PROLOGUE

He'd hardly slept a wink. His demons kept him awake. He tossed and turned as his wife snored softly beside him and their youngest child slept peacefully in her cot at the foot of their bed. In the distance the early morning trains had started running. The world was making plans to wake up as he struggled to sleep.
His head felt swollen from the fears, the worries and the thoughts that vied for attention inside it. The back of his neck was sore, itchy or just a combination of uneasiness. They were signposts to his nemesis - stress. This could lead to a stroke, the family doctor had warned over and over again. "Avoid these at all costs," the soft-spoken GP genius had said, looking each time like he'd never himself had a personal brush with insomnia other than what he learned at medical school. The man was a picture of good health, everything the sleepless sod tossing and turning in bed now looked like he'd never be.
At some point he cried out like someone waking up from a bad dream. Only he wasn't dreaming because sleep continued to elude him. He was wide awake: "God help me."
But even the Almighty, it seemed, was catching up on His own forty winks at the time. Except for the staccato breathing of the two souls in the bedroom with him, and the rail commotion on the other side, everything was all quiet. Any given cemetery would have been nosier at the time. Even his two dogs, after a night on the prowl in the yard, were getting ready to knock off and catch up on some snooze after concluding their nocturnal obligations.
He went into the kitchen for a jug of water. He'd already done so three times previously, stopping on each trip to check the time on the grandfather clock in the lounge – 9, 12, 2, 4 …
It told the correct time with chilling regularity, as if it was its chronological duty to remind him of the woes of his sleeplessness.
That very morning that was threatening to dawn was his last. He had to pay off a lot of debts that ran into several thousand Rand. This was more money than the salary that was surely, at this time of the night, day, already in his bank account, could accommodate. The salary treated his bank account like a half-way stop: it came and went at amazing speed.
The thought struck him that the total of his debt woes was inching closer to a million.
The ill-tempered plumber was coming that morning. He owed one or two loan sharks. Those who were not coming to him expected him to report to them with their cash, which he was certain he'd not scrape together once all the capitalists with preferential access to his bank account were done raiding it.
Twenty-three individual payments he had to make in a few hours!
At the most, he only had good money for six.
After the bond and the repayments on the cars; school fees; the accoutrements overflowing from the wardrobes – mostly his wife's – and other vanity items around the house bought on hire purchase; all that was left was not even enough to buy a week's food ration for a moderately undemanding boarding student .
But everybody was expecting their money from him.
He looked around the bedroom, his eyes adjusting to the minimal light available inside. Just a few years ago when they moved in to the house as newlyweds, this was one part of the house that was a sanctuary for husband and wife. They played their games here; pillow games. This is where they made their vows to always be together, come hell or high water. But these days, as

his troubles mounted and they grew apart, he came here to brood and stare wide-eyed into the night as she lay asleep, untouched by his ghosts.
Very little had changed in the room, just the couch had made way for Ntando's cot. The glossy white radiating off the doors of the built-in wardrobes seemed to throw colour at the fancy bedding, which was, as a rule, always of a lighter shade. "No drab colours in the bedroom," the wife's mantra ran. In the ricochet of brightness, the room almost looked like a night under the stars. But presently, the karma promised by the bright paintwork and linen did nothing for his moods. He stood up; he sat. A few times he decided he felt better standing as the weight of lying in bed seemed overwhelming. Even as he stood up to pace around the room, his wife and daughter slept peacefully through his raging storm. Just two of the people he knew he loved. They did not deserve this dark cloud hanging over him.
That's when he decided he had to end it.
After years of fighting the same losing battle, it was time he had to let go.
If he spent just one more night like this, he was sure it would be in a bed in a psychiatric ward. That's one route he was going to avoid.
From the little light that was beginning to creep in he could make out a lot of what were his sleeping quarters. And he knew this was the last thing he'd remember of it, if the dead too had memories.
His wife stirred, only just. She revealed the back of a spotless right leg that in less gloomier days he used to tease with his lips like someone working through a slice of watermelon on a hot summer's day.
He quickly looked away to rest his eyes on the humungous Mont Clare, then panning his vision to the matching pedestals and dressing table. The only difference between this bedroom suite and the Odyssey that came before it was a whole twenty-two Grand.
They had bought it, like most things, because his wife insisted "my house will not look like my grandmother's".
The only plus to be said for it was that Sleeping Beauty looked more serene, a femme fatale best left to her slumber. In its felicity, her face was almost mocking his depression.
He thought against kissing everybody goodbye as this would mean going into the bedrooms of his two other children, both boys, and thereby risk stirring the fickle light sleepers.
No.
The first to jump into the car even when they could walk, this was one trip they will have to miss. It was his alone.
I will die alone, a voice he was sure wasn't his repeated somewhere inside the recesses of his head.
It was only when his wife re-arranged the pillow underneath her head that it occurred to him he'd said the words out loud.
I will die alone, he repeated, now only as if to reassure himself there was no one else living in his head.
A teardrop fell into the exposed flesh in the neck of his pyjama top. He did not recognise the face that fleetingly caught his attention as his frame inched past the mirror. Mechanically, he swung back into position so he was staring at himself again. It was a cadaverous face he imagined straight out of a horror movie. "Who are you?" he demanded of the phantom staring back at him, in the acid tone one reserved for intruders.
I must die; I will die.
He was in a trance. If death came right that minute, he'd not have felt a thing.

This is how he wanted to go.
A lone man, troubled by his recurring thoughts; minus the indignity of pain.

CHAPTER ONE

Menziwa graduated cum laude with a bachelor's degree in architectural design. He was also top of his class in the diploma he did in Durban, where in his third year he tutored design theory and architectural history to first year students.

When he began the university course, a few students who had attempted entry without the technical know-how gained from the diploma told him they were initially rejected for the degree. They were now returning, better armed.

The rumour bandied about – for that was what it was for Menziwa, was that the technical background 'you get from the diploma stands you in good stead when you do the degree.'

Robert Humes, who was among those returning with the diploma, perpetuated the lie: "A lot of people don't get accepted into the degree because it is felt for some reason by people who interview them that they are not ready for the degree. So what they have done is gone and did the diploma first, like me."

Speak for your dumb ass, Menziwa, had resisted the urge to say. He knew he did not fall into this category, and those who had the temerity to ask why he took the circuitous route were told the truth: I tried the degree because the diploma did not lift my sails. I wanted more.

The skeptics who offered the course soon learnt Menziwa did both for the very reason a brainy young student with time on his hands would usually advance; the diploma was too easy to do so he thought the degree version would prove more challenging. But alas, it was not to be – he found both easy sailing with marks, year on year, to prove he had the technical nous for his chosen career.

He did well.

The three-dimensional mind that he showed from youth, starting with his Handwork projects at primary school shone through throughout his tertiary studies. Had anybody cared to look back, it may have struck them that his cardboard designs as a youngster were the beginnings of structures like the Sydney Opera House, the make and shape of which he'd later absolutely adore as a college student.

When Menziwa later learned that Jorn Utzon was inspired by the shapes of the sail boats he saw coming in and out of the harbour, he knew architecture was his calling, if indeed it was a field of work inspired by the environment.

At 14, he'd sketched a believable model of a house he said he was going to build for his mother 'when I am big'. The sketch still stood proudly in one of his mother's prized photo albums.

He was recommended for the tutoring job by a lecturer, Ravi Naipul, who had eavesdropped on Menziwa's group discussion in Visual Communication. Menziwa, according to Naipul, was virtually caressing the shape and work that went into the construction of the Sydney Opera House.

… at the mouth of a piece of land … twelve cement shells … looking like wind-filled sails …

This was a tutorial Menziwa would give in three years, each time more poetic than the previous one.

At university, he missed out on a trip to Australia when a three-week faculty exchange programme allowed only one student to go.

In the seven years he'd lived in two of the country's world-class sea-side cities as an A-student, he'd grown estranged to his hometown where the lingua franca of his peers was restricted to their mother tongue. He'd added two more indigenous languages to his repertoire, which both rolled off his tongue with the masterly ease of a native.

But it was architecture around which his whole world revolved. He felt it was a language on its own that, had it been available for everyday use, would prove even more romantic than French. For fun at tech and varsity, he played in the senior soccer squads of both institutions. “If we were in a college in the US, you’d have the cheerleader throwing yourself at you.” This was said in only his second year at tech, an observation made by a bearded chap called Marvin, who leveraged his friendship with Menziwa to find consistent company for his bed. Marvin reminded him of a girl from his high school days whose name now eluded him. It wasn’t that Marvin didn’t have a charm of his own, mind you. Their admiration for each other was reciprocal: while he envied Menziwa his football skills, the soccer star just mellowed when the fiery student politician, speaking with a lilting lisp, invoked Mao, Fanon and Cabral.

But despite the near harem their pooled skills could easily net them, Menziwa remained faithful to his girlfriend back home with whom he spoke on the phone every Friday night. Things were seriously taking shape on that front, thank you very much, Cupid. He often fantasised about the promise of married bliss and prayed it wasn’t over-rated.

With a head for figures, Marvin was now a big shot in the Treasury where he upheld his reputation as a ladies’ man and toned down his political rhetoric. He was one of the suits that sandwiched successive ministers of finance on the way to Parliament on the occasion of the Budget speech.

During Menziwa’s university years they met once or twice in Cape Town but soon drifted apart as demands on the bureaucrat’s time did not allow him the pleasure of drinks with students. “Time is money, Gum Shoes.” Marvin was still one of a dwindling number of people that addressed the soccer star with this nickname.

When Menziwa came back home in the eighth year to start work at Gill, Anderson & Lyle Inc it was almost predestined that in less than two years he’d be playing golf with Allan Anderson and Stuart Lyle and fly-fishing with head honcho Tony Gill whose father Dillon started the firm in 1962 as a one-man concern.

He fitted right in.

He was playing off a sixth handicap in the same course he caddied as a youngster and having drinks at the Gary Player Bar that was off limits to him barely two three ~~decades~~ ago when he was a scrawny little bag boy.

At GAL, where he quickly distinguished himself, he was, in another short year, earning enough for 10 individual breadwinners with good jobs in his own part of the township. Young Gill, never shy to dress himself in borrowed robes, would announce to happy clients that Menziwa ‘is a gem I unearthed myself and took time polishing, hence the shine’. But the truth is that the firm owed Menziwa’s presence to Stuart Lyle, widely dubbed the archetypal architect. Those who benefitted from his good nature never forgot to mention that he was ‘a man’s man’. He knew the craft but was human enough not to hold himself aloof.

‘He’ll do well here by us,’ Lyle said to the brain trust at GAL, ‘and we better do well by him.’ “If I were to lose my sight,” he’d said to Menziwa once, “I’d be more than happy to see buildings through your own pair. I’m sure your dad must be very proud of you.”

The younger man found it unnecessary at that point to talk to Lyle about fathers who were not around to be proud of their sons. But deep down he knew how he wished his father was alive to see him now.

His old man had died in a knife fight fending off a marauding gang who lay in ambush at the railway crossing separating the factories from the township. Many hardworking folk with hungry mouths waiting at home either arrived sans their pay packets or showed up in body bags, thanks

to these vermin. Friday afternoons at the crossing was a slugfest that queerly attracted no more than a shrug of shoulders from past, present and future victims. It seemed like people had resigned themselves to be robbed, killed or both. Not even the police could be bothered.
As rigor mortis threatened to set in, his father's right hand was clasped protectively over something that was no longer there when his body's was wheeled in at the mortuary for the close family to prepare him for burial. His father's lifeless body on the gurney would be the only dominant picture worth noting in Menziwa's head throughout his teens. He was strapped to his mother's back at the time of his old man's death.
When Lyle spoke to him about his father being proud, all that came to mind was that scene at the mortuary when his mother barged in with the baby strapped to her back against the advice of older women. "Let him see, if he can, where his father is so that he will not ask me what happened to his daddy," his mom had said through her tears. At some point as she bawled her eyes out, his mother tilted the baby towards the body on the contraption and hollered: 'This here is your father. He is not coming back to us, my child."
He'd like to think that it was here as a child who could see but not make sense of the situation, that he resolved never to ask about his father. He does not remember a conversation, even as they thumbed through the family photo albums, where his mother talked about her husband or him asking about his father. Throughout the years, even as the house underwent gradual refurbishments, one framed photo had always occupied pride of place on the dining room wall – his mother and father holding hands as young lovers. He battled – and ultimately stopped trying – to see the striking resemblance to his father that visitors to the house often alluded to when they appraised the snap. His grandfather, yes, there I could see traces of myself staring back at me, he'd tell his sisters. He was named after his grandfather who would die when Menziwa turned 11.
In the latter stages of his life, the old man had come to live with them. He distinctly remembers the smell of the old man's pipe, a trio of which took turns hanging from a briar. But with his father - not that he doubted his paternity, all Menziwas saw was a strapping young lad in a pair of slacks, Viyella shirt and a Dobb's on his head. He searched for himself in the face in the picture but saw … well, just a man, his father.
He knew then that he was not going to die like this undoubtedly genial man, his father. He'd do his damndest to escape the claustrophobic existence that trapped his father – and his grandfather in Sophiatown before him – into a life of running the gauntlet against thieves and knaves.
Going to school in a neighbourhood where high school education was considered a milestone was his way of compensating for the missed opportunities of the generations of males in his family tree that came before him. He wanted to read books and gain an education not just for himself but for all of them.
"You are going to be a doctor, my son," his mother used to say to him and anybody else within earshot after each excellent school report.
"I am going to be a BA," the young man would add his penny's worth. In his head, a BA was bigger than a teacher and the clerk at Native Affairs.
When he got his diploma, for a gift his mother presented him with a framed inscription. It was a mission statement where he'd doodled in his child's hand what he wanted to achieve by way of education. It concluded: *please ladies and jentlmens, do not be jelas of my learning*. He was told he'd written the note at age 7.
These days when he was moved to talk about his education at the Gary Player Bar and his other haunts he'd borrow from the brash astronaut played by Jack Nicholson in *Terms of Endearment* :

“It is my qualification,” he’d paraphrase the movie character, “there are only six architects in this town, and I am one of them.” Once when he said this and Lyle was within range, the master architect doubled up in mirth and said it was not Menziwa’s fault that no other practitioner had the confidence to say that about their standing in the field.

The truth was that he was the lodestar at GAL and had he lived in the days of Dillon Gill and had been of the right pigmentation, he’d have made partner much earlier. It took him four years to get the corner office at the present firm and Lyle always argued that such talent had to be rushed through the culvert: “What else is he supposed to do to prove his mettle, move to another firm?”

Of course Lyle had always had the decency to say this behind the closed boardroom door but once the meetings adjourned and the door flew open, the office grapevine spread the word.

If he ditched his taciturnity and made the right noises, Menziwa’s quality of work and presence could have effected a change in the firm’s mast and letterhead a long time ago, even the secretary knew enough to tell everyone who did not go into the meeting of the think tank.

But he seemed to be content with churning out design after prize-winning architectural design.

These days the layout of his hometown had changed. As he drove into town to the office, he proudly eyed the headquarters of the telecoms company and the Standard Bank building, masterpieces that came courtesy of his drawing.

The black steel and glass structure, now a major local landmark, had won him a trip to Malaysia at the invitation of a Kuala Lumpur firm of architects. It was his maiden overseas voyage, the first of many he’d be inundated with in his career.

To reward him for one of a plethora of jobs well-done, GAL sent him to a conference in Taipei, a fringe benefit that in the field is notoriously the preserve of senior partners. He still wondered if he’d have been allowed to go had the Gills not been in hospital for the birth of their son, named Dillon after the patriarch of the family. “Just go,” Lyle had playfully patted his bum, “do you want these sharks to change their minds?”

But when he was sent on a jaunt to Thailand, which he doubled as a 63rd birthday present to his mother, he was forced to stop thinking the worst of the GAL bigwigs who, in another city and another time, would easily have been the vanguard of the KKK, excluding Lyle, of course. Those like Greg Finley and his coterie of bigots continued to look past him as if he was just part of the furniture. Menziwa returned the favour and treated them like shit, best ignored and left alone in their dream world ruled by myopia. They did not threaten him. Instead he found them a great source of personal amusement.

When reality struck – which happened most hours of the working day, the genius of his work forced them to treat him like an equal, sometimes more equal than all of them. Over the years, he’d come to appreciate the chasm between doers and talkers, thanks to Stu – Lyle outside the office. In the entire firm, the soft-spoken Lyle was the man who could critique Menziwa’s work and offer alternatives. The rest, including Gill, were loudmouths he gradually found could not hold the candle up to him.

With very little to say but a fierce game of golf that saw him play scratch for a handicap, Lyle was a cut above the rest. He was everything Menziwa knew he’d wanted to be when he first put pen to a drawing. Lyle had done his Master’s degree – the only one in the firm with this qualification – at the University of Pennsylvania under the much revered Louis Kahn. The crème de la crème of the country’s architects of the 1970s, like Lyle, had studied at Penn.

“Hail the globetrotter,” it was Finley, intercepting Menziwa at the coffee machine.

“Finley, Sir.”

‘“How did it go?”

"Swell. My mother loved it. It should be law that all sons do the same with their mothers, once in a while."
"I see. I guess that discounts me since I'm no longer anyone's son. "
"Oh, shit," Menziwa had said, realising for the first time what a tank of a man Finley was up close. "I thought the lady who …"
"That's my mother-in-law."
"Well, she's still your …"
When Finley interrupted him again he knew the conversation was over. Meghan, the receptionist who did more work spreading gossip than fielding calls to the company saved the day by insisting on approaching the machine.
"Hate to break up this bonding session for you, boys," Miss Busy-body said.
"We're done, Meg," said Finley, "your turn at the trough. He's all yours; you miss him now, the next you know he'll be in Timbuktu."
They both watched Finley trudging down the corridor, his limp – courtesy of a bullet in the Angolan bush while on apartheid recce mission – was more pronounced as the day progressed and his disproportionate weight sat on his funny legs. But as he digested the encounter, Menziwa felt at peace with Finley. Could it just be that he told it as he saw it, no pretenseces and no sugar-coating? Maybe Finley was all bark with no intention to bite. This reminded him, a dog lover, of a breed that had just this tough exterior character but was really soft inside. He abandoned the search in the part of his brain that stored canine facts and figures when the giggling blonde spoke.
"I have a message for you, Menz," Meghan had said in her trademark cheerful voice. "Your sister called."
"Thanks, Meg."
In his rush to get away from the latest update of the office gossip, Menziwa inched past the source without asking which of his sisters had telephoned.
"She speaks good English, hey?"
"Thanks again, Meg."
Meg instantly liked anyone who Tony Gill liked, without question. Office gossip, the variety that she did not start, placed her inside Gill's office way after work hours at least once a week. Outside Gill's wife, she was the only other person who addressed the senior partner fully, as Anthony. If he'd been particularly naughty, she'd put on her school mistress voice and chide: 'Anthony H. Gill.' In this mode, it would have escaped her pretty little head that they were at work, in front of colleagues, not out on a tryst. But like a lover trying very hard to play respectable boss, Gill would try to rise above his rabbit-caught-in-the-headlight glare and remind Meghan what address this was: 'And it is a firm of architects, not an asylum of lunatics.'
After one such outburst, Meghan, in the spur of the moment, had begun the graphic description of Anthony's manhood and its deficiency when she stopped and started crying almost at the speed a coin is flipped. She was summoned to the boss' office, not the boardroom at HR where all other matters regarding personnel insubordination are tackled. Those with an interest in the lovers' tiff said when she left the office, the lair of Gill, as Finley so termed it, Meghan was smiling from ear to ear 'palming down the creases of her frock'. The only frown that came, momentarily, was when she stopped midway through her catwalk stride to tell Finley the dress was a Burburry and she wasn't sure they made sizes to pour all of the lard Mrs Finley carried about her. Point made, she mockingly traipsed to her work station and those who knew Finley's wife took the punch in solidarity with him and stopped laughing instantly amid the cacophony of

stifled guffaws. In victory, she took the first call in with the most melodic tone in the field of receptionists.
When Gill was happy, Meghan would automatically be as jubilant. When avid angler Gill brought the news of a huge weekend catch to the office, Meg would talk of the feat in the plural: You should see what we caught. It weighed a ton!
The only time she'd be unhappy – for the sake of others, would be when the temperamental Gill threw a tantrum in the office. When Gill went home early to mourn the passing of Menziwa's mother, Meg retired for the day as well and hugged Menziwa tighter than Gill.
Three weeks to the day they returned from Bangkok his mother died peacefully in her sleep. "Like a Christian," his two sisters chorused in consolation. But Menziwa would not have minded terribly to ferry her to hospital even if that would have made her a heathen in the eyes of his overzealous Bible-punching sisters. She ran away from them by dying in her sleep, he said. She denied him the chance to save her life. It would be her first and last trip aboard a plane; her first and only skip across the waters. "She died a happy woman," his eldest sister echoed the other and had the temerity to say so at their mother's wake. Why die when you're happy? Isn't this the very reason why people should continue to live?
Back at his desk, Menziwa absent-mindedly scanned the pictures on his walls. The picture directly above his desk was the imposing office building in Hamburg, Germany, designed by Fritz Hoger for a shipping company. It was a something Menziwa had dreamed he could be called upon to better some-day. It was shaped like a ship snapped from a worm's eye view.
-The bank building in town, which came from his pen, was inspired by the earlier works of one of his role models, Japanese architect Kisho Kurokawa. This is the man who designed the imposing international airport in Kuala Lumpur that left Menziwa breathless and totally in awe when he saw it on his trip to the Asian country. His peers in Malaysia insisted in their discussions with them that the future of architecture was to improve the legacy of Kurokawa. Further reading on the Japanese guru, who had written widely on the field, revealed to Menziwa that he designed many first class architectural showpieces not just in his native land but all over Europe and the USA as well. Menziwa knew that he was going to study further at some stage in his professional career. He was eyeing a place at the Graduate School of Tokyo University, the alma mater of his hero, where Kurokawa attained his master's degree and doctorate in architecture.
Designing buildings fulfilled Menziwa. He gave it his all. He had proved himself the glass and steel specialist at GAL, doing it better than anyone else. The only piece of writing competing for space on his wall with his dream buildings read thus: *Glass brings us the new age, the culture of brick gives us pain.*
But he was not all work and no play.
He played a mean round of golf lately. As he warmed up to this circle of golfing friends who were all white and had preceded him by an average five years into the industry, they started wagering the playing holes.
He was driven, a firm believer in the adage 'winning isn't everything, it is the only thing'. He played to win or not at all. He played the game like a man possessed, better than the soccer of his youth where he was a particularly gifted midfielder. He remembers that in another era of his youth he was besotted with table tennis. But this was just that, a distant memory.
He adored the short game of Severiano Ballesteros and had the knowledge of a biographer about the Spaniard, who was born on a farm near a golf course. Like Menziwa, Ballesteros was a caddie who used one club in the makeshift game where balls were often substituted by pebbles.

In Menziwa's case, they fashioned clubs out of wire coat hangers in their own game that was almost invariably won by the urchins who slept in the bunkers after slogging through the day's 36 holes.

Among his prized pictures in the post-university album was one with Nick Faldo at Sun City where the champion golfer was signing an autograph for the star-struck Menziwa. He read in his vast library of golf books that 'Faldo never even saw a golf club until he was 13 years of age'.

Once when he was in Scotland he begged to be taken to Muirfield to walk the ground on the famous 10th hole when it looked like the three-day trip would end in the plenary halls of the World Design Conference. He escaped the long speeches to see the famed golf course.

He never made it onto the actual fairway of course but downed a cold one in honour of Lee Trevino, whose heroics were legendary on the course, especially during the British Open in 1972.

Menziwa knew that someday, like old golfers, he was going to design a golf course, this, as a golf fundi and outside his work as a professional architect.

He loved the theatre and thought the world of John Kani. He had seen virtually all the plays the statesman of stage had starred in from *Woza Albert* to *Nothing But The Truth.*

-Everything Menziwa did, he did well. He worked hard; he played hard.

All this was clear from the day a six year-old kindergarten kid alerted the Matron to a fire in the kitchen of the crèche that was started by a sleeping cook. Legend had it that had the fire brigade been alerted a minute later, the whole building would have been gutted. For this act of bravery, running to the Matron's office screaming his lungs out, Menziwa was rewarded with a new school uniform to start Sub A at his first school in 1974. When his youngest sister - the baby of the family started at the same crèche, she walked into this fine legacy left by her departing brother.

In tribute to him~~his memory~~, she was treated like royalty.

These days, on the odd chance that he's back home at his mother's, he can almost not recognise the crèche as the old building has been spruced up. It has now fallen into private hands and the children are now also taught in English. It is not new, in his mind. It is the first place that inculcated in him the desire to win. He smiles fondly at the memories. Since then, Menziwa had always done better than everyone else in competition with him.

CHAPTER TWO

Menziwa could say without any fear of contradiction that growing up he went through the usual rites of passage, always acquitting himself well. He was often reminded of this whenever he bumped into childhood friends who were mostly now grown men and women with their own brood in tow. Life then pretty much centred around school and football on the bald pitches. He first came into contact with grassed fields at college.

He agreed with those soccer pundits who argued that the cramped township playgrounds made dribbling wizards out of those who were forced to play on them. True to form, as soon as he started to play with people of other races who came from more privileged backgrounds and were accustomed to grass turf, they all played the uninspired long ball. The almost unplayable pitches of his upbringing forced township kids to be crafty ball jugglers. This was his style of play, the way soccer was supposed to be played.

But soccer wasn't his only childhood pursuit. He grew up swimming with his playmates in the rancid water that formed a stream on the outskirts of the township. Its source was the engineering factory – a large employer of locals, where it was used to wash huge industrial pipes and ready them for delivery.

Later in life when Menziwa saw Julia Roberts as Erin Brockovich, he lamented the inaction of the mothers in his community who saw no need to speak up against the contamination that Pipecor had exposed generations of children to. But strangely, even when the factory was forced to close down because of the toxicity of its operations, not so much as a bad cough was reported among the children who grew up in the proximity of such environmental hazards. He laughed about it with his contemporaries now and then when they ran into each other and swimming, whether in clear blue pools or murky waters, was the subject. "That's why you guys haven't been able to produce one half-decent Olympic quality swimmer," someone had joked the other day.

When people in Limpopo and Kimberley took their case to the courts of justice in London, Menziwa and those who shared his childhood wondered out loud why the asbestos dump they played on did not have such adverse effects on their health.

"We're like the prostitutes in Kenya somewhere who were reportedly immune to HIV/Aids even after years of unprotected sex," said Smuts, an old friend.

"Exactly," seconded another, Luntu, who now worked as a medical technologist.

The sex workers in Nairobi, whose bodies patently resisted the killer virus, plied their trade in the Majengo red-light district. They were the modern curiosity of the medical fraternity.

When they were not playing on the dump where their older brothers were hauling car tyres up and down in fitness training, they were in the dusty streets making wire cars or engaged in acts of juvenile delinquency like stealing peaches off the trees of their neighbours.

Oftentimes they would go to the dairy farm nearby to buy sour milk and innards of beef and pork and raid the orchard when the owners where distracted – which was virtually all the time.

But the wire cars were a pursuit that gave Menziwa vast bragging rights. He fashioned the Valiant, a status symbol of his youth on the township roads. He did what could easily have been used as a prototype of the GMC van, another contraption that ferried goods and people in his childhood. Up to this day, the mere sight of the GMC in American flicks left him hankering to the good old days.

The downside to this boyhood pastime was a nasty character called Slow, a local bully. He made it his duty to trample on Menziwa's cars if the latter so much as suffered the imprudence to deny him a turn at the 'steering wheel'.

Slow: “Let me play.”
Menziwa: “I’ll give you in a little while.”
Then poof, Menziwa’s work would shrink under the other boy’s stomping feet!
There’s a picture of Slow that refuses to leave his memory, even now in adulthood. He’s dragging Menziwa’s car behind him, not ‘pushing’ it; driving it, like all other boys. This is clearly not his intention. He does not want to play. For each two steps he takes forward, he takes three to the back, stopping only when he can feel Menziwa’s car shriveling underfoot. People are watching, even the adults who only needed to raise their voice for Slow to stop. But no, they just watch the antics of the boyhood terror.
Though he sees this through tear-filled eyes, it is a picture that comes to Menziwa in technicolour. Whenever he sees an act of bullying, this is a scene that returns to play itself out in his head.
Carrying his mangled wreck home came to represent Menziwa’s lot; the sneer on Slow’s lips a haunting climax of his defeat at the hands of his nemesis. Slow represented everything Menziwa came to detest in other boys on the opposite end of his meek nature. Slow carried a knife as early as 12 and, at around sixteen, he packed a gun and cocked it quicker than most characters in the Western flicks they watched in the school hall on weekends.
He knew for certain that he hated Slow on the day that the bully flattened his signature work – a double-decker bus. He wished him instant death. Menziwa was inconsolable. His mother heard him before she could see him when he got home. That night he was asleep despite the supper of his favourite dish, samp and *mala-mogodu*.
Slow, who started drinking beer before all of his playmates, would never turn 18. He died tragically outside a tavern in the wee hours of one Saturday morning.
When other boys celebrated the beginning of a life with girls away from the doll house, Slow was interred.
“What would have become of him had he lived?” a friend once asked years after their Matric.
“He’d have died again already,” another said curtly before everybody collapsed in sniggers at the sad prognosis.
Years later when memories of his childhood came back to him, Menziwa stopped fighting the bad karma induced by the spectre of Slow. The twerp was just cut from a different cloth to his peers.
While other kids were laughing and playing in images of their past that returned to Menziwa later in life, the memory of Slow exclusively attracted the horror of his ill-fated young life. He had stabbed Rodney when the other boy did not want to share his orange. Rodney had to learn to use his left hand to write as the right was thereafter contorted into a grotesque shape. It looked like the hand of an awkward bowler in the game of cricket.
Once during the school holidays, a group of boys were home alone in a neighbour’s house. The boy who had invited his friends over – they called him Digger in street football – asked everyone to play outside as his mother would have objected to him having his friends inside the house. This was a simple rule of the time, respected by everyone else who played in their neighbours’ yards. But in his sick young mind, Slow always found it necessary to exempt himself from every little rule that governed their young lives.
He was alone inside the house with a full box of matches.
In those days very few homes had doors leading to the bedroom and the dining room from the kitchen. At Digger’s, like every other second house, there were curtains separating the rooms. Slow had put newspapers under them and managed to set the house alight.

When Digger cried because he couldn't extinguish the fire, Slow was laughing his face silly. The only thought in every boy's mind was to run home so to be exonerated when the rod of strict parents came.
Digger cut a forlorn figure as he sat and watched – alone – his parents dream burning down to a cinder. When the fire brigade trucks came, all that could be salvaged was of no use to the Mhlambis.
It did not surprise anyone that MaNnana, Slow's overly protective mother fought tooth and nail to defend the honour of her son. She affectionately called her young weasel Boykie, an obvious diminutive of 'boy' for a crook who'd die young.
He could not have set that house aflame because she knew for certain that he did not have money. Where then did he get the box of matches, she asked. 'Blame it on whoever bought him the matches.' Her argument won the day when not a single adult in the neighbourhood could unravel the poser of how the suspected arsonist got to be in possession of the match sticks.
When Menziwa started reading terminology and concepts that defined deviant human behaviour, he was sure 'habitual offender' aptly captured the character of his childhood playmate.
Name any act of juvenile delinquency and Slow was sure to have been guilty thereof at one stage or another. How the young hoodlum escaped incarceration at the infamous *stout skool* boggled the mind.
The first time Menziwa saw adults engaged in the physical position of the act called sexual intercourse, it was Slow who had led his young charges to sneak up on the unsuspecting couple in the veld. The sight of the man's bared bum troubled Menziwa for a long time after the incident. Sex must be a disgraceful thing if it made a man expose himself like that.
Slow was the first child Menziwa knew who had been the target on an early morning police raid. When parents reprimanded their children for bad behaviour, they'd warn that the culprits would end up like Slow. This was a curse that no child wished upon themselves. The ambition of every child in the vicinity was to have nothing in their conduct that would attract comparison with Slow. Being evil, in the colloquialism of the neighbourhood, was no longer like Satan but Slow.
Menziwa was convinced Slow was born to achieve the heights of notoriety serial killers were capable of. The only good thing Menziwa hoped those who had the misfortune of sharing Slow's childhood derived from the experience was the knack of smelling a bully from afar and avoiding contact with such unpleasant characters. He knew, thanks to the tragic life of Slow, that he was never going to be bullied again.
In the one public spat he'd had with Gill, he compared his boss to a school-ground bully and reminded him that the GAL offices housed 'a firm of architects, not an asylum for lunatics'.
When they found time to speak, Menziwa told about his hate of bullies, whether in the conventional, corporate or whatever guise. "I will not say that I know what you've been through," the boss man had said, "but take it from me: you will not be bullied in this firm."
The architect was born at around their time in primary school where they were expected to craft work for a subject called Handwork, which many looked at derisively, in retrospect. Menziwa came with strange designs, like the double storey house complete with a couple sleeping in one of the top rooms.
"Where did this idea come from?" asked a sufficiently chuffed Miss Ndlela.
"It just happened," said the shy pupil, who was by then accustomed to being congratulated on his top-of-the-class handiwork. His coup de grace was a tall cardboard structure that he said was inspired by the one his sister took him to on his first-ever Christmas shopping trip to the big city.

"It had 50 floors," he declared when Miss Ndlela made him stand at the front to tell the class about this building from the top of which he said people looked like ants.
"My father will take me there when he comes back," said Margaret, the only child in Menziwa's schooling experience who wore spectacles. Menziwa had always associated specs with older people, like his own granny, who had eye trouble. Even Mkhulu, his grandfather who died while Menziwa was out to buy tobacco for his pipe, did not wear glasses. Surely Margaret was too young to have the adult problem.
But Margaret's life was full of surprises, Menziwa had noted. Hers was the only father who did not work at the factories. He was at school, they were told, at a big school called Turfloop. He was also the only adult who the police arrested, when he came back home, for reading books. He had books about a place called Robben Island. Margaret's father was arrested even when he did not carry a knife and stabbed people like the fearsome Sing-Sing. Even the man who killed Menziwa's father was not arrested. Well, no, he was arrested but he came back too soon while his father was gone forever.
When he came out of prison, the man was given a position at the white Lutheran Church that was smaller than the other Lutheran Church in the old location. But Menziwa knew that God did not hear the prayers of such people. This they were told at his own Sunday school by teacher Nomonde, who Menziwa liked and trusted to always tell the truth.
When Menziwa's tall building came down like a deck of cards, it was long after school and the marks had already been allocated.
The following day when everyone least expected it, Sechaba and his crew told Miss Ndlela that Menziwa's funny building had toppled over. "It was before the game," Sechaba snitched. Before the game for Sechaba meant school was still not out. Why the praise if the structure could not stand the test of a school day? Surely Menziwa could not keep the top marks when his work failed the test, Sechaba's young mind boggled.
"But it was after class, Aaron," Miss Ndlela had said, calling Sechaba by his Christian name. "It fell, s'true, Ma'm."
They were ordered to redo their work. Many presented the same handiwork with a few embellishments. Menziwa went to town, creating a first – a kombi towing a caravan. For wheels, both spotted enlarged shoe-polish tins painted the same colour.
When they met as adults, Sechaba was a taxi owner driving the real kombi and Menziwa was in his first car, a shiny dainty little Alfa Romeo.
High school was the best part of Menziwa's young life – soccer, the debate committee and intra-school visits. Such trips mostly had repercussions on the Monday back to school. Older boys drank, smoked marijuana and made out with girls at the back of the bus.
It didn't strike him as odd that he was among a handful in the soccer team who did not have girlfriends while their mates began developing an interest in girls. Menziwa remained detached from this craze. Two miserly incidents represented the closest he ever came to intimacy with a girl; one, when he kissed Ntombi, a girl one class ahead who said she liked him. After this incident Ntombi was glad to spread the word that she was his girl. He did not tell his friends how repulsive he found the idea of Ntombi's tongue in his mouth. They kissed, he bragged, and when next they met they were going to go the whole hog. Two was when, for some reason he couldn't fathom, he was alone in the staff room with Eunice, a beautiful little thing who spoke with a lisp. The only reason he did not return the favour and show her his 'thing' as she begged was that she lifted her gymslip first, dragging her panties out of place to show emerging pubic hair. He lay on top of her on the floor but had no idea how to take the process forward.

He was so ashamed.
"Did she give you?" was all every single one of his buddies asked when the lovebirds finally emerged from the staff room and locked it behind them as Eunice was instructed by the principal. "Yeah," he'd lied. He wanted to kick himself.
His mates erupted in applause.
But it pained him deeply to know that he had no clue how to perform the act. A few of the other boys had already had a romp with a girl, if what they were saying was true. It never occurred to him that the claims could just be figments of their fertile imagination.
Outside school meant a chance to earn pocket money and it was when he started going to the golf course. He found dice held no allure for him. The clean crisp notes from the wallets of the larnies appealed to him more. The game of dice gave out crumpled dirty paper money and fights, often with knives. This was Slow's turf that Menziwa had vowed he'd never intrude upon.
His good language skills soon made him a sought-after caddy. But he was at his happiest carrying the bag of Sandy Guthrie, the golf pro who paid well over the stipulated tip. Guthrie smoked the cigar, which he was stingy with while other golfers offered their caddies cigarettes without qualms. This helped Menziwa not to smoke, a habit that many of the other boys began at the golf course. Bushy, who he caddied with, would die of emphysema that the doctors put down to excessive smoking. Norman, his other fellow caddie would smile from behind heavily stained teeth when they met many years later.
"I started smoking at the golf course," Norman confirmed. He said it was difficult to stop.
It was at the course where Menziwa saw BJ Vorster up close. They were ordered to assemble at the 10th for the apartheid Premier's tee shot. Though he fluffed it - sending a grass-cutter that must have decimated the nearby snake population, the assembled golfers, joined in the roar by some caddies, clapped furiously. He and a few others laughed before they could have the presence of mind to think. Before the penetrating blue eyes of Balthazar John Vorster could take them in, they were bundled off, held to dangle mid-air by the scruff of their necks. One of those who meted out this punishment was golfer/policeman Herman Wessels, whose son Roger went on to become a pro golfer.
Menziwa recalled reading somewhere that an observant spectator had ratted on Roger who unwittingly failed to return his ball to its original spot before a putt at the Heineken Classic in Perth, Australia. He was disqualified after officials verified the claim by the spectator, who had apparently tried to bring this faux pas to Roger's attention while the South African was lining up a putt at the 18th hole for a joint seventh-place finish worth US$27 500.
Ever the gentleman, Roger gracefully accepted the punishment, conceding that: "Rules are rules."
But the encounter with Vorster would return to Menziwa a few times when he himself started going to the course again many years – as a registered golfer. Once, when he began playing in four-balls with Finley, he brought up the subject of the Vorster visit: 'My father brought me and my brother to come meet the Prime Minister. We could not see him as there was a stampede to speak to him but I shook his hand when I was in the army,' Finley had declared with a self-satisfied grin.
Menziwa had taken a good look at the man as functionaries – and other men clearly earning their living by being at his beck and call – swarmed around him. The caddie was another man – stiff as a rod in a suit and a tie. He did not band together with Menziwa's group as was expected of bag carriers. He stood alone to the side, almost at attention like he was a soldier in starchy army fatigues.

And he was white!
When he handed the driver and subsequent other clubs, he placed them firmly in Vorster's hand like the Prime Minister was disabled. With no visible handicap to talk of, he was still a golfing handicap because he would hit not a single sensible shot in the four holes he played – yes, he played only four holes and no farther!
That was the quickest fee Menziwa and the other three caddies in the four-ball would ever make in their life at the golf course. They were paid their whole fee for the few holes.
Nothing was done in keeping with the usual course rules on the day. It was not just eight people in the four-ball. There were men with guns on all sides, in front and behind them. Another group followed and cheered every shank. With a whole fairway ahead of him, the man succeeded in missing it and playing into the rough, to wild applause each time.
After the 1st where Vorster's tortured ball did not reach the green, they had played the short hole 11th then the entourage cut to the par-five 17 and 18.
"This is not golf," Sizwe, who was carrying Clive Fletcher's bag had the lack of sense to say out loud. He was hushed like he'd just started talking during a church sermon. The man who called Sizwe to order was a beef cake who looked like he ate two sheep for lunch. His neck was a whole tree stump. He was also the man who screamed 'Fore' the loudest to warn other golfers of missile hits from his offending boss.
At the 17th, the ladies' group that was just about to tee off hurriedly gave way. Instead of the ruckus they would normally have kicked up, the players were happy to stand aside and allow the men behind them to go first. Vorster's driver landed him just behind the ladies' tee and when he passed them after a second amateur shot, they were only too glad to curtsey and smile broadly at the big man. Menziwa does not remember if Vorster greeted the charmed damsels and if he did, in what language. All he remembers is their excited chorus in Afrikaans, returning the greeting.
From his mouth that never opened wide enough; in fact it did not open at all, Menziwa wondered how the ventriloquist could give orders and run the country with a mouth that wouldn't open.
Instead of playing on, the group waited as Vorster pointed at the pine trees and everyone allowed past the human shield of bodyguards listened attentively to what he was saying. Grown men nodded their heads in agreement even before the point – whatever it was – was made. Fletcher and the other golfers, who knew the course like the back of their hands, looked at the trees like they were seeing them for the first time.
Gus Taylor, a hard-hitting golfer with rotten manners and the speech of a sailor, took some leaves from the tree and called his caddie over to put in his bulgy bag. Taylor swore with every shot – that was how he played golf. But Menziwa did not remember hearing one swear word that day.
Only once did Menziwa get a chance to stand within a whisker's breath of the man – on the narrow bridge leading to the tee at the 18th. Menziwa had erred by going first and when he tried to retrace his steps, he was waved on. For less than a minute, he walked alone with Vorster and when they both got off the bridge, Menziwa did not know what to do or say. The deep blue eyes that looked into his were not just staring, they were poking his soul.
Vorster had the unblemished skin of a child and when Menziwa touched his own face, the first thing his fingers traced was a pimple.
He instantly felt unsightly and soiled.
Though spotless and well-fed, it was a face that looked troubled. Menziwa didn't think running the country into the ground and making it a pariah among nations could weigh so heavily on a man's shoulders.

He stood inches taller than the head of state and if he had reached out his hand at that minute, he could easily have laid it on BJ Vorster's shoulder.
Just then, he was shoed away by the beef cake in a grunt that he no doubt had reserved for the caddies and other lesser beings that day.
For a long while the group stood talking with everyone with their arms folded like good schoolboys. At the 8, 13 and 15th, it was written in bold bright green lettering: *If you are taking too long, let others go ahead of you*. Like all other course rules that were strictly enforced, this was waived on the day of Vorster visit.
In his group, the troublesome Sizwe wanted to talk and he was battling to control a fit of laughter threatening to burst out of his lungs. One of the men in suits walked past them and Sizwe froze like he'd seen a ghost. "*Hou jou bek*," the man barked and Menziwa was sure Sizwe had by then pissed in his pants.
After what seemed like eternity the four-ball began to play on, with Fletcher giving lessons to the honoured guest on how to aim a three-iron to the pin. When the shot was finally played, it was a divot that went lower and quicker than a rattlesnake.
Other than the Prime Minister not making it to the green and throwing his iron in the air in dejection, the only memorable thing Menziwa recalls about Vorster's game was that the grass suffered.
But with his tip in his back pocket and the chance to go another 18 holes, Menziwa and his group were not complaining!
Nearly the whole club house stood to attention when Vorster made his way to the dining room.

When Menziwa graduated from the golf course, dough came from part time jobs at the supermarket-chain in town, where everybody seemed to be pre-ordained to go.
When he saw men and women being ordered around by a pimply young Afrikaner who could have been their grandson, Menziwa's resolve to get a better education was further fortified.
Ek gaan julle almal donner, the young man once threatened a group of workers who were not sure how to go about airing their grievances. This was at the time before unions were a feature on the shop floor. The young man – his name was Francois, like the rest of his ilk, was churned out by the unceasing conveyor belt at the orphanage down the street. They had crude manners and were vulgar.
Once when he demanded a sick note from an errant worker, the latter, thinking on his feet, produced a slip from the dry cleaners – the only paper he had in his pockets. Francois contemplated it in his hands, turning it this way and that before asking what was ailing the bearer.
"Smallpox, *my kroon*."
Francois threw it back at him like it were contagious and asked the older man to get back to work and stop playing truant.
Later in life, Menziwa would bump into Francois, now a family man who used the police van to buy groceries with his wife and kids. He still kept his nose up in a permanent snarl, like the air around him was foul. Menziwa had never garnered the pluck to introduce himself to the visibly belligerent sergeant.
The police college seemed to have recruited exclusively from the orphanage. The local traffic department and the fire brigade the second and third largest beneficiaries of personnel from the orphanage.

Kootie, the head speed cop, was proudly a child of Rembrandt, as the institution was officially known. Its products were proud Brandies, a rambunctious army of people with character flaws all round. The human embodiment of their unsavouriness was Slang, a local nightclub bouncer who slithered to within range of his intended victims before they could bat an eyelid. An encounter with him more often than not landed those unfortunate enough to risk it either in hospital or at the morgue. A dense man built with almost twice the material necessary to form any other ordinary being, he ran with the stealth of a cheetah. When former AWB leader, the late Eugene Terre'Blanche rode into town to famously fall off his horse, Slang was at his most hospitable albeit *kragdadig* self. He was the one the television cameras caught corralling the horse out of the path of the prostrate zealot. After this visit and rightwing show of force, Slang openly carried a gun when he was not even licensed to wield a knobkierrie. This fact was reportedly common knowledge to the law enforcement authorities in town. Instead of accosting him, local cops hailed him as a hero – Boomslang, they called out, idolising him.

Menziwa took a gap year after school where he did all sorts of things, from driving taxis, going for trials at the A-league outfit – without success, to finding his first girlfriend. He group-dated with friends, joining the exodus out of the township that kept Saturday afternoon sacrosanct for the movies in Braamfontein. The staple diet of the double feature was always a senseless action film and the climax of the outing – no pun intended, a porn movie. Everywhere around him at this time of the visit to the cinema, couples would be kissing and making all sorts of carnal sounds. The brave would even throw caution to the wind and engage in hanky-panky. The timid, like Menziwa and those in his group of friends would stay with eyes riveted to the reel romps. On these dates, he'd kiss Thembela until his tongue ached.

"Let's do it, man," one of his mates, a randy goat who later became a schoolteacher dared Menziwa. But he was too coy to take the bait, thereby passing up the chance to have this entry in his CV of a youth lived to the full.

Sex took place at street corners or behind the house. Properly, sex as it was meant to be between unwed youngsters was had when the stadium was available. The stadium had nothing to do with a game of sports – it was township patois for an available house when the parents were away, usually at work and the kids were home alone.

Soon they would outgrow Fordsburg and hire out their own tapes for the VCR. They would turn their parents' homes into their own Avalon, Lyric or Hollywood.

Being in love was beautiful. The twin joy of unguarded, uninterrupted, coitus was equally blissful. The repercussions were few and far in between like STDs and teen pregnancies. Those who suffered this eventuality were thought to have invited it upon themselves. According to the grapevine, they ate too much fertile foods, like peanuts and yoghurt!

Many around the time often denied paternity of the children because they either had sex standing up or just once. Huh?

For sure!

This was also the era where some children were born devoid of any physiological similarities to the fathers. These were the children who the elders said "looked like the late" grandfather, grandmother or some other departed soul. They were never disowned but were lovingly raised in the family like any other child. These were the microcosm of the scourge of child abuse, Menziwa and those who grew up in this period would reason, looking back.

Their latter-day shebeen talk would tell them child abuse was as old as time for blacks who apartheid forced into single-room hovels sometimes for families of eight or 10.

“If a nubile young girl has to bath before a virtual stranger who comes into the family as a stepfather, who will blame the man if his hormones get the better of him?” someone once asked at such tavern talks.
Many children were born under such circumstances. “This is technically not incest.”
“But she’s still his child.”
“Says who?” demanded another voice, pausing to release a frothy beer belch before adding: “Norms, yes; biology, no.”
These are the children who stayed home to be raised by their grannies when the mothers got married. Almost every black family in our days had such children, said consensus of the inebriated.

When he left for higher learning, Menziwa did not leave such a child behind for his mother to bring up. The only tears that were~~as~~ shed on his departure fell off Thembela’s Mona Lisa face. She vowed to join him in Durban when she finished school. A couple of times when he was home on vacation, it felt strange to be in her company. It seemed like she had stayed a child while he quickly grew up, leaving a huge void between what they liked and didn’t like. About five years later when she was herself ready to go to university, they had just grown apart with Menziwa, the long-distance relationship having forced them in different directions. The last time they spoke, she was struggling to wheel a supermarket trolley out of a tight spot and Menziwa applied some brawn. They held hands like siblings, looking into each other’s eyes. Take care of my love, Thembela had said before they parted.

CHAPTER THREE

In his second year of studies in Cape Town he was home for the winter break when he happened upon a friend from his high school days, Abe, who said he'd relocated to Harrismith.
From his earliest memories when he was a technikon student in Durban, Menziwa recalled the Greyhound bus stopping for refreshments in Harrismith. The only hubbub of activity in the entire town, as far as his memory allowed, was at the Shell garage where the long distance buses and taxis stopped for a meal and toilet use. Now he actually knew someone from the pit-stop that always fancied itself as a town.
"What do you do for fun there, after you're done waving to people on their way to Durban?" he'd quizzed Abe, who played left back in their high school team.
"Arrest stock thieves," said Abe, his arms flying all over as he gesticulated, like he always had done when he spoke. If it wasn't in semaphore, Abe felt his point was not made. After army training in Pretoria, he'd stayed over at the end of a six-month posting in the Free State town to quell civil unrest.
The house he bought, said Abe, would have enslaved him to the bank had he acquired it around here. "And you, still married to books? You need to start working at some point, bro, you can't be a student for the rest of your life."
It was something he'd heard many times before. It was beginning to have the effect of a stuck record.
"Who will I work for? My mother doesn't need my money."
"Just get a job, for the fun of it. You're black, remember? You're still a hewer of wood."
Abe was in a red VW Golf VR6, a status symbol at the time. Inspired by Abe's wheels, Menziwa would buy the sexy Alfa Romeo 147 when he himself started working. The Golf attracted all the right stares from the girls and left the young and old petrol heads green with envy. Abe drove like he had no intention to go anywhere and when they stopped outside Hugh's, the hip joint where the Who's Who of the township gathered, it acquitted itself very well against the Benzes, BMWs and other vanity machines already contesting pride of place in the parking lot.
The corporal paid for the best hooch in the house and Menziwa held the fort at the table as the man of fatigues pranced around in mufti dangling the keys to the German-made wheels. The keys jangled loud enough for even the blind to see.
George Michael, who had just parted ways with Andrew Ridgeley as the duo *Wham*, begged to have Faith! Faith! Faith! from the girl audience, who were screaming along at the top of their voices.
Other friends joined them at their table and soon one table became two and two became three before the night was over. The best table in their heyday was one with countless beer bottles. "Fill up the table" was a popular chant that won the buyers the attention of girls.
Those with little or no arrows in their quiver to arm Cupid did well if they had money to burn. They could thus fill the table to everyone's delight and get laid as a reward.
People danced in those days like there'd be a ban on merrymaking the next day. Those who chronicled speakeasies in the townships in the era had it for posterity to know that even apartheid failed to dampen spirits.
From his chair and her vantage point behind the counter, they made eye contact. But Menziwa only got to speak to her the next day.

Nandi was beautiful, Hugh Mlotshwa's only daughter. She had two older brothers – twins, who were a menace to society. They could always count on their father's deep pockets to keep them out of jail.

In their sheltered world, they were raised to know money will make the mare go. They drove around in the same car, a black Cadillac notoriously known as The Hearse. Every impressionable young girl in the township in search of fame and fortune had ridden in the long black vehicle, all, almost invariably, to their great consternation. Had Nandi not been of their blood, The Terrible Twins would have had her in their capacious car. She was untouchable, out of bounds to possible suitors. Her only known boyfriend was The Albino Terrorist, the scion of another rich family in the township who was neither a terrorist nor an albino. He died in a hail of bullets when armed men from the hostel added criminality to the internecine violence between township residents and hostel dwellers in the early '90s. The Albino Terrorist, whose given name was the meaningful Paseka as he was born around the Easter period that Christians observed, was about to close the family butchery at the end of a business day when he was killed.

Nandi drove an Opel Kadett, the famed Boss of the Road of the townships. When Paseka died she returned it to his family and drove around in her own Gusheshe – BMW 325i. It was more yellow than a canary.

A local man-about-town, who tried his luck at wooing Nandi, died under mysterious circumstances. Even when his Arbiter shoes were found inside The Hearse, the police were sufficiently persuaded to turn a blind eye. An energetic young cop who had wanted to be the Elliott Ness of the township was suddenly transferred to the Vaal, where he died even before he could make his first arrest.

Despite such a colourful family history, nothing could dissuade Menziwa from pursuing Nandi. When he spoke to her that day, she was in a rush to go to the big city, on an errand for her father. "Let's go," she said and Menziwa jumped in the car with exaggerated reluctance. History would have it that he was the first boy to get into Nandi's car without The Terrible Twins raising the roof.

The only time he'd ever spoken to Nandi's infamous brothers was when they sat behind him at the FNB Stadium during an encounter the domestic game termed the original Soweto Derby – a game between Orlando Pirates and Moroka Swallows. They had food like they were out on a picnic, not a soccer match. They had offered Menziwa and his friend Oscar pieces of their fried chicken. "No thanks," Menziwa had politely declined when they extended a bottle of brandy to him. Oscar, a fit marathon runner, was a teetotaler, thankfully.

Years later when Menziwa had visited Nandi and their first child, they joked in their usually icy chorus that he owed them money for the fried chicken. "I will pay for it," Menziwa had promised.

That day when he drove to the big city with Nandi they chatted like old lovers. She stopped at the headquarters of the breweries to pay for a huge order. She carried a designer handbag with so much cash Menziwa's eyes nearly popped out of their sockets. She spoke mostly about fashion – Gucci this, Christian Dior that, this of Pringle, that of Yves St Laurent … shoes, jeans, cardigans, scarves, the works.

"I know your sisters," she said, "the small one is very proud. She never says a word to people."

"Have you tried talking to her?"

"Nah."

"So how do you know she's proud?"

"You can tell. She's friends with Nancy but has never said one word to me even when she passed me in the street on the way to her friend." He found her face very theatrical; it came alive when she spoke. Almost every word was accompanied by a gesture – a shoulder lifting, eyes rolled or opened wide, a tongue sticking out from behind teeth so white and perfect he wondered where the toothpaste ad executives sourced their models. The lips were sensuous and the pout, when it came, gave Menziwa a hard-on. She continued to talk about Nancy, who lived three houses away from hers. They grew up together and were both juniors of Menziwa's youngest sister, Mbali.
Another stop was Spitz in town. After splashing out on herself, Nandi bought Menziwa a belt and a pair of socks. On their way back it was Menziwa who was driving, Nandi trying out her new purchases, one expensive item after the other. They spoke about many things – most of which Menziwa found hardly cerebral. But when they spewed out of Nandi's mouth, the most humdrum of subjects assumed a certain measure of importance and sounded exciting.
"My father has a child outside and he thinks my mother doesn't know. Wait till she wakes up on the wrong side of the bed. He will rue the day he unzipped his fly."
"Who is the mother of the baby?"
"That witch, Sis Cathy. You know what happened to her husband?"
"Don't tell me," he swerved as he increased speed to cut in front of a slow Ford Escort. The white man shook his hairy fist at him. It was Nandi who laughed the loudest.
That day, for the first time in his life Menziwa stepped into the home of the feared Mlotshwas. As he walked past the backrooms where the twins retreated to at night, Sonny Stitt was playing his *Cleveland Blues*.
He followed Nandi's lead into the kitchen where he deposited the shopping bags on the counter. The kitchen was big and looked like something out of *House & Home*. From somewhere inside the house Miriam Makeba led the Manhattan Brothers in singing *Ntyilo Ntyilo*.
"My mother has visitors," Menziwa could lip-read from Nandi's juicy pout. When the mother finally came into the kitchen to refill the glass jug with orange juice, she was every inch what Nandi would look like at 50. Menziwa vowed there and then that he was not going to mind this one bit. A former Miss Ellerines, the furniture shop, she was like the Negroid version of a much younger Sophia Loren. She did not bother to greet him.
That night, he repaid himself – he had his way with her daughter.

His morning after the night before began on a limp. He stepped into the dining room to stare into the blood red eyes of the Devil reincarnate – Hugh Mlotshwa himself. He had brushed past Menziwa's mother but had the decency, at least, not to barge into Menziwa's bedroom where Nandi still lay sleeping.
"Where is she?"
Menziwa still did not recall ever saying anything in response, if he spoke at all. What he remembered is the long lecture on how Hugh did not breed prostitutes who'd be no more than one-night conquests for township boys.
"You mess with my child and I will spill your brains so you won't remember where the B fell from the A." He wanted to say that he was not studying for a BA but found that his tongue was stuck to the roof of his mouth. As Hugh spoke, poking Menziwa in the ribs with a finger that could have shamed a frankfurter, Nandi emerged from the bedroom, clad only in Menziwa's oversized T-shirt.
"Look at this little twerp. Now you are the *makoti*. Who received your *lobolo*?" He was barking, not speaking.

“Baba, this is my boyfriend …”
“Shut up. Who asked you?”
For a long time no one spoke. Hugh’s flaming red eyes scanned the dining room, moving from his daughter to Menziwa and his mother.
Finally, his big voiced boomed: “Mama, I am not fighting with you. I do not know what to bring with me to a fight with a woman. I was raised to fight my equals. To this day, my father’s voice still rings in my head. I fight men, real men. All I wanted to tell you is: tether your dog, do not let it stray into my yard. The bones I have there are only for my own dogs.”
When he heaved his huge frame past the furniture on his way out, Menziwa could make out the bulge of a gun on his back.
For a while no one spoke. His mother was the first to recover. “Who is this girl, boy-boy?” his mother asked when the storm was over. When she called him boy-boy he knew she was at her loving best.
“Her name is Nandi. I was going to tell you about her.”
“Did she sleep here?”
“Ja.”

By lunch time when he returned home from his social rounds, Nandi was in animated conversation with his ‘proud’ sister Mbali, his mother cooking on the stove. They seemed to get on very well. Menziwa’s heart warmed at the smile on his mother’s face.
Around three in the afternoon, a stately Mercedes Estate was frantically hooting outside. It was Nandi’s mother, more beautiful in her anger. The party was over.
Two weeks later when Menziwa returned to Cape Town, Nandi drove him to the Rotunda bus terminal in the same Mercedes. She had slept over at his mother’s at least three more times but he heard not so much as a bleat from the gun-toting father.
He knew he was going to marry her.

Nandi flew to and from Cape Town until the end of Menziwa’s final year. At that time their first child was just under a year old. As a father, life took on a whole new meaning for Menziwa.
He’d never seen his mother so cheerful. She wore a permanent smile. It was her who insisted the child should be named Thamsanqa, after her late husband and Menziwa’s father.
Thami was a fun child, subsequently the rope in the tug-o-war between Sophia Loren and Menziwa’s own mother.
“I am also his grandmother, that woman must know that,” his mother would gripe, begging for Nandi and the child to stay for three-day weekends, not the two as ordered by her parents.
“You’re not married to that boy yet, remember. He is lucky your uncles did not kill him for giving you a child out of wedlock,” her mother was kind enough to remind Nandi, a message she duly relayed to Menziwa.
It was rich coming from her because she gave birth to the twins virtually on the catwalk, as an unmarried young woman.
By the time Menziwa was ready to walk Nandi down the aisle, his mother had died, succumbing to cancer.
For their honeymoon, they moved into the house in town that Menziwa had always pined for. When it went up for sale, he was not yet ready to buy. But not taking it would have seemed like such a departure from the unfolding romantic script. When he raised the matter with Lyle, the guru pointed him towards Gill’s direction.

"You will never get anything like this again, and at this price. Forget it," the estate agent had threatened. In a week, the cheque that paid the deposit for Menziwa's pad was signed Anthony Hubert Gill. 'This is my children's money, my dear new groom,' Gill lectured, 'it is not from GAL. You'd do well to pay it back.' When the tranches were agreed, the new home owner insisted they were like water off a duck's back. He earned a good salary, husband and wife told themselves. But with two new cars, a 'His' and 'Hers' gift to self, his salary was already maxed out by the time they moved into the vast property.
Nandi was already pregnant with their second son but continued to get an infrequent gratuity from her parents for this and the other need.
The petty cash that Menziwa needed, he made from the wagering at the golf. His star was on the rise and he continued to play good golf. Meghan at the office never missed the opportunity to tell him how marriage was the only way to make a man happy. Life was good. For a long time, time stood still and it was just Menziwa, his wife, their two young boys and the life of credit cards. When their third child arrived a few years down the line – the little girl they had been praying for, the roller-coaster ride seemed to come to a stop, but just not quite. The flashing lights cautioned that they cut down on a few frivolous expenses. They had stopped going to the Cape Town Jazz Festival. The caravan was permanently out of action.
In 10 short years the beautiful jet-set life was spoken of almost in the past tense now. Hosting lunches where expensive bubbly flowed freely, Mozambican holidays, a safari in Kenya and mixing with people who did not earn money but knew how to spend it quickly became a blur in their collective memory. But Nandi insisted 'we could still live a little, hey; it's not like we're poor'.

On a chilly winter's day, they woke up to distressing news – Hugh had died after suffering a stroke.
It was the second attack.
"Gunslinger is no more," said Menziwa, more to himself than his aggrieved wife.
"Don't ever call him that," Nandi spat.
She'd never looked more serious, and menacing.
Hugh was buried in a lavish funeral ceremony that his wife insisted should befit a man of his calibre, complete with a R75 000 casket. The tombstone unveiling was another exercise in conspicuous consumption. It set them back no less than a hundred Grand.
After cashing in a few policies, Sophia Loren moved to a smallholding west of the township, leaving the house to The Terrible Twins. She still watched over the family business with the vigilance of the mother hen. We have to count our pennies now, she told her boys and Nandi.
The boys did not like the news one bit. Things started to go south between them and their mother when the twins heard they were about to get a new father, a penniless former gang boss from Soweto. When they gave their opinion, it was that no man was ever going to step in their father's shoes, either in bed or business. They threw their lot into keeping the business going and for a long time it appeared that they had the acumen to expand the business beyond their father's sights.
Things went well.
Nandi continued to get her allowance and assured Menziwa that indeed, there was nothing to worry about on the money front.
Meanwhile, Nandi's brothers kept vigil around their mother and warned the man to stay away. He did not. In the history of gun fights, never had so many bullets been used to kill one man.

Sophia Loren got the message loud and clear. She stayed celibate and resigned herself to ageing gracefully looking after Menziwa's children when she was not behind the counter at the night club, which had now been renovated to add two more floors above the original layout.
Menziwa had designed the new building. It looked like it was leaning to its left, following the setting sun to the west. It was breath-taking and, as if to lend credence to this claim, a whole series of episodes of a popular soapie were filmed on site.
Menziwa continued his love-hate relationship with his mother-in-law, speaking to her only when spoken to. He refused to visit her or use her cars even when offered. "I have my own wheels, Nandi. Why should I drive your mother's car?"
"It's a Cayenne, sweetie. It can work wonders for your profile if you could visit Ndaba and Mumsie in it."
Like brothers-in-law who could kill at the drop of a hat, Ndaba and Mumsie embodied the toxic alliances that Menziwa inherited when he married his wife. They were birds of a feather, a couple perfectly matched by their love for fast cars –always on lease, and parties to celebrate anything, even when their cat had a litter of kittens. They were invited to one such party were guests were asked to bring presents "for the new mom and her cute babies".
Comedian Barry Hilton, playing the lead in *Finding Lenny* was more apt. In assuring a [white] friend that they were under no threat from the villagers who had previously taken him in, he said: "These people celebrate everything. A chicken crosses the road, they celebrate." This was the fake life of Ndaba and his wife that Nandi found so alluring.
Menziwa, a dog man who abhorred every four-legged creature that was neither canine nor good for his palate, did not go. He bought two 25 kg bags of dog food with the money Nandi suggested he should buy feline gifts with.
She set out alone with the kids in the Porsche Cayenne for the address in the equestrian estate. Apparently, they had a blast with the celebrants.
"I'm glad you did."
On the two vexatious occasions they had been to Menziwa's house, Ndaba and Mumsie had, one, asked that the host play something less melancholic than Clifford Brown and, two, that the Glenfiddich be the 18 year-old, not 12. He frowned upon the Jameson Menziwa took with water.
"I'm a paedophile, yes," said Ndaba, trying to make light of Menziwa's souring mood, "but I like my teenagers a bit older."
He'd continued in his dry humour: "What is a few teen years between friends, huh?"
That was the last time they visited Menziwa. Lately, they were taking their matching social outfits to new friends, always of the nouveau riche variety.
These days they made it into the social pages of the tabloids, smiling from ear to ear in the company of other New Money types.
For a while he returned to the settled life of a family man, going to church on Sundays and picnicking afterwards with his family. If they were not Mall-hopping on Saturdays, he was playing golf with wife and kids in tow. It was a normal life that allowed a fresh breeze into their personal space.
He got back to walking the dogs with the boys plodding along on their bicycles. The girls would often choose to stay home when the boys were bonding like this.
When GAL clients made suite tickets available for soccer games, he'd take his wife to the stadium. The children would either stay home with their house help or go visiting to the smallholding where their stylish granny was always waiting to spoil them rotten.

He was happy with their social life. They went to the new stadium in Durban at regular intervals. They visited the Kruger National Park almost twice a year on free junkets. He took her and their brood to Fancourt the three or so times played there on corporate invitations.
But Nandi was at her happiest shopping at places like the V & A. She identified more with the crowd that was the staple diet of the tabloids than those at the golf. At least the soccer she could tolerate.
When she read the newspapers it was always to gush about Grace Mugabe shopping, saying she strictly wore Ferragamo shoes as she had small feet. When she spoke about Jimmy Choo Menziwa had thought it was a martial arts actor in the mold of Jackie Chan.
"Shoes, baby, shoes. No man does shoes better than Jimmy, my Jimmy." When she said this she'd whistle like a toy-boy and remind Menziwa of the beautiful girl he kissed on the first day they spoke. Her beauty could always make him go weak at the knees. As she spoke, she was rolling on the bed, her snake skin print dress teasing him now and them with a glimpse of her thighs or, better still, underwear.
He took her there and then, breathing down on her and after climaxing with him, continuing where she left off: "Did you know that the late Princess Di wore the same shoes," she asked, reading from a magazine. "Take me to New York, baby or Milan. I would love you forever and take good care of your children. You should see Rihanna in a pair of these. Shucks!"
She knew that Menziwa fantasised about US actress Kerry Washington: "Did you know she wore Prada?"
"I didn't know."
"Now you know. All you need do is foot the bill and you can get your own Kerry Washington in your own home."
When she brought the DVD *The Devil Wears Prada* home with some of her shopping bags, it was not strictly for the reason she advanced: "I know you love Meryl Streep." It was to gawk at the fashion.
Once, in a foul mood from a bad day, he accused his wife of knowing more about Cartier than the children's schoolwork. She burst out crying like he'd done her the worst injustice. As she lay beside him on the bed playfully showing him page after page of 'the things you can get for me on my birthday', he reminded her of the day she cried.
She cried again.

Their home was another area of friction lately between husband and wife. He wanted a castle to retreat to after a hard day's work. She wanted to pimp it like the wheels of a gangster rapper. Each stubbornly held on to their view of happy homemaking.
"You said the home was the machine," she reminded him. He was plagiarising Kurokawa, his Japanese idol when he said that.
"It must still look lived-in," he moped, "it cannot have more ornaments in a single room like it was stocked up for a yard sale."
"You protest too much. You asked me to make a home for you and our children. I did not fail. What now do you want?"
"It is a home I want, sweetness; not a museum."

Even when she gave away more clothes than the Salvation Army, all the wardrobe space she commandeered was over-flowing with her stuff still.

The only room that looked like fresh air passed through was the kitchen, maybe because she could not stuff it with perishables. But they still had more utensils, crockery and cutlery than a medium-sized eatery.
To compensate for her extravagance and lack of good money skills, Nandi cooked like a dream. When he started packing the lunch box to the office, Menziwa would brag that everything she touched turned to a la carte. "If it has no veggies," she'd say, 'it's no proper meal, babe."
Each time he came home to culinary delights that in other households were whipped up only on special occasions, Menziwa had learnt to brace himself for the worst. There was money spent, and not just a little.
"If you're not at the table at eight sharp, you'll rue the day you were born," she sang, doing a light jitterbug in front of the stove. It was at the end of another day; another day of shopping.
"You like?" she asked, lifting her small feet one after the other for Menziwa to see the heels she was perched on. "Courtesy of my cousins at La Bohem, baby."
They were ugly bulldog-nosed heels. "I don't like them."
"You don't know the first thing about girls' shoes, Mr So-and-So," she admonished, making eyes at him a la Halle Berry.
When he got to the bedroom, he nearly suffered a heart attack from the figure on the pay-point slip. There were actually two purchases. The bulldogs had set him back a whopping R3 499 and their black San Marina sidekicks cost R2 195. This money could have settled the two months' salary they still owed their helper, he reminded her.
But, in her infinite wisdom, his wife clearly had other plans!
She brandished the credit card for everything she brought home, even the gym thingamajig she never pedalled. It was part of a New Year resolutions haul she brought home after yet another round of retail therapy. The only things she used until then from that expensive trip were the maroon Puma sneakers and matching dress, a skimpy number Menziwa did not terribly mind. "If she had any sense at all," she pranced along the corridor as if it was a fashion ramp, "Serena Williams would make me her personal style consultant." The Puma cologne that came with the sports purchase still lay unopened in the heap under the dressing table.
"I can't use everything at once."
"So don't buy everything at once."
It would be a conversation they would have over and over again, to no avail. At the worst of times, Nandi reminded him of a character in one of Zakes Mda's books. But the difference between the woman in the book – Tumi, and his own wife was that the book character earned money. His wife spent it.
Debts were piling up sky high and while Menziwa was beginning to get sleepless nights, Nandi seemed to be on cruise control, until his car was repossessed.
A lot changed from then on.

CHAPTER FOUR

A week after he'd been to see her, his sister Nomsa called to say she wanted to take him out on a date. The last time they went out together was way back when Menziwa still wore the greasy perm of the '80s rhythm and blues legends. The nearest they got to being together in public these days was coffee at The Brazilian when they ran into each other at the mall. Otherwise the rest of the time they counted on family gatherings to bring them together.
"Wednesday at six," Nomsa said, "l will pick you up."
When she pitched on the day at the appointed hour, it was in an entry-level Kia that looked like something out of a lucky packet: "Get in and sit your ass down. It will get us there, safely and on time."
It was a hired car. She was out on field duty that day. Nomsa was a social worker. As if by mutual agreement, they did not talk about Menziwa's repossessed car or how the Mazda was treating him. The Mazda was her husband's first car, his pride and joy that he was restoring to good mechanical health. When his stately Alfa was repossessed, it hit Menziwa like a bolt of lightning. This was his third Alfa, the second as a married man. Just under three years of driving it, he'd upgraded from the 159, the 'His' wedding gift to this sleek shiny black beauty, inadvertently pushing himself further down the quagmire of debt. He'd had it for almost two years to the day the repo man came calling. The man who called, Tinus he said he was, was clinical, no frills: I am coming to collect the car. When Menziwa handed over the keys after removing his golf bag and other personal items from the car, his head was in a spin. He was four months in arrears. Unbelievable! The shocking state of his finances suddenly loomed large. When the Tinus character handed over the keys to the pimply youngster who was with him, Menziwa's heart sank even further. He wanted to demand the lad's driving license but his inner voice counselled against it: Wrong move. As the car, his car, drove off, he suddenly realised that he was seeing it for the first time as, what is the word, an admirer, watching from outside. He went inside, the dogs yapping at his heels. It seemed like he was a man headed for the gallows. He'd never been that empty inside. Unbeknownst to him, Nandi had all along been watching the spectacle from a slightly parted curtain of their smallest kitchen window. The peep show over she collapsed on the couch where he passed her on his way into the bowels of their home. There was an eerie silence, followed in a while by the clink of glasses as he hauled out the bottle of the single malt. He walked like he was in a trance, soundlessly, like he did not want to wake up the dead.
In the Kia with his sister, she thrust a magazine at him with a page marker on 118/119. Suze Orman. He scanned the two pages to the financial planner responding to a 41 year-old who wanted to know what to do with her R700 000 in savings – whether or not to move it to a retirement annuity. There was also a grandmother who wanted ways to save for her granddaughter's university education, which she was due to start the following year.
He flung the magazine in the back seat as he remembered he still had outstanding bills for his two young cousins whose university fees he was paying. Everything he touched these days seemed to represent some unfinished business in the transactions of his own life. Radio and television shows discussed money issues he preferred not to hear of. Now even women's magazines were becoming a sore point.
"She's speaking to couples tonight," Nomsa said, jolting him out of his reverie.
"We're not a couple."

She looked about her in the car: "The last time I checked, there were two of us." And as if a brain wave had just hit her, she added '*Just the two of us*' and started singing slightly a notch higher than Bill Withers. She had a good singing voice. Despite the commotion in his head urging him towards a darker mood, he smiled warmly and started singing along.
When they got to the reception at The Hilton, she had signed them up as Nomsa and Terrence. Terrence was her husband, an affable bloke who functioned better on the podium, not as a member of the audience. He was a lay preacher at his church. When Menziwa had gone to pick up the car, Terence had insisted on praying while his brother-in-law wanted to just get the car and go. "If I said use it for as long as you wanted, my brother, I'd be lying. I have no urgent need for it but I want it back; not like now-now but I want it back. I want it back because it demeans you, Gum Shoes; it takes something away from you. You should be in your car. I don't want to see you in this car, it pains me a lot."
Terence was the other person who used Menziwa's soccer nickname. He did not attend with Nomsa because he thought Menziwa needed it more: "And I am not judging you, my brother. I'm just saying, please go, take a listen and, if it helps you, glory be to God."
He'd gladly sacrificed his place to accommodate his brother-in-law, Nomsa reassured her brother.
To stretch her joke about them being a couple, she insisted he display his name tag and walked hand in hand with him for a while. Menziwa cringed at the awkwardness. It struck him that he was not physical with either of his sisters. Nomsa's hand in his felt, he searched for the word, incestuous. He retrieved it and put it in his pocket as soon as he found the word. "What's with you now, hubby dearest?" Nomsa feigned confusion. She was good at this straight face act. He put the second hand into the corresponding pocket and strode like a village chief to their allocated table, number 18.
They joined three other couples already seated, these in animated conversation. The white guy, James, passionately regaled the others about what was still on his *Bucket List*. They had just been to see the movie and his wife was going to leave him to his suicidal quest to drive an emergency vehicle at high speed through the city centre, James said.
"Bungee jumping is way down the list," he said, in response to Rajesh, the name tag said, who readily confessed to a fear for heights. If any of the aid bodies would offer him the chance, he'd love to do a stint in Darfur, said James, going down his list.
His wife jibed that it looked like it was already foretold that she was going to be a wealthy widow. "Help me find a young man from the Chippendales, if they are still around."
Nomsa, who had made an exaggerated show of introducing her 'husband', said she still did not know what was still on his to-do list. The other Indian guy, after careful consideration, opined how Menziwa and Nomsa looked alike: "You could be brother and sister."
"We are," Nomsa confessed, "my husband couldn't come."
"I knew it," said James triumphantly. "Same smile, same nod of the head. Look at you!"
"The absence of sibling rivalry must have made for a boring upbringing, yes?" the Indian lady to Nomsa's immediate left asked, peering into her eyes.
"I played no role in the little act of deception," said Menziwa, holding up his hands in mock surrender, "I had a gun put to my head."
James dominated the conversation, talking like he was a curtain–raiser act, paid to keep them entertained. But he did not bore.

As the starters were removed the MC mentioned that the jazz band was playing its penultimate piece, a passable rendition of Shirley Scott's *Down By the Riverside.* When they stopped playing, their exit was met with warm applause.
The MC introduced the belle of the ball and Suze Orman almost sprinted to the podium. She was energetic and full of zest. Her voice came from the same porcelain face that stared back at Menziwa from the magazine a little while back. She spoke fast:
"Money is a living entity, and it responds to energy exactly the same way you do. It is drawn to those who welcome it, those who respect it. Wouldn't you rather be with people who respect you and don't want you to be something you're not? Your money feels the same way."
"This is one of the reasons the rich get richer. If you're respectful of your money, and do what needs to be done with it, you will become like a magnet, attracting more and more money to yourself. For some of us, this goes against the grain. We've all heard that 'money is the root of all evil' and it's easy to have the notion that caring for our money is a task that should be beneath us."

The intermittent applause was deafening.

"Remember, your financial life is like a garden. If you tend a garden carefully, nourishing the flowers, pruning and weeding, it's going to be a lot more beautiful than if you simply water it halfheartedly now and then."

This time the roar sounded like it was going to go on forever.

"Wouldn't you like your financial garden to be beautiful and bountiful? Don't you deserve it? If you treat your money with disrespect, you are actually not giving yourself the respect that you deserve. And when you fail to respect yourself and your money, you actually repel wealth from yourself, and you block more wealth from coming your way."

Beside him his sister, whose face was the younger version of their mother's, was in her element: "Say it, sister!"

"When you start really respecting yourself, those you love, and your money, the result is that you start having control over your money. What follows from that is control over your life."

At this point, everyone with a voice to scream used it maximally. They gave her a standing ovation and even as he stood to clap, Menziwa's conscience was telling him how he not so much as treated his money with disrespect but indifference. He knew how to earn it but, in the gardener's analogy, never weeded it. "I need to change," he said to himself amid the din.
Among the money faithful and the new converts, he stood out like a sore thumb. But only in his mind, Nomsa reassured him. It was not too late to change his attitude towards money, he mumbled as he sat in conference with his conscience. When they spilled out onto the foyer of the hall, every bit of conversation he caught was about money. People were excited and made vows to do better with their money, promising to change their ways. It was like a gathering of aliens. Where did these people come from? How could he and Nandi not have known about this passion?

On the drive back Nomsa was excitedly telling him how he'd never go wrong if he took the advice Suze Orman shared with them. "It is a way of life; the only way to do it," she said.
The truth was that most of what was said was easy to do but he wondered why he just couldn't get himself to instill the same financial discipline in his money affairs at home.
"Speak to Nandi," he said after a while, "we should have brought her along, I think."
"Let me see if I can get her to come with me to our women's club function, which is due soon. Money is not just there to be spent, Menziwa. You also need to sit down with her and let her see reason. Her tastes have to change to fit in with the family budget. It's not like she has a choice on the matter. You did not inherit a million dollars from your dead father. Your father is not Hugh Mlotshwa – he's Thamsanqa Gule and he died without a cent to his name. Nandi has to appreciate that in the world outside the Mlotshwas, husband and wife need to be of one mind when it comes to the family budget. She can't be off buying panties and pastries at the slightest whim. You must be told where every cent goes. You also cannot behave like a thieving gangster who will treat money like it was confetti to be wantonly sprayed around with no care in the world. Count every cent. I know how difficult it is for a man to look at every Rand and cent. Even Terrence does not care if there's any change left after the groceries. But it doesn't mean I should blow it on myself. I can only speak to Nandi with your permission and I'm glad you're giving it. I do not want to see you guys so miserable. You are my brother and I will not lose you to a psychiatric complication because you were counting your losses. People get mad, literally, after losing what they had. You can't allow yourself that decline, Menziwa, you are too special. Please wake up. Please."
"Amen. Any sermon has to end. Why should this one last until the Second Coming?"
"I was just saying. I worry about you."
"Speak to Nandi. I will also do the same. Our money needs to shape up."
"Thank you. Thank you. That's all I need to hear. I love you, boy."
"How I wish the feeling was mutual."
"Shut up."
They burst out laughing.
When she dropped him off, Menziwa was draining the bottled water he took unopened from their table at the gala event.
"I'm not coming inside. Say hi to Nandi for me. And," she was wagging her finger at him, "start showing respect for your money. It is your garden. Keep it neat and bountiful."
"Go home, Nomsa."

After weeks of trying, Nomsa finally managed to convince Nandi to come along to a session of her women's club, put together by a popular glossy magazine: "I think you will like it."
Once they entered the venue, a small but cozy Melville bistro co-owned by a television actress, Nandi knew she was going to like it. A few faces from the soapie were in attendance, clearly very close off-screen buddies.
Ntsiki, the bitch in dreadlocks was as garrulous in person as her small screen alter ego. She was speaking animatedly to a Steve Seagal look-alike complete with a pony-tail. When the man gave way, Nandi stepped in to flash pearly whites and exchange air kisses. The actress was in the red Christian Louboutins that Nandi could have done anything to own a pair of.
"These are to die for," the actress echoed Nandi's words, "but the sooner I find a place to sit, the better. They are killing me." Taking a seat to talk fashion – this was Nandi territory!

The lone photographer asked them to pose for him and two other hangers-on threw themselves around Nandi and the actress, stealing her thunder. She ended up on the extreme left of the picture.
In one night, many television and magazine faces came to life before her very eyes and Nandi forgot that Nomsa was somewhere around, where tables were moved against the walls to make more space.
"Ladies, ladies … may I have your attention please," it was the guy in the pony-tail, lightly hitting some cutlery against a wine glass, "now that I have your attention, let me move quickly to point out this one house rule for the night."
With good diction, his smooth voice quickly had the ladies craning their necks to size him up, and listen. "Seeing that many of you have had the good sense to leave your male accessories at home, both facilities are open for your exclusive use. But to eliminate the element of chance, the urinals will remain covered for the duration of the function."
"Those of you parked in the courtyard across the road, remember to collect your parking vouchers from Elaine," he pointed to a pretty young girl who bowed shyly at the mention of her name, "failing which you should have R25 ready to negotiate your exit."
"I have not read this book but those who've had the pleasure of doing so tell me it is everything you'll ever need to know to make your money work for you. I don't know about you but I must confess that keeping my money is a constant struggle. Even when I'm forced to forego a pair of sunglasses or a night out, I'll be lucky to make it to the next pay date without any major crisis."
"I have been reduced to an admirer of those who can handle their money better. If I have not been led down the garden path by those who read the book, this lady is able to make me – and you – develop a healthier relationship with our money."
"Without further ado, please show some love for author, lecturer and financial lifestyle coach, Phumelele Ndumo."
As manicured hands, many of them dangling car keys, were put together for the petite and suave Phumelele, Nomsa and Nandi made eyes at each other from opposite ends of the room. "Listen," Nomsa was lip synching to her.
She gave her sister-in-law a thumbs-up.
"I have had so many money troubles in my life," Phumelele was saying as Nandi returned her gaze to the speaker from the distraction in the black and white office outfit that had just planted itself a few feet away from her, "my friends were telling me I should be writing about my personal crises than my lame attempts at being a Messiah."
"They tell me people will always see their money going through their fingers like sand. They say I am passing up the chance to give fiction writers a run for their money while I try to fashion myself as a financial guru. But I tell them I will not let up as long as I continue to see even some among them commit hara kiri with a Porsche lifestyle while they were meant to afford a comfortable Beetle lifestyle. Unless I am being stubborn or blind, I see no wisdom in constantly choosing an item that will set you back more than what you have in your purse."
"My simple rule is that I will not have it if it means getting it on credit."
Nandi looked around and she was convinced many of those dressed to the nines for this occasion, owed their sartorial elegance to the credit facilities open to them. Resplendent in a shiny fawn suit, no doubt Givenchy, Nandi was sure Phunmelele had flashed a card or two for that outfit.
Nandi was amazed at the level of concentration shown by the women audience. You could hear the proverbial pin drop. People no doubt had issues about money, she thought to herself.

After her talk, it was question time and more than half-an-hour was devoted to sob stories of women who swore they had no idea where their money was going. For about another hour, Nandi heard the story of her life from the mouths of other women.
The muscled delicacy in the pony-tail returned to thank all and sundry 'for being such a splendid audience, kiss yourselves for me'. Anything stronger than the red label of the sponsors would be for the patrons' own account, he reminded all gathered before him. "Please enjoy our hospitality and make a note in your dairies to come back soon."
Nandi found it very easy to chat to people, especially if the subject were any of the pleasures of life, like good food and a fine taste for clothes. The women she was laughing with were huddled around the sweet chicken, lifting small portions into their plates. It was good, they agreed. Sisi was in the hospitality industry and was on the hunt for funding opportunities. She had a sweet orange scent that Nandi couldn't immediately place and she chatted freely. The two other women were colleagues at a PR company. They gave out their business cards.
"Hey," it was Nomsa, "meet Thembeka," she was saying, dragging a woman who was trying to wipe the relish off the corners of her mouth and hug at the same time, "this is my sister Nandi."
Thembeka and Nomsa were old friends after meeting at too many of these functions. Thembeka was lugging a huge handbag that forced her blouse open to reveal a tattoo on her left breast – an angel. She spoke about how financial advice cost an arm and a leg these days and how blessed they were to belong to such women's clubs. Was Nandi a member yet?
"What are you waiting for, darling? There are special perks to these things."
"She'll join up now," Nomsa offered on her behalf.
Thembeka spoke about the burden of being a single parent. Sizwe was starting high school and Mfundo wanted to spend more time with his father. Divorce, she said, was a strange word his Mfundo's forming brain had yet to fathom. She spoke very quickly, with the hint of a stutter. Nandi said she knew exactly what fathers meant to their sons. She was on familiar territory and, in no time, had Thembeka's undivided attention. They continued talking even as Nomsa drifted away to work the floor, air-kissing this or the other friend with a formal handshake or a high five for some. Nomsa was clearly in her element, a side Nandi had never seen in such overdrive before.
They posed for pictures again and this time with the pony-tail, Ronald, as everybody now seemed to have made his acquaintance. He lingered a while longer around them after the shot and talked about his gym. He was a personal trainer and found many of his female clientele were interested in self-defence. He asked them to drop by whenever they were in the Cresta area. "Come check it out yourself, you might like what you see."
The music in the background was soft and as the bubbly flowed freely, total strangers acted like long-lost friends. Nandi found Thembeka glued to her. They exchanged numbers in the ladies – oops, the gents – where a couple of friends stood talking. The urinals were too close, she noted. No wonder the sensitivity of the men in matters of size. She thought about the story in Durban were a set of brothers, they were cops, she thought, got involved in a shooting incident with fellow patrons after a joke about who was bigger. She banished the thought and smiled at Thembeka who was now adjusting her pants and re-hoisting her mountain of a handbag. It was a Gucci with the sort of leather the ads boasted came from pampered bulls.
"Time flies when you're having fun," one of the PR ladies said, "I'm off."
"Cheers, Nolu," someone said, "be safe on the road."
As bit by bit the restaurant thinned, Nandi realised that she was having fun. When Nomsa whispered in her ear to 'scoot', she knew she wanted to protest.

Reluctantly she trailed her sister-in-law to the car, laden with their free gifts and the signed copy of the book, which they bought. In the car with Nomsa, she observed: “I don’t remember Phumelele complaining when the women were swiping the cards to bring the books to her to sign.”
They giggled like naughty schoolgirls.
Nomsa was a painfully slow driver. “Safe driver,” she corrected. When Nandi looked at the woman in the car with her, even in the silhouette, she saw what her husband could have been like had he been born female. Even her mannerisms behind the wheel were Menziwa’s, albeit slower and more considered.
“So ...”
“I will go again,” she finished the sentence for Nomsa. “It was fun.”
“What do you think of her money ideas?”
“Well, let’s just say, we can agree to disagree. Not everybody has the means to pay cash for things.”
“But do you …” she let fly with an expletive, as she avoided a car that cut in dangerously in front of her, ‘look at this fool.”
They drove on in silence for a while, the guest on the talk-radio show too soft to reach their ears. This was the highest Nomsa played her car stereo, even with music. Why bother playing the damn thing at all, if it’s to always be in such hushed tones?
“Read the book,” Nomsa said, “I know I am going to enjoy it.”
“I will. I will find time.”
When she got to Nandi’s gate, Menziwa was outside, bidding farewell to someone who was leaving in a white car she did not recognise.
Nomsa got in to use the toilet. “Where are the three musketeers?” she asked her brother.
“This time?” he asked rhetorically, “they are long dead.”
When Nomsa emerged, husband and wife were locked in an embrace in the kitchen: “Hey, get a room.”
They untangled and Nandi kicked off her heels and begged Menziwa to fetch her her sleepers. When he returned, the two were whispering like they were planning a mutinous act.
“We’ll speak on the phone,” his sister said to Menziwa as he retraced his steps back to the bedroom. They walked out to Nomsa’s car, doing a post mortem of the night.
Forty minutes later when Nandi entered the bedroom, Menziwa was snoring. Changed into her nighties, she checked on their daughter in the cot and joined her husband in bed.
“Good night.”

Taking a break from playing with the kids one lazy Saturday afternoon, Menziwa picked up the book by the financial guru that Nandi had brought back home from the talk. It was almost a month after the finances shindig and it lay on the ottoman in the sun room.
He was absorbed for a long while and when Nandi returned from the funeral – and the after tears, no doubt – he was still at it.
“Sis Ivy was laid to rest at last,” she said, by way of filling him in, “in a fitting funeral with all the bells and whistles you can expect.”
In her late ‘80s already, the highly popular former matron of the local hospital was known as Sis – older sister – by even the grandchildren of the women at whose births she stood as midwife. She was diabetic.

"We went to the nurses' home for the after tears. Those who don't have to feed their big babies at home are still doing the *twalatsa*," she said, nipping about to demonstrate the dance move, now in vogue.
"Get your people to meet with my people to negotiate your release from bondage," Menziwa mimicked the wordiness he knew she liked hearing, "their child cannot miss so many important get-togethers for a stupid thing called marriage. It's barbarism in the name of culture."
"Consider it done, my dear comrade," she intoned comically, "I will let my people let your people …" He just loved it when she in turn aped him in his baritone. She just looked more beautiful.
At times like these, even his most depressing troubles seemed to fade away.
As she readied the children for bath and ultimately bed, he got back to the book. "Have you started it yet?" he thrust the cover in before poking his head in the children's bedroom.
"I was planning to do that until civic duty called, my dear comrade," she repeated the comic act. He just laughed louder and got back to the book, taking it to bed. The book was still the only aspect of the outing with Nomsa that had yet to be unraveled. Nandi did make the social pages and for this the family got two editions of the *Sunday Tribune* that weekend and an unending flurry of calls, even on the home phone.
When Nandi brought his supper into the bedroom and ran her bath, he took another break to eat. Hake as he liked it – on a heap of rice cooked in mushroom, parsley and lemon. It was at times like these that he thanked the Lord for his lineage – a childhood of good cooks in the form of his mother and sisters plus the added bonus of a wife who was a culinary genius. Nandi had her flaws but, thankfully, cooking wasn't one of them.
Bathed, scented and all dolled up for bed, he ignored her advances as she sang *Baby Come Duze* – come hither, in her best Jezebel voice.
"Shush, let me read you a few lines," he said twice, each time louder than her singing.
"Do we have a case for the Men's Clinic here?" she asked mockingly, thrusting her hand into his pyjama front, "oh, at least it can still stand. No blue pill salvation needed for now; if the quality of the firmness is anything to go by."
As she released her moist grip, he read into the first few seconds of silence:
Some people buy things they cannot afford on credit to impress others and to appear rich. This is the quickest way to a high-debt situation.
"Tell me more, wise one," she crooned:
Debt is expensive.
"Don't say!"
Debt is better prevented than cured. How do you prevent debt? You simply choose not to get into debt unless you really need to and have to. I feel so sad when I come across many people who are frustrated financially because they have lots of debt and they don't know how to get out of it. They work, but most of their money goes into paying off debt.
She sat up straight to look over the book into his eyes. He turned a page:
Buying a home on credit is good for us. That is why it is called good debt. The cost of buying a home on credit is very reasonable. It is cheaper than all types of debt.
He looked up to see her waving 'play on' like a referee in a soccer match.
Get into the habit of saving money and then buying your furniture for cash.
"They are talking to someone I know here," he said, "let me read it again." She got off him and rolled to her side of the bed:

Get into the habit of saving money and then buying your furniture for cash. In the beginning, this will feel like a punishment. You will want to buy that lounge suite orbed and pay instalments for it. After all, that is what most people do. But then again that is why over 8. 5 million people have a negative credit record! Buying furniture on credit is the most expensive thing you can do. It will waste your money, literally.

At this point his reading voice was threatening to have the lullaby effect his wife needed to hastily enter the threshold of untroubled sleep.

"You want me to go on?" No response. He put the book aside to go to the loo.

Back in bed, his eyes returned to some of the parts he'd skipped but first, he remembered, he needed a glass of water.

He switched off the lights in the bedroom and moved to the breakfast nook in the kitchen where he installed himself:

Are you borrowing money from friends and family to pay debt? You should be using your own money to pay debt. If you are using borrowed money, then you are struggling to pay off your debts. This is a clear sign that you have borrowed more than you can afford to pay back monthly. You need to do your best to cut down on your expenses so that you get out of this situation as soon as possible. See the section on debt counseling in Chapter 4.

Dressed only in a light perforated vest and pyjama shorts, he was sweating like mad. Sleep was no option. He refilled his glass with ice cold water and paged through to Chapter 4.

When his eyes couldn't stay open any more, he put the book on the kitchen table and retreated to the bedroom where everything was peaceful. The only sound he could hear was his mind ticking to absorb traces of his life he saw in the pages of the book.

Was there a solution? Surely there was, otherwise there'd not be a book aimed at helping people keep their money as the sleeve of the book promised.

When sleep finally took over, he succumbed, offering no resistance.

The grandfather clock, if he were ~~he~~ in a state of mind to hear it, struck two, Sunday morning.

CHAPTER FIVE

"Hold on a sec," the man on the phone said into the gadget and pointed the one who'd just walked in to a chair. The visitor waited until his garrulous guest was done, folded the small phone that was now suddenly invisible in his large hand and opened his mouth to speak. No formalities followed.
"Dip into the slush funds, Menz," Finley said as soon as he'd noticed the mobile phone in his hand and threw it among the rubble on his desk. Menziwa, who did not take the chair offered, was standing in the other man's office to continue the conversation they started a week previously but could not finish. Finley had intercepted Menziwa then as he got off a small white car that he had no guts to wheel into his reserved parking where his Alfa normally stood in all its sleek, shiny, black, glory.
"What's with the Mom's taxi, Menz?" Finley had asked, eyeing the tiny Mazda Sting like it'd suddenly morph into something that would bite.
"It's my sister's wheels," he'd readily confessed, "mine until further notice."
Menziwa did not know what had got into him but he'd found himself unloading on Finley that morning: "My car has been repossessed."
Finley, of all people!
The other man just sat there and listened and the quieter he remained, the more Menziwa ventilated. "'I'm screwed, Greg."
They left the car park and went in. But they had hardly started talking when they were interrupted by the newbie Staunton, Stanton or whatever the nosy Aussie's name was, who rapped his white knuckles on the heavy door and profusely apologised before he could state his business: "You said I should see you at eight sharp, Sir."
Finley sized him up like he did not know what to say to him.
"Oh, yes," he said finally, completing an about-turn of military precision like he were a marine saluting his drill sergeant, "this will have to wait, Menz. Cheer up, though. Daddy's gonna come through for you."

Three days later, Menziwa, his patience taut, stood in Daddy's office, waiting to hear the good news obscured by the self-satisfied smile currently giving his face a façade of friendliness. Get on with it, Greg, he coaxed him mentally: "The slush funds?"
"As I was saying," Finley made to start but suddenly began sneezing violently. All Menziwa could do was wait. Bide his time.
His mind on red alert, he couldn't come up with anything on slush funds except the money he vaguely remembered the apartheid government making available for the IFP - Inkatha Freedom Party, to buy arms against the ANC. He knew for certain that this was not what Finley, old regime operative and whatever hell else he'd been in his heyday, was referring to. What mattered to Finley was golf, rugby, cars and somewhere down the line, his job – strictly in that order.
"Slush funds …?"
"That's what I said," that smile again, "sorry. That's exactly what I mean."
Menziwa took a seat and gathered his hands behind his head as he cushioned himself to recline on the chair he now took when it was offered via sign language.
"I'm teeing off at one. Josh called to say something came up. You can take his place in the four-ball. Better ball. See you then." With that, the master procrastinator was out the door, headed for the coffee machine. Menziwa wanted to kill him.

Josh was his son-in-law, a criminal lawyer.
It was only 10 in the morning. The day's conference had not even convened. Menziwa did not make it to his office door.
His jacket flailing in the wind behind him as he headed back to the car park, he was of no further use to the firm that day.
"I'm back tomorrow," he was saying to Miss Busy Body who was asking if he was not going to be in the boardroom for the daily meeting. "Nice job, Menz. Ten minutes flat and out the door. Nice bloody perks indeed." He swirled around and blew Meghan a kiss.
On the way back home he was thinking about the slush fund and how it could get him out of the soup he was in, whatever the fund was. The dial in the Mazda's stereo was permanently on Radio 2000 and he was not complaining. He had his thoughts for better company and amusement. Somehow, he found himself inexplicably cooling down, like he had taken an effective anti-depressant. He contributed to the sudden good mood by whistling along to the tune on the radio – Eric Clapton's *Layla*. When Kirk Whalum came on to say *God Must Have Spent A Little More Time On You*, he was nosing the small car into his driveway and George and Herbs were furiously wagging their tails, their master's high spirits clearly contagious. He refreshed their water and topped up the Epol chunks. He went back to the front, lifted the postbox lid and retrieved his mail. None of the letters were from people who were professing their undying love for him. He chucked all of them into the dustbin and carried Nandi's correspondence – stock missive from Edgars and Co. into the house. He allowed himself to laugh at the jokes of their helper, MaMpho, a matronly woman who insisted feet be wiped on the Welcome mat before coming inside, a prerequisite that not even the man of the house was exempted from.
"'ullo, Papa," came the standard greeting, without fail.
"*Dankie*, Mama!" This was Menziwa's everyday phrase, reserved for her. Not a word more; not a word less.
He changed into golf slacks. Minus the tie, the long-sleeved shirt was still good for the course. He heaved the huge Cleveland bag onto his right shoulder and out to the car, shoving it into the back seat as his head warned it was too big for the boot. After a struggle, he got it right, with the door just barely managing to close.
Back in the house, he sat down to eat the lunch box, which he did not bother to dish into a plate. With the remote, he flicked the television on and African-American litigants were screaming their voices hoarse over a $130 loan on *Judge Judy*. The choice of channel told him MaMpho had begun her day watching the banal fare of drama served up by the public broadcaster. Among her favourites was the one in TshiVenda, where everybody seemed to speak at the same time.
"Papa?"
"No, I'm talking to the TV, Mama. Sorry."
"OK."
The dogs saw him to the car and the German shepherd him gave a look that, were it human, would have been lugubrious. "Cheer up, buddy. All in good time," he said, stealing from a television beer advert of a few minutes ago.
As he reversed out, his neighbour flagged him down. *Waar's die kar* – where's the car?
Dis 'n lang storie, Menziwa said dismissively, not intending to summarise it. He revved up the jalopy to indicate to the older man he had other plans with his time. He engaged the second gear, shaking his head to say no, he had not been hijacked. The old man and his sickly wife were nice folk, he was sure. The only blot in their sweet NG *Kerk* God-fearing character was they insisted on asking questions he'd rather remained unanswered.

The drive to the golf course was free of incident. When he parked, he went straight to where he saw Finley's Q7, chuckling to himself as he surveyed the contrast in size between the two cars. He took his wallet out of the cubby-hole, emptied it of the few notes and shoved it under the passenger seat. After the hundred bucks he reserved for the caddie – standard tip, he had forty for a bar of chocolate and grape juice after the first nine. "That would be all," he sang to himself and heaved the golf bag over his left shoulder, walking casually to the players' lounge.

They were teeing off in half-an-hour, enough time to dispense with the locker-room formalities and swipe his membership card for the day's green fees.
"You guys know Menz, the cat that ate all the cream?" it was Finley, swinging an iron behind his shoulders. Beside him stood Libby Tate and another guy Menziwa was seeing for the first time.
"Pine Pienaar," Libby said on the man's behalf, "he's just transferred from Potchefstroom."
Menziwa extended his hand in greeting and it was lost in the bear-like grip of the other man.
"That's us, boys," said Finley at the intercom announcement for the 10th tee, "off we go." The four caddies were already ahead of them all of whom Menziwa knew by sight. His own caddie was an older man called Satch who was darker than midnight.
"*Hoezit, hoezit*?" it was Satch, to which Menziwa also responded in the double thumbs-up sign, in keeping with local street cred. He handed Menziwa the driver and sashayed away to join the others huddled away from the golfers.
They all hit clean straight drives, Pine hitting his the farthest. This was a sign of things to come: a clean hitter who putted even better. In the eighteen holes, he'd not enter the rough even once. He played on the fairway and the green, collecting birdies like they were going out of fashion.
"Good shot."
"Nice shot."
"What a beauty!"
All these accolades greeted virtually every one of Pine's shots, on the back and the front nine. He played well. He laughed at his own jokes. Menziwa considered this a sign of humble folk with no qualms. He talked about his son with autism. He thanked God. He loved his wife. He was just fun. Menziwa envied his joviality.
Libby found reason, as always, to talk about 9/11. He'd lost a cousin.
"Perfect!"
This was meant for Pine's now pin-high tee shot at the par-3 15th hole. Finley followed with his own smacker that threatened a hole-in-one. Playing off a 12th handicap, he knew a few useful things about the game. He dressed the part too. When the others were outside the range of his voice, Finley talked about the money set aside to help GAL's top brass who were in financial distress: "And there have been many instances."
"Initially the idea was to help people who really needed the money, and only when the banks couldn't help. It was Dillon's brainchild, after he realised how his workers got tied into all sorts of knots with money. This is dough that was intended to take children to school when there were no bursaries or education policies. But at the time, Dill would *kak* on you first before making the payment."
"Your ball, Greg," it was Libby, "stop whispering like my grandmother. Just play, you're holding us up."
"OK," Finley said, heading straight for the water hazard at the edge of the 17th green. "Shit."

Menziwa continued to make par, as he'd been playing all along. "That thing will kill you, Baba," he said to Satch, who accepted a cigarette each time Libby's caddy offered. They smoked like chimneys.
"There was a guy called Dirk," said Finley, after struggling to hit a 7 iron onto the green. He watched forlornly as the ball rolled into the bunker. "He must have left before you came," he said when Menziwa shot him a quizzical look.
"His house burnt down. He lost everything. The insurance was structural. After the house went up again, he still had no bed to sleep on. He was not going to take donations from the church, which offered a lot of hand-me-downs."
"He took nothing. Not even a dime. So Dillon offered him a lifeline. He took the fifty Grand and made his house a home again. By the time he left, he'd paid it all back. No interest."
"Tell you what …" Finley made as if to sprint, but only as far as the gait would allow before thinking better of it. In the red slacks and matching Ballantine knitwear, he looked suave. He was a fantastic golfer but this did not make him a Greg Norman, despite the Great White Shark hat. A spade-load of sand followed his ball out of the bunker as he ducked to avoid the dust.
Menziwa did better than Pine to sink his own long putt, again for par. His game was uneventful. There was more action on a wall of drying paint.
They were driving off the 18th when they were briefly alone again: "How do you think I paid for the Jeep, Menz?" The Jeep was the latest SRT8 that Finley took out the garage when he was feeling important and meeting clients who'd bring in serious business – which was rarely.
"Dillon had gone. It was the shit son at the helm. I had to cook him a tearjerker about the Missus losing her old man's farm if she did not come up with the loot to pay off his gambling debts. True he was a gambler who lost everything his father worked for. But the farm was still safe. Gill knew half the story."
"I got 150K," he whispered again, cupping his hand to his mouth like he was afraid the wind would take his words to Libby.
" .. . the kids are off to Oregon," Libby's baritone reached Menziwa's ears, "Shirley and I are staying put."
Libby's parents were originally from Portland, Oregon. His dad was a watchmaker who sold his trade to the highest bidder. When he visited South Africa after Vietnam, he fell in love. He went back for the wife and three children. At eighteen, Libby was the eldest.
He still spoke of "the world's only superpower" with an accent he just could not lose. "Not even in a million years," those who knew him vowed.
He owned a well-kept Shelby, a rare Chevrolet he adoringly called 'the pick-up' and a Harley Davidson. When he donned the clothes of a working man, he drove a Chrysler. With none of the Tom Selleck bravura, Libby was a PI: "A man's gotta do what a man's gotta do".
Pine had closed shop to come join Libby in his business, Menziwa only got to hear over at the club house during the break for the first nine. "Who watches your wife as you watch other men's wives?" Menziwa asked him.
"She doesn't need watching," said the convivial man, looking so-so unsuited for the job. "No skeletons in her closet."
Following Menziwa's example, Pine got a soft drink and chocolate. Libby ordered a huge Texan steak that he clearly enjoyed and Finley washed down his Greek salad with bottled sparkling water. From the speakers in the ceiling, The Three Tenors came down in soothing dulcet tones.
All Menziwa could think about was the money sitting right under his nose at the office. He was thinking how he could not trust the men who laughed with him at GAL and told him how

indispensable he'd become at the firm. "But when it came to letting me in on big secrets, I wasn't as vital a cog as Gill and the others," he thought to himself. He was curious to find out if Lyle knew all these stories about people being bailed out. After all he was a big hitter too, wasn't he? Finley said the money was only accessible to big hitters at GAL. In Finley-speak important people were called big hitters. Anyone he held a rather dim view of he called a snake oil salesman.

Menziwa didn't bother consulting his own; Libby's watch, like allegedly most things American, was big enough to tell time for all of Africa. Pine's caddy was calling from down the long passage, hitting his left wrist with his right index finger to indicate time. "We're up next," Libby and Pine chorused. They bumped heads as they stood up at the same time. Then they chuckled, on cue. Menziwa knew then that he liked Pine and would play with him again if he was not trailing cheating spouses or infiltrating syndicates, as his new business card said he did, among the myriad things.

"So what grand plan are you working on, Menz?" Libby enquired.

"A hospital complex, which I'm told will service the Vryheid area and surrounds. I'm excited. It gives me reason to wake up every morning." It was true.

Libby started talking about the Empire State Building in New York. "King Kong fell from it in the movie," Menziwa preceded him. It was a topic they'd discussed before.

The other structures Libby spoke about whenever he was in the company of the GAL guys were the Chrysler and UN buildings in New York which "all my children have pictures in."

Menziwa liked him better when he left architecture to professionals and talked about his own cloak-and-dagger work. Mostly it was stuff that, had it been on television, would have come with the warning SVLNP in big bold letters. One other thing Libby did better than Martin Scorsese and Steven Spielberg combined was sound effects. When the raconteur held sway, you could hear the car door open and slam shut and shoed feet walking on concrete.

He was working on something that was going to expose the rot in our police service, he said, passing his right index finger over his lips like he was swearing Menziwa to secrecy: "Watch the space. I bet you my bottom dollar the big one's gonna hit the fan."

Menziwa played his drive neatly to the left hand corner of the 1st, a par -5. "Not so angry, Menz," it was Finley, "play nicely with other children."

As they trudged the fairway, Satch told Menziwa about a former professional soccer player who had just died in hospital after shooting himself in his home. At the time of his death Joseph Rapelego was working as a prison warder, one of a string of ex soccer stars who had followed this career path.

"I know you played with him as amateurs," Satch said, "but he was a marvelous player; that's why he played in the big league."

"Sure," Menziwa concurred with this observation. The mercurial Rapelego was just something else, a magician with the ball.

He told Menziwa about plans for a memorial service and the date of the funeral. "No, take a six iron," Satch offered, returning the over-sized club Menziwa had taken out of the bag without consulting.

"Will I get on top with the six?"

"Eventually," it was Pine, cracking up again at his wit. He had come to stand beside them. His eyes worked overtime between Menziwa's lie and the flag of the pin that protruded over the incline.

When he hit the six, it landed him slap-bang in the middle of the green. Satch thrust the putter into his hands and Menziwa cut the fairway to go walk with Finley on the other side. A sudden good feeling, with the force of a Hurricane, hit him.
"Your friend Anderson, the moralist whose wife sleeps with everybody else but him, has a holiday home in Scottburgh. He does not owe a cent on it. That's where his wife goes every third week to meet with potential clients."
When he said potential clients, Finley put his putter under his left arm and used two fingers from each hand to denote inverted commas. This was part of Finleyism – everything he didn't think much of was 'so-called'. Sometimes Mrs Finley was "my so-called better half".

Moira Anderson was an independent insurance broker contracted to Old Mutual. When Menziwa repeated this fact Finley said *Huh!* and added: "Prostitution has a new name." When Finley spoke this disparagingly about the Andersons, it occurred to him that, while he's played a few times with Al Anderson and Stu Lyle, he does not remember any of them being anxious to get Finley along.
Menziwa had played the Scottburgh golf course – twice, and each time he'd slept in Port Shepstone, further down the N2.
Scottburgh was a quaint little town. A leisurely walk that demanded no more work than watering the lawn could see you from the CBD into the grounds of the golf course. The course was almost like it was neatly tucked behind someone else's backyard. He very nearly bought a house there once, a tidy little pad with no fencing around it but the lush green of the golf course on its door-step. Nandi would not hear a thing about moving to what she called the hinterland, 'on the periphery of my idea of a good life'.
For an instant he imagined Moira on the streets of Scottburgh and conceded that she could pass for a local. He had no idea how the people of Scottburgh should look like but Moira seemed to fit right in. She could even run for Mayor, he thought.
When he veered off the fairway with a terrible third shot to the green at the 3rd, Menziwa followed his mind everywhere it took him - and it took him to many places; starting with a meeting with Gill first thing the next morning. Once he had the money, he was getting the Alfa back and paying three advance installments just to cushion himself. He was returning Nomsa's car with a big Thank You card. He'd buy her the vacuum cleaner she'd innocently showed him the other day.
With his head elsewhere, he played a lousy shot that landed far short of the green and waited in the tree shade with the caddies as Finley played hide and seek with himself behind the trees on the other side.

The caddies griped about the staple in their canteen that was not going to improve beyond the current meat pie, peanut snack and a can of fizzy drink. "We must get pap en *vleis*, like real men," said the one who was the least man.
Looking at his mousy front teeth and small features, Menziwa thought he knew his folks. As their round wore on, Menziwa chatted to him and the Mouse Man duly confirmed he was of the said family stock.
He was seconded all round about the food complaint, with a high five from Satch. He moved quickly to go stand next to Pine as he was lining up a shot.

They moved through the fifth and sixth with Menziwa alone with his thoughts and game. He birdied both holes. With the hint of a hunch back, Mouse Man was clearly happy with himself; he was all over the fairway.
They had to wait a while at the 7th tee as a maintenance tractor driving across with a heavy load of manure momentarily died in their path. It took the arrival and effort of the foreman – a Mr T look-alike to get the tractor started and out of the way.
The next two holes belonged to Pine who was playing like he was preparing for Augusta. He played every iron right, full. All the others could do was clap hands until they were sore.
He liked the way John Daly played golf, Pine said, demonstrating with every shot. But Menziwa was not listening. He wanted to conclude his talk with Finley and go home to prepare for the next day.
From the time they tallied the scores, paid the caddies and took quick showers before changing into proper club house attire, Menziwa's head was in the clouds.
He chuckled to himself a little, thinking Greg Finley was a godsend. Was it the Yankee evangelist Billy Graham who quipped that the only time his prayers were not answered was on the golf course? At one with his present state of mind, Menziwa agreed it was blasphemy. "How could you, Bill? You of little faith," he said out loud, attracting curious stares from three women pushing their carts out of the players' lounge area.
"Hit them straight ahead, ladies," he said cheerfully and the one in the pink outfit curtsied in accepting the good sporting wishes.
The club house was an old English manor house that changed shape over the years as the kitty allowed for extensions. But it still had the grand old feel. As Finley tried to get someone off the other end of his mobile phone, Menziwa glanced over the framed tidbits on the wall, stuff ~~staff~~ he'd read a million times already.
There were the tales of dogs that retrieved golf balls from ponds at various courses around the world and others that were made honorary members of the GCs they served.
His eyes glossed over the August 2008 better-ball where Lukas Meyer, a visiting leftie known as Phil Mickelson in Rustenburg had sunk an albatross at the 14th, winning a Lexus LS 600h.
In another photograph taken during the same tournament, a smiling woman golfer, owner of a local haberdashery, had won a Nikon D300 camera for closest to the pin at the same par-3 14th.
Without reading it again, his eyes moved to the plague that showed a picture of American comedian Bob Hope. He knew the words underneath by heart. Hope had played golf with eight US Presidents: Eisenhower, Kennedy, Johnson, Nixon, Ford, Reagan, Bush and Clinton.
He made six holes-in-one.
"Shake a leg, boy." It was Finley, returning his mobile to his shirt pocket.
Two whiskies in front of them, Finley unpacked the GAL slush fund.
"Look, it's pretty simple. Dillon Gill was not poor. His first contact with people in need of cash was when he hired assistants to come run his errands at the firm when he opened his doors for business. His father had taught him well from an early age. Open your purse to a man desperate for money and he will sell his soul. Old Dill would not pay for your drinks like now, whisky after a round. No. This was trivia and he had no time for small stuff. He wanted you to tell him about serious need and trouble. He bailed people out. They worked their fingers to the bone for him in recompense."
Finley's phone rang and when he yanked it out of his pocket, he stubbed it with a thick finger Menziwa feared it was not going to work again. He took a sip of his fine single malt and when he returned his eyes to Finley, the other man took his cue and continued talking.

“Dill saved men out of gambling debts when the next step was getting their knee caps broken. Men of standing came to him with tears in their eyes. He did not charge interest but wanted every cent returned. Every damn penny had to go back into the kitty.”
“Dill knew money. To make more of it, he needed people around him, people he could trust. He bought their loyalty. When he dispensed cash, he knew what he was buying. It came back to him many times over. As a result, people feared him like he was a Mafia boss.”
“You know he did not wear a watch?”
“No idea.”
“He didn’t, unlike his queer shit son who spots every Rolex ever made. For Dill, time was irrelevant; money was everything. Take the money but pay it back; it didn’t matter how long it took you, as long as every cent, like I said, was paid back.”
“This has been the difference between GAL and its competitors all these years. I came with a sob story, got the dough and, in no time, the Jeep was mine – for a song, Menz.”
“Now, I don’t understand why a guy like you, who makes a fortune for the Gill boy and his scouts, can ever complain about lack. Do you know that last year Allan acquired near majority shares in a JSE listed company? It is your sweat that helped him climb that ladder.”
“At the beginning of this year, Gill’s own wife had three million in unencumbered cash that earned her a stake in Ogilvy. Did you know that? While you’re building the city – and make no mistake, I don’t begrudge you that, you are a fine architect – the proceeds of your labour are setting up others for life.”
“If I were you, I’d call Gill now and tell him I needed a million. Now.”
Another round came. As Finley excused himself to take a call – ‘It’s the missus’ – Menziwa thought that whisky had never tasted so good, especially to the accompaniment of good news. Finley returned to the table to announce: “I’m off. Stop stressing over money. Your share is waiting for you. The only guarantee is to return it and stay married to GAL. No divorce.”
Menziwa watched as Finley’s bad legs carried him away, out of the bar, out of sight. Suddenly, Finley’s legs didn’t bother him anymore. They were as good as an Olympian’s pair. “I love this man.”
Headed home in the car that he now noticed used one headlight, Menziwa was hit by this epiphany: Finley was not the ogre he’d made him out to be. He just told it like it is. He said what needed be said, not what people wanted to hear him say.
The difficult man he saw in the office was nowhere near him at the golf that day. The one who walked the fairway with him came across as a full human being, a shoulder to cry on.
In *The Golfer’s Companion* that he kept in the boot – did it go with the Alfa? – the one PG Woodhouse quote he’d thumbed past a few times suddenly rang true: “To find a man’s true character, play golf with him.”

CHAPTER SIX

On the morning that he was going to meet with Tony Gill about the loan from the company, Menziwa's mind was racing far ahead of his plans. Just the night before he'd sat thinking deeply about how he could easily take his life forward if he got the two hundred Grand he was set on borrowing. The figure scared him as he rolled it around his tongue and wrapped his mind around it but he knew it was peanuts if Finley, his junior by many rungs down the ladder, could get the company to buy him the elephantine SRT 8, he, Menziwa, was then worth an entire Jeep dealership. He'd had the courage to gather his mail last night, even the unopened envelopes he avoided like the plague and started adding up the numbers. In his head he put away half of the money to settle the most pressing of his debt. He was planning to pay three installments ahead on the car and settle the university fees of his two cousins.

The children of his mother's younger sister, the two had failed Menziwa terribly since they started university in Limpopo and Fort Hare respectively. The understanding was that they would pass their first years with flying colours so the rest of their tuition would be carried by bursaries, just like Menziwa had done himself since he started tertiary. But all they did was merely to scrape through with average marks that attracted no sponsors.

If it's said that in the world of the blind, the one-eyed man is king, then the girl Anniki was better; her brother habitually sat supplementary exams every year. Anniki still had one more year to do towards her BA Social Work while the brother, who smoked like a chimney and managed to annoy Menziwa each time they met, was finishing his own BA which he took with Politics majors. Anniki's choice was really not hers but Nomsa's.

Each time she were home Nomsa took her to work and on rounds on the social development cases she was working on at the time, and Anniki was sold on the idea of being a do-gooder, convincing young miscreants not to fall out of society. But Menziwa thought she'd have started with her own brother just as proof that she was up to the task of reining in any of society's delinquents.

He wanted to be a political analyst but Menziwa suspected he craved the television exposure that he knew was par for the course. He was at Menziwa's during one of his breaks during Jacob Zuma's rape trial and spent each waking hour glued to the television. He colonised the living room. When he was not slumped on the couch with diminishing copious amounts of food, he was on the phone, working up a huge bill bombarding radio talk shows with his views. His unlikeable attitude and non-existent hygiene aside, Menziwa had to give it to him, the boy was good. More than that, he was family. But why he couldn't apply his gift of the gab to his studies beat Menziwa. He found he could never get to chide the boy sufficiently because he revered Menziwa, his older cousin, the man of the house that plied him with free food and drinks. Whether he was pulling the wool over his eyes or not, Menziwa couldn't quite tell. The boy sounded genuine enough, obsequiously calling him 'my hero'. For this and many other reasons, Menziwa found himself paying for his education year after year. Anniki was just a darling Menziwa adored. Once she begged Menziwa to go shopping for her provisions when Nandi, who normally chaperoned her on these trips, was not able to go. She dragged Menziwa to the lingerie section and asked him what he thought of the pairs of undies she chose.

Such a child!

Menziwa had no time to blush. In her, Menziwa saw his own girl Ntando a few years hence, in her teens. The view was not disappointing. Only he knew Ntando would fetch better grades.

He was still not sure what to buy Nomsa when he returned her car. It turned out she'd already gone out to get the vacuum cleaner. A scarf struck him like an appropriate 'Thank You' gift, albeit a tad miserly. But he'd seen one that he particularly liked in the magazine of one of the Sunday papers. He just had to look up the magazine from the used pile in the garage. Or maybe just take in the Mazda for service before returning it. His mind was on overdrive, paying this and that off, making good on this or the other monetary promise.
It came back to the idea he'd always had to go out on his own. He knew he wanted to design golf courses and flirted endlessly with the thought of being his own boss. He could do better than Greg Norman whom he recalled being a decorated designer and a shrewd businessman. Menziwa knew he could do this; he was trained to design. Norman had moved his business out of his native Australia and taken it to China with a view to conquering the Asian market. Menziwa thought he could use the money to start small, work from home and grow from there. Many of the success stories he'd read or heard about had humble beginnings.
Why can't I do the same, he asked as if there was someone there with him he was demanding the answer from.
When he read about Norman, he recalled that The Great White Shark had completed 70 design projects all over the world. 'I could do the same,' the dreamer mused.
As he dozed off, the anti-climax came: by taking the loot, he was swearing allegiance to GAL, at least for a considerable number of years.

"In a good mood this morning, aren't we?" it was his wife, who'd sneaked into the kitchen and watched from a safe distance as he retrieved the warm milk to take to his waiting bowl of cereal on the breakfast table.
"It's a good day, sweetness," he sang, not turning to look in her direction, "it can only get better."
She approached to plant a kiss on his cheek: "Mmm, nice smell."
"It's my man Ted, sweetie. Ted Lapidus."
"He's nice."
"I know."
"Oh, shut up."
He ate in silence for a while as she responded to a call from Thami. He wanted his school tie.
He finished the bowl and took it to the sink. He took the bag and the few papers alongside it and bellowed: "I'm off."
A chorus of 'bye, daddy' rang from down the passage and Nandi came to see him off.
In his best suit, his spirits were momentarily dampened when he saw the Mazda waiting. He took comfort in the knowledge that he was getting his car back – soon.
He was trying to bring back to mind a day in the past when going to the office felt like such a beautiful thing to do. He gave up when it looked like he needed to go far back into his junior years.
A handshake and a little small talk later, Tony Gill went straight for the jugular: "What's the money for, Menz?" Gill was a friend, almost. Despite his short fuse, Menziwa did not find it troublesome to tell him things, even his deepest thoughts and fears, whenever they came up. This is the same man who lured him, unsuccessfully, to fly-fishing. He even kitted out Menziwa, from the hat down to the last paraphernalia, like those things called nymphs. Menziwa had thought that he was about to be introduced to promiscuous women when he heard the men talking excitedly about nymphs. The damsel, in the language of these people, was not the female kind

that could be found in distress. When they said vices, it was no reference to their human weaknesses. Scissors were referred to in glowing hallowed terms here, almost romanticised. Flies and certain other insects were not a pet peeve. Men collected them the same way others in this odd group talked about collecting stamps and watches.

Menziwa knew how much the game of football could turn grown men into childish fanatics. When he accepted the invitation to go fly-fishing with Gill, he saw fish doing this to bearded old men whose relationship with fish should have been eating it, not venerating it. Sometimes they released their catch back into the water. What was the point, Menziwa wondered, of making an effort to catch the fish if the goal was to dunk it back?

They talked dubbing needles and teasers, tying lamps, hair stackers, soft hackles, bobbins and what-not, stuff Menziwa had never heard discussed around dinner tables, at least not in his immediate circles.

But there were things Menziwa loved about the fly-fishing excursions. He'd read somewhere that Cyril Ramaphosa was into fly-fishing but his curiosity not satisfied, he resigned himself to enjoying the scenery, especially in the Western Cape where Tony took him twice.

The highlights of the two trips to Cape Town were the nights spend at The One & Only when the high-brow establishment first hit the headlines. With Tony footing the bill, Menziwa gladly ate, drank and networked. On each occasion, he'd wriggled free of the white men to touch base with old friends from varsity days. Menziwa never caught anything, except for an accidental encounter in a lake in Griqualand with what veteran anglers described as a Witte River brown.

The best part of this trip was meeting Monique Turner, a flirtatious young accountant from Pennsylvania who made the three days spent in those backwaters really worthwhile for him. They stopped short of getting into each other's knickers.

Fly-fishing gave him a chance to get to know Tony Gill a bit more on a personal level. He shocked Menziwa when he blurted out that he really loved Meghan: "It's not just for the sex." Menziwa remembers thinking that indeed, opposites attract. Meghan was everything Tony wasn't: She was tall, slim and talkative to his pudgy soft nature. By way of speech, she screamed while he virtually whispered except for the odd occasion when he's moved to play boss and throw a public office tantrum.

Meghan had yelled at him when he told her he'd had a vasectomy done, Tony said to Menziwa, explaining the source of the spat with the office gossip queen almost a year ago. "The totality of Meg's ambition was to carry my child. Keeping the office grapevine sufficiently updated came a close second while doing her job could also be factored in somewhere there."

"Now I shoot blanks, Menz," the boss had laughed at his unintended ~~Freudian~~ slip on the return flight home. Menziwa only joined in the laughter as he contemplated the two fat fingers Tony stretched out below his thumb to simulate a gun shot. At that instant in Menziwa's head, a picture of Danny De Vito replaced Tony's.

Presently, Menziwa was seated opposite Tony, supplicating himself before the head of GAL. To reward Tony's openness with him, Menziwa told him the truth about his money woes.

Tony never once interrupted. That's what Menziwa liked about the other man – he gave you his undivided attention. You never got the sense he was somewhere else or thinking about something other than what you were telling him.

"Consider it done, Menz. I hope it helps." When he stood up, Menziwa took his cue and knew the meeting was over. Help was on its way – 200 K of help.

Later that afternoon as he was doodling on a drawing in his office, Lance from HR came in to ask Menziwa to sign for his three-day leave. He'd completely forgotten that he'd asked for the days.
"Are you going away?" Lance asked.
"Yeah," he said absent-mindedly. The truth was he had no idea what he'd wanted to do with the time off. Suddenly he snapped out of his daydreaming, like an idea of Einstein proportions had just appeared to him.
"I have a lot of work to do on the Mannesmann project. I'm going away, somewhere quiet where there'd be no sound of children."
"Or the wife," Lance said, chuckling.
"Like you were reading my mind, Lance; the world can do with a lot more psychics. It is that nagging voice especially, that I'm running away from."
After work, he bundled his clubs into the Mazda and the car got especially smaller when the kids insisted they were coming along.
Hardly a litre's petrol into the trip, Nandi called to say she'd meet up with them at the driving range. Later, at ringleader Thami's instigation, they begged to go for pizza.
When he got home, Menziwa hastily settled in front of the TV for the Real Madrid/Barcelona match, the third El Classico in as many months.

He woke up as usual on the first of his three days at home, helping the boys to put on their school uniform. With the silence that descended on the house when the kids left, he went outside to feed the dogs and clean up around the kennels. Later in the day he accompanied his wife as she went around on her errands. He was nose deep into the magazines he brought along as Nandi made her dozen and one stops at such places as the dry cleaners, the abattoir, a drive back home to drop off the innards for MaMpho then a day's trip to the township that included a longer stop at her father's night club for a meeting with her twin brothers. They did not stop to talk to their brother-in-law, just hollered their salutations and went inside for a tete-a-tete with their sister.
Then a man of colossal height and frame, who Menziwa immediately recognised, came trailing after the twins. He was Herbie Mlotshwa, their uncle. His reputation preceded him and word was that the twins could still maim and kill because he had police on his payroll. He was speaking on the phone when he passed Menziwa in the car. According to the bush telegraph, the man who was trying to get into Sophia Loren's bed after Hugh died ignored orders to get Herbie's blessings regarding his love interest. He died and the twins, not in jail for his brutal murder, were living proof that Herbie's money greased the right palms. Except for the times Nandi brought him cold ciders and when he went to the loo inside and back, Menziwa was in fine company with the magazines.
After school, the children were all over him, forcing him to go for a walk he did not need. When he went to bed that night, he was bushed. It had been a while since he'd had a day like that.
The second day was spent cleaning out the garage and listening to Nandi: "I'm falling in love with you again."
He whispered his fair share of sweet nothings back. During the day he played some of the jazz CDs he'd not had time to listen to. Some were still wrapped. He kept going back to tracks he swore he'd never heard played anywhere before, even on radio: 'Tell them when I'm gone, sweetness, that I played really fine tunes.'
He had mala-mogodu for both lunch and supper and loved every morsel. There's a certain peace that the promise of money brings to a troubled soul. He had on that day, exactly that type of

inner contentment. He spent a lot of time playing soccer with the boys. He chased after them with the ball, the Lionel Messi of their game. He just loved it when Duma baulked at the idea of not getting enough touches to the ball: 'Come and get it.' He then slipped it between his legs when the boy came rushing with a tackle. Thami was more circumspect in his engagement for the ball.
When Veronica's SMS came, he texted back to confirm that tomorrow was fine. She should get the condoms. He then switched his phone off and, from his bed, forced himself to watch *Scent Of A Woman* on MM2, for the umpteenth time.

Veronica reminded Menziwa of his own fallibility. Only three months ago they had met at the After Tears in the township, after the funeral of Lefty Mthembu, a local taxi boss and man-about-town who was gunned down in one of the bloodletting sprees the taxi people conflate with round-table talks.
Less than an hour later they were on a 300 km circuitous return joyride to Secunda, a chance trip Menziwa was still kicking himself for embarking on. They went to see an old buddy of Menziwa's called Terrence, the name-sake of his brother-in-law. They'd been at university together. When they met years later, they were both married with children. Unlike in their student days when they were almost invariably two hostel doors away from each other every year, there was now a chasm of tar that separated their homes. With fermented grapes firing up his belly, Menziwa did not feel it particularly strange that Saturday afternoon to drive the distance to visit, without prior arrangement.
Apart from the story that for a full week dominated the news bulletins because a petrified black boy had sliced off with a garden spade the ear of a white bully who had dared to strip him naked, nothing much seemed to happen in Terrence's hometown. It was the model one-horse town where everything needed for trade was virtually located in one street, the very one that, at one end, leads traffic into town and, at the other, ushers it out. Menziwa swore he could not have taken the trip had the flirt not tempted him with promises of a good time.
"Just drive," she'd said, hiking up her skirt to reveal unblemished thighs. For a while his worries about money took a back seat.
It was then that he fired the car in the direction of the big city from where the freeway lured him to the east. He thought of Terrence when the boards announced: Secunda 68 km.
He did not even phone ahead to warn Terrence who, when he finally arrived, received him warmly. Terrence's wife, who had met with Nandi a few times, raised her eyebrows when she saw the nubile young thing in tow but Menziwa wanted to believe his own lie that maybe, just maybe, their hostess did not know if he ever married Nandi.
Terrence worked at the only reputable car dealership there, as senior manager: government relations. Every Toyota that the provincial government owned in their fleet came from this branch with Terrence central to the deal. The big bosses at headquarters were apparently only too pleased to break the bank – and they have done it every year – to keep him here. For three years in succession, there were more cars sold out of Terrence's office than anywhere else in the country.
This is what his commerce degree had done for him while Menziwa's was beginning to feel like a curse sometimes, an albatross around his neck. Why could he not make money, oodles of it, as Terrence clearly seemed to have?
"You earn what you negotiate, Menz," Terrence had said.

Menziwa thought about how he could easily be debt-free if he earned commensurate to what he brought into the kitty at GAL.
He would never be privy to a discussion Tony and his wife had. “I can’t give him more if he has no balls to ask for it,” Tony had said to Helen about him.
“I am not a businessman, Terry,” he’d argued, “I am an architect; one of the best. Not at GAL; in the country.”
“So, tell them that.”
“They know.”
“Remind them because, clearly, they have forgotten.”
Terrence raised some hard truths, like how Menziwa was even more qualified than the senior partner at the firm: ‘You should be employing him, not the other way round.’
Menziwa drank more, hoping the alcohol would make the truth a bit more palatable. It didn’t.
At R820 000, his house, replete with a tennis court, stables and pool, was one of the most opulent in the district. Menziwa calculated that in the big city this could easily have fetched, in the language of estate agents, the early millions. By comparison, Menziwa’s own house was modest.
“This is huge, chief,” he remembered saying at the time, nothing else coming into his head except the cold hard facts of how he was selling himself short at work while less deserving white boys creamed it.
“Thanks,” his host had said modestly and added in his mother tongue, “This is where we hide our heads.”
If all it was good for was hiding heads, Menziwa had thought that not even the heads at a football match were enough for this monstrosity. The simple task of showing them around was like a trip half-way through the Kruger Park. After the braai and copious amounts of Johnny Walker Black, it was time to hit the highway. Even as he drove back with Veronica reclining on the seat beside him in her best funeral gear and the shoes kicked off, Menziwa’s was mulling over what Terrence had said. He was clearly comfortable, a life Menziwa thought he also deserved. He came back with a spin at the car-wash he did not pay for, a full tank of fuel in his car and spending money the sort of which he hardly ever saw in his own wallet these days. For good measure, they even threw in a kimono as a gift to Veronica. As the hooch dissipated, Menziwa felt terrible that he’d taken a woman who was not his wife to Terrence’s. He wanted to know at that instant what June was thinking about him. As he pondered his lack of foresight, he recalled that June had never sat with Veronica to talk, the same way he knew Nandi to treat the female company of their visitors.
“Those are very nice people,” Veronica had offered on the drive back.
She was beautiful. She spoke well. He actually didn’t mind her company but at that point he knew they were not supposed to be together in his car.
She took calls intermittently from people who wanted to know where she was. “I was out to freshen up,” was all she seemed prepared to say to the callers.
The silky Japanese robe Veronica had around her legs, June had hardly worn, she’d said, handing it over.
“I will wear it for you,” Veronica had said, gladly accepting it.
“I’ll bring June and the kids to come see you guys,” Terrence suggested when they next spoke on the phone after Menziwa’s visit, “it would be nice to all get together.”
“That was not my wife,” his conscience pushed the guilty party to clear the misunderstanding.
“We know. June says Veronica possessed very little knowledge about you when they spoke in the kitchen.” Menziwa thought this must have been the Mother of all Cock-Ups. What will

Nandi think if June as much as intimated that Menziwa had visited! This little act of infidelity felt so foul, cheap.
The friends had yet to meet and that it had not taken place had nothing to do with Terrence. Paying back in kind gave the next host the creeps!
Terrence stopped trying to touch base after several unreturned calls.
As he sat with Veronica in the Mazda on the third and final day of his leave, thoughts of the foolhardy trip to Terrence came flooding back.
"Let's go inside," she suggested. She was renting a flat on the outskirts of the town, not posh but clean. Inside, it was just as feminine as Veronica. The orange from the air freshener was particularly inviting. In terms of neatness, she was a woman after Menziwa's own heart. The two matching couches fitted the small sitting room well and the paintings on the walls were inexpensive but tasteful. From where he sat, Menziwa could see the whole kitchen and bits of the single bedroom.
"Are you hungry?"
"What's the food?"
"Fish."
"Not tinned fish?"
"No."
"Not from Madeira Café?"
"Of course not," she made eyes at him. "What do you take me for?"
"Bring it then."
Served with boiled vegetables and a blot of rice, it was a nice little meal he would have paid for. He took red grape juice when offered a choice between it and the wine.
She came to sit next to him on the couch and he watched a repeat of an episode he was sure he'd seen before on the travel channel. She busied herself with taking off his shoes and, before long, giving him an impromptu pedicure. She was originally from Swaziland but came here following her eldest sister who owned a hair salon in the big city. She did not like it there so she travelled west on a reconnaissance mission to see if she could not set herself up here. That was a year ago. She ditched the idea when she got a job at the optometrist in town as an assistant.
"I'm now thinking of training to be one myself. I think I like it."
After high school in Mbabane, she was going to be a police officer.
"Come again, a what?"
"A cop, what's wrong with that? Shoot the balls off the bloody rapists." She said this blowing the steam off her imaginary gun.
"Of all career paths open to a young Swati, you were going to be a cop? What happened to being a nurse, a teacher; good, respectable vocations?"
"I didn't like any of those."
She said she was convinced the eye was the most important organ in the human body. "You lose your sight, you're fucked. Not even losing your head comes close."
She spoke her IsiSwati softly, like it were a lullaby. She was very easy to speak to. And when it was her turn to listen, she cocked her head to the side, nodding in agreement. She had a way of popping out her eyes to denote surprise or incredulity.
"Some more juice?"
"Sure."
She returned with the ice-cold liquid in a different glass, the drops on the side indicating it had been rinsed before use. She spoke at length about Swaziland, responding to Menziwa's

questions, about how she could never be one of the King's wives: "I love sex too much to wait for my turn, if I'm lucky, that will come after three months."
She put a photo album in front of him. There were pictures of her with other girls. She was on a bicycle in another photo. A few shot in a primary school class. Twice she was turned out in the Girl Scout uniform. Then she grew up and wore big sunglasses. The loose pix excited his groin. Which of these bums are yours, he asked. It was a snap of young maidens with their rear to the camera.
"I'm obscured by this girl here," she said, pointing to a barely visible head with a ponytail.
The background was typically rural. The breasts in the full frontal pictures were pristine.
"She can't be a virgin?" he asked, turning the picture in question to within her range of sight.
"She is. Well, she was then."
The subject in the photograph was near obese with melons for breasts and tree stumps where her legs should have been.
"Leave it," she admonished, shielding the erection he was at pains to hide.
She continued speaking: "I've never seen or heard of men walking around with a hard-on. My great grandfather was 92 when he died. That September he'd been to the Umhlanga ceremony. Many men who come are motivated by the desire to see their tradition being carried out, their daughters coming of age by being part of the ritual. It is a proud moment for these men too, not just the girls. And it's not about flashing bums. It is not sexual, it is tradition."
In time she would emerge from the bedroom in a kanga with Mswati's face on it. Her hands on his body were soft. The sex was innocent. She moaned like she was hurting but fired off the 'Don't Stop' in quick succession when he made to ease off.
He had the Swazi culture to thank for her lack of inhibitions with nudity, almost flaunting hers.
"The female form is beautiful," she was saying, "don't lust after it, love it. Embrace it."
When he went into the bathroom it was to erase all trace of her but she followed and in time they were inside the tub, he inside of her. She was pleasant. Why would a woman give of herself so freely to a man with the biggest wedding band on his finger? She was lost in the lovemaking, her head clearly devoid of anything less erotic. As he pleasured her his own mind drifted off to the crime channels where sick men preyed on women, trusting women like Veronica.
If he harboured any ill-will or was a weirdo in the mould of those who featured on the crime doccies, he'd have easily had his day's fill with her. But then again, what else does a woman in love do?
When she stood up inches from his face, phoenix-like, she was his own mythical warrior queen. He stood too to lick and touch everywhere. His crotch was in total agreement that this before him was the perfect specimen of the naked female form.
He was very happy with himself at that precise moment. Pity it couldn't be frozen.
Someone called her name. Again, and when it came again, she excused herself to go see who it was. "It's my sister. She'll come back in a jiffy."
When the sister came back, Menziwa was also perched on the couch anew, fully clad and satiated. He flipped back the album and, yes, the young woman in the kanga draped around her and the birthmark resembling a tear drop was here before him. Standing together in the lounge as if for appraisal, Menziwa thought they could have done much better than Jean Claude van Damme in their own version of *Double Impact*.
Onica was three years older and had a bit more lumps on her girth. But she was still beautiful.
"I am pleased to meet you," she bowed respectfully towards him, "I have heard so much about you."

“All the bad things, I hope?”
“No. The only minus is that her description did not do justice to your looks.”
All three laughed and the sisters stole furtive glances when they thought he wasn’t looking.
Onica was in the bedroom until Menziwa left about five hours later. Not once did his phone ring during tour to sample the forbidden fruit.
When Veronica walked him out, she palmed him the money he had said he needed for petrol. At the filling station, he used only one of the three crisp hundred Rand notes on the Mazda.
He felt like such a conman. “A gigolo,” he said out loud. He turned on the radio. John Perlman was begging his callers to keep their comments brief.
Two days later, he was back outside her flat and Menziwa took six hundred Rand without flinching. It felt like something he was not going to burn in hell for. But he was still troubled by how open and trusting she was. She shouldn’t be, he wished.

CHAPTER SEVEN

"Are you finally getting that yacht, Menz?" it was Meghan appearing like an apparition before him, standing, as always, like she was making a sexual statement.
"What yacht?"
"Don't play that game with me, Menz. I see that grand-daddy Dillon has bequeathed you a nice tidy sum. Welcome to the club. You're not the first to be fished out of a financial tight spot by our loving grand-dad, may his soul rest in peace. Are you getting something for the Super Model? What's the money for? You know your secrets are safe with me, Menz."
Super Model was her designer sobriquet for Nandi and Menziwa knew how much Nandi loved that tag, even though she'd pretend to find it offensive.
Meghan dropped the sheaf of papers on his desk and blew her chewing gum exactly the loud way she knew was going to annoy the black man, who she heard could have been the firm's second in command if Anthony's father was still around. He was a star architect, her lover and boss had told her in strict confidence. He told her this once as they dressed to go home after one of their after-hours office romps. Anthony said he'd do all in his powers to keep him. But now that he's on the list of the grand-daddy charities, she was sure he was for keeps. She was happy for Anthony.
In that space of Menziwa's office, they could have touched hands if each stretched out – that's how close they were. But they were worlds apart. She wasn't sure if he noticed when she made heavy weather of the simple act of laying the papers in front of him.
In that blur, all Menziwa was happy to see was that two-hundred Grand was in his account and that the 'emolument' – nice word, was from the Gill Family Trust. From then on, everything else was secondary. He signed, shoved the papers back towards the in-house gossip and asked her to leave him alone: "My head."
"It's nothing Glenfiddich cannot cure, Menz." For some reason Meghan often looked for gaps to tell him just how much she knew about him, like insisting that this was his favourite drink outside the office.
"Thanks for the advice, Meg," he said, motioning for her to close the door behind her. This was just no way of getting rid of her. To make this point, she lingered on a little longer and again exaggerated the act of closing the door behind her: Spend it wisely, Menz. No groupies.
Despite himself, he chuckled. The door, left ajar for a fraction of a second, finally closed. He bowed down to pray.
He had a lunch date with wannabe property mogul Joel Stein whose company was bankrolling the Mannesmann project, a Melrose Arch-type splash they were planning for the outskirts of town. He called Stein to ask if they could move the appointment forward by an hour: "I need to be home by three." Stein readily agreed, like it was~~ere~~ the only thing he'd been waiting to hear all his life: "Meet me at The Bailiff. They serve the juiciest steak outside the body of the beast."
When he got to the imposing stand-alone building on the hip of the town, he parked near the entrance so he could be the first to exit when the time came for him to leave. Lunch-hour traffic at the steak house could be insane.
Lunch with Stein – his second such outing since they were introduced when GAL took on the job – was an elaborate affair that Menziwa unfortunately knew he had to tolerate despite his limited time and patience.
Dapper in a striped navy blue suit and tie, Stein took his middleman role seriously. Menziwa was sure he even mistook himself to be as important as those who paid his go-between fees.

“This is a fine day, isn’t it, old chap?” he smiled broadly at Menziwa, stretching his arms wide like he intended to embrace the architect. His thick-rimmed glasses made him look more important than the errand boy he actually was, lending him the air of an academic. The first time they met, Menziwa had thrown a casual remark about Stein’s striking resemblance to Philip Seymour Hoffman. ‘”You’re not the first person to say that to me,” Stein had said flatly. As it turned out, he thought Hoffman was excellent as Truman Capote. Menziwa had agreed with him. At a hurried pace just - only just - within the confines of good manners, Menziwa talked and simultaneously tucked into his sirloin, mercilessly. It was definitely enough for more than one person but the attacker made short shrift of it. Stein was entranced – by the workmanship explained, not the eating habits.

He’s worked up the concept, the architect had begun, into which he’s put together the idea of what the building would look like but he hasn’t put detail into it. The idea had in fact gelled. He’s considered the site in detail. He was clinical, eliminating the flowery non-essentials like he were a surgeon faced with an accident victim seconds away from death. For about thirty-five minutes and about the time the steak disappeared – whichever came first, he talked non-stop, pointing at the sheet spread between them. Once or twice Stein interrupted to ask a question but otherwise he sat quietly, enraptured.

Sitting opposite him, Stein recalled that the man before him came highly recommended. As he listened, it dawned on him why that was so. As an architect, apart from other entries on his portfolio, the man had his name already in two major landmark buildings in the small town, Stein remembered.

When Stein asked about these, Menziwa modestly said that it was this current project with Mannesmann that he hoped would put his name in the lights: “In it I see the realisation of a dream.”

Stein was also aware that having been taken off a hospital project or whatever other biggie it was, he was working on nothing else at the moment until the first brick was laid at their new building, a monstrosity bigger than an average village. Tony Gill had whispered to him that he’d be prepared to make this man senior partner – if he demanded it, after this job. “He’s got one helluva design brain,” Gill had whispered conspiratorially.

Stein was over the moon when the man mentioned he knew how important the Mannesmann account was for GAL and, by extension, his own career ambitions.

Stein, beside himself with excitement, was, for one moment of insanity, tempted to mention it to him that this was his ticket to the big corner office but held his horses, thinking with a tinge of regret that Gill had sworn him to secrecy.

“He seems to be happy without his name on the firm’s,” Gill had said to Stein when they talked about the genius of the principal architect assigned to the job.

Even today, as far as Stein could tell, the man looked totally at peace with the world. With the infectious blithe mannerisms he was showing today, the man was even glowing. “Aren’t you particularly in a good mood today?” he’d asked.

“I don’t know if I am,” the architect had said, “with my baby taking shape, I see no reason to be gloomy.”

“I just thought …”

“Oh, please forgive me if I’ve offended you,” the genius interrupted, “it’s just that I can see this project coming up. This means a lot to me.”

“Of course, of course,” Stein had reassured him, reaching across the table to pat him on the back.

In his head, Stein was already apportioning his fees to urgent financial commitments.
Unbeknown to him, his lunch partner was also making his own calculations about money already in his account.
I love this guy, Stein thought to himself. But what he said through his mouth was: "I share your joy – and pride."
Their business done, they sat and talked – small talk, really. Kids, cars, tweed jackets, golf, Hollywood divorces as informed by Bruce Willis and Demi Moore and, this was going to come, back to architecture.
Stein swirled his sweet wine around his mouth each time he took a sip. The other man eyed him critically but when it did not stop, he downed his two cans of red grape juice, drinking like he was really parched.
Stalemate!
"Keep well, old chap."
"You do the same, Joel."
When they parted an hour and a half later, Menziwa could still taste the blood of the animal in his mouth, battling the mushroom sauce for lingering after-taste. He was too happy to be upset by fresh memories of a drinker who sucked his liquid like it was a lollipop.
Two hands shook in a firm grip, with contrasting hues like they were an ad for the Colours of Bennetton.
A few paces away from the architect, Stein's mobile trilled and he almost curtsied when he responded: "Yes, Sir."
After a second he added: "Only the good news, Mister Chairman. You will be looking at the model in two months' time, to the day from now."
Another pause, then: "That makes the two of us, Sir."
On the other end of the property, near the exit from the vast expanse of manicured lawns, Menziwa was thinking about the crisp notes that lined Stein's wallet and noted that he'd forgotten when last his own had been that bulgy.
"Happy days are here again," he whistled to himself, composing his own tune. He nosed the car out and was gone. Had he bothered to gaze into his rear-view mirror at that exact point, he'd have caught Stein doing a light jitterbug.
But the only dance that mattered to Menziwa now was the one in his own heart.

His first stop was Grosvener Square where, for the first time in a long while, he approached the ATM with no trepidation. He punched in Own Amount when the machine prompted and took out his daily maximum, three Grand. In another time, he'd have pored over the slip to make calculations in his head and figure out why the balance showed a shortfall of almost twelve thousand in pending debit. They sure wasted no time! "The sharks have feasted on my earnings," he said in his head and immediately dismissed the rush of unhappiness that was creeping in with this news. He had a certain lightness in his step that he encouraged and wished would endure. When he walked past the mirrored front of the passage leading up to the shopping mall proper, he caught himself smiling and quickly pulled himself together. Be yourself, he told his inner man.
Mechanically, the one leg he put ahead of another led him to the trolleys at Woolies and as he piled in one food item after another, he prayed the moment would herald a new beginning in his state of finances.

“I’ve been trying to greet you,” a voice said behind him. Menziwa turned to find himself staring into the face of Harriet Ndlela, his old primary school teacher. Now pensioned, she was still her petit and beautiful self. The only difference was the gray threatening to spread from her temples towards the rest of the head.
“Mistress, oh,” he trailed off,” searching for something appropriate to say, “my mind is not here. I didn’t …”
“It’s OK, not to worry. How are the children now?”
“Fine, very well indeed.”
“How many are there?”
“There’s three – two boys and a little girl.”
“That’s lovely. And their mother is fine too?”
“Yes, yes; she’s OK too.”
A younger woman joined them, with two types of coffees that she deposited into the trolley. Her heavy glasses made her peer almost sightlessly into Menziwa’s eyes when they shook hands after being introduced.
“This is my daughter-in-law, Sylvia,” he was told. She was the wife of Eric Ndlela, a mama’s boy who was a class ahead of Menziwa.
He blushed and began to laugh with Sylvia when her mother-in-law said about him: “One of my best students; now one of the best architects in the world.” Vintage Miss Ndlela, Menziwa marvelled at the qualities of this great human being; always ready with a compliment, deserved or not. When they went their separate ways, Menziwa knew he was happy that day.
He stocked up on the bare necessities, warning himself not to go over the top like his wife, the shopaholic. When got to the till, he proffered his card and this time, his heart-beat remained normal. Lorraine – the name on her breast said – was very chatty and gracious. He led her do the talking, delighted by her youthful exuberance.
“Have a good day,” the girl said.
“Have a blessed one too, Lolo.”
She beamed proudly. It was a nickname she’d obviously come to expect, even from total strangers.
Menziwa wheeled his purchases into the bottle store along the passage to pick up his snifter. He ended up taking two bottles.
Would that be all for you, Sir, the cashier asked: “Just these two teenagers for me, yes.”
But quickly he dashed to pick up the cognac he had planned not to buy.
He returned to stare into the eyes of a bemused cashier.
His business done, he threw the coins into the plastic bag with the Bisquit and double whiskies and retrieved his groceries. The car guard ambushed him half-way and he fished inside the shopping bag for the loose change. He held the boot open as the older man carefully placed the goods inside the Mazda. That done, cash offered and accepted, he was signaled out of his parking space by the guard and he gunned the small car home.

“You’re playing truant again?” It was Nandi. “You can’t skip school and work. There must be one you stick to, at least.”
“I wanted to see who came to my house when I’m at work.”
“Oh, shit,” she said, “you missed him. He just left. He gave me one good round and ducked.”
“I’ll catch him next time and then my gun will be loaded.”

They kissed, long and hard. If there's a canine equivalent of blushing, both dogs gave it at that moment of human passion.
As MaMpho busied herself with her work, husband and wife unloaded the groceries with a mop propping up the boot of the car.
When he spread the Mannesmann project across his workstation hours after getting home, he'd still not said anything about his sudden windfall to Nandi. When she brought him the whisky, she clearly also had other things in mind. A man providing for his family seemed nothing out of the ordinary as far as his wife was concerned.
He stopped working when the kids got back from school. He readily obliged when they asked to go to the park. With Ntando on his shoulders and the boys out ahead on their bicycles, they hit the road.
He was barely watching as the children frolicked on the swings with others. His mind was on full throttle. His life had to change, he was promising himself. It had to change, for the better. He thought about his children and how he wanted a better life for them. He loved them too much not to see to the security of their future. He called out to Duma, who was perched precariously on the merry-go-round. The boy quickly returned to secure footing on the dizzying contraption. Thami was chatting to other boys, some still in school uniform. They were huddled together like a bunch of streetwise hoodlums, something they no doubt copied from older boys or picked up from television.
Ntando was trailing other children, running rings around the ducks and the nannies who were keeping a close watch on their charges.
Menziwa kept thinking the good life he had always wished for was within grasp. All he needed to do was run a tight ship with his cash.
Surprisingly, it was Thami who'd come to tell his father they could go home. "We're cool," he said in his brand of wise guy talk.
"Go get Ntando."
As he walked back he took a call from Nandi: "We're on our way."
Duma was aping the wheelies that his older brother was doing, not totally succeeding. It pained Menziwa to see him fail like that when he tried so hard. He'll grow up, the doting father comforted himself.
Supper was an easy but delicious chicken and rice with veggies. After the television news, Menziwa got back to his study but found his concentration had deserted him. He found solace in the huge serving of ice cream that Nandi placed before him. He wolfed it down in a matter of minutes.
"That whole bowl alone, champ? It was meant to be ours," she said when she returned, changed into her night gown.
"I didn't know that," he confessed, "it was your secret with yourself. I wasn't warned."
"Since when did you get two spoons with your food?"
"There's always a first time."
She made a face at him and went into the kitchen, coming back with bottled water.
They watched Steven Segal in one of his trademark *skop, skiet en donner* flicks. They still both loved his bone-breaking exploits and delighted in his tough guy antics.
MaMpho said the kids were all asleep; she was planning to turn in as well.
"Good night, Mama," they chorused.
The pony-tail was still in pursuit of the villains.

When he awoke in the morning, he gave a hearty thanks to the healing powers of a healthy bank balance. He'd slept like a log. He was in no rush to go anywhere, stretching this waking routine into a casually considered affair. After a quick shower behind MaMpho's room, he dressed in his AC Milan tracksuit and sat down to a breakfast cereal followed by a choice of fruit. He skipped the eggs and beacon Nandi tried to entice him with.
His whole day was already accounted for: he was taking the proof of payment to the MFC warehouse in the east to pick up the Alfa. Though he still had twenty-two days before it was finally auctioned, he was not planning on wasting another day. He did not mind the succession of public transport to the east of the big city. He looked outside for most of the trip, taking in the landscape, especially in the second cab he shared with a group of textile merchants from up north of Africa who apparently knew no other way of communicating other than speaking at the top of their voices.
His third taxi deposited him outside the mall in the small apartheid town made famous by Hollywood bombshell Charlize Theron. She was born on a farm somewhere around the town.
His business concluded at the bank, he took the deposit slip to the address in the letter he carried in the attaché case.
He saw his car as he approached his destination, standing head and shoulders above others in the repossession stock. Apart from the layer of dust that suggested it hadn't seen the road in forty-eight days, it was still in its pristine condition.
Apart from the greetings, he said absolutely nothing to the man processing his car papers. "I have doctors, lawyers – top guys, coming here to pick up their cars," the man was saying, "You're not the only one, my brother. It happens to all of us."
-Still Menziwa kept mum. I have no time for this twaddle, I want my car, he was thinking.
About twenty minutes later the Alfa was revving outside the premises, ready to be checked out with the security guy, who took his time getting out from under a preposterously large hat.
Menziwa was not going to say anything to this one either. The man then made a sudden U-turn to his guard house, making a caricatured show of patting his pockets for something that should have been there but wasn't.
As the peacock of a guard pranced around his turf, Menziwa confirmed that the car papers were in order and put in the CD he'd brought along.
When the man shoved the clipboard into the car, Menziwa scrawled something that passed for a signature and handed the papers back.
It felt like a brand new car. The smell of the leather upholstery assailed his senses like the scent of a long-lost lover. It was a beautiful feeling, like the warm embrace of the selfsame lover.
He cruised out of town, listening out for any unfamiliar sound. There was none, only the brawl of the engineering he'd always found exhilarating.
When the road signs pointed him to the freeway, he followed the turn and fast-flowing traffic told him he was free to run.
"Take me home, boy."
Everything inside the GT 3.2 V6 worked in perfect harmony to indulge him!
Playing it loud, Clifford Brown filled the car blowing *Joy Spring* to the heavens.
Never again, man made a promise to his machine. *Never Again*, he repeated, this time borrowing from the conviction of the Rwandanse~~se~~ who had found one another again after the genocide.
It was a pleasant trip and he did not beat himself too much when the speed camera caught him doing 185 km/h. He crawled back to within the speed limit.

He drove straight to the car-wash in the township where he still had an outstanding balance to pay.
"Full service," he told the leader of the washing pack.
"Your account is still in the red, Ta Menz," the boy said.
"I'm sorting you out today."
He took a leisurely walk to MaMokhethi's.
She made it clear she was not going to greet him: "You're not working today?"
"I was fired."
"Shame, join the queue."
Menziwa shook hands with the two men perched outside on beer crates. Though he could not put a name to each face, they were familiar.
They continued their conversation, with no intention to include him. He settled on a nip of Bell's after thinking against beer. As he nursed the wee Scotch, the story of his life force itself into his head; he did not force it out. It would be a while before he stood up to leave and go fetch the freshly washed and scented car.

"Do I phone the cops to come ask where you got the money from," Nandi asked as soon as he'd parked the car. Duma was particularly excited to see it: "Where has it been?"
He did not answer any of the questions but hushed both mother and son indoors.

That Tuesday held promise – it was going to be a beautiful day.
He went to the local supermarket to play the lottery; minding his own business in the car as he casually selected what he thought would be the winning numbers. His fortune had turned. The past two weeks had shown him the gods wished him a good life free of the stresses of money. He had paid almost everything that needed urgent payment. He was beginning to sleep a lot better. He did not remember ever waking up in a cold sweat in the middle of the night. Life was getting back to normal.
Then, suddenly, there was a knock on his side of the window.
That knock would turn his world upside down.
The unassuming guy that Menziwa had already dismissed as a country bumpkin said to him could Menziwa please help him with transport – he has to pick up his goods down the road.
In his head Menziwa knew he should have been suspicious at that very point when the guy said *Shoprite* because in his neighbourhood there was only a *Pick 'n Pay*!
He called this woman on the phone: "Mrs Mumba, where are you?"
The Mumba woman then said she was at *Pick' n Pay*. Bingo!
We drove down to the rendezvous – at high speed, Menziwa would later retell the story a countless times.
"All I wanted was for him to pay for petrol; it wasn't like I was looking for money for jam."
"All we were going to do was pick up his wares, dump him where I picked him up and, voila, everybody was happy."
When they got to Mrs Mumba – please call me Abby, she insisted, I am only 40, you make me old – the story changed.
She had tanzanite.
The Zimbabwean in Menziwa's car started speaking in tongues and, for the love of Christ, Menziwa could not pick up – at that point - that he was about to be scammed.

“Tell her you represent the old man … the old man could not be here today … don’t tell her about the buyer … you are the new buyer … yadda yadda yadda .. “
He still refuses to believe that, at lightning speed, he had driven go meet with ‘the big boss’ at the office. This, it turned out, was in the industrial township lying between the township proper and the suburb where Menziwa lived. The ‘office’ was in one of the factories, in a part of industria that Menziwa found he had never really been to. The cars parked outside were like they were being flaunted. He was certain they did not use the front reception area to access the office but he found himself in a large space with a huge mahogany office desk and cabinet set. The man seated at the desk looked like he was busy on the laptop but stopped working as soon as Menziwa was ushered in.
“Welcome, my brother,” he said, extending a hand that swallowed Menziwa’s like it were a mitt, “can we do business together?”
What sort of business, Menziwa was eager to know.
“How much do you know about tanzanite, my brother?” but before Menziwa could offer an opinion the Big Bear was already laying out pamphlets in front of him. For a big person, he was very agile, landing on Menziwa’s side of the desk with cat-like speed. The blue of the stones on the brochures was especially luminous and for a moment Menziwa thought of how beautiful a necklace of that material would look on Nandi. “This is a gem in the true sense of the word, my brother,” Big Bear continued.
They dealt in the stone and a variety of others. They were not small fry. They dealt mostly with Egyptian businesspeople who were acting as a link between the traders on the continent and those in Europe. There were offices in Madrid, Skopje and Alexandria. They were being frustrated by red tape to get an office set up in Cape Town but he was adamant the delay was only because the South African authorities wanted to be bribed. “That’s not how we do business, my brother. Everything we do must be above board. They can take as long as they want but we will not pay a cent of bribery,” he said, dabbing the side of his mouth with a handkerchief whose purple colour Menziwa was sure came from the silk cloth of only the finest quality. The man had on a light grey suit with a shirt the same shade as the hanky. The cufflinks expose at the hems of his jacket were serious stuff. The tie combined the colours of the shirt and the shiny brown shoes.
He was well-spoken, a native of the Canary Islands: “But after university in the USA I stayed after marrying a girl from Cincinnati.”
The accent then made sense to Menziwa.
“I am looking for people who want to make money, but it must be my own folk, blacks. I refuse to do business with any other people because they have had their share of wealth.”
Once or twice, or even a few more times, they were disturbed by a soft knock on the door: “Yes, Darlene?” Each time Darlene had stated her business the man would say ‘let it go’ and a leather bag would be hauled from under his side of the desk by Darlene to be given away ‘to close a deal’. And then the buzzer on his desk phone would come and, depressing the button, he’d say ‘let’s do business again’. Three of the male voices that thanked him, all profusely, promised to do business again. Among them one stayed a bit longer begging Big Bear to reinvest all the R650 000. Big Bear, very impatient as ‘I am still busy with a client’ promised to get back to the man if he left his contact details with Darlene.
Menziwa felt very important.
As Big Bear spoke, Menziwa was reading through the brochures on tanzanite, named after Tanzania, discovered in 1967, celebrated as the gemstone of the 20th century. When the

flamboyant businessmen finally returned his attention to Menziwa, the latter knew how much he wanted to be on the other side of the buzzer, thanking Big Bear and rushing off with his loot.
"This is how it works," Big Bear was saying, "buy your own stones, according to your pocket. Through me I sell it to the Egyptians at a 15% mark-up, 3% of which is my commission. So I give you back your investment, whatever you put in, plus a 12% return. I get the money in the morning; you collect by close of business. It is as simple as that. If you have the time, you could come in, and we do this every day. But if I make you money every single day, my cut rises to 7% per day. But we only work from Tuesday to Friday. I could do this myself alone but it would be greedy. So let me know if you want in."
When he stopped talking he moved back to his side of the desk and sat down heavily, freeing his neck from the grip of his tie.
To cut a long story short, Menziwa ended up going to the bank to withdraw R130 000. He was in, he said, shaking the mitt again. 'See you first thing tomorrow morning, my chief. Help me make some dough.'
When he retold the story, Menziwa would not really say why he had Big Bear's people with him in the car to the bank. There were so many cellphone calls that took place among them, from Big Bear to Mrs Mumba to her 'husband' to Pierre and the Zimbabwean in the car. 'I even had the radio off,' he'd say telling the story of how he was made to believe the hocus-pocus of a couple of thousand Rand a day, without raising a sweat.
"This is a beautiful car, my brother. One day I want to go home with something like this." It was the Zimbabwean foot soldier.
His brain was working at high speed. When he calculated, Menziwa was going to make fifteen and a half Grand a day! He was even going to get Nandi's uncle Herbie on the deal. The old crook would know where to get a buyer for the tanzanite should the Egyptians sell him short. He'd never spoken to Herbie but Menziwa knew him to be very active in black market gems. It was how he made his money when the authorities were not looking. His registered business enterprises were a front for how he really earned a living. And it was a living Menziwa would not mind one bit – cars and property all paid up.
"Good money; easy money," he was almost whistling to himself.
He saw lifelong misery dissipating right before his very eyes. God was busy answering his prayers. When he thought about it, he saw how that was the easy way the likes of Herbie were able to live comfortable lives. He was going to test the waters himself for a week then get Herbie in on it.
The man was even going to buy the Alfa from Menziwa when the deal went through. Menziwa had charged him R185 000 for the car – way more than the money he still owed on it. How he wished he'd have had that kind of moolah to settle!
Maybe getting rid of it for a newer model would not be such a bad idea, he mused.
Throughout this unraveling skullduggery Menziwa, ever the streetwise product of the township, had the presence of mind to bring someone along – just in case. He took Sipho with, a menacing character that did not need sufficient provocation to bring out his Okapi. Mrs Mumba could not hide her displeasure when she saw the extra man in the car with Menziwa. When she tried to smile with Sipho, he dressed her down like she was something totally distasteful.
"I stab people for a living, *broer*," he always said to Menziwa, "just as you design houses." This was not the only thing Sipho was capable of. The penal system knew him for far worse.
Design, when it fell off Sipho's lips, had a strange ring to it that the Queen would not have recognised as her language.

“Sips,” Menziwa said to his bouncer, “let’s make some money. Quickly.” The ex-con smiled, like it was a painful expression to pull off.
Money was a language Sipho understood very well. It was in fact the only language he spoke with a modicum of fluency. In a flash, Menziwa had left the men and Mrs Mumba with Sipho and his pen-knife in the car and went into the bank to start the process of withdrawing the money. After a long struggle like the money was not his, it was granted.
He got back to the car, indicated to Mrs Muamba that he got the money and the cell phone calls started anew.
Then Mrs Mumba said Big Bear wanted to speak to him on the phone. Menziwa took the call and Big Bear congratulated him on being a serious player. At that point, Menziwa was bursting with pride.
“But I want to make a proposition to you,” Big Bear said on the phone, “go see the stones first so that tomorrow morning when you come, you know already what precious stones you are buying. I can meet you there if you want.” Menziwa said it was OK; they can just go check out the wares: “Our real business begins tomorrow.”
He then handed Mrs Muamba her phone. She spoke briefly, clearly taking orders and then said she’d direct Menziwa to the right place. The tanzanite was with another man Pierre that they spoke on the phone with. He was at Chancellor House – on the third floor, they said. Florent Jewellers. It all seemed so legit. This was in a swankier part of town. When they got there, Pierre had laid out the stones on top of the counter for all to see. There was even some gold.
The whole process of looking at the stones did not last more than a minute. But still Menziwa, said, in retelling the dupe job, he did not find this odd. Menziwa could not take longer, said Pierre, because the ‘big boss could find out as he was still in the office’. Just as the fractional act of taking a glimpse ended, Big Bear strode in with a woman on his arm, the most beautiful woman Menziwa had ever seen outside the pages of a magazine. ‘This is my wife, Matilde.’ When she favoured Menziwa with a smile, it was to reveal a most perfect set of dentures.
Yes, he saw the stones, said Menziwa, albeit briefly. Matilde was quick to add that it was because the ‘old man’ did not like doing business like that ‘when he has not seen the money’. Big Bear seemed like he was dismissing her and said he and Menziwa will prove the old man and his bunch of skeptics wrong tomorrow: ‘Don’t talk like that about my father.’
As they walked out to the cars, Big Bear and Matilde were headed towards a Jaguar convertible whose doors Big Bear had already alarmed open. If it was an act to woo Menziwa, they succeeded. He was just green with envy. Like it was an after-thought, Big Bear called him over to the Jag. He opened the boot for Menziwa and inside was a large case. When he opened the case, it was full of money: ‘This is tomorrow’s business.’
How Menziwa got to agree to leave his investment with Big Bear remained a mystery he could not explain, even as a fuming Nandi demanded to know over and over again. Big Bear wanted to help him jump the queue and he was giving him three days’ business in advance. He was going to give him each day’s 12% in advance, all Menziwa had to do was come in every morning to check in on his capital investment. Like a bullet, Matilde came around to the back and fiercely objected to a special favour being extended to Menziwa ‘yes, he’s a fine gentleman but why the special treatment for him?’ Big Bear said he was going to go with his gut and give Menziwa a foothold in the business. In a daze, he ran to his car, retrieved the bag from under the driver’s leg space and ran back to do a secret deal with Big Bear.
“This is how much, my brother?” Big Bear asked.
“One-thirty big ones,” Menziwa said, feeling like the biggest thing since Al Capone.

‘”I trust you, I will not count it.” This left Matilde livid.
“Oscar, please count the money. How can you do business like this?” It hit Menziwa there and then that he actually did not know the man’s name.
From the case in the boot of the Jag, Oscar took out a golden calculator, did some figures and showed him the total on the small screen: 46 800.
“Agreed?”
“Sure.”
From the same case Oscar took out clean crisp R100 notes. “Ten Grand in a bundle,” he said.
Menziwa’s heart was racing. He counted out five of the bundles and just as he handed them to Menziwa, Matilde turend away angrily and got into the car, banging the door so hard it shook.
“Give me change first thing in the morning,” he said, waving a long muscled index finger at Menziwa, “I have broken rules to get you in; do not let me down.”’
‘Count on me,’ Menziwa said, pocketing the money.
When they hugged, it was like Oscar wanted to suffocate him. ‘”Tomorrow, my brother, please. I’m a stickler for punctuality.” Menziwa confirmed the hour and they parted.
When they honked their goodbye, Matilde sat the same way an angry Nandi had often done. She did not even acknowledge Menziwa when he saluted. But before he left, Menziwa insisted on calling Pierre on the office number at Florent after taking down his cell number. “No problem,” Pierre had promptly agreed.
As they drove away from the ‘deal’, he stopped outside a corner café and asked asked Sipho to get a telephone directory. In the half hour or so it took Sipho to get back with the telephone directory, obviously pinched from an unsuspecting store-keeper, Menziwa had called Pierre about three times on his mobile. “Sir, if you call me again, I will start charging you a consultancy fee,” Pierre had threatened.
Menziwa compared the number on the directory to what Pierre had given him. He dialed the number: “Florent Jewellers.” It was Pierre. Menziwa hung up without a word.
“It all seemed so genuine. They insisted I leave the cash with them,” he would tearfully recount to his sister.
That night, before he went to bed, he took the money from the boot of his car and stashed it atop a rack in the garage. It was safe. Sipho, with R300 in his pocket, thanked Menziwa so much he nearly cried.
That night Menziwa did not sleep, waiting for the break of dawn. He did not say a word to Nandi who just remarked at how happy he looked: ‘is it a crime to be happy?’
At around 7.30 the next day, he was in a suit and tie outside the factory with the many expensive cars outside. He sat for a while texting Meghan to say he wasn’t feeling well. They then texted each other back and forth playfully. 8. 15 he closed his phone and walked in. As he approached the reception, he remembered that they did not use the front entrance yesterday. But he was already face to face with a Dolly Parton lookalike who was asking if she could be of assistance. He asked to see Oscar.
“We have no one by that name here, Sir.’
‘“Or maybe I should use the door on the side.”
“That’s another company, not us, sorry.’
He mouthed an apology, quickened his step to make it for the 8. 30 am appointment. When he reached the other side, a man was sucking hungrily on a cigarette, minding his own business. When Menziwa stepped inside, the layout of the room had completely changed – there was no

mahogany desk. He retraced his steps to go ask the man with the cigarette outside but as he did, the man nearly bumped into Menziwa.
"Sorry, Sir, do you know what time the guys who work here come in?"
"This is the foyer," the man said, "people work in their offices." Menziwa could feel colour draining from his face.
"Oh, thanks." He then followed the man in like he knew where he was going.
Every door he knocked at, no one had the faintest idea who Oscar was. There were four companies that were renting space here; interior designers, plumbers, coal merchants and an estate agent. No Oscar; no tanzanite, no smart suit 'please go find out from the security at the gate'.
At the gate, the old man manning affairs there spoke IsiZulu. He was as helpful to Menziwa as a bicycle is to fish. He went back to the front reception and slowly explained his story to Dolly Parton. She listened. When he stopped talking, she was handing him a box of Kleenex. "I am so sorry. I really am hey." People began to gather around Menziwa and Dolly.
When he was escorted to his car, his feet buckled under him and the old man at the gate came to offer help. 'They knocked him,' he heard someone say, explaining to curious onlookers who were asking what had happened to him. "Do you want me to call someone for you?' he locked himself in the car and wept. Recovered, he hastily started the car and shot straight for the jewelers. He was not going to phone ahead for Pierre.
When he got to Florent, there was an Indian lady behind the counter.
Pierre?
Who is that?
He asked to sit down and the lady told him to suit himself. Until the shop closed, no one remotely resembling Pierre set foot in the store. When he counted his losses, Menziwa noted that Pierre was not exactly standing behind the counter. He looked like he was in a hurry to leave – until the Indian lady came!
It was at that point that Menziwa, looking back, knew he should have taken his money home from the bank. Running around like he did, he was begging to be robbed. Sucker that Menziwa was, he'd been hoodwinked by Pierre, who had shown him a dog-eared copy of a *Sterns* brochure: "This is what we do with the tanzanite."
Beautiful blue stones in watches and rings!
He'd tell his sobbing wife and sister: "I thought I was in the money. God was great. My ship had just come in."
He'd stopped for petrol. R300. He gave Sipho the same three crisp notes. A windfall was coming. More calls on the cell with Pierre. Looking back, he said that in that madness he broke every traffic rule in the book. The Italians would have been happy to see how their car performed with him behind the wheel.
"All along I am thinking … this is your children's money, Menziwa, don't fuck up!"
But 'fuck up' is exactly what he did.
That's when the thought came to him. Pick up Bra Sipho, "he can kick the hell out of them."
On his last call to Pierre on the Florent office line, he spoke in such low tones he was like a child using the phone without their parents' consent.
'They were gone. I was R130 000 poorer,' it was Nandi, mimicking him. She was so funny people who came to the house over the next two weeks or so were sufficiently entertained. 'The person behind the counter at Florent was definitely female. She'd never heard of Pierre. The

company did not employ anyone by that name. She should know. She was into her fourth year at the same company."
When Nandi did the Indian accent, she was hilarious: "Behind this counter, only me. The only black man we have is the scooter driver, Julius."
She told people how when Menziwa got tired of sitting down waiting for Pierre he jumped over the counter forcing the Indian lady to run for dear life into the bowels of the office. "I was screaming like a mad man, Nomsa."
Out of Nandi's mouth, it was just prize-winning comedy.
On the day at Florent, Menziwa did not recall that he fainted. When he came to, he was in hospital, shackled to his bed and a police officer standing up to motion him to sit back on the propped up pillows.
"What is this?" he'd asked.
"You're under arrest, broer," the pimply young constable said.
Menziwa had flopped back on the bed and, a few minutes later, was snoring soundly.
Three days later he was back home – out of hospital; out on bail.
This was the first time in their lives together that Nandi told him – to his face – that he was stupid.
Stooooo-pid!
It hurt more because it came from her.
"Sometimes being stupid can be a sign of great virtue." Despite the shakiness in his voice, he said this with amazing confidence but deep down he knew he didn't really believe what he was saying.
That was when something in his life gave in. He cried like a child.
"Mommy, why is daddy crying?"
"He's a fool. That's why he's crying like a little girl in a pink dress."
For a whole month at least, there was no one Menziwa could speak to.
"I love you, papa."
"I love you too, my baby."
In a daze, he'd drive around looking for Mrs Mumba and the guy from Chitungwiza. After a while, Menizwa stopped looking and started crying more.
Each time, he came home to his children and his dogs. George, the border collie, was actually Menziwa's second in this breed – he'd once nursed a rough collie back to good health after that he'd found it hit by a speeding taxi that did not bother to stop. Years later he'd read somewhere that there was a Hollywood movie starring this type of dog. The film was called *Lassie Come Home*. This had made him love the dog even more. In his eyes, his was also a film star albeit of the canine kind. For some reason, the dog was called Molby, named by an over-enthusiastic friend in his neighbourhood. Molby did not die; he just up and left. Gone but never forgotten. In George, Menziwa saw a lot of Molby, though his latest was more on the quiet side. But it was just as sweet with the children. The youngest, Ntando, grew up riding astride the dog: It is my p*er*, the child would brag as he went giggling around the vast yard. These were times when Menziwa would beam with pride, thankful to God for his adorable brood.
The German Shepherd, Herbs, he absolutely loved for its almost glossy coat no matter how many times it rolled in the flower bed, its preferred sleeping place. It abhorred the leash the same way it hated the green plastic kennel. But he knew his children were safe around it – it snarled like mad each time a stranger came to the gate when the kids were out in the sun and sand. It seemed to want to prove itself more loyal than its collie step-brother.

It was then that he wished Nandi could love him the same way, unreservedly, lost money or not. He was craving her approval. The stolen women in Menziwa's life had always treated him with the same sort of reverence as his dogs even when he knew he was being just an asshole. Veronica stood as a shining example to this truth. His wife was the only one of his harem who did not give him any money – and treated him like a dog, lately. She could really press his buttons these days. When Nandi was really angry with her husband, she called him Shaka, her shorthand for a crude Neanderthal man. He would always be incensed: "That's in bad taste."

"OK, Romeo. I'm sorry."

Did he really want to be saddled with Veronica's sort, a timid species born to please men? He wanted Nandi and her cheekiness. He found he had no hassles attracting women who could give him money. Before Veronica, in the days when he was beginning to struggle for petrol, he'd seen a few. One, Barbara, a candidate attorney at the law firm next to GAL, carried notes in her purse that always looked like they had just been disgorged by the ATM.

For his part, Menziwa would always not fail to take the money.

"I will give it back."

"Nice song."

"I mean it, *Babs*."

"Tell me when that day comes."

"*Voetsek!*"

"Thank you very much. You are very kind."

Another V-word, and another, and another, and yet another – until it became a flurry.

"Thank you, my darling."

Barbara changed jobs and Menziwa lost contact with her. He did not make an effort to locate her. Women, children and dogs ... for some time, this was his life as Nandi was going about with her WAG life, spending the money they did not have.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Driving back home from lunch with Helen Gill, Nandi couldn't mistake~~n~~ the man in shorts pushing the stroller while two older children pedaled along in their bicycles. These are my babies, she said out loud, turning down the volume in the car radio.
Despite his gloomy moods lately, Menziwa remained a good father and an absolute darling, she ruminated. She knew his love for her too remained unshaken, despite the odd storms. "And I love you too, my honey."
She turned the radio completely off as she stopped alongside her husband. "*En nou*?" she asked in her rarely spoken local patois.
"We were out for some fresh air," he said, adjusting his sunglasses to limit the damage of the sun. The honourable Thami claimed to be bored."
Thami was the eldest at 11; Duma was eight and the baby of the family, the only girl Ntando, would soon be turning four.
"Bored?" she was asking Thami, who had wheeled his Peerless to her driver's side, forcing her to wind her window further down as he pushed his head in to plant a kiss on his mother's cheek.
"Yep," the boy said, before cycling away.
The dare-devil Duma was further down the road, doing all sorts of acrobatics his tiny weight on the Raleigh allowed him. Indoors, he could often be upsettingly withdrawn. He was giving his mom hand signals from that far away. Menziwa was wondering if there was such a thing as gibberish in sign language.
"I'm bushed," it was back to hubby, "full of sushi from your white friends. See you in a bit."
The car rolled on home as the two boys raced it the short distance. From her rear view mirror, the man she loved with her whole heart followed at a leisurely pace.

He was now speaking on the phone.
She'd never know that the caller was demanding sex from her husband. "Tonight or else ..."
Menziwa does not look at other women, Nandi was sure: "He admires buildings." For a long time this was true, he had eyes only for her. But she'd never guess that he was taking money – even if it was monopoly money, from other women. Eventually, he was going to have to field calls like the one he just had from exasperated lovers who, what is the phrase, wanted their money's worth. Demanded it, is more the thing. But out of all the female contacts he'd made outside his wife, he was drawn more to~~e~~ V~~v~~eronica than to the other conquests. Examining his conscience, he came to the conclusion that what he had with Veronica was not love in the bonking sense. It was just an attraction he feared was becoming platonic with each encounter.
How do you turn back, he pondered his dilemma, and tell as gentle and fragile a~~s~~ soul as Veronica that the sex was all a big mistake, that all you ever really wanted was help out of an enduring spot of bother? Would he be able to man up some day and find the courage to tell her that much, without the risk of breaking her beautiful heart and, whilst at it, not feel like the scum of the world? He was treading on dangerous ground, he admitted. Soon it would open up and swallow him whole. The situation increasingly verged on the untenable.
Architects look at building the way a Casanova eyes women, Nandi assured her mom. And as far as she could tell, Menziwa had eyes only for her. "I'm OK with that," she'd said, "in the course of our marriage he can look at all the buildings he wants."
But unbeknown to her, Menziwa copied most things about his idols. The famous Louis Kahn, the architectural scholar, had two wives who were unknown to each other.

The only aspect of the lives of well-known architects he'd not copied was to leverage the deep pockets of his in-laws to allow him the luxury of designing lavish buildings, at which he could take his time.

All Nandi knew was that this quartet presently trailing her meant the world to her. He was a doting father. His love for the children bordered on the fanatic. Thami was very nearly born on campus when he was still studying in Cape Town. Had he delayed her departure by so much as 'just a few more hours', which he was begging for, she'd have given birth in his dorm room. Her water broke six hours later, when she already home, safe and sound.

On their subsequent visits, he'd carry the infant around campus like some sports trophy. They were quasi celebrities of his varsity days, having featured once in an edition of the student newsletter that carried a Father's Day feature. Nandi remembered that the picture was with her mother now, in one of the photo albums she'd never bothered to get back from her.

He treated the boys as bosom buddies who he took to the soccer matches, especially when Kaizer Chiefs, Thami's club, was playing. Duma went with the flow; celebrating with the mother when Orlando Pirates won, on the rare occasion that it did; with his older brother - which was often or commiserating with his father when Moroka Swallows lost. She knew that he was overly protective of Duma, whose soft demeanour convinced Menziwa that the boy needed special attention. It was a view she did not share. The boy was just in character – self-restraint, unlike Thami who was over the top.

Menziwa said he could not drive past boys begging at the street corner without thinking of how Duma was so unsuited for the life. "But he was not born into that life, champ," she argued once, "that is why he's so unsuited for its hardships."

"I'm just saying, you know."

At his most touchy-feely, Menziwa cried bitterly a few years ago when they were watching an Al Jazeera documentary of Eritrea seceding from Ethiopia. One particular boy, whose face kept filling the screen, had the sort of vulnerability Menziwa saw in Duma. Scrubbed clean and clothed in the fashion of their own children, that boy could easily have become one of their own. He looked like he could do with regular meals. In the documentary, the boy's job was to herd donkeys to the market and back as they returned heavy-laden with household purchases. Menziwa's whimpering made watching unbearable and Nandi stood up to go busy herself with cooking, a distraction she found less of a tearjerker.

Just the other day Nandi watched it again but finished, again, with dry eyes. What was wrong with Menziwa that he saw Duma in the eyes of the downtrodden of Eritrea?

She saw his mood hit rock bottom again when a Palestinian man cradled his dying son in his arms after the 12 year-old, she thought he was, was gunned down by Israeli soldiers.

"They were not carrying guns, baby, or on any dangerous mission," he said, "the man was going to buy the family a car. Yes, a car."

He'd continued making comparisons of how he'd never fully recover after losing a son like that. A few months later the same Palestinian visited South Africa and Menziwa excitedly came back home from a night out with the boys to tell her about this important visit. 'You want to go get his autograph?'

When he woke up the next day with an over-sized hangover, he'd forgotten that he had planned to go hear the man speak, wherever he was hosted.

The policy was, any toy, every toy – as long as it is not guns. The boys had every plaything at their disposal. But they had never owned even the innocuous water gun. "That's what cowards buy their children. It's OK for those parents, not us."

Their God-given duty was to raise decent members of the future society, not its would-be monsters.
He insisted on there being food in the house: "At every given time."
Now, all of a sudden, I'm being accused of wasting money of food, she clucked her tongue, telling her mother about the source of their discontent.
But no scrap of food was ever thrown away. In fact the only time she'd ever seen him get angry with the boys, his untouchables, was when they each suffered the stupidity of chucking bread crumbs in the dustbin. She thought he was going to kill them, especially Duma who was not doing it for the first time: "Not in this house. We have dogs, if you don't want the food you give it to the dogs. You hear!"
Even Ntando; in her baby talk, she grew up thinking *ntsa,* which is actually *inja* – dog, was also a word - or left- over food. It did not matter who was eating – even total strangers visiting, if there were left-over scraps on their plates, Ntando would point outside to the dogs.
With her own plate, she took matters in her own hands. Whatever was left on her plate was *ntsa*, and she would, in her infinite goodness, totter out the house in her pitty-patter, to go feed the canines. More often than not, they would knock her to the ground in their haste to get to the food.
After the two boys, the pact was that they would try for a girl. They would stop whatever the child's gender. Luckily, Ntando came.
She has been an egg ever since.
He worried sick if she so much as cried but Nandi was firm on this, she could go on crying: "They are just tears, not blood. What type of baby would she be if she did not cry?" Even her own mother, who treated the child daintily, couldn't care if Ntando wailed to the heavens, Nandi said. 'Don't spare the rod, and you will not spoil the child.'
Ntando was the only grandchild as Nandi' brothers did not have children. It did not look like the Terrible Twins were that way inclined. Sex for them was strictly for recreation, not procreation. "They will have no children~~shoot blanks~~, Nandi. It happens. Not all men were made to be fathers." This subject gave him bragging rights of a kind. He just loved it that it riled his wife. Menziwa had dared to call them misogynists and when she found out what the word meant, she was furious and did not speak to him for a while.
He had to apologise.
Child abuse was a thorny issue, for both of them. Nandi agreed she'd kill the first man who ever touched Ntando inappropriately. Menziwa was more graphic about what he'd do to the offending male genitalia. When they watched Baby Tshepang, a stage play inspired by the real life-abuse of a girl child, they vowed the scourge should be fought by all right-thinking adults. To this end, Nandi belonged to a woman's empowerment group that tackled such taboos in the township.
According to Menziwa, who just adored Basetsana Kumalo and the story of her life, he was raising a future beauty queen. When she said her aim was to grow old enough to play with Thami and Duma's children, her husband had said not before he could see Ntando win a beauty pageant. "I want to hear her pay tribute to her father when she is asked about those she owed a debt of gratitude to for supporting her choices in life," he beamed, scenes of the imaginary night playing themselves out in his head.
All the Somali beauties, like Waris Dirie, who escaped female genital mutilation and other customary ills to be the best in life, where his pegs for how far Ntando was going to go: "But without the scars of tradition."

At his most loving, he called her Princess. When she was two, Nandi said she was waiting to start baking with her little girl, which was a mere year or so away. She said Ntando was the cherry on top her bounty of boys.
Presently, the commotion outside confirmed her luck and she was thankful for these four souls who had brought so much meaning into her life. She had hit the pots as soon as she was changed into a flowery little number that showed a leg. Menziwa was outside with the children – more with Ntando than the boys. With the pool freshly cleaned, the bicycles and the swings, their father might as well just have been part of the landscape. They did not see him; they only heard his intermittent reprimands.
Now and again, Nandi would peer out the kitchen window to ask if Menziwa needed anything to drink. "Water for me," he said. Still, she brought out a carafe of 100% red grape juice.
Very few things gave her as much pleasure as cooking for them. Just that instant the heavenly aroma of spaghetti carbonara frittata, borrowed from Helen, was now wafting out the windows, luring the boys in momentarily.
Spasgetti, in Duma's language, was a dish Nandi could whip up with closed eyes, anytime, in whatever guise. This was the third time she was unleashing it on her family – each time, it never failed her, gaining her all the kudos. What she lacked in fiscal prudence, she more than made up for in the kitchen
Her mind drifted back to the book she brought home the other day from the night out with Nomsa, her sister-in-law. She couldn't understand the madness of that woman. In a huff, she went to pick it up from where Menziwa had left it.
There were questions she challenged her readers to ask themselves: like how often they brought groceries and warned against the temptation to buy more.
This was the thing Nandi couldn't understand about these people dispensing advice from their lofty air-conditioned offices. How does any right thinking woman with children to feed resist the temptation to buy more?
Look at this drivel: *Do you buy food on a credit card?*
Did she expect the modern woman to carry wheelbarrow loads of cash to the mall? What about the possibility of being mugged, which was real in these times? Did she consider this before writing?
If you do, does this cause you to buy more food than you need? And do you buy more expensive items and more luxuries? Do you make sure that you pay the full amount owing every month? If you buy food on a credit card, you must make sure you pay the card in full every month otherwise you will end paying for the food months after you ate it and disposed of it.
What utter twaddle!
She put the book down as her pots beckoned.
If buying food for her family meant she was a reckless person with money, then, yes, she had no intention of being a good girl. She was bent on feeding them until Christ came.
In his newfound ways to depress her, Menziwa had tried to wake her up the other day when he was watching a documentary about families in KwaZulu/Natal somewhere who earned a combined income of no more than R350 a month.
But this one of woman had shocked Nandi out of her wits. Surely she was exaggerating:
Things are so expensive nowadays that I cannot even think of buying extravagant things such as rice and spices.
Nandi had been to the shacks and the RDP houses. She could swear that women – with families to look out for, cooked it and even had their rice spiced!

She pretended to be deep in slumber land when these women were being so economical with the truth. One of them claimed tomatoes were luxuries!
This is not the life I know, she reminded herself. I am Hugh's daughter. My needs have always been met: "I will not start being poor in married life."
She thought of a politician whose statement used to crack Menziwa up. The man, whose name she could not recall, had said he did not join the struggle to be poor. It was a valid point that appealed to her mindset. She saw no way of playing poor after three children.
Of course she liked Helen's company but she did not wish to live her life of luxury. It was the selfsame Menziwa who insisted I befriend the wife of his boss.
No, she did not eat out as often as they used to. She understood this fully. When she did go out, it was at Helen's invitation, like that afternoon's outing. And Helen footed the bill, naturally.
Despite her comfortable upbringing and marriage, which in itself did not make them a poor family, she acknowledged that she and Helen were from opposite ends of the economic divide. Yes, Helen, an only child was from a lineage of wealthy professionals and the first to admit she knew zilch about poverty.
But, seriously, what did I know about poverty, except what I saw in Slovoville?
Poor people in our street would always eat. It was not like they went to bed on empty stomachs. They washed Hugh's cars and worked at the nightclub; they did things with their hands to earn a living. But abject poverty was a concept that belonged in books and television documentaries, not anywhere near where she grew up.
Helen had pointed out that Nandi dressed flamboyantly, with stilettos and quite flashy jewelry and weaves. This was what her peers were wearing. She couldn't help it if Helen felt intimidated. She too had her family's old money to wear whatever she wanted.
With her lanky blond hair perfectly cut, Helen was beautiful. He understated elegant suits and expensive jewelry that spoke of class suited her. But she could do more, or so Nandi felt. With the money Helen made, she was supposed to look like something out of *Vogue* each time she stepped out.
What Nandi liked with Helen was that she was very secure in her confidence. The girls in Nandi's circle of township friends were always suffering from self-doubt, which was a distressing attribute Nandi was at pains to work out of their systems, in vain.
Any meeting with Helen was always a lesson in being her best self, Nandi appreciated. No petty gossip.
Very early in their relationship Helen came to appreciate that theirs was a relationship of equals, not Madam and Eve. Helen had felt duty-bound as a good person to help Nandi. "Please don't, I am not crippled. I just happen to be black," Nandi had cautioned in their very first meetings when she was overwhelmed by Helen's patronising ways.
Helen talked about things that Nandi could not get from any of her childhood friends. She encouraged Nandi to get a bank loan to buy a stake in her events management company. But when she got the money, other urgent needs always arose. She knew Menziwa was riled by this but then, he'd always wanted to be unhappy each time money came into the picture. She never got round to asking what sort of stake, however trivial, a hundred Grand would buy her in Helen's business.
Earlier in the friendship, most of whatever they spoke about revolved around Helen's life who showed little interest or imagination about Nandi's life - both current and origins. But after a little talking-to, she turned the corner. Helen had said, against Nandi's conspicuous yawn, the country was great – better than Zimbabwe, only if people would stop going on about race. She herself, in

her own eyes, was oblivious to skin colour. 'Don't talk about it then, girl, if that's how you see it. Race, colour and whatnot are not really my choice subjects. Not every black person wants to lift their fists in the Black Power salute each time they are in white company. There are those, like me, who just want to drink their coffee without worrying about how that will affect the dynamics of race relations.'

But of the GAL wives, the person who knew no colour was Maureen Anderson, who was three months Nandi's junior. "I am your big sister," Nandi often reproved her playfully. Her much-maligned promiscuity aside, she was a complete human being.

Maureen was born in Limbe, Malawi but grew up in Mutare, Zimbabwe where the family lived until she was 14. They then moved to South Africa when the first signs of political instability under Robert Mugabe broke into public discourse.

When she said her best friends were black, she was not being ostentatious in political correctness – her photo album as a youngster was ample proof. More often than not, hers was the only pale face among a sea of black at birthday parties and other childhood socials. When her best friend came to visit – more than once – she was darker than ivory; a young black woman called Rebekkah who worked for Voice of America. They were very close. When Nandi met her, Rebekkah was the one who struck her as sexually liberal. In just her first visit, Rebekkah was caught with her pants down shagging the new guy at GAL that Finley said was a snake-oil salesman. His name escaped ~~spaded~~ her but Nandi knew Menziwa also did not give the guy the time of day.

"I got a shock of my life when I came to South Africa to attend a whites-only girls' school," Maureen had said when they first met. "I was extremely lucky not to have been aware of the evils of apartheid until much later."

Afrikaans as a language of study much later in her school life presented another culture shock.

She spoke about Africa with the passion of a mother, like it were her child. She hated those like Idi Amin, Mobutu Sese Seko and Charles Taylor who she blamed for all the continent's ills. "Why can't the continent, with all its natural resources, be able to feed her own?" she'd ask, sometimes on the verge of tears when 'the rape of Mother Africa' became too much for her. She read tomes about development in Third World countries and very little else. The only frivolity she allowed herself was going to art exhibitions.

She was a darling, the other wives agreed "but too intense". Africa will survive, they said, she doesn't need too much mothering. 'She loves Africa so much she' makes sure the men on the continent are never starved of sex.' It was Helen, very much out of character. Gossip and malice just failed her.

The other women spoke a lot about their children, Helen emphasising the achievements; sporting, academic and otherwise, of her brood. Nandi never felt the need to brag in competition, she just knew her boys were in a class of their own. Ntando, Menziwa had always said, was going to be the ultimate achiever.

Helen also spoke proudly about her husband, at times boasting about his knack for business and all-round ingenuity. Did she know that Tony's dexterity and skill was so all-encompassing that it included Meghan? In her especially, Nandi saw how women could love completely. She also understood why a woman scorned could be so lethal. She had no doubt that if the Tony and Meghan shenanigans were to come to her attention, Helen would just go ballistic. When she spoke of her husband around them, Tony the scumbag was always elevated into sainthood by his wife.

When it came to her turn to fly the family flag, Nandi had always been frugal, avoiding to remind Helen and the rest of the audience Menziwa's name was written in bold at GAL and all over town. She knew her husband was a big hitter, as Greg Finley had once described him to her. He was working on a lifestyle village in the style of Melrose Arch and everyone at GAL knew that they'd shit in their pants, the boss included, if Menziwa allowed himself to be poached by their competitors – who were always knocking at his door.

Helen's other favourite subject was the wonderful holidays they have had and their overseas trips, mainly to Europe and the lovely cathedrals in France and skiing in Switzerland. Nandi knew as well that the Gills had regular jaunts to private game parks in the country. 'But we cannot always be away at the same time as I have my own business to run, you know,' Helen had said. It was not Nandi's business to assure her not to worry as her husband is in good hands on the trips Helen could not be on. Meghan was playing Mrs Gill!

But Nandi did not begrudge the Gills this good life. On the opposite end of their restaurant table Nandi knew she was comfortable with her blackness and all that it entailed. She had never, even for a moment, felt she should justify it to Helen. Menziwa putting his two nieces through tertiary education meant a lot to her. They were obviously going to view the world from their two opposing black and white lenses.

She'd not impose her darkie eccentricities on Helen – they were hers. She'd never share her photos about her "white" wedding with Helen because she also expected her friend to spare her details of what her cat did last night.

Nandi was a dog person. So too was Maureen. "No pussy for me, darling," they had laughed at their uncharacteristic crudeness the other day.

How she met her husband wasn't such a hot topic unlike Helen who thought waking up next to a total stranger in a ferry in Thailand was such a romantic thing.

How much Menziwa had paid for her lobolo was a grand topic among her township friends then, not now with this white set that obviously viewed the practice as backward, no worse than human trafficking. Maureen's view on the matter, as on most matters peculiarly African, was in consonant with Nandi's.

It was OK to be just friends. Helen felt life was a great success and that Nandi should learn how to do it. This was enough.

"Mommy, I want to eat now," it was Duma jolting her out of her reverie.

"Yes, my angel. Go wash your hands."

As she dished up, she thanked God for her beautiful family, as always. She prayed that Menziwa could heal from the pain of losing their money. She has forgiven him, hasn't she? If only he could stop worrying so much about the state of their finances. It ruined the good life they had made for themselves and their children. Once they had all eaten, she retreated to the sun room to regurgitate Suze Orman, another gift from Nomsa that she dropped off at the gate with MaMpho just recently. The message on the Post-It note stuck outside the envelope said: 'Hi, Nandilah. Please read this; for me, for you and, especially, for your hubby, my only brother Menziwa. XXX. Nomsa. "

The pages were dripping in colour, almost every single one of them highlighted.

Then another friend, a woman with some amazing professional credits under her belt, broke down and confessed that she had rung up such staggering bills over the years that she was too terrified to tell anyone and had no idea how to pay them off.

Immediately below this, which was not highlighted, Nandi read:

Not long after, I heard from yet another friend who finally woke up to the fact that her employer was paying her significantly less than any every other executive of comparable rank in her company. Her division was one of the most profitable and consistent earners for the company, but still she just accepted the minimal increases her boss would hand her every year at review time. And even now, out of some misguided loyalty, she was reluctant to leave the employer that took advantage of her year after year.

She got goose bumps almost instantly. This was her husband! Why did Nomsa not highlight this part? Did it hit closer to home, because it described, to the letter, her very brother?

Blood is thicker than water, Nomsa had herself said the other day when she insisted on partnering Menziwa in a card game, not her own husband. Terrence had joked: "Let's take the fight to the enemy, Nandi."

But this was no joke. Nomsa always took Menziwa's side. If she wanted to help us, she thought, she must be prepared to antagonise her brother as well.

No matter how good your intentions may be, they are nonetheless draining you.

This line rang a bell. Nomsa had said the same thing to her when they returned from the Suze Orman talk.

She had skipped so many parts of the book she felt Nomsa had not read the book for herself: "She wanted to tell me something. But why not to my face?"

She got back to read this part again and laughed to herself." Why is it not highlighted, when it's so telling?"

Please know that there is not one sentence of blame within these pages. I appreciate that the incredible multitasking job called your life makes it hard, if not impossible, to find the time, energy or desire to pay attention to what you are doing with your money, let alone figure out what is the right thing to do. Your kids need mothering, your partner needs loving, your parents need help, your career needs your energy, and your friends need your ear. Throw into that mix the dry cleaning that needs to be picked up, the groceries that need to be bought, the meals that need to be prepared, and the house that needs to be cleaned, and it's no surprise that anything to with money takes a backseat.

She got up from the couch like a troopie standing to salute a senior officer who came in unawares.

"Thami!"

"Ma!"

"Get me my phone."

She dialed Nomsa's number and her sister-in-law's cheerful voice came alive from the other end. After the usual pleasantries and the good health of the kids and the husbands from both sides were confirmed, Nandi shot straight to the nub of her call: "I have done the first two Chapters of the book. Thanks. But I thought you should have told me face-to-face, and maybe recommended the book later. Forgive me for being a bitch but I detect a personal attack here."

"Bullshit, girlfriend, and you know it too. You are my sister. That's info I wanted you to have. No malice intended. Do not see plots where there are none. The conspiracy is only in your beautiful head. Get it out now; it is *kak* you don't need. "

"Nom, I'm glad you say that. But I still prefer my route. And for that reason, I will not read any further."

"Come to my house tomorrow. I'll be alone after two."

"See you then."

They hung up.

In the car with her husband, Nomsa said: “I told you she was going to go bananas.”
“And I remember telling you it was a bad idea. She needed to read it herself without you holding her by the hand. But then, you insisted on channeling her reading.”
“She’s coming over tomorrow.”
“Have fun. How’s Menziwa?”
“Fine, I guess.”
Terrence got back to steering the Chrysler Voyager westward in the direction of their home. They were returning from a prayer session at the Dawn Park home of a fellow parishioner.
At the other end, Nandi was sheathing the book among the stack of Menziwa’s growing gobbledygook on self-help. It is my gift to you, champ, she smiled.
He was still outside, the dogs sprawled at his feet; the collie belly-up. As she spied on him, she reminded herself how much she loved him: “Very much, God help me.”
She took out Thami’s laptop where she kept an occasional diary. She jotted down a few points she wanted to flag when she went to speak with Nomsa.
I want the best for my family.
Good schools for the children.
Keep my faith in God, who saw my mother through very trying times. He will do likewise for me.
Make sure they retire with the same, if not better, standard of living.
Change her ways about money. Menziwa is not Hugh. Agreed.
She circled what she considered her cardinal point: Her husband must assert himself at work and claim what was rightfully due to him.
That old man, she thought his name was Philby, no, Finley. Yes, Mr Finley. He had said at a Christmas party three years ago that Menziwa could easily run GAL alone. He did more work for the company than even Helen’s husband, a slave driver whose father made money out of black people.
Anthony was doing the same to Menziwa, milking him dry and paying him far less than what he was worth. Menziwa had turned down a job at Murray & Roberts that he was headhunted for. His excuse was that they were not in his line of business. She remembers begging Menziwa to ask Anthony to better the offer. Instead her husband, ever the softie, even when it was his own financial future at stake, chose to give GAL more time to restructure their hierarchy accordingly. Anthony had said they were striving to be BEE compliant. What utter bullshit!
Menziwa was a trained architect, not a token. What did BEE have to do with his position inside the company?
She was prepared to change, yes, but her husband must also put his shoulder to the wheel. “Let him get us his worth and then I will come to the party,” she decided. For a moment her thoughts went back to the windfall Menziwa had lost and it left her crestfallen. She was not abstemious, not by a long shot, but Nandi reckoned she’d have had to be exceptionally careless to blow one-thirty Grand in one day! She joked about the loss but in truth it was no laughing matter. If she knew of a better way of defeating this memory, she’d use it. Laughing about it was a coping mechanism. Deep inside, she was grieving. Menziwa was not going nuts. He just worried too much. He was born to freak out. Part of my duty as his wife was to make him see that the world would not end tomorrow.
She said ‘tomorrow’ slowly, almost caressing the word, as she finally closed the laptop and stood up to admire herself in the mirror in the reception room.
Just as she thinking what utter nonsense the Mayan prophecy was, her husband called for coffee.

“You look content with yourself,” Menziwa observed when they retired to bed later that night. “Who makes you happy? Is it me or is it ... me?”
“A girl’s happiness should not be dependent on a man. Tomorrow brings a new beginning.” She locked herself around him so tightly he feared she was going to throttle him.
“Tomorrow,” she vowed in her sleep. Beside her the husband was himself falling into a fitful sleep that no amount of ruckus was going to disturb.

CHAPTER NINE

He was not dreaming. Nandi did say she was going out – to Nomsa's. She'd said this as he was drifting out of deep sleep and kissed him on the forehead that protruded just over the duvet. She had taken the children with and the only sound in the house, other than his regular heartbeat, came from the kitchen where MaMpho was clearly hard at work.
He took his time, making the bed, brushing his teeth and putting a gown over the pyjamas. For some reason, the body felt relaxed and he encouraged his psyche to follow suit. He picked up his mobile phone. No messages. He then switched it off lest someone spiteful or something unpleasant intrude on his peace. Seeing that it could be fleeting, it needed to be protected.
A man's house is his castle, they say. He'd forgotten just how peaceful he used to find it being home alone. He'd play his jazz CDs and work on his side projects, consulting for small design firms that were turning a whole swathe of main road residences into office blocks these days. These odd jobs had dried out, taking the much-needed revenue with them. With time, he vowed, he'd revive those old contacts and start making money again. Many people at work put their spare time to good use, earning the extra cash with such jobs. He hated himself for not making time to do the same. Lately, he had gone back to drinking in the township and he did not like it one bit. You're going down, son, he told himself reproachfully. No sooner had he said this to himself than he banished the thought. Think happy thoughts, Desmond Tutu had said. Why can't he do the same if his aim is to be happy? He thought for a while about the Archbishop Emeritus and envied the man of the cloth his blithe manner. Apart from prostate cancer, he'd never read anywhere of a serious medical scare the old clergy had suffered. Because Tutu was happy, Menziwa thought aloud, he makes it his business to laugh. Surely beatitude did not belong to only a few people?
He peered into the children's bedrooms. Though they had kitted out the other bedroom as Ntando's, their little girl still preferred the cot at the foot of their bed. But in her wakefulness, she played doll in it and her brothers used it to store their excess toys and boyhood gadgets. This morning the beds were made and a semblance of order had returned to the chaos the bedrooms normally were when the occupants were home. Every toy was where it should be and the school bags tucked neatly away. There was no odd shoe lying about. With her housekeeping manner of opening windows like she wasn't planning to invite the whole elements in, MaMpho exposed the rooms – like the rest of the house – to a minimal whiff of the air wafting in. As this slight breeze tickled the air freshener, only a certain amount of scent, not too much and not too little, filled the house. This is what he loved about MaMpho. Her tidiness bordered on the compulsive but he didn't mind it one bit.
"Papa," it was their house help in her trademark one-word greeting.
"Hullo Mama. Are you OK?"
"Fine, thank you. MaThami said not to expect her before lunch."
"OK."
As he waited for the water to boil in the kettle, he skipped outside to feed the dogs and refresh the water. They yelped about him, glad, as always, to see him.
"Hullo, hullo. Yes, boys. This is the day that the Lord has made," he said brushing each dog in turn as they crowded wiggled about his legs.

Menziwa had read of people who spoke to plants. He'd never found reason to speak ill of them. He knew he felt absolutely sane talking to his dogs. They wagged their tails in response, they lied down to follow orders, they 'fetched'; all good reason to believe they heard and understood him.
The flower people say the sign that the vegetation talks back is when it greens. Huh! Then hoof, hoof is a complete language. He spent some time turning them this way and that, casually checking for ticks. They were clean.
He stole back into the kitchen when the dogs turned their attention to their dishes. He ransacked the fridge for leftovers and, finding what could pass for breakfast, he warmed it.
With steaming coffee in hand, he bent down in front of the hi-fi to put in a disc: As R Kelly vowed to *Rise Up*, Menziwa made a promise to his soul – he was going to do the same.
He played it again, and, yes, just one more time.
The jazz beat had pride of place in his heart but the singing voice, like Robert Kelly's, often vied for attention, and won. It was music that uplifted him, especially when he was down, as of late.
He took out the disc and replaced it with another tearjerker, one album he played back to front: when John Legend crooned about the US forces *Coming Home*, Menziwa was happily sad, a state of mind he often credited to good whisky.
Just as the thought came, he fished out a sealed bottle of Glenfiddich and a glass, sat down at his workstation and surveyed the part of his house within the range of his vision.
As John Legend begged her to *Save Room* for him, vowed that *Heaven* only knows and asked her to *Show Me*, the drink in Menziwa's hand went down particularly well. The intoxication from his light-heartedness was instant, that from the whisky was gradual.
He was doing damage on the plate of food, one slow bite size at a time.
Above him stood words he knew not who to ascribe to: *An end is also a beginning*. He loved them so much he had them framed in gold on a black background. He swore his travails represented an end, which was 'also the beginning' of a normal life. His distress was, in the words of the cliché, a temporary inconvenience.
This space in his house was his comfort zone. There was a lot that healed him here, better than all the shebeens of the world combined. But he allowed his demons to drive him away from home very easily these days, he contemplated. This was his home; his refuge. When amity came, it would find him in these placid surroundings, not when he's out drinking.
Stuck on the side of a book shelf were the words of Rudyard Kipling that the budding political analyst in his [extended] family had printed out for him when he was at Menziwa's on vacation. They were the words of Rudyard Kipling that his young cousin said were quoted by the judge in the rape trial of Jacob Zuma. Menziwa found them especially uplifting. His favourite stanza, one that particularly spoke to his during this time of need, went: *If you can make one heap of all your winnings/And risk it all on one turn of pitch-and-toss/And lose, and start again at your beginnings/And never breathe a word about your loss…*
God he loved this; it spoke to him! If he did all that, the man said, and never uttered a word of complaint, he will be a man. He found he did not tire from reading this one Kipling over and over again. He never bothered to found out who Kipling was and what else he wrote – this *If* of his served Menziwa just fine.
Where did my baby go came crisp and strong from the stereo. At that moment, in an act of telepathy they would not share, Nandi was telling Nomsa how much she loved the other woman's brother. "He's my baby," Nandi was saying with tears in her eyes.
He refilled his glass as MaMpho returned with the carafe of water.

He was reading to a bemused MaMpho now: *If you can fill the unforgiving minute/With sixty seconds' worth of distance run/Yours is the Earth and everything that's in i/And -- which is more -- you'll be a Man, my son!*

When he repeated "you'll be a Man, my son", MaMpho was sufficiently moved to clap. She eyes the bottle of whisky and understood the source of his cheerfulness at that early hour.

"You be a man, Ntate," she said, she too at the top of her voice. This was one of the rare occasions MaMpho said a full sentence, either to him or his wife. She was unfailingly monosyllabic. At best, she spoke two words, to greet or agree. She reserved her grandiloquence for the children, especially Ntando.

He can be such a darling, she thought as she walked away from her master. It had been a while since she'd seen husband and wife dance to the music from the radio. When she first came to work for them, MaMpho recalls that this is what this young couple loved to do. Lately, they had not had the time. She worried for them too. But when the husband was happy, as he seemed to be now, MaMpho knew things would work for the better.

They had not paid her salary for two months but she was assured by MaThami that her money would come.

She loved them, they were like the family she left back home in Matatiele. She will never forget how when her father died they drove down in two cars, each packed to the rafters with groceries. They paid for the funeral and the beast that was slaughtered. For that she was eternally grateful. She knew her outstanding salary would come, one day soon.

As she went about with her chores, memories of the family's good old days returned. They were young, she thought, too young to throw their lives away. They owed it to the beautiful children MaMpho loved like her own. They were clever children, especially the boys, who understood all these machines their parents bought for them. They loaded the airtime for MaMpho on her phone and just the other day she had started listening to the radio on it after the second boy showed her how to do it. The little girl was a lovable thing that looked so much like her daddy. She was sweet. Everybody had problems, theirs, if they had any, was no miracle. MaMpho thought it was nothing they could not overcome. She was happy to work for them and wished them all the best. When she knelt down to pray in her room at night, she asked God to bless them too. They had been good to her.

Everything they stopped using, from clothes to kitchen utensils, MaMpho took to Matatiele. She owned many valuable things, thanks to them. That night, after she had called MaThami home when she found the husband weeping in the lounge, she prayed hard to God that all evil that besieged him should go away. The Lord had been good to MaMpho; He would not fail her now. These children needed His guiding hand.

In the house Menziwa had changed CDs, playing the other one of the double album. *I Can Change*, the American heartthrob, now playing with Snoop Dogg, promised.

I too can change, Menziwa was saying. It was him speaking, not the tipple. He was in a head space he loved. How he wished he could drink every day. His eyes were taking in *The Secret*, another one of his framed tonics. He'd read it a million times but now it carried deeper meaning, all of a sudden. He was reading out loud and did not see MaMpho who retreated when she saw he was not calling out to her.

He read it again as the music stopped playing. He savoured the piece one more time in the silence.

"Christian D Larson," he intoned, "whoever the fuck you are, thank you. This promise I make to myself too." He looked around, his eyes settling on the books around him: *Screw it, Let's Do It*

Again, Lessons in Life and Business, Richard Branson. It had come highly recommended when he bought it but had failed to move his cheese, he thought. Muhammad Yunus, Micki Pistorius, Richard Dawkins, Salman Rushdie, Anthony Sampson, Stanley B Greenberg … were among the nice-to-have reading matter he'd never bothered with. Otherwise the rest of his stock were books on architecture, a large majority of which he'd pored over at one time or another, sometimes more than two times. He stood up to stretch his legs a little. He sat down on the couch and started reflecting on his life, how it had come to this. He fobbed off the thoughts but they insisted on occupying prime space in his head. He played more music. Escapist? Therapeutic? These were just words. He was happy to keep his head clear of disruptions and sway to the music.
For a long time, as he was wont to say, he was at conference with his conscience. When anything unpleasant infringed on his thoughts, he played the music louder, sadder. As the melancholy swept over him, he knew he had to change the direction his life was taking, sink or swim. He was going to brave the tide and swim against it.
When the tears came, the cries were soft but when MaMpho sneaked in again, he was going like he was bawling his eyes out. MaMpho phoned MaThami, begging her to come home.

When Nandi and the kids arrived, Menziwa was sprawled on the couch, out. The whisky provided the few answers she needed at the time. She put a pillow under his head and a light shawl over him. All he managed before slumping back down was: "I am so happy."
"I'm happy for you, too."
The kids had eaten at their aunt's and Ntando was put to bed, no doubt for the night. She was tired. It was only the boys who insisted on staying outside to play some more. She sat down opposite her husband and thought of her visit to his sister. She was going to be a better wife.
"I don't think you're reading the situation between me and Menziwa fairly," she's said to her sister-in-law, just as soon as they had settled down to snacks and all five children were playing outside. "My sense is that Menziwa can do no wrong in your eyes."
"We all want the best for our families, and I'm no different. I do not misuse our money, to answer your question. Every cent I spend, it is with the trust that it will keep us going."
Nomsa had interrupted, going against her promise not to do so: "Nandi-lah, I don't see how paying R3 500 for a pair of boots that you will wear only three times in a year can possibly benefit the family."
For a moment they just sat and stared at each other across the leather settee.
"You want me to talk or …"
"Oops. I'm sorry. Please continue, Nandi-lah."
Nandi felt she needed to allay Nomsa's fears that she was not trying to turn Menziwa into a rich man: "Yes, I know you said he did not own any businesses, like my father."
But I was also not going to live with lack like I was married to someone who could not afford to buy us the food we wanted. I can't feed them offal, if you think that would make me into a prudent woman who looks after every cent. I was not raised on that. I do not mean we should do shushi all the time but, hey, I need decent healthy food. All this does not have to cost an arm and a leg.
You will know, Nomsa that I buy fruit and vegetable combos, which you recommended yourself. We drink ordinary tap water because you said South Africa had some of the world's best potable water. I have no idea how much bottled water costs. The only juice you will find in my house is for the children's lunch packs. I drink water. I am not going to get a job tomorrow, my dear sister. I am a full time housewife. Keeping home just about sums up all the marketable skills I

possess – and I do not see anyone outside my house taking me on to be their housewives. I'm stuck with my husband. When I married my husband, part of the understanding was that I had no ambitions for a 9-5 job. I work at home. If he's changed his mind about this he hasn't told me. I will not work for anyone. There was a time when I harboured ambitions of buying a stake in Helen's company but there was no way we could raise the three hundred Grand she expected. I have not said this to Menziwa but I will tell you because I am comfortable with it. My mother does not have a cent left of Hugh's money. You may have noticed that she's no longer full time at the club because my brothers have barred her. She does not touch any of the money anymore. All she has is the house and everything inside it. Luckily for her, they still give her a monthly stipend. She's not rich but, again, she's not suffering. She eats and drinks every day. She can buy my kids clothes whenever she takes them to town. She has a car and a helper she can afford. In a year, she will get her pension grant. My father's money went into paying off what he owed the brewery. The fancy funeral and tombstone unveiling were both flights of fancy, a stupid oversight on the part of all of us. The club is barely breaking even. Had it not been for the patronage my brothers could keep, it would have long gone under. I could work there when my father was around, not anymore. If I go there now, it is only to get a thousand Rand for a few minor living expenses. If I was not their sister, I don't think they'd bother to give me money.
What Nandi did not know was that the club was now a decoy. It was a licensed tavern by name only – it had in fact become a drug den. And his brothers were creaming it!
Menziwa still had no idea how they were able to buy two new trucks and renovate their parents' house, which was now a double-storey abode. Nandi naively put it down to their hard work.
But then again, neither did she know that Menziwa had drawn the plan to extend the night club. But in the drip and drab manner they paid for his services, Menziwa would also not say how or on what he used their payment. 'We are together,' they kept promising him thereafter. This was slang for 'I owe you one'. How would Menziwa ever get to trade back favours?
During their meeting, Nandi continued unburdening on Nomsa, who was all ears.
I have made some bad calls, she admitted. Like the credit card, which was now a huge debt I have no idea how to erase. I have stopped buying clothes. I have started wearing stuff I had packed away a long time ago. I want to change my spending ways. I have already started, in fact. I buy the bare necessities. There's a lot I wish I could change but, with time, it all will all come together.
She was crying now and Nomsa shoved a box of Kleenex towards her side of the couch. They embraced, for a long time. When the children strayed indoors, Nomsa quickly shooed them out, each with a small tub of yoghurt. She made a pot of tea and returned with a tin of cookies. In all the time they would sit there and talk, only three biscuits had passed between them, obsessive weight-watchers that they both were.
When Nomsa spoke, it was in such sweet low tones you'd think she did not want to wake up anybody sleeping within earshot.
Menziwa is in debt, deep serious debt. You started out on a wrong footing and have left a bad situation get out of hand. He earns well, consistent with a professional of his education. But he punched way above his weight when he took that house. If there was another source of income, yes, you guys would have been comfortable. For a long time he had ceded the fate of your family earnings to you alone, which was sad because both of you need to have sat down each month to make your budget. For a long time he was happy with the money he won at the golf, which was laughable because he thought he was OK. You also thought things were kosher because you had a free hand with the salary, which you did not handle well, Nandi-lah, admit it. His golf

winnings, Jesus Christ, Nandi – that was pocket money. But he was fooled into thinking it was serious money when he started servicing the credit card debt with it. He took money here to pay there and for a long time played this sort of musical chairs with money he thought he had. The furniture, Nandi-lah, should have been hire-purchase, like all normal families.
"But it is hire purchase."
"Shush, it's my turn. Yes, hire purchase but bloody expensive hire purchase. You furnished the house like you had just won the lottery."
When they were supposed to enjoy their money, it turned them into slaves, said Nomsa.
In just three years, every cent that came went into paying off debt. What was the point of holidays, Nandi-lah? Black people and holidays, when did this marriage begin?
Our people went to the bundus to recharge. I remember you going to Kenya, two years in a row! You were already using money you did not have. I was not jealous. I worried deeply. Terrence and I have been to Lesotho, visiting his folks. No expensive hotels and hired cars. We slept on the mud floors of rondavels. Maybe it is not proper to compare, Nandi-lah, but you led an expensive lie for too long. Menziwa was just a salaried worker, not a business tycoon.
Those were the good old days, Nandi caught herself thinking and she made sure not to smile at the memory. The next line felt like a stab to her heart: You have lived a lie because it has not been within your means.
Nomsa spared no detail of their myopia with money. What she did not say is stuff she clearly forgot. For a while they stopped talking when Nomsa's Tebatso came dragging Ntando by the hand: "She's crying for her mother."
Tebatso was only a year older but never missed the chance to play big sister to Ntando on each visit. After a while, the three others came – Nandi's two boys and their 13 year-old cousin, Mapaseka.
They headed straight for Mapaseka's bedroom and the X-Box and other electronic distractions. Nomsa's voice got even softer. She was almost whispering.
If you don't do anything about your money situation, Nandi-lah, your husband is going to go mad. That gives me the creeps. He is all we have, sweetie. Do all of us a favour, get your fingers out the cookie jar. You are looting the family till.
At this, they both managed to laugh so loudly, it seemed, the older children come to share the joke. "Tell us, mama," it was Mapaseka, "what's so funny."
"It's OK, my baby. Your aunt is just being herself."
As their brood retreated, they high-fived each other and giggled some more as Nomsa poured some more tea. Nandi hopped to the toilet quickly as Nomsa went to cook the tea. In the loo, she could tell that one of her boys had been there – the toilet seat was up. Nomsa and Terence were fastidious about this, among other pet hates.
Terence and Nomsa's house was in the part of the township built by the owners themselves on pieces of land held on what was called the 99 year lease. After acquiring the land, the owners began building their choice homes, each better than the last. Nomsa's was a Tuscan laid on sprawling lush hectares of perfectly manicured lawns. There was just the right amount of trees around the house, swathing the yard in cool shade in the warmer seasons. Potted plants abounded in a variety of vases in a rainbow of colours. The swimming pool waters were blue throughout the year. According to Terence, diseases travelled faster in a dirty pool. With young children, they could not afford this oversight. Four wrought-iron loungers were strategically placed around the pool, each with a variety of cushions in a riot of colour. Those who had no wish to lounge around the pool sat on Masai stools, brought back by Nandi and Menziwa from one of their trips

to Kenya. They were a gift to Nomsa after she was promoted to the position of Chief Regional Director at work. The door leading from the pool into the sitting room area was a heavy piece of work that the man of the house liked to joke was twice as heavy as prison doors. The other door led into the kitchen and the third to the garage made for three vehicles.

Nandi just loved their kitchen. It was a stainless steel affair. Anything else that could not be had in silver was white. Nomsa served water in a green tumbler whose price tag Nandi knew off by heart. As they sat talking on the vanilla couches, the chocolate brown of the cushions blended in very well and gave the space an ambience that was inviting enough for people whose conversations normally lasted the other side of five hours. There was a formal lounge and a TV room, each equipped with leather couches of fine quality.

Like Menziwa, Nomsa and Terence were made over portraits and while Nomsa complained that Nandi was extravagant, she turned a blind ear to her brother's excesses when he bought paintings at R17 000 apiece. In one of the few pictures on the walls bearing family – not abstract designs of a mad artist – Terence stood beaming down visitors from a colossal frame next to the famed TD Jakes.

Terence's day job was as army chaplain.

The house suited them perfectly and Menziwa often joked that were it human, it would also be a Nomsa or Terence. It just reflected their personalities. Nestled on a cul-de-sac, it was within walking distance of the bus route. Terence commuted to work by bus and only drove at night or to out-of-town engagements. Their area given to them by God, the neighbours loved to say.

There were about four churches in ~~a~~ very close proximity; Lutheran, Anglican, Baptist and Roman Catholic. Those who had to drive out on Sundays to worship were the wretched of the earth.

Nomsa and Terence belonged to the Baptist church, where Terence was a lay preacher.

Back seated with a fresh pot of tea between them, the sisters-in-law resumed their talk. Try to go without, Nomsa implored, and see if you cannot survive another day, another month. Soon you will reap the rewards of thrift. Extravagance has its place, but only when there's money to go around.

About five hours into their visit, Nandi took a call from her helper, whose instructions were to phone the madam only when there was an earthquake. It used to be a joke but now, it appeared, their worst nightmare was about to be confirmed.

Menziwa is not well, she told Nomsa. She did not say it the way MaMpho had told it, that her husband was crying~~crying~~ bitterly.

"OK, get the kids. We'll finish this some other time."

Nandi grabbed the towel that was offered and wrapped her little girl in. Nomsa and her children saw them off, with both sets of offspring complaining that the visit had been brief. Nandi deposited Ntando, who was now asleep, in the back seat.

"They will come back tomorrow, babe," Nomsa assured her younger one, who was now weeping.

When they arrived, it was all quiet on the home front. Menziwa, still in his gown, was asleep on the couch. She returned with a pillow and light blanket to make him a bit comfortable. Alone with her sleeping husband, she turned off the hi-fi which was still on and, relishing the company of her thoughts, did not switch on the television.

She just sat and cast her mind back to her day.

Nomsa was correct; she and Helen were from opposite ends of the economic divide. She could not afford the life of splendor the other woman lived. Did she dress flamboyantly, though,

stilettos and flashy jewelry and weaves that Nomsa decried? She had toned down – a lot. She certainly was not in competition with Helen, whose lanky blond hair was always perfectly cut. Nandi was clean shaven, how could Nomsa even think she was in competition with the mane of whites? Of course she envied Helen her chic suits and expensive jewellery. But which 21st century woman did not seek attire that spoke of class? Even Nomsa, in her exaggerated conservative self, owned designer slacks and knitwear that she'd made into a personal uniform.
What was wrong with her friends from the township, Nomsa had asked. Well, the simple answer was that she'd grown tired of their gossip. She had outgrown that sort of friendship.
She did not hero-worship the white girls but she found Helen very secure in her confidence. She wasn't arrogant but you definitely would not give her shit if you knew what was good for you. This is the attitude Nandi was brought up with. She did not wish to carry on like she was sorry to be alive. Hell no!
Menziwa stirred and finally woke up after a few grunts. "It's bath time, champ. Off we go."
"Let me play you just one song," he begged.
Coming Home filled the whole house.
One of the perks of being married, Menziwa smiled contentedly, was that if you drank enough to render yourself incapacitated, you could get a bath ran for you and be scrubbed clean. He enjoyed just that benefit that evening.
"I was at Nomsa's," she said by way of introducing the subject. But suddenly she found she had no courage she discuss their finances with her husband, at least not yet.
They were seated on the floor in the bedroom, with a bowl of cashew nuts. She changed tack:
"What was so funny on Tuesday night that had you in stitches?"
"Tuesday night?"
"After you spoke to Leo … Leon … on the phone?"
"Oh, Monday night," he remembered, "it was Nhlanhla, not Leon. We were talking about Sierra Leone, the country. He was just bullshitting me. He said he'll give me short sleeves so I won't hit any more golf balls if I did not pitch next Sunday."
"What's so funny about short sleeves?"
H e started laughing again, so hard and so long she just stared, and waited.
It's actually so sad I shouldn't be laughing, he said. He then told her the story of how just as she was caressing his upper leg, there were women in Sierra Leone who would never stroke their men's legs ever again. There's a madman called Foday Sankoh who has been in the news recently. Like a spoiled brat, one minute he's in and the next, out of talks for a ceasefire in Sierra Leone. He leads the rebels there against government forces. He's said to have the weakness of all African dictators – wine, women and song. But worse than all of them, if he doesn't get the cigarettes and the cell phones he wants, he shoots his AK into the sky. He gets no response, people die.
By way of signs that she was listening, Nandi would firm up her grip on his thigh each time she found something blood-curdling, like people dying because no phones were delivered to a warlord.
Four or five times he pulled out of talks because he didn't like the idea of general elections. A return to civilian rule would mean losing control of a rich part of the country that fell under his rebel control. So as he sits there mulling over this dilemma, he comes up with a great idea – he decides to hack off the hands of the locals so they won't vote.
Another tightening of the grip: "Baby, you lie!"
"I'm telling you, it was in the papers last week."

Now he gives the citizens a choice: short sleeves or long sleeves. Many people had no idea what they were being offered, so they just made the choice. Those who asked for long sleeves returned with their arms cut off at the wrists. You say short sleeves then your limb is cut just above the elbow.
Her fingers dug in deeper: "Jesus Christ."
"True," he said, "so Nhlanhla is joking about it."
"He's heartless. That's no laughing matter."
"Maybe we should go there, check out the amputees ourselves."
"No way, champ. Give me Nairobi anytime."
Just as she said this, a thought of Nomsa came into her head, when she said it was irresponsible money management going to Kenya twice.
Nandi was deep in thought: Does it mean her spectre will lie in siege each time we have fun or, like now, even thinking about the fun?
She shrugged this off and returned to Menziwa who was rolling on the floor, laughing at a joke she missed. This was how they used to spend their time alone behind the closed bedroom door – holding hands and laughing. The sex that followed always took her straight to Heaven.
She threw herself on top of him and kissed him like he was going away the next day. They wriggled free of their clothes and were a bundle of sweat and fluid for an indeterminate time on the floor.
As she rolled off him and joined him in admiring the ceiling, her own thoughts were on how much she loved this man, the father of her children.
The draught that woke her up in the middle of the night was not going to ease off. He had thrown a towel over her and was not in bed.
The light at his work station told her he was back reading. She caught herself smiling as she got into bed.

CHAPTER TEN

That morning he got a call from a cheerful soprano voice he immediately recognised as Phiwe, a chatty geisha-type he preferred only with alcohol.
"What are we," she went straight to the business of her call, "lovers or friends?"
With Phiwe, or the Number One Diva as she was wont to introduce herself to people, one was never sure if one was listening to her or the lyrics of a song.
"I told you once; I told you a million times," she continued, seemingly with no intention to take a breath, "don't ever, ever leave me this way."
Eight solid minutes into the call, Menziwa had still not been able to squeeze a word in.
"You don't send me flowers …" at this point she was singing a Barbara Streisand rendition, badly.
"Love the one you're with, handsome," said the jukebox femme fatale.
Then, almost instantly, as only Phiwe can, she was belting out her own a cappella version of the Chaka Khan classic, *I'm Every Woman*.
With a master's degree in veterinary science, Phiwe, who lived alone with her zoo of cats, a parrot and a pair of something she'd told Menziwa were marmots, was queer, a Bohemian. He'd never known any black girl like her. He didn't think there were any alive. Until he met her, that is.
He hated her animals and kept his word never to go to her place again. But he found nothing wrong with her money and the apparent generosity she showed with it. When she went out, which was often, it was to one of the restaurants that seemed to line every street in Melville.
Once or twice Menziwa displayed the bad judgment call of taking her to the township – she was more miserable than, as she said it herself to a couple of Menziwa's drinking mates several times over, a vegetarian at a braai.
She was an enigma. She spent as much of her time at the eateries as Sir Alex Fergusson did around soccer pitches. But she ate like a bird.
She worked at a private animal hospital south of Johannesburg, the rose among the thorns - the only woman of her hue in a sea of white Afrikaner males who pronounced 'with' as 'wiff'. She laughed about them, they laughed with her.
"I'd never fuck a white boy. And certainly not Dirk," she'd said in the car park when a colleague walked past them to his car, but Menziwa was never sure if this was hindsight or principles.
She knew more about animals than a croupier understood the casino tables. Her screen-saver at home was the ugly picture of an iguana. "Isn't this beautiful?" she'd asked when he came calling.
The first time Menziwa came into contact with her madness, she'd booked them for three whole nights into a hotel in Richards Bay just so she could "show you this wonder of a fish".
Nandi knew him to be playing in Richards Bay, at the invitation of grateful clients, Mannesmann. It was partly true. Mannesmann was paying for one night only, the Saturday after the golf. That he decided to show up a day earlier, the lady at Mannesmann had warned him, was for his own account. He couldn't be bothered, the alibi was established. He knew the Friday and the Sunday to be for Phiwe's account. With her in tow, they pitched on the Friday, merely to dispense of the formalities for the golf and don their fish crowd hats. He had learned fast, and from the best. This was how Gill and Meghan got to be such globetrotters. A client would 'book' Gill into a hotel as a 'Thank You' and they would pay for whatever expense the client did not cover. But the paperwork, from the invitation to whatever else that could likely land in wrong

hands, was legit. So when Phiwe said they could go away for a weekend, Menziwa called around for a cover and Mannesmann, who were eternally with his work, were more than willing to 'help meet you halfway regarding the expenses of your golf trip to Richards Bay'. His heart did not skip a beat when he showed Nandi the invitation.

It looked like it was going to be a weekend of great fun, his troubles in the back burner for a while. As they entered the conference hall on the first day, one white woman exclaimed: "This is the most beautiful fish I had ever seen."

The more Menziwa looked at the pictures – several of them lining the walls – he was convinced this was the ugliest sea creature ever. The barbel looked more kissable. Said to grow in weight to a staggering 98 kg and 180 cm in length, the ugly fish, rumoured to predate dinosaurs by millions of years, was called the coelacanth. Menziwa had looked all around him to find people engrossed, most of them taking notes and fiddling with their specs. The woman who spoke first had the wrong voice for public speaking. It was 10 in the morning but Menziwa could feel a lot of sleep coming.

"The coelacanth has several very distinctive anatomical features," she said, reading from her own slides.

"The skull is in two parts with an intracranial joint which allows up and down movement between them. A strong pair of muscles beneath the skull-base lowers the front half of the skull, giving the coelacanth a powerful bite. The coelacanth is the only living animal with that structure."

The eyes and olfactory organs are in the front part of the skull, the blabbermouth continued, and a tiny brain and inner ear are in the rear.

"In the middle of the snout is a large cavity filled with a jelly-like sac which opens to the outside through three pores. This sac is called the rostral organ. It may be used to detect weak electric currents and help the coelacanth to find hidden prey."

When Phiwe next elbowed him awake, a man's voice was saying: "Lunch is served."

He still does not understand why people could find interest in such boring matters, let alone devote two days to discussing a fish that was once thought to have gone extinct 65 million years ago.

"Why can't they let bygones be bygones," he'd wondered to himself as he followed the slow queue to the lunch buffet.

Phiwe's own father had died of a heart attack. The joke among those who knew her family from Pinetown said the old goat woke up to find his youngest daughter's pet, a python, slithering up his blankets. Menziwa suspected she'd brought him all the way here to kill him with useless information.

She wasn't a 100% bore after all, he reflected. Why not use her best side, always, and spare me the fish?

The only other things she talked about outside the strange fish were action movies, with lots of violence. She insisted on walking with her hand in Menziwa's, which he tolerated far away from prying eyes. No matter how small the world may be in the words of alarmists, Menziwa knew for certain that they were unlikely to bump into anyone who'd know him. She was a divorcee and Menziwa suddenly found the thought of bedding another man's ex bothersome.

Their meeting was going to go down as uneventful, had she not displayed her brazen manner that completely disarmed Menziwa. He did not bring his lunch box to work and was waiting for his order at the deli across the street from GAL. They talked – she talked and he listened, about how,

by the time one's food order came, one could have starved to death. She had a face ~~that~~ that demanded to be looked into. It was alive; it was beautiful, in a boyish sort of way.
Her order came: carrot cake. She hung around a while then decided she was going to ask the question: "What are you doing tonight?"
"I'm working late."
"What a pity."
"What a damn pity," he agreed.
But then again, curiosity got the better of him and he asked: "What's up?"
"No, I thought we could hang out." The very language Menziwa hated. But he gave her his number anyway.
She called.

He went to meet with her in Melville tentatively at first, then more confidently. Very early in the affair, as if by magic, she'd come to learn to part with money after every meeting with him.
"Why don't you take out a petrol card?" It was a luxury he'd afforded many moons ago. He was now battling to remember exactly how long it was that he'd brandished one.
They met at a budget B&B whose owner was not sure what his clientele really needed – many used the bed for a few hours and never stayed for breakfast. "You're turning this place into a brothel," he'd complain, to ears that were always in a hurry to leave. But he soon learned there was money to be made from booking out the same room about four times a night.
Even when it got into the newspapers after a husband shot dead his wife and her lover, Phiwe and Menziwa, and others in similar position, never stopped going to the joint.
"If you kept dogs, I'd gladly come to your place," Menziwa had explained his reluctance to pitch at her townhouse.
She stopped asking.
Like a good girl, even a quickie with Phiwe filled Menziwa's tank.
He was too old to be a rent boy. He was just killing time. But his biggest fear was that Phiwe made a lot of sense, she was highly cerebral. If he continued, this could complicate things.
She was into him. His mind was elsewhere.
He'd often thought of singing her the Blackstreet Boys hit *Money Can't Buy You Love* but always feared the repercussions. You don't bite the hand that feeds you. This was an affair he knew he did not need to keep going, despite the cash flow it allowed him. Men often do things they know well do not hold any benefits for them, a friend had said once. 'My wife is beautiful," the man had said, "but I still- not just ~~just~~ look, I touch other women. I'm bewitched."
With Phiwe, Menziwa too blamed it on voodoo!
Like a junkie who was aware his poison of choice was taking him down a slippery path, Menziwa kept meeting with Phiwe. The future of this relationship, he told his nagging conscience, will take care of itself. The first time they went out on a date, they had agreed to rendezvous at an art gallery Menziwa had only driven past before. He arrived first and browsed the walls killing time. When she came in, she hugged him warmly like a wife meeting her husband in town. She was specifically looking for a Gerard Sekoto a friend had promised she'd fall for. When her eyes landed on it, she flashed her cheque book. Menziwa had found himself walking her to her car, behind the gallery assistant who was carting the piece ahead of them. Once the Sekoto, a teary oil of blue and red depicting a woman peering inquisitively over a man's shoulder, was left safely in the car, they walked back for the patio of the gallery, where coffee was sold. She was loud. Strangely, he found her likeable. The face and body were just

perfect. Her dreadlocks told him she was clean too. They were without a speck of foreign hair or dirt. They belonged to an advert about caring for that sort of hair.
They never exchanged schoolboy/schoolgirl sweet-nothings. It was all matter-of-fact, like each knew what was expected of them and acted accordingly. A week later, she opened her legs, he crammed into her; she opened her purse, he took what was offered.
'I am married.'
'I know, duh"
She invited him over. The zoo put him off returning instantly. In her bedroom was the sketched picture of what she said was a dodo. It looked so alive Menziwa always thought lexicographers and other architects of the English language needed to revisit their phrases.
That evening she'd sing a song about "as we lay". Standing there smiling, allowing himself to be serenaded by a dreamer he could never marry, he'd not hear the words of the song by Kelly Price. Only much later would he learn it to be the lament of 'the other woman' as she lay in bed with her lover who was inevitably going to go back home to her adversary, his wife. Menziwa's own thoughts would be about his wife and how she was going to lay into him with another lecture on staying out late like teenager just discovering his sexuality.
"This shit must stop, Menziwa," Nandi had said at least three times by then. He was not going to make it four. Never, he swore.
This is the vow he remembered when he took her call that morning.
"I want to come speak to you. I will come to your house," he said.
"Has your dog died?"
"No."
"Then what's with the sadness in your voice?"
"I feel like shit screwing someone who should in fact be my friend."
She interrupted: "Are you breaking up with me, black man? "
"I'm just saying …"
"Saying what?"
"You're my friend. I know that I care about you a lot. But we should never have …, you know."
"No, I don't know."
"We should never have stripped."
"I am coming to your work. If you're dumping me, better tell me to my face."
She hung up. He shook like a leaf.

Later that day, seated on opposite sides of a small table in the GAL canteen, Menziwa and Phiwe agreed they were BFF – an acronym she added to his ageing vocabulary. He told her about his money problems. She listened. He had a feeling that Phiwe was really listening to him. She just stared – not in judgment, and nodded her head from time to time. His sister, the eternal social worker had said that the successes of her job depended on how much one listened. To win someone over and to really convince them you really wanted to help, Nomsa had said, depended largely on your ability to listen – and be seen to be listening. She often made the example of how former US President Bill Clinton, in shaking hands with people, even ordinary voters, he'd devote the whole time 'even if it was a minute' to the person whose hand he was shaking at the time. The feeling the person gets is that he or she is important, Nomsa liked saying. It tells you that no matter what happens outside that person and Clinton, for the period the President was shaking his hand, he had Clinton's undivided attention. Speaking to Phiwe later that day, Menziwa knew she was listening to him. The mistake we men make is that we sleep with people

we're not supposed to touch. I connect better with you outside bed, Phiwe. I should not have got into your knickers. Sometimes I go to meet with you knowing that I need not worry about petrol. But I find this is not why I should be with you. I love what you say and how you say it. But this is not love. I am not in love with you. I just want you to listen and hear you speak. After he'd said this Menziwa felt so drained. It was a good feeling.
This was new, Phiwe had said. She'd never had a boyfriend break up with her like that: 'But what's amazing is that I agree with you. It makes me so special. It makes me feel like you really love me. If you didn't, perhaps you'd have gone ahead to take from me, selfishly, and continued to hurt me. I respect you for your honesty. I love you very much and I hope you find help with everything that ails you."
She told him about the weekend in Richards Bay and how she thought it was special. But she had always known that she was skating on thin ice: 'You were not mine, Menziwa. You were never going to be mine. I knew this well.' A few colleagues were milling about, like each was minding their own business. When he saw Meghan approaching, he knew it was time to go. He held Phiwe close to him; she held tighter. Out of the corner of his eye he could see Meghan asking, in sign language, who that was. He asked to walk Phiwe to her car. When she stood up to go, tears had welled in her eyes and she was trying hard to act brave. He reached out for her and she took his hands.
That night she called him at home and they spoke for a long time.
When he hung up, with Nandi next to him, she asked: "Who was that?"
"A friend of mine," he said with a clear conscience, "a very good friend of mine."
Before flopping into bed together, he said: "Find someone to speak to about your state of finances. It helps."
He kissed her, a light peck on the forehead.
"G'Night, champ. I love you very much."
For the first time in a long while, he slept like a log.

When he woke up the following morning, he was in high spirits.
He knew Promise, the haughty air hostess, was going to go. He was not going to call her; he just knew they were not going to happen again, ever.
She was a beautiful kid, yes, but his life did not need her at that moment. She brought him gifts from her travels around the world – CDs, DVDs, electronic gizmos, the works. There was always something in the loot he could exchange for money at the pawn shops. This made him feel so wretched. His life was going fast in a direction he did not want - and he was going to arrest the downward slide.
"I like taking matters into my own hands," Promise had said to him the first time they ever talked.
She masturbated him to the same wild release others found in penetrative sex. She had the soft hands of a goddess and he was in Paradise each time she wrapped her fingers around his Willy. And could she suck!
On the day they met he was flying back from a conference in Cape Town. His car had been in the parking lot for three long days and all he had on him was R14.
He was able to claim back his expensive – every cent, including tips – but that was a matter for another day. At that moment he needed to remit to drive home.
She looked approachable enough.

“Look,” he’d started, “I assure you I’m not mad. I’m as sane as can be. I don’t have money to release my car from parking. Do you think you can pay for me? I will pay you back once I get to the office and my bank cards.”
She laughed. A beautiful soft sound designed to hypnotise. He threw a few more of his trademark jokes and she cracked up some more, harder. A few hours later, Menziwa was dropping her off at a house on koppie in Kensington. When it got dark enough for prying eyes, she had him in her mouth.
The pervasive jasmine scent of that night still played on his nostrils, eight months later.
Promise, like the name suggested, held a lot of promise but, surely, with a man her age, not him. It would take a miracle to push her breasts south, Menziwa had noted many months later when he squeezed the time to go see her for the second time. Her mother who Menziwa eyed from the safety of his car, was more his age. When he asked, Promised confirmed his worst fears – the mother was only two years older than the paedophile in the car with her daughter. She was a nurse who had just returned permanently after six years in the UK.
Just that day, Menziwa noticed Promise liked paying for things, whatever they were. Each time she saw a till, she reached for one of her endless credit cards. He still owned a beautiful Diesel watch Nandi knew nothing about – this child had bought it for him. She wanted to be married someday and in her view, she’d found her man in Menziwa. “Couples divorce all the time,” she’d say, “you’d neither be the first nor the last.”
The trouble is, he didn’t consider divorce an option and even if he were to exit his marriage, it definitely wouldn’t be for Promise. The very idea of her as a prospective wife made him feel like he was committing a crime. It did not appeal to him; try as he might to daydream.
“I am different, Menziwa,” she liked repeating to him, “you said so yourself.” When she said his name, it was so juvenile, like a child disrespecting her father.
“I know,” he’d said, bored.
One fateful day, with a bit of wine in his head and a lot of weight on his crotch, he dragged her into the Spitz outlet in town and splashed out on a new pair of shiny black high heels.
She had since repaid him the R695 many times over with her brand of generosity. She was different, yes, because she was the only woman he’d ever spent money on. Upon calculation, he realised he was bleeding money with her.
When next Promise tasted his money, he had taken her along to the golf in Scottburgh. In a silly game that would later revile him, they had signed into the small hotel as husband and wife. This expenditure too, he managed to recoup manifold.
Promise, who had now become used to traveling the world, had never forgotten Scottburgh. “We must go back. Not just for the golf, though.”
“I don’t want to hear that song again,”
“I’m serious,” she had said.
“I’ll let you know.”
It was not going to happen, he mused that morning while at conference with his conscience, battling his demons.
Bored out of his wits the other day, he’d decided to make lively conversation. He was plagiarizing the plot of the movie *Indecent Proposal*, which she clearly hadn’t seen.
“Would you do it?” he asked after holding her entranced by the story line.
“For a mil,” she exclaimed, “of course yes.”
For a moment he was still, mulling over the meaning of all this. Strangely, he felt offended.

She added: ‘What’s a night of sex with a randy old goat that’ll probably need a lot of blue pills to help him get it up? Think of what we can do with a million bucks.”
“Let’s get our own Robert Redford and you give it to him, babe,” he said and, as he began to laugh, he looked at how the idea seemed to excite her.
As his child bride continued to titter, Menziwa’s thoughts were miles ahead. He wanted such a deal as soon as yesterday!
That’s when it hit him that his financial woes were not good for his mental health. He was becoming dangerously desperate, if not in deed, yet, at least in thought. He didn’t like it one bit.
And this is how Promise had got into the habit of addressing him as ‘my loving husband’. But each time he returned the compliment, it was always sure to be followed by a request for money.
These were the women in his life, or as he described them to his drinking buddies, the SPCA and SAA. He was glad the former was hence confirmed a friend. The latter had to be a distant thought from then on. He was cleaning up his act.
But Veronica would remain. The environment that raised him told him each man needed a concubine. Who am I to break this tradition, he pondered and immediately found the thought comforting. He reassured himself that the Swazi were by nature practicing polygamists. It was their way of life. It didn’t seem to bother Veronica that he always wanted to go home almost as soon as she sat him down. She seemed to want for nothing else outside the occasional shag.
She’d never kicked up a fuss about his prolonged absences and when he did finally show up, he was welcomed like a migrant worker gone back home. Could it be that he was reading the situation wrongly with Veronica?
“But what does the future hold for them?” one of his friends had asked the other day, “say, 10 years from now?”
“The other woman,” another friend offered his priceless piece of wisdom, “doesn’t give a shit about marriage, bro. She’s in it for something specific. Sometimes its sex, sometimes money, sometimes both, sometimes, it’s this and everything else that lifts her skirt.”
Menziwa’s stock answer was: “We’ll cross bridge when we get to it.”
But deep down he worried a lot about the loose ends around him, as someone referred to these other women. Promise seemed to think they were headed for the altar in the near future. He had to stop her.
For a while they were such a part of his life he stopped looking at another woman twice. “No new recruits,” he’d say each time one of the mates asked how big he intended his harem to be. This was the topic in his haunt; it gave the speaker bragging rights. But he knew he could never say this anywhere else outside these beer gatherings.
“Someday the hedgehog is going to kill you with her bare hands,” Tate had sounded the alarm.
Hedgehog derived from the picture emblazoned on the front of a T-shirt Phiwe wore with denim jeans when she accompanied him to Tate’s neck of the woods.
Other hip young females would have preferred Che Guevara or old DRUM cover shoots where the hedgehog stood “but not the SPCA”.
Presently, Menziwa smiled self-satisfactorily knowing she had unearthed a bosom buddy in Phiwe.
Wine, women and song was the way of life in the neighbourhood of his youth but even as he feigned to walk the talk, Menziwa knew he was totally unhappy with this lifestyle.
“Condoms do burst,” someone in this orgy of debauchery had warned.
He wished for women who’d reject him, like the police officer he’d helped with her car the other day. The friend of a girl who grew up in the same street as Menziwa, she scored him very low in

two weeks when she reported to her friend, the matchmaker: “He’s more tight-fisted than a boxer and he talks alone.”
She could stand the niggardliness, she told her friend, not the soliloquy.
In the little time it took them to realise they were water and oil, two hundred bucks had changed hands.
“I donate it to your children’s fund,” she had said after reading the writing on the wall.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Although a matchbox like all the other houses in the older part of the township, house number 500 stood out like a sore thumb.
It was perched on a corner stand that was, by some quirk of fate, larger than those around it by a fraction of hectares. This extra space allowed the owner to indulge her green fingers. The neatly trimmed lawn always seemed to call for a picnic and the dandelions, dahlias, daffodils and whatever other 'D' of the plant species seemed to bloom all year round here.
"This is the only place," the brash owner was on record saying, "where birds come to escape the chimney smoke."
This was MaMokhethi's, a shebeen – Menziwa's natural habitat of late. He hated the fact that he was recently back to socialising in the township and drinking beer of the hideous and lowly quart variety.
It would appear that it was not only a refuge for birds. It was a lot of things to a lot of people. A select few, like Menziwa, came here to drink and unburden; some came to ask for headache tablets and a myriad housewife tales to remedy this or that ailment. Young wives came for new recipes to spice up their culinary skills. This was once the house of Apollo, one of the first residents of this area.

The first residents of this area moved here from the mining compound when many found they could not bring their visiting spouses into the mine premises. The authorities were adamant this was a work place, not a love nest. So many workers chose to leave the mine's lodgings and seek their private space in this new township development. When the floodgates opened, the exodus of men from the compound was such that those who stayed behind were unmarried young men. The older men who stayed behind were either too faithful to their wives back home or were sufficiently threatened by the system about the dangers of township life. Others came over when the area they had chosen before, very near to the cemetery, was declared dolomitic and uninhabitable. As is common with groups of disparate people coming to live together for the first time, disagreements cropped up often. Most were settled by violence.
In their attempts to temper this bloodletting, the authorities quickly moved to declare it a township, after some bird had whispered into their ear something about the calming effect of female presence. In its recorded history, this was one of the first places in black South Africa where women took to the streets to protest the violent conduct of their men. Legend has it that they stripped naked to make this point. For a long while the fighting stopped, historians say. But after a while some dickhead decided the place needed to be run with an iron hand. All newbies had to pay~~in~~ a certain amount in protection fees and soon this riled others who felt their own were being subjected to the worst form of treatment. All a man needed to do to qualify for a house in this new development was show proof that he was married, with children. But the traders in protection needed something extra and soon they were selling the houses to their own, who often did not satisfy the criteria to get a house. In retaliation, gangs formed and, as is the nature of humans, people~~d~~ grouped themselves according to language and place of origin. The protectors of the Basotho formed themselves into a vicious posse of hooligans called Ma-Russia, the blanketed ones. The Nguni opened a local chapter of the Msomi Gang, who were originally operating from Alexandra. The gang members were mostly recruits from the bundus. They did not have jobs in the mines or anywhere for that matter. Their business was to ensure the safety of their clansmen. Their salaries came from the protection fees collected from the beneficiaries of

their brand of justice. Soon the township was cut up into territories decided on by the gangs. The authorities, who put up the matchbox structures in the first place, increasingly came to the realisation that they would play no role in how the township was demarcated. It is thanks to this legacy that you will find MaMokhethi and those around her are Basotho. Very close to them are the Xhosa whose links to Matatiele made them friends with the Lesotho nationals. Up to this day, it is difficult to tell if someone is Sotho or Xhosa in the neighbourhood because they spoke the two languages with equal flair and mastery. The other opposite side of MaMokhethi's – to the west, are the children of the Msomi, who are largely from KwaZulu/Natal. Throughout the years, gang warfare would come to determine the nature of life here. Every boy who was coming of age knew well to graduate into gangsterism. In the olden days, there were times when both sides engaged in stick-fighting on Saturday afternoons at an open field in the no-man's land between them. It became a tradition and as the frosty relations between them thawed, this was seen as a sport. MaMokhethi's father had a mean reputation as a stick fighter. He's said to have claimed many a scalp. But as the younger generations joined in, stick fighting was deemed primitives and guns and knives became the tools of the trade. Other gangs sprang up and the most vicious of these were the Vim-99, named after a disinfectant of the same name. Their aim, it was said, was to scrub the township clean of all grime. Many residents who did not belong to either side of the war or were just plain pacifists who saw no need to align themselves with gangs, were driven out as a result. Their homes were taken over by total strangers, the brave who were willing to throw their lot in with this or that faction. It would be only much later when the political violence pitted township residents against hostel dwellers that a unity of sorts was achieved here. But before this truce, foisted on them by the presence of a common enemy, there was no such thing as even inter-marriages. In the olden days, the two entrances/exits into the township used strictly according to affiliation. Not observing this often proved fatal to those who erred. The 'Them' and 'Us' mentality was alive and well here.

Teachers who spoke one language could not accept to be placed at a school on the other side. If a suitor found a pretty girl from the other side, he was quickly advised to gird his loins, forget and cast his net closer home: What is wrong with your own? A game of soccer between the two sides was almost invariably going to descend into a free-for-all of guns and knives. At these matches, the police always kept vigilance.

A lot had changed now and patrons who drank at MaMokhethi were sure never to set foot there when her father was alive. Those who know the story of the township, especially older folk, often tell of the heroics exploits of her father, the fearless stick fighter. When she was at her most foul, MaMokhethi was not averse to wearing the Basotho blanket and wield a stick threateningly against anyone who rubbed her the wrong way. She collected her own money from non-paying male customers. When she took the fight to people, she'd remind them that she was the daughter of Apollo and feared no one.

Those who knew better promptly paid up.

It looked like the house would never be free of the spectre of Apollo. But at least it attracted a large and varied clientele now. The new generation of the streetwise, some of whom their fathers would never have been allowed a drink here, called it Five Clipper and, when they were so moved, switched to the Afrikaans-inspired tsotsitaal moniker – *five draad.*

All but one – the bedroom – were used to house MaMokhethi's clientele, almost invariably the township's Who's Who of teachers, pick-pockets, musicians, soccer stars, an odd lawyers here and a doctor there.

"And an architect," MaMokhethi would boast, when time called for her to brag about the depth of skill of her patrons. She was oddly imbued with an equal measure of character traits. She would get mad the same way she'd throw her head back and laugh, this a real hearty guffaw straight from her ample belly. At the funerals in the area, she'd preach up a storm with the same religious intensity she applied to peppering those who cross her path with a litany of vulgarities. She swore like a sailor; she prayed like an angel. She would spare the needy a bowl of rice and three potatoes and an onion but troop down the street to collect a few Rand from a defaulting customer who forgot her on payday. She commiserated with the bereaved with as much ease as smacking a grown man for so much as breaking a drinking glass. With MaMokhethi you never knew. Things were OK if she said so.

She was a tiny tot when Sophiatown was razed to the ground. But she knew about the famous shebeens of the bygone era like she was reading from a script. When the spirit moved her – which was half the time, she would regale her captive audience with tales of the famous settlement that was flattened by apartheid.

Back O the Moon, Little Heaven, 39 Steps …

"These were the places to be," she'd say, "not the shit hovels some of you run to when you don't want to pay me."

A few of the older men would add their own names too to the list of famous watering holes of the time as MaMokhethi did the roll call. The wily younger drinkers would contribute what they gleaned from old copies of DRUM magazine but MaMokhethi would always be at the ready to chide: "You have to read some more, my boy."

Her own mother, legend had it, was also a shebeen queen who held the fort when the husband went stick-fighting with gangs. "She did not sell beer."

Then she would reel off the names of the toxic concoctions her mother and other women of the time brewed to make ends meet.

Sip and Fly, pineapple, skokiaan, gavini, mampuru, Barberton, hops, shimyaan …

"It had many names."

"Er, Mams," this was Bra Dutch, "*nylon*."

"Ja, *nylon* was another name for it."

"*Mbamba*," added Jackson, an old taxi driver whose family was to the local transport industry what MaMokhethi's has been to bootlegging.

"*Sebapa le masenke*," added a voice in that circle of dinosaurs.

The house was spotless, some say since MaMokhethi herself was a child, newly arrived from Sophiatown. She had a house- help, Sis Thandi, whose only assignment was to clean every nook and cranny of the house. The glasses she did not wash, she sterilised them. She walked with a pronounced limp courtesy of a knife from a jealous boyfriend. Menziwa liked her even though she smoked. Menziwa hated cigarettes but he didn't mind terribly the other day when Sis Thandi bought him two beers after a particularly good round at the *fahfee* which she played religiously.

Many years ago when Sis Thandi had her life nearly taken away from her by Bisto's butcher knife, it was MaMokhethi who confronted the thug and got him arrested. Bisto and his gang, the Dirty Dozen – who spawned Vim 99, was a nasty character who made life particularly miserable for the hostel dwellers that were so blasé as to risk a night out in the township. They robbed them blind.

The story is that MaMokhethi went to the police station to 'pick up' officers who had on many occasions prior to Sis Thandi's assault turned a blind eye to Bisto's criminality.

"Not this time," MaMokhethi was heard shouting repeatedly.

With Bisto safely behind bars, the township was thus rid of the gangsters and their wicked ways. The only reason the fierce virago took up the cudgels on behalf of Sis Thandi, word had it, was that both their mothers came from the same part of Matatiele. Like their mothers, both women spoke SeSotho and IsiXhosa with the same degree of native fluency.
"What are you, Mams," Bra Dutch had garnered enough courage to ask once, "Sotho or Xhosa?"
"*Ek is 'n darkie*," was the curt reply, signaling the end of the conversation before it could even start.
Township legend had it that Mokhethi died of polio just before his seventh birthday. An only child, the mother was inconsolable. Soon thereafter, the boy's father left and MaMokhethi came back to this, her parents' house. Menziwa saw the husband once, a barrel of a man; the size of two heavyweight boxers put together. He is the only man ever to have told MaMokhethi to 'shut the fuck up'. He said this in the menacing Afrikaans patois of Sophiatown. It was the only time Menziwa had heard MaMokhethi mutter an apology and kneel with a tray of drinks before a man. This barrel-chested man drank whisky like an athlete took energy drinks. He gulped it down like he'd never heard of the word 'sip'. He drove a capacious Mercedes-Benz 500 SE, clearly the only car to accommodate his bulky frame.
"*Wie's die?*" he'd bellowed on that one occasion when Menziwa lacked the presence of mind not to overstay his welcome.
"He drinks here. He's a boy I like."
It was a night of firsts for Menziwa, his eyes wide with the shock of new discoveries. That would be the only time he ever saw a man get into MaMokhethi's bedroom clearly with the intention to spend the night. In person, the man looked more intimidating. In the picture that occupied pride of place in the wall unit, the same man poses next to another ship of a car, a Chevrolet Caprice. In the picture he makes an attempt at smiling for the camera. He fails.
In the dining room where the VIPs of this drinking hole sat, it was this picture and one of the Last Supper plus the beautifully adorned words of one Jim Bailey.
So highly have I learned to respect the shebeen queens, I have been left with a profound but unanswerable question: Would the shebeen queens have preferred to be captains of industry, or in their heart of hearts, would the captains of industry have preferred to be shebeen queens?
In the lounge area adjoining the dining room were a set of cream sofas that always looked like they were delivered yesterday. Here sat only those customers who could hold their beer and not doze off after a few.
"This is not your bedroom," many unwise enough to nod off have been violently roused from their forty winks.
It was a beautiful well-kept abode with just the sort of ambience to set angels at ease.
"You must be decent in there," MaMokhethi always warned those susceptible to bouts of faux pas. Once a feared police officer had the misfortune of seeking to light up and was asking for an ashtray when MaMokhethi came into the lounge.
"And who said you could smoke in here?" MaMokhethi lashed out without preamble.
As the cop contemplated his cigarette and simultaneously searched his brain for something to say, the shebeen queen continued the tirade: "This here, brother, is my house, not a waiting room where you are allowed to smoke and fart at the same time. You can do your shit where you learned to do it, not here."
Those champions of anti-women~~women~~ abuse would have rethought their campaign messages had they heard how this woman was verbally abusing the man. In that instant, he dearly wished for a hole to open up under him and swallow him whole. There has yet to be a more apt phrase

for leaving a place unceremoniously with one's tail between one's legs. He did not get the chance to drink the hooch he'd already paid for. When he left, he'd heard enough to dissuade him from ever returning.
This was sacred space. The lady of the house was given to reminding those within the range of her voice that her lounge was the very place that sat the bums of no less a human than the late father of township theatre Gibson Kente. He came here each time after his plays at the hall, MaMokhethi would say.
Confirmed: Kente was a regular to this neck of the woods and brought *Manana the Jazz Prophet*, *Too Late*, *Taximan and the School Girl* and *Mfowethu*, among his many theatre pieces, to showcase here.
Less Confirmed: That "he sat on this couch here".
But none of his regulars was foolhardy enough to dispute this and tell MaMokhethi to her face.
What was not in doubt was that before the advent of the ubiquitous night club, soccer stars were a regular feature at MaMokhethi's after a big game. Long before he could drink, this is where Menziwa had first caught sight of big name players in mufti outside the soccer pitch.
"Kaizer Motaung used to dance on this very floor," beamed madam proprietor.
They were on first-name terms with the soccer boss, she would say. Once, in a clear sho-off, she called the soccer club and asked to be put through to the head honcho.
"Tell him it's MaMokhethi from Vuka," she'd barked into the handset, no doubt in response to the stock question: who shall I say is calling, ma'm?
Momentarily, her face would come alive.
"Chincha Guluva, *hoezit, my laaitie*?"
Touche!
It was Kaizer Motaung on the other end of the line.
The kitchen was grand, always spick and span. Every utensil was always where it's supposed to be, hanging where it's meant to. The white fridge and freezer were snow white; the electric stove a shiny black. Space was tight but every inch of it was well used. On the walls were two or three pictures of pots and vegetables and the one other piece of writing:
No nooze is good nooze. But no booze is sad nooze indeed.
The aroma of good food always seemed to linger longer here. Menziwa's eating habits bordered on nitpicking. He ate almost exclusively food prepared by two sets of hands – his mother's and wife's. The first time he broke this rule was to eat MaMokhethi's food. She cooked very well, he noted.
"Nandi also cooks well," he'd told the older woman.
When she wore the hat of a cook, the shebeen queen worshipped at the altar of the mushroom. She grew it in her back garden. She dried them, canned, pickled and froze them. If there were any trivia questions about mushrooms, Menziwa was sure MaMokhethi would know the answer.
"You must write a thesis about them," he said.
"What is a thesis?"
"Never mind."
"Voetsek."
One heavy Sunday morning after a hectic Saturday night, Menziwa came sauntering into MaMokhethi's after he'd picked up his morning papers from Slick, the newspaper vendor he periodically owed money. MaMokhethi was preparing for church, with one eye on her pots.
"I am making rice salad with mushrooms," she said in between ducking into the bedroom.
She thrust the recipe and a cold beer at him:

Cook rice, then drain. Fry some onions, then add sliced fresh mushrooms, parsley and salt and cook through. Mix in the rice and serve with olive oil, lemon, parsley and chives.
The dog-eared copy of the recipe championed mushrooms as the '"ultimate ally when it comes to losing weight". He found himself reading: Their versatility means that they enhance most dishes and flavour, without adding to the energy content.
Three beers later, MaMokhethi was still hovering over her pots in her Sunday best and slippers, her wish to go commune with the other Catholic faithful just but a distant thought.
"What is this?"
"This here is leg of lamb, dimwit. What does it look like to you?"
On a bed of roast potatoes, it sure looked appetising and Menziwa's nostrils were assailed by a heavenly smell he only previously associated with his mother's cooking and his own kitchen at home when Nandi is cooking.
"Put that over there for me."
"There? Where's there?
"There in your pocket, Menziwa. Where else could you put that pot?"
"Easy; no need for violence."
Menziwa had no sweet tooth but in no time he was sampling the cheesecake he helped prepare for dessert.
"What now? Don't go mad on me."
Menziwa was visibly sad, all of a sudden.
"This is what I used to do with my wife."
Among the many things that Menziwa and Nandi loved doing was cooking together. They did this from the time they were left alone and had his mother's house to themselves. As newlyweds they scoured the supermarket and greengrocer for the ingredients suggested by the recipe book. In time, Menziwa would learn to brag that "everything my wife touches turns to a la carte".
Their dire financial straits had seen to the death of this pastime as he spent more time away from home lately. Each time he came home, Nandi had already dished up for him. He hated this and would always vow to be back home on time to cook with his wife. But it seemed his need to drink his sorrows away did not allow this desired eventuality.
Presently, he retreated from the kitchen that was not his to take his seat in the dining room where the cold beer beckoned.
"If this is what you think you have lost, reclaim it. Go back to cooking with her. Only you can resume that practice." He could not tell this mother figure that Nandi had long stopped asking him about it. "This is what made us lovers, champ. Remember?"
Champ was Nandi's term of endearment for him. He'd always go weak at the knees each time she called him this. He played a mean round of table tennis in his youth and, once, he was declared champion at a yearly tournament run by the local municipality. Their friends had pool tables in their homes, this being the new fad. But Menziwa had a [tennis] table in his house for about a year before making way for other interests. In the early years of his marriage he'd challenge Nandi and their visitors to a game.
"Why don't we go to theatre anymore," Nandi had also enquired and at this thought, Menziwa's sullen mood thickened by a notch.
"No need to cry, big boy."
When he got out of it, he felt so relieved he started laughing.
"I am sorry for being such a girl."

“It is OK to feel sad, even to cry sometimes. The thing that kills men is this macho bullshit. You must learn to cry. Take it out otherwise it will kill you.”
“Sure.”
“Thank you. Now pay for the beers. With this one, they are four.”
For a long time it was just the two of them and the aroma of cooked food. The gods seemed to want to keep the distraction of other customers away. Menziwa used the opportunity to tell MaMokhethi the story of his finances – or, most appropriately, lack of finances. Not once did the soundboard interfere. She listened and Menziwa remembered this type of session with Phiwe. She’d allowed him to ventilate.
He stopped talking when Reuben, a gangly fellow who had worked at Home Affairs nearly all his life walked in. He was freshly bathed and smelling of cologne to Menziwa’s unwashed early morning odour.
“*Uno cerveja gelades* – It was Tony Montana, a prattling type who had seen too many mafia movies. He earned his living as a go-between for the Portuguese liquor wholesaler and the local taverns. This is where he picked up the language, which he now spoke like a native of Lisbon.
“*Ja, gweva* – it was Bra Dutch, in his signature greeting to Tony. This was the name given to people who did Tony’s type of work in the days of Sophiatown. By lunch time as more of the Usual Suspects trickled in, Menziwa was the only one with a plate of food before him.
“Voetsek,” said MaMokhethi when Tony asked for his share, “Did you buy food for me to cook?”
When Menziwa belched, he did not see the ugly stare Tony threw his way.
“Educated fool,” the quasi Portuguese spat.
“At least he has an education. What do you have, apart from that impressive criminal record?
“MaMokhethi, I was not talking to you. Why can’t this fool fight his own battles without you always hiding him under your frock? Please, man, let this boy be a man. Just once in his shit life. He can never design my house, this one.”
“Of course he won’t. You cannot afford his fees.”
“He’s fucking cheap.”
Saved by the bell, Menziwa was spared Tony’s acid tongue just as Luke walked in. Luke wore his clothes by the intensity of their colour – the redder, bluer or pinker; the better.
“Who chooses your clothes, momma’s boy?
“Shut up, you crook.” Luke always had answers at the ready, something Menziwa envied about him. “Whose panties did you steal this morning?”
Tony was a kleptomaniac, strictly in the book sense. He took whatever fell into the range of his eyes.
“I repossess; I don’t steal.”
Menziwa was not high on Tony’s list of favourite people and he knew why; he didn’t care. The Terrible Twins had once stripped him naked and marched him down the township’s main road after a bootlegging deal that went wrong. They blamed him for a failed score where they wanted to hit Tony’s boss for a six. Had they succeeded, they were going to get a whole SAB truckload of beer, for nix. When it failed, Tony was a marked man. He only had his lucky stars to thank that the trigger-happy twins did not work up the pluck to shoot him in broad daylight. Menziwa had stopped reminding the small town crook that his murky dealings with his brothers-in-law were none of his business: “I am only married to their sister. So please, leave me the fuck alone.”

His borrowed bravado didn't win the day but infuriated Tony further, not so much for anything but its truthfulness. But there'd be no violence from this unsavoury character. He knew well not to invite the wrath of the twins, his bête noire, to himself.
In no time Luke would begin his tirade against the ruling party. "These crooks must be voted out of office. They are taking the country down the tubes."
As usual, this would be the precursor to the day.
It would be just before sun set when Menziwa gingerly made his way to the car, three sheets to the wind.
Safely home by the grace of God despite flouting every traffic rule, he'd feed the dogs, steal into the shower outside and make his way to bed on tip-toe.
"M-E-N-Z-I-W-A," it would be Nandi, pissed and at her wits' end. "You cannot do this to yourself, to us. No, you can't?"
"Let's speak in the morning," he'd slur and Nandi would assume that this is at least what he said and leave him to sleep.
He'd not hear his daughter come into the bedroom to kiss him goodnight. Yet another wasted night of cuddling, Nandi was brooding. "What is happening to us," she muttered to herself. At that point she admitted that she was hurting deeply.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Kevin was shrewd; merciless.
"I'm in this business for money," said the pawn shop owner, "if I have to give extensions to all customers who come begging for them, then I might as well go sit at home and twiddle my thumbs."
Menziwa was dumbstruck, too shocked to say anything. The trailer he'd pawned was gone - all R10 500 of it; for a mere R3 000 that he borrowed against it. Three thousand six-hundred rand or nothing, Kevin kept repeating.
Menziwa did not even have two coins to rub together. This was the final straw, a kick in the seat of his pants, Menziwa thought ruefully as he stood with both his elbows on the counter, his up-turned left palm propping up his chin. He might as well not have been there. Kevin was already busy with other customers, doing roaring business.
Customers who Kevin could spare a smile for but would be equally quick to snarl at once they miss a month, Menziwa thought.
He looked around, taking in the assortment of bric-a-brac littering the store. Each item had a price tag daubed on by someone whose strong point was obviously not a good handwriting. His teary eyes passed over 4 X 4 tyres that looked like they had never touched tarmac. If you added the kiddies' tricycles to the adult stock, there were enough bicycles to run a family Tour de France, more fishing rods than you'd ever find in an entire Durban pier and plenty guitars to start a rock band. There was more stuff, making the space claustrophobic: office furniture, lawn mowers, wheel spanners, braai stands, digital cameras, garden rakes, step ladders and vacuum cleaners. There was even a yellowing pair of false teeth!
Menziwa couldn't put it past Kevin to go to an old-age home and snatch a set of dentures off an unsuspecting old cow, maybe even his own father. They were going for the princely sum of R28.
He used to think it was beneath him to shop in these parts of town and for a large part of his decade as a resident in the suburb, he avoided the area. Just over a year ago he brought his trailer here and every month, like clockwork, he'd been dropping by to pay the interest. Initially it seemed like a good idea to leave it here as it freed up the space in his yard where it stood unused. The store was a good drive up the road from him, in a decaying part of town. Subsequently, he'd bring whatever item of value to the pawn shop, borrow money against it and pay back the loan - with interest - in a month. Each time he was unable to repay the full loan amount, he had to pay the interest. This time he did not even have the R600 interest. And without a smile, this is the bad tidings Kevin was giving him: "I will sell it to cover my costs."
"What fucking costs?" he was saying in his head, not with his mouth.
Now lately, dealer and customer have met so many times, thanks to Menziwa's state of finances that they were on first name terms. Through their exchanges, they knew a wee bit more than enough about each other. For example, he knew that Kevin, an only child, had married his first girlfriend, Cindy, the daughter of liquor store owners, the Goldsteins. The two families had a relationship going back several generations to Auschwitz, Menziwa had learned through an older – better educated – cousin of Kevin's one day. When Kevin married Cindy, it was merely another given; he'd not have touched anyone else outside this circle.
"And our women are beautiful," the cousin had added, just for good measure.

“I have to agree with you there,” Menziwa remembers saying to the happy-go-lucky character. When he’d mentioned to Kevin that his own wife was not the first girl he slept with, Menziwa was branded a horny goat by the moralist: “Forgive my asking but isn’t promiscuity a township thing?”

He was saying a black thing; township was merely shorthand for black, Menziwa’s gut-feel told him. Safe for the computer that replaced the old cash register, Kevin had kept the business pretty much the same way his father had it. The walls were still adorned by the capitalist ‘paintings’ of yesteryear - Please avoid the unpleasantness of asking for credit/Nice to hold but if you break it consider it sold. There was still the old photograph juxtaposing the woes and abundance of the two businessmen - one who sold for credit and the other for cash.

“No prizes for guessing which makes more business sense,” Kevin had said a few transactions ago. The only other pictures on the wall behind him as he sat down to fiddle with the till were of someone identified as Simon Wiesenthal. “That guy is my father’s friend,” was all Kevin had ever said about the man looking dapper in a black suit. The other picture at least managed to get the businessman talking: “This one you must know, Menz,” he’d said, poking the mug shot with his stubby fingers. The man in the picture was Percy Yutar. In a good book he’d bought for only six Rand from Kevin, Menziwa had learned that of the 17 arrested at the Lilliesleaf Farm “all five of the whites were Jewish”.

“At the Rivonia Trial that led to the incarceration of Nelson Mandela, Jews were prominent on both sides,” a chapter in the book said.

“Did they make any money at the end of the trial?” Kevin had asked once when Menziwa had tried to school him about this rich heritage of his people.

“Money makes the world go round, my chana,” Kevin had said, managing a little dance at the word ‘round’. The man was painfully parsimonious. The thick gold chain and the Rolex were his only profligacy. Otherwise he came out everyday resplendent in obvious hand-me-downs.

The stereo played the same sonorous sounds his father listened to, taped recitals from the Torah. Outside food – and lots of it, the only secular indulgence Menziwa had ever caught Kevin enmeshed in was a Simply Red rendition, *Money’s Too Tight To Mention*.

If it could not be translated to Rands and cents, Kevin had no interest in it. This is the same boy who committed his own father to an old-age home when he suspected the old man was getting senile. “I’m a busy man,” he’d reasoned, “at least there I know he’ll be taken care of.” If he could do this to his own father, the man who set him up in business, of what import could the likes of Menziwa be?

A man who has tasted profit is not easy to sway away from it, he remembered someone imparting this piece of wisdom. It did not make sense then; it was bar talk. But now, right before his very eyes, Kevin The Bastard was becoming living proof.

Obese from a privileged life free of want, Kevin was 35. On the clutter of the notice board behind his desk was a police letter that gave the applicant, one Kevin Cohen, permission to trade in second-hand goods. The application showed his ID number, a whole seven-year chasm between him and the older Menziwa. But today the younger man was speaking to the penniless customer like he was a naughty child who helped himself to forbidden candy.

Menziwa found his humour dry. He hated himself that he could be at the mercy of the likes of Kevin. But there he was, deep into the quagmire, Kevin walking around like a peacock while he could merely stare miserably as plans were made to swindle him of his trailer. “This is a business, Menziwa. Charity is at another address.” He pronounced his name Men-cee-who. Menziwa’s head was spinning.

“Give me a minute to think,” he pleaded with Kevin.
“I don’t have a minute.”
Menziwa paced about the passage created for customers to walk in, with clutter on both sides. He walked outside to get some fresh air, his head suddenly pounding. Behind the pawn shop was a funeral parlour whose name was a play on the nickname of the senior national soccer team. Menziwa wondered, as he’d done many times before, how trademarks and patents worked like. Surely this could not be right?
He was convinced the owners of the morgue chose the name because they were sure the soccer squad was a bunch of buffoons. They couldn’t care about the squad. Like Kevin, a self-confessed cricket fan who told him once the only time he’d been to a local soccer match was when Italian side AC Milan came into the country to play Orlando Pirates, the morticians clearly were not soccer fanatics or, at least, fans of the local game. They were in business for money, were they not, Menziwa reasoned with himself.
The only name Kevin knew was Doctor Khumalo, who had stopped playing many years ago. He was adamant Neil Tovey was the best thing that ever happened to South Africa as a footballing nation. As a customer, he was of the idea he’d made a lot of money for Kevin. He’d lost a brand new Ping golf set here. This he’d won about a year ago and had pawned for petrol money very early in his affair with Phiwe. When he came back for it, Kevin had showed him how the contract on it had expired. Menziwa had totally forgotten about it. His head told him it was not his main bag, he could afford to lose it but deep down he knew this was a drawback. The other day he sold off a whole toolbox that had set him back R1 350 for a mere R500 Kevin’s prices. A cellphone he sold two months ago was still occupying pride of place in the display cabinet, prized at R500 when the heartless bastard had given him a pitiful R280 for it. It was an old phone that Promise had meant to donate to the neighbourhood watch in their area. Menziwa had said he wanted it for his helper who did not have a phone. MaMpho, had she known, would have objected to this blatant lie. The more he counted off his losses, the more he realised what an awful mistake he’d made by frequenting the pawn shop. Most of what he lost was on petrol to go about his business. He did not pawn his goods for a big cause that was going to save the world.
“Today you’re kicking me in the teeth,” he’d moaned some two hours previously.
“This is a business, chana,” Kevin had retorted, “not the Salvation Army.”
“But you’ve known me for years. Surely you can’t kick me when I’m down.”
“Look Menz, you’re an intelligent man,” said the other man, in a tone that said he really did not think that to be entirely true, “you read and signed the contract. What do you expect me to do? Pay for your goods? I can’t, chana. Really, I can’t.”
“But ...”
Before he could say anything more, Kevin was already half into the back, barking orders at the old man he employed to do the work of 50 slaves.

An old Afrikaner couple tottered inside, the man carrying a DVD player.
Pand, the man said, using the Afrikaans word for pawn. They had the papers for the machine, the man added. “Right here,” wifey added her shrill two cents’ worth. With that one line, she released a pungent waft of cheap wine, the staple drink of the down-and-out folk in this part of town, Menziwa’s hunting ground that was now coming back to haunt him.
Lewisham used to be posh in the old apartheid days. The sanctuary of whites whose frailties were sheltered by the system, it had now gone to the dogs. In the entire neighbourhood, the only coat of paint to have been applied was on the road markings. The houses were dilapidated. The

owners, like the pair in the pawn shop, all the worse for wear. They lived on scrap that they carted by the supermarket trolley-load to the nearby scrapyard. If they made twenty bucks a load, it was a killing that called for a feast. Alcohol abuse was a way of life here and the resultant folly of jaywalking landed many in the morgue behind or the hospital, a short drive away.
But those who went to hospital hardly ever made it back to the streets – and the deadly brew.
Menziwa looked at the van der Merwes - this is what stood on the man's ID as he proffered it to Kevin - and found he envied them, warts and all. They were not going to lose the DVD player and more, they walked out R80 richer.
"I have nothing," Menziwa muttered under his breath.
"What?" Kevin demanded, indifferently.
"No. Nothing."
"Jesus H Christ! Don't go mad on me."
The lovebirds beat a hasty retreat and were quickly replaced by a big black man at the counter. He was dark with toothpaste-ad white teeth, Menziwa observed, most likely Nigerian, if the accent was anything to go by. And when the man spoke, it was as if to confirm Menziwa's suspicion that he was an African immigrant. He wanted to sell Kevin two Nokia cellular phones. Despite assurances to the police, Menziwa knew that behind the facade of good clean business, Kevin did trade in stolen goods. At the other end of these phones he'd just taken delivery of were, nine times out of ten, distraught owners, conned out of their wits. In no time Obasanjo was out, his dashiki flailing against the soft draft that entered the store from outside.
"Look I have to go out now," said Kevin, "I won't stop you, Menz, but I don't think you want to stand here the whole day. Get me my dough today or just forget about the trailer."
"Jules," he called out to the pimply youngster who helped in the shop, "I'm off. Make Menz some tea if you're up to it."
He grabbed the keys to his beat-up bakkie and was out, in a flash. It was only then that Menziwa began to appreciate the full extent of his loss. Out on the street after almost a whole day trying to save his trailer, everything looked like a blur. The haziness was actually the tears in his eyes as he strode off home. He could go to the Terrible Twins but Nandi would know. But they owed him a favour, did they not? They had said so themselves. They can keep the trailer until he was back on his feet. If they could not pay the ten Grand to release it, surely they could come up with the interest. He was going to go to them, fuck them and his pride, he said.
"Is he gone?" asked Kevin the minute he walked into the store after his three-hour avoidance campaign. Jules answered in the affirmative and his boss ordered him to close up: "Go have sex or something. Just don't be open at six. I'll see you first thing in the morning."

En route home, Menziwa stopped at *Kom Ma' In*, another pawn shop. A year earlier he'd bought a bedroom suite here to replace MaMpho's old bed. He'd kiss the Nataniel look-alike who ran the store if he were give him just ten percent of that money back!
"No, no, no," Nataniel was saying to another customer, "not a chance."
The last negative was emphasised with a slap of his tiny bum and it was back to his plate of food – chips drowning in tomato sauce. Menziwa had long settled with his conscience that he was homophobic but he liked Nathaniel from the first day he saw him. He looked harmless enough and he spoke about little things that really did not affect Menziwa.
"They don't make ketchup like they used to," he was saying, to no one in particular. "They have a thing or two to learn from our own Mrs Ball's," and with this, he noisily smacked his lips.
Menziwa used to find him absolutely adorable when he worked up the pout. The man who was

told ‘not a chance’ came back from his car and Menziwa stood in a trance as the man counted out R100 notes in front of a suddenly friendly Nathaniel.
“There we go, darling,” he said, “it’s all yours.”
The man was paying for a piano. What sort of fucking man would pay three Grand for a damn piano, Menziwa wanted to ask. The man’s bulging muscles stopped Menziwa from vocalising his thoughts.
“Good investment, Baba,” he caught himself saying.
‘My girl will be very proud.”
“Oh.”
“Ja. She’s always wanted one. It’s her birthday tomorrow.”
“Good one, Baba; good one.”
“Thanks, my chief.”
In lightning speed, Nathaniel had made out the cash receipt and loaded the purchase on the satisfied customer’s Ford F250 with a lot of help from the customer’s acne-infested son.
“I knew he had the money,” Nataniel was saying with another smack of the lips. “What can I do for you, darling?”
In all his life, Menziwa had never known ‘darling’ to sound so pornographic. But grabbing his balls to make sure he was not getting a hard-on, he just smiled
“Just looking.”
“Suit yourself, sweetie-pie.”
His unseeing eyes glazed over fridges and beds. A futon bed like the one he had in one of the bedrooms was going for six hundred. He wanted to kick himself for having paid almost double for his. It was even smaller.
“What, darling?”
“No sorry; just thinking.”
“Speak to momma, darling. Speak to *moi*,” another smack.
Thinking about what sob story to sell to his brothers-in-law, Menziwa said down uninvited opposite Nathaniel, who made an exaggerated show of feigning surprise at his guest. What could be worse would be losing the trailer, he thought, not asking for a bail-out from the crooks whose sister he married. Pride was not going to get him out of this fix. His was actually called ‘empty pride’. He thought long and hard about the course of action he was contemplating. Nothing better presented itself.
‘Have you ever had money problems?’ he asked his new companion, forcing him into a conversation.
“Who hasn’t, darling?”
“I just thought you’d know how to look after your money.’
‘Why do you say that? What makes you say that?”
“I don’t know. I just thought, seeing that you’re not me, you’d know better.”
Nathaniel laughed, smacked his lips again and wiped his already clean hands on another paper towel.
“All of us have issues with money. Every day, Kobus and I fight over money.” When he saw Menziwa staring uncomprehendingly at him, he added hastily: ‘Kobus is my partner. In the business and in bed,’ instead of smacking his lips, he laughed a shy soft laugh.
“This was his business originally but then I came on board when we started seeing each other. He has his own ideas with money, unrealistic ideas. He constantly needs to be watched. If it were not for me, we’d long have gone under. At some point I had to borrow money from my father to

come help here: buy stock, fix the building, that sort of thing. Each time he comes here, he dips his dirty fingers in the till. He gambles, hey, at the casino. If he wins, it is one blooming once in a while. I even threatened to leave, hey. You know men, that's what they understand, tough talk; put your foot down then they listen. Otherwise they go on like the world is ending tomorrow and they have to finish everything. He's never here. I work, alone. I put food on the table. If it wasn't for me, this place would be kaput. But I guess, some of these things you do for love."
An old woman came, looking for a garden fork. For a while Menziwa had forgotten about his own situation, listening to the healing words of this person he did not really know. When the woman got what she was looking for, she paid the R75 and left them.
"What is your name?'
"Robyn. I spell it with a Y." He took out a pen and scribbled his name on a piece of paper, a message pad. Very clean scholarly writing.
"I'm Menziwa."
'Men – zoo – whaaa'
"Lazy people call me Menz."
"I will join them. OK. Menz." He extended a feminine hand and when Menziwa shook it, it felt so … porcelain.
"OK, Robyn, see you again."
"Bye, hey and do keep well. Lovely jeans you got there."
"Thanks.'
Menziwa was out the door in a trot, suddenly light on his feet.
He stopped for a minute to look at fishing and diving paraphernalia at Scuba, the only store in the row that looked like it deserved its trading license. The owner was an Afrikaner gentleman whose only line in English was "What's Wrong?"
This would in time be his nickname in the area. He was a genial fellow with a protruding beer belly that gave him the futuristic appearance of a pregnant male. And he loved his brandy and Coke.

Later that evening, as a frustrated Menziwa searched in vain for the Terrible Twins, a freshly bathed and scented Kevin hit the mall, taking Cindy out on the rare once-in-two-months outing of binge eating and drinking. If he had a crystal ball that allowed him to be in two places at one, Menziwa would be watching Kevin and Cindy take their usual seat in the corner at their favourite restaurant. When he could not find the twins, he drove to Nomsa's and found Terence, who he unburdened on about the fate of his trailer.
At the opposite end of his misery, the dining couple had no worry in the world. At 28, Cindy had the eating habits of a mare and though she was scarcely satiated at the end of the third bottle of her favourite Chateau Libertas, she wanted those around her to believe she did not have a drinking problem. "I never wake up with a hangover."
For his failure to match his wife in the drinking stakes, Kevin made up for the flaw in eating. He ate for several dinner guests. As always, his 'starter' was a Saltimbocca, as the menu said, fillet medallions, sauteed in herbed olive oil, layered with ham and mozzarella cheese and covered with mushroom sauce. At R64, 95 and nearly flowing out of the plate, many people considered it their main course. Not Kevin. He ate it ravenously, like someone had just told him this branch of Panarottis Pizza was serving their last dish that night.
"Business good, Kev?" asked the Joe Pesci look-alike, who ran the outlet. He'd known Kevin since, as he likes to put it, the lad was knee-high to a lizard.

"Good, Mario," said Kevin, battling with the napkin around his full mouth, "abso-fucking-lutely good."
"I can tell."
"Yeah."
"How's the old man," asked Mario.
Kevin tensed somewhat, hating the question the minute it left the pudgy man's mouth: "Look, the old goat has never been in better shape. I hope to see him this Sunday."
It was a lie, Kevin knew. But Mario fell for it and was ready to leave them to enjoy their meal when Cindy burped, a loud foul sound.
Mario lingered on a few seconds more like he was expecting an apology. The Cohens offered him none, as the wife sucked her plate of chicken livers clean and hubby finished what other diners could have had for the night.
When OJ, their waiter of choice, came for their main order, Cindy settled for stuffed chicken breasts, already salivating at the prospect of tucking into the accompanying fresh spinach and feta, seasoned with rosemary and olive oil.
"And please give me some water, OJ," said Cindy, with food in her mouth, flouting all rules of etiquette.
They liked OJ because they tipped him little or not at all when other prudent waiters would avoid their table like the plague. Kevin contemplated the menu a few more minutes while toying around with the scraps of left-over food in his plate. "Do I really need food?" he asked, rhetorically.
Before anybody could say anything, he asked for the man-size T-Bone Florentine and ordered that it be served "with a little bit of blood in it".
That's how he liked his animals, he roared in self-satisfactory cacchination. For the next hour not a word passed between man and woman as they lay siege to the table, removing every morself from the table that looked like it was food and paid for. Mario, OJ and whoever else made up the staff at the branch knew better to stay away from table 18. When they ordered dessert, it was like they had not eaten in six years. That night, as Menziwa chose to forgo the samp and tripe supper, his money was paying for the Cohens' more palatable fare. What was before him was usually food he'd eat with relish – his mother's signature dish. But that night it looked vile on the plate. He wouldn't use even the proverbial barge pole to touch it.
He told Terence everything about the story of the trailer. His brother-in-law, who had once borrowed the trailer, said he wondered what had happened to it because he hadn't seen it in a while. Terence remembered the twins using it to stock alcohol. Nomsa was still not home, Terence said. He could pay the interest for Menziwa, not settle the amount owed on the trailer. But it would mean starting at the bank the next day as the only money available was on the cheque account: "I did not use an ATM card for it, purposely." Yes, he was in trouble, Menziwa confessed to his brother-in-law. After losing his money on the tanzanite scam, he'd pay off a few small debts, he explained. The biggest amount he handled of that money was the twenty-three Grand he paid to bring their municipal account up to date. That was a good idea as it was accumulating huge interest every month. Then he paid up the university fees of his cousins. Eleven thousand paid the lawyer who made his public violence case at Florent go away.
"Nomsa says the credit card was paid," Terence had said. Menziwa only nodded. He told Menziwa that Nomsa had been planning a meeting with them to ask them to tear the credit card. 'Get out of that game completely, Gum Shoes. Cash is king. No cash, no buying, full stop.'

He did not tell Terence the arrears on the bond were still unpaid and that he was taking threatening calls daily.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

It had been very difficult to fall asleep. He'd heard almost every sound made by those creatures who ruled the night. He kept seeing the trailer being towed away. He tried to stop it but the men in the truck towing it away ignored him and just kept on driving further and further away from him. When he tried to scream to alert people about the theft, his voice would not come out. He sprinted after the truck, leaving his own car behind as it seemed to slow him down but still he could not catch the truck that was leaving with his trailer.

He met with Terence just as soon as the banks opened. He was rushing back to Kevin's when he was caught in a roadblock. Seeing a side street, he screeched tyres as he tried to avoid the roadblock ahead. This route was going to take him the long way round Wentworth Park, on the north when he needed to be on the east. The only thoroughfare was the bridge across the railway line, a route that was going to add another six kilometres to his travelling distance. Just as he was resigning himself to this fate, the whirr of a police siren sounded behind him. He ignored it and continued driving, accelerating a bit to drive just over the speed limit. As the siren neared him, he could see in his rear-view mirror that other cars were making way for the siren: it was the Metro police. He meant to move to the side of the road but they did not pass him now that they were behind him. In a variety of sound, he had an eeri~~ere~~ feeling they were motioning for him to pull over. He did and they stopped behind him: Shit.

"Why are you running away from the roadblock, daddy?" It was the voice of a plump woman who looked like she was still bloated from a huge breakfast.

"Me?"

"Yes, I'm talking to you, daddy."

Menziwa had no idea how to take the conversation forward. His brain just stopped functioning. When he handed his driving license over and the woman walked back to their patrol car, something clicked in Menziwa and he started sweating. He had outstanding traffic fines and if Fatso ran his ID on their system, his litany of woes was going to unfold. He could see her, jabbering away on the radio. After a while she heaved her heavy frame out of the squad car and began the effort to return to Menziwa's car. His heart was beating at an abnormal rate. He was sure it was going to jump out of his shirt. Just at that instant his cell phone rang. It was Gill.

"Could you be here in the next hour?"

"Sure, Tony. Just finishing something quickly here and will see you in the next hour."

When he hung up, Fatso put her hand to the mouth like someone stifling the impending roar of a belch.

"You have warrants, daddy."

"I know."

"I'm sorry but I have to arrest you or escort you to the Town Hall." The town hall precinct housed the traffic department, among the myriad services it offered.

"Look, I am in trouble. I have no time to be arrested. I'm in shit." Fatso walked away from his car and called his colleague over, a man who, when he arrived, did not look sober. Every minute that they took ate into his time to intercept Kevin and save his trailer.

"Are you resisting, my chief?" the man asked.

"No, I'm not." Menziwa got out of the car. "Look, someone has just removed my trailer from the yard. I'm rushing back home. I was called at work by my son to tell me this."

"Who is this person? Where is your house?" It was Fatso, who fired off the questions but did not seem to be interested in the answers.

“I hear you, my chief but you still have warrants.”
“My chief, make them go away,” Menziwa said with a straight face.
“How do I do that?” the man looked, first at his colleague, then at Menziwa. All along other traffic kept driving past, one or two of them hooting.
“I have hundred Rand.” When Menziwa said this, Fatso jumped back like she had just been stung by a bee.
“Lose my job for hundred Rand, you’re not serious.”
“Help me, man, please. Just this one time, please.”
When they parted, after a long of haggling, Menziwa had only half of the six hundred he’d taken from Terence earlier that morning.
He had to see the twins. When he stopped outside Nandi’s parents’ house, it was 10.30 am. He was supposed to be meeting with his boss. He took out his cell phone and texted Meghan an apology. He had no clue what to say to Gill. He then switched it off completely and threw it in the cubby hole.
It had been a while since he’d been at his in-laws. The yard was still kept neat. The paintwork was clearly redone, recently.
“Ola, Menziwa,” it was the shorter of the two, Nkosi. Nkosana was still snoring softly on the couch. Their back rooms were now completely broken down into one huge open plan – lounge, bedroom, bar and an enclosed ablution facility. The enclosure was glass so that wherever one was seated, one could still see whoever was taking or shower or sitting in the john. It was neat, but neat in the sense of a psychopath.
Bare-chested with a neat tattoo of a crown above his left breast, Nkosi asked what Menziwa was going to drink. The bottle of Chivas on the coffee table seemed to make any other answer difficult. He took one among the glasses, went out to rinse it and started on the whisky as Nkosi excused himself to go shower. In a moment he was joined by the carbon copy of the man who was in the shower. After greeting, this one remarked: “To what do we owe the pleasure of this early morning raid? All well on the home front?”
He looked exactly like the man in the shower: same grin, same hunching of the shoulders. He didn’t wait for the answer but got busy fidgeting on his mobile. Menziwa drank and read pieces of the Sunday papers scattered about, three days after the fact. In the ensuing minutes, the next one would go into the shower; the other, neatly dressed in the dungarees of a working man, would join Menziwa in the lounge. He switched on CNN and got down to give the chocolate bar his undivided attention. He chewed loudly, with no care in the world.
“Let’s get breakfast,” the shorter of the two suggested.
“Phone in for the pizza. It’s nearly 12. They are open already.” His other half countered.
They did not say much to Menziwa, who decided he was in fine company with the stale news and the fine whisky. They talked a lot on their phones, sharing the news after almost every call. “It was so-an-so. He says …” CNN stayed on. Menziwa sat and drank. The pizza came – three large boxes – and they wolfed it down. When Menziwa looked at his watch, he knew he’d be seated in the canteen – had he not been here, of course. When he started speaking to the twins about the business of his visit, a full bottle of the same poison had just been placed on the table, shared between him and the taller of the twins. The other one was on the X-Box and continued gorging himself on chocolate.
Halfway through the second bottle, more take-aways were ordered, this time rice and noodles. Somewhere during the day Menziwa told them about his trailer. He would not remember what

they had said. But it was never discussed again that afternoon. The twins spoke on their phones, ordering beer and spirits, giving out instructions and doing cell phone banking.
When he stood up to go, just before sunset, another bottle of whisky was shoved under his arm. Sensing that it could break, one of the two – he was not sure which one, took it to the car.
Menziwa would say that he was not drunk. He was 'high' in the same way a drug user is likely to feel after a day of shooting up. He drove past his mother's where his youngest sister Mbali now lived with her fiancé, the father of her little boy.
The child was named Menziwa!
Mbali was not in, so Menziwa did not stay. He was not sure what he'd talk about with Mbali's boyfriend.
When he inched the Alfa out of the township on the straight road leading towards his suburb, Menziwa was 'floating'. It was a state of mind that was not new to him. He'd felt like this a number of times in the past, especially after good food and drinks. Those who saw the Alfa would later tell Nandi that it was flying. The gentle curve outside the steel works factory was a death spot Menziwa knew well. Coltrane was blowing his horn to the heavens on *Just Squeeze Me,* a track he played with The Miles Davis Quintet. It was just man and machine in perfect harmony, or so he thought. When he failed to negotiate the curve, he was too quick to force the steering back into line. The car disobeyed and ploughed headlong into the high walls of the next factory, an engineering plant. It travelled at high speed inside the premises of the factory and came to a stop when it hit the body of a disused water tanker. The airbag popped at the same time as the wail of alarms that sounded all over the factory.
Menziwa was rescued by a group of night-shift workers who were roused from sleep by the commotion outside.
After two days in hospital, with amazingly few ~~little~~ injuries, he came home to find the Alfa was written off in the accident.
Was he not cut out for wealth, Menziwa had often wondered? The thought returned to him as he sat convalescing at home. Fuck wealth if it did not think he was worthy of it. He also did not want it. The contempt was mutual. But he deserved a good life, at least. It was what he had prepared for when he went to technikon, then university and spared his whole working life at the firm and paying his taxes, to the last cent. He deserved a decent life.
If there was indeed a God that loved us all, why has He not allowed him to make any money, at least once? He did not count the loan he'd got from GAL, the root of all his woes. A windfall from the lottery had evaded him since the scam was introduced to the country. Cutting his losses, he'd even stopped playing. The last time he was meaning to play, a crook knocked on his window and lured him into the trap that left him a lot poorer, not just money-wise but in spirit.
He had not really recovered from the incident. It actually drove him far into the abyss. Each time the incident replayed itself in his head again, he just sank low into despair. Now he had no car; the very car that defined him. When he had saved it from being repossessed, he resumed paying the insurance but only for a few months. Thereafter he got back to his ways of driving without insurance.
Now this, the accident!
He had never made decent money and, maybe then, lost it. God had indulged many people in this. Once he read how Carroll Shelby, the man after whom the Shelby Cobra was named made and lost stacks of wealth. With all his drawing talent, Menziwa had never made serious money from his side jobs, like the new breed of architects joining the firm seemed to be doing. One, a wet-behind-the-ears Aussie immigrant Steve Taunton, who soon proved his bulky CV worthless

pieces of paper, led the lifestyle of a movie star from the crap he designed behind the firm's back. He drove a Jaguar XJ6 Cabriolet, lived in a trendy R3 million house at the top of a cliff and could wear a different suit to work for a month if he wanted. A man of lesser talents, everything about Taunton's life was stuff Menziwa could only read about in Nandi's chick-lit. Even Finley said so that Taunton was a charlatan.

All his austerity measures had failed Menziwa terribly.

Things had gone pear-shaped and Menziwa didn't like it one bit. His life had taken a direction he'd not even wish on his worst enemy. He got himself entangled in a mess of a web he was fast losing hope he'd be able to escape. The mere thought of the people and situations he'd attracted to himself gave him the creeps. How on earth he'd ever crossed paths with the likes of Sing-Sing made him want to kick himself. How could he? It was too late now. Half the firm saw Menziwa standing and talking to this riff-raff.

Shit!

Sing-Sing was a career criminal, a nasty character that Menziwa regarded as vermin that society should have been spared from. No one seemed to know his given name or wished to confirm what they knew. Even his peers – at least those still not in prison, were afraid to say the name as if mouthing it would attract some form of bad luck to the speaker. It was a name out of the Bible; like Jeremiah. Or was it Jerome? With no one willing to put the name on their lips, he remained just that – Sing-Sing, an enigma. His closest – and only known – relative was his mother whose funeral was a spectacle of sneers in the township. Menziwa was a pimply sweet sixteen when the woman died and nearly the whole township stood in a mocking guard of honour to pour scorn on the departed on her final trip to wherever she was destined to go. There was no convoy of cars as was the norm with the practice of township funerals. Her funeral procession consisted of the hearse and family car – not one car more. Good riddance, people chanted, let the witch go. Women ululated and grown men spat at the two cars. Not a good sign.

When Menziwa saw her in the flesh, he was in the company of friends coming back from a school trip to the planetarium. Big news in the day!

The woman walked slouched, like she carried the problems of the entire world on her shoulders. She was clutching a brown paper packet very close to her chest like she'd heard someone had conspired to snatch it from her. Given the wrapping, it could only have been a piece of meat from Lota's, the local butchery. It was a rowdy crowd of boys who'd just played good football against their peers and won. Everyone was talking at the top of their boyish voices about the game but, as if on cue, when the old lady came to cross their path, not a single one of them was left speaking. The old woman was muttering under her breath, oblivious to everything else around her, even blaring car horns. Close up, she looked like something out of a horror movie. She had a tuft of unkempt beard sitting like an eyesore on a left side of a face that looked like a Halloween costume. Clearly not bathed, she wore black pantyhose that had lost its shine in the last century.

And then she died. Accused of witchcraft, no one would say exactly what the woman did. Every death in her street – and there certainly were many, were blamed on her. Her house stood vacant from the day she died. Even township vagrants, who were quick to set up home in abandoned buildings steered clear of house number 1700 Mzolo Drive. It was never vandalised; it just rotted away.

It is today the township's Ground Zero – not even the municipality has had the temerity to find use for the piece of ground.

When his mother was interred, Sing-Sing, as per usual, was away in prison. This was the longest he'd been outside prison – two years and six months when Menziwa took money from the loan shark.

Menziwa had never heard him utter more than two words but rumour had it he spoke – but only in the jail patois of the gangs. The little of his flesh that was exposed, like his face and arms, was a kaleidoscope of one giant tattoo upon another. He had teardrops etched under his eyes and lewdly exposed female genitalia on his forehead. He had the excess weight of what could have been a hunchback, if the natural process had been concluded. He was an oddity that walked with a limp, and looked even more anachronistic with the humongous cellular phone he was carrying. It looked like a walkie-talkie.

Initially he'd moved in as a live-in lover of Audrey's, the widow of a well-known bootlegger in the township. In her heyday, Audrey was Miss Chevrolet; a ravishing beauty that could have gone on to amass more titles had motherhood not beckoned. In her late 50s, traces of her beauty still showed. If women were made for anything, Audrey was born to be cherished by a loving husband. Hers died and in his wake emerged a foul excuse for a human called Sing-Sing, Jeremiah, Jerome or whoever the heck he was.

In no time he'd kicked Audrey out and had the house to himself and his harem of boys. It was an open secret that he kept his prison lovers. The present 'woman of the house' was his long-time lover from jail who Sing-Sing still kept for sexual release even on the outside. Stories out of prison say a few inmates died so the two lovebirds could be together. The head of prison in Barberton was transferred to another post when he barred Sing-Sing from being in the same cell with his lover.

Those who drank at Audrey's continued their patronage even after she'd left. One man who had the foolishness to move to another drinking hole had an 'accident'. His wife and daughter were raped before his very eyes and he was found dead at the wheel of his car outside the nearby cemetery. In police parlance, it was an open and shut case. But horror of horrors, the local police ruled the case a suicide and the docket grew legs. Suddenly there was a dearth of good men, the sort from whose silence evil is said to fester.

When the woman and her children fled their own home and put it on the market, not even the grubbiest estate agent could touch the property. In his day, there was Sheena Duncan and the Black Sash but Menziwa does not remember a whimper from even two women gossips in the neighbourhood pointing out this travesty of justice.

According to the grapevine, the incumbent tenants paid rent to Sing-Sing and not even the police could do a thing about it. The very police who were quick to take into custody anyone that Sing-Sing accused of a crime. A man was detained over a weekend when he was supposed to marry off his daughter because Sing-Sing told the police the man grew dagga on his property. It did not occur to the police to ascertain the veracity of this claim even when he tearfully begged them to search his property.

When he was released on Monday – without charge – his daughter had taken another man's surname.

Sing-Sing was on his porch triumphantly smoking the largest *zol* in the history of addiction to marijuana. Had they seen its length, Peter Tosh and Bob Marley could have instantly reconsidered their Jamaican roots, deferring to the artistry of this tattooed turd.

Men who drank at Audrey's went there every day after work and at the weekend – happy on the outside but feeling rotten on the inside. They were the kind who paid for their misery. For a man who had designs on wearing the pants in their own homes, drinking at Audrey's was the closest

to the humiliation of castration. But they had a way of getting back at the rest of society – who mocked their situation: to pass on this information to Sing-Sing. In most cases, those who jeered only a week ago were, at the beginning of the next, the newest patrons!
Those who borrowed money from the ruthless thug often found their repayment figures excessively inflated. They had no recourse to complain. Many swiftly paid up and, just as quickly, got into fresh debt. People lined up on Friday afternoons to go pay back. When Sing-Sing went out personally to collect, it was a bad sign.
And here he was, face to face with Menziwa when he was at his weakest, just out of hospital! He smelt of cheap perfume, the sort of smell one got from applying soap, not roll-on, to their under-arms. He was not speaking directly to Menziwa but one of his lackeys, who clearly relished the role of interpreter for the indebted. "Petrol is expensive," the interpreter, himself with question marks tattooed on both cheeks, was saying.
"It costs money to come to you. I have stopped doing what I was supposed to do. My business is closed; my customers are waiting for me. Why should I come to you for my money when you came to me to get it?"
As he whispered this translated communiqué, Sing-Sing had his mouth twisted in a vulgar snarl, like the air around him was putrid. He kept his fingers contorted in crippling gang hand signals to emphasise each point he felt he was making.
"Let's finish this like men. You will give me five thousand."
The feeling that overcame him was a strange new one Menziwa had never experienced before. He did not know whether the urgency was to pee in his pants or to attend to the vile taste building up in his mouth from the pit of his stomach. He did not find time to avert his aim so he got sick all over the right leg of the interpreter's neatly pressed trousers. The silence that followed was the sort where one could hear the proverbial pin drop. All eight men who had accompanied Sing-Sing on his collection route watched as Menziwa retched violently to get the rest of the vomit out of his tummy.
Menziwa carried no handkerchief so he used the inside of his shirt to wipe himself. Sing-Sing and his henchmen just stood there and watched, even the one drenched in vomit. When he finally got to speak, Menziwa heard himself say: "I owe you one thousand Rand. I will pay you one thousand Rand."
He turned to walk away and some of the bullies moved to block his path. They parted like the sea did for the children of Israel when Sing-Sing gave the order in a single word Menziwa did not have in his vocabulary. He resumed his pace and, after giving the audience behind him the finger, kept walking.
Fuck you!
Finally seated inside his yard, he rained down the F-word and a myriad other invectives on the only object he could hit at the time, the garage wall.
I am not afraid of Sing-Sing, he said to them before adjusting the glasses he wore to shield his swollen right eye from the sun. It was almost the only visible scar from the accident. He said this a few times more and then started to walk inside, leaving them at the gate. I owe him nothing, the tune in his head changed. He gets nothing from me. Had he read any of Nuruddin Farah, Menziwa would no doubt have been buoyed to paraphrase the Somali novelist: One is never indebted to a criminal!
In his rage, he managed to say out loud: 'I can kill him.'
As he got into the house, MaMpho moved askance to make way for him. He did not see them get into the car and go.

Finally seated in the lounge, Sing-Sing came into his mind's eye again. Menziwa felt like he'd just seen Lucifer. He found himself relaxing and thinking about the sperm that sired this aberration of nature. Menziwa empathised with his parentage. It could not have been his parents' fault, he was almost certain, for their offspring to live to be such a monster. He thought about that old woman from his youth who was minding her own business, on her way home to cook a piece of meat. Surely, she could not have wished for such a child!

He fleetingly thought of the parents of such people as Jeffrey Dahmer and other serial killers and knew that their parents most certainly did not account in their plans for social deviants.

With teeth that looked like they were all molars, Sing-Sing was a scary sight. He looked like the Devil reincarnate, whatever it was supposed to look like. The left sight of his face had a twitching that lent some playfulness to a face that was definitely not crafted for joviality.

Once, when he was standing before him, Sing-Sing took a call on his ancient mobile and Menziwa wondered of what benefit the conversation was to the caller as Sing-Sing merely grunted, twice, before rudely hanging up. There was nothing civil about what he did on that call. Why did people bother to call him then?

Those who talked about it said Sing-Sing was a maximum security penitentiary in the town of Ossining, New York. The home of America's most hardened criminals, the man who'd just stood in front of Menziwa identified so much with the institution, one of the most repressive in the history of American penology, that he took its name.

When he heard that 614 men and women – the calibre of Sing-Sing, were sent to the electric chair at the jail, he knew with no doubt that he'd have loved for this obnoxious creature to have been part of the statistics. Sing-Sing, the human being, was a member of the Air Force, a prison gang that specialised in prison escapes as opposed to others like the 26 and 28 who reportedly paid allegiance to money and violence respectively. But the gang did not escape to stay away from incarceration. They just broke out to prove their mettle in the gang and notch up ranks in its hierarchy.

They escaped to be recaptured. So much for the genius of convicts!

Outside the country's prisons, Sing-Sing could never have been anywhere else. He stood out like a sore thumb. The farthest car trips he took were when he was being ferried around to jails around the country to serve his time. How did men like him define ambition?

His murders only happened outside prison but all had to do with settling a prison score. His victims were ex convicts and, on the odd occasion, the loved ones he found in the company of his intended victims.

How he escaped the death penalty was still a mystery to many. His new money-making racket told them Sing-Sing was intending to stay outside; he was done with prison.

Music at Audrey's was a rarity. Patrons watched movies on DVD. Those whose lot in life was to spend their money at the joint told, in whispers, how only one flick dominated their viewing time – *Escape from Alcatraz*.

Sing-Sing had seen it a million times but still sat transfixed each time it played. He concentrated and demanded the same from every patron in the room whenever it was showing and watched like he was seeing it for the first time.

One man, Carducci Matabane – so-called because the clothing label was his preferred attire, from head to toe, had the misfortune of regaling real patrons with the tale of the reel escape whenever Sing-Sing asked him to. 'Asked' was in fact a euphemism. Carducci must have known the story of the escape by heart, given the number of times he'd had to tell it.

Once Carducci had the absence of mind to stop drinking at Audrey's and told non-patrons that he was tired of telling the same stupid tale ad infinitum. Someone who wanted to ingratiate himself with Sing-Sing ratted on Carducci and the dandy-dresser was paid a visit at home. In their wake, the henchmen left Carducci's house in the state of most homes after a hurricane. But it would be the people he loved that would suffer the worst devastation once the savages were done with them.

Carducci took his myopia a notch higher and asked to be transferred to another school, out of town. He was relocating, uprooting the family when his eldest daughter was abducted in broad daylight on her way home. Menziwa remembers the girl as a doll-like creature that wore clothes based on their brightness. A short person by birth, Carducci's daughter must have thought her height made her invisible and figured yellow, red, purple, orange and lime could make her conspicuous. Picking her out of a crowd certainly posed no problem for Sing-Sing's goons.

Her whereabouts were an open secret but the police told Carducci they were still investigating. In the two months it took them to 'follow up' leads, Carducci was forced to make a choice, either leave his daughter as a sex slave or abandon his plans to move house. For any parent, this was not going to be a difficult choice. On the day he returned to drinking at Audrey's, his daughter was released and he drank himself to a stupor – on the house.

The story of the girl's suicide is a devastating legend. Her suicide note made disparaging remarks of a father she thought she had but who, instead, turned out to be 'a small boy with a small cock'. When the wife left him, taking their three remaining children, Carducci lost his marbles. He could no longer teach. These days when people in the township talk about degrees of madness, the most extreme case is being soft in the head 'like Carducci'. If a victim is not yet thus 'diagnosed', in township slang, it means one could still benefit from the wonders of psychiatry. 'Like Carducci' is a state of madness that is beyond doctors!

When Menziwa went to make his loan – and met with Carducci, the former teacher had been bonkers for almost a year, narrating the story of Frank Morris (Clint Eastwood's character) breaking out of Alcatraz.

This jail was tough, my boy. This is where Al Capone was kept. Only hardcore criminals could come here. No man ever escaped, sonny. It was a shit house, for 29 years.

This was the rant of a nutcase, a man who, just over a year ago, was a neat teacher, a law-abiding citizen who paid his taxes. The law had failed him and chose to stand on the side of Sing-Sing. At that point, his conscience had nagged Menziwa not to take the money. It was like blood money. Taking it, he felt complicit in the mental ruination of Carducci and the annihilation of other lives.

It was in the Gulf of San Francisco Bay.

He'd get rapturous applause all round and, here and there, a beer.

It was shut down permanently in 1963. At this point Sing-Sing would stand up to busy himself with other aspects of his fiefdom and order a beer for Carducci. When Menziwa followed him into the kitchen to agree terms, Sing-Sing had something on the stove, a pot with no lid on. It was just some animal stewing in water. He took out an egg from a bowl and started hitting it violently against the cupboard, reaching for the salt with the free hand. When he offered Menziwa one, the latter wanted to decline but knew no polite way of saying 'no thanks' to a psychopath. In his con brio, he took the boiled egg, peeled it and swallowed it whole without bothering about the salt. Over and done with!

When he got home that day, Menziwa did not get out of the car, leaving the dogs to sniff around it and lie outside his driver's door. This is how Nandi found him when she herself got home a while later. "Come inside," she'd chided, "we'll speak in the house."
He told her about the biggest flop he'd just made, taking money from a loan shark: Sing-Sing. He needed it to pay the electricity, which was long overdue. He wanted to avoid them being cut off. She understood. 'We need to pay it back quickly and get that scum off our backs.' He was relieved when she understood his dilemma.
On the third day Menziwa was out of hospital, Nandi came home to find a strange car at her gate and men milling about. This enraged the dogs and made her even madder. The car was a muddy VW kombi with conspicuous travel badges all around it, the sort adventurous tourists plastered on their vehicles. The men were totally incompatible with the vehicle. It was either doled out as a gift without too much thought or stolen. Nandi settled on the latter. When she got out of her own car, she headed for the drivers' side and rudely gestured to the man behind the wheel to roll his window down.
"Can I help you?"
It was not the driver who answered but one of the men who was now getting back into the car to sardine his tiny frame next to the others in the back seat.
"We're looking for the guy who makes house plans."
"He does not draw house plans, I'm sorry." She then turned her focus to the driver: 'I want to drive in; move this thing.'
"What thing?" the man behind the wheel asked, visibly pissed.
"This thing you have in my driveway."
"Don't …"
He did not finish. A voice from the middle seat boomed out a something, clearly in reprimand. She walked back to her car and when she inched into the yard, the kombi drove in quickly behind her before the gate could roll back to close. She could not believe they had forced their way into her yard. Screaming like a lunatic, she called out to MaMpho to kill the electric motor at the gate. The dogs went ballistic. Perhaps realising the error of their criminal ways, none of the men got out the car. The gate remained closed.
Nandi got into the house, took out her cell phone and dialed a number she hadn't called in many years. Menziwa was waking up and she told him Sing-Sing was in the yard. 'I will sort him out. Please sit down.'
The person at the other end picked up after two rings. At this point she was wailing: 'There are men with guns in my house. Menziwa is not here. I am scared. My children are crying.'
Her children only started crying after she hung up. Momentarily Duma stopped crying and picked up the house phone: 'I want *Malume* to come.'*Malume* was either one of the twins. MaMpho, the house help, keyed in the numbers for the child like she always did when he asked. She knew the boy was not to be denied when he demanded to speak to his father or uncles on the phone.
'There are people in the yard. Mommy says they have guns. Come quickly.' He replaced the mouth-piece and went to sit with his mother, bringing her a box of tissues. When the police siren sounded outside the gate, Nandi did not budge. The dogs were leaping all over the strange car in the yard with people inside. With the cops at the gate, Nandi continued to sit in the house; the men in the kombi were also marooned in their vehicle.
Herbert Mlotshwa was a barrel of a man. He was the only sibling of Nandi's late father. Like his brother, Herbie was in the liquor trade. He lived on the east, 150 km away from his late brother.

When the Chrysler Hemi came to a stop outside his niece's house, he immediately ordered the policeman who was meaning to jump out the perimeter fence back inside. Everyone else stood to watch. Even the other cop on the two-way radio stopped fidgeting with the crackling device to look at the mountain of a man making his way majestically to the gate. The bulge of his concealed gun could not be disguised by his bulky frame. When the motor kicked back up and the gate finally opened, Nandi called off the dogs to let her uncle in.
"Did you tell him to scale the fence?" he asked, pointing his thick index finger – the size of a frankfurter – at the young constable.
"No, he did it of his own volition.' Nandi began to cry all over again, disappearing into the embrace of the man who towered over everything else around them. Even the dogs seemed to have taken the cue to simmer down. They stopped barking at once. The rookie policeman inside the yard looked like he was wishing for the earth to open up and swallow him whole. His colleague on the outside got back to the car radio, which was coming back to life.
Herbie circled the kombi. He was clearly going to take his time. Sing-Sing was on the phone. In a while, he killed it and got outside to talk to Herbie. They embraced like long-lost brothers. They stood talking for a long time until Nandi went back inside to tell Menziwa that all was well. Menziwa did not have the guts to go wait by the window and watch. He felt awful. It was the worst day of his life.
When they were done talking, Sing-Sing and Herbie walked outside the yard and the crook motioned for his driver to inch the kombi out. Herbie peered into the kombi and asked Sing-Sing who the men were. His own, Sing-Sing said about his lieutenants. They kept quiet like the topic was not about them.
Herbie closed the car door, shook hands with Sing-Sing and the kombi was gone.
"Tell uMalume,' Nandi said to her husband, "tell him how desperate you have become that you invite such filth into our house."
"There's nothing left to say, Nandi. You know the whole story."
"He wants to know," Nandi insisted.
Menziwa repeated the whole story of the thousand bucks, what he wanted it for, how Sing-Sing accosted him outside the house until he let himself into his property a little while ago. He told it exactly as he'd said to his wife, leaving out no detail even in this second rendition. At this point a few more cars arrived, one to disgorge a posse of men and from another came police officers with epaulets that announced them as high ranking officers. Herbie went outside to speak to them. He obviously knew some of the senior police officers by name. They were ebullient in their chatter and clearly comfortable in each other's company. They left with promises of staying in touch.
At the gate, Herbie stood gesturing, nodding his big head at the gate. Nandi motioned for MaMpho to get the electricity back on again. Soon it was back to normal, like the pandemonium of less than an hour ago had not happened.
Herbie said it was Sing-Sing who had called the police bigwigs. One of the men who'd alighted from the other car that raced the cop car to the scene was April Zondi, a local shebeen king who Nandi knew as a peer of her father. Such was the power of Sing-Sing that even the local bullies kowtowed to him.
Nandi just loved the power her uncle wielded with the cops and the crooks. It reminded her so much of her father, he'd say to Menziwa days later. She was telling the story excitedly, like it had been a great movie.

“Herbie,” Zondi addressed the big man directly – in tsotsi taal, as if the cops were just part of the scenery, “he’s my man. He called me to explain. It was just a small misunderstanding and the young lady could not let him out. I will sort it out, I promise.”
Herbie took his time to respond and when he did, it was a question: “Why terrorise my daughter?”
Flop! Flop! At his wits’ end, Zondi kept repeating this one word. Herbie then made a speech, telling Zondi and the others how he knew his late brother would not have liked this one bit. His brother had fought so the likes of Zondi could now trade as licensed beer sellers. He did not fight so his children could be tormented by the very people he looked at as his own brothers.
Sing-Sing’s money was not with his daughter but with ‘the turkey’. Referred to in these insulting poultry terms, Menziwa did not know if he’d objected had he been within earshot.
No more, Herbie said; no more, Zondi concurred. When he emerged from the car, Sing-Sing shook hands with the police officers. Then he gave all his attention to Herbie.
In the presence of all to see, Zondi pressed crisp notes into the palm of the shorter of the two officers, who was too numb to pretend he was unfamiliar with this blatant act of corruption.
In single file, the corruptor and the corrupted walked out. When the last of the men of the kombi headed for the gate, Duma set the dogs on them.
On the day, when Herbie left some three hours later, he’d still not said a word more to the man of the house. He’d taken two generous shots of the whisky offered and spent the duration of his visit talking to his niece. He asked Nandi to phone ahead to tell her mother he was on his way to see her, his sister-in-law.
Menziwa used the same glass, not bothering to rinse it, to inflict more damage on the Glenfiddich. When it was time to go to bed, he’d still not touched the supper Nandi had placed before him.
Once he tried to stand but flopped back on the couch when his legs buckled under him.
Somewhere around midnight, Nandi came to remove his shoes and throw a blanket over him.
I still love you.
He was in no fit state to hear this or make sense of it. His last conscious thought was that he’d never felt so defeated in his life.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

He took his own life …

What stands on the stone of a man who kills himself? He took his own life, that's what. It had a macabre ring to it but what else would the living say about the one who departs at his own hand? Thoughts of death reached him even when he did not want to entertain them. He'd lost many things but the straw that broke the camel's back was the Alfa. The tow truck guys had the wreck and wanted twenty-six Grand to release. He did not give them permission to tow it to their yard, he argued. No, the big boss at Flex Engineering said he did not want it on his premises. If Menziwa had issues with the bill, he could perhaps get in touch with the boss man at Flex. Menziwa had no idea what was the first thing he'd say to him. He engaged the services of the same lawyer who had got him out of the mess at Florent when he was said to have broken into the jewellery shop. Acting more like a con-man than a lawyer, Tyron Moss wanted three Grand upfront. He could get his wheels from the tow truckers for eight, total. Menziwa told him he did not have a cent.

After about two weeks of fighting this one battle, the only solution was to cart off the wreck to SMD, sell it and settle the lawyer and the tow truck hooligans from the proceeds. Moss said Menziwa could leave the whole business in his hands. He could see he was walking into a deal out of which he was going to emerge with the least satisfaction. In another week, Moss called him over to his office and presented him with a cheque. His car was gone and all he had to show for it was a piece of paper for seven Grand! He did not know whether to laugh or cry. A fierce form of depression set in.

It was while sitting at home recovering from his bodily injuries that Menziwa realised he was getting sicker in spirit. He had fought badly with Nandi who had, without consulting, taken the children to her mother's. 'I want those children back here before I go to sleep,' he had demanded. His own anger shocked him. He'd never spoken to her like that in all their life together. He had said many bad things. The twins came over to iron out things between them. He said the same thing to them: Bring back my children. When she heard, Sophia Loren was livid with anger. She was not one to come to their house but she made the effort that time around. When the Cayenne stopped outside, Menziwa knew the die was cast – and he was ready for war. How could he even suggest that the children were not safe with her, she was spitting out the questions. What did he think she might feed them, poison? He must just be a fucking man and stop gambling with his children's money. She only wanted to help, look after the children until the storm was over. He had paid his money, lots of it, to help Menziwa keep up with the charade of being a family man, a provider. Having listened to her until she finished, Menziwa then blew his top. He called Nandi over. Which money had her mother spent on them? It turned out whenever Nandi needed money she went to her mother and said she needed it to help out at the house. With the bulk of their family budget swallowed up in paying off debt, Nandi took money from her mother's. 'Then you did not support me,' Menziwa was fuming, 'you were maintaining your daughter because I had no idea where that money was going.'

Without seeking his permission, Nandi had recently changed her car, a full two years ahead of schedule. The only fault with the PT Cruiser was that 'it was out of fashion'. In hindsight, Menziwa wanted to kick himself for not standing up to this recklessness. The personalised plates on the Cruiser were now on her new wheels, a Renault cabriolet. This is where the money went and, when it ran short, as it did on numerous occasions, she went to her mother's under the pretext of fending for her family. 'This means as a husband I was failing, Nandi. That is what

you were saying to your people. But did you tell them it was under your watch that our money – my money, disappeared? You control the purse strings, tell her. Tell your mother I only work for the money, I have no say in how it is used and what for. Tell her.'
In that meeting, Nandi never said a word. As she stood to walk her mother out, he screamed after them: I want my children back here. No shit.
When mother and daughter spoke outside, Menziwa would not hear that Sophia Loren was confirming to Nandi that they were no longer rich. She was a kept woman, at the mercy of her sons. She was not complaining at what she was getting. Her life was comfortable but she had learnt to be without many things she grew accustomed to when Nandi's father was alive. Life had changed, she told her daughter. Though they were not poor, they lived hand to mouth now. The younger generation, who had the buying power were not drinking at Hugh's, they had their own preferred joints. The criminal elements that her brothers were involved with also scared many patrons away. She had a feeling, her mother said, that their night club was a drug den. She had been tipped off that if her boys did not mend their ways the police were going to shut it down.
Menziwa was a decent man, she told Nandi. He gave her a good life and made a home for her and the children. Nandi would do better to fix things between them. He looked serious about the children; she'd never seen him like that. The kids would have to come back.
That night Nandi left with her mother in the Porsche. It was a Friday and he had not seen his children since Wednesday when Nandi had spirited them away without telling him. MaMpho was with them. Alone with his thoughts in the house, Menziwa settled for the bottle of wine when he could not find anything else to drink. No whisky. 'No money, no whisky,' he said, looking himself in the mirror and pointing an accusing finger at the reflection.
His life came back to him. He was sure he had played a good game. He was let down ~~them~~ by his team mate. The referee too is not without blame – he screwed the game. He saw himself as a 17 year-old schoolboy. He already had big dreams at that age. He knew he wanted a good life and was certain he was destined for one. He did things correctly, by the book. His life turned out well, at least up to a certain point. Maybe his undoing was marrying the daughter of a rich man, who was used to a life of comfort. But if he hadn't, it would mean his children would not have been born. He could not imagine a life without them, without him being their father. Thamsanqa, Duma, Ntando – these were magic names behind which stood Menziwa's whole being. The wine was taking its toll. He drank non-stop throughout the night. Around midnight he finally fell asleep on the couch, still fully clad.
What would it be like to be dead? Do you feel anything? But dead means not seeing your children grow up. The idea of them being raised by their grandmother gave him the creeps. He did not even want to allow that thought space in his head.
In the wee hours of the morning he was at his computer, searching the net for what people said when they died and why they killed themselves.
One of a kind, the living had had to say about Buddy Rich as he lay at the Westwood Memorial Park in California. Maybe he was; why else would this be said about him if indeed there's no room for embellishments in the Hereafter?
He thought about the truths from the mouths of babies. Would the adults left behind allow his own children to pen his epitaph so they could tell the truth? *He loved [us] dearly*, Menziwa was sure his kids would agree on this. Indeed he loved them dearly. He lived for them. He was dying for … himself, to save them. He got giddy from the idea of thinking about death. His thoughts were now jumbled. He was seeing and thinking of a large variety of things at the same time.

Could he lose his mind and end up a psychiatric case? He did not want that. He knew mad people in his youth; they were treated worse than animals. People had no respect for them. He knew of a guy who got mad just after his graduation day. He never got to put his commerce degree to work, even for one day. He'd rather die. He was scrolling down suicide notes. But he was not going to leave any himself – his children understood him better when he spoke to them. They were a family averse to the pen. His pens always cluttered his desk but even at her most dutiful, Nandi would never touch the pens. She picked up after him – undies, takkies, the odd sock but just never the pens. She avoided these like the plaque.

As a married couple, he and Nandi had never really communicated by notes-on-the-fridge, the preferred method of their fake friends. She telephoned him. She left a message with MaMpho. The only time he got a hand-written note MaMpho was away on leave: *Had to rush, Mom admitted, Love you lots, N.*

He had stood looking at the note, trying to match the handwriting to the persona of his wife. He'd admitted to himself that her neat writing was compatible with her character. Once, at a home-owners' fair in town, they had seen a man who said tarot cards were passé. He was a hand-writing expert. Menziwa had his diary with him and had proffered it to the man with the shiny silk goatee to fathom his character and tell the future. But when the man named a price before 'revealing you to yourself', Nandi had said bollocks – she could find many other uses for the two hundred Rand. Three days later, Menziwa saw the same man on television, surrounded a group of hippie-type young people, hanging onto his every word.

He was adamant if he could not speak to his children and tell them why he'd arrived at the decision to die, he'd not write a suicide note. Among his treasured moments as a father was when Duma, his younger boy, read to him from his story book. He read slowly, with childish difficulty Menziwa often wondered if it was consistent with his age. A suicide note was one piece of writing he'd never subject Duma's embryonic reading mind to, Menziwa thought.

His mind drifted back to Buddy Rich and seamlessly moved to other famous suicide notes. He did not have the inclination for the gibberish of the sort Kurt Cobain had left for Courtney and Frances in his 8 April 1994 suicide note. The musician was so confused he wrote 'Love You' twice. He loved his own children a lot. How many times was he then, Menziwa, allowed to say 'Love you' in his letter of departure?

The most apt was a serious matter left for discussion by, wait for it, a comedian. When he died on 29 June 1977, Freddie Prinze wrote: *I must end it. There's no hope left. I'll be at peace. No one had anything to do with this. My decision totally.*

It was good, Menziwa told himself but it was tear-jerker drivel he was not going to subject his children to. He imagined Ntando standing there, arms akimbo in her big-girl impersonation and asking: Why?

How did men like him go, then? Men at the end of their tether, yes, but who still worried about their little girls with a vocabulary that had not yet grown beyond the ubiquitous 'Why' and the accompaniment of excessive gesticulation?

They go out with a bang!

They go like other great men, courtesy of a gunshot, like Hunter S Thompson, the gonzo journalist. At that moment Menziwa remembered that he hated pain. But he knew a gunshot was the most clinical of the exit routes. A bullet spares you the indignity of enduring pain. It was always business-like – get the job done and over with. Full stop; no questions asked.

He thought about gassing and immediately his roving mind conjured up images of someone foaming at the mouth. This would be someone in need of help. He hated to think what Nandi

would say if she ever found him in this state of helplessness. If you're in a hurry, you don't inhale gas, like Sylvia Plath – too sissy an ending. Though the cleanliness of water appealed to him, businessmen on their way out do not drown, like Virginia Woolf. To rule out this method, he threw to the mix the question of black men and water. Until there was a black Olympic gold medalist, he'd steer clear of water. When his folk die in water, it is by accident, not their wish to perish.

Shit!

'Hey, hey,' he heard Nandi saying. It was just in his head. He remembered how when he dared speak in his sleep his wife would kick him on the side of his shieen and say 'just shut up and sleep'. She was not here now. He was alone. He stood to go get his cellular phone to text her. When he got it, he did not send Nandi a message. He just flopped onto the bed and slept.

The sweating only came after he woke up. This could not have been a dream. He could have sworn that he'd heard himself think throughout all this.

'I was dreaming.' There was nothing else to say. Nandi's back heel was mean.

'Do you have to make a speech?'

'What did I say?'

'I'd tell you if I could also speak in tongues, and loudly.' This came out like a song because Nandi insisted on yawning and speaking at the same time. He woke up, for real this time. It was just a dream.

His eyes struggled to figure out the bedroom swathed in fading darkness that was making way for a new day. He switched on the telly and his eyes battled to adjust to the sudden light. A man speaking with a a good baritone voice and telling the camera why he thought China was the new colonial power in Africa.

He did not remember switching on the telly. Turn the volume down, for Christ's sake, he told himself but the strength in his body just wasn't enough to obey the order. With difficulty, he made an effort to turn to sleep on his belly and slide down the bed, landing hands first in front of the television.

It was now so low he was lip reading the comments of the interviewee. His mind drifted to a movie he'd seen – *The Whole Wide World*. He could detect the genesis of a migraine but the thoughts vying for attention in his head imposed themselves nonetheless. They just wouldn't let him be. He touched his fingers gingerly to both temples and he could see the hand-writing expert doing the same with his diary. He saw the man's face, lost in thought like a guitarist feeling the melody of his instrument.

Something else came into mind and he now saw himself in bed with Nandi, who was kicking him as he stopped to speak to the man who could decipher handwriting. He was sure he'd heard the man speak to him. But she was trying to sleep and not planning on making sense of his somnambulism. "Give her my condolences," she'd heard him say again. This was at the point in the movie that was playing in his head where Novalyn Price Ellis cried for Robert E Howard.

"I mean he died without indulging her carnal needs," he was saying now.

Nandi kicked him again. But it was a dream because Nandi was not at home. And it could not have been a dream because he was now fully awake. With his mind's eye he saw Bob Howard take his own life and leave a suicide note. None of this was making sense to him. Menziwa got out of bed. "Otherwise I will get mad from this thinking too much."

When he checked the bedside clock it was 06H34. He felt like he'd been asleep for a lifetime. As the television images flashed past, he located his slippers with one foot, then the other and when he stood standing like that, the remote appeared in his hand as if by magic. He put it to

good use. He flipped channels a few times before finally settling on *Animal Planet*. Polar bears were on the prowl.
He sat down on the couch and, without too much luck, tilted the television to within range of his sight. He did not see the polar bears catching their prey as he slowly drifted to sleep. When he went to the kitchen, he was disturbed by the hum of the PC as he walked past his work station. He sat down and resumed the Internet search.
Death sets the soul free, someone had said this. A name did not come into his head as he pondered the assertion. But it sounded like it was made by someone who knew what he was talking about.
When he'd heard this said, he remembered, he was battling another round of insomnia while Nandi was dead beside him. When he laughed, Nandi woke up, instantly, straining her eyes at the glare of the television: "Is this funny?" she had asked. When he returned his eyes to the television, baboons were mating.
"Do you find it offensive?" he'd wondered.
'No. I just pray that you find it instructive." She had got out of bed and stumbled to the bathroom.
When she got back into the bedroom, she was wide awake. "Don't you want to try the sleeping pills tomorrow?"
"I can sleep on my own, thank you."
"No you can't. You can make noise on your own. You need to start sleeping, otherwise that big head will crack open."
'Thanks, doctor. I will manage perfectly on my own."
"Come back to bed."
"No. I prefer it here."
"Why?"
"I'm watching over you, like the good guardian angel I am."
She eyed him for a long time, the same way a psychiatrist's eyes would take in a patient who has just blurted out something profound. She sat and stared.
Presently, he was staring blankly into the computer screen. He logged off and as his eyes gradually closed, he shifted this way and that to position his body as comfortably as the couch would allow. Images of his children came into his head. Ntando was running after a dog but it wasn't either of his. Thami was trying to restrain her. But she outran him to reach the dog, which rewarded her efforts by licking her face. As she turned to get away from it, the dog that came into view was Molby, a border collie he owned before George. It was the same dog that Menziwa had nursed back to health after he'd found it sprawled on the road, hit a speeding car that did not stop. Molby, so-named by a friend in the neighbourhood and Ntando belonged to separate times in Menziwa's life. Molby did not die – it just up and left, never to be seen again. Ntando could not have known it. But the scene presently in Menziwa's head was so vivid, his child and dog playing together. Molby was the same breed that starred in what he regarded as his favourite dog movie of all time~~the movie *Lassie Come Home*.~~
In George, Menziwa saw a lot of Molby, though his latest was more subdued. It was just as sweet with the children as the dog chasing after Ntando.
Menziwa was staring straight into this laughing face with strands of dreadlocked hair making a cross between the eyes. It was the quintessence of childish innocence and beauty.
Ever since her birth, her mission in life, it appeared, had been to convince Menziwa that it was possible to love unconditionally and derive pleasure from doing so. The sort of pleasure he's

seemed to have lost forever now. The melancholy that marked his days had overtaken the simple joys of watching Ntando grow up.
Of all his children, Duma was very forgiving. When they had people visiting, he'd much rather sacrifice his own playthings than have a crying child embarrass their parents. That's how he got to lose many of his toys. He'd not even throw tantrums to get them replaced, unlike his older brother who was selfishness personified.
Duma hardly ever complained - a character trait Nandi traced back to his father. The child would seek out something to play with if there was too much competition around one object of amusement.
If he died, Menziwa had vowed, it would be in defence of this child. His entire demeanour pulled at the heart-strings and Menziwa overly wanted to be a good father so Duma would never want for anything in his life. Without him the boy would just not make it, the father thought.
When he superimposed Duma on television images of children in war and famine situations, Menziwa bitterly wept inside knowing his child wouldn't survive the ravages of these ills. It pained him deeply when Duma cried – even though this was a rare occurrence. He'd jump out of bed to go jog if Duma insisted on it so he could ride his bicycle, trailing his dad. Even with a monumental hangover, Menziwa would never say no to this imposition. When he cried for Duma, it came from the gut. It was the sort of wailing people do to mourn their dead.
But he was even weaker with Ntando. "She's the other woman in this house," Nandi had often jested, "she gets every little thing she wants while I have to wait my turn in a queue that will not move." He was confident she was going to grow up into a dashing young lady.
He stirred and when he finally woke up, the clock said 12H00.

He went to make the bed in Nandi's trademark fine touch. At least, as close to Nandi's as possible, he thought. He was alone. It was eerily quiet like you could hear the proverbial pin drop. He stank.
He ran the bath and he noticed that Nandi's toiletry was not where it was supposed to be. She'd removed all trace of herself except the sweet scent of soap and her cologne. His thoughts moved to Wednesday when they left. He thought it was the usual mommy's school run. Little did he know that the kids were all packed up and that Nandi had a long-term plan set in motion, at least until he objected.
After her own breakfast of cereal and a fruit, and seeing to the children being picked up for school, Nandi would have followed her daily ritual of driving out to her mother and other errands of a suburbian housewife with a penchant for shopping.
Someone watching would not have guessed where the crying came from. It began softly as if the body was shivering and reacting to the elements. It was not loud but it was gut-wrenching. He cried to shed all the tears he should have at some point in his life but forgot to. When he was done he felt empty, like he was ridding himself of a weight he never should have carried in the first place.
He found his mind was not cluttered with thoughts. He was unbelievably free of many distractions except the thought to go meet his Maker and be free. He searched his brain for anything else lurking there but found nothing. Once, and only once, did he experience the fleeting thought of the ultimate sin he was about to commit, according to the teachings of the Quran. Islam viewed suicide in a particularly dim light. But he wasn't Muslim.
He believed in God and was convinced he'd make his case before the Lord on Judgment Day. Surely his God was not retributive and would not punish him for daring to escape his

unassailable hardship. If he continued to live, he was sure to doubt the existence of this very God. He did not have the strength to blaspheme. Taking his own life and delivering it to God was to avoid dalliance with this threatening atheism. With this amount of peace at this moment, he imagined death to be even more serene.

Having run the bath, he tested the water with his finger and ascertained it was OK. Such a rich smell could only have come from Nandi lathering her body in a foam of white before rinsing it all off. Once he told her that the soap advert to end all adverts can only come after the creatives at the ad agencies had seen her bath. He also took his time in the bath, like he'd seen his wife do. He allowed his mind to roam free.

Having bathed, he picked up after himself and folded each garment neatly on the bed, Nandi style.

He picked up his mobile to text Nandi, ordering her to come back immediately, with his children. That done, he noted he had a gazillion messages. He went to go sit in the sun room. Lyle was first. He was hoping they could meet soon, maybe play 18 holes. Menziwa should please call back and confirm availability. Nandi had left text and voice messages, mostly before the accident. Meghan texted that she worried about him, was he OK? Bushie had organised a game of golf against a team from the Parkview police station. Was he coming? Mbali told him she loved him, please he should not throw his life away. Stein wanted to meet, urgently. Gill said they needed to talk. It was not a pleasant message. The Mayor, a good friend had heard about his accident and wished him well. Then there followed a huge number of voice and text messages about the accident and all wishing him a speedy recovery.

Then it came ….

'Guess what? I am preggies. Love you.'

The lettering seemed to get bigger the more he kept staring at it. For a moment he stopped, afraid to look at the phone any more. He dialed Nandi and she picked up on the first ring. Please, she begged, they were coming back but much later in the day. She wanted to help her mother on a few things around the house. MaMpho had already taken down the curtains. It was going to take the better part of the day. 'Bring those rascals to the phone.' He then spoke to each of the children, Duma staying longer on the phone. He wanted to come home but he also wanted to stay with granny, maybe another day, one more day. When Menziwa asked if he didn't love him anymore, he said they were coming over later that day. 'We'll see granny again.'

Menziwa called Phiwe who also picked up like she had been waiting for his call. "Come to my house now," he ordered her, 'bring me a bottle of whisky.'

The only question she asked was where Nandi and the children were. Told they were not around, she said, meekly: "OK."

Alone again with his thoughts, he went back to the messages on the phone. In total, there were two more from Promise. "I am going to have your child. Call me." There other one was more chilling: "No abortion."

Promise, of all people! When he did the calculations, Menziwa realised that he was older by a staggering 21 years. She could be his child. Lost in his pain, he could see no life for him and Promise. She could have been a Playboy pin-up but he was no Hugh Heffner. He felt a gripping sadness, a new kind, that he was sure was the mother of all pain. The first thing Nomsa was going to ask was why he had unprotected sex. He ruled her out immediately. Terence was going to pray for him. Nandi was out of reckoning. She hated the boy – her half brother, who Hugh Mlotshwa had fathered with a shebeen queen, Sis Cathy, she was called. He could speak to MaMokhethi; she was sure to listen but beyond that, what?

He texted Meghan, saying he had no idea what to do next. Her response: 'Hell's bells, Menz. Does Super Model know?'
She jumped in fright when the phone rang as he was looking at Meghan's message. It was Phiwe: 'I'm outside.'
He went outside to meet her. She objected to coming into the house: 'Let's sit in the car.'
He relented. He showed her the message: 'Fuck, Menziwa; fuck. This is not good.'
He showed her the two others. He read them out loud: "I am going to have your child. Call me. No abortion.
"What is this woman thinking?"
He told her it was not a woman. It was a child of 23, who looked and acted 16. "I am so fucked, Phiwe. I am so gone. This is toxic stuff. This girl's mother is the one I should have been chasing, not her child. It is so wrong."
He saw the bottle on the back seat, wrapped like it was a birthday present. It was Glenlievet whisky, fine tipple. He meant to drink straight out of the bottle but Phiwe said it was not right. He did not raise the roof. He went back to pick up a glass, the same one he was drinking the wine out of. He brought ice cubes and for her bottled water.
She wanted to know who Promise was. He told her, sparing no detail. 'This child was conceived in the car. If it's a boy call him Romeo, after the Alfa.'
They laughed. His was not laughter. It hurt on his face when he did, so it wasn't laughter.
At his behest, Phiwe texted Promise and asked her to seriously consider abortion as Menziwa was a married man. Two minutes later, Promise wrote back: "No ways. This is my child, can look after it if you won't."
Unprompted, another one followed: 'Don't want money from you. Told you, just, so you know.'
Menziwa was beat. They weighed up all options with Phiwe. None seemed to offer a way out. He drank, he got out of the car to go to the loo, escorted her when it was her turn. She was afraid of the dogs.'
With the radio off and just the two of them there, it didn't occur to them that they had sat almost the whole day when the Porsche Cayenne approached. Nandi was driving, with Thami strapped up in the front seat. Sophia Loren and MaMpho sat on both ends with the two other kids between them.
"Your wife?"
"Yup."
"Should I fear anything?"
"Run for dear life." He looked at Phiwe worriedly and then started smiling. 'Stay put."
Nandi got out then walked towards them, leisurely.
"Hi."
"Ola. My good friend Phiwe," he said, "my wife Nandi." Phiwe stuck out her hand to shake Nandi's.
"We're back. See you in the house."
"In a mo, ma'm."
Left alone again, Phiwe said he should go in; she was on her way. She asked to use the lavatory one last time. He obliged her, to the same outside toilet next to MaMpho's sleeping quarters. When she was done, they waited outside next to Phiwe's car and she told him how she did not envy him his troubles at that moment. The only way out was to drum sense into Promise's head.
"You should have stuck with me, my friend. I don't make babies with married men."
"I don't fuck my friends."

‘Look where that got you.”
They hugged and she was gone. With the whisky and bottle in each hand, he strode into his house, sat down right next to his mother-in-law and made small talk. He was happy his children were back and he thanked for caring so much about them. But this was their home, not at her place. In a number of firsts, Menziwa addressed his mother-in-law; she listened without interruption. It seemed she did not even care for the last word.
Nandi asked if he was going to eat. He said no, he was going to drink. Mother and daughter retreated to the kitchen and left him alone with his drink. The children were in Ntando’s bedroom – or what was supposed to have been her bedroom.
When he woke up, it was the middle of the night. The rest of the house was asleep. The whisky stared back at him when he switched on the lights. The cell phone showed he had a new message. It was Promise. ‘This is our child.’ He switched it off and turned his attention to the alcohol.
When he woke up, it was a Sunday morning. That day he did not bother to take a bath. In Nandi’s car, complete with personalised plates, he felt like such a weirdo. Other motorists certainly gave him the sort of look that said his name could not be Nandi. He just shrugged his shoulders and drove on, destination Kensington.
When he got to Promise’s, her mother was outside. He did not turn back, as he’d normally have done. She acknowledged him with a slight nod of her head. In a moment Promise came out, clad in frilly nighties. She only changed into a dress when he said he needed to buy beer.
“We have beer in the house.’
“I want whisky. You are buying.”
And she bought the whisky, same as what he’d been drinking with Phiwe.
It was a wasted trip since Promise was not going to abort. He stayed surprisingly of fairly good sobriety despite his best efforts to get wasted. She was aware he was married. Women died from attempted abortions. She was young, she had the money to raise her own child, alone, if needs be. What if this was her only chance, what if there’d be no other? I didn’t matter to her that he was married. He should have thought about that before sticking his dick into her. He should stop pontificating; he was no angel himself. She loved him. All she needed was to have his child. It did not matter to her that he was almost of the same age as her mother. She loved him. She had her mother’s support. Besides, she had a job and was well capable of taking care of his one child. Many women her age had their own children with absent fathers. She started crying and speaking at the top of her voice. Her mother came out to see what was happening and when she saw her daughter crying, she called her into the house. Left alone with no idea of what course of action to take, Menziwa locked Nandi’s car and followed them inside.
Though small, it was a beautiful house, well-kept. He waited in the kitchen and could hear Promise sobbing in the inner recesses of the house. His mind wandered as he surveyed the kitchen where vegetables were piled up on the table for what was to be a Sunday feast. Whoever was busy here had already started peeling the potatoes. One pot was boiling already, the lid beginning to make a racket as the boiling water pushed it open. Pasted on the fridge door were a number of photos, mostly of promise in the airline uniform. The rest were of her with a few buddies, same faces, no doubt buddies. They looked like a bunch of schoolgirls. He really had no business fucking their friend. It was cradle-snatching.
‘Please come on in this side, baba,’ it was the mother, doing her best not to be friendly. In just that instant, Menziwa saw a preview of what Promise was going to look like in twenty years. He was ushered into an airy room full of light. The windows hugging the room made it appear like a

display window. Promise, perched on a white couch peppered with an assortment of white/green and blue/white cushions could easily have been a mannequin on this display window. She now had a shawl draped over her shoulders. From where he chose to sit, Menziwa could see half the front portion of Nandi's car. The mother perched herself on the other brown couch, the same colour as Menziwa's. The portraits on the walls were of birds taking off in flight, probably after spotting a predator. The ottoman that made up the square of the sitting area combined all colours of the cushions and the sofas. Having left home unwashed, Menziwa felt particularly filthy.
"I have no idea what I am doing," the mother began, 'Hlengiwe's father would kill me if he could see me discussing his daughter like this, as if we had already accepted cows for her." Hlengiwe was the beautiful African name that Promise said she hated.
"She's not married to anyone. She's still a child here at home. She told me about her trouble. I have since made it known to my elders that she is with child." As she spoke, Menziwa was sobering up, looking her straight in the eye. She was more like the person he should have been here to see, his love interest, not Promise. Her dimples were deeper and when she spoke she laid her hands open before her, like she was exonerating herself from the mess she was now entangled in, thanks to her daughter.
He started talking when she stopped. "I have no words to describe my shame. I am more in trouble than you, mama. I am married. I wish I could find a way to make you understand just how rotten I feel about myself right now. The truth is that Promise should not have fallen pregnant."
She interrupted, speaking for the first time: "Menziwa, you should not have slept with me." Her mother hushed her.
It is true, Menziwa admitted, he should have been more careful. But seeing that push has come to shove, Menziwa, dilly-dallied, looking for word and using any that came his way. He said an awful lot that was in fact absolutely nothing. 'I'm sure we could find a way to deal with this … pregnancy.' He was going to say deal with 'this thing'. Sheer luck gave him another word.
A teenager who was clearly just waking up mumbled a greeting, went into the kitchen, rattled cupboards and found what he was looking for after a while. Menziwa was trying to remember if Promise had said she had a brother, or was it two?
From his seat, Menziwa saw the boy go sit under an umbrella outside. He was busy on his phone.
"If by dealing with the pregnancy you mean abortion," the mother said, "you might as well forget it, baba. We don't kill our unborn. I know everything about your situation, or at least what Hlengiwe has told me. I still say it remained your duty to make sure she did not get pregnant, if indeed you did not want a child."
"I will speak to her elders and hear what they have to say but I can tell you now we'll not get rid of that child. I am busy and if there's nothing else I'd like to finish my work."
Stalemate!
No one between him and Promise said anything when the mother excused herself. Menziwa was taking in the room behind him. It was another lounge area. The chandelier hanging down the middle of the ceiling was extravagant. There were family pictures clustered on one side of the wall. Menziwa could not see the people in the photographs. The room was also lavish, tastefully decorated in shades of colour that brought out the best of the fawn fabric of the couches.
It was after some time before he said: "Can I stand?"
"Go ahead, be my guest," Promise said, shrugging her shoulders. Her lips looked parched and grey but, at that moment, she was more beautiful. But she was just a beautiful child, he reasoned.

“If you really love me, Promise, like you say you do, you will put the interests of that child first. Forget about yourself for a moment. Forget about what you want and what other women your age are doing as single parents. Think of that child, and his future.”
“Menziwa, I will tell you for the last time. I am not going to abort. Your situation at home can go to hell. It has nothing to do with my child.’
The teen came back into the house and asked Promise about his helmet. “On the work bench in the garage,” she told him.
“He has a bike?”
“It’s not huge; it’s a Vespa scooter, not really a bike.”
“Let’s go sit outside on the chairs.’ He was pointing at garden chairs, lying about outside on the patio. She opened the front door to let him out. ‘I want to put on shoes,” she said, closing the door after him.
He went to the car and brought the whisky. When Promise finally joined him, he asked her to rinse the glass for him: “Come back this week, please. Do not disappear.’
She rolled her eyes and walked back, very slowly. He drank straight out of the bottle, taking two slugs. “Get the ice.” She walked back, even slower. He took another gulp.
When she finally sat down opposite him, he asked: “What are you going to do now, with the child, without me?”
‘I’m going to raise her well.”
“Who said it was a girl?’
“I just know.”
He continued drinking.
“You want food?”
“Your mother’s cooking?”
“What else?”
‘No ways. Thanks.’
She brought her food and ate heartily. It looked like a good Sunday meal. After he himself had no doubt had his lunch, the boy in the scooter maneuvered it out. Two women came to visit. When they left a few hours later, Menziwa and Promise were still outside; the whisky giving him a pleasant feeling, she reading the O magazine.
When he asked to leave later towards the evening, she was still adamant she was carrying the child to full term. He told her it was the worst decision of her young life. They hugged goodbye.

He got home without incident and slept like a log.
The dizziness of a kind assailed him. It was the sort that he got a few times in his life after a cocktail of penicillin and pain killers whose name now escaped him. It was a ‘high’ of a certain kind. The room was as orderly as can be under the ‘Home Alone’ circumstances. It was a Monday morning. He reached under the bed and retrieved the laptop bag. He took out the gun, cocked and ready as he’d taken delivery thereof. “Just press the trigger,” one of the hoodlums had instructed when Menziwa was handed the pistol. That morning, it was lighter than the first time he’d handled it. He moved it from strong hand to the left – it was still weightless.
As he lay in the bath he was immune to the scents around him when normally he’d be luxuriating in the warmth of the water. He felt nothing, even the gun that he brought to his temple.
His face must tell the story that he died peacefully. He was bent on carrying his handsome features – at least, that’s what the women in his life had told him – into the Hereafter. He was not going to traumatise whoever would find his body, most likely his wife or MaMpho, with the

sight of a gruesome cadaver. He'd not, to paraphrase Hakan Nesser, show in death a vacant, desperate, guilt-laden expression on his face. The only blot on it would be the entry point of the bullet, which was not going to exit the other side and ruin his looks further.
"It is a Luger, with bullets …" the unwashed young man – the township's poor version of Adnan Khashoggi had said.
He was thinking that life had thrown him a curve ball. All sorts of austerity measures had failed him.
In his drowsiness, he seemed to recall that fools who swallowed pills often failed in their attempts to commit suicide, even those who took enough to kill a mule. The Luger looked equal to the task.
He did not want to fail because this meant being found – still alive – and rushed to safety. What invariably followed next was what he dreaded most – pity. He was dead set that no one was going to take pity on him and have the satisfaction of treating him like a derelict. Figures from nowhere rushed to his head giving him menopause-type hot flashes. *More males than females commit suicide. Suicides occur in the younger age groups. Up to 8 000 South Africans commit suicide annually. The youngest suicide fatality in 2001 was 10 years old, but more fatal suicides occurred in the 15-19 age group. Firearms, hanging and poison ingestion were found to be the most common methods of suicide in South Africa. According to the World Health Organisation, in South Africa hanging accounted for 36,2 percent, followed closely by shooting (35 percent), poisoning (9,8 percent), gassing (6,5 percent) and burning (4,1 percent). Among victims, those aged 10-34 mainly used hanging, 25-29 used poison, burning and jumping, 30-34 used firearms, and 40-44 opted for gassing…*
Suddenly, the thoughts disappeared. The emptiness of a few minutes ago returned. He lifted the gun to his head. *Just press the trigger …* The inflection of the order to *press* was now ringing like a gong in his head.
Just then the door opened, with the unmistakable childish effort of Ntando. Instinctively, he dunked the loaded gun in the water like a child caught with something that should not have been in his possession in the first place. He moved it to the side of his bum on the right.
The girl, rubbing sleep from her eyes, leaned back to close the door firmly behind her. For the fraction of a moment, father and daughter sized up each other and after clearly finding no better alternative, she got into the bath to lie on his chest like she'd do when she found him in bed. She was still clad in her pink pyjamas.