhekifa is the golden boy, only because he brings money into the house. It's his job as the big brother, I can't be out there sweating and hard at work when I have a big brother whose bank account is overflowing. Bhekifa has so much money that he doesn't know what to do with it. If it were up to me, everyone in this house would move into Bhekifa's house. It's big enough to accommodate all of us, but his wife will never allow it. That woman wants control over my brother's money, if she would have it she would make him turn his back on us.

Me: What did I do now mama?

I sit up from the couch, she doesn't like it when I put my feet on her couch.

Mariam: Did you see what your son did to my garden?

This again?

Me: He's just a boy mama, I will fix your garden first thing in the morning.

Mariam: That's what you said about the light in the bathroom, one week Sabelo, one week we've been bathing in the dark.

Me: Huh mama, candles give light. Maybe there's something wrong with your vision.

The click of her tongue tells me that I have offended her, I shift to the side as she sits next to me.

Mariam: When will you grow up my son? Look at your brother, he has done well for himself.

I live to hear her sing this song, she is forever comparing me to the "almighty" Bhekifa.

Me: Look magriza, not now. No, skai chunna daai ding. Bhekifa is a cheese boy and I'm just a guy from ekasi. Life is only fair to those who are smart. He took all the brains and made a life for himself, I will sit here on the couch and eat all the cheese my brother brings home. (Don't do that.)

Mariam: You should be ashamed of yourself Sabelo.

My mother might act annoyed, but I know deep down she is all smiles. I am her last born and this house will be mine when she dies. So, what is the point of leaving if I will come back one day?

Mariam: Tell me, did Bhekifa send you money today?

Me: Three thousand imagine, your son is becoming stingy mama. What will I do with three thousand rands?

Mariam: It's that wife of his, wait till he gets here, tomorrow. I will sort him out.

Sabelo: No leave Bhekifa to me, I know how to sort him out.

Mariam: I hope you're not talking about that useless girl, she couldn't separate them.

My mother is right, I fail to understand how Bhekifa can be in love with Nelly. He can do better than that woman, it seems like she rubbed off her stupidity on him.

Me: This calls for a family meeting then.

My announcement puts a smile on her face, Bhekifa never misses family meetings. He will be dancing to our tune if we play the cards right.

3

CHERYL ZIKHALI.

Me: Short left.

I shout to the taxi driver after he takes a turn at Sasol garage, what I love about Ormonde View is that it's not crowded. I moved back to my mother's house a year after my husband died, things were so bad after his death. I lost my house because I couldn't pay the mortgage, Zain was careless with money. Most of it was spent investigating paranormal activities, we both had a passion for it and that's how we grew closer and fell in love along the way. We had kids and my priorities changed, while his remained the same. His obsession for ghosts never died, I became a mother and had to put my kids first.

We didn't have life insurance, how careless that was of us. I want the best for my kids and one day I will find them a father who will give them everything they deserve.

My mother always waits for me at the door, it's strange because I am not a child anymore, but this woman worries so much about me. It's always been like this ever since I can remember. She is my rock and takes care of my children like they are her own.

Me: Really?

I say, smiling as she frowns upon my arrival, my mother was blessed with twin girls. Whoever said twins should have similar names was probably drunk that day, Beryl is doing well with her life while I find myself at my mother's doorstep every day after work. There are days when I feel like giving up and maybe follow Zain, but that would be selfish of me, my babies need me.

Mom: You're late, are you okay?

I don't mind her worrying about me, but she should take it down a notch.

Me: I'm fine mama, there was traffic as usual.

There's this smile on my face and I don't know where it's coming from, but I've always been the smiling twin. It annoys me sometimes because I smile at anyone, considering I'm familiar with them. Funny enough I continue with it even when it's not returned. I need to have that checked.

Mama: Jabu is here.

Yeah, I saw his car outside. I am not in the mood for him, I think he went crazy after Zain's death. They were more like brothers

than friends, he always goes on about how Zain was killed by a ghost.

Me: Where are my brats?

She finally smiles at me.

Mama: My grandkids are sleeping.

She emphasises on the word grandkids, moving to the living room I find Jabu watching Ghosts of Shepherdstown on the discovery channel. I hate this show because Nick Groff looks just like Zain, he reminds me so much of him. My heart breaks a little as his face appears on the TV screen, I turn my eyes back to Jabu who has not seen me. The seams of his lips are caught between the glass of orange juice on his hand and his eyes are glued on the stupid show.

Jabu: Hey, why did you do that?

He complains as I switch it off.

Me: You know how I feel about that show.

Jabu: Yeah, but I need to watch it. Somehow I feel closer to Zain.

Me: Why are you here so late at night? I hope you're not sleeping over, we only have two bedrooms and my mother's couch is not for not tall men to sleep on.

Jabu: Hahaha, funny.

His voice lacks humour, he is still sipping on the juice like he's been working in the sun the whole day.

Jabu: I came to see the kids, I missed them.

Me: Okay, and you decided to wait for me?

Jabu: Actually, there's a new show I'm producing and I'll be the host. So I need a partner and I thought, why not you?

Me: Why me?

He shifts as I find a place to sit next to him.

Jabu: You're experienced Cheryl, the show is called Paranormal lockdown.

Me: I want nothing to do with ghosts Jabu, you know that, ever since Zain died I can't bring myself to think about them.

Jabu: That's the thing, I think he's trying to reach out.

Had it been three years ago, I would be jumping on the chair with excitement, but now all I can offer this man is a scornful laugh.

Me: Don't do that, don't give me hope. If Zain was a lost soul I would know, he crossed over, we will never hear from him again.

Jabu: How do you know? Look this is a great way to make money, it's better than that job you hate so much.

Me: That job keeps my children safe, I know how dangerous this paranormal thing can be and I don't want them exposed to it.

Jabu: But Cheryl-"

Me: Nee man Jabu, wag 'n bietjie toe. (Wait a bit.)

He clears his throat and nods, defeated.

Me: Just so you know, my mother is listening in on us and that woman is afraid of anything. Trust me when I say she's not going to catch any sleep tonight, just the mention of the word ghost and her mind goes places.

He laughs, he knows this fact.

-NELLY PAGE.

Bhekifa said not to wait up

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it's past twelve am and he is not home yet. How do I sleep when I have no idea where my husband is? This is not what I signed up for when I made my wedding vows, late nights

waiting for a grown man to come home. The least he could do is call me and update me of his whereabouts, Bhekifa can be insensitive when he wants to.

I see the car headlights bursting through the window, he's here. I move to the door and open it, I want to hear his excuse. It's impossible that he was at his mother's house until this late at night. Miriam is old, her body gives up on her around 10pm and that drunkard brother of his is not someone he would hang out with till this late at night.

What would they possibly be talking about? I have heard things that come out of Sabelo's mouth, maybe a ten year old would hold a conversation with him. He is not the smartest person to ever walk the face of the earth.

Bhekifa is doing the walk of shame down the pave way, his eyes meet mine and he immediately drops them. This is a form of a man who has something to hide, my mind is entertaining the worst.

Me: Where have you been?

My voice cracks as he passes me and a whiff of a female scent hits my nose, don't cry Nelly. He will draw strength from your tears, he loves the weak you. I scold myself mentally. Bhekifa has gone to the bedroom without giving me a second look, I follow after him after closing the door.

Bhekifa: I told you not to wait up.

He says when I walk into our bedroom, he's stripping off his tie.

Me: How is your mother?

He looks at me confused for a second, the expression doesn't last on his face.

Bhekifa: She's fine, they are all fine.

Me: Were they sleeping when you left?

I know where I'm going with this.

Bhekifa: What's with the questions?

Me: I'm allowed to ask about my in-laws, right?

I notice a red lipstick stain on the collar of his white shirt, I have to take a closer look. He stops moving and frowns at me when he sees me zooming in on him.

Bhekifa: What is it?

Me: What's that on your shirt Bhekifa?

Bhekifa: Don't start Nelly please, I had a long day and I'm tired.

Me: Bhekifa, what is that thing on your shirt?

I am not letting this go until he tells me where he's been the whole night.

Bhekifa: Is this what I come home to after a long day at work? A nagging woman who keeps track of my whereabouts? Please give me a break.

You know he's guilty when he becomes defensive.

Me: Are you cheating on me, Bhekifa? Is there another woman?

Bhekifa: Gosh Nelly! Will you stop? Just stop it, okay? My cousin was at the house, you know how she is with her thick make up and all. She must have smudged my shirt when she hugged me.

I am defeated by this man's lies, his eyes follow me when I sit on the bed. I don't want to cry, but tears are here.

Bhekifa: Are you serious? You're crying?

Me: I can't live like this Bhekifa, you continue to break me and show no remorse at all. I am human too, I have a heart and you're trampling on it.

Bhekifa: Argh. Women are so dramatic, I told you that my cousin hugged me. Now it's up to you if you believe me or not.

Me: Well I don't, I don't believe you. You're nothing but a liar, I'm the naïve understanding wife who always pardons your mistakes and you tend to take advantage of that. What if I want out? What I want a-

He doesn't let me finish as he grabs my arms and pushes me down on the bed, his knee presses down on my stomach. There is anger in his eyes and possessiveness. It's a familiar look, I thought I would never see again.

Me: You're hurting me.

I try to keep my voice as low as I can, the last thing I want is my kids witnessing their father's rage.

Bhekifa: I want you to get that thought out of your head mamakhe, you're not going anywhere. You are mine Nelly and no one will ever have any claim on you. Till death do us part, remember dali, that's what we promised each other.

With these cold words, he kisses my cheek and finally lets me go.

Bhekifa: Now go to sleep, it's late. I'm going to take a shower.

My eyes follow his steps to the bathroom, could I be seeing things? Are my insecurities playing tricks with me? He could be right about his cousin.

-SABELO ZULU.

“Yes, yes, yes magriza.”

My mother clicks her tongue at my happiness, she woke up early today to prepare breakfast for her trophy son. He said he will pass by before going to work, it must be nice being a boss.

Me: The food smells nice mama, you still got it hey.

I say, reaching for a sausage on the plate. She slaps my hand and pushes the plate away.

Me: And then?

Mariam: That’s your brother’s plate.

Me: Where is mine?

She points at a plate with one sausage and probably a table spoon of scrambled eggs.

Me: Why does he get three pieces and I get one? This favouritism of yours magriza? No, I don’t like it man.

She takes a plate to cover Bhekifa's food.

Miriam: If I had favourites you and that lazy wife of yours would be living in a shack somewhere in Alex.

Me: Must you be like this mama? Your words cut so deep.

Mariam: I don't care, listen to me, Sabelo. I'm going to bath before Bhekifa arrives, no one must touch his food. Tell your wife as well, that's if she decides to wake up today. Do not touch your brother's plate.

That was an order, I am tempted to take one piece of sausage when she walks out of the kitchen. But then again, the old lady has spoken.

4

BHEKIFA ZULU.

My brother is the one to open the gate for me, he waves and smiles when I drive in. My mother called me for an emergency meeting, Nelly has no knowledge of it. We are not on speaking terms since last night's drama, sometimes I think she forgets how much I love her and focuses on non-factors that will only destroy our marriage. Her insecurity is not attractive at all, however I messed up last night and I will have to make it up to her.

Sabelo: "Ingagara, the man amongst men, the bread winner. Bhekifa Zulu, my brother.

I'm familiar with this smile on Sabelo's face, he is in a good mood.

Me: "So early in the morning Sabelo? What are you happy about?"

Sabelo: "I'm only celebrating my brother, we don't need an occasion for that."

Me: "How are you doing?"

He replies with a smile and leads me inside the house, we enter through the kitchen entrance. The aroma of my mother's cooking makes my heart dance, I am yet to meet a woman who cooks like her.

Me: "Where is mama?"

Sabelo: "In the dining room, we've been waiting for you."

My mother's face brightens up when I walk through the door, she greets me with a hug and a kiss on the cheek.

Mom: "My baby, look at you. You're so skinny, that woman is not feeding you." Her hatred for Nelly is not a secret, I have come to accept it, but I still see a need to defend the woman I love.

Me: "That woman has a name mama and she is my wife."

She waves me off with her hand, taking back her seat on the dining table.

Mom: "Hai suka, I hope you didn't spoil your appetite, I made breakfast."

Me: "You know me, I will never miss a chance to eat your food."

Sabelo walks out for a second and comes back with a bottle of beer.

Me: "I can't drink bafo, I have to go to work."

Sabelo: "Trust me, you will need a drink after you see what we have for you."

He says, pushing the now open bottle my way. What could he possibly tell me that will require me to drink?

Mom: "You're a good man Bhekifa, you deserve to know the truth about your wife."

Me: "What Truth?"

Sabelo slides a white envelop across the table, the serious expression on his face worries me.

Me: "Won't you let me finish eating first? I'll check it out once I'm done."

Sabelo: "This can't wait, open it."

I push the half eaten plate aside to accommodate my mother and brother. The envelope contains pictures of my wife with another man, they are out in restaurants. I'm not really certain of what this could mean, my gaze finds my mother's concerned face.

Me: "What is this?"

Mom: “Your wife is having an affair Bhekifa, look at those pictures. She has been meeting up with this guy for some time now.”

No, not my Nelly. That woman respects me, she worships the ground I walk on.

Me: “Where did you get these pictures?”

Her gaze finds Sabelo, my brother moves uncomfortably on the chair, he’s getting ready to explain.

Sabelo: “I didn’t want to believe it at first, my wife saw them two weeks ago. I wanted to slap her when she told me about it, thinking how dare she accuse my brother’s wife of a terrible thing. To prove her wrong, I decided to have someone look into that man. These are the results Bhekifa, your wife is having an affair.”

I hear Sabelo, I really do, but my heart is telling me something else. Nelly is so innocent and naïve, she would never look at another man. Doubt builds up inside me, looking at these pictures. My wife with another man while she preaches about me coming home late?

Me: “No, this cannot be true. Mama, I know my wife. She would never do this to me, Nelly would never hurt me like this.”

I get up in a fit of rage, part of me says go find Nelly and confront of her, another part says find this man and make him regret setting his eyes on what is mine.

Sabelo: “She did bafo, she has been going behind your back. You can confront her if you like.”

Mom: “You know we want the best for you my son and Nelly is not, she will destroy you.”

Me: “She is going to pay for this, they both will. Nelly has made a mockery out of me, this is a disgrace.”

I introduced Nelly to my parents as the woman I wanted to spend my life with and this is how she embarrasses me, she tarnishes my image. How will my mother and brother look at me now?

-NELLY PAGE.

Sabatha The Begetter is selling like hot cakes on a winter morning.

Me: “Wow Buhle, I didn’t think the book sells were this great. Come mid-year and we’ll be sold out.”

I tell my personal assistant, while going through the monthly figures of my book sells. Buhle leans in to have a closer look, she smiles as I hand her the file.

Buhle: "I'm not surprised, your first novel was a hit. This one is bound to leave a mark

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it's all over the news, radio, TV, social media. Sabatha is knocking Hlomu right off the park."

She says with so much excitement playing in her voice.

Me: "You know this is not a competition, right?"

Moving to take a sit which is something I never allow, Buhle gives me a faint smile and ignores my questioning eyes.

Buhle: "Did Shakespeare tell you this? Life is all about competition Nelly, we're all racing somewhere and desperate to be the first one to cross the finish line. In all areas of life, nothing comes easy and when something is presented to you on a silver platter you grab it and make sure no one steals it from you even if it belongs to someone else."

Me: "I don't understand your theory Buhle, you can't take something that belongs to some else. That is theft and I can't accept that."

Buhle is still young, she wouldn't understand how this life thing works. Her statement doesn't sit well with me, it reminds me of my husband and how he finds comfort in the arms of another woman when I am here. It pains me to know that there is a woman out there who is ready to destroy another woman's life. We should be looking out for each other, but all we do is snatch and snatch and snatch.

Buhle: "I can, life is not kind to anyone Nelly. The good girl attitude will not take you anywhere. Okay, let's say your husband is--"

Me: "Stop right there, my husband is off topic Buhle."

I cut in a little harshly, Buhle knows her limits, yet has a tendency of crossing them. I don't bring my personal life to work same as befriending my employees. That is one mistake I will never make.

Buhle: "I'm sorry, I wanted to make an example."

Her apology is not genuine, it lacks compassion. I'm taken aback as she sits back on the chair and folds her arms across her chest, I notice how she badly wants to roll her eyes at me. My position does not allow her the chance to do so.

Me: "I think it's time you went back to work, we're done here."

Buhle: "Yes ma'am."

I decide to ignore her little attitude as she walks out like this is her mother's company.

-CHERYL ZIKHALI.

I didn't rush to work just to find Pumla Sekhute cleaning Mr. Zulu's office, this woman thinks we're in competition. I can't stand her really, life was better when she was on leave.

Me: "Pumla baby, hoe gaan dit?"

She gives me her famous fake smile, it doesn't bother me like she wants it to.

Pumla: "Hi."

Ouch! I felt that sting.

Me: "Well since you were on leave and are not informed, this is my spot darling."

Pumla: "I've been cleaning this floor before you came to work for this company and-"

Me: "And now I'm cleaning it, we move with the times sis."

I have officially annoyed a grown woman, I accept the tongue click she gives me while pushing my cleaning equipment where I can access them easily.

Pumla: What is your story Cheryl?

Me: "Explain."

I say, paying her no attention. I won't be safe if Pumla finds out about this deep liking I have for the company CEO. 'You're aiming too high my child, you need to lower your standards and find yourself a man who will love you for you and not what you can give him in exchange for his money.' These are the words of my dear mother, she discreetly called me a prostitute. Lower my standards, she said. That is something I will never do, if I can't get myself a white husband. Why not a rich black man?

Pumla: "You seem to be obsessed with cleaning this office."

Me: "Not really sweetie, this is like church. You know how you have your favourite seat at church and every Sunday on your way there, you pray to God that aunt Dora and her bunch have not taken your space."

I'm causing confusion.

Pumla: "What do you mean?"

Me: "Don't worry, you'll get it after lunch."

Pumla: "You really are a piece of work, you know that?"

Me: "I'll take that as a yes, you can clean the first floor, there is no one there."

I just love it when women understand each other. I can't say the same for Pumla, she is frowning at me.

Me: "Tell you what, Saturday you can have this room all to yourself. Deal?"

Pumla rejects me with a tongue click and a deep sigh is her exit.

"You need to get that mouth of yours checked."

Mr. Zulu's voice startles me, he is here a bit early. I hoped that I would be halfway done before he got here. I turn and find him frowning down at me, hands hidden in the pockets of his trousers.

Mr. Zulu: "It will get you into trouble."

He finishes, raising an eyebrow. He wants to intimidate me with that expression, but I am not moved.

Me: "Where you eavesdropping?"

Mr. Zulu: "This is my office, so no I wasn't."

Yeah, sure he wasn't. He blinks at me before tightening his facial features, his eyes narrow as he intently fixes them on me. It's bad enough that I dream of this man, how do I maintain self-control when he looks at me like that? Let's not get it twisted, there is no love in his eyes, only judgement and what I would call disgust.

Me: “Okay if Mr. Zulu doesn’t mind, this cleaner would like to finish her work before the office is occupied. I don’t work well under pressure and with that look you’re giving me, I might just rush and miss a spot.”

A slow nod takes over his head and he chuckles coldly.

Mr. Zulu: “Remind me why you’re still working here?”

Me: “I’m good at what I do, although it doesn’t give me six figures at the end of the month.”

This time he laughs, it’s a real one. I take in how his eyes light up as his mouth stretches further, he is a looker, I’d give him that.

Mr. Zulu: “I will give you space then, you may continue madam cleaner.”

He leaves me with an insult and the sound of his soft laughter as he walks out of the office.

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SABELO ZULU.

I didn't think Bhekifa would actually believe us, my brother can be as naïve as his wife at times. She knows how to crawl under him and control him like a puppet, that's why we're now getting R3000 and not R7000. I will have the old Bhekifa back, the one who spoiled us rotten before he met that cursed wife of his. Mariam is comfortably lying on the couch she constantly complains about, wait till she dies, I will have this house all to myself.

Me: "Mama you deserve a trophy for that show you did there, you see Harriet Khoza has nothing on you."

My words make her happy, the smile on her face is enough for me to know that. A now victorious smile playing on her mouth, she sits up, making space for me to settle down.

Mariam: "Nelly will know that Bhekifa is my son, she has no control over him. I breastfed that boy."

She says, gripping her breast with a deep frown on her face.

Mariam: "I raised him to be the man he is today and he thinks he can take an educated woman and show off like you can't do better? Never, I will never allow it Sabelo."

This is shocking, this woman just laid down her thoughts.

Me: "Magriza, this is why I love you."

Mariam: "Suka, nawe you just had to be the useless son. You and Bhekifa are the same, look at the women you married. All Rose does is eat, sleep and finish my water bathing twice a day. I won't mention the number of times she flushes the toilet, water is expensive man Sabelo."

Me: "Hau mama, your son was lucky to find a beautiful woman like Rose. She makes me look good in public."

I clap back and frown at her laughing at my remark.

Mariam: "The woman is lazy, unemployed and hardly takes care of the children. What good is she to you?"

She wouldn't understand.

Mariam: "I don't like that woman for you son, but not as much as I hate Nelly. Argh, that skinny woman makes my insides turn. If only Bhekifa had listened to me and married Charity, she was perfect for him. A girl from the farm, humbled, she would have made the perfect housewife. Charity would have been easy to

manipulate, she is not educated after all and through her it was going to be easy to control Bhekifa.”

Me: “You’re like a leopard mama, the way you change your spots.”

Mariam: “You mean a chameleon?”

Me: “Same difference.”

Mariam: “You’re stupid my boy, very stupid. Why did you drop out of school?”

Me: “School was not for me, but I’m doing great. Life is good mama, with Bhekifa everything is smooth.”

My mother snorts while shaking her head in defeat.

Mariam: “Soon we are going to have Bhekifa fully under our control.”

I love the sound of that... my mother ladies and gentleman, stick with her and you will never go wrong in life.

-BHEKIFA ZULU.

My mind is not at work today, the pictures of Nelly and the man she is supposedly having an affair with are plastered on my office table. Rage bubbles inside me each time my eyes fall on

them. I want to confront her, God knows I do. The problem is that I don't have my facts straight, I find it hard to believe that this man frozen in these photographs is sleeping with my wife.

I take up the offer to call her as the urge pushes me, if this is true then she could be with him at this moment.

“Bhekifa?” Her voice portrays doubt, at least she still answers my calls at second ring. If she were with him, it wouldn't be so.

Me: “Where are you?”

I sound a bit possessive, but that's alright, I have every right to be. Nelly is my wife and belongs to me alone.

Nelly: “Work.”

That's all she offers, she is still upset with me.

Me: “What time will you be home Nelly?”

Nelly: “Same time as always.”

All her replies are cold and followed by a heavy silence, one that comes to play when we have problems in our marriage. Pride happens to play a major in our marital life, Nelly being the kind hearted person she is, usually offers apologies first while I'm still nursing my ego.

Me: “And what time is that?”

I snap, thinking of what my mother and Sabelo said. I doubt I will be getting over it anytime soon, I need to find out the truth.

Nelly: “You know what time I get home every day, it never changes Bhekifa.”

Me: “Good, it better not change. Don’t forget that you’re a married woman Nelly, characterlessness should not have a place in your life. Your job is to love me, satisfy me and take care of our children. You shouldn’t depend on the school to raise your kids for you, they are still young and need their mother. In fact, I think you should quit your job and be a full time mom.”

I have to keep the phone an inch away from my ear when her loud laugh resounds over the mobile phone.

Nelly: “I didn’t know they teach comedy at work, wow that was funny hubby.”

I take this as an insult.

Me: “If you only knew how serious I am, you wouldn’t be filling my ears with that stupid laugh of yours.”

Nelly: “Bhekifa, I am not going to be a house wife just to please you. I don’t care what you say to me, you will not bind me.”

Me: “You have balls now Nelly? Where do you get off talking to me like that?”

Her giggles make me feel like an idiot, she is lucky I’m nowhere close to her.

Nelly: “What is wrong with you? You never had a problem with me working, where is the sudden change coming from?”

Me: “Will you question my authority? I am the head of the house and when I say quit your job, you do it. No questions asked, respect me Nelly, I am your husband.”

Nelly: “Exactly, you’re my husband not my dictator. I am not going to quit my job because your ego screams for attention. I will not bow down to you Bhekifa, not in this lifetime.”

Me: “We’ll see about that.”

She breaths at my response, I hear her laughing softly a scornful laugh that brings anger knocking and I am tempted to let it out.

Nelly: “Yeah, don’t bet on it. Housewife my foot.”

With this insult, she drops the call on me.

-CHERYL ZIKHALI.

I clench my fist and grit my teeth at the available balance on my Capitec account... R0.16. I can't live like this forever, money doesn't love me. It comes but hardly stays, here I am with an overdrawn account. I lose my appetite at the sight of the brown bread and jam staring up at me from my lunch box. Annoyed and with no hope for the future, I close it and push it away.

"You know that's better than not having food?"

Pinky says, walking into the staff kitchen and sits down next to me. We take our lunch break around three, only because we knock off at four and that gives us time to cool off before rushing to wrestle with a crowd at the taxi rank. Funny how people fight to be the first to get in the taxi, I need to buy a bus tag. Taking two taxis is actually costing me a lot, half of my wages is spent on transport and the rest pays for school fees. This explains the available balance in my bank account.

Me: "Says the girl who has a full fish dancing on her plate."

She finds my reply amusing.

Pinky: "You speak funny, people don't understand idioms, you need to speak like a normal person. I would think there is a fish literally dancing on my plate."

Me: "Blame Zain, he was a weirdo that man."

Pinky: "Serves you right for chasing after the other race, a guy from ekasi would have been perfect for you."

Pinky states and I can't see it, I don't see it at all. Zain was perfect for me, no one will ever take his place.

Me: "Yeah right, I would have confused the guy with my obsession for ghosts and serial killer documentaries. He would've taken me to that church where they shout I receive throughout the sermon and have the pastor pray the demons out of me."

Pinky: "You're crazy Chez, maybe you do need a pastor to lay hands on you."

I want to laugh at her statement, but my spirit is down and so it denies me access to be a little joyful.

Me: "Not a pastor Pinky, but the dashing Mr. Zulu. Just one touch from him and luck will smile down at me. Did you see my bank balance? It's screaming babe, literally screaming for attention. I need to feed it and how else, but through a Zulu man whose account is overflowing with Mandela notes."

I know, I know. I sound like a gold digger, but I swear I am not. Every woman dreams of a good life. I could strip for a living and not depend on any men, but you need rhythm for that and let's

just say my father's side of the family belongs back stage where no one can see them dancing.

Pinky: "Okay, I have no clue what you said. I'm just going to eat my dancing fish and shut up, this Mr. Zulu topic is very sensitive."

She says, biting through her golden fried fish. The cat is out of the bag, Pinky is aware of my silly crush. She was bound to find out anyway, I can't keep my big mouth shut.

-NELLY PAGE.

"Your husband is..."

Buhle is denied a chance to finish her announcement when Bhekifa pushes past her into my office, a smile playing on his face and hands stashed in his pockets, I know that posture, he is not a happy man.

Bhekifa: "I knocked off early today and thought I should fetch my wife, I miss you dali."

With these words I meet him halfway, he kisses me in front of my PA which is something I am against. My personal life should

not be exposed to the staff, especially the ones that work under me. Bhekifa turns back to Buhle who for some reason is still standing at the door and dismisses her with these words...

Bhekifa: "Siyabonga sisi."

My eyes must be deceiving me, the girl rolls her eyes. She slams the door a tad bit hard, not enough though to give away the irritation scratching her skin.

Like someone presses the attack button, Bhekifa snatches my neck that I gasp in shock. He pushes me back until my legs hit the big table I use as a work station, fire fills his eyes. It's not a passionate type of fire, he is possessive right now and angry as hell. His hand tightening on my neck, Bhekifa pushes me until I'm lying flat on my back on the table. My hands circle around his wrist as I try to push him off of me.

Me: "Don't do this, not here."

My plea passes through his ears, but he doesn't heed my cry.

Bhekifa: "Ahhh! This is the naïve Nelly I know, I was confused by the lioness I spoke to over the phone. I told you this writing of yours will one day drive you crazy, you think you can take one of your crazy characters and practise their shit on me."

He spits the words out, squeezing his hand tighter around my neck and depriving me of air.

Me: “What are you on about Bhekifa? I didn’t do anything wrong, you said I should quit my job and I... I can’t do that.”

Bhekifa: “You can’t or you won’t?”

Me: “Bhekifa!”

Bhekifa: “You refuse to obey me, Nelly because you enjoy showcasing yourself to men out there like a prostitute. You have no dignity or self-respect, you shameless woman.”

His words cut deeper than a knife through a black forest cake, I would never look at another man. Bhekifa has always been the only one for me.

Bhekifa: “You said you won’t bow down to me, didn’t you?”

His hand grips my hair tightly, I muffle a scream as he pushes me down before him. His other hand circles the back of my neck and he presses me towards the floor until my face touches his feet.

Bhekifa: “Now say it again mamakhe, say you will not bow down to me.”

He grunts with an icy tone, filled with hate and condemnation. I squirm under his touch desperate to be set free.

Me: "Bhekifa stop, you're hurting me."

My voice is commanding, it's feminine nonetheless and this husband of mine regards women as weaklings. It could be that he only regards me as a weakling.

Bhekifa: "Say it Nelly, say I am the boss of you. Say it, now."

A hushed shout jumps out of his mouth, through gritted teeth.

Me: "No, no."

It's a stifled cry. If I die today, I die. I will not be controlled by this man. My neck throbs with pain when he releases it, his hand is soon replaced by a foot on my neck. With force he pushes me down and I can only fight with the little strength I have, it doesn't do much because my husband has me kissing his foot. Bow down to me Nelly' he always says and today he has demoted me from a wife to a servant.

NELLY PAGE.

A piercing silence took over during the ride home, Bhekifa insisted that I leave my car and travel with him. After what he did in the office, I didn't have the strength to argue with him.

Home is not far from work, it takes about fifteen minutes to travel and during the soundless ride my head is entertaining plans of leaving this man who keeps stealing glances at me. He is a bit calm, I can sense it. The heaviness in his demeanour is gone, he's probably back to the 'sweet and kind' Bhekifa the world is accustomed to.

Bhekifa: "Should we get something to eat? The kids will love pizza."

What kid wouldn't? I don't provide an answer and don't plan on giving one anytime soon.

Bhekifa: "Okay, I'll drive past the mall."

He says and I couldn't care less what he does, I am too upset to talk and entertain a grown man's mood swings. Bhekifa notices that I'm detached, it's enough to get him to shut his mouth.

There's a mall a few blocks away from our house, it's not close enough for me to walk and so I will have to wait for him.

Bhekifa: "Are you coming dali?"

That 'dali' right there is guilt eating him up, he won't stop asking and so I shake my head without glancing at him. Like all dramatic men, Bhekifa sighs before exiting the car. I have a good mind to request an Uber and have it take me home, fifteen minutes is not an adequate amount of time for me to pack my kids and leave. Fifteen minutes because that's how long it takes the staff at Romans Pizza to prepare the food, Bhekifa would probably get home before me.

I need to change this stupid ring tone. 'Writings on the wall by Sam Smith. I heard my eleven year old son singing to it and thought it was too deep a song for a boy his age. I had to download it and once I heard the flamboyant white man's voice pierce through my phone's speaker, goose bumps covered my skin. The song reminded me of Bhekifa and how our love was almost compared to this beautiful song, this was before he became this monster he is now.

Believe it or not, we were once happy. I was treated like a queen by that man, he taught me how to love, showed me a fairy tale kind of love that had me smiling to myself when given

a chance. The devil is real and I have seen him in the form of my husband, I don't know how far he's willing to prove his existence in my life. But I will not stay around to find out because what I have seen has terrified the living daylights out of me.

Buhle is calling... Argh, I am not her friend and she knows not to call me after office hours. If it's about work, then tomorrow is another day.

-SABELO ZULU.

I am pretty certain that a war has broken out in my brother's house, Nelly will be going to bed a bruised woman this night. I love the thought of that, this way she will leave Bhekifa and that means more for us. My mother has Rose cooking supper today, I'm not okay with this abuse. My wife can't cook to save a nation, people will die of food poisoning in this house.

Stepping into the kitchen I find my mother standing beside my wife with a wooden spoon in her hand as if Rose were a child that needs to be thrashed in order for them to learn. Rose steals a glance at me, I catch her red eyes for a second and I am not okay with this.

Me: “No magriza, no, not my wife.”

She doesn't care, the tongue click is her response.

Me: “Mama you know Rose can't cook, you know the saying you can't teach an old dog new tricks? It's too late for her mama, leave her to do what she does best and that is to look beautiful and give me more babies.”

Rose laughs at my statement, her tears have long been forgotten.

Mariam: “What will you feed those kids Sabelo? You don't have a job, none of you do. All you know is saying mama, mama, mama the whole day.”

Me: “Is that a trick question mama?”

Mariam: “Enough Sabelo, I've had enough of your stupidity. If this woman falls pregnant again you will leave my house.”

Me: “But you know it's bound to happen, we're a married couple and there is no way I'm using protection.”

Rose turns to me with a frown this time, her eyes scolding me. I have chosen the wrong words again, didn't I?

Rose: “That's not something you would tell your mother Sabelo.”

Me: “Mabhebeza, askies ntwana.”

Mariam: "How did I give birth to a son like you? I am so unlucky."

My mother's complaint has no effect on me, she loves me, I should only worry the day she stops. Mariam commands that I attend to the knock at the door, this is her house and so I do as I'm told.

Me: "Malaika?"

He shouldn't be here, I told him never to come to my house. Malaika is the only friend of mine that my mother despises, I think it has everything to do with the fact that he's a traditional healer. At the age of twenty four the man has been tied down by his ancestors, tied down because his relationships do not last. Every girl he finds either cheats on him or he dumps them without any reason. He says his ancestors are protecting him from heart break and they will bring him the right one when the time is right.

Malaika: "I've been calling you. Why aren't you taking my calls?"

I push with him outside and shut the door before Mariam the dragon spots him.

Me: "I told you

I'll call you ntwana. You know how magriza can be, she's always watching me."

Malaika: "I don't care, this is about that girl you hired to seduce your brother. She didn't use the muti properly, she was at my house today and man her face looks horrible."

Malaika explains urgently, I should have known how stupid that girl is.

Me: "What happened now?"

Malaika: "Like I said, she didn't follow proper instructions. Either that or someone is using something stronger on your brother."

Now that I think about it...

Me: "Shit, I think magriza is bewitching her son as well."

Malaika: "Your family is messed up Sabelo, I'm gone. Please tell that girl to stay away from me, I can't help her with anything at this point. I already went against my ancestors by agreeing to help you destroy your brother's marriage."

He says, shaking his head. With nothing further said, Malaika walks away, leaving me with nothing but questions. Should I confront my mother?

-NELLY PAGE.

“Mom, mom.”

My eight year old baby girl Ayanda runs to me with the biggest smile on her face, she is always a happy chappy. She constantly makes sure to open the door for me when I come home from work.

Me: “Ahh, you’re heavier than yesterday. What is Lerato feeding you?”

She laughs, wrapping her small arms around my neck. The hug is so refreshing that it has me smiling through my pain.”

Lerato greets me with a smile from the living room, she has been of great help and does a good job with taking care of the kids while we’re at work. I can feel Bhekifa standing behind me, at this moment I can’t stand the smell of pizza. I think I’ll retire early for bed.

Bhekifa: “What about daddy huh? Don’t I get a hug from my angel?”

Bhekifa’s questions shock me, since when does he regard Ayanda in this manner? For years this man has been singing how Ayanda is not his because she looks less like him. These

are speculations planted in his head by his mother and good for nothing brother. My brother Thokozane is a sangoma and believes that Ayanda has a spiritual gift, he saw it from the time she was a baby hence named her Mboni. A name given to her by her ancestors, Bhekifa hates the name and refuses to acknowledge her by it. So we stick to Ayanda the name he chose, it puzzles me how he lets his family poison his mind against his own daughter.

The husband is standing too close, so I place a giggling Ayanda down and walk to meet Lerato in the sitting room.

Me: "Where are the boys?"

Lerato: "In their rooms doing homework, they had sandwiches. I doubt they will stomach anything."

Me: "Not those boys, they will eat even if there is no space left in their stomachs. I am yet to meet kids who love food like those two."

She smiles and nods her head.

Lerato: "Ayanda didn't want to eat, she said she'll wait for her parents."

Me: "Thank you Lerato, don't come in tomorrow. I'll let you know when I need you."

She nods before gathering her belongings, she regards Bhekifa with a brief greeting on her way out.

oooooooo

The boys come down for supper, like I said they eat more than anyone. I hardly touch my food and Bhekifa is... well... let's just say he could be nominated 'Best father in the world' and walk home with the award. The kids are at their happiest right now, Ayanda has made herself comfortable on her father's lap and the boys are surrounding him like he's a Christmas present from the north-pole. I don't want to cry upon seeing this breath taking moment nor do I want to change my mind.

After gathering the plates to the kitchen, I opt for a quick shower. It's a good thing the kids are keeping Bhekifa occupied, I wouldn't want him to join me.

With the husband bathing, I have enough time to pack the kid's bags. They are sleeping, so that saves me from answering a million questions. After making sure that Bhekifa is still in the bathroom, I rush to the car to put the bags and make it back in time to jump in bed. I'll sort my clothes out tomorrow during my lunch break.

The bed moves as he jumps in, I know it's him, his scent gives him away. He smells of his favourite foam bath, floral bouquet. Not a scent I would go for, but I'm used to it now, complaining would be of no use.

"Are you sleeping?"

I make sure to snore, he always teases me about my snoring and says the neighbours probably have a hard time sleeping with the noise I make.

Bhekifa: "I'm sorry Nelly, I don't know what comes over me. I don't want to hurt you, I love you. I really don't know what to do with this guilt that's suffocating me. I wish we can be the way we were, I miss that. I miss you Nelly."

His words throw me into a pool of emotions, I hold back my tears not wanting him to hear me cry.

I feel him shift closer until his body is touching mine, the breath from his nostrils brushes down my neck before he presses his cold lips on it. I want to squirm as his beard tickles my neck. Bhekifa's arms wrap around me and he stops moving, this is how he plans on sleeping tonight. I should just shrug him off of me and sleep in the guest room, anger still has me by the throat like Bhekifa did back at the office. I don't think I will be forgiving him anytime soon.

NELLY PAGE.

“How about you skip work today? We can go for a picnic, I’ll cancel all my meetings.”

Bhekifa says, standing behind me and circling his arms around my waist. His lips find my neck, he stops with just one kiss. I guess he remembers that I am not a fan. I squirm and slip out of his arms, I feel his eyes on me while I dress for work. I won’t be going in today, my mother is my first stop after taking the kids to school. I have to let her know that we’re moving in with her, I wouldn’t want to crowd her space for too long, so I plan on finding an apartment somewhere in the west.

Bhekifa: “Mkami, ngiyak’cela. I can’t stand it when you’re not talking to me.”

Bhekifa is a good smooth talker, he would talk Julius Malema into handing over the EFF party to him. His eyes are the most dangerous, if I take one glimpse into them while he is vulnerable. I will surely end up in bed with him and forgetting the monster he is.

Me: "I will have to pass. I have work, clients are waiting for me."

I tell him as I throw my phone and car keys in my hand bag, mind you, I'm doing everything I can to avoid his eyes.

Bhekifa: "You can call in sick dali, you work too hard anyway. I want us to fix our marriage, please Nelly."

Me: "I can't, I'm sorry."

I'm not sorry at all, I want to be as far away from him as I can. He's an angel at this moment, but the wolf still lurks about.

Bhekifa: "Dammit Nelly, I'm trying here. Won't you meet me halfway?"

What did I say about the wolf lurking about? My eyes find his, he is no longer vulnerable, but angry.

Me: "You see this?"

I can snap too.

Me: "This is why I don't want to meet you halfway Bhekifa, I don't know you anymore. I never know when you'll strike and turn into that monster I saw last night."

Bhekifa: "I am not a monster, I'm your husband and I love you."

Me: "No, love does hurt. At least not like this-"

Darn his phone, I would think it is jealous of us when we engage in a conversation. He reaches for it without giving it a second thought, this is where I have been placed in my husband's life. Second best, no matter how far I run and cross the finish line first, I will never outrun whoever the third person is, in our relationship.

Bhekifa: "What is it?"

Turning his back from me, he walks to the bathroom, sounding annoyed with each word that rolls out of his tongue. I'm guessing his mother is the third person at this point, curiosity forces me to eavesdrop on the conversation.

Bhekifa: "What do you want me to do then? I have more pressing issues to attend to."

That is one pissed man in there.

Bhekifa: "Leave my son out of this, I will tell her about him when the time is right."

He half shouts, half whispers. Which son is he talking about? My boys better not be in danger.

Bhekifa: "I said leave Sandile out of this, my son doesn't lack anything. I told you that I will take care of him, didn't I?"

What in the Zululand is going on? My mind works on autopilot, I push the bathroom door open. Startled by my presence,

Bhekifa drops his hand. He looks like a little kid who has been caught with his hand in a cookie jar.

-SABELO ZULU.

“Sabelo wake up.”

That’s my wife’s voice, annoying me so early in the morning. She knows I hate being woken up.

Me: “Rose not now, I’m having a nice dream.”

Rose: “What are you dreaming about Sabelo? It better not be other women.”

She yells, pulling the covers off of me, women can be a pain in the neck. Her little tantrum is enough to sit me up, she frowns at me while folding her arms across her chest.

Me: “I’m up sthandwa sam’ talk to me.”

Rose: “There’s an ugly woman looking for you outside.”

She delivers, giving me a suspicious look.

Me: “What? Not me ma bhebeza, I don’t even talk to ugly woman, I swear.”

Rose: "So you only talk to beautiful women Sabelo?"

Okay, this is an interrogation. I need to think of an escape, where is Mariam when you need her?

Me: "Rose my darling, God will punish you. No one is ugly in this world, don't let him hear you say that other people are ugly."

My stupidity has her rolling her eyes.

Me: "Let me see who this ugly woman is before my beautiful wife strangles me to death."

I leave a peck on her cheek and run outside... my enemies are after me. This is the proof I need, this woman standing outside my mother's gate.

Me: "What are you doing here Buhle?"

Damn, Malaika was right, she looks terrible. Rose is right to confuse those boils on her face for ugliness, the head scarf is not doing much in hiding the disgusting bubbles on her face.

Buhle: "You have to help me Sabelo please, Bhekifa has turned his back on me."

I'm terrified of women that cry, I never know what to do next. Walk away or slap them so they stop crying, this gender has tears to waste.

Me: "Your problem is that you don't listen, you were given strict instructions ntombazane, but my brother's money got in your head that you forgot. I expected my sister in-law out of that house before your brat was born."

Buhle: "I know Sabelo and it's not too late

I can still fix this. I will have Bhekifa dancing to my tune soon, all I need is your help. I can't let him see me like this, he wants nothing to do with me."

Pathetic woman, I push the gate closed when she tries to open it. Rose is probably peeking through the window and will give me a mouthful when I get back.

Me: "I'm a married man woman, you can't be pushing my gate like you're my second wife."

What is it with women and clicking their tongue?

Me: "I will see what I can do, now go and don't ever come back here. I will call you when I need you."

Buhle: "Promise?"

Me: “Hey, this is not a drama. Promises don’t work in the real world, hamba Buhle, you’re crowding us. My wife and I want to have breakfast in peace.”

Buhle: “You’re an idiot Sabelo, you better call me or I will reveal everything to your brother.”

You see this is what I don’t like, threats put me in an uncomfortable position, I end up doing things that will bring families together on a Saturday at the cemetery. I let her walk with this threat, let her feel powerful for now. She won’t see me coming when I strike.

-CHERYL ZIKHALI.

I think of missing work today, but my mother will pester me the whole day. That woman talks even when it’s not necessary, I am in no mood to have her up my face. I find her in the kitchen after getting ready for another depressing day, cleaning toilets.

“It’s 5am, why are you preparing porridge so early? The kids won’t be awake till seven thirty.”

I tell my mother who closes the pot as I enter the kitchen, she turns and meets the annoying smile that always seems to pull

at my lips. The old woman doesn't return it, I should address this one day or stop smiling completely.

Mom: "Sia will be up soon, she has a cold. She was coughing the whole night. I'm surprised you didn't hear her, I had to wake up around 2am to prepare a glass of activated charcoal."

Me: "I was gone mama, why didn't you wake me up? I would've done it."

She works too hard for kids that are not her own, I wish I could do so much for her.

Mom: "I don't mind you know that. Go to work, I'll take care of her."

Me: "Thank you, please kiss her and Earth for me."

I laugh at the way she shakes her head, my mother is against the names me and Zain chose for our kids.

Mom: "You mean Makhosonke?"

There we go, the heavy name. I'm a victim of it as well, worse... her and her mother gave me a guy name claiming it's unisex. I'm yet to meet a female with this name...

"San'bonani ek'seni." (Good morning.)

Jabu pulls me back from my wandering mind, he comes around a lot lately.

Mom: "Jabu, my son."

Why is she smiling at him and calling him her son?

Me: "Just so you know mama, the brother you and your husband gave me is enough to annoy me. I don't need another one, especially one who goes by the name of Jabu."

Mom: "My son' can mean a whole lot of things, like son in-law."

I see what she's hinting at, Jabu is blushing or whatever it is men do.

Me: "Cut, cut, cut. I'd rather be married to a ghost, this is abomination. Jabu and me? Jesus come down and fix this."

My mother's thoughts definitely need spring cleaning. Jik, Handy Andy and Jeyes Fluid, that should be enough to leave her brain sparkling clean. Maybe add Holy water just so those thoughts don't crawl back into her brain.

Jabu: "Ouch Cheryl."

And then this one? He knows pretty well I will never regard him in that manner, come hell or high waters. Jabu is far from the man I want to see first thing I wake up in the morning, I cringe at the thought.

Me: "Yes Jabu, ouch. I don't see you, I don't see you at all my brother. It's dark Jabs and you know what happens when you

walk in the dark? You fall and if you're unlucky you'll fall into a hole. It doesn't matter who is holding your hand."

Jabu: "How about you give me a chance and I'll show you, I'm not as bad as you think."

I rebuke you Satan, back to sender.

Me: "How about, never, nooit nie, soze, andizi, le ka mohle?"

Jabu should not be entertaining these thoughts, I was married to his best friend for heaven's sake.

Mom: "I give up on you Nkosi, you will never come right if you continue with this path."

Yeah, you heard right, she spilled the name out loud. A mother for sale, anyone?

Jabu: "Like it or not I'm here to stay, your kids call me uncle anyway."

Me: "Yes uncle Jabu, not uncle bae. You're in the distance brother zone and malum' Jabu, I don't see you moving from that seat."

Defeated, my mother exits the kitchen with a long exhalation.

Jabu: "You're a difficult woman Cheryl."

I give him a smile a sister would give her brother and he's familiar with it.

Me: "I'm glad we understand each other brother Jabu."

My new sibling follows me outside, the free ride will do me good. I need a break from the crowded taxi rank. Yesterday I had an altercation with some guy in a taxi who wouldn't stop complaining about his fifty cents. It's days like those I wish I hadn't sold Zain's car.

NELLY PAGE.

As sadness comes you must love yourself as a good friend, treat yourself as a person you love, for then you will make it and the tough road would have been worth travelling with bare soles.

Lies, lies, lies. For years I dwelt on this mantra, lived it, ate it and hell I slept with it. Today it is darn well laughing on my face as I watch my husband sobbing on his knees. Don't get it twisted, he is not crying because he's hurt. Men only cry when they are wrong and want women to forgive them and if I was as naïve as I was when I first met him, I would take him in my arms and tell him that "It's okay, you're a man and men tend to stumble and fall in between the legs of other women."

You heard me right, this man I have loved my whole life has confessed to having an affair with another women for three years and if that's not bad, they created a human together. A whole human with legs and hands and ohh! It talks. He followed me when I walked out of the bathroom, threatening to leave him and trapped me in his arms, falling to his knees was the only option he had left.

Me: "To what extent are you willing to break me, Bhekifa? I have reached my breaking point, yet you continue to push me to the limit. Has your love turned into so much hate?"

This is where ninety nine percent of our arguments take place. Our sacred room, where we mostly loved than hated each other.

Bhekifa: "Forgive me, mkami."

Typical man messes up and asks for forgiveness. Where have we gone wrong as women to go through such? A pastor once said a woman is equivalent to the Holy Spirit, quiet, compassionate and forgiving.

Could it be true?

Me: "Forgive you again Bhekifa? Again?"

That's right, I'm yelling. He taught me how to yell, scream and throw things at him.

Me: "Tell me, where do I dig this forgiveness you ask for?"

I can't stop shouting at him, my heart is broken. Yes my bags are packed and I'm ready to leave this man, however I am human. I have a heart too and dammit I love him. I hate it, but he lives in my heart.

Me: “Why are you so evil? Who are you? What have you done to my husband? You’re useless Mageba, you have failed as a husband, a father and a son in-law. You ought to be ashamed of yourself.”

Another norm I am accustomed to, pissing him off. It’s too late to duck, his hand smashes on my cheek and because I’m not big boned, the slap throws me across the room.

Bhekifa: “You will not talk to me like that Nelly, I am your husband. Respect me dammit.”

Oh yes, the so called husband loves growling like an animal. It gives him power.

Bhekifa: “It’s not fair that you get to talk to me like that.”

Men and raising eyebrows, someone tell them it’s not a sign of power. It only depicts the devil’s rule over them, their sick natural animalistic behaviour that is meant to scare us.

Me: “What is not fair is me thinking that you will ever change.”

He doesn’t bother helping me up from the floor, I manage all by myself, the love between us is fading or in his case has faded.

Me: “Dammit Bhekifa, I loved you. I gave you my all and sold myself to you. Gosh!!! I have been an idiot, I was sixteen, bloody sixteen when I fell pregnant with you and you promised me a good life. You have wasted my life, my time. The only

good thing that has come out of this godforsaken marriage are my children.”

After the hard slap he gave me, I shouldn't be shouting at him like this, but this is me. Nelly Page Zulu, my hobby is to yell at my husband. He gave me this hobby and I have held on to it for as long as I can remember.

Bhekifa: “They are my children too Nelly.”

This man should not be shouting at me, not after cheating on me and producing a bastard just to spite me. This is the only conclusion I have come up with, then again women to him are baby making machines. Look at me, I gave him four of them. Put my life and career on hold just to cater to his needs.

Me: “You see, this is your problem. You're arrogant, you hurt me time and time and can't even bring yourself to apologise. I hate you Bhekifa, I hate you.”

I'm so angry that I slap him across the face a mistake that shouldn't have happened.

So it begins, the wrestling. Bhekifa pushes me against the wall, I know what's coming next. Punch after punch and if he wants to feel more power he will throw in a kick. My eyes fall on the bible on the nightstand, it's too late to ask God to forgive me in

advance as the Holy book flies across the room. I know it's wrong, but I wish it could have at least hit his big head.

My mother always taught me to respect a man. 'Indoda ayibekwa isandla Nelly.' (You don't hit a man.) Well this one, I will fight him for as long as I can. Today is not like all the other days, today I am tired, broken and fed up of Bhekifa Zulu. I knew he had a wandering eye, but to actually have a baby with another woman. I can't forgive him for this.

Something flashes in his eyes, I don't know what it is, but it forces him back to humanity. Regret and shame take over his face, he carries his hands on his head and tears instantly roll down his cheeks.

Bhekifa: "Ngiyaxolisa dali, I'm sorry."

He says, helping me up from the floor. I let him and allow him to set me on the bed.

Me: "Get out of my sight."

He gasps in shock, as if my words are something he never expected to hear.

Bhekifa: "Mamakhe."

Me: "I said get out Bhekifa, go."

The shout stops him from touching me

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he takes a step back, wipes his tears and rushes out of the bedroom.

-CHERYL ZIKHALI

Mr. Zulu hardly enters the staff kitchen, fancy seeing him here. I should look away right about now... Darn it, my eyes are undisciplined. He's coming over, I hope my big mouth doesn't betray me and I end up spewing things I shouldn't. Finally I give myself a lecture and send my eyes to the lunch box on the table. He's here, I'm staring right at his big feet. I will not be raising my eyes until he says something, it could be that he's here for the tea lady.

Mr. Zulu: "Can I join you?"

Smack me back to my mother's house. What the??? Instantly I look up at him and my jaw drops, breathe woman breathe.

Mr. Zulu: "Miss Cheryl?"

Breathe dammit!

Me: "If you're up for a long moment of silence, then don't let me stop you."

Ahh! There we go, he doesn't care about the warning because he sits himself down.

Mr. Zulu: "I'm not actually... up for it I mean. I have had enough of those to make me lose my mind."

Yes, but why are you here? He brought no lunch with him, the ring on his finger catches my attention. There is a little sting in my heart as I am reminded that he is a married man, one I will never have. Zain must be turning in his grave, to see what has become of his wife.

Me: "Trouble in paradise?"

I don't know why I asked him this, we'll just blame it on the fact that I like things. Mr. Zulu is puzzled by the question, he frowns as he brushes his beard.

Me: "I crossed the line, didn't I?"

Stupid question, of course you did.

Mr. Zulu: "I see you're married too. Who is the lucky guy?"

I guess it's his turn to pry, the ring on my finger keeps unwanted species away, like that other gender.

Me: "My husband is no more."

Mr. Zulu: "I'm sorry."

The moment suddenly becomes awkward, I have so much to say to this beautiful black man. His phone though gets in the way, he frowns at the screen and answers immediately.

Mr. Zulu: "Yes."

I watch his expression change from confusion to anger within a space of five seconds.

Mr. Zulu: "Shit! Thank you for briefing me."

He gets up and rushes out of the kitchen without excusing himself.

-NELLY PAGE.

Bhekifa has been the son in-law of this family for over twelve years, my parents are very fond of him. They are oblivious of the things he has done to me, I don't know why I didn't tell my mother. Maybe I was protecting him or my kids, I'm not sure. Today is different though, my mother has heard everything that man has done to me. I expect her to say something, but the woman is seated on the couch speechless. I wish I knew what she's thinking, I need to know if she's on my side.

Me: "I can find a lodge in the meantime, I don't want to crowd you with my problems ma."

I say this, but it's not what I want. I need to be with my mother, I want to feel safe and where else but here with her.

Mom: "Don't be ridiculous, you're home. I just... I don't see why Bhekifa would do something like this."

Is she kidding me? He hit me, the bruises on my face are enough proof.

Me: "Bhekifa is not as innocent as you think ma."

Mom: "I here you Nelly, but there is always two sides to a story."

Me: "And you think mine is not legit?"

Mom: "I didn't say that, all I'm saying is that no man would suddenly abuse his wife. There has to be a reason why--"

That's it, it was a mistake coming here. I saw it in her eyes when I narrated the story, she didn't believe me. My mother's ignorance sets me up on my feet.

Mom: "Where are you going?"

That is a rhetorical question, after what she said she should have a good idea where my feet are leading me.

Me: "Taking my kids and getting out of here."

Mom: "Don't leave Nelly, must you be so stubborn?"

The tone of her voice condemns me, of all people my mother is the one to judge me.

Me: "Stubborn ma? I'm stubborn? Bhekifa is what I say he is and he cheated on me. My husband cheated on me and had a child with that woman."

The thought of it makes me so angry, I could kill Bhekifa.

Mom: "I'm sorry baby."

With this apology, she takes my hands into hers. I hate that I'm crying for him.

Me: "Why are you taking his side? You're supposed to be on my side ma, I'm your baby not him. He hurt me, that man was meant to protect me."

My mother pulls me into her arms and I lean into her as I wrap my arms around her.

Mom: "I know, it's okay. We're going to fix this baby, we're going to fix this."

It has to be okay.

-SABELO ZULU.

“Yahambi ‘nja, yahambi ‘nja. Yes, yes, yes, yahambi ‘nja.” (The bastard has left.)

Nelly’s departure definitely calls for a celebration.

“Yey wena Sabelo, turn that music down.”

The party pooper is home, I dance my way to my mother and she pushes me back when I give her the biggest hug ever.

Mariam: “What the hell is your problem?”

She shouts, turning off the radio.

Me: “I hambile inja mama, I just got a call from my friend saying Nelly packed her bags plus her little brats and left my brother’s house.” (The bastard is gone.)

Boy, how I love a good ending. Mariam smiles upon hearing the news, our plan worked.

Me: “We have officially driven Nelly and Bhekifa apart.”

Mom: “Nelly, Nelly, Nelly. Look who is getting the last laugh now? I am Mariam Zulu, angiyona into yokudlala.” (I’m not a play toy.)

She stands with pride and victory, it has been a long time coming.

Me: “Now we just have to make sure that he doesn’t get back with her, that will be like taking ten steps back.”

Mom: “Don’t worry son, it will be easier to poison him against her now. All we needed was to build a bridge between them and now that it’s done, there will be no turning back. I am going to drive those two so far apart they will forget they ever shared a bed.”

Mariam says, her eyes filling with hatred. Hey! This woman is evil, I thought I was bad, but Mariam Zulu sits on the throne.

NELLY PAGE.

I can recognise the sound of Bhekifa's car and I am certain that it's him who just pulled up outside. I knew he would follow me, I didn't think it would be this soon. My mother rushes into the kitchen with an alarming expression, I drop the dish cloth to give her my attention.

Mom: "He's here."

She says softly, I rush to the living room to peek outside the window and there he is, getting out of the car. He looks decent, like a son in-law and I mean body structure and facial expression.

Mom: "What are you going to do? Should we let him in?"

Me: "I don't want to see him ma, please don't."

She shakes her head in disapproval upon hearing the knock at the door, I can see that she wants to let him in.

Mom: "Let's hear what he has to say, your father would do the same Nelly. He is the son in law of this house, we can't let him stand outside."

Me: “Then tell him to come back when baba gets home from work, I can’t face Bhekifa ma, not now please.”

The head shake again, I give up, seeing that she does not want to listen to me. I let my feet lead me back to the kitchen, I don’t want to talk to Bhekifa.

“Sawubona ma.” (Greetings.)

I hear him say, the kitchen is so close to the living room that I don’t have a hard time hearing every word.

Mom: “How are you?”

At least she doesn’t sound friendly with him.

Bhekifa: “I’m fine ma, ingabe uma uyaphila?” (How are you?)

The respect in his tone is there, it would have my mother thinking I lied about the man.

Mom: “Yebo mkhwenyane, come in please.” (Yes son in-law.)

That ‘please’ gets to me, there is a long moment of silence. They must be caught in awkwardness.

Mom: “Can I get you anything?”

Poison would be great.

Bhekifa: "I'm fine ma, is Nelly here? I would like to see her please."

Over my dead body, I repeat, Bhekifa is pulling out all guns. He is at his kindest and most vulnerable. I hear my mother clear her throat. I can only hope that she is not going to give me away.

Mom: "Nelly is in no space to see you, Mkhwenyane." (Son in-law.)

Bhekifa: "Please, I need to talk to her."

Mom: "After what you did to her, you shouldn't be here. This is not how things are done ndodana." (Son.)

Tell him ma.

Bhekifa: "It's nothing serious ma, it's normal for couples to fight. My wife and I had a disagreement, we said things to each other we shouldn't have and that led to both of us taking the violent route."

Why is that man lying? I badly want to run in there and call him a liar, if only my father was here, he would have chased him with a machete.

Mom: "That's not what she told me."

Bhekifa: "Whatever she told you is her side of the story. I'm her husband, I will never do anything to hurt her. You know me ma,

did I ever give you a reason to doubt me? Did Nelly ever come to you saying I lay a hand on her?"

Someone give that man a bells, wow. Bhekifa knows how to play this game, he almost reminds me of someone or a creature... Oh yes... the devil.

Mom: "No, Nelly has never complained. Still, that can't justify you beating your wife up as if she means nothing to you."

Bhekifa: "I hear you and I'm sorry. Please convince her for me, let me take my wife and kids back home."

When pigs could fly, I am not stepping foot in that house.

Mom: "Go home Bhekifa, your wife came back to her father's house and you know you can't just claim her back. We have to call a meeting with the uncles, Nelly refuses to go home with you and I agree with her after seeing the damage you did on her face."

Can we love on this woman? I have never been more proud to call her my mother.

Bhekifa: "You're taking sides ma, don't you think that's unfair?"

He snorts, Bhekifa Zulu snorts at my mother. I need to sort this man out.

-CHERYL ZIKHALI.

Bree is too crowded today, I cringe in crowded places. The taxi marshal points me to a taxi going to Nasrec, great there's a seat for one person right by the door. I'm pushed aside by some tall skinny guy that I stumble a few steps back, the idiot is lucky I didn't fall. He takes my seat and faces the front as if he did not just ambush me, this is why I go for white men. These brothers lack gentleness.

Me: "Excuse me, that's my seat."

He gives me a brief look with an attitude, he knows very well what I'm talking about hence the ignorant stare.

Me: "Askies abuti, I came before you. You can't just fly in here and push me aside like that." (Excuse me.)

Him: "I can and I did."

He spits, the passengers gasp at his rudeness. They attack him with questions and confirmations that I got here first. Don't you just love black people, Ubuntu is real.

Me: "Excuse me?"

Him: “You heard me sisi, get in the front seat and stop being dramatic. It’s not your father’s taxi, that’s the problem with short girls. You’re stubborn and spit nonsense all the damn time. Yey dinkie, ngen’ emotweni. Noma uzoyibamb’ ihamba?” (Get in the taxi shorty, or will you catch it when it’s moving.)”

The audacity of this fool.

Me: “Luister hier you chop stick, I am not your girlfriend. You will not talk to me like I sleep on that bonny chest, jy vurstaan?” (Listen here) (Do you understand?)

He laughs at my threat.

Him: “Yeah sure... Get in the front seat sisi, we need someone to count the change. Haibo, we have to get home and rest. It’s been a long day.”

The idiot says and the passengers agree with him, funny how people can support you and turn their backs on you in the blink of an eye.

Me: “Count change huh?”

“Yeah ngena man, une drama sisi yoh. These model C people are full of it.” (Get in, you’re so dramatic.)

Some lady sings from the back, I will show them.

The driver enters after me

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unfortunately for the forward passengers, this Quantum contains one passenger seat in front. I turn back to find the idiots collecting the money.

Me: "Everyone listen up, every row must count their money and sort the change amongst themselves. I will not be counting change."

Complaints and shouts fill the taxi, they will not insult me and think I will accommodate them.

"We're not going to do that sisi, you have to count the change."

The lady that sang before says, she has a big mouth for someone her age.

"Yeah, it's your job to count the change."

The fool who took my seat jumps in with this line.

Me: "Says who? Where does it say that the person who sits with the driver should count change?"

More complaints come my way, they are afraid of taxi maths that's why they are all seated at the back.

Me: "I don't care what you people say, count... your... own... change. I want the driver's full amount or else you will not be getting your cents back."

The driver glares at me, his mouth opens as he gets ready to say something I know will piss me off.

Driver: "You have to count the money ousie. Where do you think this is?"

I knew it.

Me: "Definitely not where I was employed."

He shakes his head, disapproving of my statement.

Driver: "We're not moving then until you accept that money."

With this declaration someone taps my shoulder, I turn to find a fist full of ten rand notes. These people think I'm playing, I turn back to the driver.

Me: "I guess we'll camp here."

Driver: "Inkani sisi, ungowakabani isbongo?" (You're so stubborn, what is your surname?)

Me: "Driver wag 'n bitjie osemblief toe. Wena do your job and drive us home, these people will do the counting for you. I do not work for the taxi association." (Wait a bit.)

My phone buzzes in my bag, I fiddle in search for it while shutting out the loud complaints. A call from my mother? I'm not late today.

Me: "Mama?"

The driver catches my serious gaze, shakes his head in defeat and starts the vehicle.

Mom: "Sia has been hospitalized, the flu worsened Nkosi. She couldn't breathe so I had to rush her to Coronation hospital. It's a good thing Jabu was around, I don't know what I would have done."

It can't be, my baby looked fine this morning.

Me: "What did the doctors say mama? Please tell me my baby is okay."

Mom: "We're still waiting for them to inform us, you have to get here now."

The urgency in her voice worries me.

Me: "Woah driver, can I get off please."

This is going to piss everyone off, I don't care. I have to take a taxi to Coronationville, the driver stops while complaining his life away. His passengers sing along, throwing insults my way. They are lucky I'm in a hurry.

-NELLY PAGE.

Bhekifa refuses to leave, I don't know what else he wants my mother to say. They have been at it for a while, I am tired of him and I'm tired of hiding in this kitchen. I don't know why my mother is not throwing him out. My father will be home around 8pm, the kids are probably on the way home from their sports activities. I can't risk them finding their father here. They will want to know why he's leaving them behind.

Mom: "Why are you so stubborn Mkhwenyane?" (Son in-law)

Maybe if you stop calling him Mkhwenyane, he will leave us in peace.

Bhekifa: "I'm not stubborn ma, I'm desperate. My house is empty, I need my family with me."

Mom: "And I told you, you can't take them with you. Go home, talk to your uncles and we'll take it from there."

Bhekifa: "Ma, you're not hearing me."

He's getting upset, I know that tone. Bhekifa better not try anything with my mother.

Bhekifa: "Nelly!"

Why is he yelling my name? My mother is right, he's stubborn. It scares me to think he will find me in here.

Bhekifa: "Dali, mamakhe. Please come out my love, let's talk about this."

How dare he disrespects my father's wife in his house by shouting like a lunatic?

Mom: "Mkhwenyane stop, you need to leave." (Son in-law.)

My mother's voice is powerless compared to Bhekifa's loud rumble, think Nelly think. Survival first, if he finds me in here then with no doubt he will surely drag me out of my father's house. Husbands think they have claim over their wives. Listening to the mini argument between the husband and my mother, I plug the kettle and turn it on. He's getting closer and I am in deep trouble. I'm not going to walk out of this kitchen, everything I need to defend myself is in here. From kitchen knives to the bottle of mayonnaise, I will not hesitate to smash it on his head and turn his bushy hair into salad.

Bhekifa: "Ngenhlonipho efanele mama, ngicela ungangivimbi."
(With all due respect, please don't stop me.)

He says that trying to maintain the respect in his tone, but failing dismally.

Mom: "You're acting crazy now, I'm going to call the police."

I don't think that would be a good idea, he's still the father of my kids.

Bhekifa: "Ngifuna umkami nje, I'm not causing trouble." (I just want my wife.)

I stand back when I hear them approaching, my eyes glued on the entrance. The kitchen entrance connected to the corridor has no door, so I can't really shut a door and lock myself in here. I would have to be quite like a church mouse. His eyes widen as they meet mine, his face takes up a threatening frown. If my mother were not here, he would thrash me for not answering him when he called. That's how angry he looks right now. My mother is standing behind him, looking defeated and unsettled.

Bhekifa: "Dali, asambe ekhaya." (Let's go home my love.)

His voice is a sweet whisper although his face depicts anger.

Me: "I'm not going anywhere with you."

I grunt, slowly and softly, my refusal has him narrowing his eyes.

Bhekifa: "Nelly Zulu... mkami. Let's go home, take the kids and let's go home." (My wife.)

Me: "I said I'm not going anywhere with you, Bhekifa."

I yell unwillingly, it's the anger that has put me in this spotlight. The man dared to disrespect my mother, today he has proven that he is his mother's child.

SABELO ZULU.

The lady I hired to trail my sister in-law is blowing up my phone, I have about five missed calls from her. Boitshepo Modisane probably wants her money, I will go broke with this woman. I had to choose a woman to spy on Nelly, in that way she would suspect nothing. Rose walks into the living room and finds a seat just as I'm about to answer her sixth call.

Me: "Poi." (Boy.)

Yes, you guessed it, she's one of the guys. Not the woman you would want to take home to your mother. Mariam would retire as a mother had she had Boitshepo as a daughter in-law. The girl can stand her ground.

Boity: "Why do you have a phone Sabelo?"

Nonsense. Why do women always have questions?

Me: "Keng Boity? O ba tlang?" (What do you want?)

Boity: "You won't believe who's at his in-laws right now?"

This woman thinks I have time to waste, I should be entertaining my wife, not her.

Me: “Ke mang?” (Who?)

Boity: “Ohoo, oang perform-ela poi? You seem to forget that I’m your spy and you need me more than I need you.” (Why are you giving me an attitude?)

Me: “Askies ntwana, bua nou. Wat gaan aan?” (Talk to me, what’s going on?)

I’m in a good mood today, I don’t want trouble.

Boity: “Ke snai se e ba re ke Bhekifa, he’s at his in-laws.” (It’s that idiot brother of yours.)

Me: “What?”

The news brings me up to my feet, this cannot be happening.

Me: “O batla eng mo?” (What is he doing there?)

Boity: “Is it not obvious? Vrou ea hae.” (His wife.)

Me: “Dammit man, Bhekifa is stupid. I could swear we have different fathers.”

Boity: “Well, I had to deliver the news. Now it’s up to you what you do with it.”

Me: “Dankie poi, I’ll sort those two out.” (Thank you boy.)

Boity: “Sho sho, dala what you must ntwana.” (Do what you must.)

She sends her goodbyes before hanging up, Rose is staring with a serious expression.

Rose: “You know you should lower the volume on your phone, it will get you into trouble.”

She says, moving to sit next to me.

Me: “You heard that?”

Rose: “Yes and there is only one option baby, kill them.”

This is why I married this woman.

Me: “Ma bhebeza man, I am a proud husband right now.”

She giggles at my words.

Rose: “I don’t know why you never thought of that Sabelo, but first you need to find out if he has you in his will. If he doesn’t then make sure your brother adds you, you are his only brother and he knows that you depend on him. I’m sure it won’t be hard.”

Lord thank you for this woman.

Me: “His money is all we want, Nelly has made our lives difficult. So if we have them killed I will take over his side businesses and his accounts. We’re going to be rich smomondiya.” (Beautiful.)

She smiles when I lean in for a kiss and pushes me back.

Rose: “You see why this is not going to work? You’re not using all of your knowledge Sabelo.”

Me: “What did I do now?”

Rose: “The brats, we have to get rid of them too. Bhekifa will probably leave his asserts to them, they have to die.”

Am I impressed or am I impressed? I thought Rose was all beauty with no brains, the woman has proven me wrong today.

Me: “Mabafe bonke.” (Let them all die.)

She smiles widely and wraps her arms around my neck.

Rose: “Mabafe bonke baby.” (Let them all die.)

She declares leaning in for that long awaited kiss, I love the grin on her face.

Rose: “You can kiss me now.”

Me: “Mabafe bonke sthandwa sam” (They must all die my love.)

Rose giggles before our lips meet.

“No one is going to die.”

My mother's loud voice interrupts our session, we turn to find her with her hands on her waist and a heavy frown on her face. Damn this woman likes ruining things for me.

-CHERYL ZIKHALI.

Sia is in ICU, I don't understand how she suddenly fell ill. The doctor diagnosed her with a severe case of pneumonia. We're waiting to see her, it's taking longer than I thought though.

Jabu: "Do you need anything? I can get you some coffee."

Me: "I'm okay Jabu."

My mother says the same, she blames herself for Sia's condition.

Mom: "How did I not see this?"

She's starting to depress me with her never ending questions.

Me: "Blaming yourself won't change anything, please stop."

Jabu: "I agree with Cheryl, Sia will be fine. She has her father's heart."

Jabu is right, Zain was strong willed, a fighter. My mother is the first to get up when we see the doctor approaching.

Me: "How is my baby?"

We eagerly wait for her as she clears out the smile on her face, I don't know if it was her way of greeting or that's just protocol.

Doctor: "I would recommend that you take her to a private hospital so she can get the best treatment, your daughter is critical ma'am. Had you brought her here on time, we would be able to tackle the problem."

Me: "I can't afford a private hospital, I don't have medical aid. Isn't there anything else you can do?"

My mother is defeated, she finds her way back to her seat.

Doctor: "We can keep her here under observation, but we're not fully equipped. I suggest you find a way to get her to a private hospital."

With that she walks away, leaving us in total silence.

-NELLY PAGE.

Bhekifa: "I don't think you heard what I said Nelly

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we... are... going... home."

I don't really need him to iron the words out for me. He takes two steps in, his eyes stabbing me. My mother can't see it as she's standing behind him, she can't see the predatory form he has taken. I am his prey and he's haunting me down with everything in him. Gosh if this woman was not here, I don't know what would be happening.

Me: "Stop."

I raise my hand to gesture that he stops, he doesn't and my mind is thinking the worst. He can be manipulative. I know he won't hit me when he gets his hands on me, however he will inflict some kind of pain that will force me to willingly walk out with him. The kettle clicks indicating that the water has boiled to an automated temperature, I'm reminded why I turned it on and that has me reaching for it over the counter. With one spin, I turn back to the husband with a weapon of mass distraction in hand. Mass distraction because his precious face will not survive water that has boiled at 100 degrees Celsius.

Me: "Take one more step and I will baptize you with this water."

He laughs, yet I am dead serious.

Bhekifa: "You wouldn't."

Me: "Try me, God try me and see how crazy I can get."

His jaw drops as shock claims his eyes.

Bhekifa: "Nelly? Is this you? You're talking to me like this?"

Me: "I'm tired Bhekifa, I'm tired of your shit. Why won't you let me breathe?"

Bhekifa: "Ma, do you see this? Then she says I attacked her, this is not the first time ma. The last time it was a knife in front of my brother, you can ask him if you don't believe me."

What the hell is he doing? He's looking for an escape for acting crazy in my father's house.

Mom: "Nelly put that kettle down."

Me: "He's lying ma, don't believe him. This is who he is, he lies and cheats. I wouldn't be surprised if he has a certificate in both these fields."

Bhekifa: "No, I would never lie about something like this ma. Nelly tends to be violent, sometimes I fear for the kids. What if she turns her anger on them?"

Me: "Stop lying Bhekifa, I would never hurt my children, never."

I shout, his lies are driving me crazy. How could he spew them like this?

Bhekifa: "You see ma, this shouting of hers is not a first. I live in constant noise, every mistake I make Nelly yells just like this."

Gosh no, please no. I don't know how to defend myself and when I'm losing a battle, tears come out to play.

Me: "Don't believe him ma, please."

I can't tell what she's thinking, Bhekifa is really good at this lying thing.

Mom: "I believe you my child, now put the kettle down."

Me: "If you believe me, then you will understand what I'm about to do."

I open the lid of the kettle and splash the water right at him, he sees it coming and escapes with a few drops on his chest.

Bhekifa: "Are you insane?"

He grunts, grinding his teeth.

Me: "Insane? No dear hubby."

I shout, and I'm not about to stop now.

Me: "I am mad as hell Bhekifa, I am tired and have had it with you."

Mom: "Nelly please calm down."

She pleads, crying. I hate seeing tears in my mother's eyes. But I need to get this man out of the house.

Bhekifa: "Ma is right, calm down dali. We can talk about this please."

This man, Jezus...

Me: "Get out of my father's house before I do the worst."

I yell at an unmoved Bhekifa, I shouldn't have missed. That's why he's so confident, he thinks I will miss again. He moves back when I begin my walk to distraction, I am going to burn this man. Seeing the grave expression on my face, Bhekifa takes more steps until he's standing right in front of the kitchen door. I ignore my mother who's begging that I stop my craziness and throw the water at him. He shouts in pain as the hot water splashes on his stomach.

Bhekifa: "You're not going to get away with this."

Me: "Get out you bastard."

With one hand he twists the door handle and flies outside, I follow him as he stumbles with fast movements until he reaches his car.

Bhekifa: "I'm coming back for you Nelly, you're my wife and I will never let you go."

He declares loudly and by God I believe him. He will never give up, I watch him until he drives out of the yard. Marching back to the kitchen, I find my mother seated on a chair, her hand on

her chin and elbow on the table. She regards me with a defeated look and shakes her head.

Mom: “Nelly...”

Me: “Not now ma, I’m done playing the naïve wife.”

I tell her and leave her to gather herself together.

SABELO ZULU.

I am up to hell and back with Mariam and her controlling ways, what in the name of money does she mean no one dies? Rose releases a long heavy sigh, showing her frustrations without shame and Mariam... well, let's just say the woman is appalled by the act. I should teach the wife to control herself, we wouldn't want to be out on the streets now. Would we? Standing in the doorway, Mariam stabs us with a deadly glare. I see the hate she has for my wife, then again, who does this woman love?

Me: "Magriza?"

She clicks her tongue at me, I should find that disrespectful.

Mariam: "Tell me why I wasted my money sending you to school Sabelo? You are such a disappointment my son, look at the bad decisions you have made in life?"

Her eyes are glued on my wife, Rose regards her with a tongue click. She couldn't care less what Mariam thinks.

Mariam: "We ntombazane, go to your room right now, gather all your trash and get out of my house." (Girl)

Ehhh!!! My mother's request brings Rose up to her feet, her eyes as wide as they can go.

Rose: "Askies mama?" (Excuse me?)

Mariam: "You heard me sfebe ndini." (Prostitute.)

She roars at the wife, Rose's tears are always on standby. I'm shook by how she quickly cries, is this not the woman who showed me a different kind of strength seconds ago?

Me: "Magriza yini manje? Why are you doing this?" (What is it?)

Mariam: "Thula wena! How dare you let your wife disrespect me like that? I give you a roof above your head, feed you and you have the nerve to click your tongue at me!" (Shut up.)

A tongue click? My wife is being thrown out of the house because of a tongue click? Mariam is not serious, she can't be.

Me: "Slip of the tongue mama, forgive her."

These looks she constantly gives me that make me feel stupid...
Jeer!

Me: "Apologise nawe Baby." (You.)

Rose: "Sorry mama."

That was a weak ass apology, but it should do.

Mariam: "Get out of my sight, useless woman."

Rose runs out of the living room in tears, I will pacify her later. I need to deal with this one first, or she will deal with me judging by that look in her eyes. She's coming in, anger in her eyes. I don't know if I should step back or wait for the inevitable.

Mariam slaps me so hard across my face that my head spins, my hand rises to rub away the throbbing pain. Never in my life have I felt my mother's hand, she handled me with care and too much affection that annoyed her siblings. Today... today she stands before me, chest rising and falling as it portrays the amount of anger held in her heart.

Mariam: "Don't you ever talk about killing your brother again."

What just happened? My eyes follow her when she moves to sit down, she crosses her leg over the other and her arms comfortably rest on the armrest of the couch.

Me: "What wrong did I do mama? I was merely trying to fix the problem we are faced with, Bhekifa went back to Nelly..."

This woman did not just shut me up by raising her hand. Where does she think this is? Wakanda?

Mariam: "I know."

She is so chilled about it, like it doesn't matter that we're going to lose it all if those two get back together.

Mariam: "Listen to me, Sabelo, Bhekifa is my son. His death would surely kill me, remember our enemy is Nelly not him. If

anyone is to die then it's her, Ms little too perfect. Knowing her father, he won't let her leave the house without talking to your uncles. All I have to do now is convince them that our dear daughter in-law is a loose woman who jumps into every bed offered to her."

And she says I'm stupid.

Me: "How will they believe you? It will be your word against hers, she will play you like a violin mama and make you look stupid to your siblings."

She can huff all she wants, I know I'm right. I'm always bloody right, like wiping out the whole family. That is one master plan, a perfect murder I would say.

Mariam: "I know how to play my cards right, you wait and watch."

Aii!! We shall wait and watch then, though I'm ready to sing 'I told you so.'

-CHERYL ZIKHALI.

Jabu drove my mother home, she has to fetch Earth from the neighbours. I'm not okay with my kids being left next door, friends or no friends. People are fighting their own demons out

there and your child could be in the wrong place at the wrong time. I've read of mothers poisoning their kids to spite an abusive husband or boyfriend and the kid from next door gets caught in the war. Murder suicides are also common within family feuds. The thought makes my blood boil, so I shake my head to clear it, of the terrible thoughts. I'm thinking of getting a loan from Capitec or African bank. Sia has to be okay, losing my husband was enough torture to last me, my whole life.

"Excuse me ousie." (Lady.)

A female nurse says, I didn't see her coming. I've been lost in my thoughts, I tend to drift away when troubled.

Nurse: "The doctor would like to see you and please wear a mask when you go in there."

Giving me an attitude so late at night! This mask thing is annoying. No one can breathe in those things, people don't bother in taxis, town is even worse. We're all breathing each other's Covids, it's really a mess out there.

I knock once and the doctor shouts for me to get in. He's seated behind a table, eyes glued on a file before him as he flips from page to page. His eyebrows tightened in a knot, it's not the doctor from the afternoon. This one is all masked up, full protective gear from head to toe.

Doctor: "Take a seat Miss."

It's Mrs actually, but I don't tell him. I'm not okay with the serious expression on his face.

Me: "How is my daughter?"

I figure that's why I'm here.

Doctor: "The doctor that assisted you this afternoon is a resident, he's new."

Me: "Okay?"

Doctor: "They tend to make mistakes and your daughter's file was exchanged with another patient's file. She doesn't have pneumonia."

My heart dances at his words.

Me: "My baby is okay?"

Doctor: "No, your daughter has the corona virus."

There must be something wrong with my hearing, this doctor says my child has corona virus. I laugh at what I think I'm hearing.

Me: "I'm sorry doc, I didn't hear you there. You see everybody is talking about this Corona, it's everywhere... the news... work... bus stations... taxi ranks. You name it, so I think I'm hearing it in my head."

Doctor: "You're not hearing things ma'am, your child has the virus. We have to place you and your family under quarantine, you're not allowed to leave this hospital. Transport will be provided for you and you will be taken to the quarantine grounds in Expo Centre."

I don't want to hear any of that, I don't care really.

Me: "I want to know how my daughter is doing. Is she going to die?"

Don't cry Cheryl, big girls don't cry.

Doctor: "She will be transferred to a special facility and..."

Me: "I think we're speaking two different languages here, I asked if my child is okay or not? Will she make it or not?"

This man is not informed about this case, yet he sits here and tells me nonsense. My child is not infected, Sia can't be... no, I refuse to entertain such thoughts.

Doctor: "I need you to calm down ma'am."

He's testing me, I explode when tested.

Doctor: "It's not guaranteed whether she will live or die, these cases are very delicate and have to be handled with special care. We were careless, it's our fault."

Me: "Damn right it's your fault, I'm going to sue this hospital."

I don't even have a lawyer that time.

Doctor: "I understand your anger ma'am, but you need to calm down."

Calm down he says.

Me: "I want to see her."

Doctor: "I'm afraid that won't be possible, she is under quarantine."

Me: "I'm never going to see my child again, am I?"

Doctor: "Like I said..."

Me: "To hell with what you said doctor, I have every right to see my child."

If this man has never seen a crazy woman

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today he gets front row seats. My whole body heats up, I'm sweating so I remove my jersey. My heart is racing faster than I would like, my life is over.

-NELLY PAGE.

A soft knock on my bedroom door catches all my attention, I open the door to find my son Victor.

Me: “Why aren’t you in bed Vicky? It’s a school night and you know how I feel about you sleeping late.”

Victor: “Relax mom, I wanted to wait for mkhulu, he is asking for you.” (Grandpa.)

He says, frowning up at me. Victor looks so much like his father, it creeps me out sometimes. He grew his hair like him too and the boy refuses to cut it, one day I will give him a surprise visit to the barber. He won’t have a choice, but do as mommy says.

Me: “Thank you, my baby, you can go to bed now.”

I pat his busy hair before letting him walk away into the corridor. My father came home a bit late today, the time on my phone says 10:25pm. I have to cover up the knee length nightwear, so a morning gown does the trick. Respect means the world to my father and that’s what I have shown him my whole life, I don’t remember a day back chatting the old man.

I find him seated on his favourite single couch, reading a newspaper. I’m surprised he can still see without his glasses on while my mother’s eyes have given up on her.

“Baba.” I greet him with a hand shake of which he accepts with a slight smile on his face. Respectfully, I take a sit on the couch positioned next to his. There’s an elephant in the room, he

probably doesn't feel it. This heavy silence means nothing to him. This is who he's always been, a man of very few words and because of that people fear him. Not fear as in he would kill them 'fear' but respect 'fear.' They hold him in high esteem.

Did I mention my father has a high position at church? I think he's second in command, both he and my mother love the Lord like there is nothing else to love. It's a beautiful sight to see them lead each other to church, I find my mother lucky to have a husband like this man.

Dad: "Your mother tells me, you burnt your husband with boiling water."

Where is that snitch? He's not looking at me, but the Daily times newspaper in his hands.

Me: "Did she tell you why I did that?"

I wish for the world to open up and swallow me when he raises his reprimanding gaze, I must have said something wrong.

Dad: "I know everything."

Then why look at me like I cheated on the pastor's son?

Dad: "What's happening with your marriage baby?"

Ahh! Now this is the daddy I know, the soft understanding father who wants nothing with his daughter.

Me: "Bhekifa hit me baba."

That's right, I'm taking the spoiled brat card, it works that one. Mind you, I'm speaking from experience.

Dad: "Why?"

As chilled as ever.

Me: "He's cheating on me and not only that, he has a child with this woman. When I confronted him, he beat me up."

My father holds a heavy frown on his face, his upper lip slowly curls in disgust. His jaw clenches and unclenches occasionally, taking up a deep sigh and with slow movements, he closes the newspaper.

Dad: "Do you still love him?"

Unfortunately, he will always have a place in my heart. The nod I give him answers his question.

Dad: "I spoke to his uncle, they will be here on Saturday. I can't make decisions for you baby, if I could you wouldn't be married to him."

Yes, he's not a fan. No father would ease up to a man who made his sixteen year old daughter pregnant.

Dad: "You're a mother now Nelly, you have kids to think about. This marriage is not only about you and Bhekifa, your children

are involved too. Whatever decision you make will affect them, good or bad.”

What does he mean good or bad? Going back to that man which I’m a hundred percent sure the uncles will vote for it; will be bad, right?

Me: “I hear you baba and I have made my decision, I don’t want Bhekifa anymore.”

Dad: “Today is too early to decide, your heart is filled with rage. Give it two to three more days and then tell me how you feel.”

I could be reading into things, but does this man want me back with Bhekifa? Besides, my heart is not taking the healing route anytime soon.

Me: “I have made up my mind baba, the only thing that links Bhekifa and I are the children. I am done with that man.”

Is that a smile I see on his face? Told you he’s not a fan.

Dad: “Good because I need to have a talk with him, alone.”

That tone...

Me: “What are you going to do to him?”

I’m asking because this father of mine is not kind when he’s angry, don’t be fooled by the Jesus sticker on the bumper of his

car and if you see him standing on the church podium, don't look too hard. His aura sometimes gives him away.

Dad: "You may go back to your room Nelly."

Listen, he says 'go back to your room.' Am I a child?

Me: "Okay baba."

Like I said before, I never back chat the old man. I can only hope he won't get himself in trouble by attacking Shembe's descendant.

-BHEKIFA ZULU.

I'm woken up by a knock on the window, the morning sun blasts my eyes that I shut them again. The knock calls to me again, I raise my eyes to see a policeman peeking in. He gestures that I pull the window down.

Me: "Good morning officer."

Cop: "Good morning se voet." (Good morning your foot.)

Okay.

Cop: "You're not supposed to be parked here sir."

Me: "Excuse me, there is no sign that says no parking."

Cop: "Really?"

He questions, pointing at some sign ahead. It was so late last night that I didn't see it. After the incident with Nelly, I drove like a maniac. I don't know where I was headed to, come to think of it, I don't know where I am. I look around to find anything familiar and meet a sign that says Market Theatre. How did I get to NewTown?

Cop: "Here's your ticket."

The officer tosses a piece of paper in the car, bloody hell!
R3000 ticket?

Cop: "You might want to call someone to come get you or catch a taxi at Bree, your car has been stripped sir."

He laughs and walks away while shaking his big head, I'm quick on my feet as I jump out to investigate the policeman's allegations. Life does not love me, my tyres are gone. Those bloody thieves took the side mirror as well.

Me: "Hey wait up."

I call out to the policeman, but he laughs like it is funny and drives off. Dammit, I need to call Nelly, I would call my brother, but he doesn't have a car. I have her number on speed dial, the phone is snatched from my hand as I send it to my ear. The guy is so fast that by the time I think of running after him, he turns

a corner. Still, I follow him. When I get to the corner, he is nowhere to be seen.

Me: “Dammit, somebody get him. He took my phone.”

These people don’t care about my problems, they are looking at me like I’ve lost my mind. As I turn back to the car, I see two men digging... in... my... car.

Me: “Hey, what are you doing?”

My wallet is in there, the men jump out in full speed. My attempt to run after them is embarrassing, I get laughed at by rubbernecks.

“This is joburg mgamla, you have to open your eyes. They might take your soul too.” (Boss.)

Some guy standing next to a white Quantum exclaims, he seems to be amused by my misfortune. How the hell am I going to get home? I can’t beg people for cents, I will not degrade myself like that.

12

NELLY PAGE.

The plan was not to go to work today, thanks to Buhle, I have to go in and find out why she hasn't been to work in two days. My boss called, complaining about how incompetent I am.

Buhle should have a good explanation as to why she's been missing work. I decide to call her on my way there, I need her at the office as soon as possible. I try again when she doesn't answer, it takes a minute for her voice to resonate through the phone.

Buhle: "Nelly!"

Wow, the attitude is still there I see. This girl has probably only heard about me, today she will know Nelly Page.

Me: "My office now."

Buhle: "I can't, I'm not feeling well."

Me: "I don't care, get to the office or kiss your job goodbye."

I cut the call before she disputes any further, Buhle is getting too comfortable.

Traffic is bad today, there are two men fighting on the streets. A crowd has gathered to watch the happenings. This is the

cause of traffic, people like things. What happened to practising social distancing? The president has to see this.

I wish these cars would just move, there's a lot of us who have real jobs to get to. But that fight looks interesting, I might as well watch since the cars are not moving. Men can be savages, they always find a reason to throw a fist. Shame the poor guy with the bushy hair is having a hard time with that short man, I thought tall men can fight and hold their own. Such a waste of tallness.

The fight is getting bumpy, someone should stop this. Shorty is going to kill him. I get out of the car to see if I can help, these cars won't be moving anytime soon. My feet falter as my eyes fall on my husband, the short man is beating the living daylights out of him. How is Bhekifa unable to fight back? This is his thing, fighting. I've seen the strength God unfortunately gave him, I felt it when he pulled me by my hair. I felt it when he strangled me, and ahh his favourite; when he forced me to bow down to him with his hand pressed on my neck.

Our eyes meet, he looks like a battered woman and strangely nothing in me pities him. The man I have loved my whole life, the only man I have ever known. I should feel sorry for him, cry or something. Lord is this a sign?

Shame shadows him, he drops his gaze for the first time in his life. Life is a bitch, isn't it? I have seen enough, I have work to get to.

I know he won't say anything when I turn and start walking back to the car. Thank God, my father drove the kids to school, this is something they shouldn't be exposed to.

-SABELO ZULU.

"Sabelo, Sabelo."

Hebanna!!! I know that voice, I get up on my feet to confirm what my mind has relayed to me and dammit I'm right. Boitshepo is outside the gate, shouting as if this is her mother's house. Rose and my mother rush into the sitting room, the noise must have brought them here.

Mariam: "Who is that idiot?"

Mariam needs to loosen up, she will have a heart attack if she continues with her tantrums.

Me: "That's my friend mama, I'll go and see what she wants."

Rose grabs my hand as I take a step towards the exit.

Rose: "You have female friends, Sabelo?"

Me: “It’s not like that mabhebeza, she’s one of the guys.”
(Baby.)

This woman wants to nag so early in the morning.

Rose: “Yey, there’s no such thing. I don’t see a guy mina, that’s a full woman standing there. That means she’s capable of giving you children, tell me I’m wrong Sabelo.”

Me: “Manje ura...se... lani Rose?” (Why are you making noise?)

Rose: “Now that your girlfriend is here ngiyarasa Sabelo?” (I’m making noise?)

Yoh, women. Boitshepo is still calling out for me, it must be an emergency. God just had to give me a stubborn, nagging wife.

Mariam: “Let him be wena, he has to check on that fool who is barking at my gate. I’m not running a stokvel here.” (You.)

Thank you Mariam, I yank my hand away and rush outside.

Boity: “Keng ka wena Sabelo heh? I’ve been calling you ntwana and why is your gate locked?” (What’s wrong with you Sabelo?)

Here’s another annoying woman.

Me: “Is this why you’re making a racket early so?” (So early in the morning.)

Boity: "It's your brother, they are going to kill him."

Sabelo: "Eng?" (What?)

Boity: "I'm telling you man, he's in New Town right now and some taxi driver is practising his boxing skills on Bhekifa."

Dammit, Bhekifa can't die before putting me in his will. Taxi drivers are dangerous, they carry guns, so I've heard and my brother will meet our ancestors before his time.

Me: "Mama, mama."

I yell for the old lady

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there is urgency in my voice and that has the two women in my life running out of the house.

Me: "It's Bhekifa, magriza hurry, he's hurt."

I tell her, depriving her a chance to ask the reason behind my panic.

Mariam: "Yoh, Kodwa Jesu." (Oh Jesus.)

Mariam screams and she carries her hands on her head, her dramatics will draw us attention.

Me: "Let's go mama."

I instruct, leading us to Boitshepo's car. Where is Rose going?

Me: “Sala wena, who is going to guard the house?”

She stops at the gate, frowning up at me.

Rose: “But baby...”

Me: “Just stay back, Rose.”

I snap and rush to the passenger’s seat.

Rose: “You’re a married man Sabelo, remember that.”

She shouts, her eyes holding Boitshepo in an intense glare, Rose can be too insecure.

CHERYL ZIKHALI.

I have to call in at work and inform them about my situation, in case they decide to fire me for being absent without leave. My mother and Earth were brought here last night, I haven’t seen them yet. Jabu is here too, unfortunately he was also exposed to the infected.

Right now I don’t want anything, but to see my babies. They must be terrified, especially Sia, she’s all alone.

I would like to believe that Earth is with my mother, it’s a crazy thought I know, but it keeps me sane. I send my boss a text message that I’m on quarantine for fourteen days, I don’t know

why I feel a need to text Mr. Zulu as well. Not that he would care, the man has not acknowledged my presence the way I would like him to.

“I’m currently under quarantine with my family, I don’t know if I will leave this place dead or alive. Just letting you know so you don’t wonder.”

And... sent... It’s strange how I think he will care.

-NELLY PAGE.

The door to my office is slightly open hence I find Buhle standing in the doorway when I raise eyes from the file before me, I get chills on my body at the way she is glaring at me. She blinks once, then knocks and lets herself in. I can hardly see her face with that head scarf covering half of it, she stands a distance away from my work station.

Me: “Will you come in or stand there?”

Buhle: “I’m fine here.”

She holds on to her stubbornness, let’s see how long she’s willing to keep it up.

Me: “What’s wrong with you? Since when do you come to work dressed like that?”

Buhle: “I’m sorry, but my contract doesn’t state how I should dress.” I see.

Me: "Where have you been? Mrs. Bhengu tells me that you haven't been to work in days."

Buhle: "I have family issues."

Me: "And you couldn't report your leave days?"

Buhle: "I forgot."

She forgot? I nod at her response, not because I agree with her, but I am up to here with her attitude.

Me: "Do you still want your job Buhle?"

She shrugs her shoulders as if I should read from that, this girl must be okay in life to have such an attitude towards her senior.

Buhle: "I wouldn't be here if I didn't."

She spits coldly, I have had it.

Me: "Then listen to me, Buhle because I am not going to repeat myself ever again. You and I are not friends, we will never be. This is a place of business, not your mother's shebeen. You report when you can't make it to work and if you happen to fall sick then I expect a doctor's note. Are we clear?"

The girl rolls her eyes at me, maybe I'm wearing a clown outfit, she's not taking me seriously.

Buhle: "I know the rules, I've been working here for a while."

She says this folding her arms across her chest, I zoom in on her to make sure I'm not seeing things. The woman is giving me an attitude.

Me: "Then you should know that I don't take nonsense from anyone, not even you Buhle."

I bring myself up to move closer to her.

Me: "Like I said, we're not friends and I will not tolerate your shit little girl. Now I want you to go to work and catch up. I have an appointment at 2pm with Mrs. Wilson. Please call her to confirm the time."

Buhle looks ready to kill, I notice the breakout on her skin. I'm not bothered, right now, I'm a bitter angry woman and I will not let anyone walk all over me.

Buhle: "I was on my way to the doctor, I can't work today."

I saw this coming.

Me: "Tough, you will have to see the doctor tomorrow. I wasn't told about a sick leave. And you can only have tomorrow off unless the doctor tells you otherwise. Now go to your desk and do what I pay you to do."

I make sure to let my anger and authority out through my words. Buhle huffs and Lord let her roll her ugly eyes at me again, I will shoot her with one good fat warning letter.

She spins with the same attitude she's been wearing since she walked in the office and begins marching towards the door.

Buhle: "Bitter bitch, no wonder your husband seeks comfort in other women."

She mumbles loud enough for me to hear, my heart does something crazy there. It's sitting on my throat and I want to strangle the life out of her. My feet rush to the door and I shut it before she slithers out, my little drama shocks her. Her eyes widen as she steps back.

Me: "What the hell did you just say to me?"

Now she's silent, no words to say! She crosses her arms again on her chest.

Me: "Sisi, you better speak now or I will be spending the night in a prison cell after I have dealt with you."

I hiss at her, preparing myself for whatever is running through her frail mind.

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CHERYL ZIKHALI.

I thought I would see my family when they were moving me to the quarantine grounds in Expo Centre, I'm going crazy with worry and no one would tell me where they are. Everyone seems to be too busy to entertain me, to think my mother's house is a few streets away from this place. It is sad how life can take a U-turn in the blink of an eye, this ordeal has taught me not take anything for granted. Love without limits, forgive whoever needs to be forgiven. Go for that one thing you have always wanted. Spend that last cent, spoil yourself because you deserve it.

My phone is the only form of contact I have. I decide to call Jabu, he might have information regarding my children and my mother. First I check his last seen, it will confirm if he has his phone with him or not. I come across a message from him, asking if I'm okay. His last seen is a few seconds ago. Let me call him using the app, it will save my airtime. The phone rings for a while before his voice tickles my ears.

Jabu: "Nkosi."

Me: "Ugogo wakho uNkosi." (Your grandmother is Nkosi.)

He laughs, I never thought I would say this, but I miss the sound of his laugh.

Jabu: "I miss you."

I said his laugh, not him.

Me: "Take it easy buddy, you'll drown if you go deep."

I'm accommodated by another laugh from him, he does that a lot, laugh like life is all rosy.

Jabu: "You see why I say I miss you? I have no one to keep me company in this ugly tent."

Me: "I'm sure mine is uglier, be comforted by that thought."

This time he chuckles, we're caught in silence for a moment. Jabu has made me forget what I wanted to say... Oh yes...

Me: "Have you heard anything regarding Sia?"

Jabu: "No, I'm not family, so you can imagine how hard it would be for me to get information on her."

Me: "Dammit, I hate this Jabu. I need to know if she's okay, she has to be okay."

My heart breaks thinking of her tiny body lying in a hospital bed, no mother can stand their child being sick.

Jabu: "Sia will be okay Cheryl, you need to stay positive. Remember the law of attraction gives you what you think about the most, now stop attracting negative things."

Jabu is right, my thoughts will bring harm upon my child.

Me: "What about mom and Earth? Are they okay?"

Jabu: "They are, I saw them during the transfer. I don't know if they are kept in the same chamber."

Me: "My baby must be terrified, he's probably confused."

This is not home and kids tend to wonder when they are kept from home for too long, soon he will start asking questions like, where his sister is and why we're not all, together.

I had a hard time with them when Zain died, Earth being the oldest was the troublesome one. He couldn't understand why his father was put in a box and buried- his words to be exact.

My mother had warned me against taking them to the funeral, she said kids should not be exposed to how a body is disposed after the soul has departed. Not only did I traumatise my child, but gave him subscription of nightmares every time he lain down to sleep.

-NELLY PAGE.

Buhle takes a step back, she refuses to let go of her attitude. It scares me to think that she could be the woman sleeping with my husband, the mother of his bastard child.

Me: "I'm waiting."

I make sure to directly keep my eyes on her solid cold gaze, her upper lip slowly curls into a smirk. The same hard eyes narrow, she's staring at me with disgust. I'm lost at first when she starts running her fingers along her lower lip. What game is she playing at?"

Buhle: "Bhekifa Zulu."

My heart stops for a second, the familiarity in her voice as she says my husband's name confirms my deepest fear.

Buhle: "He has kissed these lips,"

I'd be damned, she slides her hand down to her chest and slowly rubs her breasts.

Buhle: "He has touched and kissed these breasts."

My blood is boiling, in my head I see her dropping dead on the spot. I lose all senses when her hand begins to slide down her stomach, I know where she's taking this.

Me: "Enough."

I shout with whatever authority I have, it works because she's startled a little.

I don't have to think twice about slapping her across the face, the head scarf drops to the floor, revealing her deformed face.

The sight is appalling, something I would not want to look at. These boils must be a punishment for her evil deeds. Buhle sends her hand to rub away the pain, I should slap her on the other cheek as well. This girl is disrespectful.

Me: "Is my husband the father of your baby?"

She nods, fighting back the tears that have flooded into her eyes.

Me: "You bitch, all this while you were working for me and sleeping with my husband?"

Buhle: "Bhekifa needed a real woman, you don't have it in you to satisfy a real man like him."

Me: "Is that what he told you?"

Someone tell me why I'm tolerating this girl.

Buhle: "No, I just knew it. Why else would he approach me?"

She says, full of pride.

Me: "I see and so this is your greatest achievement, being a side chick to a married man? A man who will never spend the entire night with you, just four seconds of orgasm and he's done with your decayed vagina."

Buhle: "He always came back for more, that proves that he loved what he got from me."

I laugh at her stupidity.

Me: "You're so pathetic Buhle, Bhekifa is a man. Men love meat, no doubt about that. Show me a man who wouldn't pick up a piece of meat after it has fallen to the ground and devour it like it's the healthiest thing he's ever eaten. That same meal will send him running to the toilet with a runny stomach, their naivety will have them repeating the same process, but one day he will grow tired of the dirty meat and remember that he has a clean plate of food at home."

She drops her eyes as my words seem to hit home.

Me: "What is it? Has he grown tired of you already?"

Her eyes are still hiding from me, stupid girl doesn't know the ways of life.

Buhle: "There is nothing special about you Nelly."

Hee! This child...

Me: "Yeyi, don't you dare. You don't get to call me by my name. I am not one of your street friends."

I should gauge her eyes out, since she doesn't know what to do with them

but roll them.

Me: "You're fired."

I snap sharply, I don't want to kill someone. I know I will if she continues working here.

Buhle: "You can't fire me, I have rights."

Now she has the nerve to widen her eyes at me, she drops them due to the frown I shoot her with.

Me: "I said you're fired you bitch, get your shit and get out."

This time I feel a need to shout, loud enough to keep it in the office. Somehow, I'm relieved that Bhekifa has not revealed the abuse to her, the last thing I want is for her to know about my weak moments. She bends over to grab her ugly scarf and covers the ugliness draped on her face.

Buhle: "This is not over, I will fight you."

Me: “If you’re willing to fight your whole life, then go ahead darling. Make sure you’re prepared to pay your lawyer with your body because by the time I’m done with you, you will be living under a bridge.”

I watch too much Law and Order, this trick should work. And ohh, it does. Fear covers her eyes, she clicks her tongue and rushes out. I knew she would slam the door behind her.

-BHEKIFA ZULU.

I can’t look at my brother and mother, they have gathered in the living room to see the damage done to me. I can’t really explain what happened, the man suddenly attacked me. I couldn’t fight back, I thought I was strong to fight him, but I was proven a weakling.

Sabelo: “Eish saan, baku khawathe blind ntwana.” (They hit you pretty bad.)

Sabelo exclaims what I already know, he sits beside me, closer than I would like. I’m in pain and don’t want anyone next to me.

Mariam: “What happened Bhekifa? What was a man like you doing in a place like that?”

My mother is angry, her anger is directed to me not the man who attacked her son.

Me: “I don’t know.”

I grumble, too ashamed to speak. The old lady snorts in irritation, I wish they would leave me alone. Especially Sabelo, he’s zooming in on every wound and scratch on my battered face.

Sabelo: “So he just attacked you, out of the blue? You didn’t provoke him?”

Me: “Yes.”

My mother seems to grow annoyed by the second.

Mariam: “Bhekifa Zulu.”

She calls with a strict tone.

Me: “Ma!”

Mariam: “Are you going to tell me what happened or will you keep giving us short answers?”

Me: “Eish mama. I told you, I don’t know, okay? I was robbed this morning, they striped my car, took my phone, my wallet and the next I was in a fight with that short man.”

Mariam: "What is happening to you, my son?"

My life is falling apart, that's what.

"Hey, stop. You can't go in there."

That's my sister in law's voice, she's yelling from the kitchen. Sabelo is on his feet in a jiffy, probably to inspect what the commotion is about.

"Where is Bhekifa?"

Dammit! What is Buhle doing here? She walks into the living room, with a baby in her arms and a baby bag hanging down her shoulder. Sabelo and Rose stand right beside her.

Buhle: "I knew I would find you here when I went to your office and they told me you didn't come in today."

What is this woman saying to me? Her disrespectful confession brings me to my feet.

Me: "You did what?"

Buhle: "I went to your office Bhekifa."

Buhle has constantly been a pain in the arse, stubborn and does whatever she sees fit.

Buhle: "You don't take my calls, what did you expect me to do?"

Me: “Not go to my office dammit, I’m a married man. Do you have any idea I could lose my position at work? You’re so stupid Buhle man.”

Mariam: “Who is this Bhekifa?”

My eyes run to my mother, then to Sabelo and Rose who are now seated and observing everything, seemingly humoured by the drama unfolding before them.

Me: “She is no one mama.”

Honest truth.

Buhle: “I’m the mother of his child, this baby.”

Disrespectfully, she answers. Buhle has never met my mother, this is one woman you don’t play with.

Mariam: “I see and how can we help you?”

Buhle: “I brought his baby to him.”

Sabelo: “Heee banna.” (An expression of shock.)

Mariam: “Okay, I hear you sisi. Can I see the proof?”

My mother hasn’t moved an inch from her seat, she sits like she owns the world.

Buhle: “Askies ma?” (Excuse me?)

Mariam: "Surely you don't expect us to believe that thing in your arms is a Zulu."

Buhle gasps in shock, I did say she hasn't met my mother.

Buhle: "This child is Bhekifa's child, you can ask him if you don't believe me."

Mariam: "I'm not disputing with you ntombazana (girl), I'm only asking for proof. Who knows? Maybe you want to trap my son with a child that has nothing to do with us because of his money."

I should sit down and let Mariam handle this, I'm not saying the child is not mine nor am I claiming it as my own. But Buhle needs to be taught a lesson... to actually come to my mother's house to drop the baby without talking to me about it?

Buhle: "I would never do that, Bhekifa and I have been dating for a while now. Sandile is proof of that."

Mariam cackles, clapping her hands in disbelief. Her eyes find me, I can't look into them as they are scolding me.

Sabelo: "Sandile baby."

Sabelo expresses, I think he's enjoying this show or he's being his usual stupid-self.

Mariam: "Bhekifa!"

Me: “Ma.”

I see a lecture coming.

Mariam: “Is this what you have done for yourself? Dating women that look like this thing and giving them babies? Is this how you plan to live your life? Planting bastards all over Gauteng?”

I hope she is not expecting a reply, I don't have one.

Buhle: “Bhekifa, are you going to sit there and let your mother insult me?”

Why is she here?

Me: “I didn't ask you to come to my house Buhle, I told you that I want nothing to do with you. I will take care of my son.”

Buhle: “You can't do this to me, Bhekifa. I have given my life to you, I lost my job because of you. Your stupid wife fired me.”

It was about time.

Mariam: “Sisi, did I not tell you to bring forward proof that this child is a Zulu?”

Buhle: “He is a...”

My mother interrupts Buhle's complaint by raising her hand.

Mariam: “I don't run a feeding scheme, now get out of my house.”

No one cannot disobey that tone, I look away when Buhle glares at me. She knows her way out.

Sabelo: "Shame, let me walk you out."

What is Sabelo doing? Rose follows them and I'm left to face my mother's wrath.

NELLY PAGE.

Great! Now I have to conduct interviews for a new personal assistant as if I have time for that. Buhle just had to be a wolf in sheep's clothing. I can be stupid sometimes. Or is it that people take advantage of you when you're kind?

I'm driving home after a long day at work, I'm almost there. Bhekifa has been blowing up my phone, the stubbornness of a Zulu man has him leaving crazy multiple missed calls. There are messages as well, I don't have the strength to read them. He will just ruin my day further.

I notice my father's car parked as I drive in the yard, it's too early for him to be home. I dash into the house after parking next to his and enter through the kitchen. There are male voices coming from the living room, inquisitive and curious as to what the whispering is about, I find myself listening in.

"I knew I can count on you, Phakathi, good job."

No way, could he be talking to Phakathi Funani?

"You know me, mhlonishwa (boss), I always get the job done."

Yep, that's him alright. I recognise that voice from anywhere, Phakathi Funani is a guy I met in Varsity. I was a freshman and he happened to spot this skinny girl who was lost in the corridors while trying to find her next class. He was kind enough to accompany me, it became a norm. Honestly, I thought he would grow tired of it, but it became tradition for him. We grew apart after I married Bhekifa, he said no wife of his will have a male best friend. I'm surprised, he's still acquainted with my father.

Dad: "That's what I like to hear."

My father actually chuckles, something he hardly ever does. Whatever job Phakathi did, must have been big for my father to be so ecstatic. I keep myself busy with whatever my hands find when I hear the sound of their footsteps, trailing towards the kitchen. My father stops at the entrance, his eyes light up upon seeing me.

Dad: "Hau, you're home baby."

Phakathi is standing next to him, waiting for me to open my mouth. I have no words really, my mind is still circulating around the conversation they were having. It sounded like some illegal deal.

Phakathi: "Nelly Page, mehlo madala." (Long time no see.)

True, it has been forever. Though I can't help, but notice that he still looks at me with gleaming eyes, something Bhekifa picked up and that's when he laid rules and decided that I had to cut ties with my long time best friend.

Me: "Ngabe ubaba uyaphila?" (How are you dad?)

I greet him with a hand shake because we don't do hugs in this house, maybe my mother and me. Like I said, this one demands respect.

Dad: "Just tired my child, your mother went to a church meeting. She didn't cook."

This is how he asks me to make supper.

Me: "I'll get to it baba."

I can feel Phakathi's eyes on me as I talk to my father, the stabbing gaze forces me to shift my eyes to him.

Dad: "Phakathi is helping out at church, we have a new project coming soon and we need his building skills."

My father explains without me asking anything, I guess that's what the conversation was about.

Me: "I see, you're still into building?"

Phakathi: "My second love."

Gosh, he's giving me the look. I'm sure you have guessed what his first love is.

Me: "How long do you plan on building beautiful houses and not getting the credit for it?"

I bring that up and kick away the first love nonsense. Phakathi is a builder. He would make a great architect, he's good at designing projects, but his life is not going the way he wants it to. He thinks he has bad luck and his father has everything to do with it.

Phakathi: "You know it's not about that, I have no worries as long as I'm building something."

Vision gone down the drain.

Me: "If you say so."

Dad: "You may go now, it's getting late."

My father excuses him, the young man hesitates before bidding us goodbye.

Dad: "Please make me a cup of tea."

With that, he walks back to the living room.

-BHEKIFA ZULU.

The house feels so hallow without my family, there's no aroma that greets me the moment I walk through the door, no sounds of kids laughing that make the house feel like a home. How will I sleep without my wife and kids here?

I had to leave my mother's house, she had insisted that I stay for a few days. To be honest, Sabelo and his wife were getting on my nerves. I don't have the energy to prepare a little something to eat, so I opt for an early night.

Thoughts of Nelly float inside my head, they have me tossing and turning on the bed. I'm sweating and growing uneasy by the second, a deep urge to call her jumps at me. I have had many of these today, there is nothing more painful than calling someone you love and they reject your call.

I notice a text from an unsaved number... thinking it could be my wife, I open it to find that it's from the cleaner. I don't know why, but my lips curl into a subtle smile as her face flashes before my eyelids. She's an intriguing woman, keeps me on my toes and guessing. You can't really read Cheryl, there's something fascinating about her, something that pulls me to her. It's crazy honestly.

Is it insane that I'm calling a woman I hardly know at 10 in the night? I must be losing it. She's on quarantine, I will just use this

as an excuse for the call. It's ringing, I'm growing impatient as it rings unattended.

Cheryl: "Mr. Zulu."

Her voice fills the line as I'm about to hang up, I ease into the blankets, getting comfortable. Did I mention there's something about her voice that makes something in me jump? I can't really explain it.

Me: "How did you get my number?"

Stupid question I know

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I'm a senior in the company. Our privacy is not exactly protected.

Cheryl: "Is this why I was woken up? I thought the world was on fire."

She's funny, that I would admit.

Me: "I have to make sure that I don't have a stalker."

Cheryl: "No offence Mr. Zulu, but you border on boredom, plain and strange. Stalking you would be a hobby I wouldn't risk taking."

Me: "Ouch, are you always this blunt Cheryl?"

She chuckles at my question.

Cheryl: "I owe no one lies."

See? She's an intriguing woman, keeps me guessing like I said.

Me: "Are you okay? How is quarantine treating you?"

Cheryl: "Ahh! It's going great. Covivi is keeping me company, we're having a pyjama party right now."

She makes me laugh again, her sense of humour is... I just love it.

Me: "Be serious Cheryl, is everything okay?"

I sound worried, don't I? The line goes quiet you can hear a pin drop, it's awkward for me because I know she's still on the receiving end.

Cheryl: "My daughter has the virus, they won't let me see her. I don't understand how this happened, one minute she was fine and the next..."

The silence again, I don't know what to say, how to comfort her. She continues laying out her problems and how she can't change what is happening to her and her family. A listening ear is all I can give her right now.

-NELLY PAGE.

“Mom, my teacher says we should bring our birth certificates. We’re doing an essay about our roots.”

Victor tells me, I catch a glimpse of his eyes in the rear-view mirror. I’m driving them to school, my father had to leave early for work. He loves taking them to school whenever they visit and they love it just as much.

Me: “Why bring your birth certificate?”

Vicky: “There are different nations in our class, so each person has to bring one.”

Me: “I’ll look for it.”

I left their documents in the house, how did I forget to pack them? I will go during the day while Bhekifa is at work. Ayanda is seated next to me, soundless as a church mouse. She asked me this morning why we’re not with her father. How do I tell her that my marriage is none existent? The kids are going to be devastated when they find out, but this time I can’t stay for their sake. Bhekifa wants to be father of all nations, planting his seed wherever he trips and falls. I will not be a part of that.

-SABELO ZULU.

Ever felt like you're being watched, even when you're fast asleep? Well, my brain informs me that there are eyes stabbing me. The warning pulls me out of a deep slumber, to find my mother standing in the doorway with her arms folded across her chest. I jolt up to a sitting position... this woman... What kind of witchcraft is this?

Me: "Magriza?"

She frowns at me.

Mariam: "It's nice neh, you and your lazy wife are sleeping like royalty while your brother is suffering."

Haibo! What is happening now?

Me: "Ang' vurstaan magriza." (I don't understand.)

Mariam: "It's after 9am Sabelo and you're still fast asleep, the kids have gone to school and as usual I had to see them off."

I thought we were talking about Bhekifa, how did the kids jump into this conversation?

Me: "Mama it's too early to listen to you complaining, don't you get tired?"

Mariam: "Don't tell me nonsense wena, I want to know about that cheap girl that was in my house yesterday."

Yeah hey! I respect old age, her brain appears to be relaying so many things at the same time. Now we're talking about Buhle.

Me: "Can I get dressed first and brush my teeth, plus my wife is still sleeping. We don't want to wake her up now, do we mama?"

The smile I give her aggravates her, God really went out with this one. My jaw drops when she pulls the blanket off of us and throws it on the floor, this is the highest level of abuse. It's a good thing we're dressed. Rose slowly opens her eyes, she blinks once, closes them and curls into a ball as she falls back to sleep much to Mariam's irritation.

Mariam: "The living room, now and wake this Godzilla of yours."

She did not just compare my wife to a Godzilla, unhappy with her statement I follow her to the kitchen, right after covering Rose up. My mother can only dream of having the beauty my wife has.

Me: "What was that about mama?"

She frowns at my question and replies with a tongue click.

Mariam: "That girl that was here yesterday, is she the one you had paid to sleep with your brother?"

Me: "Yes."

Mariam: "I have always known that you're stupid Sabelo, of all the girls in Soweto, you had to go for street trash."

Me: "Buhle was the perfect candidate mama."

Mariam: "Then what went wrong? The plan was to find someone who will lure Bhekifa out of his marriage, someone we can easily control. Not a baby mama who thinks she has rights over a man because he left a seed inside her fungus womb."

Mariam? Heee! This woman spews nonsense, abomination.

Me: "I don't know what went wrong magriza, she wasn't like that at first."

Mariam: "I don't care, fix it. I will not be raising another brat, get that idiot to back off. It's bad enough that I don't have control over Bhekifa's money and wena with your idiocy add to my troubles. Fix it Sabelo, or you and I will have a big problem."

She angrily storms out of the kitchen... Google stress and you will find Mariam's old wrinkled face next to the word.

-NELLY PAGE.

“Thabang hi, is my husband in?”

I ask Bhekifa’s personal assistant over the phone. I need to make sure that he’s not at home before going there. It’s lunch time and if I leave now, I will make it back to the office before lunch is over.

Thabang: “He’s at a brunch meeting Mrs Zulu.”

Great.

Me: “Thank you Thabang, please don’t tell him I called. I’m planning a surprise and I don’t want to spoil anything.”

Thabang: “My lips are sealed.”

Oh I believe him alright... I make it out of the office and drive down town, there’s no traffic, usually lunch hour twins with morning rush hour. I get to the house in less than 10 minutes, my ears and eyes are on autopilot... Alert to the T... any sounds or movements, I would spot it before my brain can relay the message.

The kid’s documents are in my bedroom, I find them with no hassles. Why not pack some of my clothes and important essentials as well? As I walk out of the bedroom, the sound of a door shut stops my heart from beating. It jumps to my throat,

as the realization that my husband is in the same house hits me. Bhekifa never uses the kitchen entrance and whenever he gets home, the first room he goes to is the living room.

I might be able to escape him if I'm quick on my feet, cautiously I walk down the flight of stairs. The coast is clear... or not... like he knew where I was he slides in front of me from the kitchen and flashes the biggest grin that has shivers rippling through me.

15

NELLY PAGE.

I know that look on Bhekifa's face, the destructive expression, he is not a happy man.

Me: "What are you... doing here?"

I didn't intend for my voice to tremble like this, it just painted the fear in my heart and Bhekifa Zulu feeds on fear. He hasn't healed from the beating he got and here he is, on attack mode.

Bhekifa: "Did you think you were going to hide from me forever mamakhe (wife)?"

His shoulders take a predatory bow, he puts his hands on the rail of the stairs, caging me and his fingers start tapping the wood in a furious beat.

Me: "I don't want trouble Bhekifa, I came to get some of my things."

Bhekifa: "Well, this just goes to show that we're fated to be together. Little did I know that, my wife would be here."

He says with a mocking tone.

Me: "Can I pass?"

The door is three feet away, I can make it out if he could just move.

Bhekifa: "You are not going anywhere wifey."

His face flushes with rage before a cloud of warning settles on his features.

Me: "My father knows that I'm here Bhekifa, if you try anything you..."

His laugh breaks my words.

Bhekifa: "I don't scare easily Nelly, you of all people should know that."

Me: "I thought I did until I saw you being beaten up by a man half your size."

The words I choose start a war, the man frowns and his nose flares. He grabs my arm with ruthless pressure and pulls me down the remaining three steps, my bags tumble to the floor.

I stumble almost falling, but he grabs me and sends me flying with one hard slap. Naturally, a scream is pulled out of my mouth. I take on survival mode, quickly pick myself up and grab the vase displayed on the table. He ducks as I throw it at him, the pieces scatter on the tiled floor.

Bhekifa: "You're throwing things at me now Nelly?"

He spits out the words, walking to me with anger in his eyes. My stomach clenches when he cracks his knuckles.

Me: "I'm simply defending myself."

He laughs.

Bhekifa: "Like you did at your mother's house when you poured hot water on me?"

Me: "Survival first, you taught me that."

This time he smirks.

Bhekifa: "I'm going to put you in your place mkami (wife), you need to remember who wears the pants in this house."

His tone becomes chilly, his voice stern with no sympathy and I know if I don't leave this house now, I might never walk out alive. My feet move me towards the kitchen, I hear his feet thundering behind me.

There's a saying, never show your enemies your back, but I can't afford to turn in this case. I'm afraid I will meet a punch on my face.

The knife stand is at close range, a large hand furiously grips my wrist as I reach for a particular knife. He turns me around and I kick him on the nuts at a second's notice. He falls on his knees,

groaning in pain, this gives me a chance to run to the door. The kitchen door to be precise, it's closer and dammit, it's locked. I can't find the key, so I jump over an injured Bhekifa and run to use the living room door.

Me: "Why are you doing this?"

I scream while trying to open the locked door, I'm reminded of my bags that fell on the stairs. My keys are in there. As I turn Bhekifa punches me on the jaw that I feel it twist. I'm back on the floor, bleeding spewing out of my mouth. There's nothing on my mind, but getting out of the house...

If only I could get to the car... if only I could get to the car... the words repeat in my head like a broken record as I gather strength to pull myself up. My chin throbs with pain, my head hurts. Just as I make it to my knees Bhekifa kicks me on the stomach.

I bend over sharply and drops of blood spatter on the wooden tiles. He feels he hasn't had enough, so he goes for another kick and another one and adds the forth one just for control. Because he is Bhekifa Zulu, he feeds on women's weakness.

Bhekifa: "Ushaya mina Nelly? Umageba? Do you know who I am?" (You're hitting me?)

He shouts in my ear after laying his hand around my neck, my hands grab his wrist to pull him away, however his grip is too strong and too tight that it deprives me of air. He brings me up by my neck, pins me on the wall.

His eyes are burning with rage, an animalistic expression has taken over him. I can't recognise the man who is looking back at me, he smirks pressing his hand on my neck. I get the feeling of suffocating, my lungs are caving in. I try to tell him I can't breathe, but I can't speak. My eyes roll up, his face blurs as I feel a fade away. I hear his mocking laugh, he's having a good time at my expense.

Bhekifa: "It would be better if you were dead, it's the only way we'll solve this problem we have."

His words splinter inside my heart causing more pain than the one he is inflicting on me physically, I don't want to die. I have children, they can't grow up without their mother.

Bhekifa: "But not now."

He says and releases my neck, I come crashing down with a loud thud. My eyes find the door, in my head I see myself walking out and driving to my father's house where I will feel safe. It's just wishful thinking.

I'm lying face down and on my stomach unable to move, Bhekifa squats beside me. He starts stroking my hair, gently and with care. This is the possessiveness I spoke of, he's feels he has a claim over me only because I said "I do" all those years ago.

Bhekifa: "All I wanted from you was for you to respect me, Nelly. Was I asking for too much? Why must you be so unfair? Why must you treat me like I mean nothing to you? First you pack your things, take kids, my kids Nelly and leave my house."

His tone is vicious.

Bhekifa: "Those kids are Zulu, they belong to the Zulus not Magwazas. I have rights over them, not your parents."

He bangs his fists on my head with these words, I scream in agony, it feels like my scalp is going to crack.

Bhekifa: "It's okay dali wam, I'm only trying to knock some sense into this hard head of yours." (My darling.)

He bangs my head again harder this time, as he says the last words, it's so loud that I swear I feel my brain shake.

Me: "Ngi... ngiyacela babakhe... ngiya... cela... Mageba. Ngixolele." (I'm sorry my husband, forgive me.)

Knowing Bhekifa, soft talk cools him down. Let him feel the love he craves for and he will soften up like a big teddy bear.

Me: "I... was angry, I'm sorry. I didn't... have the right... to... be angry with you, I didn't have the right to walk out on you."

If I will go to hell for lying then let it be so, as long as I make it today.

Bhekifa: "That's right

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you had no right. You should be submissive to me as your husband, I say jump and you ask how high."

He has resorted to tapping on my head with his knuckles, it's still painful. My head hurts like hell and I think he broke my ribs.

Me: "Please hold me Mageba, I need you to hold me."

-SABELO ZULU.

Mariam has been checking the time on her watch, her body and facial features are expectant and she has grown anxious. The couch should complain right about now... I'm growing annoyed by her uneasiness.

Me: "Are you waiting for the lotto numbers mama?"

She eyes me with a cold look, Mariam loves clicking her tongue by the way.

Me: “Maybe I might be able to help you if you tell me what’s wrong.”

Mariam: “I can’t stop thinking about Bhekifa.”

I didn’t expect this one.

Me: “Bhekifa is an old man, just in case you forgot.”

Mariam: “I’m sure you know that I have been seeing a sangoma.” (Traditional healer.)

Me: “I knew it, I can read you like a book mama. So you’re bewitching your son?”

Mariam: “I’m not a witch, stupid child. I had to put your brother in place, you know Nelly’s family prays. I hate that, I hated that from the beginning and I knew she was going to cause us nothing but trouble.”

Like I said...

Me: “You are a witch mama, only witches hate Christians. I hope you haven’t done anything to my wife, I like Rose the way she is. She is perfect for me.”

Mariam throws a cushion my way, I catch it before it hits me on the face.

Mariam: "Rose is the witch here, why do you think you're so obsessed with her?"

Me: "My Rose? Never shame, not that beautiful woman. Witchcraft is for ugly people, like that ugly friend of yours Mponzeng. Yeyi, that woman was a mistake. I'm sure her parents are still complaining to God."

For once Mariam smiles at my words.

Mariam: "Stop talking nonsense and listen to me, the sangoma said Bhekifa is going to do something to Nelly and that will be the final cut to their cursed marriage."

Me: "You mean kill her?"

Mariam: "I hope not, he wasn't specific. I'm nervous Sabelo, I don't want him to kill her."

Me: "You're worried about Nelly now?"

Mariam: "I'm worried about your brother, Nelly can go to hell. As long as it's not my son who sends her there."

Well Bhekifa going to jail won't be such a bad thing.

Me: "Relax and trust your sangoma friend, those people always know what they are doing."

I hope Bhekifa slaughters that Nelly woman.

-NELLY PAGE.

I loathe the day I married this monster. He agrees to my request. I can't say the tears have also worked in my favour, tears mean nothing to Bhekifa.

He slips his hands under my armpits and slides me up into his arms. He starts stroking my back, gently and whispering words of comfort in my ear. I'm lying in the arms of a lion who used to be a lamb, the man I was comfortable with and trusted enough to give him heirs. The man I loved beyond words.

Me: "It hurts Bhekifa when you're holding me like this, please take me to the couch."

I plead, trying to sound strong since my tears are useless. I'm disgusted by the kiss he places on my forehead after he scoops me up in his arms, he's looking into my eyes... his are cold... emotionless and diabolical.

Bhekifa: "I love you mkami, I will love you till death."

My stomach turns at the sound of his words, there is no meaning to the declaration. It's just empty words of a sick human. He is gentle when he places me on the couch, my body is fragile right now. I feel like I might break.

Me: "Thank you."

It's hard to speak, but I have to force myself, I hug my tummy and groan in pain. I have seen this survival technique on one of the crime shows, make your attacker think you're on their side. Do whatever you can to get them to believe you, it's easier when you know their weakness.

Me: Please get me a glass of water, my throat is dry."

He frowns and gives me a suspicious look.

Bhekifa: "You know I love you, right?"

Surprisingly, I haven't shed a tear. I'm too angry for that.

Bhekifa: "I said I love you, Nelly."

He snaps, it's the first time hearing such beautiful words said with vile intentions.

Me: "I know."

Bhekifa: "You know?"

He's angry again.

Me: "I love you too dali."

He grins, it's a creepy one. My eyes follow him as he walks to the kitchen, this is my chance to slip out of the house.

The palm of my hand opens, revealing the key I snatched from his pocket when he was hugging me on the floor. Bhekifa is still washing the glass, he has an OCD, nothing deep.

It feels like my intestines are ripping with each move I take, I make it down the couch nonetheless. I see him in the kitchen behind the sink.

In pain and struggling to walk, I drag my feet towards the door. I clip the key in, it makes a little noise as I twist it, but opens still.

There is no time to grab my bag, hope rises as the breeze from outside touches my face. It smells like freedom, the feeling doesn't last when I'm pulled back with so much force. My stubbornness won't let my feet completely move back so I fall flat on the doorstep.

My eyes find the husband, he's angry. Angrier than anything I have ever seen.

Bhekifa: "You think I'm stupid huh, you think I'm stupid?"

He shouts, kicking me on the stomach. I'm groaning on the floor like a dying goat, my gaze is on the road ahead. I'm praying that someone might pass, this road is always busy with, people passing by. Bhekifa grabs my legs and starts pulling me

into the house, I grab the security gate and hold on for dear life. I will not be going back in there.

Bhekifa: "Stop being stubborn, you're not going anywhere."

Me: "Bhe... ki..."

Strength leaves me, just when all hope is lost three people walk past.

Me: "He... help... me."

I manage a whisper and notice the husband hasn't seen them, he's too focused on pulling me into the house. The people spot us and stop, there are two men and a woman.

"Hey, what's going on there?"

One of the men shouts, the grip on my legs is gone.

Me: "Help me."

Only now my tears decide to come out to play, it's more like tears of joy.

Bhekifa: "Shit."

I hear him curse.

"He's beating up a woman, he's beaten up a woman."

One of the men is shouting at the top of his lungs, he's shouting for the whole neighbourhood to hear, while the others run

inside the gate. I'm still lying on my stomach, too weak to move. Bhekifa thinks he can explain his way out of this, these men look ready to attack.

I see more people coming men and women. Some are carrying shovels, some frying pans and others weapons I can't make out. I hear Bhekifa gasp before running towards the backyard.

BHEKIFA ZULU.

The angry mob is after me, I managed to hide behind a house next door. We have a gate in the back yard that leads there. I can hear their angry voices, there is no way out for me.

Me: "What have you done Bhekifa?"

How did I become this monster? Nelly doesn't deserve what I did to her. A man appears with a brick on his hand, he widens his eyes at me.

"I found him, he's this side."

He shouts for the others, strange how people feel empowered when they stand in unison. He blocks my way when I try to move past him.

Me: "Get out of my way you idiot."

He pushes me back and smashes the brick on my head, the force sends me on the ground. Screams break out as more of them come. The crowd rushes forward, shouting "get him, get him." Before I know it, I'm curled up on the ground and these people are beating me to a pulp.

I feel kicks, punches, blunt objects on my head. There is so much force in every blow, as if to smash me into the ground. Memories of my wife curled up like this on the floor haunt me, my heart breaks. This is what Nelly must have felt, helpless with no way out. I couldn't understand then. What kind of a monster have I become? I almost killed the mother of my children, my wife.

Me: "Please stop, stop."

I scream, using my arms to shield myself from the beatings. A blunt object comes for my abdomen, the blow sends blood up my throat and out of my mouth.

"You think you will hit a woman and we will let you go?"

A male voice barks, the mob agrees with him, attacking me in all corners and leaving no stone unturned.

"Kill him, he deserves to die."

My head spins as one of them kicks me on the face, I push myself on my knees to try to stand. I need to get out of here or I will die. The attack is fierce and deadly. My eyes find a brick on the ground, I quickly grab it and shout.

Me: "Stop!"

While raising my hand ready to throw it at anyone, some guy kicks my hand and the brick tumbles to the ground. The same guy kicks me on the face, my head jerks back and instantly blood spatters from my mouth. I tilt my head to spit it out.

The technique I use to curl my body proves to be futile, I'm unable to protect myself. There is one option left and that is to play dead, I feel a fist land on my gut and someone comes with a leg. It lands on my chest and chokes me almost to death, this is my chance. I hit the ground face first and pretend to have fainted.

"Let him go, look at him. He's badly injured."

The bastard is right, I can't even breathe. I don't know who says this, but they agree with him. I listen to their footsteps as they stomp away from me and wait it out for about a minute. Just in case they are still in the premises.

NELLY PAGE.

Today I almost lost my life in the hands of my husband, if it were not for the people walking past, I don't know what would have become of me. Bhekifa was bent on killing me, the monster in him was fully unleashed. He killed my soul, I can still feel his hands tightened around my neck. The sound of his

groaning as he strangled me like I were a piece of clothing he can wring. The memory floods my mind like water rushing into a sinking ship. What if I will never be able to escape him, he will always find a way to get to me.

“Where is she?”

That’s my father’s voice, he’s yelling down the corridor. This is a public hospital and they don’t tolerate nonsense, he can’t be a starring here. There are about four more beds in this ward, three patients are fast asleep and one has been staring at the ceiling since I opened my eyes.

My heart skips when I see my father walk through the door, my mother follows behind him. Tears escape through my swollen eyes, I want to hide in his arms and cry my heart out. However I can’t move, I’m still in so much pain.

My father stands on my bedside with a clenched jaw, tears flood behind his eyes.

Mom: “Oh my child, what has happened to you?”

My mother is crying, she knows what happened to me, the nurse told her over the phone.

My father grabs a chair and sits. He takes my hand into his.

Dad: “I’m going to kill him.”

He seethes through closed teeth, my mother does what she does best and that is comfort her husband. He sighs in frustration when she places a hand on his shoulder, the frustration is not directed toward his wife, but the guilt I see in his eyes.

Dad: "Look what that boy did to my baby."

He's talking to his wife by the way, funny how they don't address each other by name.

Mom: "Can you talk?"

I can, I want to tell her, I can. But my throat hurts and there's an uncomfortable feeling grazing it.

Me: "Bhe... ki..."

Dad: "We know he did this to you."

I want him arrested.

Mom: "Why did you go there alone Nelly? You should have called me."

Should've? I hate this word, what's done is done. We can't change what has happened.

Me: "Police."

The word drags out of my mouth, it hurts when I speak.

Dad: "You want him arrested?"

I nod.

Dad: "Consider it done, we'll also get a restraining order against him."

Mom: "A restraining order is enough, but what will we tell the kids when their father goes to jail?"

She can't be serious.

Dad: "Those kids are old enough to understand, Bhekifa Zulu will be spending the night in prison."

I trust my father to protect me, my mother will not argue with him. She never does, his word is final and she knows it.

-CHERYL ZIKHALI.

Someone walks into my tent, everyone who comes in here is protected from head to toe. It makes it hard for me to differentiate between doctors and nurses, I have asked, but was given no answer. I'm not sure about the rules and regulations of this place

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I think the staff is not allowed to converse with the patients.

I'll go crazy if I don't say something, my mind wants to release the words I have held captive. Maybe I won't have to say anything, this man is looking at me. It's a long uncomfortable glare, I jump from the bed and step back. The fact that I can't see who is behind that mask creeps me out a little, now to have the person staring the way they are.

Me: "Is something wrong?"

He nods positively and places a finger against his mouth, gesturing that I keep quiet. This is getting strange, my eyes scan the spacious tent for any weapon I can use to defend myself.

"I'm here to take you away."

He whispers, sending my body on a shockwave. It locks up as my heart jumps to my throat, I'm not afraid of ghosts. I've never been, but humans creep me out, you never know what they are thinking. The human mind can release deadly desires, even God Himself must wonder how we can be so much like the devil.

Me: "Who are you? I'm going to scream."

He shakes his head, I wish he would just come out with it already.

Me: "What do you want?"

He's coming closer, there is no way out and he's standing between me and the exit. I can hear my heart pushing against my ribcage.

Me: "Hel..."

I don't complete the word because he jumps to cover my mouth, his arm circles my waist to hold me still. I kick and try to bite his hand, but he's stronger.

"Calm down Nkosi, it's me."

That voice, I know it.

"It's Jabu."

He says as he gently moves away from me, he takes the mask off and a grin welcomes me. I want to wipe it off with a slap.

Me: "What is your problem? You almost gave me a heart attack."

Nonsense, the fool is laughing.

Jabu: "The plan was to scare you and damn, I didn't think it would work."

Me: "Not funny, not funny."

The smile on his face vanishes so fast, you'd think it was fake.

Jabu: “Listen, we have to get out of here, everything is a lie. Sia having the virus, us being put under quarantine. It’s all a façade.”

Me: “I don’t understand.”

Jabu: “My cousin Nkateko works for the government as an undercover agent, he wasn’t okay with the fact that I was held under quarantine with no symptoms of the virus. He went and investigated, these people are not real doctors. They work for some Chinese human trafficking syndicate that is operating between South Africa and Zimbabwe.”

My head spins... Sia...

Me: “Where is Sia”

The question trembles out of my mouth in a whisper, my heart does that thing it did when I thought Jabu was a stranger who came to attack me.

Jabu: “I don’t want to lie to you Cheryl, Nkateko said there’s a possibility that she is being shipped to China as we speak.”

Me: “Please tell me this is a prank Jabu, tell me, you’re joking please.”

My chest tightens, fear engulfs me.

Jabu: "I'm sorry, it's not confirmed yet. He's looking into it, we have to get out of here. They will kill us if they find out that we know, we have to go now."

I can't move, my feet won't let me.

Me: "My baby, they have my baby."

Jabu: "I know you're shocked and hurting right now, but we can't stay here. Your mother and Earth are on their way home, my cousin sent us some of his men. There's a car waiting for us a few yards from these premises."

Jabu's voice becomes background sounds, I'm frozen with shock. Seeing that I'm not moving, Jabu grabs my hand and starts dragging me towards the exit. All I can do is accommodate the tears running down my face.

-BHEKIFA ZULU.

There is no one in sight, the place is as quiet as a suburb. I don't see Nelly as I limp my way past the front door. Darn those idiots, it takes forever for me to get to the car. The insurance company came through with a substitute while my car went for repairs.

I need to call my brother, I won't be able to drive like this. Locking the car doors is best, or perhaps I should drive to the nearest mall and park there. What if those savages come back to finish me? They did leave me for dead.

The pain has me tearing up, I think they broke my bones and I have a headache ordered from hell.

"Sabelo... you... have to help me."

I cry to my brother as he answers the phone.

Sabelo: "Bafoza, what happened? You sound like you're crying."

I don't sound like I'm crying, I am crying.

Me: "They beat me up... Sabelo."

I can't stop crying, this is not me. I don't cry, I never shed a tear.

Sabelo: "Who?"

There is panic in his voice.

Me: "Nelly and I were having an argument, the neighbours saw us and they beat me up."

The line goes quiet for a while.

Me: "Sabelo, are you there?"

Sabelo: "Yes, I'm here. Where are you? Come home."

Me: "I won't be able to drive, I'm badly injured and I can't drive to the hospital. What if Nelly has called the police on me?"

Sabelo: "Why would she do that? You're the one who was thrashed not her, unless you..."

He indulges in silence again.

Sabelo: "You beat your wife up bafo?"

Me: "Please come get me, I'm going to die Sabelo. I'm going to die alone."

I'm confused by his laughter, I'm in pain and he's laughing at me.

Sabelo: "You're not going die hawu Bhekifa."

He continues laughing.

Me: "Just come and get me."

I sniff, wiping my tears away.

Sabelo: "Hang in there, I'll ask a friend to drop me off."

My mother's house is not too far from where I live, I have to hide in the car until my brother gets here. I have embarrassed myself again, got beaten up twice in a week.

In less than fifteen minutes a white Kia Picanto parks in front of me, my brother jumps out and waves at the driver who drives off in full speed.

Relieved to see a familiar face, I get out of the car to meet him. I guess I must be a fool to expect a hand from him because he studies me with his eyes before bursting out in laughter. I watch him as he laughs until he falls butt down on the grass. I will die here while he is mocking me with that loud sound.

SABELO ZULU.

It is so unlike my brother to be sensitive, Mariam has done her worst on her son. I wish I could say I feel for him, I'm actually enjoying the show. Bhekifa insisted that I help him into the house, he doesn't want our mother to see him in the state he is in. I should take pictures just for control.

Bhekifa: "Please lock the door, just in case those people come back."

He tells me as I help him to the couch, I do as told.

Me: "Do you need anything else?"

Bhekifa: "Yes, I need help with dressing these wounds or else I will die in my sleep."

His answer makes me laugh.

Bhekifa: "What is this bafo? Do you enjoy seeing me in pain?"

The seriousness on his face makes me laugh even louder, I have to sit down for this.

Me: "I'm sorry bafo, it's just that I have never seen you like this and it's funny that you think you're going to die from minor wounds."

Bhekifa: "Minor wounds? Do you not see what they did to me, Sabelo?"

Me: "Yes, but you're exaggerating it nawe."

Bhekifa: "Haibo ndoda, they smashed my head with a brick. I could have a concussion."

Me: "I think you should go to the hospital."

Bhekifa: "I can't, the police are probably looking for me."

Me: "If they were, then they would find you here."

He didn't think of that, there's a sudden knock as he opens his mouth to speak.

Bhekifa: "Don't open it."

He's stupid.

Me: "Phola bafo, phola." (Relax.)

What if it is the police? I don't want to go to jail for holding a prisoner.

Bhekifa: "Sabelo stop."

Bhekifa shouts, but I don't listen to him. I'm met by two policemen as I open the door.

Me: "Bantu bomthetho." (Officers.)

I greet with a smile and my heart dances to the thought of Bhekifa going to jail.

Cop: "Bhekifa Zulu?"

God is good.

Me: "He's here, please come in."

I turn to find him standing on his feet.

Cop: "Are you Bhekifa Zulu?"

I see pain in his eyes as my brother looks at me, he feels betrayed. He nods to the officer, reluctantly.

Cop: "Your wife Nelly Zulu has laid charges against you, you are under arrest for domestic violence."

Me: "What?"

Time to put up an act.

Me: "My brother would never do that poyisa (police), look at him. He's clearly injured, the only person who should be laying charges here is him."

Cop: "If your brother wants to open a case he will do it at the station, we have to do our job and take him in."

Bhekifa looks defeated as the officer handcuffs him, it would have been fun to watch him resist arrest.

Me: “Please get him a doctor first, he won’t survive the night with these injuries.”

Bhekifa: “Call my PA bafo and tell him to call my lawyer.”

Bhekifa shouts to me as they walk him out, maybe his mother will call his PA, I will wait it out a day or two.

-CHERYL ZIKHALI.

Jabu drove us to his house in Diepkloof extension after fetching my mother and Earth from our house. Nkateko is apparently tailing the people that have Sia. It’s been too long and nothing has come up yet.

Jabu: “You should go to bed, I’ll wake you up when he calls.”

Me: “No, I will wait here with you. I won’t be able to sleep.”

He takes the TV remote and turns down the volume.

Me: “You want to sit in awkward silence?”

Jabu: “We never have those, your mother and Earth are sleeping.”

Me: “My mother sleeps like a rock.”

He moves to sit next to me, grabs my legs from the couch and places them on his lap. The act has me frowning in confusion.

Jabu: "Relax, this will help you."

He's massaging my feet, it feels good. I lean back on the couch and relax like he said.

Me: "So, your cousin is James Bond?"

He laughs.

Jabu: "You could say that."

Me: "I thought those things happen only on TV. How long has he been working as an agent?"

Jabu: "I don't know, he's an undercover agent and no one in the family knows about it. I found out by accident, I heard him talking to his boss over the phone."

Me: "Do you think he will find Sia?"

Jabu: "I know he will, I trust him. He's put many assassins behind bars, I don't know anyone who has so many enemies in jail like Nkateko does. It's a good thing no one knows the face behind the undercover agent."

Me: "How long do you think it will take for him to find her? What if Sia has crossed the borders, Jabu? If that's the case, then I will never see my child again."

I can't stomach the thought.

Jabu: "You know this massage is meant to help you relax, not stress you further. I told you, Nkateko is on it. I trust him and I need you to trust him as well."

It is easier said than done. How does a mother comfort her bleeding heart?

-SABELO ZULU.

{Aw thuza skorokoro.}

{Aw pusha skorokoro.}

{Pusha didang, pusha.}

{Aw push, push, push.}

{Pusha didang.}

My mother stops what she's doing in the kitchen when I walk in dancing and singing, she frowns at me, folding her arms across her chest.

Mariam: "And then wena?" (What is with you?)

Me: "Life is nice magriza." (Granny.)

I spin in a dance and pull her hand to join me... because she is Mariam and has no life left in her, the old woman pushes me away.

Mariam: "Voetsek. What are you happy about?" (Piss off.)

Me: "Yoh, yoh, yoh! Mama, you won't believe what happened."

I can't wait for her to hear this

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she inquisitively looks at me.

Me: "Your son decided to beat up his wife."

Mariam: "This is the reason you're so happy?"

Why is she frowning like that? I should get my mother a man, I can't stand living with a frustrated woman.

Me: "Listen, I'm not done."

Her response is a tongue click, I'm not bothered.

Me: "You constantly tell me that I'm the stupid son, turns out you have two. Bhekifa, my dear brother beat his wife in public mama. Right where the world could see and guess what they did. They attacked him."

Mariam: "What?"

Okay, I didn't expect the scream.

Me: "I'm telling you, bricks were flying left, right and centre. They went Jackie Chan on him."

Mariam: "What are you telling me, Sabelo? How is my son?"

Her question takes me back to the phone call when he was crying and I try to hold the laugh that's tickling me, but fail dismally.

Mariam: "Why are you laughing? Where is my son?"

My mother shouts, she's too dramatic.

Me: "He's fine, relax. The police took him, your daughter in-law got him arrested."

Mariam: "I am going to deal with that girl, I swear she won't see me coming."

Me: "Hiabo magriza, this is what you wanted moes. You said the sangoma..."

Mariam: "Shut up, you fool. You're celebrating your brother's downfall, are you crazy?"

Me: "I thought it's what we wanted."

Mariam: "How many times do I have to tell you that the war is between Nelly and us not Bhekifa? I want him out of jail today Sabelo, you're going to fix this."

Listen to this old woman.

Me: "Let him spend a night or two hau mama."

I duck as she throws a wooden spoon at me.

Mariam: "Get your brother out or you and your family will leave my house."

Me: "You're being personal now magriza." (Granny.)

Mariam: "I'm serious Sabelo, you don't want to test me."

Me: "Why magriza? Why? Can't you let me be happy for once?"

Mariam: "Pap and cabbage will make you happy when your brother is locked up, who will buy you food? Who do you think pays for this house?"

I didn't think of that.

Me: "Okay mama, I'll contact his lawyer. Eyy but you should have heard a grown man cry. Sabelo I don't want to die, I'm going to die bafo."

My mother narrows her eyes at me as I imitate Bhekifa and burst into laughter, this is the highlight of my week. I should have taken a video.

-NELLY PAGE.

I haven't heard anything from Bhekifa, going outside has been a struggle. I had to stay locked up in my father's house, afraid that I might bump into him. Bhekifa was released three days after his arrest, money really does make things happen.

His lawyer cried domestic violence, claiming I had beat my husband up and because we were both injured we walked away with nothing but a slap on the wrist. The neighbours who witnessed the abuse and were responsible for Bhekifa's injuries were too afraid to come forward. No one wants to find themselves in court testifying to a crime they were involved in. My father got me a straining order against Bhekifa, my lawyer is still working on the divorce papers.

There's a knock on my bedroom door, my mother walks in after.

Mom: "Your father took the kids to school."

I sit up from the bed, my wounds are healing, but my heart is still heavy and broken.

Me: "Thank you ma."

Mom: "I made soft porridge, come and join me."

Me: "I'm not hungry."

Mom: "That's what you said last night, you have to eat."

I can't stomach anything at the moment, my stomach turns when I put food in my mouth.

Me: "I'll eat later, how is Ayanda?"

She's upset with me because I wouldn't let her meet her father, she is a child and doesn't understand what's going on.

Mom: "Don't worry about her, your father will talk to her. Bhekifa's uncle called, they are coming this weekend."

The meeting with his family is still to take place, I'm not up for it. I know they will force me to go back to my marital home.

"Sanibonani ek'seni." (Good morning.)

My brother Thokozani walks in with a smile on his face, my mother's day has been made. A light scream leaves her mouth as she hurries to hug her son, he's tall that she has to stand on her toes. Thokozani chuckles lightly before letting go.

Zani: “Qhawekazi.” (Queen.)

Mom: “You don’t love me anymore, six months Zani. Where have you been?”

Zani: “You know I go where amathonga lead me.” (Ancestors.)

My mother sighs, being a Christian she was against my brother accepting his spiritual gift. But it wasn’t her choice to make, here he is doing just fine.

Zani: “Dadewethu.” (My sister.)

The smile on his face has vanished and worry takes over.

Me: “Zaza.”

My smile meets his, he has always hated me calling him that from the time I was a little girl, Thokozani is five years older than me. The age gap made us closer, we were always together growing up.

Zani: “How are you?”

There is concern in his voice, I know my father told him about Bhekifa.”

Me: “I’m here, alive.”

I make it out of bed to hug him, he suffocates me in a hug. My legs hang down from the floor as he lifts me up.

Me: “Hayi Zaza, I can’t breathe.”

He laughs and puts me down.

Zani: "I was checking for any broken bones."

Me: "I'm okay Bhuti." (Brother.)

Mom: "You two talk while I make warm breakfast."

I'm offered porridge and the baby boy gets an English breakfast?

Zani: "Qhawekazi." (Queen.)

My mother smiles at this declaration and leaves us.

Me: "Come sit."

NELLY PAGE.

Thokozani is studying me under his gaze, his eyes are trailing the bruises on my face. His jaw clenches and unclenches as he reaches for my hand.

Zani: “Do you remember when you fell from a tree.”

I giggle at the memory and the seriousness in his voice, he doesn't smile, but keeps a frown instead.

Me: “You cut the tree down because you were angry that I sprained an ankle and dad punished you. You cut down a forty year old tree Zaza.”

Zani: “You wouldn't stop crying and that was the only way to make you stop.”

Me: “And I did.”

He sighs, heavily.

Zani: “Remember the promise I made to you?”

Me: “That you will always protect me from anything and anyone.”

Zani: “And remember what I told you the day you got married?”

Me “If my husband ever touches me you will turn him into a monkey?”

He laughs, that’s not what he actually said. Thokozani has always been overprotective.

Zani: “I said I will kill Bhekifa if he ever lays a finger on you.”

I sigh at his words, I remember him uttering them.

Me “He changed Bhuti, he became an animal. I never thought Bhekifa would ever do that to me.”

Zani: “Yeah, people change Nelly. I’m glad you left him, you deserve better than that him.”

Me: “I know, but how do I stop loving him? Bhekifa has hurt me so much and I wish I could stop hating him. I hate myself for loving him like I do and I’m afraid Zaza. It terrifies me that I will go back to him like I always did, is it strange that I love him like I do?”

Zani “You’re human, no one expects you to be perfect.”

Me “I only wanted the best for my kids, I tried my best to keep them from having a weekend special dad. Bhekifa is good with them, but I fear that he will change and turn his back on them.”

I don’t know about the boys, but Ayanda will be devastated.

Zani: “Why does it sound like you want to go back to him?”

Me: “My mind is entertaining the thought, but my will has me grounded.”

Zani: “Thank God for your will, now tell your mind to stop. Bhekifa put his hands on you, who is to say he won’t kill you next time?”

The old Bhekifa wouldn’t, but this new man whose hobby is to make me cry lacks sympathy, compassion and his heart has grown cold.

Zani: “For the sake of your kids, you will forget about Bhekifa. Women are murdered by the very same men who promised to love and protect them, remember Tshegofatso Pule’s case not so long ago? At eight months pregnant, the father of her unborn baby ordered for her murder. She was stabbed and hung on a tree. Karabo Mokoena was killed by her ex-boyfriend. I’m pretty sure none of these women saw it coming, you didn’t see it coming Nelly. A woman is killed every three hours in South Africa, that’s five times the world average. You’re lucky neighbours saw you that day, or else we would be mourning your death.”

His words get to me, my heart feels heavy and sinks to pit of my stomach. I can’t fathom the thought of my kids losing their mother.

Me: “How do I get away from him? He seems to know where I am.”

Zani: “Don’t worry, we’re going to fix this.”

Me: “I hope you’re not talking about murder.”

Oops! Me and my big mouth, he gives me a disappointed look before sighing in frustration.

Zani: “I don’t belong to myself Nelly, the ancestors lead me. How will I show my face to them with blood stained hands?”

Me: “I’m sorry Zaza, I spoke out of context.”

He gives me a faint smile, it vanishes as fast as it came.

Zani: “Uyaphapha that’s why.” (You’re too forward.)

I shoot him with a wide grin and wrap my arms around him.

Me: “I love you too.”

I hear him chuckle before holding me back, things seem to be easy now that he’s here.

-NKATEKO MATHEBULA.

I’m lost in thought that I don’t hear the kettle boiling, this kettle is so old that I have to switch it off for the water to stop boiling.

I need to get a new one... Being a bachelor is not always fun, bad news for those who wish for it. I live alone in Johannesburg CBD, I would describe myself as a lone walker. Friends are the last thing I crave for in life and my heart is too broken to entertain a woman.

When my cousin Jabu told me that he was under quarantine with no symptoms of the virus, I knew this was my chance to crack the case I have been following for years. The case is personal to me, my wife was abducted five years ago in Thailand. We were newlyweds and had saved ourselves for our wedding night, Kulani was twenty two. Too trustful of the world, I would like to believe that she was naïve. I loved her regardless...

The night she was abducted is as clear in my head as the blue sky, we were at a restaurant, it was packed but we didn't mind the crowd. Kulani kept complaining about the heat, being asthmatic she started hyperventilating. Our waitress was taking forever to come.

The other staff we're too busy to assist us, I had to get up to find anyone who can get us a glass of water. It took a second, just a second for me to turn my back and she was gone. I went

crazy searching for her in the crowded restaurant, the manager had to ask me to leave as I was distracting the customers.

The police were of no help, I was told to go home, they would call me if anything came up. I died that night, spent the whole night searching for her on the streets. I took the news to social media.

There was no news of her and when my visa expired, I had to go back home without my bride. The South African police turned a blind eye to my plea, the woman was abducted in Thailand and there was nothing they could do.

That's when I was approached by a guy from Mozambique, Stephen Jacobs. He also lost his fifteen year old sister to sex trafficking. Stephen introduced me to a secretive group that dealt with bringing down the syndicate.

Months after joining them Kulani's body was found at a motel in Malawi, she was naked from waist down. Which indicated that she was raped, her throat was slit open. Her face battered, I almost couldn't recognise her.

Anger brewed inside me that day, I have been baying for their blood and one day my thirst will be quenched. I failed my wife, I will not fail Sia.

-BHEKIFA ZULU.

“Mr. Zulu.”

I raise my eyes to find Cheryl standing in the door way of my office.

Me: “Yes?”

She walks in, a cup of what I think is coffee is in her hand.

Cheryl: “Mam’Susan said you take your coffee with a teaspoon of sugar and a dash of milk.”

Me: “Have you been promoted to tea lady?”

She smiles her smile lights up my gloomy day.

Me: “Don’t tell anyone, but I have been after mam’Su’s job. Making tea is art, I swear.”

I manage a quick chuckle, she puts the cup on my desk.

Me: “Thank you.”

Her eyes are all over my face, I reckon she’s looking at the bruises and scars.

Cheryl: “Did you get the people who did this to you?”

Rumour has it in the office that I was mugged and left for dead, it's amazing what people can cook up. I let them believe whatever they want.

Me: "I don't know, I haven't been keeping tabs on the investigation."

Lies... may those fools burn in hell.

Cheryl: "It's sad how humans can be so heartless, you know the universe states that you actually attracted whatever is happening to you?"

This is the second time hearing her talk about the universe.

Me: "I disagree, I would never attract such a terrible thing."

Another lie proudly leaves my mouth, Cheryl stands with her arms folded across her chest. The look in her eyes has called me a liar, she sees right through me. She seems different, offish and there is a sadness on her face.

Me: "You're back early from quarantine."

She shrugs her shoulders and looks away from me, I could swear I saw a tear escape her eye. She brushes it away before I could make it out.

Me: "Cheryl."

What the hell am I doing? My feet have led me to her, I touch her shoulder and she looks up at me.

Me: "Is everything okay?"

She shakes her head, dropping her gaze to hide the tears that are pushing to be seen. I think of comforting her, but it won't be appropriate at work.

Someone clears their throat, the sound is coming from the door. I turn to find Thokozani, my wife's brother. Suddenly, I'm sweating.

Zani: "Am I disturbing something?"

He walks in with these words.

Me: "Thokozani? When did you get back?"

Zani: "What right do you have to ask me that?"

He turns his gaze to Cheryl and a subtle smirk plays at his lips.

Zani: "Nkosazana!" (Lady.)

He takes a light bow before raising his head to smile at her.

Zani: "Please excuse us, my brother in-law and I have important things to discuss."

I expect Cheryl to talk back like I know her to, but she nods with uttermost respect and quietly rushes out. Part of me wishes she

didn't leave, Thokozani is not kind to those who have crossed him and I fear the reason behind his visit.

It's not a second when the door shuts, Thokozani grips my shoulder and punches me in the gut. The punch jolts my breath from my lungs and out of my mouth in a gasp, just as I'm about to ease into the pain, he throws another punch on the same place. I groan in pain before a series of coughs evade from my mouth, the pain has me falling to my knees and curling into a spoon. I'm coughing like a patient dying from T.B.

Zani: "How does it feel to bow down to someone sbali?"
(Brother in law.)

At his question, the first thing I see are his feet right before my eyes. I'm almost kissing them, Thokozani pushes me back down as I attempt to raise my head.

Zani: "Phola mgodoyi, this is where you belong. Right on the ground, kissing my feet." (Relax bastard.)

Me: "Sbali ngiyakucela." (Please brother in-law.)

Zani: "Ucela ini wenja? You like acting like a dog, right? Then I will treat you like one." (What are you pleading for?)

Nelly must have told him what I did to her.

Me: "I didn't mean to touch her sbali, I apologised, you can ask her."

Zani: “Was that the first time you hit her, or when you almost killed her?”

I grind my teeth as he tightens the hold around my neck, his fingers dig on the curve of my neck, depriving me of air.

Zani: “Yini sbali? You can’t breathe?” (What is it?)

He questions at the sound of my gagging, his tone is mocking me. I’m whimpering and squirming uncomfortably under his touch, the tie around my neck adds to the suffocation.

Me: “Thokozani, please...”

My voice sounds raspy.

Zani “This is a warning Bhekifa, stay away from my sister. I know about the stupid meeting you and your uncles planned. You will tell them that you want nothing to do with Nelly anymore and cancel that meeting.”

He pulls away at this saying and watches me as I fight to breathe. I’m embarrassingly lying on the floor, my head spinning as my brain slowly accepts the air it wasn’t receiving. My eyes find Thokozani glaring down at me, a frown has claimed his features.

Zani: “Did you hear what I said?”

Me: “Nelly is my wife, I can’t let her go like our marriage means...”

He grabs my neck, lifting me up, with his hand slowly tightening around it. I take hold of his wrist, an attempt to lessen the grip. He pushes me back until my back hits the wall.

Zani: “I don’t think you heard me, sbali. I said you will cancel that meeting. I don’t want you anywhere near my sister. If I would have it, you would disappear. I don’t know maybe go herd cows in Swaziland or something, I hear the weather is nice over there. Unfortunately, my niece and nephews would be utterly heart broken. I hope we’re clear sbali, I don’t want to take drastic measures in ensuring my sister’s safety.”

I nod, reluctantly. He smirks and pulls away from me, again I’m brought to my knees.

Zani: “Ihaba sbali? Surely, you’re not this weak are you?”
(You’re exaggerating.)

I try not to look up at him, shame has me by the collar.

Zani: “I wish I could stay and chat, it was nice seeing you again... sbali.” (Brother in law.)

He leaves me with these words, Thokozani doesn’t know anything about my marriage. He’s just a big bully who thinks the word revolves around him, how does he expect me to turn my back on my family? Nelly has come back to me before, I know she will do it again.

19

NELLY PAGE.

“Ayanda get back here.”

Ayanda wants to send me into an early grave, the child has been causing trouble for days now. She wants her father. How do I bring Bhekifa around my kids when he is a danger to me?

Me: “Ayanda wait for me.”

She’s all over the mall and I can’t keep up with her, she insisted on coming with me, little did I know she was planning on giving me a headache. She disappears into the PEP store, great... Now I have to search for her in those darn aisles. I push the trolley faster, worried that she might be abducted, children go missing every day in this country.

“Nelly!”

Jesus, not him. What is he doing here? I stop, close my eyes and wish for him to go away.

“Nelly!”

Whoever said wishes come true lied, why is Bhekifa still here? I turn exhaling as loud as I can, his tall-self is standing before me

with a subtle frown on his face. He hasn't changed at all, still the Bhekifa I know. Stands with so much arrogance, a kind of confidence that would have you feeling inferior. He still smells good too. I mentally smack myself on the head for the thought.

Bhekifa: "How are you?"

Let me see, after you beat me up and almost killed me? How am I? I don't have time for this man, my baby is in the shop probably causing havoc. I turn the trolley to continue with my depressing day, but Bhekifa slides in front of the trolley.

Me: "What are you doing? You're violating the restraining order."

Bhekifa: "We're in public, surely you don't think I would attack you. Do you?"

Me: "I don't know Bhekifa, you tell me."

Bhekifa: "I want to apologise for what I did to you."

Me: "Not now, I have to get my daughter."

Bhekifa: "Ayanda? Where is she?"

Me: "Around."

Bhekifa: "What do you mean around? The mall is crowded Nelly and you let my daughter wander off with no adult supervision."

Is he kidding me?

Me: “Since when do you care about her? Were you not the one claiming she is not yours?”

Yeah hey! The devil knows no rest, look at this man. He has fallen into his claws. His pupils dilate at my exclamation, I don't understand the shock in his eyes. He would sing out loud about how Ayanda is not his daughter, she is his when it suits him.

Bhekifa: “Okay, you want to hurt me. I understand, but you can't talk to me like that. I'm still your husband. Do I not deserve respect?”

Wow!

Me: “Are there any cameras around?”

I ask, browsing the mall with my eyes, this must be a joke.

Bhekifa: “Come on Nelly.”

Me: “Who are you trying to fool Bhekifa? What respect are you talking about? Respect is earned.”

Bhekifa: “Nelly, please. Come back home, we can fix this. We love each other, I love you mamakhe.”

Me: “Don't call me that.”

I snap in annoyance, I don't have to tolerate him anymore.

Me: "I want nothing to do with you, the only thing that ties us together is this godforsaken marriage. Once were divorced..."

His grimaces at the mention of divorce, his nose creases as a flash of surprise swipes through his face.

Bhekifa: "Divorce? We're not getting a divorce, I won't allow it."

The gods must have been crazy to allow fate to pair me with this man, this is the highlight of my life.

"I knew it, it's your fault. You made daddy angry."

My brat is back and she's yelling for the whole mall to hear. This child is too much for her age. She runs to her father as I try to pull her hand, Bhekifa takes her up in his arms. I know he is about to play victim, that is one roll he plays best.

Me: "Ayanda!"

Ayanda: "You broke our family mom, I will never forgive you."

Someone smack this child for me, I can't believe she continues to yell and people are watching, undoubtedly shocked by the child speaking to an adult like she is her peer.

Bhekifa: "Our family is not broken baby, daddy will never allow it."

Master manipulator, we shall see.

Me: "Ayanda, let's go home."

She clings on to her father's neck, a belt will do at this point.
These are results of lack of discipline.

Me: "I said let's go... Ayanda."

I'm getting annoyed, I don't want to show my irritation lest Bhekifa dubs me an abuser. That's right, he is that desperate at the moment and would do anything to get me back with him, taking my kids would definitely be his first move and a good one at that because no way in Ramaphosa's country will I let my kids live with him and his toxic family.

Ayanda: "No, I'm going with daddy."

Hey! I am being tested.

Bhekifa: "I will bring her tomorrow."

Me: "No."

What does he take me for?

Bhekifa: "She is my daughter too, I have every right to be with my child."

Smart I see.

Me: "This was not planned, I can't just let you take her."

Ayanda: "I'm going with daddy, I want to stay with him."

I can't deal with this right now, Ayanda screams as I grab her arm. Can I smack her back to my father's house please?

Bhekifa: "Will you stop? You're scaring the child, I will bring her before bedtime tonight."

I am not okay with this.

Bhekifa: "Say goodbye to your mother, baby."

I must be crazy to let my baby walk away with that monster, Lord tell me I'm not making a mistake.

-NKATEKO MATHEBULA.

I'm meeting up with Stephen at Maponya mall, it's been days and I haven't updated Jabu. We might have a lead, but I don't want to get his hopes up. The mall is not so crowded

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thank God for the middle of the month. I find Stephen waiting for me at the food court.

Stephen: "I almost went back home."

He greets with these words, I join him at the table.

Me: "My apologies. What do you have me for me?"

He laughs at my question.

Stephen: "Straight to work I see?"

Me: "A little girl is missing, we don't have much time."

He nods and slides an A4 brown envelope across the table, I open it to find pictures of girls and boys being held captive in an abandoned building.

Stephen: "These footages were taken yesterday, the children are all under the ages of twelve."

Me: "How many are they?"

Stephen: "It's a hefty number, I think Sia is amongst them."

Me: "I can't imagine what she's going through, her mother said she was diagnosed with pneumonia before they claimed she had the virus. She's being neglected Stephen, I wouldn't put it past those animals."

Stephen: "I know, they don't care if they lose one. There's plenty more where they came from."

My wife was treated like trash too.

Me: "Do we have any leads?"

He looks around the mall before moving closer to whisper to me.

Stephen: "There's a load leaving for China tonight, they are located in Orange Farm. What a place to hide? They know the police hardly show their faces there."

Me: "Smart bastards, so what's the plan?"

Stephen: "I have recruited twelve men who are willing to die for the cause. Majority are like me and you, they have lost their loved ones to human traffickers."

Me: "Twelve men? That's not enough, it will be like walking into a lion's den and expect to walk out alive."

Stephen: "It's worth a try, or else you're going to lose that little girl."

I can't afford that.

Me: "What time are we meeting?"

Stephen: "We? You're sitting this one out Nkateko, it's too personal for you and bringing emotions to a mission is always risky."

Stephen knows how important this is for me, I'm not going to miss a chance to save that child.

Me: “You’re not taking me out of this mission, you know better than to do that. I have been after those people Stephen, don’t take this opportunity from me.”

Stephen: “Fine, but leave your heart at home.”

I don’t know what heart he’s talking about, I lost it the day I saw my wife’s dead body.

-SABELO ZULU.

“Your favourite son is here.”

I tell my mother as I walk into the living room with Bhekifa and his daughter strapped in his arms, another mouth to feed.

Argh!

Mariam: “What happened?”

I expect Mariam to be shocked, my brother hardly ever brings his kids over.

Bhekifa: “What do you mean?”

He questions her as he settles down with Ayanda on his lap, she’s holding on to him as if we bite. That’s how bad it is, the relationship we have with Nelly’s children is not strong. It’s null and void if I can put it lightly.

Mariam: "Why did you bring her?"

It's not hard to catch the annoyance in her voice.

Bhekifa: "She's my baby mama, I don't understand your question."

Sabelo: "Since when bafo? I thought we agreed that..."

Bhekifa: "We didn't agree on anything, you two convinced me otherwise, I never had any doubts about her until the two of you planted the thought in my head."

Mariam: "You're not a child Bhekifa, you could've put your foot down, but you went with it. You agreed with us that this is..."

Bhekifa covers Ayanda's ears as he grimaces at his mother... disrespectful...

Bhekifa: "Not in front of her, she doesn't know any of this."

He whispers, his voice chides an unhappy Mariam.

Bhekifa: "Ayanda, go find your cousins in their room. I will be with you just now."

Ayanda hops from his lap and rushes out of the living room.

Mariam: "Where did you find that child?"

She doesn't waste time.

Bhekifa: "I don't like your talks mama, Ayanda is my daughter."

Mariam: "Why are you like this Bhekifa? Must you be a fool like your brother?"

I am offended, extremely.

Me: "There's a time for everything mama and this is not it."

She ignores my complaint. When is this mother dying? Hai, she has lived man.

Bhekifa: "Tell me, what is wrong with me taking responsibility for my baby?"

Mariam: "Nothing at all son, but Ayanda can't be yours."

Bhekifa: "How do you know? I'm getting tired of your assumptions, first you told me that Ayanda couldn't be my child and like the fool you just called me, I let the words sink in. Then you showed me pictures of my wife with another man and had me thinking Nelly was cheating on me."

Sabelo: "She was bafo."

What's wrong with him? He should believe his family over anyone.

Bhekifa: "There was no video to prove your claim, just pictures of her having lunch with whoever that idiot was. All you did was

make me more insecure, I trusted Nelly and was confident that she would never betray me. But you had other plans for me, didn't you mama?"

The muti must be weighing off, we need to add more. Mariam glances at me, we must be thinking the same thing.

Me: "I don't like what you're implying bafo, magriza wants the best for you. You can't blame her for your failed marriage."

Bhekifa: "Sabelo please, I know what I'm talking about. I'm not an idiot, I know what I have done to my wife is wrong and I intend on fixing things with her."

Me: "Nelly gave you a special portion didn't she? This is not you talking."

We might be caught if we don't play our cards right, his phone rings as he prepares an answer for me.

Mariam: "Who is that?"

Ehh! Just like that?

Me: "Mama relax hau, let the man take his calls in peace."

Bhekifa: "Thank you bafo."

Ohhoo!

Mariam: "Is it Nelly? Are you serious about fixing things with that woman, Bhekifa? Is that why you brought Ayanda here?"

Bhekifa: "Mama please not now, excuse me."

He grumbles.

Bhekifa: "Cheryl, hey."

He says as he plods out of the room, Mariam loves clicking her tongue when she is annoyed. I'm shocked she can still master it at her age.

Mariam: "Your brother will kill me one day, I'm telling you Sabelo."

Me: "Cheryl? Who is that?"

Mariam: "I don't think I want to know."

She gets up from the couch, yep old age is having fun here. She's taking forever to stand up straight, with grunts here and there.

Mariam: "Tell Rose to stop looking at herself in the mirror and prepare supper. I'm going to see my friend, Bhekifa is slipping out of my hands and I can't allow that."

Hitler.

NELLY PAGE.

Thokozani is the one to open the gate for me, he smiles and waves as I drive in and closes the gate. I was told by this big brother of mine to stay away from Bhekifa, now I have to explain why I let the husband take my child. Thokozani greets me with a smile as I hop out of the car, I try to avoid his eyes, bearing in mind that he is spiritually gifted and I can't lie to him.

Zani: "Took longer than expected."

Me: "The mall was crowded."

My first lie, gosh I hope he doesn't sense this one. I should have thought of a lie while driving home, Thokozani makes me nervous that my mind is wiped clean. I grace him with a grateful smile when he helps me with the grocery bags, he stops half way to the house and looks back at the vehicle. My ancestors need to come through for me, give me an excuse.

Zani: "We're you not with Mboni?"

Thanks for nothing.

Me: "I... I was."

I'm a stammering mess.

Zani: "Where is she?"

Here goes nothing.

Me: "Her- her father took her."

I answer without looking at him, I can feel his eyes boring me and I expect him to scold me. My eyes hump when he carries on to the house, leaving me behind. Silently, Thokozani places the grocery bags on the kitchen counter.

Me: "Thank you."

It's a genuine one.

Zani: "I told Bhekifa to cancel the meeting with his uncles."

He breaks the news as he leans back on the counter, his eyes are on me, searching... I don't know what he's looking to find.

Me: "Oh! You met him already?"

Zani: "Yes, you're done with him."

Me: "I know."

I do and I never thought I would ever separate from him.

Zani: "So you know that he will never allow you to be happy?"

Scary, but...

Me: "Yes I know."

Zani: "You also know that your kids are not safe at his mother's house?"

What is with the interrogation?

Me: "Bhekifa has never taken them there, he wouldn't do that."

Zani: "He's there as we speak."

I won't even ask how he knows.

Zani: "That woman is evil Nelly, your kids are not safe with her."

Me: "Well we all know she's not a saint, she hated me from day one."

I let out these words with a huff, Thokozani frowns down at me. He can be too serious sometimes.

Zani: "That is not what I'm talking about, Bhekifa's mother is the reason behind his animosity towards you."

Go figure...

Me: "I know Zaza, it's not record science that she and Sabelo poisoned Bhekifa against me."

Feeling tired and drained, I take a sit.

Zani: "Dadewethu!" (My sister.)

A quick chuckle leaves his mouth, his eyes are glaring, making me feel stupid.

Zani: "I don't blame you, you're blind. Bhekifa has been bewitched, his mother controls every move he makes."

Me: "A witch?"

He doesn't respond to my question, but starts burping.

Zani: "I'm going to get her, she shouldn't eat in that house."

Me: "I'm coming with you."

Zani: "Cha dadewethu, you stay." (No my sister.)

He rushes out, giving me no chance to dispute.

-NKATEKO MATHEBULA.

We have men in disguise inside the building, the plan is that we attack from the inside. If we tackle the guards first then it will be easier to get the children. Stephen came up with an idea of

using a Piki-Tup truck, it won't give off anything. There are about six men in here including me and Stephen.

Stephen: "Remember, we go in, get the children and leave."

Me: "What about the suspects?"

Stephen: "We're saving the children today, we don't have enough men to go against an army."

Me: "Can't we at least catch one, one that will lead us to the others?"

Stephen: "This is what I was talking about Nkateko, you're deep into this."

His tone is cold and disapproving.

Me: "There is nothing wrong with that, I need to avenge my wife. You can't expect me to roll over and pretend like nothing happened."

I'm not going to let this go, those people deserve to be locked up and I will make sure it happens.

Stephen: "I hear you, but not today. Don't act stupid when we go in there, or those children's lives will be in danger."

There is a thread of warning in his voice... Great... This was my chance to capture those bastards who took my wife.

Stephen: "Promise you will behave Nkateko."

I can't make that promise, the other guys are glaring at me, their mouths pinched shut as if withholding what they want to say and in the process making me see my poor decision making skills.

Me: "Fine, let's do this."

Annoyance clings on to me as I snap out the answer.

Stephen: "Good, there are three entrances. We are going to scatter, if you see any threat take it down."

We wait as Stephen checks with the men inside, we're given a go ahead a while later. Checking the time on my phone it's past 07:00pm. I surf the coast outside, it's as empty as a cemetery. I give the guys a heads up and jump out of the truck each one knows where to head and what to do. There's a guard at the entrance, his back turned to me. A shot takes him down, if it weren't for the silencer a war would break out in this place.

"I'm in."

I hear Stephen say through the earpiece, just as I tiptoe inside the building. The lights are dim, I can hear voices coming from a room on my left. Men are behind the closed door, I can tell from the mannish voices.

"How many girls do we have?"

The accent is foreign, I can't say from which country, but he struggles with pronouncing English words.

"Thirty."

The second man speaks with a baritone, he sounds local.

"That's not what we agreed on, you said fifty girls."

The foreign guy grunts.

"And you're not paying enough, show me the money and I will give you what you want."

"I paid a hefty amount to be getting thirty girls."

My heart wrenches as I listen to those animals negotiate innocent lives as if they are livestock.

"Nkateko, where are you? I'm in the room where the children are kept."

Stephen's voice through the earpiece snatches me away from the depressing conversation.

Me: "I'm coming."

Dammit! I think I said that too loud. I decide to run for it when the room falls into stillness. The door swings open as I turn.

"Hey!"

It's the local voice, with no doubt calling out to me. I keep the gun on the buckle of my belt and slowly turn to find two elderly black men dressed in suits and a Chinese man. There is one more, he's Asian, probably Filipino.

"What are you doing here?"

His eyes are shifty and full of suspicion, I have to play it cool or I'm a dead man.

Me: "I was doing my rounds."

I keep my voice as low as possible.

"You're not supposed to be here, scoot."

One of the black men barks at me, I give them a slight bow before turning to walk away. That was close...

"Don't your men wear safety boots?"

It's the Chinese guy, his question stops me on my tracks although it's not directed to me. My eyes track my shoes and dammit... I'm wearing sneakers...

"They... do..."

The black man's voice drags the answer out questionably.

-SABELO ZULU.

For a second I think we're under attack when my mother runs into the house from outside, her eyes are wide with fear and she's panting like she just ran a marathon.

Mariam: "He's here."

She whispers as if mentioning the person is an abomination, I think of pouring her a glass of water. But then again let her finish her breath, I like what my eyes are seeing. Where is Rose when you need her? This scene will make one good pillow talk.

Me: "Who?"

I ask as I take my sweet time to grab a glass from the cupboard.

Mariam: "Nelly's brother, he just parked outside."

Yeah neh! Dear God, I'm okay. I don't want to age please, mark me absent for that. Is ageing is this painful?

Me: "I thought abafana baka Cynthia's were chasing you, you have been at war with that witch since you moved in here."
(Cynthia's zombies.)

Mariam: "Are you saying I'm a witch, Sabelo?"

Is she not?

Me: "I'm not saying you are and I'm not saying you're not. Phela wena magriza(old lady), you're full of secrets. Who

knows, you probably jump over us while we're sleeping. We're thinking umuntu ulele (you're asleep), but nope... she's dancing to John vuli gate, naked in our bedroom. Come to think of it, Rose lost her job when she moved in with me."

The look on her face says she's going to explode, offence is taken not given.

Mariam: "How did I manage to give birth to you? You are just like your father, he was useless and dumb."

Her words force me to put the glass on top of the sink, she will get her own water.

Me: "Are you taking it to that magriza (old lady)? You're using that man to insult me?"

Mariam: "Shut up Sabelo, my head is spinning man."

This is how old people get heart attacks and boy do they love it because they get all the attention they have been seeking from everyone. A sudden knock on the door makes her squeal, her eyes bulge.

Me: "He doesn't bite mama, relax."

What's wrong with this woman?

Mariam: "I'm going to hide in my room, if he asks about me tell him I went to see a friend."

Me: "I can't lie to a sangoma mama, he will turn me into a frog."

She narrows her eyes at me, grabs the glass on the sink and attempts to throw it at me.

Mariam: "Do what I say you stupid boy."

My mother snorts and drags her feet to her room, I am not risking my life by lying to a sangoma. I open the door to an impatient Thokozani, Bhekifa should be here to face his brother in law.

Me: "Eish saan, bafoza. Hoe gaan dit?" (How are you brother?)

He frowns down at me, his presence makes me uncomfortable. Thokozani peeps inside the house before burping about three times. Sangoma or not... Sies...

Me: "Bafo, I'm sure you didn't come here to burp on my face."

He pushes his way in, his eyes are searching my house.

Thokozani: "Where is your mother?"

He's looking into my eyes and I am not going to lie to him, not when he's looking at me like I stole his bones.

Me "Mama, our in law is here. Come out."

I shout for my mother, I'm sure she heard me.

“TWENTY ONE.”

NKATEKO MATHEBULA

The men have held me captive, I guess I didn't play my cards right. Stephen will be disappointed in me, I hope he finds Sia. For now I have to play things cool and try to think of a way out of here and I need to be smart about this. I'm tied to a chair in the same room they were having a meeting.

“How did you slip up Baloi? This was a private meeting.”

The Chinese man has not stopped complaining, he's talking to a big chubby black man who arrived minutes ago. He seems to be the one in charge.

“Please Bao, I told you to call me Ntsako.”

He sounds stupid for a man who is in charge, he doesn't give that Alpha aura when he speaks.

Bao: “Forget that, we have to get rid of this man. We can't risk anyone finding out our plan.”

Ntsako: “Don't worry, you stress too much, my boys will take care of this idiot. He won't live to see the sunrise.”

I am not going to die so easily, the other men laugh as if having someone killed is something to be elated about.

Bao: “That’s what I want to hear, now, when can we take the group to the lab?”

Ntsako: “Lab? I thought you’re shipping them to China?”

Bao: “I don’t want a bunch of dead monkeys on my territory, it’s better the vaccines are tested here in their land.”

Vaccines? What is he on about?

Ntsako: “You don’t have to be racist about it Bao? Business has been good between us, let’s not ruin it.”

Bao: “It’s not like you care about them, was it not you who came up with the plan of faking this whole virus thing and using the children to test the vaccines?”

The Ntsako guy tilts his head to look at me, the only reason they are free to talk about their plan in front of me is because they are going to kill me.

-NELLY PAGE.

I’m worried about Thokozani, my brother is hard headed, he doesn’t mind starting a fight and he always makes sure to finish

it. I'm almost done preparing supper when my parents walk in the kitchen, laughing.

Me: "What are we happy about?"

It's awkward for me seeing my father's arm around his wife, these two are never affectionate in front of us.

Dad: "Haibo!"

Me: "I want to laugh too, please share the joke."

Dad: "Am I not allowed to share jokes with my wife? Your mother and I were just talking about old times."

I shouldn't have asked, I want to hide under the table when he puts his arms around her and kisses her on the cheek.

Me: "Please don't traumatise me."

My mother laughs.

Mom: "What are you talking about? How do you think you were made?"

Jesus no!!!

Me: "Ma ewww."

Mom: "Your father and I did not hold hands and you were creating, we..."

I cover my ears, I'm not ready for this. I will never be, I blink a few times to wipe away the image of my parents getting it on that's bullying its way into my head.

Me: "This should be illegal, you can't traumatise your child like this. I want to press charges."

My father responds with a chuckle.

Dad: "Where is your brother?"

He still has his arms around his wife, someone tell them to stop please.

Me: "He went to get Ayanda."

I hope they don't give me a lecture.

Dad: "Where is she?"

Me: "Bhekifa took her, we bumped into him at the mall and Ayanda insisted on going with him."

I don't like the look on my father's face, it assures me that I made a bad decision.

Dad: "Make me a cup of tea baby."

But his wife is here, why me? I hate making tea, I have been making that old man tea since I was in primary school. Till today God hasn't answered my prayers that it burns his tongue so he never drinks it in his life again.

Mom: "You still make that face?"

She asks as he walks away.

Me: "How can I not? I thought by now he would be a juice drinker or something."

She laughs.

Me: "Seriously ma, where were you when other wives were introducing their husbands to Coke and Tropika?"

She laughs louder, I'm serious here.

Mom: "I'll prepare the tea, you'll take it to him so he thinks you made it."

Some mothers, she should tell him I quit.

Mom: "Doesn't your husband drink tea?"

Warning! Sensitive topic alert, change course of direction. She stops fiddling with the spoons in the drawer.

Mom: "Do you miss him?"

Me: "He is the only man I have ever known, of course I miss him. I will always love Bhekifa, more than I would like, but I don't want to be around him anymore."

Mom: "Oh Nelly."

Me: “It hurts ma, it really does. Being strong is not as easy as people say, he’s still the first person I think of when I go to bed at night and the moment I open my eyes in the morning. I know people will expect me to move on as if I didn’t share my life with the man, it’s easy to judge and point fingers until you’re in that very situation.

Of course he is abusive, he cheated on me and treated me like trash, but that didn’t erase the love I have for him in my heart. I will always love him, people expect me to cut my hair, dye it red and start hash tagging men are trash. Some of them are married to or dating the likes of Bhekifa and they wouldn’t dream of living them, but Nelly has to be strong because she is a public figure and I have rubbernecks sticking their nose into my personal life.”

I’m too emotional, I did say this is a sensitive topic. My mother pulls me into her arms, there is nothing like a mother’s hug. Her chest is the most comfortable place to be and her scent is heavenly. I would have lost my mind if this woman was not in my life.

-SABELO ZULU.

Thokozani should know his way to the living room, yet he's standing in my mother's kitchen like he belongs here.

Me: "Bafo, you can go in."

Visitors are a problem, they have no timing at all. It's almost supper time, I hope he will leave before hunger kills me. I let Thokozani lead the way to the living room.

Me: "You're allowed to sit on a chair bafo?"

He frowns at me.

Me: "It's just that sangomas are always sitting on a reed mat, so I figured ogogo (elders) don't like sitting on the couch. Phela old people find it hard to adjust to white people's things."

Thokozani: "What are you talking about?"

Maybe he wants me to speak Zulu.

Me: "I mean you should be careful when you sit on this comfortable chair

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we don't want to exhaust ogogo (elders.)"

Thokozani: "Call your mother."

He grunts, this is one angry man. Come to think of it, I don't remember seeing him smile. Even at the Zulu wedding, he was grumpy the whole time. I thought the man was going to pull out a gun and kill all the Zulus for taking his sister from them.

Thokozani: "Yey, what are you looking at? Get your mother."

He snaps above a whisper. Why was I staring?

Me: "Thokoza gogo." (Ancestral praises.)

He frowns, his eyes stabbing.

Me: "I mean yes bafo Thok'zizo."

Aii let me get the old lady before I am swallowed alive. I meet my mother in the corridor, she has changed into black clothing and wore a black head wrap.

-NELLY PAGE.

Worried about Thokozani, I decide to ring him up.

Zani: "Dadewethu." (My sister.)

Relief washes over me, hearing his voice over the phone.

Me: "You've been gone for too long, is everything okay?"

Zani: "Are you checking if that fool is still alive?"

Me: "Don't joke like that."

Zani: "Who said I'm joking?"

He doesn't sound like he's joking.

Me: "What's going on there Zaza?"

Zani: "I'm waiting for my niece, don't worry about us. We're okay."

Me: "Come home then."

Zani: "Yes mom."

I want to laugh, but only manage a smile.

Me: "I won't dish up until you get here."

Zani: "Perfect, I won't be long then."

He greets me goodbye and cuts the call, I trust that he won't do anything stupid in front of Ayanda.

-SABELO ZULU.

Me: "Wat is dit griza?" (What is it?)

She's sweating, my mother is definitely acting strange.

Mariam: "Keep your voice down slima." (Idiot.)

She whispers a grunt, I didn't realise I was that loud.

Me: "Why are you dressed like that?"

Mariam: "Black clothes will hide my secrets from him."

Me: "I don't understand."

Mariam: "He won't be able to see through me, what I do behind closed doors."

Heee! Wonders shall never end.

Me: "So vele vele you are a witch mama?" (Honestly.)

Mariam: "I'm not, but he will see what I have been doing to Bhekifa. I can't have that."

Me: "Is that why you're sweating like Caster Semenya?"

My mother stresses for nothing.

Mariam: "Voetsek, I told you to say I'm not around." (Piss off.)

Me: "Mama please, Thokozani is not Mboro, he won't burn you with the Holy Ghost fire."

She narrows her eyes and clicks her tongue, I can't have such a woman as a mother. See my luck, I'm stuck with Mariam Zulu. Suddenly she grabs my hand, her eyes widen. She takes the scarf draped over her shoulders and covers her head.

Me: “What’s wrong now? Mama you’re seriously acting weird.”

Her head points behind me, I turn to see Thokozani standing with his hands folded across his chest. I did say visitors are a problem, what is he doing in other people’s corridors? What if we keep zombies here?

Me: “Bafo, here she is.”

I push my mother forward, she stumbles a few steps toward Thokozani. Her body is visibly trembling.

Mariam: “My in-law.”

She greets shakily, Musa Mseleku should cancel Uthando Nesthembu (reality show). We need space for “Life With The Zulus.” This is the real definition of a reality show. I stand back to watch how this will all pin out. A sangoma versus a witch. I should record this, honestly.

Thokozani: “Unjani?” (How are you?)

That ‘unjani’ is fire, Mariam should be screaming right about now. She nods, why is she not screaming? I have seen this on TV, unless we were lied to. Thokozani studies her under his gaze, my mother is in an uncomfortable situation. I wave at her when she turns back to look at me, she clicks her tongue.

Sangomas are this powerful? The old lady is shaking in her boots.

Thokozani: "I'm here for my niece."

Argh! He's here for that brat. It's okay, Mariam's time will come. One day is one day.

Mariam: "Bhe- Bhekifa is n- not here."

Me: "Magriza yini watatazela?" (Why are you so nervous?)

I move past her.

Me: "Don't worry bafo, Bhekifa will understand. Ai you're a life saver Zisto, minus one plate, dankie poi (thank you). The meat is not enough because magriza (old lady) eats while cooking."

Mom: "Yey wena." (Stop i.)

Me: "Hawu mama, I said what you were thinking. The only difference is that I'm bold enough to speak, Zisto understands. O ru kanjani makhosi?" (How about it?)

Zani: "Call me Zisto again."

He growls, I hide behind my mother. It's bad enough that I didn't get my brother's height.

Me: "Let me get the brat... I mean Yaya baby."

Mariam: "Sabelo."

My mother calls for me, I chuckle at how terrified she sounds.

Me: “Bafo be nice to my mother, she’s preaching at church tomorrow. Please don’t stare at her for too long.”

Thokozani gives me a confused look, it quickly changes to annoyance.

Thokozani: “Don’t worry, I’m not here to expose you. I don’t care what you do to your sons, the only thing that matters to me is my family. If Bhekifa wants to seek help then he will, I can’t do anything unless my ancestors tell me otherwise. If you want to carry on killing your sons slowly, then don’t let me stop you. Just know your end will not be a nice one.”

I’m stuck on sons? The plural has me sweating in all the wrong places, my mother is...

Me: “Bafo, you keep saying sons. Don’t you mean son?”

My mother nudges me with an elbow.

Me: “No, magriza. I want to know if you’re bewitching me as well. Am I living with a snake?”

Mariam: “Sabelo I will smack you out of this house.”

Now she can talk freely because she was given permission to continue bewitching her sons. I am not okay... my mother? No way, it can’t be.

The little brat comes running into the living room, I don't know who called her. She doesn't say anything when her uncle tells her they are going home. Good riddance to bad rubbish.

Maraim: "Sabelo!"

Why is she calling me?

Me: "I don't talk to witches please."

I leave her in the living to go find my wife, I'm hungry.

“TWENTY TWO”

CHERYL ZIKHALI.

I didn't expect Bhekifa to be this kind, don't give me that look. I was given permission to address him by his first name, deep down I am a bit shocked. I mean, what are the odds of a cleaner befriending a senior in a major company? Mind you that's not the status I had my whole life. Life was comfortable for me once upon a time, things seem to be looking up again. I find it easy to communicate with him more than anyone, strange I know. Fate has a funny way of throwing us into the lion's den and makes sure you're as comfortable and safe as a baby in a womb.

The black wedding band on Bhekifa's hand is not for show, even a blind person can point out that the man is married. I'm not sure what I'm hoping will come out of this, I know though what I want from him. I can't speak for him, what he expects to gain from befriending a woman since he is tied down.

“Cheryl?”

Bhekifa's voice snatches me out of my deep thoughts, I trail the sound of his voice to find him seated beside me in the car. His delicious scent hovers about, making me purr like a kitten, he smells as he looks... expensive... I send him a brief smile, returning the subtle grin splitting his lips.

Bhekifa: "I know you're worried about your daughter, I can't say I can relate, but I can be here for you."

I called Bhekifa when everything became too much to handle, my mother found out about Sia's abduction and that it could be human trafficking. She lashed out on me, talking about how I'm a bad mother, apparently I neglected my child. I think it was the anger talking, she can get nasty when angry. I didn't think Bhekifa would pitch, but here he is... We're parked at a secluded place, in the outskirts of Johannesburg. He was driving to god-knows where till I asked him to pull over.

Me: "Thank you."

Bhekifa: "Do you trust this Jabu person?"

Me: "He's a family friend, he was my late husband's best friend."

Bhekifa: "Oh, well I hope he is not part of this syndicate."

Jabu would never, besides he's too busy obsessing over ghosts and Zain to be kidnapping innocent children.

Me: "He wouldn't, I trust him. His cousin is on it, it's been days though and I'm losing my mind."

Bhekifa: "You're an over thinker and that will not help your situation."

How does he know? I overthink things to a point that they keep on replaying in my mind.

Bhekifa: "How about we do something tomorrow? Bowling or a movie?"

Me: "How about sky diving?"

Bhekifa: "Don't tell me you're an adrenalin junkie?"

Me: "There is nothing more exhilarating like extreme sports. I had a fear of heights, but Zain made sure to drag me out of my shell, literally."

A ghostly smile paints his lips, he appears to be uncomfortable.

Bhekifa: "You loved him, didn't you?"

Random!

Me: "I did, he was the first man to actually see my worth. I wasn't looking for a relationship when Zain swept me off my feet."

Bhekifa: "So you like being swept off your feet?"

He's looking into my eyes, it's a deep stare. I can't make out what he's thinking, I shrug as confusion strokes over me.

Bhekifa: "You have beautiful lips."

I feel a shiver crawl on me and restrain my body from shaking, lest I look like a freak.

Me: "Thanks."

Shyly, I send my gratitude... yep... Shyness is not a stranger to me. There's a moment of silence that has me fidgeting on the seat, Bhekifa clears his throat before letting these words roll out of his tongue.

Bhekifa: "Let me drive you back home, my daughter must be looking for me."

I nod to his suggestion, deep down I don't want to go. I'm enjoying being around him, Lord knows I caught feelings for this man donkey years ago.

-NKATEKO MATHEBULA.

These men are not who I'm looking for, my wife was killed by human traffickers. How did we make such a mistake? Gosh, I was so close to nailing this.

"We're moving out Nkateko, where are you?"

I almost forgot about Stephen, how do I let him know that I'm held captive.

Me: "Please let me go, I have nothing to do with any of this."

I get everyone's attention with this lie, they all burst out in sarcastic laughter.

Me: "I won't tell anyone about this, the children, the vaccines. I won't say anything I swear."

Stephen should pick up something.

Ntsako: "We are going to let you go alright, with a bullet through your skull."

Stephen: "Oh shit!"

Great, he finally caught up.

Stephen: "How many are there?"

Really?

Me: "If you let me go I will forget I ever saw the four of you, please."

Stephen: “Four? It won’t be hard to take them down. Which wing are you at?”

I have to be creative about this or else these people will notice that I’m talking to someone.

Ntsako: “Shut up, there’s no use in pleading for your life. You are done for.”

Me: “Okay, I hear you. Can I please use the men’s room before I die? I doubt they have toilets in heaven.”

They chuckle as they stare like I have lost my mind.

Me: “I can just step outside the west wing, I know there are no toilets here.”

No more questions Stephen, I sound like a fool each time I open my mouth

Stephen: “Hold on man, we’re coming for you.”

I can tell that he’s running, hopefully I’ll stall these fools until backup gets here.

-NELLY PAGE.

Who knew finding a trusted Personal Assistant could be so hard? It is nothing though compared to being a single mother,

regretfully I had to disappoint my readers by pausing the story on social media until I sort out my life. Juggling between two demanding jobs and a mother is not child's play, my mother suggested that I take leave from work to focus on the kids, I will go crazy if I do that. Listening to people's problems keeps me distracted from my own.

The world is not informed about my failing marriage, thankfully. Being out of the public eye helps a lot. Right now the world is concentrated on "Mess" which is good for me. Let the Zulu brothers keep them busy while I try and fix my life.

A hefty sigh discharges from my chest as I park outside Dros restaurant

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I'm meeting up with Phakathi Funani. Heaven knows why I agreed to meet up with him, nerves have me by the throat. Don't get it twisted, he is only a friend and I'm still married. I have no plans of jumping into a relationship anytime soon, like I told my mother. However, I need a friend. Phakathi was always a good listener and that is what I need.

I'm met by a waitress at the door, she gives me a smile and I immediately tell her that I'm meeting up with a friend. I follow

her in, Phakathi said he's here already. I'm actually thirty minutes late, being a time keeper is not in my genes.

The restaurant is crowded, I think Phakathi spots me first because there he is in the middle of the room, he's on his feet waving at me with a big smile on his face.

He pulls me into an unexpected hug as I get to him, it is so sudden that I don't return it. The hug is brief, yet awkward.

Phakathi: "I'm sorry, I got too excited."

Me: "Don't worry about it."

He pulls a seat for me, I see he is still the gentleman he was back then.

Me: "Have you been waiting for too long?"

Of course he has, dummy.

Phakathi: "Almost my whole life and I will continue waiting."

Why is he taking the off ramp? I let my eyes wander around the noisy jam-packed restaurant, another waitress approaches us... perfect timing.

Waitress: "Would you like anything to drink while you're still deciding on what to eat?"

My eyes dart to Phakathi's glass, he's drinking beer.

Me: "I will have what he's having."

She nods and walks off.

Phakathi: “What happened to the wine-drinking Nelly?”

My mind takes me down memory lane, how Bhekifa hated it when I drank. Not that I abused the beverage, he would call his family to tell them how much of a drunkard I was.

Me: “Who said I don’t drink wine anymore?”

He smiles genuinely, how does he manage to keep his teeth sparkling clean? I should ask him for his routine, Phakathi has surely changed. Grown actually, he’s bald, no beard. His skin is exceptionally smooth and wooden brown, it’s tempting to the touch. When he smiles, his left cheek digs a hole and forms a dimple, “the one dimpled man” I would tease him. I feel myself smile while watching him blabber about his day, different expressions kissing his face occasionally.

Phakathi: “Do I have something on my face?”

I blink at his question, realising that I have been staring for far too long.

Me: “N- no. I’m listening, continue.”

He smiles and I spot a tint of shyness as he rubs the back of his neck.

Phakathi: "Enough about me."

The waitress brings my drink and we take this time to place for our orders, she drops a smile before walking away.

Phakathi: "How have you been, really?"

I'm not going to mention my husband, I need a break from the Bhekifa topic.

Me: "Great, I can't complain."

Phakathi: "How can you, national best-selling author?"

Quietly, he claps for my success, having me nod my head in gratitude.

Phakathi: "I read the Beloved Mashenge, you knocked it right out of the park."

I've heard these words before.

Me: "That's my first born, I didn't think it would put me on the map."

Phakathi: "Is it too forward to ask you to sign my copy?"

Me: "Not at all, you know where my office is, right?"

Phakathi: "Actually I have the book in the car, you can sign it once we're done with dinner."

Me: "I don't see why not and for being a fan, maybe I will gift you with a free copy of Sabatha."

It must be the hunger talking, I don't give away books for free.

-BHEKIFA ZULU.

Cheryl: "That's how Sia was rescued, she's at home now recovering."

Cheryl's voice has become background noise, my mind is lost around Nelly and that fool Phakathi. My focus went out the window the second they walked into the restaurant, I haven't been able to look anywhere else. I have a good mind to go and put a stop to whatever they are doing there.

Cheryl: "Earth to Bhekifa!"

Her voice plainly pulls my eyes from Nelly, she raises her brows in question.

Cheryl: "I've been talking to myself for more than ten minutes now, are you okay?"

Me: "I'm sorry, what were you saying?"

Cheryl: "I was narrating a story about how Sia was rescued."

My concentration fades again and I find myself staring at my wife across the room, she hasn't seen me yet.

Cheryl: "Isn't that Nelly Page?"

The sound of her name rolling out of Cheryl's mouth jolts my heart to my throat.

Me: "You know her?"

Cheryl: "I'm pretty sure all of South Africa knows her, she's the one who wrote *The Beloved Mashenge* and *Sabatha the Begetter*."

Oh! Sometimes I forget that she is an author.

Cheryl: "Are you thinking of introducing yourself?"

Me: "There is no need for that, she is my wife."

I tell her, my eyes refusing to move from Nelly.

Cheryl: "Get out of here, you're married to Nelly Page?"

I hope she is not star struck over Nelly, here's the thing. Cheryl and I have been spending quite some time together. It all started a month ago, I enjoy her company and we have shared a kiss once. I have no regrets about it, the woman keeps me on my toes. I told her that my wife and I are having problems and that we're separated.

Me: "Yes."

She keeps this inquisitive look on her face that is pushing me to continue.

Cheryl: “How is she like? She must be amazing.”

Me: “I’m sorry Cheryl, but I need to have a word with my wife.”

I get up, depriving her a chance to respond to my statement. My eyes are fixed on Nelly as I approach them, she’s laughing with that fool. It fades instantly as she spots my walk.

Me: “What’s going on here?”

Nelly rolls her eyes, seemingly annoyed by my presence.

23

“TWENTY THREE”

NELLY PAGE.

Bhekifa doesn't want to see me happy, this right here... him standing here with that intimidating frown on his face is proof. Lord, I hope he doesn't start a fight with Phakathi.

Bhekifa: “I asked you a question Nelly.”

The snapping is never a good sign, it means his anger seeks attention.

Phakathi: “Bhekifa.”

Why is Phakathi getting up?

Phakathi: “Long time.”

And... he holds out his hand for a shake, Bhekifa glares at it and clicks his tongue.

Me: “We're having dinner, what else does it look like?”

My words hit the warning button, I see his nose start to flicker. His eyes burn with anger.

Bhekifa: “Is this who you're cheating on me with?”

What in the heaven's armies is he talking about?

Phakathi: "It's not what you think bafo, we..." (Brother.)

Bhekifa: "Piss off, I am not your brother, you idiot."

Will I ever have peace in my life? Phakathi clears his throat, clearly embarrassed by Bhekifa's comeback and disrespect.

Me: "There is no need for that Bhekifa, Phakathi is my friend and I will not have you speak to him in that manner."

I would stand, but people are staring already. I might appear on tonight's 8pm news. ENCA lacks content, this will definitely give them something to talk about.

Bhekifa: "A friend you say? With the way he looks into your eyes, I would not be surprised if you have opened those legs for him."

He throws the insult on my face, yet it stings my heart.

Phakathi: "Nelly, with your permission. May I ask him to leave?"

Me: "Please do."

I give consent, giving the husband from hell a cold stare.

Bhekifa: "I am not going anywhere without my wife."

Sure I didn't think it would be so easy.

Me: "Phakathi, this man is not allowed anywhere near me. He is violating the restraining order."

Bhekifa's eyes pop out, something tells me, he has forgotten about it.

Bhekifa: "Don't tell me about that piece of paper, I can throw it in the fire. You're coming with me Nelly, let's go."

His hand grab and my almost hushed scream catches the full attention of the customers. Dammit! This is what I was trying to avoid, the public eye. Bhekifa is strong enough to bring me to my feet, I yank my arm away just as roughly.

Phakathi: "Bafo, I'm sure you don't want to start a fight here."

Okay, I give Phakathi the permission to punch this man. Especially now that Bhekifa has pushed him and there he goes stumbling across the floor, he regains his balance before he crashes on one of the tables. The habitants cautiously jump from their seats, almost spilling their food in the process.

Me: "Are you insane? Why did you do that?"

I yell, he ignores me and tightly grabs my hand. I gasp at the pain and the forceful pull toward the exit.

Me: “Let me go Bhekifa.”

I demand as he continues pulling me by the hand, I look back, my eyes search for Phakathi. He’s marching towards us, face drenched in anger. People are taking videos and pictures. What is wrong with this generation? All they care about is getting likes and recognition, forget about the person’s sufferings. If I knew what was going to happen tonight, I would have stayed at home.

Phakathi: “Bhekifa.”

Phakathi booms loud enough for Bhekifa to stop, his hand still stuck on mine. In my head I’ve written a three page prayer, asking God not to let Phakathi start a fight with Bhekifa because he is a useless man and we don’t need this stunt. But then, God is sometimes too busy. Phakathi punches Bhekifa, the blow has him stumbling back. What gives?

I’m freed from the prison of Bhekifa’s painful hold, but here is the bad news. There are footages of me caught between two men. I wouldn’t be surprised if I’m on national television right at this moment. The perfect love couple, South Africa’s sweetheart. Bhekifa Zulu and Nelly Page caught in a love web. Jesus fix this.

-SABELO ZULU.

Rose should pick up her socks and that's taking charge in this house. My mother's days are numbered, no I feel it man... that woman is about to kick the bucket. It took two weeks for her to convince me that she is not a witch, still I don't trust her, I sleep with one eye open, just in case she tries anything stupid.

I cringe as I hear Rose vomiting in the bathroom and my stomach twists with a need to push the food out. She has been in there for about an hour now. The same thing happened yesterday, Rose better not be pregnant. We can't afford another child, two is too much.

Me: "Mmmhh, mmhh. Mama I can't anymore. How does Rose expect us to eat while she's throwing up so loudly?"

Mariam is just as annoyed, she frowns at me from opposite the couch.

Mariam: "I told you, she's pregnant."

Me: "Never, I refuse. I know I'm good mama, but Rose is on birth control."

Mariam: "Don't say I didn't tell you Sabelo, if that girl is pregnant, then you better find her a place to stay. I will not have another child in my house."

She thinks I'm stupid, I see.

Me: "Why do you look guilty magriza?" (Old lady.)

Mariam: "What?"

This is what they do, they are good at playing innocent.

Me: "Are you sure you didn't plant anything in her womb?"

Mariam: "Don't start Sabelo, I'm not in the mood."

Me: "I'm not starting anything

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I'm only stating facts. A sangoma mama, a whole sangoma called you a witch. Those people never make mistakes."

Mariam: "How many times must I tell you that I am not a witch Sabelo?"

And I'm supposed to take that and go with it?

Me: "That's what all witches say, for all we know Rose might be pregnant with a little snake. Oh no, I can't breathe."

I put my plate on the coffee table, the thought makes my stomach boil.

Mariam: "What is wrong with you?"

Me: "My wife is going to give birth to Chuckie, mama what have you done?"

Mariam needs to stop throwing things at me, I might lose an eye. I duck when she throws a chicken bone at me.

Mariam: “Call this sangoma of yours and tell him to confirm what he said.”

My eyes catch something on the TV just as I’m about to give my mother a befitting answer.

Me: “Yoh, yoh. Wamnandi mpilo.” (Life is nice.)

I jump from the couch with this expression to grab the remote so to increase the volume. Mariam follows my eyes to see her son fighting on national television. The headlines read {South Africa’s most loved couple, best-selling author Nelly Page and husband Bhekifa Zulu catch the public’s attention again.}

Me: “I knew someone still loved me up there, this is better than watching Chiefs lose to Pirates.”

Mariam: “I knew the nurses dropped you after I gave birth, I always questioned your big head only for me to later question your stupidity as well. Nothing is right in that big empty head of yours Sabelo, it’s filled with nothing but water.”

I don't care, she will spoil my mood. And Mariam better finish that food, she is going to need all the strength she can gather to help her son out of that mess.

Me: "Look at your son, magriza. Has he forgotten about the restraining order?"

Mariam: "Your happiness baffles me, Sabelo. That is your brother dammit."

So? That doesn't change anything.

Me: "Magriza." (Old lady.)

I sing as I pull her into a hug and place a kiss on her cheek.

Me: "Thank you for giving me a is'dididi for a brother." (Idiot.)

Of course she will push me away, this is where Bhekifa gets his violence from.

"What's going on?"

Rose questions as she walks into the living room, seeing her takes me back to when she was vomiting. I'm disgusted once again.

Me: "Did you brush your teeth?"

Heee! This woman is shaking her head no.

Me: "Go brush your teeth man, Yeses Rose. Umdala" (You're old.)

She shrugs her shoulders and goes back to where she came from. I sit back to watch the show, while my mother is drowning in worry.

-NELLY PAGE.

Bhekifa and Phakathi tackled each other like animals, I couldn't stay there. Everything was overwhelming, someone had the news anchors on standby. Sounds farfetched I know, but how did they get there so fast? My life is over, my personal life is out there for the world to see. Lord, how did I get so unlucky?

I must have lost track of time driving back home that I don't realise when I pull up at the gate, it's open and my parents and brother are outside.

Thokozani rushes to open the gate, I'm thinking he will wait for me to drive in, but he runs to my side of the car. Concern pasted on his face, he opens the door and sighs heavily as our eyes meet.

My vision is blurred by tears that insisted on throwing a party on my face since I left the restaurant. Emotions dribble me and I'm tearing up again, Thokozani helps me out of the car and without wasting anymore time, suffocates me into a hug. This is the safest I have felt in hours.

Me: “Zaza...”

Zani: “I know, it’s okay. I’m here now.”

He comforts me along with his hands that are stroking my back, everything I have been through comes budging in. The emotional and physical abuse, the cheating. The look of unworthiness in Bhekifa’s eyes when he would look at me... It feels like I am stuck in a bubble filled with water and I can’t breathe, no matter how hard I try.

The emotions don’t give me time to suck in air, but push me down. The impact has me bursting in tears, my knees give in, sinking me to the floor. Thokozani catches me before I fall and scoops me up in his arms. I hold on lest I fall and hide my teary face on his chest.

“Oh my baby.”

I hear my mother’s cracking voice, pain painted in her voice. We get to my room and he places me on the bed, my mother is here with a glass of water.

Mom: “Drink baby.”

She says, holding me the glass. I take a sip through my sobs, Thokozani is angry. His eyes tell me so and his clenched fists and jaw.

Me: "Where are the kids?"

Mom: "Sleeping."

Me: "Please tell me they didn't see anything."

Mom: "Don't worry, they were in their rooms."

Mom: "What happened?"

I can't do this now.

Me: "I'm tired ma, can we not get into it?"

I find it hard to ignore my brother who is red with anger, his chest rising and falling from exasperation. Our eyes meet, for a second I think I know what he is thinking. I might be wrong.

Zani: "What were you doing there?"

His voice is profound, he wants to scold me like a child. I see it in his eyes and have picked it up in the tone of his voice.

Me: "I had gone out with a friend, I didn't think Bhekifa would be there."

Mom: "Bhekifa has violated the restraining order, the police won't spare him this time."

Thokozani scoffs.

Zani: "Come on ma, this is South Africa. Bhekifa has enough money to buy a Coca-Cola truck, it will be so easy for him to bribe his way out of this."

Something diabolical is running through his mind.

Zani: "I'm going to deal with him myself."

Mom: "No, you will do no such thing. No child of mine will go to jail."

Bhekifa is the one who belongs in jail, I hope that's where he is.

Zani: "Qhawekazi." (Queen.)

He does a mini head bow, a frown on his face.

Zani: "Forgive me, but I can't let this go. Not after feeling my sister tremble in my arms while crying because of that man."

He finishes and marches out of the room, his steps are so fast that by the time my mother wants to stop him, he is out the door.

Mom: "You have to stop him."

I will do no such thing, I lie down on the bed and pull the covers up.

“TWENTY FOUR”

CHERYL ZIKHALI.

“Thank you for coming to my aid.” I tell Jabu as I jump into his car.

Jabu: “What are you doing here?”

Me: “You don’t want to know.”

I have seen it all in life, but this... Bhekifa completely forgot that I was there, I wasn’t looking at the man I adored but an abuser. The way he spoke and manhandled his wife raised so many red flags, I wanted to intervene, maybe get him to stop. The man was too angry to be told what to do, I couldn’t help him when the police came. He was arrested along with Mike Tyson.

Jabu: “Cheryl.”

His voice cuts my thoughts, I glance at him from the passenger’s seat.

Jabu: “You’re far deep in thought, what happened to you?”

Me: "You know the show date from hell?"

Jabu: "Yeah."

Me: "Well, what was missing was the TV crew."

Jabu: "Did he try to stab you or something?"

Me: "No, guy is married. He saw his wife with another man, lost whatever dignity he had and attacked the poor man. He's in jail as we speak."

Jabu: "You date married men now?"

The condemnation in the tone of his voice is louder than the voice itself.

Me: "He told me they were separated."

Jabu: "You need to stay away from him, he will get you into trouble."

Me: "What do you mean?"

Jabu: "Married men are dangerous, he will roll with you and use you. But at the end of the day, he will go home to his wife and here's the thing, he will never leave his wife for you."

Like I don't know that, I liked Bhekifa way before he told me he separated from his wife. I liked him knowing he was married.

Me: "So what do I do with these feeling I have for him?"

Jabu: "Are you kidding me?"

Me: "Yes, now relax."

I have to play it cool with Jabu, or he will note my idiocy. I won't lie to myself, I am worried about Bhekifa, although I'm scared of him now.

-BHEKIFA ZULU.

I can't believe my luck, my reputation will be ruined if I keep finding myself behind bars. I don't understand this bad omen that is following me, I have always been a good citizen. Never got into trouble with the law, now jail seems to be my second home.

I couldn't stand seeing Nelly with this man, yes this man... We are locked up in the same cell. Phakathi is curled up in a corner, head cast down. He better keep it down, I am still not satisfied with the beating I gave him. I wanted to teach him never to look at my wife again.

I was given one phone call, my lawyer said there is nothing he can do now. It's late, the judge is home with his family. Funny how they think we don't have families to get home to.

Speaking of family, I miss my babies. They must be wondering where I am, I need to speak to my lawyer. I can't lose them, Nelly is fuming and she will do anything to keep me away from my kids. The last time we spoke she had mentioned a divorce, I haven't gotten the papers. I will surely burn them, no way am I going to divorce that woman. Till death do us part.

-NELLY PAGE.

Nelly wake up”

My brother's voice awakens me out of a deep sleep, my lids flicker open to find him standing by the bedside. He still has the frown he had when he bolted out of the house. I fish for my phone under the pillow to check the time, it's very late. Something must've happened for him to be in here at this time.

Me: “Zaza?”

The distress on his face sets me up on the bed, I pat the side for him to sit. He sighs and follows the gesture.

Me: “What happened?”

Zani: “Bhekifa is in jail.”

Is this why I was woken up? Nelly we're having cake or it's snowing in Johannesburg... that I would have understood.

Me: "Okay."

My eyes question him.

Zani: "I was ready to kill him."

He confesses, it's the confidence in the way he says it that has me shifting uncomfortably.

Me: "Zaza?"

My voice is a whispered shock.

Zani: "I had a gun, loaded with three bullets."

Do I want to hear this?

Zani: "One for his useless d**k, one for his black heart and the last one was going to go through his head."

I pull the blanket up as chills kiss every inch of my skin, there is no expression now on his face. No regret, guilt or any sign to show that he's human.

Zani: "I had it all planned out, a premeditated murder."

A cold quiet laughter departs between the seams of his lips, his face though lacks the humour. It is as dry as biltong.

Zani: "Thank the ancestors he wasn't home when I got there, or your brother would be a murderer."

Can't he do it traditionally like the others? I'm kidding, geez relax people.

Me: "I'm glad you didn't find him, I don't want you getting in trouble because of me. I will be fine Zaza, I promise."

Zani: "Come to Cape town with me."

Me: "I can't do that, the kids have school and..."

Zani: "You'll transfer them into a new school, Nelly I can't protect you from there."

Me: "I know you mean well

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but my life is here and the kids will have a hard time adjusting to a new environment."

He is not pleased with my answer.

Zani: "You know he will never stop, right? If Bhekifa was able to fight for you in public, then he is more dangerous than we thought. It might not be now or tomorrow, but he is going to unravel one day and I'm afraid that his wrath will fall on you."

Is this his way of scaring me? Because it is working.

Zani: "I would stay if I could, but I don't belong to myself, you know that. Please don't hide anything from dad, he will protect you."

My heart breaks thinking that my brother is going to leave.

Me: "I promise."

My arms wrap around him, he holds me back and drops a kiss on the top of my head.

Zani: "Ngiyak'thanda dadewethu." (I love you sis.)

That's a first, I'm always the one to show and tell my affections. Now I'm worried about him.

Me: "Are you okay Zaza?"

I ask, moving out of his arms. He nods, maybe I'm overthinking things.

Me: "I love you too."

My proclamation is enough to make him smile.

-SABELO ZULU.

"Drive faster man."

My mother orders, I had to borrow a car from a friend because this woman wants to go see her son at 11pm. Her peers are sleeping, 3am is around the corner. She will be tired by that time and miss work.

Me: "I can't drive any faster than this magriza, I don't want to die because of Bhekifa. People die on the freeway and roam around the streets as lost souls. I'm not ready to be highway-Sabelo, yoh I would be one good looking ghost. Imagine... You have to bury me in an expensive suit, Gucci or Lois Vuitton. Chaii, I will be a high grade ghost, scaring all the rich people."

Why does it suddenly sound better than being alive? Poverty visited me the second I was born and has dwelt with me since.

Mariam: "A what?"

Me: "High grade ghost, levels magriza, levels."

Mariam: "Tell me, why am I entertaining you?"

Trick question.

Me: "You don't have a life, and I'm the only one who brightens up your day."

Couldn't have said it any better.

Mariam: "The only reason I still get to see your ugly face is because you're my son. I should've done the needful and sent you to your aunt in Potchefstroom."

Me: “Where is that? Don’t talk about useless places mama, you need to thank God that I’m here. Without me, Nelly would have showed you, your mother.”

Mariam groans at the mention of her daughter in-law.

Mariam: “Bhekifa will never come right in life as long as he continues to associate himself with that woman.”

Me: “Khethile Khethile, he’s obsessed with Nelly and there is no turning back.” (He has chosen.)

Mariam: “That’s nothing I can’t fix. Nelly will soon be nothing, but a bad memory.”

We’re here, I park at the parking lot. I will let her go in alone. I don’t want to be embarrassed by the police, visiting hours are over. Knowing my mother will trouble me, I sink down on the seat and face ahead.

Mariam: “Let’s go.”

Yoh...

Me: “Where?”

I’m not going anywhere.

Me: “Go and make a fool of yourself mama, I will wait here.”

Mariam: "What will I say when I get there? I thought you were going to do the talking."

Mageba come and witness this moment with me, the woman known as my mother has finally accepted that I am useful.

Me: "I'm also shy mama, if I go with you we'll stare at the policeman like two idiots."

If lying will save me from this depressing trip, then bring all the lies you can gather. Huh! I will not die because of Mariam and Bhekifa.

Mariam: "Sabelo, your brother needs you."

Me: "He can need me in the morning, hurry magriza. It's almost 12am, the witch hour is approaching. We don't want you transforming in front of people, we burn witches in this country, we don't play." (Old lady.)

Mariam: "Voetsek, I will kill you, Sabelo. Do you hear me?" (Piss off.)

She smacks my head, the slap is hard and painful. Her temper though tickles, causing me to laugh out loud.

Me: "Hade magriza, can't you take a joke hau?" (I'm sorry.)

Mariam: "Let's go."

Me: “Shame, you can miss me on this one. Please hurry.”

Today she will see how serious I can get, she jolts out of the car with a tongue click and bangs the door. I should get Nelly to write a book about Mariam, such an easy book it will be. All she has to do is describe tongue clicks.

(Mariam’s POV)

“Click, click, click.”

I mean that’s how the woman communicates, especially when she’s angry. I am one unlucky man.

25

“TWENTY FIVE”

NELLY PAGE.

The restaurant fight trended for a week, I was relieved when it died down. Unfortunately, my kids found out about it from friends at school and that their father was arrested. They didn't take it well, especially Ayanda, she is the most affected. I have been meaning to sit them down and tell them about the divorce, I don't know how this co-parenting thing will work. What I'm aware of is that I can't keep my kids away from their father, it is not their fault that we didn't work out.

“A minute?”

My boss says, her face dipped in my office door. It's not good when she pops by your office, either I did something wrong or a client is not happy about the service. I nod as an answer to her question, she was going to come in anyway. Lydia has a poker face, one we call a bitch-face. A successful black woman who continues to climb her way up the cooperate ladder, every woman I know in this place wants to be her.

Me: "A visit from you is never good."

My joke is kicked out the window when she doesn't receive it, I clear my throat to rid the awkwardness. She tosses a white A4 envelope on the table.

Lydia: "A former employee is taking us to CCMA."

She tells me with a straight face, I don't raise my eyes to her, I would rather look at these documents in my hands. Buhle? I should have known, it is stated that I dismissed her unfairly. I should have known that she would fight me, trouble seems to follow me everywhere.

Lydia: "What you did was careless Nelly."

Me: "Her sleeping with my husband wasn't?"

My tongue slipped, you don't talk to Lydia like she owes you child maintenance. I would like to return the cold glare she gives me, but I still want my job.

Lydia: "We don't mix business with our personal lives, you should know better."

Yes ma'am. Geez!!!

Me: "I couldn't keep Buhle anymore, she was incompetent and missed worked whenever she felt like it. I had to run after her just so she stays in her lane."

Lying isn't always bad, look at me ready to kick my problems out the window with this one lie.

Lydia: "This Buhle person has become a threat to my company, fix this."

Me: "How? I can't take her back."

Lydia: "I don't care what you do, fix this mess. Get her to back off, I can't afford to have this company stained. I have worked so much..."

Blah... Blah... Blah! I mentally roll my eyes as she tells me a story about how she built this company singlehandedly and... whatever. I don't care... I have heard this story before, it was inspiring at first. Now it is used as shovel to bury us with guilt whenever we trip and fall. Can she stop already?

Me: "I will see what I can do Lydia."

I am not giving Buhle her job back, what will I tell my new PA? She has settled in just fine and she is more hands on with the work than that homewrecker.

Lydia: "Good."

Argh!

Lydia: "You have a week to clear this out."

How the hell am I going to get Buhle to back off? Her attitude ticks me off, I have enough going on as it is. I watch Lydia catwalk her way out of my office, may she trip on that long weave and fall for being a pain. These are days I wish I had my own company, maybe it's time I took writing as a career. It pays well, I would be set for life.

-BHEKIFA ZULU.

Cheryl has been avoiding me for about a month, it doesn't help that she works on a different floor. I have thought of keeping my distance, it would be so easy if she didn't knock in my head once in a while. I try to forget her, but she keeps burning in the back of my mind. I should talk to their supervisor and get her back on this floor.

I'm buried in work when I get an email from my PA reminding me of the business function this Friday. I have been nominated for businessman of the year, I bagged it last year and this year should be no different. Nelly suddenly comes to mind, after that incident at Dros restaurant she has been avoiding me. I'm

glad the media didn't put two and two together. The separation is still a secret.

I must be an idiot to be attracted to Cheryl while married to Nelly, I call my PA and send for Cheryl. It's almost midday, it gets quiet around this time. Ten minutes later, a soft knock has me raising my head from the laptop. She is here, a smile traces my lips at the sight of her. She doesn't return it, instead stands by the door with folded arms.

Me: "Please come in."

My voice is soft and welcoming. I gave her a bad impression that day and I want to make things right. Relief smiles upon me when she gradually strides in, her eyes are unashamedly piercing into mine. I move from my desk to get to her.

Me: "How have you been?"

Cheryl: "Good."

That's all she gives.

Me: "How is your daughter?"

I don't know how to start this, I'm a nervous idiot.

Cheryl: "Sia is fine, she's her normal self again. Is there anything I can help you with Mr. Zulu?"

She has got to be kidding me, is she still upset over what happened a month ago?

Me: "Look, I'm sorry I forgot about you that day. That was rude of me."

Cheryl: "I'm over that."

She shrugs her shoulders like she doesn't care. Then what is the problem?

Me: "I thought you were upset with me."

Cheryl: "I was, I got over it."

She seems different.

Me: "Okay, still I am sorry. Can I take you out? I want to make it up to you."

I want to take her hand into mine, but I don't know if it's a good idea.

Cheryl: "You're a nice person Mr. Zulu, but..."

Mr. Zulu? We're back to being formal?

Cheryl: "I think you should focus on fixing your marriage, it was made clear to me that you still love your wife..."

Me: "We're separated, there is nothing between Nelly and me. I haven't seen her in a month."

I want to do this, I know I do. I want someone to hold my hand again and love me and make me feel like I matter.

Cheryl: "How sure are you that it's completely over?"

Me: "A hundred percent, we are done."

Her eyes scan my wedding ring.

Cheryl: "As long as you're wearing that, you two are still together. Living in separate houses means nothing."

Me: "The ring means nothing now."

What the hell am I saying? Cheryl huffs

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calling me out on my lie.

Cheryl: "What exactly do you want from me?"

For some reason, I rush to lock the door and finally take her hand into mine. It's so warm.

Me: "I want to be with you, I want you to give me a chance."

I must be drunk with something, the heart really is a strange organ.

Cheryl: "You're married."

Me: "What is that? Is it a disease or something? Please tell me, I'm not dying, I haven't kissed you in a while, I can't die yet."

Cheryl laughs at my dramatics.

Cheryl: "I'm serious, if you want us to be together you need to divorce your wife."

Tough decision to make, maybe it is time.

Me: "If you let me kiss you... maybe..."

Cheryl: "We're at work Bhekifa."

We're back to first name basis, I'm winning.

Me: "I locked the door."

I say, already leaned in and brushing my lips on hers. I finally get to taste her lips, her kiss is sweet and unfortunately lasts for a second.

Cheryl: "I need to go back to work, I'm clocking off early today."

Me: "Spend the weekend with me?"

I need a smack on the mouth. How did that question leave my mouth? She shakes her head, clothing me with a cloak of disappointment.

Cheryl: "I can't, my mother is not around so it's just me and the kids."

Me: "How about we do dinner tomorrow?"

Cheryl: "I'll be free sometime next week, I'll let you know."

I hope this is not her, kindly rejecting me, I kiss her again to make sure. She returns it, we're still good.

Cheryl: "I have to go."

This is the first time seeing her shy side, I let her out with a little hope that I will see her again.

-NELLY PAGE.

It must be stupid of me to ask Buhle to meet up with me for lunch, it's not like I have a choice. Dragon Lydia will bite my head off if I don't do this. Wimpy! This is what she opted for. Typical... She openly rolls her eyes when she sees me approach, one thing I do not miss about her. I'm still praying someone

gauges those ugly eyes out, so she never looks at married men again.

Me: "Hi."

I have to be nice... I'm sorry, I mean I have to pretend to be nice. She is almost halfway done with the burger that has created a mess on her plate. Picky eater, the tomato has been placed aside along with olives. I don't know if it's still a burger or a roll with meat.

Buhle: "Are you going to stand there while I eat? How rude for an elegant woman like you."

Still insolent I see... Don't mind her Nelly, wear your best fake smile. You need her remember? I slide in the red chair opposite her.

Me: "Ten minutes is what I have."

I tell her, so she can stop slurping on that strawberry milkshake and give me her attention.

Buhle: "I don't have money to pay for this, since you fired me. So if you don't mind..."

She is not asking by the way, two hundred should be enough. I fish for my wallet and place it on the tray, it must be Mandela's face that causes her to frown because this is more than enough to cover the bill.

Buhle: "I ordered desert as well."

She says, loudly slurping on the milkshake again. Lydia has done it, she made me do this. This is humiliating. You know what?

Me: "Cut the crap Buhle, what do you want from me?"

Buhle knows damn well what I'm talking about, the innocent look does not fool me.

Buhle: "I'm a single mother Nelly, unemployed and broke. My baby daddy refuses to acknowledge his child because his wife told him so."

Me: "What are you talking about?"

The eye roll again, this fork would do wonders if I shove it in her eyes.

Buhle: "You told Bhekifa to stop supporting his son, didn't you?"

Me: "Whatever you and Bhekifa decided on has nothing to do with me. I came here for the case, you're taking us to CCMA."

The witch chuckles lowly, she thinks this is a joke.

Buhle: "It was about time, don't you think? And no, I don't want the job back. I hated that place."

Me: "What do you want then?"

Buhle: "My baby daddy, I'm willing to be a side chick."

The urge to smack her to hell and back...

Buhle: "Let's face it, Bhekifa is moneyed. I doubt you need him, you're doing well. Book sells are skyrocketing and you have a stable job. While I on the other hand have nothing, my son has nothing. He needs his father."

The gods must be smoking snuff, this cannot be happening to me.

Me: "That's your condition? You will back off if I give you Bhekifa?"

She laughs, like the idiot she is.

Buhle: "Clever girl."

I hate her.

Me: "You need help, you're sick."

Locked up, perhaps that will have her thinking straight because now she is on a train to Sterkfontein.

Buhle: "Well then prepare to pay up."

How To Get Away With Murder? Or Criminal Minds? I must have learnt something there. I have to fabricate a lie to get her to back off. I can't entertain her, I have to fetch the kids from

school. I plan on telling them today after supper, maybe I should take them out to a movie. I would be deemed a bad mom because it's a school night, but I'm desperate. I need to soften them up before I break their little hearts.

Me: "Let me think about it, Bhekifa is his own person. I can't make him do things he doesn't want."

I lie, the fool has no clue that we're separated.

Buhle: "He doesn't have to know the plan, you lead him to me and I will take care of the rest."

Buhle's craziness is getting out hand, I fake a smile.

Me: "I'll call you."

I say as I drop a R50 note on the table and walk without looking back. Next time I will pay extra attention when watching 'The Perfect Murder.' I am ready to kill someone.

“TWENTY SIX”

NELLY PAGE.

I miss Thokozane, he would know what to do in this situation. The kids have gone mute on me after I have told them about the broken marriage. I knew they wouldn't understand, what I didn't expect is the heavy silence.

Me: “Won't you guys say something?”

I ask them, they are packed on the corner couch, heads dropped and arms folded across their chests. No one says anything, and I would give anything to hear their opinions.

“I hate him.”

That's Victor's voice, and God no, I don't want him to hate his father. His eyes raise to meet mine, instead of seeing tears, I see a condemnation.

Victor: “I hate him, mom.”

He repeats and this time the other kids glance up at him inquisitively, Victor keeps his gaze on me as he stands to sit beside me.

Me: "Baby, you can't hate your father."

Victor: "But I do mom, I hate him for what he did to you."

What is he talking about?

Victor: "I know dad used to hit you, that's why you left him."

This child... I never told them anything of the sort. Ayanda jolts up from the seat and I instantly know this is not going to be good.

Ayanda: "You're a liar Vic, dad would never do that."

She screams at her brother, Ayanda is too young to be hearing such things.

Victor: "Ayanda sit down, I know what I'm talking about, okay?"

Ayanda: "Well you're lying, I know my dad. He would never hurt anyone, he loves us. It's all mom's fault, everything is."

Luvo: "Ayanda!"

My second born Luvo reprimands her, Ayanda is not touched.

Me: "Baby..."

Ayanda: "No, I will never forgive you for this."

She shouts before storming out of the living room.

Me: "Ayanda!"

What's the use of calling her back? The child never listens to me.

Luvo: "I'll check on her."

The two boys follow each other out, leaving me with my eldest.

Victor: "Don't worry mom, I will take care of you. When I grow up I'm going to be a lawyer and I will protect you from dad."

Me: "Your father is not a bad person Victor, what happens between us should not be your concern. I don't want you to hate him. He will never hurt you."

Victor: "But he hurt you."

Me: "Adults hurt each other sometimes, but we fix things at the end of the day. Don't let hatred stay in your heart, you're too young for that, tell your siblings as well."

Victor nods, his eyes tell me he doesn't agree with me. Bhekifa will have to fix his mess. I can't erase the moments he put tears on my face, the moments he made me feel inferior. But that doesn't mean the kids deserve to live without their father.

-CHERYL ZIKHALI.

“I thought I told you to stay away from married men, now you’re telling me he asked you out and you agreed?”

Maybe I shouldn’t have told him, Jabu thinks he has the right to dictate my life.

Me: “I am not a child Jabu, do not speak to me like that.”

I should have taken the bus, asking him to fetch me was a mistake.

Jabu: “I just don’t understand Cheryl and why him? What do you see in him anyway?”

Me: “Why not him?”

Jabu: “Firstly, he is a businessman and you’re a cleaner. The man is out of your league.”

Me: “Gee, thanks for the vote of confidence.”

Jabu: “I’m serious, he probably wants something from you.”

I will never hear the end of this, what a long trip this is going to be.

Me: “Stop the car.”

I don’t care if we are in the middle of nowhere, I can’t be around a person who thinks less of me.

Jabu: “Don’t be ridiculous, I’m not doing that.”

Me: “Then stop with your nonsense Jabu, in what book does it say the rich can’t mingle with people like us?”

Jabu: “I didn’t say that, but this man is married for Pete’s sake. He wants something from you.”

Me: “What? My virginity?”

Stupid.

Jabu: “This is not a joke Cheryl, think of your kids. You told me that you saw a different side to him when he attacked that man at the restaurant.”

Me: “Yeah people mess up, that’s life. It doesn’t define who they are.”

Jabu: “I hope you know what you’re doing, I don’t want to say I told you so.”

I will not justify his statement with an answer, I’m a big girl and I do know what I’m doing.

-NELLY PAGE.

I dread calling Bhekifa, but I have no choice. Ayanda has locked herself in her room, that child is going to give me grey hairs.

“He’s here.”

My mother says as she approaches from the kitchen, I would hide, but I don't want to be a coward anymore. Those days are over, besides, my father is here.

Dad: "Go to your room Nelly."

What did I say about hiding?

Me: "I'm okay dad, I don't want him to think I'm afraid of him."

I say, keeping in mind that Bhekifa feeds on fear like a demon.

Mom: "Are you sure? We'll keep an eye on him."

Me: "You really don't have to, I want my daughter to know that I'm here for her as well. She thinks Bhekifa is innocent in all this."

Not a minute passes and there is a soft knock at the door, my mother rushes to open.

"Ma." I hear his voice for the first time in a month, suddenly Buhle comes to mind. That girl must have been a demon in her past life.

Mom: "Come in."

I watch as my mother makes way for Bhekifa, his eyes find me before anything else. He stands with his hands on his back, a

subtle smile on his face. For a minute I see the good old Bhekifa, it feels strange that we are slowly becoming strangers.

Bhekifa: "Baba."

My father and his arrogance, he responds with a nod.

Dad: "Ayanda is in her room."

Me: "I will take him."

I don't want him poisoning my baby in my absence, we leave my parents and head to Ayanda's room.

Bhekifa: "How are you?"

Me: "Fine."

Bhekifa: "You look different."

I'm not up for a conversation with him

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I will keep my mouth shut. I don't owe him anything, I step aside when we get to the room. The door is still locked, I gesture that Bhekifa knocks.

Bhekifa: "Ayanda, please open for daddy."

He says above a whisper while softly knocking on the door, the spoiled brat is quick to open. With eyes filled with tears, she

throws herself at him. Bhekifa scoops her up and I follow them inside.

Ayanda: "I don't want you here, get out."

The child yells as she clings to her father's neck. She's shouting at me, her mother. I don't care if she is sitting on her father's lap, I will smack her senseless.

Bhekifa: "Baby no, we don't talk to adults like that."

I guess I'm just going to stand in the middle of the room like I didn't bring this child into the world.

Ayanda: "But it's her fault that we don't live with you anymore."

Bhekifa: "No it's not, your mother and I are not perfect. We had to go our separate ways, because we couldn't live with each other anymore, but that doesn't mean we don't love each other."

Ayanda: "I don't understand, people that love each other stay together. Why do you guys have to be apart?"

Bhekifa turns his gaze to me, I'm not going to meddle. He needs to fix this, he's the mistake maker, not me.

Bhekifa: "It's like you, when you had to be transferred to the next grade that is the circle of life baby. There are people that are destined to be together and there are people that aren't.

Your mom and I will always love you and your brothers, nothing will ever change that.”

He’s doing good, I didn’t see this coming.

Ayanda: “But I want us all to be together under the same roof.”

This is going to be a long night.

-SABELO ZULU.

Time surely flies, it’s moving a hundred miles an hour and I don’t understand how I still don’t have the house to myself. My dear mother should be walking with a stick by now, her peers are pushing wheelchairs, but she is as strong as a horse.

“You better be thinking about me.”

Can’t a man take a break from his wife? A second is all I needed, hence I came to the back yard for a breather. Yet Rose sees it fit to follow me.

Me: “Is the house on fire?”

Rose: “No..”

She replies with a frown playing on her face.

Me: “Are you pregnant?”

Rose: "No Sabelo."

Why is she giggling?"

Me: "Is my mother dead?"

Rose: "No."

Dammit! She takes the frown again, I told this woman I want to be alone.

Me: "If there is no emergency, then what are you doing here?"

She's pulling a chair, Shembe stop this woman.

Rose: "I'm worried about you."

Huh!

Me: "Am I dying?"

Rose: "Stop it with the silly questions."

Sabelo: "No Rose, I just don't understand why you are here after I specifically told you that I don't want to be disturbed. Now look, you're sitting next to me."

I move my chair away from her.

Rose: "You have been quiet lately, I'm worried about you."

Hau! People waste their worry tokens like this? Shame!

Me: “Life Rose, life. You wouldn’t understand, you’re married to us’gaqagaqa (a tough guy.) A provider, all you should worry about is hair and makeup.”

“Is this where you’re all hiding?”

Great, let’s invite the whole nation here. A man can never have peace in this place. My mother stands with her hands on her hips, she is frowning at Rose and I know why. Rose has been given all the household duties, from cleaning to cooking. She is probably running from her mother in-law, that’s why she is here.

Me: “Call the kids, call Zodwa from next door, her husband should be home by now, call him as well and their children. Don’t forget Gertrude from across the street, that one likes visiting people. Oh and Thiza, the crazy man who lives under the bridge. Call them mama, call them.”

Mariam: “Why? What’s going on?”

Rose: “Are you throwing a party?”

These people are idiots.

Me: “Party for what? Since you people are all here, invading my personal space. Why not invite everyone, let’s have an “annoy Sabelo party.”

I can't breathe in this place.

Mariam: "I have the numbers to Sterkfontein on speed dial, I won't hesitate to use them if you continue like a crazy person."

Me: "I would rather live with them than with you people."

Mariam: "Then go, you would fit perfectly there."

I need to get out of here.

Mariam: "What is your problem anyway?"

If only she knew.

Me: "There's this car I saw on TV the other day, since then I haven't been able to sleep."

Mariam: "You're grumpy because of a car you can't afford?"

Me: "That's the whole point magriza, I can't afford the damn car."

Mariam bends over to remove a sandal from her foot, I jump behind Rose when she tosses it my way.

Mariam: "Are you saying damn to me wena Sabelo?"

Hiabo! It's always 'crazy' that knocks, never death.

Me: "No mama, I said the damn car."

Mariam: "You're repeating it Sabelo."

Me: “Yoh hai, Zodwa has dealt with you mama. You have to send it back to her, hai ngeke phela.” (Never.)

I should leave this yard.

Me: “I only want a car, will I be crucified for that?”

Mariam: “You can’t even afford a pair of underwear, how will you afford a car.”

If you find time, please die.

Me: “Insurance money.”

Mariam: “From where?”

Me: “Your insurance magriza, let’s face it, you have lived. It’s been long overdue, I promise to buy you a beautiful coffin...”

I have it all planned out.

Mariam: “The only person who is going to die here is you, how could you say that to me?”

Me: “But you just said the same thing to me.”

Mariam: “I’m going to deal with you, Sabelo.”

Me: “Relax mama, can’t you take a joke?”

Yoh, people can’t joke in life. Seriously though, when is her time?

27

“TWENTY SEVEN”

SABELO ZULU.

“No mama, you can’t do this to me, you can’t. You had Bhekifa from the moment he was born and now that he wants me, you’re jealous.”

My mother is not serious, at this age she wants to go to a business function.

Mariam: “What do you mean he wants you? My son only wants an escort to the event.”

Me: “Yes, I will escort my brother.”

I emphasize on the word brother, Bhekifa belongs to all of us.

Mariam: “I don’t care what you say Sabelo, I’m ready to go. You’re staying here with your wife.”

We shall see, I know my mother is not going anywhere.

Mariam: “Imagine wearing my best dress only to stay at home.”

You should see what she's wearing, even Somizi's mother would never have been seen wearing this ugly thing she calls a dress.

Me: "Okay magriza, you go. Rose and I will watch the awards on TV."

Mariam Zulu has not met me yet. I take a sit on the couch, I want to see something. The time states almost 7pm, the awards start at 8pm and Bhekifa should be here by now.

Me: "Mama, remember the dress I bought you for Christmas last year."

Mariam: "The one you bought with my money?"

Me: "Ok'salayo (still) I bought you a dress magriza. Be grateful hau."

The tongue click is like that family friend who thinks they can now open the fridge and jump on the couch. It's forever present.

Me: "Bhekifa's suit matches with that dress, I think you should wear it. You will look better than Bonang and you know how stylish that woman is."

The smile on her face... shame.

Mariam: "You think?"

No...

Me: “Yes magriza, if I lie, my mother will be crippled for life.”

Lord, see the things we speak into existence. Is it too early to celebrate my mother being in a wheelchair?

Me: “Bonang has nothing on you, you should be queen of South Africa. Yes, yes queen M.”

The mothers we are given in this world, look at this one, smiling like she is really better than Bonang.

Mariam: “Okay, let me change fast. Tell Bhekifa to wait for me when he gets here.”

Me: “Sho sho griza, bathathe Maristo. Mariza, the granny of all grannies.” (Show them Mariam.)

Clap hands for me, she likes my praises.

It's not a second when she's gone that I hear Bhekifa's car pull up, I jump to peek through the window and it's him. Mariam won't have a chance to run out since she's changing.

Me: “Mama, don't worry I took your Tupperware. I will bring you leftovers.”

I shout to my mother from her bedroom door, run out of the house like my life is in danger and lock the door behind me.

CHERYL ZIKHALI.

Things seem to be looking up lately, I didn't think I would get the job at the call centre. I will be starting on Monday. This is a new start for me, finally I will be able to bring something valuable home.

Me: "Mama."

I rush to her bedroom the second I walk into the house, I need to tell her the good news. This woman sleeps a lot lately, I'm worried about her.

Me: "Are you okay?"

I enquire, settling on the edge of the bed. She raises an arm for a quick stretch, before her lips build a ghost of a smile.

Mom: "I was cleaning the house today, I'm just tired that's all."

Me: "You overwork yourself, you're not young anymore. You need to take it easy."

She always finds something to do around here.

Mom: "You look happy, what is it?"

A smile takes over my lips as she reminds me of the new job.

Me: "I got the job."

I expected the light in her eyes, she takes time to sit up and leans back on the headboard.

Mom: "I'm happy for you."

Me: "I'm happy for me too, where are the kids?"

Mom: "You didn't see Jabu in the living room? He's been here for hours now, Jabu is a good man and he is good with the kids."

I'm not about to tread that path with her, not again.

Me: "Sleep mom, I'll go check on them."

I exclaim and leave her to continue with her slumber, I don't mind Jabu being around my children. I can only hope he doesn't think something will brew between us, Zain would turn in his grave... his best friend? Never happening.

SABELO ZULU...

How come Bhekifa has never brought me here? Heaven cannot be as beautiful as this place... The Maslow in Sandton.

Me: "Yoh, yoh, yoh bafo. When I die, I want to come here. Heaven for what?"

I tell my brother as my eyes browse the place, rich people are living the life.

Bhekifa: "You're insane bafo."

He chuckles at my awestruck moment.

Me: "No seriously, this place is nca bafo. Ziyawa mo." (It's beautiful here.)

Bhekifa: "Let's go inside."

I follow him inside the auditorium and it's just as beautiful. Where is Julius Malema? I want him to fight for my part of the land, I have chosen this one.

The place is packed with businessman, outstandingly dressed in their noticeable expensive suits. The businesswomen are no different, suddenly I feel out of place with the suit I wore at my brother's wedding years ago. Bhekifa should have bought me something new. The sleeves are small and the pants are tight. I don't complain to him though, it's his night. I will let him be, he will hear it from me in the morning.

We settle down as an elegant black woman on the stage addresses us, there are drinks on the table and a few snacks, I'm sure to nibble on while we wait for the full meal. I didn't eat at home, so I grab a small basket filled with three pieces of

baked bread and chew away. Everything is appetizing, the peanuts even taste better than the ones I normally buy at Pick n' Pay.

Me: "What do you think they made these peanuts with? They are so delicious."

Bhekifa's lips curl in disgust, his eyes trail my mouth. He must like the way I chew or he wants what I'm eating.

Bhekifa: "At least swallow before you speak."

Mr. Businessman! Nonsense...

Bhekifa: "Don't you think you have had enough? Wipe your mouth people are staring."

He's starting, I knew he was going to act like this. I can't eat in peace in this free country.

Me: "Take me home if I embarrass you bafo

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it's not like my mother's house has no food."

Eish! One onion and half a tomato in the fridge to be exact.

Bhekifa has not been feeding us well, poverty is reigning in that house.

Bhekifa: "Okay, I'll request an Uber for you."

I'm taken aback when he stands up, my mother's child is serious about this.

Me: "Fine, I will slow down hau. Why are you so soft? Sit down bafo."

Bhekifa: "Why didn't mom come along? I thought she was the one to accompany me."

Me: "Not with that dress she was wearing, I thought she was going to a funeral and not just a funeral, but her enemy's funeral. You should pay me for being here."

I have come to realise that Bhekifa doesn't like to hear a word against his mother.

Boredom strikes as the night falls away, a few have won and my brother is nervously tapping his foot under the table. His category is mentioned next, I see his face crinkle with nerves. The black woman's English is too posh, she speaks with her nose more than she does with her mouth, I can hardly hear a thing with that twang. One day ekasi and she will come back speaking like Jacob Zuma.

"Bhekifa Zulu."

That's all I hear, at least she pronounced my brother's name right... Wait! My brother! He won, Bhekifa won. By the time I

realise this, Bhekifa is half way to the stage. How can he leave me behind? I'm a proud Zulu man and of course I will jump into a traditional Zulu dance. I hear applause and a few whistles as I dance around whistling myself.

Me: "Mageba.

Zulu ka Malandela ngokulandela izinkomo zamadoda.

Zulu omnyama.

Ondlela zimhlophe.

Wena ka Phunga no Mageba.

Wena ka Mjokwane ka Ndaba.

Wena wenkayishana ka Menzi eyaphuza umlaza ngameva.

Sthuli sika Ndaba.

Sthuli sika Nkombane.

Wena ka nogwaja omuhle ngomlenze.

Wena ka Mbambela Shoba.

Ndabezitha." (Zulu clan praises.)

More applause by the time I finish my dance, I turn to my brother on stage to see him accept the trophy, he pauses for a few pictures and just as he is ready to get off stage, I run there.

People must know that we are the Zulus, we are never defeated.

Bhekifa: "What are you doing?"

He questions with a chastising look, I will take over from here. My brother seems to be shy... Embarrassing.

NELLY PAGE.

The family is watching the awards on TV, except for my father. He retired earlier for the night. Bhekifa never disappoints when it comes to work, I knew he would take it home like he always does. Ayanda has been jumping in excitement since her father was announced.

Me: "Okay, time for bed guys."

I have to break this noise, my father is sleeping and I wouldn't want him to be woken up.

Ayanda: "Can we please watch some more?"

Bhekifa did well with Ayanda, she is starting to accept the situation.

Me: "We agreed on thirty minutes, we're going on forty five and grandpa is sleeping. You're making noise."

Luvo: ‘We’ll be quiet mom please.’”

Me: “Nope, I won’t fall for your innocence. Go brush your teeth and get in bed.”

They drop their heads and follow each other toward their rooms.

Me: “I’ll come and check on you, you better be sleeping when I get there.”

I shout loud enough for them to hear.

Mom: “You’re doing great with the kids.”

Me: “I try, some days are hard and some days, they make it easy.”

Mom: “Your father wants an apology from the Zulu family.”

Of course he does, he’s old fashioned like that.

Me: “Is that why he’s grumpy lately?”

Mom: “I guess and you know it’s happening right?”

Me: “Yes, I hope there won’t be any war between the families. I want peace ma, I’m tired of quarrelling.”

Mom: “Your father knows what he’s doing.”

I know he does, I trust him.

SABELO ZULU.

“Is that camera live?” I point to the camera on my left, the cameraman nods.

Bhekifa: “Bafo, don’t...”

I push him aside, you don’t get to be on TV every day.

Me: “Hello South Africa, my name is Sabelo Zulu. I thought I would die without being on TV, my enemies are eating their words. Mama!”

The place breaks with laughter, but I see the haughty ones like my brother.

Bhefika: “Sabelo, let’s go.”

He says as I shout for my mother, this is my moment.

Sabelo: “MAMA I MADE IT, I MADE IT MAGRIZA. I would like to thank my wife Rose, mabhebeza look at me. Your man is a celebrity, call all your friends ngwana (baby) and tell them we are famous. My kids, your old man will buy you Danone tomorrow to celebrate. I would also like to thank my mother Mariam Zulu, I thought witches were useless, but my mother has done it for me. To my enemies, especially Zodwa, I won’t mention the address for safety reasons. Libambe lingashoni.”
(Sleep with one eye open.)

Bhekifa being the jealous person he is, drags me off stage. He pulls me through the loud crowd, people love me. They are taking pictures of me.

Bhekifa: “Did you have to embarrass me like that? And how could you tell the world that your mother is a witch? Are you insane Sabelo?”

This one is like Mariam, paranoid and annoying. He pulls me down to a chair, he’s glaring at me.

Me: “This is how rivalry between siblings start, you don’t want us to shine Bhekifa. The whole of South Africa now knows that there is a Sabelo Zulu out there.”

Bhekifa: “With a mother who is a witch?”

What wrong did I say? Mariam is a witch, no one crucified Harry Potter. Mariam is safe.

Me: “They don’t have proof, just word of mouth.”

Bhekifa: “Sabe –”

Me: “Stop complaining bafo hau, show me where the kitchen is. I brought Tupperware, I have to pack meat for our mother.”

Bhekifa: “They don’t do that here.”

Me: “How do you know? Have you tried asking them for takeaway?”

He sighs, visibly annoyed by me for whatever reason.

Bhekifa: “It’s an elegant function, they don’t do takeaway.”

Sabelo: “Show me the kitchen and I will show you how we do it ekasi.” (In the hood.)

He gives me a long ugly stare. What does a man have to do to get meat around here?

Bhekifa: “I should have brought Cheryl instead.”

Cheryl or no Cheryl, I am not leaving this place without my mother’s meat.

“TWENTY EIGHT”

BHEKIFA ZULU.

My mistake was thinking Sabelo tagging along was a good idea, it only proved to be the worst mistake of my life. I will have to clean up his mess, my reputation has already been tarnished by the fight I had with Phakathi and now this. My eyes keep moving to Sabelo sleeping on the passenger seat, his loud snoring is getting to me. I have to fight the urge to push him out of the moving car, the idiot embarrassed me tonight.

Why is my mother sitting outside in the dark?

Me: “Sabelo wake up.”

He snores louder as I nudge his shoulder, I drive in and park. My mother stands, her feet carry her to me. She opens the door before I get a chance to wake Sabelo, her eyes are wet. She’s been crying and not only that, she is livid.

Me: “Mama.”

Mariam: “Wake that idiot up.”

Me: "It's okay mama, I will help him to his room."

I don't think I like the look on her face, she is up to something.

Mariam: "Sabelo will never step foot in my house again."

Mariam grunts, I was afraid of this. My brother messed up, it's not his fault. He's naturally stupid and can't help but be an idiot, my mother knows this well. Even as a kid, he has always been trouble.

Me: "What do you mean?"

I step out of the car, Mariam's comeback is a tongue click. I watch her as she strides to the lawn and grabs a hosepipe, Oh no... Maybe my brother deserves this, but my car doesn't.

Me: "Mama, what are you doing?"

Mariam: "Your brother thinks I'm a witch? Today he will know the kind of witch I am."

It's too late to stop her when she opens the passenger door and sprays Sabelo, it's not long till he jumps from his sleep and falls on the concrete ground as he tries to run from the water.

Sabelo: "Haibo, bafo help me."

He screams, seeing he can't escape. Rolling on the floor, he rubs his eyes to search for the source of his problem.

Sabelo: “Mama?”

You would think he got the shock of his life, he falls back, trying to get back up. My mother is wasting water if you ask me.

Mariam: “Who is a witch wena Sabelo? You have the nerve to announce to the whole world that I’m a witch. Do you know what you have done?”

Sabelo: “They don’t have proof mama.”

He tells her, using me as a shield. My mother has ceased her attacks.

Mariam: “You stupid boy, you announced it on national TV.”

Sabelo: “I will protect you don’t worry, there is no affidavit proving you’re really a witch. Don’t stress magriza, I’ve got you, those people have no proof.”

I give up, my mother won’t live long with this craziness.

Mariam: “Bhekifa talk to your brother please, he wants to kill me.”

Sabelo: “This idiot son of yours mama failed to get you meat from the function, what will he possibly say to me? I’m the only reliable son you have.”

Now he is brave enough to stand before his mother, she looks defeated and drained.

Sabelo: “Wait here.”

Sabelo murmurs as he wobbles to the car, he dips half of his body in the backseat and comes out with the Tupperware. I can't begin to mention how he got the food in there, embarrassment laughs at me at the thought of his idiotic actions.

Sabelo: “Here.”

He pushes the Tupperware on my mother, she frowns at it but flips the lid open still.

Sabelo: “That's for you mama, go and feast. Don't eat too much, you won't be able to wake up at 3am. You can leave some for me, I will eat in the morning. Right now I need something to drink my throat is dry.”

He's got another thing coming if he thinks I will let him drink some more, Mariam is content with what she has, I guess Sabelo knows her better.

Sabelo: “Sith' aibo awuthi ngizwe lomthakathi uthin'

'Ngiyafunga lomthakathi unes'bindi'

'Izolo ngimthol' ejaldini'

'Ephethe nemithi'

'Hamb' enqunu ngathi' uhamb' ehlathini.'

(Let me hear what this witch is saying.)

(I swear this witch is brave.)

(I found her in my yard yesterday, with herbs.)

(Naked, like she is in a forest.)

He sings while dancing his way to the house, what puzzles is how he is moving backwards, his eyes on my mother. He insists that she is a witch, Sabelo needs help. I will have to talk to him when he is sober.

Sabelo: "Yesss.... Mariam, goodnight griza." (Old lady)

-NELLY PAGE.

The basement is empty, my car is the only one parked here. I check my surroundings while rushing to the car, I had to do a

last minute shopping and not once did it cross my mind not to park in the basement parking. How clever Nelly...

I hear footsteps from behind and immediately turn to inspect to find nothing, this alone is enough for me to pick up my steps, hurrying to the car. The footsteps accelerate too, I decide to run not knowing who is after me and I'm too afraid to turn back.

My heart is thudding hard against my ribcage, I am almost certain it's about to explode. Something tells me to turn and my assumptions are right, there is a man after me. The heels make it hard for me to run faster than I already am.

A scream leaves my mouth as I am tackled to the ground, I fall face down with a loud thud. My head spins due to the collision, everything around comes crushing down when I feel weight on my body, there is a man on top of me. He is breathing down my neck, his hand instantly snakes over my head to cover my mouth, depriving me a chance to scream. I struggle under him, my screams fighting to escape through his hand.

"Shut up."

He hisses through gritted teeth.

"This is going to be easier than I thought."

His words paint a scene of what he wants to do to me, his vacant hand pushes its way under my chest and falls on my breast. This drives me absolutely insane, I have to fight for my life. The man roughly turns me around while still hovering over me, his yellow lustful eyes are scrutinising me. I want to die because of the way he is staring at me. Men can hide anything from you, anything, but lust. And I have been let in the mind of this pervert rubbing his hips against mine. He smells of alcohol and weed, he is way bigger than me, that makes it hard for me to fight him.

“Nelly, right?”

He knows me?

“You are exactly as they described you, actually even better.”

His semi-yellow teeth flash in my face as he grins like a Cheshire cat, he dips his nose in the curve of my neck and takes a long mouthful of air. Tears streak down my face, fear grips my heart.

“You smell good too.”

Lord help me, anything but this please. Muffled screams resound from my voice, it's inaudible and not ready to give a hand. I will not go down without a fight, his tongue slides

between the seams of his lips and he runs it down my cheek. My stomach churns at the feel of his slimy tongue on my skin death is better than this. It has to be.

‘Please let me go.’ I’m not able to voice out as this man has bound my speech, my tears speak for me.

“Hey! What are you doing there?”

Someone shouts, a male voice, a wave of relief consumes my whole being.

“See you next time Mazulu.” The creepy man exclaims.

My body regains its weight when my attacker jumps from me, he takes off running the opposite direction, away from the two men who are rushing to my rescue. One of them runs after the aggressor, while the other comes to my aid. I can’t move, shock has kept me prisoner. So I stay on the ground, crying my eyes out. I can feel every inch of my body trembling... Every part of me is traumatized, numb to my deepest core.

“Hey are you okay?”

It’s a black man, his eyes are soft. He helps set me to a sitting position, I would stand if fear was not wrapped around my wobbly knees. The man kneels before me, he tilts his head to inspect my eyes.

“Did he hurt you? Did he...”

He pauses, unsure how to say rape. Seeing his struggle, I shake my head.

Me: “Som – someone sent him. He – he called me by... my name.”

I’m a stammering mess, tears have taken over, rendering me weak and fragile. I am fragile, I am a woman in South Africa.

“Do you need me to call someone?”

I think of my father, but I don’t want to worry him.

Me: “I’m okay.”

I lie. How on earth am I going to get home?

“I can drive behind you to make sure you get home safe, besides, I think you are in no state to be driving. You might get yourself killed.”

Who is this man? I can’t trust him, not after what just happened.

Me: “I will manage thanks.”

“Please, I insist. My name is Nkateko Mathebula if you’re worried about the stranger tag.”

He reaches out his hand for a handshake, reluctantly I take it and claim my hand back before I could feel the warmth of his hand.

Me: “Nelly.”

I give away my identity as he regards me with an expectant gaze.

Nkateko: “Nelly, let me help you please. I won’t sleep peacefully wondering if you got home safe.”

I let his words sink in and think about the man who attacked me, the last words he said to me echo in my head. This compels me to agree to Nkateko’s suggestion. He won’t be in my car, so I’m safe. He helps me to the car and waits for me until I buckle up. As I drive out of the parking lot, I check the rear-view to see him cautiously driving behind me.

-BHEKIFA ZULU.

For the first time in a while I feel at peace and there is something to look forward to. I don’t know anything about life, but Cheryl makes it worth living.

Today is our third official date and I have had fun in all three of them, I am looking forward to many more.

Me: "Shall we go? It's getting late."

She nods at my question, I signal for the waiter to come so I settle the bill. A few minutes later we are good to go.

Cheryl: "Thank you for tonight, I had a great time."

She sends her gratitude as we tread to the car hand in hand, I trap her against the car. Her eyes rise to lock with mine.

Me: "I know how you can thank me."

I bend down, my lips against her cheek, brushing it lightly. It's the first touch that has her trembling in my arms. My hands glide down to her waist to pull her close to me so our bodies are flush together, leaving no space between us. My lips trace inches of her skin, moving toward her mouth. A yearning to feel her lips swallows me, my lips brush against hers. Barely a touch...

Cheryl: "Bhek..."

Her words hang and the rest are lost against her mouth, I kiss her mildly, cautiously. My arms ring around her, gathering her against me. A strong pull jolts me out of the blissful moment.

The second I turn, a hand collides with my cheek. The slap is from a small hand, it hardly stings. But anger does not deny me the right to retaliate, the thought of Cheryl witnessing my dark

side bothers me. This has me restraining myself, my jaw clenches in anger. How dare Buhle think she has the right to slap me? Who does she think she is?

Me: "What is your problem?"

I growl, showing her how angry I am. Buhle's arms fold across her chest, I can't stand the gum she is chewing with no remorse. It's louder than the tongue click she gives me.

Buhle: "Who is this?"

Like she has the right to ask me that.

Me: "I asked you a question first Buhle."

Buhle: "Forget that Bhekifa, I want to know who this slut is."

I hear Cheryl huff beside me, she has a comeback and I pray she withholds it. Buhle is not worth the fight.

Me: "Let's go Cheryl."

I move to open the door for her, Buhle jumps to slam it closed, making my patience run thin. I could do the worst and slap that gum out of her mouth.

Buhle: "Have you forgotten about your son Bhekifa? Is she my replacement?"

Buhle is as loud as clanging cymbals.

Me: “What replacement? You were never an option Buhle, did you really think I was serious about you? Dammit, I was married.”

Buhle: “You said you would take care of me and our son, I have...”

Me: “Our son yes, I never said I will maintain your lifestyle while you lazy around, spending money you did not work for.”

Buhle’s eyes coldly draw Cheryl’s frame, she clicks her tongue again and graces us with her famous eye roll.

Buhle: “I won’t let you move on with anyone else Bhekifa, not even the likes of this slut.”

Cheryl: “That’s it, call me a slut again.”

Cheryl snaps, entering Buhle’s personal space. I can’t let her stoop to Buhle’s level, my arms circle her waist as I pull her back.

Me: “No.”

Cheryl pushes herself from me, for a brief moment she glares at Buhle and turns to enter the car. I love how disciplined she is becoming, the old Cheryl would have said a mouthfull.

Buhle: “Who is that woman Bhekifa? What about me? What about our son?”

Me: “Are you deaf or what Buhle? I told you I will take care of my son, however, I have nothing to do with you.”

Buhle: “But...”

Me: “What are you doing here anyway? Are you following me?”

Her eyes fall, hiding the guilt building up behind them.

Me: “Consider this your last warning, I don’t want you anywhere near me or that woman in there. You are sick in the head, you need help.”

Buhle: “But I love you, please give me a second chance. How come that woman gets to have you while you’re still married? What is so special about her?”

Her tears do not move me, how did I get myself involved with this irrational woman?

Buhle: “I can be your girlfriend too, I don’t mind sharing. Please Bhekifa, don’t leave me out please.”

Buhle pleads with tears in her eyes, she truly is sick if she thinks I will entertain her craziness.

Me: “Go home Buhle.”

These are my last words, I have nothing more to say to her. I rush to the car and instantly drive off. There is no telling what Buhle will do in her crazy state, Cheryl has not said a word since we left the restaurant. It is not like her to be mute, Buhle is going to ruin things for me.

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“TWENTY NINE”

CHERYL ZIKHALI.

His jaw tightens as his hands hook the steering wheel, his anger is always at the door step. Something I have noticed lately, it hasn't been directed towards me yet and I have my fingers crossed that he never will.

Me: “What was that about?”

Bhekifa goes quiet on me and I glance at him waiting for a reaction, but nothing surfaces. I'm kidding myself thinking he will actually answer.

“Tell me about that woman, Bhekifa?”

The side eye.

Bhekifa: “She's nobody.”

I know what this means, I feel myself get emotional as a wave of jealousy washes over me.

Me: “Did you sleep with her?”

The look again... Gosh, sometimes I hate how he can be so mysterious. I'm struggling to read his emotions and it doesn't sit well with me. I'm waiting for him to provide me with an answer, but he doesn't and he's not about to.

I guess his silence answers my question. Bhekifa notices how my mood has dropped.

Bhekifa: "Why are you upset?"

Because I choose this over shedding tears for a man I have been dating for months.

Me: "You slept with her Bhekifa and you're asking me shit."

My emotions get the best of me and I shout at him, he parks the car on the side of the road, turns to look at me with a scowl on his face. Maybe it's not my right to yell at him, then again I will not be played by a man. I am not one to share.

Bhekifa: "Talk to me like that again."

He demands with a threatening tone that has me gulping.

I don't think I like the angry Bhekifa.

Me: "Is this the type of a person you really are? Did you deceive me by giving me a different impression of you?"

Bhekifa: "What are you talking about?"

Me: “You have a child with that woman back there, as far as I know, you separated with your wife months ago. Where does this one come from? Were you two timing your wife?”

Bhekifa: “You see why I say you jump into conclusions without thinking, that girl means nothing to me.”

He clenches a fist as he groans in annoyance.

Bhekifa: “Buhle was a fling yes...”

My eyes and I fight the tears that want to gush out screaming for attention. I will not weep over this man and I will not be played like an idiot. There’s one thing I have noticed about him since this relationship began, Bhekifa can’t lie to me. It’s either he doesn’t know how to or he is trying to impress me.

Bhekifa: “You and I were not together that time, I... I was...”

He is mumbling... mumbling is not good.

Bhekifa: “I was married when Buhle came along, it was stupid of me and not a day passes without me regretting it.”

Do men regret ever cheating? Jeer! Bhekifa had an affair with a woman and got her pregnant. Hell I’m not perfect, I had a crush

on a married man, but to actually date one ended in my thoughts.

Me: “What does she want now?”

He seems shocked by my question and that I’m not fighting him anymore.

Bhekifa: “She’s being a nuisance, but I’ll take care of it, she won’t bother us again.”

Don’t trust anyone who says such things, taking care of someone or something in my world means getting rid of them, completely. Bhekifa takes my hands into his and plants kisses on them, I’m fighting the urge to smile.

Me: “Do I have to worry about you cheating on me?”

I know what I said, I need to confirm so I know when to walk away.

Bhekifa: “I was stupid back then, maybe I wasn’t happy in my marriage, maybe I was bored or looking for a way out. I don’t know... I can’t explain my affair with Buhle, she came out of nowhere and brought something different in my life. Somehow, she knew me more than she should have and I found that impressive.”

That does not make sense.

Bhekifa: “Shall we go to my house?”

Me: "What for? Take me to my mother's house."

Me: "We need to talk Cheryl."

I don't think so, it's his excuse for cheating that has put me off. He cheats when he feels bored in the relationship? He was impressed by Buhle's familiarity of him? What does that even mean?

Bhekifa: "Cheryl please..."

Me: "Just drive me home, it's late and I'm tired."

Perhaps I need to sleep on this, my mind is entertaining a lot of things at the same time.

Bhekifa gives up, he starts the car and we're off.

-NELLY PAGE.

Nkateko followed me all the way to my father's house, the house lights are still on. My parents are probably waiting for me to get home, those two like worrying unnecessarily.

I don't get out of the car when I pull up at the gate. I can see Nkateko through the side mirror getting out of the car, he marches to the driver's side. The window is already drawn, he smiles. I'm still too shaken to return the smile.

Me: "This is it."

I tell him with gratitude in my heart.

Nkateko: "Drive in, I'll only be at peace after you are safe inside."

It's good to know there are still good people out there.

Me: "Uh! Okay, thank you."

He's staring, I have no idea why. Lord, don't let him ask for my numbers, lately people have a 'you scratch my back, I scratch yours' mentality.

Nkateko: "No problem, you need to keep an eye out. This world is not a safe place."

Tell me something I don't know.

Me: "I will, goodnight."

Nkateko: "Night."

He flashes a quick smile as I ask him to get the gate for me.

Nkateko: "From superman to gateman huh?"

His statement tickles, it has me giggling. I make it in, wave to him and rush into the house as he drives away.

Entering the house through the kitchen, I find Victor drinking milk from the bottle.

Me: “Hey!”

He flinches at the sound of my voice, the little fright causes him to drop the bottle, spilling the milk all over the floor.

Victor: “Mom... not fair.”

He whines, grimacing at me.

Me: “You’re lucky it wasn’t grandma who walked in, what did I tell you about drinking from the container?”

Victor: “I was thirsty.”

Me: “Too thirsty to grab a cup?”

He shrugs his shoulders as if dismissing my interrogation.

Me: ‘Get a mop and clean that up.’”

He mumbles words I can’t make out as he walks out of the kitchen.

I can hear my parents talking in the living room, I make my way there. My mother is positioned next to my father... What in God’s name is he whispering to her? Do these people know their time passed with Shaka Zulu?

Me: "Greetings."

At least they notice me, my mother smiles. I'm not sure I like the way my father is scrutinising me under his gaze, if he zooms his lenses any closer, he will notice I'm shaken.

Dad: "Good thing you're home, come sit."

Come sit? I don't want to impose, I would rather be in my room, thank you.

Me: "I'm tired, I want to go to bed."

Mom: "Sit Nelly, your father has something to say."

Okay... This sounds urgent

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judging by the looks on their faces, I find my way to a single seater and wait on my father's words.

Dad: "How are you?"

After all this while, I still don't have an answer to that question. My life is a mess, Buhle is sitting on my neck. My family has been shred in two and I have no idea how I'm going to move on from here... Oh and I was attacked today. My mind has written down the answer, but my mouth refuses to cooperate and deliver the words.

Dad: "Your in laws are coming over on Saturday."

I see we're dropping bombs tonight, my mother had mentioned it, I didn't think it would be this soon. If Thokozani were here, he would dismiss this.

Dad: "The Zulu family owes you an apology, their son wronged you."

I get that and there is nothing I will say that will change my father's mind, but I feel that it's not necessary.

Mom: "So you know what you have to do?"

Dress up like the wife I am, cook and serve Bhekifa as if nothing ever happened between us... Life.

Me: "I know ma, I don't want to see him though."

Dad: "You don't have a choice Nelly, don't get it twisted, this is not a reunion. I will never let you get back with Bhekifa again."

I trust him when it comes to this and this father of mine is a promise keeper.

Mom: "The Zulus will want to see their children, I have informed the kids about it. Victor is the only one who seems to have a problem, he said he is not ready to see his father."

I'm worried about Victor, his anger has lasted for far too long. He needs to forgive Bhekifa.

Me: "I will talk to him ma."

My father stares dismayingly, he is reading me and like I said, he can see right through me. Perhaps I should tell them what happened at the mall, but knowing my father, he will give me a curfew. His house, his rules.

Dad: "You don't look okay. Did something happen?"

What did I say?

His penetrating gaze forces me to shift uncomfortably in the chair, I clear my blocked throat as I prepare to answer his question.

Me: "I'm fine baba, it's been a long day."

He nods, not removing his eyes from me.

Dad: "Mmmmh."

That hum means he will get to the bottom of this, one way or the other, something tells me, he has eyes and ears everywhere. Or I'm exaggerating things, I don't know. My father is the most secretive person I know.

Dad: "Go to bed, we will talk when you have rested."

He means when I'm ready to tell him what the problem is, I gather myself and move to my room. I need a bath, to wash off that pervert's scent. Every fibre in my body jumps as thoughts

of earlier flood my head, I'm going to need sleeping pills because I doubt I will sleep a wink tonight.

-SABELO ZULU.

Two days later...

The uncles are here, in my mother's house. There is an argument going on in the living room between them and my mother, apparently Nelly's father wants an apology from us for treating his daughter like the trash she is and my mother will have none of it. She made it clear that she does not want Nelly anywhere near her precious son, Bhekifa.

The Zulu uncles were tired of being sent back and forth, from the time Bhekifa and Nelly went their separate ways. The first meeting was cancelled by Bhekifa himself, he gave no reason, however Mariam supported him.

Mariam was not informed about the meeting that will take place on Saturday, you should have seen how upset she was when the uncles told her the reason for their sudden visit.

My brother is different lately, he is glowing like a pregnant woman. I don't know how long it has been since he separated

from his wife, his heart has healed. He smiles and laughs more than he used to and I want to use this chance to talk to him about the money he sends home. I need a raise, he offered to pay for my children's tuition until grade 12. We are sorted in that department.

"How do I look?"

I don't pay attention to Rose's question, but my eyes trail the skimpy outfit she is wearing. She has this stupid smile on her face, like she is content with showing off her body.

Me: "Where did you say this job is?"

You heard me, my wife found herself a job. She says she would rather work than slave for my mother. I'm not happy about this though, we were doing fine with Bhekifa's money. With Rose in the house, it's easier to keep an eye on her. I'm afraid she will go out there and meet men who are better than me, men who make an honest living.

Rose: "I told you there's a shoe store in Rosebank, they needed a cashier. I applied and was hired on the spot."

Me: "Who hired you Rose? Don't tell me an Indian man, I doubt you will be making sufficient money there."

Rose: "Mr Kgasi is very much black and successful, the shop belongs to him actually."

That's it.

Me: "You're not taking that job."

She frowns at me, I watch her as she drags her size 6 feet toward the bed and throws herself on it. Rose knows once I make up my mind it takes a miracle for me to change it.

Rose: "Sabelo don't do this, we need the money."

Well I need my dignity.

Me: "Yes we do and I will make the money while you make babies."

Rose: "You don't want any more babies."

Me: "It doesn't matter, I am not letting you work Rose."

Rose: "You're not being fair Sabelo."

Me: "What is this Rose, huh? Do you want to deprive me a chance to be a provider? You want to trample on my ego?"

Rose: "What do you want me to do then? We can't rely on your brother forever, your mother had dismissed the idea of killing him and Nelly. We would be living a good life right now Sabelo."

Me: “Why do you worry about things that do not concern you? You have kids Rose, stay home and take care of my children. I will worry about the money.”

I can't afford to lose my wife, she is the only thing I have that makes sense. Rose jolts to her feet, looks at me up and down and bolts out of the bedroom. I am not in the mood to argue with her, I will deal with her later, now I need to talk to my brother. Money has to be made.

30

“THIRTY”

“BHEKIFA ZULU”

My mother is calling me for the hundredth time, I'm avoiding her calls. I woke up to her call around 5am, on a Saturday of all days. When does that woman sleep? She wants me to put a stop to the meeting happening today, I would do it if I had the power. My uncles are stubborn, they do as they please. They are elders, defying them would be a wrong move. I already made them jump to my beat more than once.

Nelly's father wants an apology for what I did to his daughter, I would protest if I didn't see anything wrong with my actions. I hurt my wife, she does not deserve what I have put her through. We would still be together if it were not for my selfishness.

It takes me about an hour to complete my Saturday mundane, and prepare for the meeting. Nerves have me by my course hair, I need to relax. I have no clue how today will go, hopefully

the divorce will not be brought forth. It is a topic I would rather avoid by all means.

I grunt at the sound of my phone ringing, it has rang plenty of times that the ringtone is starting to piss me off. It could be that or the person calling. Ohh! It's Sabelo calling, I will speak to him when I get to my mother's house.

-NELLY PAGE.

"Nelly hurry up with that stew, they are going to be here soon."

My mother is nervous for a strange reason, you would think the Zulus are coming here for her. She woke me up too early just so we can start cooking for the guests.

Me: "I still think we should have ordered the KFC bucket, gravy and rolls."

She is standing across the sink from me and that black stare she is giving me makes me uncomfortable. This lady has no idea that I am serious.

Mom: "We can't feed our guests junk food."

Me: “Why does this have to be a big deal ma? Things were going okay, Bhekifa is hands on with the kids and for the first time in a long time we are not at war with each other.”

Mom: “It might be, but also remember what Bhekifa did to you can’t be ignored.”

Unfortunately, the food is ready. What I need to do now is freshen up.

Me: “I’m going to take a bath.”

My mother frowns, my remark seems to have caused confusion.

Mom: “You haven’t bathed yet?”

I see a lecture brewing.

Mom: “Is this what you have been doing at your house? That is careless, a woman should not be in the kitchen before bathing.”

On what testament is this written? My phone saves me from disputing, my mother disapprovingly shakes her head as I grab the ringing phone from the kitchen counter. I scan the screen to see the caller ID and my mood drops instantly. Buhle will never give me a moment’s peace, The CCMA issue has not been

solved, my boss is not happy with me, the woman looks at me like I want to take away her company.

Me: "I have to take this ma."

I exclaim, walking out of the kitchen to my bedroom. Ignoring Buhle would not be such a good idea, I am at her mercy.

Me: "Yes."

I give her the iciest attitude I can gather, we're not friends and I don't owe her a smile.

Buhle: "This proves that people who owe you have a bitchy attitude."

I need to sit down for this, her insolence gives me hot flashes. I can't think of anything, but making her pay for everything she has done to me.

Me: "I don't owe you anything."

A mocking cackle shoots through the phone, making me withdraw my ear from the mobile.

Buhle: "Of course you owe me, Bhekifa belongs to me."

I'm insane to entertain a crazy person like Buhle.

Me: "Bhekifa does not love you, Buhle. He won't listen to me because of that."

I know Bhekifa, if he were in love with her, he would be with her.

Buhle: "Is that what he told you?"

Oh come on!!!

Me: "I have known that man my whole life. Trust me, if he loved you, you would not be chasing him like this."

Buhle: "Don't play games with me, Nelly. I want my father's child with me, I have always known you've been jealous of me. That's why you prefer to share him with another woman."

There is arrogance in her tone, as if I am indebted to her like she mentioned. And what on earth does she mean I would rather share him with another woman?

Me: "Excuse me?"

Buhle: "Oh cut the crap, I saw Bhekifa with another woman. In fact he has been seeing her quite a lot lately, it's all he ever does."

Is this woman stalking Bhekifa?

Me: "How do you know all this?"

If my assumptions are true, then Buhle is dangerous. She is capable of anything, this is the part where I watch my back.

Buhle: "That's for me to worry about, you do what I asked of you. Bring me, my Bhekifa. I want my son's father Nelly."

Me: "Bhekifa has never been yours, you need help."

Buhle: "Are you calling me crazy?"

She yells over the phone and yes... she sounds like a crazy person. I can't deal with this, I will have to tell Bhekifa about it. He has to handle his own mess.

Me: "I have to go, I have work to do."

Buhle: "Yes, the gathering. Say, how about you take pictures of Bhekifa for me? I haven't seen my man up close in a while. I miss that face of his."

How the hell does she know about the meeting?

Me: "Listen to me, Buhle. Stay away from me, or I will go to the police."

I'm terrified for my children now, Buhle seems to be watching all of us. What have you done Bhekifa? I hear confidence in the way Buhle laughs, she has something up her sleeve.

Buhle: "I'm not going anywhere sister-wife."

She hangs up before I could tell her that I have nothing to do with Bhekifa anymore, though I have a feeling it would be a waste of time. People like Buhle refuse to see reason, even if

you lain the truth before them. They would call it a lie, I know because I work with most of them. Bhekifa will have to hear about this, I can't carry such a heavy burden. To avoid talking to her in future, I will need to resign and get a new job.

-SABELO ZULU.

We are all gathered in the living room at the Magwaza residence, I am not going to lie. I'm here for the alcohol. Whether Bhekifa apologises or not, I do not care. However, to get on his good books I have to play my part. Be the supportive brother he wants me to be, we're talking money here.

Me: "Don't worry bafo, I've got you. You don't have to say much, let me do the talking."

I inform my brother seated beside me, looking nervous as hell. My uncles are confidently drinking like this is their mother's house, Nelly's father is a brave lad. He brought one representative

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that's four against two. Man, we are going to fry these people alive.

Bhekifa: "No bafo, I don't want you to say anything today. The uncles will speak."

My brother whispers back, I did say he is nervous. Look at him sweating like he's about to take a lie detector test.

Me: "What will these old men say? They don't know anything about city life, look at Nelly's father carefully."

My eyes point toward the old with an intimidating face, I thank my ancestors Thokozani is not here. I'm pretty sure they are deadly together.

Me: "Your father in-law looks like Mofokeng from Emzini Wezinsizwa (TV drama.) The type that likes money, I bet you, he sees the lotto when he looks at you. Don't worry bafo, I will deal with him."

Bhekifa disagrees by shaking his head, his stupid act gets us attention from Nelly's father.

Magwaza: "Is there something you would like to share?"

The old man says, I don't understand God honestly. Shouldn't old people have missing teeth or something? This one reminds me of Mariam, they refuse to age. By fire by force...Hey... their

time is near, God must just do the needful and take his people. We are tired of seeing their old wrinkled faces.

Me: “No, no baba. We were just saying how beautiful your house is, you built shame taima, you built.” (Your house is beautiful old man.)

Lessons on how to please your in laws, ask Sabelo Zulu. A smile is all it takes and they will give you an extra piece of chicken, a drumstick to be exact.

Magwaza: “I am not your old man.”

You see? They are stubborn when it comes to ageing, everyone wants to be ageless lately. Unfortunately, only a few of us are blessed.

Magwaza: “Let us begin.”

The three magic words.

“Before we begin, I would like everyone to keep the relationship that we have, in mind.”

This one who just spoke is my father’s elder brother, he is the one who makes final decisions in the family. Talk about Hitler, his hard face doesn’t lie as well. He is big on tradition and wants my brother and Nelly to fix their marriage. I know how to handle him.

Me: “Sho sho malumez, we hear you.” (Uncle.)

He is also famous for the deadly stare he is giving me, I have a list of old people I need dead. My father was the first and the devil ticked it and took him.

Magwaza: “With that being said, we should take this time to discuss the lobola that was paid. My daughter is still young, after all this is over, she will find someone and want to get to married. I don’t want...”

And...the old man has opened a can of worms, Bhekifa sits up from his seat. Eyes wide with shock and what I would call possessiveness.

Bhekifa: “Wait a minute, no one said anything about Nelly getting married.”

Magwaza: ‘Haibo wenja (bastard). Do you think my child will remain single forever?’

Bhekifa: “Nelly is my wife baba, I paid lobola for her.”

Idiot.

Magwaza: “So what? You two have decided to go your separate ways.”

Bhekifa: "I didn't decide on anything, Nelly made the decision by herself. She saw it best to pack up and leave our matrimonial home, whereas we could have gotten help from a professional or something."

Bhekifa, Bhekifa... You sound like an idiot my brother. How do I tell him this?

Magwaza: "Don't tell me that nonsense boy, you made the decision first by laying your hands on my child."

Bhekifa: "Couples fight baba, you can't tell me, you and ma have..."

Me: "Wrong button brother, (un)press it now."

He doesn't acknowledge me, I'm trying to help. Nelly's father looks ready to bite, I don't know with which teeth. Those don't look strong at all, they remind me of my mother's crooked teeth. You have got to love old age... God, I see you, I...see...you.

Magwaza: "Don't you dare bring my wife into this, you are nothing, but a coward Bhekifa."

Hehehe! Bring it on grandpa... I'm loving this, I thought I was going to be bored.

Uncle: "Can we all calm down please?"

The older uncle interrupts the bull fight, we should have dropped him off at a tavern with his peers. Bhekifa is fuming beside me, I can clearly hear every breath he inhales and exhales. Shame, this is what love does to people. It's a pandemic this thing, we were fooled. Corona has nothing on love, we are dead men walking.

Bhekifa: "Baba"

My brother breathes...

Bhekifa: "Tradition says Nelly is my wife, you of all people should know this. She is no longer a Magwaza, but a Zulu, my wife. I can't claim the lobola back, it is not done."

Well, they can pay us every cent we gave them.

Uncle: "Okay, that's enough Bhekifa."

Why is this uncle here? He is starting to get on my nerves.

Uncle: "Let's talk about the main reason we have gathered here, we will tackle the marriage issue after this one."

Nelly's father is also breathing fire, I'm sure that single couch he is seated on is feeling the heat. He shifts a little to adjust comfortably, his angry eyes are on my brother. Why can't people die from icy glares? I would have one problem down.

Magwaza: "Fine, my brother and I have spoken and we want three cows as payment for the damage done to our child."

The second coming is near, repent people. What did this father just say?

NELLY PAGE.

I had complained about my mother being nervous, but it's my turn now. Part of me is terrified that Bhekifa's uncles will want me to go back to him and my father will agree. It's only a crazy thought, my father will protect me from any harm. I trust him with my life.

My mother said to stay in the bedroom, she will call me when it's time to dish up. Argh, I am not looking forward to it. I can hear loud voices from here, I knew it wasn't going to be a peaceful meeting. Two Zulu families who are at war, under one roof is not good. I pray to God everything goes smooth.

CHERYL ZIKHALI.

Watching Jabu with my kids puts an unexpected smile on my face, the way he is with them reminds me of Zain. They are kind of similar in a way. I appreciate Jabu's efforts to bond with Earth and Sia, the sacrifices he has made for them. However the hints he sends off are way too much for me to grasp, there are times I feel suffocated by his presence.

Gosh, I didn't mean to stare, not the way he just caught me smiling at him with the kids. He smiles back and winks, motioning that he got the wrong message.

"Why don't you guys go ask grandma for juice?" Jabu says. Probably a way to get us alone, I'm ready to wear a sign around my neck that says "I'm not interested."

Earth: "Can we, mom?"

Me: "The only thing you will be putting in your mouth is an apple, grab one each on your way to your room." Grumbles fill the air as their tiny feet lead them out of the living room, my eyes follow them until they are out of sight. I turn back to Jabu to find him seated on the carpet with a smile playing on his face. What kind of bubble does this man have? I have been

hard at work, trying to burst it, but he comes back with it stronger than before.

Me: "Don't give me that smile."

Lord, it widens.

Jabu: "What smile?"

Me: "Why are you forever here Jabu?"

I won't be letting him down easily anymore, I'm tired. Men are trouble honestly, this gender has that annoying thing that twists every nerve in you.

Jabu: "You know what I want from you."

Me: "I'm in love with Bhekifa."

I haven't told the poor guy yet and here I am confessing to my late husband's best friend. Shame! His face falls after his eyes flash with hurt, this man knew from day one how I felt about him. Jabu gets up from the floor... okaaay... he is sitting too close and it's awkward, on my part.

Jabu: "What about me? I'm in love with you."

Did this man not hear what I said?

Me: "Jabu don't do this, you will only hurt yourself."

Jabu: "And you? You're in love with a man who belongs to..."

Not again!

Me: "I think it will be for the best if we stop discussing Bhekifa."

Jabu: "Why won't you see him for the man he is? Only I can love you right Cheryl, give me a chance please."

Why is he moving in me on me? I should be pushing him away, but I'm not. His lips touch mine.

Jabu: "I have a need for you, Mangwane. Won't you let me in?"

Show me a woman who doesn't tremble when a man calls her by her clan names and I will dub them crazy. Why does Jabu have to do this to me? I'm a woman for heaven's sake, we have weak spots and this gender knows just where to press to get us sweating in all the wrong places. I want to pull back when his soft lips brush against mine... did I say soft? The devil is probably preparing a place for me in hell, a king size bed. I will need it, considering I will be tossing and turning, thinking about the man I am betraying. Bhekifa will... Wait! Bhekifa...

His name alone jolts me back before Jabu plunges his tongue in my mouth.

Use your feet Cheryl and go outside to cool off, this man is using some kind of magic on you. I could never allow Jabu near me, not like that. What in Romeo and Juliet's names was I thinking? I ignore Jabu calling out to me, if he knows what's good for him, he will not come after me.

-NKATEKO MATHEBULA.

Nelly Page Zulu, married to businessman, Bhekifa Zulu. Together they have four kids and live in the north of Johannesburg.

Google does not know everything like it lets us think, this is all it has on Nelly. I had to find out who she is after saving her from that sick bastard who attacked her at the mall. I'm no prince charming, but I have this thing in me to save damsels in distress. It must have everything to do with not being able to save my wife.

It doesn't take a genius to figure out that Nelly is going through the most, her sad eyes are laid out for the whole world to see and that's when I knew she needs saving. Googling her was not

planned, I'm a curious cat that's all. I need to know who my next project is. I have a feeling the man at the parking lot will come back, haunting him down is going to be fun.

-NELLY PAGE.

MY mother comes rushing into my room, someone tell this woman to relax. She won't make it through the night if she allows anxiety to take control of her.

Me: "What's going on?"

I have been impatiently pacing up and down in this room, worried about the commotion in the lounge. Sabelo's voice is the loudest, I don't understand why he is here. The man is a joke, a whole clown.

The only thing he takes seriously is his trophy wife Rose, come to think of it, she is the only thing he is proud of attaining in his miserable life. To think women like Rose exist in this day and age, naivety at its best.

What sane woman lets a man tie her down in 2021? If Sabelo dies, Rose will have to start everything from scratch because her husband has nothing to his name.

Mom: "There is an argument regarding your separation with Bhekifa."

Me: "When has there never been one?"

I expected this, really.

Mom: "Your father told him that you will need to move on one day

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but your husband is disputing it."

Should he still be called that? Bhekifa does not deserve the husband title.

Me: "I know ma, Bhekifa told me himself before we separated. He will never let me be happy."

Her eyes widen as if the news is new to her, have I not mentioned this to her before?

Mom: "Let's hope your father will be able to convince him to back off."

Bhekifa Zulu does not back off, a restraining order and time spent in jail could not keep him away from me.

Me: "Yeah."

I brush the topic off, his possessiveness is the last thing I want to think about right now. My mother follows me as I tread to sit

on the bed, she suddenly looks out of it. I hate it when she stresses.

Me: “What is the noise about?”

Those men sound like monkeys fighting over a banana, Sabelo is the leader. My mother shakes her head in defeat, her brows furrow in annoyance.

Mom: “Your brother in law is crazy.”

I’m glad she thinks so because he is.

Me: “Do I want to know what he’s up to?”

Mom: “Why do you think I’m here? I have heard enough of his craziness, I’ll sit with you until they are done.”

Great, I need the company.

-SABELO ZULU.

People don’t come with tags describing the type of a person they are, like this one here... Nelly’s father... His tag would be written **CRAZY!!!** In bold letters.

Me: “Three cows taima?” (Oldman)

Why is everyone looking at me? It’s too much.

Magwaza: “Is there a problem?”

Me: “A big one, Haibo, these are not lobola negotiations. You should have told us if you wanted meat, I know a lot of cheap butcheries who can give you a year’s supply, very cheap.”

Bhekifa: “Bafo, I told you not to say anything.”

Bafo my foot, who will feed me when he goes broke?

Me: “I say we call Mam Angie, someone needs to step in. You think we have cows grazing in a kraal somewhere?”

I have made a wise decision and that is to avoid my brother, he is stupid at the end of the day. That’s why they want him to pay with all the cows in the world.

Uncle: “Sabelo, let him finish.”

Is this not the man I heard telling my mother this morning that he has thirty cents in his bank account? Does he know how much a single cow costs?

Me: “Look, I came prepared. I knew it was going to come to this.”

Expectant eyes follow me as I move to the door leading outside, with one pull it opens and the boy I paid is sitting on the veranda with a live chicken in his arms.

Me: “Yey wena saan!” (Hey boy.)

He turns with one whip and instantly jumps to his feet.

Me: “Why are you holding that chicken like it’s a baby? This is food twana, don’t you have toys at home?”

He drops his head.

Boy: “Hade malume.” (Uncle)

Me: “Malume ke mao, I told you to call me Sabelo.” (Uncle is your mother.)

Boy: “Askies Sabelo.” (I’m sorry.)

I grab the chicken from him, the boy has become attached to it. His eyes become glossy as he looks at the chicken like it’s the last time he will ever see it.

Me: “Argh! What did you name it? Bobby?”

I know brats like him.

Boy: “Caster because he has long legs.”

Young Bhekifa!!!

Me: “Shame, well say goodbye to him because we are eating Caster tonight and this one will not be running.”

He rushes off as I laugh at him, people still give birth to stupid kids.

I’m still the centre of attention when I step back into the house, a satisfied smile plays on the corners of my lips. No one would have thought of this.

Magwaza: “What is that?”

A duck!

Me: “Your payment taima.” (Old man.)

I hear gasps in the room, their eyes transition from confusion to shock.

Magwaza: “Is this a joke?”

Where is his wife? The old man is going to collapse from all that shouting.

I sit myself back down with Caster on my lap, my uncles have not said anything. I think they are beyond shocked, I can’t tell with their ugly faces. Bhekifa has his head dropped, must be thanking God for a brother like me.

Me: “You see bafo, there is no need to spend thousands. This chicken was R70 in town.”

I whisper to my brother, he shakes his head after palming his face. Whatever that means, I deserve a 6 pack of savannah for saving his arse.

Magwaza: “Mageba!”

He’s looking at Mr. 30cents.

Magwaza: “I thought you spoke of respect, this is an insult.”

Me: “With all due respect taima, this chicken will do. At least it’s white, that means good luck. You see how the Zulus are kind hearted, if it were someone else they would have brought a black one. Nothing says peace, like a white chicken and that is what we want with your family. We want peace, three cows will do nothing, but make everyone fat.”

I rest my case, if they don’t accept this, then I don’t know.

Magwaza clicks his tongue, he looks defeated. Deal is done, I know how to negotiate with people, kasi style.

BHEKIFA ZULU.

I'm not the best person to walk the face the earth, this I know for a fact. I have done my share of wrongs and will probably pay for it one day. Perhaps that one day is today, my punishment has come in a form of my brother. Sabelo is too old for this, he is stupid that I admit. But there is a limit to everything and he has crossed all boundaries.

Mr Magwaza is one hell of an angry man, thinking of ways to apologise for my brother's disrespect has me sweating. My uncle is wise, I hope he will bring something good to the table.

Sabelo: "Why is no one saying anything?"

My brother is still holding that stupid chicken, he can't be my mother's child. I refuse, we can't be related honestly. Unless he is losing his mind, it wouldn't be a shock.

"Magwaza, Njini, Yengwayo, Manqondo... please forgive us. It was our mistake to bring this boy along."

My uncle says, he should be able to handle this situation.

Magwaza: “The damage has been done Mageba, I will never forget this insult. This is what we have decided, you will pay with four cows.”

Sabelo: “Four?”

My brother yells, I have had enough. I need him outside now, I ruined my relationship with my wife’s family by respecting her as my wife. I am not going to let Sabelo destroy the little that’s left.

Me: “Say one more word and I will disown you so fast you will forget you ever had a brother.”

I make sure to whisper enough for only Sabelo to hear, he turns his wild eyes to me, shock written in them.

Sabelo: “I’m your only brother, you wouldn’t.”

Me: “Try me bafo, you have embarrassed me enough. Go wait in the car, we will handle this.”

He is not happy about my decision, he clicks his tongue and places the chicken on the floor.

Me: “Take that thing with you.”

He narrows his eyes at me, grabs the chicken and mumbles...

Sabelo: “Ohho, Magriza will cook it then, seeing no one appreciates my efforts.”

Mr Magwaza's eyes follow Sabelo until he closes the door behind him.

Uncle: "Now that that's sorted, I would like to apologise again. We can negotiate the payment now."

Magwaza: "There is nothing to negotiate Mageba, I have made up my mind. Four cows and one more thing, our children will never get back together unless they both decide otherwise. The only thing that connects Bhekifa and Nelly are those kids in there."

I can't stand the thought of Nelly with another man, I treated her like trash and her finding someone who will cherish her, someone who will show her that not all men are the same does not sit well with me.

Magwaza: "With that being said, I would like you to leave my house. Your son has disrespected us and I am afraid we cannot accommodate you any longer."

Uncle: "But..."

Magwaza: "My mind has been made up."

He stands to his feet, I want to dispute but it is not wise right now. Father in-law has been insulted enough.

Magwaza: "Leave my house please."

Without hesitation, I stand while my uncles exchange dazed and confused glances.

Me: “Baba this is not how things were supposed to go down. None of us had any idea my brother would do such a thing. Please forgive us.”

Mr. Magwaza is hearing none of my apology, he frowns at me, flips the door open for us to leave. This is our exit, I should add an extra cow as an apology for Sabelo’s insults.

My uncles send their apologies as they walk past my father in-law.

We find Sabelo fast asleep in the car. He still has the chicken with him, I am going to give him a mouth full when we get home.

-NELLY PAGE.

My father is fuming as he recites the story on what happened earlier...that is Sabelo for you.

I watch my mother rub my father’s hand, thankfully my uncle had to step out. I’m the one stuck with teenage-old parents. I change seats to give them privacy, well maybe their public display of affection makes me uncomfortable. My father

grimaces as he sees me jump to a different couch, slowly I shrug and pray he doesn't ask why I'm distancing myself.

Mom: "But you shouldn't have let them leave without eating."

That's the woman in my mother talking, the wife in her has intertwined her fingers with my father's. I don't remember Bhekifa and I doing that.

Dad: "Eat my food after insulting me like that?"

He is not getting over this anytime soon.

Me: "Don't stress about it too much baba, think of your health."

Dad: "I'm not as old as you think."

He's kidding.

Dad: "Everything is going to be okay my baby and don't worry about the kids, I will explain to them why they couldn't meet their father today."

Yeah, lie to them and promise to buy them anything they want, that is his way of explaining.

Me: "I know baba, this is the beginning of a new dawn. My life will evolve around my children now, it's not going to be easy though."

Dad: “Nothing in life is easy, and nothing is permanent. You’re going to pick yourself up and live life to the fullest, you deserve to be happy.”

This is the kind of father I ordered.

Me: “Thank you, baba.”

I would hug him, but we don’t do that in this household.

Me: “Uncle must be on his way back, let me go dish up.”

I leave the love birds, I think I’m happy about today’s outcome. Knowing my father will always protect me gives me hope, hope for a new beginning.

-NKATEKO MATHEBULA.

It turns out the person responsible for Nelly being attacked is a woman and she is sitting in my living room. From a personal assistant to an enemy, this world is cruel.

Me: “Buhle!”

I say, walking into the living room. One of my boys who brought her here moves to guard the door.

Buhle: “What do you want from me?”

Her voice trembles.

Me: “Not so brave are we?”

She jumps from the couch in an attempt to run, I push her back down and she falls with a gasp escaping between her lips. Her eyes widen as she glares up at me, her fear filled eyes glisten with tears which is funny because this the same woman who a paid a man to sexually harass and kill another woman.

Me: “Tell me, what is a young lady like you doing with a man like Bitso?”

If her eyes could go any wider they would, she blinks and her shifty eyes drop to her feet.

Buhle: “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Oh!

Me: “I would be careful with my answers if I were you, I am not here to play with you woman.”

I grip her cheeks with my fingers and squeeze till she starts grunting. Her head moving to and fro.

Me: “I asked you a question.”

Buhle: “He... he’s my cousin.”

Me: “Nice try... Why did you send him to kill Nelly?”

She is startled by the bomb I drop, her mouth hangs open with no words said.

Buhle: “Did Bitso tell you that? He lied, I only told him to scare her. But he had his own plans, he wanted to have fun with her and...”

Me: “Enough!”

Impassively, I laugh at her lies and release her cheeks. She wheezes while rubbing the pain away from her face. My hand reaches for an envelope on the coffee table. Her eyes narrow as I hold it to her.

Buhle: “What is that?”

Me: “Open it.”

I watch her facial expression transition from fear to confusion as she opens the envelope.

Me: “These are your travel documents, you and your son are leaving the country.”

Buhle: “What? I’m not going anywhere.”

Me: “That’s where you’re wrong, I know what you have been up to. Now it’s either you take this offer or I make calls and

send you straight to jail. How will a woman like you survive in a terrible place like that? ”

I thought this might get her attention, her lips quaver and eyes flash with fear.

Buhle: “Please, I didn’t do anything.”

Me: “Women like you are good at this fake crying.”

Buhle: “What do you want from me?”

She yells, wiping away her crocodile tears.

Me: “I told you, you don’t know what I am capable of sisi. Sending you to jail would be so easy for me, one phone call and you will have a list of charges in your name. Crimes you wouldn’t dream of committing.”

My plan is working, the woman is tongue tied.

Buhle: “I... I...have a son

Advertisement

he needs his father.”

Me: “I did my homework sweetheart, your son might as well be fatherless. Let go of whatever hope you have of getting that man, it’s never going to happen.”

Buhle: “You know nothing about me or my son.”

This woman is brave, I stride to sit on a couch opposite her, making sure not to break eye contact.

Me: “My boy over there is going to accompany you to Park Station, you will take the first bus to Namibia. You will find someone waiting for you there after crossing the borders, he will take you to where you will be staying for a month until you’re able to pay your own rent.”

Buhle: “A month? How will I even get a job over there?”

Me: “You’ll find out when you get there, go home, pack your bags and get the hell out of this country. Nelly is not going to breathe the same air as you, you should be in Namibia by sunrise tomorrow. If I hear that you’re back in South Africa or have contacted Nelly, I will personally hand you over to the police with evidence and take your son to an orphanage.”

Buhle: “Fine, I will go.”

I nod at the man at the door, he steps closer.

Me: “Get this trash out of my house, make sure she boards the bus today.”

He nods at my instructions and leads Buhle out.

Nelly has been through enough with that useless man she is married to. This should lessen her burden, if she didn’t have children with that man, I would deal with him.

-NELLY PAGE.

Shopping has become my favourite thing to do, it is therapeutic. It's even more fun when the money I'm spending comes from my pockets. Bags are my current obsession, I'm not a shopaholic. I have limits.

As I stride down the aisle at a clothing store, my eyes crash into a tall dashing gentleman and he is smiling at me. The powerful posture has my heart jumping to my throat. Hands rammed into the pockets of his black fitting formal pants, shoulders confidently straight. The familiarity on his face has me staring for way too long. I know this man.

"Nelly."

This is his way of greeting.

Me: "I know you."

That is the first thing that comes to mind.

"Of course you do, remember the parking lot incident."

Me: "Nkateko? Wow, I didn't think I would see you again."

Nkateko: "Here I am."

We exchange pleasantries and he asks if he can tag along while I do my shopping. I don't get to buy anything, the man with me

has me distracted. So we walk out of the clothing store. As we get outside, Nkateko slides in my way, softly stopping me from moving.

Nkateko: "Have lunch with me."

It's not an enquiry, I could say no but the beautiful smile on his face is not allowing me to do so. Looking at him, I am flabbergasted by how beautiful the man is. I know beautiful is farfetched, but my experienced eyes cannot deceive me.

Neat fade haircut, clean-shaven and skin so smooth, reminds of that Ferrero Rocher advert. He is handsome from the depth of his delicate brown eyes to the gentle expression of his deep voice. His soul seems to shine through his cocoa brown skin.

Nkateko: "Nelly!"

I blink myself back to life, his mouth keeps the smile that stretched his lips when he asked me to a date seconds ago, before I got lost in God's creation. I raise my eyebrows, wanting him to repeat his ask. The smile quietens down, it's still making my knees weak.

Nkateko: "Have lunch with me."

There I go nodding like a desperate woman which I am not.

Me: "Only because I'm hungry."

The chuckle he emits states that he sees through me.

Nkateko: “There’s a nice place I know around here, shall we?”

Okay, he takes my hand into his. He is not shy.

I’m led to a restaurant, we’re greeted at the entrance and led to our table by a waitress. I notice how Nkateko walks too close, not in a weird way. But his nearness says I am willing to protect you and I think I like the feeling of it. It’s nice to feel protected. We place our orders and the conversation begins the moment the waitress leaves.

Nkateko: “How have you been?”

I shrug my shoulders, life is going okay. I can’t complain about anything, Buhle has gone M.I.A. She must have given up, the CCMA case was dropped. I haven’t heard from that pest in months.

Bhekifa paid what was expected of him, his family had to apologise for Sabelo’s insults. I guess they are on good terms with my father, he is a forgiving man. The man is trying to secure a place in heaven, he has no choice but to see good in everyone. The kids are doing well too, they see their father every second week of the month.

Me: “I have been okay actually.”

The response is accompanied by a genuine smile.

Nkateko: "You are different from the last time I saw you, there is hope in your eyes."

Me: "I'm trying to pick myself up, and live life like there is no tomorrow."

Sulking is a no option, Nkateko nods, his lips almost forming a smile.

Nkateko: "I'm glad. Would you believe me if I said I have been looking for you since that day?"

Me: "Really?"

He chuckles, the way his lips move in that soft laugh makes me want to know how they move in a kiss, how his hands follow the curves of my body. His eyes are inquisitively looking into mine, I would shy away if I had a shy bone in me. In this staring moment, Nkateko reaches his hand across the table to touch mine.

Nkateko: "Can I stay?"

The whisper has me biting my bottom lip before I let my lips form a bashful smile.

Me: "Stay?"

Nkateko: "In your life, I have been going crazy looking for you. I don't think I would survive being away from you."

His words have me laughing, I've heard pickup lines and this one tops them all.

Me: "How many women have you said that to?"

Nkateko: "One."

His face suddenly takes a serious expression, his hand lightly tightens around mine. He rubs my hand with his thumb, the contact causes me to tremble. I think he notices because a smirk develops under the raised eyebrow.

Nkateko: "I have better things to do with my time than chase women, you're the first woman that has caught my attention in a long time. I'm a straightforward person, Nelly. I don't hide behind blushes, heart beats and goose bumps. You're slowly creeping into my heart and I would like to get to know you, see what my heart is so excited about. I told it to calm down, but it won't listen. It's been jumping with excitement for months."

Me: "Smooth."

This man knows his way through words, he would sell me the sun and I would buy it as hot as it is.

Me: "You're so overconfident."

I'm starting to like the way he laughs.

Nkateko: "Maybe I am, but this is the real me talking."

Me: "I don't even know you."

Nkateko: "Nkateko Mathebula, a Tsonga guy born and bred in Soweto. I'm the only child of my parents who died when I was eighteen, my aunt and her husband took care of me until I was able to fend for myself. I'm financially stable, enough to buy a loaf of bread. Short term goals, get to know the beautiful Nelly and make her fall for a loser like me. Long term goals, fall hopelessly in love with Nelly and give her the world just as she deserves."

I'm speechless, who is this man? Looks can be deceiving, that shouldn't stop one from living though. Giving him a chance wouldn't be such a bad thing, the waitress interrupts with our orders just as I'm about to voice out. One step at a time, that's what we'll do. I think I want this, I want to know how it feels to be truly loved by a man.

Years later...

CHERYL ZIKHALI...

Mariam Zulu... I knew she was going to be trouble first time I met her. Bhekifa had forgot to mention that his mother is a pain in the ass, for years the woman would throw insults at me each time our paths crossed. At first I endured for the sake of the man I love, I succumbed to her foul mouth.

Suspicious of her possessive nature toward her son, the need to control him and everything he is, I took it upon myself to read the woman and I found what drove Mariam Zulu. It was her son's bank balance, Mariam wanted even the last two cents Bhekifa had.

Like a hurricane, I had to force myself into the circle. A line had to be drawn, Bhekifa and I on one side, Mariam and Sabelo on the other. Those two would kill me if they could, that's because Bhekifa has long forgotten about them. Here he is, in deep slumber next to me.

In just about two minutes, exactly 8:46, Bhekifa's phone will ring. I sit up from the bed and reach for his phone on the nightstand, a countdown in my head begins and... the mobile buzzes, we are off to a great day. Mariam's number mirrors on the screen, stretching my mouth into a smile I swipe to receive.

Me: "Good morning."

My greeting is sent off with a contented tone, my eyes take time to adore the man peacefully sleeping next to me. He stirs a bit and goes back to his soft snores. I scurry out of the bedroom lest I wake Bhekifa up.

Mariam: "Put my son on the phone."

Ahh! How I love this woman, if she were a man, I would surely be turned on by her ability to practice dominance on me. Three years later and she still thinks she has the upper hand.

Me: "Unfortunately, he is sleeping."

Mariam: "Well wake him up."

Exactly what I was talking about.

Me: "Bhekifa is a hardworking man sis Mariam, he needs his sleep. I am sorry, I'm going to have to deny your request."

Heaven only knows what she is doing right now, it makes me happy knowing her heart has fallen into palpitations.

Mariam: "What have you done to my son? He doesn't call or come home anymore. I hardly see a cent from him, you..."

Me: "Come on Mariam, you didn't think I would sit around and let you milk Bhekifa dry, did you? Bhekifa was naïve, he couldn't see right through you. You turned him into a zombie, made him dance to your tune. I had to make him see you for what you really are, a selfish gold digger who only cares about filling her plate."

Mariam: "Enough!"

Lord of heaven's armies, how many times do I have to tell her not to yell?

Mariam: "Bhekifa is my son, I gave birth to him. He will come back to me, I don't know how long it will take. I will have my son back."

Her words have me laughing my head off, she is good at this comedy thing.

Me: "Argh shame, you're still singing the same song you sang years ago? Come on sis Mariam, you can do better than that."

Mariam: "You're an evil woman wena Sherin."

Me: "Careful Mariam, your heart is not strong enough to jump at such a great height. You're even struggling to pronounce my name."

Mariam: "I hate you."

Me: "Nc nc nc, such a strong word at your age? That cannot be good, who will pay for your hospital bills since your son wants nothing to do with you? Unless... our precious Sabelo has found a job? Don't tell me... uvukile umalambane?" (He is back on his feet?)

Mariam: "To hell with you, Sherin."

I might need to call an ambulance, this woman will pass out from all this shouting.

Me: "Goodbye to you too sis Mariam."

She hangs up with a tongue click, a habit of hers, I have perceived.

-NELLY PAGE.

This man has been holding me like this for three years and each time feels like the first, I still love the way his arms enfold around me; Lord his scent and his gentle voice whispering

sweet nothings into my ear. From the day I agreed to be his, I waited for a time he would disappoint and turn on me. I stopped when he assured me that this is all of him, he would give me more if he could, but that would only suffocate me...his words, not mine.

I know, I know; he sounds too good to be true. Join the queue as we lay in wait for the day he will show his true colours.

I fall into giggles as Nkateko nuzzles neck, this man is a hickey giver and I have grown to love neck kisses because of him.

Nkateko: "Avuxeni Nkatanga." (Good morning my spouse.)

Me: "Morning."

This is how I'm woken up most of the time, I have no comment about this ongoing honeymoon phase. A longing to turn on the bed and face him arises, I meet his eyes. They are usually small in the morning, half-lidded. Nkateko smiles, my eyes swallow his beauty, he hasn't changed a bit in the years.

Nkateko: "You're staring, again."

He points out, with a chuckle. My eyes shift away from him, his finger on my chin brings them back.

Nkateko: “Don’t ever stop looking into my eyes Nkatanga, I love how your soul paints me and claims me as your own.” (My spouse.)

Jesus! This man cannot be real, I whimper due to the erotic whisper and accept the swift kiss his plump lips offer. He tastes like nothing I have ever tasted before.

Me: “I told you to stop calling me that, we are not married.”

I’m not going through that again.

Nkateko: “I don’t need a ring to tell me that you are my better half, you are mine Nelly. You make my heart race in a way that leaves my head spinning, you’re the only person that makes me nervous. My palms sweat at the thought of you, I never know what to do with myself when you walk into the room.

Everything else ceases to exist and all I see is you, Nkatenga.”
(My spouse.)

His hoarse voice evokes a deep need in me, my hands start roaming on his bare chest down to his torso. He smirks, loving the way my hands worship his body.

Nkateko: “Are we staying in today?”

His lips work on my earlobe, his hands leave prints on my back.

Me: “It is a Saturday, I don’t see why not?”

That's the desperate me talking, maybe I love being pampered by him.

Last year I acquired a house and moved out of my parent's house with my children. Nkateko sleeps over a lot, there is a drawer of his things. He has his space in the bathroom as well, I love how he sees forever with me. I have been to his house. The man makes me feel like I make peanuts for a living, he lives, looks and smells lavish.

Bhekifa ended up being the one to file for divorce, it was finalised about two years ago. I didn't want the house as it had bad memories, I haven't heard from him in a while. I don't care about seeing Bhekifa, what worries me is how he has neglected his children. He has stopped coming to their soccer practise, he doesn't take their calls as often as he used to and when he does, the conversation is brief. I haven't seen a cent from Bhekifa in a year, he seems to be forgetting he has kids.

Nkateko: "Nkatenga!" (My spouse.)

His voice deliciously glides in my ear, I blink myself out of my fretting thoughts to find a look of worry in Nkateko's eyes.

Nkateko: "I lost you for a second there, you're so fond of spacing out lately. Won't you share what your mind is showing

you? I am a jealous man Nkatenga, your mind is competing with me, it seems to fight for your attention as well.”

I laugh at his statement, a ghost of a smile embraces his beautiful features. Nkateko is a laugher, he also can be serious when need be. And when it comes to me and the children, he doesn't play. He treats them with love and respect and gives them all the attention he can.

They have grown to love him over the years, Ayanda as well. I thought she would be the most difficult but my baby didn't fret whatsoever.

Me: “I'm sorry, I'm just worried about the children. They miss their father.”

Bringing up the ex could ruin the perfect moment, Nkateko grimaces a little before pulling me into his chest. His arms snake my waist and his hands wander on my back, gently rubbing me to comfortability.

Nkateko: “Why do you worry about that man? I am here, I will take care of you and the kids.”

A slow exhalation radiates from me as I shuffle under Nkateko's arms. Why does he have to be so perfect?

Me: “I know, but he can't abandon his children. They need him, I don't care what Bhekifa does with his life. But I can't let my

children suffer because of my choices. I know he's doing this because I left him, he is angry and is taking it out on the kids."

Nkateko: "I can have a talk with him, get him to see them."

Is he insane? I raise my head to catch a glimpse of his face.

Me: "Bhekifa is one stubborn man, he won't listen to you."

He raises an eyebrow as if I have given him a challenge.

Nkateko: "Are you doubting my power of persuasion Nkatenga?" (My spouse.)

My forehead is braced with his soft lips, causing me to smile like an infatuated teenager.

Me: "How can I? That would be an insult on its own."

Lord! That smile still affects me till today.

Nkateko: "Do I have your permission to knock some sense into that man?"

Me: "Don't worry about it, I'll talk to my father. I wouldn't want you to have problems with Bhekifa."

Nkateko: "Well, I don't mind really. You know I would do anything for you."

Am I lucky or what?

Me: "I know and I'm grateful for you."

His hand finds my cheek, the stroke is gentle and soft, it has me shivering in his arms. Seeing how he affects me, Nkateko smiles.

Nkateko: "I love you, Nkatenga."

A soft kiss on the lips, I return it. I haven't mastered the three magic words yet, Nkateko has no trouble saying it. It doesn't take long for me to get lost in euphoria, all my troubles are washed away in this seamless moment.

-SABELO ZULU.

Three... three years of pure torture. Whoever said God hears desperate prayers lied. I am living proof. God, how long does it take to answer a single prayer? Just one prayer?

"What are you thinking about, wena?"

Sigh!

The course of all my problems asks, I could tell her the truth and say I was hoping God would have taken her by now, but she is fragile lately since Cheryl happened.

Me: "Nothing magriza."

She sighs and leans back on the couch, her feet rest on the table as she places her chin on the palm of her hand.

Me: “What is wrong with you? Did Jethro break your heart again?”

Mariam found herself a little something to keep her company, as old as she is, she lays on a wrinkled flabby chest. A man by the name of Jethro who lives a few houses down, his wife died six months ago and Mariam was there to comfort the man. I bet you a million, the comforting included warming Jethro’s dead wife’s side of the bed. Eeeww!!!

Mariam: “We are doomed Sabelo, that witch has my son by the hooks.”

Ohoo... tell me something I don’t know.

Me: “Bhekifa has always been a fool, he is easily controlled by women.”

My brother was meant to be a woman, no lie. He is too soft for my liking.

Mariam: “How can Bhekifa do this to me? How can he abandon his own mother? I gave him life and nursed him till he was able to fend for himself. How does he simply forget that?”

Me: “What will complaining do for you? Just admit it magriza, you have lost your cool. I thought the older you get, the more

powerful you become. You are an embarrassment to the witches' association, they should have you dismissed."

Mariam: "What are you saying, you stupid boy?"

Me: "The truth magriza, look at Lebo's grandmother next door. She managed to renovate her house, the old witch doesn't have knees to support her legs, but she lives alone in a double story. Stairs mama, stairs. While it takes me two seconds to get to my bedroom, you think I don't want to run upstairs like they do in the movies?"

Clicking that old tongue of hers is all she knows, it has done nothing for her in life.

Mariam: "And your point is?"

Me: "That old woman is ninety years old, she looks like she will crack and bleed to death any time, but at night she runs like a cheater."

Most witches are grannies, being a witch comes with age, this I know. The older, the stronger.

Me: "You failed to bewitch Cheryl, that's when I knew that we were doomed. Jeer that woman can talk, what did my brother see in her?"

I thought we had seen it all with Nelly, Cheryl is a walking nightmare.

Mariam: "If I were a witch, Sherin would be dead by now. That's how much I hate her."

She can't even say the name right, that's why she failed to bewitch her. Her demons got lost looking for a Sherin, meanwhile Mariam meant to say Cheryl.

Me: "Like I said, you don't have it in you to take on that woman. Nelly was an easy target, we managed to break their marriage. I don't understand how it's not possible with Cheryl, Bhekifa jumps at her command and does everything she tells him to. This can't be it, it can't be the end of us magriza."

Mariam: "I have run out of ideas Sabelo, Sherin made sure not to eat my food whenever Bhekifa brought her along and she stopped him from eating as well. My own son is away from me because of her."

Someone give that girl a bells, she is smart I have to give her that.

Me: "Well; I don't care who you have to team up with, get Cheryl out of Bhekifa's life. I'm tired of eating chicken feet every night, I dream of chickens chasing me. This is not the life I ordered, I should be in Nkandla rubbing shoulders with Zuma. Not looking at your old face, no offence mama, but ishayile."
(Your time is up.)

Mariam has never liked my honesty, she glares with so much condemnation.

Mariam: "I will not comment on that because you are a failure in life and what I have to say about you will drive you to suicide."

Listen to this old woman, what is she trying to say?

Me: "The failure is still here, tolerating you and your Bhekifa is pleasing the woman who has separated you from your atm. Continue insulting me, magriza, and I will still be here until you kick the bucket."

Mariam: "And what is special about your presence in my life? You are an unemployed man, you sit on my couch day in and day out waiting for my government salary. You are a joke Sabelo."

I will not be insulted by the likes of Mariam, a witch who has fallen off her broom.

Me: "A joke is that man you call a son, when last did you see his ugly face? He refuses to come over or even take your calls. I have a feeling that the only time Bhekifa will come here is when you have died."

Mariam: "What is wrong with you? Why do you keep talking about my death?"

She doesn't get it, does she?

Me: "This is a hint mama, you need to let go. Stop fighting it, the afterlife is a beautiful place I promise you. It's a million times better than earth, there is no chicken feet there. Trust me, I have heard stories."

A cushion is thrown at me, it's too late to duck.

Mariam: "I am not dying anytime soon, do you hear me, Sabelo?"

Eish! I need to breathe, Mariam's gaze follows me as I stand to my feet.

Me: "God has never loved me, I knew it."

Mariam: "Voetsek wena Sabelo." (Piss off.)

Me: "Nawe." (You too.)

I whisper, but dammit, she hears me.

Maraim: "What did you say?"

I'm facing her enraged face with one spin, she could jump from that couch, but the years have not been kind to her knees. I'm safe.

Me: "I love you, griza."

Drop dead...

BHEKIFA ZULU.

Week five and I am getting more agitated with each passing moment, you could call me paranoid or a psycho. Nelly looks happy in these pictures, the last time I saw this smile on her face was during our dating days. I would sweep her off her feet, I knew she hated my bushy hair and beard, yet she chose to love me still. Those were happy days, days I wouldn't mind reliving. However, time changes things and people.

Here I am without my first love, now another man is making her happy and that does not sit well with me.

Don't get me wrong, I am content with Cheryl. I love her, she treats me well. But Nelly will always be in my heart, her special place can't be filled by anyone else. Seeing how my special place has been taken by that Mathebula guy... I loathe him, the hate I have for him grows every second. s

Me: "When were these taken?"

I ask the private investigator, I hired to keep tabs on my ex-wife. Every information he comes back with breaks me into a thousand splinters. Tony comes highly recommended, he is

good at what he does. He takes a sit on the swivel chair before me, I could offer him something to drink, but these are working hours.

Tony: “Just last night, the man is here to stay, so it seems.”

That bastard Nkateko, playing Romeo with my ex-wife.

Me: “Where is this, Tony?”

Tony: “Mpumalanga... weekend getaway. It appears the man has more money than the bank itself.”

Tony chuckles at the exaggeration, I would laugh if I didn't have so much hate for Mathebula.

Me: “You think it's about the money? Nelly is with him because of the money?”

Tony: “I wouldn't know, you know her best ey. From what I have observed, she does not have gold digger tendencies. If anything, she controls how they spend money. You know how women can be obsessed with budgeting.”

Deep down I know Mathebula loves Nelly, I have known from the time I found out about them.

“Are you kidding me, Bhekifa?”

Dammit! I excuse Tony and greet Cheryl with a kiss, she flips her head aside, rejecting the peck.

Me: "What are you doing here?"

She is meant to be at work and I hardly get visits from her during office hours.

Cheryl: "I thought I'd surprise you and bring you lunch."

She holds me a takeaway package and finds her way to a chair.

Me: "You didn't have to."

I should have hidden the pictures on the table, my heart races while I watch Cheryl flip through pictures of my ex-wife. Her face scrunched up in hurt, I snatch them from her and get a frown in return.

Me: "It's not what you think."

How do I explain this?

Cheryl: "It can't be any clearer than this, you're having her followed."

Nervously, I shove the pictures back in the envelope and toss it in a drawer."

Me: "She is the mother of my children."

Cheryl: "So? That doesn't mean you should keep tabs on her love life, you're stalking her, Bhekifa."

Her voice raises a little, she is well aware how much I do not approve of this act. For the fact that I am in the wrong this time, I will let it slide.

Me: "What's for lunch?"

I pick the lunch bag and dip my eyes in it, my stomach grumbles at the smell of grilled chicken. Raising my eyes, I find Cheryl narrowing her eyes at me and that has me nodding my head in question.

Cheryl: "What's going on? Are you still in love with her?"

Of course, I will always love Nelly.

Me: "No."

Lying is not as hard as it seems.

Cheryl: "Then what is this? Don't play with me Bhekifa, I am not going to take this nonsense from you."

Me: "Relax Cheryl, like I said, it's not what you think."

She doesn't believe me, who am I kidding? I can't even convince myself. Cheryl stands, I can't miss the annoyance playing at her facial features.

Cheryl: "I'm going home."

Me: "Wait, please."

She doesn't listen, but bolts out of the office. Way to go Bhekifa, look what you've done.

-NELLY PAGE.

I'm not sure what Nkateko does for a living, what I know is that he can afford this expensive trip. He mentioned that he owns a private company where they work with the government. Not wanting to pry, I didn't ask any further. I believe I can trust him, maybe from time to time I pray he is not into shady dealings. My father would bury me alive.

Nkateko: "No peeking Nkatanga." (My spouse.)

We're at a hotel in Mpumalanga, he said he has a surprise for me and I was blindfolded after that.

Me: "I can't see a thing."

There is silence for a while, his hand on the small of my back confirms his presence and the scent stemming from him, he smells of citrus fruit. His usual masculine baby powder scent hovers above the smell of oranges and lemons. Shembe, this man smells so delicious. His lips brush against my cheek, a tease

he is. I feel his warm breath around my ear before he whispers...

Nkateko: "Are you ready Nkatanga?" (My spouse.)

I nod, my heart anticipating whatever it is he has in store for me. Nkateko guides my steps, we're moving at a slow pace. My ears pick up the sound of the elevator, a few steps take us in. I can feel it moving, he continues to keep a gentle hand on the small of my back.

Nkateko: "Careful."

He says, taking my hand and leads me out of the elevator. I'm not certain if it took us up or down the building.

Me: "Where are we?"

Curiosity forces a question out of my mouth.

Nkateko: "You'll see."

Excitement lies in his voice, he can't be as excited as I am. The man I love lives to surprise me and each surprise births an excitement in me.

Nkateko: "Are you ready?"

Again this question, curiosity is suffocating me.

Me: "Baby, you asked me that a few minutes ago."

His laughter fills my ears, he is the only man who finds me funny. Nkateko slowly loosens the blindfold, we are on the rooftop and my eyes are beholding the most beautiful scenery I have ever seen.

Lord, look at your son making a woman like me happy. I see what you're doing God and I approve. The setting is beautiful, a white tent sways slightly in the middle, inside, blankets and cushions have been laid. Four lantern lights give light to the night. I see a picnic basket... picnic at night? Well, look at this romantic man.

Me: "What is this?"

Of course I know what it is.

Nkateko: "This is for the queen of my heart."

Corny I see, then again he wouldn't be my Nkateko if he were not corny.

Me: "Nkateko Corny Mathebula."

This is what I have named him, his laugh dances in the air.

Nkateko: "You do know Connie is Harriet Khoza's name?"

My giggle is just as reserved as his, he takes me into a hug and I melt in his arms.

Me: "Why are you so good to me?"

I don't want to cry, I won't cry.

Nkateko: "No, you are good to me. Till this day I am unable to grasp the fact that you gave a loser like me a chance."

His nose nuzzles against mine as he says this, his breath smells like citrus fruit. The aroma is erotic, I enfold my arms around him to accommodate his arms roaming on my back.

Me: "I love everything, it's beautiful. Thank you, Nkateko."

He smiles, I love it.

Nkateko: "Anything for you

Advertisement

Nkatanga." (My spouse.)

Me: "You spoil me too much."

I introduce as we move to the beautiful setting, hand in hand.

Me: "Will you ever stop doing romantic things for me?"

His eyes catch mine while my breath catches at how his gaze digs deep into my soul.

Nkateko: "You are my romance, stopping would mean there is no more you and I and that is something I will never let happen."

Don't look, nor listen. You might fall for this individual, I am living a dream and could be woken up one of these days. I am sure of it. My response is a smile of gratitude, this is a love I never thought I would experience.

-SABELO ZULU.

Tired, drained and wanting to be free, I have come up with a perfect plan that will shake Cheryl's stubborn heart. Three of my boys have agreed to do this job with me, we come a long way. Two of them are my former school mates, we hustled together and failed together. Today we are sinning together, God forgive my tired heart.

Cheryl has to go, she is moving at a tortoise's pace in our lives and I want to help her speed up lest she finishes last in line. She can't take my brother and think I will sit back and watch her eat prawns while I have to stomach Rose's burnt pap and undercooked "runaways" (chicken feet) every night.

Billy is the driver of the car, I'm seated on the passenger's seat. Lwandle and Spha are at the back, it is dark outside, the perfect time to attack.

Me: “Gents, we have to do this carefully, okay?”

I had briefed them on how it’s going to go down.

Billy: “I still think one person should go, she’s a woman, it can’t be that hard to tackle her.”

Spha: “Can we do this already, I have a meeting to get to.”

What meeting is he talking about? Unless he is talking about meeting his baby mama. Spha is the only man I know who is afraid of women, how did I let him tag along?

Lwandle: “Two people should do it.”

Billy: “Why are we even debating about this? This is what we do gents.”

Spha: “This one is different, she’s Bheki’s woman. I still can’t believe you want us to do this Sabelo, your brother won’t like it when he finds out.”

Me: “He won’t find out, Bhekifa is an idiot. He doesn’t know what is happening around him.”

My brother is too naïve.

Lwandle: “Let’s do this man.”

Billy: “Entlek, why isn’t Malaika here? I thought we’re a team.”

Malaika thinks he is better than us because he was chosen by his ancestors, it's just a calling, nothing serious. Now we have to bow down like he walks on streets of gold.

Spha: "A team with who? Malaika doesn't associate himself with people Billy, you know that. The only reason he tolerates us is because he feels obliged to, perhaps for old time's sake."

Me: "I'm just glad he's not here, that man is dark gents it's actually scary."

I think he is my mother's business associate, I have a feeling they hold their meetings in my house while we are sleeping. That house is depressing, there is a dark presence there.

Spha: "That is ridiculous, Malaika would never lay a hand on you. You need to relax."

This one likes witches.

Me: "You can relax, as for me, I'm going to keep my eyes wide open."

Billy: "Me too."

Spha: "Guys seriously though, you've known Malaika for years now. If he wanted to hurt you, he would've done it already."

Me: "I've known the devil my whole life as well and the bastard is still trying to take me down. I'm not taking chances with Malaika."

Lwandle: “Eyy, that dude must have escaped from the devil’s clutches. What kind of a human being is he?”

Spha: “He belongs to the ancestors, you people are seriously not judging him. What if they are listening to this conversation? You’re going to die a painful death, don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

Witch lover.

Me: “God, I’m too young to die. Listen Spha, if he kills me then tell my mother to cremate my body and scatter my ashes in her garden, maybe her spinach will finally grow. It’s been months since she planted it, but it refuses to breed.”

Spha: “What?”

Me: “I’m too handsome to be thrown into a big heavy box, buried six feet under so my body can decompose. Hell no, the thought of it makes me cringe and if my family buries me, I will haunt them till they exhume my body and cremate it...”

Spha: “Sabelo, you’re insane.”

Me: “Insane and serious, if I die before Mariam, I know she will turn me into a zombie. Imagine me, a zombie gents, no, I’d rather die.”

Lwandle: “But you’ll be dead idiot.”

Me: "I don't care, no one is turning me into a zombie."

I don't know what they are laughing at, this is a serious matter.

Billy: "There she is."

He points at Cheryl jumping out of a taxi, look at her heading to my brother's house as if she helped build his legacy. That woman is Satan's twin.

Me: "Let's go gents."

Dressed in all black and balaclavas, we quietly jump out of the car, Billy remains behind.

Carefully and quietly we follow her, she is not cautious about her surroundings. Thank God for quiet neighbourhoods. Just as Cheryl turns on the discreet street, we corner her. Spha pins her against the wall ignoring the horrified look she has on her face and holds a knife to her throat.

Me: "You scream and you're dead."

I stop her as she opens her mouth to scream, I make sure to keep my voice low just in case she recognises it.

Cheryl: "Please take anything, don't kill me."

Lwandle: "Who said you can talk?"

Cheryl: "What do you want from me?"

I must say, I'm loving this blissful moment. Seeing the all brave Cheryl tremble with fear.

Spha: "Stay away from Bhekifa."

Dammit, he wasn't supposed to say that. This woman is too smart that she will catch on and figure out that I'm behind this if not Mariam. Desperate to cover up my track, I punch her across the face and she falls to the ground. She doesn't look up, but touches her bleeding jaw.

Spha: "This is a warning sisi, know your place. You have poked a snake in its hole."

Spha adds, adding multiple kicks on her stomach. Clearly terrified for her life, Cheryl doesn't scream, but curls her body on the floor while silently crying.

Lwandle: "That's enough, let's go."

Lwandle wants to ruin the party, I'm enjoying this.

Me: "You think this is a novel, you think you're Hlomu and have an army of Zulu men ready to die for you? Wake up sisi, uzofa." (You will die.)

Cheryl: "Stop, please stop."

How I love the sound of her crying, life can be beautiful sometimes.

Lwandle: "She has learnt her lesson, let's go."

This monkey is panicking under that balaclava, he should have stayed in the car. Lwandla pulls me back as I continue to kick Cheryl, I want her to feel the pain I felt when eating chicken feet. One more kick from me and we take off, leaving her bleeding on the ground and sobbing. I feel like a king, dammit I'm on top of the world.

BHEKIFA ZULU

What is a car like that doing in an affluent neighbourhood? The driver slows down as he approaches my car, he looks as dodgy as the other three men in the car. Wait! Is that Sabelo at the back? His eyes widen when they meet mine, he ducks as if a bomb has been thrown at him. The car speeds off before I could ask the driver to pull over. I haven't seen my brother in ages, what was he doing here?

Approaching my house, I notice a woman face up on the ground. When I'm at close sight, my heart jumps to my throat. Cheryl is passed out, her face looks badly battered. I stop the car and rush to her, my heart racing faster than my legs.

Me: "Cheryl!"

She doesn't respond to my call.

Me: "Hold on baby, I got you."

I scoop her up and flash to the car, there is a hospital not far from here.

She is rushed into the emergency room, my mind has not gathered what has happened yet. We have never had any robberies in my community, it's actually the safest complex I know.

"Mr. Zulu?"

A male voice stops me from following the line of thoughts in my head.

Me: "How is she?"

The doctor explains that she has a fractured rib, thank fully she doesn't need surgery.

Me: "May I see her please?"

He escorts me to the room and I am given five minutes because the patient needs to rest. The bruises on Cheryl's face evoke a type of anger in me, she doesn't deserve this. What wrong has she ever done in her life to be punished in this manner?

Me: "You're going to be okay Cheryl, I will find whoever did this to you."

I brush the back of her hand while I keep going back to when we met and the years we spent together. Unlike a lot of people, Cheryl can tolerate my whims, she has let me get away with a

lot. I haven't been the perfect partner, however she knows that she lives in my heart.

As I start to bite my nails, a light bulb switches on in my head. A memory of a red citi golf driving out of the complex comes to play between my lashes, I see Sabelo's face and this time my mind catches the guilty look reflecting in his wide eyes. My chest heaves, I start wheezing with rage. My brother couldn't have done this, it's impossible. The door opens, I chase my breath, trying to calm down.

Doc: "Sir, the patient needs to rest."

I nod, kiss Cheryl goodbye and head out. I need to see my brother.

-NELLY PAGE.

"What do you think?"

He smiles down at me still holding the soup-smearred wooden spoon in his hand and I get a funny feeling in my stomach. He shouldn't be affecting me like this after three years of dating.

Me: "I love it."

He smiles, the smile causes a funny feeling in my stomach again. Am I in love with this man this much that everything he does affects me? Nkateko knows his way in the kitchen, he loves cooking too. Talk about perfection, I should stop titling him, it might just end in tears. We left the hotel and found a guest house, all that trouble because this Tsonga man wanted to cook for me. People have money to waste, however, you can't tell this one what to do.

Nkateko: "It's almost ready, we'll eat soon."

He turns back to the stove to stir the soup, he looks so edible in an apron. Show me a woman who doesn't drool over a man in an apron.

Me: "We could have done this tomorrow you know, we just ate and I am not hungry."

The food we ate at the picnic is still doing a vosho in my stomach, my intestines feel heavy as fuck.

Nkateko: "You don't have to eat much, just a few spoons. It is enough to make me happy. I love doing things with you."

Ahh! I forgot to mention, Nkateko is the definition of a black African man. He eats like there is no tomorrow. I think he is starting to gain relationship weight, it's that "I am happy"

weight... the “she/he treats me good” weight... that one that only third parties can spot.

I love his chubby cheeks though, they are starting to show and a little flesh on his lower torso. We eat so much rolls, that he made a joke just the other day that he will start looking like bread. I love me a squishy Tsonga man, so I don't mind. He can be my teddy bear...

The food suddenly smells heavenly that my stomach grumbles, what in the intestines happened to the food that was there?

Me: “I'm hungry.”

I pout, leaning back against the counter. His gaze whips to me, a smirk and raised brow claiming his face.

Nkateko: “I thought you said you were full?”

Me: “I was, now I'm hungry.”

He drops his head and shakes it while chuckling, if I were not his girlfriend, I would have fallen to my knees from melting. The man is gorgeous, let me point that out for the umpteenth time. When he brings his face up, he is all serious as if he never laughed. He is looking at me with a different fire in his eyes.

Nkateko: “I love this side of you,”

He confesses, striding to me cautiously. My breathe catches as he closes in on me and enters my personal space, his usual scent is there, also the smell of curry stuck on his clothes.

Me: “Which side?”

Nkateko: “The cute, sulky, childlike side. You make me want to eat you up when you do that.”

He is biting my neck as he says this and I am struggling to keep still, his hands begin to wander about my body, his face too close to my skin that he leaves barely there kisses on my face and neck.

Me: “What are you doing?”

The words are whispers, my voice has betrayed me.

Nkateko: “I know how we can make time pass fast.”

His hands glide down my sides, they find the hem of my shirt. Slowly, he lifts it up, enough for his hands to go under it. I whimper when I feel his warm hands on my bare skin, they gently run up and down my spine while his lips find their way to mine.

I love how he kisses me, I call it kiss heaven. I feel his tongue on my lower lip, softly tasting it, he wants entrance so I part my lips and let him in.

He plunges his tongue in my mouth, it finds mine and they both dance in perfect harmony. My whole body heats up, I need to catch a breather, yet I don't want to stop. His hands don't stop working on my back, they lovingly glide up and down my spine. The kiss becomes heated, insatiable. A hunger we both can't seem to fill

the only thing we can do is devour each other. His tongue goes deeper, invading mine.

Nkateko pulls out of the kiss, leaving me yearning for his lips. My own lips feel swollen, I'm panting, pursuing my breath. His eyes move to my lips as his hands stop at the small of my back. I loop my arms around his neck, he smirks and says...

Nkateko: "God, you look so perfect right now."

I look like a mess, a horny mess.

Nkateko: "Nkatanga, you taste better than anything I have ever tasted."

I manage a giggle, his forehead gently falls on mine.

Nkateko: "What have you done to me, Nkatanga? I can't think straight, I feel like a love struck teenager."

I don't know how to respond to his question, I feel the same. I am on cloud nine and not ready to come back down.

He pecks my lips, his hands glide to my hips and with one whisk he lifts me and sits me on the counter. He stands between my legs, his hand travels to my nape. It is a gentle touch, he smiles as he nears and bites my lower lip. I whimper, my reaction to this act.

He nuzzles his nose against mine, his eyes are closed, yet I can still spot the passion and love on his face. I close my eyes, wrap my arms around him.

Nkateko: "I would do anything for you to have my surname."

My heart jumps, looking for a way to escape. I have nothing against marrying him, it is marriage I have a problem with. After Bhekifa, I don't think I will ever walk down the aisle again. I pop my eyes open, his are still closed.

Me: "Nkateko..."

Nkateko: "I know... I know how you feel Nkatanga. There is no harm in me hoping, maybe one day. I won't hold it against you if it never happens. You're with me and I know I will never let you go."

Lord this man, my eyes close as he caresses my cheek with his warm hand.

Nkateko: "I love you, Nkatanga. Ndza ku rhandza." (I love you.)

He says so fluently and it has me tearing up as I feel the love he speaks of consume every part of my being.

Me: "I love you too Nkateko."

I feel him smile when his lips brush against mine, they mingle. In no time our tongues are dancing together again and his hands tattooing my skin. I could stay like this forever.

-SABELO ZULU.

The guys drop me at my mother's gate, panic has suddenly taken over. Bhekifa saw me, I think he saw me... I think he recognised me... I think he put two and two together after he found Cheryl. I think I am a dead man walking... Stop thinking Sabelo and think of a way out... Dammit, my brain will explode with all this thinking... I bite my tongue as the damn word refuses to leave my head.

I need a drink, black label will do, maybe two... I jump the street from my mother's gate and head to the Indian tuck shop two blocks from my house.

Me: "My friend, give me two bottles of black label."

I count a few notes and coins and pass it to the vendor, my mother's government salary really comes in handy. There is enough change to buy a cigarette, it will help calm my nerves. I decide to drink one before going home, the place is crowded with people coming to spend the little cents they have.

"Yey wena Sabelo!" (Hey you.)

Ehh! What is she doing here? How did she know that I am here? I manage to hide one bottle of black label, she sees it because her infamous tongue click comes to play.

Me: "What is it?"

I ask, gulping down the drink. People are staring, they are aware of the dramatic Mariam Zulu who lives on 163 Sgonondo street. Some greet while passing by, I wish they would pass with her. I can't even breathe outside the house.

Mariam: "Where have you been? Why were you not taking my calls? What are you wearing? Since when do you wear black Sabelo?"

Lord take me now, I can even be a security guard in heaven or a garden boy. Anything to get away from this woman I call my mother.

Me: "Am I under arrest?"

Mariam: "No."

Me: "Did Rose finally burn the kitchen?"

Mariam: "Not yet."

Me: "Are you having a heart attack?"

She frowns.

Mariam: "Don't be stupid."

Me: "Unless you are approaching your final moments in this world and have chosen your coffin, leave me alone."

The woman literally takes off a sandal and throws it at me. Her aiming is out of this world.

Me: "Ouch mama that hurt."

Mariam: "The aim was to kill you, bastard."

Me: "Do they teach to shoot targets in the dark world? Damn woman, you never miss. You must be ranking number one in the witch's board. Aimer of the week, Mariam Zulu."

Mariam is fast enough to remove her other shoe and hit me straight in head.

Mariam: "Where have you been wena Sabelo? Zodwa said she saw you get in Billy's car."

Zodwa must fall.

Me: "So? He's my friend."

Mariam: "He's a low life who bombs ATMs and steals from people, iphara Sabelo." (A gangster.)

Billy is an ATM-bomber? How do I not know this? People are so greedy with money, he wants to eat cheese alone.

Mariam: "Where did he take you?"

She asks as I'm about to answer the first question. I might tell her because when my brother gets here, he will unite me with our late father. I'm not ready to be an ancestor, I know they are not ready for me as well.

Me: "I messed up mama, I'm in trouble. You have to help me, can you reverse time? Perform some kind of spell to make Bhekifa forget, wipe off his memory."

Mariam glares, placing her hands on her waist. I know she is about to ask me something stupid.

Mariam: "What have you done to my son?"

Her son? What am I? Her baboon?

Me: "I saw this day coming magriza, I knew you were going to turn on me one day. This is me, mama. Your chicken feet-eating partner. Your onion to your tomato, your archar to your

fatkoek. Today you are worried about Bhekifa, the so called son who abandoned you for a vagina.”

When will she get this?

Me: “I thought we were a team, what happened to inja one inja all.”

“It’s injure-one-injure all Sabelo.”

Some idiot eating a bunny chow says next to me, the lady is leaning against the wall, chewing like a goat and a serious inquisitive face. She is listening to us, people have no filter.

Me: “Yey, fokoff wena. Get out of here, bloody hell.”

Mariam’s tongue click must be contagious because the lady clicks hers. I will smack her senseless one of these days.

“Suka, udizzy Sabelo ntwana.” (You’re stupid.)

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My voice chases her as I shout after her, she turns and shows me the middle finger.

Me: “Look at her, nonsense. She even chews like a cow, sies.”

My mother doesn't look bothered, she wants to know where her son is. They say mention the devil and he will show up, here comes my brother's car.

Me: "Magriza, ngizok'bona half-time." (I'll see you later.)

There is a Caster Semenya in me and right now it is alive and ready to reach where my feet lead me.

"Sabelo come back here."

I hear my brother yell and I turn to run back to my mother, he parks the car on the side of the road. I grab both my beers and take off running again, I almost forgot about them. I know I will be thirsty after this marathon.

—

BHEKIFA ZULU

What is a car like that doing in an affluent neighbourhood? The driver slows down as he approaches my car, he looks as dodgy as the other three men in the car. Wait! Is that Sabelo at the back? His eyes widen when they meet mine, he ducks as if a bomb has been thrown at him. The car speeds off before I could ask the driver to pull over. I haven't seen my brother in ages, what was he doing here?

Approaching my house, I notice a woman face up on the ground. When I'm at close sight, my heart jumps to my throat. Cheryl is passed out, her face looks badly battered. I stop the car and rush to her, my heart racing faster than my legs.

Me: "Cheryl!"

She doesn't respond to my call.

Me: "Hold on baby, I got you."

I scoop her up and flash to the car, there is a hospital not far from here.

She is rushed into the emergency room, my mind has not gathered what has happened yet. We have never had any robberies in my community, it's actually the safest complex I know.

"Mr. Zulu?"

A male voice stops me from following the line of thoughts in my head.

Me: "How is she?"

The doctor explains that she has a fractured rib, thank fully she doesn't need surgery.

Me: "May I see her please?"

He escorts me to the room and I am given five minutes because the patient needs to rest. The bruises on Cheryl's face evoke a type of anger in me, she doesn't deserve this. What wrong has she ever done in her life to be punished in this manner?

Me: "You're going to be okay Cheryl, I will find whoever did this to you."

I brush the back of her hand while I keep going back to when we met and the years we spent together. Unlike a lot of people, Cheryl can tolerate my whims, she has let me get away with a

lot. I haven't been the perfect partner, however she knows that she lives in my heart.

As I start to bite my nails, a light bulb switches on in my head. A memory of a red citi golf driving out of the complex comes to play between my lashes, I see Sabelo's face and this time my mind catches the guilty look reflecting in his wide eyes. My chest heaves, I start wheezing with rage. My brother couldn't have done this, it's impossible. The door opens, I chase my breath, trying to calm down.

Doc: "Sir, the patient needs to rest."

I nod, kiss Cheryl goodbye and head out. I need to see my brother.

-NELLY PAGE.

"What do you think?"

He smiles down at me still holding the soup-smearred wooden spoon in his hand and I get a funny feeling in my stomach. He shouldn't be affecting me like this after three years of dating.

Me: "I love it."

He smiles, the smile causes a funny feeling in my stomach again. Am I in love with this man this much that everything he does affects me? Nkateko knows his way in the kitchen, he loves cooking too. Talk about perfection, I should stop titling him, it might just end in tears. We left the hotel and found a guest house, all that trouble because this Tsonga man wanted to cook for me. People have money to waste, however, you can't tell this one what to do.

Nkateko: "It's almost ready, we'll eat soon."

He turns back to the stove to stir the soup, he looks so edible in an apron. Show me a woman who doesn't drool over a man in an apron.

Me: "We could have done this tomorrow you know, we just ate and I am not hungry."

The food we ate at the picnic is still doing a vosho in my stomach, my intestines feel heavy as fuck.

Nkateko: "You don't have to eat much, just a few spoons. It is enough to make me happy. I love doing things with you."

Ahh! I forgot to mention, Nkateko is the definition of a black African man. He eats like there is no tomorrow. I think he is starting to gain relationship weight, it's that "I am happy"

weight... the “she/he treats me good” weight... that one that only third parties can spot.

I love his chubby cheeks though, they are starting to show and a little flesh on his lower torso. We eat so much rolls, that he made a joke just the other day that he will start looking like bread. I love me a squishy Tsonga man, so I don't mind. He can be my teddy bear...

The food suddenly smells heavenly that my stomach grumbles, what in the intestines happened to the food that was there?

Me: “I'm hungry.”

I pout, leaning back against the counter. His gaze whips to me, a smirk and raised brow claiming his face.

Nkateko: “I thought you said you were full?”

Me: “I was, now I'm hungry.”

He drops his head and shakes it while chuckling, if I were not his girlfriend, I would have fallen to my knees from melting. The man is gorgeous, let me point that out for the umpteenth time. When he brings his face up, he is all serious as if he never laughed. He is looking at me with a different fire in his eyes.

Nkateko: “I love this side of you,”

He confesses, striding to me cautiously. My breathe catches as he closes in on me and enters my personal space, his usual scent is there, also the smell of curry stuck on his clothes.

Me: “Which side?”

Nkateko: “The cute, sulky, childlike side. You make me want to eat you up when you do that.”

He is biting my neck as he says this and I am struggling to keep still, his hands begin to wander about my body, his face too close to my skin that he leaves barely there kisses on my face and neck.

Me: “What are you doing?”

The words are whispers, my voice has betrayed me.

Nkateko: “I know how we can make time pass fast.”

His hands glide down my sides, they find the hem of my shirt. Slowly, he lifts it up, enough for his hands to go under it. I whimper when I feel his warm hands on my bare skin, they gently run up and down my spine while his lips find their way to mine.

I love how he kisses me, I call it kiss heaven. I feel his tongue on my lower lip, softly tasting it, he wants entrance so I part my lips and let him in.

He plunges his tongue in my mouth, it finds mine and they both dance in perfect harmony. My whole body heats up, I need to catch a breather, yet I don't want to stop. His hands don't stop working on my back, they lovingly glide up and down my spine. The kiss becomes heated, insatiable. A hunger we both can't seem to fill

the only thing we can do is devour each other. His tongue goes deeper, invading mine.

Nkateko pulls out of the kiss, leaving me yearning for his lips. My own lips feel swollen, I'm panting, pursuing my breath. His eyes move to my lips as his hands stop at the small of my back. I loop my arms around his neck, he smirks and says...

Nkateko: "God, you look so perfect right now."

I look like a mess, a horny mess.

Nkateko: "Nkatanga, you taste better than anything I have ever tasted."

I manage a giggle, his forehead gently falls on mine.

Nkateko: "What have you done to me, Nkatanga? I can't think straight, I feel like a love struck teenager."

I don't know how to respond to his question, I feel the same. I am on cloud nine and not ready to come back down.

He pecks my lips, his hands glide to my hips and with one whisk he lifts me and sits me on the counter. He stands between my legs, his hand travels to my nape. It is a gentle touch, he smiles as he nears and bites my lower lip. I whimper, my reaction to this act.

He nuzzles his nose against mine, his eyes are closed, yet I can still spot the passion and love on his face. I close my eyes, wrap my arms around him.

Nkateko: "I would do anything for you to have my surname."

My heart jumps, looking for a way to escape. I have nothing against marrying him, it is marriage I have a problem with. After Bhekifa, I don't think I will ever walk down the aisle again. I pop my eyes open, his are still closed.

Me: "Nkateko..."

Nkateko: "I know... I know how you feel Nkatanga. There is no harm in me hoping, maybe one day. I won't hold it against you if it never happens. You're with me and I know I will never let you go."

Lord this man, my eyes close as he caresses my cheek with his warm hand.

Nkateko: "I love you, Nkatanga. Ndza ku rhandza." (I love you.)

He says so fluently and it has me tearing up as I feel the love he speaks of consume every part of my being.

Me: "I love you too Nkateko."

I feel him smile when his lips brush against mine, they mingle. In no time our tongues are dancing together again and his hands tattooing my skin. I could stay like this forever.

-SABELO ZULU.

The guys drop me at my mother's gate, panic has suddenly taken over. Bhekifa saw me, I think he saw me... I think he recognised me... I think he put two and two together after he found Cheryl. I think I am a dead man walking... Stop thinking Sabelo and think of a way out... Dammit, my brain will explode with all this thinking... I bite my tongue as the damn word refuses to leave my head.

I need a drink, black label will do, maybe two... I jump the street from my mother's gate and head to the Indian tuck shop two blocks from my house.

Me: "My friend, give me two bottles of black label."

I count a few notes and coins and pass it to the vendor, my mother's government salary really comes in handy. There is enough change to buy a cigarette, it will help calm my nerves. I decide to drink one before going home, the place is crowded with people coming to spend the little cents they have.

“Yey wena Sabelo!” (Hey you.)

Ehh! What is she doing here? How did she know that I am here? I manage to hide one bottle of black label, she sees it because her infamous tongue click comes to play.

Me: “What is it?”

I ask, gulping down the drink. People are staring, they are aware of the dramatic Mariam Zulu who lives on 163 Sgonondo street. Some greet while passing by, I wish they would pass with her. I can't even breathe outside the house.

Mariam: “Where have you been? Why were you not taking my calls? What are you wearing? Since when do you wear black Sabelo?”

Lord take me now, I can even be a security guard in heaven or a garden boy. Anything to get away from this woman I call my mother.

Me: “Am I under arrest?”

Mariam: "No."

Me: "Did Rose finally burn the kitchen?"

Mariam: "Not yet."

Me: "Are you having a heart attack?"

She frowns.

Mariam: "Don't be stupid."

Me: "Unless you are approaching your final moments in this world and have chosen your coffin, leave me alone."

The woman literally takes off a sandal and throws it at me. Her aiming is out of this world.

Me: "Ouch mama that hurt."

Mariam: "The aim was to kill you, bastard."

Me: "Do they teach to shoot targets in the dark world? Damn woman, you never miss. You must be ranking number one in the witch's board. Aimer of the week, Mariam Zulu."

Mariam is fast enough to remove her other shoe and hit me straight in head.

Mariam: "Where have you been wena Sabelo? Zodwa said she saw you get in Billy's car."

Zodwa must fall.

Me: "So? He's my friend."

Mariam: "He's a low life who bombs ATMs and steals from people, iphara Sabelo." (A gangster.)

Billy is an ATM-bomber? How do I not know this? People are so greedy with money, he wants to eat cheese alone.

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BHEKIFA ZULU.

“What is wrong with you? Why are you after your brother?”

My mother blocks my path, I try to move to the left she moves with me. Same when I move to the right. Frustrated, I sigh and give in.

Me: “Sabelo beat Cheryl up, she is in the hospital mama.”

Her eyes narrow, but I see shock and irritation take over.

Mariam: “What did you call me?”

I don’t understand, so I keep quiet and wait for her to reveal the reason behind her exasperation.

Mariam: “Bhekifa? So this is you? You remember that you have a mother after all these years?”

Oh Lord, not this.

Me: “Mama come on...”

Mariam: “Come on what? Come on what Bhekifa? You left me to fend for myself, the woman who gave birth to you. You abandoned me, Bhekifa. Today you stand here and call me mama. Ungijwayela kabi wena.” (You’re disrespectful.)

Me: "I came here to confront Sabelo..."

Mariam: "Confront Sabelo yomsuzo, who the hell do you think you are wena Bhekifa?"

Me: "Mama calm down."

Mariam: "Calm down yani? You are just like your father, a huge disappointment. You chase skirts as if women are becoming extinct."

She is yelling at the top of her voice and I am embarrassed to my wits, people are watching.

Me: "I'm leaving, I'll come tomorrow with the police. Sabelo is going to pay for what he did to Cheryl."

My mother pushes me that I stagger and hit my back against the car.

Mariam: "You will do no such thing, do you hear me?"

What is she saying to me?

Me: "Sabelo committed a crime, he deserves to be locked up."

Mariam: "You are not taking my son away from me, I will disown if you do that. You will be dead to me and when you die, I will not bury you."

Me: "Mama you can't be serious, you're covering up for him?"

Mariam: “Yes I am covering up for him, you left me, remember? Sabelo is the only son I have left, you can’t be so cruel to take him from me. I don’t care what he did to lo Sherin ndini wakho (your stupid Cheryl). I don’t care if she is dead or alive, I will never forgive her for breaking my family apart.”

That is insane, Cheryl did no such thing.

Me: “This is so typical of you mama, blaming other people for your own evil doings. You think I don’t know that you and Sabelo were against my marriage with Nelly, you took everything away from me. I trusted you and confided in you, but all this while you were plotting against me.”

Her eyes widen, shock swims in her eyes and this has her drawing back about two feet from me.

Mariam: “What are you talking about?”

She gasps.

Me: “The day I came here to introduce Cheryl, I overheard you and Sabelo talking about how you managed to drive me and Nelly and apart. How getting rid of Cheryl was going to be a walk in the park.”

Her mouth drops open as she gasps incredulously.

Me: “Why do you think I drifted? I was tired mama, tired of you controlling my life. Then again, I was angry at you. Sabelo is an

idiot, he has always been and I am not justifying his actions. But you should've known better, you're the adult here. The one who is more experienced, you ruined me. I will never forgive you for that, as for you considering me dead. If that is what you want, then go ahead. You are toxic anyway, it's too late for my brother. You have him under your control. Congratulations Mariam Zulu, you have destroyed your own family."

I have gathered the courage to confront her, tears trickle from her eyes. She carries her hands on her head and starts sobbing, I will not be manipulated by crocodile tears.

Mariam: "Look at us Bhekifa, look what Sherin is doing to us. She's the one who fed you all these lies, don't let her come between us please son, please."

I knew she would never take responsibility.

Me: "When will you own up to your mistakes mama? You know what? Don't bother answering... I'm out of here and when Cheryl wakes up she will decide if she wants to press charges. If she decides to send Sabelo to prison, I won't stop her."

I turn and leave her there, sobbing.

-NELLY PAGE.

Me: “We’re coming back tomorrow ma, is there something wrong? Are the kids okay?”

Mom: “There is nothing wrong, am I not allowed to check on my baby?”

At this time of the night?

Me: “You’re fishing aren’t you ma?”

She laughs.

Me: “Is your husband not complaining that you’re on the phone instead of giving him attention?”

This is my way of getting rid of her, I am not dishing out anything.

Mom: “Your father is sleeping, you know how he is lately. Old age is having a toll on him.”

Me: “Is he okay though?”

Nkateko enters the room, he smiles as he strides to perch himself on the sofa beside me. His face is quickly buried on my neck and I have to suppress a laugh when he starts placing wet kisses there.

Mom: "He's fine, the kids too. They miss you."

Me: "I miss them too."

I can barely concentrate with this man kissing me like this, I try to scoot away, but he follows me.

Mom: "Have you spoken to Bhekifa? Ayanda is growing excessively restless, she hasn't stopped asking about him."

How do I fix this problem?

Me: "I haven't ma..."

Nkateko sits up with this line

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his eyes widen and he mouths...

Nkateko: "Your mom?"

I nod with a smile plastered on my face.

Nkateko: "Shit!"

He curses and moves away from me like I have a contagious virus, a giggle surges out of my mouth. He takes my feet, sits at the far end of the couch; puts my feet on his lap and starts massaging them. My heart thumps vigorously as I watch Nkateko serious at work. His face scrunched, brows knitted and eyes intently fixated on my feet.

Mom: "Are you there Nelly?"

I blink at the sound of my mother's voice.

Me: "Sorry ma, what were you saying?"

Mom: "Your father wants to meet up with him."

Me: "I don't know if that is a good idea, Bhekifa won't change his mind."

Nkateko's eyes dart up, he is suddenly curious about the conversation.

Me: "He is not a child to be reminded of his duties ma, he knows that he has children who need him."

Mom: "I know Nelly, this is for the kids. Let your father do it, Ayanda is not okay. The boys don't really say much, I don't know how they feel about his absence."

Me: "Okay, if you think that is a good idea. I don't want to take part in the meeting."

The further I stay away from Bhekifa the better, I have so much to say to him about his negligence and we might end up fighting after I have dragged him down with my words.

Mom: "I understand, that's alright."

Me: "I have to go, kiss the kids for me."

Mom: "I will, bye."

Nkateko: "Is there a problem?"

Nkateko asks as soon as I put the phone down, I feel so sleepy with the way he is caring for my feet.

Me: "My father wants to meet up with Bhekifa."

Nkateko: "Your father is a wise man, he should handle this quite well."

Me: "I believe so."

He kisses my feet, making me shy away from his intense gaze. I hear him chuckle lowly, he loves teasing me.

-SABELO ZULU.

Bhekifa's car is not outside my mother's house, thank God he left. He thinks he is Mike Tyson that one. Wait a minute... Why is there a group of people circled outside my gate? I'm drunk, but not Madlamini's mqombothi drunk. (Traditional beer.)

I drag my tipsy self toward the loud crowd.

Me: "What's going on?"

I ask while paving my way through the multitude, they are looking at something. Is Mariam performing live magic or she transformed into a witch in public? I don't trust that old woman.

There she is lying still on the ground, I move in closer to see if she is sleeping or just chilling. I'm too drunk for this shit.

Me: "What happened to her?"

I ask a lady beside me.

"She suddenly collapse, I think she is dead."

Dammit, I could kiss this lady. But I don't know her...

Mariam's death scene one: Action!

I throw my hands in the air and scream in horror.

Me: "NOOO! MY MOTHER CAN'T BE DEAD."

This is as loud as I can go. I kneel on the ground beside my mother and bury my head on her chest.

Me: "Mama wake up, please."

Ye ye ye ye! My God is good ooo... I would break into a dance, but these fools would burn me alive.

Me: “Call an ambulance, why are you people just standing there? My mother is dying, Lord don’t take my mother from me.”

Satan do your thing ntwana.

“I called an ambulance Sabelo, it’s on the way.”

Some idiot says, emerging from the crowd. Look at him, smiling as if he got Mandela out of prison. The ambulance better delay, I need Mariam gone.

Me: “Call the mortuary, my mother is dead.”

Seriously, she looks dead. She better be dead. These people are buying my fake tears, let me increase the heat. Who knows? The Ferguson’s might be passing by and see my performance. I’ve always wanted to hold Vuyiswa’s hand. I stand to my feet and stumble toward the gate, shouting for Rose.

Me: “ROSE! ROSE My mother is dead Rose.”

Where is this woman? She needs to help me fake grief... I scream when my wife materializes from the house, dressed in a gown and a stocking covering her hair.

Oh dear Rose, we are not sleeping tonight. The witch has left the building.

Her face swims in confusion as she sees my acting.

Me: “Your mother in-law is dead Rose, she’s gone.”

Rose is so slow, what is there to be confused about when what I have said is as clear as daylight?

Me: “Mariam is dead.”

With my back facing the crowd I wink at my wife, the light finally switches on in her stupid head.

Me: “Look over there.”

I point to the crowd. Upon seeing Mariam stagnant on the ground, Rose screams and runs to her.

Rose: “Mama, mama”

Now my intoxicated brain is confused, is she crying for real or feigning it like me? It doesn’t matter, let me join her. I have to make this look good.

Mariam is in the middle when Rose and I hug each other mourning. Soweto’s first corpse sandwich...

“Sabelo calm down, she is going to be okay.”

I must be hearing demon voices, it's telling me that my mother is not dead.

Me: "The devil is a liar."

I dispute, crying my eyes out. Resist the devil and he will flee from you.

"Sabelo your mother is not dead, there is a pulse."

Who said that? I let go of Rose and look up to see the same fool who said he called an ambulance. With the calmest voice, I stand up while saying...

Me: "She's alive?"

The fool nods, God does not love me.

BHEKIFA ZULU.

Immediate and distant family members are gathered at my mother's house, gloom and sadness permeates the air. Songs of lamentation add to the depressing atmosphere. Sad faces lurk about, family disputes have begun. Each fighting for a share of my mother's belongings.

I can't grasp what the fight is about, my mother had nothing. The only valuable thing she had to her name is this house. She hasn't been buried yet and the family is ready to kill each other over pots and plates.

Sabelo will have none of it, he says everything in this house belongs to him. Knowing him, he will bully everyone out of the house before the funeral. He is a take-no-nonsense type of man.

The fights are under keeps though, mostly, my mother's sisters and their daughters are eyeing her belongings. Nevertheless, the women mourn more than they fight.

I was at home three nights ago when Sabelo called to tell me that our mother had a heart attack, at first I didn't answer due

to that I was upset with him. Shock cannot begin to describe what I felt when he broke the news, dazed and my mind overthinking things that left me feeling suffocated by guilt; I rushed to the hospital.

There was nothing the doctors could do for my mother, apparently, she was brought in late. She died before I could get there. Before any of her family members could get there. To think guilt had come to settle in my heart, the damn thing consumed my whole being.

Perhaps if I didn't confront her, she would still be alive. Perhaps if I didn't keep myself away from her, if I had stayed in her life and made peace with her; my mother would still be alive today.

"Bafo can I have a word?"

My brother Sabelo whispers beside me, I excuse myself from the uncles and cousins in the living room. I follow my brother outside the house, we exit through the kitchen.

Sabelo: "We need money for food bafo, as you can see the house is crowded. It's only been two days since those people arrived and they have finished a whole truck of Albany bread, yey; those people eat man. Yesis."

That is stupid, he should know that.

Me: "I don't mind buying food, I'll go with S'bongiseni later."

S'bongiseni is my uncle's son, he is about the same age as Sabelo. The only cousin I can call a brother. Sabelo is not happy about my announcement, he furrows his brows in annoyance.

Sabelo: "S'bongiseni? Did he call you out here to remind you that we do not have food? No. I did. Give me the money and I will do it myself."

Me: "I dont mind, you must be hurting because..."

Sabelo: "Eyyy bafo, just give me the money and your car keys. I will go buy what is needed."

Why is he raising his voice?

Me: "Fine."

While fishing for a few notes in my wallet, I decide to confront Sabelo about the attack on Cheryl.

Me: "Just so you know, I haven't forgotten what you did to Cheryl."

His jaw drops, Sabelo's stupidity is annoying.

Sabelo: "I don't know what you're talking about bafo, I don't even know this Cheryl."

Me: "Stop acting a fool Sabelo, you need to grow up."

Sabelo: "Says the man who has abandoned his kids."

He spits and his words hit a nerve, I truly have abandoned my children. I don't know what came over me the past years, I guess I was too focused on rebuilding my life that I became selfish. I will have to call them or set an appointment with Nelly or something. Sabelo snatches the money from my hand just when I'm counting it.

Sabelo: "This is not enough, I need about R5000."

Me: "For what?"

Sabelo: "Haibo, I told you, I have to buy food. Did you see the whole of Zulu nation is in my house? How will I feed those big bellies with R400? I can't even buy two boxes of Romans pizza with this change."

Me: "You want to eat pizza?"

Sabelo: "The last time my children had it was two Christmases ago, you decided to buy Cheryl the whole of Romans and forgot about your family. Uy'slima bafo." (You're an idiot.)

Me: "Watch your mouth Sabelo, I am not your age."

He's laughing at me, Sabelo has officially lost his marbles.

Sabelo: "Askies kee, big brother." (Sorry.)

I will let this go for peace's sake.

Me: "I don't have enough cash on me, I'll e-wallet you the rest of the money." He snatches the car keys from my hand and marches out the gate, I will never understand him.

-SABELO ZULU.

Day of the funeral.

I am not one to celebrate birthdays, what the hell is a birthday anyway? However, from today I will celebrate a death-day. Mariam has been laid to rest, I cried all my tears out. I have nothing left anymore, my tear-tank is empty so excuse me if I never shed tears again.

My compound is flooding with people, after tears my foot. They only here to finish my food. I can't walk into the house without bumping into someone, it is crowded outside as well. Yes, you heard right; I said crowded.

Honestly I didn't know we have such a big family, Mariam's friends are present as well. Old women who keep eyeing me with shifty eyes, I think I have a phobia for old women. When I see them, my mind screams WITCH...

But I love me some young mamas, like this one passing by. I didn't think she would come to the funeral. What am I saying? The woman never crossed my mind at all. Okay prepare yourself Sabelo, you could be the one to mend what your idiotic brother broke.

"Nelly my Neliza!"

She stops and rolls her eyes, the audacity.

Me: "Semhle sana, divorce looks good on you. I see the glow, sun kissed maan. Look arts you, ngwana daddy. Awu Pearl Thusi has competition." (You're beautiful.)

People change hey, who would've thought Nelly would look like this.

Rosy cheeks? Check...

Pouty lips? Check...

Mouth-watering hips? Check...

Nelly: "Are you undressing me with your eyes?"

I shut my eyes and rub them before I flick them open, she is still beautiful. How did Bhekifa let this woman go? Oh yes... we pushed her away. The things we do for money.

Me: “Mina? Undress? Wena? Habe...” (Me? Undress you?)

Okay, I sound drunk. This time I admit that I am wasted. To hell with it, God has finally heard my prayers. Mariam has departed, I am officially a house owner. Let me celebrate.

Nelly: “Walk away Sabelo, I have nothing to say to you.”

People with money think they sleep next to Jesus and use us as pillows. The audacity Nelly has to speak to me with such rudeness.

Me: “But I am not done with you.”

I am in the mood to spoil someone’s day and my brother pisses me off. Why not tell on him?

Nelly: “Excuse me?”

You’re excused mamasita... Meow... Dammit her confidence makes her look hot, fire on fire I tell you.

Me: “How are my nephews and niece Nelly-licious?”

She squints her eyes before rolling them, God should not have given women eyes. Look what they do with them...the most useless thing.

Nelly: “None of your business.”

Oh! And she snaps like a tiger? Damn mommy got source.

Me: “Come on Nelisto, I’m a worried uncle that’s all. I bet they miss their father.”

That’s right Nelly, widen those big eyes for me. My drunk eyes are seeing true beauty, Lord come witness this.

Nelly: “Sabelo, if you have something to say

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then say it and stop wasting my time.”

Maybe this is the type of woman I want, one who knows how to take charge and speak her mind. Rose is like spaghetti, she is too soft man. I’m tired of her weak ass.

Me: “I know why my dear brother has neglected his kids.”

Now she looks interested, I scan the area. Bhekifa is oblivious of this conversation, his focus is on the stupid idiots we call cousins and uncles. Can you imagine I had to buy four loafs of bread this morning because they eat like cave men. Bread is expensive, people are just cruel.

Nelly heaves a sigh, it is loud enough to snap me back to her. I find her rolling those big eyes again and all I want to do is take a picture, I hear it lasts longer.

Nelly: "I'm waiting bhuti." (Brother.)

Brother-zoned? I refuse.

Me: "I am not your brother Neliza, haibo! You wish TKZ was as handsome as me."

Nelly: "TKZ?"

I'm confusing her.

Me: "Thok'zisto, the sangoma who looks like a machine killer."

Nelly: "Why am I even giving you the time of day?"

She turns to walk away, I can't let her do that. I haven't spoiled my brother's day yet.

Me: "There's a woman by the name of Cheryl, she is the reason your kids have an absent father."

Bomb dropped, let the games begin.

Nelly freezes on the spot, slowly she turns to face me. Her eyes drowning in disbelief, I smile in return.

Me: "Unfortunately, my brother is so whipped that he has forgotten that he ever got you pregnant."

I should be dancing on the rooftop for my achievement. Nelly fixes her fierce gaze on Bhekifa, she sashays past me. I turn just to watch her jaw dropping hips sway from left to right as she confidently approaches my senseless brother under the tree.

She greets the uncles with respect, bowing her head a little. Her knees bend a little as well. Men are stupid, look at them, smiling at her like she is swimming naked in a pool of Savannah. Nelly says something to Bhekifa who nods. He stands and follows her into the house.

I can't miss this show, so I hurry behind, careful they don't see me.

-NELLY PAGE.

My parents said I had to attend Mariam's funeral because I am still considered the daughter in-law of this family. I don't know how that is possible, the attachment I have with Bhekifa is the reason I am here. Our Children.

They didn't know how to feel nor act when I announced that their paternal grandmother has passed away. They didn't have that close knit relationship, Mariam is to blame for that. She was not fond of me and took it out on the children.

Victor being the eldest came with, Ayanda is too fragile. I didn't know what state Bhekifa would be in, if he was going to be cold

towards the kids or embrace them. So I had to leave Ayanda behind, the other two boys were not so keen on coming. Said something about not knowing who Mariam is. I don't blame them.

Victor spotted his father before we went to the graveyard and he didn't bother to try and approach him, right now he is in the car waiting for me to drive us back home. Bhekifa is a useless excuse of a man.

The plan was not to confront Bhekifa about his negligence, I was at least going to let him figure it out; for lack of a better word. Now Sabelo tells me the reason behind him neglecting the children he fathered.

How dare he do that to my kids? I will not sit back and watch them suffer, his foolishness has to stop. I don't want my children to have daddy issues, Ayanda is already treading that path. It will affect her when she grows up and finds someone to love. I can't have my baby looking to other men for love her father couldn't give her.

Sabelo's children's room is the only private room I could think of, the house is crowded with annoying family members who keep asking me why Bhekifa and I got a divorce. I was ready to

go home when Sabelo approached me and mockingly snitched on his brother.

Confusion is laced on Bhekifa's face as he walks into the bedroom, he shuts the door and I can't wait but snap at him.

Me: "A woman Bhekifa? You neglected your children because of a woman?"

Bhekifa: "What are you talking about Nelly?"

Me: "Your brother just told me why you have kept yourself away from the kids."

He sighs in frustration, right now he is frustrating me. Everything about him gets on my nerves.

Bhekifa: "Since when do you believe everything Sabelo says?"

Me: "Don't ask me that, it is irrelevant. You know I waited Bhekifa, thinking you will wake up one day and realise your mistakes. I didn't want to confront you, but after what I just heard."

Bhekifa: "Well, then maybe you should stop gossiping with my brother and ask me directly."

He has no right to be angry with me, I didn't do anything wrong. He's the one on the hot seat.

Me: "Fine."

Crossing my arms on my chest, I take two steps back while intensely looking up at him.

Me: "Kindly tell me, Bhekifa. Why have you deserted your kids?"

I wait for an answer, it's not coming. His eyes are roaming, looking for god-knows what. I can't deal with this man, so much beard, yet he is as childish as a toddler. I am going to explode with anger.

Me: "You have got to be kidding me, you can't even provide me with an answer."

Bhekifa: "What do you want from me, Nelly?"

He shouts above a whisper, I am not afraid of his roars anymore.

Me: "Care for your children Bhekifa, they need you dammit."

Bhekifa: "I will... I... I love my kids."

Manna might as well fall from heaven in this day and age, this man thinks I am stupid.

Me: “You have a very funny way of showing it. You can’t fool me, Bhekifa Zulu. Those days are long gone, you don’t have it in you to be a good father.”

He’s fuming, I see it in his flaring nose. The blaze in his eyes and puckered brow.

Bhekifa: “Do not judge my parenting.”

He nips through gritted teeth, he can bark for all I care. I will not back down.

Me: “I am stating the facts, what I have observed for the past years. Right now your son is in the car impatiently waiting for me to take him home. Not once did you try to approach him, do you know what that will do to him?”

Bhekifa: “Fine Nelly, I will take them this coming weekend.”

That is not enough.

Me: “Don’t come into their lives only to leave again, I will not have you break my kids Bhekifa.”

Bhekifa: “Didn’t I say I will take them this coming weekend? Stop nagging me already, you are not my wife anymore, remember?”

What did I say about him being childish? Smart people are stupid in a way.

Me: “Okay, I won’t tell them anything. Just in case you change your mind. I hope that woman is worth you leaving your kids behind.”

Bhekifa nods, I find it strange that he is cooperating with me. I observe his face, his head is spinning with questions. He wants to say something.

Bhekifa: “How have you been?”

Me: “I’m alive, aren’t I?”

Bhekifa: “You’re glowing I see, your lover is doing a good job.”

I don’t know what he means by that and I don’t care to ask. With a tongue click, I manoeuvre past him to open the door. Sabelo falls face down in the door way, the idiot was eavesdropping.

Sabelo: “Sorry, I lost my earring.”

He says, scanning the floor. The man does not wear earrings, I am getting out of here.

“Really bafo?”

I hear Bhekifa say before I am out of hearing range. This family is too much, really.

NELLY PAGE.

“Are you okay?”

The question is directed to Victor, he hasn't said a word since we left the Zulu residence. His jaw is clenched and face scrunched up in anger.

Me: “Victor, I'm talking to you.”

He's looking out the window, arms folded across his chest. I think of driving us to a nearby eatery, so we can talk. The problem is that Victor is not easily pleased, he holds on to anger longer than anyone I know.

Victor: “I hate him.”

He grunts, anger evident in his voice. This is what I feared all along.

Me: “We spoke about this Vic, he is...”

Victor: “That man is not my father, I hate him.”

The child bangs a fist on the car dashboard, I have never seen him this angry.

Me: “Victor...”

Victor: “Mom please, I am not a kid anymore. You can’t manipulate me like you do Ayanda.”

I would excuse the rude tone, but letting it go would give him a chance to repeat this mistake.

Me: “Are you talking to me like that young man?”

He sighs and goes back to looking out the window. How on earth am I going to fix this?

Me: “Look, I understand your frustrations, okay? But that does not give you a ticket to disrespect me, do you understand?”

I hate unruly kids.

Me: “I am talking you young man.”

Victor: “Yes mom.””

He breathes frustratingly, chiding him is proving to be a failure.

Victor: “What did we ever do to him? Why does he hate us so much?”

Me: “Your father does not hate you.”

Victor: “I wish I never went to the stupid funeral, I wish it was him who died.”

Me: “Victor that’s enough, he might be failing you, but he is still your father. I’m not justifying his actions, you guys need to hold on. Your father will come around one of these days.”

I wish to tell him what Bhekifa said, but that would be a wrong move. I don't trust Bhekifa, his word means nothing until he actually makes a move.

Victor: "Why are you taking his side? He never treated you well mom, he beat you up. You were nothing but a slave to him."

I don't remember shouting at my parents, this generation is so disrespectful.

Me: "What did I say about respect?"

Victor: "I just want you to stop taking his side, be on mine for once."

Me: "Baby, I am on your side.""

Victor: "No you're not. You are more worried about Bhekifa than you are about how I feel. I need to vent to someone, I need someone to listen to me complain about my father."

Thank God we're home.

Me: "Can't you complain without cursing him."

I ask while parking the car in front of the garage door.

Victor: "Aaaahhh!"

I am taken aback when Victor screams in frustration.

Victor: "I hate Bhekifa, I hate my life and I hate you."

Me: "Victor."

Victor: "I just want to die."

He murmurs looking into my eyes, the tears and anger in his eyes are heart breaking, it is too late to stop him when he stomps out of the car and runs into the house.

Me: "Victor wait."

What have I done?

Me: "Hey, you're home?"

Nkateko kisses my cheek before closing the door, he must have seen Victor judging by the look on his face.

Nkateko: "What happened? Why is Victor crying?"

Me: "Bhekifa hardly said a word to him at the funeral."

He leads me to the living room, his hand playing on the small of my back.

Nkateko: "I'll speak to him, let me please."

Me: "No let him cool off first. He won't hear a word if he is still upset, Victor can't control his anger and I am afraid that he will do something stupid one day."

Nkateko: "He's a needy child Nelly, teenage boys need their father in their lives. He will start questioning himself. Is he not good enough? Did he do something wrong? It will eventually lead to self-hate. Things are getting out of hand, it needs to stop. How long is Bhekifa going to keep this up?"

I wish I had all the answers, feeling tired and drained, I throw myself on the couch to have Nkateko settle beside me.

Me: "I spoke to Bhekifa, he said he will fetch them. I don't know how accurate that is, he is not a man that keeps his promises."

Nkateko: "Well, he needs to step up. I would take his place if it were possible, but the kids know him as their father."

Me: "You have been more of a father to them than Bhekifa ever was, thank you Nkateko."

Nkateko: "You don't need to thank me Nkatanga, they are the best part of you. How can I not love them?"

Me: "Why didn't I meet you earlier in life?"

Nkateko: "I'm here now and I am never letting you go."

His arms feel like home, I could hide in them forever.

-BHEKIFA ZULU.

It's a day after the funeral, life has to go on. I thought long and hard about the conversation I had with my ex-wife. The children do not deserve what I have been doing to them, I came close to calling them last night.

My pride called me bluff, it is hard to actually admit to being an idiot. I will apologize properly when I see them.

I'm at the hospital to see Cheryl, due to funeral arrangements, I couldn't visit her. I have not seen her in three days. She smiles when I walk into her hospital room, boy am I glad she is not upset. Women are a special gender, anything angers them. From a bubble gum losing its taste to the sound of the kettle boiling.

Me: "Hey."

I greet her with a kiss and settle on a chair.

Cheryl: "Hey, how was the funeral?"

Me: "Okay I guess."

Cheryl: "I'm sorry I couldn't be there."

Me: "It's not like you had a choice, how are you feeling?"

She shifts uncomfortably on the bed while wincing in pain.

Cheryl: "Like I fell off a building. How long have I been here?"

Me: "About a week, they had to sedate you. You had a fractured rib."

Cheryl: "Does my mom know?"

Me: "No."

Me: "Do you remember what happened?"

I'm sceptical about telling her who is behind her attack, sure I said I will have Sabelo arrested. I'm between a rock and a hard place now, Rose and the kids will be left alone if Sabelo goes to jail.

Cheryl: "I was attacked."

Me: "Did you happen to recognise them?"

She shakes her head, somehow I am glad that she didn't recognise my brother. This woman can spot an ant in the ear of an elephant, that's how smart she is. Not wanting to dwell on the topic for too long lest she starts suspecting something, I opt to off ramp.

Me: "I want to take the kids during school holidays."

I am not asking for her permission

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but informing her rather since it is something that has never been done since she moved in with me.

Cheryl: "Okay?"

That's is a question.

Me: "I haven't seen my children in a while, so I thought why not have them over for a week."

Cheryl: "Well, why are you telling me about it?"

Me: "We live together Cheryl, of course I would consult with you first."

Cheryl: "You don't have to consult with me, they are your children. It's your house, I have no say in it."

I can't read her emotions as she says this.

Me: "Also I want to take them to Sun City for a weekend, maybe Earth and Sia would love to tag along."

I don't really spend time with her kids, I feel like shit for having to take care of them financially and not my kids. It's a good thing Nelly is financially stable, Cheryl doesn't have much. I couldn't watch her struggle through life.

Cheryl: "Count them out, my mother is overprotective. She won't let them out of her sight, especially after what happened to Sia."

I saw this coming.

Me: "Maybe next time, what about you?"

Cheryl: "What about me?"

Me: "Are you coming with?"

Cheryl: "You go, I'll visit my mother. I miss the kids, I want to spend some time with them."

Me: "Are you sure?"

Cheryl: "What is with the questions? Are you seeking for permission to see your children?"

Me: "Come on Cheryl, I'm just asking."

Cheryl: "I don't like your way of asking, you make it sound like I forced you to neglect your kids."

Me: "I don't know how you feel about them, that's why I asked if you would like to tag along."

Cheryl: "Does it even matter? No offence, but you are not really a family man Bhekifa. Sia and Earth have seen you once, the only thing you do is provide for them financially. Deciding not

to see your kids was a decision you made on your own, I don't remember being part of the meeting."

Cheryl's bluntness stings sometimes, I cannot fathom where she gets the audacity to speak to me like this. How is it that I can't lay a finger on her?

Me: "Now you're out of line."

Cheryl: "I need to sleep."

She closes her eyes, completely shutting me out. This is my cue to leave, I'll come back when she is calmer.

-SABELO ZULU.

I have a confession to make, Mariam is haunting my dreams. The woman doesn't want to leave me in peace, every night when I close my eyes, I see her standing in the dark, crying. I thought demons were having a braai party in hell, Mariam as the meal of the day. What is she doing in my dreams?

We have just finished eating dinner, for a change I got to have a decent meal.

Me: "Thank you mabhebeza, the food was nice."

I tell my wife as she perches herself in the couch beside me.

Me: “When last did I eat meat? I was starting to grow feathers from eating too much chicken feet.”

Rose: “Thanks to the funeral we are able to eat proper food.”

Me: “It’s a good thing the family left, I thought they would milk us dry before leaving.”

The lights suddenly go off, just great.

Me: “Eish! Eskom.”

Rose: “It’s not Eskom Sabelo, the street lights are still on. There is light next door as well.”

Rose says, peeking out window. That can’t be, I always told Mariam to get prepaid electricity. What is this now?

Me: “Eish! Mariam died with our electricity.”

Rose: “You better make a plan. I am not going to live in the dark.”

Ehhh! When did this one grow wings?

Me: “What do you want me to do Rose? Borrow electricity from next door?”

Rose: “I’m not stupid Sabelo, don’t address me like I’m a fool.”

Address? We speak like that now I see.

Me: "Are you sure Rose? Are you sure that you are not stupid? Because from where I am standing I see an idiot, you complain about not having electricity and expect me to do something about it. Was I not here when it switched off?"

Rose: "I don't know why I married you Sabelo, I'm such an idiot."

Oh she is clever after all.

Me: "I said it first."

Rose: "I am sick of your stupid behaviour."

Is this Rose, raising her voice at me? I must be dreaming.

Me: "Do not talk to me like that Rose, I am your husband."

Rose: "Then start acting like one."

Did this woman just shout at me?

Me: "Do not leave your place wena...'

Rose: "Or what? What will you do?"

Me: "Are you challenging me?"

Rose: "No my dear husband."

I will smack that sarcasm out of her.

Rose: "I am simply telling you to step up as a man and make a plan, my children and I will not live like this."

Me: “You have a roof above your head, what more do you want woman?”

Rose: “You’re joking right?”

Me: “Unfortunately, I am not Trevor Noah.”

Rose cackles mockingly, I am shocked by her sudden confidence.

Rose: “This is exactly what I am talking about, you’re a joke Sabelo Zulu. You’re not serious about life, for years you sang about how you want your mother dead with no plan as to how you will pay for bills.”

Me: “I had a plan Rose, Bhekifa was my plan.”

She knows nothing about life and hustling? I have a PHD in hustling.

Rose: “Aaah!”

She falls into a series of laughter while clapping her hands like a damn penguin. I should take a video to show her how stupid she looks.

Rose: “This is what I mean, I am tired. Yes there was a time I thought sucking Bhekifa’s wallet was a good idea until it backfired.”

Me: “Hee baba, hee baba... What do you want from me hee?”

Rose: “Get a job, man up. You have children to fend for, my kids will not starve because their father can’t wear pants that fit him.”

Her insult is enough to throw me up, Rose staggers back when I take a threatening step toward her. Let her insult me further and she will be flying out the window without a broom.

Me: “Rose, how dare you.”

Rose: “Hai suka, I am giving you a week to get a job or else I will take my kids and leave you alone with your mother’s ghost.”

Me: “My mother’s ghost? You saw my mother’s ghost?”

Whoever said rolling your eyes is an answer is probably a drunkard, I hate it when women do that.

Rose: “One week Sabelo and make a plan to get the lights back. Now go wash the dishes, I’m going to bed.”

Rose pushes me aside right after snapping and strolls away, this is not my Rose. My Rose would never raise her voice at me.

Me: “Rose, where did you see the ghost?”

Wait! What? Forget Mariam the ghost, did that woman command me to wash the dishes.

Me: “Wena Rose, do I look like your mother’s washing machine?”

I trail her ugly steps, she will know me today.

NELLY PAGE...

Days have turned into gloomy weeks for my kids, Bhekifa hasn't tried to make any form of contact. The last I heard from him was when he called to tell me he will take them for the school holidays and for the life of me I cannot put the puzzle together as to why he can't speak to them via phone calls or WhatsApp.

He continues to distance himself from the kids.

Victor has become closed off, he hardly says a word and spends most of his time in his room. Ayanda talks back anyhow, I have lost the strength to discipline her. Raising kids is no child's play, I wish I was warned beforehand. This thing we call life can slap you in the face, dribble you and toss you aside, leaving you to pick up after yourself and start afresh.

"Nkatanga!"

Nkateko's voice jolts me back from my wandering mind into the dining room, I look up from the cup of coffee I was lost in, to give him a subtle weak smile. His eyes twitch with concern as he notices my depressed mood.

“I...I got this game for Victor.”

He holds me a box of the latest game Victor has been posting on his statuses for the past weeks, Nkateko holds on to the worried expression while waiting for an answer. I am aware that he hates talking about Bhekifa and will not bring the topic up even given a chance.

He stated that Bhekifa only makes us sad and we should avoid talking about him. It has been an impossible task, one I have been failing every single day. My ex-husband lives in my mind.

Me: “You didn’t have to babe.”

He sighs to showcase his disapproval, I have also come to know that Nkateko is a man of a few words. When it comes to things that do not concern his feelings for me, he doesn’t really express himself that much unless there is a need to do so.

Nkateko: “I wanted to and so I did.”

He pulls a chair beside me, and shifts a little bit closer. His muscular scent happily penetrates my nostrils and that alone causes a tingling sensation in my stomach.

Nkateko: “We might not be married, but in my heart your kids are mine and I want to give them the world.”

He means spoil them, two of them are already rebellious. The only thing they deserve is a hiding.

Me: “I know, but Vic has so many games. Moreover, he hasn’t been in his best behaviour. Giving him this would be like rewarding him for his mistakes.”

The sigh again, Nkateko shuts his eyes as he massages his temple. He seems a bit tense, he places the game on the table... sits back and crosses his hands.

Nkateko: “Did I ever tell you how my wife died?”

I only know he lost his wife on their honeymoon, I am surprised he is still alive. Had I been in his position, I would have died on the spot. I leisurely shake my head to answer his question. His eyes are intently fixated on mine, there is a longing in them. I also sense a need to protect and provide.

Nkateko: “She was kidnapped, I looked everywhere for her. I gave up my whole life to search for my wife, people thought I was crazy, but I didn’t care, I had to find her. By the time I did it was too late. We found her corpse, I wanted to die, but more than that I had a thirst for revenge. I lost myself trying to find

the people who killed her. When I met you, I was contemplating to take my life. I had failed her, I couldn't live knowing that. But Nelly, you unknowingly brought me back to life. Something about you pulled me out of that dark hovel I had fallen into, you saved me Nkatanga."

I am rendered speechless, what response do you give someone who has gone through so much in life and expresses himself in a way that leaves me breathless? Nkateko leans in and takes my hands into his, his eyes are still kept on mine.

Nkateko: "I owe you my life Nkatanga, let me do this please. Let me take care of you and the children, that's my goal in life."

How can I deny him this right? I take up a solitary nod, it puts a faint smile on his face. His lips meet the back of my hands... kisses that have shivers rippling through me.

Me: "I'm sorry you had to go through all that."

Nkateko shakes his head with finality, I know him enough now that he would rather not go into further detail. He has said what he wanted to say and this topic will never be visited again. Warmth bubbles through me when his hand gently slides up my cheek and he kisses it.

Nkateko: "Now let me do all the worrying, let me carry all your burdens."

Lord, that would be too much to ask.

Nkateko: "Do you trust me?"

His question comes just when I'm about to dispute, it takes me off the line I'm travelling on and pulls into his.

Me: "With my life."

His eyes light up, his arms swallow me. There is consolation in the way he holds me, a way only he knows.

Nkateko: "I've got you Nkatanga and I will never let you go."

Nkateko whispers in my ears and I tremble a little at the warmth of his breath on my skin.

Nkateko: "Let's go to bed, you've got work tomorrow."

He takes my hand and leads me to our room, perhaps it is time I let him help, maybe things might change for the good.

SABELO ZULU.

The award for the loneliest married man goes to Sabelo Zulu, this cannot be happening to me. Rose has become this person I

cannot recognise, she talks, walks and smells different. She has withdrawn herself from me, all for what? Eskom? Please... I am not familiar with the Gupta brothers, I would be rich if I were. I think my wife is possessed by my mother's spirit, this is the only logical explanation I can come up with.

I have spent weeks trying to figure out what her problem is, it can't only be that there is no electricity. I inwardly called her bluff when she was still here after that one week's notice she gave me... I don't want to be given funny looks, don't judge me please... I tried calling my brother for help, that big headed fool will not take my calls. I hope the devil is preparing the biggest fire for him in hell, I should send more wood there. I want it as hot as hell itself...

Bhekifa you will burn, the demons will braai you like the boerewors you are.

Look at this foolish woman I married, pretending to be sleeping. I should call her parents and get two cows back from them, their daughter thinks she paid for her own dowry.

Me: "Rose."

I call her softly, I should just slap that pantyhose off her big head. Nonsense... Rose thinks I am a fool, she is far from dreamland. This is the same woman who snores like a drunkard when she is fast asleep

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today she thinks she can fool me into thinking that she is sleeping.

Who knew sexual frustration can be frustrating? Rose and I haven't had sex since we buried Mariam, the woman is cold when I touch her. As far as I know, I did not marry a corpse. When it's time to go to Dubai, she just lies there, under me and lets me do all the work.

I'm up there, moaning and sweating alone, while the witch gives me a bored look. She doesn't even fake an orgasm, hell I'll take that over her, trampling on my ego. Hey I am a sexual man, my sex drive is high and requires me to be with a partner who is active not a rock.

Me: "Rose, salt is killing me."

Woman I know you are awake... her back is facing me, the blanket is pulled up to her neck and her body is as stiff as the

pap she usually cooks. I extend a hand to shake her, she knows what I want when I do this.

Me: "Rose come on, I'm dying here. You're not cruel enough to let me go to bed like this?"

Desperation belongs in hell, can't believe I'm begging my own wife for sex.

Rose: "Don't you dare touch me, Sabelo Zulu."

She spits, bitterness dripping like acid in her voice. I knew the witch was awake, Mariam reincarnate.

Me: "Why are you doing this to me?"

Rose: "I'm not in the mood."

Her voice is cold and unwelcoming.

Me: "That's what you say every night."

Rose better not be cheating on me, I will burn her alive I swear to God.

Me: "Is there someone else Rose? Are you cheating on me?"

I make sure there is conviction in my voice, I don't sugar-coat things. No one has time for that, I tell it like it is.

Me: "I asked you a question, are you sleeping around?"

Rose jolts up from the bed, she faces me with a furrowed brow.

Rose: "How could you ask me that?"

How could I not?

I sit up as well so we face each other man to man, since she wants to act like a guy.

Me: "You are mine Rose, your body is mine. I saw it, I bought it and now I own it."

She rolls her eyes. Somebody borrow me an Okapi, there are ugly eyes I need to pluck out.

Rose: "Oh believe me, Sabelo. If I were cheating on you, you would know."

She smirks at me without a trace of humour in her face, what in Mariam's house is going on?

Rose: "Nonsense."

I see, so I get Mariam's house and Rose gets her tongue click. Wonders shall never end... shock swamps me when my wife leaves our bedroom and bangs the door behind her. Where is she going to sleep? My life cannot get any worse than this.

BHEKIFA ZULU.

Mornings tend to be depressing, for some reason my life seems to be travelling in a path I am not comfortable with. I can't point out what it could be, however my heart feels heavy.

My office line rings, I told this boy I don't want to be disturbed. Work has been hectic lately, I had two seniors in my team resign. Now I'm left with a whole load of work, H.R hasn't found any replacements yet.

Me: "What is it? I told you not to disturb me today."

"There is someone here to see you, sir."

Me: "Do they have an appointment?"

"N- No sir, he says you might be interested in talking to him. He knows your ex-wife."

The secretary's words throw me in a pool of curiosity.

Me: "Name?"

"Mr. Mathebula."

I should have known, the nerve of that man to invade my space.

Me: "Let him in."

I disconnect the call and wait in anticipation, two seconds barely pass and there is a knock at my door. I sit back on the swivel chair and shout that he comes in. Nkateko Mathebula, funny how my enemy has found his way to me. I never thought I would see this day.

He takes a few steps in, shuts the door and arrogantly makes his way towards my office desk. Our eyes do not leave each other, we are like two bulls ready to fight for a throne.

Nkateko: "Zulu."

A cold smirk is drawn on his lips as he stabs daggers at me.

Me: "Mathebula."

I return the indifference with a deadpan voice, my mind cannot fathom what he must be doing here. The fact that he stands in my office with his hands arrogantly shoved in the pockets of his pants pisses me off, I will not stand such impudence.

SABELO ZULU.

Musa Mseleku must be my twin, the man was clever enough to get himself more than one wife. I had that thought before I

married Rose and I have no idea how I decided to stick to one woman. Today I am paying for my stupidity, the woman I call my wife has just tossed a plate of shit in front of me. Jesus himself would dismiss this abomination.

Me: "What's going on?"

She gives me a confused look while settling down on the opposite chair, Rose is good at pretending.

Rose: "What do you mean?"

Me: "Don't act stupid, what is this on my plate?"

Rose: "Bread and peanut butter."

Me: "Bread and peanut butter, Rose? You have the liver to open your mouth and say this to me. A whole insult Rose?"

Rose: "You asked what it is and I told you the truth hau."

Me: "Why am I eating bread and peanut butter for breakfast? How will this thing pass down my throat? Do you know this is murder Rose? Are you trying to kill me?"

Rose: "What are you talking about? What murder?"

Me: "Yey mfazi (woman) I said this is murder man. Do you know how dry this thing is? Okay I see, this is your plan. You want to kill me because you found someone, didn't you Rose?"

Rose: "Oh please Sabelo, the reason you are having bread with peanut butter is because there is no electricity."

Argh! That again...

Me: "That is no excuse, you're a woman. Couldn't you set a fire outside and made me a full English breakfast."

She laughs, this woman's new found bravery irks me.

Rose: "I would go that far if you would pick up your socks and get a dam job."

Wow... I called it... my wife has been possessed by my mother's demon.

Me: "A damn what? Is this how you talk to me now?"

Rose: "What? You thought I would be your slave until when? I am not the idiot you and your mother thought I was."

Me: "Oh I see, so I have been sleeping with a snake all this while. Umamlambo Rose, scratch that... so it was you who gave Eve the forbidden fruit. Bawo! What have I gotten myself into?"

Rose: "You can insult me all you want, I don't care. Ok'salayo you have to get a job. I'm not playing with you, Sabelo."

Says the woman who is still here after weeks of living in darkness.

Me: "I don't do games Rose and I don't like your tone. I will smack that ring out of your finger."

She snatches my plate and throws the food in the bin along with the plate.

Rose: "Make your own food, useless man."

She clicks her tongue again, I am losing my mind. My jaw drops as I watch her confidently walk out of the house, I need to do something. Rose is slipping out of my hands.

CHERYL ZIKHALI.

Sabelo has been ringing the doorbell for the past twenty minutes, I would have opened for him if I wasn't enjoying the desperate look on his face. Perhaps I should see what brings him to his brother's house, poor guy is tanned from standing under the sun. I meet his angry eyes as I open the door and the urge to grin wins over my humanity.

Me: "Well, well, well. Look what the devil dragged in."

Sabelo: "I want to see my brother."

Me: "Just like that? No hi Cheryl... How did you survive the attack Cheryl?"

I throw the shocking news at him and get just the reaction I projected, he looks like a deer caught in headlights.

Sabelo: "W- Why would I ask you that? I don't care about you, woman I don't even know you."

His words throw me into a fit of laughter, Sabelo Zulu is one interesting man.

Me: “How does it feel to be half a man Sabelo? Do you even sleep well at night, knowing you ambushed a defenceless woman and left her to die?”

Sabelo: “What are you talking about? Have you lost your mind?”

I knew a coward like him would deny everything.

Me: “I recognised your voice that day, you know? You were there Sabelo, you and your friends cornered a helpless woman. I should get you arrested.”

Sabelo: “Then go ahead, what proof do you have?”

Me: “Oh sir, I’m a woman. That is all the proof I need, but don’t stress. I am not as cruel as your dead mother, believe it or not, I have a heart. I had to lie to your brother and pretend that I didn’t know who my attackers were.”

Sabelo sneeringly scoffs, the bastard should be worshiping the ground I walk on.

Sabelo: “So, what do you want from me? A star? I’m not going to thank you Cheryl, you stole my brother from us.”

He’s a funny guy.

Me: “I stole your brother, or your source of income?”

Sabelo is stung by the words that happily leave my mouth, he's not as daunting as he was when his mother was around.

Sabelo: "Tell my brother I want to see him, he is not taking my calls."

Me: "Bhekifa will never take your calls, even if you were dying. You're useless to him."

Sabelo: "Yey wena, I said call my brother now."

Dogs with no teeth are the ones that bark the most, I don't appreciate him raising his voice at me.

Me: "Nc nc nc, calm down spot. You might choke on your own spit, we don't want you following mommy now, do we?"

He takes steps closer, his bloodshot eyes are emotionless. The look sends cold shivers down my spine. He reeks of alcohol, as if he has been swimming in a bottle of beer. I swallow a large lump down my throat and step away from him.

Sabelo: "One day is one day Cheryl, you are going to pay for this. I swear on my mother's grave, you are going to pay for this. Listen to me, you bitch. Make sure you sleep with one eye open, I am coming for you."

He shouts as he pushes me back, causing me to stagger a few steps.

Sabelo: "I am coming for you Cheryl, and you won't know when I hit."

My heart responds to the call of fear. I open my mouth to speak, but the deadly look he gives me pushes the words back. I breathe a sigh of relief when he marches out of the compound, the bastard leaves the gate open. What the hell was that about?

-BHEKIFA ZULU.

His eyes roam around my office, there is arrogance in the way he observes the space, a mocking expression on his face.

Me: "To what do I owe this visit?"

He glares with a raised eyebrow, before smirking.

Nkateko: "I came to see how a small boy is coping in a big man's world."

His eyes rise and fall on my build, as he disgustingly glares at me.

Me: "Excuse me?"

Nketekeo: "Oh look, you're even wearing a big man's shoes."

Me: "Who do you think you are?"

Nkateko: "I am Nelly's protector."

He cuts my speech short, I see how his jaw clenches in a manly manner. I refuse to be intimidated by the likes of this jerk. His answer has me laughing softly with a hint of mockery in my voice.

Me: "I see, so my ex-wife sent you here."

I put emphasis on 'my' to have him raise his eyebrow again. I wonder how far they can go, he seems to be the daunting type. I am not fazed nor am I dazed by his demeanour.

Nkateko: "Unlike you, Zulu I don't hide behind skirts."

I could kill this bastard... I hardly take offence. But with the way this man is going, I could be swimming in it seconds.

Me: "Are you insulting me, Mathebula?"

He shakes his head, I haven't met anyone as annoying as this man who is dauntingly standing before me.

Nkateko: "Just stating facts Zulu."

He grits his teeth as he spits venom in my face, God help me if I do not kill this son of a gun.

Me: "Why are you here?"

Nkateko: "To talk, man to... boy."

That's it, I won't stand here and take his insults. To hell with what happens next, I grab him by his fancy shirt and pin him on the wall. He doesn't flinch nor does he show any fear. He is audacious and uncanny, the stance he holds has me feeling weak; like I am not man enough.

Me: "Wipe that grin off your face Mathebula, I am not one to mess with."

I growl like an angry animal, Mathebula remains unshaken.

Nkateko: "I guess we have something in common Zulu, I too am not one to mess with. My family is hurting because of you."

The last line surges out of his mouth in bolts of anger, he pushes me hard enough for my feet to embarrass me. I manage to stop myself from stumbling back, with fire in my eyes, I scowl at the man threatening my manhood. He stands with straight shoulders, a clamped jaw and puckered brows.

I have to compose myself, lest he sees that his disgusting presence suddenly intimidates the shit out of me.

Me: "I do not know your family Mathebula."

He better not be talking about my kids. A smirk cracks on his lips. He tilts his head as he scrutinises me under his blazing gaze.

Nkateko: "Of course I would expect this from you."

The tone of his voice mocks me, I fight the urge to retaliate.

Nkateko: "Is this why you haven't been to see your children? You have forgotten that you're a father Zulu? A man your age? How embarrassing."

Me: "Do you have a death wish Mathebula? How dare you claim my children as your own."

Exasperation washes over me, it has me yelling at him. Anger decides to badge in and that pushes me to the limit that I smash my hands on his chest. Nkateko tumbles a step back, his frowns... almost sending me to the grave with a deadly glare, probably lent it from the devil on his way here.

Nkateko: "I didn't claim anyone Zulu, those kids do not have a father. I stepped in, unfortunately, you have been imprinted in their hearts. If I could, I swear to my ancestors, I would rip you out of their hearts."

Me: "Is that why you're with my wife?"

He chuckles coldly and regards me with a glare that dubs me stupid.

Nkateko: "Now, who is claiming? Nelly is not your wife."

If there is anything I hate, is someone raising their voice at me... I get into his personal space, ready for anything he might bring to the table.

Me: "Nelly is my..."

Nkateko: "Nelly..."

His voice rises above mine as he interjects.

Nkateko: "... is nothing to you. You gave up on her and the children, do you remember that Bhekifa?"

He's pushing me back as he yells in my face, I don't know why I haven't punched the living daylights out of him.

Nkateko: "You're a coward

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what kind of man neglects his children?"

Me: "You know nothing about me."

Words of anger leave my mouth, a bitter taste remains in my tongue. I hate to admit that he is right.

Nkateko: "You're right, however, I know that you are the only father those kids know. I know that they are suffering without you. They blame themselves for you abandoning them. You're not there Zulu, I'm the one who has to wipe their tears. I'm the one who deals with their tantrums. I'm the one who has to build their self-esteem and assure them that they are not at fault. Dammit! You're an asshole."

Me: "Watch your words Mathebula."

I bark to have him smirk at me with pure disgust before chuckling in disbelief.

Nkateko: "Is that all you picked up from everything I said? An insult?"

I don't know if this man's plan is to make me angry, if it is then it is working.

Nkateko: "Clearly this was a waste of time, you're far gone Zulu and I hope by the time you decide to look back, your kids will still be around."

He exclaims, disgustingly glaring at every inch that I am. I clench my jaw as his words hit me like pebbles of reality. I have no come back for him. All I can entertain are diabolical thoughts, the fact that we are breathing the same air.

The world is too small for both of us Mathebula, we keep on stepping on each other's shoes and I cannot have that.

The man regards me with one black look before he haughtily sashays out of my office.

I suggest you get off that high horse Mathebula, before you come crashing down.

The words dance around my brain as I feel anger and unfathomable hatred arouse from my deepest core.

NELLY PAGE.

“Nkatanga.” My heart hitches at the sound of his voice, only he can calm me down. My mind is working overtime, wandering everywhere like a lost soul.

Me: “Victor was involved in a fight, I’m on my way to his school.”

While busy at work, I received a call from Victor’s principal. Apparently he beat some kid from his class. What is happening to my son is above me, disciplining him is not working either. I

have thought of sending him to his father, a month or two would heal his broken heart. Victor not only resents his father, but everyone around him.

Nkateko: "I'll meet you there."

Me: "It's okay I've got this."

Nkateko: "We spoke about this Nelly."

He hardly calls me Nelly, I should stop pissing him off. His patience is being tested, I keep pulling his strings.

Me: "Okay, I'm almost there. I'll see you just now."

The line goes dead. That's odd, the man didn't bid his goodbyes. I step on it and mentally cross my fingers not to run into the traffic cops. Those people are masters in ruining people's days.

Finally I get to the school and park outside, the guard lets me in after I tell him who I am. The school is pretty strict, they don't allow visitors during school hours.

The grounds are empty, there is not a single soul outside. As I enter the principal's office, my eyes collide with Victor's. He has a cut lip and a black eye, this boy will drive me into an early

grave. I didn't raise him to be violent. There's a boy seated beside him, he is just as bruised as my son.

"Ms. Magwaza."

Mrs. Khanyile greets, I smile in return and shake the hand that's extended to me.

Me: "I am sorry about my son, ma'am."

I chastise Victor with an icy glare while giving the principal a heartfelt apology.

"Please take a sit Miss, we are waiting for Sam's parents. They have been informed as well."

Sam must be the tiny timid boy seated next to Victor, he drops his eyes when I regard him with an apologetic stare, he looks a bit shaky. How did Victor gather the courage to corner such a delicate petite boy? He better not be becoming like his father, or I will thrash every Zulu cell out of him.

Victor raises his head to see me glancing at Sam with pity, his eyes disgustingly paint Sam from head to toe. My son takes up a tongue click and shifts his chair away from Sam who doesn't bother to raise his eyes, he is like a puppy drenched in rain.

Me: “What happened, Mrs. Khanyile?”

The door opens just as I lay a question at the table, a tall large man walks in. His eyes immediately run to the little boy, he hurries to him and starts inspecting his face, concern and care enveloping him.

“Is it painful?” A menacing baritone voice fills all corners of the principal’s office. Sam nods, that has the big man cupping his bruised face.

“I don’t want to see tears in your eyes Samuel, you’re a big boy.”

Again Sam nods, is this how he disciplines the boy? I can already see my belt at home, it’s in the top drawer, ready to taste some flesh.

I will show Victor his mother today.

The door creaks open, putting an end to my agitation, my heart does a funny dance when Nkateko walks in. A ghost of a smile stretches on his lips as our eyes meet, he sees Victor and his face instantly dries up.

“Your sons were fighting in class in front of the teacher, Victor is the one who provoked Sam.”

The principal explains after the two men have settled down.

“We don’t condone bullying at the school, I’m sorry ma’am, but I will have to suspend Victor.”

Victor: “That is not fair, he started it.”

Victor growls from behind us, my son has become insolent, to say the very least.

Me: “Shut up, she is not talking to you.”

Victor: “Mom, you don’t understand.”

Heaven this child you gave me is testing my patience, if I react, you will see him sooner than you expected.

Victor: “This faggot... has been staring at me.”

Jehovah, take the wheel. Whose child is he?

Nkateko: “Victor!”

Nkateko scolds him as he jumps to his feet, Victor is not fazed whatsoever. His anger does not waver, nor does his furrowed brow fade.

Victor: “I didn’t say anything wrong, he is gay. Let him show you the pictures he has of me on his phone.”

Victor is on his feet now, pointing a finger at Sam and shouting as loud as he can. I feel like a fool and embarrassed beyond anything. Sam's father is composed, not once has he turned to glance at the rude boy who has the audacity to disrespect his son.

Victor: "I am disgusted by him and everything he is, the way he kept looking at me in class, I let it go for months, thinking he will stop. I'm not sorry for what I did and I would do it again.

Why can't he be a kid again? Why can't he be as sweet as caramel like his other brothers. This ninth grader wants to act like an adult? I will have to show him his place.

Me: "Victor, do you hear yourself? I want you to apologise to Sam and his father now."

Victor: "No!"

Did this child just... Victor needs a belt, talking to him is like pouring water on an elephant's back.

Khanyile: "This kind of behaviour is unacceptable."

The principal voices and that has Victor maliciously smirking at Sam who still refuses to face any of us in the room.

Victor: "You see Samantha? Your behaviour is not natural, even the principal agrees with me."

He mocks the boy, letting me down once more. I am shook by the arrogance in Victor's tone.

Khanyile: "I was talking about you, Victor."

Victor: "But I didn't do anything."

Me: "Will you shut up and listen? You've caused enough damage already."

"I would like to take my son, if we are done here."

Sam's father suggests, he has been way too quiet. He must be the kind that sways away from quarrels. The principal nods.

There is silence as the father takes his son by the hand and ushers him out.

Me: I promise you Mrs. Khanyile, this will not go unpunished."

I mean it, I don't know my son to be homophobic. We are all going through something, but we don't take it out on other people.

—

NELLY PAGE.

Victor drove home with Nkateko, I would have killed him if he travelled with me. That's how angry I am, I had to cancel my appointments for today to accommodate my son. I got home five minutes ago, they are not here yet. Nkateko is too much sometimes, he probably took the boy out for ice cream. I will have to have a talk with him, he is too soft on Victor.

That boy needs to know he was wrong, he needs to be punished for his bad decisions. God forbid that there comes a time when I have to bail him out of prison.

I'm home alone, the other kids are still at school. I want to tell my mother about what happened, however, stressing my parents is not a good idea.

Impatience keeps me company as seconds turn to minutes, before I know it, an hour has gone by. Nkateko is not taking my calls, neither is Victor. I tried chastising my anger and failed miserably, my thoughts are centred on Sam. What his father must be feeling to know that his son is being bullied for who he is, I would need to properly apologize to them.

It's not long after an hour has gone by when I hear Nkateko's car pull up outside, the urge to meet them half way arises. But I choose to sit it out, Nkateko had asked that I trust him, this is the test... his parenting could be better than mine.

The front door opens, they walk in side by side. Nkateko has his arm draped around the shameless boy's shoulder, shameless because he is failing to look up at me. I rise from my seat, my eyes meeting Nkateko's worried gaze.

I'm given a gentle smile, it's assuring me that things are okay. Not from where I am standing though, not according to the anger inside me and the urge to thrash that boy like the child he is. With a belt hidden behind me, I call him over.

Me: "Come here."

Victor glances at Nkateko, then back at me, hesitation playing at his face. Nkateko nods and this is when my son moves, his steps are faltered, probably by the impassive look on my face. Yeah, be very afraid my boy. Mommy didn't like what you did.

Me: "What do you have to say for yourself?"

Victor: "I didn't do anything wrong."

Me: "Victor, I am giving you one more chance to tell me why you beat that child up."

Fear takes flight in his eyes, his jaw clenches and I am instantly reminded of his father's rudeness.

Victor: "He started it, he thinks I'm gay mom. I hate the way he looks at me, who knows what disgusting things go on in his mind when he's looking at me or my pictures?"

Me: "Is that enough reason to beat him up? Couldn't you talk to him like a civilised person and tell him how you feel? Victor, since when are you this violent person?"

By the look in his eyes, he is wondering what I have hidden behind me. Boy keep provoking me and you will just have to find out sooner.

Victor: "I had to fight for my honour, I had to prove to my friends that I am not gay. Everyone knows that Sam doesn't have balls, he..."

The belt lands on his thigh before I know it. I grab him as he tries to run and trash him a few more times.

Victor: "Mom stop, stop."

This is nothing, I'm not even exerting that much power.

Me: “You’re a... child... and... will act... like one...”

Victor: “I’m sorry mom... I’m sorry...Please... stop.”

He cries.

Me: “You better be sorry.”

I chide the boy as I continue beating him, silent cries sashay from his mouth. He staggers back when I let go, head dropped and hands rubbing away the pain.

Me: “You’re grounded until I’m satisfied with your punishment. No TV, no games and no phone.”

Shock takes over his facial features, it has his eyes widening. But he seems to be too afraid to speak out.

Me: “I want you to go to your room and think of an apology you’re going to give Sam.”

He runs to his room, the entirety of my body bubbles with guilt. There’s a sting in my heart, no mother wants to exert pain on their kids.

My eyes run to Nkateko across the room, he’s standing with his arms across his chest. Brows raised and a blank expression on his face. Nevertheless, I am glad that he didn’t interfere. Victor needed to be scolded and disciplined, it is for his own good.

Me: “Where did you go?”

Nkateko: “I took him out for ice cream...”

Why am I not surprised? He stands behind me, enfolds his arms around my waist and rests his chin on my shoulder when he sees me pouting, complaints ready to explode from my chest.

Me: “You rewarded the boy for beating up someone’s son?”

Nkateko: “Come on Nkatanga.”

He speaks like a child, it can only mean he knows that sometimes I am not fond of his way of parenting.

Nkateko: “I saw the way you looked at him before we left the school, I wanted to give you time to cool off.”

Well, you’d be shocked by how upset I still am. I restrain my thoughts, the last thing I want is to fight with this man.

Me: “He messed up Nkateko.”

Nkateko: “I know my love, believe me, I wasn’t rewarding him. I needed to have a word with him.”

His arms loosen around me

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he takes my hand and guides me to the couch. The clingy side of him comes to play, I’m made to sit on his lap. His arms are back around my waist, tightly holding me. Nkateko knows how

to play this game, the kisses he's placing on my neck are evidence. All the anger passes away, my body falls into relaxation.

Nkateko: "Victor is a teenager, their emotions are everywhere. They feel so many things at the same time, it's normal that he acts like this. You don't discipline a child by belting them, they become worse."

Me: "Are you saying I shouldn't have beat him up?"

Nkateko: "No Nkatanga, our ways of parenting are different. You are his mother hence I didn't stop you from disciplining him, but corporal punishment should not always be the way out. Times have changed. Victor is sorry for what he did."

That's all I want. Victor should be glad Sam's parents are not pressing charges, at least that's what I hope. If they do though, I am not bailing anyone out of prison. I don't have money to waste. Nkateko's arms tighten around me, his clinginess is too much lately.

Nkateko: "You know I didn't get a kiss from you today."

He says as if he gets kisses from someone else as well, I turn my head to find him pouting and his forehead creased. It's adorable and funny at the same time. I find myself pressing my

lips against his, trust Nkateko to deepen the kiss. I know he is trying to make me forget Victor's disobedience.

-VICTOR.

The boy is not okay with how things have gone down for him, the humiliation Sam caused him cannot be forgiven so easily. As he lays in bed, the pain from his mother's belt reminding him of what Sam has put him through; Victor can only think diabolical thoughts.

Fifteen and too tall for his age, Victor has always been the heartthrob at his school. His physique got him attention from both boys and girls, Victor only paying attention to the girls. Is it too soon to say he is his father's son?

Sam came like an unexpected hurricane, it was during a free period in class when a friend of Victor spotted Sam adorably admiring Bhekifa's first born.

“Hey Sam.” Victor’s friend called, his voice so loud that the entire class fell into utter silence. Sam inquisitively turned his eyes towards the boy.

“Like what you see?” The boy continued with what his mind was withholding, throwing Sam into a seat of confusion. The class immediately understood what the drama was about as they had caught Sam staring at the Zulu boy countless times before. The class burst into laughter. Sam could only look away, but as he did that, his eyes met Victor’s and that’s when Sam turned beet red.

The sight of Sam blushing aggravated Victor who always suspected Sam being gay, Victor was low key disgusted by him as well.

Poor Sam was oblivious to what he was doing, he didn’t plan to glance at Victor. His eyes were just undisciplined, although Sam had tried not to stare, he would find himself staring.

“Victor, you have an admirer boy. Have you seen the pictures he has of you on his phone?” His friend teased and that only fuelled Victor’s anger.

“I bet he kisses them before going to bed at night.” Another one of Victor’s friends joined in, they became class clowns. The noise was a norm for the teacher, hence his silence.

Victor though, hated being the centre of attention, but mostly he is not a fan of homosexuals. He and his friends found it rather unnatural, it angered him that Sam had the nerve to adore him. To gain his dignity back, Victor found a need to retaliate. In a fit of rage, he kicked his chair and marched towards Sam. He tackled the boy who didn't see him coming, the class screamed in excitement as witnessing a fight riled them up like a toddler high on sugar.

Sam did not have the strength to fight the big boy who had straddled him, the punches fell on Sam's face like hailstones. The only defence Sam knew was covering his face, but that didn't seem to get Victor to stop. The small boy swung his hands, hoping to maybe hit the target. That's when he punched Victor's eye and elbowed his lip, the fight was stopped by two teachers who pulled Victor from an injured Sam.

The memory is still fresh in Victor's head, he hates that his mother didn't give him a chance to explain. Anger doesn't begin to describe what he feels, the teenage boy is angry at the world... his parents... and Sam for humiliating him.

That's what his ignorant mind has convinced him, he did not bother to investigate Sam's side of the story, but rather acted like a hooligan.

Victor's phone buzzes from under his pillow, he sends his hand to fish for it. Thinking he won't have access to his phone anymore is infuriating, his mother lives up to her promises. She will confiscate his favourite gadget... Calm down Victor, surely you can survive without a mobile.

"I heard you got suspended, sorry boy." A text reads, it is from the same friend who started the whole mess.

"Yeah, I hate my life." That's Victor's response.

No, there is no way he will tell his friend that his mother showed him flames.

"You can't let this go Vic, you need to do something about that faggot." The friend texts back, planting inhumane thoughts in Victor's head. Victor loves what his mind has just relayed to him, he smirks at the idea.

That is quite an evil smirk for a fifteen year old, don't you think Vic?

"I have a plan." Victor nods in satisfaction as he presses send... This is going to be fun... he thinks to himself.

VICTOR.

It's a month after the school incident, a month after Victor was suspended... a month after his supposed humiliation, a month after his mother embarrassed him in front of the man he has grown to adore as a father; and Victor has not healed. His raging heart still yearns for revenge, the boy is restless and he is most certain that the only way he will be at ease is when he has tasted the sweetness of revenge.

His plan is in motion as of the moment, his naïve teenage; pea sized brain has convinced him that this is the right thing to do, he is convinced that everything will go back to normal after.

Being grounded is not fun, lil Vicky is bored to sin. The walls of his room seem to be closing in on him, he is not allowed to go anywhere. The only time he goes out of his room is during breakfast, lunch and supper. His siblings try to cheer their big brother up by visiting him in his room, but grumpy Zulu is never up for company. He shoos his siblings away as if they are mere flies.

The disrespect of treating your blood like they have been feasting in sh't.

Spare the rod, spoil a child; years later and this proverb is working wonders, it is too late to bend this child. It is hard as a rock and stubborn as a mull.

Something buzzes from under Victor's pillow, he jumps from his back and immediately snatches the device. Yes, the young lad has a cell phone; thanks to his little brother who lent him his phone without their mother's knowledge.

"Love, are you there." his eyes read the WhatsApp text...

Victor grins in annoyance, it is followed by an arrogant huff. He glares at his phone, clicks his tongue and throws the phone on the bed before laying back down. He is in no mood to respond to this person.

It's been a month since he approached Sam on line. Let's not get overexcited just yet. Victor is catfishing the poor boy. Goes by a different name and sent reticent Sam pictures of someone else. The duo have been chatting day and night, confessed love to each other. Oh, how gullible can teenagers be?

Victor's heart is not in any of this, this is a wicked plan to get what he wants.

Selfish little sh't.

Victor jumps from the bed, growling in annoyance and stomps his foot a couple of times on the floor when his phone notifies for the second time. Funny how he can't help himself, curiosity is always close by, compelling him to open the text.

"Love, I miss you. Please talk to me, we haven't spoken the whole day." Victor rolls his eyes after reading the message, he is disgusted with himself for entertaining Sam's longing heart but mostly, with Sam for finding males attractive. He takes a deep breath to grace himself before replying to the text.

"Sorry love, I had a busy day today." Victor's fingers heavily type more lies as they have been doing the past weeks.

The two chat back and forth, they agree to meet this very night, even if it is just for a second. One party is excited while the other grows anxious, revenge calling out his name. Like he has been doing every day since the love affair began, Victor takes a screen shot of their chats and sends them to the group chat his friends opened. The boys share series of laughs, all in Sam's expense.

"Let the games begin." Bhekifa's son whispers to himself, a smirk he inherited from the devil, playing at his lips.

Time seems to be going slow for Sam, counting the minutes is not working for him. He is glad though that Stephen has been keeping him company. Sam hasn't told anyone about the boy he met on line, Stephen Tsilo. The boy who has won his heart in a space of a month.

"Baby get off your phone, food is ready."

A female voice calls from behind his bedroom door, Sam is so engrossed on his phone that he has become oblivious to his surroundings.

"Samuel."

A woman peeks through the door, her brows knit at the sight of her son laying on the bed and blushing at the phone in his hand. He is typing so fast a network engineer would have a hard time keeping up.

"Yes mom." Sam says as he briefly lifts his head from the pillow.

"Dinner is ready, come and eat."

"I'm not hungry yet mom."

Oh Sammy, didn't mommy teach you to sit up when adults are talking to you?

Mom finds it hopeless in arguing with her son, so she turns to walk out. But Sam calls her before she closes the door.

"Mom, can I go out for a few minutes?"

"It's late baby." She is not okay with this, kids go missing every day. Although Sam is in the ninth grade, he is still her son and mothers tend to be very protective of their sons.

"Please mom, I promised Naledi I will accompany her to buy kota." (Bunny chow)

Sam sits up from the bed, he gives his mother his famous puppy eyes and a little pout. There is no way she can say no to that look, besides, it's barely 8pm, streets are probably buzzing with people. Naledi is a childhood friend, a good girl. She and Sam have done this before, gallivanted around the neighbourhood at night.

Sam's mother gives in, nodding to the request. She gives an excited Sam a curfew before walking out. The timid boy's heart is leaping with joy, he will finally meet his Stephen. The one he calls love.

-NELLY PAGE

“Mom wake up.”

Ayanda almost gives me a fright, shaking me back to the real world. She is standing in the dark, her face unclear under the dimmed room. I turn the side lamp on to find my baby in tears, the light is enough to wake Nkateko.

Me: “What happened baby? Why are you crying?”

She sits on the edge of the bed and I pull her closer to comfort her.

Ayanda: “Victor is not home, I saw him leave the house when I was going to the bathroom. He said not to tell you, but I’m scared. I think he is going to do something bad.”

How did I not see this? He was doing so well. Panic takes over, it’s so late at night. Where could Victor have possibly gone?

Nkateko: “Did he say something to you?”

I’m on my feet changing into comfortable clothes when Nkateko questions Ayanda, his worried gaze occasionally runs to me.

Ayanda: “I heard him talking about someone, he said they don’t deserve to breathe the same air as him.”

Nkateko: “Okay my love, thank you for letting us know. We’re going to look for your brother, okay?”

Ayanda nods, wiping her tears away.

Me: “Go back to bed baby, I’ll wake you up when your brother gets here.”

The moment she walks out, a heavy sigh bubbles out of my mouth. I am exhausted, I have run out of ways to discipline Victor. He should set a good example for his siblings, but he chooses to become a nuisance.

My eyes follow Nkateko as he hurries to the closet, he picks out a pair of olive green track pants and a matching jersey. Worry displayed on his face.

Me: “Where could he have gone at this time?”

Nkateko: “He could be with friends, boys his age...”

Me: “I don’t want to hear it Nkateko, enough making excuses for that boy.”

My voice is finger pointing, I don’t mean to. Then again, Victor has gotten away with so much and the path he is taking will lead him to nothing but distraction.

Nkateko: "That's not what I'm doing Nkatanga, you need to calm down. I doubt Victor would try anything stupid."

Me: "I hope you're right, or else I won't spare him this time."

Nkateko vows silence, I follow him to the car. I don't know where we are going to start, maybe we will spot Victor while driving around. If I knew his friends, I would call them.

"Meet me at the school hall" That's what the message had said.

Sam is right on time. His stomach is in knots, palms sweaty and heart drumming against his ribcage. Breaking the rules is not something he would do, he has always been a good boy both at school and at home. What the heck? Breaking the rules for love can't be considered a crime, right?

"Hello." Sam calls as he walks into the empty hall, lights are out. His eyes can't see much. Fear tugs at his heart, something suddenly doesn't feel right. However Sam can't conjure up the

courage to turn around and leave, his mind and heart wrestle, he is caught in the middle.

He is conflicted, he wants to meet the young man who captured his heart in this little space of time. Also, he wants to be home, safe under his parent's wings. His feet have not dared to move, he stands rigid, waiting for whatever. Stephen would never lie to him, Sam believes that much. The mysterious Stephen managed to creep his way into Sam's heart.

A blue light goes on, revealing a romantic dinner setting in the middle of the spacious hall. Sam's eyes twinkle with wonder and pure joy, he knows this is Stephen's hand. From Sam's knowledge, Stephen is a romantic.

A shadow of a tall figure emerges from a corner, causing Sam's eyes to stand at attention and his ears perk up for any possible sounds lest the person is not who he's meeting. Not that he would point him out in the dark.

"Stephen?" Sam is the first to speak as the tall figure slowly approaches, he is tall and big boned... Sam's type, he is perfect. From a distance

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Sam can see the person is wearing a black masquerade (theatrical mask). His lips and eyes are the only thing on show.

“Love.” The person replies as soon as he is at earshot, his voice is masked so perfectly that Sam would not recognize it. Sam’s heart falls into ease, only one person calls him love and that is his Stephen.

“Hi love, why are you wearing a mask?” Sam questions the young man who is now towering over him.

“I’m nervous I guess, I’m afraid you might not really like me.” Ahh! The boy planned this very well, his tongue is perfectly tamed that no trace of lies are spotted in it.

“Okay, but I’ve seen your pictures. You’re handsome love, I like your face.” Sam shyly retorts, eyes cast down and lips folded in a suppressed smile.

“I know, but I’m comfortable with this.” The masked boy gives a quick reply, Sam frowns in confusion. He has waited for so long to see Stephen and now he can only catch half of him that’s all.

“Mmmhh.” Sam hums and pouts, it’s adorable and cute and... gosh, Stephen almost wonders how another boy could look so adorable.

“Tell you what?” Stephen brushes the uncomfortable thought out of his head as he comes up with a solution to erase possible

doubt clawing at Sam's head. "Next time, I won't wear a mask. I promise." His voice is ever so soft and soothing to Sam's heart.

The timid boy melts and nods like a kid offered candy. Stephen takes Sam's hand, he can't hide the fact that it's the most uncomfortable feeling he has ever known. Regardless, he leads Sam to the table where everything is set, from food to flowers.

Sam is smitten, whipped and mesmerised by his Stephen. They eat while conversing, a fairy tale is how Sam would describe this moment. Throughout the meal, his eyes cannot help but wander to the lips of the boy seated opposite him. He would love to taste them, even a mere brush would do.

It is in the blink of an eye when the tall boy plays a slow song from his phone, he offers his hand to a smitten Sam.

"Dance with me, love." The charming young man murmurs, it is loud enough to send shivers down Sam's spine. Sam takes the hand offered to him, the two create their own dance floor and begin to move slowly to the song.

If dreams ever come true then this is one for Sam, not in his wildest dreams did he ever think love would find him at an early age.

Thank the heavens, thank the stars, thank the universe or whoever is responsible for this moment. Feeling needy and

clingy, Sam moves closer and buries his head on the tall boy's chest.

"I'm so happy love, you make me happy. Thank you for this." Sam sings, while his heart dances with joy. The boy does not give a reply, his body tenses although his arms are around Sam.

"I want to kiss you." The tall boy softly declares and that creates butterflies in Sam's stomach. His eyes widen as he tries to grasp what has been said to him, eagerly, Sam nods agreeing to the sweet request.

"Close your eyes." Stephen orders, Sam trusts him, perhaps with his life and so he does as he is told. A smirk plays on Stephen's lips. "Don't open them okay, no matter what."

This puts a curious smile on Sam's lips; nevertheless, he says, "I trust you."

And oh boy, Stephen is happy about this.

"I'm going to let go, okay? I need you to pout for me love, I love your pouted lips."

Sam does as told, because love is blind and maybe stupid as well. We can go for pandemic... love is a pandemic.

Sam suddenly hears voices, but he thinks it's in his mind, so he lets it pass. Meanwhile, the tall boy glares at tiny Sam who is adorably pouting at him. His hand digs in the pocket of his jeans and comes out with a mobile phone. He snaps Sam's picture, an evil smirk playing at his lips.

"Love, what's going on?" Sam is growing impatient, nothing has happened yet and minutes have passed.

"I'm here, just want to bask in your beauty." Stephen rolls his eyes after exclaiming, a giggle is heard from a distance. Then another one, and another one. A frown builds on Sam's face, he can't understand what is happening. His eyes instantly pop open, they are big and confused.

"What's going on?"

The tall boy ignores Sam's question, but rather offers him a vicious smile that sends cold unpleasant chills through Sam's body. Stephen pulls the mask off, revealing his real identity and Sam's world comes crashing down at the sight of Victor Zulu standing before him.

He is not given a chance to question him because Victor's friends emerge from every corner, clicking pictures of the now terrified Sam.

The phone flashes are on, the lights are blinding, depriving Sam of a clear view. He lifts his hands over his face to hide, but it is futile. In Sam's eyes, Victor seems to be the host of the ambush as he stands while his friends take pictures and videos of Sam. Loud insulting laughter has filled the hall, there are so many people Sam can't count. Girls and boys, having a jolly good time at his expense.

Two boys move closer and rip Sam's shirt off, he gasps at the sudden rough pull and more laughter is heard. Just when Sam covers his naked upper body another boy pulls his pants down, this time they laugh louder, making taunting comments.

"Pause for us sis Samantha..."

"You got your mother's hips, those definitely don't lie."

"Oh but you got your daddy's flat ass, what an odd looking body you got Sammy."

"That's right Naomi Campbell, shake what your momma gave you."

Sam has fallen into shock, he could fight for his life. Ask them why they are doing this, what they want from him and probably run. But his body has taken a path of its own, leaving him

behind. He is frozen on the spot, hands hugging his exposed frame. He feels numb and his heart is shattered into a million pieces.

“I think he’s missing a weave.” Some loud short girl mocks and pushes a curly wig on Sam’s head.

“He’s too dark, bathing with milk should help.” A boy about Sam’s height and structure empties a litre of milk on Sam’s head. His eyes shut closed when they come in contact with the milk, he is a shivering mess.

“Guys, guys... he is too skinny, self-raising flour should give meat to his skeletal body.” Someone pours a bag of flour over Sam’s body.

“Eggs are good for the skin, half a dozen should do it.” This time Victor’s closest friend, the master mind of the terrible scene utters in a sing-song. He places a tray of eggs on the table, takes three in his hands and throws them Sam.

The timid boy gasps as the eggs painfully collide with his tiny body and crack. In one go, the gang empty all the eggs on Sam who has lost all the strength in him. Fear and guilt tackle Victor, they cover his face as he realises the sin he has committed. He wants his friends to stop, he wants to turn back time and undo what he has done. Oh Vicky, Vicky... It is too late for that, don’t you think?

With the last egg thrown at him, Sam comes crashing down with a loud thud. He neither cries nor does he move, shock paralysis if we could call it that. Victor's crew is not done with their insults and taunts, they throw tissues at the boy laying on the cold hard ground, uncaring about him. Like the devil has possessed them, they laugh and make sure to capture everything on camera.

"Stop." A whisper from Victor, but it is not heard by his loud friends. The Zulu boy is panicking, his body trembling with guilt and eyes filled with unshed tears.

"Stooooop!" He shouts louder and everything comes to a halt, they turn to him as if he is their leader.

"That's enough, enough." His loud voice cracks, his eyes are on Sam who is curled up on the floor trembling. The poor boy is covered in everything that was thrown at him. Victor feels like shit, he can't take the guilt that is swallowing him every second. He wants to help Sam and maybe offer an apology, but what good will that do. Victor knows he will be arrested, the Zulu boy takes off running. His friends follow pursuit, leaving a traumatised Sam helpless on the ground.

NELLY PAGE.

Time is moving at a snail's pace and I am growing tremendously restless, I have no idea where to start looking for my son.

Victor's disappearance has put me on the verge of a mental breakdown, however, it is something I cannot afford to do.

I want to be strong for my son, for my kids. If something has happened to Victor, then the police would be knocking at my door. Right? Right?

Oh darn it, this is South Africa. Depending on the police is like investing all your life's savings on a pyramid scheme.

"What if something has happened to him? I will never forgive myself."

My mind decides to work with my mouth and spew my thoughts out, Nkateko looks over me from the driver's seat, a single glimpse that leaves him scowling in confusion. He is aware of the dire situation, but he would rather take the calm route. We both cannot afford to freak out, someone has to be sane if we want to find Victor.

Nkateko: “Victor is fine, try not to entertain negative thoughts Nkatanga.”

Easy for you to say, then again, Nkateko has boarded this train before. He knows how it feels to lose someone and not know where they are. He has lost his mind before, he had his heart ripped out of his chest and almost lost his breath from fear of not knowing where the person he loved was.

Me: “How do I do that when I don’t know where my son is?”

Nkateko is not given a chance to respond as his phone’s ringtone fills the car.

Nkateko: “Please get that Nkatanga.”

This man is real, he is here to shame the devil. Look at him allowing his woman to take his calls... I reach for the phone on the dashboard, Victor’s number is displayed on the screen. My heart makes a high jump and lands on my throat, I take a deep breath and tilt the phone to show Nkateko.

Nkateko: “Let me pull over.”

We can’t park on the side of the road, like I mentioned, this is South Africa and Johannesburg is not the safest place in Gauteng.

Me: “No, don’t.”

Nkateko: “Put it on speaker.”

He orders, turning a corner on a dark empty street. The skies are dark, droplets of rain have started pouring on the wind screen.

Nkateko: "Victor."

Nkateko is trying to stay calm.

Victor: "Are you home?"

I catch the boy's trembling voice, shaded with fear.

Nkateko: "Where are you Vic?"

There is a prolonged silence, I'm tempted to scold Victor. I have the right after what he has put me through. But I choose to remain quiet, lest Victor disconnects the call before we find out where he is.

Victor: "I'm in jail, please help me, uncle. Don't tell mom please."

What the hell? Shock and fear hit me like a truck, what kind of a test is this?

Me: "Victor, what happened? What are you doing there?"

This is a mother's biggest fear, but it is better than hearing that your son has died. The line is disconnected, Victor has not explained yet and that only worries me more.

We drive to the nearest police station, Nkateko walks ahead of me while I am numb from head to toe. Unsettling thoughts linger in my head. There's a police officer behind a desk, he gives us an intimidating yet bored expression. The man doesn't seem to like his job. Nkateko and the officer exchange pleasantries, I don't get how he is a people person and feels a need to hold small talks with strangers.

Me: "What happened? Why are you keeping my son?"

I'm growing anxious by the second, the man frowns upon my probing. The little smile he had when conversing with Nkateko is gone.

"Your son broke into the school along with a bunch of other kids, they are all in a holding cell."

Me: "Can I see him."

I feel Nkateko's hand grip my waist, he tightens the hold and that has me calming down a bit.

"This way."

We follow the officer down a dim corridor, my eyes search for Victor in a cell with five boys. I see shock envelope him as our eyes meet, his widen as big as saucers. He glares at Nkateko,

eyes filled with questions. I know what is going through his mind, the boy was expecting Nkateko alone.

“One more thing.”

The officer adds as he turns to face us.

“You might want to get your boy a lawyer, a kid was found passed out in the school hall. I have no doubt these boys are responsible for it, none of them want to talk. Bulling is a serious offence, if found guilty, they will serve time.”

My ears have to be deceiving me, my baby can't be capable of that, I am most certain about this. Victor might be a troublemaker, but he will never take things this far.

Victor: “What is she doing here? I asked you not to tell her.”

The little shit screams from where he is standing, his glaring gaze is directed towards Nkateko. There is anger and authority in his voice, yet he is hiding behind some boy who is almost as tall as he is, his hands gripped on the boy's shoulders.

Me: “Why wouldn't I be here Victor? What have you done to yourself? Is this the life you want to live?”

He drops his head as shame drowns his eyes.

Me: “Look at me when I'm talking you boy and come here.”

Trying to be strict is of no use, Victor is far gone. Maybe I should take him to church, get him to join the youth.

“You can take your son home ma’am, but of course I will need a little compensation. We would hate for the boy to spend the weekend behind bars.”

I see, now I have to bribe the law just to have my son home.

Me: “Let him spend the weekend here, this should teach him a lesson.”

Victor: “What? But mom, I... I...”

He’s moved closer, but keeps shouting.

Me: “What? You didn’t do anything?”

His shifty eyes move to Nkateko and the officer, he wants someone to intervene for him. That is something I will not allow, with the pace Victor is going, I will age before my time.

“No really, you can take him home. It’s easy to make this disappear. We’ll pretend it never happened.”

Again the officer’s voice is discreet, desperation playing in it.

Me: “No, I insist. He is my son and I want him here.”

Victor’s facial expression states he cannot believe what he is hearing, his hands curl around the bars, tears filling his eyes. As a mother, my heart breaks at the sight of tears in my son’s

eyes. I can't afford to be weak though, I won't reap anything if I let him out."

"Yah neh!"

The policeman complains with little to no words, he drags his feet back down the corridor. I catch a glimpse of Nkateko, I think I need his opinion, but I am afraid that he will side with Victor. Maybe this is my chance to have him change his ways.

Victor: "Uncle please

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don't leave me here."

He pleads through clenched teeth, tears cascading down his face. The man I love releases a long hefty sigh, his hand has not left my waist. I would have it no other way, my soul approves of his closeness.

Nkateko: "I'm sorry Vic."

He breathes painfully, it hurts me that he is also hurting.

Nkateko loves my babies as if they belong to him and I will be grateful till my last breath. I would accept his surname, had I not been afraid of marriage. There must be a way to deal with my phobia of marriage, my Tsonga man deserves the entire

universe. He deserves a woman who will give him everything in the world, he can have my soul if that would suffice.

Victor: “No, no uncle please. I won’t survive in here. I didn’t mean to do it okay, I’m sorry I hurt him. I’m sorry I was foolish and stupid. I’m sorry I’ve been difficult. It’s dad. He did this to me, he made me this person. I started hating the world because my dad doesn’t want me. Please, I didn’t mean to do it, it was a game and things got out of hand. I didn’t mean to hurt Sam, I’m...”

Me: “Wait! Which Sam?”

I ask, my nose flaring as my mind has put two and two together. It cannot be that little boy Victor fought with. Annoyance nudges me as I wait for Victor to explain what he did, he bites his bottom lip, his eyes refusing to look at me. My anger must be illuminating from the outside because Nkateko draws nearer, I feel his warm breath on my ear and a shiver threatening to take over my body. With all my might I fight against it. This is not the time to show how much this man affects my body.

Nkateko: “Calm down Nkatanga.”

His voice is an undertone, soft enough for me to hear. I want to calm down, but I can’t. If my son did something to Sam then I

won't be able to help him. How will I even face Sam's parents?

I manage a deep breath that lessens my anger by a percentage, not enough for me to want to get Victor out.

Me: "What did you do to Sam?"

Victor's head whips back to the boys who have been quiet since our arrival, I see one of them shake their head, his body drenched in fear. I figure whatever they did must be worse than I thought.

Me: "Victor!"

I get his attention back with a single shout, he keeps his eyes away from me.

Victor: "It was a game mom, we didn't think it would go this far. I- I catfished him."

Why am I not surprised by this revelation? Nkateko and I exchange worried glances, I have something on my mind and I am glad he approves. Victor might not be his, but his opinion should matter like I had said.

Victor: "I'm sorry, please don't leave me in here."

Nelly: "I'm not always going to be there to clean up your mess, you messed up Victor and you need to account for your actions, a night or two in a holding cell won't kill you."

I'm done talking, so I turn and begin my walk out of this damned place. There are heavy footsteps trailing behind me.

Victor: "Uncle please do something, don't let her leave me here uncle."

My heart clips at the sound of my baby's screams, Nkateko takes my hand as we walk down the hall. Victor will be strong, I have to do damage control. I can't imagine what Sam's parents are going through.

-SABELO ZULU

This is no place to be after midnight, but I have no choice, life has brought me here. Nothing is going right, with each passing moment my wife's anger elevates. Rose is becoming impossible to live with, I would let her go if I could live without her.

"This is it man."

Lwandle says, pointing at the smallest shack in the midst of five medium ones. It is fifteen minutes after midnight, we are in Alex in the middle of informal settlements. Apparently a

powerful sangoma lives here, Lwandle says she is the only one who can change my situation.

Me: “Haibo njani ntwana? You said this woman will help me gain riches. How is a poor person going to help me get rich?”
(How?)

That shack looks like it will crumble to the ground any moment.

Lwandle: “A healer cannot heal himself.”

My foot, what am I getting myself into? She will probably strip me of my last cent.

Me: “Ok’salayo and why do we have to see her at night? Is she a witch?”

Lwandle: “I told you, she’s a powerful sangoma. Are you doing this or not?”

Me: “It’s not like I have a choice, my wife will leave me if I don’t bring money home.”

Lwandle: “That woman will be the death of you Sabza.”

Me: “Then I would die a happy man.”

Lwandle: “Beauty is not everything.”

Me: “Yeah, tell that to your ugly girlfriend.”

He laughs.

Lwandle: "Just go in."

Me: "Aren't you coming with?"

Lwandle: "I'll wait out here."

Okay this is it, my heart starts beating fast as I approach the shack. I stand at the door, contemplating if I should go in or not. Is this even a good idea?

"Come in"

A female voice says from the other side of the door, startling me. How did she know that I'm here?

"Take your shoes off." I hear Lwandle from behind, I do as told and enter the room. A woman dressed in sangoma clothes is seated on a reed mat.

"Come in Sabelo, I have been waiting for you."

She knows my name? No this is witchcraft, it can't be. Ignoring the chaos in my heart, I make my way to a reed mat before her, she starts burping the moment our eyes meet. Why am I looking at a sangoma in the eyes?

Me: "How do you know my name?"

I hope she is not my mother's friend, I am creeped out by the way she is looking at me.

Me: “Thokoza gogo.”

I clap my hands in hopes that the awkward moment would pass.

“How may I help you?”

Good, now we are getting down to business.

Me: “The thing is that I miss Mandela, I don’t remember what his face looks like anymore. Can you imagine forgetting that great man’s face? It must be a sin. I’m tired, I want to be rich.”

The confidence in my declaration is evident, I thought about this long and hard. Poverty should be a sin, no human should be subjected to such. I don’t know from which hell it came from but curse it. I want to be seen, I am sick of people seeing a shadow of me. If money gives you dignity in society, then I am willing to do anything to get it.

“How far are you willing to go to have what you want?”

Haibo! She’s a mind reader?

Me: “As far as the path goes, I’d give up my most, priciest possession if I have to.”

“Your wife?”

Huh?

Me: "My wife? Where does she fit in here? I meant alcohol, I am willing to quit drinking."

This sangoma is strange, why would she ask such a thing?

"Then you're at the wrong place, didn't your friend explain how we do things here?"

We? She and who else? I am suddenly terrified, my bones welcome cold shivers. Does she have zombies in this house?"

Me: "Makhosi?"

"I can make you rich Sabelo but easy money comes with sacrifices. You will have to give something to get what you want."

Me: "I don't have money."

"I am not talking about money, but blood."

Oh I see, that can't be hard.

Me: "Okay, when should I bring the chicken?"

Why is she shaking her head? She appears to be annoyed as well, I don't like the look she is giving me.

"I'm talking about a human sacrifice, the one you love the most will have to be sacrificed if you want riches."

What is wrong with this sangoma? Did she study 'how to confuse Sabelo' at the initiation school?

Me: "I don't understand Makhosi."

"You. Have. To. Kill. Your. Wife."

Me: "JESUS!!!"

I scream in shock and the sangoma glares daggers at me before taking up a heavy tongue click.

“Baby please eat.” Instead of opening his mouth, Sam serves his mother nothing but a blank expression. It has been like this for days, Sam has not eaten anything since he came home from the hospital nor has he uttered a single word to his parents.

The doctors cried shock and that he will be okay, the boy needs love and attention and that’s what his parents have been giving him and more. But there is no change in Sam’s condition, he stays in his room laying on the bed. When awake, he would stare into thin air or shed endless tears.

His mother gently drops the spoon of porridge in the bowl and takes another warm fresh spoonful, but Sam refuses her even a glimpse. She’s tired, exhausted beyond words. She misses her baby, his voice, his smile and his little sassy attitude. If she could, she would burst into tears and plead with her son to come back. But she is a rock and wants to be strong for her baby boy.

“Do you want chicken? It’s your favourite, remember?” Mom tries, in hopes that Sam will at least blink... anything to let her know he is still in there. To let her know that she has not lost her son.

“Okay, stay put. I’ll go and get the chicken. Three big pieces of sticky drumsticks coming right up.” Mom kisses him on the cheek, she takes a few seconds to glance at her son seated on the bed. Tears threaten to expose her weakness, she pushes them back before they could invade her privacy.

The second she shuts the door, Sam blinks at the sound of his phone buzzing. He looks over it on the nightstand and removes it from the charger. As he unlocks the screen, messages and notifications flood in. His heart stops for a while, he tries to breathe but starts hyperventilating. Fear and shame hover around him, this has been going on for days.

Various videos of that night were plastered all over social media, the perpetrators did not waste time in showing off their evilness. The footages went viral the very next day of Sam’s attack. He’s been ridiculed, made fun of and shamed in front of the entire country.

Sam doesn’t want to open the messages, but curiosity gets the better of him. His hands shake uncontrollably as he opens the notifications where his name was mentioned, his heart breaks

again at the sight of the video that destroyed his life. The comments are appalling.

-“This is sad, who would do this to someone’s child.”

-“I don’t see anything wrong with what these kids did, it was probably a game and the victim took it seriously.”

-“Serves him right, people like him don’t deserve to walk the face of the earth.”

-“My father would have beat the gayness out of him, I commend the kids who taught him a lesson. Gay for what?”

-“This is a punishment from God, he didn’t create Adam and Steve. This is an abomination, a sin to God.”

-“This comment section is full of bitter people, who are you to judge this poor boy? This God you speak of has not pointed a finger at him, hell is for judgemental people like you.”

-“It’s sad that the majority of commenters are adults who have nothing but slurs to throw at this innocent boy. What is his crime? He has the right to love whoever he wants. His sexuality is none of your business. I don’t see all of you pointing fingers at serial killers, rapists and fornicators. But you prosecute the innocent child for being gay, grow up.”

-“This is so embarrassing, if I were this boy, I would kill myself. How do you face the world after this? It can never be me.”

Sam’s heart is split in two, his brain can’t function properly. It hurts, everything hurts so bad he can’t stand it. He wants to hide from the world, he wants fade into oblivion.

His whole body shuddering, Sam wipes the stubborn tears that keep kissing his tiny face. South Africa has chosen his fate, they have trialled and sentenced him. How will he move on from this? How will he face humanity? No one from his school has bothered to apologise for what happened to him. Maybe if Victor took the step, maybe if Victor admitted to his crime... maybe Sam would be okay, maybe he would heal and start to build his life again.

He feels worthless, unloved, empty and alone. Sure his parents are there for him, but it’s not enough. It’s their job to be there, to protect him from the world and make him feel loved.

NELLY PAGE...

Victor hasn’t spoken to me in days, he walks past me as if I were invisible. Nkateko is going through the same thing, I

decided to give him space. Nonetheless, it has been too long, tomorrow we are going to Sam's house to offer an apology. I delayed the meeting because I didn't want Sam's parents to meet an angry and arrogant Victor.

They say children mirror their parents and I would be damned to take credit for Bhekifa's wrong doings. Speaking of the fool, I need him to accompany us. He is Victor's father, the least he could do is make time for this meeting. This will be good for Victor as well, his father's participation in his life will mean a lot to him. I have informed Sam's mother, she was very upset and I understand where she is coming from. Any mother would, I would kill for my kids and I can't even begin to think what is going on in her head.

I leave Nkateko with the other kids in the living room to meet Victor in his room, the boy doesn't respond to my knock so I let myself in. He's sitting on the bed, lost in thought.

Me: "Victor."

His eyes twitch before he regards me with a cold stare, he's still upset I see.

Me: "Can we talk?"

His silence is my cue, so I tread to the bed and settle on the edge of it. He huffs a little

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his brows knit in a frustrated frown.

Me: “Won’t you tell me what’s on your mind?”

He shakes his head, denying me a conversation with my first born.

Me: “You can’t bottle things up Victor, speak to me please. I’m your mother, no one will ever love you like I do.”

Victor: “Why did Nkateko leave me in that place? I hate him.”

Hiabo! This child must be possessed.

Me: “It was my decision to leave you in there, not his.”

Victor: “Still, I asked him not to tell you anything. But he brought you with, it would have been our little secrets. I guess he is just like dad, they are all full of empty promises.”

He’s crying and he’s angry, I don’t understand what is going on with him anymore. Am I losing my son?

Me: “Baby talk to me, why do you harbour so much anger? What is going on Victor?”

Victor: “I want him gone mom.”

I don't know, but my heart sinks at his announcement. It could be the cold look in his eyes or the deadpan voice.

Me: "You want who gone?"

Victor: "Your boyfriend."

Since when does he call Nkateko that?

Me: "What are you talking about Victor?"

For some reason, I am terrified.

Victor: "I want to be alone, please leave."

Me: "I hope you're not thinking of doing anything stupid, prison is not a good place for a young boy like you."

I need to call Bhekifa before this gets out of hand, I have a bad feeling about this. I counsel people for a living, but can't even help my son.

Victor: "Okay."

He deadpans as he shrugs his shoulders.

Me: "We're going to Sam's house tomorrow to offer an apology, be ready by 10am."

Victor doesn't dispute, but lies down and faces the other way. My mind is entertaining strange thoughts, thoughts that could

never lurk in the mind of a ninth grader. Death... Victor wouldn't hurt Nkateko, would he? After what happened to Sam, I am not sure what my son is capable of.

For the first in days, Sam steps out of his room. The light in the passage is off, he hears the TV from the living room and Noxolo Grootboom's voice fills the place. He knows his father is watching the news. A weak smile creeps on his mouth at how his father has recorded news bulletins of Noxolo. He watches them from time to time.

He says no one reads the news like her and he would rather watch repeats than entertain all these new comers. His dad secretly has a crush on the woman, Sam and his mother would tease the big man about it.

Sam takes a step towards the lounge, the door to the kitchen is just on the way. He stops, turns to see his mother bustling in the kitchen. The smell of fried chicken fills his nose, but does nothing to his appetite. Usually, his tummy would get all excited over the aroma.

Appreciation swamps over Sam, he loves that woman and appreciates her for everything she is to him. He strides in the kitchen, his mother misses his footsteps due to the loud sound of the food sizzling on the stove. Sam wraps his arms around her waist from behind, it startles mom a little, but she knows her baby's arms. A smile takes over her lips and tears are happy to paint her cheeks. This is what she has been waiting for, this is what she has been praying for.

"Baby." Mom whispers, sobbing.

"I love you mommy and I'm sorry." Sam murmurs, his mom moves from his arms to find that her son is back to himself. He's thinner than he was and his eyes are sunken in, but the usual glow in his eyes is back. That natural smile is back, her Sam is back. She cups his cheeks and tattoos the visible parts of his face with multiple kisses. Sam giggles... Ah! Music to his mother's ears.

The two turn as they feel a heavy presence in the kitchen to find the man of the house leaning against the door post, smiling at his little family with unshed tears in his eyes. Sam returns the smile and runs into his huge arms that swallow all of him the moment his father embraces him.

“I love you dad, I’m sorry for being a disappointment. I promise to make you proud in my next life, I will be the son you have always wanted. Not a weakling who can’t defend...”

His words are sent back down his throat by his father’s hand covering his mouth.

“No son, don’t ever say that. You are not a disappointment. You are not a weakling, you’re my baby Sam. My only son, you’re perfect for me and your mother.”

The giant embraces his son again, he lifts him up in a tight hug that brings Sam into a world of laughter. His parent’s hearts jump with joy at the sound of their son laughing, they didn’t think he would heal so soon.

“Okay, enough with the emotional stuff.” The mom interrupts, she is tired of shedding tears. “The food is almost ready, you can join your father in the living room while I finish up.”

“I would like to eat in my room if that’s okay, but I want to take a nap first. I will eat when I wake up.” Sam says, widely smiling at his mother.

“Uh... okay. Don’t sleep too much baby, I’ll wake you up once I’m done. Then you can go back to sleep after stuffing your face.” The mom.

She doesn't want to push him, Sam is okay with that.

"I love you guys, so much." He tells them and leaves after they return.

Sam's smile immediately dissipates the second he shuts his bedroom door, he leans against it as tears seep down his face. His heart is in so much pain he's finding it hard to breathe. He wants it to stop, he wants the pain to stop. Is it too much to ask for a little acceptance? He settles down on the bed, his hand hides in the pocket of his brown shorts and comes out with a box he got from the bathroom.

'Ratex'

He reads it over and over, there are no second thoughts. This is it, this is the only way he will be freed from pain and shame. The burden is too much to carry. His hands begin to shake again as he opens the box. It's a sealed packet and with great difficulty, Sam manages to consume the entire box. He quickly jumps into bed and hides under the blankets, thinking this will be an easy ride.

What is a mother's worst nightmare? One would name a few, finding your child choking in their own blood is one them. Sam is lain on his bed, groaning in excruciating pain, blood bubbling out of his mouth. His lungs are slowly shutting down, making it impossible for the young boy to breathe.

It's been over an hour since Sam said he was going to take a nap, his mother walks in his room to call him for supper and what she finds will forever be imprinted in her head.

"SAMUEL!" A blood curdling scream fills the room, it is heard by Sam's father from the living room. Mom hurries to cuddle her son, that's all she could think of as the fear of losing him consumes and paralyses every part of her. She is screaming her heart out, her arms tightly clasp around Sam, rocking him back and forth.

Sam's father is there in a jiffy, unlike his wife, his brain still works. Although his breath catches and his heart clips, he's able to grab Sam from his wife and rush to the car. Mom runs behind him, screaming and crying, her agonising cries are loud enough for the entire neighbourhood to hear.

By the time neighbours run out of their respectable homes to inspect the horrific screams, the heartbroken couple has driven

off with their son. What is left behind are trails of crimson blood leading to the crime scene... Sam's room.

BHEKIFA ZULU...

“What is so urgent that it couldn't wait till morning?” A call from Nelly took me by surprise, I haven't spoken to her in a while. I can only hope she won't ask about the kids, I have nothing to give her right now.

Nelly: “Victor did something bad...”

Me: “What happened?”

I'm in the car on my way home from work and tired as hell. Nelly goes on to explain what Victor has been up to, listening attentively to what my son has done, my heart cracks.

Nelly: “...so, we have to go there to apologise.”

Me: “Is there a need for that Nelly? Victor has served his sentence, like you said, he spent time in jail. Can't you let it go? I'm pretty sure that boy's family has forgotten about it.”

This is probably the last thing my son wants, to be reminded of his mistakes.

Nelly: "Do you hear yourself Bhekifa? What if it was Victor in Sam's shoes? Would you have let it go or demanded an apology."

Me: "You said it has been days since it happened, the family must be over it. Why do you feel a need to apologise?"

Nelly: "Because it is the right thing to do, Victor needs to know that what he did was wrong. We need to set a good example Bhekifa."

Me: "Not by humiliating him like this? Does he even want to do this? Did you ask him how he feels about it, or are you forcing him to apologise?"

Nelly: "You know what? I'm not going to argue with you about this. Your son messed up, he ruined someone else's life and we're going to make amends with the family tomorrow. I expect you to be there."

Me: "That sounds more like an order."

Nelly: "Take it however you like."

The line goes quiet, she just hung up on me.

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Grief is like living two lives. One is where you pretend that everything is alright, and the other is where your heart silently screams in pain.

The house is filled with mourning hymns, close relatives have come to mourn with the couple. The life of a fifteen year old has been cut short as if his script was a few pages long when he was born.

Sam's mother has not mustered up the courage to leave her son's room since they got home from the hospital this morning.

It was in early hours of the morning when Sam's soul departed from his body, unfortunately the poison had done too much damage in his stomach that the doctors could not save him. He had internal bleeding, his lungs collapsed.

We could say the boy gave a fight, but he didn't have the will to fight for life anymore.

Sam's parents died a thousand deaths when the doctor gave them the bad news, his mother could not control her heart

wrenching screams. It took about an hour to convince her to let go of Sam's body as she clung to it for dear life.

Meanwhile outside, Nelly parks her car outside the gate. Had it not been for Bhekifa, they would have been there earlier. Zulu has not been answering her calls, the last time Nelly tried his phone it sent her straight to voicemail. Thank God for Nkateko, the man is like a belt to loose pants... always there.

"Mom." Victor calls, eyes inspecting the crowded single story house. There are people gathered outside, men and women. The atmosphere is suddenly gloomy that even the boy can sense it.

"Something is going on." At her son's alert, Nelly peeks over and her heart immediately stops. Just one look at their faces any adult could guess what the gathering is about.

"I need you to stay in the car, I'll go and see what's happening." This is her, protecting her son.

"I'm coming with you." Of course her pillar of strength is here, like he promised from the beginning.

Cursing Bhekifa back to hell would be cruel of humanity to do, the man is just... he's just... Oh curse it... let the stones be cast upon him.

As much as Victor won't voice it out, his father's absence stings.

Victor is okay with not going in there, the younger is not ready to see Sam. It's bad enough that he's been drenched in guilt for days. Shame has him by his ears, facing Sam will be the same as hanging himself. Last night the boy spent hours going over his apology, he's not satisfied with what he came up with. A sorry is all he got, it's as shameful as he is.

Nkateko and Nelly tread towards the gate, the gentleman takes her hand into his. Intertwining their hands together as they enter the premises. Something strange seeps through Nelly's entire being, she can't point it out. However it doesn't feel good, it has her shivering coldly. Nkateko notices the small shiver and slides his hand on the small of her back.

"Are you okay?" Nelly's reaction is a single nod, Nkateko is not convinced. But he will have to take it.

The couple is approached by a middle-aged, short and plump woman. Naturally, Nelly offers a smile. It's not her usual flashy smile, lest she offends the people who look grief-stricken.

"May I help you?" The woman's voice is sadly low.

As Nelly opens her mouth to speak, a tall man walks out of the house and their eyes instantly meet. The last time she saw him, he looked stronger than this. His shoulders were not slumped, his eyes were not bloodshot and hollow. Sam's father approaches them, slowly and cautiously. So many things are running through his mind. He is not certain what his mouth will offer first, curses or greetings.

Nelly's heart does that thing again, it's hammering vigorously in her chest. Maybe with a mission to jump out and run out of that compound... Lord, don't let this be what I think it is. A silent prayer replays in her head like a broken record.

"Hi, I'm..." Nelly's hand is stretched out to Sam's father who turns a blind eye to it, he snubs it as if it's not even there. I guess his mind has chosen curses because the second he opens his mouth they pour out like a child throwing up Castor oil that was forced down their throat.

“You will never have peace in your life.”

Like a jolt of lightning, shock nudges at Nelly and Nkateko at the mention of these words. “Your son took my son from me, he took my only son.”

Nelly’s biggest fear is confirmed, something terrible has happened to Sam. Her eyes widen with unshed tears, she leers over at Nkateko who appears to be shocked as well. However, he is a tad bit reticent.

“S- Sam.” Her voice is a whisper.

Hearing his son’s name roll out of the tongue of the woman whose son is responsible for Sam taking his life evokes something dark inside the father’s chest.

“Don’t you dare mention his name,” the father’s roar catches the attention of everyone around, including Victor who is relaxing in the comfortable seat of his mother’s big vehicle. The boy is oblivious to the havoc he has created.

Spotting a murderous hatred in the father’s eyes, Nkateko feels a need to pull Nelly closer to him, a need to protect the one he loves.

“Please, what happened to him? Tell me, what happened to Sam.” A crying mess Nelly has become, it wasn’t so hard to catch the grieving father’s words. What she wants is a confirmation.

“Sam is gone, our boy is gone. He couldn’t take the suffering anymore, our son killed himself.” The middle aged woman is still here

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her words are painted with pain and misery.

Nelly wants to scream her lungs out, what has Victor done? She staggers a step back, but her pillar of strength is there to hold her up lest she falls.

“I’m sorry.” Nelly sends an apology, although it sounds more like a plea. The father refuses to accept it, he is shaking his head vigorously. It hurts, it hurts more than burning your hand with steam from a boiling kettle. It hurts more than finding your leftovers eaten after a long day at work. It hurts more than biting your tongue from chewing gum the whole day like a cow. Heck, it hurts more than anything he has ever known.

“Your son will never know peace, I swear to God he will never know how it feels to be called father. He will never hear the soothing sound of his own child crying, he will never look into

the eyes of his own child and hold them in his arms. That boy will never have anything that he has stripped from us... a child." The father's curse shreds Nelly's heart into strips like paper, her tears have ceased to be about Sam's death, they are for her son now. The boy who is standing behind her unbeknownst to Nelly. Victor cannot understand why such terrible words are spoken on him.

"I'm sorry that Sam took this route, but that curse will not fall on my son. His life belongs to God, and no weapon formed against him shall prosper" Nelly proclaims, these are her mother's teachings. Proclaim the word of God upon your children.

"Mom." Tears trace down Victor's face as he calls his mother like a lost sheep. As Nelly turns back to her son, someone turns her back to the front and something, painfully collides with her face. The slap is so hard that she falls right in Nkateko's arms, she sees stars for a while.

This is uncalled for... Nkateko is quick to shove his lover behind him, his eyes glaring at Sam's mother who came out of nowhere. Her lips pressed together in anger. She is a woman

and Nkateko understands that the lady is grieving, but how dare she. How dare, she touches his Nkatanga.

“That was not necessary.” Nkateko snarls under his breath, his jaw locked in suppressed rage. His eyes trail to Nelly beside him, her gaze is glued on the inconsolable mother adorned in black mourning clothes. Her hand works tirelessly to rub away the pain on her cheek...

Suck it up Nelly, it is nothing compared to what this family is feeling.

Everyone has come out to watch, they seem to have caught what the commotion is about and that has them stabbing glares at Nelly and her little family.

“I’m sorry.” That’s all Nelly has to offer, tears run down the mother’s face, she will most likely shed them the entire year if not her whole life. Nelly can see and feel the sorrow that is suffocating the woman.

“All my baby ever wanted was to be accepted.” She holds up something that was hanging on her hand from the second she

stepped out of the house due to the sound of her husband's roar.

“Look at him.” A picture of Sam, he looks so happy there. Like he was laughing when the picture was taken, his eyes are not looking directly at the camera. Perhaps at the person taking it, could have been his mother or father. “My son was a happy child, he has never hurt anyone in his life. Do you know how much it took for us to have a child? What we went through to finally be parents? For six years, we prayed to God thinking we were cursed with bareness. Then one day when hope was lost, Sam came like manna from heaven. He filled our lives with light, we were happy for once in our lives.”

Sam's mother struggles with her vocabulary as her voice breaks with each word she utters, people can only watch with eyes filled with tears and broken hearts. Not one has offered to comfort her, not even her husband who is slowly dying beside her. Incredulous gasps are heard when she sinks to her knees before Nelly, Sam's picture frame still held up for Nelly to see.

“Please.” The mother stifles a painful sob. “Please give me back my son, I will do anything. Just bring my son back to me.”

Louder and louder she cries, the pain is unbearable she doesn't know what to do with herself. Heart wrenching cries surround the area, reducing the bystanders to tears.

"I think you should go." There is no need for Nelly to be there, Sam's father seems to think so.

"No." Mom grabs the hem of Nelly's dress, her face falls on her legs as she desperately cries. "Please give me, my son first, don't leave without giving me, my Sam back."

Nelly is also a weeping mess, guilt and shame are dancing around her. She hasn't turned to check on her son who is probably traumatised upon hearing about Sam's death.

"SAMMY! SAMMY, MY BABY!" The mother scream cries, refusing to let go of Nelly's legs who does not bother fighting to claim them back.

"M...mom, let's go." That's Victor's voice, the little shit is crying. His peanut sized brain has caught on. Took him long enough.

"I... I WANT... MY SON, GIVE ME, MY SON. PLEA... PLEASE."

Unable to take the painful sight, the middle-aged woman attempts to embrace Sam's mother, but she doesn't want to be

comforted. A mother wants her baby back. Is she asking for too much?

“It’s okay, it’s okay.” The relative comforts to no avail as Sam’s mother breaks out of her hold. With no warning she drops the picture of Sam and shoots up to her feet, they lead her to a terrified Victor who is drowning in his own tears. Not once did he think this would happen, it has to be a mistake. Sam couldn’t have killed himself, it has to be a dream if not a mistake.

Sam’s mother grabs Victor’s arms with ruthless pressure, her eyes piercing his as if looking into soul. Victor can’t control the trembling of his body, fear has him paralysed or else he would have ran to the car.

“All I want is to see my son, even if it’s for the last time. I need to hear his voice, I need to see him smile at me again.” She pleads with Victor, Nelly wants to grab her son her from her hold, but perhaps this will ease the mother’s pain.

“H- he’s not with... m... me.” Victor’s voice breaks, fear evident in his widened eyes.

“NO.” Sam’s mother shouts. “You don’t understand, all I want is a glimpse of my Sammy or I will die. You took my baby, you took my baby.”

She's screaming at the boy, Victor manages to slip out of her great hold. His feet run him to his mother's car, he dashes in, hides in the back seat and entertains a series of tears. Sam's mother is left to her heart breaking cries, her weak knees drop her to the ground.

"NOOO! SAMMY!!! COME BACK TO ME PLEASE."

This cannot be happening, Sam was smiling at her just last night. She held him in her arms and kissed him on his soft cheek. She told him she loved him and he said it back, it was just yesterday and mom remembers it clearly. Now Sam is gone like he was never there.

Sam's father runs to his wife, he stifles a sob as he drops down next to her. His large arms cradle her, the couple weep for their son.

"I'll be a good mother this time, tell God to give me another chance. Tell him to give my son back... please." She wails loudly, clinging on to her husband by crumpling his shirt in her fisted hands, her face hidden on his chest.

Seeing that they have caused enough damage, Nelly and her lover follow their cursed brat... I mean their beloved Victor to the car. He's still weeping when they get there, if he were not

at fault, Nelly would take him in his arms and comfort him. She bursts into her own waterworks, Nkateko is quick to take her in his arms. They should be driving away, considering the lamentation outside.

-SABELO ZULU

Me? Sabelo Zulu, sacrifice my wife? When pigs fly...

There can only be one Rose in this world and I was the lucky bastard to find this gem of a woman. Okay, okay... maybe gem is taking it a little too far, she's the devil's agent lately. Shouts and screams when her demons come knocking and makes me her target. Hey, listen, I'm a man and I can stand my own unlike my brother. But to lay a hand on my wife is something I will never do, maybe in my dreams. I can have my way with her there and add a kick to that loud mouth of hers.

That day after the sangoma told me that I had to sacrifice my wife, I ran out of that house like my life depended on it. God, I even wished I had one of my mother's brooms so I could fly home. I haven't spoken to Lwandle since, that man will sell me to the lowest bidder. The friends we keep.

"Sorry bhuti."

An ugly voice drags me out of my musing, I turn to find a tall big woman glaring down at me. No man, this is not right. This woman's big body is so unnecessary, God really didn't have to

make women taller than men. Now I'm looking up at her like a child ready to be punished. I need to start wearing shoes that will make me look taller around such people.

Me: "What?"

I'm not smiling with anyone today, I haven't been smiling since I got to work.

"Where can I put this?"

She's asking me? I hate this job, Shembe hear my cry and make me a king or a president. I'll even take Gigaba's job, I don't mind.

Me: "I don't know griza, that's not my job description."

That's all I'm going to say to her, I hate tongue clicks with all my heart. Dammit, I should have a gun to shoot people who go around clicking their tongues. It's only 11am and I am dead tired, exhausted and irritated to the core.

This PEP uniform feels so uncomfortable, I can't stand it. Yeah, yeah. You can wipe that grin off your face. Yes I got a job at PEP, for an uneducated fool like me, guarding the door at PEP was the only job I could find.

“Haibo bhuti, I’m late. I need to know where to put my groceries, the next thing you’ll be accusing me of stealing these things when I bought them from Shoprite.”

Me: “Yoh, yoh, yoh gogo. So you woke up today and decided to come and annoy me? I said I don’t know hau, do whatever makes you dance and leave me out of it.”

The tongue click again, she marches in with her groceries. I don’t care, I need a new job. I barely make ends meet with the lousy two cents I make here.

-NELLY PAGE

Leaving my ex-husband was a choice I made thinking life would be a little easier, but I have been proven wrong. Nothing is going right, things are spiralling out of control and I am spent. There is nowhere to turn to, there seems to be a dark cloud hovering over our heads.

“Are you sure about this, Nkatanga?”

Gosh how I love this man, Nkateko is everything I need and more. The fact that he’s here lessens the burden. I made a decision to stop writing. I just unpublished my page on Facebook. My life is a mess and I need to focus on my kids.

Me: "There is no turning back now."

He sits on the couch facing me, I love how touchy he is. A smile stretches on my lips at the feel of his hands rubbing up and down my arms.

Nkateko: "Victor hasn't come out of his room."

I don't see him doing that anytime soon.

Me: "I called in a favour with a friend, she's a child psychologist."

Nkateko: "Getting him help is a good start, what happened today will never leave him. It might affect his future."

Me: "What if Sam's parents press charges against him, bullying is a crime Nkateko. My son is going to serve time in jail."

I know I wanted him punished, but years in jail will destroy Victor. He's only a child.

Nkateko: "If they do

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then we'll get him the best lawyer."

"Am I going to jail?"

Oh no! How did I not see him coming? He's standing in the doorway of the lounge, hands crossed over his chest. My baby looks so frail and terrified.

Victor: "Am I going to jail mom?"

He repeats when I fail to answer him, I have to stand to get closer.

Me: "Victor, you're not a child anymore. You know that bullying is a serious crime."

His eyes widen, tears streak down his cheeks. I want to caress him, but now is not the time. I am still not okay with his doings.

Victor: "B... but it was... a mistake mom. We just wanted to teach him a lesson."

Nkateko: "A lesson that has resulted in Sam taking his life."

Victor regards Nkateko with a black look, he's still upset with him.

Me: "It doesn't matter what your motive was, there is no justification for bullying, Victor. You have to face the consequences of your actions."

Victor: "So you're going to let me go to jail?"

His voice is incredulous, he steps back as if he's disgusted by my presence.

Me: "If it happens that you're taken, we'll get you a good lawyer."

Victor: "Why are you saying those things to me, mom? I don't understand what's going on."

Victor moves to a seat and hugs his body. I turn to Nkateko for help, to find his face reflecting nothing. Just a blank expression.

Me: "Hiding things from you would be wrong of me, I know I should protect you baby. But you have to know what your actions have birthed, you need to know the law is against what you did and they might take you away."

Victor sobs, he hides his face in the palms of his hands.

Victor: "I don't want to go to jail, please don't let them take me."

Me: "The only thing we can do right now is think positive, but you can't mess up and think you will go scot free. Life is not a fairy tale baby."

He jolts up in a fit of rage.

Victor: "Stop saying that to me."

Where does this child get the idea that he can shout at me?

Nkateko: “Victor!”

Victor: “No, I know I messed up. But, why does she have to sing about it. I’m tired of hearing it. Don’t you think I feel guilty enough? I’m sorry for Sam and his parents. But mom, I didn’t tell him to kill himself. It’s not my fault that he was weak.”

Wow! Victor has drained all my strength. He takes off running towards the front door.

Me: “Victor wait.”

I shout, running after him. He pulls the door open with force and my heart jolts to my throat at the figure standing on my doorstep.

Victor: “Dad.”

Victor cries, throwing himself in his father’s arms.

-SABELO ZULU

“Haibo! Rose, is that not your husband standing at the door?”

I know that rough voice, my eyes chase it to find Rose and her ugly friend Kea standing behind me. This woman is dressed like she’s on a mission to catch a blesser.

Me: "Rose!"

Her dubious eyes begin to scan the area.

Rose: "Shhh, not so loud Sabelo."

What?

Me: "What are you doing here? Where are the kids?"

Rose: "I should be asking you that. What are you doing here, Sabelo? What are you wearing?"

Disgust lies on her face as her gaze run up and down my figure.

Me: "I'm working, can't you see?"

Rose: "At PEP?"

I hear condemnation in her voice.

Me: "Why not? You said to get a job and here I am working."

Rose: Yes, but I didn't..."

The rest of her words are swallowed by an expensive looking man who emerges from nowhere and drapes his long arm around her shoulder. The sight is revolting, I am being tested here. I take my time to look at him, the fool looks and smells like money.

Me: "And then?"

Shembe, I prayed for riches not a rich old man for my wife.

Me: “What the hell is going on here?”

People are watching, yes I am shouting. Work place or not, someone is going to die today.

Rose: “Sabelo, you’re embarrassing me.”

Jesus! This must be a test, unfortunately I am not Joseph. I will kill someone, no one touches my wife. Not my Rose.

“Who is this fool?”

The old man has the audacity to call me names, I push him off of Rose, but the stupid wife pushes me back. What is this? Did that Sangoma cast a spell on me? That is the only logical explanation, Rose would never hurt me like this.

Me: “Rose you are my wife, you are my wife Rose. Who is this fool?”

She clicks tongue like all women do. My heart burns when she grabs the old man’s hand and walks away with him. Why am I not running after them? What on earth just happened? Not today Satan, you have picked the wrong man.

To be continued...

-NELLY PAGE.

“They want to send me away dad, please don’t let them.”

My son cries in his father’s arms, Bhekifa glares just as Nkateko joins us in the lobby. His hand rests on the small of my back, knowing him, he is marking his territory. Staking his claim.

Bhekifa: “It’s okay, I’m here now.”

Like hell he is, this is a two minute thing. My son will be back to crying for his father before the sun sets.

Bhekifa: “Are you okay?”

Bhe asks after pulling Victor out of his arms.

Me: “What are you doing here?”

Bhekifa: “You asked me to come, so here I am.”

Me: “Your presence was needed this morning when we went to Sam’s house.”

Bhekifa: “Are you going to invite me in or what?”

Crudeness knows him best, he steps in with Victor clung to him.

Nkateko: "I won't be able to hold myself if he starts trouble, please don't hold it against me."

Nkateko whispers to me as we follow Victor and Bhekifa to the living room.

Me: "I'm sure he'll behave."

I'm hoping he will behave, Victor is traumatised enough. I don't want him to witness two big men wrestling each other. Nkateko makes sure to hold me close as we settle down on the couch opposite Bhekifa and Victor. The boy has himself hidden under his father's wing.

Bhekifa: "I'm sorry I'm late, I had a business meeting to attend."

He's lying to his son, I know it's a lie. He can fool them all, not me. I have learned to read this man while I was married to him.

Bhekifa: "What happened? Why is my son shaken?"

I snort at Bhekifa's question because I am shocked.

Me: "If you were here, you would know."

I'm not about to play nice with this man. His shifty eyes move to Nkateko beside me, the look in them makes me wonder if he's here for Victor or Nkateko.

Bhekifa: "I told you, I was busy Nelly."

He retorts while piercing daggers in Nkateko's head, I should call him out on it. This is not his place.

Victor: "A boy from my class killed himself..."

Victor starts his story, it's hard to listen to it, especially with his cracking voice. He doesn't forget to sob here and there. It vexes me how Bhekifa is suddenly acting like the loving father, my son will be devastated when he leaves and doesn't come back. I get a judgemental look from the ex- when Victor wraps up his tale.

Bhekifa: "You want to get my son arrested?"

For an educated man, Bhekifa sure is acting stupid.

Me: "I think you didn't hear him right, Victor bullied someone. There is a possibility the boy's parents will have him arrested."

Bhekifa: "There is no proof that Victor was part of those bullies, I didn't see him in those videos."

Oh, so he's been following?

Me: "Sure there's no proof, but there are witnesses who can put him in the scene of the crime and he doesn't have an alibi."

Bhekifa: "Crime Nelly? You make it sound like he's some lowlife criminal. This is our son, you can't give up on him because you failed to protect him."

Me: "What are you talking about? The only person who failed to protect our son is you. In case you haven't noticed, you've been gone for years Bhekifa. I had to take a stand alone, I did my best to raise these kids right."

How dare he? I will not roll over and wave my tail because he says so.

Nkateko: "Vic please go to your room."

Oh God, I almost forgot Victor is here. He's perched on his father's side, looks like he's gone and never wants to come back.

Bhekifa: "Don't tell my son what to do."

Bhekifa pulls Victor back as he stands, Nkateko did predict this. I have to take a stand and try to avoid looking at Bhekifa because Victor will spot the deadly look I give him.

Me: "Baby, please go to your room. You'll see your father before he leaves."

I don't think he will obey, but he does. I watch him till he disappears up the stairs. Bhekifa could kill Nkateko with that look he's giving him, perhaps I shouldn't have let him in.

Bhekifa: "What is he doing here?"

I knew he still barks, Lord have mercy and get this man out of here.

Nkateko: "I should be asking you that question, you have no place here anymore Zulu."

Bhekifa: "I have a place in my kids' lives and as long as they are here, then I have every right."

Nkateko: "When did you come to this conclusion? Was it before or after your son lost his mind?"

Bhekifa: "Who the hell do you think you are? What right do you have over my kids to ask me such nonsense?"

It's been years and I still don't like the angry Bhekifa.

Me: "Nkateko has been here for your kids, he has loved them like a father should."

Bhekifa: "Are you saying this fool has replaced me?"

He stands to his feet, his fiery eyes state he wants to start a war.

Bhekifa: "You've got to be kidding me, I am their father not him."

Me: "You seem to have forgotten about that over the years, you neglected those kids as if they meant nothing to you."

Nkateko tries to pull me back when I stand, but I decline the offer. This is my house, Bhekifa will not tower over me.

Bhekifa: “That does not change the fact that they are mine, my blood runs in their veins in case you have forgotten.”

There is anger in his voice, malice in his words and murder in his eyes. I won't let him get away with thinking he has the right to do whatever he pleases.

Me: “How can I forget Bhekifa? Was it not me who came to beg you to have a relationship with your kids? Was it not me who pleaded with you to give them at least two minutes of your time? I fought for their place in your life, but it was a one sided battle. Surely I was never going to win against your arrogance and pride. You placed other things before your children Bhekifa. Nkateko was there, he stood and held them up. He became the father they lost, it would have been cruel of me to reject his love.”

I'm fuming, livid to the core. I want him to pay for making my children suffer. I want him to pay for his selfishness.

Nkateko: “You're a bloody coward Zulu, you run away from responsibilities like a stupid teenage boy.”

Nkateko is standing beside me, pointing an accusatory finger at Bhekifa who is ready to explode with anger.

Bhekifa: "Fuck you, Mathebula."

Bhekifa points one back

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yelling at the top. I'm praying the kids will not hear this argument.

Bhekifa: "Fuck you to hell."

Nkateko: "I didn't know I hit a nerve."

Nkateko's voice is just as condescending and that only riles Bhekifa up, his feet thunder towards Nkateko and I have to shield him in order to stop Bhekifa from doing whatever his mind has relayed to him.

Me: "Not in my house."

Nkateko's stubbornness shoves me to the side, he's standing head to head with Bhekifa and God I foresee a terrible ending to this.

Bhekifa: "Fine, you want him to be a father to my kids?"

He growls, crudely poking Nkateko in the chest. Of course being a man and fighting for his own ego, Nkateko does not let it go.

He pushes Bhekifa with force that he reels backwards almost falling, but the devil has a heel, it keeps him steady and balanced. His brows furrow, his eyes burn with a fiery rage.

Bhekifa: “You want my kids Mathebula? Go ahead, take them. Father them, I’m done.”

Me: “What is that supposed to mean?”

What kind of childish behaviour is this?

Bhekifa: “Exactly what I said.”

Me: “You can’t do that Bhekifa, you can’t throw them away as if they are yesterday’s paper.”

Bhekifa: “This is what you wanted Nelly, you and this bastard. But I want you to know one thing Mathebula.

He gets into his space, almost towering over Nkateko.

Bhekifa: “This world is too small for us both and you’re crowding my space.”

With a tongue click, Bhekifa turns and storms out of the house. The audacity he has to bang my door, the bastard won’t even see his kids for the last time.

-SABELO ZULU

It's not too late to accept that sangoma's conditions, Rose will see the devil very soon if she keeps provoking me like this. I have never been in such a hurry to go home. The lights are on, that means she's home. Today she is going to see my mother's child, Sabelo Zulu.

The house feels cold as I walk in, this could only mean she didn't cook. My assumptions are proven correct when I detect nothing on the stove. The pots are empty and packed away on their rightful place.

Me: "Is this the life I'm going to live till I'm ninety?"

Searching for answers and the wife, I tread around the house and find her in our bedroom. Rose is standing on the bedside, her hands tirelessly folding clothes and throwing them in a travel bag.

Me: "Are we going somewhere? Did we win a trip? As far as I know, we are broke."

Rose: "You are broke, not me."

What is she talking about? She has the nerve to not look at me when addressing me.

Me: "What's going on Rose?"

I stride in to stand next to her, maybe my hearing is playing games with me.

Rose: "I'm leaving, the kids are with my mother. They'll be staying with her from now on. You can go see them on weekends if you have time."

Me: "How?"

I'm confused.

Rose: "Simple, you're not the first man to be a weekend special dad. It won't hurt to see your kids..."

Me: "No, how is it possible that you're leaving me?"

She finally turns to face me, the bloody witch.

Rose: "Hiabo Sabelo, did you really think a woman like me will live in poverty? Come on, don't be a joke."

Me: "Rose, what's going on? I don't understand."

Someone please draw this down for me, maybe I'll be able to understand.

Rose: "I'm leaving you, I found someone else. The divorce papers are over there on the bedside table, I've already signed them. Abisola treats me like a queen and he's got all the money in the world."

Now it's starting to kick in, but for some reason I am too shocked to speak. All I can do is stand here like an idiot and watch my wife pack her clothes while throwing insults at me.

Rose: "He's a real man Sabelo, I had forgotten what an orgasm feels like until I met him. Wow, that man does things to me that would make any woman green with envy. Prince Kaybee has nothing on Obisola."

She laughs and my frozen state won't let me move, I'm stationary.

Rose: "He's a real man, even you would agree. I mean you saw him today, he's definitely the type that would have any man questioning their sexuality. You know what? I think he has an older brother, maybe he can hook you two up. He's rich as well, I'm sure you won't mind being his bitch. You'd do anything for money, I know. No offence Sabelo, but no woman would ever want you after this. I stayed because I fell pregnant and had nowhere to go, luck has finally found me. You're a loser, I don't know how I was able to put up with you all these years."

My head is spinning, my ears are ringing. I think I lose track of reality because the next thing Rose is on the floor screaming and I'm pounding her like fat cake dough. You can say I'm

blinded by rage, heartbreak or whatever you want to call it. I don't know anything anymore. All I know is that I want her to shut up, I don't want to hear the insults to any further extent. I don't want to listen to her mocking laugh and I want my heart to stop cracking.

Her screams and cries for help are background noise, I can't heed them, even though I want to. My logic has been overtaken by something dark, something that is beyond me.

-SABELO ZULU

How do I do it? How do I move on without my wife? I loved that woman, I loved her to death and gave her everything I could. I didn't have much, but I gave her everything I could. I should have known that Rose would be my downfall, I should've known that she would turn against me like our souls were never connected to begin with.

Look at me, stuck in a prison cell after battering my wife almost to death. I don't know what happened to me, but I lost it. I wasn't thinking when I attacked her, I would never hurt my wife, not intentionally. Rose is my life, she's the only one for me.

"Eita warden."

I call for the guard, he scowls at me while taking his time to stroll towards the cell.

"What?"

Arrogant fool, he's lucky I'm behind bars.

Me: "I want to make a call."

He snorts at my plea, what is wrong with black people? Don't tell me, he didn't hear what I said.

"You want to make a call? You're not asking to make a call?"

Eish, I forget these people think they are related to Mandela because they are on the other side of the bars.

Me: "May I please make a call... boss."

The idiot grins.

"Good, that's how you beg and because you were rude at first the answer is no. You will be granted one phone call tomorrow and that's if I'll be in a good mood."

Me: "What about my rights? I have the right to make a call."

"And who will you complain to, tell me? You're a prisoner, no one cares about you."

He mocks me and walks away, I have to find out how Rose is doing. When the neighbours came and pulled me away from her, she wasn't moving. What if I killed my wife? I will never forgive myself.

Me: "Warden, please. I need to know if my wife is okay. I need to know if she's alive."

The stupid guard does not heed my shouts, there is no peace in this country.

“Hiabo ndoda, usuyakhala manje.” (You’re crying now?)”

There’s a fool laughing behind me, I am in no mood for criminals.

Me: “Voetsek lala, jou hond.” (Piss off and go to sleep, you dog.)

He raises his hands in surrender and pivots away from my deadly glare. Who will I call to get me out of here? My brother has turned against me, I doubt he will lend a helping hand. I have no one left.

“Please eat.” Tears dance down her face as these words remind her of her son, today she is pleading with her husband who hasn’t eaten anything in days. He’s slowly fading into oblivion that mom has to forget about herself and take care of him. Losing her husband as well would surely send her to her grave.

“When will you stop crying?” Sam’s father queries, worry unashamed in his tone.

His hand reaches for his wife's cheek to wipe her tears away, she shakes her head and that has more tears trailing down her face.

"When you start eating." Her voice is raspy from all the crying she's been doing, the funeral is in three days and she's been struggling with nightmares since they chose a coffin for Sam. Images of him drenched in his own blood, laying in a coffin haunt her dreams, she would wake up covered in sweat and tears and cry till morning. Sam's father is aware of it, damn he wishes he could carry her burdens. Nevertheless, there is only so much he can carry.

"I will eat the day our enemy has been punished."

"Do you want to press charges?"

"No." Sam's dad shakes his head, he doesn't deem that enough a punishment. "Our hearts have been ripped out and trampled on, I want to rip their hearts out as well. I want them to feel what we feel. Only then will I be at peace." His voice is void of sympathy.

Mom wants to dispute, however she is not strong enough for any clashes. Her head is not in its right space, she can only pray

that whatever her husband is planning will not get him into trouble.

-NELLY PAGE

The past weeks have been foggy, the kids are so quiet that it worries Nelly. She would ask them but fears what their answers would be, deep down she knows that Bhekifa has everything to do with it. Maybe they heard the conversation the day their father disowned them and the news is still processing.

Nelly wants to make it up to them, a trip maybe. Nevertheless, work is hectic. She hardly has time for herself.

Pulling up in the driveway, Nelly spots a figure through her peripheral vision. Curiosity holds on as she trails her eyes to the right, to inspect. It's a bit dark and so she can't really see who the person lurking outside her yard is. Her heart clenches, she thinks of calling Nkateko, but he is so far away right now. It will take him forever to get to her. The police are certainly not an option.

Okay, don't panic Nelly.

She tries to keep calm, it's not working especially now that the person has turned and is looking right at her. Nelly would drive out and dash to a safer place, but her body is numb. All she can do is stare at the person.

Fearing for her life, something snaps her back to normality. Could be her kids, could be the will to live. She knows she will die if she doesn't move. Just as Nelly turns the car on and changes gears. The figure comes running towards her in full speed, it's too fast that she loses sense of thinking. Once again, her hands are frozen along with her brain.

She stares with wide eyes at the person running towards her vehicle. The person has an odd looking body, they are wearing a mask over their head. Nelly can't tell if it is male or female, but whoever it is, is carrying a brick. A scream is heard

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only it is not hers. The voice could be belonging to a male, however voices do not guarantee the gender of a person.

A brick is smashed through window where Nelly is located, she ducks while screaming for help. Her hands have gone to cover her head, they are shaky as well as her body. Seconds go by, they turn to minutes while Nelly is drenched in fear and utter

silence. She can't stay there the whole day now, can she? So she says a little hushed prayer and slowly raises her head, the first thing she is met with is a broken window. Shards of glass and the brick seated on her lap.

Of course the next logical thing to do is call for help... the police, Ramaphosa is too busy for the country... I mean Nkateko is busy at work, he probably won't take her calls. As she carefully shoves the shards of glass off her lap, a white piece of paper is revealed. With shaky hands, Nelly picks it up. She scans her surroundings for the intruder. She could run into the house and lock herself in there, but what if the trespasser is in the house.

She decides to call Bheki Cele; pardon me! She decides to call the police. Like many South Africans, Nelly is told a bunch of lies... Oops! Here I go again... The police assure her they are on the way after asking her a million irrelevant questions.

Curiosity has not left her side after the call, gradually she opens the note and what is plastered on it brings her world to a standstill. The sender cut out words from a magazine of some sort and carefully pasted them on paper.

‘There’s a coffin reserved for everyone in this dark world, sad how some of us have to lay in it sooner than others.’

Wasting no time, a shaken Nelly grabs her phone and dials the number of the one person who makes her feel safe. Busy or not, he has to answer.

“Nkatanga, what are we having for supper? I was thinking since the kids are not home, we could go out. You need a break from cooking.”

“Co- Come home now, please.” An unsteady voice, Nelly pleads. Nkateko senses the fear in her voice, all of him stands at attention.

“What’s wrong, Nkatanga? Are you okay?”

“There’s someone in the yard Nkateko, they smashed my car with a brick. What if... Nkateko, what if...”

“Please tell me, you’re okay.” Nelly could hear him wheezing, he must be running.

“I’m scared of getting out of the car, I don’t know if they are still around.”

“I’m on my way baby, stay in the car and lock the doors.” Like she is brave enough to go snooping, besides, the window is broken. She might as well be standing outside. The police are

not there yet, she knew calling them was a waste of time. You have to be a special somebody to get attention from the men in blue.

Nelly awaits her lover. It takes more or less than a second before the back doors of her SUV swing open, already terrified and alert, Nelly lets out a blaring scream and her head snaps back to check who the persons are. Just as she does that, the driver's door opens and a man in a balaclava stands before her with a gun aimed at her.

“Voetsek, shifta sfebe.” (Move.) His voice is hoarse, unpleasant to the ear. Her life flashes before her, she screams horrifically, but a gun is pressed to her temple. Instinctively, her hands rise in defence and surrender.

“I said move.” The same man whisper yells, roughly pushing Nelly to the passenger's seat. She manages to scoot her trembling body there, heart racing a hundred miles, head spinning from confusion and fear. Nelly panics as the man in a mask starts the car and drives out of her yard.

“Pl... Please... y... you can take everything... Just let me go.” She cries for her life, she's too loud for these three men and they

are exasperated by the noise. The two in the back have not said anything and Nelly is oblivious of who they are.

“Leave the begging for later, sweet stuff.” The driver spits in a mockery tone which sends cold shivers all through her body. She’s not stupid, she knows what happens when you’re hijacked or kidnapped rather. Thoughts of being molested invade her mind, she can’t fathom them hence the scream that leaves her mouth.

She grabs the steering wheel, she too has no idea why. What she knows is that she can’t let them get anywhere with her, if an accident were to happen due to her dire decision then so be it. Struggling with the driver, Nelly leans in to bite his hand. A chunk is enough to send the man screaming as the pain shoots through his body.

“You bitch,” his back hand smashes against Nelly’s cheeks.

As she falls back on the seat, her hair is roughly pulled from the back. She shouts and grabs the hands that are tightly gripped on her hair, kicking and screaming. The road they are travelling on seems awfully quiet that no matter how much she screams or fights, no one will come to her aid. That's it... having had enough of her dramatics and highly annoyed, the driver hits her on the head with a gun, causing her to fall unconscious.

The deafening sound of a train wakes Nelly from her unconscious state. She groans as she flicks her eyes open and is met by darkness and a throbbing headache. Instantly, Nelly is aware of the cold object she's seated on and realises her hands are tied behind her back when she tries to move. Where have those people brought her? What are they planning to do with her?

She blinks a couple of times until her eyes adjust to the darkness, the room she's in is small with no windows. Her eyes search for anything to get herself loose from the ropes.

Before she could grasp everything, Nelly hears footsteps outside the door and male voices. Two men walk in, one has soft facial features you'd swear he wouldn't hurt a fly while his accomplice looks like he'd slit her throat without blinking twice. The soft looking one grins coyly as his eyes meet hers, the grin is bone-chilling, it has Nelly shivering with fear.

"Welcome back sisi," she recognises the voice of the gentle looking guy, it's definitely the bastard who struck her on the head with a gun.

“Why am I here? What do you want with me?” Her question is rushed, she needs answers. The men laugh like the idiots they are.

“The boss sure has an eye for good women, look at you.” Okay this one seems to be the one in charge, he should definitely get out of this business. Find a wife and build a family for himself, then again as he gets closer, his eyes sell him off. There is something eerie about them, he bends over and grabs her chin.

“Beautiful,” the man whispers close to her ear before his eyes lustfully run down her body. She shivers with disgust.

“I didn’t do anything, let me go please.” She pleads, but they seem to find joy in her desperation.

“Relax sisi, your lover boy is the one we want and the fast way to get him is if we have you.” An evil grin appears on his face, he releases her cheek leaving a throbbing pain behind. Her eyes widen, Nelly is shocked by the revelation. What could they possibly want with her innocent Nkateko? That man is as pure as holy water. Her eyes chase the scary looking guy guarding the door to find him sneering at her.

“What do you want with Nkateko? He didn’t do anything...” Her speech is halted by an evil chuckle.

“You’ll find out soon enough, just a little more time and lover boy will come looking for you, or maybe not. In a way we’re helping you, kind of like a test. If he comes through, then you’ll know he loves you, if not then... ouch askies.”

The same guy receives a call, he rams his hand in the pocket of his pants and comes out with a phone.

“Boss.” His eyes are glued on Nelly, her mind is blank as who the boss might be. Nkateko’s life was a rollercoaster before they met and there is a possibility he might have made enemies along the way. “We’re coming.”

A coy smile pulls up at his lips after dropping the call. “Shine sisi shine, it appears someone loves you. You are a good bait.” The man laughs and lightly slaps her on the cheek, she winces at the impact.

The two goons follow each other out the door, leaving Nelly with the piercing silence.

Now that she is left by herself, her mind entertains many things. Nothing should happen to Nkateko, not him. He is her life, she’s so used to having him around that she doesn’t know how she’ll live without him.

Time is not on her side, if she could find something to cut the ropes, she’ll make it out in time to warn Nkateko. Nelly scans

the room for anything to use, those bloody idiots were so careful, the room is clean of any sharp objects. Out of frustration she tries to scoot the chair towards the door hoping it's not locked.

She manages to move a little closer, but what will she do when she gets out? They will probably see her. As she continues her escape plan, the door slowly opens and her heart hammers away in her chest. The woman standing before her kind of looks familiar, she can't place together who she is.

"Nelly?" Her eyes are wide as though she's shocked to see Nelly tied up.

"Help me, please." A woman ought to feel sorry for her, right?
"They kidnapped me and tied me up, I need to go back to my kids; they need me."

"Oh my God, I knew he was obsessed but to do this." The lady complains as she hurries to untie a baffled Nelly.

"Who are you talking about?" Nelly's curiosity can never be left behind, the lady steps back after succeeding to untie her.

“You need to get out of here before he finds you.” There is urgency in her voice, she sounds terrified and her eyes keep chasing the open door.

“Nkateko is here, I can’t leave him behind.” Nelly hopes the lady would be able to help since she seems to know the kidnapper. The lady battles with whatever is in her mind, it’s written in her eyes. Nelly anxiously waits for her answer, as her mouth opens to plead for help again, the woman grabs her hand and runs with her out the door.

They enter a dark narrow hallway

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the floor is wet and there’s a foul smell. She can’t make out if it’s a rat that died or a dog, however that is far from her worries. Who is this woman and why is she so bent on helping her? It feels like forever since they have entered the corridor, they finally come to the end. The two women are welcomed by sounds of gunshots and darkness.

The woman stops and pulls Nelly to a corner, their hearts are racing faster than the sounds of gunshots. Nelly can’t recognise the place, there are tall buildings around, she can’t see further than that.

“The exit is that way,” the lady points to her far left, she looks at a terrified Nelly after. “There’s a road not far from here, you might get a ride. I’ll keep him distracted, just in case he finds you gone.”

“What about Nkateko? He’s out there, those men said they want him.” She’s not about to leave without her Nkatanga.

“There’s nothing you can do for him, those men are fighting with guns and by the sounds of it, Nkateko is not alone. Please go.” The woman says.

“Come with me, I don’t know this place.” Nelly.

The woman lets out an exasperated sigh, a frown builds on her facial features. Nelly thinks she will change her mind about helping, instead she grabs her hand again and takes off running with her. They stay close to the wall, they haven’t seen anyone where they are but gunshots are still as loud.

“Who is this man you keep talking about?” Nelly questions while running beside the woman.

“Nelly.” Her heart stops along with her feet at the sound of his voice, swiftly, she turns and seeing him standing there brings

tears to her eyes. He looks like he's been through hell and back, his face is covered in sweat.

Nkateko is in a panicky mode, he didn't think he would ever find Nelly. He had to seek help from his friends, finding her location was not hard though. It was the thought of finding her dead that tormented him. However he was afraid that he might get there too late and now that he's standing before his beloved, his heart can beat better.

At the distance between them, the two glance at each other. There is a deep yearning to be in each other's arms. While Nkateko yearns to protect Nelly from the world, Nelly yearns to find shelter in his arms. She craves the safety only he can give her. She is still a bit shaken, however seeing him, eases the tension and fear tugging at her.

"Nkatanga." He's just a few feet from her when he calls her by this beautiful name he dubbed her with, one she has grown to love. Just a few more feet from each other, Nkateko opens his arms to welcome her under his wing where she feels safe and undone.

The sound of a gunshot interrupts the moment, this one is too loud as if fired at close range. Nelly freezes on the spot, Nkateko as well and that's after his body took a slight jolt. Eyes widened, bodies stiff and hearts pounding hard in their ribcages. Yet their eyes still refuse to look anywhere else, but at each other.

No one can detect where the gunshot came from. A lone tear escapes Nkateko's eye, the second eye releases one as well. Nelly can see the trail of his tears as he's standing under a beam of light, she can only wonder why he's crying. She attempts to ask as her mouth slightly opens, but she is stopped by another loud sound of a gunshot, at this Nkateko gasps loudly, his body takes another jolt and he falls knee first.

"NOOO!!!" The woman who helped her escape screams, it is only now that Nelly realises what is happening.

"NKATEKO!!!" A horrific scream surges from Nelly's lips. Two more shots are heard, blood bubbles out of Nkateko's mouth. Her world comes to a standstill, she scuttles to him and catches him before his head hits the ground. It all feels like a movie or a terrible nightmare to put it lightly. He's been shot from the back, however she doesn't look for the culprit. She needs to keep her eyes on the man she loves, lest he breathes his last while she's not watching.

“NKATEKO.” Nelly yelps again as she positions herself on the ground before laying his upper body on her lap. There is so much blood, she can’t tell where it’s oozing out of. His mouth too is covered in blood, he opens it to speak, but is unable to. Tears trickle down the corners of his face as he glances up at Nelly with bloodshot eyes, he’s groaning in pain and it’s slowly becoming hard to breathe.

“WHAT HAVE YOU DONE BHEKIFA?” Nelly hears the woman who rescued her scream, she turns to see horror painted on her face, her eyes looking far ahead. Nelly follows them and her heart drops when she sees Bhekifa with a gun aimed at her and Nkateko. How did she miss that? How did she not see him coming? She could have at least warned Nkateko.

“I will deal with you later, Cheryl.” Bhekifa howls, he’s angry, boiling to the extreme.

Season finale

NELLY PAGE-

It's been there for a while now, this anger, escaping when Bhekifa comes to mind. I swallowed it when my kids smiled at me, they unconsciously helped me back to sanity. Little did I know I was drinking the anger like a pill and so it has grown in my belly and now it has come out as hot as hell itself. I'm glaring up at the man I was once married to and all I can think about is how fate has been unfair to me that I crossed paths with him.

"Don't look at me like that Nelly, you know why I did this." He says and I am dumbfounded. I want to scream, shout and throw anything at him. Lord I want to squeeze the life out of him.

I feel something wet brush against my cheek, it's Nkateko caressing my cheek with his bloodied hand.

"Nk- Nkata...nga." Blood spurts out of his mouth as he calls me, my heart bleeds along with his wounds.

“Stay with me, baby please.” I can’t lose him, not like this. “Call an ambulance please.” The plea goes out to Cheryl, but Bhekifa aims his gun at her.

“I won’t hesitate to shoot you, Cheryl.”

“Please don’t do this Bhekifa.” Her voice is saturated in fear

“I... I’m... so... sorry.” Nkateko.

“No, no... please don’t leave me. I will marry you, I will have your kids. Just don’t leave me, Nkateko plea...”

“T-tell me... how to... make y-your heart stop hurting.” He says wiping my stubborn tears, this is not what I want. I want him, I need him to live.

“Don’t go... don’t... leave, please.” No one ever prepared me for this, the day I will lose my heart, the day it will stop beating. He’s giving up on me, I see it in his eyes.

“Can... I... meet you... in the next life...time? Pro...mise you will be... my wife.” He painfully pushes the words out and my heart clips with each syllable.

“We can do it now Nkateko, I’ll marry you... baby, I’ll be your wife and give you as many children as you want.” Life does not love me, how can one be exposed to such sorrow? More blood

ooze out of his mouth when he coughs, I use my top to wipe it away.

Nkateko forces a smile, it feels like the last. His eyes deeply looking into mine, I feel the stare from deep in my soul. My head spins when they slowly close.

“Nkateko, Nkateko open your eyes.” No, no, no. God please no, not him. My loud cries fill the vast surroundings, I can’t breathe. God I want to die, I can’t take this pain.

“Help him, please Bhekifa. Let me take him to the hospital.” I’m screaming at him, but there is no remorse on his face. His eyes are as cold as this night.

“No one is going anywhere.” He seethes.

“What do you want from me?”

“Don’t you get it Nelly? This was the plan, I told you this world is too small for us both. You weren’t supposed to find out that I was behind his death, I don’t know how Cheryl found out about my plan and followed me here. I guess I will have to kill everyone, a man like me can’t go to jail. Don’t worry, I will take care of our children.”

“Bhekifa please.”

“NO, NO!” He shouts. “You ruined me, Nelly. All I wanted was for you to give me, my rightful place in your life. But you chose him, you chose this loser over me, the man who loved you when you knew nothing about love.”

“What are you talking about? You ruined yourself, I chose myself. I chose my kids.” How dare, he put his miseries on me.

“This is the problem, you’ve always been a selfish bitch.” He shouts and roughly rubs his head, I’ve seen many versions of him. But this is the craziest I’ve seen so far, it is as if something dark has taken over him.

“Bhekifa let her go, baby please let’s go home.” I almost forgot about Cheryl, she hasn’t moved from her spot. The fear in her eyes is the one I had when Bhekifa would begin his possessive drama.

“I said no one is going anywhere.” He yelps at her. “How did you find me Cheryl? How did you know I would be here?”

“I followed you, I heard you talking about the kidnapping over the phone. I knew someone was in trouble, I just didn’t know who.”

“What right did you have to follow me? You have ruined my plans.” Bhekifa.

“What did you have me do? You were losing your mind and I had to make sure you don’t get yourself into trouble, but it was

too late when I got here. There was a gun fight, that's when I decided to go snooping and found Nelly. She's the mother of your children, how could you do this?" Cheryl is wasting her breath, Bhekifa does not care. This man does whatever the hell he wants.

"You should have stayed home and waited for me, now I will have to kill you too." The bastard nonchalantly says, the devil definitely lent him his heart, that's if he has one.

"Bhekifa, please." Cheryl.

She reminds me of myself when I was under his spell, the Nelly that loved Bhekifa and thought she could fix him.

"I'm done talking to you," he dismisses her with these words, anyone would be petrified when facing death. "Get up Nelly."

This is it, today is my last day. My gaze falls on Nkateko who is still in my arms, he looks so peaceful as if he's sleeping. If this is a dream, Lord wake me up right now. My eyes are closed as I say this prayer, when I open them, I'm still in the dark, holding my lover's body and Bhekifa still has a gun aimed at me. I never thought he would unravel and lose his mind.

Placing one last kiss on Nkateko's forehead, my tears rain down his face. This is no fairy tale, tears don't work like that. I can only hope he feels my pain and comes back to me.

"I'm sorry my love, this is all my fault. Please forgive me." I hug him tight, as if letting go would render me lifeless.

"Okay, that's enough." Bhekifa snaps, before his hand furiously pulls me up. He's lugging me towards a building.

"Let me cover his face at least, please." Nkateko deserves this, I can't leave his body exposed like that. "Bhekifa wait, just wait."

I'm screaming, although he has a gun pressed on my temple. He snubs my cries, my feet refuse to move with him but he continues to pull me towards the building.

"BHEKIFA!" He stops at Cheryl's voice calling out to him and turns me around with him. Cheryl is standing next to Nkateko's body, a gun aimed at us. I don't know how to feel about this.

"What are you doing?" Bhekifa yells at hers.

"I can't let you do this?"

"Cheryl, put the gun down."

"NO."

“Are you sure you want to do this? It’s me, Cheryl. The man you love, your Zulu man.” Typical.

He sounds stupid pleading, then again, I know he’s faking mercy.

“Let her go Bhekifa and take me home, we’ll pretend this never happened.” Cheryl.

“Yes, I swear I won’t tell anyone.” I add.

This is what happens when you’re desperate, you lie. This man will rot in jail, I swear to God.

“SHUT UP!!!” He screams in my ear as he presses the gun on my temple. I would flinch and wail, but I can’t feel anything right now. My heart is frozen. “Put that fucking gun away, Cheryl.” At this point it’s either kill or be killed, both Cheryl and Bhekifa have guns. He would shoot her on the spot, but there is something daring about this woman. The look in her eyes says she won’t hesitate to shoot Bhekifa if he were to shoot her.

“How the hell will you survive without me? Who is going to pay for your children’s tuition? Your lifestyle? Will you go back to being a cleaner?” He is manipulating her and this man has graduated at the school of manipulation, she seems to be rethinking her decision.

Her hands are trembling, she might miss and shoot me if she's that nervous.

"I love you, Cheryl, you know I love you, right? This has nothing to do with you, I'm not in love with Nelly anymore." The Bastard.

"Then, why are you doing this?" Good question Cheryl, I want to know as well.

"It wasn't planned, I only wanted to get Nkateko here. Nelly was not supposed to know that I'm behind this, but now that she knows, I can't let her go. She will send me to jail baby, how will you live without me? I know you can't live without me just like I can't live without you." This is actually working, Bhekifa is getting through to her. Her eyes are softening. "Now I'm going to walk away and you're going to follow me, okay baby?"

Just as I feared, Cheryl gradually lowers the gun. This man beside me sighs in relief. He turns me around with him and continues with the escapade. I will die without seeing my kids, my parents.

We have barely taken three steps and another gunshot echoes, everything happens so fast that I almost miss Bhekifa falling flat on his face with a bullet wound on his lower back. I quickly turn

to Cheryl and Oh my God, she actually did it. Her hands are trembling and eyes on Bhekifa. She drops the gun, falls to her knees and covers her face. I think she's crying, her shoulders are moving. My whole body feels numb, but I need to check if she is okay.

She shows me her face covered in tears, fear in her eyes.

"I- Is he... dead?" Her voice cracks.

"I think so, he hasn't moved." He better be dead. "Are you okay?"

"I killed him... I killed Bhekifa." She bursts into tears, never thought I'd be seen comforting my ex-husband's girlfriend for killing him. Life you son of a gun. I find myself crying with her after my eyes land on Nkateko's body. It hurts so bad that I can't breathe, life can't be so cruel to treat me this way. I have lost so much already, I have nothing more to give.

"I only had you for a second, now you're gone. How do I go on without you? I miss you, Nkateko. I really miss your warm touch on my skin. Your whispers in my ear, your clinginess and how

your eyes would sparkle when you look at me.” A hand on my shoulder has me turning around. “What are you doing here?”

The last time I saw Cheryl was eight months ago, the night she rescued me. She wouldn't stop apologising for what Bhekifa had done, it's merely not her fault. We've been talking over the phone, that night actually brought us closer. Bhekifa is paying for his sins in hell, I hope the fire increases every second.

When the police came we told them we were both kidnapped and there was a fight between the men who came to rescue us and Bhekifa's men. Self-defence is not justified in this country, she surely was going to spend time had she confessed. I owed her my life.

Bhekifa was buried a week after. I couldn't bring myself to go to his funeral, the kids were taken by Bhekifa's family for a week, saying they are Zulu kids, they had to be at the funeral. I wanted nothing to do with the Zulus, I will never forgive Bhekifa for what he took from me.

“Your mother told me, you'd be here.” She says.

I come here every day without fail. I miss him so much and I still want to spend more time with him

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I still want to tell him how much I love him. I still want to feel his passionate kisses, touch him and get lost in his presence. This is the closest I can get.

“I’m leaving town, I thought I should say goodbye.” She’s been talking about this for some time now, I didn’t think she meant it. Bhekifa didn’t have her in his will, all his assets were left to his children. Victor being the eldest is the beneficiary, I haven’t told them about their father’s will yet. They are too small to grasp that.

Speaking of Victor, he wrote Sam’s parents a heartfelt apology letter. He got his uncles to go with him, I was proud of my son. For the first time he showed maturity and remorse towards the terrible incident. He visits Sam’s grave from time to time, his parents were surprisingly forgiving.

“Where are you going to go?” I ask.

“I got a job in Eastern Cape, I’ll be starting in two weeks. That will give me time to settle in and get used to the environment.”

“Are you all moving there?”

“My mother will stay here with the kids, I need to work for my kids. Besides them, there is nothing for me here. Almost every place I go to reminds me of...” She stops seeing how uncomfortable the path she’s taking is making me, I’m not ready to talk or hear about Bhekifa. “I’m sorry, if I knew he was talking about you that night on the phone. I would have warned you, Nkateko would still be...”

“There is no use in crying over spilt milk.” I interject. “What’s done is done.” Although my heart continues to hurt. Cheryl pulls me into a brief random hug. It’s these stupid tears, they won’t stop flowing down my face.

“We’re going to be okay,” she says, wiping them away. I’m not sure I will be okay, it still hurts as the day I last looked into his eyes. She bids me goodbye and leaves me alone to talk to my Nkatanga.

The sun is going to set soon, I’ve been here since morning.

“The thought of going back home where you are not there is unbearable. I would do anything to fall asleep in your arms again, to listen to the sound of your heartbeat. You have no idea how it calmed my chaotic mind. The security you gave me when I was wrapped in your arms, every night I sleep with your

t-shirt on. It still smells like you, I haven't washed any of your clothes. I can't wash away your scent Nkateko, I'm afraid I will start to forget you if I do." My knees wobble, I'm crying again. I let the tears do whatever they want. They suffocate me when I hold them back.

"I can still taste the last kiss you gave me that morning before you went to work. I can still see how your eyes screamed out how much you loved me and I can still feel your hands carefully caress every inch of my skin." The pain is overwhelming, I cannot be subjected to such agony. It's not fair, why does God give when he will take back along the way?

"Every night before I go to bed, I pray that you come to me in my dreams. Didn't God give you, my message baby? Didn't he tell you that I asked for you? Just a glimpse of you is all I ask. He should have at least whispered that to you, I'm upset with him and you for leaving me. There's this emptiness inside of me and I'm so tired. Living without you is torture, it's your memories that linger in me; they hurt me. Everyone is telling me to move on, to wait on God, but I can't let you go. I tried, I promise I tried."

This is my life now, living with his memories and sobbing because of the pain of not being able to be with him. I'm suddenly whisked up by strong arms, not knowing who it is, I fight and squirm. Tears are blinding me and I have to blink them away to see who has scooped me up as if I weigh baby weight.

"Dadewethu, it's me. I'm here now, I'm here." Thokozani? My vision clears, the first thing I see are his sad eyes looking down at me.

"Zaza?" He nods, sits me on his lap as he settles down and holds me tight. As if the stupid tears know I'm a baby when he's with me, they throw a party on my face. "Where have you been? It hurts... Zaza, it hurts so bad..."

He holds me closer to his chest.

"Let's go home Nelly, this is no place for you. You will go crazy if you stay here." Mama must have told him this is where I live now.

"Please let me stay a little more, I can't leave him alone here." I plead, I know it sounds stupid, but my heart is convinced that Nkateko is as lonely as I am. He feels my absence when I'm not here.

“Nkateko would want you to take care of yourself.” That doesn’t make the pain any less. I hide my face in his chest and cling on to him, he’s rocking me back and forth. Thokozani is so stubborn that he will take me away from this place, I don’t want to go away from Nkateko. He needs me, he was there for me when I needed him and I need to do the same for him.

“I will dry your tears now dadewethu, you don’t have to suffer anymore. Your brother is here now and I won’t leave you again.” I believe him and my heart seems to find a little solace in his words. I will be okay, I have to be okay for my kids. “Let’s go home now, ubaba and Qhawekazi are waiting for you.”

He stand us up and places me down, my face is still hidden in his chest. I will crumble if I look back, my heart always breaks when I have to leave Nkateko in this place.

“Nka- Nkatanga.” A raspy voice calls, I must be hearing things. It’s been like this for the past eight months, his voice is stuck in my head that I hear it when he’s not really calling me. I don’t look back, it’s confirmed, I have lost my mind. “Nkat- tanga.”

Thokazani stops, I do too. He looks down at me, eyes wide and probing. I think he heard what I heard, I’m afraid to turn

around. My brother is brave, I'm looking at his face when he turns, waiting to see if I have completely lost it.

"Bafo," he doesn't have to say it twice. I quickly swivel to see Nkateko looking at me. He's trying to sit up from the hospital bed. My feet fail me, Thokozani catches me before I sink down.

"Nkateko," I can only mumble his name, shock has surfaced and swamped my whole being. The doctors said there was no chance he might come out of the comma, they had given up on him. I never thought I would ever see him looking back at me.

My brother helps me to the bed, Nkateko immediately cups my face. His hands are cold, I don't mind. He's touching me, the same touch I craved for, for months.

"Hi," he murmurs leaning his forehead on mine.

"Hi," mine is accompanied by a stifled sob. His breath whiffing my skin feels like heaven. "You came back to me, you came back." I cry in his arms, he's holding me in a tight embrace.

"I will never leave your side again, Nkatanga." He says.

I believe him, he came back for me. This is where I want to be for the rest of my life, in his arms where I belong.

SABELO ZULU-

I remember the day I danced when my mother died, it was a day like no other. I was so sure I would get the freedom I have always wanted, but oh boy was I wrong. If someone had told me, I would be nothing without that woman, I would have prevented her death. Look at me today, alone, miserable and working a crappy job.

“When are you going to stop drinking ntwana?” Lwandle has a big mouth, this witch of a man acts all innocent for my liking.

“As long as my life continues to suck.” The tavern is where I spend most of my time when I’m off from work, the house is cold and lonely. Rose survived the brutal beating, she didn’t press charges and didn’t give any reasons why. I am glad though, but I miss that woman. If I knew she was going to leave me one day, I would have given her love portion.

“Then, you’ll die of alcohol poisoning.”

“Better that than a broken heart.” This man is crazy, when has alcohol killed anyone? That’s white people’s things, my heart handles alcohol better than pain. My phone beeps, I bet it’s from Cell C. It’s always Cell C with their never ending

promotions or deals, at least they remember me, I'm so lonely that no one calls or texts me.

"Yeyi!!" My loud exclamation catches the attention of everyone in the pub, as I can't hold the excitement, I push my chair back and happily jump to my feet. Lwandle is shocked, he's staring inquisitively.

"What happened?"

"I won, I won." I'm shouting, screaming and jumping. Heck I don't know what to do with myself, I never thought luck would find me again. I really was taking chances when I played sports bet this morning. Lwandle grabs my hand, he knows I'm talking about money. But why is he touching me?

"Don't touch me," I push him off, yelling with this big smile on my face that keeps transitioning into shock. "Don't touch me, I'm rich, I'm rich." I jump on the table and shout for everyone to hear. They must know, they must know. I'm not a pauper anymore. People are staring with 'we don't care faces.' Only two or three clap for me, black people and their jealousy mentality. This is where witchcraft begins.

Lwandle is dancing, this man is not serious about life. Unless he is celebrating my luck, it's fine. He won't see a cent from me, friends or not. Money knows no friends.

“We are rich ntwana.” Listen to him... we for what?

“I am rich.” I put emphasis on that. “Uvukile umalambane.” (I’m back in the game.)

“How much is it twana?” Why does he want to know? I’m rich that’s all? He’s still happy, someone come and wipe that 50cent smile off his face.

“20K ntwana,” I tell him anyway. “I won 20k.” His face changes into a frown, I don’t care. I’m rich.

“Sabelo, 20k does not make you rich.” What did I say about black people and jealousy mentality?

“Yey, Voetsek. Do you have that kind of money wena? Do you have it?” He shakes his head. Thought as much.

“Rose, I’m coming baby, your man is coming for you.” I can’t control my excitement and screams, this is the best thing that has ever happened to me.

“It’s only 20K Sabelo, Rose won’t take you with this little money, she’s dating a man with much more.” Why am I sensing jealousy coming from this guy? It’s too heavy man, Lwandle is spoiling my mood. I jump off the table and head towards the door, I’m not talking to anyone today. Poor people have always

annoyed me anyway, I don't belong here. Sandton, here I come.

"Where are you going?" He's running behind me, I knew he wanted my money. He wants me to spend it with him, that's why he keeps telling me, Rose won't take me back. I will show him. "Sabelo..."

"Yeyi, phuma Satan." (Leave me alone you devil.) I'm not playing.

"I'm going to get my wife, I'm going to get my wife back." I know I'm loud, but who cares. Rose, daddy's coming for you.

.....**THE END**.....

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