thankful grateful blessed

Love and relationships shape five lives beyond school

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People of loving service are rare in any walk of life. Leaders of loving service are still rarer.

Justin Welby, Archbishop of Canterbury

For Tommy Wilson and leaders of the same mould:

those who favour public service over public power.

Part I

Foreword

In 2010, 16 years into South Africa's democratic era, a high school opened in Gansbaai, a coastal town close to the southernmost tip of Africa where the Atlantic and Indian oceans meet. It was the cusp of a hopeful decade. As the paint of the new school dried, South Africa was preparing to welcome the world as the host of the 2010 FIFA World Cup.

President Jacob Zuma was still new to the job and for the first time, an opposition party – the Democratic Alliance (DA) – had wrestled the governance of a province away from the African National Congress (ANC) at the polls. It was a sign of a maturing democracy, some reported. State capture, loadshedding and lockdown had not yet entered the South African vernacular.

While Gansbaai was remote – there was hardly public transport out of town, and for it was a two hour drive through winding single lane roads to Cape Town – it was far too from the promise of a New South Africa that many still clung to.

This was a town of early-rising men working longer hours to catch fewer fish. A town of historic abalone divers in depleted seas who, as the ink of legislation dried, had been criminalised as poachers on the dark side of the law. A town of people manning sharp hulled boats with cages strapped to their sterns, offering fleeting tourists face-to-face encounters with great white sharks who were being sighted less often in those waters.

A town of grey-haired retirees looking out to sea from their slate stoeps, and neat grids of dull suburban streets with holiday houses closed against the weather for much of the year. And to service all of this, it was a town like any other. With an OK Foods, a Spar, a Blue Bottle Liquors, a strip mall and three primary schools.

A town on the edge of a bay scattered with big-bellied fishing trawlers that emptied their loads into a fish processing factory at the harbour with its smoke stacks that stank up the main road with each onshore breeze. A town with contested interests on the edge of a sensitive and threatened ecosystem that, still today, needs to bet on its future as an industrial fishing town or an eco-tourism destination. It is increasingly difficult for the two to live side by side.

This town of about twelve thousand people had never had a high school. Young people had to travel far to become educated, or give up any such aspiration to work on the fishing boats as their fathers and grandfathers had done. This was a town that was growing. As Eastern Cape municipalities collapsed, migrants arrived in the Western Cape demanding jobs, healthcare, electricity and schools.

In a country thick with failing schools, some townspeople dreamed of a place that would offer young people real opportunity beyond the hollow promises of short-term politicians. They dreamed of a school that would be good, despite being free. They dreamed of children choosing between an academic or a vocational education so that they would be better equipped for life after school. They dreamed, as tired as it sounds to a jaded nation, that the school would be a place where dreams really could come true.

They dreamed also of a school that would bring a historically fractured community together. Gansbaai threads along the single-lane R43, held between rocky coastline to the west and fynbos covered mountains to the east. Within those constraints, apartheid era patterns have mostly endured. Whites live in "town". Coloureds live to the south in Blompark, set up historically as the "location". On the mountain-side of the national road, blacks live in Masakhane, an area that used to house single-sex hostels for black labourers and that has grown into a township and sprawling informal settlement.

In chapter 1 I will tell you of the people who dreamed of opening a high school in Gansbaai to bring these communities together.

What follows is an anthology of loosely connected stories about five boys who attended the school in those first few years, with two chapters dedicated to each of them.

The first tells of relationships at school that fuelled their beliefs in themselves and their prospects. The second are stories of their lives after school and their quests to realise a promise that should be made to every South African child: that, despite the failings of our democracy and the highest youth unemployment rates in the world, each child has the right to a tertiary education and a life of dignified work. Those promises are inherent to our Constitution.

In the final chapter I explore what their stories teach us about the transformative power relationships while considering how policy and its implementation might better serve young people.

I spent two and a half years visiting Gansbaai, and, once I had figured out how I wanted to tell this story, visiting the five alumni. Joudun Rooi in Stanford, Jack Swart in Oudtshoorn, Malcolm Mulope in Gansbaai, Asahleli Meje in Hermanus and Siviwe Yuyu in Cape Town. When I started out I never imagined that I would be writing about their lives so far beyond those places: in Jeddah, Livingstone, Atlanta and the wild seas of Namibia.

*

In his 2024 State of the Nation Address, President Cyril Ramaphosa told a fictional story of Tintswalo – born in 1994 – and how her life was shaped for the better by the policies of the new democracy.

These five are equally democracy's children, but they have been failed in many ways by the promise of the New South Africa. Yet each of them graduated from the classrooms of teachers who believed that they could achieve anything that their counterparts in private schools could. Each of them was helped at school and beyond school by people who believed in them and who reached out a hand. They were seen by loving adults who allowed them the space to discover themselves and who accompanied them on part of that journey. While it was Joudun Rooi who tattooed *thankful grateful blessed* onto his calf to acknowledge that, those words can be applied to each of their stories.

In the telling I will take you to a windowless room where strings of dried abalone – gutted and shelled – hang in the dull gloom as a man holds their leathery flesh to his face and inhales. As he breathes out, he believes that all will be well.

In another windowless room, a library in the interior of a declining convent, another man reads about confession by the dull light of a desk lamp. He learns that rather than a punishment, confession is an absolution. He turns the page.

I will take you to high-rise apartment block where a young man is being held against his will and where he plots his escape. Phone calls are made. Money changes hands.

I will take you on an odyssey with an eighteen-year old boy who crosses the Limpopo and Zambezi rivers to find what has been lost in a forgotten purse.

I will tell you how a man got to hold a whale's heart in his hands.

I have invested a lot to get these words down because I believe it is a story worth telling.

As I travelled for this research and spun about 75 hours of recorded interviews into story, I moved with my family from the suburbs of Johannesburg to a smallholding in Knysna in the Western Cape. As I wrote through the second year of lockdown, we settled our children into new lives and new schools. I continued my work running Social Innovations which channels private money into public schooling and that delivers after-school programmes across the country. I registered for an MA at the University of Cape Town and this book is the fruit of that study.

*

I first visited Gansbaai Academia in 2018 to interview Wilton Phillips. He was one of sixteen teachers I profiled in *Where Light Shines Through: tales of can-do teachers in South Africa's no-fee public schools*.

As I drove through the school gates for the first time there was something about it that captured my imagination. Firstly there was its name. Not Gansbaai High School. Or Gansbaai Secondary. But Gansbaai Academia. It suggested an aspiration to be more.

There was the sternness of the principal at the early morning staff meeting and the discipline that he demanded. The meeting started on time and the morning's business was dispatched swiftly. I sensed that Tommy Wilson was respected, even feared. He was also, I was later to learn, greatly loved. I was struck by the differing registers of him. From the stone faced leader of the morning meeting to the animated storyteller with the belly laugh and the abundant moustache who shared a smoke with teachers by the JoJo tanks that afternoon.

As I sat next to him, I looked at the gathered staff with their files and mugs of tea. It's unusual in a no-fee public school to find such a multi-racial gathering of teachers. I learned later that when Mr Wilson first visited the school eight years previously, he was immediately

struck by what he called the rainbow nation all gathered in one place. That is what inspired him to take the job.

There was Shark Alley, the foyer of the school, with its certificates and photos and framed newspaper cuttings celebrating its achievements. There were stories of alumni who were doing well and about a young small-town school doing great things.

It was a school with an industrial kitchen and a restaurant piloting new fields of study for the education department: hospitality studies, tourism and marine studies. There was the marimba band that had just returned from a tournament in Boksburg, Gauteng. A team of business studies students had returned from Sandton, the country's financial capital, where – competing against the most expensive schools in the country – they had won the Johannesburg Stock Exchange (JSE) Investment Challenge.

There was something going on there – something unusual – that I was drawn to understand.

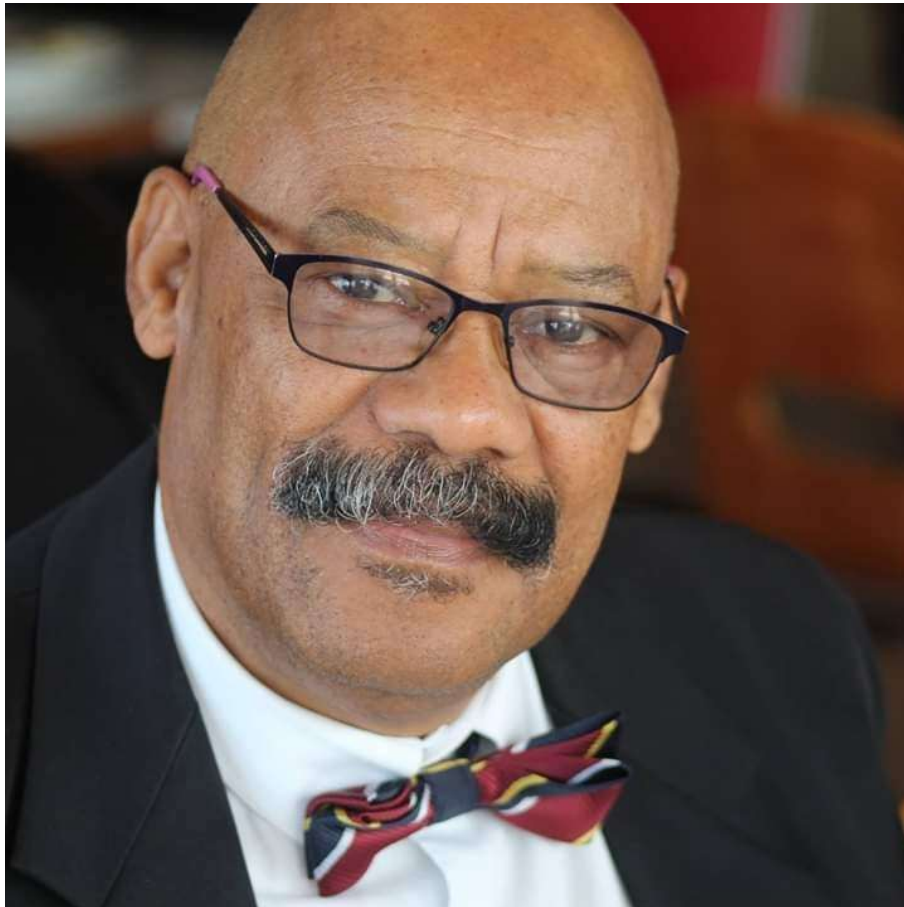
This is the story of what I discovered. It is a quest to understand how a state-sponsored pocket of care might come about in a country characterised by government neglect. It is a quest to understand how relationships of trust and belief drive the prospects of young people after school. And it is a quest to understand – if the magic that I sensed there is real – if it can be sustained in a crumbling public service environment and against the demands of a small town's growing population.

I have spoken to many people along the way, and to be democratic about the storytelling, I have brought their voices with me. So come with us, and we will tell you about five men who graduated from Gansbaai Academia in those first few years, and what became of them when they left.

Chapter 1 This is my heart

Tommy Wilson

I can tell you many stories about this school. This is my heart. This school is my heart.



Tommy Wilson as pictured on a Facebook post from the school's governing body chairperson, Sammy Brett, in 2019.

Ask just about anybody who was a student at Gansbaai Academia in that first decade and they'll share a funny story about their matric English teacher, Mrs Mona Matthews. And they'll say things like, "she really cared," or "she was the mother of the school."

When she is asked to recall a memory about one of her students she might tell of his moodiness or untidiness but then she might say "I love him very much," or, with a pause to settle her emotions, "he could be one of my very own."

Unlike "her children", Mona Matthews was a child before the Bill of Rights and the Constitution were born. She didn't have the right to go to high school.

She was born in the 1950s in Groenewald Schema, now called Blompark, a sandy coastal expanse set out as the coloured township on the outskirts of the white town of Gansbaai. She finished standard four at a school set up in the hall of the Dutch Reformed Church. "The white school in town had standard five and six of course, but we couldn't go. It was *mos* those days," she told me.

"So we both," she indicated her husband when we met in her apartment, "went to this small little school before they built Gansbaai Primêr. To study further we had to go to Stanford. And it was so inconvenient, because we had to board with other families. My mother used to get up at four o'clock in the morning to take us to the bus stop, which was at the post office. And we, as the coloured children, had to sit right at the back of course."

Mona was one of the few Blompark children who went to high school. It was a decade in which H.F. Verwoerd, as a Minister of Native Affairs in the National Party on his way to seizing the Prime Ministership, called for South Africa to be racially defined and organised under "the supremacy of the white race."

In proposing racially segregated education policies he went on to declare that "there is no place for [the Bantu] in the European community above the level of certain forms of labour ... What is the use of teaching the Bantu child mathematics when it cannot use it in practice?

That is quite absurd. Education must train people in accordance with their opportunities in life, according to the sphere in which they live." [1]

She grew up in one of the fisherman's cottages along *die nette baan,* where men and women gathered to mend fishing nets. The cottage was one of the rectangles of thatch and whitewash that used to dot the coastline of what is now Blompark. She was raised there, the third of seven children, to a father who was a driver on one of the many boats.

"In those days," says Mr Mervyn Hess, another teacher at Gansbaai Academia and long-time resident of the town, "every family in Blompark had a boat. Some families had two boats. It was just fishing, fishing, fishing.

"The town has grown tremendously since then," he says. "It was, at first, a small town, a hundred percent reliant on fishing, but since then it became also a tourist destination. That really boosted the town's expansion. Now, most people are involved in the tourist industry, fishing plays a very small role. You go to Blompark now, I know of one, two, three people who have boats. Now they are all working at shark cage diving, restaurants, bed and breakfasts..."

There was no easy schooling available to Mona Matthews beyond standard four, given policies that opened or closed doors of opportunity based on race, and there was no high school in the town for children of any race.

"I went to Caledon for standard, *sewe, agt, nege,"* she says, "but I left school because the circumstances at home was if I can work, I can help support my family. It was that kind of vibe. At that time most people would finish standard four and then go and catch fish, or work in the fish factory, it all depends on the parents. My father told me, the day I am leaving this earth, I can't leave you money, but I can leave you education. It's the best thing he could have done. And he was very strict," she says with a weighted laugh, "oh my word, he was very strict."

[1] https://www.thoughtco.com/apartheid-quotes-bantu-education-43436

In the non-linear fashion of a person walking into hostile political forces, she finally finished high school and qualified as a teacher. She later completed a master's degree in education.

Decades later, policy closed the door on her again. She was denied the right to work as a teacher beyond her 65th birthday in November 2020. That statute was signed into law by political leaders well into their sixties who could continue to work until any age, as long as they could convince the electorate to keep them in power. When asked for her view on the policy that had forced her to retire when she still loved "the hustle and bustle of school life," she replied with three words. "Stupid, stupid, stupid."

I met her in her apartment in central Gansbaai between the ABSA bank and the window displays of the SportsZone with its life sized posters of some of *her* Gansbaai Academia kids modelling beachwear. She had rushed back from a family luncheon, and, just that morning, she had had her hair done ahead of her flight. She was about to start a teaching post at a new high school in Taoyuan, a city on the north-western coast of Taiwan.

It was the second post she would be taking up in that country, having returned from a two year stint as a teacher there to join the new high school that was opening in her hometown. Her hair hung in smooth black sheets on either side of her face. She occasionally shook it back and held her head sideways, as a young girl would do, as she told me that, as much as Taiwan was exotic, she was returning to the familiar.

"I know the sights and the sounds and the smells and the food. I know it. But remember Taiwan is completely different to South Africa. There's earthquakes. There's typhoons. But, you know what? You are completely safe. The health system is excellent. The transport system is excellent. And there's no loadshedding. There's no funny business. Not like at home."

And while at home she has been forced to retire, her worth is recognised abroad.

"In Taiwan they believe that people in their sixties are middle aged, because they believe in Confucius. I saw very old teachers at their schools. That's why they say *lăoshī*. It means old teacher. Because Confucius was very old and he was still a teacher. They believe that

older people have experience. And that is why this new high school in Taoyuan chose me. And you know parents here in Gansbaai were so heartsore when they heard I was leaving. They would say to me, 'I still wanted you to take my child through grade 12.' But I can't go against the rules and regulations. But I still have so much to give. Why must I sit and rot? Why must I sit here and do nothing?"

*

Both Mona Matthews and Mervyn Hess were among the first cohort of teachers to open Gansbaai Academia in 2010. They also share the good fortune of having been born to parents who valued education at a time and place when that was not the norm. Mr Hess went to St Paul's, an Anglican primary school just outside Stanford where his father was principal. The school was named for his grandfather, Paul Sampson, a pastor who was the founding principal.

He was sent to live with his uncles in Cape Town so he could attend high school and then, like his father, grandfather and siblings, he studied to become a teacher. After many years in the classroom he became the principal of Gansbaai Primêr, but left the education sector to try his hand at other livelihoods.

"After a while as principal I just got fed up," he says. "At the time I said, I'm fighting with the department of education, I'm fighting with the parents, I'm fighting with the kids, I'm fighting with the teachers, I'm fighting with the governing body and I'm fighting with my wife. If I leave the school, I will only be left fighting with my wife," he laughs.

He was asked to come back to teaching by the interim governing body of the new high school. The promise of the new school also brought Mona Matthews back from Taiwan where she had taken a contract teaching post. Both of them were familiar with the aspirations of the new school. Mrs Matthews had family members who for years had motivated for the opening of the high school and while at Gansbaai Primêr, Mr Hess was a member of a committee that lobbied government to open a high school.

"Both schools at the time, Laerskool Gansbaai and Gansbaai Primêr, motivated for a high school in the area," he says, "because our learners had to go to Caledon or Bredarsdorp if

they wanted a high school career. They were away from their parents with other influences coming in. We wanted a high school here so they could remain under the influence of their parents."

The students who have passed through Gansbaai Academia are richer in imagination thanks to Mr Hess's return to teaching. He has taught many subjects across primary and high school, but he is best known by the alumni for his stories.

A short man with a grey beard and a face quick to break into a smile, he was born to a family of musicians and has been the driver behind the Gansbaai Academia marimba band which rose to some acclaim pre-Covid and which he is building from scratch with a new cohort of enthusiastic kids. He was once a keen guitarist, but then there was that day he went fishing…

"I went out of the rocks to cast," he recalls, "and then a huge wave approached, and I had to get out of the way. And then I slipped and fell and I put down my hand. And I got up, I didn't feel anything. But when I took the rod again, I thought, no, there's something wrong here," he laughs. "Then this finger was lying at right angles like that. There are still some small screws in here, and now, to get the finger onto the chords on the guitar, it's not working…"

To children born into a democratic South Africa, he told stories of the apartheid times when entire communities were relocated across the Cape based on the colour of their skin. Some alumni recall stories about his high school days and his ill-fated courtship of a white girl, when such a union was considered a crime. But he is most famous for stories about fishing.

"As a young kid I remember that my father, on a Friday afternoon, he would pack the fishing rods and the bait and have everything ready, and then after school he would say, 'let us just go and catch ten galjoen'", he recalls. "And then we would get to Gansbaai at about three o'clock, we would walk down, get to the rocks, and by four o'clock, way before four o'clock sometimes, we would be on our way back. By then he had caught ten, and I had caught one or two with my little fishing rod. And then today, how long does it take you to

catch ten galjoen? You can fish sometimes for the whole year and you won't catch ten. There's been a huge decline. There are lots of theories about why these fish have declined; I don't know which is the right one."

Mr Hess is quick to say that his stories are always related to the curriculum, and over the years he has taught English, history, life orientation and more. The story of the declining fish stocks could be related to marine studies, tourism or history and talks to the tensions that plays out in the town between subsistence fishing, commercial fishing, tourism and the fragility of the environment.

While he motivated for the opening of the high school, there are many others in Gansbaai with stories to tell about the injustice of a small town without a high school and the lobbying over decades to set it right.

*

Sammy Brett is a local estate agent and consultant to government and the fishing industry. He was the founding chairperson of the school's first formal governing body in 2010. "Back then it triggered something in me that kids in the city had schools close to their houses. But we in the rural areas had to leave our houses to attend schools in other towns," says

He stepped down from that role, and from his roles in church and ANC structures, while he fought to clear his name in a case about disputed abalone diving rights. It's a long tale about the rights of subsistence divers versus the rights of commercial fishermen and about defining terms along the way: illegal fishermen, poachers, rights. It took almost seven years to unravel the story through the courts and he took up those positions again when he was cleared of all charges.

"So my fight, my negotiations with the government, started back then with the National Party," he says of the lobbying efforts to open a high school in Gansbaai. "The principal of Gansbaai Laerskool, Thys Haremse, he was the guy that assisted us with talking to the old apartheid regime for bringing a high school here. It was 1986 when we started those first talks, some time ago!"

An animated, round faced man who is often seen around town wearing his maroon Gansbaai Academia tracksuit, I spoke to him in what he calls his man cave – a room thick with family photos and mementos, sweet sayings *(World's Best Mom)* and displays of stuffed toys and commemorative bottles of wine – built above the dark brown rectangle of home that he shares with his wife and five children at the bottom of a quiet cul-de-sac in Blompark.

The arrival of the school, in walking distance from home, was a blessing to the family and all his children have attended. While today he lives in Blompark by choice, as a child his family was compelled by apartheid era policies to live there when it was called *Die Skema*, contained by high fences topped with barbed wire with gates that were manned by white policemen 24 hours a day. The apartheid police were serious about keeping some people in and others out.

His father, a broad shouldered man known for his quick temper and white hair, came to Gansbaai as a 14-year-old boy from the small inland town of Napier to work on the fishing boats. He spent his adult life out at sea and in and out of jail. Sammy and his siblings spent much of their time in the backyard dwelling of their domestic worker mother in the white town where he became familiar with "living amongst the white folk." Until the day he was told he could no longer call the family *oom en tannie,* and *oupa en ouma*. He refused the language that was given to him to replace those terms, and, when he was old enough, moved back to Blompark.

"Our ethnic group, back in the day, we didn't strive to become academics and stuff. So the brown folk – I'm not coloured, check my colour," he says indicating his arm, "aspired to become top gangsters in South Africa. Most of then went to jail. And that is what was taught to me by my father. At the age of twenty, he had been in jail twice already. It's a bad cycle, and we need to break it. So I will begin to break the cycle, by educating youngsters, giving them skills and opportunities so that they can become something one day. That's what drives me."

Unlike his father, he was offered the opportunity to attend high school. He finished standard six, now known as grade eight, at Die Bron Primary in Stanford and then went to

Swartberg Secondary in Caledon. But he didn't finish matric, he says, due to the political unrest of the time and his being part of "the whole cabal, the youth of 1983 with the school boycotts and stuff like that." In his matric year, he left school and came back to work in Gansbaai.

His Facebook profile describes him as a man who is "dedicated, inspired, motivated, positive, loving, caring, takes no bullshit from anybody!!!" His posts promote properties for sale and the beauty of the town: mottled clouds over the harbour wall; a seagull in flight over calm beds of kelp; the double hulls of a foreign vessel docking in the harbour for repairs.

He also regularly posts updates about his work as the chair of the governing body of Gansbaai Academia. There are interviews for new teachers, celebrating the sponsorship of new jerseys for the rugby team and congratulating the top academic achievers. He celebrates the fact that today, his children walk to high school, something he could only have dreamed of in the 1980s.

"Later the idea of the high school was put again to the MEC for Education in the province, Cameron Dugmore, that was in 1999," he says of the lobbying efforts that had spanned South Africa's transition to democracy. "The ANC government approved the high school. But a few years later, politically, they lost the governance of the province. So the idea of the high school was parked somewhere else…I kept knocking on doors, irrespective of the party."

*

Until she retired in 2021, school principals in the Overberg reported to Wendy Colyn. Those who worked with Wendy said that she was "formidable," and that she "ruled with an iron hand."

In the early years she would have been called a school inspector, but in an era of gentler nomenclature, principals knew her as the circuit manager responsible for schools in a circuit that stretched in a crooked finger of geography 120 kilometres long, from the inland farming town of Grabouw towards the coast to include Kleinmond, Hermanus and Stanford. When Wendy was asked to include Gansbaai in her circuit, there were only two primary schools in

the town, Gansbaai Primêr Skool and Gansbaai Laerskool which had traditionally each catered to white or coloured residents of the town.

“There were also some black children who were being educated in fishermen’s cottages in Gansbaai, and they formed a satellite campus of Lukhanyo Primary in Hermanus,” says Wendy. “Once those Xhosa speaking children got to grade 4, they had to be transported by bus to Lukhanyo Primary. And that’s a whole different story about how Masakhane Primary came into being,” she says of the primary school that was later opened in the ballooning settlement of Masakhane.

It became increasingly untenable for the families of a growing town to send their children to far flung places for high school. “The problem was the parents couldn’t afford the hostel fees and the hostels closed for the weekends to save costs,” says Wendy, “so the parents would have to transport their children back to Gansbaai for the weekends, and a lot of them couldn’t afford that. There were a lot of people in Gansbaai who relied on fishing for their income, and a lot of unemployed people as well.”

Wendy had been a teacher, an academic at the University of Cape Town, and the head of an NGO that trained teachers. She believed that her training and experience equipped her to meet the demands of the job description as a circuit manager. But she didn’t always feel equipped for the reality of being a public official responding to the demands of communities.

In the early days of Masakhane being developed across the R43 from where Gansbaai Academia is today, she was held hostage by community members angry about their make-shift primary school made from mobile containers. They demanded that she call in the provincial minister of education to hear their grievances.

“Both the minister and my chief director at the time were visiting Pretoria. When I called her, my director said to me ‘hang tight’,” she laughs. “So then hostage negotiators were dispatched – no, it was hectic - they infiltrated into the crowd that was holding me, and then the one plain clothes policeman sidled up to me and said: ‘look, that guy at the gate, can you see him? You try and stay in his line of sight because he’s a trained sniper. If anybody tries to hurt you in any way, that person will be taken out.’ But I mean, I am an educator! How did I

get caught up in this? Anyway, I had been there since about half past nine that morning and I was escorted away under police guard at about half past five. It was a full-on police operation to get me out of there."

*

Wendy remembers that the ANC's Cameron Dugmore had a loyal voter base in Gansbaai, and that he had promised the community a high school, "and interestingly enough, he made it happen. I must give him credit for that. I've applied for high school to be built and, in some cases, it's taken 11 years. He got it done in a couple of years."

But before the ANC could announce the approval of the high school, the political winds turned. In an historic upset for the liberation party, the ANC lost the governance of the Western Cape to the Democratic Alliance in the general election of 2009, the first time the ANC had been ousted from provincial government at the polls.

In reporting on the election results, some media referenced the Western Cape's otherness when compared to the rest of the country, suggesting that its relative wealth and the racial makeup of its population – with two thirds of its population classified as "coloured" – swayed the voting patterns in favour of the DA.[2] But race patterns aside, the groundwork for the setting up of a new school had been set.

The catalyst for that approval to finally come about, says Sammy Brett, was that the town grew. "Back then we were 300 or 400 people in the town. Then there was a boom. The factory in the harbour where they process pelagic fish got more and more workers from the Eastern Cape. That made the decision much easier for national to approve, because so many Xhosa children had to travel by bus to Hermanus every day. And sometimes the buses were not reliable, and sometimes they were getting stuck on the side of the road so kids would have to hike to school or back to their homes."

While the small town of Gansbaai was growing, so was the population of Cape Town. New schools were being built to meet the demand, but, in many cases, says Wendy Colyn, the provincial education department was replicating dysfunction.

[2] https://www.theguardian.com/world/2009/apr/26/south-africa-election-anc-victory

Wendy had a social justice motivation in setting up the new school in Gansbaai. She believed that those who could not afford school fees should be offered equal opportunity relative to those who could.

"A problem was so many of the new Western Cape schools were failures, they were disasters with no academic achievement," she says. "My colleagues said to me, 'Wendy, you are going to saddle yourself with a looming disaster.' I listened to them and thought, I really don't want that. And I said to my team, 'we are going to have to be very strategic about how we start this school'".

"And finally," says Sammy Brett, "we started a school here. There is no obligation to pay school fees. It is free. If you wish to pay, then you pay. If you don't want to, you don't have to pay. And the quality of the education, I am very proud of."

The growth of the area has continued into the 2020s with migration into Stanford and Gansbaai and the expansion of housing and informal settlements in Masakhane. That was a trend that Mervyn Hess, a member of the committee that lobbied for the school to come about, foresaw.

"I remember the last word I shared with the department. You are building a school for eight hundred learners I see here. Have you got plans to extend or go upstairs? They asked me, 'but where are the kids going to come from?'" he laughs. "I said *ai*, you wait and see. Stanford learners are involved, Gansbaai learners are involved and soon the school will be too small."

A site was chosen in Blompark on the R43. It was on the edge of town, and across the road from Masakhane. It was accessible to all races, and, what was more, it was alongside municipal sports fields that would be available to the school.

"We started absolutely correctly with the right location," says Wendy Colyn. "Then we had to find the right acting principal. We couldn't start the school with some dead-beat who wasn't going to make any effort. We brought in Mr Havenga, he was a retired circuit manager. He understood the systems, he would be able to smooth out the appointments of staff so there wouldn't be endless grievances. We had a good staff. I made certain that each

staff member was well qualified to teach in a secondary school before I signed off their appointments."

In 2009 an interim governing body was set up, and through that body, the community pleaded for a school that was both academic and vocational. Hospitality studies and computer technology were the first of those subjects to be considered.

"It was an uphill battle because the kitchen had to be set up in a certain way and it was expensive," says Wendy. "But I won that battle, and the community got what they were asking for. So it was the starting point of what turned out to be a very successful school. My personal vision was to bring three communities together: white, black and coloured – to make it a window into what could be possible in South Africa. To demonstrate that excellence can be achieved when we all work together…"

And in January 2010, Mona Matthews and the other teachers watched 359 children walk through the gates of Gansbaai Academia as enrolled students for the very first time. "It was a big thing when the high school opened," she told me. "There were a small group of people who advocated very hard for the school and who really went out of their way. And finally, it happened."

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Jack Swart – who is a supervisor in a high school hostel in the Karoo town of Oudtshoorn and a lay preacher in the Methodist church – was looking forward to the ten year reunion of his Gansbaai Academia matric class in 2024 when I spoke to him in 2023. They were the first grade eights to attend when the school opened in 2010, and the first to matriculate in 2014 having been through their full five years of high school there.

"It was a great thing when the school opened in Gansbaai," he says, "even to this day, I mean just look at the numbers. It was desperately needed for the town. For me and my sister, it would have been a big cost going to another school far away when you look at the fees, the hostel, the transport. So those of us that were, let's say, the normal working class, middle class in Gansbaai we went to the high school. And we never looked back."

Jack remembers the 22nd of February 2010 when Helen Zille, the premier of the Western Cape, arrived in Gansbaai to officially open the school. He was yet to turn thirteen years old and was not yet wise to the politicking of politicians, but he particularly remembers that he and his classmates were asked to be patient as they waited for the newly minted DA Premier to arrive. There were hundreds of people packed into the newly hall. Generously proportioned, with its high ceilings and steps leading up to the stage, the hall, along with the kitchen, was the showcase feature of the DA showcase school.

"We were sitting on the floor because there weren't enough chairs. We were waiting and waiting and then she came about twenty minutes late. And she said, sorry for being late, traffic is a problem coming from Cape Town. I had to rush here, but I don't believe in the blue light brigade, speeding and making everyone move out of my way. She said they were driving normally and at the speed limit, even though it was her right as the premier to have the blue lights, the speeding, with no repercussions."

Jack and his best friend Joudun Rooi looked at each other and immediately agreed. No ways would they drive at the speed limit! If they were the premier it would be speeding and blue lights and sirens all the way!

The pair were inseparable during their five years at high school and always seemed to find themselves in the vortex of the story of the day. Their smiling faces appeared often in the pages of the school newspaper – *The Sharky Times*: at an Arbour Day event alongside the invited dignitary or dressed up at a school cultural event alongside the principal. They went on to be elected head boy and deputy head boy in their matric year five years later.

Die Burger, the Western Cape Afrikaans daily, carried a story about the opening of the new school the next day. It included a photo of the premier with two students – Jack Swart and Joudun Rooi – all three smiling for the camera.

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"The big issue came when we needed to appoint a principal," says Wendy Colyn.

Tommy Wilson was the acting principal of Worcester Secondary School when he saw the Western Cape Education Department (WCED) circular advertising the post. Worcester is a

small town in the mountains of the Cape Winelands that many pass through as they drive on the national highway from Johannesburg to Cape Town. He and his seven siblings went to school there.

"In the evening we would be sitting at the long table in *die voorkamer,* all of us, doing our homework. And my father – he was a standard eight guy, he was a painter for the municipality – he would walk around and he would check our work. Never mind that he didn't know the stuff. He would check the date. And he would see, we were on par with our work. And if we struggled with the mathematics, he would ask people from outside the home to come and help us. Because his brothers were all teachers."

Mr Wilson had no intention of leaving the familiarity of Worcester, but he he applied for the post and travelled to Gansbaai for the interview. It would be good practice, getting his CV together and sitting an interview, he thought. It would prepare him for his application to become the permanent principal at Worcester Secondary School.

Three weeks later he was being appointed to the post. While he resisted at first, telling the officials in the department that his wasn't a serious application, he was told by his bosses that this was his new posting, and he was expected to accept it.

"We found a brilliant man in Tommy Wilson," says Wendy Colyn. "He took the school from where we had got it: with a good curriculum, a good governing body, well qualified staff; and he continued in that vein…striving for excellence. Mr Wilson would have described me as quite a hard taskmaster, but I was not going to have another failing school in my circuit. We worked hard to create this pocket of excellence, and when I retired I was very proud of where the school was."

Mr Wilson remembers the day that he walked through the front doors of the school for the very first time as principal. He had woken early, and alone, at the home he had rented nearby. His wife Julia had stayed behind in Worcester where she was a teacher. His son, Woodrow, made it clear to his father that he was not about to go and live in *die platteland.* He was a law student at Stellenbosch University, but his home base would remain in Worcester with his mother.

He walked through the reception area with its bare walls that during his tenure would become populated with newspaper cuttings and certificates marking the school's achievements. And he walked into the staffroom to chair his first early morning staff meeting.

"A feeling came over me," he says. "I realised this was where I must be. Gansbaai Academia is a multicultural school and as school head, I could make a contribution towards the rainbow nation. It was a new school where I could make my mark, be an influence and make a difference in people's lives. I came from a coloured school, but here was the rainbow nation. It was a challenge, but I accepted the challenge."

It's an aspiration that is common in South Africa. It's rare for it to come about and tenuous when achieved. But it held at Gansbaai Academia because Mr Wilson and his team of teachers made it so.

"What stood out for me about the school was Mr Wilson and the way he went about establishing a school culture," says Wendy. "He had a heart. The school was new, it didn't have set traditions. He was particular about setting up ritual. He established a prestige evening – that is what he called the prize giving – and it had a strong academic tone to it. It warmed my heart to see these kids of all races together, hanging out as friends on the playground and working together, competing for prizes in the most wonderfully generous spirit."

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While the WCED had registered the school as Gansbaai Secondary, the interim governing body changed the name to reflect an aspiration: the school was a place of academia that prepared students for tertiary education and a life of dignified work. Tommy Wilson built on that aspiration. On every occasion, he would remind staff and students of the vision he held for the school. And word spread.

"The taxis from Hermanus would stand outside for a month," he recalls. "They would come here and beg me. Please, they don't want to go to Qhayiya Secondary, and they don't

want to go to Hermanus High. I don't know why. I always say this school must be a beacon of hope. Maybe that's why. Simply said: you can achieve your dreams here."

One of the students who was inspired by that vision was Eswin Kapot. He grew up in Stanford and was a keen rugby player. His family went through some tragic times when he was at high school, and he credits the teachers – particularly Mr Hess – for helping them through.

It was in a quiet moment while cleaning up after a hospitality studies practical when his teacher, Hanet van Deventer, told him that he had a real feel for cooking and that he had what it takes to become a chef. From those few words a vision of his future formed. Today, he is the chef and manager at Hot House, a restaurant attached to the Walker Bay nursery in Hermanus. He dreams of one day opening a restaurant of his own, under his own brand.

"Mr Wilson did a great job. He did a fantastic job," he says. "I remember when we used to be on the sports field practicing for rugby, he would be there supporting. He was full heart. He was one of those teachers that actually comes forward and wants to bring the best out of you."

Joudun Rooi recalls, "Mr Wilson would always say that you are a Sharky. Don't compare yourself with children from Hermanus High school or those model C schools. You are also good. You must just learn and rise above your circumstances. So he used to motivate us each and every day. And I think that's the thing. The way the teachers were involved in your life and telling you to go for what you want and fly high. Our school saying was *Extendere Alas Vestri.* It means fly high spread your wings.

"Yeah, you know, a lot of people says a lot about Gansbaai Academia. It's a *gangsterism* school. And there's a lot of *skollies.* But they don't know what's behind those gates. There's love and compassion in the classroom. There's empathy."

Jack and Joudun, the best friends from high school, have a lot in common. They share a way of looking at the funny side of life. They share their Christian faith. As they have grown to see more of the world and to experience the collapse of state services around them, they

share the belief that what they experienced at a state no-fee school in that small window between 2010 and 2014 was something truly unusual.

"In the last 20, 25 years we've shown this picture of education that is dysfunctional, not working, backlogged, understaffed, underpaid," says Jack. "There are lots of problems in education. Then you have these teachers at Gansbaai Academia and other schools, making a difference."

The families' of Siviwe Yuyu and his friend Asahleli Meje migrated from the Eastern Cape to the Western Cape in search of better opportunity and settled in Hermanus and Stanford. The new high school in the area opened a door of opportunity for both of them, and Siviwe went on to be the school's second head boy, an honour he handed over to Jack Swart the following year.

"There are teachers who do this to make money, just so they can have a salary to feed their families," says Siviwe. "Then there are passionate teachers that do it with love and compassion. That comes with going the extra mile for learners, making sure they are not disturbed by outside factors. There are a lot of teachers like that at Gansbaai Academia."

After school both Siviwe and Asahleli completed internships at Abagold, an abalone farm and factory that is the largest private employer in the Overberg. The human resources manager, Lou-Anne Lubbe, got to know the high schools in the area, and was drawn to the promise of Gansbaai Academia.

"Tommy is one of the reasons behind the success of Gansbaai Academia," she says. "What strikes me, when I go there, is A, the tidiness, and B, the politeness of the pupils. When you walk in, they greet. When you walk in there, it's clean. Because there's discipline and learners are taught responsibility. The school has created the conditions for students like Siviwe and Asahleli to excel. Not only are they nurtured, they are taught responsibility and they are held accountable."

Carien Fortuin was one of two deputy principals when the school opened in 2010. She has lived what she calls a nomadic existence. Her parents were teachers and the family

followed the patterns of their postings. She counts off the births of her siblings as a way of tracing the family's movements through time and space.

Like many teachers at Gansbaai Academia, she is not from the town. But now, her husband is buried in Gansbaai. She and her daughter have become woven into the community. It has become home.

She is softly spoken, and she smiles with a softening of her face as she talks of her aspiration for the school. "We aim to expose them to more, to show them that they can become more than fishermen on the commercial boats or workers in the fish processing factories. They can become marine scientists, software engineers, chartered accountants, chefs…even poets."

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While 22 February 2010 will always be remembered as the date that the school was officially opened, 29 September 2019 is written into the school's story for a more tragic reason. That was the day that Tommy and Julia Wilson were travelling back from Worcester after attending the last sermon of Tommy's brother who was retiring as a pastor.

For the first few years of his tenure, Mr Wilson travelled back home to Worcester each weekend to be with Julia, but that kept him away from the sports matches and other weekend activities of the school. After some years, he convinced her to move with him to Gansbaai and she took up a post as an Afrikaans teacher at Gansbaai Academia. Her classroom was far from the staffroom, and sometimes she didn't hear the bell warning of the early morning staff meeting. "Mrs Wilson, why are you late?" he sometimes famously asked of her as she arrived blushing and a little flustered as the meeting was starting.

But as they travelled back from the Cape Winelands they were not principal and teacher, but Tommy and Julia, husband and wife. Perhaps they were talking about the sermon, and why Tommy's brother chose that reading to mark the end of his tenure. Perhaps they were talking about how late they would arrive home and what might be in the fridge for an easy dinner. But somewhere along the long stretch of the R43 between Worcester and Villiersdorp, Mr Wilson lost control of the vehicle.

Julia, his wife of 34 years, died on impact.

Mr Wilson was hospitalised for several weeks in a critical condition where he suffered a stroke that caused a partial paralysis of his left leg and arm. After a long recovery period, he returned to school in a wheelchair and in mourning.

Asahleli was completing his in-service training before graduating with a biotechnology degree when he heard the news. "Oh, when I heard that it was just so painful," he says. "He was one of those guys that changed my life through advice and encouragement and the way he was leading the school. The culture he brought to the school. When you were in grade nine you wanted to be in grade 12, and when you were in grade 12 you wanted to be great. So he was that guy."

Mr Wilson is quiet on Facebook, but there are two posts which appear with some regularity. On 14 July, he wishes Julia a happy heavenly birthday. And on 29 September he acknowledges the day when their lives changed forever by posting a photo of his wife with a comment: RIP Julia.

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In 2018 when I first met Tommy Wilson, I was struck by the boom of his voice, the strength of his stride. When I visited in the early months of 2020 before the country was plunged into lockdown I was shocked as a teacher wheeled him in behind his desk. His belly was no longer. His face was impassive. The animated bristle of his handlebar moustache stilled.

I met him again in 2022 and 2023 over coffee and individually wrapped Ouma rusks served on a bright yellow tablecloth in *The Dictionary*. The space had been set up as the school library, but with the pressure of numbers, it was doubling up as a classroom used my Mrs Fortuin to teach her matric Afrikaans class. I asked him if, next time, we could meet at his home. This school is home, he assured me, as he looked out the open door of *The Dictionary* as students moved from one class to the next, as teachers and school administrators came into the room for a hug and to share their news. In between those visits

from his many fans he shared stories about the school and his family and the latest news he had heard about the alumni.

"I can tell you many stories about this school. This is my heart," he said, pausing with emotion and tapping his fist to his heart. "This school is my heart."

Each time I saw him he looked a little stronger. The wheelchair was replaced by two crutches and then one. He told me of the exercises he did every morning to aid his recovery. He was confident that soon he would be able to live independently, without the support of the live-in carer who had helped him from the carpark into his seat in *The Dictionary*.

A few months after his return to school from his recovery, Mr Wilson retired from his post. He was a few years short of the mandatory retirement age of 65. I sensed a frustration that what he had set out to achieve for the school had been so cruelly cut short.

"I was in a wheelchair and it was very inconvenient to try and get on stage during assemblies," he told me. "And what I realised is that learners have less respect for you if you are in a weaker position. You don't have the same kind of authority from a wheelchair. And I said to myself, 'let me give someone else the opportunity. I won't be the principal forever. Even though I wish I could be.'"

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The principal's early retirement signalled a gear change in the school's story. It was followed by two years of Covid-19 lockdowns and the bureaucratically painful process of appointing a new principal. It's as if the trajectory towards that aspiration lost its grip through that difficult period. The two deputy principals – Carien Fortuin and Wilton Phillips – alternated as acting principals, one term on, one term off.

Mr Wilson's retirement wasn't a surprise. If government processes were designed with care, rather than compliance in mind, the department might have seen how precious the school culture was and, equally, how fragile. They might have moved swiftly to appoint a principal to hold it close. Yet it took the WCED two years. It included advertising for the post, reviewing the applicants, the interviews, the re-interviews, the background checks, long

delays for this or that reason and then working through the contestations and objections once they had their candidate.

It's the norm in South Africa's state institutions and explains why so many are managed by acting leaders with insufficient authority sometimes for years at a time. Both Carien Fortuin and Wilton Phillips applied for the job.

Wilton Phillips joined the school as an accounting and economic management sciences (EMS) teacher having completed a commerce degree and a teaching qualification at the University of Stellenbosch. He once aspired to become an investment analyst. "The investments I manage now are these kids," he says. "I love seeing them grow."

"When I came here, the school was two years old," he recalls. "I saw a school that had potential, where I could grow with the school and build. There were not yet fixed customs or ways of doing things. So I had a lot of leeway and I brought in the JSE Investment Challenge, Charter Quest – a commerce competition – and many other things..."

He started with a team of high school kids who had no prior investment experience borne to parents with no or little investment experience. Against children from the most affluent private schools in the country, he led that team to win the JSE Investment Challenge in 2017.

"I believe the God that I praise don't just place certain people in certain places because of the places they come from," he says. "It's more difficult for our kids, but they have the potential to get there. As teachers we must try and set the platform straight so that we can see our kids compared with the best."

He stepped in as an alternating acting principal at the most challenging time of the school's history. While much has been written about the learning losses during this time and how difficult it will be for this generation of public-school children to recover, Wilton sees the societal impact.

"There have been many problems at schools since the Covid period. We had the rotational system, so kids were left at home while parents were at work or with parents who were unemployed. They lost the habit of school. And it was a time when family members became sick or passed away. Convincing a child now that education has a value is more

difficult. A lot of kids had the idea that they were just living for now, what was the use of anything else? Drug abuse and gangsterism in communities increased at that time, and all these societal problems are boiled down and concentrated at a school. At schools we need to build again. We need to give hope again."

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It was six hundred and sixty six days after Mr Wilson's last day as principal that student reporter Lulutho Pelem's article was published on the front page of *The Sharky Times*.

> On the evening of 27 May 2022, at a classy, dignified occasion, Ms C. Fortuin was officially inaugurated as the third principal of Gansbaai Academia. It was such a beautiful and memorable occasion, one where our former principal, Mr TD Wilson, handed robes over to Ms Fortuin with the name "PRINCIPAL" clearly spelled out on them…it was a moment that brought tears to the eyes of many who were there.

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Mrs Fortuin's job as the new principal was to lead the school through massive demand and a shifting demographic while re-building the school's culture.

Mona Matthews has watched the changes play out over the school's short history.

"When I started teaching there were mostly coloured learners and white learners and then a few black learners," she says. "All the kids those days became friends. They slept at each other's houses. They ate together. It was nothing new. They were raised to get along with other cultures, to learn from other cultures. But at this moment I'm heartsore to think that one culture is 'ruling'. And the white learners are all going slowly but surely, even though it's so expensive to go to another school."

Gansbaai was built as a high school for the children of four local primary schools, but by the 2020s, the number of primary schools feeding into it had doubled. One of those original primary schools is appropriately called Die Bron, translated into English as The Source, in Stanford.

A blue heritage plaque in the school's foyer confirms its place as one of South Africa's oldest primary schools. About half of its graduates move on to Gansbaai Academia, and the principal, Lionel Pedro, is invested in the high school's success.

"I'm worried about the school," he told me when I met him in 2022. "You have this new principal now. She was probably the one that was behind the school's results, but the school has become overcrowded now. And then there's more discipline involved, and that has an impact on your results. It's as simple as that, you see."

Die Bron has an appeal beyond its reputation for being a "good school." The walls of the administration block are covered with photos and newspaper cuttings and with tributes to past principals. The classroom blocks are well maintained. A container library has been built on the edge of a rectangle of playground dotted with newly planted trees. The school is also under pressure to grow beyond the numbers it can accommodate.

"The people who are coming to Stanford and Gansbaai, they came from the same area in the Eastern Cape where you find the most underperforming municipalities."

Asahleli is an alumnus of Die Bron. His father lived in Stanford, but he was raised by his mother in the Eastern Cape. His school teachers saw his potential and advised his mother to send him to a better school in the Western Cape.

Variations of that conversation have been playing out in family homes and school corridors across the Eastern Cape for many years, and Western Cape schools are feeling the pressure.

"The area from Grabouw to Gansbaai is massively growing," says Wendy Colyn. "I heard the mayor of Hermanus saying that the town needs six new high schools, and there isn't the finances for that. In Gansbaai, just look at Masakhane. From this tiny, well established township, it has grown tenfold. The schools haven't kept up. If you look at the sheer volume of numbers, there is a real risk that all the wonderful things Gansbaai Academia has achieved over the years might be lost.

"It's a smaller rural area competing with metropolitan areas for resources. If you look at the growth of the township areas in Cape Town, there are tens of thousands of learners that

need to be accommodated at schools. We are competing here with a couple of hundred kids, so we come off a very bad second."

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A child walks into a high school for the first time at twelve years old. A lot happens in the next five years. He moves from the gentle security of a primary school with a class teacher and only a few subjects to a high school with multiple teachers, many subjects and the subject choices that follow. And all this while walking from childhood, into adolescence and into adulthood.

Malcolm Mulope went to primary school at Okkie Smuts, a small Stanford primary school on the heritage side of town. The move to high school, though closer to where he lived in Gansbaai, left him at times startled and overwhelmed.

"It wasn't the easiest for me starting off at Gansbaai Academia," he says. "The school was very new at that stage and a lot of the kids in the local area just flooded in there. So there was like, 60 kids per classroom. There were some teething issues with a new school and it was difficult for some of the younger teachers to keep discipline."

Malcolm worked hard to achieve matric results that he hoped would be his passport to tertiary education and a bursary.

There is perhaps no change as profound as finishing school and moving into the next stage of life, where a young adult's prospects are determined largely by family, opportunity, knowledge and imagination. For Malcolm and others it's a shift from rigid compliance to a life of their own making. On the lips of any observer of that journey is the question: What next?

"Access to tertiary education is super important. I mean, I know it's hard for me, because I'm a foreigner," says Malcolm who holds a Zambian passport, "but even for locals it's super hard to get into uni. Just the fees. At Rhodes it's, what?, R55 000 a year minimum, just tuition, and then another 40 grand for accommodation per year. So if you come from a poor background, like most South African people, how are you supposed to afford that? Not everyone can get that NSFAS bursary. So I mean, you're leaving a significant portion of your

population with only a grade 12 education? And how can you boost your economy ten or 20 years down the line when most of your population doesn't have *significant* education?"

For many, they will be the first in their families to study beyond high school. Parents who have not walked that journey might be ill-equipped to guide and advise. Some schools, like Gansbaai Academia, try to take on that role.

"It's the role of the school to open the gates of opportunity and to instil hope and belief," says Wilton Phillips. "The child must believe that there is something out there for him. That is very important. For many of our learners, they have to break the cycle of poverty to make sure future generations are better off. It often requires of them a non-selfish act."

If Gansbaai Academia were to conform to the national average, only seven out of every hundred in its matric class would enrol for and finish a tertiary qualification after school. What does it take for that statistical minority to walk into a tertiary institution, and to walk out the other side with a qualification that will equip them for the world of work?

"I think the differentiator is ambition, drive, a desire for a life different to what they have," says Lou-Anne Lubbe. "And a hunger to not live the kind of life that their parents or their grandparents have lived."

And those that see the opportunities are better equipped to grab hold of them, Lou-Anne argues. "In a post-apartheid era, there's affirmative action and employment equity. If they see those opportunities, and if someone at school told them that they can achieve, and if they held onto that belief, and then they work their *touches* off...

"Of course, there is an intellectual ability needed, otherwise they wouldn't be there in the first place, but to work, to forfeit a social life, to sacrifice in order to succeed, that's the differentiator. And for those who have a vision of what success looks like – like Asahleli – they carry that discipline into the workplace."

Siviwe was the first in his family to go to university. He was the ideal student, according to Lou-Anne's description. But he would add another word to her formula: purpose.

"A quality education comes from knowing what you want to study and studying that with a purpose. If you are studying entrepreneurship, or business studies or whatever, you need to

know where you are going with that. It should not be something that you enrolled for because that's all that was available or because you had no choice."

There were several people who supported Siviwe's journey from school to university. Lou-Anne was one of them. Another was Theo Krynauw from Sparklekids, founded to help high school students with potential bridge the gap from school to the rest of their lives. Theo has worked with many students and knows that even if a person graduates, there are no guarantees.

"I have learned this very important lesson over the years: unemployment is a bad thing – but being unemployable is even worse," he says. "This is typically a young person from the township who enrols for course after course, and then with six or seven certificates in hand walks from business to business looking for a job only to be turned away because there is no depth of training towards solid sustainable jobs. And the tenth time the door is closed he loses confidence, and to his mind he is unemployable. Or young people with degrees in tourism or HR now working as waiters, if they are lucky. My heart breaks for young people who are the first to go to tertiary, the family pins its hopes on them, and then…"

And then…

But let's leave that hanging for now and look more closely at the stories of five Gansbaai Academia alumni. We'll start by imagining twelve year old Joudun Rooi starting high school. College or university admissions, job opportunities, the matric pass rate, the unemployment rate, vocation, the meaning of life. These questions came later. He arrived alone in a world of many unknowns and surprised himself by, four years later, being elected as a leader of the student body.

Chapter 2 Joudun: thankful grateful blessed

Joudun Rooi

Being appointed deputy head boy was one of the highlights of my life. I was surprised. We were chosen by the educators and the learners. So yeah, it was quite something to experience that these people were looking up to me and seeing leadership skills in me. Not that I didn't see it in myself, but coming from other people, it's quite something.

Joudun Rooi, modelling beachwear for SportsZone, a shop in Gansbaai. Source: Instagram

In the moment that his deputy head boy badge was revoked, Joudun Rooi felt cheated of the future that lay – enticingly, if not all that clearly – before him. In a heartbeat the hard won leadership position had dissipated like cloud before sunshine.

He wore his maroon *Sharky* sports shirt that Saturday even though he wasn't participating in the colour games, the annual inter-house athletics event of Gansbaai Academia. He had held the schools record for the 1500 metres for four years, but this was not the event to defend that title. He was there as a student leader: a newly appointed prefect and member of the Matric Council.

It was his matric year and the constraints of school life were almost behind him. He could never claim that it was a spontaneous act of recklessness, or that – in the moment – he had given into peer pressure. It had been pre-planned. He and his friends had gone – just that morning – to the Tops liquor store at the Great White Mall to buy the box of Cellar Cask wine.

They huddled behind the green container alongside the field. A seagull that had perched there soared to safety as the cheers of the spectators watching the Under 15 100 metre qualifying race erupted. Closer to them a Grade 10 boy hurled the shotput with a grunt as a few spectators clapped. From the other end of the field a small group sang out a war cry.

They giggled as they passed the contraband hand-to-hand, each decanting from the black plastic nozzle into disposable plastic cups. It was the brother and sisterhood of complicity. It was also the manifestation of a boyish mischievousness in Joudun that would follow him into adulthood. They looked around for witnesses. They went home that afternoon in the all-clear.

On Monday morning he was called to the deputy principal's office. Another student, it turns out, had snitched, with photographs to back it up. He had recently been through the chest-puffing honour of being awarded the deputy head boy badge; and now, it was being taken away from him. The badge – and the privileges that came with it – were revoked by *Juffrou* Fortuin.

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Joudun's family moved so often that he is at a loss when asked where he is from. He was born in Tesselaarsdal, a small settlement on the northern side of the Kleinrivier mountain range near Caledon. With the vicissitudes of rural life, the family moved often from farm to farm, but for much of his school years he grew up among the vineyards of the Lomond wine estate, fifteen kilometres inland from Gansbaai on the southern-most curve of Walker Bay.

Along the northern curve sits the more well-known town of Hermanus, popular with wealthy retirees and tourists who flock there to take in the cliff top views of sunsets over the ocean. In the summer months they arrive to realise the international promise of the town, an almost-guarantee of spotting of southern right whales as they migrate from the southern oceans to the warmer seas to calve.

It's as if Gansbaai forgot to dress up to welcome the tourists to the area, but the town claims its share of the tourist dollar thanks to being the great white shark cage diving capital of the world. From Hermanus tourists drive along the R43 that cuts a broad black swathe through the centre of Gansbaai.

There are few trees, and little indication that the town is cut into sweeping hills of fynbos known internationally as a biodiversity hotspot. On either side of the road are rag-tag strips of low slung buildings, many of them houses now converted to businesses, most in need of a coat of paint. It lacks the coffee shops, boutiques and fine dining establishments strung along neatly paved pedestrian walkways of its neighbour across the bay.

The sports field of Gansbaai Primêr, where many of Joudun's friends attended before moving to the new high school, is across the road from Blue Bottle Liquors, a Shell garage, the Arrie Nel pharmacy. Lines of lampposts with dulled Christmas lights line the main road, waiting to be switched on to welcome the onset of the December tourist season.

Many of those tourists drive through town on the R43. They turn right at the sports field of Gansbaai Academia and pass the Penguin Rehabilitation Centre before reaching a concrete pier to board one of the two storey high boats with names like Megalodon and Slashfin. Steel cages, tall enough for man to stand in as he stares a great white shark in the eye, are attached to their sterns.

Walker Bay has attracted international attention for other reasons also. Amongst its cold waters and thick kelp forests lie dwindling yet still inexhaustible beds of abalone, locally known as *perlemoen,* a pearly mottled marine snail whose pungent fleshy interior fetches exorbitant per gram prices on international markets. Crime syndicates recruit young men as poacher-divers and runners, the bottom and least profitable rung of the illicit trade, but alluring nonetheless to young people who are statistically unlikely to attend tertiary education, to start a business or to get an entry level job.

But the big spending of international tourists and the workings of the poaching syndicates were far removed from Joudun's day-to-day life as he grew up on the Lomond estate to a farm labourer father and a mother who was a domestic worker in the farmhouse.

While weekdays were filled with the promise of swimming in the farm dams and mostly peaceful family time around an evening meal, it was on weekends – sometimes – that things got difficult at home. At a young age Joudun learned, first hand, the wearing effects of alcohol abuse on the fabric of family life.

"Things weren't tough," he says, quick to defend his family, "but it wasn't easy. I didn't get things other people got, like name brands. And you know, when you go to high school, you want name brands, you want Adidas … I didn't get that stuff. But ja, there was always food. There was love. It was just the weekends…"

His mother knew that things were difficult for him. She was a mother to two daughters and he was her only son. His sister Aniza October, in the telling of the family lore, quotes what she understands to be a universal truth: mothers favour their sons. In quiet moments together preparing the evening meal or hanging out the washing, Joudun and his mother would have variations of the same conversation.

"Joudun," she would say to him, "you see your parents drinking. You see your parents fighting. Don't look at what we're doing. It's important that you have your own goals, your own dreams. Stay focused on that. Don't let your circumstances determine your future. You can rise above them. You can go far."

As a boy he heard, but didn't absorb, that counsel. He saw around him men and women born to farm work and growing old with shovels in their hands. His future was laid out before him. But as the years passed, and this conversation was repeated over and over, he began to hear the words of a woman who had once dreamed of being a social worker. He heard them as a clue to a puzzle that he needed to solve.

Those words rang out for him every day. They powered his way through high school and led to the deputy head boy badge being pinned to his blazer.

And then it was taken from him.

Aniza recalls the stress of being called in as the family representative to fight for his badge. "For me, it was very traumatic. Both of us had to appear before the SGB (School Governing Body). And it was the most uncomfortable timeframe. I think it was, I can't remember how many weeks, but his badge was suspended for a long time."

*

In 2010 Gansbaai Academia opened in time for Joudun to start high school close to home.

He woke early to get a ride to school with his father who drove the truck into town every morning to collect the labourers. And he waited at school, sometimes until dark in the winter months, for his father to collect him again when he dropped the labourers back in town.

Later his parents arranged private transport to school, but this was expensive. So he lodged with a family in Gansbaai and he lived for several years as a virtual stranger in a household with people who were not his people.

As a child he was not party to adult discussions, but sometime during high school he moved into Aniza's home in Stanford. "Aniza definitely motivated for it," he says of his sister who is much older than him. "And the reason is, we've been close since forever. So she's always very concerned about me."

He was, at last, with his people. He was closer to school. In the years that followed he has left and he has returned, but she has become a mother to him, and the family of her household have become his nuclear family.

Aniza told me of her family as we sat on puffy couches in the front room of her home. She is a sergeant at the Stanford police station. “Still a low rank,” she said, “but we will get there.” She indicated the photos on the walls and propped up on the sideboard.

“My oldest is turning 22 now, her name is Rineez. Yeah, she’s studying her last year now LLB. And the small one,” she points to the next photo, “OK, she’s not so small! She’s turning 13 years old. She’s the head girl of Okkie Smuts. And my eldest was the head girl at Die Bron.”

So there is leadership in the family, I suggest, with Joudun being the deputy head boy at Gansbaai Academia. You must be very proud?

“I am very proud. Unfortunately,” she laughs modestly, looking down at her hands. “I keep telling my brother and my sister, it doesn't matter what our parents do, what they *are* in life. Let us stand out. Let us be better, you understand? Let us teach our kids to be better. That's the only thing.”

*

As an adult, Joudun still feels the prickle of the injustice of his badge being revoked, even though, with the cooling of the years, he and his friends joke about it.

The shame of the suspension burned away in the light of his achievements. He maintained his streak as a top academic achiever and athlete and took part in school clubs and societies.

Juffrou Fortuin handed him his badge once the suspension had run its course. She straightened his collar before pinning the badge to his lapel. He remembers her exact words at that moment. “Joudun remember who you are. Remember your talents. Don’t fall into the trap of following the crowd.”

Juffrou Fortuin. As deputy principal and head of the disciplinary committee she maintained a respectful distance between herself and the students. She would stand in the courtyard with hands behind her back, supervising the transition of hundreds of pupils from one class to the next. But there was an innate kindness to her, a softening of her eyes when

she smiled which drew so many young people to her and which inspired Joudun's best friend – Jack Swart – to break with protocol and call her *Mum*.

And then the words that he recalls in moments of doubt and that have served as a talisman for every decision he has taken since then. If anyone were to ask Joudun today for his motto, or for the aspiration he holds for his life, he would recite *Juffrou* Fortuin's words.

"Remember you are not here to fit in. You are here to stand out."

"That's my motto. Still today," he says. "I'm pushing myself to the limit. Working Monday to Sunday. Because I don't want to be dependent on other people. I want my own money."

*

Having been declined a place to study towards a Bachelor of Education at the University of South Africa (UNISA) after he matriculated, Joudun completed a yearlong internship as a teacher's assistant at Die Bron Primary School in Stanford. Patches of unemployment and long stretches of self-doubt followed before he got his first permanent job the following year. It was not a chapter that he had anticipated in the story of his life, but he was appointed as a teller at the Gansbaai branch of ABSA, one of South Africa's leading banks.

"The pride that I had, I can't describe," he says of that time. "Everyone thinks, wow, you're a banker, you work at a bank. You wear a uniform each day. You drive your own car. Yes, it was nice. It was *lekker*. But it was also stressful. I was only twenty years old and I had such huge responsibility."

Joudun was well suited to the job. He liked to look good, and he was well turned out every day. He was personable, and offered quick and friendly service. He greeted the regular clients by name. And later he got appointed as the ATM custodian, loading cash into and removing deposits from each of Gansbaai's three ATMs. His hands touched millions of Rands each day, and at each day's closing, every Rand had to be accounted for.

He was earning enough to contribute to his sister's household, enough even to make the monthly payments on a white almost-new VW Polo with only twelve thousand kays on the clock. For the first time he could travel the R43 between Stanford and Gansbaai easily and

independently, windows down, listening to music all the way. The car arrived in his life as a symbol of success and with a promise of independence.

"I mean, I was just a farm boy. And there I was working at ABSA, a well-known bank. I got to be independent financially. I got to buy a new car. That for me was a big achievement at that stage."

It was a moment in time worth marking, and he did so with the age-old materials of ritual. Ink on skin. Before committing to a design, he sat on the corner couch of Aniza's Stanford home and scrolled through his phone to photos of his matric year.

He had been inked once before with black marker pen, but those images were washed down the drain in swirls of soap the night he returned home elated by the applause after the performance of *Krismis van Map Jacobs*. The play by Adam Small was their Afrikaans set work, and *Juffrou* Fortuin cast him in the leading role.

It explores the world of gang leader Map Jacobs in the build up to his release on parole after seven years in jail. On everyone's lips is the question, has Map changed, or is he still the same old Map? The drama plays out against the apartheid era forced removals of communities from Cape Town to the Cape Flats, and against the social ills that still plague those disenfranchised communities.

He scrolled through until he found the image that always stills the motion of his thumb.

There he is. Loose jeans, low on the waist. A generous rim of blue underwear on display. A loose belt, unbuckled. Bare chest. Hair cropped short for the role. The image is low quality, grainy. But he can still make out the fuzz of tattoo lines generously applied to his face, the scrawl of a star on his chest.

He leans into the camera, smiling broadly. His arm around Mr Wilson to his right, dressed in his working attire – a collared shirt and tie, the oversized squares of his glasses, his smile beneath the abundance of his moustache.

His other arm is around Map Jacobs' love interest, Blanchie Cavernellis, played by Faeza Abrahams who is a social worker in Stanford now. She wears a short frilly skirt, a low slung top, a pink headband, a jangle of jewellery. Hand on her hip, she too leans into the camera.

The production had been a resounding success, their faces where fresh with the adrenalin of the after-performance high.

The next image is from the performance. Map Jacobs is visited by his mother shortly before he is to be released on parole. There he is, his eighteen year old self, behind bars, leaning into the Bible he holds between his knees. Facing him, in the demure dress of an elderly Muslim woman, is his mother, Antie Grootmeisie played by Lizandra King.

And alongside her – also holding a Bible – is Map Jacobs' spiritual mentor, Apostle George, played by his best friend Jack Swart. A few weeks ago Jack had walked into the bank and waved. Joudun barely recognised him, he had slimmed down so. It is seldom that they see each other now. But while each of them had been born to a family of sisters, they still call each other *brother*.

In that prison scene Apostle George reads a passage about the road to Damascus and the conversion of the Apostle Paul from a persecutor of Christians to a follower of Jesus. As Map Jacobs learns about the sins of Paul he calls out.

Guilty and dirty and disgusting!

Lord, can you see these markings, all these that I have allowed myself to be marked with…'cause I wanted somewhere to belong? (He talks now to God). Can you see these tattoos, all the marks? (His voice drifts off for a moment. Is he crying?) It was a terrible search for an identity, Lord Jesus!

To mark his achievements at ABSA, Joudun resolved to commit something of his identity to ink again. One afternoon he took a bottle of tequila with him, to dampen the pain he says, and visited the private house of a tattoo artist in Gansbaai that was well known to the alumni of Gansbaai Academia.

The tattoo became a little faded over time. He learned only later about proper tattoo care and the importance of Vaseline for the first few weeks after creation. While the design is unlike what you might see on a 1960s Cape Flats gangster, it too tells a story of his past while intoning a prayer for his future.

The image curving around the line of his calf is of a Roman cross representing the crucifixion of Christ. Swirling around it is a finely wrought chain. Alongside it, in looping cursive font, are three words.

thankful grateful blessed

"Because that's how it is," he replies to anyone who asks. "It reminds me what I have to be grateful for. Sometimes you forget to say thank you, and sometimes you forget what people might have done for you. It reminds me where I've come from and what I have achieved in life, and there is more to come."

Joudun held in his hands the promise of what so many young South Africans aspire to. A full time job in a big company with the promise of benefits, security and career progression. But there was something beyond that security he yearned for. He wanted to get out of Stanford. He wanted to see the world.

"It became, I don't know how to describe it in English, the job became *afgesaags,"* he says. "I could do it in my sleep. And I'm one for challenges. I don't like doing the same thing over and over again. I don't like dealing with the same problem over and over again because, you know yourself, the same problem keeps repeating itself."

The restlessness that drove Joudun to hand in his resignation would determine the haphazard nature of his journey for many years beyond school. He has aspired always to something that he can't quite name, but that, even so, is sometimes enticingly within reach. His road for the years that followed would be characterised by dead ends, wrong turns and signs that promised to show him the way.

*

While much of what he heard in the day-to-day routine of school is now lost to him, he thinks sometimes about what *Juffrou* Fortuin told them, that *Krismis van Map Jacobs* was a story of two jails. Map Jacobs was sent to jail for committing a crime, but he was released into another jail – the Cape Flats itself – from which there was no escape and no parole. He feels like that about living in Stanford.

Lionel Pedro, the principal of Die Bron Primary School, sensed Joudun's frustration when he spent his year there as a teacher's assistant prior to joining ABSA. Stanford is no place for young people, he says.

"Rich people have moved into Stanford and they want to keep this 'village atmosphere'. So there's no investment taking place in Stanford. People will come from the cities to retire and then they will have something like a hobby. A mushroom farm, beehives, a vineyard. Small things. And then they employ four people."

"If we don't uplift the poor side of Stanford," he has said at many community meetings, "those who don't have are going to take from those who have."

Before he had a qualification or any savings, Joudun made a leap to leave after he handed in his resignation to ABSA, and he set his sights far. A friend showed him an advert for waiters in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. You can make good money, his friend told him. He applied and to his surprise was offered the job along with other young South African men, waiters of choice at the Jeddah franchise of Angelina, a high end French restaurant.

"He took this big challenge, he wanted to go overseas," says Aniza. "So I told him nothing is standing in your way, go if you want to. Yes, I was very sad. It was the saddest part of my life actually. I was crying each and every time. Yeah, unfortunately. We're very close," she pauses, apologising for her tears. "So he took this challenge..."

It was an aspiration to spread his wings and to earn some real money that inspired Joudun to apply, but as he scrolled through the Angelina website ahead of leaving for Jeddah, he couldn't help wondering why this farm boy from the Overberg with no prior restaurant experience was accepted at such a prestigious establishment.

He read that the restaurant had *a long tradition extending over nearly 120 years*. He read that when it was founded in 1903 *Proust, Coco Chanel and the biggest French fashion designers gathered in the famous tea room*. He read about *the world-famous hot chocolate "L'Africain" and the signature Mont-Blanc pastry whose secret recipe remains closely guarded after one hundred years.*

He was startled by the starkness of the Jeddah cityscape as he zoomed into Google street view, the street blocks melting into an expanse of desolate beige. But the curve of Angelina was at the point where the dun blocks met a line of white surf and vast green ocean rippled with breeze on the day a Google eye captured the image. “The atmosphere was delightful,” read a Google review from a man wearing a white *thobe* and a long black beard. “There was a live band…the mango sauce was beyond amazing…the risotto was another story…not to mention enjoying all of this with the red sea waves crashing next to you as you watch the sunset…”

A CV with hospitality studies from Gansbaai Academia helped. There are few schools worldwide that offer that. Food preparation, presentation and serving were all covered in his classes with *Juffrou* van Deventer.

He looked the part, and that helped. “I was the only coloured,” he says, “the other South Africans they hired were white. They hired South Africans for the image for the restaurant. They say we have a kind of a French look.”

His love of language inspired by *Juffrou* Fortuin and Mrs Matthews, his English teacher, helped. At school he was active in eisteddfods and debating. He learned how to hold an audience as a member of the Student Representative Council and later as deputy head boy. He was nominated by Mrs Matthews to become a member of the Junior Town Council of the Overstrand Municipality where he and other young people worked alongside the members of the mayoral committee.

And of course he was the man. Map Jacobs. There was that scene when the incarcerated Map Jacobs is visited by his mother for the first time. Joudun memorised six pages of soliloquy and delivered it to an audience that held every word. He would easily be able to deliver the promise of the Angelina menu to a captive audience.

I’m sorry, about it all, Ma…I have said everything…I have said everything to you Ma … I’m sorry about all of it…I’ve changed here in jail…You know it…I’m sorry, but you must believe me Ma, Ma you

must believe me! I've changed here…I've found my saviour Jesus here, really, I will not lie…Ma, do you think I lie?! Praise the Lord Ma!

His confidence helped. He knew that he was well spoken and good looking. That's what they were looking for. The Skype interview with the South African manager went very well.

"What is the most important thing when working in a restaurant?" he was asked.

He had never thought about it before. He had never studied towards the right answer. But his common sense kicked in. "The most important thing is to know the menu, and to sell the menu," he said. That answer secured him the job.

*

All those Google searches didn't prepare Joudun for what it was like. "When I got there it was nothing like Google said. It was different."

What Google didn't prepare him for was the culture, and how different it was from what he was used to in South Africa. "Those people are very arrogant. They won't greet you like we do. Even if I don't know you, I would say hi or I would look you in the face, no, they are not that kind of people. I think it's got to do with the money. Because they're so rich and whatsoever they think they are the best."

While he never befriended any of the locals, Joudun met a lot of South Africans, mostly some years older than him, who were also in Saudi on contract work. Most of them stayed in one compound close to the restaurant. Joudun became a regular visitor and enjoyed with his new friends an underground party scene that was not readily available in Saudi Arabia.

He lived in a company owned block of flats. Four in an apartment. Two in a room. The South African waiters were housed with the Lebanese, who were also Christian. The Indian runners were housed elsewhere.

Then with the chaos of the Covid-19 pandemic, everything that had once been taken for granted spun into remembrance. The South African hard lockdown was mild compared to the Saudi equivalent. The restaurant closed. Curfew was from 2pm until 9am the next

morning. He couldn't step out the door. Waiters were paid 150 real a month as a subsistence allowance, and had to sit it out.

He was incarcerated for about five months. He had time on his hands. He thought about South Africa, its culture of human rights, the unions in place to protect the rights of workers. His frustrations while not working eclipsed those from when he had been working. The long hours, the impromptu demands to extend shifts and even to work through the night.

He was living in his employer's apartment and the company was paying for his validation. And that's when things got sticky for the young South African. His employer would not let him leave until he had sat out the period of his contract as indicated on his *iqama (*residence card). His only option was to pay his way out, at a cost of 10 000 *real* (about R50 000). Failing that, he would not be issued an exit visa. He was trapped in the hold of a modern day equivalent of slavery.

While international travel had collapsed, he managed against all odds to secure a seat on a repatriation flight, his exit permit folded into a pocket of his carry-on luggage. How he escaped is lost to the haze of his panicked state at the time. He sometimes thinks that it was God that helped him through it. And he has always been good at talking himself out of trouble. It's that gift with language again. He still has a record of all the messages, written and recorded.

He debated, through a series of voice notes back and forth with the CEO of the company.

"I said, Mr Mustafa, you have a son, right? Would you let you son stay in America, unemployed, for five or six months or whatsoever, with a food allowance of 150 real? Would you let your son go through that? Is that right?"

He threatened.

"I said to the HR manager – we were in my flat – that I'm communicating with my embassy in South Africa, and if you you're not going to let me go, we will take this further."

Even though he had been in touch with the embassy and was told there was nothing they could do. He had signed a contract.

He prayed.

"I was just praying to God, asking him to help me to get through this thing, you know."

He negotiated.

"They were still owing me vacation money. So I made a deal with them."

He negotiated his way out of paying for the *iqama,* but paid for half his ticket home with the vacation money owed to him and with some help from others.

He begged.

Tickets were sold out within half an hour of flights for the 3-day repatriation period being opened. Many South Africans were trying to get home. But once he had the funds, a ticket opened up.

"I asked my sister and so she sent me money to pay in for that ticket. But the money wasn't reflecting at that time. So I had to ask a friend of mine. She was a teacher there in Saudi. I said I will give you the money back once it reflects in my account. And she trusted me. She gave me the money. In cash."

There was the flight to Johannesburg. The two weeks quarantine in an airport hotel where again he had to ask his sister for an allowance to buy food. The bus trip to Cape Town. And like a boomerang, he returned to his starting point at Aniza's house across the street from the YouSave.

He committed to himself that he would not go abroad again until he had a qualification and some savings. If he had a teacher qualification things would have been different. He could have applied for another position. He could have stayed.

*

It's a Saturday afternoon in summertime. Tourist season. Joudun is on shift at Birkenhead, a restaurant and brewery on the Walker Bay Estate where he works as a waiter on weekends. It's one of several jobs he took up when he got back home.

Despite the estate with its wine farm and brewery being named for Walker Bay, Stanford is detached from the sweep of coastal views. At the northern most point of the bay, near Hermanus, the R43 heads inland for 16 kilometres towards Stanford before turning south again for 22 kilometres towards Gansbaai. The town is at the apex of that inland triangle,

separated from the coast not only by the lay of the road but by abundant stretches of coastal fynbos nature reserve and the rise of the Kleinrivier mountain range that holds the town close.

Joudun has spent the day pairing the Shiraz with the chargrilled rump steak, the Chablis with the steamed mussels. He has served countless rounds of beer samples nestled into the recess of a curve of wood from a repurposed wine barrel. Tourists love the airy interior of the contemporary barn architecture. Behind an oversized bar counter, fat brass pipes disappear into a panel with a dozen equally fat silver and black beer taps. A blackboard guides visitors through the craft beer choices. Honey Blonde, Pot Belly Pilsner, Laughing Croc.

The shift has been busy, with more than the usual share of generous tippers. He takes a quiet moment behind the bar counter in his black Birkenhead apron polishing beer glasses and wondering if he will ever beat the tip he got some weeks back when he served the Afrikaans man who challenged him with the question: what percentage tip do you think you deserve with the service you gave us?

"And with me being confident," he laughs, "I said, 'I gave you 100% excellent service!' And he asked, 'OK sure, but what do you think, what percentage do you deserve?' And I was just standing there and thinking, *juur*, is this man now making a joke or what? Is he testing me or what? And I couldn't say anything. And then the wife said, 'If you believe you gave 100% service, then what do you think? How much percentage must we give you?' And I said 100%!" he laughs again at his temerity.

"And he gave me 100% of what the bill was! He gave me a nine hundred rand tip! ... it was the highlight of the day. I was the first one working at Birkenhead to get a 100% tip, so everyone was impressed. And it's not just that I was feeling confident that day – I'm always confident!"

After his shift he crosses the busy roadworks of the R43, navigating his way across the half built circle that it is hoped will relieve traffic congestion at the main entrance to Stanford. As he walks home he regrets selling the VW Polo that he was so proud of. At the time it was the

right thing to do, and the the monthly payments would have plunged him into debt while he was stuck with no income in Saudi Arabia. God has his ways of looking out for me, he thinks.

Perhaps God had brought the Saudi trip about for good reason, to help him find his way. “It was in Saudi Arabia that I started to love working in the hospitality industry. I see myself as an extrovert. I like getting to know other people, cultures, traditions. I think it gave me that confidence, that boost, to be able to talk in front of people. But actually,” he reconsiders, “that started in high school. I was confident in high school.”

To his right, as he walks around the orange safety barriers that mark the roadworks along the R43, is the first line of neat grids of houses typical of Stanford Village. Most were built in the late 1800s when the town was founded and have been preserved as world-renowned samples of Cape Victorian and Edwardian architecture, bringing to the town the accolade of World Heritage Site. A cluster of people are gathered on the front porch of one of those house with glasses of wine, platters of snacks. They’re making the most of the holiday season. Weekenders from Cape Town, probably, booked into an Airbnb.

He is 26 years old now. He was hoping – given that he was deputy head boy, his strong matric results, his role in the junior town council, his participation in sports and debating, his lead role in *Krismis van Map Jacobs* – no, not just hoping. He anticipated that by this age he would have a qualification, a steady job, a home of his own. He had anticipated that he would be well on his way. He feels frustrated sometimes at the slow march of his life, doors of opportunity that open just a crack, then slam shut, locking him out.

He crosses the wetland that marks the line between two versions of Stanford and then he is in the dusty and far from immaculate streets of Stanford North. In the geography of apartheid era planning, it would have previously been known as *the township,* an area reserved to house coloured workers servicing the homes and businesses of the white town.

It feels like just yesterday he was among the skyscrapers and highways of Jeddah. The palm fringed walkways along the corniche, the street side cafes, the nightclubs, the opulence of Angelina. And now he is back.

"I don't see myself in Stanford. I don't. I don't see Stanford as a place for young people. I want to grow outside of this town. I'm thinking of going abroad again, after my studies. Ja. Not Stanford. I like the rush of things. I like the busy life. There's nothing to do. There's no recreation centres for young people that keeps you busy or whatsoever. That's why you'll find a lot of people, a lot of youngsters, doing drugs and break-ins and whatsoever. There's no jobs."

The wide dusty streets are held by low slung houses, prosaic and modern when compared to those across the river. Asbestos roofed, tightly packed, throngs of people on the streets, competing beats of music booming out of front doors and from sound systems carried by groups of young men walking from here to there. His sister's house is across the road from the YouSave supermarket.

It's busy on a Saturday evening always, and loud, with people stocking up for the weekend. People shout out in greeting. He waves before letting himself through the gate in the un-plastered waist-high wall that separates his sister's house from the road.

On a weekday, Aniza would be at the Stanford police station receiving the exhibits from crime scenes and arrests – mandrax, tik, dagga, firearms, ammunition, liquor, stolen goods – before entering them into the register and ensuring their safekeeping. But it's a weekend, and Joudun greets Aniza and her daughters who are in the front room straightening their hair. He is home.

He splashes his face, changes out of his black Walker Bay Estates uniform into shorts and a t-shirt, and pours himself a glass of water thick with ice. He walks into the side room off the main room, the space in the busy household that he often retreats to. He folds his legs under himself and nestles into the generous folds of the corner couch, enjoying the relief of bare feet and shorts after a hot day in uniform.

In the front room the girls are busy with straighteners and dryers, combs and mirrors. He is an older brother and a younger brother. He is the only young man of the house and they love to tease him good naturedly. They sometimes draw attention to what they call his

beautiful brown eyes and teasingly call him *adorable.* They call out to him, asking how his shift was.

"Fine," he answers to that question slipping back into Afrikaans, the language of his people. "Not bad," he answers to the question about the day's tips. "No thanks," to the offer of a cup of tea as he loses himself to the world in his phone, catching up on messages, making his plans for what is left of the weekend.

He would rather not be waiting tables on a Saturday. He set his sights on becoming a teacher but he has twice been declined a place for a Bachelor of Education degree by UNISA. He has registered for a business studies certificate with Stadio, a private university, and he has to complete a business studies assignment tonight.

He is back on shift at Walker Bay Estate tomorrow and on Monday he returns to his week day job as the logistics co-ordinator for Antjies, a cosmetics company based in the modest industrial area of Stanford. He has only been there for three weeks, but the job holds promise and he is full of ideas about how the ordering and dispatch systems could be improved. He has shared ideas too about marketing and sales. When visitors to the fragrant front office comment on the new young man dispatching the orders, Nicoleen Gericke, the owner of the business, likes to reply that it's hard to find good people in such a small town and that she has had such a high staff turnover, but yes, she is lucky to have found such a "smart *okie"* to support her.

His desk there is piled with the pastel wrappings of soaps, lotions and bath bombs in preparation for an unusually huge order from Amazon. Six thousand soaps are due to be shipped to the US the following week. The little factory alongside his desk – with ladies making and packing soaps by hand – has been working overtime to get the order out on time. In the two weeks from order to delivery, the oils, labels and packaging has to be ordered, the soaps manufactured by hand, dried in the sun, packaged, labelled, boxed and dispatched. But the Amazon order is Monday's worry.

He is feeling the strain of working seven days a week and studying at night. He lies back on the couch and clicks onto his Instagram feed. He sometimes thinks that his story, his

autobiography, is held in the bits and bytes of data stored on his phone: in his Instagram and Facebook feeds and in his photo gallery. A curated version of his story is available to him to scroll through in quiet moments like this.

His Instagram feed. 152 posts. 640 followers. He still believes in the tagline of his profile, despite his frustrations. *Big dreamers become big winners!*

Some of his Instagram photos hang in shop bought frames on the wall in front of him, alongside photos of Rineez's recent matric farewell with a boy shyly wrapped in a tuxedo and bow tie. Gansbaai Academia is the closest school to their home, but Rineez went to Hermanus High. It is colloquially known in South Africa as a Model C school – public schools that charge fees and supplement what the government offers with better facilities, more teachers and smaller classes. On a police sergeant's salary, his sister can afford the fees.

As he scrolls through his feed he is proud that these are not just casual selfies. He has taken care curating his profile.

Tight black jeans, a burgundy sweater, long black cloak. Hands in pockets he looks to camera. Rows of twiggy vines disappear to distance behind him. *Strong men don't have attitude, they have standards!* 94 likes.

Hair slicked back, this one's a head and shoulders close up, and a selfie. The light catches the dark pools of his eyes as he looks down into the camera. *Be yourself for everybody else is taken #jeddah_city*. He wears the Angelina uniform. A collared white shirt. Black tie. Black waistcoat. 63 likes.

Black jeans. Black boots. Black t-shirt. A pale pink jacket open at the waist. Thumbs hooked into pockets. Feet apart, firmly planted. The creamy neutral background of a photographic studio. He laughs into the lens. *Do what you love and you'll never work a day in your life. #modeling #modelphotography #audition #capetown* 112 likes.

Black jeans. Black sneakers. A smart grey hoodie. Denim jacket. He smiles to the camera. He is in a courtyard or a square. Behind him in oversized letters lit fluorescent and bold against the black of night. JEDDAH. A man in a traditional white *thobe* and a fez sits

on the base of the sign towards the left of frame, one leg crossed over the other. He is looking down, unaware that he has been captured, unaware that Joudun is looking at him now. *You think big. You get big.* 57 likes.

In the living room, Rineez is happy with her hair. She turns this way and that in front of a mirror that her sister holds up before shouting out to him, “what do you think Joudun?”

“Nice,” he answers, without lifting his eyes from the screen. He checks his WhatsApp messages again – no new messages – before flicking his thumb through his gallery.

He pauses at a selfie he took of him and *Juffrou* Mona the last time they saw each other in Gansbaai. It’s so many years since he left school, but it feels like she is a member of his closest family. In their last WhatsApp chat she shared her news. She would be leaving soon for a second teaching contract in Taiwan.

*

I visited Mrs Matthews a week before she left for Taiwan and asked her what Joudun was like at school. “He was actually a very moody child,” she said. “You know, that teenage thing. But very loving. And he worked very hard. *Ek is baie lief vir Joudun.* He’s almost like one of my own children.”

The following year she would post a Reels movie to Facebook, a montage of images to the tune *these are the special times, these are the sweetest times*. In amongst images and video clips of her in Taiwan – in class with her students, a dance routine in the courtyard of a Taiwanese school, laughing at a dress up event – there are images of her with her family back home. And there is the clip of *Juffrou* Mona and Joudun at a bar. Joudun – elegant in a black jacket and cap – looks on uncertainly as *Juffrou* Mona shakes the salt into the depression of her fist preparing to knock back the shot of tequila in front of her, before handing him the salt. He follows her lead before the montage shifts to a video of Mona and a friend dancing on a riverbank.

In her apartment that afternoon she told me: “I say to Joudun, ‘every single morning when I get up, I see your face’. I see his photo,” she says as she indicates vaguely towards the glass door to the veranda of her flat in central Gansbaai.

“Where are the photos?” I asked her looking around the sitting room, and again she indicated towards the outside. “Where,” I asked, “on the stoep?”

“No, over there,” she indicated again somewhat impatiently. I followed her outside and she pointed to the SportsZone shop across the street. And there it is, a life sized image of Joudun leaning on a boogie board displayed in the shop window. He is modelling beachwear.

“Oh, wow! How amazing!”

“So yes, every day I get to see his face when I come out here for my coffee. Every day!”

“That’s so funny! How about that!”

Chapter 3 Jack: Never let me go

Jack Swart

It’s something I can't explain. It felt like a great touching of fate when I was elected head boy. What made our school different was that we were diversified, we had black, coloured and white kids. And just being yourself, and being elected head boy when the whites were the minority at the school. It just shows you that all this political nonsense – I call it nonsense – is not relevant because the school showed something totally different. That we all can work, study and live together. We can all be on the same council. And that the opposite elects another person and that's that. And for me, it wasn’t about the position or the title. I wanted to serve.

Pictured at the 2014 matric valedictory breakfast at Wimpy at the Great White Mall are (l-r), Mona Matthews, Juné Prins (deputy head girl), Monica De Gouveia (head girl), Tommy Wilson, Carien Fortuin, Jack Swart, Joudun Rooi and Wilton Phillips. Source: Facebook.

Jack Swart was never a typical boy amongst boys. While many were drawn to talk of booze and sex and motorcycles, he would stop a teacher in the quad to talk about history, faith or current affairs. He wanted to talk about the differing shades of love.

He was a little overweight with his hair always cropped short, but he lived comfortably in himself. He was well turned out for school each day: socks pulled up, shirt tucked, the pleats on his sleeves freshly ironed. He was unusual too in that he was one of the few white boys at Gansbaai Academia and was voted in as the student leader by the black and coloured majority. It is that notion that years later still draws him to politics, the idea that in a country where people are so defined by race, the school showed that we can put that aside and work together towards a common good.

That night, with the school hall packed with students, teachers and parents, he had no inkling that he was about to be elected. As his name was announced he was momentarily stunned and then experiences an outpouring of wonder, that it had been bestowed on him; gratefulness, that he had been trusted; and awe, at the responsibility that lay before him.

After the ceremony, Jack returned to the farm on the outskirts of Gansbaai where he lived with his family. He thought of his grandmother who had died just months before. If only she could have been here to see this, he thought.

He waited for his heart to still before making three phone calls. The first was to Mrs Matthews, his English teacher. The second was to *Juffrou* Fortuin, his Afrikaans teacher. The third was to *Juffrou* Harding-Male who had taught him hospitality studies. He thanked each of them for raising him from the twelve year old boy who started at the school five years previously, to the man that he was becoming.

The following morning, with the formality required of such a meeting, he visited the principal's office and thanked Mr Wilson for his trust. To this day so much of the principal's advice, the truisms he would repeat at the morning assemblies, guide him at times of doubt.

Almost a decade after he left school, when his teachers are asked about Jack, they generally start with a smile. "Jack is always coming back to the school, he can never forget

us," says *Juffrou* Fortuin. She smiles as she says that whenever he is in town, Jack invites her to the Wimpy for a milkshake.

They both remember a time when she, as his teacher, took him to the Wimpy for a milkshake. And it was there that they discovered a common love of history. They spoke of World War II, and Jack shared with his teacher his love of uniform and the beginnings of his collection of military memorabilia.

Juffrou Fortuin has had thousands of children pass through her life as a teacher. She holds them while they are at school, and then she let's them go. Jack is the only one she is still in contact with. "He just don't want to let me go," she says with a gentle laugh about this relationship that has transcended her instinct to keep her distance.

The former English teacher Mona Matthews, she says, is a teacher who keeps up strong links with kids after they have left school. She is pretty sure they would still be in touch. And Jack knows, all these years after school, that if he visits Gansbaai and doesn't call on *Juffrou* Mona, there will be hell to pay.

"Ooooh Jack," says Mona Matthews as she folds her arms and shakes her head. She pauses for a long time before she tells the story. "My husband told me one day, I saw Jack. And I said to him, but *where* did you see Jack? And he said, no, he was here in town with his father. Ja Jack," she says as she shakes her head again. "Jack, how could you *do* that to me? You were so *near* me." She pauses, chuckling to herself as she remembers so many stories she could tell about Jack.

"And my husband said to me that Jack is very *thin* now. And I was surprised, because I know Jack as this chubby guy, this tall chubby guy with the big feet coming into my class. And Jack would read the newspaper every morning. He would sit there and read like this," she acts out the scene, her legs crossed, scanning the broadsheet before licking her fingers and turning the page.

"Jirre Jack, hoe lyk djy nou? He says, 'Ma'am'," she laughs before she carries on with her story, "'I want to know what's going on in the country. I want to know.' And I say, oooh Jack,

you are becoming a statesman one day. Maybe you will be the president one day. And funnily enough, I think he stood for the ACDP, the Christian party?"

*

Jack went to the white primary school in town. Most of his friends left for high schools in Hermanus or for boarding schools further afield rather than attending the new no-fee school which had just been built. "But those of us that were, let's say, the normal working class in Gansbaai went to the high school," he says.

It wasn't an easy decision for the family. When the time came to apply for high schools they spoke about it around the dining room table, in the mornings as Jack collected the eggs and fed the animals, as they drove into town to do the weekly shop. The safest option, favoured by his mother, was to follow the lead of the bulk of the white families. Even though it meant early mornings and a late return every day on the bus, she believed it best that Jack attended Hermanus High rather than the new school, still to prove itself, where he would be a minority. But Jack wanted to go to Gansbaai Academia.

"And he was just sticking to his decision," says his mother Antoinette about the clarity that Jack would bring to many decisions throughout his young adulthood. "So I said, okay, we'll try it for a term and take it from there. And that term became his whole high school." There were times when she regretted that decision, and times when she thought it was the best thing that could have happened to Jack.

"If I look back now, I see the kind of people Jack and my daughter have become. They mix easily with other races, and they have learned to stand up for themselves. All in all, it was a good thing that they went to Academia."

Jack and his cohort were the first grade eights to attend when the high school opened, and the first matrics to leave five years later having lived the full five years of the Academia experience. The school arrived in the town like a talisman of what could be; an institution – well situated – that might break patterns of separation.

While initially children gathered in groups that were familiar from primary school, the cohort soon mixed, and friendships became defined by compatibility and common interest rather than by race.

It was a brand new school. There were concrete water fonts in the middle of the quadrangles. It's like being at school in America, Jack told his mom and grandmother when they came to fetch him after the first day. When you're thirsty, you just go to the water font, and press this little button, and the water squirts up just like that. You don't even have to go to the toilets to fill your water bottle.

He was the last through the school gates each day when his mother came to fetch him, delayed by talking to a teacher after class, or helping to carry her bags to the staffroom. And all the way back to the farm he was full of stories about his new school.

There were new desk and chairs, unlike the worn and scratched furniture he was used to from primary school. There were whiteboards in some of the classes, another first for Jack, who had only known classrooms with blackboards and chalk. They were the first children ever to use the classrooms and some of them smelled of paint. There was a science room with gas canisters and thick rubber pipes, and he looked forward to being older, so he could do experiments there.

Most impressive of all, there was a fully equipped kitchen and a restaurant, and a subject that he had never heard of before: hospitality studies. He never imagined that you could learn how to cook at school. There were a few trees, newly planted, and behind the school, the green expanse of the municipal sports field with its rugby posts on either end. It was a whole new world held in the school fences, and Jack knew he had five years to explore.

While the fields were impressive, sport was only starting out. There wasn't enough equipment to go round, and few coaches qualified to teach kids how to sprint the one hundred metres, or how to breach a hurdle.

It was at an athletics practice when they were just twelve years old that Jack and Joudun spoke for the first time. It was a warm day after school. Boys and girls jostled in scraggly lines across the fields. Some of the boys joked that while it was called athletics practice, it

should be called waiting practice. There was one of everything. A single javelin, a shotput, one high jump pole and many kids waiting their turn for each. They were lined up for javelin when Jack saw the boy with a hairstyle similar to his own – a military style number one – and he asked Joudun if he too had a lawnmower at home to keep his hair short.

Jack learned that Joudun lived on a wine estate out of town, though, he promised Jack, he didn't drink the wine. Joudun learned that Jack was also a "farm boy," and that he had lots of chores each morning before school. They spoke of their families, how they liked the new school, what they brought for school lunch. They spoke about the FIFA World Cup that was to be hosted in the country later that year; so many big names were on their way to South Africa. And now, well into their twenties, they are still talking.

"He was such a lovely kid," says Antoinette about Joudun. "Him and Jack were best friends. He had such good manners, and he really helped Jack a lot. Him and Jack were like this," she says crossing her fingers.

"We were the first ones to go to this brand new school. We all felt very honoured, especially Jack and I, we were very proud," says Joudun. "We were together on the RCL – the Representative Council of Learners – in grade eight. And then in grade twelve we became the head boy and deputy head boy, so we worked hard and made the most of everything."

Juffrou Fortuin cast them in the leading roles for *Krismis van Map Jacobs* believing that their bond would work on stage. At the morning assemblies, Jack would sometimes be asked to lead the school in prayer. He was the obvious choice for Apostle George, and he was cast into his enduring calling to the priesthood. Joudun – good looking, charismatic, well spoken – was well cast as Map Jacobs.

They were on the cusp of their final matric exams when the play was performed. They would have liked more time to learn their lines, but the audience was forgiving if their copies of the school edition of the play were close at hand and if they relied on whispered prompts from backstage. But they played well against each other and there was even talk of polishing the production and taking it to Cape Town, but nothing came of that.

"We enjoyed that production tremendously," says Jack. "We did little of those kinds of things at our school. Things like drama and concert evenings could never really catch a bit of wind at our school."

In scene six, in what could have been a prediction of the friendship that continued to unfold between them after school, Jack, as Apostle George, acknowledges Map Jacobs as a new brother in Christ.

Map: He will open the jail for me.....

Apostle George: You have experienced Him!

Map: He that is the Lord!

Apostle George: You are still young in your belief, my new brother!

Map: I understand! But the Lord Jesus will help me! I said so to Ma and Blanchie...

*

Jack stood out. He was personable, and he embraced his unusualness. It is also why, so many years later, he still plays a leading part in the school's story.

"The head boy who impressed me was Jack," said Mr Wilson of his tenure as principal. "Jack had the support of the kids. Simple things he did made a big impact. He ate with them in the feeding scheme. He didn't need to do that. But he would sit among the kids and he would eat. And the kids would look: hey, there's Jack!"

For a boy growing into a man, the diverse school in a divided town was a view into what the country was, and what it might be. While he lived on a smallholding on the outskirts of town, he visited Blompark and the sprawl of Masakhane to visit friends.

"We are taught that there are always people who struggle and those who are less fortunate," he says. "But at Gansbaai Academia, I experienced that first-hand. In Masakhane I saw proper shack living. I saw kids with the cheapest attire. The grey pants, the school jersey, the tie. The blazer was very expensive. And you could see that it was old stuff, or it was too small because it's been down passed and there's not money for a new one."

While Jack lived in a brick and mortar house and he always had a school blazer, he identified with those who never had quite enough.

Jack's grandparents lived on a small farm on the outskirts of Gansbaai. His parents moved there from Cape Town in search of a quieter life when Jack was an infant. Later, his sister was born there. They moved to a piece of land with some fencing and a one bedroomed house where his grandparents lived. The parents, with their baby Jack, set up a canvas tent as they built a house and worked out how they would earn a livelihood.

They experienced at first what would be known in the family lore as the lean years. Jack's mother and grandmother got work cleaning houses on a piecemeal basis, and his dad found work as a builder's assistant. But they prepared the land for planting and Jack's dad got a license to dive abalone. Jack would watch his father pack his gear into the car, wishing him best of luck for a good catch. But once he was below the surface, Jacque Swart was alone as he finned his way into the rocky caverns below forests of kelp to look for the abalone that were becoming scarce from overfishing. He would stack his plastic crates with the black and silver shells of whatever he found and then walk door to door, selling the forage to local restaurants. And his mother made a plan to contribute to the family purse.

"My mother loved gardening. She and my grandmother opened a nursery together and they did very well. They had these little flowers in hot houses that they sold throughout the country and they started a gardening landscaping business."

Every time some money came in they would fix something on the farm. They added a restaurant to the nursery. They added a driving range where Mr Wilson was regularly seen practicing his swings and putts. It brought to their relationship a common interest, and after the head boy and the principal had discussed the day's business at school they would debate how Mr Wilson might improve his handicap or weigh the odds of Tiger Woods working up the rankings ahead of the upcoming PGA tour.

For the last four years that they were on the farm, before they moved to Oudtshoorn in the arid Karoo interior, Jack's dad went back into occupational health and safety with a private company. It was familiar ground as he had been a health inspector before their move to

Gansbaai, and it offered a more consistent income. His mother studied a manicure course and opened a beauty salon on the farm where some of the Gansbaai Academia teachers came to deck out their nails in the latest designs, some even adding glitter, stones and stickers.

Mrs Harding-Male, who befriended Jack and his parents, was another regular visitor to the farm. She remembers the parents being very strict with the children. Jack was so proud each time he showed her all his animals and told her about each of their habits and peculiarities. The cow that would close its eyes in meditative ecstasy as she was milked, the pig who loved to be scratched behind the ears.

"I went there many times," she says. "They had strict rules. They had to sit and eat at the table. And the mother was a very strong figure, in all of their lives. And I think it's because of his strong relationship with the mother that he tends to lean towards mother figures."

*

Jack is inspired by the multitude of professional lives his parents have lived and by their adaptability through difficult circumstances. He sometimes holds the results of his school aptitude test as a crystal ball before him, testing threads of living that that might open up to him. It recommended teaching, psychology or the priesthood.

It was the January after his matric year when he visited the Oudtshoorn Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) College with his father with notions of service in mind. On his list was teaching, theology or a qualification that might equip him to serve in the defence force. Applications to universities had closed, and while he might have qualified for a late registration and a partial bursary, at five thousand rand a semester, the fees of the college were more within his family's means.

His father talked him out of the priesthood, even though Jack would remain loyal to that calling despite following a more sensible career path. He would never make a living as a priest, his father argued. And notions of service within a crumbling state should be put aside, he said. So teaching and aspirations within the defence force were thrown out.

“I think it's difficult for parents,” says Jack with sympathy towards his father for derailing his aspirations, “because, quite frankly, and I only learned this later, but the biggest threat to the calling of vocation, is parents.”

A college career counsellor recommended the hospitality and catering diploma. Whatever he studied, the counsellor argued, he could always follow it up with a one year teaching qualification. He would be well equipped to be a hospitality studies teacher and move into other teaching from there. Gansbaai Academia was one of the first schools in the country to pilot hospitality studies. Jack had excelled and had been inspired by his teachers *Juffrou* van Deventer and *Juffrou* Harding-Male.

He loved the creativity that the school kitchen afforded him, the blue burn of the gas hobs, the clatter of dishes, the trays of confectionary he pushed into the depths of the industrial oven as he wore his chef's hair net and apron. And he loved to cook. The measuring out of ingredients, the chopping, the sauteing of onions that transformed the air of the place into a working kitchen, the abundance of the menus: chicken cordon bleu, quiche Lorraine, fried hake with mashed potatoes and those sweet twisted confectionaries with orange juice, cinnamon and lemon zest.

But the biggest draw to the kitchen was the time he spent with his teachers and the opportunities to talk about food, music and the daily news.

“But you know, in grade eight, this chubby little boy came to school,” says Mrs Harding-Male, “and from the word go, he was just different. And we had an incredible bond. In grade 11 I asked him one day: ‘Jack, are you never worried about peer pressure?’ He said, ‘no I've never experienced peer pressure.’” She laughs at the very idea that Jack could be swayed.

“He's such an individual. You know, exam times were the best time for Jack because he loves André Rieu's music, he loves classical music. And so then he would bring snacks, he would bring a playlist, then he would bring beautiful coffee because he knows I love coffee. He would treat me, and then it's always *‘ag my ou Juffrou, ek het nou dit vir Juffrou gebring vandag’*. And later on then I would say, ‘Jack, just put the music a bit softer, I just need to focus here a bit.’”

Mrs Harding-Male had a way of narrowing her eyes and looking into the future. And her predictions were known to come true. It was as Jack lingered in the school kitchen one morning after class that she said to him that in five years time, he would be head boy. She could see then the potential in his confidence, his popularity and his drive to be of service. Jack stood out, she says.

"And then he would rock up in the kitchen with his grandmother's brooches pinned to his chest, and a checked pants and a flower shirt and a funny hat and *kruisebande* and I would say, but Jack, but where *did* you get that outfit?"

At home he learned how to grow vegetables and how to slaughter a sheep. Working with his father, they would heft the weight of the carcass onto a hook to hang, before lifting it down again onto the butcher's table. He learned how to sharpen their knives and maintain their saws. Working and talking, they would transform the animal into neatly cellophaned packs of chops, sausage, ribs and roasts that they would pack into the chest freezer to see them through many months of meals.

And he learned to enjoy that produce with humility. Every time we put lamb chops on the braai, his father reminded him, remember that we are truly blessed. We have a family, we have a meal. We have what millions of people in our country don't have.

While Jack would never have considered hospitality as his field of study, with all that behind him, the scales tipped towards common sense and away from his calling to the priesthood. But Antoinette believed that he had been swayed from a path that was predestined.

"When Jack was born, I always knew he would work for Jesus. And I told him so, since he was a little boy," she tells me. I would like her to say more, but she is expecting a client for a manicure and is in a hurry to be done with the storytelling. But she continues. "His father, on the other hand, is a more practical person. He says: study for something, get a good income, look after your wife and kids, you know, the norm. So, as the man is the ruler of the house, that's why he went and studied hospitality. But he always told me: '*Ma, ek sal klaar*

maak wat ek moet leer, but then I will continue what I want to do.' And if that's his heart's desire, then he must listen to it. I mean, it's not a calling that everyone receives."

*

True to the pattern of his high school life, he was a minority at the college as a white student who was self-funded, yet he supported the protests that characterised much of his time there. While he had expected lecture halls and busy student kitchens, for much of the time it was marches, protest songs, barricades, and banners that captured the essence of the student grievances held high.

The Revolution is Here!

Education Should not be a Debt Sentence

Are the rich the only academically deserving?

The bulk of students were funded by the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS), the state's tertiary education bursary scheme. Tuition and accommodation payments were frequently late, disrupting studies as students kicked out of private accommodation. While Jack lived nearby with his parents and walked home after college, his classmates would sometimes arrive weary eyed, in the same clothes they had worn the day before. When the doors of their flats were locked, they had to find somewhere else to sleep. Later that year, the #feesmustfall movement erupted. It was a protest movement against rising tertiary education costs that started at the University of Witwatersrand in Johannesburg and spread to other campuses.

"About 80% of the kids were on NSFAS bursaries. It was a big problem. One day they blocked off the road in front of the college. Our chancellor could do nothing."

But the chancellor's gesture of solidarity stands out for Jack as the abiding memory of his time at college. One morning many students arrived hungry. Classes were paused for the day when the chancellor took a big group of them to the Wimpy for breakfast.

Despite the maladministration of the bursary scheme by another agency and the disruption of protest movements, Jack is pleased to have attended a state institution that was well governed and representative of the South African population.

His sense of belonging was indicative of his draw to being in community, and to the many forms of family he would build around himself for years to come. "It was a diversified college, and school prepared me for that. We had Eastern Cape learners, again, coming to study. We had few white kids, I think we were four. We had a great staff, great school, it was very enjoyable. TVET was still functioning, there was proper management that wasn't running it into the ground," he says in references to the many state institutions that were being run into the ground. "I'm proud that I studied there under the banner that we were diversified."

*

While enrolled at college, Jack responded to a call from Feedem, a catering company that was looking for casuals to help out in the hostel kitchen of a local high school, Langenhoven Gimnasium. True to his nature, Jack stood out. His humour and unusual dress sense was appreciated in the hard-working industrial kitchen. After he qualified, he was offered a permanent job and was posted to the kitchen of an old age home in Oudtshoorn. While he was there for a short time, he continued to serve as a trustee.

During his time there state subsidies slowed and the home deteriorated. The town changed and the complexion of the residents darkened. Jack would sometimes look at the picture in the foyer of the 1980s founding trustees. There they were, the men in three piece suits, the ladies in dresses. Behind them, the gardens beautifully maintained. That image captured the pride that should come with service, and Jack hoped to help the home reclaim at least the essence of that time.

"The old age home is like the country. You could see things were functioning, then it took a massive step backwards. It was still semi-functioning when I worked there," he says. "But I believe in this old age home. I believe we can restore it to its former glory." And while the residents, too, had had their former glories, some of them had been abandoned by their families to institutional state care.

I imagine Jack in the dining room as the last of the residents linger over cups of tea before retreating to their rooms. While his work is in the kitchen, Jack – at 23 years old – has become both carer and surrogate grandson to some of them.

He listens attentively, a hand lightly on a shoulder, or responding with a hug, as he hears stories of marital infidelities, the house lost to a bank, the daughter who drifted away and never came back. He hears stories of their aspirations, and, as the residents reach the end of their years, the impossibilities of ever attaining them. He attended many funerals in his short time there. Sparse gatherings. Flowers, a few kindly words, tea and cake.

Jack's draw to the residents of the old age home mirrors his draw to the mother figures he found at Gansbaai Academia. Antoinette believes that, perhaps, there is a seeking behind the intimacy he finds there.

"Jack was very close to his grandma. She died when he was in grade 11, I think he always looks towards older women to fulfil her role. And Jack is very lovable. He might not say it in words, but he shows it through his actions. He will always be writing to you, asking you how it's going, he will always be interested in your life. And he's persistent with it, he wants the attention. That's his personality. So people make time for him. That's Jack!"

It was tough, breaking the news that he had been posted by Feedem to the hostel kitchen of Langenhoven Gimnasium where he had first helped as a student. The parting was softened as he told the residents that while he was leaving, he would never let them go. He would always be there for them one way or another.

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While he was employed by Feedem, Jack later applied for the post of housing supervisor at Langenhoven Gimnasium that was advertised by the Western Cape Department of Education. He is still doing the same job, but enjoys the benefits and security that come with a government post. He is loyal to both institutions and likes to tell people that the job remained the same, all that changed was the uniform. While he used to wear the red of Feedem, now he proudly wears the navy blue colours of the school.

When I first met him in 2021 he had inhabited the role for some time and was aware that he should shift from the comfort of the relationships that held him there. There was a risk to staying too long, and he saw prospects for growth before him. He could be promoted to senior housing supervisor, he could grow into a supervisory or administrative role in the Department of Health or he could convert his qualification and become a teacher.

He believed in the notions of calling and vocation, and wished that he would be sent one big sign to show him the way. But the signs revealed themselves in fragments which were still to coalesce into one clear image. And there was that calling, which first came to him as a schoolboy, that remained.

"In terms of other directions, its uncharted waters. Maybe another school? Maybe another profession? Maybe another calling? I always say there is pulling and pushing in life. At this stage, I don't know which one I'm pulled or pushed towards. But the priestly vocation calling is still lingering in the back there."

The draw to politics was also there motivated by the social injustices he saw brought about by poor policy and politicians who served themselves first. He saw Oudtshoorn crumbling in the hands of municipal officials who didn't have the will or the competence to hold back the decay.

"Through politics you can make big changes, you can have a big influence. But," he says breaking into a characteristic chuckle, "they say an honest politician is hard to find."

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It's a Wednesday afternoon in July 2021, a few days before Langenhoven Gimnasium is scheduled to close for the mid-year break. The grounds are deserted. The concrete paths – geometries of straight lines and right angles that lead through rectangles of face-brick buildings, sports fields and clusters of scraggly pepper trees – are bare.

In the dining room the floor is mopped clean. The mismatched assortment of wooden chairs are stacked on tables. The serving hatches are stark in their steamless desertion. The stainless steel surfaces are wiped clean and at rest.

The well-worn rhythm of the place has stilled. Ordinarily teenagers would gather on the lawn outside throwing rugby balls and banter ahead of mealtimes, they would quieten for grace before filing inside, the space would fill with the chatter of mealtimes and then a quietening again for the day's announcements. Dishes would be cleared onto multi-level trolleys, the rumble and clatter of the washing up stations would be heard, the floors mopped, the packing away, the kitchen would be readied for the next meal.

On Sunday night, in what has become colloquially known as the regular *Family Meeting,* the president once again announced an early closure to schools in response to the latest wave of the Covid-19 pandemic. Day scholars had to be collected early for the holiday break the following day. Hostel dwellers had two days grace. For many parents it's a long drive to Oudtshoorn from surrounding farms, but they have been collected now.

Even the long stretch of nearby Baron van Reede Street – the perfectly straight main road through town with its strip of heritage buildings, tourist shops selling "bushman curios and artefacts" and everyday shops selling groceries and clothing – is deserted. The clusters of women who gather on the pavement alongside the imposing sandstone façade of the city hall hoping to sell their long-stemmed multi-coloured ostrich feather dusters to passing tourists, have abandoned their posts.

But for Jack, there is still work to do. The kitchen needs to be cleaned and closed, there is stock take, the inspection of the hostels, general maintenance and laundry. There is always work to do.

At 25 years old he is tall, ruddily dark skinned. He has startlingly green eyes set as softly round as a pair of Os. A roundish pert nose, almost delicate. Copious waves of brown hair, brushed back, suggestive of a mane that rises above his head and then hangs down. A stringy beard. A moustache. It's his height, his complexion, a gentleness in his demeanour and all that hair that renders the impression of Chewbacca of the Star Wars stories. Or perhaps of a Jesuit missionary, making his way along a pathway thick with a tangle of vine in some far flung place, long ago.

He consumes the length of the kitchen with his strides, yelling out his contributions to the banter that is batted back and forth and is so characteristic of comradeship of this space. “We're like a family,” he says of his colleagues. “We help one another with problems. We carry each other's burdens.”

His kitchen voice is distinct from his conversational voice with the too-fast words gently tumbling into one another. In here it’s loud, sharp and flat. There’s a rasp to it. It carries with it the distinctive Afrikaans accent of the place. Much of what he shouts out draws laughter and comment from the kitchen ladies. One lady wipes down surfaces as she laughs to herself, shaking her head. Another packs supplies into the safety of the storeroom, another makes a plate of jam sandwiches for her colleagues. Alongside the kettle a little radio plays the jingle for the local station Kfm 94.5 as the presenter introduces the next song. *“Hulle speel jou liedtjie Charmaine!”* one of the ladies call out as the others laugh and do a little dance in recognition of the song. Their chuckles echo across the tiles and stainless steel surfaces along with the beat of the music, too loud for the tinny speakers to contain.

Langenhoven Gimnasium is named for CJ Langenhoven, one of the celebrated sons of the town and the composer of the apartheid era national anthem, *Die Stem*. Despite the changes to town and street names in an effort to erase the traces of South Africa’s apartheid past, the school has retained its name. In the same spirit, one verse of *Die Stem* was retained in South Africa’s post-apartheid national anthem reflecting a time when many were striving for reconciliation and integration. The spirit of that time, Jack believes, has been largely lost.

The apathy and corruption of local government is reflected in the crumbling infrastructure of the town with potholes filled, streetlights repaired and streets cleaned only ahead of the yearly influx of tourists attending an Afrikaans arts festival that – after a decades-long run – is also in decline. He is pleased that the festival brings some business to the town, but the real benefit – he likes to joke – is that for two months of the year, residents enjoy the illusion of living in a functional town.

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As a housing supervisor, Jack's job is more prosaic than one he might have inhabited as a priest or a teacher. He is responsible for feeding about three hundred teenagers three meals a day. He oversees the kitchens and the maintenance of the hostel buildings. Most importantly, while it is not written into the job description, he looks out for the general wellbeing of the children who call these buildings home for much of the year.

He tries to maintain the heritage appeal of the buildings and its fixtures, but his daily rounds through the boys' corridors always reveal more that needs to be set right. While the girls sleep on the original wooden beds of generations passed, the boys' beds have over time been replaced by weighty steel framed structures which are hardy and forgiving. Dings appear in cupboard doors, but the boys can never account for the damage.

The count of hostel dwellers is dwindling following years of drought and the inexorable decline of the ostrich and sheep farms, with many families migrating from farm to town. And there is the cost to a family, a number always under pressure when the school governors meet to balance what the school needs against what parents can afford. At R46 000 a year for school and hostel fees, Langenhoven Gimnasium is beyond the reach of many.

School enrolments have dropped over the years and the remaining boys sometimes blame the damage on the ghosts of the deserted west wing of the hostel, as if those ghouls wafted beyond their traditional confines while they, the living, slept in dream-patterned oblivion.

He walks down the long corridor of the senior boys' wing. He supervises a deep clean during each of the school holidays and one of the cleaning staff is mopping the grey laminate of the floor. He is inspecting each room, notepad in hand, and by the day's end he will have a list for maintenance to attend to.

He walks into one of the partitioned rooms shared by two grade eleven boys. Each half houses a steel framed bed, a blue mattress, a desk and chair, a wooden cupboard. It has a desolate air about it now that it has been cleared out with the early closing for the school holidays. Half of a torn poster hangs limply from a dirty ball of Prestik on the wall.

Boys have to move out completely during the holidays. In previous years rooms were rented to tourists attending the Little Karoo National Arts Festival, known by its Afrikaans

acronym KKNK. But for the last two years of Covid-19 restrictions the festival has been cancelled. It has traditionally been a tourist boom time for the town and the school, and with a depleted budget Jack finds himself having to prioritise this maintenance job over that. He is often found with a toolbox in hand attending to blown lightbulbs, broken windows and damaged furniture. He also offers to give a boy a haircut, or sew a torn blazer himself, rather than have the boy pay for those services in town.

He greets another cleaner and steps aside to accommodate the sweep of her mop. Her hair is wrapped in a modest navy blue scarf, her face covered with the light blue of a medical mask as she douses the original wooden floor of the bedroom with paraffin. Jack insists on this every holiday. While the smell lingers for a few days – he feels the familiar snag of it in the back of his throat now – he has absorbed the belief of prior generations that it is the best way to maintain the floors of the heritage building.

He looks at the cupboard door leaning against the frame of the bed and shakes his head. Just the previous night, as the two boys sharing this room were packing to leave, he had one of those familiar exchanges.

“We were standing there, Sir,” one of the boys said, “and the cupboard door just fell off its hinges.”

“It fell off, just like that?” Jack asked.

“Yes Sir, it just fell off. I promise It wasn’t us Sir, it just fell off.”

While he works to maintain a sense of responsibility amongst the boys, he feels good-natured sympathy towards them and with a knowing chuckle likes to repeat that well-worn homily *boys will be boys.* It was just eight years ago that he was a leader amongst such boys as the head boy of Gansbaai Academia.

As he strides back down the passage towards the laundry room, another cleaner – she is new and doesn’t yet know Jack – steps aside and looks at him with a mix of amusement and alarm as the white expanse of his *galabia* swishes above the ankles of his formal slacks. His face is obscured by a face mask, but more unusually, by the checked white and red head wrap, known as a *keffiyah,* that falls to below the slope of his shoulders.

It was just last week that the kitchen staff asked him when he was going to wear his furry Russian hat again. He thought he would surprise them with something different today and chose the outfit that was given to him by his uncle several years ago on his return from the United Arab Emirates. He's gone for a mix and match look. Over the *galabia* he wears a tartan waistcoat. In the vee of its cut nestles the tarnished disk of a mother and child icon that hangs from the fine silver chain around his neck. He displays these treasures as, at home, he displays the teaspoons, coins and stamps he collects, unearthed in dusty piles and drawers as he visits the junk shops so typical of small Karoo towns.

He is drawn to the nostalgia of last century and is a member of the legionnaires, an organisation set up more a century ago to support World War I veterans. He was amused when they called him, based on the year on his date of birth they assumed there had been an error. If it was correct, he was the youngest member by several decades. "Yes, my date of birth is correct," he told the volunteer on the other end of the call. "I *am* a member, and gladly so!"

He greets the cleaner with a generous smile, *Môre Lizaan, gaan dit goed vannogend?,* and carries on. He glances into the boys' bathroom on his way past. He has recently had it refurbished and is pleased with the result, but there is still that problem of the leaking pipe to attend to. He quickens his pace. There is always work to be done.

He smiles to himself. He is amused at Lizaan's expression when she returned his greeting and by the reactions of people in general to his love of dress-up. Just last Saturday he wore the same outfit while shopping in town when a message from his sister pinged into the traffic of the family WhatsApp group.

I believe you've been spotted in town wearing your Muslim wear again. You can't be walking around like that, the rest of the family also has to live in this town you know.

And why not, I say? he responded before stepping into his father's butchery to collect the lamb chops that the family were to braai that evening.

His mother and father have lived many professional lives, and the butcher shop – which had been running for three years – is the latest iteration. Jack likes to talk to boys at school

about life lessons from his parents, that you don't necessarily have to commit to one professional life, that opportunities are many, that you can choose to live a varied and interesting life.

"My dad taught us, if you've got a family, you got responsibilities," he tells the boys. "If you don't have work, get dressed every morning, properly, neatly. You go even knock door to door, asking people, can I clean? One door might close, but one door is gonna open. Do the garden, do this or do that. Because tonight you gonna have something to put on the table for your kids."

As Jack walks into the little room he calls the laundry, two ladies, dressed in the red and black Feedem uniforms, jump up from scrolling through their phones and continue to sort through piles of green and red tablecloths. Jack asks after their day, and after exchanging some friendly banter approaches one of his other treasured junk shop finds – a dated toploader washing machine, missing its lid, its sides dented. He loads the little drawer with detergent before starting to feed the first pile of cloth into its cavernous interior.

The school laundry has long since closed. He tries to save on laundry bills and rather than sending too much out, he prefers to feed the tablecloths load by slow load into the top loader himself. After the long wait as it fills with the trickle of water, it judders to life and then rattles and shakes as the grey water swirls its offerings through its pre-programmed cycles of fast and slow; wash, rinse and repeat.

The three of them settle into the meditative comradeship of repetitive manual work and Jack thinks of the book he is reading about the life of Mother Teresa. He loves reading biographies and autobiographies. He is inspired by stories of people who grew up poor and then made something of their lives, of children who grew up in homes where they were abused, but they overcame. He has read books about men who were rich and who gave everything away, drawn to a simpler monastic life.

The machine spins its load dry – to an observer not familiar with its ways it would be alarming – before shutting down with a shuddering finale. He reaches into its depths to empty the soggy load into a bucket for the ladies to hang on the line. He thinks about

Mother Teresa's life of dedication and service. Just last night he read about how it was first as a teacher and later as headmistress that she began her life of service, how it was through her work at a school that she directed her calling.

"I always joke!" he says. "I say, if I had the money, I would buy up this entire hostel, or a place like this, and fill it up with kids so there's nothing they ever need. And they will experience true love and support and understanding."

Chapter 4 Malcolm: The promise

Malcolm Mulope:

I am not Zambian.

I am not South African.

I am Malcolm.

And I have a particular set of circumstances I have to deal with.

Malcolm Mulope and Ernst Niewoudt on a trip to Silvermine in Cape Town in 2009 and with Jonathan Jansen, vice chancellor of the University of the Free State, at Gansbaai Academia in 2015. Both images were posted to Facebook by Ernst.

Malcolm Mulope – popular, personable and a great sportsman – was recognised as one of Gansbaai Academia's top matric students of 2015. His matric certificate was sure to open the door to the journalism faculty of any South African university.

But the following year, as his name was being painted in gold lettering on the board that listed the school's Dux Scholars, Malcolm wasn't enrolled. Rather, he closed himself into the prison of his room with its single bed and the screens and paraphernalia that supported his gaming hobby crammed into the too-small space. He lost three months to that room, as if it were a dream.

Hour after hour he lay on his side under the duvet, his cheek lifted against the cool of the pillow, a tablet propped against another pillow where – sideways on – he watched the stream of images with little attention or interest. Series, game shows, cooking shows and documentaries. He was always known as the boy who loved to talk to just about anyone, but he hardly spoke. He had always had a good appetite, but he hardly ate. While he was already light on his feet, he lost weight at a rate that was alarming to the few people who saw him as those weeks melted away.

He had just turned eighteen. He had never belonged here nor there, and ideas of home and statehood had failed to merge into one dependable construct. As the implications of that became clearer to him, he sank into a depression that threatened to hold him forever. He had no way of imagining a life beyond his room, in the house in the seaside suburb of De Kelders in Gansbaai with its holiday houses closed up for much of the year.

It wasn't where he chose to be the year after school. Rather, he was washed there by the storms of an adult world that he was only just beginning to understand and that were still largely beyond his control.

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But let's imagine Malcolm some years earlier when the promise of the world still stretched before him.

One afternoon an announcement crackled over the school intercom. The school would be starting a newspaper. Those who were interested were to meet in Mrs Mostert's class during break.

Malcolm responded to that call. He was slightly built, dark of complexion and kept his hair closely cropped. His face was set mostly into a friendly smile. While he to himself, he was popular with his classmates and was considered polite and diligent by his teachers. Some years later as he grew into a man, somebody who knew him well would describe him as a salt of the earth kind of guy.

He was captain of the hockey team and a top English student. He was developing a love of language and had started writing poetry. He would sit sometimes in his bedroom, staring out the window at the patch of scrubby lawn and the lines would come to him. They would flow through his pen and onto the page. It was like magic. From nothing, inspiration came, and then there was something.

The deputy principal, Mrs Fortuin, was known for telling students that they might be anything they dreamed of one day, even poets. But more reasonably, he had started imagining a life beyond school as a journalist. He would travel the world covering politics and war. Or – even better – he would be a sports reporter.

In Mrs Mostert's class he sat on the edge of a desk that had been knocked crooked by the last class leaving. He was one of a handful of students who showed up. Some pulled out chairs, and he gritted his ears against the screech of steel on linoleum flooring. They ate their sandwiches and crunched through rustling packs of crisps. The sounds of breaktime wafted in through the open windows along with the breeze. As the teacher pitched the idea of the school newspaper she stood in front of the chalky remains of a half-wiped triangle, the Pythagoras theorem spelled out beneath it in a neat teacher's hand.

Malcolm was intimidated to see Bianca de Koning at that gathering. If she was there, it was a worthwhile undertaking. She was head girl, a top achiever in every field and the smartest person he knew. And Jack Swart. Popular. Smart. He was a on his way to being nominated head boy for the following year, though none of them knew that yet. Malcolm

shared a class with Jack's younger sister. He and the siblings had waitered at school functions together and had become friends.

They threw around ideas about how the paper could be structured. There would be a lead story. They agreed on an advice column, a gossip page which would include "who's dating who", and an announcements section. While the others shouted out ideas, Malcolm put up his hand, waiting for Mrs Mostert to invite him to speak. There should be a dedicated sports page, he said. And he volunteered to be the sports guy.

They needed a name. Mr Wilson told them – at just about every morning assembly – that they were proud Sharkies. And in that first meeting, *The Sharky Times* was born. Bianca, undisputed, was voted in as editor. Over the next few years the editorship passed to Jack and then to Malcolm. And he remained committed to the dream of becoming a journalist ever since.

It was no surprise that Malcolm went to that first meeting of *The Sharky Times*. He was known as the boy who would put his hand up for anything. His eagerness served an ambition for his future more than a curiosity to discover new things. He believed that each of those extra-murals would pad out his CV and stand out on his university applications.

And there was pressure from his foster father Ernst (who he prefers to call Ernest), to perform academically and to take part in all aspects of school life. "Ernest had this racial motivation for many things," he told me. "When I got to Gansbaai Academia, he would say to me, 'Malcolm, you're a little black boy, people are going to second guess you, people are going to think you're stupid, you have to do well at school, you have to show people who you actually are.'"

He was the treasurer for the Representative Council of Learners (RCL) and a member of the Junior Town Council. He attended meetings at the municipality and travelled the towns of the Overberg handing out spectacles at old age homes and wax crayons at creches.

Malcolm went on to be recognised as one of the school's top four academic achievers in his matric year. That achievement came with a promise, and his expectation that that promise would be met.

The previous year, Jonathan Jansen, the vice chancellor of the University of Free State, visited the school and offered the top four matriculants of 2015 a bursary that covered tuition, accommodation and pocket money.

This promise was made after he spontaneously slid the bulk of his black-suited self behind the school piano and entertained the gathering with a song. When the school choir responded with a repertoire of Xhosa songs, he famously said "this is an example of what a South African school is supposed to be like." That class of 2015 were the first beneficiaries of that agreement between the two institutions that lasted for the remainder of Jansen's tenure as vice chancellor.

While Gansbaai Academia was celebrated for its diversity, Malcolm's difference was unusual. At a dual medium school most of the coloured and white students chose to be taught in Afrikaans, while the black students chose the English stream. When his classmates spoke to one another in Xhosa, he was unintentionally excluded.

"I never understood what was going on with my classmates because I didn't understand the language," he says of his developing instinct to self-reliance. "So I would just sit in the front, and I would focus. I think it was good for me. I decided that, okay, I'm gonna study. All I can do is sit here and listen to the teacher. I'm a verbal person, and that's how I absorbed the information."

In Ernst's telling of the story, Malcolm had a tough time at school and was discriminated against because of his difference. Malcolm's version is different.

"I never got the feeling that kids would stick together on the basis of race," he told me. "Obviously you would gravitate towards people of your own culture, but at that school it was very easy to speak to somebody of a different race. Most of the kids were from Masakhane or Blompark, some of the white kids from town. Everyone was of a similar income bracket. There was no rich kid looking down on any other kid. We were all just kids having an experience together."

At home too, his circumstances were unusual. He looked up to a white Afrikaans man, Ernst Niewoudt, as his father, but considered English his home language. His mother was a

distant figure, literally and in his imagination. He considered his grandmother to be his mother, but he would have to cross the Limpopo and Zambezi rivers to visit her in Livingstone, Zambia.

He held a Zambian passport, but spoke none of the languages of that distant place. His family's customs and traditions were lost in forgotten stories of ancestry and long ago. While he had lived in South Africa since he was an infant, he couldn't legally call the country home. He was not a citizen and his stay was more tenuous than he realized.

While Malcolm makes little of it, I would imagine that one of his most surprising experiences at school was, as a reporter on *The Sharky Times,* covering a school meeting where Ernst Niewoudt was elected chairperson of the school governing body. While Mr Wilson reported to Wendy Colyn from the education department, he also became accountable to Ernst for the day-to-day running of the school.

And Malcolm too was making his way into leadership. As he prepared to enter his final year of school, his popularity, his solid academic record and his participation in sports and cultural activities was recognised. He was elected to the Matric Council and became deputy head boy of the class of 2015.

Unlike others I interviewed who expressed elation or even disbelief on their election to school leadership, Malcolm is matter of fact about this achievement. I learned, as I got to know him over two years, that he is not a man who easily shows himself. He has survived by dodging through variations of not belonging and a precarious bureaucracy that threatened his aspirations. He feels safest presenting the veneer of himself so as not to invite too many questions, and that expresses as a countenance of smiles and good cheer.

He believed that he might be elected head boy, but he graciously accepted second place in the ranking and remembers it as a good experience. He had ceremonial duties, like raising the morning flag. He arranged school dances, and while he was on the disciplinary committee, what he found most rewarding, he says, was "when I had the chance to help another student, to guide them, rather than just send them to the principal's office."

Malcolm counts as one of his many school activities membership of Rachel's Angels, a university readiness programme that included regular classes at Stellenbosch University and the support of a student mentor. He learned about study skills and time management. He took extra maths classes. He sat an aptitude test and was offered career guidance.

But as he entered the last stretch of high school with dreams of a tertiary education in mind, Malcolm had a sense that his paperwork might be a problem. "I had a feeling that I might be held up for a bit," he says, "but not for as long as I have been. Because at high school they started asking me for documentation I didn't have. That was a bit difficult. And I knew that, okay, if the high school is asking me, the universities are going to be asking me for so much more."

Ernst knew also that a calamity was headed their way if Malcolm's legal status wasn't addressed, and quickly. For the first time since he had been Malcolm's guardian, Ernst tried to legally adopt him in his matric year. That process was fraught with complications and nothing came of it.

He took legal advice and set another plan in motion. Malcolm's mother was a naturalised South African citizen but had been out of the country for a long time. If she were to return, and work for a month, her permanent citizenship would be renewed and that would be a bridge towards sorting out Malcolm's papers. Ernst flew her to South Africa and arranged a short-term job for her in Gansbaai. She came to the country, but failed to bring the correct paperwork, Ernst says, and left her employment before the month ran its course.

As a Rachel's Angel, Malcolm was helped though the applications and was accepted to Social Sciences courses with English and linguistics at Stellenbosch and Rhodes. And then he received the bursary offer from the University of Free State. The doors of tertiary education were opening up to him.

And then those doors slammed shut.

Malcolm believed that somehow, things would come right. But it was not long before he learned three things.

After awkward phone calls back and forth, the kindly woman in the vice chancellor's office told him that the offer was available to South African students only. He didn't qualify.

As a foreigner, he didn't qualify for the National Student Financial Aid Assistance (NSFAS) scheme. He didn't have the funding to study.

Even if he did qualify, and even if he had the funding, he would have to apply for a study visa and that, he was later to understand, was no simple task.

*

Malcolm was born in Zambia and was brought to South Africa by his teenage mother to be raised by her mother and her mother's boyfriend in a suburban house in Kempton Park, east of Johannesburg. The three of them made for an unusual family in the recently post-apartheid South Africa. The toddler Malcolm with his grandmother, Bridget Mulope, who could easily have passed for his mother; and the substantially older white man, Ernst Niewoudt – with his grey hair and beard – as his father.

"My friends at school would ask me, hey, who's that guy?," he says of Ernst. "And I would say, he's my dad, or my uncle, or my grandmother's boyfriend or whatever. Ernest was many things to me. And they would say, but you're black? And I was like, yeah, so? I really didn't think it was such a big deal."

Bridget dropped him at Cresslawn Primary School every morning where she had registered him thanks to a law that protected the rights of children like him. No child could be turned away from school, regardless of their nationality or the status of their documentation.

The school, with its columns of three story buildings and a sports field across a busy road from a light industrial area, was named for the suburb. Those neat grids of houses bordered the Johannesburg International Airport precinct with its malls and hotels and the constant hum of traffic navigating its bypasses and spaghetti junctions.

Most afternoons after homework he rode along the jacaranda-lined streets with the neighbouring kid. Summer weekends were dotted with braais and swimming pools and the gathering of dark clouds erupting into the summer storms that typify the Highveld.

While Ernst would have preferred the security of a full-time job with its promise of a pension in his later years, he believed that luxury was not open to him as a white man. He worked two contract jobs as a software programmer and travelled frequently to Pretoria, sixty kilometres away, while Bridget left for an office job every morning with Investec Private Bank. The family of three – with a pug called Basil – lived a life of relative plenty despite the volatile relationship between Ernst and Bridget and the precarious nature of Ernst's living.

On weekends, the family sometimes visited Montecasino, a vast casino complex north of Johannesburg. Malcolm, at four or five years old, became familiar with the kids' play area with its climbing frames and little plastic bikes. There was loud music, kids shouting, the buzz of the casino all around him. But often, when Bridget and Ernst came to fetch him, there was an iciness between them. And the long drive home would be silent.

"They would fight very often," Malcolm recalls. "It was sometimes very cold in the house, very tense. Even as a young kid I would feel, OK, I'm not supposed to do anything wrong at the moment because tensions are high."

I imagine Malcolm in his room, a child huddled against an adult storm. The floor a scatter of matchbox cars, balls and blocks. He has company under the covers of the duvet with its pattern of stars and planets. The puppy, Basil, sleeping in the crook of his arm. Through the walls of his bedroom he hears the shouting. And when that subsides, the neighbours start, a little quieter because they are further away. It's nothing to worry about, he knows. It is just the way of the adult world.

Sometimes Ernst left. But he always came back after a day or two. But through his childhood and into adulthood, it is Ernst who has been the constant. "I remember that Christmas when he was three years old and I dressed up as Santa Claus for the first time," says Ernst. "I had a beard then, as I still do now. We teach our kids lies from such a young age, hey! Everybody says he is lucky that he met me, but in some ways, I complicated his life far more than it would have been otherwise, I guess. I really care for him. I really want him to succeed in his life."

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The sometimes stormy rhythms of suburban life were disrupted by little cross-border trips, taken irregularly and sometimes with startlingly little notice. With a soft toy under his arm, Malcolm would be packed into the window seat of a bus to visit Eswatini, the small country almost fully contained within the borders of South Africa and a five hour ride from home. It didn't seem particularly strange to him that they would travel all the way there, go through the queues and forms and stamps of the border crossing, to then do it all in reverse.

He remembers also their few trips to the nearby airport: the roar of the engines at take off, the snacks, the hostesses handing him sets of waxy crayons and books of dragons and fairies to be coloured.

His grandmother would point out the window, marking their crossing over the Limpopo River into Zimbabwe and then over the Zambezi River en-route to their destination: Lusaka, which, he learned, was the capital city of Zambia. And then they would travel another ten hours by bus through bushveld dotted with fields and settlements to the mining town of Solwezi, their final destination. They would spend a few days the vast crowds of his family and with his mother Bernadette who was as unfamiliar to him as the home with its steaming pots on open fires and the smells and language that were somehow familiar, but distinctly exotic.

Each time they stayed only for a few days and then that trip in reverse: the bus ride to the capital, the flights across three countries, the touchdown at Johannesburg International, and the return to his suburban home with its agapanthus beds and its fibrecrete wall. Even from a young age, Malcolm knew that Zambia would never be home. "Once when he returned from Zambia – he was about six years old," recalls Ernst, "he said, no, he can't live in Zambia. All they do there is speak Zulu and eat pap. Those were his words."

He later realised that during those trips his passport was gathering exit and entry stamps to safeguard his precarious residential status. The state of his documentation would come to characterise the tumultuous course of his young adult life, shattering that promise of a university education in his matric year.

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Ernst grew up on a farm in the Free State, South Africa's central province known for its open grasslands. In yearning for the quiet of his childhood, he moved his family to Cape Town, and later, visited Gansbaai. "I went to sit at Coffee on the Rocks with its view of the sea, got religious for a bit, and thought, no, this would not be such a bad place to live, it's the most beautiful place I've seen in many, many years."

The family of three moved to De Kelders. With its neat suburban grids it felt to Malcolm felt very much like Kempton Park. Except that this dark green rectangle of home was set back two blocks from the coast.

Malcolm went to Okkie Smuts Primary School in nearby Stanford to finish the last two years of his primary school. He was young to become a weekly boarder, but at "Okkie" he could finish his primary school in English rather than attend the nearby Gansbaai Primêr where children were taught in Afrikaans.

But most of Malcolm's hostel friends were Afrikaans and he quickly picked up the cadences and rhythms of the language. As an adult, he is equally comfortable in English and Afrikaans, yet he favours the English name Ernest, rather than calling his foster father by his Afrikaans name, Ernst.

Malcolm was among the second cohort of grade eights to attend the new high school in Gansbaai. It was close to home and Malcolm could easily get there and back on his bicycle.

After the gentle comradery of the Okkie Smuts hostel, Gansbaai Academia was overwhelming for the thirteen year old boy. "A lot of kids from the local area just flooded in there, so there were sometimes sixty kids per class," he says. "There were so many students and there were some teething issues, because it was a new school. It was very difficult for some of the younger teachers to keep discipline. I just kept my head down and didn't get into too much trouble."

Ernst and Bridget finally broke up the year Malcolm started at Gansbaai Academia. His grandmother returned to Zambia, and what was already a small family became smaller still.

"I don't really know my dad," he says of his biological father. "He did his own thing. Ernest has always been there. I never felt that I was missing out on a parental figure. Ernest

is my dad. And I am his boy. And it's just always been like that. There's someone home when I get back. When I do something wrong, there's someone to reprimand me. When I do something right, there's always someone to say, 'hey, I'm proud of you'. So I've never felt a longing for anything."

Ernst and Malcolm settled into the sparsely furnished house. While Basil had long since passed on, they lived with the next in a line of pugs, a female called Candy. The front lounge became a pool room where Malcolm could hang out with his friends, and the back of the huge lounge became Ernst's workstation with its tangle of cables and screens where he continued his work as a contract developer and coder.

At school, while the sports codes were still forming, he discovered a talent for hockey when it was introduced as a new sport by his English teacher, Ludwig Schutz. Mr Schutz was delighted when Malcolm showed up for the first ever hockey practice. "He was very intelligent, very well spoken," he told me through a series of WhatsApp voice notes. "He had extremely good manners. He was chirpy and always in a good mood. And he seemed mature for his age, even from grade eight."

While the school sports grounds included a generous rugby pitch and a netball court, hockey was new and a poor cousin to these sports. There were no proper goals, and the small team practiced on a patch of ground between the rugby posts and the cricket nets where the grass was short enough for a make-do pitch.

Each afternoon ahead of practice it was always Malcolm who helped Mr Schutz carry the bags of sticks, balls and cones to the sports field. "He was always keen to get going. Always there. Always committed," is how Mr Schutz remembers him. Malcolm's commitment to the hockey mirrored the commitment he showed in Mr Schutz's English class. "That's the one quality that really stood out. He was willing to go all out with everything he participated in."

Hockey was new to all the students. But Mr Schutz immediately saw Malcolm's potential. He was responsive and quick on his feet. And he was a good team player. "He became a good hockey player very quickly. A quick runner. Very good acceleration. And when his stick work came in, he became a really well rounded player."

“I wasn’t the best player of the team, but I was at every practice,” Malcolm says of his consistency as a team player. “My house was close, so I could just come and go. So for me, it was easy.”

Mr Schutz encouraged him to be the star player who could dribble his way past three or four of the opposition players to win the match for the team. The more the coach believed in him, the harder he practiced. “And I kind of fell in love with the sport very quickly. And it was so much fun,” says Malcolm. “I had played rugby and cricket a bit, but I didn’t really gel with those sports.”

“And he showed really good leadership qualities,” recalls Mr Schutz. “He was always in my plans to serve in some sort of leadership. Especially when he got to the older grades. It was a no-brainer.” Malcolm became captain of the school’s only boys team from Grade 10 to Grade 12 and he continued to play after school. It is also a sport that was to come to his rescue in surprising ways when things went awry for him after school.

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Malcolm had just finished his last matric exam at Gansbaai Academia but there were still a few weeks of school left. With or without a scholarship, he was determined to make it to university. Whatever the way, he would need to build his documentation off the foundation of what he did have: a Zambian passport. Throughout high school his passport still needed to accumulate its entry and exit stamps and, at some point, the family thought it expedient for Malcolm’s mother in Zambia to hold his passport.

He phoned his mother and asked her to send his passport. But his mother had lost it, she told him, in the first of many tense phone calls that led to a long estrangement between mother and son.

Malcolm, not yet out of school, couldn’t see a way out of this mess. Until the clouds of his rage cleared and he saw what he had to do. He would have to travel to Zambia – across two national borders without his documentation – to look for his passport himself.

He packed a backpack with some clothing, his phone and earphones so that he could lose himself in the music over what was to be a long journey. Ernest handed him a wad of cash.

He would need it. The first leg of the journey was to travel from Gansbaai, a finger north of the southernmost tip of Africa, to his uncle who lived in Limpopo province close to the Beit Bridge border post with Zimbabwe almost 2000 kilometres away.

Together, they continued on their journey. The older man saw to it that the teenager got through the Beit Bridge border post, and they continued on to the Victoria Falls border post on the Zambezi River, the entry point into Zambia. Landscapes of acacia pocked savannah and transport junctions rolled by in a blur as the bus stopped to let people on and off, to offload and reload cargo, through a day and a night. The names of towns landing briefly in his consciousness before passing on in a blur of sameness: West Nicholson, Gwanda, Esigodini, Lupane, Jotsholo.

"It was quite a hectic trip," he says of that six day return journey. "The only bad thing was the bus we took from Zimbabwe to Zambia, it was one of those African buses with everything stacked up on top of it. Like if you saw an American ad about Africa you would see a bus like that: here's a bus, everything goes on the roof. So that bus was overloaded on the top and there was a crosswind. So the bus would lean over every time the wind hit it – so that was quite terrifying. So we had to change buses. At the Zambian crossing my uncle spoke to a guy he knew in the passport office, he said, hey, this is my nephew, you can see he is Zambian…and then I was in Zambia again."

Malcolm arrived at his grandmother's lodge in Livingstone, the Zambian border town frequented by tourists visiting the Victoria Falls. He calculated the cost of the trip as he estimated the cost of the return. R10 000 at least.

He had hardly rested before he went into the storeroom and started looking through all the things his mother left there: bags with old clothes, dented cardboard boxes taped closed, handbags. He opened an old purse. Inside were a few copper coins and till slips with the ink faded through. And tucked into a side pocket of that purse: his Zambian passport. After a night's rest, he prepared to do the same trip in reverse. A trip which came with its own set of negotiations. This time he had a passport, but it was bare of the entry stamps into Zambia and Zimbabwe and the exit stamp from South Africa.

Malcolm blamed his mother for never sorting out his paperwork. He blamed her for the lost opportunity of a university education. He blamed her for the time and money draining trip to Livingstone. "I was already having a difficult time with my mother. I called her up and told her: 'Mom, I found my passport. How could you lose it in the first place?' It was a very brief conversation. She was just apologising, but I was not having it. I was very angry at the time."

He returned to Gansbaai Academia with the world that had been promised crumbling down around him. He left school for the last time in 2015 with no prospects but to go home, to walk into his bedroom and to close the door.

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He had just turned eighteen. He couldn't imagine a life beyond his room. Nothing that Ernest said could lift him from his despair.

"I worked my entire high school to get this thing, I did everything I was supposed to do, and then it was taken away from me," he says. "So I couldn't go to university. Obviously I felt really *kak* about that. There were all these thoughts running through my head. My mom was a permanent resident. My grandma, also a permanent resident. How could I not be a permanent resident? How could they not have sorted that out?"

Throughout his many years in South Africa, each time Malcolm's visitors visa was about to lapse, Bridget would take his passport to the Zambian Embassy and get it renewed. But his mother, Malcolm believed, was the only person who could have applied for his permanent residency. As a minor, his documentation was tied to hers. But she never did it.

"I was very depressed. I was very angry at my mom. I called my mom and had this emotional dump on her. I told her I hated her. I told her, 'this is your fault. Why didn't you do what you were supposed to do?' And I hung up the phone. She tried to call me back. I blocked her number. I didn't speak to her for about two years after that. Ernest tried to help me, but luckily I didn't lash out at him. I was just unresponsive."

Ernst had raised Malcolm from a toddler to an adolescent, and he mourned the distance that developed between them. "For those three months he was in his room, he never spoke

to me and I was very upset. I tried very hard to speak to him, but I think he blamed me, after all. Maybe fairly so, I don't know?"

Malcolm never ventured from his room. He lost about seven kilograms during those months. He became gaunt and increasingly lethargic. "I watched a lot of TV. I barely ate," he says. "Luckily I didn't go and do something stupid like drown myself in alcohol. After three months of being at home I became so sick of myself. I wanted to get up and do something."

And then Ludwig, his school hockey coach, called him and said, "Hey Malcolm, what are you doing now?"

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Gansbaai Academia still only had one hockey team each for boys and girls. Ludwig was preparing to take up a post at another school. Ahead of that, he wanted to grow and stabilise the sport at Gansbaai. But he needed more coaches.

He met with Mr Wilson and suggested that they invite Malcolm to join the coaching team. Mr Wilson had one son of his own, but he sometimes referred to Ludwig as his second son. And in the way of family, they spoke sometimes of Malcolm's set-back and debated ways that they might pull him back. Ludwig asked Malcolm to coach the U19 girls while he would continue with the U19 boys.

Ludwig and Malcolm had transcended a student/teacher relationship. While he was still at school, Ludwig asked him to join the Hermanus Hockey Club, and every week Malcolm travelled with his teacher to practice in Hermanus and further afield for matches. Through the club, Malcolm found a family of sorts, says Ludwig. "Me, Frank, Dillon, Greg and some of the other boys. We were people Malcolm could relate to and who treated him as an adult. And through that, I gained a friend in Malcolm."

They had lots of time to talk. Ludwig knew about the complexity of securing the study visa, and that Malcolm's mother committing to sorting out his paperwork was the key. "The whole thing was taking longer than it should have and he was ready to give up on it," recalls

Ludwig. "It was very frustrating to me and especially to him. But I kept pushing him to get some feedback from his mother."

As Malcolm slid deeper into his depressive state, it was his teacher from Gansbaai Academia who threw him a lifeline. For so many years he had been flotsam in the winds and currents of an adult world. He held onto that lifeline and pulled himself ashore. While it might not have been conscious at the time, that call was an invitation to take responsibility for the course of his adult life.

Malcolm got up and made his bed, the first time he had done so in a long time. He picked up the clothes that were piled on the floor and dropped them into the laundry basket. He looked out the window for a long time before he left the cell of his room. He made a sandwich with thick smears of butter and slabs of cheddar cheese. He said goodbye to Ernest who was hunched over his laptop in the lounge.

Ernst looked up, surprised to see his boy dressed in hockey gear, a bag slung over his shoulder. Malcolm pumped the tyre of his bike which had been idle in the garage for some time. He headed down Franken Street and then dropped down to the coastal road – the scenic route– with its views over rocky shores and the swells building up towards the shore.

Many a time he had seen a southern right whale with calf not far from the road, where the coastal shelf dropped to deeper waters. The sea air energised him. He stood up on the pedals as he headed up the hill past the graveyard, then past the back end of the Great White Mall. He reached the sports fields on the R43 behind Gansbaai Academia where he had spent the happiest times of his school life.

Malcolm moved rapidly out of his torpid state and understood how precarious his situation was. It was as if he was walking a line and had chosen which side of it to favour. If he continued to stew in his depressive state, he would fall on the side of failure, which was very close at hand. He chose rather to step across that line into action. He held onto his dream of a tertiary education and accepted that no bursary scheme or scholarship was coming to his rescue. He set his mind on a journalism degree at Rhodes University in

Makhanda. He researched the application process, the fees and what it would take to secure a study visa.

He was going to need a substantial bank balance to see him through. The Gansbaai Academia coaching job was an afternoon gig, and it didn't pay, but Malcolm had a reason to go somewhere most afternoons. He researched how to start building the skills and fitness of the girls' team and how he could start setting up fixtures against other schools.

That sports field was also used by the hockey team of the Grootbos Foundation, the non-profit arm of Grootbos, a high end tourism lodge and eco-reserve between Stanford and Gansbaai.

Malcolm coached the Gansbaai Academia girls between three and four in the afternoons, and before long he was coaching the Grootbos Foundation team from four to five, and that coaching job came with a fee.

"That's what got me out of my depressive state," he says, "because I got to do something I loved, and I got to be with friends again. It distracted me from the whole thing."

Ludwig encourage him to build his network and his savings. He had seen qualities in Malcolm on the hockey pitch that he knew would pull him through, if he dug deep to find them. "When he was still at Gansbaai, I would be quite harsh with him," Ludwig told me. "If he didn't listen to my instructions, or if he was too selfish with the ball, or whatever. He would take that criticism and work with it to improve his game. He didn't take it personally and I really respected that. And that's always been his best quality. His resilience, and his ability to rise above things."

And soon, a job at the Sea Star Lodge guest house followed. And then another, at The Blue Goose, Gansbaai's only fine dining establishment.

"So for a year or so I had four jobs," says Malcom. "So I started at Sea Star Lodge as an assistant manager at seven thirty until three, and then I would do hockey coaching at the high school from three to four, then from four to five I would do hockey coaching for Grootbos, Then from five until twelve or half past one in the morning, I'd be a waiter at The Blue Goose. If they had a function, I could leave there at 3am. I'm never doing that again,

but I enjoyed it! I could do it because most of it was pretty mindless. Coaching was the most mentally intensive part actually, setting up the drills and stuff like that."

In a rare Instagram post in February 2017, while he was consumed by the demands of all those jobs and found little time to be alone in his room, Malcolm posted a poem that he titled "Peace." It was, perhaps, a reflection of those many months he had spent alone and how his relationship with himself might have changed since.

Untainted by the world's "norms",
Unaffected by the status quo,
Unhindered by opinions and whisperings of
strangers,

Free to be who I want,
Free to scream and shout and sing,
Free to wave my arms and legs around and
around with no fear of judgement or social
persecution,

This brief joy,
This singular moment of ecstasy,
This fleeting moment when the world's noise
is silenced,

Is the peace I feel,
When I am alone in my room.

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He started doing his research. He would have to register at university as a foreign student and pay fifty percent of his first year's tuition upfront. He estimated that to be R60 000. To secure the study visa he would have to have a substantial amount in his account over and above tuition fees, to show that he was financially secure. He also had to have a fully paid-up medical aid. That called for another R120 000 to be found, at least.

He started with a very close to zero balance in his bank account. He worked those four jobs by day and night. He spent sparsely. He would log onto his banking profile regularly to track his account as the balance grew.

He earned about R3 000 a month from each of the three paying employers: Grootbos Foundation, Sea Star Lodge and The Blue Goose. Malcolm was personable and popular with the patrons at the restaurant that that attracted mostly foreign tourists, and during tourist season he earned close to R1 000 a night in tips. In 2017 he started applying to universities again, hoping to start in 2018.

"If I arrived thirty minutes before the Blue Goose opened, I would just sit on the couch and have a twenty minute sleep. But I was energetic at the time. I had a goal in mind. At that stage I just thought, okay cool, I'll just have to pay for university myself. I had a goal of earning as much money as I could in a year. By the end of a year I had saved up about R60 000 or thereabouts, which is alright I guess. But it wasn't enough to push me over the edge. So I applied each year, and each year I got accepted. But I still didn't have the funds."

Malcolm applied for universities beyond South Africa and was accepted at the University of Kent and University of the Arts in London. He was awarded a grant from the University of Nottingham Trent for €3 000, but he would have had to come up with the balance of the €9 000 tuition fee, and then there was board and living expenses.

He accepted that 2018 was not the year he would become a student while realising that he couldn't sustain the four jobs for too much longer. "I was waking up at six every morning, going to bed well after one the next morning. I would have died if I'd kept on having to do that."

He needed to earn, but he longed for a nine to five job that was more stable and that would offer him useful working experience. A friend had started working at Xplorio – an online platform set up to promote businesses in small towns – and she referred him for an interview. Malcolm learned that Xplorio was an initiative of Droid Projects, a Gansbaai based on-line marketing agency.

He went for an interview and submitted an on-line article promoting The Blue Goose. He wrote that the restaurant offered a casual fine dining experience showcasing the ingredients and flavours unique to the Overstrand. He wrote about the lush, sheltered garden offering

diners an *al fresco* dining experience. He wrote of the well-stocked bar and its curated selection of gins sourced from craft distillers all over South Africa.

On the strength of that article, he shed is many jobs and started what was to become a long-term job working between Xplorio and Droid.

Chapter 5 Asahleli: Show them flame

Asahleli Meje

Sometimes I worry about my future. When I open up to people about my goals, they will say, you're still young, you shouldn't be putting too much pressure on yourself. But I feel like I could be more than this. And sometimes I get caught up in my thoughts. And I wish I could share it with someone. And then I feel like I'm having a breakdown. It is a real struggle. Sometimes I think it's part of growing up. But sometimes I think that maybe it's normal. Nobody's happy with their own lives. I think immediately you are happy with your own life you are doing something wrong. You should be worried about your future. So that it always keeps you going. Moving forward.

Asahleli Meje (second from left) pictured with friends from CPUT's Hanover Residence football team. Asisipho Press to his right, and Mphathiswa Nyanga and Anda Mhlabeni to his left. A rare posting to Facebook in 2018.

Asahleli Meje lifts his head to look at the bed alongside his. It's a pile of rumpled sheets. His brother Lucky has gone to school. His phone lights up as he jabs at a key to check the time. It's a little after 08h30. He adjusts his pillow, and settles in for another hour at least. It's an unusual luxury, but a fluttering unease keeps him from sinking in.

It's exam time. He's not writing today and school is about to close for the holidays. At this time of the term, his friends bunk out all the time. But this is his first time sleeping in.

He tries to swat it away, but what occupies his thoughts is the paper he is writing tomorrow, and the one after that. And there is a niggling anxiety about his father. Where is he? He has used so many metaphors to describe his father. His father is also a king, a superhero. He doesn't like to use this example, but there's a truth to it. Sometimes when he sees his father, it's like seeing God, someone that could do anything and everything. There was nothing that could stop this guy.

He learned that morning that it was his father's habit to come into the shack attached to the house that Asahleli shared with his brother to check if the boys had gone to school.

"He woke me up while I was sleeping, Asahleli says. *"Haibo!"*

"Khange uye esikolweni?" He deepens his voice in imitation of his father.

"*Yo*, that voice! I said 'yes, I didn't go to school.'

"Kutheni ungayanga esikolweni?"

"And his voice!" he laughs again. "You know. It terrifies you when he was speaking to you. Because he has that thing, unless you guys were having a normal discussion.

"I said 'no, I'm not writing today,'" he speaks here in a calm measured voice, a stiff smile on his face, to offset the sternness of his father's voice, "I'll be going the following day when I'm writing."

"Yiya esikolweni. Ngoku!"

And then he left. Asa quickly got up and dressed into the uniform that he had folded and packed away from the previous day. The school bus had long since left Stanford, and even though there was a car parked outside the house, he had no choice but to go to the hiking

spot on the R43 and hope for a ride into Gansbaai. He waited a for a long time, the school day ticking away from his grasp, and then his father pulled up in his car.

"He never laid a hand on me, you know...but I was so afraid of him. And I thought, maybe he's coming now to beat the hell out of me. Should I run into the bushes, or what? And then he came. Now my eyes are tearing," he laughs, "because I don't know what's about to happen. And then he said '*ngena*'".

What followed was one of the most beautiful memories Asahleli has of his father. Rather than drive towards Gansbaai, his father turned the car around back towards the Stanford Spar. He bought snacks for the two of them and they went back home. He asked Asa to change out of his school uniform. He prepared food for them and they sat in the living room, watching TV. And then he asked Asa to go back to his room to study. His tone was friendly – as it often was – and Asa thought that, strangely enough, the issue was over. But no.

As primary school children, Asahleli and his brothers grew up in the Eastern Cape with their mother. While their father lived in Stanford, he visited often. Despite the distance, he was ever-present to them. Yet there was so much about him that was a mystery to his sons. He told them often, almost as a badge of pride, that Grade 2 was his highest qualification. Yet he was a councillor in Stanford. How did he achieve that, they wondered? He often joked that, despite their more advanced education, it would take them years to match his intellectual capacity. He insisted that they attend school every day, he tracked their studies against exam timetables and he tracked their results.

"And then he called me in and then he explained that regardless of anything, *ne*?, I must always go to school. Because if you are here, you will be sleeping the whole day. But at school, you will be studying and preparing for the following test. And I couldn't figure, how does he know that? It's not like he's done it before? Since that day I never missed a day of school. Even at varsity, students they are free not to attend. But I was taught that you always attend, you are always present, always attend, always present."

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Its more than a year later, and a clutch of young men – recent school leavers – are walking down Dreyer Street. It's the only tar road through Stanford North and connects town with the taxi rank. They throw their legs forward, claiming the space before them. One blows smoke copiously into the air as he laughs at a story, related in some detail, by his friend. One carries a portable sound system on his shoulder. The beat of the base, mixed with their laughter, carries down the street and in through the front door of the beige rectangle of the two-roomed tin roofed RDP house[3] where Asahleli Meje, recently graduated from Gansbaai Academia, is talking to his father, who frowns at the intrusion of the sounds from outside.

Asa can guess what he's thinking. It's a Monday morning in February 2015. It's a little past 10 o'clock. It's a time when young men should be at school or work.

Asa knows that his father would also like to be at work, but his taxi is sitting idle in the yard. His father thinks often of the date – now fast approaching – when the next instalment is due, if he is to keep the taxi from the bank.

His father had moved his family from Mbethe in the Eastern Cape to Stanford where he hoped to earn a living as a taxi driver. The Overberg was fast becoming populated with people who would need rides along the R43 as it snaked from Hermanus to Gansbaai and on to even more southernmost towns. His three sons would be the children of a taxi owner. They would want for nothing.

But it's a complex business securing a taxi route. The rights to the lucrative local routes were held by the two dominant taxi associations. His smaller taxi association only held the rights to long distance routes ferrying people from the Overberg to the Eastern Cape and back. The trips were few, and for too many days in the month, the taxi sat in the yard.

The young men call for Asa to join them.

"No!" his father says, more sharply than he intended, when Asa shouts a reply through the door and into the street. "Wait!" Asa called. "I will join you now, I'm just talking to my

[3] Government designed and funded houses. The first such houses were built under the umbrella of the Reconstruction and Development Programme, a socio-economic policy of Nelson Mandela's 1994 government. Subsequently, houses built within similar government programmes are colloquially known as RDP houses.

father." Asa questions his father with his eyes. He listens to the fading laughter of his friends.

"It will be okay *M'dala,"* he tries to reassure his father. He understands the stresses at home, he wants to start working to contribute to the family purse. "The Spar is hiring. I have updated my CV. I have a good matric *M'dala,* they will hire me as a teller I'm sure."

His father asks him to go and fetch his matric statement, stopping him short when he protests. How many times has his father asked to see his statement? He returns from his room with his statement, the job advert from the Spar, and the CV which he has had printed, ready to deliver to the manager that afternoon.

His father looks again at the statement. Maths. Physical Sciences. Life Sciences. Geography. Life Orientation. English Home Language. Xhosa First Additional Language.

There is the promise of the text that reads: *This candidate is awarded the National Senior Certificate and has met the minimum requirement for admission to bachelor's degrees, diploma or higher certificate study.*

But it's the column to the right of the subjects that his eye returns to. His son's statement is filled with distinctions. At the beginning of each of his matric terms he would come home from school to share the news. Once again, he had been called to the stage by Mr Wilson, and recognised as one of the top ten academic achievers in his grade.

"It's a big deal," he would tell his father each time, "to be called onto the stage, to have the principal shake my hand…"

His father, his biggest motivator, always recognised how well he was doing, even though he was so young. He was just sixteen when he finished matric, because he insisted on schooling alongside his brother, Lucky, who was two years older.

"I didn't want to be separated from Lucky. So when he went to Grade 1, I went with him. And I wanted to sit right next to him. And if they tried separating us, I gave them one hell of a time!" he laughs.

Asa caught on quickly in class, and while his mother was helping Lucky with homework, she made sure that Asa was up to date with the work as well. She was teaching him how to

read and write, and then the teachers saw that this young boy could read and spell out some of the words in class. "And I think now the teacher started looking at, oh, okay, we got something here. So I instantly became part of the class as well."

It was four years ago that Asa's mother, Nolusapho, called his father from their home village of Mbethe, inland between East London and Coffee Bay in the Eastern Cape. Asa was nearing the end of his primary school years, and his teacher had called her to talk about his prospects. True to the pattern he had established since grade one, he had just been awarded a merit for the top performing student in grade six. "You know how Eastern Cape schools are," the teacher advised her. "Take him from here. Remove him from this school and take him to better schools in the Western Cape."

His father brought Asa to live with him and his second wife, Nosiphathise, in Stanford. He enrolled him at Die Bron Primary School for his grade seven and eight years, and soon after he brought Lucky. Asa was a skinny boy, young for his grade. Lucky was big and strong, two years older he had always been Asa's protector and best friend. He preferred Asa, as a new boy in the township, to walk to school in the company of his brother.

Asa immediately saw the difference between Eastern Cape and Western Cape schools. The classrooms at Die Bron were well maintained. There were no potholes in the floors and the windows were intact. And it was at Die Bron that he saw – and touched – a computer for the very first time. At first he was intimidated by the computer lab and didn't want to walk through that door. But when he saw another new boy from his hometown going in, he followed him. He was shy to ask the teacher but his friend showed him how to switch it on, sign in and search the Internet.

"So I would search wrestling, John Cena and the other wrestlers," he laughs. "I remember once I tried to search my old school, Lusungulo Junior Secondary School, and it didn't show up."

To accommodate his sons, Asa's father built a shack adjoining the house, as all the neighbours had done, and the boys shared that space with a curtain separating it in two. In their grade 9 year, both boys were enrolled at Gansbaai Academia.

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While Asahleli's voice boomed on the soccer field, he was quietly spoken at school and seldom reached out to the world outside as other students had done. He never travelled the Overberg as a member of the Junior Town Council, nor wrote stories for *The Sharky Times*. He was never elected to the Representative Council of Learners or to the Matric Council. His face doesn't appear in the photos and newspaper cuttings in Shark Alley.

When asked about him some years later, some teachers cast their minds back trying to conjure a face against the name. He was very thin, one teacher told me. And he kept very much to himself, said another. But he worked hard for those matric results. At school he only released himself from his books for soccer practice and gym.

He knows that his family can't afford fees for tertiary education, and even if they could, it's a world beyond any of their understanding. Tertiary, as he always calls that mythical world, is for others. Nobody in his family has ever attended. Few of the young men who walk the streets of Stanford North have attended.

There is only one young man known to them who is enrolled. That's the same young man, some years older than him, who encouraged him to study at Gansbaai Academia, pointing out to him his academic potential and his affinity for the sciences. They're not sure what he is studying, or how he got there, or how he's paying for it. But he's enrolled.

"Please *M'dala,* can I go now? I'm going to join my friends at the gym, and later I am taking my papers to The Spar. It'll be OK. I promise."

Mr Meje releases his son. He picks up his phone from the side table, scrolling through his contacts and pressing "call".

Mr Meje knew Siviwe Yuyu well from the years he had lived in Stanford with his sister. He had always admired Siviwe, particularly because he was his own man. He didn't try and fit in with the young men walking the streets of Stanford. He liked the way the other young men spoke about Siviwe, their discomfort at his unusualness, the insecurities that his presence brought out in him. "Ja this guy," he would hear them say, "he thinks he's better than us, he thinks he's something special," before clicking their tongues in disapproval.

But this guy, Mr Meje understood, was going places. He was the head boy of Gansbaai Academia the previous year, and now he was at university. He was a year ahead of Asa at school. He had helped Asa with his studies and had passed down his textbooks. It was in part thanks to Siviwe that Asa had that strong matric statement.

He puts the phone to his ear, the familiar buzz of it, and waits for the party on the other end of the call to press "answer".

*

It's the second week of the first semester at the Cape Peninsular University of Technology (CPUT). Siviwe Yuyu is walking to his first lecture of the mornings: Fisheries Management. The phone in his hand vibrates as he passes the two giant steel anchors displayed on the lawns at the entrance to the science faculty. Mr Meje's name displays across the screen.

He was in his matric year at Gansbaai Academia when he saw a poster from the Department of Agriculture and Fisheries that advertised bursaries for oceanography studies. The poster was outdated and the bursaries no longer available, but it piqued his interest. He had never heard of the subject, but he loved the ocean and he was inspired to pursue a career that was off one of the more well-travelled paths…teaching, medicine, business, engineering.

He showed the poster to his teacher, Mrs Harding-Male, and together they went to the school's computer laboratory to search online. A new vocabulary opened up to him. He read about courses in marine biology, geological oceanography, marine aquaculture. There was a click through to the faculty's Facebook page with images of students sampling microplastics on a beach, others – thick in oversized red life jackets – doing marine survival drills in a swimming pool, still more on an ice-breaking research cruise to the world's southernmost oceans. It was a perfect choice. That was a year and a half ago. Now he has one year of his Marine Sciences Diploma complete, and true to his pattern of academic achievement, he has done well.

As his feet find their familiar way along the paths of the campus Siviwe looks again at the screen. Not having a father of his own, it was Mr Meje whose advice he sought as he prepared to go to the mountain for his initiation. Mr Meje had always respected him and

recognised him as a man, even before his initiation into manhood. He would rather be late for class than not take the call.

After a short greeting, Mr Meje asks for advice about enrolling his son. He's a smart boy, Mr Meje says, he should be at tertiary, just like you. He appealed to Siviwe for help. While the academic year had already started, Siviwe told him that there was hope. There were ways of doing things. There were ways of securing funds. Some faculties still had places and were accepting late walk-in registrations. "Send him to me," he offered, "I'll do whatever I can." And with a final greeting, he clicked off the call.

Asa returned from gym to hear the plan. No, he was not going to take his CV to the Spar that afternoon. He and his father were to leave early the next morning to drive the 140 kilometre journey to join Siviwe at CPUT. He would need to take several packs of his documents. His matric statement, his identity and proof of address. They were to leave now for the printing shop to have the copies made, and then to the police station to have them certified.

"But how...," Asa's many questions were cut short. "Just get all those documents together and let's get ourselves prepared," his father instructed, "we have an early start."

*

They met Siviwe in the parking lot. However long it took, Asa's father instructed them, his son must be enrolled. "You guys can go," he said as he got out of the car to light a cigarette, "these are things for the educated people to sort out."

They entered the campus through the commerce faculty. At six or seven stories high, it was the tallest building Asa had ever seen. Concrete. Glass. Steel. Brick. An open staircase from the ground to the top floors with a chaotic line of hopeful students. The roar of them echoed through all that open space. Asa felt lightheaded, as if the world might collapse in on him at any moment. He couldn't imagine how they could all be standing there, for so long, he looked for – surely – there must be some of these potential students fainting, falling over, giving up or going home?

"Don't worry," Siviwe advised him as they walked through the commerce faculty and onto the grounds. "Commerce is not for you. You're more a sciences guy. But what do you want to apply for?"

"What do I want to apply for, what do you mean?"

"Hey *wena*, I mean what do you want to apply for, which faculty?"

"Faculty?"

"You don't know what a faculty is?"

"I know nothing!" he laughs. "Nothing. *Niks*. It's you who will have to show me everything."

Words that now trip of Asa's tongue with ease were unfamiliar to him then. If he were to write a vocabulary list to pass onto another first year student, it would include the word: faculty.

"You know, a faculty," Siviwe explained, "it's like a department at the university, so you would have the commerce faculty, or the medicine faculty or the education faculty or the engineering faculty. So which faculty do you want to apply for?"

"I don't know. Just get me anything. I'll take anything!"

Siviwe advised again that they should apply for the sciences, given Asa's strong maths and science matric results. It was going to be best to split up. Asa stood in a queue outside the electrical engineering faculty while Siviwe went to the science block. Siviwe had told him to wait in this line, to hand in his documents and to motivate for a place in electrical engineering. They would stay in touch by phone. But he felt lost now that they had split up. He didn't know what electrical engineering was. He would try his best.

Even if he never got enrolled, right now he looked just like any other student. Some milled about the paving areas in front of the building, some drank coffee from paper cups while they sat on the lawns, most carried rucksacks with their books as they walked from here to there. They all looked so confident, like they belonged there. He inched his way forward. It was warm now, the February day opening into the full flush of summer, and a

sweat broke out on his brow. As he checked his phone for messages, it vibrated. Siviwe, as he had hoped.

“Ja, I’m standing here at biotechnology. I’ve sold them your statement. They are interested in you.”

“Bio-what? What is that, I’m not sure…”

“Yes, biotechnology. They like your results, they are ready to enrol you if you’re interested. Are you up for it?”

“Yes, I’m up for it! I’ll take it! Where do I go now?”

Biotechnology is another word Asa could add to his list of words for new students. It is, he would write, the exploitation of biological processes for industrial and other purposes, especially the genetic manipulation of micro-organisms for the production of antibiotics, hormones, etc. And even that would be difficult for a first year student to understand.

Siviwe came back to the engineering building to collect him. The biotechnology department was free of the messy queues of the commerce faculty. Only three other students were enquiring about late registrations. The calm of the space stilled his anxiety.

While Asahleli’s was motivated more by survival than vocation that day, things were aligning for him. “When I went into the science faculty I could smell education,” he says. “Do you know what education smells like? Education smells like books. Everything was well managed. Then instantly I knew that this is where I want to be. This is where I belong.”

A lecturer welcomed him and told him he would need to complete some forms and pay the R150 enrolment fee. The semester had already started, and he was to start attending the following day.

It was late in the afternoon when they shared the news with his father. Siviwe sat up front, while Asa nestled into the back seat. He knew that his father was a man of action. He knew also that the cost of the petrol and the registration fee was outside of their regular monthly expenses and that another return trip would be wasteful. But he was not prepared for his father’s response. Asa saw the back of his father’s head, the reflection of his eyes in the rear view mirror as he addressed Siviwe. “I’m not taking this one with me back to

Stanford. You're going to be taking him with you to where you're staying in Kraaifontein and he's going to start school tomorrow."

Asa had brought his papers, his phone and the registration fee. It was a warm morning when he had set out, and he didn't even have a jacket. It had not occurred to any of them that he would be registered, and that he would start attending the following day.

"I don't have any clean underwears!" Asa's eyes pleaded with his father's reflected in the rear view mirror.

"He's not coming back to Stanford," was his father's final word to Siviwe. "He's going to attend, and he's going to stay with you."

Siviwe rented a room from an uncle in the sprawl of Kraaifontein, a one and a half hour train ride north east of campus. Asa heard his father phone the uncle and ask him if he could take his son in as well. His mouth was dry, as if warning him to say no more. He had just turned seventeen. He could count on his fingers the number of times he had ever left Stanford or Gansbaai. And now he was at a university campus in Cape Town.

Ordinarily, Asa's father treated his sons as equals. "My father never treated me like a kid," he says. "He would call me in. It was a nice thing, but *so* uncomfortable. I was overwhelmed by his presence. If he was planning something, he would talk to me like I was an adult. He would say *Yihlo*[4], I'm planning this and that, and that, and that. What do you think? He was that kind of guy. He was open to ideas."

But there was no consultation this time round. Asa needed time to let it all sink in. He needed to go back and say goodbye to his friends and his brother Lucky. He needed to collect his clothes and everything else he needed for such a huge transition. A flash of anger and frustration flooded his eyes with tears. But The Big Man had spoken. He knew his father well enough to understand that his word was final.

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The bewildering travel from campus to Kraaifontein that afternoon spun Asa deeper into his anxiety with the unfamiliar spinning around him.

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[4] He called his sons *Yihlo,* which is a familiar expression meaning "brother", rather than an equivalent term which would mean "son".

"It was crazy inside Cape Town train station. All sorts of noises. People going up and down," is how he describes it. "Now this is a first time experience for me. We grabbed a pie. Remember we haven't eaten the whole day. And now we are going to go down with the escalators, and then up, and I've never been on an escalator. *Ai*, let's find another route! Because I'm afraid I'm going to fall! But he's just used to it. He's just walking. When I stepped my foot for the first time, I almost fell. But we kept going. The moving stairs. The fancy things. I was coming from a village, a small place. We knew who's who. And then I was coming to this place. It was crowded. There were so many people ... I didn't like it."

Every morning, they would do that commute in the other direction. They left home at 5am. It was a half hour walk to the station, and a one hour and twenty minute ride to CPUT. Often, the trains were delayed. Asa had never been on a train before. The language and workings of those stations were new to him. He had to learn what a platform was, that he could never lose his ticket, that he had to scan his ticket at the turnstile, that the train departed from platform one, that sometimes he had to put politeness aside to fight his way on to the train.

*

The first thing that struck Asa about Kraaifontein was the vastness of it. Houses, shacks, electricity pylons, gravel roads and lines of people coming home from work stretching into the distance as far as his eye could see. He saw it first through the orange dusk of their arrival on the most eventful day of his life.

The shacks were spaced apart from one another. Each shack had a yard, a fence and a gate that opened and closed. Compared to the shack settlement in Stanford it felt spacious, organised, safe and safely distant from the poverty associated with a shack settlement. His route from the station to home became well-worn and he never departed from it.

Some might call Kraaifontein a suburb, others would call it a a township. Asa was unaware then that it was one of the murder capitals of the world. Gang warfare, the easy availability of illegal firearms and pervasive drug and alcohol abuse in the area fuelled its high rates of violent crime.

His instinct was to keep to himself. "When you arrive in a place you must stay focused on your route," he says. "I knew I had to be in the yard early. So my route was simple…my last class was coming out at quarter past four, and then I would catch the train at five. I walked straight back to the house. There was no-one in Kraaifontein – and I was there for six months – no-one except the guy that I was staying with, who knew my name."

And it was colourful compared to the stark silver of the corrugated structures he was used to. Siviwe's uncle, who worked as a petrol attendant in Cape Town, lived in a yellow structure. Adjacent to it was another shack, painted green, where Siviwe lived. Asa was surprised also at the comfort of the uncle's interior. The ceiling boards, painted white. The brown carpet. The flat screen TV. The comfy couch. The tidily installed kitchen counters.

While his new home was green on the outside, the plastic ceiling boards inside were blue. A maroon carpet. A small table for eating and studying. The uncle's old red bicycle against a wall. They used it to hang dry their clothes and towel. A nail in the wall with a plastic hanger for Siviwe to hang his blazer. There was no wardrobe. A bare light bulb was attached by a stringy wire to the ceiling.

To start with, they shared everything. A single bed. A sheet. A blanket. A pillow. Toothpaste. A toothbrush. Soap. Shampoo. Lotion. A towel. Pens. A notepad. Asa felt some discomfort at being invited into the space rent free. He cooked, he cleaned, he swept the yard. He contributed groceries from the modest allowance his father sent him every month.

Back at campus, Asa shared Siviwe's laboratory coat, safety goggles and other equipment. He wore Siviwe's clothes, and in so doing, felt that he and his friend were morphing into one. And then, of course, they shared underwear. There weren't enough to go around for a clean pair each every day, but they laughed about it. Asa was at tertiary. He would make do.

*

The commute took its toll on both of them. In April of that year Siviwe moved into Catsville residence and Asa stayed on in Kraaifontein. Two months later Asa secured a place

in Hanover residence. It was still being built, but given the shortage of student accommodation the Student Representative Council pushed for it to be opened early.

"It was my first time being in a shower!" he laughs about it now. "And I wasn't alone, we were asking one another, how do you operate this thing? So hot water on this side, cold water on this side, you must get it at the right angle to make sure that it balances out."

While Asahleli was accepted as a late walk in registration, he had no idea how he was to fund his study, residence and living costs. Siviwe told him that he would qualify for a NSFAS bursary and guided him through the application process.

The National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) is one of the most important words Asa would add to his list to guide first year students who came after him. Its stated vision is to provide financial aid to all eligible public university and Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) college students from poor and working class families. What he didn't know then was that the scheme has been characterised by mismatching funding to demand for higher education, by bungled administration and corruption. Campus protests erupted countrywide as students were left stranded with unpaid fees.

He was elated when he was awarded the bursary. But towards the end of the year, the funding had not come through and his academic and residence fees had not been paid. His classmates – many of whom had also registered late as walk ins – were being paid out, but not him. "Why?" he kept on asking. With unpaid fees, he was not sure he would be able to register for second year. The prospect of dropping out was very real, despite his excellent first year results.

He hoped that the bursary would be paid out and that it would be renewed each year. He didn't know that he would have to re-apply each year based on passing the previous year. It was as if this behemoth of a government funding agency was a person. As he walked from class to class, he would curse it, he would plead with it, he would threaten it.

"Pass, you want me to pass? Are you joking?" he asked one day. "I'm not gonna pass, I'm gonna give it my all. I'm gonna show them flame!"

*

Sometimes people ask Asa about his time in Cape Town. Where were the student hang outs? Did he visit The Waterfront or Camps Bay beach? He seldom left campus. He knew that a set of excellent results was his key to a life of greater opportunity, even if he couldn't quiet imagine what that life might be. He held the fragile promise of a tertiary education in his hands and he didn't want to break it.

He was worried about his fees and the list of books he needed to buy. He was stressed about the due dates for assignments that lined up every day. During quiet study hours he would try and keep his mind on his work, then the thought would come to him. What if I can't cover my fees? The calls, the texts and emails to NSFAS were getting him nowhere. The only way he could see was to go the office in Cape Town to plead his case.

Outside of the lecture halls, his room and the campus football pitch, Cape Town was unknown to him. The prospect of travelling to Wynberg added to his anxiety. "First I had to find out how the taxis work, I had to ask around," he says. "And then I was told that Wynberg is a very dangerous place, so I had to be careful. It's one of those places on the taxi route you have to look out for. So I would ask the driver, please when we get there, you must let me know. I told myself, this thing of being scared to talk, it's going to get you into trouble. So I had to man up, I had to speak up."

NSFAS was the institution that just about every students approached for their final funding answer. The institution was huge in his mind, and he expected to find something grand with a busy reception area. "But it was so small…and when I went there to appeal for my fees, I showed them my first year statement. It was covered with distinctions. And I said to them, what more do you want from me?" He left without an answer.

Asa was soon to add a new word to his vocabulary. The SRC was an elected body that represented the interests of students. It fought for the rights of students like him not to have to re-apply each year. Students should be registered for the following year, the SRC argued, even if fees from the previous year were unpaid.

Asa was one of the many beneficiaries of that fight. In his second year his bursary was awarded, and his academic and residence fees for two years were paid. The bursary included

tuition and residence fees and a FundiCard. A FundiCard, he learned, looks like a credit card and when it is loaded with the allowance linked to the bursary it can be swiped for books, stationery and groceries. But his card wasn't sent to him for three years. It's not that it wasn't due to him, it was. It's just that - he learned - these things take time.

"Back at home, nobody knew that I was going up and down, running around for fees," he says. "These are the types of things, when you are at varsity, you have to face alone. When you're there, you need to step up, you need to grow up. So there were certain things I had to swallow. There are certain things I had to go through which I was not ready to face at that stage. Remember now, my first year, I was around 17 or 18 years old. Maybe it's a good thing I had to go through all those things. They made me who I am today. Because now I appreciate every little thing that comes my way."

*

With his blank Fundi card and an inconsistent allowance from home, feeding himself was a stress difficult to bear. "For me my groceries was pilchards, pack of soup, eggs and *pap*. I just needed to be headstrong while I was eating my Morvite and someone else in the kitchen was frying chops."

Students in his self-catering residence offered to share, but he would decline because he was in no position to reciprocate. "I had no problem with that," he says of students that had more to eat than he had, " because I understood my situation, right? I had to make a living out of what I had."

It was Siviwe, more than anyone, who held the threads of Asa's life, who knew – more than his family – what was happening in his life. It was Siviwe who Asa's oldest brother called to share bad news from home. He knew that Asa was approaching his third year exams and that the shock might derail him. He asked Siviwe's advice about how and when they should break the news.

When his brothers and Siviwe knocked on the door of his room to tell him that he was going home, he thought his father was calling him back to protect him from the violence on campus. It was the leading news story of the time.

#FeesMustFall was a student led protest movement that broke out at the University of Witwatersrand in Johannesburg in 2015 and soon spread to other campuses. The protests aimed to freeze fee increase while calling for more funding to be allocated to tertiary institutions. What started out as a noble protest soon turned violent. Academic programmes were closed down and infrastructure was vandalized. The movement lost public support.

"It was one of my happiest moments at varsity when they arrived," Asa said. "There is nothing nicer than getting a visit when you are far from home. Because when you are there, you are in hell. When you are there, you are alone. I was so excited that they finally decided to come. I had no idea that they could be bringing me bad news."

His brothers had come to tell him that their father had been killed in a car crash. They were calling him home to bury him.

"I cried all the way home after hearing that news. They were driving my father's taxi, and they had to stop to try and calm me down. You know, I pushed myself so hard, I wanted to brag to him. I wanted to show him what his son had done. I wanted to show him my statement, I wanted to show him I have reached the highest of my capabilities."

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Years later, with a degree to his name, if anyone asks Ash what biotechnology is, he quotes the definition often repeated by his lecturer Prof. Seteno Ntwampe. *Biotechnology is Anything and Everything*.

He admired Prof Ntwampe for designing the course with that aspiration in mind. It included modules from the humanities, chemical engineering and commerce. Their professor understood that whatever careers his students might step into, biotechnology was a portal into a world beyond the science. Understanding an income statement, for example, would drive much of their career prospects.

It's a grand definition, with its promise of realising the latent potential of the universe, and he sometimes imagined all the possibilities that the degree might open up for him. The qualification included three years of theory and a year of in-service training.

Asahleli sometimes thinks back to his graduation. It was a miracle of sorts, but one that was perhaps pre-destined. There were many times along the four year journey when he came close to quitting. He was focused enough to manage the studying, but the stress about his unpaid fees and the constant struggle for the basics that he needed – like a laptop and data – almost derailed him. "I went through a rough time at varsity, especially in terms of food…It's not a nice thing when you go to sleep without having anything to eat. It's not a nice thing."

One afternoon he asked Siviwe to loan him R150 for transport back to Stanford. He had made up his mind to leave the tertiary dream behind, and nothing Siviwe said could change his mind. As he took a series of taxis from Cape Town to Belville to Hermanus to Stanford, he was resolved. It was over.

"But as I got to Stanford, I sat there in the taxi and I was thinking, what do I do now? And then I thought about my father. And I asked myself, what would he do if he knew I quit? Would he still bless me from above? Will he still look out for me if he sees that I have failed him? I went to sleep in tears, having those thoughts. When you're thinking so much, it is blocking your heart, your heavy heart. And the following day when I woke up, I decided that I'm going back. Because in Stanford, I saw no hope. I had seen the other side of the world. I had exchanged ideas and future goals with people at the institution."

Asahleli showed them flame. He knew that studying hard was the only way for him. Recognising his academic potential, his professors encouraged him to take up a research opportunity at Stellenbosch University and to register for a master's degree which would be funded. But the offer didn't include living expenses.

As inviting as the opportunity was, things were tough for his family in Stanford, and he felt he could no longer ask them to support him. His Fundi card had still not come through, and three years worth of allowances that were due to him were outstanding. The grappling for ways to make it through each week were taking its toll. He needed to earn.

He was one of the top performing biotechnology students and five companies made him offers to complete his in-service training. He accepted an offer from Distell, a manufacturer

of alcoholic brands, because it came with a stipend of R7 500 a month, almost double the next highest offer.

While he worked on the factory floor and in the research laboratories of the industrial complex, he rented a shack in the nearby township of Mbekweni. As he had done in Kraaifontein, he kept to himself and seldom strayed off the taxi route from work to home. Mbekweni – like Kraaifontein – was known for its high crime rates and gang activity.

After his belongings were cleared out after a second break-in, local people told him that as outsider to the area, it wasn't safe for him to stay in a shack. He would always be a target. He replaced his stolen goods – again - and moved to a more expensive brick-and-mortar apartment nearby.

It was during his in-service training in his fourth year, that the money owed by NSFAS on the Fundi card came through. They had failed to reimburse him for the funds owed for his first year, but had included the allowances for his second and third years.

The anything and everything nature of biotechnology had opened up a world of possibilities to him, and he owed the degree to the memory of his father.

That day, when he was preparing his CV to apply for a position as a teller at Spar, he never imagined that four years later he would submit a thesis titled *Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Point in Glass Contamination and Validation of Procedures* with a dedication on the opening page.

Dedicated to the memory of my late father Wizana Meje († 13.11.2015)

"Now that he is no more, I see that there is nothing that my father loved more than his kids. There is nothing he loved more than us."

Chapter 6 Siviwe: Troublemaker looking for answers

Siviwe Yuyu

I started out at school as a bit of a troublemaker, but a troublemaker looking for answers. I questioned, almost anything, you know? Maybe there was something my classmates were not happy with. If they were scared to go and ask, I was the one who would say, no, I'm not scared. If it needs to be the principal, I'm gonna ask the principal. I'll do that.

Siviwe Yuyu with Bianca de Koning (head girl) and the Premier of the Western Cape, Hellen Zille, at a function in 2014. Source: xplorio.com

Gansbaai Academia is a young school. In 2011, when Siviwe Yuyu enrolled as a Grade 10 student, it was just a year old. When he graduated three years later, the school was four. But even young schools are built on legend and stories of not so long ago.

There are two Shark Alleys in Gansbaai. One is a passage between Geyser Rock and Dyer Island where great white sharks hunt for seals. The other is the passage from the front door to the rest of the school. Its face-brick walls are lined with certificates and awards, photographs and newspaper cuttings that celebrate the achievements of the school's "Sharkies". Each year, more pages are added to the story.

There is a wooden display board with each year's Dux Scholar embossed in gold. Malcolm Mulope's name is there. There is another with the names of the head boys and girls with a blocked display of their photos above it. The fourth image along is of the head boy and girl of 2014, Jack Swart and Monica De Gouveia. The third photo, that marks the 2013 pair, is of Bianca de Koning and Siviwe Yuyu. Both smile at the photographer's prompt. Both wear the maroon school blazer rimmed with the gold.

Siviwe's cheekbones are sharp against the taught frame of his face. His mouth is closed, his smile discreet. His head is shaved almost clean. The photo is old now, and Bianca's face is almost blown out white against Siviwe's dark.

Another photograph was published of the pair in uniform in a 2013 edition of *Gansbaai Courant*. Siviwe looks directly at the camera. That same closed-mouth smile. Bianca, her strawberry blonde hair pulled back in a bun, is seen talking to the Premier of the Western Cape, Helen Zille, who was there to address the Hermanus Business Chamber.

There is a cut our article from an Afrikaans newspaper headlined *Bianca is Gansbaai's Pride*. She achieved five matric distinctions despite her difficult circumstances, the article reads. "Customers are coming in the whole time to congratulate me," says her mother who is a cashier at OK Foods. "My heart is bursting with pride." She had been accepted to study at the University of Stellenbosch, it was reported, but didn't qualify for a bursary and was hoping to get a study loan.

Jonathan Jansen, the vice chancellor of the University of Free State, read that article and phoned Mr Wilson. He offered Bianca a full bursary to study a degree of her choice. He later sent a bus ticket for her travel to Bloemfontein.

The following year, the *Hermanus Times* reported that Bianca achieved seven distinctions in her first year of study for a BSc in behavioural genetics. It was perhaps on the strength of his star student's performance that the vice chancellor visited the school that year and offered Malcolm Mulope and the top four graduates of each year a bursary.

Bianca and Siviwe. Siviwe and Bianca. When anyone is called to tell the school story, at least one of them is mentioned, and with some reverence.

Bianca went to Laerskool Gansbaai before coming to the brand new high school where she had to quickly adjust to huge class sizes and to being a racial minority.

It is almost ten years since she left school. Since then she qualified with a BSc in behavioural genetics at University of Free State and as a teacher at the University of Cape Town.

Her hair is short now, and more auburn than blonde. She has intentionally left her Afrikaans accent behind, and a hint of British roundness fills her vowels as she thinks back on her time at the school from her flat in Cape Town which she shares with five cats.

She was hoping to be working as a teacher by now, but has taken some time off to recover from the effects of aggressive chemotherapy to treat an "out of left field" lung cancer diagnosis. She pulls back the memory of that time through the residue of the drugs that, she says, has turned her brain to mush.

The student body was represented by a four person leadership team. Juandre Spies was the white deputy head boy, and Jolene Filander the coloured deputy head girl. Bianca loved being in a team that was so diverse, and the four became close friends. Going to Gansbaai Academia shifted her whole world, she says.

"I grew up with a very conservative Afrikaans upbringing. I grew up in the NG Church. My grandparents were in the army during those years in South Africa. To give you some

context of the house I grew up in, I once invited a coloured boy to my birthday party and my grandparents wouldn't allow him to use the toilet inside."

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Bianca and Siviwe each brought their own flavour to the student leadership role. She was serious and followed the school rules as gospel. Siviwe wore his authority loosely and was referred to in the staffroom as a "real Malema," in reference to the troublesome leader of the ANC Youth League who was expelled from the party and started one of his own. Siviwe became known as the boy who questioned everything.

"We were representing the whole school and I was very serious about everything. But working with Siviwe relaxed me a bit," says Bianca. "He was a very bright guy. And a bit of a jokester. And yes, he questioned authority. It was interesting for me to see that, because my questioning was quieter, more internal by comparison."

Once in a physical science class, neither had done their homework because of all the responsibilities they carried on the matric council. The teacher didn't entertain their excuses. "Really, the head boy and head girl, what kind of example are you setting for everyone?" she asked. "Go to the principal's office. Right now!"

"I remember it, clear as day," says Bianca. "My blood ran cold and I was just like, freaking out, because I had always been so well behaved. I had never had detention in all my twelve years of schooling. And I was just catastrophizing. I was like, oh my God, we're going to get suspended, they're going to strip us of our titles! And Siviwe was just like, 'calm down. What are you on about? What are they going to do to us?'"

Besides their different approaches to problem solving, the pair complemented each other in other ways. Bianca learned from Siviwe about the boys who returned from their initiation ceremonies in the bush. They were allowed to wear different blazers and hats at school because they had returned as men. Siviwe learned about the cultural sensitivities of boys and girls from conservative Afrikaans homes arriving in a diverse school.

Almost a decade after they left school, the legend of them has endured.

"Have you heard about Siviwe Yuyu?" a teacher asked me when I first started visiting the school looking for a story. "He went to America. Several times. Yes, he's done very well. And I remember when he came back to speak to the students here at assembly. He said that when he walked through the doors of a university lecture hall for the very first time, the doors to his future opened also."

"They were quite a pair," another teacher told me, "each of them was so talented, and she was so very white and he was very black."

They were emblematic, perhaps, of the promise of the rainbow nation that had drawn Tommy Wilson to take up the principalship of the school five years before.

Both remember the expectations of the principal, how he aspired for the best for all his students, and how he had particularly high expectations of them, the head boy and girl of 2013.

"We were only the second matric class," says Bianca, "and I feel Siviwe and I really upped the bar and have lived up to Mr Wilson's expectations. Both of us have gone on to do our degrees. Both of us have been awarded international fellowships."

"Siviwe was one of my top students," Mr Wilson told me. "He was a great orator and good at soccer. And it's a big thing to be made head boy. If there was a fight I would say, where's my head boy? Siviwe, why aren't you sorting this out? At assembly, I would always say, where's my head boy? Siviwe, howzit! He was very proud."

Siviwe was proud to have been nominated head boy and by all accounts, he took to the role with the reverence it required. He understood that his charisma, his leadership and his accomplishments were being recognised. But he suspected that there were other motivations that influenced the vote.

"Being made head boy, it put me in a tight position. It was like a trap. Like they were saying to me, we need to put you in a position where you can't do certain things. But other than that, it was a great experience. It grew me as a leader."

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Siviwe was five, or might have been six, when a series of tragedies visited his family. His parents died within a few months of each other, or it might have been a year. There are moments from that time, like fragments of a puzzle, that he sees still with some clarity. But so many of the images are not quite in focus, and the whole picture doesn't quite materialise in his mind.

Compared to his years of township living later in life when neighbours would often go hungry, he remembers a life of relative plenty in their remote village in the Eastern Cape. He learned young to herd cattle and to tend livestock. He remembers the nervous darts back and forth of the sheep as they were herded to new grazing, the squirt into the tin pail as he learned to milk the cows. He would run his finger through shallow furrows of red soil, preparing to plant carrots and other crops as his mother showed him. He was expected to do his chores.

"That village foundation is still with me," he says as a man approaching his thirties. "I have more knowledge of the old ways compared to someone who grew up in the township. Many of those practices we were doing at the time are no longer practiced in the village."

He remembers his mother becoming sick. He remembers her funeral. And then he remembers his father becoming sick. He remembers the gathering of people as the coffin was lowered into the ground. He remembers the prayers and the traditional rites as he and his siblings watched the opening that had received their being filled with shovelfuls of soil.

He doesn't know how they became ill, or what took their lives. Nobody ever talks to him about that, not even now that he is an adult with a child of his own. But his father worked on the platinum mines in the North West province, and he suspects he might have come down with an illness that afflicts those who work underground.

Those deaths, and the consequences, tore through the family and sent the five children on a scattered diaspora from the family homestead in the village of Ntlahlane, 30 kilometres inland from Port Edward in the Eastern Cape. "I left the village, but my roots are there," he says. "My elders are still there, the people who lead us. Black families are way more broad

and complicated compared to other families. So everything that we do pertaining to traditional rituals and practices, we do there."

Siviwe was sent to live at first with an uncle in Stanford. Later, when he was about ten or eleven years old, he was taken in by his eldest sister, Nosipho. She lived in Zwelihle, the township on the outskirts of Hermanus. "My sister is way older than me, probably 18 or 20 years older, I've never calculated. I was raised by her. Everybody who lived in the township thought I was her child."

Another sister, Kholiswa, lived in Stanford. If he had been sent to live with her at first, he might have gone to Die Bron Primary and then to Gansbaai Academia as Asahleli had done. But his route to Academia was fraught and entirely of his own making.

Siviwe went to Lukhanyo Primary in Zwelihle There was some confusion as he transitioned from a village school – with its small A, middle A, small B, middle B classes – to the schooling system of the city and he started at his new school older than many of his classmates.

"They asked me – I was still fresh from the village– if I was going to do grade one or grade two, and I thought grade one was standard one," he remembers. "So I said, OK, I will do grade one. There was a lot I had to recap on to be in balance with the other learners. But later I got promoted to the next grade because of my academic performance and my age."

Even so, he started at Qhayiya Secondary School in Zwelihle a little older for his grade and finished high school when he was twenty years old.

There was good reason why Siviwe became known as a "real Malema" at school. He was outspoken. The timbre of what became a deep man's voice was developing. He became known as an orator and he was quick to speak his mind. He was always neatly turned out. His school shoes polished to a shine, his clothes clean and ironed. He was a star on the soccer field. And while he was quick to break into a smile, there was a seriousness held in his upright posture. He was a teenager who stood out. And in Zwelihle, when gangsterism was becoming a feature of the township, that wasn't a good idea.

"I was somehow caught in the middle, because I would be seen talking to certain people. So by association, people assumed…My sister was called into the school and was told that I was involved with gangs."

He was in grade nine, and his friends in Stanford had enrolled at the new high school in Gansbaai. He believed that the best thing he could do, was to get out of Zwelihle and to go and live with his other sister in Stanford. But Nosipho refused. Despite his denials, she believed that he was involved in the gangs, and that he was forcing the move so that he could move away from her supervision. She believed that he would join gangs on the other side of the bay.

"I forced the move to Gansbaai because I was trying to escape from the situation," he says. "Because when you start being involved by association, then someone is going to beat you up. And then you have to retaliate to be safer. And once you retaliate, you're in, you don't have a choice."

He was just 17 years old. He travelled to Gansbaai Academia and submitted his application, listing Stanford as his home address so that he would fall within the school's capture area. It caused an upset with the sister who raised him, but he started his grade ten year at Gansbaai Academia and spent the last three years of his high school there.

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A decade later, Siviwe had a view about why teachers were so invested in his success and why the legend of him has endured. This view might also explain why so many people became invested in his success long after school.

He was a black boy who grew up in difficult circumstances. He would prove himself an exceptional head boy, despite the doubters. He would become a university graduate. And he would go on to do great things. Through him the promise of Mr Wilson's rainbow nation would be realised for all to see.

"Some people believe that I was unfairly favoured. That I was used to sell the idea of a multi-racial school," he told me. "But it had to happen, whether it was going to be me or somebody else, the story of a black child from difficult circumstances going into the world

and doing well had to be normalised. It was as if the way had to be smoothed for others to follow And in a sense, I'm proud of it."

Looking back, Siviwe describes himself as a project of the school that was led by three collaborators.

The first was Mr Wilson. Given Siviwe's family history, it's tempting to see Mr Wilson as a father figure, but it wasn't like that, he says. He had regular meetings in Mr Wilson's office where they would have "decent one-on-one, man-to-man conversations." Those are not normal conversations in small, underprivileged families, Siviwe says now, especially when the young man was raised by his sisters. Mr Wilson spoke to him of his potential and of his responsibility – to himself, his family and the nation – to realise it. "Those conversations would focus me," he says. "They helped me to be resilient and to keep pushing forward."

The second collaborator was his English teacher, Mrs Matthews. She taught him how to speak English well. Through debating clubs and eisteddfods, she taught him how to form an argument and to present it with authority. She taught him how to hold his posture tall and proud. Ten years later when he presents an argument to potential sponsors in a corporate boardroom, he invokes the spirit of Mrs Matthews, and as he says certain words, he hears the echo of hers: "You don't pronounce that word like that, you pronounce it like this. One day you will go out into the world and people will ask you 'Who was your English teacher?'"

And then there was Mrs Harding-Male.

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Each class was allocated a teacher who took the morning register and who was responsible for guiding their journey through the school year. "When I came in Grade 10, luckily I was in Mrs Harding-Male's register class," he says. "The universe made it that way."

And she happened to like him. "Actually every teacher, at every school I'd been to, liked me. Fortunately. But with her it was different. It became on a parenting level. If I was hungry, I could go to her and say, 'I don't have lunch'. She helped me with my school uniform and everything."

As soon as Siviwe arrived, he stood out. "I loved that he was so inquisitive," says Mrs Harding-Mail. "So at first I took him for milkshakes. Because I wanted to know his story," she says of her own inquisitiveness, one of the many qualities they shared. "Because he never had family at parent evenings."

An Afrikaans woman with kindly, smiling features, Aneeri Harding-Male was responsible for learner support, assessing the educational and social needs of specific children. Students who came into her little office filled with books and games and, most importantly – WiFi - were amazed as she told them some of her story: her careers, her marriages, her tragedies, and always – her sense of moving forward and getting on with it.

She had been a ground hostess for South African Airways. She had been a farmer's wife in the Eastern Cape and a casualty of many years of failed harvest. She had sold pipes to mine and factory bosses. She was a widow and a divorcee. She had driven the mountain passes of Lesotho trading skins and hides until she became known as the white woman who travelled those roads with cash. She had been a hotel manager, a chef, and a mother of two. She had lived as a missionary in a remote village in the Eastern Cape where she became familiar with the Xhosa language and culture. And then she trained to become a teacher. "The number of things I did is too many to name," she says. "I always just did something to earn money."

She was immediately drawn to Siviwe, the boy who challenged teachers and stood up for his classmates. "I love the most difficult children. All the rebels, bring them to me," she says. "In Grade 10 when I met him I could see he had potential. And I said to him, you are our next head boy. I can see it in you. I could see his leadership skills. And he never let any challenge get in his way. So you know, that felt close to my personality. So we just gelled."

Towards the end of his grade 11 year, Mr Wilson announced Siviwe and Bianca as head boy and girl at a year-end function in the school hall.

Siviwe prepared himself to take on that responsibility even though he was already the chairperson of the Representative Council of Learners (RCL). He played soccer and had practice most afternoons after school. He travelled the province taking part in debating competitions and eisteddfods. He was a member of the Junior Town Council, and like

Malcolm, he was a Rachel's Angel and travelled frequently to the University of Stellenbosch. He was often at school until long after the bus to Stanford had left.

When he moved to Gansbaai Academia, he moved into the house of his second born sister Kholiswa in Stanford. She was frequently away as she found contract work further afield in the Western Cape – she worked in a canning factory, she worked on a lettuce farm – and Siviwe grew up for long stretches of time home alone.

"Being independent, it's something that has been plastered to me from grade eight or nine," he says. "I learned to do my own things, without relying on anybody. There was no other choice. Either she was going to work to be able to provide for me," he says of Kholiswa, "or she was going to stay at home with me with nothing."

Siviwe had mastered many of those acts of independence years previously, when he was in primary school. In Zwelihle, Nosipho – who also travelled for contract work – showed him how to scrub the collar and cuffs of his school shirt with Sunlight soap. In Stanford, Kholiswa taught him how to cook *isiqa,* a one pot meal of rice, potatoes and Rajah flavouring. She taught him how to fry an egg.

The demands of independence, coupled with the times when the family was short of money, were taking a toll. It was becoming difficult for him to imagine how he would meet the demands on him as head boy. "For me to be a competitive leader, I needed a place to stay that was closer to school," he says, "because there was no bus that was going to wait for me after school."

When he got to his grade 11 year, Mrs Harding-Male noticed that he was losing weight. "I could see he was battling. And I said to him, I live alone. Don't you want to come and stay with me? I've got an extra bedroom. My children were big, they were out of school, and this was my next child."

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Mrs Harding-Male became a mother figure to several students. Jack Swart was her first "sort of adopted child," she says, though Jack didn't live with her. "Jack and I, we would have dinner together. It sounds a bit iffy I know, a bit weird, because it's a teacher-student

relationship." Siviwe was next. "And after Siviwe, it was our next head boy Jordan. And there were more. And every year I would say, I'm not taking in another child. I refuse. I just want my own life. Then I sit in my office, and this child comes in, and I see his potential..."

Mrs Harding-Male became the next mother figure to Siviwe. The house they shared in De Kelders was quiet and comfortable. There was a living area with an open plan kitchen where they took turns cooking for one another. He had his own bedroom and a bathroom with hot and cold running water. At night he heard the gentle roar of ocean, at dawn the call of seabirds. It was so very different to where he had lived in Zwelihle and later in Stanford North.

"The environment to study is very important," he says. "And you know what it's like in the township. You're trying to study and a neighbour is playing music very loud. And then another neighbour is playing a completely different genre. And there are people screaming and shouting in the streets, people fighting. So those are just some of the things I escaped by staying at her place."

Siviwe knew that Mrs Harding-Male wouldn't put herself out for anyone. He learned first-hand that what she said of her biological and foster children was true. "I'm very strict with the boys. I don't baby them."

Each time he left the front door of the house, he passed a framed pencil sketch of a smiling young man. Glasses, curls falling down the side of his face, wisps of beard. "You know, my son was an absolute drug addict," she said of that young man while we shared a tray of coffee and rusks one Sunday morning.

She registered him for his first year of architecture at CPUT, even though she knew he would never become an architect, she says. "He smoked dagga and he drank and he partied for six months and I didn't even want to have him back. Then I sent him to a course to learn welding. After he finished the course he was drinking and smoking dagga and driving me nuts. When he had that certificate, I made twelve copies, certified them, wrote out a CV. I gave him twenty rand for bread and I dropped him at the police station where everybody hitchhikes. And I said to him, now go and make your life. He walked the industrial area

there by Kuilsriver until he found a job at an engineering works. Then he was out partying in Long Street and he met a Swiss girl. Four months later they were married. He moved to Switzerland. He went to a German university and now he has a fantastic job. They live a wonderful life. And you know what he says to me? 'Ma, if you didn't drop me there at the police station that day...'"

Siviwe knew that many children came into her office asking for help. There were others that she helped with food and uniforms and other things. Every Rand that she spent on him, might have been shared with someone else.

While she was later employed by the Department of Basic Education, when Siviwe first stayed with her, Mrs Harding-Male was employed by the school's governing body. "My little house cost me R3 000 a month rent, and then I had R4 500 left for us. I drew cash money for the month, and put it in bags marked one to 31. That was the money for each day. One day I had only R10 left. And I said to him, now you need to choose, we can either buy bread for your sandwiches tomorrow, or we can buy shoe polish – because he loved to polish his shoes until they were shiny. And he chose bread."

They lived together as mother and son, and like any family, they developed their ways of being. "Yes, she was Afrikaans and whatever, but there was never that gap," says Siviwe. "She understood my culture and I understood her culture and there was mutual respect. I felt at home with her. She understood where I came from. She understood that I was outspoken."

Siviwe was of an age when Xhosa boys are prepared to become men. He visited his uncle in Stanford who readied him to attend the initiation school in the Eastern Cape that would include traditional rites, periods of seclusion, fasting and a circumcision ceremony.

I don't claim to understand Siviwe's experience of that traditional rite of passage, but with the help of the documentary *Ubudoda, To Become a Man*[5] by Zukile Mancuga I imagine the build up, the act itself, and the period of recovery and seclusion.

[5] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-0Bn9z2RFA8

It opens with the *Ingcibi,* the traditional surgeon, in the dark of a hut, adorned in skins and beads, his face and body marked with white clay. "Let's pretend I'm the initiate," he says, dropping heavily to the floor, his legs splayed. "The boy should sit like this. He must open his legs like this," he says slapping his thighs hard to open wider. "The spear should be about this size," he says showing the iron head at the end of a wooden shaft, "because this fits easily between the legs. You hold the penis like this," he says, pretending to hold his own, "and *tjup*!" he exclaims, "you slice with the sharp tip of the spear."

His childhood clothing and possessions were discarded or given away. And he returned home wearing the customary soft cap, khaki slacks and a formal shirt buttoned to the neck. At Gansbaai Academia, a boy returning from the mountain is acknowledged as a man. Siviwe was required to cover his arms and head for three months and returned to school wearing his blazer and cap.

Siviwe describes the rite of passage as something similar to a baptism. He left the house in De Kelders as one person and returned as another, detached from the ways of his child self. "And then we picked up some problems," says Mrs Harding-Male. "When he came back from there, he was a man. He wasn't a boy anymore. He didn't want to submit to a mother."

The ritual that Siviwe attended didn't end when he came back to Gansbaai. Rather, it was a beginning, and he was compelled to see through his journey to manhood on his own. "There are certain things we speak about at initiation," he told me. "There were things I needed to memorize, so if I was to meet another man, I would be able to say them."

"And then he would start chanting in the house," Mrs Harding-Male recalled, "and it was just horrible. I just couldn't handle it. And then we started fighting. It was this huge culture clash. And I said to him if you want to chant while you're running the bath, you're not going to do it here…"

Siviwe's uncle from Stanford was the elder who prepared him to go to initiation. While his uncle no longer lived there, Siviwe chose to move out for the last month of his matric year, and stayed alone in the Stanford house.

“But we got past that and we built a relationship and I refused to let him go,” says Mrs Harding-Male. “I never stopped loving him. I never stopped caring for him. I bought all his groceries and clothing and everything. And I said to him, I will support you until the day you earn your own.”

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Mrs Harding-Male was one of a cast of characters who supported Siviwe. And soon, there were others who were drawn to his quiet confidence. All spoke of his potential, as if inviting themselves to become co-creators of his story. He was known by many along that strip of coast from Hermanus to Gansbaai, and a spotlight of opportunity seemed to frequently fall on him.

He played soccer for The Young Tigers, a Stanford based club, and he met Maryanne Ward who ran a non-profit organisation that helped the club raise sponsorship. He visited Maryanne’s house to study and use the Internet. The house was a meeting place for many, and there would often be at least a few people there talking, debating, planning – and Siviwe became part of that genteel activist community.

Maryanne and her husband where well known on the southern side of the Stanford wetland seldom frequented by white residents. Both of them with their long hair – the locals called him Tarzan – driving a combi branded with the logo of their organisation.

Siviwe was on his way to soccer practice when Maryanne called him. Her friend, a Rotarian, was hosting a man from America. He would be giving a presentation that afternoon at the church in Stanford. Please would Siviwe help them out, she asked. He needed to find a crowd of young people to attend. And fast. “So I had to turn back to go home, and start like, gathering people within ten minutes,” says Siviwe. “I called some friends, I found some other people.”

And they managed to fill the room. As the man spoke about the book he had authored, *The 7 Mindsets to Live Your Ultimate Life*, Siviwe heard about young people who were standing out, despite the odds. He learned about a young man from Brazil who wanted to bring light into the darkness. “He took a two litre bottle, the transparent one, and he put

water with some bleach in it," remembers Siviwe. "And when the sunlight hits that bottle, it reflects inside, and provides light."

Siviwe stood out in that gathering of young people. He sat right upfront. He asked a lot of questions. By the end of the evening, the presenter asked him for his email address and handed Siviwe his business card in return.

7 Mindsets

Inspiring every educator and student to live a life of passion, purpose and joy

Scott Schikler

Founder

"I had just recently opened an email address, so that was the fortunate part," says Siviwe. "But you know, I've exchanged contacts with lots of people through playing sport and stuff and you don't hear anything from them after that."

Scott Schickler travels the world talking to young people about potential and opportunity. He invites each of them to imagine a life beyond the one they are inhabiting today. In the quieter moments after each of those presentations, he might hand one or two a business card. Of all the young people he met in South Africa, it was Siviwe who stood out.

"Siviwe, one of my favourite people in the world!" he told me, as I spoke to him from his apartment in New York over Zoom. "It was one of those almost spiritual moments when I met him. I was giving this talk. He had this soft cap pulled over his head. And his eyes were so wide open. It was as if he was using every ounce of his body to take in what I was saying. I was so taken by this young man, his thirst for life. I just saw this amazing promise in him."

To Siviwe's surprise, towards the end of the year, Maryanne told him that the man from the presentation had called. He wanted Siviwe to go to America. "And my response to Maryanne was OK, that's cool, that's interesting, I would love to."

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Siviwe kept in touch with his school friends from Qhayiya Secondary in Hermanus. Through them he met Theo Krynauw, a grandfatherly man with neatly maintained stubble, round glasses and a lively demeanour. He was known to many of the Qhayiya Secondary alumni as "Uncle Theo". A former priest, he left that world of doctrine to start Sparklekids, an enterprise that identified young people with "sparkle" and supported their transition from school to the world beyond. That spark in a young person's eye, he likes to tell people, is their passport out of poverty.

Wherever he moved, Siviwe made an impression. "He's a very impressive man," Theo told me as we met early one morning on Kammabaai beach in Hermanus. "A very deep voice, you know. He's a born leader, our Siviwe. He has a really good mind. And he's vocal, because he's so clever. So people don't always like him."

Theo introduced Siviwe to Lou-Anne Lubbe, the human resources manager at Abagold, the largest private employer in the Overberg. Lou-Anne was starting the Abagold Development Trust and Siviwe was one of four beneficiaries of a scheme that offered a partial study bursary and holiday work experience.

"What first struck me about Siviwe was this bright-eyed, bushy-tailed energy," Lou-Anne told me. "He had such positive energy, and there was humility, and there was ambition. And he was comfortable engaging with people. I felt that he had the potential to be successful." And while there was once an expectation that he would live out Mr Wilson's expectations of the new school, there was again the expectation that he would realise the potential of the trust's new bursary scheme.

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In his matric year, Siviwe was invited to attend the 7 Mindsets programme in Atlanta in July the following year. At first his sisters held their hands up and said, no way. Who is this man who wants you to go to America? What does he want from you?

But Siviwe was in e-mail contact with Scott, and plans were being made. He needed to arrange a passport, a visa and to ready himself for the big international travel.

At the same time, he was applying for tertiary studies. While many of his friends applied for engineering or business degrees, he applied for both teaching and marine studies. He loved the sea, and so often in Gansbaai he had explored life in the tidal pools or had watched a whale breaching beyond the breakers. He was accepted for marine studies, and in the ways of the serendipity of fate, the application for teaching fell away.

Preparing for tertiary education was costly and there were expenses he never dreamed of. There was the cost of travel from the Overberg to Cape Town during the application, the registration fees and he needed a laptop. And while Abagold offered a partial bursary and pocket money, there was the balance of the tuition fee and the cost of living. He was not yet aware of the that there might be bursary schemes to support students like him. "Remember, I was still fresh from high school. I didn't even have friends at varsity."

While he had worked odd-jobs over the December holidays, that money was depleted. He emailed Scott and asked if he could help with the registration fee. Scott agreed to that and more. He funded a laptop and offered to pay the balance of his tuition for the year.

Mrs Harding-Male wondered about this man who had invited Siviwe to America and who was contributing to his studies. She did her research.

"The first lead I got on Google was his profile on Wall Street Journal," she says. From her couch she read and she scrolled, and she read some more. "And I said to Siviwe, 'hey this guy is like Bill Gates or something man, and you're like Scott this and Scott that. *Jislaaik,* do you know who he is?'"

She read his profile on LinkedIn and saw the number. Yes, she read it right. One hundred million dollars.

Noted as one of the world's leading experts on youth empowerment, Scott Schickler is a sought-after speaker, thought leader and bestselling author. Called a "serial entrepreneur" by the Wall Street Journal, Scott's companies have collectively grossed more than $100 million with businesses ranging from education curriculum and software to real estate and retail.

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With a growing cast backing his ambitions and funding secured, Mrs-Harding-Male travelled to the open days with him where they learned about the courses that were available. He registered at CPUT for a marine sciences diploma and later went on to do a BTech in Oceanography.

"He had to do a bridging course to qualify," recalls Mrs Harding-Male, "but I said to him, I'm not going to let you not do this. So it was very exciting to do it with him. I've put three children through post matric study. And you know what, Siviwe is the most motivated of all my children. I just admired that in him."

Thanks to his uncle in Kraaifontein, he lived in the shack attached to the house with its blue ceiling boards and the red bicycle attached to the walls. It was imperfect as a student digs, but he welcomed Asahleli to share it with him the following year.

It was far from campus, and the commute was expensive and time draining. "It was freezing cold in winter," says Mrs Harding-Male. "Then he would walk, something like 10 kilometres to the station. We couldn't afford the taxi fare to the station every day, I could only afford the train to Cape Town. We went through that first winter, but we battled. He was wet, his clothes were wet."

It was in his second year that he learned how to work with the SRC to secured a place in an on-campus residence before opening those doors for Asahleli to follow.

With Lou-Anne's support, he had paid holiday work at Abagold. Lou-Anne coached the first four people on Abagold's graduate programme through what others might be taught by their parents and peers. What bursaries were available? What about residence? What could they learn about study skills?

"So Scott and his wife helped me with tuition fees," says Siviwe. "I had some financial support from Mrs Harding-Male and my siblings helped me when I needed it. And I had the partial bursary from Abagold. That's how I got to be stress free when it comes to my tuition and stuff in my first year. The following year there were other bursaries, so my need was less. For my BTech I got a bursary from the National Research Fund, and later from NSFAS."

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In July of his first year at CPUT, he travelled to the US for the first time. It was to be his first trip out of the country and his first flight. Scott invited Maryanne to accompany him, and the two of them attended the 7 Mindsets to Live Your Ultimate Life Summit at Emory University in Georgia where attendees lodged in student residences.

"Siviwe and I would go there for breakfast," recalls Maryanne, "and there was this conveyor belt of food that would pass with a choice of six million oats, and a million this and a million that. And I said to him, Siviwe can you imagine the kids in Die Kop? [6] And he said, 'no Maryanne, they wouldn't believe it.' And then we watched how much the kids there were wasting. Our kids at Die Kop would have polished off everything! And I was just like showing him, hey bru, this is not good either, you know. This is capitalism at its worst – check it out – it's horrible."

The pair from Stanford attended the Summit and stayed on with Maryanne's friends in Atlanta. Over those few weeks, Maryanne became the next in a succession of mother figures in Siviwe's life. They spoke about his impressions of the Summit, the people he met there and how each of the seven mindsets might serve his aspirations for the future.

"He's a very polite, well mannered young man," says Maryanne. "He's determined to uplift himself and to take his family with him. And he's stuck to that. When we went to America, we went to parties, we were *jolling*. He had all the opportunity to go wayward and he was at the right age as well, but he had a goal and he was sticking to it. And he was proud of that. There is something bigger than us – something spiritual – that drives Siviwe. I think it's about losing his parents at such a young age."

He travelled three times to the 7 Mindsets Summit over the next few years, returning twice as a summit guide to mentor first time-attendees. "It's a programme that teaches you how to be resilient in life," is how Siviwe describes it. "The thinking is that what you put in your mind is really important when it comes to going for your goals. It drives you to unleash your potential."

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[6] The informal settlement in Stanford

Over several visits as an intern, Siviwe became well known at Abagold. He worked through every aspect of the farming and factory process, but what resonated most with him was the research.

He worked in the inner-most chamber where breeding stock were held in a secure room in aerated tanks where they spawned the tonnes of animals that were grown, processed and exported each year.

He worked alongside the team that grew the larvae and then raised the young – tight clusters of shiny aquamarine whorls attached to plastic cones – as they were moved through a progression of outdoor then indoor tanks until they reached the rows of farm tanks as young adults.

He monitored water quality and lost himself amongst the amphoras and microscopes of the laboratory as he learned the still developing science of spawning and growing the diatoms – a variety of sea plants – to feed the young. Lou-Anne understood his draw to the science and motivated for him to be in the labs, but like every other intern, he was also called to labour on the farms.

Hardy baskets hang in concrete tanks beneath a roof of netting and heavy grey skies. Metal plates within each basket are crowded with the spiral shells of abalone – more silver than blue now that they are grown – evolved to hold tight in stormy seas. The bubble and swish of sea water aerating, the salt air of the sea.

Siviwe – thick yellow rain gear, blue plastic apron, green gloves – walks the rows with a sack of chip-like feed. He has been taught to assess the make up of the animals in each baskets before estimating the weight of the handfuls of feed that are dropped into each. And he moves on. Row after row. Day after day.

He loads baskets onto trolleys and pulls them through gravel paths to the sorting shed, where he separates them by size, weight and health onto the strip of conveyor belt. He has been trained what to look out for: fungal diseases, bloating, ulcers, starvation.

Interns at Abagold work through each of the phases of spawning, growing, sorting and processing abalone into dried or canned product ready for export. Siviwe was an

undergraduate student alongside other interns who had postgraduate degrees in marine science and related subjects. After several visits he was still doing the work of a labourer, while interns with qualifications were moving into supervisory work.

"I think that gave his confidence a knock," says Abagold farm manager Jackie Stewart. "He wanted to stake his claim. He was in a rush to get to the top. And that caused a problem with the relationship. He has a strong personality. He has the intelligence, he has the potential and with that he didn't want to spend as much time in the fire as he did. But to get to the top you need to be mentally strong. The last time he was here he was up against strong graduate placements."

The farms rely on well-worn operating procedures informed by science. Siviwe developed a reputation as the intern who believed he had a better way. And while ideas were welcomed, his managers grew impatient with his bravado. "I have always been a person who asks questions," Siviwe told me of his fractious relationship with his managers on the farms. "Sometimes I won't agree to everything, but still, I will do the work."

What was an already unhappy relationship on the farm deteriorated further when Siviwe suggested that it was racism that was holding him back. But perhaps his pattern of surviving in a sometimes hostile world was getting in the way. Without a father or older brothers to stand up for him, he learned to quickly defending himself against any perceived injustice. And he had become deft at avoiding conflict and staying out of trouble. That might explain why he never aimed for a longer term opportunity at Abagold.

"I wondered about what was in him that brought him to the end of matric where he did so well and he was made head boy," says Lou-Anne. "All of that is innately in the person. And then there was for me a disconnect when he came back from America after the second time. There was a definite arrogance that had set in. He showed up in an American way, which is what he would have been taught there, but that doesn't resonate here in South Africa. The potential, the intellect, the hunger was there. But there needs to be the appreciation that it takes a lot of work and it takes humility. The greatest leaders in the world are humble."

Siviwe believed that as a black man he would find better opportunity for advancement in government, and left Abagold to take up a two year internship at the Department of Environmental Affairs. "By not sticking with us, it was an opportunity lost," says Jackie Stewart of that decision.

Theo Krynauw also believes that Siviwe made a mistake in letting the Abagold opportunity go. "There needs to be a rising to the occasion, an embracing of the opportunity, a gratitude – the sense that nothing is going to stop me, because this is just too good a chance. Because when Abagold takes you they will pay you two, three thousand rand a month for expenses on top of your pay, they will give you holiday work, they will even – if they can – give you a job after you graduate. So it's a huge opportunity if you see the bigger picture."

*

Siviwe attended the 7 Mindsets Summit three times and was one of the first to be awarded the Unlimited Potential Scholarship at Scott's discretion. It included a contribution towards study expenses and a US-based internship. Siviwe needed six months of practical experience to qualify for his BTech in Marine Science. While he spent some of that time at Abagold, the other three months he spent in the USA.

Scott is known by young people as the smiling man with the magic wand who wants us all to believe that anything is possible. At Siviwe's third summit, Scott stood on stage with him with his wand in hand. "If you could wave this magic wand," he asked him, "what would you like to do with your life? What would drive your passion? What would give you joy?"

Siviwe imagined walking into his future as a marine biologist with a qualification. He imagined a career as a professional person. He imagined a comfortable life in the suburbs, a house, a car, a family. He imagined a life by the sea. And imagine, he thought, wondering if this was a wish too far for the magic wand to realise, if I could do my internship at Georgia Aquarium.

On their trip to the US together, the visit to the Georgia Aquarium was a highlight for both Siviwe and Maryanne. "It was so vast and the tanks were so huge," Maryanne recalls.

"There were these tunnels that you could walk through, and yes, just the big Americanness about it. It was just absolutely mind-blowingly amazing in every way."

And what Siviwe saw was the genius – the audacity almost – of whoever came up with that aquarium in downtown Atlanta, 250 miles from the sea. Most of the exhibits were saltwater species and the salt water was mixed on site using fresh water, dry salt and trace minerals.

"Imagine telling an investor," he told Maryanne, "that we are going to use normal tap water, we're just going to balance it with salt and whatnot to meet the standards of seawater, and then we're going to put all these sea creatures into it."

As they walked through those tunnels with sharks and rays swimming above them, Maryanne planted the seed of an idea. "And I said to him, this is where your job could be, in an aquarium like this. And he said, 'I don't know, could I?'"

It was almost a stretch too far even for Scott. "But I contacted the Georgia Aquarium, I didn't know anyone there, and I found the chief zoological officer. I didn't even know there was such a title," he says. "And the guy tells me, 'do you know how many people from all over the world want to be interns at the Georgia Aquarium? Thousands. And do you know what they all want to do? They want to feed the dolphins. That's all the interns want to do'. And he says to me, 'what is it that your intern wants to do?' I said, 'he wants to get his hands dirty. He wants to clean the tanks. He wants to learn how to make his local environment in South Africa better, and he wants to become a marine biologist.' And this guy says, 'are you kidding me?'"

Siviwe was offered the internship at the aquarium that, based on water volume, was one of the top three biggest in the world.

When he arrived for his internship he was directed for what felt like kilometres through shops and displays of tanks, until he was shown into the office of the chief zoological officer who welcomed him.

"I was struck by his composure," Dr Tim Mullican recalls. "He had travelled from a different continent, through the busiest airport in world, yet he looked like this was

something he did everyday. And here he was in my office, soft spoken, quiet, not intimidated, but also not naive, or full of false bravado. He had the quiet confidence of someone who knows what they're about."

Perhaps at Abagold, where Siviwe was on home ground, he displayed a confidence that blurred into arrogance. But far from home, his colleagues saw another register of him. They saw independence that played out with humility.

"I took his quiet confidence as a very good sign, for while the staff is very helpful, they don't have a lot of time for hand holding. They are willing to share what they know, but also have a job to do, with co-workers and an animal collection that relies on everyone doing their job at a high level every day. I knew then with his demeanour and apparent independence, his internship would be a success."

During his three month stay at Georgia Aquarium, Siviwe never fed the dolphins. But he swam with the whale sharks, and even fed them from a rubber boat floating on the surface of their huge tank. He learned how to clean the tanks, as Scott had promised he would. He guided tourists through the exhibits. Siviwe was about to qualify with a BTech in Marine Science, and what interested him most about the aquarium was the science.

Each of the species relied on their share of millions of gallons of locally made seawater being prepared and maintained to their required salinity, mineral content, pH level, temperature and flow level. For most of his time there he worked with the team that monitored and maintained water quality. He collected samples from the tanks and worked with the technicians in the laboratory to test, report and adjust if needed.

There is a photograph from July 2017 that captures the spirit of a moment. Siviwe's colleagues took him to Legend Café in downtown Atlanta to celebrate his birthday. With Tim Mullican at the head of the table, there they are, a group of six, enjoying the collegial familiarity of an office lunch wearing shirts and name tags that identify them as employees of Georgia Aquarium. Siviwe wears a branded blue t-shirt with the familiar logo, an oversized G in the shape of a whale. A green cap with ATLANTA emblazoned across it. He smiles into

the camera, his eyes so wide, his mouth open showing the whites of what sometimes appear as slightly oversized front teeth.

He looks so very young in that image, and were it not for the lanyard around his neck, he might be a school boy on holiday in Atlanta, though it was his 24th birthday. There's an exuberance on his face which is shared by his colleagues and which suggests an affection between them. I see in that image a young man held in community, the promise of the world before him.

And with the support of that team he wrote up his Work Integrated Learning paper that was a requirement for his degree: *The impact of sulphur on the ionic imbalance of water chemistry due to the process of denitrification.*

And while there was collegiality at work, Siviwe went home every evening into the embrace of a family. During previous visits he had become absorbed into Scott's family, living as a brother to his two sons who were of a similar age. For the months that he worked at the aquarium, he and Scott's oldest son shared a two-bedroomed rental apartment in Atlanta. "They are such a nice family, a humble family," he says of Scott, Grace and their sons Hayden and Jackson. "They are people I regard as family."

And then he says something which projects himself into a future that he aspires to. "I hope I get to be comfortable financially so that one day I can travel to visit them at my own expense. I would love to show them that from where I was, this is where I am now."

Scott describes Siviwe as a young man who was easy to welcome into their home as a member of the family, even though the change of environment was stark. Echoing the first impressions of Tim Mullican, he describes him as man who reserved his words, "but when he spoke, it was deep."

Beneath the quite confidence was an inner turmoil. It had been a long and difficult travel alone. And he was there for many weeks. His missed his family and friends. He missed food that was familiar to him. Scott gave him a credit card so that he could buy his own food and anything else he needed, though he felt the card in his wallet might have been a test of his character and he barely touched it. "I wasn't mentally ready for that whole experience," he

told me. "It was like being poor and instantly winning fifteen million Rand. Imagine you've never even touched a hundred thousand in your life, and suddenly you have fifteen million."

Despite his internal struggle, for the first time in his life Siviwe was living in a nuclear family with mom, dad, and kids, "where", Scott says – alluding to the fact that he was raised by his sisters – "he found himself in a home with loving parents and with siblings who interacted as siblings. That experience could have filled some holes for him, and we formed bonds maybe because of that. A year or two into the relationship he would refer to our sons as brothers and to my wife and I as parents, which he would put quotes around. He would say he loved us, and we wanted to reciprocate that."

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Siviwe has never been tempted to mark himself with needle and ink. But if he did, he might consider a tattoo with the text chosen by Joudun Rooi: *thankful grateful blessed*.

He imagines sometimes that if his parents had been educated and had lived they might have guided him. "But there is no level of crying for my parents that would help me," he says. "I just need to be grateful for the people I have come across, and think that maybe, that's where my strength comes from. That I had to look after myself from a very young age."

He has lived through many constellations of non-traditional family, and is thankful to all the people who have helped him along the way.

His sisters, he believes, made huge sacrifices for him. He wonders sometimes, if they hadn't been burdened with the demands of parenting him at such young ages, they might have been free to make more of their lives.

Mr Wilson recognised him as a leader. Mrs Harding-Male saw his potential and took him in. Maryanne supported him through his matric year and beyond. Theo saw his spark and helped him in many ways. Lou-Anne supported him through his studies and with a work opportunity. Scott became both a father figure and a patron. And there were others.

He remembers living alone in Stanford when the kitchen cupboard was bare. He remembers those neighbours, who had so little, who came by and who made sure he had something to eat.

"If it were not for all those people who believed in me," he says, "I would probably not have become a graduate. I'd probably have given up with school and gone looking for a job. So many people have played a role in my life. And none of them I take for granted."

By going to such great lengths to support Asahleli, he was ploughing back, he says. "There were very few people that were finishing matric from Stanford and that would go and study. When I finished high school, I didn't know anyone at varsity who could help me through the application process and all of that. So I had the opportunity to help the kids who came after me. Because it takes one person to see the next person. Asahleli was like a brother. And I could see his potential. I wanted to mould him, to help him get to the point where he could get his first qualification."

Part II

Chapter 7 Joudun: YES and no

Joudun Rooi

I just don't know man. Maybe this is not for me. Maybe this is the universe telling me this is not my direction. UNISA has declined me for the Bachelor of Education twice! But I applied at Stadio for business management and I got accepted.   And all of these things I see as a sign from above. This is supposed to happen like this. Something better is waiting for me.

Joudun Rooi at Le Maschou, Riyadh. Posted to Instagram 2023. "Jy lewe net eenkeer so maak die beste van alles!" And pictured with Russian waitresses at a photo shoot to celebrate his birthday the same year. Photo supplied by Joudun.

Joudun had twice been declined a place for a Bachelor of Education degree (BEd) at the University of South Africa (UNISA). Living in a small town, and needing to earn while he studied, his best bet was to study through correspondence. And the continent's mega-university was his best opportunity to access that.

He had been meticulous in getting the correct paperwork together for each of those applications. The second time round Aniza travelled with him to the administration office in Cape Town to hand in the application. The administration clerk assured them that all was in order. And then he waited.

On both occasions he received the system generated email that went to perhaps tens of thousands of candidates applying for the BEd. Capacity Full. While the meaning is clear, he interpreted it also as a message from God. Maybe this was not his path. His application is blocked each time, he believes, because of his poor matric maths score.

Joudun was frequently called onto the stage of Gansbaai Academia for being one of the top ten students in his grade. But he failed matric maths. It's an anomaly how a school that had offered him so much opportunity had allowed his entire matric class – with the exception of one student, he says – to fail maths. That fail was a stain on his record, impeding his access to further studies.

Aniza was called to school to talk about his maths. "He didn't understand the mathematics because the teacher, you could say, was not teaching nice. The child had been complaining about it." Aniza wondered why Joudun – a bright boy – was not understanding the maths, when the other kids were. "And then we noticed there was only one very clever girl understanding the mathematics in the whole class."

I asked Aniza if she encouraged him to rewrite his matric maths. "Can you believe it, no. He had his matric certificate in his hands. He passed. I never thought that could hold him back. But we learn from that."

Rather than rewrite matric maths, Joudun registered for a higher certificate in education. It was a bridge, he hoped, to reach acceptance to the Bachelor of Education degree. And he applied for a three-month internship as a teacher's assistant that was advertised by the Office

of the Premier of the Western Cape. He was placed at Die Bron, a primary school that he had briefly attended and that was a short walk from his sister's house in Stanford.

He has completed two more internships at the same school, one through the WCED and the final one through the Youth Employment Service (YES) programme, a youth work experience initiative of The Presidency. These internships are meant to offer short term work experience as a stepping stone towards more secure employment.

And while he worked as a teacher's assistant by day, he continued to wait tables at Birkenhead on the weekends. Living in Stanford has its drawbacks, but working in the tourism sector of a heritage town presented him with an opportunity. It was a Saturday afternoon when he offered a wine tasting to the head of marketing of Harambee, a youth employment agency that worked with The Presidency to develop the YES programme.

"The customer service I gave her, according to her, was out of this world," says Joudun. She asked if he worked at the restaurant permanently and he told her he only helped out on weekends. During the week, he was a teacher's assistant at Die Bron.

"And she said," recalls Joudun, "I swear she could cry as she said it – she said she was part of the management that started that programme. She said she never knew that she would ever meet one of the candidates of the project she started."

After a lengthy goodbye – she wanted to know so much about his experience of the programme – she took his number. Two months later, her personal assistant called and asked him to be interviewed for a video to promote the YES programme.

The Presidency published the movie on its social media platform. To upbeat music, previously unemployed youth are seen in productive work. Buhle at Isuzu Motors. Katleho at Asili Risk Management. Siphesihle, working as an administrator at First National Bank, who says "you just have to put in hard work and understand that your time will come."

A beaming Joudun, captioned as a teacher's assistant with the Department of Basic Education, says "you should definitely register for this programme, it will open doors for you".

And featuring in that movie was a bridge to other opportunities. Sometimes when he is lost to scrolling through his phone, he watches a clip that was broadcast on 16 June 2021, Youth Day. President Ramaphosa opens his address by commemorating that day, forty five years ago when, and Joudun can quote this part verbatim, "it was young people who showed the world that freedom is not given, but it is taken."

Possibly as a nod to the youth, Ramaphosa has traded his dark suit and tie for a Nelson Mandela style paisley shirt. He goes on to quote the latest youth unemployment rate – 64% – and cites the opportunities that are available to young people today, many of them driven from his office. One of these is the Youth Employment Service which aims to create 100 000 quality work experiences in the coming year.

He officially launches an online platform, SAYouth.mobi to facilitate opportunities for "learning and earning." This platform "is already supporting over 1,4 million young people to access opportunities," he says.

And then the part Joudun sometimes plays again.

"These are young people like Joudun Rooi from Stanford in the Western Cape and over 132,000 other young people who found opportunities as education and school assistants through SA Youth."

The president mentioned his name! Surely, that must be a sign?

The President's words were his calling card to an online meeting with the head of education in The Presidency, and later to a webinar where he was invited to share his feedback about his experience.

I asked Joudun what came of all of that. "Nothing!" he said. "It was just publicity. That's all. You would think, *yho*, there's a nice job coming. Someone would see me now. But no, nothing! I would just find myself in another internship or a webinar, or ... nothing comes from it. And sometimes you wonder, now, what am I supposed to do to get recognized? People think because the president said my name he knows me. But it's nothing. He doesn't know me."

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It's a mild autumnal morning in 2022. Joudun is back at Die Bron for his third stint as a teacher's assistant. He is paid a stipend, not a salary. And the term of the agreement has an end date, unlike the much sought after security of full time posts in the public sector.

He left Antjies after a few months. While the job started out with some promise, he and Nicoleen never saw eye to eye on how things should be done. He felt that his ideas for improving the long established systems in the business were not being heard. And she, perhaps, thought that the young logistics guy who showed so much promise was too quick to know it all. And there was a sameness to the day-to-day of it – all those orders that had to be received and dispatched. Over and over. Joudun was quick to boredom, and rather than sticking things out, he was soon on the lookout for the next opportunity.

He was working a short term contract with Stats South Africa as a census 2022 field worker when he saw the Die Bron post advertised. He had been walking door to door, interviewing the 150 households closest to his house about their family make-up, their employment, their income. It was hot work, on his feet in the sun all day. And challenging sometimes when faced with men and women who were not about to open the door to a stranger. When that census was finally published it revealed that only twelve percent of the adult population held a post-school qualification. Joudun was not yet one of them.

He was immediately brought on board again at Die Bron. There was no interview. His history transcended the need for that. An image of him still smiled broadly from the 2016 team photo in the staff room.

While the pattern of the last few years had been haphazard, he believed that his life followed a course for a reason. It's as if his fate was predestined, and, right now, things seemed to be aligning. It was two years since he had last applied for the BEd. Yet, in the mysterious workings of the university system, that door was being opened to him. And he didn't even knock. The unsolicited email confirmed he was being offered a place. This time round as an intern at Die Bron, he was enrolled for the BEd while completing his final semester of the Higher Certificate in Business Management through Stadio. Yet he was frustrated at the slow pace with which the fates presented themselves.

“There's still four years to go to finish my Bachelor of Education degree,” he told me as we sat at an outside table at a restaurant in Stanford Village. “You know what goes through my mind? When I'm finishing, I will be 29, 30, you understand? That's old! No, it makes me feel like why did I waste all of those years after school? I could pinch myself, because I could have studied teaching directly after school. I applied, but I didn't get accepted.”

He paused, as if inviting sympathy or advice. I sometimes felt that Joudun looked to me as a potential mentor, but while we enjoyed animated conversation, it was not my place to judge or advise. He filled the silence with his own thought. “But it just goes to show that there's a time for everything. I had to go to Saudi Arabia, to experience that. And to get a bit of each working experience, you know, so yeah.”

The internship ends in September. There is a chance that it will be extended, and, now that he is enrolled at UNISA he feels confident that he might apply for a permanent position at the school. The promise of a qualification has rekindled another lingering aspiration.

“I'm definitely going to apply at Die Bron. Just for a year or two. Just to build the teaching experience. And then I want to spread my wings. Middle East. That's my whole plan.”

“Why do you want to go back to the Middle East?” I asked him.

“I think I left a piece of my heart in the Middle East. I want to go back there. I didn’t leave my mark, man. I want to finish it.”

While the first time around he had gone as a waiter, he hopes to return as a teacher. “The thing about the Middle East, it’s safe. And you can save a lot of money. And I think the actual reason is I like the traditions, how they do stuff, how they go about things. There’s an interest in that other culture. It fascinates me. Although they seem arrogant and stuff like that, you shouldn’t believe everything you read online.”

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A group of grade four learners have been invited to participate in the Words Open Worlds (WOW) spelling competition at the University of Stellenbosch. The competition was paused for the two years of the Covid-19 lockdown, and children are being brought back into a more

welcoming world. Joudun is coaching the team members in small groups as they prepare to represent the school.

He sits across a table from two nine year old girls, their hair pulled up into almost identical buns. They swing their legs back and forth, as Joudun sounds out and spells each of the words which they then repeat, almost inaudibly, looking up at him for an affirming nod after one.

gestuur, onthou, neer, sekere

He is held by the knit of a close-fitting maroon jersey. His hair, recently cut, is short and sculpted to the hold the diamond of his face with its triangle of neatly trimmed goatee. It is as if he has prepared for an Instagram moment. His face is set, impassive, though it opens into a tight smile when the girls look up to him for affirmation.

He raises his eyes to look out occasionally through the open doors of the pleasing container that has been set up as the new library. It's light and breezy with its white walls and books neatly stacked. Posters promote the joys of reading. A globe is positioned to show the distinctive shape of Africa floating in a sea of blue.

The view is over a playground that has been transformed from a dust bowl by Mr Pedro who became the principal five years ago. The trees that were planted then are maturing and what was once bare ground has been mulched with bark chips to dampen the dust. The sound of children playing carries in through the doors as he looks beyond the playground to the views of the Kleinrivier mountain range.

They are the same mountains he looked onto as he polished glasses behind the bar at Birkenhead or when he stepped onto the front stoep of the Antjies shop for coffee break. Stanford is contained between the line of those mountains and stretches of *vlei* that hold the curves of the Stanford River before it empties into the sea.

His return to Die Bron seems as certain as the blue Heritage Association of South Africa plaque in the foyer which tells that the school was established as the Stanford English Church Mission School by the St Thomas Anglican Church in 1865. It is one of the country's

most enduring institutions. While generations of teachers have offered life-long service, Joudun's contract has a term.

Each time he returns, Mr Pedro welcomes him back. "Joudun has a lot of potential," he tells me, "but he has to find ... what does he really want to do? Is it now teaching? Is it hospitality? Is it in the banking sector? He's now at that stage where he has to find his niche in life. He has a lot of potential. But in towns like Stanford and Gansbaai with minimal opportunities, he can get very frustrated."

Joudun recites from a list of 200 Afrikaans words. He asks the girls to repeat each one of them before spelling them out and writing them down. He ticks or corrects their offerings of white paper with the sharp point of his pencil while pointing out the differences between words that sound the same, their meanings held in the arrangements of the letters.

He is glad to be back at the school, he says. "Even when I worked at Antjie's the kids would stop me in the street and ask, when are you coming back to our school, we miss you." The children, and their circumstances, are familiar to him and he is a neighbour to many of them. "Some of the new teacher's assistants say, *Yho*, I don't want to go to that class because those children don't have any manners. I just keep quiet because I know how to deal with them."

Those children know that with him, he says, there is time for fun and there is time for work. And he is comfortable dealing with any situation in the classroom. "I think it's got to do with your passion, *né*? What you like doing. And me studying education helps also to approaching different situations and solving problems."

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The third internship ran its course and Joudun was, again, on the lookout for a job. He scanned the job ads online and secured a post as an operations administrator at Gansbaai Couriers where he was responsible for planning the deliveries of parcels from A to B. It wasn't the dream job he had hoped for, but it allowed him to earn while continuing with his Bachelor of Education studies.

“It seems that I’m very indecisive, hey?” he challenged me as he told me of his plans that seemed to swing from teaching, to hospitality to business. “That’s how you are in your twenties. Indecisive. I think it’s normal. Don’t you think so? Did you know what you wanted to be in your twenties?”

Joudun doesn’t feel drawn to vocation, as Jack does. Or to certainty, as Asahleli does. He is drawn rather to the promise of a life that he can’t quite define but that is more exciting than anything he is likely to find in Stanford.

He looked for opportunities further afield and cast a line in response to an advert from *Le Maschou,* a French restaurant in Riyadh, the capital of Saudi Arabia, that was recruiting waiters for the tourist season.

On the back of a series of Zoom interview, and his previous waitering experience in Jeddah, he was offered the six month contract soon after starting at Gansbaai Couriers in October. His first day in the *Le Maschou* black and white uniform was to be in three weeks time. While he felt the draw to Saudi Arabia, he was uncertain.

“I decided that I’m not going to listen to anyone’s advice, because it’s other people’s opinions that hold me back. I’m going to pray over it. I was asking the Almighty to give me a sign whether I should go, and I asked Him, please, He must make it clear. And I said, I’m going to be vigilant, I’m going to be ready for that sign when it comes.”

One morning Joudun answered a call at Gansbaai Couriers. The person asked if there were any vacancies. I don’t think so, Joudun told him, even though he knew that there soon would be. He asked his manager, who suggested that he invited the caller in anyway. He could start as a driver, and then he could be trained to do parts of Joudun’s job. So if Joudun was sick or had an emergency, he could step in. “And I said ‘thank you God for the sign’, because I was worried, if I leave, who’s going to take my place?”

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Instagram, November 2022

White knee-length trousers. A black and white striped collared shirt. He crouches against the night sky, the blue and white lights of a glittering Ferris wheel in soft focus behind him.

He looks directly into camera. The hint of a smile from his eyes. *The best thing about memories…is making them! #riyadhseason #winterwonderland #riyadh #saudiarabia* 78 likes.

Black ripped jeans. Black golf shirt. Black trainers (no socks). Dark glasses. He stands almost side on, thumbs tucked into the rim of his jeans. Looks into camera. The lit blues and greys of an elegant mall behind him. *Time square in Riyadh. I absolutely love this city! (emoji with heart eyes). #southafrica #saudi #riyadhseason* 90 likes.

*

Joudun's draw to Saudi Arabia the first time was a quest for the big city exotic beyond the small town familiar. He imagined that the contract job in Jeddah might lead to further opportunities abroad, but he returned to South Africa sooner than he had hoped.

He touched down for his second adventure, as he likes to call it, with a different expectation. He set out to finish something he had started. This time, it would be more familiar than exotic and he looked forward to an experience that would be calmer and wiser.

"The first time when I was in Saudi, I was a bit," he pauses looking for the right word, "*loskop.*" While he doesn't say it in so many words, it seems that there were parties and drinking despite his stay in a conservative Muslim country during the pandemic.

"I was on the level of exploring and going wild," he told me over Zoom from his apartment in Riyadh. "Even though there wasn't a lot to do, I had my ways. But now I grew up from that. So I've learned my lesson. I know what to do. I know where to draw the line. It's important to learn."

It's as if he was exploring a question that drives the study of his high school play *Krismis van Map Jacobs.* When Map returned from prison claiming that he had been saved by Jesus, was he a changed man, or was he the same old Map? In returning to Saudi Arabia, Joudun hoped to explore a similar question within himself.

This time, his contract played out in the capital city, Riyadh. It's a denser city. Its faster pace sets it apart from the coastal city of Jeddah with its lines of palm trees along the *corniche* where tourists and locals while away the evenings admiring views over the Red Sea.

From the windows of his apartment in Riyadh, Joudun looked out onto the brightly lit highways and boulevards with their manicured islands of palm trees, lined with skyscrapers and decorative lights of yellow, blue, pink and green. Beyond them, vast flats of yellow lights stretch like stars as if to infinity.

It's safe to walk through those nighttime streets as Joudun and his new friends from all over the world sometimes did after work, to visits bars and clubs, never once looking behind them, never once alarmed by the footfalls of a stranger as they might be in South Africa, or the Philippines, or Russia.

While both restaurants were French, *Le Maschou* differed in that it was in the sealed off diplomatic quarter of the capital, distant from casual walk-ins that characterised the coastal *Angelina*. Patrons had to have a reason to be in the quarter. It was a bookings only establishment.

In a country long known to be closed in on itself, the restaurant is famous for its celebrity bookings as Saudi Arabia promotes itself to the outside world. In the first few weeks of Joudun's tenure, Cristiano Ronaldo – recently signed as the star of the Saudi club All Nassr – walked through the treed avenue of the entranceway with an entourage and security detail to take up his booking. Joudun was hopeful that he would serve Tom Hanks, but that booking was cancelled the afternoon the movie star was set to arrive.

Celebrities, and the waiters who serve them, can be held there in the quite buzz of the stone walls, wood panelling, soft yellow lights and collections of family style simply framed celebrity snapshots. Long stemmed pink roses, a distinctive detail of the logo, are arranged on each table and are offset by trails of pink bougainvillea cascading from pots down the walls.

It felt incongruous to dream of becoming a teacher while ensconced in the glamour of a fine dining establishment. For the second time, Joudun had stepped out of the confines of his Stanford life, and this time it felt particularly like a dream. He was living the big city life with the high end menu and the French café playlist as celebrities and diplomats filled the gravel parking areas with their dark-windowed cars.

And at *Le Maschou,* he looked like he belonged. Patrons would often walk past the white waitering staff and would greet him in Arabic – *As-salaam 'alykum* – peace be upon you, mistaking him for a local. And that adds, perhaps, to his draw to Saudi Arabia.

There is a photo posted to Instagram of Joudun in the *Le Maschou* courtyard at night. He wears the formal white shirt, buttoned all the way up, the logo with the pink rose embroidered over his heart. And his expression is one that suggests, perhaps, that he has arrived.

At *Le Maschou* Joudun was again in the company of foreign migrant workers. A few weeks into his tenure, he was hard pressed to commit to a highlight when I spoke to him. It might have been the Filipino Christmas with its Secret Santas and karaoke, but the night that will stand out for him – and that has been substantially documented – was the night he invited fifteen of his new friends to celebrate his 26th birthday on 17 December 2022.

"I went a bit bizarre with the party!" he told me. "I bought each person a glass in remembrance of the day. And there was a photo corner where we took pictures. They made me a special book with photos and messages, and a video. And I got a lot of presents. And I got expensive perfumes, like Versace, and coffee and a mug with my face on. And what else? t-shirts, sunglasses, an Adidas cap, a Jordan cap, things like that."

In quite moments Joudun scrolls through the digital mementos of that birthday party. The photo corner was a big hit, and they guests gathered with the birthday boy – dressed for the black and white theme – at the centre of each photo. After our call, he sent them to me on WhatsApp.

Against a backdrop of black balloons, here is Joudun with four Russian women. Each one of them smiles, one foot stepping into the frame. Another with five Filipino men, more casually dressed than the women, smiling to the camera. Another with his people – seven South Africans – gathered close.

And there is the video that they produced for him ahead of the big day. After some upbeat music and mood shots of the restaurant, a Russian waitress, speaking into the pink rose of a microphone, announces, after some preamble in French: "Ladies and gentlemen,

today I need to inform you that the special event of this month is the birthday of our superstar, just superstar, super, super star…"

And tribute after tribute, from young people on an exotic work experience, all hoping to build up their savings while on contract in the Kingdom.

You're a very different, very…difficult person to understand. But once you get to know you as Joudun, the real Joudun, then you get to learn what an amazing person you are and what deep values you have…

I hope you're enjoying your day with your nice hairstyle, even though you don't like it, I want to tell you it looks amazing…and you're so beautiful, we love you man!

God bless you and wishing you many more birthdays and here's to us man, turning up, getting drunk, getting …..(she whispers inaudibly to the camera, laughs quietly, looking around, she's on duty). Listen, before I get fired, I love you…(blows kisses).

Birthdays are a big deal for this crowd. Three of them are joining forces to celebrate together in February. It will be an Arabian themed excursion into the desert. There will be themed food, a party under the night sky, dancing and a photo shoot.

It's a six month tourist season contract and it's not renewable. And it's drawing to a close. Between the long working hours and the comradery across nations, Joudun finds quiet moments to consider his next move. The weeks are racing towards themselves and soon he will be back in his sister's house across from the busy entrance of the YouSave.

He was two modules short to complete the first year of his Bachelor of Education degree in the previous year, and he has re-registered for them this year but he has been distracted from his studies. Despite the years it took to be offered a place, he is thinking of dropping out of the BEd and registering for a Business Administration degree through Stadio to follow on from his business studies certificate. It's a three years course, and after that, he will think about a Post Graduate Certificate in Education.

"And then I have both options open, I could work in corporate or in teaching. I know that it seems that I swap and change every year, but I've done my research. So the corporate world on this side in Saudi, it's huge. There's a lot of opportunity. Financially it would be a

very wise decision if I could step into the corporate world in the Middle East. And if things don't work out, I can start teaching."

This adventure, he said, as he was preparing to travel home, has been a success. He has had good work experience and he has created a network of relationships that span the globe.

"I'm doing what I planned to do here in the Middle East. I'm keeping to my goal," he told me. "I mean, I've come here with a different mindset this time round. You come to the Middle East to make money. That's what I'm doing. I could get on a plane now and go back to South Africa. I would be satisfied. So it's already a happy ending."

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Maybe it's the Almighty sending him a message, Joudun says of his second fraught escape from Saudi Arabia. Maybe Saudi is not for him?

He was nearing the end of his non-renewable contract and was longing to go home. There was a lot to look forward to. There was Rineez's graduation. His niece was the first in the family to be graduating from university, and with a law degree. And there was Aniza's 40th birthday. It was a milestone that he longed to share with his sister and it had been in the planning for a year. With his foreign currency earnings Joudun had hired "a massive house in Kleinbaai" as his birthday gift, so that Aniza could host the weekend-long celebration in style.

"And then I couldn't leave. Again! Can you believe it?" he told me.

Joudun was never informed by his manager that his visa had expired ahead of his contract. It's a long story about fingerprints that weren't taken at customs on entry, mismatched dates on permits and contracts and the employer going to great lengths to avoid a penalty.

"And it ended up in a fiasco," he says of missing his return flight by three months, missing the graduation and missing Aniza's 40th. Aniza wanted to delay the party until Joudun got home, but he encouraged her to go ahead with it. "But it wasn't nice. She didn't enjoy it. I was crying the whole flippin' weekend. And you know how close we are."

The visa was his employer's responsibility. But Joudun spent full days at the *MoI*, the Saudi Ministry of Interior, while a company representative worked through the maze of bureaucracy that would finally secure his release. "You know we have Africa time here in South Africa? They have Middle East time there in Saudi." Eventually, the company had to pay the penalty, and his exit visa was secured.

"But it was such a mission to get out of that country," he says of being denied the final exit stamp at the airport because of a series of further visa-related problems and the frantic calls to his employer to sort it out. Then there was the R5 000 fee for overweight luggage and the delays at Quatar where he was connecting. "You know, Qatar airport is huge. You have to take a train to your gate, and I was alone, and there was a delay in the flight, and I was stuck in the bus, and I was getting a panic attack. And I asked myself, *jirre* now, what else could go wrong? And you know, I went through all that shit in one night."

He returned eventually in May 2023 and immediately started looking for a job. He didn't have anything specific in mind, but he had some criteria. It would be a permanent job, as opposed to a contract. It would pay reasonably well. It would be a management position. And that would give him the stability, he hoped, to settle back into his studies. He believed in fate. And in asking all that of the universe, it manifested, and within a few weeks he was employed.

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When I met Joudun in November 2023 he was dressed in a crisp blue golf shirt, white sneakers and khaki shorts that exposed the *thankful grateful blessed* tattoo on his calf that, for modesty purposes, had been hidden during his Saudi stay. It was a smart casual look, appropriate for the manager of White Water Guest Farm who greeted tourists on arrival.

They offer an authentic farm experience about ten kilometres out of Stanford, he tells guests who phone in to enquire. He worked there once as a barman, and when he learned that the owner – Cameron – was advertising for a manager, he applied.

He is earning substantially less than he was in Saudi – and less than what he had hoped for – but he has paid off his debts and it's all he needs, he says. And with his Saudi earnings

he bought a car. A 2023 Polo Vivo. Brand new. And now, rather than take the staff transport in a mini bus from Stanford, he drives to work with the playlist of his choice. And he arrives each morning at White Water Farm in the valley below the dragon-ridges of the Kleinrivier mountains that he is so familiar with, opaque in the haze of summer, solidly green with the winter rains.

And now he is the meet-and-greet person for the mainly European guests who spend anything from R2 650 a night for one of the Dairy Suites, to R5 265 for the Farmhouse. "If you stay here, you'll see," he assures me, "it's worth it."

While he has been a barman and a waiter, this is his first management position in the hospitality industry. He is finding his feet in that role, and trying out the language to place himself as a leader of a small team for the first time. There are the three housekeeping ladies, two chefs and four grounds and maintenance guys. "But I don't see myself as a manager," he says, "I see myself as a leader."

And, rather than manage from the distance of the reception area, he is involved. "I don't want it to be too formal. We are on first name terms, you know, that kind of vibe. Everyone on the same level. But you know where you stand. There is, you know, that sort of distance."

And while he dropped out of the Bachelor of Education studies while in Saudi, this position – where he is responsible for finance and business systems – goes hand in hand with his business administration degree. "So all in all, it's a great opportunity for me to build experience." He manages the incoming bookings, seeing on the Knightsbridge system that Jasmine booked through a travel agent and has paid in full, Jennifer has booked through booking.com and will pay on arrival, and that Peter booked directly and has paid a deposit.

Each morning he assesses the check ins, informs housekeeping about the cleaning schedule and arranges for meal baskets to be delivered to the rooms. He adds drinks and other extras to bills, and he checks the rooms before check-in. He runs his finger over surfaces and peers into lampshades to inspect the globes underneath, "because our European guests are not used to dust."

It was quiet when I visited. It was hot and gusty and the fields that stretched out before the guest house were parched with summer. We sat in the cool of the entrance hall and he had time to spare. A bird kept calling from the tree outside, and he anxiously stepped outside every so often, convinced that the place was overrun with snakes. A green mamba had been spotted on the back stoep that morning. It's a job that he refuses to take on as manager, dealing with snakes. So Cameron was called.

The phone was silent, and the cleaners were in the rooms after the morning's guests had checked out. A few cars drove down the R326 as he took a smoke break outside. There was the sound of graders repairing the damage to the gravel road after the flood. There was the wind through trees.

He told me once, "I like the busy life, I like the rush of things." I didn't see that at White Water, and I asked him discreetly and then more directly, if he didn't think he would quickly get bored here, and if before long, he wouldn't be looking for something else?

But he assured me that every day is different. The best part of it, he said, is the interaction with the guests. He tells them the activities on offer – they can pick what they like from the organic vegetable gardens, they can buy little paper packets to feed the goats, alpacas and chickens, they can relax by the pool or they can go hiking in the Kleinrivier mountains. And the heritage town of Stanford is nearby.

"And that's why I've always had a love for hospitality, because I meet different people every day and I try my utmost to give them the best experience."

Joudun shows me a review he got the previous day on booking.com from Lukas who had checked in from Germany. "...the staff was extremely attentive and helpful and the service was impeccable. A special thanks to the manager Joudun for the fantastic care and for the delicious birthday cake for our son!"

And while this position is aligned with his business studies, for now he would like to take a break from studying. "I'm turning 27 this year. I'm still young. I'm very young. It's not easy having a fulltime job and studying. You know when I get home I am so tired I can't even

look at my studies. I'm thinking of taking a break from the studies. Just to get my head straight."

But he still hopes to, in time, complete the business studies degree and the Post Graduate Certificate in Education And while he is committed to White Water for now, he is impatient to finally step into a future beyond Stanford that he can't quite define.

"My plan is, when I have my degree, to take my parents with me and to go abroad again." I asked him where he might go. He laughed, because we both knew the answer to that. "To Saudi! I would go back to Saudi Arabia."

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There is an idea, which needs to grow into a plan, and eventually into an event. That idea is to gather the Gansbaai Academia matric class of 2014 for their 10 year reunion in 2024. That class were the school's first Grade 8s in 2010 and the first to graduate having been through five years of high school there. And now they will be the first to celebrate this milestone. So far it's just Joudun, Jack and *Juffrou* Mona who are throwing ideas around on WhatsApp.

In quiet moments between check ins Joudun thinks about what the reunion might look like. It will need to be something big, he told me. Maybe starting with a champagne breakfast at the school. It would be catered by the hospitality studies students. They would acknowledge dignitaries and the former principals, and then perhaps moving onto a rowdier affair somewhere else. If they pull it off, it will be the first such reunion in the school's history, and the beginning of building an alumni community.

Jack has shared his ideas about how an alumni community might contribute to the school. We are the proud alumni of the school, Jack has said to Joudun. We should be able to meet another alumni anywhere in the world and shake that person's hand as a brother or a sister. And we should be in a position to help a young person, as we were once helped. Imagine if a child needs sponsorship for a sports tour, or can't afford a new blazer, and we as an alumni community could come together to lend a hand.

Juffrou Mona imagines building that alumni spirit, even before students graduate. Imagine a buddy system, she has suggested. Imagine if every grade eleven student "adopted" a grade eight child and looked out for him. That older child would guide him through what the school has to offer and how to make the most of it. "And if we started with that," she has said to them, "imagine how much more you could do for a student in need as an old Sharkie once you have left the school."

But it must all start with that ten year reunion. Joudun is frustrated that their planning hasn't got further than just the idea of it. *Juffrou* Mona will be back from Taiwan in January, and then he believes they can start planning properly. But it just needs to happen, he says. "They want me to organise it," *Juffrou* Mona told me on a WhatsApp call from Taiwan. "Joudun is on my case about it the whole time."

While the many details have to be worked out, Joudun's big picture vision of the event is clear. "I want it to be good," he told me. "And I want it to be historical."

Chapter 9 Jack: Answering the call

Author: What is it that draws you to the saints?

Jack Swart: They were normal people like us, but look what they accomplished. They founded orphanages and schools. Most of them were never married...most of them were celibate. So their whole lives were devoted to their causes. For instance, Don Bosco, his whole mission was helping boys that were on the street corners. He also found homes for girls to learn cooking, cleaning, needlework. He had such an impact on them, making – at least for some of them - proper men for the day of tomorrow. I was reminded of this when I read an article in the *Rapport* which made the point: it's easier to fix an undisciplined boy than it is to fix a broken man.

Jack Swart at the Oudtshoorn Methodist Church, 2023 (Photo: Kimon Phitidis)

There are waves of rhythm to the mealtimes at Langenhoven Gimnasium. There's the underlying build-up. Weekly menus, budgeting, ordering, stocktake. There are the discussions with the school principal about rising fuel prices, war in Ukraine and other forces driving up prices of materials while weekly budgets remain fixed in the stagnation of a rural economy. And then there's three meals a day. Prepping, chopping, basting. Bubbling pots. Clattering pans. Banter tossed from cook to cleaner and then passed on again until steaming tureens are loaded into the serving hatches and the teenagers are called from their games on the lawns for dinner time. There's grace. Jostling into orderly lines, and then the rumble of voices, the clatter and bang of an institutional dining room at work.

As the supervisor, Jack moves through all these well worn rhythms of the kitchen – often wearing a waistcoat, or a pendant or an interesting hat – fuelled by the buzz of the performance, the rush of the chat, the fellowship of community. The pace of the dining room stills as the meal draws to a close. Boys and girls pack their trays on to the trolleys and start filing out towards the hostels for homework and bedtime.

It is in those still pools of time after dinner when the sweetness of Jack's daily routine is realised. It's when boys queue to talk to him. One asks advice about a girl he would like to invite on a date. What words should he use exactly? If she accepts, should he buy her flowers, or will she think him old fashioned? Another needs help preparing for an essay about the political contestations in Europe ahead of the outbreak of World War II. The complexity is lost to the fog of another time and place. I know you love history, *Meneer*, he says. Could you help? Another asks advice about his training schedule ahead of a weekend athletics tournament in Mossel Bay. Should he go for a light run on Friday or treat it as a rest day? Others need help repairing a torn blazer, scheduling a doctor's appointment and applying for a driver's license.

One boy comments on Jack's denim waistcoat over dark jeans and a pin striped formal shirt. It's a good match with the dark blue tie held tight in a silver clasp. Another notes his cleanly shaven scalp and close shave. Only the droop of a generous moustache remains from his long-haired and thickly-bearded look of the previous day. The boys know that Jack's

grooming follow a rhythm. They take wagers on the days of the year when all that hair is gonna go.

He addresses every boy by name and prides himself in knowing something about the family or circumstances of each of them. The boys, far from home, claim the ritual of this time he puts aside for them. And then the rhythm of his day picks up again as he supervises the last stretch of the shift. The rolling of trolleys packed with end-of-dinner trays, the clatter and clang of institutionally strong crockery thrown into steaming stainless steel tubs, the wiping down, the packing away and putting the kitchen to rest ahead of staff leaving for their own family dinners.

Jack's draw to the lives of others has always been there, even as a child, his mother Antoinette remembers. "Jack is always trying to help everybody. No matter who you are, he will try and be there for you. I mean, he gets phone calls early in the morning, late in the evening. People want to talk to him. If someone has had an argument with their parents, or is having girlfriend problems, they always talk to Jack."

Jack loves the saying – often repeated at church – that the saints live among us. "We call them companions," he says, "because we learn from them." While he is inspired by their stories of legacy, he too is building a legacy. He is preparing boys to go out into the world as better men. He thinks of young minds as fresh wax paper. If he lives a good example, something might imprint onto a child who looks up to him.

He has not chosen to commit his life to the priesthood or to teaching and his relationships with the young people around him are free of the formalities of those roles. He is only a few years older than them and some of the alumni have become his friends. Their names are written in a sharp-edged scrawl into the little black book that drives his Christmas card list. But he is aware, always, that there is a line of familiarity that he cannot cross. While he has been raised in a home where love comes naturally, he is aware of the suspicion with which adults who befriend children might be viewed.

"Some people with bad intentions have made education difficult," he says. "So always you've got to be on the lookout. You've got to have a healthy fear for children, in a good way.

Because I've seen too many good teachers lose everything because of children making up stories, saying things. That is always a danger." It's a tricky dance sometimes, maintaining the line.

"One must sometimes realize that at the end of the day, you are not the parent, you are not the house master. Even though you've tried everything, you've sometimes got to say, okay, I'm done, I'm going to wash my hands now. But that always feels so wrong, because it feels like you're dropping somebody."

That line, he knows, can be blurred. He crossed it in his relationship with *Juffrou* Fortuin at Gansbaai Academia. He was drawn to her then as he is still drawn to the mythology of her now that there is time and place between them. He was drawn to her kindness, her gentleness and her wells of tolerance that were so frequently tested by unruly boys and girls. She holds within her all the goodness that he associates with the word *Mother*.

There was a formality required of her relationships with the students, yet Jack shattered it each time he crossed the quadrangle between classes to give her a hug. He spoke to her as an equal, and still today when he visits Gansbaai, he invites her to Wimpy for a milkshake. Over the course of hours they pick up the threads of the conversations they so enjoyed at school, particularly about history and current affairs. He still calls her Mum.

At Langenhoven Gimnasium that line blurred again through a combination of happenstance and his will to be of service, when he took a grade 11 boy, Michael, into his home. As they do their weekend chores in town together, people are surprised when Jack introduces Michael as his son. *My adopted son!* he likes to clarify to bank tellers and post office clerks who have known him for years and who are confused by the notion that there are only eight years that separate Jack and Michael in age. "I try to be a father figure to him," says Jack, "and that's why I honestly say: he's my son."

There were a series of incidents at the school. Smoking, arguments, fits of temper. *Boys being boys,* is how Jack sees it, *pushing boundaries*. The school authorities saw it differently. Michael was expelled from the hostel when he was in grade 10. He still had two and a half years of schooling ahead of him. He was the child of a single mother who lived far

away. Jack believed that, while wrong is wrong, Michael's behaviour was fuelled by difficult circumstances back home and that he was dealt a tough hand at an important point of his life.

He believed that if Michael were to be offered a stable home close to school he would work diligently towards finishing high school. Jack and Antoinette both met with his mother and it was arranged that Jack would informally adopt him until he finished school. Michael was brought into his home as a son, as a grandson to Jack's parents and a nephew to his sister.

"Jack spoke to me and he said he wants to give this child another chance, because he deserves another chance," recalls Antoinette. "And I said, I don't want another kid in my house, I don't want another person becoming my responsibility. But Jack was persistent about it," she says, echoing her response to Jack's insistence that he attend Gansbaai Academia rather than Hermanus High. "He was nagging me, and telling me his soft stories, until I said, 'Okay, we will give it a term.' And that term became until the end of his matric three years later."

Once Michael had moved in his best friend from school, Marco, started visiting and as they approached their matric year, he started spending weekends. Wouldn't it be nice, Jack, Michael and Marco discussed one weekend, if – after a lifetime of hostel living – he could move into a home for his final year of schooling. He would be most welcome, Jack assured him. Marco's parents agreed, and Jack became a parent to two boys in their final year of high school.

As they eat dinner in the evenings and wash up afterwards Jack encourages them to reach out to more friends, to read more books and to spend less time lost to the cyber worlds of their phones. "Of your 500 followers on this, and your 1000 likes on that who's going to come and help you when you're in trouble, when you're stuck on the side of the road with a puncture?" he sometimes asks them.

He is concerned too that Michael has recently started dating his first girlfriend. He is losing focus on his schoolwork and hasn't been spending enough time with Marco. He

encourages Marco too, to speak to Michael, and to remind him of his responsibilities towards their home and the family that they have created.

"For any teenagers these days still trying to cling to a moral value, it's hard. It's really hard," says Jack. "Today there is a lack of patriotism. We were brought up with a sense of national pride, even through all our problems. Let's say there was conscription tomorrow or anything happened in our country, no, they won't fight. For today's youth, it's all about me. Nothing else counts."

As a father figure to so many boys growing into men, Jack is drawn to instil in them a sense of responsibility towards the wellbeing of another. "If your brother's on the wrong path, you can't turn your back and wash your hands like Pilate did when they crucified Jesus. If you see something wrong, you've got to call your brother one-on-one and tell him, you know what?, I'm missing you."

Jack believes in the sanctity of marriage and that children should be born into the safety of stable, loving homes. He imagines another version of life, one in which he might have married young and had children of his own. He is inspired by the words, spoken in matrimony, *till death do we part,* but he is living a different version of family.

Mrs Harding-Male is one of perhaps many who wonder about Jack's draw to fatherhood. "He's an amazing person. So I actually hope for a wonderful woman that's going to enjoy him, and enjoy his feminine ways as well, you know, and just embrace that. Because he'll make a wonderful father."

But for now, he lives his own version of that aspiration. "I never got to change your nappies," Jack likes to joke with the boys as they drive to school, "I just went straight into parenting the teenage stage and dealing with teenage problems!"

*

Jack believes that everyone should be given another chance, as he was once given another chance. He believes that everyone is worthy of parental love, as he has been worthy of parental love.

"I would hate to drop anybody. I never want to be known as the person who left them behind. Jesus never left anybody behind, not even the greatest sinner. That's why I always say to the kids at school, never believe that you must struggle alone. Never believe that you must carry your cross alone."

Jack has learned, first hand, what it means to be left behind. He understands, also, the relief it brought when he learned he would never carry his cross alone.

He remembers the day his biological mother left them behind. He was seven years old. His sister was six.

He remembers her dropping them at Antoinette's house.

He remembers that he and his sister held hands as they watched her drive away.

He remembers their father in the living room that evening, his head held in the cups of his hands, looking into the floor.

He remembers his father's sister, Antoinette, walking into the room. And her mother, Jack's grandmother.

He remembers them reassuring his father. They would be mothers to the children now. And they would never leave.

While in the constellation of a family tree, Antoinette would appear as his aunt, in the dust and blood of his daily life, she has always been his mother.

"If you think of the word, mother. That's a title you must earn," says Jack. "And that's why I love my mother so much, for the remarkable woman that she is. Sometimes I call other women mother for their tenderness towards me. But I said to my mom just the other day: I only have one mother, and you are the everything of that."

*

"Why do you still write to these teachers after all these years?" I asked Jack as we sat in what he calls his "rest room," a little table with coffee and rusks between us. Over two years I found Jack to be personable and engaging and I looked forward to the long threads of our conversations. While I was concerned that I was keeping him from his work, he favoured giving our time its due over rushing back to the kitchen.

"Even after I left school, those teachers felt like family," he says. "And I totally believe that the only true treasure in life is family." I am struck always about how much he loves the opportunity to consider a topic and to express his view.

"All of them were great teachers that gave advice to me. They steered me. They shared their lives and their knowledge with me, and I shared mine with them."

The rest room, that would ordinarily be an office, is alongside the hostel kitchen. It's homely, in an institutional kind of way. A single bed with a blanket, neatly made. A side table with a pile of books. A pair of chairs – faux blue leather, stainless steel armrests curving out – for when a young person needs to talk to him. Near the door, a neatly clothed table with a silver vase of fake white and yellow roses. Red flowers are arranged neatly around its base as if it were a shrine.

A pile of records is stacked behind the flowers. *Elvis. 14 Great Songs,* on top. A pile of books is topped with *St Francis of Assisi. A Biography.* On another table collections of records are bundled into box sets, wrapped in fabric, remnants of another time. *Johann Sebastian Back. Matthaus Passion.* Another: *Ludwig van Beethoven. Deutsche Grammophon Gesellschaft.*

I ask him about his unusual record collection and he tells me, with some delight, that he had befriended the nuns at a nearby convent. He bought the records when the convent was moving from town to the location so that the nuns and the priests could be closer to the people they served. "The entire collection was available!" he says. He favours this pile of treasures over the digital playlists of his peers.

A Jesus icon framed in gold and black rests against the pile of records. One hand held out in blessing, the other holding a staff. There is a story attached to that also. "My faith is important to me. It guides me. We live by the will of the Lord, not by our own will. I must be dead or in a hospital bed or locked up before I miss a Sunday service!" he says with a laugh.

While this is where we meet, it is the place where Jack reads and studies during his off time. It is also where he opens his little black book and writes a letter of birthday greeting, condolences or a salutation to acknowledge the birth of a child.

Towards the end of the year he sits here amongst sheets of stamps that he still manages to buy from the post office – even though they are frequently in short supply – and stacks of Christmas cards in packs of ten from the CNA. *Christmas Greetings* or *Gelukkige Kersfees* in gold embossed lettering, wrapped around yellow roses or holly or Christmas baubles.

He fills all the space of the insides with the spidery scrawl of his words. And I see these cards where they have been filed away in drawers and folders as I visit his teachers from Gansbaai Academia to ask them about Jack.

This one was sent to Hanet van Deventer, his hospitality studies teacher.

Geagte Juf

Hoop die kaartjie vind Juffrou goed, wel en gesond. 'n Baie mooi, geseënde, gelukkig en Voorspoedige Christusfees & Nuwe Jaar my Juf Hanet.

She shows me these cards with such delight in the office of her home, from which she runs a bed 'n breakfast. She describes the joy of it, that in a digital age, she still receives these handwritten cards delivered by post.

"I don't know, me and Jack, we just connected," she says. "Ja, I don't know…there's a couple of learners who I still have contact with. And he kept on sending me cards all these years. This one was for Christmas, and this one is also a Christmas card. And you can see, he's writing the whole card full of things."

Mrs Harding-Male also loves the novelties that arrive in her mail box as consistently as the earth orbits the sun. "Every year on my birthday I get a card mailed to me. Every Christmas I get a card mailed to me. It's the only mail I ever get, you know, because otherwise its just bills and junk mail."

This card was sent to Mona Matthews, his English teacher.

Wishing you a beautiful, A blessed, A Merry New Year my dear aunt Mona, hope this card finds you well and happy mom. May the good Lord watch over you and keep and protect you mom…

"When the principal's wife was buried in Oudtshoorn I went with the school. And Jack picked me up at the church and I went to his house. Oh, that child is like my own son," she said as she indicated the collection of envelopes on the coffee table in her apartment in Gansbaai.

"Are those letters from Jack?" I asked her.

"*Ja, dis Jack se handskrif daai,* it's Jack's handwriting that," she said before pausing for a long time to gather her thoughts. "You know Jack *mos*? *Haai*! Jack will send me," she pauses again. "Jack will send me one *every* year."

Jack would be lost without his little black book, he says. There are so many people he needs to remember, so many addresses he needs to record.

"For all the new entries I write their cellphone numbers as well because if my cellphone dies one day, boy, I'm gonna be in the dark because of the amount of numbers I'm going to lose. But at least with that book, it's your closest or inner circle. So a lot of those numbers you can find there again. Because my phone is – I joke always! – my phone is going now for seven years. It's still surviving the test of time. So it will be," he laughs, "hopefully another seven years it will still go on!"

Jack collects entries into his little black book with the same delight he brings to his collection of teaspoons, old coins and stamps. While the stamps and coins are carefully stored and curated, the teaspoons are brought into service every day, each one a thread of remembering as he stirs a morning brew: his mother, and the teaspoon she brought back from a trip to Namibia; his aunt, and the spoon she found in an antique shop on her travels. Each teaspoon, like each entry into the little black book, is attached to a story.

*

Jack believes in the notion of calling. He believes in serving the greater good and loves to read biographies of men and women who have served the world. He also reads the daily news. Given the rotten performance of those who govern South Africa's young democracy, the greater good, he believes, needs tending.

And always, knocking at the window of his mind, is the prospect of the priesthood. And now, in-between the demands of what his father sees as a sensible job, he is studying theology part time.

He first felt a calling to the priesthood as a teenager. He imagined that after school he would join the seminary and then study towards the vocation. Throughout his hospitality studies at the Oudtshoorn TVET College and his work at Langenhoven Gimnasium, he continued to see the signs that were calling him to the priesthood. As he sat in Sunday services he would imagine himself in the reverend's place, thinking what he might add or change if he was delivering the Word.

"That's why I started studying theology," he says, "to get the ball rolling. I can still be twenty years a teacher, or working here at Langenhoven Gimnasium, or anything. Later on in their careers many people change. But if I do, I won't then have another seven years of waiting while I study."

It's not that he has plans to go into the priesthood, he tells his father, it's just that study is the path to personal growth and it will never go to waste.

"And it's humbling to learn more. One can never learn enough. And specifically when it comes to faith, you will never know everything, because it's a mystery. It's really cool that it's a mystery, because there are things that are at odds all the time. It's quite interesting, they say the biggest atheists are Bible scholars," he laughs. "And they warn you about that! They tell you: keep an open mind, pray for guidance. Because there are contradictions between what one sections says and the other section says. Keep that in mind."

What he learns through his studies serves him now as a mentor to so many young people and might one day open the door to other opportunities.

Today he is a sacrosanct of the Saint Nicholas Catholic Church of Oudtshoorn. He holds the church keys and prepares the altar for services. He is the youngest member of the church council. While, as a lay person, he is not permitted to preach in the Catholic church, he delivers the sermon once a month at the Methodist church. With declining congregations across the country, smaller churches can't afford full time reverends and lay preachers like Jack are welcomed to fill the gaps.

He understands now that the priesthood transcends the show of it. He is a regular visitor to the convent on the outskirts of Oudtshoorn and he and the nuns and priests are sometimes amused to see those drawn to vacant posts based on the dumbed down Hollywood version of the clergy. The collar, the cassock, hands raised in the sign of the cross, the kissing of the hand, the merciful spiritual mentor dispensing blessings and clemencies.

At school he inhabited that version of a clergyman when *Juffrou* Fortuin cast him as Apostle George, the spiritual mentor who brought Joudun Rooi's Map Jacobs to Jesus in *Krismis van Map Jacobs*. It was an opportunity for him to try on a persona he might one day inhabit. He was just eighteen years old when he delivered redemption to Map Jacobs. "Map Jacobs is coming home," he announced then to Map's mother as they visited him ahead of his release from jail. "The same Map Jacobs, but not the same Map Jacobs. He has been washed clean, he wears new clothes, the scales have fallen from his eyes, he sees..."

*

It's eight years since he played that part and Jack is twenty six years old. The traffic lights along Oudtshoorn's Baron van Rheede Street that would ordinarily reflect red, amber or green are as dull as stained glass windows on a cloudy day as Jack drives to the Methodist Church to deliver his monthly sermon. Town is quiet on a Sunday morning. He treats each traffic light as a yield and thinks of all the ways the town could work. If only the politicians had the will to make it happen.

"Once upon a time, after school, I considered going into politics, because I could be a voice for good, for change, even in politics. It could be through running an effective

department, or as a ward councillor, or by bringing in a new policy. That might still be something in a faraway future."

On SAfm a few lines from President Cyril Ramaphosa's Heritage Day speech is broadcast with the news headlines. He speaks his words deliberately as he addresses the issue that would contribute to sinking the ANC in the 2024 elections that was two years away. After fifteen years of black outs, Eskom – the state owned power utility – was still failing to keep the light on.

"Now we're going through the throes of an energy crisis, in the recent two weeks we've been seeing rising loadshedding completely disrupting our lives, our economy, and causing havoc from a social point of view, health point of view. Even as we face these challenges, as South Africans, as we have done in the past, we have persevered, and I ask once again, let us persevere, the challenge is being addressed."

The sandstone façade of the church with its steep pitch and arched windows is modest when compared to nearby buildings from the same era: the towering majesty of the Dutch Reformed church; the big-blocked authority of the Town Hall. Nevertheless it speaks to the prosperity of the town that evaporated along with the short-lived ostrich feather boom that once fuelled a time of plenty. Today, street-corner begging is pervasive and as the congregants arrive, two car guards in dirty yellow bibs swear at each other as they compete for territory.

There is a smattering of about twenty congregants – including a nervy dachshund in a knitted yellow jersey too loose for its bony frame – who sit amongst the long wooden pews. There is plenty of open space. The congregants sit comfortably, the pews mercifully covered in red end-to-end cushions.

"Most of the people are Afrikaans," says Jack, "but they prefer to keep the preaching in English because you never know when they might get a visitor from overseas."

Jack is behind the lectern. He wears a three piece grey suit. A watch chain is attached to a button of his waistcoat and loops into a pocket. A maroon tie fading to white. His hair is lengthening now from its close cut of a few months ago and is brushed back. His beard, also, has grown out from that clean shave. He apologises for the power cuts that have dulled the lights, silenced his microphone and compelled the organist to play on the upright piano despite the neat silver rows of organ pipes reaching heavenward. On the modest altar, a white-clothed table with a Bible is displayed open, the Word facing the congregation.

His voice is practiced. Its timbre rolls through the pitch of the high dark panelled ceiling and into the recesses of the sandstone church that has hosted weekly services for more than a hundred years. He preaches here once a month and feels honoured to bring his voice and his interpretation of the Word to this small but committed congregation. Most of the congregants are two to three times his age. Somewhere there's an imbalance or a lack, he often thinks. Why are young people not feeling the need to partake anymore?

"Before we start," he smiles from the rise of the lectern, "let's shout out and stand up and start with a wonderful hymn: This is the day that the Lord has made."

This is the day, this is the day.
That the Lord has made, that the Lord has made.
We will rejoice, we will rejoice,
And be glad in it, and be glad in it.
This is the day that the Lord has made.
We will rejoice and be glad in it.
This is the day, this is the day
That the Lord has made. [7]

"We now light the candle. We present in Christ the light of the world so that it too can be the light of this world for others. We now bow our heads and ask for God's guidance and delivery..."

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[7] https://www.hymnal.net/en/hymn/c/4

In this space he occupies another version of himself. He is solemn, in contrast to the fast-talking, fast-moving supervisor who strides the length of the hostel kitchen dispensing banter and good cheer.

One of the congregants is Bernie Beets, a member of the Methodist Church Council in the Oudtshoorn Circuit. "Because Jack is young, he believes openly and freely," he told me after the service. "The youth believe with abandon, with no holding back."

The theme for the service is God as a friend of the poor, and the reading is from Saint Luke chapter 16, verses 19 to 31.

"There was this certain rich man who was clothed in purple and fine linen and he fed sumptuously every day. And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, full of sores, who desired to be fed with the crumbs that fell from the rich man's table; moreover the dogs came and licked his sores."

He reminds the congregation that where there is prosperity, the churches are empty. Where there is suffering, war, sickness, famine, poverty – the churches are overflowing.

"When we are rich, when we have fame, when we need for nothing, the Voice of God becomes very quiet. And then God becomes like the family bible or Grandma's old cookbook, stored high in the cupboard to be pulled down only when there is an emergency.

"Why do those in prison have such deep faith?" he questions, as if evoking the time when, as Apostle George, he led Map Jacobs to salvation.

He lightens into a more familiar version of himself as he departs from his written sermon to talk more anecdotally about Mother Theresa, who he has been reading about as part of his studies. He draws parallels between her devotion to the poor and Lazarus, who lay by the rich man's gate. And he lightens further with the announcements. Next Sunday the service will be held in Herold's Bay. On Wednesday evening there will be Bible study in the church hall. All are welcome.

He thanks the organist after the service and stands in the road outside, his Bible and notebooks tucked under his arm, as he talks to three elderly women who were the first to arrive for the service, the quivering dachshund stowed under one of their arms. It was a

lovely service, they all agree, and they look forward to hearing his sermon in October. Might he consider joining them for Bible study on Wednesday?

The car guards hover. Jack clutches his car keys. He's in a hurry to leave. It's month end and the stocktake is due before school closes for the holidays this week. He is on weekend duty at the hostel and there's a lot to do. It's a little after ten on Sunday morning and his working day has just begun.

*

Jack Swart has been studying confession. He is finishing his first year of what will be a seven year theology degree, and this is the subject that occupies him today. Confession, he learns, is not a punishment or a shame. Rather it is offered to the confessor as an unburdening and an opportunity to reflect. He reads these texts – the theory, the case studies, exercises that invite students to reflect on what they might like to confess – seated in the library of The Oratorium, the convent that serves the Catholic congregation of Saint Filip Neri on the outskirts of Oudtshoorn.

It's a hopeful triangle of land wedged between a truck dealership, an open stretch of polluted veld, and Bridgeton, what Jack calls "the former coloured location" – with its wide streets and spread of asbestos roofed face-brick houses. The convent is, Jack likes to say, a piece of paradise with high walls. Those high walls topped with coils of barbed wire, and the assortment of collapsing fences and concrete blocks along the choked-up river, keep the surrounds at bay.

There is a windowless, high-ceilinged dining room in the heart of the building, a slim rectangle with its table always formally laid for the next meal, with plates stacked within plates to accommodate a series of courses, an array of cutlery fanning outwards from each setting. It is here where the priests and other residents meet each night for dinner, and where a different constellation of family has come together for Jack.

"I've always been welcome here. With all the other priests here, we are a family," Jack told me. "And that's what has always drawn me ever since I first set foot here. It's the sense

of family. The care, the love, the support. And when I say to somebody, 'you are family', I mean it. I've learned in life that you can choose family."

It's nearing the end of the first school term of 2023. He has moved to a room that he rents in the convent. There is a single bed. A hat stand, with a selection of hats for any occasion. A dresser with framed photographs of family and friends. Michael and Marco smile back at him from their official school photos. A kitchenette with a hotplate and a microwave. A window that looks onto a courtyard and the high wall with the sounds and smells of the surrounding streets drifting over the top – children playing in the street, men gathered in small pavement groups to smoke bongs and play cards, burning plastic, chicken feet on open coals.

But the library is the space he favours. It is murky for lack of sunlight and air, cave like with the high ceilinged green walls showing signs of damp. But the two armchairs facing each other are soft and inviting. The little desk perfect for an hour or two of quite study.

He is watched over by paintings and statuettes of the saints and other biblical figures. The Virgin, a purity of white robes, looms over the others. Her feet are bare, her hands clasped in prayer. On the wall behind him is a portrait of the pope. Sometimes when he retreats there to study, a visiting resident on spiritual retreat comes in to play the piano and the two of them enjoy a peaceful companionship.

After his studies he walks the circular path as he inspects the grounds, his hands clasped behind his back. It's seven years ago that this community started building a church within the grounds. The foundations have been laid and the outside walls are up. Wooden frames are built into the curves of what will one day be the windows. It's a long term project. With the rise of the secular state and the shrinking back of the role of the church in Europe, donations to the convent have slowed to a modest trickle that might dry up completely.

He crosses the wooden bridge of discarded planks over the weeds and litter of the river that sometimes comes down in flood, and then up into the gardens that are intended for sanctuary and reflection. A volunteer has been arriving every year from Holland for a month, and each year he leaves an improvement behind. There is the orchard of one

hundred young olive trees that Jack hopes might be ready for their first harvest of olive oil this year, the pig pen, the goose enclosure, the chicken coop. A series of arched shrines hold statuettes of the saints. There are plantings of spekboom, a hardy desert plant, on either side of the path. And further along a spekboom labyrinth planted around a young olive tree grown from a cutting of a 2 000 year old tree in Jerusalem's Garden of Gethsemane.

He walks past the doors of the St Luigi Scrossopi Care Centre that runs after school and counselling programmes for surrounding families.

All of this is alongside a section of river valley that was previously degraded urban veld covered in rubbish and rubble. It was known for the rapes and murders that were prevalent before the convent moved from a rural area and walled this patch of land in so that the priests and the nuns could be closer to the people. There is a tension everywhere between what is planted, what is maintained, and the surge of rubbish, litter and degraded weedy veld that threatens to overwhelm.

Moving to Saint Filip Neri has been a coming home for Jack, as if he has closed a circle and is starting again. After school he and his family moved from the farm in Gansbaai to a smallholding outside Oudtshoorn and then to a rented house in town with its views directly into the kitchens and TV rooms of the neighbours.

The family that once sat around that dining room table shrunk. His mother and sister moved to Mossell Bay, his father to Heidelberg and after he had seen them through their matric exams last year Michael and Marco moved out to carry on lives after school. And now it is just Jack.

At the convent he is reviving the vegetable garden, growing the chicken flock, tending the geese, and he hopes to slaughter a pig and to process the meat into hams and bacon and chops. The priests are not in agreement. They have given the two black pigs names, and they are loved as pets. But a community such as this, Jack believes, should grow into self-sufficiency.

It's nearing the end of the first term of 2023 and Langenhoven Gimnasium is about to close for the holidays. The matrics of 2022 have moved on, and he has got to know the new grade eights who came into the hostel this year.

It is now almost three years since he was contracted by the WCED. Within seven years he will qualify for a state pension. The life of civil service comes with benefits that many only dream of: job security, medical aid, a housing allowance and so much more. And there are career and study opportunities within the civil service.

While he imagines the multitudes of lives that are open to us, he is happy with his choices, and celebrates the milestones and achievements of the many people listed in his Little Black Book who have made other choices.

Recently, he had been in touch with Joudun who told him that he had gone back to Saudi Arabia for a second stint, even though he once had a good job with ABSA, even though he had been studying to become a teacher. "And just like that, he's gone back to Saudi," he tells me. "Wow!"

As he tapped away over their WhatsApp exchange he marvelled at the profile picture of his friend. I mean, that outfit! The long length of the robes he was wearing, the traditional dress of that part of the world Jack assumed, but black? The white Nike cap. The white sneakers. Behind him, clouds tinged with the yellow of the setting sun over the red of the Sahara dunes. The South African and Saudi Arabian flags alongside each other on his profile.

"I wouldn't do that," Jack told me one Saturday morning as we sat in the cloistered quiet of the library, each of us barefoot for relief from the heat. "I wouldn't just resign and say, OK, now I'm going to seminary, or to university, or to start plumbing or to go overseas. Because if you make a decision like that, everything that is comfortable in life has to change. I mean, I would sever all ties if I went off in another direction. And I believe that everything works out, that I can have this life while I'm working towards another one."

Chapter 10 Malcolm: True grit

Malcolm Mulope

I had very visceral feelings when I realized a year of my life was to be wasted after school. But I've matured a lot since then. I know it's not the end of it all. I still have lots of more years in my life. I could even go and study abroad when I'm 40 years old. But *ja*, it has set me back. I have been accepted at Rhodes four time before, but each time I couldn't go because of money, or Home Affairs or Covid or whatever. It doesn't affect me as much as when I was fresh faced out of high school. I'm still kind of feeling that the world is my oyster. I deserve everything the world has to offer. And I know right now that shit happens. You might not like it, but it happens. You just have to accept it and move on to your next goal as quickly as possible.

Malcolm Mulope as posted to Instagram in 2022

Malcolm wakes. He eats a quick breakfast. Ernst is a late riser and Malcolm is used to quiet mornings alone. He used to get around on a bicycle, but he has a new mode of transport now. Smaller, lower. A gritty flat surface to hold the underside of his sneakers. He can flick it into his hands on arrival and it tucks neatly under his arm. He loves being low on the ground, the wind at his back most days on his way to work, bending his knees into the corners, the rasp of rubber on tarmac.

He shrugs on his backpack, loads the buds into his ears and presses play – sometimes he listens to trance, rap, pop classics, his taste in music is varied – but today he has chosen a playlist of Mozart piano instrumentals. He throws the longboard out ahead of him and jumps on, bending into that first rush of momentum down the long stretch of de Villiers street. The sun is out so so he drops down to the coast road where the froth of ocean meets the rocky coastline. He passes the tidal pool where he spent so many hours as a schoolboy with his friends.

The swell is rolling in. The dazzle of blue sea melting into blue sky, melting into the haze of distance makes the scenic route worthwhile. On a clear day he can see across the the bay to Hermanus and further along the coast to Betty's Bay and Pringle Bay.

These are towns that he has got to know well, virtually at least, working at Xplorio. Betty's Bay, he knows, is famous for its penguin colony and for the Harold Porter Botanical Garden which promotes the biodiversity of the Kogelberg Biosphere Reserve, a UNESCO World Heritage Site. He wrote the copy that promotes Pringle Bay Mini Mart as a one stop convenience store that offers a big supermarket shopping experience with heaps of small-town hospitality.

But the haze obscures those town from him today. He pushes along the distance of the coast road with his right leg, feeling the tension in the calf muscle of his left. He is aware of the slow journey of a bead of sweat down the side of his face, the sheen settling over his forehead. While longboarding is good for him, it's fun and builds his core, it doesn't help with his hockey fitness.

He hopes that he is fit enough for the match this evening at the Hermanus Hockey Club. He will need to pick up his running again to maintain his fitness. He leans into the curve up Franken Street past the broken wall of the Gansbaai Cemetery, before leaning into the right turn down Hoop Street, then down Voortrekker Street to the house that has been converted into the office of Droid Projects.

From the stoep it offers a view over the Gansbaai harbour, a rectangle of calm water protected from the open seas by its walls and haphazard concrete bollards, and the sometimes smoking stacks of Gansbaai Marine, the fish processing factory that produces canned fish and fish meal for the agricultural sector.

Beyond that is the pier where tourists board high vessels with steel cages in the hope of coming face to face with the great white sharks that have driven the tourism economy of the town, but which are sighted less often in recent years. Some say its because the commercial fishing industry has stripped the ecology of the bay, others say it's because of the orcas that have been hunting them.

Most days Malcolm longboards to work with the south-easterly to his back, the same wind that blows the factory smoke away from the town and out to sea. But should the wind turn, anyone on the stoep would be quick to step inside to escape the smell which one of his colleagues describes as "indescribably disgusting," especially if a big-bellied pelagic fishing vessel has recently offloaded its catch. A news post from the local paper, *Gansbaai Courant*, posted to xplorio.com assures visitors to the town.

> The saying goes … where there's smoke there's a fire! Not so in the case of the Gansbaai Marine factory. This smoke is non-destructive and serves humanity. It may be that when the smoke steams up from the factory chimneys in the harbour some people have a problem with the smell … but the Gansbaai community on a whole, smile broadly and claim: "The catch is good! All is well!" [8]

That posts captures the contested identity of the town, and the tension between those who favour a town powered by commercial fishing – as it has been for many years – versus those who favour a vibrant eco-tourism economy and lifting the status of Gansbaai from that of the

[8] https://xplorio.com/gansbaai/gansbaai-courant/en/weekly-updates/41624/when-the-catch-is-good-one-can-bear-the-smell/

ugly stepsister of the Overberg to one that would stand proudly alongside its more gracious sisters dotted along the rocky sweep of bay: Stanford, Hermanus, Kleinmond and Pringle Bay. While the fishing industry employs a few hundred people, the tourism industry employs thousands in a more inclusive economy, they argue.

It’s twenty minutes since he left home and he walks through the front door, popping his head into each of the offices to say hello before settling into the front office he shares with five others with its windows looking over the harbour. He unpacks his laptop and sits down to a day at work doing research and loading on-line marketing content.

“It's a town marketing thing,” he explains, “offering small to medium sized businesses in the Overberg the opportunity to market themselves and to put their best on-line foot forward. So I would go into this shop and interview the owner. There is a free option, but if he signed up I would write the piece for him and post it on-line, it might include restaurant menus and things like that. Depending on their fee I would also run digital campaigns for them, getting them onto Google, sorting out their search engine optimisation, writing their Facebook posts. There are different membership tiers the business can choose.”

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Those who show up to the office each day are invested in a movement. As the Internet and its search engines favour the biggest advertising spenders, small companies become increasingly disempowered. Xplorio allows small businesses to better market themselves – and, combined – to better promote small towns like Gansbaai.

Malcolm left his many jobs for the predictability of a job at Xplorio, in easy longboarding distance from home. While in a good month in tourist season he might have earned R18 000, it was a pace of working that he couldn’t sustain. At Xplorio, he is earning substantially less, but is gaining working and writing experience and has joined a community of young professionals who meet on Friday evenings for a beer. They celebrate the milestones of their lives together at rowdy bachelorette parties, or gentle tea-and-scone gatherings to welcome a new baby to the world.

Until colleagues meeting for a beer after work became a criminal offence and the tourism and hospitality economy across the world collapsed with the arrival of the Covid-19 pandemic. Malcolm and his colleagues took a substantial pay cut while the company weathered the storm.

While he started out as a writer for Xplorio, post-pandemic Malcolm moved to Droid Projects – a separate but related business that develops the digital presence for clients in the tourism industry. "So it's straight up marketing and a very good career path," he says. "I think Droid is like a multi-million Rand company, they have investors in Joburg and stuff. So I could just stay there for life, earn a pretty decent living, but that's not really my passion."

Malcolm learned about how to build and sustain a digital marketing strategy while writing promotional posts for high-end hotels such as Grootbos, a private nature reserve and lodge. His days are about working through revolving images, phrases, special offers and seasonal attractions to promote these destinations.

Grootbos is a 5-star private nature reserve and lodge set on 3 500 hectares of coastal fynbos mountain ten kilometres north of Gansbaai en-route to Stanford. International tourists are attracted by it's ethos of conservation, community inclusion and its support of the arts.

As the fingers behind the Grootbos on-line presence, Malcolm has a lot of material to work with. There are many experiences offered to guests from marine safaris to birding tours to botanical hikes. There are the seasonal specials, the spa specials and the seasonal changes to the fine dining menu.

"So you have to translate a small post or ad into something that aligns with the brand image. So you get a month of solid training: this is who these people are, this is what you need to convey, this is how it's supposed to be. But you still have your own creative freedom, and it's up to you how you express all of that."

Jan Lutzeyer, the owner of Droid Projects, was in primary school when his parents moved from Cape Town to develop the Grootbos Private Nature Reserve and lodge. He grew into promoting the family business, and Droid Projects and Xplorio were borne.

He immediately liked Malcolm when they first met, and during much of 2019 and 2020 Malcolm drove the copy that promoted the family business. "In Afrikaans there's a saying *sout van die aarde,* salt of the earth. That's what Malcolm is," says Jan. "He's got good attitude, good charisma. He's just a really solid *oke."*

Facebook posts are frequent and follow the pattern of the seasons.

Here are the blurred edges of a long exposure shot. Dark rocks jutting out of the water against a star streaked sky. A blue-white glow on the water as black melts into blue, blue melts into white.

These glowing blue waves are a result of marine microbes called phytoplankton. At night when the phytoplankton are disturbed by the waves crashing onto the rocks, a mystical blue light is emitted. This rare phenomenon can be spotted from Grootbos at night. #grootbosmagic [9]

A video of sunrise over forests, a tangle of vines, a bird alights from a branch, drone footage zooms out over the forest canopy.

Discover an enchanting 1000 year old Milkwood forest tucked away in the heart of Grootbos Private Nature Reserve a sanctuary of nature where the air is filled with the sweet, heady scent of seasonal flowers and the landscape sings with the sound of a million insects and birds. Follow the #ExploreGrootbos journey and stand a chance to win a 3-night Secret Season experience for 2 at Grootbos. [10]

Throughout his time at Droid, Malcolm's colleagues learned that he was a man who could be depended on. "Malcolm is mature," says Jan. "He understands the importance of taking things seriously, of working hard, of having high standards of integrity. He takes pride in his work. He wants to get somewhere, and he recognises the opportunity. I can only assume that his home upbringing has been solid and that Ernst has taught him some good ways of thinking about life."

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Malcolm remained true to the goal that he had set himself: to walk onto a university campus as a fully paid-up student, and to leave that campus several years later with a

[9] Facebook 8 March 2019
[10] Facebook 17 May 2019

journalism degree. The prospect of failing and of being in a forever limbo was too horrible to imagine. Thanks to his charisma and his *sout van die aarde* qualities, many that he came across willed his dream to come true.

Through his hockey coaching for the Grootbos Foundation, Malcolm met waves of young people who arrived from Europe during their gap years to volunteer at the foundation's conservation and education programmes.

Lara Schade from Germany was a volunteer who became a friend, then a lover, and remained a friend long after she went back home. Inspired by her and the other German volunteers, Malcolm set his sights on studying in Germany. He enrolled for an on-line course in German and prepared his applications for the universities that Lara recommended.

There is a photo on the gofundme.com page that she set up to raise money for Malcolm's studies. She wears her blonde hair loose and it falls to just below her shoulders as she smiles into the shot. Malcolm is next to her wearing a yellow sports shirt, his hair cropped into a square edged afro. He smiles also and offers a thumbs up to the camera. Behind them is a group of kids in sports gear, and beyond them, sea and mountain and a clear blue sky.

"This is our dear friend Malcolm," writes Lara in 2020. "He is Zambian, but has lived his entire life in South Africa. Ever since he was little he has dreamed of becoming a journalist… "While Malcolm might have lost faith in accomplishing his dream," she goes on to write, "we refuse to stop believing in him. He is not just a very skilled and dedicated writer with a strong work-ethic, but also an exceptional friend and human being."

Malcolm would have loved to share the campaign with his colleagues at Droid, but it was only seen by Lara's European networks.

Malcolm shared coffee breaks and Friday evening drinks with his colleagues at Droid. During tender moments he would hear about a new love or a parent's losing battle with cancer. Malcolm shared with them his aspiration to become a journalist, but the struggle that continued to characterise his life was unknown to them.

At Droid, it was only Jan who knew Malcolm's story and who went to sometimes extraordinary lengths to offer him stability and opportunity through the rough seas of his

journey. "I'm a very firm believer that you create your opportunities in life and that you should take responsibility for that," he says.

"So what do I think Malcolm's opportunities are? I think they're massive. He's got a diverse skills set. He's tech savvy. He can articulate himself well, he can write well. He can problem solve. His opportunities would be endless, he just needs to craft them, and I think he's on that journey. His biggest hurdle, the biggest burden he is carrying around with him is this problem that he is trying to solve. But I think, in the next few years, that will resolve itself."

Malcolm had learned to be cautious with what he shared about himself. He remembered a long-ago moment as a primary school boy when someone told him that foreigners like him were unwelcome, that people like him were taking jobs away from South Africans, that it was just a matter of time before people like him were driven back across the border.

And always, he faced the risk of being deported if study and work visas were not aligned with what he was doing. Throughout high school he wore his Zambian identity lightly. Throughout his years of working , his colleagues believed that he was a South African who was originally from Johannesburg. Every time he went to Zambia to gather his exit and entry stamps or to sort out his paper work, his colleagues believed that he was working remotely because he was visiting family "back home" in Johannesburg.

Malcolm added to his savings the almost three thousand euros that was raised through the gofundme.com campaign. He would have raised more, he knew, if he could have shared the campaign more widely. He continued to apply to universities in South Africa and Europe. He was accepted almost everywhere in 2020, but the onset of the pandemic ended his dreams of an education in Germany even if he had the funds.

He was accepted at Rhodes and other universities again in 2021 and 2022 but he was still short of funds, and each time his study visa expired, he had to start the sometimes impossible to achieve task of renewing it year on year. On many occasions, his approach to complex problem solving was tested and sometimes he called his grandmother – who knew her way around the Zambian bureaucracy – for help.

“So you need a passport that only expires after the end date of your course,” he says of one of these complexities. “My passport was expiring in March 2027, but the course was ending in April 2027. So I couldn’t apply for a new passport when I already had a valid passport. It’s an impossible situation. But I had to make a plan. My grandmother knew this lady at the passport office…”

It was towards the end of 2021 that Malcolm resigned from Droid. Things were finally falling into place. He had been accepted – again – at Rhodes. He had saved enough and had paid the sixty thousand Rand deposit required of a foreign student. He had submitted all the paperwork for his study visa.

“And then the visa took too long. It just never came,” he says of the last piece of the puzzle that didn’t fall into place. “I think that’s just how government agencies work. Even when I applied for my police clearance, I applied in November, I got the clearance in March. It was too late. So this year [2022] I’m going to apply for the visa in June. I have to apply again each year. Because if you have the visa and you don’t go to university, the university will go back to Home Affairs and say, hey, this guy didn’t register. It’s kind of illegal to have a visa for a certain purpose and then to not do that thing. I didn’t even want that thing in my passport anymore. Because otherwise I could just be stopped around here, somebody could check my papers and I could be deported for five years.”

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It's April 2022. In Gansbaai Malcolm would typically start feeling the autumnal chill, but in Livingstone the highs hover in the low thirties for much of the year and there is little to distinguish the seasons. But in winter the Zambezi river shrinks back, and even as the roar of the Victoria Falls quietens, it still draws tourists to Livingstone, where Malcom’s grandmother runs her lodge and bar.

“My grandmother is the most successful one in our family. So she has the lodge, she has the bar. She owns three homes in town. She could just live with the passive income from the houses, but she likes the lodge, I guess.”

It's before eight in the morning and Malcolm pulls the stickiness of his shirt away as he walks past the scrappy beds of hibiscus towards the partly built thatch outbuilding at the Desert Flower Lodge. It has been his office for the last few weeks and will be for months to come.

There are no colleagues. There is no water cooler, chill room or coffee station. There is no fish factory stench. There is the cloying humidity of summer, the dry red dust smell of winter. There is the dimness of the room with its concrete floor and its too small window. Spiders fall on their threads from the bare thatch roof. The ceiling is yet to be installed.

"We started building here, like, eight years ago," he says as he shows me the space on the Zoom camera. "So it was first the bar area that was finished. And then gradually we built the first two accommodation units. This is the third one. You could put someone in here, but it wouldn't be very comfortable. So I use it to work, to get away from the bar. It's not super popular or anything this lodge, it's more like for my grandmother's friends. They come, and they bring their friends. It's more a word-of-mouth kind of thing."

From the gardens outside he sometimes hears the descending grunts of a hippo that has wandered north of the river to graze. More than once Malcolm has come across an elephant in the yard. He has been warned to give them a wider-than-usual berth. Elephants here have been hunted, and those that wander into town are often short of a tusk, their bodies scarred by bullets and blades.

There is a bed and an old wardrobe. He found a little table he can use as a desk in one of the outbuildings, and he has brought in a chair from the bar. He plugs in the laptop, plugs in his buds for the soundtrack that will see him through the next few hours, and gets to work.

Malcolm has come to Zambia for as long as it takes secure his 2023 study visa. He has been re-employed at Xplorio.com, and is working on a project that doesn't need him to be in the office. Xplorio is growing its reach to service the small towns of the Theewaterskloof Municipality, north of Gansbaai.

He spends his days in the make-shift office doing research on-line. Before the sales team can start visiting businesses in these towns, Malcolm is checking that all the content they

have on the platform is accurate and up to date. For each town he researches what businesses are operating, what might have closed down and where new business opportunities might lie. Slowly, the make-up of these towns come to life.

Greyton is "a pint-sized town that is fondly known as South Africa's 'Little England.'" Elgin is the "'birthplace' of South Africa's most famous fizzy apple soft drink." Riviersondered is a popular stop between Cape Town and the Garden Route "known for its freshly baked goods." He is surprised that he can't find a security company in Botrivier. Surely there must be one? And that some of these towns still have a Mr Video. He tries to imagine, in a world of on-line streaming, who visits a Mr Video?

Besides the work that he is doing for Xplorio, the quest to gather the paperwork for his study visa threatens to become another full-time job. He needs three months bank statements showing that he has the money to pay for his studies, a yellow fever certificate, a radiology report, a passport, a police clearance certificate and proof of medical aid paid up for four years. He needs a CAT scan and a medical report.

"What else do I need? I need a birth certificate, but I don't have a birth certificate, I have a birth record. So I've had to apply for that. I'm in Livingstone, but there is only one office in Lusaka where you can apply for a birth certificate. A lot of things are taking longer than they should do from the Zambian side, and I am waiting for a new police clearance certificate from the South African side. I also need a letter from the university stating that they have accepted me, and then I need a few more things."

A one-way ticket to Zambia costs about five thousand rand, and that's money that could be going towards his medical aid, so he has decided on the long stay to get everything done. "So *ja*, I'm waiting to get all my ducks in a row, then I will go to the embassy in Lusaka. I have to submit the application here in Zambia, I can't do it from South Africa."

Time has slowed down for him in Livingstone. The lodge is far out of town. There is no public transport to speak of, and the taxis don't run in the evenings. At the small run-down lodge there is little to do. He meets the streams of people who come to visit, and discovers

that his family is much bigger than he imagined. He spends a lot of time talking to his grandmother as he helps her behind the bar in the evenings.

"My grandmother was a permanent resident of South Africa. So I asked her, why did nobody make me a permanent resident, and then I wouldn't have had to go through all of this? And she said – because your mother didn't do what she needed to do. Because my mother was a permanent resident in South Africa when I was borne. So all she needed to do was apply for a family visa for me and then none of this would have happened. But she didn't do that – and here we are. I don't know why she didn't do it. Maybe she was too immature, because she had me when she was 18. But my mother, still to this point, is quite irresponsible."

He has time to think about forgiveness and moving on. After his spiral into depression and during the two years when he didn't speak to his mother, Sanja Lutzeyer – Jan's sister – offered him 10 weeks of life coaching. She also encouraged him to attend Landmark Forum, a weekend course in Cape Town. He was encouraged to phone somebody who he hadn't forgiven and to make amends.

"The person I called was my mom. So ja, I've forgiven my mom. We're closer now, but not close. At least we can have a normal conversation now. Sanja taught me that keeping my mental health in check is super important. After the life coaching and the Landmark Forum, I felt really good."

And he learns more of the ways of the Zambian people. Despite his citizenship, it is a place that feels further away from home with each passing day.

"The Zambian people are very friendly," he says. "They'll always be nice to you. They'll always extend courtesies to people who they don't know. But at the same time, they're very focused on traditions and on the elders being the ruling class. Everything elder people tell you, you have to listen to that, no questions asked. And I don't feel comfortable with that. Even here at the lodge, I've been shouted at by older people, and told, that is not how we do things around here. So, yeah, it's not really the place for me. I'm not a person who will just roll over and let wrong things happen for the sake of tradition."

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Malcolm got everything in place. Again. He submitted the paperwork to the South African South African embassy in Lusaka and was issued a receipt so that he could collect his passport and his visa when it was ready. He gave the receipt to his uncle who said he would collect the passport from Lusaka on his return from Congo. That would save Malcolm the cost of the trip.

Malcolm's uncle was travelling to Congo as the middle man of a South African trader who was selling trucks from Congo to a Zambian customer. He was many days late returning from that trip, and Malcolm and his grandmother were not able to get through to his phone. They feared the worst. They found out later that those trucks were unlicensed. The uncle was arrested and jailed and it was several days before he was given access to a phone and a plan could be made for his release.

Malcolm travelled to Lusaka – a seven hour bus trip – to meet him outside the visa office on Sunday morning as they had agreed through a long string of WhatsApp messages. But his uncle was held in a Congolese cell for longer than he had anticipated. Malcolm was still waiting when he arrived at the embassy on Tuesday afternoon, shortly before it was to close for the day. He barely greeted his uncle. He grabbed the slip and ran into the office.

The woman behind the counter tapped the reference number into her computer and retrieved Malcolm's passport. A universe of possibilities raced through his mind. A complication that he could never even have imagined? A document that he had forgotten?

She handed him his passport. He flipped it open and there it was affixed to a page. Alongside the government coat of arms, the words *South African Study Permit* with his name spelled out underneath.

His whole face broke into a smile as he thanked the lady. He almost floated off with the relief of it. And then he sat for a moment on a wooden bench under the window, the humid December air warm on the back of his neck, and he cried.

Nine days later, he was back in Gansbaai, preparing for uni. "Hopefully I'm going to Rhodes next year. It's been a very long road," he told me when we met at a coffee shop

overlooking the harbour. "If I get myself to university I think it's going to be like a surreal experience, and maybe also, confusing and very scary. Because to a degree, I feel comfortable in this constant state of stress. If I do get this thing, then I can finally start my life. Because these last five or six years have been very monotonous. So if I finally make my way to Rhodes and get to sit in that first lecture hall, it would be like a new beginning."

*

It's a winter morning in August 2023, and Malcolm is glad to have his room back. In June the residence accommodated visitors to the annual National Arts Festival. The festival has had a good run. Next year will be its 50th anniversary. But audiences were thin this year, he hears. The festival, like the town, is in decline.

Makhanda, previously known as Grahamstown, is a small town in the interior of the Eastern Cape known for its heritage appeal. Founded in 1812, by South African standards, it's old. Its economy is fuelled by Rhodes University and by the activity of the Eastern Cape Division of the High Court. Malcolm arrived this year to a town in protest as government announced plans to move the court to Bisho. That move, said the university's vice chancellor at one of those protest, would turn Makhanda into a ghost town.

Malcolm puts on the clothes hanging on the back of his chair from the day before – jeans and a brown woolly jumper. He laces up his sneaker, picks up the kettle in one hand and his blue dustbin, which he uses as a bucket, in another. There are three flights of narrow stairs to get to the bottom of Goldfields residence – grey laminate floors, white walls scuffed here and there. There is a huddle of students at the glass doors and he greets them as he walks out past the broken wooden table and bench set that has been shipwrecked there since he arrived in January.

It's cold outside. He fills the kettle and bucket from the green Jojo tank that catches rain from the roof of Goldfields. It is set among a collection of other residential buildings named for the mining houses of long ago. The buildings are old now. Patches of salty white damp creep up facebrick walls. Gutters that were once white are mottled with black and jagged where they are broken. Patches of lawn are overrun with weeds.

Yesterday the power was out for twelve hours straight, but at least there is electricity this morning. Back in his room he boils the kettle. He undresses and pours some boiling and some cold water into another grey bucket.

The rectangle of room just fits a single bed and a desk. There is a cupboard and a low bookshelf – shoes on the bottom shelf, books on the top – and a little white sink and mirror. The white walls are bare. It's cramped, and it gets rowdy sometimes with so many of these rectangles slotted together. But it's home for now. As long as his fees are paid.

With a sponge and a little bar of blue soap he starts the cramped morning ritual of a bucket bath. He digs the long spikes of a silver toothed comb through the thickening rise of his unruly block of hair and pours some of the blue bucket water into a cup to brush his teeth.

It's been a week since he had a shower. While loadshedding seems to have eased in the rest of the country, Makhanda is without electricity for days at a time. It's without water for other days at a time and sometimes, those days overlap. He has had to work out systems for each of these scenarios because, while the dining rooms have backup power and water, the sixty students of the residence are left dry and in the dark. There are no showers, flushing toilets or washing machines.

He read online that the local municipality has spent 80-something million on fixing the water situation, but still the water that trickles out of the taps is undrinkable and sometimes the taps are dry.

He clears away the plate from last night's dinner on his desk to make way for his books and runs through a list of what is due before deciding what he can work through before his 11 o'clock lecture.

There is a linguistics test tomorrow on the phonology and morphology of African languages. There's a journalism essay due – he has finished the framework and the planning for it – but it still has to be written. On Monday he has three essays and a presentation due. There is an open mic tomorrow night at The Ink Society. It's a poetry reading club and the only non-academic activity he has allowed himself. He reads through the first few lines of a

piece that could – if he had time – grow into a short story.

Her vision was clouded, partly due to the repeated blows to the head, and the blood now running down her face. She was beaten, bruised, slashed and torn. But as her world dimmed to her certain death, she let out a chuckle. A chuckle so soft yet defiant it angered her three assailants. "What's so funny whore? Were your brains fucked out or have all the drugs finally driven you mad?" They stared at her. Body crumpled against a wall and fading fast. But not fast enough. With her final breath she quietly seethed. "You may call me what you like, do with me what you like. But I will never let you do to my daughter what you did to me." Then, "Run for the pier Diana! Head for the pretty boat we saw yesterday and find the nice man!"

But there will be no reading of that piece at the Ink Society. There is too much work to do. He thinks about tidying his room. But he has to prepare for the meeting with his anthropology presentation group tonight. They have been asked to consider if Marvin Harris, one of the founders of anthropological theory, was a materialist or a mentalist. They will each present five slides within the given format. "Six minutes and forty seconds. No more no less. Twenty slides, no more no less. Twenty seconds per slide, no more no less. And if its one second over then it's not the correct format."

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Rhodes University is indistinguishable from the upper side of town. Faculty and residences are scattered amongst shops and sandstone heritage houses that hint at more genteel past. That surprised him, when he first arrived, the state of the place. It's as if the Eastern Cape is another country, a poor neighbour to the Western Cape where he has lived most of his life.

He imagined longboarding from one lecture to the next. People complain about the potholes, but the roads are so badly disintegrated it's if a cancer has turned the tar to crumble. Sometimes, if he's running late, he pushes out on the longboard. But its safer to walk. He passes the car guards in their dirty yellow bibs, the people pausing to dig through

rubbish bins. There are little piles of rubbish here and there and a detritus of plastic everywhere.

He was surprised also by the cows, goats and donkeys wandering the streets, nosing through the rubbish. Sometimes it feels like the scene of a virtual apocalypse, the kind he gets lost in late at night, finger tapping at his dragon gaming mouse, huddled over the glow of his screen.

Last year he spent a few days with a friend at Stellenbosch University and even attended lectures with him. They walked the paved sidewalks past Cape Dutch buildings set amongst avenues of oak trees. He loved the pedestrian friendly streets with their bars and restaurants decked out in fairy lights.   It was still unclear, back then, if he too would be a university student in 2023. He allowed himself to imagine that things would work out and that Makhanda would be the Stellenbosch of the Eastern Cape.

When he walks the length of High Street which terminates in the gothic tower of the Anglican cathedral, he can see that this town once had its own version of that appeal. But education wise at least, he believes that Rhodes is pretty much on par with Stellenbosch.

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He assures himself that he is having the university experience and he is having fun. He is making friends and doing what he came for: he is enrolled for a Bachelor of Journalism degree. He was encouraged by an email from the university telling him that he had done well in the mid-year exams, and that if he keeps it up, he will be considered for the Dean's list of top academic achievers. That honour would come with a discount on his fees. He hasn't seen his results. They have been withheld because his fees are late.

I met Malcolm in the dining room that services a cluster of residences. I wondered about this man who showed so little of himself in order to survive, yet who had agreed to share his story with me over eighteen months. While he was contained – he spoke of his depression, anxieties and anger as if they were objects detached from him – perhaps sharing his story was an invitation to step more openly into his authenticity.

I was alarmed at how run down the dining room was with glass panes cracked and wooden door frames rotting. Huge pots that once held plants were smashed, the soil spilled and hardened out of them. It was loud, with a blaring TV and the clatter of the kitchen preparing for the Sunday evening meal, but Malcolm told me that after the five or six years of struggling to get to Rhodes, he was finally here and he was doing well.

"Some days I have too much work, I feel stressed. But then I get my marks. The majority of them are between 78% and 90%. And that motivates me to keep doing well and to follow through with this." That sentiment is shared by Ernest who posted the faculty's notice about Malcolm's excellent June results to Facebook with a comment: "When you feel so proud your heart can burst…"

But Malcolm is stressed about his fees. He has to pay two lump sums of R75 000 each this year. The first is paid. That bank of savings from all those jobs he worked in Gansbaai and from his years at Droid has dissipated. There were living expenses, particularly during Covid when salaries were cut at Droid. There was the travel to Zambia to sort out his paperwork. And then there was the big sum he lost in a scam.

A friend of his uncle promised that for a fee he would guarantee his four year South African study visa. He knew the right people, he understood the system. But he needed cash upfront to cover expenses. And then he disappeared. "I trusted him because he was my uncle's friend. And I thought, OK, he and my uncle have known each other for years. Why would someone like that scam me?"

Ernest paid that first lump sum from the last of the instalments he receives every few months for writing code for casino software used in the USA. Those funds are depleted now, and if the legalities of an inheritance that is due to him are resolved, then he will commit R220 000 towards the four year degree over and above what he has already paid.

That will take Malcolm to about August next year, but he will need to fund the balance of the four years. Making the Dean's list will help, especially if he does so over four years. As for the rest of the fees, he will have to figure something out.

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But he is at Rhodes. And while he has been to linguistics, anthropology and German today, it is the last class of the day and the one he came here for. Journalism.

While at 26 years old he is considered a mature student, with his red cap pulled low over his eyes he disappears into the comfortable anonymity of a crowded undergraduate lecture hall. A rising semi-round of seats broaden into the height of the auditorium with the lecturer – the youngest and liveliest of his teachers – talking up at the group from the screen of his presentation.

"We analyse films to engage with the world and to critique society," he tells them. He asks who has watched American History X in preparation for the class. Few raise their hands. He moves around the lecture hall as he talks, darting out questions and inviting participation despite the distracted murmur of chatter and students lost to tapping at their phones. "Quieten down, respect us comrades!"

He tells them of the language of cinema, and the cues that combine to tell the story. The music, the camera angles, the lighting. They consider themes and symbols.

"Who can name a symbol from the movie," he asks, "that might tell us something about its themes?"

"The swastika," says one student, after he cajoles them to respond.

"You have these answers in you, why do I have to drag them out of you?" he says as he bounces his way through the vast auditorium in his camo trousers and blue t-shirt, approaching students directly to respond.

"And what does that represent?"

Malcolm is one of the few who raises his hand and waits for the lecturer to invite him before he contributes. "It represents white supremacy," he says, "and it tells us that the character identifies with that."

"Films are moving pictures that tell a story, and it is in how you choose to put the pictures together that the story is told," he tells them before sharing the narrative structure that is true to all stories: exposition, rising, action, climax and resolution.

Malcolm jots down the structure in his notebook, even though he is already familiar with it. This is Lecture 4 in the module Introduction to Film Analysis. He has read the lecture notes ahead of the class and highlighted blocks of texts. He connects one section with what it is related to in another section by colour code. His books are marked with lines of luminous blue, green, yellow and pink with pencil notes jotted in the margins.

"A story starts at equilibrium," the lecturer says. "The mother is out by the lake chopping wood. She notices the child is missing. Something has changed. That's the exposition. She goes to the house to tell the father. We are in the rising. The father goes out to find the child and comes across the kidnappers who demand a ransom. We are in the action. He fights them. There are guns and blood and dead bodies all over the place. That's the climax. He retrieves the child and brings her back home. We are returned to equilibrium and that's the resolution."

Malcolm jostles out of the lecture hall and past a team planting new flower beds with aloes and succulents along the pathway that leads from the arched doorway of the administration block in a straight line: through a park, under The Arch, over Somerset Street, down the length of High Street and into the concentric stone arches of the doorway of the Anglican Cathedral of St Michael & St George.

He passes beneath The Arch and throws the longboard ahead of him. It's an easy cruise down Somerset Street, and the tar on this road, at least, has held its ground. As he leans into the left turn at the School of Business on his way back to Goldfields, he thinks about equilibrium.

"Arriving at Rhodes isn't my resolution," he told me the next morning when we met at Jack's Bagels. It was seven years after the broken promise of a university scholarship and he was finally an undergraduate. After so many adults had failed him he had single-mindedly stepped into the driving seat of his life and refused anything other than "yes" as the answer to his aspiration. It took true grit. And finally, he could start asking, What next?

"The resolution would be that I finish however many degrees I decide to do and then I reach my state of equilibrium: I'm in the career that I want, I have a stable job, and maybe I

can think about starting a family. The overarching theme is that I am somewhere stable and I don't need to keep dodging all these immigration problems by flying somewhere else every three months. That would be my return to equilibrium."

Chapter 11 Asahleli: It smells like money

Asahleli Meje

Ja, we are doing well [Asahleli is talking about himself and his brothers in 2022]. You know, there's a code that says, tough times create tough men. I think we're an example of that.

I went through all those things so that I can pave the way for all the youngsters who are coming after me. Maybe someone will relate to my story and say, okay, there is that guy who has done it before. I'm gonna be like him. I'm gonna do it.

Asahleli Meje in the drying room at Abagold, 2022. (Photo: Kimon Phitidis), and as coach of the Try Again FC in 2023 (photo supplied by Asahleli).

Asahleli continued to live in the slipstream of Siviwe's life beyond their time at CPUT.

Once Siviwe graduated, and in-line with the requirements of his partial bursary from the company, he started a six-month internship at Abagold. The abalone farm and factory's four thousand tanks were spread over 13 hectares between the Atlantic Ocean and the shacks of Zwelihle which bordered its fence.

The township was well-known to Siviwe. It was where he had been raised by his sister and where he had attended primary school and the first two years of high school. Asahleli's circumstances were also known to him. He knew that the protests had closed down campus and that Asa had returned to Stanford after burying his father in the Eastern Cape. He knew that his financial position was tenuous.

He told the human resources manager that there was this guy in Stanford who was studying biotechnology. He wasn't able to attend lectures because of the protests. "Wouldn't it be a good thing," he suggested to her, "if he came here and did some vacation work. It would be great if he could be exposed to the work environment."

Lou-Anne Lubbe agreed to meet Asahleli. She was immediately taken by the ease of his broad smile and his quickness to erupt into a deep belly laugh. He was personable and well-spoken and she saw that he would be a good fit with the company culture.

She had taken on many students before, but had never heard of the biotechnology degree. As Asa explained that the course was about Anything and Everything, she saw that it would be a perfect fit for the research that drove innovation at Abagold. And, of course, his statement was populated with distinctions.

Lou-Anne saw beyond his humility to an ambition that would drive him through holiday work, to an internship to a permanent position at Abagold. She understood that he was the first member of his family to graduate and that he was driven to build a better life for himself and his family.

And over several years, she got to know him better. "Asahleli has absolute humility. And he works his butt off. But he has a really curious and innovative mind. It's like the cogs in his mind are on the go the whole time. He's always thinking: How can we do this better? How

can we do this differently? But then he doesn't impose that. He'll test it first. His suggestions are considered."

He was brought on for casual work at the factory where abalone feed was made. It looked like thickly sliced, perfectly curled crisps made from hardened beach sand. Later in his career he would walk the rows between the tanks each morning, checking the number of animals in each basket before dropping in a handful of feed. Asa learned that the company's efforts to spawn and grow feed for the young animals and manufacture feed for the mature ones was one of its many innovations. His love for scientific discovery – the possibilities of Anything and Everything – was immediately piqued.

"I was so excited," he says of his offer of vacation work. "It was my first time being hired. I got the new uniform, the blue uniform you know, it was so nice. It gave me hope. That's why I'm so in love with the place. I love Abagold. There's nothing that I wouldn't do for them."

The campus closures extended into the December vacation period. He was getting his first taste of work experience. And, more importantly, he was paid a stipend. He bought a new jacket and new shoes. When he returned to CPUT the following year he felt – for the first time – just like any other student on campus. And he thanks Siviwe for that.

"So when I look at Siviwe, he's the guy that I looked up to in high school. He helped me through my grade 12. He enrolled me at varsity. And then he employed me. Is he a god or something?" he laughs.

"I will say that I am who I am today, because of him. I am where I am today, because of him. So for me, I will not tell you of how he is as a person, but I will tell you what he did for me and then you can decide for yourself the type of person he is," he told me. And then he was quite for a long time as we sat in an Abagold meeting room, overcome with emotion.

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Living alongside the curve of Walker Bay, Asa had grown up aware of the abalone, or perlemoen, that grew in the cold Atlantic.

At Abagold he became immersed in the lore and mythology of abalone. He learned that despite the fall from abundance to scarcity after decades of over harvesting and poaching, it was estimated that 1 000 tonnes per year were still removed from local waters by poaching syndicates who employed young men as divers and runners who fed their harvest into sophisticated criminal networks. He learned that one South African species – that grew in the tanks at Abagold – developed a reputation for its size and flavour. That species now faced extinction in the wild.

He learned that abalone had been associated with status in China for over 2000 years, and that it was the flesh of the abalone – particularly its broad foot – that made it valuable.

He learned that, if prepared correctly, the flesh of the abalone had a delicate, buttery taste, and that it remained an aspirational delicacy for the Chinese middle classes.

In the early 1990s research into spawning and rearing abalone commercially was in its infancy. Abagold was founded by a Hermanus based veterinarian who started experimenting with breeding abalone in his garage. Today it is a leading provider of farmed abalone internationally and the largest private employer in Hermanus.

He learned that there were ancient Japanese steaming and drying methods that had been perfected over generations, and that he – a young Xhosa man from South Africa – was to become part of that mythical lineage.

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It's a winter morning in 2022, four years after Asa's first informal work experience at Abagold. He is now one of a team of production supervisors responsible for producing the live, canned and dried abalone product for export.

It is so dark when he wakes in his rented room in Zwelihle it may as well be midnight. He switches on the bare bulb of the overhead light and boils the kettle. The room is small, but comfortable. The walls are grey, the floor worn planks. It is just big enough for a bed, a wardrobe, a fridge and a two plate cooker balanced on an orange gas bomb. A melamine cabinet with crockery and cooking pots obscures the single window with its view over the

washing lines of his landlord. There is a plastic chair by the bed which he sits on sometimes when he watches TV, his dinner balanced on his lap.

When he first started working at Abagold he lived in a wendy house in Marikana, an informal settlement on the outskirts of Zwelihle with public ablutions and no electricity. When he was promoted he built his own shack in the backyard of a house in Peach House, a better neighbourhood. And with further salary increases he upgraded again to this brick and mortar backyard room, a short walk from Abagold.

True to the pattern he set up after he left home – at Kraaifontein and at Mbekweni when he worked at Distell – outside of the familiar routes from home to work to evening football practice, he keeps to himself. After all these years, the loneliness inhabits him like a small burrowing creature. Sometimes he wishes there was another person he could talk to about his day and about how he is feeling.

"When you are alone at home, there's no one you can talk to, no one to give you a hug or something, you know. I know the phone is there, but it's not the same. Because, you know, we're still growing. And there are some things we face alone that we shouldn't be facing. We should be discussing it with someone, definitely….if you're not talking about that thing to anyone, then it piles up inside you…"

He huddles into his coat as he walks the dark streets, past Lukhanyo Primary and the low-slung rectangles of houses with their asbestos rooves and swept yards. Night is yet to fully lift when Asa arrives at the security gate which breaks the floodlit march of high walls and electric fences designed to keep abalone in and unauthorised people out. He is yet to speak his first words of the day or to make eye contact with another person.

He wears black boots and black jeans fashionably ripped in places. His hands are pushed deep into the pockets of a padded navy jacket that extends to below his knees, a black peak cap is pulled low over his forehead. He greets and signs in with the cluster of security guards dressed in the green and brown camo of military fatigues, firearms strapped to their thighs. *"Vulela!"* he shouts out in his father's baritone as he stands at the turnstile, one hand paused on the cold metal, waiting for the guard to click through the release.

The inside of the perimeter is quiet but for the hum of machinery that pumps sea water and air into acres of tanks. Asa's face is set in a serious frown and the characteristic bounciness of his step is flattened in his early dawn isolation.

He punches in a code to unlock a circular access gate, punches in another at a keypad to disarm the alarm system and collects and signs for the bunch of keys to the factory and surrounding buildings.

The boiler room that feeds high pressure steam into the factory is quite. The stainless steel tank with its fat pipes, levers, dials and monitors is still to be called into service. The water pressure is low, and he sets the feed pump to automatic before switching on the burner.

Outside he climbs the ladder to a tank on a wooden scaffold, and using a long wooden stick with notches, checks the diesel level. With 1 300 litres in the tank its more than enough for the day's production. He documents the various indicators on a chart alongside the boiler, and opens up the locker room where he changes into his white coat, gum boots and pink hair net – the colour that indicates that he is a manager.

The glass box of the office with views onto the factory floor hums into fluorescent life as he clicks the light switch. He checks the paperwork that has been left on a counter by the supervisor of the previous shift. It lists what has to be finished from the night shift and then the day's production target. By the end of the day he is to have overseen the canning of 10 517, and the drying and hanging of 5 870 abalone.

While blue baskets of live abalone will arrive at the one end of the factory throughout the morning, by day's end 3 700 kilograms of product will be ready to send to customers in China, Singapore, Dubai and elsewhere who have already placed their orders.

Once the shift starts there is the hum of machinery and the rush of water, as production lines of of people – white coats, black hair nets – settle into the rhythms of processing the animals that were spawned from breeding stock in a vault like room. They were grown in a series of tanks in the hatchery and fed on seaweeds spawned and grown on-site. They were moved through a series of tanks over five or more years – with water, air, feed, weight and

general health carefully monitored and controlled. And then they arrive in blue crates at the factory door.

They are weighed and counted to ensure that every one is accounted for. They are shucked, gutted, debeaked, bled, salted and fed into lines of washing, scraping and scrubbing. Then on the conveyor belt of an automated grading machine, the ovals of buttery flesh are separated into two production lines. Some will be sent for chilling, boiling, brining and hanging. Others will be canned. The value of the production that will pass through Asa's hands this shift is about half a million rand.

Asa briefs the teams on the targets for the day. He offers words of encouragement, before retreating to the sanctuary of the drying room. Lines of abalone flesh, hand threaded onto long strings, hang in densely packed lines from the ceiling. They could be strings of room dividers sold at a craft stall. A still kaleidoscope of gentle pink, brown and pale yellow in the dimly lit space offsets the pink glow of his hair net, the darkness of his complexion, the white of his coat and his eyes.

The room is small and densely packed. It's warm with the gentle hum of the dryer which circulates a pleasant meaty odour. While he is not a wine drinker, his senior exec has likened the work he does in this room to the work of a master wine maker in his cellar, crafting a world-renowned Bordeaux blend. He explained to Asa how the wine maker would tap a sample into a glass, swirl it, breathe it in, holds it to the light.

Asa breathes in the warmth of the contained space, sensing intuitively that all is well. No off-smells, no crispness of over-drying. It is just right. And his world is just right. He takes samples of flesh into his hand, holding each one first towards his face to inspect with his eyes. The colour and texture is as it should be. Each unit is whole and clean and unmarked by shucking and gutting. He inhales then feels the texture, holding each one between fingers and thumb, intuiting the squeeze of the interior against the crunch factor of the outside layer. He learned, when he first arrived at Abagold, that the dried product is the shape and yellowish colour of the Chinese gold ingots of old. The beauty of the dried product is integral to its value and to the positioning of Abagold products around the world.

Asa has taken as much to the art, as he has to the science, of perfecting the product. In the drying and cooking room – with its vast vats of fresh abalone slowly cooked and swirled with giant wooden paddles by master cookers – he is one of a line of craftsmen who have perfected the *kippin* method of drying abalone.

First developed in Japan six hundred years ago, this form of dried abalone was produced at the behest of the Japanese Emperor and sent on the 2 000 kilometre journey as gifts to the Chinese Emperor in Beijing. It has become the flagship product of Abagold, the first company to produce *kippin* dried abalone outside of Japan. It has also offered Asa a home home that he could never have dreamed of in the cramped dark of the drying room.

"I enjoy being here more than being at home. Maybe it's because I live alone. And I have fallen in love with what I'm doing. Even the smell of the dried abalone, it brings life to me."

"It smells like money!" Asahleli laughs in response to my question as I too take in the smells of the drying room. "Well that's what my senior exec said to me when I came here. I was still fresh and new. And then he came to me and then he says," he holds cupped hands to nose and inhales, "'sniff here.' And then I was sniffing. And then he says, 'what does it smell like?' And I said, 'it smells like abalone.' He said, 'no! It smells like money!'," he laughs. "So I kept that ever since, it smells like money. But also, it smells like biltong. When I'm smelling that thing, there's that voice, and it's saying, everything will be fine. I could be having a rough day, but when I smell that, it gives me hope. It gives me life."

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It was October 2021 and the pandemic had run almost two years of its disruptive course. The function had been planned, then cancelled, then planned again. It was normally a grand affair. A hotel in town. A three course meal. Black tie and evening dresses.

But that year, the annual Abagold Chairman's Award ceremony was held amongst the paths and beds of hardy coastal plants outside the head office, a stone and glass building with views over the tanks of abalone quietly growing. A small crowd attended, limited to the board members, the senior management team and only those that had good reason to be there.

Asa was taken by surprise the morning he opened his emails to learn that he was one of eight of the hundreds of Abagold employees nominated for the chairman's award. He cast his eye through the list of names. The others were so much older than him. His work had been acknowledged by his manager, but now he was being recognised by the chairman.

He was even more surprised to later find that he had been shortlisted to three finalists. And each of them was among the people who gathered that evening. They stood apart from one another, minding their distance, speaking through their face masks. A light breeze brought with it the smell of the sea just beyond the tanks.

As Werner Pick, Asa's senior executive, spoke about his achievements, he looked around, thinking that maybe he was talking about someone else. He felt out of place. He felt undeserving. Werner said that he had committed to understanding the product and that he fitted in well with the team. Despite it being his first year as a production supervisor, his care and intuitive feel for the drying process had maintained demand and pulled through sales during the disrupted Covid-19 trading period.

Asa listened, bewildered. He was new to the job. He was still trying to find his feet.

He heard that he had improved the quality of the dried abalone, the flagship product. That meant that it could be sold more widely and at a higher price. And he had improved the yield. "Typically we put one kilo in and get 100 grams out," said Werner. "If Asa puts one kilo in we get 105 grams out with attention to detail and understanding the science."

The company Sister, who managed the company's health response to the pandemic, was awarded the chairman's award. Asa was a runner-up. "That could be the biggest achievement of my life so far," he says. "And then, you know the reason for that? It caught me by surprise, you know. When I thought about it, when I still think about it, I can't believe it."

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Werner had motivated for Asahleli to be nominated for the chairman's award. He saw in Asahleli something which it took Asa some years to see within himself. Within him lived the unlikely marriage of a production guy and a quality guy.

While Abagold offered Asa his first job, it was his second experience working on a production line. The first was at Distell where as a student intern he was taught to monitor the quality of wine samples – testing for CO_2 content, protein stability, microbial count – and then later on the bottling line where he tested for glass contamination, breakages and size specifications.

Asa developed a theory of the politics of the factory floor that he believes would hold true of just about any factory setting. "A quality guy and a production guy, they don't get along." If a production guy is told that his target for the day is to get 5 000 bottles down the line, he will do whatever it takes to reach that number regardless of the quality. And then he clashes with the quality guy who tells him there is this problem and that problem, and that disrupts his production. As an intern, with no experience or authority, Asa discovered that even if he was tasked to reach a production target, at heart he was a quality guy.

At Abagold, he started out in production, but he favoured quality over reaching a production target. "I aligned with the company values before I knew what the company values were. The motto of Abagold is Quality First, and when I arrived here there was already this quality guy living inside me. Soon I got to see their vision and that aligned with my vision. So we have the same ideology."

Werner also motivated for Asa to be put on the Abagold management programme, an intensive course for future leaders. I asked Werner about Asa's prospects at Abagold.

"If Asa continues on the track he is on, he would likely be the next factory manager, that's where I see him. There are a couple of other people also in the running for that position, but we're a growing company and he might end up somewhere else. But he will definitely be in a management position in the next three to five years rather than being just a supervisor."

Through a series of management courses, he has been invited to view the bigger Abagold picture beyond the production line. He has learned about the economics of the business and about the relationship between income and expenditure. He has learned about the complexity of managing such a big workforce and about the importance of building a

company culture. And through that he believes that he is being invited to imagine himself as a future leader.

A year after Werner Piek told me about Asahleli's prospects, he was promoted to assistant production manager. He had developed a reputation for taking care of the production process when his supervisor was absent. He would easily step into the role of manager, he was told, when he was awarded the post.

"Does it come with a higher pay grade and perks and all those things?" I asked him. "Ja definitely," he laughed. "You know, it was not so long ago that I didn't know what I was going to have for supper. And then a few years down the line I'm here deciding what to have for supper. That's the huge difference."

But there is a deeper motivation to his commitment to Abagold. "My story and their story is linked. They were there for me when I lost my father and I lost every source of income I had. They offered me vacation work. And they have offered me so many opportunities to grow. And now the ball is in my court. When they have done so much for me, what will I now do for them?"

He imagines a long term future with the company. He hopes to get married. He has met someone in Zwelihle, but neatly sidesteps my questions about her name and the course of the relationship. Marriage is a big step, he says. He doesn't know when he would be ready to commit to that.

One day he would like to move into his own house and start a family. He wants to be successful, even though he doesn't have a clear picture of what that might like. "But fate has got its strange ways of doing things," he says. "I don't know my destiny, because I'm not a fortune teller. I can tell you where I will be tomorrow, but beyond that, maybe the universe has other plans for me."

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When I met Asahleli in his rented room in Zwelihle, I was struck by the scarcity of it and how it reflected the loneliness that had characterised his journey from school, through the traumas of university to being a manager at Abagold. I had got to know him as a man who

easily showed himself. He spoke with emotive integrity about his anxieties and with humble disbelief about his astounding achievement. While it was his resilience and determination that got him there, he seemed to feel undeserving and that it was his lot in life to carry his burdens alone. Yet with all his inner turmoil, he presented a charismatic lightness, was always quick to laugh and seemed to be universally well liked.

His many conversations with me were an unburdening. He was an eloquent storyteller, and was moved to tears when he read a draft of his story, much of it written in his own words. In taking the trouble to learn something of his life and write it down, I became a witness to the hero within him. He hoped that his story might fortify others who struggled alone.

Not long ago, Asahleli believed that the biggest achievement of his life was being nominated for the Abagold Chairman's award. But 2023 had brought new blessings, and these, he was happy to claim as his own.

As he sat on his bed – there was only one chair in the room – he showed me the floating trophy on the fridge, an oversized gold cup with tassels of red, white and blue ribbon. It was awarded to the Try Again FC at a ceremony in June. And until next year's tournament, it would be kept safe here, on Asahleli's fridge.

Asa has followed each chapter of the story of the Stanford based Try Again FC, the club that was founded by his father and that Asahleli played for when he was in high school. On one of his visits home, Asahleli checked in with the boys to make sure they were preparing for the June 16 Youth Day Tournament in Hermanus. He was shocked to learn that no one was coaching them. They met up informally to play, and they weren't registered for the tournament. "That's when I found out that no one cares for these boys, no one is coaching them. And I had to step in."

While Asahleli was born in the Eastern Cape, he considers Stanford home. As a teenager he spent most afternoons on the field with Try Again FC teammates and coaches who became another family to him. "When I was that age, if there was no sport – and no one coaching us – what would I have done?" he asks.

With a demanding work schedule that kept him 30 kilometres away from Stanford, and reliant on intermittent public transport, he couldn't be there every day. But he registered the team for the tournament.

Over a series of weekends Asahleli coached the team for the tournament, setting up drills and practice routines for the week and following their progress through WhatsApp and Facebook groups that he set up.

Photos were shared on the WhatsApp group showing the team proud in their new kit, thanks to the sponsorship Asahleli raised. While the players are turned out in red and white shorts and shirts, Asahleli stands at the end of the row of players in jeans, a sweatshirt and soccer boots. There is a warrior-like intensity to his stance as he looks into the camera, his training notebook and pen in hand.

Sixteen teams from all over the Overberg took part. The team survived each of the rounds, starting of as one of sixteen, then eight, then four until they faced Zwelihle LFA FC in the final.

He scrolled through his phone to show me the celebratory video clips of the team – still flushed with victory and disbelief – in the kit room after the tournament. The singing, the dancing, the gathering around the cup – each one wanting to touch it – before hoisting it into the air with a rising whoop and eruptions of laughing and cheering. I wondered what stories those boys might tell one day about the coach who believed in them and led them to victory.

"Winning that cup, it's one of the biggest achievements I've ever had," he told me as we looked at the trophy and wondered if Try Again FC would defend it at the 2024 tournament so that it could hold that pride of place on the fridge for another year.

And in 2023, he returned to his roots in other ways.

To mark Mandela Day, an annual event that encourages community service on the birthday of Nelson Mandela, staff were invited to offer a day of service to schools and creches in the area. The company asked alumni of Gansbaai Academia to volunteer to hand out solar powered lights to help the matric class of 2023 study for their year end exams as the country

continued to be beset by rolling blackouts. Asahleli responded to that call, and for the first time since he hand matriculated nine years previously, he returned to his high school. “I was so excited!” Asahleli said of that invitation. “I was so proud to go back to my school.”

Asahleli had never been a member of the Matric Council who sat on the stage during assemblies, but that afternoon he addressed the matric class from the stage as an alumni. He introduced himself as a university graduate and a manager at one of the biggest companies in the Overberg. He wished that Mr Wilson had been there to see what he had achieved. But Mrs Fortuin, the new principal, was his witness.

He invited the class of 2023 to stay focused and true to their goals in what was the most important year of their lives so far. He invited them to close the year with no regrets. He told them that every Monday morning, when he was seated where they were now, he would listen to Mr Wilson delivering a motivational talk. It would remind him to always stand tall as a proud Sharkie.

“Wherever I go, that thing is still with me,” he told them. “I am still a proud Sharky. One day soon each one of you will go out into the world. And when you do so, you should represent yourself well. And remember, you represent your school. When you walk into the world as a proud Sharkie, it will tell a story of who you are and where you came from.”

Chapter 12 Siviwe: You try, you fall, you get up

Siviwe Yuyu

I was robbed. It was close to where I'm staying in Kraaifontein. I was gunpointed and they took my phone. So because I need a phone, I took the last of my money and I bought a decent phone.

I didn't even see those guys. They were very young kids. Fifteen or sixteen. They pointed the gun at me. There were three of them. And they took my phone. At the time I didn't get much of a shock. I just raised my hands and told them, take what you're looking for. The shock - the trauma - comes after that. Now I'm very suspicious of anyone, if there is anyone around me that I don't know.

And then I started to think about things. I need to work hard and get out of the township, for peace sake. I need to get a decent job. Because the reality is, if you become a victim, the anger grows within you. And you get to a point that you want to retaliate. And when you retaliate, you are no longer different to them. And with everything I'm doing, I wouldn't want to see myself changing.

This is the life we live. Young kids can come up to you. Gunpoint you. Take whatever they want. And leave. I mean, who orders them to do these dirty jobs? Where do fifteen year olds get guns? Obviously, there's a superior gangster who sends them.

Siviwe Yuyu in a poster promoting his music business workshop (source: Facebook) and with his son Othimna, posted to Instagram October 2023. "Even when I am no longer around. I want you to know I will forever be with you."

Siviwe Yuyu is a regular visitor to the Hermanus Whale Festival that marks the summer migration of southern right whales to the bay to calve. But he knows more about the whales than his unassuming presence in the crowds that gather on the clifftop paths would suggest.

He knows, for example, that the blubber of an adult female *Eubalaena australis* that might be seen displaying just offshore is about 30 centimetres thick. She needs that to keep warm and to fuel her migrations to the southern oceans. He knows this because he has peeled back the skin of a 15 metre long whale washed up on the Namaqualand west coast.

In 2022 he finished a second one year internship in the marine mammals unit of the Department of Environmental Affairs. He worked with data that tracked their movements around South Africa's shores.

He was a member of the beached whale response unit called to dissect animals for scientific research and to conduct the necropsies to determine the cause of death.

He has used specialised blades to peel back the outer layers of a whale carcass for scientists who would remove the heart, kidneys and lungs and who would later extract the bones.

He has measured the dimensions of the ventral, dorsal and lateral muscles of beach stranded whales. He has cut tissue samples to be tested for microplastics.

He has used surgical instruments to extract samples of stomach contents and has learned that, like a cow, a whale has many stomachs. Even though they feed mostly on krill and small crustaceans he has taken squid beaks from one stomach, worms from another and has found that some stomachs are empty. He has floated these extractions in sterilised jars of formaldehyde, holding them up to the light.

He has learned how to scientifically measure a whale and how to estimate its full weight and its skeletal weight. “The dissection of a whale is very complicated,” he says. “There’s a procedure you have to follow. I know where the process starts. I know how to finish. To get that experience is pretty cool. So now, when I see the skull or the bones of a whale in a museum, I know where they come from and how that came about.”

He has been on two research cruises to study supergroups of marine mammals that feed in the cold Atlantic waters off the west coast at the onset of summer. He has learned of all the ways whales display – mating, blowing, breaching, tail slapping, lobtailing, spyhopping and sailing – as he has counted those that are visible, while estimating the size of the pod.

He has learned about photo identification and how to record first hand scientific data. He has slept on a bunkbed in a cabin with other interns as the ship rolled its way through the troughs and valleys of ocean. He has eaten his meals and watched TV in the mess room. Some days at sea will remain seared into his memory in their spectacular vividness, while others are lost to a foggy blur.

“It's very beautiful. Especially on a clear day when the work is going well. You are seeing what you came for. You can see the whales. You can get the data. Other days are hectic. When the weather’s bad, or when it’s foggy. Then it’s very difficult. Then you can’t really do the work, because there is no clear vision and you can’t do the observations properly.”

There have been so many firsts in the few years since leaving Gansbaai Academia. There was that first time that he walked into a university lecture hall. There was his first flight. And he will always remember his first time at sea.

“That was very hectic. *Yho*! Almost the entire week, I was seasick. I couldn’t even sleep, because you get this nausea, you know. I hardly ate on that trip. But then it got better. And with experience you learn and I was more prepared for the second trip. You know to bring meds, what not to eat before the trip, maybe detoxing and cleansing before going to sea so that you don’t get seasick.”

The whale dissections and the research trips were highlights of his time as an intern. The day-to-day job was to sit in a cubicle in a government office in Cape Town working with citizen science data.

In line with permit conditions, operators of boat based whale watching outfits log whale and dolphin sightings. They record the species, pod size and notes about behaviour as well as the date, time, GPS co-ordinates, water temperature and weather conditions. Operators then capture their log-books into standardised data sheets to submit monthly.

Siviwe's responsibility was to ensure its scientific integrity before entering it into the national database. If the operator had marked a dolphin as "unidentified," he would consult a senior scientist to identify the animal from the photos and then input the species into the system.

His hope was that the clean data could be interpreted by scientist to tell a story. "From that data you can check the distribution of species. You can set your search, for example, from 16 degrees east to 25 degrees west. And against a latitude and a longitude you can tell the migratory patterns. For example, now during the whale festival, you see high populations of southern right whales, this is the time they are around here," he told me as we jostled our way through the crowds on the clifftop paths of Hermanus.

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Growing up in Zwelihle, Siviwe has attended the whale festival just about every year since he was a boy. It's September 2022. He sits on the low stone wall that curves around a section of the clifftop pathway and scrolls through messages on his newly bought second-hand five thousand rand iPhone.

It was early on a Tuesday morning when he was robbed. He was on his way from a rehearsal. He had been cast as an extra for a series that was being shot about the life of the Zulu King, Shaka. He was one of many trained to fight with a spear and shield as they recreated the battle scenes.

He had just finished paying off a contract for the phone that was stolen. He found a trader in Cape Town's CBD who sold quality second hand phones and scooped out the last of his savings to pay for it.

In front of him are two black cannons retrieved from a ship wreck and displayed with the best that Hermanus has to offer – its clifftop views across acres of ocean. It's a clear day, and a tourist standing right here could follow the curve of the bay all the way past Gansbaai to the Danger Point lighthouse at its southern most curve.

But Siviwe has his back to the view. He puts his phone back into his pocket and sneezes voraciously, again and again, his whole body invested in it, before wiping his nose and the

moisture that has pooled into his eyes with a face cloth. He is back home, and the spring allergies have revisited him.

The Hermanus cliff tops are thick with residents and visitors – cameras and binoculars, doughnuts and hats – gathered to welcome the whales. The roads are clogged with cars cruising for parking. The pavements are dense with crowds walking towards the waterfront or pausing to admire shopfronts with beachwear, jewellery and art.

Rocky outcrops that jut into the ocean are laced with visitors in bright summer clothing, day packs and ice-cream cones. Binoculars aim hopefully out to sea, zoom lenses whirr in and out, fingers ready to click. There are drinks tents and bright red Coca-Cola banners flapping along the narrow pathways. Smoking hot dog stands. Competing base beats from lines of beer tents, their sheets of white canvass flapping with the breeze. Loose strings of people at the soft serve stand and the chip 'n dip.

The crowd tempo rises with an ooh as a fluke rises about a hundred metres offshore, and then exhales with an aah as it slaps heavily back into the water. And then – in just about spitting distance from the rocks – the mother shows the gleaming expanse of her back as if she had been summoned to please the crowd. She gives them what they came for.

The waterfront of Hermanus is perched on rocky cliff tops that rise directly out of the ocean. The cliffs hold the waters in relative stillness, ideal for whales to nurse their young. It's the easy opportunities for whale sightings, the views across the bay and the immersion at the clean edge where land meets sea that has drawn the country's billionaires to build their holiday houses here. They perch along clifftop paths that traverse the rocky outcrops and down again to gentle alcoves – Skulpiesbaai, Langbaai, Kammabaai, Voëlklip, Grotto Beach – which ladies in towelling gowns visit for early morning swims.

Below Siviwe, where cliffs meet ocean, rise the sounds of children laughing in the gentle wash of a tidal pool. A flock of terns nestle into themselves on the tin roof of a square of stone building. They face their beaks away from the whale sightings and into the onshore breeze.

Siviwe Yuyu and his friend, Luyande Jange, jostle through the crowds. Siviwe wears blue shorts and a chequered shirt. Black Vans sandals over white socks. Brass hoop earrings. A black North Face cap which features regularly on his Instagram feed is pulled low over his streaming eyes and the exaggerated rounds of his cheek bones.

He blows his nose abundantly into the face cloth which he stuffs back into his pocket. He's hoping that the people at the Hermanus Pharmacy will remember him – it depends who's behind the counter today – and hand over his allergy medication without a fuss. The script they have on their system has most likely expired. While he still calls Hermanus "home," he seldom visits from Cape Town.

While the crowds are here for the whales, Siviwe Yuyu is here for the crowds.

While he was a student at CPUT he started out in the music industry. Now, he is preparing to host an outdoor concert. He is back home to promote the event.

From his perch on the wall, he looks out for prospects who amble along the path in groups of two or three, reaching into greasy paper bags of KFC or with ice-creams in hand. They're here for a good time and are open to what he has to say.

"*Ei*, sinus!" as he wipes his eyes. Luanda smiles gently at his friends condition, but as they reach a prospect they greet, smile and launch easily into the pitch that is well rehearsed.

While he has been crunching citizen science data by day, by night he has been building a promotions business, representing artists and hosting events. He is here to promote his biggest yet event. It is named on the pamphlet as Ungazincish NICE TIME 2nd Festival ANNI. It will be at the Zwelihle sports field on the 10th of December, about two months away.

Previously, he has represented his artists at events organised by others. Or he has hosted smaller gigs in taverns and indoor venues. This is his event, and it is more complicated than any gig he has put on before. It's a municipal outdoor venue and there are lists of compliance longer than the spine of a southern right whale.

There is public liability. Health and safety. Crowd control. Security. Alcohol control. Food sales. Stage. Lighting. Parking. There are contingencies for foul weather. There's

video and photography. He hopes to record the event and the build up so that brands that didn't sponsor this time round will wish that they had been part of the journey.

He has raised some sponsorship from Jägermeister and from the municipality, even though the extent of these sponsorships is not yet clear. He is still talking to SAB, Distell, Red Bull and Score. But the countdown to the event is ticking by and the money side of things is uncertain.

Siviwe believes in combining social media with the sweat of old-fashioned marketing methods. Walking the pavements, face-to-face conversations, word-of-mouth promotion. This is his phase one strategy to build the visibility of the event, to bring the event closer to the people.

Phase two – bringing the tickets closer to the people – was to be the weekend before the event. He was going to hire two Quantum taxis for a roadshow from Kleinmond, through Hermanus, Grabouw, Stanford and to Gansbaai.

But the money that was going to fund that has been sunk into his new phone. He hopes that the Whale Festival weekend, the social media promotion and the media interviews will be enough to sell out and to bring to him a return for the risk he has taken.

"This is our event. And we don't compromise," he told me as we ate our burgers amongst the crowds at the festival. "But it comes with a lot of money. We personally spend a lot of money. But you need to make sure that the artist is also making a financial contribution and raising sponsorships. Because the relationship with the artist doesn't last forever. And you might lose money by organising an event if things don't fall into place."

Siviwe never included "business person" or "entrepreneur" on the list of what he might be one day. But he was inspired by Scott, who seemed to have so many businesses and who wasn't boxed into one definable profession.

"Scott said to me, you have so much potential. You would make a great business person. And when I started my music business, he invested in it. He believes that it can work. And if it fails, you learn from it and move on. It's OK to fail. That was his advice."

There has been a big outlay for this event. He hopes to sell 2000 tickets to recover the cost and take home a modest profit to add to his depleted savings. Scott has advised him to take on risk. Others who follow the story of Siviwe's life, like Maryanne Ward, are sceptical about his deep-dive into the music business.

"He finished his marine studies, and then what now for this young man? Then all of a sudden he's in the music industry? It's a very difficult career to be in, you know. But anyone could make a mistake like that, going into that kind of career. But then again, who knows? Maybe he's going to manage some famous person one day."

Siviwe and Luande have been into Zwelihle. They've worked the taxi ranks and even got permission from drivers to jump onto taxis and talk to passengers. They have been into the Whale Coast Mall and into restaurants, coffee shops, bars, supermarkets and beer tents to paste promotional posters onto poles and windows. And now they are working the waterfront.

"My focus is, by the end of the day, to have touched a reasonable number of people. The whole idea is to increase visibility and to spark conversations about the event."

It's a long time since he's been home to the Overberg. He was hoping to see his sister who still lives in Zwelihle, but she's gone to the Eastern Cape. He doesn't know why and he doesn't ask questions. He was hoping to recruit Asahleli to help hand out flyers, but he's playing a match with his team, Try Again FC, in Stanford today. When they get to Gansbaai tomorrow to promote the event he hopes to meet with Mrs Harding-Male. He'll see if he has time.

But it's a short trip, and there's a lot to do. Yesterday was the last day of his term as an intern at the Department of Environmental Affairs. He had spent the week preparing his research and the routines of the job to had over to the new intern. Tomorrow night he needs to be back in Cape Town ahead of a five day bootcamp, compulsory to attend for extras in the Shaka Zulu series.

As of today he is both unemployed and an entrepreneur. There's a lot riding on the 10 December concert and his priority is sales, sales, sales.

The poster. NICE TIME in fat white and orange letters against the grill of a bass speaker. A collage of faces of the 24 artists. Caps and hoodies, sunglasses and braids, smiling to camera against a backdrop of pale summer sky. The theme is green and white. No under 18s. Free entry for cooler boxes. The Phase 1 line up includes Holy Alpha, Miss Shelly Yeye and the artist that Siviwe started out with, Bravo Le Roux.

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"Sometimes you have friends, are they're doing careers that are almost like, impossible to believe, that don't make sense, not even to their parents," he says of his friend from Gansbaai Academia, Bravo Le Roux. "When I was doing my BTech in 2018, he released some music, and I was like, this is good, you know? And I asked him, who's helping you in terms of management and stuff? I feel like you've got the potential and can take it far. So he said he was just solo. And then I said, I'm still busy with my academics, but I'll help where I can."

He started working with Bravo when they were students and then started his artist promotion company, Mavalo Media Space, while doing his first internship.

"Slowly we started a bit shooting videos. In 2019 we became a little more of a team, we have a guy who can run the PR. We started getting TV shows, you know, bit by bit, a little bit of radio, interviews, newspapers, and then we're growing."

Siviwe spent his days behind a laptop in the drab of a government building cleaning citizen data. By night, he was building Bravo's following. "Then came 2020 and the pandemic hit, and we were just at the right level, you know. The peak was there, like OK, this is the year Bravo Le Roux breaks through."

During the pandemic people were at home, on-line. "So what do we do? We started shooting music videos, getting into mainstream media, entertainment blogs, people started recognising him. Then come 2021 we got features from mainstream artists that have won awards: Younger Chef, YoungstaCPT, the big names. We started working with them, pushing the work, releasing more music, more videos and – boom! – we are an award nominee now."

I imagine Siviwe in the shack adjoining his uncle's house in Kraaifontein, livestreaming Expresso, SABC 3's popular breakfast show, on his phone. It was another boom moment as his artists was interviewed on live TV in December 2021.

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Jingle: It's my Feel Good Breakfast Show!

Presenter: You're live with Expresso, time to el-le-vate this show to an-o-ther level entirely. We are joined this morning by a rising star on the South African Hip Hop scene. He has been nominated for two! SA Hip Hop awards. We are talking about Bravo Le Roux! He is in the house! The Khayelitsha rapper's first nomination is for mixtape of the year and that's for The Rise of Istrato, a collaboration that he did with the amazing DJ Switch. And his second nomination is for his feature on Flash Ikumkani's Mhluzi remix. Another banger! Before we get to know this incredible young man, let's get a sneak peak of a music video that he has done recently with YoungstaCPT titled – Yabo?!

Presenter: When you get to the point, you know what man?, This is me! I'm gonna make a career out of this. How do you make that decision … knowing that you've got the world against you, bra?

Bravo Le Roux: Another funny story. In 2018, early. I actually was depressed and I stopped everything, you know. I was like studying and, you know, doing my thing. But I was still trying to pursue this rap thing. But it was just not working out. I got depressed, left everything, went to Gansbaai to live with my sister. I had a nine to five right? I was working at *Kekkel en Kraai*. Nasty C had a tour, right? So I was the bru who was voted to actually go and perform there … two weeks later I'm getting texts, yo bro, Nasty C is back in the city and he'd like to meet the people who performed. Yeah, man! I told my boss, ei bru, me, I'm done! I went to my mum, I told her, *eish*, *Oledy*, I think I need to *waai* right now, you know, I didn't even tell my landlord! I just, like, locked my shack and kept on moving, you know! Crazy enough! So, transport situation is super awkward that side, right? … so I was hitchhiking my way to Cape Town…[11]

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It's the 5th of November 2022. A year after that Expresso broadcast and 35 days before the NICE TIME event. Siviwe sits on the steps of the multipurpose hall at the Hermanus New Harbour. He has invited people in the entertainment industry to come together so that

[11] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nXnHbkRoWDE 3:30

he can share what he has learned. It will be the beginning, he hopes, of a community that shares together and grows together.

A day before, I met with Maryanne in Stanford, and told her about the workshop. "I'm very pleased he's starting to run these workshops," she said. "That's the 7 Mindsets thing coming through. Scott is the kind of person who puts people in a room and who runs a workshop, or who gives them something. And Scott made a career out of that. And Scott is commercially oriented. So I wonder if Siviwe is not picking up on that?"

The hall has just been built by the municipality to boost local opportunity. Construction is not quite finished, yet cracks line the bold pyramid that make up the façade. It is set back in a parking lot behind the harbour and is surrounded by blocks of whale watching outfits – Southern Right Charters, Hermanus Whale Cruises.

Behind the hall is the perimeter wall of Abagold, and beyond that, the sprawl of Zwelihle. As Siviwe sits alone on the steps of the hall, he is within easy walking distance of his sister's house where he lived as a child. This is home ground.

It's twenty past nine. The event was scheduled to start at nine, but no-one has arrived. Siviwe is tired and run down. A couple walk past with their backpacks and sun hats. The man aims a camera at the harbour with its concrete bollards and colourful boats. He watches them pass and sneezes – the sinus problem is unresolved – before moistening his lips with some balm and looking towards the entrance gate of the harbour. What if no-one shows up?

The social media poster advertising the workshop promised that attendees would learn about CMOs, Radio & TV plugins, Artist Branding & Brand Management, Event Management, Proposals & Contracting.

His first taker wears a blue and yellow tracksuit, a beard and a braided top knot shaved at the sides. They greet and embrace and Siviwe goes into the hall to set up. A few more people drift in. The representative from the municipality welcomes Siviwe Elvis Yuyu, a director of Mavala Space Media, and thanks him for hosting this music business workshop.

Siviwe stands before the screen which displays the first slide of his presentation in his black North Face cap and a black jacket over a t-shirt that is one of an array of merchandising products for the NICE TIME event. A few more people have arrived and he greets, telling them that this is the first time that he is hosting a workshop like this.

"Why am I doing this? A lot of people ask me, how do you do this or that in the industry. So I thought, let me run a workshop to share what I know. Why in Hermanus? I grew up here. When I started events, I started in Hermanus. Now I am running this workshop for the very first time in Hermanus because this is where my foundation is. I always like to come back where I started, to come back home, and then grow out from there."

He is now talking to about eight men, all around his age, and a few more drift in. He stands stiffly to begin with, his voice wooden, but he softens into the familiar timbre of it – the voice that won speech and debating competitions at school – as he departs from the text of his slides.

His body loosens and he becomes more easy with a smile as he tells how he started and what he has learned. His hands dance their way through the story, he laughs at the early mistakes he made and offers what he learned from them. The growing audience laugh with him, taking notes into diaries or tapping into tablets. Some hold up phones, recording his talk.

In an easy mix of English and Xhosa he tells them about social media and traditional media, venue negotiations and appearance fees. "Start performing for free, build a portfolio, once you have a small portfolio start charging a small fee. Maybe one point five. As a manager think, where is the power of your artist? Where does he have a following? If it's in Worcester, go to Worcester. What are venues? What are the transport costs? Once you have secured his local following, build out from there."

It becomes a discussion about how to do branding. It's up to the manager to come up with the look, they agree. To think about how the artist dresses and how he talks.

"If I am targeting seniors, we are going for that look." Laughter. No one in the room considers himself a senior. "If we are targeting 16 or 18 years olds, that's a different look.

It's not only about the music. It's the whole package. And the package needs to talk to your target audience."

He talks about album covers. Music rights. Contracts. Lawyers. Streaming rights. There is turnover and costs and profit. There are record deals and distribution deals. There is licensing and publishing, management deals, label services and upstream potential. No university will teach you this stuff, he reminds them. Go to the blogs, follow those who have done this before you.

"Talent management is the foundation of my company. That's where I started. Anything else I need to know, I go to the Internet."

He shifts again from the confines of the PowerPoint presentation into storytelling as he talks about *his* relationship. About how over time they have become an item. "Luckily, he's a good performer," he says of Bravo Le Roux. "That's a plus one. Over time we have become an item. We aim to deliver A plus with each performance."

Siviwe has been talking for hours, and he invites his audience to take a short break. When they return the manager of economic development in the Hermanus municipality thanks Siviwe for offering this free workshop.

"I never imagined this community would come together like this. You have such power as entertainers. Long after you've died people will remember you, they will sing your songs, they will dance to your music. There is so much potential under this roof. There is business behind this industry. The municipality will support you, and it helps to have a person like Siviwe, whose heart is in the right place, to guide you."

Now that the venue has filled, he invites a round of introduction. DJ King Simba is attending. But among colleagues, it's OK to just call him Simba. Washington is a music producer. There are a handful of DJs. There is a vocalist and a poet who is starting out as an artist manager. A softly spoken man is from Stanford. He promises to share this information with the artists back home. Another owns a carwash in Hermanus, but he is starting out as a DJ.

It's almost five o'clock as Siviwe winds down his talk ahead of packing up and going home. His feet ache from standing, his voice is tired, and he looks forward to retreating from the spotlight of the talk.

"I hope you pass this on to the next person," says Siviwe. "We can't do this work forever. If we die, the knowledge dies with us. So let's share it. Let's learn from each other. You try, you fall, you get up. Then you try, you fall, you get up again. That's how it works."

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Siviwe's Instagram bursts with countdown posts in the build up to the NICE TIME event. There's a Black Friday special on ticket sales. A promotion through Pick 'n Pay. A reminder that tickets are available through Webtickets. *Big Week! Big Stress!* is the post with four days to go.

The Western Cape coast is known for the high winds that tore through the event that Saturday evening. Turnout was lower than hoped for. Those that came despite the weather had to be moved out of the way as the tents were taken down to prevent their collapse.

Siviwe closed off 2022 with the risks of the music business having become even more apparent. His internship had run its term and he had little prospect of paying work to take him into the new year. Mrs Harding-Mail was also concerned about his prospects.

"He can't work as a bloody intern – sorry for that word – at the Department of Environment. And then what is he going to do? It's not a challenge for him," she told me. "He's got too much potential. He's a scientist. But he's going to get nowhere in his field with just an honours. He has to have an end goal, he has to have a doctorate. Then he'll get somewhere. So now he's doing these gigs for Bravo, and that's fine, but that's not a life. He's got to go overseas. He's got too much potential to be stuck here in South Africa where he can't find a decent job."

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On his birthday, 9 July 2022, Siviwe posted an image of himself in the Cape Town CBD to Instagram. It looks like early morning, he could have been on his way to work. He wore a blue winter jacket, down to his knees. A blue beanie pulled low over his forehead. A bag was

slung over his shoulder. His broad smile to camera exaggerated his features. The round cheek bones. The small round of his mouth. Prominent front teeth.

iam_siv-mavala Big 29 years of ups and downs. (Red heart emoji.) The great, greater & greatest.

Halfway through his twenty ninth year, he would love the certainty of a full time job. But he has applied for contract posts advertised to absorb about 200 Department of Environmental Affairs interns whose terms are ending.

“I’ve learned with government. You get to be an intern. Then you get to be a contract worker. And then you kind of get access to a permanent post. That’s the system.”

He has applied for a post as a youth environmental co-ordinator and for another as a marine monitor. If successful, he could be monitoring the compliance of boat based whale watching and shark cage diving operators, or of commercial fishing operators.

He hopes for at least a two year contract. That would give him the space and security to study towards a master’s degree. He has attempted a master’s before, but dropped out. Now he feels ready now to see it through.

“Before I approach an institutional supervisor I need to figure out what I want to do and how I’m going to do it. I quitted it in 2019 because I didn’t like the topic. I rushed to do it after my BTech and then realised, like, four, five months in, aye, this is not what I want to do and this thing is draining me. This time I need to be sure what I’m doing. Because whatever I do, that’s where I’m putting my marine career.”

When Siviwe completed his BTech at CPUT, students were presented with a list of research topics with supervisors already attached to them. His study assessed the extent of microplastics in the ocean. It was tedious work, bent over a microscope for much of each day, and he soon lost interest in the topic. But dropping out strained the relationships of those who had supported him to get there, like Uncle Theo.

“I’ve enrolled him in courses he didn’t complete, even though he has a really good mind. He started with his masters, and we helped him for years because I believed in his calling to

study oceanography. And then he dropped out of the master's for this, that and the next reason."

Siviwe's research interest is to understand the value that the citizen science data brings to science. He has an instinct for both the problems and opportunities presented by the data sets. He knows, for example, that a tourist operator is commercially rather than scientifically motivated. He knows that if a humpback whale has been recorded several times over a few days by the same operator, it is probably the same animal. Through his research he would like to propose standard operating procedures for recording data to improve its scientific integrity.

The ultimate question he would like to ask – he thinks – is does data gathered by tourism operators support published scientific research or detract from it? At the same time, he would like to understand the trends in visitor numbers and the demographics of the passengers to inform the tourism industry.

"That could be of huge value. But I don't want to just jump into it, and then in the middle say, *ai*, I don't want to do that. I don't want to be that person. So if I could get a decent contract job, for two years, it would be the perfect time for me to do my master's."

Competing with his draw towards a masters is another study interest. "If every job was paying the same," Siviwe said, "I would definitely go and teach." He has had some experience of what that would be like. In between his studies and marine internships, Siviwe went back to his old school – Gansbaai Academia – on an internship as a teacher's assistant. And at CPUT, he took up an internship as a tutor.

He imagines being a science or marine sciences teacher inspiring a new generation of scientists. He would tell them what is likely to lie ahead, using the same words he shared at the music industry workshop. "You try, you fall, you get up. Then you try, you fall, you get up again. That's how it works."

But he was turned down for the post graduate teaching qualification by both CPUT and UNISA because he didn't have the matric subjects needed to study to become science teacher, even though he had two science-based qualifications.

Uncle Theo has long been familiar with Siviwe's aspiration to become a teacher. And he would support him, he says, though he believes that Siviwe might be hesitant to come back to him for help.

"His heart has always been to do the PGCE, but he just doesn't get into that. I've tried and he's tried. Because he will make a very good teacher. He's of the quality of Wilton Phillips. He doesn't mind being liked, or not being liked. He's a born leader. And, I would think, he's not corruptible. He's a very straight down the line kind of guy. When he is in a position of authority, he will do the job well. If Siviwe Yuyu becomes a deputy principal or principal of a school one day, he will be amazing."

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By the end of 2023, more than a year after his internship ended, Siviwe was still out of a job. He had applied at the Department of Environmental Affairs, the City of Cape Town and various other government agencies. While he doesn't specifically say it, he seems to believe that as a black man he will have more opportunity for advancement in a government agency than in the private sector.

The loss of the monthly stipend hit hard. He was still living in the shack adjoining his uncle's house in Kraaifontein where he lived as a student. But his life – and monthly budget – has substantially changed.

In the space between jobs he became a father to Othimna, who, when we spoke in November 2023, was 10 months old. Fatherhood came as a surprise rather than an intention. He was on good terms with the mother, and while he was reluctant to talk to me about his baby at first, videos and photos of baby and father smiling into one another's eyes began to appear on his WhatsApp status.

A successful hip-hop dance event that he hosted in April had sustained him, but those savings were fast depleting.

He talked me through the maths of the April two day gig which he also hosted in partnership with Luande. Between them, they risked R20 000 of their savings. The balance of the R35 000 cost – they ran over budget – they raised through ticket sales. They secured a

biggish name DJ to headline on the first day. “There’s a kid who grew up in Khayelitsha, his popularity is growing. His name is Cairo CPT,” Siviwe told me. “We had him lined up with this other popular guy, Mr. Thela, for the first day.” The gig – New Wave Alert - was planned at Verona’s Lounge, a popular venue, when there was little else going on in Zwelihle. The event sold out, bringing about R150 000 to the partnership.

He would like to host another event, but doesn’t have the savings for it, and from the little he has left after seven months of living expenses, there are costs of job hunting. The airtime, the printing. Wasted trips to Cape Town for interviews that were cancelled, on-line interviews that had been missed because of load shedding and poor Wi-Fi. His difficulties were laid bare in a series of WhatsApp voice notes that told me of his flu – “really bad, and my body is aching all over.” And a text exchange some weeks after I tried, unsuccessfully, to meet with him in Cape Town, believing that he had finally abandoned my writing project.

> I don’t have a phone at the moment, my phone decided to be blank on the screen, and I am financially suffering at the moment I can’t get it fixed…and my laptop is also super slow cause the one I had got a corner dent and has the same problem as my phone. [12]

It raises the question why, as a thirty year old man, the legend of him had not yet translated into a regular monthly income. Perhaps having learned to be independent at a young age, he is quick to defend himself against an assumed slight, and it takes him a long time to trust. In another version of his story, he might not have believed that he was discriminated against at Abagold and would, today, be on a management path there. He might have been considered for a permanent position in the Department of Environmental Affairs. He might have secured a bursary for the PGCE through Sparklekids. But perhaps he has presented himself in a way that keeps those opportunities at bay, despite his intelligence, his generosity towards others and his ambition. But there are still avenues open for his potential to be fully realised.

But there is an upside to being between jobs, gigs and studies. It has forced him to spend more time with Othimna who lives close by with his mother. Siviwe has learned, given the

[12] WhatsApp 7 September 2023

story of his family, that anything can happen. One day, if something should happen to him, he would like the child to hear – as Siviwe has heard about his own father – that his father loved and cared for him.

Each time he walks into the house and Othimna crawls on chubby knees towards him, he is recognised as more than a visitor to the house. He is recognised as a father. And he knows that, whatever happens, 24/7, he is responsible for the child. He sees other men being "sponsors" – visiting once a month, buying nappies and groceries on and off – but he is determined to be a father who is present, involved and who will always be remembered.

Afterword

When we close out Siviwe's story he has graduated with a diploma and a bachelor's degree and at thirty years old he is both unemployed and self employed. His story is one of a boy growing into a man, falling messily on this and then that side of a series of probabilities.

In the dystopian Hunger Games novels, 24 children every year are selected by lottery to compete in a compulsory death match which plays out on live TV. The last one left alive is the winner. The saying, *May the odds be forever in your favour*, is repeated often in the fictional world of Panem.

Back in the arena of the real world, South African children are thrown into an against-the-odds game of probabilities when they go to school. While this is not a fight to the death, there are some shocking truths behind the numbers.

A study that tracked the entire 2008 public school matric cohort for six years after school found that for every 100 children who enrolled for grade one, 37 made it to and passed matric, 14 with a bachelor's pass and 12 with a diploma pass. 12 went on to university, either immediately or later. Only four completed an undergraduate degree within six years of finishing school. [13]

The study only tracks university entry and completion, and some of that cohort would have completed other studies, but still, the leak-out rate is a flood of failed delivery by our education system.

In 2023 the unemployment rate of university graduates in South Africa was 33.6%. [14] So for every 100 of that grade one cohort, the odds favour two or three to become university graduates who are employed.

Those who are looking for work, or to start businesses, are doing so in an economy that is growing at about one percent a year.

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[13] Setting the Scene: Tutuwa Foundation presentation, 5 August 2021, Nick Spaull, associate professor, Stellenbosch University downloaded from www.nicspaull.com

[14] https://ddp.org.za/blog/2023/06/14/articulation-of-graduate-unemployment-in-sa-remains-a-work-in-progress-in-higher-education-sector/#:~:text=According%20to%20recent%20statistics%2C%20the,stood%20at%20a%20staggering%2033.6%25.

The reality is that with every new cohort starting at an early childhood centre and progressing to grade one we are pouring water into a leaky bucket, with most children on their journey to adulthood falling through.

More recent studies suggest that many of these trends are inching in the right direction. In releasing the 2023 matric results the Minister of Basic Education noted that government's pro-poor policies were bringing equity to schooling, with the biggest growth in bachelor's passes coming from no-fee schools like Gansbaai Academia. [15]

But the question has to be asked, how have we so consistently failed so many generations of children growing into adults?

Malcolm Mulope asks the same question through an economic lens. "How can you boost your economy ten or 20 years down the line when most of your population doesn't have *significant* education?"

As we mark the anniversary of 30 years of democracy in 2024, the answers lie in decades worth of government mismanagement, dysfunction, policy confusion and corruption. Each of these is well documented.

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The stories of Jack, Joudun, Malcolm, Asahleli and Siviwe are even more remarkable when viewed through a lens of probability. I would expect each of them to outperform the national average on just about any measure. They went to a "good" no-fee public school where each of them was recognised as exceptional. Each of them fall within the minority that leave school with a matric that qualifies them for tertiary studies.

At the time of writing four out of the five had completed a tertiary qualification and could count themselves among the only 12 percent [16] of South African adults with a post-school qualification of any sort. Malcolm was still studying. By early 2024 three of them were employed. Each of them was hovering around being counted in the two or three percent.

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[15] https://www.gov.za/news/speeches/minister-angie-motshekga-2023-matric-exams

[16] https://census.statssa.gov.za/assets/documents/2022/Census_2022_SG_Presentation_10102023.pdf

Of the five, Jack had the easiest path to a tertiary qualification. While his family couldn't afford university fees, he equally didn't qualify for a NSFAS bursary because the family's income exceeded the minimum threshold. He was one of what has become known as "the missing middle." His family opted for a substantially cheaper TVET college, and covered his fees.

Malcolm wasn't counted in the census that measured access to education. His is another story of the missing middle; he is counted neither here nor there. His is a story of grit; his David against the double Goliaths of the Zambian and South African bureaucracies who might have conspired to bring about his downfall. If he had played exclusively by their rules he would have failed. But nine years after school, he was enrolled as an undergraduate.

In 2024, Ernst took to Facebook to congratulate Malcolm for his entry to the Golden Key International Honour Society. Members qualify to join the Atlanta based organisation when they are in the top fifteen percent of their class. They are offered access to rewards, scholarships and study abroad opportunities. Malcolm might just be on his way to becoming a citizen of the world, something he has always aspired to.

Siviwe was helped into tertiary education by a cast of characters, drawn in by his charisma and the promise of his potential. He later qualified for a NSFAS bursary and then guided Asahleli along a similar path. But that bursary, we learn from Asahleli's story, comes at a cost.

A version of NSFAS was set up in 1991 to redress the discrimination of the past and to promote equal access to tertiary education. For many, this scheme is a lifeline to a better future and demand for that funding has grown from just over 500 000 applications in 2018[17] to three times that in 2024.[18]

The Act that birthed the scheme is well intended and it has undoubtedly helped many young people, but many have experienced it as a wrecking ball to the opportunity it has so enticingly promised. The broken delivery system of that fund almost derailed Asahleli's path

[17] https://www.nsfas.org.za/content/reports/researchreport_vital%20Statistics.pdf

[18] https://www.sanews.gov.za/south-africa/over-one-million-nsfas-bursary-applications-received#:~:text=The%20National%20Student%20Financial%20Aid,closes%20on%2031%20January%202024.

to becoming a graduate. It was his determination to "show them flame" that saw him through.

The story of this scheme is a convoluted one of decades worth of maladministration with scandal after scandal making headline news. In 2023 the latest CEO was axed in a corruption scandal and 2024s students were left in the dark about if and when their disbursements would be paid. The latest scandal, the DA announced in a statement, "must be the last nail" in the coffin of Blade Nzimande, the Minister of Higher Education. But ANC ministers have many lives.

Qualification or not, these five alumni have gone into the storm of another declining trend that threatens to blow them backwards. In 2003, about one out of every three people under twenty five who were looking for work remained unemployed. Twenty years later, every second young person is unable to find a job. [19]

In 2024, the odds once again favoured Jack and Asahleli. Both were employed by organisations that offered fair pay and a career path that promised progression. Jack's future could go either way, torn as he is between vocation and sensibility. Who knows what is in store for Asahleli, but the odds are that he will meet Mr Wilson's aspiration by becoming a senior executive of a big company.

Malcolm had been employed for years before registering as a student, as if he had started on the wrong end of the traditional path. He worked first informally across many jobs, and then formally for one employer who might have offered him a long-term career path. But his want was to qualify as a journalist. And he stuck to that.

Joudun had bounced from one internship to the next with a few short-term jobs in-between, and of course the two "adventures" that took him into the sometimes-dark world of seasonal contract workers in Saudi Arabia. His frustration with those internships, designed to offer meaningful work experience, was that they were short-term and didn't lead him anywhere. But in 2024 he was employed as the manager of White Water Farm in Stanford where he hoped to quieten his drive to adventure and settle in.

[19] https://www.statista.com/statistics/813010/youth-unemployment-rate-in-south-africa/

Siviwe too has had his frustrations, with his belief that government internships were a bridge to government employment being found wanting.

Joudun and Siviwe were two of 1,7 million people offered short-term work opportunities through the Presidential Employment Stimulus over five years, [20] making the Presidency one of the country's biggest employers. The Presidency doesn't report on what became of each of these people when their contracts ended.

In 2024, despite a year of job searching and rounds of interviews, Siviwe was both unemployed and partly self-employed in the high risk business of music management. Despite his job hunting in the sciences, his heart is to teach.

A 2022 University of Stellenbosch report predicts that the looming retirements of an ageing teacher population combined with the low input of teachers into the sector will lead to massive teacher shortage in the next 10 years. "The scale of teacher shortages and the need to train thousands more teachers are unprecedented in our history and require urgent policy attention from government and universities," [21] the report, which was commissioned by the Department of Higher Education, warns. And more than half of the heads of high school maths and science departments currently employed are not qualified for the job, a DBE spokesperson reportedly told parliament. [22]

Siviwe is an accomplished matric student with two science qualifications behind him. He has shown, over and again, a will to be of service. He has shown, over and again, his leadership qualities that might lead to him being an "absolutely amazing" high school principal one day to quote Theo Krynauw. Yet the higher education system denies him access to the PGCE.

It's not always easy for a person to benefit from trends that favour his prospects. I imagine a utopia where policy and prospects might meet so that doors of opportunity would more easily open. I imagine the year 2040 when Dr Siviwe Yuyu – if all his ambitions were

[20] https://www.thepresidency.gov.za/sites/default/files/2024-02/A%20Five%20Year%20Review%20_%20Presidency%20Achievements%20February%202024.pdf

[21] https://resep.sun.ac.za/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/RESEP-TDD-Policy-Brief-Demand-and-Supply-of-Teachers-4PP_WEB-2.pdf

[22] https://www.businesslive.co.za/bd/national/education/2023-03-13-numbers-do-not-add-up-for-maths-and-science-at-sa-schools/

to be realised – would be the principal of a public school with one of the top performing maths and science departments in the country.

Rather, these stories, so often, are of obstacles being rolled into the paths of young people by the very agencies that have been set up to advance them.

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The five men I followed have made their imperfect ways into the world rather successfully and against just about all the odds. Each one of them is the hero of his own story, and has brought his character, attitude and ambition to his journey.

And each one of them has been helped along the way. None of the five men were raised by their biological mother in their own home. Yet it was their families, and people who became like family, who set them up to become adults who would fall, mostly, on the right side of fortune.

And so did the ambitions of their high school principal and teachers.

In December 2023, long after his retirement, Mr Wilson posted to Facebook to celebrate the graduation of Anala Yawo. "Gansbaai Academia's first learner to become a medical doctor. WE ARE SO PROUD OF HIM." There is a photograph of Analo in a hospital canteen. He wears blue scrubs and a surgical cap with his name embroidered in white cotton over his chest. A stethoscope hangs, lobsided, around his neck. He smiles from behind the oversized rounds of his glasses.

A week later Mr Wilson changed his profile picture to one of him and Mrs Matthews shaking hands with what might be a thirteen-year-old Analo at an athletics event. That younger version of Analo smiles brightly, skinny arms out of a blue vest. He was the top matric student of 2016 and graduated with six distinctions, Mr Wilson writes. A mere seven years later he graduated with a medical degree. And there it is in the story of a before and after image: Mr Wilson's ambition for his students realised.

Analo's story is the exception to the stark reality.

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In August 2024 I attended the memorial service for Tommy Wilson in the school hall. The funeral was to be in Worcester the following weekend. While he had been in slow recovery from his accident for years, complications following a fall earlier in the year finally caught up with him.

"He believed that people should be empowered," said Mrs Visser, a former colleague from Worcester Secondary School, "that was one of his hallmarks." She said that Mr Wilson would often remind people that he was the the son of a painter from the municipality who had a standard eight. Yet his father believed in him, and he went on to become educated and a school principal. "It was his mission to empower people as he had been empowered. He was a leader who required leadership of you."

And while I have known him as a man who shaped the lives of alumni, I heard also of his impact on the adults around him.

"He had a faith and belief in me," said Sammy Brett reflecting on when Mr Wilson asked him to be the founding chairman of the governing body, a role he was reluctant to accept. "I'm a loner," he told the principal. "I fight my own battles, I'm not suited to this kind of community role." But Mr Wilson saw his potential, he says. "I was lost in this world, and he brought me back. I will always cherish him."

"He was the man who changed my life," said a tearful Mrs Harding-Male. "He taught me how to lead – not with anger and tantrums as was my way – he taught me to calm down. As a woman on my own, whenever I had a big decision to make, especially when it related to one of my foster children, I went to him for advice."

Mr Wilson has taken up so much of my imagination over the last few years. While he was as imperfect as the next person, I held him on a pedestal as an example of what a leader of a state institution should be. I believe that it is leaders like him might lead our failing democracy to a better place.

I anticipated that, beyond the school community, the people of Gansbaai might feel the same. I expected a gathering beyond what the hall could accommodate. Yet the service was poorly attended by the predominantly white townspeople. Maybe it was because Mr Wilson

was not from the town. Or maybe it was because apartheid-era patterns have ultimately endured and that they believe that the high school on the outskirts of town is there for the people on the outskirts.

"How suddenly things can flip," said the *dominee* in closing the service. "From health, leadership and inspiration; to an accident, illness and death."

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It's been quite a journey since I first visited Gansbaai Academia in 2018. That day I saw a hint of something beautiful beyond the facebrick buildings with their concrete courtyards. I caught a glimpse of the heart and soul beneath that veneer. I set off on this journey to dig a little deeper, so I could discover more.

What I found was a small town community that aspired for a high school that would stand out from the sea of disrepair that had begun to characterise state institutions like schools and clinics.

I discovered that in the dying days of the ANC governing the province, there was the political will – of one person at least – to bring the school about, and as the province was handed to the DA there was the political will of at least one other person who was uncompromising in her drive to set it up right.

I discovered that in their determination not to have "some dead beat" take up the first principalship, that community brough in "a brilliant man" in Tommy Wilson, despite his initial resistance to taking up the job. "This school is my heart," he told me. And in those words lie the secret. A man came to the job with full heart and built a team and a culture that followed through in that spirit. That word – heart – was repeated like a refrain as I spoke to people about the school and its principal. "He was all heart," said alumnus Eswin Kapot of the principal he remembers so fondly.

The cohorts of boys and girls who graduated from the school have been the beneficiaries of that culture of care and have taken with them into the world a deeper understanding of what it means to love. "The teachers at Gansbaai Academia have mirrored care to me," said Jack Swart. "The have shown it to me."

Siviwe Yuyu told me of teachers who could have responded to his reputation as a troublemaker with harsh words and punishments. They chose rather to respond “with love and compassion”. That challenged him to channel his energies towards his advancement, rather than into a downward spiral of confrontation. Malcolm Mulope will always remember his hockey coach from Gansbaai Academia who, as he teetered on the edge of despair, reached out a hand to pull him back.

I see the story of the school in those early years as a precious baton of care that was passed from one person’s hand to the next, and then passed on again. It was about each person in that chain choosing to care while not accepting less than care as an alternative. It was about each person choosing to be in service, rather than in power. And that spirit of love and service has followed through into the emerging adult lives of the alumni. “Because it takes one person to see the next person,” Siviwe told me.

I can’t think of an abstract noun to describe what I found there, but let’s call it the magic, and question if, once the magic is there, it can be sustained or if its wont to evaporate like the ephemeral thing it is.

The school went through some hard knocks. There was Mr Wilson’s catastrophic accident and his early retirement. The effects of the pandemic shook the foundations of the school’s spirit. And there was the bureaucracy that took more than two years to appoint a new leader, even though the leaving principal had given ample notice and the new principal had been there all along. It is not in the nature of a bureaucracy to recognise the magic and to hold it safe.

And then there are the macro forces that are beyond the control of any one person. In the 20-teens the rate of decay of towns and government institutions was growing at an alarming rate. Many families within the failing municipalities of the Eastern Cape believed that they would find better opportunity, healthcare and schooling in the more functional metros of the Western Cape.

Those waves of migration, and the steady growth of towns in the Overberg, threaten to overwhelm schools like Gansbaai Academia. The slow march of policy, budget allocations

and new infrastructure simply can't keep up with the more fluid movement of people, and it is difficult for a school that is becoming overcrowded to hold the magic.

It's a different school today to the one that Joudun, Jack, Malcolm, Asahleli and Siviwe attended. For one thing, it's bigger, and as I write new classroom blocks are being built to accommodate the demand. And the make-up of what was once called a rainbow nation school has changed. With the influx of more black families to the surrounding towns, white and coloured flight has left those race groups poorly represented. There is a new principal now, and with that, an inevitable shift in the culture. But with all those knocks and shifting grounds, the foundation of Mr Wilson's school, perhaps, still stands.

However, it is frozen in time in the imaginations of those who attended during his tenure. Approaching the first ever 10-year reunion in the school's short history, Jack and Joudun are planning a celebration that will be "historical" and that might be the beginnings of an active alumni community who support their old school.

Siviwe has been back several times, as a motivational speaker and as a teacher's assistant. Asahleli was behind the podium in 2023 and addressed the outgoing matrics. He motivated them to take one small step towards a better future every day, as he has done. And he told them what the former principal used to tell students from that same podium every day. Most that I spoke to, even ten years out of school, hold on to the refrain: I am a proud Sharkie.

There is no doubt that the grounding they received at Gansbaai Academia served the five men I spoke to as they navigated their sometimes haphazard ways into tertiary education and the world of work.

And where politicians – with their will to power – continue to fail us, it is people like Mr Wilson – with their will to service – who change the trajectory of so many lives for the better. And therein lies an answer. We can't wait for any politician or political party to save us from the malaise that has become so pervasive. Rather, it is the power of the individual that has to pull us through.

These stories have been about one person seeing the other and reaching out a hand. Each one of the five men have been helped in sometimes extraordinary ways, not by policy, but by people who have recognised them.

For that, I believe that each one of them is truly thankful grateful blessed.

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About the author

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The author with Asahleli Meje at Abagold in 2022