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A State of Mind by Isipo Bakana

Prologue: A State of Mind

When you live a life where a warm bath or buying new clothes is a luxury, you learn how to appreciate the little things. Like having something to eat before going to bed and having a candle last until you're done studying, at least. You learn how to appreciate the talents God has blessed you with. You learn that those very talents are the only way you'll be able to survive.

I know a bit about the luxuries of life because I've once lived them. It sounds like such a distant memory, and maybe it is because I don't see myself living that life anymore, but it was

just a few years ago when my next meal was certain and I had a normal family. I live with my mother now, S'tandiwe Ngcobo and she's the strongest woman I know. Sometimes she doesn't think so but I know she is. When I was fourteen years old my father committed suicide. We never really knew why he did that but we assumed it was because he, or rather we were bankrupt so all our property was going to be repossessed. He hung himself in our backyard a few days before. Leaving us with nothing but a letter telling us that he loves us, my mother treasures that slightly blood stained letter with her life. That isn't all he left us with, though, he left us with questions and ghosts that we had to deal with on our own.

He also left us in poverty. We were literally up there one day and as filthy as dust the next. We fell flat on our faces and that first year was the worst. The humiliation of having everything stripped away from us as we grieved for the man that made it all possible was too unbearable. We walked away that day with nothing but the clothes on our backs. We didn't know where we were going but we continued walking until we reached a place that I hadn't been to in years. It was a small house just in the outskirts of town and my mother's friend lived there. The minute she saw our state she opened up her house to us and to this day we're grateful. She made us an offer to stay in her garage rent-free since it was fixed up a bit and we accepted it.

It was pretty small but we made it work... it had a bed and at that moment that was all we needed.

‘Poverty – the state of being extremely poor.’ The dictionary doesn’t exactly define in which state so I’m going to take it upon myself to say... how do I put this? Not only are we financially poor but our hearts are too.

My name is Aphiwe Ngcobo, I’m 16 years old and this is my story.

1

It was a chilly Sunday morning and I was up even before the sun. We had managed to make the garage more homely over the years and we were content with our space. Us being content doesn't mean we were, or rather I was comfortable about where I lived because quite frankly I wasn't. I was embarrassed about it and I tried to limit my friends as much as possible. Which, in simple terms, means that I didn't want any friends at all so I didn't have them – I was bitter by choice.

I took a quick bath, trying to be as quiet as possible so I didn't wake my mother up then threw the water out. I got dressed in a simple long dress with a sweater that was now small but had to do and tied my hair in a neat bun. Before poverty I was always a neat one and I was always a lady so I always tried to hide the fact that we were poor by looking neat in my appearance. I didn't always succeed in doing so but I always tried my hardest and today was one of the good days. I lifted the mirror that was on top of the rusty counter and smiled at my reflection before putting it back down. I then reached for my Bible and read an uplifting scripture before praying and thanking God for carrying us through everything.

'It could have been worse.' I always reminded myself when I felt like giving up and that kept me going. My mom shifted softly on the bed and I turned to look at her.

Me : Good morning.

Mom : Morning baby. Are you going to choir practice now?

I nodded slightly and picked up my Bible.

Me : I hate being late.

She nodded with a small smile and ordered me to kiss her before she went back to sleep.

As I began my long journey to the one of the few places I was never embarrassed to say I was going I had a short reflection on my life. How I kept my faith in the Lord even after all that had happened in my life. My mother's faith began faltering long before I was born because her family didn't like my father. It was a young love thing back then... like, "I'll sacrifice my family for you. I love you that much." So just like that she lost one important thing because of the other. She was also driven to that decision because her parents hated that she was pregnant with me out of wedlock so they mistreated her. Even I don't know what that actually means but she wasn't welcome in her home after that. So when it came down to it, 'it's either your family or the father of your child' she settled for the latter.

They were happy

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I could tell. I grew up in a loving home and I never lacked for a thing. My childhood was fruitful and I'll forever be grateful for that.

The rest of my walk was quiet because it was quite early and most people were most probably asleep or cooking meals for when they come back from church. I arrived a few minutes later and was welcomed by the sweet smile of our choir conductor.

Nosi : My favourite.

She beamed and I walked forward to give her a warm hug.

Nosi : How are you today?

Me : I'm okay thanks. And you?

Nosi : God is always protecting me, my love. So I'm blessed.

I nodded with a smile and placed my Bible down next to hers.

We wiped the chairs cheerfully while we waited for everyone else and had a light conversation in between. One by one the rest of the choir poured in so we could finally proceed.

Naturally, the service was uplifting and I walked out of there in high spirits.

.

I was the last one out of the building because I was helping with packing up the chairs this week so I left there pretty late.

Voice : Hello.

I turned around only to be faced by this guy that has been trying to speak to me for ages. I rolled my eyes in annoyance and continued walking down the road.

Him : Aphiwe I'm greeting you.

The fact that he knew my name grabbed my attention and I stopped to look at him.

Me : How do you know my name?

Him : Jesus! Nkosi yam she finally speaks to me.

Me : I don't think I should be because I should not associate myself with people like you.

He chuckled lightly and placed his hands in his pockets, observing me.

Him : People like me?

Me : Yes. People who rob and steal from innocent people to make a living, people like you.

I said matter-of-factly then continued walking when I realised he wasn't set on saying anything back.

Him : Okay, okay look.

I sighed and faced him again with my Bible tightly pressed against my chest.

Me : What?

Him : Can we at least be friends?

Me : Why would I want to be friends with you?

I said incredulously.

Him : Because you don't have any friends and I feel you need one.

I rolled my eyes.

Him : Like me.

He added on and I laughed lightly.

Me : I'm okay. Thank you though.

I tried walking again but this time he held my arm to stop me.

Him : Please.

I looked at my arm then back at him. He mumbled a 'sorry' and let me go.

Me : Fine.

Him : Fine?

Me : Yes, fine. One condition though.

I said as I held up my index finger.

Him : Let's hear it.

Me : You come to church with me. I can't be friends with people who don't attend church.

Him : Church, joe?

He said while scratching his head lightly and I nodded.

Him : Fine... fine. I accept.

He said with a sly smile and I was a bit taken aback by the fact that he agreed.

Me : I'll see you next week then.

Him : Sho case.

I began walking again when he shouted.

"My name is Lindisizwe by the way!" I purposely ignored him and simply thought about what a mouthful his name was.

2

I slid the door open and pushed away the curtain that was the only thing standing between us and exposure to the outside world.

Me : Hi, ma.

She smiled at me.

Mom : Hello, baby. How was practice? How was church?

I told her all about it because I always have something to say to my mother. She listened attentively and laughed at all the right moments. The mood changed when I told her about Lindisizwe. She repeated his name to confirm that she heard right and I nodded.

Mom : I thought you didn't want any friends.

Me : Well I don't but he's been pestering me for months now.

There was silence.

Me : I made him promise to come to church, though.

Mom : That doesn't make it okay. I don't like this. Stay away from boys. In fact stay away from that boy.

She emphasized the 'that' so much I cringed.

Me : Mom you've been preaching this to me my whole life. I think I'm responsible enough to not do anything stupid.

I answered nonchalantly. She was peeling potatoes the whole time while we were talking and I was watching her since she refused my help. She put her knife down then looked at me intently.

Mom : If he tries anything, Phiwe, tell me and I will cut him.

I laughed lightly because my mother is the gentlest person I know but immediately stopped when I noticed how serious she was.

Me : Noted.

Mom : Good.

We ate mashed potatoes with bread that afternoon and I studied until the sun went down. I always made it a point to study in advance. Partly because I couldn't always study in time because we use candles and I always have to know my work and also because I wanted to stay on top of my game.

According to me I have a good head on my shoulders, that's one thing I can say with confidence and I plan to keep it that way. My father would be proud of me right now if he were here. I know it.

.

The following morning I was up early since I had to prepare for school then I prepared water for my mom as well because she worked every day apart from Sundays. She was a maid and she

received little pay for all the hours that she worked. It wasn't fair. I kissed her forehead like I did every morning and headed out. My hair was neatly tied back as always and I was dressed in a pullover and long skirt while I held on to the slightly damaged handles on the schoolbag on my back.

The walk to school was a long one and it was just a matter of time before the sun came up to torture us. It comes softly, kissing your shoulders at first until you get comfortable then it simply bites you. You aren't able to look it in the eye even if you try. But you should know not to because its gnawing at the exposed parts of your body and there's nothing you can do about it. Except you suck it up until you find shade...

I reached the school gates and gave a loud sigh before I entered them. I was sweaty and my baby hair was plastered to my face. I quickly walked over to the bathroom to rinse it and then wiped it with toilet paper. The day seemed long and drawn out but I enjoyed my classes since I knew my work but my body and my mind were having a war. I was famished. To the point where I wanted to cry but I bit my lip, hard, and concentrated.

Break time was the worst. It always was because the only lunch I had was a book I had borrowed from the library and that's where I hid myself for the past two years.

After school I went to chess practice but I only won one round because I was hungry. Our coach was disappointed and I could

see it in the way he eyed me while telling me that placing the boards away was my job today.

So basically, that is how my life in school is. I don't have any friends. By that I don't mean there's that one girl I sit next to in Maths class that shares her homework with me and we even have small talk in between classes, no. I literally mean I don't have friends. Who wants to associate themselves with a "has-been-who-fell-face-first-and-is-bitter-by-choice?" I know I wouldn't. So I knew nothing about having a best friend to share my secrets with or even have sleepovers so we can talk about that boy I like all night. Blegh.

.

After school life wasn't any better. The sun seemed merciless right about now but after two years I should be used to it by now. Most students were still at their sports practices, something that I once loathed going to but now that I couldn't have it I wanted it more than anything else in the world. But I couldn't do any sports because I couldn't afford the kits and the trips and everything else that required money. I just... I wondered why I didn't appreciate things like this? The little, unnecessary things I would kill for now. But what's done is done and right now I needed to be strong and walk home so I could eat.

I got home before my mother that day and peeled my clothes off because sweat made them stick to my body. I then quickly washed my shirt and hung it then headed back inside to check if we had anything to eat. There were two slices of bread and two eggs.

Me : Is this all we have left?

I thought out loud and closed the second hand fridge my mother had sacrificed so much for so she could buy it. I closed the fridge and sat on the bed with my legs crossed and tears threatening my eyes. I couldn't eat the food because I know how hungry my mother always is when she gets home so I saved the food for her and took out my Bible, randomly paging and landed on Hebrews 11:1

“Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.” I closed my eyes and breathed out. I was drained, to say the least. But I had faith and to me that was everything. I pressed my Bible to my chest and said a short prayer, looking up afterwards so my tears don't fall.

Now normally I would go to the main house and ask Sis' Vuyo, the lady that took us in

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for food but as I grew up I realised what having a container of leftovers shoved over to you without being looked in the eye and I learned what "I'm out of sugar and milk," actually meant.

To keep my mind off of things I studied until my mother got home then I made her the food that we had left. She thanked me then dug in, totally oblivious to the fact that I last ate mashed potatoes and bread – yesterday.

Me : Mama?

She looked up from her plate so I could notice that she heard me.

Me : We're out of food, again.

She swallowed hard and looked back at her plate. I regretted saying that while she was eating. I could have waited.

Mom : Is everything done?

I nodded lightly and she placed her plate aside and looked at me with weary eyes.

Mom : Oh... I am so sorry.

I opened my mouth to speak but closed it again because I was thrown off. What could she possibly be apologising for?

Me : What for, mama?

Tears streamed her face as soon as she blinked and I was by her side just as fast.

Mom : I can't provide for you. I am your mother yet I can't even ensure that you have food in your tummy before you go to sleep. I...

Her voice trailed off and she looked at me with the same weary eyes and I cupped her face with my hands.

Me : You know I hate seeing you cry, S'tandiwe.

I wiped her tears off with my thumbs then forced her to face me.

Me : S'tandiwe. We have been loved by God. She has the stamp of good character, a nice person to know, she has goodness and beauty, never far when you need her, a lady with superb taste, an optimistic person, swift to act in a crisis...

My voice trailed off like it always did when I got to the end of praising her name, praising her. I remember memorising that piece when I Googled her name a few years back for mother's day. She had cried when I recited it to her the first time and asked me to repeat it over and over again. That's probably why

I still remember it. Only this time we aren't living in 'a few years back' and this time she wasn't begging me to repeat it, she wanted me to stop. I could tell in the way she pressed her lips together and held on to the bedding, she held on to that bed because she was trying to not place her hands over my mouth. I just knew so I wiped her tears one more time and dropped them on my side.

Me : I'm the sorry one. You did nothing wrong.

She looked at me, silently saying 'stop trying to convince the both of us of a lie.' I looked down, feeling slightly embarrassed then I got up.

Me : Want me to wash that for you?

Mom : No, I'll do it. Light the candles its getting dark out.

My eyes involuntarily shifted to the tiny window and the sun was gracefully setting. I fetched the candle and lit it up, lighting the whole room up and it was one thing that wasn't going wrong today because it still had a long way to go before burning out.

That night I had water for breakfast, lunch and supper and my dessert was a short prayer. Slowly but surely I was burning out... just like the candle that looked like it had a long way to go.

3

I tossed and turned as I tried silencing my tummy but it didn't help one bit so I ended up lying on my back and staring at the ceiling while softly humming my favourite tunes. They always calmed me. My father always told me that I have a beautiful voice. Sometimes he would call me to their room so I could sing them to sleep until I complained because I also needed sleep so they recorded me on their phones and played the recordings through the night or until one of them woke up to go to the bathroom then they would stop it.

I smiled at the memory... I missed that whole feeling. A huge rush of nostalgia swallowed me in that moment and I bit my tongue so hard a tear involuntarily fell. I bit my tongue to stop myself from screaming or making any sound that would make my mother up. I was a general mess that evening so I prayed one last time and tried falling asleep.

.

As normal I was up before the sun, prepared for school and made my way to school. Meer exhaustion coursed through my veins but I strode on while trying to get to school before the sun got to me. By the time I entered the gates I was so drained I could hardly walk straight but I went to the bathroom to rinse my face as usual then headed to class.

Break time arrived and I was too drained to get up from my seat so I rested on my arms for a while.

My favourite teacher, only my favourite because she taught English and because I laughed at her surname the day I got here and she didn't cuss me out, got to my desk and sat on the chair next to my desk.

Mrs McDonald : Aphiwe.

She said as she rubbed my shoulder.

Mrs McDonald : Are you okay?

I looked up and tried talking but my mouth was too dry so I simply shook my head and lied on the desk again. My head felt heavy and tears were building up in my eyes but I kept them back as usual. She got up from her chair and crouched in front of me.

Mrs McDonald : How are things at home?

She asked in a concerned tone.

Me : Horrible.

I managed to breathe through a shaky, tear-held-back infused voice. I managed to tell her all about how I haven't eaten since Sunday and it was now Tuesday and how we didn't have any food to get us through the rest of the month. She noticed that I

was not okay so she hurried to her desk and brought me bottled water which I downed on the spot and felt a bit better.

Me : Thank you... break is almost over. I think I'm going to leave now.

I said in a small voice with my eyes tightly shut.

Mrs McDonald : You need to eat. You can't walk like this.

I shook my head and stood up.

Me : I'm okay.

But I wasn't because I fell to the floor, banging my head on the desk next to me and the last thing I heard was the loud scream of my teacher then everything went blank.

.

I woke up in a strange room, okay it wasn't strange I just used that word because of lack of a better one. It was... beautiful. I was lying in a bed and I was only in my shirt and underwear so I began panicking. Where was I? How did I get here? Why am I half naked? I was so shocked it was difficult to move.

Voice : Haha why don't you want me to...

A male walked in the room and stopped taking as soon as he laid his eyes on me. I felt like dying. I was so shocked I didn't even think of covering myself up. Except my eyes protruded

and I must have dug holes in his brain. I don't think that's a look he'll ever forget.

Him : Uh.. hi?

He didn't even wait for my response. Except he stepped out of the room still facing me then ran down the hall as soon as he was fully outside. I took deep breaths to try get back to my normal breathing but it was difficult. Tears streamed down my face because of the shock and confusion but those tears soon turned to those of joy when Ms McDonald walked in the room. She ran to the bed when she saw my state and looked me straight in the eye.

Mrs McDonald : Breathe...

She showed me how I should do it and I eventually calmed down. She wiped my tears and looked at me.

Mrs McDonald : I am so sorry about that... uhm he's my son and I told him not to come in here I just didn't tell him why so he was inquisitive and that's why he...

She sighed.

Mrs McDonald : I am so sorry.

I simply looked down at my hands and played with them.

Mrs McDonald : You passed out in class.

She went on to explain how I banged my head on a desk and how she decided to take me to her house because I was unconscious and she went on to apologising and...

Me : Ma'am. It's okay. May I please just have my uniform?

I looked down at my bare legs and she cleared her throat.

Mrs McDonald : Of course.

She passed it to me since it was on a chair in the room and I got dressed quickly since her gaze was uncomfortable.

Mrs McDonald : Let's go downstairs. I prepared a meal for you.

I wanted to refuse but my tummy was grumbling so I stumbled on after her then we sat at a ready prepared table and dug in. It was just the two of us so I guessed her husband and son were busy with something else. I didn't finish my food and asked for a container so I could give some to my mother when I got home but she told me to finish it and poured my mom her own food. I offered to wash the dishes but she refused and insisted on taking me home.

The car stopped in front of the house and she switched off the ignition and turned to look at me. I was familiar with this gesture because it was something that she always did when she took me home, she's taken me home on many occasions.

She took her purse from the back seat, scratched in it and took out a few notes. She then brought them forward and I looked at them then back at her.

Me : No thank you. You've done too much already I can't accept anything more.

In all honesty I felt offended. I was too proud to accept anything from anyone and that pride came along with fear. What if I accepted the money then I had to pay it back? Maybe she wouldn't do something like that but I wanted to be safe so I declined, thanked her and stepped out of the car, carefully closing the door behind me. The container containing my mother's food was tightly clutched in my hands and I entered the garage without a single glance back.

I wasn't a charity case.

When my mother got home I gave her the food in excitement because we hadn't had such a meal in a long time but her reaction was something I didn't expect.

Mom : Where did you get this food!

My smile slowly faded.

Me : Uhm... my teacher gave it to me.

Mom : Why did you hesitate! What did you have to do for it!

She shouted and I looked at her with wide open eyes. My mouth went dry.

Me : I passed out in class, mama then she took me to her house an-

I stumbled over my words because I was scared. My mother hadn't shouted at me in a while.

Mom : Listen, here, Aphiwe! I don't appreciate you telling everyone that siyasokola apha endlini! I try don't I!

She lifted her hands and dropped them to her sides again when she said that.

Me : I don't understand

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mama. What did...

Mom : Vuyo told me about the car that dropped you off, yes!

She looked at me with wide eyes as if waiting for an explanation but I remained silent.

Mom : And it apparently isn't the first time! Aphiwe!

She shouted louder and I cringed.

Mom : Come stand here.

She signalled with her finger where I should stand and it was directly in front of her. I climbed off the bed with wobbly legs and trod on towards her.

Mom : Unamakhwenkwe?

I shook my head.

Mom : Uyawafuna?

I shook my head again.

Mom : Then why do you have a car dropping you off here so often? What's going on?

Me : She's my teacher, mama.

By now I was drained and she could tell from my tone that I had attitude. She simply gave me a stern look and I felt the need to explain further.

Me : It's a female teacher. That food comes from her.

I pointed at the container and turned to face her again. She let out a sigh of relief and touched my face with her left hand, forcing me to look at her.

Mom : Never do anything you don't want to do for money, okay? Even food. If you feel uncomfortable with doing it then just don't do it do you hear me? It's never worth it.

I nodded and she gave me a warm hug. I could tell she was saying 'I'm sorry, I only shouted because I love you' through that hug because her lips refused. I guess that's where my pride comes from. She shared the meal with me but didn't eat much because I was still rather full. I didn't mention the fact that Ms McDonald offered me money and I declined.

The week went by quickly after that. Mom 'stole' some food from work to get us through the week and it apparently wasn't stealing because they were leftovers in any case. I didn't question her after that. Ms McDonald was still worried about her but I always refused any help but thanked her for the hospitality she had shown me that Tuesday. It was now Sunday and I was getting ready for church as usual. Humming softly as I tied my hair in a neat bun and got dressed in one of the few dresses that I had. It was getting smaller, everything was getting smaller as my assets were getting bigger. I sighed, prayed and walked to church as usual.

Sis' Nosi was still her graceful self and the choir sang beautifully. This time I decided to sit at the back because it was hot at the front and I now had a fear of passing out. And if I did

so at church who knows what others may think? 'The demons are at work', maybe? I don't know. I didn't wanna know.

The pastor was in the middle of a sentence when he suddenly stopped speaking and looked at the door. Naturally, everyone else turned and so did I. I turned around to find Lindisizwe uncomfortably standing by the door in casual jeans, a simple shirt and torn takkies. Everyone was glued to him even after the pastor had continued speaking. He spotted me and made his way to the seat beside me.

I was now uncomfortable because people glanced back every once in a while, others shocked while others gave him looks of utter disappointment. Wait, or were those aimed at me?

The minute the service ended he took my Bible and walked out so I had no choice but to follow him out, completely forgetting that I had to help out afterwards but the rest of the congregation was singing so don't think anyone saw me storming out after this boy that is supposedly not their favourite. When we were a safe distance away I grabbed his arm the same way he did to me the previous week and removed it the minute he looked at me.

Sizwe : Does this make us friends now? Because you need to understand that I was not comfortable in there. Not for a minute.

Me : There must be a reas-

Sizwe : Just a simple yes or no.

I sighed and took my Bible from him.

Me : Yes I guess.

Sizwe : Thank you.

He smiled smugly.

Me : Why were the looking at you like that?

He stopped and looked at me intently.

Sizwe : You're a naïve one, aren't you?

Me : No... yes... whatever. Why does it matter?

He shrugged.

Sizwe : It doesn't. I just feel the need to protect you.

I laughed.

Me : I do not need protection.

He smiled. But it wasn't a polite smile. It was the kind of smile you give someone when you don't want to say something out loud but still get them to understand what you mean.

Me : I don't need protection.

Sizwe : Of course.

I sighed and folded my arms over my Bible.

Me : Stop changing the subject.

Sizwe : We had a subject?

Me : Why did the congregation look at you like that?

Sizwe : Well... I don't know. Maybe because I've robbed about... 90% of all the people in there?

My mouth hung open.

Sizwe : Okkaayy... bye friend.

He left me there with a confused and slightly angered look on my face and disappeared. Probably to rob some more people.

4

My mind was all over the place as I walked home with my Bible in my hands. What did I just get myself into? I mean I don't even know this guy and that confession simply confirmed that. I was even slightly scared to go home. What if my mother had heard about him sitting next to me and then called her because they saw me running after him? But... she didn't say I couldn't hang out with him did she? Because when she said she'll cut him she must have known that I was going to spend time with him. Just not too much... but how much is too much? Ugh...

I carried on waking until I reached the house and today mom had finished cooking.

Me : Hello.

Mom : Hello, love. Sit down I'll bring your food to you.

Me : Thank you very much.

I sat down with a loud sigh and slid my old pumps off. We ate from the same dish to save some for tomorrow then I washed the dishes so I could study.

The following morning was a cool one so I took longer than usual because the sun didn't seem to be much of a threat, kissed my mom goodbye and went on my way. As I was walking I could feel someone walking behind me but I ignored it until the person was walking beside me.

Me : Ugh... Lindisizwe.

Sizwe : My name is long, bruh. Call me Sizwe. Not Lindi.

Me : Mh.

Sizwe : Why are you so late today?

Me : Excuse me?

Sizwe : You're usually way past this place at this time.

Me : How would you know this?

Sizwe : We're in the same school. And I know things.

Only then did I actually look at him. His shirt was not tucked in but his shoes were shined and he was clean.

Me : We're in the same school?

He looked offended but played it off.

Sizwe : Yep. Have been for the past two years.

Me : I never noticed you.

Sizwe : Clearly.

Me : But then I wouldn't. Look at this.

I tugged at his shirt and looked at him.

Sizwe : It looks cool.

Me : To a seventh grader, maybe. You're in high school you need to look presentable.

Sizwe : Nobody cares.

I opened my mouth to speak but closed it again because I had no comeback for that. The rest of the way we were talking about random things which I assumed is what friends spoke about. We parted ways when we entered the gate because I preferred it that way. Break time came and I was in the library as usual when someone tapped my shoulder.

Me : Lindisizwe what are you doing here?

I whispered. He said nothing but simply passed me a pie and coke. I gave him an ugly look and faced my book again. He sat down next to me and snatched my book from me.

Me : Look. I don't know what you want from me but you won't get it. So you can take your food and actually take it to someone who will take it and appreciate it because I won't. May I please have my book!

I said a little too loudly and the librarian gave me a stern look under her glasses. I cleared my throat and looked at him. He was so calm as he read through my book, having the audacity to read a sentence out loud.

Sizwe : The boy's name was Santiago.

Me : Lindisizwe.

He ignored me and carried on.

Sizwe : Dusk was falling as the boy arrived with his herd at an abandoned church.

Me : Lindisizwe.

I repeated.

Sizwe : The roof had fallen in long ago, and an enormous sycamore had grown on the spot where the sacristy had once stood.

Me : Lindisizwe.

I said one last time, irritation clearly evident in my voice.

Sizwe : What's a sycamore?

Me : Something you can't exactly steal.

Sizwe : Ah... she doesn't know it.

Me : It's a fig tree. A Middle Eastern one.

I said in defence and he laughed.

Sizwe : Thank you.

What he had just done clicked.

Me : Flip.

He laughed one more time and pushed the book back to me, along with the coke and pie.

Me : Who did you steal from to buy these?

Sizwe : I'm not exactly sure.

He lowered his eyes and twisted his mouth.

Sizwe : Nope, I don't remember. All money looks the same, though so you have to understand.

Words cannot fathom how I felt at the moment but I knew that I couldn't spend one more minute with this guy. Without another word I took my book and headed out but turned back halfway.

Me : Please leave. You found me here. In fact how exactly did you find me!

Sizwe : You said it in passing this morning. You're kicking me out? Mx I thought we were friends.

Me : I didn't know being friends with you consisted of being followed and being belittled.

I snapped.

Sizwe : Just sit down bruh. We ca-

Me : I am not interested, Lindisizwe. You aren't worth it.

I said, remembering my mother's words when I had come home with that food. He took his things with a 'Tjo.' and left me in peace.

.

Soon after successfully throwing Lindisizwe out of the library I found out that it doesn't belong to me because I was thrown out myself. I felt so betrayed by that librarian. I mean I was there all the time and the one time I make a mistake she throws me out?

I walked out with my tail between my legs and went to the class I would be in next, which was English.

Ms McDonald : Aphiwe.

She said with a smile as soon as I entered through the door.

Me : Uhm... good morning. I'm sorry I didn't realise that anyone was in here.

She shook her head and signalled for me to come in using her hands. I smiled slightly and went to sit at my normal seat and she was looking at me the whole time. Her gaze seemed to burn through my book so I lay it down and looked her.

Me : Is there a problem

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mam?

Ms McDonald : No... there's nothing.

She lied and I picked my book up again.

Ms McDonald : The Alchemist.

She said out loud and I lay my book down again.

Ms McDonald : It's a brilliant book. I'm proud to see you reading it.

I smiled.

Me : It's amazing, mam. I've learnt so much already.

Ms McDonald : Try using words like 'astounding' instead of amazing. That's the whole point of reading books.

I nodded and she continued.

Ms McDonald : Tell you what, when you're done reading that book you should come and tell me what you learnt from it, okay?

Me : Ugh, mam I really don-

Ms McDonald : Either that or you give an oral in front of the whole class.

Me : How astounding.

I responded in a bored tone.

The day went by quickly and everything was well. I had chess practice after school so I quickly packed everything up and went to the hall.

Coach : You're late.

He roared as soon as I barged through the door.

Me : I apologise, sir.

He stared at me and I squirmed under his gaze.

Coach : Aren't you going to explain yourself, Miss Ngcobo?

Me : I went to the bathroom after class, sir. I'm really so-

Our chess coach was one intimidating man. He had broad shoulders and his hands were always behind him. He had a whistle around his neck and that was because he coached the grade 8's and 9's for PE. The higher grades didn't have those anymore.

So when he took a step closer I stopped breathing for a second.

Coach : Now listen. I do not care if you have not been to the bathroom the whole and your watery faeces is already squirming out. You do NOT come late to my practices. Do you understand me?

I was too shocked to say anything so I nodded shamefacedly. He stepped back seeming pleased with his inappropriate scaring tactics.

Coach : Good.

I pointed me to my table and my opponent was this beautiful dark skinned girl with the fairest skin and a small smile played on her lips when I sat down. To me it felt like she was mocking me so I placed my bag down and waited for the clock. I only realised that I was wrong and I was being rude when she mouthed a 'sorry'. I returned the smile in embarrassment then we commenced.

.

We had played four matches that afternoon and we had both drawn so there were no hard feelings, really. Coach seemed impressed with everyone overall and gave us the freedom to leave without picking on one of us to pack the boards up. The sun was hiding behind a cloud that afternoon so I took that opportunity to hurry home before it emerged. My fantasies of getting home while the sun was hiding were short lived when I was approached by a sweaty boy in soccer boots and short breath.

Sizwe : Hey.

He said as he held on to his knees. I contemplated greeting him back but was disturbed from my thoughts when he touched my arm in an attempt to bring me back to life.

Me : Ew! Dude, look!

I shrieked as I yanked my arm away.

Me : Being 'friends' doesn't mean you get to touch me!

Sizwe : Whoo chill'a girl. No touching. Noted.

He lifted his hands in surrender and looked at me.

Me : What?

Sizwe : Oh I was waiting for the rest of the friendship rules.

I opened my mouth to speak but closed it again.

Sizwe : Do I always leave you speechless?

He said with a smirk.

Me : Ha ha very funny.

I responded, my voice thick with sarcasm.

Sizwe : Let's go... we need to talk.

I looked over to the field and soccer practice seemed to still be going on.

Me : Aren't you supposed to be there?

He looked back then shook his head and we began walking.

Sizwe : Why don't you like me?

Me : Because you're a bad influence.

I responded simply.

Sizwe : Oh?

Me :Yes.

Sizwe : You don't even know me. Doesn't church teach you to not judge?

He just used what I believe in against me.

Me : I never judged you. I just don't like what you do.

He curled his lip and lowered his eyes. I figured he was thinking because he had done the same thing earlier on in the library.

Sizwe : You don't know my reasons.

Me : I don't think they would matter.

He nodded and kicked rocks as we walked in a brief silence.

Sizwe : Bad boy, huh?

He said with a hint of humour in his voice. Clearly changing the subject.

Me : Yep.

Sizwe : What defines a bad boy then, genius?

I opened my mouth to say 'someone like you, maybe' but caught my tongue and shrugged instead.

Me : You tell me.

He thought for a while but didn't curl his lip or lower his eyes.

Sizwe : A bad guy... let's see. Cheats... a member of the KKK and Nazi, drives a stolen GTI and has a prison tattoo.

He was met with deafening silence.

5

Sizwe : You know I'm being sarcastic right ?

He clarified when he realised I wasn't going to laugh.

Me : Oh. For a second there I thought you were describing yourself.

He snorted and looked back at the school again.

Sizwe : I think I should head back now.

Me : I think so too.

He turned on his heel as if preparing to run but turned to look at me.

Sizwe : When will we talk?

I gave him a confused expression.

Me : I thought we were done talking cause that's what you said you wanted to do when you stopped me.

Sizwe : No. Like talk talk.

I shrugged nonchalantly and he sighed.

Sizwe : You're impossible, Ngcobo.

He turned and ran back to school leaving me wondering about what exactly he wanted to talk about. The sun was now slowly

emerging so I tried to hurry home but to no avail because it burnt me all the way.

I got home and changed into a dress with my pumps and tried studying when I was disturbed by a knock. I went over to open.

Sis Vuyo : Aphiwe sisi hello.

I gave her a small smile.

Me : Good afternoon.

Sis Vuyo : Are you busy?

I looked back and books were scattered on my bed.

Me : Yes... I'm studying.

There was a brief silence.

Me : Why?

Sis Vuyo : I am so late! I need to go to town for groceries because my sister is coming over and my house is a mess.

She looked at her wristwatch then back at me.

Me : So what are you asking me?

Sis Vuyo : Please clean my house quickly? Please.

She pleaded.

Sis Vuyo : I'll pay you, Aphiwe, please.

I closed my eyes for a while and opened them again.

Me : Wow.

I exclaimed. A thought crossed my mind and I opened my eyes again.

Me : I'll do it. What do you want me to do exactly?

She smiled in relief and took me inside the house showing me what to clean and where most things go but she was in a hurry so the rest I had to figure out for myself. I found the pail and poured water then went on my knees to clean the floor, using polish for shine afterwards. I even went as far as cleaning the stoep because I was into the whole thing by now. When I was done I threw the water out. There were dishes in the sink so I washed those as well and placed them in their rightful places then went around to check if everything was in order and it was. Feeling proud of myself I went out to carry on studying.

My mom came home later on and Sis Vuyo wasn't back yet. I told her all about my day and she looked pissed off.

Mom : Vuyo had no right to ask you to clean her house!

She shouted.

Me : I could have said no, though. I don't understand why you're mad.

Mom : Aphiwe.

Me : She said she would pay me when she gets back.

Her features softened a bit but she acted it off.

Mom : Mhm. Just make sure it doesn't happen again.

Me : If she wants it to then it will.

Mom was placing her bag down on our rusty counter when I said that so her eyes shot up and she stared at me for what seemed like the longest time.

Mom : Excuse me?

I remained silent and she stepped closer to me.

Mom : Aphiwe uthini?

I sighed and stood up so we could at least be level.

Me : Mom, we're struggling. We both know that and you know what? I'm tired. I'm tired of being left out and not being able to participate in activities at school because we don't have the funds! I'm tired of sleeping without nothing but water in my stomach because I save the food for you then you're going to come here and shout at me for trying to make our lives better?

I didn't realise that I was shouting until I she slapped me. There was a stretched out silence, the only sound being out breathing. Tears stung my eyes, not because of the slap but because of the fact that she slapped me for speaking the truth.

The tears involuntarily rolled down my face and I pushed past her but turned back at the door.

Me : I only agreed to clean her house because I wanted to go see dad.

I turned to walk out straight after saying that.

I didn't realise how dark it was until I was outside but I didn't turn back because I was mad. I ran out the gate and continued running with no idea where I was headed. Tears blurred my vision but I carried on until I couldn't breathe anymore, keep in mind that I was unfit.

I stood in the middle of a street I wasn't familiar with to catch my breath but I was crying so hard I had to crouch down in order to catch my breath. I heard a few male voices from a distance but I couldn't quite make out what they were saying

but the closer they got the more I realised that I should never have come here.

Voice 1 : Do you know her?

Voice 2 : Nah.

They had a hushed conversation and to me that was more terrifying than hearing them because I didn't know what they were planning. They were a few feet behind me so I said a small prayer and stood up straight, forming fists so I could run or at least try fight them off. I took one last breath and took off only to be held back roughly with my whole body jerking back. The guys were silent in searching me and I couldn't scream because one of them had a hand over my mouth and I was crying in any case so I was drained. They searched me but obviously found nothing so they pushed me to the ground in irritation.

Voice 2 : Mxm she's useless. Why unje kodwa?

I remained silent because I figured that it was a rhetorical question. The same guy who asked the question kicked my stomach and I screamed out in agony.

Me : I...

He had kicked the air out of my lungs so I turned over while clutching my tummy and tried begging them to stop but the words got stuck in my throat. One of them kicked me again but the other one pulled him back. They walked away while

throwing cusses my way and I lied in that same position, scared that if I moved they might come back and do something worse than to just kick me. When I was certain that they were out of sight I sat up straight with great difficulty. I saw another group of guys and did the same thing I did when the first two came

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I said a short prayer and weakly formed a fist and knew I was dead when one of them came running.

Sizwe : Aphiwe.

He kneeled in front of me and the only way I knew it was him was by his voice. I cried harder for reasons that I do not know.

Sizwe : What happened? How...

He let out a deep breath and helped me up. The other guys were standing there and watching us but he told them to go ahead and finish what they had started.

I eventually stopped walking.

Me : I can't.

I breathed with a thick voice. He made a sound in his throat and picked me up gently with one precipitate move.

.

Sizwe : Hey, you're up.

He muttered and placed his phone down. I sat up with a little difficulty but I was better than earlier on. I looked around the room and it was homely. There was a laptop on the table at the far end and I was lying on a double bed.

He went out the room for a while and came back with a tray of food and a tall glass of juice then placed them next to me. I was still confused so I simply looked at the food then back at him.

Me : Where am I?

My voice was rusty so I cleared it.

Sizwe : My house.

He responded in a calm and pride dipped tone.

Me : Your house?

He nodded.

Sizwe : Eat first and I'll tell you all about it.

I looked at the appetising meal and took it without thinking twice. While I was eating he was making small talk.

Sizwe : Entlek what were you doing outside at this time?

Me : I had this big fight with my mom.

I responded honestly.

Sizwe : What was it about? Well that's if you want to talk.

Me : She is so selfish! Like... I don't understand how one can be so blinded by pride. Pride that doesn't even make sense.

Sizwe : Honey the only person who isn't making sense here is you.

I looked at him and he shrugged.

Sizwe : I'm just saying.

I finished the food and went on to tell him all about the argument we had and how much I sacrificed for my mother only for her to thank me with a slap in the face. There more and more I thought and spoke about it was the more my anger arose.

Me : The only reason I agreed to clean that house was because I wanted to go visit my father's grave...

My voice had gradually become softer so he came closer and placed the tray next to me.

Sizwe : I didn't know your father was late.

Me : Well now you know.

Sizwe : How did he-

Me : Don't... do not even ask, okay? Just don't.

He looked down at his hands and nodded. There was silence for a while and he got up to fetch his phone from the chair he was sitting on when I woke up then came to sit next to me again.

Me : That is a nice phone.

It was an iPhone 6. He smiled.

Me : Did your parents get it for you?

Sizwe : No... no I bought it myself. That as well.

He said while pointing at the laptop.

Me : How?

He snorted and looked at me.

Sizwe : You know how.

Me : Of course.

There was silence again.

Sizwe : I'll take those to the kitchen.

He got up and took the tray to the kitchen and came back almost immediately.

Sizwe : Remember I said I wanted to talk to you?

I nodded and waited for him to carry on.

Sizwe : I'd like to do that now.

Me : Uhm okay... but I think I should be heading home though.

Sizwe : Aphiwe, please just listen. I need to talk.

The desperation in his voice and eyes made me sink back down since I was already standing up.

Sizwe : Can I join you?

He said pointing at the large empty space next to me on the bed.

I snorted.

Me : Not a chance.

He chuckled and pulled a chair so he was sitting directly opposite me.

Sizwe : Where do I start?

Me : How ab-

Sizwe : It was a rhetorical question.

Me : Mhkay.

He did that lowering his eyes and twisting his mouth thing.

Sizwe : I... hmm... both my parents are still alive but I live alone.

Me : Why would you do that?

Sizwe : Okay, Aphiwe, listen. Don't speak. Just listen.

I sighed and leaned back on the headboard.

Sizwe : You know when you feel unappreciated for too long you reach a breaking point. When I reached mine I happened to be at the right place at the right time. To some it may seem like it was the wrong time but look around, I'm well off. Okay... I wasn't thrown out or anything I left by choice because I wanted to do my own thing, you know? I needed to feel free and not feel caged by those people. They put you in a little cage and expect you to survive but to me survival meant getting out of that cage and simply getting away. So I ran away from home and ended up on the streets. Now the real surviving had to be done and I didn't mind.

He laughed lightly and leaned forward.

Sizwe : I did not mind, Aphiwe. So I did what I had to do to survive. So it became a hobby, a hobby that I needed in order to survive and I was eventually able to buy this... and that.

He said referring to his phone and laptop. He leaned back on his chair again and lowered his eyes.

Sizwe : Does that make me a bad person?

Me : Am I allowed to speak now?

Sizwe : Does it, Aphiwe?

He said with a more stern voice and I shrugged. He sighed.

Sizwe : I've been doing this for years, I'm well of.

I looked around the room and nodded in agreement.

Me : It is a beautiful room.

Sizwe : You should see the rest of the house.

Me : Why did you tell me this?

Sizwe : Because....

He bit his lip and lowered his eyes as if contemplating whether to tell me or not.

Sizwe : Because I hate seeing you suffer. I don't want you to live in poverty anymore.

Me : Excuse me?

Sizwe : Remember I said I feel the need to protect you?

I nodded.

Sizwe : I meant this. I've never had a sister.

Me : So what does that have to do with me?

Sizwe : You are so slow! I want you to do this with me.

He said more calmly.

Me : Steal?

Sizwe : No. Survive.

6

What he was saying took a while to process but when it kicked in I gave him the most ridiculed look then burst out laughing. I laughed to the point where tears were falling down my cheeks but my tummy hurt because of the kicks I received earlier so I stopped.

Lindisizwe was looking at me from his chair with his jaw clenched but I didn't care.

Me : Uthini na? To survive? Khawume torho.

I said in a humorous tone and wiped my tears away with the back of my hands.

Sizwe : Aphiwe I'm serious.

Me : And I'm not? I won't be a thief front slash survivor bruu. I apologise.

I looked at him and broke out into fits of laughter again, this time he broke into a smile.

Sizwe : Mxm.

He chuckled lightly and we conversed some more.

Me : You have everything you need right?

Sizwe : Yeah... yeah I do.

Me : Then why carry on? Why don't you stop?

Sizwe : I can't. Man old habits die hard.

I kept silent for a while.

Me : But you could stop!

I said with hope in my voice and my face lit up.

Me : Like... you could invest in companies that grow your money then you won't have to worry about having to go to bed hungry. It makes sense right?

Sizwe : I guess.

Me : Dude!

I threw a pillow at him and he chuckled.

Sizwe : Fine, dawg! I'll think about it.

Me : Good. Besides you're only in grade 11 so we don't want you going to prison now do we?

Sizwe : Prison is like my second home fam. The police and I are even on a first name basis.

I burst out into laughter for the second time that night and this time he joined me immediately.

Sizwe : Uhm should I walk you home?

My stomach dropped at the mention of home as I thought of my mother's worry. My smile faded and I cleared my throat.

Sizwe : Scared?

Me : Petrified.

Sizwe : I'm sorry this had to happen.

Me : I'll be okay.

Sizwe :But you're hurt

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man can't you-

Me : No. No I have to go before she sends out a search party then kills you.

I got out from under the covers and my feet met the soft carpet. I sighed and slid down then searched for my shoes under the bed.

Sizwe : Your shoes are worn out and your clothes are small.

I was looking under the bed for my shoes when he said that.

Me : Well that's my own baby to nurse, Lindisizwe.

I sighed and rested on my knees.

Me : Where are my shoes?

Sizwe : In the lounge. I'll get them for you.

Me : No its okay I'll get them myself since I'm leaving in any case.

He nodded and led me out. The house was simple but had an expensive touch to it. His furniture looked expensive and he had a plasma TV. I wondered what he had to steal in order to be able to afford it.

I snapped out of my thoughts when he passed me my shoes. I thanked him and slipped them on.

Sizwe : Let me walk you home then.

Me : Thank you.

My hands were getting clammy so I rubbed them on my clothing continuously. The walk to my house was silent and I preferred it that way. The closer we got the more my nerves got the best of me so I took a deep breath and rubbed my hands together because they were shaking.

Lindisizwe simply held my shoulder and made me look at him.

Sizwe : Look... I can't go in with you because no one here likes me and that could get you into more trouble so I'll watch you from a distance until you get inside.

I nodded and took a deep breath.

Me : Thank you.

Sizwe : Sho. Now go.

I obliged and counted every step I took towards the garage, fearing for my life. The gate made a screeching sound as I opened it and I said my tenth prayer that evening. I slowly walked to the garage and opened it. My mother was seated on the bed and her eyes were fixed on the door. I could see the relief wash over her when I entered so we simply looked at each other like that, no one daring to utter a word and I didn't know how to feel because I had expected to get the beating of my life. I closed the door behind me and stood and the door while playing with my hands.

Mom : Ubuphi? You have bruises.

I touched my face and dropped my hands again.

Me : I'm okay.

Mom : I know. I knew you were going to be okay.

Me : How? You don't even care.

The pain on her face after I uttered those words was pertinent. A tear rolled down her eyes and she quickly wiped it off.

Mom : If I can't protect you then your God will. You know that too.

She sniffed and closed her eyes while shaking her head.

Mom : But... I don't understand. Your God protects his own.

Me : That isn't true.

Mom : It is!

She shouted.

Mom : It is.

This time she said it in a softer voice. It was barely audible. I remained silent and waited for her to carry on.

Mom : If he cared... if he cared for us all then I would still be employed.

Her breath hitched and she buried her face in her hands.

Mom : I don't know what we're going to do.

7

I fell back and got caught by the door. The information simply refused to process in my mind so I asked her to repeat what she had just said.

Mom : My boss found out that I was stealing food, Aphiwe. She doesn't understand that I have a child to take care of and...

Her voice trailed off and she breathed out then took out something under the pillow. She stretched out her hand and I walked over to her then took it. It was two crumpled up R200 notes.

Mom : Vuyo was here earlier. She said thank you and that you did a wonderful job.

I gave her one note and placed the other in my school bag. She shook her head.

Me : Just take it.

I was too drained to fight so I took her hand and forcefully placed it there.

Me : We'll figure this out... we'll... I could clean some more for uSis' Vuyo and that way we'll get some money to help us get by.

She wasn't even looking at me when I was talking so let her be and got out of my clothes then slipped under the covers.

Me : Will you blow out the candle?

No response. I turned to look at her and a single tear was rolling down her cheek. I sighed then got up to fetch my Bible. I randomly paged and landed on 1 Peter 5:7-9. I walked over to the bed again and sat with my legs crossed.

Me : 7 Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you.

I read and looked at her.

Me : I believe I didn't just randomly open this. It's meant for us.

She ignored me and placed the money under her pillow again then faced the other way while sniffing so I carried on.

Me : 8 Be serious and keep watch; the Evil One, who is against you, goes about like a lion with open mouth in search of food.

9 Do not give way to him but be strong in your faith, in the knowledge that your brothers who are in the world undergo the same troubles.

I then closed my Bible, prayed for a good 10 minutes and placed it besides her. "It could have been worse." I told myself and blew out the candle.

.

Things got more difficult by the day. Mom used that money to buy us some food and it lasted us long enough but we

eventually needed some more and I was saving the other hundred for taxi fare to the graveyard. I don't know what I was waiting for, I was scared to go because I hadn't been there in a while and no matter how hard I tried to block the memory of exactly how my father died it was unmanageable. The image of his body dangling on that tree was fresh and blasting with colour. In this memory there are greens, whites, browns and a touch of red. I also wish my mother would throw that letter away, it's only holding her back. That blood stained letter...

Lindisizwe and I had gradually grown closer and people were beginning to question our friendship but I didn't care because we both knew where we stood. The only thing that bothered me was the people at church, the fact that they questioned me and judged me scared me a bit but I didn't show it. I was offended by the fact that they raised me and now they think that simply because I got a friend that they don't like or approve of I shouldn't as well.

Through all this the only thing that worried me now was my mother because two years ago when we moved into this garage that we now call home she seemed on top of things. Everything seemed normal and the fact that she was dealing with everything so well gave me the comfort that everything was going to be okay because my mother is here and we're going to make it through. That was until everything came crashing down

for her, I think that reality caught up with her since she was trying so hard to be happy and to be okay. And for this reason she even stopped going to church.

She never really gave herself time to heal so since that day I had to mother her because she wasn't okay. I needed a mother, I still do. My father took my mother away from me and simply left me with the watered down, weaker version of her. He took away S'tandiwe and left me with all these broken pieces of her. One day she's one piece and the other she's the next. I know I should pick them up but I don't know where to start. How do I start when mine need to be picked up as well?

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It was a Saturday afternoon and I woke up determined to go visit my father's grave so I prepared myself, tied my hair up in a neat bun and kissed my mother who was still asleep. This was all she ever did these days. I cooked

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cleaned and even told her to take a bath. I needed a miracle. We needed a miracle. I took out the crumpled R100 note and walked to the taxis. I hadn't been in one in a very long while that I had forgotten how rude the drivers could be, I was reminded when the driver cussed me out for coming with so much money knowing very well that they don't have change in

the mornings. I kept quiet and he eventually gathered up my change. I thanked him and placed it in my pocket.

It was quite a long ride to the graveyard but we eventually got there and I thanked him only to receive a 'nx' in return. I said a short prayer and walked down the long pathway that led to the graves. I scanned through them all until I spotted my father's one then walked over to it with clammy and shaking hands. I went down on my knees and rested on them, just sitting here in silence gave me a peace of mind.

Me : I have so much to say.

I sighed.

Me : Or maybe I thought that I had a lot to say but I really don't.

So I didn't. I sat in that same position for what seemed like hours in silence. When I finally felt content I got up.

Me : What did I do to deserve this?

I whispered while biting back tears.

Guy : You lived.

For a moment there I thought I was hallucinating, that maybe me sitting there for so long made me paranoid but I turned around and was met by this guy. I was relieved, to say the least. And I was determined to give him a piece of my mind simply because he wasn't a ghost.

Me : And you've got your brain so far up your ass you can't stop thinking crap. How shallow can one person be?

I snapped back and instead of looking snubbed he looked impressed.

Guy : Haha nice one!

He scanned me then came back to my face. His face screamed 'which hole are you living in'? the type of expression that doesn't need words and I died a bit. I didn't show it though.

Guy : You're probably in the middle of nowhere, telling from your clothes.

I opened my mouth to speak but he cut me before the words left my mouth.

Guy : Isn't necessarily a bad thing. Chill. You might just find yourself.

He scanned me again.

Guy : Well if you look hard enough. Damn, you have got a lot of looking to do.

The words rolled off his tongue so easily and he didn't even look the slightest bit remorseful. Instead he turned on his heel and walked away, leaving me to crumble in my unfinished thoughts.

‘Poverty – the state of being extremely poor.’

The dictionary doesn't define how poverty makes others act towards you. It doesn't explain how people like this rob you of the straws of happiness, pride, dignity that you have left. It doesn't explain how you're not only financially poor but your heart is too.

I was still standing there as I fought the urge to cry. I didn't understand how someone could be so mean to a person they don't even know. When I felt better I walked out and caught a taxi. During the whole trip I was thinking back to the days when I used to be happy – genuinely happy and that was before my father passed on. We used to go to the museum, just the two of us and marvel at all that was around us. We were quiet when looking at everything only speaking when pointing something out. It seems silly and whatever but I was happy. If I could have stored that happiness in a jar I would have. I would be selfish with it because it's mine and someone else probably wants to take it away. If I could store that happiness in a jar, I would have opened it now. I was pulled back from my thoughts when

the taxi came to a halt. I thanked the driver and hopped off then strolled off while thinking about what that guy said.

I tugged at his words and broke them down until I realised what he was actually saying. I played the words over and over in my head.

Me : You're probably in the middle of nowhere. You might just find yourself.

That's what I came up with when I took out the rude remarks that would stick with me. I repeated the words over and over again wondering what exactly he meant... middle of nowhere? I felt a hand wrap around my shoulder and I rolled my eyes at the familiarity and removed his arm.

Me : No touching.

Sizwe : You weren't saying that when you were helplessly lying in the middle of the street.

Me : That's different.

He was about to say something back but looked at me and probably noticed that I was deep in thought.

Me : You're probably in the middle of nowhere. You might just find yourself...

I said out loud and looked at Lindisizwe.

He looked around and shrugged.

Sizwe : This is my hood so I wouldn't exactly call it nowhere and about fi-

Me : You are such an idiot.

I looked at him and snorted.

Me : You are such an idiot.

I repeated and he laughed.

Sizwe : Where do you come from then genius? The garden of wise words?

I snorted again.

Me : I wish.

Sizwe : Uvelaphi ke?

Me : Graveyard...

Sizwe : Oh... to see your dad.

I nodded.

Sizwe : Is he the one you're drinking wise words from?

He nudged me with his elbow and I felt like punching him for being such an idiot.

Me : Stop with your facetious crap, Lindisizwe. I'm not in the mood and this is serious.

I accelerated my pace but he caught up in no time.

Sizwe : I'm sorry...?

Me : Okay.

Sizwe : What happened?

Me : Nothing.

Sizwe : You know you can tell me anything right? Will you slow down!

I stopped and looked at him.

Me : That was really insensitive. You don't just say things like that.

He sighed.

Sizwe : I'm really sorry. I don't know what I was thinking.

Me : You never do.

Sizwe : I guess I deserved that.

Me : You did.

There was an awkward silence for a while so I looked around only to find people eyeing us suspiciously. I guess he also noticed this because he said we should keep walking.

Sizwe : Remember that get together I said I was going to have?

Me : Yeah?

Sizwe : Well I'm having it tonight.

He said and I looked at him expectantly but he simply carried on walking.

Me : And...

He looked at me with a confused expression.

Sizwe : And? There's no 'and'. I just thought you would like to know.

I sighed and brushed my already tied hair back.

Me : Can I come?

He looked at me and laughed.

Sizwe : Mxm quit playing.

I stopped and crossed my arms over my chest.

Me : Is it because I'm poor?

Sizwe : What? No you aren't going to blackmail me like this.

Me : What is it then?

Sizwe : You're a kid, mfondini.

Me : You're only a year older.

Sizwe : And your point is?

I squinted my eyes at him and opened them again.

Me : I want to go.

Sizwe : Your mother bruh. And it could be dangerous for you so no.

Me : Mxm. You aren't my keeper.

Sizwe : I don't care. You aren't coming and that is final.

Me : Says the same guy who wants me to be his accomplice in stealing.

He wanted to say something but I had stomped away already, leaving him to feel guilty. The closer I got to home the more drained I became. I needed to get out of that place even if it was for a few hours.

8

I got home and as expected my mom was under the bed covers staring into nothing. I walked inside without uttering a word and took out my school books.

Mom : Where do you come from?

Me : The graveyard.

I was on my way out when she stopped me so turned and looked at looked at her.

Mom : How was it?

I sighed.

Me : Okay.

Mom : Did he say anything?

I rolled my eyes at how thoughtless that question was.

Me : Yeah. That he's tired of seeing you like this and that I should do everything in my power to take care of the both of us since you can't do it anymore.

She was about to respond but I was out the door before she could utter the words. I sat on the steps by Sis Vuyo's back door for hours on end because I didn't want to think about anything else. After studying I finished reading The Alchemist and

prepared a short oral for Ms McDonald since she wanted one when I was done.

I went back inside and sighed at the sight. I was tired of this place, I was tired of this life.

Me : Have you eaten?

Mom : I'm not hungry.

Me : Okay.

I drank some water and began changing but remembered the get together at Sizwe's place.

Me : Mama?

Mom : Yes?

Me : May I please go out tonight?

She glanced over at me as if I had just asked her for permission to murder.

Mom : Uyaphi? Kulankwenkwe yakho?

Me : He's my friend.

Mom gave me an intimidating look again and shook her head.

Mom : Do what makes you happy, Aphiwe. I just hope that you remember everything that I've taught you. I raised you well.

Ndizingomba isifuba ngayo lonto. But what you decide to do with your life is your choice.

I have to admit that those words did hit home but how dare she make me feel guilty when I've practically been the one taking care of her since my father's death? I was driven by confusion and pure fury. The more I grew up the more I realised things that I wouldn't have a few years ago. I realised how I have been a mother to my mother since she couldn't be one to me. I realised how I was missing out on my teenage years because I was too busy being a mother to a grown woman and tonight was my chance to go out there so I can say that 'I've been to a party' even if it's a one-time thing.

I was driven by bravery and all these other emotions to sneak out that evening. I waited for my mom to fall asleep then slipped out the door and jumped the fence. Note that I was terrified because of the incident that happened the last time I was out at night. This time I doubted God was on my side because I was defying my mother which was a big sin. 'Obey your father and your mother...' those words simply passed by in my brain because I chose to ignore them. I carried on walking until I finally heard chattering and loud music so I hurried on because I was now excited. I got there and everyone was minding their own business so I walked around and looked for

Lindisizwe but changed my mind halfway through the door because he was going to shout at me and walk me home.

.

Two hours later the party is pumping, music is louder and me, well, I'm on my sixth bottle of this weird tasting substance called alcohol. I was on the couch the whole time just taking bottle after bottle of the alcohol that was in front of me. Once I started I simply couldn't stop and I was taking a shaky sip when someone came and snatched the bottle away.

Sizwe : Voetsak man Aphiwe ufuna ntoni apha! Did I not fucking tell you to not come here!

He shouted. I had never heard him swear in my life so under normal circumstances I would have been scared but this time I just laughed in his face and asked for my bottle.

He roughly pulled me up and dragged me through the room down to his then threw me on the carpeted floor.

Me : You're probably in the middle of nowhere. You might just find yourself.

I recited while stumbling over my words and burping at the end.

Sizwe : And you think you'll find yourself in the middle of a fucking bottle! Hai man Aphiwe what the fuck!

He carried on with his fucks and asking me what I was thinking and whatnot but I was laughing at him because I'd never seen him like this which clearly infuriated him further and he left the room then came back with a pail and water.

Sizwe : Guqa.

Me : For the why?

Sizwe : Fokoff Aphiwe vah? Guqa.

Me : Kuguqwa njani kanene.

I laughed again and finally got on my knees. Sizwe made me drink the whole jug until I couldn't anymore so everything came back out, leaving me with an empty stomach and a half clear mind. I was in tears so I wiped my mouth with his shirt and looked at him apologetically. He gave me an ugly stare then left the room and came back again to change his shirt, throwing it on the floor. I was in the same position he left me in and my crying was escalating the more he ignored me.

Me : I'm sorry.

Sizwe : What for, Aphiwe?

He pulled a clean shirt over his head and turned to look at me.

Sizwe : Did I not fucking tell you to not come here?

Me : You did.

Sizwe : Ngoku? Kaloku wena you're smart you're 'finding yourself' in the middle of beer bottle! Nxa uyacaphukisa man voetsak!

He said in anger and pulled me up by my arm and threw me on the bed.

Sizwe : Awucingi sometimes. Are you sleeping here?

Me : If you don't mind.

Sizwe : Okay. I'll sleep in the next room.

He headed to the door but I stopped him and he turned around in irritation.

Sizwe : iGirls azikho right pha phandle so what do you want?

Me : My father committed suicide... he hung himself in the backyard when I was 14 years old and...

I choked on my words and he came to sit next to me.

Me : I went to his grave today and... it just reminded me of all the things I want to forget.

I went on to tell him about why my father committed suicide and how it's affecting my mother and I to this day. By the time I was done I was clutching on to his shirt and he was rubbing my back, begging me to stop crying because he was a gangster and

his friends couldn't see him crying. I laughed a bit at that then we sat in silence until I had calmed down.

I let go of his shirt and looked down in embarrassment.

Me : I'm sorry for just... yeah.

Sizwe : I'm so sorry you have to go through this... you kept on saying everyone leaves. What makes you think I won't stay?

I shrugged. He sighed and tried something else.

Sizwe : Why do you never talk about this? Why do you go through all this alone?

Me : It's my pain. I don't understand this about myself either, I clutch it all to myself because it's mine and I'm selfish with it.

Sizwe : You don't have to go through anything alone again, okay? I'm here now and you're like my little sister.

He punched my shoulder and I smiled while sniffing. He smiled as well.

Sizwe : I'm here for you

Advertisement

okay? For like a temporary forever.

We embraced in a hug and I fought the urge to cry. We broke it and I looked at him.

Me : Yes.

Sizwe : Yes what?

Me : I want to survive. Help me survive, everything you said the other night, I thought about it and...

I sighed.

Me : I want to survive.

He closed his eyes and shook his head slightly after a whole minute of silence.

Sizwe : This is most probably just drunk talk. Sleep, we'll talk in the morning.

I didn't retort because I was tired in any case so I opened the covers and sunk in the bed. He went to switch the lights off then closed the door behind him.

.

I woke up early the following morning because I was used to it and I had the worst headache ever so I sat up and looked around to familiarise myself with the surroundings. When I finally remembered where I was I slipped off the bed and exited the room with great caution. There were no people but the

place was a mess so I drank cold water and cleaned up. I guess the clattering noise of the bottles woke Sizwe up cause he came into the room shouting.

Sizwe : Oh nguwe. What are you doing? Put these down.

He came and tried taking the bottles away from me but I swung them away from him and looked at him.

Sizwe : Uh... okay?

Me : Have you thought about what I said last night?

Sizwe : You were serious.

Me : Yes.

He sighed and took the bottles then placed the bottles down. We sat down on the couch and he sat with his one arm plopped up.

Sizwe : You were serious?

Me : Yes... yes I was.

Sizwe : Last night you were a mess, Aphiwe. You can't make decisions based on your emotions.

Me : I told you that I thought about it and with all that's going on I really think that I'm meant to be here.

He looked at his wristwatch.

Sizwe : You're meant to be at school honey not here. I'll run a bath for you then we'll leave together. A bath. I smiled at the thought of sinking into the water and not just having a quick scrub in a waskom. I shortly followed after him and he showed me how to use everything and whatnot. To my disappointment I had to take a quick one because we were going to be late for school so I used his lotion then got dressed. We ate cereal in silence and walked out the door together. While he was locking up a group of school children walked past us and I recognised one of the girls, she was from my church and she kept looking back at me and shaking her head then the rest of the group looked at me and whispered among themselves.

Sizwe : Masambe.

I was stuck on the spot until he nudged me.

Sizwe : Ujonge nto-

He looked in that direction then back at me.

Sizwe : Ignore them, Aphiwe, man. They're just gossipers who live in a bubble. Those kids wouldn't be able to live a day in your shoes if their lives depended on it.

I nodded and stepped down then we walked in more silence.

Sizwe : You're making me soft.

Me : I don't care.

He looked at me then faced the road again and that's how it was until we reached school. We separated at the gate and I wasn't at ease the whole day. At break time I went to Ms McDonald's class to tell her about the book. She welcomed me in and I placed my bag down.

Ms McDonald : What can I do for you today?

Me : I finished reading the book so I'm here to tell you what I learned.

She smiled widely.

Ms McDonald : Please... go ahead.

Me : Its basically about dreams... like you need to have dreams and a vision and know what you want in life then go and grab it with both hands.

I thought for a while and sighed. I wasn't into this whole thing so I wanted to talk and leave.

Me : In life, if you don't dream then what's the point of living?

I kept quiet and looked at her because we were done.

Ms McDonald : Aren't you carrying on?

Me : I'm done.

She gave me a concerned look and sighed.

Ms McDonald : Is that really all you learnt from that brilliant book?

Me : That's all it teaches.

I said without thinking then bit my tongue in embarrassment.

Me : I'm sorry.

Ms McDonald : You may leave, Aphiwe. Thank you for your time.

I opened my mouth to speak but closed it again because there was nothing to say. I picked my bag up and headed for the door.

.

That week went by fast and it was finally Sunday again. I had been slacking on praying lately to the point where my mother noticed and asked but I brushed her off. I was excited to go to church because I needed to pray hard and I wouldn't be able to do that properly in the cramped space we lived in. I got dressed and walked the dusty road to the church I cherished with my all because I was accepted for who I am and even placed in the choir. I arrived early in the hopes of seeing Sis Nosi's kind face but instead was met by the cold faces of the pastor and church elders.

I stopped breathing for a minute and stood at the door just staring at me.

Pastor : Silinde wena. Ngena uhlale apha.

He pointed the seat opposite him and directly in the middle of the two women and two men. I walked over with shaky hands and my heart was in my throat with fear and I didn't understand why I was scared because I had done nothing wrong.

Pastor : I'm not going to beat around the bush but I received troubling news that you're having sexual relations with that Lindisizwe character. Is this true?

My mouth hung open and I sat there with tears at the brim of my eyes. I guess they took my reaction as a 'yes' because he carried on.

Pastor : I am deeply disappointed in you, Aphiwe. This is unlike you and I'm afraid we're going to have to ban you from the choir.

Me : I did noth-

Pastor : Do not backchat.

He said in a calm but intimidating tone.

Pastor : You know very well that I don't tolerate promiscuous behaviour and we..

He said referring to the people sitting beside me.

Pastor : Have decided that we can't have such behaviour in our midst. You are banned from the church as well, Aphiwe. You chose your path now you have to live with the consequences.

Those words killed an already broken soul. I let out a weak whimper and my 'it could have been worse' turned into 'it doesn't get more worse than this' in one moment. In one lousy moment for something I didn't even do.

I cannot put into words exactly how I felt at that moment. My vocabulary isn't strong enough to handle all the emotion I was engulfed in while sitting in the building I was no longer welcome in and surrounded by the people who had come up with this decision. My eyes failed me and tears rolled down my cheeks while I looked at them with pain etched on my face. I tried getting up because I could not stand them but my legs failed me so I plopped back down.

Me : Who do you think you are?

The words rolled off my tongue before I could stop them. I was looking at the ground and my voice was soft. No one responded so I figured they didn't hear me and looked up.

Me : Who do you think you are?

I said more audibly, pressing each word down so they would sink into their brains.

Me : What right do you people think you are to throw me out of the house of the Lord? Do I serve you or him? Does the Bible not tell us that all people are welcome here? And here I am being thrown out for something that I didn't even do? Why? Because of rumors?

I said in a level voice while looking at them in turn.

Pastor : We're letting you go because you know the difference between right and wrong yet you chose to do wrong.

Me : That doesn't even make sense!

I shouted.

Me : 'Letting me go'? You speak about this like some school suspension but this isn't school. This is my life!

The other elders tried calming me down but I got up in irritation.

Me : I will leave!

I shouted and angrily wiped my tears away.

Me : I will leave and I hope you remember this moment when your sins catch up with you. I hope you remember exactly how you threw a supposedly lost soul out instead of trying to save it. I hope...

My voice trailed off and I stormed out without a single glance back.

I could see people coming to the church from a distance and I spotted the girl that was staring at me the day I was standing by Lindisizwe's door. It all made sense now. It was so stupid... I

didn't understand why someone would lie about me like that. Because clearly it was her that spread these rumours. She got closer and I met her halfway. My vision was blurred by the tears but I carried on and stopped her.

Girl : What do you want fro-

Me : Why did you do it?

Girl : Why did I do what?

Me : You lied about me.

She shook her head and closed her eyes.

Girl : What? What are you talking about?

Me : You know exactly what I'm talking about!

I shouted, drawing some attention to myself but I didn't care.

Me : Do you understand the thing that I go through every day?
Do you?

I asked and she looked at me with a soft look.

Me : You wouldn't because you live in a little bubble, a bubble that's concealed from reality but you just have to snatch the little that I kept for myself. Why!

I shouted and she sighed.

Girl : I really don't kno-

Me : I don't even care. Carry on with your perfect life because mine...

I lifted my hands in surrender to show her that I had nothing apart from the worn out Bible I was holding.

Me : Is over.

I walked away in embarrassment because the crowd was rather big now and no one bothered to stop me. I walked home while crying silently and when I got there my mom was sewing my school pants. She looked up from what she was doing and looked up at me. She then placed the pants down and opened her arms up for me, I cried harder and plunged into her arms.

Me : Mama I can't do this anymore. It's just... it's so hard. I can't...

I babbled and she brushed my hair in silence. I'm sure she was biting back tears because I could hear her breathing get heavier. I clung on to her clothing and cried harder, causing her to quit trying and cry with me. If anyone saw that sight they would have been touched. Two poverty stricken human beings crying because no one accepts them.

A few minutes later we had calmed down. My head was still on her chest and the only thing one could hear was our soft

breathing and a few hiccups. My arms were tightly wrapped around her and she was still brushing my hair when I decided to pull back and looked at her. For once in a long time I saw a mother in her and she kissed the space between my eyes, causing me to smile slightly.

Mom : Want to talk about it?

She asked. I shook my head a bit and stood up to take my shoes off.

Me : I'd just like to take a nap.

I said with a corroded voice and she nodded to show she understands then shifted so I could get on the bed.

Mom : I love you.

She said softly but sleep had already coursed through me so I couldn't respond. I let out a simple 'mhhh' and slept. I had to forget all this even if it was just for a few hours.

.

The coming months were okay. Well, with Sizwe's help. I had to lie to my mother every time I came home with money when she asked where I got it. I always used the 'I was cleaning for the lady six streets away' so she wouldn't be able to go there. The cleaning part wasn't technically a lie because I cleaned for him in exchange for the money, that's the only way he got me

to agree to take it. I had been really quiet since the church incident and I never really talked about it. I brushed it off whenever mom or Sizwe asked me about it and talked about something else or remained silent.

Sizwe was doing the same thing to me, brushing me off whenever I asked him about surviving and at times he would shout at me asking if I'm not content with the fact that I go to bed with something to eat every night. I would sulk and get over it. Other days he would simply give me excuses like, "just concentrate on your school work and we'll talk again when you pass". That oddly pushed me to work very hard, I was even surprising myself. I would get 80's and 90's at the end of the term then receive silver and gold bars for these achievements. My mother was extremely proud of me and I found it ironic. She didn't know the reason behind these brilliant results and I wasn't planning on telling her. She was doing really well, she was talking more and she had even begun sewing clothes again. At first she was just patching up our torn clothes until I remembered that she used to make clothes for us when we had an event like a wedding which required traditional attire. She was amazing and it was a hobby she enjoyed doing so I bought some cheap material for her to use with some money we had left over and borrowed a machine from a neighbour. The look on her face when I walked through the door with all this is priceless. <3

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It was a Saturday afternoon and Sizwe and I had decided to study together (or I forced him to study with me) since exams were fast approaching. I got to the house and barged in without knocking since I was so comfortable with coming here by now. I regretted it immediately when I saw him exchanging spit with some girl. She was sitting on the kitchen counter and he was standing between her legs. They both looked at me with wide eyes until I made a disgusted face and passed to the lounge.

Me : Ew.

I said loud enough so they could hear me. They spoke in hushed tones and she fetched a few of her stuff, kissed his lips subtly, gave me a death stare and left. I looked up at Sizwe and he was giving me the same stare, only his was worse because even his jaw was clenched and he was branding his eyes into my soul. I quickly looked away and switched the TV on because I couldn't bare his loud breathing.

Sizwe : Nxa.

He disappeared into the passage and I heard some shuffling then water so I figured he was taking a shower. I wasn't about to wait for him, I took my books out and studied so long with songs playing softly on the TV. He finally came back and he was dressed in sweatpants, a big vest and a sour look.

Me : Awumbi.

I voiced and concentrated on my books again. He remained silent and switched the TV off and sat on the couch opposite mine and stared at me, again. I sighed and placed my pen down.

Me : What?

Sizwe : You disturbed me.

Me : I don't even care. You know very well that sex before marriage is a sin sooo...

He laughed lightly.

Sizwe : Do I look like I care? Well I don't.

He said quickly because he knew that I was going to answer his rhetorical question.

Sizwe : Wait until you're in that position then tell me 'nyex nyefore nyarriage nyis nya sin.'

I laughed really hard to annoy him some more and he got up with a 'mxm' then came back after a while with cool drinks and juice.

Sizwe : Please talk to me?

I sipped on my juice then looked at him.

Me : I never stopped dweebiot.

Sizwe : You did. Like you stopped talking to me.

He said, pressing down the 'talking' so I could understand what he meant.

Me : Oh.

I cleared my throat and sat upright. I told him about the church thing and about how it affected. About how I wasn't sure whether I was still allowed to pray or now because I wasn't allowed in church anymore since I'm such a big sinner. I told him about how confused I was about whether I was still a Christian or not. He was quiet the whole time as he looked at me with a pained look but I wasn't going to cry. My tears for this subject had dried up.

Sizwe : So basically
they judged you.

Me : Yes.

Sizwe : And this makes you mad?

Me : Clearly.

Sizwe : The Bible tells you not to judge right?

Me : Yes.

Sizwe : But you judged me.

I turned to face him. I couldn't believe he had just said that. He simply shrugged nonchalantly and continued talking.

Sizwe : I mean, you aren't exactly sanctimonious either. You judged me but here I am.

Me : No, Sizwe! The only difference between you and I is the fact that I was correct in judging you! You steal don't you!

I shouted and he told me to chill.

Sizwe : I hear you and ndiyavuma ukuba you're right but the fact remains, you judged me, only accepting me when I did what you wanted me to do.

Me : And your point is?

Sizwe : I'm like... the best thing that's ever happened so maybe this could also be some sort of blessing in disguise? I don't know. Just maybe.

Me : I hate you so much right now.

Sizwe : Love you too sweetheart.

He then kissed the side of my head and took the glasses to the kitchen, leaving me to think.

I slumped back into the couch and let out a loud sigh. I was never ready for this realization and what hurt the most was the fact that he right. I did to him what is being done to me right now and it was a bitter pill to swallow, made worse by guilt and confusion.

Sizwe : Hey!

He then poked my arm lightly and I gave him an irritated look.

Sizwe : I've been calling you for the past 10 minutes. What you thinking about? Me?

He smirked a bit and I rolled my eyes and his stupid cockiness.

Me : I'm sorry.

Sizwe : What for?

Me : The way I treated you? Before I got to know you, I guess. You didn't deserve that so I'm sorry.

She smirked again and I rolled my eyes again.

Me : Stop smirking! It is so annoying. Especially because I'm in the middle of an apology.

Sizwe : Mx I don't even care about your apology, fam. I was never even mad.

Me : That isn't even the point.

Sizwe : Oh?

Me : Yes.

Sizwe : That was your cue to explain what the point is.

Me : The point is that...

I closed my mouth so I could think some more about exactly what I wanted to say.

Me : That I shouldn't have treated you the way that I did simply because everyone else was doing it. like...

I sighed.

Sizwe : I get it, chill. I don't do.... Sippy.

I chuckled at that.

Me : Right.

I forced him to fetch his books and he did so, so we studied for hours on end. Surprisingly he didn't complain [much] and we had a lot of work done then he walked me home since it was getting late. For the first time in a long time I didn't die a bit at the idea of going home and for me, that meant everything so I walked inside and my mother was sewing something on the rusty counter. She had to use the thin blankets we had packed

away for those cold days as a way to elevate herself because she couldn't exactly reach it properly while sitting down.

She turned and gave me a small smile when I walked inside.

Mom : I'm making you something.

Me : Really!

I said in excitement. You could hear it in the squeal I let out when she said that and my facial expression. My smile reached my eyes and I couldn't help it. When I walked towards her she stopped me.

Mom : You are not allowed to see this until it's done and I'm content with the results okay?

Me : Whatever.

I sulked and placed my worn out bag on the floor next to the door then threw myself on the bed with my face in the covers.

Mom : Are you hungry?

Me : Very much so.

It came out as 'memy mumh mo' but she understood and quickly made something so we could eat. We ate in silence then we sat there just looking at each other.

Mom : You're very beautiful, Aphiwe.

I blushed.

Me : Enkosi mama.

She collected our plates and came to sit down again.

Mom : You know, you remind me of myself when I was your age.

Me : Really?

Mom : Yes, I was a beautiful girl, sweetheart. Boys fell at my feet left right and centre a-

I sighed loudly and she stopped talking.

Me : Then my father came along and you fell in love then you had me then your life was ruined then then then...! I know the story mother.

She looked down at my hands and took them into hers, a gesture I had learned to be afraid of because it meant she wanted to talk about something serious.

Mom : Is there anything that you want to tell me?

I looked at her in confusion.

Me : Something like...?

She sighed.

Mom : I heard why... you were banned from church.

I closed my eyes because of the pain that shot through my chest when she said that.

Me : They're lies, mama. I promise you they're lying.

My eyes were still shut tightly because I was afraid of seeing the truth in her eyes. If I opened my eyes then that would determine whether my mother believed me or not and I don't think I would have been able to handle her not believing me. It would be too much.

Mom : It's okay.

She pulled me to her chest and I lied there, taking that opportunity to open my eyes and give tears the chance to roll down my face.

Me : Why is this happening, mama? They're lying!

I shouted and she brushed my back and my hair as if she didn't know which gesture would calm me down more effectively.

Mom : I know, baby. I'm sorry.

She whispered and kissed the top of my head while rocking me back and forth.

I didn't cry for long this time because this whole thing was draining. And me being naïve is probably a good thing at times because I noticed that people's voices became smaller and stares harsher whenever I passed by but I didn't care because I didn't think much into it. But now... Now its all different. I know exactly why I get those stares and it hurts. It hurts...

I wanted to stay in bed for the rest of the day and my mother let me. She simply carried on with her sewing and let me be after a kiss on the forehead and a mere "I love you". I knew that was all I'd be getting from her because she wasn't good with words so she showed me by these small acts and I had learned and accepted them.

I didn't want to cry but I did. I cried into my pillow but it was one of those silent, painful ones. Because I didn't want to disturb my mother and because I was trying to convince myself that I was okay. I needed to be okay.

I tried falling asleep but I couldn't until my mother stopped what she was doing and wrapped her arms around me in my sleeping position. I finally fell asleep and forgot everything. For a few hours.

.

I woke up the following day with a throbbing headache and I opened my eyes only to meet my mother's ones. She was studying my face with a small smile on her face and I sat up straight. I didn't have the energy to smile back at her. Flip I hardly had the energy to fully open my eyes but then I soon realized that it was because my eyes were slightly swollen from all the crying so I slipped off the bed and prepared for school in silence and under the uncomfortable gaze of my mother. I wasn't even prepared to ask her what she was looking at. Instead, I kissed her cheek before walking out and dragging my feet all the way to school. Arriving late, getting break detention and flunking a test. So basically, I was having a really bad day.

Lindisizwe didn't rock up to school that day and that aggravated me because I needed him to be there with me through all this. But then again him not being there was probably a good thing because being seen together was going to confirm a lot in the minds of all these narrow minded people. School ended and I had not said more than two words to anyone. Not even Mrs McDonald and she let me be. Even being nice enough to let me stay in her class after school just until the students had cleared out a bit so the humiliation wouldn't be as bad.

And the thing about school children is that they aren't afraid to talk about so you know that they're talking about you. And you

just have to know and accept the fact that they're talking about you and not to you.. Which makes everything worse.

.

I was trying to study in Mrs McD's class. Books were scattered on the desks besides me and my highlighter was in my shaking hand. I didn't seem to get anything right so I threw it on my book in frustration and buried my head in my shaking hands. I didn't deserve this right? Surely I didn't. I took deep, soothing breaths until I calmed down and told myself that I was okay and that I wasn't going to cry. My eyes were already swollen from last night's crying. I didn't need to look any more worse than I already did.

I felt someone presence in the room and I looked up to find the guy that saw me half naked in my teachers house standing in a neatly pressed blazer, grey school pants and a white matric jersey. He stared at me awkwardly and I looked down, for some reason I couldn't hold his gaze. Which probably made sense because he had seen me half naked and because I realized that a person like me had no right to even breathe the same air as such... He was in a private school and he was holding one of those really big phones. I couldn't tell which one cause he was pretty far.

When I figured that he wasn't going to move I packed my stuff in preparation to leave until his deep voice interrupted me.

Guy : You're the girl. That girl right?

He emphasized the 'that'.

Me : I don't know. Am I?

I responded without looking up.

He cleared his throat and took a step closer. Very cautiously like he was afraid of something.

Me : What? Do I stink?

I snapped, catching him off guard so he stopped walking and looked at me with a confused look on his face.

Guy : Wha-

He cleared his throat again.

Guy : Why would you think I think that you stink?

I shrugged in irritation.

Me : Look at me.

He actually took more steps towards me and looked at me, making me uncomfortable so I closed my bag and threw it on my back.

Guy : It is you...

Me : Uhm...

Guy : The girl I walked in on... Sort of... In my mom's room that other day...

I kept quiet because I had recognized him straight away.

Guy : I've always wanted to apologize.

Me : There's no need, really. You were inquisitive and you walked in. Your mom explained it to me.

He nodded awkwardly and I began walking away.

Guy : Wait.

I stopped and turned.

Guy : My name is Xolani, just by the way.

Me : Aphiwe. And I'm also sorry for being such a slow reactor on that day.

He chuckled lightly and scratched his head while I turned around and walked away without returning the chuckle. Not even giving him a smile.

The school grounds were as quiet as I had hoped they would be when I walked out of the school building. The sun was gracefully setting, kissing me gently as I walked down the dusty to the place I called home. When I reached the door I could hear the sewing machine going on inside and I slid the door open. My mom didn't even look up, she was too busy with what she was doing to even acknowledge my presence so I let her be and slipped out of my uniform and into some old clothes.

Mom : Uvelaphi?

I climbed the bed with my bag in an attempt to study.

Me : Studying at school.

Mom : Oh... Are you hungry?

I didn't realize how hungry I was until she asked so I nodded, forgetting that she was too busy to steal a glance at me.

Mom : We're out of eggs again. Uhm you'd like that right?

Me : Yeah whatever is okay.

I responded and she dugged into her pocket for some money and produced a ten rand note.

Mom : I think ihalf a dozen izophuma apho. I hope it does.

Me : Me too.

I took the money and shifted off the bed. As lazy as I was to go to the shop we had to eat so I put on my shoes and began walking there. The distance from my house to there seemed rather long because I wasn't used to this life. Yes, we ate eggs and bread all the time but we never had the luxury to actually have extra money lying around for when we were hungry so I was content with my life at the time.

I was obviously still getting all those stares but I tried my all to ignore them and carry on walking to where I had to go. When I finally reached the shop my hands were balled up into fists to the point where my knuckles turned white. I realized this when I was handing the money over.

Me : Eggs

please.

"My friend" sized me up and went to get the eggs and gave me some change. I didn't even count it. I simply wanted to leave so I turned instantly, even forgetting to say thank you only to bump into a familiar smelling figure.

Sizwe : Hey..

He said with worry and took the eggs from me.

Me : I need to go.

I whispered and he looked behind me then back at me.

Sizwe : Masambe.

He took my hand which was balled up in a fist again and opened it up with a bit of difficulty. I eventually let him and we walked out of there hand in hand. I was facing down the whole down and he was staring at me with concern etched on his face.

Sizwe : What's up?

I shook my head and pulled my hand away.

Me : Nothing. I'm fine.

He sighed and dropped his hands to his sides.

Sizwe : Phiwe what's wrong?

Me : I...

I signed and looked around us. People were staring at us and I figured they thought the rumors were true. My heartbeat accelerated, thoughts raced and palms sweated so I acted on impulse when grabbing the eggs from him and walking away fast. Sizwe, being himself, let me go. Well technically he did because he was walking a fair distance behind me to ensure that I was safe on my way home. He once said he doesn't like me walking around when the sun is setting because of the fact that I was once beat up ebusuku.

We were now nearing my house when I turned and he stopped on his tracks as well.

Me : Am I a bad person?

Sizwe : You aren't. We both know you aren't.

Me : Then why is this happening to me?

Sizwe : I don't know, Phiwe but you'll be okay. You'll pull through.

Me : Sizwe I'm tired.

I whined in a soft voice and he took a step closer.

Sizwe : Can I hold you?

Me : Please...

He walked to me and gave me a warm hug. So warm I ended up crying on his chest while he rubbed my back softly and kissing the top of my head. I stopped in a few and pulled back, not looking him in the eye. I then took a long breathe and stepped back from him.

Sizwe : That was such a PDA [Public Display of Affection] moment.

Me : Not even.

I said with a small smile. We carried on walking slowly.

Me : Why weren't you at school today?

He shrugged.

Sizwe : Didn't feel like it.

There was silence for a while.

Sizwe : Why? Did anything happen?

I shook my head lightly but changed my mind in the middle of doing so.

Me : Remember Mrs McD's son?

Sizwe : Ah. The pretty boy that had the privilege of seeing your thighs. How could I ever forget such?

I rolled my eyes.

Me : You're an idiot. He apologized today.

Sizwe : What for! It isn't his fault you're a slow reactor.

Me : Whatever Sizwe!

I said with a light chuckle.

Me : He's pretty nice.

Sizwe : Mhh... Mhkay.

I looked at him to explain myself but decided otherwise so walked in silence until we reached the gate and he kissed my forehead.

Sizwe : Stay away from niggas.

Me : Including you. Noted.

I stuck my tongue out at him and went inside the garage.

.

I got inside and met my mother's beaming eyes. She was holding up a piece of clothing and I squinted my eyes.

Me : Whoa...

I knew the pattern was beautiful when I chose it but she turned it into something incredible. I stepped closer to her, placing the eggs on the bed and taking the clothing from her. It was a jumpsuit type of thing and when I pressed it against my body I could tell that it was going to fit me perfectly.

She sighed happily.

Mom : Come on! Try it on!

She said in enthusiasm and took it from me so I could take off my clothes. I quickly slipped out of my torn clothes and took it from her. Pulling the zip down and getting into it with great ease. I then turned around so she could zip it back up. I took a

deep breathe and turned back around so she could take a good look at me.

Mom : Phiwe...

She whispered and made me turn around over and over again. I was laughing jubilantly the whole time because for once... Just once in a very long time I felt beautiful. The jumpsuit was off the shoulders, exposing the beauty mark I had on my left shoulder and I guessed she also had such in mind because when you were close enough you could see it. She was smiling proudly when I jumped at her and engulfed her in a love filled hug. She hugged me back with just as much intensity and I kissed both her cheeks because a simple "thank you" wasn't going to be able to properly explain my gratitude for this. Getting out of it was difficult because I loved everything about it. I loved the way it hugged my upper body then getting looser towards the bottom, only to get tight again towards the end. I loved how I loved it and how I was thinking so much into it. I appreciated it with my all because o hadn't had something new... Something specially made for me in a very very long time. God knows how happy I was in that moment.

She eventually helped me out of it and I folded it then placed it in the creaky wardrobe we put the few clothes in.

Me : Thank you so much mama. You don't understand how happy this just made me...

She smiled sweetly and pulled me to her, placing my head on her chest and brushing my hair.

Mom : Oh I understand, honey. I understand.

We stayed like that for a while just talking about anything and everything until we couldn't take the hunger anymore so I got up and made us some food then made a mental note to return the machine to the owner the following day.

.

The following day I woke up still happy from yesterdays events and prepared for school quickly. I thought for a while and decided to give the machine back before I went to school because chances were I was going to get home late again so I took it and made way to the house. The machine was really heavy but I didn't mind because the house wasn't far. I knocked lightly after placing it down by the door. The woman took a while to answer but eventually she did and she didn't look very happy.

Woman : What?

Me : Uhm... I just... I brought your machine back to you.

I stuttered.

Woman : Mhkay.

She then held out her palm. A gesture I didn't quite understand so I stared at her blankly.

Woman : Haibo! Pay up, sisi.

Me: Excuse me?

Woman : Nyexcuse me. You knew you had to pay when you borrowed it now you're coming here and expect to leave ndi empty handed? Haibo gal.

She said with an annoyed chuckle and tapped her hand with the other one to show exactly where I should place the money. I was dumbstruck, to say the least.

Me : I don't have any money, ma'am... I...

A familiar voice interrupted me. I looked back and it was the girl who was spreading rumors about me. I took a deep breathe to compose myself as she got closer.

Girl : How much would you like?

The woman thought for a bit.

Woman : R30.

The girl looked at the woman with wide eyes and searched her pockets, only producing a R20 note.

Girl : I'm sorry but that's all I have right now.

The woman rolled her eyes and snatched the money with a 'mxm' and mumbled while she took the machine and banged the door in our faces.

I turned to face the girl in annoyance since I had to thank her now.

Me : I'll pay you back.

She shook her head lightly.

Girl : Its okay. You don't have to.

Me : I will.

I then began walking away when she launched forward and stood in front of me.

Girl : Aphiwe right?

Me : Oh? You know my name when you gossip about me but you don't know it to my face?

She was shaking her head the whole time.

Girl : I promise you. Aphiwe I swear on my life it wasn't me. Please...

She sighed and looked at me with pain filled eyes.

Girl : Please believe me. I can't sleep knowing you think I would do such a thing to you. Andikwazi nokwazi bruh why would I? Please just believe me.

I stood there and gave her a blank stare. Too much was going on in my head at the time. My heart and mind were in a war and I didn't know which one to let win.

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I looked at her uneasily and started walking away. This was all too much. If I believed her then I would go back to square one. Not knowing who would do such a thing and why. As selfish as it sounded blaming her made me sane. It would all make sense if the rumors were spread by her because we go to the same church but if not then... I wouldn't know what to do and I would break down again. So my mind was then made up : I'm not forgiving her.

She caught up with me and walked besides me in silence.

Me : What's your name?

Girl : Alizwa. Why?

I shrugged.

Me : So I can know the name of the girl who ruined my reputation.

I responded without even looking at her. She then sighed in defeat and stopped walking so I rolled my eyes and went home.

.

The exams were fast approaching and the closer they got the more freaked out I became. Sizwe would shout at me telling me how prepared I was compared to him so I had absolutely no

right to complain. I did it in any case. He was also not encouraging me because the closer I got to passing, which was a given, was the closer I was getting to have to "survive" and he knew that. I knew it too but we never said it out loud.

I had been doing my homework and studying in Mrs McDonalds class lately and I think that was a good idea because I was finishing quicker and studying without distractions helped me understand better.

One afternoon I was buried in my books since they had sort of become my coping mechanism when a vaguely familiar voice greeted me.

Xolani : Hi.

I sighed.

Me : Hey.

I greeted without looking up since I already knew who it was and because I was still embarrassed. There was an awkward silence for a while and he did that whole hesitant walking towards me thing. I mentally rolled my eyes.

Xolani : Uhm... You forgot your LO book in class yesterday.

He said as he handed it to me. I looked up as I took it.

Me : Flip. I didn't even notice it was gone.

I said more to myself than to him.

Me : And thank you.

He said nothing and the atmosphere was awkward again so I began packing up.

Xolani : You do know I don't bite right? I'm not gonna harass you or anything. You can carry on with your work... I'll keep my distance

He said with a hint of hurt in his voice but I continued packing up and as I was about to walk out he shouted my name.

Xolani : Aphiwe!

I turned around silently and looked at him.

Xolani : Please stay.

He asked shyly.

And I stayed. Not because he asked me to but because of the way he said my name.

.

I sat by the window and he sat all the way on the other side of the room by the wall. He didn't say anything and neither did I. He was listening to music with his earphones when he randomly started singing Part Of The List. I don't think he was aware of the fact that he was singing out loud because he just

carried on naturally. The words rolled off his tongue perfectly and he knew every single word. His voice was beautiful... I don't know how else to explain it. I wasn't planning on telling him that he was singing out loud just in case he stopped so I simply stared at him in adoration. But thinking about it now I probably looked like a creepy human being.

Another thing that made it difficult for me to look away was that I had not heard someone singing with such passion, other than myself, in a very long time. So this both excited and fascinated me. His voice it... It calmed me. It made me happy... And trust me I know what happiness is when I get to experience it. It was not as intense as when I put on that jumpsuit but it was somewhat close to the feeling and I wanted to cherish it.

He suddenly looked up, naturally making eye contact with me and I wanted to look away. I really did but there seemed to be a disconnection between my brain and my eyes! Now of all times.

Xolani : Is something the matter?

He asked with a smile and I still didn't/couldn't look away. "Spare me the humiliation!" I thought.

Me : You were... Uhm... Singing out loud.

Xolani : Oh sorry, was I disturbing you?

He asked as he pulled the earphones out of his ears and looked at me expectantly.

Me : No. Its just that I hadn't heard someone sing like that in a really long time.

I blurted and cleared my throat then pretended to busy myself with my books. He was so calm. This guy oozed calmness and confidence. That I could tell because he wasn't thrown off when he learned that he was singing out loud. He smiled and turned back to his phone, disconnecting the earphones and playing the song out loud and singing... To me.

Xolani : The way your sweet smell, lingers when you leave a room. The stories you tell as we lay in bed all afternoon. I dream you now, every night, and my mind is where we meet. And when I'm awake, staring at pictures of you asleep.

He then stood up and starting walking towards me while singing.

Xolani : Touching your face. Invading your space.

Me : They're all part of the list. Things that I miss. Things like your funny little laugh or the way you smile
or the way we kiss.

I subconsciously finished off and excitement coursed through me because of the way my voice sounded right after his.

Just as we were about to do a duet, Mrs McDonald walked in while talking to someone on the phone. She smiled at him and I and sat at her desk still talking to the person on the other end of the line. I looked at Xolani who seemed to be frozen on his spot but I couldn't read his expression. I don't think I wanted to. He then paused his music and watched me pack my bags and dash out awkwardly.

Neyo huh? Who would've thought.

.

I was walking down the school corridor with my heart thumping loudly against my chest – both from excitement and from some foreign feeling that seemed to occupy my mind at the moment. I couldn't stop thinking about how the whole scene happened and the anticipation of what could have happened, meaning how our voices would have sounded like if they collided, was still floating around in my head. I spotted Sizwe walking with the girl from chess practice, the one I happened to be rude to, and I ran up to them.

Me : Molweni.

They greeted back in unison and an awkward silence filled the air around us.

Sizwe : I need the toilet... so wait up I'll be right back.

We nodded and stood there with even more awkwardness.

Girl : So... ready for the exams?

Me : You've also began preparing? Yeah I'd like to think I am.
Are you?

She nodded with a small smile and silence loomed over us again.

Girl : So... my name is Lulama.

Me : Aph-

She cut me short.

Lulama : Aphiwe. I know. Sizwe was just telling me about you.

She pointed towards the bathroom to show she was talking about him.

Me : Hm... Mhkay.

She lowered her eyes like she wasn't expecting my response.

Lulama : You aren't going to ask what he was saying?

I shook my head and shrugged nonchalantly.

Me : He was probably saying something irrelevant like how I never let him not study or something like that.

She chuckled lightly.

Lulama : Is there anything going on between you guys though?

Me : Going on?

She nodded slowly as if that would put me in some sort of trance and I would understand what she meant.

Lulama : Like... do you guys have like feelings for each other or something.

She clarified and I crunched up my face.

Me : Ew, no.

I sighed because I had long given up trying to explain my relationship with Sizwe. Me : He's like an older brother.

She nodded and cleared her throat.

Lulama : I don't really believe you though. I shrugged again.

Me : Believe me. Don't believe me. I don't care. At least we know wassup.

Sizwe came out of the bathroom laughing.

Sizwe : We're using each other's lines now?

I rolled my eyes at him with a small smile because seeing him reminded me that I needed to tell him about what just happened.

Sizwe and Lulama were talking the whole time we were walking to the gate and I was silent because I had no business with her. The things they were talking about didn't spark my interest so I

began humming the song and waited for Sizwe while he hugged her then came to me.

Sizwe : Uthini na? “At least we know wassup.”

He said in an attempt to mimic my voice.

Me : Yes. I don't understand why she was so inquisitive kwizinto that have nothing to do with her.

He laughed and shook his head while giving me a proud smile.

Me : In any case! I shouted in excitement.

Me : Remember my mother was sewing something?

He nodded.

Me : It was a jumpsuit. Dude... ayintle. I'm getting emotional just talking about it.

I said honestly and he pinched my cheek.

Sizwe : Aww... poochie poochie? You're the cutest thing ever.

I slapped off his hand.

Me : Poochie poochie? You're so lame. And I was singing again today! Sizwe is was so... incredible? I don't know how to describe it.

I babbled on and on about the whole experience only to have him stop me when I mentioned Xolani.

Sizwe : Yima, whoa. A guy made you this happy, basically?

Me : It isn't even like that. I explained.

Me : It was his voice and the way it sounded when he said my name and how he was singing... to me!

I emphasized and he stopped, forcing me to stop as well then look at his slightly tilted head.

Sizwe : Did I not tell you to stay away from niggas, Aphiwe?

I pouted and crossed my arms over my chest.

Me : I did nothing wrong. All I did was sing with the guy so please.

Sizwe : "Nyis voice nyand the way nyit sounded nywen he said my name."

He quoted and I rolled my eyes at him for the umpteenth time that afternoon.

Me : Mxm. Can we just walk, please?

He said nothing so we walked in silence the whole time, with him walking me to the gate as usual and kissing my forehead like he always did before leaving.

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I walked inside the garage and placed my bag by the door.

Me : Afternoon mother.

She smiled at me and I walked up to her then kissed her cheek, plopping myself next to her.

Me : You look really bored.

Mom : I need to get a job.

She announced and I smiled, facing her.

Me : Yes. Yes you should.

She sighed in defeat and looked at me.

Mom : I think I want to make clothes for a living... I missed that whole experience. Thank you for bringing it to me.

Me : You're making me emotional.

I said in a jolly voice.

Me : So what are you going to do? With the clothes thing?

She shrugged.

Mom : Is there any possibility that you could maybe borrow the machine again?

I shook my head rapidly.

Me : Nah. Not at all, mama that woman is so rude! I can't shame I'm sorry.

She looked down in disappointment.

Mom : Oh...

She looked at me and saw how my face dropped.

Mom : I'll make a plan though. Don't you worry.

I nodded and got up so I could prepare something to eat – making a mental note to push Sizwe about this whole survival thing so I could buy my mother a machine and lots of material.

.

The following morning I woke up and prepared for school quickly. The day was just like any other day. Any other day being receiving stares and whispers whenever I was passing by but I guess the pain got better or I got used to it. Wait, what does that quote say again? "It doesn't get better, you just get used to it" or something along those lines. Because in reality you don't just get over something like that, you can't.

After school I stayed behind in Mrs McDonald's class to study. But this time I didn't just stay for studying, I stayed because there was a tiny glimpse of hope that Xolani might come and he'd sing again and I would stare at him again. That whole scene... I just wanted it – again.

I laughed at my own thought as I wrote 'again' accidentally on my paper and scratched in my old, withered pencil case for an eraser only to realise I didn't have one.

Me : Flip.

I sighed and he came in with the smile he always seemed to have.

Xolani : Hey.

Me : Hey.

I responded and ripped the paper out and crumbled it up then placed it on the desk next to me. I took the pen again and wrote the exact same things that were on the previous page, luckily they weren't too much. Xolani came to sit on the desk crumpled up paper was on and took out his thick textbook and an exam pad.

Xolani : I hope you don't mind me joining you.

I shook my head without looking up.

He closed his book and faced me completely.

Xolani : Do I make you awkward?

I stopped what I was doing but didn't look anywhere but my book.

Me : Excuse me?

Xolani : I mean... you can't even look at me.

I took a very deep breathe and looked at him.

Me : There. Happy?

I asked sarcastically and faced my paper again. I could see him shake his head lightly and open his book again so we studied side by side with him playing music on his phone so the atmosphere wouldn't be so heavy.

.

This carried on for a few more days, us not speaking more than two words to one another which disappointed me because I wanted him to sing again. I wanted to sing again.

It was a Friday afternoon when he came in and sat next to me, muttering a "Good afternoon" as usual and playing music then carrying on with his work. He then placed a new eraser on my desk and I stopped breathing as I looked at the eraser for what seemed like an eternity.

Xolani shifted uncomfortably in his seat and cleared his throat.

Xolani : I noticed that you don't have one so I thought maybe...

He trailed off and I looked at him. I also didn't know how to feel.

Me : Uhm... thank you?

I mumbled in confusion and I saw a wave of relieve on his face.
He smiled widely.

Xolani : You're very welcome.

I smiled awkwardly and he carried on talking.

Xolani : You have a great voice by the way.

Me : Thank you so much. So do you.

I responded honestly and he chuckled in response.

Xolani : I have a under the shower type voice.

I shook my head.

Me : Your voice is really...

I let the sentence hang for lack of a better word.

Xolani : Very...?

I shrugged.

Me : I don't know how to describe it, really. But I'd listen to it
any day.

He nodded with a smile.

Xolani : Are you in a choir or singing group or something?

I didn't answer for a while because if I said "I was" he would expect an explanation and I wasn't about the life of explaining that whole story to him so I shook my head.

Xolani : You should be.

I chuckled.

Me : No... no I think not. I'm okay.

There was silence for a while and he took his phone from his desk and I heard a snapping sound. When I snapped my head up he was holding his phone towards me with a stupid grin on his face.

Me : Wait... wait, wait, wait did you just take a picture of me?

He nodded lightly.

Xolani : I do photography as well, just by the way.

He turned the screen so I could see what was on it and the picture came out nicely. But my hair...

Me : My hair.

He played the music again and looked at me.

Xolani : You don't understand how beautiful you are, do you?

I was tongue tied by that and I was saved from responding by Lindisizwe and he was standing there with a smug look on his face.

Sizwe : Cute.

He said referring to Xolani who was sitting there calmly. Sizwe strutted inside and looked at the both of us disapprovingly.

Sizwe : Is this the boy you were telling me about? “His voice and the way he says my name” nigga?

He asked with a smirk. I felt the blood rush to my face because of embarrassment. I couldn't even look at him but I was staring straight at Sizwe mentally throwing daggers at him. There was silence again so I packed my books away and walked straight past him, making sure I bumped him with my bag in the process. So much for being a caring brother.

I practically ran down the corridor while playing Sizwe's words over and over in my head. How could he? And to be honest I didn't know why I was so mad about this whole thing because I barely knew him but still... how was I going to look at him again. I reached the stairs and ran down when Xolani's breathless voice echoed down.

Xolani : Aphiwe!

He shouted and I turned roughly forgetting to stop walking so I tumbled down the steps. The pain I felt when I landed on the floor was excruciating and it was on my leg. I covered my tear

stained face with both my hands and silently cried into them. Xolani ran down the stairs just as fast as I fell down them and crouched next to me.

Xolani : Oh my God... uhm...

He removed my hands from my face and made me look at him.

Xolani : Where does it hurt? Can I pick you up?

I shook my head and tried getting up

letting out a loud scream in the process so he scooped me up instead and went to the staff room to fetch Mrs McDonald so she could drive me to the hospital, he sat in the back seat with me trying to calm me down and I guess it worked to an extent. It was in the midst of that whole ordeal when I remembered.

Me : I can't afford a hospital.

I said softly and he brought his ear closer.

Me : I can't afford a hospital.

I repeated in a louder tone and he looked at his mother.

Mrs McDonald : Don't worry about that right now, okay? I'll handle it.

I said nothing more even though I was uneasy about the whole thing.

We finally reached the hospital and the pain seemed to be excited by our arrival so it shot through my leg and I let out a scream and cried all over again. Mrs McDonald jolted out the car and came back with hospital staff that placed me on a stretcher and carried me inside.

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About an hour later I was in a hospital bed with a small screen just above it and two other people, both with their legs propped up just like me and the pain was better than it was. I looked to the door and my mother and Mrs McDonald were standing by the door. My mom ran to give me a bone crushing hug and I hugged her back with just as much intensity.

Mom : Honey what happened!

She cupped my face in her hands, observing to ensure that I was okay.

Me : I fell down the stairs.

I responded honestly. She let out a loud sigh and kissed my forehead then sat down on the provided chair.

Mom : I was... I was just thanking your teacher for doing this for us. For you.

She said in a small voice and I figured it was because she didn't want Mrs McDonald, who was talking on the phone just outside the ward, to hear her.

Me : I'll work out a way to pay them back, mama. Don't worry.

She gave me a look.

Mom : How?

I shrugged even though I knew exactly what I was going to do.

Me : Her son is the one who helped me.

Mom : Oh? Wow that was mighty kind of him.

I nodded and we carried on talking about anything and everything when Mrs McDonald entered with the doctor. It was a tall man and he was carrying a board with him to which he was writing on.

Dr : Good afternoon.

He said with a polite smile and we greeted back.

Dr : Xolani McDonald?

My mother looked at me then back at the doctor.

Mom : No, it's Ap-

Mrs McDonald : Xolani!

She corrected quickly, giving us a look then facing the doctor who looked at her but proceeded.

Dr : You say you fell down the stairs?

Me : Correct.

Dr : Well I'm afraid you broke your leg in the process...

He babbled on and on but I zoned out when he said 'broke'. I couldn't afford to break my knee at this time of the year. Exams were fast approaching. How was I going to write them in a hospital room and how was I going to study? He finished off but I didn't hear a thing he said. Everything else came into focus when he was saying goodbye and mentioning that he'll come later to check up on me.

As soon as the doctor left mom looked at my teacher.

Mom : Xolani?

Mrs McDonald pulled a chair and sat on the other side of my bed.

Mrs McDonald : I apologise for that. Xolani is my son and he's on a medical aid so I just thought this would be better.

Mom : Thank you so much for your kindness, ma'am I don't know how we could ever repay you.

Mrs McDonald : Oh you wouldn't have to. As long as she keeps her marks up then I'll be happy.

Mom wiped a tear away and kept on thanking her.

Me : I thank you as well, ma'am. I really appreciate this.

I said in a shaky voice and she squeezed my hand in response. They stayed for a while and as soon as they left Xolani entered with a chocolate and juice.

Xolani : Hey.

Me : Hey.

I said with a small smile and he plopped on the chair then handed me the things he came with.

Me : Oh... these are for me?

I asked in a small voice and he nodded in confusion. I shook my head while looking at them.

Me : You guys have already done so much for me I wouldn't be able to take any more.

I explained and he placed them in the drawer besides him in disappointment.

Xolani : I guess you'll eat those when you're ready.

I looked down at my fingers.

Me : Thank you.

Xolani : You're welcome.

Me : No... like thank you. For everything. Thank you.

He held my fiddling hands with both of his and made me look at him.

Xolani : Really... it's okay.

My heart was stuck in my throat because of the fact that he was touching me. He was holding my hands and that made me feel some type of way. I didn't move an inch in the fear that he might remove them so I talked about something else.

Me : So... since I'm Xolani McDonald... what happens when you need to go to the hospital.

He laughed a bit, still not removing his hands from mine and sighed.

Xolani : We'll just go to another one, I guess. My mother is really fond of you.

Me : Yeah?

Xolani : Duude... I swear.

He went on to tell me about how active I was in class when I wanted to and how great my marks were and how I'm the most humble person she knows.

Me : That's probably because I'm poor.

I said softly and he looked at me.

Xolani : What?

I shook my head in embarrassment and pulled my hands out of his. He let me.

Xolani : I heard what you said. I just wanted to ensure that I heard you correctly.

Me : You probably didn't.

I lied and he faced down then looked up at me again.

Xolani : You know...

He trailed off awkwardly and looked up at me with lowered eyes.

Xolani : You know I'm trying to say something really wise right now but nah, fam. Nothing is happening.

He said in a serious tone and I laughed heartily with my eyes closed.

Me : Wow... uhm just don't, okay? Stick to singing and photography.

Xolani : Noted.

He said with a small chuckle and we carried on talking about a lot of things, a lot of light things because he was joking around a lot. Again, he was making me happy. Only this time it wasn't his voice or the way he said my name.

It was just him.

His presence.

His mere existence.

And for some reason that terrified me.

13

Xolani left using a taxi soon afterwards because his mother refused to fetch him at the hospital since it was his decision to stay. He didn't seem to mind much because he made a joke of the whole thing saying he'd be back again tomorrow but I simply laughed at him and he left with a "I'll be back" line.

The following day he indeed did come over with my books and home baked scones, saying he got them from my mother. How she managed to make them? I do not know.

Me : Thank you so much.

I took them and placed them next to me while he fetched a chair and sat on the same side of the bed he was sitting on yesterday.

Xolani : Its a pleasure. Did you eat the...

He opened the drawer and saw that I hadn't touched the things he had brought for me yesterday. He then lowered his eyes in an attempt to look intimidating

Xolani : You disappoint me.

I laughed into my hands.

Me : I'm sorry.

He took the contents out of the drawer and opened the chocolate, taking three bars for himself and giving me the rest.

Me : Thank you...

I hadn't had chocolate in years so one can imagine how it tasted and my reaction to it. I couldn't help but close my eyes in delight so I could enjoy the newly found sensation. It was in that moment when I heard a vaguely familiar snapping sound. I sighed and looked at him. He had an excited glimmer in his eye while looking at the picture.

Me : You need to stop doing such. Honestly.

I said hardly paying attention to him because of this chocolate.

Xolani : How about no?

I rolled my eyes at him and he placed his phone in his blazer pocket.

Xolani : I've never seen anyone react that way to chocolate before.

I stopped chewing in embarrassment and placed it down slowly.

Me : Oh...

Xolani : No no no I mean its amazing! Like... Flip...

He trailed off and I placed the chocolate in the drawer.

Me : Don't worry about it. Its okay.

Xolani : I feel like such a douche right now.

Me : Don't.

Xolani : I can't help it.

Me : Oh... Okay.

Silence loomed over us.

Me : I don't understand how...

I stopped talking because I didn't want what I wanted to say sound harsh.

Xolani : Do carry on.

Me : Why are you here? I don't mean that in a 'I want you to leave' way. Because I don't.

I clarified.

Me : But we clearly have nothing to say to each other.

Xolani : Honestly? I have no idea why I'm here but I know that I want to be here.

He explained.

Me : Oh... I don't know how to respond to this.

He chuckled.

Xolani : That was the whole point.

Me : Such lies.

Xolani : Mx okay maybe it wasn't the point but yeah man. It just fit the situation yabo?

I laughed lightly.

Me : You are so lame.

.

Time flew by and it seemed Xolani and I were getting closer by the hour. I tried by all means to let him do all the talking because my life was just too painful to be discussed over chocolates and juice. When it was time for him to leave he kissed both my hands and winked a walking out, leaving me to distract myself from the whole afternoon by studying.

I was in the midst of all that when I felt a figure hovering over me and when I looked up I met Sizwe's remorseful eyes.

Sizwe : What happened, Aphiwe I was so worried about you!

I looked at my books again even though I couldn't concentrate anymore.

Sizwe : Are you still mad at me about that other thing? Man it was no big deal.

I shot him a look and he sighed and sat down.

Sizwe : Okay Aphiwe I'm sorry okay? I'm sorry.

I said nothing and he was quiet for a while.

Sizwe : I feel so left out. Like... How did you get here? Who brought-

Me : You know what, Sizwe? This is ultimately all your fault okay? If you hadn't made that... Stupid remark then I wouldn't be here!

Sizwe : It wasn't even a remark though, sis. It was a quote.

Me : You are such a...!

I cut myself mid sentence.

Sizwe : Sorry. Why are you so mad about this in any case? You like him don't you?

He asked as he poked my stomach. I slapped his hand off.

Me : He's an amazing person, dude. You didn't even bring me something to eat.

I sulked.

Sizwe : Ahh dude come on like I literally ran here from school man have a heart.

I smiled lightly.

Me : Such lies.

Sizwe : Seriously bruu. I'll make it up to you though, okay?
Don't worry about it.

Me : Yeah yeah.

He chuckled lightly and observed me for a while.

Sizwe : I missed you though. Like before you were one legged
though.

I simply laughed so I could avoid responding to that since I
didn't miss him back when he wasn't here.

Hell, he hardly crossed my mind.

.

I blankly stared at Sizwe as he babbled on about whatever he
was talking about, which I couldn't hear because I had zoned
out while staring at him, when he pinched my arm.

Me : Ow.

I said lightly and brushed the place he'd pinched me on.

Sizwe : Did you hear a word I just said?

He asked with a hint of annoyance in his voice.

Me : No.

I responded honestly and he shook his head.

Sizwe : What is it? What are you thinking?

Me : Nothing... Really. Its nothing.

He leaned back in his chair and studied me intently. Me : You're staring.

Sizwe : So what must happen?

Me : You should stop. You're making me uncomfortable.

Sizwe : I don't care

really. Tell me. Are you falling for this guy?

I flushed and scratched my leg.

Me : What do you mean?

Sizwe : Do you get butterflies and your heart becomes all fuzzy and all that crappy stuff you kids feel when you think you love someone?

Me : I don't love him. I hardly know him.

Sizwe : You like him though?

Me : As a friend, yes.

I lied and sighed. He lowered his eyes and twisted his lip like he always did when he was thinking.

Me : Penny for your thoughts?

Sizwe : The pretty, rich boys are always the ones to cause the first heartbreak.

Me : He isn't going to break my heart, Sizwe.

I defended.

Me : He couldn't. He's out of my league... I don't understand why he's so nice to me even.

Sizwe : Look... You'll deal with your insecurities later because you know that you're beautiful and you're smart and quite frankly you're out of his league. Not everything is about money or your social standing.

He sighed.

Sizwe : This is just... Me warning my little sister. Be careful, okay? If you do happen to take the plunge and be with him just don't be reckless in your feelings or relationship for him, okay? The last I want is for you to get hurt by some yellow ass nigga.

I laughed lightly at the last line.

Me : I hear you. Scones?

I offered as I reached for the container and offered them to him.

We sat and talked about everything. From my fall to Xolani helping me and me actually being a Xolani according to the hospital. He laughed at that and commented on how savage "Miss D" was for it.

It was eventually time for Sizwe to leave and he kissed my forehead as usual then promised to come see me tomorrow. When he left I felt rather content with the way everything was going on. Maybe me being in hospital was a good thing, to an extent. I was building a relationship with two people that mattered.

I didn't mind the fact that my mother couldn't come visit me because I knew she wasn't going to afford the transport so I enjoyed the remainder of the scones and reminded myself of her with them.

During the course of the day the doctor made his rounds and informed me that my leg will take six to eight weeks to heal. I cringed when he mentioned such and he warned me to not put too much pressure on it or return to my regular activities too fast since I'll be doing myself a disservice. He recommended physiotherapy sessions after the cast has been removed and I simply nodded knowing very well that I wouldn't be coming. I couldn't abuse the McDonald's kindness like that because I knew that the sessions would require money. Money we didn't have.

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A week later I was still on that hospital bed. Enjoying and appreciating every delicious meal I was provided with. Studying insanely hard and watching soapies on the small screen above

my bed when I got the chance. Having laugh sessions whenever Sizwe or Xolani came and I found it weird how they never came at the same time. Like they had a schedule that worked for the both of them to not clash.

My mother had come to visit me sometime during the week and I was the happiest kid ever when I met her warm eyes and embraced her in a loving hug. She told me about how quiet her life was without me and how she had been looking for a job but nothing came up so she asked me about "that woman's house I clean which is six streets away". A lump formed in my throat and she explained how she borrowed money to come visit me because she missed me and because the only thing that filled our fridge at the time was frost.

I stuttered something that didn't make sense because I didn't know how I was going to explain the fact that I had been lying the whole time about cleaning for a woman when in actual fact I was cleaning for a notorious small time gangster. She suspected something from the way I couldn't answer the question and pressed on harder but I wouldn't budge. Instead I brushed it off with a "I'm going to get money, mom. Don't worry she still owes me a bit of money from the last time I went there..." Lies, lies and more lies.

She had to accept that because she clearly wasn't going to get anything out of me that day. She left with a "I love you and I'll

visit when I can". Kissing my forehead she both cheeks she walked out and I let out a sigh of relief.

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Later in the day Xolani came over as usual only this time he was a mess. His tie was loose, blazer hanging over his right arm and his eyes were lowered like they were strained or he was crying. Crying? My brain immediately shot up to attention and I sat up straight. Immediately holding my hand out to him and he rushed forward so he could hold it. We sat in silence for a minute with his head laying on my open palm. I think he was gathering up the courage to speak because he looked up with barely open eyes.

Xolani : Wanna take a walk?

I did. The doctor had given me crutches and it was going to be my first time using them so he was supporting me the whole way. We made our way to the ground floor and went out some door to the benches and they were luckily empty. He helped me sit down then plopped down next to me, placing his blazer on the bench as well.

Xolani was facing down the whole time and I figured he just wanted to sit in silence. I didn't mind that because I wanted moments like this but had no one to share them with so I shifted closer and gathered up the courage to lift his head up

gently only to notice that tears were slowly rolling down his cheeks. My breath hitched in my throat and I reacted by wiping them off with the back of hand while maintaining eye contact.

He looked weak and drained and I didn't know how to help him since I was getting sentimental myself. His head dropped again and to me that was silent surrender to whatever he was going through. I wasn't going to allow that so I took both his hands into mine, clearly surprising him because his head shot up and he looked at me in confusion. I drew them to myself, wrapping them around my waiste then giving him a much needed hug.

His hold around my waiste tightened and so did mine around him. He cried onto my neck and I tried my best to be strong for him.

Me : Everything will be okay.

I breathed and I felt him slightly shaking his head. His sobs gradually became more audible until I couldn't help it anymore... I cried along with him.

Because at this point? His pain was mine.

Xolani's soft sobs into the dingy fabric of my hospital gown teared me apart inside. I was rubbing his back the whole time, patiently whispering "everything is going to be okay" in his ear. I was trying to console the both of us at that moment because we were crying together and it wasn't beautiful. I hated this feeling so I tried pulling myself together so he could stop crying as well. Maybe the reason he couldn't stop was because I was crying with him.

A few minutes later he calmed down but didn't move. Instead he gave me a tight squeeze and moved his head from my neck but didn't remove his hands around my waiste. His grip simply loosened a bit. I moved my hands from his neck and wiped his tears off with my thumb. He closed his eyes at my touch and turned his head to kiss one of my hands then opened his eyes, looking straight at me.

Xolani : Thank you...

He said in a soft voice. I was about to respond when he wiped my tears away the same way I did his. I smiled lightly.

Me : Its a pleasure.

He took both my hands in his. A gesture that now seemed normal since he did it so much. I was slowly getting used to it... I was getting comfortable with having his soft hands wrapped

around in mine. He was looking down at our hands the whole time. Simply playing with my fingers so I watched him because I didn't know what to say. What do you say in such a situation?

Xolani : I don't want to talk about it yet.

Me : You don't have to... I understand. Uhm you'll talk when you're ready, really. That's if you want to.

I babbled and he chuckled lightly. A chuckle which turned into a hiccup.

Xolani : Flip. Let's go get some water?

He looked up at me as if asking for permission so I nodded and he helped me up and we passed to buy water before going back to my room. We were talking about light things on our way back. Like how we didn't like the smell of a hospital and how weird we must have looked both hiccupping at the same time and how we'd like to sing together one day.

When we got to my room we found Sizwe pacing up and down my side of the room in frustration. Xolani and I looked at each other quietly and I cleared my throat lightly before entering the room. His eyes shot up and he charged towards me.

Sizwe : Aphiwe what the hell? Where do you come from!

He shouted and led me to the bed, opening the cover swiftly and picking me up with ease and placing me on it. We were all silent while this was happening and he brushed my hair back.

Sizwe : Are you okay? Were you crying?

Me : I'm okay. Yes... But I'm okay.

I looked at Xolani who was awkwardly standing on the other side of the bed. Sizwe observed my face some more then planted a sloppy kiss on my forehead when he was satisfied that I indeed was okay. He stepped back and only then did he seem to acknowledge Xolani's presence.

Sizwe : Why was she crying?

He asked. His tone changing from the caring one he had a minute ago.

Sizwe ignored him and he simply took his blazer which was laying on the chair and walked out silently. My heart slowly bled because he didn't even say goodbye. Sizwe sat down and made me face him.

Sizwe : Are you okay?

Me : Yeah.

I looked towards the door again but figured that he wasn't going to come back so I focused on Sizwe.

Sizwe : I brought you something.

He reached into his pocket and pulled out a few notes.

Sizwe : This is the money you would receive when cleaning for me but since you're broken you can't do such. But I'm paying you in any case.

I took the money and placed it in the drawer.

Me : Thank you so much. I'll spring clean the next time I go there.

Sizwe : Whoa. No fight today?

I shook my head.

Sizwe : Is this boy already giving you problems?

Me : He isn't giving me problems

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Sizwe. In fact I'd like to sleep so...

Sizwe : Okay, kid. I'll be back tomorrow.

Me : Okay.

I said as I snuggled in the bed in preparation for sleep. He kissed my forehead and left.

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Xolani's POV

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I quietly walked out of that room and made my way down the hospital corridor, putting my blazer on in the process. Who was that guy? I took my phone and earphones out of my pocket only to notice that I was shaking so I sat down on the closest bench to try calm myself down. I was mad. I was mad at that Sizwe guy for not respecting me and my presence and I was mad at Aphiwe for allowing him to disrespect me like that.

I was... I was mad at myself for being mad for something that didn't exist. Aphiwe didn't have to act in any type of way when it came to each other because we were just friends and friends have all the freedom in the world when it came to each other. But I couldn't help it. How do you not get mad when you see someone else having the audacity of even touching your sanity and place of tranquility. The fact that she had become these things for me in such a short space of time simply terrified me. When I was calm I plugged my earphones in and listened to music all the way to the taxi rank then boarded one home.

Home...? Sometimes I wish I could see my life from someone else's eyes. Because when you're looking from the outside in you might get the wrong picture. And right now I want to get the wrong picture of my own life. What is home? What is family? Is it coming home to find your mother crying while she

cooks spaghetti and mince for two because she knows her husband won't be coming home? Again? Is it coming home the following day only to find her crying while she cooks rice and meat for three because her husband is home? Only she doesn't want him here but she's caught between what she wants and what's best for everyone. Its twisted though. Who decides what's best for everyone? Us? The people looking from the outside in?

I was still deep in my thoughts when I opened the kitchen door to find my father sitting at the counter with a half empty beer bottle in front of him. I closed the door quietly in disgust and passed him without a word.

Dad : Come back here.

I clenched my jaw and went back to him, taking my earphones out.

Dad : Can't you greet anymore?

Me : Is this why you called me?

He shook his head lightly as he made that 'ncncnc' sound.

Dad : Yazi kwedini uphelelwa sismilo.

Me : Only when it comes to you.

I responded more to myself that to him but it was clearly audible so he slapped me with the back of his hand. I stumbled

back until I had my back against the fridge. I slumped down and buried my head in my hands while biting back tears. He got up from his chair and hovered over me.

Dad : I will NOT be disrespected in my own house, Xolani!
Never! By a kid nogal? Nxa!

He shouted and stumbled to their room while Aphiwe's words played in my head like a broken record.

"Everything is going to be okay."

Aphiwe's POV

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The sun poured into the hospital room and I cringed because I was a day closer to going... Home. I liked it here. The food was good and I took proper baths. I didn't want to leave. I hadn't slept a wink the previous night. Partly because I knew that I would be going home soon and mostly because of the way Xolani left yesterday. It had been bugging me all night and I hated not understanding why it bothered me so much and why he acted the way that he did.

I sat up carefully since my leg was still a bit painful. But it had healed a lot over the time so it was okay. I took out my books and began studying like I had been doing for the whole time I was here.

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I had been working for hours since I woke up. The nurses came and went, helping me get to the bathroom, giving me food and whatnot, so I was really into this studying thing when Sizwe walked in with a plastic bag. I smiled lightly and closed my book, placing it next to me.

Sizwe : Hey.

Me : Hello.

He plopped onto the provided chair and held out the plastic bag. I took it with both hands.

Me : Thank you so much.

I peeped inside and there was junk food, mostly.

Me : Haha thank you. Is this you making it up to me?

Sizwe : Nah fam. I haven't made it up to you yet. I just bought those for you because I wanted to.

I sighed contently.

Me : Thank you.

Sizwe : You thank too much, man. So. What are we doing today?

I placed the plastic besides me and focused on him.

Me : Thinking...

Sizwe : Oh? About?

Me : The fact that I'm going to leave this place soon.

I said as I looked around the room.

Sizwe : You should be happy mos. Why so depressed?

I looked at him with a pained expression.

Me : Sizwe... I...

I shrugged.

Me : I don't want to leave.

I said honestly.

Me : I don't.

I pressed on so he could understand.

He laid back in his chair and loosened his already loose tie then unbuttoned the top button of his shirt.

Me : What are you doing?

Sizwe : Thinking.

He responded honestly and let his hands hang to his sides.

Me : About?

Sizwe : How unappreciative we as people are. I bet you if I went to the next person and asked them about their experience they would complain about how horrible the food is and how they just want to leave this place. Then there's you.

He chuckled lightly.

Sizwe : You're amazing, babe. Don't ever forget that.

I frowned.

Me : I'm not.

Sizwe : Well you are. Everyone else sees it. Sweets?

He grabbed the plastic and hauled out a packet of sour sweets, not mentioning what we had just talked about for the rest of the afternoon.

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We had been chilling for a few hours and it was time for Sizwe to go home. I had asked him to make a plan to get the money to my mother and he said "I got it.". Which made me uneasy because he might go and give it to her himself but that was irrelevant at the time since she needed money urgently and she couldn't exactly come fetch it from me.

Just as he was getting up, Xolani walked in but stopped on his tracks the minute his eyes landed on Sizwe. He shifted his focus from him to me then to him again. I didn't realize I was holding my breathe until he stepped inside and walked towards my bed. I was relieved since I thought he was going to turn around and walk away.

Sizwe ignored his presence like he always did and kissed my forehead. I stole a glance at Xolani, who's jaw was clenched a bit and I think Sizwe also noticed this because he asked to have a word with him. Outside.

Me : Why?

I asked in Xolani's defense.

Sizwe : Hayi hayi hayi. Uthanda iindaba khawuthule.

He said dismissively and shoved an uninterested Xolani out. He was dressed in black jeans with a black shirt and black sneakers. He had never come to visit me in casual clothes before, he was always in uniform so this change spoke volumes. The fact that he went home for hours before coming to see me spoke volumes. But I had to understand what they were first.

I sat there playing with my fingers for what seemed like forever when Xolani came back into the room alone. I noticed that his eyes weren't as dark as they were when he first entered but they still had a hint of sadness in them. He reached the side of my bed and hovered over me, giving me a look I couldn't quite explain. It was intimidating yet confused.

Xolani : Hey.

Me : Hey.

Xolani : Wanna go for a walk?

He said as he reached for my crutches.

Me : Always.

He helped me up and we strolled down the corridor to the same spot we went to yesterday in silence. It wasn't a comfortable silence. It seemed as though the air was polluted

with unspoken words and unexpressed feelings. We finally reached the bench and it was empty again.

He sat beside me and stared at me.

Me : What did Sizwe say to you?

Xolani : That I should stay away from you. And that I should back.

Me : Fight back? Fight what back?

Xolani : It doesn't matter. I just refused to stay away from you. He doesn't own you.

Me : Oh...

Xolani : Or does he?

Me : Of course he doesn't.

He breathed out in relief in hopes that I wouldn't notice but I did. I didn't react though.

Xolani : He's so comfortable around you... And you around him.

Me : I'm comfortable around you as well, am I not?

I said with a nonchalant shrug.

Me : And why are you in all black? And why did you just leave like that yesterday?

He got up in one sudden movement and paced up and down in front of me. His movements being slow and precise, hands slipped into his pocket.

Xolani : Its how I'm feeling.

Me : You wear your feelings?

Xolani : Yes.

He wasn't paying attention to me while talking to me while I paid attention to his every move.

Me : And why did you leave the way you did yesterday?

Xolani : Because...

He stopped and looked at me, only to shake his head lightly and carry on walking.

Xolani : It doesn't matter.

Me : It does.

I said with authority.

Xolani : It does not.

Me : It does!

Xolani : Fine, Aphiwe! I don't like the way you and that Sizwe nigga are around each other! I hate how comfortable you are in his space but you aren't in mine, okay!

I huffed loudly because he was shouting at me. That one fact made everything that he was saying at the moment irrelevant.

Me : I don't get why it bothers you so much!

I bit back since I had nothing better to say but still wanted to say something. My heart was pounding in my stomach because of the way his eyes burned into mine when I said that. He stepped towards me with the same sudden movement he had gotten up with, hovering over me and me not breaking eye contact since I wanted to show him that he didn't scare me. I stood up furiously, placing pressure on the leg that wasn't hurt.

We stood there staring furiously at each other. Chemistry was buzzing in the air and in an instant his eyes shifted from blazing to soft. He leaned in slowly, giving me a chance to think. Push him away. Cuss him out. But I did none of those things. Instead I watched as his face grew closer and my heart beat faster by the second. I wasn't prepared for this. I couldn't do it. Our lips met before I remembered to take a breath.

I broke the kiss as quickly as it began. He leaned

again, but I turned this time, letting him catch my cheek.

He breathed onto my cheek while I tried controlling my heart, which was beating furiously against my ribcage.

Xolani : It bothers me because I'm falling for you.

He whispered and my breathe hitched in my throat. I didn't want to move. I didn't want to look at him at the moment and he understood. He understood because he slowly pulled me into a warm embrace, burying his face in my neck like I was a taste of a home he'd been longing for. I snaked my hands around him as well. Because he... He was my taste of bliss and tranquility.

Before my father died, when we used to live thee life, I used to be the average teenage girl. The average teenage girl who had a crush on the most popular guy a school. The average girl who wished to meet her prince charming. But the moment my father died, I lost that side of me. All my feelings died along with him. I never saw a male as anything more than just a male, a normal person. But then there's Xolani, he isn't just a male or a normal person, he is Xolani. He is my place of serenity.

At first, I thought it was the way he said my name. Then I thought it was because of the way we sang together because together because I had never experienced such before. Then I thought it was because of the way he was comfortable with the silence between us. Then I thought it was because of his smile, because he has an amazing smile. His smile is just so... so genuine. So genuine that it scares me. All of him is so real, he's so raw and he's got this rich soul that you just want to dig into and never come out of.

Hope. Happiness. Two intangible things that I've wanted to hold in my heart for years now. And Xolani, Xolani is my hope and happiness. I've never waited for someone like I wait for him. The moment I see him walk through the door, my heart wants to beat out of my chest and my cheeks burn up and there are butterflies in my stomach and it's all just so amazing.

The excitement and that thrill, it's just exhilarating. I've never felt this way before, it's weird but I like it. I want to take this feeling and wrap it up and put it in a pretty box and hide it, then when I'm feeling down, I just unwrap it and relive the moment.

This is happening too quickly. It's all too intense. It's all too sudden. I shouldn't give in. I should let go. should...

"Hi." Xolani's voice echoed in my head, disturbing my train of thought. He then walked over to my bed, held both my hands in his and smiled shyly.

Me : I'm scared.

I said honestly

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my voice dripping with vulnerability.

Xolani : Don't be. I'll guide you.

He looked at our hands.

Xolani : Just don't let go.

He planted a kiss on them and looked up at me while doing so.

Xolani : Because I won't.

I stopped breathing for a moment and just stared at him, afraid that if I exhaled he would disappear into thin air just like my breath.

Me : Did you bunk?

I said between giggles. He had been making me laugh ever since he got here.

Xolani : Haha no, babe, as if my mother would allow. We're on our study break.

Me : You're supposed to be studying.

I said with a frown.

Xolani : I've been studying like crazy since you fell down those stairs. I needed something to distract me so I'm ready for whatever. Are you ready for yours?

I took a quick glance at the books that were scattered on the other side of my bed.

Me : Basically.

Xolani : See? So we can chill now before...

He looked at his watch.

Xolani : Before my mother gets here.

I choked on my spit.

Me : Why is she coming here?

Xolani : Whoa are you okay? To fetch you, of course...

He said slowly.

Me : Oh. Of course.

I cleared my throat and shifted uncomfortably.

Xolani : Nothing has changed...

Me : She doesn't know?

Xolani : Yeah. I know she's your teacher so I didn't want to make things awkward for you guys. Especially you. And I think its quite evident that you don't want me to tell her.

Me : Please don't.

I pleaded.

Me : Or just not now. I'm not ready yet.

He nodded in understanding and we chatted for a few more hours until his mother got there. She was with my mom and the

fact that she missed me was very evident. She couldn't stop kissing me and it was awkward because Xolani was watching and laughing to himself. My mom gave me a bag with some clothes and I went to put them on. They were my more presentable ones so I wasn't too embarrassed. Xolani took everything that belonged to me and we made our way to the car since Mrs McD had already signed the the discharge papers.

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We were quiet the whole way because I think we both knew that we would say things we weren't supposed to at that moment in time. It was insane how everything around us disappeared when we talked. The closer we got to my house the more uncomfortable I became. They were going to see where I live... he was going to see where I live. I let out a disgruntled grumble which was supposedly louder than I anticipated because he shot me a concerned look but I smiled reassuringly and looked straight ahead.

The car finally came to a halt and something that was supposed to feel familiar since it wasn't the first time that Mrs McD took me home made me want to crawl into a hole and come out when Xolani wasn't here.

Mrs McD : Would you like us to help you carry your things inside?

She asked with a kind smile and a glanced at Xolani who was already preparing to get out with my bags.

Me : No... we... oka-

Mom : Your son is such a gentleman. Thank you so much, Xolani ndoda but I think we'll manage from here. You've already done so much for us.

I looked at my mother and her face completely contradicted what she was saying. She looked slightly sad and you could hear it in her tone that she was.

Xolani : Oh okay then, ma'am. I'll just walk you to the gate then.

Mom : We'll appreciate that.

She said with a small smile and it immediately faded when she looked at me. She then turned to look at Mrs McD.

Mom : I don't know what t-

She cut her off.

Mrs McD : S'tandiwe, it's okay. Really.

She then took one of her hands in hers.

Xolani : Aii I don't have to watch this. Let's go.

He hopped off and came to my side to open the door. He then helped me out and we walked to the gate.

Me : I'm not getting used to these crutches.

I grumbled and he chuckled.

Xolani : You'll be okay, man. Practise makes perfect, does it not?

I sighed.

Me : I guess.

The parents finally made their way towards us and Xolani handed my mom my bags.

Mom : Thank you.

She looked at his mother.

Mom : To the both of you. Thank you.

She bit her bottom lip to keep herself from crying and Mrs McD gave her a warm hug.

Mrs McD : It's only a pleasure.

She took a step back still holding my mother's shoulders.

Mrs McD : We should go out for coffee sometime?

Mom looked taken aback. She looked taken aback to the point where she gasped loudly, dropping my school bag and quickly picking it up then clutching it to her chest. We were all looking at her expectantly.

Mom : I... I would love that.

She breathed and Mrs McD clasped her hands together in delight.

They left after another hug while Xolani and I took the chance to give each other a hug as well.

.

We made our way inside the garage and the familiarity of everything slapped me in the face. This was the place I dreaded coming back to. Mom placed my bags on the bed and turned to face me. Her expression wasn't a pleasant one.

Mom : What happened to you?

Me : I fell down the stairs.

I responded.

Mom : Aphiwe... what happened to you?

She sighed in defeat and sat on the bed.

Mom : Ever since you stopped going to church you've changed. Very gradually, but you changed nonetheless.

She put her hand on her chest as if the words she was about to utter hurt her before they even left her lips.

Mom : Are you embarrassed about your home?

I bit my tongue in the hopes that it would bleed and I would have an excuse to not answer that question. She looked at me with a pained expression.

Mom : You are... aren't you? Oh my lord.

She breathed and she pulled at her clothing.

Mom : I thought you were content with this... the roof the...

She couldn't bring herself to finish because her tears beat her to it.

Me : I'm sorry.

I muttered through a cracking voice then limped to her, plopping on the bed as well and to my surprise she allowed me to hold and comfort her.

Me : I'm sorry.

I breathed into her hair while biting back my own tears.

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It was the following day and I was in Mrs McD's class like I always was after school. Yesterday's events were still stuck in my brain and the more I tried concentrating and forgetting it screamed for my attention which was why I was sitting by the window staring into nothing.

Xolani : Earth to Aphiwe.

He said as he waved his hands in front of my face then pulled a chair so he could sit next to me. I smiled lightly but it quickly disappeared.

Me : I'm such a selfish person...

I said more to myself than to him.

Me : Things weren't supposed to happen like this... he wasn't supposed to go.

I said so randomly that he eyed me suspiciously but giving me all his attention at the same time.

Me : My father.

I clarified briefly as though clarifying more to myself than to him, clarifying my own sanity.

Xolani : Aphiwe I...

He stuttered as fresh tears rolled down my face and suddenly I felt defeated. Everything was hitting me at the same time and it was hitting me hard. I was up all night just thinking and I think at that very moment everything just decided to register. I couldn't even stop trying. I wanted to keep quiet... I wanted to not say anything but the desperation in his weary look urged me to go on.

Me : You'll leave me too.

I said, almost choking on the lump in my throat that throbbed for attention.

Me : I can't go through it again. I can't. I won't.

I said as I furiously wiped away tears which immediately paved the way for others.

Xolani : But I'm not dead.

He resonated, bringing his hands closer to mine. A gesture which, to my own surprise, I rejected. A gesture I had grown comfortable with... a gesture I had learnt to belong to. To feel his fingertips as they slowly wrapped around mine... a gesture that almost kept me alive.

Me : You'll be...

My voice trailed off, but I needed to continue.

Me : You'll be as good as dead. When you walk away.

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I'm not one who hides how they're feeling. I'm not going to pretend that everything is okay when it isn't. And when I was uttering all that to Xolani, I meant it. Every single word.

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Xolani : You think I'm going to leave?

He asked after a minute of silence, only hiccups and high emotions between us.

Me : Yes.

I responded honestly.

Me : No one ever stays. Either that or I'm told to leave.

I said, referring to the church incident. He breathed out and tried touching my hand. Unsure whether he was allowed or not so I met him halfway and they wrapped around mine. Familiarity overwhelmed me and I breathed in quickly.

Xolani : I'm not good with words. You know this.

I nodded lightly and he took my other hand into both of his then brought them to his face. Kissing both of them in turn without looking at me.

Xolani : But... I want this, Phiwe. I want you and I want to stay... I will stay. As long as you let me.

I closed my eyes and shook my head.

Me : I'm scared.

I whispered.

Xolani : I know, babe. I know and I'm scared too but we're already in this.

He touched my cheek with his one hand but I still kept my eyes shut.

Xolani : Please look at me. Please.

I took a deep breathe and looked at him. He wiped my tears while looking straight at me.

Xolani : I'm in too deep, Aphiwe. So... So please give this a chance. Give us a chance. Because it's beautiful... You're beautiful.

He concluded and my tears failed me. He made me stand up and I cried into his white shirt with him patiently brushing my back.

It was in that moment when I decided that for once in my life I knew exactly what I wanted and I actually had it.

Him.

A wave of euphoria suddenly hit me and I wrapped my hands around his neck in one sudden movement, pulling him closer

with every breathe because I didn't want him to slip away and because I wanted us to be one.

Me : Thank you so much.

Xolani : No, thank you.

With a bit of difficulty, he broke the hug and held both my cheeks in the palm of his hands. He was holding my happiness the same way, and he could take it away as quickly as he gave it to me but I brushed the thought away and basked in the moment.

Xolani : So, allow me to stay.

Me : Please do.

He smiled lightly and planted a soft kiss on my lips. I breathed out lightly while looking at him and I could tell that he wanted to do more. In all honesty, so did I. So I leaned forward and kissed him gently. It felt like a second first kiss.

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Time passed and I was happy. I was happy because he was always there, in his mother's class and we would study together until I had to leave. Either that or he would be lazy and take pictures of me the whole time. For some reason I never asked to see the pictures. I just... I don't understand what beauty I saw in this. Me, this basic girl. And he never tried to explain so I

guessed it was something he wanted to keep to himself. Until one day he came into the room, singing along to 'You.' by 11:11 and I could tell he was in a good mood because of the colours he was wearing.

Xolani : Hey you.

He made his way to the desk I was sitting on and planted a kiss on my cheek.

Me : Hey you. Why are we so happy?

Xolani : Because we know how to show you how beautiful you are.

I huffed and looked down at my book.

Me : I'm not interested.

He pulled a chair and sat beside me, grabbing my hand happily and placing them on his knees.

Xolani : Yes, you are. Everything has been arranged.

I yanked my hands away.

Me : Wait, what?

He sighed and took my hands again.

Me : Yes, that. Trust me, will you.

He leaned forward and pecked my lips gently. I sighed and yanked my hands away.

Me : Stop it.

I warned. And he lifted his hands up in fake surrender since he was laughing.

Me : What did you do?

Xolani : You'll see.

Me : Excuse me?

Xolani : I want to show you how beautiful you are, babe. I don't think you understand.

Me : And how exactly are you going to do this? Take pictures of me?

I asked as rolled my eyes.

Xolani : Well... basically.

I sighed.

Me : I can't... mx don't you always do this?

Xolani : Aphiwe, please. Just say yes and I'll give the go ahead to everything. Please.

He pleaded with a serious look. You could tell he really wanted to do this and I was interested.

Me : Fine. What do I have to do?

.

Later that afternoon I was walking home when I realised how much I missed Sizwe. I hadn't seen him since the other day at the hospital and I missed him terribly so I put my crutches to actual use and made my way to his house. I knocked once and made my way in. It was no surprise that it was open but it was dark inside and the place was a mess, like he hadn't cleaned up in days. Then it clicked that it was my fault his place was like this. I hadn't cleaned in a long time.

Me : Sizwe?

I called out, leaving my crutches by the door and limping to the lounge. He was sleeping there with one leg off the couch and his mouth hanging open.

Me : Ugh.

I walked up to him and shook him harshly. He sat up as soon as he saw that it was me and gave me an annoyed look.

Sizwe : What are you doing here?

Me : I missed you.

I said honestly and he rolled his eyes.

Sizwe : Let me walk you home.

He said as he got up and stretched, making his way to the kitchen. I said nothing. I simply followed him and he walked me home in silence.

The following morning, which was a Friday, I woke up in a limbo. I was unsure about how to feel because Xolani was making me happy yet Sizwe was being cold. I prepared for the day in those thoughts, kissed my mother goodbye and was on my way.

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The day went by swiftly since we were simply revising for exams at this point. Xolani came after school, as usual and we caught a taxi to his house so he could show me how beautiful I was. I didn't know what to expect hence I was nervous. We made our way there while having a light conversation and he wouldn't tell me what it was.

When we entered the house we were met by two girls, two beautiful girls and they were making themselves something to eat. I immediately clammed up and looked at him.

Me : You're going to show me how beautiful I am by comparing me to other girls?

He laughed lightly and simply took my hand, leading me into a room and leaving the two girls with me. They introduced themselves to me and gave me a sleeveless dress to put on

then applied make up on my face. I was quiet the whole time since I was inquisitive. When we were done refused to let me look at myself in the mirror.

Xolani was sitting on a chair in a room that had a white sheet just hanging there and he was juggling his camera from one hand to the other. He stood up as soon as he saw me

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not uttering anything. He looked at me like he was appreciating what he was seeing and walked forward, planting a kiss on my lips giving me a brief hug. Now we all know “he isn’t good with words” so yeah.

Xolani : So... I’ll prove it to you by giving you your very own photo shoot.

“Ask most people what they want out of life and the answer is simple: to be happy. Maybe it’s this explanation though of wanting to be happy that just keeps us from ever getting there. Maybe the more we try to will ourselves to states of bliss, the

more confused we get – to the point where we don't recognize ourselves. Instead we just keep smiling, trying to be the happy people we wish we were, until it hits us, it's been there all along. Not in our dreams, or our hopes, but in the known, the comfortable, the familiar." Meredith Grey, Grey's Anatomy.

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I think my happiness, or rather my idea of happiness at the time was defined the moment I saw the pictures that Xolani took. Seeing the twinkle in his eyes when he said, "Hey, that's my favourite one", then he'd change his mind when he saw the next one, saying that's his favourite instead until he decided that he loved them all. I think it was the way his voice shook with pride when he turned the camera to me and told me to look at how beautiful I am, how that was the way that I looked in his eyes and he hated the fact that I never realised that – until now. It was the tranquillity that I felt when I was with him even if we were sitting in silence and trying to study when we both knew very well that both our minds were on each other. It was him, he was the happiness that I had looked for in most parts of my life but never got it. But that didn't matter because he was there and my happiness was in the palm of his hands. Yes, all this was beautiful but the reality was I was just waiting for him to drop it, humbly hoping that he wouldn't.

We were now lying on the carpet with our tummies as we held ourselves up with a few cushions while he went through all the pictures on his PC. Every one of them had a story, when he broke his arm in grade 5, his grade 7 farewell, his first day of grade 8 and a family holiday picture. The mood was light and we were laughing throughout until he reached the picture of his family, there was him as a child standing between his parents and looking up at them while his father kissed his mother's cheek. They all looked so happy that I smiled to myself until I looked over at him. Pain passed through his eyes and he clenched his jaw lightly, my smile faded.

Xolani : What's wrong with this picture?

He asked suddenly. I looked back at the picture and saw happiness.

Me : Nothing...

I said silently and he sat up so I was forced to look up at him.

Xolani : Everything is wrong with it.

He said numbly while blankly staring at the picture, I turned to the side and propped myself up with my arm so I could have a better view of him.

Me : How? You all look so happy.

He laughed coldly.

Xolani : Happy?

He asked rhetorically and I kept quiet.

Xolani : See, in photography there's always two sides. The 'happy', "everything was perfect, even if it was just for a moment" side. The side that people who look from the outside in see, the side they're allowed to see.

He paused and took a breath.

Xolani : Then there's the other side. The side no one else is allowed to see. The "things will never be this way again" side.

For the first time since he started talking he looked down at me.

Xolani : The dark side... and that's the side I live in.

He blurted like it was something one says every day.

Me : But... you love photography. I don't understand why you're so passionate about something that makes you feel this way.

Xolani : It isn't always bad. I also take photographs of beautiful things; like the sunset or the sunrise. Like when I see siblings happily playing together at the park while their parents look out at them with smiles on their faces and their fingers intertwined.

He made a delighted sound in his throat.

Xolani : And you.

He took my hand in his and made me sit up so we were looking directly at each other.

Xolani : You make me happy. Thank you.

I opened my mouth to speak but he placed his finger on my lips.

Xolani : I don't want you to respond. Just... just know, okay?

I nodded.

Xolani : Come here.

He pulled me to him and gave me a long, silent hug.

Xolani : Don't you ever forget.

He pulled back and pecked my lips.

Me : Never.

He smiled and sighed then faced his laptop again.

Xolani : I want to teach you a song.

He searched up the lyrics to Photographs by Ed Sheeran and we spent the rest of the afternoon finishing each other's lyrics while it played in the background.

There's nothing romantic about panicking because you're going to get home when the sun has fully set since you and him forgot to check the time between all your singing and lyric learning. There's nothing fun about having him give you transport money because he doesn't drive and he also needs to be home when his parents get there so you give each other a hurried goodbye and an awkward cheek kiss.

Two hours. I was two hours late and all bad things were rushing through my head when I was sitting in the taxi that seemed to be taking forever to reach its destination. When I finally got off, my legs weren't doing me much justice as they wobbled from pure fear as I got closer and closer to the house. I could see the candle burning faintly from the distance and I said a short prayer.

I slid open the door and was met by my mother's gaze. It burned all the excuses that I was making up in my head since I closed that taxi door as well as all the thoughts that said 'she's going to understand.' Understand what? The fact that I was with a boy for the past few hours and having a photo shoot? Flip - that sounds like the hugest lie ever. She shot up from her seat and charged towards me, the movement was so fast I didn't realise she was slapping me until the stinging sensation

kicked in and I stumbled back. Shock coursed through me and I held my hand up to my cheek while I begged myself to not cry.

Mom : Aphiwe...

She said with a shaky voice. I looked up at her in anger.

Mom : Aphiwe Ngcobo uvelaphi!

She shouted and I jumped a bit, now crying from both the shock and the slap.

Mom : Uyakhala? Andikakwenzi nto ke kanti! Thetha!

She said as she pushed me back by my shoulder, completely ignoring the fact that I could hardly breathe through all these tears. She sighed and took a step back, holding back her own tears.

Mom : Aphiwe.

Me : Ma?

Mom : Unamakhwenkwe?

She asked calmly and for the first time that question made me think. 'Boys? Do I have boys? No... no I have A boy and he makes me happy.' I reasoned with myself.

Mom : Hewethu! Phendula!

She pushed on and I remained quiet. I guess that was all the confirmation she needed because she pulled me by my clothes and gave me the beating of my life.

.

The following day I didn't go to school because my body hurt. I could hardly move and I had been crying all night so my mom made me sleep on the floor with a thin mattress and a sheet. She woke me up at the first sign of sunlight and made me sit up and listen to her.

Mom : Come sit here.

She said as she patted the empty space next to her. I slowly got up from the floor, still wincing in pain and sat uncomfortably besides her. She tried brushing my hair but I moved back just so she could know I didn't want her touching me. She got the message and placed her hands on her lap then sighed.

Mom : Who is it? Is it Lindisiwe?

I shook my head and she sighed in relief.

Mom : Who is it?

I shrugged because I didn't want to talk to her.

Mom : Aphiwe, mamela. What I did last night? I will not apologise for it. You are my child. My responsibility. It's my job to get you back endleleni when you're beginning to lose it. I

won't apologise for slapping you or even hitting you with a belt for that matter because you were in the wrong.

Me : Okay.

I got up and went to fold the sheet and place the mattress in its rightful place. I could feel my mother's gaze on me the whole time but I ignored her and carried on with everything.

Mom : Are you hungry?

Me : No.

I got water from outside and took a cold bath while she was watching me. It made the bruises hurt a little less and I threw it out afterwards then got dressed in an old, long dress and a light jacket.

Mom : Isn't it too hot to be dressed like that?

She asked in concern. I shrugged and took my books then sat outside. I wasn't about to expose the fact that I got a beating because the bruises were all over my legs and arms. There was a slight mark on my face from the slap but it wasn't all that visible because I wasn't light skinned.

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I couldn't study. I simply couldn't because my mind was way too occupied so I closed my book in frustration and placed my bag inside the garage. Since I had nothing to do for the rest of

the day I decided to pay Sizwe a visit in the hopes that he had bunked school again. Which was hypocritical of me since I wouldn't want him to do it under any other circumstances. But now, since it suited me, I didn't mind it. That thought had me wondering what sort of person I actually was. I felt so lost and I didn't know where I went wrong. What happened? Where? How do I fix this? Where do I begin with fixing my life? I had fallen through the cracks of justifications I had created for myself and I couldn't find a way back. I didn't know where to start.

I finally reached Sizwe's house and the door was slightly open so I stepped inside. It was as dark as it was the last time I was here and there was a slight odour coming from the lounge so I went there and found him lying in a pool of his own vomit with empty bottles of alcohol scattered next to him. My heart broke at the sight and my sympathy overcame the disgust I was supposed to be feeling.

Me : Sizwe.

I said as I poked him with my finger but he grunted and didn't move. I sighed and let him be as I cleaned thoroughly. Opened the windows and curtains but he still didn't wake up. Either he was really out of it or he was choosing to ignore it. When I was done with everything there was a breeze of fresh air in the

house so I decided to wake him up with a bucket of cold water on his face.

Sizwe : What the fuck!

He exclaimed and quickly sat up.

Me : You wouldn't wake up.

I said quietly and helped him up.

Me : I ran a bath for you... just make sure you find your way to the bathroom without falling or anything.

I warned and he ignored me. I refilled the same bucket with water and scrubbed the floor of his vomit until there was no stench.

.

I was sitting on the couch with my legs up and jersey besides me when Sizwe walked in without a shirt and plopped himself next to me.

Me : Are you still drunk?

Sizwe : Just a bit.

He said with a crappy voice then cleared his throat. I stood up with the aim of going to the kitchen when I noticed something on his arm so I went to the other side of the couch to observe it.

Me : Oh my... oh my goodness.

He had a tattoo. He had a really big tattoo written 'forever family' and the artwork around it was just beautiful. I reached out and touched it.

Me : When did you get this?

Sizwe : Few days ago.

He responded and I used my fingers to trace it.

Me : Its beautiful.

I admired and he burped loudly.

Sizwe : I know. It couldn't not be. You're beautiful as well.

Me : What does that have to do with anything?

Sizwe : Mx kanene you're slow. I got it for you.

He announced and looked over at me.

Me : Why?

Sizwe : Guilt.

Me : Guilt?

I stopped what I was doing and sat back.

Sizwe : Lying to your pastor.

He said casually and burped again. I stopped breathing and looked at him with utter astonishment. The tears I had now become so familiar with invited themselves to my eyes. A second later his eyes also grew as large as mine. Realisation had kicked in but it was too late to change his statement. It was too late for anything.

Me : Wait...

I said, allowing my hand to slowly slide down his arm onto the couch.

Me : What?

I could feel my chest close up but I had to hear what he had to say. He shook his head vigorously as he looked down at his shaking hands.

Sizwe : No, no, no. I'm drunk. I don't know what I'm saying.

He muttered and looked at me hopefully. I wiped away my tears and looked at him through the ones that were threatening to come out.

Me : Sizwe you... you said you lied to my pasto... you said you ruined my life and spread all those rumours about me...

Lindisizwe my reputation is ruined. People are never going to look at me the same ever again and you just told me that that is because of you!

I shouted and stood up abruptly only to have the heaviness of his confession slam me back down. My knees had failed me and I was forced to look at the person I once trusted with my all.

Me : Why, Lindisizwe? Why! I understand that I'm poor and I don't even deserve to be sitting beside you right now but to lie... like that? I just need to know why?

He sniffed lightly and only then did I realise that he was crying.

Sizwe : Because I wanted you to be desperate, Aphiwe.

He whispered. I breathed in...

Me : What...?

He stood up and went to stand next to the window, giving me his back.

Sizwe : I wanted you to be desperate and only have me to be there for you.

He turned around and looked straight at me, his eyes were now dark.

Sizwe : I also wanted you to experience rejection.

He charged forward and grabbed my hands, his eyes were now softer.

Sizwe : You were only supposed to be rejected by the church, Aphiwe, I swear. Please forgive me.

I yanked my hands away and pushed him back so I could stand up.

Me : Lindisizwe you are one sick human being! I don't know what I saw in you! I wish... the Lord knows that I wish I never met you! How dare you!

He was on the ground with one knee up and head hanging down while I hovered over him and spilled my emotions over.

Me : And you know what's crazy? The fact that you think getting a tattoo will make it all okay! The fact that you never want to forget me... Sizwe...

I breathed.

Me : The only thing I want you to remember about me is this moment. The moment where you realised that... no, the moment that you made me realise that you were the one who broke me. Sizwe who's going to pick up my pieces? Because the ones that you picked up you kept for yourself you selfish bastard! I wish you could just leave, Sizwe! Leave and never ever come back because I despise you!

I said through gritted teeth and took deep breaths to get my breathing back to normal.

Me : I hate you so much, Sizwe.

I said in a cold voice and walked out of the house I had once considered a home; walked out of the life I had once considered family.

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The life I lived after that day was not one that I would wish for anybody else. Not only was I physically poor, but I was spiritually and emotionally robbed as well. I was cold to everyone, especially my mother and Xolani but they both tried to get to me to open up, it didn't happen. My life was a bundle of routine. Wake up

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bath, write exams, study, drink water for supper and sleep. My marks were somewhere between 'good enough and fail' and for once I simply didn't care. I had apologised to Alizwa for accusing her and she understood then explained that I didn't have to pay back her R20. She did that because she wanted to. I didn't believe her. People don't just do things because they want to, I learnt that the tough way

As time went by Xolani began pulling away from me the same way I had been pulling away from him. I used the fact that he was writing exams as an excuse but even I knew that that wasn't true. I was just losing people all around me. What was wrong with me? Do I reek of poverty? Do people take one look

at me and think, “No, she’s poor. She isn’t the one.” Do they? Because I didn’t understand this life... I was simply tired.

I’ll never forget the afternoon Xolani and I were sitting in his mother’s classroom after school like we always did and he was sitting on the table, his feet were hanging and he was singing them back and forth. I was sitting on the table next to him with my legs crossed over each other and I was leaning on the wall behind me. We had been sitting in silence for the past 10 since he said ‘we were just friends.’ I don’t remember, rather I don’t care to remember what I had asked before that. It didn’t matter.

Me : Just friends?

I echoed and he nodded coolly.

Me : But... but what about the afternoon conversations? The ones where we’d pour our hearts out? The ones that involved all the tears?

I took a moment to bite my lip so I wouldn’t cry.

Me : What about all the singing? The singing that I can only do with you, Xolani? The moments where I’d sing happy birthday and mash it up with your favourite song, you loved that. What about the soft hello’s? The one’s where we’d whisper sweet nothings to each other because we didn’t want anyone else to hear, not because we were embarrassed but because we

wanted it to stay between us, in our own little world. Did those not mean anything?

I asked in a small voice. I felt as small as I sounded. He sighed lightly and closed his eyes, facing me when he opened them so I could understand.

Xolani : No, because we were just friends.

My heart punctured and I let out a breath.

Me : We were just friends? So I meant nothing more than just a friend? We? We were nothing more than just friends? What about us? Was there no us?

Xolani : Aphiwe, listen. I never asked you out, okay? I liked you, yes. We were good friends for a while, yes but that was that. You pushed me away and this is where we're at. Dude I never said 'I love you', in case you never noticed and that should have confirmed everything. I'm sorry...

He said with a casual shrug and slid off the table. He walked out without looking back, he walked out with his confident aura, the way he said my name, his voice and my happiness.

After he disappeared, this conversation kept playing in my head. Was there someone else? Surely there must be. Does he pour his heart out to her like he did with me? Does he sing her happy birthday and mash it up with her favourite song like he did with me? Do they whisper sweet nothings to each other,

not because they're embarrassed but because they want to keep it between them, in their own little world.

He shouldn't have left. He shouldn't have disappeared like that. He shouldn't be with that girl. He should be with me, here. He should be here because we weren't just friends. We? We were more than just friends. And you and I were us.

But I couldn't tell him this because he disappeared and he disappeared because we were just friends

“I thought everything he did was beautiful, even breaking me.”

It's stupid. It's ridiculous. It's unreasonable. It's true. When Xolani walked out of that door, ultimately walking out of my life everything stopped. My body, my mind, my heart, my life, and I hated myself for it. I hated myself for allowing a boy to come into my life and give it all to him – forgetting that this was reality. You don't just give someone your heart and say, “Here, keep this for me.” in the hopes that they will keep it as safe as you always did until they came along and peeled away all your protective layers and left you naked and vulnerable. Until they reminded you why you loved singing so much – until they taught you that there's nothing rational about... love? But see, he didn't love me. He spat that right at me and didn't even make an attempt to swallow those words back. And me? I was left out in the dark. Looking from the outside in once again, alone.

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I've loved and I've lost. Sometimes I wonder if someone will or would ever say that about me. Like, “Hey. I really loved that girl and now I've lost her” or “There's no one like her” or even “I'll do whatever it takes to get her back into my life.”

But poverty, will I ever be free of you?

I asked myself this question while walking down the dusty road to my home. Tears were involuntarily making their way down my face and yes, I minded. How dare they? He isn't worth you. I furiously wiped them away with my palm and hurried on home. When I got there my mom had turned the house upside down and she seemed to be looking for something. I cleared my throat lightly, wiped my tears and took a deep breath before informing her of my presence.

Me : Mama?

She looked up at me and she was in a real panic.

Mom : The letter.

She announced and went back to what she was doing. She didn't say anything else. She didn't have to. I dumped my bag by the door and kicked off my shoes then stepped on the bed, reaching over to the wardrobe and pulled the letter out from under a few books we kept there. I stepped down and handed it to her. She snatched it away from me and dust particles flew right off of it. I looked at her blankly and wore my shoes again. She took a deep breath to calm herself down.

Mom : I'm sorry.

Me : It's okay.

She plopped down on the bed as she traced the edges of the letter. Edges I'm guessing she was so used to it felt wrong to not go over them every time she was holding the letter.

Mom : I miss him so much, Aphiwe.

I sat down beside her and looked down at the letter.

Me : I miss him too, mom.

She sniffed lightly and opened it up slowly and read it to me like she always did when I allowed her. As I listened to her reading it to me I noticed that she was no longer reading it. Rather she was reciting to me. All the words fit perfectly in her mouth. All the turns and sharp edges, she took them gracefully and simply carried on. But that didn't make it okay, this was something she had to learn to do. The turns and sharp edges weren't always this easy to get through. Sometimes the hairs behind her neck would stand. Sometimes she would stop breathing for a second before carrying on. Sometimes she would trail over the tear stains he left behind and at this point I couldn't differentiate between her tears and his. But now? Now she went through it like she would a love poem or an English essay I asked her to read for me. Time does that to a person.

My mother and I were still sitting on the bed, reading this God forsaken letter until she started crying. I was used to this by now. She was too, another reason I couldn't seem to wrap my head around – she knew the letter always made her sad instead of consoling her but she read it in any case, breaking her own heart. I let her. I should have stopped letting her. I hopped off the bed since I didn't want to cry with her. It wouldn't feel right because we wouldn't be crying for the same reason. She would be crying for her husband, my father, and I would be crying for a boy, a foolish boy who had twisted my whole idea of this love thing. He said he would never leave. He's as good as dead.

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The holidays were getting closer and closer and the exams were gradually drawing to an end. I don't think I ever mentioned that my leg had healed. I was happy when it did because it was a constant reminder of the fact that I was running away from him, Xolani, and that he's the same person that helped me. Lindisizwe hadn't been coming to school and I'd be lying blatantly if I said I wasn't worried because I found myself heading to his house a few times but turning around as soon as it came into reach. My life was just one big mess, the way it was before both these guys. But now it was different, it was

different because I now had no God so I had no one. I felt like I had no right to go to church any church. I mean, how could I?

On the last day of school there was a buzz of excitement throughout the corridors, on the grounds and even in the exam venue before we wrote our final paper. My grade was writing English and I flew through it despite everything that was going on in my head. Afterwards we had final assembly and I found myself looking around, praying and hoping that Sizwe had shown up for his last paper, at least but there was no such luck. I slumped down in my chair and simply listened to what was being said until we were dismissed. I hurried out and made up my mind to go see him.

I was mad, to be honest. The first day Sizwe told me what he did I couldn't bear the thought of him. He ruined my life, people around here would never look at me the same way again and there was nothing I could do to change their minds. I would always be the girl who slept with the township gangster. It may sound petty to some people but this was my reputation. My life. But I knew him better than that, I knew I did. So I looked at things from his point of view. Why would he do what he did? He did explain that he wanted to need him, he was so desperate for my desperation that he took desperate measures to ensure that that happened. He went about it the wrong way but isn't that what I've always wanted? Not in this way but to

be so special to someone that they would go out of their way to be there for me. Was I thinking about this the wrong way? Just so I could justify his actions? If so, why? I had opened his front door before I even gave myself the chance to answer my own question.

There was a sense of abandonment in the house. I was greeted by a rush of cold air as soon as I entered and there were layers of dust on every visible thing. I let out a shaky sigh.

Me : Sizwe?

Silence. I stepped further into the house and hoped to walk into the lounge to find him chilling with a bottle of alcohol besides him while he screamed at the TV like he always did when he watched TV or to find him passed out on the floor with a pool of his own vomit besides him. But there was no alcohol, no soccer match, no Sizwe. I closed my eyes for a second and shook my head as I opened them. Silently, I turned around and walked to the passage. Me : Sizwe?

I whispered. Silence. I pushed open all the doors in a panic and finally went into his bedroom, heading straight for his wardrobe and pulling the doors open. They were empty. There wasn't a single trace of Lindisizwe in there and I could feel my heart bleed. Me : No no no no...

I said in a panic and walked back out into the lounge and noticed a note on the coffee table. I shook my head rapidly and tilted my head back as tears rushed down my cheek.

Me : I hate letters.

I said out loud and slowly walked towards it. I took it into my hands and stumbled onto the floor as I opened it up in frustration.

“Poverty.” Was the first line and I leaned back onto the couch, afraid of whatever I was about to read.

"They say if you love someone, let them go or let it run free or whatever stupid thing these corny people say. I don't get it. Why would you let go of someone that you love? Why would you let go of the one person that you trust? The one person that you feel safe with? Why would you let go of someone who has your heart? That's basically letting go of your heart and what are you without your heart? You're nothing.

I... I don't want to be nothing because that's all I've ever been. Nothing. But with her, with her I'm something. She hasn't given up on me yet. I'm a human being in her eyes, I'm not some guy with money and good looks that she wants to sleep with. No. She wants to help me. Nobody has ever wanted to help me, not even my own parents. And the feeling that comes with knowing that I'm a human being in her eyes is unbelievable. It's

exhilarating, warm and scary. I can hear my heart beating when she's around, I can feel my heart beating! It's crazy, I know. But when you've spent your whole life being nothing, you get used to not having a heart.

Poverty? We had that in common, but my poverty was different. See, I lacked happiness, I had no happiness. For years. But then with her, I was happy, I felt so rich! I felt like the richest man in the world. But you know what's the worst thing? You get used to living in poverty but you never get used to being rich. You know you're not going to be rich for forever, so you sit and you wait. You wait for the happiness to be taken away. You wait for poverty and poverty does come back after a while. It waltzes into your life, smooth and beautiful. It wins first place and stays at the the number one spot for years until the dance competition is over. Then the dance competition is just a memory but poverty is still at the first place and you're still nothing.

She was the dance competition and I was a dancer and so was Poverty. I tripped and Poverty didn't. I lost and Poverty won. The dance competition was over. She was gone. And I.. I was nothing."

A letter. The same thing my father left for my mother, Lindisizwe left for me. I know it was for me because he wrote my name at the bottom of the page, carefully, with a teardrop as the full stop. I brought my knees up to my chest and rocked back and forth as I read and reread it. I wondered if just like my mother I would read it so much that I would end up reciting it rather than actually reading it. I wondered if all the words would eventually fit perfectly in my mouth. All the sharp turns and edges, would I also take them gracefully and simply carry on? Would all that make it okay, since it was something I had to learn to do?

I understood now. I understood how the hairs behind her neck would stand, how she would stop breathing for a second before carrying on. I understood how she would trail over the tear stains he left behind.

I noticed there was another note on the table so I stood up from my position and crawled to it. 'There's a box in my wardrobe. Everything in there is yours if you want it. I'm sorry and I love you.' And that was it. No explanation of where he went, when I'll see him again if I ever will and words that would echo in my head forever – I'm sorry and I love you. I got up slowly. I had been crying so much I could hardly breathe but I wiped them away furiously and went to the bedroom. Indeed

there was a box, one I had not noticed the first time I opened the wardrobe but it was visible. I took a deep breath before kneeling down and pulling it towards me. It was things like his phone, house keys, TV remote and also a stack of cash. I took a breath in and pushed it back inside in fury then ran out the house with only the letter in my hand.

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I cried, for days. Mom would ask what was wrong but I never gave her an answer. Instead I would just look at her with my now-always puffy eyes and burst into tears again, she'd just hold me and tell me everything is going to be okay. I was a mess, an emotional wreck no one knew how to handle. Even when my report came back showing that I had passed surprisingly well I had no reaction. The same thing happened when my mom found a temporary job at a clothing factory in town. She did it for me, I know that. She had given up, but when she saw that I had given up as well she got up and did something to change that. It didn't. The money she received was little but it lasted us until her next payment because I wasn't eating. Mom was worried about what was going to happen when her time at the factory ended. I told her I would quit school and find a job. I wasn't kidding.

"Everything is going to be okay." I've always wanted someone to say that to me. I've always wanted to hear it from someone

else because I said it all the time when I comforted someone else. I've always wanted to hear it because when I said it to people, they would calm down and believe me. But when my mother said it to me, it didn't help. It didn't calm me down and I didn't believe it.

Why?

Because when I say that everything is going to be okay, I have hope that it's all going to be okay, but my mom had no hope. She tried very hard to show that she did but I knew she didn't. She lost it long ago, and I just lost mine.

After weeks of crying, I'd finally gained the energy to get out of bed, the first place I decided to visit was the graveyard. Did I mention that the new year had started? That schools were open and already I had missed three days. I didn't care, really. Because even if I did go I wouldn't be able to concentrate, I'd have to see Xolani's mother, my shirts were torn now imagine what puffy eyes would add to the outfit.

At the graveyard, I came here so often that there was a flat part in the midst of the grass, that's where I sat. It was like my own VIP seat. Okay no, that wasn't funny at all.

I sat down and just stared at my father's tombstone

his name and surname was there, date of birth and death and at the bottom it said, "He was a wonderful husband, father and

will be dearly missed.” I looked around and there were about ten other tombstones that had the same message. Wow... how mediocre. No one really thinks about these things. It’s like “just write something short and get it over and done with”. Is that because there’s nothing more to say or because there’s too much to say and no one has the courage and strength to say these things? Is it a case of being insensitive or just too sensitive?

Me : Sizwe left.

I said out loud. One whole month later and that whole concept hadn’t kicked in yet. I had been sitting there for ten whole minutes and those were the only words that came out of my mouth, sobs just followed.

“You come here almost every week and I’ve never seen you cry.” A familiar voice said behind me. “You sit here and you talk or read your Bible, well you haven’t done that in a while, or you sit here and hum or you just sit here in silence. There’s never a teardrop, let alone sobs. And no, I’m not stalking you, the person I visit is right behind you so I sit right behind you and you’ve never noticed because you completely zone out when you come here.” He babbled. I didn’t even take the effort to turn back and look at him. I knew who he was, you don’t forget the voices of the people who break your spirit.

I remained quiet because the tears were falling down my cheeks, uncontrollably. If I could speak in that moment I would have asked him why he was mean the first time he talked to me. I would ask him why he rubbed in my face that I look like poverty while he reeked of riches. But that was irrelevant at the moment because he walked over and sat next to me. He looked at me and I turned to look at him. He then put his hand over mine and said, "It's going to be okay."

Lunathi said those words and I calmed down.

Ironically, I believed him.

Growing up I always thought I was going to be some big star. I thought everyone would know my name and kids would want to be just like me and ask for my autograph. Cry when they meet me and ask to take pictures then frame them. All that crap. Its crap now because I'll never be the person I thought I would be. Now I imagine myself begging for food and cleaning up after other people for a living. I had been quiet since he told me everything was going to be okay and I was numb to his

touch so I didn't remove his hand from mine. He didn't either, for some reason. So we both just stared at my father's tombstone with blank expressions. Two people from completely different worlds brought together by grief and despondency.

He was well off. You could tell just by looking at him. His hair was neatly combed and trimmed, nails were clean and his cologne faintly filled the air around us. That accompanied by the smell of booze and cigarettes. As soon as that clicked, I drew my hand away from his and stood up slowly. He looked up at me and stood up as well.

Lunathi : You okay?

I nodded as I wiped away the tears that still stained my face. He scratched the back of his head as he looked at me.

Lunathi : Listen, I'm sorry for saying all the things I said when I first spoke to you.

I sighed.

Me : Don't apologise.

Lunathi : Why not?

Me : Because you've already played your roll in breaking my spirit, okay? I spent nights thinking about what you said and I

found no reasonable excuse as to why someone I don't even know would say such things to me.

I said in one breath.

Lunathi : That sounds so recited.

Me : I've had this conversation with you in my head a thousand times before.

I explained and turned to walk away. He took a second before walking next to me.

Lunathi : Oh so you've been thinking about me?

He said cockily and I rolled my eyes in irritation.

Me : Don't flatter yourself.

He stood in front of me so I could stop walking.

Lunathi : Listen, girl, I was in a bad space that day, okay? I was just... I was having an off day and-

I cut him short.

Me : And the girl in rags who always sits and hums and reads her Bible or whatever crap you think you know about me was the perfect target right?

Lunathi : Come on don't put it like that.

Me : Why? Because it's true?

I asked hotly and he made way for me to pass with his hands up in surrender. I gave him one last look and passed.

Lunathi : My name is Lunathi, by the way!

He shouted when I was quite a distance away.

Me : I don't care.

I said more to myself than to him. I didn't care because he wasn't Lindisizwe.

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I got home later that afternoon and found my mom sewing a school shirt. She smiled when she saw me.

Mom : Come here.

I walked over to her.

Mom : This is one of the shirts the lady I'm working with gave to me.

She explained as she made me wear it to determine how much adjusting she still needed to do.

Mom : The arms are too long...

She said more to herself than to me.

Mom : Jika.

I turned around and she checked what needed to be done there as well.

Mom : Okay. Khulula ke.

I took the shirt off and handed it to her.

Mom : How was it?

She asked as she sat down and continued doing what she was doing.

Me : Okay.

I lied.

Mom : Aphiwe...

I looked at her.

Mom : You're pulling away from me.

She smoothed her hand over the hem of the shirt while looking down at it.

Mom : Don't you know you're all I have?

I didn't respond to that. I couldn't. She realised this and spoke about something else.

Mom : Why haven't you been going to school?

She asked as she shortened the right arm of the shirt. I took off my shoes and sat cross legged on the bed, watching her.

Me : What's the point?

She made a sound in her throat but didn't look at me.

Mom : What's the point?

She asked rhetorically and I sank in the spot.

Mom : The point, Aphiwe, is that I have a very smart young lady sitting across me at this very moment and she is willing to throw her future away because of whatever she is going through.

She said matter-of-factly.

Mom : If there's one thing I know it's that you won't amount to anything because you choose not to.

Me : Oh? I'm guessing that's the decision you made then?

She took in a sharp breath of air.

Mom : Wow...

Me : Mama... I am so sorry.

I begged as I jumped off the bed and kneeled in front of her.

Me : I really didn't mean that, mama, I am so sorry.

I said and she brushed me off.

Mom : Suka, Aphiwe.

She warned.

Mom : I'm working with a needle here.

That was the last thing my mom said to me. Days passed and the only communication between us was for the necessary things.

Have you eaten?

Should I boil water for you?

Do we have enough food for the rest of the week?

Please sign my test?

And I hated that but I didn't mind it, which was twisted.

I think so far in my life one thing I've learned and accepted is the fact that in order to gain one thing you have to lose or let go of another. Like now, for example, I lost Sizwe but after that my mom got this job. At first it was temporary but the lady she works for realised just how hard working and talented she is in what she does so she hired her permanently. Again, that was after she showed her the jumpsuit she sewed for me and sold it to her without thinking twice. You win some you lose some right? In all honesty I was shattered when my mom got home and told me how she sold my jumpsuit for a fine amount of money. She had even bought groceries that afternoon. I hadn't seen that much food for us in years and happiness overwhelmed me. I genuinely smiled – something I hadn't done in a while and helped her unpack everything into our rusty cupboards. All was forgiven but not forgotten.

I was also going to school then. I had stopped crying for Sizwe. In fact I think when I realised that he wasn't coming back, when I figured that he left everything behind because he didn't want to be found, I was more at peace. I was still caught between hating him and spending the rest of my life worrying about someone who doesn't give a rat's ass about me or my feelings. I kept the letter. I secretly went to his house when I could and cleaned so it wouldn't feel as cold as it did whenever I went

there. The box? I hadn't touched since the first day I found it. And I wasn't going to until my feelings and thoughts about him stopped contradicting one another.

Then there was Lunathi. We had grown closer, that fool and I. Since mom could afford stuff now I went to the graveyard every Saturday. He would also always be there so it sort of became a norm to meet up there. He was 19 years old, meaning he was done with school but lived off his parents because he didn't want to go to university. Instead he was looking for a job around town. Be it being a cashier

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waiter or even a stripper he would go for it. He wasn't desperate - he just wanted to get his parents off his back.

It was the March holidays. Schools had just closed and I had scraped through the first term of grade 11, getting 68% as my overall average. I was actually really disappointed in that mark. It was the worst mark I had received in high school.

Lunathi : Grade 11 is a shit grade.

He said as a way of trying to comfort me.

Me : Gee, thanks.

He was sitting against the tree we had chosen one afternoon when it randomly decided to rain in the middle of our visit. I

popped down beside him in the new dress my mom had bought me at PEP for R69.99. I really loved it because I hadn't had something new in a while and because it was colourful.

Lunathi : Your dress suits you.

Me : Thanks. It's new.

Lunathi : I noticed.

He reached into his leather bag and pulled out a packet of cigarettes.

Me : You know I don't like it when you smoke in front of me.

He went ahead and smoked it anyway, blowing the first puff in my face.

Lunathi : You know I don't like it when you tell me what to do.

I kept quiet after that and let him do what makes him happy.

Me : Lunathi?

Lunathi : Aphiwe?

Me : Why don't you want to go to varsity?

He took a long drag of his cigarette before answering me.

Lunathi : Because what I do doesn't require varsity.

Me : Oh? What do you do?

Lunathi : I draw.

He answered confidently. I put my one leg on top of the other then placed my clasped hands in between them so I could face him properly.

Me : You draw?

Lunathi : Yes. I create art.

He took another long drag of his cigarette.

Lunathi : But my parents don't get that.

Me : Oh... is that why you just want to get a job?

Lunathi : Yeah. They're always on my case about how I won't amount to anything unless I get a job and whatever so yeah.

He answered honestly.

Me : Why do you smoke?

Lunathi : Because.

Me : Because?

Lunathi : Just because.

I figured that this was a question he didn't want to answer so I let him be. After a while of silence I talked again.

Me : Hey, who do you visit here?

Lunathi : You're asking too many questions.

He said grumpily and crashed his half smoked cigarette with his hand, throwing it on the ground afterwards and sighing in satisfaction.

Lunathi : Now it's my turn.

He also shifted to look at me.

Lunathi : What's your surname?

Me : Ngcobo.

Lunathi : Ngcobo?

I nodded and he stood up then snapped off a small branch from the tree.

Lunathi : Sounds familiar.

Me : It's a common surname.

Lunathi : No, man.

He was breaking the branch into tiny pieces and throwing each of them at me.

Lunathi : Your dad... how did he die.

I swallowed hard.

Me : He hung himself.

I looked down at my neat nails.

Me : In our backyard.

Lunathi : It was in the papers the following day. That's why you look so familiar. They showed his wife and 12 year old kid as well in the article.

He laughed to himself.

Me : Why are you laughing?

He threw the rest of the branch at me and wiped his hands off on his jeans.

Lunathi : Because puberty did you a hell of a favour.

Me : Thanks.

I said dryly and got up, wiping the dust off my dress.

Lunathi : It's still pretty early. You ready to go home?

Me : Yes.

I responded.

Me : My mom will worry.

Lunathi : Ayt cool then.

We walked to the gate and parted ways when I got into a taxi heading in one direction and him in another.

“Not everything is supposed to become beautiful and long-lasting. Sometimes people come into your life to show you what is right and what is wrong, to show you who you can be, to teach you to love yourself, to make you feel better for a little while, or just to be someone to walk with at night and spill your life to. Not everyone is going to stay forever, and we still have to keep on going and thank them for what they’ve given us.”

Lunathi wrote that for me in the diary he carried around in his bag wherever he went. He never allowed me to read it, I wasn’t even allowed to touch it but he read this one out to me as I was leaning on our tree at the graveyard while he rested his head on my lap. I took a deep breath in and opened my eyes as I exhaled.

Me : Why?

Lunathi : Why what?

Me : That. Why did you write that? For me.

He shrugged nonchalantly and shut the diary then placed it besides him.

Lunathi : You’ve been dropping hints about me leaving for the past few months. So I figured people just... left your life.

He lifted his head up so we could make eye contact.

Lunathi : And you think I'll do the same thing.

I sighed and he dropped his head again.

Me : I never understand why they leave.

I confessed.

Me : I think I'm a good person. I really do so why don't people just stay? Just come and stay!

Lunathi : That's all you want?

I took a deep breath to calm myself down.

Me : Yes. That's it.

He nodded. There was silence for a while and I broke it.

Me : Are you going to leave?

He shrugged.

Lunathi : I'm really not about to lie to you, Aphiwe. I won't promise you the world or promise to swim oceans for you or whatever crap all these other people have fed you, okay?

He sat up and faced me with his leg propped up.

Lunathi : But if we can maintain the friendship that we have for the past... pfff... I don't know... plus-minus 10 months? Then I don't see myself leaving.

I nodded in understanding.

Lunathi : You know, I think it's really crazy how I've known you for so long yet I know nothing about you.

I shrugged.

Me : So? It isn't like I know much about you either.

"Which is twisted." We said in unison and laughed lightly.

Lunathi : You go first.

He announced as he reached for his bag and hauled out a packet of cigarettes. I looked at it then back at him.

Me : Only if you allow me to smoke first.

.

Injudicious decisions. I don't know why I asked for that cigarette, to be honest. Maybe I wanted to know what Lunathi loved so much about it because I had been begging him to stop for months and he always dismissed me with 'you'll never understand, so let me be' or just a puff of smoke in my face meaning he wasn't even considering it. Or because I couldn't talk about anyone in my life without choking on emotion so I wanted to choke on something as relevant as cigarette smoke instead. I do not know. All I know is that I shouldn't have done it. But I did, we did, and it all started a little something like this...

Heartbreak.

Me : We all know heartbreak, right? The whole 'heart shatters' and tears and all. You know how when your heart breaks and it shatters into pieces, you run after all the pieces. You pick them up as fast as possible because you don't want people to see your shattered pieces but you don't want to lose the shattered pieces either.

I paused, and looked at him. He didn't look at me, he just carried on drinking. [Something that I was doing as well now-since an hour ago. This was our second bottle and we were downing it as quickly as we did the first.] So I carried on talking.

Me : So you pick up the pieces and you spend months trying to mend your broken heart. You try to fix it. You find glue and you sit down and you glue every single piece together, you spend days, weeks or months trying to fix it. But then a few days after gluing the pieces together, you stumble upon a word. And that one word takes your breath away and dries up the glue so a piece gets loose. And the piece falls and after that, every other piece falls. Your heart breaks and it shatters, again. So you run around and pick the shattered pieces, again.

I paused

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burped and then laughed, remembering to take a drag of the cigarette he had allowed me to have.

Lunathi : And you spend days, weeks or even months trying to fix it.

He finished my sentence without looking at me. We were now both numbly leaning against the tree. Shoulders touching and emotions spilling.

Me : And then you stumble upon a word and a gesture. And your heart breaks. It shatters.

I carried on. I took another drag of my cigarette, he finished another bottle of whiskey.

Me : But you see, there's one type of heartbreak that we don't know of. That type of heartbreak where you watch your heart break, you watch it shatter into pieces and you watch the pieces fall onto the floor. You don't pick them up, instead you fall with the pieces. You let your shattered heart cover you. You allow the shattered pieces to inhibit your body. You allow your body to become your shattered pieces's habitat.

A tear fell down my cheek.

Me : You allow the shattered pieces to coarse through your veins. You allow the pieces to tear everything apart, you allow

them to tear through the cartilage until they reach the veins. You allow the pieces to flow through your blood. You allow the pieces to break you. And because you're so broken, you begin to choke on your blood made of pieces of your broken heart. You taste your own broken heart.

When I said that, he turned around and looked at me with eyes I couldn't fully understand. So I took a sip of his new bottle of whiskey. The third one.

Me : In that moment, not only is your heart broken. But your soul is too.

I turned to look at him and in that moment we were so close our noses were almost touching. We both didn't bother to move.

"And that.. That is true heartbreak." He whispered, finishing off my sentence, again. I chuckled, sympathetically. Smiling shyly I asked,

Me : Do you know that type of heartbreak Lunathi?

He paused.

Lunathi : Yes. I'm looking right at it.

.

We were drunk and high off our emotions. We had just realised how alike we actually were and I think that added to our

excitement so we did what any broken teenager would do. We ran. Not from ourselves or the feelings we had just exposed, but to trouble. We were drunk and high off our emotions. So we made stupid decisions.

It was fun. That I won't lie about. I enjoyed stealing those CD's and the beeping sound indicating that they were being stolen exhilarated me. Encouraged us to run faster, laugh harder and get caught even faster. Like any other criminal we were cuffed and thrown in the police van. We spent a night in the holding cells and when the alcohol had worn off a bit, when our memories and thoughts had stopped being fuzzy then reality kicked in.

And it did so in the form of a woman. A very beautiful woman, if I may add. We had been bailed out early in the morning and were waiting for the person who had done such to come fetch us. She stomped in and her presence filled the room, Lunathi was trying to act calm but I could see that he was shaking in his boots.

Woman : Lunathi! Juoel! Mahangu!

She shouted with each step that she took closer to us with her heels clinking loudly on the cold cement floor.

.

Again, injudicious decisions. No regrets, just lessons learned. Lunathi was pulled out of that dump by his mother, forbidden to ever see me again and the same police officer that arrested me felt sorry for me and drove a new kind of broken me home.

That was the last time I ever saw Lunathi Mahangu.

The guy that made me forget about poverty, even if just for a moment.

.....**The End**.....

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