

D U D U B U S A N I - D U B E

ZULU WEDDING DUDU BUSANI-DUBE

My uncle Phisoa once said during one of his rants-ol-tate that all that land that was now called the Free State was the land of Mashoeshop, the greatest King he said ever lived, and therefore it belonged to the Basotho people.

They stole that land from us because it has diamonds under it, a worthless piece of stone that can do nothing except glitter. Everything can glitter unlike, even a rock glitter when left in the sun for too long," he'd say.

And then he'd look at me and smile a smile of satisfaction.

"They butchered us and stole our land for a worthless stone, but you know what? The one thing they should have stolen, they didn't. We have water. If they were smart they would have come for that land. Let's see what happens to them when we close our borders and seal our rivers. Let's see them drink those diamonds."

He would say it as if it was something that would happen soon, something he was looking forward to.

I did not understand what my uncle really meant the white people whom he mentioned had no right to breathe African oxygen or breathe in general, but I knew it was the Zulu people that he had a special problem with.

The call has stopped in front of my apartment building.

"I charge you double fare."

I thought I had heard him wrong, so sat up straight.

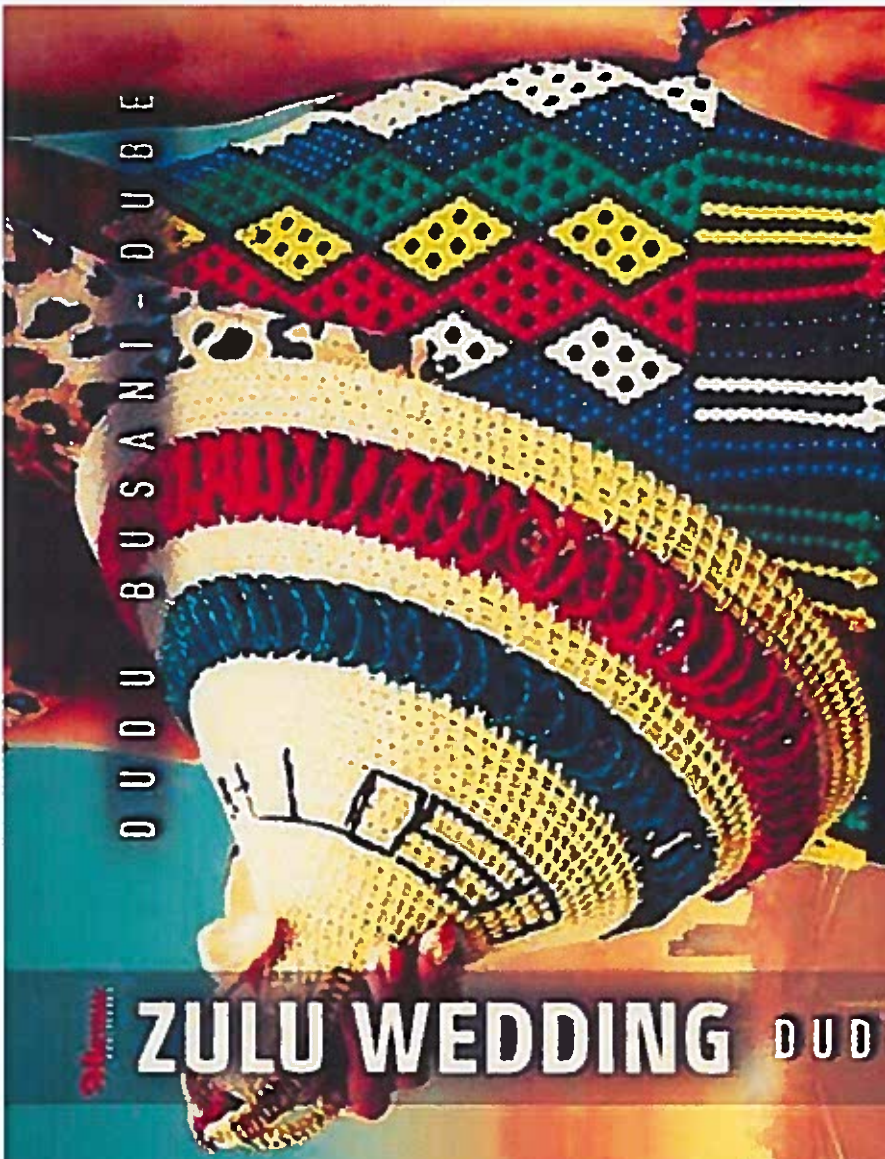
"Double fare for taking a nap here. I been waiting for you to wake up. Dreaming and talking strange language here," he said, his head open and ready to scam me. His turban sat slightly loose due to the occasional scratching and his long beard sagging over his slightly exposed chest.

I had been lulled enough in in foreign lands so I opened the door and stepped out.

He looked me to the trunk and said: "I let you go free because you have too much children, my because. You keep bringing my brining because you want child support, you want social services cheque. You never stop bring things you people, never. No I have seven children but I work, no handouts."

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The End

But we were left with only four days in Maseru before going back to Joburg and the things that needed to be done had to be done immediately.

I followed her, like I had always done, past the kitchen where my mother was preparing *dipabi*, a meal she had mastered over years as it didn't form part of cuisine where she came from.

It was the Tuesday before the Friday my father was to have a meeting with his whole family about something I didn't know. Always, during those meetings he wore the blue and black blanket, the one we had just discovered, or should I say Mabo had investigated into discovering that the Ntaote boys had stolen.

I said to her: "Ntate has many blankets. He won't notice it's gone."

And she said to me: "It's not about the blanket Lungile, it's about justice. We are going to get Ntate's blanket back, by fire by force."

Most times she meant things literally. She could, and I do not lie, set fire to the Ntaote house to get that blanket back.

We left our home through a hole in the fence and instructed Dikeledi to keep guard.

On top of ensuring that nobody came close to the hole in the fence, she was supposed to come up with a good lie if our parents noticed we were missing.

We walked past all the fenced big houses, past barking dogs, past the suburb's rubbish bin scavengers and all the way to the top of a hill with three thatched rondavels looking up at us. There was smoke coming out of a mud house in the middle.

My sister, Mabo, knew everything.

Iters was a life of curiosity and action while I, older and said to be more adorable, was the centre of attention to my parents and the whole Sabata family.

We were cut from the same cloth but came in different colours. She black, red and bold, and I, a cocktail of spring flowers with a pastel soul.

Dikeledi didn't come in any colour.

I decided I wanted to be a dancer at 10 years old when a gold-haired ballerina came to buy one of my father's paintings.

It was her poise, her cat-like moves around my father's small gallery in Makhoarane Morijo, Maseru, and her perfectly shaped torso that made me want to be exactly like her.

But Mabo didn't like her. She had something against her type. She couldn't understand why I wasted time crouching behind our father's painting board watching this woman like she was magic.

We had things to do, she said while tapping my shoulder.

She was already in her red tights and red T-shirt and I knew that when she wore those, she meant business, which usually ended with us being in trouble with our parents and Dikeledi being spanked by her mother.

I had never been to that side of the neighbourhood before, the one where people didn't have everything, and neither had Mabo.

"Walk behind me," she said, going downhill.

"And if we have to run? What must I do? Should we run in different directions?"

She grabbed my wrist and told me: "We will not run, not even when that blanket is in our hands. We will walk out of here at the same pace we came in."

The Ntaote boys were famous for bullying and jumping over people's fences to steal things from washing lines.

We spent only the school holidays in Maseru but we had been victims of their atrocities several times.

Dikeledi had once told us that those boys, the eldest 14, once stole a sheep from two villages away and painted it black so its owners would not recognise it.

But Dikeledi had many unbelievable stories about what went down in Maseru when we were in Joburg. She didn't talk much but when she did, she made things awkward. She said things we didn't understand, things that didn't feature in our lives, and I found it suspicious that none of those things ever happened during school holidays when we were in Maseru.

The yard was empty but we knew smoke coming out of the chimney meant there were people in the mud house.

Mabo grabbed an axe we found lying next to one of the rondavels.

I stood still and looked at her, expecting to be filled in on the game plan but all she did was signal for me to follow her.

I was already fearing the worst when we entered the mud house to find the whole Ntaote family sitting around the fire, eating.

I hid behind Mabo, oblivious to the fact that I was taller than her and everybody saw me before they saw her.

"Scanamarena!" Mabo shouted.

When all we got in response were stunned quiet faces, she raised the axe up in the air and screamed again: "*Scanamarena a nitate!*" and smashed the clay pot on a table with the axe.

Two of the Ntaote boys stood up and that meant it was time to run but Mabo moved forward, axe up and aimed. Had they come any closer she would have plunged it into someone's forehead.

It could have become ugly and maybe even bloody had their mother not stood up and thrown the blanket at us.

We strolled out of that house at the same pace we walked in, and as soon as we were out of sight, we ran for our lives until we collapsed at Dikeledi's feet just as we entered through the hole in the fence. She had made sure the coast was clear, just like she always did.

For Mabo, it was a victory but for me, it was traumatic because I didn't get to do stuff like that.

My parents, and I noticed this when I was very young, had the tendency to allow Mabo to be herself, but with me it was different. I found them to be overly protective, overbearing and over loving, as if they owed me something.

We were able to slip Father's blanket back in his wardrobe before he noticed it was missing.

It was even easier because he wasn't home, both him and mother.

Selloane, who was our nanny and Dikeledi's mother, said something about them going to another village to buy clay, which father used in some of his artworks.

This meant a free pass for us, no set dinner and no endless questions about how our day was.

I galloped behind Mabo as we headed to the only private space we unofficially owned in our home, the retainer wall behind the tool-shed where we lay on our backs and talked about the things we would do when we grew up, the places we would go and the stuff we would buy when we had jobs.

The stories changed each time based on what happened since the last time we were there.

"I'm going to be a dancer when I grow up," I said, looking up at the sky, with nothing but the gold-haired ballerina on my mind.

I had wanted to be many things before, even a thick-haired princess who wore a beaded crown once, but this time I was certain.

Mabo sat up, looked at me and frowned.

"But yesterday you said you were going to work at Edgars."

She was right, but I had immediately outgrown the fascination with how good those women wearing black and white, with red lipstick, smelled.

I had discovered my passion that very same afternoon.

"I know but now I want to be a dancer."

She shook her head and lay back down.

I was sure. It's not every day that one decides at 10 years old what they want to do with their life but I was sure.

It wasn't only because our family was wealthy, with my father being a famous artist, that made us, his only daughters, believe we could be anything we wanted to be. It was our parents' free spirits and encouragement that had us believe we would be happy and free forever.

"Mabo, what about you? What do you want to be when you grow up?"

I didn't look at her but I know she rolled her eyes.

"I told you yesterday, Lu. I'm going to own a farm and a butchery."

She had been hell-bent on that and I could not understand why anyone would want to kill animals for a living, but her justification was always that people needed meat, everywhere in the world.

"But maybe I will be a policewoman," she said.

I was surprised and a little relieved too although I didn't know if her being allowed to carry a gun was any better than slaughtering animals.

Mabo was like that. Some of the kids at school were scared of her, even though she never bothered them. But they were the small children, the big kids laughed at her.

"I need to protect you. That's why I'm going to be a policewoman," she said.

We looked at each other and laughed. She had always protected me in her own unique way, against bullies, against neighbourhood dogs that barked at every kid they saw, and against the Ntaote boys.

Dikeledi lay down on her back quietly next to me, looking at the same sky as us and listening to us speak out our dreams.

We never really made an effort to include her in our conversations and if she did jump in, especially when we talked about what we wanted to be, it was always awkward.

The truth was that we all knew her dreams were limited.

She wasn't like us. She didn't eat with us at the same table and she didn't have half the things we had.

Her new clothes were Mabo's old clothes. She spoke funny English and she ate with her hands and spoke with her mouth full.

She was flossing her teeth with a string of hay she had just plucked from the ground when we heard her stutter first before saying the words.

"I'm going to be an astra-nate," she said.

There was silence among us. I'm not sure what Mabo was thinking but I was wracking my brain trying to figure out what an astra-nate is.

"When I finish high school, I'm going to go to university. I'm not going to go to Joburg to clean houses and look after people's babies like my aunts Mapaseka and Aggy. I won't go to work in the mines in Welkom and get killed like my uncle," she said.

I knew about all of that.

My father had sent money to her family for her uncle's funeral.

He, her uncle, had told them he owned a supermarket in Welkom, only for them to find out after he was killed that he had been an illegal miner.

He was shot dead, along with seven other people, including his brother-in-law and a neighbour by mine security guards employed by British mine owners who had never set foot in Welkom.

The police from Welkom never came or called. They just sent a message for them to fetch the bodies at the border.

After that, Dikeledi's grandmother never came to our house. Her cousins too, Tankiso and Nkateko, whom we had technically grown up with, never came to spend school holidays at our home again.

But I was still stuck on the astra-nate part.

"What's an astra-nate?" I asked.

"It's people who go to the moon," she said.

Mabo laughed at that answer.

I nudged her with my elbow and she stopped.

"They fly on a spaceship, like an aeroplane except the spaceship goes past the clouds and outside the earth. They say there are people there but they are not like us, they are aliens," she said.

It sounded far-fetched, especially for Dikeledi whose family could not even afford to buy her new clothes.

How was she going to go from a village behind the mountain to the moon?

Maseru was the furthest she had ever been, and she only visited on school holidays so she could be with her mother.

She lived with her grandmother in a village with no electricity and no running water. Her grandmother named her Dikeledi because on the day she was born, her father was getting married to another woman.

Her grandmother said her mother was in tears when she gave birth to her, not because of the pain of labour, but because of a broken heart.

So she named her 'tears'.

The odds had been against her since the day she was born, but we did not interrogate her further about the moon thing. She had every right to dream.

After all, it's what children do. It's the beauty of innocence, of seeing the world as it is, beautiful and accommodating, until it starts taking things away from you.

We looked up to see my uncle Phineas, my father's younger brother, standing over us. He had found us again.

We looked up at him, expecting anything from pokes on our feet with his stick to a tough lecture about our unacceptable behaviour. But he didn't speak. He stared at the three of us and blinked a few times.

"Tloho le nna," he said.

We stood up and followed him. He was a nonsense man, short with squinted eyes and a sharp nose.

He wore traditional regalia, every, single, day, and often butted heads with father over how he, my father, had no regard for culture and where he came from.

He was against our parents moving us to Joburg, said people there looked down on Basotho, especially the Tswanas and Pedis.

He said they had no culture, that they were mine slaves who went to South Africa and changed their language, created their own tribes and started acting as if they were superior.

My mother described him as bitter and unprogressive. I thought he was insane.

We followed him behind the studio, across the garden and past the washing line.

"Lu!" Mabo said, pulling me back.

There were police cars in the yard and movement all over the veranda.

I spotted my aunt first and Selloane fanning her and patting her back.

"They are here for me. I know it." Mabo hissed.

The Ntaotes had gone to the police and we were going to be arrested for trying to kill them and...

We had nowhere to run so we kept walking.

"I didn't go there, Mmê. I was here the whole time. They made me watch the fence," Dikeledi said as soon as we stood in front of my aunt and her mother.

Had Mabo not been so scared, she would have kicked Dikeledi the way she always did whenever she told on us.

"Oh, my children!"

It was my aunt. She grabbed both of us and pulled us close to her chest. She was crying but we weren't surprised because she cried about everything and anything. She cried every time we had to leave Maseru for Joburg and she cried every time she saw my father on TV, so we knew she was crying because her nieces were about to be arrested.

She pulled us inside the house where we were asked to sit down by Uncle Phineas and were told everything was going to be okay before he broke the news.

"There was an accident on the highway," he said.

We looked at each other, wondering what that information had to do with us.

"Gerald and Ntombi, they didn't make it. The ambulance took them but they didn't make it to hospital. They died," he said.

I had only ever heard about people dying on TV and radio, and Dikeledi's uncle, but there was nothing painful about it because I didn't know those dead people.

Things like that didn't happen to us. Not us, the Sabata family, not us, Lu and Mabo. We had never known anything except happiness and privilege all our lives.

Mabo stopped talking.

Dikeledi went back to the village because her grandmother said a child shouldn't be at a place where there had been death.

She said it was bad luck, that it would make her path to a bright future dark.

And so I was alone, with Mabo not talking to me or anyone else, and Dikeledi gone. I had no one.

For a week, people from as far as Zimbabwe and Soweto filled our home but Mabo stayed in our room, quiet.

I brought her food and I talked to her when the lights were out and the house was quiet. I spoke to her until I fell asleep and when I woke up the next morning to find her eyes still open and her facial expression still the same, I greeted her and wished her a good morning.

First she'd look at me like she felt sorry for me, and then her face would change to express panic, and then anger.

I knew her well enough to know leaving the room was the best thing to do.

I would now and again sit in the kitchen and eavesdrop on adult conversations about who was or wasn't going to attend the funeral.

Sometimes I caught the news on the radio where people sent condolences and said it was a 'great loss' that my parents were dead.

They talked about them as if they were objects, items, idols that belonged to everyone.

"The artist and his wife..." they'd say on radio.

"Their two little daughters, shame..." they'd say.

It was the pity that Mabo hated, the pats on the shoulders, rubs on the heads, the over-supply of sugar water and uninvited hugs that changed nothing.

I understood her anger, I really did, but we were both too young to understand what our lives were to become going forward.

On the morning of the funeral, Mabo started talking again and suggested we run away and never return, but we got over that idea when the two coffins arrived, my mother's white and my father's black.

They put a *seamarena* and *modinyeo* over my father's and a white fluffy blanket over my mother's. Maybe it was significant, but it didn't matter much because they were there in body, but also gone.

There were so many people, some I had never seen in my life, and they were all obviously important.

Mabo held my hand tight as we watched the coffins go down. There was a pang in my chest, a sudden tight-

ening that went up my throat, leaving everything inside me turned upside down. I cried for the zillionth time that week and I knew it wasn't the last time I'd cry for them.

The house was still full of relatives after the burial ceremony. I heard them debating whether we should go back to Joburg or stay in Maseru with my uncle and aunt.

I wanted my life back. I wanted my parents, I wanted Maboo to be herself again and whether it was in Maseru or Joburg didn't matter, I just wanted things to go back to the way they were.

But the time had finally come for me to not get whatever I wanted, whenever I wanted it.

When things became too much, I went and hid in my father's studio, the only place that hadn't been infested by strangers and family members I saw only once every five years.

I ran my thumb over each painting, just as father had taught me. He said there was a special feel to it. It called your senses to silence. All you needed was to close your eyes and let your sense of touch guide you. Velvet and earth, it was magical and unique, something found in all his paintings. I knew that special feel, I could tell it apart from anything.

"Is that you?"

It was a boy, standing behind me, pointing at a painting my father had finished just two weeks before he died.

He had made me stand with my back to him and turn my head to look at him. He said it was the only way a painter could capture a human soul, through their eyes.

But when it was finished, it wasn't the 10-year-old me. I looked older.

I asked him about that because I didn't understand.

"I looked into your eyes. Lungile. Your face and skin and shape will change as you grow but never your eyes," he said.

I wanted to touch it but he said no, it was a gift and I was only going to be allowed to own it when I turned 21. I was furious because I had a decade and a little more to go before getting to that age.

"You look exactly like your father," the boy said, with a slight smirk and no care in the world that I didn't want to talk.

"And you are?"

"Zweli. I came with my father. I didn't want to but..." he said and shrugged.

I didn't know him or his father and I was pretty sure they were not family friends.

"I saw you crying," he said.

By then I had figured out we were not in the same emotional state. I was hurting, he wasn't, and all I knew was that I didn't want him there.

He could have been a year or two older than me but he walked with his hands knotted behind his back like a grown man. He walked slowly too, as if he was used to people walking beside him.

"You know what you should do?"

I rolled my eyes. I was not interested at all.

"Every time you feel sad about your parents, think about the good things you did with them."

He didn't understand. I was thinking about the good things I wasn't going to be able to do with them in future.

We left the studio when a man with a beard found us and hushed us to go back to the house.

I couldn't find Mabo but I found my uncle and aunt talking to the tallest man in the room, who kept glancing at me.

"Take any of the paintings. They are worth thousands each," my aunt said but the man kept shaking his head.

My eyes found Mabo behind the tall man and my aunt.

"Are the Zulu people going to take Lungi now?" she asked.

She had been standing right behind them the whole time.

Nobody answered. It would be 10 more years before I found the answer.

The Bargain

"I can't believe you spent four years at varsity studying how to dig graves, Lu."

That was Sam, 15 minutes before my party was to start, my 21st birthday being just three days after my graduation.

Sam, whom I had to explain to everyone, including my family and anyone we had ever been in the same room with, was the closest thing I had to a best friend.

She had an issue with me studying geology, a profession she claimed was no different from talk shows.

"Those two things, they change nothing," she'd say.

We met when we were 17 years old, on our first day at Walter Sisulu University. I was the girl from Sandton and she was the bubbly one from Rustenburg. Two teenage girls who found themselves in the tiny town of Umtata for all the wrong reasons.

I was there to delay my dreams, she was there to figure out if she had dreams at all.

The first time we met, she walked up to me on campus and asked if I lived in res.

I said no and she said: "Too bad. We could have made a killing together."

I wasn't the type who warmed easily to strangers but she was the first and only person I knew on campus, even if it had only been for two minutes.

I figured I may as well grab the opportunity to have a conversation.

"Where are you staying?" I asked.

"I'm supposed to rent a flat but I thought you were in res so I was going to squat with you and put the rent money to good use. I know all the res people are funded by NSFAS so..."

I wasn't funded by a student loan but I had a two-bedroom townhouse close to campus. I wasn't happy living alone in a town I didn't know, so I offered her a room, under the impression that she needed it.

It turned out, too late of course, that her big plan for making a killing involved her rich stepfather's money and inflating textbook prices to make a profit.

Initially she was studying law, the following year she registered for sociology and by the time I completed my geology degree, she was in her second year in political and international studies. It was funny to watch because it wasn't that she had failed all those courses, she was just decisive enough to let something go if it didn't make her happy.

It was the same with boyfriends. They came and went.

The extravagant party I was about to be treated to was my uncle's wife Yvonne's idea and I could have said no but she partly raised me.

She sacrificed so much of her own life when she left Lesotho and moved to live with us at our parents' house in Atholl in Sandton. That's what she always

said, even though she only arrived years after our parents died.

Also, I knew my uncle, besides love of course, was her ticket to getting out of Lesotho to eat sushi with a fork at Dainfern Square.

A part of me felt I owed my family, that's why I went to university and got a degree in something I wasn't the least bit interested in.

"People are waiting," Sam said.

It was Mabo who was waiting for me at the door, wearing a black dress with sneakers. She didn't look happy.

"And you, Rabobi, why do you look so grumpy?" Sam said to her. Mabo had left early that morning for her interview with the army. It was one of her biggest dreams. Anything that involved law enforcement and authority was her dream.

When all her peers were excited about going to university after high school, she wanted to join the navy but quickly did a U-turn when they mentioned being at sea for two years.

She tried the police academy but was told she could only be considered after she turned 21. And so she decided she was going to be a soldier.

"How did it go?"

"They rejected me."

"Oh no, Mabo. Why?"

"I'm too intelligent."

"They said that?"

"No, just that I sounded over prepared."

What did that even mean?

I had watched her the previous night preparing her answers. She had been exercising for the physical test

for a while and she had read all about the South African National Defence Force, from its highest-ranking general to the obligations the country had to the UN.

My sister was the most determined person, the most hardworking human I had ever come across.

"I think I impressed them enough until they asked me why I wanted to join the army. I was honest because that's what's required from a soldier," she said.

Sam looked concerned.

"What did you say Mabo?" she asked.

"That we must invade countries before they invade us, instil fear so they never even think about invading us, starting with those overpopulated ones in West Africa," Mabo answered.

I knew Mabo more than anyone in the world but even I was shocked.

Sam needed a drink. She said so herself.

"What's the point of having an army and carrying big guns if you aren't going to go to war? If I wanted to serve soup to the homeless in uniform I would have joined the Salvation Army," Mabo said.

I wanted to take that as a joke but I knew how much she had wanted to succeed that day. I gave her a hug and proceeded to the garden.

I couldn't look at Sam because I knew what was coming next, and it came.

"Are you sure she's all okay up there...?"

"My sister, Sam, don't!"

"Sorry," she said, raising her arms defensively.

Mabo was different, and I knew that, but there was nothing wrong with her. She was who she had always been. She hadn't changed even after everything we had

been through in our lives and I was never, ever going to let anyone, best friend or not, judge her.

The garden, for as long as I could remember, had always been a perfect place to hold events. We had had many weddings of cousins and distant relatives, a few fundraisers held in memory of my father and a couple of other things Uncle Phineas' young Yvonne did in her social circles. So much had been removed and erected in that decade but the water feature remained, a sculpture of an overweight child carrying a clay pot leaking water at the bottom. It was handmade by my father when he was 20 and apparently he offered it to my mother's parents back in KwaZulu-Natal as lobola because he had nothing else to his name.

They didn't accept it, it was worthless then.

"Walk like a lady and don't offer handshakes, wait to be offered, some people don't like being touched," that was Yvonne.

She led me straight to my uncle who gently placed his arm on mine as if he was walking me down the aisle.

"My brother would be very proud," he said.

I doubt my father would have wanted me to be a geologist. He was all about following one's dreams.

I greeted strangers and kissed the cheeks of old family friends. I felt the warm hands of *rakgadis* who donned blue seShweshwe dresses and spoke Sesotho as if their tongues were lined with rare diamonds. I saw my parents' old friends and fans. I saw art lovers and collectors. I listened to stories about me that I could hardly remember. It was a typical Joburg mansions-of-the-north gathering where it was all about who you knew and what they had. My uncle's wife had turned

our lives into that type of situation. Sometimes I thought that was why Uncle Phineas chose to stay in Maseru and come to Joburg only occasionally. He had always been a traditionalist at heart. He had argued with my aunt before about me having a 21st party. As far as he was concerned, all of it was being done in the wrong way at the wrong place. But that wasn't what I was worried about. My biggest worry was the news I was going to break to my family that evening when all the guests had left.

I was, after all, officially an adult. I had done everything right and I had achieved according to their expectations. I didn't need a guardian anymore. In fact, now that I was 21, I was officially in control of all of my father's art. Not a single one of the paintings he had signed LMS were sold in those 10 years. They all belonged to me and Mabo except one, which he had only signed L21. I had not seen that painting since the day of my parent's funeral. Everything that wasn't meant to be commercialised was packed away and the studio locked until the unveiling a year later, but even then, nobody went to that studio anymore. Everything there was covered with white cloths and people moved on with their lives. It was one of the things I wanted to do in those three weeks that I had, travel to Maseru, to my parents' graves and tell them I had decided to follow my dream.

"Ben Mashankura is here," Sam said.

I had to think hard to figure out who that was.

"At your party. Ben Mashankura is at your party, friend."

"Ben who? The guy who runs a pyramid scheme?"

It was him. I had never met him in person before but I had heard about him many times.

"He is friends with Lekgoa," Sam said.

Lekgoa, by the way, was Sam's white stepfather. She had never called him Dad or even by his first name, although she lived to ransack his bank account. His name was Stewart and he met Sam's mother when they were teenagers, a different time. They crossed paths again in their late 20s and they had been inseparable since. Stewart raised Sam as if she was his own and in the process, spoiled her into believing she was entitled to anything she wanted. His only crime was loving Sam's mother and being a far better father and husband than her biological dad. Sam could not handle that.

Anyway, I didn't know Mashankura and I didn't understand why he would be at my party with Sam's dad.

"Toooooo," my uncle's wife was tapping her champagne flute with a teaspoon.

I knew what was coming next, my biggest fear.

"Everyone... everyone."

She called "everyone" until the tent was completely quiet. There were three possible things likely to unfold at that particular moment. Either she was about to introduce herself and recite her forever memorised public relations profile, call me to the stage and make me stand next to her while she talked about herself, or indirectly tell everyone about how much money the family spent on the party.

Sometimes I felt like she didn't get us at all. She had never met my father in her life but she dropped his name whenever it suited her.

I liked her though. Besides being self-centred and vain, she loved my uncle.

"Everyone, you all know my niece, Lungile, the charming, beautiful daughter of the Sabatas who has brought all of us together today. Three days ago she graduated, she is now a qualified errrrr..." she stopped and shoved the microphone in front of my mouth.

"Geologist," I said.

"Yes... that."

It went on and on and all I was able to do was thank my aunt, my sister and my uncle.

Sam had already had one too many. And I needed to go outside for some air.

"Lunkile," my uncle said. He couldn't properly pronounce my full name and didn't care to try because, well, why did I have a Zulu name in the first place?

"We must talk when you are done drinking wine."

"I don't drink, ranganane," I lied. I had been holding one glass of wine all evening and I hadn't even drunk half of it. It was my sister that I was more worried about because even though I had left home when she was 15, I was always near enough. But now I wanted my life to be about me.

"We will talk in the morning," Uncle said.

He sounded serious, suspiciously serious, but my uncle could call a family meeting to announce a birth of a goat.

I had not yet told Sam or Maboniso that I planned to relocate to study dance, the only thing I had ever wanted to do in my life. Maboniso would have told me to go but Sam would have called me crazy. That was if I had gotten the chance to tell them.

The studio, which was a lone structure between the garden and the pool, had been built two years after we moved into the house.

I remember how we used to stand at the window of my bedroom and watch Father painting through the studio's transparent glass walls. Sometimes he'd be quiet and when he was creating a happy piece, he would listen to Sipho Gumede and dance around the room. I missed that, I missed him.

It was completely empty the last time I was in it but that night a painting was placed against the wall, covered in a white cloth. I knew it was my father's but what I didn't understand was why it was in that room because nothing of his could be exhibited or sold without the curator who made decisions on behalf of us, his heirs. I slipped my hand under the white linen cloth, closed my eyes and touched it. Velvet and earth, I felt it and the feeling was as delicate as it had been when I was 10 years old.

It was that painting, the last my father ever done of me. For a second, I thought I locked eyes with him when I looked into my eyes. Everybody said I looked exactly like him but he always laughed and said that I got my spirit from my mother.

He said one day: "I know that when you grow up you will do exactly as your mother did. You will not let anyone stop you."

I was not grown up enough to understand what he was talking about then.

The painting was signed L21, and I remember it being the only one with that signature. He had said, and I had long forgotten until that moment, that I could only own it when I turned 21. But it still was strange that the painting had ended up in Sandton when nobody was allowed to touch it in the first place.

I sat on the floor with my back against the wall and my knees pulled up to my chest. Being there didn't make me sad. I had long learned to remember only the good times I had with my parents when they were alive. I ran my thumb over the painting again and tried to remember what my father's face looked like when he painted it, whether he was quiet and still or whether he was dancing to Sipho Gumede's guitar. I couldn't. But I noticed a piece of paper sticking out of the corner of the frame made of clay. I broke my nail trying to pick it out. Judging by how much the colour had faded from white to cream, it had been stuck there for a long time.

My Lungile

There is no better or less painful way to tell you this... it began.

My father wasn't much of a writer but the letter felt like his own heart had written it instead of the hand. I already knew my mother was Zulu and that they had met when my father was a struggling artist.

I knew we didn't have a relationship with my mother's side of the family because they did not approve of the relationship. But the one thing the letter said, that I didn't know, was that my parents had bargained. For them to be able to be together, they had to make a sacrifice, give something away.

They had to bargain, and I was the bargain.

The Thing on my shoulders

No, actually, I came here as a tourist, or a runaway. It was a 21st birthday gift from my uncle.

He said: "Go there and come back when you are calmer. A month should be enough."
I asked to take Maboo with me but he said no. He was smart.

I had enough savings to sustain me for a few months and my father's painting, the only valuable thing I owned.

Before that, I was in a dark place, feeling betrayed by my parents and resentful towards my uncles and aunts for not telling me the truth earlier, for not warning me, not preparing me.

Had I known that I was being raised to pay back my father's debt, I would have planned my life differently.

I would have run away earlier or maybe messed up my life so much that I would have been banished or disowned.

I know now that Maboo always knew.

Sometimes I laughed at her escapades, and Sam had even named her Rabobi because she was always investigating something, but I understood now.

When we hugged at the airport, she cried and said: "Go, hopefully when you come back that idiot will be dead," and for the first time in my life, I hoped her dark prayers would be answered.

She had found out not long before our parents died.

"They were talking about it with Uncle Phineas. They wanted to go to the Zulu people and pay them money so they could break the deal," she said.

It sounded so peculiar that all of this happened in my home, with my own family.

35

In December, Manhattan is like a prison.

If you do make it outside, you either do it faceless or shapeless.

I got to understand on my first winter in New York why people here make such a fuss about Christmas. It is the only thing they can celebrate in a city completely covered in snow.

I have loved this place since the first time I set foot in it six years ago. I've made many apartments a home, from the smallest to the warmest, the duller to the creepiest, but I have always lived on the left, or right, depending on where you are going, of 57th Street just so I can witness seasons come and go from my window.

There is no second side to 57th. It begins and ends in front of my current building and is 100 steps away from Columbus Circle where strangers are more alive than life itself.

The first time I felt free and strong enough to move on with life, I put on a tutu and ran barefoot from my apartment, across the square and deep into Central Park.

I raced past a group of children, mothers pushing strollers, a group of elderly people exercising and a few down-on-their-luck people who were once just like me, full of dreams and hope.

I came here to be a dancer.

34

Anyway, I love New York. I've loved it from the beginning, although it didn't immediately love me back.

The first dance studio I tried to join when I arrived turned me away very quickly because even though I had taken dance classes throughout high school, it took far more than that to start a career.

It was the same with the second and the third and the rest of them all over Manhattan until I swallowed my pride and called home for money.

They tried to talk me into coming back but I wasn't going to, not even for Mabo, who my uncle thinks is his leverage over me.

The money, however, was mine and they were going to give it to me.

I hired a personal dance teacher, Shemar, who I found out after we were deep in it was persona non grata in the dance industry.

I could have been more decisive and cut him loose, but Shemar was the type of person who got under your skin very quickly.

I found myself drawn to him.

His intentions were clear from the beginning. He needed the money. I needed to get ahead.

Our relationship, if I in any way was serious about getting ahead, wasn't supposed to be public or personal.

He understood that as much as I did but there was something fragile and needy about him that made me want to save him.

Most importantly, he possessed immense talent and skill despite his self-destructive nature.

I found out things long after the morning I opened my apartment door to find him curled on the doorstep, with his knees pulled up to his chest.

I could have been cautious, saved myself a lot of future trouble and stress by telling him to leave, but instead I let him in and fed him breakfast and coffee.

When he was done eating, he stood up and walked around the apartment, looking and touching things.

I didn't have much then, just basic furniture I had managed to buy in a hurry.

"Why on earth do you want to be a dancer? It doesn't pay much, you know," he said.

I didn't answer him but I knew why he was asking.

I had been asked that question many times, except it had always been asked by people who knew it wasn't about the money.

To be honest, I wasn't even sure anymore if it was the dream of being a dancer that kept me going and justified, to me that is, my stay in New York.

All I knew was I was going to pursue it until I won, for myself, for the fact that I wasn't given the chance to determine my own path by my own family.

Shemar didn't know me and I decided, particularly when I saw the signs, that I wasn't going to allow him to know me.

He paid extra attention to the painting of me, which I moved around a lot in the apartment depending on my mood.

"You look humble here," he said, staring at the painting with his arms folded.

I laughed because I didn't know if that was a sarcastic comment or a meaningless statement.

"So someone painted your face?"

I nodded but I wasn't going to tell him it was my father because then I would have had to tell him the whole story.

"What do you call it? The painting. People name paintings, you know. My f... friend is into this stuff," he said.

It didn't have a name.

"Nzinga. It is named Nzinga after an Angolan queen," I lied.

I let him take a shower and change into my denim shorts and an oversized T-shirt.

I intentionally offered those specific clothes to him because I was half his height but almost as thin.

We didn't immediately talk about why he was sleeping on my doorstep. All he did was apologise and say he had had a rough night.

I was fine with that, and so we stuck to the daily routine. Three times a week we booked a small basement studio from a retired dance teacher and the rest of the time we danced in Central Park.

Shemar's theory was that walls and roofs confine creativity. We'd both wear tutus and tights and dance until midday in the park.

Sometimes people watched us, watched him in particular because he moved flawlessly and danced like he was born doing it.

I mimicked everything he did although I knew I wasn't close to being as good as he was. Nobody in Manhattan was and they all knew that.

He was an exhibitionist, a headliner with no stage or lights or applause, but he gave sterling performances nevertheless to the homeless and burnt-out park dwellers.

They were a perfect audience, a bunch of honest misfits who had nothing to give and nothing to lose.

"Feather Man", the one who became an alcoholic and went crazy because he had lost all his millions in a bad investment, never had anything good to say about us.

"Waste of time, this thing of yours," he would say, and spit on the ground and push his junk-filled trolley away.

Sometimes Shemar swore at him, I lived to calm him down.

"You are a fast learner, 'Loo', but you know what the problem is?" Shemar asked me one Tuesday morning, sticking the plastic teaspoon on his tongue.

I tossed my empty ice cream bowl behind me. It landed on a flower bed.

He looked at me judgmentally and frowned, his flecked eyebrows not moving a millimetre. They were always perfectly shaped above his light brown eyes but somehow looked out of place on his face.

He was the "orange" type, coarse ginger afro that complemented his scant freckles.

Nothing said mixed race about him but there was something uniquely different about the way he looked. A certain shade of beautiful, of black.

"You can't do that. This is not Africa. You can't just litter!" he said.

I had learned long ago not to be offended by these types of statements, more so because I didn't understand if they stemmed from ignorance or a horrible sense of humour.

I leaned back on the park bench and waited to hear what the problem was.

"Your shoulders don't move, Loo. You allow your body to be art, but not your shoulders."

I still had a lot to learn. Surely that was something I could work on. He had said the same thing about my torso the first time we had a session.

"What are you carrying over them?" he asked while tossing his empty bowl in the bin in front of us. It went straight in.

"Being an artist is all about expressing yourself. You can't be a great artist unless you remove that thing on your shoulders."

The aftertaste of caramel and wild berries immediately turned bitter in my mouth.

It was that first question about the thing on my shoulders, and the pointing out of how much its heaviness was holding me back, that turned everything in front of my eyes ugly.

Suddenly the homeless people around us looked gross, the high cherry trees coming to life in early spring smelt horrible and Shemar, sitting next to me, felt like a buzzing insect I wanted to throw to the ground and crush with my foot.

He knew that. He knew it because he kept quiet and thought hard about what our next subject of that mid-day conversation would be.

I wanted to help him decide, many topics, safe and interesting topics, came to my mind right at that moment but the rage building up inside me suppressed my speech so I sat and watched him squirm.

Eventually he asked if I had ever touched an elephant.

I shook my head and told him they didn't allow us to touch them at the zoos back home.

"You have to go to the zoo too? What's the point of being born in Africa if you can't have access to the very things the whole world envies you for?"

It was a stupid question really, but I understood where we were at that particular moment.

"Wild animals are not our friends in Africa. We just treat them with more respect compared to the rest of the world," I said.

He laughed. I didn't.

He came home with me that afternoon and asked if he could take a nap on my couch before going back to his place.

I didn't know where he lived or who he lived with but there had been a boyfriend whose calls he ignored and rejected more than he answered.

He rarely talked about him, except that every afternoon he had to go back to him.

His style was simple and clean, bordering on cheap, but he carried a fawn Armani leather handbag full of make-up all the time and each time we had to part ways, he'd take out a MAC powder and run the brush over his face.

But that afternoon was different.

He slept on my couch past early evening while his phone rang and rang and rang until it died.

I gave up and put a blanket over him when he was still curled up and fast asleep at 9pm.

Had I told Mabo about what was happening when I emailed her late that night, she would have screamed at me and called me careless.

She would have come up with a thousand theories about why he was at my house and they all would have

been worst case scenarios that ended with me dead and buried in a shallow grave under my bed.

But unlike Mabo, I was trusting. I was also patient and kind.

Shemar must have figured out that about me early on because he kept testing me.

Like on that very same night, I was woken at the crack of dawn by a tap running in the bathroom. At first I thought he must have been using the toilet and was washing his hands. But it went on and on until I knew something was wrong.

I found him kneeling on the bathroom floor tiles, bending over with his face and arms under the water that was almost filling the bathtub.

I froze for what must have been two seconds. convinced he was dead.

When I finally came to my senses and turned off the tap, I grabbed him by his afro and pulled him out of the water. He slouched on the floor, hugged his legs and pulled his knees up to his chest.

The water was brown with small pieces of food, vomited food, floating on the surface.

"Don't call 911," he murmured.

He was alive.

"Shemar."

"I took painkillers without eating. I'm fine," he spoke.

I watched him get up and crawl out of the bathroom, his eyes half-closed.

When I came back from the kitchen with a glass of water, he was curled up on the carpet, fast asleep.

I let him be, certain that whatever was going on with him, I wasn't going to be part of it going forward.

But Sam had always said about me that it wasn't that I was kind and patient, it was that I was obsessed with seeing things through, obsessed with being part of the ending.

She said that at varsity when I cried for three days because Tatenda had moved on four hours after we broke up.

"What did you think was going to happen?" she asked.

I didn't think, I just knew I didn't want us to break up after we broke up, even though we had not really been dating.

I liked Tatenda because he was loud and radical. He lived for activism and Patrice Lumumba's ideology.

"A minimum of comfort is necessary for the practice of virtue," I remembered him shouting, quoting Lumumba.

That quote resonated with my situation so much at that moment when Shemar was passed out on my floor.

I was in a moment of discomfort, working on my virtue.

I convinced myself there and then that I could handle him and whatever he came with, because he was my ticket to making it in New York. Flawed and bended, yes, he was, but straight and perfect paths rarely lead to perfect places.

I took Shemar in and for my own sanity, convinced myself that he needed me as much as I needed him.

His situation kind of reminded me of Tatenda. Not that they were any similar, just that they both came with warning signs from the beginning.

Tatenda was a con artist, Shemar was bruised.

He had an ankle injury he sustained when he fell from the stage during a snow-themed production he was the lead act in.

The fall occurred two years before we met, when he was the best thing to ever happen to the dancing industry in Manhattan.

He said dance schools fought over him in those days. That he didn't have to audition for productions, they came to him.

"But Loo, you must know this. I learned the hard way that there are no friends in this place. You are as good as what you can offer and if you can't offer anything, don't even bother," he said.

I didn't take that to heart. As I said, I was always too trusting.

So now, Shemar was addicted to painkillers, struggling financially and running from an obsessed boyfriend.

I took him in, probably because, among many other reasons, we were both running from something.

We danced.

One day, when he thought I would be ready, he even organised an audition for me with one of the few people who were low-key still talking to him in the industry.

It wasn't anything big but I went anyway and he came along although he had to hide in one of the buildings across the street so my non-existent reputation would not be "tarnished".

The judges said I had potential, that I could be good only if I learned to show more emotion, if I tried to be more natural.

"You lack sex appeal, Loo, that's what it is," Shemar said as we sat on the same park bench eating corn dogs. I had heard that thing about my lack of sex appeal before, from Sam.

"You're a pretty girl, a bit too skinny with an awkward forehead but you know, you are unique and people like unique people. I mean, look at me," he said.

He always knew how to cheer me up, even in moments of failure. But his sense of humour was sometimes wicked, like the day a hawker from Jamaica tried to sell him flowers.

We knew the guy, he was at the park every day selling anything he could get his hands on. Sometimes we joked with him, briefly though, and we liked him because, you know, he was the closest we could get to Usain Bolt who we both had a crush on.

On that day, he came to us with a bunch of flowers. It was a Monday morning and Shemar always insisted we do yoga, no dancing, just yoga on Mondays. We were both lying on our backs with our legs up when the Jamaican guy, I never got to know his name, stood over us with a yellow smile.

"Happy Valentine," he said, with a bunch of red roses in his hand. We laughed hard. He stood still. "I'll give you a discount," he said, looking at Shemar.

Shemar laughed even harder. We hadn't even realised it was Valentine's Day and we both found it funny that someone actually thought it important.

"No, thank you," Shemar, who was on his feet rolling up his yoga mat, said, waving the man away.

I felt bad watching the jah-man walk away, sad and disappointed by his failure to sell red roses on Valen-

time's Day, of all days. I thought Shemar felt the same way too when he called him back.

But he didn't. He grabbed his wrist and squeezed it tight.

I gaped.

Looking up at Shemar, who was two times taller, the man stuttered: "My brother, you are hurting me..."

I had thought it was one of his usual ways of playing around until I heard Shemar hissing: "Toughen up! What are you doing walking away like a little bitch? What is wrong with you? Crying because I didn't buy your stupid flowers?"

It was not necessary, it was not at all.

"Shemar!" I shouted.

He still didn't let him go. The man looked at me, fearful and surprised. I would have tried to pull Shemar away was I not scared for my life right at that moment too.

"Shemar!" I tried again, with less conviction this time. He let him go. The man ran. I looked at Shemar. He smiled and grabbed his handbag and mat, as if none of that had just happened.

I was quiet for a while after that, worried and shocked. But somehow he managed to get me back. I don't know how.

That night, I should have stayed at home. But I didn't. I tagged along because he said there would be people there, people he used to hang with when he was still hip and happening. I went because I knew that even though it seemed nobody wanted to touch him anymore, some still had a soft spot for him. He always used that fact to get me to do things with him and for him. I dressed up, heels on and hair down. He wore my

clothes but carried his own handbag. I followed his lead when we entered the dark brown varnished double door duplex uptown. I remembered the many times I had walked down that street and counted the doors, each looking more expensive than the other. I remembered the days I had walked down that street on Christmas holidays, how some doors had red and green wreaths hanging on doorbells while others had nothing. I didn't remember if the door we entered had a wreath a few months earlier. In fact, it was so immemorable to me that I didn't even recall if I had looked up at it at all the last time I was in the neighbourhood.

A noble house it looked like, warm and welcoming with a touch of vintage, but a bit too masculine for me.

Shemar knew I was about to ask why we were climbing up the stairs of a deserted house in the middle of the night, so he shushed me and pointed to a small bar on the left as we reached the top.

"Sit there, drink whatever you want to," he said.

The smell of rich nicotine fused with perfume and a jacket hanging over one of the leather bar stools was the only evidence that there was someone in the house and that they were alive. In the background was soft music, instrumental with occasional humming by a woman with a deep voice.

I didn't know the song but it sounded too familiar, like something I had heard before in a different life.

Shemar had disappeared somewhere behind one of the many doors. I didn't see which one but I knew he went to the left, and so I went to the right and followed the passage.

I kept thinking I was going to bump into a housekeeper, a butler, a chef... something. But no, there was

no sign of life except the still faces on the walls. The starry eyes, some happy and others lost.

They reminded me of my father's portraits, the ordinary people, "the neighbours" as he used to call them. My father would look into a stranger's eyes once and be able to paint their faces exactly as they were.

I was especially drawn to one hanging low on the wall, a young woman with a lit cigarette in her mouth, smoke going up to her face, making one of her eyes almost invisible.

She was classy, arty and beautiful but her eyes seemed to say "stay away". I wanted to go near her, look closely into her soul and touch her, simply because she was dismissing me with her eyes.

It was that thing again, of me being obsessed with seeing things through because that wasn't even my house. I didn't know where I was but I was there trying to connect with the woman in the picture.

I tried to stop myself, more so because I knew from my father how much painters hate it when people touch their work.

I ran my thumb on the frame first, pine.

There was no velvet and earth feel, just softness, delicate like a flower petal.

"Benya Sekatane. She was my first love," a voice behind me said.

It was a white man, past 60 or so, puffing a cigar with only a robe covering his wrinkled ass.

He froze when our eyes met. I had never seen him before.

"What on earth...?" he started but stopped mid-question.

Normally I would get this type of reaction from people who knew my father. The older I grew, the more I looked like him, that's what they always said. But that was back home, not in America. People barely knew him here unless they were really into art.

And that old man must have been serious about art because he had a lot of it, a lot of expensive paintings on his walls.

After a long, frozen moment, a smile, a frown and batting of eyelids, the strange old man spoke again.

"Do you know of her?"

I was lost.

"Benya Sekatane. Do you know of her?"

I shook my head.

He smiled at me, exposing a set of perfect top teeth.

"Nobody called her Benya, nobody at all. I was the only one who knew her real name, you know."

His face lit up when he spoke her name, as if it went back to a place where he had been happiest.

I stood there and didn't say a word, not a single word except to nod when I agreed with what he said.

"She was a musician, a singer with a hoarse yet hypnotic voice. Everybody called her Dolly."

"But that was her stage name," he said, as if trying to emphasise an important point to a confused person.

He shook the ball-shaped glass in his hand, making the ice tinkle as my eyes wandered all over the house looking for Shemar.

"But trust me, she wasn't a doll at all, not by a long shot. If she had been a doll, she would have been a voodoo doll. You know, the one with needles stuck in it and muppy hair, that one."

He was funny. I almost laughed but something about him, about the whole situation, made me uneasy.

I kept searching for Shemar but he was nowhere to be seen and in front of me was a half-naked, rich, white man who, judging by how he thought we could have a conversation, clearly believed I knew where I was and why.

I thought about many things, things I had heard about New York and how people had to do whatever it took to succeed.

But I thought, there was no way Shemar would do that to me, not after everything I had done for him.

"There's just something about African women, something rich and deep..." he said, but he wasn't looking at me, he was still looking at the woman in the picture.

She had braids, tied at the top of her head, and big hoop earrings that touched her bare shoulders. She held a cigarette between two fingers on her left hand. She sat with one knee up and her right elbow resting on it.

She wore a yellow maxi dress with thin straps and a low-cut neckline that exposed the top of her breasts.

There was something deep and bold about her, something dark too, as if she could throw you down and choke you if you dared mess with her.

I found the white man's obsession with her interesting and had we been in a different place, I would have asked him to tell me about her, particularly the fact that she had a Sotho name.

But I had to save myself from whatever it was that was happening.

"I have to go," I said, squeezing the gold clutch bag under my armpit.

"You can't go," he said.

He smiled and muttered "Feisty" when I raised my eyebrows.

I had already figured I could push him to the ground with just one blow, that's how old and frail he was. But I decided to ask him nicely, to give him one last chance of escaping what I was about to do to him.

He didn't move, I moved.

I heard the glass breaking as it landed on the floor next to him. He never screamed or shouted.

Outside the street was alive. People all over, friends, lovers, fighters, kissers, stars...

It felt like I had just come out of a different world.

I hugged my clutch bag close to my chest and walked up the road instead of taking a 10-minute cab ride back home.

I needed to think because even though it had been just five minutes since I left that house, I was already blaming myself for being in that situation in the first place.

When it came to Shemar and all the shit he came with, I blamed myself. I did that because the signs were there from the beginning. He was clear about who he was and I chose to bring him into my life anyway.

When I got home, I knew he had been there.

He had, as he always did, much to my irritation, left an empty glass on the kitchen counter with a trace of beige lipstick on its surface.

He had taken his pills, that was great, but I still hated that he never put things back the way he found them.

Next to the empty glass was a piece of paper.

Future Dance Studio

The Bronx

Friday

I I am

Genre: Hip Hop

*PS: You'll be second to go in, don't be late. Kiss
kiss.*

That was all. He'd scoured me an audition and that was it. He thought it would make everything right.

I was hurt and offended. Hurt that he'd pimp me and not even give me a chance to be aware that I was being pimped.

I thought about skipping the audition just to make it clear that that was not the way I planned on doing things. But I was starting to become desperate. I had been in New York for three years and nothing had come of it.

I had something to prove, to myself.

When Friday came and there was no sign of She-mar, I figured he was gone forever. I never tried to call him.

The Bronx was nothing like Manhattan, particularly the part of Manhattan I was accustomed to.

I wore a maxi dress over black gypsum pants and a nude bodysuit because I still wasn't sure. In case I arrived at the doorstep and decided to turn around and go back home, at least nobody would know I had been there for the audition.

The cab driver dropped me off in front of a nail par-lour and eyebrow threading studio.

"Der der," he said pointing at a red door one traffic light away.

He could have been from Pakistan or anywhere in that part of the world. It was normal for people from those parts to drive cabs because certain jobs tended to be dominated by particular immigrants.

I could barely see what was written above the door but he insisted that was where I was going.

"No pa-ki-ng der, go go get off," he kept saying. I opened the door reluctantly and stepped into a different shade of New York.

People walked like they were dancing, they spoke like they were rapping.

Graffiti couldn't have been illegal in that side of town otherwise the whole neighbourhood would be a crime scene.

I weaved my way between the scores of people, glad I had opted to wear sneakers, and fixed my eyes on the red door.

Outside I found a group of kids sitting on the pavement beat-boxing. They paid no attention to me.

I pushed the door open, barely any light, no humans, no sound.

A normal person would have turned back and ran but not me, I wanted to go all the way, to see it through.

I followed the corridor, unsure of where I was headed, but the sound I started hearing led me to an auditorium where I could see the back of four heads looking ahead at a lit stage.

"Oops, wrong door, come with me," a voice said behind me.

He pulled me by my arm before I could answer.

"Who are you?"

"Lungile," I said, trying hard not to show the discomfort that his grip on my arm was causing.

"Okay, you're next," he said, pushing me inside another almost dark room. It was backstage.

"There's the door, get ready," he said and left me standing there.

Behind the curtain they were already clapping. The person auditioning was done and I was next.

She walked right in while I was trying to fit in a silent prayer.

I was shaking, she noticed.

"They're not that bad, go," she said.

I moved, only for her to pull me back.

"Dress!"

Oh.

I threw it to the ground and walked hesitantly on to the stage.

"Lou-keele Sabar-tar," the one with a thousand tattoos tried to read my name out loud.

I said a low "yes".

"Where you from?"

"South Africa."

It was a safer answer because normally I have to explain where Lesotho is. At least with South Africa one only has to confirm or deny they are related to Shaka Zulu or Mandela.

"She don't know nothing 'bout hip hop dancing," the one with buffed shoulders said.

I assumed I wasn't meant to hear that.

"Let's try her," the tattooed one responded.

I was already too nervous to remember what I had rehearsed.

Hip hop was one of the things we practised indoors and I always felt like Shemar was too fast or too flexible.

He should have been there with me. I hated him and I was angry at him but I had never needed him more than I did at that moment.

"Ready?"

I nodded.

"Hit her!"

Which of dem girls gonna park the pum pum

I'mma whine up dey waist, I'ma part de pum pum

Queens dem girls gonna park de pum pum

"Don't forget your dress."

It was hanging on the crook of her arm.

All I wanted was to run out of that dance studio, out of the Bronx and back to Manhattan where at least I had potential.

I had heard "disaster, disaster" in my head throughout the eight minutes I was on stage.

"You weren't bad, you know," she said.

It didn't matter how I was, I just knew it wasn't my time, yet again.

I wasn't properly prepared, probably because a lot was going on in my mind. Maybe because I wasn't supposed to be there in the first place. I was supposed to be back home doing what I was supposed to be doing, being who I was destined to be.

They didn't laugh you know, but they didn't clap either. It was as if I hadn't been there at all.

I still lacked sex appeal, I guess.

“Lou-keele.”

It was the tattooed one, peeping through the curtain separating the backstage from the auditorium.

“Yes.”

“Come on Monday. We start rehearsal at 10am.”

I begged his pardon.

“Monday,” he said.

“And dress like a dancer.”

And with that, he disappeared behind the curtain again.

I was as surprised by this turn of events as the girl standing next to me. Her name was Lashandra, a professional dancer with natural sex appeal.

Lashandra grew up in the Bronx but she wasn't born there. She wasn't even born in America but she wasn't sure where she was born. All she knew was that she was missing and somebody out there, somewhere in the world, was looking for her. She was a missing child, a trafficked child.

But she grew up in the Bronx, in a neighbourhood with living standard measures no different from Soshanguve or Thaba Nchu.

She was a resident at Future Studio. She had started by dancing to beat boxing on the same pavement where I found a group of kids sitting when I went in.

Her biggest dream now, she told me while we sat at a burger and fries joint across the street, was to work with Miz-G, one of the most famous choreographers in New York.

I had heard of Miz-G, but only bad things. He was prissy and obnoxious, Shemar said.

I liked Lashandra. She spoke with a toned-down ghetto dialect, although sometimes it felt like she was forcing it.

“You are coming with me tonight. We're going out to celebrate,” she said, standing at my cab window.

I had just met her and I wasn't in the right frame of mind, so I politely said no and promised to do it another time.

That trip back to Manhattan wasn't as short as the trip to the Bronx had been that morning.

I kept thinking I was going to have a panic attack, in that cab with a Middle Eastern man who kept swearing at anyone who overtook him.

I was more scared than happy, worried that I wasn't going to live up to expectations. Suddenly everything Shemar had taught me seemed like it was not enough, like whatever I did in that audition to make them want me was just pure luck.

When I entered my apartment, I went straight to the fridge, pulled out a half-empty bottle of white wine and drank straight from the bottle.

It calmed me down, until I remembered I had not left an open bottle of wine in my fridge that morning.

It was a Cros Parantoux with the same name and texture as the one Sam and I once stole from my uncle's wife's cellar one Easter weekend.

We didn't know it cost R20 000 until she called a family meeting and asked for a confession.

It was clear she suspected Mabso so I had no choice but to confess, even though I only drank one glass of it.

The mysterious wine wasn't the only thing off about my apartment. I could feel it although I couldn't see it.

I checked everywhere, the bathroom, balcony, bedroom, cupboards until I finally found it on the wall.

The black stallion was gone.

I looked at the wall, looked away from it and looked back again just to be certain it was gone.

And then, in a moment of denial, I convinced myself that I had moved it to the bedroom. It wasn't there.

When I banged on my landlord's door, I still had hope that he would say it had flown out of the window and they had found it lying somewhere, or anything of that miraculous nature.

But he just looked at me and told me it was impossible that I had had a break-in.

"We have never had a break-in in this building," he said.

I insisted.

"Is your door broken? Did they steal anything else? Don't you have an alarm system?"

All my answers were No.

"What did you expect, living with a drug addict?"

With that, he shut the door in my face.

I had to stop being in denial and accept that I knew the moment I found that mysterious wine in the fridge that Shemar had been in the apartment. And that I knew deep down he had taken the painting.

What I didn't know was where I was going to start looking for him.

I regretted not telling him that it was most probably the most precious painting I owned because then maybe he would have been more compassionate.

I went to the park, asked around but got no answers.

I went to the police too but they weren't helpful.

"If you say he is a drug addict, he will come back, they never go far. And when he comes back, bring him here so he can tell us who he sold the painting to. We will go and get your painting back and then arrest him."

That was all they could offer.

When I tried to explain that it was a Sabata painting, nobody knew what and who I was talking about.

Shemar wasn't just addicted to painkillers. There was cocaine when he was younger and now heroin. I heard that from the retired dancer we rented the basement studio from when I went there looking for him.

"He told me he was addicted to painkillers because he had an injury," I said.

"He does have an injury. He fell from the stage because he was too high on drugs to balance," the old woman said.

I felt so stupid, so naïve to have thought he cared at all.

I didn't call home, not even Mabou to tell her what I had done.

That painting of a black stallion was sent to me because I asked for it, against my uncle's wishes.

I demanded that they send it to me in New York during one of my "I hate all the Sabatas" emotional episodes.

I didn't even know what I planned to do with it.

And so I had no choice but to accept the situation and wait for Shemar to return so I could call the police to arrest him and get my father's painting back.

For the two weeks that followed I avoided making calls to my family. I avoided going out, even to the park. My days were routine. I took the subway to the

Bronx and focused all my energy on excelling at my job.

I welcomed the compliments from our choreographer with mixed feelings because I resented that it was Shemar who was responsible for me being there, and being that good.

A few times I almost poured my heart out to Lashandra but I didn't want her, or anyone else, discovering that I had been that stupid.

I had become one more person in the dance world who wanted nothing more to do with Shemar and his orange hair.

On the Saturday morning I planned to take a lone walk down Manhattan Avenue, I opened my door to find a big parcel covered in brown paper over a white cloth.

It had no address, no note, it was just placed there leaning against the wall next to my door.

I wasn't sure it was for me but it was on my doorstep so I took it.

It was the stallion, neatly wrapped and still as it was when it disappeared.

I looked for a note, a sign, a message, an explanation but nothing. I ran my thumb over it and I felt it, velvet and earth.

I tried calling Shemar again, as I had, frantically, when I discovered it was missing. As I had tried in the two weeks it was missing to call him every time I felt emotional. Sometimes I would call, planning to swear at him, other times I called planning to beg and sometimes I hoped just the sound my voice would kill him wherever he was.

I actually hugged and kissed the painting, and then I cried.

It didn't go back to where it had been mounted on the wall. Instead I put the white cloth and torn brown wrapper back and shoved it under my bed.

I'm not going to lie and say getting the stallion back made me feel better, or hate Shemar any less, but I was relieved, and free.

I never called the police or tried to find out where he had taken it. I accepted that he was a coward who couldn't face me.

I moved on.

I was getting used to it, you know, having things and having to let them go.

At least something good was happening in my life. We had our best show on the first day of summer, a full house and a standing ovation.

After that, I wanted to go home and cover my head with a pillow, and rejoice.

But I had been turning Lashandra down for far too long, and so I ended up on the doorstep of a club called The Floor after going back to my apartment to change clothes that night.

I soon found out I was overdressed wearing a black bandage dress to just below my knees. The girls in front of me in the queue were barely dressed at all. I didn't even have proper boobs to flaunt.

Lashandra had sent me a text saying she was already inside, only she did not explain to me that you don't just pay the bouncer at the door and walk in...

I waited to be picked from the queue like all the other pretty girls, some who came after me.

It didn't happen soon enough.

"She's with me," Lashandra shouted to the bouncer, pulling me out of the long queue and just like that, we were inside The Floor.

I wasn't asked if I wanted a drink, or if I drank at all. A cosmopolitan was shoved in my hand and I was pulled to the front table.

"Is this a...?"

"Yes, it's a strip club. It's all about chocolate and muscles, baby."

She was right. All the semi-naked men gyrating on poles and multi-coloured stages were melanin on steroids.

I had never been to a strip club before, let alone one with only male strippers.

At our table there were three other girls, all aspiring dancers whom I assumed were in Lashandra's circle.

They congratulated me on the Future Studio gig before they got to the real reason they were fascinated with me.

"Aren't you too light-skinned to be from Africa?" one said.

The whole crew looked at her judgmentally. I figured she was the type they had to explain to people, Sam's type.

I laughed it off and complimented her dreadlocks.

"Don't mind her. She grew up with white people," one of them said.

She did sound different, looked different too.

Just like me, she seemed out of place yet desperate to be part of the circle.

She seemed cool but she wasn't someone I wanted to be close friends with. She reminded me too much of myself before I became a low-key runaway and a victim of New York's broken people.

"Another round?" Lashandra asked, wrapping her arm around my shoulders.

I was on my fifth cosmopolitan and I knew if I drank any more, I would pass out. I couldn't afford that, not in a club full of people who could be anyone. And also, I was making new friends, friends I didn't have to hide or clean their vomit from my bathroom in the middle of the night and, maybe, friends I could trust.

If anyone was going to help me get ahead, it was these girls.

"Oh, she's back!" one of them said, clapping excitedly.

An announcement had just been made by the DJ and the whole room grew quiet, and dark except for a light in the middle of the stage.

The lights turned red as the music started and a shadowy figure appeared inside a ball of smoke...

*Like a virgin... touched for the very first time
Like a virgin*

It was fitting that a two-metre tall man wearing a long black silk robe would be serenaded on stage by Madonna, singing about being a virgin.

Had I been devoutly religious it would have been disturbing, but I immediately understood the beauty of it.

The beauty of this mysterious thing who wore a masquerade mask.

There was no pole for him to hump and climb, just the stage and lights and an audience in awe.

Also, we weren't allowed to put money in his underwear. It was collected by waiters.

I looked at Lashandra for an explanation. She smiled briefly and whispered: "Trust me, you could learn a lot from him."

I watched this...creature with sex appeal like no other, a body that moved with rhythm, a flawless performance in a strip club full of women and old, overworked men who should have been at home with their bored wives.

I immediately understood that they were all there for him.

"He is magic," the other girl said.

"Who is he?" I asked.

She shrugged.

"He calls himself Nzinga. Imagine, such grace."

Lashandra had earlier told me that some of the best dancers either started or had had to work in strip clubs.

She said that's where, and she said it as if it was a joke, people who are stiff like me get their sex appeal.

"Imagine all those people watching and lusting over you. If that doesn't inspire you to be sexy, I don't know what will," she said.

We laughed.

"A setback for feminism but you know, things have to be achieved," she joked.

We laughed about that too. I laughed even harder because it was so true, I had to convince myself that it was funny too.

Nzinga, as the dancer's alter ego was called, was somewhat of a mystery. Nothing about him was exposed, not his face. When he took off his robe and was left only with gold undies on, his body was covered in glitter and oil. He wore a big afro wig.

He was a performer, not a stripper, an entertainer, not a dancer.

I found myself standing closer to the stage than I had been, away from my new friends and the flowing cosmopolitans.

I moved, shyly and discreetly, as George Michael's version of *Roxanne* blasted from the speakers.

I closed my eyes and moved to a song about prostitution.

*"Roxanne... Roxanne... you don't have to put on the red light... Those days are over Roxanne
You don't have to wear that dress tonight ...*

"What the hell are you doing here?" I heard the creature say.

I opened my eyes and closed them again, pretty sure it was the alcohol making me hear and see things.

"Loo!"

Only one person, ever, pronounced my name like they were referring to a toilet.

Oh hell, no!

"Shemar?"

"Shut up! Get out of here," he said.

I was drunk, yes, but I knew exactly what I was doing when I jumped to the edge of the stage and pulled that bloody wig off his head.

I tried to punch him but a bouncer grabbed me and pulled me away. I was shouting and swearing, still waving his wig in my hand when the bouncer picked me up.

Someone snatched the wig from me and threw it back to the stage. He must have picked it up and put it back on because by the time I was sitting back at my table, with a bouncer on each side of me, he was back to doing whatever con artist, drug-inspired bullshit he was getting paid to do.

I sat at that table, fuming and downing every left-over drink I could find in front of me.

"Another passionate fan, Nzinga has that effect," the DJ said on the speaker.

Passionate fan, my foot!

I caught a couple of sex pests staring at me judgmentally and I stared back at one of them.

Shemar was a nonsense of a person!

How was I not able to recognise him early?

What was he doing there in the first place?

I sat down and downed another cosmo I found on the table. It wasn't even mine.

When Lashandra came and asked if I was okay, I thought about telling her, and then I remembered I couldn't.

"Yes, I'm fine. This is amazing."

She chuckled and said: "I told you."

She must have thought I was talking about the club, or the night, or the mysterious dancer.

I ordered another cosmo and confined myself to that chair for the next 20 minutes of whatever it was that Shemar was doing on that stage. I had lost all interest and fascination with it. He wasn't a mystery anymore.

He left the stage with the same song serenading him, Like A Virgin, and soon the chocolate strippers were back on stage dancing to trap songs.

Everybody was either back on the dance floor or waving dollar notes to grab their favourite stripper's attention.

As soon as the bouncers were distracted, I stood up and went to look for the door to the dressing room. I was prepared to do anything, stab him even.

But he was nowhere to be found. The stripper men I found in the dressing room asked me if I was lost and offered to help me.

I looked at all of them and frowned.

"I'm waiting for you outside."

It was Shemar. His phone had been off for weeks, and now he was texting me?

"Voetsek!" I replied.

"Huh?"

"Voetsek, Shemar. I don't want to see you."

But I did want to see him so I could kill him.

"I will come in there and drag your bony ass out! Try me! Let's see what your hoc friends will say," he texted back.

I didn't care about being seen with him anymore and he could come in! I didn't care! But I was too angry to wait for him to come in. I needed to deal with him and I needed to do it fast.

I found him standing on the pavement behind a bouncer looking like a normal person, wearing my bloody Ankara dock!

I pounced on him but he was too fast. He grabbed my arm and pulled me to his chest.

"What the fuck are you doing in this place, Loo? Are you crazy?"

I wanted to hit him, even if it was one little slap. I wanted to inflict pain on him. But I was like an ant trying to murder an elephant.

"I should be asking you the same question!"

He rolled his eyes and pulled me by my wrist. I trotted behind him, trying to hit him with my handbag but the bloody heels were almost throwing me to the ground each time I took a step.

"We're going home, now!" he said.

"What home? You have no home, Shemar! What are you? A fetish prostitute?"

He turned to look at me, frowned, and continued dragging me up the street.

"Take those things off!"

I hated him but he was right about the heels. I took them off and put them under my arm.

"Where are you taking me? Are you going to sell me again so you can buy your drugs?"

He didn't turn to look at me. This time, he stopped and let go of my wrist.

"Is that why you attacked my father, Loo? An elderly man? You beat him and left him on the floor to die. What kind of person are you?"

He didn't say that. It was the alcohol making me hear things so I folded my arms and kept quiet.

He started walking again but didn't drag me along this time.

"No! What kind of a person are you, Shemar?"

He didn't respond.

"Why did you steal my painting? How could you do that to me, you stupid..."

His grip around my arm got tighter. I screamed that he was hurting me but he wasn't bothered.

People in the street just watched and did nothing.

I was still in denial about that father part so I wasn't going to ask about it.

"I have been at my father's bedside in hospital. I found him almost dead on the floor, struggling to get up because your psycho ass tried to kill him. I should have opened a case against you. I wanted to but he stopped me."

He was crazy!

"I opened a case against you too, you thief! The police are looking for you!"

I knew he was done talking when he dragged me down the stairs to the subway in silence.

But I wasn't going to let him bully and manipulate me with that father nonsense!

"And you named your stripper alter ego after my painting? Really?"

"Don't be petty."

That was all he had to say!

Had I been anywhere near being a sane person, I would have run from him or called 911, but no, I wanted to get to the bottom of things, to see him regret what he did to me.

We waited for 10 minutes at the subway station, standing almost a metre apart from each other, me bare-foot and drunk and him anxious and angry.

We made it to my apartment just after Zam, looking like downtown, low-price hookers who had had a busy night.

My alcohol levels had dropped and reality was starting to bother me. Not that I had forgiven Shemar for all the nonsense, which I still had to sit down and spell out to him before calling the police to come and get him, but the fact that I had beaten up an old man and put him in hospital freaked me out, all of a sudden.

I actually assumed that after running out of that house, he got up and called a prostitute to provide whatever kinky sex he had planned to get from me.

I felt everything, the vodka, the barbeque wings, the mints and cherries, pushing each other up to my throat the moment I sat down on the couch and looked up at the ceiling.

"Keep your head down and wait for it," he said, holding me by my hair, just as I had held him by his afro when he threw up all over my bathtub.

I had never been drunk to the point of throwing up before. It's something Sam would do and be proud of, not me.

Shemar cleaned up my mess and gave me a glass of water. I wanted to fall asleep, desperately, but I was being haunted by many things, things I didn't even understand, including that he was in my apartment, again, and that I had failed to execute all the things I had planned to do to him if I ever saw him again.

I wanted the truth from him, that was all. An apology was not that important but I wanted him to man up and tell me he had been using me from the start.

"That man is your father?" I asked, certain that it was another lie.

"Yes."

I noticed he was angry too, but he had no right to be.

"How?"

"I'm adopted."

Okay, it made sense.

"You pimped me out to your own father, Shemar?"

"I didn't pimp you out. Loo! What the fuck is wrong with you? Just because you are a bad, selfish person, you think everybody is like you?"

Oh no, no, no!

"Put your hands on me and I'll fucking slaughter you!" he screamed, grabbing my hand to stop me from slapping him.

That was it. I needed him to leave.

But I didn't tell him that, probably because I didn't want him to leave.

We sat on the same couch, curtains open and the wall in front of us clean and bare.

"I'm not selfish. And I'm not a bad person," I said.

He kept quiet for a while.

"Whatever, you're still a coward, stuck here hiding from whatever you're running from."

I was getting used to being insulted by him.

"Says a drug addict who lies about everything."

"At least I'm not a violent psychopath," he charged back.

I could have gone on and on about what a bad and broken person he was but he was just going to keep throwing truths back at me, and there were some truths I wasn't prepared to hear.

And so we sat in silence again.

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"Tell you what?"

"That that was your home, that he was your father."

"I was going to tell you over dinner. Besides, he was the one who wanted to talk to you. He would have told you himself!"

But...

"You left me alone with him Shemar."

"I went up the road to get a tonic from the liquor store."

If only he had informed me, told me everything before we entered that house.

"But..."

"Are you trying to justify what you did? Trying to find a way to blame me for putting your hands on someone?"

He was seriously judging me now. And I didn't even hit that old man. I just pushed him. That was all.

"I'm sorry. I misread the whole situation," I said.

I wasn't truly sorry, I just wanted to deal with that part and move on to the more infuriating issue.

"Why did you take my painting?"

"I didn't take your painting."

"You expect me to believe that?"

"I don't care what you believe."

Sigh.

Strangely, in the midst of that tension, I wanted to tell him I got the gig in the Bronx, but he probably already knew that.

We sat in silence for minutes, he on the couch and me sitting on the floor, wondering how I ended up so emotionally and spiritually attached to such a person when all I ever wanted was to be a famous dancer.

Why was my path to that dream so difficult? So full of thorns and monsters and dragons...?

I realised he had done the same thing I did to him, he shut me out and created boundaries.

I looked at the painting of my face in front of me. It was the reason I was there. Had I not found that piece of paper, maybe my life would have turned out differently.

Had I waited for the next morning for Uncle Phineas to sit me down and talk to me instead of storming back in the party and screaming at everyone, maybe things would have been different. Maybe my uncle would have been able to justify what my family did. Maybe had I thought about it carefully, and tried it out, instead of running away, maybe I would be somewhere happy and content. Or maybe not.

"Shemar, who are you?"

It was time we had that talk, open up and accept that we hurt each other more than we thought we did.

He cleared his throat.

"I've been clean for 11 months," he started.

I looked up at him.

I had known him for a year and two months. He had been living with me for eight months.

"Did you take drugs here, Shemar? In my house?"

He glanced at me, as if warning me against judging him.

He didn't answer the question.

"I started with cocaine when I was 17. It was just a casual thing then, a rebellion of some sort after I heard the story about my mother. I needed to cope with a lot of things, including my father's overbearing personality."

But...

"But I found that it was good for my creativity. I could do anything when I was high. Can you believe that I was high when I auditioned at Juilliard?" he laughs, but it wasn't really a laugh. It was that laugh of regret, a coping mechanism of some sort.

But Juilliard? He went to Juilliard?

"They accepted me on the spot but I was kicked out after some months. Long story..."

Who gets kicked out of Juilliard and doesn't go into severe depression and die? Who?

"To say my dad was disappointed in me is an understatement. But maybe that's what I needed, for him to write me off and let me be me. But he didn't. Instead he sent me to rehab and visited me every week. My dad is like that, you know. He believes in people, especially me."

He sounded as if he had wanted to tell this story to someone for a long time. He sounded like he was overflowing, something I needed to do myself.

"So I was fine for a while. I got off drugs and tried to focus until Mark happened."

I had never heard of Mark.

"He was my dad's friend. I had known him since I was a kid and thought of him as a second father. I played with his kids."

"When dad sent me to him for therapy, he thought it was an advantage, that because I trusted him it would be easier to talk about whatever issues I had.

"He showed me the couch, the usual therapy shebang and I lay there on my back and told him why I was angry at the world. I was angry because, first of all, I had never had to fight for anything in my life. Everything was just there for me, the money, the best schools, the cool friends... the privilege.

"I know it sounds silly but had I known how to fight, I think I would have been able to fight the temptation to get deeper into cocaine.

"Mark told me he wasn't shocked by any of that, that people like me tended to feel guilty about having material things, especially when they lack things that cannot be bought with money, things like identity."

I understood that very well.

"So Mark got me, he really did, more so because he was mixed race, although our stories were totally different. I was adopted by my biological father's stepbrother.

It's a long story. The woman in that painting was my mother. My dad, the white guy you tried to kill, and his stepbrother fell for the same woman, Dolly. She was a musician from Africa."

Where in Africa?

"I don't know. Some little country. She left after giving birth to me, and then she died. I think she left for the sake of peace between my dad and his stepbrother but it didn't really help.

ther's social status. But eventually people got tired and they started shunning me."

I would too, or maybe not, considering my obsession with broken people.

"So now, fast forward to when I got a call from you. You know I put up that ad on the internet just because I wanted my father to think I was doing something with my time and life? I really had no plans of coaching another obnoxious, talentless, wannabe dancer."

He glanced at me and smiled.

"You are not talentless, thank God."

That was a relief.

"So when you called and I saw your name, I thought: 'This one must not be from New York'. I agreed to meet you just out of curiosity and I knew there was something on your shoulders the first time I laid eyes on you. Something that brought you here all the way from across the seas to pursue a dream you weren't even sure you wanted."

He was right. Maybe I was still stuck in the 10-year-old me. Maybe I was doing all of this to prove a point, to myself or my dead parents or the world, I didn't know anymore.

"I was high on cocaine when I first met you. Any other person would have noticed but you didn't. You were so blinded by a dream you thought would come easy and quickly. I loved your innocence, and the fact that you kept me even after you found out nobody wanted to be associated with me."

If only he knew how close I had come to cutting him loose. It was a tough battle between my mind and my heart.

"She was naturally wild, that's what my dad says about her. She slept with both of them."

His dad did say she was a voodoo doll.

"When she was pregnant, they both hoped I was their child, until I came out black and it was obvious I was the other brother's. So, long story short, the other one wasn't ready to be a father so this one took me."

I'm not sure if stuff like that can happen where I come from but...

"Back to Mark. Our therapy sessions led to a very toxic relationship. It turned sexual and later uncontrollable. It led to heroin and a dangerous situation where he would lock me in the house because he didn't want anyone else looking at me. I told my father when it became unbearable but he couldn't get Mark arrested because I'm an adult. I ran, to here.

"My dad again did everything to get me out of that situation but Mark would sit on our doorstep and cry. He killed himself."

"What? When?"

"After he found out I was living here, he somehow managed to break in and steal your painting. I don't know why he did that. I think he wanted us to be where we are now, here."

I feel like I'm in one of those horror suspense movies that end with everyone dead and the cat stuffed in a burning oven.

"My dad got your painting back. Mark killed himself soon after that."

And that was just recently.

"During that junkie mess, before even Mark, my dancing career came crumbling down. I was a mess. The only thing that kept me in the industry was my fa-

"To be honest, I didn't think there was much to go with you at first but I loved your dedication and fighting spirit.

"I figured you out very early, you know, that you were on the run. What are you running from, Loo?"

I guessed then that it was my turn.

I had been dreading the moment the whole time although I really wanted to throw down that load on my shoulders.

"Where do I start? I'm a product of a beautiful love story between a troubled musician and a beautiful maiden."

He slid down from the couch to sit on the floor next to me.

"I guess we have a lot in common, neh? Dysfunctional musicians," I say.

I had never thought of it like that, my dad being a dysfunctional creative, like Shemar, before he was an artist.

"What does neh mean?"

He's being random now.

"It means 'right'."

I hope.

"My father comes from an interesting family in Lesotho. He has an equally interesting brother called Phineas.

"When they were young, they started a band called Sabata and the Basotho 10. It was a Famo band."

"Famo?"

"Yes, traditional Sotho music. There were 10 of them. The other eight were the band and dancers and back-up singers. So my dad was the lead singer and my

uncle Phineas, he remains talentless even today, was just there as whatever."

"He sounds like an interesting dude, this Phineas."

"Yes, trust me. Uncle Phineas appointed himself the band manager and along the way, they became very successful and money was just pouring in, but you know how money is the root of all evil? Yep, animosity started and things got really ugly.

My dad, I told you he was a loose cannon like you, right?"

He laughed.

"Whenever he got his share of the money, he would disappear for days. That had negative impact on the group because they couldn't perform, especially with my uncle who is obsessed with having things under control.

"My dad had a reputation of loving fast girls and booze. He could not be held down.

"What they did not know though was that he had another passion, one that had taken over him completely.

"During one of his disappearances, he ended up in some village in KwaZulu-Natal. He loved places that had a lot of clay and beautiful landscape where he could sit and carve sculptures.

"That's where he met my mother, by a river.

"She was, according to him, the most beautiful thing he had ever seen. Apparently she wasn't supposed to be there alone.

"He asked to paint her and she agreed.

"They looked into each other's eyes and my mother said she was, right at that moment, ready to leave everything behind and run away with him.

"If he had asked, she said she would have left with him there and then.

"But he didn't and so they carried on with their forbidden love affair."

"Why was it forbidden?" Shemar asked softly.

"Because my mother was born and raised to be a queen."

He raised his eyebrows. He must have thought the story was going the Cinderella route.

"So they ran away from the kingdom?"

"No, not until my mom was knocked up. But even then my dad tried to do the right thing, or was it the right thing? I don't know. He went to her family and tried to pay damages with a sculpture he had made, because he had drunk all the money he made from his music.

"They said 'No' to the useless sculpture and asked him to leave, without my mother.

"So he went back to find Phineas and the Basotho 10. I told you they were a bunch of rural thugs, right?"

He laughed.

"So they went to my mother's family, all fired up and ready to kidnap her and take her to Lesotho with them. But nobody messes with Zulus."

"Ha! Shaka?"

Oh Lord!

"Yes, Shaka's cousins."

"When they got there, they had already taken her away. She was locked up somewhere in a hut, like a prisoner. My dad and his folk tried to be thugs about it, walked in there all flexed up, but you know, Zulus."

"Before they were almost killed, they agreed to a deal that since the two families, my mother being some

royalty herself, were required by culture to form some kind of relation. If the child was a girl she'd be required to marry into that family, the one my mother was supposed to marry into."

"What? That sounds so before-slavery," he said, shocked.

"I know but it happened. I believe my mother cried when she found out about the deal. She had not been part of the negotiations. My dad, I'm pretty sure, was against it but he would have done anything to get my mother. Uncle Phineas was the mastermind behind that nonsense, and I didn't know until I turned 21." I continued.

"I trusted that uncle of mine all my life! His explanation was that they were looking for an immediate solution, and that he had really thought I was going to be a boy because my mother didn't get morning sickness."

"I'm sure those Zulu people have forgotten about it." Shemar.

"No, they haven't, and it has nothing to do with love or culture. They have a point to prove. It's a power thing."

"So do you know the person you are supposed to marry?" him.

"No, I just know it's never going to happen because I'm never going back."

If only I could get Maboo to move here, I'd have no reason to ever want to go back home.

But she had her own life. She had just been accepted into the traffic police force and was too excited to worry about my problems.

"Don't you wonder if maybe you should meet him? Check if he does actually want to marry you instead of

hiding here from something you don't even know? Maybe he's also annoyed by this arrangement. Maybe he's gay."

Only Shemar could come up with that.

He was making sense, but I knew better.

"The person I'm supposed to marry is the king himself and no, he won't let it go. Even if he doesn't want me, he'll still want to get back at my father."

My aunt had told me that. She said my father had bruised the king's ego so much that the story was being told to younger generations.

I hated all of it, that I was in the middle of all that drama.

"It's bad, neh?" he said.

I laughed. I couldn't help it. That "neh" was so out of place.

"I'm not sure what's worse, the fact that this happened or the fact that I try to avoid falling in love, with anyone. I don't know. I'm scared."

He raised his eyebrows.

"That's why you don't have a man?"

That was Shemar. I chose to ignore him.

The sun rose with us still sitting on the floor, feeling lighter and free.

We had offloaded everything, something we should have done when we first met because no matter how much we annoyed and hurt each other, we always found ourselves together again.

"Shemar, why did your father want to talk to me?"

That bothered me a lot.

"He wanted to thank you for getting me off drugs."

How did I get him off drugs? I didn't even know he was doing drugs until weeks before than night.

"He also wants you to sell him this painting," he said, pointing at the black stallion. It was the last thing my father did before he died and it wasn't for sale.

I told him that.

I had one more question.

"And then? The Floor?"

He laughed.

"I'm an exhibitionist, Loo. I love that kind of stuff.

I do it for fun, that's all."

I was unable to be shocked by him anymore.

In the months that followed, we walked the streets together. We'd take the subway together to the Bronx and he'd go to The Floor while I went to Future.

We still danced in the park some mornings.

We had dinners at his father's house and stole his expensive alcohol when he passed out on the couch.

I got used to his father walking around with only a robe on and his tales about how he was a fuck-boy in his heyday.

"It was Dolly's fault, you know. I never found true love after her." he'd say.

Shemar would roll his eyes and laugh.

"Dolly wasn't even yours in the first place. You were still being a fuck-boy by going after her."

Dolly was from QwaQwa, I found out during one of the dinners.

She came to America as Busi Mhlongo's back-up singer but got caught up in the city lights.

They were a beautiful family, flawed but beautiful.

They made me wonder more and more if I shouldn't go back to mine. But then the thought would leave my mind the moment I stepped out of that house.

During one evening, the one Shemar's father told me about how his own father went to war and never returned, although he wasn't killed in the war, I looked at my own life and wondered how long it would take my own family to move on from me, to let me go and forget me.

He told the story with a cigar in his mouth; his face emotionless.

"He went to join the war when I was seven. My brother had just been born and my mother, a beauty queen who married her high school sweetheart soon after she turned 18, sat on the porch and cried her eyes out for six long days. I'd sit under the stairs and watch milk dripping from her breasts, making marks on her blue dress and the baby crying on her lap.

"She wore that dress, and nothing else, for six full days. I didn't know if she was falling apart because she thought my father would die or if it was the loss, the fact that he was breathing and living thousands of miles away and she couldn't reach him. Or maybe the fact that my father voluntarily went to the war, which he had been exempted from because he suffered from epilepsy.

"The black car with a man in white gloves started coming a month later.

"The man would come out from the back seat with an envelope in his hand. At the doorstep, he would ring the bell and take off his hat, and then the wailing would start. I lived to watch that, you know. Every time the car would stop in someone's driveway, our neighbour's, the house down the street, the house on the corner, the house with the red roof, the house with the dying trees and flowers... By the time I turned nine, only

12 houses had not been visited by the man in the black car, including ours. By that time, I had stopped waiting for it, my mother had stopped listening to the news and by then, she slept in the middle of the bed. She didn't avoid my father's side of the bed anymore. She had let her hair grow longer too and she smoked cigarettes and drank her coffee with whisky.

"We weren't waiting anymore, not for the black car and not for my father. But then, when I was 15, the war ended. I found my mother passed out on her bed, a whisky bottle next to the magazine she had been reading and a pack of cigarettes on the floor. I shook her so hard she knocked her forehead on the whisky bottle when she tried to get up. She didn't call me 'shithead like your father' that day, she called me 'retard like your brother' but she still followed me down the stairs and out to the Griffiths' house next door.

"They had a TV. We didn't have one because my mother didn't want to know.

"We found Mrs Griffith standing in the lounge staring at the moving black and white pictures of soldiers moving all at once, some looking like they hadn't slept in days, eyes hollow but their lips smiling. They were celebrating. 'It is over...over', the voice on TV kept saying, the war was over.

"I looked at my mother's face. She wasn't smiling.

"'You'd better clean yourself up, soon'. I heard Mrs Griffith say to her. But my mother was still not smiling, she was still not happy and she didn't clean herself up.

"On the day we, along with the 11 other families, travelled by bus to the train station, she carried the whisky bottle in her purse but she didn't smoke. We

waited for the train, my brother drooling as always and me trying really hard to remember my father's face.

"Man after man in uniform came out of the train until it was just the ones who had to be carried out because they were missing limbs, the last ones, but James Pelham didn't emerge. We waited until the last of those people left the station, until the train itself left the station.

"We walked back home, three hours of my mother smoking cigarette after cigarette and my brother who, although he was eight years old by then, still behaved and cried like a toddler. I was still waiting the next day. My mother wasn't and that was why Mr Tom from the house on the corner told me the news and not her.

"He said he had not seen my father in five years, that he abandoned the camp and ran off with a Vietnamese nurse. Apparently they were about to have their second child. He told me to tell Mother but I knew she already knew, and so I got on my bike and rode down to the trailer park to have sex with Bianca."

Then came the awkward silence, as if he expected me to ask a question or say something. I didn't. I looked down at my hands and wondered what became of Bianca from the trailer park.

"We left our home and came here, to New York," Shemar's father continued. "My mother thought she could still pursue her dreams, that she could still turn heads wherever she walked but instead she ended up washing people's hair at a beauty salon downtown and raising a teenage boy and a special boy in a studio apartment shared with cockroaches.

"My stepfather, he was our landlord, the only one who wanted just money and nothing else as rent. He

was the best thing to ever happen to us, the best thing to ever happen to my mother. He was a father. He made me forget my own father just by being present. He didn't have much but he was there.

"And you know what, Lulu? I realised when I was older that I was never even angry with my father and do you know why?"

I shook my head.

"I let him go. My mother let him go. We all did. It happens and most of the time, it is unintentional and you don't even realise it until it hits you that even though the people you love chose to not be present and you really do love and care about them and wish they were present, you are still fine, you are still living and you can still feel the same feelings for other people who choose to be present."

He looked me in the eye as he said that and I knew he was talking to me, that he was trying to tell me something.

"You don't know the half of it," I said, although I didn't mean to sound so angry and defensive.

I stood up but his gaze forced my ass back down on the leather single seater opposite him.

I had nothing to say and so I sat and stared at Dolly's photo on the wall.

"You've never let go of Dolly," I said, another thing I didn't mean to say out loud.

"Dolly died," he said, and that was that.

He was a crazy old man if he thought my family would stop begging me to come back home, that they'd move on and let me go? It was impossible.

I thought I left that moment behind when I stepped out of his house that evening. I didn't tell Shemar about

that conversation because I didn't want to think about it, to even remember it. But I was fooling myself because the next morning, after trying my hardest to fight the urge, I dragged myself down 42nd Street and entered the first toy store I saw.

In bold red letters it read "Kidding Around". It was such a welcoming name and so were the aisles and aisles of pink and blue and a cocktail of colours lining the shelves. It looked like a rainbow, exactly like the one that peeped from behind the mountains every time the sun fought the rain and won in Maseru.

I picked up a skinny doll with Chinese eyes and red hair first, but the fat one looked more adorable so I took it too. I took a choo-choo train next but I wasn't sure so I took a pink truck with a picture of a unicorn on the side too.

My hands were full but it wasn't enough. I needed a trolley and so I ran back to the entrance and grabbed a big one. There were jigsaw puzzles, I took five. There was a purple stuffed dinosaur, it matched the colour of the purple and lime octopus, so I took them both. I took the beach bucket and spade and barking puppy and talking monkey and grey helicopter and five Smurfs. I grabbed the Minions at the far end of the aisle and the big pink box, for a tea party. I spotted little orange balls squashed in a plastic bag. I took them and the yellow ducks, all 10 of them. I threw a pink helmet in the trolley but it rolled out and landed on the floor because there was no space for it.

"Let me help you with that," a kid who could be no older than 19 said behind me. He looked appalled, disturbed.

I wanted to say no but I couldn't speak. I couldn't catch my breath and the salt of my sweat was tormenting my tongue. I had been rushing and running and grabbing and throwing all over the shop.

I took a deep breath, shook my head and pushed the trolley to the tills. He followed me, keeping a safe distance between us.

When I muttered a low 'hello' to the woman behind the till, she nodded and avoided all eye contact.

I didn't know half of the things in my trolley but I had put them there so I pulled them out and placed each on the conveyor belt one by one, slowly as my sanity quickly returned.

I could have stopped and taken them back. I wanted to, but then I had to finish what I had started. I had to see it through.

I swiped my credit card without looking at the total amount and I walked out of the store, flagged a cab and stood still with my handbag held tight to my chest as the cab driver, occasionally stopping to stick his index finger under his turban to scratch, packed the giant plastic bags in the trunk.

He muttered: "Woman, too many children" before he slammed the trunk shut and walked around the car to the driver's side.

I sat in the back, handbag still pressed to my chest. He turned around, widened his eyes questioning and said: "You want Biyonsy?"

I didn't answer.

"Riyana?" he asked, waving a USB in front of my face.

I kept quiet.

He let me be, threw the USB on the passenger seat and slipped a CD in the stereo. A tiny voice started singing. It reminded me of the many times back home where I frequency-hopped radio stations and stumbled upon Lotus FM.

Sometimes I'd leave the station on to play and wonder how, so many years after they had left their country and sailed across seas to be slaves in South Africa, Indians back home could still connect with the music. Did they even understand the language? The rhythm? The culture? Were their names even really Indian?

I had seen how black Americans could turn anything into a name, anything that had a click sound... La-Quanda, Laquesha, Shaquenda and so on. I would laugh sometimes when I heard those names but I knew, especially when I met a girl named Shaqueta who said her name was inspired by a great African king called Shaka. I knew then that you can put people anywhere, have them born anywhere and throw their umbilical cords in the Atlantic Ocean if you wanted to but they would always long for home. And if they couldn't make it back home, they would create a duplicate of home, only it's more difficult if they have never been to that home.

I wondered, if I ever returned home, if I would still be able to connect with my people. I wondered if *dipabi* would still taste the same and if I'd still be able to dance to *kwaito*.

My mind wandered to Maseru, to the hole in the fence and the retainer wall behind the house. I closed my eyes and saw those men on horseback and *seamamarena* we always drove past when we travelled between Joburg and Maseru. They would wave at us

and my father would wave back, my mother would smile and Maboo would stick out her tongue at them.

I thought about the men at the border post wearing green in Lesotho and brown in the Free State, South Africa. It took only 22 steps, and I know because I counted them each time, 22 walking steps to cross from one country to the other. Men on both sides spoke the same language, some of them even had the same names, but different citizenships. They carried different identity documents, had different living standards and earned different salaries but they all did the same job. It was just that some were luckier to be born 22 steps away from the others.

Uncle Phineas once said during one of his rants-of-hate that all the land that was now the Free State was the land of Moshoeshoe, the greatest king who had ever lived, he said, and therefore it belonged to the Basotho people.

"They stole that land from us because it has diamonds under it, a worthless piece of stone that can do nothing except glitter. Everything can glitter, Lunkile, even a rock glitters when left in the sun for too long," he'd say.

And then he'd look at me and smile with satisfaction.

"They butchered us and stole our land for a worthless stone, but you know what? The one thing they should have stolen, they didn't. We have water. If they were smart, they would have come for these lands. Let's see what happens to them when we close our borders and seal our rivers. Let's see them drink those diamonds."

He would say that with so much pride on his face, as if it was something that would happen soon, something he was looking forward to.

Sometimes I did not understand who my uncle really hated, the white people who he maintained had no right to breathe African oxygen or humans in general, but I knew it was the Zulu people he had a serious problem with.

The cab had stopped in front of my apartment building.

"I charge you double fare," the cab driver said.

I thought I had heard wrong so I opened my eyes and sat up straight.

"Double fare for taking a nap here. I been waiting for you to wake up. Dreaming and dreaming and talking strange languages here," he said, his hand open and ready to scam me. His turban was slightly loose from the occasional scratching and his long beard wiggled over his slightly exposed chest hair.

I had been bullied enough in foreign lands so I opened the door and stepped out of the car. He followed me to the trunk and said: "I let you go free because you have too much children, only because. You keep birthing and birthing because you want child support. You want social services cheque. You never stop being slaves, you people, never. Me, I have seven children but I work, no handouts."

All these insults were hurled as he furiously overflowed my things out of his trunk, straight on to the pavement outside my building. I didn't reply. I would have told him I was a foreigner far from home myself but he would have looked at me like I was crazy. He would have judged me for being a spoiled brat who left

home because she could. The truth is, we were there for completely different reasons. He would have given anything to go back home, I could have gone home anytime I wanted to. My reason was selfish.

Three trips later up and down the stairs, everything I had bought was scattered on the floor inside my apartment.

To say I was drowning in regret would be an understatement but the toys were there and I couldn't take them back. I knew exactly why I had entered that shop and who I was buying all those things for but I didn't think anyone would understand if I explained it to them.

I was about to make myself comfortable on the couch when Shemar emerged from the bedroom, scratching his almost non-existent stomach and yawning like a bloated hippo.

I didn't know he was home and judging by how he still had lipstick on his lower lip and mascara on, it was clear he had had a busy night at The Floor.

He jumped over the toys, the giant plastic bags on the floor and went straight to the fridge to take out a lamb chop he had put there two days earlier and ate it, cold as it was.

I had thought about asking him if he was planning to move out and finding his own apartment before, but then, I didn't really want to live alone. I had found myself a family in him and his father and sometimes he was useful in times of need, like when I needed someone to change a light bulb. Not that being a handyman

was something that came naturally to him but he was tall enough to pull the old one out and put the new one in.

He didn't ask. He just looked at me, the things on the floor and back at me again.

"You need therapy," he said, and with that he went back to the bedroom.

The needling therapy thing was a joke he made every time he wanted to emphasize that I was crazy.

I packed the toys in boxes, stuffed animals in smaller ones because I could squash them in, and the trains and cars and little yellow balls in the bigger ones. I taped each box closed neatly and carefully, covered all of them with pink wrapping paper and wrote with a marker:

"Couscous.

You are a big girl now.

Happy 4th birthday.

Love, cousin Lou."

I kissed every box, leaving my pink lipstick on each one and hoping she'd smudge it with her finger and somewhat touch my lips all the way in Sandton.

It had been four-and-a-half years, four-and-a-half years of not seeing or touching anyone who had my DNA.

Couscous was Uncle Phineas' daughter with Yvonne. She was born just months after I had left home, five months to be exact, and because Yvonne is skin and bones, nobody noticed that she was already pregnant at my 21st party, where she gulped glass after glass of champagne.

I had never met Couscous, never touched her skin or looked into her eyes but still, I did not want her to forget me.

I wanted to be alive and present in her life so that maybe if the others stopped mentioning me, she would remind them.

I dropped off her presents at the courier the next morning, on the 4th of July, the day everybody is more American than America itself, before we took a drive across the Brooklyn Bridge with no clue where we were going, but we knew that at the end we would see the Statue of Liberty on some island we couldn't access with a car.

Shemar said there was something to see there. I said there was nothing to see in a pile of concrete carved to look like a woman, but he said they had the best food and alcohol not too far from it.

I went with him only because his father was going to be there too and I couldn't really say no to him.

July 4, Independence Day as they call it, is more like family day, like an exaggerated Christmas except there is no snow. People dress in red, white and blue, others stick American flags on their hats, fly flags in their yards and little children watch with fascination, although they barely understand what is being celebrated.

I had nothing to celebrate. Whatever it was that Shemar and his father and the rest of their countrymen had achieved on that day decades or centuries ago wasn't mine to celebrate. But I loved the spirit. I loved being part of their family and being in the mix of their love for each other.

And so we trekked across the long bridge, all three of us. Shemar driving, me on the front seat and his father sitting like a boss at the back, with clothes covering his body for a change. It was his car, a shiny black convertible vintage Cadillac that drove slower than a bicycle. We wanted to take a train but he insisted we take the car because, and I had never thought hard about this until that day, he never left his house. He did not like being around a lot of people and I think it was because his first job, when he was barely out of his teens, was selling newspapers on the subway where hundreds of thousands of people walked past him each day. It was a post-traumatic stress kind of situation but he didn't realise that. He claimed he stayed at home because he did not have to go out and make money.

Besides, Shemar and I didn't even have cars and we were counting on him to pay for whatever it was that we were going to consume on that day, so we let him take us to a parade of radical patriotism. We stood behind the rails and watched drum majorettes, army veterans, beauty queens, football and baseball teams and brass bands and cheerleaders and a group of skinheads as they paraded and chanted down the red, white and blue road.

It was all fascinating and fun but Shemar's father's anti-social behaviour kicked in soon enough and we moved to a more quiet and classy spot, an Italian restaurant that he proudly informed me was the first thing he and his stepbrother had owned when they were in their 20s.

"But it was a sandwich shop back then, and it wasn't this big. We had that little space in the corner there," he said, pointing at the bar. "We sold sandwich-

es and cordial juice, which we mixed with soda water and claimed was a special recipe we created ourselves. It was the one thing that made us money. People loved it."

He said they eventually sold the business, after the fallout caused by Dolly.

We had to leave our food unfinished when the parade crowd, some of them sweaty and overexcited, started filling up the tables.

We drove about five blocks uptown to a bar he said was once owned by a friend of his who was eaten by a lion in Egypt. But there are no lions in Egypt, I know that for sure.

The bar was fairly full but less chaotic than the ones we left downtown. It had dimmed lights, dark furniture and a small stage with musical instruments and a microphone, but no band and no singer. Shemar and I looked at each other, thinking we would rather stuff our faces with cookies and coffee at Starbucks or drink alcohol in strip clubs than be caught in a place like that. But we sat down anyway and ordered alcohol usually reserved for the elderly. They didn't even serve champagne and a man with a long beard and red bandana made us feel uneasy.

Shemar's father's eyes were glued to the stage, as if he had left something there the last time he visited, and so we sat awkwardly opposite him and waited for his anti-social behaviour to kick in again.

It didn't. Instead a woman with red long hair and a thick fur boa walked past our table and straight on to the empty stage. I could see his forehead wrinkle and his eyes twinkle.

"Barbara, oh, I be damned," he whispered.

I looked at Shemar. He shook his head.

Barbara must have been in her late 50s or early 60s, but her body was about three decades younger. Her face and cleavage looked like they had been artificially improved. She wore a black satin dress with a high slit and a short train. On the stage she took off the fur boa and passed it to one of the waiters.

I noticed Shemar's father sitting up straight and fixing his shirt.

I expected the mysterious Barbara to start singing, but she didn't. Instead she tapped the microphone three times with a long-nailed finger before sashaying to the bar and settling on a high stool.

"Blood and Sand with two cherries and a slice of lemon," Shemar's father whispered to the waiter. "Take it to her," he said, pointing to Barbara.

I had only ever seen that kind of stuff in movies where couples who meet at bars either ended up married with too many children or killing each other.

We sat and waited to see what would happen, with Shemar's father in front of us, sitting up straight as if waiting for the skies to open.

It didn't take long after the drink was placed in front of her for Barbara to stroll to our table and stand over all of us.

"Lincoln Pelham, after all these years, you are still as cheesy," she said.

I almost laughed, not because it was funny but because it was a little weird. I had never heard anyone call Shemar's father by his full name, let alone see him blush at the sight of a woman.

"Barbara Coleman, still as beautiful as you ever were," he said.

I had never heard him speak like that too. He usually had a swear word in every sentence.

"Charming. But the last time you called me beautiful I ended up on my knees, under you..."

"Okay!" Shemar shouted and stood up.

That was when I really laughed hard.

"Loo, I think this is our cue," Shemar said.

But I didn't want to leave. I wanted to hang out with Barbara. I wanted to hear their story and I was enjoying seeing the legendary fuck-boy being struck powerless under her spell.

"Dad," Shemar said, raising his eyebrows, seemingly embarrassed by the whole scene.

He was ignored.

"Dad, we still have to show Loo the Statue of Liberty," Shemar insisted.

"Go away," his father said.

"Without you?"

He was again ignored.

"Car keys?" Shemar asked, holding out his hand.

"Take a bus."

We looked at each other and we knew the quality time with his father was officially over. And so with limited funds and no car, we had to make a plan.

"Take care. Call when you are ready to go home," I said, as we left the table.

Barbara was already sitting where I had been sitting by the time we reached the door.

We could not afford uptown so we went back downtown on foot. The Statue of Liberty was no longer an option. We couldn't get there without a car and we definitely were not taking a bus. The parade crowds

were still there, drunk but at least sitting down in different spots.

"Wanna do face painting?" I said.

I had to suggest something to put him at ease. He was worried about his father and I knew he didn't want to leave him alone in that bar with that Barbara, but personally I thought that was the best thing we could do for a man who never left the house.

The face painters were two teenage girls who looked so exhausted I immediately felt guilty that I was about to ask them to do the whole damn thing again. They wore T-shirts branded "Paint for hungry children" so I figured they were raising funds for charity and therefore instead of looking exhausted, they needed to lighten up and look interested.

"Do you want your flag up-down, down-up or across, ma'am?" the one with a fake smile asked.

"Nope. How about a wild cat with long whiskers?" She hesitated but nodded after a few seconds. When I was done, I didn't recognise my face. Shemar's face was covered in an American flag facing upwards. It looked rather unpleasant on an orange face.

Then we wandered around the area, waiting for the old man to call, until it was dark outside, until we got hungry again.

As Shemar walked across the street to join a long queue at the hot-dog stand, I imagined what his father was doing with Barbara, if they were still at the bar or if they had moved to a hotel room somewhere to continue where they left off before I was born, with Barbara on her knees.

I knew I couldn't share my thoughts with Shemar, not thoughts about his father having sex.

There were still about 50 people, if not more, waiting to be served at the three hot-dog stands. I knew it would take a while so I went and joined some teenagers standing in the park watching fire-dancers.

It was such a beautiful scene to watch and as more and more people gathered around me, I noticed the stares and soon remembered that I had the face of a wild cat, whiskers and all.

People were lining up to take pictures with the fire dancers, at a safe distance though because there is no insurance for self-inflicted death by fire.

There was nobody to take my picture but I got closer to the dancers anyway, raised my arms and did a chaîné turn.

It felt so good, so free and unlike me.

I had not planned to join the dancing but people were clapping and cheering, so I gave them a show to watch for a couple of minutes until more people joined in the dancing and suddenly we were at a jamboree in a park.

I moved to look for Shemar, only to find a tiger-face standing in front of me, with a Nikon camera hanging around his neck.

"I didn't know cats could dance?" he said, smiling.

I didn't smile or laugh because that was the lamest thing I had ever heard anyone try to start a conversation with.

I immediately assumed he was hitting on me, so I turned to the direction where the crowd was thicker and walked away.

"Look," he shouted after me.

On impulse I turned around to look, only to see the back of his digital camera, a screen with a picture of me and the fire-dancers.

There were so many of them, he took a lot of photographs. Me doing a chaîné turn, a heel pull, cranking, the wop... I looked so happy, he told me that too.

"I'm a professional dancer, by the way." I said, not knowing why I needed to boast.

I found myself glued to the little screen that created a blue light between us, shining on both our faces although we were just cat and tiger.

"I can send them to you if you like," he said.

I did want them, so I asked for a pen so I could give him my number and... BANG! Screams, then chaos.

BANG! BANG! BANG!

Screaming... running... chaos... stampede... and more and more bangs.

"Lie down! Down!"

He was trying to press me down and I was kicking and screaming, trying to stand up and run.

From far I could hear sirens, more bangs and more people either running or lying flat on the ground.

The last three bangs sounded too near, more deafening and the cries and screams were more desperate.

There were two seconds of frightening calm before sirens filled the air.

I raised my head and the tiger was still next to me, half his body covering mine.

The shooting had stopped, but the park was even more chaotic than it was when death was facing us.

All I could see was his eyes and what I saw in them was fear and desperation.

"I have to find my Robin," he said, standing up and running off with his camera still hanging around his neck.

I got up but was knocked down back to the ground by a man running and screaming "Mother! Mother!"

The dust was blinding but I had to find my way back to the street. Everyone was running into the park and I was going in the opposite direction. I had to find Shemar.

"Ma'am! Ma'am, you can't cross here. Stay away," a policeman said.

They had already cordoned off most of the street.

"I want to get across. My friend is there at the food trucks," I explained.

He looked at me, longer than normal.

"You can't go to the food trucks, ma'am. It's a crime scene," he said and pulled the cordon tape up to allow three paramedics through.

I stood there, still, as people ran up and down on the pavement, screaming and cursing and panicking.

I stood and waited for Shemar to appear, panicking and shouting "Loo!" and maybe limping because he fell trying to run.

I moved aside when a man with a big TV camera asked to set up where I was standing. I moved aside a few steps again when more and more of them filled my spot, video cameras, microphones, live crossings, statements, discussions — all of it happened there, next to me.

The numbers started coming out. Fourteen dead, scores injured, more still unaccounted for, and this and that and this...

I wanted to go home.

I wanted to go home and meet Couscous in person and fight with my uncle and laugh with Mabo and drink with Sam and whine about the government and watch *Generations* and *Mivhaingo*.

But first I had to tell Shemar.

The Dead Are Owed Nothing

"Do you remember the first time they brought you here? How wide your eyes were when you looked around the yard and saw all these houses?" he says.

"I remember how nervous you were about me being here."

He rubs my back with one hand and scratches the tip of his nose with the other. He does this when he finds himself in a moment of weakness, any moment that has ever proved he is human.

"I feared my mother more than anyone. She died with a heavy heart," he says.

I know all about that. I watched her die and I knew when I looked in her eyes for the last time that there was no peace there, no acceptance and no room for love.

She loved her son more than anything in this world though. She raised him to be a king, to lead people but follow rules, to do as he is expected but also to be smart enough to change things for the better and challenge the ones he did not agree with.

I have stood by him through it all, from when he was a jovial young warrior who turned heads wherever he walked, to now, where his head is covered in snow-white hair and he has to carefully bend his knees before he sits.

I have borne him children, raised him an heir to carry on his name and do better than he has done in these changing times.

"Nobuntu, do you think this is going to work? That the people won't rise against me? Against us?"

I have my own fears, but it is my duty to calm him, to give him peace and hope in his own bedroom because that was what my mother told me when I left home, 19 years old and in love with a man I should have stayed away from.

She said: "It won't be easy. Many do not want you there. They do not believe you have the right but it is up to you to prove them wrong. Hold that man's heart with both hands, hold it tight and make sure it never slips and falls because if you have his heart, you have everything."

It hasn't always been easy trying to hold the heart of a man who was born with the power to do whatever he wants. I have had to pull him back from going astray many times and in desperate situations, I have had to decide for him, be wise for him and stand by his side while he gave speeches word for word of what I told him.

I wasn't the first choice, you know, and his mother reminded me of this until the day she went to the grave.

"You were *my* choice, Nobuntu," he said to me once when I was pregnant with NoNqaba, my hormones so hectic I ran around the yard wailing after his mother reminded me for the 100th time that I shouldn't be here.

She told me the same thing again when the midwife pulled NoMakhosi out of me and shouted "*Inkosazana*

fiithi" and again when NoMazwe screamed her lungs out for the first time.

"This house is dead," she said and left the room without looking at the baby.

I only ever saw her happy when I sat in the crowd and watched my husband accept a spear from another woman, women ululating all around me and men jumping and dancing to welcome the new bride.

I had cried enough, begged enough and in the end had accepted that it was me who had caused it. That it was my failures and inabilities that had brought that woman to the royal house to give my husband a boy child, a future king.

I was called to the front to welcome her, and I did. I showed her where she would sleep and I took her to the kitchen to show her where she would prepare food for our husband. She smiled at me, but I knew she was as nervous as I was when I first entered the yard of that compound.

I left her taking off *isicholo* and washing dust off her feet, told her to leave the door unlocked and keep a jug of water in the room because our husband got thirsty at night. She nodded in appreciation and thanked me for my help.

When I entered my own room that night, ready to cover my head with a pillow and let all the tears flow, I found my husband in bed waiting for me.

I almost asked but he covered my mouth with his hand and pulled me close to him.

Not long after that came Zweli. His mother didn't stay long enough to see him grow teeth, but my husband's mother was happy nevertheless.

"Are you sure there's enough *utshwala*?" he asks. He worries too much.

"There's enough everything. Come."

I can see the worry on his face as he takes three steps towards me. These gatherings have become more and more difficult with time. People are exposed to many things now. They leave the villages to live in towns and when they come back here they have experienced a different life, sometimes a better life. He worries about his place here, his power and his influence. He worries about the youth leaving and never coming back, leaving the elderly to die without teaching their grandchildren who they are. He worries about the language of our forefathers, the teachings about humanity and the spirit of *umuntu wumuntu ngabantu*.

"What will I say to my ancestors, Nobuntu? How will I explain myself when I see them again? How will I explain giving up this land that they fought for with blood and tears?"

I fix his *injobo*, flattening it on his shoulders with my hands.

"They will applaud you for not condemning your people to death, for not making them starve to death when there was an option. Sometimes sacrifices have to be made, Mvelase. Good leaders make sacrifices."

I know by the mumbings outside the door that his headmen are getting anxious. The men started arriving hours ago, properly dressed in *amabheshu* and carrying their weapons. They have been standing in groups, discussing and deliberating. We have had reports that they have been holding their own small meetings in villages, hence the growing fear. People in rural areas understand the value of land, that it is what is keeping all of

us alive, that it gives us water and it gives us food. It feeds the food that it cannot produce and it is the foundation of our shelters. It is not something they will easily let go of. They will die first.

"Go now," I say.

He takes a deep breath.

"When did I become so fearful? I used to be the bravest man in the land," he says.

"You've always had a soft heart. Go now," I say, trying to push him to the door.

"It's your fault, you tamed me," he says, kisses my cheek and straightens his shoulders.

"*Ndabezitha!*" the headmen say when he steps out of the door.

He starts the journey to *evigcwini*, his spear and shield held in one hand.

Since I cannot sit beside him today, I go to the last hut in the yard, the one close enough to *evigcwini* for me to spy through the small window.

I watch the men rise and shout "*Ndabezitha!*" with their spears raised. He raises his spear too and sits on that same chair his father sat on, his head held high and the fear I saw in his eyes five minutes ago completely gone.

His headmen sit beside him, ready to calm the crowd and call for order. A few of them sit beside his father too at that time when we were absolutely certain that they'd give up their lives for their king if need be. Now we are not sure anymore. Now things are not the same, the struggles are different.

He stands and clears his throat before he speaks.

"*Madoda!*" He shouts.

"*Ndabezitha!*" They say in unison.

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"You all know why we have gathered here. We have been talking about this, trying to find a solution but it all has been in vain. If we continue like this, continue to do nothing, we will starve to death. Our livestock is dying, our rivers are drying and our people are abandoning their lands. We are losing everything. Soon we will turn into walking skeletons. We will have no choice but to go and seek refuge in foreign lands. We will have to abandon our roots, abandon the graves of our forefathers and parents and children. Without this land, our children will forget what we stand for. They will forget our language and they will forget how we raised them!"

He stops.

"*Ndabezitha!*" they shout.

He looks at the headmen beside him, as if silently asking if he should get to the point immediately or try to explain further why change is necessary. I see Mthembu, the eldest of the headmen, look away from him. He has already said many times that he would rather starve to death than agree to this.

There was a time when I trusted him, but now we don't know who to trust anymore.

I feel presence getting heavy on my shoulders, and I know he's here.

"I thought I'd find you here," he says.

Judging by how he is standing in the middle of the hut, I know he has been here for a while.

"Zweli, you came? I thought you said you had something to do?"

He smiles, that same smile that his father gives me when he means to say, "You should know me better".

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He comes to stand next to me at the small window and briefly puts his arm around my shoulders as a greeting.

"You look beautiful, Mama."

He never forgets to say that. His sisters always say they feel sorry for the woman he will marry.

He has been living in Ballito since he came back for a reason I do not understand.

His father says he has a dark streak like his grandfather but I disagree. He has always been a gentle soul with a beautiful mind.

"You know, he always does better with you by his side," he says.

He's right, but this is one of those gatherings that are exclusive to men and those generally take longer than normal because...

"How does it look?" he asks.

"I don't know yet. He's just started speaking. You should be there with him, Zwelli."

"He is a tough man, Mama," he says, but his eyes are not convincing.

He leaves the room and I'm left looking across at the one thing we have fought for, for decades. Many have come and tried to sell us dreams. Some came with sketches of what this place would look like when they were done with it, others came with computers and screens and made presentations to us. They begged, promised money, the likes of which we have never heard of in our lives, and went behind our backs to speak to our people. They tried to influence rebellions, wrote bad things about us in newspapers, came here to take TV videos and tell the world we are starving people because of a bloody dam!

None of them, not a single one of them understands.

There was a man, all the way from Asia, who came here with some white people and one black man to interpret for him. He showed us pictures of big buildings, some floating over the water. There were pictures of big boats full of people with cameras and wine glasses in their hands.

They sat with us at the table and handed files with words and pictures, smiling at my daughters as if they stood a better chance at convincing them than they did us, old, uneducated people of the villages.

NoNqaba was the first to put the file aside and fold her arms before speaking.

"So if you are going to build all of this, where will our livestock drink? Where will our people get their water?" she asked.

The white man didn't wait for the interpreter. He jumped straight in.

"With all due respect, ma'am... errr... princess, we cannot have cows damaging things and scaring tourists away. We will have to put a fence along the river bank for the sake of safety," he said.

"So our people will have no access?" she asked.

"People will have access, where they can, but we will build them houses with taps inside, like a township, you know, like 'Umlaaaazi' where everybody lives close to each other and not this..." he said, waving his hand up in the air.

I knew by the look on NoNqaba's face that she was done and nothing that man was going to say mattered anymore. She left the meeting, leaving all of us with NoMazwe's ill temper and "I'm a lawyer and everywhere is a court room" attitude.

"So, what is it exactly that we, the people of Jozini, stand to gain from this big venture?" she asked.

The white man fixed his tie and raised his hand when his interpreter attempted to speak.

"This place will be booming with tourists. There will be businesses coming here, people will get jobs and, like I said, we will build new houses with all necessities and you will not be just rural villages with a big dam anymore. This will be a place everyone wants to come to, the whole world will come here," the white man said, so passionately you would think everything he was explaining had already happened.

"You talk about tourists who will come here and spend money at hotels that you plan to build here, hotels owned by you. They will ride boats owned by you, shop at businesses owned by you. You say there will be jobs for our people, jobs like cleaning your hotels and being cashiers and cleaners at your businesses, cooking and driving people around for you. With all due respect, sir, will you build a school here? A university? Will you allow our people to build and own hotels along with you here or you will have us wear animal skins and sing and dance to amuse your tourists? Is that on the cards, sir? Because if it is not, then you might as well pack your Asians and leave Jozini now."

Nothing could be discussed after that. We offered them tea and waved goodbye as they drove off.

But now things are different. We are in a desperate situation and this dam is all we have. All the small rivers have dried up, people can't grow crops, people from small villages far from the banks cannot afford to travel here to get water. The government is too slow, the mu-

nicipality is not making any money and water tanks are costing us an arm and a leg. We are desperate.

"Mama."

"Come in, NoMakhosi, darling."

"You look beautiful, as always. What are those brainless men saying to *Baba*?" she asks and pulls open the curtain.

"Stop it! We are spying here!" I say, pulling the curtain closed.

"Spying in our own home? Please! I bumped into Aunt Noma Velase outside and she started asking me that nonsense about getting a husband again. I swear, one day I will slap that woman so hard..."

"Shut up! There will be no slapping your aunt here. And don't complain to me. She is your blood. I'm not related to her, you are."

"You should have married that cow herder, Mama. At least his sisters are nice and we wouldn't be here dealing with those people. Oh wait, here comes the mini-king..."

It's Zwelli. He went to change clothes first. He sits on the ground next to his father, his knees up and his *injobo* slightly tilted to the side. He should have come to me first, I would have fixed it for him.

He was raised to take over from his father and he has known this all his life. We could have kept him here, kept him away from the world to avoid him being tempted and influenced but he has never been the type to be held down by anything or anyone.

But also, he has always been a true prince of the Mzimela clan. He always comes home. He knows everything that goes on here.

"Why is he standing up, Mama?"

Why is he standing up?

He raises his spear.

"*Ndabezitha!*" they say.

"The land belongs to us. Jozini belongs to us and we will never sell it, no matter how desperate we are! We will never sell this soil that was enriched by the blood of our ancestors!"

The crowd stands up and cheers. His father remains seated, the headmen look confused.

What is he doing?

"*Mama?* What is Zweli doing?"

He cannot do this to his father! He cannot!

"I'm going to stop him, Mama."

"You are not going anywhere. I'm going there!"

I will not have this. I will not have this child disrespect his father like this in front of people. We talked about this, we agreed as a family that we would support his father! Not this.

I'm stopped by my husband's cousin, the one who tried to partner with the Chinese to build a casino in one of the poorest villages in KwaZulu-Natal. People rose against it and now he is hiding here because he had already taken the Chinese' money and promised them it was a done deal.

"This meeting is not for women. Don't go there. Those men will eat you alive, you and your husband. Let the boy speak," he says.

I am surprised he feels this way because he has never agreed to anything that doesn't involve selling our souls. There must be something that's going to benefit him in this. He probably put Zweli up to this. I know he is always trying to turn him against me, al-

ways telling him that I'm not his mother although I raised him and I'm the only mother he knows.

I go back to my spying spot to find NoMakhosi still standing at the window, watching. Zweli is still speaking, still gassing up the crowd by raising his spear each time he makes a point. His father sits calmly on the king's chair, looking at everything except Zweli, and I know he is upset. I know this because his one fist is clenched.

Zweli is lucky because his father was still explaining how bad things are and had not yet told these people that we are allowing foreigners to come here and take our land.

When he finally sits down, his father stands up and announces that he is giving the people an hour to eat before the meeting resumes again. There is no time to breathe a sigh of relief. I rush back to our house for the sake of Zweli because if I don't get there soon enough, I will find him dead.

"And you did not speak to me first because?"

It has already started.

"There was no time, *Baba. Ndabezitha*. I had to stop you. You were about to make an announcement that was going to end us all. Did you see their faces? They are not ready for defeat. They are not ready to let go of what is theirs."

"And you think I don't know that, Zwelonke? You think I don't know that?"

I have to intervene.

"Mvelase."

"No. Nobuntu, no. I make the rules here. I'm the one who decides what's best for my people. I'm the one who says what should be done."

I know the headmen are waiting outside, eavesdropping on this conversation and that could lead to disaster. We cannot appear to be divided. It will make us look weak.

"Zweli, what is happening?"

"I have a plan, Mama."

"And why didn't you tell your father about this plan?"

"There was no time. But the plan is ..."

"I don't want to hear it," his father says.

Their arguments can go on but in the end, his father always has the last word. That is the one thing he never backs away from, an argument, and it always has to end with him being right. I have told him before, three times to be exact, that if there is one thing that will destroy him, it is his inability to listen.

"Hear your son out, Mvelase. He is on your side."

I hand him a glass of water and leave them alone in the room.

"NoMakhosi! We don't start eating until your father gets here."

This child has been a problem since the day she was born. By the time she was 10, she was already talking about the easiest ways to poison her grandmother. She does not respect rules, she never has.

"Obviously they are not hungry," she grumbles.

I left Zweli and his father to talk because I wanted them to iron out their issues before they went back to face those men. They did, and when they went back there, it was his father who spoke and it was him that the crowd cheered and thanked for saving their lives.

I did not know what Zweli's sudden great idea was but when I heard his father speak, confident and proud, I knew that we had raised a good future leader who was ready to take over. I saw new hope and prosperity coming to the people of Jozini. Yes, we will allow outsiders to come here and build their things and bring their tourists, but we will not give them our land. We will rent it out to them and we will share the proceeds equally. That was Zweli's great idea.

We sit quietly and listen to their footsteps as they approach the dining room. I cooked the food myself. I do that when my whole family is home and when my husband needs some calming down.

"NoMakhosi, did you start eating without me? And take that cap off," her father says.

She frowns and points to her empty plate before pulling her jersey sleeves down to cover her arms. I don't know how long she thinks she can hide all those tattoos on her arms and back from her father, but me. I've given up.

I made *ujeqe* and lamb stew, the first meal I cooked on the day after my wedding. That day I woke up at 3am and slaved until my ankles were the size of my legs. When I served his mother the food, on a tray, on my knees, she pulled the plate up to her nose and sniffed it before giving it to the dog. I never told my husband this, but his aunt came to my room and told me it was normal for mothers-in-law to treat their son's wife that way. She said it was meant to train me to be tough and learn to endure marriage struggles. I just thought she genuinely hated me, and that has never changed.

"You did well, little king," NoNqaba says.

“He is not as weak as we all thought,” NoMazwe adds.

“Leave him alone,” I intervene.

I will not have bickering, not tonight because it is the first time in a long time that we are all sitting around this table and not counting wrinkles on their father’s forehead. There is no tension, no awkward silence and no worries. It feels like we are going back to where we were before the drought, when people came to us with silly cases to report and not with a list of how many cows they had lost and dead crops they had had to burn down.

We are together and that is enough. We will sit here and laugh and talk about everything except things we should be talking about, things like NoNqaba’s breast cancer and NoMakhosi’s unruliness, which these days they call activism.

We simply don’t talk about NoNqaba’s illness because she too does not want to talk about it, but it is taking a toll on us. At first, it was a lump that was deemed harmless and removed. And then it came back again but this time it was described as a threat. Now she’s waiting to hear if her breast will have to be removed and at this point I feel powerless. Powerless because this is the child I have always felt I could not protect. The child who was not properly welcomed to the world because she was, technically, a useless addition. I was put under pressure to get pregnant again before she could start walking, because there had to be an heir and the heir usually doesn’t come with a vagina.

The most intelligent and humble child she is, strong and resilient and independent, but bad things tend to

follow her wherever she goes. She has lost children, some when they were still clots and others full term.

People have said things, about me and about my daughters that the ancestors of this home have never accepted us.

And then there is the elephant in the room, the one we usually joke about. The one NoMakhosi has just raised now.

“At least you don’t have to worry about that part. You have a mail order bride all the way from Lesotho, signed and sealed for you by your dearest grandfather,” she says.

Zweli does what he always does when this subject comes up, which is to laugh because he has never really believed the story.

“If you don’t want her, I’ll take her,” NoMakhosi says.

“I’ll gladly donate her to you. Do you want to be king too? I can give you that too,” Zweli answers.

I see my husband’s forehead wrinkle for the first time since he walked in.

“Well, you would have to give me your penis and balls too because according to these backward men of the Mzimela clan, male genitals are the ultimate requirement to rule a nation. Forget that the whole universe is this fucked up because of the same genitals.”

I look up at their father again, his eyes are staring down at his half-empty plate. He had been part of the conversation until the elephant in the room was mentioned. We don’t talk about it between the two of us, so basically I do not know how he feels about it.

“How on earth are you supposed to marry someone you don’t even know? What does she even do in life? Is

she educated? Can she even speak Zulu? What if she already has five children? What if she's ugly?"

"There's no such thing as an ugly woman, Zwe," NoMakhosi. Activism.

"She's not ugly, trust me," NoNqaba says.

"You know her?" asks Zweli.

"No, I Googled her. I saw a picture on the social pages of some magazine years ago. It was her 21st birthday party, I think. The name on the caption sounded familiar so I Googled her, found out she was the daughter of a famous artist and all of that. They said the party was also a graduation party. She's a geologist."

They laughed, too loudly for my liking.

"That's not a bad thing, little brother. She can come here and plough Jozini fields. She's qualified for it."

I'm not even sure who is saying this among these girls.

"Geologist, not a farmer. There's a difference," Zweli says defensively.

What if she has one eye? someone asks.

Good, then she will see only half of his nonsense, someone says.

Mvelase stands up. It must be exhaustion from today's events. I follow him to the bedroom, leaving silence behind in the dining room.

I found the regalia he wore to the meeting still hanging over the cream chair in the right corner of the bedroom. I was too busy to pack it up and hang *ibheshu* so it doesn't crease.

I want him to talk to me, to say what he feels because one minute he is laughing and the next he looks troubled. He was like that throughout dinner, joining in

the conversation and withdrawing and coming back again.

"I'm going to take a bath,"

This is to give him time to compose himself before I start questioning him.

"No, Nobuntu, don't go," he says.

Now I know he's ready. He takes my hand and leads me out to the veranda where the wooden bench has been for the past 12 years. It was a gift given to us by children from Ophondweni when we visited the area to open a new clinic. They made it themselves.

I sit next to him and wait on his silence.

"Do you remember how we always forgot to bring this bench in when it rained, and then it would be wet and we couldn't sit on it until it dried? And when it was dry, it would smell like shit because of the mould."

I remember all of that, and I remember that it is something we have not had to worry about in a year, which makes it not funny anymore.

"I remember how many times I begged you to let me throw it away and you said no because you can never forget the smiles on those children's faces when they handed it to us and told you they made it themselves."

I expect a response, but he is back to being silent again, so I wait.

"There is one thing I have been waiting for you to tell me to do for a while, but you haven't."

I raise my eyebrows.

"Ask me to rest *nkosikazi*. Tell me Zweli is ready. Tell me I have done my duties and that it's okay for me to let go now."

What does he mean by 'rest'?

"But Zweli can't succeed you until you... while you are still alive."

"Nobuntu, I need you to say it. I need to hear it..."

I don't know what to say so I stretch my eyes wide across the dam to the houses, some dark and some with burning wood fires. This man has been king for more than half our lives. I don't know him as anything else except that. I don't know if I will understand him at all if he isn't what he has always been. But I know what needs to be done. I know that he is tired and I know that we don't have much time.

"I think Zweli is ready," he says.

"Did he tell you that?"

"No, I decide when he is ready. Nobody asked me if I was ready to be king, or if I wanted to. Instead a woman was chosen for me and..."

He sounds furious all of a sudden, as if had he had a choice, he would have chosen a different family to be born into.

"My daughter could be dying, Nobuntu. Another one is so confused, she dresses like a man and is sleeping with other women, and the other is... I don't even understand her anymore. Her children speak English to me, they call me Grandpa and they say I'm cruel to animals for wearing *ibheshu*."

He isn't lying about all of that, but he has responsibilities. He was born with them hanging over his head. That is something he cannot rest from.

"Zweli is ready," I say.

He frowns and looks at me.

"You mean it?"

"Yes, he's been ready for a while."

I hope I'm doing the right thing.

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"You've always been the love of my life, you know?"

I know. Even if things had gone according to his parents' plans, I know I would have still ended up here anyway.

Ntombenhle, and her name suited her perfectly, didn't want him, but she carried royal blood and I carried peasant blood.

"Here stands the man with the master plan. Stop holding your hands behind your back like your father. You're too young for that shit, man."

"I can't be that young at 28. What do you have there?" he asks, attempting to snatch her satchel from her.

She digs inside it and pulls out items, one by one.

"Weed, weed mixed with menthol, weed from Kranskop, weed from Eshowe. Weed from Swaziland..."

"Are you selling this shit now? Why do you have so much of it?" he asks.

She laughs and tells him there are better things to sell than what nature supplies to the people free of charge.

"I'll take the Kranskop roll. The Midlands have the most beautiful women, hitmen and all," he says.

She lights up the joint and passes it to him, and then she lights hers and takes one long drag, puffs out and takes a deep sigh.

"You know it's time, right?" she says.

He nods.

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"I know it's time," he says and takes a long pull.

"NoMakhosi, you will be here with me, right? You can do this better. You are just like Mama."

She shakes her head and says that not as long as patriarchy continues, not as long as tradition refuses to recognise women as anything other than homemakers and submissive to men.

"I'd probably end up murdering some of those headmen. You know I've always hated them. I hate how sometimes they don't acknowledge Mama and what she has done for this place. I've seen how they look at her when she addresses the people. How they never rise for her and call her *Ntabezitha* like they do to *Baba*."

"But, sis, you have to understand that..."

"I don't have to understand anything, Zwelonke. I cannot live in a place where people are not equal. A place where I cannot bring my girlfriend and tell everyone about her. *Baba* thinks there's something wrong with me, do you know that? Do you know that he claims I'm confused and unruly, all because I know who I am and I choose to live my life the way I want."

There's silence as they both pull and puff and pull simultaneously. This place under the mango tree is where they always hide when they get up to no good. They used to dig a hole and hide bottles of alcohol here during Christmas holidays when the girls were still at varsity.

Zweli was still young then, still in high school, but he always caught them drinking here and to shut him up, they would let him sneak out through the fence to see NoNzwakele, his first love from down across the

river who he only saw during holidays because she attended boarding school.

Every time he jumped the fence, they would all say at the same time: "If she sees your penis, she'll get pregnant, so don't ever take it out. Keep your clothes on."

Of course, he knew that was impossible but he kept his clothes on anyway because NoNzwakele would not take off hers.

In the end, he went to university and she went on to be a model in Johannesburg.

His sisters call her a "slay queen" now.

When they both came back to Jozini, they were different, grown up, and Zweli had learned the truth about why his grandmother was the way she was.

But he has never taken that thing seriously. His theory has always been that no woman would accept to be traded like that, not in this day and age.

"You're committing royal atrocities without me? Who discovered this place, you idiots?"

"MaMzimela," Zweli says, briefly putting his arm around her shoulders to acknowledge her presence.

"The first idiot I married used to call me that. Ecu-uwu, what are you smoking here? Makho, why do you behave like you were raised by wolves?"

NoMakhosi doesn't answer her because she knows this could easily lead to an argument about who judges who for what, and then Zweli will have to be the peace maker but it wouldn't help because he will always be a child in their eyes.

So NoMakhosi offers her a pull and she frowns and fans the smoke away from her face.

"Where's your girlfriend?" she asks.

"He has a girlfriend I don't know about?" NoMakhosi says.

"Yes, she speaks English with her nostrils and has claws for nails."

Zweli laughs and shakes his head.

"Does that mean we have a queen-in-waiting?"

He shakes his head.

"She would never adapt to life here, as much as I love her and her intelligence," he says.

"Well, then that leaves us with the geologist," NoMazwe says.

"I'm not marrying no geologist. She probably has coarse hands and black nails and wears gumboots all the time. I can just imagine her sharing a plate of pap and tripe with a group of mineworkers somewhere in Welkom," he says.

"And Grandfather's dying wish for revenge?" NoMazwe asks.

"The dead are owed nothing, my sister. They are owed nothing by the living," he says, his jaw tightening.

Dogs and Crocodiles

I came from Mkuze too, but down below the forest because that is where my father was born.

I only ever saw him when he came home once almost every two years to grow a family he could barely support.

He never brought anything with him except for a bent stick and a bag that carried his good pants and a brown blazer.

The only valuable thing he owned was a *dompas*, something very few men in the village possessed, and he would show it to us, his six children, like it was a bar of gold only rich men could possess.

Father was not a respected man. He came from down below in the racks and the ruins and he would have stayed deep down there until the day he died had Mvelase, my dear husband, not had a roving eye.

The first time I saw the young prince, he had come to Mkuze with a group of men, some of his cousins and others, his minders who were supposed to keep him on the straight and narrow in case he forgot he was royalty and started behaving like a commoner.

It wasn't his first time in Mkuze, but it was the first time he had been humble enough to allow himself to be used as bait.

One of his minders, Mthotshelwa, had been courting a girl from my village for over a year, and to protect

his ego, he would not give up until he got her, even if it was just for a week. And so when all else failed, the young prince offered to accompany him so he could try to put in a good word for him.

It would have worked had it been another girl and not Ncamisile, but it didn't because Ncamisile had no plans of staying in Mkuze and marrying a village boy whose job was to follow a prince around for the rest of his life. She left a week later and from what we heard, it was on a big truck heading in the Pongola direction. The next time we saw her, decades later, it was in a photograph in a newspaper. She was standing next to Nelson Mandela, raising a fist.

Mthotshelwa never recovered from that kind of rejection and had it been up to him, he would have never set foot in Mkuze again, especially not down below the forest where not many people dared to go because of the risk of being eaten by crocodiles.

But the prince's roving eye had caught something, something it wasn't supposed to look at and that thing came in a form of an 18-year-old maiden.

I knew of him and Ntombenhle. We all knew because as the maidens of Mkuze, even we at the bottom of the hierarchy, had the obligation to treat her like she was gold.

She was the only thing standing between us and war.

She was a peace offering, like the white flag that ends everything when raised on a battlefield.

The blood of the Mzimelas and the blood of the Zondis, Mvelase and Ntombenhle, that was what ended the war over land. They were still infants when it was decided that they would grow up and marry, have an

heir that would share the blood of both families. A neutral king, that was the plan.

Wherever she went, Ntombenhle was guarded and protected. When she went to bathe in the river, a large group of maidens would be deployed to accompany her. Behind the rocks and trees, a group of men would wait in case they heard screams and had to come out and protect us.

Every dog in the village would be sent to the river banks to keep crocodiles away.

We all knew that a crocodile would rather starve to death in the water than come out and smell the scent of a dog. Even one dog far from the river bank was enough to keep them away for days.

But Ntombenhle was too important, hence the whole village dog community was sent out to protect her.

The young prince and his entourage appeared along the bank of the river on one of those bathing days, tall and brave and unbothered by half-naked women singing and laughing loudly.

"*Makhosazana!*" he shouted.

There was silence before mayhem broke out, girls jumping in the river to hide their breasts and bare backs, others running behind trees and some scattering all over the place trying to find their clothes.

He wasn't looking at any of them, not even Ntombenhle who stood frozen, arms crossed over her chest to hide her breasts and her lower body hidden under water.

He was looking at me. I wasn't looking at him, I wouldn't dare, but I could feel his eyes stuck on me.

"*Nibahle makhoxazana*," he said, laughed briefly and continued with his journey.

Calm returned for a few seconds and then mayhem ensued again.

There was a rush to get Ntombenhle out of the water and get her covered.

By the time the young men who had been tasked with protecting us came out from behind the rocks, the prince was long gone.

Even the dogs had done nothing for us.

What happened on that day, we left at the river bank and agreed it was never to be mentioned to anyone. I never told, not because I had promised not to but because the young prince wasn't supposed to be looking at me when his future wife was standing not too far away.

It took weeks before I saw him again, and this time he didn't just stare and leave, he called me by name.

And now we are here again.

This morning before they left, it felt like I was back in that river, fearful and unsure.

Everything came back to me like it was happening all over again.

I have been here in Jozini for many years, for more than half my life but I have never forgotten my people and their stubbornness.

It was they who started that war you know.

Before that, we all lived in harmony. We shared what was given to us by nature and we danced and celebrated together on special occasions.

But then came Ntombenhle's grandfather. Some say he killed his own father so he could take over from him.

He claimed, and this was told to me by my father after he showed me his *ompas* again, that he claimed half of Jozini belonged to the Zondis and that his own father had been too much of a coward to claim it back. And so he demanded it back and met by resilience from the Mzimelas, he resorted to violence.

Had it not been for the women from both sides who marched to both royal houses and staged a sit-in, he would have covered the whole of Jozini with the blood of its own people.

A mutual agreement had to be reached but things were never the same after that.

And then Ntombenhle went and did what she did and Jozini and Mkuze were dog and crocodile again.

"You must at least eat something, Mama."

She sits next to me, twisting her fingers on her lap.

Her skin has thinned. I can see the traces of her veins all over the back of her hands.

She notices me looking and quickly puts them in her pockets. My dear child, she has always been the type to suffer in silence, just as my own mother used to.

"You don't have to worry, Mama. It's not those old days anymore. Things have changed. People are more educated now. They just want to live their lives and forget about who belongs where."

People do not change. History will always find a way of repeating itself.

"What if they say no, NoNqaba? We cannot do anything without their approval,"

"But why would they say..."

"Not every man is like your father, my child. To some people, power is everything. They would rather

die than be seen as weak. Not everybody moved on, not from what we went through."

Ntombenhle running off like that with some men in blankets who spoke a language we did not understand didn't help.

The Mzimelas felt betrayed and the Zondis powerless.

A new agreement was made but I doubt anybody cares about it at all. Only we remember it and we have no plans of seeing it through because that is not who we are.

But it helped because again it stopped an imminent war.

"I think they are back," she says.

They are, and so are the cramps in my stomach that have been coming and going since morning.

The message came at noon yesterday. It was more of a question than a statement really, a simple "What is this we hear?"

My husband meant to go and inform them. It's just that he had not found the proper time to do it with everything that had been going on.

I know the moment he walks in that I was right to worry.

"NoNqaba, leave me with your father and brother please."

"But why?"

"NoNqaba!"

She looks at Zweli, he raises his eyebrows and she leaves us.

"I prepared some food." I say.

"They gave us food," my husband says.

When his answers are short and his forehead is furrowed, it means things are really bad. I learned to hear his words before he speaks them very early in this marriage. I know what each facial expression means, how many throat clearings mean he is uncomfortable and how many knuckle pops mean he is unsure.

"We are back where we started, Nobuntu. We could not agree on anything and we cannot do anything without their buy-in. They refused, blatantly refused everything! I don't get it. I don't understand it."

I don't understand it either. We should have involved them from the beginning, yes, but this is a desperate situation. This is a matter of life and death.

"Did they even give you a chance to explain the plan and how much it is going to benefit everyone?"

"I did try to explain, Mama. They would hear none of it," Zweli says.

We are back where we started and I don't know if my husband has any strength left in him to handle this.

The softer and weaker he becomes with age, the more Zweli transforms into a more intense, younger version of him, the version that would never have left Mkuze without an answer that suited him.

"Zweli's temper didn't help either," he says.

Yes, he has a temper and he does not back down, something he inherited from his grandfather.

Had we sent him there alone, I don't know what would have happened.

There was a time where my husband was not known for negotiating. He made decisions and stuck with them. He led and everyone else followed, whether they liked him or hated him. In those times, his eyes never saw the ground because he never dropped them.

He spoke with vigour and authority and he carried wisdom far beyond his age. But that Mvelase is gone now. And here is Zwelonke, above and beyond all of that.

“What are we going to do now?”

That is all I can offer, a question I know they are relying on me to come up with an answer to.

“You can rest now, *Baba*. You are tired. I’ll take over, I’ll fix this.” Zweli says.

But that cannot be done, not when his father is still alive. He cannot dethrone a living king.

“How are you going to fix this, Mvelase?” his father asks. He calls him that when he wants them to talk as equals.

But I don’t know if this is a real question.

“I have to go away for a while,” he says. I don’t understand.

“They owe me,” he says.

Wild Cats

On a scale of one to 10, Barbara is a 12 today.

Yes, her breasts are larger than most parts of her body and her hair, now miraculously blonde, could make about 10 weaves, depending on where they are being sold.

Barbara puts a smile on Lincoln's face. I call him Lincoln now because it would just be weird to call him Father.

So Barbara, she's been here for him, supporting him, tolerating him and drumming it in his head that what happened was not his fault.

I couldn't do it. I couldn't be there for him because I think it was my fault too.

So today they are getting married and Barbara came to my place to invite me personally because I have not been to his house since the cremation.

It's not that I abandoned them. It's that I knew that whenever he looked at me, he saw Shemar, so I decided to make things easier for him.

But now I'm here and I am one of the few people, with Lashandra as my plus one, on the groom's side because he did not invite anyone except the best man, who isn't even here.

Lashandra nudges me when people sitting on the bride's side keep looking at us for answers.

"You should go get him," she says.

I've been thinking about it, but what will I say to him?

"I'm sure he's coming. He's probably just fixing his suit or something."

I say it like I believe it but I'm just making excuses because I don't want to mess up his big day by being near him and reminding him of what he lost.

I only stand up and rush inside the dressing rooms when I overhear someone saying Barbara is crying somewhere.

I slowly push the door open when there's still no answer after knocking three times.

He's standing at the window, fully dressed in a tuxedo and his hands in his pockets. Another black tuxedo hangs on the door of the closet. He is looking down at the decorated garden, at the same people who have become anxious because they have been waiting for the groom to come out for almost an hour now.

I haven't spoken yet but I know he knows I'm here.

"They are waiting for you," I say, careful not to sound like I'm giving him an order.

"I need more time," he says.

I thought he loved Barbara. They have been inseparable since that day.

She held his hand and gave him a handkerchief during the memorial service. She was the one doing all the TV interviews, condemning the hate and gun violence and explaining how shattered the family was by the tragedy. She had only met Shemar once, in that bar, but she spoke like he was her son.

"Barbara thinks you are bailing out on her."

That's when he turns around and our eyes meet. He looks clean and healthy. His hair is neatly cut and he doesn't look as old as he is anymore.

"I need a best man. Do you want to be my best man?"

I almost laugh but he looks too serious to be deliberately cracking jokes.

"You don't need a best man. You need to do what you promised to Barbara."

He looks me in the eye and slowly turns around to look back out the window.

"I need more time," he says again.

I sit down on the couch and wait, hoping my presence will bring him back to his senses. But instead he picks up a cigar and lights it.

Now I'm defeated. I pull up my long chiffon dress, turn around and head for the door. I think about closing it behind me but I don't because I want him to see that there is a way out when he turns around again.

I can hear people talking downstairs and I know that it's Barbara's guests, panicking. I don't know what I'm going to tell them because...

"Trying to kill the best man?"

I rub my forehead and look up, my chin raised because it's like looking high up at a street light.

"Sorry I didn't..."

He's smiling down at me.

"Did I hurt you?" he asks.

I shake my head slowly and try hard not to stare.

His freckles are not brief, they are everywhere. He doesn't have an afro but his beard makes up for it. It is thick and orange. I know who he is but I won't admit that to him and I won't explain why I'm standing in front of him looking like I have just seen a ghost.

"He's in there," I say, pointing at an open door behind me. I step aside to let him through.

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He wasn't at the memorial or cremation. From what I heard, he wasn't even in the country and nobody expected him to show up anyway. Shemar once told me that he had only ever met him twice, when his grandparents died and he came to their funerals.

When I reach the bottom of the stairs, I find a group of women who are undoubtedly Barbara's friends, most of them looking too glamorous to be at a garden wedding.

"The best man is here. He will come down soon," I tell them.

They are relieved but I'm not sure if I'm telling the truth or lying.

I settle next to Lashandra again and cross my fingers for a happy ending to this day.

"Lou, I just saw Dolly Parton. I swear I just saw Dolly Parton here."

I doubt she just saw Dolly Parton but I can't dwell much on that because the women are rushing back to their seats and the priest is fixing his robe and testing the microphone at the same time.

The music starts playing *Somewhere over the rainbow* on violin.

"Did you see her?" Lashandra asks.

"Who?" I snap.

"Dolly Parton."

They appear at the start of the white carpet together, one too tall and the other too white.

They walk side by side until they are standing at the front, not talking, not looking at each other, just standing together.

I ignore Lashandra when she asks about the orange old man because I just want to see Barbara coming

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down the aisle so that this wedding happens and there is a happy ending.

She appears, looking exactly like she did when I bumped into her in the passage earlier, rushing somewhere.

Her dress is almost gold and she doesn't wear a veil, just a comb pushing her hair to the back on one side.

I say a silent "Whew" and hook my arm through Lashandra's.

The priest doesn't waste time. He gets right to "We are gathered here..."

I watch Barbara and remember that day clearly, thinking that maybe if we had stayed with her and Lincoln, Shemar would still be alive. We would never have become hungry so he would never have gone to the food park.

I think he would have loved Barbara eventually, once he got to know how nice and funny she is and once he saw how happy she makes his father.

They would have been best friends and she would have been the mother he never had.

But those thoughts and wishes are useless now. Someone shot him dead. Someone who didn't even know how great a person he was and how much he had fought to find himself, to love himself.

They pulled out a gun and fired and fired and fired as if they were holding a hose-pipe watering a lawn.

He was the 20th person to be confirmed dead among men and children and their mothers and some grandfathers and couples and strangers.

It's been two years and five months, and still nobody knows why. Why the young man chose that day and that street and that food park to do what he did.

We should have gone to see the Statue of Liberty, I think to myself sometimes. But it's no use now. They say everybody is born with the date and time and place of their death hovering over them like an invisible cloud.

But not Shemar. He was supposed to live forever.

He was the creature with a masquerade mask at The Floor. He was the drug addict who made it. He was my friend.

They opened the body bag for me.

"He has a flag painted on his face, facing up," I told the policeman when we were going through all the body bags that were lined up.

He pulled the zipper down to his neck and I saw him.

The bullets didn't touch his face, it remained beautiful and orange.

His eyes were still open but he could no longer see the wild cat staring down at him.

The Falling

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Something drew me to him.

Something I could neither understand nor explain.

Our eyes didn't meet at that moment but I swear I could remember his. It was like déjà vu, a feeling I knew I had felt before perhaps in a past life and right in the middle of an unpleasant moment because I could feel my stomach turn.

As unsettling as the feeling was, I didn't want to look away, and so I stared long enough for Lashandra to wave a hand in front of my eyes and ask if I was okay.

I said yes and went back to staring at the large painting of three big rocks leaning on each other in front of me.

At the corner of my eye, I could see the group of people listening attentively as the artist explained what the image translated to. He said something about how it was the fact that the earth had not moved that kept the rocks intact, relying on each other for balance and support. Much of it didn't make scientific sense, just the usual deep but probably intoxicated kind of talk.

In those days, I had taken a liking to New York art galleries and exhibitions but not because I longed for my father, because it was something I could do in silence.

Most guests there were older and wealthy, while the artists, some with accents I could not place, were either

too scruffy or extremely introverted. When they did talk, they talked about art and nothing else. I had heard my father's name mentioned a few times but I never got the courage to speak up and introduce myself.

Sometimes Lashandra came with me but only when she had nothing else to do.

I looked around, behind me and towards the door but I couldn't spot him. He was gone and I was relieved.

"Are you sure you're okay, Lou?"

I said yes again and stared back at the three rocks that spoke nothing to my senses.

"Good. I met some idiot there at the wine display and he gave me this," she said.

She waved a flyer in my face that I could not read because she was waving it too fast.

"It's tomorrow night and I swear, I only accepted it because his friend was cute. Photo exhibition of some sort but I assume that it is at least photographs of real things, not the stones and fruit loops that are lining these walls. I want to go now. Do you want to go? The free wine is not even nice in this place."

I wasn't ready to go but we had an early morning the next day at the New York Contemporary Company, a big day for both of us and our careers, although the production wasn't exactly the biggest achievement of our lives.

We had spent all day rehearsing, checking if everything was in place and getting the dancers to go through every routine again and again.

I focused on the dancers because compared to Lashandra, I was a little less intimidating.

We cruised through that show and got our fifth standing ovation in a row. Holding hands, we were the last two to bow out of the stage and that's when it happened again. Our eyes still did not meet but I knew it was him.

I could have looked harder, tried to find him and maybe wave to get his attention but instead I rushed out off the stage like I was running from something.

"Don't forget the photo exhibition thing," Lashandra reminded me.

I didn't want to go and she insisted that neither did she, it was just that the friend wasn't so bad looking and she had promised to show up.

"Don't we have to go home to change clothes?" I asked, hoping that would put her off.

"No, it's photographers. They are as scruffy as those artists of yours, if not worse. Let's go and hope they have class because I cannot be subjected to cheap wine two nights in a row..."

She was still talking when we stood on the pavement waiting for a cab, the flyer in her hand with an address we did not recognise.

When we climbed in the cab, the driver looked at the address, and then at us and at the flyer again. He shrugged and started driving. We were just getting comfortable on the back seat when he parked in front of a black door, literally a traffic light and four buildings away.

"We are here," he said.

"Here?" I asked. "We could have walked."

"Well, you didn't walk, so that will be a dollar and 50 cents."

I had long accepted that my relationship with the cab drivers of Manhattan was complicated.

We entered what could have easily been described as a dungeon with low lighting. The lady who welcomed us had tattoos from the neck down to her navel.

I thought about writing just Lou on the guest register, the way I always did at art galleries, but on impulse I wrote my full name and even my correct cell phone number.

The crowd was different. It wasn't quiet and calm, it was chatty and the laughs were loud. The music wasn't slow and soothing, it had a lot of drumming and screeching. Some of the people walked around with cameras hanging around their necks, standing in groups analysing pictures, mostly portraits, something like "Humans of New York".

I liked that we were looking at real people. Under each photograph was a story of where and who those people were.

I stopped and looked up at a photograph of a young couple. The girl had ivory skin and blue eyes. She stood next to a boy with very dark hair and a long chin who could have been a year or two older than her. They were holding hands, the girl smiling and the boy's eyes too cautious.

Below them the text read:

Aheng (20) and Elend (22) both fled the Yazidi genocide in Syria two years ago.

They met on the day they arrived in America when Aheng lost her only luggage, a bag with six books and a photo album.

Elend helped her look for it and from that moment on they have been inseparable.

Aheng was rescued from being a child soldier and Elend says his biggest fear is that she can fire a rifle and not miss.

A beautiful story of young love in difficult circumstances.

I moved on to the next one, a young boy with vitiligo who said he glowed in the dark and an old woman with not a single tooth but the biggest smile on her face.

Next to her was a picture of a fire and a cat arising from it. At least that's what I thought until I saw human feet and realised it wasn't a cat.

All the caption said was:

"Five minutes before the Brooklyn massacre on July 4, a wild cat danced in the fire."

I turned around to look for the exit. I wanted to run as fast as I could and scream as loudly as I could. But all I could find was him, again, explaining to guests where and when he took the picture of the gypsy with a thousand bangles.

I found the fire escape behind the restrooms.

I've said it before, I love New York.

It didn't love me back at first but it has showed me how beautiful ugly can be.

Now, almost three years since I walked through the red doorway in the Bronx, I'm standing backstage at the Joyce Theatre waiting for my turn to audition.

It took a lot for me to get here. I worked my ass off at Future, all the way up to becoming a choreographer for three small productions.

If I nail this audition, it will be my second big break after the New York Contemporary Company gig I did two months ago.

But things had been so slow in the year before this that my uncle sent me a goat to help me with my bad luck. It was depression really, but my uncle thought a goat would help me out of it.

I'd sit down and tell all about the drama that came with it but now is not the time.

I've been here three times before. On my first try, they asked me about my accent and promised to call me back.

On the second time, they called me to audition for an Africa-themed concert because, well, I was supposed to know how Nigeria's Igbo people dance to celebrate the birth of a child.

I'm here now for a Spring in New York themed production.

It runs every year but the cast and script is always different.

Everyone, and I mean everyone, wants to be part of it. Had I been told that I'd be here today, three years ago I would have had a panic attack.

Had I been told that things would pan out the way they have, maybe I would have stopped running.

But I'm not running anymore, not from myself, not from my family's past and definitely not out of fear.

"Lou-nkile, nice to see you again."

It's the same woman from last time. Toya. People talk about her a lot. They say she was born a bitch of the dance industry and that's why her hair is red.

"Her hair is already burning in hell," they say.

I perfect my pose and make eye contact with Miz-G, the most important person in this room right now.

"You are a leaf falling from a jacaranda tree," Toya says, whatever that means.

I had rehearsed for something different but this will do.

"They stood up and clapped when I was done," I whisper to myself, close my eyes and lie back on the park bench.

I come here often to sit and watch people. Some have become too familiar, too routine.

They pass by here at the same time, buy the same lunch from the same food truck and walk back where they came from.

If I knew them at all, I'd approach them and ask if their lives were fulfilled and if they were who they have

always wanted to be. But then again, what would my answer be if they asked me the same question?

They are different from the people at Central Park. They are faster, more anxious and a little unwelcoming to each other.

Before I moved out of my old apartment, I couldn't bring myself to go back to the park, to sit down on the bench that holds so many memories for one last time. To say goodbye to the feather man, the Jamaican hustler and the ice cream vendor who always insisted her products were low fat.

I just couldn't look at them again.

I packed at the crack of dawn and moved to the other side of town, found a new park and made a new home in a building across the road from it.

Here, I've found the man with a pink coat, the woman in a wheelchair and Trump, a stray dog that has a habit of peeing on people's legs.

I have not made friends with these people at this park. I can't get myself to. They are not like the people from Central Park. But I do give them food, and sometimes flowers just to get smiles from them.

I'm almost happy now, I think. I've made friends in the dancing industry, both in Manhattan and the Bronx. I go out to party and I've survived another winter alone.

I have made peace with the fact that I'm torn between two worlds.

I love that things are looking up for me now, whether it was the goat or the gods. I love that the past seven years of my life have been colourful and gloomy, beautiful and ugly. I gained and lost and loved and learned.

There are four important Ls in life, my mother used to say. They are living, loving, laughing and Lungile, she'd say.

I'd laugh when she said Lungile at the end because I thought she was just trying to please me.

"The last L is the most important one – always remember that. The first three Ls can only be achieved through putting the last L first," she'd say.

But I was only 10 years old, and when you are 10 you don't have time to sit and think about the things your mother tells you. Anyway, that's all they do, tell you things and expect you not to question them. It is even worse if they die before you are old enough to ask them what they meant.

I watch news from back home lately, a lot, without even feeling guilty like I used to.

The other day I watched 3 *Talk* online and saw Dikeledi looking nothing like herself. Even her English wasn't funny anymore. She started almost all her sentences with "Basically, Noleen..." and then she would tell her story. The things she was saying were believable, they did not sound awkward or far-fetched for a girl from a village behind the mountain anymore. She was a pilot now, the first female pilot to fly internationally.

I wondered if her ultimate dream was still to become an 'astra-natic'.

It's funny how unpredictable life is, how fate, unlike destiny, is determined by nothing at all.

If I do get the Spring in New York part, which Lashandra insists I got, it will mean I am officially among the cream of the crop in these dancing streets. I could end up on Broadway, or being poached to teach

at Julliard or even, if I look good enough, find myself being a judge on one of those TV dance competitions.

My dreams here are coming true and they are coming true fast. Everything I have ever wanted is happening now and I'm getting swallowed by this city more and more.

I've heard "Your accent has improved" a few times, as if it is an achievement that now I almost sound like everyone else. As if it is not enough that I am African, that I speak many languages and that I have a name that, although it is one of the easiest names to pronounce where I come from, people here keep mispronouncing. As if it is not all of that that makes people interested in me.

I was told, and this by one of Lashandra's friends, that I stood a better chance at getting jobs because I am light-skinned and I speak English better than most black Americans.

I could have engaged her on a debate about that, tell her how hard it has been for me too, but she had since started wearing *doeks* and reading Chimamanda and quoting Ngungi. She would have gone all out to explain to me how the fact that I sometimes wear a weave equalled to self-hate and how I had no right to be angry about anything because I have a flat stomach and can walk around in a bikini without body shamers frowning at me. She would have brought up my skin tone too, called me derogatory things like "yellow bone", which some people think is a compliment.

But, as I said, my dreams are coming true and I'm staying in New York, in this park where I sat last week and ate frozen yoghurt on my 26th birthday before go-

ing home to Skype with Maboo who keeps telling me how much life has moved on without me.

People almost always bring up the issue of therapy about the Shemar thing, but what they don't know is that we all deal with things differently, and therapy is not on my list of how to deal with things.

I dance to deal with things. I run barefoot and do yoga in the park and smile at strangers because they know nothing about me, and therefore they always believe my smile, whether it is real or just me trying to cope.

The man in the pink coat always smiles back but never says anything.

He is smiling now at the guy taking his picture. He even rubs dust off his coat and poses for the man to get the best angle.

There are a lot of those here, walking around with cameras and taking pictures of anything and anyone they see.

Most of them are tourists who have to collect proof that the American Dream does not exist, that there are homeless people here, drug addicts too and women who sell their vaginas to feed their children and penniless immigrants who work their bodies to hunched backs because this country has to make money and pay its people social benefits and fund wars.

I raise my eyes to find the same camera aimed at me and suddenly my stomach turns and my throat fills up.

I know why.

Maybe I'll talk to him the next time we meet, but also, maybe I'll run again.

I stand up and walk away but I can still hear the camera snapping behind me.

The call came this morning.

I'm well on my way, if I'm not already there, to being one of Manhattan's most desirable dancers.

So now we are going to celebrate because Lashandra will find any excuse to go out drinking.

She picked out a club downtown and instructed me to "be sexy" and show some skin.

"Look sexy for you and nobody else. Show skin because it's yours and you are comfortable in it," she always says.

I still haven't figured out if she is a staunch feminist or not, but she says the only time we should forget about equality and feminism is when we go out partying.

And then she insists that one-night stands are the biggest weapon of fighting male ego.

"Shag him and block him the next morning. When you bump into him in future, pretend you've never seen him before."

I always laugh when she says these things.

And so I put on my fawn halter neck dress. It's low cut at the back with high slits on the sides and it makes me feel and look sexy.

But snow has come again tonight, although light and weak, forcing me to cover my sexiness with a coat.

"You're coming in, beautiful?"

I shake my head.

"Nope, just a few minutes," I shout over the noise of people trying to convince the bouncer to let them in.

I check my watch again. Lashandra is never late unless it's for work. She is never late for anything that involves partying and drinking.

"That is definitely not sexy!" she says, hooking her arm in mine.

I didn't see her coming.

She's wearing a big coat too.

We move effortlessly to the front of the line, on the receiving end of a warm smile from the bouncer welcoming us inside. It's dark and cosy with Black Coffee blasting in the background.

*♫ I need someone that needs me, I need someone ♪
that loves me*

Can you be my Superman?

♫ Can you be my Superman?

♫ Will you be my Superman? ♪

I can't help moving and singing along as Lashandra looks at me strangely. She claims if I wasn't a trained dancer, I'd have two left feet.

"Oh, the morons are everywhere," she says when we spot a hyperactive guy with an s-curl doing whatever it is that he was doing on the dance floor.

"I thought strip dancing was art," I say and giggle.

"For the girls, yes, not that moron," she says.

We laugh.

It's a beautiful night and we plan to be as wild as we can be.

Our martinis arrive from high up on the roof, carried by an aerial bartender on a silk harness.

Fancy, I think to myself.

We shrug off our coats and find a middle table to hog with hope that no man, particularly the idiot making a fool of himself on the dance floor right now, will try to hit on us.

Another Black Coffee song, Dance Again, starts playing and I pull Lashandra by hand to the dance floor.

She prefers hip-hop and to me it's not a nightclub until I hear house music.

"Refill?" a blue-eyed, dark-haired waitress with black lipstick is standing in front of us holding a tray with two martinis.

She's wearing a black leather bra and hot pants.

I take one and drink it in one go.

She smirks and says: "I guess this is why that guy finds you amusing."

I look around but I see no guy looking my way.

I almost laugh until she points at someone with her head.

"He's been staring at you. The one with a big head."

And with that she moves along with her tray and hot pants.

I flash a smile at him, I don't know why.

And then he and his friend come over to us. Lashandra knows the idiotic one but she pretends not to remember him.

I know the guy with the big head but I don't run, not this time.

I put on a relaxed face and let him dance with me.

I respond to his contained, confident moves just to protect his ego, until he gets too close, until his presence makes me uncomfortable and his scent is too familiar. The feeling again.

"I'm getting out of here," I whisper to Lashandra. I'm not sure if she heard me.

"Going somewhere?"

This guy!

I push him out of the way and try to disappear into the crowd but he blocks me again.

"Why did you stop dancing? Did I make you shy?"

His head really is big.

"Really? You? Make me shy? I'm a professional dancer and choreographer so please..."

He folds his arms and looks at me.

"I know. You're in my pictures."

Which pictures?

"The ones we'll pay you a fortune for if you let us use..."

No, no, no...

"You've been taking pictures of me? Without my consent?"

He shrugs and says: "I just like taking pictures."

I smile. He must think I'm impressed, but he doesn't know that this is my coping mechanism.

I have to go.

He doesn't block me this time. What he doesn't know is that he's just saved himself a possible episode of assault with grievous bodily harm.

I find my way to the ladies' room only to be met by two girls wax-covering their faces with make-up.

I was hoping for at least five seconds of complete silence, alone, in the bathroom.

"Too much to drink?" a girl with gold eye-shadow asks me.

I sigh.

"Nope, escaping a man."

She puts her lipstick back in her handbag.

"Such jerks. It's disgusting the way they treat us like pieces of meat," she says.

Well, she speaks the truth but it looks like that one is about to make me far more than a piece of meat.

I leave the bathroom without getting my five seconds of peace and sneak out of the club through the back entrance without anyone seeing me. I find myself in a dark alley on a very cold night.

And I left my coat inside!

Leaving, please take my coat xoxo. I text Lashandra.

She probably won't see my message until she is the last person left in the club.

The alley stretches far more than my liking, particularly because I'm trying to run from something I don't know, from a feeling I have been suppressing for too long.

I feel I'm not alone anymore and so many things have happened to women in dark alleys in this town. Half of my brain says turn back and check, the other says run and together they say fight.

I can feel someone breathing behind me, his pace increasing and a hand approaching my shoulder.

"Don't touch me!"

He's on the ground!

I look at him struggling to stand. All I did was hit him with my elbow, that's all.

"You're following me now?"

He looks up at me and says: "No, I was worried about you."

He picks up my coat from the ground and hands it to me. I don't immediately take it because I'm torn between running and hitting him again to teach him that he shouldn't sneak up on girls walking alone in dark alleys.

He can't blame me for knocking him down.

He hands me my coat again, as if taking it wasn't intrusive on its own.

I take it this time but I keep some distance between us.

He offers to walk me to my apartment. I think about saying no but I am scared to walk alone.

"I'm Tex, by the way. As in Texas. I grew up there," he says.

He isn't joking. That was creative of his parents.

"So what brought you to civilisation?" I ask.

I'm not really concerned about offending him, yet.

He looks like he is thinking hard.

"Long story. Mom leaves Texas and meets a man in New York, they fall in love, man raises me," he says.

Wow. "That's it?"

"That's it. I wouldn't have it any other way."

He must have had a great childhood then.

"I'm Lungile. But I prefer being called Lou because I can't stand the way people slaughter my name in this country."

He laughs.

"This country?"

"You didn't notice the accent?"

He shakes his head.

"You've said about five words to me since I met you, Lu-ngi-le."

Finally, someone who can say my name properly.

"It's a Zulu name. Google the meaning."

He's following me closely as we climb the stairs to my apartment and I wonder if he thinks we are about to have a one-night stand. I wouldn't put it past him, considering how dodgy he has been.

"This is me," I say, standing firmly in front of my door.

"Oh," he says and stands still.

I unlock my door, he moves closer and peeps inside.

"Sorry, you can't come in."

He raises his eyebrows.

What did he expect?

"How about we go out then, get something exotic like you to eat? Just so you can make up for pulling your Zulu warrior moves on me..."

Shame.

He must know this.

"Look, Texas. Today was a big day for me. I just got a big break in my career and relationships are the last thing on my mind, so please..."

He still doesn't move.

"Who said anything about relationships, Lu? I didn't ask you to marry me or have sex. You're just... interesting, different, that's all. But now you're behaving like a virgin."

It does hurt a bit that he doesn't want to have sex with me, I must be honest. But I won't give him the satisfaction.

"I just want to know you, that's all," he says.

No, not tonight!

"So you want to be just friends? That's why you want to come in?"

He stutters.

"I'll pass, because the promises of the night, made of butter, melt when the first sun rays appear. Good night," I say firmly.

He must leave now.

"I doubt there'll be any rays of sun tomorrow morning. The clouds look gloomy so trust me, my promises will still be as solid as butter in the morning," he says with a smile.

This guy!

"Bye!"

I shut the door in his face and stand behind it, hoping he will leave, and that's when the feeling comes rushing back. I don't know this guy but he makes me anxious.

But he makes me feel safe too.

He must not come back here again.

My conversations with Uncle Phineas are very limited.

He is a staunch culturist. He believes that everything goes back to ancestors, that everything, good or bad, is their will and that they will protect you at all cost.

I guess that's why he sent me a goat when he heard things weren't going well for me over here.

However, he did not specify whether I had to slaughter it for sacrifice or make it my roommate.

It arrived in a cart, by courier and nobody warned me it was coming.

Apparently, and this is what Mabou told me, Uncle Phineas sent one of his Basotho 10 to travel with it on a hired jet.

That poor man was kept at airport customs for nearly two days.

He didn't make it out of JFK. He was sent back home but the goat miraculously made it here.

I have never asked my uncle about it because of fear of what he might order me to do with it.

This is why I'm dreading the Skype chat we are about to have now.

He said it was important, something about moving forward.

"Ready?" It's Dorcas. She always sets up the laptop for him whenever he has to do this.

"Is he in a good mood?" I whisper, in case he is sitting next to her.

"Hhe?"

I'm late, the cone hat and red and black blanket are already looking at me on the screen.

Dorcas is gone.

"Malome," I say.

He doesn't return my greeting but gets right to the point.

"I asked Dorcas to brief you," he says.

Dorcas didn't brief me, and I could see her avoiding eye contact when I greeted her.

Now I'm worried.

I expect him to speak but he doesn't. Instead he looks at my face, as if he is examining me and spotting something unusual while at it.

I wait for it, something about me being thin or too pale or something behind me bothering him.

I decide to speak first.

"How is Couscous?"

"Her name is Neo," he snaps. He hates that Couscous nickname, more so because he hates the fact that his parents named him Phineas when there were more than enough Sotho names they could choose from. Now his wife goes and nicknames his daughter something he does not know or understand, some type of rice.

"We must talk about Gerald's work. We must talk about what we are going to do with it," he says.

What does he mean?

"We can't keep it forever, Lunkile. There are many things we can do. We could sell all of it or..."

No, no, no!

"Malome, we are not selling my father's art. Why would you even suggest that? This is our legacy, my and Mabo's..."

"Mabo does not care about any legacy, Lunkile!"

Why is he shouting at me? It's not even as if we need the money. Father made sure there was more than enough of it and I'd be damned if I let him take the only valuable things my sister and I own.

"No, *rangoane*. I will not agree to that," I say.

"So what must we do now? Who is going to do all this work? Taking care of them, taking them to exhibitions, entertaining Gerald's fans and all those things?"

I keep quiet. I don't have an answer to that but I know he can't sell any of it without my consent.

"Are you going to come back here and do all those things? Eh, Lunkile?"

I stay silent because I know exactly what he is doing.

"Lunkile!"

"No, *rangoane*, not now. I just got my big break here and I'm finally getting..."

"You have been saying that for the past six years, my child."

And with that he disappears from the screen.

I expected many things from him, from this conversation, but not this.

My father's work is what has sustained us since the day he died, and now Phineas wants to open a tuck shop and steal something that does not even belong to him? Does he not already have enough money to spend on Yvonne?

I will not have it!

"Dorcas, wait!" I shout when she is about to push the screen down.

All I can see is her hand because she can't even look me in the eye. I don't understand why she didn't talk my uncle out of it, or at least warn me it was coming.

"Is Mabo at work?"

"No, she's been suspended," she says before her hand disappears from the screen.

What?

I hear her shouting Mabo's name.

She's here.

"You've been suspended?"

She rolls her eyes.

"Why Mabo?"

"Nothing. People must wear their seat belts, that's all," she replies.

I hope she didn't land some poor motorist in hospital.

I tell her the shocking conversation with Uncle but she doesn't look in the least bit shocked.

"He can't do that, Mabo. This is our father's legacy," I say.

"Ntate died, Lu, he died years ago. It's time to move on," she says.

Move on to where?

She tells me tourists have been coming over wanting to buy some of them. One couple even wanted the sculpture in our yard but Dorcas was clear that it wasn't for sale. There have even been requests for them to be donated so they could be auctioned and the proceeds given to charity. Mabo says it's a good thing. She asks what the point of keeping them is.

"It's not as if we can eat them to stay alive," she says.

To say I am shocked would be an understatement. I cannot believe people back home, my own family, is plotting to jumble-sale the most important thing to us, the one thing that defines us.

I could end this conversation now, but this is my sister.

"How is Sam? Have you spoken to her?"

"No, but I saw her on TV recently," she says. TV?

"Doing what?"

"In DJ Tira's music video, wearing a bikini and drinking champagne," she says scornfully.

Oh, I never!

"DJ Tira?"

"Yep, DJ Tira. She's a video vixen now. She beat you into being a world-famous dancer. Imagine!"

Mabo jokes about serious things sometimes.

Sam had not told me about this new venture but I can't say I'm surprised. But why someone with two degrees would be in a music video half-naked instead of getting a paying job beats me. But we are talking about Sam. She doesn't explain herself to anyone.

"Please sort out that thing out at work, Mabo."

"So early in the morning?" she says.

She couldn't be bothered.

I say goodbye and log off when I realise I'm going to be late for one of the biggest days of my career.

Shemar always said I looked great with my hair tied up. He said it minimised the extent of my forehead.

When I step outside, the sun still has not appeared and it's been days now, just as Texas predicted the time he tried to worm his way into my life.

He came the next day with breakfast and flowers he claimed were from "The motherland".

He came again the other night with dinner and a butler accompanying him. And again I pushed him away, not because I wanted to but because I came to New York for one thing only.

At the studio, I find my new team of dancers waiting, all young and nervous. They remind me of me a long time ago.

I take them through the routine under Miz-G's watchful eye. Some of them have potential while others lack sex appeal and emotion. They seem to have things they need to let go of, things they are carrying on their shoulders.

As I walk back home, I think about them and how much I carry on my shoulders, or if I'm still carrying anything.

I've let go of the fear and guilt. I've accepted that this is where my life is now but I can't say I don't still long for things I left behind.

I miss him and I know about Shemar is, he would never have allowed Gemma to live here, let alone the nights I have to take him out to the park.

I think about Tex and wonder if the butter has finally melted now that spring has come.

"The sun is out. Butter is still as solid as it was in snow. Look out the window."

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I read the text three times and put down the phone down as I open the window.

You know guys back home, guys like Tatenda, and wouldn't even know where to find butterflies.

They'll be like "I want you to be my girl" and it would be up to you to hang yourself or save yourself.

Where did this guy even buy butterflies?
Ayi! Americans!

I watch them fly past me.

My soft side tells me to let him in but my common sense says for what? My whole being wants to protect him from me, to keep him far and save him from everything.

But maybe he doesn't need protecting or saving. Maybe, like Shemar once said, I'm running from nothing.

The 'maybe' takes over me and I invite him to come up.

But first I stand at the door and look him in the eye. The thing is not there anymore. It doesn't tell me to run. Instead it is begging me to embrace him and allow him to be here.

I move aside when his smile gets too much.

I watch him stroll in, arms folded.

He scans the apartment, turns around and looks at me still holding on to the door handle.

"Nice place, Lungile," he says.

People don't usually compliment this place. Lashandra once said it looked like someone with multiple personality disorder decorated it.

"Thank you, Texas."

He does that thing of looking at me like he doesn't know that me calling him Texas is me teasing him.

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He looks around the apartment again, walls, furniture, kitchen, closed bathroom door.

"It's interesting that the first time you decided to talk to me, you whined about how people say your name, and yet here you are..." he says without looking at me.

"Whine?" I ask, trying to look shocked and offended.

"Yes, whine. What are you going to do? Beat me again?"

I didn't beat him. It was just an elbow tackle.

I don't know whether to offer him a seat or a drink, so I follow him slowly as he walks around the apartment as if he's been wondering all his life what is inside.

"I'm glad you finally let me in because I had run out of tricks. This was the last."

"I never wanted any tricks," I burst out before I can stop myself.

He stops and looks at me again.

"What did you want?"

I don't know, and I don't know what to say.

"What did you want, Lu?"

I could tell him I wanted him to give up and not come here to complicate my life. I could tell him I had been running away from him for months, and that I had met him before he met me. That there is something strange about him and me being here and that I am no good for him. But I don't because I want him to be here. I want to see this through.

That's me, I run and if I don't run, I dive in head first and once I'm there, I do not get out until I get to the finish.

"You love art?"

He's standing in front of the painting and he knows not to touch it. Good.

"It's very close to my heart," I say.

He looks closer, as if looking for sun rays behind the earthy colours, and when he turns around to look at me again, his eyes are narrowed.

"Is this a Sabata picce?" he asks.

He is shocked, but I'm even more shocked so all I do is nod.

"A real Sabata creation?" he asks, as if he thinks it would be impossible.

I think about giving him a half-truth but he's been here for only 10 minutes and I've been honest with him the whole time. I don't know why, I can't help it.

I walk past him to stand next to the painting with my back to him, and then I turn my face to look at him.

"It's you," he says.

I can see he is still shocked.

"It's your face."

For a moment there I think he sees it. I think he is going to mention that night we first met years ago but he doesn't. He hasn't seen it yet but I know what he wants to ask.

"Sabata is my father, was my father... I'm his daughter."

He doesn't say anything, just a long stare and a blank face.

Maybe I shouldn't have told him this.

"You are the only person who knows this."

He nods and says: "Then it's our little secret."

His smile is back.

He seems nothing like the guy who has been annoying me this whole time, doing stupid things to get my attention and leaving stuff on my doorstep. He looks calmer now, as if he's finally got what he wanted and he is just marvelling in it now.

I watch him look up at the stallion hanging on the wall, the giant bed placed almost in the middle and my clothes hanging on chairs and randomly placed rails.

I didn't know he was going to be here. I hope he understands that.

Oh, no!

"Is there someone here?" he asks.

I'm going to kill that goat!

"No! I think I left the bathroom window open. I'll be back now."

I rush to the bathroom and close the door behind me quickly.

"Move again and I will slaughter you and cook you right now," I hiss to Gemma. I should have drugged his goat ass!

When I come out, he's still standing in front of the painting, as if he is looking at a real-life person.

"Your eyes are exactly the same," he says.

Father told me this.

"When was this done? You must have been a child when he died."

"I was. Sabata had a rare gift."

He doesn't question this, a normal person would. I'm also a little glad he doesn't because there isn't much time for me to stand here and answer his questions. Gemma might start acting up and this guy will never want to see a girl who lives with a goat again.

"Well, Texas, it's almost past my bedtime,"

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He narrows his eyes and tilts his head, as if what I have just said is none of his concern.

"I'm hungry," he says. What?

"Well, you didn't offer me any food and I'm hungry. And I don't eat alone so grab your coat."

What?

"You'll find me outside, in case you want to change into something that's not dancing clothes."

"Now? It's 10pm. We're going out on the town at 10pm?"

"What? You don't think I'm capable of protecting you? Besides, I once found you walking down a dark alley alone at 2am. Wear comfortable shoes. We're hitting the streets of Manhattan," he says and goes outside.

The Lu I know would shut the door, change into pyjamas and go to sleep. She wouldn't be rummaging around in her wardrobe looking for something nice to wear to go out, late at night, with a guy she barely knows.

Where is my babydoll dress? It goes well with my dusty pink lipstick. Shemar always said I looked good with my hair tied up. Where is my scrunchie? A quick spray of perfume ...

I twirl in front of the mirror to check the back of my legs again. I have dancer's legs and abs but at least this dress makes me look feminine.

I poke my head out first, to check if...

"I'm still here," he grins.

This guy!

"You look beautiful," he says.

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I try to hide my smile and hold my handbag close to my chest to avoid taking his outstretched hand. I know I'm acting stupidly right now but I still have my boundaries. I'm not ready for the cuddly-cuddly-touching phase yet. Besides, we've kind of just met and I don't want to give him ideas.

"So where are we going, Mr Texas?"

"I'm not sure. We'll stop wherever we want to stop."

This is not exactly how you take a woman on a first date, but none of our encounters have been normal so far.

He leads me down Bowery Street and I can't say I'm surprised. It's where all the deep and nocturnal types hang out until sunrise, whether it is Monday or Friday.

I know he's the type. A photographer who takes random pictures of strangers in parks and turn them into exhibitions can only be the type.

"I take it we are going to hang out with some dreadlocked poets in a poorly lit corner cafe with nicotine filling the air." I say.

He laughs and tries to take my hand again, but I fold my arms across my chest. He gets the message and puts his hand back in his pocket.

"Is that what you like? That's what you do for fun?" he asks.

Hardly.

"Nope. If I told you the things I do for fun, you'd be shocked," I reply.

Well, that's a lie. I don't do much for fun except going out occasionally with friends and friends of friends who are also my colleagues.

"I don't really get poetry," he says.

"Really? You? Didn't you try to charm me with butter lines?"

"Yes, me. You started it with the butter things. I had to be creative. And I'm not a photographer, by the way. It's just something I do for fun. Well something I used to do but stopped doing and started doing again a few months ago."

Oh.

"Why?"

"I saw a girl dancing barefoot in the park during lunch hour and I decided to take photos of her. I thought she was homeless."

It must have been a beautiful sight, a homeless person dancing, she must have been happy.

After thinking about it and stopping myself a few times, I finally pluck up the courage to hook my arm through his, not because I want to be cosy but because I'm getting a little scared. New York has all types of people. You can bump into Kim Kardashian and her entourage of bodyguards here and crack-head Tiffany with a pocket-knife around the next corner minutes later.

He places his hand on mine and I try to pull away on impulse, but he stops me by tightening the grip.

"You still don't trust me?" he asks.

I look away from him.

The strange thing is I trust him fully and I don't even know why because not so long ago I was running from him.

"How do you know my father, Tex?"

He frowns and asks if I'm really asking him that.

"I got a print of his work for my 15th birthday," he says.

Oh.

We walk past restaurants lining the pavement, bakeries and flower shops and bars with red lights and right now I'm ashamed to say I could walk with him until the sun comes out. There's something about his masculinity, his blackness and the way he smells that makes me want to stay close to him.

He speaks like he is sure of himself, like nothing he says is overthought or not meant.

Here and there I spot the characters I expected, with statement-making hair and cigarettes hanging from their lips.

He slows the pace when he realises my attention is still on the teenage boy wearing a hoodie and stringing the shit out of a guitar.

I dig my free hand in my purse.

I'm trying to free myself from him so I can throw a dollar note in the bowl but he doesn't let me.

"There," he says pulling some cash from his pocket handing it to the boy.

I know he did that because he didn't want to let go of my arm, in case I return to my senses and fold my arms again.

If this was me years ago, I would have found a place to sit and watch that boy play for a while. Maybe I'd have danced to his music too, in my head though.

We turn a corner and suddenly we are in an alley, and it's a bit dark.

He taps my arm and I know that means "trust me".

In front of a randomly placed black painted door is a big man with a leather jacket, just like the bouncers at the clubs we usually go to.

He waves at him briefly. The man nods in acknowledgement.

"It's a strip club," he says, as if he knows I want to ask.

"Strip club? You go to strip clubs?" I ask and immediately find myself laughing.

He looks at me questioningly.

I wave my hand and say: "I just remembered something. Sorry."

His face says he wants to know what.

"It's a long story."

I would tell him about my history with strip clubs but it's too early for that. If I were to tell him my history, I wouldn't know where to start, and even if I decided where to start, I wouldn't know where to stop.

"I grew up in strip clubs," he says. What?

"Long story. We're here."

This doesn't look like a restaurant and there is no door here, just a passage leading us to narrow stairs with walls covered in graffiti.

It looks like an empty building but strangely enough, it isn't run down and it doesn't have that smell of mould and filth.

At the end of the stairs, there is a door, a normal-sized door with a strangely shaped handle.

I stop and watch him unlock it, asking myself why I'm in a semi-dark empty building in the middle of the night.

It's an empty room, a huge one that would be completely dark if it wasn't for one glass wall allowing the moonlight to come in.

The light comes on and I find myself standing on a floor with no tiles or carpet. The roof is high, like a church roof.

The walls are lined with pictures, many pictures of familiar scenes, the man in the pink coat, the woman in the wheelchair, the peeing dog, the cross-dresser who sings at the park, the old man who feeds birds every day, the Cuban guy who trims the trees... homeless people from the park, all of them.

"Are they going to be your next exhibition?"

It's only when he asks me how I know that I remember he had not met me yet when I saw that picture of the cat dancing by the fire and ran away.

I ignore the question and look closely at the man in the pink coat. He is posing and smiling, showing teeth that look like dry micelies. The woman in a wheelchair is not looking at the camera, but the lines on her forehead tell me she was in one of her foul moods when this was taken.

"So this is what you do with your life? Take pictures of strangers?"

"No, advertising. This is the first picture I took of you."

At the back of my mind I knew there had to be a reason he brought me here, and I knew it was this.

I move closer to him and here I am, handing a bagel to the woman in the wheelchair.

"You were serious about having pictures of me?"

He nods.

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I'm starting to wonder what this campaign of his is about.

He doesn't know that this is not the first picture he took of me.

I look around the room again, looking for the girl he said inspired him to take pictures of strangers in parks.

"And the dancing homeless girl? Where is she?"

He scratches his chin.

I look around again, looking for her.

"Well, I thought... until I saw you at the club and..."

What?

"I'm the girl? You thought I was homeless?"

"No, it was actually my friend Nate who assumed you were homeless because..."

What stupidity is this?

"Lu, wait! Where are you going?"

"Ayi voetsek!"

"Huh?"

He grabs me by the arm just before I touch the door handle.

"You're mad because I thought you were homeless? But you love homeless people, you give them food and..."

"Do I look homeless to you, Tex?"

He doesn't answer me, but that smirk on his face says he's about to annoy me even more.

"If it's any consolation, I was willing to change your life. In fact, I would have taken you in..."

Oh, my god.

"You're a jerk!"

He grabs me again, this time by my waist and pulls me close to him.

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I look up at him and quickly drop my eyes.

He doesn't move or say anything. He just stands there with his arms tight around my waist and the smell of amber and broad shoulders inviting my head to rest on them.

"What are you doing?"

He must know that this is inappropriate. He can't hold me like this, against my will.

"Waiting for you."

Nx!

"Waiting for me to do what?"

"To stop whatever it is that you are doing right now."

This guy is downright disrespectful. This is not how you treat someone.

"Are you done?" he asks.

Now he's going to make me really mad.

"Good, now come here."

Noooooo...

"Now let's go get that food. I'm starving," he says.

Was I just kissed against my will? And did I just kiss him back?

We are holding hands as we walk down the stairs, but only because it's almost dark and I don't want to trip and fall.

As soon as we are out in the street, his arm goes around my shoulders.

I let him, just to avoid him kissing me against my will again, but Shemar would say I'm lying.

Every time my father would confine himself to his studio, sometimes all day and all night, my mother would sit by the pool and read a book.

When she got tired of reading, she would call me to come sit with her and she would tell me stories. One was about a princess who wore a beaded crown and plaited her hair in cornrows.

The princess, she said, was the strongest and smartest girl in the village and nobody was as beautiful as she was.

But she was still respectful and honest and kind, she said.

Her hair had never been cut since she was born.

"It was the most beautiful hair, black and thick and shiny. When people touched her hair, their skin became beautiful too, their sicknesses were healed. To her, her hair was the most important thing, the one thing she loved with all her heart," my mother would say.

I imagined the princess to have skin as black as a wild berry and eyes as white as coconut, just like my mother.

"But then came a drought so severe, the village turned into a desert. All the crops and animals died and people had nothing to drink. They started to starve too. They had tried everything, everything, but nothing helped."

I had a picture of the village in my eight-year-old mind, people looking skinny and their lips white because they were hungry and thirsty.

She said one day a man sent by the gods arrived at the village and said the only way rain would come was if the princess cut off all her hair.

Her parents cried, she cried, the whole village cried because they knew how much she loved her hair.

"On the day she cut it..."

"She cut it? But it was the most important thing to her. She loved her hair Mama."

She looked down at me and brushed my head with her hand.

"She cut her hair, Lungi, because sometimes in life you have to sacrifice the most important thing to you for others. Her hair never grew back, but the thousands of people in her village were happy. They never went hungry again. Rain came whenever they needed it. The sun came out when they needed it to nourish their crop and clear the sky. Everybody was happy."

"Except her?"

"No, my child. She was happy too because there is nothing as fulfilling as selflessness."

I was too young to understand what she meant.

I was eight and the only thing that needed to be fulfilled then was my stomach and taste buds.

I asked her if it always had to be like that in life, the sacrifice thing, and she said no.

"If you don't want to do something, don't do it. You are my daughter. You will know when you have to fight. You got that from me. Your heart will guide you."

The story of the princess was one of my favourites and yet the most confusing. It felt like an African version of Cinderella or Snow White, except in real African fairy tales, there never were princes who came and saved the princesses from distress before whisking them off their feet and marrying them.

In African tales, the princesses were warriors who saved babies from jackals or whose singing voices were so sweet, they put poisonous snakes to sleep. If they weren't being heroes, they were making sacrifices, and my mother always told me the ones that talked about sacrifice more than all others.

She was beautiful. Ntombenhle, just like her name said.

She talked of places I didn't believe existed. Of large dams that had crocodiles and rivers that flowed from mountains to the seas.

I was born in Lesotho and grew up in Joburg. I had no connection to the sea and I barely knew the language she kept trying to teach me.

She said once that when I was old enough, she would take me to see those rivers and dams and mountains.

"But only when you are old enough," she'd say. I would fantasise about it, make up pictures in my head for five minutes before losing interest and moving on to things I could see and touch.

She never told me the names of these places and rivers.

"How long have you been here?"

"Lou?"

Oh, my mind left this place again.

"Babe?"

"How long have you been here?"

"Four months."

"No, not the theatre. New York, the US."

I don't answer immediately because he has caught me off-guard.

Longer than I should, but I don't say that out loud.

"I arrived soon after I turned 21."

I know what he wants is the exact number of years, but seven years sounds longer than the period between my 21st birthday and now.

I expect him to count the years and give me a quick seven, but he disappoints.

"You've done well. That was beautiful," he says. "Is that why you were the first to stand up and clap? I mean, that was sweet and all but you didn't have to shout 'yes baby!' while at it."

"He laughs and adjusts his wristwatch.

"You were so beautiful up there. flawless, like a wild cat moving in silence and calmness."

Something moves inside my stomach. Did he really just say that?

I suggested we walk because I wanted to hook my arm through his and occasionally lean my head on his shoulder while at it.

He agreed because he loves walking under street lights and the sounds of people around him. He loves showing me things too.

On Friday he took me to see the Statue of Liberty, because I asked. I had never been on a New York ferry boat before and I had never seen the whole of New York from up above. In fact, I had never done anything except dance, try to be the best dancer, go to dance au-

ditions, go out partying with dancers, have dinners with families of dancers...

I rest my head on his shoulder again.

"You cold?"

I shake my head.

It's almost summer now and only a few days are left before we officially close Spring in New York. I have three job offers on the table, two of them running simultaneously, and I'm battling to make up my mind.

Tex says I must go with the one that's going to challenge me the most but I'm tired of being challenged in this life. I just want to be.

I want this, to be here with this man and to be happy and content. I want to go to places with him, to have lunches sitting on the floor at the top of empty buildings and look at his pictures of people the world believes are broken when, in fact, their spirits are more alive than most of ours.

I told Mabo and Sam about Tex. Mabo asked me if he had ever been to jail and if I had made him do blood tests. Sam said I must just fall pregnant with his baby so that the "culture thing" can disappear.

I never bother to take their advice on anything and besides, he has been a perfect gentleman.

But Mabo did ask if I had told him everything. I told her there was no need and she said: "If you say so, gal."

"Are you coming in?"

"Do you want me to come in?" he asks, with that face that says he is coming in anyway.

"I want you to come in."

I kick off my heels the moment I enter my apartment and place a bottle of wine and two glasses on the kitchen counter.

I watch him do what he always does, walk around, look at the painting, the stallion on the wall and then finds himself a place to sit.

He asked me the first time he came here how I could afford an apartment in the middle of one of Manhattan's poshest streets on a dancer's salary. I don't remember what my answer was.

He also asked me about the bible on the coffee table but didn't believe me when I told him I'm deeply spiritual, to a certain extent.

"I've had this wine for two years and tonight, because it's been a wonderful night and you are here, I'm going to open it."

"Are we toasting something?" he asks.

"No. I just happen to love you."

I've said this only three times since that first kiss. He says it every day, more than once.

He stands up and comes to stand behind me, his arms hugging me from behind, the smell of amber on his light T-shirt making my knees weak.

I remember why he shouldn't hold me like this and I gently push him away.

"I'm going to slip into something comfortable," I say and head to the bedroom.

I'm looking forward to a glass of wine and a cosy night in front of the TV with his arms wrapped around me as I head back to the lounge.

"Tex!"

He jumps and covers himself with his hands.

"Why are you naked?"

"Why aren't you?"

What?

I cannot believe this!

Oh, shit!

"Lu! Lu!"

Oh, shit, shit, shit... this bloody goat!

"It's just a goat. It won't hurt you." I try to explain while trying to catch Gemma who is chasing him all over the apartment.

I thought I locked the goat in the bathroom. How did she get out?

She stops only when I catch up with her and pull her by her collar.

"Why do you have a springbok in your house, Lu?" he asks.

He's pulling up his pants and I'm pushing Gemma back inside the bathroom.

"It's a goat, not a springbok."

"Whatever! Why do you have an animal in your house, Lu?"

"It's a long story."

I want to explain more but he doesn't give me a chance. As soon as he has all his clothes back on, he leaves and I'm not really sure if he is angry or freaked out by all this.

I'm not even sure if he will ever come back.

"You! I'm taking you straight to the animal shelter tomorrow," I say sternly to Gemma.

Of Kings and Promises

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You don't say a king is dead, you say *inkosi ikhotheme*.

You don't put a king's body in a coffin, you wrap it with a lion's skin.

You don't let a king's back touch the earth, you lay ox skin on the ground and you place the horns of a Nguni bull on top of him before the soil buries him.

Mvelase wasn't one to prepare you for his death. No, he was never the type to wait until he was weak and finished to make his exit.

He took his last breath with his shoulders straightened, his head held high and his eyes still piercing.

He wouldn't allow himself to be fragile, not even for me, although he knew I knew it was coming.

I knew when I walked in that room and couldn't feel him that it had taken him.

I could have announced it with a wail or shouting one of my children's names but I didn't. Instead I sat down next to him and placed my hand on his.

I can't say he looked peaceful and rested, but also, I can't say he fought death when it came for him.

He was as he had always been, Mvelase the king.

I sat there and felt the diminishing warmth of his palm on mine.

And then I told him everything, all the things I had ever wanted to tell him in the many years we had shared a bed.

Things like how I secretly took contraceptives after I had NoMazwe because I couldn't bear disappointing his family again.

Things like how I drove NoMazwe to a clinic in Empangeni when she was 16 years old because we needed to get rid of the shame she had brought to the family.

I also told him that I once caught NoMakhosi kissing a girl when she was 14, and how I forced her to wear dresses when she was still too young to stand up to me.

I also told him about Zweli, that even though I nursed him since birth because his mother was always plotting to run away, it took a while for me to truly love him.

There were times where the thought of strangling or choking him crossed my mind.

But when I finally did love him, I loved him more than I loved myself.

There were moments where I'd stop talking, look at his still face and try to imagine what his facial expression would be if he could hear and react to the things I was telling him.

He would have been livid, but he would have still loved me. I lived all those years wishing I could confess all those things to him when he was still alive, but confessions are one of the worst ideas ever thought of by humans. They may take the load off your shoulders but they do not restore trust, or make your guilt disappear.

I could lose anything, but not Mvelase's trust because it was what kept his heart in my hand for 36 years.

He went to sleep and never woke up, leaving his heart still in my hand.

I should have given myself time to fall apart, but there wasn't any. A new king has to take his place.

I fix *isicholo* on my head and straighten my shoulders. My chair awaits me outside.

"*Ntabezitha!*" they shout and rise.

I rise with them.

His *injobo* is not sitting right. He should have come to me, I would have fixed it for him.

I watch him walk towards us with many men surrounding him, calling our clan names and women ululating. I see Mvelase as he was when he took the same walk many years ago when my skin was still smooth and my body was still capable of being aroused.

But the new king's face is different, more intense, his eyes deeper and shoulders broader.

"Mama," he says and sits next to me, on the chair I have seen his father and grandfather sitting on. The chair that takes them away from us and hands them over to their people.

My eyes are on his shoulders because I cannot ignore the unevenness of his *injobo*.

But I wouldn't dare touch him and try to fix it, not in front of all these people because he is not my baby here. He is no longer my son. He is a king and what awaits him is something he can never be fully prepared for.

"Are you ready?" I whisper to him.

He gives me that Mzimela men look that says "You should know me better than that".

He is up on his feet again before I can be sure he is prepared to address his people.

"Let him be, Mama. He was born for this."
NoNqaba whispers to me when she sees the worry on my face.

I let him, and watch him stand above all of us with his spear raised up in the air.

He shouts the name of his father and grandfather and all the kings before them.

He recites all the Mzimela clan names amid ululating women and men jumping to their feet.

And then he calls on them to be quiet and hear him speak.

He makes promises and swears on his father's grave. He calls for calm and perseverance and assures them that Jozini will be great again.

"*Ntabezitha!*" they all say.

And when he is done, he sits back on the king's chair and clenches his fists.

His jaw is tensed and his eyes are narrowed.

"They didn't come," I whisper to him.

"They will come," he says, not bothering to whisper back.

Strippers and ashes

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Stewart died.

But before that he was on the news a lot about the fraud he committed with Ben Mashankura.

He had a stroke and then he died. Maboo said it was probably the people he defrauded who bewitched him, but Yvonne said witchcraft doesn't work on white people.

Sam called me in the middle of the night, hysterical, screaming: "He's gone Lu! Stewart is gone!"

It was the first time I had ever heard her call her stepfather Stewart.

I tried to calm her down until I realised it wasn't calming that she needed, it was silent breathing on the other side of the phone so she could cry and scream and wail without being disrupted, yet knowing someone was listening.

Mashankura was still being held in jail awaiting trial but Stewart had gotten bail somehow, even though they had committed the same crimes and stole equally.

Sam said she would have helped Stewart skip the country, but they took his passport and they had him reporting to the police station twice every day.

I felt sorry for her when all of that was happening. I wished I could be there for her and cry with her because she had lost her stepfather but, most of all, be-

cause the Asset Forfeiture Unit was taking everything they owned and I knew that if anything was going to kill Sam too, it was the reality of being poor.

I told Tex, when he found me with puffy red eyes, that my best friend's father had died and that I felt helpless because I couldn't be there for her.

"You have friends?" he asked.

I should have been offended by that question.

"My friend varsity."

He looked surprised. I didn't talk much about Sam to him.

"When was the last time you saw her?" he asked.

I was too sad to come up with an answer that would not lead to another question, so I had no choice but to be honest.

"At the airport the day I left South Africa."

"The day you left home?"

Yes, the day I left home.

I had stopped calling home. I was calling it by its name like I would call Denmark or Kazakhstan and any other country I had never been to.

"Are you going to the funeral?"

Tex can be too much with his questions sometimes. I would have snapped at him if I didn't know that they were coming from a good place.

"No, he's being buried on Saturday, and it's the day of our last show."

I told him that Stewart had had a stroke but I didn't tell him what led to it.

I said he was old and that he got sick and died because that's how human nature usually works, unless it decides to be weird and hold people hostage until they are 100.

I could have been honest with him, you know, because that story of Stewart and Mashankura and how they stole money for years without being caught was Ocean's Eleven kind of stuff.

But I have a goat, and he is still trying to get his head around that and the fact that he took my call the next day and came back to my apartment for dinner and actually ate with a goat looking at him.

He still doesn't understand why I haven't taken Gemma to the animal shelter or given it to the gypsies' downtown, just as he doesn't understand why we haven't had sex yet.

Lashandra told him it was a voodoo goat sent by my ancestors to look after me in case some American man tried to take advantage of me.

He laughed at that stupid theory, but he still doesn't understand. There is a lot he doesn't understand about me yet he is still here, trying and trying and trying...

If I didn't love him with all my heart, I'd save him by letting him go.

"I'm done," he says.

Good because my neck was getting stiff from posing here and wondering what the end result will look like.

"Can I see it?"

"Not yet. I just want to do some shading first."

And so I wait and watch his face fully focused on the painting board.

He had never mentioned he had a passion for painting until today when he brought me to his apartment and said he had a surprise for me.

The surprise was an easel, a canvas and some brushes, and the fact that he was going to paint a portrait of me.

"Can I see it now?"

He ignores me and looks up at the door because someone is shouting from outside.

"Hey, Tex! Open up man."

He places the brushes on the window sill and walks to the door.

I expect to see someone walking in but instead he opens the door halfway and stands in front of it.

"What's up, man? Open the door."

I know exactly who is there.

"I don't mind kicking it with French cherries but explain to me why I have to give speeches on your behalf as well as be your delivery guy?" the person says.

Tex doesn't say much in response, all I see is a champagne bottle being put down on the table close to the door.

"Come on, man let me in! What is wrong with you?"

I catch his eye as he tries to push Tex aside and come in.

"Is that the goat girl? The goat that tried to castrate you?"

Tex pushes the door closed, locking him out and walks back in, with an award in his hand.

"He calls me goat girl?" I ask, my hands on my hips.

He laughs and puts the award on a display shelf next to a string of others.

He tells me not to mind Nate and goes back to his painting.

"You won. Congratulations."

"It was your pictures that won," he says, as if it's nothing that he just got an award, in absence.

When I finally agreed for him to use my pictures in his advertising campaign, I didn't know it was going to end up this big, awards and all.

And I don't understand why he didn't want to go to the ceremony and accept his award himself.

Nate is his best friend slash lawyer slash the dancing idiot from the club who told him I was homeless. "I'm done."

Thank you, Jesus. Finally!

"Can I see it now?"

I'm already standing in front of it and all I can think about is all the time I spent posing, straining my neck and holding my breath because I didn't want to disturb his flow.

I love Tex, I must mention this. He smells nice and he is a beautiful black man with chocolate skin and deep eyes.

"Babe, you drew a rabbit?" I say.

He scratches his chin when I look up at him.

"You can frame it for me. I'll keep it forever and ever," I say.

He knows I'm patronising him.

"Want some wine?" he says.

I run to the fridge to pull out a bottle.

I love being here, in his space, in this apartment that is a reflection of him.

We started hanging out here more and more because of Gemma and the fact that I think his place has more personality than mine.

Also, he stocks good wine and he always has food.

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"We both deserve a glass because *kushubile*," I say, handing him an almost full glass of wine.

"Are you swearing at me in Zulu again?"

"Swearing? Why would I swear at you? I've never sworn at you in Zulu or any other language you don't understand."

Why would he even think that?

"The other day you called me a foot-egg."

What the hell is a foot-egg?

Oh. He means *voetsek*.

"And by the way, I don't speak Zulu. I speak Sotho."

I have to explain the difference first before explaining how my home is in Joburg when I was born in Maseru.

"If your parents had not died, do you think you would have ended up here?"

I don't know, I really don't, but I know nothing beats being here with him. This is my happiness right here.

"I don't know. Maybe I would have changed along the way, you know, had they been around. I love being a dancer. It's my passion but before now, when things weren't going well, I'd sometimes question if it was what I really should be doing."

I feel his hand on mine.

"I decided on the day my parents died that I was going to be a dancer, before they died but on the same day. When in doubt I'd ask myself if this was really my dream or if it was just something I was holding on to because it keeps my parents' memories alive in me."

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He nods, silent, and watches me sipping my wine twice before I get the courage to open my mouth and speak again.

"It led me to you, all of it," I say.

He squeezes my hand but says nothing.

"Come here," he says after what felt like years of silence.

He leads me to the window. Across is a tall brown building, some of its windows broken.

"Do you see that building there?"

He is pointing at it.

"I started working when I was 11 years old, cutting people's lawns and doing odd jobs here and there. I had one goal and one goal only, to buy that building."

I ask him why because it doesn't look like something anyone would want to invest in.

"It was the last place where I saw my mother."

I look up at him and all I can offer is my arms around his waist and my head on his chest.

"She stuck around for a fair while after she met my stepdad. She even stopped stripping and started making that place feel like a home. For that short while, and this was for the first time in my life, I'd be home watching TV and eating food at 8pm like normal kids, not sitting in a strip club manager's office doing my homework.

"She was there to tuck me in at night and my stepdad, when he wasn't playing late, would be there too. But then one day, she was gone and it was just me and my stepdad. We realised late at night that she was gone after waiting all day for her to walk in, so we moved on with life, just the two of us. It's been like that since that day.

"And to be honest, she did me a huge favour."

"You can't say that, Tex, not about your mother. I'm sure it was a tough decision for her..."

He kisses my shoulder and sighs deeply.

"It's not coming from a bad place, babe. I was tired. I was a kid and I was already tired. If she had tried to take me with her, I would have refused to go. All I wanted was a home and a bed and a normal life like all the other kids at school. I didn't want to have to bump into half-naked adult women in strip club corridors, let alone my own mother. Imagine what that would have done to me had it continued?"

I understand.

"My stepdad taught me so much as he was raising me. He spent the whole time doing damage control, trying to make me unlearn things, especially how I viewed women. In my little boy mind, I had always seen women being portrayed as objects that men looked at and threw money at. I had a picture of how a woman should look and they were all skinny with big breasts and long legs. And they didn't have to wear much..."

I cannot imagine how, had he continued to be exposed to that life, how he would have turned out.

But this building? I understand it holds memories and sentimental value, but what is he going to do with it? It's not like he can ever live in it.

"So what do you plan to do with the building?" I ask.

He is quiet for a second, as if thinking hard about how he is going to structure his answer, although it is there in his head just waiting to come out.

"So many people have offered to buy it. I keep saying no but I don't really know what I'm going to do with it."

It doesn't make sense.

"Are you good at letting go, Lu?"

It's such a strange and random question. I think I am, I think.

"I don't know, Tex. I think it depends on what has to be let go."

I'm wracking my brain trying to remember if I am good or not good at letting go.

"I think baggage is harder to let go more than anything, more than people or material things or... I don't know but I think baggage, even if it doesn't pull you down, it stays on your shoulders because then you have something..." he says.

"Something?"

"Something for you to say, 'This is why', even if it's just to yourself. You hold on to your baggage and you say, 'Well, I went through this, it hurt me, it destroyed me and so that is why I'm a shit person and inconsiderate and selfish and that is why I drink or take drugs'. You always have a justification, something to blame for your own actions and choices."

I'd be more comfortable and maybe more empathetic if I understood where he was going with this, if it is a rant or something he is trying to tell me.

"It makes life easier, keeping the baggage with you."

No, it doesn't.

If it did, we wouldn't be standing here looking at a rundown building and discussing a mother who abandoned her child.

Tex has achieved so much already. He is successful in what he does, he is an attractive, healthy man and he has me, a woman who loves him. And yet here we are, looking at a derelict building.

"There's somewhere I want to take you, some people I want you to meet," I say.
I had not planned to invite him.

I was going to go there and not tell him about it when I came back, but maybe I need to let him in a little, show him a bit of me.

The first time I climbed these stairs and stood in front of this door, I ended up thinking I was being pimped out.

It feels like a lifetime ago.

I find the story funny now but when I told Mabou about it, long after it happened, she accused me of having trust issues.

"Where are we?"

He's been asking questions since we jumped in the cab. I told him it was something I had to do, and all he had to do was trust me.

I didn't tell Barbara I was bringing a guest, which could be a problem but we are here now and I can't turn back.

When she called to invite me for dinner, I sensed there was something more to it because she wasn't herself. She didn't ask me personal questions and she didn't tell me things I would rather not know about her sex life.

She packed her stuff and crossed the Brooklyn Bridge to live here the morning after Shemar died so now I think it was a good thing we went to that old people's bar.

She's all dressed up and perfectly made up when she opens the door.

Tex looks at me and raises his eyebrows. I know he is asking but I hold his hand tighter and pull him inside without saying a word.

Barbara is also asking.

"This is Tex." I say and scan the house with my eyes looking for Lincoln.

"He's getting dressed," Barbara puts me at ease.

I don't even want to imagine why he wasn't dressed in the first place.

She directs us to the long dining room table, the one I had sat at many times having dinner and listening to stories and laughing at Lincoln's escapades.

Everything is still the same except a few new features, big framed photographs of Barbara when she was younger.

There's their wedding photograph hanging on the wall that separates the dining room from Lincoln's man cave, the one where he keeps all his art and cigars and expensive alcohol and Dolly.

"Lu. Where. Are. We?"

He is whispering now.

I'm about to tell him when...

"You brought a guest? This is a first."

It's so like him to appear from behind us and speak. He did that the first time I met him.

"Why is he naked?"

Tex!

He's still whispering. And Lincoln is not naked. He's wearing his favourite silk leopard print robe.

I look at Barbara. She shrugs.

"Are you going to introduce the young man?"

Oh, yes.

"This is Tex, my boyfriend."

"Oh, that's another first. Tex, I'm Lincoln, and this is my house. That is why I'm naked, as you say."

I see the old man has not changed a bit.

All Tex says is "Nice to meet you" and sits down at the set table.

There are big plates under small plates and three wine glasses and forks and spoons and all the things that never featured at our dinners. We usually ate our food from take-away containers to avoid washing dishes afterwards.

Barbara comes back from the kitchen with a bottle of wine and pours some in everyone's glass without asking.

"I'll have water," I say.

"Why? Are you pregnant?"

Under normal circumstances I would laugh at what she just said, but right now I'm worried about Tex because he looks a little freaked out.

"No, I have an early morning tomorrow," I reply.

I don't have an early morning tomorrow. I'm just worried about a lot of things, including the way Lincoln is looking at Tex.

"He's a good guy," I tell Lincoln.

I decide not to wait for him to ask because I don't know how he might structure the question.

"You say? What does he do for a living?"

"I'm in advertising," Tex jumps in.

"And you are from?"

"Here in Manhattan but I was born in Texas, came here when I was a child."

I'm just looking at whoever is speaking at that moment and hoping things don't go...

"Have you ever been in jail?"

Things are going there.

Tex looks at me, I look to Barbara for help.

"I'm not asking this because you're black. I've been to jail myself."

"For what? Stealing your daddy's Ferrari?" Tex

Oh, no, no, no.

"Oh great, starters are here. Thank you, Paulina," Barbara says, trying to change the subject.

Paulina? There's a housekeeper now? How did that even happen?

"No, for fighting with police who tried to arrest my brother because he fit the profile of some drug pusher."

I didn't know anything about that.

"His brother is black, by the way. Lincoln was raised by a black stepfather," explains Barbara. Why can't she just keep quiet like me?

The starter is three pieces of cold meat, white cheese and olive tapenade. It's not something I would eat generally but I dig in because things are too intense here.

Tex doesn't touch the tapenade. He keeps exchanging looks with Lincoln and they aren't good looks.

I'm avoiding looking his way at all cost.

"Tex did that Humanitarian campaign. He took the pictures," I say, trying to change the subject.

"You're a photographer too?" Lincoln asks.

"Sometimes I take photos," Tex says and pushes his plate aside.

This night isn't going the way I had hoped it would. I brought Tex here because I wanted him to meet people who are important to me, to give him a glimpse of where I was before he came into my life, not this.

"I've seen those pictures on billboards. Shemar would be proud of you, Lou," Lincoln says.

That's when Tex looks at me and frowns. I should have told him earlier who these people are.

"Lincoln is Shemar's father," I say.

He doesn't respond and I'm not sure exactly what it is that he is mad about, the fact that I didn't tell him before we came here or the fact that we are here and this man has offended him.

Barbara offers wine again. I'll have a glass this time because I really need it.

The main course is rump steak with mashed potato and green beans, prepared by the chubby Paulina herself because Barbara is not about the domestic life.

I could ask how she convinced her husband to hire a housekeeper because he hates living with people in his house but I've come to know that she can make him do anything.

"We're moving to Nebraska," Barbara says, taking me by surprise.
Nebraska?

I look at Lincoln. Why would he move anywhere? This is his home.

"That's why I invited you here, Lou. We are moving next Saturday," Barbara says.

I know Nebraska is where Lincoln was born but why would he want to move back there? All the people he grew up with are probably dead now.

"I found the farm where my mother grew up and I'm buying it. When I die, I want it to be in a quiet and peaceful place. I'm tired of New York. It has taken everything away from me and it's time I let go of it."

"But this is your home," I argue.

"Everywhere is home, Lulu, as long as you are happy there."

I don't know how I feel about this. I know I don't come here to visit him anymore but he is the only family I have in this city.

"So your parents named you after the capital city of where you were born?" Tex asks.

"Yes, for reasons I do not understand," Lincoln replies.

"Well, at least it's the capital city. I was named after the whole state, Texas."

The laugh they share is a little reserved but at least it is progress.

I understand where Lincoln is coming from. I guess it's normal in life that everybody wants to end up where they came from.

"But, Lulu, I called you here because I want to give you something."

He takes a silver urn from the shelf behind him and puts it on the table.

I don't know what it is but I hope it's something rare and expensive, like diamonds.

"I want you to go to QwaQwa, find Dolly's grave and give her her son."

Oh, no.

212

"When you go home, because you have to go home one day, I want you to take him with you, take him home."

Why does this sound like it's not negotiable?

"I don't think I can," I say quietly.

"Yes, you can. He died happy and content because of you. I'm sure you can do this for him too."

This conversation should have been in private, without Tex or Barbara watching and judging me for saying no.

"I'm taking half with me, the other half is yours. That day, the 4th of July was one of the happiest days of his life. He died happy, with you close to him."

I don't want to talk about that day! That's why I don't come here in the first place.

"He died on the 4th of July?" asks Tex.

"Yes, a senseless death caused by someone who had no regard for human life," says Barbara.

The lump in my throat keeps getting bigger and thicker.

"I was there. I lost Robin," Tex says.

Silence.

I feel his hand on mine from under the table when the lump in my throat bursts.

"Was she also shot?" Barbara asks.

"No, she fell trying to run, and a car hit her. I found her in hospital hours after the whole thing. They found her body lying in a gutter, with no handbag or any form of identification. Her face still had the American flag painted on it."

He has never told me this before, and now I remember him saying, "I have to find Robin" before he disappeared.

213

I didn't come here for this.

"I'm so sorry to hear that, Tex. We have all suffered the worst," Barbara says.

Lincoln keeps telling me to stop crying but how, with Shemar's ashes sitting in front of me on the table?

"The worst part is that I should have been with her, but instead I was busy taking photographs in the park across the street. I saw a girl dancing with the fire dancers and I just took off with my camera. I still remember her last words to me: 'Tex wait!'

"But I left her anyway. It was our first date."

Now I put my hand over his. I have known for a while that it was him that night, but I just couldn't bring myself to tell him because I didn't want to talk about what happened, and now we are here.

"Lulu," Lincoln says.

I sob even harder because I know why he is saying my name.

"Did you know?" he asks.

I nod.

"Does he know?"

I shake my head.

I told Lincoln when I busy blaming myself that I was with some photographer looking at pictures of myself dancing with the fire dancers when the first shot went off.

I said to him that I should have been with Shemar but he said I would have died too.

There was a point where I thought that would have been better, a point where I couldn't get myself out of bed because everything reminded me of him and the TV showing nothing but death, death, death for days, talking about how the killer was being taken for psy-

chiatric examination and how he had had a hard life because he was abandoned and all those things that Shemar was not responsible for.

I'm trying to ignore Tex's questioning, piercing eyes on me.

Paulina walks in with dessert.

Hlasela

217

216

I chose to take this trip to the hospital alone despite Zwelli's nagging about it not being safe and me not being an ordinary person who can drive from Jozini to Empangeni on her own.

But the boy must understand that my own husband is lying deep in the ground and the fact that he is now king doesn't give him the right to tell me what to do. I'm his mother.

The meeting place had to be discreet for obvious reasons. If anyone sees us together, it could turn into a disaster. Who knows what they'd say we were doing?

As I sit here watching the ocean and wondering if Mvelase would approve of me doing this here, memories of the times we spent here, hiding from our responsibilities, come to me as aggressively as the wave that has just roared.

He used to bring me here to St Lucia when we were in our 20s, when his mother was still alive and ruled our lives.

Sometimes we would sleep over and then spend the drive back to Jozini trying to come up with convincing lies about where we were.

He was always the one to go to his mother first and explain himself because if I had even tried she would have accused me of this and that.

I see him coming, head as white as snow and the lines on his face detailing the amount of wisdom he possesses.

I have not seen him in years.

"Nobuntu."

That's how he greets.

"It's been a long time," he says next.

It's really been a long time.

219

Today is the day I went to fetch NoNqaba from hospital, but she refused to come home.

"I belong with the Mkhizes, Ma," she said. "I have to go there."

I have never liked those people.

I cried on her wedding day because I knew I had lost her. I knew that as much as she could come home whenever she wanted, I no longer had a claim to her as my daughter. Instead, some woman and her family now had the right to call her their own and the right to bury her according to their customs if she were to die.

Her left breast was removed two weeks ago and in true NoNqaba nature, she took it like a hero.

"At least I'm alive, Mama. A missing breast is nothing," she said.

A missing breast is nothing? I thought to myself.

How can losing the one thing that physically defines your femininity mean nothing? How is having an illness eat you from the inside nothing?

I let her husband take her with him, but I knew when I looked in her eyes that she was as uncertain as I was about it.

I left the hospital with a heavy heart and anxious mind because I had been dreading coming here, to this place for the first time without my husband.

218

The first time we spoke, we were teenagers when he, his father and some men from the royal house rounded us maidens up and interrogated us about Ntombenhle.

They wanted to know how she had become pregnant and where we were when all of that happened.

They made it seem like it was our fault and he, although he was a teenager and still wet behind the ears, actually thought he was a grown man and spoke like he was capable of doing something to us.

I knew the most because I lived down below the forest and had seen the young man with a blanket and cone hat at the riverbank many times.

I also, although I had never been asked to, always kept guard for them.

"You, you live by the river. You surely must have seen something," he shouted, pointing at me with *isagila*.

I looked down at my feet and lied that I had seen nothing at all.

At that time, Ntombenhle was locked in one of the huts in the royal house, to hide the shame she had brought to the family, and the possibility of bloodshed, again.

They left without getting an answer from us but we heard days later that the men in blankets came and took Ntombenhle, and that she wanted to go with them.

The second time I saw him was at my wedding and he wasn't trying to smash my head with *isagila* anymore. He later married a girl from KwaNongoma.

Sometimes I wish he was the one born from his father's first wife because then he would be king of the Zondis, not that stubborn older brother of his.

"How are you keeping up after... you know?" he asks.

"I was prepared. He prepared me for it," I say. He did not prepare me for anything. He made me prepare myself for his imminent death by not talking about it but making plans for what would happen after he left.

He was the one who told me to contact Hlasela if the Zondis continued with their nonsense. He said he was the only person in that family with the ability to reason. But he didn't tell me to go to him alone and meet him at a place that was sacred to our love.

"And he has a soft spot for you," he said about Hlasela.

I didn't entertain that part because I knew that if I had, his jealousy would have kicked in and we would have ended up talking about all the men who ever showed an interest in me, including the cow herder from down below the forest.

I requested to meet Hlasela because every negotiation we have tried to have with his family has failed, and Zweji's temper has not helped. Things are getting worse.

"So you want to talk about the problem?" he asks.

"I need your help. That's all I want to talk about."

"How?"

"Speak to your brother. How can he let people suffer like this when there is a solution available? How can he be so ruthless, Hlasela?"

He does that thing of folding his arms and looking above my head.

"But we are not suffering. We are fine. This is a Jozini problem and you want Mkuze to bend over backwards for you?"

I thought he was supposed to be reasonable.

"So you are going to let our people suffer because it is not your problem?"

He picks up a stone and throws it to the sand in front of us.

"What are you asking? What do you want from me, Nobuntu?"

"I want you to help us?"

I know that if it was up to him, he would do it. But what kind of a man would he be, born of royal blood, if he could not do something as simple as changing people's minds? People who are his own blood?

"Does the boy know you are here? That you are talking to me?"

What does it matter?

"He is not a boy. He is the king," I snap back.

"Then why isn't he here talking to me? Why did he send his mother to do a king's job?"

Nobody sends me anywhere, not even the king himself.

Hlasela is talking about things I didn't come here for. Isn't it my responsibility to fix things as the queen?

He may not know this but I have ruled more than Mvelase ever did. I was the one who made the right decisions for him, told him what to say and protected his ego when it should have been dragged through the mud because he behaved like a typical man, small-minded and petty inside while portraying an image of a warrior on the outside.

"Are you going to help or not, Hlasela?"

222

He looks at me, longer than I'm comfortable with. "We are back there, aren't we? Back where all of this started?" he says.

I don't know what he is talking about.

"Don't act confused. You know what I'm talking about. You know what has to be done, Nobuntu. Only blood, one blood, can make us one, Nobuntu. You know that but you Mzimelas, you have abandoned your customs, who you are. Your boy comes to Mkuze and thinks he can act all tough, make demands and shout at my brother, a king? You daughters don't even know who they are. They think they have the right and freedom to do as they please? Look around you, Nobuntu. Ask yourself why this misfortune has fallen upon your people. Ask yourself why the ancestors have forsaken you. Every promise made has to be fulfilled, especially if blood was spilled and incense was burned to pronounce it."

Why is he bringing this up now? We both know times have changed. We don't need to go back to things that happened decades ago. We need to find a solution and it is already there, waiting for his people to stop being stubborn and be considerate.

"You need to do what was promised. This is life. It always comes full circle, no matter how long it takes."

Things are simpler than that. We don't have to do this, not to our children. I'm quiet because I don't know what to say anymore.

It is only when he stands up that I grab him by the arm and ask what I never thought I would care to know.

"Where is she?"

He sits back down.

"In America, New York."

223

What's a geologist doing in America?

"Don't wait until it's too late."

With that he stands up again and leaves this time.

224

May-Mey-Lodi

225

I had been looking forward to Sam visiting but at last minute her visa application was declined because, well, she is a state witness in one of biggest white-collar crimes the country has ever seen.

She's also one of the biggest beneficiaries.

I had planned to introduce her to Tex and hope she didn't slip up about "that culture thing" and spoil my already eventful relationship.

It's only been eight months but so much has happened in this Lungile and Tex union.

The biggest threat so far was that issue of July 4.

He was mad, not because I was the cat in the fire but because I did not tell him when I realised it was he who took my pictures.

"What else are you not telling me, Lou?" he screamed before storming out of Lincoln's house.

I followed him out and down the street, trying to explain myself.

"I wasn't sure at first, Tex," I pleaded.

"Besides, I don't want to talk about that day. I want to forget it. Are you mad because you blame me? Do you blame me for taking your attention off Robin?"

People were watching this desperate-sounding woman rushing after a man who wanted nothing to do with her.

He kept walking and I kept following him, shouting to myself.

When he had had enough, he flagged down a taxi, opened the door and jumped in, leaving me standing on the pavement, still pleading.

I had started to cry and could feel the start of a panic attack when he opened the door and got out of the cab, grabbed me by my waist and shoved me inside.

The cab driver tried to say something but the response was "Drive!" and me, I was still trying to explain myself when I was told to "Stop talking!"

I did that and sat with my handbag held tightly to my chest, only to feel his arm over my shoulders, pulling me close to him.

We travelled in silence, all kinds of thoughts going in and out of my head about how we even got there.

It was supposed to be a simple dinner with an elderly couple but no, it ended up being the biggest fight I've ever had with my boyfriend.

The cab drove straight to my apartment, with me thinking I was going to be dropped there alone and him jumping out and walking up the stairs with me.

"You left the ashes."

He said that as we stepped in to my apartment, still very much annoyed and frustrated.

Yes, I forgot the ashes. They were delivered to my door the next morning.

"And when is this goat leaving? If you're not going to take it to the animal shelter, at least kill it and eat it. Do some voodoo thing with it," he said grumpily.

I wondered what Gemma had done to him.

We needed to talk and we both knew that.

I wanted to tell him everything, all of it.

I told him about my family and who we are. I told him about my life with Shemar and everything that happened that night and everything before that, about the Bronx, about how I landed Lincoln in hospital and about my painting going missing and Mark and Dolly and meeting Shemar's father and about Lashandra's story and Stewart and Sam. I even told him about how Tatanda stole my assignment and submitted it as his own and how he stole my money and then dumped me because I didn't want to have sex.

I didn't tell him about my mother and father and how they met, simply because it wasn't important. He didn't have to know that side of the story because it was never going to affect him anyway.

It won't affect him because I have decided I'm staying in New York. I'm never going back home. I'm staying with Tex and all the people I have accepted into my life.

If I need to go away, for Christmas or something, I will go to Nevada to be with Lincoln and Barbara. They are my family.

The next morning, after all the drama, Tex took me to meet his stepfather, a south American-sounding man with a Nigerian surname.

He is a jazz musician and has been here for 30 years but still talks about "back home" when referring to Africa.

He is a nice guy, a gentleman like Tex, although calmer and less persistent.

He doesn't do home dinners like Lincoln. He loves the streetlights and pavements and action down in Chinatown.

I love that about him, that he is a free spirit, just like my father.

A month ago, when we were at another of Tex's exhibitions, he called me outside and we sat on the stairs.

He had a packet of peanuts and when he offered me some, I said no because it's summer and I'm trying to keep certain things away from my skin.

"It's rude to say no when someone offers you food," he said.

Well, not in America. In fact, people don't offer food in America.

He told me about Tex and how I must handle him with care. He said raising him had been tough because he had to unlearn many things.

"He is a good man. He will never hurt you on purpose and he will always respect you. Just do me a favour. Don't shut him out, encourage him and show him you love him. He will do all those things and more for you. Just promise me you will do your part," he said.

Making promises has never been my thing but that night I swore to be everything he asked me to be.

I was about to tell him how much I love Tex when Nate appeared and without even greeting me, asked me why I was wasting "his boy's" time.

"This one I cannot explain," Tex's father said and stood up.

"But he comes with the package so I guess he is one of the things you have to embrace," he said, patting Nate's shoulders.

And with that he left. I followed him and left Nate still talking.

I can't say he doesn't get to me sometimes, but Nate is an idiot and he cannot help it.

I also know he had everything to do with Tex not being here tonight. He said something about having an emergency at work but I know it was Nate's whining that made him go wherever he is.

So tonight it's just me and Lashandra, who, by the way, doesn't want to come to my place anymore. She says between the voodoo goat and a dead man's ashes, she doesn't know what will kill her faster.

"Lou, I can't believe I'm in a park walking a goat on a Friday night. Are we old? Is that what it is? Because I think we still look good. I mean, we can still enter a club without standing in a queue and we still party like..."

And so she starts.

"I don't understand why you have issues with Gemma. I mean, she's family," I say.

"She's a goat, and if you don't get rid of her, you'll be evicted from your apartment," she retorts.

She's right about that. Someone complained to the landlord that there were strange sounds coming from my apartment and I had to make some lame excuse about putting the volume too high when I was watching TV.

It doesn't help that people in this park are looking at us strangely. Some even change direction when they approach us, as if a goat is capable of eating them.

I persuaded Lashandra to spend tonight with me for one reason and one reason only, and that is the fact that I need her advice.

Spring in New York ended months ago and from there I went straight to dance in another production.

230

Now I have another offer but it requires me to move to another town.

When they called, I knew there and then that I wasn't going to take it. I didn't even tell Tex about it because he was busy talking about us moving in together, which will also not happen.

"I think you have to weigh it up and decide what is more important. I mean, at this point, Lou, you can get any job you want. It's time to stop chasing the dance industry and settle where you are comfortable. We both know how short this career is so you need to have a life outside of it."

But the main reason I came here was to chase the dance industry. I'm always chasing after something and something is always chasing after me. It's just who I am.

"I mean, look how happy you are. For the first time since I met you, you look content. You are not that timid girl anymore who didn't want to try new things and meet new people. I like who you are with Tex. I want you to stay. Besides, what about me?"

She's right. Imagine me being in a new town and having to make new friends. I'd probably end up buying a cat and giving it a name.

"I'm from May-mey-lodi," she says.

I didn't hear her correctly. Did she just say she's from somewhere?

"I found out yesterday. They found an article about a missing three-year-old from a long time ago and she looks like me, I think. They said she was from somewhere in South Africa, May-mey-lodi."

Oh, I never!

"Mamelodi? Are you sure?"

231

"They are still investigating," she says.

How is this even possible?

It was Tex's advice for her to hire private investigators but I never thought something would ever come of it, let alone Mamelodi.

I want to know more about this Mamelodi story. I want to know what will happen if it is confirmed that the missing three-year-old girl was her. Will she pack and go back home? Will she want to...?

"Look! Fire dancers," she says.

Yes, there they are. I hesitate for a moment before following her as she rushes up to them.

There are three of them with fire-rings.

I should be freaked out right now but I'm not. I have let everything go.

It's such a beautiful scene to watch and people have started to gather around them.

They spin their fire rings, making perfectly round patterns and beautiful reflections in the sky.

They remind me of that night but strangely enough I am not sad or scared. I just want to watch them and capture this moment in my heart.

I could stand here all night, watching this.

"Wait, I need to capture this," Lashandra says.

I take it she has not clicked that this is like a repeat of the night that changed my life.

But that's the beautiful thing about humans. They move on.

I'm the first to clap when they are done. The thought of joining them and dancing crossed my mind a couple of times but I wouldn't dare let go of Gemma's leash, lest she tries horning and castrating people and landing me in jail.

The small crowd starts dispersing, especially now that the entertainment has stopped and...

"Look at these, urgh, so gorgeous," Lashandra says, scrolling through pictures on her phone.

She took a lot of them.

"Look," she points at a specific one.

Wow!

"Someone was proposing? This was a proposal? Oh my God, to who?"

I look around us, expecting to see a man on one knee and a girl jumping for joy near us. Instead all I see is Texas emerging from behind the fire dancers.

What's he doing here? What happened to the work emergency?

He's with his father? And Natic?

"That's exactly what someone is doing?"

No, no, no ... this can't be happening!

"Tex!"

He gets down on one knee, I want to pull him up but he doesn't even have hair.

"I haven't found the perfect ring but I've found the perfect girl," he says.

Why on earth does he want to be married?

Oh no, he must get up now! No, no, no!

"Lou, will you marry me?"

He's holding a Zulu beaded bangle in his hand.

I look at him, kneeling in front of me, doing the one thing he shouldn't be doing.

I want to pull him up and tell him how much I love him. I want to kiss him and tell him this is not how it should be but all I can do is...

"I don't know what to say," I stutter.

"Say yes!" Lashandra shouts.

My God!

I shouldn't, I shouldn't.

"Yes!"

He quickly ties the bangle around my wrist and stands up, picks me up and whirls me around.

Everybody is clapping and happy. I'm also happy for a second until reality comes rushing back and I realize saying yes was the biggest mistake I have ever made.

But everybody is happy. Tex is happy.

This wasn't supposed to happen.

"I think we should elope, go to Vegas and get married immediately."

He laughs as if I've just told him a lame joke.

I didn't mean to say that loud. It just came out. It's panic.

"Well, then, let's start with the party," he says and pulls me by hand.

There's a party?

There's a party and it's at that same place where he had held his exhibition, the first one I attended before he met me.

There are people I know, people I wouldn't invite to anything outside work, people like Miz-G and Toya.

How did he do all this stuff? When?

After all the congratulations and the "But where is the ring?" questions, with Tex trying to explain the Zulu bangle, I need at least two minutes of peace and quiet.

Just two minutes of peace, in the bathroom.

"This was not supposed to happen, not now, not until I have a plan," I think to myself, looking at my flushed face in the mirror.

Where to from here?"

I take that walk back to the main event and if I could run, I would, but I'd have to take Tex with me.

I'm met with smiles when I walk back in. Everyone looking at me as if I should be saying something.

"Lunkile, *ke matlakata a eng a?*"

It's Phineas.

I felt him before he spoke. It was as if something had landed on my shoulders and dug its claws in very deep.

The room is silent and I'm afraid to turn around and see him.

I find Tex with my eyes. He is smiling, as if he has done something great.

"*Rangoane*," I say before I turn.

He should have at least left the Basotho 10 behind.

"Tex?"

"I brought him here for the 'low-bowler' negotiations. I want a proper Zulu wedding," he says.

The people here are clapping.

A Zulu wedding? In America? Is he mad?

Zulu Wedding

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Half of the money will be donated to charity and half of it... Well, he said that besides me, there was one other thing the Zulus wanted from us.

Had he said this for the second time, about selling my father's paintings, before Tex came into my life, I would have definitely still said no because my trust for Phineas has deteriorated as I grow older.

Now I'm going home.

Tex doesn't know why we are selling all the paintings and by the time he and his father come to South Africa to pay *lobola* in a few days, all will be done and dusted.

I told him I had to go home and prepare, that I had to gather my whole family and confirm I have agreed to marry him so they can hold a meeting and decide on the *lobola* price, although it doesn't really happen like that.

I told him another lie but Tex is happy, clueless and being put in danger — but he is happy.

The last time I was here at JFK airport was the day I arrived in this country, young and desperate to escape.

Had I known things would pan out the way they have, maybe I would have rerouted to Brazil or somewhere else. But maybe not.

I have found my soul mate here. A man who has been patient with me, respects me, supports my career and tolerates my goat and I'll be damned if I sacrifice him for some stupid agreement made before I was born.

It's time for me to stop running and fight.

When I sat Tex down and told him I was leaving, he agreed. His father also agreed that they had to respect my family and allow us time to make arrangements.

But I could see it in Tex's eyes, the fear and doubt. The worry that anything could happen, anything could

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I made a deal with Phineas.

It happened a week ago, after I had pleaded, wept, threatened, dropped to the ground and pulled myself up again.

I knew when I decided to stand my ground that whatever came out of a confrontation with my uncle, Tex was not going to be the casualty, never. I was going to do whatever it took to make sure of that.

I love him deeply, I told my uncle.

It doesn't matter, he responded.

He said it shouldn't have gotten to the part where I love him deeply in the first place because I knew.

"But what about me?" I asked him.

"What about you?" he replied.

"You shouldn't have run away, Lunkile. You should have stayed. We would have sorted this out. How was I supposed to fix things without you around? How many times did I beg you to come home?"

But how was I supposed to sort things out? Fix problems I didn't create?

My uncle treats me like I'm not an innocent victim in this.

I'm going to marry Tex, and to do that, I'm going to sell my father's paintings, each and every one of them, including the portrait I hold dearest to my heart.

Phineas said that was the only way.

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change, especially because my uncle made it clear from the beginning that he did not approve of this marriage.

"These people have no culture, *ngoanaka*," he said. He said this in front of Tex and Nate. Tex was hurt, and Nate was Nate. He said: "It's not our fault that we were kidnapped and made slaves."

Any person in that room would have laughed at that reasoning but I knew better.

It's going to be a long flight back home and I wonder how much of it I have forgotten.

I wonder if I will still see the poverty in Alex from my bedroom balcony in Sandton.

I wonder if people still have conversations in different languages and if Dikeledi is not the pilot flying me home.

"Did you invite these people, Lunkile?"

No, I didn't.

It's Tex and Nate. They are here. And they say they are coming with us. Today.

We take the N12 highway to Johannesburg and I'm immediately taken back to the days when I would be driven to the airport to fly to Umtata when I was at university.

I'm reminded of the family holidays we went on, sometimes just the two of us and Dorcas.

And also, of that day I hugged my family goodbye at the airport and listened to a list of things they wanted me to bring them when I came back in a month.

I pretended to memorise them, knowing very well I wasn't coming back, possibly not ever.

Some of them have never forgiven me for that, Mabobo included.

These days, and I witnessed this before we even left the airport, she has a habit of pricking people's fingers with a needle to do an instant blood test on them.

She did it with Tex and he has been sitting here next to me, timid the whole time.

He asked me three times if Mabobo is really my sister. And he asked me four times if she isn't dangerous.

I said no but now I'm not sure anymore because she is driving us home in a branded traffic police car, siren on and we are swerving and overtaking and jumping traffic lights.

I hold Tex's hand when we turn into my street because I'm getting emotional, thinking I'm really doing this, and I'm doing it because of him.

If he were to ask me again if I'm good at letting go, I'd have a clear answer. Yes, I'm good at letting go now. I let go of fear and anger, I let go of my father's paintings and I let go of New York, even if it's only for a month and even after it had swallowed me so much I didn't even refer to South Africa as home anymore.

"The fences are very long," he says as we drive down Atholl Drive.

I squeeze his hand tighter and smile briefly.

I would tell him that I have never really understood who these walls are meant to keep away, the criminals or anyone who isn't us.

I'd tell him that those who aren't us spend more time inside these walls and the walls of our houses than us, making them clean and cooking our food.

But there really is no need. The whole world is like that, it's not just us over here in these mansions looking over squatter camps.

My heart skips a beat when I see it.

The trees are taller, the gate smaller and the driveway a little too narrow.

We pass the statue still standing exactly where I left it, water still pouring out of it.

The paint has been changed. The house was off-white when I left and the door was black.

Tex turns to look at me. I know what he's asking. I look away.

I want to take off my shoes when I step out of the car, run across the yard, around the house, jump in the pool, kiss the trees and kiss the ground.

But I can't do that now. I need to go inside and breathe the air of my home.

A convoy of white cars with black stripes parks behind us just as we step out of the car.

This is new to me.

Nate is amazed.

"These are the zebras?" he asks.

He must have thought Maboo was talking about real zebras when she said my uncle and his Basotho 10 were travelling in Zebras from the airport. I don't how.

Nobody answers him.

Up the stairs, in front of the open door stands Yvonne and next to her is Couscous. She is the most beautiful thing I had never seen before now.

I make my way up. I would run if I could but this is so surreal, my mind and body are operating in slow motion.

I bend and look down at her.

"Couscous, nice to finally meet you in person."

She hurls herself at me and hugs me around the thighs.

I hug Yvonne too, a frigid hug. She's never forgiven me for what she says I did to the family.

Behind them appears Dorcas, walking as if she's stepping on rare diamonds.

Her posture and perfect body is exactly the way I remember it.

"My child, home at last. And which of these is your young man?"

I had completely forgotten about Tex and Nate behind me.

"The gorgeous one," I look back and wink at him.

"Oh, and this is Nate, his appendage," I joke.

Nate steps forward swiftly and offers her a hand-shake.

"Lawyer, best friend, bodyguard. I could make a case for the argument equally gorgeous."

Doreas smiles when she sees me rolling my eyes. He leaves us standing and walks further inside the house.

"Goat girl is loaded," he mutters.

He's talking to himself.

Behind me, Couscous is scamming Tex out of dollars.

Father's paintings are lining the path to the living room. Some are hanging on walls, others are placed on the floor and on top of tables.

We are letting go of all of this, my father's legacy, his years of work for a man I met less than a year ago.

I look at him, trying to negotiate getting back his 50 dollars from my cousin. It's not going to happen but it's cute to watch.

Nate looks at two paintings hanging high up on the wall.

"Are these your grandfathers?" he asks.

Mabo laughs.

"This is Moshoeshoe, the great and glorious king who founded the Basotho nation and led us to our glorious homeland. That other one is Shaka. He was a Zulu," Uncle Phineas says.

Nobody really knows what both kings looked like. In fact, a lot is being questioned about what colonial historians wrote about them.

I explained this to Tex once after he asked me if it was true that Shaka cut his enemies' limbs and ate them.

I see they have changed the kitchen cupboards, and curtains and the garden furniture. I'm surprised I notice

all this because I spent years trying to forget what my home looked like.

The pool outside reminds me of my mother. We sat right there when she told me stories about warrior princesses.

I still remember her words: "If you don't want to do something, don't do it. You are my daughter. You will know when you have to fight, you got that from me. Your heart will guide you."

And right now I'm doing just that, fighting for my happiness.

After telling me these stories, which were always almost similar, my mother would hug me tight and kiss the top of my head many times.

I loved that about her, that she was the demonstrative type, unlike my father who showed love in a typically African man way.

"Your uncle is abusing your man in the house," Mabo says from behind me.

I've been so busy standing here staring out at the pool, I forgot I hadn't helped Tex settle in.

"You cannot sleep under the same roof as the bride. Follow me."

What is going on now?

"Where is he taking him, Mabo?"

"To the Zozo hut outside."

I'm home.

I watch her stroll down the passage and notice something different about her face.

She's still shaped like an hourglass, swerves her hips to the sides when she walks and carries a glass of wine in her hand.

She has grown in all the right places yet she has not changed a bit, not even after becoming famous for all the wrong reasons.

The last time we were both here in this house, she was pining over Ben Mashankura, and now she is testifying against him in the most eagerly followed criminal trial in the country.

"Isn't it too early to be showing cleavage?"

She smiles, hugs me, lets me go and stands in front of me quietly.

I'm confused for a few seconds before I notice it.

"Oh, nice nose," I say.

"It's brand new."

I thought she was broke.

She hooks her arm through mine as we walk down the passage to the living room.

If I say we have so much to catch up on, I'd be lying. She's always been present, out of reach physically but present in every other way. It's like I've lived with her all these years.

"Where did you get the wine again?"

"Bac here, he keeps bottles in the car."

I still cannot believe this happened, even though I'm seeing it live.

She leaves me and goes to hook her arm through his.

They kiss briefly and I'm just standing here trying to understand how this can be right.

She hands me a piece of paper. She says it's an invoice. She says it's for planning my wedding.

I don't have a wedding date yet. I don't even know where I'm getting married or what type of dress I want.

"I've made an appointment with a top designer, babe, and negotiated a nice little discount. Thanks to him, people fall over themselves to give him free stuff," she says and looks at DJ Tira next to her.

Where did she even meet DJ Tira? At the Durban July?

"We met eYadini," she says.

I wasn't even going to ask out loud.

She tells me she has booked a provisional wedding venue, a Catholic church in Krugersdorp.

"It's a nice set-up. Or we could stage the wedding in Cape Town?"

"Stage a wedding?"

That's Tex asking.

I introduce Tex and switch off from the conversation because I'm tired of explaining people to him. If he is going to be family, he might as well start embracing it all, just as I have embraced Natc, who has been on the receiving end of insults from Mabo ever since we landed at OR Tambo yesterday afternoon.

We all head into the garden where the braai is.

Father's studio is on the other end. The glass wall is covered in dust and the paint is peeling.

"We must practise the step," Mabo says.

"Step? Are you sure you're from here? Sandton? Because you have serious Hammanskraal issues," Sam says.

"Koala molomo sferb," Mabo.

I missed this place.

"Tex! Tex, wake up!"

What kind of man sleeps such a deep sleep in a

Zozo hut?

"Tex!"

And here I was worried about him all night. Meanwhile, he is in a deep sleep.

"Tex! Babe?"

I'm about to rush to the back of the Zozo when the curtain is pulled open. He is shirtless.

"Get dressed and let's go," I urge.

He stands still, his face dazed and confused as if he doesn't know where he is.

I have to clap twice to wake him up from this sleepwalking mode.

"Lou?"

Yes, you're looking at me.

"Yes, it's Lou. Get dressed and come out now."

I went through enough trouble trying to get out of the house without getting caught and now this man is busy asking me questions instead of doing as I say.

I run to the back door and knock three times so he knows where to get out.

"It's 5am. What are you doing here?" he asks, pulling a thin T-shirt over his head.

"You'll put on your shoes in the car. Come on, let's go."

I took the first car keys I found, assuming they belonged to one of the Zebra cabs because they have a wooden key holder shaped like a zebra. Also, it has the gate remote control.

It takes me four presses before I find the right car because they are all identical.

Nobody drives these cars except my uncle's Baso-tho entourage.

"Come on, get in the car."

He opens the door on the right side, looks at the steering wheel and looks even more confused after that.

Now I'm pretty sure he doesn't know where he is.

"Lou, you're going to drive? I've never seen you drive? Let me drive."

I'm already reversing the car, trying too hard to focus because I'm trying to be as discreet as possible.

"Can you drive a right-hand drive, Tex?"

He shakes his head, his eyes looking all over the inside of the car as if it's something he's never seen in his life.

All I have to do is drive out of this gate, of these premises and after that we can go wherever we want to go.

"Are we running away?" he asks.

I swear I'm not annoyed yet.

"No, baby, we are going for a ride."

I give a deep sigh of relief as soon as the gate closes behind me.

The frown on his face reminds me that I'm still wearing my night robe, but I keep driving and decide not to explain myself.

I could not sleep. I could not even think straight, knowing that I let them put him in that place while Nate slept comfortably in a queen-size bed with an en-suite bathroom and flat-screen TV, just because he is not a danger to my vagina.

I couldn't even kiss my man good night because Phineas' entourage was roaming the yard half the night.

"Did you sleep well?"

He shakes his head, arms folded across his chest and his eyes puffy.

"I'm sorry, baby, my uncle is..."

"The bed made a noise each time I tried to turn. I thought it was going to break. Is he going to let me sleep in the house tonight?"

Well, culturally he isn't even supposed to enter the house but maybe someone will talk some sense into Phineas.

"I'm sure he will. You will have paid *lobola* by the end of today so you will be family, officially."

I had to explain what *lobola* was to him before we came here because the definition he found on Google was nothing but an insult to my people.

He pushes the car seat back and sits comfortably.

"I can't believe y'all drive on the right side of the road. How is that even possible? Where are we now?"

"Rivonia Road."

I know the awkward look on his face that keeps coming and going has everything with the robe and the *doek* on my head, as well as the fact that he doesn't understand why we are on the road at 5am.

The sun is still trying to show itself but the pavements of Rivonia Road are already filled with people walking in one direction. Women squeezing handbags under their arms and men with their hands free.

Some are jumping out of minibus taxis, others are getting in and smaller cars are trying to weave their way around the random stops.

"These are called taxis. They are the most popular mode of transport and they carry 14 people each, sometimes 18 if the driver is carrying enough cash to bribe traffic cops," I say.

I feel the need to explain because I can see he wants to ask.

It's strange because he spent so much time on Google trying to get a picture of what to expect in Johannesburg. I don't know why he didn't just ask me what he wanted to know.

In Manhattan, there are more yellow cabs than actual cars. People there either use the cabs or the subway because the reality is there is no place to drive or park a car in that jungle.

Now and again, when you find yourself between suburbs, you see a family squashed in a mini-van or a couple passing in a convertible.

I get why he is so stunned.

I think about crossing under the highway bridge and going up Witkopp Road so we can join William Nicol Drive just after Montecasino, but I don't think Tex is ready for Gauteng traffic yet and so I join the highway towards the south and hope I can get to the off-ramp before the traffic ghost whose spirit was left there wakes up.

"Do you even have a driver's license?"

Good question. It expired three years ago but the police wouldn't arrest me.

"Do you have cash?" I ask.

"Yes, a few dollars."

"Great. Then it doesn't matter if I have a licence or not."

When we cross over William Nicol towards Fourways, that is when I really have to remind myself how to drive in this city. I have to slam on brakes three times when a taxi just stops in front of me and by the time the fourth one does that, "Yoetsek" is already on the tip of my tongue.

I press the hooter even harder when one of them thinks it proper to open their window and say something I can't even hear because everything is just too loud.

"What is this place?"

Oh.

"It's Montecasino." I say and wave my hand dismissively. I'm just trying to get across this robot without being crushed by a Putco bus or scratched by a taxi. That's if I can ignore the road-raged BMW drivers who think they are entitled to a "let me in".

"I can't believe how these people drive, Tex, and to think they have the audacity to talk back when they are the ones behaving like maniacs."

"I don't know, babe. Maybe it's because you're wearing a night robe so they think you're crazy or drunk, or maybe the fact that you're driving a car painted like a zebra. Where are we going again?"

Urgh.

We finally cross over Witkoppen and I don't know if the nightmare is better or worse. By the time I see the Dainfern sign, the sun is already out and scorching, and it's only 6am.

"Lou, why are these places named like this?"

"Like what, babe?"

"Rivonia, William what what, Fourways, Dainfern," he says.

I once asked my teacher, Mrs Roux, the same question and she said had the people these roads and highways were named after not come to South Africa, I would be in the jungle walking around naked and eating mud. But that was in primary school. Had it been in high school, I would probably have ended up being expelled for what I would have said back.

"Colonialism. It left only on paper but the ghosts remain and I think they are responsible for this traffic."

The roadworks in Dainfern keep us stuck and burning for a good 20 minutes. I'm tempted to join the taxis there on the inside of the yellow line but Tex tells me to "not even think of it".

"Are you okay, Lou? You seem a little aggressive."

He must know this is not America.

I'm as okay as can be.

The arrival of a pointsman saves us from further traffic horror and soon we are driving in no man's land. The road is narrow, which means more traffic, but luckily someone, taxis I believe, has created an unofficial second lane.

I would like to be polite and answer all of Tex's tourist questions about why there are no houses along the road but I'm just trying to get to where we are going before my uncle sends Tracker on me, and we need to make it back to my *tobola* negotiations before the clock strikes midday and the ancestors go back to heaven.

We are moving again, and the horror on Tex's face means he is about to start asking questions again.

"Diepsfoot. This is what we call informal settlements," I say, pointing at the shacks around us.

He shakes his head in what could be shock or sadness. I'd be able to figure it out if I wasn't trying to avoid hitting people who are all over the road.

"Informal settlements? You mean this is allowed? It even has a name?"

"It's more like a trailer park. Nobody is really from here. They are in Gauteng to work but they can't afford proper accommodation so this is their only option."

I wish I could make him understand that there are three worlds in Africa. One is mine, the other is in between mine and these peoples' and the last is this one we are driving past, the one where all the odds are stacked against you, unless you are lucky.

He may have spent his early life hopping from one strip club to another and living in dingy apartments but he was always guaranteed free education and a meal.

"Oh, fuck!"

"What?" he asks.

"Roadblock."

Of all days! So early in the morning?

I'm already almost sweating when the traffic cop flags me to stop behind a stupid BMW that tried to force itself in front of me in Fourways. I hope they give the driver a ticket because...

"Madam, nice car," the cop says.

I know by the look on his face that he is mocking me. But I smile because I don't even have a valid driver's licence.

I stare up at him, smile still wide and ready to ask Tex to pass those dollars.

"Uyaphi madam?"

He glances at Tex as he asks.

Between my poor Zulu and American accent, I'm not sure which one will help me get out of this.

"*Ngiphuthumisa lo, owase America,*" I answer, pointing at Tex with my head.

"Oh, tourist."

I nod.

"Okay, don't join the N14. There's a service delivery protest."

I wasn't going to go on the N14 but I thank him for saving me and drive away from the roadblock with my heart filled with joy.

It must have been the tourist, or the robe.

"He didn't ask for your licence."

Thanks to you, tourist.

This will take another 30 minutes and I've made peace with the fact that we will be late for our own *lobola* negotiations.

I take the Hartbeespoort off-ramp and suddenly we are driving in peace and tranquillity between trees and the veld.

"This is so weird," Tex says.

I know he is talking about the fact that we are suddenly driving in what looks like a rural area lined with farms. I'm more relaxed than he is now, enough to turn up the radio volume and be met by a Lesedi FM presenter shouting at the top of his voice about a service delivery protest on the N14 and tyres burning. I'm really home.

By the time we park at the entrance of Harties, I am sweating from my neck to my feet.

I take off the robe and throw it on the backseat while ignoring Tex, who is laughing at the whole situation.

"Nice dress," he says.

I found it hanging in my closet, seven years later and it still fits me so I wore it with flip-flops.

I want to do this as quickly as possible, but no, they only open at 8am.

I'm on my 100th "shit, shit, shit" when Tex asks what's going on.

"We can't go in. We have to wait another 45 minutes." I say.

"We are going in the dam?"

"Yes, it's a dam and a zoo and there are ferry boats and..."

"A zoo? I want to go to the zoo."

Is he ten-years-old now?

"I'll take you another time. Come on."

I'm pulling him by his arm up the road, looking for a spot close enough for us to see as much as we can of the dam.

I finally find a spot under some trees, safe enough for us to see the cars coming from the bridge.

"This is amazing, Lou."

I know it's amazing. I decided on it before I even left New York.

It was one of my mother's stories, about rivers and dams and beautiful mountains that inspired my decision. I swear I even dreamed of what my wedding would look like.

"So this is it. This is where I want it to be."

"Want what to be?"

"Our wedding, Tex. What else? We could hire a ferry boat for the day."

Okay, that won't work, because I'm black.

"Or we could rent one of those big houses up on the hill and have our wedding there. What do you think?"

I have a feeling he is more interested in the scenery than what we are discussing here.

"Anywhere, Lou. As long as you are there to be my wife, anywhere," he says.

I finally remember that this is my man and I can hug and kiss him, so I do exactly that.

"I wish I had met you the day I arrived in Manhattan," I say.

He tightens his arm around me.

"Well, if that had happened, maybe we wouldn't be here. There is a time for everything, a perfect time."

I've always had a problem with that theory.

"What makes you think that we wouldn't be here or this happy if we had met at a different time? Why do people always assume the negative?"

He shrugs, because he doesn't know.

But I also think that had we met at a different time, I wouldn't be the Lungile that I am, that maybe I would have continued running.

"We have to go."

"Already? We can't even wait for the zoo to open?"

"Trust me, it's the same as every other zoo in the world. Get in the car."

We don't have functioning cell phones and my uncle has probably sent out a search party by now.

I let Tex sleep on the way back while I spend the whole trip thinking about what my wedding dress will look like.

Later today we are going to meet Marang for the rings and tomorrow is auction day. I will be selling off my father's artwork, all of it, and I'm not even worried.

The gate is open and up ahead a black Mercedes is parked.

It must be the car that picked Tex's father up from the airport.

But Mabo, Yvonne, Dorcas and Sam standing at the door looking worried means something.

All the Zebras are gone too and I see no coneheads.

By the time I stand in front of them, I know something is wrong.

I look at Mabo, I trust her more.

"Lu, the Zutus are here," she says.

She's always been a joker.

Not too far from them is Nate, looking at me like he's never looked at me before, anger and resentment and everything...

"He knows," Mabo again.

But how? How could this happen?

I look at Yvonne for an answer. I get nothing.

Behind me is Tex walking up the stairs, looking worried.

"Did someone pick up my dad from the airport?" he asks.

Nobody answers him, but Nate taps his shoulder and asks Tex to follow him. They are going to the Zozo.

If I even knew where to start, I'd call them back and tell Tex the truth myself, but instead I stand next to Mabo and watch them walking away.

"I thought *Malome* sorted this out."

I'm talking to Yvonne.

"It's not Mzimela. It's your uncle, your mother's brother, He says he has a message for you, and you can't get married to Tex," she says.

My mother spoke about Uncle Hlasela sometimes but I had only ever met him once when I was a child and I didn't even remember what he looked like until I saw him again at my parents' funeral. That was the last time.

Mabo looks like them, the Zondis.

When I walked in the room, he looked at me from head to toe before he stood up to shake my hand and smiled.

I didn't smile back for many reasons, one of them being that he has no right to be here, to come into my life like this and behave as if we are connected somehow.

I saw a bit of my mother in the way he talks, and I wondered how he could stay away from us for so long if he even cared about my mother at all.

I looked at my uncle sitting on a chair across us and asked him questions with my eyes, but Phineas is Phineas.

I saw Tex rushing in, his father and Nate trying to pull him back but when he stood in the middle of the lounge with men he had never seen looking up at him, he stormed off without saying a word.

I followed him to try and explain what was happening but he was gone. Nate and his father too.

So I've been sitting here thinking about all the times I could have told him but didn't.

To be honest, I'm not worried about the possibility of going to KwaZulu-Natal somewhere and being some king's bride because I know it will not happen. I'd die

first. But I'm worried about whether Tex will ever forgive me. Even if he doesn't forgive me, will he ever trust again? Because that is very important.

"They're in the Zozo. They'll come out eventually," Mabo says.

Mabo doesn't understand what I'm going through here. She can never understand what I have gone through since I was 21, running and running and being alone in foreign lands and getting hurt and rejected and being scared and cold and uncertain. Nobody can understand what it means for me to be back here, to have everything I want in my hand and yet find it so hard to hold on to.

A part of me wants Tex to come out so I can explain, but another part of me doesn't want him to come out because I fear what he might do when he does. The fear of him coming out with his bags and going straight to the airport and back to America and never wanting to see me again is why my hands are trembling.

I know Mabo wants to say "You should have told him Lu," and that Sam is trying to come up with some crazy plan, but I'm just trying to not scream my lungs out and pull all my hair out.

"Lu," Mabo says, tapping my shoulder.

I look up and my eyes meet his father's, and Nate's. I'm afraid to look up again because I know I will meet his next.

"Can you give us a minute?" I hear him say.

They all scurry off, Nate and father going inside the house and Mabo and Sam going out to the garden.

I haven't looked up at him because I'm trying to construct the perfect words in my head.

But he doesn't give me a chance.

260

"Why didn't you tell me, Lou?"

Why didn't I tell him? Because I love him too much.

"I tried but..."

"You tried? When did you try? When I kissed you for the first time or when I asked you to marry me? Or when you agreed for me to come here? When I boarded the plane? When, Lou? Was it this morning when you showed me our wedding venue?"

Oh, Lord!

"Tex, I didn't know they were coming!"

"That is not the point, Lungile! They would have come eventually. They would have come to New York if they wanted to. The point is, you did not tell me about this. You led me on knowing exactly that you didn't want this."

What?

"Tex, no!"

"Is that why you wanted to go to Vegas? To have some insignificant wedding ceremony with no family and..."

He stops and takes a deep breath. I know when he starts pacing around that I was right to not want him to come out.

"I can't believe this! I can't believe I'm this stupid."

"I was going to tell you, but you brought my uncle to..."

"I did that because I respected you, Lungile, because I wanted to do things the right way, to respect your culture and show you that I'm in this for good..."

I can't look up at him, all I can see are his feet pacing back and forth ...

261

This Hlasela must not come here and make demands.

"You know what I want, *Malome*. Tell him what I want and don't want. I have already told you, I came here for *lobola* and a wedding. After that I'm going back to my life in New York and nobody can stop me, not even you. When Tex comes back, we are packing and leaving and that's it."

"He says it's important Lunkile. You stormed out earlier before he could tell you. I swear, he is not here to abduct you."

He is talking to himself because I'm not about to have a conversation with someone who traded me before I was even born.

He sighs when I don't respond.

"Mabo has gone out to look for Tex. I still think you should talk to your uncle. He has a message he wants to give you," he says and leaves me standing there, still looking up at the picture of my parents hanging on the wall.

I will never forgive them for dying and leaving me to suffer like this.

I only leave my room when the house is quiet.

Hlasela and his people are gone. I saw them driving out of the driveway from my balcony. I hope they will never come back here but even if they do, I will be long gone.

I know now that Shemar was wrong. I wasn't running from nothing.

And if Mabo doesn't find Tex, I will go to the top of the highest building and jump. If something bad happens to him, I will have to follow him. Maybe my

parents, wherever their spirits are wandering, will care enough to tell us why they ruined our lives.

"Lou."

"Mabo."

"Your man is back. He's in the Zozo."

She grabs me and pulls me back when I try to run out of the house.

"He doesn't want to talk to you, not now. But I had a long talk with him. Let's see what happens in the morning."

No! I'm not going to wait until the morning. I need to talk to him now.

"He's with his father. Leave them."

I still want to go, but she won't let go of my arm and she's big and tough.

"He's not going anywhere, not tonight. Respect him enough to give him space because you are the one who wronged him."

She's making sense, but it's going to be difficult.

"I can't stand weak men," she murmurs and walks off to the kitchen.

I heard that.

I see Sam coming in first and then: "Iyoh iyoh iyoh."

Urgh.

Why is DJ Tira still here?

“*Basutho bakoLexuthu! BakoMoshosho bakoMaseru! BakoSabata BakoMofokeng...*”

Why is someone shouting so loudly so early in the morning?

“*Bayede! Bayede!*”

That sounds like Tex.

“No, my man. You can’t say *bayede* here.”

That sounds like someone else.

What is going on now?

Mabo barges in my room, still in her pyjamas and carrying a bowl of cereal.

“It’s happening,” she says.

What’s happening?

“Your *lobola* negotiators, they are outside. Make yourself pretty.”

But...

I rush to the balcony and there, down on the driveway is Tex, his father, Nate and Tira.

I look at Mabo.

“Tira is leading the negotiations now. They recruited him last night over a couple of beers and drunken conversations.”

But...

“I have to talk to Tex. Now.”

“No, big sis, you are not allowed to, not until he has paid *lobola*. By the way, your friend is already drunk, and she’s going back to court to testify tomorrow. You should see the things she wears to court,” she says and shuts the door behind her.

What happened between last night and now? And how did Tex change his mind without even hearing me out?

I know when I don’t hear any shouting that they’ve been let in.

At least I won’t be jumping from any building.

My portrait is the first to go.

In fact, it isn’t even auctioned. Before the auction had even started, it was already wrapped in a brown cover and put aside.

At first I hoped Tex had bought it for me as a surprise but I know his pockets aren’t that deep.

The stallion is bought by a guy from Colombia. Sam whispered to me that the only way to get rich and afford art worth millions in Colombia is to be a cocaine dealer. So basically, she means my father’s most prized artwork is bought with the proceeds of drug dealing.

I watch all of them go, one by one, some cheaper than others and I can only hope that these new owners will treat them with as much value as we did. They are being wrapped up and labelled with new owners’ names and this is the last time I’ll see them.

It feels so final, like I’m doing this at the right time, when I have a valid reason. It’s a trade of some sort, my father’s legacy for my happiness, just as he traded me for his happiness.

I’m not even sad about this because it is all worth it. Tex is worth all of it and more.

When all of this is done, we will lock ourselves in my room and Google wedding venues in Har-

beespoort. Our rings are being designed as we speak and Uncle Phincas has contacted all the extended family, including Dikeledi and her mother.

Lashandra is coming too but Lincoln and Barbara can't make it because he is not well enough to travel.

I'm finally happy. My "weak man", as Mabo called him, stood up and fought for our love. He told my uncle straight to his face that he wasn't leaving Joburg without his wife so it was either they accepted the *lobola* or we get on a plane and leave there and then.

If my uncle had said no, I would have packed and left with Tex, but first I would have smashed all the windows of those Zebra cars and maybe even chase those bloody Basotho 10, who ate my goat, down the street with a bush knife before saying goodbye.

I've decided not to have any bridesmaids or a maid of honour because between Mabo and Sam, I don't know who will be more offended if I don't choose her.

When the last painting goes, I pour myself a glass of champagne and look at the fine man I'm about to marry, standing talking to people I don't know.

I find Sam stationed at the bar, a bottle of wine sitting half-empty in front of her.

She hasn't explained to me why Tira is still here.

"I must say this, Lu, your man shocked me this morning. I thought he was going to run back home and never come back. Instead he behaved like a thug from Tembisa."

Really, Sam?

"He's hot too. And he looks like he could be Zulu? Do you think his ancestors were Zulu maybe?"

First of all, what she's just said is stupid.

"Sam, he can't be Zulu. People who were abducted and made slaves were from West Africa, not South."

She pours herself another glass.

"Africans are all related, babes, from Cape to Cairo. Even Jesus was African," she says.

I forgot she's highly educated.

"Actually, Jesus was an Arab, but that's open for argument since history can be distorted whenever and wherever."

Who is this now?

"Your conversations are very interesting, *makhosazama*."

"I'm sorry, who are you?" Sam asks.

"A lover of good art, and also a family friend by default. I've been sent to represent important people who couldn't be here," he says.

This guy speaks in codes, I see.

He does seem like a collector, with his expensive suit and eloquent tongue.

He's holding a scotch glass, ice tinkling each time his hand moves.

He is Sam's type, obviously wealthy with a bad boy streak.

"So did you buy any of the paintings?" I ask.

He nods and sips his drink.

I'm waiting to hear which one.

"The most beautiful one," he says.

Okay, I'll take that. I know it's not polite to interrogate customers. They might just start thinking I have a problem letting go.

I leave him talking to Sam because Yvonne wants to introduce me to someone with a perfect-looking body. That's the type of friends she keeps.

I can't find Tex or my uncle but I do see Nate talking to a group of women who are laughing at everything he says.

I want to ask him where Tex is but we've been awkward around each other since yesterday. I don't think he's forgiven me.

"Lu."

"Yes, Couscous? That's a very pretty dress."

"Thank you. Are you going to come back after you go to America again?"

I sure will.

"Yes, but you can also come visit me if you want."

"No, they have tornados there, and terrorists."

What?

"Who told you that?"

"I watch TV. Please take me to the bank. I want to change my dollars to rands. They said it's R12 per dollar so this is..."

She's counting with her fingers and I'm amazed at how much she has inherited her mother's streetwise ways.

She counts, gets confused, starts counting again until I cannot keep up anymore and take my mind somewhere else.

Behind me I hear the Basotho 10 whispering among themselves as if this is not a public space.

"The Mzimeias sent him. He was sent by the king."
They are looking at the guy. He's still talking to Sam but his eyes are on me.

I feel my stomach turn and it feels like everything in my stomach is coming up to my throat at once.

I try to find Tex with my eyes but he's still not here, nor is my uncle.

"They will never let it go," another Basotho whispers.

My God!

This will never end, will it?

Not unless I end it myself.

The Beginning

Lungile always sees things through, you can trust her on that one.

Sometimes she doesn't apply her mind you know, she jumps in. She doesn't sit and think carefully about possible consequences.

Lungile will stand here and say, well, here is a bee nest, what do I do now? Do I run because the bees might sting me or do I stick my hand in it and scoop out the honey?

If her mind says run, Lungile will run and if it says get the honey, she will get the honey.

If she runs, she will never go back, never walk in the direction of the bee nest.

But if she decides to stick her hand in and get the honey, she will keep her hand in there, even if the bees sting her while she's at it. She will push her hand in even deeper until she has every single bit of that honey in her hand.

She doesn't let go until she sees it through.

That is Lungile's problem. That is what will kill Lungile.

This, in a nutshell, is how Selloane once explained me to her own mother, Dikeledi's grandmother, when she still visited our house in Maseru.

Selloane knew exactly who we were, me and Mabo. Whenever there was something wrong, she knew exactly which one of us had done it. But sometimes,

when Dikeledi had been there too when it was done, she would beat her although she knew most of the time Dikeledi was forced into participating.

She never touched me and Mabo, although her face would say exactly what she wanted to do to us but she never touched us.

If she were here now, I know what she'd say about me, not to me.

She'd say Lungile took a decision to run and she ran for seven years and she wasn't going to stop running.

She'd say if Lungile had not decided to run, she would have married the king and she would have stayed with him until the end.

Maybe, if she likes him, she would thank Tex for changing me, just like my aunt thanked him for bringing me back home at last.

But neither of them knows that Tex is capable of many things, but changing me is not one of them.

I want to put an end to this once and for all and I will not stop until I hear him, the king, say: "Okay, I understand. I will never bother you. You don't want me, I get that. Go back to New York and live your life with the man you chose. I'm sorry we put you through so much. It wasn't right."

And then I will walk out of there with a smile on my face, run back to Joburg and throw myself in Tex's arms and look into his eyes as he slips the ring on my finger and promises to love me through good and bad and diabetes and high blood pressure.

I will wave goodbye to my family and tell them I'll come back to see them in six months or so, and this time I'll be telling the truth.

That is what will happen from here, as soon as I get out of this car trunk.

I didn't tell anyone I had decided to do this, not even Tex. But after everything we have been through, he must know that I'm doing this for him, for us, just like I sold all of father's artwork for us.

I want us to start on a clean slate and for him to know that I choose him over everything else.

From today on, I will not be the Lou that runs and hides and lies and keeps secrets. I will be a free Lou. I choose to be loyal to my heart and my love and my feelings.

I choose to break the cycle of women who are refused the right to choose their own destiny just because they are born important.

I am my mother's daughter.

We've stopped? Why?

Eish....

He's standing looking down at me, arms folded.

"Hi," I say.

I don't think that's the first thing one says if they are caught in the trunk of a stranger's car but...

"Where are you headed?" he asks.

Well, I'm not really sure. I just know I'm going where he is going.

He raises his hand when I try to get up.

"No, no, no, it's fine. Stay here. I just wanted to know where *you* are heading to so I can drop you off there first, but it doesn't look like you know so..."

He shrugs and pushes the trunk door down. I raise my arm to block it from closing.

He stands still and looks down at me.

I look up at him but I don't say anything because I'm not sure how to explain my being here.

He pushes the door down and it closes this time.

What kind of a person is this?

The car is moving again.

I can't stay here!

I bang and scream until the car stops again.

"Are you going drive with me in here?"

"I thought that's what you wanted."

Urgh!

He lets me get out this time, not even helping me jump out of the boot.

I open the car door and sit at the back with my arms folded because I'm pissed off at his lack of manners. How can he drive with a woman in his trunk? In this heat?

Okay, I sneaked in and he didn't know I was there until now but where are his manners?

He's standing next to the door, looking at me like I've done something wrong.

"Can we go please?" I say.

He shakes his head and gets in the car.

I know he is watching me in the rear-view mirror but I will not look his way because he is obviously inconsiderate.

"You must know that I will tell the king about this," I say.

"The king?"

"Yes, I'm going to see him. I have something important that I need to discuss with him, but rest assured I will not leave out the fact that you drove with me in the trunk even after you saw me."

He nods and keeps driving. This guy has no manners at all.

I rest my head against the window and look out at the green scenery and cows feeding off what nature gives to them for free.

On the radio MXO's *Kanjani lapho?* is playing and mesmerising my mind as much as these cream leather seats and the smoothness of this car's motion.

I'm really not sure where we are going. I just know it is KwaZulu-Natal and it is where this guy is going.

If he was sent by the king to buy a painting, that means he is taking the painting to him right now, although there is no painting in this car.

But if he was sent by the Mzimelas to the auction, then he knows exactly who I am and why he shouldn't even try to mess with me.

He was there for me, and we both know that.

"Suster or kanjani lapho...ye ye..."

Ör kanjani lapho...ye ye..."

Ohhhh yeye..."

"What the fuck?"

"Watch your tongue. Queens don't swear. We're here, unless you've decided where you are going."

Did he really have to wake me by turning up the volume full blast? Stupid man!

"Where are we?"

"We are where I was going. You can get out of the car now because it's late and I want to sleep."

But this is not a village, this is a complex.

"I thought we were going to the Mzimela royal house. Isn't that where you were supposed to be going?"

"Well, this is the Mzimela royal house. Are you going to follow me or do you prefer sleeping in the car? Because I don't mind if you do. I have an early morning tomorrow and I can't sit here all night."

He isn't very nice is he?

Oh, well.

I get out of the car and follow him. This humid air is not helping my breathing and he walking ahead without even telling me where we are is not helping my anxiety.

The lights are already on when we walk in.

Nice apartment but everything is right here, the kitchen and bedroom and shower and dining room... it's all here in front of me. Penthouse living is fancy and all but what's the point of having a place this big if there isn't even privacy?

This must be one of the apartments owned by the king.

He pulls aside the curtains and opens a sliding door leading to the balcony and suddenly the humidity fills my nose again.

I'm drawn out to the balcony by the sound of the waves.

"Are we in Durban?" I ask.

"No, we are in Ballito. Would you like something to drink?"

No, I want to go to the village.

"When are we going to see the king?"

"I can put you in a taxi tomorrow."

What?

"You can't do that. You have to take me there. Don't you work for him?"

He smiles a brief smile and switches on the coffee machine.

"I work for the people," he replies.

But then he pours himself a scotch and takes off his shirt.

This is rather inappropriate.

"The bed is there, shower here, food in the fridge and TV remote over there. I'll sleep on the couch because I'm a gentleman. Make yourself at home," he says.

I didn't sneak in his trunk to come here and make myself at home. I have questions and since he has access to the king's apartments, he must know a lot.

I sit next to him on the couch, with a glass of water in my hand.

"What's he like? Do you think he will hear me out? That he won't kidnap me and lock me in some hut like they did to my mother?"

I see a brief smile on his face again.

"I'm sure he won't kidnap you. If you want to stay, you will do it voluntarily."

Well, we all know that's out of the question but if he says the king won't kidnap me that means we are talking about a reasonable man.

"What I know is that he is dealing with a lot. He has so much responsibility on his shoulders and he is trying to do the right thing. It's a tough job, you know, being king. You have to respect customs, but you also want to be a good person, to be able to love and laugh and live. You envy people whose lives are simple, but then you

are also proud of your birthright and you have to be tough, all the time."

I can imagine how stressful it must be, which gives me hope that the man has bigger things to worry about than chasing a girl who knows nothing about his world, his language and his customs. This will work, I know it will.

"You said something about your mother being locked in a hut?"

Oh, I mentioned that.

"Yes, it's a story I only got to know when I was 21, through a letter my father left for me."

"He left a letter?"

Why is he interrupting me?

"Yes, my mother was a princess, somewhere deep in the rural areas. She was a Zondi. She was supposed to marry the Mzimela king but she fell in love with my father and they ran away together. So for them to be together, they had to bargain, and I was the bargain. I am supposed to marry the king but I'm in love with my fiancé, Tex, and I want to be with him. I love him. That's why I want to talk to the king and tell him chasing after me is pointless because I will never marry him anyway. You don't know that story?"

He picks the scotch glass up from the coffee table and shakes it a little bit so that the ice tinkles. He takes a sip, looks out at the balcony as if he is thinking hard and takes another sip again before putting it back on the coffee table.

"I've heard bits of it but I didn't really think it was real, or that if it was, someone actually took it seriously," he says.

Well, I did.

"How do you know he is chasing after you?" Well that's a good question, I don't really know if he is. But I don't have to answer it, so I won't.

"You know my mother used to tell me stories, fairy tales I think her own mother used to tell her."

"What were the stories about?"

There were so many of them.

"Mostly about rivers and large dams. About villages that rested on top of mountains with rivers flowing below. She said girls used to bathe in those rivers and young men used to wait for them there, to court them. She once told me about a princess who sacrificed it all for her people. I was a child then so they fascinated me. I actually thought those stories were true, until I was older, of course, and realised they were just tales, that she couldn't tell me real stories about the real world because they are hardly ever pleasant."

He picks up his glass again.

I've noticed that his face never reacts to anything. It's always the same, no matter what I say to him.

But his eyes, his eyes speak more than his mouth.

"Negativity much?" he says.

"Well, you know how life is. One has to fight for happiness. Isn't it supposed to be free?"

He looks into my eyes and the look is so intense that I instantly start questioning my decision to open up to him. I don't even know this person. And what if he goes and tells the king everything I've just said?

"Do you believe if fate? Lungile,"

Do I?

"Do you believe that one moment can change everything? Everything you thought you knew and be-

lieved, everything you thought you were, do you believe that a single moment can change everything?

I don't understand why he is asking or where it stems from, but I always have an answer don't I, to everything.

"No, I don't,"

He takes his eyes off me and looks ahead at the open sliding door, sea breeze blowing the curtain and our faces at once.

I have to ask.

"Do you?"

He doesn't nod or shake his head.

"I don't know anymore. You can take the bed, I'll sleep right here. I'll take you to the village tomorrow. We're leaving early."

With that he stands up and goes out to the balcony.

Maybe he's not so bad after all.

I find a large T-shirt neatly placed on the bed, and a bath towel. I'm not taking a shower with him here. He can forget about that.

We left the car down on the road and walked up here to the hill.

Zweli — that's his name — asked me if I was going to manage the steep climb and I said yes without thinking. Now I'm breathing like I'm on life support.

It's amazing how easily he did this, walking without even looking down as if he knows every stone and curve on this narrow path. But he's wearing shorts and sneakers and I'm still wearing the cocktail dress I wore at the auction yesterday.

I sit on the rock.

"Now turn around and look below you," he says.

I have never seen anything so serene and so perfect.

"It's better to sit," he says when I attempt to stand up.

"Why?"

"So that you can see the water itself, not what lies on its banks."

I don't understand but I do as he says anyway. I widen my gaze and look at the houses across, mostly rondavels and occasional brick and mud houses.

There's something humbling about this moment and this place.

"Is it always this green? Throughout the year?" I ask.

"Most of the time, yes."

I don't even know where I am but I know I have never been this peaceful before in my life. Everything feels so natural, like I've been here in a past life or something.

I feel as if I have been looking for this feeling all my life, one that doesn't require me to make a decision and see it through. I'm not at odds with myself. For

My mother wasn't lying.

The dams and rivers do exist. The people who wake up to them, drink from them, desert them when they overflow and pray for them when they dry up do exist.

They are all here, on top of mountains and down below forests.

They have stories to tell about them, stories of wars and triumphs and droughts and death.

Zweli says most love stories begin here, on these river banks and from them come children and children of children.

When he woke me this morning and we had breakfast on the balcony before I took a shower, all I could think of was what I was going to say to the king when I finally see him.

Would I have to kneel? How should I address him? Is he old or young? Good or bad?

I asked myself all these questions but never did it cross my mind that maybe I should go back to Joburg and forget about it.

I haven't called home either because I know that if I do, they will drive down here like mad people.

I should be back in Joburg by this afternoon. By then, everything will be sorted out and it will all be over.

"Here," he says, pointing me to a shiny big rock.

once in my life, I'm not thinking about what's the best thing to do.

"What is this place called?"

"You would have seen the road signs taking us here if you weren't sleeping throughout the trip. This place is called Mkuze, and this river is one of the mothers of Jozini Dam."

A mother?

"How is it a mother?"

"Nature nurtures each other, Lungile. Rivers give birth to dams. They feed them, like a mother breast-feeds a child."

Okay.

"Did you grow up around here?"

He doesn't answer me immediately, and when he eventually answers, he shakes his head and says: "No, these are not my people. I'm from Jozini. These are your people."

"What do you mean, 'my people'?"

He stands up and tells me to follow him for about 10 steps, where he stands under a tall tree.

"See there?"

He's pointing across us, across the river.

"That is where your mother was born. That is where she grew up and that is where her family still lives."

It's the biggest house, with many rondavels and brick houses and cows grazing not too far from it.

"And you know all this stuff how?"

I've noticed he has this habit of looking at me long and hard, staring moments and awkward glances. I don't blame him though because if he knows the story about my mother and thought it was just a myth, me being here must feel strange.

"I don't understand why my mother never brought us here. I mean, this is her home."

"It's always been complicated," he says.

But sometimes Zweli speaks in code. He doesn't say what he really wants to say and he doesn't answer my questions.

I know that he wants us to leave because he hasn't come back to sit with me on the rock. He's still standing, waiting.

But I can't leave, at least not immediately. I want to but I can't let go of this feeling and this thing that is drawing me deeper and deeper into this place.

It's early in the morning but unlike Joburg, there is no buzz of people walking and talking all over the place.

Now and again a herd of cows appears and passes, with a young boy or man carrying a stick behind them.

"I feel like..."

I don't know how to explain this?

"You feel like?" he asks.

"Like everything is all right. And perfect. Like I know where I am and why."

That long stare again.

"Have you ever felt that way Zweli? Like..."

"Like everything makes sense?"

"Yes, like everything makes sense."

"No, not until recently," he says.

He reaches out his hand, I take it without thinking and by the time I realise this, he has pulled me up to my feet and let my hand go.

"Now let's go see that king, shall we?"

He speaks just Zulu and I have to answer in English because all of a sudden, I'm embarrassed that I have a

Zulu name and limited knowledge of the language. And this place... it just does something to me. Something.

The walk back down to the road is easier, except the scorching sun is not doing any favours to my forehead.

"Look out for snakes. They're coming out to feel the sun."

What?

"Why are you jumping? They're just snakes. They won't do anything to you unless you step on them."

What kind of nonsense is that?

"They are snakes, Zwelli. They are dangerous!"

Now I'm hopping all over the place looking for snakes, as if they are hiding in the grass, and this guy is not even bothered. He's just walking as if he's walking on a tiled floor but at least he is looking down.

"Animals aren't dangerous, humans are. Animals will never harm you unless they think you are trying to harm them, or if they are hungry."

Okay, he has a point but this is no time to be deep.

I throw myself on the passenger seat as soon as he opens the car door. I didn't come here to die.

We drive further up the road and now that I'm wide awake, I get to appreciate the beauty of my mother's roots.

How did Father even get to this place? It's too far from home, too different from where he came from.

I push the chair down and lean back, close my eyes and imagine my wedding dress. It won't be white, I don't like wearing white. I'm thinking cream white, but no lace, just simple, plain material and maybe a belt around the waist with a flower attached to it.

It will be a small wedding, about 50 people or so and the priest. Yvonne is organising a pastor from her charismatic church in Bedfordview. Tex doesn't even go to church. At least I read the Bible and pray.

Tex's father will obviously want to play the saxophone. Uncle Phineas will want to speak on behalf of the bride's family and Nate will propose a toast. Sam will make a speech on behalf of friends but it will have to be the first item on the reception programme so that she speaks before she gets too drunk.

I'll finally get to congratulate Dikeledi on her success and hope she doesn't remember how Mabo laughed when she told us she'd fly in the sky one day.

"What's on your mind?" he asks.

A lot.

"Not much. Do we still have far to go?"

"No, we are in Jozini now but we still have to drive another 15 minutes. I have to make one last stop."

Sigh.

He turns on to a gravel road and suddenly we are driving in dust, so much dust that I can't see anything outside the window.

I'd tell him that I'm pressed for time but the reality is, he doesn't even have to do this, it's not even part of his job. What his job is, I don't know. I just know it doesn't involve driving me around.

We are in the middle of a village now. Women and children are walking along the road carrying buckets of water. Most of them wave at the car and he presses the hooter in response.

There aren't any cows here, the grass is also not green and there is too much dust.

"This is different," I say.

I expect a smart response, but it doesn't come. All I see is a tight jaw and his deep eyes staring ahead at the road.

I wonder if I said something wrong but I don't dare ask.

It gets worse as we drive on. Now there aren't even that many people on the road. There are houses that look deserted, some look like they burnt down and here and there are patches of what looks like they used to be maize fields.

This environment is different and he too is suddenly different, no more smiling and no smart answers.

We turn on to an open gate with a big sign written: "Jozini Community Hall".

Outside on the yard are two women but they don't even see us because they are walking away from the building.

He gets out of the car without saying a word to me so now I'm confused because I don't know whether to follow him or not. I follow.

"You're already here?"

I catch up with him just as he says this to a young woman standing in front of a large group of children.

"Did the water truck come this week?" he asks.

"Yes, on Wednesday. The farmers from Piet Retief

also came to fetch the cows," the woman answers.

"Is everybody selling?"

"Almost everyone. It's better to sell them while

they're still alive. It's the only option," she says.

I'm standing here not knowing whether I will be introduced to this woman or the children, who are all staring at me like I'm an alien.

I see the worry on his face when he turns and looks at the kids.

And then he notices me standing behind him.

"Oh, this is Lungile. She's visiting," that's all he says.

I smile because I don't know what to say.

They continue with their conversation as if I'm not here, so I decide to engage with the kids before they start pelting things at me.

I walk to stand in front of them and smile. They don't smile back. Okay.

"So what do you do here?"

"We are dancing," the smallest one with the missing front teeth says.

"Oh, really? I'm a dancer too. What kind of dance do you do here?"

"Siyasina," the tallest one says.

"I do all types of dance but I don't know how to si-na."

They laugh.

"What's your name?" one asks.

I tell them.

"Okay, Auntie Lungile, we can teach you."

Auntie? Really?

"Is that your real hair?" one asks.

Well...

"Most of it," I say and I immediately know I've just confused them.

They're looking at me from head to toe. I know I'm overdressed but this is rather uncomfortable.

"Why are you wearing a *stromisi* dress?"

They are little demons, these children.

"I'd like to learn how to sina," I say. It's not that I really want to learn right *now*, but it's just that I'm being dragged and if I don't shift the attention I might end up walking out of here in tears.

They start singing and clapping and just as I'm trying to remember where I have heard the song before, they are already standing in a circle with me in the middle.

I try to join in the singing because the tune sounds familiar but the words are too complicated, so I just smile and clap.

"You said you can dance, dance *phela*," the little one says.

I don't know what to do so I stand still inside the circle until one of them jumps in and starts doing the Zulu dance.

She's fast and her leg goes high up and down with the rhythm.

I've always wanted to blend it with contemporary dance in one of my productions. But it's difficult if the rhythm is not the right one.

"Come on," she says, telling me to watch her and do as she does.

I watch her leg going up and down three times before I make an attempt, but it's met with laughter and fingers pointed at me.

I join in the laughing because I know children are monsters. They will laugh at me if I start crying now. I catch Zweli's eyes on me, a smile too. I think he wants to go.

"Okay, kids, next time I come here, I will have learned. You'll see," I say. They are still laughing.

292

"Say goodbye to the king," the woman says. King?

"Byeeeee," they all say at once.

A king?

"Zweli?"

"Get in the car," he says. What? How?

"What did she mean, king? You're a king of where?"

He starts the car and doesn't look at me. How is he a king? And if he is, why didn't he tell me?

"Zwe..."

"Can we not talk about this, Lungile? I'm taking you where you asked me to take you. After that, you can go wherever you want to go."

His phone rings and as I listen to him speaking with whoever is on the other end and probably doesn't speak or understand Zulu. I start to notice his accent, and the expensive car I have been travelling in since yesterday and the apartment and the...

We are driving into another large compound of houses and rondavels and kraals.

I guess we are here.

I don't get out of the car and follow him this time, so he comes back and opens the passenger door, still on the phone. I sit, still with my arms folded. I don't trust him anymore.

"Lungile, you said you wanted to come here. We are here. Get out of the car," he says.

Does he think I'm stupid?

I took this thing of him ordering me around lightly earlier but now I know it's because it's in his nature. He is used to giving orders.

293

"I've changed my mind. Please take me to the airport."

He tells the person he will call them back and hangs up.

"Airport? What time is your flight?"

Eyi! I didn't even bring my purse, I have no flight and no money to pay for one and he knows this. That's why he's freaking asking!

My mind says I should get out of this car but my pride says "Fight on because none of this is going according to plan and right now you really have no idea what to do next."

This is where I start twitching my fingers and thinking about biting my nails, which I stopped doing when I was nine after Selloane rubbed chillies all over my fingers while I was asleep.

I should have stayed in Joburg.

"Can I use your phone?"

Now I want to call my family because I need a flight ticket. How I will get to the airport, I don't know.

He doesn't hand me the phone. He just looks at me.

I can see a woman approaching him from behind and I'm thinking that maybe she could lend me a phone but she also doesn't look happy. Instead, she looks frail.

She stands behind him with her hand on his shoulder.

"We weren't expecting you today," she says.

He doesn't turn to look at her. He just keeps his eyes on me and I don't know if the look on his face is begging me to come out or telling me that now he is really annoyed with me.

She pushes him aside, obviously to see why he is standing next to the passenger door, staring at something.

When our eyes meet, she smiles and says: "Oh wow, Brother brought a girl home. It's a miracle!"

I smile back, a half-smile though because what she has just said is disrespectful.

I don't say a word to her but her eyes are back on Zweili anyway, and he is still standing like a statue.

She looks at me again and her smile starts to slowly disappear. Her eyes narrow and her expression turns to shock.

"Mama!" she shouts and rushes back where she came from.

This is not how I pictured this visit. That girl obviously knows me.

"Zweili, I want to call home."

I'm pleading now.

"Lungile, get out of the car. We need to talk."

I should never have come here because... look at me now. What am I doing?

I follow him across the yard to a house, a big house with a patio and brown bricks.

On the walls down the passage hangs pictures of men who look similar to each other, from the old black and white picture of a man wearing *umqhele* and carrying a spear to the second last picture. Next to it is a picture of Zweili and he is wearing the same thing.

I want to scream at him for not being honest with me from the start but I have no strength left to fight.

He shows me to a long table with chairs and three big vases.

"Would you like something to drink? Or eat?"

I shake my head and sit with my hands on my lap. He disappears and comes back with two glasses of water and two apples. I don't want any of it. He sits across me and bites into an apple. To think that not so long ago I thought he was a driver or messenger.

"Do you want to ask me something?" he says.

"No. Do you want to tell me something?" I ask.

"But you are the one who asked to come here."

"Well, if you had been honest and told me you were the king, I would have asked you what I want to ask you in Joburg. I would have saved you the trouble of driving me around, or were you driving me around?"

"Oh, so you do have something to ask me."

"Zweli, please!"

He goes back to eating his apple and drinking his water as if I'm not even here, annoyed at him and regretting the last 24 hours because I showed him my vulnerable side. I opened up to this person who I barely know, just like that.

How would Tex feel if he heard about this? Especially after I shut him out for so long?

"So you're the king?"

I might as well get the whole story since I'm here.

"Yes, Zwelonke Mzimela," he says.

My follow-up question should be "When are you taking me home because I have to prepare for my wedding?" but...

"Why did you come to Joburg yesterday?"

He puts the apple down on the table, folds his arms and looks at me.

"I don't know. Why did you want to come here?" I already told him that.

296

"Because I wanted to tell the king that I can't marry him," I say.

He's still looking at me and for some reason I can't look him in the eye anymore.

"Okay, I'm the king. Tell me,"

I want to say it, I really do.

"Would you like to leave now?"

For another incomprehensible reason, I can't open my mouth to say yes and I can't get myself to stand up and leave.

I'm looking everywhere except at him when two women rush in. One, who I assume is his mother, is standing with her hands on her hips, looking at him enraged.

But Zweli doesn't look up at her. His eyes are still fixed on me.

"I didn't kidnap her," he says.

That's what his mother is thinking?

"Well, then explain this because she doesn't look happy!"

She's really angry.

"Lungile, do you want to explain yourself to my mother?" he says.

I'm done talking, to him or anyone else for that matter.

"Did he force you to come here?" his mother asks.

I shake my head and that's it. I'm tired of words, of talking and asking and shouting.

"She was about to leave. She has to go back to Joburg and get married," Zweli says.

He says it like he doesn't mean it, as if he was trying to test me or push me. And strangely, I'm still seated, and they are all looking at me.

297

"I need to book a flight," I say. It's all I can say because in the midst of all of this, I know I have to get out of here as soon as possible.

"I'll get my laptop," his sister says and leaves the room.

Here is to seeing things through, Lou. Here is to being ing you. Selloane warned you that it would kill you one day.

"Before you go, can I have a word with you?" his mother says.

"Mama, don't," Zwelli warns.

She nods at him and then instructs me to follow her and I do, leaving Zwelli still sitting with his arms folded.

We end up sitting on the veranda, on a bench and looking down at Jozini Dam.

The scenery is not as beautiful as the one I saw this morning. This place, it's also beautiful, just different.

"I grew up with Ntombenhle. I was one of her maidens," she begins.

If someone had said this to me before today, before Zwelli, I would have been excited to hear it. But now I don't know. I think I don't want to know anymore.

"I knew your father too. Well, not exactly but I saw him with your mother, many times. He used to wait for her by the river and she used to sneak out to see him. You must know that your mother never wanted to marry Zwelli's father. She never loved him. That's why she ran off with your father, the man she loved."

I already know all of that, and I know what they had to bargain with to have their love.

I think she's waiting for me to say something but I don't even know where to start.

298

I have too many questions, questions I didn't come here to ask and whose answers shouldn't matter to me.

"Did you know about me?"

I just want to know if the past seven years have been worth it, just that, and then I can leave.

"I was there,"

Wow!

"It wasn't about you. It was about all of us, about who were are and what we stand for,"

What does that even mean?

"You don't have to worry about any of it now. Go and be where you want to be. You are your mother's daughter," she says with a smile.

Now I'm even more confused than I was before I sat on this bench.

But I have to go, that's the one thing I cannot afford to be confused about.

As I stand up, she sighs and plays with her fingers.

"I just want you to know that Zwelli didn't even believe the story, about you two. He usually just laughs it off. He didn't even hear it from his father or me, just through some people, his uncle, I think. I want you to know that he is a good man. He can be a little intense sometimes but he will never force you to marry him," she says. "To be honest, I never even thought the two of you would ever meet. I'm shocked."

I hear her, but it doesn't matter now does it?

The silence again.

"You are about to marry?" she asks.

I nod.

"Congratulations. Love is a beautiful thing. Marriage is a beautiful thing."

She's right.

299

"Found the flight! It's at 7pm," she says and looks at her watch.

Where the hell did she come from?

"The drive to Durban is about three hours so you still have time. Don't worry, Zweli paid with his credit card. I didn't know he knew your date of birth," she says.

It's only 11am but I can't stay here any longer.

I guess this is it then. But I have to ask...

"Mama, what happened? Why is...?"

"Drought. It's been like this for a year," she says.

It has destroyed everything but it's strange that the dam hasn't dried up at all.

"Is there anything that can be done?"

She looks at her daughter, and then back at me.

"No, we can only pray to the gods," she says.

I'll pray for them too.

I've said my goodbyes. It's time to leave.

"Lungile, did your mother ever tell you the story of...?"

"Of the princess with a beaded crown? Yes, she did."

"What did she say in the end?"

"That my heart will lead me..."

She nods.

"There is a reason you are here," she says.

Like my mother said, it is my heart that will lead me, and nothing else.

Firstly, he could have asked a driver to take me to Durban instead of subjecting us to three hours of silence.

Secondly, I have a feeling he already knew I wasn't going to get on that flight.

I know this because when I finally accepted that I wasn't going home today and walked away from the check-in counter, I turned around to find him standing behind me.

I was turned away because I didn't have an ID and you know what? I'm not even mad at myself. I lost my mind the moment I decided to jump in that car trunk and leave my fiancé' in Joburg.

I feel like there has been some demon, something like a voodoo doll hovering over me since the day I set foot in this province because everything I had hoped for, the complete opposite has happened.

Now I need to take a shower and call home so that they can organise someone to fetch me.

As to what I will say brought me here, I do not know.

Zweli, it's not that he didn't offer to drive me home, it's just that the sooner we go our separate ways, the better and safer.

On our way from Jozini, all I could think about was how I shouldn't have gone there.

My life was eventful before yesterday but at least I could keep myself, my emotions and thoughts in check.

Now I think that maybe I wasn't running from some deal, a cultural agreement made before I was born. Maybe I was running away from my roots, from these dams and rivers and the stories my mother told me.

How is it that it is me my mother's roots were ingrained in? Mabona is a Sabata through and through and she doesn't even look like them. She always has been. So why are the Zondis resting on my shoulders?

When I asked to take a shower, he went out to the balcony, just as he did this morning. But we were in a different place then. We both still trusted ourselves and each other.

Now things are different. I feel like we are fighting a silent fight, individually and with each other.

My "*stromisi* dress" is hanging on a chair and as much as I dread putting it back on, it's the only thing I have.

I find a white robe on the bed, big and long enough to make me feel like I'm fully dressed.

He walks back in just as I walk to the kitchen, not knowing what to do with myself.

There, somewhere between the bookshelf and the bar, it stands. It is unwrapped and it is looking back at me and I know for sure it wasn't here when I got in the shower.

He is standing behind me, I can feel him.

I wait for him to say something, to explain himself even though I have realised it is something he never does.

"I let it go Zweli. It was the one thing I needed to let go, and I did. Why did you have to bring it back?"

He doesn't answer me.

"Are you doing all of this on purpose Zweli?"

302

He is still quiet.

I had made peace with that I was never going to see this painting again, the painting that revealed the truth to me, the one that started everything. I kept it with me, close to my heart for seven years and when I finally decided to let it go I felt like everything that had been holding me back, that had been the source of my fear, left with it.

But here I am again, looking into my own eyes.

"I remember the first time I saw it, I must have been eleven or twelve," he says.

"The first time you saw what?" I ask and turn around to face him.

"The first time I saw this painting, and you. You had been crying but and I didn't understand why your eyes were the first thing I saw when I entered that studio, and by the way, I didn't even know you were there. I wasn't even looking for you, I was just bored so I decided to explore."

I remember him.

But I don't understand the relevance of this conversation now, today.

I wait for him to continue, but he doesn't.

"Zweli, did you know? Have you always known?"

He shakes his head and says: "I found out when I was in university, but I still didn't know it was you. In fact I didn't remember the day we met until I saw this painting again."

I hate that I'm participating in this conversation, and that I'm going to let him keep this painting and that I remember him, I have always remembered that boy. Had someone told me that I'd be here with him, today, I would have done my best to forget him.

303

I sit down on the floor with my back leaning against the couch.

I do this every time I'm about to have a serious talk with someone. I did it with Shemar and I did it with Tex when we talked about the wild cat.

I do this because I want to talk with my back on them, but Zweil doesn't accept that.

He sits on the floor with me and wants to look into my eyes.

"Tell me about your life Lungile. How have you been?"

How have I been?

"It's been bad and it's been great. I followed a dream I had had since I was 10 and eventually I succeeded in it. But in the process I lost my best friend in the most brutal way. I missed home, I missed the chaos and the madness and I missed belonging.

I missed so many births and so many goodbyes, so many opportunities to throw soil in the grave.

It got really cold sometimes. The snow and the people, sometimes they were also cold. The apartments, they were all lonely.

I moved a lot, sometimes for no reason but I could never find one that made me want to stay.

I lived with Shemar for a while and I met his father and for the first time I felt like I had a family,"

"Shemar?"

"Yes, he was my friend, and dance teacher. But he died, they killed him, that place killed him,"

I need to swallow the lump in my throat and fold my arms because he is about to reach for my hand.

"But I live well in New York now, I have good friends and I have Te..."

Sigh.

I have Tex.

"I have to go to Qwaqwa,"

"Qwaqwa?"

"Yes, I have to throw Shemar's ashes on top of his mother's grave,"

He doesn't ask me how and why and I can't even explain to him because the lump in my throat is back and bigger now and I'm trying really hard to push it down to my stomach so that it dissolves and turns into nothing but harmless and painless water.

He knows this because he pulls my head to his shoulder.

It would be easier if I knew what it is exactly that I'm crying for between Shemar and Tex and the fact that everything I thought I knew and believed yesterday morning seems to be escaping me, very fast.

But I cry anyway, louder than I have ever cried in my life.

He lets me cry until I'm composed enough to pull myself away from him.

We sit quietly, looking at the wind blowing the curtain.

"After that I lived with Gemma,"

He doesn't ask about Gemma, probably because he fears I'm going to say he died too.

"But he died,"

He takes a deep sigh.

"They ate him,"

"What?"

"He was a goat. I'm still not sure if Gemma was male or female, I never checked. Why are you looking at me like that?"

And for the first time in hours, I laugh. We laugh, harder than I have laughed in a long time.

But not loud enough for me not to hear him say: "You belong with me Lungile."

No, I don't.

"I belong in New York, with Tex," I say softly.

I belong in New York, with Tex. That was the decision I made, the decision that brought me here.

I am Lungile and I see things through.

"Lou! Open the door!"

What?

"Lou!"

I know that voice! I know all of those voices shouting from outside.

I look at Zweli, his face hasn't changed at all. Why is he so relaxed?

"I think that's..."

"Do you want me to open for them or are you going to do it?" he says before I finish the sentence.

I'm not even dressed.

"It's open!" he shouts just as I stand up to grab my dress from the bed.

I don't make it to the bed before they barge in.

Tex followed by Mabo and Nate.

"Lou?" Nate.

My God!!

"Tex, I can explain. It's not what it looks like,"

I can feel Nate's eyes on me, all their eyes on me and I can see Zweli from the corner of my eye getting up and walking to them, a glass of whisky still in his hand.

He doesn't say anything except to look at Tex and Nate and sip his drink.

I want to put my dress on, but I can't because everybody is right here so I pull the robe tight around me and try to explain to Tex, although I don't even know what I want to say.

"Lu, why aren't you dressed?" Sam looks puzzled, she has just walked in.

I look at her once and my eyes go back to Tex who looks more hurt than I've ever seen him.

"This guy? This is the kidnapper?" Sam.

"Does she look like she was kidnapped to you?" Nate.

This is not supposed to be happening.

And why are they still wearing the same clothes they were wearing yesterday?

"We've been looking for you for two days, but it doesn't look like we had to," Mabo says.

Lord! How am I going to get myself out of this one?

"Tex, wait! Texxxxxx!"

I'm chasing after him, again, but my pace is slower this time. I don't know if I want to catch up with him.

Acknowledgements

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You inspire all of it. Everything.

Lineo Sekeleoane

Thank you for these characters, and for allowing me to get carried away.

Nikita Morare

I told you I'd finish it.

Zanele Dlamini

Imagine if I paid you for each time you read my stuff, tell me to get my shit together and point out that ron-davels don't have chimneys.



