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Discovering NyaDenga : reflexive essay.

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Discovering NyaDenga

A novel

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A novel submitted to the School of Literature and Language Studies, Faculty of Humanities, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Writing (Research).

Declaration

I declare that this novel, *Discovering NyaDenga*, is my own unaided work. It is submitted for the degree of Master of Arts in Writing (Research) at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. *Discovering NyaDenga* has not been submitted before for any other degree or examination in any other university. I declare that *Discovering NyaDenga* is a work of fiction and in no way represents or reproduces any person or incident. Any likeness or similarity is coincidence.

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Vuyolwethu Madanda

2 September 2011

Part one

Stories must be told or they die, and when they die, we can't remember who we are or why we're here.
– (Sue Monk Kidd, *The Secret Life of Bees*)

Wipe your hand across your mouth, and laugh;
The worlds revolve like ancient women
Gathering fuel in vacant lots
– (*Preludes IV* – T.S. Eliot)

Chapter one

At the first cock's crow, my mother's enthusiastic footsteps woke me. The time on my cell phone confirmed it was four in the morning. I wished for nothing more than to relish the warmth and comfort of my bed as it would be a long time before I slept in it again.

I knew my mother was on her way to my bedroom to wake me up. Over the years we all learnt to associate roosters with her. She still used them to tell the time. And no matter how much technology changed the world around us, the roosters at home indefatigably reminded us that they also could still tell the time.

"Wake up my child," nudged my mother while holding a kerosene lamp in her hand.

I turned to face her and replied, "*Ndihleli mama*."

I had been awake for some time. I could never sleep peacefully ahead of a journey. I was restless through the night. Above that, I was excited about my new job in Port Elizabeth, as was my whole family. This, in spite of never having discussed the details.

Nonjongo, who, at nine, was the youngest child in the family, was more excited than everybody else. She could see me on my next visit home with a big car, one that piggybacked a wheel. She also talked about how she would show this off to her friends. Talk about counting the chickens before the eggs hatch, I thought.

Nkosazana, my other sister, who was in her matric year, was also happy for me. More than anything, she wanted an opportunity to visit me in the city as this would ensure she was the envy of her friends. In our village, Fort Malan, very few people could afford to take trips to big cities. Therefore, going to the city for a holiday was more than a privilege. Not only this, but Nkosazana also couldn't wait to get away from our parents. When I was her age, I too desperately wanted to see myself leave the village.

Sure enough there was a town near us, but nothing about it sparkled. Compared to life in the village, the city appealed more. Perhaps it was the glitter or the simple undeclared promise of a better life that made it so. Nkosazana promised to visit me the minute her mid-year examinations were through.

"You'll be late if you don't wake up now," my mother said. I knew she would not leave my side until she could see that I was up. She

needed to be sure of this because she despised tardiness. She said it was disrespectful and showed little or no consideration for others.

"*Sisi*," she continued. "*Xa ugqibile*, you must help me to prepare your travel provisions." I could hear by how she breathed that she wanted to say something.

"I'm very proud of you," she said after sitting on the bed. I thought she wanted to talk some more because she looked at me like she was thinking of what to say next. I expected her to say more, but she didn't. She got up and left before I could think of a response. It was the first time my mother said that to me. She did not easily get emotional and I rarely saw her cry or laugh. She mostly spoke her emotions; if she was sad, she articulated rather than displayed it. And if she was happy, she said so. Sometimes I thought it had something to do with her unremitting need to be busy. I, on the other hand, cried easily. I cried when I was happy, I cried when I was sad, I cried when somebody died and also cried when somebody got married.

When I got to the candle-illuminated bathroom, I found, on the stand, a blue enamel jug with piping hot water inside and a matching washing container. Next to these was a small plastic jug with cold water. My mother put it all there. That was her telling me she loved me.

The very first time I left home for Durban to attend university, my mother stayed up the whole night baking scones and roasting chicken for my journey. I had protested against her making too much, arguing that I would not be able to eat everything by myself. She told me that I did not have to eat everything alone; in fact she did not expect that I would. She was concerned that I would have nothing to share with people in the bus, and other students on my first day. I hoped that this time she would not make such a fuss because I did not want to carry more luggage than necessary.

It was still dark outside and I could see nothing from the window, except the bright full moon that would light up the surrounds. I brushed my teeth after bathing and then wore my pyjamas. As I left the bathroom, I met my father in the passage.

"*Tyhini*, *ntomb'am*. What are you doing at this time of morning?" He was from outside and had just finished smoking because he was still trying to stuff the BB Best Blend tobacco packet in his jacket.

"Getting ready to go," I laughed quietly.

"Is it today that you are leaving?" he asked, taking his walking stick from under his arm and putting it on the floor.

When I told him, "Yes," he was surprised.

"I thought you had a few more days." He knew I would leave, but he did not know when. My father never paid that much attention to this kind of detail. I figured it was his way of saying, 'do you really need to go? But it's fine. Go if you must.' He was more concerned about his cows, rain, drought and the gatherings at the chief's kraal.

At the chief's kraal, the men who were invited to participate in discussions spoke about life. They spoke about families that needed financial assistance; children who went to the cities and never came back; they lamented the dead and discussed how they would help; they found solutions to crime problems in the village. My father's stories from the chief's kraal always managed to get the whole family to debate. Some of us felt we had better problem-solving skills than the men at the chief's kraal. In the end these became debates that had everybody stimulated.

"I'll have a chance to earn some money finally," I said.

"Very good. Very good then," came his response. He looked at his walking stick as if he was already thinking about other things. I was not used to the idea that he carried a stick to help him walk.

"Tata, you must lose that stick," I said feeling a twinge of sadness that he seemed old. "You're not old." I wanted to embrace him, be his little girl all over again, but I did not move. Instead, I began to miss him although I had not even said goodbye.

"My girl, what is it exactly that you will do there again?" asked tata interrupting my thoughts. He walked slowly down the passage towards the kitchen. I followed him.

The kitchen was warm and smelled of butter and vanilla essence. I always loved the smell of fresh baking. There were hot scones cooling on a rack. On the gas stove stood a pot of sour porridge, which tata insisted on having every morning. Mama sat at the table making round balls from dough preparing to fry *amagwinya*. I pulled out a chair for myself and tata did the same. He poured himself a cup of coffee from the flask on the table while mama looked at him and turned up her nose. "You know I don't like you smoking," she said, but my father did not look like he heard.

To me she said, "*Hay'bo*, Chuma, you can't just sit and fold your arms while I work so hard for you." She always said she did not like children who sat and did nothing while older people broke their backs with hard work. I rolled up my pyjama sleeves and took over the function of rolling the dough.

"He-e Gxarha, what did you say your daughter was going to do?" said my mother.

"Ee, Zizi," replied my father. "She must explain this to us, *uyaqonda*. *Kaloku*, when the others ask, we must be able to tell them exactly what it is that our daughter does." They deliberately held conversations like this sometimes, where the person they were talking about was present but excluded.

"I couldn't agree with you more," said my mother picking up the dough again.

"I'm going to be an assistant editor for a new magazine eBhayi," I jumped in as they expected.

"*Hee bafazi*!" exclaimed my mother clapping her hands. "Gxarha, did you hear this properly?"

When the oil was ready, I fried the dough balls to make *amagwinya*.

"Ewe Zizi, I heard," my father slurped his coffee. "Give the child a chance to explain. Professions today are no longer what they were in our day. In those days, you could either be a teacher or a nurse, a-"

"A lawyer," interrupted my mother. I kept turning the rolls in the frying pan until they looked deliciously golden brown.

"Yes."

"And doctor," snapped my mother.

"That one also," said my father removing his hat from his knee to put it on the table. "What did you say your profession was going to be my child?"

"An assistant editor," I replied proudly. I was in my final year of literary and media studies when I first saw the launch issue of *For You* magazine. I knew I would one day work there. At that time all I could think about was telling stories which could reach the parts of a person's mind that slept.

"Now what work does a person like that do?" my mother wanted to know.

"I will help with the production of the magazine every month. I will suggest story ideas and I will write some of them myself," I replied.

"Ooh," pondered my father. "I see now," he said nodding to himself. "Zizi, your daughter will write stories for people to read."

My parents took what I was going to do seriously, even though in our village people did not buy much of magazines. I did not think my parents knew the details of my job, but they understood that stories would be written and that people would read. I had, however, been trying to explain what I was going to do since the day I found out I got the job.

"Chuma, my child," said my father in a serious tone. "I'm not going to warn you again about city people. I did this when you went to eThekwini. Maybe your mother would like to say something to you." He cleared his throat and waited for my mother to say something.

"Ee, Chuma," my mother began. "You know, if it was all up to me, I would let you stay here at home because the world out there is cruel. You know what we said the very first time you left home." I nodded and said, "You told me to take care of myself."

"You remember," said my mother. "You are a little older now and you might meet somebody who may want to marry you, and you may say yes." This sudden talk of marriage was awkward. Before I left to study, they said I was not allowed to fall in love and think about marriage.

"Remember how important it is that you meet your own kind. We don't want to have any difficulty with the ancestors should you bring anybody different," said my mother, pulling her small *tyali* over her chest. The lamp on the kitchen table flickered as the sun slowly began to rise.

"Your mother is right. We don't want any difficulty. I know you'll do us proud once you're there," tata laughed. He took his pipe from the pocket of his jacket and filled it with tobacco. He stood up and with his cane, started to make his way slowly out of the kitchen. As he reached the door he said, "Chuma, just go and write those stories of yours and don't forget to write about people like us."

"The ancestors will not be riled on your account, do you hear?" Mama was stern with me because she knew how serious tata was with custom.

My mother stood up and went to the pantry. She came back with a cage that had a cackling chicken inside.

"This is yours," she said. "Your father sent Nomountaini's grandchildren to catch the fattest for you."

I couldn't believe she thought I would carry a chicken all the way to Port Elizabeth. What will people say, I asked myself. I could imagine aunt Nomountaini's grandsons, Soso and Zwezwe, running after the chicken.

"Can't we slaughter this now?" I asked feeling panic.

"Chuma! You know that is going to take a long time."

"Ma I don't know about this chicken," I said, careful not to offend her kindness. "But thanks for it." Thanking her was better than me complaining.

When I left home the sun was so blistering I could have melted. The taxi stop, which also doubled as a bus stop, was not far from home. Nonjongo carried the cage with the chicken while Nkosazana helped to carry the bigger bag with my clothes. When we arrived at the stop, Nonjongo began,

"Sisi, are you going to carry this chicken all the way to Port Elizabeth?" she laughed mischievously. I did not tell her that I wished mama would give her two cages of chicken when she went to work in Johannesburg or Cape Town one day. It was the only way she would understand. I was not upset with the chicken; I was upset because I could not refuse my mother's generosity.

"Shh," pleaded Nkosazana. "Sisi will carry this to the big city. Don't you know people in the cities eat chicken?"

"*Yhu*!" Nonjongo cried out, holding back more laughter. "Sisi please tell me that they don't eat the same chicken that we do here in the village." I tried my best not to reveal any sensitivity about this to her. When I had calmed myself down, I told her,

"Njongo, chicken is the same. The only difference is that here we may have to run after chickens before we eat them but in the cities people buy them in the shops. But somebody still has to run after them before they're slaughtered and taken to the shops." Nkosazana laughed and told Nonjongo not to ask foolish questions anymore.

When a van arrived I hugged my sisters and they handed me my luggage, including the chicken. As the van drove off, I watched my sisters wave at me from a cloud of dust.

The ride was rough as the road was uneven. The dirt road we were on cut through a mountain pass. At the bottom and across the mountain were clusters of villages with houses painted in white and shades of blue. Occasionally we drove over a small low-lying bridge under which there was little water and overgrown reeds. Sometimes we stopped for wandering livestock to cross the road before we continued on our way. I watched the hills I had always enjoyed roll past. Rondavels with fist-sized windows were perched at intervals.

A mother sat with her legs stretched out, feeding a child from a bowl in one hut, and in another children played outside. I thought about how lucky I was to have landed the job. I couldn't wait to start writing stories about ordinary people, their circumstances and where they lived. I had got it in me that when the world moved forward, and the well-connected were awarded big business tenders, thus improving their lives and the lives of those close to them, the ordinary, with their struggles and poverty, were soon forgotten. Over and over I promised myself that my stories would make a difference. I had been working on stories I would pitch as soon as I began working.

"Tell me something," a large woman sitting next to me burst out. I had not paid her any attention since I got in the van. "Why is it that girls like you don't want to stay at home?" I did not know why she was angry with me. "Girls like you have feet that always itch to walk all over the place. Who's going to look after your parents while you go gallivanting?" It was obvious that I was going somewhere given that I had luggage. I did not know what it was about me that made her think I would never be capable of looking after my parents. I contemplated the best way to respond to her.

"Girls like me want to be everywhere. We do so not because we want to stay away from our parents, but because we recognise that there is value in knowing what people on the other side are doing. We hate to be bound by the world we know and we refuse to be envious of those who have different opportunities in the cities. We would rather be there participating too. Are there jobs here for people who have been to school?"

"*Mpxhim! Lent'ingenambeko, icing'bibhetele*," was all the response I got from her.

The last thing I wanted to do was to pick a fight with a strange, angry woman. The only fight I was ever involved in was years ago. I was

in primary school, in sub-B. A girl who was a known bully had demanded twenty cents from me. I lied and said I had no money when most of my friends knew I kept my money in my shoes. The bully accused me of lying and I accused her of being a bully. She swore at me, saying I was a worthless thing in her eyes. She threatened to crumple me up like a piece of paper. I dared her to go ahead, believing that somebody from the crowd would come to my rescue. None of the children came when the bully showed me a thing or two about crumpling people up. Although she beat me up that day I never gave her my money.

The van stopped as we arrived in town and I was relieved to get out. I had my luggage in my one hand and the cage with the squawking chicken in the other. The dust had made my Vaseline-smeared legs appear like I was wearing pantyhose.

Chapter two

The night's cold in Phungoni cut mercilessly through the hut as three women huddled near the wall. With sticks, they dug a small, deep hole on the floor where they buried the afterbirth of an infant. Avhashoni, the eldest of the women poured hot water over the hole and Solani, the youngest, flattened the afterbirth spot so that when it dried, it was as even as the rest of the floor.

Only moments before, Lowani, one of the midwives, raised the spirited newborn to Nnyambeni, its mother, and told her she had given birth to a beautiful little girl. Drenched in sweat and exhausted, Nnyambeni glared back at Lowani and attempted to smile. She collapsed back on her grass mat and was soon captive to sleep.

The women fussed over Nnyambeni and the child. She must not get cold, she must not talk excessively or it is bad for the child, and she must not fall asleep before the baby sees her, they said. The baby wailed and Solani tried to quell her cries while the others chattered on. Avhashoni explained, as the others listened, that the hot water on the afterbirth spot was sufficient to stop Nnyambeni's pains.

"We know," Lowani and Solani replied in unison. They continued to talk among themselves, often agreeing that living in the valley in winter was plain bad as no one could smile while their teeth chattered from cold. But in summer, when there was not enough shade in the land, everyone else wished they lived high up on the mountain where it was cool, or down in the valley where the shadowing mountains pacified the heat.

Although Nnyambeni slept, she seemed troubled by dreams for she tossed, turned and kicked off the mantle that covered her. The baby's unceasing screams caused Lowani and Solani to panic as they struggled in vain to wake Nnyambeni up.

"Nnyambeni," said the Lowani frantically shaking her.

"Nnyambeni *vuwani*," urged Solani.

"*Mulitsheni*," said Avhashoni. "What good will she be if she awakes?"

Nnyambeni did not come back from her dream until Lowani placed the baby on her breast and squeezed it. Oblivious to her mother's half-presence, the infant imbibed eagerly.

Having watched this scene unfold from a distance Avhashoni whispered in a firm tone,

"You should not do that." When Lowani and Solani did not respond, she walked over to them and repeated that they should remove the baby from the breast. She snatched the baby away from Nnyambeni, rocked it in her arms and sang to it. Lowani and Solani cowered at Nnyambeni's side.

Most timidly, Lowani said, "The child must be fed. She is hungry."

"Do you know for certain who the child's father is? Do you not know that a child cannot be fed its mother's milk until the father is known? *Ni vhaVenda vhagai*?" barked Avhashoni.

Having mustered enough courage to speak, Solani said, "Milk is milk no matter who the father is. Would you rather that the child died?"

The women continued their whispered confrontation not realising that Nnyambeni had woken. She sat quietly and stared up at the thatched roof. She did not blink until minute soil particles began to fall into her eyes.

"It is my husband's child," she said softly. She was jaded. "Lowani? Solani?" she called. "Do you really think this is not Mulamuleli's baby?" The women were quiet. "You know me," she pleaded.

It was true that Lowani and Solani knew her better than Avhashoni. When she married Mulamuleli, Avhashoni's husband, and became his second wife, they spoke with her while Avhashoni did not.

"Quiet!" screeched Avhashoni. "The time for the truth will come."

Lowani and Solani looked at each other, each accusing the other in the silence that echoed through the hut. The silence caused their earlier exchange to linger for much longer.

"When you are disappointed, Avhashoni, I will not be the one to comfort you," said Nnyambeni rescuing herself.

"I said do not talk. Are you a medicine man?" retorted Avhashoni.

"I suggest you keep quiet if you know you are not a medicine man."

As Nnyambeni fell back on her mat, Lowani pulled out a rugged bag of herbs. She emptied out its contents and diluted them with warm water. She fed some of the medicine to Nnyambeni, while she rubbed some

of it on her body. She dipped a cloth in cold water so as to manage her temperature.

Nnyambeni sobbed and mumbled under her breath that it had not been her aspiration to steal any husband from anybody. She merely accepted a man who wanted to marry her.

There was an uncomfortable silence in the compound as Avhashoni handed the baby to Solani. Lowani begged Nnyambeni not to talk any longer as doing so would cause her more pain.

"Let her talk," Avhashoni demanded. "She knows nothing about my husband. Had I disagreed to my husband taking her as my 'younger sister', she would not be here. Let her tell me about this husband she says she agreed to marry."

"Lowani," pleaded Nnyambeni again, her voice coated in pain. "Tell them that you never saw another man near me."

"Until we know for sure," Avhashoni turned and pointed a finger at the baby, "she will feed on *mukapu* only." Lowani and Solani nodded while tears flooded out of Nnyambeni's eyes.

The rivalry between Nnyambeni and Avhashoni began long before they even met. Avhashoni had been married to Mulamuleli for many years when one day he told her that he wanted to take another wife. That she would no longer be the only one desired by her husband nearly caused Avhashoni to collapse. She had long been proud of being the only woman in the village whose husband had one wife. The women with whom Avhashoni ploughed warned her not to be proud, but she did not listen. She had laughed at them, implored them not to blame her that her husband was only interested in her.

On the day Mulamuleli told her of his intention, she went to sleep in her compound, feeling ashamed that the women had been right and she was wrong. She had no courage to face her husband and he clearly did not know that he would make her the laughing stock of the village. Every time Mulamuleli came to her hut to ask her to eat or to attend to visitors, she ignored him. The day she decided to speak she told him she did not care what he did, and that he was a pathetic husband.

However, when he said, "Come here you woman," as he embraced

Avhashoni in the privacy of their hut, she forgave him. He had made her feel like a new bride all over again.

When he reasoned that another wife might give him a child, maybe a son, who would look after their home when they died, Avhashoni said she understood absolutely. She felt loved by her husband that night, and in her heart she knew that she would love him and he would love her, even with the introduction of another woman. She made peace with her husband's idea.

Four days after the birth of the child, Lowani and Solani were confident about the cleanliness of the hut. They had cautiously swept the floor and packed the medicines, water carriers, mats and cloths in a corner and in an orderly manner. Avhashoni had left them earlier, insisting there were other urgent things that needed her attention at the homestead. She promised she would return soon.

Lowani and Solani left Nnyambeni alone with the baby while they went outside to stamp maize. The heat from the sun was unforgiving; their bodies constantly broke into perspiration. VhoTshikalange, the medicine man, came limping along as the women began to winnow the maize. He sat on a stack of wood, situated before the *tshitanga*, his dreadlocks falling on his forehead.

"*Ndaa*!" he saluted with his hands together.

The women dropped to their knees as they greeted in unison,

"*Aa*!"

VhoTshikalange was known and respected in many villages because he had great skill. He was good at finding cures for different ailments. He was good at 'sniffing out' witches and excelled in exorcising evil spirits out of people. Lowani and Solani were visibly nervous in his presence.

He came to the homestead to interrogate Nnyambeni about her baby's paternity. It was the norm with new mothers and VhoTshikalange made no exceptions when he talked to them. Nnyambeni would be no different despite the fact that VhoTshikalange and Mulamuleli were good friends. Mulamuleli's father was the one who taught him everything he knew about healing plants.

After assessing the homestead, VhoTshikalange asked Lowani and Solani if he could see Nnyambeni. Lowani led the way while Solani remained to continue with winnowing the maize. She watched them until they disappeared into the hut where the child was born.

Nnyambeni was awake and dressed when the visitor arrived. She had been sewing beads onto a string to make a bracelet for Mulamuleli. She

would give it to him when he came to see his first-born child. He would know that she loved him with all her being. She was glad VhoTshikalange had come as this would give her a chance to settle the matter with Avhashoni once and for all. Lowani led him to the chair, which had been prepared for him.

"*Ndaa*!"

"*Aa*!" both Nnyambeni and Avhashoni greeted. They were pleased for reasons best known in their hearts.

Having cleared his throat, the medicine man told the women that he expected they knew why he had come. Nnyambeni replied that she had an idea, but Avhashoni said that it would be best if he explained himself. VhoTshikalange cleared his throat again and looked pensively around the hut. He walked around the hearth to the corner where the baby's afterbirth was buried. He knelt down, dug his right hand into the ground and brought out a fistful of soil. He felt it between his fingers and let it filter through back to the ground. He turned to the women and asked if he could see the baby. He walked over to Nnyambeni who had the child in her arms. She looked up at him and allowed him a glance.

"She is a small image of Mulamuleli," said VhoTshikalange after carefully examining the child. Avhashoni strutted over to where the medicine man and Nnyambeni sat. She jostled her way between the two of them so that she could have another look at the baby.

Nnyambeni grinned as she sat up from her mat. She held the child more closely to her chest.

"What part of her looks like him?" asked Avhashoni with a hint of panic in her voice.

"The big head," pointed VhoTshikalange. "The forehead looks familiar." Avhashoni stormed out of the room and did not return for the rest of the day.

VhoTshikalange produced herbs and a blade from his sack. He made small incisions on the baby's inner arms, thighs and nape. As the baby screamed, he rubbed herbs into the blood that seeped from her wounds. The herbs were going to ensure that evil spirits would not possess her. When he finished, he gave the child back to its mother.

Before the sun went down at the end of that day, a beaming Mulamuleli walked into the hut with his mother. She had grown older since the last time she visited the homestead. She walked slowly to get

to Nnyambeni and the baby. Her back was no longer good for she hunkered down on her walking stick. Her *vhukunda*-adorned arms were lean and the skin on them, like her face, was wrinkled. When she reached Nnyambeni and the child she sat down and placed her stick next to her. Mulamuleli still stood at the door, the sun's rays shining on his face. Nnyambeni handed over the baby to her before she greeted.

"*Aa*! *Mazwale*. Are you well today?" Her voice was hoarse and deep.

"Yes. I trust you woke up well too." When Nnyambeni sat up again, her mother-in-law's mind was on the child comfortably cradled in her arms. She looked at Mulamuleli and then stared at the baby who was beginning to kick her little legs about. She began to rock the baby gently so that it could settle. When it calmed, she whispered very softly into its ear.

Mulamuleli's mother named the child Denga, after her own mother. It was her wish that her mother would return to complete her work on earth.

*****

Chapter three

The afternoon was hot and unusually windy. I regretted wearing a dress as I was worried that the wind would at any moment blow it over my head. I had a difficult time trying hold on to it while I had the suitcase and the chicken cage in my hands.

The pathway towards the bus pick-up point was lined on either side with crumbly stalls constructed from bits of wood and colourful plastic. Women were selling fruit, vegetables, meat, fly-infested tripe, smiling sheep heads, swollen bare chickens, sweets, nuts, roasted mealies and second-hand clothes. The roads in town, where people moved about like ants on sugar, were mostly gravel. This was the case, especially because it was nearly midday on a Friday. It was the day people came from all directions to buy things, and when they were done, they disappeared in the taxis, which drove them to their home villages. Many did their shopping before the weekend because stores opened early on Saturdays and closed completely on Sundays.

The time was half past eleven when I sat down on a bench near a vegetable stall. The bus was not due for at least another hour. The owner of the stall eyed me suspiciously when my chicken began to squawk. After I exchanged greetings with her, she continued to chatter loudly to her neighbour.

I had conflicting ideas about how I would deal with the chicken. I was not keen to travel with it, but also felt guilty for thinking like this when I knew my parents had given it to me with love. I thought it would be wrong to sell it and not give my mother the money.

A brazier at one of the stalls burned steadily on which stood a big lidless silver pot of boiling water. A scrawny woman, who sat on an old dented paint tin, was tending it. The sleeves of her blue jacket were rolled up as she plucked feathers from a chicken. Some feathers flew into the pot while she discarded the rest on the ground. When she finished, she handed the chicken over to another woman, also a stall owner, who then told her to keep the chicken in the boiling water for a few more minutes.

The woman next to me complained about how some people made more money by cheating.

"She makes more money when chicken is bigger. But that is cheating of the worst kind," she said wiping her hands on her pinafore.

She squirted water from a makeshift spray bottle on her fruit and vegetables. In an instant they appeared delicious, fresh and juicy. She also cheated, so I could not see why she complained about her neighbour. But I did not say this to her. No matter how beautiful her goods looked, they still did not sell as well as chicken, or any other meat. I was still thinking about the chicken, which had to be in water so that it could be increased in size when the woman called,

"Lhalha!" referring to me. I would have told her my name if she had asked. "*Inkukhu le yona*?" She craned her neck to have a better view of the chicken.

"*Bububele babazali*," I said trying to pretend that I couldn't see that she was holding back laughter.

"*Hee-ee*!" she guffawed. "Are you not going far?" When I nodded, she said, "*Inkukhu ke, izakwenzela umjojo*." She clapped her hands in disbelief.

I could not believe my luck when she suddenly suggested that I should sell the chicken to her.

"You can have this for free," I was relieved to offer. After this I silently apologised to my mother.

The bus was full when it arrived. Children sitting on their mothers' laps were visible from the windows as it came to a stop. The smell of food and sweat drifted through the bus as I walked to my seat. I sat down next to a young woman who was not much older than I. We did not talk much; she spent most of her time talking to people on her phone while I spent the initial leg of my trip looking out the window, glad to be on my way.

After we left Idutywa we joined a major road, which connected towns along the coast. I took out my travel provisions and began to eat slowly.

Small town after small town, young women clad in skimpy mini dresses and heels paced the streets. It was not hard to tell that they were in the business of prostitution. They had become a familiar sight and were, many times, used as subjects in stories.

"A woman must do whatever it takes to survive," muttered my neighbour. I was taken aback and did not answer immediately.

"Even if it means she becomes a prostitute?" I said eventually.

"Yep." She kept her eyes on a cosmetics pamphlet.

I reclined my seat and closed my eyes, forcing myself to fall asleep. Images of the girls in skimpy clothes floated in my mind. Was it a stroke of fortune that I was born to parents who had the means to see to it that I would not end up on the streets? It was poverty that drove them to do what they did.

"Would you do what they are doing?" I said.

"I don't know. But maybe they're forced to do what they do."

"Sad. But contracting Aids is scarier."

I wished prostitution wasn't an alternative means of making a living for women.

"And what would you propose that the women do?"

"I don't know, maybe domestic work?"

"Look, I'm only saying that this is not a world for softies. Women must learn to survive and do whatever it takes."

My phone vibrated in my bag. I had a message from my landlord with details of my new address. Technology was a wonderful thing. Had it not been for the internet, I would not have easily found a place to stay. As I read the text message, I wished that the internet could be accessed in all villages. I had to drive with my father to town to get internet and if he wasn't going, I had to catch a taxi there. The roads were bad, particularly after it rained, and the drive to town took an hour, although the distance between my home and town was 20 kilometers.

"Any chance you're going to PE?" I asked after we were quiet.

"Yes. Is that where you're going?"

"Yes. My first time."

"It's a lovely, clean city."

"I've heard. They say it's windy there too."

"Tell me all about it."

"Do you know a place called The Dunes? It's a complex."

"Do you know the name of the suburb?" After I told her, she said she had an idea where that was as she lived nearby.

"Why don't we share a cab to get home?" Her face lit up as she made this suggestion. "I'll pay my half of the cab fare and you'll pay yours." It was not a bad idea and I thanked her for saving me the trouble.

As the road wound down a hill, more villages on either side of the main road appeared. Although the summer rains had come, the grass was not green; the water was not enough.

I paged through a magazine and arrived at a page that advertised make-up. My neighbour stared at this page and asked me what I thought about the products.

"Except the unreasonable price, nothing," I replied.

"I couldn't agree with you more about the price," she said as she handed me the cosmetic pamphlet I had seen her peruse earlier. She sold beauty products for the company and now she wanted me to compare her prices to the ones in the magazine.

"There's not much of a difference." She turned over the page to a price list.

"The front page prices are not discounted, but these are. Everything you saw before is actually on special," she said confidently.

"Really?" I was not very interested as I rarely wore make-up. But I also did not want her to feel like she had wasted her words on me. She turned to face me and held my chin between her hands.

"You'd be more beautiful if you used make up." She let go of my face as she reached for her highly organised vanity case. She had the kind of touch that lingered and even after she stopped touching me, I could still feel her fingers dance about my face like butterflies. I was still enthralled by her touch when she asked if she could show me some make up tricks, which, she said, were simple. I found it impressive that she was an expert at what she did, and that she was confident about her skill.

"But I hardly wear makeup. It's bad for your skin."

"Nonsense, people wear make up all the time and it just makes them more beautiful."

"Look, I don't even know your name but you want to powder my face with used sponges. I don't think so."

"I don't know you either, but I think I can make you more gorgeous. And if you're so bothered about my name, I'm Thuthelwa. But you can call me Thuthu. And yours?"

"I'm Chuma."

Thuthelwa had the kind of energy about her that overshadowed what I thought and what I had to say. She did not care for personal boundaries. I suspected that if had told her I did not like strangers touching me because I didn't know where their hands had been, she would not have cared.

"Good. Nice to meet you, Chuma. Now, may I give your beautiful face a lift? With clean sponges? I do this sort of thing all the time in my line of work."

"You are pushy, aren't you?" I said beginning to feel like I was going to give into her.

"Your answer is…?"

"Okay. You can do my face if you won't leave me smudged."

"Thank you," she said in a way that made her sound like a professional. She shifted in her seat to make herself comfortable. She asked me to turn and face her so that she could have a better view of her work. I felt pampered. But with the bus occasionally hitting potholes, I begged her not to apply eye-make up. When she had finished she gave me a small mirror so that I could look at myself. I thought I looked good.

"I told you you'd look good," she said. "If there's anything you'd like to buy now, I'll give you a gift," she grinned as she retrieved her pamphlet from a net pocket attached to the back of the seat in front of her. She was disappointed when I said I would only buy a lipstick and powder because they were the only things I could afford. After we exchanged money, she wrote her number on the back of the pamphlet and told me if I was interested in any of the products, I should let her know as she would order and deliver them. She put her vanity case down, stretched out her legs and plugged earphones in her ears.

The bus filled up with more people as it stopped at small towns. We passed over the Kei Bridge, once the border of Transkei. I remembered crossing over the border with my parents, no more than six times to visit relatives in Bhisho, Mdantsane and Qonce. There were farms in the vicinity of the border, but one which, without fail, caught my eye was situated high up on a peak. Rows and rows of crops were planted beneath the residence and the trees around it stood tall. The farm was a perfect sanctuary; it was surreal. It turned out that Thuthu loved the farm too because she removed her earphones as we passed it.

"Do you see how beautiful it is?" she asked. After we exchanged our views about the farms, we shared more of my travel provisions while we chatted about work. She was a freelance stylist for a magazine. She sold beauty products to supplement her income.

I wasted no time to ask her about *For You* magazine. I was not surprised that she worked for it. I had a sense she would tell me she did before she said it. When I asked her if she enjoyed working there she said she was just doing her job.

Chapter four

The year of Denga's birth was celebrated with much ado. Relatives from afar visited and paid homage to the child whose spirit they said was reincarnated.

"*Ovhuya*," the relatives enthused. They sat with the child and passed her around for each to hold. While some unintelligibly muttered over her head, others blew air in her face and said that in her the spirit of NyaDenga would forever live.

Nnyambeni glowed and smiled as the relatives admired Denga. When the old women asked when she would have another baby, she told them "soon".

"You are indeed Mulamuleli's wife," said one of the old women. Avhashoni, who was within hearing range of this conversation, cringed. "A good wife must be able to bear children," continued the woman. Others close to her nodded their agreement.

"*Ni khwathise vhutanzi uri ndi nwana wa mutukana*," another old woman interrupted. Most agreed that Mulamuleli needed an heir. Avhashoni was initially in high spirits when the visitors arrived. She saw the birth of Denga as her own. She had almost forgotten about the difficulty she had when she dealt with the reality that she could not give Mulamuleli a child. In those days, she rebuked her menstrual period for coming and when it did not come one day, she was hopeful for a pregnancy. But it did not happen.

Although she was the one to prepare food and drink for them, the relatives said little to Avhashoni, not even 'Avhashoni-*wee*, it is good that the child came.' They only ate and drank.

"Nothing will change, I promise," Mulamuleli had assured Avhashoni. She had clung to this promise even when things began to change.

A rift formed between Avhashoni and Mulamuleli. In it there were the child, Nnyambeni, the relatives, chores, the homestead, village gatherings, births and deaths. When the visitors stopped coming, Avhashoni, Nnyambeni and Mulamuleli were left alone to raise Denga.

Denga grew up knowing that her mothers, Nnyambeni and Avhashoni, constantly fought. Many times it was not clear what the altercations were about, but they were there no matter how hard they tried to ignore each other. The women mostly kept their communication to a bare

minimum, but they spoke in the presence of someone else. They cooked separately and competed fiercely for Mulamuleli's attention. He accepted two meals at any given point in a day, presented to him with an overzealous manner of respect by both women. Mulamuleli would eat his fill and leave what he could not eat behind. The women would comb his hut, where he ate, to see whose food was eaten the most. The one whose food was eaten least became sullen and could be seen toiling quietly in and around the homestead. Denga was about five years old when this habit between her mothers stopped.

It was around this time when Mulamuleli called his eldest sister to come and mediate the situation between his wives. She was to the point when she spoke to them in Mulamuleli's presence, outside his compound.

"You women are going to kill my brother if you continue like this," she said sharply. Avhashoni broke down and sobbed while Nnyambeni glanced at Mulamuleli and his sister.

"Makhadzi," Avhashoni said to Mulamuleli's sister. "I have lost not only the love of my husband, but also my life."

"Love?" asked the sister with a measure of confusion. "Love is a thing for children, not married women."

"Nobody cares for me and what I think," continued Avhashoni amid her sobs. She wiped her tears with the back of her hand while Mulamuleli sat quietly, staring at her.

"That is not true," he said. He cleared his throat several times with his eyes fixed on Avhashoni.

"Avhashoni!" called Mulamuleli's sister. "What is wrong with you? Nnyambeni is younger than you. Treat her as your younger sister."

After drying her eyes, Avhashoni stood up with her hands on her hips. Shaking her head from side to side, she sighed. She had had enough. All the while, Nnyambeni sat quietly and did not move until Denga came traipsing along. After asking her to go and a fetch water, Nnyambeni sat quietly again.

"Mulamuleli, what happened to us?" asked Avhashoni looking at him. "What happened to our lives?" She threw her hands in the air and before Mulamuleli could open his mouth to speak. His sister answered,

"Avhashoni, stop it! Were you promised a good and easy life by Mulamuleli?" Avhashoni stopped and walked over to where Mulamuleli and his sister were sitting.

"You will not tell me what to think. I am sick and tired of you pretending you intend to build the family when you mean to break it. Look at me," she yelled.

"Sit down Avhashoni," demanded Mulamuleli. Avhashoni ignored him as she stood towering over his sister.

"No. I will not be told again and I have done enough listening. I listened to you when you wanted to take her as your wife," she pointed at Nnyambeni. "Look where that got me. I am losing my mind now because you told nothing would change. Well, nothing is fine. I was quiet for too long." The more Avhashoni talked, the angrier she got.

"I am sorry my brother promised you the world. I hope you can accept that things are not always according to promises people make," Mulamuleli's sister interjected.

"*Ebo makhadzi*. Did you not just hear me say that I will not be listening anymore? From now on, you will hear me."

"You forget that you are also here because of me," retorted Mulamuleli's sister. "My brother would have grown old and alone had I not told my family that Mulamuleli needed a wife. I did the same thing when you could not bear children for us." She looked at Mulamuleli and then back at Avhashoni. "Nnyambeni is your helping hand here at home and there is no need for you to feel bitter and betrayed by decisions we make." Avhashoni began to hum a song.

"Makhadzi, I am Mulamuleli's wife and we already had agreed on our marriage before your family came and talked to mine about me." Mulamuleli's sister looked at him to confirm whether what she had heard was the truth. Mulamuleli nodded. "You see now Makhadzi," continued Avhashoni, "you have not always provided the best solutions for this family." Avhashoni folded her grass mat and left the meeting.

While growing up, Denga spent more time with Avhashoni, who not only had the skill, but also the passion to mould clay pots. For hours on end, she observed how Avhashoni transformed and brought to life basic clay. She came to believe that there was magic in Avhashoni's hands. The first time Denga asked her to teach her how to work with clay, she agreed on the spot. She spent time practising to make pots, but somehow, what she made was dry and unimaginative.

"Draw things you see with your naked eye," Avhashoni said when Denga felt despondent with the results of her clay pot making. "Close your eyes and put no limits to what you can imagine."

Nnyambeni was not pleased with the amount of time Denga and Avhashoni spent together. She took to criticising the clay pots they made, and when Denga showed no sign of giving up, she told her to stay away from the clay. She warned that Denga would see something if she ever found her near clay again. What that 'something' was, she did not explain. Denga did not find this threat serious enough because she continued to make pots, mostly when she went to the river to fetch water.

She was hardly alone when she went to the river. She usually walked with her friend, Talu, from the homestead below. The two of them were friends for as long as she could remember. At the crack of dawn, and depending on who was the first to wake, they woke each other up. The very first time the girls walked alone to the river they were frightened of bush monsters as they had heard much about them. They did not understand why other girls laughed and jeered at them as if they, themselves, did not believe there were monsters who took children away to places where their parents could never find them. Gradually they became accustomed to the early morning walk. They even learnt to enjoy it as the sun still hid its warmth. They also took pleasure in playing games while they were on their way. Once at the river, they helped each other fill their calabashes with water. After this they would go and bath on the other side of the river. Having bathed, Denga would ask Talu to wait while she filled her small container with clay.

Denga undertook to teach Talu to make clay pots but she was not interested. It did not make sense to her that her friend did not warm up to moulding clay. She also did not understand why anybody would not want an alternative pastime activity. Talu preferred to stick to beating the drum and dancing in her leisure time.

The older Denga grew the more difficult she found it to keep away from the clay. Although she could not remember the exact day she understood that she could let her imagination flow, the clay allowed her to tap into something in her heart she would otherwise not be able to reach. Her mind journeyed and wandered until it took hold of an idea, an image that it would not easily release. The clay allowed her to bring to life illustrations that lay in her imagination.

Chapter five

My new beachside flat was impressive to say the least. When the landlord showed me in I could hardly hear his words as he took me to each room, explaining how things worked. I could not believe that all of it was going to be mine. I had never lived alone in a flat before; this was excessive, indulgent yet exciting. It did not make sense to have one person staying in a two bedroom place, but I could imagine myself sleeping in both bedrooms depending on my mood.

"You might want to think about getting a roommate," said the landlord, interrupting my fantasy.

"Why would I want to do that?"

"You might save on rent." This was something I had not carefully considered. Perhaps it was because it hadn't occurred to me that I should still be sharing a house with other people even in my working life. I had shared enough space at the university residence. That was one place where people ate or stole your food from the fridge even if it was marked clearly with the owner's name on it. At least this was the case until I heeded a friend's advice. I left a note saying *you will get diarrhoea if you eat my food again*. My food never disappeared again and I never found out who the culprit was. The idea of sharing a flat brought these food memories back.

"But I don't want a flat mate."

"I thought it might help," he shrugged.

The air inside the house smelled like mould and I guessed it was because the windows had been closed for a long time. I rushed to open them and the salty sea breeze quickly filled my nostrils. I inhaled deeply, making sure that it would fill every cell in my body. Salt cleansed and I hoped it would have the same effect once it was inside.

I phoned Nkosazana wanting to tell her about the house, as well as my safe arrival, of course. But she was sleeping and sounded very uninterested in my ramble.

"Is mama there?"

"*Bamba ndimbize*," she replied. I could hear her shout *mama*! I could hear my mother's footsteps in the background as she got nearer the phone. She did not take the phone from my sister without scolding her for calling out to her like they were mates.

"Why did you not phone on my phone? Can you see how this child thinks we are the same age?" my mother was irate.

"Sorry mama, but I did not want to make too many calls."

"I thought there was an emergency, but now I hear it's only you on the phone."

"*Uxolo Dlamini*. I'm missing you already," I tried to appease her. Most of our conversation was simply about the journey and what I was going to do the following day.

"How much will you be paying in rent?" she wanted to know. I told her, with my heart missing a beat because I knew the amount was a little steep.

"I will get somebody to stay with me," I lied or else she would have said I was spoilt and wasteful.

I could not hear her response as her line broke.

"Technology!" I thought I heard her say. "Father – no – money – pay." Silence. Did she just say she and my father would not pay for my flat? It did not matter because I was not going to ask them anyway. I was relieved that the call was over.

Although bare, I was crazy about the space around me – the large windows, white furnished kitchen, which opened onto the lounge. Suddenly I remembered that I had not locked the kitchen door, so I locked myself in, after which I indulged myself in the warm bright lights. The damp breeze continued to surge in while I stood on the balcony staring below at car lights, which resembled diamond raindrops. The dark sea shimmered across as stars shone above.

After what I considered my moments of indulgence, I realised that for the first time I had planned nothing to do, at least for the evening. I walked around the house aimlessly, stopping in each room to admire the walls. But I was soon tired and reprimanded myself for obsessing.

I made a mental list of things I would need to do before going to bed: clean up the shelves with soapy water; hang up the curtains; unpack my clothes from the suitcase and onto the shelves; sweep the lounge and bedrooms; scrub the kitchen and bathroom floors. With my bags in tow I walked to the bedroom deciding I could do with some sleep. I was fortunate that the previous tenant had left a bed and a fridge because I would be in no rush to buy my own.

I only managed the first half of my list when I gave in to sleep in the early hours of the morning.

I woke up feeling lost at first, but soon remembered that I was only in my second day of my new life. I wanted to drink coffee but could not as I had no groceries, let alone a kettle. A new list of what to buy took shape in my mind in addition to the remainder from the night before. I settled for a tepid glass of water from the tap and pretended to enjoy it as I stood out on the balcony again, taking in my new environment. The diamond lights I had seen at night were gone, and there were more people walking about. There was something strained about their expression. It could have been the wind blowing hard. Some moved with a purpose while others did not.

After I completed the last half of the list, from the night before, I showered, brushed my teeth and added to the new list. I would need to read and finish all the books I never completed, starting with the one at the top of the pile in my suitcase. Of course, I would not do this in one day, but I was glad to have made a plan to carry out that resolution.

Every New Year's Day I noted my resolutions with a heart full of verve. I did not care that some resolutions found themselves on the list every year and nothing was ever done about them. Going to the gym to lose weight and meet friends was always on the list, but I never went to the gym – not only that, I was not compelled to go there. Finding a rich boyfriend to sort out my financial troubles was another resolution that was always there, but somehow this never happened. My book of resolutions was on top of the pile of books and completing my reading was my first priority.

The first page was entitled 1998 in large letters. That year I was going to start gym, buy a leather jacket, which I had always wanted, and ensure good grades at varsity. That was not much compared to the 1999 list. The very first task I had for that year was to find a find a rich boyfriend that would give me money when things became tough. A girl could not eat love, could she? Although I met Langa that year, he was more broke than I was. But as a consolation, I told myself that being richer in love was worth more than any amount of money could ever buy.

Langa. My preoccupation with loving him spanned nearly a year. He was the first thing I thought about in the morning and the last when I

closed my eyes to sleep. It came as a surprise when he, one morning, called to say that his feelings for me had changed. He was out of love.

"Are you sure about this?" I asked, hoping that I had misunderstood him.

"Yes." He sounded slightly annoyed.

"So you lied to me the other day. You told me that you loved me. Remember?" After a long silence he replied,

"I don't know when I stopped. All I know is that I don't want to lie to you anymore."

After knowing him for nearly a year, the conversation we had that night was the last. I wanted to scream, throttle him and force him to make me understand; reconcile me to his ideas without making a mess and a fool of me.

That night I could not sleep. I turned my tiny room in the varsity residence up-side-down, cleaning it. I washed all my clothes and bed linen, dried everything and ironed. All the while I thought, *how could he?*

In the afternoon my friends Thandi and Tso came, as they usually did on Saturdays. I could see their jaws drop when I told them what had happened.

"*Askies* my friend," sympathised Tso as she hugged me. "Just remember that what doesn't kill you makes you stronger and sexier."

"*Mngan'am*," added Thandi in her small voice, "Don't worry about men. You know how they are. One moment they want this and the next they don't know what they want. Next time just don't make an effort to love anybody."

Although my friends meant well, their advice made little difference to how I felt: cheated.

"I have an idea," declared an excited Tso.

"What now?" said Thandi rolling her eyes.

"If you had any plans for later, cancel them." She looked at Thandi and I. "We're going out tonight. We'll hire a cab and go to The Bar."

"The Bar!" cried Thandi.

"*Ja*, what's wrong with that? I think it's the perfect place to go given Chuma's circumstance."

"Or we could stay right here and go nowhere." I suggested. I was not up to an outing, let alone to The Bar.

"Chuma," said Tso firmly, "Let me take care of this. Let me make you feel better, okay?"

The Bar outing made all the difference. Armed with an 'I don't care attitude', I told the walls in the passage, when I got back, to tell Langa to go to hell if they saw him. And in case the walls did not hear, I told the coins in my pocket to pass the message too.

The year 2000 simply read: to avoid disappointment, bring no one close to your heart. Langa and I had broken up, and I chided myself to no end because I never took him seriously enough the very first time he said he loved me less than before. I thought it impossible since I was the one who constantly bailed him out financially. Of course I provided the small things when I could; I never paid fees.

In 2001, I was going to find a man with more integrity than Langa. This would be in addition to doing part-time work to ensure I earned a little extra money. Although I appreciated what my parents gave, it was not enough. I needed to buy clothes and see that I did not run out of money at all. My plan was that the man would take me to work and back to varsity on the days I did not have lectures. I found a weekend job as a sales assistant in a clothing shop, but just not the man.

I planned that 2002 would see me quit smoking or at least reduce the number of cigarettes I smoked in a day. I could finally admit to myself that the habit was bad – not only that but my mother would also collapse and die if she knew she had a daughter who smoked. Tobacco, as far she was concerned, was reserved for the deep rural women who smoked pipes and still did not care that smoking caused cancer. The most important resolution was that I would find a job as I was already in my final year.

My resolutions for 2003 were:

*Finish reading
*Get a job
*Go to gym
*Make new friends
*Delete the name Langa from vocabulary
*Find man (I know it takes effort)
*Look good all the time, even when going to bed
*Upgrade wardrobe
*Stop procrastinating

*Plan better
*Write a book?
*Stop feeling guilty about everything
*Good luck Some of these, I thought, were do-able, but some were going to be difficult. Going to gym and finding a man, for example, were going to be difficult as year after year they were. The good luck resolution was going to be a breeze and I was tempted to put a tick next to it as I put one next to 'get a job'. The only reason I did not was that I did not know where they sold luck. I would leave luck to luck then.

I created another mental list for things to buy at the end of the month: a microwave, couch, computer or maybe a laptop. I liked the sound of this. Like a flash of light, the thought of the job I was starting on Monday crossed my mind. I still needed to find my way to my new work place. I added shopping for a map to the list of things to do for the day.

For breakfast, I ate left-overs – from my mother's travel provisions – scones and *amagwinya* and washed those down with a glass of juice. I prepared myself to go shopping as I diligently tied my braids and brushed my hairline. I needed new braids, so I added this to the list of things to do when there was time. I said a small prayer that I would forget nothing from the increasing list as I powdered my face and applied lip-gloss. I was satisfied that I looked good. Neat. With my blue, fashionably oversized shopping bag, I walked out of the house ready to conquer the city.

It was not difficult to find my way to the city centre, especially as the bus stop was on the same road as my block of flats. A friendly lady told me what bus to take to town, where to get off and where to get back on. By now it was slightly windy outside although it was neither hot nor cold.

The city centre was a conglomeration of buildings which mirrored one another and were separated by an island of parked cars. There was a supermarket where I could buy my groceries; a music store and many more clothing stores with FOR SALE signs on the windows. There was a second-hand bookstore, a hairdresser, restaurant, furniture shop, banks, ATMs and offices.

The scent of freshly baked bread wafted through the air and gave me an instant appetite although I was not hungry.

My first stop was at the supermarket. I walked through the aisles and picked out everything on my grocery list, including a plant and the map.

I made my way to the bus stop, with my blue bag over my shoulder and plastic bags in my hands when I was done. I could not even walk straight because of the weight of my bags. I began to think about the map and how I had two days to navigate it before work began. I would need to figure out my taxi route as quickly as possible so that I would not do it in a panic. I knew I was not good with maps. The last time I read a one was in high school – in the geography class. I was taught how to do it, but was just out of practice. I gave myself no other option but to read the map, otherwise I would have to ask people in the taxi where Chestnut House was. That would not be right for someone who wanted to be better at planning. I resolved to look at the map the first thing when I got back to the flat.

For the rest of my afternoon, after unpacking the groceries, I would go to the beach to walk about and read. Raindrops, propelled by sudden wind, began to hit hard on the windows of the bus. I could not believe that the weather had changed just like that. My plans were changed in an instant. When it was my turn to get off, I understood why the people I had seen earlier that morning from the balcony were strained. Because of the wind, it seemed reasonable not to wear a skirt when shopping. I would have had a serious problem had I worn one. If both my hands had to carry plastic bags, how would I also hold down my skirt to prevent it from flying up?

Before I knew it I was in the lift going up to my flat. There I found the most handsome man I had ever seen. He had gorgeous eyes and I noticed this when he greeted me. He was dark and had teeth as white as clouds on a sunny day. His hair and beard were neatly trimmed. I did not know how God gave people eyes, ears, a nose and lips but still made these features look different on each person.

“Did you buy the whole town?” he smiled playfully. I smiled foolishly at the confident and strangely seductive tone of his voice.

“How I wish.” My heart thumped as I feared he might have read all my thoughts about him. He giggled softly, and his eyes looking directly into mine.

“Can I help you with that?” he asked.

"No. I'm almost there." I hated it when the truth just flowed out of me like I was under some truth spell. I wished I had said I needed help.

"Are you sure?"

"I'm almost there. Next time." I did not know what I was saying.

"Next time," he repeated before he proceeded to hum a song. "I'm Shandukani, by the way."

"What does it mean?"

"Change, in the Venda language."

"I'm Chuma." I replied curtly. "Nice to meet you."

The lift opened on my floor and as I stepped out, Shandukani said, "It was nice meeting you too Chuma."

Chapter six

The morning Denga woke up with a sticky dampness between her thighs and a red stain on her mat, she knew something was wrong. It was only when she moved towards the light in her compound that she discovered blood. In her astonishment she could have screamed for the whole homestead to hear, but she did not. The reason was that she did not know how she would explain the blood. The problem was not with the blood as such, but was with the place of its origin, her 'private place'. If she spoke about it she would be forced to talk about where it came from. She had not heard people speak explicitly about the 'private place'. At that moment, she decided that the matter of the blood would be her closely guarded secret.

She was still on her feet near her sleeping mat when Avhashoni appeared at the door, her arms folded across her chest. She was irate and Denga knew it was because she had woken up late again. It was not her intention to wake up late. She frantically attempted to fold her mat and blankets as she wanted to hurry to the river.

"The sun must taste good," Avhashoni mocked as she blocked the sun and Denga's view of the morning outside. She sashayed towards Denga, who was at a loss for words and expected the curses to flow out of her mother. Denga glanced away and nervously concealed an uneasy smile as Avhashoni's eyes landed on her. She could see her scrutinise her body and she knew then that she, Avhashoni, saw the blood.

"I can explain, but I do not know-" Denga cried. As she finished folding her mat, blood dripped from her and was swallowed by the floor of the hut.

Avhashoni seized the blanket and mat from Denga and carefully inspected the blood.

"It has come finally," she said. With her eyes cast down, Denga did not know what to say. In all her life, this instant was by far the most miserable she had ever experienced. Never before had she lost complete control of a situation. Avhashoni hurried out of the hut, leaving her confused and wondering whether she would be back with a stick to beat her for the sins of waking up late and bleeding. When she returned, Avhashoni brought a plastic tub. She instructed Denga to wash in it until the bleeding stopped.

Although Denga was relieved that she did not get a beating, she was concerned that it sounded as if the blood would be there for longer than a day. She also speculated about whether this was the same bleeding she had vaguely heard other girls talk about. She wished she had cared enough to listen to the detail of those conversations, perhaps she would understand better.

Denga hated the idea of bathing in a tub because it made her feel confined. Besides, her mother Nnyambeni, washed Vele, her younger brother in it as he was not old enough to go to the river.

She missed the river because there the sun watched her and she never cared what it thought. Here inside, vhoAvhashoni watched her closely and told her what spot she missed. Denga cursed the blood as she waited for Avhashoni to explain.

"You will bleed to death if you let boys sit or stand near you. Do you hear me?" Avhashoni warned of the dangers of the blood. Denga listened keenly. The part about dying left her feeling paralysed. A part of her did not want to believe she would die. How could it be so when she did not invite the blood? How was it her fault? she asked herself.

"But I did not make it come to me," said Denga. Instead of giving an answer, Avhashoni laughed until tears came out of her eyes. She choked and coughed before she replied,

"All young women have this coming to them and none asks for it. Once you have it, it keeps coming."

Denga finished washing and dried herself. She did not know why her mother had laughed as she did not find the situation amusing.

"When will it end?" the question escaped Denga. Avhashoni laughed again, but not as hard as before.

"It will stay with you until you are very old."

"Older than you?"

"Much, much older, yes."

"Will I really die?"

"As longs as no man comes near you."

Denga asked no further questions. Avhashoni gave her about three pieces of cloth, which she said she was to use to make sure that the blood did not flow down her legs again. She was to wash these and ensure that she had a clean one all the time. Denga wondered whether Talu had also been visited by the blood. She did not think she would

easily be able to talk to her about it, unless she knew she had experienced it.

Avhashoni told Denga not to go and play with her friends for the rest of the day. Instead, she was to go to the field with her mother, Nnyambeni, to help her there. Denga would have rather stayed at the homestead the whole day. She felt uncomfortable in her body and the summer heat made it worse. Above that, Nnyambeni provided no amusement for children. She was stern and was never short of things to chastise Denga about. Denga reluctantly waited for *mma* Nnyambeni outside her hut. Her mother carried Vele on her back and a hoe, which she promptly handed to Denga as they made their way to the field.

"Is it true?" Nnyambeni asked. Denga already knew what she was referring to and she was not anxious as she answered,

"*Ee*," she replied. Nnyambeni led the way while Denga trailed slowly behind. For a long time they said nothing as they walked on a narrow path through long grass. Denga had no way of knowing what her mother thought as she could not see her face. She also did not know how much *mma* Avhashoni told her.

A gentle breeze wafted through the grass and cooled Denga's skin.

"Did *mmemuhulu* tell you not to play near boys?" Nnyambeni said. Denga had dreaded this subject, but she was relieved to hear no insinuation that the blood was her fault.

"*Ee*. She said I would die," Denga replied, suddenly feeling energetic. Her mother had to know that *mma* Avhashoni, who was not her actual mother, told her she would die.

"She was right. You can die, but I am certain you will not," said Nnyambeni. Although Denga felt somewhat frustrated, she found it assuring that she would not die.

Nnyambeni was the kind of person whom others said had a good hand for growing crops. Her field was green and the maize plants' ears shone with life. In a strange kind of way, she was proud of her mother, especially as she compared her maize plot to others around it. Most of the vegetable plots were situated above a small stream, which was used by all the women.

Denga had two duties for the day: to look after Vele and to draw water from the stream to water her mother's field when the sun went down. Her mother had, over the years, stressed the importance of watering the fields when the sun was not high anymore. She said maize

drank up plenty of water and heat made water dissolve much more quickly.

Soon Denga was alone with Vele in the shade. She remembered that when he was born, *mma* Avhashoni said he should have been born a long time ago.

Across the field opposite the stream Denga could see younger children play. She watched as the young girls perspired in the blazing sun. Their bright faces glistened, while on their backs they carried make-believe babies of stone. They swept dust away from their imaginary huts, but only managed to scatter it so that it came back and settled. They swept again and again before they could carry on with other things. The young boys converged near where the girls played. They spoke in high-pitched tones, pointed at one another and pulled their dogs along as they dispersed, disappearing in the woods for their imagined hunt for wild animals.

Denga wished she could be free to play and do anything she pleased again. She was sad for herself as she watched Vele play with soil. She felt her life ebb away from her as she closed her eyes and wanted to cry. When she had closed them for long enough, she noticed that she no longer thought about her sadness. She created sculptures of clay in her mind and before she knew it, a young woman with firewood crowning her head appeared. Denga was pleased with her imagination's creation and could not wait to get to her clay so that she could make the woman just as she saw her. She did not hear her mother approach and when she opened her eyes, she was already there, Vele on her hip.

"Must I now beg you to look after your brother?" she complained as she put Vele down, edging him to go and sit next to Denga.

"Vele?" Denga was surprised as she had not seen him wander off. "Why did you go?"

"Do not think about lying. Admit you fell asleep and I will not hit you. I hate a child who lies."

"*Ndi khou humbela pfarelo mma*," said Denga without looking at her mother. She knew that her mother would continue to scold her despite her apology.

"You are a child and at that, my child. I am not going to beg you to do anything for me. What kind of a child are you? You cannot do simple things. Tell me who will marry a girl who cannot do anything?"

Nnyambeni was not one to talk very much but it sometimes only took a small thing to trigger her off. Denga knew there was more coming from her mother and she had learnt that keeping quiet when she spoke sometimes prevented a beating.

Chapter seven

Sometime after the onset of her menstruation, Denga discovered that she, together with Talu, would attend a *vhusha* ceremony. The girls were sitting on a tree at Talu's homestead – they normally did this when most of their chores for the day were finished. They were discussing the changes they saw in their bodies when the news was broken to them. Wiping sweat off her forehead, Talu's mother said,

"*Vhasidzana*, as you are no longer children, the time has now come for you to learn to be proper." Denga guessed where this conversation was leading because most girls their age were already talking.

"A *vhusha* is going to be held at the chief's *khoro*, and the two of you are going." Talu's mother spoke softly and had long breaks between her sentences.

The girls were thrilled as their suspicions were confirmed. Denga thought that this would be a chance for her to learn the truth about what really went on at the ceremony. Many girls, upon their return from a vhusha, said that they were not allowed to talk about the frivolities of the school. The only way a girl could find out was by attending.

Denga recalled the day, long ago, she surreptitiously followed her mother Nnyambeni to a *vhusha* closing ceremony at the chief's *khoro*. She hid behind every bush and slowed down whenever her mother slowed her pace. Then she was not allowed to enter the khoro, and if she had chanced it, she might have been discovered. Instead, she squatted behind the low boundary wall and waited to see what would take place inside. She stiffened with fear when Nnyambeni suddenly appeared behind her.

"Go home now, you silly foolish child," she admonished. "I will deal with you when I get there." As Denga began her walk back home, she wished she had been old enough to enter the *khoro* on her own. It was not long before she was seized with anxiety, especially as it was becoming dark. Soon she was convinced that the ground beneath her was beginning to tremble. Panting, she ran but fell hard on twigs and dry leaves. She managed to get up and ran on again. She believed that the trees were relentless in chasing her. When they began to close in on her, Denga screamed. The forest unleashed ugly winged creatures that hovered about her. Denga could not figure out whether these were birds or not. If they were, she had never seen their kind before. Their whole

bodies were made of bark. They had no beaks and had mouths that resembled a cow's.

The creatures flew above her as she lay on the ground. They cackled whenever she tried to flee from them. She knew that they meant harm when they licked her skin. Denga was sobbing when a voice repeatedly whispered *Imani! Go home. You will not be harmed*. It quelled her and after she had heard it over and over, she found she was not so afraid anymore. She dried her eyes, and as she walked home the creatures faded away.

Nnyambeni later confirmed the news of a *vhusha* to Denga. It would begin the following day, and would continue for five more days. Denga's excitement was marred by a little worry when she thought that for six days she would not be able to sit at the river and mould clay figures from her dreams. She feared she was going to be idle.

In the morning, Denga, Talu and their mothers walked to the chief's place on the other side of the village. Denga loved the feeling she had when she raised her cape like a bird in the air and glided down a hill; her body felt light as she took giant strides and the air also felt cool. She was ahead while Talu was behind with the mothers. The narrow path they trod on was occasionally obstructed by smooth enormous rocks, which they had to climb. They crossed a rivulet and stepped on stones in the water. Behind her she heard her mother say,

"Children need to learn how to show respect for their elders." Talu's mother agreed with this and added,

"They need somebody else to tell them these things, otherwise we can talk to them until we are old and they will not hear us. There they will learn."

Nnyambeni and Talu's mother spoke about little else other than the benefits of *vhusha*.

Denga did not know why her mother emphasised respect. Was there more respect than she already knew? She knew of no other way to greet an elder other than to kneel with her hands clasped together and say, *Aa*! Not only that but she also no longer complained when she performed her duties at home. As far as she was concerned she was respectful. She concluded that the *vhusha* would teach her something completely new. She was curious about what the next few days would unveil.

They walked up a hillock and had to negotiate their way through thickets, which left their legs scratched, and eventually they arrived at the chief's place.

Two women, instructors at the school, met them. After exchanging greetings, the instructors offered Nnyambeni and Talu's mother water to drink and a place to rest. Before leaving, the mothers warned their girls to behave themselves; the instructors assured them they had nothing to worry about in that regard.

After the mothers left, the instructors dragged the girls by their arms to a hut and Denga had never witnessed that level of hostility before. The hut, in which all the *vhusha* initiates were to be housed, was much bigger than an ordinary one. When they reached it the instructors flung the girls inside, where they overbalanced and fell.

"Sit here and do not leave the *tshivhambo* until you are told," ordered one of the instructors.

"We are not here to be nice to you," yelled the other, "There is no place for soft women in the world. If you know what is good for you, you will toughen up."

After the instructors left, the girls said nothing to each other and while Talu started to cry, Denga sniffled, staring at the floor.

"*Ni songo u lila*," whispered Denga.

"I am not crying," Talu denied and quickly rubbed her eyes.

Although the *hut* was dark inside rays of the sun fell through small ventilation openings high up on the wall.

"Why are they bad to us?" asked Denga. Talu shrugged. "I hope it will not be bad when the other girls arrive," she consoled Talu. From everything she had expected, Denga never imagined that the first day at the school would see her and Talu morose. As far as she could see, she and her friend had not done anything to deserve the treatment meted out to them.

More girls came to join them and they were also flung across the hut. Gradually the compound filled with brooding, tearful girls. By late afternoon most of them complained of hunger. Nobody knew when food would be provided. However, there were few girls who had brought along with them *vhuswa* and relish and were kind enough to share it with those who had nothing.

In the evening Denga could hear women's voices talking outside. The voices got the girls curious; they jostled for space at the door as

they wanted to see. The girls speculated among themselves about the women outside.

The two instructors returned wearing only their undergarments. The girls quickly moved away from the door and stood against the walls. They told the girls to strip naked, form a single line and then make their way outside. There was commotion in the room because none wanted to expose their nakedness by being the first in line. Denga shifted about trying to find Talu so that she could be naked next to her. It would be more comfortable that way. The instructors grew impatient with the girls and told them not to waste time anymore as there were old people waiting to see them. Denga could not easily find Talu; she decided to stand as far back as possible so that she would not be first in line. The instructors randomly pulled out the girls, beginning with Denga at the front, and lined them up, one behind the other. They told them to crawl, as it was disrespectful to walk upright when meeting elders. Denga's knees hurt and several times she was tempted to stand and walk upright.

It was dark outside but a fire burned steadily in the middle of the *khoro*. The women's voices, which Denga had heard earlier, were quiet. Sitting around the fire, the older women were naked except for their undergarments. When the girls reached them, they saluted and formed an outer circle behind.

A woman from the inner circle came and asked Denga what her name was, without explaining anything. As soon as all the girls had settled down, a song on a drum began to play. The woman who had asked Denga for her name led the song, above the drum's intricate rhythms, which others followed. Denga was surprised and amused when she heard her name in the song.

Denga you will not be in charge here
We know at your home you do as you please
You rule them there with your waywardness and you do not listen
Here we will show you who is in charge

The initiates were in stitches, with some asking who Denga was. Denga tried not to draw any attention to herself by pretending that she also did not know who Denga was. But those who already knew her name began pointing at her. She was embarrassed, although she knew that the song had nothing to do with what she did at home.

The lead singer was invisible in the dark, but her enviable voice mesmerised those who listened. Its huskiness told stories with characters Denga wished she knew. It gave her goose flesh as she wished she could sing like that.

Food was finally served and after the meal an old woman addressed the initiates.

"Your lives are about to change. You are not children anymore and you are not yet women. We are here to teach you how people of your age should behave." Only the chirping night crickets accompanied the old woman's speech.

"Six days is a long time to be here. So be sure that you do not waste your time by learning nothing," she continued. All the women in the inner circle agreed.

"You will, from now on, abide by the strict laws of our culture. When you were children, nobody minded your foolishness, but now you will be judged by your actions."

After the old woman sat down, a new song began. The drums followed and once again the *khoro* was alive with song, dance and ululation.

Denga was impressed with the old woman's kindness. She reminded her of her grandmother – her mother's mother – whom she loved more than her mother. She promised herself that she would be obedient and learn everything she could. She was overwhelmed with pride as she considered herself a MuVenda girl; she had been oblivious to this knowledge before but now she became conscious that her culture was one of the things, which made her who she was.

Two women stood up from the inner circle and danced in front of the initiates. They did the *tshigombela* with its elaborate foot movements perfectly synchronised. Their feet raised dust as they hit the ground, and arms moved to the rhythm of the drums. Denga and the girls spent the rest of the night practising the *tshifhasi,* which dance they were supposed to know by the end of *vhusha.* She danced the night away, enjoying herself immensely. It was the first time in a long time she felt as carefree.

The following morning the instructors came to wake up the initiates very early. It was time to go to the river. And so with only some light from the half-moon the blanket-covered initiates marched in single file with sleep still in their eyes. Denga could hardly see the

things around her, but the form of the girl before her served to guide her. She felt the soft dewy ground under her feet, while occasionally her head touched low-leaning branches. Water droplets from the leaves touched her face, waking her up. She was tired from the dancing. Every muscle in her body ached.

On the banks of the river the initiates lit a fire and were allowed to sleep more so that they could recover. When Denga opened her eyes the sun shone through the tall tree under which she slept. It was not yet hot and she wanted to wash while it was still early. She was about to get out of her blanket when an instructor asked her why she moved without being told. Denga remained still so as not to vex her.

Soon the initiates were woken and told to sit up. An old, bald and half-naked woman stood up to speak. Her dangling breasts faced the ground and her skin was creased. In a hoarse deep voice she began to talk to the initiates.

"I am certain many of you know about sex and its evils." The initiates looked at one another and began to chuckle. "You laugh now," she said, suppressing her own laughter, "But I know you know something." Denga knew about it, so did Talu and she suspected that the other girls did too. Denga could not remember the very first time she became aware of it, but nobody talked about it. To have the old woman talk openly about it was not only strange it also made her cringe despite her curiosity.

"Now that you are at this stage of your lives," she continued, "things will happen to you." Once again it was quiet and the initiates stared at her. The old woman paced before them and then paused. "Your bodies are going to feel things sometimes; especially when you see a man and think he could be your husband." The initiates giggled again. "Sometimes the men are going to tell you about how you are the most beautiful woman on earth, when all they want to do is to sleep with you." The initiates were wide-eyed and some gasped. "Yes, I said sleep with you," stressed the old woman. Denga listened with fascination and could not believe the ease with which the subject was discussed. The old woman continued, "Now girls, you must always be careful. Be careful that you do not sleep with a man before he marries you. The only person who is supposed to touch you in that way is your husband."

After the old woman's talk, the instructors told the initiates to jump into the river, wash and not get out until further instruction.

At first Denga enjoyed being in the cool water but when she was there long enough, she began to feel cold. She wondered why they were not allowed to get out. As she was planning to get out of the water the instructors told the initiates to submerge their heads under the water. Denga was in two minds about the necessity to follow this instruction. She was slowly growing tired of following rules which were not explained. Although she remembered she had promised herself to be obedient, this instruction, she decided, was not going to teach her anything.

Denga waded out of the water. When the instructors and the initiates squealed behind her, she got in the water again, feeling angry as she immersed her head. Every time she attempted to come up for air, the instructors squealed and pelted pebbles and sticks at her. It was a challenge to hold her breath long enough under the water. Her patience wore thin enough for her not to be afraid of the instructors anymore.

When the instructors were satisfied they allowed the girls to get out of the water. The initiates dried in the sun and then covered themselves in their blankets. In single file again they walked back to the chief's *khoro*.

After they had had lunch, *vhuswa* and green vegetables, the initiates rested until evening when the procedures of the night before were repeated. The singing and dancing continued through the night. Denga could still remember some of the *tshifhasa* dance movements, and the more she danced the more she felt confident.

That night she felt her feet move to the rhythm of the drum and the melody of the song as she slept.

The daily routine mostly stayed the same and the fourth morning was no different. The initiates had just finished washing in the river when the instructors started asking them, one at a time, to come out of the water. Denga was among them. Once outside three old women, with help from the instructors, told the girls to lie down on a patch of grass near where they had emerged from the water. The women started with the initiate closest to them, asking her to open her legs so that they could see whether or not she had already had sex.

The first initiate kicked and screamed as the old women and the instructors held her down, forcing her legs open. It was only when she was subdued that they were able to inspect the girl. They ululated and

told her she had done well for her family and made the village proud when she passed the test. They moved on to the next initiate and performed the same examination. Denga was frightened and knew how humiliated she would be when her turn came. Something about the procedure felt like an unnecessary invasion to her. She hated the idea of proving to someone else that she was still a virgin. How could she explain this embarrassing situation to anybody else who asked her how *vhusha* was? In her mind it was simple. All the old women needed to do was to ask her to reveal the truth about her virginity. She would tell her that it was still there, intact.

Denga watched as the initiates in the water nervously huddled together. Her heart beat wildly as the women got closer to her. She shut her eyes tightly and fervently wished for the disappearance of the women.

Believing that she heard a voice telling her, *gidimani!* Denga suddenly sprinted from the river bank, escaping her turn to be inspected. She did not look back, and even as she heard people shout, with thudding footsteps behind her, she ran as fast as she could. In the distance, she heard Talu yell,

"*Gidimani khonani yanga*!" She also heard other initiates cheer for her.

When she could no longer hear anybody behind her, she stopped running and caught her breath. She sat on her haunches and glanced around her. Encircled by silence, she was naked and uninhibited. The grass-covered ground before her was vast and surrounded by trees and bushes.

She sauntered amid the trees thinking about what she had done. Although she felt guilty she laughed at herself. Perhaps, she thought, it would be a good idea if she went home to tell her mother about everything before she found out from somebody else. She was not afraid of being beaten, she only dreaded the tension that came with it. She reached for *mahuyu* fruit on a tree, took a bitter bite and then threw it away.

She liked the uninhibited feeling she had as she walked around naked. Out in the woods there was nobody to tell her what to do; she could do as she pleased. But what was there to do? she thought. She sat down and decided that for a moment, she would try not to feel bad. The cool wind brushed against her and she heard the birds sing against the

soft rustle of the leaves. Soon she fell asleep and woke up later feeling lost.

When she was certain that everybody had gone, she slowly walked back to the river to collect clay. Her hands had begun to itch from being idle. She searched the banks and felt thoroughly indulged when she found plenty of it, which she collected and piled to one side. As she walked around to search for abandoned items, she found her cape hanging from a branch. After she had wrapped it around herself she walked back to the clay.

By sunset, Denga had completed a miniature figurine representing an old woman sitting on a drum. It was the image that first came to her when she sat down to mould. She had been quiet and admiring her art when she thought she heard something. She listened more closely, but heard nothing. At this stage, her hands shook from hunger. The only thing on her mind was food. She wondered what Talu and the other initiates were doing. She imagined them with full stomachs, sitting around the fire at the chief's *khoro*. She had to find a way back before it became very dark. She was afraid to be alone in the dark. It suffocated her. She covered herself in her cape, picked up her clay figurine and walked.

Musidzana we! a voice said. Denga stopped and looked about her. *Ndi nne. I am in your hands. Just look*. All Denga could see was the figurine, still with sealed lips. She began her walk again, but this time, the voice was louder, with a mocking tone. No *world for soft women! Ha. Is it one for soft men*? *Is it why they can marry as many wives as they want, because they are too soft and would be destroyed if they did not get what they wanted? One for a woman and always more for a man.* By now Denga had thrown the figurine down and because it was not yet completely dry, it became slightly disfigured. After there were no more words and she had convinced herself that she had been mistaken, Denga picked up the figurine and began to reshape it.

Outside the *khoro* the women trilled, sang and danced to the drum's song. Denga could see the initiates crouched around the fire while the initiates' hut stood empty. She saw this as the perfect opportunity to enter the chief's place. She tried to find an opening in the twigs that surrounded the *khoro*. When she found a place she hastened to enter, careful not to get scratched or to be noticed. Once

inside, she crept towards the *tshivhambo*. As she did so, a woman's shrill voice stopped her,

"*Azwi itei*. How has a *tokoloshi* entered this place?" The music and dance stopped as all eyes searched for the *tokoloshi* walking to the initiates' *tshivhambo*.

"Stop where you are, you evil thing," yelled a different voice while the first continued to shout expletives. The *khoro* now gradually became louder with people shouting. But none dared to get close to her.

"Get out of here before I get my hands on you," said a woman. "Why do you hide? Turn around and reveal yourself to us!"

When Denga did not turn the women and the initiates started throwing food, bones, branches, and anything they could find at her. She was still thinking of the best way to get away from the frenzy when somebody threw something that felt like a stone at her forehead. Her head felt light and before she knew it she was on the ground. It was the first time she had passed out. When she opened her eyes again she was at the *tshivhambo* with Talu stroking her head. She felt faint and was thirsty.

"I was happy to see you run," said Talu. "I was afraid of what they were doing to the girls. After you ran they stopped everything and told us we could go."

"*Madi*," said Denga. After she had drunk the water she told Talu that a voice whispered *gidimani!* to her.

"I have no words to describe what happened, but I know it was a spirit in me." Denga became quiet as she gazed at the wall in front of her.

"You could have died out there on your own. Where would I get a friend like you again?" said Talu wiping some blood from Denga's temple.

"I don't mind dying," laughed Denga but was soon worried when she could not see her figurine.

"What happened to my woman?"

"What woman?"

"*Musadzi wa bvumba*."

"You mean that. They took it away."

"Who did?" She could see how she would go and demand her clay woman from whoever took it. It was hers.

"When you fell, you dropped it and one of the women found it," Talu explained. The women in the *khoro* speculated that it resembled an old woman in the village. They agreed that Denga was *tokoloshi* sent by the woman as they did not understand how she ended up with the figurine. That night, the words Denga had heard earlier sounded in Denga's sleep.

With the exception of Talu, the initiates kept away from Denga and for the duration of *vhusha*, she was known as the possessed girl.

Chapter eight

When I woke on Sunday morning, I thought nothing of the missed calls from Nkosazana and a text message from my mother that I should call her urgently. She was the only person who usually desperately needed to be called even if all she wanted to say was that she missed me. And so, as I went about my morning, I thought I would return her call at some point.

When she finally called me again, I expected her to chide at first. My mother did not like it when I did not respond quickly enough to her. None of her children were allowed to be too busy for her. *Busy with what? My needs come before yours because I am your mother*, she would assert.

"Chuma, are you sitting down?" She sounded lethargic and I could tell she had been crying. I had always regarded her as strong and this was uncharacteristic. My heart thumped and my head throbbed as I thought of the possible reasons.

"No. Why?"

"You might want to sit down for this."

"What's wrong? I'm sitting," I lied. The truth was that my knees felt as weak as an amoeba looked when in motion. In fact, I did not know what part of my body felt that way.

"You father died last night." There was silence from both my side and hers. That was impossible. My father could never die. I had just been with him and–

"You will have to come home. I know you've just started, but see what you can do. Are you still there?"

"Are you talking about *my* father?"

My mother sighed. "Yes, your father. Pay attention, Chuma."

"I was with my father a few days ago and he was fine. What happened? How could a man go from healthy to dead in a day and a bit?"

"He collapsed after supper. I called for an ambulance. They took a while, but they arrived eventually. The paramedics said he was dead."

"Did you give him mouth to mouth?"

"My dear girl, I tried everything. Even the paramedics said it was his time. They suspected a heart attack. You know there's nothing anybody can do when the time has come. We're waiting for the doctor's report about his death. I'll let you know."

"I will arrange to come home."

"I will see you."I could not believe how matter of fact my mother was as I struggled to make sense of it all. More than anything, I did not want to believe that I had even had that conversation with her. I wanted to believe I had had a dream holding a vivid conversation with my mother. How could it make sense that my father was gone? He was the perfect example of a human being. He was a Christian who, without fail, upheld his traditions as a Xhosa man. He was always mindful of what God and the ancestors required of him; he lived on the promise that his life would be longer if he obeyed God's word and did what was right by our ancestors.

He made us pray as a family most mornings and nights and on occasion we slaughtered a goat to give thanks to our ancestors for our good fortune as a family. Sometimes, the slaughtering was for appeasement. This way, we apologised in advance in case we angered the ancestors without knowing it. How could he be the best man he could be, and still be repaid with an early death? I always imagined that the death of one's parent was an event that took place when one was old enough. Of course I knew there were unfortunate situations where parents died, but I could simply never see this happen to my family. I dearly loved my father, just as I loved my mother and sisters. I loved all of my family. I always thought that the death of one of them would shift me from a state of being complete to utter incompleteness. So how could my mother tell me this news without me feeling incomplete?

Having circumspectly avoided any thoughts about the death of my father, I studied the map that evening. I wanted to be sure I would get to work without incident in the morning. It was easier to get lost in the finest detail of everything else than to think of my father as dead. When I was convinced that I knew my way, I went to the bedroom to take out the clothes I was going to wear. I wanted to dress in something smart so as to make a good impression on my new employers. I ironed out every crease on my grey pants, which I would pair with a short sleeved pink shirt. Ready to look suave I packed my handbag and placed my shoes and accessories nearby.

In the morning I was flustered as I still had to ask people I suspected were trustworthy where to catch the bus to work. The ride itself was uneventful, although it was easily punctuated with

uncomfortable thoughts of my dead father when I wasn't concentrating on the conversations taking place around me.

At the reception entrance I was met by a familiar woman, Megan. I remembered her as one of the panelists at my interview the year before. They had visited our campus on recruitment drive.

"I'm Megan," she said, her voice bold and certain.

"I remember you. I'm Chuma. It's good to meet you again." We shook hands.

"Yes, of course," she said in a manner that seemed almost absent-minded. We walked to her office down the corridor. Abstract paintings adorned the walls and I had little time to try and explore them as Megan raced to her office.

I completed some administrative forms, which Megan had ready for me. I couldn't read my contract carefully and Megan seemed most impatient when I requested to read it at home. However she conceded it would be a good idea, at least, to go over it before signing. She dialed a number on her phone and told the person on the receiving end that I had arrived.

"Right," she said when she had finished on the phone. "Cindy will be here to take you to your office. Harry's not here. He's the publisher. But you'll meet Hazel, our editor, later today, if she comes, that is." She fished out a packet of cigarettes from her bag before dashing off without saying another word. I read through my contract and signed it while I waited for Cindy.

I did not get a chance to request I be allowed home.

Cindy came to fetch me. She was red-haired, stout and waddled a little when she walked.

"Hi," she grinned as we shook hands.

"Hi. I'm Chuma."

"Cindy. Let's go up and meet the others."

We were on the first floor of a three-storey building. The second floor, Cindy said, housed a new production company while the third had a law firm. The ground floor handled all the administration and also had a smoking room next to a tuck shop.

I was allocated a cubicle with a computer next to the door of our open plan office, much to the delight of the rest of the women who were there.

"Thank God you can now officially be the first person Harry sees when he gets here," an amused voice said. Its owner came from a cubicle on the other side of the room. Her mischievious eyes beamed as she told me her name was Suzy.

"See right there," she said pointing to her desk, "That's my office." The whole office erupted in laughter and I laughed too, especially when I imagined her summoning the boss to give him a serious scolding. "It is my office," she insisted. "When I first came, I also sat where you're sitting." Suzy and the others in the office soon surrounded my desk, each introducing herself.

"I'm Suzy," she shook my hand. "I'm many things, but I mostly edit copy."

"Oli – short for Olwethu," was next. "I'm in this hell-hole just to support my studies. I work part time and I contribute health articles."

"I'm Bells. Don't mind her, she's crazy," she said sarcastically of Oli. Bells was a graphic designer. "Do you know anything about PageMaker?" she asked, her fingers playing with her dreadlocks.

"Uh… No." I admitted.

"In that case you must sit with me this afternoon so I can show you how it works."

Cindy edited photographs for the publication. I was excited to hear that Thuthelwa, someone I already knew, would soon be back from sourcing fashion and beauty items.

I spent the rest of the morning proof reading articles handed to me by Suzy. They were for the March issue of *For You*. I was completely engrossed, carefully reading every word and punctuation mark. When I had finished Suzy came and explained how the production schedule worked. From what I could see, there was work to be done from eight to five, five days a week. There was a fifteen-minute tea break at ten, and a thirty minute lunch break at half past twelve.

"Harry freaks out if we eat anything at our desks."

"Really?" How could drinking at one's desk be a crime, unless Harry was most pedantic? I started to imagine Harry as a fastidious man who strove on his own version of perfection.

"Be careful of that Megan," murmured Suzy. "One can't just say anything in front of her. You may think she isn't paying attention, but she is."

I didn't think I was going to like Harry much although he was my boss. The mention of his name made my body crawl with anxiety and when I finally met him, this sentiment altered very little. He spoke candidly, as I sat across his desk later in the afternoon, about the rules in his company.

"Working hours are from eight to five if you're lucky. We generally do not go home until the work is done. There are no late comers here. If you think you can't make eight, let's stop talking right now. I don't accept people eating in the office. It invites cockroaches. There are no excuses for missing deadlines and we do not steal, cheat or lie," he paused, ruffled his hair and perused some stapled pages in front of him. I shifted uncomfortably in my chair and wondered if there were more rules.

"This is a list of the things I would like you to take over." I read through it and asked questions where I needed clarification. I was going to write some of the regular small, almost insignificant, columns including text for advertorial. According to the list, I would occasionally contribute articles, set up interviews for the cover feature, commission articles to journalists at a later stage and ensure that they were properly briefed. A giggle unwittingly escaped my lips when I read: Create problems for the advice column. I glanced up at Harry but he didn't seem amused. I would then ensure that the production process went without any glitches and that all the contributions came in on time.

"Do you have any questions?" he asked.

"Yes. Three."

"Shoot."

"I have never done any of this before. Will I at least have someone show me?"

"Yes. Suzy will guide you. But I want her to focus more on the copy."

"What does it mean to create problems for the advice column?"

"Which part of that phrase isn't clear?" He sounded annoyed, but I quickly realised that he was unfriendly and annoyed in general. He struck me as being temperamental and I thought I would have to work around his mood whenever dealing with him. After all, he was the man who was going to pay my salary. In the end he explained that there were

not enough letters arriving for the advice column. I would have to create some of the problems for the advice page.

"I see. When will I meet Hazel?"

"Good thing you mention this. She's not coming. The editorial meeting to discuss the April issue's been moved to tomorrow," Harry said getting up. "If there's nothing else?" he raised his eyebrow.

"Yes." I told him about the death of my father, even though I was most uncomfortable about doing so, and that I would have to take time off for his burial.

"I'm sorry to hear about your father. You take all the time you need, but you must tell Megan. I'll tell her, but in case I forget, you'll have to do it." Perhaps I had been quick to judge Harry and his sympathy made me think there was more to him than I'd initially thought. It was precisely because he sounded sympathetic that I had to catch tears in my throat. Apart from the conversation I had had with my mother, Harry was the first person to whom I had verbalised the news of the death of my father. It was strange to hear myself say my father died. Even as I said it, I felt as though it was someone else saying it. When there was nothing more to add, I got up and led the way out of Harry's office. With his hands in his pockets, he asked me to tell the team the editorial meeting's been postponed and would start the following day at nine.

I stood for a while after Harry left, feeling half-overwhelmed, wondering if I would be any good at my job. But I mostly thought about why my father had to do this at this time. Why could he not wait for my first pay cheque? Had we not always discussed I'd buy him a suit with it? I tried to calm down, reminding myself that I would soon get used to the work. I would also ask if I did not know. But would I get used to the idea of my father no longer being here? How would I mourn him? Who could I ask?

By the time I reached the office, Megan had been to the office to tell the others about my father. It was very quiet when I entered. They all spoke very softly. Suzy came over to tell me how sorry she was. Soon the whole office surrounded me, offering hugs and kind words. I wished Megan had not told them anything, until I'd figured out a way to deal with it. Although the death of my father had still not hit me in the way I expected (I always thought I would collapse and die), I cried

uncontrollably when my colleagues spoke with me. I did not want to be at work, but I also did not want to be alone in an empty house.

I spent the rest of the afternoon researching themes and ideas for the editorial meeting.

Chapter nine

The day's humidity did nothing more than make Denga purposeless for a while. She had forgotten about her somber return from the *vhusha*. There was no celebration at her homestead, as there was in others, because her parents were still trying to find a way to deal with the fact that Denga was possessed, and they mostly kept away from her.

Her siesta under the bare, thick-stemmed *muvhuyu* tree was mostly uninterrupted as she had hidden, preferring to sleep on the side that faced away from the homestead. However, her time to bask was over when the chickens came and pecked the ground, scouring for food. Denga glanced over her shoulder and when she found that nobody had seen her while she slept, she skulked towards the hearth opposite the cooking hut.

She knew she should not have slept during the day because whenever she did, she woke up feeling irritable, sometimes from dreams and sometimes simply from not wanting to be responsible for chores around the homestead. When she finally arrived at the hearth, she saw Lowani and Solani stumping maize in a *mutuli* near the entrance of the hut.

"*Nwana-nga! Nibva fhi duvha lingafha*?" lamented Solani, taking a break from stumping. "You have been sleeping, have you not?" Before Denga could reply, a stumper was handed to her so that she too could start working.

"How can you sleep when you have visitors today? Your mother will not be happy to know that you slept while we, old as we are, worked." Lowani began to laugh.

"This child," said Solani shaking her head incredulously. "Who is going to cook for your husband when you marry? No man will marry a woman who sleeps all day."

Denga stumped the maize until her shoulders ached and when they did the older women took over. Sweat streamed down the sides of her face.

"Who are the visitors?" Denga asked, her curiosity getting the better of her. There was no answer offered immediately. She asked her question again, this time directing it to Solani.

"I only know it is your mother's people." Denga's mind raced as the thought of her grandmother filled her mind. It had been a very long while she last saw her.

"Is it Makhulu?" No one had told her that there would be visitors.

"No." Without giving a warning to Lowani and Solani, Denga left, intending to find out who the visitors were. When she was near her father's compound where the visitors had convened she walked cautiously so that she would not attract any attention. She crouched as she reached *Avhashoni*'s compound, which flanked the one with the visitors. She made as if she was removing stones and dry autumn leaves from the side. As she did this she could hear deep voices speaking, but they were not loud enough for her to make out what they said. She strained to hear and occasionally craned her neck to have a better look inside, but all she could see were feet; long, dry and wrinkly feet that belonged to old men.

"*Khotsi munene*," said one, "you know Malise is a man of his word. You have no reason to doubt anything that comes out of his mouth."

Denga did not recognise the voice and she had never heard of Malise before. Soon she lost interest and decided to go back to her stumping before her mother caught her.

"Take some cold water to your father's hut," her mother's calm voice said just as she was leaving. For a moment she did not know what to do or say. She did not know if her mother had seen her or how long she had observed her listening at the bits and pieces of conversation her father was having with the men.

"*Ee mma*." she offered.

When she arrived back at her father's compound, she found her mother waiting forlornly at the entrance.

The men inside sat in the shadows and Denga could still not see them as she knelt down to place before them the water-filled calabash.

"You have brought us water my child," said her father.

"*Ee*! *Mma* said you were thirsty," replied Denga. She could not identify the men even when she managed to steal a quick glance around the room after setting down the calabash. Her mother had now found herself a place to sit – in a corner, away from everybody. She occasionally sighed. This puzzled Denga as it was unusual to see her mother be in the same room as her father's visitors. She also did not doubt that her mother was wretched about something. But what that thing

was eluded her and she could think of nothing that she could have done to vex her.

"My daughter, do you know these people?" Mulamuleli's voice was deep and bold as usual although it initially sounded hesitant asking the question.

"*Hayi*." Denga thought about why she was being asked like this, instead of being told who the men were. "I must go," she said standing up.

"Do not be in a hurry. Sit next to your mother," insisted her father. "There are things that we must discuss as a family today."

The visitors, Mulamuleli said, came from afar and had walked many days to arrive at Phungoni.

"You must treat them with respect," he stressed. In her dark corner Nnyambeni continued to sigh. The visitors were her mother's relatives. Mulamuleli pointed at the old man who sat to his left. "This is your mother's uncle vhoMudau." His shriveled and taut skin reminded Denga of a bat. The man sat up straight and with his gaze fixed on her, said nothing. The hut became utterly silent as Denga felt their stares pierce into her. She was suddenly overcome by the need to run away. The tension was starting to be unbearable and she wished she was not in any way involved in the conversation. She stayed and listened to her father talk once more.

Nnyambeni's mother and vhoMudau, said vhoMudau, were born in the year the rain did not want to stop. That was the year the rain fell so hard that the rain-makers had to plead with the rain gods to take most of it back.

"The gods would not hear of it, as you know, they do not like to be told what to do," said vhoMudau. "People said that the gods became angry with the rain-making tribes for calling upon them to make rain and then change their minds later." The visitors laughed, especially vhoMudau.

"The story," said vhoMudau, "was told to me over and over that I am always mistaken to think that I was there." He choked on his laughter.

"Sometimes I think I saw the rain people frantically invoking the rain gods. But maybe the gods misunderstood the message and decided to pour more rain than was initially requested," vhoMudau paused as the whole hut erupted in laughter. Even *Mmbwa*, the dog, came to the

compound, wagging his tail with excitement. He whimpered curiously and then left.

Denga and her mother did not laugh. She did not know what her mother thought, but she, Denga, did not feel it was in her place to laugh. When the laughter died down, vho-Mudau spoke in a less animated tone.

"The girl can go now. We have seen her and are satisfied." Mulamuleli nodded in agreement. The others nodded and also mumbled their approval.

Denga left the hut feeling torn, her head abuzz. As she leapt out of the compound and out of the homestead, she thought she understood why her mother sighed deeply and why vhoMudau said they had seen the girl, but how could she be certain? She hoped to find Talu at home, especially as she wanted someone else to know what she had just heard.

Indeed, she found her friend hunched over her mother's vegetable plot. Denga stood and watched as the wild plants Talu weeded out rolled away on the ground. It had not been her intention to stand and quietly gaze at her friend in a manner so eerie even to herself. The truth was that she could not stop asking herself questions she could not answer. Vho-Mudau had said that they had seen her and were satisfied. Was her father honestly planning to give her away in marriage? What about the fact that he still did not talk to her after the *vhusha*? Was he trying to get rid of her? And who was this Malise she had heard them speak of earlier?

Talu turned around and was bewildered when their eyes met.

"Why do you just stare?"

"Forgive me. My feet may have carried me here, but my mind is far" said Denga, managing only half a smile.

"Come and help me," said Talu pulling Denga by the hand.

When Denga told her friend that she suspected her father wanted to give her away, Talu exclaimed,

"No! Do not tell stories in daylight. You know you will grow horns if you do that."

"*Na zwino*. I am speaking the truth. May I be struck by lightening if I am lying." She felt desperate for her suspicion to be incorrect, but the more she wanted to be wrong the more she became convinced that she was right. She relayed the day's events and Talu agreed that she

also shared Denga's suspicion, although she also conceded that there could be a mistake.

"Can you honestly say that your father said you would be married ten to twenty days from now?"

"*A thi ngo pfa tshithu nga zwithu zwo raloho*. But I was in the compound with my father and the men." Denga helped pluck out more weeds, remembering how her father laughed feebly at the dull story vhoMudau told of the year of the rain. She felt betrayed by her father. She had always taken it for granted that he would always take her side. Many times he had encouraged her to run for her life when her mother threatened to beat her at the homestead. They did not talk much, but she was always assured of his love for her.

"I think you did not hear everything. You cannot say that you are getting married," said Talu.

"You did not hear them say that they would tell Malise that they had seen me and were satisfied. *Ezwi zwithu azwi ambi tshithu kha inwi*?" Talu was quiet and after what seemed like an eternity, she spoke.

"What will you do?"

"I have never heard of a Malise in my life."

Malise. This name haunted Denga and made her heart leap every time she thought about it. It was one she wanted to hide from or perhaps give a good beating and lock it up before restoring it back to the owner.

After finishing their work on the plot, Denga sat with her legs stretched before her. The idea of being married to somebody she did not know frightened her. Never in her wildest dreams did she imagine how she would react when she heard that she was to marry. She did not want to be some man's wife, least of all this unknown Malise.

"Did you never think this day would come?" asked Talu. "I think about being a man's wife all the time, even if I do not know him." She stood up and walked around Denga, making as if she was a large woman. Denga laughed as Talu imitated how she would walk as a fat married mother with so many children that she could not remember all their names.

"A day like this comes for all girls Denga," Talu said more soberly and sat down again next to Denga.

Denga wished there was a way she could erase the afternoon from her memory – take it back to wherever it came from. She wished that she had not been curios enough to go anywhere near her father's cursed compound. Perhaps then she would not have been called in. But she could not trick herself into thinking nothing of the words that were said earlier in her father's hut.

"I am going to VhoTshikalange for this. He must give me *mushonga* to send this Malise far away from me." Yes, that was what she needed to do. It made sense. She would not be the first person to seek the assistance of an old wise man to deal with a matter such as this.

"Khaladzi yanga! Ni khou zwifha!"

"My sister. *Baba* cannot do this to me."

"I have heard of *mushonga* for inviting love, but not for repelling it." Denga had also not heard of *mushonga* that repelled love, which was what she wanted now. "How will you begin to request this *mushonga* of VhoTshikalange?" There was a hint of terror in Talu's voice.

"I am not afraid to ask him," said Denga trying to sound as brave as possible.

"Marry him." Denga was taken aback by this order.

"No. You marry him." She was annoyed that Talu did not seem to support her. She had gone to talk to her hoping that the two of them would devise ways to ward off the marriage.

"*Ndi khou humbela pfarelo khaladzi*. I just thought that marrying this man would be easier."

"*Bona khaladzi*," said Denga. "There will be more trouble if I marry this man."

When it began to drizzle, they gathered the plants they had rooted out, separating them into piles of what could be eaten and what could not. Talu would later burn the non-edibles. Denga marched home, leaving her friend behind.

Lowani and Solani had already left by the time she entered the homestead. Denga headed for her hut intending to sleep and did not fret that she would eat nothing before sleeping. She stared at the roof until dust motes fell into her eyes, forcing her to close them.

That night she dreamt that she was on her father's field shepherding his goats. She was diligent with the task but when her father came he was startled to discover her there; all alone. He yelled at her demanding to know what she had done with his missing goat.

You should have stayed at home, he said.

When she woke, Denga felt cheated. She could not understand how, for most of her life her father never asked her what she was doing, but now wanted to give her away. Slowly anger rose in her chest. She wanted to confront her father; ask him why.

Chapter ten

Her restlessness from the night before was the reason for Denga's early morning walk to vhoTshikalange's homestead. He lived in the same village, and Denga would still not be tired when she arrived there. She wanted nothing more than the potion she was convinced was called *Ibvani kha nne lwa tshothe* to make Malise stay away from her forever. Or was it called *Ni songo mpfuna nne ndi sa ni funi* for people who loved those who did not love them back? The more she repeated the names in her head, the more convinced she was that she would soon find a solution to end the Malise problem.

She walked past the village granaries and her mother's plot near the stream and did not care when she saw that the sheaths from the *tshikoli* appeared dry. Under normal circumstances she would have worried about the imminent change of season. Soon it would be so unbearably cold that she would wish she lived somewhere warmer.

The goats, with bells on their necks, stared at her from the confines of their enclosure in their homesteads. Denga did not care for the sturdiness of the ground underneath her feet as she trod with a blend of fear and curiosity in her body. She hated her father and did not want to be anywhere near him, touch anything he had touched, see the same sun he saw or breathe the same air even.

The same went for Malise. Her rage was silent, but she could feel its heat burning and melting away her insides. She was furious that there seemed to have been a consensus to give her away, or discard her from the surroundings she had loved all her life. She knew that this sort of thing happened everywhere and many girls knew and expected it to come about at some point in their lives. She did not know how the other girls thought *with* their hearts when the faceless or unknown men came to ask their fathers to give them away. But Denga's heart protested.

"*Zwi nga si itee*." These words of disbelief escaped her lips at the same time that vhoTshikalange's dogs began to bark. She did not move and in her inertia, she made up her mind that she would have to be dead to marry Malise.

VhoTshikalange, struggling to restrain his dogs, squinted his eyes, face contorted and walked towards Denga. He relaxed when he finally made out who she was.

"Denga my girl. Is it really you?" The dogs now jumped at her in excitement. Their paws on her bare torso hurt, but Denga only flinched.

"Ee," she replied as VhoTshikalange chased the dogs away.

"*No vuwa hani nwana-nga*?"

Denga no longer felt as confident as she had before. She needed to find a way to break her matter to this man known to all of Phungoni as the most powerful *nanga*.

"*Zhenani*." He gestured Denga to sit on the wall that joined the huts of his homestead. "*Vho vuwa hani hayani*?" She did not want to answer because she did not care how they were at home.

"They are well," she answered anyway. But after this she was quiet, twiddled her fingers and thought up a most appropriate, convincing lie to tell him.

"My mother sent me to get *Ibvani kha nne lwa tshothe* for her." "*Niri mini nwana*?" he chuckled, making Denga feel as though he could see through this lie. He cleared his throat and said, "What is that now?" Denga decided that it was better for her to continue with the lie than to rectify her earlier declaration.

"My mother said I must come and ask for the medicine. She promises to give you something for it. Only not today."

Denga would have preferred it if the old man said something, but he did not. His one scraggy hand played over his knotted beard while the other was folded across his chest. At that moment her eye caught the sight of a woman with a baby on her back quickly dashing from one hut to the next. It was Gundo's mother. She wished that vhoTshikalange would not take so much time thinking. She did not want anybody to see her.

"Does your mother know that *mushonga* is dangerous in the hands of children?" he said. Now Denga was startled.

"Did you hear I said it was dangerous?"

"*Ee*, I will tell her you said it was dangerous."

"In the hands of children," he stressed.

"I will tell her." But Denga did not wait for vhoTshikalange to get back with the medicine; instead, she decided she would be better off on her own, far away. She trusted that running away to where she would not be easily found was a better option than any.

There was nothing wrong with the forest. She would live there, mould her clay figurines, eat from the trees and wash in the river.

When she left, therefore, it was not in the direction of her home. She walked further and further away from the village knowing in her heart she would not see it for a long time. She would finally be free of this impending marriage to Malise.

The sun was high when she arrived at the river, near her hiding spot. She sat at its banks and watched languidly as her reflection rippled on the water. She had exhausted herself with all her fear and worry when all she wanted, she believed, was simple. She looked at her reflection again in the water, but saw something other than her face. It is not possible, she thought.

"*Tshidudwane*?" she said softly. Only half of its face was visible. It was half human, a woman with frightened eyes.

Denga looked pensively around her and saw no one at the river. She was all alone and scared. She looked in the water again and was alarmed when she did not see the *tshidudwane*. She wondered where it had come from and if it would be back later.

Witches were known to send *zwidudwane* to be their eyes and ears everywhere and she did not know what witch would go after her. Talu would never believe her if she told her what she had seen. The thought of holding the half woman's face in her memory appealed to her, but she did not trust herself to explain in great detail what she had seen. She scrambled for clay, knowing that she explained things best when she moulded them.

Before she knew it, her hands poured over the clay, working the magic she had just seen. She did not need to close her eyes to imagine the small detail because she remembered it all. Its image was perfect. When she was satisfied with she had done, she left the figurine to dry. She walked off to raid trees bearing fruit and searched for locusts and mopani worms. As the sun set and her fear for darkness slowly descended on her.

Denga had never seen a *tshidudwane* before but had heard about these water spirits many times. They lived in sacred water and were half in this world, and half with the ancestors. But there were those who said that the spirits were the work of witches. Avhashoni once told her that no one who saw a *tshidudwane* lived. What had happened was surreal.

The closest she ever came to a similar occurrence was the day Raluvhimba arrived. The village women were working on their fields on a

warm day when suddenly a dark cloud covered the sky. The women said that although the clouds had gathered, there was a hole in the sky, out of which came the sun's rays. They were still talking about how strange this was when the thunder struck. It rumbled, echoing far in the distance and made everything around vibrate.

"Raluvhimba!" they shouted excitedly. When the men arrived at the fields, the women could not talk; they only trilled with their hands up in the air. When the commotion stopped, Denga, like the other children, ran to the fields to witness what had happened. The men were still clapping and singing praises when she arrived.

When Nnyambeni saw Denga she threw her hoe towards her and told her to go back home. Denga only backed away, determined to find out exactly what had happened. She lingered at the field's periphery waiting to see if she would hear more about the thunder. When all died down, Denga heard some say that they saw Raluvhimba descend from heaven through a hole he made in the sky. Some said that they saw him sitting on the thunder. Others said that it was a mixed blessing that he came because whenever he visited, the land ended up with either plenty of rains or a drought that lasted a long time. But Denga did not hear anybody speak about what Raluvhimba came down to say.

Having eaten her fill of the *mafula* fruit, Denga found a low lying bush with soft leaves not far from the river. She could hide under it and no one would find her easily, not even those who would be fetching water in the morning. She loved the kind of night whose warmth wrapped itself, like a blanket, around her. The night crickets sang sharply while she and the bright stars played a game to see who would close eyes first. The ground under her body was soft and easily the type to get muddy when it rained. She did not want it to rain and she did not want to fall asleep.

She was careful not to make any sound lest she woke whatever was out there. She had slept outdoors numerous times on hot nights, but it was always out of choice. This was the first time that she slept out in the wild because she felt she did not have anywhere else to go. The idea of having little choice about where she slept saddened her. She could have gone back home, perhaps speak with her father and tell him in no uncertain terms that she would not get married. She would tell him no reason other than that she did not want to be married. In her mind she still saw herself as a child. Not only this, but she had

always yearned to have a say in the kind of life she wanted to lead. When she imagined it, it was not complicated. If she could mould her pots and figurines, spend as little time as possible cooking and performing chores, she would be happy. She found it unfair that her father wanted to punish her by sending her off to live a life she doubted she would embrace. How she was supposed to leap from following instructions, tolerating sometimes needless scolding, to being a wife, bearing children and be able to run a whole homestead, was beyond her.

How did her mother do it? And how did vhoAvhashoni do it? How old were they when it happened to them? Denga did not know the answers, but she only knew that her mother was taken by her father as a second wife. That vhoAvhashoni could not bear children was an open secret, but Denga never asked her about it. All Denga knew was that vhoAvhashoni and her father had always looked at each other in a way that made her feel embarrassed to be in their presence.

There was something about the way they spoke to each other, with her father displaying copious amounts of forgiveness towards her, no matter what she did. VhoAvhashoni could also get him to agree with most things she wanted and if she did not succeed she would mope until her father did something to leave her smiling again.

Things did not work like this between her and her father. They talked, fought and looked at each other less. Perhaps this was because it was rare to see them in the same place at the same time. VhoNnyambeni had little patience and if things did not go her way, she made plans to do them herself, often reporting nothing to her husband. She never asked for anybody's help once her mind was made up. Denga liked her mother's tenacity, but also liked vhoAvhashoni's fiery moods. They were a source of comfort for her and one never knew what to expect.

When sleep finally came, with the figure positioned next to her, she heard the words, *A boy would not be where you are today. It is simply because he is born a mutukana and that is all there is to it. They can do things whenever it is they want.*

Chapter eleven

The conversation I had with Nkosazana on the evening of my first day at work was one that left me with more questions than answers. I had hoped she'd tell me that they were coping better with news of my father's death, but her words: "It's so ugly here, I wish you'd come home," disturbed me long after we spoke. It would have been better if she'd explained exactly what she meant, but instead she cried. My attempts to make her stop were futile and I too ended up crying.

I was listless and overwhelmed, to say the least, and experienced a range of emotions I couldn't explain. For the entire evening I didn't know what to do with myself. Had I been home, I'd have participated in the daily evening prayers and would have been busy enough. As I closed my eyes and sang the church hymn *Jerusalem'ikhaya lam*, I imagined being home, mourning with my mother and sisters, but could mostly see a tearful Nkosazana huddled in a corner, alone, and telling me how ugly things were. I stopped singing and said a prayer. But I could complete none of my sentences. If God sat in the heavens and I said prayers that only reached the roof, my prayers were inane.

I turned to address the ancestors, calling up on my patriarchal lineage going as far back as I could remember, and realised that this too might not be good enough without *umqombothi,* a goat and song. I didn't recall a time when these objects were not a part of any communication with the ancestors. I wanted to ask them if they could see the suffering in my family, my suffering, brought on by the passing of my father. I wanted to ask why they had allowed it after he did everything to satisfy them.

Later, at the editorial meeting, I felt like a surrogate representing myself. Present only in body, my mind was at home with my family. The boardroom was lively with chatter until Hazel walked in. I couldn't tell why she had this effect. She was beautiful, trendy, well-dressed and accessorised, and well-spoken. Her silky fringed hair extensions hung below her shoulders; her perfectly manicured hands connected her laptop to a plug point before we began. She appeared and sounded very confident as she sat at the head of the oval-shaped table.

"Ladies, welcome. Welcome especially to Chuma," she grinned. "Shall we begin by introducing ourselves?" She sat up straight, clasped

her hands together and looked around the table. It was Suzy who started to laugh saying,

"Actually, you're the only one who needs to be introduced. We've all met." The others agreed.

"All right then. I'm Hazel and I'm the editor of *For You* magazine. Chuma, I'm going to explain only to you what we do here. The others already know." Hazel moved in her chair, as if trying to find the perfect position. "I'm sure you know we're a new black women's publication. We're still trying to find our feet in the market, but we are in the business of telling stories, first and foremost. We cater for the woman who wants a little more," she paused. "The kind of woman who wants to have her spirit nurtured while also wanting glamour, fashion, a great career, good health and financial advice."

I already understood what the magazine stood for, because before my appointment I never missed an issue. I always read *For You* with a pen in my hand, identifying all the places where I thought there was missing information, and where I thought changes, according to me, could be made. First off, there were not many black women's magazines on the market and those that were there already did everything that *For You* aimed to do. They were better too, with pages upon pages dedicated to fashion, beauty and adverts. *For You*, on the other hand, did exactly the same but on a much smaller scale as it had fewer pages and adverts. It always struck me that many of the magazines I bought featured well-known TV faces who usually echoed one another in what they said were their belief systems and lifestyle values.

I was very tempted to ask who determined what women aspired to read from *For You*, but instead asked if any research had been done to establish what women wanted to read from For You. Suzy looked as though she would answer but chose to say nothing.

"I've asked Harry so many times to commission research but he's refused so far. Says it takes truckloads of money to do it," said Hazel.

The purpose of the meeting was to discuss the theme for the April issue. Hazel thought the theme should be on fools.

"We could ask the question: What are you a fool for?" she smiled. "I'm one for well-meaning, but bad men. Nothing can separate me from them," she teased. This joke was well appreciated by most around the room.

After all the ideas were laid on the table and dissected, and the finer detail fine-tuned, Hazel excused herself to answer her phone. It was then that Thuthelwa walked in with her hands full of clothes and bags. When she saw me she screamed.

"My God. What are you doing here?" She stood up and came to give me a hug.

"If you think I'm God… well… okay?" I quipped. I felt as though we were old time acquaintances. When she sat down she explained to the rest of the group how we met in the bus.

Hazel walked in again, apologising for having interrupted our meeting. She, Thuthelwa and Cindy excitedly talked at length a photo shoot scheduled for the following day.

When it was quiet again, Hazel asked how far we were with the planning of the next issue and I made a point of reminding everyone where we were with the discussion, also adding that I wanted to propose freedom as a possible theme.

"I can't think of something better because our country celebrates its freedom on April 27." There was no response. I talked on. "We could explore what this concept means to people; find out how women, rural or urban, live freedom, if at all they feel like they're free. After all, we write for women." Suddenly I had pain as my heart felt quite literally broken. As Hazel nodded, I struggled to hold back tears I wanted to shed for my father, until I hurriedly left the boardroom.On the toilet seat, I held my head between my head, disbelieving once again. I felt pain I could not quite point to. I screamed to try and let it out, but it would not leave. Instead, my scream invited Suzy, who I could hear knock.

"Chuma are you alright?" she asked. "Please come out so we can talk."

"I'm fine."

"No you're not fine. I also lost my father and I just want to say I know it's not easy."

I dried my eyes and splashed cold water on my face, with Suzy stroking my back. "It's gonna be okay, you'll see."

It wasn't fine. Not with my father gone.

"Hazel liked your idea, but said our focus needs to be urban," said Suzy after passing me a glass of water.

"And the rural?" my voice was still groggy.

"Well, she says the people who advertise with us live in cities. Urban, celebrity stories sell and that's what pays our salaries. Come, let's go now." She led me out of the restroom

I didn't have strength to think about what was fair or not. At this stage I found life unfair in general. To my mind, all people, rural or urban, man or woman, deserved an equal opportunity to be heard.

Suzy told me it was agreed that both the themes of fools and freedom would be used. With Suzy's assistance, I commissioned the articles, agreed upon at the meeting.

Hazel later came by to ask how I was coping and also said she agreed that I should not be at work with that kind of situation in my family. I had, in fact, thought about going home, but thought it would be a problem to take leave so soon after starting. Just as she left, Hazel said, "Chuma, just remember that your family is all you have. No one builds a monument and writes an epitaph reading: *here lies a woman who worked hard all* her *life* when you die. Go home and be with your family. But talk to Megan about taking leave."

That very evening I took the bus home and arrived early in the morning.

Chapter twelve

Denga was the only person who lived in her world. The sun rose and set seven times since she arrived at the river. She knew this because she planted sticks where she slept every day since her second day. Were it not for her thoughts, which by now rang loudly in her imagination, the silence around her might have overwhelmed her. In her mind she sometimes held vivid conversations with Talu, chided Vele, whom she missed very much, and defended herself against her mothers' accusations of her laziness.

At times she spoke out and laughed out loudly in the awkwardness of the silence. Doing these made her feel like she was not alone. She spent most of her time near the water, hoping to see the *tshidudwane* again. She wanted to ask it what it was, who sent it and why. Did it have any messages for her? But it did not re-emerge. Besides this, she looked for food, wild plants and satisfied her constant urge to mould pots and figurines.

A bird, which flew over her sleeping bush, caused her to believe it was carrying a message for her when it stopped and chirped in the middle of her sticks. Not wanting to frighten the creature, she lay before it, spoke softly, attempting to coerce into delivering whatever message it had for her. The bird chirped and chirped, tousling its feathers now and again, but Denga could not decipher its message.

After muttering "*Mmbudziseni* – tell me," over and over, she grew frustrated and chased the bird away. It flew up and away, with Denga laughing after it. She felt sick in the pit of her stomach and her chest felt stuffed with a heavy bolder, which she could neither move nor see beyond it. The thought of eating any more of the fruit she had collected filled her up instantly. When the bird was completely out of sight, she drew deep breaths. "Why? What? How? No meat. No salt. I hate *nkhwe*. *Ndo neta*," she sobbed. What was more was that she could feel the vigour in her body rapidly dwindling.

In the midst of her sobs she remembered one plant she had collected with the idea of adding variety to her diet. She did not know what it was and also thought that if she died from it, it would not matter. It was a pity she was unable to cook it properly as she was sure it would taste good when soft. But there was nothing she could do about a fire, so she would have to eat the plant as it was.

Denga did not know what the plant had, but as soon as she had eaten it, her head felt lighter. Suddenly, she could think clearly. She knew the answers to her questions. It was right for her to be out in the forest. She absolutely did not need her parents and she would not marry a man whose name she detested. She felt bold and blissful.

"I will tell Mulamuleli right now," she pointed in the air, her speech slurring a little. "Mulamuleli," she yelled. "Listen here. You may be my father, but you marry that idiotic Malise. Did you hear that? You marry him! A boy would not be where I am, would he?!" The forest echoed her words.

Why did she not think of things this way before? It was all simple now. Her new-found courage saw the return of vitality in her body. Her walk to the river was very short and brisk. There she promised herself enjoyment working with the clay. She did not know immediately what she would do, but she would mould something.

Like never before, her heart sang as she began to mix the clay with water, careful that the blend in her hands had the kind of consistency she preferred to work with. Oh, how she loved the feeling of being unguided, having no one to answer to and having no obligations towards others but herself. Her mother said she hated children who could think about nothing else but themselves. As far as she could see now, there was nothing wrong with doing something completely self-indulgent. Her mother said these things, perhaps because she never did anything for herself. What she did was always for the family and sometimes for the neighbours, even though she sometimes complained bitterly.

Denga spent the afternoon toiling over every figurine, sometimes telling herself that she had finished when she had not. She did not think much about what she was doing because the work flowed from her. She focused on that.

For minutes on end she felt disconnected. She imagined that the *tshidudwane* had come back to take possession of her, for although she could see her hands move she could not feel them. Her body and mind felt like completely separate entities. She talked to herself as she worked but the words felt as if they came from someplace else. She could feel the clay between her hands with her ears, nose and lips as she touched, traced and made lines on it. She did not care and believed that completing the figurines would occur on its own.

She moulded into the night and only stopped when *khoumbela tshilalelo*, the evening star, came asking for dinner. She had nothing to offer it, but at least was content with what she had accomplished. She gave names to each of her figurines and wanted to befriend them afterwards. However, the idea of telling them things about herself and where she came from and her village was risible.

When she woke up, with a throbbing head, in the morning Denga wondered what had happened because she was not even sleeping in her shrub. In fact, she did not even remember falling asleep. Her figurines, half dry and arranged in a semi-circle, stared at her blankly. They reminded her of people whose thoughts were preoccupied by anything but the present.

She had an urge to talk to the figurines and the best way to do this, she thought, was to try talk to them in her head first.

"Did you hit me on the head last night?" she asked hesitantly. There was no reply. When she inspected them closely, she recognised none of them. The first was a dog with a missing ear. Next to that was one that looked like a pair of crossed legs, but with its body and arms fused together. There was no head. She guessed that she must have meant to make a woman because there was a breast, although only one. This was the most she had ever made in any day.

She planted one more stick on the ground to mark the rising of the new sun. There was not much planning to do and she reveled once again at having no chores. However, it was beginning to be more and more difficult to keep herself occupied, particularly on this day when she did not feel like doing anything. She sat and basked in the sun and when she felt that one side of her body had burnt enough, she turned to expose the other side. When she could not bear the sun any longer she decided to go and swim in the river, even though she did not know how to swim properly.

She was going to teach herself to swim and that would keep her busy for some time. The more she thought about it the easier swimming seemed. She looked forward to the challenge. True to the promise to herself, she learnt to swim, which was done with a measure of impatience. Every now and again she reprimanded herself for making the same mistakes over and over. In the end she could do it well even though her muscles ached and hunger beckoned. Her stomach turned at the thought of eating nuts, *nkhwe* and *mafula* again.

She decided to rather eat the leaves until she could face eating the fruit again. They had a bland taste and she could eat as much as she pleased. After she was sated, her head felt light again, much like it did the day before. She started to feel ill. She vomited soggy green leaves and water as tears spontaneously came to her eyes. Her hands became very weak, as were her legs. She wanted to move to the safety of her sleeping shrub, away from the possibility of prying eyes. She was not quick enough to do it because she fell before she could reach her shrub.

Soft rain pattered and soaked her skin as she slept while she willed her energy to return once more to her. Her head spun as she pulled leaves, struggling to cover the muddy soil underneath her. The leaves sunk into the ground instead of covering it. She was too tired and all her strength had gone. She shivered as raindrops from a nearby tree rolled down and fell on her face. She did not move as felt a powerful force paralyse her.

Denga gazed at the droplets of water, which fell and disappeared into the earth. The figurines, which lay scattered near her, whispered garbled words in her ears and brought her a strange sort of comfort.

"Why do you talk only sometimes?" she asked in her imagined conversation with them. Again they did not answer. Physically she felt wholly uncomfortable although, apart from feeling dizzy, she could not say where it hurt. She needed to scream.

For days she had spared no thought towards Malise but now she did. Her heart formed a knot which tightened. She thought the name would kill her slowly, one body part at a time. Her insides felt hot, although the rain cooled her.

Denga decided to sit still and wait for moments to pass. She listened to the rain while pretending she could empty all the contents of her mind. She wanted to wipe everything from it and then start putting back the memories, selecting only the ones she wanted. She could feel her body surrender to this trick.

The raucous whispers of the figurines nearly roused her to her feet but she could neither stand nor hear well what they said. She thought she heard them argue about where Denga came from. She wanted to ask them if they had not heard about her village before, but no words would form out of her mouth. She tried hard to focus on what she wanted to say so that they would not only hear her but also answer her.

"I know I made you, but where is your home?" Denga did not probe further. They would answer when they wanted.

When sleep came, the whispers began again. She only caught the last phrase,

"*Fhethu hu sina dzina* – a place without a name."

"All places have names," said Denga, but the figurines were quiet again.

Soon, a deep, dreamless sleep shrouded her.

Chapter thirteen

It was absurd of me to expect to sense the ugliness Nkosazana had described even as I walked in the yard, passing my mother's orchard. My eye caught a lone, unattended cast-iron pot boiling steadily on the hearth near the kraal.

It was strange not seeing my father's tall form with his hat on, stick in hand. In all my university years, the only other time I lived away from home, I always found my father waiting for me outside the homestead no matter when I arrived home. I dialed his number, just in case he picked up. My mother answered the phone.

"Chuma, uphi?"

"I'm here."

"*Phi*?"

"I'm home. Are you in your room?"

Except for the sound of snoring emanating from some of the bedrooms, the house was silent. I met aunt Nobanzi, my father's eldest sister, as I made my way to my mother's bedroom. She and my father were close and although she lived at the Mission nearly 20 kilometres from us – a distance easily underestimated when one travels by car – she and her children always visited. Aunt Nobanzi's husband died when I was a child and I could no longer remember him.

"Tyhini, Chuma, you have come finally?" she said when we met in the passage.

"Molo *dabs*." There was something different about her embrace. It was aloof, particularly as she pushed me off her. Perhaps it might have been different had I not felt like crying when my head fell on her sturdy shoulders. Meeting her was a reminder of the support she had given us throughout the years, such as the year my mother took ill with a stroke. Aunt Nobanzi and Anga, her youngest daughter, who was at the time as old as Nonjongo, came to live with us. Although she was not adept at assisting us with school work, given that she had very little education, she cooked, cleaned, ensured a smooth running household and nursed my mother back to health. My mother always felt gratitude towards her and would also do anything for her. It upset her to hear anyone speak negatively about her. Once Nkosazana called her Cholesterol because of her size and my mother, being one to act quickly

sometimes on her perception, struck her on the cheeck. She warned her never to speak like that about her aunt again.

It was odd that aunt Nobanzi left in haste without saying anything about my father's death.

In my parents' bedroom, I found Nkosazana and Nonjongo still sleeping and my mother putting on her sleepers.

In the solemn atmosphere, we inhaled and exhaled our sorrow as my mother led us in prayer on our knees. My mother, sisters and I went through the list of all the things we would do during the day; I doubted if I would be able to laugh again. Not without my father around.

There was, around the homestead, an uneasy atmosphere. I finally understood what Nkosazana meant when she had referred to things being ugly at home. When everybody was awake there were two, perhaps two-and-a-half, distinct groupings of people in my father's house. There was me and my family on the one side, and aunt Nobanzi, her friends, including an *igqirha*, and other people who had their children with them.

First of all when my mother and I went into the kitchen, an altercation broke out between her and aunt Nobanzi because one of the plates on the gas stove had been left to burn although there was nothing on it. My aunt had been chatting with her *igqirha* friend in hushed voices before my mother and I walked in. When she saw the burning plate, my mother complained that aunt Nobanzi was wasting her gas. In turn, she retorted that my mother didn't know what waste was because she had wasted my father's life. There was something in her voice that was certain and knowing. If her remark came from a closet located somewhere in her body, then there were a lot more similar ones in the same place. My mother tried to ignore her at first but my aunt was persistent.

"Can you tell me what you did to my brother? Tell us," she demanded, arms akimbo now.

"How many times must I explain to you people that Gxarha had a heart attack?" said my mother. "I keep showing you the doctor's report. I can't help that you can't read."

"Do you think I care for your kind of education? I'm also educated by tradition. I know and understand things you will never understand. I know that there is something else to my brother's death. You know it, but now you are hiding behind your education and

pretending you don't know what I'm talking about. Ask Nonyethi," she said pointing to her *igqirha* friend. My mother sighed very loudly. Nonyethi would have been quiet if it weren't for the fact that she kept on sneezing loudly. It was the kind of sneeze associated with traditional doctors during a divination.

"Chuma, do you see the kind of thing I've been putting up with since your father died?" said my mother, throwing her hands in the air. "I don't know what do anymore." She spoke as if my aunt and Nonyethi were not there while they continued obliviously with their rant about the demerits of education and modern life.

The rest of my aunt's friends sided with her and Nonyethi. They and their children made unreasonable demands. For instance, a woman I didn't know, one of my aunt's friends, asked me bring her hot water in a plastic basin. When I said I was still busy cleaning, she snapped and called me disrespectful; she said I must have learnt it from my mother. Had I known that she would go around telling, also with a little embellishment, all those who were around, I would have avoided being in the same place as her all together. The children did not understand what was going on, but understood enough to be churlish with my sisters and me. They had a habit of suddenly turning up randomly, and instead of speaking they smacked us. When Nonjongo struck one of them right back, the homestead nearly turned into a war zone. Every kind of insult, including how we thought a little education made us better, was hurled my mother's way while Nonjongo quietly cried.
Many times my mother was called a husband killer. My grandmother's sister, who was my father's mother's sister, was also there. Occasionally she told my mother not to worry about *amaqaba,* the red people, because they did not know how to change with the times.

On the day of the funeral I looked forward to an opportunity to be relieved of our visitors. In my mind, I wanted only to deal with practical things, count the hours and mark off each event as it occurred. After the body arrived there was a short prayer service in the lounge followed by the actual funeral service in a marquee erected in front of our homestead. Those who spoke, spoke well of my father, relating moving anecdotes. This was in spite of the fact that my aunt's group of friends kept passing cynical remarks, sometimes to the befuddlement of the other attendees. Meanwhile, my aunt sat in the front row next to my mother, in the seat between my mother and us, also

dressed in black mourning clothes. She had her hand over my mother's shoulder, which provided falsified support.

"Don't cry," she said. "Let the will of God be." I saw my mother try to extricate herself from her hold and each time she moved, my aunt moved closer.

We followed the hearse on foot to the burial site, situated in another village, on the other side of the main dirt road. I was stupefied when suddenly Nonyethi, who had been ambling behind me, asked if she could have a word with me.

"As you know, I speak with the dead," she began when Nkosazana and Nonjongo were out of hearing range. "Your father came to me in a dream last night. He said you were angry."

"Please, sisi, I don't want to hear about this." I meant it. I was still feeling upset with the ancestors for taking my father away, and now my father went into somebody else's dream. Why couldn't he come to me directly? I too could dream.

"*Ntomb'encinci*, just hear me out. You see your father told me to tell you that he has joined his ancestors now."

"I know that. Where else would he be?" Apart from the fact that she called me a little girl, I felt something was amiss with this conversation for Nonyethi was the same person who sat sneezing while my mother took insults from my aunt.

"I will leave you alone, but just hear me out first. He said he will come if you will stop being angry." She left me alone after that.

At the grave yard, I thought about Nonyethi's words, to the point that I barely heard the pastor as he read from the bible. I stood when it was time to stand, sang when it was time to sing, and even joined the line to pour soil onto the casket in the ground.

If indeed my father was in Nonyethi's dream, what did he mean that I should not be angry? What was there not to be angry about? His death brought out the worst in some of us.

Chapter fourteen

"Denga, *ni songou lala*. *Vuwani!*"

These were the words Denga woke to in her hut. Her head pounded as if it was being hit with a stone while she vaguely remembered getting home. She did not know how long she had been asleep or what day it was. Vele played with Denga's eyes, opening and closing them and sometimes blowing air into them. He looked different, grown up. Denga was pleased to see her brother. She wondered what he ate to make him grow so quickly.

"*Ni songou lala*," Vele repeated.

"Can you not see I am still sleeping?" She was not angry with him for waking her up, but she also did not want to wake up her parents. She neither felt strong enough nor as courageous as before, but she was still determined to tell her parents she would not marry Malise.

"*Ndikale no edela*," protested Vele. Denga had no energy and her body still felt frail. The thought of her figurines made her anxious as she lazily scanned the hut for them.

"Vele. Have you seen little clay people?" The boy shrugged. "You have to find them for me," said Denga desperately while Vele looked baffled.

The door of the hut was open and Denga could see the clouds rushing across the sky. Although the weather seemed cold, her body was warm under the heavy blankets. Vele was quiet and only breathed beside her. As she drifted in and out of sleep she tossed and turned, her mind filled with images of what she saw when she was out on her own.

Her figurines! What happened to them when she left? How did she get home?

"*Baba* and Mmbwa found you in the forest. Baba thought you were going to die. VhoTshikalange came to feed you medicine. Now you are awake. Khaladzi, please do not sleep again," Vele pleaded. Denga stared at him, thinking about why she could not remember seeing her father and Mmbwa at all.

"What?"

"I am telling the truth. Baba found you. He promised all of us to kill you when he found you. He said you did not listen and we were all worried. He blamed *mma* for everything," Vele rambled.

As Denga listened, her heart thumped at the sound of looming trouble.

"Vele, stop lying," she said sitting up.

"*Khaladzi*, do you know me to tell you lies?" His animated gestures amazed Denga and she wanted to laugh. He seemed to revel in the drama he was creating. Denga did not know when Vele had become a storyteller.

"*Baba* said when he found you, you were surrounded by baboons." Vele raised his hand and counted up to five. "Five of them. *Baba* was afraid that they were going to eat you up, but Mmbwa saved you when he fought all of them off. *Baba* had his stick too, ready to hit them, but he ended up throwing stones at the baboons. They all ran away." Vele was out of breath when he got to this point, but he looked like he still wanted to tell more. Denga sat up in awe of her brother and also laughed because she did not believe him.

"*Mmbwa* cannot attack anything brother. You know anybody can walk into this homestead and he will just sit and not bark at all."

Vele shrugged. "It is what *baba* says. *Mmbwa* goes everywhere *baba* goes now. As a reward for saving you, he gets to eat meat whenever *baba* eats." Denga heard a commotion outside; her mothers were fighting. Nnyambeni did not usually raise her voice, but hearing her do so now was strange.

"They have been fighting since you left. Sometimes *mma* shouts at me for nothing. Why did you run?" Vele looked somber now, to Denga's astonishment. Vele was always a child and for a long time she took care of him. Now she needed to explain things to him. He seemed sincere, and for a minute as grown up as Denga. She felt she could take a chance and explain to him exactly what she thought was happening.

"They do not like me here. They want to give me away to a man," she whispered.

"You mean *mma* and *baba*?" Vele whispered. Denga felt foolish for trying to confide in her brother, who was half her age. "They do not hate you," Vele appeared anxious. "*Mma* cried the whole time you were gone and *baba* was forlorn."

"Vele, you do not understand these things. One day when you are as big as I am, you will. You should have been born a girl."

The shouting contest got closer to the hut, but there were no obscenities howled. Denga's mothers hurled accusations at each other

because Denga had run away. According to Nnyambeni, Avhashoni allowed Denga to do everything she pleased.

"Now this child has become selfish." Denga and Vele sat and listened intently to Nnyambeni. Vele was about to speak when Denga hurriedly told him to hush. Their mother's voice was clear and loud and quite the opposite of Avhashoni's.

"You obviously have forgotten why Mulamuleli brought you here. It was not because of love," declared Avhashoni. "I am the first wife and the children belong to me first before they belong to you. You can go and ask Mulamuleli if you do not believe me." There was no reply for a while from Nnyambeni until she said,

"I cannot help that you could not reproduce. But you are mistaken if you think the children belong to you. They came out of me, so they are mine. I am the one who endured labour pains. You have no idea what that is like," argued Nnyambeni. "As Denga is mine, this is what will happen: she will marry Malise and she does not have to like it; she will listen to me and will not go against what I tell her; she will understand that all girls end up in marriage and their bodies produce children after they are married. She must understand these things and I will not be driven to my grave before my time because she does not want to listen."

"That is where you are wrong," said Avhashoni, "Do you think you would be here had I not agreed to it? Let me tell you something you did not know. If you had ever walked my path, you would understand why I think children are not here to be played with. Have you ever noticed that there is a difference between Denga and you? Just because she came from you does not mean that she is an extension of you. My body failed me repeatedly through the years. Do you think that was my decision?" You would be wrong if you thought I took that decision. People have laughed and talked about my situation. They can, but I will not fight them. Imagine fighting the whole of Phungoni because people said something about my disabled womb."

There was silence again and Denga heard Avhashoni sniffle softly. Only Nnyambeni entered the hut eventually. Denga had never heard this kind of talk at the homestead before. Loud confrontations were normally about her indolence. They were never this spiteful. She always knew that there was not much love between her mothers and until now had assumed that that was normal. However, today it seemed that something

had exploded. Something that brought Vele on the brink of tears and made Denga feel evil for habouring the slightest delight in this demise. Her body suddenly filled with energy and pleasantness. It was as though the fabric of how she understood life as it was had become undone. She loved both her mothers but now found herself wondering who was right between the two.

"Vele, leave us alone. I want to talk to your sister," demanded Nnyambeni. "You knew why those men came and that is why you left."

"Yes, but you never told me."

"It is not for you to decide whether you would like to get married. Your father and I make that decision."

"*Mma*. I am not going to marry this man." Nnyambeni was startled. Denga surprised herself when she said this without fear. She rid herself of the blankets and stood up next to her mother.

"What did you say?"

"I am not going." Before Denga could complete her sentence, her mother had struck her. Denga gasped and clasped her tingling cheek. It was not pain she felt but resentment seated so deeply that she wanted to spit at her mother's feet.

"I did not raise you to be disobedient. You will do what I tell you to do."

"No!" Her voice was louder. "I am not going there." Her mother looked at her curiously. "I am not going. I do not want a husband and I do not want children. If you force me I will go and hate those people for the rest of my life."

"*No lemala*! Spoilt!" Nnyambeni stormed out, cursing for the whole homestead and anybody passing to hear. Denga felt a kind of a relief wash over her. Her worst fear was realised as she no longer had to wonder how confronting her mother would be. As vhoAvashoni was on her side, she now only needed to tell her father that she was not going to marry.

So famished was she that she could eat anything. The kitchen floor was freshly smeared with cow dung; she had always loved the smell dung as it gave her a feeling of cleanliness and order. But the air did not smell of food. She rummaged around but the pots were empty. She possessed the same feeling later that evening when her father arrived with Malise, a tall and sturdy man, and told her in no uncertain terms

that she was going to marry him. It had all been arranged and Malise's cows were already in the kraal.

Denga was startled into silence as all the eyes in her father's compound fell on her. But, Denga faced her father squarely and told him that she was not going anywhere with anybody. The men gasped and grumbled. Denga could hear some of them talk about how bad it was that such a young, promising woman lacked discipline. They had hoped to take her away without any problems.

Malise, whose towering presence intimidated Denga, had his eyes cast on the floor and did not move. He commanded the respect of his company. He had a calm demeanour and spoke softly to the man who sat next to him. Her father glanced around uncomfortably.

"Go and call your mother, Avhashoni," he said. Denga was not expecting to be sent away to call her mother. She had prepared herself, although she did not know how, for an argument, a fight or a beating. It did not matter anymore but she was adamant that she would not go. When she stepped out of the compound she was met by Talu, whom she suspected knew everything.

"What do you think you are doing?" Talu whispered. Denga had not seen her since she left. Seeing her now she did not feel any excitement.

"What are you talking about?"

"These people are old and respectable and they have come all the way-"

"Go in my place if you want."

"You are a fool, you know. You will invite misfortune in your life if you mistreat them."

It mattered little to Denga that her friend agreed with everybody because her mind was made up. She thought it would be better to live a life of bad luck than to live in a place she found repulsive for the rest of her life. Denga did not want to call her mother, Avhashoni, to her father's compound. She walked as slowly as possible and occasionally slowed Talu as well. The night air was warm, humid and promised a warmer day in the morning.

"Where are we going now?" asked Talu on seeing that they were not headed for Avhashoni's compound. Denga had not given much thought to where she was going because she had decided not to call her mother. "We have passed vhoAvhashoni's compound."

"I am not looking for her."

"What! Have you lost your mind? Did your father not ask you to summon vhoAvhashoni to his compound?"

Solani, Lowani, together with Nnyambeni, were seated on the small wall surrounding the hearth. The fire, with a pot on it, burned lazily and the air smelled of boiling goat meat. Denga's stomach ached from hunger as she had not eaten the whole day. She imagined eating the salted soft meat with *vhuswa*, dabbled in juicy green vegetables. The women looked on curiously when Denga and Talu walked past, with Denga pretending that she had not seen them.

"I do not know when I last ate," said Denga clutching her stomach."We have food at home. You can come and eat with me," Talu offered. Denga gobbled *vhuswa,* which Talu served with boiled *mushidzhi* and crushed *nduhu.* The food was almost tasteless, a fact she did not establish until she was sated, her belly at bursting point. Talu, who was still eating, watched amazed.

Denga spent the days that followed constantly resisting any attempts to get her to agree to her impending marriage to Malise. Her mother brought the wire beads – *vhukunda* – which she said Malise had lovingly made for her. She wanted her to wear them, but Denga only sneered and never once did she touch them. There were clothes too from Malise. Talu said they would give her the kind of dignity that married women displayed, but Denga was still not convinced. She conducted herself and her daily chores as if there was no imminent marriage, preferring instead to find her figurines when she thought no one was looking.

Once, in the afternoon, she sneaked into her father's compound, knowing well that she was forbidden on the grounds that his compound had nothing that belonged to her. She looked everywhere for the figurines but found nothing. She felt guilty for having entered, yet soon blamed her father for everything.

In the morning it was Talu who came to fetch Denga for the granary and cheerfully delivered the news that Malise had requested to see her. It meant nothing to Denga as she continued to pack, in an orderly fashion, the maize that had been gathered during the last reaping season. She stacked it up slowly, so slowly that Talu knelt beside her, hastening to pack the maize. Denga stopped."You will finish tomorrow at this rate," complained Talu.

"And how does that affect you?"

"I am just trying to help you. I look forward to the day I am taken from here. I know you do not want to marry this man. But I hope that you will soon realize that you must. He does not look like a bad man. Besides being old, can you not see that he is handsome? You will have beautiful children with him." Denga did not reply as she went back to packing. By the time she was done, Talu had gone.

The sun was still high and her sweat stuck to her skin. A gentle breeze dried and cooled her as she walked from the granary towards the middle of the homestead. She saw Talu sit with one of Malise's men on the small wall surrounding the homestead. She watched them engaged in small talk. Denga wondered what would be wrong if Talu married Malise instead of her. She was certain her friend would like that. When she saw Denga approach, Talu ran towards her, her face beaming. The man had told her to tell Denga that Malise said he knew she hated him but he promised to take good care of her. Denga hated that Malise had sent Talu as a messenger, and hated it more that Talu did not side with her on this.

"Tell him I beg him to find somebody else; somebody closer to him in age."

"No, you go and tell him," said Talu, leaving her friend behind. Denga watched her leave the homestead.

She was in the kitchen sweeping the floor and thinking about a way to search for her figurines in the forest, where she had been, when she suddenly felt a powerful force lift her off her feet. It was the man she had seen Talu with earlier. She nearly fell as she tried to gain her balance, but before she could stand up properly, the man, whose body smelled of sweat and armpits, seized her waist and slung her over his shoulder, so that her legs dangled down his front while her face pressed against his back.

She kicked and screamed for the man to put her down, while she pummeled him on his back and bottom. But he was calm and her blows seemed to have no impact on his plump clammy body. He walked out of the kitchen with her as she wriggled this way and that trying to free herself, but his grip on her was very firm and hurt her ribs and part of her belly.

As Malise's man carried Denga away, a tearful Avhashoni watched on as Vele cried and hid behind her skirt. Denga could not see her

father anywhere. She felt betrayed, especially as she watched Avhashoni do nothing. Malise, together with another man, waited at the homestead's entrance and with a sack on his back he followed Denga and the man with a clammy body. Denga attempted to scream again but stopped when some villagers, who were walking nearby, pointed fingers and laughed at her.

She begged the man to put her down but he would not listen. Her stomach hurt but when she told the men about this, they laughed and mocked. They were in no mood to run after an ill-mannered girl, they said.

They had covered a great distance when the man told Denga he would let her walk on her own if she did not run. She had thought about running when an opportunity presented itself, but it was Malise's threat to hack her head that deterred her. He looked like the kind of man who was true to his word.

She wished she possessed the strength of a lion to deal with Malise and his men.

Chapter fifteen

Four months had passed since the death of my father and I still had a difficult time dealing with it. I cried constantly, but mostly when I thought about him. Some days were better than others and in those which were better I was able to share jokes at work, laugh and feel normal again. I also had moments when I thought I might have been happier if I never knew who my father was. But having known him and loved him made the pain of losing him worse than any pain I had ever experienced. Physical pain would have been better, I thought, and I knew I could take a lot more if I had to if it meant a chance to be relieved of what I felt inside. It was neither in my heart nor my mind where it hurt, but everywhere. More and more I asked what kind of God would allow such pain in anyone's life. As for the ancestors, I still felt too upset to be worried about how wrathful they might be with me if they knew I had my own anger towards them.

Work continued as normal and I had learnt a great deal of things about our magazine. I worked early, due to interrupted sleep, and spent most of my time at work. I worked even on the Fridays that my colleagues went to the pub across the road for 'happy hour'.

One Friday, however, I decided to join in when Bells, Thuthu and Suzy said they were going to 'happy hour' to de-stress. It was just an hour to be happy, I convinced myself, even though at the back of my mind I carried guilt. How could I be cheerful when my father was dead and my mother sad and insulted?

The bar was dimly lit and reeked of cigarette smoke. I craved a cigarette the moment the smell assailed my nose. *Be strong, you've quit. It's not worth going back to smoking,* one part of me said to myself while the other said, *It's not a sin to smoke. What crime do you commit when you pollute your lungs? Your lungs and not somebody else's. Besides, it wouldn't happen outside of 'happy hour'.* I could feel myself weakening, especially when I admitted that 'happy hour' was not a thing I planned to do on a daily basis. There would be no harm in having fun once in a while.

There were women in stilettos, tight pants and tops playing snooker next to the entrance. We placed our orders at the bar and proceeded to sit at a table. The girls and I made a pact to drink until were so drunk we would laugh at flies fluttering past. All of us

ordered bottles of alcohol and had all the bottles lined up before each person. I had six ciders, Bells had a bottle of red wine, Thuthu had two bottles of white wine and Suzy had two 'diva' bottles of castle lager. She said she wanted to drink like an '*Ou*', a statement which sent the whole table into stitches.

We drank, smoked and chatted at the top of our voices as the music drowned our conversation. I was on my third cider when Harry came and asked if he could join us. It was strange to see him there, asking to sit with us. I expected it would be agonising to drink with the boss.

"No problem, but you're not sitting next to me," said Suzy mischievously as Harry tried to find a place to sit. Bells and Thuthu appeared to have heard nothing and Harry ended up sitting next to me.

We ordered shooters and Thuthu suggested whoever finished first must be treated to free drinks the next time.

"I have a better idea," I blurted.

"Let's hear it," said Suzy.

"Well, whoever finishes first gets to ask Harry whatever they want. You can even ask for a raise." Everyone but Harry, who blushed, agreed it was a good idea.

"Harry, are you in?" Thuthu roguishly asked.

"I suppose. Just don't make any ridiculous requests; nothing involving large amounts of money."

Suzy set her stop watch but soon abandoned the idea when she saw she could not time everyone and drink simultaneously. I finished first, but was accused of cheating by Bells. She said I did not have as much to drink as everybody else.

"But I did," I shot back, feeling lightheaded. "Therefore I get to request something from Harry." In a matter of minutes, the more we drank the more I went from being almost sober to being very drunk.

"Dance with me, boss" I requested of Harry as I felt audacious.

"What? No, I'm not any good at dancing."
"Dance with me please." I got up and pulled him out of his chair and he reluctantly obliged.

On Monday Bells accused me of flirting with Harry and throwing myself at him. She was right although I did not think it was her place to judge me for it. It was also during this skirmish that I found out Harry and Hazel were a couple. I would not have guessed Harry was

attached to anyone in a serious way, considering how he was with me when he drove me home later on the evening in question.

Harry had not talked much in the car; I was the one who had. I'd ranted about the need to broaden the array of articles we ran by, including stories of ordinary people. He'd said that I talked too much and that much of what I said was repetition.

He ran his hand over my thigh, which under the circumstances, did not feel peculiar. We clumsily kissed on the lips and lingered a little as he said goodbye.

I saw him again the following day, Saturday, when came to deliver my new computer. Somewhere in our drunken conversation of the night before, I'd asked him, as a favour, to collect the computer from the store for me. We kissed again, but did not feel awkward. If the kiss could talk, it might have said: "I missed you stranger." I spent that Saturday afternoon drinking wine and noting down my ideas for the next issue. Owning a computer I didn't have to share was a delight and tantamount to owning a car for the first time. I managed to write the beginning of a story, I called *It's Me*, about a young woman who was constantly on a diet and eventually lost so much weight that no one in her town recognised her anymore. When people asked who she was, she told them it's me, can't you see? While I wrote it I imagined myself to be one of those people – in films – with the luxury of spending holidays at their coastal beach homes, writing award-winning stories.

Frankly speaking, I thought Bells should not have made an issue out of me dancing with Harry and I told her this.

"He's taken with what you did," she said.

"Bells please, man. Are you a morality police? I don't think you have a certificate on morals." I tried to defend myself again.

Later I had tea in the passage with Suzy, who told me to expect Hazel to know about the dance from Bell's perspective.

I was effectively having a 'blue Monday'.

"You're a slut!" Bells said in a forced whisper when I returned from my tea break. She'd been waiting at my desk for me.

"What do you want from me?" I felt blood rushing to my face.

"Imagine what Hazel will say?"

"I don't care what she says. Stop harassing me," I replied in a stern whisper.

For the rest of the day, I wished that the tension between Bells and I had not been so obvious. I always hated having to carry discomfort after a fall-out with someone. It was such an effort remembering to sulk around Bells.

Suzy and I ate pies for lunch and gossiped about how Bells needed to find a man so that she wouldn't be Hazel's spy anymore.

After lunch on Thursday, nearly a week later, Hazel came to work and I felt a brief rush of nervousness. She rarely came to the office, but when she did she shared Harry's office. Hazel wanted an urgent meeting, first with me and then with Suzy and me.

I found her in Harry's office, paging through the previous issue of *For You* and making diagrams on a page. Where she sat, Harry had sat just under an hour before while I kissed him, pretending to be a disobedient nun who'd come to steal a kiss. He'd told me he liked it and I'd promised to come back as something else to him. "I love this," he'd said lustfully.

"Sit," she commanded without looking at me. Harry was there too and he raised his brow and grimaced to acknowledge my presence. "I want an update on everything that's happened these last few days." I had my magazine diary with me because I learnt that I needed to carry it everywhere, except to lunch. I didn't trust myself enough to absorb all the detail in the meetings so it helped to write things down. I took Hazel through the previous week's developments.

"And Harry?" said Hazel while Harry nonchalantly raised his head at the mention of his name.

"What about him?" I wondered if Bells had said anything to her yet.

"Did he change anything while I was away?"

"No. Nothing." The team knew Harry liked changing things around without discussing them first.

When I left their office, I was relieved. *Don't feel guilty, you did nothing wrong*, I said to myself.

When I got to my desk an idea suddenly struck me. Why had I not thought of it before when it seemed obvious? We could ask the readers to either send us their inspirational stories and each month we could publish a different story.

People must be able to tell their stories because their experience counts no matter who or where they are, I thought. I worried

about whether or not Harry would think I was being too generous with magazine space and for what reason.

My father always said I should have been a social worker because as a child I usually took food from the house to give to people who looked hungry in the village.

"Chuma my child. *Indoda nganye mayizimele*. People must work to feed their children. You cannot give and give and give," my father would protest. I didn't listen to him because my inclination to give exceeded my concern about being chastised. It wasn't my plan to run my job as a charity, but I had convinced myself that it was necessary for people to write their stories and talk about what was happening in their lives.

I wrote my idea in an email and thought many times before I sent it to Hazel. I did not think that she or Harry would have any reason to refuse it. I was optimistic when Hazel called me back to Harry's office saying she wanted to talk.

I was relieved to find her alone in the office.

"I've an idea. I've been toying with it for a while now." She crossed her legs while playing Black Jack on the computer. "It should address your earlier concern, Chuma. We'll start a new column where readers will submit their personal stories. It will be good to see the reaction and hopefully more people will read."

"I'm so glad you've finally agreed to this," I said.

"Agreed to my own idea?" she said. "You can begin sourcing stories for this. I don't know how you'll start, but I'm sure you can do it."

"How, Hazel? I just sent you an email and thought you called me to respond to it. She did not answer.

I could not believe Hazel thought she could steal my idea without me noticing it.

On the last day of the month I was pleased to receive text messages from Nkosazana and Nonjongo requesting airtime. It was the first time since the passing of my father that they were doing so. When I called them I found out how great school was and how both my sisters were looking forward to coming to spend their holiday with me. My mother said she was doing fine, although she missed my father dearly. At the end of our conversation my mother spoke about the need for us to give thanks to the ancestors for my job.

“Not every woman’s child gets to work,” said my mother.

“After what happened with my father’s funeral, I don’t think we should. We’d have to work with the same people again–”, my mother cut me short.

“We’re not doing it for people. The ancestors must see that we will not forget, even though your father is gone.”

“When would you like us to do this?”

“Whenever you can, but don’t leave it too late. I wouldn’t like anything else to happen to my family. We must do all we can to appease the ancestors.”

Chapter sixteen

Kate and Jinja were my student friends who lived next door. They were in their early 20s and the three of us spent the bulk of our weekends together. We mostly cooked and ate together. This was not a planned arrangement, but the girls invited themselves into my life and the next thing they wanted to know was when I would visit them.

Kate studied Information Technology while Jinja studied Communications. They were the first lesbian couple I ever befriended and before them I knew no one else who was. They did not believe me when I told them this. If anything, they argued, there's a lesbian waiting to come out of every woman. For hours on end we would debate this – them versus me. How could a woman not know her own sexual orientation? I would ask and they would say: how could she when the patriarchs who lead our society define who or what she is and even go as far as prescribing how she should behave?

I thought something must have happened to one of them when one evening someone unceremoniously banged so loudly on my door that they could have broken their knuckles. It was Harry, vociferating my name like it was some kind of demon he was exorcising.

Harry was not even pronouncing my name correctly as he emphasised C and pronounced 'huma' separately. I had never seen a drunken monkey, but he reminded me of one as he hiccupped. He came to tell me that he had scrapped the idea of the column, and that he'd fallen in love with me. He lurched and seemed as though he was about to fall.

In a strange kind of way, I'd grown fond of Harry. If he were a room in my ideal house, he'd be the library – with all my favourite books, a comfortable chair and a sturdy good-looking table. A couple of times we kissed in his office, before I pretended to be a nun, and fantasised about living in a remote city, walking hand-in-hand, incognito, amidst crowds of people.

"Jus lemme esplain," he hiccupped some more as he flopped on the couch. He kicked his shoes off his feet. "Tha idea shucks. I shouldn't have allowed it. No one will read it. I donwanit shtarted." He rolled over on his back and folded his arms across his chest.

"That column hasn't even taken off, how can you say no one will read it?" How could Harry abort my idea? He just came to gloat about it

and the way I saw it was that he could have just stayed at home and told me in the morning about it.

"Does Hazel know?" He did not respond until I asked again, this time a little louder. That column would have reflected untold lives.

A part of me did not want to believe a drunk Harry, but then again inebriation made for an honest person. I was miserable, feeling I had failed.

"You should go now," I said.

"So, that's it." He belched. "I tell you I love you, and you tell me to go?"

"Harry please; you're drunk. Does Hazel even know you're here?"

"Fuck Hazel." He rolled over on the couch and fell asleep. He snored so loudly; the whole flat was filled with the sound. I went to bed and couldn't sleep despite having had a tot of whisky.

I received a text message while I was still mulling over how to save the aborted column. It was from Jinja. Kate had been attacked. I jumped out of bed as I called Jinja's number and got dressed at the same time. Jinja was in hospital with Kate.

"I'll be there," I said. Jinja insisted that everything was okay and that I did not need to worry. But I was worried.

I called a cab and made my way to hospital. I always hated hospitals with their smell of detergent combined with spirit. I could not believe that there were still queues of people waiting to be seen by the doctor. One or two people slept on stretchers in the passage.

The receptionist behind the desk told me she could not find Kate's name on her register. She did not look hard because I saw Kate's name. When I told the receptionist this, she asked me if I wanted to take over her job. I called Jinja again and she came out to meet me. The doctor on night duty had just left Kate's side when I arrived. She was sedated.

"She's asleep," said Jinja.

"What happened?"

Kate was walking back from campus when she was accosted by a group of men who started insulting her. At first she did not notice that the men were actually insulting her until she turned back. It was then that they started to throw objects at her. She ran.

"It was strange that nobody intervened. And I mean she was in town and there were still people walking about," said Jinja.

"You know people are afraid to talk in case the criminals turn on them instead."

The men attacked Kate and threatened her with corrective rape. They kicked and beat her, calling her a bitch-loving female. They said they wanted to remind her that as a woman, she needed to be with a man and not another woman.

"I guess they're from campus. They had to have known Kate and I'm sure they know me too," said Jinja.

I was disturbed to hear this. None of it made any sense. I was angry with the men for hurting someone's daughter, my friend, only because she was not attracted to men. Kate herself would never hurt anybody. How was sexual orientation a crime?

"But how could they decide who a woman should be with?"

Jinja shrugged. "I don't know." I could see that she was exhausted. "We're lucky she wasn't raped. She's bruised but I'm sure she'll recover."

"I know it could have been worse. But you know it shouldn't have happened," I said.

When I arrived back at my flat later that evening Harry was gone. In the morning I planned that I would talk to him properly about the column and hoped that Hazel would back me up.

When I walked into my office, I found Hazel sitting comfortably in my chair, looking through my email. She had not seen me come in and was shocked to see me standing over her shoulder, asking what she wanted.

"Um… Actually…" she replied, getting up from the chair while I put my bag next to the computer monitor.

"Harry missed our date last night."

"And how will my emails help explain that?" I was annoyed with her. Yes Harry slept on my couch, but he was not invited and I hated that she took out her insecurities in this way.

"I know he took you home the other Friday."

"It was just a ride." It was at this moment that my fondness for Harry waned. A secret is only sweet with its veil on.

"He came home this morning. He said he'd been sleeping at your place. Said he didn't love me anymore."

There was nothing to explain, but I could see that Hazel thought there was.

"Did he tell you how he ended up on my couch?"

"So you admit he slept over at your place?"

"I didn't say he didn't sleep over. But did he tell you why he was there?"

Before she could answer, I asked if she knew Harry wanted to drop the column.

"Don't change the subject," Hazel snapped.

"I don't know what you want from me."

"Darling, I have my eye on you."

I didn't ask about the column again, so I spent most of my days at the office dreaming about bringing something brand new to the magazine; something that would make its readers not want to put it down.

Suzy later asked me if it was really true that Harry dumped Hazel because of me. I told her I knew nothing about it.

At home I wrote a story about the attack on Kate. In the story she possessed superpowers and was able to knock the daylights out of her attackers so that every single one of them apologised. I also re-angled the story so that it would work as a feature for the magazine. What really did strike me was the fact that as I did my research, I found information about corrective rape. Sure enough Kate wasn't raped, but many lesbian women who were attacked, especially in the townships, were subjected to it. They were raped, sometimes with instruction from a family member, as a way to correct them of their sexual orientation. I prepared the article so that it incorporated Kate's story as a case study, but also found others, through the not for profit organisations I made contact with. I also included a fact box about basic human rights and contact numbers of the organisations I had contacted.

In the ensuing weeks, Hazel did all she could to make things difficult. In editorial meetings she stopped asking for my opinion, even though she, as well as everybody else, knew she could count on my thorough research on topics. However, there was nothing she could do about my article on corrective rape making it into the magazine because the rest of the team was sold on it, in spite of the fact that they were angered by what had happened to Kate. Every time I made contributions, Hazel disregarded them and quickly moved on to a different subject. Slowly, Hazel delegated my duties to Suzy, who

pleaded desperately not to be given extra work. But I continued to do my work as diligently as before.

When I was tired of how things were going, I talked to Harry, hoping he might be able come up with some kind of solution to the problem. He said he heard me, but that I would have to give him time to come up with a solution.

Part two

Chapter seventeen

There were times I wished I could run into Shandukani, even if accidentally. I had not seen him since that first time in the lift. I searched for his face in the apartment corridors. Once I even pretended I had lost my mind and walked in the direction I suspected would lead me to his place, but felt embarrassed for myself when I realised that I was running after a stranger who was not running after me. Not only that, but he also knew the floor where I lived.

It was, therefore, a pleasant surprise, after many months, to see Shandukani hunched over the open bonnet of a blue citi golf in front of the apartment building. It was a week day morning and I was on my way to work. I could hardly believe my eyes and felt like I was seeing an old good friend. I tried to calm myself, reminding myself that I knew very little about him. The thought that he might already have someone was sobering.

Shandukani was oblivious to everything around him, and I wasn't sure he'd seen me as I contemplated walking over to him. I caved in eventually and went to greet him anyway.

"Hi, you," I said.

He swung around, clearly distracted. With a smile which completely melted my heart, he walked towards me, stopped midway and gestured excitedly for me to get closer. I found myself debating the merits and demerits of being the one who walked the rest of the way over to him. Would that simple gesture make me seem easy or overly eager?

I was soon over on his side of the road and his arms were wide open. His embrace was warm and I could hear his heart beat wildly, as did mine. Suddenly he wasn't the old friend I saw from across the road but the man with whom I'd fallen in love many months ago; the man who disappeared. I felt inept by the time we pulled away from each other. It only took him asking me how I was, and I told him everything to do with the passing of my father. By the time I had finished, I was in tears. He pulled me close to him again and sympathised. After what felt like an eternity, I pulled away once again.

"How have you been keeping?" I asked eventually.

"Good. It's been a while. I've been thinking of you."

"A good while, hey. What have you been up to?"

"Working out of the country. I actually am almost back for good now. I'll have to go back to Uganda to wrap things up and then that will be it."

"Really?"

"*Ja*. I've worked a lot out of the country and have been back for a week or so. I spent my week back between my family in Venda and taking care of a few things down here."

It turned out that Shandukani worked as a civil engineer for a company whose headquarters were in town. The company had branches all over the continent and he worked in different countries all the time.

"That sounds great. It's a great opportunity to see Africa."

"It's tiring; you just want to be in one place sometimes."

There were many things I wanted to say and much more that I wished to hear from him but my bus to work soon arrived and I had to leave.

"Come by later, I'll make dinner for you," he called as I rushed off.

I spent the day nervous, but also excited that I would later see him. It was a good day.

When I reached home in the afternoon I found a note, signed by Shandukani, under my door. On it he had both his house and cell phone numbers. I had parted in such a rush in the morning that I forgot that I didn't know his flat number. I immediately sent him a text message saying that I'd received his note and also asked him to confirm the time of our meeting.

I wanted to look gorgeous for him so I took all the trouble I could to look the part. But for some reason my wardrobe was not working out well. For a start, my braids were a mess and needed to be redone; my makeup did not seem as pleasing as it did most other times. I turned my whole wardrobe up-side-down and inside-out trying to find the perfect outfit, but found nothing that would make me suitably attractive.

My heart sank when a young beautiful woman opened the door at Shandukani's flat. She radiated confidence and elegance. In a friendly tone, the woman asked me to enter and led me to the lounge. Shandukani emerged from the passage, smiling.

"Have you met my sister?"

"Your sister?"

"Hey, you must introduce me to your visitor," she said to him. Rose, Shandukani's older sister, became the evening's host. She fussed over everything and wanted to know if the food was tasty or hot enough and if we had eaten enough.

Dinner went well and I helped with the dishes afterwards. Shandukani later opened a bottle of wine and offered a glass to Rose and me. Rose refused on the grounds that a Christian should not drink. Well, I was raised in a Catholic church and we had alcohol, in the form of the blood of Christ – every Sunday. A glass was not going to make a difference to me.

I watched him diligently shine two wine glasses. As he did this it was easy for me to imagine his diligence extend over other areas. After he poured the wine into the glasses, Rose, who had been making an effort to change the CDs on the sound system, opened a cupboard on the wall unit and retrieved a photo album. At that moment, I could see how Shandukani, who still had the glasses in his hands, wanted to stop Rose from showing the photos. He laughed nervously. I supposed that there was nothing he could do. Perhaps there were pictures of him in there as a five-year-old without his front teeth.

Rose told me about every photograph in the album and while doing so I learnt a great deal about their family. They came from the village of Phungoni in Venda. Rose narrated as much detail as possible about the individuals on the photographs. I especially enjoyed viewing pictures of Shandukani as a child for he struck innocent, unburdened, and happy poses. It was the same innocence I found in his eyes and demeanour, although now it was fused with a hint of mischief in his adulthood.

A woman in one of the pictures caught my eye. She was old and dusty with a contrived smile; one that could have been as a result of an instruction, I guessed. She sat on a grass mat with her legs stretched out. Her *minwenda* dress was faded in colour but her eyes revealed temerity. The sun was reflected on her bold, shiny head and her face was covered with numerous lines that told her years of experience.

"Who is she?" I asked and Rose and Shandukani were hesitant to answer.

"Actually, this is a very old picture. My mother found it in my grandmother's possession. She is my great-grandmother, NyaDenga."

"That's an awfully old picture. I didn't know they had cameras at that time." Shandukani and Rose merely shrugged.

After the photo album, Rose said she was tired and wanted to sleep. Shandukani and I decided to have one last glass of wine on the balcony before I left. It was strange to be with him at that time of day, in a confined space. There were not many words said as we sipped the wine and gazed at the stars above. And soon I felt mellow. Shandukani at first seemed to be in his own world, but when our eyes locked, he paused for a moment and then said,

"Cherie come here." My heart missed two beats or more. "Come here," he repeated, extending his hand to me. Without thinking further, I placed my hand in his as he pulled me closer. He wrapped his arms tightly around me. I was at a loss for words, but also loved every second that his warm breath massaged my cheek.

"Would you forever be mine if I gave you the moon? Think of me whenever you see it?" At that moment I felt something between love, lust and awe. I was completely and utterly flattered.

I sipped the last drops from my glass and enjoyed being wrapped in Shandukani's assuring presence.

"Will you be my girl?" he repeated.

"Yes. I will be."

That night my heart drummed away and I was convinced it was love. But as sleep descended on me, images of my father and NyaDenga flashed in my mind. I tried to fight these with the sugary feeling I had after my time with Shandukani. I could still feel his arms around me. I dreamt of my father walking out of my closet. He walked so fast, as if on wheels, to my side to wake me. He told me, "See I have come. I told you I'd come when you were no longer angry."

Like a restless spirit, NyaDenga moved about my mind wherever she pleased. I had not solicited her to pick my brain in the way that she did; selecting and deselecting questions, statements, and answers straight out of the labyrinth of my mind. I wanted to wake up and make sense of it all, but couldn't.

Chapter eighteen

For days Denga recoiled when they brought her food. In the compound that she shared with Malise's mother, also called Makhulu by Malise's two wives and their children, Denga sat with her back against the mud wall. Her knees, bound by her arms, were drawn to her chest. Sometimes she rested her head on her arms. She sat still when the homestead's children came to her door to steal curious stares at her. Often they imitated her; standing still when Denga was motionless and when she shifted even just slightly, the children ran off laughing and talking to themselves. She was aware that to them she was a game they played when Makhulu was not around to chase them away.

On the night that she arrived at Malise's homestead, Denga confirmed that something in her had died. She did not have to think hard about what it was because she did not care to know. She simply did not want to be there, yet going back to her home was not an option. The thought of her clay figurines failed to arouse the interest it had done before.

Her mind wandered and she thought of nothing specific and when Makhulu came to persuade her to eat she always thought of reasons not to. Eating food prepared by the very people she despised would have meant that she accepting them and she did not. Makhulu, however, usually showed a measure of patience with her that the others did not. She did not raise her voice when she spoke, and whenever Denga refused to eat, Makhulu lowered her eyes and said she did not think Mulamuleli would be glad to know that his child was starving at her new home. Denga wanted her father to know that she starved. It was the only way she could think to punish him for sending her away against her will. Before leaving Denga alone, Makhulu would cover her food, instructing her to eat when she became hungry. Of course, she did not touch the food; she merely stared at it until the following day.

"Your buttocks must be sore from sitting like that day and night," complained Makhulu one evening. What she did not know was that Denga did, in fact sometimes, go out, but only in the deep of the night when all was still and silent.

She would tip-toe past the snores emanating from the various compounds to use the toilet. She sometimes washed with some of the water that stood outside the kitchen for use in the morning. Once or

twice she heard the wives argue that there was not enough water in the container. She wanted to laugh, and she later reprimanded herself for this, as she thought they could never guess that she was the one who used their water. She carried it in a small container to the far end of the homestead where the great *mutshikili* tree was situated. She washed herself under the tree and often shivered as the cool mountain air touched her skin. Makhulu did not even move when Denga crept back into the compound; she slept like a log. Denga would sleep but then awoke long before Makhulu.

"*Aningo edela na?*" Makhulu inquired in the mornings and when Denga did not reply she continued to talk to herself, saying something about Mulamuleli being unhappy.

She went about her morning routine of collecting the food she had placed in front of Denga the night before and took it back to the kitchen. Shortly after Makhulu left, Denga heard the wives complain that they were tired of making food that was returned to them daily.

What did she eat anyway, they asked. She was not going to jump up to thank them for the left-over food she ate in the middle of the night while on her way to bath under the *mutshikili* tree.

The very first time she ate from the pots, Denga had felt utterly disappointed in herself. For a few more days after that she did not eat, until the day she could not resist the smell of meat as she passed the hearth on her way to the *mutshikili*. The second time she ate she did not feel guilty. Instead, she reasoned she was justified to cheat Malise's family into thinking that they had been starving her when they too had cheated her out of her own life. After licking the taste from her fingers, she proceeded to bath. From then on she made it a habit to stop at the hearth and help herself to whatever remained of the homestead's dinner.

Although eating from the pots became a kind of reprisal she still would not accept the food they gave her. Besides, she had a vague suspicion that the food would have tacit obligations attached to it. She did not want to have to clean up dirty dishes, tidy up the *tshitanga* and look after the homestead's children as a way of saying thank you for the food.

Denga felt a little uncomfortable when one afternoon Malise's wives came with their brood of children – seven in total – to her compound. Nyawasedza, the eldest of Malise's wives, lined the children

up and called their names out as a way of introducing them to Denga. They were all girls. After that, and when all the children had gone, Nyawasedza began in a serious tone:

"We always give you food, but do you ever say thank you?" Although there was a hint of threat in her tone Denga merely raised her head and then looked down at her knees. As far as she was concerned Denga had very little room to accommodate threats. Her unarticulated boldness caught her by surprise but impressed her all the same. Nyawasedza looked hesitantly at Nyamukamadi, the younger wife, when Denga did not reply. However, Nyamukamadi seemed unperturbed, and true to her name, she excused herself from the meeting, saying she needed to go and draw water from the stream with her girls. Nyawasedza continued speaking.

"You do not show any respect and you treat us as if you do not live here. We are not invisible." Denga could not help but notice how her teeth at the top hung so low from her gum. Her lips would not close properly because her teeth were in the way. "You need to do some work around here. Nyamukamadi cannot continue to fetch water when there is a young girl like you around." Denga felt a little rage well up inside her, but she continued to look out the door as if Nyawasedza had said nothing. By now Nyawasedza could see that Denga was not listening to her.

"I am going out now and when I come back you had better be on your feet."

"What will you do if I refuse to get on my feet?" asked Denga intrepidly. It was not her intention to break her silence but Nyawasedza wasted time threatening her. "Will you send me away?" she mocked. Nyawasedza left in a vexed state, promising to return to see if Denga would be up. Denga was pleased to be left alone again. She was certain she would be the subject of discussion at the homestead but she was not troubled by what Nyawasedza would say to Nyamukamadi and Makhulu. Whatever the case would be Denga spent the afternoon rocking her back against the wall as she always did.

In the early evening Makhulu arrived, without food, but with Malise, who towered over her like a giant. Denga had heard Makhulu, as they approached her compound, pleading with him not to be overly harsh with her. But the pleas ceased as soon as they reached the entrance. Denga could feel Malise's gaze on her as her face rested between her

knees. She turned to look up when the silence became palpable and found Malise standing, staring at her. She did not wish to ask him what brought him by, so she stared right back at him without a word. This, however, she did not do without hesitation for was not this the man who insisted on carrying her away from her home despite her wishes? Makhulu stood aside with her wrinkled hands on the sides of her face.

"I came to sort out the trouble that arose earlier," he said at last, his voice firm. Denga knew what he was referring to. She should have known Nyawasedza's threat would actually be carried out by Malise.

"*Ho bvelela mini* – what is wrong?" Moments passed and not a word came out of Denga. Makhulu's voice in the background punctuated the air with advice to her son to get Denga to eat. Denga could not see her but she supposed that she was either folding or putting things away because her sentences had intervals in-between. Malise repeated his earlier question but this time his words were forced through his teeth. Denga could feel his patience wearing thin. Malise turned to his mother and accused her of spoiling Denga.

"You have asked me to be patient and I have been. Do you see that it does not make a difference?"

"*Nwana nga*. I have told you numerous times that you cannot beat someone every time something rises in your chest." Denga's eyes widened at the realisation that Malise could have easily hit her had it not been for Makhulu's advice.

"Get up!" bellowed Malise. Denga moved only just slightly. "I said get up, *imani ngamilenzhe yanu mivhili*." Her unhurried movement antagonised Malise. At this point Makhulu stood up and attempted to pull him out of the compound. She begged him to leave and return a little later when his anger had settled. Denga was already against the wall with nowhere else to move as Malise had moved closer and closer. At that moment she conceded that it would be ideal to run, but she did not doubt that she would barely make it past the angry man whose shadow covered more than the full length and breadth of the door. The loud voices in the compound must have attracted attention from the homestead's inhabitants because Denga could see their shadows reflected at the entrance. She heard them whisper too, in addition to trying to keep one another quiet. When the incensed Malise was close enough to Denga, he raised his hand so high that Makhulu leapt from her position, screaming that Mulamuleli's child would not be abused. With her body

she shielded Denga from the blows that might have followed. Malise then bolted out of the room leaving Denga sobbing in Makhulu's inadvertent embrace.

Denga found it increasingly difficult to be by herself in the compound, especially when Makhulu was not in. She constantly feared that Malise would harm her in a fit of rage. However, she hardly ever saw him. She took to sitting outside the hut, or sometimes roving around to satisfy her own curiosity.

The homestead was perched on a hill and the path to its entrance was on a slope. She imagined that it might be difficult to see visitors until they appeared right at the gate. The cattle-kraal, situated near the gate, was empty during the day, but she always heard them when they returned from the fields. She had not yet had a chance to see the person who herded the cows, but like the cattle, she heard him whistle when bringing the cows home. She knew that it was not Malise as she had once heard Makhulu talking to herself, saying that she could not understand why he, Malise, worshipped hunting. He was away for days at a time, and this suited Denga well. Beyond the sloping path lay a narrow stream with vast, vegetable plots not far from it.

Her fear of Malise was what drove her to simulate some level of interest in the activities of the homestead. Besides, she was still feeling a sense of gratitude towards Makhulu for protecting her from her son. When Denga appeared at the fireside one evening, everyone – Makhulu, the wives and the children – was astonished, but not in an unwelcoming manner. Makhulu invited her to sit close to her.

"You have arrived in good time because I am about to begin my story for the evening," she announced. The children squealed with delight and made themselves as comfortable as possible in their positions. A hush fell over the fireside and the only sounds that could be heard were those of barking dogs in the distance, the chirping crickets and crackling from the brazier. The wives were more concerned with roasting maize for the children even though they too were quiet.

"*Salungani salungani*!" began Makhulu.

"*Salungani*," replied the children in unison.

"Sankambe, the jackal, came upon a lioness with her cubs. 'Look after my children for I must now go and work in the fields,' said the lioness. 'Give them meat and you can eat the bones when they have eaten.' Sankambe agreed, telling the mother lion how good he was with

children and how impressed the lioness would be with his work.'" The children laughed and murmured among themselves. "The first thing Sankambe did was to eat the meat and feed the children bones!" Makhulu narrated and the children gasped.

"And when the meat was finished, Sankambe ate the first cub." The children were wide-eyed at this point. "When mother lion returned from the fields, she said, 'bring me my children so I can see them.' The shrewd Sankambe brought them to the mother one by one, but counted one once over. The following day Sankambe ate another cub and performed the same trick when the mother lion wanted to see her children. After eating the last cub, Sankambe did not know what he would tell the lioness. He quickly thought of a way to deceive her. He bruised himself on sticks and rolled around. When the mother lion wanted to see her children, she found Sankambe looking very sad: 'Today I was almost killed by the baboons. They attacked me and ate up your children,' he said. The lioness was very angry and vowed to kill the baboons. Meanwhile, Sankambe went to the baboons and found them playing a game of *mefuvha*. He said he knew a way to make their game more interesting. He asked to add to the game the words: 'We have eaten the lion's cubs, what will become of us now?' The baboons enjoyed this and kept on repeating the words. Sankambe then went to tell the lioness he heard with his own ears that the baboons had killed her children. He took the lioness to where the baboons played, but was careful to hide her in the bush while he went up to the baboons and asked them to repeat the words he taught them. The baboons were glad and they shouted the words: 'We have eaten the lion's cubs, what will become of us now?' When the lioness heard this she pounced on the baboons and killed them all. The story is finished," said Makhulu opening up her hands, signaling the end. The children did not talk and Denga thought they were visibly shaken.

Denga herself had not heard this story since she was a child. Listening to it now, she remembered how Avhashoni told it to her. She was just as startled with the ending as the children at this homestead. She remembered being angry with Sankambe every time he appeared in a different story. He was the most devious creature she had ever heard of. And every time, Denga wanted to haul him out of a story and throttle him until he confessed to all his deceitful ways.

"The baboons should not have died," protested a small voice from a corner. "Sankambe should have been the one to die. He tricked the baboons." The rest of the children agreed. Another added:

"Sankambe always wins, but he is bad."

"Are bad people good, Makhulu?" asked a little girl with her thumb in her mouth. Everyone around the fire laughed for that was unexpected.

"Bad people are bad *nwana wa nwana nga*. You should never do what bad people do because you will be bad yourself. Do you want to be bad?" All around the fire the children said they did not want to be bad.

On her sleeping mat Denga not only thought about the day, but also had fragmented versions of what she would do, how she would live if she left Malise's homestead.

Chapter nineteen

Dear Resident

If you receive this it is because you're one of the few who might understand the need for such correspondence.

Kate Madi was attacked last week only because she's lesbian. This is not the first attack of its kind. Often lesbian woman are attacked, in the same way that many more women in our country are attacked and abused on a daily basis. But why must women pay a heavy price simply because they were born women?

Many might still remember reports about the partially clothed body of Bee Simms, a rising soccer star, which was found in a creek in her KwaThema township, just outside Johannesburg. She had been brutally stabbed all over the body because she was lesbian. In an Mpumalanga township, a similar attack took place. More and more there are reports of this kind of attack. A month ago, Cindy Kumkani from Langa township, near Cape Town, was stabbed with a broken beer bottle while walking back home with her partner. Her crime was to be born preferring women to men. Cindy, who was not only fortunate to survive, but was also fortunately not raped, recalled that her attacker abased her as he gave chase.

How many more women must suffer and die at the hands of intolerant ignoramuses who speak of 'correcting' women who are differently inclined?

This is an urgent dialogue that needs to take place. If you agree, please meet us on Wednesday, 19 September, at no 36 Summer Place, Beach Road, Strand at 19:30.

Kate, Jinja and I decided that we would raise awareness of the issue of corrective rape and what happened to Kate. We drafted the letter and handed it out on the streets. With nervous anticipation, I looked forward to the day of the meeting. Although I still had my job, I spent more time now thinking about corrective rape. I was angry that the criminal justice system did not think this issue deserved special attention. It said it was difficult to classify these attacks as hate crimes and that they were only viewed as crimes in which the intention was to do grievious bodily harm. To me it seemed that the reluctance to

classify them as separate would result in the situation not being prioritised.

Meanwhile, Shandukani and I began to spend more time together especially as he no longer worked much outside the country. If I were to find the perfect words to describe our situation, I couldn't. He was the most charming man I'd ever met. Although we didn't complete each other's sentences, he always knew what to say to me.

When I first told him about the attack on Kate, and seeing my distress, he took me in his arms and told me,

"My sweet Cherie, you're a good friend. Kate's lucky to have you. But how can I brighten up your day?" Nothing felt more right than that moment. I was mostly spellbound by him and often stole moments to daydream about his touch and kisses, which always sent shivers through my body.

He mostly just showed up at my place, and I at his sometimes, and we would have dinner together. Kate and Jinja also joined in occasionally. There were times, however, when all I wanted was my own company – to enjoy the evening with a glass of wine and a book and not bother about plans.

One of my favourite times with him was when we watched the sunset at the beach and convinced ourselves that all beautiful things in life were free and came with no hassle.

We also speculated at length about NyaDenga, his great-grandmother. Each time Shandukani unraveled something new about her world, my fascination with her grew. There were times I woke up at two in the morning thinking about detail Shandukani could not explain about NyaDenga. In these instances, with pen and paper in hand, I tried to stretch my imagination, noting my cogitations of this woman who, to the sound of a beating drum, had a tendency to walk all over my mind, telling me to open up to her.

It must have been six months after the death of my father that he began to visit me more regularly in my dreams. The more he appeared to me, the more at peace I felt in the knowledge that my relationship with him somehow continued beyond my physical world. Sometimes he sat at the edge of my, and at other times he said things, many of which I couldn't remember upon waking up.

In one haunting encounter he told me I was no different from NyaDenga. *Stories transcend time and boundaries*, he said. When I awoke, I remembered him urging me to go and write my stories.

My encounters with my father encouraged me to dream; to make space somewhere in me in case he wanted to visit.

Chapter twenty

At the stream Denga sat on a rock with the leather bag given to her that morning by Nyamukamadi still tucked under her arm, the calabashes at her feet. When Nyamukamadi gave it to her, it was with the understanding that she would not expose it anywhere around the homestead. She explained she had been asked by Malise to dispose of it, and not let Denga, the spoilt girl, find it. When Denga wanted to know why Nyamukamadi decided to give it to her anyway, the answer was:

"Just have the bag if you still want it." Denga did not recognise it and only managed to peer inside it. The sight made her gasp with child-like pleasure and relief.

"*Ndi inwi no zwi itaho?*" asked Nyamukamadi.

"Yes, I did." Denga did not want to say much more than that. She had thanked her promptly before stepping into the dawn, making her way to the stream. It was only after walking out of the homestead that she allowed herself to feel gleeful. Within the confines of the homestead she did not dare let a ray of joy show because she still needed to remind them that she was not one of them.

Denga pondered the meaning of a dream she had had. In it she lived in a people-less, nameless village, with her one-compound homestead situated at the foot of a small hill. Surrounded by the tallest trees and the thickest foliage she had ever seen, the silence that enveloped her life and home was such that insect sounds formed an integral part of it all. Although she could feel herself breathe and move about, she was invisible. The dream, she thought, could only mean that she was free to go. But where to, when or how, she did not know. This dampened her spirit.

The spring sun was beginning to shine and its rays produced enough warmth on the rock on which Denga sat. She smiled when she thought about her dream. Rather pleased with the way in which the sun warmed her, she resisted turning over in order to warm her back. Instead, she drew the leather bag from under her arm and looked at the figurines inside. She took them out and lined them up on a crevice on the rock. She stared at them and hoped that they would confirm something about her dream, but they said nothing.

She leapt off the rock when she heard the canter of a horse. She fidgeted nervously while attempting to stuff the figurines back in the

bag and did not know whether or not she should have covered herself appropriately first.

A man cleared his throat from behind her and her heart raced as she hesitantly turned around. A young man held on to the horse's mane. Upon meeting Denga, he froze and did not seem to notice his horse wander off.

"Why do you look at me like that?" asked a startled Denga, no longer feeling as awkward as before. "*Ndi bere yanu iyi*?" she pointed at the horse.

"Yes. But you should not mind me."

"Do not look at me. Who are you?"

"Forgive me *mukololo*. But you are the most beautiful woman I have ever met."

"*Mukololo*? You must be imagining things because I am no princess?"

"In my heart you are." A smile escaped Denga's lips for it was her belief that the handsome man before her had lost his mind. She never thought of herself as beautiful. Nevertheless, the idea of her being called a princess brought about pleasant feelings.

"Can I hold your hand just so I can sleep well tonight?" By now Denga had finished packing all her figurines in the leather bag and was making ready to draw water at last.

"I will not give my hand to a man whose name I do not even know."

"I am Nemukula," he beamed.

"I am Denga," she held out her hand to him.

There was something about him, which she could not explain, that allowed her to feel at ease with him. As their hands touched, hers felt as though it were melting into his. Nemukula raised it up to his chest.

"Can you hear? My heart beats just for you?" he said looking into her eyes. She could feel it but did not know what she was supposed to do about it. "*Mukololo*. You have to come away with me."

"*Fhedzi* –"

"I want you and I am as certain as the sun rises every morning." Denga pulled her hand away from his grasp.

"I am married." Nemukula's eyes widened and his initial smile faded a degree.

"Do you know what your husband's heart beats like?"

"No."

"Well then, you know how mine beats. Leave him. I can make you much happier than anybody on earth. I will give you everything you want."

Denga shook her head. This man and his horse came from the bushes but now he wanted to take her away. She could not deny that she felt something she had never felt before, particularly when their hands touched.

"I have to go," said Denga.

"Will you at least think about it?"

"Yes. But you should know I do not know what I am saying."

"Meet me here tomorrow in the morning and tell me your decision."

"*Matshelo?*" said Denga, considering that tomorrow was too soon to leave with a stranger.

"*Zwoluga mukololo wanga*. Take as much time as you want. But I assure you I will be here every morning at this time, and when you are ready, I will take you with me. Only if you want." Denga watched his muscular body ascend the horse and gallop away.

She filled her calabashes up with water and hung the leather bag around her neck before heading home.

Her head was in a cloud, floating for most of the day. Because of this, she was hardly aware of what happened around her at the homestead. Above it all, she was terribly undecided about Nemukula. She wanted to leave and if what she understood of her dream was correct, she would. But did Nemukula mean what he said? Would it be right to take him seriously? As the day progressed so did Denga's curiosity about him. Thoughts about Nemukula were the reason she could not think clearly about her plan to escape. Makhulu's solemn appearance, which Denga witnessed while sweeping the open ground in the centre of the homestead, did not help.

"*Nwana nga*. I have spoken with the others, Nyawasedza *na* Nyamukamadi." She touched the side of her waistline as if she felt pain. She walked slowly, with a slight limp; Denga followed closely behind. When they reached the *mutshikili* Makhulu spread out her grass mat, which had been rolled up against the tree. She sat down with her hands on her knees while Denga folded her legs under her buttocks.

"*Ndo takala mbiluni yanga*. Your father will be very pleased to know you are finally happy here. Your happiness is very important."

“What are you talking about Makhulu?” How could that be because as far as Denga was concerned she had carefully guarded every word, smile and action she took.

“Malise is my child and I want to urge you to exercise patience with him. He was not always like this, you know. The temper. No. The son I gave birth to was not an angry one,” Makhulu twiddled her fingers. “But in life, things change all the time. They change no matter how much you think they will not.”

“Makhulu, he is hardly here, Malise.”

“Yes, but I will not always be here. I am old now and I cannot always come to rescue you when your husband wants to deal with you.”

The sun by now was hot and there was not even a hint of a breeze, although it helped to be in the shade. Denga thought Makhulu was now turning on her.

“You said you talked to the others.”

“Well yes. Thank you for reminding me. We think it is time you have a child. As you can see, all the children here *ndi vhana vha vhasidzana*. Maybe Mulamuleli will be pleased with you and we will finally have an heir, if it is a boy.”

Denga completely lost interest in what Makhulu was saying, and if she could she would have hurried her up somehow. But what became clear in her mind was that her leaving the homestead would have to take place without delay. This talk of an heir was more than she could handle.

“Well,” said Makhulu with a twinkle in her eye, “When your husband comes home, you must be the one to prepare him food. You will no longer sleep in my *tshitanga*. Tonight when your husband comes, you must go to him.”

Denga did not have much to pack before she ventured into no-man’s land. Her few belongings still occupied the same corner that they that they had been occupying since her arrival. All she needed to do now was to wait for the signs of dawn.

Denga also knew that her plan might not be as simple to execute as she had imagined. Following her conversation Denga observed that Nyawasedza seemed kinder to her. She spoke softer and also asked her to sit next to her during the nighttime story. Nyamukamadi was apathetic.

After the story Nyawasedza took Denga to the cooking area and explained to her how Malise wanted his food to be cooked, how he wanted to be served and how he wanted to be greeted by a respectful wife. She

emphasised that a good wife was never idle; she thought of the needs of her husband before she thought of her own first. In fact, she did not need to have needs of her own because it was enough that her husband was contented. Every time Denga looked behind her, Nyamukamadi was right there, quietly working on other things. Nyawasedza left Denga to cook. Instead of preparing to begin, Denga folded her arms.

Nyamukamadi began,

"Have you never cooked *vhuswa* before?" Before Denga had an opportunity to answer, she said: "I saw you this morning at the stream."

"Do you plan to do tell someone about it?"

"If I said I did?"

"I did nothing wrong."

"I will not tell. But you must know that our husband is a respected man in this village. Had someone else seen you, I do not know what would have become of you. Be careful."

"Why did you come after me?" asked Denga.

"No reason."

Malise came home. His arrival was much later than expected, and in the silence of the Makhulu's compound Denga could hear the excited voices of the children asking their father what he had brought for them this time. In his interaction with them, Malise sounded affectionate. Denga almost relished the thought that she could have misjudged his character but soon remembered that he was the same person with a violent temper. She would have to be dead to give him an heir. She did not have much longer to be at the homestead and as soon as all was quiet, she too would quietly make her exit. She was deep in thought when Nyawasedza entered hurriedly.

"He is here. Our husband is here. You have to come and greet him. You will serve him his food later, but do everything as I told you and you will be fine."

Denga reluctantly followed the older woman to the fireside where Malise sat with Makhulu. She greeted him politely, much to Makhulu's delight, but did not stay to find out about the details of his expedition. Nyawasedza stayed.

In the kitchen Denga found Nyamukamadi more than ready to help prepare food for their husband.

"You need not go into our husband's compound tonight if you do not feel up to it." Denga stared back at her and said nothing. "He will not have to know. I can go in your place and will hide my face from him. If he talks I will say nothing back."

Denga filled a wooden bowl with water and took it to Malise so that he could wash his hands. When she came back to the kitchen, Nyamukamadi continued,

"Some people think they are *Vhadzimu*. I can give our husband an heir. I hate that Nyawasedza is the only one who always decides who our husband sleeps with. She rules him."

Denga served the food. Malise ate and said nothing. She went back to the compound she shared with Makhulu and waited for an opportune moment to flee. Nyawasedza paid her an unexpected visit. She wanted to make sure that Denga would not be confused about what needed to happen that night regarding the making of an heir. Her talk was disrupted when her children called for her attention.

One by one the children of the homestead filled their sleeping compound as the night wore on. Makhulu, Nyawasedza, Nyamukamadi and Malise all remained at the fireside. From the compound Denga could hear the women laugh whenever Malise stopped talking. She could not hear the conversation, but as the homestead settled down she found her opportunity to leave.

It was dark save for the illumination of the moon as she clandestinely crept into the shadows of homestead. As she neared the tree next to the entrance, she heard Malise's voice.

"Where do you think you are going?" She felt her mouth become dry in an instant. "I said, where do you think you are going?" Malise repeated, his voice steady and firm.

Denga could not see him and could not tell if he was indeed addressing her. She resolved not to answer until she could see him. She hoped that the tree at the homestead's exit concealed her completely as she hid behind the trunk. At that moment she heard a sound of feet shuffling but could not make out whether they were coming towards her or going away. She stood very still and tried not to breathe. It came as a relief to hear Nyamukamadi reply,

"I am just trying to see if all is in order in Makhulu's compound."

"The girl? Where is she?"

"*Ukhou tamba*. She is right here," Denga heard Nyamukamadi lie. It was quiet again when the voices stopped.

Denga walked stealthily into the dark of the night with very little idea of where she was going. Her plan was to walk and walk and walk until she was certain that she was very far away from the homestead.

That night she found that there were three things that mattered. The first was that she was not afraid of the dark anymore; it was certainly better than spending one more night at the homestead. The second was that not knowing where she was going was the least of her worries. Lastly, thoughts of Nemukula kept her going. Now she knew that she wanted to be with him. Many times she thought she could walk slowly so that by the time morning broke, she could meet Nemukula again. She planned to tell him that she wanted to go away with him, and that she wanted to be with him all the time. Yet she did not want to risk being found nearby the homestead, for the stream was not at all far from it.

She trudged in the dark until her legs could no longer carry her. She found shelter in a nearby bush, promising herself that as soon as she was rested she would resume her journey.

She wished she were a star in the sky when she watched them shine brightly above her.

Chapter twenty-one

The much anticipated evening of the meeting arrived and Kate, Jinja and I were all a bundle of nerves. We didn't know how many people to expect, or what to expect. What I knew for certain was that a discussion on violence against lesbians was going to take place.

Three people showed up; that gave us a total of six. We had decided that since Kate became emotional sometimes when she talked about her attack, it would be good if I handled the introductions of everyone in attendance, and later when she felt well enough to speak, then she would speak. It was only after Jinja, brought tea and coffee to our guests that Kate wanted to say something. I was amazed at clarity with which she spoke as she related everything to the riveted guests in as much detail as possible. Although I had not been there, I re-lived the events of the night of her attack, and all the associated emotions, as if it had taken place only the night before. By the time Kate had finished telling her story, there was not a sound in the room; only terror-struck faces. Questions and comments began only after Jinja, who had been holding Kate's hand throughout, offered more tea and coffee.

Mark and Delight, the only other gay couple in the lounge, seemed most disturbed.

"We fled our country because it's illegal to be born gay," lamented Delight.

"It's hard to believe these things do happen here too. I mean, South Africans are supposed to have it all figured out. Were you not the first country in Africa to include the protection of gay rights in your national constitution?" added Mark.

Mrs. Sililo, who had been quiet, began: "You're mistaken if you think we have it all figured out. Sometimes I don't think we can make heads or tails of where we are."

Mrs. Sililo's only child, Vusi, was murdered because he was gay. "One moment we speak of all human rights being equal and protected, the next, we discover that some rights are more equal than others. The police didn't say my son was murdered because he was gay. I said it. But they wouldn't hear of it. Had I been helped to find my son's killers, I may have been satisfied that there is true justice. But the

case vanished. Every single day I wait to hear news that his murderers have been found." Mrs. Sililo was deeply troubled.

"Our families had reported us to authorities, but we fled as soon as we heard the police would soon look for us," Mark said.

"O God, you should have seen our haste. Haste is one thing, but fearing for our lives because we were born this way was completely unfair. No one should have to live like that."

"You should have met my son Vusi. You'd have loved him," said Mrs. Sililo who had been staring at the space before her. "He had the most beautiful heart I'd ever seen." Tears fell from her eyes as she began to hum a tune I couldn't recognise. I reached for a packet of tissues from my bag and offered them to her, but she refused. "My angel," she whispered. "My angel."

At the end of the meeting I wanted to suggest that if people were interested, we should discuss a day and a time to meet again so that we could decide how we moved forward, but I was crying. It was Mrs. Sililo who made me cry. Although the circumstances of the death of her son and my father were different, I could relate to her loss. I missed my father very dearly and wished, in that moment, to die so that I could go and be with him.

It was fortunate that Jinja and Kate knew what should have been said at the end of the meeting and so helped say what I couldn't. *Stories transcend time and boundaries*, my father had said during one of his ancestral visitations.

When I decided to take leave from work, it was with the intention of taking a break from everything. I needed to connect more with NyaDenga and her story. I had for a while been curious about her, and the dreams I had about her almost every night were vivid, sometimes to the point that I woke up with a sense of her presence in my flat. I didn't know what she wanted from me, but nearly every time I had dreams, she showed me her village. It was nothing like mine, yet she told me sometimes that it was. I began to feel like there was a part of me that knew her, and had a deep-seated yearning to know her.

Once I told Shandukani about this but he just said it must have been something I ate or drank that gave me the dreams.

"Look, I hardly know the woman myself. I'm only telling you what I've heard in my family," Shandukani had said.

"I know. But I think my ancestors could have sent her to pass a message or something. Maybe your ancestors did. I don't know," I didn't even know if I believed what I said, but I needed a way to explain why I spent many nights in my flat with a dead woman I didn't know.

"Cherie," he'd said. "We're not superstitious. Those beliefs belong to the olden times. Science can explain most things these days."

Hers was one of those situations I couldn't run from; and no matter how much I didn't want to think of NyaDenga, I still did. She was the same woman who walked all over my mind telling me to open up to her.

Stories transcend time and boundaries, my father had said in my dream.

During my leave I took an eighteen hour train ride to Johannesburg. I was in fact on the way to Venda. It was a spontaneous decision; a self-imposed challenge I wanted to rise to. When my mother called wanting to find out if I would be home, I told her I had to work. I knew she would never agree with me traveling far and to a place where she thought I knew no one.

Shandukani had left town to wrap up a few more things in Uganda. I'd only spoken about my visit to his hometown with his sister Rose, who worked in Thohoyandou – what used to the capital town of Venda. She was the one who told me that all buses and trains going to Venda stopped at Johannesburg's Park Station first, and from there I would have to catch another bus to Thohoyandou.

I had never been to Johannesburg before and when I got off the train at Park Station, it looked like the kind of Johannesburg I had read about and seen in films. Scenes from the films *Cry Freedom, Cry the Beloved Country* and *Sarafina* came to my mind as a sea of people rushed back and forth like waves. They spoke seSotho, mixed with isiZulu, a touch of Afrikaans and English and other languages which were unfamiliar to me. Rose had not explained where the buses to Venda were; she'd only said I should ask. I had heard how new people in the city were almost always robbed of their belongings, sometimes, by amateurish crooks. Sometimes newbies were easy to spot. I myself could easily spot new-comers in PE – they stopped everyone to ask for directions. In Johannesburg I did not want to be obvious in case some felon noticed me.

Clutching my bag tightly I followed others who were coming out of the train, up the stairs, past urine-scented corridors and into the main area of the station. There were offices everywhere. Restaurants, shops, banks, ATMs, and a huge TV screen that blasted music by one of the local gospel artists. In front of the different bus offices were long lines of people waiting. Some sat on their luggage while some stood. It was strange that there were also benches where people could sit while waiting, but these were not visible. They were used as beds by those who, I assumed, had spent the night at the station.

I was in Johannesburg. *The* far away Johannesburg that people regarded so highly where I came from. When I was young I listened on the radio to songs by Madosini, a legendary Xhosa musician. At that time her music was played before the one o'clock drama. While the people slept on the chairs at Park Station, the sound of *umrhube* – a mouth bow – played in my head as I remembered the song *Wenu Se Goli*, about a woman whose husband worked in the mines of Johannesburg. As a four or five-year old at the time, I had made up my own lyrics to the song although I later discovered that the woman was in fact making a plea with her husband to go back home to the village. Or else, *'uzakudibana nent'ezibandayo'* (her love for him would be finished or she'd simply find another love).

I found myself in a queue at one of the bus offices. When my turn came I asked where I could find a bus to Venda.

"I'm sorry ma'am, where?" said the lady.

"Thohoyandou," I corrected myself. Venda as a homeland, no longer existed since the change of government. Just like there was no longer a Transkei and a Ciskei, but African people who came from those areas still used the old homeland names.

"Try the other guys," she said, pointing to the buses opposite her. I joined many queues trying to find the bus and was lucky in the end. There was a bus leaving in ten minutes. I rushed to buy my ticket and was escorted by a security guard to the bus. It was full with only one seat remaining. When I sat down I sent a text message to Rose, telling her that I would arrive in the late afternoon. I thanked her for being kind enough to make my reservation at the local hotel in town. She replied that I could save myself a lot of money if I went to stay over at her home with her and Shandukani's parents. She had suggested this before, but I had not been introduced to their parents.

In my culture, the introduction of families only took place around the time of *lobola* negotiations.

I closed my eyes and went through the list of things Rose and I had discussed we would do. I could imagine the Phiphidi waterfalls, Thathe Vondwe Forest and Lake Fundudzi. Rose promised to show me all these and Phungoni village, although the last was not in her plans. When I proposed it initially, she said she was confused about why I would want to go there.

"It's so far," she said.

"Please Rose, I can't travel this far and still be unable to see the place." I wanted to see if it would be the place NyaDenga showed me in my dreams. If it was or bore any resemblance, I would know for sure that she had indeed visited me in my dreams. I would ask her what she wanted the next time she came.

Phungoni was a long way away from Thohoyandou and the drive felt endless. The place was more mountainous than I imagined. I recalled, from my reading, that the mountains in the region were the reason that other tribes could not conquer the vhaVenda people during tribal wars. We ascended and descended the Soutpansberg mountain range on a gravel road; from the top, scattered villages appeared small enough to fit into a large human hand, and from the bottom they looked nearly impossible to reach.

Rose gave me a crash course in her language as I snapped photographs of the villages we passed and of people walking along the road. This part of Venda was different from Thohoyandou, which had a KFC, Nandos, Shoprite, Debonair's and retail clothing franchises sprouting everywhere. The housing settlements surrounding the town were a mix of ordinary houses, townhouse complexes and newly built homes with posh designs. In some of the villages, homesteads were a combination of newly built structures, rondavels with thatched roofs, animal enclosures, granaries and water tanks.

"We build modern houses in Venda," teased Rose when I commented on the beauty of the houses.

"It's very impressive."

Once we reached an apex on the road Rose stopped the car and asked me to step out. From where we stood she pointed to a lake at the bottom.

"Do you see that?" she asked.

"Yes," I said, after locating the lake amid trees and foliage.

"It's the holy lake. Fundudzi. It's the largest natural lake in the region, I think."

"Why is it holy?"

"Spirits live there. It's better not to get too close." I wondered what would happen if we ventured close to the water, but the dense forest that surrounded it and the fact that there was no visible direct road to get there proved to be effective deterrents.

"The river, Mutale, runs through the lake. *Mutale* means to draw a line in TshiVenda," said Rose, moving slightly so as to get a clearer view. I moved along with her. "The water in the lake does not mix with the river water and if we were a little closer, you would actually see the line drawn in the lake by the river. The lake water is said to be colder than the river water," said Rose.

In the lake, I also learnt, resided a python to which young maidens were sacrificed in olden times. Rose told me that a python was symbolic and was central to the *domba* ritual. This ritual was performed in the olden days, not as much now, to initiate young men and women into their marital roles. It was where they learnt about marriage, childbirth, parenthood, diseases and behaviour.

In the *domba* the chief's kraal, symbolised Lake Fundudzi and the python represented a small snake believed to be inherent in all women. The snake was believed to be the main ingredient in building a foetus. I could imagine the python dance, as Rose explained and animatedly illustrated, with dancers standing in a long line, their hands placed on the shoulders of the person in front, moving to imitate a snake.

The remains of the old homestead where NyaDenga lived were situated on a terraced slope of a hill. Across it were more houses built on yet another hill incline. I saw a solid wall of rocks at the edge of a grass-covered rise, which Rose explained were the foundations on which the homestead compounds were built. Some parts of the ground were clear while others were covered with bits of dead grass and trees. I stretched my imagination to see the homestead's compounds as they might have been. I saw the kraal and the field where the cows might have grazed.

Rose's aunt, Makhadzi vhoMarubini, lived a few metres from the old homestead.

What I saw in her home is a story for another day.

Chapter twenty-two

At dawn Denga awoke to the sound of grass softly rustling in her ear. Her soles and palms were yellow from the night's cold. Her body ached even though she had slept soundly.

She stretched and inhaled morning air, before searching for her goatskin cape, which Avhashoni made for her long ago. When she found it, she draped it over her shoulders and contemplated her next move. In the distance she saw a cloud of smoke unfurling and decided to follow it. She walked on the pebbled soil, which had outcrops of thorny bushes. Her legs were occasionally scratched as she steered clear of existing footpaths. By the middle of the day, however, it began to rain and slowly the smoke faded. As the rain strengthened, Denga, soaked and quivering, was exhausted.

She was tired of a life on the run, of being frightened of Malise, her anger and the battle she fought when nobody was watching. Why did her father not listen to her when she said she did not want to be married? Why did her mothers do nothing as Malise and his men carried her away? Why did no one question a man when he wanted to do things, but because she was a woman, she could not be heard? Her *musadzi wa bvumba* once said *One for a woman and always more for a man.* It *did* not make sense then, but it did now. As her shivers became more violent, she decided to sit where she was and began to make up her mind that she would rather be dead. For the first time Denga admitted to herself that wanting her self-determination was difficult. What she wanted, she thought, she had seen no one do. As these thoughts occurred to her, she saw darkness around her; her spirit insipid.

Her heart felt heavy as she walked, deliberating the most reasonable way to ease her pain. She would jump into a river, the nearest one she found, and let herself sink to the bottom. She would initially hold her breath until she could do it no more. She would ultimately breathe in the river water until it filled her lungs completely.

The vegetation thickened and the trees had become taller by the time she reached the edge of a hillock. There were also a few hills she had had to climb. She stood for a moment and watched with curiosity the lake, which lay below. It was the biggest she had ever seen. Could it have been the mysterious lake of spirits she had heard about as a

child? At its opposite end a mountain cast a shadow on it, as if guarding the lake. All around it were smaller, meagerly covered undulating hills. From a cleft between the lake and the mountain, smoke emanated.

Denga saw that the lake was still a distance from her as she made her way to it. The shrubbery with its thickness and prickly thorns made her navigation all the more difficult as she descended rock and soil. She dropped her bag with figurines and clothes, and felt the weight on her shoulders lift. Thorns hooked onto her cape but Denga would not slow down. The breeze which whistled through the hushed valley was cold and caused her damp cape to cling to her.

When her feet eventually touched the cold water, she paused a moment before wading towards the centre. As she trod she could see golden clay beneath the small ripples. She lost her balance and fell in the water. She pulled herself out, but soon slipped back in. No sooner had she stood up than she fell in again. She removed her cape and the rest of her clothes as she suspected that their heaviness was the reason behind her falling. When she was up again, ready to wade forward, she realised that her desire to drown herself was no longer as strong. She wanted to live, and with that thought turned around and began to walk out of the lake.

As she headed back, a voice called to her. She dismissed it, thinking it impossible as she hadn't seen anybody. When the voice called her name again, Denga heard it. It called repeatedly from behind her. She was frightened out of her mind, but could not run, also because she was knee-deep in the water. She could not decipher if it was a woman's or a man's voice. Denga splattered water vigorously all around her, crawling and digging her fingers into the smooth clay as she hastened to come out. She made it out of the lake. Exhausted, panting and naked, she collapsed on her back. The voice had gone.

When she finally sat up she could see her cape drift further and further away in the water. The bag with her figurines lay beside her, and in a transitory moment she recalled having disposed of it.
"I must have forgotten," she thought. While glancing at the bag she caught sight of a half complete miniature old man sitting on a drum. What troubled Denga was a feeling she had of being watched. She leapt to her feet and ran for cover, but soon found herself walking back to the figurine, her hand over her mouth. Before her eyes, the figurine

was transformed into an apparition of an ordinary-sized old man with white hair. He beat his drum in furious rhythms, which initially sounded unsynchronised. The more he beat, the more the rhythm sounded harmonised. From time to time he glanced up at Denga saying nothing.

The old man beat the drum until white smoke, which choked and caused Denga to feel dizzy, blew. She coughed and when she was overcome she crashed on the ground. She convulsed until all the strength had ebbed from her.

The old man, with the drum under his arm, stood above her. His beating had grown softer. He inspected Denga's face and often changed his position as if to catch a better view of her.

"You called and I came, I was expecting you," he said. Denga lay motionless and although she could hear him, she felt as though she were in a trance. The light from the sun shone through the man, blinding Denga.

"*No mmbiza nda da, fhedzi ndo vha ndo ni lavhelela*," he repeated.

All Denga did was moan as she could not speak. This frustrated her as she wanted to respond.

"*No mmbidza nda da, fhedzi ndo vha ndo nilavhelela*. It is not your fault." The old man turned away from Denga and faced the water. He put his drum down, squatted over it and began to play as furiously as before. When he had finished, he sat on top of it, just the way Denga had made him, and seemed contemplative. He stood up and paced the small distance between Denga and his drum, all the while mumbling. He scooped a handful of damp soil and peppered it over Denga's torso. She felt her limbs freeze as the soil landed on her.

"I am making a mark on you,". He answered the unarticulated question that had been playing on Denga's mind. The man stared at her face, but she wanted to turn away. The confusion she had initially felt slowly waned as a torrent of questions filled her mind.

"*Mmbudziso nga nthihi*. A child should not ask so many questions." The man laughed, but did not give a reason for marking Denga. She was frustrated that she could not talk.

"I am the ancestor you called. You are the chosen one." The old man sprinkled Denga with soil again.

"Once in a while a person who can change things around is born." Denga heard the old man's words, but when she opened her mouth to speak, an incoherent sound came out.

When the man was silent, Denga's mind became flooded with images of her rigid clay figurines dancing in the air and speaking in voices she had nearly forgotten. Their lips did not move and she could not easily see which figurine said what.

Before Denga could formulate a question in her mind, the figurines started talking,

"It is good she left, she must never be married. She has obligations and some things she cannot do." said one.

"Let her figure it out," said the other. "She is no longer a child."

When Denga regained the full effect of her senses, she was still on the ground, enveloped in silence. The old man had gone but she had his figurine in her hand. She jumped to her feet, bewildered at the sudden realisation of what she had experienced. When she asked herself what had happened, she could still hear the high-pitched voices say,

"She is not a child, *mulitsheni azwi wana ene mune*." Her heart and head felt as if they were about to explode. In a feat of rage, she unleashed a long piercing scream, which echoed throughout the valley. She turned in all directions, and stomping her feet at times.

"Did you have to paralyse me old man?" Her question went unanswered. "Answer me!" she demanded. Her chest still burned with anger when she decided to build herself shelter for the night. She had seen people build their compounds with nothing more than sticks, rocks and soil. Denga did not doubt her ability to do the same. She would sleep under a bush in the night and as soon as morning broke she would build her compound until it was all done.

True to her commitment, she awoke at the first sign of dawn and began effecting her building plans. She walked about searching for suitable sticks and wood, and when she found them she spent the better part of the day knocking them into the ground in the shape of a hut. Exhausted and thirsty she went to the lake, which she now called Bvungwi because of the spirits she was convinced lived there. She drank from it and also rested. She thought about the challenges of completing her hut. She began to feel hunger pangs. There must be wild fruit somewhere, she thought. However, before she knew it, she yielded to the temptation of moulding a clay pot, which she knew she would need.

It was while she was preoccupied with this task that she heard the sound of a horse in the distance. At once she stopped what she was

doing and listened closely. When she glanced back, she caught sight of the horse next to her hut. Not knowing what to expect, she rushed up to see who had arrived. The horse grazed on bits of grass as Denga approached it. Its owner, however, was out of sight. She had hardly seen any horses around, in fact, Nemukula's was one of a few she had seen. With one of the sticks in her hand, she walked around the hut, careful not to rouse any suspicion, and found Nemukula waiting for her with a broad smile on his face.

"I thought it was you," he said.

"Nemukula?" she said dropping her stick and beginning to feel messy and not at all like the woman he had first met.

"A man came to tell me he had seen a woman at Bvungwi, so I came."

"Is that where I am?"

"What happened to you? We were supposed to meet," said Nemukula.

"Wait. I never saw people."

"It does not mean someone did not see you. This is Bvungwi. Spirits live here."

"*Azwidini*. I will be where I please."

"*Mukololo*."

"*Aa*?" replied Denga looking up at him. For the first time during their short meeting their eyes met.

"I have not slept well since the last time I saw you. I became worried when I did not see you for days."

"I left the man and his wives."

"You did?" said Nemukula with a hint of a smile.

"Ee," Denga said, her arms folded across her chest.

"Did you think about what I asked?"

"Do you want truth or lies out of me?"

"I want good news from you."

"I have thought about you since our last meeting. At first I wanted to be with you because you were all I could think about. But now–"

"Do not tell me you no longer wish for this. *Mukololo*, you have to be my wife," he pleaded.

"I cannot marry you. My life, everything in it is up-side-down."

"I do not care. Come with me."

"Do you want somebody that does not have a home? I do not have people. I left them in Phungoni."

"I will give you a family and a home. I will give you anything you want."

"It is not possible. Do you even know why I left?"

"The reasons are not important to me. I love what I see before me and that is enough."

"I want to stay where I am. I do not want to be told where I should stay and with whom. If I am alone, I can do this."

"I love you as you are."

"Will you love me still when I wake up some mornings telling you that you should be the one to make food because I simply have no desire to do it?"

"*Mukololo*, believe me when I tell you that I am all yours." Denga eyed him suspiciously. In all her life she had never heard of a man who would trade places with his wife.

"Do you not have a wife?"

"You are the wife I have been waiting for."

"It is getting late. I must finish here," said Denga looking around her.

"Tomorrow I will go to your father. I would like him to accept a dowry from me."

"I have not agreed with you on this," she said walking away from Nemukula. He stood back before following her.

"*Mukololo* I will sleep better knowing I did what was right," said Nemukula.

In the silence that ensued they picked up more sticks to close the existing gaps on the hut. He helped her search for grass, which they would use to cover the roof.

"My father's name is Mulamuleli. But remember I said there is no need for you to go there," said Denga at last. Tell him not to be angry when you meet him."

Chapter twenty-three

While I spent the weekend in Venda avoiding to think about work, I had an opportunity to begin writing about NyaDenga's story, including everything Shandukani ever told me about her. I wanted to forget nothing especially as my journey to Venda had been by far the most precious I'd undertaken. It was like a gem I didn't want to lose; I felt richer in experience for having touched and seen the soil that NyaDenga once walked on.

Stories transcend time and boundaries, my father had said during one of his visitations.

I slept for the better part of Monday morning and sent a text message to Shandukani when I woke up. He was about to board a flight back and said he wanted to take me on a special date in the evening. After hearing his voice I feared I might get ill. I made myself a strong cup of coffee and had a cigarette.

Only an hour before our date, I panicked. The secret I had closely guarded came tumbling forth in my mind. There was nothing I could do to make sure it remained only a distant memory. I wanted to run and hit my head hard against some concrete surface to get rid of it.

As I dressed, I took deep breaths to calm my nerves. It did not help, so instead I talked to myself about letting sleeping dogs lie.

I wept like a baby when I held Shandukani in my arms; he looked more handsome with his unkempt beard and sideburns.

"Cherie, why are you crying? Is it something I did?" he kept asking. I hated myself for being weak-willed. I should have enjoyed his homecoming but instead I found myself at the beach, at the special date he'd promised, with half my thoughts on him and the other half on my guilt.

He laid out a throw on the sand and placed the picnic basket on top. In it was a bottle of wine, plastic wine glasses, candles, chocolates but no food. I hoped that he did not plan for us to stay out long, considering that I had eaten nothing substantial for the whole day.

We chatted about his work. He told me about how he and a friend had got into a minor accident at a traffic light. He must have passed

out, he said, he said, because when he woke up, the car was overturned and all around it were people filled with sympathetic stares. His shoes and wallet were missing and none of the sympathisers saw them.

"Shandu, why didn't you call?"

"What would you have done? Besides, I did call, but you didn't answer."

"I'm sorry about it."

"You see, you couldn't have done anything about it." After a pause, he said, "How did you end up in Venda?"

"I took the train to Johannesburg and then a bus to Venda. Rose told me how I could do it."

"I see." I remembered I hadn't told him about my trip as it hadn't occurred to me that I should.

"You should have told me," he said.

"What would you have done?"

"Wished you well?"

The wine and the chocolates were the best part of the picnic. Soon I began to luxuriate in the ocean's salty smell, imagining it to clear out the clutter scattered in my mind. I wished Shandukani would not look at me so attentively as the small foamy waves came crashing to the shore; it made me feel transparent.

"What's wrong tonight?" he asked.

"I'm tired," I replied, and quickly added, "Do you want another glass?"

"No. I want to talk to you." The wine disappeared from my system faster that I could blink.

"About what?" my voice came out with a little squeak, so I cleared my throat. He laughed.

The waves circulated back and forth; near and far. I loved the sound of the ocean and, just for tonight, I wished it could hide me in some secret place only it knew about.

"I've been thinking," said Shandukani. He asked me to move closer to him so that we sat face to face. The moment he faced me, I wanted to tell him everything, spill the beans on myself. I must have been half a second from spewing everything out when he said,

"I know we haven't been together that long but I can't imagine my life without you. Cherie, you make my world go round." At that moment my love for him welled up inside me like the surge of a tide.

"I don't know what to say."

"Just say you love me," and he waited for me to say it.

"I love you."

He took his phone from his pocket and showed me a date he had saved on the calendar.

"That's the date I hope to send my father to your people so they can discuss how much I can buy you for," he teased.

"Are you asking me to marry you?"

"Will you? Will you be wife?" he said taking my hands and squeezing them in his.

"What happened to the engagement ring being hidden in a sparkling wine glass? What about the treasure hunt?" I joked.

"We're Africans and we'll do it the African way. I would like to send cows to your father first."

"We haven't even been together that long so this is all too sudden."

"Cherie, I have made up my mind about you. I know six, ten, twenty months from now, I'll still be feeling the same."

"Let me think about it first," I said, promising to give him an answer when I was ready.

"You mean you don't know what you think about us?" Now he seemed to be getting nervous.

"It's not that. But it's only fair that you give me time."

We picked up our shoes, the empty bottle and the plastic glasses and began walking back to the flat.

"Would I be accepted in your family if I am not a Venda?" I asked.

"Of course you'd be," Shandukani turned to me and smiled. "I didn't think you were this insecure. Why wouldn't they?" he laughed.

"Well, you know how old people are. I'm sure they always told you they expected you to bring them a Venda bride."

"Are you worried about what your mother and uncles would say?"

"No, not worried."

As soon as Shandukani and I kissed goodnight, Kate and Jinja arrived at my flat, throwing themselves on to the sofas, before we all decided that we would go to smoke outside on the balcony. A friend of theirs from tech had on that day received a marriage proposal from her student boyfriend. Although most of their friends said they were happy

for them, Jinja had been harsh in telling her friend that she thought it was stupid to marry straight out of varsity.

I could honestly not look at Jinja, not since the night Kate was attacked. I was surprised that she was comfortable. I found myself wondering if she had amnesia.

"Why not wait? Why couldn't the guy wait until she was ready to pop the question herself?" said Jinja, blowing out ringlets of smoke. Kate said, "Love, don't you think you've insulted the poor woman enough?" To me she said, "I've been telling her it's very rude to express her opinion like that. She should have just congratulated the woman."

"I think the whole marriage proposal, thing is a scam. It's meant for men to perpetuate their hold over women," said Jinja.

As I listened to Jinja talk I recalled the night of Kate's attack. After we left her in hospital, I went back with Jinja to their flat. I'd made hot chocolate hoping that it would get us both out of our misery with Kate being in hospital.

I tried to reason that sometimes tragedy brought people together and forced them to relate more on an emotional level. Some things just couldn't be said in words.

After I made hot chocolate for Jinja and myself we sat on the couch and slowly sipped it, all the while talking about how our society did not embrace and be tolerant of difference.

When we had finished drinking I took the cups to the kitchen to wash them. Jinja came and as she dried the cups there was a moment in which we were both silent, just gazing at each other. I didn't know what went through her mind, but I felt strangely drawn to her. She was an attractive person and I found her love and concern for Kate compelling. She placed the dry cups on the counter and held my hand. I didn't resist as I felt a current rush through me. What happened next was unexpected. We kissed with such passion that our hands were all over our bodies and faces. I had never kissed a woman before.

"What's wrong?" Jinja wanted to know as I suddenly pulled away.

"This," I said, throwing my hands in the air. "I'm not a lesbian."

"But we just kissed."

"I know. Please, I don't know what I'm doing. I think I am curious."

"I told you there's a lesbian waiting to come out of every woman." Jinja wasn't as perturbed by this as I was. I bolted out of her flat back to my place thinking about Kate who was lying in hospital and about Shandukani.

"You read too much into things," said Kate. "People should be allowed to marry if they're in love."

"All that stuff about love fizzles over a long period. What then after that?" said Jinja.

"Somebody once told me you've to marry your best friend because when love is gone at least you still have friendship," I chirped in. I did not plan to tell Kate and Jinja that I had been proposed to.

"My parents are divorced," said Kate. "But it doesn't stop me from thinking it's romantic when a guy proposes. Even if the ring he provides for the occasion only costs five rands." We all laughed.

"That's precisely why you shouldn't want to marry. It disorganises your life completely," said Jinja.

"Spoken like a true divorcee," I mocked.

"Tell her, Chuma," protested Kate.

After they both left Jinja came back alone. I nearly spilled the water I was drinking when I saw her. She wanted to know if I had thought about her since that time in her flat.

"If I got into a relationship with another woman, I would feel like I'm wearing my right shoe on my left foot. I love men. I think I mean testosterone."

"It's fine. Be confused if you want" said Jinja.
After she left I took a shower, ate left-over spaghetti bolognaise and went to my room. I lit up incense and lay on my back for a while. The first thought that came to me was that I had to tell Shandukani the truth. I watched as a white cloud of smoke furl up from the incense.

Chapter twenty-four

A gust of wind blew down Denga's unfinished compound the very day Nemukula left to see her father. It was while she slept at night that the voices from the figurines returned, waking her. She could not hear them well at first because they talked simultaneously, and shouted. Denga sat up, rubbing sleep from her eyes. Her figurine bag lay beside her, securely bound.

The raucous sounds, however, came not from the bag, but were above, below and everywhere around her. It was a community of voices. Other than to sit and wait until the racket ceased she did not know what to do. As the figurines persisted, Denga learnt that there was a kind of debate going on. In no time the voices became lucid, and when she began to listen she wished she was deaf. The voices were talking to her. For some reason they were angry. Some said they did not understand how she could not accept that she had been 'marked' by *Vhadzimu*. At this point Denga asked the voices what they expected of her. As far as she knew she was paralysed by the old man only the day before, who said he was 'marking her.

The voices became quiet, and when she looked about the night was so quiet that she could hear only the rustling grass. No sooner had she repeated the question in her mind than the voices spoke again. A high-pitched voice told Denga to stop pretending she did not know about being 'marked' and being chosen.

Denga knew of people who had *uhwelwa* but did not think that it was something that could happen to her. People who were chosen many times found out through severe illness, what their situation in life was. Denga remembered being told that her great-grandmother had also been a healer. Like many, she too had a story of an unknown sickness, which would not abate no matter how many healers she saw. When she became a healer, she was healed because she accepted her call to be a healer from *Vhadzimu*. What confused Denga about this situation was that she was not sick. She also knew that they became very sick before they accepted that they had a calling from *Vhadzimu*. But she was not ill. `

"You cannot simply take over my life without an explanation," said Denga to the figurines.

Another high-pitched voice, calmer than the first, replied: "We thought you knew when you called." Then, to the others it said:

"Imagine she thinks there is only one way to be sick," to which the figurines laughed

"But I never called," protested Denga.

"When you shape and lose yourself in clay, and wake up having completed something which you cannot remember, where do you think you go?" the calm-voiced figurine asked.

Denga was at a loss for words as she wondered how her love for making clay figurines, an activity despised by her mother, could turn out like this.

"You speak softly to her," demanded another high-pitched voice. "Did we not tell her to figure it out? But now she makes excuses for her inability to work things out herself. She is not a child and we should not treat her like one."

Denga could feel her patience wearing thin as she said, "First you came – you said I called. And now you want to take over my life?" According to her, the figurines were much too opinionated and did not realise that Denga had it in her to pound every single one of them into fine dust.

There was silence as she pulled the figurine bag, drawing the string on it loose. She emptied it and then watched as the clay sculptures lay scattered on the ground. The temptation to destroy them was great, especially when she saw a rock within her reach. She picked the rock up and was about to pulverise the figurines when the young muVenda girl figurine screamed, "No! Are you out of your mind?"

"You are a nuisance," screamed Denga.

"I have never been treated with so little respect in my life. Look *musidzana*, we are here to help you. You need us, can you not see that?" said a low-pitched voice.

"*Nikhou toda mini?*" asked Denga hoping they would tell her what they wanted from her.

"You must acknowledge us. If you fail to do this, he will think we did not do what he asked of us."

"Who are you talking about?"

"*Vhadzimu*. He told us you would be difficult," said the calm figurine.

"I still do not understand what you want from me."

"He gave you a rare ability to bring things to life," said the calm voice. "You may think you are only doing it for yourself, but you

cannot and must not destroy what you have started, but build on it. One day, your creations will meet the future."

Denga did not understand what the figurine meant about the future. To her the future was mostly made up of what she was going to do the following day. This future that the calm figurine spoke about was elusive. Only moments ago she was ready to destroy them but now she did not know.

"Will you leave me alone if I promise to think about what you have said?" said Denga.

She laughed to herself when she tried to form an image of what women would be and behave like in the future.

"One last thing," said the calm one. "You must not be distracted from your work. Nemukula is a good man, but you must leave him to someone else."

"What?" said Denga baffled. "I will be with him if I want. It is not up to you to decide this." There was no answer from the voices. "This is the reason I wanted to destroy you in the first place. You cannot just take over my life. My life is mine. You live yours and let me live mine." There was still no answer.

She was weary by the end of her conversation with the voices and was falling asleep when a sudden wind blew down her compound down. Denga cursed the wind, saying that she hoped it would be crippled for the rest of its life. Reluctantly, she got on her feet to begin re-erecting the poles. After hitting four poles into the ground, she decided that a confrontation with the wind was in order. The wind must come back to help.

Denga draped her wrap around her shoulders, having an impulsive urge to mould. The moonlight illuminated her way to the lake. When she settled down near the water, she began to work on the cold clay. With her legs stretched, she pressed the clay with the tips of her fingers and soon broke chunks of it from the ground. When it was enough, she rolled it between her hands until it formed a smooth ball. Again she pinched bits from the larger roll to make smaller ones. Inspiration descended on her like a hunter bird that spotted its prey.

Out of her hands came a young woman with locks on her head and parted lips. Denga was curious about her and could not shake the idea that the young woman wanted to say something. The trick she used to get the other figurines to talk to her did not work. She resolved to wait

until the new figurine had dried. Perhaps, she thought, she would be better able to hear her when she was dry. Had it not been for the disruptive sounds made by Nemukula and his horse, she would have spent more time speculating.

He carried the demeanor of a defeated person as his shoulders were slumped. Gone was his confidence. Filled with sympathy for him, Denga did not even need to ask how his visit went. He climbed down from the horse and walked to her.

"What are you making here?" he asked as squatted next to her.

"A girl."

"She is beautiful just like you," he said after scrutinising the clay sculpture.

"What did my father say?"

"He asked if I had inhaled *mbanje* for stumbling into his home and rambling madness about a daughter whom he gave away in marriage." Denga could feel a small laugh come up to her lips, but she suppressed it because Nemukula was flustered.

"What did you tell him?"

"Of course I told him no. But he told me he did not appreciate a drunk coming to him."

"Ni khou zwifha!"

"*Ngoho*." Nemukula stood up and started throwing stones as far into the water as possible. Denga had a feeling that she did not want to hear much more than she had already heard. She did not want to stay at the lake for much longer.

"The house has been blown away." Nemukula, with pebbles in his hand, turned to her.

"*Ho bvelela mini Mukololo*?"

"It was the wind."

"What wind. There is no wind."

"I want to show you something," she told him. She led the way to where the compound ought to have been and pulled out her figurine bag from beneath the sticks. They were all there. After lining them up on the ground, she related the story of her running away from home the first time, how she ended up in the wilderness, and how she made the figurines.

He mostly nodded, sporadically asked questions and needed things repeated to him. He burst out with laughter when Denga told him about the plants she ate, which had made her light-headed.

"*Mbanje*, no doubt," he said.

"No, you must be mistaken. That is the kind of tobacco that is smoked only by-"

"It seems you did smoke it, and who knows, I could well be sitting here with my own *nanga*."

It was difficult for Denga to get back to her story and at times she did not want to tell Nemukula about the voices. This was because with him there, life felt normal and she feared that any mention of the voices might taint the mood. However, after deliberating, she decided it was better to tell him the truth.

When she had finished narrating the events relating to the old man *Vhadzimu* and the voices, not a sound came from Nemukula. She had thought about the possibility of not being believed.

"How sure are you that you were not tricking yourself into hearing the voices and seeing the old man?" he asked at last.

"If it was a trick played by anybody on me, do you not think I would have known?"

"*Mukololo*, do not misunderstand me, please. We must think of all the possibilities. It is not easy for me to believe something I have not seen."

"There are many things you believe in but cannot see."

"Yes. But you are out here alone. It is not good for a person to live alone like this."

"I heard the voices. They talked and they were coherent. I cannot be confused about this." She had hoped for a different reaction, perhaps Nemukula believing her. Now she doubted if she did the right thing by telling him the truth. She felt a need to end her conversation, let him go back to wherever he pleased and leave her in peace.

"I believe you, *Mukololo*."

"But you have not seen any of the things I was telling you about."

"I believe you now." Denga knew he did not believe her. It seemed that he wanted to allay her suspicion. She caught herself smiling as

she was unable to be angry with him. Besides, he had done nothing wrong, except to say that he could not believe what he had not seen.

"Do you not believe your ancestors are looking after you?"

"I want to tell you something," said Nemukula whose mood was suddenly solemn. "When I was young, my mother was struck by lightning. She died." His mother's death had hurt his father to the point that he became less and less interested in his family and the affairs of his village. He no longer cared for himself, although he had been the kind of man with a keen interest in day-to-day life. Many a *nanga* came, threw bones and concluded that if Nemukula's father, Vhamusanda, had appeased the ancestors in the first place; his wife would not have died. They would not explain what his father should have done.

"Who knows what the ancestors wanted?" said Nemukula. "They always seemed angry and I think it was impossible for them to take pleasure in anything my father did."

What the bones speculated did not bring his wife, Mutanuni, back. He began to trade his live-stock to any *nanga* who said he could bring his Mutanuni back from the dead. Following the death, villager upon villager came to Vhamusanda's kraal. In their corners the women's gossip was relentless. He should have known, they said, there is a reason for having more than one wife. Look what has happened to him now.

Nemukula said he watched his father sink to a life of drinking every day. He relinquished his duties as chief of his village over to his only son, Nemukula. When he died he was no longer living at home. One *nanga* after another said it should not have been like that. The ancestors were angry and that was the reason he had lost his mind.

"The ancestors could never say what they wanted. They could have talked to my father, but they chose to speak through the bones."

Denga did not know what to say or how to console Nemukula. As much as possible she tried to understand, but thought it was not enough. There was an awkward silence after he stopped talking. She wanted to ask him if he really was the chief of his father's village now but she decided not to, fearing that he might think she had not been listening to him. After a long silence, he said,

"I know your father dismissed me, but I would like to know if you would still like to come with me." Then, as an afterthought, added,

"Your father said you were a bad influence. He warned me to stay away from you."

According to Nemukula, after Denga left to be married to Malise, news about her reached Phungoni without difficulty. This was one of the main reasons her father continued to be angry with her. Villagers could not forget how she kicked and screamed while being carried away. Denga had no shame being indulgent and not wanting to do what she was told, they said. A girl would always end in marriage, they said, and Denga should have known that. Mulamuleli bore the brunt of being weak man who could not discipline his daughter. What disturbed him even more was the emergence of a new manner at the village where young women thought they should not have to be forced to marry if it was against their desires. If parents insisted anyway, their daughters told them they would also run away from their marital homes, like Denga did from hers. Because parents did not want to be embarrassed in the way Malise was, they gave in to whatever their daughters' wishes were.

"Your friend, what is her name?"

"Talu," replied Denga.

"Yes. She caught up with me just as your homestead. She is the one who told me about all these things."

That Denga had seen *Vhadzimu* was something she could not deny. To her it did not matter that the figurines told her about obligations and leaving Nemukula to somebody else because for once something felt right and she free to do what she pleased.

Chapter twenty-five

Once I read that a gold crest's roots were so weak that often it failed to thrive when it was plucked out of its normal environment and transplanted in a different place. I felt like a gold crest on the morning I returned to work after my leave, and had a difficult time adjusting to my normal life again. Everybody looked the same, behaved the same.

I had no desire to talk, socialise or even be noticeable. My mind and body were in different places simultaneously. At work I continued to do only what I needed but beyond that, nothing. I was no longer fulfilled. I wanted more, much more than a column would be able to give. At home I was satisfied to sit without watching TV and I did not answer calls at the door and my correspondence with Shandukani was kept to a minimum. Every time he asked me what was wrong I told him, nothing. After a week of probing, practically begging me to tell him what was going on with me, he gave up and did not write text messages and emails as much as before.

I retreated to a place inside myself where I felt like I could hide. A place safe enough for me to ask uncomfortable questions I had for a long time avoided. Some of these I knew I couldn't just ask anybody. How on earth would I ask someone like my mother about her views on women kissing? She would insist that I made a mistake, that I didn't hear myself say women. She would only say things that took place between men and women, and then happily move on to the next subject. I already told Jinja I liked testosterone, but even so, the kiss between us did take place. I knew of a few women who said they knew since they were little girls that they were attracted to other women. Jinja, for example. This was not the case with me. I thought very carefully before deciding that I did not recall a time I was ever attracted to women, just in case I'd ever been but didn't realise it. Because I needed to get to the bottom of this so that it would stop hanging over me like a veil, I called Jinja and asked if she wanted to chat. At first she refused, accusing me of using her. I objected to this accusation and asked her to clarify it. She said she knew I had been hibernating and ignoring her knocks on my door. I told her she did not have to come if she did not want to but in the end she obliged.

"What's up?" she said as she walked in at my flat.

"I must talk to you," I said.

"Uh-huh." I sensed she was annoyed from the distant look she gave me.

When she sat down I realised that I wanted her to tell me something I already knew, but just to be sure, I began,

"How sure are you about your sexuality? Can you say with certainty that you will never date a man?"

"Is this why you called me here?" Jinja was not amused, not that it was my intention to amuse her.

"Jinja please, you need to tell me-"

"What do you want me to tell you? That you're not gay? That you probably kissed me because you felt sorry for me? You were curious? What?" I expected her to storm out at any moment, but she remained seated. Then she said, "The thing is that you're either gay or you're not. There're many women these days trying to be on both sides."

"But see, I'm not trying be on both sides," I butted in.

"Women have a lot more freedom to explore nowadays. If they want, they go with men, but when they feel they have tried everything with them and nothing worked they go with women."

Had I had this conversation with someone a few years ago, I would have said that there's no such thing as women going for other women when they're sick and tired of being sick and tired of men. But now having experienced what I did, I knew that what Jinja said was true. There was a whole community of people like her that lived on the margins, trying and acting according to what was accepted as normal. If they did not do this they risked being attacked, like Kate.

"Women are wacky," she said after a long pause.

"Huh?"

"Women get together with women for the same reasons they want to be with men. They're looking for stability, friendship, love, blah blah blah. Some are downright gold diggers."

As she rambled I realised that as much as people were born to be attracted to a certain gender they still always made their choices about who they wanted to be with. Men and women did it all the time.

"You're my friend Jinja and I don't like to see us be bitter towards each other. I'm sorry you feel the way you do, but please know that I don't regret what happened between us. But I regret that it happened with Kate in the picture."

"So, are you saying that if Kate wasn't there you might date me?"

"I don't know about dating, but maybe satisfy my curiosity?"

"You see now, that is selfish. Why should this be about you and your curiosity? What about me and how I feel? Until you're decided about me, I don't want to talk to you about this again."

"I'm sorry, Jinja, but it was just a kiss."

This conversation was the source of tension between Jinja and I. Kate at times asked what the matter was when she saw Jinja avoiding being in the same place as I. It was difficult to work together, especially as the three of us still needed to work on a follow up meeting. Not only that, but we'd begun plans to start a website covering gay and lesbian issues and gender violence. Jinja's contribution mostly came through Kate.

I threw myself into my work, paying more attention than ever to the production schedule. I never realised how detailed it was and doing this now gave me a sense of having achieved something, especially as I marked off every task I completed. Following the schedule on a daily basis ensured that all my time in the office was used productively and that I had no chance to think of other things, which were not work related.

I decided to go and visit my mother and sisters at home as it had been a while. I hoped that going home would enable me to talk to my mother about life. I needed her wisdom on simplifying things.

My journey home was different this time. My mother shrieked when she saw me at the door with a bag on my shoulder. She called my sisters while taking my bag from me and embracing me.

"Child, why did you not say you were coming? We would have prepared better for you." It felt good to be in my mother's warm arms. Soon my sisters arrived and I was pulled in all directions, everyone wanting my attention.

Nonjongo could not wait to hear all about the city and everything I did there; she would not leave my side. Nkosazana beamed and was only interested to know why I had still not invited her to spend a weekend with me. I could not think up an excuse quickly enough before she announced a date she would come and visit.

I was glad to see that my mother was in good health, although she appeared older than the last time I saw her. When all the fuss of the

greetings was over, my mother, sisters and I went to the kitchen to prepare supper.

"Chuma, do they not pay you well enough at work? You have been very scarce on the phone." I could not defend myself against her attack because she was right.

"*Uxolo mama*," I said trying my best to pacify her while my sisters looked on.

"No, Chuma, I must say this now to you. When you don't phone, we don't know whether you're alive or dead." My mother was upset, but was perked up again.

"Sisi, did you hear I got myself a bursary to study medicine next year?" said Nkosazana.

"No, congratulations!"

"Let me tell you the story behind those applications," said my mother as she took out the cutting board and slammed it on the table. "*Uyamazi uNobantu*, the one I teach with?"

"Yes."

"*Heke*. Now, her sister's daughter, I think they call her Beauty, studies in uMthatha, at the university there. One time Beauty went to inquire about her fees. It was then that she found out about a bursary being offered to Eastern Cape students wanting to study medicine or nursing."

Nkosazana nudged at me and whispered that currently it was mama's favourite story.

"Don't just stand there, Chuma, there's meat waiting to be cooked. *Yitsh'ungena kuyo*." Out of all the things I missed about home, I did not miss doing chores, especially when my mother was forceful about them. But I left the frozen meat to thaw in warm water. Nkosazana chopped vegetables, promising to make stir fry using a recipe she found in a magazine.

"I cannot understand why that information had to come to us in such a long-winded manner," my mother continued.

"At least we got the forms eventually, mama," said Nkosazana.

"But still, you know, nobody cares for us in the villages. These politicians are only here when they want us to vote for them in the elections. They promise to build roads and bring electricity; some of it happens and some of it just never sees the light of day."

"Mama, do you not want to hear what sis' Chuma has been doing in the city?" asked Nonjongo, who was the only one doing nothing. The only thing she managed was to make herself a cup of tea.

"Yes. I'm sure she works and does nothing else," said my mother.

"Are the things I read about in the papers true? Do white people use black people as fronts for their companies?" asked Nkosazana.

"Answer her, my child," said my mother. "These things mean nothing to us here. There are no companies for black people to front for."

"I hear that this kind of thing sometimes happens," I answered vaguely because I was trying to think about whether or not I was unwittingly working as a front myself. "But those being used might not even know they're being used."

"Nonsense! A person always knows. You mean you can take on a job and you have no inkling what your role in it is?" my mother said.

"Mama, what if sis' Chuma is right?" said Nonjongo. "Now let's ask her about her job. We can't even buy your magazine here. The shops don't sell it."

At this point I found myself trying hard to explain as much as possible about my work. There were no reactions in the kitchen after I had finished telling them what I did. There was not even a question. I was nearly grateful, but then my mother said,

"Is that all?"

"Do you have a boyfriend there?" asked Nonjongo, to my surprise. Since when were boyfriends ever discussed at home, never mind that, but in front of either of my parents? My mother looked irritably from Nkosazana to Nonjongo before walking out of the kitchen. Nkosazana passed Njongo a stern glance and said, "And now? Where do you get off saying things like this in front of mama?"

"Njongo, some things you just cannot say in front of parents. You're not allowed to," I added my bit to reprimand her, but all she did was slurp her tea.

"My darling little sister," I said. "I have some goodies in my bag for you."

"*Nyhani sisi*?" she said excitedly before running off to the bedroom to get my bag.

I had an opportunity to be alone with Nkosazana. We finished cooking and went to sit outside on the verandah at the back of the

house. The breeze out there was refreshing. I felt restored as I watched the tranquility and the familiar rolling hills covered in green grass. For a moment, nothing and no one moved. Only the hydrangeas next to the water tank smiled and waved in the wind.

We could see my mother working in her garden down below but she did not see us. With a hoe in her hand she occasionally bent down to dig out potatoes from the soil.

"Sisi, tell me the truth now. You seem less happy than you were before. Are they not treating you well there?" said Nkosazana.

"No man. I'm surviving there. Everything is fine, but not everything is working out the way I expected."

"Is your boyfriend good to you?"

"What! Is yours good to you?"

"Mama says I should not be thinking about boys at this stage, but yes, mine is good to me."

"Since when?"

"Two years ago he said he loved me and I said I loved him too."

"Okay, that's enough. You're giving me too much information here," I teased.

I would have loved to talk to my sister about everything but I didn't want to burden her. I did not trust her to fully understand in as much as I did not fully trust myself to fully explain. Just then Nonjongo joined us with my bag. She handed it over to me so I could open it. I had been buying clothes, whenever I could, and other odds that I thought my sisters would like. Nonjongo's excitement was palpable as she tried on her dress. Our verandah without a mirror suddenly became flawed to her. She made her way to her bedroom and did not come out until she was convinced she looked good from all possible angles.

From the garden, my mother called out to Nkosazana and me, asking us if seeing an old lady work hard for her children did not arouse any guilt. When we reached her we were instructed which vegetables to pick, place in the basket and wash. My mother leaned against the garden's perimeter fence and watched us work.

Early in the evening we had our supper of rice, vegetables and lamb stew at the table. Although it felt good to be home our conversation lacked my father's stories. He would have updated us on meetings he'd attended and demanded our opinions on issues. We would

have argued about my parents attending too many events at a time and my father would have said he and his wife were too old to be sitting at home admiring each other all day.

"I have been thinking," began my mother when we were all quiet. "There are rituals that we, as a family, must fulfill before you children leave me for good. Things come and go. Change happens and we move on. But we are still African people and we do not want to make our ancestors angry with us by not doing what is right by them."

"We will give thanks to the ancestors in December. Chuma, you must not fail to come home for this.

"I'll be here in December," I said.

"Good, give me a date suitable for you before we start making arrangements," said mama.

I had hoped that this would not come up during my visit. At best I had hoped to avoid the subject altogether. Although I was grateful for having landed a job I did not feel keen to have the relatives, who gave us a difficult time, come again.

"Mama, don't you remember what our relatives did to us when-"

"I know what they did," she cut in.

"Why should we ever have to deal with them again?"

"Chuma you're a child and don't understand. I don't expect you to. You see, your aunt came last week and we ironed everything out."

"Just like that and we're all right to be a big happy family again?" Nonjongo began to panic about this exchange.

"Please don't fight," she said sullenly. "I don't like this." She went to cry on my mother's shoulder. My mother stroked her hair and told her not to worry.

Sleep did not come easily that night. I tossed and turned as Nonjongo slept soundly in her bed. I loved Shandukani. I had no better way to explain it except that in my heart I knew. I loved how he made me feel around him; like I was the most important person. I loved how he talked and listened to me when I talked. I loved how he looked at me, touched and caressed me, how he brought a ray of sunlight to my life. I fell asleep as I pondered these things. As I slept a voice in my dream continually called my name, rousing me out of a nightmare. Eventually I sat up and switched my cell phone on. I used its light to search about the room, but saw nothing.

My heart began to pound loudly, with my old fear of the dark, and I tried to wake Nonjongo up. The girl slept like a dead person. The whisper of my name came again. This time I fumbled for the matches on the table next to me. Having found it, I lit up the kerosene lamp. Apart from my sister and me, there was still no one in the room. I swiftly moved to Nonjongo's bed and shook her but she grunted and did not wake up. I managed to steady myself as I stood next to my bed, listening more closely. When I was confident enough, I ventured out of the bedroom and out of the house.

The moon was full and bright above my mother's orchard. I watched it as I sat on top of a small wall in front of the entrance of our house, basking in the silence of the night.

I was startled at the sight of a burning orange circle, which I could see through the lemon trees. I was reminded of the story of Moses and his interaction with a burning bush in the Bible, when I saw a small cloud of smoke coming through the trees. My hands shook as I had heard that ghosts appeared in the form of burning coal. I had also heard that when a ghost appeared in this manner the person who saw it would lose their way home. The person would follow the burning coal indefinitely and only realise in the morning that he or she had been lost.

If it was a ghost I was seeing I did not want to disturb it, inadvertently drawing attention to myself. So I sat still and planned to sneak back in to the house. I was already on my feet when I heard a tiny cough from behind the tree. I held my breath and waited, but there was no cough again, instead the smell of a burning cigarette assailed my nostrils.

I plucked up courage to walk into my mother's orchard with the intention of confronting the ghost. At worst I would tell it to go and smoke in its mother's orchard and not in mine. Although I felt brave, I was still nervous. As I approached the lemon tree, Nkosazana, cigarette in hand, leapt up and asked,

"What are you doing here?" She gave me a fright and I screamed as I reciprocated her question.

"What on earth are you doing with that?" I said pointing to the cigarette in her hand.

"I'm smoking. What are you doing here?" From the controlled tone of her voice I could tell that she had probably been doing it for some time and also that she was not about to say sorry. So I said,

"Why are you smoking?"

"Why do birds have wings?" she replied.

"So they can fly?"

"They could have walked."

"You do know the health risks, don't you?"

"Every smoker knows there are risks. It's just like everybody knows there's Aids. The risk means nothing unless you can see results in a day."

"Do you want a smoke?" she offered. I was hesitant to accept but I did anyway, after I made her promise that we would never touch another cigarette afterwards. "I come out here all the time. Mama sleeps like a log, so I know she wouldn't catch me doing this."

"But why?"

"Come on! You've been my age before. You know what it's like. Lots of girls do this at school."

"You don't have to do what everybody else is doing," I said, at the risk of sounding like my mother. Of course I was no saint, but I didn't want Nkosazana going around believing that smoking was healthy.

"I know. It still doesn't stop me from wanting to be like everybody else."

"Is everything fine with you?"

"Yes. Everybody's expecting a little too much out of me. When I got the bursary the principal announced at assembly that I would be going to attend medical school next year."

"I am happy for you. You should be happy too."

"I would be if I really wanted to become a doctor."

"I thought your mind was made up about this."

"No. It was made up for me. It's only that I'm good in maths and science and now mama thinks I will definitely do well."

"But what do you really want to do?"

"I don't know. I would like to make up my mind and have a choice. I know I should have thought about it a long time ago but it didn't happen. I mean, look at you, you're doing something you love."

"*Ja*, but there are challenges everywhere."

"Why are you out here anyway?"

"I wanted to think."

"I knew there was something wrong." I could see she was pleased with herself. "You know you can tell me anything, right?"

"Sure I do." I made my mind up that instant that I would tell Nkosazana everything. Something told me she I could trust her with the information now. I told her everything about my work, the love I had found and the situation with Jinja. As I talked, she uttered not a word. I did not know what she thought.

"What are you thinking?" I asked eventually.

"Just that I'm glad I'm not in your shoes. From what you have said about Shandukani, I like him. I think Jinja is a distraction."

Jinja was not a distraction. She helped me decide that I wanted to be with Shandukani.

"I must tell Shandukani everything."

"Why kiss and tell?" asked Nkosazana.

"Because if you're going to marry somebody, you've got to come clean about everything."

"Okay. Be honest with him, but if you lose him, don't come crying to me."

Chapter twenty-six

In the scorching heat, Malise cut a lone figure as he crouched on the ground with a tattered bag dangling from his waist. He crushed particles of soil between his fingers and waited patiently, like a lion waiting for its kill.

NyaDenga was not surprised when she encountered him at the hearth that morning. It was the time of day when the homestead chores were beginning. Nemukula and his two cousins, who lived with them, had just left for the fields as harvest time had begun. NyaDenga was alone with her small child on her back.

"*Ndi vhone fhuthi*."

"Did you expect that it would be someone else?"

She was tired of him thinking he could loaf about at her homestead without so much as feeling a need to explain his presence. Even when he did, she already knew why he was there.

"You know I am here for my cows."

"Why else would you be here?" sighed NyaDenga.

"I want all of them back in my *khoro*."

"How many times must I tell you do I not have them? I was never consulted when you came to my father. You talked to my people and I was not there." The baby on her back began to squeal. She rocked him a little until he was calm again. A warm light wind blew, which was the last thing she needed when her pots were already on the fire. She stirred the *vhuswa* with a ladle while Malise followed her every move, peeping over her shoulder at every opportunity. She hated it when he did that.

"The last time I was here, I told you to make a plan about my cows. Did you?" And then he answered himself, "No you did not. You have always thought you were better than everybody else." Then he spat in the distance to show his repugnance. NyaDenga ignored him, as she had learnt that there worth to disregarding him and his temper. She could hear him ramble as if he came from a distance, as she moved to prepare relish in the *tshitanga*. Were it not for the fact that he was on her heels she would not have heard him. She wished Nemukula was present because he always had a way to ensure that his visits were brief. Without fail he was polite and yet managed to have Malise listen to him.

"You insulted me when you left. You will be sorry for what you did." NyaDenga had heard it all before. It had now become like listening to a small child tell a favourite story over and over again. "You will regret treating me with disrespect," he continued. NyaDenga was taken aback by this threat as it was the first time she was hearing it. He had obviously had time to think through his regular threats and found that he needed to improve on them, NyaDenga thought.

"VhoMalise, you have to leave now. I have been telling you all along that I do not have your cows. Talk to my father, you know where to find him. I am tired of you making threats."

She walked away when she saw that he was not about to give up demanding his cows from her. She had taken enough time listening to him and this was eating into the time she had set aside to mould a figurine. She had made a commitment to herself to continue to mould even after she was married. Nemukula respected this commitment and would sometimes urge her to go even when she seemed reluctant.

She swept the open space before the hearth, hoping Malise would leave, but he did not move. She wanted to see him leave her homestead but his eye was focused on the boiling pots. NyaDenga continued sweeping around the compounds until she was sure that everything was spotless.

Malise was still there. She fetched warm water to bath her baby in the compound where she and Nemukula slept, and out of the corner of her eye could still see Malise move closer to the pots.

From the compound she observed him as he stood at the hearth. His waist bag seemed to have got tangled. She strained to see but decided to leave him alone; she thought that the less she took an interest in him the quicker he would surrender these visits. Soon he stopped and seemed unaware that NyaDenga was watching him all along as he stepped away from the hearth with a self-congratulatory smile.

What a foolish man, she thought, while her baby happily danced around the compound. Imagine a sturdy man moving about like that around the fire. It is nothing short of *vhuloi* – wizardry, she concluded.

After Malise left, NyaDenga finished her meal preparations and went into the room where she moulded.

As was always the case, Nemukula and his cousins returned from the field in the early afternoon for their meal. NyaDenga served them, having added *tshikoli* as a meal treat, but declined food herself as her

stomach had been upset. This was why the baby refused to eat for he was not used to doing things unless his mother did them first. Although he did not like to see his wife refuse to eat, Nemukula encouraged NyaDenga to drink water and eat fruit until her stomach settled.

Late in the afternoon, long after Nemukula and his cousins had left, a girl hastily entered the homestead shouting,

"*Mutanuni*, you must come very quickly. *Vhamusanda* is very ill. His stomach–"

NyaDenga did not hear the end of the girl's explanation as she rushed out leaving the baby behind with her. She wished Nemukula had listened to her when she told him he did not need to work as hard as he did. But he would not listen, reasoning that not only could he do things better if he did them himself, but also that there were no limbs missing from him. He had no excuse not to work.

The bodies of her husband and his two cousins lay sprawled in the field near where they had toiled earlier.

The whole village was gathered at Nemukula's plot and NyaDenga could hear as people speculated about what could have happened. There was silence when she reached his side. She knew then that he was dead. Disbelieving, she vehemently shook and willed him to wake up. He was gone. The village women restrained her as she bitterly yelled and wailed at the top of her voice until she had no breath.

After that day, none in the village could face NyaDenga without making her feel accused of poisoning *Vhamusanda*. How could they know that her husband had been poisoned when she did not know? The villagers, however, insisted that even if she did not know what killed her husband, the fact remained that the food she had prepared for him killed him.

She spent most of her time in the seclusion of her homestead, moulding figurines as if she had lost her mind. Every time they dried, she asked them why Nemukula died. When they did not respond she moved on to mould the next figurine. All the while, Vhadzimu, the figurine, watched her create but his lips were sealed.

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Chapter twenty-seven

His legs were joined to the hands of the one below him while he held him up with a contorted expression. Another man clung to his waist, while another was hinged on his toes. It was a conglomeration of men hanging on to one another in some way, all suspended in the air and floating around a wooden drum on which they were carved.

Elsewhere in the room, curious pots made out of clay were displayed. One was designed to take the form of a woman's torso. There were no limbs. Others were shaped into animal heads. The place was filled with these and at the centre, was the biggest drum I had ever seen.

"We call this, *ngoma*," explained Makhadzi vhoMarubini, patting the drum on the side. "*Rosu*, did you tell her what a drum means in our culture?" When Rose shook her head, she continued, "This is a very sacred instrument. In the olden days, whenever the chief's attendants beat it villagers were filled with fear because *Vhadzimu*, the great ancestor would have spoken. He spoke through the drum."

VhoMarubini was alone at home; her children had gone to visit relatives in different villages. Easter and Christmas were similar in Venda, Rose told me, because they were a time to feast.

I was drawn to figurines, which occupied a corner in the room. Unlike the rest of the colourful relics, they were dusty and covered with a thick veil of spider web and dust. They were representations of people from a by-gone era. Some were young, some old but all of them carried some form of an expression. I thought that had they been proper human beings, they would have had something to say.

I wanted to ask if there was a chance that NyaDenga had something to do with them. I was about to touch them when VhoMarubini told Rose to ask me not to.

"Yes, it was NyaDenga who made them," she said as if she was reading my mind. "Rosu, have you told her the story?"

"I have not told her everything," said Rose. "Maybe you can tell her what happened."

VhoMarubini was the custodian of NyaDenga's art, and, apart from being a teacher by day she herself moulded clay sculptures at night.

She said she moulded as a way to distract her. If she did not she became unsettled and had nightmares.

When I asked if they knew where NyaDenga's grave was, Rose and VhoMarubini did not know. We took a walk outside. A few metres from the house was Nemukula's run-down grave. Next to it, where I thought NyaDenga's grave should have been, was flat ground. Where would I begin my search for her grave? I had no simple answers, but I understood that I had two choices: continue to try find clues, listen, and wait for her to come in my dreams to leave more clues, or to give up on her without trying.

A tho ngo tevhedza mbidzo, NyaDenga had been saying repeatedly. According to Rose this meant 'I did not follow my calling'.

Before I left Venda, VhoMarubini told me that no one defied Vhadzimu and got away with it. She was of the view that NyaDenga should not have married in the first place because it was what Vhadzimu had instructed.

"In the normal course of things, a chosen person has to be guided by an older, more experienced *nanga* so as to learn about the art of healing," vhoMarubini had said to me at her home.

NyaDenga decided her own fate when she ignored everything to marry Nemukula.

"What do you think Vhadzimu wanted her to do?" I had asked vhoMarubini.

"Well, when one begins any type of work with Vhadzimu, the ancestors must be involved. Nemukula, with his doubts about his own ancestors drew her away from her own ancestors. That was not good. I think she might have made a good *nanga*, but we will never know now. But I know that her husband had to die so that Vhadzimu could teach her a lesson."

The girls and women of Phungoni, according to vhoMarubini, still remembered the story of the young girl, Denga, who changed things for them, for it was passed on to them from one generation of women to the next. Her acts of defiance brought about a change in how men dealt with them. It was not unusual to hear that potential husbands and suitors were nervous to marry girls from the village. Sometimes this caused the women to be overlooked for marriage, but they said, at least they had peace of mind knowing they would not be forced to marry against their wishes.

Chapter twenty-eight

Six months after I finished writing NyaDenga's story, an activity I found gratifying, Shandukani had still not forgiven me. But he did, at first say that it was no bother to him because two girls kissing was a cute thing. But he later changed his mind when he discovered that Harry was also involved at some point.

"What are you?" he demanded.

"Am I a thing now? It's still me; I'm admitting my mistakes and want to start over."

"You've hurt me," he said. "I have never cheated on you, not in anyway."

"I'm really very sorry."

In a way, I had hoped for his latter response because then I thought if he could get on the other side of his anger and disappointment with me, we might start afresh with me having nothing to hide. It was all up to him.

From NyaDenga I learnt that in every era women have their own struggles, which they must overcome. Whether or not their efforts were realised immediately was not the point. The point was to follow through, and to keep the struggle going so that the more people who knew, the more hearts and minds could be transformed.

The website Jinja, Kate and I started was up and running and we received positive feedback on it. There were, of course, odd and hateful comments at times, but I learnt to use these as a platform to address issues relating to the abuse of women. Jinja and I were friends again and after I told her about my confession to Shandukani, she was supportive of me.

At work things had changed. Harry called me to his office to tell me he was considering selling his company. He said if I wanted to leave he would understand, but that if it would be no bother he wanted to leave Suzy and I in charge of the editorial until he made up his mind. He wanted to move to London for a few months to see how things would work out for him there. His move was prompted by the rate of crime in our country. He said there was too much of it. In the time we spoke, he must have counted at least five people, close to him, who were affected

by crime. Nothing had happened to him, but he said he didn't want to wait until he became a victim.

Suzy and I became the co-editors of the magazine. At least for a while.

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