Looking for Thabang:
My search for my lost brother

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Declaration

This work has not been previously submitted in whole, or in part, for the award of any degree. It is my own work. Each significant contribution to, and quotation in, this dissertation from the work, or works, of other people has been attributed, and has been cited and referenced.

L. Shale

Signed by candidate

Signed

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements

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Having said this, all the errors in the book are totally mine. As for the credits? They are evenly shared by the fellow travellers.

Abstract

This memoir/dissertation is about the relationship between two brothers growing up in apartheid South Africa during the eighties. Hlonkis wishes for his brother Thabang to live peacefully back home after years in exile. He reminisces about their earlier years in QwaQwa when his brother was playful and full of mischief like any other teenager. But when he comes back home his brother is a total stranger. He does not say much about his time in exile as a freedom fighter.

Instead, Thabang hurries back to his birthplace in Thaba Nchu to lay the wreaths on their maternal side which includes a war veteran. Later he moves to Bloemfontein where a reception is held in his honour by the paternal side of the family. Meanwhile, no such event is held in Pimville, Soweto their home.

The State charges Thabang criminally. Hlonkis believes the charges are trumped up and decides to go to court to prove it. His brother decides to represent himself at a case which attracts media attention and some protestors. The State convicts his brother and sentences him to time in jail. Whilst in prison, his health deteriorates.

Prison is no comfort zone. But Thabang downplays it and hatches a plan to study further. His wish is to compensate for the gap left in his high school studies when he skipped the country to join the liberation army. His deteriorating condition gets in the way of applying for studies.

Soon he is released from prison on medical parole. At their home in Pimville Thabang battles with a dreaded disease. The costs of medical attention and his acute state of illness make his recovery near impossible. Hlonkis can only get to internalise the lessons that his brother, on his sick bed, tries to impart. One of them is the spirit of generosity. But will Hlonkis ever find out the truth about his brother?

For Tharollo

There is still some life around the settlement, even though most of the men have been gone for months. It is not known if any of them will come down from the hills, or if they do how much of themselves, they will have left behind.

– The narrator in Yvonne Vera's *Nehanda*

Prologue

November 2018: On that Sunday morning I take a trip to the gravesite at Avalon Cemetery. I am with my younger brother Tharollo, who is 34 years old. He has expressed a wish that we visit my late brother Thabang's grave. My mother, Judith (or Mama), is not feeling well, so she asks to be excused from the trip but gives it her blessings. My dad, Andrew (or simply Papa), is not around. He is seldom part of these arrangements.

The cemetery is the biggest in the country, having been established in 1972, when I was born. The apartheid rulers decree separate development policy beyond the grave, such that Avalon is for the exclusive use by the township dwellers. It is filled with more than 300 000 graves on a 172-hectare piece of land.

When we arrive at the cemetery, we find the gates locked. Tharollo is in the driving seat when I decide to get out and enquire from the other cars, which include a Mercedes Benz, a Toyota Corolla and Hi Ace Combi, parked before us outside the gates.

An elderly woman sits at her flower stall, two orange plastic chairs and a table, just before the main entrance. Her offerings include incense and matchboxes for the mourners. The combination of the fresh flowers and incense come in handy for the funeral rites of our people.

A Pan Africanist Congress (PAC) of Azania cadre tells me that the cemetery is no longer used for burials in the traditional sense. Nowadays, it is reserved for those who have loved ones already buried there, or those unveiling tombstones. "Unfortunately, the place is full to the brim," he says.

Two mounds separate the main gate of the cemetery. They share the words "Welcome to Avalon Cemetery", written in white bricks.

The car occupants decide to come out and have a chat or smoke with fellow mourners whilst awaiting the opening:

"We are told the gates will open at 7 a.m.," says a middle-aged man I meet.

"I guess it must be a new rule," I say.

"Maybe it's just extra precaution on the side of the authorities," he suggests.

I suspect it is the fear of criminal acts. Indeed, crime can rear its ugly head anywhere. It is not unheard of for criminals to prowl the place of the dead. I read a newspaper article sometime back about a medical doctor who was accosted by car hijackers at the cemetery. Sadly, the doctor lost his life in the ensuing scuffle, but not without first firing a shot. He was there, like us, to pay respects to his loved ones.

The gates finally open at 7 a.m., after we had been there for about half an hour, and the municipal guards are abuzz: “We shall need all motorists to open the boot of their cars so that we can do a routine search,” they announce. Tharollo indicates to them that his is a self-locked boot and therefore cannot open. After a couple of seconds, the guards find a way via the car’s backseat. Fortunately, they find nothing unbecoming. I am relieved.

I have been a passenger before in cars (mainly minibus taxis) where the driver would make an about-turn when they see the blue lights, not because their cars were not roadworthy but because they suspected the authorities would find something wrong anyway.

After the security clearance, we proceed to search for my late brother’s grave.

For a while now I have noticed that every time we visit his tombstone, we always get lost. Deep down I hope for this not to be the case today. So, I dictate to Tharollo what I think are the correct directions to our destination. I remember that an Azanian People’s Organisation (Azapo) cadre, Esau Tshehlo Mokhethi, is one of my brother’s neighbours. I was there several years ago at his reburial on 24 March 2012 in Mapetla, Soweto. Mokhethi’s remains were repatriated from Gaborone, Botswana, after he served the liberation struggle.

The founder of the Bantu Women’s League, which was aligned to the South African Native National Congress (SANNC), Charlotte Maxeke, is buried here. This is also the resting place of Helen Joseph, the former national secretary of the Federation of South African Women (FEDSAW).

Some, like Joseph and the South African Communist Party (SACP) leader Joe Slovo, attempt to break this mould of separate development. So Slovo is buried at Avalon as per his will.

This is also the burial place for Hector Pieterson, one of the youngest fatalities of the Soweto Uprising. Hastings Ndlovu, the first student to be shot on 16 June, is also buried here. It is also the burial ground for student leaders Khotso Seatlholo and Tsietsi Mashinini. They occupy an area declared the Heroes Acre, although it has often been criticised for not resembling the grandeur of ones in other liberated African countries.

For instance, one ponders: Where does the Heroes Acre begin and where does it end? Later, when I am with a young man in blue overalls who does “piece” jobs at the cemetery, he tells me that the sign that once indicated the site has been vandalised and ultimately stolen. But I wonder: heroes’ acres in Zimbabwe and Zambia have either bold statues or tall plagues, making any vandal’s job difficult, if not impossible.

The PAC fraternity also has many of its leaders resting at Heroes Acre, including Zephaniah Lekoame Mothopeng and John Dlevalile Ganya. The former was the number one

accused in the Secret Bethal Treason Trial and the latter the second accused. The trial related to the Soweto Uprising. I was at their funerals in 1990 and 2004 respectively.

The first secretary for education in the founding conference of the PAC Peter Nkutsoe Raboroko's tombstone hovers somewhere in this area. He was buried here on 4 January 2000. I was also present at his funeral.

Notably, another development at the graveyard is the Mendi Memorial Site, commemorating the African men who died on that fateful day in 1917 overseas in what some researchers describe as "the greatest wartime maritime disaster ever suffered in South Africa". The men were volunteers on the Allies' side during World War 1. The epitaph quotes the words of the Reverend Isaac Wauchope Dyoba to the men:

> Be quiet and calm, my countrymen. For what is taking place now is exactly what you came to do.
>
> You are going to die, but that is what you came to do.
>
> Brothers, we are drilling the drill of death. I, a Xhosa, say you are all my brothers Zulu, Swazis, Pondos, Basutos, we die like brothers. We are the sons of Africa.
>
> Raise your cries, brothers. For though they made us leave our weapons at our home, our voices are left with our bodies.

Queen Elizabeth II unveiled the stone on 23 March 1995 and the place was christened "The Garden of Remembrance".

But it is not only activists and soldiers who are buried here. Late music star Jabu Khanyile's stone is also at the cemetery. Khanyile is famous for hits like "Mmalo-We" and "Thabo". He is a former drummer of Afro-fusion band Bayete, which was a thorn in the side of the apartheid regime in the late 80s with songs such as Miriam Makeba's cover "Mbobela". Khanyile died on 12 November 2006.

For business giant Moloi, burial space is a family affair. The Moloi family members share a brown face-bricked yard containing their graves. Its walls lie low, almost at the foundation level. So, we ascend.

It takes us a couple of minutes to arrive at what I suspect is our destination. I jump out in anticipation. “This must be it!” I say to Tharollo after recognising a bend in the road. However, after a while, I fail to locate the gravestone boldly written with a PAC emblem. I admit to my brother: “I think we are lost, again.”

A casual worker in blue overalls and a yellow vest comes to our rescue:

“Do you have the grave number?” he asks.

“No,” I respond.

“OK. Do you at least know when your brother was buried?”

“Yes. 2001.”

The worker offers us a piece of advice: “You guys are at the area allocated for those who passed on during the 80s; you will not find your brother here.”

Part 1: Home

1. Earliest Memories

It is 1974 and I am butt naked with a loosely clad white vest and trying to retrieve a piece of food from my eight-year-old brother Thabang. He is mischievously laughing whilst my parents look as if nothing is happening in our three-bedroomed house in Rocklands, Bloemfontein. I am two years old, and this is where I am born.

In the background the music of American crooner Clarence Cater is playing, probably "It's all in your mind". As I recall, someone is snapping away the tiff with their Canon 35mm film camera. I can barely walk.

Instead, I pretend an upright movement is an unattainable scale. But that is not what is occupying my mind right now. My primary goal is to get to the piece of food, which could be a chicken drumstick, on a good day. The food doubles up as a toy in my imaginary world of big people and big houses. In fact, at that age I tend to lick rather than eat delicacies. Thabang likes my presence at the dinner table because it means all the food, I leave behind is his by right. I tend to be allergic to all the goodies he likes: French polonies, cheese, and dairy products.

But what is strange on this occasion is that every minute attempt at walking by me is relished by the hiding photographer who quickly snaps away. The adults are not bothered if I get my prop or not. All they want is to see me walking, preferably running. Who knows? They could have a world athlete right in their abode… When I realise this game being played by the adults and my older brother, I make every effort not to walk again, just to spite them.

But I am always defeated since I must make some move to get the food. These are the memories that stick to mind when I think of my brother, the younger Thabang. It is always about him playing some trick on me so that he could have his hearty laugh – the last laugh, so to speak.

Another early memory is of him being very fond of police toys: guns, police cars, plastic handcuffs, the works. At that stage, everyone thought that he would be a policeman one day, given his favourite toys.

My brother was born in Thaba Nchu in 1966. He was the firstborn of my parents, Judith, and Andrew Shale. Two years later, Martin Luther King Junior is assassinated after making the "I have a dream" speech. Later, Democratic presidential candidate Robert F. Kennedy suffers the same fate.

The US Spacecraft 8 Apollo Program Spaceship orbits the Moon, making the astronauts the first people to see the globe as whole. This is a scientific feat. But it is blighted by the fact that the Vietnam War also rages on. It would cost both sides many casualties.

My brother comes from an area divided into three parts: Dipolotong (the Plots), Toropong (Town) and Distenseng (the stands). My mother never misses the chance to indicate that her own section is much more civilised than my father's:

"Your father comes from Dipolotong where the distance between neighbours is huge. This also means that when a goods train passes at the nearby rail track the kids come out to witness this eventful occurrence," quips Judith. She comes from Toropong which boasts amenities such as schools, a hospital and grocery stores. The town is literally a street crossing the place where my mum was born.

On the other end, Distenseng relies on the "cow economy". This term encapsulates everything cow-related: milk, hide and meat, etc. The residents of this area are reputed to use this cash flow to survive. It is, so to speak, their "cash-cow".

But I feel my father would have a prank pulled on my mother's birthplace also. Judith's family is a jovial one. They can play a joke on a visitor approaching their house to visit! Anyway, Thaba Nchu is where my mum and dad first meet and fall in love. Apparently, they were in a musical group together in their youth. At this stage it seems their troupe made tours to Bloemfontein, now known as Mangaung. In fact, my mum reliably tells me that the legendary actor Ken Gampu signed as a witness for their marriage.

In time, they fell in love with the place, Mangaung. Of course, this was a bigger town with promises of bigger opportunities for budding artists. Today, Mangaung could pass for a city, though not on the same scale as Johannesburg or Cape Town. One can only imagine what hope it brought to love-struck youths back then.

Although I am born at Pelonomi Hospital in Mangaung, all I know about my birthplace is that it is the formative town of the SANNC, the forerunner to the African National Congress (ANC) in 1912. The national liberation movement's ancestors thought it prudent that delegates to the founding conference should meet at a central place. Therefore, in their wisdom Mangaung was it.

The name "Bloemfontein" is an Afrikaans name meaning "City of Roses". Whereas the name Mangaung means "the place of cheetahs". It was "founded" in 1846 (of course the indigenous Africans had occupied it long before that time) by the Boer settlers. In 1892, the

latter lost a battle with the British in what was named the Anglo-Boer War, although Africans also became casualties.

The politics of the two rivals has always been a kind of *broedertwis*, a sibling rivalry. At the core of the fight was control of the wealth of the African land. After smoking the peace pipe, the British granted the Boers independence. This day was celebrated with verve in the "old" South Africa. The argument was that there was no longer any need for an anti-colonial struggle. The Afrikaner, meaning *African*, has been freed.

Bloemfontein is also the seat of the Supreme Court of Appeal; the birthplace of the National Party (NP) (whose claim to fame is the system of apartheid implemented from 1948 after stealing the election from prime minister Jan Smuts's United Party (UP)); and the host to the only War Museum in the country.

One of its famous sons is the lawyer Bram Fischer. He was an advocate admitted to the Johannesburg Bar who was against the doctrine of apartheid. He suffered dearly for this position at the hands of the conservative lawmakers (although he himself comes from an Afrikaner family). During the later years of his life, when he was terminally ill, he was released from prison and returned to the city to die in his parents' house, known as "Harmonie".

Another struggle hero whose house has been declared a heritage site is ANC founder member Thomas Mapikela. The house, in the Batho location, is simply known as "The Mapikela House". Mapikela sadly passed on in 1945 before he could see his movement adopting the 1949 Programme of Action which emphasised the right to self-determination of the African people. The PAC would later argue that it is the custodian of the programme with the ANC having abandoned it in 1955 in favour of the Freedom Charter. The key author of the Programme of Action was PAC founding president Robert Mangaliso Sobukwe.
On the other hand, the PAC chose to launch "the ship of freedom" at the township of Orlando East in Soweto. The area was at the heart of ANC activity in the early 50s and a jewel in the crown of the movement in the then Transvaal.

But back to Rocklands, where my family comes from. It is an area consisting of "matchbox" houses in monotonous rows adjacent to one another. In that sense it is not different from a township like Soweto. The tarred streets are mainly on the main road. But many of the streets are untarred. Many of the homeowners had only the right to occupation and never the right of ownership of their properties. This gradually changed after 1994 with the incoming government. But the promises of full ownership and the transfer of title deeds to owners is slow, leaving many frustrated.

On the occasions that I could play outside on the *stoep* of our Rocklands house, as a toddler, all I could see were rows of brown face-bricked houses divided by untarred streets and older children playing football. Even on such occasions I longed for a day when I could join them. The day never comes since a couple of years later we relocate to QwaQwa.

Still, a lingering memory of Rocklands remains etched in my mind every time I look at a photograph of young Thabang from that time. It is a summer's day, and he is dressed in his Sunday best: bare feet but with denim shorts and a well-buttoned matching denim T-shirt. His eyes penetrate the cameraman's lens with a wry smile. It looks like the picture was taken at our outside lawn in the township. The youngster also sports an unassuming dimple on his left cheek. This snapshot could have been taken just before we left for QwaQwa.

In QwaQwa (later named Phuthaditjhaba) we live in a double four-roomed house. My parents have come up with an ingenious plan to partition the two adjoining houses to make for a bigger place to accommodate the family. Inside the dining room a painting by Russian-born painter Vladimir Tretchikoff (who later in life made South Africa his home) "Penny Whistlers" is hanging on the sky-blue walls. I have always referred to it as "The Three Penny Whistlers" for lack of information about the print featuring three Kwela buskers in Cape Town. It was produced in 1958 by the artist. I guess my home had a print which can be found in other parts of the country and the world. My suspicion is that the original is pricey.

My brother, now a montage artist of some sort at 10, has a photo album which includes cropped images of family members with their hands and feet chopped off. We are at the mercy of Thabang's long figures, and our half-torsos bop around inside our family album. Their bodies are hanging inside a transparent plastic bag, and they lie fastened together by disparate threads of Pritt glue.

This is Thabang playing with the model figures in his life – us. In one picture: a sculpture of the Hercules Man carrying the world on his shoulders hangs on a thread on the left-hand side whilst a variety of colours occupy the top right-hand corner, looking like multi-coloured balloons celebrating the protégé.

From an early age, Thabang veers towards tasks that involve creating things with his hands. He is one of those youngsters who takes to painting on their picture books and dying in crayons – green, black, and gold. Later in his life, he would develop this hobby to some interesting degree.

The year is 1976 and QwaQwa is as cold as ever…

At the other end of the country, Soweto has just erupted and some of its student activists have gone into exile. The students' demands include the scrapping of Afrikaans as a medium of instruction in African schools. In other words, they argue Afrikaans should be like any other school subject, for example Biology.

The students are outraged with the State, which is forcing them to learn all their subjects in Afrikaans. The students are tired of the general heavy-handedness of the police state. They want their right to self-determination. This is a universal principle only decreed a crime in South Africa.

For a long time, I thought the uprising was just a high school affair with heroes such as Tsietsi Mashinini and Khotso Seatlholo being high school students themselves. But I have recently learned that the primary schools like Bantu Primary were the real catalysts of the movement. According to this version, the senior students came in later since the implementation of the draconian policy was supposed to start at primary schools. So, these young lads were rightfully outraged.

The days preceding June 16 starts with primary kids, who, having heard the proposal of the introduction of Afrikaans as a medium of instruction, target the white inspectors. At one of these incidents, the victim is fatally wounded. Apparently, this happens at Bantu Primary School in Pimville. Other schools catch the fire, and the same thing happens in Naledi township.

There is not much the teachers can do with the anger, as they themselves will be expected to teach in a language with which they are not familiar. Imagine a teacher who already finds teaching mathematics in English difficult having to translate the same content into Afrikaans? It must have been disheartening, to say the least.

But the point is that the language issue came at a time when there were other burning issues in the townships: the lack of amenities (schools included), inadequate health care, lack of housing and poor working conditions for the working class. For me, all these issues speak to a sense of dispossession. It cannot be that the Uprising is only about a medium of instruction.

For the Class of '76, schooling in the famous township comes to a halt. Soon after, it takes off slowly. Indeed, Soweto would never be the same again. Later in life, I would become part of the '86 generation and we would emulate our predecessors from a decade earlier to the ire of the pariah state. I do not think it would be an exaggeration to say our predecessors also inspired the #FeesMustFall generation, as we were all influenced by preceding waves of struggle. The struggle tends to create its own seismic undercurrents.

But these are all things I find out later. In QwaQwa on an ordinary day, I'm licking a muddy lollipop in this new terrain. I am wearing shorts and a white polo-neck, barefoot on the dusty streets of the "location". I am with a friend and the face-brick Apollo houses (municipal double-storey houses in the township) are staring at us from the opposite side of the street. We are laughing in a jolly way, thinking we own the streets. I am now four years old.

On this day, no adult is on site to admonish us on whatever wrong we might be doing, and my friend and I are holding hands, as carefree as any kid can be on a mild sunny day. All I see are the grey, and sometimes brown, colours of the houses. Behind us is a parked blue Mazda Capella 606 in my yard. However free we might feel, we know it can be short-lived. All it would take is a stare from an angry adult and our jol is over. Hence, ours is a fairly restrained movement.

Our walk's finishing line is the end of the untarred street with its black soil. If we are lucky, we reach half the street before we are caught out. We are shouted at as if we have already reached the end of the road. "Hey, you children why aren't you wearing shoes? Don't you know you will get sick? Hlonkis, where is your mother?" the typical rant would go. Nevertheless, the goal remains – to reach the end of the street, which meanders back to another one on the opposite side with the same row of houses.

My father has secured a transfer to work at the new offices of the South African Broadcasting Cooperation (SABC) in QwaQwa. He is one of the new recruits for Radio Sesotho, the predecessor to Lesedi FM. He does everything from reading the news to presenting music programmes and starring in a local drama series. To his bosses this is just part of the job.

Although radio predates apartheid in South Africa, it is not really until the 1960s that it is affordable to the general populace. The medium provides listeners in the area with news and entertainment. New household names spring up and my father's is one of them. Others are Tseliso Leballo, Khotso Nkhatho, Sebota Lekhelebane and Kefuoe Mohobane.

The state treats broadcasting as it would national policy. In other words, the broadcaster must reflect the view that different "nations" can live together harmoniously but separately in South Africa. The requirement is just to respect one another. Of course, the regime itself does not follow this prescript to the letter. The word "respect" is far from the practice of the regime.

But, as journalist Jacob Dlamini says in his book *Native Nostalgia*, the medium defeats the purpose of balkanising the listeners even though it is called Bantu Radio. Listeners tune in to any station they choose at their will.

In QwaQwa (or Phuthaditjhaba) we are (almost) an ideal nuclear family: two boys and a set of parents. Our extended family is left behind in Bloemfontein and Thaba 'Nchu, where my brother was born. I'm only four years old and hardly knowledgeable about where we come from in Mangaung. But I am told Phuthaditjhaba means "gather the nations" from the word go.

The Bantustans come about after the government proclaims the Bantu Authority Act in 1951. They are supposed to be the original homelands of the African linguistic groups. For instance, my father speaks South Sotho, so he belongs in the Free State. My mother's tongue is Setswana, so she belongs in the North West. To be precise, had the authorities had their way, they would be placed at QwaQwa and Bophuthatswana respectively. And where would my brother and I be? This was the absurdity of what was euphemistically called "Separate Development Policy."

It is within this milieu that my home in QwaQwa becomes host to two additional youngsters from Soweto.

As a journalist Papa has befriended another from a publication called *Pace*. Ntate Lucas Molete is one of a few Africans holding editorial sway at a popular magazine. Like many parents in Soweto, he is concerned about the strife in the township and its effects on schooling. He thus pleads to my father to host his two kids, Goitsemang and Neo, for schooling in QwaQwa with the hope that things will be calmer in that part of the world. Molete's illustrious career includes interviewing Mashinini just after June 16. His wife Mme Molete is a nursing sister at the Baragwanath Hospital, the biggest hospital on the continent. We welcome the siblings to my home in QwaQwa – an area surrounded by the Maluti Mountains. When it snows, usually in winter, the mountain is covered by a white snow, which in turn makes them look grey to me. The nearest town is called Harrismith and is described in not-so-endearing terms by the writers of a travel companion called *Insight Guides South Africa*. Their verdict: "Harrismith, which lies just across the provincial border in the southern Free State, is the main town in this part of the country and something of a route focus, but otherwise difficult to get excited about."

A search for something vaguely interesting leads the writers to a dam:

> The only real exception (and then only in a generous mood) is the vast Vaal Dam, which is sign-posted just north of Villiers. The Vaal River, which feeds the dam, is one of the country's largest, forming the natural border between Free State Province and Gauteng. Apart from supplying water to the Witwatersrand, the dam also caters to the recreational needs of local water sports enthusiasts.

From my vantage point, I see skiers sloping down the grey mountains, which cries snowy larva tears every winter, occasionally in summer too. Could this be what the San people saw when they decreed it "whiter than white", this QwaQwa? Somehow the monotonous houses and their colour, the untarred streets, the cold make me conjure up a "greyer than grey" QwaQwa.

This is the environment the newcomers from Johannesburg find themselves in. The visiting Molete kids, "Goitse" and Neo, are taken as my blood sister and brother. In other words, the concept of an extended family in African tradition includes family friends. This is quite radical, I want to believe, compared to the western-capitalist concept of a nuclear family, two kids (preferably a boy and a girl) and two parents.

They immediately strike a chord with my brother, especially Neo, with whom Thabang shares a bedroom. On the other hand, I am just dismissed as a kid, "Hlonkis" – this being the bastardisation of my longer name Lehlohonolo. It's a kind of diminutive term like the one used as a suffix to some Afrikaans names such as Saar(-tjie) although it can also be an endearing address, depending on who uses it. Fortunately, I am allocated my own room.

The girl *Ausie* Goitsemang has fair skin and is short and chubby with a radiant smile. She is allocated a visitor's room. She exudes confidence in her demeanour, and you will swear she does not do any work in the house. She is immaculately dressed even for a schoolgirl her age. By the look of things, she is a little younger than her brother. If a magazine would happen to fall in her hands, she is the kind to pick up the fashion pages with the rest following later.

One of the first chores she undertakes is to force me to take evening baths. She administers this task with glee. I resist this benevolence meted out to me.

As a kid, I hate this bath time. Our bathroom consists of a 7-piece set. This includes a white built-in bath, a white basin with a silver mixer and a white top flush suit. I feel like people just want me to wash away the excitement of the day. I prefer to go to bed with the memories of the games we play with my friends. But I do not get my wish to skip bath time

because getting me bathed is taken as Goitsemang's contribution to the upkeep of the house. She does other chores like cleaning the bathroom porcelain tiles coloured black and grey.

Meanwhile, Thabang and Neo do boys' stuff like playing rioters at passing police vans and hiding in the yard. Occasionally, they do garden and water-spraying the lawn. At their most valiant these games they play involve throwing a stone or two at the passing police motorcade. But, on some days, their pranks became precarious, and the boys come home choking on teargas smoke. "Soweto" has visited QwaQwa, so the boys see this as "our contribution to Power". My 10-year-old brother and his sidekick understand "power" to mean a demand made by the oppressed all over the world to gain just that – Power.

Neo is a tall and dark boy prone to a wide smile with white blasting teeth. I see a resemblance of him in the male models' page I peruse in *Drum* and *Pace* magazines, respectively. But for me Neo, looks like a younger Dikgang Moseneke starting out his law practice in Pretoria after being released from Robben Island for pursuing the aims and objects of a banned organisation, in this case the PAC. In later life, Moseneke would become judge in the highest court of the land.

Both my parents admonish Neo and Thabang for "playing with fire". My mother warns, "You are too young to be chasing around police vans. They will not hesitate to shoot you. These are not safe times, especially for youngsters like you." But no sooner had they been warned about their precarious actions than they repeat the same exploits the next day. It is the actions of these naughty boys that makes me agree to the postulation that the uprising is not only a Soweto affair; it is a national affair. I now know that Kagiso, a township in the West Rand of Gauteng, erupted on 17 June 1976, led by people like Themba Hlatshwayo and Mike Matsobane. Later, they were accused at the Bethal Trial with Zephaniah Lekoame Mothopeng, late PAC president, who became accused number 1 for the instigation of the rebellion.

It is no wonder then that some argue for a repositioning of "Soweto Day" as "National Student Uprising Day" because its ripple effects would be felt across the country, including in "safe" QwaQwa.

These are the little impressions that make a huge impact on my brother's early political awakening. It begins in Phuthaditjhaba.

The following year, after the uprising, Thabang and Neo start taking sojourns to the mountains, ostensibly to study. My parents are elated. Finally, the children have understood the value of education – even in liberation.

So, I watch with keen interest at these latest developments in my family. I feel there is something fishy about these "studies". Why is it that the textbooks are always carried clandestinely, even in the presence of the dumb Hlonkis? The colours of these books are sometimes black or red. Sometimes they are green. Nevertheless, why does one not see the titles? Surely, books must have titles.

My suspicion is that my brother and his accomplice are deep in political literature, the kind that inspired "Soweto", the kind that is associated with the "terrorists." And this is not good for the government. It also means that in the morning they attend "normal" school only to start an evening shift at the mountain school.

At this stage, I'm not sure which political party my brother, or Neo, belongs to. In hindsight, I think they could have been reading excerpts from Stephen Bantubonke Biko's *I Write What I Like* or Robert Mangaliso Sobukwe's *Speeches*, both banned books that were passed around clandestinely. If this is the case, then it makes them ahead of most of their peers in relation to political awareness. It seems at this stage they have resolved that the main task at hand is to read.

I am strictly forbidden from joining the two at these evening classes. The culprits themselves communicate this to me, clearly.

Thabang charges first: "Have you ever heard of four-year-olds going to the mountains?"

"No," I reply.

"Yes. You know why?"

Here I interject: "But you guys are able to go. Why not me?"

Neo enters the fray: "Hlonkis, I think you are missing the point. To be honest the mountain is a dangerous place for kids with all the bad creatures you can imagine. Besides, Papa and Mama will give us a serous hiding if they learn that we have taken you along to the mountains."

This makes me even more suspicious of their shenanigans. The conspirators are beginning to speak in hushed tones as they prepare to go to the mountains. The result is that police vans pass our home without incident. The perpetrators must be in some preparatory mode for an impending catastrophe.

But it was not all doom and gloom at the Free State township. There was also a semblance of culture. In order to give us a more balanced life my parents arrange outings to the community hall to watch shows. The area hardly has a theatre. You have only one community hall that doubles up as a wedding venue and a funeral programme host at the

same time. So, you can imagine what a touring troupe does to the vibe of the sedated community.

This is where my love for theatre begins – when Gibson Kente comes to town.

Several weeks before the show the playwright's bus moves about in the township with an emblazoned banner of ISIKALO. What makes it fascinating is the stories I hear about this strange bus. It is one of those school busses I see in American movies with the playful kids inside the yellow bus. This theatre bus has turned into a home for the cast. Inside it has all the amenities that one needs: bathroom, shower, eating tables, if my friends' stories are to be believed. I vow that one day I want to be part of this magic.

So, the famous township playwright Kente brings his *Isikalo* (The Cry) to QwaQwa and we are part of the audience.

The play is about a protagonist who is forced into the world of crime by the harsh realities of township life. He soon finds himself imprisoned. This is where his Damascus moment happens as he pleads to the audience to take care of their community and never forget where they come from. He becomes a new man, so to speak. In this sense it is like the film *Mapantsula*, which I would be part of later as a youth.

Neo relishes these outings, especially when they relate to Soweto. It seems odd that at every one of them he recognises someone from his hood, "back ekasie", as he says. Soon my brother makes the same claims, even though, to my knowledge, he has never set foot in Africa's famous township.

Apart from the occasional theatre, there is another form of entertainment in the township: Ntate Punch and his racing cars.

Not that we had any racing tracks in my street but the huge man with an equally huge voice has imagined one, an untarred one for that matter. He seems to relish fast cars. I have never seen his car in slow speed except when there is something wrong.

One mundane sunny afternoon, I am playing with my friend in my yard. We are playing with our wire-made cars. Ntate Punch drives his car down the street in a very slow speed. Something is amiss here because Ntate Punch never obeys the speed limits set by the traffic officials. But soon after this scene a police van follows suit. For a while, they pick up their speed to chase him. It seems like he is about to be apprehended. But to the police officer's wrath (and to our revel) his car transforms into this monster, which roars and leaves the police officers behind, aghast, and fuming. Another daring escape courtesy of Ntate Punch.

I seem to recall my mother revealing to me that the Houdini-like character is a former Robben Island prisoner who spent time in jail for furthering the aims of the banned PAC. But my mother does not recall this version. As it was many prisoners could be related to the outpost of the Bantustan now and again. My mother could have been referring to someone else.

It seems Ntate Punch is originally from Potchefstroom in the North West. He comes to the location of Phuthadithjaba as a teacher at Selelekela High School. Whatever the true version of the story is, one thing is clear: Ntate Punch provides comic relief to our dull street. Later, I learn that he is the father of senior political reporter at the SABC Tsholofelo Mathibedi.

Meanwhile, my dad juggles radio broadcasting and disc jockeying at the local QwaQwa Hotel, especially on Thursday nights and occasionally on weekends. This is strange for a newsreader, I tell myself. Nevertheless, the arts bug bites my dad. In fact, he and Mom dated whilst both were band members. But my mother chooses a quieter life in QwaQwa and only attends Dad's gigs on opening nights. Still, Dad sometimes brings the party home.

It is during these times that Thabang and Neo see boundless opportunities for their mischiefs. The two pranksters have now started dating girls. After peeping through our bedroom door to see who is king or queen of the dancefloor, they plan their escape out into the night. As always, I stay behind. Then on some occasions, my parents catch the culprits. Strangely, here I am made to play the role of an alibi: "You can ask Hlonkis. We are always in our bedroom, always," says Neo. In hindsight, I now see why Neo has taken to a career in law. Those QwaQwa years provided a good training ground for him.

The jolly life of my parents in QwaQwa brings up some interesting innovations in language.

For instance, on one occasion my dad asks a friend of his, "How do you translate *wa Shale* into English?"

"Now that's a tough one there," responds the baffled friend.

"No man, it's easy. It's *of the Shale*," answers Papa.

There is laughter in the room, and everyone ponders on this new discovery. Every time someone addresses my parents as "of the…" I know that they probably have a history with them, probably stretching back to Bloemfontein.

But the saddest moment I have about QwaQwa are my early primary-schooling years in 1978. I was six years old.

It is lunchtime at Akofang Community School in Phuthaditjhaba and we are looking for a place to tug into our lunchboxes with my fellow schoolmates. We spot a drinking hole for the cows, which was a couple of metres away from the white-brick-walled classrooms. The school must have been in the outskirts of the township.

As we seat near the pond my classmates unexpectedly start playing pranks on me.

"You think you are smart with your rich lunchbox?"

"No, I don't think so and I'm not rich," I say.

"You are lying. How come your box contains what ours doesn't?" they ask.

"What do you mean?"

Whilst I am trying to reason with the boys that mine was an average family like anyone else's at the school they begin to wrangle with me and finally pull me into the muddy hole. The next thing I know I am deep inside and trying to keep my head up.

The more I tried to keep my head up the more the mates would pull it down like a hot lid over a boiling pot. I think they utilised the rock strata above the hole to close me in. The more I thought about my next move the more the struggle seemed hopeless and helpless. Therefore, I gave in. I had resigned to my unfortunate fate. All I could inhale was the muddied water of the hole.

Fortunately, one teacher seemed to have noticed the scuffle and he quickly rushed to my rescue. Seeing him, the boys scattered. By the time he hauled me out my uniform was wet and brown because of the mud. I could still taste the salty water on my lips. It was the teacher, instead of the boys, who was profusely apologising for the incident and consoling me.

I never told my parents (or Thabang for that matter) about the occurrence up until now. My brother would have been very furious because he was at the same school. Whether they have heard it on their own I am not sure. What I know is that the image would reoccur to me repeatedly when I am near a pool. I would be reminded of this incident every time I saw *e'Lollipop* whilst in QwaQwa at the community hall.

The movie came out in 1976. The opening scenes display the Maluti Mountains in their majesty blanketed by white snow and an overflowing river. The two characters Tshepo (Muntu Ndebele) and Jannie (Norman Knox) sometimes play merrily in this river but at times they get injured. There is always danger lurking somewhere in the river: snakes, floods and other perils of nature. It could be that the combined effect of rivers, floods, kids playing care freely in my mind solidifies the image of the situation I was in with my schoolmates at the drinking hole.

In fact, Tshepo dies on the mountain whilst protecting his friend against the fierce cold. The movie is melancholic drama at its best shot in multiple locations including New York and Lesotho. It was created by Andre Pieterse, of the Ma-Afrika Films, and stars legendary actor Gampu. I would later learn that it became one of the highest-grossing films in South Africa. The film was re-released in 2004 due to popular demand.

After staying a couple of years with us in Phuthaditjhaba it is now time for the Molete's to bid us farewell. They have passed their grades and Soweto has lulled, at least for a moment. The children of '76 have sought refuge in far-flung countries to plan future manoeuvres of returning home. My brother is the saddest with the Sowetans' sudden departure, especially his sidekick Neo. Who is going to attend the mountain school with him now? Not me, because I would offer a scathing rebuttal if asked.

It would be several years before we re-join our visitors in Pimville, Soweto. But our first stop was another famous township – Orlando East.

2. Reggae Mylitis

The sepia house has a corrugated iron veranda which serves as a lounge to entertain customers of the umqombothi beer and the occupants of the house. At the back of the rental rooms there are hips of liquor bottles forming hillocks to be transported back to the factories for recycling. My family and I live in one of the metal-roof back rooms.

This is Orlando East in 1982, a sprawling township in Soweto. It has had its fair share of historical claims such as the Orlando Football Stadium, playing midwife to the famous Buccaneers. It is also the birthplace of the PAC.

When we arrive in the township, Thabang enrols at the local high school, Selelekela Senior Secondary School where he studies for Standard 9. He is 16 years old and has lost his Bloemfontein chubbiness for a slight built with small, cropped hair. But one constant is a dimple on his cheek. Both the school and the stadium are not far from our one-room abode. I attend the local primary school called Ditau which will later grab the news headlines with the discovery of a beehive outside one of its classrooms. But let's save that story for later.

The yard that we are living in is full of merriment and love as customers of the homebrew stagger around and quip about their hard knock lives in the township: "Aaih… don't tell me about that so-called superstar. I was with him at school many years ago. In fact, he used to get the tail end of the queue when our reports came out. With me always, of course, taking the top position. You can ask him. He will tell you," quips a tipsy albino customer.

Sometimes when the "superstar" does make a crossing at the discreet drinking hole, which also stocks up on a fair share of the Western brew, one would be shocked to learn that Mr Of Course, the storyteller, is right – not about the failure rate. But what went wrong with the superstar, you ask? Well, at times it is a case of a former celebrity who is finding it difficult to navigate the life of stifling South Africa after a bout of fame. At other times you find that he had to drug himself into a stupor to deal with the high expectations of the fans. I am told that one of my childhood heroes Muntu Ndebele, the guy who plays Tsepo from *e'Lollipop*, occasionally pops in at the house.

Unfortunately, I never get my chance to be star struck: "Whenever he comes around you are out playing", I'm told by the older people. In fact, as kids these are fleeting stories that never occupy our minds for too long. We have some business to do.

I am 10-years old, and we are playing marbles with my friends in the yard when a squeaky hooter is heard outside: "It's the banana *kar*!" someone shouts at our congregation. No sooner has the call summonsed us than another instruction follows: "Take the two nips

and follow us!" There is a saying: When in Rome do what the Romans do. So, I follow suit. I am not about to become the black sheep of the house during my first days at Orlando East. The venerated car is a white Toyota van carrying hips of mealies, popcorn, and a smattering of banana fruit at the back. It moves at a snail's pace in the untarred streets opposite our house. In fact, if you look carefully at the back there is an assortment of oranges and apples. As we surround it, it slowly grinds to a halt.

"Give them the bottles!" another friend shouts at me. I oblige and give the lanky and dark man at the back my nip contingent and in exchange I get a couple of bananas. Where did that come from? Friends who carry more than a couple of nip bottles get an extra bowl of popcorn from the worker who scoops the delicacy from the hip before him.

I am warned by the sponsor that next time I should be quicker to earn my popcorn. Apparently if a customer carries a variety of bottles, including the nips, then they get some oranges, which have been hidden under the popcorn mound all along.

But the priced gift for us kids is the popcorn scoop which is poured into the owner's bowl. How my friends time the banana *kar* and subsequently secure the bowls from their moms is a mystery to me. These are the lessons I learn as the van continues begrudgingly on its journey up the street: "Banana *kar*, banana *kar*…" the almost faceless man in blue overalls in the drivers' seat competes with its ubiquitous honk – thus waking up another gang of kids in slumber.

But the township is also where I meet my first crush, MH.

She is what in the township we call "coffee-coloured", somewhere between light and dark. She of a tall built, but not skinny, with pointed breasts. She looks like one of those *Pace* models, I browse over on Ntate Molete's publication. I wonder how she would be like if she puts on her makeup.

She likes to wear her pitch-black hair in short afros and exudes a slight smile with a tinge of mischief. The only time I hear her laughter is when she is in conversation with her classmates at the local Lofentse Secondary School for Girls. The topic is mostly about boys: "Did you see him? The guy from Bazabazar? Oh, I would die for him," says MH.

"Chomi. You have not seen anything yet. Did you see the new guy from Emndeni? says Maditaba.

Sometimes it is about the teachers who administer the hated corporal punishment:

"Oh, he thinks he is the best thing after peanut butter," says Maditaba.

"One of these days that *sjambok* will beat him in his sleep, I tell you," says MH.

"Itjo, chomi, that's a curse?"

"Yes. I guess he deserves it, I mean we are not his kids."

We are about a year into our stay at the backroom when MH, who is several years older than me, probably my brother's age or younger, comes up to me with a suggestion: "Would you like to be my baby?"

Of course, I know what she means by "baby", but I feign ignorance as I must understand the terms and conditions of this contract first.

"It means I get to take you out to nice places with my friends," she smiles.

"But what do I get in return?" I say.

"An odd baby kiss and lots of hugs?"

"Agreed."

That's how we start a relationship, if one can call it that, me, and MH. I am the 'baby", and she is the "mummy."

One sunny afternoon, we visit one of her friends, Nthabiseng, on Mooki Street next to the Orlando Communal Hall. They are also school mates at Lofentse.

"My choma meet my new friend Hlonkis," says MH.

"Hi, Hlonkis. And what brings you two together?" says Nthabiseng.

"He is my new baby," says MH.

"OK. In that case then, Hlonkis, you are also my friend. Welcome."

All this time any attempt by me to speak is muted. But it is done through nudged interjections every time I attempt: "Oh, don't worry, Hlonkis you will get used to this crazy bunch. In time we shall introduce you to the other members," says Nthabiseng as a matter of fact.

Under normal circumstances, my brother should be dating MH, but he seems inactive when it comes to matters of the heart. This delights me. But this "baby" and "mummy" business does not amount to anything serious really, except for an occasional "baby" kiss on the cheek. I hardly reciprocate with a "Mummy" kiss. I am just content to have MH by my side.

One day my brother asks me to practise reggae star Peter Tosh's lyrics for an upcoming birthday bash for *Mastand*, the landlord. Thabang duly records me singing it onto our glazy black portable Blaupunkt tape recorder. "Sounds great! The people will love it," he says. Whatever. I feel my brother is overconfident about my vocal abilities.

Gogo is the *Mastand*, (which literally means *lady of the stands*), where we rent a room. It could have been her 75th birthday as far I could deduce. She was way older than my parents

and was occasionally walking with a stick. I believe she is MH's mum. She does not really say. In our relationship familial ties often take the backburner.

The days pass before the big day, and I casually forget about the booking. In fact, I unconsciously hope it will not happen, so that I save myself the embarrassment before MH – of all people.

But the big day does arrive, and everyone is dressed to the nines. Whilst we sing "for she is a jolly good fella" in merriment, my song bursts out of the speakers. This is a cue to ascend to the stage. To say that I am nervous is an understatement. Now for the first time I must perform in front of a crowd, which includes my "Mummy".

I manage to pull a mimicry of Tosh's song *Equal Rights*. I remember the title song because Tosh does an uncanny refrain on it which goes: "Equal Rights (Fight for it)". Somehow, to an impressionable mind it sounds like: "Equal Rights (Fight for Porridge)". It really made sense to me at the time. We are fighting for porridge, aren't we? Or at least porridge is one of the things we are fighting for, right? I am not sure how I am able to pull out the hat trick on that fateful day which made MH smile.

But there is another reggae song which equally takes the township by storm during our stay in Orlando East – *Jahovia* by the Twinkle Brothers from the album *Praise Jah*.

The group is formed in 1962 by brothers Norman and Ralston Grant in Jamaica. They get their name from a tipsy fan who watches them as they busk in the early days of their careers: "From now on you shall be known as the Twinkle Brothers," he declares. Attempts to change their name meet insurmountable obstacles. The self-nominated band manager's name has its day – everyone is beaten to the post for the naming rights.

This song *Jahovia* is a must-have item on the playlist of any serious DJ in Orlando. So, it invariably plays after my performance at the birthday gig. The yard goes into a frenzy and the drinks flow and the more faithful in the crowd roll a zol – including my brother. The song is a reference to the deity of the Rastafarians, King Selassie I.

At the time, I know little about the Rasta movement. All I know is that I love their music. Buoyed by the message of the song I seek the Rasta House, a few blocks away from my home, where the congregates gather randomly to praise Jah. I am afflicted with a Reggae Myelitis, an uncurable disease paralysing reggae music lovers all over the world.
At the Rasta House I find him -their leader.

A characteristic red, black, and green scarf hangs around one of his shoulders. He wears an African print with some lions and zebras of the African jungle. He is light skinned

with freckles on his face and wears long thick dreadlocks: “Welcome, young lion,” he says. The guy is already assuming I am a convert.

The Rastafarian movement springs out of Jamaica in the 1930s. It is inspired by the ideas of Marcus Garvey who reportedly states: “Look to Africa where a black King shall arise...this will be the day of your deliverance.” This is a brand of Pan Africanism which urges its followers, the former slaves, to go back home to Africa, the motherland. But who is this king that Garvey refers to? Rastas believe it is the Emperor of Ethiopia Selassie I or Ras Tafari.

The movement represents a yearning for freedom away from the suffering in the “new world” precipitated by the Atlantic Slave Trade. It fuses some traditional African beliefs with a new reading of the Bible. It converts white symbols into black ones in the Holy Book. Thus, Jesus and Solomon are Africans. African people, like the Jews, have been scattered in the Diaspora by the Almighty to appreciate His Greatness, the argument goes.

This is not the usual sermon I hear at church on Sundays in the township. I also know that most people do not interpret the Bible this way since the township is largely Christian. But in Orlando my church, the Dutch Reformed Church, seems a faraway place. So, my parents don’t enforce their strict rule of trekking to it vigorously.

My mentor continues: “The Western capitalist system is Babylon, an inhuman place. Zion is a human world steeped in freedom. These places have got an actual existence in the real world. Thus, Babylon is the western world and Zion is Ethiopia in Africa”.

As popular movements go, it also influences the Africans at home. Here the parallelism between South Africa and Babylon cannot escape me. Even in my young mind I focalise South Africa as Babylon. The fleeting images of white policemen chasing unarmed youth during the Soweto Uprising do not escape me.

On the other hand, reggae music, the medium for the message, has its own unique melodies, chants, and beats. The music has a reputation for carrying a political message. To this, the musicians only point out that they sing about things that they see in society.

For a moment, our conversation is suspended by the leader:

“Would you like some *Ital*? We have a delicious dish today *me brethren*”, he says.

“Yes please. I would love to taste Rasta food,” I say.

The “delicious dish” consists of porridge sprinkled with tomato sauce sans meat. *Is this what I am going to have to put up with every day?* So, I ponder for less onerous perks for my chosen new religion.

Strangely, I do not hear any records playing in this house whilst I visit. Perhaps when I visit the Rastas are busy meditating. Who needs songs in this state? This ritual involves the smoking of ganja, which for Rasta is sacrament, like the Christians would do at the Roman Catholic Church, for example. For me, this "holy herb" seems to give them an altered state of consciousness: sleepy eyes, slow speech, etc.

The Rasta leader justifies the smoking thus: "Look at the Bible, My King. What does it say? *Genesis 1:29*: 'And God said, Behold I have given you every herb bearing seed, which is upon the face of the earth, and every tree, in which is the fruit of a tree yielding seed, to you it shall be for meat.'" As if that is not evidence enough my leader continues: "You have *fi overstan dis tings me lion*. Check out another book in the Scriptures, *Psalm 104:14*, 'He causeth the grass to grow for the cattle, and herb for the service of man.'"

From my spiritual teacher I also learn a couple of words in the new language: "*Patra* means patriot and *Jah* is the King of Kings." Fortunately, the smoking rule is not enforced. In fact, some Rastas do not inhale the herb. But they are few and far between.

Still, I am curious. I hardly see any women; except for a figure I suspect is my leader's girlfriend. "We do welcome them," says my leader, who now brandishes a broad smile and lets off his guard. *Sistrens*. That's what women are called in the movement.

Somehow, I expect to see Thabang at the Rasta House, during my free lessons, but I don't. By now he has decided to throw the comb away – when my parents are not looking. Thabang hardly brings any friends to our Orlando abode. It seems he has signed a secrecy pact which I first saw when he was with his sidekick Neo in QwaQwa. When he is chilling in the yard, Thabang listens to a couple of reggae artists on my recorder and off he goes to the wilderness. One of his favourite albums is Jimmy Cliff's *Follow My Mind*. It features tracks such as *The News*, *Dear Mother* and *Remake the World*. And it comes out on the eve of the Soweto Uprising.

The reggae artist's visit to our country happens at the Orlando Stadium in 1980. As I recall Mr Of Course would have had something to say about it: "My son that stadium was full to the brims…" Unfortunately, the tour would be the only one the reggae star undertakes to our shores. I know Thabang regretted the fact that he missed this one: "If only we had come to this place earlier." That's all he says.

On the other hand, *Jahovia* would have a long shelf-life being re-done and re-mixed several times – not least by the Twinkle Brothers themselves. Today it is a must-sing number at any of their tours. The super kwaito group TKzee would do their own take in 1993. The

song *Fiasco* from the album *Guz 2001* would live up to its name and hook up the new generation in the townships of South Africa.

One could say the 80s was reggae's decade: On 18 April 1981 reggae star Bob Marley makes an appearance in Zimbabwe on its Independence Day causing the masses outside the stadium to demand entry to see their idol. The new flag of the new country rises on top of the song *Zimbabwe*. The same decade witnesses another reggae icon Gregory Issacs making a turn to our northern neighbour.

But for me, reggae becomes my first political school: It is a great school which teaches me that politics is not just about protesting the system in the streets. It is about the diet you choose to follow; the type of clothes you wear; the language you speak and the hairstyles you choose. I know that many a Rasta, including the leader I meet, would eschew joining a political party (some Rastas call it *politricks*), but the political tinge is unmistaken in most songs. For instance, Hugh Mundell's album is simply titled *Africa Must be Free by 1983.*

Still, my attempts at becoming a Rastafarian fail at the door of these strictures. But not before I attempt to read up on the movement in popular media.

Later, I would hear that Tosh, my idol, is murdered on 11 September 1987 at his home in Jamaica under the pretext of a robbery. Unfortunately, in our country decades later reggae star Lucky Dube and bassist Gito Baloi would fall victim to the same kind of thuggery.

In a different context a pithy question is asked by Reggae dub-poet Mutabaruka when he visits our country: "But is the pen mightier than the sword?"

Interestingly, musicality is not Thabang's forte. Or so I think. He himself would admit that he is vocally wounded. Most of the time when I watch him trying to dance (which he rarely does) to a tune he steps out of rhythm. But he would surprise me one day as we make our next relocation to another township in Soweto.

It will be a while before I see MH again…

3. The guy from Hollywood

It's a sunny Saturday afternoon and a live band is playing at Klipspruit, one of the earliest townships in Soweto. The band members are clad in tight-fitting Arabic garbs. I am in the audience. But I am alone.

Harari is a popular township band which boasts the likes of Masike "Funky" Mohapi, Sipho "Hot Stix" Mabuse, "Om" Alec Khaoli, Oupa Segwai and Thelma Segone. The Afro-Funk band's hits include *Give, Get up and dance* and *Party*. They are an interesting group because they wear red-coloured Arabic skirts and hoods, which make them eccentric. Thabang, my brother, and his QwaQwa posse Neo and Goitsemang are mimicking the band at the Molete home. The gang has scoured the kitchen and the dining room for their props which include: a couple of black comfy stools, a set of shiny spoons and an odd fork and knife. Somehow Goitse, the girl, has managed to discover a cupboard in the kitchen containing stowed old curtains which now serve as the band's impressive wardrobe.

My brother imitates "Om Alec" on the lead guitar, Neo is "Funky" on the bass guitar and Goitse naturally becomes Segone, the only female member of the pop group, on the keyboards. I could be "Hotstix" on the drums but then it means there would be no audience to watch the performance. I'm overlooked for this job and instead a neighbour is called to fill in the venerated role.

It looks like Thabang has been put on some rehearsal regime because his body does a fair share of bopping around to the rhythms of *Get up and dance*. Not the kind of movement of which "Om Alec" would approve, I suspect. Still a surprising improvement on his former Orlando East moves, I must say.

Unfortunately, Harari members split to pursue solo careers. "Om Alec" releases such hits as *Sekuru* (with *Umoja*), *Bambo Wangu (U.R. the One*) and *Say you love me*. Mabuse follows suit with *Burn out, Shikisha* and *Jive Soweto*. Mohapi staggers along with his own tunes such as *Babe, Feel and Understand* and *It's all right*.

Sadly, Segone passes on due to illness and Mohapi is hit by an allegedly speeding car during a crossing on Chris Hani Road which divides Pimville and Klipspruit. Later, whilst attending his funeral I am told of another sad passing of Segwai, from Diepkloof.

But Thabang and his friends always remind each other of another band member Lionel Petersen. I think to them it was a statement of unity amongst the oppressed in the wake of the divide rule tactics and adoption of the Tricameral parliamentary system by the apartheid regime. It seeks to further divide the people by creating different voting chambers along engineered racial divisions.

This was the time of the presidency of Ronald Reagan in the US. His government could be easily accused of being in a cosy relationship with the NP rulers who were now complacent about their rule since it had been decades on the helm.

Unfortunately, the Harari band split after they did a couple of tours overseas, including the US. A success by any measure. Nowadays the remaining band members reunite at concerts reminiscent of the 80s genre, the so-called bubble-gum music. They call them the "Legends" concerts.

Masike was a regular at these. I also recall that he was very fond of Klipspruit. This area consists of four-roomed houses, or "matchbox" houses in township parlance. This is where most of the working class resides. Many of the families are multi-generational and some are women-headed. Further down the Molete's home is the two-roomed abodes simply called "Diturumung" by the locals.

This area is next to Dikomponeng, meaning mine compounds. This is where the migrant workers live. Long before the internecine violence of the early 90s this community lived in harmony with the locals.

Typical to many streets in Soweto Molete's street is long and narrow. It is not uncommon to see drivers giving each other right of way on busy days. Fortunately, there is no main road situation to talk about although recently many communities have called on the municipality to install humps on the internal roads. These are mainly in areas where the schools are in proximity.

Upon seeing "Funky" the locals tease him: "Please sing *Give* for us!" Most of the time he obliges. In that sense he is the people's music man. So, when it is time to search for a new home in 1983 my parents choose Pimville – the home of Harari. But not without Thabang's warning:

"You guys think you are running away from a hotbed of politics? But you are entering a political beehive," says Thabang.

"But who told you that?" asks Mama.

"No one told me. I know so."

Thabang is the only one in my family who can claim to thoroughly know the township, even though he is a pedestrian. He can walk from Pimville to Orlando without looking back. Moreover, he makes friends at every corner of the places he traverses.

My dad always intimated that he did not prefer a place that is the epicentre of political activity in the township. Was Pimville not it? *It was,* according to Thabang. I am not sure as

to why my dad preferred this neutrality in a township or how he measured the high-profile political rating of some townships. It turns out that my brother was right about Pimville.

Not only did it host popular musicians such as Mabuse, Mohapi and Khaoli but it also hosted civic leaders and former Robben Island prisoners. Some of its famous denizens are former minister Jabu Moleketi, PAC veteran Mabhedle Nkosi, late civic leader Khabisi Mosunkutu, late youth leader Ephraim Nkoe, Azapo president Strike Thokoane and many others. After his release from Robben Island, June 16 leader Seatlholo chooses this area to build his new house.

All the same, my parents ignore Thabang's warnings. Still, for me the township makes for a great choice.

The township, which is next to Klipspruit, has *spaza* shops. The *spazas* are mini grocery stores stocking up on everything from a dozen eggs to a pint of milk for sale. All of these in turn have got their mini versions. Where can you find this in a chain store in town? What happens when you feel like a loaf of bread is too much? You purchase a half a loaf instead at a *spaza* shop near you, at a lesser price. It is the ingenuity of the township entrepreneur to come up with such innovation.

Moreover, a certain level of communalism is still practised in the township. It is not only the issue of banding together against crime as it happens in the suburban areas. It goes beyond that. You are acquainted to your neighbour. Good relations with *Makhelwane* are a matter of life and death in the hood. You can practically leave the doors of your house open at night. Well, almost.

But, for me, more importantly here we shall have an opportunity to own our own house.

The year sees my brother in his final year of schooling at Selelekela. Unfortunately, he does not do very well and the following year, at 17 years old, he is sent back to QwaQwa to a boarding school to finish his studies. This is where he meets up with Mpho, a fellow Sowetan.

Mpho is well endowed with a big body. Her big eyes penetrate an observer as if into their deepest crevices. This is counterbalanced by her tiny lips which hardly wear a frown. They complement her smooth brown skin carved on her equally tiny cone-shaped face. When she is happy her laughter is rapacious. Mpho is also the daughter of the PAC activist "Didi" Masilo in Pimville. She is a year older than Thabang and upon meeting they instantly fall in love.

But boarding schools currently are notorious for their "treatment" culture. The newcomers are referred to as *manywera*, a derogatory name for freshmen. Once the local students hear that there are newcomers at their school all hell breaks loose. It is even worse when the said newcomers are from Soweto. Any bully wants to buttress his/her authority by initiating a township kid into their regime, Soweto being the top of the list. It is fame (notoriety really) worth fighting for because Soweto has a reputation of being host to the *clevers*, or the township know-it-alls.

On one school holiday, I notice that Thabang has this visible mark on his backside whilst we chat in his new bedroom. I enquire:

"I've never seen this mark before; have you always, had it?"

"It's an old mark that I have always had. You would never notice it since I don't go around shirtless in the house," he says.

"But its shape is particular, like it was some artist who has drawn it?"

"Yeah right. What do you know about art? Nature can be a great artist too."

On that day my brother dismisses my queries by lecturing me about art. But who can dispute that he *is* the Montage Artist? But I keep on worrying about the "birthmark" which to me looks like a hot iron imprint on his back. *Was he "treated" at school?* As I would hear stories of boarding schools from friends: "They do that to you when you are a *lenywera*."

As I leave Ditau Higher Primary in Orlando East and prepare to enter Nkholi Combined School in Mokoerekoere Street in Pimville, zone 2; I remember another incident which gets etched in my mind forever from my alma mater:

We are sitting in a classroom, and we hear a buzz wafting in the air. No, this can't be what we think it is. So, we continue with our lessons. But now another hubbub joins the one we heard before. When this happens, we don't even ask for permission to leave from our worried female class teacher. We just rise and go. We don't want to perish in our classrooms. "Please pupils. Where do you think you are going? We are in the middle of a lesson here. *He banna!*" This is all my class teacher can say. Surprisingly she follows us.

It turns out that a bee colony has been developing outside one of our corrugated-iron roof classrooms. The invaders are also encroaching on the neighbouring classrooms. Upon seeing onlookers, they attack. All sorts of calls for peace are flurried about as teachers try to calm us down and make us return to our classes. I see some people waving white handkerchiefs appealing to the enemy: "We will deal with the situation. Please go back to class," says one stout female teacher.

Amid the pandemonium the media arrives. To be precise, it is *The Star* newspaper from Johannesburg. I'm hoping to also see my dad's crew from the SABC also plunge for the scoop. But they are beaten to the post by the print crew. Fortunately, no learner is injured in the whole scuffle.

Back in Pimville, we find that our house is one of the SABC 5 (this is how I see them). These are the houses initially built for the state broadcaster's staffers. Ours is the corner house on Thakadu Street. House number 257 is laced with a mustard water paint. My brother and my dad plant shrub trees and Kikuyu grass in the yard. They also pave it with Corobrick stone from the rubble leftover by the exhausted construction workers.

Whilst doing their chore they play *My Love Is Waiting* by soul crooner Marvin Gaye from the album *Midnight Love*. My dad plays this song repeatedly on our metallic Pioneer Hi-Fi speakers until the lyrics get into my head. I particularly like the acknowledgements Marvin Gaye makes whilst the song has begun playing: "Thank you ladies and gentlemen, I sure hope you've enjoyed our new album here on CBS Records. We'd like to thank Mister Harvey Fuqua, Mister Gordon Banks, Mister Mike Butcher (and) Mr Larkin Arnold. Most of all we want to thank our heavenly father Jesus!"

This is an innovation for me, and I would misclassify this song as a gospel tune. It looks like the singer is interrupting the song halfway to send a message. Anybody remotely passing outside our house can hear this song and others blasting from our new dining room speakers. I guess my dad is nostalgic about the QwaQwa years. On the other hand, I guess he is happy that we have a house we can call our own in Soweto. Sadly, *Midnight Love* would be Gaye's final album before he dies tragically, allegedly at the hands of his own father.

When my brother comes back from QwaQwa he picks up where he left off in Orlando; he hangs out with a group of like-minded youngsters during vacations. They call him *Jahman* because at this time he has decided to embrace the Rasta faith. This does not sit well with my parents, especially my dad, who insists that he should attend the conservative Dutch Reformed Church where he is a lay preacher.

At this point Thabang is starting to question Christianity: "These people want to convince us that our oppression is due to the natural laws of the world. We are supposed to be on the receiving end. I disagree." Thabang would pretend to go to church at zone 1 Pimville every other Sunday, he would. But only when it is out. Instead, he would hang out with his like-minded posse who don't bother to visit the "holy place" despite their proximity to it.

When we arrive in Pimville I make friends with a new boy from Meadowlands zone 10, Alfred Ngwira. There are hardly any fences to divide our houses. Both his parents work for the SABC. Alfred goes to Parktown Convent on Oxford Road, one of those private schools in town. It boasts facilities such as computer labs, a library, science laboratories, a swimming pool and tennis courts. Its pupils can choose different sporting codes like Karate, Netball, Basketball and Table Tennis. It is founded in 1905 by Mother Ambrose Farren and one of its notable alumni is Helen Suzman.

Alfred is a couple of years younger than me, and he is in the first grade. His family arrives in Pimville form Meadowlands in 1980 during winter: "I remember it was cold," says Alfred.

I always tease him that he was more suited to my township school than the "white school" he was attending given his dark complexion. In addition, he has a tough physique. This gives an impression of a kid who does not need the comforts of suburbia. But this was the exterior. Inside he is a gentle soul seldom wanting to start a fight.

Neither of us had any choice about the friendship, we just had to bond because it was only the two of us in the whole street. But at first, he came across as a secluded kid playing alone. I don't remember who approached who first, but we immediately struck a chord: "Hi, would you like to be friends?" one of us proposes. Being more forthright I bet it would have been Alfred.

We would play the simple games like marbles and sometimes fly kites. Most of the time we would draw stuff on the ground with no acute angles. We seldom drew diagrams with an opening. Perhaps it was the sign of the times – a certain claustrophobia after the clampdown on peaceful protests by the regime.

This is where I learn that football can be a solitary sport. I would play football alone whilst waiting for my friend to come back from school in town. I literally became player and referee at the same time. After bemoaning the different schools' systems- mainly the ugly uniforms or the beautiful ones, we would start the games.

Alfred's school has this tendency of making the pupils wear a black blazer with red stripes and a tie even when its summer. So, I tease him about that:

"Do you always need to wear that heavy stuff?"

Alfred shrugs and in turn teases me about my uniform: "At least on Wednesdays I wear a sports gear."

My only respite is my grey shorts. But even these are in mortal combat with my woolly socks – my Nkholi uniform, a navy-blue jersey with yellow stripes on the V-neck and wrists.

My school is a state primary school with no more than seventeen teachers at a time. I would later learn that it is not older than Parktown Convent, having been founded in 1978. We are around 500 kids at the most at school with one makeshift soccer ground. Our library is one of the classrooms. This means that it is a real classroom, with its own class teacher and lesson plan. It takes turns with "reading periods." My proudest moment is when I receive a merit certificate as a "Super Reader" from *Kalula*, a project of the Read Educational Trust, in late 1984. The certificate still hangs proudly on my wall.

At the same time elsewhere in the country the rent boycotts were raging in the Vaal townships (Sebokeng, Sharpeville, etc). These were demands of the residents for quality and affordable municipal services. The aftermath would be the Sharpeville 6 case where the deputy mayor, Jacob Kuzwayo Dlamini, lost his life. One of the co-accused in the case was Oupa "Scotch" Diniso, brother of Diniso Gamakhulu, actor and playwright. After being on death row for several years, the six were later acquitted.

The movie circuit scene at the time included *Ghostbusters* and *Beverly Hills Cop*, starring Eddie Murphy. I particularly liked the theme song of the former by R&B singer Ray Parker Junior: "If there's something strange in the neighbourhood/ Who you gonna call?"

Meanwhile, the world was introduced to the new DNA technology. This would push crime-busting efforts to another level. In addition, the technology has the potential to clear wrongfully accused persons in the system.

But despite the differences in resources bestowed upon our schools Alfred was never the type to belabour the point on the inferiority of township schools. In fact, I think he felt that he was missing out on some of the action in the township schools. This is a typical day at Nkholi:

In the morning at 8am we gather for assembly. Then off we go to our classes and pray that the bell rings at exactly 10am for our first short break. Then it is back to class again to look forward to the long break at around 12 noon. At this time, we get to play on the school grounds-mainly the "catch me or I will fall" games. We cannot afford to dirty ourselves too much because, if we do, we will get the ire of our teachers when we return to class. Sport practice seems to be reserved for practice sessions in preparation for district athletics competitions. But for those who are picked up as star runners the training happens even after school or on weekends.

We also have time to socialise with classmates and share lunches with those in our favour. Before we know it, the school bell rings, and the pupils are back in class. Then school is out at 2pm. It's back to our homes where tomorrow the trudge will start all over again.

But things change drastically that year-end in 1984 in zone 7 as more kids from nearby townships join us. These are from various townships including Diepkloof, Zola, Mndeni, etc. But my immediate neighbours, the Maithufi's, pitch up earlier than everyone. Their eldest son Tebogo attends a local primary Tshebedisano in zone 2. He is a couple of years older than me.

I remember that Lionel Richie's *All Night Long (All Night)* was the song for us. We would even act out some of the video scenes. I would imagine myself and Alfred as the two young boys who play a hand-clapping game when, to our surprise, Lionel joins us. In another scene a lonely little African American girl sits on top of the leathery brown backseat of an open coupe. She wears her hair in a single bun whilst waiting for an absent date. She is rescued by the chivalrous Lionel. This, for a while, takes her blues away. We love this scene.

Later we would debate as to who the girl on the video was. Some of my friends claimed she was one of the Huxtables' kids seen in *The Cosby Show*. Some vowed that she was way too young to be Vanessa Huxtable (Tempestt Bledsoe) the fourth child of Dr Huxtable (Bill Cosby) and Clair Huxtable (Phylicia Rashad).

Whatever the case was, the song from Richie's second solo album *Can't Slow Down* takes us by storm. It turns out it is his best album to date. What a way to describe the festive mood of Pimville during that year. In fact, there was a new girl in town…

Gontse is a dark beauty with a curvy body. Unlike MH, she is short. Her hair is always worn in one high bun – like the girl in the video. Her smile seems hard to summon but when she does it preys on the onlooker (I think alluring is the word I am looking for). She is 13 years old.

Hers is one of those "multi-racial" schools like Alfred's. She seems to be a flag-carrier for her school for she seldom takes off her school uniform. It invariably includes a decorated heavy blazer.

Unusual for this early evening, Gontse is wearing a white ballerina dress. It's like she is attending her own wedding and seems spoilt for choice when it comes to a prospective bridegroom. I know it sounds strange – Ballerinas and Brides. Well, that's what I see on the night or perhaps it is what I want to see – aiming for the coveted bridegroom's spot.

New Year's Eve is one of those few days in a year when my parents agree for the kids to go out and be with friends at night. When I am in the house they do not seem to mind

because it reassures them that I'm safe. But for me, New Year's Eve has a special effect – this is where I let go of my straitjacket and become a dreamer, in my best outfit.

I am wearing a Michael Jackson Thriller King of Pop fancy costume. But it is not a full costume; it's only a jacket. You don't want your friends thinking you are an MJ freak popping out of nowhere in a music video. So, to top it off I wear a black Carlo Galucci men's Byron formal trousers and some Carrera men's trainer shoes (cream and tan) and I convince myself: *I look swell*. I look swell for Gontse – my new crush.

For Thabang though, the night does not become a big deal. It simply means that on that day he goes out officially at night. He seems to gel naturally with the night. He hangs out with his Pimville posse that smokes ganja. During this time, I never see him drinking any alcoholic beverages. His only vice is the "holy herb". Every approaching year he seems more geared to defy the Babylon system.

I brood for days on end over what I should say to Gontse when we finally meet. Now that the year is about to end what better time to make my move?

On this early evening braais abound, and people are generally outdoors to catch the breeze. It is normally warm in the evening although rain is always anticipated later towards midnight. It always rains on this day. It is as if the people's faltering's over the past 364 days are washed away by *The One* above.

As I move towards a group of friends who always sit at the corner house pavement, rain or shine, I recognise her. She is the only girl amidst the group of the teenage boys. As usual she is keeping everybody in a trance. At this very moment, she is describing her "ideal man", my total opposite:

"He should be well built and tall. I want a dark and handsome hunk on whose chest I can lay my head," she says.

"But those are few and far between in the township. Will you go to Hollywood?" asks one of the silly newcomer boys, Mavatha.

"If I have to in order to get my man? Hell, I would," she says.

I notice she seems to be describing a 31-year-old man. I'm only 12!

I lose the war before the battle has begun. These matters of the heart I hardly discuss with Thabang. After my dismal failure with MH, I know he would laugh me off. He would argue that I couldn't take my relationship with MH to a higher level. Instead, I perfected the role of a "baby", following her up and down the streets of Orlando even as she was pursued by older boys. I was too complacent not to think that at one stage she would need a real lover.

On the other hand, after his return from boarding school my brother seems to be doing well in the relationships department. I hear stories about Thabang's escapades with women. In particular, I hear about one, Madibuseng, a skinny girl from an adjoining street in zone 7.

"You are not like your brother. You are too timid," Bra Jazz teases me.

"What do you mean?" I ask.

One night I see it for myself: a light-complexioned, slender, and beautiful hand of a woman under my brother's blankets in his bedroom. We now have our separate rooms and his is adorned with pencil sketches of Sobukwe, Biko and a self-portrait. There is a particularly disturbing one with the protagonist chopping off the enemy's limbs on a battlefield. It looks like it comes straight from some battlefield in colonial times. It is the only one I see as incongruent with the rest of the smiling faces of our leaders. It does not match.

Interestingly Thabang and Madibuseng meet at a stokvel – a happy place.

The stokvels are informal saving arrangements amongst township folk because of the lack of credit facilities at the mainstream banks. They become a popular way of saving during that time. But my brother's is what is called a Party Stokvel. These are youth gatherings ostensibly to empower one another economically. The money collected amongst members of this type contributes towards the organising of a party or social event from which members make some earnings. Every member gets their turn to host this event, which also allows sub-members to participate.

The outings are serious for Thabang, who has purchased a brown suede jacket which he wears during these excursions: "I'm just going out to visit some friends," he says. He does not say exactly where he is going or when he would be back. It could be that he does not want to be disturbed whilst having fun. Or it could be that he is avoiding a police force bust, which is not uncommon at any auspicious township gathering.

How I wish it could be Mpho navigating these fun places with him. But she was still sticking it out in QwaQwa where she had found a way to navigate the Bantustan maze and get herself a school certificate.

In my hood on this New Year's Eve, Gontse comes back at night to sit all by herself at the corner rendezvous. My friends are busy organising a New Year party up the road for that night. I think she will be the guest of honour at this gig, given the heads she is able to turn amongst us.

But as I approach, she is surprisingly left to her own devices. So, I ask:

"Hey. Why are you not at the party?"

"Hey. Why are *you* not at the party?" she mimics me with a wry smile.

“Well, I was on my way there,” I lie.

“And then...?”

I am lost for words, and she laughs.

“Never mind. I don’t really like gate-crashing. Besides I don’t feel like a party tonight. That’s not what this day is all about,” she says.

I pull a sigh. Hint: She likes you.

“So, what’s the day really about?” I ask.

I relax a bit from my crouching position and get closer. Her hand slowly touches mine: “It’s about being with the ones you love.” As she says these words, I grip her hand and ensure that my cheek touches hers before the big moment – the kiss.

All along Mavatha is watching this from a safe distance, unseen by us. He chooses the moment when we are about to kiss to enter the stage: “So, is this the Hollywood guy?” he shrugs in reference to the earlier conversation they had about Gontse’s ideal man.

In the township, once you have done what is perceived as a transgression with a witness present then there is a price you must pay. The guy demands all sorts of favours from you on the pretext that they are going to call you out for your sin if you don’t accede to their demands. Not that Gontse and I were doing anything wayward, I think. But we knew the deal. We’d been found out. So, she improvises a funny line: “Yo, guys. I didn’t realise that it’s almost midnight. Got to rush back home. See you tomorrow, happy new year!”

It’s like those words are meant for one person only – me. The spoiler Mavatha is disappointed. And as we part, I am hopeful that when she is alone Gontse thinks about me. I know the stories that she relates to the boys are just like playing to the gallery. Deep down, I know she likes me. So, at midnight, on New Year’s Eve, I walk back home amidst the firecrackers with a sense of renewed hope for the future.

4. That's the way love is

That year in 1985 Gontse does not come back to the township for what feels like eternity in my heart. Did I deceive myself into thinking that she cares about me? When she is here today, I only hear about it tomorrow.

My friends continue as normal whilst I take on a baby-sitting role. The previous year a family member was added to my household by the name of Tharollo, my younger brother. His name says it all – *to resolve*. Would he resolve my relationship with Gontse? Perhaps that is asking for too much. Tharollo is born on the 26th of April 1984, in Soweto.

I had always wanted a younger brother – to play the role that my older brother played in my formative years. But it is the older boys in my street who alert me to the possibility of having an additional member of the family in Pimville. Being a naughty lot, these friends of mine must have heard the adults speaking: that my mum was expecting a baby. Being 13 I am too embarrassed to focus on such matters. But it looks like Tharollo, my younger brother, was expected. To say I was elated is an understatement.

Finally, I thought, I would make amends for the erratic moves I made as a younger self. I would teach Tharollo how to navigate the township streets easier; how to choose friends; how to succeed better in life; and other lessons.

The subsequent year, I start taking my younger brother to a creche in zone 5 during the mornings as he begins to walk. The street is next to the Bi-Rite Supermarket and sometimes we take a detour to buy some sweets. But these are very slow walks, often intercepted with playing on the streets next to the Bible House. Tharollo demands his "me time" and this costs me my punctuality at my own school and the principal, Mr Hams, notices:

"Mr Shale. These days you are always late for the assembly. Why?" says my principal and Biblical Studies teacher.

"Meneer. I have to take my younger brother to creche in the mornings," I say.

"I understand but you have to be punctual at school. Can't you take him earlier?"

"Unfortunately, not Meneer. Creche only opens later."

"Then you shall have to make other arrangements with your parents, Mr Shale. I am sorry."

Fortunately, Mr Hams does not follow up on this as he normally does. Such transgressions carry a harsh penalty since this is the time of corporal punishment. To my surprise he lets it pass. I never really make any arrangements with my parents as expected

either. It is just understood at my school that one of their boys is elated to have a younger brother in his life. School will have to wait.

It is I who takes Tharollo to school on his first day at the local Tshebedisano Primary School on number 2650 Motloma Street in zone 2 when he is of school-going age. I can scantily recall this day:

Tharollo is wearing a navy-blue jersey with light-blue stripes on the V-neck and on the wrists. We are standing next to the staffroom in order to wrap up the admissions paper trail at a school of no more than 800 pupils and about 20 teachers. My younger brother's prospective class teacher, a woman, comes up to greet us:

"I assume you are the brother to this young man who is eager to join us?"

"Yes, Ma'am"

"It looks like you are at school yourself. Progress, if I am not mistaken?"

"That's correct Ma'am."

"Don't worry about this young man, most of the paperwork is done. I shall allocate him his class in a moment. You must rush to school. We don't want Mr Hams to start calling on us now. Do we?"

"No, Ma'am."

So, I dash back to school.

During my lunch break I go back to fetch Tharollo at his new school and ask him how it was on his very first day:

"Boring," he says.

"Made any friends?" I ask.

"Yeah, just a few. Most of them seemed lost."

Never mind my brother's first impressions of the schooling system in the township, all I want is to see a day when I can carry him on my shoulders, like my older brother Thabang did several years ago at Orlando East, when he fetched me to watch a music festival at the Jabulani Amphitheatre. I vividly recall this day from 1982:

Thabang comes to me whilst Mama is helping me choose appropriate attire for the outdoor event:

"We shall be late, hurry up," Thabang says looking directly at me.

"Give the boy a chance. *Hau*!" says Mama.

We take a taxi to Naledi. On arrival, we walk some distance before we reach the venue. It is full to the brims with music fans. I have been promised a lifetime experience by

my brother and I am waiting to see how this will pan out. The line-up includes hit-makers Brenda Fassie, CJB and PJ Powers, amongst others:

"*Sanibonani*!" shouts Powers, aka Thandeka, to the crowd.

"Yebo!" the crowd roars back taken by this anomaly of a *mlungu* speaking isiZulu. So far, the only person who can claim the status of a "white Zulu" is Johnny Clegg who had earlier hit the music scene with Sipho Mchunu as Juluka.

The concert starts and Powers belts out her song *Help*. How appropriate. We really need help in this place. South Africa is a pariah state which still celebrates "Republic Day" on the 31st of May. The powers that be sought to dissociate themselves with their former colonial master, Britain. However, this set-up has always excluded the indigenous African people and in times of great crisis the Dutch settlers and their British counterparts have always united against the "black peril".

After the last song is rendered, we prepare to leave. My brother broaches the subject of catching a train. It is late at night, around 10pm. Our parents must be worried by now, he says. Luckily, for me, we find the last minibus taxi to the township in the vicinity. "But I can only take you halfway," says the combi driver. No problem, my brother says.

The taxi driver drops us at Orlando West. From there we walk to Orlando East. Whilst on our journey Thabang shows me the houses of famous township people: Winnie Mandela's house; Mothopeng's house on Pela Street; and Walter Sisulu's house just a stone's throw away from the PAC leader. From the bush that we cross we walk towards the bridge. From there we can see Orlando East with its magnificent streetlights.

When we finally arrive home, I make a promise to my brother that I shall not tell my parents about the struggle we encountered to get home. "Ma, we had a good time and the taxi dropped us at Orlando Stadium," I say. The truth is that I really had a good time. The transport challenge seemed to have been a blessing in disguise since I got to know my township better.

My brother's train ride would have taken us to Mlamlankunzi, the Orlando train station which witnesses many Buccaneer fans emerge from its belly as they enter the stadium to watch their favourite team. For my brother, the train is a mode of transport. For me, it is a hazardous adventure.

Pimville, like Orlando and Jabulani, is a train neighbourhood. It has two train stations – Kliptown and Nancefield. The former being the place famous for the adoption of the Freedom Charter in 1955 which becomes a guiding document for the ANC up to this day. Nancefield is closer to Klipspruit.

At my school the boys take to train rides, sometimes up to perilous heights with their *isiparapara* games. These are daredevil games which involve a participant riding on the roof of a train in motion whilst mimicking an isipantsula move. Others have taken to the *ama-smokesara* business. They wear khaki Dickies original chino trousers with matching button-down t-shirts. They bump around in their meticulously clean Chuck Taylor All-Star high-top sneakers. It is a way for the hawkers to sell anything from cigarettes to fruits in order to eke out a living.

For the boys whose parents are at work from dawn to dusk this is not a train smash. I remember asking permission from my dad, a broadcast journalist, to join this enterprising group:

Me: "Pa I just found a great way to make extra pocket money?"

Dad: "Yes. I am listening."

Me: "I would like to sell sweets on the train. I am already doing it at school."

Dad: "Hlonkis. Are you not getting enough pocket money from home?"

Me: "I am, but…"

Dad: "Exactly. I would have been surprised if you said you didn't. Now, that business of the trains is for the boys who must supplement their pocket money because their parents cannot afford more."

There were no further discussions. That was the end of it.

With the declaration of the state of emergency on 20 July 1985 it means soldiers are in most public places, including the train stations. Under the restrictions any organisation or meeting could be banned. The state disallows the publication of the detainee's names in the media and many political activists are killed by the police. But the boys at my school continue with their selling business on the trains.

So, I join the stone throwers. We have identified our targets as anything or anyone who is furthering the aims and objectives of "the system": company delivery trucks, state agents (these include the police and the army), municipal council buildings, so forth and so on. At any opportune moment we strike.

Similarly, there is also the gangster phenomenon at school.

The song *A Song for Denise* by Piano Fantasia is playing out of the speakers of a *ledombolo* (Mazda 323 hatchback) which is moving at a very slow pace towards the main entrance and straight into the car parking lot of our school. This is mainly a staff parking lot. No student at the time is known to own a car, so there is no student parking lot. The driver

parks right next to Mr Hams's white Toyota Cressida car. Mr Hams comes out running after hearing the din in the school yard. "Hey, Moshemane (boy) what do you think you are doing? You will scratch my car. Do you have a licence?"

The Cressida is the pride of the principal, and it is almost brand new. The model is a redesigned special for that year. It includes features such as an electronic shock absorber control, wood panelling, radio controls placed near the steering wheel and a new automatic transmission. You could see that Mr Hams was very comfortable in his car and had fun driving it.

The boy just laughs back. He is the leader of a local Pimville gang. "Don't worry Meneer, even if I were to scratch it, I could easily get it repaired with its new parts in no time." The onlookers laugh back at hearing this retort to the embarrassment of the principal. "You will have to see me at my office now," says the principal who shuffles back to his office.

One winter afternoon I take a walk to a night vigil in zone 2. One of the boys at our school has been caught up in the township violence of the time. He is fatally stabbed after an ambush by a rival gang.

We normally have stay awakes to revive the spirit of the rebellion even in cases when the deceased cannot be said to have perished in clear political circumstances. To us, South Africa is a political country and any opportunity to make us gather to a cause as the oppressed is welcome.

Before then I decide to take a detour to greet my schoolmate Thokozani at his home on the opposite street. He is the apolitical type. Because of this I know he might miss the night vigil. But I am distracted by an activity two houses away. "Who is that girl acing her mates in that game?" I ask. At this point I am balancing my elbow on the corrugated-iron gate:

"Her name is Mazet," replies Thokozani.

"I am smitten. Do you think you can make us meet?" I ask.

"I think it's asking for too much. Aren't boys supposed to be the initiators?"

"No, man, you don't understand. I think I *really* like her?"

"OK. I understand. I will do it. Give me a couple of days."

"That's what friends are for," I say.

Mazet is a petite and light-complexioned girl. When we meet, she is probably 11 years old and still at Motjoli Primary whilst I am at high school doing my standard six at Progress High. I am 13 years old.

I arrive at her home, and I am treated to an Oros orange squash and some tennis biscuits snack– a real treat for me. The dining room consists of a brown coffee table with two pieces of white embroidery. On the wall pictures of her grandmother and grandpa hover above us as we eat. Her mum is a nurse at the local clinic and is currently at work. I break the ice in anticipation of an unannounced visit by her mum:

"When last did you speak to Thokozani?" I say.

"I speak to him every day. Why?"

"Well, I had asked him to make an appointment for me with you."

"So?"

"I had also told him to tell you that I like you."

Despite this very amateurish performance on my part Mazet agrees for us to be lovers. We hold our Oros glasses up in the air to toast our new love. But before we go any further Mazet whisks me out of the house in case her mum makes an unannounced return home.

If these arrangements are said to be reciprocal, I don't know what promise I would make to my mate, Thokozani. Fortunately, he doesn't bother. In fact, he has real doubts about the sustainability of our relationship.

I'm very dumbfounded at this time as I find my "real match" (i.e., the traditional thinking that a man should be older than a woman). I hardly touch or kiss her. I just admire her. But what do I really want from her? Most of the time I plan for when we shall get married.

The question remains: What do I really want? The answer is: I want her to come to Progress for her school career next year.

To my surprise she agrees. Thus in 1986, Mazet joins the Progress Comprehensive School for her first year. I announce the good news to my friends – not least Thokozani:

"Have I got good news for you," I say.

"I'm all ears," he says.

"She is coming here this year. Mazet will be one of the students in our high school."

"I know. She has already told me so."

Thokozani is one of the coolest guys I know. He is what we call *Ma-Ivy,* the guys who belong to the Ivy League. These are guys who listen to Michael Jackson tracks only. Now and then they imitate him. You don't know anything in vogue that Thokozani does not already know about, except politics of course.

Except for the schoolyard our hangout spots are usually township street corners and occasionally her home. We don't attend many social events unless you count occasions where we gate-crash at wedding anniversaries on her street.

Things soon change once she is at Progress. For starters the *ama-smokesara* boys give her too much attention for my liking. One boy wearing a Samson overall and All Star tekkies approaches her during lunchbreak. She is eating a potato chip sandwich with her girlfriends. The boy interrupts the merriment: "Hey beautiful girl, would you like to go out sometime? I mean I wouldn't ask if I had no money to take you out. Who is stupid enough to let go of a beauty like you?" To this Mazet only smiles back. All this time I am lurking behind the classroom watching – beaten by jealousy.

One afternoon we are sitting on a lush green lawn not far from our school. She is standing up and I'm squatting down outside one of the "big houses," a brown face-brick house in Pimville, zone 4. The garden is also laced with well-trimmed shrubs and lilies in contorted colours; pink, white and blue – bright. This is the more affluent side of the zone, but the air is humid although it is sunny.

The school is out, and the chattering of the pupils is loud. I hear some whistles from the elated crowd outside the school gates. My mouth is dry, my hands are numb and the grass I am sitting on stings.

A new state of emergency has been declared on 12 June 1986 and this time it is more stringent than the previous one. It is a nationwide lockdown which restricts political funerals, bans certain public meetings, and imposes a curfew, amongst other things. To top it all off, the media is restricted from covering the political unrest in the townships.

By now South Africa boasts the infamy of instituting three state of emergencies to suppress the spirit of freedom among the people. The first one is declared after the Sharpeville Massacre in 1960 when both the PAC and the ANC are banned.

Our distance from the schoolyard insulates us, in a way. At this point, I do not realise that a sitting arrangement could be the starting point of contention:

"You are sitting down while I'm standing. What kind of a man are you? shouts Mazet.

"Well, you can sit down if you want to. No one is stopping you," I say.

"Look at us, we don't even behave like lovers," says Mazet.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean look at the distance between us."

An occasional stare from a passer-by does not break this meeting of destiny. My casual response to her accusations incites Mazet and she unleashes her fire.

"You are a real bore. Do you know that?" says Mazet

"I guess you are the innovative one in this relationship?"

"But I told you last year that we needed a break and you refused," she says.

"I still refuse now," I respond.

"Guess what then, we are going to be forced to take it."

"The only reason you want a break is to dump me and go out with the other boys at school," I retort.

After this, I do not even wait for Mazet's response because I do what I always do when faced with these type of situations – walk away. I think Mazet's response is, *Hamba Uzobuya* (leave but you shall come back).

That was the end.

No matter how many times we tried after the break-up to make up it just didn't work out. This is one relationship that has affected all my relationships thereafter. I tend to enter any new relationship with a sense of scepticism and mistrust for my partner. I never got any help to navigate the future without Mazet.

Even the songs I subsequently listen to in order to get over her do not do the magic. For instance, I am taken up by Ten City's *That's the way love is*. Here, the singer is amazed that after agreeing to a lifetime of love a couple in a relationship decides to call it quits. Later, I am duped by The Pasadenas' *I'm doing fine now (Without you)*. The two songs do not become palliative to me.

Meanwhile, Thabang has found out about my relationship with Mazet. The only thing he has to say is, "She looks like a good girl to me. Take good care of her." I am not surprised by his response. He is always seeking an amicable solution in times of conflict among the people. He feels we have a bigger enemy to worry about.

He, on the other hand, has resuscitated his relationship with Mpho, his young sweetheart from boarding school. He goes on to see her at zone 2 and occasionally she comes to our house. My mother is content about this relationship: "I think your brother has found his soulmate," she smiles.

5. My brother, my protector

With Gontse in the vicinity that year I know it promises to be one of the merriest. I am confounded since this time my crush comes as often as she can to Pimville. Although this is good news for me, I try to hide my elation from her.

Seeing Gontse for the second time around gives me another chance to consolidate our "relationship". My prayers have been answered. This time she abandons her school uniform for the older looks of a young woman – the girl of my dreams, she becomes. More like the image of the Lionel Richie actress in the *All night long* video.

But it's funny how these days whenever I think of Gontse I think of Joyce Simms' song *Come into my life*, a Soul/ R&B number where the singer promises her would-be lover heaven on earth. Only if…well, only if, he could come into her life. I cannot say I never entertain the thought that the song is specifically made for us – me and Gontse.

Weirdly, though, I think I need a breather. Perhaps her entrance was too soon, I reason.

I create a distraction: I join the latest music craze called House Music. It is founded by American DJ and remixer Frankie Knuckles and takes its name from one of his clubs called the Warehouse. The genre falls under the supergenre of electronic dance music incorporating such styles as disco, post-punk, R&B and synthesiser heavy Eurodisco. Knuckles makes his debut recording in 1985, although he has been DJ-ing for longer than that, starting out in the mid-seventies as a teenager.

I buy into the craze in a big way. My collection includes JM Silk, TNT, and Colonel Abrahams, amongst others. One seldom hears this stuff on mainstream radio, let alone at birthday parties. It is mainly the township DJs and their acquaintances who possess the collection. I am excited to be at the forefront of this fanaticism.

I particularly like JM Silk's album *Hold on to Your Dream* and its title track. It starts off with the dreamy voice of civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jnr in his famous "I have a dream" speech before he is assassinated. The suspected killer, James Earl Ray, serves time for this dastardly act. I guess the album is part-tribute to the leader and part-motivation for the youth to keep their heads up.

But if I really wanted to mesmerise my audience, I play them the group's house remix track called *I can't turn around*. It is an ode to the dance floor. Its drum machine beat with an overlay of an Isaac Hayes' classic is mesmerising, to say the least. Listening to the original version by Hayes, I must say, the house duo Steve "Silk" Hurley and Keith Nunnally create a

new song altogether, which is what the house revolution is all about. Some of its good DJs re-arrange the songs from the ground up until something new comes up. They even have the guts to recall the original artists to give the remix their blessing!

Earlier that year in 1987, J.M. Silk's *Jack your body* hits the number one spot in the UK's Top Ten Charts. Later, house music becomes the midwife to the rave sub-culture in Britain.

But on our shores, house music is associated with the Pantsula sub-culture. I have sworn to the pantsula code and the amapantsula have a reputation of being politically active, despite another perception of them being just thugs. In the show *Bozzoli: Like Pantsula, like Mshoza* the playwright Thulani Nyembe intimates that isi*pantsula* comes from the word *ukupentsula* which means "to waddle like a duck or protruding buttocks".

Their involvement in the resistance movement becomes particularly pronounced from the 70s onwards. Although earlier influences include the machismo of the Kofifi (Sophiatown) gangs of the 50s and their associated music. The new century has introduced other subcultures rendering a serious challenge to isipantsula in the townships of Gauteng. But nothing can beat their "waddling like ducks" on the dance floor.

I remember one classical pantsula high school teacher simply named Meneer Lepantsula (I think ordinarily he was supposed to be called Meneer Diale). He would come to class donning a Brentwood Single Pleat Slim Trouser with a striped golfer t-shirt and a pair of black Marc Men's Brentwood brogues. He would then follow up with a John Lewis vintage hat, the one made famous by reggae poet LK J – complete with a feather on the side. We used to relish his classes just to watch him strut his stuff as he reached for the blackboard.

At the opposite end of the pantsula cult you had Ma-Ivy, who would just get up and dance to pop king Michael Jackson's hits like *Rock with you*, *Don't stop 'till you get enough* and *The way you make me feel*. These dudes wear their hair in s-curl perm styles and rarely in afros like the earlier version of their pop king. Their distinguishing feature is their tight-fitting trousers, the opposite of the pantsula's custom-fit formal trousers.

The Ama-Ivy were the more respectable members of society. They wore straight-cut Carducci men's Csquared formal trousers and Derrawe leather shoes. On top they would put on a floral shirt or a viyella formal one. Sometimes they wore tight-fitting jeans or botsotso's as we would call them.

These guys were also popular amongst the women, since they were known for their TLC (tender loving care). But now and then you had complaints from their jilted lovers who accused them of cheating. Some Mshoza's (Pantsula women) would date them just to teach

them a lesson or two on being loyal to one's partner. Not that the pantsula guys like me were any better. This is where the local girls compose a song about the "respectable" guys: *A kae mapantsula? Ma-Ivy ke difebe* ("Where are those good ol' pantsula men? The Ivy's are just bitching around").

The third sub-culture, Ama-Punk, took the clothing sense to its extremes. The amapunk's (Punk's) dress sense is designed to shock; they wear their slashed garments precariously held together by safety pins. Their favourite hairstyle is the spiked multi-coloured one made shiny by the application of Vaseline coupled with uncanny make-up. Some of these trousers even have shoelaces at the bottom in case the wearer wants to tighten the loose ends.

This is when one begins to see body tattoos. I remember seeing this phenomenon at the Newtown Cultural Precinct, outside what is now known as Museum Africa. Before then I had always thought it's an overseas cult. But here we are right in Johannesburg with a group of white youth wearing black and bracelets all over their garments. Albeit a minority, these Punks just want to rock, whatever that means.

We, the amapantsula, see both groups as the enemy. I remember us pulling a stunt on a group of youth we thought belonged to the Punk group. They were wearing jeans and t-shirts, the ones which look like they come straight off a Miami beach. Yes, the floral ones. These could hardly be labelled as "punk"? But what the hell…they wore purposely torn stonewashed jeans. We did not know any better:

"Hey nina, Ma-Punk! Who do you think you are?" one of us shouts. It's probably me. I am 15 years old, and I am with two other boys my age. After hearing this, the "punk" gang chases us up the streets of zone 4, the vicinity of my high school Progress. They give chase as far as the border between zone 4 and zone 7. Luckily, we outmanoeuvre them. After finding a resting spot after a good run we pat ourselves on the back for outrunning our adversaries.

Later, I learn that the true Punks are the rebellious type. The type of youth, mainly in Britain, who question the conservative status quo. These are the youth who are fighting against any attempts by the conservatives to cut down on public service spending and disadvantage the working class. Their style of clothing, mainly black, is a form of a rebellion.

The Punks historically come up in the cultural radar in the mid-seventies, although their nascent roots can be traced back to the US in the 1960s with groups such as the New York Dolls, Velvet Underground, and the Ramones.

In Britain this subculture is assimilated to give birth to the classic punk movement which includes not only song but a unique type of behaviour for the followers. Essentially, they carry an anti-establishment attitude. These are mainly the urban working-class youth demoralised by the profit motive of the system, the "me first" culture. Here, the most representative rock band of the subculture becomes The Sex Pistols. Sadly, they split during a US national tour at the height of their fame.

For us, the pantsula's in the mid-eighties, these punks are somehow linked to the Ama-Ivy group. We are the *real* rebels, we pronounce. But township life being what it is you always have exceptions: a pantsula dancing to a Michael Jackson tune. I would find no contradiction in loving Wacko Jacko alongside my Dickies pants and my All Star tekkies.

The local bands are also strutting their stuff in the game. What was to be framed as "Bubblegum music" has its roots emerging during this decade. The word "bubblegum music" is less than flattering. It refers to music relying heavily on electronic keyboards and synthesisers. Apparently, a call and response overlapped with vocals characterises this music. Singers like Branda Fassie, Yvonne Chaka Chaka and Chicco Twala, amongst others, are boxed under this new genre.

Sometimes the word is used to describe non-creativity on the part of the composers. Critics claim that it is the basest type of pop where the refrain makes for the whole song. Still, one wonders why the same criticism isn't labelled at overseas pop groups who can be accused of doing the same. The labelling of the 80s local music and its subsequent criticism leaves a bitter taste in my mouth since one is not sure if the true target of the criticism is the homebrewed nature of the productions or some unattainable aesthetic standards set by the artistic deities.

One local group that is making moves during this time, and probably boxed under the genre, is Ashiko, an outfit from zone 1 in my neighbourhood. The previous year they introduce a hit with the *Gumba Fire (Madlakadlaka)* album. Everybody is waiting for the sequel. They do not disappoint with their *Umaseven* album.

For us, the amapantsula, it becomes a national anthem. Something local, but something to be proud of. I suspect this is when the slogan "Local is lekker" is coined. One of the popular tracks from this offering is *Ushukela Mningi lapha*, meaning "There is lots of sugar here". The sextet consists of three keyboardists: Innocent Hala, Diliza Maneli and Bonakele Mbambisa; two guitarists Skipper Shabalala and Thomas Tladi; and one lead vocalist Alpheus Mofokeng. In fact, the group gets together at the beginning of the new decade.

But for Thabang, singer Kamazu is the man. The pop singer releases his *African Man* vinyl in 1986. The title track is written by legendary composer/singer Steve Kekana. In this song Kamazu lures all the tribes to sit under the African tree's shade. My brother loves this track and subsequently every other song by the artist. Other songs from the album include *Black Mampatile* and *Feel like I do (Brenda)*.

One afternoon when I come back from school, I am distraught. One of my schoolmates at Progress Comprehensive is refusing to return a cassette tape that I lent him. I am 15 years old and for a moment I am a collector of the house genre which is still largely an overseas phenomenon.

On this day, school is out earlier than usual, although "usual" in mid-80s Soweto means something else. School being out before its official hour is a rule rather than an exception. It only takes a rebellious student to run to the staff room, locate the button of the siren, and press it. Buzz – school is out!

The ringing of the bell is a cue for children to run helter-skelter. Once they hear this, they do not wait for the authorities to explain. It is an unwritten rule between us and the school. Both parties understand that there is an expectation of home-going when the bell starts to ring more than once.

On some days, the battles end up ugly with a few injured students rushed to a clinic or, on some days, it can end up with a few soldiers sustaining petrol bomb wounds. This is a country on the brink of a civil war. Little do we know that this state of emergency will last for four years. We have no qualms about it if it shall usher in a new day. The liberation movement has declared that decade as the decade of the youth and revolution.

Earlier, the PAC's chairman Nyathi Pokela had commanded, in a new year message, in 1984: "The youth in the 1980s are conscious of their historic mission, and jointly with the peasants and workers are mentally and physically prepared to ransack and destroy the citadel of racist power. We have entered the eighties and alas!" On the other hand, in its January 8 Statement in 1985 the then banned ANC calls on the masses to make South Africa ungovernable.

At this stage, Thabang is doing his matric through correspondence at Damelin. He has convinced my parents that day-schooling is not for his ilk. In fact, many activist students have taken this option in defiance of the Bantu Education diet fed to countless pupils in township schools.

On this afternoon as I come back home early, I greet and pass my brother in the kitchen of our zone 7 home. He is doing some chores. He is used to helping with the dishes and scrubbing the floor. Unlike in QwaQwa there is no one like Goitse to help. We are only boys in the house. But I take advantage of his overzealousness and miss my turns to wash the dishes. I pretend I am busy with schoolwork, although everybody knows that there is hardly any.

In many respects our kitchen looks like the QwaQwa one, except for the new electric stove. The room consists of white and yellow chequered tiles, a kitchen unit set with matching colours, some designer pots bought by my mum and a white combi Westpoint International two-door fridge which is also a carryover from the bantustan. The kitchen floor cupboards are made of aluminium.

My mother insists on the cleanliness of her kitchen. The tiles would be forever pristine and shining with Thabang's help. But on this afternoon, he notices something strange in me whilst drying the dishes:

"Why do you look so sad today?" he asks, not looking at me.

"No, I am fine," I say.

"No, you are not. I know you. Remember I am your brother."

"OK. Someone took my cassette."

"Who?"

"Don't worry. It's no big deal."

"I asked who?"

"It's a boy named M. No big deal really."

I am trying to avoid this talk and so before he knows it, I go to my room which is adorned with a picture of Ruud Gullit, the AC Milan attacking midfielder, behind my brown door. I still harbour latent Rasta sentiments because the soccer player wears long dreadlocks and for me this means he is Rasta. That year in 1987 he wins the World Soccer Player of the Year award. He would repeat the same feat two years later.

Looking at this picture: a goal driven Gullit in action with the ball all by himself and wearing the traditional red jersey with black vertical stripes of his team; eyes fixed on the ball; I hurl myself onto my single bed with white linen sheets, a brown blanket, and a navy-blue bed cover with horizontal white stripes. Since its winter it could be two blankets. I try to take a nap. I do not even think I am able to change into my home clothes as I slumber. Even the shoes, I believe, I take off instinctively.

After a short time, before I know it, Thabang abruptly wakes me up. In his hands, he has my prized possession – a tape cassette. I think I am dreaming:

"But this is the cassette I have been looking for. How did you get hold of it?" I say.

"It was easy. I went to the person who took it away and demanded that he return it to the rightful owner," Thabang says.

"How did you even know M's house?"

"That M of yours is a troublesome character I tell you."

My brother returns my possessions in good condition, with himself still intact. I wonder what transpired? I wonder how the streetwise M responded. I never get to find out what really happened on that day. Neither M nor Thabang ever recount the full story to me.

The following day one of my friends, a short fellow who is a lot younger than me, comes to me whilst I am standing at the corner of the street, where we normally burn a brazier fire and warm ourselves in winter whilst singing amagwijo liberation songs. He says Gontse has left for overseas to further her studies.

When did this happen, I ask. My young friend answers with a question: Didn't I know that her relatives in Pimville have connections with a student exchange programme, especially her uncle? Didn't I know that the uncle was the director of the programme in South Africa? But I thought that was meant for the overseas kids to experience our country, not vice versa, I say.

Selfishly, I think that the overseas exchange programme does not matter since we the locals have got work to do in our country – to liberate ourselves from the yoke of oppression, at least for future generations to come. Currently, the overseas benefactors want to see themselves assisting in the liberation project of South Africa. The best way to do it in a conscience-affirming way is through education. They offer scholarships to the bright stars amongst the masses – the future leaders of a new reconciled country.

The "future" for me means Gontse and I; our big house; our kids and our…

"In your dreams," says Mavatha, who is a dark-complexioned teenager with glistening white eyes and a protruding forehead. He now approaches us to stop me in my tracks. He is watching me catching the blues:

"You are crazy. Do you think Gontse is that foolish to come back to this poor place again?" Mavatha says, in a combative mood.

I don't understand this latest behaviour. Perhaps he is also sad that Gontse has left. I try to be empathetic, but I soon drop the thought since I know that in the Gontse stakes he is

my main rival. I say “main rival” because I know there are other contenders to the throne. But he is the most daring:

“You think you can get all the beautiful girls in this location. Hee? I say in your dreams. It’s time to wake up and smell the coffee, my friend,” he says in his newly acquired vocabulary.

I seem to come back to my senses. Maybe Mavatha is right. Who would want to come back home to apartheid South Africa? Who would wish to invest in a youth swimming in the struggle streams of the land when they can have it all “in the land of the free”? Who would want to be associated with the “lost generation,” for this is how we would be known? I was, by default, a member of the Congress of South African Students (COSAS).

That day I leave my nemesis alone without any argument. I behave like a coward after hearing the dispatches from my young friend and walk back home dejected, wishing that Gontse could have at least warned me about her impending exile. Now I was expected to start all over again.

6. A Chauffer on my stoep

My brother has taken to being a loner. He is always in his room lying down on his bed and looking up at the ceiling as if he is pondering some grand schemes somewhere in the sky. But his is a stern face looking up.

All kinds of scenarios crop up in my mind about what could be bothering my brother. His room has a white built-in cupboard, unlike mine. Most of the time my brother is lying on his single bed, either reading a magazine or just gazing at the ceiling. I can see this because I hang my clothes inside his cupboard which has turned into "our" cupboard.

The room has posters of Biko and Sobukwe hung on his beige water-painted wall. These pictures are his own pencil-sketches. They are a reminder of how detailed my brother can get sometimes if he wants to. But there is no bookcase except for one or two books I suspect come from our family library. One is titled, if my memory serves me well, *Kill or Get Killed*. To my mind, this was a Human Rights abuses report on South Africa. I must confess the title just sent shivers in my spine. So, I didn't even attempt to read it. Or I thought I knew what was inside the book – details about the now well-known atrocities of the apartheid police state.

My brother reads this like there are no other books on our shelves. The books in our passage shelf include novels and a couple of school setworks. Occasionally, my father displays one of his trade books. It's the "How to understand the newsroom" type of hardcover. In addition, the shelf doubles up as a filing cabinet for our important documents like electricity and water accounts and our school reports. I have my own couple of books to display in the legion. Mine are prescribed books from school, especially the history books.

My brother is currently an out-of-school youth who is not working. Our ordinary world in the year 1987 has a lot of these young people. Most have given up on a prospective job, knowing that the labour market would not accommodate them either due to racist politics or the sheer logic of a capitalist system. At some point I read somewhere that this system needs an army of the unemployed. I become worried about my brother, knowing that now he would be statistically linked to this group.

Now and then I leave my small change in "our" cupboard, and he generously redistributes it, without my authorisation. I understand "our" situation. I am still lucky to be at school doing something, even if it is throwing stones at a passing camouflaged Casspir or what we euphemistically call the "Mellow Yellow", an armoured police van. It is musician Condry Ziqubu who would forever etch it into our psyche: "Yellow, mellow yellow (Yellow mealie meal)". Ziqubu is featured by Lumumba in the *Sounds of Soweto*.

But one day I happen upon an unexpected find in my brother's bedroom. Inside one of the shelves of the cupboard, a transparent packet with a brownish powder is neatly packed. It is packed in such a way that it is not supposed to be seen. I suspect Mandrax. It is a drug that is being talked about lately in the township. There is still only a minority of users in the township because the drug has a bad name. But it threatens to grow.

The activists feel this is the latest encroachment by "the system" to derail the efforts of young people and sap their energy to fight it. In fact, many have a suspicion that the security forces, through their spies, are infiltrating the drug into the townships.

One of the mechanisms, the critics feel, is to make the drug ridiculously cheap so that potential customers cannot plead poverty as the reason for non-purchase. For my part, I remember one student exhibiting a cream plastic bag allegedly containing the drug. Being young and curious most of us followed him to the gents to see it for ourselves.

Inside, he begins to lecture us on its hallucinatory effects. Indeed, those who dare taste the forbidden fruit say it makes them feel a sudden hunger whilst others say it takes them to a merry land akin to the Paradise spoken about in the Holy Book. After the experience of seeing the so-called recreational drug and looking at its effects on my mates I feel instead of being strong, they become weak.

Could this explain the strange behaviour lately in my brother? His stupor-like state?

I contemplate reporting the matter to my parents, especially my mother. But wouldn't this look like I am selling out my brother? I mean he has looked after me in many ways, including the other incident with M. I am worried that my mother would feel disappointed if told. This is her favourite son we are talking about here.

At every available opportunity my mother relates stories about how she, her friend and young Thabang used to go out to shop in Bloemfontein. The friend, a nurse at Pelonomi, would also come with her young kids on the sojourn:

"Me and Khini liked fun," my mother would start. "Thabang and my friend's kids used to enjoy these trips."

"Exactly where did you go?" I say.

"Everywhere...the clothing shops, the park, all over. But at the end we ate our delicious lunch at the city park."

This would take almost half an hour before someone knocks on our front door, mostly our neighbours. Sometimes it would be Thabang himself calling out for assistance for something he can't find in the kitchen.

But back to the topic of substance abuse. I felt like letting it go. Only, it might result in my brother's further deterioration, I reason. I decide to sacrifice our bond for a while in favour of what I feel is for his good. That's what brothers are for, I convince myself:

"Ma. You won't believe what I have found in Thabang's cupboard?" I say one afternoon.

"What now?" asks Mum.

"Drugs."

"No. Are you sure it's drugs?"

"Positive. We learn about these things at school," I convince her.

"I see."

When my mother ends a conversation with "I see", then one of two things can happen: one is to confront the wrongdoer and the other is to escalate the wrongdoing to my dad. I hate the latter possibility. My dad is a traditionalist. He still believes that kids should be kids. He believes that parents know best. If a kid is wayward then he deserves punishment.

I have risked the possibility of being ex-communicated by my brother. Fortunately, it does not go that far.

One thing I know is that my mother does have a talk with my brother because after that he seems to transform into a more focused individual. Or am I just being duped here?

Ultimately, my mum tells me that she had a good chat with Thabang, who denied all the allegations levelled against him. Whether what I see during that week are indeed drugs I cannot say. It remains a mystery to me. It sadly reflects the kind of precarious life my brother was in danger of drowning himself in.

The drug scare did give my mum an opportunity to connect with my brother though and get to know his emotional needs as a youth growing up in Soweto during the turmoil. Surprisingly, my brother never had any qualms with me after this incident. I guess he was playing ignorant, as if he was unaware that I had reported him to my mum. I think this little detour created a stronger bond between mother and son. For that I am grateful.

In my home my mother handles the domestic crises. My father will only intervene when things get out of hand. Of course, "out of hand" is relative. Was this situation with my brother not "out of hand"? I still believe though that my mother's solution came in handy.

Meanwhile at our new home in 203 Thakadu Street relatives from the Free State visit us. First it is my cousin Moipone from Bloemfontein. She is the stay-home type. She likes to do her domestic chores, including cooking. One day one of the neighbouring older boys tries to convince me to introduce him to her. Of course, this was a proposal to go out. I became

frank: “My man, you can talk to her for yourself. If she really likes you, she will go out with you.” Here I was avoiding playing the matchmaker. My friend was not happy. He left.

Later it would be Zozo, my other cousin from Bloemfontein. She is tall and bright. She has that haughty walk which is puzzling because her dad is shorter. Perhaps she inherits the height from her mum, whom I don’t recall meeting often. It looks like my dad’s younger brother had been estranged from aunty some time back.

I sometimes go to the local grocery stores with my cousin and heads turn around. If you don’t know we are related I bet, you would say we are an odd couple. She overwhelms me with her height. I am of short built. But I love going to the shops and introducing her to the envious boys in my street. “So, you thought I had no cousins? Ag shame, you and your illusions,” I would brag.

My brother seems to have a set routine. In the morning after he wakes, he washes what would have been leftover dirty pots from last night. Not prone to wasting food he would ask if everyone were full-up and then he would dish out for himself and put the leftover food in the microwave for when he comes back in the evening. These days it is always in the evening. He’s got the key to freedom. He is 21.

One April evening he comes home in muddy khaki pants with brushstrokes of lime green splattered all over them. He is still huffing and puffing when I open the kitchen door for him to come inside our house in Pimville, Soweto. The kitchen door is the backdoor.

A group of men, unbeknown to anyone, crowded over my brother and his comrades at an isolated bush in the sprawling township of Orlando East:

“We were having our usual meeting in the bush, minding our own business, when this group of guys approached us from nowhere. At that point we realised that we were being ambushed,” he says.

“Did anyone of you shout for help or try to accost the guys?” I ask.

“How do you shout for help in the bushes? It was out of question. The guys were carrying dangerous weapons. The only option was to run.”

“Was anyone caught?”

“Just consider yourself lucky because your brother is still here. It was very close. But I suspect that all my comrades are safe.”

My brother, a stutterer, and his comrades were having a meeting near a marshland in Orlando East. He goes to the bathroom to wash off the dirt and change into new clothes. Then he goes to bed.

My mother says stuttering is a condition that afflicts very intelligent individuals. Their speech tends to race behind their vision, she says. The moral of the story? Be grateful we have an intelligent child in this house.

But the stuttering of my brother comes out especially when he is angry. This is rare since he does not display his anger easily. It is like he is aware what anger can evoke in someone. He likes to smile and when he does his set of canine teeth are exposed for the incongruous bunch they are. He is dark complexioned, with a smile that makes him handsome. Still, I have never heard my parents or Thabang himself talk about plans to operate on these teeth. They are his unique feature I guess – a birthmark.

Meanwhile, at my parents' house in Pimville I see a copy of *The Star* newspaper and I begin to take notice. I have begun reading newspapers lately and when my father knocks off in the evenings, I am the first one to loan the tabloids. I mainly take the arts supplement *Tonight*.

I seldom browse over the sports page, the back page. To be fair, at this stage I am not a ferocious media consumer. I am selective.

So, I go back to the front page again. There is one story on the cover which has caught my eye. I now go back to it: an announcement that a new executive committee of a youth body that has recently emerged on the political scene has been elected at Ipelegeng.

In fact, the Azanian National Youth Unity (Azanyu) is formed in 1981. The evidence suggests that it was a direct instruction from the former PAC Chairman Pokela. For instance, in his speech titled "Opening Remarks at the Plenary Session held in Bagamoyo on 21-27th July 1983" he says, amongst other things, that "the youth should be organised and organically linked with the PAC to form an integrated part of the organisation, functioning as a unit within the party".

This story in the papers that catches my eyes is placed at the bottom of the page as some teaser and it goes to the second. I see my brother's name on the list of the newly elected executive. It is as the secretary of the Soweto branch. Why would my brother choose this job? It is awfully hard to be an administrator. By this time, I know that fact. Couldn't he have chosen to be an additional member at least? Why take up any office at all?

My brother is duly elected at the youth formation which is effectively the flag hoister for the banned PAC inside the country. At this stage I don't even know what PAC means. But I know my brother is linked to an organisation I conjure up as the Pimville Action Committee.

In the afternoons when my parents are at work, he meets a couple of friends in our kitchen. My mother is now working for a research company as a field researcher. Over coffee my brother discusses topics which always involve "Our people" and "Sechaba." They talk about how "the system is hard on our people". They hardly use the word "South Africa". That's why I suspect they are a local community group.

I greet and pass the group on the way to my bedroom to change my uniform, on days that I would be wearing a uniform, which was not every day. The uniform has turned into identification for the students. In our time this is a double-edged sword. It can point to a united action against crime in the township. But it can also identify the comrades who are resisting against the police repression. Once identified as the culprits in the resistance against the state of emergency regulations the police almost singlehandedly pursue the students in school uniform.

A call from the student movement advises against the wearing of such uniform. In a sense wearing the uniform becomes nostalgic for me and a couple of friends. The older people don't like the stance against the uniforms. They feel the school uniform dignifies us and separates us from the thugs – those who, according to the speakers, linger around at the corners and shops in the township.

In my eyes, Thabang's election to the youth movement answers a call in the quest for national liberation. By being publicly associated with a political structure linked to a banned political movement is itself asking for trouble in the South Africa of the time. It is illegal to belong to a banned political organisation and one can be prosecuted for such association.

My brother mutters something to me on one of our very rare engagements on politics when I pose a question:

"Which organisations would you say are progressive in current South Africa?" I ask.

"When you see an organisation with the appendix 'Azania' in its name then you know that that organisation is progressive," he says.

"But there are churches I have seen carrying that name?"

"Then...thhh…then it means those churches are progressive," my brother says.

He has also relayed an incident which is in the news of that week. The media is widely reporting on the hand grenade attack on the much-hated Amajekeje (municipal police) at Tladi in Soweto on the 22nd of April 1987. One person is fatally wounded and 64 are injured, reports the media.

The Amajekeje are the municipality police who do the dirty work of the regime, which includes evicting rent defaulters and breaking up suspicious gatherings in the township, including those organised by the civic movement. But they are a law unto themselves.

These constables are basically the rent police. They disrespect the people they are evicting for rent defaults. Often the community organises itself against them. The evictions are an injustice and thus worth the resistance. These constables are sometimes accompanied by the South African Police (SAP) on their skulduggery in the township:

"That attack at those municipal office grounds has the hallmarks of APLA," Thabang says.

"Who are they?" I ask.

"They are the military wing of the PAC."

"How do you know it is not any other wing of other parties?"

"The modus operandi can only be executed by APLA. Wait a while, you will see."

I was taken aback by this matter-of-fact analysis of a newsworthy event by my brother.

The municipal police attack according to *Azania Combat*, the military journal of APLA, claims 12 "enemy agents", 67 injured by a unit of the combatants. The mainstream media would downplay this figure. For instance, *The Star* newspaper puts the number of the injured at 64, with only one fatality – a police officer. APLA seems to be staking its claim, with these attacks, on the developing guerrilla warfare in South Africa.

The other incident which I seek clarity on involves an attack on a tavern by a group of men in Orlando East. The targets are members of the SAP.

"Would you still say it is APLA?" I ask.

"Well, the modus operandi looks like it. But, right now, I cannot confirm. The reports are still blurry."

"Who will confirm?" I ask.

"If it's APLA. They will confirm it," he responds.

It turns out the place is also the house of a family friend whom we had known for some time since our relocation to Soweto. The incident happens in the evening of Boxing Day on the 26th of December 1987:

My mother, a non-drinker, is annoyed by the merriment of the revellers, on that fateful day. Like any other festive day, the drinkers start to make a din and sing Christmas carols or hymns. My mother asks my father to immediately take her home as she feels tired. A

few hours later gunmen wielding AK47 rifles descend on the tavern. The first victim is the tavern owner who is sitting outside. Later, the patrons inside the house are targeted. At the end of that hour or so of shooting about five people lie dead.

My parents miss that encounter by a few hours. Is this why Thabang does not want to associate it with the APLA? He does not say. He leaves me in suspense.

That year the conservative Margaret Thatcher wins the parliamentary election in the United Kingdom. This is her third term in office, and she becomes the longest-serving British minister in the 20th century, and the first woman to hold that position in the country.

But her policies are conservative; they are dubbed "Thatcherism." Basically, she spurs the move towards the privatisation of state-owned entities and pursues an anti-trade unionist agenda. Her Achilles' heel becomes the poll tax she institutes amongst Britons. This becomes very unpopular, and she resigns several years later after a challenge to her leadership.

In this milieu Thabang gravitates towards politics more and more. I can sense it. I, on the other hand, have found a new posse in the township.

I begin to recoup my social engagements – two boys who stay in zone 2 and zone 3 respectively. The one guy has a younger sister, Thembi. The age gap between them is not huge. I would say between one and a couple of years. I like Thembi very much.

One day when the *skeem* decides to go out to the movies I invite her along. She is still our little sister, so to speak. She agrees to my proposal, and I put it to the posse – a day before the movies. They feign agreement and off we go to the place to be for teenagers at the time – Shareworld, south of Johannesburg.

This is a makeshift sea resort complete with its own seashore. It displays Mexican-type architecture right in the heart of Jozi. It is convenient in terms of transport since it is not in the Joburg CBD. For the lucky ones who stay in nearby Diepkloof, it is within walking distance. If you want to understand what Shareworld means to us teenagers imagine what Disneyland means for American kids.

On arrival, we buy tickets at Ster Kinekor to watch *Dirty Dancing* starring Patrick Swayze and Jennifer Grey. It is a buzz at that time. The movie is about a girl named Frances (Grey) who falls head over hills with a resident dance instructor (Swayze) at a holiday resort. This does not augur well for her father who proposes an exit from the venue. But not before she gets the time of her life with her new lover.

In the darkness of the movie house, we hold hands and even manage to steal a kiss. After the movie we buy ourselves lunch. It could be KFC or Chicken Licken or something. What disturbs me though is the stares that I get form my friends – both inside and outside the

movie house. Thembi's brother would articulate it when we later meet as the gents: "The idea of going out with another member's sister is out of order. We should outlaw it in our group," he says. There is an Amen from the other friend.

Somehow, me and Thembi always anticipated this reaction. But I guess at the time we couldn't help it; we were falling in love. I don't think it's infatuation. Like the protagonists in *Dirty Dancing,* we would do anything to be together at that moment. Here, fiction would imitate real life. That's why that movie still speaks to me to this day.

Later, in a professional setting I would meet Thembi:

"Hi, do you still see me?" I jog her memory whilst on a break after her company makes a presentation.

"Ummm..."

"Hloni?" I interject before she could finish her reply.

"Oh my gosh! You guys have grown up," she says excitedly.

She still sees me as part of the *skeem* with her brother. Ironically, this realisation is what made us grow apart. I think she could not live with the possibility that I was to choose between her and my close friends. She felt it would be unfair to me.

Every time I would see her (which was not often) after the Shareworld fling I am reminded of the Rick Astley song *Never gonna give you up* which wins the "Song of the year" at the British Awards in 1987.

The same year, my theatre inroads take off. First, I audition for a part in *Bugsy Malone* at my school. I like the part of Snake Eyes. But first I must sing. I sing Lionel Richie's *Hello* and impress the judges at the auditions, or so they say.

The director wants me to try out a singing role in the play. But the producers disagree. At the end I get two parts: Snake Eyes and the Boxing Coach. We have two casts, A and B, and work in shifts. My counterpart is Alfred, my neighbour, and my friend. He is a couple of years younger than me.

An attempt to get other kids to audition proves a mammoth task for the producers. Alfred calls a schoolmate, Tshepo. A boy from zone 7. This lack of enthusiasm amongst my contemporaries unsettles me. I ask my brother for advice:

"Did I make the right move to jump into these auditions in town? "I say.

"Look *Hlonkis,* my man. We all have different roles to play at this stage in our lives," he says.

"But I don't think I am ready for these showbiz roles which seem too detached from the struggle," I say.

"Don't worry, it is your contribution too. And by the look of things, you are good at it."

From then onwards I play the part of Snake Eyes with all my energy, knowing that I have the unflinching support of my brother.

Snake Eyes is a streetwise tsotsi who is quick with a knife if you get on his wrong side. This is the character I have chosen. But I would also be assigned another part since Snake Eyes dies early in the script. After his death, I play Cagey Joe, a boxing trainer in New York, who is a hard nut to crack

The movie *Bugsy Malone* is a directorial debut film by Alan Parker in 1976 and later adapted for the stage. The movie is about old-time gangsters who fight everything, including the unfair economic system. What is unique about the musical, which is performed all over the world by different casts, is that its actors are all kids.

The original movie version stars the inimitable Jodie Foster as Tallulah, the mistress of the hoodlum, Fat Sam (played by John Cassisi). The 12-year-old Foster is mesmerising as a leading lady in this version.

Inside the production I learn theatre-making skills both on and off stage. I get to know that there are people, for instance, who built the sets used on stage; that there are those who assist with make-up; there are those who compose the songs; those who choreograph the movements; and so, on and so forth.

Rehearsals take the whole afternoon right up to the evening. Thus, transport is crucial to and from the township. The nearest taxi rank is a couple of kilometres away. But even if one were to consider public transport the safety considerations would also take precedence, especially in the evening. Jozi can be unsafe sometimes.

This means that after knocking off at about 2 p.m. at Progress I must catch a taxi to the bustling taxi rank known as Noord Street in town. Thereafter, I must catch another to the suburb Orange Grove, next to Sandton. After the rehearsals, Alfred's dad picks us up to go to the township. Sometimes my dad does his shift. This would be my route for the next couple of weeks before the season runs at the former Intimate Theatre in Braamfontein.

One evening somehow, I am under the impression that my dad is coming for me, so I let Alfred go back with his dad alone. I don't want my dad to come from his workplace only to find me gone, I reason. Therefore, I wait – next to the classroom balcony – but my dad is nowhere to be seen. I move to the main gate to get a better view. Still my dad is nowhere to be seen. I start to panic. I see the security guard watchhouse, my last resort.

Fortunately, the guy has a landline inside his hut. He calls home and finds my mum. She is hysterical that I'm stranded but reassures me that she will request help. After half an hour, I see my neighbour Ntate Makgopa's car. He cheers me up on the way to Pimville.

When I arrive home, I find my dad already there:

"Are you fine, Hlonkis?"

"No. I was waiting for you to come and pick me up."

"But I had arranged with Alfred's dad to come and pick you up."

"But you had promised to pick me up."

"I thought it wouldn't make sense to have two cars coming to the same place," he says.

For me, this explanation is unsatisfactory because it assumes I was not clever enough to catch a ride with Alfred, which was coming to Pimville anyway. With anger in my heart, I say to my dad that I want to go to my bedroom.

I have since forgiven my dad, and the experience does not dampen my desire for acting.

The sad news for me that year is the murder of reggae star Peter Tosh, the musician I lip sync at the birthday party of Gogo in Orlando East. He dies at the hands of alleged robbers in his home in Kingston, Jamaica.

Later that year, I land a minor role of "youth" in *Mapantsula*, a film by Oliver Schmitz and Thomas Mogotlane. Through a membership of casting agency Lilian Dube Casting I am given a chance to further demonstrate my acting skills.

Mapantsula is about the struggles of rookie thief Johannes "Panic" Themba Mzolo (Mogotlane), who is confronted by the bigger crime of injustice in our country. It is only when in prison that he discovers the real motives of the political activists of transforming the country. But when he comes out, he goes back to his old bad ways with devastating effects.

My meeting with Ma'am Lilian, a great actress in her own right, is facilitated by my dad. Basically, my dad is a shadow actor. Having opted to have a "stable" job as a journalist he reckons he could do some acting on the side. But this does not always work out as he soon climbs the media ladder. At this point he is a news editor at the SABC, an overdue appointment if you ask me, given his contribution to the broadcaster over the years. So, in his spare time he does voiceovers. I suspect this is how he gets introduced to the husky voiced Dube.

During one of the meetings at the casting agency I see Somizi Mhlongo, then a child protege appearing in the stage musical *Sarafina*. We exchange casual greetings and don't say

much after that. Surprisingly, at that stage Mhlongo looks quiet. I don't think at that stage anyone suspected (well, except maybe for Dube) that he would be the phenomenal *Idols* judge we talk about today. I recall lately seeing Somizi struggle to find a quiet parking bay at Soweto's Maponya Mall because fans were crowding him. Ultimately, he failed.

On set in front of the camera I get a little nervous, but I am encouraged by director Schmitz (who would go on to direct *Hijack Stories*) to give it a shot. Take a deep breath and let's try it again, he says. I try it again, but it still does not come out the way he had visualised. A compromise is made. The director lets me play another part if I don't mind. Of course, I don't. I am happy to have my foot in showbiz. I am both nervous and excited at the same time.

Plus, I get to meet the star of the show Mogotlane (from *Oh Shucks! Here comes UNTAG*) in person. He is shy in real life. In fact, he seems to be concerned about the welfare of all on set, including us start-ups. Onscreen he transforms; he is totally consumed by the characters he is portraying. A great lesson for me on being a "star": always mingle with the ordinary people, even as they seem star-struck by your presence.

But unbeknown to Dube then my house was just a street away from the set. So, she arranged that I be driven to the location:

"You are now an actor, you deserve these privileges," she says.

"Thank you," I say.

In her characteristic chic way, she says: "OK, now go off to work!"

So, every morning, for a couple of days, a driver knocks at my door and reminds me that it is call time. As one of the "stars" of the show this is not a privilege, it is a right, he says. I am taken aback by this nice treatment of a young boy trying to get his foot in the film environment.

Not understanding this anomaly, myself (but still chuffed about it) I would decline the offer and explain to my agent that I can in fact walk myself to the set since it is nearby.

It makes a lasting impression on me that, if done right, the film industry could be one of the greatest employers of our people. Besides, it's not every day that one is chauffeured to work at the next street in his neighbourhood!

My brother is elated at the prospect of having an actor in our house, so he eggs me on: "Well done, my man. It looks like soon we are going to need protection from the fans," he says tongue in cheek.

7. Friends for life

One night at the beginning of the year there is a sudden knock on our front door. I rouse from our velvet brown comfy sofa and go to the door, *Ke mang?* (Who is it?). You can't be sure these days in the township. It could be the police or the army trying to arrest someone at their whim. Fortunately, it's Neo and Goitsemang Molete, our QwaQwa friends. What a relief.

It has been a long time since we have seen them. For Thabang this is great news, particularly his reunion with his former sidekick Neo.

This is early January 1988, and the declared state of emergency means police and the army are a law unto themselves. At the helm of the regime is PW Botha, nicknamed "Die Groot Krokodil" by his followers. The state could detain anyone suspected of being an activist, or worse, a "terrorist". We are still in the throes of a civil war although some prominent political prisoners are out of prison, such as Govan Mbeki of the SACP.

The visitors find us sitting in the lounge of my home in zone 7 Pimville and watching *Lapologa*, the TV variety show presented by Collins Mashego, the flamboyant father of Vinolia "V-Mash" Mashego, the late TV presenter. It's a Friday night and the line-up includes the Amapantsula dance moves, skits, and anything in between. It usually closes off with a live performance by a local artist. This is where Brenda Fassie and the Big Dudes make their mark with *Weekend Special*. Brenda would become one of the greatest pop icons the country ever produces.

Lapologa has also got a talent search element. The odd youth drama group is given a platform here. The chances of your seeing a boy or girl from next door are high. You can be anything on *Lapologa*. It's rated as a family programme during the prime-time TV slot of the state broadcaster and the set is designed like a home away from home with a lounge unit built in. We all watch and hope to get entertained in the process. This is staple food for many families in my area:

"Come in, *bana baka*," says my pleasantly surprised mum.

"Greetings, Papa and Mama," says Goitsemang, followed by Neo.

"Greetings, *bana baka*. What fortune should we thank for this surprise visit?" says Mum.

"No, Ma. We were just passing by, to greet," says Goitse.

In fact, Goitsemang is being economic with the truth here. They are planning to go out on a pre-arranged date with my brother to the Market Theatre in Newtown. The theatre

has a history of putting politically conscious plays on its stages. These depict the plight of the oppressed. The line-up is mainly decided by the artistic director, Barney Simon. Together with lighting designer/administrator Mannie Manim he founds the entity on the eve of the Soweto Uprising:

"In fact, we were here to find out how Thabang is doing? We know he loves the theatre since the days of QwaQwa," says the still-chubby Goitse.

"Well, thank my family's genes for that, *bana*," says my mum.

It is interesting that Goitse is the spokesperson. My brother is smiling in anticipation. It is very odd that he would sit around the TV room with both my parents at the same time to watch the news. Something is amiss here:

"Dad offered us tickets to a show. So, we thought of Thabang," says Goitse.

"That's very good, kids. And how is Dad?" says my father.

This is how lucky Thabang gets with the undercover plan of his friends. My parents bless the trip to the theatre and even give him some pocket money after he argues: "You know what it's like at the theatre. You can't just sit around and watch people eating."

I know this to be an undercover plan because Goitse is with a friend, a girl who gets briefly introduced at my home. I can see that this is a planned "blind" date for my brother.

But my parents don't ask any further. Indeed, my father is a loyal member of the audience at the "struggle theatre" which is forced to find multiple sources of funding since the powers that be, who see it as a thorn in their flesh, do not fund it. So, most of the funders are overseas donors and the local Samaritans. The rest is from ticket sales. They also have a membership scheme which my father belongs to.

The regime tries but fails to dim the lights at the theatre. Every time they try, they are beaten by the theatre's management, who cry suppression of freedom of speech. This becomes a dilemma for the pariah state who wishes to appear democratic.

The theatre building had hitherto been earmarked for demolition by the city. Had it not been a pithy caution to the state by a city official who indicated a heritage feature in the architecture of the former Indian Fruit Market the spotlight would not have fallen on the building. To this preservation proposal the city grudgingly agrees. Perhaps this shall always be the saving grace for the iconic theatre – the largest three-pin arch built in the southern hemisphere.

After watching the *Sarafina* show, Thabang comes back elated:

"You should have seen it, Hlonkis…"

"Yoh. I wish I was there," I say.

"It was a marvel to watch. I have not seen such talented actors and musicians in my life."

Seeing that I am envious, my brother reassures me: "Don't worry, you will get your chance."

Fortunately, soon after, my parents and I go to the theatre to watch it – the play that Thabang had earlier raved about. *Sarafina* is a play by Mbongeni Ngema which is about a young Soweto student, Sarafina, who unwittingly gets involved in the uprising after her favourite teacher is arrested by the police.

It would see the original cast of the play, which includes Leleti Khumalo and the young protégé Somizi Mhlongo, going overseas to perform to critical acclaim.

On my side I now have an expectation that these outings shall become a permanent feature of our lives in Pimville. Perhaps I would even get to join Thabang and his friends on these outings and have more fun in the process. But after their excursion with my brother the Molete children seldom come to my home.

I would now and then meet Goitse, and occasionally Neo, at the adjacent streets in the township. I suspect they remain friends for life with my brother. I think they have decided on a neutral meeting place with him. Being young adults, I think they need more freedom. Or it could be that my brother is now permanently hooked with the "blind" date.

That year the days pass quickly by. I say "quickly" because my former flame Gontse is absent from my neighbourhood. She had indeed gone overseas although no country is mentioned. Some said she had gone to the US whilst others pointed to the Nordic countries, "because they are the friends of the liberation movement".

Then, one late afternoon, on my way to the shops, someone calls my name at a street corner near my house. It turns out it's someone I know – Dan Masilo.

Dan is a senior student at Progress Comprehensive School. He is the kind of guy who would abandon his own wedding reception for a Chiefs match. I think half the time he would be glued to the telly to the annoyance of his guests.

Occasionally, he throws stones at passing armoured vehicles belonging to the SADF. Other than that, I tell myself, politics is just a game for Dan. But what brings him to my street this afternoon?

"Go ahead, *Khosi for Life*, I am listening," I say to try to be funny.

"This is not a joke; I am serious," says Dan.

"Of course, you are," I reply smugly.

"My *laaitie*, listen. Your brother's gone," he says.

"Are you crazy? Gone? Where?" I say.

"Your brother has gone to Tanzania."

"No ways, for what?"

"To join APLA. I am planning to follow suit."

I take another moment to ponder this news.

There is no way that it can be true. For starters, it's uncharacteristic of any underground operative (not that I know one) to reveal any sensitive information to someone as vulnerable as a teenager still going to school and who is not part of the underground structures, I convince myself. Additionally, there is no way that the senior student could claim that he himself would be leaving soon to join my brother. This exposes him to the state security apparatus. At least this is what happens in a couple of spy movies I watch.

Whilst I ponder a future without my brother, Dan thanks me for listening and says he is in a hurry. I watch him taking the direction to his home in "Selection Park", where he lives with his father, a traffic officer; his mother, a schoolteacher; his siblings Montsheng and Tshidi. Montsheng has a young daughter, Nkele.

At this time, I am sapped of any energy to run after him and demand answers. The discussions have been too weighty on my teenage body. The honours now fall to me to break the news to my parents. This is what he says I should do. I feel like it's an instruction. So, I find some way to do it. My parents' response is frantic:

"Wait a minute. Who is this person who told you the news? Do you know where they stay?" says my dad.

"Yes, Dan. He has just left for Tanzania," I say.

"Do you know where he stays?" says my dad.

"*Ofthe*… The child says the person has also left. How is your question going to assist?" says my mum.

"Wait, Judy. We need to get to the bottom of this thing."

To my mum I am always a child, even when I am a young man aged 16. So, I'm dismissed to my bedroom after I relay the news.

My thoughts race back to a conversation I had earlier with my brother: "You have grown up. Take care of Mama," my brother had said. At the time I don't see it as a parting shot.

Meanwhile, by this time, in exile former Robben Island inmate Johnson Mlambo has taken over the chairmanship of the PAC, and APLA activities are on the increase. Two operatives fall after a skirmish with the security forces.

This is an incident where a roadblock is set up by the South African police in Johannesburg. Having sworn to fight till the last man the cadres open fire, and a gun battle ensues, and a car chase commences. At the end, the cadres Neo Khoza and Tsepo Lilele are shot and killed.

Tsepo becomes immortalised in song by APLA:

Comrade Tsepo
Igagu le Vuli'ndlela
liwabulele amqaqa
eAzania
Comrade Tsepo
Is a pathbreaker
He has eliminated many settlers
In Occupied Azania (South Africa)

Tsepo gets a hero's send off in Welkom, his hometown.

Elsewhere in the world, the Winter Olympics take place in Calgary and the Summer ones in Seoul. George H.W. Bush is elected the 41st president of the US. During the campaign trail he infamously remarks, "Read my lips: no new taxes." He subsequently reneges on this promise to the American people and does the exact opposite: he raises taxes.

Meanwhile, the NASA Space Shuttle programme resumes after the 1986 Challenger disaster caused by the malfunctioning O-ring system of the cargo. There would be major motor improvements with safety features in the new shuttle.

A shattering news event is when a passenger aircraft Pan Am Flight 103 from London to New York is bombed over Lockerbie in Scotland by alleged terrorists. More than 250 passengers are killed on board. In addition, 11 people are killed on the ground. Both the accused Abdelbaset al-Megrahi and Al Amin Khalifa Fhimah plead innocence. But the Scottish court finds al-Megrahi guilty. As we speak, an appeal is set to be run posthumously.

On the home front, my parents search for my brother at the National Council of Trade Unions (NACTU) offices at Lekton House in the Johannesburg CBD where Thabang had been assisting with organising workers. NACTU is a non-partisan federation that is galvanising workers across many industrial sectors. It is the second largest federation in the country. What is unique about it is that most of its officials swear allegiance to the PAC. Hence it became a refuge for my brother as an unemployed youth.

That same year some of its affiliates, including the media union Media Workers Association of Southern Africa (MWASA), hold a joint commemorative event for Robert Sobukwe with AZANYU. This is also the year which sees a meeting between a NACTU delegation and the PAC in Dar-es-Salaam in Tanzania.

The South African state flexes its military muscles and begins raids on SADC countries harbouring the liberation movement. Six ANC fighters are killed in a car bomb explosion in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe. Later, the anti-apartheid lawyer Albie Sachs would suffer serious injuries as a result of a car bomb explosion.

The next stop for my distraught parents is the hospitals and the prisons. My dad solicits the services of a lawyer to search for Thabang. A reply comes back from the prison authorities to say that no one with that name exists on their system. Later that year, ANC leader Nelson Mandela is moved to Victor Verster prison to serve out the rest of his sentence. He had been in Robben Island for 18 years after the Rivonia Trial and thereafter at Pollsmoor Prison.

For my part "ordinary" life carried on, as much as it could under the circumstances. I was taking on a punk persona, the very sub-cult I had hitherto criticised. My friends and I, in a quest to be different, were collecting hard rock albums, including Australian bands Midnight Oil and INXS, as well as U2, Bon Jovi, etc. I was really taken aback by some of the lyrics. For instance, on their track *Beds are burning*, Midnight Oil sings about how the land should be returned to its rightful owners. Later the band would announce that some of the proceeds from the sale would go to the anti-apartheid struggle. They would donate some of the *Diesel and Dust* album proceeds to the coffers of the ANC. Of course, this put them on the radar of the white minority regime.

In our music fanaticism we were helped, in no small measure, by Radio 5's DJ Alex "Cool" Jay whose repertoire revolved around these albums. So, when we didn't have the money to buy the records there was a cool rock show to look forward to on weekends. In this sense Radio 5 became something of an anomaly on the SABC Radio stable.

It was Alex Jay who reintroduced me to my first musical love – reggae music. He is the one who popularised Ziggy Marley and The Melody Makers' *Tomorrow People* from the *Conscious Party* album on his radio show. To make it more interesting the DJ exports his "Top 5" to television. This turns me into something of a couch potato. The programme plays on Friday early evenings. By that time, I am long home.

In the official video of Marley's and the Melody Makers' song a young actor argues: "I don't wanna go to another planet. I'd rather fix this one." At some stage it would top Jay's

"Top 5" charts. The song talks about knowing your past and knowing your future. The singer is worried about young people's seeming rush to adopt the decadent values from the West.

But I could see my friends becoming upset: how can a rock band support a political party? In South Africa *nogal*? Now, we are not any different from those stone-throwers, those *pantsulas,* are we? Interestingly, this is what causes a fissure between me and my friends. I would want us to follow up on the lyrics of the bands we were listening to:

"I really like Midnight Oil. I mean who could sing about that in their comfortable place in Australia?" I declare.

"But what business do they have in politics?" one of my posse retorts.

"Well, music is steeped in society. They don't live in the sky. Do they?" I respond.

Thabang would have looked at these eccentrics as a passing phase – some teenage angst that is part of growing up. I could not understand his disinterest, especially when these bands were "rocking". This is when I contemplate growing dreadlocks but fail again.

I search for my Rasta badges which were donated to me by Ntate Molete when he had the privilege of going to Jamaica, as a journalist, several years ago to attend reggae legend Bob Marley's funeral. I was determined to look like Ziggy. I even subscribe to a vegetarian diet:

"*Hlonkis,* are you sure you don't want any meat? says mum when I announce my new restriction.

"Yes, Ma. It's against our religion," I say.

"But how are you going to get the proteins?"

I remember at my primary school they used to drum this message in every Health and Hygiene class: Proteins are good for a young body to grow. This was in addition to the health benefits of dairy products and Sunshine vitamin D.

"Well, Ma. Guess what? Some vegetables can easily replace the proteins found in meat," I say.

It is a cooking nightmare for her at dinner time – with me having to be served separately from the rest of the family. My younger brother would be in stiches whilst observing this scene at the dinner table. My conviction to a new diet lasts for a week – to the relief of my mum.

Coming back to my brother's "disappearance", my parents' errands lead to nought. My brother, it seems, has chosen his path. Or did he? Unbeknown to my parents, the day after the news of my brother's disappearance, my own search begins.

Part 2: Exile

Chapter 8: The search begins

It is at the assembly point in late-January 1988. At my school, my principal Meneer Hams tells us about his recent trip to Tanzania:

"Kids…" begins Mr Hams in his sermon-like style.

Everybody is quiet now. Senior students are familiar with the sermon:

"I have been to the other side. I have seen the prodigal sons and daughters lost and crying for home…"

According to our principal they are regretting their decision to go to exile to undergo military training. They are finding that the grass is not greener on the other side. Home is better than abroad. Many African countries are faced with their own problems. "What is disturbing is that some of them get caught up in the internal squabbles of the greedy African leaders," says Mr Hams.

Although Dan had indicated that they would get their military training in Tanzania, I am still not satisfied. I need to know exactly where they are. I want to know, if it's true, why did they have to leave the country in the first place? Was Mr Hams's version authentic?

"Out there in the bush there is nothing to eat," Mr Hams says. "It's each man for himself. This is what your brothers and sisters want me to tell you. Study hard. Education is the key. You are lucky to have a home and a meal every day. Imagine if you were to eat a baboon for dinner," says Mr Hams wryly.

To conclude, Mr Hams releases another bombshell: "They told me to tell you not to follow them to exile."

One mischievous boy starts a song "*Dubul' ibhunu*" ("Kill the boer, the farmer") after the principal asks for a post-sermon hymn.

This is how my search for my brother begins…

First, I trace someone who is said to be a PAC leader in Pimville. I find Ntate Motho in one of the zones in Pimville. He is in his 60s and has weathered the harsh conditions of working life. He is wearing khakhi long pants and a green short-sleeved t-shirt. Initially my questions make him suspicious.

"So, you are not interested in our party? You just want to know the whereabouts of your brother," he enquires.

"No… well, yes. Let me put it this way…" I stutter, "I am interested to know about the party which made my brother go to exile."

"Is that all?"

"Oh. I also want to report back to my parents who are very worried by now."

My father has instructed us to keep mum about the disappearance of my brother. We are sworn not to tell anyone, including the police.

"I see," Ntate Motho nods. After ascertaining that I have no sinister motives he starts to reveal that he has abetted the movement of many youths out of the country to receive military training abroad. According to him, the African people have no choice but to fight. I must also join in the fight, he says. But first, he must hook me up with the leadership of AZANYU, the youth wing of the PAC. These are the people who will tell me what my brother's movement all is about.

Although Ntate Motho denies ever knowing my brother in our conversation, I leave with a sense of achievement. At least there are some local links to my brother's disappearance. In addition, I am going to learn more about the organisation.

"So, as you can see there are many reasons that could have made your brother go to exile," continues Ntate Motho when we meet the following day. "We have many enemies. On the one hand, it is the state and its apparatus of *impimpis* and on the other it is our political rivals who think we are taking over their territory." Then he concludes: "Don't worry. Your brother is in safe hands."

In fact, as I would later understand, it is Thabang himself who moots the whole idea of skipping the country to his would-be commander.

In the same breath I'm oblivious to the fact that my brother had already linked up with APLA cadres from as early as 1982. It seems Orlando East is the place where he meets some guides who introduce him to the underground. APLA is the military wing of the PAC that had hitherto been known as POQO in the 60s. He serves it inside the country in various capacities, mainly as the organiser of the youth.

Through Ntate Motho's connections I meet up with a couple of AZANYU leaders who orientate me on the party history. They wear stonewashed jeans and All-Star tekkies. One is wearing a green t-shirt and another a black one. The one who is dark-complexioned goes through South African history in a very calm but intellectual manner. The other one who is tall, but stout emphasises the wars of resistance. His point being: the African people were not resting on their laurels for all these centuries. Each generation will always pass the baton to the next. Seemingly, the baton is now being passed to my generation:

“But how come we don’t hear about your organisation in the media?” I ask.

“The media is owned by those who are oppressing us. It cannot promote people who want to dismantle the colonial system,” the stout guy says.

“I see,” I say.

Later at the political workshops we learn about the history of the PAC, the adoption of the “Freedom Charter” by the ANC and the nation-building Programme of Action of 1949. The two documents are juxtaposed to reveal inconsistencies.

This is how I join the PAC, the organisation of my brother.

We meet in the evenings where it is usually a political curriculum which includes analysing newspaper articles and reading the basic documents of the party. My new mentor is an intelligent man who works full-time in Johannesburg. On weekends, it is usually political rallies and meetings. Other times we visit neighbouring branches of the party.

Other newsworthy events of that year include an attempted palace coup in the Bantustan Bophuthatswana. It is led by General Rocky Malebane-Metsing and some disillusioned soldiers of the homeland. Later in the year, in the Pretoria region of the Transvaal, a white racist Barend “Wit Wolfe” Strydom shoots and murders eight unarmed Africans in the city centre.

Another important development during December 1989 is the formation of the Pan Africanist Movement (PAM), which seeks to counter the dominance of the Charterist School of Thought. The “Charterists” are ANC-aligned movements such as the United Democratic Front (UDF) and the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU), the Congress of South African Students (COSAS), amongst others. This name is taken from their link with the “Freedom Charter”. On the other hand, the PAM adopts the Pan Africanist Manifesto under the leadership of Mlamli Makwetu.

This is the same when the Pan Africanist Student Organisation (PASO) is formed at Wilgespruit. I am specifically tasked with starting a unit of the Pan Africanist Student Organisation (PASO) at Progress High. The mother body christens it “the seed bird of the revolution”.

One day our national student leadership calls upon us to boycott classes and attend a meeting at Orlando East’s Selelekela High School, the former school of my brother Thabang. The leadership feels that the issue of matric exams should be thoroughly discussed by the student body. They feel that in the past emotional decisions like exam boycotts were taken without due consideration and an equally dismal implementation phase imposed. The idea

was that for the current academic year, the students should take sober decisions on their final year. At least this is the version I hear from a comrade who seem to have been in the know.

Whatever PASO's real reason is for calling us it is clear that the student body needed to talk about strategic issues, including unity. Everything else, including points of view, would be discussed at the meeting.

As a new branch (we called it a unit) we were not yet inducted into the culture of attending events beyond our vicinity. So, we were not present at a meeting which resolved to call a bigger meeting of all Soweto students. It seems PASO was flexing its muscles.

The student wing would later engage in running battles with COSAS mainly around recognition issues. Surprisingly, my school manages to handle the contradictions. But other schools in my area claim their causalities. I guess it talks to the balance of forces from the two schools of thought at Progress: The Charterists and the Africanists/Black Consciousness adherents. Both had their own reliable followings. On that day our plan to go to Orlando is botched. We get a visit from a neighbouring school's COSAS leadership. They appeal to us to reconsider the meeting.

I think at the time our main concern is the potential of the move to cause skirmishes at our school. We were in fact a new branch still needing experience. But when the leaders of COSAS leave, after our "talks," we learn some lessons: it is important for us to consolidate for future struggles to come.

That evening, I open the front door of my home in Pimville Soweto to lock the gates. A group of lush shrubs cushions the rusty gates. We still lock them because of the high crime rate in the township, mainly house break-ins.

The place we live in is a new suburb of zone 7 in Pimville, the township is meant to attract the professional workers (mainly public servants). It runs alongside the older township of Sunvalley. The latter is a neighbour to "Selection Park", another experiment by the minority regime to stratify the township. The assumption is if you stay in "Selection Park" (actually zone 5), you are well-off when compared to "the rest". To their credit, many residents on both sides have tried to resist the categorisations imposed by the town planners, to varying degrees of success.

For instance, when it comes to thwarting crime in the area the residents decide to undertake a joint patrol operation. At the other end, many residents of Sunvalley address themselves as zone 7 and vice versa. Journalists like Sam Mabe, whom I credit with the

concept of "nation building," try their best to unite the community. Mabe stays a few streets away from my home. The scribe would later die in a fatal shooting in Jabulani, Soweto.

Our house overlooks a football field which stiches together a high school and a primary school known as Musi and Bantu respectively. Bantu's official name is Pimville Primary School. Although Bantu is a Nguni name meaning people, I also think many have an affinity to it because it is the name of murdered black consciousness leader Stephen Bantu Biko. These buildings date back to the 1940s and, in my view at least, they are heritage sites. The likes of the former Bafana Bafana coach Ephraim "Shakes" Mashaba and the soccer legend Jomo "Matsilele" Sono are some of their famous alumni.

The schoolyards boast a sports ground, although many dispute its real ownership. Does it belong to the municipality or to the schools? It's a question with various answers depending on who you ask. The pitch is home to a couple of soccer goalposts. The Johannesburg Municipality comes in at intermittent times; no one really knows their itinerary for cutting the grass, which can resemble a veld in winter. It can harbour criminal elements during this time.

It has been some time since the municipality has visited and I ponder the veld before me. Will it ever be trimmed.

I have this romanticised view of a guerrilla army and I am thinking that my brother is hiding somewhere in the veld opposite my home. I see him engaging in running battles with the enemy. In my postulation, the "enemy" is the state apparatus, which is oppressing us.

I am convinced genuine guerrilla armies are hiding undercover amongst the people. Here it becomes difficult for the enemy to isolate them as an expert shooter would his target. It is the people's poet Mzwakhe Mbuli who remarks on this in one of his poems *Crocodiles* from his anthology *Before Dawn*. He says: "The people are like crocodiles in the river/And no one can fight crocodiles inside the river..." As an aspiring poet, I change this line to read, "Guerrillas are like crocodiles inside the river/the people are like the river/Therefore you cannot chase crocodiles inside the river."

If indeed Thabang is with the people's army, chances are that he is sleeping in the veld opposite our house. This is important for me to drill into my head for two reasons. First, it gives me the illusion that my brother is within reach. Secondly, it convinces me of the elusiveness of insurgents and therefore their inevitable victory over the enemy. Revolutionary songs that we sing at Progress High School, where I am doing my final year, do not help to debunk the myths – they consolidate them. One talks about counting down the days to a revolution:

Shona Malanga (Shona) Great day dawn (Dawn)

Sesizodibana (dibana) ehlathini We shall meet (meet) in the bush

eSoweto in Soweto

I am oblivious of what is about to happen next year. In fact, most of us have no idea. But my teacher at the workshop is trying to raise our critical faculties in anticipation. So, he prods us:

"When you see a box of matches on the table. What do you do?" he says after the introductions.

"You open it to see what's in it," I volunteer an answer.

"Wrong," he says. "That is the kind of attitude that will get you in trouble."

"What do you do then?" I enquire.

Currently, I am steeped into Pan Africanist politics. I have already declared this to my parents – having shown my father my PASO membership application form. This is unprecedented, at least in my family – a son being courageous enough to tell his father that he is enlisting into a militant group, with its attendant dangers, including possible arrest. Not wanting to burst my bubble, my father feigns agreement. Why PASO? Do you want to join your brother to the wilderness? I am sure he ponders.

My teacher at the workshop finally gives an answer to my starry-eyed question: you study the object for some time; you leave it alone for a while; you might not know what's in it. It could be some dangerous explosives meant to wipe you out.

It's a lesson I would ponder on for many years to come. What does it really mean?

9. A Shared World

The state president FW De Klerk has unbanned political organisations including the PAC and the ANC in his maiden speech on 2 February 1990. He further commits himself to the release of long-term prisoner Nelson Mandela. In the speech, De Klerk intimates that it has been a long time coming:

"These decisions by the Cabinet are in accordance with the Government's declared intention to normalise the political process in South Africa without jeopardising the maintenance of the good order. They were preceded by thorough and unanimous advice by a group of officials which included members of the security community," De Klerk announces to an astonished world.

According to the speech the security cluster have advised the state president that any reforms will not lead to a national security crisis. In KwaZulu-Natal, the state of emergency must remain. Elsewhere common-law crimes must still be prosecuted, only political "crimes" should be absolved. De Klerk agrees and sets the tone for negotiations, even before they start. There is a sense of surprise in some quarters of the liberation movement – a conservative government has done the unthinkable – it has given so much away. Now is the time to reciprocate, according to this logic.

At Progress High a junior student asks for assistance with a debate contest question: *Will South Africa resolve its problems through the negotiations or through civil war?* Or something to that effect. The eager teenager is on the team which argues for the resolution of the country's problems through talks! In my zealousness to assist her team I find myself countering a position that my comrades have adopted against the "talks". Fortunately, they forgive me with the proviso that I study and internalise the current position against negotiations: "If you see a page containing that word in the Oxford Dictionary, or any dictionary for that matter, tear it out! It does not belong there," one regional leader emphasises our stance against negotiations. For all my efforts the student does not come back to me to report whether they have won or not. I don't blame her. I am no longer interested either.

The PAC's anti-negotiations stance had been articulated most clearly by recently released Robben Island prisoner Jafta Kgalabi Masemola: "We cannot negotiate away the bones of our ancestors," he famously says during public appearances. He has spent 27 years

on the prison island. Mandela finds him there in the early 60s and leaves him there when he is transferred to other prisons.

Masemola is killed in a suspicious car accident just outside Pretoria. He is en route to address striking nurses at Garankuwa Hospital. This would affect Mothopeng greatly and he would emotionally pronounce at Masemola's funeral: "uPoqo akabethwa" (the PAC is invincible). In retrospect, one sees in Mothopeng a leader who holds the "Tiger of Azania" in high regard – possibly as an eligible head of the organisation one day.

The ANC accepts the invitation to negotiate with the NP and its allies. For them, it seems, there was always this possibility for talks with the incumbents. Or put differently, their pressure on the regime was expected to yield some results from negotiations. The only thing is that it comes surprisingly early, even for them. Characteristically, the PAC rejects these talks and calls for the intensification of the struggle on all fronts, mainly the armed struggle. The organisation argues, after some indications of possible talks with the regime start in the mid-eighties, that it cannot gate-crash a party to which it has not been invited.

Later, the party does get an invite to the "talks about talks" via the Minister of Constitutional Development, Gerrit Viljoen. In his characteristic leadership style Mothopeng receives the letter only to share it with the branches of the movement. This means so much to the ordinary members of the party. It presents the masses of our people with the possibility of replying to a letter from a top office of the land. Mothopeng's actions give credence to the slogan: a struggle from below.

Most of the branches reject the call to talk. For a while, the PAC holds on to this position until its first congress inside the country after the unbanning held at Shareworld, south of Johannesburg in December 1990**.**

A buzz outside of the silver gates moves like a whiff towards us. Party branch members sway a green and gold banner to the clapping beat of a revolutionary song. Bystanders watch, including myself, as they majestically enter – their bodies flung high as if in mid-air. Not unlike Ntate Punch's menacing car. The continent is at the heart of their banner and black t-shirts. Most of them are young people. A group of young people, you might say. We feel a sense of elation. I am now a card-carrying member of AZANYU, and I slowly move my right hand out of my pocket to sculpt the open-palm salute in their honour: Courage, unity, action. I recite the motto of the youth movement in my heart. For all we know the youth is united under the position of no-talks with the regime.

The congress security is uptight. We assume they are members of the military wing. My mentor is whisked away to the sides by the security. This is not good. They speak in hushed but firm tones to him. I begin to worry. Is my brother one of them? Disguised?

Inside the venue, a few of the delegates at the congress are sceptical and one asks: "But who is the enemy? It seems this man De Klerk genuinely wants peace."

"No ways, Son of the Soil. He is a perfect example of a jackal in sheep's skin," another youth delegate says amidst some laughter in the hall.

The chairman Advocate Dikgang Moseneke tries to maintain order: "Order, Sons, and Daughters. A nation is awaiting to hear the outcomes of this historical congress," he says as chair. Another batch of security personnel is called in to reinforce those already inside. This is how the congress proceeds – tense.

Here I can't say anything, I am an observer. The delegates are divided between those who prefer negotiations with the powers that be and those who oppose it. The day is won by those who support the talks based on certain pre-conditions: a neutral venue and a neutral chairperson, amongst others. There is also a call for a Constituent Assembly, a thorny issue amongst the youthful ranks.

The following day, after the congress, the newly elected PAC president Clarence Mlamli Makwetu appears on prime-time TV condemning the usage of the slogan "One settler, One bullet." He tells the news anchor: "The slogan is shouted by unarmed youths in Soweto." This does not augur well with the leadership of the youth wing. This, I feel, is where the battlelines are drawn between the mother body and its youth.

On the world stage Mikhail Sergeyevich Gorbachev wins the Noble Peace Prize for ensuring dialogue between the East and the West. The citation also records his role in abetting "greater openness" within the former Soviet Union. The Perestroika and Glasnost policies of the former president become critical for history students henceforth.

After matric, in 1991, I take a "gap year" at 19 years old. It is mainly because I am undecided about which career path to follow. I imagine myself in the music business after seeing the likes of Stimela and Ray "Chikapa" Phiri on television. But my father insists that all roads lead to university. At the same time, I don't see myself as particularly academic. Although I am flattered by statements made by some friends and family that I am intelligent. "Well, I am just a hard worker. I reckon I can work harder at music," is my retort.

I have this perception that the South African university music curriculum is westernised. I want to be like Stimela not Bach. Funda Centre, at the time, is a bursting arts and culture scene in Diepkloof, Soweto, with an emphasis on African musicology. It falls out of my radar since it is not a university. I don't even propose it to my dad as an alternative. I know his stock answer.

Maybe I should start my own band. But where will I get other band members? The last time I played in a "band" is when I was in lower primary school in QwaQwa many years ago. During the lunch breaks, one particularly talented kid named Shale used to make me sing over his drum set, made from used tin cans and a bookcase. My father dismisses this idea. "That you have not even entered a music competition before in your life makes you ineligible in music town," he says. So, I give up on this idea too.

At this stage I lead a double life. On the one hand, I am an activist and on the other a social butterfly – a wannabe. There is a new lexicon in town: a stay-awake party. This arrangement means that we, the revellers, do not sleep. At least for twelve hours of the day we stay awake, partying.

And so it is that one early evening in summer I and some friends arrive at a house around my vicinity in Pimville zone 7. Ma-2klipa is our capable host: "Welcome magents. You are early. Where are the sisters," he says.

We hold our breaths. Without sisters, we think our host will change his mind about our presence and turn us away. Last year we were at this house, to celebrate our matric feats with well-wishers. We wouldn't want to miss out this time around. The tempo of these parties improves seasonally. "Don't worry magents, most people arrive late anyway. Please come in," says the host to our relief.

We go through the front door of the face-brick house which leads us to the lounge. It contains a brown suede sofa in one corner and a coffee table in the middle of the room. Towards the white wall opposite the table there's a glass TV stand which looks like its silver linings get polished every day. Its flickering rays blur my sight. There is no TV set. I am taken aback by the sparseness of the room. It is atypical for township lounges to be this empty. Homeowners love their vintage furniture and display it to the admiring public. Later, I learn that this sitting room is not meant to impress, at least for the duration of the night. It is purpose-designed for dancing – all night long.

One of the soundtracks played by the hired DJ is Crystal Waters' *Gypsy Woman*. It talks about an ordinary woman who sings but is homeless. Again, to my mind, music seems to be making some kind of social commentary. I am now reunited with my high school posse,

the former Punks. They, too, have changed their musical tastes. They are now more mellow, for lack of a better word.

As the sisters arrive at our zone 7 spot at around 9pm the DJ turns the turntables around to the tunes of Victoria Wilson-James with the hit *Woman of colour* from her debut *Perseverance*. What is striking is that it is the young men who dance up a sweat to this song. The women, it seems, just want to observe how they are being celebrated by those who claim to revere them.

We are also served Drizabone's *Real Love*. We stay awake until the break of dawn and my longevity is tested to the brink. The morning after, I arrive at home with the song *This is your life* by Banderas still playing in my head. It is heavy from a night-long bout of drinking and dancing. I plunge onto my bed to sleep.

On 26 December 1991, I awaken to the news of the Soviet Union's dissolution. It had been some time coming after Gorbachev had announced the reform policies of his government. But on this day the dissolution was certified by members of the central government.

Coming back to Soweto the Revolutionary Watchdogs hold their own conference at the popular Ipelegeng Conference Centre. It is the same venue where my brother had been elected to the executive of AZANYU a couple of years earlier. The delegates come out and declare that the slogan "One settler one bullet" is a principle; that Marxism-Leninism is a guide; that the Constituent Assembly is a sell-out position and that negotiations will not lead to the genuine freedom of the masses. The detractors of this position term it *watchdog-ism*. The Watchdogs in turn label all those who are pro-talks as *amazambane* (potatoes).

I join the Revolutionary Watchdogs. We, the youth, seek to persuade party members of the folly of negotiations. But it is a tough act to follow since our mother body does not support us. For those who oppose our ideological standpoint, we are the epitome of intransigence at best and left-wing communism at worst. I attend many rallies of the newly revived youth movement. In one of them, I hope to see Thabang. Maybe he will throw me back his mischievous wink and smile. This is all I need to know to report back to my distraught parents about the miracle I have just seen:

Mama. Your prodigal son is back! He says he had to leave in order to free his people. Sometimes, Mama, a soldier needs to leave his people in order to liberate them, I imagine myself saying.

Before the decisive break between the *amazambane* and the Watchdogs, opportunities abound for robust debates within the organisation:

"So are negotiations a principle or a policy?" one comrade asks at a rally at Vista.

"It can't be a principle," another argues from the left flank of the hall. "Principles can't bend. Only policies can," he says. This language is complex for me. What bothers me is I don't understand what this has got to do with a decision to talk or not to talk.

A youth leader ascends to the stage: "Comrades, whether we negotiate or not is not an issue. The question is: if you negotiate then tell us why? If you don't negotiate, then also tell us why?" says the hefty leader who has a squint eye. He is light in complexion and speaks with a baritone like R&B crooner Barry White. He is wearing Old Khaki pants and a red t-shirt with an image of a revolutionary leader blasted on his chest. It could be Che Guevara himself. I don't remember.

The hall becomes tense as the relative unity amongst the youth is tested. I can't think of any other position outside of the watchdog one I belong to at this stage. I trust my leaders although I haven't read all those history books about Constituent Assemblies and revolutions. My idea of engagement with the enemy is the stone-throwing contests we sometimes have with the Casspirs back at Progress. But History, a subject I'm fond of at school, is said to have a distaste for vacuums.

We, the Watchdogs, elect our own mother body in 1992 that runs parallel to the national leadership elected at Shareworld. We call this a two-lined struggle and I'm convinced that we are going to win this important struggle – the "internal struggle".

We see ourselves as pathbreakers, following in the footsteps of the Lembede's and Sobukwe's of this world, who as youths forced the mother body to adopt a Programme of Action mooted back in the forties. It is Lembede himself who coins the term "watchdog" during those exciting times of the Youth Leaguers. In 1959 the PAC argues that the ANC has abandoned the programme. Or in the words of the Pan Africanist Manifesto: it is "no longer within the ranks…"

But it is sad to see my movement being divided in this way. It shifts the focus away from the real debates that the nation should engage. To recall the sceptical leader at the youth summit the other day and to twist around his words a bit, I say: If we don't need the present what is our plan?

In another corner of the world the LA Riots break out on 29 April 1992 after three police officers accused of killing Rodney King, an African American, are acquitted by a jury. The events of the fateful night of King's beating had been captured on video camera.

Whilst all this is happening, I am corresponding with UNISA and majoring in Communication. I have decided that my township revelling is unproductive and

unsustainable. I nearly miss the registration date at UNISA during that year because I am still harbouring dreams of musical stardom.

"Take any course. At the end of the day, it will accrue for a degree qualification," says dad.

Our parents always seem to worry about our future. What if something unforeseen happens to them and we are left alone? What will happen to us? The funny thing is that as a child your plan is always inadequate according to them. Sometimes I wish they didn't have to worry too much. Let them allow us to fly.

Later I reconsider my anti-academic stance. Maybe I can learn something at a contact university. Correspondence needs a special type of person. Someone who is steadfast and disciplined enough. Not someone who will always be at the "stay awake".

By the end of the academic year, I manage to bag two courses with a fair pass: Communication and Practical English. I fail Communication Law. Not that I was expecting any miraculous results, given the limited time I dedicated to serious study. This becomes a learning curve for me, and I vow to go to a residential university the following year.

Vista University proves to be another political maelstrom. Political parties have been unbanned and there are constant contestations amongst the student bodies. The overall theme for that year is Transformation.

I immerse myself within these struggles which are broad-based. All students want some change. But what type of change differs from one student body to the other. These are mainly what are referred to as "struggles for transformation". Whilst PASO is part of the struggles, they would be critical: transforming from what to what?

As I arrive at Vista, I know that within the Watchdogs there are simmering fissures. My mentors have been branded *amatamatie* (tomatoes). They are accused of wanting to turn the PAC into a Marxist organisation. To this, my leaders reply that they are merely following the Ipelegeng Congress resolutions.

So, at first, I tread carefully when I arrive at Vista. Fortunately, the branch leaders have a scant recollection of me. Initially I don't introduce myself, but I immerse myself in campus struggles. It seems my Progress High debates will continue even here. But at least I have grown politically somewhat.

After a year I gradually move towards PASO. I have ascertained that they respect my leaders. But the Charterists on campus make a field day of the division between the mother body and the student body. They argue that it doesn't make sense for PASO to run for student leadership on campus while they refuse to run for parliament off-campus.

A few scuffles happen on campus between *amazambane* and the Watchdogs. But I do not hear of the issues fought over. I suspect the usual debates on the strategies for repossession and redistribution of the land. The Watchdogs argue that it is only through the armed struggle that this can be achieved, whereas the *amazambane* prefer constitutional means. These differences cost the branch some potential voters in the student leadership contest, particularly those who are not privy to the "two-line" struggle.

The beginning of the new year 1992 proves to be uneventful and foreboding at the same time.

10. A Storm is Brewing

After not seeing her for a while MH, my first crush, my "Mummy, comes back into my life. She makes a surprise visit to Pimville one sunny Monday afternoon, and everything takes a whirling turn:

"Has your brother not come back? I hear he has left for exile," she says.

"How do you know?" I say.

"Such things are never a secret you know…"

"It's dangerous to talk about it. You know…"

"Oh, come on, let's change the subject then. Can you accompany me to see my relatives?"

"Where?"

"Don't worry, just around the corner… Selection Park to be precise."

So, we take a trip to "the relatives". It's the first day of the week and relatively quiet since schools have reopened. We find a lanky man in his mid-twenties in this five-bedroomed house. He has a macho style and is wearing pointed shiny plastic shoes – they are green in colour. He has a white tight pants (tighter than the *Botsotso*) on. On welcoming us, he immediately wants to smooch MH as we enter the house:

"Whoa. Please. Wait. Can't you see I am with a friend?" says a surprised MH.

"Who is that?" he answers as if I am invisible.

This is how I meet MH's boyfriend in Pimville. He seems a little tipsy. To my relief, we leave. But on the way back home I can't hide my anger:

"But why, MH?" I address her by her nickname.

"Why, what? says as a nonchalant MH.

As I murmur some words she interjects: "Who did you think I was with when you left Orlando East, huh?"

"But leaving was not my choice. It was my…"

Before I go any further, my first crush pecks me on the cheek: "Oh baby. Do you know that I still love you?" she says. She implores me to visit Orlando East soon: "To remind each other about the good old times." She promises to take good care of me when I am over there. To rubberstamp her point she gives me a deeper kiss – there on the streets. I become coy. She leaves.

I place my hand on my mouth, as a kid would, to try and wipe off the tingling effect left by a loving parent. I put my hand back in my pocket in embarrassment. I then look at her as she walks away at a distance, her body in full, slow swings. Maybe I should be in Orlando East right now.

During the university vacation, I receive a call from someone who claims to be with my brother in Tanzania. His name is Makerere, and he instructs me to call on a certain day at this same hour in order to talk to my "lost" brother. I can't believe what I am hearing. Whilst hopeful, I am also sceptical. It could be a scam targeting vulnerable families like ours who would do anything to reconnect with their loved ones. Sometimes, it's the children who are looking for their "lost" parents.

What crystalizes my search and the longing for my brother is epitomised by the international trunk call I make to Tanzania early in 1993, some five years after my brother left home:

"Can I speak to Thabang?" I announce to the exchange operator on the other side.

"Sorry, we don't speak English here," a voice says.

"What language do you speak?" I ask.

"Swahili."

"But I do not know Swahili."

"I am afraid we only speak Swahili."

The attitude of the exchange operator forces me to ask myself several difficult questions: What does it mean to be an African? What does freedom mean? What will our attitude be towards non-citizens in our newly founded country?

Many images come to mind during this interaction. Could this be a way to frustrate me initially, in case I am an agent of the apartheid regime? There is a point to be made for the usage of African languages in the African continent. I know this statement sounds like an anomaly of some sorts. Africans should speak African languages. Right? Well, if you take the history of colonialism in the continent then you will understand that this is not the case. The continent is dominated by European languages. The Tanzanians try hard to centre the indigenous languages. This is a good thing. But should desperate callers like me suffer in the process? I drop the phone and wallow in sadness for another missed opportunity to locate my lost brother.

Another opportunity presents itself through a phone call I get a couple of minutes later. This time it's from Tanzania:

"Can I speak to *Hlonkis*?"

"Speaking."

"Why did you drop the phone a while ago?" says the male voice on the other side.

After a split second I think I recognise the voice: "Is it you Thabang?" I say.

"Of course, it's me," he says, "I am still waiting for the reply. Why did you hang up on the operator?"

"But those people don't know how to treat fellow Africans. They insisted I speak Swahili."

"But it *is* their language."

"Would they allow me to speak Sesotho?"

"Well. I guess they wouldn't. But it is your language, too, right?"

"Yes. It is."

We both laugh heartily with my brother. At this stage no one has said anything about how they have been since we parted. We understand that this is an initial connection, and it means the world to everyone. It is fine until we meet again in a different country.

I report this conversation to my elated parents. I have the luxury of receiving Thabang's occasional calls because I am a student who is on vacation. An unemployed youth. I am always home when he calls. I never dare to make any more calls myself in case I get the same reception as my first attempt. Thabang shrugs it off: "Don't worry. They will cooperate. At least they know you now."

In one of the calls, he appeals to me to stay put inside the country and not to join him in exile. My ilk belongs in school, he says. "That is where you should focus your energies." This sounds strangely like my high school principal Mr Hams's sermon. Was Thabang one of his interviewees? He then stops calling.

The year 1993 is a period of uncertainty in the country. Indeed, one can say that South Africa was at the crossroads. The PAC loses its two most prominent leaders. First it is Masemola, who dies in a mysterious car accident in April 1990, and then it is Mothopeng, who dies after a long illness in October 1990. Now everybody in the movement wants to lay claim to their legacies. The Watchdogs want to show how they were anti-negotiations. The *amazambane* argue the opposite – how they were pro-negotiations. The most contested would be Mothopeng's. He had been elected leader whilst serving a prison sentence in 1986, an undisputed leader of the movement. The election itself is a vote of confidence in the leader.

Zephania Lekoame Mothopeng is born in the Free State town of Vrede in 1913. His father is a farmer, and Mothopeng grows up understanding the hardships of tilling the

unyielding soil. He understands the scarcity of the land for the African people and how this in turn leads to poverty.

It is not rocket science that he chooses to join the liberation movement at a young age in the 1940s to pursue the national liberation of the indigenous people. He defines this struggle as a struggle for national independence. The right to be. For his troubles he gets imprisoned several times, starting from the sixties for the Anti-Pass campaign up to the seventies for the student uprising. He is released in the late eighties on humanitarian grounds.

After his release, when everyone thinks he shall retire and call it quits, he continues where he left off – mobilising the masses for the overthrow of white domination. He becomes the uniting figure in the PAC. His death on the eve of the first congress of the PAC after the unbanning leaves the organisation in need of a revolutionary shepherd. He himself had pinned his hopes on Masemola.

The internal conflict in the PAC claims its own casualties. Some members are unceremoniously chased away from the movement's meetings and warned never to set foot in their midst again. The wrangling usually amounts to nothing more than threats or perceived threats. However, there is this incident, which allegedly takes place at the PAC president's house in Daveyton, which threaten to upscale the tempo of the conflict.

One morning, it is alleged that Clarence Makwetu, the movement's leader, wakes up to find a corpse hurled into his premises. It is the dead body of a police officer. To the leadership of the party, this is a hallmark action of the Watchdogs and the section of the military they have hoodwinked into supporting them.

The same year, 1993, in April, Sabelo Phama declares it "The Year of the Great Storm" in an exclusive SABC interview. The interview is aired for a couple of days. Attacks follow at the Highgate Hotel in East London, St. James Church in Kenilworth, and the Heidelberg Tavern in Observatory.

But APLA is operating even before then. For instance, during the previous year the King William's Town Golf Club in the Eastern Cape is attacked and four people perish and seventeen are injured.

Later APLA would justify these attacks as acts of self-defence. Former member of the High Command Brigadier Dan Mofokeng puts it to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC): "It will therefore be a fallacy in the context of White South Africa to talk about innocent civilians. Military trained and armed citizens defied the definition of civilians…," says the General who went by the nom de plume of Romero Daniels.

The so-called “black on black violence” is unleashed on the African populace in the early nineties. Whilst Mothopeng is still alive he calls for “Peace amongst the Africans. War against the enemy.” There are some anecdotes from the youth of the PAC sent to the hostels by the leadership to try to talk peace with the inmates:

“It was a chilling experience,” says a young cadre.

“But why did you go?” I ask.

“The leader Mothopeng made one courageous. With his leadership style one seldom saw any obstacle before a mission.”

These youth are sent to a potentially armed area. This is at the height of the violence:

The dark passageway leads to an even darker room where four men are squatting beside a single mattress balanced on four brown bricks. They are brewing a concoction inside the calabash. The smell of the red concoction is not welcoming. It could be anything. God forbid it is blood. Any type of blood. To the surprise of the young delegation the hosts imbibe the mix. After wiping their mouths with their raw hands, they offer the visitors a sip with a wry smile.

Daniels continues at the TRC presentations before the acting chairman, Dr Alex Boraine: “The decision (to attack white civilians) was aimed at carrying out legitimate reprisals in forcing the regime to end the killings of African people, by intensifying the armed struggle.”

Later Boraine intervenes as a PAC delegation expounds on Daniels’ point: “Just for your information, I was not so trained, and I have never owned a gun. I don’t know even what it looks like. So, you have a benefit over me.” This is said to the amused audience in the hall. The PAC undertakes to source the law that requires the white population to be armed.

Sadly, the “black on black” violence leads to the Boipatong massacre on 17 June 1992 and the people demand arms from the liberation movement. The Watchdogs intensify their call for the boycott of the Convention for a Democratic South Africa (CODESA), the negotiation forum. Clearly, the violence is state sponsored. Witnesses report that some of the attackers wear black make-up to hide their identity.

It makes sense for the minority regime to fuel the violence because the masses are the key, core, and cornerstone of the revolution. No weapon of mass destruction can quell the fire for revolution if the masses take that resolution.

The SACP general secretary Martin Tembisisle Hani (Chris) calls for peace. A couple of days later (10 April 1993) he is assassinated by a Polish immigrant Janusz Walus. This threatens to plunge the country into an all-out civil war.

It is a normal Easter weekend at the Hani abode in Boksburg, and he is doing his morning errands: exercise and getting the morning paper. Little does he know an assassin is lurking near his home – waiting for an opportune moment to fatally strike his target. As he enters his driveway, coming from the shops, the killer pulls the trigger.

In court proceedings Walus claims that he killed Hani because Hani was a communist. This system, according to him, has ruined many countries, including his own country of origin. His father's business is a casualty of successive communist takeovers in the former Soviet regime. This is the narrative being paddled around about communism. For the record, there is no properly communist state in the world. There has never been one. Despicable crimes like Hani's murder are committed on the pretext of this lie. Unfortunately for some, it seems like a permanent delusion.

But because De Klerk is doing the unthinkable, the youth are branded extremists bent on fighting at all costs – "rebels without a cause". Some within AZANYU see another revolutionary opportunity in the anger of the masses after Hani's death. One evening I speak to one of them:

"I think now the masses will see the light. I mean for a man of peace…to be befallen by this?" says the youth comrade.

"But how do you think they will see the light?" I say.

"The struggle is the best university. Take the people from the known to the unknown."

"How do you mean?

"At the funeral service we put the line across."

The funeral takes place on 18 April 1993 in Soweto. Earlier, Madiba has insisted that the dove of peace fly over the south. He implores the youth to act peacefully during the funeral service: "A particular responsibility rests on your shoulders," he says.

The militant youth within the ANC hope to win the day and convince the masses of the need for revolution. This augurs well for the radicals within AZANYU who are also in attendance. But at the actual service it is a different story. Leaders like Tokyo Sexwale snub the defiance at the gravesite. I decide to be a couch potato and watch the proceedings on the telly:

The masses swamp the FNB stadium. An all-familiar site during soccer match seasons, especially on the Soweto derby. Although this is a sombre day the masses sing revolutionary songs energetically.

As the proceedings go on inside the stadium an aerial shot of the event shows a trickle moving outside the gates. The turnout to the funeral is overwhelming. The masses are adequately mobilised.

After what seems like an endless 21-gun salute by the mourners at the gravesite, Sexwale calls out: "Cease fire!" I guess many radicals present want to counter: "Seize the moment!"

But Mandela wants the assassination of Hani to remind us of the time lost in resolving the South African question. It should precipitate the date of the election. Thus, Mandela keeps true to his earlier call: "Throw your weapons to the sea."

Elsewhere in the world, the PLO leader Yasser Arafat signs a peace accord with the Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin. It becomes a series of agreements known as the Oslo Accords. The aim is to bring the two sides of the conflict into a peaceful resolution of the Palestinian Question.

Another notable incident is the World Trade Center bombing in New York City. Suspected terrorists carry out this attack through an underground parking lot at the Centre. About six people are killed and more than a thousand injured. This wakes up the authorities to the possibilities of a war outside the conflict-ridden regions in the Middle East. The war is now on the doorstep of the US. It is just after Bill Clinton is inaugurated as the 42nd president of the US.

On the home front, Percy Mtwa's stage play *Bopha!* is turned into a Hollywood movie. The film is directed by Morgan Freeman, and it stars Danny Glover in the leading role of Micah Mangena.

The original stage play had been performed in 1985 at the iconic Market Theatre starring Aubrey Radebe, Aubrey Moalosi Molefe and Sydney Khumalo. This version was directed by Mtwa himself.

Bopha! is a play revolving around the relationship between an activist son and a policeman father at the height of the struggle in South Africa in the eighties. The father finds himself in a dilemma of having to quell a student protest where his son is one of the participants. What would you do if you were in his shoes? Having to choose between a job and your family?

Fast-forward to eight years later and politics still occupies centre stage with the election date for the first democratic election in South Africa at last proclaimed. For some, 27 April 1994 is not a date. It is a curtain-raiser for freedom. A cue for apartheid to take a bow. I wonder what my brother thinks.

I never make time to see MH in Orlando East, but I manage a couple of sightings in zone 5 Pimville. She is with the same guy that made our visit hell earlier at his home. Holding hands and laughing, they straddle the streets of the suburb in broad daylight. This time I am not angry. I am biding my time for her to change her mind.

11. Inside the country

I listen attentively to an interview on 702 talk radio station with the secretary for defence and APLA Commander Sabelo Phama as a guest on the line. It is the 16th of January 1994. It is around midnight and Phama is shocked by the announcement of the suspension of the armed struggle by the leadership of the PAC at an earlier news conference.

Sadly, a month later Phama (real name Sabelo Victor Gqwetha) is killed in a suspicious car accident in Tanzania. He was on his way back to South Africa (Azania). Still today there has never been a satisfactory outcome of any investigation on the circumstances of his death. Not even the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) could unravel the mystery.

There are several similar cases in our neighbouring Zimbabwe. These are high-profile liberation movement leaders who die mysteriously in car accidents, some on the eve of the independence of their country. They include Zimbabwean National Union (ZANU) leader Herbert Chitepo, killed on 18 March 1975, whilst travelling in Lusaka, Zambia. The other one happens on 26 December 1979 in Mozambique. It involves popular Zimbabwean National Liberation Army (ZANLA) commander Josiah Tongogara.

There is a popular song, *Weeping*, in the South Africa of the late eighties by the band Bright Blue. It is haunting in its condemnation of oppression and is sung by four South African white males. The composer Dan Heymann is, in his own words, "an unwilling soldier, drafted into the army of South Africa's white-supremacist regime". The recording is first aired on radio in 1987. It is the time of state president PW Botha. Some say the song is about him.

The following year was the year my brother disappeared.

Despite the events of the nineties, for me the South Africa of 1988 is the real transition. You almost see a new country emerging out of the ashes of the old. When my brother gets "lost" he is only 22 years old, and the PAC is embarking on its "Home-going Program". This is to address the masses' need for armaments to defend themselves against state violence; guerrillas' training; and the starting of self-help projects inside the country. The operations of the guerrilla army spread to the smaller towns of the Western Transvaal.

I recall one day a local priest arriving at my home to pray for my parents who have endured the "sin" of Thabang of going into exile and leaving them, myself and my sibling behind to suffer depression as a result.

At this point I can't help but recall the critical role the church plays in harbouring activists and vulnerable youth during the height of our struggle. Some of the political classes I attend were clandestinely held in churches.

My brother is not a big fan of Christianity. But to accuse him of being "a big disappointment" by electing to join the liberation movement is unpalatable, to say the least. I leave it to that on that early evening.

I have given up any hope of my brother returning home. I thought the search for him would take me about six months, at the most. I would then continue living my life. Currently, there is no hint of his exact location, except for the call I alluded to earlier. By now, anything is possible. God forbid that he is in any kind of danger.

Then, one night in early January 1994 at around 11 p.m. there is a knock on the front door of my home. We are not expecting a knock at that time of the night:

"Who is it?" I say.

"It's your brother," the voice on the other side responds.

"Sorry. Wrong address. My brother does not live here anymore," I say.

I start to swear. Who could make such a cruel claim? At this time of the night? Because of frequent township house burglaries, this response from me as a resident is normal. You don't want to open to strangers only to be accosted and robbed of all your belongings if you survive.

On the other hand, we have been keeping the true nature of my brother's sudden disappearance in Pimville secret. It could be the police on the other side of the door. You don't want them to trouble you with a myriad question you cannot answer because you simply don't know.

"*Hlonkis,* please open the door," the voice on the other side persists. I could hear some suppressed laughter now. Again, I turn around. No one calls me with that name except for some of my relatives in Bloemfontein … and my brother. Or Thabang. Wait a minute. I come to my senses. I immediately open the door.

I greet my "lost" brother and he reciprocate with his characteristic dimpled smile. I immediately call out to my Mum and Dad. "Ma. Pa. You won't believe who is here!" Tharollo, my younger brother, also wakes up to witness these shenanigans. I am ecstatic. My brother has spent six years in exile. I never thought I would see his return to the country. We did not get any message from anyone about his impending homecoming.

I remember one speaker at a Watchdog rally in Orlando East dishing out a lesson: "The revolution has no warning. It happens when it happens." He was responding to a hostile crowd who were suspecting he held a "sell-out" position during the debate about a negotiated settlement. Is this then the homecoming revolution?

Thabang is with a group of other young men. One of them, Jackson, I recognise as Dan's classmate from Progress High. Another, Abrahm, I had met at PASO meetings a couple of years back. My parents hug my brother, and my mother is close to tears. Seeing this, my brother side-tracks to my younger sibling:

"Oh. Is this Tharollo?" he says.

"Yes. It's him," my mother responds on behalf of my younger brother.

"I have heard a lot about you." Thabang shakes Tharollo's hand.

"Me too," my sibling grins.

The house bursts into laughter. "Welcome home, sons of the soil," I say to the group of returnees.

I would get bits and pieces about my brother's journey to exile from some of his comrades. It would prove difficult to fit some of the pieces into the jigsaw puzzle because he does not stay long with us in Pimville after he arrives. He does not say much about the exile experience either. Or at least not to me. These are the bits and pieces, the scraps, that I manage to piece together.

My brother's exile is known, along with his comrades, as the 1988/1989 Group. Their main motivation is the uprisings that shake the townships perennially in the mid- to the late eighties. Arriving in exile, they bring their own culture and understanding of the struggle. This leads to some contradictions within the camps, just as the arrival of the 1976 Group had done earlier.

On the 21st of January 1988 Thabang and his comrades go to town to sleep over at an office block near Lekton House. They stay over for a night and leave the following day for the Faraday Taxi Rank in downtown Johannesburg. There, they board taxis to the Vaal. At the end of the journey, they walk towards the Ficksburg border where they prepare to cross over into the mountain Kingdom of Lesotho.

But Thabang is mischievous in Lesotho. He instigates his group to strike against the bad diet allegedly dished out by aid officials at the Refugee Camp. His commander finds himself isolated at the camp.

One day my brother goes to him to ask for a piece of food, which he reckons looks delicious. The commander agrees to share. However, at this stage Thabang breaks his plate to the ground, reminding the unsuspecting fighter: “We are still on strike!”

In April 1988 my brother arrives in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. He then goes to the rural side, Ruvu (a former sugar plantation and the largest PAC camp).

May 1988: Thabang contracts Malaria in Bagamoyo, Tanzania.

January 1989: Military training in Guinea Conakry.

February 1989: Back to Bagamoyo where he is a journalist, medic, and assistant doctor.

Before his return home my brother spends some time in Uganda to do an officer’s course. He is ranked Major. In all the trainings that my brother attends the Ugandan experience, I am told, is the harshest. This is juxtaposed with the training at the French-speaking Guinea Conakry which is said to be more reasonable or “intellectual”.

But when Thabang arrives in Tanzania it is not that rosy.

The farming activities suffer. In turn, poor production of crops forces the PAC to plead for donations from overseas in order to feed the camp residents. This leads to a disease outbreak of tuberculosis, diarrhoea, dysentery, and other ailments.

Interestingly, this challenge forces the party to construct a medical facility, with funding from overseas donors and sympathetic African heads of state, to cater for the basic health needs of the camp residents and the surrounding villages**.** This is how my brother’s interest in medicine is sparked. He later enrols in a medical college to study dental medicine.

I have accepted that this knowledge is the best I can hope for under the circumstances. I am reminded of his accomplice Dan’s words in an earlier chat: “You are lucky that your brother made it back home.” This, after my brother nearly succumbs to malaria in Tanzania. The liberation army loses many of its soldiers to the disease. The local population is not spared the pain either. A typical day in my brother’s life in the Ruvu Camp, the largest and the most hospitable PAC camp, looks like this:

Breakfast from 7am to 8am.

Ideological Studies from 8am to 9am (including the history of the movement and its leaders, Maoism, and latest developments in South Africa).

Various Chores from 9am to 12:30am (including gardening and poetry)

Lunch time which typically comes with Rice or Pap, Vegetables and Meat. The latter is a luxury.

Resting and Recreation is from 1:30pm to 4pm. During the recreation period residents reminisce about South Africa through music. The guerrillas compose revolutionary songs to be recorded later for radio broadcasts in the camp. My brother works for the party media. He works in the editorial room of the camp newspaper. Taken together radio and the newspaper fall under the auspices of the Publicity Department.

It is during these recreational periods that some nostalgically haul out their stereos and play mbaqanga and pop music. But the choice of music pits the urban "clevers" against the so-called country bumpkins. The urbanites are likely to put disco music in the mix. This division spills over into the soccer games amongst camp members. Regional teams "from back home" crop up. Still, it is soccer, at the end of the day, which becomes the great leveller: even the leadership plays the same game as the rank and file.

Current Events Analysis and Discussion from 4pm to 5pm (this is done through Camp Radio)

Supper Time is from 6:30 pm to 7:30 pm. This is much like the lunch menu.

Cultural hour from 7:30 pm to 8:30 pm (or later). This is arguably the most exciting and popular event at the camp. Here, new revolutionary songs are composed and recorded to be sung at future gatherings. All these, including poems, are broadcast on radio for the enjoyment of the camp residents.

Tanzania hosts the head office of the PAC. The Ruvu camp where Thabang stays for a while after leaving home is the largest and most stable of the movement's camps in exile and is established in 1978. Prior to this, the organisation's camps are temporary. Ruvu itself is initially conceptualised as a transit camp for soldiers going abroad for training or just arriving from "home" (South Africa).

Later, the camp's aim is to train personnel and offer a stable exile community. It is also to prepare cadres for the daunting work of rebuilding a future socialist Azania. The skills include horticulture, poultry, carpentry, sanitary engineering, plumbing, motor mechanics and electrification, amongst others. It should be noted that some of these skills are not traditionally offered to the oppressed in "occupied Azania". Thus, whole families can settle in the camp.

When my brother arrives at the settlement it consists of more than a thousand residents. Around 1984 under the leadership of Nyathi Pokela it consists of about 67 houses. In the early eighties it develops beyond being just a sanctuary for activists running away from the persecution of the oppressor and his machinery to a self-sustained community with a clinic, a school, and some mechanical and agricultural training centres.

The new settlement is built around a rough road 170 km from the city, Dar-es-Salaam. This leads the organisation to incur enormous transport costs to and from the camp, let alone all the other maintenance costs. The boon is the Ruvu river which passes through the camp.

This is a time when the PAC revives itself. Pokela sadly passes on in 1985. The leadership tries to steer away from internal fights. The Chairman Mlambo, who takes over after Pokela, stresses the importance of reviving internal (i.e., South African) activity and presence. During his tenure APLA's engagement with the enemy inside "occupied Azania" intensifies.

It is a time when Sabelo Phama takes up the post of the Secretary of Defence. He is also Commander of the Army. Still the highest position is that of Chairman occupied by Mlambo. He also chairs the military council.

Mlambo facilitates the set-up of the women's affairs department. They play a critical role in assisting with the welfare of the soldiers in the camps. These activities include the building of a crèche for cadres with parental responsibilities.

Here the leaders take a resolution that the women's wing should be a fully-fledged department with its own budget. The women are designated a full-time secretary who also sits on the Central Committee meetings.

The party's Department of Education and Manpower trains some cadres in agricultural skills for the self-sustenance of the settlement. But many cadres like Thabang come from the township and are less interested in manual labour.

The positive aspect is that members can now settle with their families and concentrate on the task at hand – the liberation of Azania (South Africa). In addition, farmer's crops, including maize, rice, sorghum and fruit like pawpaw and pineapple, become abundant. The camp even boasts its own herd of cattle!

But the legacy of Pokela is characterised by the "home-going" programme. Cadres are urged to remember the initial goal of exile: to gain valuable skills and return home to liberate the country, alongside the masses of the people, or what Mothopeng calls the "internal factor." Pokela reminds the soldiers that this is the most decisive factor. The Ruvu settlement exists until 1993.

Back home, the leadership of the PAC military wing sends my brother to the assembly point at the De Brug Military Base in Bloemfontein to integrate into the new army which will be christened the South African National Defence Force (SANDF). He ends up with the South African Medical Services College (SAMS) the following year. About his

decision to integrate, he says: “The leadership has done so much for us outside the country. We can’t then abandon their call at this hour.”

There is a call to merge the former liberation movement armies with the state’s army (including the former homeland armies). The British have been roped in to assist in this tricky process. The military wing of the PAC is better equipped because of the Zimbabwean experience. The northern neighbours had warned the cadres about the possibility of forming a new army from previously opposed forces. They have gone through the process after their own negotiated settlement in the eighties.

But the challenges of integration, it seems, are much bigger: ranking system; army culture; training; incentives; the list is endless. It should also be noted that perceptions about each army’s strength exist on both sides. For instance, there is a tendency from the old South African army to view the liberation army as non-conventional. The guerrillas are expecting a hostile reception from the white minority army. In most cases the latter perception is proven right.

Many freedom fighters abide by the call of the leadership. No sooner have they done so than they are accosted, at the assembly point, by the old authorities and charged for past crimes. Some are taken to prison. Others are accused whilst they begin working for the new army.

Charges range from going AWOL to disregarding the instructions of senior officers as expected. Some are charged for allegedly making off with ammunition belonging to the camp. The charges are almost always trumped up, I am told. I am crossing my fingers that none of this happens to my brother.

Mangaung, the place where Thabang grew up**,** is where he chooses to set up house when he returns. This is an area which includes the Wesleyan Church, believed to be the birthplace of the ANC in 1912, and a Sesotho Literary Museum. This is also where Thabang meets Nozi, the new love of his life.

In a way I am relieved that my brother relocates to Mangaung. We have grown apart politically. I am now with the Watchdogs who are against the leadership’s plans to negotiate the national question. I am convinced, more than ever before, about the Watchdog case. I think my brother also realises this although he does not confess it except for one incident where it threatens physical spats amongst members. Even then it is articulated by Dan, his comrade: “Are you with the Watchdogs?” he asks me.

At the time, I do not know about the Daveyton incident where it is alleged that the Watchdogs commit a crime of murder and leave the victim at the entrance of Makwetu’s

house in the township thus turning the place into a crime scene, let alone exposing the occupants of the house to possible arrest, or worse:

"How can the Watchdogs wish any African bad?" I say.

"But you are not answering. We do not want to see ourselves being hit by friendly fire," says Dan.

It is clear, to him that "friendly fire" is the worst kind of fire a soldier can endure. By "we", he means himself and my brother, who is quiet all the time that the erstwhile Chiefs fan is interrogating me at our home. Could it be that my brother is secretly in agreement with the policy of the Watchdogs? Since his arrival, Thabang is as hard as a wall about his latest political orientation; he avoids political talk at all costs.

Dan and I become best friends when my brother relocates to Bloemfontein. It is he who tells me how lucky we are as a family that my brother did not pass on in exile. "Your brother was as thin as a stalk. We thought it's the last time we would see him. How he recovered is a miracle," he tells me.

It makes sense for him to be the one to probe me further on the existence of the Watchdogs since he returns home long before my brother does. He is amongst the first groups to do so at the start of the new decade. He participates in these debates frequently since coming back from exile.

Whilst there is optimism amongst some about the resolution of the South African conflict through peaceful means the other countries in the world experience their own brands of civil wars, including in Yemen on the 7th of July 1994.

The Rwandan genocide happens in April 1994 and is a blight on Africa and its leadership because of what looks like a clear tribalist conflict. For a period of one hundred days the perceived "other" is maimed on the soil of another wealth-endowed African country. This is an indictment on leaders who claim the mantle of Pan Africanism.

The North Korean leader Kim II-sung passes on on the 8th of July 1994. He had risen from the position of premier in 1948 to that of president in 1972, the year I am born.

Some will say these events do not halt the grinding wheel of history and where our country needs to be. Life goes on. We tend to think of history as a series of victories for mankind. Who won the world war? Who became the first president of a liberated country? Who led an overthrow of an oppressive government? The list goes on and on.

But if we are to learn anything from history, I believe we must take the good with the bad – even the ugly.

When my brother leaves for Bloemfontein, I wish him well and hope that when we meet again one of us will find it in his stride to compromise and fulfil Mothopeng's mission: Peace amongst the Africans and war against the enemy.

Part 3: Home Again

12. "I am not around"

Thabang returns to South Africa before the 1994 elections, at the age of 28, and immediately integrates into the SANDF in Bloemfontein. In a way, my brother's comrade Dan is right: we are lucky to have him back home. The last APLA pass-out parade happens in 1995. Can you imagine the kind of anxiety that the parents of those soon-to-return soldier felt? "Everybody's son is back, where is mine?" I imagine a mother lamenting.

Thabang becomes a Captain in the Medical Command (OFS) structure and meets a young woman at the hospital.

At our first meeting, Nozi, a local from Mangaung and the would-be fiancée of my brother, recounts their own meeting to me.

"I was out looking for a job at the hospital," she tells me. "I was dressed to the nines like I always am. At the time I did not know your brother. I go to this stranger and casually ask him if the establishment has any vacancies. I ask because I can see he is working there."

"How did you know?" I say. "Was he wearing a white dustcoat like the doctors?"

"No. I think he was still in his military regalia," says Nozi. "They had been called in to deal with the staff shortages due to the strike."

"Oh, yes. I do remember seeing the strike in the news," I say.

"Exactly. So instead of directing me to the relevant department, he proposes to me right on the spot. And, as they say, the rest is history."

"That's such an inspiring encounter."

"Yes, it is. I can announce that we are now a live-in couple. And soon the wedding bells will ring. I shall be your new in-law," she says.

This is the kind of story I wish to see in a movie, on a theatre stage, or in a novel, one day. That year, the movie *Titanic* comes out, but I never get the chance to see it. It doesn't matter; I shall never have as much of a good time as I had with Thembi at the movies when I was a teen.

But my brother and Nozi's relationship is no great love story. It doesn't see our heroes living happily ever after. Their marriage is beset with many challenges, as you will see.

Nozi is taller than my brother. She is well endowed physically, but not stout. Her tall figure balances out her body mass in a chiselled-out way. She radiates with light. But it is not the shimmering type. It's the kind that consumes you, draws you closer in.

My brother visits us in Soweto periodically. He is not well. He is coughing during intervals. My mother suggests he rests in my room. It allows more sunrays, she says. I am always baffled at how my mother makes these prescriptions as if she is a doctor. I must say most of the time she is right.

For one of his first visits, Thabang arrives with Nozi. This is her first trip to my home in Soweto.

The family, including the couple, and my parents, is winding down in the sitting room. Tharollo is away to visit friends in zone 1, where I used to attend youth clubs during my Sunday school days at the Dutch Reformed Church.

Nozi asks if I am fine and generally plays the role of a big sister. She looks a couple of years older than me, though she could be my age. I do not bother to ask her or my brother her actual age.

To her question I say, yes, except that I am still looking for a job. She then asks my brother if he has some coins to spare for me to go out.

"It's a weekend," she says.

"No," my brother replies.

She goes to their bedroom (my bedroom) and comes back with some coins. I thank her for her generosity. I then bounce off.

For his second visit, my brother leaves Nozi behind. This time he is coughing persistently. It looks like he is also losing some weight. When he comes back from exile my brother was already slimmer. I attribute it to lots of exercises and a bout of malaria. With the story I hear about this affliction it makes sense that he is slimmer. I am worried but leave it at that.

Soon after his arrival, there is a knock on the door. It is his ex-girlfriend Mpho Masilo, the girl Thabang met back in QwaQwa when he was in boarding school. What brought them closer together was the realisation that they both come from Pimville. They came to QwaQwa for the same reasons as the Molete's – to attend a relatively peaceful school. Or so their parents thought …

I think Mpho is upset with my brother. When he comes back from exile, he doesn't come to stay in Soweto to be with her. Instead, the soldier decides to date a local girl in

Bloemfontein and gets married. Is this perhaps why he went back to Bloemfontein in the first place? These questions, I suspect, worry Mpho.

Earlier, he had pleaded with us whilst lying in bed: “I’m not around in case anybody wants to see me, especially Mpho.” My brother is not a coward, but I think he knows he will not win any argument with Mpho any time soon. So, he retreats.

He takes the normal cough suppressants which are recommended by my mother. By now, everyone knows that he is in the good books of Mum. He is the prodigal son who has finally returned home. I can see my mum is baffled by the situation of the visits by Mpho. I suspect my brother does not declare to my mum the real situation with his former girlfriend either.

The erstwhile girlfriend can feel the tension in the house when she visits but she has no idea that my brother is actually in the house. As usual, whether she finds Thabang or not, she treats the place like it is her home too. She behaves like a daughter-in-law. She makes herself comfortable by preparing tea for herself and my mother. That’s Mpho for you: ever joyous.

Thabang goes back to Mangaung in a Maxi taxi ride hired by my father. These are sedans converted into taxis by their owners. They work 24/7 – well, almost, depending on the client’s needs. Our man at the wheel is Bongani; he has been with my father since he unexpectedly returned to the public broadcaster – helping with transport. I am invited along for the ride, just for the fun of it.

On the road, I learn something about my brother…

“Put some fast music in your audio,” he whispers to the driver as we enter the highway. “Some rock ’n roll. This car is too slow.”

The mood in the car is hilarious thanks to Thabang. Now my brother’s life back in the country is like a roller coaster. It’s as if he wants to compensate for the years lost. I wish he didn’t feel this way.

We drop him off at Kamhout 22858, Lourierpark, Bloemfontein. On our way back, Bongani is calmer. I request to see his R&B playlist. When I see a couple of tracks I like from it I request he plays some. Some of my all-time favourite artists are there: Freddy Jackson, Keith Sweat, Keith Washington Jnr and Anita Baker. He obliges. The “in and out” trip takes a few hours, but I would get another glimpse into my brother’s character – the one I did not know before.

My brother himself makes a couple of return trips to Pimville, mostly without Nozi. On one of these, he has a bit too much to drink. This complicates his flailing health, which is beginning to show on his physique. He is getting leaner.

One afternoon, we are watching a game of Chiefs and Pirates in the sitting room:

"Well, you know football is just meant to dupe the masses. These teams are not really rivalling," says Thabang with a favourite drink in hand.

"I understand, but when my team plays Chiefs, I know who I am rooting for. I don't sit on the fence," I joke.

"No! Truth be told these games are just facades. They are meant to blind the people. They are like an opium," he says after a gulp from the gin.

My brother can continue an argument to its bitter end whilst also trying to show you different possibilities. When he was younger, he fancied himself as a lawyer. I bet he would have made a good one if he had not chosen to answer another call: the fight for national liberation.

Sitting there, watching football with my brother nagging me about my loyalty to a soccer team I call it quits. I sense that he is not talking. It is now the bitter drink talking. This is not a healthy jest. My mother is patiently monitoring the situation. I decide to go out.

There, in the middle of the night, just a stone's throw away from our gate, a black Citi golf passes by next to me.

These could be lost strangers looking for direction or these could be my buddies from the neighbourhood offering me a lift. I try to keep calm, but I soon realise I am wrong.

The dimmed car pulls over and a window opens. A guy wearing a black leather jacket and a hood points a revolver at me whilst muttering: "How do you like this?" He is admiring his weapon as he asks.

I have no time to exchange pleasantries with strangers, especially strangers with guns. I hit the ground running. The gunman is perplexed. He and his accomplices speed off in another direction. At a safe distance, I hear them cursing at one another for a missed opportunity.

I am not going to stop. I am not perturbed by the incident. Though I must admit it is a close call. I continue with my journey to my friend's place at Klipspruit. When I arrive, I find him still watching the game. It's around 9 p.m. and Pirates is not winning.

Interestingly, the street, Mokoena Street, is where the Khomane family stays. The father Johannes "Yster" Khoamane and the son Papi Khomane are Buccaneer legends. The

other siblings of Papi are ardent Pirates fans themselves. On the same street, adjacent to the Chris Hani Road, there is the SAFA/SIMBA stadium where tournaments take place during school holidays. This helps learners to focus on productive activity during their rest (some adults attend too). This is where my relationship with football begins and ends. If it's not Pirates, I am not watching.

The reason I go to Klipspruit is because that is where my community work is based. I am putting it mildly here. This is how it is:

In 1997 I dedicate the whole year to community theatre activities. I am a recent Wits graduate and have pushed aside suggestions by one of my supervisors about possibly working for the new government. I suspect it is one of those boring nine-to-five administration jobs. The incumbents always look like they are longing for knock-off time. I don't envy their burden.

Instead, I teach young people drama. Though I have not been to drama school myself; I want to give someone a *Bugsy Malone* moment. Selfishly, I also want to take a shot at the director's seat. Later, I write a playscript *Lekopokopo*. It is about a love triangle in the township during the eighties. A professional theatre troupe Bachaki visits to conduct workshops for a week. I am grateful.

The leader of the troupe, Thulani Sifeni, asks me to showcase the work at an upcoming community theatre festival. I decline as I feel the work still needs to be polished. How wrong I am about this. Theatre-making is a process not an event, I later learn. Even on opening nights, directors are still making the last-minute changes to a production to make it look polished.

It is during this year that *Muvhango*, a new South Africa soap opera, debuts on television. It is conceptualised by former exile Duma Ka Ndlovu. It is historic in the sense that the medium is Tshivenda, mixed with some local languages. This encourages me on my indigenous language quest. I take inspiration from writer Ngugi wa Thiong'o, who famously stated that he will no longer write in English. But how will you survive, friends ask me. I don't know, I say.

Later, I apply to the Department of Arts and Culture for a vacant position, having reconsidered my earlier boycott of administrative work. I guess there is a need for good arts administrators all round.

The following morning, I am back home at zone 7. My mother does not ask where I was. She hopes I will just reveal it in time. Surprisingly, it is my now-sober brother who asks. I don't reply except to say, "I went nowhere." Thabang is all smiles and courteous towards

me. He never acknowledges the previous night's argument which made me go out in the first place.

On another visit, my brother is nostalgic. He takes me to his local friends in the township and introduces me as "my *laaitie*", meaning "my younger brother". He then orders a quart of Hanser Pilsner beer and insists that I also take a sip. I oblige. During the merriment he also takes a sip of Richelieu brandy. Lately, he prefers spirited alcohol, especially a nip of Gordon's London Dry Gin. I will not touch it, however much he tries to persuade me.

On one of these sojourns, he forgets about a friend left behind at our home. After a while, he remembers.

"Oh, shit…" he says. And we quickly leave to go back and pick up the friend to join us at the shebeen, which is just a four-roomed house converted into a drinking den. In the township these houses are drinking places where patrons enjoy themselves to musical revelry usually after a day's work in town. On weekends they are abuzz with revellers who have a few days off. The places are also patronised by *abomahlalela* (the hustlers) who are usually the unemployed youth.

The friend (apparently, they trained together in Uganda) is furious: "How do you take me? Am I your fool?" the friend demands to know.

"Is it my duty?" says Thabang.

"But you should have indicated that you shall take so long so that I should relax, knowing you are coming."

"I say," my brother repeats. "*Is* it my duty?"

Finally, the friend gives up on this monotonous line of questioning from what looks like his senior-ranked comrade.

My brother retorts: "You. Stop it! You are not behaving like a soldier. Thugs are better soldiers than you. They are not cry-babies."

As much as 1993 is an uncertain year in relation to our country politically, the year 1997 also threatens to remind us of our sad past. The Afrikaner Weerstandsbeweging (AWB) leader Eugene Terre'Blanche resumes his theatrics and is convicted of attempted murder and assault at the Potchefstroom Magistrate Court. In addition, the Vlakplaas counter-insurgency unit members, including Dirk Coetzee, are granted amnesty by the TRC for the murder of attorney Griffiths Mxenge which took place back in 1981.

Attempts to reconcile the nation are afoot with efforts such as putting the new constitution into effect. This goes to the extent of marrying the two opposite national anthems, *Nkosi Sikelel' iAfrika* and *Die Stem van Suid-Afrika*. Only time will tell if these

innovations are real or just cosmetic, a difference which does not make any difference at all. Not so long-ago songbird Thandiswa Mazwai expressed her ambivalence about the new South African national anthem on national radio. For her, it's a question of tradition. The oppressed have been singing *Nkosi* to express their need for independence. It is the national anthem of other independent Africa states north of us as well, she points out. Why change it now?

When we return to the tavern, it is fuller, and the drinks are flowing. The music is playing. My brother shouts in my ear and tries to compete with the din in the four-roomed house: "He does not know that he has lost his beloved uncle," he yells, pointing to his friend. "I just got the news now," he says.

"OK!" I shout back.

A few kilometres from where we are, at the Garden City Clinic, the Malawian president Hastings Kamuzu Banda passes on. He is 99 years old. His legacy is mixed because of an accusation that he was a friend of the apartheid regime and the West in general.

Whether the story Thabang tells me about the bereavement of the friend's family is true or not, I am not sure. I see it as a form of apology to me for his earlier unacceptable tantrums where he was trying to enforce his point of view in our debates, especially the soccer debates. Sometimes he does it when we are watching the news on the telly. When I point out the abundance of protests in our country, he shows me the failures of certain politicians. He tries his luck again:

"I hear you want to be a journalist," he says.

"Yes," I say.

"Then you should invest in a good tape recorder."

"I sure will. Thanks."

"Do you have a typewriter?"

"No."

"You should have one. It will help you a great deal."

I ask myself what he is talking about because currently we have desktops, although I don't own one. I start to stand up and dance to the music, if only to distract my curious brother from his line of questioning. He gets the point and as the music blasts he re-joins his exile mate and makes merriment with the other intoxicated patrons.

He doesn't say much about his fiancée Nozi and when she will visit us again in Pimville. I like it when she visits because my brother then spends much of the time indoors. It's like he confronts the place and the people he left behind several years ago.

Then after a month or so after they leave Pimville my brother gives me a call one afternoon. After the usual pleasantries he starts:

"Guess who I am with?" I can hear some mutterings in the background, what sounds like suppressed laughter.

"No. I am unable to guess," I say.

"It's Zozo. Do you want to speak to her?" my brother says.

"No. Not now," I say. I don't want to spoil the fun. Then I say: "Please pass my regards to her. I shall see her next time I visit."

After dropping the phone, I ponder this new relationship. I debate it with myself. But what happened to Nozi? Is my brother now estranged from his wife? Or has she gone to visit her relatives? This unsettles me a bit.

13. The trial

On one of my brother's visits to Pimville sometime in December 1997 an event occurs which threatens his serenity. It hangs like a dark cloud on his shoulders. Zozo, my cousin, accuses him of rape. It is my father who informs me:

"Hlonkis, a very unfortunate thing has happened to your brother Thabang."

At first, I'm taken aback. But I don't want to pre-empt my father's story. He goes straight to the point: "Remember Zozo, your cousin?

"Yes, I do. The one in Bloemfontein?" I say

"Yes. Hlonkis. She says your brother has raped her. A case against Thabang has been opened as we speak."

This is a real shock and I recall the ealier call I got from my brother with Zozo in the vicinity. But still the mood then seemed jovial, or at least according to my brother.

"I hear you, Papa," I say, lost for words.

There's nothing we can really do now; the matter is in the hands of the courts. All attempts to reach out to Zozo's dad have failed. He says his daughter must be granted justice.

It is Nozi who complains that when my brother is salaried, he turns into some Father Christmas to many of his friends. He becomes a spendthrift. All those in his entourage enjoy the splash of gifts. This tradition continues unabated in Bloemfontein after he returns from exile. But on the day of the call is it one of those days that my brother just wants to let go and be merry? I struggle to find answers.

My brother's trial begins at the Batho Magistrate's Court in the middle of the year in 1998 and I attend:

Inside the courtroom, white walls blanket the audience in a conspiracy with the Bloemfontein sky. It peeps out of the sky even in winter. The court officials are ominous because of the brown desks and chairs that they perch at. The legal eagles wear their traditional black gowns and super white shirts.

Outside, although I don't see them, members of the Women's League are milling about the courtyard waiting for a guilty verdict. I am confused. Let this be a nightmare, I pray, from which I will abruptly awaken. It is Nozi, who unfortunately could not join us due to illness, who tells me of the possibility of a protest by the Women's League. My other cousin from Bloemfontein has joined us at the court. "It looks like there was an about-turn about the protest. By now there should have been crowds, but I don't see any," she says. I get

a sense of relief. My family cannot get this negative media exposure whilst I have not heard the charges which as things stand look very embarrassing.

It is like a fall from grace of a high-ranking soldier who is supposed to serve his country diligently after years of exile.

Thabang is no ordinary person, he is a soldier, a freedom fighter. I'm not surprised at this interest by the media. At journalism school we are taught about the newsworthiness criteria. My brother's case fits the bill. It is a tantalising story for the tabloids: "a high-ranking soldier falls from grace."

I have been sent to the court to represent my family. My parents are not able to attend the trial due to much logistics, including transport. My parents wish for a speedy resolution which can be a win-win situation for all parties involved. In this case "all parties" means the same family. My father expresses a certain hope: "Oh, don't worry, Hlonkis. The whole matter will probably be settled out of court," he says before I leave for Bloemfontein.

During a court adjournment, my brother tells me his version of events: "That night Zozo slept over," he says. "She usually pays me a visit at my house to while away time. Because it was late, I insisted she sleep over."

I nod my head as he continues matter-of factly but visibly shaking as he speaks:

"I bought drinks, so we could have fun. The following day I decide to take a walk to the shebeen and be with the boys. After ten minutes, I see a police van entering the booze yard. I can see it is there to arrest me. I become a law-abiding citizen and follow the officers to the van. Later, I hear that Zozo, our cousin, has laid rape charges against me. This is a surprise to me."

Further pleas to my uncle, Zozo's dad, fall on deaf ears. Her mother can't be located to intervene. She is separated from my uncle. It is alleged that my cousin goes back to her boyfriend to ask for advice on the sexual harassment matter. The boyfriend insists she lays the charges or risk losing him.

This drama unfolds before my eyes. What happened to the happy-go-lucky brother I had known for many years before this humiliating trial? What happened to his principles? I anticipate the proceedings with bated breath to hear the story for myself.

My mother is a traditionalist, and she blames the trial on witchcraft. She is the one who teaches us about the importance of visiting the gravesite to pay our respects to the departed. To her, the dead are not deceased; they are part of the living – the spirit that connects us to our *badimo* (ancestors) and *Modimo* (God). She has a theory that my brother's reception and return to South Africa was not supposed to happen in Bloemfontein, at least not

from the start. By the time he comes home he should have succumbed to a traditional ritual ceremony – done at his home in Pimville, Soweto. This is where he decided to go into exile and fight for freedom in the first place.

I must confess that I am a late convert to the traditional belief systems. Who can blame me after all the years of colonial education? But Thabang is more adept with these traditions, having straddled the rural setting more than me in Thaba Nchu. Even in earlier years in QwaQwa he tends to talk about *badimo*.

Many African traditions allow for this ceremony to happen. In many of these instances it is compulsory. It is meant to welcome the returning hero to the ordinary world. My brother has been to far-flung lands and his ancestors (and the community) need to welcome him back. Even after a convict comes from prison, a cleansing ceremony is done to ward off *senyama* (bad luck). The two worlds negotiate a path for the "released" individual.

In Thabang's case the ceremony is done in Bloemfontein on my father's side. This irks my mother who feels this should not have been the case. To add salt to the wound, my mother only finds out after the fact.

"It hurts, Hlonkis," she said at the time, "because Thabang's home is in Pimville. His friends are here. This is where he grew up." Apparently, there is a video circulating in my family (which I don't get to see) which reflects the merriment of the day.

Back at the court, the Afrikaans language used by the officials is not helpful. I hardly hear the legal jargon bandied about. The plaintiff is not present. At issue is whether my brother is a soldier or not.

"Yes, I am with the defence force," my brother answers. I glance at my brother; he smiles at me as if to reassure me that everything is going to be all right. He chooses to represent himself at the trial. I remember my mother saying he always wanted to be a lawyer. But surely this is not the time nor place to practise those ambitions. He must get legal aid to get a fair trial.

One of the aggravating factors is that he is a trained soldier and therefore could harm witnesses.

"I don't wish anybody harm," he tells me during one of the numerous breaks at the court, "especially in this case. I would accept the outcome as the court sees fit. All I want is a fair trial."

A lone figure sits silent at the back of the court during the proceedings. I don't see him until my brother alerts me to his presence.

“He is Mabhampa,” Thabang says. “He is always here. Out of all people they decide to send my own comrade to record my downfall. Well, they will be surprised. I know their tricks.”

For Thabang, the role of his erstwhile comrade is akin to that of a spy. Why would the army care about the outcome of the trial since they have already suspended him? To my brother, the military authorities are biased. They are hoping for a certain outcome: Thabang’s conviction.

Another hurdle in his path is that, as a soldier, he should not be tried by a civilian court. His case is for the jurisprudence of the military court. There is some to-ing and fro-ing between the prosecutor and the judge on this matter. On the balance of probabilities, one assumes that a military tribunal will be harsher. Maybe I have watched too many war movies, but the very fact that they call it a “tribunal” sends shivers down my spine. What will follow the trial? A shooting range? I know that this might be an exaggeration, but there’s an unsettling difference, in my mind, between the two trials.

After the first appearance, the case is postponed, and my brother is a free man, at least for now…

The following year, in one unusual phone call from Bloemfontein sometime in mid-September, Thabang relates a story which I see in the news. It is reported that an army lieutenant has opened fire on his colleagues at the Tempe Military Base:

“He’s one of us,” my brother tells me.

“What do you mean ‘one of us?” I ask.

“He is APLA. He was trained in Uganda. Lieutenant Sibusiso Madubela is one of our most disciplined soldiers.”

The news report says the soldier goes straight to the offices of his colleagues in the administration wing and shoots randomly. The motive for the attack is unclear, but the reports emphasise that he targeted his white counterparts. According to some witnesses this seems to have been triggered by non-payment of salaries due to his going AWOL. Others claim the lieutenant was generally ill-disciplined, refusing to take lawful instructions.

The aftermath leaves eight people dead and five injured. Amongst the dead is Madubela himself. He is confronted by three armed colleagues and eventually shot.

But does Thabang mean that he approves of the actions of the lone shooter? Or worse: is the action sanctioned by the party structure?

"It's time for the army to take issues of transformation seriously," my brother says. "The former guerrilla armies are not treated fairly."

In October, the PAC gives the former APLA soldier a military send-off in Umtata in the Transkei, since the SANDF is absent. The party is represented by its deputy president Dr Motsoko Pheko. Asked what might have triggered the soldier's unexpected attack on colleagues the PAC secretary general Mike Muendane says Madubela was not given time off for his father's funeral, a flouting of the procedure expected within the defence force. Muendane says the soldier had been insulted and abused by his colleagues in the army.

Later, another soldier, Andries Potsane, is arrested after making claims in the media that the new army is untransformed.

On the flip side of the coin, white extremism rears its ugly head in the US. On the 2nd of July 1999 a white male, Benjamin Nathaniel Smith, targets African Americans and other minority groups in a three-day shooting spree across two states. He is a member of the so-called "Creativity Movement", a white supremacist organisation whose leader Matthew Hale is denied a licence to practise law in Illonis. Apparently, this enrages Smith.

But an earlier documentary on the eve of the shootings reveals the racism at the core of the shootings. Smith's supporters argue that he is a martyr of the "Racial Holy War". The aftermath of the killing spree leaves a couple of people dead and nine injured. The murderer commits suicide after a car chase with the police.

Earlier on in the year, a West African immigrant Amadou Diallo succumbs to the bullets of four NYDP officers in New York City. The police allege that Diallo was threatening them with a gun. Another officer says he mistook Diallo for a rapist that they had been looking for all along. This inflames the already tense race relations in America.

This trial becomes a travesty of justice since the police officers are acquitted after an initial indictment. The tactic to move the trial to another city serves the alleged preparators of the crime. A different jury acquits them. Kenneth Boss, one of the officers, is later promoted to the rank of sergeant. This would not be the first time he fatally shoots an unarmed African American on the streets.

The 23-year-old Diallo's family sues the city and the officers for $61 million. After the court proceedings they manage to win a settlement of $3 million. For many, the shooting incident shows the endemic happy-trigger culture of the police force in the city.

Currently, my brother is on suspension at his workplace due to the ensuing trial between him and Zozo. Or at least this is what I suspect. The institution says it awaits the outcome of the trial. It deems the allegations to be of a very serious nature. Whatever the

reason, my brother seems to spend a lot of time home by himself these days. This is where he makes several calls to me back in Soweto.

Throughout the trial, Nozi supports my brother. The newlywed couple choose a quieter side of Manguang. The area consists of bond houses – an arrangement which could take decades to settle. This literally means the bank owns the property whilst the debtor is paying off monthly instalments. To get to "the boys" my brother must walk for a while. But this is still an African township. The urban area still has racially segregated spots. The areas are either predominantly African or predominantly white.

I worry about his state of loneliness. I cross my fingers that it is not depression – in his case acute depression since he is awaiting his fate in court after being granted bail. The outcome could go either way.

This is also the year that the impeachment case of the US president Bill Clinton is finalised at the US Senate. As I watch cable network news Clinton is embroiled in a sexual scandal involving a White House intern, Monica Lewinsky. The trial starts at the House of Representatives on 19 December 1998. It drags on until he is acquitted by the Senate on 12 February 1999. Although he is a popular president amongst the masses in the US, this trial cost his political career dearly.

As I watch I can't stop to think about my brother's trial. The two men in positions of authority. My brother a relative one compared to Clinton's but still a significant decoration in the army.

Closer to home, the African continent mourns the death of Pan Africanist leader and former Tanzanian president Julius Nyerere. He dies in October 1999 in London. He is 77 years old.

Nyerere first became prime minister of independent Tanganyika in 1961 and later president of Tanzania (which combines Tanganyika and Zanzibar) in 1964. Earlier he had made representations to the UN about the need for his country to be free. He had also proved himself academically by being the first in his country to obtain a master's degree overseas.

He is one of the leading lights in the Pan Africanist struggle. During independence, he writes several books as a blueprint for a new Tanzanian society. These include *Uhuru na Umoja* (Freedom and Unity) and *Uhuru na Ujamaa* (Freedom and Socialism) published in the late 60s in Kiswahili. He is the founder member of the African Union.

The PAC attends the funeral of the elder statesman and is represented by its president Bishop Stanley Mmutlanyane Mogoba.

The albatross around my brother's neck resumes at a Bloemfontein Regional Court. I am not around. I am too busy trying to break into the media industry in Johannesburg, having recently completed my media certificate. It's Thabang himself who tells me he is hopeful of being acquitted, given the last arguments presented at the court.

I do a stint at the public broadcaster's radio news channel. I quickly learn the ropes, but I feel I need to apply my skills to my specialisation – the arts. I get a freelance publicity gig for an arts organisation, which I enjoy tremendously. I feel this is where I belong. But as it turns out it can't be a permanent arrangement. I need to do something fast to get my feet on a more permanent basis in the arts. I go job hunting for vacancies, looking in the arts supplements of mainstream newspapers. This promises to be a mammoth task because many companies are downsizing. For some time, I get despondent. When I am lucky and do get a gig, it turns out to pay a pittance. I bounce back to my forte: theatre.

Coming back to the second leg of my brother's trial, I feel a sense of confusion. Is there a possibility that my brother is guilty as charged? But this goes against the grain of having taken steps to cross the border in the name of ending all oppressions - including women's. Or could it be a case of my brother being bewitched – which is how my mother oftens explains away the trial?

I cannot ascertain for sure the guilty verdict. All I know is that it is a dark cloud on myself and my family back in Pimville. We try to wish it away to the extent of not making any reference to it during our conversations. We wish it would end yesterday already.

I have earlier alluded to the complexities of the trial: should he be tried at a Military Court? How are the witnesses assured of their safety at the trial? There is also what I believe my brother can argue are mitigating factors: he has no previous criminal record. He has thus far co-operated with his bail conditions.

I continue my work in Johannesburg with a sense of hope that my brother will be freed to finally come back home to Pimville to start all over again. I wish for him to get a second shot at life. I graduate with my certificate in basic journalism to the joy of my parents, especially my father who now feels I am firmly following in his footsteps.

Earlier, I alert him to an advert in a daily about a bursary scheme sponsored by Unesco, the United Nations' education wing. I indicate an interest. What follows is not my application but his on my behalf. Surely, he should be excited to see the fruits of his labour. It is he who organises an internship for me at the public broadcaster.

Fellow classmates include the first African female sports anchor on the telly, Xolela Majeke, Right to Know national coordinator Mark Weinberg and arts journalist Edward Tsumele. The pressure group Right to Know has since made many policy interventions in the media space. But they also are not shy about taking to the streets with their grassroots members to demand change from media institutions. They also become known for protesting the notorious Info Bill which they say threatens access to information by ordinary citizens.

Tsumele has gone on to freelance for such publications as the *Sowetan* and *Business Day*. His portfolio includes editing a cityscape tabloid called *City Life Arts*. Surely, I think, I am in good company, as these accolades show. Because of this, a group photo taken on a lush green campus lawn on graduation day becomes a valuable archived object in my cupboard up to this day.

But while my fortunes are improving, what I hear from my extended family back in Bloemfontein is devastating. The magistrate has pronounced my brother guilty as charged. He is duly sentenced to several years' imprisonment. I am told this by my dad, who is in turn told by the lawyers. Hearing the news, Nozi becomes very ill. My sister-in-law has invested so much in this relationship. She sees them (herself and my brother) as an ideal couple. In a sense, she is right. For starters, their meeting is the stuff of fairy tales. Two unlikely souls – one a soldier, another an unemployed woman – meet amidst strike unrest in Mangaung, the place of cheetahs.

Hearing about Nozi's deteriorating health in turn devastates my brother. Now, both are in a precarious condition, with neither able to come to the rescue of the other.

14. “This is not a movie”

My perception of South African prisons is not great. I imagine that when the wardens close the gates, all hell breaks loose. One becomes a victim of all sorts of atrocities: rape, assault, gang fights, the list is endless. At the point the guards leave, I believe, one is at the mercy of one’s fellow inmates.

For instance, a commission of inquiry set up by President Thabo Mbeki in 2001 reveals vulnerability to scourges such as disease and crime in the prison cells. Judge Jali makes certain recommendations, including tighter monitoring of the overcrowded prison facilities. At the time of the inquiry, the prison population was close to 180 000. The majority of the inmates are African males. It’s called overcrowding because the land’s prison capacity can only take 114 000 prisoners.

For me, this says it all. I know that there might be worse prisons in the world, but I have heard too many local prison stories to believe otherwise. I hear stories of rape and assaults within these facilities from ex-prisoners. I’m sure the current government is trying their best to change that perception. For me, it’s real. I ask my brother about his stay at Grootvlei Prison, situated on the southwest of Bloemfontein. Its population is overwhelmingly African with the majority speaking Sesotho. The prison yard is surrounded by tall and lush Acacia trees. We are at the prison reception surrounded by glass doors and windows. I see Thabang through one of the windows with surround speakers:

“Well, it’s not like home. But it’s not like in the movies either,” he says.

“How do you mean?” I say.

“I mean … people are housed here. It’s not a jungle.”

For some reason, deep down, I thank him for this version of his reality because I am still bracing for a gory picture. None is forthcoming. Be that as it may, I can see he is unwell. During his imprisonment, I visit him twice.

On this first visit after the court case in 1999 he is wearing his green prison-issue trousers and buttoned-down t-shirt. From where I’m sitting, he looks like he has lost even more weight. But his dimpled smile is lurking somewhere behind the now-sombre face:

“How are you, Hlonkis?” he asks.

“I’m doing well. I should be asking you,” I say.

"Don't worry. I'm OK. It's just that these people are taking their time to process my applications for school. I want to do my matric certificate through correspondence. Anyway, how are Mum and Dad?

"They are fine."

"How about Tharollo?"

"Oh, he's just missing you. He keeps on asking when you're coming out."

"Tell him soon. Tell him, very soon."

Tharollo is a great fan of my brother's. I remember one day Thabang coming to me with a surprised look on his face: "Hlonkis, you know what? Every time Tharollo greets me he salutes me. Like we do in army." Somehow, I am not surprised. My younger brother encounters my older brother later in his young life. Most of the time he is told about this enigmatic brother who is a freedom fighter preparing to come home to liberate his people.

My mother shares correspondence that Thabang wrote from Tanzania with my younger brother. One letter is written in Sesotho and its subject line is, *Di sa kopaneng ke dithaba* ("Only mountains can't meet but people do"). The letter aims for two things. First, it's an assurance that my brother is well in exile. We don't have to worry. Secondly, it announces his inevitable meeting with us. I remember praying at the time that it meant meeting us alive.

But because we still think Tharollo is too young we don't discuss the possibility of his visiting Thabang in prison. Besides, we think this might affect his schooling. Currently, he is improving his matric grades at the Rand Tutorial College in town. He was barely four years old when Thabang got "lost."

Tharollo has been at Progress for most of his high school career. It's a different environment from my alma mater when he enrols. For starters, there is no longer the state of emergencies imposed on the population which hark back to the sixties after Sharpeville. I can only envy him for attending school under "normal" conditions. This doesn't mean I have any regrets for being a student activist whilst I am at high school. Given another chance I would do it again. But attending classes with an occupying army constantly peeping through your windowpane besides a helpless teacher at the chalkboard is not what learners should be confronted with in any country.

The occupying army onsite at school premises must be one of those unique characteristics of this land – one which will haunt my generation, the so-called "lost generation," for many years to come. We are prisoners of great political epochs – too young to have been active in the 70s uprising and too old to be "born free".

Tharollo is born on the cusp of the rebellion, in the eighties. He is old enough to witness the dawn of a new era – a child of the transition. Like many of his counterparts he tends to want practical solutions to problems rather than to be bogged down in theory. His generation feels a great need to break away from the red tape.

But compared to the current generation I feel Tharollo's is ponderous. The current crop is critical of past attempts by the liberation movement to negotiate an acceptable settlement. They want the promises of freedom to be fulfilled. One of their torchbearers is the #Fees Must Fall/Rhodes Must Fall movement. They strive to break free from the colonial chains (and anything associated with it).

At the end of my prison visitation, which is not long, I promise my brother I will visit soon. But I wait for the new millennium, which comes with its own new challenges.

The doomsayers predict the end of the world. For many of the followers of these cults whether the predictions come true or not does not shake their believe in their charismatic leaders. For others, the belief is strengthened, and they go on to set a new date.

In South Africa we aren't new to these predictions. Back in 1994 some sections of our population thought the end was nigh with impending African majority rule on the horizon. Many stockpiled essentials like tinned foods and toilet rolls. But the critical elections came and went without much incident, except the "miracle" they come to be known as. The first African president Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela occupies the highest office in the land.

Now the new millennium is another litmus test. Songs are produced to reflect the mood. A popular track comes from kwaito artist Mdu Masilela called "Y2K", a shorthand for the uncertain future. This even though kwaito itself is steeped in the early 90s hope of a new South Africa in the townships. Like many popular songs it is left to the listener to have their own take on it. The idea is to move to the rhythm of the beat.

Back in the eighties it was the fifties crooners the O'Jays who, on their title track album, *The year 2000*, asked pertinently: "How old will you be in the year 2000?" I am 28 years old, and my brother is 34.

My next visit to him comes around in March. I go to stay overnight at a cousin, Moipone, from Bloemfontein. I sleep at her home overnight and she accompanies me on this trip but allows me a few moments alone with my brother first.

This time, I find Thabang in a wheelchair. This is unexpected. Behind the prison glass window, during our last visit, I had thought he had not looked that bad. This time around, because he is no longer new, the correctional facilities allow us a contact visit in the reception

area. Though I relish this privilege, Thabang's state of health is not good. His lips are dry and are slightly bleeding. It looks like he has been nibbling them since last night. He is nibbling them now as we speak:

"As you can see, I'm very sick," he says.

Out of courtesy, I do not ask what it is that is devouring him. All I say is: "You shall be fine, my brother." I feel like he would have said the same thing if I were in a similar condition – just to console me.

A few minutes later our cousin, Moipone, joins us. She demonstrates sympathy for my brother. She crouches down to hug him on his stationary wheelchair and then reassures him: "I know you will be fine."

Thabang nods with his frail body in tandem.

As we leave, I ponder anew the Grootvlei Correctional Services in Bloemfontein, an Afrikaans name meaning "Big Marsh." I re-envision it as a centre for the true rehabilitation of the offenders:

The inmates sit on the lush green lawns inside the yard of the penitentiary. There are different study groups doing their chores. Some are playing sports whilst others are going through their paces at yoga. But it is not a once-off thing; it occurs daily. A plethora of sporting codes and recreational activities and study await the prisoners whilst flamingos swim in their natural habitat nearby.

At my cousin's home where other relatives and Moipone's mother, Rakgadi Selloane, are awaiting a report back. We tell them that my brother is not feeling well, but we hope that he will recover. The authorities will give him the necessary attention, we say. By this time, my brother has a lawyer.

The family does not ask much. I guess there's not much to ask. We are now faced with a new reality. My brother is embarking on a new journey with its own new challenges and road signs ahead. The next day I bid everyone farewell and return home to Johannesburg to relay the news to my parents. My parents are relying on me to make these visits on their behalf. At this stage, I'm unemployed.

It is some time before I make a third visit to the prison. I become despondent and numb. To be honest I am beginning to lose hope. At the same time, I wish for a miracle. Instead, I hear the sad news about Nozi's passing. I remember an earlier visit to their home in Bloemfontein:

She was straddling to the corrugated silver gate. I remember our own gate back in Pimville. The silver is turning rusty. In one conversation Nozi tells me that my brother says it

is not his duty to mend the garden nor the gates. Handymen are hired to do the chore. He says the same thing about attending church on Sunday: "It is not my duty." I remember a young energetic Thabang at 257 Pimville zone 7. The garden and the gates used to shine. Is this the sign of the times? Is my brother getting weary?

Back to Nozi. Inside the house she insists on making me tea. I can see she is not well. She has lost an enormous amount of weight and can barely speak. Despite my insistence that I should make her tea, she feels she can manage. She wants to give the impression of the woman of the house who can take care of her place and her guests. I did not know that she was in this difficult state. I should not have insisted on sleeping over at my brother's place. In the morning I assure her that I shall pass her regards to my brother. But I am greatly affected by her state of health.

In one phone call from prison, after my second visit, my brother announces what we all already know: "I have it. I am sick."

Somehow, I assume "it" means HIV/AIDS. This, after I have witnessed the condition of his fiancée. The disease is ravaging our communities whilst the politicians argue about its existence or non-existence. We have just entered the new millennium.

This conundrum is epitomised at the 13th International AIDS Conference held in Durban when the president of the country Thabo Mbeki refuses to share the stage with young AIDS sufferer Nkosi Johnson. The young activist takes centre stage as he admonishes the denialists that, if anything, he is the living example of what the disease can do to the human body. But he ends on a positive note – the intervention of the anti-retroviral can reverse the process.

The disease rears its ugly head around 1987 in South Africa, the year before my brother goes to exile. This is during the height of our struggle against oppression, and both sides become sceptical as to the cause of the disease. The oppressed have suspicions that the system is under such pressure that they have had to resort to biological warfare. Many think it is a mechanism to defeat the forces of liberation. Attached to this argument is another theory of depopulation. The powers that be wanting to reduce the overwhelming numbers of the African population by any means, the argument goes.

These suspicions are bolstered by allegations that apartheid scientist Dr Wouter Basson is busy in his laboratory manufacturing biological chemicals targeting the African population – more so its activists.

But the epidemic is also eating away sections of the US population by this time. Initially, it arises within the gay community. This raises another conspiracy theory levelled against this community until the disease starts to creep into the rest of the population.

The liberation movement feels that the cure to all challenges facing the people is to oust the discriminatory white minority regime and install a new democratic one. The struggle continues unabated amidst this health crises. I can even say, it intensifies.

High-profile HIV-status disclosures include that of US basketball player Earvin "Magic" Johnson (no relation to Nkosi) and Queen rock band frontman Freddie Mercury in 1991. What is shocking is that the announcements come back-to-back in the same month! I wonder: who's next?

It is US tennis star Arthur Robert Ashe Junior who makes the next declaration. He wins three titles including the US Open, Wimbledon and the Australian Open – the only African American male ever to do so. He is a true champion on and off the court. He had encouraged world tennis bodies to boycott South Africa because of its discriminatory policies and gets arrested outside the South African embassy in protest after a rally to mobilise against the minority regime.

Ashe discloses his HIV status in 1992. This is after he undergoes several heart surgeries. His doctors believe he gets infected through a blood transfusion after his second heart surgery in 1983. In his subsequent public addresses, he dispels the myth that the disease only afflicts gay and bisexual men. He passes on on the 6th of February 1993 due to AIDS-related pneumonia. He is 49 years old.

I do not ask my brother how or when he got "it". I am taken aback by the fact of the disclosure. But I believe he can make a miraculous recovery, so I reiterate once more: "Don't worry brother, you will be fine." At the back of my mind, I know there is no vaccine for the epidemic, let alone a cure. All we have now are medicines which, when used in combination, can slow down the progress of the disease. But these medicines are currently not available to the populace.

It's years before South Africa will have its own massive rollout of anti-retrovirals. It turns out to be the biggest in the world. This victory will mostly be credited to the AIDS activists who mobilised their communities to fight for access to the life-saving drugs.

Today, the ailment is classified as a chronic disease, no longer a death sentence. This does not mean that patients today do not succumb to the scourge. In South Africa, with its notorious historical inequality, many still do. But thanks to the improvements in the treatment regime stars like Magic are still with us.

For my brother, however, it is too little too late.

15. How (not) to bury a cadre

It's the middle of June 2001 and someone from the correctional services comes to our home in Pimville to inform us that my brother is to be released soon. It has now been a couple of years since he was first imprisoned in Bloemfontein. His ten-year sentence has been commuted to eight.

The official is someone I'm acquainted with, though I'd never known his job. I always see him at zone 6, Pimville and assume he lives there. The zone is divided into sections embracing continental nostalgia: Angola and Biafra. To the locals, the place is simply, *eMgababa*. It is lined up with four-roomed houses on a steep *veld* ultimately forming a koppie, a farm known as Kwa Fushi. A couple of the streets are not tarred.

Back at my home the prison official is a fashionista and wears a Daniel Hechter blue-checked slim shirt, a brown reversable on a stone-checked trouser. His feet are adorned with a pair of black Chateau men's shoes. He is a dandy and goes out to social gatherings in his downtime. The dude is a humble guy and the girls in the area swoon around him. But I had never known his occupation until now:

"Your brother is very sick," he says. "The department tells us he should come home."

"Yes. I understand," I say.

"He is going to be released soon on medical grounds. There are documents that I need you to sign," he says contemplatively as he takes out his clipboard.

"I guess my father will be better suited to do that," I reply.

It is the first sight of the papers that puts me off. They are written in Afrikaans. I don't see the English translations below. I'm relieved when my father signs them. I don't want to be embroiled in the signing of documents whose fine print I can't see. I have heard too many stories of unsuspecting individuals signing contractual obligations only to end up losing their fortunes. "Read the fine print!" the lawyers exclaim after the fact.

My father reads the documents. Later, he goes up to Bloemfontein to pick up Thabang from the Grootvlei prison. My brother endures all those hours to be back home in Pimville:

That day, in June, my brother comes back home emaciated, and pale faced. When he arrives, he immediately lays a complaint against me. He fires: "You didn't come to visit me as you promised."

I try to plead ignorance: "My apologies, I was meant to come soon," I say.

"Well, it doesn't help now. Look how sick I am," he retorts.

Seeing this situation unfolding I rush to his already prepared bedroom on the pretext that I shall be setting it up nicely for him. “Let me quickly check if your bedroom is right,” I say on my way out of the garage.

“Yes. Please do that, Hlonkis,” my father concurs.

It is clear that my brother is in need of good medical attention. My parents rush him to the family doctor who examines him and sends him back to our care. At first, I am a bit worried and ask my father if we can’t get him admitted to hospital for full treatment, no matter how long it takes? I am asking this, but I am unemployed.

My father brings me to the realities of medical care in our country, long before the talk of a national health insurance (NHI):

“Hlonkis, we can’t afford it, the costs of hospitalisation are just too much,” he says.

“Can’t we then have the doctor visit him regularly to check up on him?”

“The doctor has already done that,” he reassures me.

I suspect my father knows something I don’t. I vow to make my brother’s days at home comfortable. My mother hires a helper, Hessie, to take care of him whilst she is at work during the day. Currently, my mom is running a tuck shop at a factory in Roodepoort. Blue-collar workers go there for their tea breaks and lunch. She cooks and sells hot meals for the hardworking cohort. The menu is a staple African diet popular with migrant workers: pap and meat (chicken, beef, and steak).

The arrangement is that she takes over the caregiving duties at home at 6 p.m. daily. But on some days, she comes home early to resume her duties. The two women, my mom and Hessie, cushion me from being a caregiver.

For my part, I chat to my brother until he dozes off. I do this whilst trying to make some jokes at the same time. Clearly, they are not amusing, because my brother just stares at me. As for Tharollo, we all try to make sure he is as unaffected as possible, even though it is his bedroom that my brother inhabits.

One day, I give Thabang his wallet in his sick bay. It contains a R20 note and some silver coins on the side.

“You might need this, big brother,” I say.

“No, you take it,” he responds.

“But it’s yours,” I protest.

“No, *you* take it. I am giving it to you,” he insists.

In his mind, I need the money the most since I'm currently not working. I am touched by the gesture and thank him. I feel more hopeless for the seemingly inevitable trajectory of my brother's life. I pray that this will not be his parting shot.

But my brother has accepted his fate. He is content that he has told me what he needs to. He holds on until he has a chance to impart the important lessons.

Looking back, I think that some of these gestures are an indirect apology to me, because when I ask him if he is fine, he answers back: "Are *you* fine?" Not that he owes me any apology, but it's like he is saying: *All this time when the charges dragged on, I was hurting inside knowing that I must absolve myself. I have accepted that I might have done things differently if given a second chance. I might have needed to hang out with different advisers than those who just encouraged me in merriment.*

My brother passes on on the 23rd of June 2001 (the same month as AIDS activist Nkosi Johnson) at home in zone 7 Pimville:

In the early hours of the morning, I am sitting and watching 24-hour news channels in the lounge. I like to do this sometimes – to be an early bird to catch the fattest fish. But out of the blue I hear a gasp for air, accompanied by a shriek. It sounds like it comes from my brother's bedroom. He must be having a nightmare. In this case he is awake and might go back to sleep again.

Luckily, my mother hears it too. I am assured I am not dreaming. She is the first to rush to my brother's bed. Then my dad follows. By the time I come around to the bedroom I am instructed to call a neighbour who is a nurse. "Go quickly, Hlonkis, your brother is in trouble," says Mom.

When the nurse arrives, she takes my brother's pulse. After a few seconds, she opines that my brother is late. She closes his eyes with the palm of her soft hands. She is an experienced healthcare worker who has worked for many years at Bara (Chris Hani Baragwanath Hospital). She then asks my parents to call a doctor who will be able to certify that my brother is no more.

Later in the week, we prepare the obituary. The family requests me to take on the task. I accept and in turn rope in the services of a former youth leader Ntsie Mohloai, who led AZANYU during the late eighties. He is in a better position to recall some important historical facts about my brother.

We both go to the NACTU offices in downtown Johannesburg to seek design and printing services. There we meet with Lesole, a union official. He remembers a youthful Thabang. My brother used to come here to the offices and help with the recruitment of the workers.

"Oh, that chap had a way with *abasebenzi*. He used to unravel sometimes complicated political concepts for them," Lesole recalls.

My brother was a volunteer in the union offices during the mid-eighties. Lesole is clearly saddened at his passing and duly sends his condolences to me and the family.

After this sojourn it's back home to show off the results. The family is impressed with the designs. The cover is adorned with the PAC emblem (a map of the continent with a shining star of Ghana) on its flanks. A Sobukwe quote is pasted below my brother's portrait picture: "We shall go on, Sons and Daughters of Africa, until every shanty, in every bunk in the compounds, in every hill-top, the cry of African Freedom and Independence is heard." I choose the quote from the Prof's selected speeches.

Meanwhile, the funeral service of my brother takes place on the cold Saturday morning of the 30th of June 2001 at the Anglican Church, St. Andrew's Parish in Pimville. The church building is painted a light maroon and has a toll built in brown bricks. On top of the structure there's a white cross made from silver metal. It is encamped by a grey roughcast brick wall, intercepted by a red palisade fence matching the roof rafters. Protruding from the top of the roof there is another white cross made from wood; it is whiter than the first one on the toll.

Outside the yard is paved with an assortment of bricks. They almost overlap on the street but are held back by the black and white pavement stencilled *Mokoerekoere St* in black.

This is where we find a group of young men in Sankara uniforms waiting for us. It's about a dozen of them, more than enough for a guard of honour. But I can see some developing goosebumps from the still-shy sun of winter outside. There are hardly any cars at this stage except the one on Magabe Street from an early riser who serves as a guide for the outsiders who are not familiar with the local terrain.

We enter inside the church and the cadres proceed to the front with the coffin. Some of the congregants are already sitting on the church stools. As a show of respect for the bereaved family, they rise as we enter. We go to the front seats where we face a large wooden crucifixion cross adorning the white wall. This time the cross competes with a green banner of the portrait of "the Prof" on an emblem of the PAC (a map of Africa with several golden stripes and a star emerging out of Ghana and spreading all over the continent). The following

words are emblazoned on it: “R.M Sobukwe, Son of the Soil, Revolutionary Africanist, Thinker of the 20th Century.” On our left there is a demarcated area where the church choir sits. The small ceramic stairs going up delineate a podium reserved for the men of the cloth.

I am grateful that they are here – the young cadres. They have travelled all the way from the East Rand (now Ekurhuleni) to Soweto to attend the service. Fortunately, they arrive on time, early enough to see the start of the proceedings. But exhaustion is written all over their faces. They were probably at a vigil for another member the previous night.

A comedy of errors happens at some point during the programme when their commander gives an instruction to salute the deceased before the coffin. Unfortunately, by then, his hand is already up so that when the soldiers try to emulate the order, they do so in the opposite direction. Ironically this action gives a much-needed light relief to the otherwise sombre mood of the funeral.

I can hear some murmurs from the surprised mourners, some of them my former high school mates. But for others, this borders on incompetence.

After a while I go to the loo to answer the call of nature. The toilets are next to the priest’s house. They are clearly demarcated with gender-specific signs: Male/Female. One of my mate’s notices and follows me. He wants to raise a point.

“Look at your soldiers. Look how dismal they were. Anyway, where is the SANDF? Surely, this is not how you bury a cadre,” he says. I guess what he really wants to say is: *this is not how you bury a South African army soldier*.

I brush off the remarks with a wry smile: “Surely we do not need the SANDF when APLA is here?” I say.

But the real reason why the SANDF is not at my late brother’s send-off is that they have dismissed him after his trial in Bloemfontein. I am grateful that this unit from the East Rand is here to rescue the situation. These erstwhile comrades are carrying his coffin wrapped in party colours.

At this point it is my uncle, Maime, who ascends the podium to speak. We call him Ntatemoholo (“grandfather”) because of his seniority in the family. He is my father’s older brother. He comes with a limping gait to the podium and thereafter projects dramatically:

“Many of you do not know that the deceased comes from a long line of soldiers in our family,” he says. “Our grandfather fought in the Second World War on the side of the Allies against Hitler. He was part of the cohort of African volunteers in that skirmish.”

Gasps follow this revelation. Usually, mourners tend to sneer at clapping during these services. The revelation is also news to me. Later, when I try to verify it with my mother, she

is dismissive: “If truth be told that grandfather comes from my family’s side.” Now the pieces of the puzzle come fitting into my mind. My mother had told me that Thabang laid wreaths on the tombstones of her family in Thaba Nchu. At the time she just referred to the family member as, “your grandfather”, whereas he is a world war veteran – probably part of the thousands who form the Native Military Corps (NMC) in South Africa’s war effort.

The next speaker is Mpho, Thabang’s former girlfriend, now appearing as a “friend” in the programme. She chooses a similar vein albeit for a different purpose.

“Today in the archives of Tanzania there is a name written in bold and it is the name of the deceased,” she says of Thabang. “His surname now appears in the archives of Lesotho, Libya, Uganda, etc. It is a tribute to you, the family. who bore this Son of the Soil.”

I can see Ntatemoholo nodding in agreement. Apparently, these are some of the stops that my late brother made during his journey to seek freedom. Mpho should know. She has been friends with my brother since their boarding school days in QwaQwa. No doubt, he shared some of the intimate details of his sojourns with her.

The mourners are impressed by the last speaker. It is Thami Ka Plaatjie – the secretary general of the PAC**.** He is of tall build and light in complexion. I have known him since the student activist days in PASO. He has a towering gait which betrays his presence the minute he enters the room. He is currently writing a biography on Sobukwe.

The SG is not as familiar with the deceased as Mpho, but he breaks the ice by first recognising the role of the maternal side in bringing up a child, a soldier.

“At these types of events it is only the paternal side which is recognised. That is not correct. The mother’s side is also important,” he cautions.

This time I see my mother nodding in agreement. I only seem to recall that part of Ka Plaatjie’s speech. I suppose the rest has something to do with explicating the history of the armed struggle in South Africa, the catalyst being Sharpeville. One thing I know is that up to this day my mother speaks fondly of the speaker who made such incisive observation at the funeral.

Next is the priest’s sermon:

He wears a purple frock with a white collar whilst his assistants don white frocks with black collars. A sign of the cross adorns the front part of the priest’s garment. His sermon is based on a verse found in the book of 2 Timothy 4:7. The King James Version reads thus: “I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith…”

I have heard this sermon before on similar occasions, but I look forward to a new interpretation of the book. The priest uses this quote to pay tribute to all those who have fought against the oppressive system.

The reason why we are congregated at this parish today is because my mother is a member. Most of her family back in Thaba Nchu attended the church. I guess it is one of the perks of paying your dues, of keeping the faith. The sermon by Rev Moeti, the incumbent, winds up and we take the holy communion – wine and bread. It's a Christian tradition, symbolising the cleansing of our sins.

It's 12 noon and the mourners are tired after a long programme. A disclaimer is made to the mourners: there will be bullets and gun smoke since it is the burial of a guerrilla. He himself (the deceased) would expect nothing less, argues the Sankara-clad comrades. The congregants are assured of a smooth undertaking: "This is a disciplined army with only one commander." I can sense a sigh of relief from some mourners after the clarification. They have been inside the service for two hours already, some for longer (if you count the prayer service at my home).

I remember my mother remarking earlier when we presented the final version of the funeral programme to her: "But it looks like a book," she said.

"Well, it's standard practice for politicians' funerals," I quipped. I don't tell her that some political funerals can even take longer.

We are off to the Avalon Cemetry after what seems like a marathon service at the church. This is where I anticipate that the traditional anthem of a fallen soldiers will be sung by the faithfull. It always does get sung this song *Niyisibane Maqhawe!* Its first stanza goes like so:

Niyisibane sethu maqhawe ase Azania (You are the shining light heroes of Azania)
Ukufa kwenu akusoze kulibalwe; (Your death shall not be forgotten)
Ukufa kwenu kuyo khanyisa indlela yabo (Your death will light up the way)
Bonke abaphantsi kwengcinezelo! (For all those under the yoke of oppression)

16. Epilogue

A cemetery is not only a place for the burial of the dead. Thoughts too have to be killed…
– Don Mattera in *Memory Is the Weapon*

Somehow, I can't stop thinking about MH, my "Mummy", at the burial site. Was she amongst the mourners at my brother's funeral? But I would've seen her if she was. Anyway, I don't think anything unbecoming happened in her life. I would've heard by now. What, with township gossip moving at the speed of lightning today.

I still can't kill the thought of my late brother. I keep on thinking that maybe MH knew my brother better than I did, with her being older and closer to my brother's generation. What type of person is my brother? How did he decide to abandon his own family and join another in exile? When he comes back home in the 90s, what did he think about the "new" South Africa? What did he *really* think about the status quo?

I have a feeling that to him the new environment is stranger than fiction. He seems overwhelmed. There's a sense of his hurrying to make up the lost time. But also, there's a sense of looking in the dark and not finding what he really wants.

I love my brother dearly. In hindsight, I think he and his comrades took a correct decision not to inform their families about their imminent departures to exile. It would've been hard for me to let my brother off with such a decision. I would have argued that whatever he wanted to do in exile he could do better on home soil. In that way I would've been an impediment for him to fulfil his generational mission – to see to the national and social liberation of our country. Whether the mission has been achieved or not is a story for another day.

Writing this memoir is not a walk in the park for me. For starters, I did not attend the whole trial of my brother back in Bloemfontein. I did not hear him present his case before the court, nor did I hear my cousin Zozo's side of the story. I have accepted that I might not get to know the full story of what happened on that fateful morning when my brother is taken in for questioning by the SAPS.

I remember years ago putting a proposition to an ex-girlfriend that I wish there could be an academy for boys to become better men, whatever that meant at the time. In a way I am crying out for re-education for myself, for better handling of relationships between men and

women in the toxic atmosphere of economic deprivation, inadequate socialization of boys and girls, limited self-determination, etc.

What follows is a scathing answer from my then love interest: “It is *you* who must create that institution.” I was not expecting this rude awakening at all. But since then, I have been searching for the courage to embark on the mission.

It seems to me the more I search for my brother the more I need to first find myself.

ENDS