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The eyes of the naked: what do the eyes of the naked see?

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The Eyes of the Naked:
What Do The Eyes of the Naked See?

A reflexive essay, including the full novel *The Eyes of the Naked*, by Litha Hermanus

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Abstract

Protest literature is dead! Modify it or kill it, said many, including the likes of Professor Njabulo Ndebele and Justice Albie Sachs. At the dawn of the South African democracy, the latter is famously reported to have requested that, at the very least, the genre be sent into a five-year coma (Plummer, 1998). At its height, protest literature was criticised for its lack of creative depth and complexity. A 'go-to' for many African writers, it became too ubiquitous. Most of the genre's authors produced works that were said to suffer from too much sameness. Their white characters were often predictably and typically oppressive, and their African ones were necessarily good. Among other recurring themes, existed political turmoil, violence, death and communities engaging in politically-charged funerals (Lockwood, 2008). Themes did not venture much beyond the struggle against apartheid. It was argued – by Professor Ndebele and others – that a plethora of other themes were part of the South African human experience and they also warranted exploration in literature.

This Masters in Creative Writing work, which is comprised of a novel and a complementary reflexive essay (titled *The Eyes of the Naked: What Do The Eyes of the Naked See?*), explores the notion that, despite the end of apartheid, the conditions that gave rise to protest literature endure. There remains much to protest. There was plenty to protest before the advent of apartheid. Thus, in the essay, the novel *The Eyes of the Naked* is positioned in the South African canon between a seminal protest literature novel in Mongane Serote's *To Every Birth Its Blood* and a pivotal post-apartheid literature text in Zakes Mda's *Ways of Dying*. In all three novels there is a colonial thread that traverses epochs. It is suggested that *The Eyes of the Naked* is a reimagining of protest literature. However, this new variety unequivocally aspires towards complexity and depth. In the novel, protest is located in myriad themes that have their roots in the colonial (and apartheid) experience. These are themes such as civilian violence/crime; love; sexuality; filial disconnection; cultural deracination; masculinity/femininity; the migrant labour system; racism/xenophobia/revolution vs. terrorism.

In the end, however, one must submit that *The Eyes of the Naked* is not classic protest literature. It is a revival of it that seeks to address, with creative depth and complexity, and through a host of other themes, the unrelenting subjugation of Africans in a land that is their home – on soil which most of their feet have never left.

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Dedication

Zazi Mnombo Leeto: you are my world and representative of everything that grows in it.

Part 1

The Eyes of the Naked: What Do The Eyes of the Naked See?

Introduction: *What Do The Eyes of the Naked See?*

The Eyes of the Naked: What Do The Eyes of the Naked See? is a reflexive essay about my novel *The Eyes of the Naked*. It is a positioning of the work within the canon of South African literature, as well as an examination of the themes and concerns expressed in the book. Chief of these is the cultural deracination of Africans within a South Africa where violence is ever the backdrop. The continual political oppression of Africans and their dire social and familial conditions are also important themes.

In the first section of the essay, "A Colonial Thread through Time", the novel is positioned within the dormant genre of protest literature. Inside this mode, it is Mongane Serote's debut novel *To Every Birth Its Blood* that I evoke. I pit Serote's book against Zakes Mda's first work of fiction – *Ways of Dying*. This is because the latter was said to be a decided departure from protest literature, the genre of Serote's work. In setting the scene to later relate both these novels to mine, I look at the history of the protest literature genre: the milieu that conceived it, the social conditions into which it was birthed; and the social conditions it deals with inside its pages. I then do similarly for *Ways of Dying* and *The Eyes of the Naked*. All the while I argue that, given the oppression and dire social conditions of Africans in the eras of all three books, protest literature cannot and should not be considered dead. There remains much to protest.

The second section "From Allure to Alienation: An Ambivalent Journey with the English Language" introduces the idea of cultural deracination in my own life. It is a precursor to discussing how deracination works in general, in our country and in *The Eyes of the Naked*.

"Culture Identity and Globalisation Discussed" is the next segment. It foreshadows a subsequent one – "Cultural Deracination: Displacement within Constantly Displaced Culture" – in which some theory on cultural deracination is explored. Both these sections interrogate how the idea of culture works, looking at the complexities surrounding its stasis versus its dynamism, and how deracination can be perceived to be occurring while at the same time perceived to be not occurring. After this, a section titled "Power and Social Control: Force and Hegemony" follows. It further bolsters the previous two by detailing how culture and identity can be affected by man-made power relations in society, leading to an uplifting of Western culture(s) and the devaluating of African ones.

Once all the above has been covered, a little will be said about the writing process in the section "*The Eyes of the Naked*: The Process of the Pen", before the need for protest

literature is revisited and resolved in a segment aptly named, “There Remains Much to Protest”. In this final piece I ask and answer the questions: Why should a work of fiction written in the years leading up to 2020 care to be relatable to what should be a dead genre in protest literature? Are the conditions worthy of protest in our society no longer existent? The answer to the latter question is that they are still existent! And this will be displayed by highlighting the similar or consistent negative conditions of African people in Serote’s, Mda’s and my work.

A Colonial Thread through Time

Given the ongoing damaging effects of our colonial history, the need for protest in our writing has never gone away. Protest literature still has an essential place in South Africa today, and I aim to locate my work within its dormant tradition. This is a significant part of my point of departure as I look into the creative process of my novel – *The Eyes of the Naked.* I will be positioning my book in relation to two others: Mongane Wally Serote's *To Every Birth Its Blood* and Zakes Mda's *Ways of Dying*.

Serote's novel is considered a strong contribution to the genre of protest literature. This is a veritable tradition in the canon of South African writing, typically by African writers under apartheid (Lockwood, 2008). Of course literature that protested colonial injustices in South Africa was nothing new when Serote wrote this debut novel. With the likes of Thomas Pringle and Sol Plaatjie, there had been writers composing literature against nefarious colonial practices as far back as the 1800s and early 1900s, ahead of the advent of apartheid. Even around 1948 and after, authors such as Alan Paton, Nadine Gordimer, Alex La Guma and others, produced literature that protested the abject conditions of apartheid (Dennis Brutus, 2006). But none of the above writing was given the express title of 'protest literature'. This name would emerge as a moniker for a particular genre in the 1970s going into the 1980s (Lockwood, 2008). The genre was obviously given that name because it protested apartheid, but also because some of the works grouped under its rubric came to use notable conventions in their protest (Lockwood, 2008). It was also distinct as a brand of literature because it existed at a time when apartheid began to show incipient cracks that would widen in the mid to late 1980s. The lineage of this genre issues from the 'Sophiatown Renaissance' and a group of writers known as the Drum Writers. They earned this name by writing for the incendiary *Drum* magazine of the 1950s. Ntongela Masilela (1990) says this about them. They were inspired by the Harlem Renaissance (Lockwood, 2008), and after clashing with the authorities over time, most of them went into exile after the Sharpeville Massacre of 1961 (Masilela, 1990). Nat Nakasa, the only one of them who had not fled immediately into exile, set up a new cultural review named *The Classic* with the assistance of Nadine Gordimer. This review helped give energy to a dying South African literary race by passing the baton (or pen, if you will) to the next literary school in South Africa. This was the Staffrider School that came about in 1978. "It was [*The Classic*] that enabled Mongane Serote, a very prominent member of the Staffrider Literary School (also known as the Black Consciousness literary generation), to find sustenance", writes Masilela (1990). Yet, while the genre had the above

genealogy, it was also inspired by the verisimilitude and political commitment found in the socialist realism literature of the U.S.S.R. in the 1930s (Foster, 2005). But why is Serote's novel of relevance to my work? In establishing my own novel as a mutated form of protest literature, *To Every Birth Its Blood* is as worthwhile as any seminal text of the genre would be to explore. Moreover, the fact that the book was being written in 1976 places it next to one of apartheid's biggest acts of terror in our country, the Soweto Youth Uprising. The text certainly had much to 'protest' then. The novel also speaks to me because I was born in 1976 – three weeks after the murder of those Soweto children on June 16. In some way, the book and I share formative years (though one might say it knew a lot about the world, while I knew nothing).

Quite contrary to Mongane Serote's book, Mda's *Ways of Dying* was celebrated by many as a welcome break from protest literature. It was read as a post-apartheid text – a novel reflecting a South Africa in which there was hope and no longer any apartheid terror to fear (Foster, 2005). Apart from being post-apartheid fiction, however, Mda's book is primarily a work of magic realism. This aspect of it is also in contrast with the social realism elements of Serote's novel. Whereas magic realism – much like social realism – may be set in a factual world that is true to material conditions, it goes on to supplement the reality of its world with 'the supernatural' (Foster, 2005). In other words, the verisimilitude of social realism is sustained throughout the storyline of such work, while supernatural elements become integral to the plot of a magic realism text. This use of magical features, *instead of* merely 'documenting reality' in politically committed fiction, was smiled upon by dissenters of protest literature (Foster, 2005). This was particularly within the South African context where magic realism, as well as other non-protest fiction, was said to call more on the imagination of the writer (Ndebele, 2012; Dlamini, 2016). It was said to showcase higher creativity and artistry in its authors – qualities that much of the realist protest literature was castigated for lacking. One negative quality attributed to protest plots was the oversimplified binary of the 'bad' white and his oppressive government versus the 'good' African and his community bemoaning or fighting their subjugation (Lockwood, 2008). The protest tradition was also frowned upon because of its repetitive conventions and proliferation. The genre seemed to be the go-to mode of fiction for most African writers. Literary thinkers and authors such as Njabulo Ndebele had long been calling on protest tradition writers to produce work that did not suffer from sameness and was not inspired merely by the hardships of apartheid (Ndebele, 2012). Life is multifarious, and it offers other non-political and personal subjects

and themes to centre on, it was said. As apartheid neared its end, Albie Sachs sounded a call to all to kill this 'unwanted' mode, or send it into a coma for at least five years (Plummer, 1998). *Ways of Dying* went in this direction. It becomes significant to positioning my novel because it was hailed as an exemplar of the type of work needed to replace protest literature, the very same tradition I would see resurrected in my work. Mda's distance or proximity to the genre then, is worth interrogating. In looking at the above books in relation to my own (itself in the psychological and social realism modes), I will be suggesting the following. Only one of these novels may be protest literature proper, but all three are committed pieces of work. They speak to, or speak against the effects of an established and oppressive colonial order in South Africa.

Of course the established and oppressive colonial order is not a monolithic one, for these three texts were/are all written in different eras in our history. Serote began writing his work in 1975 though it was published in 1981 (Serote, 1981). Apartheid was in full swing and fighting for a longer life then. Obviously, the Soweto Youth Uprising was yet to take place when he took up the pen. The events of that day gave a new cause to Serote's sentences and even shaped the (eventual) content and structure of his novel (Lockwood, 2008). Zakes Mda published his work in 1995 (Mda, 1995). This was just after the death of apartheid, in the second year of the 'New South Africa'. In fact, he commenced working on *Ways of Dying* in 1991 and a significant part of it is set in the same period – the years approaching 1994 (Mda, 2013). This was a period of transition into the South African democracy. The blood of men, women, and children became the labour pains of a country that sought to birth itself anew. Political murders and assassinations were initiated. There was the murder of Chris Hani among other violence in hostels and in the streets. To every birth its blood, indeed! *My* novel is written more than twenty years after the death of Chris Hani and the advent of our so-called democracy. These days apartheid lives only as a ghost among us, with no physical form – only the harrowing proofs of its former existence. Not only is it long gone, but so too is the breath of hope with which Nelson Mandela and his comrades spoke as they fashioned into reality the tenuous ideas of a New South Africa and a Rainbow Nation. Those are failed projects now. The nation has grown out of the novelty of its own 'newness' and the colours of the rainbow remain fragmented. This is evident in the resurgent strain on our race relations and in growing tensions around the return of land to Africans. There is the ever-lingering stain of Marikana on the fabric of our society – in damning red. It is also increasingly obvious that there is a cycle of gross financial mismanagement and corruption in the private sector.

(This is a problem often identified as endemic to the public sector and that sector alone.) Finally, even though the African National Congress (ANC) is still the ruling party, it has fallen from its hero-liberator status, and has lost significant ground in the eyes and size of its constituency, especially in the last few years. In the cyber-shorthand of today, the following hashtags express the milieu and some of our concerns in the time of my writing: #Marikana #Nkandla #ZumaMustFall #RhodesMustFall #FeesMustFall #GiveBackTheLand #StateCapture #StateCaptureReport #WMC #BellPottinger #KPMG #Multichoice #Steinhoff #H&M. Much of Rome seems to be in ashes already, and the fires did not start burning yesterday.

Once more, the eras from which Serote's, Mda's, and my work emerge, are different. But, if my novel consists in protesting the enduring negative effects of colonisation on African people in South Africa, then there is a thread that ties these texts and their different epochs together. This is a thread I will locate before displaying how it is stitched into the themes and concerns of my novel, and is something against which sustained protest must be launched.

From Allure to Alienation: An Ambivalent Journey with the English Language

"*Aprityu prityu prityu: Hollit*!" In the household (as well as the neighbourhood) in which I was raised in the early 1980s, this gibberish was our English dialogue when we played among ourselves as children. Those of us who could not speak the language we heard on television made it up. The name of one of our most popular games as boys was '*gans*' (guns), our own version of cowboys and Indians or cops and robbers. It was probably influenced by the likes of *The Big Valley, The Lone Ranger*, and *CHiPs* – American television series that were part of our South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) programming. I was 6 years old and had had no formal brush with the English language or white people on a personal level. That would only happen at age 7. Without knowing the reasons, I was drawn to the world of English and white people, and naturally saw them and their world as better. I *never* stopped to question '*why'*. Was it the proliferation of media images that glorified white characters and people above those of other races? Was it our parents who lived as though white people were the truth, as they were under both the yoke of apartheid and an ingrained tendency for marvelling at Western ways? I never considered whether or not 6-year-old white children elsewhere in South Africa attempted to speak in African languages during their playtime; especially with no African children around them. This kind of thinking was obviously not within my reach then. Yet I was already primed to appreciate English and Western culture above my own language and way of life.

When the mini-series *Shaka Zulu* aired in 1985 I was 9 and already attending an English medium school for two years. I watched the mini-series in its original English audio track on TV1, instead of on TV2, where it was dubbed into *isiZulu*. I could understand *isiZulu* well enough. Although it is not my mother tongue (*isiXhosa*), it is a cognate Nguni language. The truth is I simply preferred the content in English. I could already speak it fluently enough for my grade (Standard 2). And I considered myself pretty fortunate I could understand English dialogue. This was for *Shaka Zulu* as well as other shows such as *The Gummi Bears, Thundercats, Knight Rider, The A-Team, and MacGyver*. I considered myself particularly fortunate because some of my neighbourhood friends could not grapple with English dialogue much. This was evidenced by their conversation when we watched TV together or talked about a movie we had all seen apart from each other. It was embarrassing how much guessing they did when it came to the dialogue. These friends studied English in school too, but not as a first language. They studied it as a second language, and they did so in *isiXhosa*, for the most part. The only time they could fully 'enjoy' the images on TV

together with the dialogue is when they watched dubbed content.

As mentioned earlier with *Shaka Zulu*, TV2 and TV3 offered English language content fully dubbed into certain local tongues. Besides *Shaka Zulu*, some of these dubbed shows included the likes of *Kung Fu*, starring David Carradine, and *Sanford and Son* (*uSanford Nonyana* on TV2), a sitcom starring Redd Foxx. Unlike *Shaka Zulu* – which was offered in both its original English audio and in *isiZulu*, these shows were aired with no original English audio track. There was just the dubbed African language audio. As American as Redd Foxx and David Carradine were, on South African TV they '*talked African*'. This is the kind of content my friends could penetrate fully linguistically. They needed 'translation' help with English content because there were always language lacunae working against them. In that context, knowing English better than them felt like a socially elevated position (to both myself and them). This was more so the case when I visited the *lalis* where my maternal grandmother lived. We had cousins and their friends there. Those friends seemed to elevate us even further for our urban ways and fluent English. The coloniser's tongue gained a further foothold in my psyche as a jewel among the 'dusty' languages of my people.

While I also enjoyed some of the dubbed content to some degree, something about it always seemed impoverished or 'less than'. By default, English shows felt like the better shows. This was probably because with English content one did not have to suspend their disbelief as they watched white people or African Americans mouth different words to what was coming out of the speakers. The pitches of the voices in the dubbed tracks made things worse because they were often ill-fitting. On top of all that, meaning was frequently lost in translation with dubbed audio. One need only imagine a Redd Foxx joke in *isiZulu* in order to grasp just how much meaning could be lost. Incidentally, in 1986, even before it became commonplace for TV sets to be fitted with a simulcast switch, my cousins made a great discovery. They caught wind of a simulcast service on Radio 2000 (an SABC radio station) and shared their find. This service carried the original English dialogue for much of the dubbed overseas content screened on TV. I still recall the relief that this find was, especially because we could eventually watch *uPopeye iTilosi* on TV (with the volume off) and listen to it as *Popeye the Sailor Man* at the same time on radio. It was quite frustrating when the radio audio started late at times, and was unsynchronised with the images. But rather than watch (and listen to) content in local languages, my brothers and I undoubtedly preferred the English on simulcast. A pattern had emerged. Whenever I had a choice between any other

language and English, the choice was automatically English. This language that was not mine was clearly the leading language in my life. It was becoming 'mine' in the same sense that Chinua Achebe stated English became 'his', as per Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's assertion in *Decolonizing the Mind* (wa Thiong'o, 1986). Still I had no words with which to define this thing that automatically set up English in my consciousness, and that of my peers, as something better than mine/our own languages. Not only had my friends and I gravitated towards English and made it up when we could not speak it ("*Aprityu prityu prityu…"*), but when I could wield it with confidence, I felt the kind of pride I did not feel regarding getting better at my own language. In fact, I did not get much better at my own language as I got older. My parents did not even see it fit for me to study my mother tongue and become literate in it. Theirs, instead, was to send me to a school where I was fined or took lashes for being caught speaking in *isiXhosa*. This is something Ngũgĩ details in *Decolonizing the Mind* about his own early relationship with Western education – effectively being torn with violence from his own language while being deliberately sutured to another (wa Thiong'o, 1986).

Having dealt with some examples of how I gravitated towards English and gave it pride of place above other languages in my life, I will focus next on what I think were some of the causes for that behaviour. It began at home, although society at large was also to blame. As African children already growing up under white domination and apartheid, the messages we picked up from our parents and the rest of society concerning English and Western ways, were damaging. Our parents too had suffered the same affliction from their parents and society. Even as toddlers we could see in the conduct of our mothers and fathers that English carried a currency our own language(s) did not. We had no sociolinguistic theory with which to frame our understanding, but we intrinsically knew this truth about English and our languages through a variety of interactions. Firstly, if adults and their friends (mine and those of my companions) were discussing something, and they did not want the children to be privy to the conversation, they would switch to English. At my house, this worked until I learned the language and then I had to leave the room when *abantu abadala* were speaking. The ability for English to be used this way probably marked it in our young imaginations as a language that could deal with the important things of the worlds of our parents; let alone a language having the ability to protect information from others while they remained in the room. Secondly (and this point is closely linked to the first one), it was often the case that the domestic worker did not know how to speak English. The domestic worker was an adult – the

only other authority figure in the house, especially when the parents were out at work. The fact that this authority figure could not speak English seemed linked to her station in life. Even as children we knew that domestic workers were often people who had not completed their schooling. It was clear that English was for the educated. This too probably set up the English language in our understanding as a language of power. Thirdly (and this is quite important), most African children of my generation who learned English and could speak it fluently early on, will remember their linguistic skills being paraded by their parents to friends or extended family. "*Khanikhumshe*! *Khanisome*" the words would come, sometimes entreatingly and other times as a curt command (as if to suggest: 'We pay for your fees, little man; you will speak that English whenever we say'). At hearing the request or order to 'perform' English, one would belt out sentences, with or without context. At the end of whatever one was able to say, there were sweets, and in their absence, at least smiles, applause, and affirmation. But even more than that was the ever-present recognition by most adults that speaking English with fluency as an African child was no mean feat. It was a major achievement that they could not accomplish until they were in high school or already working adults. For some it was something they had altogether not managed to learn. They needed someone to interpret the sentences we put on display for them at the request of our parents. What were we, as children, supposed to gather from the behaviour of these adults? That English intrinsically had more value than our own language(s). That those for whom it is a mother tongue, as well as their things, should be more important to us than ourselves and our own things. For obvious reasons this was a terrible place to be in. A kind of alienation began in me.

By the time I was 12 I kept a cosmopolitan group of friends. English became something of a necessity for me and the social relationships I was building in the course of my life. My best friends were two white brothers (Mitchell and Stuart) and a Ghanaian (Kofi). When I was 13 I was extremely shy and had a crush on an Afrikaans girl who went to the Afrikaans school in town. I would write letters to her and send them through René, a mutual friend (who was bi-racial). The letters served their purpose. Heloise and I began talking on the phone almost every afternoon that year – in English, of course; this was besides hanging out at church youth meetings on weekends. Even the African people with whom I was friends (and later came to befriend) used English as their primary means of communication for the most part. Yet, as I kept to this multicultural circle and conducted most of my daily conversations in English, something else was happening. The deeper I was immersed into this

Anglophone world, the more there was an alienation I began to feel. It was not a concrete feeling at first, just a whisper in me that I could not articulate, save to say it filled me with anxiety. While this Western language was still alluring to me I was having difficulty with it in class. By now I was in Standard 6 or 7 (Grade 8 or 9). I remember quite distinctly the feeling of ineptitude that crept over me almost daily. It was something I kept to myself. I was not doing particularly well in my English classes (or studies in general), but that, in and of itself, was not the problem. I was fairly proficient in English and even dreamt in it. Yet I was not getting good marks when it came to tests. I did not have a handle on how to break down the rules and inner workings of the language, and never would. I remember that being a source of shame for me. When it came to English I was an 'outsider looking in', and I would always be that. During the same time I was feeling inept over my English proficiency, something else was also happening. Because I had not interacted with *isiXhosa* whatsoever academically, I was beginning to have anxiety around my abilities with it. Had I not been having issues with English I doubt I would have been concerned about my proficiency in *isiXhosa*. As Kobena Mercer, a cultural critic, articulates: "Identity only becomes an issue when it is in crisis.". It was simply a case of feeling a certain level of exclusion from the English side of things that caused me to remember that there actually was a language that was mine. And this was a language for which I did not have to satisfy gatekeepers to knowledge like I had to do with Sister Laurentia or Mr. Dippenaar – my English teachers. While I felt inadequate around English I could at least read and write it. My mother tongue, on the other hand, was a source of even deeper anxiety and embarrassment for me when I looked back at it as a possible place of linguistic refuge. Outside of speaking it colloquially I was illiterate in it. Xhosa-speaking adults, who generally conversed in colourful and impeccable *isiXhosa*, would often ridicule us (some of my friends and I) for being 'white' or not being more proficient in our own language. "*O! Abelungu abamnyama*," they would say and laugh. Sometimes it would be my own parents taking jibes. Over time I began to feel like I was neither good enough for the 'English world' nor the 'Xhosa world'. While I was an 'outsider looking in' with English, I was an 'insider' looking lost with my own language. This left me with a diminished sense of self, self-identity, and belonging. This was the very first time I can say I experienced a feeling of being displaced linguistically and culturally. It was not something someone told me about or sensitised me to; it was all an internal experience. Of course I would get better academically with age and effort, but that feeling of being spread thinly between two cultures is something that has never quite left me. Instead, it has found

expression in other experiences in my life around issues of identity and culture.

Exactly why is my historical relationship with English of significance? Because I am an African writer who has a complex relationship with the language in which he writes. I write in English because it is the *only* language in which I am *able* to convey the range of ideas that exist in my head. I can hardly produce a to-do list in *isiXhosa*, let alone attempt a novel or academic essay. The fact that I am able to compose competent prose in a would-be foreign tongue, and am unable to do the same in my own language, means English had a foothold in my life that my own language did not. It was an 'external' language that found its way to my linguistic centre and displaced *isiXhosa* from its 'rightful' place. This is not something that usually happens with native English speakers, trading in their English competency for that of an African language. There are power relations of hegemony inherent in this. Not only did I experience English in school, as a subject and the medium of instruction, but it was in relationships I enjoyed, in and out of school. It was in media I interacted with, from television to music to movies. There were *Archie*, *Marvel* and *DC* comics I shared with friends. There were books, too: Enid Blyton's *Famous Five* series, 'Carolyn Keene's' *Nancy Drew*, and favourites such as Roald Dahl's *Danny the Champion of the World*. There is not a single Xhosa book I have read in my life. As said before, detailing my journey with English offers a glimpse into my complex relationship with the language, as well as my own cultural deracination. Evoking that deracination is further significant because my novel carries similar ideas – themes expressly about the loss of culture and identity for Africans.

Culture Identity and Globalisation Discussed

To speak of culture and identity is to be on treacherous ground. To claim cultural deracination and a resultant loss of identity is even worse. It requires more than detailing what happened to me with English and Westernisation, as I have done in the previous section. That *was* indeed an example of cultural deracination at work. But to further any argument on culture and identity, as well as the deracination thereof, I need to provide a clear definition of what deracination is, before discussing culture, and showing its relationship with identity. Claiming deracination is the same as claiming a loss of identity, and being displaced in some way or other within the cultural matrix you occupy. According to J. Këhaulani Kauanui (2007) it can be explained in the following way: "[Displacing] a people from their own territory, place, or environment – literally, to uproot [them]". While Kauanui speaks of a more physical uprooting, Hussein Abdilahi Bulhan (1985) adds another dimension. In *Frantz Fanon and the Psychology of Oppression*, he says: "[The] cultural deracination of blacks was but the intellectual and emotional counterpart of economic enslavement. The Middle Passage uprooted *bodies*, transporting them to alien lands. Cultural deracination dislocated *psyches*, imposing an alien worldview." In Hussein's example it is the mind that is taken over, a way of thinking about and seeing the world, as though one trades in their cultural goggles and asks to see life through the goggles of another group – even if that group holds the role of oppressor. It is a slavery of sorts, a bondage of the mind. But what is this culture that one is displaced from?

Richard Münch and Neil Smelser (1992) speak of culture as something that is not only defined differently in present times, but a phenomenon that has never ever been conceived of in the same uniform way throughout time. "Before the end of the nineteenth century, many philosophers and historians tended to treat culture as a kind of idea, spirit, or *Geist* that provided a basis for characterising a society". This was quite a different conception to Edward Tylor's (1884). He spoke of culture as a "complex whole which encompasses knowledge, beliefs… laws… customs and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a [*member*] of society". The first definition differs from the second in the sense that it speaks of a nebulously defined whole that cuts through a society at a particular time. In the second definition, however, the whole that is culture is broken up into a variety of components that are seen to make up the whole. These components, unlike with the nineteenth century definition of the term, are not vaguely defined. They are categories of human existence and interaction that are at once recognisable. Knowledge is recognisable and

so are the institutions that keep it in a society – such as museums, schools and universities, and what have you. The law is also a component of culture. We know what it is in society, as well as how it is accessed, dispensed, and how to interact with it through specific institutions of law. Another part of Tylor's culture is customs. Customs are actions that are performed repeatedly and are also readily familiar (especially to a member of a group that practices his or her particular ones). All of this goes beyond the idea of a *Geist* or spirit of a time. While I agree with Tylor's definition of the term, and will evoke it to a certain extent, I will add another layer to the discussion – Stuart Hall's conception of culture. It is his understanding that will largely inform how I interrogate and use the word.

Hall's (1992; 1996) culture and identity are ever-changing. He roots identity and culture in the Enlightenment or Cartesian comprehension of the self. This is the human being seen as a fully-centred subject, endowed with consciousness – the capacities to reason and to act, which make him self-sufficient. This Cartesian individual is seen as having a core, an identity that is essentially unchanging from birth to death. "I think, therefore I am"; this is the point from which the identity of this Cartesian self departs. Yet, Hall (1996) progresses the understanding of the subject along from the Enlightenment Self to the Sociological Self. This is the individual as removed from Des Cartes' conception of a person. The self is seen in the context of modernity and its institutional influences. In this modern world the self's *self*-sufficiency and singularity are in doubt. This is because the individual came to be appreciated as a social being whose consciousness is in conversation with the 'consciousnesses' of other significant individuals in his or her life. These are relationships with family, friends, as well as at school, work, and within one's community, *inter alia*. These significant relationships between the individual and other individuals (as a group) are seen to give cues on shared values, meanings, and symbols. These values and such form the bedrock of the culture that is lived by and shared between the subjects. This bedrock is the 'what is appropriate to do in what situation in the culture of which specific society'. The identity of the individual is derived from and negotiated within this culture. In the Sociological conception of the individual and his or her identity, the self no longer has self-sufficiency as a solipsistic being. The person can only have an identity as a social being because other social beings mirror and co-create identity for him or her. As Hall (1992) plainly puts it, "Identity is formed through the interaction between self and society". He goes on to talk about the Post-modern Self, however. This is the subject as having migrated from being the Sociological Self due to even further structural changes and institutional influences in society. For the Post-modern self

there is no longer just the culture of significant others in close proximity with which to be in 'dialogue' about identity. For this self, multiple cultures and identities abound. Not only do they abound within an individual, but at times they *can* be contradictory within the same individual. One can easily see this in the action of being a Xhosa person who goes to an English medium school where one accepts (by way of their parents) getting beaten or fined for speaking in *isiXhosa*. Or one can be an African manager in a multinational corporation and deny an African employee family leave for the burial of an extended family member. This is especially in a case where this African manager still believes in the idea of family as more than one's nuclear unit, as most African's once did. Besides the existence of a multiplicity of identities, and their occasionally contradictory nature within a single psyche, Hall's culture and identity are also characterised by features of constant motion and change. Identity is always 'unresolved' and altering itself. It is not just one thing, and those many things that it is, never remain entirely identical through the passage of time. Change is the only thing about culture and identity that remains the same. Regarding *change*, Hall (1996) suggests that from late modernity, societies were characterised by an unprecedented rate of it. He attributes an even more accelerated rate of change to Globalisation. Referencing Anthony McGrew, he explains this phenomenon as:

> "… Those processes, operating on a global scale, which cut across national boundaries, integrating and connecting, communities and [organisations] in new space-time combinations, making the world in reality and in experience more interconnected. [Globalisation] implies a movement away from the classical sociological idea of a 'society' as a well-bounded system, and its replacement by a perspective which concentrates on 'how social life is ordered across time and space'".

Held and McGrew (2007) describe it as something "simply understood as the widening, deepening and speeding up of worldwide interconnectedness". A simple illustration of how globalisation works can be made using multinational corporations that are littered all over the world and South Africa. McDonalds and KFC are both Western fast food outlets. The McDonalds' hamburger and KFC chicken experiences, however, are in multiple countries around the world, including ours. The same can be said for Western fashion tastes, with brands like H&M, Zara, Nike, and Adidas penetrating the world market. Incidentally, we have seen how an H&M advertisement in Sweden – perceived as violent in a racist sense by many – caused havoc in South Africa. The word 'monkey', on a sweater modelled by an African child, led to the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) performing counter-violence

against multiple H&M stores in South Africa by destroying them. On another level, Stuart Hall makes an interesting point about the fashion aspect of Globalisation. He talks about Western youth fashion and how it has taken hold of the imagination of the youth in eastern countries. This is through shared media and images. Yet the same fashion items popular in the West are physically fabricated in countries like Taiwan and China. Globalisation blurs time and space in a way that they were not blurred before. This blurring of time and space works two-fold. Firstly, borders become porous by way of actual production, goods, and services exchanging hands between the eastern and Western countries to whom this pattern applies. Secondly though, the mimicry of fashion often takes place over media messages in music, movies, literature and travel (for those who can afford it). If we add to this conversation the aspect of new media such as the Internet, one can immediately see how time and space can become blurred. In past times someone had to be in America, for example, to enjoy American culture in a live music show (and by way of that, even fashion). But cameras and live streaming have allowed people across the world to be in single communities and events from different continents and time zones at the same time. Generally speaking, everybody is on the same (Internet-)page. An example even closer to home is that of corporations such as Bell Pottinger, KPMG, and Steinhoff that operate and affect the economies, politics, and lives of people across borders, in ideological and substantive ways. The latter case is something we have seen play out in the South African news and media landscape recently. Besides scandals by big corporates KPMG and Steinhoff, Bell Pottinger, a former public relations firm in the United Kingdom, was embroiled in controversy relating to economic, political and ideological messages it was manufacturing in the UK and dispensing in South Africa and elsewhere. This speaks to the permeability of borders, and the interaction of individuals beyond those borders in a global network of information and other services. This is in a deeper and accelerated way. Again, time and space collapse and identity has no singularity; the individual's culture and identity are something of a pastiche in our time. Because of Globalisation, many South Africans have an identity that includes parts of American culture. When local rapper Emtee was recently taunted for having a fake American accent, his response amounted to the fact that his accent is "Hip Hop". Not only has Emtee borrowed a style (culture) of music from the U.S., he has also borrowed the accent. An accent can be seen as something that is a key clue to the identity of entire nations. Using Hall's understanding of culture and identity, one could argue that with an accent like that, a facet of the local rapper's culture lends him an identity that could be read as partly 'American'. The rest of him is a composite of other identities drawn from other cultures, so he probably has

many other attributes that render him ‘South African’. One day he may stop using his American accent. If that day comes, he will no longer be partly ‘American’, at least not in that sense. And this is how Stuart Hall’s culture and identity work.

Cultural Deracination: Displacement within Constantly Displaced Culture

Having covered the meanings of culture and identity that I will use in my discussion, an ironic question immediately begs answering. How can someone be deracinated or removed from their culture if that same culture is permanently in a state of change? Or we could ask an inverted form of the same question. If culture is always in a state of change, how do individuals who identify as members of the same cultural group maintain a unified identity, such that deracination becomes a clear plausibility? Many people and institutions create a world in which culture and identity are not given to a dislocated trajectory. They think of them as static forces, 'tameable' and manageable. Perhaps it is now and again that they are reminded of the fluid nature of culture and identity, but for the most part they treat the concepts as coherent. Hall (1996) writes:

> "Within us are contradictory identities… pulling in different directions, so that our identifications are continuously being shifted about. If we feel we have a unified identity from birth to death, it is only because we construct a comforting story or 'narrative of the self' about ourselves. The fully unified, completed, secure, and coherent identity is a fantasy".

If this construction of a fantasy exists for the individual, it follows it exists for the group with whom the individual identifies. Despite these "comforting stories" and fantasies, however, culture and identity are anything but coherent. In his explanation of the two terms, Stuart Hall uses nationhood as his example of a cultural grouping under which individuals unite and identify. Of course other cultural groupings exist. It is possible to create an identity as part of a tribe – as Xhosa, Sotho, Ndebele or Zulu, for example. Tribe is the cultural grouping I will use in my line of argument as the essay progresses. In fact, notions of tribe will be in conversation with those of nationhood. Regarding the creation of national identity, Hall (1996) borrows from Benedict Anderson, who speaks of nations as "imagined communities". These are not physical communities but communities that exist in the realm of the imaginary. He suggests that being English, French, or some other nation, means you identify with something larger than yourself as an individual. You have a national identity. It is not a natural identity, but rather one that is arrived at in a constructed kind of way. Anderson (in Hall, 1996) suggests that:

> "A national culture is a discourse - a way of constructing meanings which influences and [organises] both our actions and our conception of ourselves. National cultures construct identities by producing meanings about "the nation" with which we can identify; these are contained in the stories

> which are told about it, memories which connect its present with its past, and images which are constructed of it."

The "imagined community" of a nation, and the meanings that resonate within that community about itself, are what 'make it' the nation it is in its mind's eye, and subsequently in some of its actions. These meanings come to resonate because they are ingrained in societies as they are 'transmitted' by institutions inside those societies. This is done through the media, literature, schools, universities, and whatever other institutions reproduce narratives of national identity. This identity is established on recurring traditions, recounted histories, and stories of triumph and/or greatness. For example, we know something about U.S. national identity from the reproduced idea of seemingly righteous and infallible founding fathers, the Bill of Rights, and the great American Constitution. This sets up the U.S. in the imagination as truly a 'land of the free' and a bastion of rights. In reality, if one uses the Civil Rights Movement as a marker, the U.S. was still trampling on African American civil rights in the 1950s and '60s, close to two hundred years after the country's inception. What would an African American say of his or her rights in the U.S. today?

Around the birth of the New South Africa in 1994, we were marketed to ourselves as diverse and tolerant – as a unified national entity known to some as the Rainbow Nation. Our media teemed with images of reconciliation between Nelson Mandela and F.W. De Klerk. There were debates and there was angst, but the countenance was one of unity. The pair jointly won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1993. There was the tragic farce of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (T.R.C.) on our TV screens, encouraging the forgiveness of apartheid atrocities, even where it was not warranted. Madiba magic – Mandela's touted talismanic quality – permeated national sports, but was most significant in rugby, in such moments as when the president stood alongside South African team captain, Francois Pienaar, as Pienaar hoisted the 1995 Rugby World Cup trophy in victory. I remember where I was in Nelson Drive in Mthatha, and I remember buying in. Implicit in these images were reconciliation, unity, triumph, and hope for the future. These were all meanings created and dispensed in order to have South Africans buy into a specific idea of a post-apartheid nation. The significance with created meanings is that, even though dynamic individuals exist in ever-changing cultures, with identities that are always in flux, those dynamic individuals *can be*, and *usually are*, grouped together by certain sectors of society that are invested in particular identity formations. Stuart Hall suggests that for the sake of their elevation,

countries invest in uniform histories, traditions, myths, and a variety of other tools in order to create this unity and sameness. We have just looked at how this formation of identity worked in certain ways in the promotion of national identity in the U.S. as well as in South Africa. In both examples, one could say there is a single face of a nation presented, but behind that face are many different and sometimes oppositional faces or realities. Also, the formation of national identity issues from the top-down in these examples, from within the realms of government or liberation and party politics. Next is to look at an attempt to form national identity from the bottom-up.

Since 2005, one man has been on a mission to transform the South African public holiday of National Heritage Day into something else. "Jan Scannell, or Jan Braai as he is best known, [tries to focus South Africa's] energy into building the concept of 'National Braai Day'" reads *Who's Who Southern Africa*, a website that "assists professionals in creating, managing and growing their personal brand and reputation". Scannell's reason for doing this? To unite all South Africans under one cultural activity (and hence identity) on that day. To do away with the difference that is otherwise echoed when people look to their tribal heritages instead. Is this an innocent action on Scannell's part? We already know that a braai is the South African equivalent of a barbecue, but what exactly is heritage? The *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* defines it as: "*1: property that descends to an heir; 2: a: something transmitted by or acquired from a predecessor: legacy, inheritance b: tradition; 3: something possessed as a result of one's natural situation or birth: birthright*". In all these entries there is clear mention of something, whether it is property, tradition, or birth-right, being bequeathed or received, passed on, from predecessor to posterity. One's relationship with his or her heritage then, especially if they value and seek out that relationship, is umbilical in a sense. The problem for Scannell is that his lightweight *braaivleis* idea is competing with concepts of culture and identity that are centuries old in some cases. Even if a braai is part of what I view as my heritage, it is not the most significant part to foreground out of that heritage, especially given the history of the public holiday. Also, this holiday has its roots in an idea of culture that carries more gravitas than a braai. What is now National Heritage Day in South Africa was once Shaka's Day for those who grew up in KwaZulu. Our Heritage Day exists expressly because a segment of Zulu people took a stand against losing their holiday, and their right to commemorate a historical figure of importance to them. An entry in South African History Online (2017) reads:

"In KwaZulu-Natal, 24 September has been observed as 'Shaka's Day,' in commemoration of the legendary Zulu king, King Shaka [kaSenzangakhona]. When the proposed Public Holidays Bill before the New South African Parliament omitted Shaka Day, the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP), a South African political party with a large Zulu membership, objected to the bill. A compromise was reached when it was decided to create a day where all South Africans could observe and celebrate their diverse cultural heritage. In an address marking [the day] in 1996, former President Nelson Mandela stated: 'When our first democratically-elected government decided to make Heritage Day one of our national days, we did so because we knew that our rich and varied cultural heritage has a profound power to help build our new nation'".

Again, Scannell's insubstantial concept is working against ideas of culture and identity that have a deep history and a tendency towards collective identities of tribe. The second problem Scannell's proposition is faced with is that, because our nation appears conspicuously diverse, our "imagined community" is even tougher to standardise, especially on a day when we are called upon to share our differences. It is to be emphasised though that cultural difference is not unique to South Africa, regardless of our country's obvious diversity. Even nations that would, for the most part, appear more culturally unified than ours, are not. Regarding this, Ernest Renan (in Hall, 1996) insists that:

> "The leading nations of Europe are nations of essentially mixed blood: France is… Celtic, Iberic and Germanic. Germany is Germanic, Celtic and Slav. Italy is the country where. . . Gauls, Etruscans, Pelagians and Greeks, not to mention many other elements, intersect in an indecipherable mixture… The British Isles, considered as a whole, present a mixture of Celtic and Germanic blood, the proportions of which are singularly difficult to define."

Yes, this kind of fragmentation is everywhere. Still, to ourselves in South Africa we may 'appear' even more culturally dislocated than the ethnicities in Renan's example, because not so long ago our differences were actually institutionalised under apartheid. But Scannell is determined to bridge this difference and get us closer to sameness in his attempt at a national braai day. To illustrate the impossibility of his attempt at universal unification, let me share an encounter that former Talk Radio 702 presenter, Udo Carelse, had with a listener who called into the station to criticise Scannell's idea as uncooked. This was on 24 September 2013 (National Heritage Day) and Udo was standing in for Redi Thlabi between 9 to 12 AM. I was co-producing the show with its then producer Nolwazi Tusini. I screened the call in question and put it through to the presenter. The female listener, who remained anonymous and only identified herself as phoning from the south of Johannesburg, made the case that Scannell was disingenuous in his request. The lady said she and many other South

African people were living in poverty. She did not have enough food in her fridge that day, let alone meat and charcoal for a braai with friends. So Scannell's attempt to join everyone under something all South Africans can *do*, and 'identify' with, did not take into account the landscape of South African poverty. Scannell's concept fell short in that it only brought to mind a braai she could not afford, and a host of historical reasons behind our economic gaps as a nation. In typical Talk Radio 702 style, Udo told the lady he could help. He was aware of a braai currently taking place in Mondeor (a suburb also in the south of Johannesburg). The lady could still be part of braai day if she wanted to do so. Some of the people at the braai were Udo's friends and could, upon his request, give directions to the caller so she could join them. She refused nicely but plainly. She was not looking for charity, she said. She was hoping just for the acknowledgement of the truth in what she was saying. The only heritage she would be commemorating is the one related to her traditional background, and that was that. Something distinct can be gleaned in both Scannell's and the anonymous caller's views or intentions. There is an attempt, by both individuals, to unify themselves with an "imagined community", and more so with Scannell, to unify that "community". For the caller the "imagined community" is those who subscribe to her brand of traditional African heritage, and for Scannell it is crowds around braai stands. While Scannell suggests he is trying to help unify South Africans, one may be wary that he is trying to whitewash African identity using some arbitrary form of national identity that is centred on a *lekker jol* and *braaivleis*.

To recapitulate, I agree that notions of nationhood are specious in how they are presented as unified. There exists neither a coherent national identity nor a solid identity of the self. Individuals, by themselves, and as part of cultural groupings, simply create a world in which culture and identity are ordered for them. Moving away from Hall and his ideas of nationhood, I would like to look at how people exist as an "imagined community" under the umbrella of tribe, and how the colonial encounter has deracinated their culture and identity. But the question remains, if culture is always in a state of change, how can someone's identity be uprooted from it? Well, because there are individuals and institutions who manipulate and order culture, as has been said. Their approach and actions set the stage for static conditions from which culture can be seen to be uproot-able. There is another answer, however, and it speaks to deracination operating within the context of ever-evolving culture and identity. I will begin it with the logic of Ernesto Laclau (in Hall, 1996), who argues that constant change around culture and identity is a positive thing, and that those who lament it as a crisis need not do so. The constant de-centering of identity and culture means there is

always an opportunity for new creations and iterations of self and community, he suggests. While I agree that there indeed are opportunities for creations of new identities and cultures, I do not believe those new creations are automatically positive for everyone involved in the change. The new creations do not occur in politically and economically neutral spaces. The major question for me becomes: Who is responsible for the new creations and iterations of whose culture and identity, and what are the power relations under which those new creations and iterations take shape? More aptly, is there any cultural deracination taking place when these new creations happen? The idea of deracination follows the ensuing logic for me. If change in culture and identity is inevitable; so be it. If others seek to domesticate these concepts, as some individuals and institutions do, let them hold on to the traditions and symbols they like, according to their own cultural preferences. But when change affects a culture, it is important to mark who is imbued with power versus who is stripped of it. Put another way, it is important who has the upper hand in influencing change. For example, African cultures had been evolving before colonisation, and they would have continued to evolve in dislocated ways without the introduction of the coloniser's hand in shaping them. Whether the coloniser had come or had not come to Southern African shores, the cultures of the Africans living here would have changed. Shaka kaSenzangakhona himself affected the cultures of tribes he conquered, even though those cultures would have experienced organic internal changes before they were conquered. The same can be said for the Xhosa and the other tribes they conquered, including the Khoi and San people with whom they had documented periodic conflict. In other words, cultural deracination was already taking place in South Africa. Yet the deracination that was brought on by colonisation was different. Let us compare the two briefly to see how. The people known as the Xhosa are not a single tribe. They are a group of clans who speak a largely similar Nguni language. They have come together through intermarriage, transferal of allegiance, migration, war and conquest, among other historical and social forces. Just as the French may be Germanic, Celtic and Iberic, the Xhosa tribe is made up of sub-groups or clans such as the Xhosa, Mpondo, Mpondomise, and Thembu, who are descended from the more dominant lines of Tshawe, Jola, Nyawuza and Hala. Many other clans exist, such as ooNgqosini, ooMncotshe, and what have you. Peires (1981) suggests: "The Ngqosini [clan], for example, were either Sotho or Khoi in origin. They were subjugated by the Xhosa after a fierce resistance, [though they subsequently] switched their allegiance to the Thembu king [before] finally [returning] to being Xhosa…" A point of interest in what Peires says is that the Ngqosini would have become Xhosa people against their wishes at first, but after committing themselves to the Thembu king, they went

back to being Xhosa again without the element of subjugation. What made one Xhosa? There was no ID document or Passport for the tribe. The simple answer: taking on the customs and traditions of Xhosa people. This meant, putting aside the customs and traditions one previously had, or amending them to fit a new cultural identity, chief of which was accepting the rule of the Xhosa king. Peires (1981) writes:

> "There were minor cultural differences among the larger polities, but the clansmen who crossed national boundaries found it easy to adopt the fashion of their new home. Thus the Ngqosini took to red ocher when they came to live among the Xhosa, and the Zangwa (who were originally Mpondo) stopped scarifying their faces and started circumcising their children…"

The above tells us clearly that certain groups (*ooNgqosini namaZangwa*), under conditions wherein the Xhosa group had more power than them, experienced a deracination of culture and identity. On the surface, this might seem like the same thing the European colonial machine did to Africans. They subjugated African people and caused a deracination of culture and identity for them. But the distinct difference between subjugation by the Xhosa tribe versus being subjugated by the Dutch or British nation lies in the next quote by Peires (1981):

> "The Khoi who were defeated by the Xhosa… the Gona, Dama, Hoengiqua were not expelled from their ancient homes or relegated to a condition of hereditary servitude on the basis of their skin colour. They became Xhosa with the full rights of any other Xhosa."

Thus, the cultural deracination effected by the Xhosa on these tribes may not seem as terrible in comparison to the cultural deracination visited on Africans by European colonisers. This is because the Xhosa replaced a culture and identity that previously existed with a new one. But all along there was a component of cultural inclusion in their approach to dealing with the defeated peoples. There was a more substantial kind of peace, even after a war or battle, as people lived equally and were not separated from their land, their economy, and their means of production. With the Dutch (later Afrikaans) and English, the cultural deracination is pronounced – perhaps because of two reasons. The first of these may be the fact that it would have been difficult to tell a Xhosa or a Ngqosini apart with the naked eye. With colonisation, however, whether or not a European and a Xhosa person could have shared a culture, they had notable external differences. Also, and more importantly, European people have subjugated African people in a manner that has, from the time of their arrival on

our shores as nations, never ever been inclusive. Instead, they have used their power to get more power and leave as little as possible to other groups.

I have laid out how cultural deracination works – in both the contexts of an imagined static culture and an ever-evolving one. It is not my concern to prove culture and identity as transient or permanent, fractured or coherent. That is up to the particular individual or group interacting with their own culture and identity. My only concern is who wields power over whom in the moment of cultural exchange (and change), and to exactly what end that power affects the identity of the powerless.

Power and Social Control: Force and Hegemony

When it comes to questions of who wields power over whom in a society, looking to Antonio Gramsci becomes essential. The Italian politician and Marxist philosopher advanced the concept of hegemony. This is a 'tool' for studying how power is wielded by dominant groups over groups they subordinate. It is about how the thinking and way of life of a dominant group takes over as the undercurrent of awareness that informs 'everything' in the day to day – including political, economic, and other cultural transactions. Gramsci borrowed the idea of hegemony from Lenin's writings, though he used it in a different manner to Lenin, adding a completely new dimension to Marxist theory, according to Joseph Femia (1981). Like most political thinkers before him, Gramsci began his examination of social control with the notions of force and consent. The meaning of force is not difficult to comprehend. With colonisation; slavery, apartheid; the Fees Must Fall movement; Marikana; Andries Tatane; we know how force has manifested itself in South Africa. At its worst, it produces casualties and martyrs; injury and death. Consent, on the other hand, is a little trickier to define within the context of hegemony, because the word usually implies the presence of choice. While force is unequivocal in *demanding* and *making* the oppressed behave in a particular way, consent seems like a willing 'yes' from the oppressed. But under what conditions is that 'yes' given? Are the oppressed aware of the implications of their consent when they give it? Gramsci talks about consent as coercion. This suggests the 'yes' of the oppressed is not given without pressure on the part of the oppressor. In detailing his understanding of Gramsci's hegemony, Femia (1981) states that:

> "The [supremacy] of a social group or class manifests itself in two different ways: 'domination' (*dominio*), or coercion, and intellectual and moral leadership (*direzione intelletuale e morale*). This latter type of supremacy constitutes hegemony. Social control, in other words, takes two basic forms: besides influencing behaviour and choice externally, through rewards and punishments, it also affects them internally, by moulding personal convictions into a replica of prevailing norms. Such 'internal control' is based on hegemony. Which refers to an order in which common social-moral language is spoken in which one concept of reality is dominant, informing with its spirit all modes of thought and behaviour."

In South Africa, the consent given to the dominant group by other groups is given within a setting where, historically speaking, force has been used to establish a clear hierarchy of power. For Femia, hegemony clearly does not include force. Yes, he acknowledges that it is employed by dominant groups to gain and maintain social control

over other groups. But force is an altogether separate process from hegemony. The latter is specifically the coercion into believing that one group's world-view is more legitimate than the world-views of other groups that coexist with it. Jackson Lears (1985) differs from Femia in how he reads Gramsci. He approaches force and consent as inseparable. For him, social control over subordinate groups *via* consent is only possible because that consent is tied to a threat of violence. Subordinate groups are tacitly aware of the introduction of violence should they no longer 'stick to the script' of the dominant group. Thus, Lears sees hegemony as both "*dominio*" (force) and "*direzione intelletuale e morale*" (coercion as well as intellectual and moral leadership). While hegemony works on the psyche, it is infused with a latent but ever-lingering threat of physical violence that *helps* it to work. So, whether hegemony is separate from force or is inclusive of it, one thing remains: it is a means of social control that works on, and in, the mind. Gramsci (1992) gives us further insight into how hegemony is realised, by detailing who the agents of its success are in society:

> "[1] The 'spontaneous' consent given by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group; this consent is "historically" caused by the prestige (and consequent confidence) which the dominant group enjoys because of its position and function in the world of production. [2] The apparatus of state coercive power which "legally" enforces discipline on those groups who do not "consent" either actively or passively. This apparatus is, however, constituted for the whole of society in anticipation of moments of crisis of command and direction when spontaneous consent has failed."

Gramsci's second point is self-explanatory; I will give attention only to his first one. The quote is from a chapter titled 'The Formation of Intellectuals' (in *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*). In it, Gramsci talks about the role of intellectuals in society, going as far back as the feudal system of Europe. He notes how intellectuals traditionally occupy a privileged position in society because of their place in the hierarchy of the production process. There are different spheres of society within production, he notes; and inside each sphere, producers have varying degrees of competency and functionality. On one end of the spectrum there is the producer with minimum technical skill. On the other end is the advanced producer who creates, innovates, and is afforded prestige in society because of his or her academic qualifications and/or high level of intellectual and technical work. For example, the bricklayer and the architect are essentially in the same sphere of society and production process. They work towards the fruition of the same projects. But the two do not enjoy the same prestige and confidence in their field or even in greater society; nor do they

receive similar education and training to qualify for their positions. To be fair, Gramsci notes that all human beings, especially those involved in production are intellectuals. There is a level at which each producer in the production process performs an intellectual function. The only difference is the esteem (or lack thereof) granted different producers. In any event, it is intellectuals on the higher end of the spectrum, from scientists, artists, innovators, entrepreneurs, captains of industry, politicians etc., who do the work of maintaining cultural hegemony. They do this through the institutions of society they occupy. In particular, Gramsci singles out political society (the state) as well as civil society (private institutions, including the individuals and groups who work through them). He says intellectuals, in both civil and political society, engage in dialogue that serves only to solidify bourgeois or mainstream thought at the expense of competing voices. It is of little consequence that these intellectuals are sometimes classified as right-wing or left-wing (across political and civil society), because their voices are similar to a certain degree. Their concerns are confined to the cultural principles, practices and processes of their class, and these are presented to subordinate groups as normalised ways of approaching life – as the perimeters of societal discourse, as it were. So how does hegemony fit into the overall argument I am making? It assists in explaining who wields power over whom in the moment of cultural change and exchange. It is language that helps to highlight how the coloniser used both force and consent in subjugating the African, and, in the process, deracinated him/her from his/her culture and way of life. Because I am primarily concerned with colonisation and its ongoing damaging effects, I will be evoking hegemony within the context of race and class. The colonisers' descendants, much like their forefathers and mothers did, dominate the majority of Africans – politically, economically, and all-round culturally, as a race. There are those Africans, however, who have consented and/or succumbed to the hegemony of white culture, and have become Westernised out of that cultivated reverence and love for the West. Some of these Africans, as the elite within the private sector and state machinery, even dominate their own people along class lines. There are also Africans who aspire to be part of Western bourgeois identity but are unable to participate at that socio-economic level. They are nevertheless able to participate ideologically by assenting to Western values. Yet we have other Africans still, who do not consent, because they reject a Western way of life. All these groups though, whether or not they are for or against the way of the dominant class, live within a system of laws, politics, and an economy, that is dictated by Western norms. Education, language, notions of beauty, etc. – all kowtow to Western standards, or fall short of them. The alternative voices that exist have to fight in order to get representation. Ultimately, we have

the African who takes to the culture of his/her oppressor in a positive way and seeks to adopt it for himself or herself. And we have the African who is dominated and cannot escape the reach of the coloniser's culture.

How does the former kind of African come to be? In part, through being historically subjected to the type of institutionalised racism that afforded white people more opportunities at success and economic and familial stability. This made the white race seem more successful and worthy of 'prestige' in the eyes of the oppressed people whose progress in the mainstream economy was thwarted in a variety of institutionalised ways. This sort of African also results from being repeatedly told his or her culture is nothing, and that much of it needs to be discarded. Fanon (1963) speaks about how colonisers always project their own culture(s) as indispensable, while at the same time drumming into the colonised just how repugnant their cultures are. He points out that the coloniser attacks the culture of the colonised in the following way:

> "The area of culture is then marked off by fences and signposts[.] The… oppressor does not manage to convince himself of the objective non-existence of the oppressed nation and its culture. Every effort is made to bring the [colonised] person to admit the inferiority of his culture which has been transformed into instinctive patterns of behaviour, to [recognise] the unreality of his 'nation', and, in the last extreme, the confused and imperfect character of his own biological structure."

The oppressed person's feeling of legitimacy is stripped in all he or she does, in all he or she is. This leaves a being who is not proud of the state of his or her culture before its collision with the coloniser's one. He or she gravitates towards the coloniser's culture for legitimacy. This African experiences deracination in this manner. An example of this is given by Noushin Kalati and James Manor (1999) who share their insights on post-colonial South Africa. They talk about how the elite segment of African society tends to move away from the rest of their African compatriots, along a trajectory of culture that erases their own, and writes in its place that of the coloniser:

> "Most have internalised many 'first-world' habits of mind. All of this has usually, though not always, had a deracinating impact upon them and creates considerable psychological distance between them and even the urban and peri-urban poor within their segments[*]. And since severe poverty is mainly found in rural areas, the distance between black elites and many or most of the poor within their segments is [physically] vast. To make matters worse, a huge number of poor South Africans have also

> experienced deracination. In the apartheid era, many were uprooted as a consequence of state policy and the peculiar mixed economy which it helped to foster. They were deprived of pre-existing rights, not least to land, and families were broken apart by the… search of work."

In the above quote we have psychological and physical deracination. Not only do African people experience a loss of culture, becoming less like themselves and more like another people (within complex power relations), but their way of life is tempered with materially by the coloniser. Among other things, the colonised people's relationship with the land and economy is altered. There are plenty examples of Africans being uprooted physically from their land in order to make way for white people. We have the Native Land Act of 1913, the Group Areas Act of 1950, and the Native Resettlement Act of 1954, besides a plethora of others. While the Native Land Act was effectively used to take all the land from Africans, the Group Areas Act was the law under which District Six residents lost their land use, and the Native Resettlement Act was responsible for the Sophiatown removals. Going past these 20th century examples and deeper into history, a British coloniser in the 1800s, General Henry Pottinger, went after the Xhosa with redoubled vigour when they would not cede the lands (around the Keiskamma to the Kei) to the British after being defeated by them. The Xhosa had accepted defeat and agreed to peace through talks, but, after handing over a few of their weapons, they simply continued their lives as though they had not been defeated in war. Pottinger did exactly what the Grahamstown press was also clamouring for. He avoided any further encounter with Xhosa soldiers and attacked homesteads instead. According to Peires (1981), this is what the press said:

> "Let the war be made against the Kafir huts and gardens. Let all these be burned down and destroyed. Let there be no ploughing, sowing or reaping. Or, if you cannot conveniently, or without bloodshed prevent the cultivation of the ground, take care to destroy the enemy's crops before they are ripe, and shoot all who resist. Shoot their cattle too wherever you see any. Tell them that the time has come for the white man to show his mastery over them."

When the livelihood of the Africans was done away with for the most part, and their previous economic activity was brought to a halt by wars and such interventions as Pottinger's, the African was ripe to be lured towards an economy of the West as a poorly paid worker. Another of the British Empire's more celebrated plunderers, Harry Smith, provides us with an example of this. He is quoted below 'in dialogue' with Africans about bringing them more into a Western way of life. He talks about changing into English names the very

places under their feet; places for which they have long had names. He calls them to work in the support of a larger economic project than he deems they have yet given themselves to in their history as a people. He refers to them as barbarians, and as such, calls them uncultured. This is a clear effort at uprooting, or culturally deracinating the African; psychologically telling him he or she is not enough, and physically taking over his or her destiny by force. These are Smith's words according to Peires (1981):

> "Your land shall be marked out and marks placed that you may all know it. It shall be divided into counties, towns and villages, bearing English names. You shall all learn to speak English at the schools which I shall establish for you… You may no longer be naked and wicked barbarians, which you will ever be unless you labour and become industrious. You shall be taught to plough; and the Commissary shall buy of you. You shall have traders, and you must teach your people to bring gum, timber, hides etc. to sell, that you may learn the art of money, and buy for yourselves. You must learn that it is money that makes people rich by work, and help me to make roads. I will pay you."

With the display of military might, the meting out of violence over centuries, the projection of Western culture as leading, while simultaneously tearing down African cultures, the coloniser was able to achieve decided supremacy over the colonised. Hegemony took effect as a form of social control, and the coloniser's culture became the dominant way of life. Western politics, the economy, and Western culture in general, developed into the standard. The result? Many Africans give more legitimacy to the coloniser's way of life than they do to their own – just as I did with the English language over *isiXhosa* as a youth. Indeed the cultures of African people have naturally changed over time. Some of that change was (and is) internal, but a significant amount of it was (and is) brought on by a collision with Western cultures. Again, it is significant who wields power over whom in the moment of cultural exchange (and change), and exactly how that power affects the identity of the powerless. During the cultural collisions and changes (abstract and material) that occurred between colonisers and the colonised in South Africa over time, it is clear the colonisers had the upper hand. What came of that upper hand is the cultural deracination that has displaced (and continues to displace) Africans within their cultures and within their land. Even after the so-called liberation of African people in 1994, the nation of South Africa, replete as it is with Africans, esteems Western culture over the cultures of its indigenous peoples. Just as Fanon (1963) states, even after the removal of white colonial faces from the political and economic machinery of a post-colonial country, the unthinking (or cunning) African elite simply keep to the same oppressive systems that came with a Western way of life.

The Eyes of the Naked: The Process of the Pen

When the thought first came to me to write *The Eyes of the Naked* I was preoccupied with a certain aspect of our South African reality – our violence. I was absorbed with its different forms. Some of it issued from the news and some of it from real or unmediated life. But all the time I wanted to make deeper connections with it, to investigate and understand it somehow. If I had the skills of a Jackson Pollock I would have dripped it onto a snow-white canvas, in varying shades of red. In fact, my initial thought was to call the novel *Violand* – a portmanteau word composed of 'violent' and 'land'. I intended to write about South Africa and its countless forms of physical and psychological harm. The aim was to abstract some of the violence, sit it on my palm, and turn it this way and that way as I create a work of fiction around it. I would eventually take the title of *Violand* with me into my Masters in Creative Writing class. It was criticised as drab and unimaginative. I disagreed at first, but relented as I witnessed the novel grow into something much larger than an interrogation of violence. It became a work curious about notions of culture – the loss and transformation thereof – but still within a matrix of violence, and with links to it. How I ended up with *The Eyes of the Naked* is a long creative and learning journey. I will detail that journey as I lay the ground to say: there remains a need for protest literature in South Africa today.

The journey begins with the *how* and *why* of my writing because a writer ought to mention why and how he or she writes. I will begin with the how.

For me, the process consists in bringing together moments and ideas that may be unrelated but carry similar themes, at least in my imagination. As an artist, I am a keen observer of the grand and the mundane in people and society. I mean that in the following sense. Many years ago, Dr. John Kani once gave a guest lecture in my FVPA class at Wits (a first year course offered at the School of Arts). It was about his play *Nothing but the Truth*. He spoke at length regarding characterisation in general. He taught us about the skill of perpetual observation – a skill which is important in the creation of characters and their personalities, proclivities, whims, and what have you. He spoke of watching the crowd, and asked us to think more about strangers in the moments in which we encounter them. In particular, he wanted us to imagine the lives of strangers as vignettes. And that given their states of mind or dispositions during our encounters with them, we should be able to guess their lives outside of those moments. In other words, it should be in us to fictionalise the parts of the strangers' lives that we are not privy to, based on what we can see in the present. As said, this is the manner in which I observe. But that observation is not limited to strangers. It

is for all human beings, for all animate and inanimate things. Once I have taken things in, and mulled them over, I breathe life into them and render them into a single seamless work of fiction. Sometimes the sequences I create may be nothing like the thoughts that initially sparked them. To finish my point I will borrow from Mikhailov, a painter in Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* (1877). When Vronsky and Anna first go abroad together, to Italy, they meet a Russian expatriate and acquaintance of Vronsky's, Golenishchev. He takes the couple to Mikhailov's house. The painter, Russian as well, is the new dissentient and self-taught type of man in Europe, but is incredibly brilliant. He paints Anna's best portrait yet; one that captures her quintessence like no other in the book, not even Vronsky's (who is really a self-important dilettante). When the reader first meets Mikhailov, the artist is preoccupied with the sketch of a man. It is a drawing he had tried before and discarded, but is trying to recreate. It is *this* sketch that speaks to my writing process. Mikhailov struggles to draw his man well. In fact, he struggles so much he resorts to seeking out the first attempt he made at the drawing. When he eventually finds the paper, the image has dirt and candle grease on it. These stains give the image lines the artist had not considered as possibilities before. The sketch is enhanced by something that may be expected to spoil it in a different context. Mikhailov is encouraged and new possibilities appear to him. He goes on to finish his sketch triumphantly. In a sense, my writing process works like this because I do not begin with a coherent story in my mind and see it through to the end as a fully imagined piece. I begin with wanting to investigate and make some observation about a subject or subjects. I observe myriad abstract and concrete occurrences in people and society in the everyday. And Like Mikhailov's dirty sketch, I meld these sometimes unrelated elements in a way that hopefully yields an honest story.

The *why* of my writing rests firmly in the fact that I *know* I must do it. It is a feeling that sits like a weight on my conscience. When I neglect it, it becomes heavy to bear. Or I feel as if I am wasting something; like one who knowingly leaves a tap running while they step out to run errands. There is simply a compulsion in me to write. This compulsion was cultivated or strengthened by the following three things: 1) My experience of a major car accident and the aftermath thereof; 2) an unexpected telephone call from the man who would become my writing mentor; and 3) my perceived relationship with destiny as an African person who has lived under colonial subjugation and continues to live under forms of it.

The first time I knew beyond a doubt I *had* to write, I was in my late-20s. My life was caught in a vortex of ups and downs. This was after near-death and severe injury from a car

accident; the loss of my ability to earn for nearly two years; the loss of a home; as well as the incurring of colossal medical debt. Up to this point I had always written in some form or other – mostly poetry (and a little music). But during this period I began to write fiction in the form of short stories, and for the first time ever, I considered the idea of writing a novel. Around this same time my troubles led me to Wits University, in search of an education in order to better my life. Times became even harder as a student. There were days upon days when all I had in my fridge was cold air, and all the kitchen cupboards had to offer was one wrinkled onion. During those days, I was growing in new ways in the world, recovering from breaks of all sorts. Sometimes I would have to walk twenty kilometres home from Wits because I had no money for the commute. I was too proud to beg for it from fellow students who were, on average, ten years younger than me. Suffice it to say I was a recluse and borderline misanthrope, even though I wore a face that was pleasant enough to get me through interactions. Moments of happiness and/or pleasure were extremely hard to come by. Yet one day, on probably the emptiest stretch my stomach had experienced, I began writing one of the short stories that would later get me into the Masters in Creative Writing program at Wits. As I was writing it, my words and ideas flowing as freely as they ever had, I recall having to stop to massage my face after a long spell. It was aching; my face was aching. Unknowingly, I had been smiling for a long time, to a point of pain; and this from the sheer enjoyment of the activity of writing a work of fiction. It was a radiant feeling deep inside me that kept my body and spirit suspended from any pressing wants and needs. I remember the power of that epiphany. I had to keep writing, for my own sake if for nothing else, the epiphany said. Committing words to paper in the form of fiction was something I would always do. The story took me a few months to complete. That same short story was taken by a friend who inadvertently let it be seen by my writing mentor. I received a call out of the blue from him, as a stranger then. He advised me to keep writing. If you keep writing and become better than you are, he said, you could become one of the better writers of your generation. He may have been mistaken or correct, but that is neither here nor there. What he did is fill me with expectation for myself, an internal summit to climb and conquer. Whether I do conquer it or stumble along the way is of little consequence. I simply must continue to march towards it as long as I have breath, creativity, and words in me. Otherwise it would feel as though I am leaving something to die. This is another big part of *why* I write. Finally, I write because I am burdened by a need to distil human experience, to understand life and make meaning in it and of it, because I am part of it. Our individual journeys through life, even when considered long, are relatively short. We never know when the train of life will

stop at our station, and our exit from existence will be required. It is thus important to be in charge of our own destinies while we are here, as much as we can be. As such, I am an observer who makes meaning of the things in me and around me through my writing. I engage in what Dennis Brutus and Chinua Achebe call committed writing (Brutus, 2006). My writing is concerned with making comment on issues that pertain to a wide scope of human experience. However, as an African who has been colonised and subjugated by Western 'forces' my entire life (called a monkey by a white boy in church as he moved away to avoid sitting next to me, spat on by strangers at The Wheel in Durban, growing up in the labour reserve that was the Transkei and having social and racial conditions and laws that thwarted my forefathers' and my father's progress) I am fixated on, as well as convinced of the importance of telling African stories that seek to liberate the African mind.

Both the *how* and the *why* of my writing have led me to *The Eyes of the Naked*. As said, I was initially preoccupied with the subject of violence when I wanted to write this book. The kinds of violence that stood out to me when I took to writing the novel are innumerable. I will attempt to highlight some of the more important ones and how they became the impetus as well as glue for my writing of this novel.

I had worked for years at O.R. Tambo International Airport as a flight attendant. Around the same time I left that job there was a crime that was becoming prevalent in the news. It piqued my interest because I had spent nearly eight years of my life in the space in which it was happening. This was the robbing of tourists while in transit, in shuttle busses between O.R. Tambo International Airport and wherever the tourists' destinations were. As a younger writer grappling with ideas for novels and short stories, this type of crime had stood out as something I could use as a kernel around which to develop a plot. But that never took off (until years later, with the male protagonist of *The Eyes of the Naked* being involved in such a crime).

The next time the novel came to me I was reading a lot about South African violence from outside the country, in news reports, blogs, social media, and radio streaming as well. I was living in Japan, and I was a few months into my eventual three-year stay. The current Minister of Police in South Africa, Bheki Cele, was the then Commissioner of the South African Police Service. His motto, in the face of what was reported by the media to be high criminal activity, was "shoot to kill". I remember streaming South African talk radio one morning (*Talk at Nine* with Kieno Kammies on Talk Radio 702) and hearing that the black

female passenger of a Toyota Conquest had been killed in Pretoria because the police mistook the vehicle she was in for one that had been reported as hijacked. I wondered about that kind of violence too, how the police are both a solution and problem in society. Theirs is a legitimated violence, but that does not always equate it to a just one. Around the idea of "shoot to kill" there were a few debates on Talk Radio 702 about the colour of violent crime in South Africa. Did "shoot to kill" affect white people? In other words, did they stand even a remote chance of being shot erroneously by the police as was done in the incident involving the Toyota Conquest? Quite a few white people said violent crime is indeed a 'black thing'; that they did not fear the police mistaking them for criminals. Most callers seemed to agree that there were socio-economic and historical factors to the crime in our country. Many, but not all, agreed there was nothing intrinsically bad in the African that contributed to the African being the largest race performing violent crime in the country. There was talk that the exhortation to shoot criminals in the streets was 'lazy thinking' that would put only one group at the risk of being shot by mistake. More inspired responses than "shoot to kill" were needed. Education and unemployment needed to be tackled, for example. I was aware of these arguments and even had my own views at this time. By then, the violence that interested me stood out, not just as violence, but as something textured by a complex set of historical and socio-economic conditions.

Marikana followed, and so did the death of Andries Tatane, which many South Africans viewed on live television. These sets of violence were particularly highlighted to me because the one was said to be a continuation of the struggle against colonialism, similar to the Frontier Wars. This was Marikana. I was interested in a discussion of how colonialism, with the brands of violence that it brought with it, arrived and never left. It just changed its appearance into neo-colonialism, with relatively the same systems in place, similar violence being meted out, but an African elite manning the stations of power, as Fanon (1963) suggests is the case with many a post-colonial African state. The death of Andries Tatane was striking because we watched a man die on national television and all over social media. This was a harrowing moment for anyone who watched. I will end here with the how and why of my writing and devote the final part of this essay to the rationale behind the positioning of my novel within the protest literature genre in the South African canon.

There Remains Much to Protest

Why should *The Eyes of the Naked*, a story written in the years leading up to 2020, care to be relatable to what should be a dead genre in protest literature? Are the conditions worthy of protest in our society no longer existent? The answer to this question is simple. The conditions still exist. This is because the African has been uprooted from his culture since his/her initial encounter with colonialism, and through time, he/she has been subjected to a variety of 'violences'. Many of these 'violences' have yet to come to an end. A few of these are linguistic displacement and physical displacement from the land. They are hunger, poverty, exclusion. They are beatings and murders by the police if at all the masses seek an inch of freedom from their oppressors. The times may be different, but the history and conditions for the majority of Africans in Mongane Serote's *To Every Birth Its Blood*, Zakes Mda's *Ways of Dying*, and my novel *The Eyes of the Naked* are scarcely different. In my time of writing, there remains much to protest.

It should be noted that my attempt to compare the conditions of Africans in these three texts is not undertaken as rigorous academic enquiry. I merely aim to position the novel within the South African canon of literature by highlighting the social conditions evident in each of the three novels.

We have already expressed culture as a complete way of life, not just customs and traditions. Let us dissect how this way of life of the African was disrupted by colonialism in terms of cultural deracination, and also in terms of the brands of violence that colonialism ushered in. We will reposition ourselves from this mark.

After being uprooted from their cultures, African people were inserted into Western ones; into a society with a system of politics and an economy that favoured a Western way of life over an African one. It still does. It is a system in which Africans have always been disadvantaged as the conquered. They have largely been excluded from the economy and its material benefits. Up until 1994 they were not even regarded as citizens. Still, we know how the forefathers of these African people lived before this land was overridden by the tyranny of the West, in the days of their independence. It was not without challenges. This part of Africa was not in some pre-lapsarian pre-colonial past. The people here faced life's harshness from the environment and each other; there were tribal wars and thee was peace, there were nationalist aspirations on the part of some leaders such as Shaka ka Senzangakhona. There were politics, politicians, emissaries, sets of laws (albeit not codified). There were rulers with

cabinets (*amaphakathi*) as well as spiritual leaders. I know this from oral tradition before I know it from Peires (1981) who speaks mostly about the Xhosa way of life. African people faced vicissitudes, small and grand in scale, but they lived decidedly differently from the Western culture that would conquer theirs materially, psychologically, and spiritually. The changes that would be forced upon them were numerous. Not only would Africans be physically and linguistically displaced, but there would be violence attached to this displacement in the form of hunger, poverty, exclusion (and beatings and murder by the police in times of rebellion).

Examples of linguistic and physical displacement abound. One such case is that of the land being changed and reshaped right under the African's feet. He/she became zoned in it according to the laws, plans and benefit of his/her Western conqueror. Here we recall Harry Smith who, according to Peires (1981), said: "Your land shall be marked out and marks placed that you may all know it. It shall be divided into counties, towns and villages, bearing English names." Linguistically, the African had to begin to shape his/her tongue to pronounce English words in order to denote his/her home, to refer to his/her land. It should be highlighted that Harry Smith was speaking to defeated people in the above quote. Subjugation and violence are already implicit in this. But more than this it should be noted that his words speak to a larger violence that resides in the mapping out and cartography of South Africa by the coloniser. It speaks to physical displacement. In Harry Smith's quote, the land, in name and in shape, is changed in ways that separate the African from his/her destiny and influence over it. Harry Smith may have been speaking in a particular moment in history, but this exercise of naming and zoning the land, and removing Africans from it, has taken many forms since the Cape became a colony. There have been independent Boere Republics; the Union of South Africa; the Republic of South Africa (which, in part of its apartheid iteration, had homelands). This same republic became a 'New South Africa' in 1994, with provinces and municipalities being redrawn on the map. Throughout our South African colonial history, the cartography, the making of our country, its territories, provinces, municipalities and what have you, has yielded many different manifestations and names. All of these have zoned the African in ways that have spoken to his/her physical and linguistic displacement, hunger, poverty, and exclusion.

We see this, for example, in the creation of the township – a form of labour reserve for Africans on the outskirts of white cities. We also see it in the creation of the homelands such as the Transkei, Ciskei, Venda, Bophuthatswana (and other non-independent ones). Africans

were housed in these labour reserves for the benefit of the white South African government and the white South African families who voted for it. While African people living in homelands could live relatively freely in this kind of segregated space, away from the physical violence visited on Africans daily in South Africa, there was poverty in the homelands. The major economy and majority of jobs were to be found in the cities of white South Africa, where Africans were *personae-non-grata* past their hours of utility. An article in the *Economic and Political Weekly* (1976), titled "Programme of Retribalisation", speaks about the relationship between the homeland and the Western economy of white South Africans. It reads:

> "The [homeland] as envisaged will continue to supply the white settlers with cheap labour, and will be compelled to do so by being made small, fragmentary, overcrowded and underdeveloped. That indeed is what the Bantustan programme amounts [to] – an exercise in fragmentation based on tribalism".

In order to access white cities when escaping the engineered poverty of the homelands, African people had to produce paperwork such as the infamous passbook. Once in the cities, they were zoned into townships. This all speaks to the physical displacement of the African. It speaks to masses moving for the necessity of work within a scaffolding of lack deliberately laid out by their coloniser. It speaks to the sundering of families. The most noteworthy aspect to the physical displacement of the African lies exactly in that: in this fragmentation of the African family unit. The African family unit is supremely important in that Africans of this part of the world used to thrive as units in their pre-colonial cultural experience (Peires, 1981). They lived in homesteads (with the exception of nomadic tribes). The sense of community carried a premium for the African. Hardihood may have been in individuals, but fortitude was also experienced as a collective. Peires (1981) speaks about how people would bond together in times of famine and share with each other from their granaries, not just within their family units but with other families too. I know this sense of community in my own rearing, although I also know it is lost in the spaces I inhabit. I do not have to read about it in books to grasp its essence. It is because of it that we have such concepts as *Ubuntu*. (And this was before *Ubuntu* was pronounced as *Ubhunthu* on the coloniser's tongue and lost all sense of meaning.) All in all then, the physical displacement of the African was particularly brutal in that the family unit was broken up as the African sought work further afield.

It has been made clear that the Bantustans were labour reserves. But one must go back to why the African had to begin with the business of labour in the Western economy in the first place. Even before the engineering of the homeland, why did the African have to seek work? We look to Harry Smith again, who, after telling Africans they would receive street names in English, and the geography of their land would be altered, told those same Africans they would have to work in a new way to what they had hitherto known. Peires (1981) writes:

> "You shall all learn to speak English at the schools which I shall establish for you… [You will labour and become industrious]. You shall be taught to plough; and the Commissary shall buy of you. You shall have traders, and you must teach your people to bring gum, timber, hides etc. to sell, that you may learn the art of money, and buy for yourselves. You must learn that it is money that makes people rich by work, and help me to make roads. I will pay you."

Of course Peires goes on to detail that these people were exploited and paid an unfair pittance. Herein also resides the poverty and hunger. But we see people here who were being told that the economic mode that they had been previously part of was changing. They were no longer to live in the manner that suited them. Now, they had to march to the clock of the industry of the Western economic machine – a new culture. They were defeated and being reorganised as a society. There were factories and mines and the homes of white families to work in. With that came the separation of families from each other – husbands from wives, wives from husbands, and mothers and fathers away from children. The trauma implicit in this separation of the family should not be lamented as an event of a single generation. It should be mourned as something that echoes through generations and can be seen in South African society today. The former homelands still have such bad economies that African people still leave their loved ones, their support systems, behind. They go to cities to work in an economy that still excludes the majority of Africans. Things are now as they were in Serote's time, and before that, under colonialism.

In all the novels in question, the violence of linguistic and physical displacement echoes. The land, in all three novels, still has English names that were thrust upon it and upon the mouths of defeated Africans. There is hunger, poverty, and exclusion for the majority of Africans, and there is police violence to set back in line those who would rise up for their freedom – Gramsci's (1992) concept of coercion within the theory of hegemony.

The characters of *To Every Birth Its Blood* live in an impoverished township called Alexandra, in a city called Johannesburg (both colonial names). Tsietsi 'Tsi' Molope, a journalist and actor, is one of the main characters through whose point of view the plot and action are focalised in the first part of the book. As much as he is attached to where he lives, because it is his home, he is oppressed in every minute of his existence by the apartheid system that rules him and this space with fear and violence. In Alexandra, just as in Johannesburg, there are police beatings of civilians in public and private. There are police raids and shootings of freedom fighters. These usher in violence so brutal its aftermath of silence is just as ferocious. Tsietsi is aware of the design of Alexandra by the coloniser, in order to impoverish the African and make him a labourer, a worker in an exchange that heavily benefits the coloniser and disempowers the African. He even mourns how the African commutes in the morning like a flood out of Alexander and into the city for his/her slavery and how he/she comes back home to his/her labour reserve, in the early evening because he/she is no longer welcome in the city. He knows there are poverty, hunger, and exclusion in this reality that is Alexandra. The poverty is evident in his having to manage money in the way he manages it with his wife. It is a pittance that she earns and they have for their household. This is especially after Tsi is abused by the police and leaves his employment as a journalist. This poverty is also evident in the kinds of dwellings that are in Alexandra. There are motley dwellings, but one-room homes and shacks, then like now, are packed tightly together there. Tsi also mourns this lack of space in his township. Serote writes of people living almost on top of each other. It is to be noted before we go any further that despite dealing with vicissitudes small and grand, Africans did not live in such squalor as we see in townships and squatter camps before colonisation. Townships and squatter camps are the bastardised children of the colonial project. They are locales that are directly linked to the migrant labour system. And in them, just as in the homeland, forced exclusion from certain spaces of the country is built in.

Though Mda does not use English names for the coastal city in which his main characters (Toloki and Noria) live in *Ways of Dying*, it could be East London, Port Elizabeth or even Cape Town or an imagined amalgam of all. To me it certainly has the feel of Cape Town. These are all English names of the land that are conjured up in the mind of the reader. Apart from this linguistic displacement, Mda also conjures up ideas of physical displacement in his evocation of migrant labour, the township, and squatter camps, all of which are elements present in Serote's work. Mda's protagonist, Toloki, is not a migrant labourer in the

sense of working in factories, mines, and the homes of white families. One might say he has debunked this narrative altogether in his own life by working for himself as a professional mourner. However, he does have to leave his rural homeland like any other migrant worker because of its poor economy. Whether or not Mda turns this theme into a concern and focuses on it, it remains that he writes about a homeland, an engineered space of physical displacement and other 'violences' visited upon the African. Sure, once Toloki reaches the city he does not need to be in possession of a passbook and register with a government office in order to legally remain there. But he is also not welcome everywhere in the city. He is often seen as a loiterer and is not free to be wherever he pleases. Even when purchasing his iconic tights, top hat, and cape in the city, he is looked upon warily, and made to feel unwelcome. While it may not be laws that keep him out of the best parts of the city, he is excluded by way of his inability to financially afford to be in certain spaces. This is the case with the majority of Africans. It is only in the township and squatter camp (where Toloki runs into, interacts with, and later lives with Noria) that he feels fully at home.

Of course, just as in Tsi's Alexandra, there is the underbelly of physical violence in Toloki's and Noria's township. This violence is also politically motivated and perpetrated by the police of the white government. A 'third force' is said to be stoking the fires between rival political parties that are separated along ethnic lines. Here Zakes Mda was depicting a white political machine that did not want to yield easily to the winds of change leading up to the first democratic elections of South Africa in 1994. Noria's son, Vutha the Second, is killed in this political township violence when he is 'necklaced' and burned to death. This is the kind of division and violence that also echoes through the pages of Serote's work. It is interesting that we again see the notion of migrant labour being evoked by Mda with his use of miners who live in hostels. It is these migrant labourers who kill Noria's boy. These are men who are away from their families in the homelands only to die in the political violence they perpetrate or encounter in the hostels.

To talk more about the poverty evident in the environment in which Toloki and Noria live I will look at the idea of a shack and its emptiness. They live in one. They build it together in what is a bonding experience between them. It is a one room dwelling, much like in Tsi's Alexandra. The difference with this shack is that instead of being a place of sheer nervousness that inspires feelings of claustrophobia, it becomes a place for them to escape and dream. It is a place of freedom and not oppression – for them. It is this precisely because they are aware of their poverty and the emptiness of their shack, but they choose to escape it through their imagination. They look at the various pictures they have put up on the

corrugated iron walls as decoration, and they dream of beds and leather couches being in their shack. In reality, just as with the majority of Africans in Serote's novel, Toloki and Noria experience the violence of material lack through engineered poverty. But instead of being overwhelmed and oppressed by it like Tsietsi, they imagine it away as a means of coping with its brutality.

In *The Eyes of the Naked* we have similar social conditions for the African as we do in the other two texts. Firstly the protagonists – Nakedi and Kele Solomon – live in Johannesburg, in Bryanston (and Nakedi later in Kempton Park). The names of the pieces of land zoned under their feet are far from African. It must be covered that the linguistic displacement inherent in the naming of African places in colonial languages is not an arbitrary or benign one. These are Western names with an inherent trauma in them for Africans, much like how a statue of John Cecil Rhodes carries trauma for a 'Fallist' in the #RhodesMustFall Movement. In the *Eyes of the Naked* this naming of places in English is addressed. The mountains of Port St Johns are referred to by their colonial names – Mount Thesiger and Mount Sullivan. Their African names are *Ephembeni* and *Etshobeni*. Although only one of these names is used in the novel, it is clearly stated in the second chapter that Thesiger and Sullivan are the colonial names of the mountains.

In terms of physical displacement, the migrant labour status of Nakedi and Kele is different to that of Tsietsi in Serote's work or Toloki and Noria in Mda's work. Of course Kele and Nakedi are in Johannesburg but they live in Bryanston. (Kele does not even come from a previous homeland – she is from Cape Town – so she does not fit the classic migrant labour archetype.) But her situation is a peculiar one because her struggle as a character is around trying to make it in mainstream economy and in her job. She is a single mother and breadwinner who is paid unfairly and treated terribly. She endures similar struggles to the migrant labourer of apartheid in her employment in a white company. Even at close quarters, the Western economic system tears her away from her family in Donovan. She is forced to work, just like the defeated Africans to whom Harry Smith spoke those many years ago. Perhaps she would be a better parent to her boy if she had full time support. But to make matters worse, she stands alone, even financially, until Malcolm comes along and Nakedi gets his 'act' together as a financial contributor towards Donovan's upbringing. For me, both Nakedi and Kele are a representation of the larger African male and female. They broadly represent the modern African family, a family torn apart as a result of being touched by the abuse and violence of colonisation and a Western way of life. Nakedi comes from a family

torn apart by the migrant labour system of the apartheid government. It did not touch him directly. It touched his father, and through his father touched him. He is thus not raised by a man. He becomes an absent father too, to some degree – certainly not the best kind of father. Kele is also faced with trying to conquer her professional world. In that preoccupation, each parent with his and her concerns, Donovan is raised by McDonalds, TV games and his own self. His prospects for a bright future in life are not great. If the child obesity does not affect his health first, then the damaged organs from his time in the boot will get him. That is if Malcolm, a man known to his mother (and a little to his father) does not kill or maim him. The people who are responsible for Donovan in life have not been able to protect him. Of course they bear some culpability in this; however, they are also the victims of circumstances deliberately laid down by the oppressors of their fathers and their forefathers. This is a metaphor for the African child who will not make it to a brighter future if the parents are caught in the same whirlwind that came on the sails of the colonisers.

On another note, Nakedi and Kele are not in the squalor of a township or squatter camp. Unlike in the first two novels, here we have protagonists who live in a white space and, to a lesser degree, benefit from the same things white people benefit from in their mainstream economy. But many other Africans within the same setting are not able to access the economic progress that Kele and Nakedi are able to access. Petunia, the cleaner at Kele's job, for example; Agnes, Kele's domestic worker, and the host of people who live in Mandelaspruit and Diepsloot all live in squalor. Kele is seen visiting a shack in Mandelaspruit in the beginning of the book. It is a dwelling place similar to that of both Tsi's and Mda's protagonists. It even has pictures on its corrugated walls, just like Toloki's and Noria's. Unlike with their magical shack of possibilities, however, the pictures that Kele sees on these corrugated iron walls are those of Marikana and Andries Tatane. Besides the fact that the Old Man Thato's roof is leaking and his tea is quite weak – both of which symbolise the hunger and poverty in that space – the pictures on the walls speak volumes. They speak of the exclusion from material benefits that was being fought against by Andries Tatane in the service delivery protest in Ficksburg where he was killed in 2011. They speak to the violence of the police as they murdered fathers and husbands in Marikana, as African men gathered in protest against their employers at Lonmin for salary increases in 2012. Let us note again that this all happened within the matrix of a Western economy and politics, to workers who were migrant workers for the most part. This is a subject broached obliquely in my novel as many 'violences' are highlighted.

But one may say that this Western system of politics and economy is no longer in the hands of the white imperialists as it was in the time of Serote's and even Mda's work. The African is no longer oppressed; he is simply dealing with survival within the set of economic and political circumstances in which he finds himself/herself. But that would not be accurate. The economy is still linked directly to West. Companies like Lonmin (in Marikana) are multinational corporations who issue out of Great Britain, our colonisers. The exploitation of cheap migrant labour is still their staple. The only difference now is that a minority of Africans is not excluded from key positions in the economy and in these companies. They are more than citizens now. Some even enjoy levels of economic success that are comparable to those of their white counterparts who are in management, executive, and even ownership positions. One such individual is the current president of the Republic of South Africa, Mr Cyril Ramaphosa. When the mass shooting of workers by the police happened at Marikana the following was Cyril's position in the Western economy, according to the Marikana Commission of Enquiry (2015):

> "During August 2012 Mr Matamela Cyril Ramaphosa, who is now the Deputy President of South Africa, was a non-executive director of Lonmin, having been appointed in July 2010. His appointment to the board followed the acquisition by a company of which he was the founder and chairperson, Shanduka Group (Pty) Ltd, through a wholly-owned subsidiary, of 50.03% in another company, Incwala Resources Ltd, a black economic empowerment company which owns an 18% shareholding in two Lonmin subsidiaries, Western Platinum Ltd and Eastern Platinum Ltd. As a result Shanduka Group (Pty) Ltd owns an effective 9% in Lonmin. He subsequently resigned from the board with effect from 31 January 2013. In August 2012 he was also a member of the National Executive Committee of the African National Congress. He was not, however, a member of the government in 2012."

Cyril Ramaphosa is said to have used his favoured position within our Western economic and political neo-colonial system to help crush the workers' strike at Lonmin. This he did by escalating their wage-related protest to criminal activity and using his high level political connections to apply pressure to get the might of the police force behind Lonmin in the wage dispute. This resulted in the death of thirty-four men at the hands of the police. There may no longer be a majority of white faces in our government, or explicit racial exclusion from the private sector economy for those Africans who are able to be elevated into the middle class or the elite. It would appear the white oppressor of the African is at bay, and that it is up to the African majority to right itself and change its fortunes for the better. But

there is still oppression. It just so happens that the oppressor is also African, a member of the elite who is in neo-colonial cahoots with the West. It is these kinds of elite that Fanon (1963) talks about; ones who have more affinity towards enriching themselves and the colonial system that has elevated them, than they have a proclivity to free their people from the conditions they were thrust under by colonisation. Cyril Ramaphosa is not alone in this. He is simply a quintessential example. And there is a reason for that. He is someone who has done work on behalf of the people in his ascendency, as the very first Secretary of the National Union of Mineworkers (Butler, 2011). Even more, as part of the elite, he has had power at the highest echelons of business. He has done even better in politics – clearly. He is someone who allows us to see, if we do not yet see, that it is not just government we need to keep our eyes on because we give them our taxes. We should keep our eyes on the private sector too. The following transgressions are not committed by Cyril specifically, but price fixing, collusion, pollution, accounting irregularities (often a euphemism for theft) and many other transgressions are staples in our private sector. Both the private sector and the government have shown themselves to be against the people. They are stripping the people, they are stealing the very clothes off the people's backs with the amount of looting they do. Whether it is bonuses they pay themselves after failed fiscal performances, or they siphon out the money in other ways, such as in the purchase of Nkandla, the private sector and government take turns in looting – or do it simultaneously. The conduct of those who wield power over us in South Africa often sounds like a work of fiction, with an audacious and incredulous plot. Even worse than this, however, is paying employees a pittance in relation to their value or performance. The people see this surely? *Do* they see it? They are naked. What are they going to do? The people are naked. *What do the eyes of the naked see*?

There is a reason I have spent some time and detail on the migrant labourer aspects that tie in with mining while discussing *The Eyes of the Naked*. The reason is two-fold. The first part of it is that Nakedi's identity and economic conditions issue out of this kind of existence. His father Tolo is swallowed up by Johannesburg mines, his family is split by his migrant labour existence, and he loses himself in this experience. But it is important to note (and this being the second part of the two-fold reason) that the existences of African generations, like the generations of any other race, are not hermetically sealed off from each other. What happens in one generation affects the make-up of the next generation. Because Tolo is the kind of father he is, devoured by the horrors of colonialism and migrant labour in his own life, Nakedi becomes the kind of son he his. He is touched by poverty and hunger quite

directly until Aunt Eve rescues him from his father's one room dwelling in Zonyele. But there is something else he has been touched by that also touches the majority of African families as a result of the colonial enterprise. He has a broken family, devoid of a father figure, devoid of a man to show him the way.

Conclusion

After starting this essay with the quest of positioning my novel within the protest tradition in the South African canon, I have gone on to do so, highlighting why there are still colonial conditions worthy of protest. To get here I had to define culture and its complexities in order to show how the culture of the African was negatively affected by its collision with colonisation, and how some of those effects were, and still are, tied to violence. One needs to be careful, though, when claiming protest literature. The presence of the oppression of Africans within the pages of a novel does not automatically make that novel protest literature. Protest literature became a genre and not just some phrase to denote writing committed to highlighting colonial injustice(s). According to Foster (2005), Lockwood (2008), and Ndebele (2012), it takes a set of particular conventions to render a text one of protest literature. Some of these conventions require the presence of an oppressive apartheid state. And in protesting that state and its oppressive organs and actions, a text needs to employ the binary and over-simplistic convention of a good African community that is at loggerheads with the bad apartheid government. There is also supposed to be a politically motivated funeral that is the centerpiece to some of the action. There are other conventions too. But suffice it to say that while apartheid had a brand of literature dedicated to protesting against it (in the late 1970s), the notion of 'protest literature' has a richer history than that literature. As said, with the likes of Thomas Pringle and Sol Plaatjie, there had been writers composing literature against nefarious colonial practices as far back as the 1800s and early 1900s, ahead of apartheid. Even around 1948 and after, authors such as Paton, Gordimer, La Guma and others, produced literature that protested the miserable conditions of apartheid (Dennis Brutus, 2006). This kind of protest literature, which ultimately does not limit itself to the Staffrider School, is appealing to me as a novelist. True protest literture work was explicit about its intentions. It was so explicit it was accused of sacrificing the important elements of texture, complexity, wonder and creativity in fiction. Similarly though, in *The Eyes of the Naked* the revolutionary characters of Malcolm and Simon (the bald-headed man) are also explicit about their protest against colonialization and its effects. While other dissent is built into the narrative of my novel in creative and oblique ways, the parts with the bald-headed man and Malcolm are explicit in speaking out in protest.

In the end, I am aware I cannot outrightly claim a genre whose conventions my work does not fit into expressly. *The Eyes of the Naked* is not classic protest literature. It is, however, a determined revival of its spirit.

Part 2:

The Eyes of the Naked: A novel by Litha Hermanus

Chapter One

The path of crushed-stone groaned under the tyres as Nakedi brought the car to a halt. Ahead in the short distance was a gate, and deep beyond its arch a green house with many windows. He unclasped his seatbelt and reached inside the cubbyhole. His hand brought out a Zippo and a half-smoked joint. Something to take the edge off; to blunt the sharp trepidation of seeing Sabine. He brought the joint up to his nose and gave it a sniff; the lighter, too. His face was filled with sudden displeasure. He'd thrown both items in the cubby after his smoke break at Montrose. But the joint smelled thickly of stale perfume now, a sickly apple scent. He put it between his lips anyway and flicked the lighter. As he leaned carefully into the flame and drew his first puff, a roaring noise went off behind him.

'F–!' He bit his lip just in time to stifle the curse.

It was Donovan, snoring. In his preoccupation Nakedi had completely forgotten about him. He threw a look over his left shoulder at his son's body. It was stretched across the backseat, every corpulent inch of it limp with sleep. The boy was sweaty, and his head was pressed up against the holdall his father had packed for him. He let out another gravelly breath that ended in a whistle-like wheeze.

'It's all that McDonald's and sweets Kele bloody feeds him. Six, but snores like he's sixty-six,' Nakedi thought with disgust.

His heart sank at once. He hated himself for the contempt he sometimes felt for his son.

'The boy's not his mother,' he reprimanded under his breath. 'Be good to him while you still can. The next time you see him you might–'

He froze. The only thing left moving was the smoke that escaped his lips. The thought of prison sent a visceral chill through him. He felt as though the drum of a mixer-truck had suddenly begun churning wet cement right behind his navel. He fingered the lighter in his hand as he drew three hurried puffs. The nightmare of Windsor-East was one he could not wake up from; one the law would never brush aside. He extinguished the joint and placed it back in the cubby with the lighter. It was time.

'Fuck it,' he whispered to himself as he stepped out of the vehicle.

He proceeded towards the house, halting once to look back. The windows are cracked open enough for the boy, he decided, before turning back around and making for the gate. It was mid-morning, but the sun was already scorching hot – its rays like mild pinpricks on his bare arms. He felt filthy and sticky all over with days of dirt and dried up sweat. To his right, the land fell gently to reveal a river mouth beyond a golf course and a sea of trees. A refreshing breeze blew across his face. As he looked at First Beach, and then the ocean, he could not help but begrudge the carefree lives of

the few figures who were already out fishing or frolicking in the water. Hiding his troubles from Sabine would take some doing, he thought. For one, she'd wonder why he was looking so unkempt. There were dry mud-stains on his jeans, his hair was matted, and on his left hand was a shoddily wrapped makeshift bandage. He stopped a moment to steel himself. He would not fail to come up with a plausible story for his appearance if the conversation called for it, he decided. Reassurance rose within him and he began to move once more. Yet, as he reached the entrance, heavy memories of his childhood began to kindle other uneasiness in him. A skinny twelve-year-old boy he had long forgotten began to shiver in his mind. The boy wept silently in the midnight rain, curled up under nothing save the few banana tree leaves he had managed to gather in the dark. That night, when he first came to know that blood had a taste, that it was warm and metallic, and it made you sick if you swallowed enough of it, grew larger in his mind. He curled his fingers around the handle of the rusty gate and snuffed out the memory of his father's blows. He turned to look at the ocean, and then back at the car, before drawing the breath of one about to take a plunge.

Nakedi did not quite know why he'd come back to Port St Johns. Following a stop at the Engen garage just outside Kokstad, he'd driven past a road-sign that confirmed his destination of Mthatha at 174 km. He'd heaved a sigh of relief at seeing it; both surprised and glad he was still awake and on course. His foot sank deeper onto the accelerator then, and the responsive power of the engine caressed the small of his back. An agreement to press on, he told himself, patting the car approvingly on the dash. So, it was quite curious that he heeded a call from a different road-sign only fifteen kilometres later. On it were the words: Port St Johns (and an arrow that indicated a left turn onto the R61 up ahead). Nakedi took the turnoff as though the decision to do so was always in his plans. As the dust of the gravel road rose in the red of his taillights, he thought no more about the one question that had sat heaviest on his mind since he had decided to flee Joburg: what exactly would his first words to his mother be after three years of absolute silence?

Here he was now, his shoulders hunched as he ducked under some honeysuckle that hung low off the arch of Sabine's gate. The hinges let out a familiar creak when he pushed it open. He handled it slowly and carefully as he shut it behind him, as though careful not to rouse all the ghosts of his past too soon. And a haunted house it looked, too, something about it grim and dark, even under the brilliance of the sun. Perhaps it was the feral nature of the trees, overgrown and thick. Nakedi looked closely at their leaves: they were eerily green, as though their colour were seeping out of itself. He stood firmly inside the yard now. To his left, the bees in the enclosure of the apiary buzzed irritably. They reminded him of his first few visits to Sabine's. She would walk down from the house to fetch him from the gate, because the fear of being stung sent him into a near-catatonic state.

'Just like the rest of your kind. You boys love to taste the honey, but you can't handle the bees,' Sabine would always tease.

He would laugh, though he never quite understood what she meant then. With his hand in hers, she would instruct him about his awaiting chores in her stern madam's voice. Then she would turn right around, and in a mellifluous tone, quiz him about the stories and characters in the books he had taken home with him on his last visit. This was always the shape of their conversation until they reached the top and went their separate ways. Their ways became less separate with time though, as Sabine began to trust Nakedi with her apiary, and Nakedi's boyish body began to resemble that of a man. He turned from the apiary and his eyes were fixed on the house again. Memories of the many weekends he had spent inside that home of honey, Nina Simone, Frank Zappa, and books, rushed like river waters back into his mind. He remembered now, most of all, Sabine's bedroom with the lazy smoke, and how the rays of the late day's light would pour in through her lace curtains. When the light hit the smoke she exhaled, it was as though an invisible hand had painted henna patterns onto the very skin of the air. Nakedi felt a warmth suddenly diffuse through him as his buxom madam sat naked in his mind. She had a homemade cigarette in one hand and a glass of mead in the other. A vervet monkey leapt out of the bushes and onto the path of cobblestone that led to Sabine's front door. It startled Nakedi just as he resolved to walk up to the house and ring the doorbell.

'Damn it! Wake up, Nakedi; you're no longer in the concrete jungle. You are back in the real wild now.'

The monkey chattered something its companion must have understood, for another monkey jumped from one tree to the next, and alighted deftly to the ground, beside its friend. It exposed its bright blue genitals and seemed to snigger at Nakedi, before both primates scurried over some shrubs and disappeared in the trees behind his father's old hut. Nakedi gazed long in the direction of the hovel. It was in the far right corner of the front fence. His father, Tolo, had been Sabine's gardener for as long as Nakedi could remember. He was the reason Nakedi had begun making fortnightly weekend visits from Mthatha as a twelve year old in the first place. These, of course, were at his mother's behest.

'You need to spend more time with your father, *mtan'am*; every boy needs a father in his life. So what you'll be sleeping in a hut every other weekend? We grew up in such huts and there is absolutely nothing wrong with us,' his mother scolded when he refused to go the first time.

He did not know it as he sat indignantly through dinner, but she had already packed him a bag and it was in the boot of her Toyota Camry. He was dropped off at the rank first thing the next morning, with no more than the taxi fare he would need to get to Port St Johns and back. Nakedi's eyes stayed glued to the hut. It had always been under an imperceptible blanket of moisture, even on dry days, he thought. Its waterlogged walls had always threatened to fall, but they were as resilient as the man who called them home. Although he drank and smoked heavily, got into fights frequently, and skipped most of the meals that were left out for him, Tolo always managed to meet the next day

and the one after it. In the end though, his body had given in, just like the hut. About a third of the building had spilled onto the ground, and a family of tall weeds were the new inhabitants of what was left. Nakedi turned and walked towards the house, each of his steps heavy with apprehension as he passed under a tunnel of tree bowers. He wondered whether or not Sabine still kept horses. There used to be a small corral to the left of the hut, he remembered, but it was no longer there. It housed three of the animals: a Basotho Pony gelding and two Boerperd stallions.

There was a sudden creak, and a voice. Nakedi started.

'*Tata*, where is this? This is not *Khulu's* house!'

Nakedi caught quite a fright even though he recognised his son's voice. Donovan had finally woken up from more than six hours of heavy sleep and was calling from the gate as he handled it.

'This is not *Khulu's* house! You said we were going to her house,' the boy continued. His voice sounded congested as he picked his nose.

'Shhh,' his father responded. 'Are you okay? Breathe, breathe! There was no need to run. You should have stayed in the car! Why didn't you stay?' his father scolded in a raspy whisper, even though he had not instructed Donovan to wait.

The boy was silent. His eyes were looking around as if suddenly realising that he should indeed have remained in the car. Something about this place was unsettling. Perhaps it was the terrible nature of the yard or it was his father's harsh words that made him snivel and begin to cry. Going up to the house was no longer a good idea. He longed to walk up and knock on the door, but not with the boy crying. He was not sure what he would find behind those walls; as unsure as he was of what it was he was looking for.

'Stop crying!' he yelled. Then he looked at the front door and at the windows to see if any of the curtains moved.

Somebody surely should have heard them by now. Sabine was always home. She hardly ever left the yard. At present though, it seemed only the trees listened. Donovan went quiet, and Nakedi's eyes remained fixed on the house. It was the same place he had known as a boy. Yet it was strangely changed, too, older, much older. Something about its silence seemed almost sentient.

'*Tata*!'

'Yes, boy, you're right; this is not *Khulu's* house! Let's go. Nakedi felt sorry for the boy.'

'*Tata*?'

'What!'

‘There's a monkey there,’ he pointed. ‘I’m scared!’

Nakedi felt himself scowl but immediately softened his face. He realised the boy had never seen one that was not in a cage or smiling on the cover of a cereal box.

‘Come, boy. Don't worry about the monkeys. Look, there's another one; and there's two more over there. Hold daddy's hand; they won't hurt you. Let's go.’

Donovan stood frozen, still pointing. His lips were quivering and his face was about to give way to a flood of tears.

‘Come, Donovan; don't be a sissy!’ Nakedi erupted.

The boy began to sob.

‘Don’t do that! Let’s go; it’s another hour to *Khulu's* house.’

He picked up a long, gnarled branch and shooed the monkeys away. As he and Donovan walked back to the car no words passed between them. Nakedi was ahead while Donovan did his best to keep up, lest the monkeys returned and pounced on him. He was still crying, but Nakedi was glad that his snivelling was momentarily drowned by the groan of the crushed-stone under their feet.

Chapter Two

The two giants of stone that stood over Port St Johns were Mount Sullivan and Mount Thesiger. These were their colonial names. They were separated by the Mthatha-bound R61 as well as the turbulent flow of the Mzimvubu River. Cut off by a different kind of stream, mounts Nakedi and Donovan sat as silently as the other two peaks. The sun fell on their backs as Port St Johns retreated behind them, and the south-facing cliffs of Mount Sullivan loomed large to their right, beyond the Mzimvubu. The sky was a deep blue, dotted with dreamy tufts of white. What a picture of perfection it all made, but Nakedi had no inclination to take in any of it. He accelerated to overtake an overloaded donkey cart, hauling firewood and a cage full of chickens. He did his best to keep his eyes on the road but noticed Donovan was making out shapes in the sky. The boy probably would have shared them, too, had the two of them been getting along. He'd taken his sketchpad out of the holdall and had already drawn a cumulous cloud with the face of a bear on it. He was busy with another figure. Nakedi considered asking him about the clouds; if only to make peace, but he decided against it at once. Even twenty kilometres later, as they sped past the turnoff to Mngazi Mouth, not a single syllable had passed between them. But inside Nakedi's head, countless words swam in violent streams about the mess he had made of his life. He had not spoken to Wesley yet. His boss would want to know what the company vehicle was doing at the address it would, no doubt, already have been found in. Nakedi had not been able to catch any news either. He was eager to know what was being said in the time he'd been hiding out.

‘Have Thulani and Mojalefa been arrested? Do the police know they killed Morinaga? And what about Dr Amoa; is he just hurt or dead?’

All of this, Nakedi had no way of knowing...

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He'd fled on foot from the crime scene in Windsor-East amidst the chaos, and left his shuttle bus in the driveway. He ran under the cover of night, his escape aided by a series of broken street lamps. He'd come away with nothing save the clothes on his back and the small sling bag tucked under his armpit – Wesley’s money. He cut his way through the streets of Linden and raced all the way down to the Victory Park Shopping Centre before eventually coming to a stop. He stood by the bridge across the street from the centre. He went under its light to check whether he was hurt in any way. His muscles were throbbing painfully. But he was fine as far as he could tell. The coast seemed clear, so he stopped a little longer by the bridge while he caught his breath. The low flow of the Braamfontein Spruit murmured below him. His stomach convulsed, and, without warning disgorged

something green and unfamiliar as he recalled the mayhem of Windsor-East. The cold steel of the gun in his hand, the sound of gunshots, the smell of gun-smoke, the blood, all sickened him. Dr Amoa had dropped to the floor as though someone let a heavy log slip from their grip. Nakedi felt numb as he was bent over, spitting out the last of the vomit under the light. He had the peculiar feeling of being marooned somewhere far away, cut off from his body. He heard sirens in the distance.

'Shit! What the hell are you doing under a light! Catch your breath, but not under a fucking light!' He admonished himself as though it were the first time he realised he was crouching under it.

He crept under the bridge and began moving northwards up the banks of the stream, until he came to the heart of Delta Park and found cover among the many clusters of trees. It started drizzling the first night, and he emptied out a garbage bag that lined one of the park's bins. After turning it inside out and washing it in the stream, he tore three holes in it. One for his head; two for his arms. Not all his effort was encouraged by the rain. The bag formed part of his subterfuge while it also helped with concealing the money. He knelt on the ground and smeared his hair, face, and arms with mud until he was satisfied he looked the part of a complete vagabond. He would have stayed hidden a lot longer if he'd been able to help it. He would have been okay with not knowing what the news were reporting about him if no one came for him; if he could get lost forever. He wondered constantly who was in pursuit, and what the law could still forgive him. Yet those questions were not enough for him to risk getting caught. It was his hunger, dizzying the longer it lasted, that caused him the most discomfort and prompted him to think about his next move. Not even the incessant drizzle was enough to chase him out of the park. In fact, it helped him. He would have been worse for wear without it. He occasionally cupped his hands, and like a dog drinking from a bowl, lapped what little he could collect off his palms. He cursed his weakness. His pangs took him back to a time before Aunt Eve came to rescue him from his father. When he would curl up from days of starvation, and with his face pressed against his belly, beg for the mercy of the monster eating holes into him. He wished he could hold out for much longer, until he could think of something. He'd been feeling relatively safe as an obscure homeless man. Besides another homeless man who had come on the second day to inspect the rubbish Nakedi had spilled out, not a single soul had come close to him. He had looked on as the old man ate, and envied how he was unperturbed by the wetness of the bread and the rancid state of the sardines he was gobbling down. Even with his unbearable pangs, he couldn't bring himself to join the old man. He thought about the money he was holding, and let delusions of ordering a Bacon Jammer at Thyme and Nicol overtake him. He imagined the warmth and comfort of a full belly. But using any of Wesley's cash was absolutely out of the question. There were a thousand R100 notes in the sling bag, crisp and new. His only wish was to give it back to his boss, intact, just as he had got it from Stefan.

On the afternoon of the fourth day, a splitting headache, such as Nakedi had never experienced in his life, attacked him. There was a faint whistling sound in his ears and he felt even dizzier than before. It was as though his torso were connected to his legs by nothing but an abdomen of thin air. When the pain in his head dissipated, he got up from under the tree where he had been curled into himself and walked down to the stream to wash. He made up his mind to leave Delta Park. He didn't know yet what he'd say to his ex-wife, but she would have to hear him out. He was not sure what the time was either. Around 7pm perhaps? It was already dark, but not dark enough to move. His phone had died on the first night. He figured it might have a spark if he tried it again. He had tried it many times, but not in the last two days. He brought it out of his pocket and switched it on. He was as relieved as he was terrified when it came alive. A cacophony of beeps sounded as a string of notifications flooded in. He scrambled to silence the device. After he did so his eyes scoured the darkness before looking back down at the phone. The time was 7:15. There was no text from Wesley but there were six voicemails. He dialled in to listen to the first one, but the battery was quickly down to two percent from three. He knew he would not get through all of them before the phone went dead again. So he changed his voicemail greeting instead. The result was a veiled message to his boss. He stayed put for about three more hours, for the full cover of night before abandoning his Delta Park hideout for his ex-wife's house. He followed the river banks as the stream carved parts of Randburg into two, Blairgowrie now to his left and Craighall Park to his right. He waded through the shallow water until he came up on Jan Smuts Avenue. It crossed his mind to get on the road but something talked him out of it. He continued along the river behind the Old Parktonian Sports Club. The Braamfontein Spruit was wide in parts, but in certain spots where the banks became narrow dongas, he had to be extra careful. At such points he sometimes came too close for comfort to the surrounding Hurlingham homes. He still had the garbage bag over his t-shirt, and he hated the noise it made each time it got caught on something or he had to gather it to pass through a gap. What if someone heard him and raised alarm? When he reached William Nicol Drive there was a fence. He jumped over it, joined the road and made his way towards Bryanston. Kele's home was not far now. It was the same house in which Nakedi had lived until the unfortunate events of three years ago led to the end of his marriage. He knew he would have to beg and plead to be let inside, especially in the state he was in. He would take Peter Place and be up Homestead Avenue in no time. He went into a jog, and hoped with everything in him that he would encounter no police.

Gaining access at the gate was no problem, though the look he was given by the guard on duty made him wary. Good thing he'd taken off the garbage bag before he came into the light, otherwise the look may have been stranger. He saw Kele's car in the parking bays on his way up. Instead of the anger it always brought out in him, because Malcolm, her lover, had bought it for her, it now made him glad she was home. He braced himself for the worst as he approached the door. The surprise he

received upon knocking on it was twofold – it was Agnes who opened it, and she was expecting him. Her voice was loud and shrill:

'I should not have let her leave me to wait for you! Why always so late? It's eleven now! I've been waiting for an hour!' She drew a long breath. 'Your son is in the lounge, passed out in front of his sketchpad and TV game,' she continued, much calmer than before. 'You will have to drop me off in Diepsloot. She turned around and walked into the house.'

'I'm sorry I'm late Agnes; my car is b-br-broken,' he stammered.

He was still nervous but relieved Kele was not home. He steadied himself, looking for his next words. He could see how Agnes's eyes were judging his appearance and how her nostrils were both disgusted and curious about his odour.

'I had to push the car in the rain and I fell in some mud. I smell like this because the mud had more than mud in it. It has been a terrible evening, Agnes.' His voice trailed off. He looked up and down the passage, not quite sure what he was looking for.

'*Shem,* that nice Airport *kombi* is broken?' Agnes asked the question without looking at Nakedi. Her voice was incredulous, as if to say: 'You manage to spoil everything; you didn't go and spoil that, too!'

'My work car is none of your business,' Nakedi snapped. 'I'm going to use the bathroom.'

Kele was on an important assignment at the Mandelaspruit informal settlement. This is what Nakedi learned when he came back, looking noticeably cleaner and smelling of a hint of his ex-wife's perfume. Kele had obviously lied about making arrangements with him, so he was quite careful not to give anything away, especially if he could use it for his own cause. In reality, they had not spoken in over three weeks, and their last exchange was one of daggers after Kele's video of Donovan and Malcolm playing and laughing together ended up on Facebook.

'I have been waiting for far too long. I must get home now. I may no longer have kids but I have grandchildren. They also need me,' began Agnes impatiently.

Nakedi was poking around in a McDonald's paper-bag that he spotted on the far end of the kitchen counter. He found some left-over fries and dug into them. He rummaged through the burger boxes, and in the second one, found a barely eaten cheeseburger wrapped in its paper. As he gobbled it all up, he thought of the old man who had eaten the wet bread and fish at Delta Park.

'You must be really hungry.' Agnes remarked.

Nakedi had run through the leftovers.

'There is no other food here,' Agnes said to him. 'Just three cakes.'

She took out some brownies.

‘Ma'am said they should not be eaten, but the boy had three of them earlier when I was not looking. You can eat these and both of you can apologise to ma'am later.’
Nakedi didn’t want to eat too much and too quickly after days of hunger, so he took the brownies, and collected whatever else he could find to take with him.

‘That’s all there is,’ said Agnes. ‘Anyway,’ she went on, ‘if your car is broken you better take ma’am’s. There is no way I'm spending the night here, if I can help it. The keys are in the kitchen; I will bring them.

‘And the boy?’

‘You can leave him or bring him with you. You’re his father, you decide.’

Those were Agnes’s last words to Nakedi. She had not opened her mouth again except to direct him when he struggled to find her house in Diepsloot.

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Presently, there was a beep on the dash. Donovan looked up with a smug, knowing face. Nakedi knew the beep too. The petrol tank was going on empty. They would make it to Mthatha, with some fuel to spare, but they would have to fill up again soon. Nakedi's mood took a further dip at the thought of this. He hated the idea of spending Wesley’s money. He'd used his Ariemi petrol card after he dropped Agnes off. The car had beeped then, too, while he was driving back from her place, deciding what his next move would be. Right then, he’d just resigned himself to going back to his flat in Kempton Park. His world was too small to run in. He would go to the flat and sit there with his boy and wait for fate to knock on the door in whatever form it came. At first he’d wanted just enough petrol to get himself home. But as the attendant was about done, Nakedi asked him to fill up the rest of the tank. The idea to go to Mthatha presented itself to him just then. There he was, with his boy, nothing packed for him but his toys, yet going to Mthatha seemed the only way to get some distance between himself and the whirlwind he had created. He needed to think about how he could get out of it, if at all he could. Just as he was done paying with the card though, something struck him cold. He realised it could be used to track him. It was then he knew that eating away at Wesley's money was inevitable. The beep on the dash and the knowing look on Donovan’s face had just reminded him of this. He would pay the money back somehow, he told himself. Still, he hated the idea of using it. They had been on the road for over forty minutes since leaving Sabine's house.

‘Kele is probably back from Mandelaspruit by now,’ Nakedi guessed, as he came out of his thoughts and slowed the car down.

He swerved to avoid some cows that had strayed onto the road. If she hasn't already done it, she is at the police station right now, screaming her lungs out about the theft of her car. But his ex-wife was the least of his problems. He desperately needed a charger. His boss would have surely tried to reach him by now. He would be angry with him for disappearing for days, especially after abandoning a work vehicle at a place he was never supposed to visit. But in the end, he needed to talk to Wesley. He was the only person Nakedi knew who would know how to handle this mess. Mount Sullivan and Mount Thesiger were some 70 km behind now, but Nakedi and Donovan were still cut off by a river of acrimony. Mthatha appeared on the horizon. The sun was directly above everything, and the houses in the distance looked like shiny metal sheets strewn out across the rolling landscape. Nakedi sighed. It was a long one – a mixture of exhaustion and concern. Before anything else, he had to do something about his appearance, he decided. Arriving at home in the state he was in would only lead to questions he couldn’t answer. There were the dried blotches of mud on his knees, the soiled bandage on his hand, and the faint sour smell of garbage that still clung to him. All these things had to go before he set foot in Eve Solomon’s house. He turned to look at Donovan. He'd have to freshen him up, too. The boy was carefully shading in the contours of one of four faces He'd newly drawn. He looked up from his work. The eyes of the father and the son met. A look lingered between them. One of them managed a smile; the other, still quite aggrieved, did not.

Chapter Three

The dimly lit clusters of shacks appeared far off on the dark horizon. Kele's foray into unfamiliar territory was no longer just a thought, or a brave idea in her head. It was something she was doing. She conceded it was dangerous to be out by herself in Mandelaspruit. But she wasn't visiting a bunch of thugs, she told herself. She was going quickly into an informal settlement to interview a harmless old man, his daughter, and whoever else she might be introduced to. As a means of gaining entry into Old Man Thato's home she had told him she needed a domestic worker, and he had nominated his daughter on the spot. By the time she divulged the real purpose of her visit, she would have Thato's and his family's favour already, she hoped. Perhaps she could tell his daughter about Malcolm's job instead of the one she had falsely used to set up the interview. Who knows, since Admire, Malcolm's helper, had fallen off the map recently, Malcolm might need someone once he got back from his business trip to Nigeria. Kele smiled at the thought of that small detail. She opened the window quickly to feel the pulse of the night. She let her arm out, outstretched like the wing of a bird, fingers splayed. The air was mild. She took in three deliberate gulps of it before drawing her arm back in and winding the window shut. She smiled. Just as she did so, a vehicle cut so close to hers it would have separated her arm from her shoulder only moments ago. It was a taxi, with only the driver in it. He overtook as the road became narrow. And to make matters worse, he was coasting with his headlights off. Kele flung a curse at him just as he kick-started his car. The taxi shot a bang that shattered the air as it pulled off and sped into the night. She could feel her heart pounding. Her hands were trembling from the fright. She brought the Renault Sandero to a halt on the side of the road. There were no street lights in this part of Johannesburg. This made her uneasy. She looked back in the distance. The multi-coloured lights of the city were shining like the facets of a gigantic, sprawling jewel. She looked to her left and then to her right. There was nothing but night on either side of her. Her sense of safety had been shaken by the incident with the *kombi*, but the darkness surrounding her made things worse. The pallid lights of Mandelaspruit were not of much comfort to her, but they were close. After a silent moment she put the car back into gear, dropped the hand break, and got back on the road.

'Big girl, Kele; big girl! There's still work to do,' she told herself.

She wanted to conduct in-depth interviews on how the people of Mandelaspruit truly felt about foreigners. That would be her angle. She would allow them to tell their story without policing their responses with political correctness. She wouldn't even use the word xenophobia. Instead, she would try to get to the bottom of their emotions; to tell their stories honestly.

'Honest moments, that's what good radio is about,' she said to herself.

Hard journalistic work, she would also make a solid attempt at that. She would get the names of those behind the attacks, and if possible, speak to them. But talking directly to them only occurred to

her as she drove. She wasn't sure about it. It gave her mission a little more edge than she was really prepared for, especially in the evening. But what would her scoop be without the main players?

'Let's see how the night goes. If it goes well, and the big names want to talk, I'll meet them during the day tomorrow and give them a platform, and anonymity. That should establish trust between us,' she reassured herself. 'As long as I am ready with the people's interviews when all the mess starts.'

She could see it all play out positively as she spoke the words to herself. Her plan was that once she had a reasonable amount of content to work with, she would wait for the attacks to begin. She'd work on the video and audio on Adobe and load everything onto Wavelab. It would just be a small matter of dropping the files onto Zetta, and taking the content directly to air and social media when the mayhem was loosed.

There was another dip in the land, and when she came up on the other side of it, she was already in Mandelaspruit. She immediately recognised the Somali shop from earlier, when she'd come to drop off the old man so she could learn the directions to his place. The shop had a bright light on it. The turnoff was just up ahead. She would take the left off the main road and backtrack on the scraggly path behind the broken fence. It was dark, very dark, and the place seemed dead. The only sign of life was a few figures attending a drum fire across from where she parked. She did not want to be too conspicuous, so she parked just outside of the glow of the *spaza* shop light. She heard talk and laughter from the bodies around the fire as she took the key out of the ignition. It was a group of young boys. She pushed the door open and the cabin light came on.

'Damn it, Kele!' she screamed at herself under her breath as she switched it off – quickly, but calmly. She'd pushed it to the 'door' setting when turning it off earlier at the garage.

She placed her wallet and phone in the pockets of the jeans she wore under an oversized black shirt. Then she reached down to her feet and put a backup phone – a tiny little thing – into her UGG ankle boots. Over the shirt she had a green coat that matched her *doek*. It had once belonged to her mother, and she had pulled it out of an old trunk in her closet. She held it closed against the slight breeze as she walked down the path leading to Old Man Thato's place. There was a putrid odour of faeces in the air. It invaded her nostrils. She recalled the old man's instructions: 'Many holes and mud in the street now after the rain of the last few days. Walk on a right side and feel the walls and doors. Even in the night you can see my house; bright orange! My house is number five.'

'Oh, are they numbered?' Kele had thought out aloud.

'No, ma'am. But if you can count the houses; my door is the five door.'

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‘Welcome,’ Old Man Thato said when he opened the door after Kele's very first knock. He had been waiting outside for her and had just gone back in when she knocked, he told her. ‘Lerato still not here; she is at meeting.’

He seemed excited to have a guest in his house.

‘She’s still at the meeting?’

‘Yes, ma'am, remember it is important meeting here in Mandelaspruit; many people go.’

‘So, she doesn't want my job then?’ Kele said this jokingly. ‘I am a little late so I was expecting to find her here already, Thato. What’s so important about this meeting anyway?’

‘No, ma'am, your job is good job. My daughter, she wants. But many jobs in South Africa is take by, you know, Africans. That is why we have meeting. But I am old for meeting, so I don't go.’ He smiled.

Kele felt a frisson of excitement. What he said confirmed the xenophobic element of the attacks.

‘I am sorry I cannot give something else to drink, I have only the tea.’ Old Man Thato interrupted her train of thought.

‘No, thank you, Thato.’

Kele could not imagine living inside this house, where the kitchen was the living-room and the living-room was the bedroom which, in turn, was the same kitchen from which her host was trying to serve her something that resembled tea. There wasn’t much furniture; only a small table – no chairs – save a lonely one that stood along a wall away from it. There was a single bed and next to it a bench. Kele could see a mattress peeking out from under the bed. Her eyes drifted to the walls. She looked at the many newspaper clippings on them, their corners delicately stuck onto the crests of the corrugated iron. In the corner where they kept the pots and dishes there were soccer players whose names she didn’t quite know. Next to them was Andries Tatane, dying in the street. That image she knew well, just like the one with the police shooting at people in Marikana. As Kele turned to look at the pictures and clippings on the other side she felt something on her forehead. A drop from a drip. She ducked a little to the left.

‘Oh, you have a leak,’ she said to Old Man Thato, as she wiped her forehead and brought the fringe of her *doek* further down towards her eyebrows. She spoke as though she were telling someone

who'd just purchased a new home and was not yet aware of the problem. But the old man was fully aware.

'Yes, small pro-bu-lem,' he said with a sheepish grin. 'It rain in the *zink* and stay in the *zink*. Then some times after, it come down when it wants. Anyway, the only person with a leaky roof in Mandelaspruit is the person with no leaky roof,' Old Man Thato laughed, but Kele did not seem to get the humour. The awkward silence that followed didn't last long, however. It was broken by a loud noise, and then another one right on top of it. Old Man Thato started. His cup of tea slipped from his grasp making Kele's jeans wet as it broke at her feet. Her heart raced.

Boom!

There was a third and final explosion. Her mind flew to her car. The camera and flash-mic were still there. She darted for the entrance of the shack, shards crumpling under her feet. The attacks had begun. The hinges of the door squeaked as she swung it open violently.

'No, let me!' Old Man Thato said as he held the open door and blocked her exit with a forearm. He stuck his head out. He was surprisingly agile, and something about his manner was reassuring. But there was no mass of people carrying out attacks outside. As soon as they stepped out, Kele caught a whiff of household pesticide in the air. The drum fire that had only been glowing before was raging momentarily. It lit up the night brightly enough for Kele to see the registration number of her car from where she and Thato stood. The youths seemed to be returning to the drum after scattering away. The fire was dimming back down.

'*Makwedini*! Siya! reprimanded Old Man Thato. '*Akekho olimeleyo*?'

'*Hayi, tata*; *cha, baba*,' the boys said collectively, replying that none of them were hurt.

The old man said nothing further to them.

'I smell Doom. It's just boys and their mischief,' he turned and said to Kele.

'I told you the canisters would explode,' Kele heard one of the boys say in isiZulu.

'You lie, *I'm* the one who told you; you didn't know anything, you dumb Zulu boy,' shouted another one in isiXhosa. The two boys began to box each other and the others joined in to separate them. But they did not need to. The fracas ended just as soon as it started. There were a multitude of voices singing in low song and making their way in the direction of Old Man Thato's place.

'Soon we will go to the school,' one of the boys said *sotto voce*, 'then you will see.'

'Shut up about that,' the authoritative command came from the same Xhosa boy who had just been fighting.

Figures of different shapes and sizes appeared. Some of them carried paraffin lamps and others used their cell-phones to light their way. The mass of bodies separated and passed, each one going to homes that were down more invisible paths in the large maze that was Mandelaspruit.

‘Ah, Lerato,’ Old Man Thato raised both his arms at the sight of his daughter. ‘Here is the kind woman send by God himself: Mrs Solomon; and Mrs Solomon, this is my Lerato.’

Kele shook Lerato's hand. She had not expected Thato's daughter would be a beautiful young woman, so sure of herself. Of course, something about her was stout and tomboyish, but she had a quiet kind of beauty, the kind that just is and caters to no standard. Her eyes bore into Kele’s. Something about her stood out as aloof, though it seemed she tried to dress it up.

‘Nice to meet you,’ she said, as they went into the house. The bright light she carried livened up the interior of the shack. Her accent was thick and rural; her voice pleasant and sonorous, like a Joan Armatrading song.

‘She knows how to work, and she knows how to speak English, too. I want her a job at Reijger. But nothing yet, young Mr Reijger keeps saying. But now she can work for you until Reijger say yes,’ Old Man Thato was excited. ‘She can work hard, too. You said before you want a worker with a good hand. She have two good hands!’ The old man seemed pleased with himself.

Growing up, Kele had never experienced a domestic worker who wasn't an older woman. Her mother had preferred them old, because she said the older they were, the more likely it was they had children to fend for in life. This is what made their hand good. The young ones just wanted to dress nicely, drink and get naked with boys. That's why they were in the streets before the laundry and dishes were dry, she told everyone. It was for this very reason that Kele herself had chosen someone of ripe age in Agnes. But she looked at this girl, who was probably the same age as her, and thought how she would begin telling her what she was really here for. There was a push on the door. A young boy came in.

‘*Molo, Mama*; *molo, Ta mkhulu*,’ said the boy.

‘*Molo*, Siya. This is Mrs Solomon. Mrs Solomon, my son Siyambulela.’

Kele recognised the slap-boxer with the domineering voice.

‘Hello, Siya.’ She tried to be warm. The trying was as plain as day.

‘Hello.’ Siya was distant, and did not attempt to dress it up. Kele was still thinking of her next words to Lerato when, out of nowhere, the boy’s mother took decided control of the proceedings.

‘Okay,’ she said. Her voice was sharp and resolute. ‘You are both interesting and funny to me. No rich black people come to do job interviews at night in Mandelaspruit.’

Kele didn't know what to say. Her first instinct was to dispute being called rich. But standing where she was, it was futile. She looked at Thato, but he looked away immediately.

'Perhaps you think my father is a fool and you can feed him such nonsense?' Lerato said. But the joke, as white people like to say, is on you.'

She pulled out a beer crate from under the table and motioned Kele to have a seat. For herself, she dragged the chair that had been standing alongside the wall, and sat down. Her eyes studied Kele like a book before she eventually spoke again.

'So, what is it that really brings you to our beautiful Mandelaspruit?'

Chapter Four

Kele would not accept the offer to sit down at first, but she thought it might calm Lerato's belligerence if she did.

'Will you really not sit? I know it's not the kind of thing you're used to, but I'm offering it to you,' Lerato was saying, signalling at the beer crate with an open palm.

Kele sat slowly. She did not know where Old Man Thato's daughter was going with her abrasive line of conversation, but she didn't want to make the situation any worse. She wanted to keep things from unravelling, so she could still get what she came for.

'Did your father not tell you it was an emergency? I need a helper urgently. I have a son who needs looking after while I work. That's why I came here,' Kele protested.

But inside she felt like an actor who was reading her lines instead of performing them. Something in the way Lerato spoke gave Kele the impression she was already wise to the real reason for her visit. Kele looked at the old man, hoping for some sort of intervention. Again his eyes evaded hers and he said nothing. A suspicious look passed between the boy and his mother. She nodded her head; he stood up and began to lock the door. Fear and doubt swallowed Kele slowly. The atmosphere was changing right before her eyes, like the clouds of a gathering storm. She didn't know what to think or do next.

'What's the meaning of that? Why do you need to lock the door?' she asked. She got up from the beer crate with a feeling of being taken by an ocean swell. Yet her feet sprang quickly forward. As she rushed for the door though, Lerato rose from her chair and sent her straight to the floor. It was a deft hammer-like strike to the temple with the bottom of her fist.

'I asked you to sit. Now I'm telling you!'

Kele lay on the ground, her head swimming, realising she had to make a move. She watched Lerato retrieve a phone from her pocket and make a call. Kele tried to stand up, but her arms failed her.

'Donovan!' The cry escaped her mouth in a whisper so slight only she could have heard it.

She considered for a moment she may not return home to him, that she may never see her son again. She raised herself up and got back on the crate. But her head was still unsteady. What was going on? Was she being robbed? She was baffled at how Thato, who worked for the same company she did, was sitting quietly in the corner while his daughter assaulted her. Right now she was summoning someone over the phone to come to her.

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The evening was turning into one of unknown horror, but Kele's day had not started off badly. For one, Agnes arrived earlier to work than was usual and ironed Kele's favourite skirt without being asked to do so. Donovan, had been a gem too. His flu had definitely died down, though he was booked off for the rest of the week. He'd run, huffing and puffing, down to the parking lot after her, to get an extra hug and kiss goodbye. Kele's trip to work wasn't as wonderful though. Besides the heavy traffic there was her wrestling match with Ayanda over babysitting Donovan. How inconsequential that had all been in the end! She also recalled her meeting with David Killian, her boss, and how it had angered her, and fuelled her fire to go into Mandelaspruit even further. But all of that was in the past now, and even the meeting with Killian seemed like a vacation in comparison to where she was. Presently, desperation raced back and forth inside her chest. A voice in her head yelled at her to get up again and make another charge for the door. It screamed to her to do whatever she could to get back to Donovan. But she reasoned with herself and calmed her anxiety. If she survived this it would not be because of her physical strength. That she knew. She had to think logically about a solution. Yet all she could think of now was how stupid she had been to come here. How dumb! How irresponsible! As she berated herself her inner voice assumed the tone of her mother's, as it always did when she was disappointed in herself. Kele squinted. The lighting inside the shack appeared to be getting dimmer. Something seemed to be choking the air, stifling her vision. She rubbed her eyes slowly, and her mind began to wander…

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Much earlier in the day Kele had sung along to the radio in traffic, sanguine, plotting the hours ahead. '*Cheers to the freaking weekend; I drink to that*!' She swallowed a quick sip of coffee, and wished she were indeed toasting the weekend, drinking something closer to that Jameson old school Rihanna was singing about. But all she had was black coffee – she was using it to get ready for the tough Thursday ahead. Being a talk radio producer on the Maître Minute at Reijger Media House was no easy task, and she was trying to move up in the world of work. She placed her drink in the cup holder and reached for her phone. She quickly tapped a number and raised the cell up to her ear. She cleared her throat and readied herself for the cajoling it would take to get Ayanda to babysit Donovan. A quick shift from chick to mom. She flicked the indicator switch and joined William Nicol Drive from Peter Place.

'Thank God for automatics,' she thought. 'If only the bloody Bluetooth wasn't broken!'

She had only had the C200 Mercedes for three months; it was a real pleasure to drive. A welcome break from her old Sandero with the sad-looking grille. She'd been driving along fairly smoothly, but as soon as she turned onto William Nicol, the Sandton-bound traffic came to a grinding halt.

'Just in good time,' she thought.

She needed the stop. She was tapping the top of her head to get rid of an unbearable itch that had just started. It was too deep under the netting of her weave to get to with her fingers.

'Why the hell aren't you picking up? Come on, Ayanda!' Kele shouted as she let the phone fall on her lap.

The traffic had still not started moving, so she opened the cubbyhole to look for something thin and long: a hairpin, a pen, whatever she could use to get to the terrible itch.

'No!' she cried. A cloying smell of old apples emanated from the cubby.

She had not closed her hand-cream properly when she used it last. In the heat of the parking lot it had oozed out onto the car manual and one or two other papers. A hooter sounded just as she found a fountain pen. There was already a huge gap in front of her; enough for three or four cars. She pulled off, but the traffic was back to a standstill as soon as she closed the gap. She tucked the pen carefully under the netting of her hair and scratched. Bliss!

'It's like an orgasm of the scalp,' she said to herself as she flung the pen onto the passenger seat and reached for her coffee. She took another sip.

'Hey, K,' crackled a voice on the phone.

The device was still on her lap. It had redialled automatically and Ayanda finally picked up. But as Kele tried to take the call, the traffic moved. There was another hoot. The horn of the car behind her sounded even louder than before. It was followed by honks from two other cars. One of the vehicles she had been holding back – an old Volvo SUV – managed to pass on her right as she began to move, while at the same time trying to put her coffee down. The driver of the Volvo smiled. Amid the impatience there was empathy in the world after all, Kele felt. She offered a smile back when she noticed the driver also held up a peace sign. But her expression quickly turned to one of horror as he stuck his tongue out, and wiggled it like a worm between the V of his fat fingers.

'Learn how to drive, you black bitch!' he shouted.

Before she knew it, she'd knocked the coffee cup on the centre console. It toppled over on her lap, next to her phone.

‘Fuck this morning; fuck this bloody week!’ she screamed. She threw her phone on the passenger seat in order to save it. She managed to get to the hot drink before its cap popped off and all of it ended up on her.

‘Excuse you? What’s going on?’ The voice on her phone was loud now. Kele had put her friend on speaker as she finished wiping her skirt down with a serviette.

‘Fuck! Hello, Ayanda,’ she said.

The traffic was just now clearing for her as she passed the cause of the congestion. There were two men arguing on the side of the road, probably about whose fault the fender-bender was.

‘Fuck-hello-to-you-too. What's with so much profanity so early in the morning?’ This was Ayanda’s response to her friend’s greeting.

‘Nothing major, babe. I only happened to spill some coffee on my crotch, that's all.’

‘You what! What are you still doing talking to me? Pull over!’

‘Not a chance; I've just made it through the thick of the traffic. But I’m cool. Close shave with the coffee though.’

‘Close shave!’ Ayanda laughed. ‘That's probably as apt an expression as you are gonna get for that part of your body.’ They both giggled. ‘What's on your mind, girl?’

Kele cleared her throat.

‘I was wondering whether you could babysit Donovan for me this evening; can you? There is something brewing in Mandelaspruit I have to check out. There’s gonna be huge xenophobic attacks soon, I'm told.’

‘Xenophobic violence?’

‘Yes! But the good folks at Reijger don't think it's news enough. What pisses me off is they just don't want to believe what I’ve said about it, even though my sources are solid. The attacks are not big enough for them I suppose. All they care about is reporting flowery shit about the new president, and throwing shade on anyone else who is serious about the land issue. They’d rather report on Gaza or Syria before taking care of stuff closer to home!’

‘What do you expect? This president loves white people more than his own; and they love him right back. And you know your private media people are precious. Even when white companies like Steinhoff steal our parents’ pensions it’s just accounting irregularities to them. It’s never corruption. Corruption is only for black politicians and business. And I won’t even talk about how they love protecting Anglo-American and French thuggery in the world,’ Ayanda chimed in.

‘But I think Mandelaspruit is bigger than all of that combined. Something Admire, Malcolm’s helper, said to me before she disappeared two weeks ago.’ Kele flinched a little. She didn’t like to bring up his name with Ayanda. ‘Maybe it's the way Admire said it,’ Kele continued, ‘something in her eyes. And she was talking about things she knows, too; she’s from Mandelaspruit after all.’

Kele was not done.

‘Guess what else?’ she said. ‘Max, one of the guys at the gate at Reijger, he’s from there, too. He and I are kind of cool.’

‘Cool? What does that mean? Since when are you cool with the help?’

‘He helped me change a tyre once and we got to talking; long story. Anyway, I knew he was from Mandelaspruit, so I asked him about the attacks after Admire first gave me wind of them.’

‘And what did he say?’ Ayanda asked.

‘He wasn't talking to journalists, he said. He would get into trouble for it. Not only did he not deny it, Aya, he said he would get into trouble because of it. And there was something real in his eyes, too, a genuine fear.’

‘And the point is?’

‘The point is I haven't seen Max for the past week and a half either. And he was this close to opening up to me. He’s sick, according to his boss; but I’m not really buying that.’

‘So what are you saying exactly? Their disappearances are linked somehow?’ Ayanda’s voice had a distinct note of incredulity in it.

‘Now, don't get me wrong; I'm not saying they are definitely related, but Admire was dead serious when she told me about this xenophobia thing, Ayanda. And again, it's not like Reijger don't know about it. There's just no will to get hands on deck because it’s not big enough for them. Not enough blood!’ She paused. ‘Listen, I’ve been trying to find Admire. Besides Max, who I wouldn't want to trust with my life, she is the only one I know who lives in Mandelaspruit.’

‘So what you're saying is you actually want to go to an informal settlement by yourself this evening to find Admire? To go talk to people that your security guard friend was reluctant to take on?’

‘I’ve been there once before to drop her off with Malcolm. I just have to go before sunset to make contact, and I can go back again after work once I know it’s safe. I know it sounds crazy. But I can't not follow this up. It’ll be fine.’

‘Have you really thought this through, hun?’

‘*Carpe*-fucking-*diem*, Ayanda! This is big, okay! There's gonna be a lot of dead people by the time this thing is over; I'm telling you. There’ll be so much blood flowing Reijger Media House won’t know what to do with it but use it for ink on their papers. And this could be it for me. I could get in and break the story and get out with a name for myself by the time the chaos really hits.’ Kele let her voice calm back down. Her passion had overtaken her composure. ‘Even if it's nothing,’ she went on, ‘I’ll be back before you know it, and you can call it a night with your nephew. You're the closest thing he has to an aunt after all.’ Kele chuckled.

But Ayanda was unmoved at being called an aunt; if anything, she sounded a touch irritable. ‘I always seem to be his aunt when you need a favour, babe. What about Agnes, can’t she do it?’

‘I can barely afford Agnes for the week, much less paying her for overtime.’

There was silence.

‘Can you do this for me or not?’ Kele went on. ‘Frankly, there's nobody else I can ask.’

‘Not even Nakedi, babe? Or does his broke ass also need to be paid to look after his own child since he became a taxi driver? And I really don't get that you can't pay for a helper. Malcolm has tons of money and he loves you. What better equation is there in the world of equations? You should have left him alone if you don’t know how to handle a man. The rest of us would have–’ Ayanda’s voice trailed off.

The line went quiet. The silence was colder, and a lot longer than the one before it.

‘Shit! I'm sorry, babe. Kele? Kele?’

‘Yes?’ Kele's voice was soft and tentative.

‘Listen, I'm really sorry... I didn't mean to take it there. I shouldn’t have said that. I know you fought Malcolm on the rent with good reason; and you didn’t even want to take the car from him. Okay?’

Kele’s voice was like the lash of a whip: ‘Nakedi and I broke up three years ago, Ayanda; I wish everybody, especially you and my mother, would get that and move on! I certainly have. And I know you met Malcolm first. We’ve been through this tons of times. But you never came clean about liking him; not until it was too late! What was I supposed to do?’

‘I’m sorry! I'll see what I can do about Donovan tonight. Okay? I'll do anything to make that up to you. And I really am fine with you and Malcolm. I’m okay. True story!’
But Kele was not okay. The Malcolm thing was tired. Ordinarily she would have dropped the phone and carried on with her life. But she sensed the victory she was looking for close at hand, so she pressed on: ‘Does that mean you’ll babysit for me then?’

‘I’ll do my best.’

‘Good! Thank you,’ she said, taking care not to let her indignation subside too quickly in the face of her gratitude. ‘I would need you to be there around 6:30 to 7.’ She was pressing on to ensure her triumph. ‘I promise I'll feed him before you come. You won’t have to worry about that, at least.’

‘Okay, like I said, I'll do my best. But please call me just after lunch to confirm; I still don't know what my day fully looks like. *Ciao*, babe!’
Kele let her friend go. She knew that was the closest she was going to get to a ‘yes’.

‘*Ciao*,’ she replied, and Ayanda’s voice disappeared.

Although their call didn't end badly, their friendship was on a discordant note of late; the awkwardness of their energy reminiscent of two strangers whose clumsy hug ends up in trying to avoid a kiss.

Chapter Five

Eve Solomon was Nakedi's mother, but she was not. She was his aunt, his father's sister. From quite early in his life though, she had insisted he refer to her as mother. She had even adopted him. He was legally the older brother to her only son, Buntu, and the younger sibling to her twin girls, Mandisa and Thandiswa.

Nakedi never knew his real mother. Only his father did. But that was of no help because most of his father's words were spoken into the mouth of a bottle. He said nothing about such serious things to his son during the four years of their time at Sabine's house. But because of Nakedi's complexion, dark like a roasted coffee bean, it was whispered around the village of Zonyele that his mother was probably a Venda woman. Aunt Eve had told him this. His father was light-skinned after all, they said; how possible was it for his loins to produce such a dark child unless the mother came from dark people? The dark ones protested that any *ntsundu* person could be dark, and that Tolo's mistress in Johannesburg could have easily been umZulu, or even umShangaan. There were others though who swore they had heard Tolo blurt out drunkenly that she was a young Sotho girl from Soweto. And that's why his name is Nakedi, they argued. That's a Sotho name, not Shangaan, not Venda, and certainly not Zulu.

The only thing everybody managed to agree on were the facts: that Tolo had left for the mines as a young man, with nothing but a tiny bag over his shoulder. He had left behind a beautiful young wife; visited four times in the first two years, but had come back with less frequency over the next three. He returned home finally, after six years of absence, with a baby boy and nothing else save the clothes on both their backs. His wife had left him for another man by then and had children of her own, but both she and her husband had later died from disease. All of this Aunt Eve shared with him one night after a scolding, as she stressed to him how fortunate he was to have a family take him in.

It could be said then that the only thing Tolo ever gave his son was a name, but even that was as much in doubt as the identity of Nakedi's mother. It was his aunt, Eve Solomon, who had done everything else for him, including providing him with the home he was now running back to.

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Nakedi and Donovan only began speaking to each other when the R61 was about to become Sunderland Road. They were entering the town, headed in the direction of the city centre.

‘Like my picture?’ the boy asked out of nowhere as he threw his sketch pad on top of the dash.

His question drew Nakedi out of his own thoughts. He was grim, but his son's dimpled smile quickly softened his mood. He was glad the boy was eventually giving of it.

'Who's that?' Donovan asked, quizzing his father about the face on the pad.
Although the face lacked somewhat in proportion, its chin too small for its forehead, there was a lifelike quality to its eyes, an unmistakable verisimilitude to the mole on the left side of its nose.

'Erm… erm…' Nakedi pretended to not know.

'Agnes, silly! *Yho*, Tata is blind. He can't see. *Yho*! *Yho*, this man is blind,' Donovan spoke as though to himself, in disbelief that he'd drawn something someone couldn't recognise.

'Yes, I'm blind; look.'

Nakedi put one hand across his face and drove blind for a two-second count.

The boy giggled: 'No, you can see through your fingers. Do it with your eyes really closed.'

Nakedi shut his eyes again for another two-second count, but Donovan wasn't satisfied. He undid his seatbelt: 'Come let me close your eyes for you.'

'Okay, okay, I'm not blind. I could tell it was Agnes. I was just messing with you.' Nakedi made funny faces as he came clean and the boy laughed heartily. He was jiggling almost beyond control when Nakedi asked him to fasten his seatbelt.

He composed himself and asked: '*Tata*, this is Mthatha, right?'

Nakedi looked at the corrugated iron tanks to their left. The pavement looked like an open-air industrial area.

'Yes, boy, it's *Khulu's* town,' Nakedi responded dejectedly. It was quite a different town to the one he'd grown up in and he didn't like what it had become. Besides, being here meant he was eventually faced with the reality of seeing his mother. He tried to lift his spirits and added: 'This is where daddy grew up, boy. And in that house you saw before, of course. But this is where daddy's home is.'

'I know,' Donovan said with that childlike confidence of a know-it-all: 'When I was three I came the last time with you and mommy. *Khulu* bought me a yellow ball and Boss Baby pyjamas. And I played with Uncle Buntu. Don't you remember?'

The boy's smile and manner warmed Nakedi's heart. The gap between his front teeth was just like Kele's, and for the first time in a long time Nakedi thought of his ex-wife with a certain measure of fondness.

‘Cir-cus Tri-angle,’ Nakedi heard the boy read slowly. He was reading the red and white sign that barely had space on the facade of the humungous building to their right.
‘*Tata*, is there a circus inside there? Isn't a circus supposed to be in a big tent?’

Nakedi laughed.

The boy continued before his father could answer: ‘Are there clowns and elephants inside? I bet there are, but they have superpowers, and the elephants can fly…’

The boy was starting to breathe heavily, struggling under the pressure of his seatbelt to look back as the building began to disappear behind them.

‘No, boy, it’s a shopping centre, like Nicolway,’ Nakedi said, ‘Circus Triangle is just its name. They used to have the circus in that spot when I was a kid.’

‘In a tent with real clowns and elephants?’ Donovan couldn’t believe it. He'd only seen the circus on TV.

‘Sure, boy, with real clowns and elephants. But I'm sure there's one or two clowns and plenty elephants inside the mall,’ Nakedi added, as he was reminded of some of the unpleasant people he had worked for during school holidays in his teens.

His laughter was pure. For a moment he had the mirth of a man without cares. It was love he felt. That was it. It fell on him as lightly as the hairs of a hundred crashing dandelions. He couldn't remember the last time he'd been like this with his son and he let himself luxuriate in the feeling.

Donovan opened the window and stuck his head out. His father opened his, too, and was about to give into an inclination to do the same with his head.

‘Put your head back in the car!’ Nakedi shouted abruptly as two police cars sped past in the opposite direction with their sirens blaring and lights flashing. His heart nearly beat out of his chest. He pulled himself quickly together and hoped Donovan had not noticed how deep his uneasiness ran at seeing the police.

The drive from Port St Johns had seemed somewhat safe, but the police brought his mind back to the reality of his situation. For the first time he wondered what the boy had been thinking of him since they had been together. Did he sense the gravity of the trouble his father was in? Could he tell Nakedi was a fugitive on the run? Despair suddenly took him over. Of course the boy knew. Explaining the events of the last few days to Aunt Eve was also the last thing Nakedi wanted to do. She could not pray him out of trouble. He would only talk to her about it if everybody knew, he decided.

He tried the radio for the first time since the night before. The reception was bad when they left Johannesburg. It was crystal clear now, but there was nothing about him on SA-FM and Radio 2000, and on the new station. The only other station he could get was UCR-FM and there'd be nothing on there but local news, he thought.

'Look, *Tata*, Steers!' Donovan screamed excitedly, as they passed the fast food restaurant to their left, next to a garage teeming with *kombis*. Nakedi thought of getting petrol but was put off by the sight of countless taxis. The boy was kicking his legs and flapping his arms like the wings of a chicken.

'Can we get a burger, please? And a–'

'Is there anything else you eat besides burgers, Donovan?' Nakedi's voice was so harsh the boy recoiled frightfully mid-sentence. Nakedi knew they had not eaten since the night before and his son needed a good meal. They had stopped only for petrol the entire trip. All food stops had been avoided for fear of cameras. When his son woke up from his first sleep complaining of hunger, he had given his son the rest of his mother's brownies for something substantial.

He felt remorseful for shouting at the boy about the burgers – a constant feeling, it seemed. But he had no time to be apologising now. The light had just turned green and the car ahead of him was already driving off. He had to decide his next move. If he continued straight on Sutherland Street he'd be in Blakeway in five minutes. But he had to lay low a little first and clean up. A bed and breakfast, that was his next move, though he didn't immediately know where to find one. He made an impulsive left onto Madeira Street but was met by oncoming traffic and a cacophony of hooters. The honks were followed by a sound that chilled him to the bone – a siren he had no doubt was meant for him. He hadn't been back home in a long time, and he'd forgotten that Madeira Street was a one-way road.

Chapter Six

Kele was still vexed by parts of her conversation with Ayanda. When she finally arrived at work she swiped her access card at the boom-gate, but there was no response. This compounded her annoyance. She tried it a second time. The boom stayed down, but Old Man Thato was already running over to raise it for her.

'This thing is still broken! It's been like this since Monday,' Kele exclaimed. 'Are we supposed to sit here and wait for a slow old man like you every single day? Where's Max? I mean, God, don't we have enough to deal with in this place as it is!'

'Yes, ma'am, no working this machine,' the old man offered, before his eyes fell to the ground as though he was directly responsible for the condition of the motor.

Kele looked straight ahead and no longer acknowledged him as she drove inside to the back of the building. Perhaps it was because she felt the weight of regret about how she treated the old man, but on her walk back from the parking bays she decided to have a word with him. Besides, he could know someone who lives in Mandelaspruit.

'That's worth a shot,' she suddenly thought.

'Listen, Thato,' she said when she reached him, 'I'm sorry about earlier. Just the morning's stress, I guess; that's all. Nothing personal. If you worked inside that building you'd know what I mean,' she added, with certainty that this was something he would never know.

'No problem, ma'am.'

'Good! I'm glad we're friends. Have you heard anything about Max? Is he feeling better? Do you know when he'll be back at work?'

'No ma'am. I don't know. But I ask today, if ma'am wants.'

'You will ask him today? Where will you see him?'

'Yes, ma'am. I see him.'

'Where do you live?'

'I leave 5pm, ma'am,' he replied.

'No, where do you live? The place where you stay? Diepsloot, Tembisa, Mandelaspruit… where?'

'Oh... *heh*!' Old Man Thato laughed a little. 'I stay Mandelaspruit.'

Kele smiled at hearing his answer. Why hadn't she thought of asking him before? He was the perfect person to go into that environment with if Admire couldn't be found. He was as sharp as a blunt knife, but that's exactly what made him a jackpot. Kele's smile seemed to make him happy, too, but his toothless gums did no justice to what would otherwise have been a brilliant smile from him. She looked at him and wondered whether or not he had full access to his faculties. He'd been at Reijger for a long time but she had never spoken to him before.

'And you leave… I mean you go at 5pm?' She a keen promise of success as she calculated her next series of moves for the afternoon.

'Yes, I go 5.'

'Okay, please come upstairs when you have a chance. I need to talk to you about something important. I've got some food for you, too,' she added, guessing that would be a good prize for him. 'I will leave it with Petunia in the kitchen. And maybe I can take you home later and we can talk? I need your help.'

Old Man Thato nodded and his hollow smile widened even further.

'You give me lift to home, ma'am? And food? Ma'am is good, *yho*! God is very good!'

'Yes, but do keep it quiet now! Don't tell anyone; it's secret business. Okay!' Her voice was suddenly tense, and she threw her eyes around suspiciously, as though Old Man Thato had already divulged everything she had said. She tossed her hair over both shoulders before turning to walk towards the main door, disappearing under the enormous RMH that welcomed visitors and swallowed workers.

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Besides her weekly meeting with Maître, quite a few things still stood in the way of her planning and preparation. For starters, she still didn't have a full radio show for today. But, she couldn't trust Thato to get her to his home by directing her. She had to take him there and see for herself where it was. As she got out of the elevator on the second floor she rang Agnes.

'Hello, Agnes.'

'Yes Ma'am.'

'Thanks for coming in early this morning; and for the skirt. You won't believe what happened to it already,' Kele laughed. 'Anyway, listen, I'm going to be late. I'll be home at 7pm, latest. What time does the last taxi leave?'

‘No set time, ma'am. It's not the Gautrain.’

‘Yes, I know that, Agnes. You know what I mean. Around what time can you catch the last one?’

‘To Diepsloot? Around 7 ma'am.’

‘Okay, I'll drop you off at the rank later. I'll make sure you get a taxi home. Just wait until I get there; okay?’

‘Okay, ma’am.’

‘Ayanda may get there before me. She’ll stay with the boy. If she has the money for me, maybe she’ll give it to you and you can leave. Otherwise, please wait for me,’ Kele implored.

‘Okay. But, ma'am?'

‘Yes, Agnes?’

‘What should Donovan eat today?’

Kele could tell from Agnes's tone that she was pointing out the obvious: that there was nothing to cook in the house.

‘Yesterday I gave him my own food from home,’ continued the old woman.

‘Don't worry yourself about the food.’ Kele's voice was stern. ‘I’ll bring something when I come back.’ She was incensed, mostly with herself, because she had put off her grocery shopping a few too many times, and now their food had run out. There was always something to do. Now this Mandelaspruit thing had come up again and she could not do it. ‘There's an unopened box of chocolate biscuits in the corner cupboard, and a big packet of chips. There's brownies behind the chips, in the corner; stay away from them please,’ she warned. She’d got the brownies from Myrtle Prince, the owner of The Sweets Pot, a new marijuana confectionery in Sandton. She’d been a guest on the Maître Minute the day before. Kele had thought to try the brownies but decided against it. She hadn’t yet thrown them out. ‘You can have anything except the brownies. And oh, there's also milk in the fridge.’

‘Next to the wine ma'am? I did see it. I will feed Donovan until you get home.’

‘Goodbye, Agnes!’

‘Goodbye, ma'am.’

Kele would have a word with Agnes about her attitude later. Right now the day ahead looked like a mess, and so did her desk. Her half-eaten Nandos chicken and chips was still next to her

computer from last night. She would give it to Petunia for Thato later. Right now there were people to email, calls to make, talk-show guests and contributors to source. She cleared a little space for her bag and sat down with a hopeful sigh. She was glad she had already found a way into Mandelaspruit. Thato was certainly it – a familiar and safe face. All she had to do now was find a way to tell him what the secret business was. She couldn't tell him the truth just yet. Not until she knew where he stood regarding the xenophobic attacks.

'A Little Rwanda!' she thought, as she was reminded of what Admire had called the impending violence.

Any size Rwanda, if she broke the story, was going to be big for her. All Ayanda had to do now was babysit, and Kele would go into the weekend with more to toast than just its arrival.

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'Morning, Solomon! In my office as soon as I get back.'

'In connection with?' Kele responded.

But Killian was already walking past towards the door and did not bother to look back. Even on occasions when his unhappiness was hidden under a smile, which was often the case with him, Kele could always tell when his weather wasn't truly sunny. She had learned to read him. One had to understand his moods to survive the office; especially the women.

He was in his early fifties; Kele was in her twenties. He was white and rich; she was black and still trying to carve out a healthy financial existence. But the most significant of their differences was that he was a man. His manhood was the one thing he never failed to remind everyone about, especially the women.

'He's really not happy today; he's not even able to hide it,' said Marius, the ruddy-faced young man who sat next to Kele.

But Kele was preoccupied ask he spoke, searching through her mind, trying to figure out what she might be wanted for in Killian's office.

'This place is still going to see flames the way Lekeng left,' Marius continued, slipping in the serious news as though they were nothing out of the ordinary.

'What! What do you mean Lekeng's left?'

'He's left. As in he no longer works here.'

‘When?’ Kele didn’t want to believe it, but anything was possible in radio.

‘This very morning, not long before you got here – maybe half an hour…’ Marius replied.

Kele had been half-leaning and half-sitting on her desk as she tidied it. She dropped everything she was doing at once and got up to look, first at Lekeng’s seat and then around the office, and then back at Marius.

‘He’s usually here at this time. And his desk is never that neat,’ she thought. ‘What happened?’ she asked Marius in a whisper

‘You’ll probably find out sooner than me what happened to him, girl. You might be going exactly where he went by the looks of it, *wena*,’ Marius laughed. “In my office first chance you get,” he pinched his nose to mimic David’s flu-like tone. But just as he began to laugh at his own foolishness, he paused suddenly, as though a different thought had struck him. ‘Or maybe you're going to the breakfast show,’ he said with a serious tone, and nodded his head in affirmation.

‘In my office could really be a good thing today. It could be a promotion. You could get to produce for Bruno.’

‘Check it out, Trevor Noah’s back in SA!’ she said dismissively, even though the idea of leaving Maître excited her. And Bruno would indeed be a promotion.

‘I know you don't like Bruno but you’ve been crying in silence about Maître and your position for the entire year now. This would be a great move for you. And for me too, come to think of it. You’d finally stop crying my ear off.’

Kele took in Marius’s words and smiled, all the while scanning the room for any sign of Lekeng. She opened her emails and began to go through them.

‘Anyway, last I checked you were up to some silliness that could get you fired instead of promoted,’ Marius teased as she scrolled down. ‘What’s up with Mandelaspruit? Or have you come around to your senses, girl?’ He stretched the ‘girl’ and added a raised eyebrow that he punctuated with a pout.

Marius was Afrikaans but for some inexplicable reason spoke with an American accent that sat awkwardly atop his South African one, especially when he threw in his Africanisms. He was the only white producer remaining at the media house’s radio station. The new black listener was who the advertiser was after now; the burgeoning black middle-class man and woman with something to say. Naturally then, even though the money and aspirations of the station remained white, the producers and presenters payroll had to be stacked with the closest thing to this kind of black. The ‘non-threatening’, white-sounding sort that Caucasian people everywhere are at ease with. Marius’s kind

had gradually got pushed out. But the producer for the station's entertainment show was upbeat about life nonetheless. Despite their periodic differences, his personality allowed Kele the occasional office giggle and smile. But she was irritated with him now for referring to her Mandelaspruit mission as silliness.

'Anyway, enough talking with me,' he said, 'off to the office you go; here comes Killian.'

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'Yes, sit down. What's the matter with you and Maître? Why the discord? As if I don't have enough to deal with.'

'Nothing's the matter, we're solid. We just had a little difference of opinion regarding the last hour of the show when you came into the meeting yesterday,' Kele said.

There had indeed been a difference of opinion between them regarding planned content, but something else was also the matter. They were certainly not solid, whatever solid really meant. The truth of it was Kele felt stagnated under her and wanted something else for herself at the station or elsewhere. She disliked Maître and her condescending nature. But the fights were minimal because Kele was the lesser of the two employees in the eyes of the powers at the station. So she bit her tongue and toed the line.

'Does that mean you guys are cool? Good!'

'Yes, she just wanted me to cancel an entire–'

'I said good, Solomon. On to the next thing! It doesn't matter what she wanted you to do now. What matters is what *I* want you to do.' David smiled – something more like a jeer – and then composed himself. 'You will find out sooner or later, if you haven't already, that Lekeng has made like Elvis and left the building. Unfortunately the demands of time in our profession mean we have absolutely none of it to cry for the departed. I need a producer for the breakfast show. This is where you come in.'

'You want me to work with Bruno?'

Bruno Sutton had a more than successful breakfast show – The Morning Republic – but was an absolute pain to be around, mostly because he was full of himself. Working with him was indeed a promotion. Besides, unlike Maître, who was strong but past her apex, Bruno was a black man on the upward swing of a so far stellar career. He was a logical choice for any producer who wanted to advance their career in radio. Kele knew of two or three people on the floor who would kill to be on

the breakfast show. Still, she played the part of one not too thrilled with the news of working with the raucous host. In truth she was setting herself up to negotiate what would be better terms than the ones she was working under.

‘Seems to me you don't want to work with Bruno? I'll have you know, young lady, that no producer here decides where they work. You only produce Maître because I decided you would. Management! I may not be the top guy in this building, but I am the man on this floor. I could drop these pants for you and show you just how much of a man I am, but you’d be up at HR quicker than you can spell harassment.’

His words blinded her.

‘That's not what I meant,’ she protested. She wanted to spit raw fire at him, but she was also beginning to rue her act of not wanting to work with Bruno. As she was beginning to express her real intentions, Killian smiled and stopped her.

‘Yes, of course you work where we say you should work, but you're in luck because I don’t want you to work with Bruno at all. Justin will do that. He'll come off Night-time Prime. You can help with that for the foreseeable future.’ Killian smiled.

Kele didn't know what to say next.

‘What’s happened with Lekeng? Is this a permanent move? Is he coming back?’ This was all she could manage.

Her aversion towards working the night shift was no act at all, and although try she did, she was unable to mask it. His comment about his pants was distracting to her also, a reaction to it was steadily growing like a turgid lump inside her throat, choking her ability to choose the words she wanted to use.

‘Do I sense reluctance in you once again, Solomon? Is my request too much for you? To answer your question, Lekeng Molefi is *not* coming back. But show enough of this attitude and you might have cause to follow him and ask him for yourself why that is.’

‘No, I have no problem,’ Kele said sheepishly, as she screamed inside her mind to herself: ‘You are being overlooked again!’

The sting of this realisation was worsened all the more by the burden that was being thrust upon her with the graveyard shift. The presenter of that show, Goodwin Dlamini, wasn’t just loud like Bruno; he was an absolute chauvinist. She hated the very idea of him. But the biggest conundrum for her was getting someone to look after Donovan in the evenings.

‘Do we understand each other with everything?’ David asked, derailing her train of thought.

‘Yes, we do, David.’

‘Good! Starting Monday next week, you're on at 9 to 12. I know you’ve only really worked on Maître your entire time here. Chat to Justin about what happens on Night-time Prime. And don't worry. I know it's a shitty slot, especially for a single mother. But there is a silver lining: at least your money stays the same; right? And don't look at this as a demotion either; you’ll be back to your position as soon as we steady this Reijger ship. I'll talk to Maître about it when she comes in later. Cool! Call Marius in for me on your way out, will you?’

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Kele was furious when she left Killian’s office. She nearly ran into Petunia, who seemed to be coming back from cleaning the desks in Kele's section of the floor.

‘Who said you could take that food?’ Kele immediately barked at the cleaning lady, taking no care to consider who was within earshot. ‘I was actually going to give that to someone else, you know. You could have at least asked for it before taking it. Otherwise it's theft if you don’t!’

‘I suppose you are more educated than me and you may be right. But this,’ she held up the Nandos box, ‘is not for eating; not by me. And it shouldn't be for eating by anyone else. Not unless you want the person to get sick.’ Petunia let the box drop to the bottom of the refuse bag she was holding.

When Kele snapped out of her fury and realised she needed to apologise, the cleaning lady was already walking away, and the entire office was staring in their direction. Kele ran for the door, realising two things as she did. She had not called Marius in for Killian. And she'd no longer be able to do so, because the turgid lump that had begun growing in her throat earlier had burst into a flood of tears.

Chapter Seven

When the clock struck 7pm, Kele still had no babysitter to speak of. She was on her way home from the office, with a flash-mic and a tiny point-and-shoot video camera in the boot. But first, she wanted to get dinner for Donovan. She had dropped off Old Man Thato in Mandelaspruit before her meeting with Maître and got caught in horrid traffic again. It wasn't the worst, but it didn't help her cause for the evening one bit. Her story to the old man was she needed a domestic worker urgently, asking whether he knew anyone trustworthy, with a good hand. This was a phrase her mother would use when talking about hard-working 'maids'. But Kele couldn't shake off the feeling that Old Man Thato had expected something a little more serious than her news of needing a helper. He appeared surprised by the banality of it, given how she had acted earlier perhaps.

'His brain is fine. Quite a bit more of him there than I expected; but not too much,' Kele had thought as she drove and made conversation with him. She told him she had a few loose ends to tie up, but she would be back to see him later about his daughter. They had made an appointment for 8pm.

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Kele edged slowly forward in the packed McDonald's drive-thru queue. She had just ordered a Double Cheese Burger and two Quarter Pounder meals with two shakes. Ayanda had not picked up any of her calls since their morning conversation. Sure, Kele had been inundated and was unable check in with her after lunch as promised. But that was no reason for her to not pick up her calls at all the entire day; or to ignore her texts.

'Is Malcolm still a problem between us?' Kele wondered as she dialled the number for a final time. It went directly to voicemail. Her phone was now off. Kele didn't bother to listen to the familiar voicemail greeting again, and she had written all the SMSes she was going to write to her friend. She drew a deep breath before dialling the next number that came to her mind.

Kele had been halfway-considering the idea of asking Nakedi to babysit since the afternoon, when not finding Ayanda first dawned on her as a possibility.

'He'll be fine for a couple of hours,' she told herself. 'Besides, looking after Donovan is as much his job as it is mine.' She looked at the time. 'He should still be out on his shuttle, making trips,' she thought as she rang him.

But voicemail greetings were in vogue, it seemed. She didn't leave a message. The sound of his voice was still enchanting to her but she denied herself the appreciation of it. He was one of the

hardest drugs she'd ever imbibed. She'd worked diligently to rehabilitate herself over the last year and a half, especially after taking up with Malcolm. But she wanted to call again. She hadn't left a message, she told herself.

'That'll be R133.50,' said the man who'd taken her order.

She took out her card and handed it over to him. She had a vague idea of her ex-husband's work schedule. It wasn't a complicated one after all. He would possibly be done around 9pm. Perhaps if he took off early he could be of some help? She took her bank card back. There were still three cars between Kele and her order and the time was 7:17.

'Maybe it's his reception,' she suddenly thought as soon as she was done with the payment.

She made another call to Nakedi. To her surprise, his voicemail greeting had changed from a few minutes earlier. It sounded hurried and a touch nervous, though she could not be sure. And its message seemed directed to someone: 'I'm sorry you cannot reach me for now; my battery is very low. I will be in touch with you as soon as I can,' it said.

'That's odd! I wonder what that's about.' Kele was a tad unsettled. But she quickly dismissed it, and her mind swung right back to her own needs. 'Dammit, Nakedi! If I've ever needed you it's today. You need to spend more time with your son anyway. Instead you wanna fight about Malcolm getting along with him.'

She remembered his vicious words during their last encounter, and how angry he was that Malcolm was allowed to play with Donovan. Kele had taken a video of them drawing together and then playing X-Box, her son better than Malcolm at both. She had posted it on Instagram and captioned it with two hearts and the words: 'When the two bulls in your kraal finally get along.' Malcolm had shared the video, and Nakedi came at her for it. She hadn't posted the many others that came after that as their friendship blossomed even more.

She was finally at the last window. She knew most of the faces at this McDonald's, but was not familiar with the woman who re-confirmed her order and asked her to wait a minute while they finished the new batch of fries.

'Nakedi has been doing better since getting this shuttle job,' Kele thought. She knew the work he did was a far cry from his globetrotting cruise-liner days or even his work as a cabin attendant. She was glad he had finally accepted the reality of being a father, even if only financially. It was a good thing he was drinking less, too. She still had hope for him as a person. The amount of money he made from his driving job was a bit of a concern for her, however, even if she didn't dwell on it. He'd paid for his half of Donovan's school fees in full by midyear, after only a few months of saving. Granted, Ariemi Shuttle Services was a high-end company, but that amount of money seemed a bit much. She

let her worries dissipate for a moment and found herself wondering whether she could ever be with him again. He still had not finished university and that bothered her. And what did he want for his life anyway? He always had strange choices. Her mind drifted even further into her thoughts of him and ended up in the bitterness that always coloured these remembrances: the most bizarre of all his choices. She recalled that morning three years ago, when she lingered in the doorway, devastated at the sight of his hands, watching as Nndini, their next-door neighbour's domestic worker, repeatedly sank her dark thighs onto his lap, and he, angled upwards to receive her.

'One Double Cheeseburger and two Quarter Pounders meals with two milkshakes; thank you for coming to McDonald's… Excuse me…'

With the sting of the memory in her head, Kele heard nothing.

'Ma'am, here is your family's supper; tonight is bad. You are holding up the line!' the girl behind the window reprimanded.

'Oh, sorry,' Kele smiled sheepishly as she took the food and at the same time tried to make out the name on the tag of this new girl, 'I got lost there... Patience.'

Kele was finally off.

'Who's she to talk to me like that?' She had half a mind to drive back around and show this Patience girl what she could do when she ran out of her own patience. But more important business beckoned.

She doubled back on Rivonia and merged onto Grayston Drive. She drove for a moderate stretch before passing Benmore Gardens and dipping down the hill. Every single traffic light was green for her along Grayston, until the very last one on Sandton Drive.

'A good omen for tonight,' she thought, as she put the box of her Quarter Pounder on her lap and flipped open its top. She made a right as soon as the red turned green, and drove along, eating, once again thanking God for the convenience of not having to change gears.

She would change gears tonight though; she would take the Sandero to Mandelaspruit. No sense in going back in the Mercedes and attracting attention, she resolved. As she made a left onto Peter Place she threw her used box back in the packet with Donovan's two burgers and took one of the shakes. She had seen the looks that met her when Thato got off near the Somali spaza shop in Mandelaspruit. She had felt envied, on a pedestal; but, in the face of the evident hunger of the informal settlement, she had also felt like bread.

The Sandero was old and ash grey in colour. It had sat in the sun for over three months, collecting dust. There was a problem with the left headlight, too, when she drove it last, she recalled.

Her smile, and maybe her outfit, had got her out of what should have been a sure ticket at a roadblock that night.

‘It's just the car for Mandelaspruit,’ she decided, with a triumphant grin. She would just have to dress the part.

She admired a convertible, a Jaguar F-Type, as she drove past the KFC on Homestead Avenue. She knew her cars well, even in the early evening darkness. It was just her bank account that didn't, she always joked. That was until Malcolm came along and saved her from the Sandero. And although she had promised to pay him back every cent of the huge deposit he had taken out for her to make her monthly repayments affordable, he had refused.

‘It's not even the latest model. Really, it's fine. Anything for a queen. For my queen!’

Malcolm had sounded unoriginal, she remembered. He always sounded unoriginal, as though his love were a rehearsal. This sometimes led to her missing Nakedi; his charm and effortlessness. But the sentiment behind Malcolm’s words was always heart-warming. And more than anything, he was dependable. He would have been the perfect person to look after Donovan tonight, but Lagos was a long way away.

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Agnes was already waiting downstairs when Kele drove up from the gate. As usual, she was clutching her handbag as though she were shielding it from imminent theft, while the Checkers plastic bag that held her lunchbox dangled off her wrist.

‘Thank you, ma'am,’ she said when she collected her day's wages.

‘And where is Donovan?’ Kele asked as she took the micro-phone and camera out of the car. She looked up to her flat on the second floor.

‘The boy is inside, ma'am.’

‘I know he's inside the house; I just don't appreciate you waiting out here. You don't know what he could be doing *in*-side. He is six for Christ's sake; he could start a fire in there or something.’

‘The office was very busy for ma'am today?’ Agnes's voice was flat.
Kele's response was not: ‘I am just saying, Agnes! You're not going to understand. We don't live like you used to. You need to keep an eye on children all the time,’ Kele looked around self-consciously and lowered her voice. ‘Do you understand?’

‘The boy is fine, ma'am. I have just come out,’ Agnes said reassuringly. ‘But it's almost 7:40,’ she added, as she leaned into the glow of the light above no.73 to read the time. I can still be lucky to get a taxi if we go now.’

‘Yes…’ Kele hesitated before proceeding. ‘Agnes, listen… would you be able to stay here for about two more hours? Please. I know I said I would drive you to the rank, but we might miss the taxis. You said it yourself, we'll be relying on luck if we go now.’ Kele searched Agnes’s eyes. ‘I have somewhere to go; Mandelaspruit. It's work; something really important. And I'm already late. I can drive you home afterwards, I promise. And I can even pay you for a full day for just these two hours.’

Kele spoke in run-on sentences that left her almost breathless. Perhaps she did not trust the money she was offering Agnes would suffice because she added a little white lie to it.

‘I have also called his father. He finishes at 9, and he might come before I do and take him. I have asked him to drop you off at home if I am late. And I will still pay you for a full day,’ she said as she took four crisp fifties out of her purse and held them out to Agnes. ‘What do you say?’

Kele knew Agnes did not care for her cute face with the playful frown and supplicant pout. She also knew Agnes knew how unreliable Nakedi could be. She had waited for him on a few occasions in the past. But Kele also knew her domestic worker recognised easy money when she saw it. She already had two one hundred rand notes tucked away in the left cup of her bra. Now she was sticking four folded fifties in there with them.

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Once upstairs, Kele changed quickly and only gave Donovan his food when she was done with her costume. The burgers were part of her apology for leaving him with Agnes for the evening. Sure, she was always working even when she was home with him, and he was always on the X-box or some TV channel if not sketching in his pad. But leaving him with Agnes in the evening was different.

‘Why are you dressed like that, mommy?’ he asked when he saw her, as he lay on the floor with video game controls in his hands.

‘Like what?’

‘Like you’re wearing Agnes's *doek* or something.’

Kele laughed heartily. She adored her boy. But her laughter quickly came to a stop. She allowed a brief pause before telling him the bad news: ‘I have to go somewhere for work, honey.’

The boy's face drooped immediately.

‘Look what I brought you,’ she said as she revealed the McDonald’s she was hiding behind her back.

His face lifted a little, but was not as radiant as she had imagined it would be.

‘It’s a Quarter Pounder, just like mommy had. There's a milkshake too,’ she added. ‘And I bought you a Double Cheeseburger for later, just like you like. It’s in the kitchen.’

This is something he was not always allowed, because he often over-ordered but didn’t finish his food. It seemed appeasement enough. He smiled. She knelt down, looked into his eyes and kissed him on the forehead before reaching for softer words:

‘Mommy has to go. This is huge for her. It’s going to be huge for us. Don't forget I love you, big guy. Mommy loves you!’

The first thing he did after she let go of the embrace was to get his burger and bite into it. By the time she left the room he'd gone back to his X-box, falling right back into the groove of his game.

Kele stepped outside and flew down the stairs to the parking lot with her equipment in hand. She fired up the Sandero. It coughed up something terrible, but gave her no problems on the way to the filling station. She got her tyres pumped, her oil and her water checked, and her windscreen wiped down. She had taken off her watch and rings, and for a change her neck was bare. The *doek* she'd chosen to wear felt firmly secured on her head. It somehow solidified her confidence. She said goodbye to the petrol attendant when he was done, and she reached up to switch off the car light. As she did that she glimpsed herself in the rear view mirror. In the reflection she saw a younger version of her mother.

‘I’m no longer the young eighteen-year-old girl that first came to Joburg, that's for sure,’ she mused.

As she hit the ignition her phone rang. It was Ayanda. She looked at it and decided she would let it ring. She'd already paid for a babysitter. But her friend called again, and then a third and fourth time. As Kele joined William Nicol Drive and headed for the freeway, she took the phone in her hand. But this was only to mute its ringtone.

Chapter Eight

It was already evening when Nakedi pulled up in front of his mother's yard with fresh clothes and a clean-shaved head under a new cap. The lump he had on his crown from being hit by Mojalefa four days ago was no more than a little bump now. Even though it had healed well, the scar looked rather fresh on his shaved head. It needed to be hidden to avoid any necessary questions. Nakedi found himself using more of Wesley's money. Besides the clothes, R200 of it had gone towards appeasing the ire of the traffic officer who threatened to give him a ticket for driving into oncoming traffic. It was money well-spent, too, for the officer turned out to be quite personable and recommended a bed and breakfast in Hillcrest, the old 'Coloured neighbourhood'. Nakedi had almost wet his pants when the officer first walked up to his window. He feared Kele had already reported her car stolen and his life was done. Clearly she had not done that yet. Either Agnes had told her he took the car along with the boy, or the affair in Mandelaspruit was still keeping her occupied. In any event, Nakedi wouldn't know for sure until he switched his phone on. He still needed a charger for it.

Donovan looked presentable, like a grandson should before meeting his grandmother. More of Wesley's money had been spent on him, too. Colleen, their host at the bed and breakfast in Hillcrest had been helpful with that, among other things. She'd offered to send someone to do their shopping if Nakedi added a little extra to the rate she was charging. Nakedi appreciated this very much, but the lady who'd been sent on the errand had bought the wrong charger for his phone. Colleen also let him borrow her late husband's hair clippers for a little extra, and sat watching him as he shaved Donovan's head first, and then his own. Nakedi knew the police would be looking for a dark man with dreadlocks and a big kid with a short afro in no time if they were not out there already doing so. He couldn't do anything about his complexion or his son's weight, but he could do something about both their hair. Thanks to Colleen, they were well-fed and appeared fresh as they arrived at Aunt Eve's. He looked around for the best place to park the car. There were three vehicles in the yard and two in the driveway. He rubbed his hands together as he contemplated his next move.

'Why does *Khulu* have so many cars?' Donovan questioned after Nakedi confirmed the house was indeed *Khulu's*.

'They're not hers, boy,' he said, almost absentmindedly. 'She must have visitors.'

It must be one of her cell meetings, Nakedi thought to himself. He considered turning the car around and going someplace else. But where else could he go? He certainly was not up to meeting his mother's church friends, if church friends they were, but he had been on the road for far longer than he liked. He was aching to settle in inside. He parked Kele's car in front of the big gate. As they walked from the car towards the small gate a light above the front door came on and a lean figure stepped out. Nakedi looked closer. He could not believe it at first, but it was Thandi... or Mandi. He could not tell the difference between his twin sisters at this distance, especially after years of not

seeing them in the flesh. But something soon gave it away. Smoke sailed past the garage light under which she now stood, and disappeared into the night as soon as it escaped the light's glow.

'Mandi,' Nakedi confirmed in his mind and was glad.

He was getting closer to the small gate now with his son in tow. The boy was quietly asking his father to slow down. He was breathing heavily from the slight incline to the gate.

'Who's there?' The smoker was alarmed. 'Buntu, is that you?' There was no light by the gate, and even though they could see her, she could not see them.

Nakedi was about to answer when the front door swung open and a group of people walked out. The smoker ran quickly around the back.

Four men stepped out and were followed by three women. Nakedi recognised the women. The first was Aunt Fikile Mbonise, Aunt Eve's oldest friend. The other two he knew but their names were not quick to come. He could not make out any more as he quickly backed away from the gate and yanked Donovan under the drooping branches of the neighbour's willow tree.

'These white people's doors are sometimes tough to open,' laughed one of the men. 'Aunt Eve always has the clever things!' he said in the kind of isiXhosa Nakedi had not heard in some time.

'*Hayi wethu*, it's not the door that's clever; it's you that's not so smart,' clowned Aunt Fikile. She lowered her voice. 'Besides, there's not that much that's smart about her any more. I hear the money is running out. Even now when she had that accident, her car was fixed by Willem at church. Of course it was a small bump on the boot, but she couldn't even afford to fix that. She's even been behind on her insurance, I hear. But you didn't hear any of it from me…'

'Did you see the bathroom taps are broken?' said one of the other women. 'It's like this street. Definitely not as nice as it used to be.'

'There's not much of a difference now between our homes and theirs, concluded the last of the women. Mthatha is one big location now no suburbs but some people still think they're better than others.'

The closer they got the more Nakedi could make out of their conversation. He watched through slightly parted branches in the dark. As the group got closer the silhouettes of two of the men suggested they might be security guards. Perhaps the alarm had gone off by accident, and they had come to check it? That wasn't an unusual occurrence when Nakedi lived here last. But that did not make any sense. Why would they bring a crowd of women with them? Nakedi knew his guess about the alarm was definitely wrong when the security guards reached the gate. They were in uniforms, all right, but they were police uniforms. He fell to one knee.

‘Are they here for me?’ he wondered in a sudden panic.

He clutched his son tightly in a hug from the back and put a firm hand across his mouth in case he made a sound.

‘Whatever happens in this life, Donovan, I want you to know I love you,’ he whispered. ‘I want you to always know that. I may not have been the best father so far…’ his voice trailed off. He had not planned to say the words. They escaped him amid panicked breaths and the welling up of tears. But he suppressed all of it. He felt for something he could use on the ground. There was a rock by his knee. He picked it up. He knew the police could not yet see him under the tree. But that might change as soon as they got in their cars and put on their lights.

‘*Tata*, why are we hiding?’ The boy's whisper escaped through his father’s fingers. It was filled with terror.

‘We wanna give *Khulu* a surprise.’ Nakedi's reply was automatic and unconsidered. It made no sense. He knew the boy could tell from the unmistakable tension in the air that there was nothing fun on the horizon. Donovan began to cry just as the first of the policemen opened the gate. Nakedi had three choices, at least in his mind: muffle the boy harder and hope and pray they would not be seen; come out swinging with the rock he had in his fist; or leave Donovan there and run as fast as he could. But his son would only scream louder if he tried to shut him up. Nakedi had been through too much in the last few days. He did not have much more left in him. So he decided to step out from under the tree and hand everything over to fate. It was his choice to accept Wesley's offer to move drugs and perlemoen. It was his choice to put himself and his life in harm’s way by doing extra deals on the side with Thulani. There was now a price to pay. And if the police were here to collect, he had no choice but to be ready.

‘Ha! Nakedi, is that you? At least there’ll be a man in the house to look after this situation now,’ said one of the policemen to the rest of the group. It was Bhut’ Themba, Aunt Fikile's first born. He had a stomach the size of a drum. He was holstering the weapon he had just now taken out at being startled by the movement behind the drooping branches. The other policemen were on high alert, too.

‘What were you doing behind there?’ one of them asked, clearly still suspicious of Nakedi.

‘The boy had to pee but could not wait to get inside. He did not like what I had to say to him about it. But he's okay now.’

Donovan looked up at his father. The boy still had tears in his eyes.

‘Don't cry, my sweetheart,’ said one of the women whose names Nakedi did not know. ‘Did daddy scold you for peeing in the street? He mustn’t be too sophisticated now. He used to be a

watering can, too; he used to pee in the dusty streets of Siyamthanda all the time before his mother moved out to these fancy suburbs.'

The other women, apparently surmising Nakedi had not overheard their previous conversation, laughed at hearing 'fancy suburbs'. Aunt Fikile pulled a sweet out of her handbag and handed it to Donovan before everybody said their goodbyes. The meeting at the gate left Nakedi with an uneasy feeling. He was glad to be safe for now, but something inside the house was definitely amiss.

'At least there'll be a man in the house to look after this situation.' He couldn't stop Bhut' Themba's words from ringing inside his head. He heard singing as he approached the door. It was a church hymn. He knocked and was received by Thandi. The people inside the house were all covered by a blanket of sadness as they sang the last of their hymn and said their goodbyes. There was a lot of movement as some of them went through to the bathroom to wash up before leaving. Nakedi greeted the ones he knew, with a sombre face to match theirs. He tried to keep out of the way as much as he could, but there was really no need for that. Something bigger than him was going on. When Mandi came back inside from her smoke, she too wore the same blanket of misery. She joined in the goodbyes and both the twins saw the visitors off. All the while Donovan stayed attached to his father like the terrified child he was. Nakedi wondered where Aunt Eve and Buntu were. Had one of them been in an accident; had one of them passed away? But he soon found out where the former was. She was up in her room, praying in that incomprehensible language that only the angels and God are said to understand. He could hear her wailing from downstairs, her voice audible now without the singing and murmuring of the guests. Something was definitely wrong with Buntu then. It was only after Mandi and Thandi had seen the last of the visitors off that Nakedi found out exactly what was amiss. The three years of absence that stood between him and his family didn't make it easy for any kind of conversation, let alone the type that stood before them. Donovan began to cry. He needed the bathroom, but instead of asking he simply gave into tears. The heaviness of the atmosphere inside his grandmother's house was too much for him. When he eventually voiced his problem, Thandi took him quickly away. As soon as Nakedi and Mandi were alone, the latter threw her face into his chest and let go of all her pain. It was a while before she spoke, her words filled with the self-same sadness that had drained her face of the radiance Nakedi remembered it for. There had indeed been an accident, he learned; there had indeed been a death.

Chapter Nine

'*Haraba shan-dera bakun-dera, hara-shara basan-tera…*'

Nakedi opened the door to his mother's bedroom slowly after a few unanswered knocks. He found her with her hands raised to the ceiling, walking barefoot over Buntu's clothes which were strewn all over the floor. She was praying as wildly as he had ever seen her do before. It was even worse than those eerie nights, when he was still in high school, and she would sneak quietly and carefully into his bedroom to cover him with the blood of the Lamb. She would tip-toe in as if not to wake him, only to wail in long refrains and sniffle wildly as though she were drowning in something. While he knew Buntu was the reason behind her summoning of God, Nakedi was yet to find out about Aunt Eve's hand in it.

'*Hara-kara basa-ntera bakun-dera,*' his mother went on.

He continued to watch, remembering when he too would be commanded to pray this way; to just let the Holy Spirit take over and make his heart speak directly to the Lord.

'Hi, Ma,' he whispered eventually, as loudly as he could, without disrespecting her state of prayer. He'd already had supper, given Donovan a bath, and got into more conversation with his sisters. They told him there would be a meeting tomorrow at noon. The Solomon men, who hadn't come since Buntu's disappearance, were invited and apparently going to show up. For now Nakedi did not want to converse with any one person in the house for longer than was necessary. The less he said the less likely it was he would betray news of his own situation. He wanted to speak to Aunt Eve and at least let her know he was home, before he called it a night.

'Hi, Ma,' Nakedi said again as his mother continued, not heeding him. Donovan ran up the stairs. He stopped behind his dad, with his wide frame half-hidden behind his father's leg. He too watched his *Khulu*.

'What are you doing here? I said wait at the bottom of the stairs. What is wrong with you, boy?' Nakedi was scolding Donovan when Aunt Eve stopped her prayer mid-syllable and opened her eyes. A smile began growing on her lips but came crashing down before being fully formed.

'No, this is not my son. This is not my son! Bring back my son, Lord!' she let out in a long, chilling yelp, thrashing her arms around as though she was fighting off an unseen horde.

She looked through Nakedi and Donovan as though they were made of nothing but air. Nakedi noticed the boy was terrified of his *Khulu*. He grabbed him by the head and hid his face fully behind his leg.

‘This is why I didn't want you here, but you don't bloody listen.’ Nakedi squeezed the boy’s head as he scolded him in a rasping whisper.

Just as Donovan was beginning to cry, his Aunt Mandi came up the stairs and rescued him.

‘What are you guys doing here? I said you can talk to her tomorrow before the meeting.’ Mandi pulled the door just enough to shield Donovan from the sight of his grandmother. ‘Leave her alone. She’ll be done soon.’

‘And when is that?’ Nakedi asked, quite concerned about Aunt Eve’s mental state.

‘Whenever she is done, Kedi,’ Mandi shrugged her shoulders and her voice became stern, ‘I don't think the boy should be here watching her like this anyway; do you? Look at him!’ She said her last words in isiXhosa so her nephew wouldn't catch on. He was snivelling. ‘Like I said before,’ she changed into a less harsh tone, ‘there's a family meeting tomorrow. The Solomons coming. Mom will have to get ready for that. You can talk to her then.’

Nakedi watched as Mandi took the boy downstairs by the hand. He had a strong urge to follow them, but he lingered a moment and pushed the door open again. Aunt Eve hadn't missed a beat with her prayer since mistaking him for Buntu. Her wails flowed out of her like rhythmic nocturnal calls. Her pain was raw, and the sadness Nakedi felt for her was debilitating. It was deeper than any he had yet felt for himself since he had altered the course of his own life. He was overcome by an urge to walk over to Aunt Eve and wrap her up in the warmth of his arms. Instead of obeying that sentiment however, he pulled the bedroom door and turned to follow the boy and his aunt. He needed to be next to his son at all times, to make sure he didn't say anything he wasn't supposed to say about their journey. Nakedi had given him a long talk at the bed and breakfast regarding what he could and could not say to *Khulu* about their trip. There was to be no talk of Port St Johns and the house with the monkeys, and there was definitely to be no mention of Colleen’s place. But Nakedi had not pulled his mother’s door completely closed, and what he heard as he retreated down the stairs startled him beyond all comprehension. He stopped dead where he was, just as his heart almost did.

‘Even if he sleeps with other boys he is still my son, Lord,’ she cried out. ‘I did not mean to kick him out. Don't let him kill himself over this, Father. *Haraba shan-dera bakun-dera hara-shara basanti*…’ Aunt Eve made a final plea in tongues before her voice collapsed into a wave of wanton weeping.

Nakedi could not believe what he’d heard. The pain and shock of her words haunted him in echoes as he raced down the rest of the stairs in pursuit of Donovan.

Chapter Ten

Donovan was the first thing to leap into Kele's mind when the men in black walked in through the door. Her head was still throbbing from Lerato's blow and she was devastated by the regret of not having spent more time with her son before saying goodbye. She worried about how long she would be in this place, and what Agnes would do with her son when she eventually got tired of waiting. Of the three men who walked in, two had hats on, and one sported a clean-shaven head. On the shoulders of their black uniforms were red badges, but in the dimness of the lights Kele was not able to make out exactly what the image on them was. The bald-headed man immediately stood out as the leader of the trio. He was tall and hunched over under the low roof of the shack. This made him look menacing in the flickering glow of the lamp. Lerato offered him the chair she had been sitting on. She had stood up when he entered, and kept standing, as had Old Man Thato and his grandson. After a few moments in which the man gazed at each of them, he motioned them to take their seats. He sat down slowly in front of Kele, his movements measured and deliberate. Kele now wished she had picked up Ayanda's call on her way here. Perhaps something about it would have made her change her mind, and save herself. But she did not see how anything could have stopped her, given the determination that was in her. Coming here was about getting ahead and not living under the constant fear of how she was going to give Donovan a better life. She thought about how she was on her fifth year at Reijger Media. She'd interned on the Maître Minute for a year before being made a freelance junior producer on the same radio show. After another three years she landed the very same position, only this time as a permanent employee. She appreciated the medical insurance and provident fund that came with being permanent, but the money wasn't all that good. And she was a dark-skinned woman in a white, male-dominated media house. Life felt like a merry-go-round in ceaseless motion. If it wasn't about Donovan's needs – and plenty of those there were – it was about constantly chasing the next new and exciting guest to get on-air; cutting and posting podcasts; editing videos; writing blogs; and creating promos to get more listeners to tune in to more shows to come. She felt like she never had time to think, to refocus, and to coalesce the sum of her daily activities into a meaningful existence. But whatever it was that was on the horizon for her in Mandelaspruit, she was ready to take it, she had thought. And if it worked, it would be her chance to move out of the stagnation her career had become. If these were indeed going to be the worst xenophobic attacks yet, and her name was going to be at the forefront of them, people would see and know her work. Then she'd be attractive to other media houses. Better yet, her parents would be proud of her. And she might even start to make real money, and not have to ask for favours like she'd had to do with Ayanda earlier, only to end up paying Agnes anyway. Kele certainly didn't appreciate the demeaning side of asking people for help. It made one a lapdog, even if for a moment. But here she was, worse off than a lapdog.

'Glad you could come, sir,' Lerato said to the bald-headed man. There was only a half-smile in response, and it was gone as quickly as it came. Lerato moved towards the far adjacent corner of the

room, to where her son and father sat on the bench. The other two men followed. Her awe of the leader was unmissable. She was a delicate little thing with him; no longer the bull she had been towards Kele.

'Is he the leader of the xenophobic attacks – or one of them?' Kele wondered. 'They must be very organised if they even have uniforms.'

The glow of the paraffin lamp swam on the man's light-complexioned face. He was handsome, but there was hardness in his eyes and a distinct firmness to his jawline that took away from what would have otherwise been a pleasant countenance.

'Here to investigate the xenophobia, right?' he began.

The man's accent was not South African. He sounded as though he were from West or North Africa somewhere; though where, she couldn't say.

'Is he being ironic?' she was puzzled. 'Is he faking the accent just to make a point?'

The man repeated himself, but the authenticity of his accent threw her off all the more, and she appeared to not know the answer to his simple question.

'Oh no, yes, I'm here for a job… sorry… I mean I'm here to interview Thato's daughter for a job.' She immediately knew she was unconvincing, and took the wry smile on the man's face to be confirmation of that.

'For a domestic worker's job?' The man's lips parted into a full smile. They revealed teeth that were tightly packed in, as though he had a few extra molars in there. The reason for the equine jawline, no doubt. His face was hard now as he searched her eyes.

'Stop looking at Ntate Ramogase and Lerato, they are not going to be able to help you,' he said coolly, as Kele swung her head around to look at Old Man Thato with a supplicant expression. She was waiting for him to corroborate her words about the job interview.

'But ask Thato; ask him,' she said. 'He and I spoke about this. And I wouldn't have come all the way if I didn't have an urgent need for someone. I wish he would just come out and tell the truth about what's going on here.'

But as before, Old Man Thato offered no words to aid her. The two men who had come in with Kele's interviewer were pulling something out of a bag now and offering it to him. One unfurled one part of it while the other unfurled another. It was a black uniform, similar to theirs. Old Man Thato was smiling at receiving it, shaking the young men's hands with a mix of gladness and reverence. He seemed changed to Kele; no longer the meek man at the gate with the apologetic smile.

‘I said turn your head back around and stop looking at them!’ The bald-headed man’s voice was thunderous, but came down instantly. He cleared his throat as if to recompose himself and continued, calmly. But there was a caustic edge to his tone now. ‘So, Ntate Ramogase is just Thato to you, I see?’ He paused. ‘Do you address him properly when you speak his name this way? Ask Thato, you say. Did your people at home teach you this? You are an unbelievable woman, Kele Solomon.’

He must have seen a certain look in Kele’s eyes, for he asked: ‘What is the matter? Do you not like how I speak? Or could it be that you have come to investigate xenophobic attacks and you find that the first person who speaks to you of them is the kind who should be getting attacked? Are you stunned by this discovery?’ He didn’t wait for a response from Kele. ‘Not all is at it seems with the world anymore; isn’t it? Anyway, let me leave the world alone for now. We’ll have enough time to talk about that later, you and I. Right now I just want to understand.’ He smiled again, fleetingly. ‘You came for a job interview in Mandelaspruit? A rich woman comes over to drop off a security guard at his very humble abode. Look at the place; it leaks, you are sitting on a beer crate. The very soil that we walk on outside is carpeting in here.’ He stomped his foot to make his point. ‘We have a paraffin lamp in front of us; they have a candle in the corner there. Fortunately for us nobody is drunk and knocks any of them over, because we are done for then. And how long do you think it takes a fire truck to come out here while every man woman and child in this settlement burns alive?’ There was another pause. ‘There’s pee and shit outside, too. Did you smell it as you walked down? It’s always there but it’s worse after the rains. I have to ask because some of the people here no longer smell the reek. It fills the streets after it rains, if you can call some of these alleys that, and people walk in it. In South Africa in the past we’ve had political parties fighting about toilets. They’ve always talked shit while we walk in their talk.’ He laughed, amused with himself, but even his chuckles were measured. ‘I’ll say it again: You are an amazing woman, Kele. I am not worthy of women in general, but even if I were one of your kind, I would not be worthy of you.’ His audience sniggered from the corner around their candle. ‘Can you believe it, my people? She comes here to walk on faeces. She leaves her lofty Sandton world in her white Mercedes Benz to drop off a man she clearly shows disrespect to, and then comes back to interview his daughter for a job later that same evening in a different car… in a... What are you driving there now?’

‘It’s a Re-nolt! A Sandero,’ Siya shouted.

‘Yes, in your Renault Sandero,’ the man finished. ‘You come here to be around this misery and squalor, only to conduct an interview you could have conducted in the comfort of your own world. Since when does the madam come to the maid?’ The man asked his last question in quite a perfunctory manner, and for a moment it seemed he was distracted. ‘Lerato!’ he roared suddenly, ‘Have you looked at the time? What is the boy still doing here? The children are supposed to have started going to the school ten minutes ago. Do we need to remind people about reminding them

before things get done? This is a revolution; your son is not exempt. Take him! They will be well looked after there. They will be as safe as houses.' The man turned his attention back to Kele and repeated the expression as Lerato left with Siya: 'Safe as houses… Do you think that expression is lost on some of the people who live here?'

Kele did not respond.

'In any event, on to the next thing.' He was done with the humour. 'I will need your phone.' He asked for it in a manner that let Kele know she had no choice but to hand it over. She pulled it out of her pocket. There were still Ayanda's missed call on it. And an SMS. She swiped quickly across the screen and read it as she handed the phone over.

'Finish reading, the man said.'

Kele continued, all the while slowly handing the phone over. The message read:

'*Hey, babe, sorry was unavailable. Meetings all day. Bumped into Thando. Remember her? Maybe you don't… She dated Chiba, before he dated Khwezi? Anyway, she was on about Mandelaspruit and xenophobia. She thinks it's big, just like you. Anyway, sorry I couldn't help with Donovan eventually. Chat soon. Kisses. Hope you found someone*.'

'Are you sure you are done?' The man made certain. 'You cannot make any calls but you can read what you already have. That's fair, I think.' He smiled. 'But if you are done, that is that.'

He took the phone casually, opened it up and removed the SIM card. He put the card in his mouth and chewed it slowly, his copious teeth crushing it with ease, all the while the expression on his face neutral.

'I'm sorry. We have to do that,' he said, as soon as he spat the pieces of the SIM card out onto the floor. 'Your arms, too, please.' He stretched out his arms on the table to show Kele just how he wanted hers. 'Give them to me, like this.'
Kele sat frozen.

'Do not be alarmed,' he continued, as Kele's head began to swivel from side to side.

She was overcome with panic. She didn't know why, but she felt more desperation in Lerato's and Siya's absence. There were no xenophobic attacks. Something more complex than she had accounted for was unfolding. The bald-headed man tied her arms, and she gasped as he did so, before letting out half a scream. She held her breath to quell the disquiet inside. She turned and fixed her eyes on Old Man Thato. She knew for certain now he would not help. But she looked at him nonetheless. She would not allow him the satisfaction of a scream. He was in his black pants and was putting on the rest of his uniform.

‘I’m sorry,’ the bald-headed man continued after tying her arms, ‘but your head will have to go in this.’

He was holding something that looked like a pillowcase. The material looked thick and unbreathable, dirty.

‘Where are we going? What is going on?’ Kele's voice was quivering as she began protesting, but again, she did her best to steady herself. Outbursts were not going to help her, judging from the demeanour of her captors.

The man laughed: ‘You came here with questions and now you have more of them. Life is full of irony, isn’t it? You thought you’d be doing the interviews. About xenophobia, no less! But it is you who is going for interrogation, and taking you there is a man born and raised here, there and everywhere in Africa. Someone some of you would call a *kwere-kwere*. Boys, it’s time to move!’ His voice became sharp. It was different when he gave instructions to his men. Sure it was methodical and calculated in general, but when it gave orders, it was like the sure strike of a fencer.

Kele and the men were soon outside. Old Man Thato was with them.

‘I am taking her up to headquarters to meet the others. You can take the car; go and see how organised they are at the school with the women and children. We will go in her Renault.’ He threw the thick hood over her head. ‘Let’s go! Work awaits.’ The other men peeled off.

The night was quiet, strangely quiet, as though the homes around were empty. The bald-headed man reached inside Kele’s jacket pocket and took out her car keys. He opened for her, sat her down in the back seat and fastened her seatbelt.

‘There you go. You are with a stranger, but there’s absolutely no need to feel unsafe,’ he chuckled. He got in, started the car, and they were off. ‘All your questions will be answered in good time; even the ones you haven’t thought to ask yet. But I will tell you this: When Lerato said we have another one, she was wrong. You are the only one from Reijger Media besides Phumlani Ndleleni. You two have worked there for four years. That is a special place. The one hundred and twenty-seven people who work there decide what millions of South Africans think about themselves and the world around them. Isn’t that special?’

‘Have for what? What do you have us for?’ There were no words, just puzzlement under the darkness of the sack. But pride found a way to brim inside Kele even in that moment, for Phumlani Ndleleni was an accomplished journalist with two books to his name, and awards in both print and radio. And these people, whoever they were, weighted her and Ndleleni equally. She had no sense of the direction they were going in. But instead of preoccupying her mind with those details, in case she had to relay her whereabouts to a potential rescuer, her head suddenly turned towards Donovan. She

was again weighed down with the regret and sadness of not having spent more time with him before leaving. The last memory she had of him replayed itself in her mind. He was laid out in front of the TV with his joystick in his hands, playing an X-box game whose name she didn't know.

Chapter Eleven

The mingled smells of bacon, eggs, and sausages were reassuring to Nakedi. He had just been jolted out of a bad dream and, after a moment's panic, realised he was home. Even the odour of burnt toast that choked the air all the way down the passage wasn't displeasing to him. He pulled his sheet over his face and wiped his forehead dry. He had sweat on his back too, and the top he'd slept in was soaked in it. He felt cold. He looked over at the other bed. Donovan was still asleep; the rumble of low snoring the only sign of life in him. Nakedi tried to shake off the remnants of his nightmare, but the memory of it was rippling in his head. He got up and tip-toed over to the wardrobe to look for something to wear. He found a couple of his old t-shirts. They had not been worn in years and were covered in an imperceptible film of dust and must. Surely they needed washing before being put on again. But Buntu had fresher ones. Nakedi held one up. The brothers were probably about the same size now; the badminton top looked like a good fit. But was it appropriate for him to wear Buntu's championship t-shirt, he wondered. As he put it down he came across a black Slum Village top he had given to his brother years back. He'd bought it for himself at a Syllabolix rap show in Perth, and Buntu, though smaller then, had pestered him for it. Memories of Australia, the Syllabolix, and Karen's after-party in Scarborough came to him as he threw the t-shirt over his body and got back into bed. Good times. Better times. But echoes of the bad dream wouldn't let him think of much else but blood and screams. They brought back lucidly the memory of the night everything went awry for him.

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It was Monday night in Windsor, and Nakedi was stooped over in the dark, resigned to the inevitability of his undoing. Light streamed in through the window and fell on a heap of newspapers stacked in the corner. A fetor of decay emanated from the mould in the shower, and it was made even worse by the cheap aerosol scent of strawberries that clung to the air. He swallowed hard in order to quell the queasiness the fear in him caused. He curled his fingers tightly around the gun in his hand and hung his head even lower, below his knees. His dreadlocks were draped about his face, giving the room a feeling of even deeper darkness. There was a visceral tug each time he weighed up the details of what Mojalefa and Thulani were asking him to do to avoid his own death. Something rose in his stomach once more, and raced up towards his throat. He clenched his teeth and swallowed again as it came into his mouth. He certainly didn't want to kill anyone. He'd made that clear. But his refusal had been violently rejected. In the afternoon the top of his head had met with the butt of the gun he was holding. It was the same weapon Mojalefa had used to shoot Mr Morinaga. Nakedi ransacked his mind for ideas on how he could possibly get out of this. But not a single one offered him any comfort. It was Dr Amoa they wanted him to shoot, in order to prove he wouldn't go to the police. A jolt, like a

javelin throw through the folds of his brain, shot from the back of his head to his left temple, sending out piercing throbs of pain. He clenched his teeth. Tears, mucous, and sweat dripped down his face, mixing in with the blood from his head that had long coagulated. There was a noise of knuckles on the door, followed by Mojalefa's voice. Nakedi started, and sprang to his feet. He couldn't help curling up inside of himself as the key turned. The bathroom light came on as Mojalefa hit it from outside. Its brightness hurt Nakedi's eyes. He rubbed quickly across his face with a forearm and grimaced. Lifting his left arm hurt. But his other hand was still wrapped around the gun and he dared not move it.

'Excuse me, may I enter please!' It was Mr Morinaga's wife.

Nakedi's body went rigid at seeing her. Her hair and clothes were dishevelled, and her make-up was ruined by tears.

'Get out of the way; can't you see she wants to pee!' Mojalefa barked.

Nakedi stepped forward in order to vacate the bathroom for her, but he had hardly set a foot outside the door when the force of a fist to his midriff sent him reeling back, crashing against the sink. He fell to the floor on one knee, winded, sucking in buckets of air.

'What the hell is your problem? Put that down!' Mojalefa shouted as Nakedi raised the gun in anger. The tiny woman screamed.

'Shut up, bitch!' Mojalefa ordered in a harsh whisper. He put Mrs. Morinaga in a chokehold. 'There's only one bullet in there; and it's not for me!' Mojalefa was visibly unperturbed by Nakedi's weak effort at pointing the gun at him. 'You think you're going to shoot me with the same gun I gave you? Come on, *sani*; what would that make me? And what are you going to do about my friend upstairs? Or do you still think Thulani is your buddy? *Uskaba setlayela*, *sani*. I told you clearly: You will only come out of this bathroom when I tell you! Don't give me that stupid face; that's why I punched your faggot ass back in there. You don't listen!'

With that, he let go of Mrs Morinaga's neck and shoved her small frame fully inside. The door shut behind her with the dulled bang of swollen wood as it hit the frame. Mojalefa hadn't stopped speaking. His words were muffled behind the closed door: 'Hurry up with your pee-pee, Miss China-face! Don't make me have to come in and help you with your taps! I suck at plumbing; I suck real badly, if you know what I mean.' He hit the light from outside and the bathroom was back in darkness. 'I'm giving China-face some privacy,' he laughed. 'I'm not setting the mood for you two to fall in love in there.'

Mrs Morinaga had no love of any kind for Nakedi. '*Omae no seida*! *Omae no seida*.'

She hadn't stopped crying after being put in the chokehold, and she hissed the words at Nakedi between her sobs.

The words made no sense to Nakedi (who had retreated as far back into the bathroom as he could without climbing into the sour-smelling shower).

'*Omae no seida*!'

He remained silent. There was nothing he could say or do to change what he had done to her and her husband. The weight of his conscience was enough to press him into the earth.

'I've destroyed her life. I've destroyed her friends, her family – people I'm never going to meet.'

'How is Mr Morinaga? There was a lot of blood on his jacket.' The words escaped Nakedi.

Mrs Morinaga did not utter a single word to him. All he heard was her zipper as she stood and pulled it back up.

'*Owatta*,' she shouted reflexively in Japanese, and then again in English, 'I'm finish.'

The door swung open, and just as soon as Mrs Morinaga walked out, Mojalefa extended his arm towards Nakedi and yanked him out by the collar.

'Come, your time has come! Let's follow her.' He dragged Nakedi up the stairs of the old Windsor-East duplex. Mrs Morinaga did not need to be dragged or guided. She walked as though she already knew where to go, and did so with purpose.

'Hey! Stop!' shouted Mojalefa.

She halted next to a door she was already passing. He unlocked it, the muscles in his thick arms rippling as he did so. He led them into an unfurnished bedroom. Sitting in the corner of it was Dr Amoa.

'There he is; this one is yours,' Mojalefa whispered in Nakedi's ear, as though he were offering him something delicious to share. Mine is over there,' he pointed in the other room. 'Thulani is going to take care of this bitch right here when the time comes.'

Mrs Morinaga stood looking at them, unflinching.

'Anyway, fuck this bitch. The real woman is what you have in your hand. That's a Vektor SP1, Na-kedi; a pig's gun. Do the pigs proud.' Mojalefa laughed, his tongue peering between his yellow teeth in a way that caused Nakedi's skin to crawl. Thulani walked into the room just then.

'Ah, in time for the fireworks,' Mojalefa said to him.

Nakedi looked at Thulani. It was happening. They wanted him to shoot Dr Amoa now. Thulani walked up to Nakedi and spoke earnestly.

'*Kau*,' he said to him, 'it's either us or them. I didn't want to get you into this. You must believe me. But life happens. You can tell Wesley you got robbed by people you don't know. He'll believe you. You have been good to him,' he said. 'He knows these things happen in this line of business.' Thulani paused. His voice was conciliatory, but it changed. 'On the other hand Mojalefa is a killer; the kind who shoots you in broad daylight. You have to take care of one of these people so he knows you are not going to rat. These people you are scared to shoot aren't killers. Do the right thing for all of us and shoot this *kwere-kwere*!'

Dr Amoa had been crying quietly all this time. He got up and began to plead out loudly.

'Don't do this! Please! I'm not a *kwere-kwere*; I'm a human being, just like you. This is senseless–'

'Shoot this fucker!' screamed Mojalefa. 'Don't let him talk you out of it!'

'My wife, my children! Ama, oh, Ama,' the Ghanaian doctor wailed. 'Oh Kweku! Oh Nana!' His face was wet with perspiration and mucous, contorted by terror. Wetness began growing from his crotch as Nakedi raised his arm and cocked the weapon. The wetness had the shape of a tiny round island on his crotch, but it grew large and turned into an isthmus as it stretched down his leg and reached all the way to his ankle. Mojalefa and Thulani laughed at the sight of the puddle collecting on the old hardwood floor.

'Shoot him before he shits!' Mojalefa was excited and blood-hungry. 'What are you fucking waiting for?'

'*Omae no seida*; *omae no seida*!' Mrs Morinaga began mumbling the same unintelligible words she had mumbled in the toilet. But she soon changed them for ones Nakedi understood quite well. They came in a shrill scream: 'You were supposed to take us to hotel. But you bring us this place. This your fault. *Omae no seida*! Even you shoot or you don't shoot, you are killer!'

Nakedi felt his finger tighten around the trigger. He felt lightheaded, too, as though he was on a conveyor belt, not sure which direction he was going in. For a moment it crossed his mind to turn the gun on himself, to put the barrel of its silencer right on his temple and pull. That way all this would be over. Another javelin flew through the folds of his brain, this time from the base of his skull to the top of his face. His arm dropped. That's when the desperate doctor lunged at him, and the air shattered with the sound of death.

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Donovan bellowed loudly as he changed his sleeping position and then went immediately quiet. The snore shocked Nakedi out of the memory. His heart was racing, beating so hard there was a physical pain in his chest. He wanted to get up now and get some air, but he also wanted nothing more than to forget everything, to curl up and be swallowed whole by the earth right where he lay. But there was no forgetting. A crescent moon, pale but menacing, rose on the periphery of his conscience and taunted him. He heard the names of Dr Amoa's wife and children: Kweku, Nana, and Ama. Whether awake or in a dream, the nightmare of his life would not free him from its existence.

Chapter Twelve

Kele had taken note of neither the direction they were going in, nor the turns and stops they had made since leaving Mandelaspruit. And these had been plenty. She was consumed by thoughts of her son so much it was some time before it dawned on her to consciously map out the direction in which her captor was taking her. They had been driving for some time now, on a long, narrow road. It was quite lean, at times they would slip off the side of the tarmac and end up on the dirt. Kele even knew how to anticipate the moments when the bald-headed man would swerve the car to the left. First, the light of the oncoming vehicle would glow, despite the darkness of the hood over her head. And when it was close, her abductor would slow theirs down, and veer off. It was the trucks and not the cars, she surmised, that pressed them for space. This is how she came to guess she was on some narrow secondary road far out of Johannesburg. Not only was it narrow, it was bumpy, too, as though it was packed with countless poorly patched potholes. When their car picked up speed, the wheels spent as much time in the air as they did on the surface. There was no telling where she was. All she knew was they had so far driven unimpeded, for about an hour or so. Whether they were headed north or south, east or west, she couldn't guess. The road suddenly became bumpier, and they drove slowly over some potholes that were certainly not repaired. They made a right, then another one immediately afterwards. After a long straight stretch, they hit a sharp left. Kele was drawing a map inside the darkness of the hood, but its lines disappeared as soon as she captured them. From the little she had, she worked her mind overtime to imagine where she could be. But before she could begin piecing anything plausible together, the car came to a halt. She shifted in her seat as a new disquiet set into her. There was a wind, and on it a light drizzle sprinkled. Kele felt both on her hands when the man opened the window. He pressed something; a sequence or code on an electronic pad. There was a series of beeps and a woman's voice crackled over an intercom.

'Name?' she asked.

'Black Spider UBG-1.1,' replied the driver.

'Welcome back, sir! Please key in your current password.'

'It must be an industrial area out of town,' Kele guessed as she heard more beeping from the keypad.

'*Current password accepted*,' commanded an electronic voice. '*Password now expired*! *Report to your Senior Operations Officer for a new password*.'

'Use bay number one, please, sir.' The female voice was back.

There was a pulling of chains and what sounded like the opening of a heavy garage door.

'It must be a warehouse or factory of some kind,' Kele decided.

They drove in. There was a gradual descent and then a turn. They went down in a spiral, as though driving into the basement floor of a multi-level mall parking. She anticipated they would be coming to a stop soon, but to her surprise, they kept going, in constant vertiginous turn. Until then, even with the hood over her face she had not felt claustrophobic. But the further the car descended, the more she began to feel like her chest was tightening up – as though she was slowly being buried alive.

Chapter Thirteen

The Saturday morning was unlike any Nakedi had ever experienced at home. Despite the beautiful day outdoors, with sunshine and birdsong, heaviness inhabited both the house and his conscience. It stole any possibility of fond spells of nostalgia and warm distant memories. Instead, he was replaying parts of the night before. The incident at the gate with the police and Aunt Fikile's gossip; the news about Buntu; and his mother's wild state of prayer. Growing up, he'd hated having the only room downstairs. It felt like some kind of demotion. Yet he was glad Aunt Eve was upstairs now, far from where Donovan could hear her clearly. The boy was still asleep. He'd appeared disturbed by the incident last night.

'What is wrong with Khulu? Is she sick?' he'd asked solemnly, with the kind of expression of sadness on his face that Nakedi figured would grow with him into adulthood.

The father had no reply for his son. He'd asked himself the very same question when he first saw Aunt Eve, and he'd not been able to answer it. Another thought struck him. He hoped it hadn't appeared too odd to the twins when he insisted on taking care of Donovan's feeding and bathing, despite both their offers and the boy's own wishes. Surely it was strange how he kept the boy close to him all the time. Helped along by the smell of breakfast and the need to empty his bladder, Nakedi finally got out of bed. He was coming out of the bathroom, wiping his hands on the tail of his t-shirt and headed for the kitchen when he heard unfamiliar voices in the house. His heart almost beat to a standstill when he picked up their low tones. It sounded like two men.

'Who are they? And what are they doing here? Could it be *Oompi* Solomon? Not possible,' he thought.

The meeting was at twelve noon, and it was barely eight o' clock. They weren't the kind to call socially and enjoy family time before a meeting. The female voice talking to the men sounded like Aunt Eve's, and from what Nakedi could pick up, the exchange was serious.

'Could it be the police?' Fear leapt into him as if a robber into a quiet room. 'Is it about Buntu or me?'

He pondered retreating back to the bedroom until the men were gone and it was safe to come out. But what if it was not about his brother? Going back to the bedroom would mean he'd be getting himself cornered. He put his hands together as if in supplication and brought them up to his mouth. His chin rested on his thumbs and his lips pressed against his index fingers as he thought out his next move. His palms were moist. The beat of his heart was turbulent. He felt vulnerable and exposed, as though he were being sought in an open field with nowhere to hide. His mind ran in different directions. Among the many thoughts that came to him, getting to the front door unnoticed and making a run for it was the best one. The only challenge: he was dressed in just a t-shirt, shorts, a cap,

and had no shoes on his feet. Not quite the get-up to run away in. And what about Wesley's money in Kele's car? How would he get to that? The more immediate problem though was, to get to the front door, he had to pass the kitchen, where the voices were coming from.

'No, I'm afraid that won't be possible…' Nakedi could finally make out the female voice. The accent wasn't Aunt Eve's. The timbre of Thandi's voice was just like her mother's, though hers still possessed that youthfulness Aunt Eve's had lost with age. Nakedi was glad it wasn't his mother, yet he still felt uneasy at the presence of the male speakers. He stood on one spot and listened with his head leaning towards the kitchen before edging closer and closer. His ears were on extremely high alert, focused on the purpose of the men's visit.

'Who owns the white Benz with the GP number plate?' one of them asked. 'May we see the boot?'

'That's none of your business,' was Thandi's reply. 'And no, you may not see the boot!'

His sister was being interrogated, and it was definitely about him. His heart beat frantically, and something nauseating fell into the pit of his stomach. He felt light-headed and heavy-footed. Enveloped by panic, he stood frozen in motion near the kitchen. He was just about to dart forward when the sound of a banging door startled him into a petrified cry: '*Oh God*!'

But it was no more than Donovan, running for the bathroom with wetness already staining his new pyjamas.

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'What the hell was that scream about?' Thandi asked much later after everyone had got up to leave the breakfast table. Nakedi's cry had brought Aunt Eve and Mandi out of their bedrooms, although only one of them came down to breakfast after learning the noise had nothing to do with Buntu. Nakedi had anticipated breakfast would be uneasy. But Donovan dragged his sketch pad to the kitchen with him and stole the show with it and his whimsical conversation. His father was glad to escape the focus of everyone's attention. He was even able to sneak in some questions about the men who'd come. This set Thandi off on a tangent.

'What a bad bunch they are, these coloureds that are left in the church. They are the lowest kind from Hillcrest,' she said, 'not like Uncle Danny and Aunt Heather's sort from Dellville. Even though they claim the same Lord and Saviour we do,' she stressed, 'they are controlled by the kind of greed even Jesus can't save them from!'

When Nakedi asked what all the anger was about, Mandi stepped in and explained that Aunt Eve had been in a minor accident a few weeks ago. The boot of her car had needed fixing, and they had done such a bad welding job on it.

‘And they’ve got the gall to tell me I don’t know what that boot looked like before,’ Thandi cut in.

‘So what did they want with the white car?’ Nakedi asked, quite aware he wasn’t calling it his.

‘The audacity! They wanted to show me the boots were the same. Except I know yours doesn’t have holes in it. These are Benzes. They’re not supposed to have holes in them! Then they’ve got the cheek to tell me they gave us a normal-sized spare wheel instead of another skinny one, so we should be happy. What does that have to do with fixing the boot to look like it did before the accident?’

It had taken Mandi in the end to change the subject at the table, talking to Donovan about his sketches and his games again. Nakedi wished she were here now to save him from Thandi’s sharp questioning:

‘What was that scream really about?’ she repeated slowly, and waited for an answer from her brother, with point-blank expectation on her face.

Besides the similarity of voice, Thandi had her mother’s authority. She wasn't quite at her mother's level yet, but she'd also taken on a militant love for all things church and Christ. She was as grim as the mood the house was in, and her eyes probed Nakedi's as she scraped discarded streaks of bacon fat and other leftovers into the bin.

‘You can lie to Mandi all you want,’ she whispered. ‘Go ahead, tell her you were playing with Donovan and trying to scare him. I heard you come out of the bathroom long before I heard him do anything. Let me tell you something: you’re the one who’s scared, Nakedi. I can see it. Something about you has been off since you got here. What is going on with your life?’

‘And what, this place has been normal since I arrived? I was playing with my son; that’s all there is. The only people scaring anyone here are you and mom with your Jesus shit and speaking in tongues through the night like–’ Nakedi held back. He’d listened to both of them, their voices muffled, as he lay awake on his bed for much of the night. Mother and daughter howling in prayer, speaking that gibberish they call the heavenly language.

‘Mom! Why do you even bother to still call her your mother? We’re all grown up now, Nakedi; let's be real. We all know she is not your mother. And even if she were, I think avoiding her for years clearly shows you’re not her son.’ She paused and her eyes zoomed in on the top he was wearing: ‘And why in God’s name are you wearing Buntu’s clothes!’

‘Calm down! It's only a t-shirt. The rest of this is mine. What in god’s name is *your* fucking problem, Thandi?’ He stopped short of beating the palms of his hands on the table. ‘*I* bought this t-shirt; *I* gave it to Buntu, if you care to know.’

It was not Thandi's questions or comments that incensed Nakedi the most. It was her face. It was the same face of condescending authority she had used on him growing up. It was just older now, skin a little tighter. Although he’d become close with Mandi a few years after moving in with them as a child, he’d always felt like an outsider with Aunt Eve and Thandi. Their love was like a tide – sometimes it was in, sometimes it was out. He stared his sister squarely in the face now and pushed his chair back from the table. He stood up slowly.

‘I owe you no explanations; not for anything,’ he said, trying to recompose himself. ‘Believe what you want to believe.’ With that, he turned away and left the kitchen.

‘Donovan, Donovan!’ he called as he walked towards the TV room.

There was no response although he could hear his son laughing away.

‘Donovan!’ Still, no response.

The ire evoked by Thandi could not be immediately quelled. It was a smouldering kind of anger, with menacing embers. Donovan was going to bear the brunt of it if he did not respond to his father's next call.

‘Donovan!’

‘Hey, answer your father, my Little Oros Man,’ Nakedi heard Mandi say as he stuck his face through the TV room door. ‘He’s here, Keds; I thought he might like to play his X-box after breakfast,’ she said as she assaulted her nephew with copious kisses to the neck. The boy screamed and giggled. ‘We’d started setting it up but he thought he could wrestle me; so I had to show him who’s boss.’

‘I’m still the boss,’ the boy shouted amid the giggling, but his aunt muffled him.

‘I think he’s too scared to take me on on the X-Box anyway,’ she said.
As Nakedi listened to his sister, his anger softened. He wondered why he was upset with his son to begin with. He knew the root of his rage and shoved Thandi to the back of his mind.

‘Do we have internet?’ he asked his sister.

‘No, unfortunately we don’t; and the PC is broken. But I brought my laptop with. It’s in the study upstairs. You can hotspot from my phone if you need to. What do you need?’

‘Thanks, Mandi; that’ll be a lot of help. I need to check in with work.’

‘On a Saturday?’ his sister exclaimed. ‘And what do you do these days, my world-travelling stranger; obviously not any of that anymore?’ she added with a sarcastic smile as she handed him the phone.

‘Will let you know all about it later,’ he said, changing the subject as quickly as he could. ‘Come, Donovan, let’s go,’ he added, motioning the boy to come away from his aunt.

‘Does your new job involve child labour? What do you need him for? Let me and my Little Oros Man play away,’ Mandi protested. ‘Go do your thing. You'll find us right here when you get back.’

Nakedi knew any protestation he made would be conspicuously odd, and futile. He decided to go without him, and just be quick about getting back.

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The study was the same as he remembered it. Hulking inside it were the same old shelves of dark teak. The Encyclopaedia Britannica set that lined them looked brand new, even though it (and its year update volumes) ran from 1990 through 1994. Nakedi thought about the times Aunt Eve would impress the importance of education and knowledge upon him. From time to time she’d ask him what he’d learned from the tomes, and when he could offer nothing, she’d admonish that she hadn’t bought the books for them to be ornaments. A little snigger escaped him now at his remembrance of how he only found such words as clitoris, *mons pubis*, vulva, scrotum, and prepuce.

He set up the hotspot on Mandi’s phone. Then he took out his own phone, which he’d fetched from the room on his way to the study, and hooked it up to his sister’s charger before sitting down to switch the MacBook on. The laptop was sleeping. He woke it and clicked open the browser. His eyes floated about the room as he waited for it to load. He caught here and there memories of the old house stored in frames. Buntu with a soccer ball; then Buntu with a toy gun – a water pistol – shooting at chrysanthemum shrubs that were only a tad shorter than him. In both pictures his cheeks were as round as dumplings. There was Buntu again, older, face more chiselled. He was smiling in his school blazer, sporting his colours for badminton. There were pictures of Nakedi, too, playing with his sisters in Siyamthanda. But there were singular ones of the girls, just like Buntu’s, in their blazers and academic colours. He marked the absence of a school photo of himself. The school he went to never took any photos. It didn’t produce fancy yearbooks in which he could scribble his dreams for the future. It wasn’t even a popular place for dreams. Those, he found at Sabine’s house. At Langelihle the children’s hopes were mostly in shards, like the many windows of the school, twisted, like the scrap-metal that occupied half of what was the sports field. Nakedi looked at the only picture of

himself alone. He was in a green vest and jogger with dry mucous on his upper lip. He'd just moved here from Port St Johns then, he recalled. But he realised he was losing track of time now and stole his mind back from the photographs. Safari had long since loaded…

There was nothing about the Windsor-East incident on the *Independent Online* website. He tried *News24* and Reijger Media next. Again, nothing! He Googled the street address of the crime for a broader search. He even typed in "Wesley Byron Marshall" (his boss's full name) and "Ariemi Shuttle Services". Still nothing! Finally, he searched for his own name. Same result. He clicked on the "history" tab and scrolled down to clear the browser.

'Dr Amoa and the Morinagas were people of reasonably good stature; weren't they? Why wasn't their disappearance and death in the news yet?'

It was the first time Nakedi had driven them. He knew nothing more than their names and those of the hotels they were going to: The Maslow and the Balalaika. A phone buzzed and beeped. It was his, finally on. There was that feeling of a mixer truck churning cement behind his navel again. Two SMSes came in; one email; some Facebook notifications and seventeen missed calls. Thirteen were from an unknown cell phone number, two were Kele's, and the last two were from a landline number – also unknown to Nakedi. He called Wesley immediately and cleared his throat as he waited for the ring. But there was no ring; only a dull beep.

'Strange,' he thought, and dialled again. There was the same short dull beep. He was about to write an SMS but decided against it. He looked at the other SMSes. One was about funeral cover and the other was a collective notification of the missed calls. Something struck him about the time of Kele's call. It was around 7pm on Thursday.

'I hadn't gone to her house then.'

There was a voice message. He dialled 121 and listened to it – Kele's urgent plea to look after Donovan for the evening if he could. Nakedi remembered his son.

'Shit, hurry up!'

By this time the boy had probably said something Nakedi was going to have to explain as soon as he stepped through the door. But the father wasn't finished yet. He dialled his ex-wife's number and composed himself. The line neither rang nor went to voicemail. The same dull beep as Wesley's phone and then... silence. Nakedi searched for her other number. Apart from her smartphone, he knew she kept a cheap Nokia as a back-up. He found the number in his contacts and called it. He steeled himself once more. How would he explain taking her car across the country with Donovan in it? The line rang once, then twice, and was picked up before it was quickly dropped. He tried again. This time the call was ended after half a ring and went into voicemail. He was overcome with concern. There

was only fifteen percent of battery life in his phone, but he didn't want to take the chance of leaving it charging in the study by itself. He went to the bedroom to change, put some shoes on, and gather a couple of things. He thought of Wesley's money in the car. He was going to need a little bit of it to talk to a lawyer. Seeking one out was the next best move he could make. Yet he wanted someone he didn't know. The news would travel faster if he talked to people he knew. He popped back into the TV room and found his son and his sister getting along quite well. There were sounds of screams and laughter between noises of revving engines and explosions on the X-box.

'May I steal him from you?' Nakedi was a tad envious of their lightness of spirit.
'Steal him? Where are you going with my Oros Man? I'm going to drink, drink, drink him all day. You can't have him.' She let out the laugh of an evil witch and kissed him on the top of his head.

Donovan's body jiggled as he giggled and Nakedi was briefly nauseated by it.

'Please stop playing with him; I need to go into town, Mandi.'

'What's in town? Can we come along? I feel like dessert. Maybe we can grab a coffee and cake somewhere nice.'

'Yes! Cake!' shouted the boy at his aunt's idea.

'We just had breakfast,' protested Nakedi. 'I'll be in and out anyway; I just need to run a quick errand.'

'But dad, we didn't have any cake for breakfast; cake is different. We can go when you're finished with your stuff,' Donovan pleaded with his father, using the charming, and crafty logic of a six year old. But his effort was lost on his dad.

'No, Donovan!' His voice was starting to strain, his patience wearing thin.

'Okay, go alone then,' Mandi said. 'How's Donovan going to help you with your errand anyway? Can he double-park a car yet? Why can't you just leave him here with me?'

'Come, Aunt Mandi, let's play!' the boy tugged at his aunt's shirt. He knew his father and his 'no's' well. 'I'm going to beat you and you will lose for the hundredth time.'

'Donovan, just bloody shut up and listen when old people are speaking!' Nakedi's patience snapped like a twig.

'No! You wait, Nakedi! Don't shout at him.' She put down the video game controls, walked up to her brother, and took him by the wrist. She switched to isiXhosa: 'You come here with tiny bags, with these new clothes on, in a car you apparently got from your ex-wife's house in her absence, if I understand the boy well. All this is three years after not talking to anyone in the family! And you think everything is just... okay? You think we can't see there's something wrong with you? There's

something worse here with Buntu, of course, but there's something definitely wrong with you. And for you to act like I don't see it is to tell me, in not so many words, little brother, that I'm stupid. Am I stupid to you?'

Nakedi stood looking at Mandi, his upper lip quivering and tears burning behind his eyes.

'What's going on with you?' she persisted. 'We love you… I love you… you're home now.'

Nakedi fought hard to keep back the flood of tears welling up inside him, but the hug his sister threw around him caused the levees to break. He wrestled himself free and fled from the living room before his son could see him cry.

Chapter Fourteen

Nakedi and Thandi's relationship had never possessed the kind of warmth one might expect between siblings. She was the older sister who, from the time he arrived as a six-year-old in Mthatha, asserted herself over him. She was already tall and willowy then, her body long like the necks of the flamingos she liked to draw. She would tower above him. If she caught him doing something wrong she would report it without fail, whether he was being naughty or committing a simple blunder. On occasion she even beat him. According to her, each of his transgressions and *faux pas* were borne out of one of two things: a contemptible kind of ignorance or malicious intent.

'*Nc nc nc*, you naughty *lali* boy,' she would often end her scolding. He was nothing more than a common rural child to her – a cousin not worth regarding as highly as she did her relatives on the Solomon side of the family. Pity the Solomons themselves were cold. But Nakedi was a Tolo after all, and the only reason he was living with them was because her mother, 'not his', had once been a Tolo.

'I'd be more careful if I were you; my mom is not your family anymore, and she hasn't even been to that place since we brought you here,' Thandi would warn in the portentous hours before Aunt Eve got home to find him in trouble once more. 'If I tell her you wet the bed and hid the sheets behind the wardrobe again, you dirty child, you're gonna be out of here!'

Nakedi would shudder at the thought of being returned to the one-room house in Zonyele where his father still lived then. It was not a mud hut but a large single room of brick and mortar. Still, it was something of a shed in comparison to the Siyamthanda Extension home he was in, and hoped never to be sent away from.

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Thandi and Mandi were as agreeable to the eye as they were identical, though the latter was the more prepossessing. If a womb is equipped with something that kindles comeliness, it must have worked more on her than it did on her sister. How is it possible, Nakedi asked himself as a child, that they have exactly the same face, yet Thandi wears hers in a decidedly ugly way? Besides their physical features, the girls were similar in their treatment of young Nakedi. Yet here again Mandi was the fairer of the two. She had been even more unwelcoming to her cousin at first, but her aversion towards him softened over the years. She too would tell when he did childlike things such as pretending to eat his samp and dumping it in the loo later. He broke a bowl in the toilet once. As he emptied out the last of the samp bits stuck to the bottom, he shook it, and let it slip. He was fishing out the evidence of porcelain shards that wouldn't flush when she came in and found him with blood dripping from a cut on his hand. As if the blood were not enough, Aunt Eve made him fetch a branch

from the peach tree when she arrived. He received twenty lashes and was banished to his room for the evening. But Mandi told less on him as time went on. What caused the change he didn't know, but just how much she'd softened he found out one summer evening when he was twelve and had committed the biggest transgression he'd ever committed against her. The twins were sixteen then, and they had come back from boarding school with their bodies changed, much fuller around the breasts and hips. The Solomons were on a year-end holiday with the Mbonise family at Dwesa, a beachfront resort in *kuGatyane*, deep in the Transkei. Nakedi had already begun making his fortnightly trips to Sabine Villion's house that year. On his last visit, it had happened that upon wandering around her yard aimlessly, and coming up behind her bedroom window unseen, he had caught her sitting naked in front of the dressing table mirror. Her lace curtains were open. She was brushing her red hair with strokes much too graceful for a large woman's. Her bare back, slightly curved, her breasts resting on her belly, and her pale thighs on display, all gave him a tingle to the loins that his boyish body had never known before. Most curious to him were the wild freckles he would always see on her face, arms, and legs. They seemed to disappear the whiter her body got, the more naked it became. She was the first woman he had seen unclothed. He had never even known a mother with whom he'd taken baths as a baby. But the sight of Sabine had not been enough for his hungry curiosity; the view had only been from the side. He'd thirsted for more. He waited a while, crouched behind a geranium bush. But the only thing he managed to see was her backside as she walked off to her wardrobe and threw a dress over the object of his interest. Sabine was over twice Nakedi's age, but there was a wonder and charm in her unveiled body for him. For the rest of his visit that weekend, however, each time he came up behind her window there was nothing to see. What his eyes hungered for he would witness on a much younger body during their stay at Dwesa.

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It was a curious day. Aunt Eve and the family were off to the beach early for morning waves and breakfast, but because they had come back home late from a braai the previous night, Mandi had been late to rise. They were meeting Aunt Fikile and her family and were behind already. The bungalows were a leisurely ten-minute stroll to the sand where Aunt Eve liked to set up by some flat, table-like rocks near the water at the mouth of an estuary. Upon complaining halfway to the beach that he felt a little bilious, Nakedi was sent back to lie down and get Mandi to hurry along. They would need to take turns with enjoying the water and looking after baby Buntu.

'I told you not to over-eat last night. You eat like you've never seen food before: biscuits, meat, chips, with Creme Soda and cake! Who does that?' Aunt Eve admonished. 'Just make sure Mandisa hurries up!'

And that's exactly what he would have done had he not come in and found Mandi already in the shower. He could hear the hiss of the water.

'Mama says you must hurry up,' he shouted, but there was no response. He tried again; still, no response. His sister couldn't hear him through the shower stream, he gathered, so he made his way towards the bathroom. At first he told himself he was getting close enough for her to hear him, but when he found the door slightly ajar, he became ever the quieter as he neared it. What he did next was no simple blunder or *faux pas*. It was a deliberate, invasive act borne out of the curiosity of a young child's mind – and a tantalising need to fuel the frisson of excitement he'd felt only two weeks before as he crouched behind the geranium bush. Watching Mandi didn't end well, though. He lingered too long as she dried herself with a towel and wrapped her body in it. When she grabbed the camphor cream, he expected her to lotion her body with it next. But without warning she turned around and hurried in the direction of the door. He had to move fast, get to an unimpeachable distance. But he was betrayed by the creaking of wood underfoot when he reared from his crouching position.

'Who's there?' Mandi shouted as she pulled the door open.

Although he was already standing upright when she saw him, the expression of horror on her face told him she knew exactly what he'd been up to. His initial silence was damning also. Why didn't he answer when she asked who it was? But it was even worse that he turned and ran away without a single word. This he thought as he wandered by himself under the mangrove trees near the river, far away from the beach. He kept out of sight the entire day. He was convinced he would be sent back to live with his father, after six years with Aunt Eve. His permanent home would now be a hut among banana trees, next to Sabine's fence. Trouble was indeed waiting for him when hunger finally sent him home. He was given the hiding of his life. But the lashes were not for illicitly catching his first glimpse of pubic hair. According to the scolding that accompanied his beating, his punishment was solely for vanishing without a trace. This surprised him to such an extent he took the beating well. Since then, Nakedi and Mandi developed something of a bond. He was thankful she didn't tell, but he was even more grateful she didn't hold it over him like Thandi did with most things. They never once spoke about it. They sat together now at Cafe Lang on Dellville Road, having a coffee and cake, with chatter of better times on their lips. Nakedi had run a fake errand at the bank earlier, loitering inside as his sister and son waited in the car. Now the boy was playing with a friend he'd made three tables away. When Nakedi and Mandi's conversation dissipated, the boy's father found himself doing the unthinkable – opening up about Windsor-East.

'Mandi, I could never think of you as stupid,' he began faintly after some silence.

'What do you mean?' His words took her by surprise.

‘About before, you were right. There is more going on with my life than I’ve let on.’ He was looking away when he spoke the words, not once allowing his eyes to meet hers, lest they give in to another flood of tears.

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‘Sure you can smoke it but don’t fucking sell it, Nakedi!' Mandi was saying in a raspy whisper. Nakedi was only giving her measured approximations of the truth. He made no mention of the Morinagas and Dr Amoa. As a legal mind, he figured she could tell he was holding back certain details, and in order to fill these imagined gaps, he invented other truths to his story.

‘So you shuttle your passengers to five-star hotels and then deliver these packages for this boss of yours in dingy Windsor?’ Her face wore a reproachful look, and an expression similar to Aunt Eve’s flashed across it as she asked now: ‘Perlemoen? Marijuana? What else?’

He could sense disappointment in her, not just over this one thing, but about who and what he’d become. She was the only one proud of him when he got his first job after high school, working as a waiter on cruise ships overseas. Coming back home with stories of the world seemed to put him on an equal footing with the rest of his family for the first time in his life. Buntu began looking at him like an older brother, and though years stood between them, they were able to forge a friendship. It was even better when he became a flight attendant in his next job. He went to more parts of the world, places his family had only read about in books or seen in movies. He was even able to fly Mandi on a company ticket to Frankfurt once, where she met up with some of her old school friends for a memorable night of Sting at Jahrhunderthalle. Those were some of the happier times that had just been on their lips. Mandi tried to comfort him as best she could when he lost his flying job to retrenchment a few years ago. Since then, the best he’d been able to do for himself was to become a shuttle bus driver. And it was that job that brought him the mess he was in.

‘For him it was coke… and the abalone.’ Nakedi answered finally. ‘The marijuana was mine, and Thulani’s, an old friend from varsity,’ he responded.

‘Friend!’ Mandi said sarcastically. ‘Did he also drop out?’ She was becoming a little impatient. ‘What happened exactly, Nakedi? You’re jumping all over the place.’

‘I can’t tell you everything; you’ll know in due time. I just really need to speak to a lawyer and I don’t know any around here.’

He didn’t know any lawyers around anywhere.

‘How can you say that sitting right in front of one?’

‘Last I checked you were no criminal lawyer. I’m not looking to close any business deals with this. And really, Mandi, I don’t want to be judged before I get to a court room. And you’re already doing that!’

Silence came between them and lasted for what felt like minutes. Mandi looked away towards the door, and out through it.

‘I could probably find someone around here I went to school with,’ Nakedi continued, ‘but I don’t really want anyone who knows me to know about this.’
Mandi turned back to face her brother and spoke at last: ‘So your boss wants you because you’ve lost his perlemoen, his cocaine, and his money. And now you’re running from him *and* the police?’

Nakedi told Mandi he was stopped at a roadblock and caught with the perlemoen and drugs, but that he’d managed to escape on foot, leaving the bag of money in the vehicle, right there on the side of the road. It was only a matter of time before the police traced him back to his job and came looking for him.

‘When the police go looking, which I’m sure they’ve done already, your gangster boss is going to protect himself at your expense and sink you.’ Mandi scolded. ‘You do know this, right?’

‘He’s not a real gangster,’ Nakedi began, but the return of the Aunt Eve-like expression put the rest of that thought to pasture.

‘Let me help you with this, Nakedi.’

He didn’t want her to know any more.

‘It’s complicated,’ he said. ‘If my boss knows about you, and knows you know about him, you could be in trouble with him and his people.’

Wesley was a wealthy white man of seemingly good standing. He travelled, played polo, drank champagne, and lived on an estate in Hartebeespoort with a boat in his backyard. He could never hurt anyone, or anything, save the champagne bottles on which he religiously performed *sabrages* at his parties. Nakedi’s weekly Monday drop-off in Windsor, on the other hand, was a middle-aged man named Stefan de Oliveira. He was a Portuguese-Afrikaans fellow with as many tattoos as he had dogs. None of the dogs wore collars though *their owner* was always in a choker and had the shoulders of a pit-bull. Perhaps the presence of this particular crony in Nakedi’s mind as he spoke gave his face an expression that suggested to Mandi a real presence of danger.

‘I know a guy, okay. Frank; last name Nyaniso,’ she said after a moment’s consideration. ‘I just don’t like him; I don’t like him one bit. But he’s good at what he does. He’s got off a few construction

tenderpreneur boys whose only work after signing their deals was choosing the paint on their Range Rovers. He also got off his lawyer friend – Nkondzo Nxuba – who took all his clients' Road Accident Fund money – millions. Big story in the *Dispatch* – elsewhere, even. But that guy is free as a bird now, roaming the streets, still practising. Selling a little perlemoen and drugs is not that bad in comparison. It's not like you've killed anyone.' She looked at him in the eye with a sense of hope and punctuated it with a smile. 'I'll get you Frank's number. He has a practice in Port Elizabeth and one here. He works out of the boot, really, if you ask me. He could very well be in town.'

It was apparent to Nakedi she really didn't like Frank. But to him, the man sounded like a fighting chance.

'Thank you. Now, enough about my world of worries,' he said. 'I thought you lived in P.E. Or do you work out of your boot like your beloved friend Frank?' Nakedi attempted a smile, but he felt drained, his reserves of joy depleted from within. 'Mandi,' he said in a whisper as he watched his son say goodbye to his friend and walk back towards their table, 'how long have you been back home? I mean, is Ma okay? And what's really going on with this Buntu thing? It's breaking her.'

It was many questions at one go. As Mandi parted her lips to respond to the barrage, Nakedi managed one more question that left her with her mouth agape.

'Did you know about Buntu? Did you know he was into boys?'

Chapter Fifteen

With the exception of glimpses of the room she was in, Kele had not yet seen where she was being held. But the place smelled sanitary, like ammonia and medicine coating the air of a hospital corridor. But with her body tied up, it inevitably had the feel of a jail. She needed the bathroom badly and wondered whether there was one inside here, like in a television prison cell. There was incredible quietness when she was brought in and there was incredible quietness now. Occasionally though, she'd hear voices and screams. The screams only came as a response to sounds of pounding, drilling, and sawing that evoked in Kele's mind the work of her uncle, Malinga. He was an orthopaedic surgeon at Groote Schuur Hospital. She'd visit him as a child and he'd occasionally sneak her to the operating rooms and show her what they did to the bodies of patients who were out under anaesthesia. The beating and sawing of bones sounded like the work of a mechanic in an auto-shop. But her uncle and his colleagues only beat the bodies to build them up. Whoever was at work here was different. For one, it seemed they preferred to do their jobs without an anaesthetist. The howls and screams of their victims were raw, visceral, their sharpness cutting into the room and through the heavy pillow over her head. Who was being tortured? Why? Why was she here? Was she next? And when was that – next? These were some of the questions that raced in her head, colliding with countless others. Donovan was in and out of her mind. She worried terribly about him but was also unable to focus on the thought of him. Her brain wouldn't let her think straight. The bald-headed man had not said a word to her since the morning, and even then he had not said what his intentions were for her. The only thing he did when he came in and yanked off the bag over her head was to give her a phone and instructions to book off sick from work. The call to Killian was not an exercise without its bumps.

'Why are you calling my cell at six in the morning, and from a fucking private number, Solomon? Killian asked when he took the call. 'Don't tell me you're another one not coming to work?'

'I'm sorry, David. I ate a McDonald's burger from hell. I have some kind of fever, and a tummy-ache. I've practically moved into my bathroom.' She grunted as though she'd been vomiting. 'Is Phumlani also not coming?' She surprised herself with the question.

The bald-headed man had a lit torch attached to a retractable cord on his waist. Up until then it had been shining on the ground. He drew its string and shone it on her face for a split-second, before letting it drop back down and retract to his waist.

'No, it's not Phumlani. What on earth gave you the idea it was him?' replied Killian. 'Phumlani is not a slacker; he knows where his bread is buttered. It's Maître. She asked for leave last night. Not long after I texted her about the new arrangements she texted me back: something about her family. I don't think she likes the idea of working with an interning producer too much.' He laughed – a short insincere note. 'Charity is standing in for her. And it sucks when the stand-in doesn't have the usual

producer of the show – everything slows down. It's a recipe for bad radio. I know this; you know this. But I'm neither your doctor nor *sangoma*, so I can't make you well enough to come to work today, can I? I wish I were your priest though; maybe I could confess you to tell me whether you're really sick or you just need to run errands like you people do with your sick leave.' Another cynical laugh. 'We'll do what we have to do today. See you on Monday – with a sick-note, Solomon.' He dropped the call.

Although there was awkwardness when Kele asked about Phumlani, her boss didn't make as much of it as the bald-headed man did. The latter was incensed. With the light of his torch back on her, he took the phone calmly and put it in his pocket. He began swinging the pillowcase he kept for Kele's head around in his hand like a propeller. She couldn't see it behind the glare of the torch in her eyes, but felt its wind and swooshing noise. He stopped and dropped the pillowcase on her lap and switched off his torch and the room was in complete darkness.

The next thing she felt was his breath. He came up right against her face, breathing first on her forehead, her nose, and then her mouth.

'Don't try that again, my girl! Not unless you want to lose a hand, just as a lesson.' His whisper was a harsh hiss. He lit his torch again and fixed its beam on her eyes. What came next, she didn't see. All she felt was the full force of his knuckles on her navel. She broke out into a violent series of coughs.

'What the hell was that for?' she protested. But even as she did so she knew her question to Killian about Phumlani was the breach in their unspoken contract.

The man said nothing. He simply directed the beam of his torch to his own face, perhaps to show her his expression. His eyes certainly didn't believe she was oblivious to what her transgression was. They believed she was not going to get away with anything of that sort again. A raised eyebrow and tacit nod of the head were the man's last moves before he let the torch drop on its cord and threw the bag over Kele's head. The heavy steel door shut with a clanging noise behind him. It was during this time that Kele was able to make out that the room she was in was windowless. She had suspected that was the case; they had descended for quite a while after driving into the facility. She was dizzy and tired now from straining for air in this windowless space, her nose back under the hood. She was on the same chair she was tied to when she arrived in the night. Just like the chair, which was riveted to the floor, she hadn't moved an inch. There were ropes around her body as well as her wrists. It crossed her mind to try to reach for her backup phone and call Killian again. But it would be quite a struggle to do that. She was tied to the backrest of the chair, but because of a little slack she felt on the rope around the shoulders, she imagined reaching her ankle was something she'd be able to do if she somehow managed to wriggle her upper body free. This was especially so because her feet were untied and she raise them. She only had to find the right time to reach for the phone. And that right

time was definitely not now. First, she needed to know where and why she was being held. Reporting she was in an underground cell without windows would be as good as opening her mouth to say nothing. What was the big story here? She had to get free; but she had to do so with a well-put-together report of what this was. Her kidnapping by itself was not going to be a scoop. It may not be the xenophobic attacks she thought it was, but making the headlines without being the reporter of the story would only make her a victim, a spectacle in someone else's horror show. With no sleep and no light, she didn't know what time of day it was. It had been some hours since she had made the call to her boss. In that time she'd developed an incessant thirst and gone through bouts of hunger. No one had come to her though, neither with food nor with a drink of water; not even news of why she was here. All day, all she heard were the screams brought on by the doctors of terror and their tools. Her body was now sore and stiff from sitting in the same position for a protracted period. Time felt stretched out, as if in a dream. Her neck in particular was aching from her head hanging each time she nodded off from weakness.

'Why did they book me off only for today?' Kele wondered. 'Will they let me go to work on Monday? And what are they going to do to me until then?' The questions continued to gather, but still the answers evaded her. Out of all the questions that kept coming, there was one of incredible importance. What was happening with Donovan?

'Even if Agnes stayed the night and the whole day today, she's not going to spend another night with him. That I'm sure of. ' More gloom set in. 'Perhaps she called Nakedi when she couldn't reach me. Yes, that's what she probably did,' she said to herself reassuringly. 'She may have no schooling but she has as much common sense as she does cheek. I told her he'd be coming for his son after all,' Kele comforted herself, but was not entirely satisfied.

There was another clanging of the door.

'Your supper; you must be hungry!' The voice that drew nearer as it spoke was a new one she had not heard before. It also had a non-South African accent whose region of origin she could not make out, though she was quick to pick up how impersonal it was. The speaker took the pillow case off her head and put a plate on her lap. There'd been a paraffin lamp on a shelf behind her all along; this Kele only realised when the man lit it. She looked around the room. Its walls were painted black. She looked down at the food. It was an open cheese and onion sandwich. There was nothing to drink.

'Any water?' she asked the man.

'Food,' he replied, pointing at her lap.

He was quite indifferent to whether she claimed the plate or not. He stood looking at her, with an expression as dull as the light in the room. She was expected to feed herself by taking the bread and cheese with her tied hands and partly bringing her neck down to eat it. Is that what the slack in the

rope was for? She thought of the ignominious nature of her position – being in this dark room, looked down upon by this strange man, with no water, made to thirst like a neglected dog tied to a pole. Indeed the fear and humiliation she had been made to endure since things had gone wrong with Lerato was an affront to her spirit. She was hungry, and tired, and yearned for her son. Though she could do nothing about the last two things, there was something to eat. And it was right on her lap. But she simply looked disdainfully at the plate before looking up the same way at the man who had served it. He met her gaze. Her arms ached to be set free. Her nails begged to dig into his skin.

'Let me go!' she screamed, 'let me fucking go!' She fought against the ropes.

'That is not for me to do,' he responded calmly, 'scream like this again and I will give you a real reason to cry, my girl.'

'Take this shit away from me,' she shouted, even more dispossessed of her composure.

'Now that's something I can do,' he said, and wasted no time doing it.

Just as he leaned down to take the plate from her, she let all her frustration burst. She stared into his indifferent eyes and allowed the urine she'd been holding in all day to flow from her in defiance.

Chapter Sixteen

The despair that sat on Mandi's face as she spoke also sat on Nakedi's as he listened. She was relaying the events that led to Buntu's disappearance. Besides the little that Nakedi had heard from Aunt Eve as he ran down the stairs the night before, it was the first time he learned about the fight that took place, and everything behind it. It all began with a car accident and a funeral. Donovan was sitting at the table now, next to Mandi. His new friend waved at him as he ran for the door ahead of his parents. Nakedi looked at the boy. He was the Michelin Man to Donovan's Oros, and they were both smiling fat-cheeked smiles at each other that repulsed him. Mandi went on. Her isiXhosa, with its lax accent, was not particularly good. It was littered with a few English words between shoddy grammar and soft clicks, yet it was enough to shield the boy from the details. There was absolutely no way for the sadness in Mandi's words to escape Donovan, Nakedi figured. Still, he listened on while the boy took to playing with the salt-shaker quietly, pushing it along like a toy car on top of some crystals he'd just shaken out of it.

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The collision that resulted in the funeral that brought Buntu home claimed the lives of four school-boys. Two of the dead were twins, Timothy and Bradley Cairncross, from Kenton-on-Sea. Another was a black boy from Joza, whose name Mandi couldn't remember. But the fourth was someone Nakedi knew of fairly well. He was around Buntu's age; another of Aunt Fikile's sons, Ngqiqo 'Q' Mbonise. When Nakedi first moved to Mthatha, Aunt Eve was much closer to the Mbonise family than she was to his father Tolo, or any of her other siblings and their families. At first, Nakedi found this strange. Living with Aunt Eve, he came to see less of his father's people and his cousins in Zonyele. He knew, instead, the names of Aunt Fikile's brothers and sisters, and even the nicknames of their children. Some of them were from the village right next to his – Ngqiqweni. But they were mostly scattered in various places all over the hills of the Mpondo people, from nearby Libode to the furthest reaches of Flagstaff and beyond. It was their gatherings he attended. They were a family so large they always arrived at functions in two busloads, besides their many cars. Even on holiday trips, it was with Aunt Fikile's husband, Ndlu, and his children that Aunt Eve's nucleus of Solomons travelled. There could have been the extended Solomon side of Aunt Eve's life for Nakedi to know. However, he only moved to Mthatha after the man who carried the Solomon name into his aunt's life had passed. When Nkosi Solomon died, he left all he had to Aunt Eve and her daughters; and absolutely nothing to his brothers and parents. Since then the Solomons, who had never really approved of her to begin with, kept her at a greater distance. It was even worse when she had Buntu years later. In the end, Aunt Fikile was the extended family she'd created for herself and her children;

the only other family she chose to have. For all their closeness, though, the Mbonise and Solomon families experienced a rift over the years, especially after Aunt Eve became a born-again Christian. Besides their divergent views on the correct version of God, it was a difference in their material fortunes that was the cause of the division. The split was without turmoil. No cumulative fights over broken china, unreturned Tupperware, or monies owed. Just a gradual but sure fracture. Having received a reasonable inheritance from her late husband's estate, it took Aunt Eve the better part of six years to turn it into a lucrative landscaping business, and later, a dry cleaning service, both of which were quite popular with the latest family she found herself in: the happy-clappy Children of the Cross Church. It was when both businesses were doing well that she moved from Siyamthanda Extension to Blakeway. Before the move, her friendship with Aunt Fikile continued in a desultory manner that both women seemed comfortable with. It was the physical distance that finally severed all contact. For this reason, Nakedi had known Q as a young child, but not much more than that.

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While the Mbonise and Solomon families still kept their distance, fate had reunited Buntu and Q in the same Grahamstown boarding school in the last few years. They rekindled their childhood closeness, only this time with a romantic relationship. Q was in Matric and almost done with his finals, while Buntu was in Grade 11. They were looking forward to the summer of their last year together, as Q would be moving on to Cape Town for university when the first semester arrived, Mandi revealed.

‘He kept Ma and Thandi in the dark about it, obviously, but he mentioned he wanted to get circumcised when Q did his this summer. I tried to talk him out of it, of course, but they were going to find a way to do it together. I know it. They were so fond of each other, Nakedi. You should have seen it.'

Nakedi gazed on with disbelief as Mandi's eyes watered lightly and her voice trailed off. She looked away in order to hide her face from Donovan when the boy reared his head from his play. Nakedi felt an unpleasant substance rise inside him at her words, wondering whether she encouraged the boys in this homosexual insanity she was telling him about. He didn’t bother to shield his irritability from Donovan. He looked sharply at him and the boy’s eyes fell back to the table.

‘Don't give me that face!’ Mandi said when she looked back to find Nakedi’s gaze still on her. ‘Q was such a darling; you wouldn't believe it. He really helped Buntu.’

‘Helped him with what? That? What help did he need exactly?’ The words were laden with disdain.

Buntu was a taciturn child, much like Nakedi. He opened up a little and became sunnier with time. But somehow that all disappeared as he got to high school, around the last time Nakedi saw him. He had something of a soft perennial sadness. But he was a serious, bright young boy, good at many things he touched.

‘You couldn't tell it by looking at him, but he wasn't like the rest of the boys. He was different,’ Mandi exclaimed.

‘What do you mean he wasn't like the rest of the boys? He didn’t seem to me–’

‘He wouldn’t seem to you like anything, Nakedi!’ she cut him off. ‘When was the last time you saw him? He wasn't happy on the inside. He couldn’t really live his life the way he wanted to. That's what I mean!’

‘We all know what Buntu's eternal unhappiness was about.’ Nakedi was referring to the largest elephant in the room of the Solomon household: the secrecy around the identity of Buntu's father.

Mandi's cup of coffee was almost finished and already cold, but she drank the bitter dregs and made a disagreeable face.

‘What do you expect?’ she said after setting down the cup. ‘Of course he grew up without knowing his father. But he’s also different in a way you seem to not want to acknowledge, Nakedi. He’s gay, and there’s nothing wrong with that. I’m sure he’s felt repressed for a long time by society and mom's strict rules. Church on Sundays, and church values at home pretty much the rest of the time. All of that speaking against who he was, who he is inside. Don't you remember what that was like?'

‘At least he had boarding school,’ Nakedi retorted, perhaps too carelessly.

Though her body didn’t move an inch, the expression that formed on Mandi’s face had the force of a forward lunge.

‘You really don’t remember what that was like?’

She knew about his relationship with Sabine. Even though Aunt Eve screamed rape when that scandal first came to light through his journal, he confided in Mandi just how much he ached to be reconnected with the white woman when he was barred from going back to Port St Johns. Mandi’s present look was a challenge – a question why his forbidden love was more legitimate than his brother’s.

‘Buntu was losing himself trying to be someone else, Nakedi. You really should have seen it. With Q, he seemed filled with purpose, alive, happy. He was his best self yet, and I was glad for him.'

Nakedi still had much to say but chose to remain silent instead. He didn’t want a fight.

‘Yet he and Q were also different,' Mandi almost spoke the words to herself. ‘They were from such different worlds. But I guess that's what drew Buntu in too.'

Nakedi guessed just how different they would have been. Like all the kids in his family, including Themba, the policeman Nakedi bumped into at the gate, Q had started his schooling at Langelihle Primary. Going to a ‘good school’ with white kids, on the other hand, was something Buntu had done all his life. In certain ways, he was more white than black. Mandi looked at Donovan before she continued. The boy was fully back to driving his makeshift car. He’d opened the cellar now and spilled all its contents on the table in front of him. He parted the salt and bits of raw rice grains in a wavy streak to make a winding road.

'You know that family, they're quite traditional to say the least,’ said Mandi. ‘Buntu was excited with just how “woke” Q was. Like really woke, he said, not fake social media woke.'

Unlike Buntu, Q was quite in tune with his African ways despite his brush with white education. Even though he also spoke and sounded like the product of a private school, he was able to belt out his long list of clan names in a heartbeat, Mandi explained.

‘It was the most curious thing, as though he was two different people in one. Like flipping a TV channel – speaking with a refined English accent the one minute, and talking with real lali-boy Xhosa the next. If it wasn't the clan names he was rattling out, he’d name all the Xhosa Kings, going back to before they lost their independence to colonialism.’

Mandi explained to Nakedi how this all took place during a half-term holiday visit to her place by both boys – for Buntu's birthday.

‘That was just now in October,' Nakedi thought. ‘I see you were fascinated by this.’ His tone was laced with a hint of irony. Mandi met it with a wry smile.

‘It was fascinating to some degree. Buntu was taken by it, too; much more taken than I could ever be,’ Mandi injected her own dose of sarcasm. ‘It wasn’t only Q's ramblings, but also this one book he gave him as a present. An old beat up thing: The House of Phalo, by Jeff Paris – something like that.' Mandi spoke long, relaying how Buntu was glued to its pages like Pritt to paper. ‘He wouldn’t do anything else but read that damn thing, including hanging out with Q. I ended up spending more time with his friend than he did. And that was a good thing, I guess now. I got to know what a lovely boy and wonderful friend he was. There was something old and wise about him, Keds.’ She paused, as if to deliberately let her words settle on her brother. ‘I mean, I didn't know then he and Buntu were together. He was Aunt Fikile's last born and he was buddies with my kid brother. That’s all it was. And then it changed.’ She looked into Nakedi’s eyes and he into hers.

‘So how did you find out?’

Mandi opened her mouth to speak, but even as her lips flew open it felt as though something held her words back.

‘It was the Sunday morning,’ she said, ‘on the same visit…’

‘Go on.’

‘Around 11… 11:30… They must have not seen my car and thought I was out or something…’

Mandi talked of how she’d left her visitors after breakfast to run some errands and take her Honda to the carwash. The queue was excruciatingly long, and after being assailed by a headache from hell, she left the car in the line and took an Über back with her new stockings and toiletries. When she arrived home, one of the boys was in the shower and the other seemed to have gone back to sleep.

‘I don’t think either of them heard me come in.’

Since she had a headache, she took an aspirin and almost went straight to bed.

‘When I got up from my nap it sounded like they were both in the lounge, turning it into a club with that annoying music of theirs. It was loud, and so were they. I screamed to them to shut it down. When I realised they couldn’t hear me I got up to shut it down myself. I was so pissed off. I thought they were wrestling as I got closer, you know, like boys do. But when I walked in…’ Mandi’s voice dropped into a deeper whisper: ‘Q was… They were locked together…’ She froze, as if unable to complete her thoughts in words.

‘My God! What did you do? What did you say?’

‘What do you say to that?’ she laughed out of the blue. ‘Nothing! I ran out. And I mean all the way out. My body forgot about the headache even; I grabbed my purse and phone and got the hell out of there.’

‘I don’t get what’s so funny. You didn’t confront them about doing that, let alone in your house?’

‘Listen I’m not against it. I wasn’t against them either. It’s just everybody was shocked in the moment. I was; they were.’

‘Jesus! It *is* fucking shocking.’

‘Watch your mouth, Nakedi,’ she warned. ‘When I got back they were both gone; but there was a letter. And that's the last time I saw both of them together. And now this mess!’

Nakedi didn’t know what to say. Mandi went quiet too. Donovan glimpsed his father and then his aunt. His face enquired when they would all be leaving. Mandi was tearful. This time she didn’t

bother to look away or hide the pain in her eyes. It was there for both Nakedi and Donovan to see. She wiped the tears away silently before summoning their waiter for the bill. Amid everything, Nakedi's interest was piqued most by the Paris book his sister had mentioned. Something about it sounded familiar, though he didn't know why. He thought about Aunt Eve and how she would have burnt such a thing had she found it on him when he was younger, just like she did his journal, even though that was for a different reason. For Aunt Eve, everything traditionally African was ungodly first, and backwards second. Yet Buntu had rattled her iron cage by revealing he wanted to do the most traditional thing a Xhosa boy could ever do: get circumcised to become *indoda*. And that, in the middle of a fight, as Nakedi would find out. Aunt Eve's general position on circumcision was that it was enough for a boy to visit a hospital, get the operation done, and carry on with his life. Whether or not he became a man afterwards, was up to his actions and God. In his younger years, Nakedi was also discouraged quite early from expecting a circumcision ceremony. Having spent much time with Sabine, in which she also encouraged him to have it done, but only for medical purposes, he'd willingly let go of any attachment he may have had to a ceremony. He caused Aunt Eve no trouble, even though his peers at school gave him plenty of it. When the vitriol from his schoolmates intensified, he simply spent less time with them outside of class and took to a more solitary existence, such as he'd always had. Things weren't as simple with Buntu, however. Being in love with Q, he'd come to a different decision about this important milestone in a Xhosa boy's life. But Aunt Eve is not where Buntu began with his plea for manhood, Mandi recounted. He made two mistakes in this regard, chief of which was going to Aunt Fikile first.

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Since the beginning of his adolescent friendship with her son, Aunt Fikile had taken a keen liking to Buntu. Although there were no longer any holiday trips shared between the two families, he was always welcome to dinner and other engagements when he and Q were in town, Nakedi heard. So when he visited her on the Monday after the funeral, they wept alone together for the first time over their loss. After the tears she spoke long about her son and his love for Buntu, and he, touched by the agony in her words, bore his own soul to her. He spoke of his love for Q, detailing, in all nakedness, the beauty and fullest extent of their relationship. In the same breath he asked her, if she and her family would let him, to consider being circumcised in Q's place this summer. He stressed he didn't want the family to have a circumcision ceremony for him, only that the men allow him to use the family *ngcibi* to perform the cut. That's when Aunt Fikile exploded.

'I think it was a moment of tenderness in which he lost himself and said too much,' Mandi expressed. 'He misread things. But it was an act of evil according to Aunt Fikile to speak like this of

her dead boy; to sully his name when he could no longer speak for himself. She threw Buntu out, hissing warnings at him to keep his homosexual lies to himself. He called me about it, broken, as you would expect. It was the last time we spoke.' She stopped. 'I was a little too busy for him, Nakedi. The firm was counting on me for a very important deal. That's why I didn't even make it down for the funeral.' Her remorse over this shaped her face and coloured her eyes with more gloom than Nakedi had yet seen in her.

'So was it Aunt Fikile who told mother he is gay then?' Nakedi asked. 'She wasn't too friendly when I saw her yesterday.'

'She's a bitch, full stop. But no, it wasn't her. It was mom's snooping nature that took care of that.'

Mandi told Nakedi what Buntu's second mistake was. His fixation with his phone. Needless to say, because of the events at Q's house, he was a mess when he came home. Fear and regret over the things he'd said to Aunt Fikile perhaps. But according to Aunt Eve he was moping around as though he'd heard news his friend died a second death. She caught him weeping in the garden first, preoccupied with his phone in what she says was a peculiar way. After that she walked in on him in the toilet, sitting on a lidded loo, sobbing. Again he was on his phone. Both times his reactions to her unexpected presence seemed curious, she noted, like there was something he was hiding. Because of this she began to be suspicious.

'Now you know that's all mother needs before she gets to invading your privacy,' Mandi said with a hint of humour in her voice. 'She accepted he should be broken over the loss of Q, yet she was convinced he had too many tears for that alone. When she tried to get his problem out of him and he wouldn't say anything, she began to suspect it was something very serious. And so she waited for the right opportunity to present itself. When he took a shower in the evening and left his phone in the charger in his room, she took it off the wall and went through it. What she discovered though turned her stomach more than anything she could have imagined finding.'

'What was inside it?' Nakedi asked.

'Pictures of circumcision initiates… literature… newspaper articles about that sort of stuff… and…' she faltered.

'And what?'

'I can't really say now,' Mandi stole a glance at her nephew. 'I'll show it to you later. But let's just say it was so bad Ma couldn't even wait for Buntu to come out the bathroom. She flew in there and snatched him out from under the shower with soap still in his eyes.'

That’s how the relationship between mother and son combusted, Mandi told. Buntu ended up outside in nothing but a towel around his waist. And even that he’d managed to wrap around himself as his mother harangued, beat, and chased him out. After the first night he spent away from home Aunt Eve said nothing, not even to Thandi, who lived with her. It was only on the second day, when Thandi was enquiring about her missing t-shirt and jeans, both of which she'd left on the line with other clothes, that Aunt Eve broke her silence and gave her leave to contact Mandi. The latter drove home the same day and had been around since Wednesday afternoon. But in the face of the kind of problem this was, Mandi’s presence meant next to nothing. It was understood Buntu was seeking a 'traditional' circumcision school. A belligerent Aunt Fikile had come by incensed by Buntu’s “lies” after Mandi’s arrival, claiming she would take whatever action was possible if they tried to dirty her son’s name. It was she who divulged the boy’s intentions. Her words immediately rang true for Mandi, given her own conversation with her brother. But it was only after Aunt Fikile’s visit that Aunt Eve admitted to knowing the boy’s intentions, and even more, the immediacy of the threat. His last words to her were just about that; getting circumcised in honour of Q, despite her dissension. Bad circumcision schools and mutilated ‘manhoods’ loomed large in everyone's fears. He would also be writing exams soon and needed to go back to school, or the year would be wasted. But Nakedi was back now, and for Mandi, that was a blessing. It didn’t matter that he had his own problems, with the law no less. In her mind they could wait because there was presently a colossal disaster to avert, a life to save. And there was a measure of good news. Themba had put word out with his family in Ngqiqweni where the Mbonise *ngcibi* lived. The school was open to the public, but *Ngcibi* Mbonise never took in boys who couldn’t demonstrate their parents’ consent. Buntu hadn’t been seen there yet. But a boy matching his description may have been spotted in Port St Johns, it was believed. Though Nakedi didn’t know much more about the tradition than the women in his family, because he was a man (in that he could pee standing) it fell on him to go looking for Buntu and bring him back unharmed. Nakedi welcomed the challenge, but inside he felt the real weight of his own burden. The crescent moon was back. It sailed in the dark skies of his mind, at a distance, taunting him still with the truth. Agreeing to go in search of his brother was an extension of his freedom, an opportunity to keep more space between himself and the law. Still he welcomed the challenge, and promised his sister he would return with their brother.

Mandi looked at the time. It was already 11:45. The Solomons were probably close. She thanked the waiter again as they walked out. And just like the Michelin Man had done with his parents, Donovan ran out ahead of his father, seeming quite eager to get home, or away from his gloominess.

Chapter Seventeen

Kele's clothes were still cold against her skin from the urine, and her cheeks were wet with fresh tears under her hood. It was night again. She estimated it was around midnight. It had been quite some time since the guard left with the supper of dry bread and cheese. She tried to not think of Donovan; it was thoughts of him that drove her to more despair and reduced her to sobbing. She had to harness her wits and strength to map a way out of the maze she found herself in. She expelled her son from her mind and locked him up in her heart. She needed to put her brain to other use. In her memory she retraced her steps and backtracked over the last few weeks. How had she got herself into this position? How did it all go awry so quickly? She knew before anything else her ambition to get away from Maître was the reason she was now alone in a dark room in some underground facility. She thought about Malcolm. It was he who'd brought her the story. It was he who provided her with a possible vehicle with which to escape Maître. She had no choice but to believe him when he first brought the rumour to her attention. He was disturbed, visibly shaken.

'Fuck,' he'd cried out. 'I've just found out something the media absolutely should expose. Something has to be done. They have to prevent this madness, Kele. We have to say no more when it comes to our brothers and sisters'.

His helper had told him of impending xenophobic attacks of a level and scale yet unseen in the country. 'The Final Cleansing', Malcolm called it, which was not dissimilar to what Admire would dub it when Kele finally interviewed her: 'South Africa's Rwanda'. Admire was from Zimbabwe, and lived right in the middle of Mandelaspruit. If anything like what she was suggesting was on the horizon, she would be right in the middle of it. During their interview, her fear had felt real and palpable. 'South Africa's Rwanda!' Kele replayed the words again. But that's not what was going on here. There were no xenophobic attacks. Admire was wrong. Malcolm was wrong. And while he was away on business Admire had just gone missing.

'But she was so convinced! Or is it she was convincing?' Kele's instincts were vacillating between suspicion and sympathy for the girl. 'Did she deliberately deceive us? To what end though? What could she possibly stand to gain from that?' Why had her phone been off for the last two weeks? Did she have an accident? There were no answers, only the kind of frustration that built up inside Kele like the pus of a menacing boil.

'And why was Malcolm so sure?'

Besides interviewing Admire for herself, Kele had given weight to the girl's claims because Malcolm had done so. He was a respectable businessman working on multiple continents. He was a good judge of character and situations. If he believed it there had to be good reason. So convinced was Malcolm about the bloodshed that, when Kele first told him she would cover the story herself, he

forbade her with a tone of finality she'd never heard from him before. They'd had their first real fight over this.

'Or was his lack of judgement based on his own fear of the attacks?' But Kele already knew the answer to this. Although he was a Nigerian foreign national, he himself was not in any immediate danger, because he lived in a social class in which being an African from outside the borders wasn't a hazard or death sentence. It was only African expats who lived in informal settlements, locations, and parts of the inner city who had cause to fear such chaos. While Admire had been quite convincing, so too had Max, the other guard at the gate. But he had also since disappeared.

'What's the link there?' she wondered. But she had no way of knowing. None of it added up. She was beginning to retrace her conversation with Max, and how she'd found out he was from Mandelaspruit, when she was interrupted by the clanging noise of the door. Under her hood she felt her ears prick up, like those of a dog on alert. She heard the door open and then close again. There were footsteps. Even before he spoke, she knew who it was.

'I have displayed the manners of a Neanderthal. I must sincerely apologise.' The bald-headed man (whose name she still didn't know) was back.
He lifted the hood off her head and continued to speak in the semi-darkness, the beam of his torch shining at his feet.

'I have told you neither my first name nor my last one; I have not told you why we've invited you here. And I make no mistake when I say this is an invitation. It may not have seemed like it at first, but things will get a little better. They may altogether be great for you. But of course, this all depends on whether you come to the proverbial party or not. The invitation is there; all you have to do is come.' He chuckled.
He began to untie her, starting with her wrists, and then her chest and shoulders.
'Please don't try anything. I don't want to have to hurt you, or ask anyone else to do that. Do you understand?' he asked.

In his tone, though quite faint, Kele picked up a genuine sense of concern that unsettled her.

'I won't do anything,' she heard herself say, as if an obedient little school girl. She was surprised by this too.

'Good,' the man replied.

He was done with the ropes.

'You must be tired,' he said, 'and hungry, no doubt.' He paused. 'We're going to do something about that first.'

He helped Kele up. Her body was limp, and she found it hard to support herself at first. Sitting in the same position for as long as she had, had caused her muscles to become weak. Her buttocks were sore from the ridges on the seat of the hard chair. The two walked to the door. Kele found it difficult to get her legs back under her. She made a concerted effort to firm up her ankles and take control of her weight so she wouldn't need the bald-headed man's arm. But as she let go of him her phone rang. This caused her to flounder and seek out his arm again. Her heart leapt to the edge of her throat. The ringtone was off, of course, but the phone vibrated. She wiggled her ankle and stomped her foot as she walked, so as to drown out any audible sound the vibration might make in the relative quietness of the facility. To her surprise the vibration died. Perhaps it was the movement of her ankle inside the boot that killed the call. She felt the keypad of the phone rub against the knob of her ankle. It caused her a little discomfort as well, and affected her gait.

'Don't fight it; let your blood ease itself into a flow again,' the man said, sounding to Kele as though he was irritated by her fidgeting feet.

'I'll try not to fight it,' she said politely, 'but it's hard after sitting for so long.'

There was another scare. The phone vibrated a second time. But that vibration was a very short one. It died as soon as it began.

Chapter Eighteen

As he waited in line, Nakedi turned Buntu's phone in his hand. Mandi had given it to him before his departure to the coast in search of his brother. Inside it were the homoerotic images that had unloosed Aunt Eve's fury – the reason Buntu was gone. The story became more bizarre each time Nakedi played it back in his mind. The details his sister had shared with him seemed too incredible to be happening to anyone he knew. But then again his own life was something of a movie script of late. Though a part of him was angry about his brother's homosexuality, he also empathised. He'd indeed suffered a similar kind of experience with Aunt Eve regarding his choice of lover in Sabine as a boy. But he needed to find his brother before he did anything fatal to himself, and in the boy's phone probably lay clues. Nakedi had picked up a generic charger in the store and would charge his own phone on his way to Lusikisiki and Port St Johns.

'Next!' called a lady from one of the tills.

He paid for his food and supplies as well as the petrol that was being pumped into his mother's car outside. He could see the rear of the vehicle through the window and it saddened him how badly the paint job was done on the boot. There was certainly a different kind of beige on there, a little matt, not like the rest of the car. He'd seen the body-work on the inside too. Downright shoddy. The light carpeted board intended for covering the boot floor was missing, and in its place was a thick folded black blanket. Nakedi sank into an even deeper sorrow at the thought of it. The heaviness he felt was less about the car, and more about what it echoed about Aunt Eve. Until his talk with Mandi he hadn't known just how much his mother was getting on. She was a relatively old woman in a changing town. She'd always been firm, in manner and in form – unbreakable. But her money, strength, friends, and influence, were all no longer what they used to be. They'd waned to a point where she needed help with some of her battles. It was for this very reason Thandi had been harsh with Uncle Willem's mechanics, when they came the previous morning in time to witness Nakedi make a fool of himself with his terrified yelp. She had complained petrol fumes were seeping into the boot. But the men were adamant they could smell nothing of the sort. If there was anything, they contested, it was a pre-existing problem. They would find a new boot floor cover for her, they said, but they'd done their best with the rest – certainly all they could for what Aunt Eve was paying. Nakedi had seen the two holes under the thick black blanket when he stashed the money bag in with the spare wheel. He'd indeed detected a very faint odour of petrol fumes then. Despite the problems with his mother's car though, he wasn't going to be driving Kele's, in case her frustration after days of hard work sent her running to the cops with more venom than was necessary.

'Thank you,' Nakedi said, trading his words for change and his goods in a bag from the cashier.

He looked at the slip, coins and notes. So far he had spent around R7000 from the R100 000 he was holding for Wesley. He'd used the money for gas from Joburg; new clothes (both Donovan's and

his own); a few groceries; and most importantly, lawyer fees for Frank Nyaniso.

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Nakedi had sought out Frank in the afternoon, soon after getting home in a hurry only to find out the Solomons would no longer be visiting. Their message about visiting had been misunderstood, it was said. The litigator was a very well-travelled and educated man, but his tastes were quite local. He was at a shebeen and tshisa nyama when he answered his phone.

'I don't know this sister of yours, but did she tell you my fees, especially on a Saturday?' he questioned after a few words into their conversation. He asked as though his fees were something everyone knew, or ought to make time to know about.
'No; I don't know. How much?' Nakedi replied, choosing to ignore the retaliatory words that were begging to fly off his tongue.

'It's R2500 an hour. Poor people say I'm expensive. Maybe they mean my tastes. As for my fees, they are certainly affordable,' he chuckled. 'Are you are poor person, *nantsika*?' Before Nakedi could respond he went on. 'Just be glad you're not in P.E. If this was *Mamboza* I'd be charging you even more.' He cleared his throat. 'Time is money, chap; if I'm not making it I'm spending it. I told you where I am – in Mbuqe. *Ub' uyeza, uze neezjwiva* – cash money, *baba*!' He dropped the phone.

Nakedi couldn't tell whether or not Frank was drunk when he met up with him an hour later. The first thing he learned was he'd lost his wallet in a fracas of some sort the night before.

'I'm not always as crass as I seem,' the lawyer said as he asked for the money upfront. 'I do have a business with a bank account and two banging secretaries.'
They sat in his Volvo S90 and he ran the engine to keep the air-conditioner on. There was a stale and sweaty 'I-haven't-been-home-for-a-week' look to the large-framed man, yet he spoke with such cool, captivating clarity. He was in a dress shirt, pants and patent leather shoes. There was a small town swagger to him, but his words were delivered with that manner most common to old village orators.

'Some people think our police don't do their job well. To some degree, this is true. But to a very small degree. It's true of every sector, every business. You'll be surprised how much of their jobs these chaps really do; and do well. Just because you are not in the news doesn't mean they are not working, *nto ka* Solomon. It's only been five days. What if the police want this kept quiet? You say there is a Japanese fellow who is dead, and a Ghanaian doctor. They are not nobodies sniffing glue under a bridge somewhere. People will miss them. They probably already do. But the police don't want a diplomatic shit storm, I imagine. Or maybe the media hasn't even caught wind of it yet.

They don't report everything that happens, you know. Or do you think yours was the only crime committed that day in Joburg?' He seemed somewhat sober as he spoke his next piece: 'I'd turn myself in if I was in your shoes, for leniency's sake,' he added. 'Who knows? Maybe your friends, if we must call them that, have done the same and blamed this whole mess on you. You can turn yourself in and let me make this thing light for you. Otherwise you might end up paying for all of it – with your freedom, with your life. Meanwhile it's really this Thulani's fault, according to what you you've told me. All you did was sell a few drugs and a little perlemoen, and got roped into unfortunate circumstances in which one, possibly two people lost their lives. Maybe three,' Frank's voice subsided. 'Do we know what happened to Mrs Nagamori?' he continued after the dramatic pause, mixing up the Japanese name. His eyebrows came together in an expression of worry that seemed somewhat routine in his job.

Nakedi thought about Mrs Morinaga for the first time since he'd fled, but said nothing. Had Thulani shot her?

'You will not pay by much if you give yourself in. But maybe you have other plans? Remember this, *nto ka* Solomon: Once you start running you begin the whole thing on the worst footing with the law. How long is a piece of string, they like to ask. As long as the arm of the law; it just keeps stretching and stretching… until it ties itself onto something… which, in the end, is you.'

Frank Nyaniso's words had lived up to his name, and he'd taken his full fee for each of them – in cash. But that was yesterday. Now Nakedi was well on his way out of Mthatha. He didn't know how he was going to repay Wesley's money yet. Perhaps out of his Ariemi salary, he pondered. He could ask Wesley for that. Surely he'd understand. It even crossed Nakedi's mind to ask him to offset it against the cash he made for him on the side, after things got back to normal. He could pay it back even quicker that way. But the thought of Wesley's side business put an abrupt end to his delusions and took him right back to Monday night. He began to despair. All his vague plans to pay his boss back fell away, crumbled into dust. He rubbed his eyes. He knew fully well he was in the kind of trouble he couldn't wish himself out of. Yet from time to time his mind betrayed him into forgetting the true extent of his troubles; it allowed him to think things could get back to some kind of normalcy. But that could never be. Frank had given him very little hope, too. Conviction in his case was almost a certainty; it was only the sentence and length of it that were in question. Nakedi hoped for the suspended sentence the lawyer had also spoken of. He couldn't fathom prison – years inside with truly wild men. He wondered what a day might be like, a month, one year… life.

'Maybe I won't need to pay back any of the cash after all.' He managed an ironic grin that was followed by a snigger.

As he drove, he steered his mind towards Buntu and circumcision but it landed elsewhere. Instead of his brother, he thought of himself and manhood. He looked at himself in relation to this

custom of amaXhosa that had taken centre stage in his family for the first time. He himself had gone to a hospital, got the snip, and sat for an English exam only days later. Were it not for receiving a local anaesthetic before the 'procedure', he might have retained some self-respect in the eyes of his peers (his circumcision even had a fancy name attached to it – anaesthetic). According to them, he was a Xhosa man only in as far as he spoke the language of amaXhosa and was male. But he was not Indoda YomXhosa, a Xhosa man. Being male was of no consequence; being a man was an institution accessed only through rites. As a boy, Nakedi recalled a man being kicked out of a *kraal* at a circumcision ceremony in Libode once, the small lali outside of Mthatha through which he'd just now driven. It was Lumkile's coming out party – a Mbonise cousin of Themba's age. Even as an onlooker, it was a lesson for Nakedi to stay away from *kraals* when they were occupied by men. A lesson he'd always have to keep in mind.

'You're not a real man, you dog! You're not a man because you just cut your thing in the hospital with a white man's dirty hands. You hear me! You have to be instructed by men of *kwaXhosa* in the ways of Manhood according to *kwaXhosa*. Maybe they call you a man there where you come from because you pee standing. But you're not a man in this house and you cannot sit with us.' The old man was poking the air above him with the handle of the whip with which he'd delivered his blows. He dropped it on the floor and summoned a random boy to pick it up while he took out his *okapi* pocket knife.

'*Ndak ncwela unye mna uba awubhadlanga*! I'll complete the job your dirty white doctor couldn't finish' The old man threatened before he spat a prodigious amount of saliva next to his feet and turned to walk back into the kraal.

Nakedi wondered why he'd become circumcised this way even though he knew it would make him a pariah. The world of Xhosa customs and traditions had missed him completely in his youth. Besides his fortnightly trips to Port St Johns, in which he was immersed in a somewhat surreal life of bees, books, music, and the skin of a woman old enough to be his mother, he was reared inside Aunt Eve's cocoon of Christianity. He'd never had *imbeleko* as a boy like most of his school friends had. Many of them spoke of ceremonies he'd never attended and whose names he could never recall. In a particular ceremony the boys all spoke of, they had eaten the full leg of a goat, fresh off a fire in a *kraal*, and had to finish it, too. Something to do with certain circumcision rites. Nakedi's own father, Tolo, wanted absolutely nothing to do with his son's circumcision when his boy began to come of age. He made it clear time and again that he had no son.

'You know... in the mines, many women used to come to me,' he said with his drunken lisp. 'One day a woman came in the night in the hostel. She left something that was still in the darkness, but it began to kick and scream in the morning when the sun came. And when the sun came, she was

gone. It's not my fault I was kind enough to bring this thing home with me. I could have left it in that ugly place where they break your mind like they crush the rock.'

It could be said by some that Tolo's reasons for not helping Nakedi with his rites of passage were those of a reprobate. For Aunt Eve, however, the custom of ulwaluko was a downright filthy one. She thought of it as a journey through a world of spirits in which the souls of unclean, dead men who had never bathed in the blood of Jesus, were evoked through the consumption of alcohol and dedication of slaughtered animals. The church did not approve, and consequently, neither did she.

'The nonsense turns boys against their mothers,' she protested. 'They are commanded to not see the very women who gave birth to them, for weeks on end while they are kept in that world of dark spirits. They are told that if witches will come, they will come as their mothers in the night, and that they have to beware and put on their *kota*. And what is *isigqwathi* anyhow? *Imifinya*? Snot! What sort of name is that for the woman who split herself open, almost into two, as you came into the world down the bridge of her thighs? Is this not the same as saying that we mothers are in fact witches? And what does this nonsense result in, especially in fatherless homes? These boys come back from this devil's exile with spirits running amok in their heads, making them believe they're actually the men of their mothers' houses. Meanwhile they are still in high school or university and aren't even man enough to hold the liquor they drink. They want to come home and make everyone unhappy.'

Nakedi's father claimed he was not his father, and Aunt Eve was adamant God would have none of this traditional mess in her house after being so giving of his only Son. It was thus that Nakedi had little to no knowledge about the world he was now thrusting himself into.

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Mount Thesiger came up on the horizon. Nakedi was getting close. He wasn't sure where he'd begin looking for his brother between Lusikisiki and Port St Johns. He would have to decide soon. He'd been pressing on, the car glued to the countless curves he took it through. As he came around the last bend before the Lusikisiki Bridge the two mountains stood proud. Sure someone matching Buntu's description had been seen in Port St Johns according to Themba, but an idea came to Nakedi about his uncle in Lusikisiki. He indicated left. As he turned towards there he marked the series of dilapidated stalls from which sunburned hawkers held out fruit, firewood, and roasted mealies for sale. A little boy, pushed by two of his peers, stood inside a three-wheeled trolley and waved. He seemed to covet Nakedi his four-wheeled vehicle. Nakedi, on the other hand, looked back at the boy and envied him his freedom. He drove over a multi-coloured stone bridge and crossed the Mzimvubu River. It was another forty or so kilometres to his destination. His fists folded over the wheel and he

sped up, taking care to watch out for any traffic cops that may be lurking in the bushes. When he reached the town he passed a Midas to his right. Across the street from it was Lusikisiki Police Station. He instinctively sunk lower in his seat as he passed it. But the police would be looking for a white C-Class Mercedes, not a beige one (if they were already looking for Kele's car) he told himself. His body loosened up. At the traffic circle near the Sasol garage he bore left towards Flagstaff and Port Edward. There was another police building, much bigger than the first. Not long after that his eyes began scouring for a dirt path to his left. It led past a school and all the way up to a church on the top of a hill. There was a solitary square house among some trees. Blue. He had to leave the car further up the path and go down a dell to gain access into Uncle Ntandazo's residence. As he got closer he saw two shacks and a decent looking rondavel under gum and other trees. It was windy. There were dongas in the dell, and he held on to some of the waist-high patches of grass that grew in the walls of the dongas. His uncle shouted something to him but his words were carried away by the wind. Nakedi only understood as he got closer.

'It's better to come down this way,' his uncle was still muttering and pointing when he reached the tree stump by which the old man was standing.

The first thing Nakedi noticed as they met was how much like his father, Tolo, he looked. It was just before midday and uncle Ntandazo was drunk. This, of course, helped the resemblance even further. While Nakedi's father wore a perennial sullen expression, however, (unless he was working with flowers or nurturing grass) all his brother did was smile. He spoke to his nephew now as though he were addressing a sizeable crowd, his watery eyes wandering.

'Yes, we have fought, me and your mother. Even with our two sisters, Nozenzile and Nomonde, we quarrelled. They can also be impossible. Even after your father died, we disagreed. Really disagreed. We are very good at that. Evile thinks she is better than all of us because she married a teacher who died and left her with money. She must stop thinking she is better. But okay, let me stop there. I know what's happening. So as a brother I have to put the fight to the side and try to help. But what help am I? Her boy doesn't know me; he wouldn't have come here. Boys don't usually do this important work with their mother's side of the family. None of Evile's children know me,' he repeated. 'Only you know me from when you were this high. *Usama ngenja, kwerin*!' he motioned with a flat hand around his knees and laughed, but he lost his balance as he was doing so. His nephew flew to his rescue and grabbed him before he met with the ground.

Nakedi indeed had recollections of Uncle Ntandazo visiting Mthatha when he was younger. Aunt Eve kept sporadic contact with him over the years, but not so much Aunt Nozenzile and Nomonde. His visits happened mostly when the twins were in boarding school in Grahamstown. But he wasn't a drunkard then. Oddly, Nakedi suddenly thought about how he'd longed to go to boarding school with Mandi and Thandi. This was especially after their first holiday back, when they'd

returned speaking differently, their ‘r’s’ no longer the rough ones from Langelihle Primary, but sounding as though they were spoken as much through their nostrils as they were through their mouths.

‘Sorry I can’t help with your brother, but you should have come to the funeral of your father. It’s many years since we have seen you. Where’ve you been all these years?’ The old man asked Nakedi as though he were no longer addressing a crowd but talking to him directly. ’Where have you been?’ he repeated almost impatiently.

‘I’ve been working in Joburg, Uncle Ntandazo.’

‘I heard you were in overseas places. Johannesburg isn’t in another world,’ he spoke to the invisible mass of people again, addressing them on either side of Nakedi and off in the distance above his head. ‘You should’ve come here to bury your father.’

Nakedi could get nothing much out of his uncle. But Nozenzile’s boy was ‘going in’ into circumcision school soon in Zonyele. From what Nakedi could gather, the place his uncle was talking about was not far from Ngqiqweni, where the Mbonise family lived. He would include it in his search, he thought. His was a mission with no real direction, no distinct plan. He only knew he felt overwhelmed by the idea of dealing with men in a world in which he wasn’t considered one. There was a tingle on his left calf as he said his goodbyes to his father’s brother. It was a tiny insect feasting on his blood. He flicked it off, finished with his salutations, and went back up to the car. This time he used the simpler but long way his uncle was shouting for him to use earlier. Nakedi’s spirits were sunken. He’d decided to come to Lusikisiki first because he hoped to ask Uncle Ntandazo to accompany him and speak on his behalf with other men. He spoke with the kind of Xhosa that would know how to say everything. But he was clearly broken, and Nakedi had no confidence in his authority.

It was a winding drive down the R61 towards the Mzimvubu River and Port St Johns. The vegetation on either side of the road, and in the distance, was lush and wild and free. As he neared Port St Johns, he was touched by the immensity of things. He drove over the colourful bridge again, over the Mzimvubu. He felt at once the freedom and liberation that were possible for one in the world as he looked to his left and saw two cliffs of rock, cutting a spectacular frame for the wild river spilling itself out into the sea. He stopped the car, and in a spontaneous move, picked up his now fully charged phone. He wanted to take a photo of the river and the peaks flanking it. But as he reached for the door handle he changed his mind. Before he could set the phone back on the console however, it vibrated in his hand. He immediately recognised the number as one of the missed calls he’d seen when he first switched on the device in his mother’s study the day before. He looked at the phone and did nothing else for some time.

‘Hello,’ he said tentatively, when he eventually answered the call.

He waited for a voice to speak. There was static on the line.

‘Can you talk?’ It was Wesley.

‘Hi Wesley. Yes... yes I can.’

‘Don’t fucking “hi Wesley” me. You are fucking up big time! Where are you? Do you still have my money? I want that money – all of it. And what the fuck did you do? I could be in the middle of a fucking investigation because of you. How could you leave the kombi in such a state? What happened in Windsor on Monday? Don’t tell me over the phone; I don’t want to know over the fucking phone. Where are you? When can you come in?’

‘I can’t right now.’

‘What the hell do you mean you can’t right now! One of my Windsor boys sees my kombi looking like a mess with broken windows in some yard; and you tell me you can’t right now! I had no choice but to report the thing stolen in case some shit came back to me. Listen here, Nakedi... let’s be real: I don’t mind you, okay? But I will drown you if you try to burn me. Where are you?’

‘In... in the Eastern Cape.’

‘In the Eastern Cape!’

‘Yes, I…’

‘You can’t be in the fucking Eastern Cape! The police are investigating this shit here in Joburg, and they’re not saying what you’ve done. You need to make it back here right now and fill in the missing blanks for me before we are all in shit we can’t come back from! You hear me? Right now! Use the following number to get me... Are you ready to take it down? And kill that SIM of yours and keep that phone off. Don’t make it easy for the police to find you. I need to talk to you before they do. They already know you were the driver. Listen; I don’t care what’s going on, you’re going to have to give them what they need and make this go away for me. I have a business and family to think of. You understand?’

The static was gone, and so was Wesley’s voice.

Port St Johns was three kilometres and a couple of speed humps away. The anxiety of finding Buntu was redoubled by Wesley’s call. All manner of emotions rushed through Nakedi. He now wished he’d found elsewhere to park Kele’s car, not his mother’s house. Or that he’d not brought Donovan with him. He didn’t even know why he’d brought the boy. He cursed himself for it. But then again, he knew… Out of everyone in his world there was a connection that always showed itself as failing, tenuous, breakable. His wife was one of the closest people he had, but their relationship was

splintered beyond repair. Yet with his son it was different. He was connected to him by something greater than a relationship of agreements and disagreements. With him it was biology, DNA, destiny. When Nakedi first took him, the boy had felt to him like an anchor in lonely waters – a symbol of certainty amid an ocean of unnavigable doubt. It suddenly dawned on him he wouldn't be seeing the boy again. The way things were, going back to Mthatha seemed out of the question, at least for now. The Eastern Cape would surely include his mother's house to any detective who was privy to his conversation with Wesley. And even if they weren't listening in, there was geo-location to trace the position of his smartphone. Until then, having his cell phone movements traced was not something that had been at the forefront of his mind. His heart sank as the magnitude of everything crashed over him.

'That's the last I've seen of my family. That's the last I've seen of my son,' he cried.

It was just like Frank said, running meant he was going to be constantly looking over his shoulder. He was already in jail. What difference would actual jail bars make? For a fleeting moment he considered turning himself in. But again, going after Buntu was a problem to overcome that was also an opportunity to keep running. And run he did. He sped towards Port St Johns as though his freedom lay that way. But his phone was left suspended in the Mzimvubu waters, drowning beneath the breath-taking cliffs.

Chapter Nineteen

The bald-headed man walked Kele into a room with many clocks – a kind of control or operation room that was attached to a mess-hall. It was cavernous inside, two of its walls wrought of rock, just like the ceiling. The other two were fashioned from high-strength steel, with ridges like a shipping container, and rivets everywhere. Inside were rudimentary cupboards and counters of steel and timber. There were tables and stools, on single stilt-like legs that protruded from a rubber floor. All of this stood towards the far end, near a cooking area where something like an extractor fan was at work. A man was tending to the pots. Kele and her captor sat on a table and bench unit by an alcove of hewn stone. Closer to them on other table and bench units were the clocks and laptops, which were folded closed. She tried to imagine how many people could fit into this dining hall at one time but she quickly gave up that enterprise. After so much time spent in darkness, the light above her was cutting with sharp edges through her iris. Her body felt inert, like her muscles still needed awakening.

'You are weak. First you will eat, get the nutrition you've been missing and you will lie down. After that you will see a doctor,' the man said. Perhaps he saw a look of anxiety creep onto Kele's face because he added: 'No don't worry; it's not for whatever terrible thing you might be imagining. We don't want to cause you any harm. That's not our intention. We need you. You'll see the doctor for processing. Everyone who comes here goes through it.' He ended off with an air of reassurance that gave Kele some measure of comfort.

'Where is here?' Kele asked herself. Still, her mind felt like putty, and nothing she'd seen or experienced so far gave her any clues she felt confident using as leverage.

She wanted to know what the time was. And one might imagine this to be an easy ask in a room with as many clocks as were hanging on the wall diagonally across from her. There were twenty-three of them, set in rows of five, with the exception of the fifth one. And above each was a city name: Atlanta. Moscow. Addis Ababa. Lagos. London. She tried to locate Johannesburg, or Cape Town, and as a last ditch effort, even Pretoria. But there were none of those city names above the clocks.

'Want to know the time, do we? If you know your time zones it should be easy to guess ours.' The bald-headed man smiled.

It was a genial one, unlike his previous sneers with a mocking curve to them, even though he was still having fun at her expense. Kele noticed his teeth again as his smile grew to the brink of laughter. All his molars, it seemed, were inclined towards the front of his mouth, as though they were quite dissatisfied with their positions, and were trying to remedy that dissatisfaction. A vain attempt at being the centre of the same smile they only succeeded in spoiling.

'Your food, sir,' said the man who'd been cooking. He'd walked over quietly.

He placed a plate on the bald-headed man's side of the table, but he declined it and pointed the cook to Kele.

'Where are your manners?' he asked. 'The lady should eat first.'

'Sorry, sir,' the cook replied as he pushed the food towards Kele and served the bald-headed man his plate next.

The new man's accent was a local one. Kele looked up at his face so she could memorise it. She wanted to keep in as much as she could of what she saw.

'Come. Eat. Stop all that thinking. It's a waste of time. Soon, all will be revealed to you. You can load up your brain with goodness in the meantime; look, there's eggs, avocado, salmon, toast,' the bald-headed man said, using his knife to point with precise movements at each item on her plate. 'The others aren't getting the same treatment.'

Kele ate. She sat quietly, wondering who the others were, and who'd tried to call her; and why? Only a handful of people knew the number of the phone she was hiding in her boot: Ayanda, Nakedi, her mother… and maybe Agnes. No, not Agnes. She'd never given it to her. But she'd given it to Donovan.

At this thought of her son life was immediately sucked into her body, and she loosed the lethargy that had wrapped itself around her.

'What's the matter?' asked her captor, as she almost sprang up in her chair.

'My son! He could be all alone at home. I left him with his nanny when I went to Mandelaspruit, but she could be gone by now,' Kele responded, with supplicant notes in her speech.

The bald-headed man stopped chewing.

'I see,' he said, with food still in his mouth, 'so now you do have a nanny? Your visit to Ntate Ramogase and Lerato's home then?'

'Let's cut out the games, okay! You already know what I was there for. The question is what are you here for? And where's here… this place?'

'I thought your concern was your son,' retorted the man. 'Still looking for that scoop, I see?'

'Of course my only concern is my son!'

'So what would you like me to do about your boy? Would you like me to send some of the men to go get him for you? Or would you prefer I let you go for a short visit and bring you back later when it suits you?' The sarcasm in his speech was thick and the nasty curve had returned to his smile. 'What do you think we're doing here? Mommy day-care? Are you feeling like a bad parent going

after a dangerous story in Mandelaspruit – in a world of people so hungry they'd eat the flesh off the bones of the rich if that were the call?'

Kele was stung at being called a terrible parent.

'No, I am not a terrible parent! Where do you get off saying that?' There was a fire in her chest. 'Everything I do, I do for that boy! And you don't know us. You're a kidnapper who has taken me away from my son. That's who you are. No more! You know nothing about us!'

'Calm down,' said the man. 'I know you love your boy. And I love that. All mothers should love their children. Shame on them if they don't.' He shifted in his chair and settled himself as if to make a grave point, and showed his teeth again. 'What I don't love, Kele Solomon, or what I don't appreciate, is you lying to me.'

'What am I lying about? How am I lying?'

'You're lying about your son and you're doing it through your beautiful mouth,' shouted the bald-headed man. 'Understand we are no fools here, Kele!' His voice was thunderous. Even the cook, who was back at his stove, turned to look.

'Sir, shift one is coming in for breakfast in fifteen minutes,' he said, daring, eventually, to fill the violent silence that followed the bald-headed man's outburst.

'No problem. We we'll give you the privacy of your dining hall.' He looked back at Kele and spoke earnestly. 'We know you left your son Donovan with your housekeeper Agnes Sebete.'

Kele's heart jumped in her chest.

'You know her as Agnes Khumalo, of course,' continued her captor. 'But she's Sebete.'

Kele's stomach pulled itself into a tight knot.

'Are you listening?' He snapped his fingers to get her attention and her eyes to focus. 'Let me tell you about Agnes. She lost her first child, a pregnant teenage daughter, to a teargas canister that came in through her window, with love from the Apartheid government. It caught her in the toilet of the small house they were living in, straight in the head. The poor girl was disoriented and, unfortunately, she was asthmatic and unable to unlock the door from the inside. It was some time before it could be broken down; and so she died. She couldn't exactly be taken to the hospital either with the SADF raining bullets in the streets. It was a miracle a medical student from next door was around to cut the baby out of the warm corpse with a kitchen knife. A blunt C-section if you ask me.' There was a tilt of the head and a grin from the bald-headed man. 'For this reason, Agnes became a grandmother and a mother again, all at the same time. Do you understand?'

'Why are you telling me all–'

‘Why am I telling you all this? Because your nanny was supposed to keep your son for us. But we underestimated her affinity for children. We didn’t know these finer details about her daughter until recently. She was supposed to hold on to him until the boss could be clear on how we are to approach your situation. We have to begin earlier than anticipated, and nothing conclusive was said about your precious boy.’

Tears began to stream down Kele’s face. ‘No!’ she cried. ‘Not my son! He has nothing to do with this. I have nothing to do with this, damn it!’

‘You’re wrong.’ Kele watched her captor lean in towards her. ‘Your boy, he has everything to do with this. It is for him and other children like him that we are doing this. It is for young girls like you. But don’t worry about him; he’s safe in the Eastern Cape. Your ex-husband got your boy the same night you came to us.’

Kele gasped.

‘How did he know to come by and get him?’

She was perplexed by the news of Nakedi for a moment but then she remembered she’d left him a message. She recalled his greeting and how it had changed in a matter of seconds. She remembered how uneasy the new one had made her feel.

‘But why would he come that late?’ she wondered.
She knew he never came then because it was something she strictly forbade. He’d come too many times in the evening after their divorce, saturated with drink, waking the neighbours with his arguments and accusations of her. Kele was grateful the boy was at least with his father, but the portentous feeling growing in her heart about Nakedi wouldn’t leave her.

‘Agnes will have to answer for her insubordination, of course, but that’s not for me to worry about. It only means we may have to do with you what we do with the others who do not see the logic of working with us.’ The man spoke clearly but everything he said left Kele with a new question to be answered.

‘Who are you? Who’s this “we” you keep talking about? Why am I here? You could have taken anyone; why me?’

‘That’s your frustration talking, my dear girl. This is something I have already told you before. Or could it be you’re hard of hearing? We couldn’t have taken just anyone. That would make us stupid.’ The man’s eyes were stern. ‘Like I said, be patient. You’ll find out soon why you were chosen to be here, right in the eye of the storm of history.’ With that he put the last of his toast in his mouth and shut his teeth on it.

‘Sir,’ said the cook. ‘The men will be here anytime, sir.’

‘You heard that. We have to get out of here. You’ll take a shower first and get a nap before your education begins. We’re preparing for a revolution like you’ve never seen here in your country, Kele Solomon. These are exciting times for those who seek not to merely liberate the bodies of African people, but to liberate their minds and their souls. You’d be grateful to be here if you knew what we’re doing to change the course of history. You’ve walked into a new day for the African!’

‘Might I remind you I did not walk into it; I was brought here without my consent.’
‘Yes, it may be us who brought you to the mountain, but it’s your dissatisfaction with your own life that led you to Mandelaspruit, isn’t it? There is a lot for you to still learn, my dear girl; quite a lot.’ The man faced Kele with a look of unfettered smugness. She returned it with one of fire.

‘The mountain? What does he mean, the mountain? Are we in the Magaliesburg?’

She smiled inwardly at her last question. She thought she might finally have an idea where they were keeping her. Now that she believed Donovan was safe with his father, a new flame was kindled in her. She was glad for the meal she’d had, and ready for the shower and nap. All she had to do now was look for the right time to reach for her phone and make the call that would free her.

Chapter Twenty

Mandi had given her brother two leads regarding a place to stay should the need arise – Silaka Nature Reserve and Amapondo Backpackers. He'd never been to any of the two. Despite the four years he spent visiting his father at Sabine's house as a child, Nakedi didn't know much about the small town he was arriving in. He knew even less about its surrounding *lali*s, which included Ngqiqweni and Zonyele. As a boy, he'd arrive in Port St Johns by taxi, and disembark at the rank, near the old Cape Needles Hotel. He'd make his way on foot, taking Main Road straight down in the direction of the lighthouse. He recalled just how he'd mark the name change of the street as Main first became Berea and then Marine Drive. It struck him as peculiar then, that one stretch of road could have different names.

'Don't the people of Port St Johns get confused?' he'd ask himself as a boy.

Finally, the same road became Golf Course Drive as it neared the Cape Hermes Hotel. He would curve with it, away from the sea and the lighthouse, passing the golf greens with his head invariably oriented towards them. This was because they brimmed with a beauty and tranquillity he'd neither thought possible nor had the words to describe. There was a golf course near his home in Blakeway, of course – the Mthatha Country Club. It was beautiful enough. Yet it was lacking in one tiny detail: having the Indian Ocean as its backdrop. He mostly saw white people play on the Port St Johns course. This alone was sufficient in making the fairways enticing. He'd marvel always, not knowing until much later, that the hands that created the greens were those of black prisoners. After letting himself be struck fully by the wonder of both the ocean and the fairways, he'd be swallowed up by one of the many paths that hid themselves under the trees that covered the hills of Port St Johns. It was thus he'd arrive at Sabine's house. Although that wasn't where he was headed currently, her place was the only Port St Johns he'd ever really known. He thought about all this as he drove in, with Mount Sullivan and the Mzimvubu River running alongside the passenger side of the car. Before he knew it he was at a traffic circle, near the very heart of town. He bore left, merging onto Bridge Street and thereafter turned gently right. The mountain and the river were now behind him. As he approached the town square, his eyes flew up ahead and caught a Boxer Superstore. There was a humongous logo on the façade of the building. On it were words and a cut-out of a musclebound boxer with a flat-top haircut. His skin was shaded white. His eyes locked onto Nakedi's, and he stared right back. With the whiteness of his skin, the pugilist reminded him of a circumcision initiate covered in *kota*. An image of Buntu, sick, gaunt, and with his manhood mutilated, leapt into Nakedi's mind and he was reminded of the seriousness of his mission. Again, two things to accomplish. A place to put up, in case the search needed him to spend the night, and a man who knew the area and the intricacies of the culture well. Were it not for the sake of seeking a guide, Nakedi would have gone straight towards Zonyele and Ngqiqweni. His road to the two *lali*s went over the Mzimvubu

River to Ferry Point, by boat. Thereafter he would need to navigate a treacherous gravel road on foot, past the *lali* of Noqhekwana. The road, uneven and furrowed, could be reached by car, too, by driving over the grey stone bridge Nakedi had crossed earlier and making a turn onto a small road. But because it wasn't tarred, it was vulnerable to rain waters, flooded estuaries, and the wild sea lapping at it in certain points. On dry days, daring taxis and other cars went on the road. But when it was wet, one needed a *4x4* and the requisite skill to have a decent chance. Besides, the road came to an end after Noqhekwana as it neared the villages of Zonyele and Ngqiqweni. There, neither roads, water, nor electricity ran.

More than anything else he might encounter on this trip, Nakedi felt the most trepidation when he considered how he would broach the subject of circumcision with his would-be guide. What if the first person he spoke to was a staunch traditionalist and took exception to his line of questions? Adding the disappearance of his brother to the equation was an even taller order. He needed to find someone he could trust. But how would he even decide who was the right person to approach? And what language would he use – isiXhosa or English?

'English might be better,' he weighed up in his mind as he headed down Main with the driver's window open, smelling the sea salt in the air.

English had become his language of choice over the years. He could express his ideas much more fluidly in it. But he thought again. Would he know how to express in English some of what he needed to say in isiXhosa, especially to people who may not be fluent in the former? Besides, would that language be adequate in carrying the meanings he needed to convey in the world of customs?

'In the white man's tongue, circumcision is the removal of foreskin. But its closest translation in isiXhosa is *ulwaluko*. And this speaks to much more than just the loss of a foreskin. It speaks to an entire process and institution.'

Nakedi decided against the use of English. It might even be deemed haughty of him to speak in it anyway, if he knows isiXhosa. If he conducted his business in isiXhosa, however, the language native to these parts, he would definitely have to state where he stood in relation to the rites of passage he was enquiring about. But wait! He didn't have to know isiXhosa at all, did he? He could be a tourist – perhaps a Tswana man. It was indeed far worse – and perhaps even dangerous – for him to admit being Xhosa and not know all he would be expected to know surrounding *ulwaluko*. To Nakedi's knowledge, Xhosa males who were either uncircumcised at an age when they should already have been, or were not circumcised in what was deemed the proper way, were accosted and cut against their will. Those who'd done the work improperly could receive a superficial incision to right the situation, while those who'd never been circumcised were dragged off with their penises as if French monarchs to the guillotine. A few years ago something similar had happened to a former Parliamentarian and Cabinet Minister of the South African Republic. He'd not managed to attend to

his rites of passage because his life, like the lives of many of his generation, was interrupted by the liberation struggle. But it was not the Minister who reminded himself of the lingering pout on his penis after apartheid was dismantled. He'd been neglecting it for a couple of years when other men in his circle remembered it on his behalf and took action for him. Nakedi thought of his own situation. He recalled the old man who'd taken out an *okapi* knife in Libode and threatened to finish off what the white doctor had started. That could very well be Nakedi now.

'*Ndakuk' ncwela unye, kwedini*!' the bile-filled words of the old man rang. Would anyone in Port St Johns try to put him through circumcision school against his wishes? Deep down, he doubted it. But it did no harm to take all the precautions he could take.

'Yes, I could be a Tswana man – from Botswana. A tourist!' The solution presented itself finally.

He was now on Second Beach Road, headed for where the beach and some of the town's resorts were. Much to his credit, Nakedi had picked up enough seTswana during his many years in Joburg. He'd also visited Gaborone on multiple occasions on account of dating a Botswana girl who lived in South Africa for two years. He could mention names and places with confidence in conversations.

'In fact, with a name like Nakedi I'm as moTswana as it's gonna get in these parts,' he laughed out loud, but his laughter came to an abrupt end.

He couldn't be Nakedi either, he realised. Not if the police in Joburg already knew he was driving that shuttle bus. That name would be in the news soon enough, if it wasn't already. He tried to think of a suitable alias but nothing came to mind. His brain skipped and changed course. It flew back to Buntu. Nakedi thought about circumcision schools. He wondered what the inside (and even outside) of one might look like. How do the boys assemble? When do they assemble? How much do they pay; and to whom? What happens? Even with a credible guide, could he simply go to a school and ask about his missing brother? It killed Nakedi inside that he knew absolutely nothing about initiation schools. All he was aware of was there were good ones and bad ones. The good ones were the fewer, it seemed. They weren't the ones that made countless headlines.

'What's a good circumcision school anyway?' Nakedi asked himself. He didn't really know the answer to his question, but he figured it was fairly simple to come to a conclusion.

'The good ones are the ones in which boys die the least or not at all, or where youngsters hardly ever lose the use of their manhoods.'

Besides the little that headlines on street poles told him from time to time, as he shuttled passengers through the streets of Joburg for Ariemi, Nakedi knew absolutely nothing about the

intricacies of this world. The only first-hand information he had on the subject of becoming a man were snippets of conversations with his peers, long before his Joburg days. He'd been revisiting those conversations for things he might need to use. He revisited them again now. But the reality of it was the peers who'd gone to traditional schools of *ulwaluko* had nothing to say to him on the subject. He was far beneath them. The ones who'd gone to Dr Parker's rooms (the town's renowned surgeon) for the cut before going to the bush, were more generous with the secrets of manhood. But their tales were also peppered with superficial information that Nakedi already knew. There were guarded truths that they were not privy to. It all happened like this: The 'realest' of the men – the true mountain men – would mock the manhood of all those who had been to Dr Parker before seeking isolation. There was a pecking order, you see. This was something Nakedi knew very well after a series of unpleasant encounters around the subject of manhood with his peers. First came the mountain men whose penises had been handled by surgeons with clan names that read like a history book. Then it was the white doctor's men with a bit of mountain in them. Last in the order were boys who'd spent their healing time in isolation, in rooms inside their homes instead of going to the mountain. But even lower than the lowest yet was Nakedi's kind. This was the type that got circumcised and went about the business of life as though nobody had so much as sneezed. On the totem pole of penises, foreskins, and manhood, Nakedi and his sex, despite how beautifully Dr Parker had sculpted it, were right down at the bottom.

Chapter Twenty-One

The shower was good. Its head was wide but its pressure was low. Yet the warmth of its water was like the hands of a masseuse on Kele's shoulders. After getting clean was sleep. She guessed it was mid-morning when she slid under the covers earlier, on account of having eaten a breakfast meal with the bald-headed man. But she had no idea what time of day it was when she woke up the first time. She was in a different room than before. It also would have been pitch-black were it not for the spotlight mounted on a camera, just like in the shower. The light's pale yellow glow filled the cell and cast shadows that were still but seemed to crawl. Besides a simple divan there was a table (jutting out of the steel wall like the bed) and chair, a small air-conditioner, as well as a hook and hanger. The cell was well-constructed, too – three walls of dark steel, and one of natural rock, covered on top by the ovoid roof of the cave. The metal was shaped to bend with the earth where it curved. Her captor had descended even further with her, taking a brief ride down what felt like a mine cage. It felt so because she couldn't see. The hood was back over her head. But she knew what that kind of ride was like. Her first Outside Broadcast for the Maître Minute was at Metsa-Môrewag, a mine in Rustenburg, near Marikana, leading up to the second anniversary of the Massacre. The entire station had broadcast from there that day, taking different angles into the topic of mining and communities. This place didn't feel like a mine much. It felt more like the Sterkfontein caves or the chambers of Sudwala in Mpumalanga.

She'd been warned the sleep would only be a short one, but she welcomed it. Anything was better than sitting tied to a chair for hours on end. The sleep had been far from short, though. She was in and out of it, as though it were drug-induced, her mind in a nebulous haze. She needed to regain some of her strength and sense of equilibrium. She was in new matching apparel – a black t-shirt and light tracksuit pants (no pockets). With the exception of her boots, which were under the bed with the phone still in them, she'd been asked to leave all her clothes on the floor after the shower. She'd also been served more food. It had been very long since breakfast. But her plate was nothing like the canned salmon she'd eaten in the canteen. It was the cheese and onion sandwich she'd literally peed on the day before. Maybe there was something in it. She fell suspicious. Its pungent odour was still present in her mouth. She'd taken to another bout of sleep thinking about this, the kind in which one falls languorously through oneself, until lost in a galaxy within. She dreamt many dreams, all of them pleasant – none infected with the terrible reality of her situation. She was tired from playing with her childhood friends, sitting away from them on a merry-go-round under the hot sun, sucking her fingertips, red and sticky from Kool Aid Sweet powder, when water pelted her face and jolted her out of her dreams. She raised herself off the pillow and shot off the bed onto her feet, coughing some of the water back up. The light above the camera was out. There was a rumble of boots. Four men ran in. Like the one who'd just poured water over her face, they had bright headlamps on their foreheads, such that she couldn't make out their features. They grabbed her. She struggled, flailing her arms and

kicking her legs, fighting to keep her feet as they raised her off the floor. But they overcame her easily, each taking her by an arm or leg with her face upwards.

'Help! Help me!' Kele shouted from the bottom of her lungs as her body writhed uncontrollably.

'That's exactly what this is, help with a capital H. You'll soon see,' said the man who'd poured the water over her face. It was the bald-headed man. Who else?

'To the doctor,' he ordered.

'Wait, my shoes!' Kele shouted as the man threw the bag over her head. Having them with her was the best way to keep her phone concealed. But she bit her tongue as soon as the words came out. 'Fuck! I should have kept my mouth shut,' she admonished herself for her haste. 'What if he sends for them? The weight of the phone will surely give itself away. Worse yet, it could slide into plain view.'

This set her heart beating even faster than it already was. She managed to get one foot on the ground, but the man who'd dropped it quickly snatched it into the air again.
'Don't worry about your shoes. You don't need those where you're going. Depending on your choice, of course, you may come back still able to put a pair on. You will have two clear choices ahead of you. Two. All you have to do is make the right one, for yourself and your loved ones.'

The man's words confused Kele, but they also struck more fear into her heart. He seemed to always speak in riddles and parables. Besides the liberation of Africans implied in his soliloquies, she hadn't quite made out who he and his people were, and what their real business with her was. All she knew was she was being held against her will in a system of caves and cells with ever-watchful cameras. In other cells people were being tortured. And all of this was about an hour and a half from Mandelaspruit. In which direction that was though, she couldn't say. The jerking motion of the men's hurried steps hurt her shoulders and hips. She heard the sound of a drill. Under it was a long drawn out scream.

'Hear that? We are close,' said the bald-headed man.

'No!' Kele cried under the hood. 'You said you wouldn't. You promised!' Fear caused her voice to struggle out of her throat.

'You want life to play into your expectations; that's the problem with you.' The man let out a disdainful chuckle. 'You've taught yourself it has to be this or that. To be sure, you didn't teach yourself. But you've come to accept it. When we accept things we shouldn't, it becomes our fault. The first lesson you're going to learn here is you never know what to expect in life, even when you do.' He laughed again. 'Just because we had a breakfast date with salmon and over-easy eggs together doesn't mean you know the next thing I'm going to do. I'm not your father or your man. I'm not your

friend either. But I'm also not your enemy. Think of me... think of us... this operation, as a wind passing through the lives of the have-nots, the long forgotten people, bringing rain clouds for a black harvest. But the wind is unpredictable, isn't it? You never know what it will do next. It may bring clouds or chase them away.'

The cries came again. They were closer now and intensified, and at times they rose even above the sound of the drilling, pounding, and sawing. The men who carried her came to a stop. Their leader keyed in a code. A door unlocked with a beep. They walked in and laid her on a bed with the entrance behind her. They strapped her in and took off her blindfold. Her heart pounded, but she was no longer struggling because she felt limp. She was glad she'd not been taken to one of the rooms from which the screams were emanating. The nearest seemed only a door or two away from them. The lights came on. And as her eyes fought to adjust to them the four men left, closing the door behind them. Their leader remained in the room. She paid no attention to him and looked at the medical equipment she saw on top of the counter to her right. Except for the dark walls of steel (on which there were white marks at one place, notches) everything in this room was white. There were many packets and boxes on the counter top, also white. And from what she could see she surmised them to be pills, gauzes, bandages, and syringes. Her eyes fell on the machines that stood on either side of the counter, paying close attention to any cutting or drilling attachments they might have. She found none. There were also two chairs next to a long floor mirror. Under one of them sat a weight scale. She turned her neck and followed her kidnapper. He walked over to the counter as he took the headlamp off. He put it next to the boxes and packets on the counter-top and walked towards the bed with one of the chairs in his hand.

'Listen closely,' he said, setting it down. 'This is what's going to happen. I'm going to unstrap you. I'm not supposed to do that. But I want to. Over here is my Taser,' he pointed at it. It was next to his retractable flashlight. 'I'd rather not use it, just as I would've liked to not hit you when I did. But I'll use it if you make me. Do we understand each other?' He spoke clearly and sternly but soon softened his words. 'The doctor will be here any minute now,' he began. And just as he said this she heard the beeping of the keypad outside. He let go of the straps as he was starting on them. The door unlocked itself and it was opened. In her position she was unable to see the face of the person who'd come in. But as her captor offered a respectful greeting she heard the response of a deep female voice. Kele knew it wasn't Lerato, Old Man Thato's daughter, but she was the closest association Kele could make.

'This our girl?' asked the woman, her voice bigger and bolder than it had just been in her greeting.

'Yes, I'm hoping it is; but she'll make that choice in the end. You know how it goes.'

‘Yes... but that part of things is not quite my concern. Let me carry out the examination and you can move her on to the next stop.’

‘What next stop?’ Kele cut in. ‘What do you want with me?’ The leather of the straps bit into her wrists as she struggled once again under a new frustration burning inside her.

‘Oh you haven’t told her yet?’ The doctor came around and Kele saw her face. It was androgynous and seraphic. More like a man’s than a woman’s. The black spectacles on it were its most prominent feature. Her headlamp was in her hand, its band dangling.

‘You’re an important person. Whether you like it or not, you’re now going to be part of history.’ The doctor was standing by the bed, her face over Kele’s. ‘You just need to make sure you’re on the correct side of it. That’s all I can say. It’s a new day – a day for new truths about who we are. But again, let me leave that alone and do my job, which is to assess how fit you are for your new position.’

The man joined her; they began loosening Kele’s straps.

‘Remember what I told you?’ he asked, as he undid the buckles and glanced at his waist.

‘First I’m going to need you to take all your clothes off, underwear too, and step on the scale over there,’ the doctor said, and walked over to the counter to open a drawer. From it she drew a chart and clipboard with a pen on a string.

Kele stole a glance at the bald-headed man with questioning eyes before throwing the same gaze in the doctor’s direction. Neither of them seemed to heed her bewilderment.

‘Is he going to step outside?’ she finally asked the doctor boldly.

‘You’re not the first woman I have seen naked. No, I won’t be stepping outside. But I will look away if that is your request. I’ll be right here, in case the doctor needs me, or you do anything to make her need me.’

‘That’s fine then. Have it your way,’ Kele said.

‘That’s fine?’ asked the man. ‘No, you’re not here in a position of power. You don’t dictate I leave the room and you don’t decide it’s okay for me to stay. This has to sink into your mind. This may save you unnecessary trouble. Believe me.’

The man’s smug manner of speaking enraged Kele, but he was right.

‘Clothes off and on the scale. I do have two more of you to see,’ said the doctor impatiently.

The man turned around on his chair and gave his prisoner all the privacy he was going to give her. Kele took off her t-shirt and put it on the counter. She did the same with the pants and underwear. She felt strange about her nakedness, even under the gaze of this woman.

'Wait, over here before you get on the scale. The doctor stood Kele with her back to the wall and marked with something at the top of her head. She took out tape measure and took her height from the mark she'd made on the wall.

'To the scale,' the doctor pointed.

Kele's feet felt cold as she stepped on it.

'Height: 157 centimetres. Weight: 68kg,' the doctor said audibly as she entered these on her chart. 'Step off... and on again,' she added as she gave Kele a slight push on her lower back. 'BMI, 27.59. It should be less than 25. You're a little overweight according to the chart here.'

Kele looked at herself in the mirror from head to toe. Her ginger weave ran down the sides of her face, ending with an inward curl around the shoulders and back. Who cared now that it was Brazilian and it had cost her, (well, Malcolm) the salary of a full-time domestic worker. Her chest was dark, but lighter than the skin on her face. She looked at her belly, and touched it. Soft, ever since Donovan, she thought.

'Off. This way.'

Kele felt the hand of the doctor on her again, the fingernail of its pinky resting in the hollow of her navel as it guided her. It sent a tingle she didn't understand into her body. The doctor looked her in the eye through the lenses of her cat's-eye frames. She was tall and Kele looked up.

'Now I know I just said you are overweight. I don't mean that in real life. That's the chart speaking. It speaks to your health; your choice to listen. I speak to you.' She winked. 'Here, pee into this.'

The bald-headed man was typing something on his phone. Kele wondered whether he could get signal even down at this level. When she was done with the urine she got dressed and there was another doctor's order:

'On the bed. Let me get your vitals. Let's see what the general state of your health is.' She put the ear-tips of her stethoscope in place. 'In; out,' she commanded after placing the diaphragm on Kele's chest.

As she inhaled and exhaled Kele looked up at this woman. Her skin smelled like coconut, and though her accent was rural, she spoke with utter confidence, through a smile that seemed to linger even in her stern moments. Sure, there was secrecy and mystery all around this place. Kele still didn't

know the name of anyone she'd come across. She didn't know what was required of her, why she was here. There was that. But there was something strangely enigmatic about the doctor, too. In her eyes, in her movements, she carried a mystique of hot own that was quite divorced from everything else.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Amapondo Backpackers. Nakedi convinced himself he quite liked the idea of setting up camp there rather than at Silaka Nature Reserve. This was because Amapondo was just up ahead according to the sign posts he passed along the way. Silaka was still much further. That wouldn't do. If nothing else, he needed to get out of the car and stretch his legs. The time was leaning towards noon. Well over two hours had passed since he left Mthatha, and his back, now slightly stiff, had only been off the driver's seat for the fifteen minutes it took to talk to his uncle. Nakedi yawned, and as he did so, his stomach growled. He'd also had nothing to eat since a muffin and juice he'd gobbled down for breakfast at home just before leaving. He had Vienna sausages and rolls in the backseat. The sausages were the canned kind. Besides not knowing whether or not he'd find a fridge for regular ones, buying the cheaper can was an attempt at keeping from digging deeper into Wesley's bag. He couldn't eat them right away because he'd have to be settled to remove them from the brine they were in without making a mess. Except for food though, he needed water. He'd already finished the little he'd bought. The weather was cloudy and cold for the better part of the morning, but it had got quite hot in the last half hour. It was getting hotter still. He looked at the motley dwellings of brick and mortar, mixed in with ones of mud and corrugated iron. Colourful paints and whitewash. Some were built on the summits of hills and others on slopes and cliffs, with virtually nowhere to walk, unless with the skill of a mountain goat. The road was a series of curves. Before he knew it, the Amapondo gate came up on his right. So sudden was the turn he would have missed the steep driveway completely if he were coming from the opposite direction. After parking the car and walking up another steep to reception (past a sad, pregnant donkey), he was met by a lady named Signorina. Amapondo was simple and rustic. It took him no time to get a bed. Since he'd made no booking, however, the only available one was Crystal House, a family-sized cabin. It was the most private and expensive of the two-star lot. Nakedi's stomach made another noise. He could no longer ignore it. Mandi had also never been to Amapondo Backpackers, but she'd relayed a funny story to her brother about Camilla, a friend of hers who'd stayed here. The hostel's halloumi and mushroom burgers were some of the best in the world, she said – so good she threatened to dry-hump the next one she ordered on her next visit. Coming out of the reception area there stood an empty bar, and the Pondolicious Restaurant to his right. He'd passed it on the way in, but his palate craved a little excitement now – that halloumi and mushroom burger. He'd have the cheap canned meat later. There was a lady at the bar. He approached her.

'Hi... I'm Tshepo... I'm at Crystal House' he said, giving her the name under which he'd taken the cabin.

'Hi, sir,' was her reply. She was fidgety – a young girl with a timid face and a weave she should have let go of a long time ago. With all the new growth of hair, the synthetic locks had receded and would be sitting like a ponytailed yarmulke soon.

‘Would you like a drink or are you going to order something from the kitchen?’ she asked. Before Nakedi could respond, she added: ‘The kitchen is closed for now. Art, our guy, has gone to town for some fresh ingredients. So very sorry, sir; but you can have a drink if you want.’

‘No thanks. Don’t worry about it.’

Nakedi’s bag of clothes was still in the car, next to the money. He thought about his food again. His palate would have to do without the excitement. He would fetch everything and retreat to his cabin where he could eat his sausages as he devised the next step to his plan. He looked in the direction of the car anticipating the steep descent, but as he did so his eyes flew out to the waters of Second Beach in the distance below. They caught something. Among a few trees in a glade to the left of the beach, was a gathering of white rondavels. There were about twelve to fifteen of them, congregating to one side, next to an inordinately large one. On the thatch of the humungous hut, in paint or whitewash, were the words Mead and Mellow.

‘What’s that?’ he turned around and asked the girl, pointing.

‘The Mead and Mellow – a new hotel and restaurant,’ she answered. Her face had a slight expression of disdain for the place.

Hearing her say the word ‘mead’ made it more real in his head. His mind recalled Sabine, from whose honey and hands he was taught to make the drink, and from whose warm tongue he’d first known its taste. But he’d not had a glass of it since his last visit to Port St Johns more than fifteen years ago; the very last time he saw her.

‘They have food there all day, if you’re really hungry. But it’s no better than microwave food. Maybe you can try there for now and come back to us for dessert later?’

They both smiled at each other.

‘How do I get there?’

‘It’s very easy. You go out the gate and drive back the same way you came from town, a hundred meters or so. As the road curves to the right you must look for a turn. You would have passed it on the way here and missed it – no signs.’ She rolled her eyes at the lack of signs. ‘The turn goes onto a bridge between the reeds. Be careful,’ she said once more, ‘it’s really easy to miss’. That was all the girl could offer before taking up the chore of cleaning the wine glasses hanging above her head.

Nakedi’s eyes continued to wander. They ran up a hill behind the Mead and Mellow and came down to the rondavels before looking out towards the ocean. He marked the yellow-green grass that ran from the trees beyond the rondavels and rushed like water towards an estuary. On the hill was a thicket of trees of varying shades, standing in choir-like formation near a cliff. He noted the uncanny

way in which the choir, leaned into the wind as though it were serenading the white water. The waves seemed thankful. As if in reverence to the land that grew the trees, they laid themselves down repeatedly at the feet of the sand. Nakedi was overcome with emotion. Just as he'd experienced on the bridge on Lusikisiki Road, he was again struck by the immensity of the world, and the freedom possible in it. But dark, ominous clouds flew low offshore in the distance, like alien ships. Something uncomfortable stirred in him.

'The clouds will be coming in later,' Nakedi said to the girl, but she was gone. So was he.

He proceeded down the slope, past the dejected donkey. He would definitely go to the Mead and Mellow for a meal, he decided, and drove out. He went back onto Second Beach Road and indicated right as soon as he spotted the gap in the reeds on the roadside. He drove across a narrow bridge that ran over a different part of the same estuary he'd seen from above. He proceeded under a canopy of trees that let light in, in dazzling streaks. There was parking under some blue gum trees, on a bed of crushed stone. A few paces from it stood the big hut.

Although Nakedi had food on his mind, a nostalgic thirst for a glass of mead overtook his hunger. After one glass it would be straight back to the task at hand, he assured himself. He would sit down and go through Buntu's phone first, and thereafter find a guide to take him wherever he needed to go. Ngqiqweni was the closer of the two *lalis* he was headed to. That's where Buntu probably was if he went through with his supposed plan. Just as Uncle Ntandazo said, Buntu knew nobody on his mother's side of the family – and if he indeed was trying to get circumcised the right way, he wouldn't want to do it with his mother's people.

Nakedi parked the car. He knew he probably didn't have to go to Zonyele, but still, he harboured a feeling of going there. He thought of Uncle Ntandazo again, and his uncanny resemblance to his father. He didn't remember his two aunts, who both lived in Zonyele. But something inside him was steadily growing – a longing for the acquaintance lost with his father's people. As he got out of the car he wondered why that was. He hadn't thought much of them before. After growing up in the relative sophistication of Aunt Eve's home, they became simpletons to him, backward bumpkins. This was even worse after Sabine began to groom him for the world and had him thinking and speaking in a new way, reading, and writing poetry they could never grasp. In a sense, he'd come to completely forget about them. Except for his mother, none of the Tolos were educated. He thought about his own education; how he'd left it hanging in the air when Kele fell pregnant. He wondered whether or not he'd ever go back to university. His train of thought was quickly derailed. Four or five monkeys hurried out of the way as he slammed the car door shut. One of them did not retreat far. It watched Nakedi intently as soon as it was at a safe distance. He looked at the monkey too as he walked. It gazed at him as though it had something of importance to convey. Perhaps it had word of Buntu. Or it was offering to be his guide? He managed a little laughter as he finally reached

the door of the big hut and let go of the primate's gaze. He pushed and tugged at the closed door before knocking twice. There was no response. He tugged at the handle again and beat the wood with a flat hand. An irritated voice shouted from inside: 'This is the delivery door. Go around to the back!'

'Ah! So that's what you wanted to tell me?' Nakedi looked back at the monkey. But he could no longer tell its face from the others as they all frolicked about under the tree by his car.

Chapter Twenty-Three

The barman was the only one inside the hut. Owing to its small windows, the place was dark and musty. It needed lights even in the daytime. Everything inside it mimicked its round shape. The photos and mirrors on the walls were set in spherical frames, and were interspersed with old 12-inch vinyls whose centres projected various colours that did what they could to brighten up the room. The tables were also round, like the seats and backs of the chairs. And all was rather tightly packed in. Nakedi meandered around the furniture to get to the bar. Although not a complete circle, even the counter was curved. The crescent of strong timber ran parallel to the wall of the rondavel for about six to eight meters. Behind it were mounted shelves of the same wood. As Nakedi approached, he noticed the barman was young – in his mid to late-twenties perhaps. He was in a maroon Reebok t-shirt and a *spoti* – a bucket hat with its brim upturned in front.

'That must be the door I knocked on just now,' he thought as he greeted his host in seTswana as part of his subterfuge. The door was just behind the barman. He was of good height and build, and possessed seemingly uninterested eyes. To be sure, his entire face was peculiar. This was not only because of his eyes. His top lip was drawn slightly upwards. With flared nostrils to boot, this left him looking as though he were sniffing out a foul odour only he could detect. As Nakedi sat down, the restaurant was filled with two new voices. A couple, both with long blond hair, came in. They spoke in a mixture of English and what Nakedi quickly made out to be *Nederlands*.

'Here they are again with their funny Afrikaans, these two.' A female waiter had also just come in, securing her apron behind her back as she hurried.

She was on her way towards the bar and was addressing her colleague in isiXhosa as she walked. The barman was tickled, though his facial expression changed very little. Nakedi pretended to not understand what had been said.

'Dumelang,' he offered another seTswana greeting when the girl reached the bar. He was seated in the middle, at the innermost part of the concave counter, and she stood next to him. Just as before, the seTswana felt strange coming out of his mouth.

'Dumelani,' she said, placing a flat palm on her chest. 'That's as far as I can go. That's all the Sotho I'll ever know.' She let out a silly, even coquettish laugh.

Though she spoke in English now, her isiXhosa was beautiful and rhythmic to Nakedi's ears; the kind he'd once known but had gradually parted ways with over the years. He was inwardly embarrassed at feeling like an overseas tourist, admiring the strength and boldness of her clicks as though it wasn't his own language she was speaking. The girl turned to the barman:

'They'd like two Castle and Limes, please. And their pub lunches from earlier. I put the food behind the bar. If you could just reheat it for me–'

The barman gave the girl an impatient look.

‘This man is a customer, too. He *was* first. And do you see an apron around me? Food is a woman’s job. You know the only thing a man should do is eat it. I’ll get your damn beers, but you can get your own food.’

‘And you, sir, would you like anything to eat while I’m being a woman?’

Nakedi smiled at the girl’s fortitude and easy nature.

‘I’ll have the pub lunch fish and chips too, please,’ he said, glancing at the restaurant chalkboard with the specials on it (it was round). ‘With a tall glass of mead,’ he added, directing his eyes to the barman.

‘There isn’t any,’ the girl was quick to say. ‘The lady who makes it hasn’t sent any, for a couple of days now.’

The barman cast another admonishing look at the girl: ‘*Uyaspida*!’ he said.
Nakedi’s heart sank. The mead was part of the reason he’d come here. ‘an Amstel then,’ he sighed.

‘They’re not cold yet. They came in just before you did.’

‘What do you have? What’s cold, drinkable?’

As the barman counted the scant choices, Castle Lager or Lite, Nakedi felt a ball of irritation building up inside him. But he immediately decided against making any kind of fuss, as was custom with society in the city. Complaints would get him unwanted attention. It was better to drink a Castle with his food and be cordial.

‘I’ll have a fruit cocktail.’ His mind changed the order on him as he spoke it. ‘*Yho*, i-juice! *Hayi lona*!’ the girl laughed.

‘What’s so funny?’ Nakedi asked in mock indignation.

‘Nothing, I guess. It’s like asking for *i*-t-bone steak, and when there’s none, skipping the pork chops and chicken, and going straight for *i*-vegetarian. That’s all.’ She seemed pleased with her culinary metaphor. It was probably straight off her work menu.

The barman chuckled, delighted as though his sniffing face were on to a pleasant scent.

‘And don’t laugh, *wena*,’ she addressed him. ‘If this one drank as much water or juice as he does *la*-alcohol he wouldn’t look as old as he looks,’ she winked at Nakedi as the microwave beeped for the second meal. She set it on a tray with the first one and grabbed some condiments.

The man behind the counter certainly did have a slight puffy look of being aged by whisky or some other kind of drink.

'Well, we can't all be as beautiful as you are,' Nakedi sided with the barman.

He looked closer at the girl. The uniform she wore was a lacklustre green. It went with a white cap that matched its apron. He studied her face. It was fair in complexion, with full lips whose natural colour was closer to light purple than pink. She wore a short afro, and it showed charmingly on the sides and back of her head from under the cap. Her legs were stout, though she was tall and slender. Nakedi read the writing on her apron, making out only for the first time what it said. A peal of laughter escaped him.

'It's rude to laugh at people. I'll deal with you when I come back,' the girl giggled as she took the food and beers and was gone.

'It's your apron,' Nakedi said in his defence when she returned.
'*Itheni*? What about it?'

"You may knead dough; but you need mead too," he read the faded letters.
'That's very funny, right? I mean...'

She neither understood it nor was interested; and he felt a little awkwardness gather.

'*i*-Joke is normally bad if it has to be explained; don't you think?' she said, before changing the conversation as a wind might change direction. 'You look like someone important. Where are you from? What do you do?' She rested an elbow on the bar and cupped her chin with a hand, waiting expectantly for an answer.

'That's rather forward of you, don't you think?'

'Maybe it is. Maybe I'm always forward. We are who we are, you know; that's how we get by in life; and get the things we want, isn't it?' She turned her head in a way that would have flicked her hair were she white. 'What's your name?' Her insouciant manner was infectious.

'I'm Tshepo... Tshepo Selota.' Giving his false surname somehow solidified his fake name and he said both with the conviction of an easy conscience.

'Selaelo's son or something?'

'No, who's that?'

'Never mind. Shame on you for not knowing a legend, especially with your family name. And what is it you do?'

‘I’m a writer... a student... doing research for university. Nakedi had thought of this before while getting the cabin with Grace, but unlike the name it was unpractised and sounded inauthentic to him, especially coming from a dropout. But he felt safe in present company.

‘See, I told you, you look important. What are you writing about? Tell me, and my little brain will try to understand,’ she mocked and was amused with herself, though she seemed genuinely curious.

‘I’m working on an article about Xhosa circumcision and its treatment in the media. But given the subject, that’s definitely not anything you’d know about, let alone understand.’ Nakedi laughed, and immediately marked how the barman’s eyes came alive when he mentioned manhood. It was an unrehearsed response from the fake scholar, but it presented a great opportunity to test the waters with his male counterpart. The barman laughed at the girl, too.

‘What makes you think I don’t know anything about circumcision? Because I’m a girl? Maybe I know more than you who has to study it in school.’

‘Shut up! I’d stick to women’s things if I was you,’ the barman scolded, while doing his best to keep his voice down for the white customers.

‘Oh, the beast in him! *Uyindlavini*!’ the young girl said. ‘Since there are certain things we’re not allowed to talk about I guess it’s back to you. Tell me more about being a student. I always wanted to be one, but could never afford it. And aren’t you a little old to be in university anyway?’ She pursed her lips into a pout and smiled with her light brown eyes.

‘I’m doing my Masters; we’re allowed to be old sometimes.’

The girl’s lashes were lush and full, and her smile – crooked, imperfect – carried in it childlike delight, and she gave abundantly of it.

‘What do you do? The dumb words stumbled out of Nakedi’s mouth without much thought. Of course he knew what she did. She was doing it right now, serving him his food.

‘What? You mean besides being a waitress? I’m a dreamer, I guess. I couldn’t afford to study anything like you when I left school; so I’m left with dreams and working in these huts. Take me away,’ she said melodramatically with outstretched arms. ‘Go make me a clever student with you wherever you come from.’

‘Stop acting like a fool; this is a customer,’ the barman barked in isiXhosa. Then he addressed Nakedi in English: ‘She thinks she’s a poet. Like that’s something to be in life, especially here. That’s why she’s a dreamer, stuck in a bad dream; with this much talent.’ He signalled with his hand just how little she had, and the dismissive face he made flared his nostrils even wider.

The girl was evidently stung by his words. Nakedi flew to her aid, but the only thing he could manage was to ask her name.

'Happy,' she said sadly. 'That's what they call me. Sonwabile. Get it?'

'Yes, I do,' he said with a level of affection that surprised him. 'And we could have something in common there.'

'Something in common?' The waitress was beginning to look confused again. 'I'm Happy, too; quite happy to have met you.'

She understood him clearly. He wanted to say more, but his words were accompanied by another brief moment of awkwardness. She smiled softly, no longer reachable, and walked off to clear the tables for her other customers. Nakedi sat in silence and drank his juice slowly, wondering how the clever pun on the apron could have escaped a poet. Maybe she really wasn't talented after all. He was mad at her now that she was distant. Something she'd done began gnawing at him, irritating him, deep beneath his skin. He couldn't place a finger on it at first, but he soon realised what it was. It wasn't her at all. He was angry at himself for slipping up so easily. If he was moTswana, how likely was it he would know the meaning of Sonwabile in English? Not very likely. His spirit began to turn gloomy at this, like the sunlight that came into the room but died as soon as it passed through the windowpanes.

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The other patrons had left, and Sonwabile, clearly in no mood to be around the barman any longer, had followed them.

'So, you're writing about this thing, *Razzo*? He made a cutting gesture with his hand as he spoke, to signify what 'this thing' was. What are you writing about it?' The barman's voice was full of guarded curiosity. 'People think it's for child's play and they are dying. More juice?'

'No, thanks.' Nakedi put down his almost empty glass. 'I'm writing about how the custom is reported only negatively in the press, when there are good things about it that you're never told. But what do you mean people are dying? What's killing them exactly?'

'White people, that's who!'

'White people? How?'

'You have to be fed up with the way they kill our culture. It's even worse with circumcision. They poison it to die a slow death in the media you're talking about, with no kind of understanding.

Black people follow them. Even a white woman can write about it. Imagine that! What does she know? A white woman writing about bloody black penises! They're trying to kill us, bottom line. But we won't let them anymore. We've let them for far too long.' The speaker paused, and became pensive. 'For example, you may not be a man according to KwaXhosa, but you're a man and you're black. That's always better than a white woman writing about this thing. In fact, we shouldn't even write about it, and non-Xhosa people should never be involved in anything to do with it. But someone has to write something positive against all the negativity. Especially when white women are writing.'

Nakedi nodded his head. He'd mistaken the barman's evocation of death to be literal when he first asked the question: 'I see. I thought you were talking about a different kind of death, maybe from botched jobs and disease,' he said. He wanted to lean the conversation this way.

'Well, that happens, too.' The barman's response was grave. 'Death is always a possibility when you volunteer for that kind of wound and go to the bush. Nobody wants death, but you become a man also because you face the pain and survive everything the start of your manhood brings. That's why these things that go to the hospital are not men. They get painkillers, before and after the job. They're not ready for what it is to be a man.'

'I see.' Nakedi said. He wondered, probably for the first time in his life in such a way, what it meant to be a man. This man seemed so certain about the answer; his words, the force behind them, left no room for doubt. 'You seem passionate about this,' Nakedi ventured. 'I'd absolutely love to interview you for my work. Would that be okay?'

The barman needed no more to bring him fully out of his shell. He'd come out of it by degrees. He was clearly thrilled at the suggestion of being interviewed for a good circumcision cause. He seemed quite keen to opine on anything and everything associated with the ritual. He spoke at length, said many things and relayed marvellous stories, some of which had witches, liquor, fights, and death in them. Nakedi was intrigued at first, but the longer the barman spoke, the more he became lost. It was too much tradition, too many mythical stories, and names of faceless people all at the same time. What he really wanted to know were things that could or would lead him to Buntu. And the barman's winding chatter was becoming further and further from it. The customer was done eating and was thinking of getting up when the conversation suddenly turned towards the very thing that had brought him to Port St Johns – circumcisions... for runaway boys. Nakedi took the barman up on the juice and ordered dessert with it – a polenta orange cake and ice cream. What he heard drew him in. He listened, and listened for a very long time.

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The barman was part of a small informal group of young men – friends – dedicated to protecting the rituals of their people. The upholding of circumcision rites was something they saw as more than a duty. They took it to be well within their rights to steer the custom in the right direction. In town, in the locations, and in the nearby *lalis*, he and his crew kept watch of the goings-on with boys, he said. They made it a point to know which ones in the community were coming of age and ready for the honour. They talked frequently to the youngsters in taverns leading up to the season of *imingeno*, about the seriousness of the ritual: the dignity, nobleness and need of it. They knew of the ones who went to boarding schools far away and the ones whose parents loved Jesus so much they defiled their children's manhood by taking them to hospitals, or by preventing them from going to the bush completely. They were not averse to taking serious action where the situation warranted it. It was the boys they encountered in the watering holes and were friendly with who pointed out their peers: who disrespected or rejected the ritual. They made life unbearably difficult for youths who didn't toe the cultural line, wherever they encountered them, and so did their younger connections. This was until the boys gave into the pressure – whatever form it took – and did the right thing. But it was the runaway boys the barman liked. It was this group that appealed to him, and was his passion, because they were not cowards. They were brave men, ready to be freed from boyhood. The only cowards in their lives were their parents or other family members who got in the way.

'A boy even hung himself here last year. He was found by his uncle and brothers in the forest after his mother had fetched him among other boys at a school, already awaiting his turn for the spear,' the barman recounted with disgust. 'He left a note and took his life. I would do the same!'

He talked about his own circumcision and how he'd delayed his day out of fear but found the bravery to go in the end.

'You just have to do it when your time comes; no choice in the matter!' he said, his eyes staring vaguely into space, looking inwardly at the memory of his own introduction to manhood. 'Even if you don't want to go, if you are of Xhosa blood, you have to go in the end. Otherwise you are saying you are no longer Xhosa in your blood.'

He recounted his story. He was the eldest of four children in his family – all boys, with a single mother. He'd moved to Durban as a youth, where his aunt was a teacher. She had no children of her own, and no one else to support, so she took him in. Although he would come home during the December holidays of every year, he lost touch with the essence of home over time. When he eventually returned to Port St Johns for good he was the only one out of his siblings who'd ever left his small hometown.

'Because of this I was too cool for circumcision. I didn't want to go. I didn't see the point!'

'Why?' asked Nakedi.

‘Because it wasn’t a problem being uncircumcised in Durban, even if your beard was longer than your foreskin. There was no one to ask you about it every five steps you took. But I had no money after losing my job that side. So I came back here and found work.’

At some point, the barman became the only one in his family with work. His mother relied on him like a husband, while his brothers looked to him like a father. It was he who bought the little food in the household when it was possible, and it was he who paid for the meat and drinks when there was merrymaking. Still, because he was uncircumcised, wherever there was a gathering in which a distinction was made between men and boys, he had to give way to the men and remain with the boys.

‘One time, at the home of my youngest brother’s girlfriend, I bought beers and meat for the evening. It was her eighteenth birthday. Only to have my own brothers turn against me when a stranger complained I wasn’t a man. I couldn’t enjoy the very things I’d bought. I had to step outside with fifteen and sixteen year old boys in that family until the men were done. Some of those boys were full of the same beers I’d bought, and they made it no secret how they felt. To them I was just like them, despite my age. I would have beat the shit out of them, but there would have been unpleasantness between my brother and his girl. And worse, the source of it would have been my shame.’

Nakedi was glued to every word.

‘Now, I may have been older than all my brothers, but I was always going to be a boy until I chose manhood. Until I chose bravery over cowardice. Now I’m a man and can face anything because I dared to face that pain four years ago.’

The barman continued to speak, but Nakedi no longer heard him. His mind took its own direction and wandered straight into the inevitable – his crimes. Just as the moon appeared, pale with the dread of his memories, he heard something that struck him.

‘... Because deep down you know it must be done, but somebody else won’t let you. I mean my friends met another boy two days ago who’d run here all the way from Mthatha. He was really passionate about being a man, the real way. But his family wouldn’t hear it.’

Port St Johns was indeed a very small town, but Nakedi couldn’t believe his luck, finding a lead on Buntu so soon after his arrival. He listened intently. The man spoke of a drunken night out with his friends, and a strange boy his other two companions had had in tow.

‘When I asked about his people, he told he had no people who were interested in that. They called it a barbaric way of life. If you ask me, the boy definitely has no people the way they treated him. They denied him the chance to become a man in his own culture. To be a boy all your life! That’s heart-breaking.’

Nakedi thought about himself. He was thirty-one now. With all that age on him was he still a boy? Would he be that for the rest of his life? There was a knock on the delivery door. At first the barman paid it no mind, wanting to finish his story. Nakedi asked him a question, but he didn't hear it because there was a louder knock at the door. It was irritating to the barman, like the incessant buzzing of a carpenter bee.

'That's the delivery door; go around to the other side!' he shouted.

'I'd love to interview the boy from Mthatha. Would that be possible; interviewing you and him too?' Nakedi repeated, raising his voice even higher to compete with the knocking.

He was convinced it was Buntu, at least there was a huge chance, and this made him impatient. There was a series of knocks, fierce and unrelenting.

'Okay! Be patient! I'm opening,' the barman shouted against the closed door.

'It must be Jabu, from Mama S with your mead,' the barman turned to say over his shoulder as he worked the lock on the door. 'I don't know why he didn't bring his key if he's making a delivery.'

The door swung open. It wasn't any kind of Jabu by the sound of it.

'Ah, Mama S, you've come by yourself?' the barman asked. 'Why didn't you say it was you? Where's Jabu? Oh no! What happened to your hand?' he exclaimed upon looking down.

'Where's Jhaboo indeed? Probably face-down in an ocean of Black Label beer. Don't worry about the hand, Fizili,' said the voice of a white woman. 'Come outside quickly, come; take the keys from my back pocket, my boy. No, not that one,' she became impatient, 'the one on the left. And get the mead barrels from the car. There's four of them in the boot.' The timbre of the speaker's voice held Nakedi's imagination, and he leaned in closer to hear well.

'Is the first aid kit still under the till?' the woman asked, shouting the question as the barman ran towards his chore. 'Cool!' she said as she stepped inside.

Nakedi stared at her. She was white but had a *doek* on her head, in the traditional manner of Xhosa women. She was buxom, and on the verge of her fifties. There was blood between the thumb and index finger of her left hand, and she was applying pressure just below the wound to stop the bleeding. She seemed bothered, and her hello to Nakedi was more of an afterthought than a genuine and kind greeting. He only stared at her and said nothing. She threw out another greeting, perhaps realising just how bad her first one had been. Still Nakedi remained silent. She looked at him and their eyes met. Their gaze was soft and long, and in it a great many things were said. Nakedi noticed the smile that began to grow on the woman's face.

‘Nakedi? Nakedi Solomon?’ The incredulity and elation in the woman’s voice was unmistakable. She looked as though she were readying herself to say more, but she faltered, perhaps feeling the only fondness in the room was the one she herself felt.

Nakedi remained speechless, frozen. He felt a seed of joy grow in him. It bloomed into a smile. It was as though the sun were rising inside him after a period of prolonged darkness. At last he let out a sigh, and mouthed the words that followed it as though they bore life in them:

‘Sabine. Sophie. Villion!’

Chapter Twenty-Four

'On your feet; get dressed,' commanded the doctor. 'Your cholesterol is a little on the high side. Besides that, and your bad posture, everything is fine. Your breasts aren't even that big, *sthandwa sam*. If you just tighten up here you'll stand a little straighter.'

The doctor touched Kele's tummy around the navel again and smiled. Something about her was certainly bewitching. So bewitching Kele caught herself returning it but curbed herself immediately.

'You won't be seeing me soon again, I think. Unless of course the choice you make makes it so.' The doctor looked at Kele a good while as she pulled on the clothes before turning around. 'I'm done with her,' she said to the bald-headed man.

He'd since turned around as well, but was still seated on his chair. He stood up and went towards the counter where his flashlight sat. He strapped it to his forehead and made his way towards Kele. As soon as he reached her he lifted a pair of handcuffs from his belt. He clicked one of the manacles over her wrist and fastened the other over his own.

'This is your moment of truth,' he said. 'Follow me.'

'It's not like I have a choice,' Kele thought. The spell of the doctor was still over her, and she harboured a false sense of security. It disappeared quickly as her captor led her deeper into the large room.

She hadn't noticed the door at the far end of the room. She remembered the screams that had come from that direction and something in her jerked. But they had since disappeared. The door opened to a narrow corridor of stone in which the two of them could barely fit side by side. She stood to his right and he to her left. Save for the man's headlamp, it was dark and the floor was rough. His light showed teeth jutting out from the darkness above. The naked rock hurt her underfoot as she walked. She was about to complain, but a long, guttural yelp cut the air. Her gut tightened and her bladder felt heavy. Not only were the screams back, but they were the closest she'd heard them yet. The man bent down and motioned her to do the same by tugging on the cuffs. They came around a curve and there was suddenly room. There was also light up ahead. The man looked up and his beam revealed a hollow hall of stone, but up ahead it showed walls of dark riveted metal.

'Where are you taking me?' Kele's voice was quivering, weighed down by the worry that had dumped itself like dead weight in her abdomen.

'Shhh! I'm taking you to see things you must see,' whispered the man.

As they neared the first of the windows he switched off his light.

‘We can see in; they can’t see us,’ he said. ‘But the rooms are not soundproof; so if you make any noise you will be heard. You are here to watch and observe, for now; not disturb.’

They passed the first window. It was fairly small and to their right. Beyond it was nothing but a room, similar to the one she’d been examined in. But it was also noticeably smaller. Inside it was a black leather chair in the middle. It was a big sturdy thing, like the ones that massage your back in an airport lounge. But there were straps dangling from its arms and around its footrests. Kele counted ten steps before they came to a second window on their left. Inside the room was a similar chair. But there was a white sheet on it, and on that sheet was a man, strapped to the chair. His chest was heaving and distress was engraved on his face. There were two other people in the room, dressed in white duster coats, just like the doctor with the enchanting smile.

‘They’re working on the ones who know the truth but choose to ignore it,’ whispered the bald-headed man as he came to a halt. ‘People like you.’

The two other men were conversing with surgical masks on their faces and goggles above their heads, away from the chair. Each of the men had contraptions in their hands. Kele struggled to make out what they were at first. But she was soon sure as they ended their chat and advanced towards the chair. They had surgical bone saws on them, similar to the ones her uncle used at Groote Schuur Hospital. One of the two men put his saw down and pulled a light that stood on wheels closer to the chair and switched it on. He let it hover directly above the man’s face. Kele noticed blood on the duster coat of the doctor nearest to the man.

‘It’s a dentist’s chair,’ it dawned on Kele. ‘My God, they’re going to pull out his teeth with a bone saw! They’re going to cut them out!’ Kele thought to herself, terrified to the core by the sheer gore of it.

The man in the chair began struggling fiercely, but the straps around his wrists and ankles did a good job on him. Even around his throat and forehead were straps to keep his head in place.

‘No! No!’ he pleaded.

A whizzing sound sawed through the air. The man wielding the saw pulled his goggles over his face and delved in. The same gut-wrenching scream Kele had heard before shot out of the victim’s throat. A spray of blood flew onto the white of the duster coat of the doctor at work.

‘Okay. Okay. I’ll do it,’ screamed the man in the chair. ‘You win; I’ll do it!’

‘This is not a matter of us winning. I don’t think you get the point,’ said the other doctor who’d been looking on. ‘It’s too late. What good are you to us now? You are damaged, and we have not even gone to your face yet.’ He was speaking in a loud voice under his mask, above the wails of his partner’s victim. He quickly applied something to the hand his partner had just injured. ‘Do you think

he gets the point?' His colleague was presently dumping the finger he'd cut off into a silver receptacle.

'He doesn't get it. If they end up with us it's because they don't get it,' the colleague shouted back. 'He loses a little of himself and he is suddenly ready to make a one-eighty-degree turn on how he's lived his life. You had your chance. They gave you to us because you already had your chance. It's people like you who hold us back. You want to forget like the white people tell you to forget. You need to lose all your fingers and toes, and something else too, before you learn your lesson.'

Whoever her kidnappers were, they were serious people; serious about the security of the place in which she was being kept, and serious about hurting those who stood in the way of whatever it was they were doing here. The bone saw whizzed again and more blood flew into the air chased by more screams.

'Let's go; you've seen enough,' ordered the bald-headed man as he pulled Kele along. 'We are almost there. You need to see what this is all about and make a decision on whether you will join us or not. If Agnes had taken the boy as instructed, we wouldn't have to deal with the unfortunate situation of threatening to put you through what you just saw. That would have been your son. But then again, a new order is out. The Eastern Cape may be far; we will get to him yet.'

'Leave Donovan out of this. You leave my boy out of this!' Kele struggled as she shouted in a harsh whisper. Her captor simply tugged on her wrist and dragged her past another room. It stood to their right, and it too was empty, save the clunky chair in the centre. There was one more lit room to pass before walking into a deeper darkness beyond. It was big, much bigger, even, than the one her doctor had seen. Its walls housed many beds. Kele counted nine. On top of each was a human form lying on its back under a white sheet. On the white of the sheets, in different places, were gruesome blotches of blood. Kele's heart was stained with grief and was awash with a new kind of fear at the sight of this.

'Are they dead?' she asked the bald-headed man.

'Shhh! Don't raise your voice,' he responded and tugged at Kele's arm once again with the cuffs. 'And yes, they're dead. It's quite unfortunate too. But they made their choices a long time ago. I'll tell you all about them just now. But first you have a history lesson. Come on; we're almost there.'

As soon as they passed the fourth and final window the man switched his torch back on. They walked further, leaving more screams behind them. Kele and her captor came to another door. He reached for his pockets and pulled out another key. He swung the door open and led them in. As Kele walked in, glad her feet were off the hard rock that had been cutting into them, her eyes were greeted by a sight she had not imagined seeing. The bald-headed man sat her down next to Maître.

‘No need for introductions,’ he said with a smirk on his face.

Unspoken questions flew about the room as the women’s eyes met. He undid his end of the cuffs and latched it to the leg of the table before walking around to sit on the other side. He faced both women and smiled again.

‘Here we are,’ he said, ‘on the Maître Minute underground edition.’ He allowed himself only a brief chuckle before carrying on. ‘You probably have a lot you would like to ask and tell each other. Unfortunately it will have to wait.’ The room was well-lit and on top of the table were a cell phone, a laptop and a printer next to a pile of papers and stationery. There were also two portable CD players.

‘What have we done to you? What do you want with us? Let us fucking go!’ shouted Maître out of nowhere, the familiarity of Kele’s face the most probable fuel for her newfound bravery.

‘Shhh,’ said Kele calmly. ‘I think he is about to tell us what this is about and where we fit in. What I don’t understand is the see-saw treatment. If you’re going to treat me like shit, treat me like shit; but don’t turn around and offer me meaningless decency whenever you feel like it. Why can’t you get to what it is you want without the humiliation? First you are a barbarian, then you’re not; but then you are a barbarian again.’ Kele’s calmness was behind her. ‘Is there any explanation for this? Can you tell me why I’m tied up like a goat with rope, punched in the stomach, then given a warm breakfast, shower and a decent bed? Can you tell me why I’m wet with ice and water next, and being man-handled? Then there’s the things you’ve shown me. And you’ve threatened me and my son with a similar fate. What the fuck do you want from us?’ Kele shouted in utter exasperation, shaking her head like a mad person in the end.

‘Quiet down!’ commanded the man with a roar that set Kele still. ’The food was for your nutrition and the bed was for your rest. You’d peed yourself so the shower was more than necessary. Is there anything else you need to know?’ The man’s speech was like rapid fire out of the barrel of a gun. ‘Remember this: you are not in charge here, and we will treat you how we treat you when we need to treat you in that way. We are dealing with things bigger than you. All you need to do now is pay attention, and decide whether you will be in the way, or help us get on our way. There is a lot to reclaim; in this country, on this continent.’ The bald-headed man spoke with an elegiac tone as he said the last word, his eyes staring into nothingness. The two women looked on and listened.

‘In a few days the Maître Minute will have centre stage to the revolution. You will report on the first liberation activity in the country since before we let the white people have dominion over us with our permission. Others may call it terrorist activity, but we know what we will call it. We call it The New Root. Who are we? Maître knows the Broederbond quite well; don’t you, Maître? Both your grandfather and your uncle did their bit for their culture and respective generations from inside that infamous university in the Western Cape, didn’t they?’ The man paused as if waiting for

corroboration from Maître, but he went on without it. ‘You can think of us as the children of an African Broederbond. A friend to every African and an enemy to anyone who is at odds with the African.’ With that he looked at Maître, his eyes driving his point into her. ‘We are here to do some work; to show the world we can see what is happening. No longer can colonialists have the mental shackles they have managed to tie our minds with. It is time for the big fight back. At times you may not have the weapons to fight off your oppressor. You may not be ready to fight. But it is important, at all times, to let him know, and your children know, that you see him and you know him for who he is and who she is – for what they are. We are about to lead a revolution such as you have never seen in this country before. It will come and it will go quickly, but it will be of the kind that is never forgotten. Each in your own way,’ the bald-headed man looked at the women separately and said, ‘this revolution needs you.’

Chapter Twenty-Five

By the time Fezile finished his four trips to the car for the mead, Nakedi was sitting with Sabine at the farthest table from the bar - the same one the Dutch couple had used. He felt the weight of her curious stare. It made him shift uncomfortably in his chair as they spoke. A probing look remained in her eyes between the coming and going of smiles. Even after fifteen years, Nakedi could tell Sabine remembered enough of him to know that something was off. He watched his former madam and lover put the finishing touches to the gauze and Elastoplast she had deftly applied to her one hand with the other.

'Ever the nurse,' Nakedi remarked.

'What can I say?' She smiled. 'Old habits die hard.' She put everything back into the small kit and continued to speak. 'We haven't seen you in this town in years. What brings you by?'

'Well–'

'Or maybe you've been back here often over the years and it's just me you never come to see? It is a tourist town after all, and here you are now, being a tourist.' She paused to have a look over at the bar. 'Bring the car keys here when you're done,' she shouted over to Fezile.

'No, don't let him come here. Let's keep our distance, at least for now. I don't want him to know we know each other.'

'What do you mean? Why would you not want him to?'

'I'm supposed to be somebody else,' Nakedi replied, his voice breaking into a mild tremble. 'I'm doing some important undercover work. I'm not supposed to be from the Eastern Cape, much less Port St Johns. I already introduced myself as–'

'I'm done, Mama S,' Fezile shouted from behind the bar, and began to make his way between the tightly packed tables.

'Who are you supposed to be? And again, why?'

'It doesn't matter why,' Nakedi protested. 'I'll tell you all of that later. I introduced myself to him as Tshepo. I need to interview this guy; but he needs to trust me.'

'Lying to him about who you are is a godawful way of kicking things off if you want him to trust you.'

Fezile was getting closer.

'Okay, Sabine! I'm here writing a book about the Transkei.'

‘Oh my, a book; look at you,’ she said gleefully. Nakedi thought she was both surprised and proud of her hand in that trajectory of his life.

‘Yes, a book. Don’t let him walk all the way over here.’

‘Okay. Relax. What was your name again?’ She asked the question quite audibly as she stretched out her hand to him.

‘Tshepo,’ Nakedi replied as his hand met hers.
Nakedi’s acknowledged Fezile when he reached the table, but when his eyes returned to Sabine they saw a familiar expression pass over her face. She had just been studying him. There’s more to this than writing a book, her face said. But that look was followed by another one, soft and melancholic. It is wonderful to see you, Nakedi, it said.

‘It’s nice to meet you, Tshepo.’ They continued their greeting. ‘I’m Sabine Villion, but they call me Mama S. I own the place. Well, partly. I just do the restaurant and my partner does the accommodation. I know it doesn’t look like much, but I own it.’ She paused, and with a genial air said: ‘I’ll try to do anything I can to help you with your book. But first I need your help with–’

‘How are you going to help him with his book, Mama S?’ Fezile interjected as he set the key down and took the first aid kit in his hand. ‘What do you know about the things in his book, Mama S?’

‘Well, if you knew anything about books you would know that a book is just words, Fizili. I don’t know anything about it yet, but words can be read and understood.

‘Yes, Mama S. But also, no! I know you yourself you have many books. But they don’t tell you everything. They cannot make you really understand this thing. We don’t even talk to African women about this thing. Why would Tshepo talk to you to understand things?’

‘Oh, I thought your book was about the Transkei.’ She drew her head back as she looked searchingly at Nakedi. ‘What is your book about in the Transkei?’

‘Circumcision,’ Nakedi answered.

‘I see! Cir-cum-ci-sion.’ She made a cutting motion with her index and middle fingers, stressing the sibilant sounds of the word. ‘I certainly cannot help with that.’ She turned to look at Fezile after holding Nakedi’s gaze for a moment. ‘But your new friend can help me with something, Fizili, and then he can interview you about foreskins to his heart’s content.’

Fezile sneered, but Sabine was unaffected by it. She made fun of him, provoked him further.

‘How important do you feel, huh, Fizili; being interviewed for a book?’

‘What is it you need help with?’ Nakedi asked as one who was eager to help, if only to keep relations unstrained.

‘An electric pump. I punctured a tyre on the way in,’ she replied. ‘These are the beautiful results of that little mishap.’ She raised her bandaged hand and scrunched her face comically behind it. ‘The spare wheel had no air in it so I finished the drive here on the buggered tyre.’

‘So how did you hurt the hand?’ Nakedi asked.

‘Shoving the thing into the boot, my hand got caught on the sharp edge of the spanner. I can’t drive my car back into town. I need to get the spare pumped. Is that something you could help me with?’ Sabine’s face was fixed in an entreating expression.

Nakedi had been watching her keenly. The dimples on her cheeks transported him to another time, before her skin was etched with fine lines as it was now. Despite the etchings, her smile warmed Nakedi up. He did not have to say yes to her request.

‘I’ll get my things from the car and meet you by yours. After we get the pump Fizili can do the job for me and you can be on your way, or interview him; whatever you like.’

‘No problem,’ Nakedi replied. ‘I would love a glass of that mead before we hit the road though.’

‘Sure, have that quickly and you’ll find me outside. I’ll get my things.’ She paused. ‘Are you in the Mitsubishi or the Mercedes?’ Sabine asked as she got up.

‘The Benz,’ replied Nakedi. His old lover walked away, leaving a familiar scent in her trail.

‘When will you interview me, *Razzo*?’

‘I’d love to know more about the boy you met. He’d also be great to study and talk to. That’s if he wants to talk to me.’

‘He’s in the location with us like I said. But maybe him and my friends will be at the Fishing Boat later, if he gets his money today,’ replied Fezile.

‘What fishing boat?’

‘It’s a drinking place in town. I will see him in the location or there tonight. My friends Tankiso and Bonga are moving with him. The boy wanted to pay money, good money, to be shown to *ingcibi*. So they won’t lose him.’

A look that caused Nakedi to feel leery flashed in Fezile’s eyes as he spoke about the money.

‘We are going to take the boy to Bra Mbu and some other bras that do this thing, *Razzo*. Yesterday he was still waiting for an eWallet.’

Nakedi was puzzled. If indeed it was Buntu he was talking about, how would he receive an eWallet without his phone? A hoot from outside interrupted him.

‘You better go; that’s Mama S’s car,’ exclaimed the barman ‘We’ll talk when you come back. Eish, your mead,’ he remembered.

‘Don’t worry about that; we’ll talk later,’ a running Nakedi said as he passed through the door.

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Sabine’s and Nakedi’s drive was a silent one at first. He felt naked under her gaze again as he drove towards town. It was as though his falseness were laid bare for her to see. It seemed neither of the two knew what to say to each other, or rather, how to begin saying it.

‘Are you still at the same house?’

‘Yes, why would I ever move? It belonged to my father.’

‘I don’t know; things change. A lot seems changed about you. I mean, you weren’t quite a Miss Havisham, but you hardly ever left the house. Now here you are enterprising about town.’

‘Ouch, not the most flattering of references for an old woman, Nakedi,’ said Sabine, holding on to her chest, feigning a feeling of affront. But her emotion turned suddenly raw. ‘Why did you never come back, Nakedi?’ she asked, seeming to startle herself with the question. ‘I mean, you were here the one weekend and you were supposed to come back, but you never did. Not until now. Perhaps I was kind of a Havisham after all, stuck, waiting for something that would never come.’’ The silence grew again momentarily, like air expanding inside a large balloon. But it was soon popped by Sabine’s next question.

‘Did I abuse you, Nakedi? Did I really molest you like you said I did?’
Nakedi’s heart leapt. ‘Why would you say that?’ he asked.

‘Because of the letter.’

‘What letter?’

‘Your aunt, she wrote to me and told me how I had broken your innocence. How you told her you never wanted to be sent to see your father again because of me. How you were scared. The letter

accused me of everything from being a simple-minded white witch to being the devil's right-hand woman.'

Nakedi recalled how Aunt Eve had terminated his visits to Port St Johns after finding his diary. She decided he would stop visiting his father just as quickly as she had decided he would begin. He was scared for his life when she found his journal with the poems and sexual drawings in it. He thought she would beat him like a slave. But she simply terminated his visits and never said a word about the journal again. The writing of a letter was news to him.

'I'm sorry, that's shameful enough,' Sabine said. 'I don't mean to sound like we were a couple or I was your woman. You were only fifteen I know, and I was old enough to be your mom. But I loved you, Nakedi. Like a child at first, but I loved you like a young man too. Didn't you love me? Didn't we feel happiest and safest from the world when we were together?'

He turned to look at her. Their eyes met.

'Oh my God this doesn't sound right,' she exclaimed before putting her hand over her mouth. 'Did I abuse you?' There were tears in her eyes, and an expression both frightened and remorseful.

'No, I never told Aunt Eve you molested me. She found my journal and I was forbidden to ever see you again.'

'You were my baby, Nakedi. You were my friend; my salvation and redemption. I picked you up from the dirt under banana tree leaves with a swollen face and a bruised body. You looked like you'd been in a car wreck. You were a child, but I watched you grow. You grew up under these hands and I took care of you the best way I could. When your aunt took her own kids to a good school and left you alone in that wretched township place, I took it upon myself to teach you, to invite you into a world of books. This was all out of love. It may have been out of pity or sympathy at first, but my heart grew to know love for you, Nakedi. You became my lover. Yes, you were not yet a man yet. But you were fifteen and close. And I protected you more than I corrupted you, Nakedi. Didn't I?'

Nakedi reached over with his hand rubbed her gently on her lap.

'It was a difficult time for me, Nakedi.' She couldn't stop speaking. 'I never told you or anyone just how difficult. But I was broken then. And I'm not making excuses for loving you and taking care of you, but maybe I shouldn't have done what I did with you. But you healed me. You didn't know you were doing that for me, but you healed me and gave me purpose when I had no more to speak off. When I first came back to Port St Johns, before I got your father to work for me...' Sabine's voice trailed off. Tears were streaming down her face accompanied by piteous sobs.

Nakedi slowed the car down. They were at the house already. Sabine began to speak but paused a little before going on.

‘Listen, I don’t mean to be all heavy, but I wasn’t even supposed to be at the Mead and Mellow today, but my delivery guy, Jabulani, has absconded the last two days. Seeing you unexpectedly like this was maybe too much for me. I don’t mean to be so heavy.’

Nakedi didn’t know what to say. Sabine had once been the only person with whom he shared everything in the world. In his youth, she was the only one who allowed him a space to be himself. With her he could be as honest as he was with himself. Hers was a house of chores, just as Aunt Eve’s was; but it was also a sanctuary like no other place in the world. Even before their love, Nakedi had relished the hours she spent with him, teaching him how to speak so his ‘r’s would also sound like those of his cousins who spoke out of their nostrils. In fact, she had been his teacher with most things. It was precisely in instructing him how to kiss a girl he liked that she first had a brush with his sexuality.

He remembered her tongue pressing against his, big, moist, and through thin lips. He recalled the frisson of excitement he’d felt along with the restless buzzing of the bees that afternoon.

‘Did she molest me?’ he asked himself. This was of course not the first time he’d asked himself this over the years. Since the day he’d listened to Aunt Eve talk to him about the inappropriateness of his relationship with Sabine, he’d wondered about it at various times in his life, on and off, never coming to a concrete understanding of what it was that had taken place. Before his aunt found out, he’d kept it a secret from everyone, even the other boys at school. He wondered why that was. But in all honesty, he had merely considered her an older girlfriend and never saw himself as a victim of anything that should never have happened. The only complexity he remembered having to contend with in their relationship was that she was his madam when she was not being his lover.

‘I don’t think you molested me,’ Sabine. ‘But our relationship was indeed a complicated one.’ Nakedi did not know where he was going with his words. He only knew he wanted to comfort her. ‘A lot happened,’ he went on. ‘My father was your servant, and so was I. Even if you and I were of a similar age, having a sexual relationship with the help is complicated enough as it is, right?’

Sabine squeezed the hand Nakedi had left on her lap and he felt her familiar touch of it. ‘Thank you,’ she said after they had both been sitting without words between them.
‘The pump is in the garage, behind the bakkie. It won’t take long to get.’

‘Let me get it,’ said Nakedi.

She took out a huge bunch of keys and pointed out which ones were for the car gate and for the garage. In no time he returned with the pump in his hand. It was dirty and cobwebbed. He found Sabine sitting on the edge of the bonnet, in deep in thought.

‘How long have you known Fezile?’ Nakedi asked as he reached the car. ‘What is the deal with him? Is he another me?’

‘What is that supposed to mean?’ Sabine was offended. ‘Are you implying I am sleeping with him?’

‘No, not in that way,’ Nakedi hastened to explain. ‘I mean, what kind of person is he? Can I trust him? Or is he the rough kind that will take chances with things, even people’s lives?’

‘Why are you asking me such questions? What is this book of yours really about?’

‘I am not writing a book, Sabine,’ replied Nakedi as he went around to the back of the car to put the pump in the boot. ‘My brother has disappeared. He ran away from home. He wants to be circumcised in the ‘true way of the Xhosa people’, and this is all very surprising to me because he is gay. These things don’t add up. Why be a female of a man but want to be a real man at the same time?’

Sabine followed Nakedi as he spoke, her interest piqued by this new development.

‘So you need Fizili to help you find him... because... well... because they will eat you up in that world, right?’ She seemed to piece it all together as she spoke.

‘Correct,’ Nakedi responded. ‘Since Aunt Eve considers circumcision a dirty and spiritually dead affair, there was no chance Buntu would get her to do it for him the traditional way. So he’s run away, and I believe your guy knows where he is. I just need to know your guy is the kind of person I can trust. I am going searching for my brother later with him, all under the guise of writing this book.’

Nakedi pressed the immobiliser to flip the boot open as he spoke. But it stayed down. He pressed it again, and just as he was beginning to press it for a third time he remembered the car had been rear-ended. With Sabine next to him, he reached for the boot and opened it manually. As he lifted the lid he discovered something that sent a stab to his heart. The pump fell from his hand and he let out a gravelly scream, like an animal in an abattoir.

‘Oh my God!’ Sabine’s words were filled with terror as she threw her arms around Nakedi’s heaving body. ‘Who is that?’

‘Oh no; not him too. Oh God! Not him! Donovan!’ Nakedi cried out as he broke free from her embrace and reached into the boot to grab his son. The boy’s body lay still, every corpulent inch of it limp with what looked like permanent sleep.

Chapter Twenty-Six

The bald-headed man tinkered on his computer, paying no attention to Kele and Maître for a moment. He'd put on glasses. The light of the monitor reflected on their lenses and changed every time he selected a new page.

'Mmmh,' he commented sporadically, his head tilting to the side a little, as though what he was reading was quite interesting to learn. 'Okay. I see. Mmmh.'

She perceived arrogance in his manner. Something in the way he occasionally looked at her and Maître told her it was them he was reading about. She turned to her Reijger colleague. Maître's back was hunched over and her eyes were downcast. She was usually strong, with her lean middle-aged body as fit as her mind, but she was taking strain down here. She was visibly tired. Kele wondered how long she'd been down here. Then it came to her. Maître had also booked off sick the same morning she had. No, she remembered, Killian had told her it was the previous evening. Could they have got here the same night, too? She wanted to find out what Maître knew, what she'd seen. If they could put together the information they each had, perhaps they could end up with enough. She wanted to make a play for the phone soon, before it ran out of battery life. She no longer needed to know the intentions of her captors. She knew enough: they had killed and maimed. This she'd witnessed. An inexplicable feeling assailed her inside, causing her to be a little unsteady when she thought about the blood and bodies she had seen. She had to know whether or not Maître had any idea where they were being held. It was obviously far away from 'civilisation'. Her kidnapper had made mention of a mountain. Although he had said it as if metaphorically, Kele still suspected they were in or around the Magaliesberg. If Maître had seen something worth sharing they could somehow get back to her backup phone and blow this thing apart. As she wondered about her phone she looked at the one the bald-headed man had sitting on the table. She remembered that the deeper they had driven in, the more she worried that she wouldn't be able to call out. But she somehow had caught the signal in the first room she was trapped in. Her phone had rung twice. Something happened with the bald-headed man's phone that gave her hope about hers. He picked it up and spoke to someone on the other end.

'I don't have all of the white woman's file. Please send it to me. Thanks.'

'File? Why are you keeping a file on me?' Maître erupted. 'What do you want with me… with us?' There was more fire still left in her than her tired-looking body suggested.

'You two women have so much in common with your feistiness, but you are so many worlds apart. I know you have worked with each other for the better part of the last four years, but there is also a lot you don't know about one another. We are going to use the next hour to get a little more acquainted between the three of us. That's what the file is for. After all, how are we supposed to work together if we do not become acquainted?'

Kele looked at the man – his eyes had something sinister in them. She looked at Maître. Again, many questions, and doubt, passed between the two women.

'Oh here we are. The complete file on Nicole Maître. We're just about ready to begin.' He turned his attention back to the computer screen. Both women were startled by the sound of the printer as it began churning out paper. He'd received the file on his phone it seemed, but viewed it on his laptop before sending it to the printer. Again Kele was glad she didn't have to get back to the first room to call. It would be a taller order doing that. If only she could go back to her current room and get to her boots. But first, she had to find out what Maître knew.

'Here we go, that's your reading,' the man said as he dropped the first pile of unstapled papers in front of Maître. She looked at the top page and then at Kele with a curious stare. But before Kele could make out what the stare was about a second pile of papers fell on her side of the large desk. She glanced at her pile and her eyes automatically flew towards Maître and then to her captor.

'Now, I did say we are going to get to know each other. That's why you each have the other's information in front of you,' he said.

Kele motioned to turn over the cover page but he stopped her immediately.

'No, you read when I say you do. For now we talk and listen. Papers and books are a great way to get information. They are the lifeblood of how we get to share ideas. So we have to appreciate them. That's why where you work is so important to who we are as a nation.' The man's tone was sincere. Kele and Maître stole another glance at each other.

'But are we not too quick at times to believe in something because it is written in ink?' he continued. 'I mean, I told you we are going to get to know each other. You have this as context, correct?' he paused. 'You each have information about the other in front of you. This is clear from the heading and picture on the cover of the file, right?' He had the air of a teacher about him and it penetrated through the revolutionary in him. 'But what else do we have? We have each other in front of us. We therefore shouldn't begin with the paper. As useful as the paper is going to be, Kele Solomon, you have Nicole Maître right in front of you,' he said pointing at the older woman. 'Why go to the ink first when she's here, in person? Hmmm?' He smiled to himself.

'I know Kele,' protested Maître. 'As you said we've been colleagues for nearly four years. What do you suppose I need to learn from you that I haven't been able to learn for myself in that time?'

'Pronouncing her name correctly might be one thing,' the man retorted.

His words left the air quiet and cold. But during his and Maître's exchange, Kele was most surprised by the use of the word colleague. It was strange because Maître had always made it a point

to let her know they were neither colleagues, co-workers, nor friends. Sure she had mellowed over time and become nicer, but even now she always impressed upon Kele that the presenter was the boss because it was her name on the show; and that was that. ‘To put it in terms you and your kind should understand,’ she’d said once, ‘you producers fetch the water from the river, and after you bring it to us on your tiny little heads, we turn it into the wine that is fit to serve our listening guests.’

Kele’s smarting memory and train of thought were derailed by the bald-headed man’s next words.

‘Okay, Maître, what can Kele Solomon learn about you that she didn’t already know? Let’s find out from her.’ The man cleared his throat. The room was thick with his sarcasm.

Maître looked at Kele, and for the first time the message in her eyes was spoken in plain words in Kele’s mind: ‘We need each other to get out of here. Let’s not let him get between us, whatever he does, whatever happens.’ Kele looked inside herself, and she agreed.

‘How would you say Maître feels about you as a person, after these four years of your acquaintance? Does she like you? In fact, would you call what you have an acquaintance or friendship?’

Kele glanced at Maître before she spoke. ‘This is childish,’ she said. ‘What does my knowing or liking Maître have to do with you kidnapping us?’

‘Okay, we’ll try this another way,’ the man said as he smiled and looked in Maître’s direction. Maître, do you like Kele?’

‘Yes, I like Kele. What is it to you?’

‘Okay. Would you say you are friends?’

‘We don’t have to be friends, do we? Does working together always have to end up in friendship? I think your question, or rather its assumption, is flawed,’ Maître tried to ward him off. Her back was no longer hunched and her voice was strong, as though she were conducting an interview – grilling a shifty public figure.

‘My question to you asked nothing of my assumptions or premises, Maître. My question to you was simple. Do you like Kele Solomon? Whether I assume this necessary to your working relationship is immaterial. The question was: would you say you are friends or not?’

‘No we are not friends,’ replied Maître all the time her eyes fixed on Kele’s.

‘Good, one truth one lie. The truth: you are not friends. Even with a very loose definition of what that is, the two of you are certainly not friends. But do you like Kele?’

‘I already told you the answer to that.’

‘I know. But you told me a lie. You do not like Kele.’ The man’s voice became harsh and stern. ‘How do I know this? Despite four years of working with you, in which your show numbers have steadily grown, you have blocked her three times from getting ahead in her career. Twice for a promotion and once when she attempted to get a correspondent’s job at a multinational media house in Cape Town. Is this true, or is it not?’ The teacher was gone; a determined litigator had taken his place.

‘Where did you get that? That’s nonsense; utter nonsense!’ Maître protested.
Kele’s eyes flew back and forth between her and the bald-headed man, unsure what to make of what either said.

‘Now you can read, Kele. Now is the time to read. Go to pages 8 to 10 and tell me what you see there.’

Kele used her free hand to flip over the sheets of paper. On page 10 was an email Kele immediately recognised. She had sent it to David Killian and Melvin Keet, Killian’s boss, asking to be considered for the breakfast show production role once the then senior producer, Stacey, left. Kele knew Stacey was leaving way ahead of her resignation date, just as everyone in the company did. Killian’s response to Kele was also on the page in the thread of emails. She didn’t have to look at it. She remembered it. The two emails she had never seen were from Killian and Melvin Keet to Maître. They were for her honest opinion on whether or not Kele would be able to handle the breakfast show or not. She had done more than answer that question for them. She had gone into Kele’s work and a little past it, questioning her loyalty to the company as well as her ‘chutzpah’.

‘That’s not all; turn to the next page,’ the man ordered. And that was not so long ago from what I can tell on the dates there. Perhaps you don’t need the dates as someone like I do. Your recently crushed self-confidence should be enough of a reminder of your exchange with Killian. What you didn’t know is what this woman who professes to like you so much had to do with it.’

Kele did not bother to look at the following mails. She glanced at Maître, but the white woman’s eyes bore immediately downwards, wearing in them the shame of one whose machinations had been discovered.

‘What does this have to do with why we are here?’ Kele’s question seemed indifferent to what she had just learned. She pushed the pile of papers away from her. Even if Maître was more unkind to her than she had imagined, the woman had not kidnapped her or threatened her boy with any kind of harm. There were two devils in the room as far as she was concerned, each with its own special evil. She knew she had to choose the lesser of them. To her, this was Maître.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

There were many rooms in Sabine's house, each in a style and manner quite incongruent to the next. There was the kitchen, itself a patchwork of different cupboards and cabinets – all four in different colours – green, yellow, blue and black. Hanging off clips and nails on the walls were motley pots and utensils. The sink was old and so were the fridge and stove; the same Fuchsware hunks of metal that were new and seemed much bigger when Nakedi was young. He marked all this as he followed his former madam frantically through the room. Right next to the kitchen, directly through a door, was the honey room, where Sabine extracted the gooey gold from her bees' combs and put it into jars. It's walls were dressed completely in dark wood, varnished slats of teak fitted side by side from floor to ceiling all around. There was a large table in the middle; light green in colour, but most of its paint was chipped with use.

'Quickly, let's set him down here first. He needs CPR,' Sabine ordered. She and Nakedi put Donovan down on the table.

'Remember my room?' she asked.

'Yes,' Nakedi replied, sniffling.

'Go down there and get a key from the urn on the dresser. Tip it over. Two keys should fall out. Bring the longer one.'

Nakedi dithered, tears streaming down his cheeks. 'The smell of fumes in that boot,' he asked, 'how much of it did he inhale?'

'We're not going to know that now, Nakedi.' Sabine's voice was firm. 'It hasn't been that hot outside today, but it could be a heat stroke.' She ran into the kitchen and came back with a bowl of ice and a wet cloth. She hadn't stopped speaking. 'But if it's not just the heat. If it's something he inhaled that we must worry about, my concern is not the exhaust fumes we could smell; it's that silent culprit.'

'Carbon monoxide?' Nakedi asked between sobs and murmurs of regret that were inaudible to Sabine.

'Yes, that!' Sabine turned from Donovan, whose t-shirt she'd just taken off, and looked Nakedi in the eye with an expression that drove home the seriousness of everything. 'Your son still has a pulse. Go to the room and bring that key! *Now*, *Nakedi*!' she shouted. '*Now*!'

He ran out and left the boy with Sabine breathing into his mouth. He took comfort in the knowledge that she was a nurse.

'She'll know what to do; Lord help her know what to do…' he repeated the prayer as he ran.

The door out of the honey room led him into a long passage that gave access to four other rooms as well as the front door, and adjacent to it, the stairs to the first floor. Sabine's bedroom was straight ahead at the end of the passage. Nakedi's feet pounded hard on the wooden floor as he ran, past the study, the front door, the living room, and bathroom. He swung the door open and his eyes immediately panned to locate the dresser. He saw the urn on top of it and darted in its direction. Though he moved with great urgency his mind managed to fill itself with early memories of the room he was in. He quickly recalled the first time Sabine led him in here one Saturday afternoon after kissing him in the apiary. He remembered the faint taste of honey on her tongue and the mead on her breath. He reached for the urn and tipped it over. Two keys fell out. The longer one wasn't immediately obvious, but he didn't take long to make out which one it was. He ran back towards the honey room with it. The smells in the house were familiar, threatening to steal his mind away with memories with every step he took. In seconds he reached the extraction room and the sight of Donovan on the table sent shudders through him. He wiped across his face with a forearm, leaving it smeared with mucous and tears. He looked at Sabine and held the key up.

'Here it is.'

'Good,' she said between her numbers. She was counting and compressing Donovan's chest repeatedly with the heel of her right hand. The damp towel was on the boy's forehead. 'Run up the stairs; turn left at the top; and go to the room directly above mine. Bring me the big black doctor's bag in the corner. It's under a few books; please be careful with them. There are two oxygen bottles on the desk; look at their gauges and bring me the fullest one.'

'What are we going to do?'

'We're going to get him to a hospital – not a mortuary. You hear me? But first we are going to try and save the little bit of life that's left in him.'

'I can't go to a hospital,' Nakedi protested, afraid he was already a wanted man. He began pacing back and forth, three short steps each way.

'I don't care what you think you can and cannot do, Nakedi. If you say this boy is your son, you don't have a choice but to go,' she admonished. 'I'll go with you if you need me to,' she added and her voice fell softer. 'But go upstairs now. Get me that doctor's bag and bloody oxygen.'

Nakedi was back in the passage heading for the stairs. He knew the room he was being sent to. In all his time at Sabine's it was the only room he'd never seen the inside of. He was always barred from going upstairs. She threatened him with throwing him out and never allowing him back into the main house if he ever poked his nose around upstairs. He had listened and obeyed her, mostly. But on one or two occasions his curiosity had got the better of him. He had indeed gone upstairs and found four other rooms. In three of them were beds, pictures on walls, and regular furniture; but he'd never

seen inside the last one. All he knew about it was Sabine would lock herself up in there from time to time. It was for this room that he now had a key. He stood in front of the door and inserted it. The door squeaked as it gave way to his push. He walked in, with cautious steps. Inside there were dark leather-bound textbooks all over; thick tomes, some on shelves and some on the floor. There were medical journals strewn all over the place, such that it was difficult to find spaces to walk on. Unlike the other books they seemed new and had no dust on them. On the desk, next to the oxygen bottles, Nakedi noticed a faded picture of Sabine standing with her father. She was slim. Both were in white coats with stethoscopes around their necks. Nakedi was confused by it.

'What! Is she a doctor?' he wondered.

There was another picture next to the one with her father in it. It was without a frame and rested against the wall, bent in the middle. Sabine was gorgeous in it, her face resplendent with youth. Her dress was sleeveless and black, with images of orange strelitzia flowers on its borders. Against the black of the fabric, they looked like flames licking at the night. Behind her was a building with a clock tower and next to her a young man in a police uniform with elaborate insignia. Nakedi picked up the photo and turned it over. It was dusty, like most of the things in the room.

'*Liefde altyd*: Maarten *en* Sabina Viljoen PE 1977,' it read on the back in green ink.
He put it back down, but it fell behind the desk.

'What's taking so long, Nakedi!' He could hear Sabine shouting from downstairs. 'Something is happening. Come quickly. The boy is—!' She fell quiet.

In the corner under a pile of big books Nakedi saw a black bag. He quickly removed the volumes that sat on it and lifted it off the ground. He glanced at the oxygen tanks. Only one was full. He reached for it with his free hand and sprinted out of the room and down the stairs. When he reached Sabine he saw what was exciting her. Copious amounts of vomit were on the table, with some dripping off on the side. Donovan was lying on his side with his cheek resting on the back of one hand while his other arm lay outstretched. Sabine had done her best to get him away from the bodily fluids.

'I put him in the recovery position,' she said. 'He is breathing now. But he vomited, as you can see. This close to my mouth, no less,' she gestured.

Nakedi could not believe his eyes. He saw his boy's chest rise and fall by itself, marginally, and he smiled as tears gathered in his eyes. But with the relief he felt a stab of concern because his son's face was the picture of fatigue.

'Will he be fine? Is this it? What can I do to get him stronger?'

‘Get to the lounge,’ Sabine ordered, ‘and bring a day-bed. I don’t want to move him. He is still a little cyanosed. We’ll set him in it and give the oxygen.’
Nakedi handed it to her.

‘Damn it!’ she exclaimed. ‘Just as I thought; expired.’ She seemed to have all the air sucked out of her.

‘Does it mean we can’t use it?’

‘Yes; but don’t worry, that’s why you brought the doctor’s bag too. We have an Ambu bag and endotracheal tubes we can work with in the meantime. It’s not chemical oxygen, but it’s something, just to assist with this breathing. The best thing would be to get him into a hyperbaric oxygen tank. St Mary’s Hospital might have it, though I’m not sure. St Barnabas would definitely not. But Mthatha is far away. All we have here is an old Ambu bag and some tubes. We’ll do what we can for now, and you can drive the boy back to Mthatha as soon as possible.’

Nakedi did not respond to the talk of hospital. After he brought the day-bed from the lounge they put Donovan on it and Sabine cleaned the table. She sat next to where Donovan lay now, on one of two footstools that Nakedi had also brought from the living room.

‘That was a close call,’ she said. ‘You are fortunate the sun wasn’t blazing today. He could have easily died from heat stroke alone.’

‘Does this mean he’ll be fine now?’

‘We need to find out what else he was exposed to,’ Sabine said.

‘Exhaust fumes for sure,’ Nakedi put in. ‘I know there are two big holes in the boot. The car was rear-ended not so long ago and badly fixed.’

‘How big are the holes?’ she asked. Maybe they let in some air too and they are the reason he did not completely heat up?’ Sabine wondered out aloud. ‘But if there were exhaust fumes coming in, then we have to be worried about carbon monoxide poisoning either way. Even if he seems fine now, if it was that, there could be permanent brain and organ damage.’

Donovan lay on the day-bed his chest barely moving.

‘Here you go. Put your hands on here. And give him breaths like this; every six seconds,’ Sabine said to Nakedi and gave him the rear of the Ambu bag and he worked it just as she had been doing.

‘The key for the room upstairs?’ she asked.

‘Oh, I came straight down; didn’t lock the door,’ Nakedi replied.

A look passed between them before Sabine left the room. Perhaps in her eyes lay a want to know why he'd taken so long, and what he had seen in there. But in his eyes sat a denial of whatever suspicion he read on her face.

'Give me a minute. I'll be right back,' she said as she walked out.

With Sabine gone, Nakedi continued to work the Ambu bag at regular intervals, compressing its rugby-ball-like body to deliver oxygen through its mask. His attention though was quickly grabbed by a fly whose flight pattern was in precise lines, in the repeated shape of a rectangle. Another one joined it, and both maintained the rectangle, even though they crossed paths now and again and fought about it. Before long Nakedi's eyes sailed past the flies and fell on the big un-curtained window across from him. It let in lots of light but he could see the day was fading fast. He had wanted to eat quickly and look through Buntu's phone, he remembered. Somehow his quick trip for food to the Mead and Mellow had led him away from what he was here to do. But the discovery of his son had changed everything.

'Why the fuck did you get in the boot, Donovan!' Nakedi screamed inside. 'What am I going to do if you die? There's been too much death. I don't need yours too, my boy; I don't need yours, too.' Nakedi said the last words out aloud. He was looking at Donovan when he said them, but his eyes returned to the window. On each side of its green frame stood tall plant stands of French-style carved tiger-oak. They were solid, and on top of the pedestal of each was a pot of jasmine. He remembered the warmth of this room, especially on afternoons spent exchanging laughs with Sabine. He looked at the fireplace that kindled some of that warmth and helped the honey along. Its mantelpiece, also a dark emerald green, was carved of solid oak and also in a French style.

'French style,' the two words stood out in Nakedi's head. 'Sabine Villion. French. Sabina Viljoen. Afrikaans,' he said to himself under his breath.

As a young boy he'd always listened to Sabine speak of her late father and his French heritage. She spoke fluent French and even had photos of visits to Paris and Versailles in her study. If it weren't for her constantly saying it years ago, he wouldn't even know that the plant stands and mantelpiece were done in a French-style, let alone other things he knew from her about that country.

'So why the Viljoen? Was she Villion before she married that Maarten guy?' he wondered. 'But why would she change Sabina to Sabine if Viljoen was her husband's name? Most of all, why lie about being a nurse? Nurses don't wear stethoscopes.'
Donovan coughed and his body jerked. This took Nakedi's mind momentarily off Sabine.

'How is he doing?' she inquired as she walked back in through the door. 'He is fine,' Nakedi replied.

She walked on to the kitchen. Nakedi heard water boiling in a kettle. Before long she was back with some honey and lemon rooibos tea for three on a tray. She sat back down on her footstool.

'We'll give him a little bit of this at a time; he needs fluids for rehydration.'

'Nakedi removed the Ambu bag from his son's face and marked again how tired and spent he looked.'

'I think he'll be fine,' Sabine said, perhaps noticing the concern on Nakedi's face.

The boy took in little teaspoon sips of the tea that were given to him, swallowing each with great difficulty. His father looked at him before he looked out of the window again. The sun was going down faster than he liked.

'I have a room at Amapondo Backpackers,' he began, as if out of nowhere.

'Well, you can't take him there,' Sabine protested. 'That place is a non-stop party zone. He is going to stay here until you drive him to St Mary's. You seem very tired, too. As much as he should get to a hospital, I wouldn't want you to get into an accident. I know there's Buntu to think about, but you should go. Perhaps I should come with you.'

Nakedi was biting on his lower lip, considering his response to her words, when loud violent banging began on the kitchen door. He and Sabine looked at each other.

'Who could that be?' she said *sotto voce*. 'I'm not expecting anyone.'

The pounding came again.

'Who is it?' shouted Sabine. But there was a long silence, as though whoever was knocking had changed their mind. Then the banging returned, this time a little more frenzied and a whole lot louder.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Kele and Maître were not allowed to speak to each other. When they were done reading the files the bald-headed man had given them, he began to lay out the plan for the coming days. They would do their final show together, he said. The Final Curtain, he dubbed it. Kele's fear cast a dark shadow inside her. She shuddered to think, as she was sure Maître did too, why it would be their final one. What would happen to them afterwards?

'I will need you to do your best producing yet, Kele Solomon,' he commanded. 'You will no longer be preparing content for white people and black people who have an invisible paint of whiteness on them. You will to tell the truth to the country as it is rarely told, and to billions in the world. You haven't done this kind of work yet. You haven't produced from the heart, or produced with the charge of telling the truth on your head. You haven't done work without skewing it by deciding the parameters of the agenda along propaganda lines. And I'm not saying this is entirely your fault. I'll tell you exactly what I mean later when we are alone.' He turned to Maître. 'You're old in this game now. It was only yesterday that you were thought of as in your prime. You've interviewed some of the most high profile people who have come to this country. But this is going to be the best work you've done yet. Thing is, you're so good at what you do you could scoop up dirt and talk about how filthy it is for the next half hour, and people would listen. Something in your voice perhaps, something like the teacher every young boy fell in love with, and every little girl wanted to become. But the strongest thing you have going for you is your ability to unpack a story with the right amount of pace and depth, as though you were slowly peeling the clothes off a lover. Not too fast; not too slow; but always to the point. You may as well be writing a book with your voice. That is what we need from you, unpacking a story South Africa knows, but with a truth they aren't used to hearing or interrogating.'

Kele looked at Maître. She knew her. There was no overt reflection of it on her colleague's face, but Kele was convinced that deep down, even amid the derision, Maître was luxuriating in the praise. 'It's just like your numbers say.' He was not done. 'You're not what you used to be, but you've retained your loyal fans and now and again you have a spike with this frivolous stuff they make you do. I think there is one major chapter in you left. For someone who has a list of interviews that includes the likes of Freddie Mercury, Bob Marley, FW de Klerk and Nelson Mandela, and even Bill Clinton, there has to be a quite a bit of disappointment with falling down the food chain at Reijger.'

Though Maître had been revelling in the mentioning of her accolades just a moment before, she was piqued at how he was playing up the slowing down of her career. Kele knew that look, too; that sneer.

’What are you getting at?’ Maître asked. ‘Is there some point at which you are going to get to the bottom of all this?’

The bald-headed man simply laughed at her.

‘You may think you have some kind of power in here that means you can speak to me that way. You don’t. Raise your voice again and you will meet with some real-life unpleasantness. Remember, it’s your voice we need. You can certainly broadcast without a couple of fingers or a hand.’

Maître drew back into herself. And the man went on speaking. ‘You and I both know, you never really reached the heights you wanted to reach in your career. Or maybe you did. But you just dropped down unceremoniously, like a plane that crashes in the mountains instead of landing where it should.’ The man looked at Kele but continued speaking to Maître. ‘Thank God you survived. I’m here to rescue you. Let this be your resurrection.’

‘I need the bathroom,’ Kele interrupted.

‘Don’t worry. You’ll be off soon. You can do what you need to do then.’

The man pulled out two CD’s and put them next to the CD players. He also got two booklets that had been hidden under some papers. He gave one of everything to each of the women.

‘Maître you will leave us first,’ he said. ‘You may not know when we will come to get you next, but when we come to you, you better know everything we have given you there to know. There’ll be a full media briefing later. More will come to light then.’ He picked up his phone from the table: I’m done with the white woman,’ he said.

He went over to Maître’s side of the table and reached into his pocket for the key to her handcuffs. He freed her wrist. He then walked over to Kele’s side, speaking slowly and deliberately to both of them. He sat on the edge of the table.

‘Now that you know the things you know about each other, you can rest assured that you are not friends. The only thing that keeps you tethered together in your daily lives is the need for financial survival; you in your own capacity and you in your own. As you can see, Solomon, you do most of the work and she makes four times what you do. I say that to say this: It may seem like an attractive proposition to team up together and try to betray the mission at some point, but know, especially you, Solomon, that you will be playing into the hands of your enemy.

‘You have known me for only a matter of days,’ he proceeded, ‘but in the grander scheme of things, I have more concern for you and your wellbeing in the world than she has, this person you see every day. Why is that? Simple. Because I am African and you are African; because she is white. Now, before you think I am painting all white people with the same brush, as they say, please stop to

think. Think, really and truly: do you have any people you can call friends who are white? Do they exist?'

'Yes!' Kele's answer was quick and emphatic.' But she immediately began to question herself about her actual friendships. There was Stacey. They had been close before Stacey left the breakfast show and the station. She had Stephanie and Natalie in her life when she grew up, her best friends in high school, though they both lived overseas now. There was Gerrard from school also, her very first boyfriend. She no longer spoke to him as much; and he worked at Mortimer and Ferguson, an investment banking firm just up the road from Reijger.

'What is that in your eyes, doubt?' the man taunted. 'Do you think you have friends in the absolute sense, who are white? Would you have these friends if you didn't speak in an accent similar to theirs and bend and break your name for the comfort of their tongues? Nonsense! Those aren't friends; those are people to whom you've capitulated over time. Our parents did it; their parents did it too, and so on. No more capitulating.'

'All these wild sweeping statements!' Maître was angry but conscious of her voice. 'Sure you've studied us by the looks of things, but you have absolutely no right to tell people they can't be friends just based on race. You don't know what intimate experiences and realities this girl shares with her friends; black, blue, pink, or white. You have simply decided white people are a problem. But that's just for you. Let Kele live her life the way she wants to, knowing that white people are not the enemy.'

'Do you agree with that, Kele?' he asked.

Kele said nothing, but her defiance of him was unhidden in her eyes.

'Do you know who Rabindranath Tagore is, Maître?'

'What does an Indian poet have to do with anything?'

'You?' He looked at Kele. But she didn't know. 'Tagore, Poet, Essayist, Novelist, Nobel Prize winner for Literature and what have you, makes a wonderful distinction between an individual and a nation. He speaks about white people who colonised the subcontinent as much as they did our great land. He says this about them: As individuals, even before the Dutch and their VOC got to their country for spices and the English crown later became a colonial thorn on their heads, as individuals, white people were humane and dealt with Indians, to some degree, as human counterparts. When white people came to India, as a nation – an economic and colonial machine – things changed. The nation moves with an all-encompassing thrust that seeks to devour that which it finds, regardless of whether it finds its people along with it. White people have been in South Africa as a nation now for hundreds of years. Their governments brought them here, not as individuals, but in droves, to take

over the land and settle on it. They took this land with its different nations and made it theirs and cast those nations they found here out of their places. Soon it will be time for a reversal, soon we will force the hand of equilibrium to restore balance in the land.'

'Are you even from South Africa?' Maître lashed out. 'I get it. I understand you are concerned about blacks everywhere, but do you think the blacks in South Africa don't know they have freedom already? They know this. They have gone to the polls since 1994. Nelson Mandela freed them. And their democracy is strong. They almost ousted one of their own a couple of years ago at the municipal elections.'

'Are you telling me of this farce of a democratic South Africa?' Blatant incredulity hung on his face. 'You are not speaking to a child! If these are the things you believe, you still have a lot to learn, Maître. Perhaps you believe them only for your convenience or you have let yourself be duped. You still have a lot to learn. When white people first came here we were not holding on to a vote that they snatched from us and only gave back in 1994. Not at all! We were in possession of land, an economy, a particular kind of government and law – a way of life.' He counted these things on his fingers, and Kele marked how strong his hands looked. 'These are some of the things white people took away from us: our land, our destiny and self-determination, and the health and prosperity of our children – not a bloody vote.'

There was a knock on the door. The bald-headed man got up and walked over to open it. With his back to them Maître turned immediately to Kele and mouthed something surreptitiously.

'What?' Kele mouthed back, not able to read Maître's lips. Maître tried again.

'What?' Kele was getting frustrated and almost spoke out loud.

There was a beeping sequence on the keypad of the lock.

'The cameras are...' Maître said. Kele made out the first three words but was lost again.

'What about the cameras?' she tried one last time, but it was too late. The bald-headed man opened the door, and a few men with bright lights on their heads came in.
'Enough, I think we have done well today with getting to know each other. We will meet again. Like I said,' his eyes fell on Kele, 'I need a little more time with you. Take this one,' he said to the men. One of the men threw a hood over Maître's head while another picked up her file on Kele, along with the booklet, CD, and CD player. 'Come back for this one immediately,' we won't be long,' the bald-headed man added, waiting to close the door behind them.

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With Maître gone the bald-headed man freed Kele and began to speak to her in something of an amicable tone, though what he told her was far from friendly.

‘Earlier I said you’ve never produced from your heart, and never with the charge to tell the truth on your head as you have now. But news have come in. That charge will not be directly on your head for too long. There are two cars off to Mthatha; they’ll pick something up for us.’ He smiled. ‘We are this close to reuniting you with your son.’

Kele’s felt her chin, lips, and cheeks twitch. Her body shook. She felt the burning of tears in her eyes, but she held them back. She had a good mind to spit in his face. He must have seen something in her that warned him, perhaps a slight movement of her neck, like that of a serpent readying itself to strike. He leapt back.

‘Easy, Solomon!’ He said, and went back around to his side of the table. He sat in his chair and after gazing at her for what seemed like an eternity he said: ‘I want to show you something. This is bigger than all of us.’

His fingers tapped on the keys and clicked on the mouse a few times before he disconnected a short cable on his laptop and turned the computer around so the monitor faced Kele.

‘This is serious,’ he said, and watched her face. Kele’s eyes sank to the video he was playing. It was of a woman, being dragged after being beaten and bloodied inside a shack.

‘Oh God!’ Kele had not an ounce of love or even affinity for Agnes, but she couldn’t stop the tears from streaming down her cheeks.

Kele had never had any real love or affinity for Agnes, but she couldn’t stop the tears as they streamed down her cheeks.

‘All she did was not secure your boy for us. You are tasked with talking to a nation. Don’t. Fail. Us.’

The man turned around. There was another knock on the door. Kele knew it was time for her to return to the room. She welcomed the bag over her head because she was desperate to get to her phone. She still wanted to call Killian, but Nakedi was foremost on her mind now. He needed to know to keep Donovan safe.

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Kele wanted to scream, but she knew only the walls would listen. She was back in her cell. She needed to get to the boots under the bed, but she couldn't be obvious about going for them. It wasn't like reaching for a t-shirt or a blanket. She had nowhere to go and didn't need shoes. Whoever was on the other side of that camera would find it suspicious of her to even look inside them. She'd have to do it all as clandestinely as was possible. So she stretched her body and yawned long, like a cat before rolling as naturally as she could closer to the edge, where she remained still for some time. After a while she began snoring and appeared completely lost to sleep. Her arm fell lightly off the side of the bed near where the boots were. Again, she remained in this position for long. But unseen, her hand reached ever so slowly under the bed until her fingers stumbled on something. They remembered the raised rubber nodule on the floor. She had placed the boots right behind it. She was close. Her heart beat faster and faster. She steadied herself and made a final reach with her fingers splayed, turning her wrist from side to side. But there was nothing. Out of a panicked desperation she lost all caution for the camera and swung her head over the side of the bed to see. To her horror, there were no shoes.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Nakedi and Sabine approached the door differently. In her eyes he could see a build-up of anger at the disrespect of such a noisy intrusion, but what he felt was angst. When they opened the door, however, it seemed they were both surprised and glad to find no one.

'Perhaps it was monkeys,' Nakedi said, in a manner that was unconvincing, even to himself.

'Maybe you've forgotten what the sound of monkeys is like. That was definitely not it.'

Deep down he feared it was the police. He wondered whether they had gone towards the front door or away.

'Let me check the other door,' he said to Sabine.

'It's locked; I always keep it locked nowadays. You're better off using this door if you want to check the front.'

'I'll do that,' he said. 'I need to get my phone from the car anyway,' he added, referring to Buntu's phone.

He wanted to call Mthatha. Mandi was probably worried sick about the boy if he had been missing since the morning. He would fill her in on what happened with her nephew and ask her to find out about the oxygen tank at St Mary's. Nakedi stepped outside and saw the sun as it was sailing over the horizon inland. It was still light enough to see, but not for long. He glanced nervously at the front door as he walked past it at a distance, but there was nobody there. When he reached the car he sat inside and switched the phone on. The thing buzzed and flashed like a pinball machine in his hand as messages hurried in, one after the other. Messages from his sisters about Donovan. He selected the call log and looked under missed calls. There were thirteen from Mandi's number, and eight more from Thandi's. He called Mandi. The phone rang. It rang and rang. He was about to drop when eventually there was a voice on the other end. But it was the very formal one of her voicemail greeting. Surely she'd be expecting a call from him. He tried Thandi. But the result was the same. He wondered whether or not to try Aunt Eve on hers. He didn't want to burden her brain with more than was necessary. Sabine was enough for the boy, for now, he decided, before sending a text message to Mandi about Donovan. He mentioned nothing about the state the boy was in. He simply let her know that he had found him hidden in the boot and they were safe, and together.

Next, he thought about Fezile. He needed to ask Sabine when he would be coming out of work, if he wasn't already out drinking with his friends as promised. Nakedi put his hand on the steering wheel and another on the key and hit the ignition with the intention to get the vehicle closer to the big gate and out of the way. As it edged forward, something caught his eye. Between where the crushed stone ended and the concrete of the driveway began there was a patch of sandy soil. In it he thought

he saw one of the thick pencils Donovan drew with. He parked the car carefully, parallel with the fence and with its rear closest to the gate, and kept its lights on. He walked towards the spot where he'd seen the pencil. It was exactly what he thought it was; broken in half. As he quizzed himself about how it could have possibly got there something else came to his attention. The tyre tracks in which he found it seemed rather new though he could not quite say how new. They were thick, like they'd been made by a bakkie or 4x4. He glanced over at Sabine's garage. Her bakkie had not moved since before he'd got here. He thought about the knock on the door again and his heart fluttered with fear. He ran to the car to switch the lights off and ran back inside the yard. He made his way quickly up the walkway under the trees, but before he reached the fork that split the paths to the kitchen and front door, something else revealed itself. It was white, stuck between some weeds near the tree Sabine used to call Mr Msimbeet. He walked up to it. It was a torn piece of paper. He reached for it. It felt glossy to the touch, almost like the kind Donovan drew on. There was something on it, too, but the day's light was now much too faded for him to make out what it was. As he walked towards the kitchen, both the inside and outside lights came on. When he got closer to the light he looked at the paper again. There was an eye on it; no, two. The second was torn in half. Nakedi stopped dead. He recognised them, even without the mole. The paper was indeed from Donovan's sketchpad, and those were Agnes's eyes. His skin crawled with an inexplicable sensation from how they looked at him. He squashed them and deposited them in his pants. A feeling of being watched suddenly overtook him. The trees were alive with the sounds of nocturnal creatures. He turned around and looked back at the gate before making for the door.

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'That was long. Did you find anyone; anything?' Sabine asked when he walked in. She was standing over a pot of soup by the stove. 'Thought I'd make him a little something warm for comfort,' she said. 'Any monkeys confess to banging on the door?'

They looked at each other and smiled. It was a smile that cut through time, and for a moment everything else melted away for Nakedi. An expulsion of some of the heaviness that he'd been carrying inside him; that's what it was.

'Yes, I spoke to one, actually,' he said finally. 'It was concerned about Donovan. Thought he may be one of theirs or something, with that kind of behaviour – hiding in the boot. I sorted it all out though.' He smiled as she laughed, but inside he was wondering about the eyes in his pants and the broken pencil that had drawn them. Did they fall out as they carried Donovan from the car earlier? But the pencil; how did that get to where it was, and under those tracks? These were some of the

questions that went through his mind, probably casting an expression on his face that caused Sabine to abandon the laughter and ask her next question.

'Is there something you'd like us to talk about? We need to head out to Mthatha soon, but perhaps you would like me to clear the air about something you saw upstairs?'

'Like what?' Nakedi asked, unhappy that the mood had taken this turn.

'Like the picture in the room upstairs?'

'What picture?' He looked her straight in the eye and lied as he walked over to the sink to pour himself a glass of water.

'I was just up there; It wasn't in its place so you know exactly what picture.'

'I'm sorry I went up there. But something did fall behind the desk when I picked up the oxygen tank. I just didn't see what it was. Maybe it was your picture.'

'Why would you be sorry you went up there? I sent you, didn't I?' Sabine responded tersely. She allowed a brief silence before she continued. 'I know you saw it. You may lie to me if you want to, but the dusty fingerprint on it told me it had been touched,' she smiled, allowing some of the pressure to escape the room. 'I want to tell you things, Nakedi. I've always wanted to tell you things. Things about why I took you into my life. Things about my father; about who we are; who I am; why I came back here when a life in the city, with all its trappings, was available to me. How unwell and poisoned I was until you cured me. I've wanted to tell you these things. But you were no longer in my life. Until today.'

Nakedi drank from his glass and swallowed uncomfortably.

'You were the last person I got close to,' Sabine continued, her voice quavering. 'The last person I got naked with; with this and with this.' She gestured at her body and put her hand over her heart. 'And yes, there is a lot you don't know about me. I did have another life before we met; before I came back to Port St Johns.'

Nakedi looked away and said nothing.

'I know you saw both pictures in that room, with Maarten and with my dad.'

'Okay, I saw the picture. I only said I didn't because I didn't want you to burden yourself with having to talk about it. You really don't owe me any explanations.' In truth, it was Nakedi who felt burdened. There was his son in the next room, sick. Buntu was still missing. And there was the moon, always the moon, whether he liked it or not. Sometimes it was out of sight, but it was in constant orbit around him, pale with his culpability, mocking him about the inevitability of his downfall. 'I am not that same kid you used to know. That's all. Your words are wasted on me now.'

‘What’s that supposed to mean? Am I absolutely nothing to you?’

‘No,’ Nakedi responded. ‘I just don’t want you to feel like you owe me anything. If you were married that’s your own business. I mean, you don’t know everything about me either.’ As these words left Nakedi he was reminded of Mr Morinaga and Dr Amoa. The sounds of both gunshots ringing out echoed in his memory. An expression that touched Sabine must have flashed across his face.

‘I still care deeply for you, Nakedi. I *want* to tell you; I don’t *have* to. Just like I wish *you’d* tell me what the hell is going on with you. But I can’t force you. It’s your decision to do that.’

Nakedi felt disarmed in his spirit, debilitated. It was something akin to the listlessness that grows on the limbs of one who tries to run away from danger in a dream, but cannot.

‘Yes, I was married,’ said Sabine, ‘to more than Maarten Viljoen too. And I was a doctor, not a nurse. I know that question is also in your head. God, let me in, Nakedi! Just let me in! You popped up here today pretending to be someone else, with your son almost dead in the boot of your car.’ She caught her breath. ‘Perhaps it is right you don’t tell me. I don’t know,’ she exhaled. ‘But somehow I get the feeling I will never see you again. And I know it’s just a feeling, too, but it makes me want to talk to you. It makes me want to be honest with the last person I allowed myself to truly love.’ Sabine left off talking and silence surrounded them.

There was a cough in the honey room. Nakedi sprang to his feet and raced for the door. Sabine followed. When they got to the boy they found him docile, something in his eyes extinguished. The light was on in the middle of the room.

‘Are you okay, my toy soldier?’ Nakedi said as he looked into his son’s eyes. There was little response in the boy’s fatigued face.

‘Donovan,’ Sabine called, and the boy looked at her slowly. ‘At least he knows who he is, even if he is not speaking yet,’ she said. ‘But I’m not happy he is not talking to us. Does he do that a lot? To tell you the truth, I think we should get him out of here as soon as we can. You can come back for your brother after we’ve had Donovan checked out at a hospital, and you can stay here. You’re welcome to stay here, but we need to take him to a doctor with the right tools for him.’

Nakedi nodded in agreement. Though he was still reluctant to be in such a public place, there was no use in fighting Sabine.

He pulled out Buntu’s phone and dialled his sister’s number again.

‘I just want to let them know I’m on my way back at home.’

‘Sure!’ Sabine seemed happy with this. ‘I’ll just give him a little soup.’ She left for the kitchen and came back with a bowl of soup with a spoon and serviette.

Again there was no answer on Mandi’s phone. This was beginning to worry Nakedi all the more. He put the phone back in his pocket, and just as he was about to open his mouth terror struck him. There was thunderous banging on the door again, just like before. They looked at each other. Sabine’s eyes were big with fear and concern. She got up and put the soup on the table. They walked towards the door with no words exchanged between them. Nakedi stopped and reached for a meat cleaver on the wall. Sabine threw him a questioning expression, but he shrugged it off and so did she. The banging continued. Still they said nothing, not even to each other, their steps calculated and cautious. They reached the door. He grabbed the handle while she undid the latch slowly and as quietly as she could. They looked at each other one last time. A click betrayed them, but the door was already unlocked. Nakedi swung it open with tremendous speed. The cleaver was already in the air, ready to drop. He was screaming, Sabine was screaming, and so was Fezile, who stood with his chest heaving his Reebok t-shirt drenched in sweat.

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‘What brings you here? Is everything fine at the Mead?’ Sabine asked Fezile as soon as everyone regained their wits and composure.

‘Everything is fine at the Mead Mama S. My shift is over. I left Sonwabile in charge. I’m here for bra Tshepo,’ Fezile turned, looking at Nakedi. He was slurring his words.

‘Come in,’ said Sabine. ‘And what is so urgent you have come here running for him, looking like that?’

‘It’s the boy, *Razzo*. We need to go to St Barnabas. We need a hospital.’ Fezile seemed tired of addressing Sabine.

‘What boy?’ Nakedi enquired.

‘The boy for circumcision, *Razzo*; the boy for circumcision. There is big, big trouble with him at the Fishing Boat!’

Chapter Thirty

There was a deep pool of despondency and Kele lay at the bottom of it. She feared the worst over the missing phone. What was going to happen to her the next time she saw the bald-headed man? What about her son once they got hold of him? Had she made things worse for him?

The light was on, and on the table were the file on Maître and everything else Kele had been given. She wanted to know more about the booklet and CD, but she also wanted nothing to do with them. She didn't need to read up more on Maître to find more nasty things. She knew fully well how unkind, how cruel, her presenter was against anyone with dark skin, including Kele herself. Kele tried to think of the black people in the office who had relationships her. She couldn't come up with any. It was not only inside the station either.

Once, after Reijger Media House had made the decision to 'go black', a caller had come on the Maître Minute and impressed Maître by arguing against her and beating her. He was African.

'That Jikilili guy was Killian's black; the kind of caller he wants – our target market, the growing black middle-class. Let's get his number off PhoneBox so we can insert him into future conversations when we need a black voice with a black accent that knows what the hell it's taking about,' she had ordered in the post-show debriefing.

Kele wondered about that statement for days, feeling more than a little uncomfortable with it, yet unable to give any clear shape to what was behind her repulsion to it. When she finally hit upon the reason, she realised it was because, to Maitre, Africans with the ability to think were something new, and so few and far between that the first one she recognised needed to be brought in. Lest the show struggled to find any others in the future. The truth is she'd come across many such 'blacks' on her show. But she was just never able to concede to their points, even in defeat. Jikelele from Soweto had shattered her argument on the need to change Heritage Day officially into Braai Day. However, the real difference was that the station had now made it a priority to make blacks feel welcome enough to listen to the actual lines of their arguments, and not dismiss them based on not having palatable white-sounding accents. Besides all that though, Jikelele had been quite skilful, something in him reminiscent of a standup comedian. He'd ended his thoughts by calling Jan Scannell 'Jan Scoundrel' and changing his lacklustre nickname of Jan Braai to Jan 'Naai'. It all fit well together.

Kele's mind didn't know where to go after these thoughts. Her heart fled towards Malcolm. He was always protective of her and she needed him. What if she could reach him? There was Killian to contact, of course; but what might Malcolm be able to do? Would he be able to get any of his overseas contacts to get to the foreign press? It had turned out to not be the xenophobic attacks he feared, but something bigger he could still help with, Kele thought. But there was no way of contacting him and he was more than halfway up the continent; probably out of Lagos by now, in Abuja.

As was usually the case, Kele was incapable of thinking about Malcolm without drifting to thoughts of her ex-husband. She was unable to escape the trap of comparing them. Malcolm was no Nakedi as a lover, but he was a solid man with a dependable word. The only issue she had with him was his frequent travelling. She was always saying goodbye to him.

Her captors said Nakedi had her son. She wished it were the other way around; that Malcolm had him instead. What would Nakedi do? Would he find the right kind of help; do the right thing? Her despondency redoubled because she knew the reality of her situation. She no longer had the phone and couldn't call him, even if she were somehow able to evade the cameras. She thought about her past with her ex-husband; their life in their home. She felt anger towards him now, as though he were somehow responsible for her ending up where she was. With him she had just been content to live life for the joy of all her senses. And it was a thrilling sensual ride at first. She recalled how they'd met, halfway through the year, in their Journalism lecture. They had been in the class together all year, both of them quiet and studious. The lecture hall was partitioned into three sections with aisles separating the sections. While Kele would sit in the front row on the far right Nakedi would sit in the same row on the far left. With the curved formation of the seating in the auditorium they both had a good view of each other. But they never came together. Not until one day when she was late enough to find her usual seat taken. That day she sat two rows behind Nakedi. And that's the day they would talk for the very first time. He would protest to her after class that she'd spoiled everything for him by being late and sitting behind him. He proceeded to plead with her to never do it again. When she asked what it was he had done he insisted he could only tell her over coffee. She was keen on it. She agreed. He had a smile both kind and mischievous as they sat and talked, she recalled. When she asked how she had ruined his lecture he spoke softly. She loved that he lavished attention on her as though she were the only thing he could see, hear, touch, and imagine.

'I love our Journalism class,' Nakedi said. 'Right now the Sociology of News Production is killing it. Interesting is an understatement, but not so much Professor Brown. He is smart and all, but he isn't much to look at. You on the other hand may be smart, but from time to time I like to steal a glance in your direction, you know, to give myself life; to ease the pain. But today both my eyes and neck hurt.'

'Why is that?'

'Well, I can't not look at Brown; it's his lecture. So there go my eyes.'

'And your neck?'

'I can't not look at you. So here I am wrestling with my neck the entire lecture because it wants to turn around and enjoy your face, but it's embarrassing to stare if you're behind me; it's too obvious. Right?'

‘Your neck wants to enjoy my face?’ Kele laughed. ‘I’ve never heard that one before.’

‘All of me wants to enjoy you,’ he replied, in a manner that caused something in her to stir and flutter. In his eyes glowed embers of mischief, the kind Kele loved.

Though he didn’t appear so at first glance, Nakedi was five years older than her. He seemed then to have tasted the world in adult ways she was still sheltered from, even as a university student who was living as freely as she could away from the direct rule of her parents. He’d resigned from his marine life the year before and had tales and photos of places she’d only seen in movies and heard about in songs; places that lived on pages of books she loved. Besides going on a trip with the family to Mauritius as a child, she had only left the country on a hockey tour to England in Grade Ten. She had never done anything like seeing a Roots concert in Zurich or been on top of the Eiffel Tower and the Statue of Liberty in the space of one week. She’d never been out in the world without a parent or chaperone. They had gone back to her room later that afternoon. She remembered now that she didn’t even like the Wu Tang Clan, but when he waxed lyrical about how he wound up backstage with them once at a London nightclub, she was filled with envy.

There was raw sexual energy between them, but she thought now, as she often did, that they should have left it at that. But they had lingered, and in an undertaking much like alchemy, tried to fashion true love from the dust of lust. And then came Donovan, forcing both of them to quit school. But what a thrill Nakedi could be. It was just sad that as they year wore on, it wasn’t always with her that he was thrilling. She recalled his indiscretions, but none of them stood out like the final one she actually witnessed. This memory began, as always, at his hands:

They were the first thing Kele noticed that cold and windy morning as she lingered in the doorway of their bedroom, not quite sure what to do with herself. Other things struck her, of course, but none of them struck her as singularly as her husband's hands. She watched for what seemed like five full minutes as Nndini, the next door neighbour’s domestic worker, repeatedly sank her thighs onto his lap, and he, angled upwards to receive her. He moaned loudly, as she always knew him to, and the girl’s throaty whimpers of pleasure rippled through the air. The wind howled outside, causing the pine tree by their bedroom window to tap against the pane. Yet with all those noises it was eerily silent as Kele stood fixed to the floor, watching her husband’s hands do the kind of work they had not done on her in a while. She remembered the name of that pine tree – Ringo Starr, they called it. Nakedi had given it that name in the first week they moved into the house, during three days of ravenous love-making when it beat its bristled branch repeatedly against the glass, like a drummer drumming with a brush stick. She asked him why the tree was called Ringo: ‘Why the Beatles’ drummer and not another one?’ His reply was in the strawberries he ate off her body, and off her fields below. He’d sung the tune as he went back down to kiss and eat her: ‘Strawberry Fields Forever’. He’d thrilled her into another bout of love-making. She drifted back to Malcolm again. Her

current lover was quite pedestrian in comparison. She thought of the things she had done with him in their time together, and the places they had done them in. Not many things; not many places. He indeed was no Nakedi, but he was a solid man, with a dependable word. Sometimes that's all that mattered. Kele wished with all her life that he were close at hand. Her body hurt. Inside she hurt. She felt defeated. Without any warning, even to herself, she fell to a bag of tears and wept long, until sleep took her.

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When Kele woke up it was violently from a bad dream. In it she was fighting faceless foes with shadow-like forms. They were running away with her son. She pursued them but was held back by others. Even though they held her by her ankles and wrists, she felt as though she was suffocating, like there was dead weight on her chest. As she sank into the ground in the dream she continued to fight. Up behind her enemies she saw the bald-headed man. He was smiling, his teeth extremely large. They grew bigger and bigger as he laughed, and so did he. They turned into buildings. The bottom row was like a city skyline, and the top one too, inverted. Their roofs met as his mouth crushed them to dust with a single bite of the air. When she turned around to look where the shadowy figures were taking her son, she found Nakedi on the floor weeping, already mourning Donovan's death. She fought to get to him, but she gave it all up when the next thing happened. He too turned into a shadowy figure, and his mournful cries changed into a raspy laughter that hurt Kele's ears. Still the shadows pulled her into the ground. And when they took her all the way under, and she could breathe no more, sleep spat her out with the same sobs that had lulled her into it. She sat up on the divan and looked around the small room, frustrated. She didn't know how long she'd been sleeping for and what time of day it was. Her eyes flew to the camera and she thought about Maître again.

'What was she saying about you?' she asked it out loud, thinking about the words she had read on Maître's lips; but she couldn't make them out then, let alone remember them now.

'The phone,' she recalled, and her heart raced. She felt as though she were being jolted back into another nightmare. How was she going to explain having the phone on her? She thought about the dentist's chairs and the bone saws. Was it going to be her or Donovan who was going to suffer that punishment in the end? In order to soften the blows of whatever the penalty would be, she decided to pick up the file and booklet off the table along with the CD and CD player, and learn what they expected her to know. She examined the cover of the CD first. It had the same logo they wore on their uniforms: a yellow badge, like a sun, but with a black spider outlined in its centre. The booklet too had the same design. Kele picked up the player and flipped its top open. She loaded the CD, put on some headphones and got to listening. A man spoke. His voice was sturdy and sure. But the shock

it sent though Kele when she heard it was not like any she had felt so far on this dark journey she was on.

'Welcome to a new dawn,' the man said, 'when African people will take over Africa again, beginning with what is essential – themselves. Welcome to the dawn of justice. You are listening to the voice of ____, leader and servant of the Black Spiders; and what you are about to hear is to be ignored only at your peril.'

Up until the voice introduced its speaker's name it had said nothing new or astonishing that the bald-headed man had not already mentioned or intimated. But immediately at hearing it, Kele was filled with astonishment, coupled with dread. The room spun and her head heated up with something that felt like a fever. Her heart beat like a drum in her chest. She seemed to leave her body momentarily, becoming numb as she did so. But even in the numbness she could feel. She felt horror, anger, pain, and then shame – like one who'd been violated. She couldn't comprehend what was happening to her. She sought her balance. It too was betraying her, like the man in her headphones. It was better she was on the bed, because she certainly would have succumbed to vertigo and lost her feet had she been standing. A shudder deep inside her body took her and rose to the surface before her mind failed, and all went blank.

Chapter Thirty-One

Sabine did her best to keep Nakedi's subterfuge alive in Fezile s presence. She referred to him as Tshepo while the visitor stood in the kitchen explaining his problem. When he was done, Sabine asked him to go ahead and warm up the bakkie for her while she and Tshepo followed after gathering her things. She had already decided their collective plan of action. She was adamant that Donovan should have been in a hospital for tests hours ago. Her idea was to begin the trip with the boy towards Mthatha in the meantime. Nakedi would catch up as soon as he could, with Buntu. At the end of their very brief talk they exchanged numbers and stepped out in time to find Fezile in the garage, hopping out of Sabine's idling bakkie. They called him over. Nakedi unlocked his car and asked him to take the front seat while he and Sabine rushed towards the boot. He worked the boot lock, lifted the spare wheel, and took out the bag with Wesley's money in it. He didn't know how many tests the boy was going to need, or how much lying in a hyperbaric oxygen tank was going to cost. He figured R5000 was enough, but offered Sabine R5000 more, just in case. Even as he was driving with Fezile, the words that had come out of her mouth at the sight of the Wesley's cash replayed themselves in his head: 'No, this should be fine,' she began as she held on to the first set of bills she got from him and recoiled from the rest. 'I never picked you for the kind that would grow up to bank in your boot.' Her face was downturned with disappointment. 'What is going on with you; is everything alright?'

Nakedi wondered whether Sabine's barman had picked up anything amiss in the house. Did he detect anything between him and his boss? Surely there was enough familiarity in the air between them after such a day as they had spent together, especially since discovering Donovan. And though Donovan was fairly quiet, did Fezile catch wind of the boy s presence in the next room?

'We're almost there, *Razzo*; turn here,' Fezile pointed. 'Go straight, and after Steve's Pub and Outspan Inn, turn right and go towards the river mouth and I'll show you.'

Nakedi looked at the young man out of the corner of his eye and for a moment felt uneasy about him. Sabine had not managed to give Nakedi an answer about his character earlier. Something in his manner unsettled Nakedi, though what, he could not exactly say. He was just a little different compared to the person he had been in the afternoon at his job. Sure, he'd sat on the side of the bar he apparently prefers better, for more than one drink; but it wasn't his drunkenness that made him different. He was unrestrained, with what seemed like an air of unpredictability about him. Despite his doubts about Fezile, the one thing Nakedi knew was this young man was the closest thing to the guide he had hoped to find. Not only that, but from what he had already learned from their exchange in the afternoon, he could already be leading him to Buntu.

'What is this Fishing Boat anyway? You said this place is a shebeen?'

'No, *Razzo*, it's a restaurant, but you can drink there. Many girls come, local girls, and some yummy white girls from overseas.'

There was something salacious in how he said the words white girls, as though he were savouring their skin in his brown, cigarette stained mouth (Nakedi couldn't see his mouth clearly now, but he remembered it well from the afternoon).

'What started the whole thing; girls?' Nakedi asked.

'*Eish, Razzo,* I came there and these guys were already drinking the whole day I was at work. I even had to catch up. There's Steve s Pub; you're gonna turn right soon.'

Nakedi slowed down and indicated.

'Basically, the boy got his money today, Fezile continued. Tankiso and Bonga are going to take him to *ingcibi* tomorrow morning, so all of them were celebrating with a little something before his journey into manhood. But he became too friendly with Sis' Thandile, a known mistress of the owner. They were caught doing it in the store room.' He paused and sighed. 'And Tankiso and Bonga told me they tried to stop him too, *Razzo*. I mean, Bra Sipho's bitch is famous for doing young ones, boys and girls,' he laughed. 'Poor Buhle didn't know; he fell right into her trap. I almost did her once, too, but common sense came back to my good head. What about you, *Razzo*: you like old fruit? Is your good head pleased with Mama S? Meet her once and it's straight off to bed!' The young man amused himself and chuckled away.

Nakedi ignored his last question, as well as his amusement. He was thinking of something else.

'Buhle? Was that a slip of the tongue? Did he mean Buntu?' he wondered.

But even as that slip of the tongue dawned as a plausibility, something else confounded Nakedi. He could not reconcile the reason given for the fracas with the news he'd found out about his brother. If Buntu was gay, why would he waste absolutely no time in sleeping with the owner's mistress? It might have something to do with proving his manhood. Or was it he was bisexual?

'Where were you when all this was happening, if you were already drinking, playing catch up? Why didn't *you* stop him?' Nakedi asked.

'My good head was also hunting for something nice,' laughed the young man.
Nakedi was growing angry, but he spoke calmly: 'Fezile, what is the boy's name–'

'Here, *Razzo*, stop; there they are,' shouted Fezile.

Nakedi caught sight of three male figures on a bench under a shelter with a dim light on the side of the road. He slammed the breaks. Fezile jumped out immediately, before the car was even out of the road. As Nakedi reversed and parked, the air was already filled with the laughter and loud cursing of the four drunk friends. To his surprise all of them were standing now; not a single one so incapacitated as to need a trip to the hospital or warrant the uphill run to Sabine's house. Even worse,

not a single one of them was Buntu. The three who'd been left behind were sharing two quarts of beer between them. One of them had blood on his t-shirt the lower abdomen. They all began singing traditional songs in isiXhosa as Nakedi walked up to them. He could immediately tell the boy from Mthatha apart from the Port St Johns locals. He looked younger, perhaps seventeen or eighteen, and he didn't completely know the words to the *Somagwaza* song they were singing. Besides that, even his build and dress sense were different to theirs. Apart from his slight frame his clothes seemed newer, fresher. Theirs were old, but under them their bodies were fit, hard as though made of stone the colour of mud. The locals weren't so big as they were tall and strong-looking. It was only their drunkenness and loudness that gave the three and the boy any semblance of being together.

'I gather no one needs a lift to St Barnabas anymore,' Nakedi said to Fezile, utterly deflated and angry the drive had not resulted in finding his brother.

'*Ngubani lenja ithetha isingesi sika* Naledi Pandor *apha*: *whong whong whong*! *Kutheni futhi izobuz ububhanx apha nge* St Barnabas? *Ufuna ndife ne*? You want me to go to hospital and die?' said the young man with blood on his shirt. The other young men laughed at him. He was clearly the drunkest of them all.

'*Soze ndife*! I'll never die *mna*!' he continued, referring to himself in the third person. He lifted his top to reveal his wound. It was on his flank, quite unsightly, like he'd been chewed by the teeth of a broken bottle. Nakedi felt a bubbling of ire inside him. Fezile had deliberately misled him because of his interest in the circumcision hopeful.

'Calm down!' ordered Fezile to his friend. 'This bra is Sotho, he can't even hear you rambling anyway. But he can tell you're being rude. And worse, he was here to help you. You were bleeding here, crying about dying and asking for a doctor. Now you are fine and full of shit. What are you doing? Put your t-shirt back on.' Fezile laughed.

He was trying to be curt with Tankiso, but Nakedi could see he was not equal to the task. His friend was tying his bloody top around his neck, letting it hang like a cape. He was the most uninhibited of the lot, with an animal-like confidence rippling in his shoulders. Though Fezile was taller than Nakedi, both his friends were taller than *him*.

'*Myeke*, Fez; leave him. He thinks he's clever now,' the one who must have been Bonga chimed in. He grabbed the side of his stomach and pretended he was Tankiso: 'Gents! *ndiyafa*; *ndiyafa*! I'm dying, gents; help me! I need a hospital! Help me!' Everyone laughed save Nakedi. 'That was you just now,' Bonga barked at Tankiso. 'Now you're like this.'

Nakedi cast an eye on each of them. The only word that came to him was buffoonery.

'This is a waste of my time. Clearly I didn't have to come all the way out here,' he said.

‘It looked really bad at first, we didn’t know it was only a flesh wound,’ explained the boy to Nakedi. He spoke in a careless air.

Nakedi looked at him and then back at Tankiso’s wound. Even if it was a flesh wound, it indeed was an ugly one – a bit of skin hanging on the side. If it were him, Nakedi would still get it looked at, he thought. The pain was going to tear into Tankiso as soon as the alcohol wore off.

Something else drew Nakedi’s attention.
The more the young boy looked at him, the more something in his eyes seemed to become aware and suspicious. He seemed to recognise Nakedi through his liquor-sodden eyes. He at once straightened his back. Nakedi marked this too and was puzzled by it. The boy looked past him now at the car, seeming to recognise it too, before looking away.

‘What is up with that look? Does he know me? Did he see me on the news?’ Nakedi wondered. But his thoughts were interrupted by two loud noises: one far off in the sky and another at his feet on the concrete.

‘We need more medicine, this one’s finished!’ shouted Tankiso as he tossed an empty bottle of beer to the ground, shattering shards at everyone’s feet.

‘What the fuck is wrong with you?’ Bonga grabbed him by the scruff of his neck. ‘Have you got more money to buy this medicine anyway?’ He let him go. ‘This boy must walk far early tomorrow morning, and he’s already had too much to drink,’ said Bonga with a sneer on his face. ‘Or do you just want to finish his money even before he needs it?’

‘What’s it to you? He can afford it,’ howled Tankiso.

‘Are you going to send him another eWallet? You couldn’t drink today until he brought the money. And how are you going to make sure he has food there *ehlathini* everyday if we finish the money?’ Bonga dismissed him.

All the while Nakedi paid attention to the boy. He was meek during the entire exchange, as though he were a child who’d been expelled to a corner of a classroom by a teacher. Nakedi would already have left were it not for how he’d stared at him earlier. There was something there. He needed a chance to speak to the boy, in order to learn about that look.

‘That’s fine, I have my own bottle of *i*Hennesy *e*-air strip.’ Tankiso started off again. Once I get home I am going to drink alone, without you filthy dogs to ruin it for me.’ He sulked like a petulant child.

‘You mean half a bottle. You mustn’t say bottle when it’s half. Say half a bottle; okay! And we bought that bottle together. Just because it ended up at your house doesn’t mean it’s yours,’ Fezile put in, but Tankiso ignored him.

‘And you,’ Tankiso turned to Buhle, ‘leave people’s women alone. You almost killed me today. Tomorrow you will learn, my boy; tomorrow you are going to be the one to face a blade and be cut.’ He touched himself near the wound.

‘You owe me a bottle *futhi*, *kwedini*! And not *ibhotile enxibileyo*. Sisela *i*Hennesy, *kwedini*!’

Nakedi looked at the boy again as Tankiso addressed him. But his eyes were still evading Nakedi’s. There was a hurried pitter-patter on the leaves of the trees next to the road, as though a flock of birds was beating its wings between the branches. Drops of rain were falling. Bonga turned and said something to Fezile before they both turned to Nakedi and Fezile began:

‘*Razzo*, thank you for helping us. I know you have to go. I didn’t want to make a fool of you, but I really thought we needed the hospital.’ A more composed and modest Fezile was speaking.

‘How did you even know I was there at Sabine’s?’

‘I didn’t, St Barnabas is far, and Mama S is the only one I know with a car. I was going to ask her, but when I saw you I knew it was better to talk to a man than her.’
‘And why didn’t you tell me it was your friend who was hurt, not the boy?’
‘Because of your writing. I thought the boy would make you come faster, more than telling you it’s my friend. I’m sorry, *Razzo*.’

‘It’s okay,’ Nakedi said, glancing at the boy one last time. ‘It’s time to go anyway.’

‘Sorry to bother you even more, bra,’ Fezile continued stepping in his way. He was rubbing his palms together: ‘Can you please take us to eTshobeni, to the air strip? I mean, it *is* closer than St Barnabas.’ He let out a goofy laugh. ‘We’ll camp there for the night–’

‘Camp where? And drink my booze? That bottle is mine and belongs to nobody else. You hear me? Nobody else! After I get stabbed for this boy you treat me like shit! It’s my bottle now; don’t care who bought it.’

‘What do you say, *Razzo*?’ Fezile kept on, ignoring his sulky friend. ‘We’ll give you petrol money. We have to sleep early because we have to take this boy in the morning. And I know he is drunk,’ Fezile went on, and in his eyes he appeared to have hit upon something to entice Nakedi, ‘but maybe you can even ask him some questions about your book on the way. You can even ask all of them,’ he pointed to his friends. ‘But not him,’ he signalled with his eyes and a clandestine nod of the head to his troublesome friend.

Nakedi looked at this drunken chaos and wondered where Buntu was, and whether or not he was with people like this. He began to fear the worst. Nakedi had absolutely no interest in helping Tankiso and Bonga, but he told himself he still needed Fezile. Besides, he really did need to speak to this boy who'd looked at him in a very peculiar manner and then seemed to avoid him altogether afterwards.

'Okay, everybody in the car; let's go,' Nakedi ordered as the pitter-patter of rain grew suddenly into a fully-fledged drizzle.

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The evening was unravelling too quickly. Nakedi had decided against driving to Mthatha, but he couldn't call Sabine in the presence of the others as he drove to Tankiso's house. He had too little strength left in him and was altogether unsettled. This was because he hadn't found Buntu as he'd been so optimistic he would. This task now seemed more daunting. Buhle's look, too, wouldn't give him rest. But more than the look were the possibilities it echoed. There was yet no moon in the sky, but one was threatening to rise inside him. The terrible things he had done pursued his conscience, and the prospect of prison ate away at him with voracious fear. He peered in the rear-view mirror. The boy sat between Tankiso and Bonga. Nakedi decided he would call him aside as soon as they got to Tankiso's house, and ask him what the look was all about.

The road up Mount Thesiger to the strip was narrow and windy, with ever-encroaching edges of forest on either side of it. Its curves were unending, some in places so steep Nakedi felt as though he was driving on the very edge of the world. They reached the top, and as the road began to level off Nakedi noticed countless eyes gleaming like gemstones in his lights. There were cows sleeping on their haunches in their numbers on the warm tarred surface. The rain had stopped again and steam was coming off the road and rising in the beams of the car.

'Here,' Tankiso shouted.

There was a house on the left. Nakedi bore towards it.

'No, not there; this side.'

There was another one on the right side of the road, under the cover of the last patch of trees, before the airstrip. Nakedi drove towards it and stopped the car.

'*Inkomo zam*, *kwedini*. My cows, my soldiers, guarding my air-strip.'

‘You and this airstrip of yours! Just because you live next to it, it’s yours. When was the last time you saw a plane land here? This thing belongs to the government or whoever else owns it; stop talking shit.’

Tankiso was directly behind Nakedi. ‘Sorry, *bra* Tshepo. Sorry *bra Msotho* for talking shit,’ he said bringing Nakedi into the conversation with no cause to do so. It happens sometimes when you’re drunk!’ There was a mocking gesture of remorse in his voice, and then a pause. ‘And thank you for the lift. Thank you very much.’ This sounded refreshingly sincere.

‘You’re welcome,’ Nakedi replied in an unfeigned manner that also did not mask his disgust at how the night had turned out.

‘If fact,’ Tankiso seemed to ponder in silence before making his next point, oblivious to Nakedi’s current mood. ‘Only you can have my bottle, *bra Msotho*. Come inside for the bottle.’

‘Really, *Razzo*, thanks for the lift,’ Fezile added, as Tankiso got out of the car. Fezile had sobered up somewhat, especially in comparison to the rest of the group. The other two were sleeping; they had passed out sometime during the drive. ‘I can see you are tired,’ Fezile went on. ‘We can talk tomorrow if you come to the Mead. This boy is useless now. He is sleeping here and leaving very early so I don’t know if you will get another chance to chat to him. But I know a lot. We can talk.’

Nakedi wanted to stay but was hesitant to take Tankiso up on his offer of a drink. This would make him the drunken man’s guest, and that would come with Tankiso being a nuisance. Fezile reached to the backseat and smacked Buhle on the lap: ‘*Vuka, kwedini*!’ he shouted. The shot was so loud Bonga woke up next to him with a fright.

‘I wasn’t passed out,’ Bonga claimed.

‘I’m not talking to you; I’m talking to the boy,’ Fezile replied. ‘Everybody outside! The *razzo* has to go.’

There was a knock on Nakedi’s window. He opened it and through it came a pleasant smell of cow dung along with the trill of the forest. But along with all that came the rancid alcohol breath of Tankiso.

‘Are you coming inside or not? I have Hennessy. Hennessy, *kwedini*.’

‘*Hey, ayiyokwedini yakho le. Aw’boni yi bra le*?’ Fezile admonished his friend for calling Nakedi a small fry. ‘Have you lost your mind? How are you going to call a fully grown man that?’

‘How do you know he is a man? What is Tshepo, Sotho? Is he a man? Has he ever been circumcised *kwaXhosa*?’

‘If he is Sotho, why would he be circumcised in the way of *kwaXhosa*? Are you listening to yourself speak?’

‘Okay,’ conceded Tankiso, ‘but I am listening to him talk. He talks in English all the time: *whong, whong, whong*. In fact, when Buhle and him speak, it sounds like there are white people sitting inside their throats conveying a message; especially this one,’ he said, pointing at Buhle. ‘At least he says he has never been circumcised and he wants to do it. What about this one here? Are you a man, *baba*? We don’t know.’

The directness of the question alarmed Nakedi. For a moment he was back in Libode with the old man brandishing his *okapi*, kicking the young man out of the kraal. Bonga had retreated towards the gate and was shouting at his friend to stop talking recklessly. Fezile, who perhaps finally realised the futility of asking Tankiso to conduct himself better, simply came around and led him away by the arm, just as he was getting more out of hand. Buhle was following them when Nakedi called out to him.

‘Yes, *bra*,’ he replied.

‘Can I talk to you for a minute?’

The boy came back towards the car.

‘So tomorrow is your big day, huh?’ Nakedi began.

‘Yes, *bra*,’ the boy replied.

Nakedi wanted to skip all the small talk and ask him about the look he had given him earlier. If it had something to do with being on the news for the Windsor-East incident at least he would know where he stood with the police and disappear.

‘Where are you from Buhle?’

‘East London, *bra*. And Mthatha.’

‘You are from two places?’ Nakedi mocked.

‘Yes, *bra*, I grew up in Mthatha. We moved to East London a few years ago.’

‘Do you know me?’ Nakedi asked boldly.

‘You don’t remember me, *bra*?’ was Buhle’s incredulous response.

Nakedi was thrown off:

‘We know each other?’ he asked.

‘Yes, you are Buntu’s older brother.’ When the boy said Buntu’s name his body shrunk and his eyes began to avoid Nakedi’s anew. ‘Remember that Honda CR-V wreck near Fort Gale three years ago? You came and took the blame.’

‘Hey *wena,* come! Do you want us to leave you? Is that boy you are with going to make you a man?’ Tankiso was at it again.

‘Tell him you are not Sotho, *bra* Nakedi. Tell them you are a man. Aren’t you a man?’ The boy startled himself with his words. He bit his tongue, but it was too late. ‘I’m coming now,’ he called out to the three who were now on the other side of the gate.

‘What business of yours is my manhood?’ Nakedi was curt. He remembered the incident with the SUV. It was his first evening back, visiting from Johannesburg, when Buntu called to tell him they had been joyriding a car one of his friends stole from his parents and crashed. It was Buntu who’d lost control of the vehicle, so Nakedi had no choice but to go. The damage wasn’t great. The nub of the matter though was that, at about fifteen, they were underage and without a licence between them. Insurance wouldn’t pay. And of course Aunt Eve was never supposed to find out about what her precious Buntu did. Nakedi recalled how he hurried to the scene before the police got there. It was he who made the call to them and assumed responsibility for the collision with the traffic light.

‘I do remember you,’ Nakedi said eventually.

The boy took out a cigarette and lit it. He offered Nakedi one but he declined it.

‘Yes, long time, bra. We were kids then. Now we’re ready for manhood.’

‘Long time. So you live in East London now, you say; so there’s really no point in asking you I guess.’

‘Asking me what?’

‘When the last time you saw Buntu was?’

The boy looked down, his eyes moving about restlessly as he took a long drag.

‘Two days ago, bra. I last saw him two days ago.’

‘Where?’

The boy was quiet.c

‘Where did you see him two days ago?’ Nakedi’s voice began to rise.c

‘At Amapondo, backpackers here in Port St Johns.’c

‘Is he staying there?’

‘Maybe he was; I don’t know.’

‘You know where he went?’

Silence.

From the look in Buhle’s eyes Nakedi knew something was amiss.

‘What happened? Did he tell you anything? Do you know where he might have gone?’

‘I have to go.’ Buhle’s voice was suddenly distant.

‘What do you mean you have to go? I need your help. My brother has been missing from home for some time.’ Nakedi’s voice was quavering. ‘We have reason to believe he is here trying to get circumcised in a traditional way – like you. We don’t want him to run into any trouble. If you–’

‘What! Like me? Not like *me, bra*! Not like *me*,’ Buhle protested.

Nakedi saw disgust in him, as though the very suggestion of any likeness was an insult – outright disrespect and mockery of the man he was yet to become.

‘Are you and Buntu still friends?’ Nakedi’s words were more of a challenge than a question and he intended them as such.

There was no response, but Buhle’s silence was telling.

‘Do you know where he went?’ Nakedi persisted.

‘I don’t’. He cleared his throat as if to make a serious point and tried to compose himself as much as he could with the liquor still in him. ‘I don’t mean to be an asshole, but it’s a fact: Whether he sees *ingcibi* or goes to a hospital he will never be a man; not if he sleeps with other men. There is always a woman in that equation; and Xhosa women don’t get circumcised.’

The boy walked away without any further words. As he left, Fezile appeared at the gate again. He and his friends had already gone into the house and he was back to check on Buhle.

‘Oh you two are done?’ he said from the distance. ‘Okay, *Razzo*. See you tomorrow at the Mead.’

Nakedi did not know what to make of the conversation he’d just had with Buhle. Would the boy betray his cover with the others? Would Fezile still want to talk to him tomorrow? He suddenly regretted not taking Buhle’s cigarette when it was on offer. He got back in the car, made a U-turn and drove off. He glanced at the time on the dash. It was 20:10. He couldn’t go back to Sabine’s place; there was nobody there. And he certainly wouldn’t be following her to Mthatha. He resolved to call her to find out about Donovan, but later. Buhle’s words came back to him: Amapondo Backpackers.

Nakedi recalled he did have a place to sleep for the night, and it was already paid for. But even more than that it was something else – a definite location at which Buntu was last seen.

‘Could he still be there?’ Nakedi wondered as he descended the steep curves of Mount Thesiger, getting that feeling again, like he was driving quite close to the edge of the world.

Chapter Thirty-Two

'It's tiring work whipping a slave. This is evidenced in the grunting of the master as he wields his whip. Wiping his brow between letting his whip fall, lash after lash. It's a laborious task beating a man into submission everyday until he is tame like a domesticated beast. It's even more exhausting doing this with each and every single slave that comes into the population. There is another way in which to ensure the man's submissiveness, to make certain he picks up the whip and flagellates himself in the mind daily – before, after, and during work – while the slave-master sits back and tends to his profits. There is the erasure of the man's purpose and self-determination in life. There is the stripping of a sense of who he is. This is the best way to tame him. Make him a hollow automaton that thinks everything else outside of him is good, that everything external to him is beautiful and what is inside is worthless and in a state of rot. I've told you who I am. Now, I'll tell you who we are...'

Kele could not believe what she was hearing.

'We are the children of cleaners, gardeners, and refuse removers: rural people, shack people – the forgotten people. We are the babies of mothers and fathers who are taxi drivers, line marshals, and domestic workers. We are the boys and girls of so-called illegal miners, people who have to dig deep beneath the earth for survival, only to get arrested when they come up. We are men and women with limited opportunity outside the formal capitalist economy that is both an illusion of freedom and an impediment to it. We are the forgotten people. We were suckled on the breasts of society's lowest – the unwanted, the uncared for, our mothers.

'We are the offspring of Mandelaspruit and elsewhere; the children of informal settlements and townships just like us, across rural towns and villages in this land they call South Africa, and beyond it on our continent...'

Insane! But masterful! These were the words that came to Kele's mind as she listened to Malcolm. His voice had a timbre to it that she'd never heard before – thunderous power and command. He'd always been gentle and capitulating with her – the perfect textbook boyfriend. This was part of what made him seem a bit of a bore at times, though she dared not confess it. Presently, his voice was passion-filled – as clear as a cloudless sky. It invited one to listen.

'We are the children of mothers who left our bums full, so they could clean the soiled diapers of white babies, and then the toilet bowls of their parents. We are children mothered by grandmothers, older siblings, and aunts. We are the sons and daughters of legal miners who, before and after apartheid, died in the belly of the earth while they and their families had little to nothing to live on. This is while the children of the men and women who stole the land and the jewels in it ate, and continue to eat, living sweetly under a broad shield of the very law they also used in stealing the land. This is who we are. Hear me! We are the people who wonder why it is, that those who scream the

loudest about crime and corruption, are the sons and daughters of those who stole the very land the people stand on.

'We are Steven Bantu Biko: whose head was cracked like an egg on a rock before he was thrown in the back of a bakkie only to be driven across the country as his brain oozed from his skull and his life slowly whispered out of him. And why was he beaten, brutalised and killed? Because he dared to defend himself from injustice made legal under an alien law we should collectively denounce in our land...'

'Is he crazy?' Kele said out aloud. 'We should denounce the law? And have what in its place?' She had never had any arguments with Malcolm, none like the ones she'd have with Nakedi. Now and again she longed for them, if only to warm her blood and break the languorous monotony of their relationship. Right now she'd take him on, about more than just his political points. But she couldn't talk back to a disc.

'We are brown-skinned people who are oppressed in this land of ours, on this continent of ours, by visitors. These visitors took over the kitchen, took over the coal in the stoves and took possession of the knives and forks, and with sharp edges and fire, drove us out of every room in our homes. We are those people lied to by media houses, kept in place with determined misinformation. Oh, listen carefully who we are, for we know who you are, those who feign peace and unity and charity, when all you really mean is harm.'

There was a long silence. Kele looked at the CD player. The disc was only eleven minutes in. There were forty-three more.

'We are the offspring of those who have been lied to and told that the greatest injustice to befall this land at the hand of the white nation is apartheid. Are people not aware of the 1920s and the strikes of miners then? The death and desolation? Are those people unaware of the slavery that was once legal in this land, before the twentieth century in which apartheid was championed? Can you fathom what it is like to own someone through the law; to be yourself owned, like a child owns a doll, or a dog? Yes, they'll say, slavery is not a new phenomenon. White people didn't invent it. Arabs enslaved African people and Africans enslaved other Africans. People are still enslaved and trafficked today across the world. That's no different to someone pointing at a group of women and saying: "She's been raped and so has she, so it must be okay for me to rape the rest of them". That kind of thinking is unjustifiable to say the least. When it's time for retribution all those who force themselves on others, and take their lives, land, and destiny, must meet their comeuppance.'

Kele wondered whether or not she'd ever known Malcolm at all. Was there any part of him that had been real?

'We are the boys and girls of fathers and mothers victimised by more than just apartheid,' the CD went on. 'The children of Makhanda Nxele who fought in the Frontier Wars for his people to retain the spirit of who they were and to retain their land. For this he was locked up behind the iron and rock of Robben Island years before the darling of the white people, Nelson Mandela. We are the children of iinkosi eyinkulu ooShaka, ooPhalo, ooMoshoeshoe.' Even with his Nigerian accent Malcolm was able to hit the pronunciation of the names with near perfection. *We are the landless, a people culture-less and at once clueless about the real ramifications of that loss–'* Kele paused the CD. It was dizzying that all this was connected with her life to the degree that it was.

There were knocking noises on the door, like something was banging against it. She put the CD player down on the bed and took her earphones off.

The keypad beep from the outside was muffled, but the clumsy knocking persisted. When the door finally swung open there was a woman with a basket over her forearm. She walked into the room and switched off her headlamp. Her basket had a few clothes in it, and in her hand, she held a coat hanger. Kele was flabbergasted. The woman was Admire.

'I brought your clothes. We took the time to clean them for you, especially after your little wet accident.' She let out a laugh as she put the basket down.

'Admire! Admire, what is going on? Where are we? Who are these people and why are you working with them? This is not right and you know it. These people have killed.' Admire shrugged nonchalantly. 'You know me, Admire. Help me! Please help me out of this.'

'And what, I know Mr Malcolm less? This is bigger than you and your help-me's. It's bigger than me.' Admire put the naked hanger to the hook.

'It's like I'm in the middle of a fucking nightmare here. What's wrong with you? This is wrong! You're going to get into serious trouble for it. Don't you know that? Are you out of your senses?' Kele forgot herself for a minute and shouted as though she had the upper hand, as was usually the case.

'This is not Mr Malcolm's house and you are not the beloved girlfriend spending the night or weekend anymore. This is where I am a freedom fighter, a soldier, and you are simply the grass and mud I must trample on, on the way to meet my enemy.'

'This is certainly a world where I can't ask you anything, let alone tell you. It seems you're right about that,' she said. 'My dear, is it power you seek? Because, I will tell you, you don't have it even in here; it belongs to these men.' Something in Admire's eyes knew Kele was right about that. Still, Admire had more power in here than Kele, and the latter could hardly reconcile that this woman she had known and given orders to for a little over a year, was now a part of the group in charge of

her, holding her against her will. This was the same woman who occasionally begged to be brought hand-me-downs and old clothes for herself and her sisters.

'I don't seek power,' Admire responded, picking up clothes from the basket. 'We are only out for truth and meaningful justice. This one event will show the world what we are about.'

'It's a good thing you don't seek power because whether you're playing the part of a fake revolutionary or not, even in your revolution you're still the same thing: a maid. You'll always be a maid. Fold my clothes and put them on the desk over here,' Kele cracked the words out like a whip. Admire roared with laughter.

'They're for hanging. You still don't get it, do you? Yes, I may be doing what you call the job of a maid right now, but I am working for something bigger than myself. A larger cause that even includes you and your children's children. But, you wouldn't know anything about fighting for children? As Agnes told us, you can't even look after your own boy. Not that I needed to hear it from her; I've seen some of it for myself.' An accusatory look flashed across Admire's eyes before she turned to put the clothes on the hanger. Her look stung Kele.

'That's funny because Agnes couldn't look after her own life,' she hissed. She regretted the words as soon as they left her.

'I don't know happened to Agnes, but whatever she got, she probably deserved it. She is not bigger than the movement. It's people like you who are a problem, Kele; people who think they or others are above the mess that this country is. It's wonderful for the likes of you to live in a broken society that you benefit from, while your brothers and sisters are locked out of it – kept out of its mainstream economy, culture, politics.'

'Oh, not this from you. Are we going to act educated in the workings of society now? Stick to what you do, please. No one is going to mistake you for the brains of whatever is going on here. What do you mean people are locked out of their culture? People are in charge of their own cultures; white people, or whoever you're blaming here have absolutely nothing to do with how you live your life and express yourself in your culture. I'll give it to you with the economy, and even the politics, but our culture is ours to do what we wish with it, especially since our freedom as a people.'

'And what did you do with yours since your so-called freedom?' Admire asked, not with the scorn Kele would have expected, but with something akin to concern – pity even. 'You may not know it to look at us, my dear, but we are educated in ways your kind is yet to discover.' She walked deeper into the room as though she were surveying it all of a sudden. She took small cautious steps until she was on the far end of the room, right under the camera. 'You're still focused on who is a maid and who isn't? There's clearly a lot you still need to learn.' She turned around and hurried back towards the door and stood by the basket. She pulled something out of it, from under what looked like sheets.

Kele's heart almost beat to a halt.

'I cleaned them,' Admire said, holding up a pair of boots. 'Just on the outside.'

'Oh, you shouldn't have worried about that,' Kele hastened to say, already reaching out with both hands to collect her shoes.

'No, I *should've* worried about *that*; it is my job as a maid,' she looked at Kele with a touch of smug irony in her eyes.

She placed the boots on the floor instead. 'Besides, if it's the phone you are so eager to get, I already took care of that,' she tapped the pocket above her left breast to show Kele where it was. 'I'll be giving it to Mr Simon as soon as he gets back,' she said.

'That phone–'

'Don't worry about the phone. I'd get back to *that* if I were you. It's *far* more useful to you at this time,' she said, pointing at Maître's file, the booklet, and CD player.

Before Kele could muster a response Admire turned around, pressed the keypad, and walked out just as she'd come in, with the basket back over her forearm. Yet it was Kele's pride and no longer a hanger that she held in her other hand.

Chapter Thirty-Three

Nakedi pressed the intercom three times before the gate was opened. Although it was Sunday night there were a lot of cars in the parking lot. Loud house music filled the air and was carried off by the wind in descending echoes towards the ocean and the Mead and Mellow below. Nakedi took his bag and food out of the car and made his way towards his room. He walked past a braai fire and saw a sizeable crowd behind it at the restaurant where music and dancing were in full swing. The hunger in his belly was deep, but he didn't know whether he could stomach the commotion and numbers of people that were at the tables. He wanted go to the restaurant to order something a takeaway. Besides, he was curious to find out whether or not Buntu was in the crowd, but he feared being seen by many eyes at once. It made him feel naked, like the terrible things he had done were in plain view for everyone to see. He was suddenly assailed by an eerie sense of foreboding. Someone, or many people, somewhere, were talking about him, asking questions, determined to get answers. So he forewent the idea of a takeaway meal and made a steady climb up wooden steps instead, passing the showers on his right. There was the sound of water and steam was emanating from the bathroom window. At the top he traversed a little camping area with tents to either side of him. He walked up another set of wooden steps and under the cover of trees to a final landing. It was a few more steps to his door. He was worn out from the sheer climb by the time he got to his room. The place was huge, but despite its roominess, its air was choked with dust and mustiness. He hit the lights and looked above. There was a network of beams in the form of planks, and beyond them, naked sheets of corrugated iron made up the full extent of the ceiling. A gecko, two, were on the ceiling above the bed, which was a few paces directly ahead of him. To his left was a bathroom. Its door was ajar though closed, tenuously held in place by a stick and rope mechanism that Nakedi found forgivable only in such a plain setting. He walked towards the bed. Above it was a steel ring with a mosquito net draped from it. The net hung in the centre of the bed, having to be avoided. He put his bag down next to the bed and threw himself on it, taking care not to hit the dangling object. He lay there for a second with his face down but his hunger demanded his attention. He'd felt a series of pangs on the way in, and the smell of the meat on the braai had rekindled them. He got up and looked towards the kitchen. There was a fridge, a stove, a sink, as well as a high table (with high tripod leather stools); cupboards too. A ladder caught his eye. It led up to a ledge on which there were more sleeping places, supposedly for kids. The wall beyond the beds was sheer glass. Nakedi thought about what an amazing view it must be to rise to, facing the ocean with the sun on it. Still the hunger called. He got up and walked to the kitchen. He opened the cupboards to find plates and bowls. There was cutlery in the top drawer too. In and among all the stainless steel, the first thing he noticed was a can opener. He thought about his canned sausages and his bread rolls. The dullness of that meal, in comparison to the *boerewors* or steak down at the restaurant, seemed to drain even more strength out of him. But the crowd and music below were

a good deterrent. He took the can opener and made a meal of what he had. When he was done he called Sabine.

'Hello, Nakedi,' she said.

'Hi… Sorry I couldn't follow,' he rushed to explain. 'The evening and its problems just stretched itself. Is everything okay on your side?'

'I called an old friend on the way here. She mentors some young doctors and she asked a Dr Qotoyi to help me out with whatever I needed. Qotoyi's nice. At least she sounded nice when we spoke over the phone. She's on her way. But we've done the paperwork.'

Nakedi said nothing. He wanted to ask Sabine what name she used to check the boy in, but he couldn't. It would further raise her suspicions of him. But his surname was dangerous for Nakedi because they shared it.

'Your son still has not said a thing. I'm worried about him,' Sabine said. Nakedi seemed to not know what to say, so Sabine continued. 'How did it go with Fezile? Any word of Buntu?'

'Yes, and no. It turned out to be another boy Fezile was with; a boy from East London. But he knew Buntu.' Nakedi decided to skip the complications of their relationship. 'I did get wind of where my brother was last seen,' he said with a distinct air of optimism. 'When are you coming back?'

'That'll depend on the doctor. Once she's done with Donovan and he can go I'm coming straight back.'

There was silence. Sabine broke it.

'You should be here.'

'Okay,' Nakedi responded. He felt himself wince as one suffering from an ailment. He wanted to tell Sabine everything about his life – everything. He wanted to tell her about Monday night, and before that. He longed to lay bare the details of his love and marriage to Kele; how it had happened and why it had come apart at the seams. He yearned to share stories about his travels on the ships, and as a flight attendant – to France – to the rest of the world. He needed his former lover to know how she'd made much of that possible for him, even if he served trays of food and cleaned toilets inflight doing it. He was grateful now, more than he had ever been before, if at all he'd ever been grateful. He wanted her to know that he knew he would have been just another kid from another black government school were it not for her. He wanted to tell Sabine that before his life had become broken, he'd become someone she would have been proud of. But he was a mess now. That's all he was. And the words with which to begin sharing his heart with her eluded him. It used to come so easily as a child, but the weight of everything in his world was like a strain on his chest, like a chain, shackling the very

breaths that would have carried his words. He went on long after clearing his throat, but instead of addressing anything about Donovan he was beginning to speak of Buntu again. But Sabine cut him off.

'Are you scared for your son? I mean, are you afraid for him that he may never be completely well again? Have you become your father, and are you leaving me to take care of your son too, as he did?'

Sabine's barrage of questions came as a complete surprise.

'Of course I am scared for my son. Why would you ask me that?'

'I am not saying one should not love their brother, or cousin in this case, any less; but the way you've automatically picked Buntu as more important than your son is bewildering to me. Maybe I speak out of turn and I speak as a woman, but I would look after my son first and let others look for Buntu in the meantime. Besides, he is grown enough to fend for himself unlike your boy.'

Nakedi knew he had no real connection with Donovan. He also knew he never wanted a child when the boy came. It was asinine, but he had even resented the boy for coming into the world. He took a deep breath before he spoke to Sabine. He opened his mouth, but nothing came out.

'Are you going to say anything for yourself, Nakedi? Are you going to say anything at all, even about running around with a bag of money in your boot and fabricated stories on the tip of your tongue?'

Still Nakedi said nothing. Instead of words, his long silence was followed by a stream of quiet tears.

'I have to go,' he said as his voice gave him away, and dropped the phone.

Not long afterwards his phone beeped. It was a text from Sabine, but he didn't care to read it. He got himself off the leather high chair and took off his shoes. Next, he walked back to the bed. Instead of throwing himself on it this time though, he slid under the covers, curled up, and gave the full weight of his body over to the mattress while his tears soaked into his pillow.

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It was almost midnight when Nakedi woke with his bladder full, cold with the door wide open. He got up and looked around to see if he was missing anything. His bag was still where he'd left it. He went first to the bathroom. He was still in his jeans and t-shirt. It was a big step down into a room that appeared to have been an afterthought and constructed with thin corrugated Perspex sheets. The

night was more alive inside it than in the bedroom. After he relieved himself and washed his hands he decided on a pair of shorts. But first there was the small matter of closing the door. The wind blew the curtains in before sucking them out. Nakedi ran to remedy the situation. He got quickly to the door and as the curtain blew outwards again he leaned outside to retrieve it. Two figures walked out of the lodge across from his onto a dimly lit patio. From what Nakedi could make out they were male, each with a glass of something in hand. They were of similar build but one had a hat on – a trilby or something like it – and the other wore short dreadlocks. Nakedi had already corralled the unruly curtain, but something about the way the boys moved and giggled caught his interest. They walked in his direction, but away from where he could see them and down the stairs of their cottage. They appeared again, silhouettes in the dim lights beyond them. The guy with the hat was in front. He stopped and turned so suddenly his companion ran up against his face, surely stopping short of kissing him. They must be drunk and going back to the party, Nakedi thought. But just as he realised there was no longer the booming of house music in the air, the guy with the hat swung both his arms around his companion. Their lips fell into each other. And with what seemed like unabated longing, they lavished on each other kisses like gulps. Nakedi felt his skin crawl as he watched. He tightened his grip on the door but held it open for a moment longer. Just as he was stepping back with the door in tow, the objects of his gaze turned and looked at him.

'What are you staring at?' shouted the guy with the dreadlocks. 'You want some of these donuts? Caramel and chocolate, baby; caramel and cho-co-late!'
His friend laughed and pulled him in, whispering something Nakedi guessed was of a licentious nature.

'You made me wet,' shouted the guy dreadlocked guy into the night sky. The words were for the voyeur's benefit, to taunt him, it seemed. But his friend raised his voice even higher, explaining himself:

'*Hayi thyini, nangoku nje undimanzisile. Undimanzise ngale*-wine *apha emqolo… ngok' ubundi hug-a!'* The twosome giggled. They ran.

As they approached the wooden steps leading down to the camp site, lights fell on them from below. In that brief moment of illumination, Nakedi saw his brother's features under the trilby. He was at once sure of it, then he wasn't. But he knew he had to find out for certain. It took absolutely no time for him to lock up and follow the couple as they capered down the stairs. The disgust of their kiss filled him, it wouldn't leave him; but a mix of curiosity and trepidation pounded in his chest as he walked. When he reached the first set of stairs and was walking down towards the tents he saw the two boys had stopped on the edge of the landing before then next set of steps. They were kissing again. Nakedi took a step back into the shadows in order to conceal himself. When they proceeded downstairs again, he followed, as stealthily as he could. The couple reached the final landing and

began running. Naked tried not to pound audibly on the steps as he fought to keep up. Again, he doubted it was Buntu in the hat, but he had to be absolutely certain. When Nakedi reached the bottom he was confronted by the decision of which direction to take. The path straight ahead led towards a couple of dormitories, and past them to the right, down towards the parking lot. Before all that though, was the left turn to the restaurant, just where the braai fire had been burning earlier.

'Did they go into the showers to make love?' Nakedi wondered, but soon decided the thought was a stupid one. 'Why would they leave a room they have all to themselves only to make love in a public bathroom?' But Nakedi heard whispers up ahead in the direction of the dormitories. He followed them. Two women and a man came up suddenly. They were headed for the restaurant. Nakedi turned his head so they wouldn't make out his face. They passed him, seemingly unconcerned with his presence as they laughed among themselves. He decided he would go back to the room. He had lost the boys. But there was a turn he had missed. It was to his right before but lay to his left now. It led away behind the wall of the dorms. It was bordered on the other side by trees that ran a straight line into darkness and Lord knows what. Nakedi listened in that direction, his ears sifting the air for voices through the other natural sounds of the night. He thought he heard something. Contrary to the decision he'd just now made to go back to the room, he found himself venturing into the darkness beyond the dormitories. He took out the phone from his pocket and used its light for his feet, lest he trip on something. His steps were tiny and more like shuffles; his feet hardly leaving the ground. He stopped to listen again. There was nothing but the heartbeat of the night in the air. He killed the light of the phone and put the thing back in his pocket. He had gone in too deep for his liking, but he knew he had no obstacles to worry about ahead of him now. There was a sound of a cracking twig or branch, but Nakedi hadn't stepped on anything. He froze. There were male voices in the air now, and in the distance, he thought he saw something move.

'Stop; I think there's someone watching,' whispered one voice, barely audible.

'There's no one!'

'I really think there is. I thought there was a light that came on just before, but wasn't sure.'

Nakedi stood very still.

'Where? Maybe someone put on a dorm light or something. But who cares? Whoever wants to watch can watch; it's a beautiful thing, love. Everybody should have it; and if they don't, they should at least see it in action.' There was laughter from both boys. Now hidden behind a tree, Nakedi could make out their feint shapes and features against the stump of a trunk. Their laughter was followed by kissing noises and suppressed moans that ascended and mingled with the trill of the night.

'I wanna see you,' said one of the voices.

Nakedi knew that neither of the voices belonged to Buntu. He was free to turn around and sneak away, but his feet felt somehow one with the ground. He couldn't move, and he couldn't take his eyes off the little he could make out of the lewd act. There was fidgeting. Bodies moved in the shadows.

'I really wanna see you,' repeated the same voice as before.

'No, it's fine like this,' complained the other boy. 'Just come. Sit. Stop with the phone.'

A light came on and illuminated parts of the act for Nakedi to see. The boys were face to face now, both their pants off. The one with dreadlocks was sitting on the other's lap. Nakedi could finally see the face under the hat clearly. Just as the voices had confirmed previously, it wasn't Buntu. The boy's face was contorted this way then that way with pleasure as the other boy rocked back and forth on him. Two things built up inside Nakedi. The first was a bizarre surge of excitement that filled him and sent an unwanted whisper to his manhood; the other was unadulterated disgust. The latter formed itself into a viscous mass that swam inside him before rising up to his throat and erupting out of his mouth.

'Who's there?' shouted the two male voices out of the dark. Their phone fell to the ground. Nakedi moved. When they picked it up and turned its light in Nakedi's direction, it was not strong enough to reach him. He was running. When he got to the paving by the bathroom and the wooden stairs, he decided against going to his room. What if the two boys knew it was him and came to confront him? He knew he had more than a step on them because they had to put on their pants before chasing. So he walked hurriedly towards the bar instead of to his room.

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When he reached the bar, Nakedi sat down. There was a group of three at a table away from where he was standing. He recognised them. It was the same trio he had encountered and ducked earlier. They had three bottles of wine and were seeing to them. Nakedi kept looking in the direction he'd come from, but no one seemed to have followed him. He was still shocked by what he'd witnessed but more so his reaction to it. He gave the people at the far off table his back, then took Buntu's phone out of his pocket and began doing what he should have done a long time ago. He combed through its texts, emails and photos. First he went through the SMSes and Whatsapps, (ignoring Sabine's text) but decided he should be going through the pictures first.

There was one of the Mbonise boy and Buntu at something like a camp. There was another one of them at a school play, dressed in togas. Nakedi could not imagine anything between them. After

what he had seen he found it difficult to reconcile the image of his brother with anything homosexual. He flipped to another picture. It was of Buntu playing badminton at a tournament. Nakedi quickly flipped past it. It had no useful clues to offer him. The next picture though was exactly the same as the previous one, only it was cropped and zoomed into. The gracefulness of his brother's body, in full flight, with his arm outstretched in pursuit of the shuttlecock, stood immediately out to him as feminine. Despite the daring dexterity of the move though, there was tranquillity, a sense of effortlessness, on his face.

'Sprezzatura,' Nakedi thought. It was one of many words he'd learned from his time on Sabine's bosom.

He flipped to the next picture. Again, it was the Q and Buntu. They were topless now, inside a tent, probably at the same camp. The next picture didn't so much startle Nakedi as give him a surreal feeling, like reality was the ground, and it was moving under his feet, shifting. It was also in the tent. The boys had taken a selfie of themselves kissing. There was a tap on Nakedi's shoulder.

'Hey you,' said a voice.

He started and turned around to find one of the women who'd been sitting with the tall white man drinking wine.

'You never came back for dessert,' she said.

He didn't recognise her at first. She was the girl from the bar earlier, but she was different now, swaying like a reed in a somnolent wind. Her yarmulke of a weave was under a cap and she was slurring her words.

'Oh shit, this guy, shame. You know him?' she said, looking at Nakedi's phone.

Chapter Thirty-Four

After listening to Malcolm, Kele realised just how dire the situation she was in was. She worried about her role in this event, and what exactly was expected of her and Maître. The fact that she had been dating the leader of the Black Spiders for more than a year would not reflect well on her and she knew it – even if she'd done it unwittingly. Her mother and father came to mind. Would she ever see them again? Would they even care now if they knew where she was and what she was going through? She figured her mother would only berate her for her consistently errant choice in men, and her father would do what he always did since the day he found out she was pregnant with Donovan: look away, as if facing her would somehow taint his Catholic sensibilities. Kele wondered how many other media personnel were trapped here besides herself and Maître. The bald-headed man had mentioned Phumlani Ndleleni before, and in her text, Ayanda talked about Thando. Could that mean the two of them were already here? Where could they be? What was *their* version of the Final Curtain going to be? She let the fantasy of joining forces with them take her over for a minute, but at once recalled the horrors she had seen through the doctors' windows earlier: the dead figures covered in blood-spotted sheets and the man she watched lose a finger. She wondered who he was and what media house he was from. Or was he one of them and had he failed them like Agnes did? Besides being thrown by the sheer terror of the moment, she had been unable to make out his face at the time because it was oriented slightly upwards and partly covered with the straps that held it in place. She thought of Admire and the phone, and wondered whether any of the torture she had seen was now going to be her fate. She had to impress the bald-headed man. She had to make herself indispensable to him if she was going to survive the phone and give herself a chance at freedom. She looked at the CD and booklet and went over the material again, studiously this time. Malcolm's introduction – that passion-filled lamentation of the poor condition of Africans in a country and on a continent that is supposed to be their home was electric again. It was followed by a breakdown of the problem. And they, the media, he said, were a significant part of the issue. The positions they took when they revisited history or omitted it as the original context of current issues, was narrow and geared towards a growing state of socio-historical amnesia in the country. Malcolm began his protest with a stab at the idea of a father of a nation.

'*First of all there are two political Nelson Mandelas we should be aware of,'* he explained. *'There is the young revolutionary who was sent to prison, that every African should always remember, cherish and commemorate. Then there is the Mandela Square Nelson – the old benign statue of a man whose spirit was too old and broken to remember the things that stood behind his initial fight. That is the Mandela who surrendered for the sake of the vote above all else.'*

Malcolm accused the media of deifying the older Mandela and consistently forcing him down the people's throats because he was easier on the consciences of those who still occupied stolen land and siphoned the country's resources for their own riches and the well-being of their children.

'*There is more when it comes to this amnesia,*' he said. '*The African in this country has seen more than apartheid. So if we talk about white subjugation we must go back to even before the Frontier Wars and the mass dispossession of land through the law, the snatching of the economy, and the erasure of history and culture. We must go back to when the African still had true independence; free, to determine for himself what his African destiny was. Then we must look at how the life of the African was disrupted from here onwards by the white nation.'*

There was a pause here that didn't sound deliberate. Kele's instinct as a producer made her wish she could clean the clumsy gap in the audio.

'The media play up this democracy nonsense every couple of years, highlighting how apartheid was beaten and we are free. It's like we set the parameters of African pain between the forty-six years that the Afrikaner was in political power. We forget the concentration camps of the British in the South African War. We forget the scorched earth policy of Kitchener; the killing of all crops and livestock and the putting of women and children in cages. We pay no attention to the S.S. Mendi and the deaths of our fathers on the high seas, far away from home on their way to serve in a world war on the side of their own conquerors. We close our eyes to the slave uprisings of the 1800s. What were they rising against? Certainly not apartheid; something preceding it; something worse! And were the Khoi not wiped out by the Dutch who were forefathers of Verwoerd who was only later to be an architect of apartheid? Is the decimation of a people not of more significance than the pilfering of their land, possessions, and dignity? At least the living still have a chance to fight to get their losses back. When a people are obliterated and removed off the face of the earth that's something else. When white people are killed in this manner it's genocide. Now I know I'll be criticised, as people often are, when they speak of African pain and highlight our long history of subjugation by white people, and talk about seeking justice. Yet when the child of Israel speaks about how he suffered at the hands of the Führer, no one is quick to tell him to forget, lest that person be soiled with the unfavourable title of anti-Semite. There were no Nuremberg-style trials here in South Africa, after centuries of crimes visited on the African body. There was no victory for the African. Africans do not write their own history. This is the reason why even in the imagination of some Africans, the pain of an Anne Frank or Viktor Frankel, or even the collective, is larger than life. This is while Steve Biko is reduced to a headshot emblazoned on t-shirts and posters of festivals, much like Che Guevara. The difference between the child of Israel and that of the soil is that the allied forces won that war and came to the aid of the other. The Africans of South Africa, and many other countries in Africa, did not win any wars against the white colonisers of Europe. Many of these so-called liberated countries still worship

at the altar of their colonial headquarters. It is only the elite who move into positions and revel in the opportunities and riches that exist. In that time they purport to inspire the rest of us with speeches, to wait in the wings and to live vicariously through them, because all the time, there is a burgeoning middle class, they tell us, and if we do the right things and live life according to their rules, we'll become part of it.

'But the child of Israel never forgot. He never forgets his pain. The commemorations of his struggles and history are not reduced to braais and booze. They are genuine. In fact, the memory of his struggle is so far reaching it rests between the covers of one of the most read books on the planet: the Bible. His history becomes the history of the world through it. We understand his pain. But when it comes to the African, the child of the soil must pipe down and forget what happened before 1948 and before 1994 in South Africa. Yet all of it is the same struggle; it's only the players and perimeters of it that shift. The loss of the African began centuries ago. He must stop to look and take stock of what he has lost; consider the extent of his complicity in that loss, as well as the best way to have all that is his – including his dignity – returned to him.'

Kele stopped the disc. She did not agree with being kidnapped and tortured, and she absolutely didn't agree with terrorism or whatever this was. But she wondered deeper about the merits of some of what Malcolm was saying. It was all rushing in her mind much too untidily for her to form any opinions. She carried on with the disc.

'*There are other very good reasons why the Jewish struggle is so rich and so deep and meaningful even to the non-Jew. Not only does the Christian world learn to empathise with the child of Israel through the biblical existence of his history, but the child has the advantage of another thing. He owns one of the means of production it is vital to own in the world as a people: significant chunks of the mainstream media. So whether it's Spielberg's* Schindler's List *in the form of a movie or calling out a supposed anti-Semite in other media, the Jew always has at his disposal a global soap-box from which to share his opinion, and remember and commemorate his pain on his own terms. And should an anti-Semite surface indeed, the world whose opinion the Jew has influenced through his media, issues a clarion call to denounce the anti-Semite before the child of Israel opens his own mouth. Do not be fooled; media ownership is absolute power.*

'And on that note, let's talk for a moment about the long line of Afrikaans capital and media in South Africa, as well as that of the English. They have long been a power-base for these groups. The media, even the liberal media, has always, first and foremost, held up the views, represented the aspirations, and favoured the economy and the culture of the white man here in South Africa, at the expense of the African. Ultimately, it is the media we seek to own, and we will own them, even if for a brief period of time, so we can speak unimpeded.'

Kele didn't know what he meant by owning the media for a brief period. Was that what this was? Were they going to take over media houses for broadcast? She didn't know how that might happen. Surely they'd be sitting ducks for the police if they were on site at Reijger, broadcasting from there. 'Maybe they're going to patch in and broadcast remotely,' Kele thought.

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There were no further meals for the rest of the day and she was famished. She certainly no longer knew what day it was or even what time of day. She guessed it was Sunday morning or afternoon, maybe late Saturday night. The project of trying to figure out the time suddenly seemed futile, so she turned her attention to the one thing that never took its attention off her: the camera. It was bothering her that she couldn't decipher what Maître had tried to tell her.

'Now what was she saying about you?' Kele asked again, as though she were addressing a child from whom she was coaxing out a guarded secret. 'What does she know about you that I don't?'

Chapter Thirty-Five

Precious, as the girl's name turned out to be, invited Nakedi over to the table where she was sitting with her friends. He was about to refuse when the two boys he'd followed and watched came around the corner with another male friend. They headed straight towards his table, and as they advanced he took her up on her offer.

'I don't know the boy. I found the phone, and I was looking through it… you know… so I could give it back to him,' he said, a little awkward in answering the question she'd asked. He got up. The phone was already in his pocket.

'You'll have to go to Ntafufu then, if you still want to give it back. It's just a shame what happened to him; that's all,' said Precious. 'Where did you find the phone, here at the backpackers?'

'Yes, hidden by a tree in the parking lot. You know where the boy is? What happened to him?'

'Nothing major, just a fight. You know boys, or should I say 'wannabe men', when it comes to this manhood thing. It was an argument about that.'

'Was he hurt? Is he okay?'

'I said nothing major. Why do you care so much for a stranger anyway? Did you find pity for him along with his phone?'

'Do you know where he is now?' Nakedi asked.

'Ntafufu, that's all I know. Enough about the boy. We're drinking now. I invited you for a drink. Do you want it or not? Keep the phone if you want. I won't tell anyone; I didn't see anything.' She winked, with the reflex of s drunk person.

Nakedi let the conversation about Buntu go. He and Precious were already by the table with her friends. He would talk to her again tomorrow, when sober. At least he knew where Buntu was, and that was enough. Wherever Ntafufu was, it would be smaller than Port St Johns, he thought. And that was small. He was closing in on Buntu, and he felt it.

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Nakedi was sipping on a glass of wine now. The men were sitting across from each other and so were the young women. The restaurant was filled with that untidy tranquillity typical of the aftermath of a no-holds-barred good time. Nakedi recalled the noise from earlier as he looked around at the state of the restaurant and bar area, between stealing glances at the three boys from afar. They

were sitting at the table next to the one he'd been sitting at. He appreciated the conversation with his new found companions. It took his mind off things. He liked it mostly because he didn't have to do any of the talking. That was Art's job, it seemed, or Art Monger, as the man preferred to be called by his full name.

'Yes, I rather like my full name because it is a thing, you know? I am a monger of art. It gives me purpose although I know absolutely fuck-all about art. Couldn't tell you a Picasso from a *poes*'s job.' He laughed at himself. 'It's like a black man's name or a Native Indian's.' He paused and mustered an unsuccessful Native American accent. 'I am Man Who Mongs Art, dear friend; what name do you go by?'
The women laughed, though the lady whose name he hadn't yet learned appeared to be laughing less at the jesting and more at the jester.

'I am Man Who is Trust; they call me Tshepo.' Nakedi humoured Art, though he too found this puerile. But Art took this as a sign to carry on with the act and accent. His face was fixed into a hard pout before each broken sentence he spewed.
'White people name usually not have meaning. Mitchell, Martin, Stuart. Can anyone tell Chief what a Stuart is?'

'Nobody knows, Man Who Mongs Art,' shouted Precious clearly amused.

'I know what a Martin is,' chimed in her friend quickly with a curious smile in her eyes. She seemed to be fighting the dullness.

'Pray tell Chief Art what Martin is.' Art was using his wine glass as a microphone or the head of a staff, Nakedi couldn't quite tell from his joggling it to the side of his chin and in front of his mouth.
'Martin,' the mixed-race lady said as she put on a flat African English accent, 'Martin is the cousin of beef.'

Everybody laughed. The young woman's name was Leontien, Nakedi learned. He also realised she was not as drunk as the other two and that she did not work at the backpackers' lodge as they did.

The boys at the table had been sharing two cigarettes among the three of them. They were done. They looked Nakedi's way and waved goodbye before they walked off. He recoiled deep down inside, but tried to conceal it.

'I see you don't drink queer beer,' Art said. 'I don't like faggots either.'

'Stop calling them that,' Leontien protested at once.

'What are they?' Precious shouted in defence of Art. 'What are they?'

As she spoke, Art passed Nakedi a clean glass and offered him some wine.

‘Would you like a coke?’ he asked as he tilted the wine towards him and poured it.

The young women looked at each other.

‘I don’t get it,’ said Precious, and took a big gulp from her glass.

‘Well, if we are going to stop calling things by exactly what they are, we are all going to get confused, aren’t we?’ Art said, overtaken by a bout of passion. ‘Wine is not *cola* and homosexuals are faggots. All I did was ask this man—’ he looked apologetically at Nakedi. ‘What’s your name again, buddy?’

‘Tshepo.’

‘Yes, all I did was ask Tchepo here if he liked faggots or not. Sorry, Tchepo, I don’t mean it like that,’ he stopped to say with a sincere look in his eyes, and then burst out laughing.

‘Do you think gay people are faggots?’ Leontien cut in. Her eyes were fixed on Nakedi, and he was transfixed by their gaze. There was a confident manner of being about her and was intrigued by it.

‘It’s complicated,’ he replied.

‘What the fuck do you mean it’s complicated, man?’ Art burst out. ‘This is not a fucking relationship setting on Facebook.’ He paused. ‘Sorry, pardon my French,’ he said. ‘Turns out I’m a French Fuck and not an Indian Chief.’ He laughed with his neck extended and face upturned to the night before he began to howl like a wolf.

‘If you think people’s souls shouldn’t connect just because society feels this kind of body shouldn’t get together with that kind of body, then you can drop the French and say exactly what you are, Arthur.’

‘Whoa,’ responded the tall man mockingly, putting his palms up in peace and lowering his head in submission. ‘You can’t disagree with a woman nowadays, even about penises; though you own one and she doesn’t.’ He was looking at Nakedi as he spoke; as though there were a wall between him and Leontien.

Nakedi was feeling the pressure to choose sides. Perhaps Art noticed this and decided to diffuse the tension he was responsible for creating.

‘Okay, fuck it, I’ve got a joke for you all. It’s a peacemaker; you’ll love it,’ he said. He rubbed his hands together as he asked a question: ‘What are the names of those two Irish f—‘ he halted, and

turned to Leontien. He smiled an impish smile before going on slowly. ‘What are the names of those two Irish *homosexuals*?’

There was a brief silence and it seemed everyone was either contemplating or waiting for an answer.

‘I don’t know,’ shouted Precious.

‘Nobody knows? Going once, going twice! No one knows? Okay I’ll put you out of your misery.’ He shaped the fingers of his one hand into an ‘O’ and extended the index finger on his other hand. He poked the finger into the hole of his ‘O’ and said: ‘Their names, my good friends, are Patrick Fitzgerald (fits Gerald),’ he paused for dramatic effect, ‘and Gerald Fitzpatrick (fits Patrick). He fits him right back!’ He laughed and howled.

Art was at the level of inebriation where he was the most hilarious man in the whole world, but only to himself. And perhaps he was a little funny to Precious too, because she was giggling away softly despite the awkwardness of the moment.
Leontien pushed the remainder of her glass of wine away from her.

‘Had enough?’ Nakedi asked.

‘Enough of?’

‘The wine?’ he said.

‘That and more!’ she replied. She nodded her head at Art and rolled her eyes. Then she turned her wrist upwards to look at her watch. ‘Geez, it’s going for 1am,’ she said with alarm in her voice. ‘I’ve got to head out early tomorrow morning, Presh. I don’t think coming out here to hang out with you was the best decision, babe. If I had slept in town tonight I wouldn’t have the morning trip on my conscience right now. And now here we are with this idiot of a friend of yours. The party was great and everything, *mntase*; and seeing you was the best, don’t get me wrong. I’m just tired. You think we can head off to the room now?’

‘We’re not heading off anywhere until I say so,’ Art began as though he’d been given cause to speak.

‘*Eish mntase*,’ Precious said with a guilty look in her heavy drunk eyes. ‘About the room *neh*. You know I normally sleep at Art’s place if the rooms are fully booked. I didn’t know they were chock-a-block before we came back to the party here. We were going to sneak a couple of bunks in one of the dorms, but the place just filled up today. Even *he* came today unexpected without a booking,’ she said, pointing at Nakedi.

‘Yes, we sleep together,’ Art interrupted with an arm raised up high like a good student. ‘Yes, we sleep on the same bed, *but*, we don’t *fornicate*. So it’s safe, see,’ he addressed Nakedi and then Leontien with a smile of exaggerated innocence. The smile went away. ‘But my not *pomping* her in the night certainly does not make me a *genteel* man, Tchepo; no, sir! It makes me a *gentle*-man.’

‘So what are you saying to me about where we are spending the night, Precious?’ Leontien’s anger rose. She buried her face in the palm of her hand, hoping as an ostrich might, that this new bad situation would somehow make itself go away.
Precious shrugged her shoulders as she spoke: ‘I guess I am saying all the rooms are booked and the three of us can sleep on Art’s bed.’

‘There’s nothing, not even in the dorms?’ Leontien confirmed.

There was a long silence. Leontien filled it again.

‘Okay, that’s that I guess. I’m going to sit right here and wait for sunrise. I am not sharing anything with a man who is so far from being evolved his family could be Neanderthals. We don’t call gay people faggots in this day and age; no we don’t.’

‘You can have my room,’ Nakedi found himself offering. He’d been quiet for a while, looking for the perfect gap to excuse himself. ‘I mean, I don’t want to sleep three in a bed with Art Monger and your cousin over here, so I’m not trading places with you and giving you the entire thing. I just have a few beds in there, and there’s only one of me. Besides, it’s only for a few hours.’

‘Yes, he’s right; he’s in Crystal House, and it is huuuuge!’ Precious confirmed, glad her cousin was taken care of.
Leontien thought long about it.

‘As long as you don’t hate gay people, I’ll sleep with you,’ Leontien said in the end.

‘Uh oh,’ her cousin warned. ‘Be careful how you say that, *mntase*. You could end up with another body in the bed with you tonight if you say it like that. And there might be *pomping* if you ask me.’ She burst into a fit of giggles. Her eyes looked Nakedi up and down for a second before she stopped. She appeared to have remembered something. ‘But you’re safe here, I think. He might say it’s complicated how he feels about faggots, but he was holding a picture of that faggot who was in a fight the other day.

‘My God! Stop using that word,’ cried Leontien.

‘Okay then, not faggots; a pack of castrated wolves,’ said Art to himself and let out a mournful howl.

‘I’m sorry, Leo,’ Precious relented, but she didn’t seem remorseful. ‘The wine is finished, Arty-Farty,’ she said next. . ‘Does that mean the same for our night too?’

Leontien made sure with Nakedi once again that it was okay to go back to his room with him. There was no longer any charm to what was left of the night for any of the company, it seemed. So they parted ways. Nakedi left Precious and her friend at the bar, and as he walked with Leontien past the spot where he’d first encountered the three of them, he recalled the boy in the trilby and his companion: first their kiss and then the cell phone light. Just as before, delight and disgust, two feelings that rarely mingle with each other stirred themselves inside him.

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When they reached the room Nakedi changed into his shorts in the bathroom. When he came out Leontien was lying on her stomach on the bed, rolling a homemade cigarette.

‘You don’t mind; do you? Please don’t go all righteous on me. I’ll smoke it outside.’
Nakedi walked over and looked at the marijuana on left on the paper. It was light green, the texture of the bud and leaves fluffy, with a crystalline finish to it.
‘It’s *blueberry cheese*,’ she said.

He knew what it was, but said nothing.

‘Mind if I join you?’ he said.

‘I often smoke alone,’ she replied, ‘but it *is* always good to puff and pass with a cool stranger.’

They smoked on the balcony and talked as they half sat and half lay on a wide hammock-like bench. The wind had chased the clouds away and stars populated the dark sky in abundance.

‘Are you really into men?’ asked Leontien abruptly.

The question came as a bit of a shock.

‘Why do you ask me that? Did you really believe the shit Precious was saying?’

‘No, not necessarily,’ she said, ‘But there’s nothing wrong with it, even if you are.’

There was a moment’s silence. Nakedi took her words in. His gaze locked onto hers before his teeth began to show through a devilish smile.

‘The only way I’d be into men, my dear, is if *you* were one.’

‘Oh! Okay, brother man with the original lines. Okay!’ exclaimed Leontien in a mock African-American accent, her voice pitched high. ‘And with that killer smile to boot, too. Ooh, child! I think my cousin was indeed wrong about you. I do think we should test you out though, just to make sure; you know, sleep on the same bed and see what happens.’

‘Me and you on the same bed? What if I jumped you?’ he asked. ‘What would you do then?’

‘Well, then maybe you’re not gay. Although you could be bisexual – and that’s fine too.’

They both smiled. Leontien looked at the joint. It had gone off in her hand.

‘Roach?’ she asked and lit it. ‘And if you’re bisexual, I think I might want to molest you first anyway,’ she said, passing the cigarette to him, searching his face earnestly for a reaction in the dimness of the balcony light. ‘Or would that make me a bad girl in your mind?’

Since the early days, when Sabine had first instructed Nakedi how to work with a woman’s body, he’d grown up and had countless encounters of his own. There were enough teachers to solidify his ease and comfort around women and sex.

‘First of all; I invited you into my world, and whatever your world comes within the next few hours until sunrise, is welcome here. If you would like to forget your cares for a while and lay with me, that’s fine. I’ll gladly give you my body for your pleasure.’ He smiled. ‘But then again, you may be a little intoxicated and buzzing and you don’t know what you’re saying.’

‘You’re an interesting character, Tshepo.’ she said. ‘Many guys I know would have already tried to jump me if I made even half the kind of offer I’ve just made you. And here you are still telling me I may have offered you a good time because I’ve had a little something to drink and smoke.’ She was quiet. ‘I bed men I want to bed, Tshepo. When I want to bed them, if and when they want me back. You can call me a sexual revolutionary.’

‘What’s that?’

‘Let’s just loosely call me a feminist who is about attaining and defending her power in the world, and not letting men automatically decide her trajectory in anything.’

‘Ooh, attain, trajectory!’ Nakedi laughed. ‘These are big words for the weekend, aren’t they? But it’s actually Monday morning, so I’ll cut you some slack.’

‘Mock me if you must, dude. But just like you guys like to talk about this head or that head deciding your sexual situations for you, I also have a head that thinks for me.’

‘But you don’t actually have a head down there like we do–.’

‘Well, I just might if you give me some, Tshepo.’ She paused and sought his eyes.

‘Listen. I have been feeling deliciously electric since I got here, but I hadn’t actually met anyone. Tomorrow I leave the coast and that’ll be that for me and Port St Johns. You’ll be my beautiful goodbye, like a flutter of butterflies waving in the wind. Wait, what? Am I begging you for sex?’ She stopped herself.

‘No, never that,’ he said. ‘You’re schooling me about yourself and what you like, that you like to take charge. And I guess you’re serious about me… about us… tonight.’

‘Fuck! Why is that so hard to believe?’ She sounded a little incensed. ‘Would you doubt it if one of your male friends wanted to bed some chick he just met?’

‘Probably not,’ Nakedi replied slowly.

‘So why do it with me?’ she asked as she let the frustration go and welcomed some coquettishness back into her voice. ‘Sometimes my clitoris speaks to me, Tshepo; that’s all. And she just told me you’re a cool boy to lie with.’

Nakedi remained silent but a smile was on his face. She flicked the remainder of the cigarette into the trees below.

‘Oops, I shouldn’t have done that. They don’t like that here.’

Before Nakedi could say anything about it, she leaned into him and took his lips in a voracious kiss.

Chapter Thirty-Six

Sleep came and went. It felt like many hours had passed, and all this time nobody arrived to check on Kele or bring her food. Her somnolence was beginning to return when she heard something strange at the end of her yawn. It was like water dripping onto a hard floor, as if inside a wall. She listened closely. There was a soft tapping on the wall at the foot of the bed, the one on which the camera hung. She sat up slowly and focused to find out exactly where it was coming from. It sounded as though it were directly behind the device. She thought something could be wrong with it; with its wiring, and maybe it was crackling. Did it have anything to do with what Maître was trying to tell her before? But the sound moved. It now sounded as though it were to the right of the camera, her left. She got up on her knees on the divan and put her ear to the wall, by now oblivious to the electronic eye. There it was again, tap-tap-tap-tap. As she listened she advanced on her knees towards the foot of the bed, tracking the sound, her palms flat on the wall, her ear glued to it. The tapping seemed as though it were moving towards her as she was progressing towards it. She stopped, confused. It went by and around her, like the surround sound of stereo speakers. It was now by the wall at the head of the bed, and before she knew it, behind the door. It was the footfall of marching boots. Her heart beat fast. She darted for her shoes. She no longer had the phone she needed in them, but she put them on just in case the bald-headed man was going to make her walk on jagged rock again. When the door opened four men came in. This time there was no running; there was no bucket of ice water for her face.

'They sure do know how to switch it up,' she said to herself, waiting for the bald-headed man to walk in. She didn't have to see their faces past their bright lights to know he wasn't one of them.

She took a deep breath in anticipation; still no one else came in. She was immediately afraid for herself. What did his absence mean? Did it have to do with the phone? Before she could investigate any further, one of them stepped forward and dropped the black bag over her face. They picked her up and made briskly out of the room.

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Even as she arrived with the bag still over her head, Kele was aware of the presence of many people, even though it was quiet. The air was humid and coated with a thin film of something that smelled like hard-boiled eggs. The men sat her down on a beer crate and took the bag off her face. There were many people. Perhaps a dozen, Kele surmised, belonged to the media. That was because they were dressed just like she was, and sitting down like she was. The rest were in uniform like the bald-headed man's; standing. There were three rows for the media, with noticeable space between

them. Kele was in the first row and Maître was on the far end of the third. The place was dimly lit, with a relatively low roof of naked rock. The bald-headed man stood in front next to a projector screen. To his back was a clutter of stalagmites and stalactites, and where their sharp edges met, columns – some slim and shapely, some thick and amorphous. One of these had been knocked out from above and shaped into a shoddy makeshift podium.

'It is nice to have all of you here,' the bald-headed man said. Kele looked around to seek out the faces of those seated around and behind her, to make out who each of them was. 'Your attention, Mrs Solomon,' the bald-headed man said. She quickly turned around. 'Before we get into anything important I have something to ask. Does anyone want to own up to this flatulence in the air?' The man laughed and his people joined him, but there was silence from the rest of the room. 'In any event, I am not a joker, and what you smell here is nothing funny either. This is a network of dolomite caves next to what used to be a mine many years ago. It was a small one, not successful, not well known; mostly because we didn't want it to be. It was tailor-made for our purposes for this mission. In this particular cavern, ladies and gentlemen, we might be safe, but some of the adjacent caves have in them low doses of hydrogen sulphide. Are any of you smart people who keep the world informed aware of what that is?'

'It's a flammable gas that smells like shit. Who are you people? Are you some kind of military wing of a political party – the MK of the EFF? I've been locked up for God knows how many days, with no food and no toilet. You've threatened us and you've threatened our families. It's about time you gave us some answers if you keep telling us you're going to use us. We is this fucking about?'

The man who spoke was the biggest person in the room and his blonde beard amplified his size. There was silence.

'Wonderful,' responded the bald-headed man to the big man's answer. 'It is flammable gas; dangerous, just like your words. It's not only that though; breathing it in in high concentrations also kills. And once you let enough in, it deadens your senses and can kill you even when you can't smell it if you continue to breathe it in. You are not handcuffed. Know that should you run deeper into the other caves, you may not come out.' The man was serious and took a deep breath before he made his next point. 'We are not at ZAR FM here Bernard; we are also not at your house. *Bite*. *That*. *Tongue*! We are most certainly not the EFF. That is not to say anything about them; but they are a political party and we are not that. We are an event.'

'Sorry, sir,' the man relented. It didn't seem natural for him to cower and capitulate in the way he did, and Kele wondered which of his loved ones they had kidnapped and were torturing. But the big man spoke again, this time a little softer. 'And it's Bernard, sir, not Bernard,' he said, stressing both the 'r's in his name. The correction was matter-of-factly and unaffected.

‘Sorry, Bernard; I do take pride in the correct pronunciation of people’s names.’

Kele could not tell whether or not the bald-headed man was being sarcastic. While she was waiting to see what else would follow, her captor responded to one of his minions. A short man was standing at the back with others. He appeared to have something to say, some secret news to share. The bald-headed man motioned him to the front. When he reached him they began a silent conversation that seemed to make the bald-headed man happy. His copious teeth showed. During that conversation Kele turned around and her eyes scoured the room. She noticed Samantha Wasserman; *Die Sonskyn en Konfyt Ontbyt* news anchor on ZAR FM, the biggest Afrikaans breakfast show in the country. They were with Bluefields Media. The Bernard guy must be her producer then, Kele thought. Besides Maître, she knew some of the other faces in the room too; a couple of other radio presenters and columnists from Braxton, the media house with the biggest print publications in the country. One of their writers was Thando. There she was indeed. Kele made eye-contact. The one person she was expecting to see but was missing was Phumlani Ndleleni. Just as the bald-headed man cleared his throat to speak and Kele was turning around to face forward, she caught Ndleleni out of the corner of her eye. He was here all right, but he was in the back, in a black uniform, standing at the end of the group where the short messenger had come from.

‘This is the biggest media briefing session you have ever been part of. I had hoped that you would meet the man who has been able to make this possible. He was actually supposed to speak here. All of you may have heard his recording, but not all of you know him,’ he said, and cast what Kele felt was a look at her. She felt a sense of embarrassment, as though all her industry colleagues were aware that it was she who knew Malcolm better than anyone else here.

‘But Mr Malcolm will soon be on his way,’ the man went on. ‘He is close to helping us tie up the last loose end we have in our mission on the side of Reijger.’ This time there was no mistaking it; he did look at Kele. She felt Maître’s eyes on her too.

‘First we are going to watch a video. You will all appreciate it; it’s like a commercial and South African history all in one. Something media guys should like.’

A projector came on. Its light gave ambient colour to the rock, an aurora-like tinge, like in the Cango Caves in Oudtshoorn. A video played. But it was nothing like the kind of advert he had just said it would be. It was crude and rudimentary; more like an amateur documentary than anything else. But it showed something deadly. There were images of letter bombs as a woman’s voice gave narration over the soundtrack of a piano. Kele wondered whether she was the only one in the room who recognised Lerato’s voice. Had any of the others met her? There was so much to find out. Kele’s attention quickly latched back onto the letter bombs. Right now Lerato’s voice was giving a brief narration of their history. She mentioned the Walkman bomb that killed Bheki Mlangeni as well as the deadly delivery to Ruth First in Mozambique and a few other cases. There was a factory on the

screen, small, with only a few sewing machines. There were a handful of people in black hoods manning the machines, sewing the bombs into the hems of rugby, cricket and soccer jerseys. Gasps of astonishment could be heard around the room as the voice of the narrator went on. But just as the detonation was being explained the video froze. The men tinkered with it at the back, but to no avail.

'Embarrassing: the video is stuck. This is why we had to get people like you on our side. To make sure our media run smoothly. Besides the sloppy work on the video, these pocket-sized explosives are the great work of young African minds. There was no Cuba or Soviet Union involved here, no China; just Africans working together across the continent. Young people with the same make up as me, and some of you, created these.' He paused, looking proud. 'You may wonder too where you are. The place you find yourself in is another reminder of African creativity and resilience. And I'll tell you why:

'Our great, great, grandfathers' economy was the land they ploughed and the cattle they fed, fattened, slaughtered, but mostly kept. Over centuries we were driven away from that economy and came to find ourselves in one that was foreign to us, in rhythm, pace, purpose, ethics, and what have you. Our great-grandmothers lived in homesteads with a culture conducive to the lives they chose. Over time this was transformed. But not all of them made it into this new economy. There were more kept out than were allowed in. While some of them are now able to go home in the relative safety of their cars after a day's work in these cities, many others who are domestic workers, cashiers, hawkers, run around the streets after hours looking for the last few taxis in the dark, vulnerable to whatever might be lurking under the cover of night. Do white women go through this in their numbers? Why are white mothers not as disadvantaged as our African ones? Is the safety and dignity of the African woman less than that of white ones?' The bald-headed man coughed and repositioned himself. 'The Bantu Education Act was a way to get African children educated, but only enough to comprehend instruction and work low-level jobs. It was a way to protect the upper echelon jobs in society for people with fairer skin. They used us to build this economy, to dig up the diamond and the gold, to bend the steel and lay the brick, to man the factories and do the heavy lifting.

'After many years of being beaten in war, beaten through religion, beaten through education – just beaten – we succumbed to a colonial way of life. Our names are Philip or Malcolm or Prudence or Patience. Our family names are Grootboom, January, and whatever else have you. How many white people, in their numbers, have African names they put on school registration forms or on their IDs and passports? We assimilated culturally and in certain ways became more western than African. We had no choice because we were the conquered; the defeated.

'Perhaps I digress, but I say all of that in order to say this: some African minds have always remained determined and undeterred; resilient and creative. Yes, of course, a great many Africans are despondent and lose the focus to fight for the right to live their lives according to their destiny. Others

arrive in the life of the white man and leave their African-ness at the gate. These people forget to assist the brothers and sisters they leave behind. Some leave their children behind. Again, I apologise, for being all over the place. Public speaking is not my strong suit. My original point was this: we have had builders who have not been able to get jobs, miners with skills who have languished, but we have been able to get these people to build us an underground facility. We simply employed them, paid them the money they deserve, more than they've seen in all the years of their work put together. And we gave them to understand what was needed. Here, we stand inside the work of discarded builders and supposed illegal miners. They are illegal, while the families and companies that stole the land and destinies are being legitimised in their continual theft.

'In any event, Mr Malcolm would have been best to make this address. But again, our revolution needed his hand in solving a particular problem for us. Let's get into what brings you here and how we are all to proceed. You will notice, if you haven't already, that we have here troops from the three powerhouses: Braxton, Bluefields, and Reijger. Do you know what brings you all together, may I ask? Have any of you a clue?' He walked closer to them and looked at each as he advanced. 'Huh, anybody know?'

Kele knew Braxton media was in Rosebank and the two other companies were in Sandton. They were all relatively close to each other. Was that it? She said nothing and neither did her media counterparts.

'The answer, ladies and gentlemen, is Hopewell Drommedaris. A small school in Sandton. He smiled.

'What about Hopewell D?' asked Thando. Her voice was shaky at first, as though it was searching for its confidence. 'What does that have to do with xenophobia? I don't know about the others, but I for one have come across quite a few African accents here – even something I could have sworn was Swahili.' She'd found her confidence now; it sat on her square shoulders like shoulder puffs. 'Is this a kind of backlash by the peoples of Africa somehow? For the xenophobia, for South African hubris, thinking we're better?' Thando asked as though she were at a mainstream press briefing. 'And what, if anything, do white people have to do with it?'

'Am I to take your question as a lack of belief in what we are trying to achieve here? Am I to gather you think just because you hear certain African accents we cannot be involved in the cause of another part of the continent? This is Africa. White people came here with the intention to divide and rule us, especially along some lines of differences we already had. It is your white missionaries, priests, monarchs, commercial enterprises, and politicians that led the colonisation and cutting up of our continent. Xenophobia is a real problem, yes; one we are up to tackling. But not everything should be jumbled together. The current problem, the one that concerns us, is that Africa still doesn't belong to Africans. The ones who are perpetrating xenophobic attacks don't realise they are fighting for

scraps, and not for the land and self-determination they need to get back. We are here with the view of solving one particular problem at a time, and not all others. We came to have a moment of truth as Africans – real truth – about our oppressors as well as the level of our own complicity in the state of our bondage, in choosing the chains that bind us.

'Both Mr Braxton's and Mr Reijger's boys go to Hopewell D. They're in the cricket team with my son.' A voice suddenly shot out from the third row.

'Impressive, Koveni Pillay, impressive. But that's only part of it.'

Koveni was with Braxton, a Social Media manager now, but she'd been in Marketing at Reijger before.

'*Meneer Serfontein se dogter is ook by Hopewell Drommedaris*,' blurted out Samantha Wasserman in Afrikaans. 'Suzette Serfontein is also at that school.'

'That is very correct. And now the final piece to the puzzle…'

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When the bald-headed man added his final piece to the puzzle, and Kele understood what was at play, it was as if the cavern were submerged in water and the things being said were swimming into her ear, broken up by the pulse of the underwater current, losing all meaning. She looked around. The rest of her colleagues seemed to be swimming in bewilderment too. The long and short of it: there was a big charity day soon at Hopewell D. Kids from Mandelaspruit Junior Primary School would be visiting the good school for a day to take part in a series of Rugby, Cricket, Soccer clinics and matches, as well as other sports. Mandelaspruit JPS was a newly adopted school by Hopewell D, and this kind of meeting was in its second year. In the first turnout the Hopewell D XV B-side had taken an unexpected beating from the black school. Things went a little awry at a planned jersey exchange ceremony when some white students with injured spirits wouldn't touch the sweaty garments of '*straat kinders*'. Kele remembered this now, and so did her peers. The mess had gone viral on social media and hit a couple of mainstream channels. For this reason the jersey exchange, still a key symbolic act of solidarity for the event, was going to be held before the games instead of afterwards as is customary in sports. The garments came folded, the bald-headed man explained, before adding a part that hadn't been shown in the video because it had got stuck. Their detonation mechanism was genius, he lauded. Once they were put on they could not be taken off, or they would explode. Even worse, if they got wet, drenched with sweat, they would also go off.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

When Nakedi woke up all the curtains in the cabin were open, and through the panorama of the Crystal House glass doors was a splendid view of trees. Beyond their leaves the blue of the sky met that of the ocean and the sun was shining on the clouds, coating them with a reddish hue beneath. He could hear the shower, and the events of the early morning rushed back into his mind. His nose recalled Leontien's scent, and his exploration of her body: swimming naked on her beaches, laying tenderly on the shores of her skin. He sat up and reached for Buntu's phone on the bedside table. It had just beeped. The time was 6:03. It was another text from Sabine. He opened it. Donovan was okay, it read. Some of the tests couldn't be done last night so they would be done promptly at 8:00. When Nakedi was finished he scrolled up to the text he'd ignored the night before:

'I'll try find a Bed and Breakfast around here somewhere, or try the Holiday Inn on the N2. Sorry for the things I said earlier. Or how I said them. Can we talk about it when I get back? Love Sabine.'

He dialled her number. He wanted to make it a quick call, before Leontien came out of the shower.

'Morning, Nakedi,' she greeted with a croaky voice.

'Hi. How are you doing? You at the Holiday Inn?'

'No. Dr Qotoyi let me sleep here. I couldn't leave Donovan. It would have broken my heart to do it.'

'Thank you,' Nakedi said with slight trembling in his voice after a moment's silence.

'Forget the things I said yesterday. You don't have to thank me. He is part of you, and for that alone he receives my love. I don't know what you looked like when you were eight,' she laughed, 'but his eyes are yours; and so are his hands. He doesn't speak much either.'

'I certainly wasn't that big. I didn't have people shoving burgers and fries down my throat the whole day.'

'Some children overeat,' Sabine interjected.

'Not me. The only place I could really eat without being told how much it cost to feed me was in your kitchen.'

'Give the kid a break, Nakedi; he's just a child. And he is your son. He probably plays indoors too much. He'll get out more when he gets older, I'm sure.'

‘Yes, kids may get stuck playing TV games all the time, but it’s another thing with the all-day McDonald’s. And that’s all his mother; not me.’

Leontien came out of the bathroom half-naked. She was wearing her towel around her waist like a man. She was tall and walked with the grace of a gazelle. Nakedi acknowledged her with a nod and his eyes remained on her magnificent form. She blew a kiss.

‘Where is his mother?’ asked Sabine.
‘I wish I knew at this point.’ The question took Nakedi by surprise. His attention was split between the two women. Leontien was asking for lotion in a funny pantomime, gliding her palms in circles over her breasts. He pointed to the bag but he was drawn back to Sabine because her next question and its tone begged to be addressed.

‘Does your not knowing where his mother is have anything to do with the money in the boot of your car?’

‘No, it doesn’t have anything to do with that. And I wish you’d leave that alone.’ Nakedi did his best to hold back his irritation, for Leontien’s sake. ‘Please let’s not talk about that right now. We’ll do that when you’re back in town. I have to go.’

‘Okay, don’t drop the phone just yet,’ she said quickly. ‘I’m only concerned about you. If you don’t see that, your heart has become blind to who you are to me; who you used to be. Anyway, I’ll let you know what happens this morning with the tests. Always know you can talk to me, Nakedi. Always know that.’

He dropped the phone, feeling like a maelstrom of mixed emotions.

‘Who was that; your baby mother?’

‘What? It was nothing; nobody.’ He brushed her off. ‘Why are we still naked?

‘I’m naked because I’m still waiting for the lotion. God knows I’ve been asking,’ she responded.

‘I did point to the bag.’

‘But I can’t find it in there. Why are you being so secretive about who was on the phone?’ She continued to ask as she rummaged through the sports bag.
‘It’s in one of the inside pockets. The one closest to the door. Yes, that one; don’t know whether you’ll like it or not.’

‘What’s to like, Tshepo!’ she said as she held it. ‘I don’t have much of a choice now, do I? It’s not like I brought toiletries here with me. I’m a pick-up; a random pick-up you don’t have to talk to!’

‘Okay, I don’t like where this is going. I’ve clearly upset you.’

‘No. Quite the opposite, really. I think it was your baby mother or girlfriend on the phone who upset *you*.’

‘What? Don’t you think you’re being nosy?’ Nakedi was vexed. ‘And how did you come to the conclusion I was speaking to a woman anyway?’

‘Nothing complex there; your phone is loud. I could hear a female voice. That’s all. It’s fine if you don’t want to talk about it. But don’t make me an idiot doing it.’

‘How am I doing that?’ Nakedi was not aware he’d begun shouting at her. He realised it and caught himself.

She certainly couldn’t be upset about his speaking on the phone to what she thought was the mother of his child. Especially if she took to the sheets so easily and claimed to be the male-spirited woman she said she was. She said nothing as she rubbed more lotion into her skin; she simply looked at him with an accusatory stare. When she was done she said: ‘I am not what you may think of women. You’re a little evolved, I can see that. But you’re still caught up in your male bullshit.’

‘Where’s all this coming from?’ Nakedi protested.

‘Listen. This is simple. I let you inside me. I know I made it easy for you. But that was only because I wanted it easy for myself. I let you in because I saw something I liked in you. The least you can do is not treat me like I’m dumb. That gets boring very quickly.’

‘Okay, let’s take this back,’ Nakedi said. ‘Can we go back to the moment right before I made a dumb idiot out of you?’

‘That’s easy,’ she responded, her look still confrontational. ‘Who was that on the phone?’

He couldn’t believe it. She was seriously jealous.’

‘I didn’t ask you whether it was a woman or not. I asked who it was.’

‘A friend.’

‘A friend you have sexual relations with?’

‘No, and what’s it to you anyway?’

‘I’d just like to know if what we did earlier means I am sharing someone else’s man; that’s all. That’s not something I like doing. Maybe I should have found out before if you were single or not. Now here I am allowing myself to be made an idiot of.’

‘Okay,’ Nakedi put his hands up. ‘Okay. Tell me exactly how I’m making a fool of you.’

‘I asked you who that was on the phone. Now, besides the bullshit you answered, you could have tried–’

‘You didn’t ask who I was speaking to,’ Nakedi cut in. ‘You’d already decided I was speaking to my baby mother.’

‘Yes but that was only a joke, Tshepo; and because of how tense you looked, like you didn’t want anyone to know there was someone else in the room with you. The least you could have said to me is yes, I was talking to my baby mother… or no, I wasn’t… or she’s my girlfriend. Anything! Anything but the dismissiveness you showed me, like I’m some *Chiquita* you can spew typical male shit to: “Oh, it was nothing, nobody,”’ she spoke with boyish goofiness and waved Nakedi off. ‘I would have to be batshit crazy to be jealous about your love-life within a few hours of meeting you. All you needed to do was talk to me just like you lay with me: straight up. That’s all I’m saying.’
Nakedi was stunned. He didn’t know what to say.

‘I get it. I’m sorry. It’s just a little complicated,’ he said finally.

‘There you go with the Facebook talk again. “It’s not a Facebook relationship status!”’ Leontien laughed, repeating the words just as Art had said them before.

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After Nakedi took a shower he got into a fresh t-shirt. He wore the same jeans he’d worn the day before. Leontien too was in yesterday’s clothes. At around 7:30 he grabbed his bag and they went down to breakfast. Precious and Art were already up sharing a cigarette. A man in blue overalls swept up dust and was picking up the previous night’s litter next to where a sunburned, hungover couple sat by the bar.

‘You must get in fast if you want to order breakfast. Once more people come your order is going to take very long,’ Precious warned.

Art was quiet, his eyes red and watery. He was no longer the bullish character he had been under the influence of the bottle, churning out a dozen derisive witticisms per sentence. Nakedi noticed his shaking hands as he took in a hellish drag from his cigarette. He felt sorry for him.

‘Well, let’s get that order going,’ Leontien said to her cousin, ‘Ntafufu won’t wait for anyone.’

‘Let me organise you a waiter,’ Precious said, before walking over to the man in overalls and leading him towards the kitchen.

‘What’s in Ntafufu for you?’ Nakedi asked eagerly as soon as he and Leontien sat down at their table, trying hard to conceal the extent of his incredulity about the news.

‘My father has a lodge out there, and other business. I’ve been doing rounds around my family tree and I’m seeing him last.’

‘Can I tell you the weirdest thing you’re going to hear today?’ he asked her.

‘What?’’

‘I’m actually supposed to be leaving for Ntafufu today too. I am looking to conduct some university research out there,’ Nakedi put in, sticking to his original lie of writing for school.

‘Interesting. Masters or Phd?’

‘It’s a Masters,’ he said.

‘What’s your topic?’

‘I’m still a little muddled with it,’ he said, ‘but I’m looking at the representation of traditional Xhosa circumcision in the media.’

‘Nice, what program are you in; which university?’

‘Journalism, at Braamfontein University. The best one.’

‘Erm, I don’t know anything about it being the best though. Anyway, I know someone you may want to talk to for your research if you’re going out there. Though I don’t know whether or not he’d actually let you into anything deep. But he’s worth a try. He’s been doing it for years.’

Nakedi was amazed by the news, but he downplayed his joy. This was his best lead yet. Maybe when Precious said the boy had gone to Ntafufu she was talking about the same man Leontien was talking about, since they were cousins. Precious’s words came back to Nakedi about the fight his brother was in and a little anxiety overtook him.

’Enough about me and my studies,’ he changed the subject. ‘Back to you… so you’re doing a mini South African tour. What pays the bills if you’re out here gallivanting visiting family?’ he continued with the earlier part of the conversation.

A waiter came. It was the same man who’d just now been in blue overalls. He was topless. He’d merely dropped the top part of his worker gear and tied it around his waist. Leontien ordered a fruit salad with muesli and Nakedi asked for a plate of bacon and eggs with toast.

‘And to drink?’ the man asked.

They replied and he left.

‘I try to keep my bills minimal,’ Leontien went on, ‘but I’m on a sabbatical from everything, I guess.’

‘Wow, lucky us!’ teased Nakedi.

‘I’m moving overseas next year. As soon as I got the news I decided to quit everything I was doing and see the people in my family that I never get to see. It’s my paltry savings that are paying for my life for now.’

Precious came over to the table. She had to go into town with Art to run errands and stock up on a few supplies, she explained.

‘We’d drop you off at the house if you were already done with breakfast. Maybe you can cancel it and eat there before you go.’

Before Leontien could say anything Nakedi interjected: ‘Don’t worry; I was going to take her into town anyway. Let her eat.’ He guarded her company jealously. To him she was like a new-found slice of freedom, a piece of sunshine to keep the darkness of his thoughts, and his moon, at bay.

The girls said their goodbyes as the breakfast came.

‘Where are you moving to overseas? Did you grow up in Ntafufu? And how come you never get to see your father?’

The waiter was back with their drinks.

‘Which of your questions do you want me to answer first?’ she laughed. ‘Well, where do I begin? I grew up a little in East London with my mother, and when she died my grandma adopted me, so I moved to Port Elizabeth.’

And your mom and dad? They didn’t stay together?’

‘Let’s just say my parents had my grandpa to deal with. I didn’t get to meet my father until I was in my final year of high school. That’s when I started coming to Port St Johns. He used to live here then.’

‘Why didn’t you get to see him?’

‘My story is a classic apartheid one; a little Trevor Noah-like, but not so funny.’ Her brown creased in a pensive motion. ‘My mom was very white and a little underage when she and my dad got together. He was already in university by then. And when my grandparents found out about the pregnancy, and his race, they made it difficult for him and threatened legal action.’

‘For what? Because he was black? You must be twenty-five at best. What are you, a ’91 or ’92 baby? Surely they couldn’t get him with the Immorality Act any more by the time she was pregnant with you.’

‘No, they couldn’t. But did you miss the part where I said she was underage?’

‘Sorry,’ Nakedi said, feeling a little dense for asking the question.

‘Don’t apologise; just pay attention,’ Leontien said with a smile on her face. Nakedi was enchanted by it each time it came. ‘Anyway,’ she continued, ‘when I was young I couldn’t see my dad at all. He came over to East London once when I was maybe six, and my mom snuck me off to see him. She was of legal age by then but hadn’t broken free of my grandfather’s shackles because she still lived in his house. Long story short, when they were caught, my granddad beat her to the point of near death. She was never the same, not until she died months later. When he was convicted I went to live with my grandmother and her husband. She took me to boarding school and did with my dad what her first husband would have wanted – she kept me away from him. Eight years ago, when I was sixteen, I tracked him down.’

The look on Nakedi’s face must have been one of evident horror because Leontien said: ‘Don’t look so bleak; you almost got my age right at least. Besides, there are so many others with tough lives out there.’ Really he was surprised by how she was able to talk so candidly about such things with a stranger between sips of coffee and occasional smiles on her lips.

‘Hi I’m Leontien; lovely to meet you,’ she said with an arm extended.

‘Hi Leontien,’ he shook her hand. ‘Are you always this free with the details of your life to strangers?’

‘What’s to hide? You are hardly a stranger now, Tshepo. I may not know you much, but I know you biblically; and that counts for a lot.’ She licked her spoon clean and wagged it at him. ‘Besides, isn’t this the kind of stuff that makes up all our lives in one way or the other?’ They smiled sad smiles before looking away from each other and into the distance.

In his quietness Nakedi thought about the tranquillity of her face in spite of the trauma she was explaining her life to have been. He wondered when his own trauma would be a thing of the past. He wondered whether she could see through him and could tell that he had, not so long ago, been in the presence of blood and the breath of death. Her presence though lightened his load, and just as he was glad his heavy thoughts were away, his phone rang and unsettled him. It was Sabine.

‘They said Donovan is free to go; he just needs to take some meds and be monitored closely. I’ve got him in the bakkie now and we’ve just left the hospital. I was thinking I should leave him with your mother in Blakeway, since you are still in the business of finding your brother. Wouldn’t that be better?’

Nakedi liked the idea and told Sabine he would text the address of the house as well as Mandi’s number. They were about to say their goodbyes when Sabine screamed: ‘Oh shit!’

‘Are you okay?’ Nakedi did his best to contain his concern.

‘It’s nothing, I almost hit the world’s largest pothole, that’s all. Mthatha! What’s happened to this place? Anyway, let me concentrate on my driving. Huggies.’

Nakedi sent the text with the address and Mandi’s number to Sabine. He was glad she’d taken Donovan off his hands and the boy was no longer going to affect his movements. He looked at Leontien. She was staring off into the ocean. The time was nine o‘clock and the waiter came over. Just as he was about to open his mouth there were three successive thuds on the roof. Both Nakedi and Leontien started, but the man with food carried on as though not a single thing had happened. ‘Monkeys,’ he said, and put down their orders. ‘Playing on the roof in the morning is nice for them.’

Leontien chuckled.

‘Thanks; the food looks amazing,’ she said to the waiter and then turned to Nakedi.

‘Thanks for offering to drop me off in town when we’re done.’

Nakedi spoke slowly. He’d been contemplating his following words for some time: ‘What am I still dropping you in town for if we both have business in Ntafufu? I’ll do you one better,’ he said, ‘I’ll drop you off at your gate if you introduce me to this guy you think would be great for my work.’

‘Really? That would be kind of you.’ Leontien smiled one of her many smiles.

This was a grateful one, and it warmed Nakedi’s heart like the rays of the morning sun falling on a field of flowers. He took it in, and in a smile of his own he gave some of her sun back.

Chapter Thirty-Eight

The bomb-laced jerseys of the children were horrifying for the media team, especially Koveni, who had a son at the school taking part in the cricket.

'My God! Vishal thinks I'm overseas on a business trip. He thinks his father is with me. Where are you keeping my husband?' she screamed. 'My boy is going to die thinking he's alone. Oh, Vishal! Vishal!' she broke down and began to weep maniacally.

'No,' the bald-headed man countered calmly. 'He will see your hand in this important work.' She screamed as though she were being beaten. The man motioned to his people to take Koveni away. Four responded and one gagged her. They were swift, and silence, though itself morbid and loud in the wake of such a spectacle, soon returned to the gathering. As Kele's eyes followed the inconsolable mother with the muffled cries to the back of the cave they caught something that caused her heart to skip. It was Admire. She'd been watching Kele all along, it seemed. Just as she had done in the room, she touched the pocket of her uniform where she was keeping the phone. Kele was at once unsettled, thinking Admire would let the bald-headed man know about it as soon as a chance presented itself. Yet something in her manner, the look on her eyes, was different from before, though Kele couldn't say how.

'You, my dear people,' began the bald-headed man in earnest. 'You are going to be in the magnified view of the public eye for many days to come. You will broadcast every second and every minute of what is to happen. You will work long shifts, cutting audio clips, vox-pops, video, writing articles and blogs for online, uploading podcasts, and posting hourly on social media. The editor for all written pieces is Phumlani Ndleleni, even the Afrikaans copy.'

The two ZAR FM employees stole a glance at each other. Samantha appeared more displeased with that arrangement than was Bernard.

'You'll have a variety of guests to get content from; from the children in the school, their mothers and fathers and teachers, and of course, Mr Malcolm himself will be available.

'Ah, don't look so down and out,' the bald-headed man added. 'It's the jobs you already do and do so well. You will just have to do them with an element of truth leading you, something other than your bank accounts. But note,' he showed his big teeth in a smile, 'there is the small matter of working with translators and interpreters because this revolution is going out to the people in all the languages we have at our disposal. That means all eleven and sign language. This might slow you down. But let me not speak too much about it.' He raised a thick white folder and said: 'It's all in here. Everything! You will get it before you go back to your chambers. Learn it well, like the first one we gave you.'

He put the folder back down on his podium of stone. Kele was curious to learn exactly what was in it. If it really contained everything concerning this 'event', it would make sharing the information with the authorities a little easier when the time came. Donovan's safety immediately crossed her mind, and she decided against the passing on of any intelligence to the police. She would toe the line of her kidnappers until she was certain her son was free from all harm. If only she could call Nakedi and warn him about Malcolm, she thought desperately. The boy was not in harm's way yet, as far as she knew, and a call to his father might make sure things remain that way. Trying to alert her ex-husband would be the only aberration to her planned obedience, she resolved, and she would do it without as much as a doubt if the opportunity presented itself. She turned back to look at Admire; but the woman was no longer where she'd been standing.

'We are almost done,' said the bald-headed man. 'You will receive your full briefs before you return to your rooms. But it would be so unfair for the kids to look good all by themselves. So, you'll be having some fittings of your own, too, quickly before you go.'

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To some, even more terrifying than the children's bombs were the ones intended for the media team. They were the real deal, it was said: plastic explosives inserted inside what looked to Kele like police bulletproof vests. The bald-headed man held up a replica as he continued to wax lyrical about them. They were slim, and could be worn under one's garments. Moreover, they could take out an entire office floor. But unlike the children's ones, their detonation was operated from a remote location.

'Another great design feat by an African hand,' said the bald-headed man about the work he was still holding up. 'They've tried, they've always tried to make us feel as if we're dumb and incapable. And they've succeeded with many, and continue to.' He stopped. 'The woman who made these worked at Daniels & Buekes Weapons Dynamics in Pretoria, for five years, believe it or not; and they ignored her talent. At their own peril, I guess; or someone else's now, you might say.'

Phumlani eventually got the projector to work again. Two videos were played: The first was about the standard operating procedures of the detainees' vests, showcasing their blast radius on an empty field with a crowd of scarecrows on it; the second was the first one he'd played; the one that had got stuck. There were all manner of gasps and astonished reactions in the cavern as the media team witnessed the carnage the children's t-shirt bombs could wreak. Kele felt sick and weak. They were neither explosive enough to demolish an office floor, nor potent enough to collapse a small toilet cubicle for that matter. This the video pointed out. But they could rend flesh, decimate internal

organs, and rip through the spine and rib cage of a schoolchild, leaving skin and bone mangled, everything wet with red. For now though, it was mannequins dying. When the video tutorials were done, each of the media crew was fitted with a vest for size.

'We have to get that part of it right,' their captor said, 'because you will have them on for days and maybe weeks to come, depending on how this thing turns out.'
Kele put one over her head. She was minded, like each of her colleagues, by a guard. It was a young man with the countenance of an innocent boy. He zipped the vest up from behind and latched it at the base of her neck. He rolled a combination on a lock at the top, at the base of her neck.

'How does it feel?' asked the bald-headed man from his podium. 'That looks about a good fit for everyone.' He came down, closer to his captives. 'Getting dressed for success, I tell you,' he muttered as he approached them. 'They're great; they're adjustable. The real thing will be a little bit heavy though. You're going to have to get that core working to keep that posture up, eh, Bernard?'

'Does this mean we won't be able to take them off at all, not even to shower?'

'That is part of the problem with you white people, Bernard. Did I say your name to your satisfaction this time? Huh? Your comforts, just like your showers, flowers and dogs, mean much more to you than the basic needs and lives of other human beings who are different from you. We are about to turn this city, this country, and this part of the world on its head. Do you mean to tell me a shower means more to you than the reality of having a bomb wrapped around your fat trunk?' He composed himself. 'Once these things are on, they're on. There will be absolutely no need for showers. Unless you want to go under one with a bomb on your back. I am no explosives expert, but I just wouldn't do that. It strikes me as not too bright, and a tad dangerous.' At those words, his teeth peered behind his smile: and the very white on them may as well have been sarcasm.

The relationship between the bald-headed man and Bernard had surely started off on the worst foot possible. Kele looked at the large man. Even as he subdued himself, he seemed to be chomping at the bit, as though he were someone who would readily take risks to get out of this situation they were in. In no time his aggression was completely curtailed, but Kele could see its remnants lingering, bubbling beneath his flushed skin.

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Kele was disappointed she couldn't reach Maître to find out about the cameras. There really had been no freedom to move around or speak to anyone during the gathering. Now that the briefing was over, she couldn't even find Phumlani's face. But it was not like she would know what to say to

him were they to come within speaking distance of each other. There was only anger and revolt for him – no words.

She watched as the cave emptied out by degrees. Taking the captives back to their quarters in turns was no easy task for the guards. There were only twelve of them designated for the job, it seemed, and they were doing it in rotation, four men per detainee at a time. Once the captives were ready to be carted off, with hoods over their heads, Admire gave the white folder the bald-headed man had promised each of them to their chaperones, and sent them on their way. Kele found it easy to understand why they put bags over their heads. But she couldn't get why they weren't letting them walk to their quarters on their own two feet, like the adults they were. Kele was especially interested in the reason behind this absurdity as she watched the guards struggle with Bernard's hefty frame. She read the ZAR FM man's face as his feet left the ground. They dropped him. He fell like a bag of cabbages. She knew he was cursing with everything inside him at the ignominy of being carried like an invalid, though his face was in a state of extreme serenity. In the end it took five of the sentinels to execute the task of four, such that Kele wondered how they had brought him here in the first place.

Just as she had been the last to arrive, she was going to be the last to leave. There was one more person still ahead of her – a tall media man she didn't know. She hated the wait. On account of five guards having left with Bernard, after another previous four, there were only three sentinels now left in the cave. They were waiting for a fourth man so they could leave with the tall media guy. Besides him, Admire, and the guards, the bald-headed man was also still in the cave. He was speaking on his phone, off in the distance towards the stalactites and stalagmites, out of earshot. Fear burned inside Kele. She knew Admire was going to expose her once the bald-headed man was done with his call. But she was also confused because something about Admire was timid. Her eyes were certainly not the bold, spiteful ones she'd displayed in the room when she brought the clothes. She was clearly avoiding Kele's gaze now. The four guards who had left ahead of Bernard's five returned. Three of them remained, with one immediately joining the other three who'd been waiting. They were off with their burden as soon as Admire sent them packing with another white folder. Kele was the only media person left in the room and all the attention would soon be on her. She willed Admire to look at her, to make eye contact, so she could once and for all discern the motive in her eyes. But the bald-headed man got off his phone and quickly made his way back towards them. He went directly towards Admire. When he reached her he whispered something in her ear, and then gave her a chance to talk back into his. He was nodding constantly. His brow creased, the expression on his face as though he were learning new information or comprehending something that had eluded him before. Kele felt her bowels move. She could have sworn they betrayed her. When the bald-headed man came away from Admire and called out Kele's name, she became lightheaded and had to fight to keep her balance.

‘Your ex-husband is an elusive man. You could swear he knows we are looking for that precious cargo of yours he is carrying,’ the man said. ‘And he is deliberately running away with it.’ His face assumed an even more serious air. ‘Is it possible someone has had a chance to warm him? He is making life a little too difficult for us. We found his family in the house in Mthatha; his two sisters and mother. But they wouldn’t speak. Now they can’t speak.’ He flashed a cruel smile and took it away. ‘‘Your mother-in-law had apparently gone crazy from what I can understand from the men down there. They couldn’t comprehend a single word she was saying; and she was saying a lot, in Biblical tongues.’ The tone of his voice changed. There was a touch of self-satisfaction in it. ‘But still we thank God for phones and SMSes. We know where your boy is now. He may be far, but it’s only a matter of time. That’s enough about that. I have to go.’

The bald-headed man turned to Admire and spoke to her. At the end of that talk Admire was seemingly displeased with being asked to play the fourth man and help carry Kele back to her cell. But she obliged her Mr Simon. As the bald-headed man walked off, Admire put together Kele’s white folder, and instead of giving it to the guards put it in a backpack she was carrying and flung it over her shoulder. That feeling of being underwater returned. Kele felt her heart sinking to the pit of her gut. Darkness fell over her face. She was glad her son was still safe, and that she had not been asked about the phone by the bald-headed man. Wherever far was, she prayed Nakedi somehow knew he was being followed. She prayed for distance between him and his pursuers; that he’d find his way to the police before the bald-headed man’s people find their way to him and Donovan. Her thought about the police swung her mind back to Nakedi’s family and the crime committed there. It hit her anew, this time like an iceberg to a ship. She didn’t know what to make of what the bald-headed man had said about her in-laws. What did he mean they couldn’t speak? Kele felt hand on her arms, shoulders and legs. She realised she was shaking. And at the moment she was thrust carelessly into the air and carted off, all the while wondering:

‘What did he mean *now they can’t speak*? Did they cut their tongues or worse yet, kill them?’

Chapter Thirty-Nine

The food was incredibly good, every bit of it fresh and just right. Nakedi had tasted the natural sweetness and juiciness of Leontien's fruit salad. His eggs too were just right, great with the crispy bacon and tomatoes. He was back on the R61 to Lusikisiki, but this time he was not going all the way there, and neither was he going alone. Unlike the trip he'd made to see Uncle Ntandazo, the drive to Ntafufu had the feel of a holiday road trip because of his newfound companion. Despite the urgency of his search for his brother, he relaxed enough to stop and get out at the Lusikisiki Bridge with Leontien and enjoy the sight of the Mzimvubu River giving itself to the Indian Ocean.

'See that? It's like surrendering yourself to something greater, bigger than you,' Leontien said as they looked out into the ocean in the distance and contemplated the water. Nakedi revelled in the freedom of the moment again, just as he had done from inside the car the first time he drove across the stone bridge. He allowed himself to feel every bit of the wind on his face and body. He was reminded of a young Pip in *Great Expectations*, standing by the tombstones in the churchyard near the marshes, discovering for the very first time the factualness and singularity of his own existence in the world, as the wind blew on him all the way from the sea. He recalled Dickens, and other authors he'd read at Sabine's growing up. He thought of who Sabine was to him; and how his life was the better materially for having known her. He thought about this life of his, and how he'd broken and squandered it, how everything was lost to him now. He started spiralling into despair. His moon rose. He was living on borrowed time. He started spiralling into despair but came quickly out of it when Leontien snapped a picture of him.

'No! Don't do that!' he shouted at her with his palm up towards the lens of her phone.

She stopped immediately, with body language similar to that of a child who'd been caught doing something wrong and called to order. Nakedi saw this and knew he was too hard on her. So he decided against asking her to delete it as well, though he badly wanted to. She would become suspicious if he did that after such an outburst. She was probably suspicious of him already.

'I'm sorry about that,' he said. 'I didn't mean to shout.'

But asking her forgiveness would only be complete if he had a good reason for his outburst. He was searching her face for its acceptance of his apology while rapidly turning his mind over for a reason he could give her for his harshness.

'I don't translate well onto camera, and before you know it I'm on Facebook and people are making fun of me. I just hate it when people do that.'

'What's to make fun of?' she asked, looking him up and down with perplexed eyes.

But he did; he did hate it when people posted pictures of him on social media without his consent. That feeling was only redoubled now that he was on the run. He wanted to be cautious, but he also couldn't bear the thought of her being distrustful of him because of such erratic behaviour. So he ended it there, not on the false reason for his flare-up but on a genuine remorseful note, sincerity and penitence in each of his words. He only hoped his mention of being anti-social media would deter her from posting whatever she took.

She smiled back at him with only her eyes and said three words: 'Cool, let's go.'

The sun was out in full splendour as they drove. It shone down on the vegetation on the sides of the road, with foliage as thick as the locks of an African child. The road was windy; uphill, then downhill, then windy again. Up ahead the land rolled and rolled, with mounds like the hips and breasts of many Nguni women in brown and green lying side by side. Between some of the hills were valleys so wide and long they stretched out into the distance like giant wings. They were dotted with huts here and there, as well as the shadows of the many small clouds above. Even though he had spent some of his childhood in a hut and hated it, the *rondavels* on the rustic landscape filled him with something akin to nostalgia.

'What a hell of a place the Wild Coast is,' he said to Leontien.

'Amazing! When I was young I never understood why they called it that. But now I get it. When I was a kid and my mom first told me my dad was from here, I imagined many animals. And not just that; I also thought it was something like a cross between *The Jungle Book* and *Baywatch*. I definitely imagined more than monkeys jumping on the roof.'

Nakedi looked at her as he laughed, but his eyes lingered too long.

'Eyes on the road, silly; drivers shouldn't be sightseeing, especially inside the car,' she said.

Leontien had her naked legs up on the dashboard with a book downturned on her lap. *Decolonising the Mind*, the cover read. Her seat was also reclined so Nakedi had to look back a little to see her face.

'Okay, okay, I'll keep my eyes where they need to be if you keep your feet in the foot well, where they're supposed to go. I mean, how is a man expected to focus and all?'

She took her legs down and brought her seat forward a little.

'Oh wow, she actually listens,' Nakedi teased, but quickly changed his tone as she began to move her feet. 'You can keep them there. I was only joking. I didn't really mean for you to–'

'Trust me, it's not about you,' she said, turning her body to put the book on the backseat. 'My heels hurt from digging in the dash, that's all.'

‘Cool. Who’s this author of yours and how does he suggest you go about decolonising your brain? Is that like a self-help book or something?’

Leontien broke out laughing: ‘Self-help book!’ she exclaimed between her chortling. She picked the book up again.

‘What are you laughing at?’ Nakedi said in mock protest. He didn’t mind that her mirth was at his expense. He enjoyed the energy it gave off and loved the creases of joy it etched on her face.

‘First of all, it’s not decolonising the brain; it’s the mind. Read! The mind!’ She put the book in front of his face, and forced him to read the title as he drove.

‘I know. I saw it. Mind… brain… Same difference, right?’

‘There’s a big difference between those two things.’ She brought the book down and laughed anew. ‘And no, it’s not a self-help book, *Tchepo*!’ she added in an exaggerated white accent to taunt him even further. ‘The name of the author is Ngũgĩ. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o.’

‘Oh, okay; I see. Something about his name sounds like some obscure African dish to me.’

‘Wow, now you wanna make it a cook book!’ Leontien exclaimed. ‘But you could call it a self-help book if you really wanted to. But not in the strictest sense, if you know what I mean,’ she added as another giggle escaped her. She turned around again to put the book back with her things.

‘That’s odd,’ she said, with curious concern in her voice.

‘What? What’s odd?’

‘That Pajero, I saw it at Amapondo yesterday, and again when we left Presh’s house earlier. Did you see it?’

Nakedi looked in the mirror but there was nothing there now. The road was windy and the Mitsubishi hadn’t made it around the curve to be in the rear-view mirror’s line of sight. He turned his head around, but Leontien’s loud voice startled him back into facing forward.

‘Eyes on the road,’ she was screaming. ‘Jesus!, No need to lose our lives over it. It’s not like they’re following us. And it could even be a different Pajero. It’s not like I took down number plates. So eyes on the road, please.’

‘I don’t recall seeing a Pajero anywhere,’ Nakedi said.

‘Well, if you slow down a little you just might.’ She was holding on to the dashboard as though uncomfortable with the speed.

Nakedi did not realise how fast he was driving. He slowed down and his eyes kept going back to all three of his mirrors every chance he got. But there was nothing for him to see. A Toyota Corolla soon overtook them, followed by a GLA Mercedes Benz a little later. Nakedi took his right hand off the steering wheel and ran the tips of its fingers over his pocket. He thought about the eyes on the sketch paper that he'd put in his pocket, and the 4x4 tyre tracks in which he'd found the broken pencil. A black 4x4 appeared in the rear-view mirror. It flew up behind them. As Nakedi sank his foot onto the accelerator and sent the car shooting forward, he saw a Toyota emblem on the vehicle. It was a Prado, not a Pajero. It indicated and overtook them.

'Is that your Pajero?' he asked, poking fun at her.

'I don't know what that is,' she said as she leaned forward to make out what the name of the vehicle was, 'but I know it's not a Pajero. I know a Pajero when I see one.'

'Okay, it must be a transformer then, changed from a Mitsubishi to a Toyota behind a couple of curves and caught up. I see how that can happen'.

Leontien pouted playfully before pulling out her tobacco pouch and taking out a pre-rolled homemade cigarette. She saw the look on his face.

'When did you roll that?' he asked.

'Last night; made two.'

'When are you going to smoke it? Now?' Nakedi inquired.

'Don't worry, it's not gonna make me jump you like I did last night. That wasn't it.' Her lips parted into another enthralling smile.

'Not that that's something I'd mind, but aren't you gonna see your dad soon after smoking that thing?'

'Don't worry about my dad; I'll make him his own when we get there.'

They made a right off the R61 and onto the dirt road leading to their destination.

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The trip was no more than forty-five minutes from start to finish. Leontien directed Nakedi through a scant network of small rural roads and pathways across a couple of hamlets until he came to her father's place. There was a huge entrance with an open gate. They drove through it. Inside was a

big house and four *rondavels* beside it. Here and there was an old scrap of a car; three to be exact. Two of the jalopies had grass and weeds growing out of them.

'Interesting lodge,' Nakedi said as they approached the big house.

'You've got jokes, huh?' she replied. 'This is not the lodge. That's in Ntafufu.'

'Where are we now? I thought we *were* in Ntafufu.'

'In Komityi. This is my father's house, you know, the place where *he lodges*. We passed the *lalis* of Kwagingqi, Mantusini, and Kutonjeni before this one. Ntafufu is that way,' she pointed out of her window. But it's stupid to even differentiate between the lalis at this point because it's a hop skip and a jump to Ntafufu and Manzamnandi Lodge from here.'

'Manzamnandi? I thought the lodge out here was called Ntafufu Eco Lodge. At least that's what the road signs said.'

'Well, you're quite correct. There is a lodge by that name here. But it's not the only one; just the one white people like to go to. Keep this name in your mouth from now on – Manzamnandi. Okay?'

Nakedi stopped the car in front of the main house. The front door was closed.

'He might be at the lodge now. He is usually there afternoons. We'll go to him just now.'

'How do you know all this? I thought you didn't see him much.'

'I didn't say I don't see him much; just not as much as I'd like to. Seeing your father three or four times a year, especially when you grew up without him, is not much.'

Little kids were standing next to the entrance of one of the rondavels and were waving. Many of them appeared unkempt in that manner that dust-ridden rural children tend to have, especially in the eyes of city folk.

'Are we going down to him or do we wait in the car, outside the door? Who does he live with?' Nakedi asked.

'He would say he lives alone, but he lives with his books. I think he chose them over people a long time ago. My younger brother and sister live at the lodge and help out there. And oh, you can sleep there tonight if you're hanging around for longer than today.'

As Leontien spoke, a woman opened the front door.

'*Ndinganinceda*?' she asked from a distance but advanced towards the car as she spoke.

'*Molweni Mama. Thyini!* Aunt Nontyatyambo, is that you?'

‘*Thyini na nguwe* Leontien? *Ah, Mamncotshe, Mandala*,’ said the woman to Leontien.

‘*Ah, Mncotshekazi, Mandala, Ndlebentlezombini*,’ Leontien returned to the lady before looking at Nakedi. ’It’s my dad’s sister. I didn’t know she was here. Come; come say hello.’

As Nakedi left the car he was astonished by her command of isiXhosa, her knowledge of her clan-names, and more than anything else, her stout accent.

‘Hello, Ma,’ he said in English.

‘Hello, my child,’ she responded, taking him into her arms after she had embraced and kissed Leontien a few times over.

‘I didn’t know you were here,’ Leontien said. ‘Is everything okay?’

‘Eish, *mtan’am*, I live here now. Things went completely bad for me in Durban and your father is letting me help him out where I can so I can make a little something, you know? So I am at the lodge now, with your brother and sister. Quickly, come in, let’s get you a drink and something to eat,’ she said as she ushered them into the house and into the living room.

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Nakedi was invited to take a seat while aunt and niece went into the kitchen to get the drinks. Just as on the outside, the inside walls had an undulating surface and were visibly crooked. The width of the passage was almost twice that of a normal one, and the entire floor, from the front door to the living room, was fitted with flower-decorated linoleum. What kind of flower it was, was difficult to tell because the interior was dim, as though the house itself fought off the light. The air was choked with smoke. Someone, somewhere inside the house, was cooking on an open fire. In the living room they sat on expensive leather couches that seemed new and rather anachronistic with the setting they were in. On the walls hung photographs so old they were closer to their daguerreotype cousins than their digital ones. Nakedi could barely make out the faded faces in them; only the magnificent clothing. Leontien and her aunt came in with a tray bearing homemade juice in a jug, four empty glasses, and four side plates of Marie and Tennis biscuits. Nakedi wondered who the fourth one was intended for. But a tall man with a booming voice stepped into the room just then.

Thyini, awusatsho noba uyeza? How are we supposed to prepare for you?’

‘As long as this house has you, *Tata*, then I have everything I need prepared for me. And it’s even better now because Aunt Ntyatyi is here.’

‘Gunya and Ncedisa have gone up to Flagstaff. They will be back later on. How long are you staying for?’

‘*Andikazi okwangoku, Tata*. If you have space for me I’ll stay a couple of days to a week; I really don’t know yet.’

‘And the young man?’ her father signalled to Nakedi.
Nakedi had let the family congregate in the middle of the room without infringing on their space. He stood up from the chair now and extended his hand.

‘Oh, this is my friend. We met in Port St Johns. Turns out he’s a student doing a project you might be interested in.’

‘Is that a fact?’

‘I believe it is,’ she paused and smiled. ‘*Tata*, meet Tshepo; Tshepo meet my father, or as the rest of the world calls him, Tat’ uVelelo.’

Chapter Forty

Kele was feeling quite tender in her joints as she was carried through the door of her cell – tenderer than she'd been on any other occasion of being transported this way. She was even sore around the hips and lower abdomen. The throbbing of joint pain was especially bad on the right side of her body. The cause of it was simple. With two of the guards holding her by her ankles, and the third one cradling her right arm where it became armpit, Kele had been dangled lopsidedly the entire way. This was because Admire, whose task it was to hold her left arm, was shorter than the men, and not physically as strong. Her tiny feet struggled to keep up with their longer strides, and her grip on Kele alternated between could-*always*-be-sturdier and downright feeble. Of course the cargo that was Kele expected to be jolted under these circumstances. Much to her chagrin, however, she was left to slip more uncontrollably and with redoubled pain each time Admire failed to hang on to her. She smashed her free hand repeatedly on the firm ground. Eventually, even the bag over her head fell off. Admire lingered a moment in order to pick it up. Still, the guards stopped for nothing, almost dragging Kele. The labyrinthine nature of the corridors didn't help matters either. With the beams of their lights swimming on the walls of rock, the men cut this way and that way into shadows, manoeuvring backwards in certain places, before cutting this way and that way again. The sheer motion of it left Kele bilious, and presently, everything was eddying inside her. She was taking incredible strain. They treated her like an inanimate weight, regarding neither her pleas for them to slow down, nor the abuses she was hurling at them for their heedless way with her body. When they tossed her on the divan, it was with the air of mill workers who'd just flung their last bag of grain for the day onto the back of a truck. They switched off their headlamps and waited for Admire.

Her phone had beeped and vibrated as they came in. She'd quickly taken it out and was pre-occupied with it, texting or emailing. Whichever it was, her facial expression did not bode well. Though she'd switched her headlamp off too, she was standing by the spotlight on the camera. Kele could not focus her eyes on her for too long. The light made her nausea worse. She looked down a moment, before turning her strained gaze back to the guards. Admire seemed to be taking too long for their liking. They drifted towards the door. Two of them whispered to each other about "lighting one up". Kele noticed that this talk excited the third guard, who got closer to his mates and playfully forced himself between them. He curled an arm around each.

'*Aweh, aweh izinto ezimnandi*! *Asiyeni sibuyeni*, gents; fast, fast!' he said.

It was the first time she had seen a display of personality from any of them since she'd been brought underground.

'Seems they keep their form and dignity better in packs of four,' she thought to herself with a touch of spiteful humour, trying to rise above her nausea. All the guards she'd come across before had the serious demeanour of soldiers, or at least something similar to it. The ones presently in her cell,

not so much. Their bodies moved with the energy of purposeless boys, newly bored and looking for the next thing to tinker with. And it appeared they were quite pleased with themselves for hitting upon the idea of a cigarette. One pulled the door ajar and they switched on their headlamps just as Admire slipped her phone back into her pants' pocket. Unlike them, she was not pleased one bit; in fact, she was as removed from her joy as Kele had ever seen her.

'Are you out of your bloody minds?' she interrupted the men's chatter, accosting them just as they were leaving. 'Where do you think you're going?'

'We thought we could quickly run for a cigarette now while–' answered one, apparently too casually for Admire's liking.

'While what?' she cut him off with the sharpness of a fang. 'Who's going to take this?' The dark hood flew at all three of them. 'Somebody needs to take that back to where it belongs. And there's other work, too. If you keep your eyes open and out of the smoke clouds long enough you will see it.'

The childlike excitement that had overtaken the men disappeared. They seemed surprised by the source of their discipline, but knew better than to second-guess Admire. Not a scintilla of their egos was left in the wake of her tongue-lashing. She finished off by impressing on them the importance of seeing their tasks through to the end before rushing off like a master-less pack of dogs. The fact that Mr Simon is out of the compound doesn't mean all people who care about the revolution are gone, she warned. Kele was dumbstruck at this display of power. It was not so much that she didn't expect a woman to hold such authority over militant men. It was that this was the same woman who used to wait on her when she'd spend nights at Malcolm's. This was the same Admire who would get her shoes ready, or help with ironing a skirt or shirt to save her time in the morning. She was ever the bashful acquiescent helper. And Kele had a liking for her because of that perpetual air of penury she wore, the way a nun might wear a habit and clutch her rosary. But this very person had become a lioness with veins sticking out of her neck. Her roaring words were good for Kele though. They lent her strength and were a welcome distraction from the sickness still swirling inside her, discombobulating her thoughts.

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In the end Admire sent the men off with a stern warning they seemed to heed, almost banging the door on their backsides when she closed it. She explained she would remain behind because Mr Simon had asked her to do special work on the prisoner for Mr Malcolm. Kele recalled her and the bald-headed man whispering into each other's ears in the cavern.

When the two women were left alone Kele braced herself for an awful encounter. The queasiness had begun to leave her alone, but she was sure she was in for something worse with Admire. When the latter spoke, however, things took a different turn. She was as meek as a lamb, and suddenly broke down. Her first sobs were as wild as those of a little girl who'd stubbed a toe for the first time. She covered her mouth with her free hand. She covered her mouth with her free hand. Her double-jointed arm bent awkwardly at the wrist when she did this, as though it belonged to someone else behind her. Kele was lost. This woman was like many books printed onto the same pages. It was utterly impossible to read her. What she did next was even more unexpected. She took Kele's phone out of her pocket and held it out to her.

'Why are you giving me that?' Kele asked, her manner confrontational. 'What the hell is going on here?' As she spoke, she stole a look at the camera out of the corner of her eye, convinced Admire was putting on a show for it. She turned her face slightly away from its lens to protect her lips from being read by anyone who could be manning it.

'Listen,' Admire spoke eventually. 'Listen carefully to me. There isn't much time. Take the phone. I know where you can make a call.' She wiped her tears frantically, stopping to look over her shoulder, as though she'd heard someone approaching behind the door. But there was nothing save a distant sound, like a hammer on steel. 'It is not supposed to be like this,' she tried to go on, but her weeping drowned her words.

Kele couldn't deny the raw emotion issuing from Admire, but if it was really genuine, why would she say and do everything in full view of a camera she knew would betray her actions? There was another noise outside, and Admire froze before looking over her shoulder a second time. Kele was even more perplexed by this. Why would this woman be concerned with a threat to her rear when they were being watched in front? Could the person looking at them on the other side be in concert with her? But just as Kele was considering the possibility of Admire's sincerity, waves of queasiness returned, welling up to her chest and throat. She felt weak and unsteady in her stomach, in desperate need of ballast against the floating feeling. She'd been sitting on the bed all along, but she wanted to lie down and turn away from the light.

'Are you okay?' Admire's voice was filled with concern. She came over to the bed and sat down next to her.

'Don't worry about me,' Kele said stoically. 'I'll be fine. Have you told Simon about the phone yet?' she asked, weighing up Admire's sincerity again. If nothing else, the girl was the first opportunity of help to present itself to Kele since she became entangled in this mess.

'Don't you think it would be with him right now if I had?'

'And how come you haven't given it to him?'

‘I haven’t told him because I did not sign up for putting children’s lives in danger. I knew absolutely nothing about what we all just saw back there. Children’s chests being carved out with fire like that? I can’t be part of that!’

Kele listened and let her go on.

‘I overheard one of the men earlier talking about these bombs and I didn’t believe it. That’s not anything Malcolm would ever do, I told myself.’

Kele was surprised by the familiarity with which she referred to Malcolm; no more Mr Malcolm.

‘Children were never supposed to be part of this. I believe with all my heart in what we’re doing here; but children are sacred.’

All of this Admire said through sporadic gasps and the coming and going of new tears. Yet Kele remained wary. To her this could be Admire doing the bald-headed man’s and Malcolm’s ‘special work’, just as she had told the guards.

‘So you didn’t know about any of the bombs at all then?’

‘Of course I did. They said the bombs would only be for the newspapers and radio stations. For you; only for you,’ she protested, frustrated Kele still did not believe her. ‘Nobody told me the people’s children would be in danger too. The games at the school were supposed to be a distraction – just bombs at each of the gates that would never blow, not on the bodies of children. I can’t be part of that. Malcolm lied! Don’t you understand? He lied!’ Admire had paced up and down occasionally as she spoke, balling her shaking hand into a fist and breathing into it, as though soliciting it for ideas. No longer weeping but calculating, she had a face with the cold expression of a stone.

Again her familiarity with Malcolm’s name struck Kele and blew into her mind a notion that hadn’t crossed it until then. This woman who was offering her something of a positive gesture spoke about her boss more like a betrayed lover than a senior comrade-in-arms.

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Admire only departed after an incredulous account and audacious plan to get Kele out of the compound for a cell phone call, and back in again unnoticed. First, she revealed what Maître might have been trying to tell Kele about the cameras all along. They were damn near dummies – a panopticon – not a single eye keeping watch; at least not for long stretches of time. They recorded onto USB devices and were reviewed by the women after every twelve hours of footage. This gave

Kele a reasonable window to execute the plan Admire had come up with, while Admire in turn would intercept the camera footage. But how did Maître come to know about the cameras? And how much more does she know? Kele was keen to learn, but there was no time for that now. She was glad to have the phone back with her, yet she was disappointed to find out the next thing Admire revealed. She couldn't immediately use it. Even though the Black Spiders were using their phones to communicate underground, theirs weren't phones at all, at least not in the strictest sense.

'Cell phones don't work in caves,' Admire had said with an air of smug certitude. 'You can't do this without getting out.'

The unit was in fact using cell phones, but they were always 'off'. Everything here was off the grid. They functioned like good old walkie-talkies, with the added advantages of texting, offline file sharing, and closed-circuit location services. The technology was nothing new, though Admire said the bald-headed man hailed it as another mark of advancement for black people by the Black Spiders. It was borrowed from already existing off-the-grid forms like GoTenna and BearTooth – a way to use one's phone for adventure activities such as orienteering and spelunking. Kele was somewhat astonished at hearing Admire explain everything the way she did, as though she was educated and had been hiding it all along. Kele knew what orienteering was, but had no clue about spelunking. After her reluctant accomplice left, she switched on her phone to see the time. But it was wrong. It was definitely not 01:35 on Thursday, January 2nd. Admire must have taken out the battery or tinkered with the phone's settings. This upset Kele because she didn't know what day it was, let alone the time. She desperately needed to reorientate herself. More upsetting than the altered settings, however, was something that put her under immense pressure to act, and not to spend more time than was necessary pondering the execution of the plan. Her phone battery was low – on 30%. Despite this cause for urgency, Kele wasn't ready. Some of Admire's words were still ringing in her head.

'I know it doesn't sound easy. I'll try to get you a gas mask, but not everybody has access to them. They are for emergencies only and it might be suspicious if I try too hard. If I can't get you one you'll have to hold your breath as you pass the chambers with the hydrogen sulphide in them. It's more uncomfortable than it is tough to do this. You can get there. It's where some of the men go out to smoke sometimes.'

Kele had to go back to the cavern in which the media briefing was held, and manoeuvre past the stalagmites, stalactites and columns that had formed the backdrop for the bald-headed man's presentation. The corridor that led there meandered all the way without opening out to any others. In that sense the directions were straightforward enough. But there were ill-timed protrusions of rock, jutting out from above, below, and from the walls, though the space was wide enough for two people to walk side by side, especially if they knew their way. But Kele didn't know her way; she needed as much illumination as she did patience to make sure she didn't stumble or strike her head. She couldn't

take a headlamp with her, but her phone would be fine, Admire had said. Its light was pale enough to not be immediately conspicuous in the unlikely chance there would be people along the way. But it *would* help her if she kept it low and crouched along the ground instead of walking upright. Kele appreciated that she couldn't get to the cavern without the use of her cell phone flashlight. But the obvious drawback in this was draining the device's battery-life too quickly. There would only be light at the end, after pulling her body up five meters of rope through a sinkhole. Only then could she make the call.

All of this was so daunting it kept Kele's stomach fighting her, keeping her in disequilibrium, threatening to throw itself up. She looked at her missed calls. It was Nakedi who'd tried to call her twice as she walked with the bald-headed man that morning. But there were no messages from him. Again the battery caught her attention. It was now on 28%. What if it became so low she had to choose when the time to make a call came? Admire wanted her to reach the headmaster at Hopewell D and ask him to call off the games, quietly, without raising any suspicion about the source of the tip-off. While that would help Admire's cause, it would do nothing for Kele. Donovan's safety was still her chief concern, and the call that would help her was one to Nakedi, to warn him about Malcolm and Simon's men. Yet there was Killian also. He could alert both the police and the headmaster of the school; and along with her and Maître as his primary sources, get the right people to produce a spectacle that might still contribute positively to Kele's career.

'Foiling the plans at Hopewell D through Killian might save Donovan too,' Kele calculated now, leaning her hope on this idea. 'It might get Simon's men off Nakedi's trail because they would probably have to regroup if the police became unexpectedly involved.'

She considered this deeply and for a long time, until she caught herself beginning to drift into a state of thoughtlessness. She was exhausted. Her body felt awful; her mind was out of her reach. She looked at the white folder Kele had left behind for her. In big, bold, black font, its heading read: *White History Now*. She became lost in the title and drifted into further musings she didn't quite have a handle on. When she came crashing down to reality again her battery was on 26%. It was falling fast. She needed to get up to that sinkhole quickly and make the call that would free her and save her child. She switched the phone off and lay curled up in her divan, in a tight ball of anxiety and distress.

Chapter Forty-One

After the squash and biscuits Nakedi sat down to an early lunch with Leontien and her family. The conversation around the table was warm and interesting, except in the moments when it turned towards him, and Leontien's father wanted to know more about his point of view on something that was being discussed. Between green beans, butternut, chicken and dumplings, they talked about everything from politics to religion. For as much as he could, Nakedi eschewed speaking and listened. Leontien's aunt was a staunch Christian. Like Aunt Eve, she attended what she called a Pentecostal church; what Leontien's dad referred to as a 'happy-clappy' bunch of crap. Since her joblessness had her sequestered in the lalis of late, she was recruiting and saving souls around the village when she wasn't at the lodge. Tat' Velelo was complaining she was using his house for gatherings on Sundays recently. He didn't approve and was relaying to his daughter the commotion of the day before. He was threatening to chase them out the next time, lest they run him off his land first and snatch away its culture, like the white people did with Africans and their soil and mores.

'Imagine that. If I welcomed them here, that's exactly what they'd do. They would begin to chase away all the boys who have been coming here to become men since my grandfather's grandfather was a youth. And mind you,' he looked at Aunt Ntyatyi: 'they wouldn't chase them out the yard, no. They'd chase them out of their culture and counsel them to go to hospitals for *ulwaluko*. That's if they counselled them to *ulwaluko* at all. Maybe they'll start an anti-circumcision church here in the yard.'

Though all was said with a jocund air, Tat' Velelo was imperious in making his point. Out of empathy, Nakedi sided with the aunt. He mentioned that his mother too was a staunch Christian and that her faith kept her over the years, especially since the loss of her husband. But this was a mistake on his part. He called more of his host's attention upon himself.

'It's fine for religion to comfort people; to carry them, what have you. If only we could confine it to that or the other good things it does,' the old man said to Nakedi. 'The major problem with it is that these Christians, these congregations, follow a mythical man, an idea for which no one can truly account with any measure of empiricism.' He stopped to look at each one at the table ending off with Nakedi. 'But guess what, they do this by following this mythical man through one who is made of flesh and bones, just like them. He becomes their conduit, a more direct connection and relationship with their invisible friend.'

'But, Velelo—' Aunt Ntyatyi weighed in but was cut off.

'The others,' Leontien's father went on, 'must give all their money and loyalty to him and he will see to the work of the Lord on their behalf. Tell me this is not how people end up eating grass, getting stepped on, and substituting their perfectly fine oxygen for a known pesticide in Doom?' He

was quoting stories from the news in bygone times, where different preachers had abused congregation members in the name of faith and religion by intentionally exposing them to harm.

'That's an oversimplification of things, Velelo. You of all people should know it is wrong to oversimplify,' Aunt Ntyatyi complained. 'Isn't that what you always preach? Educated people,' she turned to address Nakedi. 'They're just like that. They like to overcomplicate the world and aren't happy until they make it one big problem. Not all preachers are the same, Velelo. Remember that.'

'Yes, not all of them use insecticide,' responded the man. He was quick off the mark and his tone was no longer jovial. 'One once used poison to test the faith of his people. Let me tell you something: He was lucky nobody died because that was feeding people something that could have actually killed them. Killing someone is a crime in South Africa, the last I cared to check.'

Nakedi felt something collapse inside him at those words; but the old man quickly returned to his original point, and the moon, already rising in Nakedi's mind, sunk back down.

'And that's really how this religion stuff works. You have one guy who claims to have a divine calling. Whether he was riding the bus, working in the garden or sitting on the shitter when he heard this calling, none of us will ever know. We're just supposed to believe and trust. That is, we're supposed to surrender to his gift of gab and claims of talking to God, and follow him with our wallets in hand. That is dangerous. And again, we have white people to thank for that; and insecure African people.' He pushed is plate away from him. Nakedi wondered how he was done eating at the rate at which he spoke.

He looked at Leontien, thinking she might take offence to her father's statement about white people, because of her mother; but he decided against any form of succour towards her.

'Still you made me with them white people, huh, *Tata*; didn't you?' Leontien teased.
Aunt Ntyatyi got up. Her spirit seemed injured but she bore well under the humiliation of her religion. She appeared used to these verbal exchanges and seemed accustomed to leaving them with her tail between her legs, too. Instead of waiting for one of the servants to arrive, she began to clean up some of the dishes and plates herself. Nakedi rushed to finish the remainder of his food as Tat' Velelo continued his white people talk with his daughter.

'Yes, let's rather talk about white people and let Jesus alone,' Aunt Ntyatyi said, leaving with what she thought was a parting shot.

'He's the whitest of them all, is he not, your Jesus that you sing English hymns to and wake me in my sleep?' Leontien's father struck back.
Aunt Ntyatyi could only shrug her shoulders and stick out her tongue at him in response.

'*Yho*! You're such a heathen,' she complained.

Tat' Velelo shrugged his shoulders and stuck his own tongue out, and he and Leontien let out a hearty laugh. But Nakedi, unsure of the aunt's true sentiment, only followed with a faltering titter.

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'Why didn't you tell me this guy you know out here is your father?' Nakedi asked as he and Leontien walked to the garage to look for a toolbox. Tat' Velelo wanted to fix a shelf in his study. He would sit with Nakedi as soon as he was done with that, before going to see the newly circumcised boys in the field behind his smallholding. 'Seems to me,' Nakedi continued, 'he knows more than a little, coming from generations of surgeons. How come you didn't say anything?'

'I wanted to surprise you; that's all. Is there a problem?'

'No, absolutely not! Really, I should thank you again for introducing me to him.'

The sleuth in Nakedi had pieced it all together. Precious had probably sympathised with Buntu after his fight. They must have sat down and drunk together. Maybe that's how she knew the fight was about manhood. He probably shared the details of his plight with her, and she, being cousins with Leontien, must have recommended the best circumcision school she knew for him to try – her uncle's place. Joy overtook Nakedi but he did his best to contain it and maintain the same energy. They reached the side door of the garage and Leontien unlocked it. But she couldn't open it. The thing was made of hollow metal and its handle was very rusty. It was stuck.

'I just wish you had told me we were going to run into him this soon,' Nakedi said with a bit of strain in his breathing as he fought with the handle. 'Thing is, I would have loved to prepare. Even as a man, you can't assume these kinds of men will speak to you, especially if you don't fall into their definition of manhood and you don't fully know what you're talking about with them.' The handle gave and he pushed the door open but waited for Leontien to go in first, but she didn't.

'I thought you said there was no problem! I'm sorry I didn't tell you. Okay? I thought you'd be happy.' She was clearly irritated with him, standing hands akimbo with her back to the open door.

'Listen, my father is not one of these guys you imagine. Give him that. I may not know anything about his circumcision school stuff, but he respects the study of things as much as he advocates the doing of things in a particular way. Anyhow, what made you choose this topic if all this cultural, male red tape worries you so much?'

Nakedi was beginning to apologise, but Leontien turned and walked in ahead of him and said nothing. The ceiling light came on.

‘There we go,’ she said.

The garage, just like the house, was roomy. In its centre stood a maroon Pajero and mounted on the walls were immaculately built shelves – three levels of them. Their straight edges were starkly contrasted with the unevenness of the garage walls.

‘Ah, so now I see why you’d know all about Pajeros,’ Nakedi teased as he nodded at the old car. She gave him a dismissive expression that suggested he should have just believed her when she said it.

‘You haven’t answered me yet. Why did you go with this topic if the Xhosa male red tape is such a problem for you?’ Leontien was pressing him now.

‘Why did I choose Xhosa circumcision for my research?’

‘There’s only one of us doing that here; so, yes.’

‘I don’t know. It could have been on anything I guess. I’m Tswana, but because we are a rainbow nation I think it’s really important that we, even as black people, get to know about each other’s cultures. Circumcision is an interesting part of African culture, and I’m just passionate about cultures; how they stick, how they evolve.’

‘Rainbow nation? Do people still use that?’ Leontien asked with laughter on her lips and friendliness back in her voice.

‘Guess I’m not a person then,’ Nakedi protested, also amused at having used what was clearly an archaic phrase. But he collected himself and spoke further. ‘I always see Xhosa circumcision so badly written about. I mean, if Xhosa people have done it for so long, surely they must be holding onto something they understand as vital to them and their identity. Right?’ Nakedi paused. ‘Even if there are people who get it wrong, there are some who do it correctly and get it right. Your dad seems like one of those who do it the right way; which is why it’s going to be great talking to him.’ Nakedi said this so decisively he just about believed every word of it himself.

‘I see,’ Leontien said. ‘I wish I was as passionate about something – anything – as you are with that.’

‘I’m sure there is something you’re passionate about,’ Nakedi wanted to say, but he decided it was better to say something else.

She smiled and let silence pass: ‘Now where could that toolbox be?’

‘He said it was on the shelf nearest to the driver’s side, right?’ Nakedi put in and asked a question of his own. ‘So what is your dad qualified in anyway – what did he study?’

‘What doesn’t he study? He’s interested in everything,’ Leontien explained. ‘He keeps a huge study at the back, separate to the house even; you’ll see it just now, as soon as we get that damn toolbox. But he’s a Sociologist, a big Stuart Hall and Cultural Studies guy.

This information was important to Nakedi in order to prepare himself for whatever was on the horizon, so he would not easily get found out by the old man. He knew about Hall from his ‘Media and Culture’ Journalism class. But he’d only read one or two articles.

There was more disorder than order on the shelves, and as she rummaged, Leontien left even more chaos in her wake.

‘The fact that you’re studying something he does will excite him. But he’s secretive when it comes to that world with me so I don’t know much. And I don’t know what he’ll be willing to share.’

‘What’s that?’ Nakedi asked as he spotted something he thought was a toolbox at the far end of the shelf they were searching on. It was.

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Behind the house were three more buildings. It was not difficult to make out the prized study from the other two. Nakedi was behind Leontien on the narrow walkway. Just like the other buildings on the property, the study was green – or a variation of the colour. Its door was open, and stood a few paces under a jutting frontage supported by white pillars. Though the building was sizeable for a study, it was much too small for the facade and pillars which appeared to Nakedi gaudy and overdone. They walked in. Inside Tat’ Velelo sat behind a desk in the centre of the room. He got up when he saw them.

‘Thanks; over here,’ he said, leading them towards where the faulty shelf was. Unlike the garage and the rest of the house, the walls were smooth, as though someone had taken extra care with the plastering job before painting them. There was an extraordinary variety of books on the shelves, all impeccably arranged. Tat’ Velelo even had numbers on them. It was a kind of library system, Nakedi imagined. He guessed the man’s study also doubled as a library for locals.

‘What are the numbers on the books for?’ he asked.

‘It’s a filing system I use. I have more books than my memory can account for. I’ve lost lots of them over the years from lending them out to people, especially when I used to live in the city.’ Leontien’s father knelt down on the floor and began removing books from the lowest of the three shelves, which were replicas of the ones in the garage, mounted all around the room.

‘And do you lend them out to the local students?’

‘I wouldn’t quite say so. The kids have to be able to read the books first and foremost, obviously; but it is imperative they read them in here. There are some exceptions to the rule of course. Thobile, for example, one of the boys who is here for *ukoluka* – nice young man, you’ll see him later if you come down with me to *emabhomeni* later. What time are you returning to Port St Johns?’ Tat’ Velelo digressed.

‘I am not sure yet; I have to make a phone call about that. But I might stay over at your lodge overnight if I don’t go.’

‘Anyway, you’ll let me know. But this boy Thobile is graduating from high school this year and has earned a place at Wits to do Media Studies. I let him borrow some Tomasellis, Curran, Morley, and some Habermas to read while *eSuthwini*.’

‘Are you allowed to read books in there?’ Leontien asked.

‘Please help me with *these* books, my dear,’ her dad replied. ‘You know I don’t talk to women about those things. I know it’s sexist in your feminist world, but that’s just how it is in mine.’

Leontien began to help with the books and Nakedi, who’d been standing idly by as her dad picked up the first few, joined in.

Chapter Forty-Two

As soon as Tat' Velelo was done restoring his shelf he asked Leontien to give him and the guest room to talk. She did so gladly after picking out a couple of books to keep herself occupied with for the remainder of her stay. Nakedi was the first to speak as soon as she was out of the room. This was partly because the day was going and he wanted to get closer to the point of asking about Buntu. He knew this was a subject that required patience because he had to skirt around it. Yet he also spoke first because he did not want Leontien's father to be the one steering the conversation and asking him things he was not prepared to give answers to.

'Does traditional Xhosa circumcision still have a place today?' Nakedi asked. He'd formulated the question in the last while – his thesis statement.

And the response he got to this was an out-stretched arm pointing to the desk.

'A seat?'

Nakedi took the offer and they sat facing each other, the old man on the chair they had found him in and he on another.

Under his strict form of a teacher, Tat' Velelo's manner was easy and Nakedi had taken to his hospitality.
'Well, let me answer you with a question of my own. You are Sotho, right?'

'No, I'm moTswana.'

'And you are a Tswana man who hails from where?'

'Johannesburg.' Nakedi felt this was a safe answer as his ignorance about aspects of culture in general would be easily forgiven.

'What interests you so much with Xhosa circumcision if you are a Tswana man? So much that you would go out of your way like this to study it?'

Nakedi gave the same answer he'd given Leontien before, but he didn't say anything about a rainbow nation this time: 'I think it's really important that we, as black people, get to know about each other's cultures. Circumcision is an interesting part of African culture, and I'm just passionate about cultures; how they stick, how they evolve. I am African before I am moTswana, and I know Xhosa circumcision is always represented negatively in the press and other media. I want to find out my own truth about its complexities.'

'Interesting,' said Leontien's father. 'What made you choose Xhosa people when amaHhlubi do this thing there on the mountains of Matatiele and Mount Ayliff, kuQumbu and other places?' He pointed as though he could see the places he spoke of beyond the walls of his study. 'And abeSotho

and amaPedi; don't forget about them. In fact, even within kwaXhosa this thing is done differently with all the rituals, including circumcision.' Leontien's father continued. 'AmaMpondo will differ in certain things from amaMfengu and abaThembu and others. The only unshakably common denominator with everyone is the actual loss of the foreskin.'

Though Nakedi had grown up hearing about amaHlubi, amaMpondo, amaMpondomise and other tribes of kwaXhosa, he didn't know what marked each and how they varied from each other. He didn't know how other Xhosa people's Xhosaness differed from his. To him everyone was Xhosa, just as he generally considered himself to be.

'So what does any of this have to do with your original point of whether I'm Sotho or not?' Nakedi asked respectfully, still trying to understand why Tat' Velelo had implied a choice in becoming part of amaXhosa.

'That is what a good talk does,' the old man said. 'It goes where it wants and needs to go. But you are correct to ask. I asked you that because I wanted to show you two things.' The man stuck out two fingers like a peace sign. Despite the hazel colour of Leontien's, Nakedi could make out a resemblance between this man and his daughter's eyes; something about the shape of them. 'The first thing is that we are not the only ones who do it, though we are maybe the most vilified for several reasons. Also, and more importantly, I might add, I wanted to know what you think intrinsically makes you Sotho or makes me Xhosa.'

'If my father was Sotho then I would be Sotho. That's how I understand it. It's not more complicated than that.'

'Okay, fine. I'll give you that because it's true to a certain degree and that's what people are taught to believe. And yes you can't really decide today you are part of amaXhosa and decide tomorrow to be part of *abeSotho*. But there is this.' The old man got up from his chair and came around the table to Nakedi's side. He pulled up his shirt sleeve and put his and Nakedi's forearms side by side. Nakedi's heart began to pick up pace. He wasn't sure what this action was all about.

'If you were an alien and you landed on the planet and you were asked to look at a Zulu man, a Sotho man, as well as a Xhosa man, how would you be able to tell them apart?'

'From how they speak,' Nakedi replied with as much quickness as assuredness.

'Granted,' said the old man. 'But what if they said nothing. What if they could not speak? We have Zulu, Xhosa, and Sotho people who may be deaf and do not hear and speak a word of any of those languages.'
Nakedi's lips began to move, but nothing came out.

‘Are the people no longer Zulu, Xhosa, or whatever else have you because they cannot speak the language?’

‘No.’ Nakedi was no longer as sure of himself as he had been with is initial reply to this question.

‘So, while language is indeed an identifier of who we are, it cannot be the only thing. There are a lot of these Model C kids out in the world. When there is racism are they spared from it because they speak the English language like white people?’
Nakedi smiled, and replied with another ‘no’.

‘I will ask you one more question. If we have a Chinese woman and a Japanese woman how do we know without their flags which is which? Do you know anything about Semiotics?’ enquired Tat’ Velelo. But perhaps he could already read the next ‘no’ on Nakedi’s face so he carried on. ’Never mind that. The point is this. If they were dressed in their traditional styles it would be easy to tell them apart. We would assume the woman dressed in a kimono is Japanese and the one dressed in a cheongsam is Chinese. So if we had an imaginary bag of what we call culture, we could already place language and dress in it as two things that signify which people a person identifies with. And yes, you are correct; some of this identification is not willy-nilly. It is decided for the individual. But there are circumstances in which one can be brought into a tribe.’

Nakedi began to see what Tat’ Velelo was driving at: ‘No, it’s not only our languages that make us who we are,’ he conceded, and at that he wondered whether he were a Xhosa person, let alone a Xhosa man. Besides speaking the language, what else did he do that was Xhosa? And if he wasn’t a Xhosa person then what was he? That kind of question had never mattered to him before, but the missing answer to it produced in his spirit the metaphysical equivalent of hunger pangs.

‘No, languages don’t fully decide,’ Tat’ Velelo pressed on. ‘Yes, the languages are important. They are even named for who we are. A Xhosa man speaks isiXhosa like an English man speaks English. But it is also the rituals and the customs we choose to observe that define and affirm who we are.’ The old man walked back to his seat as he continued to make his point and Nakedi propped himself up on the chair and listened carefully as though he were sitting in a class in which the teacher was tackling his favourite subject. ‘For example,’ continued Tat’ Velelo, ‘if we look back at history and at wars between, say, the Khoi and the Xhosa, we learn something significant. If the Khoi was defeated in war he himself was not given the opportunity to become fully Xhosa, but was allowed to remain with the Xhosa if he took on their customs and paid respect to the Xhosa chief under whose jurisdiction he was living. But more importantly, if his children, growing up with Xhosa children, reached that age when boys want to become men, they could fully become Xhosa men, especially if they had all the other rituals before that performed for them.’

‘So circumcision makes you a Xhosa person?’

‘Yes. But that circumcision is only a part of many other things that make one Xhosa. Xhosa women don’t get circumcised but we know they exist. For example, certain Xhosa people perform the ritual of *imbheleko*. When a new child is born a sheep is slaughtered for them, and from its wool is made the child’s first blanket in the world. Of course we no longer live in the times where this has any practical application so a lot of families will let it go. At their own peril, I might add. But it is things such as these that make one this or the other thing. If you cut both our arms open and got the finest of DNA specialists to look inside for what makes me Xhosa and what makes you Sotho, they would not find it. It is only the things we choose to practise as customs that are claimed by the mass of Xhosa people that determine whether we are Xhosa or not. So in the end, yes, if Leontien gets married to a Zulu man who wants nothing to do with circumcision that will be fine. But should her son grow up and seek to identify with her Xhosa heritage, that is something I would help him along with.’

Nakedi understood quite well what Tat’ Velelo was saying. The truth of it hit him with the sharpness of a day’s new light. He had the feeling of being ushered into a kind of knowledge that was vital; a kind of knowledge he would not have come to encounter all by himself. He had never thought of it like that at all. He sat and said nothing for a moment. This new wisdom was like a morsel food, and as someone might move a bite through their mouth as they chew in order to savour more of the flavour, he was taking in with his mind the full extent of what he had tasted in Tat’ Velelo’s words. He thought about his own son and wondered what he was, and whether it mattered at all that he or his son knew the answer to this. Tears almost assailed him at this thought.

‘There is another question you’d begun to ask,’ said the old man, freeing him from his thoughts. He rose to his feet. ‘Would you be able to ask that and other questions on the way out to *eSuthwini*? Is that a trip you are still able to make? I have quite a few of those young men to see today.’

Nakedi looked at the time. He wondered about calling Sabine and where she was at this point. He wondered whether Donovan was back with his family in Mthatha or she still had him with her. Of course finding Buntu was a trip he was still going to make.

‘Can I make that call quickly and get back to you?’ Nakedi said.

‘Sure,’ I have to get ready in the house quickly before I go. I will meet you back here.’ With that the old man left Nakedi with the privacy in which to complete his call.

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The time was going for 3PM. Sabine was already back at her house with Nakedi's son. She had not found anyone at his home in Blakeway, she said. This worried Nakedi, but he wondered whether his sisters had taken their mother somewhere for help. Where that might be exactly he couldn't fathom. All the possibilities he considered were outlandish. He could not quite figure out what the matter might be with their phones either. Perhaps there had been no electricity, he thought in the end, and none of them were able to charge their phones. He decided to worry less about them and more about the thing that would make them happy once he accomplished it. He was telling Sabine how close he was to finding Buntu now. He had just finished explaining the events of the night before with Fezile when Tat' Velelo returned. The man was in a leather hat and gloves and a complete change of clothing. He was in horse-riding gear.

'This way,' said the old man as he motioned Nakedi towards one of the two other buildings on either side of the study.

Nakedi thought the earlier talk of horseback was joke. He had not been on a horse in about the same time he had not seen Sabine, who had taught him how to ride over and above all else she had instructed him in. He looked at the horses in the stable. There were four in total.

'It's a long way by car, and my Pajero has issues much bigger than my toolbox or knowledge can tackle. I like to ride out there anyway and take in the afternoon. There are beautiful rivers and waterfalls to cross. The brooks babble and talk to you about where the waters have been and what they have seen. Can you ride? I mean, you could go in your car but the dongas down that way are unforgiving.'

The man said his other car, which was also a four by four, was the one his son and daughter were using to get supplies for him in Flagstaff. Nakedi wanted nothing more than to find Buntu, so he decided he would ride with the old man regardless of the years.

The land was a joy to go over on horseback. At first they had ridden at an easy walk out of the gates in the back. The gates led immediately into an open plane on land that was richly green with myriad types of vegetation. It all fell gently as though the grass itself was a body of water flowing into the forest of trees below in the distance. The walk of the horses became a trot, and before long a canter. Nakedi was falling behind every time and this made it difficult for them to carry on their conversation.

'You said you visit with the boy's families and mothers before you take their boys in? Is that allowed?' he shouted, his voice coming out in undulating waves.

'Allowed by whom?' Tat' Velelo replied with a question. 'And yes, I do visit.'

'Each and every one of them?' Nakedi was surprised given what he'd heard about the popularity of the man's work.

‘Yes, correct.’

‘But I heard you have people come here as far as Cape Town. How do they do that?’

‘Well, the ones from that far have to come here for a visit long before their boy comes to spend his time here. Come, it’s better to see what we are talking about here.’

He broke the canter and his horse went into a full gallop as though chasing the same wind that blew past them and leaned the grass forward towards the distant trees.

Chapter Forty-Three

The trees were thickly clustered from a distance, but once there the horses made their way in the spaces between them easily. It was as though they were aware of the terrain in the same way a guide might be aware of it. They came to a fork by a clear brook. There were three choices of paths all quickly disappearing among the copious leaves and branches. The horses ignored all three of the paths and chose the stream instead.

'The family lodge is that way,' pointed Tat' Velelo at one of the narrow paths. 'But if you go right through here you end up at Ngqiqweni and Zonyele then onto Noqhekwana. Once you're there you are already right in the middle of Port St Johns.' This he said as he pointed at the other path, ignoring the one in the middle.

'Oh, you can go all the way to Port St Johns through here?' Nakedi asked.

'Not by car you can't. The rocks and craters on the small road beyond the forest won't allow it. Even four by fours struggle. That's why it's still tough to get electricity into Noqhekwana. There's only one way in, through Ferry Point Road. They've started installing electricity there in the last while, but coming in even through Ferry Point is cumbersome. Too many cables, poles, and equipment have to be offloaded quite a distance from where they're going. And it's tough work.'

'I see,' said Nakedi, though he didn't really understand the lie of the land or why it was important for Tat' Velelo to point these other things out.

'But yes, you can go this way. Some of the initiates who don't stay here the entire term usually use this way through the trees.' Tat' Velelo patted his horse and leaned forward to brush it on the neck with a gloved hand as it drank.

'Why would initiates do that? Why get circumcised in order to leave?'

'Some people only come here or send their kids here because they want to be circumcised by a trustworthy family name. Those are people who want to remain as close as possible to the culture of their forefathers. They are people who don't want any white doctors touching and defiling the foreskins and rites of their children. So they bring them here. But they don't necessarily want to keep them here. Perhaps their *khankatha* is a trusted relative they believe will look well after the son. Maybe they have no money to give me to feed the boys the entire term of four weeks here.'

'So you charge for the circumcision as well as for keeping the boys here for a month?'

'No,' I only charge for keeping the boys here. I do not charge for the actual operation. But they have to eat something while they are here. They also have to be protected while out in the bush. These are all things that cost money. And then there's the education.'

Nakedi was confused.

‘I don’t understand. So if I were uncircumcised and wanted to have the job done I could come here and get the cut and leave on the same day?’

‘I would not let even my most despised enemy do that.’ He laughed almost at the top of his voice at what Nakedi supposed was the asinine nature of his question. ‘I usually insist on a medical check-up by the boys before they get here. This lets me know what I am dealing with should there be any issues. And mostly, this is to protect myself should anything go wrong.’

‘And does anything usually go wrong?’

‘What have you heard?’ asked Tat’ Velelo with a smile.

‘Only good things,’ Nakedi said.

‘I’m glad,’ said Leontien’s father. ‘It has been at least twenty years now since I took over from my brother when he passed and I am yet to have an incident, and he only had one in his time as *ingcibi* here. Once they come, the boys can’t leave until they are allowed to take liquids after the first week. It’s very dangerous for them to be doing anything that’ll exert them on the first day. For one they’ll need water if they exert themselves, and the last thing an initiate wants to do is pee.’

Nakedi listened to the songs of birds and heard what he thought were the waves of the ocean in the distance.

‘That’s odd,’ he said out loud.

‘What?’ asked the old man as he pulled his horse from the water and joined Nakedi, whose horse had had its fill sooner.

‘That I can hear the waves yet we are so far from the ocean.’

‘We’re a distance from the ocean, but not that far. I don’t know if you should be hearing waves from here, but if we turned and went this way, as I said before, we would end up at the Manzamnandi Lodge. Directly from there, as the crow flies, we would end up on the sand and white water of the Indian Ocean.’

‘Why did you start the lodge? Was it to supplement your teacher’s salary?’ As soon as Nakedi uttered the words about the salary he remembered one of Aunt Eve’s teachings when he was growing up: Never speak to a man about his salary unless you’re paying it. But Tat’ Velelo didn’t seem to mind.

‘The lodge is what I came here to build when I left the city. I was sick and tired of the rhythm of the concrete jungle. So I took my pension early, when they still allowed you to and didn’t hold onto

your money so they could speculate with it and use it while you struggle and your family starves. I took my hard-earned coins and paper and came back to the place where I first felt love and nurture: the love of my father and mother; the love of my late brothers and one and only sister; the love of the soil here, the grass, the trees and these rivers; this grass they feed.' He looked down the mane of is horse, which was still oriented towards the ground because the beast was feasting on a patch of grass.

He kicked his heels into the horse and it knew it was time to stop eating and carry on with the journey. Nakedi did the same and the two horses followed each other into the path in the middle that Tat' Velelo had said nothing about. They rode for fifteen more minutes before reaching a wide glade in which there were about twelve mounds of grass with small mouths, and smoke coming out the mouth of each.

'We're here,' said Tat' Velelo. 'It's always faster and better by car, but much more liberating this way. Again, we said there would be no recording of any sort. Please keep your phone in your pocket at all times.'

'I understand,' Nakedi responded.
'Now you may not speak to any of the initiates about their business here. You can only observe me as I go about my duties. You did not get any permission from any of them. The only reason I brought you here with me is because I will not be coming here again this week and I know you have your deadline at the end of November and have to go back and finish your work.'

Nakedi expressed his gratitude. He did not need to talk to any of the initiates as far as he was concerned. As long as he was able to spot Buntu he would be content, especially if he was safe.

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Seven of the twelve boys went in this last Wednesday, Tat' Velelo said. They were the second batch of initiates for the November-December season. The other five had gone in the Wednesday before and were staying for a full four weeks. When Nakedi heard this he was worried that Buntu was not in any of the twelve huts. Buhle had mentioned he last saw Buntu three days ago on Sunday night. This would mean he was not circumcised on Wednesday but on Thursday. Nakedi wondered whether he could trust Buhle's word or not. Even though he heard all this before Tat' Velelo starting going with him to the individual huts, he decided he would carry on with it, if only to witness what the real world of Xhosa circumcision was like. And if things went in any direction that allowed him to ask about Buntu, he resolved he would do so.

The things that Nakedi saw were from a world he was supposed to be part of but knew absolutely nothing about. When he saw the first boy he was scared. He was big and tall even though

he sat low in his *bhoma* with a white blanket wrapped around the lower part of his body. His face and the rest of him was covered in a white paste that made from rocks that sat near the opening of the hut. Before Tat' Velelo said anything to the initiate in the first hut, he introduced who Nakedi was. He said he was not going to be addressing him so he should not address him back. This he said in isiXhosa, which Nakedi knew but still played off as foreign to him. After that Tat' Velelo went into a kind of language that resembled isiXhosa in that the words were isiXhosa words but used in contexts that caused them to lose whatever meaning Nakedi previously understood of them. The exercise was the same from the first to the twelfth hut, though some of the initiates were alone in their temporary homes. Tat' Velelo went in, spoke to the man to be, checked his wound, walked out, and spoke to his keeper. In the second hut Nakedi had embarrassed himself. While he had followed the boys in the first hut and exited with his body in reverse, when it was time to leave the second hut he made the mistake of going out head first.

'*Nqash*! *Nqash*!' reprimanded the initiate whose angry face was still imperceptible to Nakedi behind the white paste on his flesh.

Nakedi knew then he did something wrong and reserved to get it right the next time, if the invitation to the other huts still stood. He did his entrances and exits perfectly in all the other eleven huts that he went into. Each time though it was difficult to make out the features of the initiate whose hut they were in. Three of the boys had been built like Buntu, but none of them had recognised him or react to him in any way that he would expect from his little brother. In the end was just more disappointment for Nakedi and his search for his brother.

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For much of the way back Nakedi was agitated. Sabine called him but he was not able to take her call. He continued to make conversation with Leontien's father, trying to be as enthusiastic about his world as he had pretended to be before. Nakedi didn't know where he was going to go next in search of his brother. And for the most part he had not been honest with anyone here, not even Leontien, so he was unable to share his frustration or ask for advice for his next move, even though he felt the advice was something he might need more than anything else.

As they rode back Tat' Velelo explained more of what he did. For him taking over the circumcision school was both a traditional project as well as a decolonising one. He explained how he had two streams of initiates in the school: the local lali boys who attended schools and could hardly string two perfect sentences of English together. And then there were the ones who came here as a break from their white lives. Those are the boys who spoke English with musical accents and no

longer knew anything about who they were. Those he would ask to choose names. And by their parents sending them here, they were sending them to be re-educated in who they were; to shed off their whiteness, so to speak. Nakedi laughed at the irony of some of the initiates shedding their whiteness when all they had been is the colour of chalk. When Nakedi asked why the initiates covered themselves in pure white, Tat' Velelo explained.

'It's protection. *Ubhida abaloyi*,' he said. 'Whoever is your enemy and would like to take you at this time that you are immobile can take you quite easily. You are a sitting duck, almost literally. And these enemies will not see who you are if *ukotile*. It is said that your mother's is the face that witches will use to deceive you, because that is the face you trust the most.'

This news was interesting to Nakedi and he wondered just how gullible people could be.

'Surely I'd be able to tell my mother apart from another woman,' he said. But as soon as the words left him, sadness took him. He propped himself and his face up quickly so as not to give his melancholy away, but he thought he saw in Tat' Velelo's expression something that said he'd been caught out. The truth is that Nakedi knew he never had a mother to speak of and was never going to have one. A real mother was something he would never know. He wouldn't know her whether he walked past her at the supermarket or she came knocking in his very *bhoma* as a ghost.

'Is everything okay with your mother?' Tat' Velelo asked as the horses cantered side by side. 'It's fine, I will not pry if you would like to not talk about it. Nakedi did not reply. He simply dug his heels into the sides of the horse through the stirrups.

'I don't really know if everything is fine with her,' he said, giving in to the melancholy. It was Aunt Eve who was invoked in his mind by Tat' Velelo's question. And the last he had seen of her she was speaking with maddened passion in tongues. Just as on his first day he arrived at home she'd looked past or through him when he said he is going out to look for Buntu at Mandi's behest.

'Bring back my son! Bring back my son!'

These were the only comprehensible words she had managed between her use of tongues, and they were haunting Nakedi now as he rode ahead of Tat' Velelo at a gallop and he flew up behind him up the hill of the plain towards the homestead.

Chapter Forty-Four

When Tat' Velelo and Nakedi rode back into the stables, Leontien was waiting for them. She was visibly upset.

'We've been trying to call you.'

Her father alighted the horse much too swiftly for a middle-aged man.

'We don't have reception out there *eSuthwini* where the boys are, you know that. What's wrong?' he asked as he ran towards her.

'It's Gunya and Ncedisa, *Tata*. There's been an accident… in Flagstaff... with a truck…'

The man and his daughter fell into each other's arms, in a pain-ridden hug. Nakedi got off the horse and tied it next to Tat' Velelo's. He had no clue what to do with himself as the two reeled in the wake of these tragic news.

'How did the accident happen? Do we know it's them for sure?' cried Tat' Velelo. 'We must be sure now, before we make a crying fuss!'

Aunt Ntyatyi came out of the house. Her eyes were red from the flow of tears, just like Leontien's. She had just been on the phone again, with the same man – a bystander who'd called earlier to report the terrible news. This time he'd called back to leave the contact details of the officer in charge of the case, as well as the name and address of her police station. Ncedisa and Gunya were reported dead. Tat' Velelo telephoned Constable Prudence Ndleleni and found out all they could tell him over the phone. It was definitely his Toyota Hilux double-cab that had collided with a bus. The number plate confirmed this: DMX 441 EC. And it had two African occupants in it, a male and female. Their bodies were burned beyond recognition, but a handbag was found near the wreckage, and inside it, Ncedisa's charred driver's license and Manzamnandi Lodge business cards.

The old man's face moved as though it were melting in place. It's expression reflective of multiple others. There was anger in it, fear, and worry – a destitution of spirit that wanted to throw itself into desperate prayer, or just give up and be swallowed whole by the earth where he stood. It was a while before he could say anything, and even then, it was as if he had just been awoken from long sleep. He didn't look well.

'Oh, God, I need to go to Flagstaff. A car... God! Oh, Ntyatyi... I…' he called out and faltered, and stood unmoving.

His sister took him by the hand and into the house for a drink of water. They walked away in an embrace that made Nakedi imagine how they would have looked many years ago as little ones. Their frames, which were bowed under the burden of this new death, gave off the meekness and

powerlessness of children. Nakedi felt the touch of death too, this and other death. He swooned slightly but recovered himself. He was about to succumb to one of his lunar spells when Leontien came up and pleaded with him to drive her family to Flagstaff. He thought about it and said nothing. He'd weighed up the question from the onset, aware it would be asked of him. Yet he was not sure what to do.

'We'll get you some petrol for it,' Leontien implored. 'And I'm sure we can pay you extra. I understand I just met you and I'm hijacking you, taking you away from your plans… but we need your help!'

He certainly didn't want to be visiting Flagstaff, let alone a police station there. However, he also could not refuse the kind of help being sought. So he did the next best thing. He offered them Aunt Eve's car, without him in it. And before Leontien could make a fuss about why he would not come, he confessed to her he didn't do well around death and would rather spend the time alone, checking out some material in Tat' Velelo's study. All of it sounded weak, he felt, but Leontien was not concerned with anything that came after his decision to lend them the car. She leapt at him with a hug, and before he could raise his arms to reciprocate, she broke away and ran into the house to tell her father.

Nakedi fell into cerebral thought, calculating the time he could expect to get the car back.

'It's an hour and a half's drive between Ntafufu and Flagstaff. That makes it three hours there and back. With an hour or two in-between to conduct their necessary business, it will make it a total of five, give or take.'

He looked at the time. They would be back around 8PM if he was right, or just after. Donovan and Sabine sat in his conscience now, demanding his attention. He didn't want to call them about this new development. It was all too much to explain. As long as the boy was with Sabine, Nakedi figured he was safe. So he switched off his phone until further notice. Whatever consequences came with that decision he would confront later. Tat' Velelo emerged from the door with the two ladies. The confident knowledgeable-man-in-control in him was gone. Now he was more like someone who, after begging for alms, had received succour from an unlikely source. He and his sister were incredibly grateful for the use of the vehicle, repeatedly bowing and thanking Nakedi all the way to the car until they drove off.

Leontien remained behind as per her father's wishes.

'We can't leave a guest alone in the house, especially one doing us such a kindness,' he'd said. And turning to Nakedi he'd added: 'Leontien will take care of you. We'll be back with your car, safe, as soon as all necessity allows.'

Nakedi looked at Leontien now that they were standing together after waving goodbye, and watching the car raise a plume of dust until it disappeared. She was also like her father, something in her diminished from the person she was before.

'At least it would be something if they were broken but alive… if we could at least pray for their survival. But we can't even do that! Oh God, *Tata*!' she finished in a hopeless gasp, before signalling to Nakedi she'd like to be alone.

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After dabbling in the study for some time, Nakedi wanted to lie down. He'd passed out a few times at Tat' Velelo's desk, over the pages of a Gramsci reader that his host seemed to be translating into isiXhosa: *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*/*Izabelo Zezibhalo Zika Gramsci Ebotshiwe*. Nakedi left the study for the house. It was fairly dark inside, even though the low afternoon sun still occupied the sky. Leontien was making tea in the kitchen.

'They should've arrived by now,' she said when he walked in from the passage. 'I haven't been able to get them on the phone, but it's already been two hours. How did the reading go? Find anything?'

'So, so,' Nakedi returned, signalling with a see-sawing flat hand. Playing an academic was tiring.

'Would you like a cup of tea? There's no milk, but there's honey, lemon, ginger.'

'Yes, please. I'll have all of those, thanks.'

When Leontien was done she handed him his cup, took hers, as well as some papers that were strewn on the table. With the papers tucked in her armpit she grabbed and dropped a pencil into her pocket.

'Let's go say bye to the sun,' she said with a smile that Nakedi thought a little laboured and forlorn.

She led the way towards the front door and opened it. They sat down on the stoep. At first there was no conversation between them. Leontien sipped her tea, busy with her papers (about five or six loose leaves with copious writing on them, like the skin of a tattooed rock star, Nakedi thought). He drank looking at her and intermittently up at the sky. There were many clouds, long, almost set in rows like a fleet of ships out in the ocean. The early evening was approaching, and the air would soon

be filled with the music of nocturnal life. Cow-dung. The smell of it abounded, filled Nakedi's nostrils, and left him with a distant comforting feeling.

'Thank you again for giving my father your car,' said Leontien at last.

Nakedi looked at the strain in her eyes. She was beautiful even in pain.

'Don't mention it,' he said, and looked back up. 'Beautiful… the clouds… aren't they?'

'Yes, look at the sun under them; it's like liquid gold. It feels more like early morning than evening, doesn't it? Don't you ever get that feeling, like sunset is sunrise, everything beautifully reversed, like you're going to get another crack at the same day? At doing things better this time around?'

Nakedi looked at her and smiled. She smiled too.

'Yeah, hardly ever, but sometimes,' he said. 'What's all the writing about?'

'What? This? Nothing, just some poems I'm cleaning up.'

'Everybody's a poet these days,' Nakedi said jokingly, remembering that Sonwabile, the waitress at the Mead, was also one. For his own part, though he never called himself a poet, he thought of his verse as some of the best he knew. Not many people he'd come across could produce anything remotely close to what he could. 'Any chance I can read any of them?'

'Sure, which would you like?' She was handing them over but appeared to be changing her mind. 'But you can't even read these,' she said, decidedly holding them back now. 'Can't you see what they look like? I'd have to read them for you. Its damn near like deciphering code.'

Nakedi looked at the papers again. She was right. Something caught his interest on one of them though, a striking image of a willow tree. It was on the corner of the page. It stood sad and drooping, almost life-like among the writing edits and doodles.

'That one looks interesting; what's it about?'

'It's about a willow I've driven past a couple of times on the N6, on the Groenspruit, between Jamestown and Bloemfontein. It is in water, so even in winter when everything around it on the plains is starved of rain, parched and lacklustre in appearance, it retains its striking rich green. Even though it's sad-looking, like all willows, it is quite content with its rich position in life, living under the vastness of the open sky. It thrives in its natural environment and doesn't have to attempt to be anything it's not, because it's wise. You'd lose your mind if you were to see it. It's like the sun lives inside its leaves.'

‘Okay, enough… enough about the wise, talking tree. Let’s actually hear you read the poem… sorry… decipher it, or whatever you’re supposed to do.’

They smiled at each other. There was the sound of a jet plane flying through the clouds, journeying towards the ocean. Nakedi didn’t think the poem would be any good; still he wanted to hear it as something of a kindness to her.

‘Ahem,’ Leontien cleared her throat. ‘*Wayside Willow*… ahem…’ she stopped.

‘What? Read already! Or is it you can’t break down your own doodle-code?’

She shoved him on the shoulder playfully.

‘Stop making fun of me! Anyway, a little boy stops by the tree in my poem and begs it to come away with him to the city where everything is a wonder. But the tree refuses and lets him know that his city life is not all it’s cracked up to be, and that in life we should be wise in enough to know where we belong. *Wayside Willow*, by me… Here goes…

Wayside Willow

Wayside Willow on the lonely road
Where wandering winds whisper stories told
To only those who walk that lonely road
On the great open plains where it all unfolds

Wayside Willow often looking sad
Woeful, weepy, softly brooding – mad
At a world indifferent to a beauty that
Came eons before Sandton and Gucci bags

Wayside Willow wholly wondrous – fair
One weeping in the rain as it showers there
On the great open plains where a coward dare
Not tread with an army, yet she wanders bare

Wayside Willow won’t you come and play?
Give me wind of it at once when you’re ’round my way
In the bright city lights where the night is day
And the shiny neon stars steal your heart away.

“Neon?” wondered Willow with a woeful face.
“Stars?” He wondered once more with a wounded grace.

"You have it written right here before your foolish face
Yet you shun all words that have truthful shape!

Though the wonder of a city is a wonder sure
It's a wonder with squander not a wonder pure
Can't you see young friend I'm in this mere moored
In these waters well wise all my weakness cured

Though my stars shine far, their light burns bright
In a kaleidoscope of fire yet night is night
On the great open plains where the fireflies
Dance flickers in the dark, so my heart must cry

Not from pain but a pleasure so sublime and full
That it sets me all afire though the night be cool
Said it once, friend, I'm fine here inside my pool
Where I weep in want of naught as is my wont to do"

Oh Wayside Willow won't you come at all?
Maybe come just once and never come once more?
"I have given reasons many, more than five or four
Why I'm loath to leave here where my life is moored.

But if a deafness of the mind to you an ailment be
And you've yet learned naught in your exchange with me
Let me offer yet a reason – maybe two or three
And then maybe I'll be rid of you, and you of me:

Though the summer clouds clamour in lights and thunder
And the predatory hunter spills blood in hunger
There's purpose plus peace in this waking wonder
And more importantly, no sirens and emergency numbers!"

So, Wayside Willow, is it nicer there?
But Wayside Willow did not answer there
He simply laughed aloud as without a care
Yet still with a fallen brow and dour stare

Wayside Willow walks that lonely road
Where wandering winds whisper stories told

To only those who know that lonely road
'Walk wisely in the world' is how the story goes!

'Wow!' Nakedi exclaimed when she was done. Not only had her voice undulated in a manner that enveloped the words and meaning around them wonderfully, but the poem was downright solid. 'That's probably one of the best poems I've ever heard read, spoken, whatever.'

'Really? Stop messing around.' She was pleased.

'Yes, really.' Nakedi was also pleased he didn't have to pretend the work was good for the sake of not hurting her feelings.

'And what exactly is your experience with poetry. I mean, it's a great compliment and all, don't get me wrong,' she laughed, 'but I can't assume it means all that much if you don't know Wordsworth from Woolworths or Lebo Mathosa from Mashile. Who's your favourite poet?'

'Well, I know enough about Lebo Mashile to have read her in first year, and enough about poetry to enjoy it from time to time. And to answer the other part of your question, the best poet I've ever met is myself, well, maybe until today.' Nakedi smiled.

'Oh, excuse us! And you do know you're going to have to prove what you said, right?'

'Well, I don't consider myself a poet. But I have been writing since I was about twelve or thirteen.'

'Don't start making excuses now. You already went big and said it with your chest.'

'You'll find no excuses here when it comes to that. Give me a clean piece of paper and that ugly pencil of yours and I'll make it do something beautiful.'

She turned over one of her scribbled pages and it was blank. Nakedi took it. He looked up to the sky again and was silent for a moment, contemplating the clouds as he had been doing before their conversation. After writing for some time he stopped and asked: 'Why is it a boy in your poem if you're a girl? Aren't you supposed to be all about female representation in absolutely everything? Isn't that the world now?'

'Because I've always wanted to be one. Well not always.'

'Good God why?'

‘You don’t really want to know. Keep writing your poem.’ An expression Nakedi couldn’t quite make out passed her face. She was holding something back. ‘Maybe, maybe if your poem is good enough I might tell you.’

‘Wow, such pressure,’ Nakedi returned.
‘Well, no more than you gave yourself when you said you were the best at it.’

Nakedi already had ten lines he was pleased with.

‘No problem. It’s a sonnet. I’ve got four lines to go.’

He was soon done. He dropped the pencil and paper on Leontien’s lap and smiled.

‘Voila! Whether it’s any good or not, you’ll decide. But remember I had absolutely no time to write that. You’ve been keeping talking to your willow for God knows how long.’

Leontien looked at the paper. Her lips moved silently for some time as her eyes glided over it. After a short while her brows shifted, then her lips stopped and shaped themselves into something beautiful. Her two front teeth were a little sunken – an imperfection that rendered her absolutely perfect. She continued to read until she came to the end and looked up.

‘God! It’s beautiful, Tshepo. Read it for me please, just how you wrote it, how you meant it.’

Nakedi was happy she was pleased. She was a wonder to him, just like the tree was to her. He wanted to run off somewhere with her because she was his escape from everything unpoetic in his life, everything stark and real that was threatening his freedom. He took the paper back from her and was about to read, but she stopped him.
‘Let’s step inside first. The light is bad out here.’

They went back in the house to put the cups back in the kitchen. It was pitch black until Leontien lit the light in the passage. She dropped everything in the sink without putting the kitchen light on and ran water over it. When she came back she said: ‘Come, I think we’ll be better off in my room.’

‘Your father won’t mind?’ Nakedi asked.

‘Well, do you see him anywhere here? If you do, maybe you should ask him for his permission. And maybe you can ask him whether or not it’s okay to fuck me when you get there. No?’ She tilted her head with the question, and walked away after these words. He stood, dumbstruck and aroused by her spontaneous eroticism. He feared what might happen if Tat’ Velelo came back and caught him in his daughter’s room, doing what she was asking him to do. The man had been kind enough to accommodate him as a guest, and getting caught doing anything disrespectful in his house would be spitting in the face of his hospitality. But Nakedi followed his daughter down the deep passage. He

heard a light switch click in the room she had disappeared into, to the left. Then a flurry of familiar but long-forgotten piano keys came on, accompanied by that voice with a timeless timbre: '*Won't you be my chauffeur*? *Be my chauffeur*! *Won't you to ride me*; *won't you to ride me, downtown*. *Oh yeah*…'

Leontien met Nakedi at the door, kissed him full on his mouth and took steps towards the bed. She let her clothes come effortlessly off her body as she walked, and lay down with her knees up, slightly apart. She was as uninhibited as though Nakedi was no more than another piece of furniture in the room. She found his eyes and said:

'Read your poem for me.' Her voice was sultry and distant. 'I want you to read for me, but to these lips. And when you're done you can whisper to them and my pretty pearl, with your tongue.' She placed her hands where he couldn't see, yet. Her eyes were alive with something electric as she spoke, but there was also a delicious innocence in them.

Nakedi took all of this in, feeling swollen with hunger. With his clothes on, he lay on his stomach on the low bed between her knees. She made room for him, and like an obedient boy, with his best reading voice and his best form, he did all that was asked of him.

The Sky above Leontien: Portraits of the Breeze

'They're fine figures sketched in pure white allure
What a sight they seem fire-kissed beneath–'
'How'd each come to be? Who's it shapes their forms,
This legion in the likeness of a fleet
Of myriad great ships which take their seat
On the high-up seas of serene azure,
Where fin-less feathered fly-fish wide-winged sweep
In these last breaths of light like early morn?'
'I'd just begun to say,' said the keener voice.
'The air rising moist births the clouds to view,
And its whimsical wafts cast shapes of choice
Puffy proofs of its pathways in the blue.
So yes, while your fleet floats on swell-less seas
I see in the clouds portraits of the breeze!'

Chapter Forty-Five

Kele couldn't bear the stench around her. She no longer felt as though she were out at sea in choppy waters on a light vessel. Her nausea had left her. But that was because she had just vomited on the floor. It was something pale and yellow under the light. Her lower abdomen still hurt, the same way it did after the guards had carried her to her cell. The rest of her body was fine however; her joints were no longer in pain. Saliva filled her mouth and made her bilious if she swallowed it and bilious if too much of it accumulated. So she spat it out on the floor, where she'd vomited. She felt itchy too. But there was hunger that demanded her attention in the midst of all this. She hoped for something to eat. She wondered why no one had come around with any in such a long time. The hunger pangs came and went, but her abdominal pain lingered always only growing and decreasing in intensity. She turned away from the vomit and faced the wall. A new idea that blew wind into her sails struck her. She felt around her on the bed for her phone. She found it and switched it on. Instead of waiting until she was at the sinkhole to make a call, and possibly be forced to choose between the calls she wanted to make, she would write SMSes now. Once she got to the sinkhole they would send automatically. If there was still enough battery life left, then she would make calls to Nakedi and Killian. She needed to ensure her ex-husband received the message and was acting on it. And she had to know what he was planning to do about it. She wanted nothing else but for him to take her son to the police. Then she would talk to Killian and devise the specifics around blowing this entire thing apart. But she needed to fly through the cave to save enough energy to get both calls in. She knew this and hoped her body would continue to work with her and keep the nausea away. She couldn't take the idea of attempting this exploit while overcome with queasiness. She got down to the messages. She was able to get through the first text with no difficulties. It was simple.

'*EMERGENCY*! *Nakedi this is an EMERGENCY. I have been kidnapped*.'

She erased the last word. She didn't want to risk him reading it too quickly and thinking she was accusing him of kidnapping the boy. She generally had to be careful with her words with him. 'I am being held,' she typed.

'*They will TAKE DONOVAN if they find you. They might KILL HIM. PLEASE GO to the NEAREST POLICE STATION. Tell them Malcolm Oluome is a criminal and is planning to set off bombs at Hopewell Drommedaris, the school in Sandton. I cannot say more. I will call you if I can. But TAKE DONOVAN IMMEDIATELY to a police station and tell them he is in DANGER*!'

She hoped she had said enough. And when she sent it she felt good about it. But as she composed the SMS to Killian her sickness returned. It was faint, somewhere in the background, like if her stomach were a room, it was morbid mood music inside it.

She continued typing until she was done and read it back. She was convinced it was solid. Unlike her message to Nakedi she had broken this into the *5 Ws and H* of her first Journalism class with Dr Lesley Metcalf.

'***Who***: *Kele Solomon* (*Maître's here*) ***What***: *Kidnapped* ***Where***: *In unknown location … caves/mining facility… less than two hours out of Joburg. Suspect platinum belt.* ***When***: *Thursday (booking off next day was fake. Kidnappers did it. Don't know what day it is– could've been drugged – not well fed).* ***Why***: *There's going to be a terrorist attack at Hopewell Drommedaris soon. Call headmaster. Call of games with Mandelaspruit.* ***How***: *They have letter bombs sowed into children's sports jerseys*.'

By the time she got to the how of her message the volume of the biliousness was louder in her stomach. It was beginning to take over. Without any warning she rose up as though her body snatched itself up. She went on her forearms and then onto her hands and chose the same spot to throw up in. She retched. It was nothing but air that came out, but her body twisted and knotted itself terribly, as though it was regurgitating plate upon plate of masticated food. She felt her brow and the top of her upper lip grow wet with sweat. She held on to the edge of the bed and her body lunged itself forward, again disgorging a mass of nothingness that choked her on its way out. She heard the beeping at the door like it was at a distance until the spasm let her go. When the door flew open Admire came in. Kele braced herself for another convulsion. But nothing happened, like one hanging on the verge of a sneeze that never comes. She only spat before sitting back on the bed with her back to the wall.

'Oh my God; you look terrible! It smells sour in here,' Admire cried. 'But we have no time; twenty minutes at best. Can you do this or not?'

'I can,' Kele said resolutely. Though her body had vomited nothing she felt better again. She didn't really know whether or not she could, but she knew she couldn't bear the thought of losing the only opportunity she had to steer things in her favour.

'I drained that battery as much as I could before I gave it to you. It will take you about ten minutes to get to the cavern. From the stalagmites and the two chambers behind them it will take you another three to five minutes. Then there is a turn to the right and then a final chamber. I could not get you a mask so you have to get through the final chamber in seconds. Take deep breath as soon as you hit the corridor leading to it. Don't inhale; don't exhale. Just go as fast as you can. Once you are through that you will turn to the left and walk until you begin to see sunlight. The rope should be easy

to find. It leads up to the light. Get there before the battery dies, and do what you have to do and come back. Do not attempt to leave the rim of the sinkhole once you pull yourself out. There are landmines and booby-trap sensors out there. You don't want to die that way.'

Kele looked ahead as Admire spoke. She took in everything like a computer, and flinched not once at the details of the peril she was facing. What choice did she have? She could sit here and wait for fate to have its way with her, without attempting to force its hand, or she could do something to save herself, to aid her own freedom. The bravery that had driven her to Mandelaspruit on a disastrous assignment seemed insignificant in comparison to what was burning inside her now. This one was a stark mixture of urgency and necessity, each pulsating as the heavy beat of her heart.

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Admire made it absolutely clear, both in her words and manner, that she was not in concert with Kele. She was only doing this one thing for the sake of the children and her conscience. As a result, Kele had received neither a gas mask nor flashlight. She wanted to know why this was the perfect time for her to go. What was happening that was keeping everyone occupied long enough for her to roam free? But Admire would not betray the answer to this though Kele asked ever so casually:

'Where is everyone else going to be while I do this?'

'Not at the sinkhole. You now have about.

So here Kele was, creeping low, seeing the rock's wrinkled skin only where her wan phone light could reach. The cave was rugged, but it looked like it had received some work. Stalagmites and stalactites had been knocked out of the way or left in place in a fashion that seemed deliberate. Along the walls there were now and again gaping holes that seemed like the openings of corridors to other caves. Kele would have perhaps tried to go through one had Admire not instructed and reminded her to not make a single turn until she reached the chamber she had seen before. The battery was on 17%. This made her nervous and drove her to move faster. The nausea had let her go since the last time she vomited air. But saliva still accumulated in her mouth, and now and again she had to spit it out. All of a sudden she suddenly walked into a part of the corridor that was wider and had a very high ceiling. Kele fancied she could see patches of light in the rocks up at the top. She stopped to look and investigate. Was that the sinkhole she was going to, she wondered. Maybe there's more than one of them, she concluded, and moved one. But she heard something: ahead, behind, even in the walls. She couldn't tell. Then she immediately could. It was a pitter-patter of boots, just like she'd heard before lying on the divan in her cell. She wanted to run, but she didn't know in which direction the danger

lay. She heard voices now. They too seemed to be coming out of everywhere: ahead, behind, the walls. She cowered from the cave, as though it was the enemy. Yet at the last minutes saw a light come around the bend and voices, panting from walking fast, were reprimanding each other for not keeping the time.

'We're going to be late; I should never have listened to you. Now all we're going to have to eat is a scolding. And if we don't go, even worse; they'll dock our pay. Of all the days we could have fucked up. And don't tell me it was my fault. It was yours.'

Kele heard many things all at once and latched onto every word. She hoped to hear more, and instead of being terrified and throwing herself behind any rock that would hide her, she stood a little out of the way and listened, hoping to hear more she could tell Killian if she got to call him. But right then her senses came to her. She scrambled to switch her cell phone light off and she darted into one of the dead-end corridors Admire had reminded her to avoid. This one was like a concave alcove. Her light was still not off. Just as she began to see the two men she pressed her keypad frantically, no longer sure what she was doing. Just in time. All was black in the alcove. The men passed not too far from her, and in her state of fear she seemed to no longer hear what they were saying. She smelled the smoke in their trail as their headlamps lit the cave ahead of them and their voices reverberated against the walls, mixing in with the footfall of their boots. One of them stopped unexpectedly.

'What?' said the other, also coming to a stop.

'Did you hear that?'

'Hear what?'

'Shhh! Listen.'

Kele was squeezing her phone hard around its speaker. When scrambling to switch off its light she had somehow begun playing a voice recording that had just now come on. It was an old meeting with Killian. She'd wanted to catch his behaviour out in her days as an intern, when she thought such a recording might be of some consequence. She'd set up her phone to record before she got to his office. He'd started speaking now after the silent part of the audio, welcoming her into his office, telling her to sit on the happy chair. When she asked which one that was he answered: 'Whichever will be cupping your ass, my liquorice intern.' The memory crawled on her. But Killian wasn't loud when he spoke like that. And Kele was doing everything she could to make sure he was even less audible. The phone was behind her, pressed up between her buttocks and the rock. But the sound must have made its way through the stone of the cave somehow, like their voices and footsteps did. The men listened carefully, and one even turned his head around and sent the light of his headlamp towards Kele. But she was on the safe side of the alcove, hidden by its shadows in her black clothes.

‘I can’t hear anything. What did you hear?’

‘I don’t know, sounded like someone was talking. Maybe calling us? I don’t know. It’s nothing; let’s go.’

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Kele made her way again with redoubled speed. She lifted her feet as little as she could, almost dragging them along the ground, taking care not to turn her ankle. When she reached the chamber with the shoddy podium of stone she knew it. There was that feint smell of hydrogen sulphide. She shuffled towards the stalagmites, and once there, she moved between them as quickly as she could. The battery was on 13% now, but she could not afford to switch it off. She would need it especially after this, when getting through the next couple of chambers, especially the final one, with as much speed as she could muster in the partial darkness. There was recess she needed to squeeze herself through. She had to get over an obstacle of thick rock while taking care to not knock her head above. The smell of rotten eggs was even fainter now than in the chamber with the podium. She was through the next two chambers and headed towards the final one. In the corridor leading up to it she sucked in a lungful and made haste, suddenly remembering one more thing the bald-headed man had said: the hydrogen sulphide could kill you even if you even without the smell.

Chapter Forty-Six

When Nakedi was done, Leontien's clouds let out a little rain and she rolled like soft thunder at the throat, with moans that made her beauty grow in Nakedi's eye. He looked on as she relished the warmth and glow of sexual satiation. He moved up on the bed and put his face next to hers. She was smiling.

'Can you do something for me?' she asked.

'Sure, what?'

'Take off your clothes; all of them.'

He did just that.

'Can you do something for me?'

'Something… like what?'

'Just say yes or no. I can't tell you beforehand. You just have to trust me… or not trust me.'

Nakedi still had the taste of her flower in his mouth, and its scent lingered in his nostrils, and sent echoes and throbs of longing though his body until they converged in his loins.

'Yes,' he said. 'I trust you.'

Leontien was serious. She was still sexual, of course, but she was serious, as though she was about to introduce something that might be uncomfortable to him. But he was open-minded when it came to sex, heterosexual sex, and not much was going to scare him or throw him off. He hungered for Leontien as though he was seeing her for the first time and had not been between her thighs earlier the same day. She got off the bed and went into her bag. Out of it she took some socks and threw them over to the bed. One fell on the floor. Then she took a bra, looked at it and pursed her lips before letting it fall back down in favour of another one. The first one was lilac, this one was black, like the socks she'd thrown over. She picked up the one that had fallen to the floor and began making a ball of it. She made a few of these balls and stuffed them into a single sock, making one soft orb at a time. When she was done with a second orb she looked into Nakedi's eyes, searched for something in them earnestly, and said:

'Are you still sure you want to do this?'

Nakedi felt no discomfort so he nodded his head and allowed her to go on.

'Come here,' she said, guiding him to the bottom corner of the bed, such that he sat with it between his legs. She did something that took him entirely by surprise, even though he'd been waiting

in anticipation. She made breasts for him with the orbs of socks and proceeded to put her bra around him.

When he opened his mouth to speak she put a finger over his lips and kissed over it. He yielded and deferred everything to her, feeling strange but courageous. She brought him to the very edge of the corner and made him lie back with his knees up, as though he were a woman about to receive a man. And then she elevated herself and set her body on him, taking him inside her with her feet on the ground. From how she stood and he lay, it looked as though she was the male and he was the female. She thrust back and forth, as though she were pushing her male sex into him. But it was he who felt the heaven inside her with each thrust she sent towards his body. They fell into the night together.

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When they were done Nakedi crawled immediately to the wall and faced it. He pulled out the socks from the bra and tugged at it, desperate to take it off. It was stifling him. She helped him out of it. He kept his face to the wall and wouldn't look at her, curling himself up in the foetal position. He was not ashamed over what he had just done; that wasn't it. He was overcome with emotion he could neither explain nor contain. It came at him like vertigo that hits one suddenly, out of nowhere. There was a dizziness in his emotions, a welling up of something that overcame him with a deluge of tears. She touched him lightly on the shoulder and he shuddered. She drew back and retreated off the bed. Next, Nakedi felt a light eiderdown fall on him and envelope him like a hug. Then he heard her leave the room as it fell dark to the click of the light switch. He wanted to call her back, tell her it wasn't her fault. But he couldn't turn away from the wall, he couldn't stop his tears from drenching the bed, and even if he could call her back, he wouldn't be able to tell her what was spilling out of him. He too didn't know.

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Nakedi didn't know how long he had slept. Leontien came back into bed with him after some time. He felt her skin against his as she lay next to him and said nothing. After a while he turned around to face her in the dark. His eyes were dry now, and whatever had taken him over before had left him. He felt somehow new inside, clean, like air in the atmosphere following a fall of rain that rids it of dust.

'What time is it? Any news from your father?'

‘It’s 11:57,’ she said after reaching for her phone. ‘Yes, I talked to him. You won’t believe what happened.’

‘Is the car okay?’ Nakedi asked with notable concern in his voice.

‘It’s fine; they’re fine,’ Leontien laughed. ‘They got there pretty quickly, but they couldn’t find Constable Ndleleni. She was not at the station. They eventually located her at Holy Cross Hospital.’ Leontien laughed again.

‘What’s so funny?’ Nakedi was confused by this joviality. The room light was still off and he wished he could read her face.

‘You won’t believe why she was at the hospital.’

‘Why?’

Indeed Nakedi couldn’t believe it. The constable was there to talk to the victims of a hijacking who were linked to her case. A woman who had found them had come to report it to the police after dropping the victims off at the hospital. They had been brought in after being found tied up together to a tree, deep in a field off the R61 to Flagstaff. Gunya and Ncedisa. According to Tat’ Velelo, they had stopped for a woman who was in tattered clothes, crying as though she’d been beaten. She told them she’d just escaped death at the hands of her abusive husband, and was off to meet her sister in Flagstaff. They gave her a lift, but after a few kilometres she asked them to stop so she could relieve herself. There was a field with the convenience of privacy that she knew up ahead.

‘Apparently she was nervous because of everything that just happened to her. And she couldn’t hold it in. She normally peed herself as he beat her, but this was the last time, and she would no longer give that part of her dignity over to him.’ Leontien said incredulously.

When Gunya did stop for her on the side of the road, she went into the tall grass and crouched, disappearing completely. But when she came out she was no longer alone. She was with a man with a gun who took everything off Gunya and Ncedisa, including the bakkie.

‘My brother tried to fight back and the bastard beat him over the head with the gun. He’s dealing with a concussion now.’

‘Jesus!’ cried Nakedi.

‘This country, right! That why I want to leave this place. We’re not safe here,’ Leontien lamented before carrying on. ‘Anyway, the hijackers drove them off the main road and tied them to some trees, leaving them there vulnerable to whatever fate would do to them. Fucking bastards!’

Besides the concussion, Gunya was getting stitches and Ncedisa too was receiving help and making a statement with the police. That was all Leontien knew for now from the last time she spoke to her father. They would rise with the sun and be back first thing in the morning.

'I hope that doesn't throw off your plans by much. Thanks again for helping us.'

'Sure. It's fine.'

Nakedi got up. His bladder was begging to be set free. Leontien directed him to the bathroom. The hijacking reminded him of his own situation in Johannesburg as he walked. He remembered how Mojalefa suddenly pulled out a gun on the freeway and began robbing the passengers, and everything that happened after that. But Windsor East didn't affect him now as it did before. The ugly pull of the moon in his conscience seemed unable reach him while he was orbiting Leontien and the aura that surrounded her. She was a shield of some kind from his reality. Because of her, his atmosphere felt free of dust. He came back into bed after washing his hands and they both lost themselves to each other again, before losing themselves to deep sleep.

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The sleep was deeper than either of them would have liked, and they didn't hear Tat' Velelo drive into the yard or walk into the house. These were things Leontien was confident she would hear, even though she wasn't relying on them. The arrangement she'd relayed to Nakedi, before they lost themselves to each other, was that she'd let him use her room and she'd sleep in the next. But that had not happened. Instead, they had fallen deep into post-coital sleep. A loud banging noise is what jolted them out of it. It was Leontien's father. He swung the door so wildly it hit the wall behind it. Nakedi sprang to the floor as soon as his eyes met the old man's and he remembered where he was. He rushed for his clothes, apologising, dressing, all the while keeping his eyes on Leontien's father, in case he charged.

'I'm sorry,' Nakedi said.

'Get out of my house,' screamed Tat' Velelo after looking on with disgust. He'd said nothing until Nakedi was fully dressed. 'Get the hell out of my house!'

'But, *Tata*–'

'You keep quiet. You shut your mouth. What is this you're doing? What is this you've dragged into our home?'

'I'm sorry, I didn't mean to–'

‘Didn’t mean to what?’

‘*Tata*, it was me, I asked him to come here–’

‘Did I not tell you to shut up? What did I teach you about boys, about men?’ Tat’ Velelo’s nostrils flared with anger and he was pointing at her with a shaking finger. ‘You–’ He cut himself short, seeming to not want to say something he would regret later. ‘I’ll talk to you after you get this thing out of my house. Get him out! Now!’ Tat’ Velelo gathered the door and slammed it again as he walked out.

‘I’m sorry about that. I don’t know why he’s that angry,’ Leontien said to Nakedi, seeming confused by the extent of her father’s fury.

Nakedi found this confusion strange. It was obvious what had got into the man. He found his daughter naked in bed with a male guest. Nakedi was a little angry at Leontien too, because he’d warned her about this. But he was even more incensed with himself for falling weak to her whims and jeopardising any further relationship he could have with Tat’ Velelo, a man worth his salt in the world he was trying to find his brother in.

‘Come, let’s go,’ said Leontien, now putting on her shoes. She had taken out a pair of shorts and a t-shirt from her bag. She quickly checked which side of the house Tat’ Velelo was in. But he was out. He’d left the house, fearing, according to Aunt Ntyatyi (who gave her the car keys), what he might do to Nakedi if he stayed. Besides her aunt there were also her siblings in the house.

‘Here are your keys,’ Leontien said, handing them over to him. ‘My brother is angry too. I don’t know what the fuck for. I think you should leave before he does anything stupid. I don’t know what their problem is; I really don’t. They should be like Ncedisa and Aunty Nontyatyambo and just mind their business. So what I was having sex with you here. Where else am I supposed to have it, in the bushes with the monkeys somewhere?’

She walked Nakedi out the back. Tat’ Velelo and his family had definitely risen before the sun because it was just over the horizon in the east now, where the ocean lay. It was a beautiful morning, another fleet of clouds sailing in the blue above.

The goodbye when they reached the car was far from beautiful. It was even more upsetting to Nakedi than the unceremonious way in which he was leaving Tat’ Velelo’s house. Leontien had not been in his life long, but she had somehow managed to anchor him from the tides of his life threatening to wash him away. She was the last hope between him and the vast terrifying unknown that was his future. But she was a false hope, a mirage, just a girl with her own angst in the world, he decided, looking at her in the mirror as the dust settled, and he headed back to the R61 and off to

Sabine's house.

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Nakedi was well on his way. He'd switched his phone back on. There were missed calls and messages from Sabine, but he decided to not respond to them. He'd be with her in person within the hour and make her understand all that had happened since they had parted ways. He recalled the journey up to Ntafufu and how liberated he had felt for most of it, in awe of the wonderful wildness of nature. Instead of marvelling at the trees, valleys and hills, this time around he marvelled at nothing. He saw instead the poverty and desolation that littered the landscape: long-standing scraps of cars and ill-constructed houses that were probably hardly homes. His eyes were drawn to the towering steel of electricity power-lines that dominated the terrain. Some of these structures were placed precariously on the noses of knolls, and he wondered gloomily about the workers who had been used to place them in their positions. The clouds were eating away at the blue of the sky the farther he drove towards Port St Johns. But before they could let out a single drop from their turgid grey shapes, Nakedi's eyes were fogged up with tears that he now and again dried with his forearm, like a windscreen wiper. By the time he reached the multi-coloured bridge of stone over the Mzimvubu, all was wet. The stalls on the side of the road were vacant and dripping inside and outside with rainwater. Before long Nakedi was through town and by the golf course, snaking the car around potholes whose depth was hard to gauge because they were filled with rain. When he reached Sabine's house both gates were open, the small one and the one to the garage. There were two men at each, in black paramilitary uniforms with yellow badges on their shoulders. They had weapons. They were holstered. Nakedi feared, but only for a moment, that the men were here about Windsor East. Yet something about their uniforms told him that might not be the case. Wesley had said the police talked to him. They were on the case. That thought chilled Nakedi, and he recalled Frank Nyaniso's words about their single-minded resolve. How far behind were they now? He didn't know, but he was glad the men in uniform were not them yet. This was probably about Sabine, whatever it was. He got out of the car and walked towards the small gate. Something about the manner in which they watched him was disconcerting; it told him they *might be* here about him after all. They let him in easily, with no more than a minor nod of the head and subdued smiles. He walked past and into the yard, increasingly anxious.

'It's him. He's going up to the house,' he heard one of them speak, perhaps into some walky-talky device, as though they were telling someone who had not seen him yet.

But he didn't turn back. He continued walking under the trees, past Mr Msimbeet and towards the kitchen. As he gained an angle, a new line of sight towards the garage gate and the other men who

stood there, he froze instantaneously. He saw two vehicles that had been parked out of the way, behind Sabine's garage: two black Mistubishi Pajeros.

Chapter Forty-Seven

Nakedi heard the voice of a man all the way from the honey extraction room. It was seemingly courteous but something in it was forceful. Sabine was distressed.

'Listen, it is not my business who the mother is or what she said. I don't know her and I don't know you. I only know this boy's father. To give him over to you would be irresponsible of me. Don't you see that?'

'Of course I see all that, but I have come here for the boy and am not leaving without him. I don't know much about anything else. Can you not see the boy knows me?'

'Yes, but he has not warmed up to you since you walked in. Taking him would be kidnapping him.'

'Kidnapping him is what his father did. I am here to correct that. I have showed you pictures of us. The boy doesn't look well. I know he didn't warm up to me. He wouldn't warm up to anything right now. And this is why I have to take him back home to his mother the only person I know he will warm up to.'

'I just don't feel comfortable. Get her on the phone at least. Let me talk to her and ask her some questions–'

'There won't be a need for that.' Nakedi said as he walked in.

Sabine and the man were standing. Buntu was sitting down. At the sight of his father he got up and ran past Sabine, towards the man and stood behind him, as if in refuge from Nakedi. The man was Malcolm. Nakedi didn't know his voice but his face was more than a little familiar to him.

'Thank goodness!' Sabine exclaimed with unchecked relief. She was obviously glad to no longer be in the position of having to make a decision about a child's life.

'Great!' said Malcolm. 'This no longer concerns you.'

He seemed glad to be rid of Sabine. His arm was already outstretched, its big hand open to Nakedi, just like the smile on his face.

'Hi, I am Malcolm. It's nice to meet you. I'm the boy's mother's–' He stopped short. 'I'm friends with your ex-wife,' he said instead.

'I know who you are.' Nakedi could not help the belligerent tone of his words. 'What brings you here?''

'Listen, I'll leave you two to it.' Sabine cried out, departing with a look and of revulsion towards Malcolm. 'Be done quickly, please. And find the same way that brought you in.'

‘Thank you, ma’am.’ Again Malcolm’s words were soft, pleasant; but they were spoken like a mild threat.

‘What are you doing here?’ Nakedi asked again.

‘I’m here for Donovan. Kele is not well,’ Malcolm responded. ‘She is in private care right now getting right.’

‘What’s wrong with her?’

‘Do you want me to have that conversation in front of the boy? Kele wouldn’t want that. Besides, we really have to get going. Your friend, the lady of the house, would like this very much.’

Sabine had left the room, but she had not quite left it. She was lingering half in the passage and half in the doorway, as though she were keeping eyes on Malcolm like an impish kleptomaniac child. She looked at him at his comment about her and nodded clearly for him to see.

‘Listen, Kele hasn’t got in touch with me once about the boy since I took him,’ Nakedi began.

‘Kidnapped him,’ Malcolm corrected. The way in which he spoke left no doubt that he thought he was in command and meant to be in command.

‘What do you mean kidnapped? This is my son. I can take him anytime I want.’

‘Not without his mother’s permission, leaving her in misery. She has tried the police, but you know, they think like you. But thank God I have a private security company and am able to help. So here we are with time not on our side. We need the boy. That’s all there is to it.’ He put the palm of his hand over the boy’s head like the crown of a cap as he said this.

Nakedi looked at his son, with his hat of a hand. He saw his eyes. They were scared, or something like it. The light in them was the dimmest he’d ever seen it. He thought to himself and looked at Sabine. She may have had an unpleasant look for her unwanted guest, but she had one for Nakedi too – one that seemed to pity him. Letting the boy go would still be a good thing for him, he thought. He had no clue of Buntu’s whereabouts. He’d bungled the best lead he’d found so far, without as much as testing it. He thought about Leontien and the feeling of clear dustless skies returned to his chest. He needed freedom. Donovan needed freedom from him too. Perhaps it was a good idea that he go with Malcolm back to his mother. The man was not a stranger, and the boy clearly preferred him to his father right now. This hurt Nakedi but it also liberated him, made his choice to let him go easier. Still he wanted to call Kele and make certain he was doing the right thing. He’d done so many wrong things it probably didn’t matter, but something in his spirit compelled him to call her.

‘Give me a moment, let me gather his things,’ he said.

‘The boy really has nothing here.’ That’s what Sabine’s look said as Nakedi walked past her. But another look soon overtook that one. It was reassuring. Telling him to do whatever it was he was thinking of doing. He reached extraction room and pulled out Buntu’s phone. He continued into the kitchen walking to the edge of the door, but taking care to not be visible to the guards by the garage gate.

He knew both of Kele’s number’s by heart. He dialled her everyday phone. It went straight to that beep it had gone to when he’d tried it before. He tried the other one. It rang.

‘Hello?’ Nakedi said after a moment of confusion. He’d expected her to speak, but instead he heard noises in the back, like she was vomiting…

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When Donovan left with Malcolm Nakedi felt a weight lift itself off his shoulders. Still, something about the black Mitsubishi Pajeros left something in his stomach unsettled, like improperly-chewed food. Sabine locked all her gates before she and Nakedi walked back up to the house. She did this with the air of someone locking up with regret, only after a robbery had taken place. He could sense too that she was terribly upset with him because of the kind of people he had led here. He walked behind her back to the house. She wasted no time putting on the kettle when they reached the kitchen.

‘Tea?’ she asked.

Nakedi was glad she was offering him some but he didn’t want any. He felt like something strong, something that would wash him even cleaner of everything dirty in him, make him forget it all.

‘Is it too early for wine?’ he joked.

‘Not at all,’ Sabine responded throwing the cup she had picked up back in the cupboard as though it were shatterproof. ‘I’ll even do you one better.’

She went to the fridge and pulled out a familiar tall jar, silver, with a cloth and an elastic band over its head. It was a quaint thing that had once belonged to her father. He remembered its name. It was Shake; which was quite peculiar because to shake it would be to spill its content or make a mess on the cloth. It only hit Nakedi now that its name was never Shake. It was Sheikh – from the cloth and elastic band that it wore like a *kufiya* on a *Sheikh*. He smiled to himself.

Sabine was pouring the Sheikh's contents into two medium-sized carafes on the table. She put the kufiya back on the jar and placed it back in the fridge. Then she took one carafe and gave it to Nakedi. She took the other one, and with her free hand took Nakedi by his and the led him outside. Instead of going towards the front of the house she led him to the back, to where her geraniums stood. She walked all the way to a bench that stood in the vicinity of her window, with his hand still in hers. They sat down. There was a hole in the arm of the bench on Sabine's side, and she pulled out a tiny container from it. Out of it she took out a pre-rolled joint and smiled.

'You don't mind, do you?'

Nakedi certainly didn't mind. The joint reminded him of Leontien. He took a sip of his mead and made as if to eat Sabine's smoke as it sailed past him.

'Patience, patience,' she laughed.

The back of the yard had that wild coast in it. The mead was beautiful and the joint that Sabine gave her was fresh and spicy. He let more weight fly off his shoulders. Donovan was a distant memory now, and Buntu, thought still an immediate concern, was of very little concern right now.

'You used to like walking to love walking out here when you were young. Remember that?

'*Don't I*? Nakedi laughed unable to hide the impish streak in his thoughts.

'What's that supposed to mean? What's the big deal with walking around a backyard' Sabine enquired, lost.

'Well, if you really must know, the first time I saw you naked was from right here. See this geranium right here behind us?' He pointed with two fingers, the joint between them. 'If this bench was closer to it, I would have been this bench.

Sabine seemed surprised by this line of conversation, but she smiled a smile that drew Nakedi in and they conversed about many sweet memories, and as if in contract, avoiding anything that might dampen their mood. They drank together and finished their smoke.

'Strange, this weather,' Nakedi said. 'Just this morning, rain, and now, look.'

'More mead?' Sabine asked.

Nakedi looked down from the sky and opened his mouth to answer in the affirmative. But he immediately felt something moist on his lips. It was Sabine's lips.

'Oh Nakedi,' she exhaled before drawing her face back, and looked in his eyes as if to confirm whether or not her lips were welcome.

Nakedi had begun kissing her back when he pulled back without warning, sending the warm, intoxicated pleasantness on her face away, and leaving shame in her eyes.

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Nakedi and Sabine did not leave off drinking for the rest of the morning and afternoon. She cooked; they played music: Zappa, *Watermelon in Easter Hay* on repeat. There was some Sinatra, Janice Joplin, and good old Nina. They drank like teenagers who were new to the idea of alcohol, lapping up every single drop of mead in the house. It was twilight now and Nakedi had a slight hangover. He was in Sabine's bed and so was she, but they were both clothed. She was already sitting up, looking tipsy as in the sense that she was slightly dishevelled from the day's intoxicated activity. But she seemed sober of mind, as though she were in a faraway place, sorting out her thoughts like piles of paper, putting these in that cabinet, taking those out of this cabinet, and repeating this until she became aware that Nakedi was awake. Even in her awareness she seemed not to come back fully from her cabinets. Instead, she began speaking, saying things that Nakedi could never have fathomed or believed about her, even if she had witnessed them.

'I was an apartheid operative, a spy. I was a doctor for the Nationalists. I signed death certificates and completed false autopsies–'

Nakedi thought she may have been daydreaming. Her eyes were looking ahead as if seeing nothing.

'Sabine,' he called her name.

'No, listen.' She spoke directly to him but still she did not heed him with her eyes. I did terrible things to innocent people on behalf of terrible people. I was a terrible person. I *am*.'

Nakedi let the silence after these words linger. He didn't know what to say.

'There was a boy once, his name was Andile Ndiselele. He was beaten over the head with a gun repeatedly, bludgeoned by old men twice his size – four of them. One of them was a decorated policeman, Maarten, my ex-husband. It was not the first time he and his squad had brought in a barely breathing body. But it was the last one I was going to deal with. I was pregnant at the time, with a child that would never get to see the light also because of Maarten. He was abusive you see. "Bare hands or knuckledusters, have it your way," he would say. One day I chose a knuckle duster out of spite. I knew, or at least I thought he would never hit me once he found out I was pregnant. But oh no, that didn't stop him. After I lost the baby we continued together. Until that day, when he brought

Andile in. I still remember his face. I still remember his eyes. They are always open in my memory. They are always watching me. Asking me, to save him, asking me why–' Sabine coughed. Her saliva and mucous was choking her up. If you have ever wondered why I picked you up from the ground that rainy day with all that blood all over you, let me give you the answer. It was because I saw Andile in your eyes. You looked at me like he did. Or maybe I thought you did. I didn't see you for some time to come. To me you were always Andile Ndiselele, well not always, only until I let you between me and inside me. Only then I began to see you, your sadness, your smile, innocent yet with gravity in its curve like that of an old man. You were lonely and sad. And I thought I could help you. So I loved you with a love big enough for the three of us, you me, and Andile Ndiselele.'

At these words Sabine got up and left the room. She didn't return, and Nakedi did not seek her. He wanted to hold her deeply in his arms, but he also wanted no part of her, just as he wanted no part of himself for the things he'd done. His moon returned after a long absence and Leontien swept across his mind before he fell back asleep.

Chapter Forty-Eight

When Kele saw the rope ahead of her she knew that the kind of light she was seeing was not the proverbial one at the end of the tunnel. She was pleased to see the sky and wanted to pull herself up and be one with the outside world. This was not an easy ask. The sinkhole was rugged on the sides with scree that fell off. Some of it was under Kele's feet. But getting to the top was secondary for Kele. She checked her phone to see whether the messages had sent already. But she still had no signal. It was just as Admire said. She would have to get to the top for that. The battery life was on 9%. She had not come all this way to let the battery die on her. She leapt up at the rope gripping her fingers tightly around its thick girth. There were knots on it, space out like the rungs of a ladder. She pulled herself up but let herself fall as her palms burned from slipping down the line. She looked at the width of the walls. Could she reach both at the same time? She recalled her mother's house before judgment lived in it. Her tomboy days, when she would play by herself and place her flat palms and feet on opposite walls, apply pressure and get herself to the ceiling. She left the rope and tried that instead. Already hurt by the rope, Kele's hands suffered even more from the loose pebbles on the natural walls. But she was determined to get to the top and carry out her plan and not just Admire's.

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The sun almost blinded her when she peak out at daylight for the first time in a long time. The messages sent and the battery was on 6%. She hadn't switched off her cell phone light. She quickly did that. The light was dazzling and she couldn't tell whether it was mid-morning or late afternoon. She couldn't tell east from west. As she tried to orient herself it was as if she stirred the pits of her stomach and awoke the nausea. It rose up.

Right then, Nakedi called from a number she didn't know.

'Listen, Kele,' as always, these were his first words to her. 'I understand I was wrong by taking Donovan. I wish you knew what my life has been like in the past week.' This too sounded like him, getting ready to make excuses as though she were somewhere nice, among petals, sitting down to tea. I know you are in some sort of trouble, but you didn't have to send --- out to Port St Johns with bodyguards or --- guards of whatever these guys were.' He said something else, but she could not hear it. The reception was lost momentarily.

Her gut sent buoyant spasms to her throat. She fought them.

'Oh my God, Nakedi. You're with him,' she realised. 'You're with Malcolm. Where's Donovan? Where's my son?'

‘I heard that --- sick. What’s wrong? And your phone? What wrong with ---’

She was aware he could not hear her. There was lag time and omission of words on both ends.

‘Where is my son?’ she shouted, gagging at the same time. It came out fierce.

‘He’s my ---, too,’ Nakedi returned. ‘I didn’t actually kidnap him like Malcolm keeps saying I did.’ There was no omission there.

‘No, that’s not what I mean!’ Kele shouted as loud as her lungs would let her. ‘Don’t give him to Malcolm. Please!’

But the loss of reception and omission returned.

‘Sure, I’ll give him to Malcolm,’ he said before he dropped the phone. That’s what he must have heard: --- him to Malcolm. Please!’

Kele wondered how the battery had survived that conversation. It was on 2% now and she had got nothing across. What was this phone number Nakedi was using? Did he even get her SMS?

Killian called just as she was wondering. His SMS had definitely arrived.

‘Solomon. I just got your mail. Where have you been? And Maître? Are you being for real with me with this SMS?’

‘Listen, I only have 2% on this phone and this is the last time I’m going to use it. Everything I said is true.’

‘Okay, where can I get you later, you know, for more.’

‘I don’t know Killian. You find us! We’re in danger, please find us!’

Kele didn’t want to lose herself. She wanted to remain in control; be professional. But just then, as she steeled herself she realised she could do something for Donovan and tears streamed out of her. ‘My son, Killian. He’s also been taken, by a man who goes by the name of Malcolm. They are in Port St Johns; please contact the police down there and get them involved. This is more serious that you’ll ever know. This is history. Get everyone involved. His full name is Malcolm O–’

The phone died. Killian’s voice was gone.

‘Shit!’ Kele screamed. ‘Shit!’

A voice replied. It was Admire, tugging at the rope, telling her to come back down immediately. There was a change of plans for her.

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Take her to the doctor immediately, said the bald-headed man. She tucked the phone in the pocket of her pants and was hoping to not be rocked as she had been rocked by the other guards before.

When she reached the infirmary she waited and waited for the doctor. It was the same room she had been in before. She was hoping that it was the doctor from earlier who would see her. She was glad when she heard her voice. She was talking to someone. But Kele didn't like the voice that talked back. She didn't know it, but something in it was cold and detached, she thought. She could not yet make out its words, but she just felt this way. When she eventually came in her smile was the first thing to comfort Kele. But she was not here for Kele; she was here for this doctor. He needed help. Kele was pregnant. Kele smiled. She didn't know whether or not to follow her next instinct. It seemed absurd. It burned inside her like the head of a match combusting into flame. A desire to laugh at the ridiculousness of what she was hearing exploded into ripples of laughter that rose quickly to an apex and then descended in tears. But she laughed again when she remembered she hadn't missed a single period. More ridiculousness. And how would she be pregnant anyway if they always used protection? It was all bizarre, like her laughter.

Chapter Forty-Nine

When Nakedi woke up it was the next day and it was to the sound of police sirens. They were not in his dreams. They were at Sabine's gate and he could see them through the widow. Two of them were trying to open the gate and another one jumped over. Nakedi got up. He didn't want to cause alarm for Sabine. So he got up and started looking for her. He didn't know what he would say to her. Ask her to conceal him? But his car was out there. There was a knock on the door. But Sabine was silent. Nakedi did his best to keep himself inconspicuous. There was another knock before the voice at the door shouted: 'There is no one here! This is a waste of time. That call from Joburg must be mistaken.' The voice faded as it went away, but Nakedi's fear did not. It grew. They were finally here, looking for him – the police. For whatever reason though, their resolve was not a solid one. They left. When Nakedi couldn't find Sabine inside the house or the apiary, she did the same. He got into his car and drove slowly, to not attract any attention. In his heart though he was speeding; running away from certain danger. He drove past the golf course knowing fully well the police station was on the other side of it. Thoughts clouded his head. Where was Sabine? She didn't kill herself after all that talking she did last night? It was quite a life she had lived, and Nakedi would not have known a single thing about it had she not opened up to him about it. Andile Ndiselele; the name repeated itself in his head. Andile Ndiselele. Just as he was mouthing it one last time he saw a face that didn't go with it. It was a sad face, walking towards him. The boy wearing the long face was also in some tight jeans and an oversized white t-shirt with silver sequins. The white was not white anymore. He walked looking down as though over and above his sadness he was burdened by a hangover. It almost didn't dawn on Nakedi that he was looking at the very thing that had brought him out of Port St Johns, just as he was running away from the town. Nakedi pulled over, and just as he did so two things happened. Buntu also recognised him and the car he was in and two police vehicles speeding in his direction made a right a couple of blocks away, as though they were going towards Amapondo Backpackers. This was it. Fuck. He stopped the car. The police knew where he was booked before he left for Ntafufu. There was no time to think; only to act.

'Buntu,' he called out as he opened the window and the young man approached the car. Fuck! Do you know what I've been through looking for you? Thank God I found you. Are you okay?'

Buntu was quiet. There was a scar on his cheek. It was healing; maybe from a few days ago.

'Are you okay?'

'Jesus! Not so loud, okay! Yes, I'm fine. I will be as soon as I get home. '

The police bakkies that had disappeared around the corner made a turn from Second Beach, and racing with others with their sirens blaring, they drove as if out of town. They were going to block the

road. They were looking for him. At last giving himself over to the law seemed like the right thing to do. He suddenly became at peace with it.

'Dude, can we go home?' Buntu said.

The boy was like a stranger to Nakedi. He looked nothing like anything that aspired to manhood – whatever that meant.

'You can definitely do that,' Nakedi replied. 'I know you don't have a licence, but I think you should do that.'

Nakedi didn't want to be with Buntu when he got arrested. He was making peace with taking the punishment, whatever it would be, but only the notion of the shame he would carry was heavy for him to bear.

'You're driving yourself home; you look like you could use a good bed and a decent plate.'

'Sure; no doubt. But look who's talking. Pot – kettle situation if you ask me.'

Nakedi laughed. His brother, cousin, or whoever this kid was, he was a white boy. The way he spoke, his r's resonating in his nasal cavity.

Nakedi wondered whether he would have come looking for the boy in the first place, now that he was with him. Sure, putting some distance between himself and the police helped, but he didn't know whether he would do the same thing over again if he were asked to. This Nakedi thought as he lifted the boot and handed the key over to Buntu. But just as he'd stood with Sabine before and was greeted by a surprise in this very same boot, something else was amiss when looked in now. The blanket had been moved and so had the spare wheel. There was Wesley's bag in the middle. Nakedi rushed to pick it up. He did not believe he had forgotten about it for so long. Leontien was indeed an elixir for getting him out of his gloom, his savour from his wan moon. That moon rose now. It was full, sitting low on the horizon, red like a blood moon. He gave Buntu his back and looked in the bag. The money was still all there. And so was his driver's licence.

'Tat' Velelo must have had a puncture. He must have found this when changing the wheel. That's why he was so mad. He knew… he knew I wasn't–'

'Dude, I'm off, you with your secret bags.'

Nakedi and Buntu said their goodbyes. All of it was surreal. Like not just his head but all of life was a hangover.

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Giving up one's freedom is not as easy an exercise as some may think. I'd love to look in the eyes of the ones who like to profess they would hand their children in to the police first if those children committed a crime. I would love to see them when the moment comes. In the moment of encounter with the police it is not easy to say to them: 'Take me, I have committed such and such a crime'. That's why even those who are caught red-handed fight for their freedom. It is not easy to give it up. Nakedi knew he did not kill anyone. The gun that went off wasn't his. It was Mojalefa's, who couldn't risk the idea of Nakedi letting one of the tourists get their hands on the gun. And Dr Amoa had given himself over to fate at the time. In his mind Nakedi fancied he could fight this in court and get just the sentence he deserved, that of selling drugs and moving perlemoen on behalf of his boss, whatever it was. Whatever it was? What was it? How many years of his freedom was he ready to give away? In the end: none. This is why Nakedi walked to the river after parting ways with Buntu. He hopped onto a ferry and went towards Ferry Point. He was making everything up in his mind as he went on foot, over water. He didn't know why he was going in that direction. Certainly to preserve his freedom, but there was something else; there was Leontien, the girl who gave him that cloudy happiness like a portrait of the breeze. When Nakedi reached the other side he walked towards Zonyele and Ngqiqweni. He wondered how many steps it would take him to get back to Tat' Velelo's in Komityi, where they had ridden. Another brick to the house of spontaneous plans he was building landed in place. What if I told Tat' Velelo everything? What if I came clean with him and asked for his forgiveness. What if I asked him for the highest honour he could do me? Even to Nakedi Leontien's name came up. But that is not who he was talking about. But right now he was thinking of the old man from Libode with the *okapi*. He thought about *ukuncwelwa*. The symbolic cut. What if Tat' Velelo would allow him that; redoing the circumcision rite for him? This appealed to Nakedi like nothing he had hitherto thought of. Again, it would keep him away from the police for at least a month if he did it his way. Nakedi was walking past Noqhekwana-Poenskop now looking at the expanse of the land to his right and the endless expanse of the ocean to his left, majestically blue, but something in it fierce and feral. The pieces to his puzzle were getting themselves together. But even in his relative happiness he knew he would soon find pain. This is not something he knew in the future. It was something he knew now.

'Razzo!'

Nakedi knew the voice that called out to him even before he turned. There was a group of boys behind him close in the distance. He had not been paying attention to his rear. He was mad at himself. What kind of person makes a getaway without securing his rear?

It was Tankiso and Bonga, without Fezile; without Buhle.

'Razzo remember me?'

‘Of course he remembers us,’ Bonga said. ‘Why wouldn’t he? He lied to us and told us he was Sotho meanwhile he is an old Xhosa boy parading himself as man.

It was just as Nakedi feared, Buhle had told them about him. But he had never thought in a million years that he would run into them in so remote an area without–

‘What’s in the bag Xhosa boy? It was Bonga who was more belligerent than Tankiso, unlike the other night. He was already reaching for the bag. Both of them were drunk and Nakedi fought them off. The boys were still at a distance while their minders took care of whatever business these two were taking care of.

‘Leave the bag alone; it has nothing to do with you.’

For all the blood he had seen in the last week, Nakedi did not feel good around violence. He did not know how to confront it or protect himself from it when he encountered it. This was the case now. Just as he was fending off Tankiso’s forearm he saw the gleam of the sun of a knife… no it was a… it was a… Nakedi could not decide. He didn’t know what to name the thing that had just hit him twice; once on his flank in his stomach, and again through the flesh next to the horn of his pelvic bone. He fell down, letting the bag go. It was a screwdriver he decided eventually. But it was concealed and its wielders were already running away, shouting to the boys to begin moving. The sun was splendid. The clouds, the sky, everything. Nakedi had a feeling he was dying. It wasn’t a certain thing. It was almost something he could have asked of someone else about him, like the kind of help one gets on that game show. He had forgotten the name of the game show too.

‘What wants… who wants to live forever?’ he sung in a Freddie Mercury voice before falling into a dream where he was in an aeroplane. He flew away, far, far away across the ocean of deep sleep.

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