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Living dangerously

McGregor, Elizabeth Ann

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PREFACE

Fana Khaba died a horrible death. The HI virus had destroyed his brain, leaving him demented and hallucinatory. He could no longer move his arms or legs. He could neither defecate nor urinate. The colostomy bag attached to his bowel to drain his waste was leaking blood. Pus seeped from the wound left by the operation to remove his intestines. A vast bedsore had eaten away his right buttock. More bedsores festered on his back, hips, ankles and elbows. It must have been a relief to him when, at 12.10 on January 14, 2004, he finally stopped breathing. He was 35 years old. Fana Khaba's premature death was all the more tragic because it was preventable. Unlike millions of other people with Aids, he was offered the drugs that might have given him another 20-odd years of healthy life – possibly until a cure was found. But he refused to take them.

I came upon Fana Khaba by accident. In 2003, I was working as a freelance journalist. An American magazine for people living with HIV called Poz asked for an interview with an HIV positive black celebrity. In South Africa in 2003, black celebrities living openly with HIV were pretty thin on the ground so when Yfm DJ Khabzela announced on air one day that he was HIV positive, I pricked up my ears. By further coincidence, the CEO of Yfm turned out to be Dirk Hartford, an old friend from university days and so I was able to secure an interview with the man. I wrote up the story and despatched it to New York. In the normal course, this would have been the end of it. Journalism is a short-term affair. You immerse yourself in a story, write it up and then move on to the next one. But this particular tale got under my skin. A lot of this had to do with my circumstances. I had recently returned to

South Africa after a 17-year stint abroad and found myself in a radically different country to the one I had left in 1985. I had avidly followed every twist in the country's fortunes from my base in London but, however closely you read every news report and watch every TV broadcast, you will only get the highlights, the broad brush strokes; a version of the truth determined by the direction the cameraman chooses to point his or her lens. The South Africa I found when I returned to live in it bore little resemblance to the one I'd prepared myself for in London.

So, 2003 was catch-up time. As a young reporter in the early eighties, I had been passionately identified with the liberation struggle but as a white person I entered black townships rarely and fleetingly, always fearful of arrest. Traditional culture was manipulated by the government for its own ends so those of us opposed to apartheid wanted no truck with it.Now I was in Soweto virtually every weekend, eagerly soaking up every scrap of culture I came across. After years of Britain's homogeneity, the kaleidoscope of rituals, languages and belief systems to be found within half an hour of my home seemed to me endlessly fascinating. The more I heard about Fana Khaba, the more it became clear that this man had lived every twist of the drama that had transformed my country during my long absence. A child of Soweto, he had grown up in hardship and poverty, fourth child of seven brought up by a single mother. Fana surfed every wave that came crashing in with democracy. When public transport was deregulated and the minibus taxi became the chief mode of travel for black commuters and the first industry owned and controlled by black people, Fana was there. He was a taxi driver for several years and deeply immersed in the macho, marginalised culture of taxi drivers. When the air waves were deregulated, Fana was there - the most popular DJ on Gauteng's most popular youth radio station, Yfm. When kwaito emerged as the beat to which the post-apartheid black youth

moved, Fana championed it. And when Aids began to ravish the same generation, Fana caught it and died from it.

In order to understand the central paradox of his death – why he refused the drugs that might have saved him – I understood that I would need to look at how he had lived. And I discovered a life that eerily echoed the fortunes of his country. The man who died in Johannesburg Hospital on January 14, 2004, could not have been made anywhere else but in South Africa in the tumultuous closing decades of the 20th century.

I had three long encounters with Fana Khaba before his death but the virus was already eating away at his brain and not much of what he told me made much sense. I have put together my picture of his life mostly from interviews with his family, his friends, his colleagues and the many members of the medical and alternative healing community whom he consulted during his last frantic attempts to defeat the virus.

So, this is a life told in retrospect; through the eyes of other people with all the gaps and shadings that inevitably involves.