



TALES
FROM TOWN
AND
COUNTRY

M. J. MOKWE

The copyright of this thesis vests in the author. No quotation from it or information derived from it is to be published without full acknowledgement of the source. The thesis is to be used for private study or non-commercial research purposes only.

Published by the University of Cape Town (UCT) in terms of the non-exclusive license granted to UCT by the author.

ALOE AND HONEY: TALES FROM TOWN AND COUNTRY

BY

MZWAMADODA THEOPHILUS MXAKWE

**SUBMITTED IN ACCORDANCE WITH THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF ARTS (CREATIVE WRITING) IN THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH.**

SUPERVISORS: JM COETZEE & D GALGUT

DATE: 1 OCTOBER 1998

PLACE: CAPE TOWN

DECLARATION

I declare that **ALOE AND HONEY: TALES FROM TOWN AND COUNTRY** is my own work, and that this dissertation was not previously submitted by me for a degree at another university.

Signature:

University of Cape Town

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Prof. JM Coetzee for his assistance and guidance in the composition and revision of this collection. His expertise came in handy in honing my writing skills. This collection benefited immensely from the contributions made by Damon Galgut and the examiners. Thanks, as well, to Themba Mhambi and Vuyani Mlati, whose editorial skills helped in the refinement of this work. My family, Tali, Lwayiphi, Mncedisi, Mhise and Luvo, the time you gave me for my continual absence from home was the motivating factor in the writing of this book. Zuki, thanks for your love, support and understanding.

University of Cape Town

Dedication

For my mother, Tali, whose humility and love I fail to emulate, and also for my late cousin, Wanda, (I miss you nigga!).

University of Cape Town

Foreword

A story is inherently a beautiful thing, introducing, as it does, its reader to a new situation. It is even more beautiful when it depicts the human side of humanity - the weaknesses, the vulnerabilities, the simple pleasures, the joys, the excitement. A story adds another dimension to common experience, for it is at once a confirmation of the usual and a creation of the unusual. I am intrigued by the capacity of a story to create a new world, one that is familiar at the same time as it is new. My experience of any story is the closest I can imagine the true feeling of undertaking a journey into the unknown - so secretive but tantalising is it.

Mzwamadoda Theophilus Mxakwe's stories have been, for me, a journey into the psyches of individuals, communities, the South African nation. They have extended my family and made me one or two more enemies. They have added extra sensory perceptions into my makeup as they compelled me to come to terms with human behaviour - its predictability and proclivity towards the irrational and the unpredictable.

I am the better for having lived the lives of Mxakwe's characters.

Themnba Mhambi

Preface

The Black South African literary oeuvre has as its dominant background township life. There has been a considerable neglect of village or rural setting. Even the proliferation of writing that has been regarded as depicting genuine African experience has fallen short of remedying this malady. There is a paucity of writings that endeavour to depict rural communities, and even where South African writers attempted to depict rural community, theirs has been an indolent attempt, as evinced by a lack of insight in such writings. One example is Matshoba's Call Me Not A Man, which is merely a glimpse into the rural setting. This shortcoming, coupled with a travesty of the rural setting, suggests a non-existence of the rural community. Whether South African writers, especially, Black writers, eschew rural setting deliberately or not is open to debate. Hence my project has as its paramount aim an endeavour to expose authentic rural realities.

This collection, therefore, portrays rural life against the backdrop of city life. This paradoxical juxtapositioning is a deliberate attempt to enable the reader to extricate real-life happenings from both scenarios, and have a sound judgement about his/her observation.

There is discernible discrepancy between my depiction of city life and rural life regarding representation, content and authenticity of experience. This emanates from accumulated rural life experiences. Owing to my rural background, the depiction of city life is not as convincing and succinct as my depiction of rural life. This, however, is not an excuse for an under-representation of city life. It is probably a ruse on my part to elucidate the discrepancies between the two scenarios. Thus at the core of this collection is the clash between Eurocentric and Afrocentric values. The decaying natural life of the village is at loggerheads with the urban student life.

On the horizon of this collection lurks my autobiographical data. My real-life experiences are supplemented by a considerable chunk of my imaginative flair. Notwithstanding the intrusion of my personal aspects, I would not like people to read these stories within that ambience. Having said that I would not insist that people should not. Social comments are also espoused, for instance on albinism, society versus the individual and others.

Admittedly, mine has been an experimentation and wrestling with a foreign language and an attempt at honing my skills in the craft. I have learnt the value of becoming economical with the language, and using it concisely. There is a deliberate attempt at introducing mother-tongue (Xhosa) linguistic intricacies into English. Xhosa modes of expression, idiomatic expressions and linguistic idiosyncracies have been deeply embedded within the English language. This linguistic concern of the collection is clearly depicted in “The Return” and “Mongezi”. Thus I find it pertinent to make English bear the burden of Xhosa culture. I was reluctant at first, knowing this would amount to chastisement by the *avant garde* as if I am “profaning their sacred words, putting [my] black hands” on them. I have intentionally contaminated (this should not be misconstrued as insinuating the purity of English as it is not an innocent language) English with my own cultural language, thus appropriating it within my own context. Consequently, in this collection English is made prey to Xhosa proverbs and other peculiarities of Xhosa speech and folklore.

The technicalities involved in plotting these stories were baffling, and it was a progressional process to come to terms with the technique. The flow of thoughts and the simultaneous stylistic demand for closure resulted in abrupt and unceremonious endings in almost all the stories. The chronology of events, or the lack thereof, led to events happening haphazardly and with increased rapidity. Moreover, the trajectory nature of events could be equated to scenes in movies.

Another technical dimension that constantly corroded this collection was character development. Initially, there was no traceable evolution of characters and this jeopardized a holistic understanding of the characters. The introduction of new characters was another recurring predicament in the collection which, had it not been attended to, would have made the reader base his/her judgement on assumptions. More often than not, I would kill a character once it became too much for me to handle. This closely ties up with an abrupt dropping of characters, thus the reader is left wondering about what happens to the character.

My friends complained about the depiction of women in my stories. Their concern is that the trend in most African writing is to relegate women to the lowest ebb of the African hierarchical stratum. This, I believe, would be the impression people, especially feminists, will have when reading these stories. The appropriate African patriarchal backdrop in which I set these stories precludes any notion of women empowerment. I tried very hard to liberate women, especially rural women, but regrettably failed. Hence the rural women in this collection are mostly subservient, recipients of male chauvinistic attitudes, and are always subject to men's whims. Alternatively, society exerts pressure on them to be submissive. I have also noted with great concern the "negative" representation of women. They are depicted as mischievous, deceptive and are on a perpetual search to hurt men. Unequivocally, this depiction epitomizes a social stereotype. However, this is not an intentionally orchestrated move to discredit or emasculate women. It was after numerous revisions that I became aware of this shortcoming, which has become a major feature of African writing. I need to reiterate that the misrepresentation, if it is, has not been a conscious decision in the composition.

I would therefore like people to view this as an earnest effort to revisit the rural life in an attempt to challenge other writers to follow suit.

This collection is for the rural in me.

Mzwamadoda Theophilus Mxakwe

University of Cape Town

TALES

FROM

COUNTRY

University of Cape Town

THE RETURN

“My elders, the boy is mature now and has reached the stage of initiation every Xhosa boy must undergo. I have therefore called you today to inform you that as soon as the boy arrives for his June holidays, he will be introduced to the world of manhood.” Tembani had called all his brothers to inform them of his decision to have his son circumcised. He thereafter called on his wife to serve them sorghum beer to quench their thirst. Mhise’s dexterity at brewing beer kept the men’s tongues wagging : They talked about the happenings in the village and the way traditional values were being undermined by the up and coming youth. All the elders vowed not to abandon their traditional ways because of their children’s influence. But one man in the group, Zolile, was more overwhelmed by the courage of Tembani’s son in representing an obscure village like Lesseyton in big cities. Rumour had spread like wildfire, reaching even the ones living in the peripheral areas of the village, that the boy was excelling in his studies.

Tembani was flattered by these remarks to which he proudly replied:

“Well, that boy inherited his intelligence from me. He is a genius who, when he speaks English, swallows all the words. I think he even dreams in English. I remember when we went to the Department of Home Affairs to arrange my pension. He convinced those boys in that office to give me pension even though they were unwilling to. They did not waste my time. It took only a month for me to receive my pension funds. Think about hundreds of people in this village who have long waited for their pension funds. That boy is following in my footsteps. I was a very intelligent student -” Turning towards his younger brother, Tembani continued: “Fotose, do you still remember the day I left school when the mistress told me not to come to school because of

my intelligence?”

At this everybody laughed and became more interested in the details of what had happened.

Tembani, pleased by the curiosity he had just aroused, gulped from the gourd and positioned himself comfortably to “impart to his brothers his pearls of wisdom”. After wiping *umqombothi* from his well-trimmed moustache, he continued:

“On the first day of my environment studies class, this mistress asked one of the most stupid questions that I ever heard. She asked the class ‘Where does the sun set?’ I listened to everyone offering ridiculous answers, some saying in the east, and others saying in the west. I laughed with satisfaction, pleased that our ancestors did not endow me with such brains. When my turn came I told the teacher that the sun sets on those Lukhanji Mountains that you (referring to his brothers) also see. The poor teacher dropped the chalk and the book she was holding, fascinated that there was someone in her class who could give such a brilliant answer. All those poor pupils turned towards me with their mouths open, amazed by my ability to reason. From that day I vowed not to go to school again to mix with such a dumb breed whose intelligence was far below that of an imbecile.”

Before Tembani finished narrating his story, all his brothers cried with laughter, because they knew that the reason he quit school was because of his stubbornness. But it became apparent as the loquacity of the elders increased that they had had too much *umqombothi*.

On behalf of his other brothers, Zolile thanked Tembani:

“Mqocwa, thank you very much for informing us about your plan to have the boy circumcised. We will be waiting for you to inform us of any progress regarding this matter. Tell your wife that we really enjoyed the beer and that she knows how to brew.”

Before dusk fell Tembani’s brothers begged their trembling legs to carry them to their houses. Belching all the way home, Tembani bade his brothers farewell, pleased to have impressed them with his talk.

* * *

Wanda was alone in his room, fascinated by the possibility of going home earlier than usual. He was thinking about his love for Lindi, his girlfriend in Lesseyton. Vivid memories of the good times they had had unrolled in his mind as if he were watching a movie. His heart beat faster as he thought of his imminent departure the following day. An enlarged photograph of Lindi hung on the wall of his room. Next to the photo Wanda had written in bold letters **THE PARAGON OF HUMAN PERFECTION**, and this description fitted the person on the photo. She was an African beauty with fully-fleshed lips, and her smile revealed a set of white teeth with gold fittings inserted in one of her front teeth. Wanda was mesmerized by the photo. He was gigantic, with a physique that dwarfed his peers. A good basketball player, he was adored by many and criticized by a few who accused him of aping Shaquile O’Neal, the American basketball player and rapper. Nonetheless, others equated his skills to those of Shaquile. Not the one to be complacent with his achievements, Wanda always wanted to maximise his potential. He was the Best Third Year Law student at Wits, was voted the Best Basketball Player of the Season, and he had many certificates

and awards to his credit.

The following day Wanda packed all his belongings and prepared for his journey home. He thought that the bus was taking its own time, and he became very impatient. He thought about many things he was planning to do during the holidays : meet old friends, clean his grandfather's grave and ride on horseback with Lindi, among other things. The more he thought about these things, the more nostalgic he became and the slower the pace of the bus seemed to be. As his thoughts overflowed, he stopped suddenly as if he had forgotten something. The smile on his handsome face turned into a frown. My stubborn dad! The sudden change of thought seemed to haunt him. He was so preoccupied with his father that he did not realize that the bus had arrived in Queenstown, which is a stone's throw away from Lesseyton.

Wanda's family was very happy to see him back. On his arrival his father slaughtered a goat to thank his ancestors for guiding his son. It was a very big occasion with women singing and ululating while men emptied every gourd of *umqombothi* they could lay their hands on. Wanda was not impressed with all the happenings as he was thinking about Lindi.

At dusk Wanda visited Lindi because it was considered a sign of disrespect to be seen going around with a girl during the day. He sent a small boy who was loitering around to call Lindi. On seeing Wanda, Lindi was overwhelmed with joy and she did not know whether to run to him or to cry. Running to him and giving him a hug would have amounted to disobedience as it was taboo. Though she wanted to do it, she was afraid.

Later that night, Luther Vandross's "Till You Come Back To Me" echoed in Wanda's room from the tape-recorder he used at Wits. The atmosphere which filled the room, which was a few metres away from the main house, was of love and caring. Voices were in very harmonious low tones, and it was easy to tell that the two melted into each other. In the midst of all this eventful evening, Lindi asked Wanda:

"So when are you going to come back?"

"Back? From where?" Wanda asked puzzled.

"I am talking about-" Lindi was reluctant to tell him.

"What are you talking about baby?" Wanda moved closer to her, trying to extract from her the crux of her anxiety.

"From the circumcision school....."

"Circumcision? Me going to the circumcision school? Who told you that rubbish?"

When Lindi explained to him that it was common knowledge in the village that he would undergo initiation, Wanda fumed with anger.

"How dare my father take such a decision on my behalf? Who said I want to attend the circumcision school? He does not even have the decency to inform me of his decision. I am not

going there, and if this be a sign of disrespect, let it be.”

* * *

Those dark clouds shattered hopes of the sun brightening that Saturday morning. The villagers talked about the bad omens that had appeared the previous day : an owl had been seen flying around the village and light rain had fallen from a cloudless sky. These events made great news to the village people who were very cautious of bad omens. The dairy cows, with their hind legs apart, broke the still of that morning, bellowing to be united with their calves, locked up in kraals before the boys could start milking them.

Many villagers were already awake with fires burning in tin boxes, which had holes throughout to enable wood to burn easier. Small boys in tattered oversize jackets tended the fires and whistled as if to welcome that chilly morning. A long line of women with buckets on their heads moved up and down the Tabata River like ants.

Ntombi, a notorious gossip, cautioned the women about the previous day’s omens and what they foreshowed. She told them that the omens were linked to Wanda’s return. She had already informed other women about those who had borrowed cups of sugar from her that morning. Ntombi explained in detail how Herdman had beaten his wife because of promiscuity. She made very early headlines, hence she was affectionately known as “The Dispatch”.

Many household heads in the village complained that Ntombi was keeping their wives too long at the well whilst they were thirsty for the morning coffee. Because the village men did not have

coffee made from the previous afternoon's water, as it was believed to be an omen of bad luck to do so, women had to wake up very early to bring fresh water.

"I am a man, not a weakling. My wife serves me very early before the first cock crows in the morning. That's just what my mother used to do to my father. It is a tradition and it must be preserved." Tembani mumbled proudly.

Mhise suddenly appeared carrying a bundle of wood on her head and a child on her back. Barefoot, her face was slightly obscured by a black cloth which covered her head. Her long dress which dragged in the dust seemed to be imitating her sideways movement. She hummed a low song. Her head was pressed on her neck as the bundle was very heavy. The child on her back, though, seemed to be enjoying the ride.

In the midst of this busy morning Wanda slept, exhausted by his journey home. He had returned from accompanying Lindi and had decided to take a nap, only to fall fast asleep.

A mammoth dark beast comes from a deep abyss and moves forward with its eyes exuding fire, its mouth watering, revealing long canine teeth and a double-edged tongue which cuts through the air. The beast attacks young men and the carcasses of some of its prey lie behind it. The beast strikes again and attacks a youthful team which is spearheaded by Wanda. The youth retaliates with assegais, and in spite of the blood gushing from its fresh wounds the beast is still on the offensive. It kills all the young men. Wanda is left alone and the beast turns on him.....

Wanda screamed so loudly that his family heard him.

Wanda's scream evoked the wrath of Tembani. He thundered:

"Wake that lazy boy up! At five o'clock he's still asleep, snoring and screaming like a woman.

Ever since he went to this university he has lost touch with our way of life. Who milks the cows?"

An unexpected interruption came from his wife:

"The child is very tired from his long journey, he needs a little rest. At least for today."

Mhise was not looking directly at him. Her eyes were wandering to avoid contact with her husband's. She could not believe the courage she had amassed to argue with him.

"Since when did you start arguing with me, woman? On my father's grave! No woman will tell me what to do."

Seeing that she had pulled the tiger by its tail, Mhise ran away quickly to wake Wanda up.

Having heard the thunderous voice of his father, Wanda woke up, still haunted by his bad dream.

When his mother came into his room he took her in his arms and hugged her. The tears flowing down his mother's cheek were indicative of deep-seated anxiety.

"Please Mama don't cry, everything is going to be alright," Wanda said. His voice was consoling but he could not stop his own tears from falling.

* * *

Before the cow dung had begun to cool, Tembani's brothers had already gathered to discuss the return of the boy. Sitting in a circular pattern in the kraal, they spoke in very low tones. It was obvious that they were discussing a matter they regarded as sacred. Tembani stood and talked, then his brother followed and then his other brothers. Finally Tembani again rose to speak with a sense of authority, forcefully beating his right fist on the palm of his left hand.

After the lengthy debate, Fotose, Tembani's younger brother, walked back to the house.

"Wanda my son, your elders would like to talk to you about an important matter," Fotose said.

Wanda did not utter a word but followed him.

The atmosphere in the kraal was tense. All the elders breathed heavily to the same heartbeat and smoke ceased from their pipes. Some scratched their bald patches as if in quest of a solution. This meeting, which was barred to young men, was a gathering of Mqocwa elders, the well-known traditionalists in Lesseyton.

When Wanda appeared all but Fotose looked down, thrusting chins on their knees. They sighed deeply; others coughed and spat out yellowish phlegm which they quickly buried in the dust with their boots. Wanda looked very relaxed among the elders. Fotose, who seemed to tremble as he stood up, cleared his throat:

"Ah Tiyeka!" Fotose saluted Wanda by his clan name. Wanda stood erect, his hands deeply buried in his baggy Pepe jeans. He did not respond or bend as required when an elder salutes. Nor did he take off his NBA cap which had become his trademark at Wits.

Tembani surreptitiously eyed Wanda out the corner of his eye and noticed his son's posture in front of the elders. Tembani fumed with anger. He was also irritated by the way his son smelled. Tembani was at pains to be stoical. "He smells like Whites," Tembani thought to himself. **You're The Fire** had all the elders complaining about headaches after the meeting. It was as though Wanda had bathed in a pool of that cologne.

"Wanda, you are the pride of this family, the strength of this village, and the hope of the nation at large. Many people are counting on you. You are a role model to the young ones and you have put this family's name where everyone can see it, right on top of the mountain, just like that aerial on top of Xhasa Mountain." Fotose pointed at the nearby mountain. He paused and dragged from his pipe.

The elders nodded in agreement with what Fotose had just said.

Tembani looked unimpressed. His eyes mirrored a deep-seated anger.

Wanda sat on a brick, his chin on the palm of his right hand. He was listening attentively to what Fotose was saying.

"You have achieved this success while you are still a boy. Now it is about time we dignify not only you but your achievements as well. As you know it is our duty as your elders to decide what is right for you. Therefore my son -" Fotose paused with a sudden smile on his face as if he had a prestigious award to announce to Wanda, "we have decided to promote you since you have

reached the stage of maturity. We are going to make you a man of your people. The last traces of boyhood are over now, and in their place a very strong man is emerging as shown by your beard.” He pointed at Wanda’s well-trimmed goatee.

Thereafter, Fotose indicated that he had finished by bowing towards the elders, whose eyes were now fixed on Wanda who looked stupefied. In spite of the cold weather Fotose was perspiring heavily. He took out a yellowish cloth, which seemed to have been white in its day, wiped his nose, then his whole face.

Wanda was trembling with anger mixed with fear. He wanted to tell them his feelings on the issue, but it was against the norm. He wanted to talk, but that would imply disrespect. He wanted to break down and cry, but that would amount to cowardice. He wanted to tell them he did not want to be circumcised, but Lindi would be laughed at by her friends, would be ashamed of going out with an uncircumcised man..... a boy. He wanted to look at them again, but he could not, his eyes were full of tears. Be quiet and do not utter a word. Good, you are an obedient child. Being submissive to the elders is what is expected of young ones.

Wanda’s quietness was taken as a sign of willingness to attend the traditional circumcision school. Even his father, who had harboured anger against him, looked happy.

Fotose, honoured to be delegated the role of orator, spoke:

“My brothers, I think we have settled the matter now. The boy can go. He will hear from us what’s next.” Turning to Wanda, he said: “You can go for now but you are not expected to

wander around the village.”

Wanda walked slowly down a path leading to the Tabata River. He sat on a high hillock, inhaling the smell of the river water and nearby gum trees. He recalled the days when he used to look after his father’s livestock, hunt wildlife, play stick-fights, raid beehives for honey, and swim in very dangerous streams and dams. It was on this hillock that he had lost his long-preserved virginity. All these thoughts seemed not to obscure his present problems. He stared at the turbulent stream of the river eroding boulders and disintegrating them into small particles which followed the sinuous flow of the river, and his thoughts seemed to follow suit. Nature seemed to mourn with him, he thought. He felt nostalgic and thought about Lindi.

These eyes will always adore you,

These arms will love you everyday,

Darling, I’ll never break your heart.

As he was singing this **All For One** song he did not realize that he was singing loudly until a soft touch on his shoulder made him shiver. He saw the tiny hand - who else could it be but Lindi. She had followed him since she had seen him walking out of the kraal. They fell into each other’s arms, kissing and caressing.

“What did they say?” Lindi asked.

“I have to attend the circumcision school,” Wanda replied disinterestedly.

“So what did you say when they told you?”

“Nothing.”

“Oh darling, just as I was beginning to enjoy being with you, they are now taking you away. Why are people so insensitive?” Lindi was hurting.

“No Lindi, please don’t cry. I guess it’s one of those things that a man has to go through.”

Wanda was trying to amass strength to console Lindi.

The sun was descending slightly towards the Xhasa Mountains and the couple walked hand in hand from the river.

* * *

The people of Lesseyton held traditional circumcision in very high esteem. It was highly treasured. This tiny village was enclosed by a range of mountains as if to isolate it from the outside world and had very fertile lands which were conducive to farming. It was by custom that a boy had to herd livestock, and that when the elders decided, he had to attend the traditional circumcision

Traditional circumcision is a very sacred ritual among Xhosa people. Women ululate, the boy fasts, and the whole village comes to life. Old men quench their thirst at the house where *umqombothi* is served. Xhosa heroes like Ngqika and Mandela are extolled and an *imbongi* recites oral poetry.

The Saturday night preceding Wanda's great day was very hectic. Arrangements were made : two fat cows were slaughtered, gallons of *umqombothi* were brewed, and all the village people gathered to honour the occasion.

Saturday night was meant for the youth who had not yet attended the ritual, to bid farewell to their mate as he left the world of boyhood. Tax, who was Wanda's close friend and a student at Fort Hare University, stood up and called everybody in the house to order. He was to make a speech on behalf of the youth and Wanda's friends:

"On behalf of *amagents*, I would like to take this opportunity to wish our brother well on his journey to manhood. May he set a good example to all as he has done." Tax now turned to Wanda:

"Yo' ma' man, it iz kinda eazy to ring with a nigga like ya who knowz his abc's damn well. Ain't nuthing much I'll say, ya know da name of da game. Only jealous punks in da 'hood don't know dat ya got it made. Hey G keep cool, be ya'self and us dig ya."

Tax touched Wanda's hand and they saluted each other, aping the likes of Snoop Doggy Dogg, Tupac Shakur and other American hip-hop rappers. Loud applause came from both the girls and boys in the house. A chant was started, with boys whistling and girls ululating:

Zenimphathe kakuhle ubhuti wethu

Zeningadlali ngaye

(You must take care of our brother

Do not ill-treat him)

Songs of bravery to incite soldiers to war were sung, and though it was at night the whole village came to life. The boys gulped more *umqombothi* than their small stomachs could take.

In the midst of the celebration a man was authorised by the elders to take Wanda away. Wanda was taken to a secluded place and ordered to rest before the ritual.

His departure went unnoticed by all the youth except Lindi. She screamed, with tears rolling down her cheeks and this jeopardized the whole occasion. Tax accompanied Lindi to her home and this incident made almost everyone pity her. Nonetheless, it was not a good enough excuse to make the hyperactive youth quit partying.

Left by himself in a room guarded by a man appointed by the elders, Wanda took out DominiTaylor's *Not Fair* and read.

* * *

At three o'clock that Sunday morning, a man was ordered to shave Wanda's head whilst another group of men went to the bush to build the initiate's hut. As men took axes to chop trees and branches to build the hut, songs of bravery were heard echoed by cliffs throughout the village. Wanda's hut was built many kilometres away from the village.

The fog which covered the Xhasa Mountain that morning heralded a bright sunny day. Tembani's household was full of busy people. Even little Chappy had a very hectic day chasing other dogs that were attracted to the house by the smell of meat. Women sang and danced while "The

Dispatch' was surrounded by many women, giving them that morning's bulletins.

Inside the kraal a big pot of meat was heated with dry cow dung, the flames showing everyone in the village where the gathering was. Old men with hats on their knees smoked their long pipes, creating a greyish smoke which polluted the clear morning air. A bucket of *umqombothi* was circulating among them. Occupying the corner of the kraal, Wanda was covered in a white blanket crossed by a red stripe in the middle. Women were not allowed entrance nor were boys admitted. Only one boy was allowed inside the kraal to kindle the flames of the fire.

Tembani called Pepe, a famous village traditionalist, and gave him instructions. Quickly, Pepe went to Wanda, gave him a knobkerrie and ordered him to stand up. Pepe then led a chant and other men began stick-fighting outside the kraal. Women ululated, dogs barked, children cried and men looked depressed as Wanda was about to leave the kraal for the bush. The long journey to manhood had begun! An *imbongi*, wearing traditional garb and holding a stick in his hand, moved to and fro as Wanda moved out of the kraal, covered in a white blanket,

Hoyina! Ikhwelo lityala MaXhosa AkwaXhosa,

Kwahluk'Inkwenkw' Emadodeni,

Laphum 'Ithol'Elomthonyama.

(A whistle is for attention for Xhosas,

A division of boys from men has just begun,

There goes the son of the soil)

Usomagwaza (a group of men taking the boy to the bush), moved by the poet, began to sway slowly in a dignified manner as if in trance. Wanda led the ceremony, with Pepe next to him. Others followed behind him, playing stick-fights. Nobody talked, only the cracking noise of the sticks broke the deadly silence.

Shaven, naked, barefoot and perspiring from the scorching sun and the heat of the blanket which covered his whole body, Wanda began to tremble out of fear. He endured the pain inflicted by small pebbles and thorns which pierced his feet. He could not take them out as that was considered a sign of weakness. Boys must endure if they want to become strong men!

Eventually, out of curiosity, Wanda peeped through the edge of the blanket and saw where they were : passing next to his former primary school, which was made of tree trunks, stones and mud. The girls used to smear the floors with cow dung to keep it clean. He smiled as if this was the first time he had noticed such things. This was where he got his formal primary education before proceeding to Ndlovukazi High. The building seemed strange and dilapidated. He thought about how Mr Malotana once told them about the crucifixion of Jesus Christ and how the group of men around him now reminded him of that lesson.

Wanda was so deep in thought that he forgot about where he was going. He thought about how he had tried to develop his community, and how that project had failed due to the naivety of the villagers. He had started the night school project when he was on June holidays during his first year at Wits. Old people could be taught the basic skills of writing, reading and arithmetic. Many villagers were cynical of this endeavour and viewed it as time-consuming. Nonetheless, a few attended the night classes, and Wanda had embarked on it with such vitality that the class number

increased remarkably. As the class number increased so did the number of stubborn old men, the cause of the ultimate failure of Wanda's earnest effort.

The class was very full on that fateful day, and it was scarcely possible to breathe. Wanda had planned his lesson to be as practical as possible.

"Class, today we are going to concentrate on addition and subtraction. If you master this lesson today, your children will not cheat you again when you send them to buy you tobacco Kwa Stocks." Wanda introduced his lesson with a bright smile that calmed his "students". A lot of coughing followed.

Beyi, one of the "students", responded to Wanda's introduction:

"No child cheats on me. I know my change very well and I don't have problems with mathematics. You boy must teach stupids like Mcira who have never seen a school's door in all their lives. That's why he's disturbing us by coughing, he is allergic to school. When we came to school when we were boys he was busy playing stick-fighting."

Beyi could not go unharmed. Mcira exploded:

"How dare you talk about me like that, you skinny idiot. People have been telling me about how silly you are, and now you have met your match. Let us go outside sonny boy, and I will give you what you deserve."

Mcira took off his jacket and swung his knobkerrie sideways:

"You don't even have a cat to own. I am self-sufficient. My family does not beg and my kraal is full of sheep and goats, and I have lost count of my cows. All you know is putting that newspaper of yours under your stinking arm, going up and down this village begging for tea in exchange for news. You are only best at gossiping with women. Other men go and bathe in the river whilst you are busy contaminating this whole village with your odour. With what does your education help you, Englishman?"

"Tat'u Mcira, please behave yourself. Old peopl-." Wanda's intervention merely injected more anger in the old man.

"Hey Wanda, look my boy. I am the head of my family. This fool doesn't even have a wife or a kid. I don't think there is even a single mouse in his house. This coward is a boy, he didn't even attend the circumcision school but escaped to work in the mines." Mcira was breathing heavily now.

Tired of grown-ups behaving like adolescents, Wanda threatened to drop the night school project. Everyone begged him not to. Everybody in the class requested Wanda to ignore Mcira and Beyi's childish behaviour. The voices of complaining women harmonized the situation, but both Beyi and Mcira promised to meet each other afterwards. Wanda smiled, much to the satisfaction of the whole class. Attention and normality prevailed, momentarily at least.

"Okay, now this exercise is very simple." Wanda started again. "Tat'u Mcira, let us assume that

you have ten goats and three of them get lost, how many goats are left?"

Mcira burst out laughing.

"What! Me having ten goats, never! Don't make a fool out of me young man. I have hundreds of goats not ten. Besides you are right, a lot are stolen by thieves. But that doesn't make any difference."

"No tata, this is just an assumption. It's an example and not a real situation." Wanda was very exasperated.

"Oh, I see now. You must speak clearly young man. Next time you make your assumptions know your facts." Mcira was pleased to have put this boy where he belonged.

"Oh God! Let me make a very simple example." Wanda was perturbed by Mcira's lack of comprehension. He wanted to be as little abstract as he could possibly be to avoid misunderstanding and confusion. Wanda stood thoughtfully for a few seconds. Then he smiled, pleased to have thought of a vivid example.

"Tat'uMcira, let's say you are in MaBolo's house and you buy yourself three litres of umqombothi. Then Tat'uBeyi arrives and is very thirsty. You then decide to offer him one litre, how many litres do you have?"

"Ha-ha-ha, Now you are talking," said Mcira laughing. "I will never give a litre of mqombothi

to that dog, let alone a sip," Mcira said pointing to Beyi. "You're quite right he's always thirsty but penniless. He may know all the world news but he is a pain in the neck always begging for a sip. Every man in this village knows that."

Before Mcira finished his talk, Beyi put aside his newspaper and drew his knife. All the old people, especially the women screamed:

"He's carrying a knife. Beyi is a tsotsi from the locations." Pandemonium broke out, some ran on top of desks and the screeching sound of desks added to the confusion. They fled for their dear lives, Mcira included.

*Only Beyi and Wanda remained in the classroom. The candle was about to burn out as it had served them the whole night. Beyi took his hat and approached Wanda who stood there dumbfounded. Beyi put his knife back into his pocket and took his newspaper. On the front page of the City Press was a picture of P.W. Botha wagging his finger and the headlines **FIFTY ANC TERRORISTS KILLED AFTER DISREGARDING WARNING SHOTS**. The headlines were partly invisible as the newspaper had stains of fat. Though it was dated 30 June 1987, Beyi maintained it was spreading current news. Wanda recalled that Beyi was retrenched from the mines in the middle of 1987. Thus Wanda surmised that he had bought that newspaper then. Beyi addressed Wanda in an apologetic tone.*

"I know you gave it your best shot. It is very difficult to enlighten darkened minds, not to mention old ones. You see that candle," he said philosophically, pointing at the small piece of candle on the desk, "No matter how it tries to light up this classroom, it cannot reach all those

dark corners of the room. But as I used to say to you, you can take a villager out of the village but not the village out of a villager."

*Beyi was an amusing character. He was stout, his belly hanging over his trousers. He was wearing a tattered overall with **Freddies Mine** engraved in black letters. His boots emitted an odour which irritated Wanda's nose, but Beyi pretended not to notice.*

"You know what, today I was reading what these Whites are saying about our pensions." He started referring to the newspaper. Wanda noticed something peculiar. Beyi turned the newspaper and read from it upside down. Beyi was cheating people, he did not know how to read. He was just making up stories! Wanda could not control himself. He came out of the classroom laughing until he cried.

He laughed so much that he did not realize that the men had heard him. This revitalized the men who began to whistle - to them Wanda's laughter was a sign of bravery. They thought the boy was not afraid of what was about to happen. Tembani swelled with pride as all the men nodded in approval of Wanda's laughter.

When Wanda ceased reminiscing they were already descending from a hill which separated his new hut from the village. A very big, round-walled sail, covering tree branches which formed the core of the hut, greeted them as they appeared. This was Wanda's destination where he would be moulded to a man. His power to endure would be tested so that he could be accepted in the prestigious league of manhood.

* * *

The date for Wanda's return was not yet set. However, the village people began to fantasize about the big day. Some started to save enough money to buy the new man presents. Others had already bought clothes they wanted to wear on that day. The return of an initiate is an important event in the whole village. People dance, others praise Qamata (Xhosa for God) for looking after the initiate, while converts extol God for taking the boy through such an excruciating journey. The traditional poet thunders spontaneously:

Yabuy' inkwenkwe madoda,

Bathin' abachasi,

Bathin' abathakathi,

MaXhosa masibhiyoze,

Samkel' umfan' omtsha,

Ulifezil' igqatso,

Ndisatshaya.

(The boy has returned,

What do witches say,

What do the detractors say,

Xhosas let's rejoice,

And welcome our new man,

As he has finished the race,

I rest.)

After the men had climbed the hill, a whirlpool of dust covered the whole path leading to the mountain. Children in the village were terrified and held on to their mother's skirts, while their mothers stood outdoors watching the scene : a white stallion galloped along the path, leaving big holes on the ground with its hooves. The hair at the back of its neck was upright and so was its black tail. Its huge nostrils moved inwards and outwards, and its eyes were flashing as if they would emit fire. The beast was wild!

Wearing a black overall and white gumboots, Mpinga mounted the horse towards the hill. He was a famous *ingcibi* (traditional circumciser) in the village. The conspicuous stallion ascended the hill and went out of sight.

Both women and boys speculated about what would happen. "The Dispatch" and other women dwelled on what Mpinga would do to Wanda. Boys collected the fragments of lies heard from drunk men and integrated them with their own imagination.

After what seemed like a decade to the village onlookers, a group of men came back. The white stallion, still mounted by Mpinga, was moving slowly with them. Old men carried their jackets on their shoulders as the sun was hot. They had taken the boy to the mountain and the ritual had started. What was left was the return.

Two weeks after Wanda's circumcision Pepe, who was authorized to stay with the initiate, came running, seeking to talk to Tembani. Definitely something had gone amiss. A group of men quickly gathered and ascended the mountain. This led to suspicions which spread from one corner of the village to the other. In the rivers women talked about what could have happened. In the

veld shepherds argued about the cause of the gathering, and “The Dispatch” seemed to be as well-informed as usual.

“Beyi informed me about the whole thing two weeks back. He said from the very first day that that boy could not take it. He is a sissy and is very civilized. Wanda had complained about how primitive and unhygienic the ritual is. He is very silly. All boys must endure the hardships of the ritual if they want to be strong and respectable men. Even if you are from university, there’s no exemption.” But before she finished, she opened her eyes to discover that she was talking to herself. All the women had deserted her. It was taboo for women to know about circumcision, let alone to converse about it freely. Even her close friends left her, lest a man overheard them talking about the ritual.

With all the speculations, Wanda’s mother vowed to know the mystery surrounding her son. But she did not know how to approach Tembani as it was not customary for women to enquire about the initiate. Nonetheless, she was willing to try.

“Tata, you have lost appetite these days. And today I have cooked your favourite meal.” Mhise carefully chose her words while mixing porridge with sour milk, Tembani’s favourite meal.

“Who said I want food? A man cannot think clearly in this house. Can’t you see that you are disturbing me? I am thinking,” Tembani said, filling his pipe.

“Tata, can I ask you a question? Please just one simple question.” With tears in her eyes, Mhise was determined to know the truth. Wanda is my child, she thought, I must know what is

happening, and as such I have a right to know. Tembani just looked at her, neither affirming nor rejecting her request to ask.

“When is Wanda returning home? It’s about six weeks since he went to the bush. And all the villagers are----.” She did not finish expressing her anguish.

“That’s enough!” Tembani roared. “You - you - you. Whatever happened to your discipline? You talk to me like you are talking with other women. Who told you to indulge in men things? That weakling son of yours won’t come until he endures the challenges of manhood. Until he copes, failing which he’ll be food for worms. Everybody is getting on my nerves. No matter what they say I won’t take him to the hospital. Sis!” He said, spitting on the floor which had just been smeared with fresh cow dung. “Who in this family was ever treated by nurses, women! We did our ritual traditionally and as such he will have to follow suit or die.” Tembani was now talking more to himself than with Mhise. “He could have healed a long time ago. All he knows is reading books, listening to the radio, things we never did in our days and it is because of Fotose’s lenience that he got such rubbish.”

Like a tigress protective of its young ones, she felt an uncontrollable urge to confront her husband. She had dutifully served her husband and had given him the pride of the village, Wanda. Tembani felt happy when Wanda did the community proud, but she had always borne the brunt of insults when Wanda misbehaved. The tolerance she had had for years was replaced by a deep need of revenge. She felt the time had come to break the stony silence. Dying in defence of her son would be a noble cause:

“All you ever cared about is you. No one else but you. Am I not human? Don't I have feelings? Are you the only person in this house? What about me? What about Wanda? Do you ever care about my feelings?” This spontaneous outburst shocked Tembani. He had lost count of the number of years he had been married to Mhise. In all those years she had never challenged his authority. This outburst came not only as a surprise but also left him dumbfounded. He stared at her.

“Oh my child, I knew the witches of this village would not let him alone,” Mhise's trembling voice was indicative of her powerlessness. But the appearance of Fotose filled her with hope and joy. After greeting Mhise, Fotose went straight to his older brother's room. Although he respected Tembani, he thought it unwise to let things go the way they did. He was prepared to convince Tembani to change his viewpoint on the matter. Fotose was very close to Wanda. If Wanda had a problem, he would seek Fotose's counsel. Consequently, Wanda felt at home with Fotose who had encouraged him with his studies. Tembani greeted him:

“Good day my father's last hope,” Tembani addressed him affectionately. He loved his younger brother and he always sought his advice in important matters.

“Greetings big brother. How is the old man doing today?” Fotose intended to merely break the ice, and then drop the bombshell.

“I'm keeping well in spite of all the hiccups. But we must not always complain because we were born in a troubled world. My father's younger brother was here yesterday to inform us about the unveiling of his wife's tombstone. Oh! Another thing that I nearly forgot, my youngest daughter

is very sick but I had called the witchdoctor to attend to her. And..... Romeis has given birth to a lively calf and the livestock is also expanding,” Tembani’s boring talk, though a normal ritual to include everything in one’s well-being, irritated Fotose who had come strictly on business. Tembani lit his pipe and stared at his brother who was relieved by the ultimate end of Tembani’s speech. Having dragged a few puffs, Tembani asked his brother:

“So, how are things with you?”

“No I can’t complain. I just came here to talk about Wanda, nothing but Wanda.” His solid voice disguised the terror that Tembani’s presence brought in him.

“Hold it right there, young man. You come here as if you are a little boy. You don’t even tell me about the wellbeing of your family and livestock but jump onto another matter. Whatever happened to you? Have you changed now?” His pensive mood changed to a more conciliatory one. “I have also been pondering about Wanda’s matter and was about to send a child to call you so that we can talk about it. Don’t disappoint me.” His faith in Fotose was such that it overpowered his temperament.

“I apologize for that, it was not my intention. I am simply worried about what that boy is going through. I think we need to take the boy to hospital. His condition is deteriorating and the sooner we take him to the hospital the better.” Having said this, Fotose looked at Tembani to see whether his assertion would be met with rejection. Tembani wanted someone he considered intelligent to merely confirm the rationale for taking Wanda to the hospital. He also wanted to take Wanda to hospital but feelings of guilt tormented him. Having seen the look of despair on Tembani’s face

Fotose decided to accentuate his attack.

“Look brother, we need to realize that we no longer live a purely traditional life. It’s only when we come to terms with this reality that we can accept our present situation. Let us only take those rituals that are still pertinent, and where necessary blend the new with the old. Taking Wanda to hospital will definitely be a disgrace to the whole community, but that will also save his life. Assume we are stubborn enough not to take him to hospital and he dies, the very community will be laughing at us.” Fotose’ words caught Tembani’s attention. He knew that Fotose had a gift with words and that every single word he uttered had a purpose. Tembani felt numb and shook the hand of his younger brother, interrupting the flow of Fotose’s speech.

“Fotose, there’s not much to say now. You’ve said it all. All will be as you say. Tomorrow the boy will be taken to the hospital.” Both reached consensus. Tembani assured Fotose that he would take care of the matter and would inform him of progress.

* * *

MaBolo’s house was full of customers, and the focus was on Wanda’s circumcision. Beyi, the most frequent customer, held a lecture on Tembani’s resistance to other men’s suggestions.

“He is one of the most stubborn men I’ve ever known. What was Napoleon’s end?” He looked very serious, obviously pleased to impart his knowledge. His audience seemed not to know a thing about Napoleon, much to the satisfaction of the “sage”.

“That boy is going to die there and it’s then that Tembani will come to his senses. Where have you ever heard of an initiate staying two months and not yet healed? What if he dehydrates?” Although others could not make sense of what Beyi was trying to say, a few were in agreement with him.

An ambulance was a source of anxiety in the tiny village of Lesseyton. Its appearance led to heart attacks among the old and much excitement among the young. On that Wednesday morning an ambulance drove through the dusty streets of Lesseyton, its tyres driving over scattered cow dung, heading towards the mountain. At its appearance young children ran beside it, shouting “please give me sweets, please give me sweets.” The ambulance stopped near a mimosa tree and the whole village looked in the direction of the mountain. Women with children on their backs stood with one hand on their foreheads to protect them from the sun and the other holding the sticks they used to stir porridge. Old men from the village took their knobkerries and followed the ambulance. Children rushed to the mountain, disregarding their parents’ commands not to go.

After a while, three men descended from the mountain, Tembani on one side and Pepe on the other. Wanda was between them, wearing a blue overall and walking very slowly. Both his arms were thrust between Tembani and Pepe. Wanda looked like a corpse. He looked like a strange animal: his eyes were very deep, his cheek bones seemed to cut through his skin. He opened his mouth as if to cry, no sound came out, only an odour which made almost everyone sneeze. His teeth had all the colours of the rainbow, his nails were long and dirty. The overall he was wearing looked as though it was perched on a hanger. His feet were cracked in the heels, while his mouth was a battleground for flies.

Having taken out all the apparatus to put Wanda inside the ambulance, the driver was shocked at the sight of him. He could not control his anger.

“Why did you allow a person to get like this?” He hurriedly took Wanda from the crowd to the ambulance. So intense was the shock that even after the ambulance had gone, people stood on that spot, dumbfounded. Tembani was amongst them. He was worried about the manner in which he would be kept informed of his son’s condition. The only form of communication the villagers had was through the clinic and the shop. They received their telephone calls from the clinic, and their mail from the shop.

Thirty minutes after the ambulance had gone, a child came to Tembani’s house, running.

“Nurse Smakoti says I should come and call Tat’uTembani.” So fast had the pace of the child been that she heaved after having delivered the message. Tembani quickly grabbed his stick and hat and ran to the clinic. The nurse ushered Tembani inside and waited for him to relax before disclosing the news. She offered him a glass of ice-cold water and started.

“Tat’uTembani, this is not good news. And I know you are a very strong man and hope you will take this as such. I have just received a call from the hospital that your son’s case is **DOA**”. She looked at him as if awaiting a response. Tembani still hoped that the nurse had good news for him. He did not understand the nurse’s last words but knew that Nurse Smakoti would explain everything to him. He thought that she called him to inform him that his son would be transferred to Cecilia Makiwane Hospital. The nurse realized that the old man did not understand him. She therefore decided to be as precise as possible.

“Your son passed away on his way to the hospital.”

These words sounded like a roaring thunder that struck far away on Tembani’s ears. After realizing the truth in Nurse Smakoti’s statement, Tembani could not control himself. His tears flowed as though they were from the Tabata River.

“Oh my little boy, I never meant to hurt him. I was doing what I deemed necessary for him. I was following my forefathers’ tradition. I did so because I loved him. May our ancestors be with him, but he died for a good cause.” he said, wiping tears away, ashamed to have cried publicly, especially in front of women.

Lindi kept indoors the whole month. Her mother berated her for this and encouraged her to go out with her friends:

“Stop torturing yourself. Go out with your friends. Wanda is going to be fine *mntanam*. The people of this village are jealous of your relationship with Wanda and that is why he is going through all these hardships. But good will eventually triumph over evil. *Ndifung’aMping’ephelele.*”

All she did was gaze at Wanda’s photographs. This exercise was not therapeutic. The more she looked at the photos the more her longing to see him increased. She lost weight and hope for living.

“She has brought that deadly disease that I heard about on the radio. She should have been wise from the start. How do you sleep with a man who has been sleeping with *iintlanga* in Johannesburg? That is why Wanda did not heal,” “The Dispatch” told her willing listeners.

When Lindi’s mother heard the news of Wanda’s death, she concealed it from her. She took time to reveal the bad news to her daughter:

“Lindi *mntanam*, I want to talk to you.”

“What is it *mama*? Is Wanda alright?” Her intuition made her suspicious.

“Yes, it’s him *sanalam*. He has passed away.”

This shattered Lindi’s hopes. In all her life she had nursed a dream of being Wanda’s wife. Their closeness made people assume that marriage would be a logical and natural progression. She had been as faithful to him as he had been to her.

Lindi’s health deteriorated drastically. She became unresponsive even to the charming touch of her sister’s baby. Her life became a living Hell. Her mother was forced to take her to Tabata village:

“Lindi, prepare all your things, we’re leaving tonight. I have spoken with your uncle and you will stay with him. You will be able to start a new life there,” Absentmindedly, Lindi did as commanded.

Wanda's death created confusion in the village. The circumcision of many boys who were supposed to have gone to the school during the course of Wanda's saga was suspended. The village was divided into two camps. There were those who advocated the involvement of health inspectors in the ritual, whilst others maintained a strict adherence to the traditional way. Some blamed Wanda's death on the circumciser's inability to operate and "The Despatch" and her group pointed towards the bewitchment of Wanda by MaLote. But one thing that became apparent was that Wanda's death became an excuse to avoid the ritual. Even the boys who were due to undergo the ritual became reluctant and were often heard muttering "I don't want to fall into Wanda's trap."

Wanda's death caught his mother by surprise. The whole village became silent as if in mourning for his death.

Wanda's death proved profitable to many *sangomas* in the village. They encouraged people to have their children protected against the evil forces of witches. Tembani went from one *sangoma* to the other enquiring about the person responsible for bewitching his son, but with little success. Amateur *sangomas* erupted like mushrooms after a rainy season, and claimed to have found a cure for the raging evil forces in the village.

Neighbours refrained from greeting each other, became suspicious and accused of bewitching each other's children. Many old women were accused of bewitching other people, and enmity increased rapidly throughout the village. The good gestures of borrowing sugar and tea came to be viewed as a ploy for witchcraft. But still, people commented about how the return could have been.

A dark cloud hung dangerously over the village.

University of Cape Town

MONGEZI

On that morning the drizzle was heavy enough to invoke laziness in the Lesseyton community. It was very rare that a morning could greet the people with such chilly and rainy weather. It was a good excuse for the unemployed to enjoy the warmth of their blankets and to resist waking up, whilst their parents accused them of loafing around and neglecting their responsibility of looking for jobs. The school children did not go unaffected by that chilly morning. Some waited impatiently in their blankets to get approval from their parents not to go to school. Others faked coughs and their coughing worsened with the dawning of a new day. As the rain intensified parents were more concerned about the ability of their mud-houses to withstand the rain's intensity.

Nature seemed to be rejoicing with the advent of a new day. Cows bellowed their appreciation, birds sang their joyous songs whilst frogs in their rivers irritated those in slumberland. But the holes in zincs had created a pool in Senam's mud-house by the time Senam woke up. She quickly glanced at her grandchildren who seemed asleep on the floor. Knowing that three of her grandchildren attended classes under the trees, she focussed her attention on waking Mongezi up, the eldest of her grandchildren who was doing standard five.

"Mongezi!" Senam raised her voice. "Wake up, you're going to be late for school. Light the primus stove and warm the water." She paused and spat on the floor which was also her bed.

His eyes half-opened, Mongezi intensified his snoring. This trick usually did not work but he just

tried it in case. He was on the alert in case his grandmother approached him. His thighs were scarred from her pinching. When Senam came closer, Mongezi yawned and stretched his body as if he had just woken up.

“You’ve just rescued yourself, otherwise I would have pinched you to death.” Senam was fuming, her desperation at the rain water leaking through the roof mixed with her anger.

“But Makhulu what do you want me to do?” asked Mongezi, quickly planning a way out.

“Don’t ask obvious things, child. You know as well as I do that you have to go to school.”

“Makhulu, yesterday Mistress Thombo told us that all those who got all the sums right need not come to school today.” He licked his lips, his eyes blinking as if to see the effect his trick would have on his grandmother.

“Why didn’t you tell me yesterday, and which Mistress is that who tells children not to come to school?” Knowing her grandson very well, Senam became suspicious.

“It’s Miss Thombo. Yesterday she asked me to come in front of the class to commend me for my good work. The whole class gave me applause.” Mongezi was pleased he was on the verge of convincing his grandmother.

“What are the sums that you got all right?” Senam asked in desperation, unwilling to give up lest a loophole could be found in Mongezi’s trick.

“Grandma, you will not know what the sums are no matter how brilliantly I try to explain. Only those who are educated know what sums are.” Mongezi was merely hammering his point, knowing he had once again got away with it.

“That’s the disease you educated folks suffer from. You always undermine the illiterates who have put you where you are today. Alright, you may sleep now. But let this not be one of your tricks Mongezi, or else!” Senam threatened him knowing that she had lost the battle.

Senam had always hoped that Mongezi would one day rescue her from the misery and suffering. She prayed day and night that Mongezi would take his family out of desperation and poverty, just like Moses led the Israelites from Egypt to Canaan, the land of milk and honey. To Senam, Mongezi had come to symbolise a triumph of abundance over nothingness. She was therefore very strict in dealing with her grandson lest the temptations of the world corrupted him. Her strong belief in him was frequently betrayed by fears which manifested themselves into suspicions. These suspicions disguised the underlying trust that she had in him and the thought of what she would do if that trust could be betrayed.

Senam had never been exposed to education. All her teenage years were spent helping her mother, who was a maid on a farm. So when her mother got old it was an automatic choice that Senam had to take over from her. Her father had forced her and her twin sister to marry at an early age. For the past seventy years all she had learnt was to clean the house, feed her husband and nurse babies. When her husband died, she did not cry. His death came as a relief to her. He had sexually molested his children, had threatened to kill them if they revealed his behaviour and became furious at any visitor. Senam was also afraid to talk to anyone about this matter. Her children fled

to relatives and were afraid to tell who impregnated them. When Bonisile hung himself on a mimosa tree, people were surprised to see that Senam did not cry.

Whatever Mongezi told Senam, she would not dispute outright but merely view with suspicion. Although earning only R80.00 monthly, she did her best to give Mongezi the money he frequently requested. One day he would request money to “buy carbon dioxide” whilst “the arrival of Jan Van Riebeeck” was a daily song which dried the already exhausted resources of Senam. Senam gave all this money to her grandson with no ill-feelings, hoping that Mongezi would one day rescue them from their present condition. It was this hope that carried her through in spite of all the difficulties. It was this very hope which overcame the suspicion which haunted her about her grandson’s behaviour. Though she found it difficult raising five grandchildren on her own, as her two daughters had eloped with the migrant workers who came to build a dam, this hope lightened her predicament.

* * *

The Johnson bus went through Lesseyton vomiting weary people who had laboured the whole day long. Some were in blue, pink, red, white or black overalls and their faces were contorted, making youths seem older than their age. The bus stopped frequently to let passengers get off. Having drowned their miseries in Charles Glass, a youthful group in the backseat started a chant which irritated the maids who rather got comfort from the deafening sound of the bus. Oozing dark fumes which made the distance travelled invisible, the bus was struggling with a heavy burden of mealie meal, gallons of paraffin, boxes of groceries and beer. The odour of boots mixed with sweat and smoke made each person hardly able to recognise the next.

The following stop was at the tap, a water reservoir used by the villagers. Senam got off, carrying her stick which had never let her down for the decades she had spent with it. After getting off the bus, she met Miss Thombo who was always concerned about Senam's situation. She waved to Senam, who did not see her clearly with her double-lensed spectacles.

"Molo Mama, are you coming from work now?" asked Thombo.

"Yes Mistress, there's no other way. I am still hanging on, but my knees and ankles are refusing now," Senam responded tiredly.

"Mama, why don't you resign and apply for pension?" Her voice trembled from empathizing with the old lady.

"Oh, I don't know where to start Mistress. I have been trying to get pension for as long as I can remember but it's not working out. And the young officials in that office are rude and arrogant. When I tell them I was born during the Great Snow they demand that I tell them my age." Her voiced harboured a deep-seated pain.

"Don't worry Mama, tomorrow I will go to the Home Affairs office and arrange pension for you. But please don't give up letting the kid come to school. He may make things better." Miss Thombo was about to part with the old lady when Senam started as if she had forgotten to say something.

"Oh Mistress, before I forget, that money for "carbon dioxide" will be sent next week."

“What’s that money for?” Miss Thombo was a bit confused.

“Mongezi told me all about it. Please don’t beat him Mistress as he always complains that he is the only one who does not have all this money you want. And he also told me that yesterday he got all the sums right and you had commended him for that.”

“Damn it! He cheats you. There’s nothing like that. He plays tricks on you and he will pay for this. You’re busy struggling for him and he drains the very source. He plays dice with that money. That cheap little trickster, and it’s a blue lie that he got all the sums right. I will discipline him.”

“Really Mistress, O-o-o-h-h-.” Senam’s whole body trembled; her wrinkled skin turned pale. All the fears and suspicions she had harboured for years brought a feeling of helplessness and a regret of the essence of being. She had tried to fight her intuition that Mongezi would let her down but was overwhelmed by wishful thinking. She had indulged in false pretence of contentment hoping that he would make her dream a reality. She had worked twice as hard as soon as the thought of Mongezi alleviating poverty came to her mind. The realisation that this would never happen was too much for her to accept. She collapsed.

A group of boys who were playing soccer nearby were disturbed by Miss Thombo’s voice instructing them to help Senam. Miss Thombo went with them to see to it that the old lady arrived home safely.

The memories of all the toiled-for rands that were wasted unnecessarily overwhelmed Senam. On regaining consciousness Senam called her younger granddaughter.

“My granddaughter, please call your uncles Eddie and Wilson. Tell them the matter we need to discuss is urgent.” Senam’s voice had become throaty.

Senam thought about the winters she used to wake up before dawn in order to walk from Lesseyton to town to put bread on the table. She wanted to cry, but her well of agony had dried up after all her children and her grandchildren had been hurting her throughout her life. She forced her eyelids to close so that drops of tears could empty the pain she was harbouring. But still tears would not come. She sighed deeply.

When Wilson and Eddie arrived it became apparent to them that something was bothering their older sister.

“Senam, sister what’s wrong?” Eddie started seeing the state his sister was in.

“It’s Mongezi----” she could not finish it as her brother jumped to look for Mongezi.

“Where is this boy? We will discipline him. He plays with my father’s child.” Wilson roared looking for Mongezi.

“No don’t,” interrupted Senam. “I don’t want you to beat him. I want us to perform a ritual. After all these years I have been trying to make ends meet, this devil was robbing me.”

“No let’s discipline this boy right away.” Wilson said stubbornly.

“I said I want to perform a ritual of disowning him and that it should be done tomorrow at sunset.” There was a tone of authority in her voice. Her brothers respected their older sister and knew once she had made up her mind, no one could dissuade her. Both Wilson and Eddie agreed to meet the following day to do as their sister wished.

The ritual of disowning a child is a very rare traditional custom. So history was made when Mongezi was disowned by his grandmother.

A tranquil afternoon followed after the rainy day which made almost everyone stay outside inhaling humid air which refreshed their souls. Old men smoked outside whilst the weary shepherds were slowly following the livestock home.

At sunset Senam’s brothers conducted the disowning ritual. Eddie and Wilson ordered Mongezi to go out of the Payana gate, forever! Carrying his bag in one hand, his jacket in the other, Mongezi slowly proceeded to the gate. Wilson, the uncle authorized to lead the ritual, grabbed a dog and quickly cut the edge of its ear with a sharp knife. The dog howled in pain, jumping up and down, its blood soaking the barren ground of the Payana household. Whilst the dog was trembling, all the members of the family shouted at Mongezi, cursing him and ordering him not to return.

“Get out, you devil. May the world and all its evil forces swallow you. You are the curse of the earth.” These were Wilson’s last words.

This incident injected life into the whole village. Dogs barked, cows bellowed, children screamed, old people sighed, and swallows made a chaotic flight before Mongezi's way. Mongezi's shirt was soaked in tears which made the path hazy to him. He had read and heard about the ritual of disowning where a dog's ear is cut so that when it howls the disowned should leave his home, forever. Never had it occurred to him that he would be the subject of such torment and embarrassment. Of all the animals, why a dog? He thought this was a curse. Mongezi still loved his grandmother and guilt haunted him. He did not know where to go.

* * *

The people were still recovering from the shock of disowning a child, when they heard that Mongezi was employed in the mines. This came as a surprise because Mongezi was too young to work. He was twenty years old, too tender an age. The village was divided into two groups. Some accused Senam of cruelty and insensitivity whilst others commended her for her firm stand and for giving a good example to other recalcitrant youths. It was thereafter common to hear parents threatening their children that they would emulate Senam's example if they were disobedient. The news that Mongezi was working and doing well calmed Senam, who was worried and anxious about her grandson. She secretly regretted her deed but was adamant that she had had to do it.

Working conditions on the mines were very shocking to Mongezi. Everything was very fast. Multitudes of hurrying workers trying to reach their destination in time confused him every morning. The noise of huge machinery, the soprano of flutes, people carrying portable radios each playing a different tune loudly but walking with the same group, the sound of the chief boss

commanding workers to hurry up. All this frustrated Mongezi who was always late for work. He had on more than one occasion received strong warnings from the boss and this scared him. He had been here for three months and he missed home badly. Homesickness made him look back and view his misdemeanours from a distance. It was the same homesickness which caused him to write a letter of apology pleading for forgiveness from his grandmother. Even Wilson's hardest heart melted under Mongezi's humble apology. Back home they envisaged Mongezi coming with carts full of money from the mines and they consequently forgave him. A cleansing ritual was arranged to purge the curse from Mongezi.

When the postman in the hostel arrived and gave Mongezi the letter which stated that he was forgiven and that he should come back home for a cleansing ceremony, he was overjoyed. That letter created anger mixed with jealousy among other mineworkers who always anticipated letters from their loved ones at home.

That very day Mongezi informed his boss that he wanted to resign immediately. After much persuasion by his boss and fellow workers not to resign but to apply for sick leave, he was given all his money and signed his resignation letter. With R500.00 in his pocket Mongezi thought he was sitting on top of the world. He packed all his bags, took out the tape recorder that he had just bought himself and went to town. He bought himself a new shirt, pair of trousers, pair of shoes and went to the taxi rank to book a seat home. After sorting out everything he decided to quickly rush to town again and buy himself something to eat on the way home. He was already wearing the new clothes and when he boarded the taxi to town his walk had changed. His peculiar walk made him look like a crippled crab. On climbing into the taxi he enquired from the driver whether he was allowed to pay by cheque, but the driver demanded cash, much to the amusement of the

passengers.

A fragrant smell enveloped the whole taxi and Mongezi found it intoxicating. It was not hard to tell the source of the refreshing smell. The lady seated next to Mongezi was immaculately dressed. Mongezi used his idiosyncratic logic that because she was dressed to kill it followed that she was the one wearing that perfume. He did not have doubts about himself as the new clothes suited him perfectly, or so he thought. Though not well-versed in the Queen's language he decided to address himself in English.

"Hello beautiful," he said charmingly.

"Hi," she responded interestedly.

"I never knew that this world still has such beautiful angels."

"I shall take that as a compliment."

"You should, as it was intended to be one. Doesn't this angel have a name?"

"Oh, my name is Ponso Maheu from Pimville. I'm working at Wits Tech as a manager in catering services." This was a euphemism for being a helper. By this she was trying to impress not only Mongezi but also the other passengers.

"I'm Gregory Mele and an MD at Anglo-American. But you can call me Greg." So huge was his

TALES

FROM

TOWN

416

416 is a source of inspiration for those who fail to achieve their desired marks in their courses. A pool of consolation for those deserted by their girlfriends back home. An oasis of wisdom and strength for those who want to sharpen their rusting intellectual edge. It is a place where students emulate and imitate their political idols, most of the time giving themselves undeserved credit for plagiarising. 416 is a place students while away time in as it provides an ideal view which frees their minds to go places they have never been to before. It is a place where students display their skills in making love and dwell on the vulnerability of women to their charms.

A gigantic building dismembered into six segments parallels Liesbeeck River, which flows through Rondebosch. Tall trees guard the sinuous flow of the river, whilst the grass enjoys the security provided by the trees. The humidity of the area nurtures the grass to a radiating green whilst the lively leaves create an inviting atmosphere. It is this very atmosphere which radiates vitality into the tortured souls of Liesbeeck students, ameliorating their nostalgia. Well known for emptying the intoxicating beverages of SAB during the weekends until Charles Glass becomes wary that his well will dry soon, Liesbeeck residents are notorious for their misdemeanours. Sandwiched between the fifth and the third floors, 416 occupies the corner of Liesbeeck Gardens.

Ntate had just arrived in 416, and was narrating his story about how he would have nearly killed two people in a scuffle at UWC had it not been for the intervention of two pretty women.

“Ntate, I would have punished them severely were it not for those two women who begged me not to.” Ntate was telling Hloks, one of 416’s occupants, about his ordeal. Ntate had a tendency of narrating one incident in different ways to different people with changing times. Ntate, so-called because he addressed people likewise, liked respect and behaved older than his age. Thus he was not always a welcome and appreciated visitor at 416. His addiction to tea gave him the status of an old man.

“Ntate, I’m very thirsty can’t we have tea?” His tone was more commanding than pleading. Babes’ arrival resulted in Ntate’s sudden urge to attend to his schoolwork. He hated Babes with a passion because his presence always overshadowed his. Immediately Babes entered the flat Ntate suddenly mourned about his workload and how he should practise good time-management. This did not come as a surprise. Babes’ presence always made everyone think about something to do. Babes was a recipient of the prestigious Vuyane Mlati Scholarship but he was very secretive about this. He was well-known for his obsession with status. He made it known that his family was filthy rich and for this reason he too often spoiled the discussion of the students who visited 416. It was common knowledge that his father owned a string of supermarkets, butcheries, hotels and a fleet of taxis. When he was with women it was not uncommon to hear Babes bragging.

“You know ladies, I really don’t know what will happen when the old man leaves this world. As I am the only child my mom spoils me very much. I wish I were you, to desperately need something in life. Right now my 20th birthday is approaching and she wants to buy me a Jeep.” Once again Babes bombarded the women with the latest on his riches. This made the women green with envy as Babes unravelled his secrets. This was Babes’ daily sermon about how rich he was and how filthy rich he would be in the future. Because of this he was not short of company.

Everyone tried to be counted among his friends. Even those who were less known tended to be illuminated by his shadow as they came to be pointed at as Babes' friends. For three years at UCT Babes basked in the limelight of richness which brought admiration from girls who would do anything to entice him whilst it developed envy and contempt from the male students. Babes' immaculate style of dressing, complemented by his ever looked after hairdo confirmed his status and left his critics with no suspicions. His smile was disarming as his gold tooth fitting twinkled and shone, matching his gold chain, watch and bracelet.

One thing that remained an unfolded mystery was Babes' origins. Some maintained he hailed from Houghton, Jo'burg, whilst others pointed towards Constantia in Cape Town. A handful knew him as coming from Durban and a doubting group argued that he lived in every suburb in South Africa. Babes had made it known that he frequented London and New York as if taking a local taxi from home to town.

As he was doing his final year at UCT all fantasized about Babes' graduation day. He had made it clear that his family would board a private jet and on arrival would drive in their Cadillac limousine. That made the havenots curse their parents for their predicaments. They had nothing to show or brag about. During the September examination many a student lost concentration in their studies and thought about Babes' prosperity. Others even came to him to ask for financial assistance but with fruitless results.

September 17 1996 has gone down in the annals of Liesbeeck Gardens as an exposition day. It is even referred to as the Revelation Day. Something mysterious, close to the Second Coming of Jesus Christ, took place. On that day the sun was scorching and what seemed like an old woman

with a baby on her back hit the shores of Liesbeeck. She looked older than her years with cracks on the soles of her feet indicating that she had never worn shoes in her life. Her teeth revealed all kinds of food she had been eating throughout her lifetime : green, yellow, pink and black. It was as if her teeth had never been white. The child's face, hardly recognizable, was smeared with mucus which had a solidified green forming a core all over. On the sides of the baby's face streams of tears with branching tributaries flowed from the eyes, stretching down the ears. Though the baby tried to cry out loudly, only his lips showed the urge to cry. There was no strength. Moving closer to a group of male students who were hanging out that Saturday morning, Mpumi approached them. An odour contaminated the whole area and it worsened as she opened her mouth to speak:

"Morning people, do you perhaps know where Baboon stays?" she said on bended knees, showing the respect of a village girl.

The laughter of this group of students echoed through Liesbeeck, inviting even those who were indoors. This laughter made Mpumi shiver with fear and anxiety. She had never been to a place like that before : high buildings, noise, cars, lights - all this left her mesmerized. To her the echo of those boys' laughter was reminiscent of the echo made by cliffs when she and Baboon used to go to the veld to collect wood for fire.

"Who did you say you want to meet, old lady?" asked Thabang sarcastically.

"It's my brother, Baboon. We are from Lesseyton village in Queenstown and he studies here and my mother sent me to tell him that my father has passed away and that I should tell him to come home and the funeral is tomorrow." Mpumi neither paused nor breathed. Her fast speech, coupled

with a trembling voice that showed uneasiness, caught the sympathy of the students.

“No, sister, there’s no person with that name here. At least if you can tell us his surname,” said Thabang suggestively.

“It is Manzini,” Mpumi said sharp-pointedly.

At this Thabang gasped for air. Babes’ surname was Manzini. It could not be. No it was impossible. The impossibility of it made Thabang strive to turn it to something possible. This could not be Babes’ sister. It became apparent, in the enthusiasm of the boys in showing Mpumi where her brother was, that they wanted to use her as a bait to crush Babes’ ego. That she found herself in the midst of flamboyant boys further unsettled Mpumi.

“That fuckin’ narcissist! He shall pay for his lies,” vowed Thabang, who was now leading the group to the hostel. The group escorted Mpumi to room 314 where Babes was, as usual, relaxing with many women, chit-chatting. The tapping of a multitude on the floor alarmed Babes and his friends who rushed to the door. Babes was the first one to step outside and on seeing his sister he was powerless. He tensed and felt the urge to ignore his sister striking hard and painfully. But he had to. He returned inside as if nothing had happened.

“Hey Baboon, don’t you dare try to fool us,” Thabang yelled at him. “Here’s your sister and boy she damn sure looks like you. Don’t play those tricks, son of Sol Kerzner. Your name is Baboon not Babes. You cannot fool all people all the time.” Thabang’s jealousy towards Babes over the years had accumulated to produce the monster that was rising in him.

“What did you say?” asked Babes aggressively. “Did I just hear you calling that good-for-nothing hobo my sister? I’ll kick your butt, you dare not fuck with me like that.”

“Oh my mother’s child.” She felt warm inside that in spite of the strange environment and the people who surrounded her, her brother was in their midst. She approached Babes in an embracing manner.

“Hey you, step back.” His forehead was sweating intensely. This was his own blood, his mother’s and father’s own blood. But a man must do what a man must do, he thought.

Babes abandoned his sister and left her with the crowd. She was very scared and was trembling. Thabang and his group offered to take care of Mpumi and took her to his flat. They provided Mpumi with all the basic amenities, told her to take a bath and later accompanied her to the station where she took a train from Cape Town to Queenstown. That was the end of Mpumi’s ordeal.

Nobody knew what the truth was. Some argued that Thabang had planned Mpumi’s visit to embarrass Babes whilst others argued that the close resemblance between Babes and Mpumi showed clearly that Babes was abandoning his sister because of the fake he had created of himself. But only one person knew the truth, Babes.

SURPRISE! SURPRISE!

The Technics speakers echoed the therapeutic voice of Luther Vandross, which revitalised Brian as he sped down the freeway to see Vicky, his love for life. Though driving on the fast-lane he was preoccupied with Vicky, he even visualised her.

“You are part of my life. Even now I see you.” He was not even aware that he was saying these words aloud. He loved her dearly. His love for her had been tested and he believed it had stood against all odds. He had often failed because he spent more time with her than on books. He had even lost friends who, he thought, were jealous of their relationship and had insinuated that she cheated on him. Brian also had an uphill battle with his family because of Vicky.

“Anyone who does not like her does not like me either,” he had proclaimed in the last quarrel he had had with his family members about Vicky. Brian was blind with love.

Brian had just knocked off from work and had betrayed his integrity with this abrupt visit. Anyway, if it was for Vicky it was a worthy adventure as she would be delighted about this surprise visit, he thought. Brian moved out of the glittering lights of Gauteng immediately he knocked off from the Gauteng Legislature, where he was a new employee. After what seemed like ages on the road Brian was convinced that he was half-way to Cape Town. The mist enveloping the road made everything hazy and that convinced him that he was in the Western Cape region. Out of joy he decided to dial Radio Metro on his cellular phone as he knew that it was Vicky’s favourite station, especially the deejay who was on air. After minutes of impatience and desperation, his call was

attended to:

“This is Radio Metro and my name is Wilson B Nkosi, good evening.” Wilson welcomed Brian to his show.

“Evening Wilson, my name is Brian Tibe and I would like to send a dedication to my one and only.” Brian’s excitement was evident in his voice.

“Wow! You sound like a caring and honest man. You may proceed with your dedication.”

“I would like to send a message to Vicky Pempi who is in Cape Town and I would like to tell her that no words can express how much she means to me.”

“Okay brother, you sure are a romantic person and I hope that your girlfriend is listening. Thanks for calling and you take very good care of yourself.”

Brian was sure that Vicky had heard him as Wilson’s “In The Still Of The Night” show was her favourite radio programme. She would be very excited and just before that upsurge of excitement subsided he would knock at her door. The surprise visit would thus be the cherry on top.

Table Mountain greeted Brian as soon as he appeared whilst the University of Cape Town welcomed him to the other side of town. He realised later that he was talking to himself:

“Cape Town is beautiful. Only beautiful people like Vicky supplement its image. The green and

friendly atmosphere represents humility, honesty and loyalty, qualities Vicky has in cartloads. Cape Town is just like her, beautiful, friendly and lovely.”

He had never been to Vicky’s flat before but emotionally he had always been with her. The frequent telephone calls and letters Vicky received made the bond stronger. As he had not called Vicky to inform her about his presence in Cape Town he had to find his way to her flat. He waited for the moment of fruition with anticipation and impatience, the moment when Vicky would cry tears of joy because of his presence. He asked a few people before meeting someone who knew where she stayed.

“Is Vicky your girlfriend?” asked the stranger.

“Yes, she is. Do you know her?” Brian asked excitedly.

“Yeah, everybody knows her. Who doesn’t know Vicky?” was the disinterested remark of the stranger.

This was enough for Brian to prove how beautiful Vicky was. She was right, thought Brian, who would ignore such beauty! The lady who showed Brian Vicky’s flat seemed to know more about Vicky than Brian expected. After thanking her, Brian took out the bunch of roses he had bought from a filling station on his way. As he knocked at her door, a sudden burst of emotions flooded through his veins. He felt warm inside when he thought about the lonely nights and days which Vicky had spent because of loving him. He felt honoured to have fallen in love with someone like her, who made him feel her love was his.

The drizzle kept most students indoors and few roamed around. Brian felt pity for the ladies who were in the windows watching the rain longingly. He surmised that they had been hurt by irresponsible men who were insensitive, but he felt great that he was honest with Vicky. As Brian rang the bell there was commotion inside the flat. Because Pele, Vicky's boyfriend in Cape Town, had arranged with his friends to wake him that morning so as to go to the gym, he responded to his "friends" at the door.

"Fuck, I'm sorry guys. Vicky didn't wake me up. We slept very late last night doing all the things lovers do. We're hoping to be premature parents very soon. Ha-ha-ha." Pele was dressing up for the gym.

"Stop delaying, your friends are waiting," was Vicky's tired contribution to the conversation.

"Hey Bonzo, I'm coming. Guess what happened last night? This one is the boob of the year. Vicky's 'Mr Romantic' called whilst she was in my arms." Rowdy laughter from within the room followed.

"*Hayi* Pele, don't make fun of Brian." She mildly reprimanded Pele, who was more concerned about Bonzo's unusual silence at the door.

Brian could not believe his ears. No they were cheating him, he thought. He was daydreaming and wished that the dream would end soon. Concerned about the pregnant silence of his friends outside, Pele went straight to the door and opened it. At that point Brian realised that his nightmare was a reality. He was weak from fatigue as if he had just run a million kilometres. The

roses he was carrying fell on the ground and he was dumbfounded.

Pele had seen the figure at the door before and he merely begged his memory to recall who the figure was. He realised that he had seen the fellow on many photos Vicky had. He used to make a mockery of the love letters Brian used to write to Vicky. Pele had also been the chief benefactor of the money Brian sent Vicky monthly. Of the ring he had bought in France for their engagement, it was in her purse only to be revealed when Brian was around.

“Hey Vicky,” shouted Pele. “Surprise! Surprise! Look who we have here. Mr Romantic himself, Brian. He wanted to surprise you, only to be surprised. Poor fellow.”

The drums of guilt beat very hard in her conscience. Vicky screamed at him:

“Didn’t we agree that you should inform me before visiting? I told you I was not ready for commitment and you insisted. I told you that I am still unsure about my feelings for you and you bulldozed your way through my heart. Do you expect me to be guilty? No ways! How does it feel Mr? Do you now understand the pain you put me through when I caught you in bed with Nombeko? Do you now understand how unfair it is to betray your trust in someone?”

“Wait a minute, Vicky,” Pele said “Did you use me to hurt this faggot?”

“If a man can use a woman as a pawn in his game, why can’t a woman do likewise? Pele, you were only in this relationship for money. You think I’m dumb?” She was firing from all angles.

Having seen and heard everything for himself Brian thought about the long journey back home.

In front of Pele and Vicky, he broke into tears.

“Oh God, how can you do this to me? Why should it be me? Vicky, after all that we’ve been through, is this your way of thanking me? Why?” As he said these last words Brian ran to his car, which had been hastily parked in the basement. The screeching of the tyres signalled Brian’s departure from Cape Town, and from Vicky’s life as well.

University of Cape Town

THAT NIGHT

The night was very busy: the glittering lights, Pioneer speakers pumping, car hooters adding to the confusion, half-naked women gyrating to the seductive sounds of R. Kelly. The stadium was full to capacity as Ernest spun the discs. He was the darling of the nation and a crowd-puller. Fort Hare stadium had never witnessed such a crowd.

Nelly was one of those who were tempted to attend. She was initially reluctant but much persuasion from her friends had forced her to succumb. She had agreed, knowing that Tito, her boyfriend, was in the lecture hall preparing for the final examination and would be back during the wee hours of the morning. Tito was a final year LLB student with good prospects as he had sealed a deal with Eskom, while Nelly was a final year BCom student.

“We all wanna party don’t we? We definitely gonna have a good time, so everybody relax, take it easy and have fun. Let’s have fun before this exam.” Ernest’s voice echoed throughout the stadium, much to the approval of the crowd, which roared with satisfaction, disturbing those who stayed nearby.

Nomsa, one of Nelly’s friends, suggested they buy drinks. Reluctant and scared at first, Nelly decided to be part of the group. Thereafter everything happened so quickly that Nelly was in a state that she had never been in in her life. The rapidity of events ended up with her in a circle of women dancing to the deafening tunes. “Fish Eagle” made her body loose and everybody was stunned that she had such a hidden talent for dancing. Nobody was as surprised as Nelly herself.

She found herself surrounded by a chanting crowd, encouraging and urging her to continue.

After much commotion and confusion, people wanting to go this or that way, Nelly found herself close to the deejaying box. Her eyes and Ernest's met, her body melted and flames sparked in all directions. Both stood there, momentarily hypnotized. Nelly did not recognize that her friends had left her behind. Ernest made a move and Nelly reciprocated. He caressingly held her by hand and she put her tiny lovely face on his hairy chest and both bodies melted into one. They secretly dashed out of the stadium to Ernest's car. They spent two solid hours and the deejay's absence was conspicuous. Nobody really knew what happened there, in the car.

When Ernest was buttoning up his shirt Nelly came to her senses. She first vomited, emptying all the alcohol from her stomach, looked straight at Ernest's eyes, and felt powerless. How could he have done that, she asked herself regretfully. She did not even bid Ernest farewell. She quickly headed for the ladies' private rooms and then went to her room.

She felt guilty as she thought about Tito. Not only did the happenings of the night leave her embarrassed and powerless, but they also shook the roots of her womanhood and her pride. She felt worthless.

Nelly took a bath and tried to forget about everything. It was Tito's knock at dawn that brought back feelings of guilt and betrayal which were to bounce back every now and then in her life. She thought it best to tell Tito once and for all, but dismissed it as an inopportune time. Moreover, his trust and love for her prohibited her from telling him the truth. An alcoholic smell contaminated the room, and Tito found that strange, as he believed that Nelly was a teetotaler.

“Morning sweetheart,” he said, caressing her. “I missed you, how’s your day been?”

“Please honey, I’m tired and have a severe headache. Can we talk in the morning?” She was sweating from guilt.

“Yeah sure, anything for you honey. I will have to treat you like a queen as very soon you will be Nelly Momo-Mali, a rainbow surname our children will bear,” Tito said proudly. This understanding that Tito had had kept the relationship intact for many years.

* * *

Tito and Nelly were celebrating their twenty-fifth anniversary and took much pride in knowing that they had spent almost three decades together whilst many of their peers had fallen along the way.

“The ingredients for a long-lasting marriage are love, trust, understanding and openness, period. Don’t be too formal once married. Do all the things you used to do when you were single. Take your wife out to the movies, visit old friends, spend quality time with your family, and take an occasional walk. Always call her at work and tell her how much she means to you,” Tito said sagaciously and proudly, as if he had found the key to blissful matrimonial life, to those who had just tied the matrimonial knot who were guests at their anniversary. The sight of a familiar figure among the guests perturbed Nelly. It was as though she had seen a ghost. Ernest was not there to play turntables, nor was he aware of what Nelly was going through. He could not even remember if Nelly was once a victim of his flirtatious behaviour when he was still a deejay. He had been persuaded by his friends to accompany them to the ceremony unaware that his visit would change

the course of the very longevity of the marriage people had gathered to celebrate. The sight of Ernest was simply unbearable to Nelly. She went outside, took a deep breath, and the events of that night became vivid:

“Oh my God! Aren’t other people noticing the similar features of Luvo and Ernest? What if Ernest decides to tell the truth? Does he know that he impregnated me? Oh-oh-oh-no-no. But why all this torture? Why did he come now?” Though Nelly was preoccupied with these thoughts she tried not to reveal her fears and anxiety to the guests. She watched every move Ernest made, thinking he would ultimately spoil the ceremony by divulging their past. Tito was unaware of what his wife was experiencing. Neither was Luvo. She was all by herself.

Tito was proud that he was the father of a twenty-five year old lawyer. Through tests he and Nelly had undergone, doctors had regrettably told them that they could no longer have children. A multimillionaire who was chairing numerous boards, Tito was content with his only child and would often console his wife.

“This is a blessing in disguise as it means that Luvo will have all that he wants in the world, even the world itself.”

Luvo rode the crest of the waves and carved a niche for himself in the corporate world. He was known in legal circles and his name became synonymous with promotion and success. He did not bask in the name of his famous and wealthy father but rather moulded his own unique identity which made his parents proud and protective. Luvo was the apple of his parents’ eye and he made the family happy. Nelly thought that he had come to resemble Ernest, and the more she looked at

him grow the more vivid the happenings of that night became. This haunted her by night and tormented her by day. Consequently, amidst all this bliss there was one person who was not happy, and that was Nelly. Her past haunted her like a ghost and for three successive months after day of the anniversary, she got thinner and thinner by the day, with doctors unable to diagnose her disease. She was therefore frequently hospitalised and doctors pointed to nervousness as the cause of her illness. This unsettled Tito, who dearly loved his wife, and was prepared to part with anything to make her well. He was always beside her hospital beds, most of the time spending nights with her. Such love and devotion surprised the night-duty nurses who appreciated Tito's stays for making their job much easier.

Tito caressed Nelly's hand when he thought she was asleep. The lights were off, only the flickering light from the window shed light to the room. The whiteness of everything around : sheets, beds, ceiling, jugs and even the clothes unnerved Tito. He wanted them to go home. Nelly was not asleep, she had tried hard to muster strength and courage to tell Tito that she was not suffering from a bodily sickness, but from a desire to purify her soul.

"Tito honey ----" The voice that Tito had not heard for ages cut sharp like a blade in his ears. He jumped off the bed as if pinched.

"No, don't get shocked dear. For the past three months I've been very sick and doctors don't seem to know the disease. And nobody knows what I'm suffering from but me." She stopped, gasped for air while her husband looked as if imbued with spirits, puzzled by her rapid recovery. She looked exactly the way she did when they first met, a radiant beauty that blinded everyone, a smile that disarmed even the arrogant. Nelly's road to recovery made Tito reminisce.

“Do you still remember the night before you wrote your last course at ‘varsity?’” Tito probed his memory to relive the night Nelly was talking about. “The night when there was a big bash when you found me asleep?” Nelly helped her husband remember their youthful days.

“Yes, I do remember.” Tito was surprised that his memory could serve him that well as the incident was decades ago.

“I was in the stadium with my friends, had drinks and --- and I was --- no I felt d-- drunk (silence) then I---I---I don’t know what happened but I found myself in Ernest’s car and I -- no -- we actually--- he --m--made--no--had- s--e--x with me and I fell p-r-e-g-n-a-n-t. Tito I’m sorry for this but Luvo is not your son and this has been haunting me for ages.” The flow of tears, accompanied by intense sweating, made the beautiful face slippery.

“What?” roared Tito. “You ---- you ---cheated on me? Luvo is not my son?” Tito’s mad laughter filled the whole room and it echoed in the guilt-ridden ears of Nelly.

Tito went out of the hospital and paced up and down on the lawn. It was like a huge baggage had been put on his shoulders:

“No, it can’t be. Oh, my Nelly. Has this been tormenting you? Why didn’t you talk to me? Why wait until now?” He quickly rushed to his car, ignited the engine and the screeching of the tyres competing with a screaming voice in desperation echoed through the corridors of the hospital, catching the attention of the nurses. When they rushed to the scene, Nelly had dressed herself and this momentarily stopped their wagging tongues and hastening shoe-steps. The ostensible fury of

Tito was in striking contrast to the early harmony which prevailed between the two. The nurses prevented Nelly from leaving as she showed suicidal tendencies:

“Let me go. I want to end this nonsense once and for all. I have told him and now it’s time that I leave this world in peace. At least my conscience is clear.” In spite of these pleas to let her go the nurses did not.

“Hey you girls,” Tito’s voice echoed through the corridors of the hospital “can’t you leave my wife alone? Do you think she is mad, he-e-e? Do you think she is like you? Which woman in this corrupt world which is contaminated with cheat and lies would have the audacity to tell her husband her wrongdoings? It’s only my Nelly who can do that.” The nurses coyly went out of Nelly’s ward, one by one, as though they had been accused of promiscuity. They did not know the cause of their castigation.

Nelly was trembling with fear. She was afraid that Tito would kill her. To her the penance she went through was redemptive, and now that she had told her husband she felt relieved. Her husband’s tone in lambasting the nurses also confused her. She thought it was a ploy to chase them out in order to kill her. But the sincerity with which he uttered those words convinced her that he was by her side. She avoided eye contact with him.

“Nelly, it’s all over now. Do you hear me?”

“Yes, I think that’s the most appropriate punishment. You deserve better and I have failed you. But I will forever remain thankful of all the things—”

“What are you talking about? When I said it’s over I meant what you’ve been through. And I want you to listen to me very attentively: I will never leave you for anything. To err is human and your positive attributes outpoint your negatives, if there are any that I’m know of. More than anything else, this has strengthened my commitment to you. I took a drive around thinking about the solution to this and I realised how few women, if any, could have done what you did . Your courage to tell me what happened overwhelms me. Who would risk destroying whatever she’s built for years for the sake of truth? Luvo is my child, period. I don’t care what happened.” Tito uttered these words with great precision and the more emphatic he became the greater the flow of Nelly’s tears.

“No-no, I can’t accept this. I don’t deserve you. You—” What if he wanted to let her in again and then hurt her, she thought.

“It’s time to go home now, I miss your cup of tea.” Tito said with a smile that could have invigorated even a mourning wife.

When Tito’s Porsche ate the Cathcart Road, it left a love-lesson to be learnt.

COURAGE

His years at the University of Venda had been lifeless, thought Teddy. Though he had graduated with a four-year degree from UNIVEN, Teddy regretted his stay there. His arrival at the University of Cape Town convinced him that he had not yet lived life to its fullest. Everything was lively : the town with its rejuvenating air, the seawater, the green leaves which enveloped the gigantic UCT buildings, the radiant sun which shone on the ever misty Table Mountain, and a precipitation cloud layer that hung dangerously over the mountain. Teddy found the people very exciting, diverse creatures from different walks of life. As Teddy proceeded to attend his first class he met amusing characters, many wearing big Popeye smiles while occasional grins were not hard to find. It was while ascending the tiring UCT stairs that Teddy became optimistic that the city had much good in store for him, though maybe some disappointments as well.

The small number of students in the seminar room and its smaller size convinced Teddy that he was in a different atmosphere. The no-nonsense figure in front of him did not mince his words.

“Ladies and gentlemen, this is an Honours course, and unlike undergraduate courses we expect independent thought, responsibility, self-discipline and critical thinking. I will not accept any excuses for late submissions of seminar papers. Having said that, I hope you will enjoy the course. Thank you.” His facial expression was as serious as the tone of his voice.

Teddy began to feel out of place. All his classmates were white and, having spent the past years of his student life with hordes of irritating pitch-black students, Teddy started to feel nervous. It

was the very nervousness and anxiety that made him jump as he felt a cold hand on his shoulder.

“Hi,” Whitney said, trying to conceal her shock at his reaction.

“Hello,” Teddy’s voice became throaty.

“My name is Whitney,” she said, extending her hand.

“Oh, I’m Teddy.” He wished she would just leave him as she caused him to sweat in his armpits.

“Are you okay, Teddy, can I help in any way?” Whitney enquired, having noticed that his black skin turned navy while his eyes were ox-blood.

“No-no, I’m okay.” He had never been in a class with whites, let alone been touched so tenderly and a concern expressed about his well-being.

“C’mon Teddy, let’s get something to eat and have a chat.” Whitney held him by his hand as they joined the multitudes of souls who were basking in the sun. Whitney bought hotdogs for both.

“So Teddy, tell me about yourself.” She was attentively anticipating his response, her palms on her chin and her elbows deeply thrust in her thighs. Her eyes were very penetrating and she wanted to lighten his anxiety.

“Oh, where do I start now? Okay, I’m black, tall and handsome,” Teddy started jokingly, feeling

a bit relaxed.

Seeing that Teddy was at ease Whitney laughed at his joke so much that she hugged him. Oh! it felt so good and Teddy momentarily suspended his breath lest it came into contact with Whitney's skin. A feeling of worth rose in him as fellow Black students saw him in the company of a white woman. That was something worth writing home about.

The first thing Teddy did on arriving in his flat was to rush to the nearest mirror to watch himself. He wondered how he was handsome enough to attract the attention of women, let alone white women. That was unbelievable, a warm hug from a white woman. He definitely wanted to share his experience with his flatmate, Manu. Concerned that Manu would arrive late from the gym, Teddy quickly went to the nearest telephone booth.

"Hello *mama*. I'm fine and you? Guess what? I'm going to bring you a daughter-in-law. You happy with me, good. And guess what? She is white mama. (Silence) No mama just because her complexion is white does not make her white inside. Mama I love her--." The te-e-e-e te-e-e voice of the phone indicated that the machine wanted more coins.

As soon as Manu arrived Teddy burst out in laughter.

"Yes! I did it Bro'," was Teddy's ruse in invoking curiosity in Manu.

"What's up now Teddy?" Manu was still undressing.

“I am dating a gorgeous woman.” Teddy was content that he had dropped a bomb.

“Oh Yeah, so what’s so exhilarating about dating a woman?”

“Wait ‘till you see her. She’s not of our kind man, she is white.” He looked at Manu, trying to see his reaction.

“Really? You are dating a white dame? Shucks! You are moving on the fast lane nigga. Anyway congratulations, I hope you’ll get white soon. But remember when she dumps you our beautiful black sisters will always be there for you.”

Manu thought about how hard he had been trying to get himself a girlfriend but in vain. In all his three years at UCT he had never dated, let alone been seen with a woman. People even gossiped about his sexuality. He had tried to make a move on Angela but only once. From then onwards he had vowed not to hurt himself. It was a very excruciating emotional experience. He felt as if he was stripped naked in front of the whole world. The way it happened was still vivid in his memory. He had met Angela at Upper Campus and had made an appointment with her for nine o'clock in the evening. He was very restless as he waited impatiently for that decisive hour to arrive. He envisaged himself in her arms, had visions of them walking hand-in-hand in the dirty streets of Mowbray, heard whispers of people pointing at the lovely couple. His fantasy intensified, raising very high expectations. She also had something for him, thought Manu, in a self-consolation fantasy, as the looks in her eyes were obvious.

Tugwell Hall towered threateningly in front of Manu. He was swallowed by the huge building like

other students who entered there like ants. On his arrival the receptionist immediately offered to help and he was allowed to see Angela. As he entered Angela's room, a fragrance complemented the radiance of her beauty. She was dressed immaculately for the appointment.

"So what is it that you wanted to see me about?" Angela asked.

"Let me not waste time Angy, I'm here to ask if it is not possible for you to hook me up. I mean, girl, I'm in love with you." A deep breath showed that the weight of his fear had been lightened.

"I'm still listening,"

"Angy, when I saw you this morning I became warm inside and the feeling I have about you is simply indescribable." Mamu thought that was enough to convince her.

"You say you love me, right? What is it that you love in me?"

"You, I love you as a whole, please trust m--." Mamu's persuasion was disturbed by the ejection noise of the tape-recorder that was on Angela's bedside. It dawned on him that there was something wrong.

"What was that? Did you record this conversation?" A feeling of betrayal made him fume with anger but he tried to contain himself.

"No, but --." She was trying hard to control her laughter. An uproar of laughter in Angela's

wardrobe confused him further. Her three friends came out and rushed out of the door, scared that Mamu would beat them. Embarrassed and disappointed, Mamu rushed out of Angela's room, banging the door, and vowed never to propose to any woman.

Teddy's friendship with Whitney boosted his confidence and self-worth. His self-esteem burgeoned and he walked tall. It was not uncommon to see people pointing fingers at him, saying, "There he is, he is dating a white woman". Even those women who had not noticed him before he knew Whitney felt envious of him. Teddy was often seen at the cinema with Whitney, much to the disapproval of white attendants, while Teddy's fellow black brothers labelled him a traitor. That did not deter Teddy's feelings about Whitney. But there was only one thing that bothered him : they were just friends, not lovers. He had lied to many, making them believe that they were lovers.

Teddy thought that it was time to stop fooling himself and tell Whitney his feelings. People had always believed that they were lovers but it was time to make that wish a reality. Teddy spent sleepless nights planning the way to approach Whitney.

"What if she rejects me? What about the relationship we have? Will making a move not affect our friendship?" These questions were to become Teddy's daily thoughts and they made him reluctant to move on his deep desire to propose to Whitney. Whitney could sense that all was not well with her pal but Teddy persuaded her to believe that everything was alright. But he tried to amass strength to let out his true feelings.

The seminar was nearing its end when the lecturer noticed that Teddy had lost concentration.

Professor Mpilo approached him:

“Teddy, you are not participating today and you don’t seem well. What’s the matter?”

“Yes Prof, I’m not feeling well. I caught flu last night.” His explanation gave those concerned an excuse to understand his unusual behaviour. Glad that he had managed to divert their attention from him, Teddy went on fantasizing about Whitney. His eyes and Whitney’s met frequently. Her smile ignited sparks of flame in him. But Whitney was not aware of the pain she brought him.

When the seminar ended Whitney went to him, took him by his hand and they strolled down the stairs. She wanted a very tranquil place where her friend could unravel his inner predicament. She found a good spot under the trees where the birds sang their melodious song, as if in celebration of the couple.

“Okay now, you are with me. Take a very deep breath.” She stared at him. Teddy did as commanded. “Now tell me, what is the matter?” Her trembling voice showed a deep-seated concern.

“It’s you,” Teddy replied. Those words echoed very far, as if said by someone else.

“Me? You mean I’m the cause of your behaviour?” Whitney could not believe what she had just heard.

“Yes, it’s you.” An assurance crept through his voice. He had to be firm, thought Teddy, and finish the mystery he had revealed. Her wide-open mouth indicated her disbelief.

“Whitney, I’m sorry to say this but it has always been on my mind. No matter how hard I try to forget it comes back. Whitney, I’m in love with you. I really am and have always been.” He felt very emotional as he expressed himself.

After this confession a deadly silence that was deafening in its quietness lasted for what seemed like eternity. Both looked mesmerised. As if recovering, Whitney stood up, came closer to him and hugged him closely. Teddy thought that his intuition had told him that she could not resist him. He knew that he was just nervous about something that was less obvious. She had always been in love with him. She had always been waiting for him to say it. He blamed himself for such stupidity and regretted having wasted much time without telling her. They were heaven-cut to be together. All these poignant thoughts overflowed in Teddy’s clean-shaven head.

All along Whitney was carefully selecting words that would not hurt Teddy. She had come to realize that he was weak emotionally, but she decided to put herself first as she came first.

“Look Teddy, I really commend your courage to tell me but I don’t think it is possible. I don’t have feelings for you. I love you as a friend and friendship is all that I can offer.” She was still holding him. As soon as she uttered these words Teddy shrugged himself off her. He was hurt and did not know the cause of her regret. He thought that politicizing the issue would change her mind, as she always wanted to appear politically-correct. But not that time.

“Oh, now I know. It’s because I’m black.” He thought she would feel guilty.

“Call it whatever you want, but I cannot start a relationship with you.”

She took her bag and marched out of his life .

When Manu returned from the gym he was surprised to find Teddy home that time of the day.

“Hey what’s up white boy?”

“You don’t be calling me no white boy, nigga, else I’m gonna get physical with you.” Teddy’s aggressiveness surprised Manu.

“C’mon man, can’t nobody joke with you, nigga? Chill out. Are you okay?”

“It’s that bitch.”

“Who? Whitney?”

“Yeah, man. I was trying to reveal my feelings for her and she rejected me.”

“No man, this is confusing. Wasn’t she your babe, man?”

“No, we were just friends.”

“Damn nigga! You mean you did not—. Okay, it’s alright man, your Black sisters will always be there for you. But isn’t Whitney within her rights to do what she wants with her life?” Although Teddy did not respond to this question it subsequently haunted him.

Teddy felt empty without Whitney. He missed the days they used to spend together: shopping, studying, joking, watching movies and going to the beach. He felt an urge to call her and apologise. He thought he had undermined her dignity as a woman and had insinuated that she was racist. It was not pride that prevented him from calling her but rather what her initial response would be. He closed his eyes and thought about the way forward. He could not respond to the knock at the door due to his preoccupation with Whitney.

“Hi Teddy.” When he opened his eyes, he thought his senses were deceiving him.

“Whitney! Is it really you? I was thinking about you. I don’t believe this.”

“Yes, it’s me Teddy. I was also thinking about the altercation we had that day. And I thought we owe it to us to handle it as mature people.” Whitney realised how empty her life had been without Teddy.

“Oh yes, I was thinking that we should do that. In fact I realise that I was wrong. I should not have treated you like that. You have a right to—”

“Enough about that. I also have to share the blame because I was a bit hard on you. I thought we might do with a little cruising in my beetle. Maybe we can then fill each other in about what happened after that misunderstanding.”

“That’s a good idea. Let me grab my jacket and we’ll be out of here.” Teddy could not contain his excitement. He thought that the good old days were back again. He did not know whether their relationship would change from what it used to be or they would reconcile to be lovers. He found himself in an awkward position. Just before they were about to leave, Whitney looked at him:

“I missed you. I thought I had lost you”

“I missed you too, Whitney. I knew eventually we would be together.” Teddy was pleased that other students were looking at him. His ego burgeoned as he saw those who used to laughed at him when Whitney “dumped” him.

“But I meant what I said though.” Her voice was emphatic.

“Oh, you mean that thing of us being friends?” He wished she would not confirm his suspicion.

“Exactly.”

Having struck a good understanding of and respect for each other, the two drove around Rondebosch, chatting and giggling.

University of Cape Town

IT AINT NO FUN

The gamtoos trees seemed to have been in the service of the buildings for eternity, having dutifully hidden all the wickedness which prevailed in room B42 North. Those gigantic trees had been witnesses to the backbiting and double-crossing which ruled the area. The continual shouts of women had nurtured them everyday, producing in them an illuminating and conspicuous green which obscured from the outside world the evil in the room. B42 North was every woman's dream place which came to be associated with romance and intense love making. The occupants of the room were famous for their hospitality. They spent their last cent satisfying women, making women fantasize about the place day and night. The room resembled a nest for lovers for those who did not know the inside story. Many a woman had been the victims of the two, Siphon and Ren. Ren was studying for a BSc degree whilst Siphon was doing his BA and "squatted" with Ren. They had much in common but "getting laid" was their favourite pastime.

"You know Ren, I am 35 years old now and would have long secured a niche for myself in the corporate world were it not for the stubbornness of this conventional society." Siphon was playing chess with Ren.

"What prevents you from not occupying your rightful place bro'?" Ren was ten years younger than Siphon but they treated each other as mates.

"Every company that I apply to requires a CV, right, which is standard procedure. But they seem

to have a problem with my hobbies.” Siphso looked a bit perturbed and this invoked curiosity from Ren. He could not figure out why someone would be excluded from a job merely because of his hobbies.

“They are mad Bra Sira. I mean, as far as I know, hobbies are your interest and if they don’t like what you do in your leisure time then tough luck for them.”

“That’s right fana. See, that’s why I like you. These chaps reject me because of my inclusion of my most personal interest in the CV.”

“What’s that *Bhut*’ Sira?”

“Doing the wild thing fana, bumpin’ and grindin’.” Siphso stood up, shaking his body to and fro, showing his act.

“You mean you include sex as one of your interests in your CV?”

“Exactly, what’s wrong with that? I’m being honest, man.”

This discussion was disturbed by Buko’s knock. It was very late when she arrived. She had been going out with Ren ever since she had arrived at UWC. She loved him wholeheartedly, but his promiscuous behaviour disturbed her. Her sisters had cautioned her about getting too involved in a relationship with him. She had lost friends who disapproved of her relationship with Ren. She had come to accept his flirting but had hoped that he would change for the better. She looked to

the future with patient eyes, hoping that that day would come soon. In the meantime she could not help the acceleration of her heartbeat at the mere thought of him. Her adrenalin rose very fast at the sight of him.

“Shucks, I think it’s one of these first-years. You do her a favour for one night and then she comes for more. I will tell her to get off my back. I need some peace of mind.” Ren went to open the door. On seeing that it was Buko he took a deep breath and invited her in.

* * *

Ren had gone to one of his dusk-till-dawn parties and had not informed Buko beforehand that he would go to the party.

Buko watched the last episode of **Living Single** before preparing to go to Ren’s room. She had no doubts that since it was a Friday he was definitely drunk. The absence of loud music from Ren’s room convinced Buko that he was not there. Siphon invited her in. The room was dark except for the light from the television set. The filmic montage of the blue movie Siphon was watching made her shiver with overwhelming desire. She stared expressionlessly at Siphon for a long time. She thought of him. He was the witness to all the pains Ren had inflicted on her. He was always there to console her. He was caring, passionate and, most importantly, sensitive towards other people’s feelings. She was disturbed in her thoughts by Siphon’s “He’s not in. He’s gone to the bash.” He looked handsome and collected, she thought. She sat down and was deeply absorbed by the movie Siphon was watching.

After two hours of intense introspection, her feelings fluctuated and her whole body was wet from sweating. The society is so unjust, she thought. It accepts men's flirtatious behaviour as normal but vilifies women who do likewise. She felt it was time to get even. Maybe Ren was also with one of her string of girlfriends. Why should she wait for someone who does not love her? She wished Siphon would initiate something, so that she could reciprocate.

He slowly switched off the television set and the lights and undressed. He thought: "If I make a move what will Ren say? What if she objects? No, it is immoral, Ren is my friend, actually he is more than just a friend." Besides, with the university strict on sexual harassment he might kiss UWC goodbye. So he pleaded with his irritated muscle to behave itself and let go. When it subsided he felt amused and proud that he had just taught that disrespectful chap good manners. Siphon felt proud of his self-control. How many men would have miscalculated that night as a good opportunity? How many irresponsible men had raped and thereafter faced prison? How many times had he seen disrespectful penises standing up in public places, making those men a scene of mockery? He felt very proud.

Siphon looked around and saw the naked body of Buko who had just undressed and was about to sleep in Ren's bed. As she proceeded to bed, she inserted her finger between her bum and underwear, pulled her underwear sideways and let it loose against her thighs. The clapping noise made Siphon salivate with unbridled desire. As a township boy he knew that when a woman did that she was inviting the man. Caught between the rigid world of rationality and the fluid world of emotions, Siphon shivered with feelings of guilt and desire. She looked at him, knowing that she had a spell on him, made a big bubble with her chewing gum and loudly popped it.

Sipho thought that there was much at stake here, his reputation and his manhood. He would rather live with guilt feelings of having “ambushed” Ren than not follow his natural instinct. He had witnessed her moves every night when she was with Ren. Like a cat, Sipho would creep towards Ren’s bed, watch them in the dark, pumping each other’s wet bodies. Sipho would moisten his underpants because of their mere cries of satisfaction from the action. He would spend the whole night masturbating, fantasizing, and picturing himself on top of Buko. In his fantasy she would plead for mercy while he thrust his muscle, indifferent to her pleas. On seeing her the following day Sipho would feel restless as if she were scanning his thoughts. Now Sipho remembered his matric history teacher when he quoted Bismark’s “when opportunity present itself it must be grabbed with both hands.” It was in this spirit that he decided to make a move, once and for all. He looked at her curvaceous body once more, and he felt extremely hot. Their eyes met and it became evident that they wanted each other, her eyes sparkling deep sexual desire while Sipho wanted to devour her. It was as if he was in a trance as he stood up from his own bed slowly approaching Ren’s, where Buko was eyeing him with intense desire. He gently took her to his own bed. He would have liked to say something but his throat betrayed him and it was too dry to moisten words out of the mouth. He then decided to be silent, lest a word disturbed the romantic flow which was apparent in Buko’s conspicuous veins. He closed his eyes and was carried away by his emotions until he found himself the following morning in his bed with her. She had entangled herself with his skinny body like the branches of a grapetree to a pole.

It was nearing six o’clock, the time Ren usually returned from his parties. Quickly, Sipho woke up.

“Buko, go and sleep in Ren’s bed. It’s late and I am damn sure he’s on his way. Go quickly, he’ll

catch us.”

An hour later Ren arrived, rapping lyrics from Snoop Doggy Dog’s latest CD.

“Guess who’s back in the house with a fair deal for your ears?” All Ren’s neighbours were accustomed to his penchant for miming the lyrics of American rappers. Ren looked suspiciously at both Buko and Siphon. He paced up and down the room, smelling the odour of the intense love-making of the previous night. Convinced that something wild had happened, Ren roared.

“Siphon, don’t pretend that you’re asleep. Did you enjoy doing Buko last night? Hey *wena* Buko did he give you the same way I do.”

Siphon tried to behave as if he knew nothing. “C’mon man. What’s gone wrong with you? What are you talking about?”

“Hey you hypocrite, did you stick your stinking thing in her? The smell can tell. Even an idiot can tell that this room smells of love juices.” Ren was approaching Siphon as if ready to attack him anytime.

“Look Ren, any right thinking person can’t smell that in this room ‘cause nothing happened. You’ve really disappointed me. How can you think I would betray you *fana*.” Siphon was trying to calm his friend, feeling bitter about what he had done.

“Alright, I will call anyone around here to testify to this odour in this room.” Ren rushed out and

called Sello, who was still in his pyjamas.

“Tell me Sello and please be objective. What do you smell in here?”

“Man, I can smell it.” Sello was still using the palm of his hand to remove dirt from his red eyes.

“What?” Ren’s anxiety was sky-rocketing now.

“There was sure a lot of *bump an grinding* here man.”

“Yeah, confirmed! Siphon you dipped your stinking *dig* in her. Fool. Hey you bitch, get out of my room and never dare come to me again. Sello what do you do in a situation like this? You know I love this woman though it’s been hard for me to say.”

Buko quickly rushed out of the room as she was used to Ren throwing tantrums at her.

Siphon planted his head deep in his pillow.

Sello, who liked to be philosophical, took the stage to his own advantage. He liked it when his peers looked upon him to provide solutions to their problems.

“*Ja*, this is a very difficult situation that you’re in Ren. But I’ll ask you a question which is basically a solution to your problem. If a fly jumps in your coffee, what can you do? Do you take out the fly and drink the coffee or do you throw everything away?” Sello paused, glad that his

analogy provoked thought in both parties, as evinced by their silence.

“Did I just hear you calling me a fly? You know these Sotho boys are disrespectful,” interrupted Sipho.

“No Sipho, I’m just responding to Ren,” Sello continued, addressing Ren. “If your coffee was hot in the first place the fly would not have jumped in as the vapour would have kept it away. Anyway Ren, you have nothing to lose. As Snoop puts it, it ain’t no fun if your *homie* can’t have a taste.”

Ren grabbed Sipho by his shirt collar and a scuffle ensued. Sipho muttered: “I didn’t rape her. It was out of her own courtesy and she enjoyed it.”

Sello came to their rescue and stopped what seemed like a fight of two bulls. Ren was shouting.

“I let you ‘squat’ in my room and then you betray the trust I have in you. Pack your things now and follow that whore.”

Sipho tried to reason with Ren. “Look *fana* I had no alternative. She invited it. We cannot just part over a lousy thing.”

Ren fumed. “Do you call it a lousy thing? Take your bags and leave now.”

Ren was already helping Sipho pack all his belongings, indifferent to his plea for another chance.

Ren came to realise that he loved Buko but had taken her for granted all the time. He tried hard to underplay the importance of Buko in his life. He had used her to show his virility and the thought of her having slept with Siphos was unbearable. He felt betrayed. The sudden realisation that he was in fact in love with Buko shattered him. He wondered if Buko was taking revenge for all the hurt he had caused her. He did not realise that his legs had taken him where his heart belonged:

“What do you want? Is it not enough that you embarrassed me in front of your friends?” Buko fumed, refusing to open the door.

“Shucks! How did I come here? Okay, Buko let’s talk sweetheart.”

“Oh, you’re still drunk? Next time you get drunk know where to go. I’m not a shebeen queen. I’ve had enough of you. And you know what, I can do better by myself.” Ren was trying to figure out ways to console Buko when the door was shut in his face.

Life became a very dark journey without Buko.

INDECENCY

The number of cars parked outside Las Vegas Nightclub competed with the number of the gyrating bodies inside. The place looked decent and cosy, and the people who gathered there were immaculately dressed. Hats, caps, knives and guns were not allowed. It was a place where teachers talked about their students, a centre where legal eagles counted the number of cases they had successfully defended, business people took pride in displaying their new business ventures, traffic officers accepted bribes; it was a labyrinth in which policemen connived in criminal acts, priests surreptitiously came to buy themselves “something to calm their nerves”. Tertiary students also drowned their miseries in that pool and forgot about the vows they had made to their parents. Marriages had been born out of this oasis, divorces contemplated in this abyss. Trust and honesty’s embryo was nurtured there, and friendships were obliterated there. Friends became enemies and enemies friends. It was the binaric nature of this fountain that made it a favourite place in town.

The metallic green VR6 that moved slowly, looking for a parking bay, caught the attention of the onlookers. All four windows were down and Thebe’s music was loud enough to contest the sound inside the club. The colourful shirts worn by the four ladies in the car illuminated their beauty and complemented their make-up. Vuyiswa and her friends had planned that outing for her cousin, Thami, who had just arrived and was to commence lecturing at Vista University the following week. The presence of these ladies injected life into the onlookers. They started to show off. Some men playfully displayed their Nokias whilst others started activating the alarms of their MERCs and BMWs from a distance. This subtle competition resulted in a cold war whilst the ladies

seemed not to notice. It was not uncommon to see a group of women by themselves and not unusual for any man to show his courtesy by offering to take care of them.

Benjy, one of the onlookers, approached the ladies before they entered the nightclub.

“Sorry ladies, Oh! What a bunch of gorgeous, cuty little pies. Now you don’t want to tell me that you don’t need a man who can take care of you for the night---.”

“No thanks Mr Nice Guy. We will take care of ourselves,” Vuyiswa said. She was the type who seemed to have a rooted hatred for men. She hated opportunists with a deep passion.

Convinced that he had bitten off more than he could swallow, Benjy quietly joined those inside the nightclub.

When the ladies entered, they occupied the extreme corner, which obscured their view of the deejaying box. Xola, the waiter, went to enquire what they would prefer to drink. He was very tall, slim and dark in complexion.

“Four beers please, and make it Hunters,” Vuyiswa said.

Thami was thinking about her new lecturing job, nervous about the type of students to expect and horrified by the notoriety of tertiary students. But the charming man in front of her disturbed her thoughts. Xola reminded Thami of Vuyile, her boyfriend at home. Thami wondered if she was infatuated with him or if it was out of the desperation of missing Vuyile.

Vuyiswa noticed her cousin was preoccupied with other thoughts.

“Hey girl c’mon. Cheer up now. Vuyile misses you as much as you do but don’t be so obsessed with his absence.” Vuyiswa said this knowingly as Thami was so much into Vuyile. Thami intended to smile to show appreciation for her cousin but only a grin came out. When Xola came out with the drinks he could not take his eyes off Thami, and consequently he tripped and fell. The beer spilt over the four ladies and Vuyiswa’s scream alarmed everybody. She cursed, shouted, kicked and reiterated her curses.

“You SOB, my cellular phone is wet, my Police-spectacles--.”

“You dare not label and call people names. It’s a mistake. It’s natural and anyone could have done it.” As she was saying this, Thami was helping Xola to his feet.

“Oh you’re on his side?” Vuyiswa asked as she marched out of the nightclub.

A deafening silence whistled through the walls of the nightclub. The deejay had to stop the music and people were still asking about what had happened. Others had dipped so much into the glass that they honed their talents in telling stories. Distorted versions of what had happened passed from one person to the other, with each improvising on what he had heard. One of the versions maintained that Vuyiswa was too drunk and had soaked herself in beer and had screamed just to get the attention of men. Benjy, who had earlier on been refused company, said all four ladies were lesbians and were jealous of each other. People outside the nightclub who did not see what had happened talked about the virago who had beaten four men and stabbed one. All these lies created

confusion and disturbed the party mood people were in. Amidst all this Thami was left with Xola. The two talked to each other while her friends followed Vuyiswa to the car.

Just after Thami and her friends left, Xola offered to take Thami home. They did not say much but merely listened to their hearts which beat simultaneously. The eye contact was indicative of their deep dark desires. Concerned about their quietness, Xola wanted to say something. Anything.

“Oh, is it possible that we can perhaps meet after school?” He did not know that his enquiry would shock her. She immediately turned to Xola, observed him.

“Are you still at school?” She was more concerned about the occupation of her prospective date.

“Yes, I’m doing my third year at Vista University and am majoring in psychology.” He thought that the fact that he was at university rather than school would calm her a bit.

“Oh my God! From next week I’ll be lecturing psychology at Vista. I’m glad that I have met one of my students.” There was a tone of disappointment in her voice. As much as she wanted him she could not have him.

As she left Xola to join her cousin in their flat she thought “Oh no, I just can’t do it. He is a student and I am a lecturer. Doing that would be an act of indecency.”

THE COMING OF THE DAY

The cell had a frightening dark in it. A cold breeze crept through the rattling window, accentuating his shivering and sneezing. The humid air made him vulnerable to asthmatic illnesses. The eternal noise made by the waves outside had jeopardized his hearing. The warders, once again, had decided not to switch the lights on. The darkness of the room worsened the longing to be with his people. He indolently moved to the only place that gave him contact with the outside world, the window. The illumination that it shed into the dark room was like the hope that he believed would brighten the chaotic world outside. It was that very hope that made him determined to stay in prison. He watched thoughtfully the marine beauty of his motherland. He looked with pride at the point where the great waters of the Indian and Atlantic Oceans converged. He wondered about the marvellous ideal when all views of humanity would run in one solid body, when white and black would merge. He gazed absentmindedly at the waters of the Indian Ocean that nourished the rich while the poor souls swam in poverty. Waters that looked so natural yet had made many souls wallow in obscurity. He inhaled the rejuvenating breeze which brought back memories of when he had lived a normal life. But the thought of how he was part of a great tradition made him proud. He was not the main player but merely a continuation of a tradition from time immemorial, spearheaded by the likes of Nxele Makhanda, Jabavu, Tambo, Mandela. Makhanda's courage and bravery, the legend that he swam from the island to the coast, swelled him with pride and determination. But the longing in his heart made him weak and nostalgic. News from the land of the brutality of the security forces made him despair. It was his twenty fifth year in Robben Island but each day passed just like the other.

Mncedisi had landed there in his early twenties; he was ageing and his greying hair and baldhead bore witness to that. He looked at the photograph he had when he landed. It was strikingly different from his present physical frame. His photo captured a figure that had posed for a hand-clinched ANC salute, a strikingly handsome face and an upright frame. His hunched shoulders stood in contrast to those in the photo. He had been to Lusaka, trained as a soldier for guerilla warfare and had been involved in many military operations. He had fed on snakes, had drunk the dirty waters of the Niger, had fallen prey to ants and smaller insects as he had slept in the bush, and had sharpened his senses by always being on the alert. Life in the bush had been good. It had been an intersecting zone for conflicting cultures. His misconception about the uniformity of African peoples had been obliterated as he had come to realize the differences. He had fought, been wounded, and come to learn the value of collectivism. The bush had been a museum of agony and pain for him. He had lost all his three brothers, who had been mercilessly ambushed, so it had been alleged, by the security forces. The blood from his amputated leg still dripped profusely in the eye of his mind. The bush was a trench of death where bodies of friends were buried in one big hole. Soldiers had no graves, the ever-hungry earth swallowed them.

The irritating bell calling all prisoners for supper and counting disturbed Mncedisi from threading the thin line between his prison and soldier life. Clad in green overalls, a queue of men, old and young, who seemed deeply absorbed, patiently waited their turn for the meal. The warders monitored every movement of each prisoner, disallowing any conversation between groups of prisoners. It was a monotonous life. The prisoners' eyes harboured defeat and disillusionment but a subtle hope seemed to brighten up this deep and dark despair. The news of the youth who were butchered, tortured and massacred by the police made their hope even more oblivious. The more chaotic and rebellious people became, the more brutal and repressive the police were in their

response.

A thin mattress carelessly spread on the cold cemented floor had strained his pelvis for decades. Cockroaches and rats roamed around freely, making the old newspapers and books their home ground. They were the only company that Mncedisi had in the room and he never bothered to chase them away. Their presence alleviated the stress and loneliness. As he slept on the mattress, reading Trevor Huddleston's **Naught For Your Comfort**, the rats climbed on him and he enjoyed their company. A pile of letters, the only communication from home, were reread a thousand times.

He managed to force his memory to put together the flimsy pictures of his arrest. His involvement in the struggle had made him one of the most wanted people by the police. He was eventually caught and the misery and torture of that day obscured all other happenings. It had been snowing and almost everyone had kept indoors. Mncedisi had been in his bedroom enjoying the joys of manhood when he heard the sound of an automobile outside. On peeping through the window he had noticed that his house was surrounded by armed policemen. He had not even tried to hide or run away. The police had stormed into the house as if attacking a dangerous bank robber. They had handcuffed and assaulted him, swearing, *Jy sal waarheid praat, kaffir*. When Nomsa had remonstrated against the ill-treatment of her husband, she had been kicked in her tummy.

Three weeks later, Mncedisi had received a letter from his wife informing him that she had had a miscarriage after that fateful kick. He had subsequently been bombarded with news that made him sob all day. Five years after his imprisonment, his father had been mercilessly killed by comrades. He had been stripped naked in front of the entire township by a group who were

imbued with zeal. He had been forced to drink a litre of petrol and had been given a tyre and a cigarette lighter to set himself alight. He had done as commanded and, when the flames were engulfing him, he had been stabbed and stones thrown at him. This had been worsened by the subsequent death of his mother, who had committed suicide. His presence at her funeral could have made him realize that he had not been dreaming and that all was real, but the refusal by the prison authorities for him to attend the funeral had an adverse effect on him. He had had a very strong bond with his mother and had been the closest person to her. When he had heard the news that his wife had eloped with a man who had impregnated her, and that the same man had impregnated Mncedisi's and Nomsa's daughter as well, he seemed to become immune to pain. He only mumbled something like "Is this the price I have to pay for the struggle?".

Drums of freedom were beating very loud. Everywhere people talked about freedom, in the locations, villages and farms. At schools teachers ignored the syllabus and gave pupils long lectures about their involvement in the struggle. In buses people became heroes of the Movement, sharing ordeals of their participation in the struggle. In churches priests emphasized the emancipation from Israel and they posed as Moses. Everyone became a champion of the struggle. Every soul claimed to have been vocal in the cause of the people and almost every member of the society claimed to have been in exile or in the war camps of the liberation army. The excitement was not only inland but on the island as well. Prisoners danced and sang, even rapists and robbers claimed to have been in prison for political causes, for following Nature's call and for repossession, respectively. The inevitability of the release of the political prisoners made the warders gaze at the future nonchalantly. Mncedisi thought that all the misery and tribulations would be over. He did not anticipate holding any government position because he hailed from a peripheral Queenstown township, but the idea of seeing his people free intrigued him.

The big day came. Mncedisi looked for the umpteenth time at the cell he was about to leave. He felt attached to it and tears ran down his hairy face as he was about to step out of the door. He felt indebted to the cell, he thought about the camaraderie of the rats and the cockroaches, and felt helplessly lonely.

When the gate was opened for all the prisoners, fathers, mothers, sisters, brothers, aunts, sons and daughters ran to welcome them. A plethora of kisses and hugs were exchanged and Mncedisi was there but not part of the excitement. After twenty nine years in jail there was nobody to welcome him home. He had a very quiet day. The streets of all the locations were abuzz with activities with cries of "Welcome Home, Comrades". Mncedisi had no home. Both his parents were dead, his three brothers killed in the camps, whilst his wife and daughter had eloped, and his house sold. Nobody in the neighbourhood seemed to recognize him.

A new breed of comrades was now in the forefront. They drove huge automobiles, did not say anything but merely echoed liberal sentiments. Educated, suave and sophisticated, the new crop carried laptops and cellular phones and were time-conscious and panicky to anyone who introduced talks about mass meetings. They looked more like fashion designers than politicians. All these new developments shocked Mncedisi.

Mncedisi was not given an invitation to the welcoming rally held for ex-prisoners. In spite of this Mncedisi had a glimpse of the proceedings from the small Nokhaya Store's black and white television. He watched his fellow former prisoners approaching the podium with ululations from the whole stadium. This hurt him deeply. He thought it unfair that he was not part of the

celebrations. All his worthwhile attempts were now declared futile. Even among those watching television with him in that tiny shop, no one acknowledged his role, they simply cheered those on the screen.

Time flew, and people seemed to have forgotten that there were people who were arrested for political purposes. History, however, engraved certain individuals in its museum as the fighters for human rights, individuals whom Mncedisi had shared his political life with. They had decided not to know him, nor did they bother to know about his whereabouts. Life was pouring disappointment and misery onto him.

That Saturday morning wore a weary facial outlook. The OK supermarket was a beehive of activity as people went about shopping. A solitary figure with a placard around his neck was a source of irritating to all the shoppers. "PLEASE HELP ME. I'M DESTITUTE. I WAS A LIBERATION SOLDIER AND A PRISONER FOR TWENTY NINE YEARS." People simply sneered at him, "He's lying. They like taking chances."

Those were the pains that Mncedisi had to deal with daily.
