

A Soft Landing

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Abstract

For Andzani, home has always been a trigger for unpleasant memories, it has become the site for anxiety. After completing his Accounting Degree at the University of Cape Town and securing employment after, Andzani minimizes his visits back home to evade those memories home allows to seep through and confront him. He fears what this remembering will do to him, undo in him. Then one morning he receives a phone call from his uncle, Sontaga, to come fetch his mother, Violet, and take her to a mental institution because her mental health is deteriorating. As if given a last chance, on this trip, long-repressed memories flood his head and dull his days in order to force him to pay attention to them, digest them. In Dorothy L. Pennington conceptualisation of memory as a helix, she states that “the past is an indispensable part of the present which participates in it, enlightens it, and gives it meaning.” Taking this assertion as a point of departure, ‘*A Soft Landing*’ is a novel that explores the implications of a past not decisively dealt with. The novel explores how the past gives meaning to present identities and how new identity formations are negotiated within the eye of the past participating in the present.

A Soft Landing

A novel

by

Wisani Mushwana

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Part One: Home

Chapter 1

Cape Town

2016

Not wanting to be touched throughout the night, Andzani had inserted his pillow between his knees and clung onto it with both hands. And because his other pillow was used by his visitor, he'd slept flat on the bed with nothing to support his head. Now, as he sat up against the headboard, slowly adjusting his eyes to the light that rushed through the drawn curtain to land on his face, felt pain on his neck.

He was woken up by the sound of shower water running. And as he placed the pillow back beneath his head, gathering his thoughts, he imagined the water, like rain droplets, hitting the shower floor in crystal balls that popped and raced along the shower tiles for the drain. It was soothing at first, before his visitor got in and the water splashed as it met his visitor's body. It irked Andzani now, and although he'd had an urge to go suggest the use of the bathtub, he decided against it. As he lay on the bed, staring at the light bulb that emitted an amber glow, his mind raced, trying to recollect the previous night's events. But because chasing the memory seemed elusive as the water hit the floor and interrupted his thought process, he gave up and laid motionless.

Andzani always slept with the lights off and had recently installed blackout curtains, that gave the illusion of night during the day. He preferred it this way. He looked at the black curtain and then shifted his eyes to the matching black cupboard. Everything in his room was black, apart from his white bedding. When he raised his head, a sharp pain ran the back of his

neck and forced him back down. Finding the pillow his visitor had used, he pushed it beneath his back before extending his arm for the phone that lay on the table next to his bed. Then, like a violent wave, the events of the previous night confronted him; there had been, on top of the table, Savanna bottles and he remembered that when he'd extended his hand for a pack of condoms, the packet had ripped, the condoms flying all over the table. In his hasty manner, he'd picked each up, and as he did so, knocked off the ash tray so that the salt and peppered cigarette ash spilled and scattered everywhere on the table. He had shifted Neo's photo frame and placed it, facing down, far end of the table closest to the wall. And before he fell asleep, there had been folds of used tissues on top the table, and some scattered the wooden floor.

But now he picked his phone on a freshly wiped table. The food magazine he had received from Pick n Pay on his way back from work, that a friendly cashier had literally forced on him as he possessed a smart shopper card, was placed delicately by the corner of the table, closer to the bed. The same magazine had been used, the previous night, as a coaster for the cold sweating Savannas he took out, one at a time, from the fridge as he laid in bed, texting on Grindr. The bottles had been removed and the desk smelled of the lavender multi-surface cleaner he'd bought when he received the food magazine. Coming from work, Andzani had decided against gym, and as he neared Pick n Pay Platteklouf, having also made up his mind about taking a day off the following day, decided to get drinks to keep him company for the night. The traffic lights amber, Andzani had pressed the accelerator, turned the sharp curve and drove through Pick n Pay's parking lot. Apart from the lavender cleaner and some groceries to make breakfast the following morning, he'd got himself a six pack of Savanna and two bottles of Chenin Blanc.

The ash tray now sat emptied, and Neo's picture—with Neo leaning against the wall of a pool, his eyes slitted, a murky smile plastered on his face—was up, facing him. He had put up Neo's photo on top of his desk after his return from his recent trip back home in

Mbambamencisi. Upon his return, coupled with the relentless dreams that accompanied him back, Andzani felt guilty for having not visited Neo's grave and so to ease the guilt, he had put up the picture and apologized for deserting him. He placed the photo down whenever he was about to engage in anything his mind thought obscene, as if not faced down, the image would witness and hear everything. He hated the judgement and self-abasement he often subjected himself to after engaging in sexual intercourse with the image watching. He wondered if the dead could see and hear the things the living did, if Neo could hear and see the things he did. When Neo's photo frame was up, he imagined Neo standing above him, watching. Often more than not it occurred whenever he was about to engage in sexual intercourse, when his manhood would become spongy and die out as a result. It had started to happen frequently, even when he wasn't engaging in any sexual relations, he couldn't rid his mind of the thought that Neo was watching his every move. He didn't mind it, this feeling of being watched when he would come back from work and would talk to Neo, tell him about his day, about his shitty boss and his loud colleagues. But lately it had also started inducing anxiety such that he often found himself negotiating packing the picture away.

The clothes he'd left on the floor the previous night were now neatly folded and placed on the chair at the corner of the room. On the armrest of this chair was his visitor's underwear. They often made comments about the state of his room, his visitors, whenever they were putting on their clothes and were about to leave. Some offered to help clean it, some made their remarks and left the room as was and others, like the one who was in the shower right now, tidied the place up before leaving. Andzani was indifferent to these remarks, and often found an opportunity to kick his visitors out only at the mention of his room needing cleaning.

His latest visitor had taken it a little far by putting up the photo frame. Andzani usually waited for his visitors to leave before he put it up; this he did to eliminate questions about the

individual pictured in the photo frame, questions he'd answered countless times but also questions that ignited nostalgia, days he could only relive through memories that brought longing and despair. And so every time he had a visitor around, he'd try to steer away any conversation that was brought up by the photo frame. When this didn't work, he resorted to placing it face down. His latest visitor had crossed several boundaries already but realising the photo frame was up pushed Andzani over the edge. He didn't know how long the frame had been watching—had it witnessed his indecent behavior? How much of it had it witnessed?

Andzani had a set rules for the people he brought to his place, his hookups or what he preferred to call them—visitors. He never allowed them to take showers or to spend the night in his room. He never allowed them to ponder on sexual encounters had, through pillow talk and cuddling; anything that would suggest a romantic encounter was taken out of the equation. This prevented the prospect of these encounters budding into unforeseen single-ended relationships, as was the pattern in the past. The moment he reached climax, reverting to sanity, clear minded, that disgust crawled over him, he wanted them out of his room, immediately. Then, they repulsed him, and wanting not to be touched, he would find his underwear, put it on as he found his phone on the desk and offer to uber them back home.

He didn't remember how this one did it, make him disregard these rules; the visitor had woken him up early in the morning which meant he was going to be grumpy and irritable throughout the day. Usually when he wasn't going to work, he slept until eleven. Secondly, the visitor had cleaned his room without his permission and then proceeded to take a shower, using the en-suite bathroom instead of the bathroom reserved for visitors. This was after he had touched his belongings without his permission.

Andzani extended his hand again, placing Neo's picture down before unlocking his phone to three missed calls from Violet. He sat up in bed, looked at the time the calls were

made—she never called at that time. He sat back and dialed the number, and as he raised his phone to his ear, heard the shower water go off. Quickly, he ended the call, his eyes on the door.

“Oh, hi. I hope I didn’t wake you?” the guy said walking out of the shower, a towel knotted around his slimly built figure. His hip bones were visible and enhanced the V-shape that led to his pubic area, and Andzani remembered that it was a picture of that waist the guy had sent him the previous night on *Grindr*, that made blood rush to the area between his thighs, and made him stub out his cigarette and jump into the shower after sending him his location, inviting him over. He had imagined holding onto the waist with both hands, moving his hand up the flat of his stomach, feeling those bones as his visitor glided and gyrated on top of his abdominal area. But that never happened. Andzani had enjoyed the warmth of his visitor’s mouth and the back of his throat; when his visitor’s tongue circled the tip of his manhood, making him gasp for air. But when the guy had splayed on top of the bed flat on his stomach, Andzani’s manhood proved not to be up for the task, and like a flower lacking water, kept wilting. Each time Andzani tried resuscitating it, putting it back in the guy’s mouth, the guy lost patience, and finally, Andzani, like a spoilt child denied sweets, turned his back to him and cuddled his pillow the rest of the night.

The same sensation took place now, when blood threatened to rush between his thighs, and Andzani hated that it would cloud his sanity, that it would calm him, take away the anger that had built up while his visitor was in the shower. He shook his head in response before averting his eyes back to his phone screen. And when his visitor took off his towel, Andzani leaned his head back on the wall and watched with interest, his anticipation rising together with his manhood. And what seemed like a perfectly orchestrated performance took place: his visitor found his bag next to the sofa chair, then proceeded, with grace, to lower himself on

the sofa. He took out a tube from the bag and in no hurry squeezed the content onto his palm, and in an effortless move, started from his left wrist swiftly moving up his left hand, his right arm moving to find the back of his neck, then down the collar bones to the front of his neck, before moving to the back of his neck once more with a precision that signaled an everyday practice. He then moved both hands down his stomach to let them linger on his groin area, massaging his penis. The same was done with his left hand as he applied the content to his right side of the body. Andzani's eyes followed the movements, the soft-wristed hands that Andzani thought easily gave away his sexuality. It reminded him of Mbambamencisi, of Setice's gym and the boys who hung there, when the boys would sling their wrists to indicate what they called 'sesi-buti'. They didn't need to utter the word, gay, as if it would desecrate the sacredness of their tongues, or was it that it never was part of their vocabulary? Andzani didn't remember, they were all dumb anyway, taking after their leader Setice. Apart from Neo of course; Neo had been different, he wasn't as smart as Andzani, nor was he dumb. He was what Setice called street-smart. Anyway, Andzani remembered that the softening of the wrists was always met with laughter that was underlined with disapproval and seemed to get the message across; never do that gay shit.

His visitor was one at peace and in touch with his feminine side, clearly didn't have struggles with it and instead took pride in its presence, even worked hard to enhance it. How could one be so carefree? Andzani felt a tingling jealousy.

Recently, to derail the dreams that had become unrelenting since his visit back home, Andzani had gone back to Grindr. It kept him occupied—thinking about other men and fantasizing about their manhood—made it easier to get through the days, eased the guilt of not responding to Yolula's calls and texts. This was after all the only way he knew how to

deal with problems in his life, sleep them through with strange men. It had worked when he'd just arrived in Cape Town, just after Neo's death, why wouldn't it work now?

On Grindr Andzani felt like someone over-experienced. He knew that he only needed to do the bare minimum to secure himself hookups. What he did first was put up a picture of himself bare-chested. His muscles exposed and the mountains of his chest visible were bound to attract attention. They liked it, the sissies, always wanting to be topped by someone masculine, bearing a strong voice that barked commandments.

Andzani's profile biography started with the word, in capital letters: 'TOP'. Wasn't that there was more supply of bottoms than there was of tops in the city? He knew he needed to capitalize on this. Below this he wrote, 'be as interesting as you're interested. Mobile and I always host.' This he knew would reach its intended audience.

He had grown particular with the individuals he showed interest in; the soft-wristed were his favorite, more often than not preferred to be topped as opposed to ones who put on their profiles that they were straight acting. Straight acting meant confused, most likely to call themselves vers because they were exploring. These ones had many issues and always came with drama. Andzani wanted sex and aimed at people who would easily give it up.

The fat ones usually had issues with their confidence, often facing rejection on the App— most guys on the app preferred the slimly built ones— were always hungry for intimacy, pleasure and affection, that he only needed to throw out a few nice words their way, a little attention, and like hungry fish in a sea of bottoms, thrown a bait by a willing top, would bite with fervor.

And then there were the not so nice-looking ones, those ones who always got rejected, hence their self-confidence was stunted and ragged over time. They easily accepted anyone who jumped into their inboxes, and after he'd given them a taste of attention, would demand more, like stray puppies on the road after being showered with food. These ones would fill

his inboxes with nudes and strings of ‘hi’s’ and ‘hellos’ that were never ending. They never gave up, even when ignored, they always found their way back to his inbox with more determination than was in their previous texts.

And then, of course, there the students, always enticed by the fact that he had a car and they would not have to uber themselves to their host as he volunteered picking them up. These ones loved the nice things their student budgets could not afford. He only needed to tell them he was mobile, throwing around the fact that he was an accountant only made them swoon as they assumed he was monied, and thereafter he had them eating out of his palm.

Feeling the silence start to get uncomfortable, Andzani’s visitor raised his eyes to find Andzani watching him. He smiled.

“What? Do you want to apply lotion on my back?” the visitor asked sincerely.

Andzani, coming out of his head found the guy’s long fingers at his feet as he arched his upper body to apply lotion to his legs, up his thighs. There was no sense of urgency, unlike Andzani in the mornings when late for work; applying lotion to the parts that would be visible for the day; the face, neck and arms. Everything else remaining ashy under the hidden cover of clothes. His visitor paid attention to the parts Andzani neglected; his buttocks, his groin area, his penis. Andzani found no need to bother with those areas, lotion only exacerbated sweating in any case.

“No,” Andzani said, and after a moment added, “Muzi right?”

Muzi nodded, and from his glance Andzani realized that Muzi had overestimated his significance in their interaction—he’d assumed Andzani remembered his name.

“You do this every morning?”

Muzi, not comprehending, wrinkled his forehead.

“The way you apply lotion,” Andzani added.

“But what is wrong with the way I apply lotion?”

“One could argue it wastes time.”

“*One* being you?”

“Besides the point.”

“Well, not if factored.”

Andzani blinked, yielding. He followed Muzi’s eyes and found them mounted on the photo frame he’d placed face down on the desk.

Muzi stood, putting on his underwear. “You’re not getting ready? Work?”

“I’m not going in today.”

“You seem fine.”

“I think you might have omitted the fact that you are a doctor last night when we spoke?” Andzani said, good humoredly.

“No. I’m not...”

“Good.”

“Just that you look fine. . .”

“Well, looks can be deceiving.” The geniality in Andzani’s tone had disappeared as quickly as it had taken over. It wasn’t well intended. Hit by this realisation, Muzi yielded.

“I see you prefer it facing down,” Muzi said, his eyes back on Neo’s photograph. Momentarily Andzani feigned non-comprehension and Muzi had to nod at it.

Andzani nodded, his eyes unrelenting, not inviting further commentary on the subject. The message was loud and Muzi slitted his eyes at Andzani before they found his toiletries bag on the chair.

“I thought I’d wake up early and fix my mess before leaving,” Muzi beckoned with his head to the bin under the desk filled with empty Savanna bottles. Andzani’s smile was lopsided, forced and his eyes ran across the room as if only realising now its cleanliness.

“It was all my doing. . .the mess,” Andzani said. “You shouldn’t have cleaned up after me.”

“It was no biggy, really.”

“No, I don’t think you understand what I am saying.”

“Okay...?”

“Next time just leave the place as is.”

“Oh–,” Muzi blinked repeatedly. “Okay,” he said. He was tucking in the one side of his shirt that looked like a blouse. His white jeans, folded at the bottom, only reached a few centimeters above his ankles. After a moment had passed, he raised his head to find Andzani, “wait, don’t tell me you’re mad that I actually cleared up?”

“Look, my guy...I am not mad, I am just... edgy when people go through my stuff.”

“By stuff I reckon you mean that photograph?” Muzi pointed at it.

Andzani shrugged, “how do I know you didn’t go through other things while you cleaned?”

“You know what...,” Muzi raised both his index fingers in the air before throwing them back down, holding back from finishing his sentence, he lowered himself on the chair to put on his shoes. “You don’t have to worry,” Muzi shook his head a bit before tilting it sideways in disbelief. “Won’t be a next time.”

Andzani pressed his lips together. Was it remorse sneaking up on him? He quickly shut it. And to show agreement that there would be no next time, Andzani picked up his phone on top of his covers. “Do you want me to request an Uber for you?” his one eyebrow slanted, signaling eagerness to rid of Muzi.

“This is not fair. You have been nothing but mean to me since I walked out of that shower.”

Andzani said nothing, holding on to his phone, he only looked at Muzi, waiting for him to relent whilst feigning impatience.

“What? You don’t have to be embarrassed about last night. I’ve been through it countless times.”

“I have nothing to be ashamed of.”

“You know an erectile dysfunction can be caused by too much alcohol intake, right?”

Muzi said this as he shifted his eyes to the bin filled with bottles.

“Mfethu, I told you to stop with your doctor tendencies. My alcohol consumption has nothing to do with my penis. Last night was a bad night. . .I have a lot on my mind,” Andzani stopped, feeling about to let out, vulnerability slipping in his voice, in the way his words became soft and felt as if he were justifying himself, something he never did with his visitors.

“I don’t need to explain myself to you.”

“Then keep your attitude in check.”

“Look, if you are used to being treated like a *queen*, this is not the place.”

Muzi humphed, his smile condescending. “Oh. . .you are one of those,” Muzi shook his head lightly. “Used to your egos being nursed. Well fuck you. I am not here for that. You give me lousy sex, and then have the audacity to top it up with this stinking attitude.”

“Alright, I need you to leave now,” Andzani said, not offended that his sex was considered awful but by Muzi’s rise in tone.

“You could not hold an erection for two seconds, what are you? 25? Don’t you think it is too early to be suffering from an erectile dysfunction?”

“Stop hurling insults at me, bra.”

“I am not your bra,” this last part tossed in sternly. “You got your priorities misplaced. If I were you, I would focus on getting my dick energy on par with this attitude you’re giving off.”

Muzi threw his toiletries in his cross-body shoulder bag that sat leaning against the legs of the sofa chair. Andzani got out of bed, pulled his jeans from the batch of clothes Muzi had neatly folded on the sofa—unfolding the ones on top—and put them on. Muzi gave a side glance to the falling clothes he'd taken the time to fold. Andzani opened the bedroom door, walking into the sitting room, he picked up keys on the kitchen counter and unlocked his main door. He opened it wide and was met with the chilling cold morning air. Andzani turned around and waited for Muzi to appear from his bedroom door.

“Fuck you.” Muzi said as he walked out of the bedroom and past Andzani, he hung his bag across his chest and rested his right palm on top of it.

“Yes. Bye!” Andzani said, letting the door go as soon as Muzi made his way out. He strutted back to his bedroom, found his phone and opened the work's WhatsApp group. He told them his car brake-pedals needed to be changed as he almost got into an accident on his way from work the previous night. When his boss started typing, he exited the App. Then, he went through dialed numbers, for a long time stared at the screen, at Violet's number. He decided against it, moved toward the table, and placed Neo's picture up. He remembered when the picture was taken, and a smile threatened on his face. Immediately Yolula crossed his mind and the smile waned.

Chapter 2

Cape Town

2016

Andzani's dreams started shortly after his return from Mbambamencisi. At first he thought his mind was digesting the recent trip back home; his encounter with Uncle Sontaga whom he blamed for Neo's death, and the fact that he'd dropped his mother, Violet, at a mental institution in Polokwane, before catching a taxi to Johannesburg to catch a flight back to Cape Town. Thus, the first few days Andzani had been unconcerned about the dreams. But when the dreams became unrelenting, Andzani knew going home had triggered the memory of things left neglected, unattended for such a long time that they festered like a wound left uncleaned; unrelenting as if heeding his failures to have paid his dues. Home had been the center of his childhood memories. Undigested memories he had hoarded all his adult life because he feared what remembering would do to him, undo in him. When Andzani left Mbambamencisi for university, he'd minimized his visits back home because home allowed those memories to seep through and confront him. Home had become the site for anxiety. Securing employment post his university studies, together with the hectic schedule that accompanied being employed, had lessened the guilt of not thinking about or visiting home.

As if given a last chance, on his recent visit home, those long-repressed memories had flooded his head, slowed and dulled his days so to force him to pay attention to them, digest them. Like a yarn ball slowly unraveling, the memories demanded his attention with each day the sun rose.

When the snippets began, they were fleeting, images of people's faces that had been a significant part of his childhood in Mbambamencisi, people he'd attended schools with, episodes of past traumatic events. When not dreaming, the episodes occurred mostly in the middle of tasks; when cooking and he would stop to stare vacantly. Or when showering in the mornings for work—when he'd let the water run down his back, head bowed, eyes closed as he lapsed into a burrow filled with painful childhood memories. These snippets were accompanied by shame and regret and they left him terror stricken.

Lately these episodes consumed his working hours, when he would stare, while sitting in front of the two monitors on top of his desk with an excel spreadsheet running across them, into space. Then, he would will his mind to numbness, but when he closed his eyes, ears, and saw darkness, he only created more space for the clarity of the images against the dark of his eyelids. He found himself having to finish work at home because his efficiency decreased during office hours.

A few weeks after his arrival back in Cape Town from Mbambamencisi, during their Saturday afternoon sessions, Andzani told Zenani, his best friend, about his trip back home, and the dreams that accompanied his return.

“So you think Neo is haunting you?” Zenani had asked, taking a sip of her gin and tonic. They were sitting on the floor, on top of the rug that ran across the sitting room, almost meeting the television stand in his flat in Parrow North. Andzani occupied a two roomed flat

on the first floor of a complex named after the island of Martinique. He had placed cushions on the rug for comfort. On top of the glass table was a small container with slices of cucumber and fresh rosemary. The sliding door was open, allowing a chilling breeze to come in and take with it the cigarette smell, as they smoked, more frequently, with each glass of gin they refilled. These afternoon sessions had become a tradition and consisted of Simphiwe Dana, Judith Sephuma or Thandiswa Mazwai's voice drifting in the air as they drank and caught up. They alternated hosting, one weekend at Andzani's flat and the next at Zenani's place in Burgundy Estate.

"Not hauntin-haunting," Andzani said. "But it's like my past life is laid bare in front of me, and it's overwhelming."

"What do you mean, ntwana?"

Andzani remembered he hadn't shared with Zenani a significant part of his childhood. These were things too difficult to name. And so, carefully, he thought of what to say next.

"For example, this other time as I was exiting Vida e Caffè in Newlands after my lunch time, I saw this guy I thought was Spakuza."

"Remind me again, who is Spakuza?" Zenani asked.

"This boy who used to bully me in Primary school."

"Primary school?"

"That's the thing. These events date back then, but they are vivid in my mind as if they occurred recently."

"It wasn't him?"

"No. And the thing is I'll never forget how Spakuza walks. And this person I saw, walked the same way as him. And he was headed towards my workplace. So instead of walking behind him, I ordered an uber."

"That's hectic."

“Listen, the only thing that calmed me was the knowledge that Spakuza was a truant, don’t think he finished school, and so couldn’t have been in the same place as me.”

“Classist much?” Zenani joked. “Maybe he got a construction job or something.”

“From Tzaneen to Cape Town for construction work? Ahh please.”

“Wait, is this why you have Neo’s photograph up in your bedroom?”

For a moment Andzani wondered how she had seen this, but remembered he’d offered her his shorts to change into from the jeans she came wearing so she could be comfortable. She had changed in his bedroom. So he raised his shoulders above his ears.

“You don’t talk much about Neo,” Zenani added.

“Now you know the reason for that.”

“I know you have a traumatic past, but nothing outside that trauma. What kind of a person what he? What did he like? What didn’t he like?”

Andzani was quiet a beat.

“Was there more to your relationship than you’ve let me believe?”

Andzani gave a slight pout.

“Andzani?”

“What?” he smiled.

“And no one knew?”

“Well, one person knew. Two actually. But they were people from this other gym I used to chill at. And they never said anything to anyone.”

“Yazini! Every day I realise I don’t know anything about you actually.”

“What do you mean, wenja?”

“No, seriously, friend, I feel like you should talk to someone about all this.”

“But we’re talking njena.”

“You know what I mean. A therapist, I don’t know” Zenani said, taking out a cigarette and lighting it. “I mean I know we black people don’t like unearthing trauma, because then what do you do with it? Especially when you do not have the resources to aid you in dealing with it, you know? To soothe the healing process or whatever. But you can afford it. Ntwana, if not, I’m here. I can meet you half-way.”

Andzani gave a weary smile, held his fingers in the air for Zenani to pass him the cigarette. He took a long drag and then inhaled. And then another, when he gave it back, the cigarette was almost half.

“I forget what a smoker you are when drinking,” Zenani said, taking the cigarette between her fingers.

“Don’t start,” Andzani picked his glass from the floor. “I even told Violet about it.”

“How is she?”

“Can’t say. . .still early days. Her doctor said progress is noticeable. But it didn’t sound like it over the phone.”

“When will you go see her again?”

“Probably when she gets discharged,” Andzani let his head slant to the side. “She’s supposed to be in there for 21 days. Also have a few days left of leave this year, so I have to make the most of them.”

“True. And what did she say?”

“She just went on about how I may need to perform traditional ceremonies and stuff.”

“And?”

“And nothing. My mother has never engaged in anything traditional. It was probably the drugs they are giving her at that clinic talking.”

“Yeah,” Zenani said, as if suddenly reflecting on something that had crossed her mind. “Does Yolula know?” She asked after a moment, knowing the answer to the question. Yolula

had gotten in touch with her when Andzani didn't return his calls or replied to his texts when he'd returned from Mbambamencisi. Worried, Yolula had called Zenani to find out if she'd heard anything.

Andzani's forehead was full of lines, those of a person not comprehending a question.

"I mean the episodes," Zenani continued. "What did Yolula say?"

"Nothing," Andzani made to get up.

"You've told him, right?"

"Yeah. . ." Andzani said, his tone full of uncertainty.

"Where are you going now?"

"The bathroom, Zeni."

"He called me," Zenani said, and Andzani halted and turned at the bathroom's door.

"What's happening, Ntwana?" Zenani asked.

Andzani covered his eyes with his palms as his back found the wall. He exhaled loudly.

"I haven't seen him since my return."

Zenani was quiet, looked at him with a face free of emotions.

"Okay I feel judged now."

"No, no. I am not judging you," Zenani shook her head. "I'm trying to understand these things that are ruining great things in your life."

"I needed space, time to think," Andzani pointed to his head with both hands as he moved to settled on the arm of the couch. "I don't want to drag him into this until I have sorted it out. Until I know what to do, when I have it all together."

"But then what's the point of your relationship if you can't go through shit together?"

"What did he say?"

"He asked if I'd heard from you, if you were okay, then mid call realised you had been ignoring him all this long and things got awkward."

“And what did *you* say?”

“I said I would tell you he called. Nigga, you need to call your man.”

“I will.”

“Okay then. But how do we plan to sort this out when we don’t even know what’s up?”

Andzani was quiet.

“Ntwana, you guys have something good,” Zenani added.

“I’ll figure it out,” Andzani said somberly.

“Okay,” Zenani shrugged and raised her glass to her lips. But her eyes had remained on Andzani, she watched him for some time before he remembered he needed the bathroom

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The day before his hookup with Muzi, Andzani had been thrust into one those episodes when his phone vibrated on his desk at work, taking him out of his head. When he extended his neck to peek at the lit screen, he saw the icon, at the top. A Grindr notification. He wasn’t going to open it, he had ceased opening Grindr notifications at work, especially because unsolicited nudes always filled his inbox. After viewing them, it became harder for him to concentrate with the throb they induced between his thighs.

He shifted the portable aircon that sat on his desk so that it faced him directly. The small office felt warmer than usual and the aircon barely did its job. The office had previously been a home, located in Newlands, but now housed the executive structure of the company. Some people occupied the bedroom, the kitchen, dining area, and Andzani, his boss and two other women occupied the sitting room. This space was fitted with four desks; Andzani faced his boss, Claire, and Liza faced her boss Katherine. This is how Claire had witnessed one of his episodes, when she’d raised her eyes from her screen to enquire about

the cashflow. Andzani hadn't responded promptly as he usually did when she called his name, and when finally he snapped out of the mild trance, she saw terror in his eyes. Claire had managed a smile and decided to type out her query and send him an email instead.

Now coming from the CFO's office, Claire tapped her knuckles on Andzani's desk. In hand she held a glass of water.

"So Chris thinks it was an inside job," Claire said when she got to her desk. She took a sip, placed her glass on the desk before she lowered herself to her chair. Since witnessing one of his episodes, Andzani felt she behaved as if she had decoded an enigma that was his life. After the incident, she had given him side glances, as if let it on some secret. This was before she wrote him an email offering her support and asking if anything had happened during his trip home.

"That's the only reasonable explanation. How else then did they know we had just received new stock at the warehouse?" Katherine said. She was the cost management accountant and Claire, the financial controller. Andzani and Liza were Financial Accountants.

"But who?" Andzani asked.

"Mystery still unresolved," said Claire.

"Four fucken trucks of liquor. Four!" Katherine projected four fingers in the air.

"It's unbelievable," Claire said. "But Chris and Eric are working on it. They already called the insurance."

"I'm just glad no one was hurt," Liza said.

"Yeah. Thank goodness." Claire asserted. "Andzani, will it be possible to finish on those payments before noon? I want to sign them off so we can get started with Vat. Eric has been breathing down my neck about it."

Andzani looked at the time. Ten to eleven.

“Yeah, sure.” He nodded. His eyes moved to the batch of payments that lay on top of his desk. He felt a sharp pain pierce the back of his neck.

Lately, he loathed the alarm tone when it rang in the morning urging him to get up for work. No longer as eager as he had been when he’d started working at the company, he allowed his mind to succumb to thoughts of traffic, his boss, his co-workers who filled the small office and often submitted work that needed constant corrections. He dreaded the bickering between Katherine and Liza because Liza had no idea half the time what she was doing. He wondered how she’d secured the same position as him. When Liza and Katherine’s fights took a break, it was Claire and Eric, the financial manager, clawing at each other’s throats because more often than not, when things didn’t go her way, Claire ran to Chris, the CFO, because they had started getting intimate after office hours.

Andzani had started to feel stagnant. Often felt uninspired, that sometimes he slackened. He didn’t feel that the job presented him with the possibility of climbing the corporate ladder anymore. That the only chance he’d get to do so was if he moved companies. He detested how Claire mostly took credit for work he’d done without acknowledging him, and that she wasn’t digging into his full potential, what could be, but relegated him work that made her life easier, and not with the intention to groom or nurture him. He felt uneasy knowing he was not going to undergo growth in the company but remained grateful when he remembered that some of the people he had graduated with struggled to get hired. He knew people in Cape Town that lived in back rooms, earned lesser salaries than what he received each month and almost paid half their salaries as rent while struggling to meet monthly necessities.

Andzani’s salary afforded him a comfortable life; he had a car, lived in a two-bedroom flat where the rent was decent and the complex secured. He was able to meet his monthly bills and still managed to maneuver the few bumps ahead before his next salary. It was

seldom that he thought dearly about his job. Most of the time, he negotiated with himself to keep thoughts of quitting and moving to a different company in the back of his mind during working hours.

Andzani raised his eyes from his monitors to find Claire looking at him, as if reading his thoughts. She smiled. He reciprocated. It had become second nature, this reciprocation even when he didn't feel like it, his lips just stretched.

He picked up his headphones and put them on. Even when music wasn't playing, Andzani had his headphones on. It had become a habit, a way of not engaging unnecessary conversations in the office. No one dared disturb him then, even Claire, resorting to email communication when she needed something from him.

Andzani turned and found Liza's desk. On top of it sat a box of payments she had taken to review when she came in the morning. But she was moving at the pace of a tortoise. Another thing that bothered him; she was paid more than him even though she had found him in the company and was not as efficient as he was.

He got irritated, shook his head and returned his eyes to his monitors. He remembered the conversation he'd had with Violet, before nurses confiscated her phone. He'd woken up past midnight because he'd dreamed about Neo's death. And when the sun threatened to rise, he was already on the phone with Violet. He told her about his recent episodes that had taken over his daily functioning and she had listened intently on the other end of the line, annotating the end of his sentences with 'mhh's' and 'oh's'. Andzani imagined her nodding her head, lines running across her forehead, reflecting sympathy. When he'd finished, Violet said she feared it had something to do with ancestors. Tallied him names of people who had ancestral callings on his father's side of the family. Maybe that was it, his time now. And

soon after, she changed tunes, she knew how greedy they were and was certain they were trying to slow his success.

“But this is not fair,” Violet had started sniffing, and Andzani imagined her wiping her nose with the sleeve of the pink gown she’d made him pack before they left for Polokwane.

At that moment Andzani had regretted calling her. He knew the moment she spoke of ancestors that she wasn’t getting better; hadn’t gotten better since the last time he’d seen her. Violet was a devout Christian, and although she hadn’t frequented church much in her life, she had lived by the word of the bible. Often, she devoured it before she slept and again before the new day began—a tradition she’d tried passing unto Andzani, but her efforts futile.

She had never taken part in any traditional or ancestral ceremonies when still married to his father, Pete. Nor did she have any urges to engage conversations whose subject matter had at its center ancestral ceremonies. So at the mention of ancestors, it had been easier for Andzani to deduce his mother’s progress. But what she had said had stuck with him—what if there was some sense to it; not that he had an ancestral calling, but that he needed to appease his ancestors so things could go well for him. Andzani wondered then if Neo also felt neglected? He hadn’t visited Neo’s grave since the day of his burial. He wondered if it was guilt playing with his mind. But what about the other things that kept him up at night?

After his phone call with his mother, he thought about Pete, where he might be, about the ceremony Pete had done to appease the ancestors with the hope that it would fix his marriage. How it only achieved a complete deterioration of his relationship with Violet. Andzani thought then of how Pete left them for another woman. Anger had swirled in him.

Andzani’s phone vibrated again, taking him, once more, out of his head. He picked it up eagerly, hoping the text is from Yolula. It was Mark, the IT guy, wanting to go for a smoke break. A wave of disappointment floated on his face as he unlocked the phone and

swiped away the Grindr notifications on his screen. He opened his WhatsApp and replied to Mark, 'be there just now,' before he pushed back his chair, removed his headphones and checked the time on the monitor. Quarter to twelve. He would be done with the batch on his desk before one. He got up and walked out.

Mark was already smoking, standing near the pool as he scrolled on his phone.

"Howzit, howzit. . ." Andzani said to Mark.

"All good, how are you?"

"I'm good, disappointed you didn't even wait for me." Andzani gave a light smile.

"You know you always take your time," Mark said, passing the cigarette to Andzani.

Andzani had always tried to overlook the little theatricals Mark did when he spoke. But, every day, when he'd speak to Mark, it would catch him off guard; the little head tilts Mark did that took Andzani back to the day when they first met; that reminded him of the Bollywood films Andzani used to watch on SABC 3. Then, when they had just met, the head bobs were still overly exaggerated as that of the Bollywood actors. Then, Andzani always fought the urge to imitate, when not in Mark's company, Mark's head tilts or his Indian accent that felt as if words danced on his tongue. Andzani imagined the words jumping to each side of Mark's cheeks with each head tilt. The head tilts were not as apparent now, unlike then when Mark was still indifferent, now he had grown conscious of his movements and speech. Now they only became defiant when Mark was eager and deeply passionate about a subject matter that he cared less for his demeanor.

Andzani had wondered what it had taken for Mark to rid himself of the idiosyncrasies that had led all his life, that had been a part of him, manifested themselves unconsciously. Andzani also wondered what else Mark had had to rid himself of in the process of suppressing the head bops, what other parts of him did he have to silence, alter, so not to become the Indian stereotype. Was Mark even the name his parents had given him? Mark's

accent had remained though, and Andzani liked the possibility that, like a rebellious stain, Mark couldn't rid himself of it.

It had always been a mystery to their co-workers how Andzani and Mark were drawn to each other. Apart from the fact that they both smoked and occupied the lowest strata in the company's social hierarchy, they didn't have much in common. Mark was in his early forties, and Andzani in his late twenties. Andzani maintained his physique, going to the gym and jogging on weekends, whereas Mark had a pot belly that he took pride in. Married with a child, Mark worked in the IT department while Andzani, having let his relationship with Yolula erode, was an accountant.

However, for Andzani, it had been being a witness to Mark's transformation that pushed him towards Mark. How Mark allowed vulnerability and delicateness to be second nature to him. It was in the way Mark tried, when drunk, to ingratiate himself with the white people in the company, how he would recount stories of war when he was still a soldier, that made people uneasy towards him; when he would demand attention with knowledge no one was interested in sponging. It was also in the delicateness of his voice when he would call Andzani, each morning after they had had a party at their workplace, to enquire if he hadn't said or done anything that would jeopardize his job. Andzani would then try and reassure him that nothing he had said could be stretched to get him fired—apart from successfully isolating himself further from everyone else, Andzani would not mention this part of course—he didn't do anything out of line.

Andzani sensed that Mark longed for acceptance, a longing Andzani had become familiar with, that Andzani recalled from his childhood, which he now woke up and maneuvered with. And because of this, Andzani saw a part of himself in Mark. It was a sense of obligation that had pushed him towards Mark. Mark wanting a friend out of everyone had gravitated towards Andzani. And soon they had found solace in each other.

Mark was speaking now and Andzani half listened, smiling at him, listening mostly to how Mark's speech left his mouth. His accent had vigor, unlike when Mark altered it in the company of the people he shared office space with. And Andzani often felt a deep sense of pity for mark when this alteration came about in his presence.

"Andzani?" Mark said. "Are you listening, man?"

"Yeah. Yes."

"So what do you think?"

"Huh?"

"The company? Do you think it will be able to give me half of my pension funds?"

"Wait, why would you need half of your pension funds paid out?"

"See, you haven't been listening," Mark said despondently. "Remember the trip I told you about, to India?"

Andzani nodded, pulled out another cigarette.

"I need cash injection and was hoping I could get some of my pension funds paid out," Mark added. "The trip is expensive man, and now taking my daughter with seems impossible."

"I won't lie to you; I don't think that is possible. Don't think company policy allows such."

"Oh," Mark seemed disappointed and Andzani became irritated.

"But you can speak to Eric and hear what he has to say." Andzani said, knowing already what Eric's answer would be to the request but also feeling the need to instill a sense of hope in Mark.

Although Andzani and Mark hung out together at work, Andzani didn't know much about him. He knew Mark was married with a child and that he had been a soldier before he

came to South Africa—a topic Mark felt comfortable taking apart when inebriated. When he spoke of his time as a soldier, it was as if a different spirit assumed his body. Andzani hated how this side of Mark terrified him. When sober, Andzani noted how Mark became agitated when he spoke of his past life in war, about the drugs and alcohol they used to take to numb themselves. And how always there was a sense of holding back, an omission of facts throughout his narrative so not to incriminate himself. Trauma flickered in Mark’s eyes and saddened them whenever he brought up the subject. When smoking, he would pull long and hard at his cigarette so that Andzani imagined the smoke clouding those parts that were too horrific to narrate.

During one of their Christmas parties, Mark had invited Andzani to an after party. He’d said that there would be drugs, alcohol and women. He asked if Andzani was keen, and since Mark was drunk, Andzani assumed he was joking. There would be guns too, Mark had added, to entice Andzani. If he needed one, or wanted to learn how to shoot, Mark had said.

Now, Andzani wondered if Mark had anything to do with their stolen stock at the warehouse.

“I’ll have a word with Eric,” Mark said. “You haven’t forgotten we are going to Cavendish lunch time, right? I need to settle some accounts. These people have been bugging me.”

“No, we’ll go. Also need to get something to eat.”

“Cool.”

There was a moment, silence, when each man gathered his thoughts. Andzani handed Mark the last of the cigarette and stared at the dry leaves on top of the pool blanket, imagined Mark and his friends with guns in an empty room, planning to rob the company’s warehouse.

“So when are you helping me sort out my tax returns?” asked Mark.

“If you arrive early tomorrow, I’ll be here. And we can work on it. Today I need to finish payments and help Claire with VAT.”

Mark nodded. “You always say help when referring to your work,” Mark noted. “Help Claire do this, help Claire do that, as if you’re a helper around here. You’re a financial accountant.”

“I know.”

“Don’t let them make you feel like you are a helper around here, man.”

“I don’t.”

“Oh?” Mark lifted an eyebrow and nodded.

“Are you done?”

Mark pulled the last of the cigarette, stepped on the butt, before they got in tune, and walked the two steps up the entryway into the office.

Part Two: Metamorphosis

Chapter 3

Mbambamencisi

2000

Andzani had become a truant, taking advantage of the fact that Mrs Marivate, his grade two class teacher, had been brought to speed with his medical history. Mrs Marivate knew of the Asthma that was seasonal, when Andzani would grasp for air whenever he laughed so hard that he would need an inhaler to help remedy the excess air loss in his lungs. She was aware of the rash that spread on his joints; the knees, his arms and all over his neck, when he would scratch and scratch, enraging his blood vessels so that they responded through swelling, making it difficult for him to bend his knees or arms. Mrs Marivate was also aware of his constant need to screw and unscrew his eyes with his knuckles, turning his eyes red as if high on marijuana. Mrs Marivate knew that because of all this Andzani frequented Letaba Hospital, where doctors gave him cream to apply to his joints—the cream dried his joints, the sores, that they creased before flaking off as they began to heal. The doctors also gave him asthmatic sprays and eye drops for when his eyes became itchy. This was a monthly pilgrimage, when he would get time off school to visit the hospital for a new prescription.

But in the weeks that preceded Andzani meeting Neo, he'd made sure to give himself two days of relief each week from school, which he attributed to his physical ineptitude; my joints had swollen and so I couldn't walk the journey to school; my eyes had become so red

and I feared other learners would make fun of me. This had worked the first few weeks, but then Mrs Marivate became less patient with his excuses.

The week Andzani didn't show up at school at all and Mrs. Marivate heard that he frequented a video game store during school time, she'd tried to inform Violet. But each learner she'd dispatched with a message for Violet stayed far from Andzani's house and seemed to lose the message whenever they left the school grounds, as if the moment they got outside the school gates, the memory of the task at hand became elusive.

Violet didn't know of her son's newly acquired dissident behavior. Pete, on the other hand, wasn't at all concerned with the comings and goings of his son, unless it inconvenienced him—this was always when money was involved; when Violet asked for taxi fare to travel to Letaba to get Andzani's prescription or when *he* wanted to send the boy to go buy him weed. He had relegated keeping up with Andzani's schedule to Violet. Was it not that when Andzani wanted something from him the boy asked for it through his mother? Violet being a mediator between father and son's relationship, or what there was of it. If anything was bothering the boy, Pete trusted that Violet would be the first to notice and inform him.

This was true because rarely was there anything that bothered the young man Violet did not notice and alert Pete to. Not because Violet trusted Pete to do anything about it, but in an effort to get him to participate in his son's daily life. Pete acknowledged whatever he was told, and if he could throw money at the problem, did so. Violet was always left to have a conversation with her son and to find a way forward. But this time Violet had missed it; there hadn't been anything overtly unusual with the boy's behavior. His morning routine had not been disrupted in any way; she woke him up in the morning, poured water for him in a bucket while she prepared the day's meal. When he got up, he poured the water into a plastic wash

tub, and when done bathing, ate his breakfast and was off to school. At one o'clock, Andzani walked through the gate, ate his lunch and took a nap. Nothing had changed.

On the day he met Neo, Andzani had been forced to suspend his mischief, to show up at school and account for the days he had missed. Violet had told Andzani about their new neighbors. The house next door had been vacant for some time as Ntate Kgope, the previous occupant, had moved in with his long-time girlfriend. The man had sold the house to the Moagis, Ousie Ketsi and Neo. They were coming from Ga-Kgapane, a predominantly Sepedi speaking town and when Andzani asked if they knew how to speak Xitsonga, Violet said no, but they would learn. And how was Neo going to navigate this change in schools and language? Andzani had pressed on. Why do you think I am telling you all this? Neo will be your responsibility, you will walk with him to school, make sure to communicate in Tsonga with him, so he learns. I want you to cater for his smooth transition. And when Andzani had asked why him, Violet retorted with 'kindness never killed anyone'. But then she pleaded with him, her voice sincere, and Andzani had nodded.

That was the first time Andzani had heard his mother plead; often Violet instructed and the boy merely abided. That was the foundation their relationship was built on: she was the mother, and he the son, they were not friends. Andzani already hated the weight of the task ahead, dreaded the day he'd have to meet Neo. He would later on, when Ousie Ketsi and Neo had settled in Mbambamencisi and had become part of the community, code switching between Sesotho and Xitsonga, learn that Ousie Ketsi had fled home, that her husband, Neo's father, used to lay hands on her. That the night she left her husband, she had used a hammer on his feet while he was fast asleep. She broke his ankles, locked him in the bedroom and fled.

After purchasing the plot of land from Ntate Kgope, Ousie Ketsi had taken down the lopsided, dilapidated one room shack that she'd found on the compound and hired men to build a two room house consisting of a bedroom and a kitchen; the kitchen was also a sitting room, converted into Neo's bedroom at night. Ousie Ketsi had quickly gotten along with Violet, as many people did in Mbambamencisi, but because of her runny tongue, she was perceived a threat by the other women in the street. They said she spoke a lot, that she seemed as if she couldn't keep people's business down her throat. Violet knew it wasn't because she was loud mouthed that these women disliked her, but because she was fair-skinned. They felt threatened and feared their husbands would drool after her. Rumors had already knocked on each door in the street. The women knew Ousie Ketsi had run from her husband; the reason unclear, they had concocted whatever reason best supported their theories in order to convince each other to keep their men on leash.

Violet had not been threatened by Ousie Ketsi's forward demeanor. She had not been unsettled by her presence, as the other women were. The other women said it was because Violet's marriage was already unraveling, why would she feel threatened? However, Violet had admired Ousie Ketsi's ability to leave her marriage, to pack up and leave everything she had known all her life, things she had worked for, things that defined her, to start afresh in a foreign town. Ousie Ketsi had explored an uncharted journey, one that many women dared not think about in their unhappy marriages. Ousie Ketsi was a breath of fresh air for Violet. She wasn't another story, a woman who had died at the hands of her husband, a woman who had turned into a drunkard when it became unbearable to stay in her marriage. She was a positive to the many negatives that were a constant source of gossip in the community. Thus, Ousie Ketsi had been the first woman Violet felt comfortable being around. And because of this mutual feeling, Ousie Ketsi had felt comfortable asking to leave her building materials in Violet's yard when she was building her house; to connect the hose pipe to her yard when her

workers needed to mix concrete and cement for the foundation; and to enquire about schools in the vicinity, for her son, Neo.

Violet told Ousie Ketsi about her son who was the same age as Neo, doing the same grade at Banana Primary school in Rhulani. Although a distance away, factoring that the school was a no-fee paying school compensated for the long walk to the school. Violet also told Ousie Ketsi that since Andzani and Neo would be doing the same grade, they could walk together to the school, and hopefully would also be placed in the same classroom to allow for Neo's fast transition to the new environment.

Mrs. Marivate had been skeptical when Ousie Ketsi suggested this to her when she'd gone to register Neo for the school year. Mrs. Marivate had refused to place them in the same classroom, stating that since Neo was joining the school at the end of the first half of the first term, being in the same classroom with a familiar face would deter him and he would find it difficult to catch up on the missed school term.

"I deal with little rascals each year in my classroom and they always cause each other to fail. I don't want this for your son," Mrs Marivate had told Ousie Ketsi. Of course, Ousie Ketsi concurred with Mrs Marivate who knew better, and that is how Neo got placed in Mrs Bila's class.

The day Andzani dreaded the most arrived. He feared Mrs. Marivate. Who did not fear Mrs Marivate? Everyone who knew or had heard of the woman feared her. Learners at the school finishing their Grade One were always worried about being placed in her class. Anecdotes from students a year above them were guaranteed to reach them, and as each year approached the end, each learner's anxiety was heightened in anticipation of the class they would be placed in. Many preferred Mrs Bila's class because she was the quiet one, but learners in that class tended to fail. Mrs Bayana was old and frail and often fell asleep in the

class and learners were not fond of her late-coming ways as she didn't have a car and had to always walk to the school. Mrs Mhlongo was a tall woman of inviting demeanor, the school's bell was kept in her class and so she was never late. And although students were fond of her, they hated that she kept them on their toes when it came to arriving on time. When her maroon bakkie drove past the corner for the school gate, learners knew to run because in a few minutes the bell would ring, the school gates close, and late comers made to pick up rubbish around the school yard as punishment. Her class was always spotless; each Friday after the school day ended, girls would apply polish to the classroom floor while the boys cleaned the windows—taking off shoes when they walked into the classroom was non-negotiable. This last part was the cause of many parents' frustration when their children returned home, crying because they had lost their school shoes or socks.

And then there was Mrs Marivate who had gained herself a reputation for her strict disciplinary measures. She was fond of the duster, often using it on her students when they submitted dog-eared books or books whose pencil inscription was visible in the pages that followed or inscriptions that were erased using saliva or books whose handwriting went above the stipulated two lines. Often, when she was not in the mood to use the duster on her students, she would throw the books in their small faces, telling them to go fix their mess. If their books had ears, she made them straighten the corners, if they had used a large handwriting, they would have to draw a line, neatly, over the 'dirty' handwriting and rewrite using the acceptable format, while staying within the boundaries of the stipulated two lines for each sentence. Those who'd used saliva were left wondering how to rectify their mistakes, often resorting to tearing off book pages. This left their books thin. And when she held their books and found they had lost weight as compared to the others she'd marked on her desk, she would call them to the front and let their fingers feel the sting of the duster. After, she would ask them to copy each exercise into a new book and bring to her to sign.

In order to abate the number of students who fell victim to the sting of the duster, she had taught them a song, one she taught learners each year. And she reminded them that whenever they wrote class work, exercises and homework, they were to sing this song as it would keep them in check and their writing neat. The song went like this:

A hi gabuleli, a hi tshikeleli, a hi rabi buki hi marha.

Essentially repeating the three rules of writing; you don't write using large font, your pencil inscription should not be visible in the following pages and you should not use saliva as an eraser. In the beginning of the year, she made learners sing this song before each class exercise.

Andzani, like many other learners when approaching the end of their Grade One year, upon receiving his report card, had prayed to not get placed into Mrs. Marivate's classroom for his Grade Two year. But like many other learners who had joked that when you get placed in Mrs. Marivate's class that means your ancestors have deserted you, Andzani was thrown into the lion's den. Then, Andzani actually believed that his ancestors had forsaken him. But just like every other learner who got placed into Mrs. Marivate's class, he'd learned to survive. And because he was quiet and shy, Mrs. Marivate had mistaken him for an abider, one who always complied with her rules, but honestly, it was Andzani's way of avoiding conflict. Having witnessed it many times between Violet and Pete, he'd learned that keeping quiet and preventing arguments was always better than asking for forgiveness. Always getting good marks in his classwork and tests made Mrs. Marivate tender towards him, so that she made him the class prefect because he didn't make noise in the class, abided by the rules, was neat, arrived on time daily and did great in his school work. She encouraged many learners to look up to him, often raising his name whenever she gave examples of neatness, of excellence and someone who stayed far from the school but managed to get to school on

time, every day, as if this was an achievement. When learners arrived late in her class, she would look at his desk and make him stand up to tell the entire class how he managed to make it on time daily even though he stayed far from the school.

And because of this knowledge, Andzani wasn't as worried about the punishment Mrs Marivate reserved for him as he was of Spakuza and Mpanyaza, the two older boys in his grade who were the cause of his truant behavior. He feared them, abhorred their presence so much that a cold wave ran his back whenever he laid eyes on them; when his heartbeat would suck out all sound and he would have to count to three to steady his breathing. This happened mostly on those days when his prefect duties dictated that he hand out class exercises to them, return marked books or even when patrolling the class with a cane.

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Usually, the smell of paraffin from the stove alerted him the day had begun when it hit his nostrils and irritated his sinuses. This often tickled a sneeze at the back of his nose that erupted and produced a flow of mucus that Andzani would sniffle, forcing the liquid mucus back into his nose before swallowing it. Recently he had found ways of evading the smell, forcing his head under the huge blanket so that he was forced to breathe the same air over and over again as clean air took time to penetrate the blanket he'd turned into a sac, covering his naked body.

Violet always complained that Andzani slept like the dead, that one day the house would burn with him inside. This had become an everyday sermon, but mostly on those days when she needed him to wake up early and prepare firewood outside to warm bathing water. This was always on days closest to month end, when everything was used sparingly so to reach Pete's pay day—when the paraffin stove was low on paraffin supply and was only used to boil Pete's tea water when he returned from work; when they started taking their tea black

because the powdered milk had run out. Or when there was no television time because there was no money to take the automotive battery to Buti Ndhuma's place to get it recharged.

"Andzani?" Violet poked the blanket with her hand, trying to uncover his head.

"Clearly when I don't say anything you won't get up?"

Andzani had heard when the door shrieked and when she'd walked toward him, but he hadn't uncovered himself. Now, he obliged, uncovering his head as he opened his eyes.

Violet wore an impatient look. He wondered what he'd done so early in the morning to tick her off.

"I don't want to come back here again." She said when she walked out of his room. He knew a sermon lay prepared on her tongue should he not get up.

Dragging himself up, he sat on the edge of the single bed that was supported by a brick on each foot, beneath the bed was a trunk that had Violet's valuable belongings. His legs hung above the floor as he supported his head, as if heavy, with his right palm, his elbow resting on his thigh. He closed his eyes, garnering energy to start the day. Thoughts of Mrs Marivate, Spakuza, Mpanyaza raced in his head, dampening his mood.

As she passed his room from her bedroom, Violet pushed open his door once more and instantly he opened his eyes, jumped off the bed and started making it.

"You didn't see Neo waiting for you outside? Heh?"

Andzani shook his head.

"He's been waiting for a long time. The poor child woke up early only for you to make him late on his first day of school. Hurry up!"

Andzani scratched his back, heat sores that were not itchy, but he desperately wanted Violet to stop shouting and embarrassing him. Maybe if he was cause for concern her tone would alter. He had miscalculated, not this morning, it only riled her up.

“That rash won’t go away because I tell you every night, Andzani, pour water and take a bath. No, you’d rather sit in front of the television until I go to sleep so that you avoid bathing. You like it when I’m loud in the morning? Hayi maan.”

Andzani placed his pillow on top of the bed after making it. The paraffin smell irritated his eyes and they had started stitching and become teary. He had ceased sniffing and the runny mucus dripped down his nose. He searched for a dirty T-shirt in the laundry basket, found one he had discarded after changing the previous night and used it to wipe his tears before blowing the runny mucus on it.

Violet was back at the door watching, her head held back, disgusted. She did his laundry.

“Who’s going to wash that mucus ridden t-shirt?” Andzani was folding the T-shirt when he heard her voice again. “You’ll wash it. You don’t know me well.” Violet said as Andzani threw the t-shirt back into the laundry basket.

“Andzani? Stop dragging your feet. The water is getting cold in that bucket.”

Andzani stretched and moved toward the door. He waited for Violet to move so he could pass. She stood staring at him, “You don’t listen. It irritates me, Andzani. You don’t listen.” She said before she made her way back to the kitchen.

It had poured the night before, and before it had, Violet had thrown her nose in the air, told Andzani she could smell rain coming and instructed him to move the wood at the back of the house near the mango tree into the shack that housed their cooking utensils and water drums. They also made fire in the shack on rainy days or when paraffin was low on supply and month end was still far.

Andzani had forgotten to remove the wood and it had gotten drenched through the night. Violet saw the logs when she wanted to start fire to warm his bathing water. He was

reminded of this task when he walked out of his room for the kitchen, finally pinpointing the source of Violet's irritation; the paraffin stove with a pot atop, cooking pap, something Violet rarely did on the paraffin stove.

The bathing water was in a bucket placed near the entrance of the kitchen from the sitting room. Andzani dipped his finger in to feel the temperature, the water wasn't as warm now as the bucket had been sitting there for some time. Before carrying the bucket to his room, he went outside, found the plastic washtub, rinsed it at the tap and took it to his room where he placed it in the center. He went back to the kitchen, carried the bucket of water and poured it in the tub, after he walked towards the window and tied the curtain to allow light to fill the room.

And so the morning ritual began; he washed his head and face before stepping into the bathtub to wash his upper body, then proceeded to the lower parts, his legs, wiped his buttocks before he crouched and slowly, with the utmost care in his hand movement, moved the wash towel, up and down between his buttocks. It had gotten better with each day since the day behind the school's latrines.

When Andzani took out his bathing water, it hit him that there was a fourth person in the house. Neo was watching *Morning Live* on the black and white television set that had horizontal lines running across it because the battery powering it was running out. Andzani wondered if Neo understood the language used by the news anchors. When thinner lines started running frequently on the screen, Andzani realised that upon his return from school, he would need to take the battery to Buti Ndhuma to get it recharged. That's if Violet had not taken it already upon his return. She often did and relegated him the task of fetching it. But he'd irritated her this morning and doubted she would do him this favor.

“Neo?” Andzani said after spilling his bathing water on the lawn near the stoep, by the front door, where Violet had instructed him to cease doing so as the grass there grew quicker because of his dirty water.

Neo nodded, acknowledging Andzani’s presence, then he smiled when Andzani lingered. Andzani noticed the inflated and shiny cheeks. Neo was eating oats from a black bowl, and Andzani feared that Neo’s weight, coupled with his inability to speak Xitsonga, would subject him to bullies at the school. Spakuza and Mpanyaza were going to have a field day.

The television went off as Pete pushed his bicycle out of the door. A backpack with his lunchbox hung from his shoulder.

“Andzani?” Pete called out.

“Pap?” Andzani replied.

“When you come back from school, go see Uncle Sonti. He will give you money for electricity cables.”

“Ohho.” Andzani said and watched his father cycle out of the gate for work.

Finally it was happening. Andzani had heard Pete talking to Uncle Sontaga about installing Izinyoka electricity at their homes. This would, in the long run, save them the money they gave Nduma to charge their batteries, batteries that only lasted a few days with only the TV set connected. It was futile relying on the government to do things for them; had they not taken it upon themselves to install water pipes at their homes what would have become of them? Wouldn’t their children be pushing wheelbarrows full of water drums every day after school? Now people wheeled wheelbarrows to ask for water at their homes. Andzani had heard Uncle Sontaga tell his father this.

The prospect of having electricity at their house excited Andzani. This meant he would cease pushing the wheelbarrow with a battery in it every couple of days to Lusaka, thirty

minutes' walk from his house. Power at their house also meant more television time, meaning he wouldn't need to speculate on any missed *Generations* episodes on those days when the battery was getting charged overnight. Although he knew they would need to dig a trench where the cables would run, his father and Uncle Sontaga would do this job quickly. He'd only have to take out soil from the trench using a spade, which was easier than the pick they used to dig with. He'd done the same job when they dug the water pipe trench from the water main line in Lusaka, closer to Buti Ndhuma's house.

Andzani was not aware that his father allocated him these jobs because they were manly. Pete knew that Andzani would cease—on those days when he instructed him to take out soil from the trench and cover the pipes after the installation—doing dishes or cleaning the stoep and sweeping the yard. Chores Violet expected to be done daily. Realising that the effeminate qualities of his son overpowered those destined by his physical attributes, Pete had turned the little boy into a project of turning him into man. He resurrected this project now and again when he had time on his hands.

At first, Pete had tried watching soccer with the boy, and instead of staying up the ninety minutes of the match, the boy fell asleep before half time. After, to encourage the boy, Pete would speak of his time when he was still a soccer player, before his team got sold and they were laid off. He took out a photo album, filled with his youthful days in soccer kits. None of these things had moved the boy; he half listened, giving attention to anything that went past his eyes. When Pete realised this, he'd given the boy garden duty, stopped paying the lawn mower so that his son used a grass cutter to cut the grass and trim its edges. After, he made the boy cut and trim the flowers that ran from the stoep to the gate. The boy's hands had grown calluses and when he complained to Violet, she gave him money to go call the grass mower.

It had taken them a few weeks to dig, connect to the water mainline and install pipes that ran all the way from Lusaka to Mbambamencisi. But at the end, Andzani had been content when he saw water run at his house. The first couple of days after school he'd filled the zinc bathtub Violet used to wash clothes and blankets and sat in there until the sun set and then claimed to have showered when *Backstage* came on.

Pete having disappeared down the road, Andzani's eyes found Neo again as Neo wiped his mouth with his palm and walked the short distance to the kitchen, his bowl empty.

Outside, when Neo and Andzani walked to school, the clouds threatened to pour, only releasing scattered rain drops. The road was uneven with edges in the middle where the rain had swept the topsoil. Andzani knew that by the time they returned from school, the holes would be filled with maize meal sacks packed with sand to allow the bakery lorry to deliver bread to the spaza shops. The previous night Andzani had wished, when he'd heard the rain drumming on his roof, before it lulled him back to sleep, that it should rain till morning so he would not be forced to face his bullies at school.

Hardly was a word exchanged between Andzani and Neo as they walked the way to school. Andzani pointed at major turns and spaza shops so Neo could learn and remember the route. This is the amarula tree, also a taxi rank, but you won't find taxis here, it's a stop and drop. This is a café, they sell food, also it's a hardware, see the timber? You can see it all the way from school, it's so long. This is the fastest route to get to the school, after passing this café you will find this passage. And out of this passage you are met by that big house with the red tile roofing. It is one of the few houses that have tile roofing around here as you can see. After you have passed the house you will see these boulders there, I wonder how they got here, but these big rocks should be the last thing you see before you get to school.

Neo nodded, looking attentively as Andzani pointed at the objects as he spoke. Andzani realised Neo was sweating profusely; even though the sun was still hidden behind clouds, his shirt's underarms were soaked. Andzani pitied this fat kid who would have to walk all this way, back and forth, home to school, every single day. By the end of the year, Andzani thought, Neo will have shed a significant amount of weight.

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Spakuza and Mpanyaza stayed away from him that day and Andzani had learned that the reason behind their odd behavior, was because police officers had recently, on the days Andzani had missed school, raided the school yard. They hadn't given any prior notice, even the principal wasn't made aware they were coming. He'd seen the four vans pull up at the gate after he'd instructed students at assembly to go to their classes. The principal learned from the police that a few parents had complained at the police station that they feared for their children's safety at the school. These learners had returned to their respective homes with anecdotes of how other learners wielded knives in the school grounds and intimidated them. The police also told the principal that they had been given names of students who were top priority.

His classmates, as they filled him in, said Spakuza had first refused to be searched, threatening the police officer who wanted to search him with his father, a well-known taxi boss. But after having two slaps land on him, he'd voluntarily given the officers his school bag. They found a pack of Peter Stuyvesant cigarettes, a matchbox and an unloaded gun in this bag. The police confiscated this, together with the twelve knives they found in other learners' possession. And Mpanyaza? Andzani had asked eagerly. They found a screwdriver and a sachet of weed with that puppy. They laughed, still eager to fill him in, to answer

questions that lingered in his mind. And for the first time since Andzani had been placed in Mrs. Marivate's class, he felt at ease.

The day had gone by and Mrs. Marivate hadn't said anything to him regarding his truant behavior. When some learners arrived late that morning, she didn't make him get up to give an example of a non-late school comer. When she left the classroom for the school's computer lab, she had instructed everyone to take a nap and told him to write down noise makers. These naps were common in the school whenever teachers left their classrooms for a certain amount of time and wanted to keep peace and quiet so not to disrupt the learning of other pupils.

Spakuza had given the coast some time to clear lest Mrs Marivate returned having forgotten something on her table as she normally did when she left the classroom in a hurry. Spakuza usually teased that old age was knocking at her door.

After some time had passed, he moved from his desk and squeezed himself between Andzani and Nyiko, the learner who had regurgitated, to Andzani, everything that had taken place during the police raid.

To avoid Spakuza, Nyiko laid his head on top of the desk, took his school jersey and covered his face to nap. Spakuza's hand had, as Nyiko did this, moved to find Andzani's. He took Andzani's hand, and with the air of someone used to doing it, placed it on his thigh. He looked at Andzani, followed his eyes as they found his hand, the color of brown chocolate, contrasted on top of Spakuza's thigh, the color of ripe pawpaw. Spakuza then extended his neck to peek at the piece of paper Andzani used to write names of those who had already disregarded Mrs. Marivate's instructions. He sat composed, Andzani, and turned his head now and again to the door Mrs. Marivate had shut closed when she left, hoping she'd return to find Spakuza not at his seat. Andzani's hand quivered, and although Spakuza's thigh

emitted heat, goose pimples grew visible on his arm. He shut his eyes momentarily, hoping Spakuza would not force him to move his hand up and down as he usually did. Spakuza was going through the list, slowly, because he struggled to read, as he struggled with any subject presented to him. When finally Andzani let go of the weight of his arm, his palm still and heavy on the yellow of the thigh, he wished his hand dismembered from his body.

Spakuza, having gone through the list, lifted his eyes from the paper and nodded to Mpanyaza on the other side of the class. He put his hand on top of Andzani's on his thigh. And Andzani's started tapping the heel of his foot on the floor, counting, in his head, as he breathed, to ten.

“Kasi Swoyini hi wehe sesi buti?” Spakuza started. “You know you're being dumb by staying away from school? Clearly you haven't heard what Mrs Marivate does to people who truant school?” Spakuza was whispering. He clicked his tongue before continuing. “Entlek, you don't realize that you staying away from school only brings attention to all of us. You are the prefect; she'll always notice when you are not here. And she'll wonder why you're not coming to school. Huh? What will you say when she starts asking questions?” Andzani caught this last part because he hadn't thought carefully what his excuse would be. “Stop acting like a girl, you'll get us into trouble.”

Since Spakuza had settled on his desk, Andzani hadn't met his eyes. And when Andzani turned to find Spakuza's eyes, he struggled to hold his gaze and thus settled for his forehead. Andzani noticed the dark spots that stood out on Spakuza's fair skin, evidence that he'd recently suffered chicken pox. Unlike Neo's freckles that ran the bridge of his nose in a helix shape, as if the maker had taken his time putting them there as decoration, Spakuza's were scattered all over his face. They reminded Andzani of the verse Mrs. Bila read often at the school's assembly—as if the only verse she was familiar with in the entire bible—of the seeds that were scattered on rocks and failed to grow because the rocks didn't have enough

soil to accommodate their growth. “If I hear you said anything about me!” Spakuza shook his head in that threatening manner Andzani had seen Papa Action do in *Yizo Yizo*, forcing Andzani’s gaze to meet his. Andzani stopped tapping his heel when he heard Mpanyaza’s voice.

“He Spakuza? No wrestling match today?”

“Not today, she’s just around the corner. She’ll be back soon.”

Usually during nap time, when Mrs Marivate left the classroom, Spakuza and Mpanyaza lined the classroom desks against the wall, leaving space in the center and forced boys in the class to fight each other, an imitation of the wrestling matches they watched on TV. Mpanyaza would be the referee, imitating, dramatically, WWE referees when they threw themselves on the floor and counted to three. They were always careful with these, when they would ask the participants not to hit each other too much, or when the participants wanted to attempt to jump from a desk onto their opponents, would ask them to do it in slow motion so not to hurt them. Sometimes the boys in the class would volunteer to engage in these wrestling matches; “I am Ray Mysterio,” “I am Eddy Guerrero”, “I’ll be The Undertaker” and “I’ll take you on as Batista”. The girls, the audience, shouting as Ray Mysterio attempted jumping on top of Batista only to land on the floor as Batista would, at the last second, move his body.

Andzani was relieved when he saw the ruby dyed hair—complimenting her fair skin and red lipstick—climb the stoep and head for the classroom door. Mrs Marivate wasn’t a slim woman, nor was she fat, but her weight and age had started altering her gait so that she walked as if something weighed on her.

“Nap time over,” she shouted as she opened the door and walked towards her table, which sat at the front, closer to the steel cabinet so she didn’t obstruct the green board.

Disoriented crumpled faces rose from the desks they had fallen asleep on. Lines ran their cheeks, sweat dribbled down their faces as they had covered their heads with their school jerseys to prevent other learners putting rolled tissue paper, dipped on their tongues, in their ears while they slept. Others wiped, with their palms, drool that streaked their cheeks, using the same palms to wipe it off the desks before wiping their palms on their blue skirts and shorts. Briefly there was a moment of confusion as these faces wondered how they had fallen asleep, where they were, and why they were woken up. And only when they saw Mrs Marivate, remembered they were still in the classroom.

“Wena Spakuza, do you sit there?”

“No ma’am,” Spakuza grumbled.

“Then what are you doing there?” she was looking under her table cover where she often placed important documents during the day before locking them in her cabinet when school came out.

“I wanted Andzani to help me with an exercise I have been struggling with, ma’am.”

Taken aback she stopped searching under the table cover and looked at Spakuza. Pride or something close to it hung fleetingly on her face and having noticed, Spakuza found the confidence to continue speaking.

“Ma’am, I was thinking. Why not sit learners who struggle with their schoolwork with those who excel? I mean look at the back row. Everyone sitting there is dumb, just like me.” The class giggled. Mrs. Marivate pulled her chair to rest her back. “No one is going to pass there, ma’am. And me I would like to leave this grade. Look at these rows here,” Spakuza pointed at the three rows in front. “Everyone performs well. They raise their hands when asked questions, and they do their homework every day. Us at the back ma’am, ah no one is passing. So me I think it would be better if you placed all those kids who don’t perform well

with those who do well. I think I would do better if I stayed with Andzani as opposed to Mpanyaza, he-ma'am."

"Eh? So now you're turning on me?" Mpanyaza retorted.

Spakuza laughed, he was enjoying the attention given to him, freely, without his demanding it. Even Mrs. Marivate was listening to him, considering what he was saying, a rare thing.

"Me and you are friends," Spakuza said to Mpanyaza. "We see each other at home and at school. We don't need to sit together in the classroom."

"You just want to copy Andzani's work," Nyiko said and the class laughed. "There is nothing here."

Spakuza pinched Nyiko on the side, "Heweh, am I speaking to you?"

"Eh, Spakuza leave me alone," Nyiko yelled as he shifted on his seat.

"Spakuza? Go back to your seat," Mrs Marivate barked.

"But ma'am, Andzani's not yet done showing me this exercise."

"I'm not showing him anything," Andzani said under his breath.

"I said go back to your seat," Mrs Marivate was looking at Spakuza over her glasses.

"You'll irritate me soon."

"Eish, ma'am" Spakuza said as he got up.

"I will decide, if I do decide, who I pair you with."

Andzani stood to give way to Spakuza and watched as Spakuza walked the mini distance to his desk, his shoulder slanted, waddling like a duck, an imitation of how pantsula dancers walk, but his was more exaggerated that it instead turned comedic.

"Andzani, come here," Mrs Marivate called out. And Andzani took the list of names with.

Her eyes ran along the names, “the usual culprits. You know what your punishment is. I want to see this class shiny before you leave for home today.” She turned her eyes to Andzani.

“Andzani, I have written a letter to your mother. I gave it to the new kid you came to school with this morning. What is his name?”

“Neo?” Andzani said.

“Yes. Tomorrow I want to see you holding your mother’s hand when you enter this classroom,” she was pointing at the door. “I know you have been missing schools to play arcade games. What’s got into you?”

Andzani’s eyes quickly swept the floor. His right hand fiddled the corner of her table.

“Look at me when I am talking to you.” Andzani lifted his eyes to meet hers, occasionally looking outside the window as he failed to hold Mrs. Marivate’s gaze. There was a group of women in the smallholdings behind the class. These women cooked at the school, and after feeding learners during the first break, moved to work their smallholdings. Right now, they were weeding, clearing weeds that competed in size with the ground nuts. “You think people don’t see you with your school uniform during school time as you waste away money playing nonsense?”

“No.”

“Does your mother know you don’t reach school grounds when you leave home?”

Andzani shook his head.

“Use your words when I am talking to you maan.”

“No, ma’am.”

“You’re giving this school a bad name. You’re no different to the learners who come harboring knives and guns.” She shifted her eyes to Spakuza and Mpanyaza, then back to him.

“Your parents think you leave home for school, kasi NO. You’re gallivanting around, chasing every arcade shop you set your eyes on. Where do you think you will end up? Where do you think people who do not attend school end up? Do you want to be like your parents? Huh? Do you want your children to attend a no fees paying school? Andzani? Cause that is what will happen if you continue with this behavior.”

Only the sound of the fluorescent lamps could be heard interspersing Mrs. Marivate’s voice. One lamp flickered, dark on both its ends. It was only a matter of time before it gave up.

“I want to see your mother in this classroom tomorrow. If you don’t come with her, don’t set your foot in my class. Are we clear?”

Andzani nodded, eyes in the classroom glued to him, and he felt that if she didn’t sit him down, they would see his glistering eyes, tears pushing out the humiliation. And as if his ancestors were listening to him, the bell rang.

“Move away from me,” Mrs Marivate said with what sounded like revulsion. Andzani walked back to his desk.

But she wasn’t ready to dismiss the class yet, she chastised Spakuza and Mpanyaza for having been in possession of illegal weapons in school grounds, Andzani grew impatient. He’d wanted to run to Neo’s class, negotiate if he could be the person to hand the letter to Violet. She was, after all, his mother. Mrs Marivate told Spakuza she wanted to see his father. Mpanyaza, I will deal with you, she said. I don’t want that old woman dragging herself to school because your head is filled with water. Remember that if that old woman dies, you will be left alone with no one to care for you. Continue trailing Spakuza. You will kill the old woman.

By the time Andzani got to Neo’s class, Neo had long gotten entangled within the large threads of learners who rushed out of the school gate in their yellow shirts and blue shorts

and skirts that covered their tiny legs and took the best route that would get them home quicker.

. . .

“Where is Neo?” Violet asked Andzani as he walked into the house, sweat dripping down his forehead, his cheeks, like rain drops on a windowpane. The rain that fell the previous night had been a relief, and as if the sun regretted this kind gesture, came parching, doing away with any evidence of its neglect. The road was now dry.

“Is he not back yet?” Andzani, thinking of the journey he’d have to make back to the school if Neo had not returned, asked, his shoulders drooping.

“No.” Violet said as she moved closer to him, a dish cloth in hand. “Did you not tell him where to find you after school?”

“I told him. I even showed him the spot, outside his class on the stoep,” Andzani sat on the sofa. “I told him to sit there and wait for me but then Mrs Marivate kept us in the class longer.”

“And you are certain he understood you?”

“Yes.”

There was a moment when Andzani recalled Neo’s reaction when he told him to wait for him after school. Andzani remembered his mangled sentences, a bit of Sesotho here with a dose of Xitsonga to finish off the sentence. Andzani hated the relationship he had with the Sotho language, his mother was a Mosotho woman and his father, Tsonga. And because Andzani had spent a lot of time with his father’s side of the family, Sesotho became indecisive on his tongue. Not certain if it was there to stay or leave, it always betrayed him. When he’d manage through sentences, he’d be proud and at other times, mostly when in need for it to show up and be present, would disappoint him, becoming unstable on his tongue.

Like when he'd told Neo to wait for him after school, there had been more Tsonga than Sotho in his sentences and he feared that Neo might have misunderstood him. There had been a brief moment of incomprehensiveness on Neo's face, then a light bulb moment when Andzani had pointed to the stoep and added Sotho to the Tsonga. Neo had been eager to get into his classroom and had grown impatient with Andzani's talking. When he saw learners pushing each other at the door, trying to get into the classroom to secure the best desks, Neo fled.

"Mhani, I pointed where I wanted to find him waiting for me and he nodded his head," Andzani wiped sweat with his arm, leaving dark streaks on his shirt. "I think he left with the group of kids he laughed with and entertained during our first break."

Violet hung the dish cloth on the pan stand before going to her bedroom to apply lotion on her hands. When she came out, she had a sun hat on her head and a cap dangled on her fingers. Andzani took it.

"Go back, use the same route you used in the morning when you walked to school. Look for him at the school, ask people if they saw him. I will use the route going to the bus stop."

Andzani took off his shirt, wet under the arms and on the back. He put on a t-shirt before journeying under the blistering sun back to the school. He took the route to Lusaka, passed the amarula tree where they had heard Zola's Mzioni in the morning. There were a few scattered vendors now, schools being out, some had begun packing their stock. He asked a few of them if they had seen Neo; with impatience they shook their heads. Andzani wandered down the main road leading to the ZCC church, stopping at each intersection connected to the main road to inspect, hoping to see Neo walking aimlessly. Nothing. When he got to the ZCC church, he asked a lady who wore a ZCC badge if she had seen Neo. She was young, this lady, unlike the old women he associated the church with, and in the

blistering sun, she wore a jersey and tied a doek on her head. She held a plastic bag with a two liters coke bottle; in it, tea.

“Sorry sesi, have you seen a fat kid wearing a yellow shirt and blue shorts? He was coming from school; he goes to Banana Primary.”

Andzani felt tears rush to his eyes each time he had to describe Neo to strangers, imagined never finding Neo again, imagined the sadness on Ousie Ketsi’s face. Everyone blaming him.

It was the same case now, tears had welled, and the lady having noticed, quickly replied.

“Does he have freckles on his face?” the lady asked in Sotho.

And Andzani nodded, vigorously, finally someone had seen Neo. Hope unfurled in him as she pointed, speaking. “I sent him back to the school. He didn’t know where he was going. Run back to the school, you might find him.”

Andzani’s strides were urgent, hurried as he walked towards the school’s direction.

The school yard was deserted, there was only, at the corner of the school, a few boys, younger than him, standing next to the stinging nettle tree. On their hands were plastic bags that held the stinging nettle leaves between their fingers, threatening to rub it on each other’s skin. Andzani remembered the day Spakuza rubbed those leaves on his desk, when his thighs had turned red and bumps developed where the skin raged as if blood wanted to escape but the skin wouldn’t budge. Andzani had run to the taps at the back of grade one classrooms, rubbed water on his thighs and applied vaseline on them, but the swelling hadn’t gone down until he’d placed his school jersey on the desk and sat on top of it. When the school bell rang, and he’d walked past the tree, he saw a woman, with a plastic bowl, plucking off the leaves. The woman wore gloves to protect herself from the stings. Andzani had heard that people ate the stinging nettle leaves, but he’d never seen anyone pluck off its leaves for cooking.

Now he walked towards the kids and asked if they had seen the new fat kid who arrived at the school that day. The kids pointed to the direction he was coming from. They knew Neo, had been part of the group that tailed him during breaktime. But he'd just come from where they were pointing at.

Dejected, Andzani gave up, took the route leading to the hardware store, to check once more if Neo hadn't found his way home.

"Where did you find him?" Andzani asked Violet when he walked into the kitchen, she was busy dishing food. He had passed Neo outside on the veranda, sitting on top of the wooden foot stool Pete had made out of pallets. Neo had unbuttoned his shirt, taken off his shoes and placed them next to him. He was eating his lunch box, indifferent to Andzani's greeting as Andzani walked past. Relief had flooded Andzani when he got to the gate and saw Neo, when his eyes started to lose the red in them.

"I found him at the bus stop, sitting under the amarula tree, he said he was waiting for his mother." Violet gave Andzani a plate of food, looking at him, she saw the fatigue on his face, heard it in his tone when he said, "this kid is crazy." Andzani had noticed how unusually calm Violet had been as he took the plate. He placed it next to the bucket of water, picked up the half-filled jug and downed it.

"Don't fill your stomach with water before you've had your food, Andzani. You won't finish."

"I will," Andzani said as he took a break from gulping water. After, he took his plate of food and went to settle next to Neo. He had forgotten about the letter, about Mrs Marivate and while he sat eating, the thoughts prodded his mind. He wondered if Neo had already given Violet the letter, and afraid to ask for fear she would hear, he instead asked why Neo hadn't waited for him outside his class.

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Violet did not use the route Andzani had showed Neo when she walked with them to school the following morning. Instead, she led them through the one that passed by the fig tree, where community meetings were usually held. It was a large tree in the middle of a vacant plot. There was enough space for everyone to stand and listen to the councilor speak. A foot path traversed the plot diagonally, it existed because people crossed this meeting place to get to the other side of the road that spat them at the hardware shop. From there, to get to the school, they would go down the road to find the passage Andzani had showed Neo.

When they got to the school, the principal had just dismissed the assembly gathering and students rushed to their classrooms. Violet told Neo to go to his class, and she watched him as he strutted and climbed the steps to his classroom before she pushed Andzani forward to lead her to his.

Mrs Marivate had just settled on her chair, learners walked through the door, some taking off their school jerseys as the sun's rays threatened through the morning clouds.

"Avuxeni ma'am," greeted Violet as she stepped into the classroom, the small eyes in the classroom rushing to cling on her. Andzani was next to her, but his eyes rushed to where Spakuza and Mpanyaza sat, and this time, his gaze stayed with them until the exchange of greetings had been concluded between Violet and Mrs. Marivate, when Mrs. Marivate turned to him and said, "I see you have received my letter."

"Yes ma'am. It found its way to me." Violet said.

"I've been sending word of mouth, but you know how kids are. Always forgetful. Some even complained they stayed far from your house. So I let them be."

"It is quite a walk ma'am. It is tiring too."

"Did you know he was truanting school?" Mrs. Marivate took the extra chair she'd put her handbag on and gave it to Violet.

“I was surprised, ma’am. There was no change in behavior or anything. His daily pattern remained the same. That is the reason my guard was down.”

“An owner of a tuck-shop that has these things. . .arcade games these children like to play, told me, as I was walking home, that a young boy from my school frequented his shops during school time and that he had chased him away a few times. When I asked him to describe this young boy—Andzani in his entirety.”

“I wish I knew what was going on with this child,” said Violet.

“He’s a smart boy, it saddens me that he’s suddenly developed this rotting behavior,” Mrs Marivate said, and then she lowered her voice. “Is everything alright at home?”

Violet nodded, “Yes. Of course. Everything in my house is fine”. “Whatever it is that is keeping him away from school has got nothing to do with my household, nor does it stem from my parenting ways.”

Mrs Marivate nodded vigorously as Violet spoke.

Violet turned to Andzani who stood behind her. “Why are you truanting school?”

Andzani fidgeted with the nail he’d been biting.

“Answer your mom when she is talking to you,” Mrs. Marivate raised her voice.

“It is nothing.”

“So you decided to not show up at school for no reason?” asked Violet.

Andzani remained quiet, his eyes glued to his hands.

“Speak! If you don’t say anything how will I know what is keeping you away from school?” added Violet.

Andzani felt a wave of anticipation in the classroom, everyone waiting on him to speak his truth, to reveal this thing that had kept him away from school. He looked at Nyiko and was met by what he thought was a look of encouragement, but then he made the mistake of shifting his eyes so that they found Spakuza and Mpanyaza again. He remembered the day

behind the school's latrines as he watched them, both slouching on their desks, their eyes boring into him. He staggered a bit, his hand finding the corner of the desk to support his frame. Spakuza's eyes had reddened and Mpanyaza's nostrils flared wide. Andzani swallowed.

"Why don't you want to come to school, Andzani?" Violet had grown impatient. Andzani was familiar with the trembling voice, heard it many times when Violet exchanged words with Pete. He felt apprehensive.

"I was scared of the weapons that were seized by the police."

"What?" that was Violet, taken aback.

"Police came and searched the whole school," Mrs. Marivate began. "I could not believe it either, but they retrieved a gun, from this very class, and knives from other learners in this school. The principal is planning to meet all parents this coming weekend. To give greater clarity regarding what happened. Learners should return home today with written invitations to the meeting. He's always been slow, that principal of ours."

Violet, feeling she'd lost hold of the issue at hand turned to Andzani. "You never told me this Andzani, why?"

"I was scared, he-mhani. . .that the learners would bully me if I told on them."

Violet only needed to look at her son to tell he was lying. She had birthed the boy, she knew every part of his body, and now could tell he was lying to her.

"Are you going to tell me the truth or do you want us to get it out of you?"

Andzani remained quiet.

"Andzani?" Violet yelled, but Andzani's eyes swept the floor. "Ma'am, I think the punishment you outlined on the letter will suffice," she asserted.

Violet was suddenly overwhelmed, unable to locate the source of her anger—was it because Andzani had been missing school and she hadn't been the one to clock it first or was

it that he had just blatantly lied to her in front of everyone, or was it that the school had not informed parents about pressing issues that concerned them and their children's safety—she tapped her foot furiously on the floor?

“Andzani? Do you want to tell us what is going on?” Mrs. Marivate gave Andzani another chance.

There was new insolence in Andzani's demeanor now, defiance caused by the fact that even if he told the truth, they were not going to believe him. Spakuza and Mpanyaza were in the room, watching his every move, every facial expression he made. He shrugged his shoulders. Telling on them would only exacerbate their bullying tendencies. Half the class called him a lady when he wrote their names on the noise maker's list; they were listening, to find things to use against him in the future. He refused to give them that. Whatever punishment came his way would be better than being subjected, after school, to more of the gruesome experience he'd gone through.

Andzani had no idea what punishment was outlined in the letter as Violet had not mentioned it to him the previous night after the day's debacle. He'd heard her fill in Ousie Ketsi on Neo getting lost, and the electricity they were planning on connecting from section B, when Violet enquired if Ousie Ketsi wanted in. Nothing on the letter.

“Spakuza, Mpanyaza...line the desks,” Mrs. Marivate called out and Spakuza and Mpanyaza got up from their desks, eager for the task at hand, and like people who had undertaken it countless times, they moved the four learners that occupied the two front desks, pushed the desks forward and joined them together so that they formed a line. Andzani had heard a little about Mrs. Marivate's Magada Hanci, horse riding, it was a punishment reserved for the most severe misconduct. No one knew where the name came from. Spakuza and Mpanyaza were familiar with the punishment as they were ancestors in the classroom. They repeated grades before progressing to the next. And because their age didn't allow for

them to still be in primary school anymore, the principal didn't think twice whenever presented with the argument of promoting them to subsequent grades.

"Take off your shoes and sit on top of the desk," Mrs Marivate instructed, grabbing the steel cabinet keys on top of her table.

Reluctantly Andzani got on top of the desks.

"Your legs must be straightened," Spakuza said, pushing Andzani's legs flat on the desks.

Mrs. Marivate retrieved a pipe, a thick orange pipe the length of her arm from the steel cabinet. She had come with the pipe to school after renovations were done at her house and had stored it in the cabinet with everyone in the classroom watching.

"Hold him," she instructed. And like soldiers trained for this moment, Spakuza and Mpanyaza moved into position; Spakuza stood behind him, clasping Andzani's arms with his own around Andzani's back. Tight. While Mpanyaza held the length of Andzani's legs flat against the desks so that he couldn't wriggle himself free.

Mrs. Marivate raised her arm high and brought it back with such ferocity that Andzani winced as the pipe landed under his feet. And because Andzani could not move his feet, he curled his toes.

Mrs. Marivate.

"These legs lead you astray. They are the reason you don't want to come to school," she said, stroke after stroke. "Next time your feet want to lead you astray, let this be a reminder that you will feel pain, that they only bring you pain. Do you hear me?"

Andzani.

Could only curl his toes, each stroke worsening the pain beneath his feet. He'd started writhing his body, like maggots.

"I'll never do it again, ma'am," he twisted and managed to lay sideways, facing Violet. "Mhani, please tell her to stop. I'll never do it again. I promise I'll never do it again." He begged.

Mrs. Marivate.

"Of course, you won't do it again. No learner of mine will truant school to only become a wanderer in the community with nothing to do but crime."

Violet.

Stood back watching, hoping this was the best decision for her son, the bible did say, 'he who spares his rod hates his son, but he who loves him disciplines him promptly.' This was after all, for his own good. She hadn't attended school, not because she didn't want to but because during school time she'd had to work on farms, put food on the table and take care of her brother, Sontaga. Andzani had everything, attended school for free, what was keeping him away from school?

Everyone in the classroom.

Watched, a lesson to them should they even think of becoming little truants.

After countless whips, Mrs Marivate gave the pipe to Violet. Discipline your child, she said. Violet took the pipe, hesitantly she moved forward. She looked at Andzani, for a long time. He'd ceased screaming, his throat dry, he only let tears run his face, carving paths, routes, where streaks of tears would follow, cross his nose bridge into the ear, leaving a cold sensation, others trailing on his cheeks and coming into contact with his watery mucus.

Violet placed the pipe on top of the table. She moved back.

“I think that is enough.”

Andzani felt the grips loosen, his body jelly like on top of the desk before he attempted climbing off. He turned his head and found his mother, and with wounded eyes he stared at her before getting off the desks. Needles of stinging pain shot through his feet as he stepped on the cold floor and walked the short distance to his desk.

At his desk, Andzani looked at his hands as they quivered, past his hands to the woman's chest drawn on the desk—breasts pointy, a few smiley faces beneath this drawing accompanied by a name and ‘was here’ at the end. Eyes were on him, consoling eyes, eyes that thought he deserved more, eyes that were indifferent to his pain as it did not concern them, and eyes that wondered what would happen next.

Andzani lay his head on top of the pointy breasts and covered his head with his school jersey; tears continued trailing, landing on top of the breasts, the smiles, and the name—streaks of tears meandering on top of the desk.

Violet had left without saying goodbye, and Andzani refusing Mrs. Marivate's attempts at making him pay attention to the day's lessons, lay his head on his desk the rest of the day.

When the bell rang, signaling the end of the school day, Andzani walked out of the classroom, paying no mind to those learners who attempted to catch his gaze. He did not bother to wait for Neo as he walked out of the school yard. He walked the long way home,

and when he got to his house, passed it, passed his street and knocked on Uncle Sontaga's door. The door opened, a smile fading on Uncle Sontaga's face when he saw Andzani.

"I never want to go back to that school," Andzani said before breaking down in front of him.

Uncle Sontaga stood holding the door, curious at Andzani's assertion. Then, he opened it wide, letting him pass in.

Chapter 4

Mbambamencisi

2005

When Pete staggered into the house with a puppy, Violet and Andzani thought he'd stolen it on the road on his way home. Pete's drinking had become exacerbated to a point that doing questionable things had become a norm and one could not put stealing puppies past him. Recently he'd cut the Izinyoka electrical cables powering his neighbors' homes, the very same people who had mobilized and contributed money with him to buying the electrical cables needed to install the illegal connections from section B. And because they had failed to wake up, just one time, in the middle of the night the last time officials cut and took their electrical cables, Pete demanded they pay for the stolen cables; this was after Pete and Andzani had had to run beneath the jackal berry tree, past the gleaming stream under the moon, to cut the cables on the other side so officials didn't follow them back to their homes. The following day Andzani's legs had become swollen from mosquito bites. Pete hadn't wanted to find a common ground, and because they feared for their packed freezers filled with meat that would rot should they defy and refuse to pay him, they obliged. They had become attuned to his unreasonable behavior, and not wanting to deal with him, often relented to his demands in order to avoid igniting even the slightest of conflicts.

Since the ancestral ceremony had taken place, Pete's drinking had become unparalleled because the results had not been instant as he had anticipated. And with each day that passed, Andzani felt it gnawed at his father's patience, at his hope. After losing his job at the Mayonnaise firm, no, after getting fired, Pete had gone rogue, no longer reserving his drinking for the weekend, but drinking whenever the opportunity presented itself in between his job hunting. And when he'd had to bury his daughter—his second child with Violet, Andzani's younger sister who only smelled the earthy scent for three months—the drinking had become ceremonious, that the moment he opened his eyes he would locate a quart of beer. Each morning, when he woke up, Pete would wash off the previous night's babalas with a couple of quarts, to only get drunk and repeat the process the following morning. A dog chasing its tail.

The drinking had started to shrivel Violet and Pete's union, or what was left of their marriage. Like a garden left unattended, invasive weeds had started to sprout uncontrollably. Pete's ceremonious drinking had been accompanied by a buffet of blame that he dished out for breakfast, lunch and supper. He blamed Violet for the death of their child. He reminded her of how she had dismissed him when he'd suggested they introduce the child to the ancestors; how Violet had looked away when he took out the small sachet that contained grounded aloe roots he'd been given by his mother to administer to the baby for her soft spot. He blasphemed Violet's God for failing to save the child because Violet had dismissed the traditional ceremonies and herbs he'd brought forward citing it went against her faith. He told Violet his ancestors failed to save the child because they didn't know her. Her God knew the child, he just didn't care. Each day, Pete returned home drunk with a different musical note that drove Violet to tears.

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On the day Andzani found out his sister had passed, he had been sitting atop a guava tree branch, chewing on the guava seeds even though aware they made it harder for him to defecate.

He saw Violet walk towards their gate, she hadn't called Pete or Uncle Sontaga to come pick her up from the hospital, nor had she alerted Ousie Ketsi she was being discharged. Pete and Uncle Sontaga had driven her to the hospital when the baby had struggled to breathe, after Violet had screamed at Andzani to run and call his uncle. On that day Uncle Sontaga drove her to the hospital, Violet had fed the child and put her to sleep before going outside to resume her task of refilling the water drums because they were running out—water had become rationed, the municipal turning it on at certain times during the day. She returned to her bedroom, her top soaking wet from lifting bucket after bucket of water into the drums. After taking off her top at the entrance of her bedroom, she noticed the flaring nostrils, rushed towards the baby and placed her cheek against the baby's mouth and nose to listen to her breathing rate. And when nothing came for some time, she'd grown alarmed, placing her cold palm on the baby's chest before screaming Andzani's name. That was before a succession of waves hit the front of Violet's head, leaving her drowsy and triggering the release of tears that hindered normal breathing.

Andzani was watching her from the top of the guava tree, like a hawk spying on its victim as she walked into the yard with the baby bag. She held the blanket, folded delicately, with both hands closest to her chest. She had taken a taxi home, one of the small Ventures that transported locals to Letaba Hospital, that they had both used when he still frequented Letaba for his prescriptions. He wondered where his baby sister was as he made his way down the tree trunk. Andzani had anticipated that she would scold him for climbing the guava tree because she'd told him to cease doing so. But Violet, without acknowledging him, had walked into the house, to her bedroom where Andzani heard a screech, forcing him to jump

down the rest of the way and dash to his mother's bedroom. He found her holding onto the blanket tightly to her chest. She stuffed it into her mouth when she saw him emerge from the doorway as she realised she had alarmed him and tried preventing her shrieks from reaching passersby. Each shriek left her neck bulging with veins, her face tight and wet, she seemed tired—tired of crying, tired of breathing, tired of walking, and tired of controlling her own frame. When she started gasping for air, Andzani pulled the small blanket away from her mouth before rushing out the door, hitting the frame with his ankle so that his leg froze momentarily before he limped his way to Ous Ketsi's house.

The blaming had not ceased after the burial. Pete blamed Violet for the ancestral ceremony not yielding any fruitful results. He gave examples of members of his clan who were already basking in the fruits of their labor; some bought cars, some resuscitated their businesses whereas his job hunting never yielded anything tangible other than promises sworn by dry lips motivated by bribery that changed tunes when the time to deliver on promises made came. All the energy he'd put into the ceremony, into building the small mud hut the ancestors demanded, money spent on food, and all he received were anecdotes of his clansmen's progress. He swore he only wanted participation from Violet, support, but no, she had cemented her position to stand against him and his ancestral belief—all facilitated by the black book she consumed daily. Pete had cited the bible that sat on Violet's side of the bed on top of the nightstand, as the source of Violet's disobedience. It derailed his attainment of greener pastures, as he liked to call it. Was it not Violet who wanted nothing to do with the ancestral ceremony when it was announced? Who made him beg to take his own son to the ceremony? What was she constantly kneeling and begging her heavenly father for? If not for him to not progress? Her holy book had become a tall wall that hindered his progress in life.

And each time Pete sounded this monotonous monologue, all Violet could do was listen, let the words fill her, feel her stomach sag, the words finding comfort as they unsettled her. Most times when Pete started, Violet negotiated getting up and leaving him alone in the sitting room. But always this was countered by intrusive thoughts that worried her about the effects of walking away from him—something she always cautioned Andzani against, walking away when someone was talking to you was disrespectful. Pete had never laid hands on her, but she attributed this to the advice she'd once heard, a piece of advice many women said saved them from their husbands, that when their husbands started with their squabbles, they filled a glass with water, and instead of drinking it, let it fill their cheeks, inhibiting the urge to retort which would end in an exchange of blows. Violet never filled a glass with water but bit her tongue and felt blood seep and dilute her rage whenever she was overcome by the urge to speak, retaliate. She knew that a day would come when Pete's words would cease having an impact on her, when Pete would realize this and resort to physical violence, but until that day arrived, she swore to never lose control of her tongue.

Lately Pete had started blaming the pamphlets that a watchtower woman had left with Violet after she'd heard about the loss of her child. Sometimes this watchtower woman would study these pamphlets with Violet under the mango tree, cross referencing the passages with bible verses—this was to facilitate Violet's healing journey, to suture the gashes in her faith and restore her belief. And it did work, Andzani had started to see the benefit of these consultations with the watchtower woman; Violet had started moving around more, doing things on her own again, her occasional tantrums had returned when she found the kitchen a mess, clearing it while complaining Andzani would miss her once she's dead because he couldn't do things on his own. She was a slave, wasn't she? But he loved that she had returned to cooking his favorite Sunday meals, that she let him go with Neo when he was supposed to mop the front stoep.

Pete never acknowledged the watchtower woman when he walked into his yard to find them studying the bible under the mango tree, or when the shade disappeared, forcing Violet and the woman to move to the stoep and bear his disgusted gaze as he passed by. Each time, Pete would walk into the house, into his bedroom, where Violet would soon hear him wheezing.

And then one-night Pete had returned home, drunk, as had become habitual, to find Violet sleeping in their bedroom. Violet had read her bible as always and had left it open on top of her nightstand. She faced the bible each night when she slept, as if left open, the bible would cast away demons in the middle of the night. That night when she heard the door squeak, her mind raced as she wondered what had changed. Pete had ceased sleeping in the same bed as her, often falling asleep in the sitting room after stuffing himself with food she'd left for him on the table. That night he'd pushed open their bedroom door soon after she'd heard the kitchen door unlock. She didn't move, feigning sleep, she let her eyes remain closed.

She heard the staggered footsteps, as Pete swayed and found the bed to support his weight. But then the alcohol had a greater say in this willful composure as he slipped on the rug he'd forgotten was in his bedroom. He pushed the bed slightly as he slouched against it, miming 'fok' and like a naughty child, put his index finger on his lips to quieten himself. He held the bed when he brought his weight up, and two steps forward he managed to reach Violet's nightstand. She could smell the brewery that had followed him home, felt the shadow of her bible pass her closed eyelids in Pete's hands, felt when the hand went down again to return with the pamphlets that had been beneath the bible.

A certain confidence had grown in his footsteps when he'd walked out of the bedroom, having achieved his mission with little hassle.

She saw the fire through the curtain; when it reached its peak, devouring the pages, forming a silhouette of the man who stood drunk before it, a man she once could not fall asleep without, feeding it, pamphlet after pamphlet, tearing off pages for its easier consumption. That night he came to sleep in his bedroom, and she could smell the cocktail of brewery, puke, paraffin and smoke. He returned to his bedroom confident that night because he had got rid of the things that were the source of his stagnation. And as he lay snoring next to her, she struggled to pull the covers and cover her head because he hadn't bothered to get beneath the covers.

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So when he opened the door that Friday night, so drunk that he stumbled on the mat written 'welcome' at the entrance, Pete had lost grip of the two liters of *umqombothi* that met the floor, but held firmly this puppy buried within his arms. Violet had been the first to notice the black puppy with a brown blanket running beneath its stomach, lodged within Pete's arms.

"Vava Andzani, Andzani's father," Violet exclaimed, causing the dog to raise its head to locate where the voice was coming from. Violet hadn't spoken to Pete since the night he burned her bible, but she knew that a dog would instigate Andzani's rash that had long disappeared so that she no longer had to frequent Letaba hospital for his prescriptions.

Andzani turned his eyes from the episode of *Scandal* to this man who was about to start his daily tantrums.

"Where did you get the dog?" Andzani heard his mother ask, and without waiting for his father's response he heard her add, "I don't want a dog in my house. Take it outside." She blew wind with the back of her fingers, motioning for Pete to turn back.

Andzani heard Pete say, "eh" and as if he had not heard Violet, he shuffled past him, between the couch and coffee table space, past Violet and was at his couch, a single couch

that he'd reserved for himself when the set was delivered and still smelled of the shop. No one was allowed to sit on this couch. Before he lost his job, when he would return home to find Andzani slouching on the couch, would turn a blind eye to it, turning on his small radio to listen to the evening news on Mughana Lonene FM before asking Violet to make him tea. And then weekends would come when he didn't have work and would spend his days drinking; then, everything he'd witnessed, disapproved of but sponged in silence, including Andzani sitting on his couch, would be regurgitated in detail and Andzani and Violet reminded of their place in the household.

When Pete got to his reserved couch, he placed the puppy down, shuffled past Andzani again and went into his bedroom where he returned with a blue towel Violet usually laid on his pillow when he was drunk and feared he would puke all over his pillow. He laid the towel comfortably on the couch before placing the puppy back on top. It fell asleep, the puppy.

"This is our sofa now. If I am not here, Jabu must be here," Pete said, his words slurred. "When I come back home, I need to find Jabu alone on this couch." He took a seat on the two-seater next to it.

"Jabu?" Andzani heard Violet ask. She had become silent, watching Pete's movements. Andzani suspected it was to curb her irritation at having a dog in her house. "So you brought a dog home because you do not want your son to sit on your couch? Imihlo nwhaku!"

And although it was a question, Pete knew she wasn't waiting for a response because she'd already clapped her hands once and turned her eyes back to the screen.

"Jabulani Dlomo?" Andzani enquired of his father. "From *Generations*?" When Pete nodded sternly, Andzani fought hard to withhold the bubbles in his chest from erupting, but he burst into laughter, shaking his head and returned his eyes to the TV. The dog raised its head as if he'd sensed the tense atmosphere when he'd got into the house and now welcomed the ease in the air.

The room became dark, power cut.

“Iyoh,” Andzani heard Pete say. And immediately got up and opened the door to check if there was also power outage in section B where they had connected their izinyoka from.

Andzani saw Neo unlocking his gate, a torch flashing the way.

“Andzani?” Uncertain, Neo shouted when he heard the door open. “Let’s go!”

“Let me quickly change into long pants, I’m coming!” Andzani replied.

“Is there power in section B?” Enquired Violet.

“Yes,” Andzani said, and moved toward Pete, “Papa, can I have your phone, I want to use the torch. Neo is waiting for me outside.”

Pete took out his Nokia 1100 from his pocket and handed it to Andzani.

“Are you not wearing long pants?” Asked Violet.

“I’m going to change,” Andzani said and promptly walked to his room. In his room he shouted, “he-mhani, have you seen the pliers?”

“Is it not on the vegetable rack in the kitchen? I last saw it there.”

Violet got up from the couch and walked into the kitchen, opening one of the drawers, she retrieved a candle and a matchbox. She lit the candle and placed it at the center, on the floor.

Usually when the power went out, Pete would be the first to get up and locate the pliers. Andzani would trail his father as he exited the gate for the small forest that shrouded the small stream separating Nkowankowa section B to Mbambamencisi. But tonight? Aided by the dark, Pete was already falling asleep on the couch next to his dog.

When Andzani emerged from his room, Violet handed him the pliers. “Call Sontaga to go with you,” she turned to look at Pete. “You can see how useless he is on the couch.”

Andzani found Neo sitting on a small boulder next to his gate. “Is your father not coming with us tonight?” Neo asked him.

“He’s drunk,” Andzani said, holding his hand out for Neo to get up. “Let’s check Uncle Sonti there and see if he can come with us.”

“Do you have pliers,” Neo asked.

“Why would you leave your house to fix electrical cables without pliers?”

“I have cables with me,” Neo pointed to the backpack on his back. “Just couldn’t find our pliers in the dark at home.”

“You have a torch with you, Neo!”

“And then wena? Why are you acting like an old man?”

“No one has come out of their homes; it is only the two of us. But when we fix the power,” Andzani shook his head, “you will see, they will be quick to plug all their electrical appliances and our bulbs will dim.”

“Fridges won’t work,” concurred Neo. “But ke, you know all these households are women led, the husbands useless, all of them. Swi dyisiwile.” Neo flung his arm around Andzani. “Also, it’s not every day I see you holding pliers.” He laughed.

Andzani removed Neo’s arm from around him. “You’re slowing my pace.”

“I hope you know how to use it,” Neo said, laughing. Andzani had never used the pliers to fix electrical cables. He used it when they went to fix their water pipes, but where Andzani had inserted a piping fitting and used wire to tighten the ends of the connection was easily recognizable because it was often sloppy. When Pete, Uncle Sontaga or Neo cut and reconnected cables, Andzani carried the torch, handed them masking tape and the testing lightbulbs. He never agreed to use the pliers.

“And did you bring gloves?” Andzani asked Neo before they turned the corner and saw Uncle Sontaga’s yard.

“Yah, remember the bag carries everything.”

The bag always contained the necessary tools; testing lightbulbs, masking tapes, gloves, and spare cables should they need to replace stolen or burnt ones. And of course, Pliers.

“Okay, I don’t see Uncle Sonti’s car there,” Andzani said. “I don’t think he’s home.”

“Let’s go,” Neo said. But Andzani stood back, hesitant. Neo had started walking towards the stream through the footpath that had become bald over time as they walked, back and forth, installing and fixing cables, or when they went to eat jackal berries after school.

“I am not touching electricital cables,” Andzani said.

“As if you ever do. I will do it.”

“Neo? You know they don’t like it when you fix electricity unobserved. We’ll return when Uncle Sonti is back.”

“You worry too much, Andzani, come, let’s go.”

Andzani stood there and watched Neo.

“Andzani!”

Andzani shook his head, took out Pete’s phone and turned on the torch. He followed the footpath.

“I don’t have enough cables in the bag to fix this, can you see where the burn starts, from the jackal berry tree past the stream to the other side, can you see?”

Neo asked Andzani as he shone the torch, following the cables’ length above the non-flowing stream of water that had turned green. They were standing under the jackal berry tree. Andzani nodded, he could smell the burnt wires. The cables snaked under the root of the tree, the one root that grew exposed on top of the soil, turned into a V-elbow-shape. The cables, red, green and black were inserted under the elbowing root and tied around it, countless times, to prevent thieves stealing them in the middle of the night. On the ground

were jackal berries, dried, and some, eaten by birds. Those lazy to climb the tree ate the ones already nibbled by birds, their seeds exposed. Andzani loved these ones as he rarely climbed the tree.

“Good,” said Andzani. “We cannot do anything about this until day light tomorrow. Let’s go back.”

“Says who?” Neo asked as he traversed, diagonally, forming a new footpath, across the small shrubs that separated their cables and the cables of the man who sold Pete weed. Andzani knew what Neo was about to do.

“Neo don’t start with your mischief.”

“Andzani, you need to relax.”

“What if they find out?”

“Who’s going tell them? In any case, it’s only for tonight. We’ll come remove it tomorrow morning when we have cables to replace the burnt ones.”

“Their bulbs will dim, and they will notice their power has been stolen. You know your neighbors always connect a lot of appliances.”

“Do you want to sleep in the dark tonight?” Neo asked Andzani as he unzipped the backpack. There was silence. “Exactly! These cables are not long enough to run across the stream, but they are long enough to run across and connect to these ones.” Neo said, handing Andzani the torch.

Andzani shone the torch as Neo unraveled the roll of cable, measuring it from the cables they were about to connect from to the tree, where they would connect to theirs. Andzani walked next to Neo, illuminating the way. He stomped the ground now and again because mosquitoes had started feeding on his feet.

“And he’s not wearing sneakers again,” Neo said, disappointment accompanying his tone.

“I was in a hurry,” Andzani was indifferent.

Neo stopped what he was doing—passing cables under clumps of small bush, hiding them from view—to meet Andzani’s gaze. “What if you step on a bare wire? What if a bare wire scratches your foot? Death! You will die. Do you not understand that?” Neo said, his tone earnest.

“It won’t happen,” Andzani replied in a low voice.

“Eh!” Neo said as he moved past him, pushing the cable fiercely under weeds. Andzani stomped his feet once more.

“Stop it. You’re making noise. Akere you do not want to wear sneakers. ”

“So you’re angry now?” Andzani asked.

Rarely did Neo raise his voice at Andzani, and when he did, it was always to caution him. It was a side of Neo Andzani chose to overlook because he knew the reason behind the budding persona that grew overprotective and shielded him from people’s derision. And it was times like this, when they encountered fraught situations, that the side became enhanced, made worse. Andzani was always unsure how to behave in most cases. Often falling silent until Neo was calm and speaking to him again.

After uncle Sontaga spoke to Violet and they had decided to move Andzani from Banana Primary to Bombeleni Primary School, Spakuza and Mpanyaza had diverted their attention to Neo. At first, they teased him, called him fats, then grew tender towards him when Neo shared his lunch money with them and hung around them during break time. Then they had let him in on their secret. They told him what they had done to Andzani behind the school’s pit latrines, and because Andzani was no longer at the school, they could laugh about it without getting into trouble. Neo had told Andzani he knew the reason Andzani changed schools. Since then, he’d started acting differently in Andzani’s presence. He took

pity on him, cautious of the words he used in his presence, and ceased teasing him about his feminine attributes.

It had grown, this caution, that when Neo started frequenting Setice's gym, when the other boys who spent their time smoking marijuana at the gym spoke ill of Andzani, Neo would opt out of the conversations, and over time had grown to chastising them. He would tell them that he and Andzani were brothers because they had grown up together, then asked them where they found the guts to speak ill of his brother. And when some rebutted this assertion, a fight ensued. Setice often broke off these fights, giving Neo stern warnings and claiming that he would prevent him frequenting the gym, but he never did, because he was fond of Neo. Many people were fond of Neo. Uncle Sontaga often said Neo was an old man in a young boy's body, and Andzani knew that Uncle Sontaga liked that Neo was hands on, that he took initiative whereas, he, Andzani, needed to be instructed what to do. At funerals Neo would get hold of the spade, shoving soil back into graves with the other boys who frequented Setice's gym, while Andzani stood a distance away from the gaping hole that would induce ceaseless dreams weeks after the funeral had taken place. It was Neo who wired their neighbors' homes, who fixed their appliances when they stopped working, who currently used a Motorola Razr because its owner failed to pay him money for fixing it. Of course, Andzani was always there with him, passing him the small screws when Neo needed them, the screwdrivers and pliers. Where Neo was, Andzani was always with him. The only time they were not together was when Neo frequented Setice's Gym. Andzani disliked the smell of weed and cigarettes that hung in the air at the gym, the smoke that irritated his chest that he often ran out of breath and coughed and coughed and the boys teased him and said he acted like a cherrie. Neo had also started smoking, but whenever he was about engage in this exercise, would turn a corner.

Throughout the years at Banana Primary, Neo had shed his weight. It was as if each year demanded a particular weight off his body. This weight loss was not done for health reasons but because it had become a weapon Mpanyaza and boys at the school used to poke at his self-esteem; *Mafurha*, fat, minnie me, they would say. Their pinky fingers raised in the air when they shouted ‘minnie me’ to denote the size associated with fat men’s penises. This teasing had scraped at Neo’s self-confidence and to reclaim it, he lost weight and became boastful about his newly attained physique that now attracted the attention of girls. To maintain his physique, before joining Setice’s gym and doing weights, Neo jogged at the local stadium.

“You should see them,” Neo told Andzani once when they were fixing the water pipe together. “When I stand at assembly to address them regarding sporting events. The girls fanning themselves with their hands as if I’ve suddenly turned up the sun’s temperature, some fake fainting, their friends standing behind them to catch them as they fake fall. Everything turns into a mini spectacle, delaying the proceedings until the principal interferes. I’m not even going mention the ones who ask for my Mxit numbers. Borrowing my Razr to take pictures in class.” He shook his head as he tightened the fitting around the pipe to prevent leakage.

“And what do you do with these pictures?” had been a response from Andzani, a lingering jealousy lining his tone. It wasn’t only the girls at Banana Primary that had taken notice of Neo’s appealing physique. Andzani had also grown enamored of him, at first, he’d tried convincing himself that he merely appreciated Neo’s beauty that lately was enhanced by his gym experience. But over time Andzani gave way for the feelings to cave in his mind, conjured up intimate scenarios in his head. He imagined running his fingers on Neo’s freckles, imagined the bitterness on Neo’s darkened lips when Neo blew clouds of cigarette smoke on his face after Andzani had annoyed him.

Once, after attending a funeral, Andzani had mentioned to Neo that he feared that when he napped, he would dream of the gravesite and the events they had just witnessed. To prevent thinking about the upsetting scenes from the funeral, Neo had told Andzani to make up pleasant scenarios in his head in order to fall asleep. And Andzani had used the directive to make up scenarios with Neo at their center because Neo made most of his dreams pleasant.

Lately an unabating dream persisted each night. In this dream Andzani and Neo lived in a thatched roof house, secluded from everyone else. Always in the dream Andzani took care of Neo, sick and sweating in bed. He fed him, brought food in a wooden plate, wearing a heavy traditional animal skin around his waist that smelled of fire. But the food, the food always made Neo better. He struggled to understand what it meant because always when a visitor would knock on the door of their thatched roof house to explain, he would open his eyes in response.

Andzani reveled at the dreams, at the mental images that often felt transgressive, punishable that whenever he woke up in the morning felt regret mount on him. But who would know? It would always remain within the walls of his imagination. He rued mostly when he felt watched by Uncle Sontaga whenever he spoke of Neo, or when he spoke to Neo in Uncle Sontaga's presence as if Uncle Sontaga knew, had read his mind and negotiated reprimanding him. It was also in the pronounced manner Uncle Sontaga reminded him that growing up together rendered them brothers, why did Uncle Sontaga go out of his way to stress the significance of this kinship that was not blood related?

“Do you even like soccer?” Andzani asked Neo now with genuine curiosity.

“I guess so...I don't know. I know the rules, so I guess it is easier to tolerate,” Neo said, knowing this was what Andzani wanted to hear. “The pliers.” He offered his palm.

Andzani gave him the pliers. “Why then do you let Pete bully you into watching men run after a ball”.

“Does he know you call him Pete? And it is not just men running after a soccer ball. . .I’m sure *Pete* would be offended. Didn’t he grow up playing the sport?”

“He did, he also has a photo album filled with different soccer jerseys – If ever you needed proof that the Apple does fall far from the tree–,” Andzani pointed at himself. “Me.”

Neo gave a lopsided smile. “*Pete* doesn’t bully me.”

Andzani rolled his eyes.

“What? What is it you have against soccer?” Neo was pinching off the plastic, with the pliers, that clothed the cable wires, such that it exposed the gleaming bronze wires.

“I just don’t want to be present when you are watching soccer.” Andzani’s tone was almost solemn.

Neo laughed. “You’ve made that clear...you always fall asleep. I feel like the way you feel about soccer is the way I feel about *Passions*.”

Andzani moved the flashlight from Neo’s hands to his eyes, Neo squinted.

“Andzani?” Neo shouted, laughing as he faced the other way. “Ey! Stop.”

Andzani was an avid consumer of the American soap opera *Passions* and had initiated Neo into sitting in front of the TV at quarter to five weekdays to watch the forty-five minute show which Neo felt dragged with the story line consisting of only love triangles.

“The only difference is that you don’t fall asleep. In any case, you can’t compare *Passions* to soccer.” Andzani said.

Neo simply raised his eyebrows, tilting his head to the side. He pulled their cables towards him, bent the ends into little hooks before hooking them to the cables they were stealing power from. Neo clipped the cables so that the hook turned into a little loop, he made the pliers bite into the connection, so the cables became one.

“But you know why I watch *Passions*,” Neo started. “I’m just returning the favor. For sitting with me throughout the soccer matches because it’s easier to enjoy them when you are there. And your dad talks more with you around.

There was a brief silence, both parties acknowledging this mutual understanding of the need to be in each other’s presence that ran deeper than merely doing each other favors.

“Pete probably thinks he is winning.”

“What do you mean?”

“That I am finally turning into you, that I also like soccer.”

“Pete’s not bad, you just need to tell him you don’t like his sport.” Neo started plucking off weeds to cover the connection point.

“I feel like if he was your father you would understand. Look, it is like a baby – it’s fun playing with it to pass time knowing fully you are going to give it back to its parents the moment it starts whining. Now imagine living with that whining baby every single day. It is tiring, hemfo.”

“Okay, we are done here,” Neo put the pliers, testing lightbulb and masking tape back into the backpack and handed it to Andzani. “Let’s go.”

Andzani turned and shone the flashlight onto the footpath leading back to the main road. Neo put his hand in his pocket and retrieved a box of cigarettes. Inside, the box was half full, making room for the green lighter that took space at the corner. He took out a cigarette and brought the lighter to its tip, sucking in firm draws to get it lit, and then blowing out large clouds.

“Yes, walk in front,” Neo said to Andzani who’d already started marching ahead of him.

“Ousie Ketsi knows you’ve started smoking?”

Neo plunged his shoulders in the air. “I don’t care.”

“You know you’re putting in an application to smoke each time you want to use the bathroom?”

“Huh?” Neo’s face creased.

“Pete does it, smokes every time he needs to use the bathroom.”

“One of these days your tongue will slip, and you’ll call him Pete in his presence.”

“It’s his name—I think it is awful having to put your ability to do number two on a cigarette. What happens when you’re out of them?”

“I can go to the bathroom without a cigarette, Andzani.”

“For now, yes.”

“I won’t get to that point.”

“Surely every smoker said that before they got addicted. I don’t understand why you need to smoke.”

To evade further questions, Neo took a long drag before he threw the half cigarette on the ground and stepped on it. He took out mint chewing gum from his back pocket and threw it in his mouth while rushing to fall in step with Andzani. He placed his arm over Andzani’s shoulder, his entire weight leaning on him as they walked.

“You ask a lot of questions, Andzani.”

“*You* think you are heavy. You forget you have lost all the weight,” Andzani teased.

“Haha, waphapha,” Neo said, letting go. “There, lights at Uncle Sonti’s garage.”

They were nearing the end of the footpath that spat them on the gravel road that would take them either to Uncle Sontaga’s house or to turn the corner and join their street.

“But it is not as bright,” Andzani said.

“Mission accomplished though,” Neo smirked. “We have lights for the night.”

They turned the corner and joined their street. And when they neared Neo’s gate he said:

“Say hi to Pete.”

“Who’s Pete?”

“Your father.”

“You want to cry, I see.”

Neo laughed. “Sharp, Andzani.”

While Neo struggled with his gate, Andzani felt an uncomfortable feeling sneak up on him as he headed towards the green gate. The feeling had been suspended by his interaction with Neo, and now in Neo’s absence, it informed him of its presence again.

When Andzani opened the door, Violet had gone to bed, leaving Pete snoring in the sitting room. Jabu bulged his eyes and hid his head behind his limb shyly when he saw Andzani. Adorable, Andzani thought. But he felt pity for the dog, pity that it was in his father’s care.

Chapter 5

Mbambamencisi

2008

Police officers had become abhorred in Mbambamencisi because they denounced their profession when civilians went to the police station to report crimes happening in the community. The people said it was as if the police had been forced to take up the profession. And the police retorted, stating they were husbands, wives, mothers, and fathers first before they were police officers and should not be reduced to merely their police uniforms which dehumanized them and glorified the idea that they were immortal. In the face of danger, they needed to think of their children and families first before putting their lives at risk for people who would be left to live and fend for theirs, while they fed maggots in cemeteries. Thus, Mbambamencisi had become notorious as police officers delivered bare minimum work ethic when it came to making arrests and instilling discipline in civilians. People ceased reporting crime and resorted to taking matters into their own hands. And so it was known that when a police van pulled up at your house, then the police were there to report the aftermath of mob justice. It was for this reason that when the police van pulled up in Violet's driveway, she became agitated because she knew Andzani had become a part of a gang and that recently a member of that gang had lost his eyesight at the hands of community members.

It seemed that recently everyone who walked into her yard was the bearer of bad news; first had been Tsakani, who lived three streets down from hers, who'd come to tell her how Andzani and his goons had robbed her son of the last of her money she had sent him with to buy mealie meal; and then came Sello who gave her a stern warning to tie serathana sela sa hao, her bastard child, because one of these days he would shoot it and would find it dragging its feet on the road for taunting and robbing his customers; or how David, a neighbour, had come to let her know that people were restless because they had heard Andzani was part of the crew that conducted break-ins at night in the community.

In her mind, Violet had concluded that the day had finally come, the day she feared most when police officers, in their dark blue uniforms, would show up at her door to let her know that Andzani had finally met his maker. The day had arrived sooner than she had expected, but it had arrived.

The police officers found her leaning against the pillar of her stoep. Her arms met around this pillar in a clasp. She wanted to prevent herself tumbling to the ground from the weight of the news when it landed. She was not going to allow herself to turn into a spectacle, she refused to turn into a spectacle.

When the officers got out of the van, Violet felt her toes curl and weaken and up went the sensation she'd once felt the first time she encountered grief. This sensation had weakened her knees so that her body came drooping to the ground. When she opened her eyes, she found herself in her bedroom, there by the window overlooking the street, where once used to be a table adorned by a vase the colour of eggplant, and a lamp, lay a mound of soil that had been dug out of the small grave ready to swallow the remains of what she had only known for three months. A small coffin sat half open near her that at first she had struggled to extend her head to peek inside.

Her legs would give in each time she walked into her bedroom after the funeral.

. . .

The legs had given in when Violet had seen the white hearse driving towards her house. She was coming from the latrine which was at the corner of her yard. Ousie Ketsi was walking next to her, holding her frail frame as she guided each step of the way. Under the mango tree were Violet's family, Pete's relatives and a few neighbors. They were sitting in what seemed like an unorchestrated circle, some sitting on grass mats with their green, blue small blankets covering their shoulders, others had black shawls around their collar bones, headwraps adorned their heads. Lunch had just been served and some plates sat empty with only chicken bones chewed at their ends. A huge green bowl filled with warm water sat almost in the middle of the circle with a few men surrounding it, their backs bent, washing their hands after the meal.

Violet saw Andzani and Neo talking to Uncle Sontaga, nodding their heads as Uncle Sontaga spoke, gesturing with his hands as if giving them instructions. And then she saw it, the hearse, passing the T-junction, passing the corner house and coming to her direction. She stopped walking and immediately Ousie Ketsi followed her gaze and felt Violet tremble. She used both hands, Ousie Ketsi, to enhance her grasp and steady Violet as if aware of what loomed, and as if the move calculated, came the violent screech Ousie Ketsi had anticipated. Violet's legs gave in and she tumbled, slowly and like a marionette, to the ground. This caught the attention of those under the mango tree. A few women got up and rushed to help Ousie Ketsi carry her to her bedroom where the ceremony would take place. The men shifted their gaze to the road and knew the time had arrived. And Andzani stood behind Neo, holding Neo's shoulder, as if Neo was a shield, shielding him from this oncoming meteorite that would destruct his life and inflict pain. Neo, fully aware of how Andzani felt about funerals, stood as close to him as he could, becoming that shield but also the cane Andzani needed to support his weight.

Pete got up from his chair, he hadn't finished eating, he put his plate on the ground, washed his hands on the green bowl and hurried toward the gate. Uncle Sontaga and a few men followed behind.

In Violet's bedroom, most of the furniture had been moved except for the bed whose mattress lay on the floor and carried the weight of an unconscious Violet. The wardrobe had been moved to the corner of the room and the table that had been near the window moved to the sitting room. There was a small mound where the table had occupied space, a small grave where Violet's three-month old baby would be laid to rest. Uncle Sontaga had dug the grave with the help of Andzani and Neo. He had used his leg to determine its depth, and when it got to his knee length, resolved it was deep enough. Andzani dug the grave as if he'd taken an oath to do so, as if his sister's resting place was upon him to make it comfortable. How he trimmed, with a spade, the jagged walls of the grave until they were smooth and even; how he put cement on the floor of the grave, on its insides, sweating and refusing the meals that were prepared for him.

When Violet regained consciousness, the blue shawl around her neck had become undone and her headwrap sat at an awkward position atop her head; the ends loose, fell to her shoulders. Ous' Ketsi sat her up and made her swallow some water. Her face blank, Violet stared straight at the small coffin that lay at the edge of her mattress before crawling towards it, using both hands to steady the mattress so it wouldn't shift as she moved her hips. When Ousie Ketsi made to help her move, Uncle Sontaga placed his hand on her back—leave her, the hand seemed to say. When Violet reached the coffin, she hugged it. They let her lie hugging the small coffin while waiting for the ceremony to begin. And when the ceremony began, they had had to beg her to let go of the coffin, this was before they were forced to unglue her body because she wouldn't let go.

Andzani had stood at the back of his mother's bedroom closest to the door, behind the chairs his relatives occupied. He stared at the men who had chosen to stand outside, watching through the window because there wasn't enough room in his parents bedroom. He tasted salt, and more salt as tears wet his cheeks and ran down his chin as if racing when the brawl started; Violet crawling for the coffin and Uncle Sontaga holding her back, saying 'Sesi, it's going to be alright.' Andzani stood there not knowing what to do with himself, fidgeting with his fingers as if trying to retain the pain that stung at the corners of his eyes, that made the roots of his hair itchy and made the roof of his mouth dry, wanting to escape, to be belched out. Andzani watched Neo standing closest to the hole—everything he wasn't feeling; calm, upright with his hands meeting in front of him like the two undertakers present, observant and ready to take action upon Uncle Sontaga's instructions. Andzani fixed his eyes on Neo, not wanting to look at his mother who now lay on her side, sniffing as Ousie Ketsi tried sitting her up, to watch, watch the gaping hole swallow her child, in her bedroom, where she was to have many more sleeps.

After the ceremony, Violet couldn't walk, had stopped eating solids and the skin around her eyes had become taut and outlined perfectly her cheekbones, the ones she had passed on to Andzani. Her eyes were often vacant, carried longing, and at night Andzani heard her sob, until he could hear her no more because she got drowned by his father's snoring in the sitting room. It was on these nights when Andzani wondered how she felt sleeping next to her child's grave. Did it give her nightmares as it had him? The nightmares had caused Andzani to cease entering his mother's bedroom. After he'd told her about these dreams that kept him awake at night, Violet had shifted the table that had returned to its original position in her bedroom after the funeral and made him lie on top of the grave. The floor was immediately tiled after the funeral and one wouldn't suspect a grave in the room unless told.

Andzani had laid with his eyes open, looking at the zinc roofing. He heard a creaking sound as the roof heated up under the scorching sun rays. Then he'd moved his eyes to the timbre poles that ran vertically and horizontally, making square and rectangular shapes beneath the corrugated iron sheets. He counted the squares, then the rectangles before he closed his eyes and recalled when uncle Sontaga lowered the small coffin, heard the song they sung on the day and recollected the pensive faces that kept shifting from his mother, his father and him before bouncing off the small coffin. The grave was going to be there all his life and Violet needed for him to be comfortable living with it.

After some time had passed, Violet gave Andzani her hand and helped him up. Briefly Andzani stood above the grave, as if saying his silent prayers, then helped Violet push back the table in position.

But the dreams didn't cease immediately, and like a laceration, the wound closed with time.

...

Now as the police officers approached Violet, she fastened her arms around the pillar as tight as she could and felt the stings at the back of her eyeballs, alerting her to the tears fighting their way out. She blinked repeatedly.

"Ndzawini," Hlungwana greeted, the eldest of the two officers.

Violet swallowed, then nodded, acknowledging them. The officers looked at each other when Violet's eyes stayed on their mouths. There was silence, the officers trying to decipher why her arms were behind the pillar and Violet waiting on them to deliver the news that would alter her life forever.

But the officers only looked at her until she managed to part her lips.

"Officers," Violet tightened her jaws. "What can I do for you?" She asked, her voice subdued, forced.

Nyoni spoke first. He was young and bald headed. Violet thought of how being an officer didn't suit him, with his neatly ironed uniform, his boots polished, or were they new? And a neatly trimmed beard. He wasn't like the officers she usually found at the station when she'd gone to certify documents, their shoulder pads hanging by a thread. Nor was he anything like his partner, Hlungwana, who was short and tired, as if he'd spent the night awake.

"Yes. Uhm . . .mhani, u kona Andzani? is Andzani home?" He looked around the yard. "We believe he stays here? He has to come with us to the station."

Violet gasped, tears filling her eye lids but refusing to fall off. She let go of the hand clasp and slithered down the pillar until her buttocks were one with the cold maroon stoep.

"Mhani, are you alright?" Nyoni enquired already a step forward to lend a helping hand. Hlungwana grabbed him to a halt. And when Violet noticed this, she nodded and raised her palm at him.

". . .Andzani needs to come with us to the station because of his involvement in a rape case reported this morning." Hlungwana said after a moment he'd given Violet to compose herself.

"Sexual assault!" Nyoni rectified, giving Hlungwana a look as if reprimanding him for the use of the word rape. "We have his friend, Neo, in our holding cells. He told us we would find Andzani here." Nyoni said.

"Andzani will kill me, vanhu va hosi," Violet said, she took the nceka she'd tied around her waist when she'd started turning the house upside down, cleaning, and dabbed her eyes, removing the glistening tears. "This child will not rest until he sees my body eased into the ground." Violet added to no one in particular. Then she pressed her nceka on her eyes and heaved. She was relieved, the police officers looking for Andzani meant he was still alive. She would, later on, reprimand herself for her reaction, that the tears she had shed had not

been for the fact that her child was suspected of committing an atrocity she hadn't imagined him capable of, but were of joy that at least he was still alive.

Hlungwana felt uncomfortable, irritable as he looked about him, checking if Violet's neighbours were watching them. It seemed that the years in service had worn him, having dealt with criminals, manipulators, and lawyers who argued their way out to free delinquents, had stripped him off the patience he'd started with when he'd joined the police force. The years of service had taken a large bite at his humility, sympathy – unlike his colleague, Nyoni, who had recently joined the force, who still possessed the patience to deal with aging women riddled with lies. Hlungwana had no time for it. What the force had taught him was to never trust anyone and that everyone should be treated like a criminal until proven otherwise. He wasn't about to go against this belief.

“Mhani, you are wasting our time,” Hlungwana said. “Save this little performance for when we are not here.”

Violet wiped her eyes with the nceka before they found Hlungwana again.

“Just tell us where we can find the boy so we can leave you in peace with your theatricals,” Hlungwana added.

Violet looked at Nyoni as she rose from the stoep.

“I am sure your colleague is not saying I taught my child to rape.” Violet shifted her gaze to Hlungwana, and because she was taller than him it appeared as if she were addressing a child. “You are a man of the law, but you don't come to my home and disrespect me in my yard.” She wrapped her nceka around her waist. “The only thing standing between my wanting to crush you into a fine pulp right now is the uniform you are wearing.”

“Nyoni, you see. Do you see what I'm talking about? Are you going to stand there and allow her to talk to your senior like this? Heh Nyoni?”

“Hlungwana, wait,” Nyoni interjected, his hand slicing air. “Mhani, there is no need to raise your voice. You are inviting eyes on us all.” Nyoni touched his forehead as if feeling his temperature, then folded the skin on his forehead into thin lines as if repressing what he was about to say. “We only want to ask Andzani a few questions and we. . .I ask for your cooperation.” His tone was respectful but lined with a firmness that reminded Violet that he held a superior position in their interaction. “Do we understand each other?”

When Violet spoke, she addressed Nyoni as if Hlungwana was not present even when he stood there visibly irritated at both Violet and Nyoni.

“Andzani left here after supper last night. He didn’t say where he was headed but he spends most of his time at the gym. Usually when he doesn’t sleep home he sleeps next door at his friend’s, but since you say you have Neo at the police station, I think he must have slept at his Uncle’s.

“Everything happened at the gym. He’s not there,” said Nyoni. “Can you direct us to his uncle’s?”

Hlungwana, frustrated at Nyoni’s patience, strutted towards the gate—community members didn’t negotiate with police officers, they obeyed. The sincerity he felt in Nyoni’s voice would bring his downfall. Hlungwana thought. It would lessen his career in the force. You needed an iron fist to survive in the force, not empathy. This was another reason he disliked being paired with new cops, the reason he’d objected to this pairing that morning. This would go into his report when he got back to the station; a police officer being pulled by the nose was a weak one.

He turned around sharply.

“Nyoni, this woman thinks we are here to play Morabaraba,” Hlungwana said taking out his handcuffs and walked towards Violet. Nyoni quickly intercepted him.

“If he wants to arrest me let him. Mina I’ll embarrass him in front of his colleagues at the station. Let him.” Violet offered her wrists.

“Hlungwana – Mhani – wait!” Nyoni said, holding Hlungwana’s hands and trying to pull the handcuffs from his hands. Violet fastened her nceka even though it still held firmly around her waist. “Hlungwana, there is no need for that. A ni she was about to show us where we can find the boy.”

Nyoni turned to face Violet, “Mhani, where did you say the boy was?”

Violet, impatient as she pointed, “Down this road at the end turn right, the third house from your left with a garage door.”

“Nyoni, let’s go,” Hlungwana beckoned with his head for Nyoni to follow as he started for the van. Nyoni nodded to Violet, his demeanour apologetic for his colleague’s tantrums. He turned.

“You will stay well, Mhani.”

Violet clicked her tongue.

As the Van drove out, Violet could feel her neighbours’ eyes on her. She bolted into her house, where she found, on top of the room divider, her cell phone. She dialled Sontaga’s numbers, told him two disrespectful officers were on their way to his house and asked if Andzani was at his place. He told her he would sort it out and that he could see the van turn the corner for his house. He hung up and walked to his gate.

After, Violet dialled Ous’ Ketsi’s numbers, cursing Setice’s gym under her breathe as she waited for the line to ring. When Ous’ Ketsi finally answered, she told her the police had Neo in their holding cells and that Ous’ Ketsi needed to make her way to the police station where they’d meet.

When she hung the call, curses still ran the length of her tongue. She untied the nceka on her waist and walked to her bedroom to change before heading to the police station.

...

Setice was six years Andzani's senior. He'd attended Bankuna High School, and after numerous attempts at passing grade ten, and feeling he was fast becoming an ancestor in the school, dropped out after his fourth fail. He started a gym in the community and quickly the gym gained traction because not only was the nearest gym in town, a twenty minutes' drive using a taxi, but it also cost twice as much as Setice's gym. But the gym's main attraction was not its low-cost membership, but the weed that was available on request.

The gym started housing truants who spent their school days drinking and smoking weed. When the weed business slowed down and didn't generate sufficient profit because competition emerged in the community, Setice decided to recruit the little truants into a gang. The gang's mandate had been clear during the early days; terrorize anyone who dared tried to steal his customers. These new businesses were housed within taverns and pubs because tavern and pub owners knew that drunkards liked to smoke as they drank, and so made it convenient for them with the supply of weed. But soon the gang had transcended the initial specified mandate because the money Setice rewarded them was not enough and they were aware they could get more. And so at night if the gang was not stealing illegal electrical connection cables that were installed by community members from section B utility poles, to sell them, they were traversing the community with machetes, bread knives and hammers. They mostly targeted drunkards in the middle of the night as they were the most vulnerable. Politely they asked for their phones, and when the drunkards refused, they held their arms and undressed them. The drunkards would arrive home clothed in shame. In extreme cases, when the drunkards fought back, then they were made to taste the hammer.

And when targeting drunkards didn't yield calculated results—when it was quiet in the month, everyone going broke and bottle stores emptying with each week—they conducted break-ins, stealing portable appliances that they sold at cheaper prices and shared the money.

This gang terrorised the community so much that people went under voluntary curfew. Not a single soul would be found walking the streets—apart from those whose courage had liquor at its centre—when darkness descended.

Andzani, once again, had become a truant, spending most of his days smoking weed and cigarettes while he loitered at the gym with Neo. This was when he'd started undergoing a metamorphosis, when he wanted his body to assert its manliness. He was going through a transition, mentally and physically. And to help aid this transition, speed it up, he had accepted Neo's invitation to join Setice's gym, to build muscle as Neo had, and to rid himself of those feminine characteristics that rendered him an anomaly in Mbambamencisi. Once, after he'd witnessed a gang member share money with Neo at the gym, Andzani asked what it was for. And when Neo let him in on the secret, Andzani asked Neo to speak to Setice on his behalf. Neo, hesitant at first, but quickly realised having Andzani closer meant he could look after him, convinced Setice to let him join the gang.

Andzani, who once wouldn't walk on his street without greeting every person he came across, now walked with his head bowed, eyes sweeping the ground as if weighed down by the guilt of his wrong doings, his disgrace. People feared him as his notoriety became a common subject that ran on their tongues daily; this was accompanied by his fast transformation, something they couldn't fathom.

Violet feared for Andzani's life. She feared that soon the community would put a car tyre around his neck, pour petrol on him and light a match.

...

They didn't blame themselves; everyone was in denial and didn't attribute any of the effects to their own doing. No one wanted to take responsibility for it, they passed it on silently but with vigour to the next person as if it was a hot coal burning their palms. No one preached that it took a community to raise a child anymore. No! they said it was Violet's

responsibility, that she needed to tame her child. These people who were so quick to point out his inadequacies, what he lacked and what he needed to correct, were now quiet. Their silence clouded by the pain and knowledge of what their thoughts and utterances were capable of, of the being that they had woven with their tongues. No one had the slightest idea what had triggered this phenomenon, this spit of fire which had resolved itself into a ball, moved within his veins and alighted his entire body so that he morphed into something totally unknown to them; this being that was everything opposite to what they had known all their lives. Had this change not brought pain to their daily existence, created tension which had brought, as a result, sleepless nights, they would have easily welcomed it, rejoiced and complimented the power their tongues carried. But instead this change brought havoc, terrorized their lives so that walking around the community during daylight became a hefty exercise. People who knew Andzani swore that a demon had inhabited his body, found the warmest veins and settled deep within the plump blood cells. For they knew the old character, not this one that had matured within a short time span and had subsequently become a sign for terror. People who previously would easily have vowed for him in the highest court should the need have arisen, would now throw him to the wolves, assert their dissent with their shoulders held high and scoff at the sight of him.

Gym had been one of the ways Andzani maintained this new-found physique, of polishing and presenting this man they had for a long time advocated for. And he had worked hard to suppress the unconscious flinging of his arms swiftly in the air, the hitting of his thigh with his right hand as he spoke, and the rolling of eyes or shaking his head lightly when he feigned indifference during conversations, or in the condescending manner that followed most of his interactions with the boys that ostracized him, pin-pointed his differences so they could make fun of him.

This transition started with how he walked; this movement of legs that he had all his life done unconsciously had now suddenly become strenuous. He had to watch how long his strides were, how his hips appeared as he strutted, was his bump as effortless as that of other boys? It wore him out, this constant policing of his body movements. But it was either that, this incessant self-scrutiny, this assumption of a new persona, a new way of walking and behaving, or forever have his manliness under question, be subjected to malicious treatment that would continue to scrape at his self-confidence. Wasn't this what Spakuza and Mpanyaza had achieved at Banana Primary School? When he'd had to change schools because they constantly called him names and ill-treated him because he was a puzzle that didn't fit in with those society had equipped them with.

He wanted ways to undo the pain, and if that was not possible, to not add to the already heavy coat that they forced on him, on his body so that he became dissatisfied with who he was. He wanted ways to prevent their words from becoming a constant torture, and to not feel excluded, to not become an outcast. So he'd relented, succumbed to the pressure, to this ideal they conceived appropriate for boys to conduct themselves.

He'd grown quiet, Andzani, in that manner that one adopts when one is mourning the death of a loved one. It was as if someone had cut out his tongue; that quick peppery tongue that had been his shield against people's vile words, that was so swift to put troublesome boys in their place at his new school. It was like something had grown on his neck, how he grew reserved, something that hindered his speech so that he only spoke when he needed to. The eloquence that had made him stand out had been stifled.

Andzani realised that him saying less meant he was able to suppress those feminine gestures that popped up in his speech unexpectedly and had long subjected him to loathing. He noticed that when he said less, he rolled his eyes less, that when he didn't engage in conversations, he was less likely to fling his hands in the air and hit his thigh the way girls

around him normally did when they spoke. And so he lessened his interactions with people because being around them meant the way he carried himself was examined and questioned.

At Bombeleni Primary, boys made fun of his hitting of the thigh when he spoke, and would imitate—in that cunning manner that displayed keen insight—Andzani’s demeanour, which they had long observed. They had taken to the little intricacies that defined him. These boys would perform these theatrics in that overly exaggerated effeminate way that was condescending altogether. They had become thorns, piercing and prickling him so that he loathed going to school. He realised that when they didn’t feel content, when their words no longer had their intended effect, these boys would find alternative ways of inflicting pain on him. His past school had taught him this lesson and he hadn’t wanted to endure it again. What had made him move from his previous primary school while still doing grade two had followed him like a bad scent he couldn’t rid himself of to Bombeleni Primary.

So, it was a coping mechanism, this shedding of his feminine traits. He knew he was treated like he possessed a foreign disease because of his feminine attributes; boys warned to stay away from him lest what had attacked him was easily transmittable. He had become an example in the community of Mbambamencisi of how a man ought not to behave. And it seemed to him that to be the man they wanted him to be he needed to shed off the only part of himself he’d known all his life and revelled in.

He hated himself, hated the process every time when Neo would wake him up to go to Setice’s gym to build muscle. Even though it was him, Andzani, who had made a pact with Neo, to make sure that whenever Neo went to the gym, he did not leave him behind. Neo told him it needed determination, commitment and that he needed to visualize the end results, whenever he slacked. But then Andzani’s femininity would pop out at the gym as he interacted with other gym members—to remind him, possibly, of his truer self. Then, he’d punish himself, sticking to the strictest of diets and putting in more hours at the gym than Neo

did. The self-loathing became a part of him, a reminder that he needed to keep in check the way he carried himself, a reminder of how far he'd come and how far he still needed to go. He was tired of Neo fighting his battles, protecting him or even needing to be protected. And slowly he'd morphed into what people regarded a beast.

...

No one knew that everything had started on that day when the rain fell hard and filled the local streams so that people from Mbambamencisi had to take off their shoes, trousers and pull their tops up, tucking them under their chins as they crossed the streams for work; when Andzani got soaked and shivered as he made his way to school, his teeth chattering and watery mucus running down the gorge of his upper lip. The dark clouds hung low and made the outside of his grade seven classroom gloomy and grotesque. He felt a deep sense of pity, as he walked to his class, for the hawkers who stood under the trees near the school ground, waiting for the rain to stop so they could lay out their meagre food items to sell to school children during break time.

His grade seven classroom accommodated thirty-six students, a little over the class capacity but there was a scarcity of classrooms at this school. At the back of the class, one with the wall was a brown large pin board which had had its share of misery being poked at that it now had brown flaps wanting to come off. Streaks of water had trailed down the pin board from the ceiling and dampened a large part of it. On it was a large blue A 4 chart with the classroom's timetable—a day had eight school periods, each spanned thirty minutes. The classes started at quarter to eight in the morning and ended at one in the afternoon. There were two breaks between the periods, one small and one long. The long break accommodated the feeding scheme at the school.

On the right of the chart was a large diagram of a skeleton labelled in red capital letters. The classroom was arranged in such a way that the desks lined the walls, everyone's back to

the wall facing whoever sat in front of them—two students occupied each desk. In the middle, two rows ran along to the front of the classroom. The desks faced each other such that their occupants were forced to engage.

Mrs Mathebula's desk was at the front, facing the entire class. On top of it was a stack of exercise books that she had been marking. A stapler lay next to the chalk duster, with some chalk dust whitening the green plastic table cover. Her handbag sat next to her and a see-through container open next to it. Inside the small box were neatly cut watermelon cubes, their seeds removed and from the way they were carefully arranged, Andzani imagined Mrs Mathebula's helper stacking them. Mrs Mathebula was a large woman in her late fifties. Her teeth, uneven, gave out her age in that one jutted out, and others had fallen out. Her hair had greyed, and spectacles lay on top of her nose bridge. When she chewed, the skin around her mouth tightened into wrinkles and formed vertical lines.

No one knew that it was on that day when Mrs Mathebula, sitting in front of the classroom, eating the watermelon cubes, instructed the students in her class that the task for the Life Orientation period was to write, on a piece of paper, what each student disliked about the student sitting in front of them. After, each student would stand in front of the class and say what they had written for everybody to hear. Andzani could not comprehend this task as he took off his damp jersey and placed it over his chair to dry; this task that meant that if you sat facing your friend in class then you would need to write things you didn't like about them and say it out loud for the whole class to hear. What if you didn't have bad things to say about your friends? Andzani knew that this task would dent some learners' confidence, leaving them wounded that it would take forever to heal and regain confidence in themselves. This task that would, at the end of the period, subject students to being bullied because they would have said things others didn't want pointed out. This task that would test friendships

and destroy cliques. Lives upturned because a teacher who had absolute authority didn't want to solve a private matter in a civilized manner.

The issue at hand had been that a couple of learners regarded as the teacher's pets by other learners in the class had complained about a stale smell that caused them discomfort and emanated from a certain student in the classroom. These learners knew who the culprit was and had told Mrs Mathebula about her. The culprit had started menstruating and without proper hygiene knowledge, came to school with a stale smell that nauseated other learners, especially those who sat next to her. Andzani wondered why instead of dealing with the hygiene problem in a way that would be beneficial to everyone in the class, Mrs. Mathebula reckoned that public humiliation would effect change. He despised her at that moment, when she sat chewing her watermelon, indifferent to the many faces that looked on, their eyes pleading for the task to not go ahead. But it was the indifference in her tone when she'd called the first student to the front that made Andzani wish he could gouge her eyes out.

First to speak was Ntsakelo; she had the confidence of a fox, cunning and sly with a runny tongue. From the mischievous smile on her face when she got up, Andzani could sense that she was enticed by the game, the white piece of paper she held between her fingers overran with pencil inscription. She tucked the ends of her white shirt into her blue skirt as she prepared to speak. Her victim was Mshefana, a boy with an oval-shaped face and sharp eyes that had earned him the nickname Le-china, a Chinese. He was notorious around the school and pupils feared him. Not Ntsakelo. She knew he could never do anything to her no matter how much she teased him. He liked her, as did most boys in the classroom who had tried their luck but got rejected. She knew he liked that her skin was lighter, unlike most of the girls in the class who had the skin the colour of gingerbread. Her teeth were white like the Typek papers they were required to bring to the school at the beginning of each year, and they fit her crooked smile. Her hair was relaxed and tied in a chic lifted ponytail.

“I am not trying to offend anyone in this class but I’m doing what I was tasked to do by our teacher here,” Ntsakelo began and turned to acknowledge Mrs. Mathebula next to her. “Ma’am, Mshefana doesn’t bath. Every day when he comes to school his skin is dry that you can even draw the map of the countr—”

“Hayi, ma’am. This is not right. She’s disrespectful now,” Mshefani had risen from his chair, his thumb and index fingers formed the number seven as he spoke, pointing at Ntsakelo. The other pupils chuckled, fighting hard to not show their teeth as they feared the consequences that would follow outside the classroom should Mshefana spot them.

“Mshefana, sit down! I said sit down maan. Look at him!” Mrs. Mathebula barked before her teeth gnawed at another piece of watermelon, the juicy red running down her fingers. Mshefana slumped back into his chair. His eyes swept the desk mechanically.

“Ma’am, can I also say something about Mtshepi? I’ve written something about him too,” Ntsakelo said, and to everyone’s surprise, Mrs. Mathebula nodded. The learners looked at each other because they were not aware that one could write about two people. She was one of the pets, so they understood.

Mtshepi, hearing his name, shifted uncomfortably from in chair, his gaze tight on the desk as if examining something unfathomable. He stole side glances at Ntsakelo now and again.

“With Mtshepi, ma’am, is that he doesn’t like brushing his teeth. Every day when he speaks his mouth smells of fish.”

A wave of laughter moved from one end of the classroom to the other as the learners were aware of Ntsakelo’s reference. Mtshepi’s mother sold baked fish and vetkoeks to school children on her stall that was erected near the school gate. The vetkoeks and fish had eventually become Mtshepi’s daily breakfast as they were the first thing he came in contact with before he began his day.

Mtshepi remained silent when bursts of laughter filled the classroom. He simply sat with his fists on top of the table, the veins in his eyes red and his lips turned into a pout. Ntsakelo went to sit down next to her livid victims, indifferent to their side glances.

Next to speak was Simon. Simon was Andzani's friend. The gaps between his teeth easily made him distinguishable in a crowd. He wore a capri school trouser—the blue colour had come off—and heavy school shoes that Andzani thought weighed Simon down as they walked to school. They had met at the school when Andzani had moved from Banana Primary. And out of convenience, because they used the same route to school, had become friends. Andzani usually passed by Simon's house in section B and waited for him to finish his morning preparations before journeying the route to school. Simon was always late.

Simon brought up this issue that bothered many participants in this little game of who could say the most embarrassing thing about their friend: Andzani's feminine features.

Simon stood there looking about him as if a lost rabbit. And then he smiled, exposing the gaps in his teeth. He turned the piece of paper around and then looked at Andzani, who was scribbling objects on his piece of paper.

“Andzani, ma'am – he spends a lot of time with women, that's why he acts like a girl,” the class chuckled.

Simon continued, “he walks like a woman and when we tell him to come spend time with us boys at the school grounds, playing soccer, he refuses, you'll find him playing skipping rope with the girls behind those classrooms.” Simon pointed to the adjacent classrooms.

“Is it?” Mrs. Mathebula inquired to the whole class, her question met with little nods, she turned to Andzani and gave him a stern look as if she couldn't believe he was capable of such.

“This other time, ma’am, remember when you’d given us an assignment to knit slippers for our Arts and Culture project?”

Mrs. Mathebula nodded.

“Even when we had submitted that assignment, you’d still find him knitting during break-times.”

And once more Mrs. Mathebula’s eyes landed on Andzani, questioningly. Andzani couldn’t move from his chair as he felt numb. He’d stopped scribbling, his palm on his forehead supported by his elbow on top of the desk; his fingers almost concealing his eyes. At that moment he regretted the mornings he’d spent waiting for Simon when he was late, swore to never speak to him or share his homework with him. Something erupted within Andzani and it could only be watered with the anger and distaste Simon and Mrs. Mathebula induced in him. He wanted at that moment to hide under the desks, hoped for the roof of the classroom to cave in and crush him together with the shame that had befallen him.

Then came his turn. Slowly Andzani pushed through the chairs and made it to the front. His cheeks hot, he fought tears that burned his eyes to be let go. He hadn’t written much about Simon.

“Ma’am, Simon–,” Andzani forced a smile. “He’s always late for school and I have to wait for him to get done every day.” Andzani stopped and blinked repeatedly. “Also, I always share my homework with him. He doesn’t do his homework at home.”

“Why do you share your homework with him? Mrs. Mathebula asked.

“Because. . .he’s slow, ma’am,” Andzani said hesitantly and Mrs Mathebula shook her head as if he were a crazy person. And because she became silent, he continued. “He also doesn’t change his underpants that his trousers end up smelling of urine, ma’am.”

The classroom laughed.

“Simon?” Mrs. Mathebula said and Simon looked at her, his fingers threading each other. “Sis, man!”

Feeling that he had said something embarrassing about Simon, Andzani calmed, his heartbeat not as fast as it had been when he’d stood up, when he’d felt he would faint the moment he opened his mouth.

The siren rang and learners in the classroom took out their plastic plates and readied themselves to run and queue for food outside. The plates, the colours of the rainbow, adorned the dull brown tabletops as Andzani walked back to his seat. No one cared about him at that moment, the only thing in their minds being food.

When Mrs Mathebula gave the go ahead, the learners rushed out of the classroom and fell in line close to the door, pushing against each other as others fought because some had allowed their friends to cut the line. Andzani walked past them, past the quad and walked into the bathrooms, his backpack on his shoulders. He started from the door, urinating on the open space, opening each cubicle and urinating on the seats, then he washed his hands and went to sit under a fig tree in the school ground, reading his EMS textbook.

They didn’t know that it was on that day when Mrs Mathebula instructed her learners to write what they didn’t like about the student sitting opposite them that something ruptured within Andzani, something that fed off their disgust of him, off his anger at how they treated him, in order to grow. And they had watered it with their tongues, with their criticism that each time they disapproved of his way of being, were feeding it so that it morphed, shedding off his feminine qualities and altering his world view.

Going to high school became a symbol for a new beginning, a fresh start with different qualities that would deprive him of ill treatment, of name-calling. Once again, he felt he had a chance to prove himself, to start over, but this time, to be the man that many yearned for him to become.

On the day Andzani received his Grade Seven report card, there were rumours that Mrs Mathebula's Maroon Honda Ballade car tyres were slashed with a knife. Andzani walked away to register at his high school with his heart less heavy because although he hadn't gouged Mrs Mathebula's eyes out, he'd found satisfaction slashing her car tyres.

...

The day Andzani decide to quit being a member of Setice's gang was the day he got dared by Nkateko, another member of the gang, to burn the legs of an innocent man. Nkateko was the loud-mouthed of the gang and Andzani disliked him for his superiority complex, for thinking he harbored the world's knowledge and that no one could compete with him. During arguments, he always had the final say because after going back and forth with him, with him concocting lies to feed whatever argument he stood for, his opponents were inclined to give up. Andzani also hated that Nkateko felt the need to assume Setice's position in Setice's absence, relaying information as if Setice had discussed it with him and not merely a messenger.

It was a Saturday morning and one could still see the dew that had fallen on the sidewalk grass as the sun hadn't fully announced its presence for the day. The gang was coming from a Tavern in Lusaka—Lusaka was separated from Mbambamencisi by a wide gravel road—where drunkards and dancers had scattered and climbed walls past midnight in a bid to get away from the gang when the gang had fired shots in the air to alert everyone of their presence. The DJ had abandoned his booth, leaving music playing so that it drowned the cries of the tavern owner when they beat and threatened to burn the tavern should he not point them to his safe. They all had T-shirts tied on their faces like face masks concealing most of their facial features and had altered their voices as to go unrecognized. The tavern owner conceded and gave them the safe password, where in it they took out two bulging brown envelopes.

In the early hours as they marched from their mission, the group met a man on his way to work. He wore the uniform of a well-known supermarket in town—a red checked shirt with black pants and boots. A green and white tag was clipped just above his left breast. When he saw the gang approach, the man had negotiated turning back, but the only other way out of the community to the taxi rank was through the Marula tree route in Lusaka. He was already late to turn back, and so he'd surged on, calling on his ancestors to look over him as the gang got close. Just as relief descended on the man as he'd just passed the gang, Nkateko turned, as if suddenly realised something, and called the man back. And when the man was about to make a run for it he felt a kick on his back that landed him on the ground. His arms found the ground first and blood dripped from them.

“Grootman, there is no running here,” Nkateko said to the man who'd remained on his stomach on the ground. Nkateko sat on the man's back. “A miri tiger daar, grootman. Let me have ten Rands, grootman.”

The man swore he only carried the taxi fare, his hands brought together above his head as if to say a prayer. But he was begging to be let go. Nkateko had sensed defiance from the man's tone when he'd pleaded that he only carried the taxi fare.

“Eh, gents! this man wa goloza,” Nkateko spit next to the man. He got up and laid his foot on the man's back. This drew Andzani and Neo's attention, they were a few meters ahead, leading the march back to the gym. “He's refusing me a tiger, imagine!” Nkateko turned to the man on the ground. “Where is the ubuntu in that heh? Timer?”

Andzani and Neo rushed back to the scene as Nkateko instructed two members of the gang to hold the man down. He took off the T-shirt to breathe and the man saw his face.

“Vazaya, please let me go. I'm a father, you can have the taxi fare.” The man pleaded as the boys pinned him to the ground. Nkateko looked around for littered plastic bags—he

found some sun burnt old ones that tore away when he plucked them off the weeds they were stuck on.

“Take off his boots,” Nkateko instructed, tying the ends of the plastics together. One of the boys knelt and took off the man’s boots. Then the one boy who pinned the man’s arms together on his chest, placed his knee on the arms, took off the T-shirt on his face and shoved it into the man’s mouth to muffle his screams.

Nkateko kicked the boots out of his way and they landed close to Neo and Andzani’s feet as they got close.

“Eh, Nkateko, what are you doing?” Andzani, irritable, asked.

Nkateko laughed. “I’m teaching grootman some ubuntu. What?” Nkateko said as he tied the length of the plastic around the man’s ankles, on top of his grey socks.

“Neo, I told you die man doesn’t listen. What is he doing now?”

“Ey, Nkateko,” Neo started. The lack of sleep showing in his eyes, and now sounded in his tone. “Let the man go.”

“Don’t tell me what to do. This man is stingy. He will be stingy at his house, not on the streets.”

“Iyoh!” Andzani threw his hands in the air before they found his waist again.

“There is no need, Nkateko maan.” Neo raised his voice as loud as he could. “It’s getting light out here and people might be watching.”

Nkateko got up from the man’s legs.

“No one is watching anything.” He was upon Andzani, a lighter held between his fingers. “You haven’t done anything to show your loyalty to members of this group. You were snuck in from the back. Some of us had to slit people’s throats. Wena? Nex! Akere you have people doing you favours.” Nkateko shifted his gaze from Andzani to Neo, then back to Andzani. “You’re forever hiding behind your boyfriend’s ass.”

“Hewena, I’m not his boyfriend.” Neo Interjected.

“Entlek you two think we are stupid, heh?” Nkateko’s Zola 7 finger sign flashed close to Neo and Andzani’s eyes as he spoke. “Okay. Prove us wrong.” Nkateko held out the light for Andzani. “Here, let’s see what you can do.” He backslapped Andzani slightly on the chest.

Andzani followed Nkateko’s eyes to the man’s feet, tied with old dirty plastic bags. His eyes searched among the boys’ faces, only their eyes visible, waiting in anticipation, as if this had been planned out beforehand and they had all been looking forward to this moment. Andzani shifted his eyes to Neo standing next to him but failed to read his expression clearly. There had been what Andzani thought was a fleeting frown.

Andzani snapped the lighter off Nkateko’s fingers and moved towards the man who writhed his legs and mumbled to be let go. Andzani knelt, one knee to the ground as the other boys held the man firmly. He lit the plastics, holding the burning lighter longer against the plastic as it took time to burn because of the dew that had fallen on it. When finally, the plastic caught fire, there was popping sounds of the wetness burning against the flame. And when the plastic dripped down the man’s ankles, he’d writhed against the hands that held him down. Andzani remembered being in the same position in Mrs Marivate’s class, remembered how powerless he felt under Spakuza and Mpanyaza’s firm grasps. He threw the lighter on the ground and walked away. When at a distance, Andzani craned his neck after hearing Neo shout, “I said let the man go. Akere you got what you wanted.”

Andzani witnessed the man run to the nearest dew filled knee-length grass with the plastic still burning on his ankles and kick his legs against the moisture. The man managed to get the fire off, but the plastic and socks had already turned sap like and clung to his skin as it came into contact with the droplets of water.

The boys had scattered and were at a safe distance when a woman opened her front door to pour out bathing water on her front lawn when she saw a man dancing in the grass. Andzani was a distance ahead and when he got to the four way stop, took the route leading home instead of Setice's gym. He'd heard, immediately after his turn, whistles from Neo and when he craned his head again, saw Neo raise his shoulders, palms held out, inquiringly. Andzani ignored him and continued the way home.

...

Setice's gym was always quiet on Monday nights because then people still nursed their weekend's babalas and had no strength to be fighting gym equipment after the Monday blues. Thus, it was Mondays that Neo had set aside, dedicated to maintaining the gym equipment. It had been an agreement between him and Setice; that he would get a monthly stipend for the general maintenance of the gym—the lubricating of the treadmill, disinfecting the seats, benches, mats, and identifying worn and broken equipment needing to be replaced.

The Monday that followed the Saturday morning incident, after doing his work around the gym, Neo sat on the brown, almost worn out, car seat that sat at the back of the gym, closest to the corner and overlooked all the gym equipment. Setice sometimes relaxed on this seat and smoked in the dark.

Earlier, before the sun set, Neo had texted Andzani on Mxit and asked him to come chill and smoke at the gym as it was quiet. When Andzani arrived, he found Neo sitting in the dark with one of the double garage doors up. Neo had been lazy to get up and turn the lights on when darkness descended. He was rolling a joint when he saw Andzani's frame walk past the gate, into the yard and towards the gym.

“Ekse?” Andzani greeted as he walked towards the car seat.

“Heita.”

“And then?”

“What?”

“Why are the lights off?”

“Because I like things that happen in the dark,” Neo said, his tone humor filled. He lit the joint between his lips and watched Andzani throw himself on the seat, slouching a bit. Neo had transcended the cigarette smoking stage and now smoked weed. At first, he’d thought Andzani would object, but they had grown to sharing the weed together.

Neo, after blowing white streaks out of his nostrils, like contrails, handed the joint to Andzani.

“I don’t even know why I’m sharing my joint with you because you have been avoiding my texts wena Satan,” Neo said.

Andzani didn’t reply, focusing on the joint as he narrowed his eyes with each pull.

“You can’t still be mad about what happened on Saturday, Andzani.” Neo had started omitting the ‘A’ and prolonging the “I” such that the sound Andzani heard was ‘Ndzanie’.

“I’m not.”

“Then what’s up? You ignored my calls yesterday.”

“Nkateko wa khinya hemfo. . .it wasn’t necessary, what he did. I mean – I burnt that man’s legs for what? A tiger? He was going to work, so he could feed his family. . .so he could get the tiger you guys were demanding.”

“Eh? Brika daar, I didn’t demand money from no one.”

“But you stood there and let that idiot force me to burn that man’s legs.” Andzani passed back the joint.

“So I was supposed to have done what? Stopped you? Remember what you said when you wanted to join the gang? That I should step back and not be in your way? That this was something you *needed* to do? I did that, I let you make your own decisions. It wasn’t easy for me letting you get tangled up with this nonsense. But it was something *you* needed to do. And

I respected your decision. What you did Saturday morning, I'm sorry but that's part of the package."

"I know, Neo."

"En nou? Why are you blaming me for not stepping in?"

Andzani exhaled. "I'm not blaming you. . .I'm just saying it was wrong, it felt wrong."

"Of course, it felt wrong, nothing we do here is right. But we do it anyway."

"What happened to us! We were grand, good people."

"Everyone is capable of doing evil. We all have an evil side. What sets most people apart is how they respond to that urge, to that tickle--," Neo ran his fingers on Andzani's knee. "When evil calls. . .me and you decided to respond to that tickle. We like experimenting." Neo stopped, as if to think. "Well, let me speak for myself. I like experimenting." He pulled on the joint between his fingers.

"Something Nkateko said has been bothering me."

"What?"

"That some people had to slit throats to become members."

Neo shook his head lightly and laughed.

"Did you slit any?" Andzani asked.

"No!"

"So no one has killed?"

"You shouldn't believe things that come out of that dumb ass's mouth. He only said that to see if you had the courage to burn the guy's legs."

There was silence, only the sound of cannabis seeds crackling could be heard when Neo pulled and pulled at the joint as if to cloud the frustration on his face.

"I want out," Andzani said quietly. "I'm not sleeping well at night . . .I've sent Setice a message." He rubbed his nose.

“You’ve sent Setice a message?” Neo feigned laughter. He had known this moment would come; he was disappointed it hadn’t come sooner. Neo knew Andzani feared pain, he was scared to get hurt and being part of a gang meant he either had to inflict or feel pain.

“Yes. And he ignored me.”

“He’s not going to let you go.”

“I know,” Andzani took the last of the joint between Neo’s fingers. “All I know is that I wasn’t asking.”

“Wena na?”

“I came here willingly. . .I should be able to leave so.”

“Mmh?” Neo was nodding, his eyebrows raised. “So you think you’ll be able to use such reasoning on that dunderhead?”

Andzani looked at Neo a beat.

“Ah, Andzani?” Neo said.

“Neo, please.”

“Talking to him will only ruin things for me. You know I need the money I get here.”

“Okay fine ke,” Andzani said. “He can beat me up if he wants.”

“Your guilt tripping me won’t work.”

Neo’s eyes followed Andzani’s hands as Andzani placed the roach beneath his foot before he sat back and splayed his fingers over his forehead. Neo, slouching, swung his legs. The effects of the joint were kicking in and he very much wanted to change the subject.

“Entlek, that’s not the reason I called you here,” Neo said and Andzani’s eyes shot his way. “What’s going on at your house?”

“How do you mean?”

“Violet, Ketsi tells me she’s not doing well.”

“She’s fine now.”

“Mhh-uhm?”

“She moved out of the main bedroom; says she can’t sleep. So I gave her my room and moved into her bedroom. But she’s okay now. She slept the entire night last night.”

“She’s still hearing voices?” Neo asked. His swinging had gained momentum and the waves on the seat bothered Andzani. It was as if they were interfering with his ability to think, process his feelings, and it brought up a sudden irritation. He placed his hand on Neo’s knee, to stop the swinging.

“Nah, that has stopped. Insomnia, but I suspect she fears closing her eyes.”

Andzani had told Neo about the day he’d found Violet hiding behind the red laundry basket in the corner of her room. When she saw him, she’d held her hand out to him. And when he came closer, she’d pulled at his T-shirt so they could both hide behind the laundry basket, whispered that people were after her, that she could hear their voices. She calmed down after Andzani had rushed for her bible on top of the nightstand and forced her to hold the other end as he willed himself to pray. The words, foreign on his tongue, as he labored through the prayer, repeating the words ‘in Jesus’ name’ aggressively because he blamed this Jesus for what his mother was going through but also because he needed for him to make her better. She’d repeated after him.

“Maybe you should get her sleeping pills,” Neo said.

Andzani thought about this. “Do you think I can get these over the counter?”

“Not sure.”

“I will go check tomorrow.”

“Do you miss him?” Neo asked.

There was silence, Andzani ruminating on the question. “No,” he replied.

Neo felt there was more coming, so he waited.

“It doesn’t feel different, that he is not here,” Andzani laughed a little, a sad forced laugh. “I mean apart from lack of his tantrums and the house being quiet now, that’s it. I don’t feel like he’s left. . .with a part of me, if that makes sense. Yes, he was my father—but it ends there, the tag, timer. There is no void or anything. Just peace.”

“Do you think the way he left is the reason Violet is going off like this?”

“He’s the reason for everything going wrong in our lives.” Andzani felt a warm breeze sweep in, felt a trail of sweat run his back. He rubbed his back against the seat. “Those two were done a long time ago. You know what he said when he left us?” Neo shook his head slowly. “That his ancestors were punishing my mother for the death of my little sister because she refused to participate in the initial ceremony that was meant to save their marriage and then didn’t allow him to introduce my little sister to them. He told her she was suffering for her defiance.

“Do you think it’s true?”

“I think if anybody deserves punishment it’s him, for everything he made us go through.”

“Eish, and ancestors are known to be strict.”

“Do you believe in them?” Andzani asked.

“I don’t know. I think I do. But I feel that admitting it will only anger the man above.”

Andzani smiled a bit at Neo’s silliness. “But the man above knows your heart already.”

“I know,” Neo replied. “See, this is the reason I don’t like talking about it. Entlek, let’s change the subject ya vale hansì.”

Andzani began twisting a thread on his afro. “Thinking about it now,” Andzani started again. “That man was in my life but I never felt his fatherly presence. Like father me, don’t give me chores and send me to do stuff that make your life convenient.”

“Father you how?”

“I don’t know, Neo. I’m not a father. What I know is that I always felt judged in that man’s presence. Always felt the need to put on a performance, an actor in front of him just so he could be decent to me. I don’t know how to explain it, but I feel glad that he’s out of our lives.”

“Have you heard from him?”

“I’ve seen him around where he stays in Lusaka. He didn’t see me when I passed him in the street the other day, so we didn’t speak. The woman he stays with has a child. I feel sorry for that kid.”

There was more silence, Neo thinking of what to say next and Andzani comparing what he’d just said to Neo to how he felt, if really that was how he felt.

“I might as well have been you. . .living without a father,” Andzani joked, trying to break the ice forming.

“Eh joe—that’s not nice.”

“I’m joking,” Andzani laughed.

“Hayi, tsek.”

Andzani’s attempt at diffusing the emotions that had gathered in his chest failed, and Neo, realising this, took charge. He placed his hand on Andzani’s knee. His head leaning against the seat, he tilted it to face Andzani as they both slouched in the dark of the garage like gym.

Neo moved closer and Andzani shifted uncomfortably.

“Keng?” Neo asked, sitting upright. He could barely open his eyes.

“The garage door, Neo.”

“Eh joe, di problems tsa hao di ngata. Your problems are a lot.”

Andzani shrugged. “Better safe than sorry.”

“E tla mo, come here,” Neo said and pulled Andzani closer. Then he placed his hand on Andzani’s afro, massaging his scalp. “Look at me.”

“Why? It’s dark in here you can hardly see anything.”

“I can see the white of your eyes. And when you smile, I can see your teeth. . .”

Andzani held on showing his teeth but Neo was already smiling at him and so he gave up.

Tenderly, Neo, his hand still on Andzani’s afro, pulled Andzani’s face towards him. “Zwakala hier,” Neo said before his lips met Andzani’s.

Andzani, familiar with their thickness, familiar with what Neo liked doing and was doing now—taking both his lips in his mouth and then letting go, slowly—relaxed his body.

Neo had done this, kissed him, in his room which he’d built himself using money he’d earned from Setice’s gym and the gang. He’d told Ousie Ketsi he wanted to move out of the main house or at least extend a room which would become his bedroom. And before she had had a chance to protest, he told her she didn’t need to worry about the money; he would buy the material needed using the money he got from his job at the gym. He bought the bricks, a door, a window and a door frame, after buying cements and hiring the man who would extend the room. It took a week, with the help of the two boys the man had employed, to dig the foundation, build and do the roofing.

On that day, Andzani had fallen asleep on Neo’s bed, a Geography textbook, open, covered his face. Neo sat in front of the desktop he’d recently secured through the gang’s break-ins, practicing virtual deejaying. He’d got up from the desk and went to stand above Andzani, whose face was still concealed by the textbook. Andzani could feel the weight of another shadow behind it. So he shifted the book slightly down, so that his eyes became exposed. And without a word, Neo pulled down the rest of the textbook from Andzani’s face and took both his lips in his mouth.

He let go of the lips after he'd heard a knock on the door—Ous' Ketsi complaining that her house was not a tavern and that they should lower the music. When Neo moved to lower the volume on his computer, Andzani had noticed that the silk soccer shorts Neo wore, sagging down his waist to expose his boxers—the fat kid Andzani once knew completely effaced from his memory, as if he'd never existed—had formed a small tent.

Andzani would release religiously to that image stored in the crevices of his brain many nights after.

They never spoke about that moment because whenever they thought about it, awkwardness peeled and exposed guilt. It was better left unsaid. And so there had been that lingering longing for each other which neither party had the courage to act on.

Back at the gym, Andzani felt Neo's other hand rub the length of his thigh smoothly, creating warmth beneath the jeans he wore. And then Neo moved his hands towards Andzani's zip, unzipping the jeans while he took Andzani's hand and placed it on his bulge, for Andzani to feel the turgid penis fighting to be let out.

Through the fly front, Neo forced his fingers and slipped Andzani's sex out, brushing lightly beneath its head with his thumb. What Andzani was not aware of was that Neo had been recreating the gay porn video he'd recently downloaded with his phone, transferred to his desktop and hid in multiples files so no one could find them. He consumed these at night.

Andzani's hand pulled down the front of Neo's shorts, finally letting the throbbing dick out of the confined space. He encircled it and felt the veins that ran along its length, warm, he tightened his hand around it and felt Neo's breaths become rapid. They kissed, each of their hands on each other's hardness. And when their hands gained momentum, they halted the kissing, letting their tongues linger in each other's mouths while they savored the effects of each other's hand work.

Their lips parted when Andzani felt Neo extend his legs and he imagined Neo's toes curl as his did when he released with the help of Neo in his mind during the mornings he woke up with a throb. Andzani increased his momentum then, working the length of Neo's sex, felt Neo's waist rise above the seat, legs straightened. Neo placed his hand atop Andzani's on his manhood before Andzani felt the warm liquid run down his fingers as Neo grunted and his dick pulsated.

Then, carefully, Neo loosened Andzani's hand around his manhood—your turn, he seemed to say. He changed hands, Neo, when he reached for Andzani's now partial erection. His fingers circled the head, the sensitive area where scars from Andzani's circumcision were still visible, and down the shaft his hand went. In tune with the hand was Neo's head as he lowered it and took Andzani in his mouth. Neo felt Andzani protest, trying to push his head off. "Relax, Andzani. You need to learn to relax," Neo whispered, placed his palm on Andzani's chest and pushed back slightly. Then he began to work his way down Andzani's shaft, taking it in until Andzani's pubic hair scratched his nose. Each time Neo's face met Andzani's pubic hair, his speed increased. Neo felt Andzani crumple the back of his T-shirt so that it tightened around his neck before Andzani gasped for air. And when he felt liquid shoot the roof of his mouth, he sucked in the last drop as if determined to suck out Andzani's soul. Then watched Andzani twitch, his Adam's Apple protruding as he faced the roof.

When Neo raised his head, Andzani expected him to spit out the liquid, but it had already found its way down his throat.

They started laughing, Neo taking off his T-shirt to wipe off the liquid that had sprayed all over Andzani's fingers. And as he wiped Andzani's hand, their laughter became loud, as if suddenly possessed. He passed the T-shirt to Andzani to wipe the parts he'd missed. Unable to get a hold of himself, Neo pressed his fist on his mouth as he watched Andzani wipe off

each finger at a time. When Neo had put back on his T-shirt, Andzani touched it and felt the damp spots, he broke down laughing again.

Andzani shifted and lay on the seat, placing his head on top of Neo's lap. Neo played with his afro.

"Your T-shirt smells weird," Andzani exclaimed, tears filled his eyes once more as they burst into laughter again.

And with their laughter, they had missed the eyes that had been on them for some time, had clouded the sound when the door from Setice's room opened and shut. Setice, in the dark, had watched them, witnessed and heard everything.

...

The day Andzani and Neo learned that Nkateko's eyesight was taken by community members was the day they received a text from Setice demanding to see them both and threatening to sing of what he'd witnessed in his gym should they be defiant. Then Andzani had trembled with rage, sending countless text messages to Neo who had had to abandon his morning run at the local stadium, rushed back home and tried to abate Andzani's panic attacks.

News of Nkateko's loss of eyesight circulated around Mbambamencisi after he was caught trying to rob a Somali tuck shop when two men who delivered bread each morning to the shop found him demanding money with a broken beer bottle. Nkateko was drunk. The men gave chase, shouting for people to come out of their houses. Eventually they caught and dragged him on the sandy soil, across sharp rocks, back to the tuck shop. Here the men whipped him with their belt buckles till they heard his cry change from pleading he'd never do it again to begging that he couldn't see anymore. The buckles had ruptured his right eyeball and blood flowed down his cheek. Police had been called, took their time to arrive

and when finally, they arrived, asserted they couldn't arrest the culprit as he needed medical attention. And so it was the police who called an ambulance for him.

The news burned Setice's chest; he knew that Nkateko's attack would cause his group to disintegrate, and like water seeping into a rock and causing cracks, would soon wedge off other members of the gang too. If they started denouncing him, his business would collapse, years of hard work evaporating just like that. So to prevent this from happening, Setice swore to teach those who had betrayed him a lesson, one that would teach the rest of the crew that he wasn't a playing field. Burning his beloved car seat that Neo and Andzani had defiled had pushed him over the edge. And so, when he texted both Andzani and Neo, he'd already concocted a plan.

Andzani and Neo decided Neo would go see Setice's first and find out what was happening; if anyone could talk Setice out of this madness, it was Neo. And so when Andzani entered Setice's yard that night and heard music playing in Setice's room, he thought everything was sorted. He turned the corner of the gym, pushed open Setice's door and halted midway—Neo was on top of Nsovo, his trousers around his ankles. Andzani felt his heartbeat in his ears.

Nsovo was the daughter of the councilor of Mbambamencisi, the man who had given instructions and permission to community members to take matters into their own hands when the police fell short. After losing her mother to wounds inflicted by her father, Nsovo had left home. She didn't run, she didn't sneak out at night. She simply told her father she was leaving home because if she didn't, she feared she would kill him. She moved in with Setice, already a part of his weed business—dealing with suppliers and the dispatching of weed, while Setice focused on the gym and the gang—it was easier to reach an agreement with him. The one thing she made clear to him was that even though she cooked, cleaned

around the gym and slept with him, occasionally, she didn't belong to him, she was not his woman. The only thing that bound them together was her share in the weed business.

People called her Magosha, a whore, because even though she slept with Setice, she also entertained men who drove expensive cars and came to buy weed at the gym—her clients. She reveled in her sexual autonomy, and because of this, many couldn't place her. At first, when she'd started spending time at the gym, wearing her hair short and often wearing shorts and shirts, the truants called her a lesbian behind her back. But women didn't move her the same way men did, and what she'd grown to learn, was survival. Her mom had died at the hands of a man she called a father, one she never imagined could inflict pain on his family. And when her mother died, she swore to protect herself whichever way possible from men. She spent her time with men because she needed to learn how to survive on her own, and to prevent them oversexualizing her during this process, she wore the same clothes as them. Their suspicions died down when she'd started sleeping with her clients, because when she did so, her clients paid her more for the weed than she normally charged. And those few that fell for her, that wanted more than she could offer, she discarded like rinds. She did all this and came back to sleep in the same bed as Setice. But it had started to make him uncomfortable. He wanted her to be his own, alone. He hated the fact that he was sharing her with the many men that frequented his business. It was as if when she'd started sleeping with the men, when he'd witnessed their desire for her, when they'd expressed it, her worth went up. For a long time he'd found her undesirable—except for those few times when he'd needed to release and she met his needs. The reason he tolerated her in his bed. He joked often with the truants that sleeping next to her was like sleeping next to a man.

But when he couldn't take anymore from her, when he couldn't exchange her love and affection for money as did the men who frequented his gym, he'd slowly grown to despise her. Despised the fact that she would never find him attractive beyond the exchange of bodily

fluids when she'd offered. So, when he'd started suggesting exclusivity because his self-esteem was taking a hit, she'd shut each conversation down, threatening to leave the weed business with her clients. Exclusivity wasn't on the table.

...

Andzani found Setice sitting on top of the mirror top, legs crossed with a rolling paper between his fingers—he scooped the weed scattered next to the gun, on top of the mirror top, into the rolling paper. The people he believed had betrayed him were all in the same room. When Setice walked into the room with Neo, Nsovo was taken aback because often, Setice held his meetings with his boys at the gym and not inside their room. She sat up and covered her legs with a blanket as she waited to hear the reason behind Neo's visit. But Setice had swiftly moved toward his wardrobe and retrieved his gun, opening one of the lower drawers, he took out a loaded magazine.

“There is no reason to be alarmed,” Setice said as he inserted the magazine into the gun. “This is all yours tonight,” he pointed at Neo. Nsovo, uncomprehending, ran her eyes back and forth between Setice and Neo's faces. She noticed the fear and surprise in Neo's eyes—at that moment, Neo had contemplated turning and running out of the door, but Setice had raised his eyes from the firearm before the urge had taken over him—and she'd noticed the burning rage that lingered on Setice's face and refused to dissipate. She shut her eyes and swallowed.

“And then? Setice? What's happening?” Nsovo asked, putting her phone aside.

To no one in particular, Setice spoke, “you people think this gym is the breeding ground ya vu feve, for your whoring tendencies. Everything that has been happening behind my back, shall happen in front of me.”

“What is this about, Setice? What did we do?” Nsovo sat up from her slouching position.

“This one,” Setice pointed his gun at Neo, “thinks he can use my gym to fulfill his dirty fantasies. He soiled my father’s car seat. The only thing that was left from my father’s belonging. Ask him what I found them doing in my gym.” Nsovo turned to look at Neo enquiringly. “I knew I shouldn’t have agreed for that crab bitten kid to be part of the gang, nxa!”

“Then—I don’t understand. . .why am I dragged into your business?”

“Wena? You sleep with anyone who sets foot in my yard mos. So, here. This kid has never been with a woman,” Setice shot Neo a look. “Explains why he’s busy sucking dick in my gym—let him have some, go on. This is what you do mos? Sleep with everyone?”

“Setice, why are you doing this?” Nsovo asked, removing the blanket she’d covered herself with and tried getting up. But Setice shoved her back onto the bed.

“Don’t touch me you filthy pig.” Nsovo shouted as her back met the bed again.

“Who are you calling a pig,” Setice barked, pointing the gun at her. Nsovo’s nostrils flared as she stared at Setice, she didn’t blink. Then, Setice shifted the gun to Neo, moved it down in the air swiftly so it pointed to the grey shorts that sagged and exposed his underwear.

“Freckles, take them off.”

Neo, his eyes sweeping Nsovo’s face, froze. Then his gaze shifted and found Setice who was unsmiling, head tilted to the side as if suffering a blow, but it was inquiring, the head tilt; why hadn’t he done what he was instructed to do already?

“Freckles, man!”

“Heh Setice, U nga yi chuni dideng. . .let’s talk about this, he vava. Me and you come far, bra. There is no need for this. Check, Setice, let’s not involve her in our disagreements. If you want to punish me for what happened at the gym, fine. But involving her in all of this is not fair joe.”

“This bitch ratted Nkateko to her father, wena maan.”

“That’s nonsense. I didn’t do that.” Nsovo said, her back one with the wall.

“Setice, me and you know no one ratted Nkateko,” Neo said. “He’s clumsy and they caught him, we know this. That’s it.”

“And I haven’t spoken to my father since I moved in with you, you know very well,” said Nsovo.

“Blood is thicker than water, vava,” said Setice, unwavering. “Blood is thicker than water. That’s all I know.”

“Setice, please, bra,” Neo, almost on his knees, begged.

“Even if she didn’t rat him out,” Setice swung the gun in the air. “Her father is messing with my livelihood. You know what I do with people who mess with my livelihood. I hit where it hurts. I will show him flames.” Setice turned to Neo, “Freckles, your shorts maan,” he barked, and Neo’s face vibrated. “I didn’t call you here to talk.”

Neo swallowed, his eyes on Nsovo, a resigned look on his face as his hands pushed down, unwillingly, his shorts.

“So this is how you repay me for all the hard work I have put into the business?” Nsovo breathed heavily, tears eluding her. “For taking care of you?”

“Did I force you?” Setice asked sternly. “Didn’t you also eat? Didn’t you also stay in a clean space? Did you not get your share of the money we made? Did you not have the freedom to sleep with whoever you wanted? Manje? Why are you making this about me like I forced you?”

Nsovo entwined her legs.

“What are you doing?” Asked Setice. “Open your legs wena xifebe!”

He hit her knee with the back of the gun and an electric like shock wave ran Nsovo’s leg and numbed it momentarily.

“Setice, nitshike. Nitshike!” She shook her head, refusing.

Setice turned to Neo, whose grey shorts rested on his knees. “Are you waiting for me to tell you what to do?”

Neo shook his head.

“Oh, so you know what to do, freckles? Voetsek, get on top then and stop wasting my time.”

“Setice bra yameh–,” Neo’s eyes begged.

“Ey Voetsek wena, mahn. I said get on top of that bed,” Setice shrieked as his right foot lunged Neo forward, his lips hitting Nsovo’s knees. Setice’s gaze remained tight on them as he sat on the mirror top, his legs on the mirror stool, beckoning with his firearm for Neo to proceed. Nsovo gave Neo a stern look before averting her face to face the other way. She refused to part her legs and take off her tights.

“Eh?!” Setice exclaimed before moving in to do the job for her, pulling her tights from her waist, her body swaying with the intensity of his hands. Then he pushed Neo on top of her. She felt coldness in her ears when she looked up, tears trailing into them. Then she felt Neo’s flaccid penis try push in between her legs.

“Hosi ya mina, my king, right on time,” Setice said when Andzani entered the room. He quivered, Andzani, when he saw Neo, who’d turned his head to the door, on top of Nsovo, a flinty stare on his face. Andzani’s eyes moved to Nsovo’s face, which gleamed, briefly, with hope.

“Freckles, you’ll stop when I say stop, mjita.” Setice said, taking the gun into his hand once again as Neo resumed his reluctant thrusts; his eyes still fixed on Andzani.

“Andzani, come,” Setice beckoned with the gun, on his feet now.

Andzani’s eyes remained glued on Neo as he moved slowly towards Setice.

“Hosi ya mina, soon it’ll be your turn, don’t worry,” Setice smiled reassuringly.

The fear on Nsovo's face reminded Andzani of Spakuza and Mpanyaza; when they pulled him with his yellow school shirt so that the buttons came undone; when they dragged his jelly body on the dry grass of the school ground—the grass had stuck on his shorts and socks—to the back of the school's pit latrines, he'd given up fighting then because they had overpowered him; when he'd stopped crying as they unbuttoned his trousers and soon after heard the sharp sound of a twig breaking from the blackberry tree that grew near the school fence, close to the latrines. No one ate the berries from this tree, learners at the school said it was green, lush and produced sweet berries because it got its manure from the shit in the pit latrines that seeped to its roots.

That sound of the twig breaking, like the sound corn made when grilled on the fireplace at his house, would be the cause of his many nightmares.

"Freckles move away," said Setice. "The gayness runs in your blood you can't even get it hard."

Neo stared at him, trying to determine if he genuinely wanted him to stop.

"Step aside wena mahn." Setice roared and Neo descended the bed as if it were hot coals. Then, Nsovo held her body in a foetal position, pulling the blanket to cover herself.

"Andzani? It's your turn, hosi ya mina, my king." Setice swept air with the gun in Nsovo's direction. "You say you want to quit the gang? I can't let you go without doing you this one favour. Get on top."

Nsovo pulled her legs towards her chin and pushed her back against the wall. Andzani was still staring at her when he got jerked out of his thoughts by Setice's grip. He turned to face Setice but Setice's voice was faint, afar and his lips moved grotesquely. His mouth emitted a fetid smell that took Andzani back into his thoughts. He could smell them, the pit latrines, saw the brown stained walls, the back of the toilets where learners turned to urinate when trying to avoid the insides of the latrines. He felt the pain between his legs as he

writhed in Setice's grasp, and remembered the burning sensation of the stick as they held him, a knee on his back and a hand on his neck, pushing his face to the ground, that his lips kissed the damp soil. He felt the hands that locked his legs together, the searing sensation when the stick made its way in, meeting friction as his walls contracted.

Before Setice could throw him onto the bed, he felt it, in his throat, before he heaved forward, and it came out in chunks, some of it landing on Setice's arm.

"Msathanyoko loyi!" Andzani felt Setice's arm hit the back of his shoulder. "You are vomiting on me!" Setice turned to look for a face cloth to wipe his arm on top of the small washing basket by the corner. Disgust filled his face.

Neo crossed the room as Andzani continued to dry-heave, as if running out of air, as his guts fought to expel more.

Neo, indifferent now to Setice and his barking, pulled Andzani outside and near the Lemon tree, let go of him. Andzani sank to his knees, the chicken stew Violet had served him for supper, desecrating the ground—a cocktail of colours. He managed to get up, Andzani, beads of sweat scattered on his forehead, his eyes blood shot with tear trails on his face. He staggered, feeling bitterness at the back of his throat when he swallowed. He looked at Neo, then shifted his eyes before he looked at him again as if seeing something strange.

He backed up when Neo started toward him.

"Andzani?" Neo called out.

Andzani turned and hurried for the gate.

"Andzani, wait," Neo said as he quickened his pace behind him, and Andzani, realising Neo was catching up, ran, increasing his speed until Neo was nowhere in sight. He contemplated running to his house but he knew Violet would be alarmed, would ask him questions, because she would fear the community is after him. She was sleeping well at night

and had ceased talking to herself. The last thing he wanted was for her to slip into another depressive episode.

Home would also be the first place Neo would go looking for him. He didn't want to see him. Neo had evoked those memories he had worked so hard to bury and forget.

Andzani turned the corner to his street and ran straight down, passing his house, he turned again at the end of the street for Uncle Sontaga's house. When Uncle Sontaga opened the door, he found Andzani panting, his head bowed as he held on to the wall for support. Uncle Sontaga didn't say anything, he cast his eyes to the gate before he let him pass into the house.

Part Three: Here is the Hope

Chapter 6

Cape Town

2016

“Okay, let me rephrase: how does the passage Likho has just read, tie in with this week’s theme of naming and renaming?”

There was silence in the classroom and only the buzzing sound of lightbulbs could be heard. Yolula felt impatience swirl in him with each second that passed.

“This is where I have been trying to get you guys, thinking about the significance of renaming oneself,” Yolula referred to a page from the book he now held in the air, *We Need New Names* by NoViolet Bulawayo. He stood in front of his students in the half-lit classroom of the Arts Block. It was that time of the year when assignment submissions were close to each other and students prioritised work and submissions from their major courses and did last their chosen electives. He wondered then how many were taking the course as an elective. Usually he asked this at the start of the semester, during their introductions. But this semester it had slipped his mind. He knew that almost half the class had not read this last text of the seminar series because of the awkward glances they gave him now and again as if begging not to be picked to give an answer; how their faces had gotten glued to the novel as if encountering the words the first time when he’d directed them to the relevant passage; how

they took longer to answer his follow up questions because their eyes had never seen the passage.

However, he had taught enough classes to not be bothered by this. In fact, and in most cases when he felt that his students slacked in terms of participation, he made it his point to show off to them, the knowledge he carried, referencing a few papers here and there, mentioning a few books and giving recommendations so as to make them feel bad for their lack of preparation. But on this day? He lacked the patience for it. He checked the laptop screen and thirty minutes had already passed.

“Okay. . . I want you to think about this in terms of queer representation and how certain names lead to certain subjectivities, how naming is significant in aiding self-translation and how naming leads to how queer characters are read. For example, Darling and her friends want to perform an illegal abortion on Chipso because they fear that if Chipso gives birth at a young age, she will die. But, before they begin with the abortion, they take on new names, each takes on the name of a doctor in the American drama series *ER*, Sbho calls herself Dr Bullets, Darling becomes Dr Roz and Forgiveness becomes . . .” he let his voice trail, waiting on the students to provide the answer.

“Doctor Cutter,” a voice, closer to the door, and almost nonchalant, replied.

“Yes. Cutter. In this way these doctor titles carry with them a certain ability, a certain identity, which would allow each child to carry out his or her role during the abortion process, right? Without these titles, Sbho does not think they will do it right—the abortion, that is. Thus, this eponymous chapter, with its themes of renaming, highlights the significance of new names in the assumption of new identities and being able to carry out certain tasks—this is my argument, right! But not only is naming significant in aiding one to self-translate but also leads to the idealization of certain masculinities as desirable, maybe more desirable than others, and this is what I am trying to get you thinking about. I am trying

to show you how naming is important in the context of queer representation, and how, although this text,” Yolula held the book in the air again. “Is not about queerness or queer representation—but some aspects of it are important in helping us think through how naming allows for queer individuals to be read and in effect lets us in on representational politics.”

He was running out of breath when he stopped, spoon feeding them, that is what he was doing. But this was better than the awkwardness that would have resulted had he asked the set questions he had prepared for them. They hadn’t read the text. What was the point in asking them? He watched the students; some typed furiously on their laptops, others had their eyes on the projector behind him, rereading the passage he’d directed them to, and a few were disinterested, watching him with sleepy eyes. The class dynamic was always of interest in the beginning of each semester when new students signed up for tutorials under his name. When he taught first year students, he noticed how white students were the most vocal participants and black students the silent majority. But in his second years tutorials, black students participated equally with their white counterparts.

Yolula had recognized this trend, how his second-year students were more articulate because, while they had been initiated into the university culture, into academia and the scheme of making arguments, at the core of the confidence they assumed, were their budding accents. An imitation of those they had encountered in the food courts, shuttles, classrooms and of course, for some, their residences. Conscious of the way they sounded, what others considered thick accents, first year black students were always reluctant to speak, rarely participated in class discussions nor asked questions—to get them to participate he’d make them read. Yolula knew his accent was intimidating. Often he joked of how his Makhulu reminded him that she paid lot of money for him to speak like the white kids he’d gone to school with. That she always made sure to remind him that if she’d wanted him to speak like an uneducated man, she would have sent him to a public school. And often, in social

gatherings, he reminded people that he was aware his accent made it easy for him to slide into and occupy spaces regarded as too white, how much easier it was for him to dive into conversations with his white counterparts in the department because his command of the English language was on par with theirs, if not better. When people pointed out his accent, and gunned for the privileges it afforded him, he hit back stating that his Makhulu had paid a lot of money for him to not use that accent, judge him however they wished, he wasn't going to throw his grandmother's hard earned money down the drain.

He knew that his accent made it difficult for his first-year black students to contribute and engage in conversations in class—the tutor that sounded too white. He knew many of the black students in his tutorial group had opted for him because they saw his black name among the myriad of white surnames, hoping they would relate to him, only to be showered with disappointment when they got to their first tutorial meeting. He tried to flatten it, in class, to speak with an accent he considered neutral, but he only achieved sounding condescending and felt as if overworking the muscles of his tongue. He could not shake off imagining their disappointment upon their realisation that they probably had nothing in common with this tutor they had so eagerly signed up for.

Even though he never admitted to it, it did bother him, the effects his accent subjected him to; the unyielding judgement in people's eyes when they heard how he sounded. And at other times, longed for when he still spoke with a tongue that was common among his cousins, before he went to boarding school. But that way of speaking was lost within the map of his tongue, exchanged for this twang that made him stand out in masses of black voices that sounded almost the same.

Often, he felt sad, watching, listening to the kids twist their tongues and contort their words in class so that they strangled their speech, inducing anxiety, trying to privilege one way of talking over the other they had known all their lives.

And when he thought of mediating, he held back because he knew that once mastered, this new way of talking would elevate them and the position they held in their respective social hierarchies. It was a tough pill to swallow, but that is how the world worked.

“Was that clear? Or was I just rambling through?” He gave a nervous laugh.

A student, sitting close to the window, raised her arm.

“Yes, Tshego?”

The semester nearing its end meant he could place each name on his register to each face in his class.

“I was just thinking about what you have just said. . . how naming idealizes some masculinities more than others. . .” she cleared her throat, looking at him for confirmation, he nodded approvingly. “I was thinking about this in terms of the South African television industry, like how naming informs how audiences view certain characters,” she looked down on the piece of paper in front of her.

Yolula gave another nod of encouragement.

“I don’t know, I feel like the industry is undoing the hard work that has been done in terms of the representation of gay characters. Like for example, I was watching this other show on SABC 1?” She turned to the class to confirm familiarity to the show she’d mentioned. Yolula noted how only the black students nodded their confirmation. “And how it plays on the stereotypical representation of the gay friend—like how this gay guy is supposed to be hyper active and entertaining, how he’s always throwing around jokes and how he can’t speak proper English—how his inability to speak ‘proper English’ . . .”

She threw her fingers into quotation marks with an emphasis on the derision that accompanied the quoted words. “Allows for him to be ridiculed and turned into memes on social media. So, I was just thinking of how the character not only becomes entertainment for other characters within the context of the people in the show but also for viewers at home.

And so people don't take him seriously as compared to. . . for example, this hardcore looking guy who is the lead and gets referred to by his clan name, and this reference instills uhm. . . a sense of masculine, traditional behavior, a person who is the head of the family and is bestowed respect. Not only from other characters, but also the viewers at home too. So, I just thought this ties in with what you mentioned earlier about naming and representation. . . uhm, yeah, I'm not sure if that makes sense?"

She wore an uncertain look on her face as she removed braids that had scattered all over her face each time she'd referred to the piece of paper in front of her.

Yolula was still nodding when she finished talking. "Tshego, I think that is an interesting observation—I don't watch the show myself, but I am aware of the lacuna that is there, I mean in terms of research. SA TV is one of the most neglected when it comes to being researched and uhm. . . studied. I think it is a field worth tapping into actually. . . anyway, I digress, yes that was an apt example—" Yolula stopped to listen. Chanting. It was coming from outside. "Is there protest going on outside?" he threw the question in the air as he maneuvered the few chairs and desks before reaching the window to peek outside. The singing got louder as the group of students got closer to the building. "Okay, protest outside," he said to the now anxious faces awaiting confirmation. "Okay, listen up everyone, we are going to end it here today. But I need you to finish reading the text—it will be a worthy discussion in your last essays," he shouted now to the already impatient students packing up their laptops and notebooks into their rucksacks.

"Remember, your seminar mark counts fifty percent, so put in as much effort into this last essay as you have the others."

The fire alarm in the building went off and the students, one by one, started slipping out of the classroom.

“I’ll see you. . . when I see you,” he said, his voice now clouded by the chatter of students in the hallway. Those who had remained behind to listen to his last words also got up and started leaving, saying thank you before they exited the door. He had grown accustomed to these bouts of thank yous that followed each seminar; for what were they thanking him? Bestowing on them with the knowledge he was being paid to give them? In all the tutor WhatsApp groups he’d been part of, someone was always getting thanked for doing their job. If he were to count the thank yous, he’d probably find more of them than the WhatsApp group’s initial intention—to make announcements.

And so with each thank you, he replied, “Sharp, sharp.”

He picked up his phone—only about eight minutes was left of his seminar time. He bent his back, switching off, just behind him, below the projector’s screen, the classroom lights. And then he closed off the tabs on his laptop—the last tab closed and on screen, still projected on the large screen behind him were two tall champagne flutes, filled to the brim. The picture was taken at a vineyard in Plattekloof—with the vineyard the background of the two flutes—Table Mountain and Lion’s head floated above the vine leaves that had a taint of red on them.

Andzani had called it a performance review when the starter was served. Yolula joked about how at first, he’d wanted to hit and run, and Andzani countered it by asking who had said ‘I love you’ first, his flute meeting his lips in a mocking manner. It had been Yolula of course, to say I love you first, in a text, after their second date. Andzani had spent the night at his place after they had left a gallery in town together.

It had become an inside joke; upon their first meeting, Andzani’s intentions were to hook up, and Yolula, interested in Andzani, had one thing set in his mind, a relationship.

“Haw, I couldn’t help it. You were critical but stable and I needed some sort of stability in my life,” Yolula had joked.

“And which part of me was critical?”

“Haike, now you are making your problems mine.”

“Wow. . . uyinja vele ke wena.”

They laughed.

It was almost a year since that anniversary date, since the picture was taken—and if they had not been apart, they would be preparing for their second one. This was going to be Yolula’s to plan; they had put money aside—the money remained untouched in the joint account they had created. And Yolula had continued to deposit money in the account each month end even though Andzani had ceased from his side. Yolula knew that each time he deposited money into the account, Andzani received a notification. And he had hoped, with each deposit, that Andzani would call him.

Life had not stopped in Andzani absence, events had happened; events Andzani had no idea had taken place, such as the passing of Yolula’s grandmother. She had been the first person to give their relationship blessings on that weekend they arrived unannounced in Alice in the Eastern Cape. On the day of their arrival she hadn’t gotten the chance to have a chat with her grandson because immediately upon their arrival, their bodies, tired, forced them to sleep.

Yolula’s room was still unoccupied, his grandmother kept it locked for fear that his cousins would enter and want to share some of his belongings. His uncle, the youngest of his dad’s siblings, had built a house in the same yard. He had returned home to take care of his mother. And upon their arrival, Yolula had introduced the entire family to Andzani, his friend. However, the following morning when he woke up early—as he did each time he paid his grandmother a visit—found his grandmother up and drinking her first cup of tea. He sat next to her against the wall of the main house on a bench, facing the sun rays that were getting warmer. Yolula told her he was only there for the weekend and that they were going

to leave on Sunday because he needed to be back on campus on the Monday as he had classes to teach.

“Actually, Makhulu,” Yolula started. “We drove all this way because I wanted to introduce you Andzani.”

A sudden interest rose in his grandmother’s face, a little alarmed. Yolula brushed his palms together, the friction creating warmth.

“Andzani and I,” Yolula took a deep breath. “Siyathandana, Makhulu.”

“Mntaka-Crimon. . .” She’d exclaimed, putting down the cup of tea on the stoep before wiping her hands together. “What are you telling me?”

“Siyathandana, mama.” Yolula folded his lips together and started to bite on them.

She had looked at him a long time, as if recalling memories, the times she had inferred but quickly dismissed, the instances when she doubted herself and her conclusions.

And when she realised that she had been right all along, a fleeting smile rushed through her face. A part of her content she had not been wrong, rarely was she wrong. Yolula kept stealing side glances, his eyes rushing for the gate, back at his grandmother and quickly at his uncle’s house, hoping no one walked out the door to interrupt this moment he had planned for weeks.

“I’ve always said,” she said to herself, her tone reminiscent.

“Mama?”

“Mhhh.” She shook her head.

“What do you mean, Makhulu?” Yolula licked the corners of his mouth.

“Let me tell you something wena deliverer of shocking news,” she said. “Andithi you’re trying to get my blood pressure through the roof. . .it won’t work.”

“Never that, Makhulu.” The tightness in Yolula’s chest started to ease. “That’s not what I am trying to do.” He smiled shyly when she caught his eyes.

“Let me let you in a secret then,” she lowered her voice as if already not low enough. “The family never wondered, nor questioned it because he was a man of the struggle, ngutatomncinci wam lo ndithetha ngaye. He was recruited into the struggle by his friend.”

Yolula nodded respectfully. “I think I remember you once spoke about him.”

“Yes. Him and his friend, uLucky, would sabotage public installations headed by this organization Lucky had recruited him into. They used to keep the explosives they used and other incriminating material at Lucky’s place—detonators, organization documents, everything. He would leave home, tell us he is going to Lucky’s place, and a week or two would pass without us seeing him. When my father asked him where he disappeared to, he told him he was not going to answer that for my father’s safety should police come look for him. They were close with my father but he never told him about the missions he undertook for the organization.”

“So the family knew about this organization he’d joined?”

“My father knew, and so did some of his other siblings, but they only whispered their knowledge of it. No one knew about the two until the day he died. When Lucky trudged into our yard to tell us the bad news.”

Andzani raised his eyebrows, not wanting to interrupt his grandmother, he let her clarify her statement.

“Everything unraveled the week he was buried in, where, amongst the document found in his room, was a letter he had addressed to my father. He trusted my father. And he trusted my father would carry out his last wishes. This was the same letter uLucky had come to the house with when my father had called a meeting with the family.”

“They had written the letters together?” Yolula asked. Putting together the pieces.

“Yes. In the letter, my father’s brother asked to be buried in the same grave with the man they had known as a friend. The letter carried instructions as to how my father would

carry out this mission. When my father called a meeting with Lucky, the elders refused. It was never done. Who did he think he was to make such demands? At first they resisted, could not believe that one of their own had turned out the way he was. But utatomncinci was a man who always got what he wanted. When it was time to go dig his grave, they had to reckon with the fact that they could not deny a dead man's last wish. That is what he got. A few years later, after being subjected to the wrath of the security police, Lucky succumbed to his wounds. He was buried in the same grave as utatomncinci. So child, if your aim was to get my blood pressure high, you've failed dismally."

Yolula saw warmth in his grandmother's face. She searched the ground for her cup of tea, and when she raised it to her lips, it was cold.

"See, the only thing you've achieved is getting my tea cold."

They laughed. Yolula didn't need her to say anything else because he knew what she was trying to get across.

On the Sunday they left, and to Andzani's surprise, she had taken both his hands in hers and told him to take care of her grandson. Mortified, Andzani's eyes found the ground and started sweeping it. When they got into the car, she smiled conspiratorially because from Andzani's reaction, she had deduced Yolula hadn't told him they had spoken.

"Yolula?" Andzani said after he'd strapped on his seatbelt.

Yolula laughed. "You didn't think you would spend the weekend in her home and she wouldn't know did you?"

"So you told her?"

"It was only a matter of time." Yolula started the car.

Something crept on Andzani's face, something that teetered on the brink of joy, gratitude. He was grateful for her words, that they had instilled a sense of affirmation in him, and in what they shared with Yolula.

Upon receiving a phone call from his uncle that his grandmother had suffered a stroke, Yolula had tried getting hold of Andzani in ways that were still possible. Emails. Since Andzani had changed his number and deactivated his social media accounts, emails were Yolula's last resort. Thus was the reality of living in Cape Town Yolula had come to accept, that you could stay with someone in the same community but needed to make an appointment just to spend time with them, even with friends, it had become a requisite.

Yolula had hoped that his grandmother being in hospital would reignite, in Andzani, moments shared, memories made when they'd visited her the first time. But his emails too went unanswered.

Before he'd boarded the plane for the Eastern Cape, Yolula received another phone call from his uncle. She had not made it. His name was the first thing she'd called in a fit of panic before she'd shut her eyes forever.

He'd gotten angry then, angry at the fact that the aloneness he'd envisaged when he'd first received the phone call from his uncle was fast becoming his reality. He'd feared the lonely road ahead. Loneliness for a long time had not been part of his life, but suddenly it had found a warm space and was settling. He feared that it would settle forever, this ardent desire, constant yearning for what he knew may never be attainable. He feared for this lacuna that would always accommodate the mishaps of his actions.

After the funeral, when Yolula had returned to the city, he'd harbored resentment towards the world, towards Andzani, misdirected it towards his friends such that he spent his days in the company of a laptop screen with words flaring before his eyes. However, in recent weeks this resentment had started to wane, letting through the nudging longing that it had suspended temporarily, the longing for familiarity; for familiar spaces and faces. This was the time when he remembered little things Andzani had told him, how once, jokingly, Andzani

had said that his physical sciences teacher, when left with only five minutes of his teaching time and students were worn out, would say, ‘five minutes is a long time, a baby can be born and die in five minutes. Alive now, gone the next.’ Why did they think he couldn’t impart knowledge in the remaining five minutes? Andzani had said this on those days when Yolula was drunk and only lasted a few minutes before he climaxed and passed out. The following morning when Yolula apologized profusely, Andzani would repeat this statement, his tone humor filled, who said Yolula couldn’t satisfy him in five minutes? It left Yolula’s confidence undented.

Now, it had been over a couple of months since Andzani’s return from Mbambamencisi, since he last saw him. Did he realize how much time had gone past? If a lot could happen in five minutes, did Andzani imagine the things that had happened in his absence?

And as Yolula unplugged the HDMI cable on his laptop, he wondered what Andzani was doing—definitely at work, he was devoted to his work. But, who did he complain to now about his annoying boss, or his loud colleagues, or his car boot that only opened when it felt like it? Who did he alert about every small thing he did, even going to the bathroom? He missed all these; when he would be teaching a class and his phone would glimmer as each text reached his phone. He would not check his phone until his class was over so he could play catch up and laugh at all the dramatic threads of the chaos Andzani had said happened at his office.

Yolula switched off the projector which had now turned blue and packed his laptop in his bag.

The hallway was almost empty, the fire-alarm had stopped ringing and just before he reached the exit of the building, felt keys in his pocket and remembered he hadn’t returned the keys of one of the tutors’ rooms. He turned, crossed a dark passageway, brown in color

and intimidating in its blandness—on his right were the English department lecturers’ offices. The wooden floor squeaked until he emerged on the passageway of the second exit. He pushed open the swing door with his arm and reached the tutors’ rooms.

He unlocked the room he had the key to and locked it behind him. And upon settling on a chair, took out his laptop and opened the word document he had been typing notes for his dissertation chapter before he went to his seminar. He read it out loud now; “The conceptualisation of city spaces as liberating: a myth for black South African queer subjects”. Then he stared at the screen a long beat. He had come to accept that he wasn’t going to finish his doctorate in the stipulated three-year period. His writing had suffered a setback because he had taken a few more first year classes to tutor in order to be able to pay the year’s fees. One thing he regretted most was that he had used his first year to work on what his supervisor had called an inconclusive research proposal, something he could have done during his gap year.

He placed his hands on the keyboard, closed his eyes and willed his mind to start working. Words did not float in his head, and all he could see in his mental image was Andzani’s face. He took out his cellphone and opened his contact list, typing ‘Z’ Zenani’s name popped out. Then he remembered the last time he’d called her, a few weeks after Andzani’s return to the city, when he’d gone to Facebook and searched her profile for her numbers. He’d asked to call her and she had agreed.

When she answered the phone, he had enquired about Andzani, and she, on her side had humored him. She gave him an update, he was doing well, but she was not the right person to answer all the questions he had. She told him she would pass on his message and that she was certain Andzani would get in touch with him in due course. Then she said she was late for a meeting before she hung up.

Yolula put his phone away and started typing furiously.

Chapter 7

Cape Town

2014

When Senah told Yolula about the event she was organizing revolving around the girl child, he knew she wanted something from him. It was in the elaborate way she had outlined every detail: the event is centered around the girl child, a platform for women and girls to talk about issues pertaining to womanhood, their first time menstruating, patriarchy in their homes and how it has affected them, masculinity and its toxicity and how they came to learn about feminism and just a load of other things. There would be performances too, poetry reading and live music. The venue had already been booked, in Observatory. Catering was sorted and performers for the night had already confirmed attendance. She wanted him to play his guitar as poetry performances took place, music accompanying the readings. The moment she mentioned the lineup and started exaggerating her tone he knew already the answer to her request, but he let her continue, mentioning the date, time and ticket prices.

“It’s on a Friday because that is when black kids go out here in Cape Town,” Senah said, moving the braids that obstructed her right eye from view. Once moved, he had a clearer view of her face.

“No,” Yolula said calmly, shaking his head.

“Haw’? But why not?” she had stopped walking. They were on their way to his place in Rondebosch, walking on the main road past the Baxter Theatre. A group of students hurried towards them. Clouds had started spitting scattered rain drops and the students together with the rain drops reminded him of his time at Glen Res when he’d had to wake up and go eat at Tugwell Residence; how inconvenient it always was when the rain fell hard and the cold cut through his skin and attacked his bones. But because his daily productivity depended on breakfast, on those days when the rain was unrelenting, he knew to soldier on and make a run for it before breakfast was done being served.

“Dude, I don’t understand you. You have all this talent and you don’t want to share it with other kids.”

“You’re right,” Yolula agreed, emphatically.

She prodded him on his waist with her finger and he felt ticklish. “Seriously, why don’t you want to perform at the event?”

“Senah, it doesn’t pay. And you know how my guitar playing talent is sacred and can only be seen by the few chosen ones—*the paying ones*.”

She rolled her eyes at him. He was being his typical self. Self-restraint was what he lived by. Even when they were still undergraduates studying drama, where they met, she had been the one to always nudge him in the right direction, or so she believed that the many decisions he took was upon receiving her words of advice and interventions. She had been attracted by his talent, jealous even—though she had never admitted it to herself—of his ability to take on whatever character was thrown at him, wear it like a garment that fit perfectly without struggle on stage, as if tailored for him. And when done, cast it away with an ease that she struggled with. Right now, she still believed she wielded the same influence on his decision-making capabilities and could sway him in the ‘right direction’.

“At least take pictures then,” she said eagerly.

He scrunched his face, unsure how to turn her down.

Senah added, “look, in that way you get to increase your collection of portraits. Since you are very keen on people seeing that part of your work.”

“Still not paying?” He raised his eyebrow, crinkling his forehead.

“Hayke, tsek.”

“Senah, you just said that this was an all-girls event.”

“So?”

“So, don’t you think they will find it uncomfortable having a guy play at the event?”

He had a point. “I don’t think they will mind when you take pictures though.”

“Okay fine. I’ll take the pictures. . . mainly because I think it is for a worthy cause. I’ll even spread the word around, so you at least have a reasonable audience. Yeah?”

“Whoah! Who says I don’t already have a reasonable audience?”

“I’m not attacking you.” He patted her back in a patronizing manner.

“But you are doubting my abilities at organizing events.”

“Nope, that’s not what I’m doing,” Yolula stifled a laugh.

She pulled him to her and put her arm around his waist, and because she was short, almost under his armpits, she had to tilt her head up as if gazing at the sky, her face watching him threateningly as he tried suppressing his laughter.

They turned, joined Campground road and headed for his place in an embrace.

The event took place in Observatory at a small café that felt claustrophobic and tried to retain a vintage style through its retention of old brand logos. It catered for no more than thirty people at a time. Having never seen it before since it was hidden from view by a bridge almost on top of it, Yolula had cycled past it twice before taking out his phone and typing in its directions.

When he walked in, the event had already started, the lights dimmed, the guitar loud and accompanying two female voices on stage as they recited their poem. “I need to breathe, take your dick out of my throat,” one of the performers recited while the other made gurgling sounds with her throat as if getting choked. The art scene in Cape Town always entranced him, the backrooms he frequented felt always like stumbling into gold. Yolula knew that the art he encountered in this city would not be palatable where he came from. He imagined the chaos that would ensue if the same girls stood in front of elders in his community and uttered the same words. But always, the art explored uncharted terrains, always managed to get him outside his comfort zone, almost every time he was left enthralled by this new generation of artists that were conscious and produced art that was not only beautiful but also effective in its own transgressive way.

Yolula got hold of his camera suspended on his chest by a strap. He took shots of the two performers from different angles—he would sift through the pictures later. The performers bowed and got off stage to applause in the room. There was a five-minute break in between performances; to give attendees time to order drinks from the bar, refill their glasses and get seconds from the table adorned with different fruits near the entrance. Yolula took pictures of the audience members who now moved and assembled at the bar holding onto their empty glasses, bank notes and cards, waiting for their chance to call out their order. There were still a few empty seats scattered about, the few people who had come alone had placed their belongings on them. And then Yolula saw him. He was sitting in the last row of seats, near the entrance, his head tilted and laid against the wall as his phone screen illuminated his face, now and again he typed furiously and smiled to it. Just as Yolula focused his camera on him, he felt a tap on his shoulder. He turned to find Senah, her arms folded.

“You were late, Yolula.”

“Try getting here without a GPS. This place is dodge,” he looked around as he spoke. “I wonder how it attracts customers.” He stopped; she was looking at him unsmiling. “I came with my bike, do you think it’s safe outside?”

“Yolula!”

“What?” He chuckled. “Okay, I am sorry. I got lost. For real though. I struggled finding a place to fasten my bike.” He leaned in to give her a kiss on her cheek.

“You should have Ubered.”

“Hello, you are talking to an unemployed individual here.”

“Hayi, uthand’ drama. You tutor there by upper.”

“Akere they pay me millions.” His tone shifted, “How’s it going? I have only seen one performance. Got to say, hectic stuff.”

Senah’s eyes were drawn to the digital camera strapped across his body. “I know you are not serious about the work when you bring a digital camera instead of the film one, Yolula.” She hit his chest with the back of her hand, gently.

“Senah, this is not a paying gig.”

“But still friend.”

“The photographer is still the same person, so the images will just be as good, trust me”

“Okay, fine.”

“Look how beautiful these are,” he pressed the playback button and quickly scrolled to pictures he’d taken of her. Impressed she nodded as they browsed through.

“Okay I really love this one,” Senah pointed at an image where she was looking at the stage; her gaze tight and unyielding, her yellow doek with black slim lines tightly tied around her head. Her black top exposed her belly button and her skirt left enough room for the breeze to grace her thighs, her legs crossed, exposed the heavy black boots she wore. She was snapping her fingers. “Please send it to me right now.”

“Imagine the admin. Please, Instagram will have to wait.”

She tried poking him but he swayed to the side and laughed.

“I have to make sure our next performers are ready,” Senah said. “Grab something to eat—drinks are on me tonight. I have already let the bartender know,” her fingers were pointing at the direction of each as she spoke. “uhmm. . .okay, the food is at the back. Well snacks.”

“Fruit is not real food. I want something to hold in my stomach. Meat.”

“Askies,” she faked concern and touched his shoulder. “We eat healthy here in this house,” unperturbed, she turned and walked towards the two ladies who’d just performed on stage.

Yolula approached the bar.

“Hi, what can I get you?” the bartender had already clocked him.

Yolula looked over the Bartender’s shoulders to the fridge filled with liquor.

“I’ll have uhm. . . ,” not impressed with the contents in the fridge he turned to the Bartender. “What do you have on tap?”

“Black, Castle, Windhoek Lager, Heineken. . .uhm —”

“I’ll have Black, thanks. I’m with Senah.” He threw his thumb over his shoulder. The bartender gave him a slight nod, almost uninterested.

While waiting for his beer, Yolula remembered the guy he’d seen sitting close to the entrance. He turned sharply, hoping to still find him. He smiled, a wave of relief on his face when he saw the guy still on his phone. He raised his camera, pointed it at the guy and the flash went off.

Andzani raised his eyes from his phone to locate where the flash had come from, studied the camera man a moment then his eyes went back to his phone screen.

The bartender handed Yolula a tall glass filled with gold content. He took a large sip, realising the glass sweat had dripped onto his camera, shifted the glass forward and shielded the camera with his palm as he took another sip. Then he proceeded towards the vacant seat next to Andzani.

“You are beautiful,” Yolula said when he’d sat down, he placed his glass on the floor and ran his palms along the bottom of his pants.

Andzani shifted his eyes from his phone and waited for Yolula to finish wiping his hands.

“Why do you go around telling strange men they are beautiful?”

“Strange men deserve compliments too.”

“It’s creepy.”

Yolula shrugged.

There was a moment of silence when Andzani’s eyes traveled from Yolula’s scattered beard, up his full lips with his perfectly aligned white teeth that told of a history with braces. And up, the eyes went and located the slits of eyes that narrowed with each smile Yolula would give. Andzani examined the hair that appeared as if left uncombed for a long time so that it threaded into each other and made him look as if he had a long-term commotion with water. And as Yolula raised his glass from the floor, Andzani noticed the bangles that adorned his wrist. His skin, a golden brown, matched the contents in the glass as he raised it to his lips and reminded Andzani of the few Khoi people’s pictures he had browsed on the internet not long ago. He wore a blue shirt folded back on his arms to his elbows. Andzani had had to travel a distance from Yolula’s eyebrows to meet his hairline. He looked opposite to the way he smelled; his smell was inviting, relaxing, brought about nostalgia for those fleeting moments when Andzani had whiffed a similar cologne scent in the past but couldn’t locate when exactly. Then Andzani wanted to be near him, to be next to this person whose

scent reminded him of those transient memories when he'd forgotten life's fragility, moments when he'd felt thankful to be alive because life had said yes.

"And what do you use to measure this beauty?" prodded Andzani to a now quiet Yolula.

"My eyes," Yolula's smile was inviting.

"Right. . .yes of course," Andzani drew his eyeballs back into his eyelids.

"Nyani ketana, umhle."

The switch to Isixhosa felt sincere. "Thank you," he said.

Andzani had never thought himself beautiful. Growing up, the only person he'd felt was beautiful was Neo, with his fair skin that resisted dryness, unlike his that cracked when left unattended even for a day. He remembered how Ousie Ketsi's beauty had subjected her to malice in Mbambamencisi when she'd just moved there. How women despised her because they feared her beauty would draw their husbands. But he'd also witnessed how Neo's beauty had shielded him from life's cruelties. Boys wanted to be Neo and girls wanted to be with him. And often Andzani wondered how, maybe if he'd had Neo's fair skin, it would have shielded him or minimized the treatment he'd received from his community growing up. Maybe if he were beautiful growing up, he wouldn't have experienced the disgust he'd witnessed in the eyes of many. Maybe if Mpanyaza and Spakuza had wanted to be him, they wouldn't have cornered him at the back of the school latrines; maybe life would have spared him difficulties that had cut deep and refused to heal.

For Andzani it wasn't until he'd interacted with his victims online on the dating sites he spent much of his time, when they had expressed interest in him, that his self-confidence had begun to shoot, when he felt desired. But he knew that this longing for him was only rooted in physical desire. Surely everyone was worthy of a compliment when it would get them a

step closer to achieving their bodily desires? He'd done it all the time; thrown a compliment here and there as bait to his victims.

Either way, his definition of beauty had altered, and he'd started considering his dark skin beautiful. Although he still harbored reservations; always he felt that there was the normal beauty, beauty standards he'd grown accustomed to, and then there was his which needed to be justified, aestheticized and othered and often needed to be consolidated. You're tall, dark and handsome, his *Grindr* hookups would assert the cliché on their first meeting; your dark skin with the sharp cheekbones compliments your broad forehead, strangers would say upon meeting him; you're fit for a perfect model, his co-workers always asserted, what are you doing here in the office? They joked.

"There aren't many guys here," Yolula said looking about the room.

"Nah."

"And you find interest in this?" Yolula's head beckoned to the stage, trying to gauge Andzani's level of interest in the event.

"I should ask you the same question."

Yolula raised his camera in the air to say he'd been hired. "But I frequent such events a lot. A friend of mine organized this one," he added, crossing his legs and putting the camera on his thighs.

Andzani nodded as Yolula spoke. "I enjoy them, they are enlightening, and I have had to unlearn many things after each event. . .you get me? They make you question stuff. . . it is good to question stuff." His fingers played with the bangles on his arm, encircling them. "Most of the time I'm the only guy in the room, which is awkward at times but today there are. . ." Yolula searched the room for men, counting. "Five. . . that's a great turnout from guys this time around."

“I see. . .,” Andzani said, feeling the need to reciprocate. “I was supposed to have come with my friend Zeni, she’s the one who invited me. But she got into a dispute with her landlord’s son.” Andzani shook his head as he smiled to the ceiling, brought his face down and took a sip from his Savanna cider. He had Yolula’s full attention. “She loves drama that one.”

“That sounds hectic, what happened? Is she okay?”

“Oh no, she’s fine—she’s been updating me on all this. So. . .” Andzani started but a laugh evaded him. He got hold of himself as Yolula waited in awkward anticipation. He attempted again. “Okay. . . so the son of the landlord parked his car on a yellow line strictly written ‘no parking’. Son of a bitch hindered Zenani’s car from reversing out of her parking space. And this is not the first time this guy has done this, right. The other time Zeni couldn’t reverse her car because this motherfucker parked just behind her, she had to maneuver her car out of her parking space and proceeded to write a note saying ‘Even after Easter you haven’t found Jesus’ it was just after the Easter weekend.” Andzani stopped and laughed. “Then he did it again today, but today she couldn’t reverse her car at *all*, so she went to confront the boy. . .”

“Wait, so I’m assuming she stays in a complex,” Andzani nodded and took a sip from his drink. “Naye uKwenkwe uhlala pha, at the complex?”

“Not even. . .this boy comes to visit his mother there.” It was Yolula’s turn to nod, his forearms entangled on his chest. “Now, the landlord found Zeni exchanging words with her son on her doorway when she returned from the supermarket. Apparently, he called her a bitch or something and the exchange just got loud and turned into a mess. . .so now the landlord invited her in to sort out this mess, she even made her tea. Imagine!” Andzani wiped tears at the corners of his eyes with his thumb. “And that’s why you are sitting on her seat.”

He pointed to Yolula’s seat.

“So much drama,” Yolula said.

“Trust me, Zenani’s a lot. That’s just half of it.”

“Yolula,” Yolula extended his hand and Andzani took it.

“Andzani.” Andzani noticed the shining, well-groomed fingernails now. He withdrew his hand because his were nibbled.

“Andzani. . .,” Yolula said the name again to himself, weighing it on his tongue, his pronunciation lengthened—Un-zun-nie. Later, he would practice at his place until his tongue could swiftly move past the d-z-a.

“Wait, are you also Venda?” Yolula asked, excitement seeping from his tone.

“Also? No.”

“Wait. . .what are you?”

“Tsonga,” Andzani said, his eyebrows half raised. His smile had waned and his eyes dry as if they hadn’t just shed tears.

“Oh yeah. . . okay, I got dribbled by the ‘d’ and ‘z’. A friend of mine, Pfulupfedzo, and I shared a room in first year. He is also from Limpopo, but currently working in Johannesburg.

“Ahhh. . . that’s cool, good for him.” Andzani gave a weary smile.

Andzani had noted how Yolula’s accent sounded like he’d attended an all boys’ high school. But his Xhosa accent popped up every so often as if to remind him of his roots. Ever since arriving at the university, Andzani had become intrigued, drawn by the myriad ways people spoke and pronounced words differently when expressing themselves; in class, in the dining hall of his residence, in the cafeteria and even in the university shuttles when he would eavesdrop on people’s conversations. He’d listen and try map out their historical backgrounds; where they grew up, what they might have encountered growing up, their family structures, whether life had been unkind to them or did they form part of the few that

dictated to it. And now, as he engaged with Yolula, Andzani had been doing the same. He wondered if it was done unconsciously, the Xhosa accent that snuck out now and again, if it was Yolula's way of avoiding the possibility of his English accent enclosing and covering his mother tongue, the fear of fully swapping his Xhosa accent for his English accent. Or was it the reclamation of his mother tongue? Having for so long forsaken it. Andzani found it a bit comical when Yolula would throw in a few Xhosa words in his speech because the words sounded as if they were foreign on his tongue, as if his tongue encountered difficulties rolling through them. Or how his enunciation changed when he code-switched, in that elaborate manner as if practised beforehand so its effects could fully be felt. Andzani was drawn by this, by this need for Yolula to contort himself so to belong in the company of this stranger he'd just met. Was it always done in the company of new faces? Andzani wondered. But this delicateness in Yolula was alluring and grew an interest in him.

“So what do you do?” Yolula asked.

Andzani, taken aback by his frankness, replied. “You do not beat around the bush, neh?”

“Uzama uthini kengoku?”

“You, asking me what I do.”

“Yes—is there anything wrong with that?”

“Yes—no . . . I just. . . I guess I hate the reason behind the question that's all.”

“Which is?” Yolula gave a faltering smile.

“You trying to gauge what level of respect to give me? Always the go to question when people want to establish what amount of respect to afford the other person they have just met.” Again, Andzani let the white of his eyes show.

“I think you are overthinking this,” Yolula shifted to face him. “I mean, I get it. But for me I always use it as an opportunity to see if there is anything I know. . . you know, in your

line of work, in your studies even—trying to get to know the other person, an opportunity to progress the conversation. . . interaction. However, you are right, I have found, in the past, that it is a question that makes many people uncomfortable.”

“So what do *you* do?” Andzani asked, a sly smile appeared on his face.

“I study English. Well, I just submitted my Masters dissertation not long ago,” Yolula found his glass on the floor and brought it to his lips. “But I’m on a gap year this year. Hoping to submit a PhD proposal end of year.” He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

“English.”

“Yes—English,” Yolula said, aware of the question that loomed in Andzani’s mind, a question he’d had to answer and provide justification for since the start of his university career.

“Explains a lot. . .but why English?” his new companion asked, keenly.

“Wait, what do you mean ‘explains a lot’?”

“The accent.”

“What about it?”

“Nothing.” Andzani smiled.

“Yazini?” Yolula raised his hand in the air, “Never mind.”

“So why did you choose to study English?” Andzani pressed.

“I mean why not?”

Andzani creased his forehead, forming horizontal lines.

Yolula realised he didn’t know how to fully answer this question but he attempted.

“Well I have always been interested in the connection between the past, the present and the future. For individuals, collectively, for example as a nation, you know how the past influences the present, the present the future. And I guess what I do is research that, produce knowledge that will hopefully influence decision making in the country someday.”

“I’m still a bit confused, I mean I know that knowledge production is the foundation of academia, but what do you guys do there on a daily basis? I’ve always wondered.

Yolula laughed. “You mean in the classroom?”

“Yeah. . .”

“Well I guide students in developing critical reading and writing skills needed for them to become savvy readers of contemporary culture and politics.”

Andzani nodded.

“It’s interesting that question.”

“Is it?”

“Yeah. I guess what I hate most about it is how grounded in capitalist thinking it is. Questions like what will you do with an English degree? Print media is dying so is journalism with the rise of social media, books don’t sell blah blah.”

“But these are true.”

“Not quite. I think this is aligned with the whole argument that humanities education needs to be dealt a blow and done away with, and I think this mostly is because it doesn’t contribute to capitalism greatly as other career paths do. So when you do away with the humanities, you are in effect doing away with that aspect of learning that provides critical thinking which is crucial in critiquing capitalistic institutions.”

Yolula stopped, realised the conversation was headed in a direction he didn’t feel like exploring, especially on a Friday night. Arguments were reserved for the classroom, outside he was learning to relax.

“But basically, my love for books landed me in English Studies,” he added. “I did drama in my undergraduate.”

“So you act?”

“In theatre, yes.”

“You need to invite me to one of your shows,” Andzani said. And immediately saw something in Yolula’s face, perhaps he wasn’t keen to have him watch one of his productions. He decided to change the subject. “I’m in accounting by the way.”

“Makes sense,” said Yolula before they both laughed.

“*Waphapha*, that’s it.”

Yolula noticed Andzani’s cider was almost done. “Do you want me to get you another one?”

“No. But thank you. I’ll get it myself.”

Andzani smiled when he noticed that Yolula’s lips turned down slightly at the sides.

Then there was a beat. Both staring at each other, smiles beaming on their faces, acknowledging the spark ignited. Everyone was back on their seats now, with new faces filling the empty seats that had been vacant before.

Senah got on stage. She noticed no empty seat in the room and gave a triumphant smile.

“Okay. Let’s bring it back,” Senah said. Conversations died down as faces rose to locate her. “To those that have just joined us, you’re welcome to the food at the back, just by the entrance—drinks though are not complimentary. We have to support the establishment. Thank you for coming. The next category is for my fellow sisters to share their experiences regarding the first time they menstruated. . . the first time they saw blood, the first time they even engaged in conversations about menstruation and how it felt. I can imagine how terrifying it must have been, I’m talking about those who had never had the talk with their parents. . . like myself. This is a safe space to share your experiences and hopefully debunk misconceptions surrounding menstruation. The aim is to normalize discourse around it, making it an everyday subject, something not to be shy about, or feel ashamed of.”

Senah took a moment as if recalling a past memory, as if negotiating sharing this recollection. Then she proceeded.

“I remember the first-time spotting, on the bed I shared with my boyfriend. How terrified I was, but luckily, he was in the shower when I noticed and so, I quickly changed the sheets. He didn’t see the stained sheets when he came out, but we had a conversation when he’d noticed I’d changed sheets without his help. And that became my first time having a conversation about menstruation with my boyfriend, of seven months at that time. So, this is what this platform is for, sharing stories and normalizing conversations around menstruation. What has been your experiences, what has been the reaction of those around you? What has changed for you? What do you still struggle with? Let’s have a conversation.”

Yolula got up. “Back on duty,” he said.

“I’ll keep your chair empty.”

Yolula’s eyes lingered on Andzani; his legs hesitant to move. He turned and took a picture of him before going to kneel next to the stage to take a series of shots of the woman who’d got on stage and was talking about the first time she had a conversation with her father about menstruation.

Andzani woke up with a babalas the following day. And as he did each morning when he woke up, checked his phone first. This morning he found a missed call from an unsaved number. He remembered little of the previous night after the event, but he hadn’t forgotten that Yolula had driven him home. He needed to thank him. Then a reminder went off his phone—thrifting date with Yolula at 11. It seemed to knock off the babalas as his memory refocused and he remembered how, the previous night, he’d given Yolula his phone and forced him to set the reminder. The confidence that had oozed from his demeanor the night before wasn’t there to wash away the embarrassment he felt this morning. Opening text messages, he found a text from the unsaved number; ‘I’m home safe—give me a call when

you wake up, or a text me if you change your mind about our date.’ The text was sent around 2.am.

Andzani sat up and propped his back with a pillow. He called the number.

“I was actually expecting a text message,” Yolula said over the phone.

“I keep my promises.”

“How’s the babalas?” Yolula’s tone was humor filled.

“That’s for the weak. I don’t get those anymore,” Andzani lied.

“Mhh.”

“Mhh what?”

Yolula laughed. “But ugrand?”

“Yeah. . . I’m alright,” Andzani removed crust from his eyes. “Saw a reminder now that we have a *date*.” He dragged the word ‘date’.

“Yes. You insisted I type out the date part because my vocal confirmation was not enough.”

“Yeah, no. No need to remind me of that,” Andzani pressed his fingers on his eyes.

“So you do remember what went on last night?”

“Barely.” He lied again.

“You remember nothing?”

“I remember us chilling at the bar after the event. . . having shots. . . well you made me have shots alone while you clung to your black label.”

“And because of my clinging to a black label you got home safe.”

“Yeah, of course—thank you for driving me home.”

“No worries.”

There was silence on the line.

“So where do I meet you?”

“Will send you the location just now.”

“Cool. And are *you* okay?”

“I’m well. Up and editing some pictures.”

“That’s good. . . I will see you at 11 then?” Andzani said, not knowing what else to say.

Phone calls made him anxious.

“Definitely!”

The enthusiasm in Yolula’s voice was assuring.

Immediately after the phonecall, Yolula sent the location. He also sent Andzani two pictures he’d taken of him at the bar; one of Andzani laughing with his fingers covering his nose and mouth and another, when Andzani had felt his head heavy and bowed, before Yolula decided to drive him home. Andzani shook his head at the images and because he felt awkward, quickly deleted the one where he was about to pass out.

In Claremont Andzani struggled to find parking closest to the location Yolula had sent him. So he’d parked his car a few meters down the FNB branch and had had to walk all the way to KFC on the main road. His skin glistened with sweat as he hurried, crossing the road at the traffic lights and walked on the sidewalk towards *Fashion World*.

Yolula’s clothes looked tighter than they had the previous night as if these were tailored for him and not passed down by a family uncle. He wore a yellow beanie, folded, once, around his head, a brown knitted jersey and jeans that seemed to have their color come off. He had folded the jeans on his ankles to reveal the white Nike sneakers he wore. His camera hung around his neck. He stood next to a traffic light, ignoring the gaatjie luring him into the taxi that had stopped at the green light. He typed on his phone, asking if Andzani was close.

“Heita.”

Yolula turned around.

“Ola,” Yolula said. “Did you walk from Parrow?”

“Ahh, that’s not nice,” Andzani wiped his forehead with the back of his hand.

Yolula laughed.

“I parked a bit far,” Andzani said, looking around him. “So where do we go from here?” There was an awkwardness in his speech that had not been present the previous night in the company of liquor.

“Let’s thrift,” confident, Yolula led the way into a mini alleyway that led to a descending staircase. The shop was on the ground level and when Andzani looked up above the shop’s entrance it was written *Coats for Africa*.

“It’s a bit dodge right, but it has some really nice jackets.” Yolula said as they walked into the shop and immediately Andzani was met by the smell of mothballs.

“So this is your to go to place when you want to thrift?” Andzani asked, following Yolula down an aisle.

“Here I buy mostly jackets, shirts are a bit pricy, so I normally stock up on those when I go home or when I’m in Woodstock or Salt River. They are reasonably priced there.”

Andzani nodded as they passed a sign that said: Ladies summer jackets now on special, in red capital letters. It was dim lit inside the shop and felt like he’d walked into the 1980s. Yolula stopped at a rail to inspect a few denim jackets.

“The smell in this place reminds me of my grandmother.”

Yolula steadied his gaze. “I know the clothes are old, but they are not that old.”

“I meant the smell of the mothballs, haw’.” They both smiled. “It reminds me of the time when I would visit her during school holidays, and she would take me along when she went to receive her grant.”

Yolula took off his jersey and handed it to Andzani. He put on a black denim jacket.

“They usually received their grant money at the local football grounds which were always packed on the day: people selling hardbody chickens, buckets of atchar, pots scourers,

potatoes and of course the women who laid, on cut mealie sacks, successively on the ground, clothes that smelled of mothballs. My gran would bend her back there, the smell of mothballs always made me nauseous so I would stand far away from the clothes. . . she would examine each clothing item carefully before buying one or two things for herself—”

“How do I look?” Yolula interrupted, closely examining the jacket.

“Dull, I don’t like that the black is starting to grey.”

“I think it’s nice, I have an outfit in mind that would go nicely with this jacket.”

“How much is it?”

“150.”

“Oh, that’s cheap.” Andzani held out his hand to feel the jacket before he felt the sides of his nose twitch and the violent explosion escape him. He managed to bow his head on time and then sniffled as he raised his eyes to find Yolula taking off the jacket.

“Ugrand?”

“I’m good.”

“So your grandmother never bought you clothes? Is that why you are mentioning her. You have some undigested anger toward her.” Yolula joked. He walked to the next rail with parka jackets on.

“Funny! No, my grandmother was a nice woman. I was already wearing thrifted clothes then. So there was no need for her to get me more. Though I wanted to ask, do you ever wonder if the person who worn the clothes you thrift is alive or dead?”

“Huh?”

“Thrifted clothes, whenever you buy them? Do you ever wonder if the person who wore them is alive or dead?”

“I heard you the first time. That is so random.”

Growing up, this bothered Andzani whenever Violet bought him secondhand clothing. He'd wondered if the people who'd worn the clothes were alive or dead, if they would haunt him for wearing their clothes. Most people who sold secondhand clothing sold clothes that were of their dead loved ones, and because of this, he disliked thrifting.

After the phone call with Yolula, Andzani had got out of bed and went to sit in the kitchen in front of a bowl of cereal. He wondered about things he could say to Yolula, things that would pique Yolula's mind, appealing things that would gleam a different light on his personality. He had noticed how Yolula had spoken about his career choice and wanted to also appear knowledgeable, observant, as one who engaged with his surroundings. And so to prepare for this date, while factoring the fact that they were going thrifting, Andzani had pondered on the subject and evoked those childhood memories that involved thrifting to form the basis of the topics he would initiate. He had made notes on his phone as he ate on the kitchen counter, and then at the end, written a few personal questions he would ask Yolula.

"The answer to your question is no. That has never crossed my mind. I guess I like to think of these clothes as preloved and not as secondhand or pass me downs."

Andzani nodded politely.

"This would look good on you," Yolula slid out a blue parka jacket from the rail.

"Nah."

"Come on, try it." Yolula handed the jacket to Andzani. He took it and handed Yolula his jersey back. Andzani put on the parka jacket, while Yolula put back on his jersey. And as Andzani buttoned up the jacket the sneeze didn't warn him, it came successively, without a break. He covered his face with his t-shirt with each expulsion, six times. He pointed to the jacket as he took it off.

"Not for me," Andzani managed to say between snuffles. He handed the jacket back to Yolula and searched his pockets for tissue. He found an old one, unrolled it and rolled it over

his hand so he could use the cleaner part. He walked out of the shop because his nostrils had become irritated. Yolula hung the jacket back and walked out to find Andzani blowing his nose.

“That’s it then. The shop and its clothes make you sick.”

“Do they wash these clothes before hanging them?” Andzani asked, humor lining his tone so not to sound insincere.

“Yes, I think it’s because they stay there longer and just accumulate dust,” Yolula said. “Is there anything you want to do? Since my idea flopped.”

Yolula didn’t want to suggest going to his place because he didn’t want to plant ideas in Andzani’s head.

“Not really. . . honestly? My head is still pounding from last night. I just want to sit down or something.”

“Okay, here’s a suggestion then. . . let’s make you lunch, you can watch me while I cook. I’m sure by the time the food is ready you’ll be feeling better.”

Andzani’s imagination had gone to work, enticed by the prospect of spending time alone with Yolula, sexual thoughts traversed his head. Suddenly he wondered what kind of underwear Yolula wore or was he one of those who believed their privates needed to breathe? Whatever that meant. A part of him had resolved that should the date fail, at least get sex out of it.

They walked up the stairs and emerged on the main road again. A wave of cold air hit him, the underground had been warmer and musty.

“Let’s cross here,” Yolula pressed the silver button on the traffic light. “We can walk on the other side.”

No one said anything as they waited for the chattering sound from the traffic light to alert them to cross.

“There goes your thrifting experience,” Yolula said when the traffic lights turned red for cars. He seemed disappointed, unable to hold Andzani’s gaze as they crossed the road. “You were quite eager to thrift last night,” he said when they reached the other side of the road.

“Was I?” Andzani failed to recall this eagerness, but inebriation usually led him to make a lot of empty promises.

“Yeah. But I also get this feeling that you really are not into it. Probably just wanted to impress me.”

“It’s not that I am not into it. . .”

“What then?” Yolula raised his chin.

“I guess for me for a long-time thrifting has been a symbol of poverty. Where I come from if you are not buying clothes from fashion retailers then it means at your house you are struggling,” said Andzani, his hand gesturing as if giving a talk. “And then you come to university and you meet rich kids who are doing it willfully because of what? Aesthetics.”

“What makes you sure that kids who thrift are rich.”

“Please. . . I am talking about kids who sat with MacBooks and iPhones in front of them during class. Those kids do not come from trying homes.”

Yolula was quiet.

“I think I hate most the romanticization of poverty it gives off.” Andzani continued. Again, he was trying to impress, but was fast becoming conscious of the fact that he might offend. Briefly his attention was stolen by the group of people emerging onto the main road from the university shuttle stop. Andzani and Yolula turned the corner at *Edgars* and went up. “I mean if you have the means why choose thrifting instead of just buying new clothes.”

“It is cheap, saves money even for those people you think are rich?”

This idea Andzani had planted in his head of romanticizing poverty bothered Yolula. But he felt at ease when he thought about the reason he was drawn to thrifting, vanity.

“I know. . . I parked right there.” Andzani pointed as they crossed the road and passed the FNB branch. “There is this look I do not like, the scruffy hair look, the wearing of ‘vintage clothes’ and just not caring about one’s outlook to show solidarity with the poor. I think it is a look that I have come across many times on campus. Hated it.”

“You realize you just described me, right?” Yolula said as Andzani unlocked the car and they got in. “Does that mean you don’t like me.” Yolula feigned concern, holding to his chest.

“Haha, I don’t think you fit the description.”

“If you do not like the way I dress, wait until you get to my flat.”

“Hey, I didn’t say I don’t like the way you dress.”

Yolula tilted his head to the side and back before Andzani gave in and swerved the car out of the parking space.

Yolula’s apartment felt like he’d walked into a little museum that juxtaposed vintage antique furniture with contemporary. It was as if reserving vintage for those born frees who’d be starved of ancient artefact but also introduce them to a more contemporary furniture to highlight the difference. The kitchen and sitting room were one, an open space design such that sitting on the couch gave Andzani full view of the lean person who stood at the kitchen counter, chopping different fruits into small chunks before throwing them into a bowl already filled with nuts. Yolula had already introduced him to the guy, Sam, a flat mate and friend.

After an exchange of pleasantries between Sam and Andzani, Yolula remained sitting on top of the dining table, his hands folded. He had taken off his jersey.

“Sam, Andzani has been on my case all day regarding my look—he even went as far as to accuse me of romanticizing poverty.”

“Whooh,” Sam exclaimed, turned around, and shot a look at Andzani.

“Okay, now he’s just exaggerating.”

“Am I?” Yolula said, turning to Sam. “Please tell him I’m none of those things.”

“Oh yes. I don’t think he romanticizes poverty. I think he has an. . .” Sam stopped a moment to think. “. . .*an appreciative effort of the past*. Believe me, we’ve had many fights when furnishing this apartment because he wanted to go old school and I was just not feeling it.”

Yolula nodded before he jumped in.

“Exhibit A, the dining table. We had to negotiate,” Yolula pointed to the dining table. “Either we had a modern table with antique chairs or an antique table with modern chairs. He,” Yolula pointed at Sam. “Opted for the latter.”

“Don’t forget the TV stand,” Sam jumped in. He leaned against the fridge now, holding on to his bowl while he ground muesli and nuts with his teeth. Andzani would later learn that Sam was vegetarian and that often his meals consisted of nuts, fruits and sometimes boiled vegetables.

“I bought the couch and he bought the television stand. I couldn’t afford a vintage sofa and so settled for the leather,” Yolula said.

Andzani wondered what relationship they had, if they fought often, what they had in common, but mostly how they met.

“But why go out of your way for such old stuff?” Andzani asked.

“*An appreciative effort of the past*,” Sam interjected, spooning fruits into his mouth.

Yolula walked to the couch and settled next to Andzani.

“I love nostalgia man. I want things that remind me of my childhood. Memories we made back then. It’s easier to delve back there when you have triggers available closer to you. For example, the table. Had to go fetch it back home in the Eastern Cape. I bought my grandma a new table and transported this one here because it’s a table of my childhood. Many breakfasts with cousins were had on it, many dinners,” Yolula’s face was filled with a transient yearning. “Happy memories. I’m all about making new memories but I also love reserving old ones.”

There was a brief silence, nobody wanting to disturb the sentimental atmosphere that had descended.

“Oh shucks,” said Yolula getting up. “What can I get you to drink?” He walked towards the kitchen.

“I need to meet some deadlines in my room,” Sam said to no one in particular as he started for his bedroom door. He raised his head from his bowl and said, “cheers hey, it was nice meeting you, Andzani.”

“Likewise, bra.” Andzani said and Sam disappeared into his room.

“Andzani?” Yolula called from the kitchen.

“Throats are open bra, it’s after twelve.”

“*Inxila.*”

Andzani shrugged and smiled.

“I have a bottle of unfinished wine in the fridge,” Yolula opened the fridge and retrieved a bottle of white wine, placed it on the counter and opened the cupboard doors above him to take out two wine glasses. “It’s opened but it’s really good.”

“See, now you’re talking,” Andzani got up from the couch and went to settle on the counter chair. He noticed they also had a modern built but maintained their brown wooden tops as if refurbished. He was mesmerized by Yolula’s efforts to retain the past, to try keep

memories burning. He, Andzani, worked hard to forget the past, his childhood, because life hadn't always said yes to him. He hadn't imagined there were people out here who dictated to life, people who did everything they could to reserve their childhood memories.

In Yolula's bedroom, Andzani sat on the teak desk, placing his glass of wine on top, his eyes had taken in the cluttered desk; the stack of books whose authors Andzani was not familiar with except for J.M Coetzee whose book *Disgrace* he'd come across in the news for its controversy. On the wall, above the pinboard, suspended on two towel hooks was a dry pine tree branch. A guitar hung on the opposite wall. Yolula lay on the bed transferring pictures from his digital camera to his laptop. He wanted the transfer to happen while he prepared lunch.

"A man of many talents, I see" Andzani teased.

"Mhmm?" Yolula raised his eyes from the camera screen. And Andzani pointed at the guitar on the wall.

"I do what I can for this world, hey." Yolula said proudly. "I do what I can."

Andzani laughed. "Are all these books yours?"

"Some, some got from the library and others, this other professor was clearing out his office," Andzani raised his eyebrows, "retiring. And so he had said in our last tutorial that if we wanted books we should come get. I went."

"And you've read them all?"

"Mostly. . .do you read?"

"IFRS standards? Yes."

The last time Andzani had read a book of literature was during matric when he read the prescribed English texts for his English papers; *Nothing But the Truth* and *Mine Boy*. After

taking the exams, Andzani hadn't read for fun, apart from the poetry book by Andrea Gibson he'd recently downloaded.

"Those heavy accounting books I see people carrying on campus?" Yolula took a pillow and put it behind his back.

"Yeah."

Andzani took a bunch of books in his hands and shuffled through, reading the titles in his head; *What is Slavery to Me*, *Rape: A South African nightmare*, *A Man Who is Not a Man*, *The Reactive* and *To Every Birth Its Blood*.

"I see Pumla is your fav," he read the name again Pumla Dineo. "Is she half Sotho or something?"

"I don't know actually. . . her surname is Xhosa, that I know."

"This one is interesting," Andzani had put the stack down and held the book up, turning it around. He read the title: *The Quiet Violence of Dreams*. "Can I take this with?"

"Uhm. . .," Yolula raised his eyes once more to look at the book, "reading that one currently, research purposes. But the moment I'm done, I'll bring it over."

"Cool," Andzani brought his glass of wine to his lips. "Do you have any idea what your doctoral research will be on?"

"I do," said Yolula, pressing, multiple times, a key on his laptop. "Rough ideas around sexuality in the city space."

Andzani nodded eagerly, his eyes starting to glimmer because of the second glass of wine.

"Cape Town city space?"

"Yeah."

"Tell me more."

Yolula raised his eyes to meet Andzani's. He smiled at the interest.

“I have been thinking about the city of Cape Town and queer subjectivities a lot. So I think I will do a sort of comparative analysis on how black queer subjectivities in the city space differ to those of their white counterparts. Often, there is this conceptualization of city spaces, Cape Town in this context, as liberating and honestly it is just a myth for black south African queer subjects.”

“But what do you mean? I have never seen people ‘more free’ than queer Cape Town folks.”

“Haha. . .black people are not free in this city, and if black people are not free in general, how can queer black people be free?”

Andzani nodded, he concurred.

“It is all about inclusion and exclusion,” Yolula continued. “Who is included, who is excluded? And at the center of this is of course social standing, class and race. With white people and the upper-class black people part of this inclusion while everyone else is excluded. Also, even though upper-class black people manage to form part of this inclusion, find ‘liberation’, they are also disempowered in many ways, just imagine existing as a black person in white spaces.”

“Ah so this is what you meant by research.”

“What did you think I do?”

“I don’t know, this is why I asked last night.”

“Yazi wena!”

Andzani was smiling at him admiringly and Yolula noticed how Andzani’s eyelids appeared heavy.

“Do you want to slow down a bit on the wine?” Yolula said, smiling.

“This is my last glass I promise.”

“No. I’m just thinking ukba u-weak, so you might want to take it slowly.”

“Haw, mina futhi?”

“Ewe.”

They both laughed.

“Come here,” Yolula said. “I want to show you something before you fall off that chair.”

Andzani got up from the chair and went to sit, leaning against the headboard, with Yolula on the bed.

“I want to show you some of the portraits I took that will form part of my exhibition. . . when eventually it happens.” He sighed.

Yolula pressed a key on his laptop, letting time pass before moving to the next image for Andzani to take each image in. Silence made itself comfortable as Yolula showed Andzani pictures of a kraal, pictures of Xhosa women wearing *Umbhaco*, pictures of the sun setting behind thatched roofed round houses, the houses forming silhouettes, blurry pictures, in black and white, of people smiling.

“Wait,” Andzani placed his hand on Yolula’s to stop him scrolling, “even these blurry pictures will form part of the exhibition?”

“Why not?”

“What?”

“I mean, isn’t life like that sometimes? Blurry, unpredictable?”

Andzani laughed at this. “Niqqa you are a scam.”

Yolula raised his shoulders above his ears. Then continued pressing the key. A picture of a student in a desolate classroom appeared, close-up pictures of faces with dreadlocked fade haircuts and nose piercings, hair dyed in pink, green and blue colors, things that would be frowned upon in Mbambamencisi, deemed a sign of defiance. There were close-ups of men putting on make-up, brushes on their faces, lipsticks on their mouths, glitter scattered on

their cheekbones, looking unintimidated at the camera; pictures of cross dressers—the pictures sepia-toned; pictures of people in vintage clothing, in fade braids, bald headed, wearing Spoti Pantsula hats; then pictures of the sea uncalm, of the sea calm.

“Where do you find these people?” Andzani asked.

“They inbox me on Facebook. . .” Yolula said. “But some are people I have studied with.”

“And all these pictures are taken using that camera?” Andzani pointed at the digital camera next to Yolula.

“I used film for most of the ones I took back at home, and then used the digital camera when I took the ones here in Cape Town.”

“And what’s the difference?” Andzani took the digital camera and examined it.

“Film” Yolula pointed to the film camera on his nightstand, “forces you to be decisive, you need to think more about the shot because every shot needs to be worth it, and also it makes shooting intentional. I can’t take a picture without having given it enough thought. So I guess film forces you to take meaningful photos.”

“I see. . .”

Another wave of silence descended on them. Yolula didn’t let it settle before he spoke again.

“What are you thinking?”

“Nothing.”

Yolula closed his laptop and placed it next to the film camera on top of the nightstand.

“Can I ask you a question?”

“Yeah.”

“Is there a possibility that your hatred for antique furniture and vintage clothing stems from your past?”

“What do you mean?”

“That you have unresolved issues? Affecting your outlook? Maybe it reminds you of the past?”

“I don’t know. . .but if you are asking if it reminds me of poverty, the answer is yes.”

They laughed.

“So now you’re saying I’m poor?” Yolula feigned devastation. “Why are you coming for me today?”

“See, you are putting words in my mouth.”

“You can’t possibly not like my wardrobe, my furniture, but like me. These things are mutually exclusive.”

“Not even.”

“Wenja?”

“These things are not mountains. They can be changed.”

Yolula gave a hearty laugh. “Haibo, lentwana. . .so now you want to change me?”

“Not you, but like your space and maybe your wardrobe.”

“That’s not nice,” Yolula said imitating Andzani’s tone.

“I know,” Andzani was smiling. “I don’t want to change you. You are different and I like that.” He’d directed this to the ceiling, and then tossed his head to the side to look at Yolula appreciatively. Yolula could see the wine had kindled a confidence in Andzani, a confidence Yolula was familiar with, from the previous night when he’d offered to drive him home.

“But you don’t like me?” Yolula said, in a tone so low as if meant to hypnotize.

“I didn’t say that.”

“Well you didn’t say you like me.”

“You didn’t either—”

“This is not competition.” Yolula said, smiling at his guest tenderly.

“Haw’?”

And as if dared, Andzani leaned in, excitement already directing blood between his thighs. This was the moment. He closed his eyes and kissed Yolula. He had done his part, initiated the kiss. A moment passed as they looked at each other. Then Andzani felt Yolula’s hand reach for the back of his neck, pulling him in. Before fully letting his body become entranced, Andzani placed the digital camera carefully next to him and then dragged his weight on top of Yolula. His hands worked Yolula’s belt, undid his zipper as his tongue searched for the depth of Yolula’s mouth. In a swift move, Andzani sat on top of Yolula, taking off his T-shirt. When his lips came back down, Yolula placed his palm on Andzani’s chest, halting him. Andzani tried again, but Yolula held his arms back.

“What?” Andzani asked, he felt awkward.

“I feel like this is escalating quickly.”

“No,” Andzani dragged his reply, moving to kiss Yolula’s neck.

Yolula held back. Then Andzani tried flipping him over. But Yolula’s body was stiff.

“Wait!”

“What?” Andzani, overcome by his sexual excitement, sounded deflated.

“I don’t want to engage in penetrative sex.”

“Oh.” Disappointment accompanied Andzani’s tone. He got off Yolula, his eyes searching for the T-shirt he’d flung across the room.

“Look, Andzani, I know how this story ends. We fuck and you block my number after, and we never see each other again.”

“No. . .” There was a transient moment of hesitation on Andzani’s face, when he realised there might be some truth to it. “No. I don’t think this is how this story will end.”

“I’ve been through this road. Andzani, I don’t want sex to be the foundation of my relationship.”

Andzani swallowed. “I hear you.” He felt a flush of shame as he descended the bed, picked his T-shirt and put it back on.

“What are you doing then. . .?”

“I have to go bra.”

Yolula gave a defeated sigh.

Andzani stood staring at the door awhile. Then turned to Yolula, “can you come open the gate for me?”

Andzani had postponed a meeting with a guy, a student, from UWC he’d met on *Grindr*, to go on a date with Yolula. But the student had filled his phone with text messages, begging to meet with him, almost as if in desperate need for sex. Horny as he drove back, Andzani took out his phone and sent the guy his location, then he dialed him. Was he available to meet in about thirty minutes? Of course, he was, he couldn’t wait to meet him. Could he Uber himself to the location he’d sent him on WhatsApp? The student hesitated, he wanted to be picked up—students, this is the reason he hated hooking up with them. Andzani promised to repay him the money he would use on Uber. The student obliged. Call the Uber now! Those were the last words Andzani said to the student. His tone instructive, authoritative and urgent.

Turning the corner into his home, Andzani had passed a guy sitting on the road next to a side drain. He was colored and so could not be his *Grindr* hookup. His *Grindr* hookup’s name was Luzuko. And so Andzani hadn’t slowed down to confirm the name, he’d passed the guy there.

“Hi, Andzani. . .Luzoko here,” Luzuko said when Andzani opened the gate after he’d texted him, letting him know he had arrived.

“Luzuko? I thought you were black.”

“Lot of people are surprised. That’s my dad’s name. He gave it to me.”

“Oh!”

Andzani stared at his visitor a long time, and his visitor becoming nervous, looked both sides of the road.

“Are we gonna stand here or?”

“No. uhm. . .come.” Andzani said, leading the way. His visitor followed at a safe distance; his eyes buried in his phone’s screen.

“You got a nice place here man,” Luzuko said once inside Andzani’s place.

Andzani nodded his acknowledgment. “You can have a seat there,” Andzani pointed to the couch.

“Cool.” His visitor moved to take a seat.

Still leaning on the kitchen counter Andzani leered at his visitor. He wasn’t bad looking, and he smelled fine. Luzuko gave a nervous smile when he found Andzani staring at him.

“Do you want something to drink?” Andzani asked.

“Sure. Anything.”

Andzani walked towards the fridge and took out Savanna ciders. He handed Luzuko one and went to lean back on the kitchen counter.

“So, your dad is Xhosa?”

“Yeah.”

“See, the thing is I thought you were black.”

“I am.” Luzuko gave a slight laugh.

“I know. I mean, you know what I mean?”

“Is that a problem, sir?”

“No. Just interesting, that’s all.”

His visitor stood up; an outline of his sex visible on the blue sweatpants he wore. He pointed at it. “Are we going to do anything about this, man?”

Andzani saw himself releasing on his visitor’s chest and had to subdue the mental image as he spoke.

“What position are you in bed?” The question came out with an ease that hadn’t been there when he was with Yolula. He felt asking Yolula such a question would build a wall between them, offend. But he didn’t care if it offended his visitor.

“I’m versatile man, anything goes.” His visitor changed notes, online he’d said he was a masterful bottom, and now claimed versatility.

“I don’t take dick,” Andzani asserted, his tone matter of fact. “I don’t suck, I don’t kiss,” Andzani lied about the kissing part because he wondered where else his visitor’s mouth had been. His visitor looked confused. “Right now, I just want a hand job, get rid of some strain.”

Luzuko raised his shoulders and tilted his head to say whatever. Andzani beckoned for his visitor to follow him to his bedroom.

In his bedroom, Andzani removed clothes he’d left on top of the bed, “you can sit on the bed,” he pointed, for his now leaning on the door visitor, to a vacant space on the bed previously occupied by the clothes he’d just removed. His visitor made a beeline for the bed, sat and took off his shoes.

“So here is what I want us to do, I want you to lay your head to the headboard, and I will lay my head to the door, opposite directions,” Andzani said as confusion grew on his visitor’s face. “We use our hands on each other, no sucking, no kissing.”

His visitor's forehead had creased with uncertainty, doubt hung momentarily on his face, but his now pulsating throb won. Fuck it, his face seemed to say and he took off his large T-shirt and pulled his sweatpants to his ankles. He wore no underwear as he lay in bed, uncircumcised.

Andzani opened his wardrobe and took a small blue towel he used to wipe off his mornings' release. He held on to it the entire time they fondled each other's privates. It felt as if he were betraying Yolula, infringing on what could be, as if they already had agreed on commitment. This occupying his mind, made it longer for his visitor to get him to reach climax because half the time his manhood was half erect.

After, he wiped off the evidence of their meeting in a matter of seconds. He asked for his visitor's account number, to refund him his Uber fare.

He wanted to be alone, to be in his head, to think about Yolula. And so immediately he'd thrown to his visitor, who had his eyes shut recovering from their session, his pants. His visitor got the message; he got dressed. Andzani didn't wait for Luzuko to call an Uber while indoors, he opened the gate for him and said his goodbyes.

His date with Yolula had reminded him of Neo, of what they had shared. Andzani had forced himself to believe that he would never experience what he'd had with Neo again. He hoped not to. And he had lived within this bubble that had protected this hope until now. All his past sexual encounters had never come close to disturbing this bubble. And then came along Yolula and something shifted, a dent formed, one not negligible. Yolula had managed to destabilize this bubble, forced him to acknowledge that whatever he had shared with Neo, was not sacred. A lot more people were having it out there. But at the center of this realisation was that, he was growing enamored of Yolula.

His interaction with Luzuko had, temporarily, suspended the morass of guilt and embarrassment he'd felt when he left Yolula's place; for having wanted to fuck him and

discard him as he did his usual *Grindr* hookups. Now, the wave was back and descending on him and he felt the need to apologize. But he had never been good with apologies; growing up he felt that people owed him apologies, even life owed him apologies, and thus, he had never learned how to apologize. Each time he picked his phone up and typed out an apology, he shrieked, an overwhelming awkwardness dictating he hide his shame.

That night Andzani took out a bottle of wine and emptied it in one sitting. He never sent through the apology.

Chapter 8

Cape Town

2014

Andzani didn't remember where he had heard it from, but it had been growing up when he was berated for covering up a hand wound; it does not heal because you've covered it up, it needs to breathe—don't fiddle with the scab. Let it be. And so Andzani, recalling this advice, had decided to not contact Yolula, to let the wound heal on its own without his fidgeting with it. And like all wounds in their healing process, the wound itched, implored to be scratched. And one Tuesday morning driving to work, Andzani, stuck in traffic, had taken out his phone and searched Yolula's name on WhatsApp. He'd archived their chats so to not be tempted to scratch the wound. But on that Tuesday morning, he'd sent Yolula a text, a greeting, and immediately after, thrown his phone on the passenger seat and shrunk with regret. When the traffic started moving, the phone beeped twice, replies from Yolula registered on the screen. Andzani waited until he arrived at work, and after settling at his desk, thought of a reply that would progress the conversation. But there had been no need for that because as soon as he started typing, the phone registered an incoming call. It was Yolula. Andzani felt his heartbeat descend to his stomach, his hands start to shake as he pushed back his chair and walked outside.

“Yolula. . .ugrand?” Andzani said after taking a deep breath.

“Ndi right mfethu, wena?”

“I’m alright,” Andzani’s chest drooped, his hands remained shaking.

“Unqabile ntwana maan.”

“I’m here. . . I’m around.”

“Ndikubona nini ke?”

Andzani felt relief overcome him, Yolula was still as frank, still didn’t bite his words and still wanted to see him.

“Yolula, listen. . .”

“Yes. . .”

“How I left your place the last time. . .”

“Mamela, boy. Let’s leave that. Wena just answer my question.”

“When do you want to see me?”

“Okay. . .so remember how I was talking about securing gallery space to showcase some of my portraits?”

“Yeah.”

“It’s finally happening. . . this coming Saturday—I’ve partnered with a gallery in town, of course with the help of Senah ‘cause she’s well connected. . . But I am holding an exhibition this coming weekend. Since you asked when I want to see you. . . pull through this Saturday. There will be some sort of a performance around two. You can arrive at that time.”

“Yolula, this is great news. . .Of course, I’ll be there.”

“Please, man. Yoh, the way I’m so fucken nervous. . .”

Andzani raised his eyebrows, this was the first time he’d heard Yolula use profanity in his speech. “Okay, I am moving some of my portraits there now—so I have to go. We’ll talk?”

“Yeah. . .most def.”

“Sunqaba maan.” Yolula said before the call ended.

The gallery was at 52 Waterkant Street in Town. And although Andzani had left Parow a little early, he couldn't have factored enough time for the accident he came across in Foreshore. A car had been upturned after hitting the concrete barrier separating the lanes. He'd frozen momentarily when the traffic started moving because he feared he'd see blood and scattered body parts when he passed the scene. The few men who had stopped their cars and went to help, had managed to get the driver out of the car. He sat against the wall, the driver, his head slumping as if intoxicated. Andzani shook his head as the fear that had suddenly enveloped him abated and his hands firmed on the steering wheel.

When he walked into the gallery, the performance was almost over. Yolula stood next to Senah amongst the crowd, and after clocking Andzani's entrance, raised his glass to him. Andzani maneuvered, between the spaces left by people, to get to Yolula. Yolula moved a bit to the side so that Andzani stood between him and Senah. She smiled at him in acknowledgement before Yolula offered his glass of wine and Andzani shook his head.

The lights were off and only a light beam bounced off each portrait frame, spending just enough time to let the minds of the attendees wonder about the context of each image, to imbed each image within the cervixes of their brains, so that they pondered about them even after the show had ended. The soft piano keys Andzani heard lingered enough to direct emotional responses to the images that hung on the wall in a web like form. The music forced Andzani to reckon with the images, instead of glancing over them, it forced his gaze to remain with the beam of light, appeal to his sensibilities. The images told stories. A spectacle, Andzani thought, but it worked, it minimized distraction. Andzani had attended First Thursdays and was acutely aware how attendees viewed the art with a transient gaze. Their eyes lurking, moving swiftly to find an interesting enough piece to rest them on.

The piano music was transcendental, forced his reckoning with each image. The light lingering on each portrait prevented eyes running to other images until it was time. The music refused to offer the portraits only for the pleasurable gaze. It was done intentionally.

“Is that Sam?” Andzani asked Yolula when two guys in front of them shifted, leaving enough space to get a view of the piano player.

“Yes.”

“He plays the piano?” Andzani, in awe of this ability, dropped his jaw.

“He does,” Yolula said, his gaze not leaving Sam and the piano. “The guitar too. He taught me how to play the guitar,” Yolula nursed his glass with pride.

Just then, a burst of applause filled the room as the light beam dimmed and switched off on the last image and the music stopped. Then lights lit the room, almost blindingly.

“What now?” Andzani yelled in Yolula’s ears.

“The most important part of the day is over, and I do not have to be here anymore.” Sam was up and bowing to the whistles, the snapping of fingers from a group on the left side of Andzani and the clapping of hands from the rest of the crowd. “I just need to say my thanks.” Yolula said before he slid between people and emerged next to the piano with Sam.

“Thank you for coming,” Yolula said, half raising his glass in the air. “It gives me enormous joy to see this turnout, the familiar faces. I really didn’t expect it, especially with everything done at such short notice. *Ndyabulela*.”

“Whoowhie!” came from the crowd, and more people joined in the cheering. Yolula nodded, managing a wide smile.

“Growing up I took pictures, family portraits, and I did so to preserve memories, to freeze moments in time, as with the popular saying. Today I take pictures to ‘visibilize’, to make ‘real’, whatever ‘real’ is—some people view my portraits as transgressive, and for others, it’s affirmation, to be acknowledged in public spaces such as these, to see themselves

hung on high walls. Validation! We all long for it, and, it's crucial to our existence. Many people have their existence questioned and invalidated and if I can do anything to help validate them, I'll continue doing so. I am aware of the important work photography does, of the important work that I do, and I hope today, this work here, sparks much needed conversations."

Andzani saw glistening tears in Yolula's eyes. But he managed to keep them there, within the confines of his eyelids.

"I'd like to give a shout out to a few people who made this happen; Senah, I will forever be indebted to you and your connections," there was laughter in the room. "Sam, thank you for the music, and for your friendship. And Hannie, if you had not said yes, my work wouldn't be hung high on the walls of this gallery. So, thank you for giving me the benefit of the doubt. To everyone here," Yolula raised his glass to the crowd again, "you are incredible. Thank you again for coming."

"YAAAAAAS! . . .Yolula." Someone in the crowd shouted and the rest clapped, the air in the gallery boisterous.

Yolula and Sam bowed. Andzani watched as a photographer took pictures of Yolula conversing with Sam, before a middle-aged white couple approached them. Andzani could feel the mounting unease between him and Senah. She kept looking at him, as if wanting to say something but gauging it so it would be well received. He kept his gaze on Yolula, who now smiled and nodded as the couple asked questions, pointing. Yolula's hand gestured, directing them to the portraits on the wall as he replied.

"Do you have something to say?" Andzani asked Senah

"No—why?"

"You keep sizing me up and this mounting anxiety is crippling me."

"Can I get you anything to drink?"

“No, thank you,” Andzani said nervously. “I still have to drive.”

She turned her face from him. Andzani followed her gaze as she found Yolula. The white couple had now moved, viewing other portraits. A group had gathered around Yolula, some took selfies with him, their faces familiar. Andzani realised they were the images hung on the wall.

“Yolula is really a nice guy, Andzani.” Senah said this in a low voice but audible enough to be heard.

“I wouldn’t be here if he wasn’t it,” Andzani said, good humoredly. He put his hands in his pockets, nervous as she turned and smiled at him. In her tone he’d sensed what felt like a plea.

Andzani spent that night at Yolula’s apartment after they dropped Senah at her place. He sat in front of the large TV when Yolula emerged from his bedroom, changed into orange shorts and a brown vest. He came to kneel next to the coffee table where his laptop sat. Yolula connected the HDMI cable that lay next to it. His computer screen became projected onto the large TV screen and he punched in his password.

“I have extra shorts if you want to change.” Yolula said, briefly turning to face Andzani.

“I’m feeling a bit cold. I’ll hang on to my pants for now.” Andzani replied. “Who are those?”

Projected on the TV screen now were three men, wearing jackets and fedora hats as if going for lobola negotiations. They stood next to a kraal and from the way they squinted at the camera, Andzani surmised the image was impromptu taken.

“That is my father,” Yolula pointed to the man on the right, facing the other two men. “And next to him are his brothers.”

Yolula had found the image in his grandmother's photo album, and because she refused him permission to take the picture with when he came to Cape Town, he had taken out his camera, laid the picture on her bed and taken a shot. He had made the image his computer wallpaper.

"Is that back home?" Andzani placed his arm along the couch's arm rest and stretched his legs before he leaned back on the couch.

"Yes. But at his father's place."

"Where is he now?"

"My old man?" Andzani nodded. "Dead."

"Oh?"

Yolula came to settle next to him, he pulled the throw from his arm rest and covered Andzani up to his waist. Then he pulled a cushion from the corner of the sofa and placed it on top of his thighs before placing a mouse he'd taken out from the TV stand drawer, on top.

"My dad was a coward," Yolula said. "I want you to hear this EP. There is this song that reminds me of you whenever it comes on." He moved the mouse on top of the cushion.

"What do you mean he was a coward?"

"He took his own life. I was still young and so I do not remember much about him. But I have vivid memories of this kraal growing up because we used to frequent it a lot with my cousins."

"Do you know what pushed him to it?"

"Selfishness," Yolula raised his shoulders above his ears. "Okay so we had to pay for this EP before it was released. So like pay for the work in advance so she could complete it. People actually came through for her."

"Who's she?"

“Msaki. Imagine the level of trust and respect people have in your work to pay for it before it was even produced. And she delivered.”

Andzani studied Yolula. “You’re nonchalant.”

Yolula threw his head to the side to look at Andzani.

“Maybe he was going through a lot,” Andzani added. “Your dad, maybe life had him by the collars. I’m just thinking.”

“I wouldn’t make excuses for that man. . .it is one of those things you get over. I asked the relevant questions. I didn’t get answers. I guess—I let it rest.”

“And your mother?”

“She’s here, in Delft, with her children.”

“You have siblings?”

“Half-siblings, but yeah.”

“And you’ve met them?”

“We didn’t grow up together, so our relationship is not that solid.”

“Do you have a relationship with her?”

“We tried establishing one, but you know, once you leave an area for weeds to grow tall, it becomes difficult clearing it out. So we’re working on it.”

Andzani nodded. “Ohkay, one last question.” He smiled. “Has she mentioned anything about your dad?”

Yolula shook his head, then scratched his forehead. “The story my grandmother told me doesn’t align with what she’s told me. Like she’s economical with the truth. She left my dad, and briefly after, he committed suicide. I mean my dad was not an angel, things I heard about that man would make you cringe. But me? Why did she leave me with him? I had a great childhood and all but it lacked something, her presence, and that’s just something she can’t make up for now.”

Yolula's eyes seemed heavy, as if something was forcing the eyelids together. Tired.

“Okay, back to the EP. . . here is the song I want you to listen to.” The EP was just four songs. The song *Nal' ithemba*, fourth on the list. Yolula clicked on it. Andzani didn't hear the last words Yolula said because the song started playing. Then Yolula's hand crept beneath the throw to find his. And instead of interlocking their fingers, he clung to his thumb in a handshake like move that was intimately so.

Yolula shut his eyes, invested in the song and its lyrics, forced Andzani to pay attention to what he felt.

Andzani didn't know how to respond to the hand clasp and thus kept his hand movement minimal. He watched Yolula's face, the occasional bursts of singing to the lyrics brought him a strange comforting feeling, and Yolula slanting his neck to smile at him while brushing his thumb beneath the blanket made his eyes sparkle.

“Is she a ‘chakra hun’?” Andzani asked, throwing his fingers into quotation marks.

Yolula laughed. “Why do you say such?”

“She sounds very much in tune with nature.”

“Not sure if she's gifted spiritually. But most of her lyrics connect to nature in some way; the wind, the sea. . .the sea, for example, resembles vastness. Uncharted terrain if you will. . .strong willed and cleansing— people believe the sea washes away bad luck.”

“The sea is also ruthless, restless and can take life,” Andzani added.

“That's also true,” Yolula concurred.

“I remember in primary school we went on a trip to Durban and six kids drowned—”

“Andzani,” Yolula halted him. “Don't ruin a good listening session.”

Andzani laughed, “okay ke.” He became silent. The only sound that could be heard were drums and what sounded like a trumpet coming from the song nearing its end.

“In my next life I will be a musician,” Yolula said, picking up the mouse to play another song.

Andzani looked at him, eyes open like slits, his hand clinging to his thumb beneath the throw and he realised he loved him.

That night, as they lay in bed talking, Yolula got out of the covers and switched off the lights. They had on only their briefs as they were about to sleep. And once back in bed, in the dark of the room, Yolula took both Andzani’s hands and placed the open palms on his chest—an invitation to explore his body. While his, Yolula’s hands, traced the bridge of Andzani’s nose, the hills of his cheekbones, down his shoulder blades, as if learning his body and its bone structure. He urged Andzani to do the same. Andzani, having grown used to taking the lead in such interactions, found it strange that he was the one taking directions. These directions were different to his, as these weren’t informed by selfishness; they forced him to reckon with the other individual’s body, they were not only about him reaching climax.

Reluctantly, Andzani’s hand had started moving. Intimacy was intended and he forced his mind to go there, to that state where for a long time he’d feared traversing, that state of vulnerability loving another human being demanded, when love opened up space to feel vulnerable, to feel hurt, to allow pain to cut deeper than it would if not informed by it; to allow death to lacerate and leave a scar, a scar deeper than it would be if not laced by emotions, by love.

Neo had taken him there, had taken so much space in his life, and in him. And when Neo was taken, a part of him also died. He feared returning to that space, he feared feeling vulnerable, he feared the trauma that resulted from such vulnerability. And whatever had shielded him for so long, Yolula succeeded in peeling it off.

It was terrifying now, as his palms moved down Yolula's chest, tracing its firmness, his fingers still reluctant to move down the gorge—it were as if learning a new skill, with the discomfort that he might do wrong in the process. It was familiar, yet strange. Yolula leaned over, shut his eyes as soon as he felt Andzani's breathe. His lips slowly located Andzani's, and when his tongue had familiarized itself with the depth of Andzani's mouth, Yolula brought his entire body forward. He slumped on top of Andzani, his hand tracing the length of Andzani's thigh, a move that made Andzani straighten his body.

Briefly, then, Andzani felt that emptiness that announced itself whenever he was about to engage with his *Grindr* hookups. The feeling of doubt and resignation that pushed forward memories of that day behind the school's pit latrines. A familiar fear cloaked him—with Yolula on top of him, he had assumed the position many of his hookups assumed; subservience, the receiver, and he lay there, suspended in this state, as Yolula's lips brushed his neck.

Andzani wrestled with the fear that always informed his assertion of control over his hookups, his dominancy, not wanting to be pinned down, of wanting to be the one doing the pinning down. The day of reckoning had come sooner for him. But, when he let his body go, he felt himself get lighter, as if his fear shed off. The shame that lurked whenever he undressed in the presence of other men, deserted him, suddenly exorcised from his body.

He felt Yolula's lips make their way down his chest. His tongue encircling his nipples, while Yolula gently brought Andzani's arms above his head and pinned his wrists down; let them remain there, Yolula seemed to say.

“Do you have lube,” Andzani had asked, raising his head.

Yolula halted, brought his face up to meet Andzani's gaze, as if wanting confirmation for what he'd heard. He'd only prepared for an oral session, he thought he'd take it slow seeing that the last time Andzani had walked out on him. But now the question had ignited a

passion he wasn't aware had lingered, just waiting for the flame to be aroused. Andzani pulled back his eyebrows, forming wave-like horizontal lines on his forehead. Yolula nodded, held Andzani's gaze a beat—as if seeking surety in Andzani's eyes before extending his arm for the nightstand and pulling out the drawer. He retrieved a small box of condoms and a bottle of lube. From the small box, he took out two condoms. He held on to one and placed the other on top of the nightstand. When Andzani gave him an enquiring look, Yolula said;

“One for now, one for later.”

Again, Andzani pulled back his eyebrows. But this time it was accompanied by uncertainty.

“Relax, one on you and one on me,” Yolula said, his hands on his ankles as he pulled the rest of his underwear off. A surreptitious smile lurked on Andzani's face. Before he grabbed the condom on Yolula's hand, he had, with his fingers, traced Yolula's manhood, as if measuring its size, cupped his balls with his palm and massaged lightly. Then he grabbed the condom, ripped it open so that the slippery rubber almost fell out. Carefully, he'd put it on Yolula and directed him, in the dark of the night, to one uncharted terrain.

The power dynamics Andzani had been used to were blurred. He hadn't been the only one doing all the work, nor had he relegated all the responsibilities to Yolula. He had taken charge and so did Yolula; a bit of him, then a bit of Yolula. A sensation he'd never felt. And when they both released, Andzani didn't get from the bed to throw a towel at anyone. They both remained in bed, and in their nakedness, held on to each other without the disgust that normally clung to him post his climax clarity. It hadn't felt transgressive, or that they had done something wrong, offensive; unlike when he had done it with his hookups, when he'd felt shameful after. Now, he felt unashamed; Yolula had managed to get him to that space of shamelessness. He searched for the word then, to describe the experience—liberatory. He

smiled to himself. He had chosen love, intentionally so, and in choosing it, he'd allowed the prospect of painful experiences in his life.

That night as he lay awake next to Yolula's grumbling throat, he scrolled through his Apps and found *Grindr*. He deleted it, deleted the numbers of the people he had promised to hook up with, and blocked their numbers on WhatsApp after deleting their chats.

Chapter 9
Cape Town/ Mbambamencisi
2016

“Babe, you are snoring.”

“Mhh? What?” Andzani stumbled awake, confused. “Why are you pushing me to face the other way?”

“Babe, you were sleeping badly. You were snoring.”

Andzani turned, his back to Yolula. And Yolula forced, lightly, his fingers, under the straps of Andzani’s underwear. An expression of endearment. He’d grown to doing it every night because Andzani didn’t like being snuggled. Struggling to breathe with Yolula’s arm over his chest, Yolula had resorted to placing his arm along Andzani’s thigh when they slept or beneath the strap of his underwear, even holding on to his shorts sometimes. Andzani joked often that Yolula had abandonment issues and that it was the reason he glued himself to him at night.

Andzani now struggled to fall back to sleep. He raised his upper body, turned to face Yolula. Yolula could feel Andzani hovering behind his closed eyelids. He opened his eyes.

“Why did you wake me up?” still disoriented, Andzani asked.

“Babe, you were sleeping badly that’s all. Akere you snore when you sleep facing up. I was trying to get you to face the other way so you don’t snore, and prevent a sore throat.”

Recently ‘Akere’ always lurked at the back of Yolula’s tongue because he’d promised himself to learn another language. He had decided that Sesotho was exciting, and he’d taken to throwing ‘akere’ in his speech to show his efforts. Andzani relented, laid his head back on the pillow. It was true, he always had bad dreams when he slept on his back.

“We need a family meeting, wena mashayashayane,” Andzani said.

Yolula laughed.

Family meetings, this is what they called them, the random impromptu talks they had; about their relationship, about money, about growing insecurities, when they felt the need for reassurance in their relationship.

Unable to sleep, Andzani ran his hand beneath his pillow and retrieved his phone. There was a missed call from his Uncle, Sontaga.

“Murhandziwa, are you still awake?” Andzani asked.

Yolula groaned an affirmative response.

“I missed a call from my uncle,” Andzani added.

“Is there a reason you sound alarmed?”

“Uncle Sontaga rarely calls. We don’t talk much.”

“And you rarely talk about him or your family for that matter,” Yolula said, his voice muffled as he spoke into his pillow.

“I will call him tomorrow morning.”

“It’s already morning, babe.”

Andzani’s eyes moved to the clock at the corner of the screen. Quarter to four. He sighed.

“Call him. We both know you won’t sleep until you do.”

Andzani slanted his face to find Yolula's mouth buried in the pillow. He kissed him.

Then dialed his uncle back.

"Malume!"

"Andzani. Rixile."

"Malume, it's almost four am."

"Men wake up at this time."

"Haike, clearly I'm not a man."

Haike?" Uncle Sontaga repeated. Andzani had taken to Yolula's way of speaking and Yolula joked that his use of Xhosa exclamations was sexually transmitted.

"Malume?"

"I hear you've adopted their way of talking there."

"Yeah, no. I guess it's because I'm always around them."

"Them?" Andzani heard Yolula mumble and he took his pillow and placed it on Yolula's head.

"I called earlier because of your mother, Andzani maan."

"Malume?"

"Speaking to you now, I slept on the couch at your house."

"Eh?"

"I managed to get her back to her bedroom. She's not herself, son."

Andzani had an idea of what he meant. She had slipped. He didn't remember clearly when last she'd had an episode. He wondered what triggered it this time. The last time Violet had suffered depressive episodes was after the child of a woman with whom she had given birth on the same day, passed their street. Violet had stopped washing her clothes, stared at the child as she walked down the street until she disappeared into a passage. "Mhani?"

Andzani had called her, and when she turned to him, said, “your sister would have been her age,” she’d pointed at the passage the girl had disappeared into.

“How long has she been like that?”

“Almost a week now and she’s still the same.”

“I told her to call me when she started feeling different,” Andzani said.

“You know how these things are, they always come unannounced, son.”

“No, man. She does this every time, he-malume. What if you were not there and she hurt herself?”

“Andzani. . .” Uncle Sontaga tried to interject but Andzani was overcome by emotions. Something had grown on his throat, triggering tears in his eyes. The worst-case scenarios he made up in his head overwhelmed him. Yolula was up and his phone screen glimmered a blue hue on his face. When he felt Andzani’s voice alter, he placed his hand on Andzani’s waist.

“Hayi, he-Malume. Why is she like this? Every time I have to force her to communicate with me.”

Andzani turned on his side to face the wall, and Yolula followed, he threw his arm over him, pulling himself to Andzani.

“She’s fine now but I think it’s time we get white people to treat her.”

A moment passed when Andzani pressed his fingers to his eyes, inhibiting tears escaping his eyelids.

“I’ll arrive there tomorrow evening. I just need to sort out a few things at work and let them know I won’t be coming in for a couple of days.”

“Alright, son. Don’t stress too much. She’s still in good hands.” Uncle Sontaga’s voice was light now.

“I hear you, Malume.”

After the phone call, Andzani turned and embraced Yolula. He wrapped his arms around him and tightened.

“Babe. . .I still need to breathe.”

Andzani loosened his embrace.

“What’s happening? Is your mother alright?” Yolula asked.

“I don’t know.” Andzani was quiet a beat, negotiating opening up this chapter of his life to Yolula. Then he started, “my mother lost a child years ago. And ever since then she hasn’t been the same. She experiences these episodes where she goes a long time without doing anything—cooking, bathing, just regular chores. It’s like she’s still mourning.”

“There is no formula for mourning, but it sounds like your mom needs help. Thought about grief counselling?”

Andzani exhaled and Yolula felt his warm breath on his neck.

“That’s what my uncle is saying. The thing is she always comes out of it, but now it has been days and he’s worried.”

“Can I come with you?” Yolula asked and Andzani pulled back from his embrace to meet his eyes.

“Babe—the timing is just not right.”

“Yeah – no. I understand, Murhandziwa. It’s fine we-baby.” Yolula kissed Andzani on his cheek as if his words hadn’t been enough reassurance he was fine. “My eyes still feel heavy.”

“Sleep ke wena malalanjalo. I need to book my ticket.”

“It’s four am, stop judging me.” Yolula said, his voice humor filled as he turned his back to Andzani and covered his head with a blanket.

Andzani had anticipated change in Mbambamencisi, but his anticipation was met by disappointment. The streets remained untarred, taps remained at the corner of every street and not within each homestead, and when you turned them on, they bellowed of thirst. The sun remained where it had been, overhead, and still burned as intensely as he had left it. The only thing that surprised him was the availability of taxis that did hourly rounds around the community to the taxi rank. This eliminated the thirty minutes' walk from the taxi rank to his house he would have had to endure.

The taxi passed where once stood Setice's gym. Now, a four roomed house stood erect where the gym had been; its history concealed beneath the new structure. If he told a stranger that there used to be a gym where the house stood, he feared they wouldn't believe him. Setice's gate remained but had been painted a new color now and Andzani remembered how the men had jumped through that gate in the middle of the night, their steps light like feathers. They had parked their bakkie a few meters from the gym and carried buckets of ice-cold water over the gate. They were the same men that patrolled the community, led by the councilor, the same men who had beaten Nkateko to blindness. They had found out what had happened to Nsovo, and because Nsovo had dropped the rape charges against her father's wishes, the councilor had decided to do away with the root of their problems in the community.

Before knocking on Setice's door, two men had run around the house to find the only window and guard it. When their knocks went answered, they yelled, letting Setice know that should he even try to use his gun, they would burn him alive. There was no way out. Setice walked out of his room to be met by a slap across his face which left him seeing shades of rainbow colors and glitters. They tied his hands, undressed him and left him bare in the cold of the night. He was uncircumcised and one of the men had shouted, "where do you even get the liver to do all the things you do when you are not even circumcised. You are not a man,

phela wena.” That was followed by a smack on the back of his neck and laughter reverberated from the other men who stood watching.

The men instructed Setice to stand on his toes and count to hundred, his eyes red from the slap and marking of the hand visible across his face, Setice started counting. Slow at first and each time he lost his balance the councilor whipped him with a Sjambok. And as he counted, one of the men stood behind him, pouring ice cold water on his head with a bucket. Setice’s body was covered in goosebumps and where the Sjambok licked him, blood clotted. His penis and scrotum shrunk, almost invisible under the pot belly from the cold water. This was the joke that sustained the men throughout the night. Before the sun announced itself, the men packed him his clothes in a bag they had found with weed in his room and swore that if ever they saw him in Mbambamencisi again, he would meet his ancestors. Naked, and in the dark of the night with only a rucksack on his back, Setice left Mbambamencisi. The men emptied his room and burned his belongings together with his gym equipment. The councilor then sold the place to a family that promised to demolish the gym and build afresh. The family had lived up to its promise and Andzani, now, was impressed by how simply they had buried the history of that place.

Andzani got off the taxi at the T-junction leading to his house, he passed the corner house and waved at Uncle Sontaga who stood by the peeling green gate waiting for him. Uncle Sontaga wore glasses as his eyesight had started to deteriorate.

“Malume,” Andzani said, extending his hand to his uncle.

“Magayisa. Ha amukela.” Uncle Sontaga said, shaking, firmly, Andzani’s hand.

Andzani smiled at being called Magayisa, a person coming back from the city.

“You don’t call when you are in the city, Andzani?” Uncle Sontaga added. “Look at you, you are growing a stomach. You don’t go to the gym anymore?”

Uncle Sontaga and Andzani had never spoken about Neo's death. The weight of the unsaid lingered between them, altered their body language and the way they carried themselves in front of each other.

Andzani gave a weary smile.

"Let me help you carry this," Uncle Sontaga said, reaching for Andzani's bag. His enthusiasm deflated.

"Malume, it's fine. We don't want to worsen your back."

"Who? Me? I eat meat, Mzaya. My back is strong as an iron," Uncle Sontaga said as he walked through the gate, Andzani followed.

"How many days did you get off?"

"Only managed two days. So I have to be back at work the day after tomorrow."

"Oh, I see. . .working for the white man. Ayi! He doesn't care when you have a family emergency. All he wants to see is production." Uncle Sontaga shook his head as he climbed the stoep. "Welcome home, son." Uncle Sontaga said affirmatively. And when Andzani snorted, he turned to look at him.

"And then?" Uncle Sontaga asked.

"Nothing," Andzani said. But then Uncle Sontaga raised his eyebrows at him. "It's hard to look at this place and call it home when the person who made this place a *home* is no longer here. . . it used to be bearable. . .but now-." Andzani raised his shoulders.

Uncle Sontaga stared at him a beat. Then, "I think about Neo too," he said.

Andzani's lips turned into the little pout he always made when trying to hold back tears.

"He made everything better," Andzani said.

"Are you at home?" Uncle Sontaga asked. "In Cape Town? Have you found a home?" There was genuine curiosity in his voice. And Andzani realised how this was the first time

Uncle Sontaga admitted his knowledge of his relationship with Neo. Andzani looked at him and smiled away the brief sadness that was in his eyes. Andzani's jaw made sudden movements, as if his mouth prepared what to say next.

"Yes," Andzani nodded stupidly, looking at the ground. "I do feel at home," he said. He thought about Yolula then and let another smile escape him.

Uncle Sontaga nodded then led the way into the house.

The house felt musty, the air warm because apart from the open door, all the windows were still closed. Violet was watching SABC Encore on TV. When Andzani walked in, she gave a steady look to her brother, why didn't you tell me? She seemed to say, before her eyes went back to Andzani. He in turn was struck by how much weight she had lost. The bottom of her eyes dark as if she wasn't getting enough sleep; her cheeks submerged beneath her cheekbones; the skin taut and shiny. She tied a doek on her head and covered herself with a blanket. When her eyes shifted from him and back to the TV, he thought he saw a wave of discomfort. His mother, uncomfortable in his presence. Sadness descended on him.

"Mhani?" Andzani said. He came and knelt beside the couch which once used to be his father's. Andzani placed his palm on her arm. "Inhlelani!" he greeted.

Violet's face softened.

"It's great to see you, mhani." There was yearning in Violet's eyes, her lips unable to smile, she'd relegated the job to her eyes. They lit up. "Malume Sonti told me what happened. I came to take you to a clinic, it's in Polokwane. They will help you, they will help you get better."

Andzani turned to look at his uncle, for support. Uncle Sontaga was nodding.

"Can I pack your clothes for you? We leave tomorrow."

Quietly, Violet had shifted her gaze from Andzani back to the TV screen. For a long time she didn't say anything. And when finally she found his eyes again, she gave him a slight nod.

Andzani exhaled, took her hand in his and held on tight. He didn't remember the last time he held his mother's hand. It was unfamiliar, strange, as if it were wrong. They were never friends; she was his mother and he was her son. Boundaries had always been in place. And at that moment, he swore that he would try harder, mend their relationship because he envied those children who were friends with their parents.

Part Four: Deracination

Chapter 10

Cape Town

2011

The two weeks of student orientation had come and passed and Andzani hadn't left his residence. It was a catering residence and he had his meals in the dining hall located on the ground floor of the tampon like building that rose high up into the sky next to the main road in Rosebank. With a tuck-shop and a dining hall available within the building, Andzani didn't leave the building and only left his room to go to the dining hall during mealtimes. When his roommate woke up each morning and clung to his orientation schedule, Andzani remained indifferent, in bed.

To ease his guilty conscience for not attending orientation, he watched campus videos on YouTube and browsed through the campus map as an alternative; cramming the route from his residence to the main campus and the different buildings' names. He alternated this with spending time on an online dating website he'd recently subscribed to because he wanted to talk strangers. His intentions at first had been to find like-minded people, people who would, almost, recognize his grief, understand the experience he'd gone through. He hadn't spoken about Neo's death to close friends and relatives because no one was aware that the depth of their relationship ran deeper than friendship; that intimacy had informed their

relationship. Whereas with strangers online, he was able to lay bare his heart without the fear of looming judgement.

And so, going online and speaking to strangers had at first been a form of escapism. Andzani realised it afforded him momentary relief, sharing his experiences, listening to other people talk of their experiences with men. It prevented him concocting scenarios in his head that would never take place but were laden with anxiety.

Meeting people he engaged with online had not been on his agenda, but they had soon grown to complimenting him, to making him feel desired. And then they had asked to meet him, asked what role he played in bed—when he had to google what they meant. This was before he had become addicted to the attention, when intense cravings for it pushed him to sleep with different guys each day of the weekend. During the week, course work kept him occupied, and on weekends, he relegated this occupation to strange men. This was before he realised he'd come to know more faces on campus, that with each arranged meeting, the count went up; before he decided that he would hook up with anyone except people from the commerce faculty because it meant he would never have to share classes or tutorials with his hookups; before hookups had become his way of dealing with the grief he'd traveled with from Mbambamencisi to Cape Town.

As he'd anticipated, he got lost on his first day of classes. He'd got off the shuttle, knew the building he was going to but didn't know where the lecture theatre on his timetable was. Running up the flight of stairs towards Jammie Plaza he'd met Nsuku. Andzani and Nsuku had gone to the same high school, only that Nsuku had come to the university a year earlier as he'd been a grade higher during their high school careers.

“Hey, hey. . . wait. . . you are going to lose your teeth down these stairs.”

Andzani stopped, turned and recognized the face, Nsuku was going down the flight of stairs.

“Nsuku? Hemfo? I totally forgot you were at this place,” Andzani said, breathless. Nsuku was taller than him and although Andzani was standing on a step higher, he still looked up into the sky when he addressed him. “I didn’t know you got in,” Nsuku replied.

“No one at the school knows. Not many people from Mbambamencisi know either. I just upped and left in the middle of the night, leave them wondering, you know, give them something to talk about.”

“Before they bewitch you,” Nsuku nodded mockingly.

“Exactly,” Andzani replied and they laughed.

“I understand.”

In high school they had seen each other within the school premises, but they had never spoken to each other, held conversations. They knew each other’s names because they occupied the top ten each term in their respective grades. Had they met elsewhere in their province, they wouldn’t have spoken to each other apart from a head nod or a ‘heita!’. But this was Cape Town, it demanded you stick to familiar faces. Andzani’s eyes lightened, they were speaking Tsonga, among the myriad of languages that passed them as they stood talking on the stairs. Ever since he’d arrived in Cape Town, he hadn’t spoken Tsonga to anyone. He’d had to twist his tongue speaking this language that was only reserved for the classrooms in his high school but now demanded to be spoken in all corners he walked into.

“Vona, vale hansi va na mina,” Andzani joked. “I am lost, I’m looking for Maths Building M304. I have to attend a class there.”

“What were you doing during Orientation when other kids marched building to building learning their names?” Nsuku joked.

“Eh, mfo. Mina I was busy with other things,” Andzani said, his tone suggestive of bad behavior.

“Wena, women will kill you,” Nsuku shook his head and laughed heartily. “Okay, so it’s that building over there,” he pointed to a building on his right. “Walk through the entrance, in there are more stairs, follow them,” he chuckled. “And you’ll find your class up there.”

“Yoh! Seems like I’m going to leave here with a potris with all these stairs.”

“We are at the gym here.”

They both laughed.

“So where did they place you?” asked Andzani.

“Right there,” Nsuku pointed to a residence peeking from behind tall trees.

“Oh, the cool kids’ res,” Andzani said.

“What do you mean?” Nsuku gave a little smile.

“Either you are rich, stink of privilege or are condescending if you get placed at Smuts, so which one are you?”

“I guess I am condescending cause I’m definitely not rich nor privileged.”

They laughed.

“Where do you stay?” Nsuku asked.

“The yellow tampon in Rosebank, bra.”

“The ghetto?”

“I mean. . .” Andzani let out a laugh. “At least you see what I’m talking about. Not only do you need to be condescending to stay at Smuts, you also need to be classist. What do they dish for you there?”

Nsuku just laughed. “You’ve only been here two weeks and already you know of these things?”

“The thing about senior students is that they talk. They were talking about it in the dining hall the other day. I don’t know what you guys did to hurt Marquardians but those guys are hurt.”

“I don’t know what kind of Lions those are,” Nsuku said and Andzani laughed because he knew what Nsuku was referring to. Marquardians roared like Lions, that was their slogan and this is what they had done on the first day of his arrival in the dining hall, roared. “They are too sensitive.”

“What did you get in for?” Nsuku asked when their laughter subsided.

“Accounting. Bachelor of Business Science. How’s Actuary treating you?”

“How do you know about that?”

“The school couldn’t stop raving about you. Your name was used whenever they tried motivating us to study, ‘have you seen Nsuku, he’s in Cape Town now blah blah.’”

“That school is making us susceptible to witchcraft,” Nsuku laughed. Andzani noticed how different this Nsuku was to the reserved one he knew from his school. This one laughed and smiled more.

“Look, take my numbers,” Nsuku added. “So we can keep in touch.”

Andzani nodded and hurriedly took out his Nokia Asha and typed in the numbers as Nsuku called out.

“Okay bra. . .I’ll leave a miss call so you can save mine,” Andzani said.

“Sure.”

“Okay, let me march up these stairs, hemfo” said Andzani fist bumping Nsuku.

Nsuku smiled as he watched him climb the stairs, exhausted. He remembered how on his first day he was was made to get on the wrong shuttle that ended up in Hidding campus because he had been told, by some ill-mannered students, he’d find lecture theatre TBA there.

When he got out of the shuttle in Hiddingh and asked students where TBA was located, they laughed at him before letting him in on what TBA meant.

He returned to the main campus to find his next class dismissed.

“Andzani? Wait!” Nsuku shouted, climbing a few more steps behind Andzani. “I just remembered something. Me and majita from back home have contributed money together and are buying *xikopo*, cow head, on Saturday. Do you want to come through?”

“How much is the contribution?”

“No, we’ve already covered that part. Wena just come?” Nsuku said. “The cooking starts around 12 so it’s a lunch thing.”

“Ok. But are you sure the guys won’t have a problem with me being there without having contributed anything?”

“I invited you, if they do, I’ll just fork out the money myself, so no hassles.”

“Okay then,” Andzani nodded slowly. “I’ll be there.”

“Alright, I’ll send you an SMS?”

“Yah. And tell me if anything changes.”

“Okay, sharp,” Nsuku said. And Andzani bolted up the rest of the stairs.

Nsuku and his friends were cooking the cow head at a residential area called The Six in Zonnebloem, an area previously part of District Six. It was Nhluvuko’s flat, Nhluvuko and Nsuku had come to the university together the previous year.

Andzani found them on the rooftop of the building where the braai area was located. Nsuku and three other guys were playing cards while Nhluvuko stood next to the fireplace, emptying packets of spices into the large pot on top of the raging fire.

Andzani was glad to find that the head was already skinned and already on top of the fire when he emerged from the elevator.

“Ey majita. Andzani is here,” Nsuku said when Andzani approached them. The guys placed, face down, their cards on the table. They were playing crazy 8.

“Andzani,” Nsuku continued. “This is Ntiyiso.” Ntiyiso fist bumped him. “That’s Vukosi,” Nsuku pointed at Vukosi. And because Vukosi wasn’t within a hand’s reach, he raised his fingers in the air in a peace sign. “And this here,” Nsuku brushed the guy’s head as he tried to evade Nsuku’s hands. “Is Fumani.”

“Ola, ola. Nice of you to join us.” Fumani said, taking a sip of gin and tonic before picking up his cards on the table.

“Moes you know Nhluvuko,” Nsuku confirmed.

Andzani nodded and raised his arm to acknowledge Nhluvuko again, whom he’d passed at the fireplace.

“Can you play crazy 8?” Vukosi asked, putting down his phone.

“No,” Andzani said. He’d never learned how to play cards, even during his time at Setice’s gym when the truants would gather around to pass time.

“Ah, it means you’ll be left out then,” Fumani said.

Andzani felt a growing dislike for Fumani. He sensed from his tone that they wouldn’t get along. Andzani ignored him.

“Can you play Casino?” Nsuku asked. “After this round we can switch.”

“No. It’s fine. I’ll just watch.” Andzani managed a little smile. A breeze graced their skin. He saw goosepimples grow on Ntiyiso’s arms and thighs as he wore shorts. Ntiyiso was oblivious of the pimples as if they had become second nature.

“Oh, Nsuku said you could make pap,” Fumani said, not shifting his gaze from his cards.

“I said I would ask if he could. Eh, you don’t even give me a chance before throwing me under the bus,” Nsuku said to Fumani, a little bit annoyed, before he averted his gaze to Andzani. “Can you make pap? You don’t have to. . .just that these guys can’t cook for shit.”

“You can’t cook either, Nsuku.” Fumani said.

“Why are you loud then?” Nsuku asked, even though Fumani hadn’t raised his tone.

“It’s fine. I’ll cook,” said Andzani.

As he leaned against the wall and watched the boys proceed with their game, Andzani wondered if they had deliberated and had come to the conclusion that he would be the one cooking pap since he hadn’t contributed to the cow head. And as he observed and tried to learn the boys, Andzani grew uncomfortable, suddenly feeling the need to perform, to alter his tone so that it was lined with a certain aggression that he’d felt in theirs. His posture as he stood watching the game imitated the manliness he knew—a hand in his pocket, his back to the wall, and a side slant. And when he finally was offered a seat, instead of crossing his legs as he wanted to, sat with his knees wide open.

When Fumani asked him if he was a boob or an ass guy, Andzani took his time to answer, then finally said both, because he was trying to stay on the safe side. Did he have a girlfriend? Andzani said no. You look like you are a player, Fumani remarked and Andzani gave him a fleeting smile hoping for the conversation to take a different direction.

Finally, the meat was done, Ntiyiso and Nhluvuko carried the hot pot to the elevator while the rest followed with the spices, cooking utensils and the drinks.

Nhluvuko stayed on the second floor of the building. His apartment was nicely furnished but lacked enough room for movement. And so, they were packed in the small sitting room adjacent to the kitchen as Andzani made pap. They played a game; passing the remote amongst themselves and selecting a song on YouTube, then rating each other’s selection to see who would score the highest for the best music selection. Each time it was

Andzani's turn he'd had to shout his song; this was after he'd deliberated in his head which song would appease them the most, when he opted for the few famous rap songs he'd heard on the radio.

When he was done with the pap, Nhluvuko gave him a plate to dish it into a small mound— everyone was going to eat from the same dish. The cow head with all its juices was removed from the pot and put into a large container. These were placed, side to side, on the table in the center of the sitting room for everyone to dig in.

Andzani dug in once, removing a piece of falling meat from the head, with some pap on his hand he ate slowly as he watched the TV screen. When his eyes found the mound again, it was blasted and was now of a smaller size. That is when he realised that if he wanted to get full, he would need to increase his chewing and swallowing game. But he didn't stand a chance for the other guys were too skilled at eating in groups, they didn't care that the pap was still hot.

In the end, when only the skeleton of the head was left and there was no pap anymore, Andzani had rarely plastered his stomach. He sat back and cemented his gaze on the TV as the other boys cleared remnants of meat hidden within the skeleton. The juices on his hands dried as he waited for one of the boys to get up to wash his hands so he could follow because he didn't want to be the first one to get up.

“Nsuku, have you told Andzani about your idea of starting a society at the university. Maybe he knows people who may be interested in joining. Especially macherry so.” Fumani said, tapping each breast on his chest as if concluding a prayer, a conniving smile on his face.

Andzani turned his attention from the TV to Nsuku. Nsuku, full and sweating from the heat of the food, slouched in his seat before he began his sermon.

“Heh Andzani, I’m not sure if you are aware of societies and students’ organizations that are there on campus,” Nsuku started. “Did you attend orienta—you didn’t attend orientation right?”

Andzani nodded, hoped for the others to not ask the reason he did not.

“So, there are different societies and organizations you can sign up for. There are religious societies, academic societies, political societies and a bunch of others, debating and stuff. There was a dedicated day on your orientation schedule where these different societies erected their tents on the Jammie Plaza for students to go sign up.”

“Oh, I think I remember. My roommate warned me to not sign up for Ikey Vibes or something.”

“Uh huh!” Nsuku said. “Did you sign up?”

“No,” Andzani shook his head. “I am not into rugby.”

“Good,” said Nsuku.

“But why are people dissuaded from signing up, what’s wrong with the society?” asked Andzani.

“We’ll come back to that,” Nsuku said and the others laughed, as if aware what Nsuku would say. “So there are also cultural societies,” Nsuku continued. “There is the Zimbabwe soc, Nigerian’s student society. Swazi student’s society. But we do not have something similar for Tsonga people. So we want to do something similar but outside of the university.”

“Is that why you joined Swazi Soc?” Nhluvuko asked, stifling a laugh. Andzani now realised how chubby he was as he struggled to get up, and then took with him to the kitchen the container with the skeleton and its juices. Ntiyiso followed, he picked up the plate which had pap.

“It hadn’t been my intention to join Swazi soc. A friend, we were doing the same course first year, a Swati guy, asked me to join and there was nothing to lose, so I joined. We had fun.”

“And that is the only reason he wants to start one, the girls that will sign up,” Ntiyiso teased, washing his hands on the sink.

“Stop fooling around. I just saw how supportive the society was. Not only does it make you feel like you belong, especially in this foreign city. . .you know how lonely Cape Town can be for first year students. So if you are a part of a society at least you get to be around people now and again. And that is what the Swazi soc did, held events throughout the year for people to meet up and engage each other. After like a stressful exam period we would organize something and drive out of the city for fresh air and familiarize ourselves with the parts of the city we might never occupy, you know. What I know about societies is that they force you to belong, forge new relationships and make lasting friendships. It’s like a small family. And that is the type of vibe I am going for. I realised that there are a lot of Tsonga people in Cape Town and we do not know each other, and people often feel isolated because they are not aware of the support systems available around them.”

“A hi tivaneni, let’s get to know each other, vibes,” Ntiyiso said as he settled back on his sit.

“My thing is,” Fumani started. “There are probably lot of Tsonga people around, but they are probably speaking that language, what is it, Isiqosa—”

“Isixhosa,” Nhluvuko corrected.

“Same difference,” asserted Fumani. “At the end of the day iti bari, they are idiots. Scared to speak their mother tongue. Losing their heritage.” He shook his head, now his turn to go wash his hands.

“I think that’s bull,” Nsuku said. “This idea that Tsonga people become chameleons in new settings because they are embarrassed to speak their home language or that they feel inferior—”

“Is that not another reason you came up with the idea to start the society?” Fumani asked.

“No. . . Achuzi vona, friend look. I don’t think it’s fair that Tsonga people are made to tuck their tails when they are versed in other South African languages and are able to speak them confidently. Firstly, why are they are not applauded as other tribal groups when they do decide to learn the other South African languages? E.g. White people, they throw around two Zulu words and people cheer for them. Xhosa people will say ‘Akere’ and ‘Bathong’ and you welcome them with open arms. Tsonga people come into the game, well versed in all these languages and the first thing they get is ‘tuck your tail in shame because you suffer from an identity crisis.’”

“Tsonga people *do* suffer from an identity crisis,” Nhluvuko asserted.

“Achuz’, I’m not disputing that. But we cannot box everyone. Why should it be Tsonga people’s problems that other tribes are lazy to learn other people’s languages? Yes, Tsonga people may suffer from an identity crisis, but it doesn’t take away from the fact that many are fluent in many South African languages. I don’t understand why they are made to feel embarrassed when they are versed and are able to communicate with other South Africans in *their* languages. Why should it be their problem that other tribes are lazy to learn other South African languages? It should be embarrassing, really, for other tribal groups that, apart from their home languages, they are only prepared to speak the colonizer’s language, in an African country, please! We have 11 official languages and you only speak your home language and English? No! The shame should be on them, not on Tsonga people to bear.”

“But then don’t you think we are feeding this laziness? That other tribal groups in South Africa are now lazy to learn other people’s language because well, they know that the minority groups will learn their languages?” Asked Vukosi.

“Maybe we are, and that is fine. All I am saying is instead of battering Tsonga people who learn other people’s languages, why not celebrate them? They know their Tsonga, it’s not like they are losing their heritage.”

“Some are,” Fumani said.

“What do you mean?” Asked Nsuku.

“Some people return to Limpopo speaking broken Tsonga seasoned with a lot of broken Zulu.”

“Oh please. Those are just acting out. I have been speaking English all my life, and I’ve never stuttered, not even once, when speaking Tsonga. Those ones are doing it on purpose.”

Andzani smiled, he liked how passionate Nsuku sounded, for a moment hoped their interaction to materialize to genuine friendship.

Vukosi noticed Andzani’s smile.

“This is what we deal with, heh Andzani, all the time,” Vukosi said, he was quiet most of the time, checking his phone regularly. “We literally had the same conversation last week when we hiked.”

Andzani, not knowing what to say, only smiled at him.

“Don’t you want to be part of the executive committee?” Vukosi asked him.

“The executive team?”

“Each of us have already taken on a role in the exec, but there is still space for a secretary general,” added Vukosi. “So if you want it, it’s yours.”

“What do I know about being a secretary?” Andzani said, smiling uncertainly at Nsuku.

“You will learn on the job,” replied Vukosi. “All of us will be starting out if this takes off. It’s all trial and error.”

Nsuku now stood by the sink and was nodding.

A major part of Andzani’s life had longed for the acceptance of men, to be regarded as equal and wanting to be invited in their space. He had forgotten how uncomfortable it felt being around them, and this gathering had reminded him of how much he’d depended on Neo for comfort in such spaces. He realised that the group would be a constant reminder that something lacked in his life, that discomfort would always nudge him to remind him of Neo’s absence. He hated most how within that space, he’d already grown conscious of the way he carried himself, how he compared his demeanor to theirs; that he felt the need to work twice as hard to assert his manliness in their presence.

“Can I think about it?” Andzani asked, certain that he would turn the offer down.

“Yeah, sure. White people say ‘take all the time you need.’” Vukosi said.

“But we are not white, so if you take longer, we’re just going to offer it to someone else,” Fumani said.

“He’s just joking,” it was Nsuku, back on his seat.

At that moment Andzani’s phone beeped. A text message from a guy he’d met once during the week in his car parked outside the tall tampons. Both unable to host each other, they had only kissed and promised to see each other Saturday night. And when Andzani received an invitation from Nsuku, he’d tried moving their rendezvous to another day, but the guy had been persistent, horny, Andzani knew, and had decided to move their meeting to a later time that Saturday. The guy was now checking if Andzani was done so he could pull through. Seeing that the gathering was almost done, Andzani knew that leaving The Six meant going back to his residence room to spend the rest of the night in his head. And so he replied to the guy, told him to make his way as he, Andzani, said his goodbyes and left the

building to catch a taxi back to Rosebank down on the main road next to the Good Hope Centre.

The effects of that rendezvous came a few weeks later, when Andzani started taking seriously the symptoms; the itchiness at the head of his penis that brought about an urge to insert a metal rod in his urethra and scratch the insides, the remnant like precum that always lurked in his underwear whenever he was about to urinate, the burning sensation he felt when he urinated. Feeling uneasy seeing a doctor and discussing his sexual life, he had put off many times making an appointment. And finally, when the damp in his underwear started growing, fear that he would lose his penis gripped him and he'd made an appointment to see a nurse at the student wellness center.

He prayed, while waiting at reception, to not get a woman to examine his manhood. And when the black male nurse came and called his name, relief swooped his face and he said his silent thanks to God. In the surgery room, the nurse asked him what his symptoms were, asked him what type of sex he'd engaged in recently, asked him if it was with his girlfriend, if he needed to let her know so she could also get medical attention. Then he asked him to take off his pants. Andzani worried that his bum might be ashy because he never applied lotion on it, had only unbuttoned his pants and took the zipper down, showing only his frontal. The nurse asked him, as he fiddled with his penis, examining it—and Andzani worrying that he might get an erection—who had performed his circumcision.

“A doctor, back home, we were a group on the day, one after the other she sliced off everything.”

His mind had gone back to the day, he hadn't watched, preferred not to watch while the other boys, Neo included, watched as the doctor circumcised them.

“She did a tremendous job,” the nurse said, inspecting his penis, twisting a bit to the side. “Okay, I’ll need the pants beneath your bum.” He said as he went and opened the cabinet at the corner of the room, retrieved a syringe and some tablets that Andzani would need to drink later on, all at once.

Andzani hadn’t gotten an erection during the process and had wondered if that was a trick the nurse used on everyone; remind them of the day they got circumcised so as to avoid any embarrassing moments in the examination room.

After lowering his pants to his knees, the nurse had wiped a cold liquid on the side of his buttock, then followed the much-anticipated sting.

On his way back from student wellness Andzani had felt a lump in his throat from thinking about where he could have gotten the infection from. There could only be one person; the guy he had made out with at the parking lot behind Baxter Residence on Chapel road. Arriving from Nsuku’s place, Andzani had gotten off Chapel road, and, avoiding being seen getting into a car in front of his residence, had texted the guy to drive up to the parking space behind Baxter residence where he’d find him.

In the car, they had spent some time talking, the guy giving less about his background, and Andzani giving more of his made-up life history, lies on top of lies. He was surprised how easy it was, lying, how easily it became after encountering the first bump, telling the first lie. How he hadn’t needed to work hard after because at that moment he too believed his own lies.

The guy had taken him in his mouth before he reclined his seat and Andzani got on top of him. He’d promised he wouldn’t release in him, but when the time came and Andzani tried getting off, the guy held Andzani’s hips firmly so that he couldn’t move. When he was done groaning, he softened his grasp. Andzani opened the door and kicked it behind him. He walked the short distance to his res, his eyes a glacier of tears. He didn’t look back, even

when the car started and revved for his attention. When he got to his room, he sat in the bathroom, willed his muscles to relax so he could empty the liquid in him. After, he took a shower, got in bed, and reported the guy on the dating site.

Now, he arrived in his room with a throbbing buttock. Pain seared through, it felt as if someone was slicing his buttock with a razor blade, as if something was collecting, clotting where the syringe had made its way, forming a small lump. He drank the tablets the nurse had given him and avoided lying on his back.

Chapter 11
Mbambamencisi
2011

Andzani drank paraffin two weeks after they buried Neo and a week before his departure for university. Violet was in her small garden next to the sugarcane she had planted by the corner of her yard. She was weeding, clearing the small spinach patch of invasive weeds when she saw him walk out of the kitchen, a little bit disoriented, as if searching for a needle on the ground and needing for his eyes to be one with the earth. At first, she had been indifferent, but grew alarmed when he'd started walking languidly, as if entranced, his gait following a spell. She had rushed to him as he turned the corner of the house. Watery saliva had started dripping at the corners of his lips, a warning that his body was ready to regurgitate the toxins he'd forced into it. She grabbed his arm and jerked him back. Andzani lost his balance, his back meeting the ground. He smelled like the paraffin stove she'd gone back to using since officials cut off their power supply after Neo's death. The smell overwhelmed her.

Andzani had seen what grief had done to his mother. She had not been the same after the death of his sister. People said with time her wounds would heal, but Violet's wounds

seemed defiant, they seemed to fester with each year that passed. Each morning Andzani saw the longing his mother would never sate.

His post matric plans had involved Neo at their core; leaving home for university and being able to care for each other without the audience that was people of Mbambamencisi. But now, with Neo gone, each dream achieved would be lined with grief, a constant reminder that it was a dream meant to be shared. He feared that the grief would never unburden him of what could have been; he feared living a life as full of yearning as his mother's was. Determined to end it, he'd sat against the size thirty three-legged pot that was behind his kitchen door, that housed their twenty-five kilogram mealie meal sack; that Violet had got from her stokvel with the women on her street when it was her turn. He had swallowed in gulps, shutting his nostrils with his fingers so the paraffin didn't trigger nausea. He leaned his head back and took mouthfuls. Tears had hindered his sight, clouded the kitchen furniture and the two liters of paraffin on his hand.

When he walked outside, he'd felt a dizzying sensation hit his forehead, like a sharp pain parting his skull into two. He'd planned to run around the house so his body could digest the liquid quicker, but his run had merely become a tepid walk.

Now, Violet made him kneel and struck him hard on the back when it came rushing out, the tinted, rainbow colored particles, accompanied by a paraffin smell mixed with digestive fluid that rushed to Violet's nostrils. A wave of relief, and something like hope, landed on her face. She sat next to him, drops of vomit landing on her skirt, on her arms as Andzani bellowed. She'd looked at him through the glacier of tears that occupied her eye lids, anger and gratitude fighting to mix together but not finding the right state to co-exist. She heard the gate open and when she craned her neck, saw Uncle Sontaga rush towards them. She hadn't heard the sound of his car approach her gate. She screamed his name, pointing at the house, "He needs milk, Sonti come with milk in the fridge." Uncle Sontaga

dashed, the door almost gracing his forehead. He returned with a carton of milk. Andzani was wiping his mouth with the back of his hand when he felt his lips kiss the opening of the milk carton as Violet forced him to down a quarter of it.

It pained, his stomach, as if he'd jumped into a pool of water with his pelvis forward; the pain seared across his abdomen that he'd held his arms across, tightening them around his abdominal area when Uncle Sontaga walked him to his bakkie, Violet behind them. He helped Andzani get into the front and Violet next to him before he drove them to the local clinic.

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On the day Andzani saw Neo's body entwined with wire rods, he was coming from the post-office, two white envelopes in hand when he noticed the crowd of school children in their school uniforms, men who wandered the streets of Mbambamencisi during daylight, stay-at-home mothers with their children strapped on their backs, police vans, Eskom cars, an ambulance was just arriving as he turned the corner of uncle Sontaga's road. Curiosity made him pass his house, walk down the road until he turned the corner and saw Uncle Sontaga emerge from the group, a bit distraught. People's eyes landed on Uncle Sontaga, and then Andzani, waiting to see what would unfold between them.

Seeing Uncle Sontaga emerge from the crowd, Andzani knew. He'd left him with Neo to fix the electrical cables and Uncle Sontaga emerging from the crowd alone meant something was wrong with Neo.

Andzani felt his legs tremble like reeds in a cupping stream; when his mind attuned to his pace and he ran towards the crowd. Uncle Sontaga saw him approach, and he hurried towards him, to meet him halfway. When Andzani got close, he tried to evade Uncle Sontaga's grasp, but Uncle Sontaga managed to get hold of him by his T-shirt. Uncle Sontaga

was buying the forensic people time to remove the last of the wires on Neo's body. Andzani let go of the envelopes and they scattered to the ground, Uncle Sontaga stepping on them as he pulled him back.

Andzani turned, tried to take off his T-shirt but slipped and fell on his back. And when Uncle Sontaga helped him up, Andzani bit him. Letting go of him, Uncle Sontaga screamed "Andzani, swoyini?" But Andzani was already amongst the crowd.

When Uncle Sontaga's eyes found Andzani again, he was pushing through two police officers who held their arms akimbo. Andzani threw slurs at them for hindering him access to Neo.

Then he was floating, struggling in the air as the policemen carried him up high and away from the crowd. His screams seemed to cause a few among the crowd to shed tears. Andzani felt Uncle Sontaga get hold of his arm when the police officers eased him to the ground. The forensic people were almost done untangling the burnt wires from the body. Andzani heard Uncle Sontaga tell the police officers he was Neo's friend, begged them to let him get close to the body. And because the begging was getting uncomfortable for the young officers, they moved to the side and allowed Andzani to pass.

The first thing Andzani saw was the bright fluffy pink slipper which had strayed from Neo's foot. It belonged to Ousie Ketsi, and Neo had taken to wearing the pair whenever he didn't remember where he'd left his flops and was in a hurry to leave the house. Then his eyes found Neo. He lay next to the jackal berry tree. It was cut down and what remained was a stump. All the wires came and gathered there before being connected to cables and taken to different homes. The community no longer used cables to connect from the utility poles but instead used wires that fell from the poles like dry biltong. This was their last resort because each time they connected cables, Eskom officials would come, unhook them and take them with. Wire rods were cheaper and easily replaceable.

Andzani froze, he got hold of his mouth with both hands and screamed, his palms preventing the intensity of his screams. But he couldn't breathe properly and so removed his palms from his mouth to let out the screech that followed. The back of his throat felt painful and the corners of his eyes seared. Andzani slumped, like a mealie sack thrown to the ground, he fell on his knees next to Neo's body.

Neo's skin was shriveled, his cheek one with the ground as if he had dropped on his face. The top part of his body, where the forensic team had untangled the wires, had burnt plastic remnants stuck on it. Rain had poured the previous night and his shorts were covered in damp sand. The other pink slipper had refused to let go of Neo's foot. Andzani knelt there screaming Neo's name. Tears refused to come, making as if close and then deciding that it wasn't quite time yet. At that moment Andzani wished for the earth to part so he could sink in it.

Violet emerged from the small passage. She was coming from the clinic when she saw the crowd. She knew immediately that something was wrong. Rushing towards the crowd she saw her brother picking up envelopes from the ground, they were now covered in dirt.

"Sonti, what happened?"

And before Uncle Sontaga could answer her, Violet heard Andzani scream Neo's name. She hurried past her brother, the crowd seeing her approach, parted the way for her to reach the center and witness everything herself.

"Andzani," Violet called out.

Andzani struggled to his feet, pointed at Neo on the ground and screamed his name. The tears that had decided it was not time yet, now decided otherwise. Heaving as if worsened by his mother's presence, Andzani fell on her chest.

"Mhani, I can't breathe," Andzani said in between sobs.

“You’re going to be fine,” Violet whispered repeatedly in Andzani’s ears, even though she herself struggled to believe it. She knew he wasn’t going to be fine for a long time.

And when Andzani wouldn’t stop bellowing, an officer shot a look her way. She held him close to her body, her hand on his waist, and with slow strides, they moved, moved towards Uncle Sontaga’s gate.

Andzani hunched over his knees after she sat him on Uncle Sontaga’s gleaming stoep, his head resting on top of his arms. When she reappeared, she had a glass of sugared water which she made him drink. The water trailed down his chin onto his t-shirt. Sugared water and tears becoming one.

“Imihlolo ya yini leyi?” Violet said to herself, looking at the crowd, at Uncle Sontaga talking to the paramedics close to the ambulance.

“I thought you’d gone with him to the Post Office,” Violet added and Andzani felt that she was finding fault with the fact that he hadn’t taken Neo with, that somehow, he could have prevented his death. Regret clung on him.

The air around Uncle Sontaga was thick with heaviness when he walked into the yard, it weighed him down, weighed his gait that he strutted towards them. In hand he held the envelopes Andzani had dropped on the ground.

Uncle Sontaga lowered himself to the stoep.

“Have you called Ketsi?” Violet asked, her eyes on Uncle Sontaga, whose gaze was on the state vehicle that carried Neo’s body, as it turned the corner and joined Andzani’s street. He shook his head, tears gleaming in his eyes.

“She shouldn’t find out from the police, Sonti.” Violet added, her voice urgent. Uncle Sontaga took out his cellphone and dialed Ousie Ketsi.

After all these years she’d been his neighbor, Andzani could not say for sure what Ousie Ketsi did. She wasn’t quite a social worker, but she worked for an organization that

required of her to do rounds in the most impoverished households. Sometimes she worked at the local clinic, what she did there, he had no clue.

When Ousie Ketsi returned, the crowd of spectators had lessened, only neighbors raised their heads when she walked into uncle Sontaga's yard. The crowd of students had dissipated, gone home to feed their groaning stomachs after the long day of witnessing the traumatic sight. Andzani imagined many losing sleep in days to come, their minds recounting the event of that afternoon, the image flashing back whenever they shut their eyes to sleep. That's how he'd felt after they had buried his little sister. Her image had lingered in the dark of his eyelids years after, that he only needed to shut his eyes to remember clearly her facial features. He no longer attended funerals for the same reason, the fear to carry with him the memory of funeral events. He expected it to be the same with Neo; to see his face whenever he shut his eyes. But what bothered him most was that the last image that would occupy his eyelids would be of Neo lying on the wet ground entangled by electrical wires.

They rose from the stoep when Ousie Ketsi approached them, her senses heightening as they stood.

"Sonti? Keng?" She asked in the sing song voice she used on him whenever she wanted to take things on credit from his stall.

"Have a seat, mosadi." Uncle Sontaga pointed to the stoep.

"I haven't finished my rounds, Sonti. What's wrong?" Her head was slanted to the side.

"It's Neo," Violet said, impatient at Uncle Sontaga's advances at getting Ousie Ketsi to sit.

"What about Neo?" Ousie Ketsi turned to Andzani.

Violet's eyes found the spot Neo had taken his last breath, next to the jackal berry tree stump, deserted now with no cables or wires in sight. She conjured up the image, reliving the

moment so not to betray the truth. Ousie Ketsi's eyes had followed Violet's. She seemed uncomfortable, Ousie Ketsi. But Violet struggled to speak.

"He passed away, Ketsi." Uncle Sontaga said.

Ousie Ketsi's eyes found Andzani again and clung to him, waiting for him to discount what she'd just heard. "What do you mean he passed away?"

"He got electrocuted," Violet said, her eyes back to the tree stump.

Silence fell over them as Ousie Ketsi's eyes rested on Andzani, they rarely left him when his mother and Uncle Sontaga spoke. He was the only person who could confirm Neo's whereabouts. Andzani's eyes swept the ground, tears had gathered again, he wiped them with his palm below his chin.

The handbag Ousie Ketsi had clung onto landed on the ground, as if clutching on to it required strength she needed to retain.

"Sonti, what happened to my son?" Ousie Ketsi asked, her voice shattered, tears betraying it. "What happened to my son?"

"We were fixing the cables, and I left him to check if power reached my house, when I returned, I found him on the ground, Ketsi." Uncle Sonti wiped off the one tear that trailed down his cheek with his index finger as he spoke, his eyes red. "I know I shouldn't have left him."

Ousie Ketsi approached Andzani, got hold of him by the collar. "I asked where Neo is!" her voice reverberated in Andzani's ears. The sadness in her eyes made Andzani's tongue freeze. He opened his mouth, but no sound escaped. Ousie Ketsi's grip tightened as if she was about to howl him. "I asked, o kae Neo?" Andzani shivered.

"They took him Ous' Ketsi. They took Neo." Andzani's voice finally let out.

He covered his face with both hands when he felt her hands loosen. That was before she held her head with both hands and screamed her son's name, her voice seething. Andzani had never seen her so fragile, so undone.

Ousie Ketsi gave a loud shriek, became one with the ground and went mute.

"Etna le metsi. Bring water," Violet said to Andzani as she knelt and took Ousie Ketsi on her lap. The neighbors hurried into the yard when they heard her shriek. Some people stood on the road to watch things unfold.

Andzani came out of the house with a jug full of water. Violet poured some on Ousie Ketsi's face before making her swallow some.

When Ousie Ketsi regained consciousness, Uncle Sontaga and a neighbor helped sit her up. Her mouth in a pouting manner, she looked around, her wig undone, her eyes red, searched around, searched for a face she'd never see again.

"Ketsi?" Violet called her, hoping she'd respond, but her mouth remained in that pouting manner, as if the pout withheld words, prevented them from slithering down her tongue, through her teeth and between her lips. She did not respond.

She would remain mute until they buried her son.

That night Andzani sat by his window, the window open allowed a cold breeze to grace him. He could see silhouettes in the dark of the night on the street, hear the rushed voices of men, the smell of the weed they smoked. Their movement hurried, as if they had knocked off late at work and were rushing to get home before their bathing water got cold on top of fireplaces tended by their wives. Andzani imagined the fires dying out because their wives deserted them to nurse their crying children inside their houses.

A candle sat right next to him, illuminating, on top of the study table, the two envelopes he'd fetched from the post-office earlier that day. Open and laid bare were two letters from the University of Cape Town. One addressed to his name, and the other to Neo. Neo having

used Andzani's postal address, the letters had arrived around the same time. He had got in into the College of Accounting. And Neo had got in for Mechatronics. There lay, on top of his table, the tickets they had eagerly waited for, tickets out of Mbambamencisi. Tickets that would have fulfilled the pact they had made—the pack that had fueled their cross nights on days they felt demotivated studying for their matric exams—to get out of Mbambamencisi, together, and never return.

Andzani hadn't yet told Violet about their university outcomes because she was spending the night at Ousie Ketsi's house, awaiting the arrival of Ousie Ketsi's relatives.

Before he got in bed, Andzani wet his forefinger and thumb and squelched the candle flame. The furniture turned into miniature human figures. And when he drew the duvet over his head and covered his face, Neo's face became clearer, bigger and alive.

Chapter 12

Cape Town

2016

Andzani told Yolula about Neo, about his sexual assault and about Mrs Mathebula the day he went to see a therapist. It was the first time he had been to see Yolula post his return from taking his mother to the mental institution almost three months ago in Polokwane. When Violet got released, Andzani had asked Uncle Sontaga to go fetch her. And, on that day he stopped paying for Violet's clinic bill, Andzani decided that he would take Zenani's advice and book himself therapy sessions. On his way to his first meeting, he decided to stop by Yolula's place.

Yolula found him parked outside his gate on the narrow road so that the two-way street became one where the car was parked. He'd recognized the car from afar, and when he walked towards his gate hoped that it wasn't who he thought it was because on that day he hadn't prepared himself to meet Andzani. When he got closer and looked at the number plate, his heart sank. Andzani had been watching him from the rear-view mirror. And when Yolula stopped just behind the car, he unlocked the door and climbed out.

Yolula took him in a long beat as tears welled in his eyes. Every day when he walked from campus, he would make up scenarios in his head as to how he'd react should he meet Andzani on the way, played different scenarios in his head to prepare himself. Today he'd

been occupied by meetings with his mentees on campus, marking clinics for the courses he tutored and then a meeting with his supervisor after. He hadn't found the time to factor in Andzani in his thoughts, to think of how he would respond should he come across him, plan out his response in detail. And so he'd stood there close to tears when Andzani got out of the car. He wanted to hug him, but couldn't because he also wanted to remain truthful to his pride, and so he held back.

"Andzani," Yolula said.

Andzani fiddled with his car key before he raised his eyes from the ground to meet Yolula's gaze. Breathtaking, he still was, even with his grown beard that drew attention to his lips and made his face look a bit round.

"Hey. . . Yolula," Andzani responded.

"Where are you coming from?"

Andzani could hear Yolula's voice at the brink of breaking. He looked around him.

"Can we go in? Can we talk?"

A moment had passed when Yolula didn't say anything. Then he walked past Andzani and unlocked the gate. Andzani fell behind him and locked his car. The sitting room then smelled of the previous night's air, told of the previous night's event when Yolula and Sam had friends over to watch a soccer match. Heineken cans were scattered on top of the table, the kitchen sink cluttered. That morning, Yolula had left in a hurry because he'd woken up late for his first meeting and still had to walk a bit to catch the university shuttle, and Sam had an early class. Both hadn't the time to clear up the space.

And so when Yolula walked in, he'd thrown his keys on top of the kitchen counter, rushed to open the kitchen blinds and then the window.

“You can have a seat,” Yolula had said when he threw his bag on the couch, crossed the room to open the sitting room windows. Then he stood there a moment, garnering his thoughts, his back to Andzani.

And Andzani watched him in silence. When Yolula turned, Andzani saw him dry his cheeks with his thumb before he came and settled next to him.

Now, Yolula sat leaning forward, his arms supported by his knees and Andzani sat in a half lotus pose on the couch. Yolula was digesting what he’d just heard; about Spakuza and Mpanyaza, about Setice’s gym and Mrs. Mathebula and finally about Neo who had started occupying more and more of Andzani’s headspace since his visit home.

“Okay, I don’t understand. If home is such a trigger, then why do you have to go back there?” Yolula asked.

“There is something my father said to my mother a long time ago that has been eating me up,” Andzani said. “He told her that she would suffer the wrath of the ancestors for the rest of her life. And look at her now. How long has it been since we lost my little sister? Years Yolula. And still, she struggles with her death every day.”

“Do you even believe in ancestors? Or is it because you feel this will alleviate all these things you’re seeing?”

“Neo believed in ancestors. And I am just thinking of how this might be related to him. How I’ve been seeing him in my dreams. The last time I was at his grave was before I left for university. It’s been years since I went there. Recently when I went home I know I should have gone there, but there was no time to do it. After my return, the dreams and episodes started.”

“Andzani, I can’t compete with a dead person.” Yolula sounded deflated.

“I’m not asking you to compete with him.”

“Then what are you asking me? I don’t know where this puts me.” Yolula got up. “It sounds like this guy was a significant part of your life. Does our relationship need his blessings?”

Yolula walked towards the kitchen counter and stood there, arms folded.

“I have to go update him about my life, my relationship and ask for forgiveness for having not visited him for such a long time. But I want to ask you to come with me. I want to introduce you to him, let him know I have found love again and how happy I am when I am with you. I just need you to be there.”

There was a brief moment when silence announced itself. But Andzani didn’t allow it to settle.

“We’re not going to slaughter anything. We are just going to talk to him, I am going to talk to him.”

“And Therapy?” Yolula asked.

“There are just a lot of things from my past that I have not properly dealt with. I think it is time I faced them head on.”

Yolula nodded. “I just don’t understand why you didn’t come to me upon your return. All this time you left me worried about you and how life was treating you.”

“To be honest with you I don’t know why I did that. A part of me didn’t want you to look at me and see a problem needing solving. I wanted to deal with past traumas before I continued with our relationship, but I can’t do that without your help.”

“What do you mean? We were in a relationship. This is just the basics of relationships. We share stuff, we solve problems together,” Yolula came back to settle on the couch.

It hit Andzani then that he’d referred to their relationship in the past tense. He wondered if truly Yolula saw their relationship with a past eye.

“When I tell you to use your words, I mean in times like these. I want you to communicate things with me, that’s the only way I will know what’s occupying your mind.”

Yolula stopped to think. Then he continued. “Remember what you said about love?”

Andzani’s eyes softened.

That to love is to accept vulnerability. That you become susceptible to hurt, to accept the possibility of loss, a certain preparedness for it, for the pain that comes with loving.”

Andzani remembered his words. This was what he’d said to Yolula before he told him he loved him and because of that, was prepared for everything that came with loving.

“To not love is to occupy a precarious position, at least love provides bearing, something you can always lean on. Precarity is a lonely road, Andzani. I don’t want to remain on this road. It hurts worse, just existing in this city while knowing you don’t want to see me. It hurts.”

Andzani got hold of Yolula’s hand, and in that handshake like gesture they preferred, brushed his thumb.

“I buried my grandmother in your absence,” Yolula added.

“How are you?” Andzani asked. He didn’t know what to say. And he wondered then if he’d become comfortable with loss, if ever there came a point in one’s life when loss didn’t affect them. He wondered if he was nearing such a point, if he’d become desensitized to news of death.

“Grief is weird,” Yolula said. “Negotiating myself around it, how to best respond to it, has been tricky and overwhelming. But I’m good.”

“I’m sorry, Murhandziwa.” Andzani said.

And Yolula’s eyes sparkled. He liked it when Andzani called him Murhandziwa.

“When do you start with the therapy sessions?”

“Today, now actually.”

“Can I come with?”

“Yolula—”

“Please let me.”

Andzani slanted his head to the side and after a moment, nodded.

END