

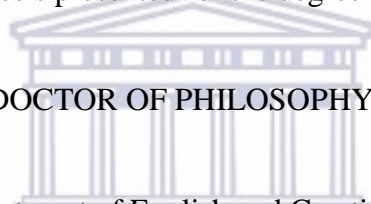
When the Village Sleeps

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NB

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ABSTRACT

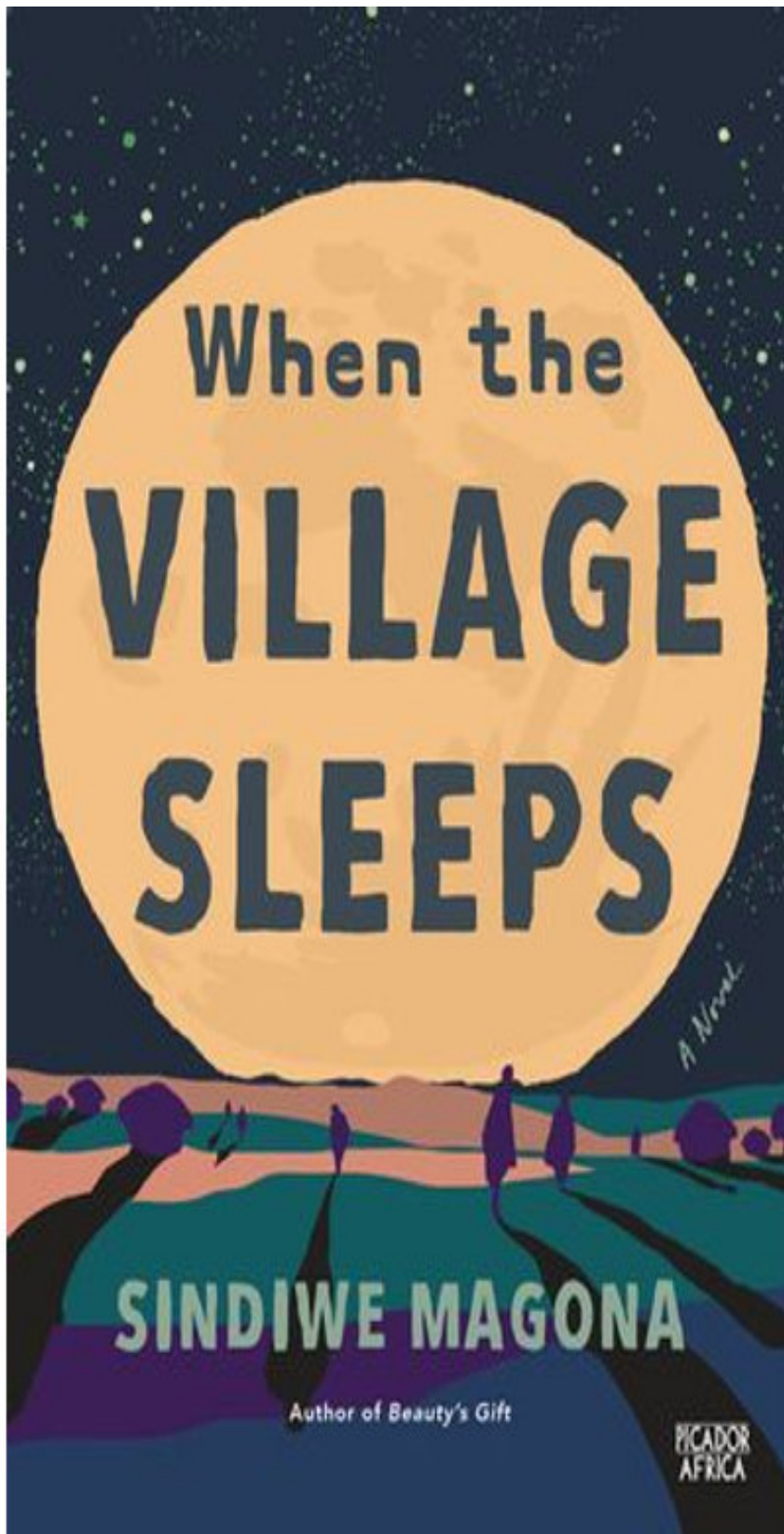
This thesis consists of a creative and in-depth research component: a speculative novel, *When the Village Sleeps*, and a reflective long essay. It is about a young woman, Mandlakazi, who was born severely malformed, the result of deliberate invitro chemical exposure by her teen mother, Busisiwe. Busisiwe watched her own mother raise three children with the help of the child grant and decided that she would be better off financially were she to take advantage of the grant system by having a disabled baby. Set in the ‘speculative present’ (a term I explain in my reflective), the novel *When the Village Sleeps* examines the lived realities faced by South Africa’s urban black poor, particularly women; the failures of the grant system; ever widening socio-economic divisions; perceptions of the disabled body within the culture of amaXhosa and the possibilities offered to us as a people if we reclaim and reconnect to the life-affirming and unifying traditions of our cultural and literary heritage. Underpinning all of these topics are questions of social and civil justice; agency; roots; and a possible way forward during troubled and turbulent times.

The creative and reflective components of my research drew upon my imagination as well as various sociological and literary resources. These include journalism articles about the current social grant system – more specifically the child security grant (CSG) and abuses of that system and speculative works by local female writers, as well as the literary works of my amaXhosa predecessors, most notably Samuel Edward Krune Mqhayi, who acted as a sort of Ancestral literary inspiration and guide whilst I was writing the novel. To date, there are no published full-length works of speculative fiction by black female South African authors. *When the Village Sleeps* is thus the first.

Key Words: Speculative Fiction; Literary Realism, Child Support Grant, Black Women’s Writing, Ubuntu, Disability Studies, Poverty, Traditional Knowledge Systems, Mqhayi.

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To the community of Woodside Special Care Centre, who show what is possible when every
person is cared for,
and supported to allow them to realise their potential.



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*WHEN
THE VILLAGE SLEEPS*

A NOVEL

Sindiwe Magona



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PICADOR AFRICA

PART ONE



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CHAPTER ONE

A-aah! Blessed day— Saturday!

Busisiwe wiggled her toes. With all her heart, she hated her life. Not all of it – people like that committed suicide, her mother once told her – not that anyone took what Phyllis said seriously. Yes, Busi hated her life, but one of the few blessings, one thing she really appreciated, was the sixth day of the week. Not only was there no school, there was no one else in the house. Phyllis, her mother, gone; Aunt Lily, in whose house they lived, gone; Lily’s husband, Uncle Luvo, gone. The whole lovely morning, she was alone.

OMG, she had all the space to herself. Just herself, by herself, no one else but herself!

Saturday! The grown-ups were away at work. They all worked over the weekend, including half-day Sundays for the two women, Mama and Aunt Lily. The two older boys, her cousins, were out, attending funerals.

Funerals were opportunities for feasting. On Mondays already, Themba and Sazi started prowling for houses with tents in their yards. Tents meant death, and death meant a funeral, and a funeral meant food galore. Food for all, and not per invitation either. Nobody would turn people away from a funeral. Funerals were much better than weddings. The ancestors (and God and His angels? wondered Busisiwe) were present. Now, what host would dare appear graceless before the ancestors and God, and demand an invitation card? The bereaved family welcomed all who came to honour the dead with proper respect.

Therefore, on weekends, the boys went funeralling. They were veritable funerongers. Busisiwe smiled as she shook out a blanket. The boys often chattered about how they helped the men slaughter a beast, how fantastic innards roasted on an open fire tasted, what was served during the Friday night vigil, how the really good meat was cooked and distributed. Lately, even her little brothers Owam and Esam had started tagging along, following the older boys, who didn’t seem to mind the tails.

A week after the burial, the following Saturday, the family would be cleansed with the Washing of Spades ceremony, observed by all. Not as lavish as the funeral, it was nonetheless a feast for amahonkco – all aboard the gravy train.

Because she was a girl, Busisiwe was not allowed the same privileges. Women could go to funerals, of course. It would fall on them to clean, scrape and cook the veggies – a job tedious and back-breaking, with absolutely no reward. The older women saw to it that the job

was done properly, for such a weighty affair as death; but they imposed their authority on younger women, who did the work while they supervised.

I don't need such supervision, Busi thought to herself. She had had the best teacher on cooking samp and beans, steamed bread, vegetable preparation and making ginger beer – her grandmother. *Khulu had me watch her since before I was even six or seven years old. Then, one day, she turned the tables on me – watched while I prepared. Said the way she saw things my mother was not teaching me anything. Said that behind Phyllis's back, of course. But it was the truth.*

Her uncle Luvo, like the boys, was hardly ever indoors on weekends, because Sunday was the day the bereaved, having buried their loved one the day before, were drinking herb-infused and bitter water as though to say: accept the bitter taste of death and know that you will live, must live. These were the two inescapable sides of the coin. Accept death as you accept the skin in which you live, the skin that gathers all you are – protects you from harm that lives in the air.

Not that Busi gave such matters much thought. At first, she had resented being unable to benefit from the funeral bonanzas. But she would be dead in the water if she went mooching for food; yes, she would be ridiculed by both her kasi neighbours as well as her classmates at her posh Model C school, where she did not dare wear poverty too brazenly. Sometimes she even resented that her grandmother's former employer, Mrs Bird, paid her school fees so that she could have what the grown-ups called a 'decent education'. Nobody spoke about the pressure Busi felt, how she was always out of step at that school.

Now, brows scrunched, she surveyed the fruits of her labour: bed made, just so, as Lily liked; furniture dusted; floor swept ... She put away the duster and looked around – all she still had to do was to scoop up the little mound of inkunkuma and go put it in the cardboard box under the kitchen sink. That would spell HOUSE DONE!

In the comings and goings of the family members, she had no power or influence; hers was to do what she was told, and, according to her mama, be not only cheerful about it, but grateful; very grateful, in fact. Well, grateful was choking her, killing her – except on Saturdays. Then she was tremendously grateful.

She could breathe.

She could hear herself think. She could sing out loud.

There was no one in the whole house to tell her, 'Stop it!' or 'Heyi, wena! You are not here all by yourself!'

Oh, yes! For one day of the week, she was truly happy.

Saturday meant a lot of chores, and of course, nobody regarded her work as their skutete, a blessing. No, they expected her to welcome it, enjoy it, and never forget she had to pull her weight, contributing to the wellbeing of the family, ‘as we all are contributing to yours’.

Stepping outside, she picked a small piece of the peppery fennel bush along the hedge, took it back into the house and put it in a little fishpaste bottle on Aunt Lily’s dressing table. She always left this room for last. With a long, deep breath, she braced her shoulders and lifted her tired arms, waved them about two-three times, stretched. She smiled as she reached for the remote and sunk herself onto the little sofa at the bottom of the bed. Now was the time to steal a look at the TV; sometimes Utatakho was on. It entertained her, but also made her sad when it reminded her of her own plight – tata-less. But now the smile stayed on Busi’s face, an idle smile, but a smile all the same.

My heart is light, she thought. See how I am watching television in Aunt Lily’s bedroom; the only room in the house that has such a luxury. Who else has money not only to buy a set, but keep it running – pay for the electricity and DStv – to say nothing of paying for the licence – *every year?*

Busisiwe clicked, and up on the screen came: ‘Heroines of Our Time!’

The only hero who came to her mind was, of course, Tata Mandela, whose picture was on every coin and note of South Africa’s money. Perhaps he had a mine? Busi left the thought hanging as she turned back to the programme, where an advertisement for funeral cover for everyone in the family (including beloved pets) was playing. Aargh! What a waste of time.

She still had to wash the laundry soaking in the huge red plastic tub. Well, let it soak, she wasn’t going to hang it out before she’d gone to fetch water for the house. She knew better than to take an eye off it; one wrong move and the clothes, the whole tub would be gone. Drug thieves had no qualms about stealing even wet clothes. Things simply vanished without a trace, and people became sightless to avoid being implicated, which could have nasty consequences.

She glanced at the bottom of the screen. Yhoo! Ten o’clock! A girl who did her chores late was considered lazy – that was why the smart ones always started with the laundry – visible industrious-ness. What’s the point of doing anything if no one knows about it? Brag is the name of the game ... even about the most insignificant matters, such as who puts out the garbage bin first, or whose white laundry is whitest. Which reminded her: she had better get going.

As she got up, remote in hand to switch off the TV, an insert at the top right corner of the screen came alive: a group of young men performing the gumboot dance.

A young woman, all smiles, with a clear café-au-lait complexion, glowed on the screen. Her long black dreadlocks were swept up in a knot, crowning the top of her head. She wore a

brown shweshwe dress that left her arms and one shoulder bare. Her well-toned arms rippled as she gestured. Brightly beaded bangles rose half-way up both her arms, and a necklace of the same colour draped across her chest. Two big silver rings flashed on each middle finger; big silver hoops dangled from her earlobes.

‘Maybe this is what Aunt Lily calls African Elegance ...’ said Busi to herself.

Introduced as a social worker, this elegant woman, her voice sweet and carrying, explained how she got involved with this group of gumboot dancers as part of a programme to address the perennial problem of youth unemployment in the townships. She encouraged these young men to do gumboot dancing instead of milling around in frustration, their self-esteem draining away like water in a leaky bucket.

‘Anything is better than doing nothing!’ she said, adding, ‘And the boys took to it immediately.’

The camera zoomed onto this group of fit young men in overalls of different colours – red, yellow, blue, orange – some with one sleeve off the arm, and a few with both sleeves off and tied around the waist. Their bodies ... yhoo! The muscles! Busi’s eyes bulged. All wore black gumboots, and their makarabhas finished the mgodi look. Right now, the group was shuffling around, warming up, gearing for performance.

The social worker said she had even found sponsors for the group. ‘There is a lot of help available for programmes of social upliftment,’ she said. ‘People must help themselves if they want to get anywhere in life!’

On cue, the young men sprang into performance mode. The leader blew a whistle and like a well-oiled machine:

Tshisa Bo!

Paqa-paqa!

Tshisa Bo!

Paqa-paqa!

Tshisa Boooooo!!!

Paqa-paqa-paqa-paqa-paqa-paqa!

Their smiles and the fierceness with which they exuded confidence were beamed straight at the TV camera. Aware of her blessedly untrammelled morning, Busi got up and paqaza’d right along with them, no matter that her paqaza came sans the rhythmic boom of the gumboots.

What a performance! The thunder of their heavy boots, accompanied by the insistent ‘PREE-PREE-PREEEE!’ of the leaping and gyrating leader’s whistle, was in turn accompanied

by rhythmic hand smacks. These hand sounds didn't quite alternate, didn't quite follow, but rather shadowed the stamping feet, coming just after them, so the two blended in a kind of thud-and-echo, thud- and-echo ... it was a perfect – NO, brilliant – orchestra.

'They have improved,' said the social worker. 'They are miles better than before!'

'Walala, wasala! You snooze, you lose!' said the host as he gave out the social worker's contact details in case anyone out there wanted to start something similar. 'There is a lot of help available. Don't just sit on your behind and expect things to fall into your lap. M-O-V-E! Move yourself. When you do, you'll find other things begin to move. Your life moves! Daxa phantsi; daxa your life too!'

Busi wished they had someone or something like that in her neighbourhood – a group right here in Kwanele that she could join. Scores of people around her were jobless, young people especially. Maybe if she joined a project like that, she could at last make a little bit of money.

And daxa phantsi is what she was doing right now. 'The laundry won't up and wash itself,' she muttered. Snatching the remote, she got up and made for the door. There, just at that teeny moment between pressing the remote button and the TV actually turning off, her eye caught something, and no sooner was the TV off than she switched it right back on again.

The social worker and the TV host had moved to the audience for a Q & A session. Now questions flew.

'Did you enjoy that?'

'What did you think of the dancing?'

'Would you like to do something like that too?' 'What do you want to be when you grow up?'

Busi squirmed. Ridiculous! Grown-ups asked such dumb questions. Children want to be grown-ups, of course; at least, she did. Grown-ups could boss everyone, every single child. It was the worst thing in the world to be a child – especially a child in miserable Kwanele.

Most of the spectators were young people; some simply responded with smiles, shy in the sudden limelight. Then a hand shot up, like a kid seeking the teacher's attention in a crowded classroom when they knew the answer to the question, and another kid had just said something they knew, absolutely knew, to be incorrect. The host stretched his microphone towards her. This little girl, younger than Busisiwe, but bold as brass, said something Busi couldn't catch. The host gulped visibly and urged, 'Again? Please repeat what you just said?'

What do you want to do when you grow up?'

'I want to marry a deformed man!'

‘Yii-yhoo!’ Busi gasped and took a second look at the scrawny little girl with her tired hair, the unnatural rust colour telling of long-faded chemical treatment. She could hardly believe her ears. Where had the child come upon such a mind-boggling idea?

The host, clearly also staggered, asked, ‘Do you mean a man with a disability? Why?’

‘So, I can get a lot of money!’ the girl replied without hesitation.

‘Where will you get that money?’

‘The grant! Everyone knows deformed people get more money!’

How much more? Busi screamed silently at the girl on the screen in the shapeless gym dress, her shoes badly in need of more than just polish – even the laces were frayed. *How much?* Why was the host not asking that question? Ask! Ask!

But the stupid man just thanked the girl and turned to the viewers: ‘There you are!’ he announced, ‘You heard it on Mzansi 1017!’ And, flashing his all-teeth-bared smile, he exhorted: ‘Remember, your future is in your hands!’

Busi stood a long time. Then she made sure she left no trace she had been relaxing in Aunt Lily’s room – put everything as she’d found it, the two remote controls just so, crossed, with the smaller one on top, at the corner of the bedside table.

Long after the programme ended, the girl’s words rang in Busi’s mind. That child knew what she wanted, all right!

She would not judge her. She’d heard the words, and they echoed what she’d heard before, but never so blatantly, so boldly; and never before from the lips of someone that young. How could such a child already know how to solve the ever-present crisis of money?

Maybe a disabled husband could get one money for airtime, for that swanky cell phone, new sneakers, a dress to wear to her best friend Thandi’s party in a few weeks, the school’s choir tour ...

Take Thandi, for instance. Three years older and twice as glamorous as Busi, her father gave her his card to shop at Splendour, and her sugar daddy gave her a fat envelope every time they met. But how much did Mama get for her, Owam and Esam? Was it three hundred a month for each child? Less? More? No, surely not. Phyllis was always, but always, short of money.

And then Busi had a new idea: for a disabled child, the grant must be huge: a thousand ... *at least!*

CHAPTER TWO

Khulu loved Sidwadweni, her home village not far from Mthatha and near Tsolo in the Eastern Cape. The name Mthatha spoke of grandeur, glamour, splendid living. Tsolo also had much of which to be proud, including great chiefs, but Sidwadweni was the village Khulu chose to retire to after working for the same family in the manicured white suburb of Bishopscourt for decades.

At the time that her knees began to ache after years of polishing floors, Khulu tore herself away from the clinging vines of family – and her employer, Mrs Bird, who over the years had also become friend and benefactress, fondly called MaNtaka (a take on her surname) by Khulu and her family.

‘Now that I am retiring, I want to go back to the place my beloved Hlombe and I planned for our old age,’ Khulu told everyone. She and her husband Hlombe were newly married when she first got that job; Mr and Mrs Bird also a newly married couple. Both women thought it a good omen that they shared the date of their weddings. Both were blessed with two, and two children only. Girls for both; no boys – much to the secret lamentation of the husbands. As much as both men professed to love their daughters, each harboured a sorrow in his heart; for each, the girls were not true heirs. Perhaps this private sorrow accounted for their early demises.

While the two women both lost their husbands much too early, they did not lose each other. When Khulu lost Hlombe, Mrs Bird was a huge support to her; and Khulu returned the favour hardly a year and a half later.

The two remained together until Khulu’s bones refused to go on co-operating with housework. ‘Not my fault you don’t want to move with the times,’ said Mrs Bird. ‘I bought the Hoover for you, you know?’ She patted Khulu on the shoulder as she always did. ‘Make yourself a cuppa Milo!’

The separation was far from unkind. Khulu received a golden handshake, plus so many extras even she was surprised. Even more surprising, Mrs Bird suggested that the famously unreliable Phyllis, take over housekeeping duties from Khulu: ‘I’ve known Phyllis since she was born! Let her come here to char for me.’

She went on, ‘Your room here with me will always be available. Leave your stuff here and take the key with you. I have a spare, but doubt I will ever need to use it. There’s nothing of mine in there.’

And so Khulu was free to return to the house she and Hlombe had built eSidwadweni. They had planned to retire there; the place of their growing years. Now she would go to that place where his bones rested. That was her home now. She said only very soft words to her God. She said very soft words to her ancestors, the Old, the long line without end of which she was just a tiny dot, insignificant. Yet her God and her Old saw to all her needs, protected her from harm, forefended evil from her path so that her foot never on ungodly thorn did tread.

In serene Sidwadweni, placid land of rolling hills and soft valleys, here and there a silent stream gleamed past, only to return and do the same over and over and over. All around, broad-leafed lazy cabbage trees dotted the veld; aloes stabbed the hill flanks with their bloody spears; here and there, cattle dozed in the mid- day sun among sweet thorn and kei apple.

Human habitation appeared scant, sightings of hut, house or rondavel cluster were rare. And those visible appeared uninhabited or deserted, except for a few trading stations where white shopkeepers had called the shots until the political tide had turned, and one and all had fled to the cities. A few rare souls – ministers or doctors – stayed behind, as did the farmers. Not an easy thing to do, pack up a farm and cart it off to the city; so a lot of the farmers stayed on.

Here Khulu lived alone in Ekuphumleni, the homestead of Hlombe's and her dreams. Their little castle on the plain, where, if one stood quite still amidst the warbles of finches and starlings, one could hear whispers of the rushing waters of ages long gone. And here Khulu could live out her dream of gardening. She grew all her own vegetables – onions, carrots, tomatoes, potatoes, cabbages, beans and maize. She even had a few fruit trees: apricot, peach and pear. 'I only grow what I like!' she would say.

Her eyes softened and a smile parted her lips to show the gap between the front upper teeth, big enough to pass a mealie- pip through, as she thought back to planting those trees in her youth. Way back when Sidwadweni boasted lush bushes, pinned by impressive trees – thick forests alongside the streams and wide fields of maize on the plains, heavy-laden stalks swaying in the breeze as autumn winds breathed to ripen them. Some planted swathes of broad bean, squash on the vine, plump carrots in deep dark fertile soil. Buffalo grass, red grass boosted the rich milk of ewes, and the thickets rustled with the midday cooing of doves, the melodious boubou and raw crackling sounds of ravens – and starlings so black that the black hurt the eye, the black so black it was blue-tinged. So black it called out for praise in poem and song:

Pitch black is the starling;
Songbird of the thickets.

Isomi limnyama thsu;
Ngumlonji, imyoli ingoma yalo—
Melodious is the song of starling.

Khulu also kept chickens. So when the shadows grew long, the chickens stopped scratching and sauntered toward the coop. Khulu would get up from where she was shelling beans or stamping maize on a stool in the sun, and head for the end rondavel. Here, from under the table against the far wall, she would haul out the chickenfeed. The hens flapped about her feet, clucking like there was no tomorrow. Khulu smiled and shook her head at their reflex anticipation.

And that set her thinking about the morning's call from Phyllis, one that always came at this time of the month. It was more than two weeks since the child grant had been in her pocket. She found it easier to ask for money when her mother was in the Eastern Cape. Phyllis would rather not see her mother's face screwed up, eyes slit like a cat's, mouth agape at the spectre of a daughter begging for money from a pensioner.

That SASSA pension! It added lines of care to her face. And lines of sorrow to her prayer: 'Uyaziwa umntu onemali yaye ehlala yedwa; ukukutya okuvuthiweyo.' There was no rest or freedom in her old age. Cooked food was she. After battling long unruly lines and the ever-present risk of on-site robbery for her pension, next she faced the ever-outstretching beggarly hands of her elder daughter. And the two add-ons, the babies born after Busi, whose fathers Phyllis did not even know, were red coals in Khulu's heart. They were sure signs her daughter was lost.

It will kill me, the way my daughter lives, thought Khulu, as she watched the satisfied chickens jostle and trip over one another as they hustled towards their coop. It will send me to my grave. Long before the ancestors would have wished to see me, they surely will. I have fled here to avoid that early grave, but the phone, that most astute detective, bites into the innermost ear of my heart, lacerating my very spirit.

Her daughter's pitiful voice as she said the same words Khulu heard each month: 'Apologies for waking you at so early an hour, Mama.'

Like she wasn't aware of this before she went to bed the night before.

'Siyashota, Mama – we are running short!'

The grant money did not seem to help Phyllis one bit. It never did. It made no difference at all, at least not as far as her children were concerned.

Khulu shook her head as she heard Phyllis wheedle and beg yet again. 'I know, Mama, it is not I who, in utter inconvenience and danger, have to travel solo kilometres to town. It is

not I who have to wait the whole day in long, long queues! It is not I who have to cross wide fields to the tarred road, walking all alone while being observed by young men and boys who would like to help one travel lighter ... I know, I know. Why are these tellers always so resentful? Really! The reluctance of people in jobs supposed to offer service is a national scandal. Prisoners hired out to farmers show more enthusiasm digging and tilling and heaving and shoving heaps of rock-hard turf.'

The phone conversation stayed with Khulu well into the night. *My elder daughter brays. Will she ever grow up? Will she ever sober up? Will she ever take responsibility? God help us if she foals again! Lily will kick her out. Lamb-like husband might also balk.*

Fat chance of ever escaping her children! Phyllis was a heavy load on her shoulders; Khulu had thought that if she left Cape Town, maybe that would help. That her older daughter would learn to stand on her two feet at last. *Yhoo, ndikhe ndizibhanxe kanene! Golly, I do sometimes fool myself. Must talk to Phyllis one more time. Must do that. Next time I'm in Cape Town ...*

And it wasn't just her. When she was still living at Mrs Bird's, at least once a month the phone would ring, and: 'That will be Marvin! Wonder what he wants,' her employer would say as she shuffled off to answer. Marvin was her most spoiled nephew and godchild. Khulu knew what Marvin wanted. What Marvin always wanted towards the end of the month – money!

Khulu shook her head. She and this woman she worked for were old, getting older, but the younger people seemed to believe they did not need the money they had: 'But where mine think I get the money they want from me beats me!'

We, the Old, heard the cry of our daughter; Looked at the long years of her living ...

Awu! What shall we say about earthly matters?

The blue cranes stacked in heaps lying dead at Hoho;

The black vulture and its dogs ate, at Hoho;

Our hearts are grieved

*For we see no relief for her from her drainage; Only growing sorrow; growing
hardship;*

All sprung from the death of ubuntu; Even that grant to the poor:

What did it really grant the poor Except more poor; more poverty?

CHAPTER THREE

Every time Busi travelled to and from Cape Town, she knew Cape Town had no idea of Kwanele at all. No idea it lay there, waiting, seething, ready, at minimal spark, to erupt. But the informal settlement was there because of Cape Town. It saw itself as part of Cape Town. No! Kwanele *believed* it was Cape Town. Knew its very existence, its evolution was inescapably tied to Cape Town: 'Here we are, Kwanele, rooted in, sprouted from and irrigated by Cape Town for Cape Town.'

Busi's thoughts guided her automatically: *Just let me get to my seat!* If she'd forgotten today was Friday, the noise in this over-crowded kombi told the story: over-excited children, relieved to be on their way from the centre of town to the townships for the weekend. *If those two girls get in, we'll be nearly thirty kids in here.* The rowdiness was always greatest on Fridays, and it seemed Tatomkhulu, driver, conductor and manager, wanted to join the celebration with his loud music.

Here come the traffic cops, slowly overtaking us. Hey, you two, don't you hear this rhythm belting out? Don't you see this potential slaughterhouse? But nobody cares. Let me look at the wide sweep of the sea as we hurtle along Baden Powell Drive.

Like my heart, the houses are getting smaller and smaller as the taxi gets closer and closer to home. Home? I have to call it that. But in my heart of hearts, it will never really be. Home is elsewhere; it is where, once upon a time, I lived with Mama and Tata. I was happy there. Very happy! Aunt Lily's house is a pre-tend home.

Here is the dreaded left turn towards Dunes Road, past the make-do soccer playgrounds on the left, opposite the white sand hill. Now speeding on to Lookout Hill, to be struck by another but totally different kind of sea: as endless as the ocean and as hurtful to the eye as that other sea is pleasing, uplifting to the soul. Khayelitsha. Within Khayelitsha lies Kwanele, which means 'Enough!' Funny that! Call a place 'enough' when it never has enough of anything, except more than enough squalor, crime and disease. I wonder whether anybody knows how many divisions and subdivisions Khayelitsha has? I can't even direct my school friends to my home! No matter how detailed the directions, they would get hopelessly lost. Thank God for that, actually! Nobody from my school must ever-ever come here.

From the Main Road, Tatomkhulu turned left, and immediately the tyres of the kombi made a sound like soft ice being crushed under a stone. No tar on this road. On the left was the

community centre with its bright-blue painted walls, on which leaders of a past era stared out at the passing world. *Tata Nelson Mandela is the only one I know, the others ... who cares! But why are no women there? What about Mama Albertina Sisulu, Winnie Mandela, and the other women Khulu always talks about? Her heroines.*

Let me get my things ready, I am the first to be dropped off.

Aunt Lily's house is the first house in this row. The taxi doesn't have to turn into Second Avenue, our street.

Jump out. Quickly slide the kombi's rusty white door shut. Don't look back. Scoot for the house. Through the gate and two, three, four strides; hand on the doorknob and inside!

The stares of always-lying-in-wait neighbours and the ever-ready sneers of passers-by are daily hurdles I must ignore, moving as swiftly as possible, eyes and ears closed. Not my fault I go to a Model C school. Not my fault I live in a Wendy house in a crowded yard. How I hate it here! But at least, unlike most RDP houses, Aunt Lily's has a back door so I can go in and out the back to change into street clothes.

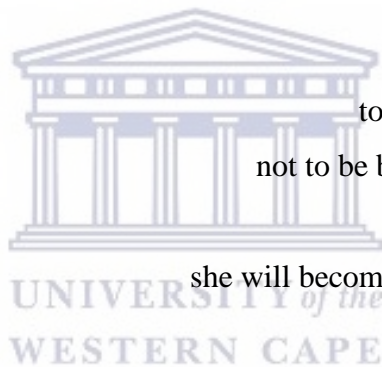
Only one more dreaded task still to do: walk all the way back up the street to pick up little bhuti from the crèche. I will never go and fetch him in my city school uniform – no ways. Thank God for kasi soccer practice; the boys, my cousins and Owam, are almost never home when I get here, but look at the dirty mugs and saucers left behind from their snacking. Boys! Anyway, today being Friday, they won't be around much.

Past the crèche, down the small hill, I can see the line of scholars waiting their turn at the communal tap, or as Thandi calls it: the Gossipmongers' Communal Tap.

Little brother settled. Washing soaking. What else can I do to shut up my mother? Shut out her loud, husky voice, followed with that long quick click of tongue. Head turned half-way to the shoulder, eyes slanted, glaring at where I am sitting, mouth corners turned down when she talks to me. And those sad traces of red on her lips and cheeks. But, hey! One: I don't care, and two: the reasons for her fury are unpredictable. I have zero feelings for that woman.

ntyilo-ntyilo uyalila
uyalila umntan'akho
take a good look at this girl
her name is Busisiwe
but everybody calls her Busi

Busisiwe – She-who-is-graced
 Busi – honey-graced.
 Busi is nearly thirteen years old
 Graced-honey is soon to be my mother
 she will try
 she will want me
 want to be my mother
 she will
 eventually
 be
 my mother
 though herself still a child
 but I know she will be my mother
 I also know
 I will fight
 to the best of what power is mine
 not to be born to a thirteen-year-old child
 not yet done being a child
 she will become my mother in the end, though
 that I also know
 I will be accepted
 if reluctantly
 if with much regret
 it has to be.



On that Friday in Kwanele, that ramshackle sprawl of a place, an hour by death-defying taxi away from Cape Town city centre, Busi was doing the ironing, Lily was reading the Bible in her bedroom, while Phyllis sat with her eyes glued to the TV. ‘Can you believe this?’ Phyllis yelled at nobody in particular. ‘Thugs made off with all the grant money! At gun-point. Shame!’ Busi looked up from her pile of ironing at the screen, as the reporter described how the recipients just waited and waited and waited. Some folded themselves down onto the

drought-scorched grass, stretched their legs before them, and dozed off. Others slept where they had stood all day long, trusting that the next day the cash vans would come.

‘A new vocabulary we have,’ said Phyllis, counting on her fingers: ‘Siyalamba/we starve; asinazindlu/no houses; imali yesikolo/school money; amayeza noogqirha/medications and doctors; ziyasityabula/chafe us ...’

She pointed at her daughter: ‘This is what you can escape, if you put your mind to it!’ Phyllis laughed, but with menace, before turning back to the TV, hanging on every word coming out of the mouth of the Minister of Women, Children, and People Living with Disability.

The gentleman was now speaking in Parliament, but every word was an exact repeat of what he had said so many times, at different venues, several per province, he could say them in his sleep.

‘Do you still remember that you didn’t get any grants from government during apartheid? Yes, my friends, if you were classified Bantu you were not allowed to even apply for grants. Grants were only given to Whites, Coloureds, Indians and Asiatics! But this is your government, and it is doing all in its power to support the poorest of the poor. Look at how much money your party, the party in government, spends. Hear how much grant money you get *every month!*’

At that, Phyllis sat up straight, hammering her fists on her thighs, and opened her ears wider.

‘Yes, I am increasing the amounts. You are going to get more money in three months’ time.’

Phyllis screamed, ‘Liii-ly! Did you hear that? They’re increasing the grant money!’

‘Oh?’ Lily could have guessed that one. Besides drink, the only thing that ever made Phyllis sit up and pay attention was money ... or rather, free money.

The Minister continued: ‘Listen, all! This is how much we have raised the new grants.’

Phyllis stood and went even closer to the TV in case a car hooted or something else roared or boomed. She didn’t want to miss a word.

‘The Child Support Grant goes from R380.00 to R400.00; the Care Dependency Grant from R1 600.00 to R1 780.00. We can do this now because—’

But Phyllis didn’t care what he was about to say, her excitement bubbled over. ‘Yes!’ she screamed, then burst into song: ‘More money! More money!’ she shrilled. ‘Guess how much ...’ She paused, oblivious to Lily’s marked disinterest in the news she was busy broadcasting. Receiving no answer to her question, she completed it: ‘... I will be getting now?’

Thought better of what she'd just said, and clarified, 'Well, not immediately, unfortunately, but in three months' time.' She certainly didn't want her sister thinking she was loaded.

'So sorry for you.' Lily went back to her reading.

But Phyllis interrupted again: 'Uyaphoxisa? Are you being sarcastic? But it doesn't matter,' she sang. 'I'm going to get more money! I'm going to get more money!'

With a sigh, her sister asked, 'What difference will that make?' But Phyllis's song turned into a war cry: 'More money is more money! More money is more money!'

'More, to do what more?' retorted Lily, setting her Bible neatly down on the table next to her bed.

Busi, who had been silent until now, thumped the iron down on the board: 'Maybe I will get a new phone!' she cried. 'Nobody I know still uses these stupid things,' and she flung her old tilili onto the couch.

Unbeknown to her, via this action, Busisiwe had answered a call from the ancestors, from the Old. CAMAGU! They moved their bones. They rattled.

Awu! What can we say about earthly matters!

The blue cranes stacked in heaps lying dead at Hoho;

Steel ate blood, at Hoho;

The trees clashed, at Hoho;

The skin of the cow spoke, at Hoho;

Beating and beating, at Hoho;

The black vulture and its dogs ate, at Hoho;

A large flock ate and left some

For the white-necked raven, at Hoho;

The hyena ate and gave some

To the Cape hunting dog, at Hoho;

The green bottle-fly ate and left some

For the worms, at Hoho;

Ho-yi-i-i-i-i-i-na!

The Old had seen enough:

Do all the children need phones?

That one thinks she does.

And not any fanakalo phone either.

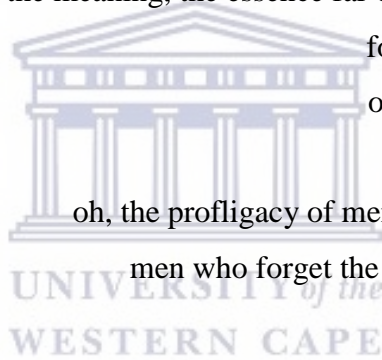
*What's wrong with the one she has?
The children get it from their parents:
Give me! Give me! Give, give, give!
Terrible to say, they teach their children;
By example train them in febleness.
Hands forever outstretched,
Begging begging begging!*

*Who can speak to them? We have found the one:
CAMAGU!
Livumile! Our wish granted; the call answered.*



... nty ... ntyilo ... ntyilo-ntyilo
ntyilo-ntyilo
someone is crying uyalila
someone is crying uyalila
someone is crying
uyalila umntan'akho
your baby is crying
that little girl throwing down her phone
is twelve years old
uyalila, my mother, she will soon be—
this is my story
it is also my mother's story.
what we will go through, my mother and I?
a long and winding road shall we travel.
here and there, straight as the bridge on your nose—
at other places, hilly like a mountain range,
curved as a harvesting sickle.
expert in the art of gathering Earth's rich green grass
take a good look at me
look!

see?
I will be born perfect!
designed so
by my mother
Busisiwe Mkhonto
Busi
take a look
a very good look
this is your story too
witness the crazy path to my birth
witness that
but know this
remember this
the meaning, the essence far outweighs what the eye beholds
for the fruit is always in the seed
oh me! oh mama! uyalila uyalila
what act fruits me?
oh, the profligacy of men of power; men in the moment
men who forget the oneness, timelessness, the total
inter-relatedness
of all.



CHAPTER FOUR

The next morning, walking to the communal taps, Busi hoped to bump into her bestie. She had sent Thandi a ‘Please Call Me’, their sign to go fetch water together, but no response had come yet. Maybe her friend was already waiting for her.

Thandi had asked Busi to help design her ‘SWEET SIXTEEN’ invitation card, because she could use her time at the school computer to do it.

Can’t wait to show her my design! Can’t wait to see her face when she opens it! The party was strictly invitation-only. Thandi’s dad was a cop, and the uninvited would know better than to even try to ambush his favourite daughter’s Sweet Sixteen party.

The card had come out brilliantly. Busi had chosen an old- fashioned font, and now she admired its purple flourishes on her phone.

Obviously, as Thandi’s best friend, she would be there. She just had to figure out how to attend without the rigmarole of asking for permission, which might either be refused, or be given with iron chains instead of strings attached! She could hear it all now: ‘Go for an hour and a half ... no, okay then, three hours. You are a student; can’t party all night. Wait, there’s bound to be liquor there, with that older Thandi.’

Better if she just found a way to get there without anyone the wiser. *One good thing about my own mama being the way she is – she can’t keep tabs on me. She doesn’t even try or, as some mothers do, pretend to.* The only real hurdle would be if Khulu was around, paying one of her visits from the Eastern Cape. But even then, she always went to bed early, and once she fell asleep, she might as well be dead. Most parties didn’t really start getting down till around midnight anyway.

At the tap, Busi spotted Thandi a mile away. Tall, dark as night, you couldn’t miss her if you tried; not with those thick, gleaming braids cascading down her back to well below the waist, cutting her butt in half in a shimmering swirl that swayed this way and that as she gestured, hands up in the air, head and shoulders moving from side to side. In her ears, as always, she wore hoops you could shoot a ball through.

The two girls joined each other in the usual long, slow-moving line. Busi watched with dismay as water overflowed cans, pails or whatever containers were under the tap, the owners busy yapping and not watching them fill. Didn’t they know South Africa was a dry country, prone to drought and water shortages? She caught herself: most of the people here had no idea.

How could they? People believed what they wanted to believe. Truth stared them in the face, but they preferred to ignore it, letting the tap run on.

But now Thandi demanded her attention, and the two girls were soon sharing tingly secrets, keeping their voices low, although anyone with ears could hear them if they wanted.

‘Ah, my blesser, Ganja Guru, is my bestest! I have no ring on my finger, so I owe him NOTHING! Yet he’s my creamiest milk cow!’

Busi looked down sadly at her bare feet in the mud around the tap. She had also tried to get money. Had called Tata: ‘Tata, what about me?’

‘What about you?’ her father sneered.

‘Don’t you love me anymore?’ *Why ask him that?* His voice already held the answer. Silence.

‘What have I done?’

That had brought a loud and heavy sigh from him before he barked: ‘What do you need?’

‘A father ...’ The thought had run out of her mouth, a loud whisper, before she could stop it.

‘I mean, something I can get you!’ he said, shouting as if she were deaf. Busi heard only denial. Tata denying her. There was pain in her throat: *money couldn’t buy what she wanted ...*

‘Sneakers,’ she whispered again. ‘All right!’ He sounded relieved.

When Busi got back home, it was as if she heard Khulu dispensing wisdoms: ‘A girl hanging laundry around lunchtime is lazy! No man will offer lobola for a young woman who sleeps until the sun has not only risen, but stretched and yawned its way up the sky, making shadows shrink before she gets up.’

Busi found herself chuckling. As much as she was glad that Khulu was not interrupting her precious Saturday, she missed her terribly. In the days when Khulu still worked for Mrs Bird in Bishopscourt, it took just one phone call to arrange a visit after school or on Saturdays. Of course, the ache was deeper when she was in the Eastern Cape. That was far. Busi was happy Khulu was coming to them for the holidays, due to arrive any day now.

When Khulu had worked and lived in Bishopscourt, she always spent Thursday nights with them all in Kwanele – the day she attended her church group, the Women’s Manyano. Busi cherished these visits. Those Thursday nights were the only nights that were semi-normal; times when Busi felt she had a warm, loving family. For one, her mom would do her best to act normally; she would try to be a mother in front of her own mother; she’d have dinner and

spend the night at home. However, even then, some- times Phyllis would wait for Khulu to fall asleep and then sneak out, pretending the next morning that she had slept in the old children's room inside the main house.

Busi truly loved Khulu. She was grateful for her – the glue that held them all together. It was thanks to Khulu they all lived in Aunt Lily's house; or rather, the Wendy house attached to Lily's home. They had lived there since Busi was five.

Phyllis looked ten years older than her baptismal certificate said. Alcohol and stress, Busi heard Khulu muttering. Her mother had never recovered from what her best friend, who had been maid of honour at her wedding, had done. Phyllis had caught her and Busi's father, Mzi, red-handed so to speak ... in bed together! Even though she was only five at the time, Busi's memory of that day remained fresh. After Phyllis kicked Mzi out, his uncle in turn kicked her and Busi out the shack they were renting.

'My shack, my nephew – no nephew, no shack,' he reasoned. Phyllis had nowhere else to go except her sister Lily's home.

At first, Aunt Lily was kindness itself: would she let her mother's daughter sleep under the railway bridge? But only one year into their Kwanale stay, Mama had given birth to another baby. Thank God Khulu had intervened – that was when she had put up the back room for Phyllis, Busi and the new baby, Owam.

Soon the words 'Ingxaki nguPhyllis: The problem is Phyllis!' spouted from Lily's lips. Even at the age of six, Busi knew this meant that her mama was unacceptable, ugly and unwelcome before the eyes of God. Worse, she heard even her sweet-tempered uncle refer to Phyllis as a slut. It was too much to bear: Tata gone; Mama, ingxaki; a new baby, one she had to mind, too. No one to love her. And there was no help from above, either. Prayer was nothing but fooling your sweet, sorry self. Prayer only worked for that minute you did it. Knees on the floor, heart and mind in some cloud, trying to pass the burden to the unseeable, untouchable, unresponsive One.

As Lily's resentment grew, Phyllis had her own resentments to nurse: Lily, her younger sister, at least had a house. Yes, an RDP house, but a house all the same. Phyllis had never had a house of her own. And that was cancer to her very soul. She would tell any with ears to hear that she had been on the waiting list for housing since the dawn of democracy – she'd put her name down even before Busi was born. Yet she had as much hope of getting that house as landing on the planet Venus.

And Busi heard. She absorbed all the venom spewed by and about her mother, and the older she got, the more she had to accept it as the truth. She had to listen to the gossips saying

that Phyllis got so hot, many a night she didn't find her way home at all. Missing at night became Mama's second name.

The first time this happened, alarmed, the family had notified the police. Where was she? Statements were taken, but a day later, Phyllis turned up back at Lily's. The third time it happened, no one called the police – not after that unforgettable second time, when the phantom had reappeared.

That time, it was the police who came to them. The van screeched to a halt outside the house very early in the morning, before people crawled out of their beds. Two burly police officers, male and female, marched up and banged fists against the door.

'Yes, she lives here,' said Uncle Luvo who'd answered the summons.

The police, alerted by a concerned citizen, had found Phyllis mindlessly wandering along Baden Powell Drive.

'When?'

'Oh,' replied the woman police officer. 'Three-o-three! That is when the call came in.'

Aunt Lily had joined her husband, and wanted to know who was with Phyllis when they found her.

'Alone,' answered both police officers. After a brief discussion, voices dropped low-low, Lily exclaimed, 'But she might have been—' She caught herself, dropped her voice again. She and Luvo followed the police to the van and dragged out a pap-dronk and stinking Phyllis. They shooed away the children, Busi's eyes borrowed from a bull frog, and took Phyllis to the garden hose at the back of the house.

Afterwards, the three adults never referred to the incident. They hid it from Khulu, too. But now and then a look, a word recalled it. Much worse, less than a year later, there was another baby in the Wendy house, another little brother, Esam, for Busi to mind.

'If I had known that Phyllis would make a habit of making children without a husband, I would have thought twice about letting her come stay with us,' Aunt Lily grumbled. 'Yes, she's my sister, after all. But the add-ons – aba songezile bakhe – are red coals in my heart, I tell you!'

Of course, all this happened years and years ago – a lifetime for Busi. Back when she was Mama's only child. With Tata gone, it couldn't have been easy for Mama. Busi understood that now, at least more than when she was only five, and blamed her mother for making her fatherless. But what she still did not understand was how Phyllis could not only go on letting herself down, but Busi down as well.

CHAPTER FIVE

I have to wait to be sure-sure they're all asleep, said Busi to herself. She was nearly dying from the tension of lying awake in bed, pretending to sleep. In her mind's ear, she could already hear the noise of kwaito, see everybody vibing. Wait wait wait and die, bit by bit. Now! All was quiet; out the window she flew. She was soooo late for Thandi's Sweet Sixteen party!

But here she was at last, and the two friends jumped up and down upon seeing each other, squealing with excitement. Then Thandi pointed towards this pretty boy. Busi held her breath, walked away nonchalantly. First check him out, she told herself. *What's he like? Cute, not tall, but hefty as hell. Could lift a whole horse. Eyes like a chief when he lifts them. Ah there, he is eyeing me when he thinks I'm not looking his way. I make sure he sees I AM NOT ... HA-HA-HA-HAA!*

Thandi intervened, pulling him towards her friend: 'Dance, you two!' she shouted above the roar of the music. She had drunk a bit more than Coca-Cola. 'He's from Section B ... hotter than hell! I saved him especially for you!' she said in Busi's ear.

She raised her voice again: 'Brian, this is Busi. Make sure you're happy; neither of you's allowed outta here before noon tomorrow!'

And off she sashayed, shouting to another friend, waving her arms as she disappeared into the gyrating crowd of cuddling, bobbing, bubbling bodies.

Busi and Brian got down, dancing without wasting words. Rhythm was king that night. But then she heard his voice: 'Girl, you look hot!'

That was all she got from the boy: that, and his name. And oh, let's not forget: his number! Got that when he buzzed her right back after she gave him her number.

Wait, there was more: he fished out a small bottle from his pocket, twisted off the cap, and held it out to her. Thirsty, she took a gulp, then had to hide her coughing as the liquor burned its way down her gullet. After that, whenever he offered her the bottle, she was careful to sip, the warmth soon spreading to her outstretched fingers, her gyrating hips.

Although Busi sneaked back home early the next morning, before six, that whole Sunday, she was more nervous than a brooding hen. She kept to herself, pleading a headache (that was true) and loads and loads of homework. Not quite a lie that either ... just an overstatement of fact. Had anyone detected her absence? Did anyone know?

Busi knew if one knew in that house, all knew. She hoped that no one had noticed her empty bed during the night. She'd been very careful, but everyone knew about Thandi's party – also that she, Busi, was too young to attend.

But soon she picked up Khulu's eyes following her, one brow raised, one corner of mouth drawn down – a piercing look of dis-approval. Sadness was there, too.

Khulu saw the alarm and brooding on her granddaughter's face and troubling thoughts, most unwelcome, inveigled her mind. No good could come from Busi's meetings with that ougat Thandi ... no good at all. Khulu felt this in her old bones. But how to stop Busi from taking what she had been fed? Khulu thought about it. She picked at it like a dog with a bone. Then she called Phyllis.

'Busi will see her moon time soon!'

'Hayi, suka, Mama! Ngumntwana lo. This is a child.'

'A child who has sprouted! You don't see the peaches on her chest?'

'No! You imagine things!'

'And the oily face?'

'Oily face?'

'Uyafikisa. Coming into womanhood, she is.'

'Hehake! Goodness!'

'Uza kumthombisa nini? When will you give her the rites-of- passage ceremony?'

Phyllis jumped to her feet. 'No, I am not doing that! Not me.'

'And why not?'

'That is backward, Mama.'

'Backward? No, that is tradition!'

Lily heard their heated discussion and joined in. 'The child will be laughed off the face of the earth. Even here in Kwanele – and I don't want to think about that posh school of hers! Times have changed, Mama. Please leave the poor girl alone.'

The 'poor girl' eavesdropping on this adult discussion, soundlessly punched her right fist into her left palm, said to herself: 'Good!' She couldn't remember when last she'd been in full agreement with her fussy aunty.

'If you say so,' Khulu retorted. 'Kodwa, nakundikhumbula ngenye imini. But one day you will remember what I said today!'

The older woman looked at her daughters, shook her head and murmured, 'Mark my words. Yes, you mark my words. I must take Busi to the village. She will learn a lot eSidwadweni. But also just to get the poor child away from this place ... if only for a while.'

Busisiwe, in Grade Seven, had no such concerns. She felt quite grown-up now that she was almost in high school. Just a few more months and the year would be dead. The principal talked about nothing else: ‘You all have one foot already in high school. You had better behave yourselves. You’re not quite there yet, remember that and act your age!’ What she meant by that, Busisiwe had no idea.

What she did know was that she was hopelessly moneyless. Had always been, but now, for some reason, it was just more pronounced, more terrifying. The only thing she seemed to see was how other kids at her school flaunted their wealth ... well, those from the suburbs, the blessed ones, not those travelling in the minibus back to the township. She definitely saw and felt that divide more keenly. One couldn’t help be embarrassed by one’s nakedness when everyone else was wearing clothes. But never mind! There were many tricks a girl could come up with to tart up her school uniform, and Busi had learned them all. Had had to learn them, or she’d have been dead in the water.

She was lucky that way, Busi told herself. Her sister-friend Thandi in the township was not only older; that girl was a fashion-maker. She could take an insignificant piece of nothing, wrap it around her lower body, and BOOM! Thandi had an elegant designer skirt. It was from her that Busi learned the trick of shortening her tunic with an extra set of buttons hidden in the shoulder seam.

Thandi’s horror stories about the school she attended in the township made Busi aware that perhaps she should be grateful for her opportunities. No, definitely grateful, she corrected herself. Kasi schools, it was a well-known fact, suffered chronic shortages of textbooks; had no computer or science labs; many had taverns right around the corner from the school premises, and it was not uncommon for learners and sometimes even teachers to sneak off there – they did that during school hours, or, for the few still with some sense of shame, right after school.

In an effort to save her sneakers, Busi went to fetch water in an old pair of Mrs Bird’s shoes, which were too small to be useful until they were cut open at the back. As she stood there, waiting her turn at the ever weaker-running tap, hopelessness sifted into her. Somewhere deep inside her, desperation grew. Every second she was consumed by burning thoughts about the gross unfair-ness of her life. Imagining how Thandi spent the past weekend with her Ganja Guru choked her. Yhoo, Thandi didn’t spend it in a hokey-pokey shack, or even an RDP leg-out or apartheid four-room. The girl had stayed in a HOTELE. For a whole long weekend

– Thursday through to Tuesday morning. And then she was driven to school! Although she didn't disclose the exact amount her sugar daddy slipped her, Busi suspected, KNEW in fact, that Thandi had at least five grand in her pocket.

Imagine that! To have that!

And that's a girl attending a rickety-rackety nothing school while she, the blessed one, a learner from a posh Model C school with a saint's name, stood here with her cut-down, throwaway shoes in the mud.

Busi felt caught between a rock and a hard place. When she wanted, needed something, her mother stubbornly refused to pay for it. For Phyllis, the education Busi was getting courtesy of Khulu's old employer was already more than she could expect. She should concentrate on doing well at school, an opportunity many in her position – fatherless and mother a domestic worker – could not even begin to dream of. She was very, very lucky, Phyllis kept on saying. Hers was an opportunity many would give anything, everything to receive.

But she couldn't begin to tell her mother how difficult, how anxiety-making it felt straddling Kwanele and Cape Town every single day. Moving from the one to the other was like climbing in and out of two different TV shows: one full of colour and strange-ness, the other drab but familiar.

'We had no such chances during our time!' Phyllis would snap. This irritated Busi to no end. Why should she be punished because she was getting a better education? Mama and Khulu's suffering under apartheid was not her fault. Besides, it was not Mama herself who had suffered, nor had she personally defeated the apartheid government. That had been the job of Tata Mandela and the ANC.

Sitting next to a white kid at school! That was Mama's idea of freedom. But Busi did not feel the freedom. If her Mama could only see the 'to-die-for' three-grand sneakers her desk-mate Shona wore when she went out with her parents. Mama did not know how hard she had to pretend not to show envy while chatting to happy, kind-hearted Shona with her long straight hair, who was always nice to her. Why couldn't she be an awful snob so that Busi would have a good reason to hate her?

To crown it all, with frowns and jeers, Mama forbade Busi to ask her absentee father for anything. 'Why do you think he stays away ... because he loves you and wants what's best for you?'

This crushed her spirit, deterred her from calling her father.
Well, sometimes.

‘Are you sure?’ asked Ms Priscilla, the school secretary. Busi had not yet paid the fare money for the trip, although her name was down as a definite. Mortified, Busi told the secretary she’d been given the money, but had forgotten to bring it.

‘Well then,’ said Ms Priscilla, ‘bring it tomorrow.’

Busi wished the ground would just open up and swallow her. The school was planning a trip to a clothing factory. The learners would not only see how evening gowns were made, but some would be allowed to dress up like mannequins and parade on a real ramp, modelling dresses for teenage girls!

Back home, she pleaded and scolded and wept until her uncle couldn’t bear it any longer. He gave her the money. Gave it to her, and then suffered through the hours of fighting with Aunt Lily behind the closed door of their bedroom that followed. As if that were not bad enough, Phyllis bitched: ‘Do you want them to throw us out?’

Busi felt as if she stood on a crumbling piece of clay, while all around her roads led to wonderful new and exciting possibilities. The only thing needed to step off that lump was money.

And then nosy Shona asked Busi where she was going during the holidays. Busi shrugged and said, ‘Family’s keeping it secret so far.’

‘Oh, my dad is taking us to Mauritius.’

Busi’s head swirled with names and words like this, thrown around during school time. Names of places, foods, brands of clothing, hobbies, gym equipment, cars, names names names ...

‘That’s nice,’ she said and painted a big, lips-only smile: ‘Enjoy!’ But Shona was already racing off and away to another group, no doubt to discuss their holiday plans before all the Grade Sevens trooped into the assembly hall for a lecture.

The speaker was there to talk to them about respect for self. Busi’s mind started burning. Did she respect herself? Did her Mama respect herself? She didn’t love herself, that’s for sure. Is respect possible without love – or the other way round? Love with- out respect?

That evening, Busi asked Mama about respect and love.

‘The Bible says: Beka uyihlo nonyoko,’ Phyllis replied.

‘Awu, Mama, the Bible assumes one has a yihlo – father!’

‘Miss Know-all!’ Mama slapped the table, got up, pushing the chair she was sitting on so hard, it tottered backwards like a drunken wooden robot. Uncle Luvo stopped it from toppling over, shook his head and put it back in its place. ‘Respect your furniture,’ he said.

Busi looked at the figure of her mother disappearing out the door, and her usual thoughts started up: *There she goes again! She’ll most certainly get herself soused. Any wonder Tata left? Or am I blaming the victim again? Didn’t the teacher in Life Orientation the other day say we must be loyal to members of our families? Trouble is, which one must I be loyal to? Tata, who said he loved me, but left me, or Mama who stayed, but is always out and about, leaving me to babysit the fruits of her actions?*

Busi knew that the enraged Phyllis would disappear for the whole night, and with her charring for Mrs Bird finished for the week, she might stay away even longer. The two little boys would sleep with Busi. That meant getting up and settling a crying child several times in the course of the night: ‘Been there, done that, more times than I care to remember!’

She sighed. The teachers told them, ‘When you get home, rest for half an hour after a snack, and then hit your books.’ She arrived long after even the possibility of a snack; then she had so many chores to do. If only they could all sit down like the families she saw in advertisements, be together like a real family.

Busi had another anxiety. She hoped Tata would remember her birthday this year. He forgot it last year, after promising, nogoal, he’d come especially to be with her. The man hadn’t even called, and had his phone off all day long. So much for fatherly love!

Her mind was buzzing. She simply had to come up with a plan for new sneakers for the outing. Although the principal was strict, very strict about uniform – brown lace-up shoes only – uniform rules always relaxed when they went on an outing. She couldn’t have the class see her in her regular tatty mud-splashed sneakers. No way!

Although all the blood in her veins screamed against it, she texted Tata and appealed for money.

‘Sure, baby!’ came the prompt response. No explanation about not sending the money he’d promised her last time round – and forget any apology. But surprise, surprise! This time the man actually honoured his word. Within an hour, Busi got a notification of cash received. Wow! Papa had sent her a lousy R200 via Checkers.

‘How big-hearted of him,’ Busi fumed. What kind of pathetic sneakers could one buy for that miserable pittance? But when she complained, Aunt Lily snapped: ‘Be grateful for small mercies.’

Phyllis’s response was to scream: ‘I could kill the swine!’

‘If he’s a swine, are you a sow?’ Lily countered. The sisters glared at each other with scorn-filled eyes.

Then Lily turned back to Busi: ‘You’re at that place to learn, not to be a fashion modeller!’

Phyllis chimed in: ‘Perhaps Mrs Bird can help. Why don’t you go ask her for money?’

Busi made a face. She didn’t like asking Mrs Bird for anything. ‘Khulu doesn’t want me to bother Mrs Bird.’

‘Don’t tell me you expect me to go on my knees for you! I have news for you: nothing doing!’

‘You’re the one who sees Mrs Bird, Phyllis,’ said Lily. ‘Don’t be selfish. The child needs to go on school trips ... you work for the woman.’

Phyllis turned to her daughter and spat: ‘Go ask Mrs Bird yourself!’

Busi felt as if she was splintering into nothingness. In the back room, she went straight to her bed, lay face down. Buried in the rough corduroy overcover, she stifled groans. She couldn’t go on the trip. It was as simple as that. She couldn’t make a friend because she had nothing. She was a nothing.

The next day, Phyllis came home in the evening, her face longer than a pole.

‘What’s the matter?’ Lily asked. ‘MaNtaka is something else!’ ‘You two had a fight?’

‘Well,’ answered Phyllis, ‘I did what you said I should do, and you have should heard the mouthful I got!’

‘From Mrs Bird?’

‘No, from Jesus Christ!’

Lily burst out laughing: ‘That bad?’

Phyllis went into a rant about the lecture she had received on the difference between needing and wanting things. She couldn’t remember which of the two Mrs Bird said was right, and which was wrong. Cutting coat according to cloth, lying on the bed one had made, there are many poorer families, and so on and so on ...

Lily sighed and turned to Busi: ‘Know what our father used to say to us – your mother and I – when we were your age?’

Phyllis shouted, ‘Choose which you want: education or swank!’ The sisters laughed out loud, looked at each other, and there was an amazed spark of recognition, of admission, remembering who they once were ... who they still were: Hlombe’s beloved daughters. Remembering their father, wordlessly, they reached for each other, embraced.

So surprised was she by this rare show of kinship between the two sisters, Busi found herself tearing up at the same time that a slow-spreading smile split her face. That minute, something was born in her heart: recognition of kinship. Love of family. She'd always understood the concept, but it had not been a living thing, real and tangible.

Despite all the ups and downs of her family, love was also present. She must not forget that. Their living in Kwanele, living under Aunt Lily's roof – well, in her backyard – was proof positive thereof.



CHAPTER SIX

All day long Busi could hardly pay attention to what the teacher was saying. The number so loud in her mind she could hear her heart beat it loud and clear. THIR-teen – two-beat strokes; loud-gap-soft.

THIR-teen THIR-teen THIR-teen! Hello? She was grown. Finally, she was grown. At the stroke of midnight tonight she would be a teenager, no less!

Sleep was scarcer than a hen's tooth that night. Now life could begin to happen. Now she would be able to live out the things she felt churning inside her. Her mind had a million zillion crazy things to think about. She could hardly wait for the coming morning.

Her phone alarm buzzed, but she was already up. Up and waiting. Surely ... now? Now he would call, for he knew perfectly well she'd be awake. Knew what time she woke for school. But everything was stubbornly quiet.

Busi's thoughts went round and round in her head. *This can't be happening. It can't be happening to me. I went to bed expecting a midnight call. It didn't come. So I told myself: he considerately thinks I should rather sleep and will call first thing tomorrow. Even as I drifted off to sleep, I imagined his deep bass voice singing: 'Happy birthday to you! Happy birthday to you! Happy birthday, dear Daddy's girl! Happy birthday to you!' Yes, and he would drag that last note, making it dip and rise, dip and rise, his voice deeper on the dip and shooting up like a wave on the rise.*

Why hasn't he called yet? He can't possibly forget the day, as we share a birthday. If I'd arranged the year's calendar myself, I could not have organised it better: a double birthday with my father.

Busi realised she'd forgotten how old her father was, even as she remembered how handsome he was, and how much he had loved her as a five-year-old. Long ago he'd promised to spend this important day with her. Surely, he wouldn't break his promise this time? Of course not! This birthday was special. Maybe he hadn't called because he wanted his visit to come as a surprise.

As Busi emptied the wash basin onto the garden, the rest of the house suddenly descended on her, singing at full throttle, no stopping them, the chorus loud and out of tune. Now the whole neighbourhood knew it was her birthday.

*Happy birthday to you!
Happy birthday to you!
Happy birthday, Busi-Busi!
Happy birthday to you!*

And then they sang again, translating the whole distinctly inharmonious song into isiXhosa. OMG, her family was something else. Embarrassment meant nothing to them.

Surprise, surprise! Even Mama made it. Not only was Phyllis present; she looked good, quite pleased with herself. Just because, for a change, she had slept in the house and was sober in the morning for her daughter's birthday, was no reason to look as though she deserved a prize.

Although it was her birthday, it was also still a school day, so the family made short shrift of the cream biscuits and Oros.

'There will be chocolate cake when you come back from school,' said Phyllis.

Really? But aloud Busi said, 'Of course!' even though she didn't believe one word.

'Nyhan-nyhan!' said her mama.

Lily shrugged, eyeballs going north until only the whites showed.

'Believe it when I see it,' Busi shouted back as she ran out the door to catch the school taxi. Although she wasn't looking at Phyllis, the girl felt her mother wince – a cat caught stretching for milk not in her saucer. Busi told herself: *She so desperately wants me to think she loves me, and maybe she does. But I know she loves her liquor more. I'm done with her lies. Yes, I know we shouldn't say a grown-up lies. That's rude. Grown-ups make mistakes – bayaphosisa.*

Busi kicked her mother out of her thoughts as she got into the transi, switching back to Tata. He was more important – more reliable. Well, she hoped so.

All the way to school, and all day long, the same thought kept turning and turning in her mind. *He will not forget my birthday. It is also his. No way could he forget his own birthday. Surely, he remembers he shares it with me, his beloved daughter. We spoke about it during our weekly 'visits', as he calls our scheduled Sunday afternoon telephone talks. And today is not any old ordinary birthday, either. THIRTEEN! I am a teenager at last. Certified, verified, glorified.*

Should I call him? No, it is a special day for me: he must call first!

Thina sobabini? We two? We jive!

Except, that whole long day, no call came from her father.

At her school, a learner got detention if a teacher had to warn her to be quiet more than once during the day. Busi had got detention during her very first week there. Was it her fault she had a loud voice and was not so good at whispering? But the teacher also said she was cheeky. Cheeky? Cat's whiskers.

So today, although distracted, in fact more like subtracted from what the teacher said, Busi trod carefully – today of all days she didn't want detention.

But what a tedious day as it stretched out and no call came. That day the benevolence of her big-hearted class teacher stuck in Busi's throat. And then busybody, know-it-all Shona had to broadcast to the entire school that it was 'Boosie's' birthday. Boosie – why the belungus exploded the soft 'b' was beyond her. After so many years, it had stopped jarring her ear. Once Shona had alerted all the silly girls in her class, break was a nightmare of thanking people for cupcakes, juice and gaudy birthday cards quickly handmade by classmates.

On her way home, Busi still nursed some hope her father would call. At home, no surprise, Phyllis had not only forgotten her promise of the morning; she forgot to come home at all. No card, no cake. As they sat around the table joylessly drinking tea, poor Aunt Lily scuttled to her room and miraculously returned with a box with a cake and some soft drinks in it. 'I know my sister,' her eyes said.

The boys were delighted, but something vile lodged in Busi's new teen throat. *Broken promises from both of those who bred me! A washout day!*

Busi felt she no longer even had a heart – it had been hammered and trampled, torn and crushed into a clot. That was the gift she had to mark this supposedly special day, this milestone passage. A bleeding clot where her heart had been.

As she lay sleepless in the dark that night, she agonised over how long it had taken her to wake up to the truth, to see her parents – especially her Tata – clearly. She had only herself to blame. All these years, she had been fooling herself.

She had wasted half her life chasing a father who did not love her, maybe never had. The staggering fact was that for eight of her thirteen years, she had lived a dead life without knowing it, waiting and praying for the miracle of being loved for herself.

Later that night, the back-room door blew open. It was Mama stumbling in, making such a lawaai ...

‘Why does your father call me when it is your birthday? Why doesn’t the swine call you, his dropping?’

Busi could hear the neighbours complaining about the noise.

‘He called *you*? I waited for his call all day long ...’

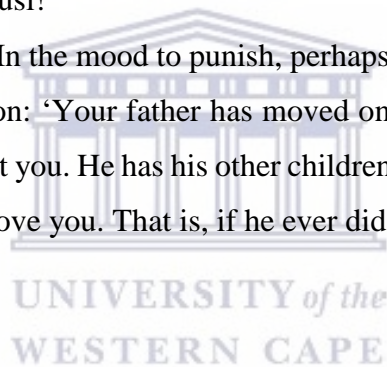
‘No, he wanted to call me so that I could listen to his pitiful excuses! He has his other children and his *wife* ... do you hear that? His wife, my dear – the man has no shame telling me, the woman he abandoned and left holding his baby with nowhere to live – tells me about his wife who is not working. I told the dog what I thought of him and cut him off. Flipping wasting *my* *airtime*!’

‘But how did he waste your *airtime*? You said he called you.’

But even as she spoke, Busi knew it was the absolute last straw. Why hadn’t he called her, even if he couldn’t make the visit he’d promised? Even a ‘Happy Birthday!’ message would have been something!

Stupid! Stupid! Stupid Busi!

Phyllis wasn’t done yet. In the mood to punish, perhaps to make up for her own failure to materialise a cake, she went on: ‘Your father has moved on, Busisiwe. You’d better move on too! He has forgotten all about you. He has his other children to love. Yes, that’s it. He loves his other children and does not love you. That is, if he ever did.’



CHAPTER SEVEN

Fully thirteen-year-old Busisiwe told herself: 'Enough is enough. I must come up with a plan ... a plan that works. Forget the father! Forget the mother! I cannot live like this anymore. I'm on my own.'

A plan was percolating in her mind. A plan that could generate breathing space. Trouble was, how was she going to get Brian to agree to this? They hadn't been dating long, but he was the only reliable human being she knew.

Her plan was simple. Lots of girls were doing it; why shouldn't she? She'd just make him. Convince him. She had to.

Busi read the signs. Busi calculated the dates. Meticulously, she went over all the facts. Brian had kissed her on the lips. He had begun frequenting her neighbourhood. She would tell him: it was love at first sight at Thandi's Sweet Sixteen party! He would believe her.

She had to brush up her act, and a better coach than Thandi Kwanele could not produce. Busi soon became a mistress at batting doll's lashes and swinging her hips.

She also picked up that Brian never contradicted her. He also confessed to being a bit intimidated by her superior knowledge, picked up from her Model C school. 'Jeepers,' he once said. 'You can gempe-gempe-gempe all right. With so many English words in between. But you still a girlie, mos!'

So, she hadn't had to work hard to get him between her thighs. Her words were there to melt away any reluctance he had. Nobody would ever blame him. She was pushing for it; ready and greedy. Why wait? Did he want somebody else to be there first? Why not grab the cherry when it was offered on a smooth virgin-white plate? That was Busi's favourite phrase, borrowed from Thandi, who was coaching her behind the scenes.

Soon the women in the house began frowning. Why was Busi suddenly so sprightly? Why had she become such a keen water mule? Was she giving it up to boys? 'Remember, smart one,' said sarcastic Phyllis, 'boys will make you pregnant! Then see who raises that child. Not the boy. No, never the boy; and it won't be me either, that I can tell you ... you can bet your last penny on that!'

And it was not just the grown-up members of her family, but also neighbours who were remarking on the new confident stance of Busi: ‘They gossip that I grow up posh! Well, let them gossip; I will just go on minding my own business. Mine and Brian’s!’

Busi listened to the clot that was once a heart inside her: rememberthat-rememberthat-rememberthat-rememberthat. *I am alone. I have to do it all myself.*

Brian became a regular layabout in Kwanele, and Busi became adept at getting the other children out of the back room during the weekends.

She would never forget that first time; the awkwardness of it. The whole thing suddenly overwhelmed her. Shivering as though thrust inside the deep freeze of a fridge, teeth chattering, eyes smarting, she heard a strange voice squeak: ‘No!’

Brian pulled back, eyes wide as plates, barking, ‘No?’ She grabbed him back. ‘No, I mean YES!’ she said with a moan. His voice deep, gruff: ‘Don’t say no, then.’ Back came her brain, her quick lips shut him up in the ways Thandi taught her.

And that became the ritual, whenever opportunity dawned. Fridays, but Saturday of course the best day; blessed Saturday with everybody out and away – not even the neighbours around, despite the terribly high rate of unemployment.

Busi had it all planned. She intended for the ninth month to fall during the holidays so that the birth would not interfere with her schoolwork, or the grant that would fund her through the rest of high school.

Now she had to scheme and plan on how to free her Saturdays, becoming prompt and orderly. On Fridays, she didn’t even bother with a snack after returning from school; she went right ahead and did most of the laundry before the adults came back from work. She alerted the boys so they left their school uniforms where she could find them. Pretending to be soaking it overnight, she left the already washed laundry in clean water. The minute everybody left the next morning – et voilà, as the French teacher at her school would say: wring, rinse, and onto the washing line it all went!

Brian was her first. She was not his, but that did not matter – the last thing she needed was a fumbling virgin. What did surprise her, however, was the swiftness with which the whole thing was over. Already? The heady-dreamy-steamy sense of well-being ... did it really last only a few minutes?

After their first few times, Busi realised that there was no way she was going to become pregnant – Brian fastidiously sheathed his spear to the hilt. No baby from him!

‘Don’t want a lot of little Brians running all over the place!’ he’d said the very first time they did it. He didn’t even ask her to do anything; he took care of the business himself. Good boy, her Brian, but it was a baby she wanted, not this caution, this sense of responsibility! She had to change his style, and so she started the tap-tap-tap of the hammer: ‘You keep telling me to wait. For what? Why is now not the right time? Why are we screwing then, if you want to do things the old-fashioned way? My mother didn’t wait!’

‘I want to do the right thing,’ Brian defended himself.

‘Which is?’

‘My baby mama should first be ...’ – he shot loud-shouting eyes at her – ‘my wife.’

Not impressed, Busi challenged him: ‘Your mother didn’t wait for any white wedding dress, either.’

‘Hey, wena! Mind your mouth. That’s my late mama you’re insulting!’

‘So what?’

‘Keep my mother out of your filthy lips.’

‘They were not filthy just now,’ she said, pursing those very lips and reaching up towards him. He shook his head and, frowning, firmly but gently pushed her away, put distance between that upturned, eager face and his, which remained stern, unsmiling.

But it wasn’t long before she knew which piano keys to press, when and how. It pleased her no end that she could make Brian cry tears during nookie. His yelps thrilled her. And she relished the attention. So much attention! Her own body felt lifted. Luxurious. Honoured. It was as if the connecting eyes, mouths, and hips were the first real connection her body had ever experienced.

‘Who sees your toes?’ Phyllis asked as she watched her daughter painting her toenails. ‘Your feet are always boxed in shoes,’ she added, irritation ruffling her words.

‘I do,’ replied Busi sweetly but with eyebrows arched. Did her mother dare come out with it? Of course, it was the subject of boys and sex she was skirting around, not nail polish. Her thoughts moved to the forever-ring Brian had promised her for Christmas, and remembering, she burst out laughing, aglow at the memory of the words with which he’d made that promise.

‘What’s funny?’ Phyllis asked.

‘Nothing,’ replied Busi, but her laugh had morphed into a smirk she could not for the life of her stifle.

‘Mmmh, uyathungulula,’ Phyllis sneered. Puppy eyes begin to open! *Bitch!* Abruptly, she turned and made for the door. Out in the backyard of the house, Busi saw how her mother ran towards the hedge, bent over its bushes, and puked. When she’d gathered herself, she rinsed her mouth and swiped at the wet all around her wide-open but unseeing eyes.

Ignoring Phyllis’s distress, Busi admitted to herself that she would have to change her strategy. She wanted a baby, yes; otherwise on what would they live?

But she also wanted to live with Brian: *I love Brian, and it is his baby I want. But his goodness niggles me – even during a smoochie nookie, he is careful. But I will get him. I will get him... our baby’s name will start with B. The announcement will go: Brian and Busi have a baby. Her or his name will be Belinda; Bubele; Buyiswa; Bulelwa; Boyboy; Brutus; Bertha; Beulah; Benjamin; Bethwell; Barbara; Beauty – no, what if she isn’t and we have to change it later? But let’s get Brian over the hurdle first.*



As we are correcting things, they are disturbing them:

So it will happen then

There will be turmoil and arguments

There will be chaos and madness

The girl is bent on it

She will not turn back

The curse of a nation

Children begetting children

Long before they are ready to be parents

As we are correcting things, they are disturbing them:

What cruel times they live in, our leavelings!

What cruel times, our neglected leavelings.

Time was passing. Busi was filled with irritation, while Brian was confused about the ridicule she hurled at him for insisting on always using a condom.

‘Are you old enough for what you’re asking for?’ ‘Of course!’

‘Sure?’

As she tried to kiss him, his head jerked back. ‘What do you want a child for?’

‘What do you want smarts for?’

That stopped him short. Busi pulled down Brian’s pants, then snatched the condom out of his hand. Finally, nothing could stop him. After that first time without a condom, they never went back to using ‘that tiresome thing’. Saw no reason to. He was almost six- teen. She was thirteen. They were figuring out a new life together. Or at least, Busi was.

‘We’ll manage,’ she was convinced. ‘We already look after our- selves, the way things are. My mama, too strict, too stingy, too drunk; and you, without mother or father! We’ll make our own family. A family where there’ll be fun and love, and no one will ever be hungry or beg for things they want – a loving family. Unlike the ones we have.’



uyalila
someone is crying
my mother, herself still a child
wants a child
no-no-no-no!
I refuse to be fleshborn
she thinks her body is ready
but her body hungers to be touched
hungers to be owned hungers to be respected
her body is ready
her heart is not
her mind is not
only her foolheart wants me to be fleshborn
her foolheart stronger than her real heart
but I refuse to be fleshborn

how she weeps to see her monthly flow
for three months I resisted
finally, spirit world said I should go
one can't forever refuse when called

the tadpole in shallow water he wallows
this is his world; all he knows, all he will ever know
this way and that, the tail swishing
water retreats,
tadpole does not know
water retreats
tadpole does not see
water gone
tadpole sloshing
tadpole sloshing



my mother was thirteen
when the teardrop from my father's thigh spilled
crawled right up into the cage
of my first flesh home
my mother's sacred cage
she, all of thirteen years
and now:

it is done.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Thrumpthrumpthrumpthrump
I am little more than a heartbeat
inside my first flesh home
the cage in my mother's body
thrumpthrumpthrumpthrump
does Busisiwe hear me?
hear my heartbeat?
echoing hers?

Far away from Kwanele, Khulu was not at peace. Recently, it felt as if there was a heavy chunk of dry, dry ubulongwe, cow dung, in the innermost chamber of her heart. A premonition? Dread silted her soul. What evil was sloughing her way? There was no way of telling, but it made her innards shake and growl.

She prayed: 'Almighty, please, give me the strength to wade through whatever river of fire comes my way.'

Perhaps as a result of this heavy cloud hanging over her, birthed by the weight inside her heart, Khulu had of late become particularly observant. Things she used to take for granted, paid scant attention to, had suddenly taken on peculiar meaning. Anthills. Beehives. The croaking of toads shortly after the sun went to rest on her mother's breast.

She paid attention, wondering whether Hlombe, her late husband, might possibly be visiting her, all these years after he left this earth. He was the one who could tell of the stars, say which portended what.

'See the way that cluster over there leans a little to the east? Watch,' he would say in the evenings as they sat beside the hut, leaning against the rondavel's sun-warmed, mud-brick wall, their legs stretched out before them; she, flat on isicamba on the ground, and he perched on a block of wood. She would; and every time she would witness some oddity she'd have otherwise missed. Something beautiful, unusual, something that never failed to lift her spirits.

He taught her to pick out uCanzibe, the evening star; to first look for the group of amaKroza, Orion; and showed her how bright isiLimela became when it was time for harvesting. He had been a rare gift in her life. It is sad but true: the good die young.

Hlombe also knew the clouds – which ran before the rain, brought it, and how pregnant they were with that blessing – heavy or light, of long duration or swiftly passing showers. All that, just from the colours the clouds wore and the contours in which they were shaped as they hovered atop the mountain and hills, or scudded like beasts with predators hot on their heels, or waltzed across the heavens. They made a picture of the sense of belongingness that is the inheritance of all life on this beautiful planet, home to humans, animals and plants, beings visible and invisible, known and as yet unknown to humanity.

But the most unforgettable day was when Hlombe pointed at a formation of birds in flight. ‘Do you see that one in front, how he leads? How the rest follow in orderly fashion. Now wait, you see how he falters, feeling the burden of leadership beginning to weary him? Now see how that other one thrusts herself forward. Not in envy or grumbling or boastfulness. But in humble obligation, to relieve the courageous leader now stepping down ... doing so without fuss.’

And so she learned that true glory lay in service rendered to others for the greater good. There was no nobler pursuit than contribution to the common well-being – never forgetting that ISINA IDEDELANA! One gave way to what followed; like the waves of the ocean, each in dying gives way to the coming, the new that follows in its wake.

Shortly after he left her for the spirit world – when he went to never-wake-from-sleep-land – she had begun to sense, discern, see the meaning of the soft, sweet song of air and felt submerged into thoughts of oneness:

THERE/IS/NO/TIME/PAST/TO/COME/GONE/NEVER/OR/EVER/TIME/IS/ONE/ALWAYS/AND/ALWAYS/ONE/TIME/ ALL/ TIME/NOW/ THEN/WHEN/IS/NOW/ NOW/ NOW/ NEVER/THEN/NOW/NOW/FOR/WE/LIVE/FOREVER/FOREVER/BREATHING/THE/SAME/AIR/ALWAYS/THE/SAMESAME/AIR/OVER/AND/OVER/THE/SAME/AIR .../WHEN/WE/ARE/BORN/AGAIN/AND/AGAIN/AND/AGAIN/THE/SAME/SAME/SAME/AIR/WE/BREATHE/THE/SAME/SAME/AIR/OVER/AND/OVER/AND/OVER/REMEMBER/THAT/ REMEMBER/THAT/WE/BREATHE/THE/SAME/SAME/ SAME/AIR TIME/IS/ONE...TOMORROW/YESTERDAY/TODAY/AND/ALWAYS/ALL/ONE AND/EVERYONE/IS/PRESENT/ALL/THE/TIME THEREFORE/NEVER/ASK WERE/YOU/THERE?

DID/YOU/KNOW/OR/REFUSE/TO/KNOW/REFUSE/TO/SEE
SEE/KNOW/FOR/SURE/SOMETHING/SO/WRONG
SO/EVIL/SO/INCONCEIVABLE/MANY/REFUSE/TO/SEE/IT/
REFUSE
TO/ACKNOWLEDGE/ITS/EXISTENCE/FOR/SEEING/IT/IS/
ALREADY
ENOUGH/RESPONSIBILITY/SEEING/IT/DEMANDS/
ACTION/OF/THE/SEER
THEY/WERE/THERE/AS/YOU/WERE
YOU/WERE/THEY/WERE/ALL/WERE/ALWAYS/FOR
TOMORROW/IS/TODAY/YESTERDAY/FOREVER/AND/EVER
YOU/WERE/THERE/ARE/HERE/WILL/BE/EVERYWHERE/
ALL/THE/TIME/ANY/AND/ALL/TIME

Then one night, Hlombe came to her in an unsettling dream. He looked so sad, it brought tears to her eyes. The look he gave her was sorrowful and loving, as if to say: I wish I could take this from you, suffer in your stead. She hardly slept after the dream, and when she did, Hlombe reappeared a second and a third time.

The next morning, she fretted: what evil was stalking her? Her heart flew to her children, Phyllis and Lilian. There was trouble there! Oh, there was always trouble in the townships: toyi-toyi-ing and protests against one or another service delivery deficit; violence against children; against women; and against anyone perceived as not belonging, violence against those strange, different, outside – the Other. Khulu clenched her hands: *that always-there Other – we create in the smallness and meanness of our hearts, in our inability to see the inescapable oneness of humanity; our blunted, blighted and blinded soul eyes.* Us-them! We-they! Making monsters of one another, making monsters of ourselves.

Convinced of trouble in Kwanele, at the crack of dawn, Khulu called MaNtaka. She knew Mrs Bird woke up with the first tweet of birdsong and was out walking by six-thirty.

‘Please, Mrs B,’ she said, ‘find out what is wrong in Kwanele for me.’

‘My goodness! Why don’t you just call your girls?’

‘They’ll lie to me; pretend all is well, thinking they’re protecting me.’

‘And you don’t want to be protected?’ MaNtaka laughed. She knew Khulu too well.

‘I want to know the truth, that’s all.’

While waiting for news, night after night, Hlombe stood before her. Weeping. For decades, he had not visited her; now, she went to bed fearing his arrival. It was not good news that he was bringing.

thrumpthrumphtrump
I see my family before I was there
long before I was in it
I would be born
designed other than by the Creator of all
uMdali weento zonke
pray that Spirit World supports and protects me obedient, I will suffer the consequences
gladly
oh, that humanity regains the humaneness it has forsaken
this is my family
the only family I know
everyone in my family has a heart full of wounds
some bleed; some are beached tadpoles
they gape and gasp but give out no sound
the mouths of beached tadpoles
give out no sound
dry sobs of hearts broken
over and over and over again

Aunt Lily was the first to speak her mind. ‘What mouse ravished the peanut butter so?’

‘I thought your children only liked jam and cheese?’

‘Yes! That’s why this disappearance of stuff from the bottle is suspicious. Look here, somebody is scooping it with a finger!’

Phyllis didn’t answer. She was watching the news and as usual, was raging: ‘Promises. Promises. Promises! Listen to this one barking like a beached seal! Aargh-aaargh! Aargh-aaahargrhh! Khulu is so right; they just give promises to get votes.’

‘Maybe you should watch Busi,’ Aunt Lily suggested. ‘Because I will simply stop buying bread ...’

‘Busi hates peanut butter, you know that. Doesn’t it kill you that in a land of gold and platinum, we starve? In a land of universities galore, we are unschooled in the most basic of life-skills, conned into illicit acts and demonic dreams?’ Phyllis was on a roll and did not even see her sister leaving the room.

‘In the land of the first heart transplant, our teeth rot to mush. And all because of corruption: use the taxi of a company that has a tender with the government! Job creation has taken the form of tenderpreneurship.’ Phyllis got up, still ranting: ‘The formerly dispossessed continue to blame history, while the present is but a mirror thereof. Graft is king.’

Meanwhile Busi was beside herself with joy. No monthly visitor! Her plan was coming to fruition at last. The jackpot! Delight sent her to a baby shop in town, not to buy anything yet, but to look things over. But a cursory glance at the price of even the littlest thing came as a huge shock:



NAPPIES NEWBORN 2-5KG R199.99

NEWBORN INFANT BATH ADJUSTABLE R112.00;

BABY CARE BATH SET R19.00.

How could such little things cost so-oo-oo much? And she could only collect the money once the baby was born. This meant she had to implement Stage 2 of her plan. She must work on the baby in her belly. Get him to do as she intended.

She was happy and worried. Happy she was pregnant, worried about what Aunt Lily would say. And Uncle Luvo? What about Mama? She would probably make the loudest noise, the biggest fuss, but she was the last one to point fingers of blame. Besides, she would be of absolutely no help at all. Ingxaki nguMama!

But then it hit her: dear God! Khulu! Yhoo! Khulu would freak out. She would be the most disappointed of all. But Busi would make sure Khulu understood that her education would not be affected. She would definitely continue going to school; nowadays, teachers had to support girls who were pregnant. And besides, her moneyless days would soon be over.

In fact, if she had any money, she wouldn’t be doing what she was doing. Wouldn’t be making the plans she was making for, well

... a special baby. What would Brian think of that? Should she tell him? Perhaps not. Not yet. But he would have to supply her with the necessary stuff. Wait, better idea, she’d hang around

Thandi, who always had lots of everything – ganja, tik lollies, booze. Oh yes, and she would buy her own peanut butter and stash it under her clothes in the cardboard box that served as her suitcase. Peanut butter, lollies and brandy if she could lay hands on it: they would be her diet from now on.



*I am not yet born
uyalila uyalila uyalila
but the pain
the pain
the pain
as poison floods my tiny body
the tiny walnut of my brain freezes
the pain
the pain
the pain
my minuscule heart tires
my spine withdraws into itself
protect me Old Ones
uyalila
uyalila*

*I knew it would come to this
knew before I allowed myself to be fleshborn
in the spirit world one sees all
sees even before-before
see, my mother's heart is not twined with mine
it does not beat with mine in song
the Song of Old; the Song of Life
my mother's heart is not singing with mine
my mother's heart is not singing at all
thrumphtrumpthruuummmpp!*

The next thing, Busi sprouted a sixth finger on each hand: daily breakages when she did the dishes, crust-rimmed cups, chipped dishes, water too soapy. A wasteful girl! Furious, Lily sent her to bed without dinner one night. Thrilled, Busi went to her room out the back. Where had she stowed her treat from Thandi? Here it was! She fished a half-jack of brandy out of her cardboard box. Bliss and more bliss. Bliss to oblivion!

Hot on the heels of Lily's complaints, alarm bells sounded from the school: Busi was inattentive and rude; her performance was plunging; teachers noticed dazed looks, red eyes, sometimes even alcohol fumes. Unless there was a speedy turnaround, the school would have 'to take drastic steps.'

Meanwhile, Lily's son Sazi seemed dedicated to outdoing Busi in this unwanted category. It seemed his habit of funerring had had dire consequences, giving him a taste for alcohol in ever greater quantities. Suspicion of drinking was soon confirmed, but instead of reversing gear, the boy started missing school and missing nights at home, going 'Who knows where?' as his mother said. Drunk! – Lily grieved.

When the school results arrived, it was time for the showdown, but Busi was prepared. How could her family expect anything different? Had they forgotten the endless chores she had to do every day, lasting until well after dinner in the evenings? When was she supposed to study?

None of them went to one of those schools where the parents of classmates prepared special diets full of protein and vitamins for their studying children. Good results didn't just fall on kids; they and their parents worked for them. Was anybody in this house prepared to do their own laundry, wash dishes, clean the house, and sweep the yard? So, what if her results stank? Of course, they did, given the stupid conditions of her entire life since she had been only five, before she even started real school.

But – and now Busi outdid herself, turning in a fine performance – she was sorry. The truth is, the results were not bad, they were not even very bad: they were absolutely dreadful. They were a disgrace. 'I need to pick myself up and I will! I know I am very fortunate to be in the school I attend. I am grateful for all the help my family gives me even when their own lives are full of hardship. I know they're doing all this for me so that I escape the same fate.' Copious tears flew as she swore, 'I promise you, with all my heart I promise you, this will not happen again!'

The grown-ups were only too happy, eager to accept her remorse. They had harder nuts to grind – the boys had not done any better. Phyllis sighed and hiccupped. Lily scolded her sons: ‘At least Busi here is sorry, while you don’t seem to care!’

Luvo supported her. ‘We didn’t call this a pass in our days,’ he said, tossing Sazi’s report to the floor, disdain painted on his face. ‘These are not your days!’ Sazi shot back, striding out the door and banging it shut after him.

‘Tyhini!’ Luvo exclaimed. ‘What’s the matter with this boy?’ ‘Told you!’ his wife said, also on her way out the door, ‘but you won’t do anything about it. They’re all getting out of hand, these our children!’

Luvo shook his head and stared at the door that had swallowed his son and his wife as if he expected it to yield them back.

Hours later that night, a bedraggled Lily woke him up and told him she’d gone hunting all over the place. She’d finally found Sazi at Mamsie’s, a hot spot for those who wanted to forget their sorrows and cares – a spaza shop by day and night club after dark. Drink, drugs, and sex galore ... oh, nyama too – vleis en pap for the stomach-hungry. Sazi had refused to budge, and, much to her chagrin, she had been forced to leave him there.

Meanwhile, Phyllis had been apprehensive about Busi for some time. The girl was up to no good. She was keeping bad company; it was plain to see. That Thandi, with her sugar daddies, she was not a good example for Busi. Her behaviour ... and she not yet even in high school? Yhoo! Kuya kuthi kuphi, kube kuphi? Where would it end?

But she had a plan. She would send her daughter to the Eastern Cape to prevent more trouble.

When the idea was first mooted, Busi was keen to go and stay with Khulu. However, Brian’s presence in her life changed things. By the time the December school holidays came, her enthusiasm for the trip had not only dwindled in her heart of hearts, it had almost vanished. Much as she adored her grandmother, what on earth would she do in the village for weeks and weeks? Not a small consideration was how she would cope without her daily fix. There was no way that Khulu would miss seeing she was using something ... drink or smoke, whichever. No, Khulu was bound to notice Busi’s new habits. She’d just have to leave all that back here, she told herself.

Brian was also supportive in the end. ‘It will be nice,’ he said, ‘to miss you stacks and stacks.’ Busi took umbrage. ‘I thought you did that already – missed me each minute we are apart?’ He laughed, brushing off her protestation. A kiss stopped further words running out

that pretty mouth. A thought crossed his mind, and his eyes lit up: 'Let's pack all the fun we'd have had these holidays into the couple of days before your trip!'

That put a stop to the suspicion already brewing in Busi's mind. Everybody knew that December holidays were when everyone had fun. No school. Grown-up, if temporarily. Working, perhaps, if lucky. Very lucky! New clothes, braais and beaches! Was Brian encouraging her to leave because he wanted to hook up with someone else ... see other girls while she was away? But now, with this offer, her fears were allayed. It would also be easier to stop all bad habits after one last spree.

She would not disappoint her darling Khulu. When all was said and done, Khulu was the only person who truly loved her ... well, within the family. Of course, Brian loved her – no doubt about that! She'd be done with drugs and drink by the time she arrived at Khulu's. Fine, then.



CHAPTER NINE

Aunt Lily paid for iPhela, the cockroach – the unlicensed and unlicensable wrecks that cart people to and from townships, not daring to set their tyres beyond those condemned places. Phyllis insisted on accompanying Busi to the transi depot at Stock Road. Strange, that. When Busi wanted a mother, Phyllis was never there. Now that she'd come to need her less, not to want her around in fact, Phyllis made herself too readily available.

Busi had hoped the boys wouldn't come to the depot with her, as Brian would be there. Now with her mother with her, she might not get an opportunity to kiss Brian goodbye!

This was the busiest time of the year, and taxi conductors took full advantage. December, they saw bags or suitcases and they knew: you are going emaXhoseni – in you go! Off to Stock Road they took you, and you were already linked to a taxi. A handsome reward awaited the cockroach driver from the taxi driver whose vehicle he helped fill with passengers.

Thus did Phyllis and Busi find themselves smoothly and swiftly ferried to a Quantum mini-bus, which pleased Phyllis. She preferred taxis to buses: fewer people, less trouble.

Phyllis made sure she had the taxi's number and knew the name of the driver. Even the most reckless of parents did this; there were too many fatalities on the road not to know which one of the hundreds of taxis one's child was in. On top of the drunken driving and excessive speed, drivers and other male passengers all too often had itchy fingers, groping children – girls and boys.

Mindful of this, once they'd found Busi's taxi, Phyllis made sure she had a seat next to a mama, a much older woman. Despite murderous looks from Busi, Phyllis introduced herself and Busi to the woman, who said she was MaNdaba. Next, she begged her to look after her little girl: 'First time she's travelling long-distance!'

'Where is she getting off?'

'EMthatha.'

The woman was also going to Mthatha. Phyllis made sure MaNdaba's and Busi's luggage was packed close together. The latter had a huge canvas bag, striped in bold red, blue and yellow with sturdy plastic handles, an incongruous white. This went into the trailer and Busi, now carrying a blanket, her backpack, and a big Tupperware crammed full of amagwinya, steamed bread, as well as home-made KFC and boiled eggs, followed the lady onto the minibus.

Phyllis didn't tarry long. As soon as she was satisfied that Busi would be looked after, she left.

Busi sighed with relief: she had spotted Brian and a friend of his waiting for Phyllis to leave so Brian could see her off. Telling MaNdaba she was going for a brief chat with a friend, Busi scrambled back out the taxi.

'Ten minutes, and we're off!' warned the driver, seeing her dash off.

Brian had brought a parcel for her: 'Open it in the taxi,' he said. Busi flushed. What could it be? But there was no time to ponder; Brian walked her back to her taxi, behind which they stole a quick kiss.

'Miss you already,' he said.

'Miss you more!' One more hug, and then, hearing buses revving and taxis going PEEEEPEEP, she quickly disengaged and ran to the taxi door, got in, turned to blow him one last kiss. But he'd turned his back, already running to join his friend.

A self-conscious smile on her face, Busi returned to her seat. She forced herself to make small talk with MaNdaba before turning her attention to the contents of her parcel. More curious than excited, she peeped into the plastic bag Brian had thrust into her hand. Inside, not in any fancy special wrapping paper, just the usual soft store tissue, was a bottle of perfume. She would have been happy with a packet of Extra Strong Peppermints – all that mattered was that Brian cared enough to take the trouble to get her something, anything. Gingerly, she opened the bottle just enough to inhale a whiff. The soft scent of some flower wafted into her nostrils, made her close her eyes dreamily ... sweet sweet sweet!

Her hand trembled so that some of the perfume spilled. Fortunately, the bottle's mouth was small, and only a drop or two ran out, but the scent mushroomed. Not only was MaNdaba sniffing curiously, but a couple of people from the rows back and front of hers began sneezing. Heads turned; but Busi had stealthily pushed the offending article into the bag, out of sight.

Within minutes, the taxi was making its way along the high- way. Traffic on both sides was thick but gliding swiftly – no jams.

Busi drank in the passing sights. The two roads, going and coming from Cape Town City ... green ... bushes in flower, reds, yellows and blues ... all so beautiful. And over there, greyish-white clouds hugged the sky, a fading blue in the late afternoon sun.

She thrust the packet into the backpack at her feet, fished out her earphones and stuck them into her phone, closed her eyes and listened to Beyoncé croon.

Her mind wandered off to her mother. Had Phyllis gone straight home as she said she would? Hell, no! Phyllis, home on a Friday night? Next, she would be going to church. The

thought of church brought Khulu to her mind. She smiled. Her eyes closed. Soon she was lost to the world, dancing with Brian, dancing to the soft, slow hum-m-m of loveland to which the melody had transported her.

Listen, Unborn One, let us give you the fullness of the heart.

Listen, sweetest Unborn One, we have heeded your call.

You who wait at the waterfall will get a respite.

You who hit with vapour will get a respite.

You who stop the wives of the ground hornbill,

Will get a respite.

There is no there

No here

No somewhere else

For everywhere is nowhere but

Where you stand is

The world

The world is where you

Think you stand

As you are

As the world turns and turns and turns

You are not there but

Here

Where wind kisses

Faces you will never see

Faces you see

Faces you saw

Will always, always kiss wind

Hear the waterfall,

Feel the vapour.

Stretch your hand to the ground hornbill,

Trees

Roots
Water
Everywhere you stand
Everywhere you
Are always not
Standing
Where
There
Where you believe
You are.



thrumpthrumpthrumpthrump
thrumpthrumpthrumpthrump

Busi had not realised she'd fallen asleep or when. When she woke up, the sweet she'd popped into her mouth at take-off stuck to the roof of her mouth, soggy than a dunked piece of toast, and as sticky. The taxi was no longer on the road; right then, it was reverse parking ... smooth as silk, almost not a sound, the tyres merely gliding. This startled Busi – it was the cessation of speed and sound that had awoken her.

'I would've thought the opposite would be true: the ride would keep me awake while the stillness would send me to thongoland!' she said to herself.

Wondering at the strangeness of things, she stole a glance at her neighbour and smiled when she saw the other was still asleep. Good! She was not the only sleepyhead. Looking around, Busi saw evidence confirming this. Many faces were bleary-eyed and not a few eyes were closed tight in sleep. But that didn't last for more than a few seconds. The agitation of people astir, and, of course, talk talk talk – voices unguarded in the excitement of the moment: George!

All at once, everybody was moving. A glance out the window told Busi they were at a garage – a very busy one. All the buses and taxis and cars she'd seen taking off from Stock Road seemed to have come to rest here.

Obviously, this was a popular stop; the first major place for vehicles to refuel and get whatever else they needed for the long trip ahead. It was the first stop for the passengers to get whatever their own provisions lacked, replenish what might have been inadvertently left behind, lost in transit, or already used up. She knew she didn't really need to buy anything, but got to her feet, stretched and yawned. Her neighbour was already heading towards the door and Busi fell in after her. Once they had got out the taxi, MaNdaba turned to Busi: 'Ukhawuleze, Sisana!' The smile in that voice told the girl the lady had some inkling she hadn't welcomed her mother's intervention.

'Yes, Mother,' Busi replied and quickly followed the throng, her eyes telling her which way to go. The place had good signage: toilets, shops, bank ATMs – all well indicated.

She had no missed calls, but was sure to get a message from Brian before long, she told herself. The crowds at the shops decided it for her; after visiting the toilets, she made a beeline back to her taxi. Busi had an aversion to loud, crowded spaces – they reminded her too much of breaks at school ... Kwanele too, especially around the communal tap or spaza shops. She was one of the first back in, and even finished a chicken piece she'd taken from her Tupperware, gulped down a can of ginger beer, shoved another of the delicious toffees Aunt Lily had given her into her mouth, all before MaNdaba returned.

Once back in her seat, MaNdaba pulled out a laptop and set to what appeared to be work. Busi remembered she also brought some reading, and fished out a book from her bag. The two then sat in companionable silence, each with eyes glued to what was before her. Busi, earphones plugged in, heart dancing to Beyoncé, reading by the torch of her phone, one of the pink novels Aunt Lily sometimes read. Unlike buses, taxis had no reading lights; something her mother didn't think mattered.

Busi suddenly realised that her mother did not read. She could not remember ever seeing a book in her mother's hands. No, in her memory bank, such a picture did not exist. How had such a blatant truth escaped her all this time? How was it possible she did not know this about Phyllis? Was she blind or just plain stupid? This realisation shook Busi not only for what it meant about her mother, but for what it told about family life ekasi. She had never, not once, seen her mother hold a book, never mind read one. Not even to read it for her own self! Forget about reading to Busi or any of her other children.

Except for one cold stop in the middle of nowhere, around mid- night, there were no other noteworthy episodes on the journey, and, eventually both MaNdaba and Busi fell sound asleep. Bit by bit, the bus settled into quiet as one by one, the passengers drifted off. Finally, the lights dimmed as cell phone torches were switched off. Total silence except for the distant-sounding hum of heavy tyres on hard tar ... a constant deep humhmm, lulling one into deeper and deeper slumber. Intermittently, a puff of a word, whispers between the driver and the occupant of the front passenger seat – designated! That passenger did not dare sleep; uzawulalis’ udriver – they might be responsible for the driver falling asleep.

Early the next morning, the noise of the taxi ground to a stop, accompanied by the upheaval, hustle and bustle of other passengers waking up, gathering bags, yawning, phoning – the whole cacophony, to which the driver added, hollering: ‘SIFIKILE! MTHATHA!’

That brought both Busi and MaNdaba to their feet. Like every- body else was doing, they hastily said their goodbyes and, thanking each other for the company, grabbed their bags and headed for the door. It was a little after seven, just as the driver had promised.

Outside in the early morning light, as they stood side by side, MaNdaba asked: ‘nguMakhulu?’ She tipped her head in the direction of an older woman ambling towards them, a smile broad as a carefully cut slice of melon. Had to be – was. MaNdaba exchanged greetings, a few pleasantries with Khulu, turned to Busi and said, ‘Remember to call me when you’re going back!’

Just then, the taxi driver pounced on them, and insisted they take his telephone number. ‘Let me know when you’re going back!’ It was not a bad idea to book one’s space, as taxis did get full. One risked spending a whole week in Mthatha, trying to find a seat in a taxi. Then MaNdaba was off and away, in search of her own people.

Now Khulu’s arms spread, the wings of a mother hen, Busi snuggled into her embrace and, for a long minute, they hugged tightly. Then, calling a man standing at a slight distance, Khulu turned to Busi and pointed to the bag and backpack at her feet. ‘These yours?’ When she nodded, the man took the two bags and led the way to where he’d parked his car – a blood-red RAV4. He opened the back door for the two, packed in the luggage, and got behind the wheel. All in silence.

First, they stopped at a store where Khulu bought bread, margarine, tea and sugar. This puzzled Busi – surely her grandmother had food at home? – but she didn’t comment. The rest of the drive home was uneventful. Khulu asked her granddaughter about the taxi ride and how she had found it: she herself preferred the bus. It was sturdier, roomier, and more comfortable. The real fact of the matter, however, was that she had no great confidence in taxi drivers –

chance-takers, some without drivers' licences; often sozzled even while on duty, or they did not heed road signs ... that is, if they understood them at all, which she sometimes doubted. No, as far as Khulu was concerned, taking a taxi was asking for trouble.

But it was not necessary to burden the child with such anxieties. Instead, she pointed out or named the villages they passed, giving a brief history of each, some titbit of local news. While Busi paid attention and participated in the conversation, her eyes were wide open, taking in the so-different scenery. Yes, it was summer, this she knew. But the countryside here was so-oo green! The grass was lush, tall and thick; the trees in heavy leaf, brilliant in their abundance, their trunks barely showing where they branched into all sorts of crazy shapes. Some – Khulu said they were willows – hung their leaves down as if they were curtains. Busi felt that the homeless people her school kombi passed daily on their way into Cape Town, people who sheltered under bare bridges and beside dingy and garbage-clogged waterways, would welcome such spaces. She wondered whether Sidwadweni had any such unfortunate victims of homelessness.

After about half an hour, the car turned off the road on which it had been travelling since leaving town. The tar ended, but car and driver seemed quite at home on the gravel surface. Yes, there were a few bumps and dips, but, on the whole, nothing to write home about. Khulu's home was not that far from the national road. Busi recognised it immediately, as she had seen enough photos; but now, driving into the yard, getting out of the car, the place appeared much grander than she had imagined. And clean! The yard all around looked freshly raked. But it was not the quick 'Visitors coming!' flurry and feverish tidying-up kind of clean, done to impress. The serenity here looked as though it was always just so.

They were met at the gate by a beaming young man, not a close relative, as a cursory glance ascertained. The man, judging by his appearance, was definitely not in the same league as the man in whose car Khulu had come to pick her up. His conduct confirmed this: the way he opened and closed the gate after the car had passed through, running in the wake of the car, notwithstanding the dust it raised – even though he did run not behind but alongside that wake. But still! Something in his demeanour said 'paid servant' – umqeshwa or hired hand. Sibuka, for that was the name by which Khulu addressed him, was at the door even as they clambered out of the car. He grabbed the luggage and hastened inside with Busi's bags.

'Put those just inside the door, Sibuka!' Khulu said as they followed him into the house. Sibuka put everything down by the door but to one side. He stood at attention, and, as Busi and Khulu entered, extended his right hand, the left under the elbow of that arm: a show of respect as from a child to an adult or a commoner to an official or professional person ... someone

assumed to be upper-class. Busi was a bit embarrassed by this. She shook hands with him, however, making sure that the contact was as brief as decency allowed, not a second longer. After the greetings and introductions were done, Khulu, still standing just inside the door, declared a moment of silence. Their heads bowed and Khulu raised her voice in prayer:

‘Everlasting Father, we offer our huge thanks, from deep within our hearts. Here is our child. You have safely guarded her from a faraway place. She has come to set foot at the centre of her mother’s origin. We beg You, loving All-powerful, be with her now, all the while she is here. See that You hide her under Your mighty wing and protect her from evil! We ask this, believing it is already granted, for You know the yearnings of our poor hearts long before they form in our pitiful minds.’

She paused, and all responded: ‘Amen!’

Sibuka took the bags into the main bedroom and left, telling Khulu he was going to see to a leak that had sprung in one of the water drums. ‘Maybe the drum is overfull,’ he said as he exited. Later Busi would learn that he was the grandson of a distant clan cousin, who, as Khulu’s factotum, minded the homestead during her absences.

Khulu now led Busi into the room where her luggage stood, obviously out of place in the meticulous if sparsely furnished room, where everything was where it was supposed to be, neat and orderly. ‘We are going to share this room,’ Khulu said. It would make it easier to have talks ... the whole point of Busi being there. But at that moment, Busi was busy giving Khulu what was hers.

Khulu was happy being shown and given her gifts. She was particularly moved and surprised that even Phyllis had remembered to send her something ... maybe ... just maybe ... her eldest was mending her ways. No words about that now. But Khulu was most visibly thrilled by a small bag from Luvo: ‘For Mother-in-law!’ Inside were two bottles of brandy; he knew she would need that. He knew the ways of the village.

‘Son-in-law remembered! He knows men of this home will come to help me welcome you home, celebrate your being here! Of course, they will expect to get something a little stronger than amarhewu! Hayi, undincede nyhani!’

But even as she made that announcement, she snatched one of the bottles and stashed it in the smaller of the two wardrobes in the room. ‘For Christmas!’ Khulu said in answer to the query in Busi’s eyes.

The two had not quite finished the handover of gifts when someone at the door announced their arrival: ‘EmaTolweni!’ An older man’s voice hailed.

Busi assumed this was a close neighbour. How else would he have got here so soon after their arrival? But there were no houses that close to Khulu's. The nearest, according to her eyes, would surely demand a full half-hour to reach on foot. Where did he come from?

Later, as she got to understand how things were done eSidwadweni, she would realise the man must have been lying in readiness somewhere nearby. Sondlo, as Khulu later introduced him, must have seen Khulu leave early that morning. Busi would come to see that the village might be without many of the modern communication facilities readily available in cities, but the village had eyes. It had ears. Very little happened in the village that was not common knowledge. When the once-a-day bus left in the morning on its way to town, the village knew where it stopped, who boarded it. It knew when that bus would return, bringing them back home. It also knew, was quite certain, which person would be bringing those mouth-watering delicacies one only got in town ... and only when one had money. But then, who went to town unless they had word that their son or daughter or other benefactor had sent them money? Therefore, one expected close friends, neighbours and relatives – people with social claims on one – to drop by after one's return for a cup of tea – euphemism for a full plate of food, meat included. Why else? Meat, that's what they came for. Inyama!

So, this gentleman at the door, having such a social claim, as Hlombe's cousin and the last of that generation still living, announced his arrival – greeted by calling out the clan-name of the man of the house, although he had been dead for more than a decade. Yet he lived in the memory of the village. This was his home. Would always be.

'EmaTolweni!'

'E-hee!' came Khulu's response, acknowledging the greeting. From the effusiveness of her welcome, Busi knew this was an important and welcome visitor. Even before the 'how are you's' were done, Khulu beckoned and called Busi to approach. Her smile stretched from ear to ear as she introduced the man as Sondlo, son of Hlombe's uncle, his father's youngest brother. But the introduction and 'getting to know you' business didn't last long, for hot on the heels of that visitor, came another. And then another. Busi soon saw that these visitors arrived at regular intervals. A decent interval seemed to be observed between the arrival of two or three, never a crowd; their stay for an hour or so; their departure and the arrival of the next visitor or someone in the company of one or two others.

As a sign of respect to the home, everyone identified themselves via the husband's clan name – EmaTolweni! Aa-a! Tolo! Standing at the door, there would be a loud hailing, acknowledged, followed by questions about the health of those in the homestead.

Protocol observed, the men automatically went to sit outside the kraal while the women joined Khulu inside the separate flat in which visitors were received. All were served, with great care taken that the men were not neglected. If anything, their servings often came before those of the womenfolk.

Now Busi understood why she had needed to carry all these magwinya; the home-made KFC pieces were a thrill to people. Over and over, she heard, ‘Yhoo! Sayigqibela nini inyama! Uncedile ufike!’ Both men and women said out loud how long it had been since they had tasted meat.

Everyone who came was received with the usual cup of tea or coffee. However, this day people were also offered biscuits. A big box of assorted biscuits stood on the serving table next to several plates of freshly made steamed bread, as well as loaves of home-made bread from Busi’s Tupperware, and the sliced bread bought from the store that morning. Khulu took care that there would be enough for the endless stream of visitors. Indeed, the fare seemed to multiply miraculously as she managed to divide and, with a smile, serve all who dropped by ‘unexpectedly’ to see Khulu’s grandchild from Cape Town.

Needing help, Khulu sent Sibuka to the nearest neighbour. He returned with Thobeka, a girl about Busi’s age; the two girls would spend the rest of that day busy in the rondavel that served as a kitchen.

Thobeka joked, ‘Perhaps we should just have the tray ready,’ because as soon as the girls were called to come and clear a tray, they were called back the very next minute: ‘Please bring the tray!’ Refills were the order of the day. Tea with amagwinya or biscuits or buttered bread was not every-day fare for most. So most made sure they had their fill. For the two girls, this also meant endlessly fetching water, and Busi was grateful Khulu had diverted from the communal tap and paid to have her own one installed.

Amidst giggles, outbursts of laughter, oohs and aahs, Thobeka told Busi all about the guests – who was who in the Sidwadweni zoo. Gossiping was easy as the guests were in the stand-alone flat with its lounge-cum-dining area and inside bathroom Khulu used when she had visitors. She herself preferred to sleep under the thatched roof in the room her late husband had built, in which he had drawn his last breath. Like many of her age, she did not believe the Old could find one beneath a zinc roof. How would they enter?

Luvo’s gift stood Khulu in great stead. For elderly men, there can be no better entertainment than a good bottle of brandy.

This continued throughout that first day. Although cell phone reception in the area was weak or non-existent at times, not only Sidwadweni, but surrounding villages knew Khulu had

been to town that day. Knew also that she had come back with a young woman, a granddaughter. Word did get around, village-style!

After supper and evening prayer, Busi and Khulu readied themselves for bed. In the dim light of moonshine through a thin gauze curtain, the nightly ritual began: Khulu telling her granddaughter family tales and legends, and stories of Sidwadweni village. Some were stories Busi had heard before, others were new. That evening, listening to her grandmother, she remembered the big hoopla about a government project that would completely change the lives of people in the Eastern Cape region of Mthatha. It had something to do with the revival of agriculture, including cattle people would be able to buy with hefty sponsorship from government.

‘How did that project you once told me about go?’ she asked. Busi remembered that people were apparently very, very excited about it. Khulu had said back then she had last seen such excitement when Mandela gave his first public speech as a free man in 1990.

‘Which project?’

‘The cattle and cultivation of crops!’ said Busi, surprised.

‘I-ii’sh!’ Khulu spat out. ‘I will show you when we go to town.’ She was silent for quite a while before, into the dark, she spoke again: ‘Ulele?’

‘No, Khulu.’

‘Tomorrow morning, very early, we’ll go see your grandfather.’

You must go to greet your grandfather at his place of rest.’ ‘Kulungile, Khulu,’ Busi replied. Her voice was soft, subdued, but she was far from sleepy.

The girl’s mind was whirling. Over and over again, she replayed the events and sights of the day: a happy Khulu meeting her at the taxi rank in town. Mthatha just about to wake up; very few people and cars on the streets. The drive: not much to see, really. Sibuka – he was about Brian’s age. Not old, yet not in school, obviously. Working for Khulu ... since when? So handy and seemingly at peace with himself, at peace with the world. Thobeka: what was her story? Busi realised that despite their easy conversation, she knew very little about her new friend. She must ask tomorrow. And ... wow! All the people who had come to see her? Well, not really to see her, but to help Khulu receive her. They had come to welcome and acknowledge her presence among them. Community spirit in action! What a day it had been!

CHAPTER TEN

The next day, Khulu woke Busi up very early. 'Let me take you to your grandfather,' she said. At once Busi jumped up, scrambled into her clothes and, within minutes, joined Khulu in the front room. Busi saw that her grandmother carried a small plastic vaskom, with a towel slung over one shoulder. That arm was slightly bent at the elbow, showing that she hugged something against her breast. Because she wore a loose shawl, whatever that was remained invisible to the eye. As soon as Busi joined her, Khulu led the way out the door, which stood open.

The sky still looked undecided whether to call day in and chase night away. The fight, it appeared, was fierce. Iridescent reds splashed the sky, announcing the birth of day. However, night fought back; thick and heavy belts of black turning grey mingled with the red, attempting to overpower it. But this old battle had long been fought, long been decided, and a truce achieved. This was but play; reminder of what was what and the when of it. This morning, her first eSidwadweni, was also the first time Busi experienced the entire sky engaging in an exchange of dramatic beauty - and now she was visiting Hlombe's place of rest for the first time.

The soft slap-plash of water in the vaskom Khulu carried was the only sound as the two made their way along, not hurrying, but not as slow or solemn as though they were on a funeral march. Their feet made no sound on the unpaved ground, so different from the sand underfoot Busi was used to in Cape Town. This was earth, indeed; her mildly startled feet registered that they were not traversing umhlaba or isanti or intlabathi, sand.

They went down the slight slope to the gate, which Busi helped Khulu to open, unfastening the gnarled and twisted wire that kept the cross-bar in place. Khulu placed the vaskom just outside the gate as they entered the garden. Just then, a bull bellowed and at once, Khulu called out the clan praises of amaTolo, her late husband's clan. Even as she did so, she did not stop what she was doing. The praising became part of what was happening. She praised ooTolo, walked to the fence, and hung the towel there. A short minute or two further, and they stopped. Khulu fished out a small bundle from beneath her shawl - impepho - and from a pocket, a box of matches.

They walked on, across the thick wet grass. Although light was fighting to come into life in the sky, it was still dark. The sky was robing layer by delicate and ephemeral layer, donning the dazzling colours of her birth day.

Then Busi's eyes clapped onto the silent mound before them.

'Your grandfather rests here.' So saying, the old woman took the girl's hand, drew her close to the foot of the grave. Busi could see that there was writing on the flat headstone facing them but in the still-dim light, she couldn't make out the words. Khulu let go of her hand, and they stood, side by side, in reverent silence. Busi was surprised by a little sadness; on the way here, she had wondered what she was supposed to feel. She had never met Ma's Tata. She ascribed her sadness to sorrow for Khulu, whose husband this was, had been.

Then Khulu came alive. Busi watched in awe as deliberately, caringly, Khulu kindled impepho. At once, sparks flew and the new flame bit into the leafy bundle, making it crackle and softly hiss. The flame grew brighter, stronger, and Khulu bent down and placed the burning torch of leaves at the foot of the grave. After this, she kept clapping her hands, rhythmically, softly, the sound not loud, but musical. This she accompanied with praise calling – the clan praises of Hlombe, her husband, at whose place of rest they had arrived. Khulu's hands went on clapping, slightly cupped to arrest the sound so that it did not fly away and all over the place. It was meant only for this specific being, whose ears were sharper than before.

The brightly burning bunch had stopped its crackle; now thick wispy smoke spiralled high into the air, sending a pungent scent up and away all around. Those with sharp nostrils could tell from a mile away that someone was burning impepho. But this was not a scent that aroused suspicion or anxiety about witchcraft. All knew that impepho called on the Old to protect the living, ward off evil, bring blessings; none would disavow its use.

'Hlombe! Tolo, Zulu, Mchenge, Mabhanekazi, Vumba lempongo liyanuka, here is your eldest's eldest ... Nali izibulo lezibulo lakho. Where you are, talk to your cohorts in that world. Walk with this child; protect her against all evil, including the dangers that lurk for the hearts and minds of the young in this wicked world we're still stuck in.' She paused. Then, her voice much softened, she continued, 'Where you left us,' paused again; then a smile in her voice, she added, 'Siyakukhumbula!'

Busi held herself still, her gaze fixed on her grandfather's grave, hearing Khulu's voice sounding as though she was not standing right next to her, but a distance away as she said soft, loving words to her husband no longer of this flesh world. Right at that moment, Busi was surprised by what felt like a fist boxing gently from inside her stomach.

Hlombe's bones had turned, communing with the unborn spirit.

Do you feel the homesteads of our beginning?

The scent when the waterfall sings for us?

Dove in front,

Duiker at the back,

The grave and herb of our clan

Child of the child of my child

We meet again

You and I who dwell in the House of the Old

The Everywhere

All Time House of Spirit

We meet again

You have now appeared,

My flesh offspring,

I, your spirit kin

Know your journey will be tough

This you know

Knew before the Before

I salute what is in you

Go and guide our lost fleshlings

Who no longer heed dreams and symbols

Tradition-forsaking

Followers of naught that builds them

Lost lost lost our children's children

I salute you for your sacrifice.

The young woman walking alongside her grandmother was not the same as the one Khulu had led to her late husband's grave less than half an hour before. As the two returned from paying their respects to their dearly departed, the young woman may have looked the same. Yes, outwardly, Busisiwe looked very much the same as before. However, inside, it was a totally different story. Busi was transformed. Since that moment when she had felt and then known, understood, that what moved within her was a life, a human being, someone else who lived in

her body, someone who would live there until time came for her or him to emerge, be born into the world – she had changed. Changed completely.

Not for naught had Hlombe's bones turned.

As on the way hither, the two women walked in solemn silence. But this time, there was something different in the silence – it seemed to carry a weight that Khulu could feel, but not fathom. As for Busi, she walked with breath held; whirling thoughts in her head made her step light as that of a sleepwalker, unguided, unweighted – as light as clouds up in the sky, unanchored. She was filled with a bewildering fearfulness. She had felt the baby move inside her. What did that mean? Surely not ... no, it couldn't be. She would have felt pain. Everybody said birthing was painful. They said even a miscarriage was painful. And for that to not only happen, but happen here ... she would die. She would surely die ... what would Khulu say? Do?

They reached the gate and stopped. Khulu washed her hands and indicated that Busi should do the same. They dried their hands using the towel left there earlier. Busi emptied the vaskom, and the two walked back to the homestead.

Khulu informed her: 'You have met your grandfather and, favoured, we knew he moved his bones for you. You must never forget that we are never alone, that there is an unbreakable chain of life. And you will get the full benefit of your ancestral home, because your grandfather has favoured you!'

Busi understood, but didn't yet know she understood. Khulu explained: 'Your grandfather knows everything. He has known you from before-before. He has helped you to be with me, his wife, so that you can learn from me; that was part of his mission. And mine. To help you, who is Busisiwe, the child of our Phyllis, to be in the world. So that being one in caring can be possible, and so all will be well again. If the flesh-ears open, the flesh-heart opens; and mouths forget to talk talk talk in pursuit of vanity and evil.'

They had not yet finished breakfast when Thobeka arrived. Khulu had made an arrangement with the girl's mother that she would keep company with Busi during the holidays. As she was the middle one of three daughters, her mother had no problems sparing her. Thobeka said she had come early because her mother had seen Khulu Ngxama descending towards the homestead. Khulu Ngxama was, of course, aiming to breakfast at Khulu's. The two girls got cracking right away, for, as Khulu said, as soon as the eyes of the village saw him enter, that

would be a declaration: ‘The gates are open!’ It would be an invitation to all and sundry to come and keep them company. ‘We are cold; your company will warm us!’

That whole day, a Saturday, there was an endless stream of people arriving at Khulu’s, the mood decidedly joyous. Busi could not remember when last, if ever, she had enjoyed a Saturday with people so much. She was particularly struck by the stress-free way things were done; the ease with which they seemed to happen; the camaraderie of it all. Everybody knew everybody else. These were people with a common history, a common way of doing things, a common understanding of who they were and what they were about. They laughed a lot, teasing one another with various jokes. What a jarring contrast to her world, to Kwanele!

Sunday morning, Busi did not even hear Khulu wake up. When Khulu eventually woke her, a roaring fire greeted her outside.

‘There’s your hot water!’ Khulu jerked her head, pointing to the fire on which stood a great three-legged pot. She put a round bright-blue basin filled with steaming water near Busi’s bed.

‘When did Khulu get up?’ the girl wondered aloud, hastening to get herself clean and ready. Khulu was already fully dressed for church! After washing and while still dressing, Busi heard the church bells peal.

‘Those bells say we must be on our way,’ Khulu said. ‘The second lot must find us half-way there,’ she added. She didn’t say ‘otherwise we’ll be late,’ but Busi heard the implication. She knew being late for anything, but especially church, was a no-no for Khulu.

She hurried, but as always, the unfamiliar made Busi nervous. She was reassured, therefore, to see Thobeka waiting for them at the gate. When she reached her new friend, Thobeka showed her two small packets – sweets and biscuits – in her bag. The three walked briskly, Khulu leading the way, to the white building Busi saw some distance away, a big cross on the roof letting her know it was their destination. She was a little less apprehensive when Khulu asked Thobeka to show Busi the Girls section, so she would not need to wander all over the place, announcing to all and sundry that she was a stranger.

The white building looked humble from the outside, not at all imposing. Inside, the one-room affair was little better, the make-shift pulpit a bit rickety, the benches on which the congregation sat announcing themselves as the work of a dedicated church member who had most probably not asked for much for his labour. Definitely not factory-made, but they served their purpose.

What Busi did not know was that at a specific moment during the service, the priest would call for those with special requests, announcements or news they would like to share: 'Please come up to the altar!'

And that even before the reverend minister had finished her announcement, Khulu would already be up and singing at the top of her voice as she three-stepped, in rhythm to the tune of the hymn she was singing, up the aisle to the front, where she whispered to the priest, who stepped back to give her a space to speak.

'I am grateful!' said Khulu, 'to our ever-loving, ever-shielding Father. He has safely carried to my arms my granddaughter, izibulo lezibulo lam, eldest of my eldest, all the way from Cape Town. Brothers and sisters, you all know how these dangerous roads swallow our children, especially during the December holidays. What with drunk driving, speeding, and roads that cry for mending. With this one-hundred rand' – she held the note up for all to see – 'I want to say, "Thank you, Jesus!"'

Thunderous clapping sounded. Khulu raised her arm and the congregation quietened. 'Busi,' Khulu said, her voice loud, 'stand up!'

Please, ground, just open up and swallow me NOW!

'That's my first granddaughter!'

Another round of applause and Busi felt heads turn. Everybody would be looking this way, at the Girls section. Thobeka nudged her even as Busi unfolded herself as slowly as a chameleon changes colour.

'Thank you!' said the priest as, dying inside, Busi collapsed back onto her pew. Thobeka put a hand to her back and slapped it two-three times, then brushed it up and down before giving it a firm, final pat. Silently, the two looked at each other, Thobeka grinning mischievously. Busi shrugged and shook her head. *So what? The skies had not fallen.*

Of course, Brian would choose that moment to call. Fortunately, her phone was set to vibrate and, as it began purring, she reached one hand into the back of her pocket, squeezed the appropriate button, and the phone died.

Meanwhile, she gave herself over to the service, enjoying the joyous, carefree singing, the beautiful harmonising, stamping of feet sedate and dignified, in rhythm with the soft tapping of hands and gently swaying bodies, shoulders rising and falling in alignment with hip control. It was beautiful to watch, to hear, and Busi drank it all in. She even caught herself participating. When she didn't know the lyrics of a hymn, she just hummed along, arms raised and hands upturned to the ceiling.

Afterwards several of the younger girls congregated around Busi, who was very glad Thobeka was by her side to help field some of the questions and to direct both introductions and conversation. Several times, Busi heard mention made of seeing her ‘Wednesday’. With no idea what this was about, she nodded along as Thobeka did, or voiced consent.

They then made their way home where lunch awaited them; Khulu, the miracle-maker, produced meat and vegetables that only needed to be warmed. Then, pleading exhaustion, she took herself into the bedroom, leaving the two girls to keep each other company.

On the way to church, Thobeka had expressed admiration for Busi’s dress, and Busi had not been able to ignore the shabby state of the one the girl wore. In the few days she had known Thobeka, Busi had seen her wearing only the one dress. Before lunch, Busi had changed into her jeans, put her dress into a plastic bag and thrown in a few more articles of clothing – items she had brought along not because she liked them, but precisely because she wanted to wear them to rags, and the village seemed the most appropriate space to do that. No one knew her there, and no one cared what she wore. No competition and no vying with others about libitso!

When she gave Thobeka the bag of clothing, the girl went bananas. She couldn’t believe her luck. Now, she said, if only she had money to do her hair, she’d be tops.

‘I can give you braids,’ Busi said. ‘You can do plaits?’

The girls set to, and Thobeka couldn’t wait to go home to show her mother the total transformation the plaits had accomplished. That evening, after supper, a happily exhausted Busi washed up, and after prayers, grandmother and granddaughter turned in. In bed, Busi was amazed at how contented people seemed to be ... and yet, the simplicity of their lives – their manner of dress, the absence of flamboyance – she stood out in her braids, and those were far from ‘high fashion’ or extravagant. The ordinariness of it all surprised her. It looked, felt, so uncontrived, natural, easy. She liked it. She especially appreciated the non-judgemental manner in which even the young people operated. No competition about clothes, never mind brands!

She had enjoyed talking with Thobeka, too. Being with her the whole day, they’d chatted, not about boys or clothes, but about life: chores, family, church. Busi realised she felt accepted for who she was, with no frills. She didn’t have to pretend or prove to be anything other than herself. What a relief! Herself was as special as everybody else!

Busi and Thobeka soon became inseparable, their friendship cemented over making tea for Khulu’s never-ending stream of visitors. Although, to be fair to the people of Sidwadweni, that stream was never quite as thick, as strong, as on that first day.

When other young people stopped by, the chorus ‘See you Wednesday!’ echoed over and over.

‘What’s this about Wednesday?’ Busi asked Thobeka, who explained that on that day, the community would gather at the fields for ilima, the community gathering and harvesting day.

‘You better go to bed early tonight,’ Thobeka warned her friend on Tuesday. The next day being ilima, an early start was the norm. Although Khulu was not part of this conversation, that evening even her prayer was much curtailed. And their nightly conversation was abbreviated, too. By eight, both Khulu and Busi were fast asleep.

Just as well, because at four the next morning, Busi heard something unusual. Since she had arrived eSidwadweni, the stillness, the quietness of the place was one of the things that had struck her, and which she came to enjoy. However, this morning the sound of voices could be heard – cheery voices of people greeting one another, singing, and going about as though they were at a fair.

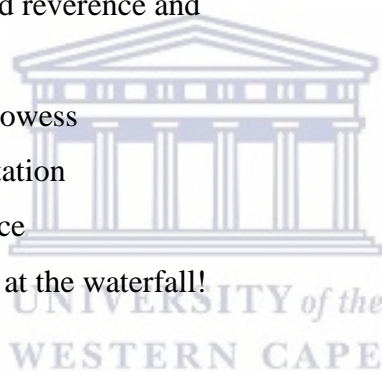
Khulu was not only up, she was dressed, a cup of coffee in her hand. Even as Busi dressed, she heard Thobeka enter and greet Khulu. Busi joined them in the front room, and the two girls each got a huge slice of steamed bread Khulu had just turned out of the pot. Busi didn’t even bother adding anything to hers – no spread. Not so her friend. When would she get the chance again? She lathered hers with butter, cut it into two, added jam to one half and peanut butter to the other. Then the two girls were on their way.

Khulu stayed behind. By the look of things, she’d been busy for some time. Busi wondered when she had arisen. She had not heard her. The cooking pots were ready, waiting just outside the kitchen where Sibuka had piled lots and lots of wood – more than enough for the envisaged feast Khulu was preparing – food to take to the headman’s home later. That was where the whole village would meet and the crop exchange would take place. When people gathered, there was food for them to eat. During ilima, everybody contributed. Each brought food and shared the food others had brought. That was an indispensable aspect of ilima.

Meanwhile, Busi and Thobeka arrived at the field at the centre of activity. They had found Sibuka and several others, men and women of all ages, already hard at work – a pile of maize cobs evidence of their efforts. If you think all that work went on in silence, then you don’t know village life. Their voices joined in song:

Sing, sing, you who wait at the waterfall
Sing, you who release vapour
Sing, you who stop the wives of ground hornbill
When abantu gather, in joy or in sorrow
Their voices they raise
Praying to the source of all
Living in constant awareness
Of their limitedness
Their vulnerability
Their power
From the Source all comes

To the Source they accord reverence and
thanksgiving
For what appears their prowess
Is nothing if not manifestation
Of the power of the Source
Sing, sing, you who wait at the waterfall!



Busi was dumbstruck by what her grandmother and others grew in their fields. The thing they called a garden back in Kwanele was pitiful – no comparison between the two. Not only was there more land, more rich soil, but the hard work people put in, and so happily, eagerly even, floored her. And as a direct result of that, the yield was so much more impressive. Briefly, the analogy reminded her of her poor grades. *I really have to put more in to do better next year*, she resolved.

Later that day, talking to her grandmother about how splendidly everything grew, Busi added, ‘It’s because here in the village, you have all this land!’

The implied comparison provoked a strong reaction from Khulu: ‘It is not only the land, my child, but the management of the land that is making the difference!’ Khulu stopped, looked at the young woman, and said: ‘Let me tell you something my mother told me. She said, “Lumka, my child, you must do for yourself. Never accept charity. That is what living is ... one’s participation in life. One does not just drift along like dead leaves blown about by autumn’s unfriendly winds.”’

Saying all this, her face glowed; it was obvious that Khulu took pride in what she did. Their Kwanele township garden was suffered and tolerated: always frenziedly planted and weeded when they heard Khulu was coming, visited grudgingly in desperate search of something to cook, and its yield was stingy. The garden showed it was not loved; a more reluctant grower would be hard to find.

Another of the many surprises and discoveries Sidwadweni offered Busi was duck meat. It was her first taste of duck meat, which she absolutely loved.

And there were other tastes to develop, too. One evening as Busi admired the setting sun, Khulu asked her to bring a particular book from the small bookshelf in the visiting room. Khulu opened the clearly well-thumbed volume and read aloud:

Dyo-o-rhom! Livakele lihlokoma bukhali lisitsho izwi lendun' enkulu, emazants' entlambo ngasentshonalanga yezo ntaba zaseKorana. Bô ... grom! With a throaty but authoritative sound the old male baboon waited on the west side of the Korana mountains. Dyo? Dyo? Dyo? Ivakele isitsho ngelibuzayo indyondyo ephantsi ivela kwiqela elalithe xaka esingeni emazants' enduli enentlabathi. Bogroh? Bogroh? The group of baboons answered while searching for the dinner among the sandy hills where the kloof stopped ...

'But now,' Khulu said, 'I want to read this to you ... hear how our great SEK Mqhayi describes the sunset, second by second.'



The last level-falling rays extinguish slowly and softly like a lamp, dies; like eyes being closed into darkness. In the dusk, the time when rabbits run, the trees are covered in a sunset dust, dry and chapped like winter lips crying out for balm, appearing spooky like the lightning bird. The evening breeze dies down and the calm of great open stretches hangs breathless above the sleeping baboons lying fallow, lying asleep soft like snow. As these creatures of the veld fall asleep; they are embraced by a light fragrance of impepho.

Busi sat transfixed. She was taking isiXhosa at her Model C school, but never had she been under the spell of her mother tongue this way before, as the words fell from Khulu's lips in the quiet slow dusk.

As Busi became more and more attracted to everything Khulu stood for, the older woman was transported one morning back to what her mother taught her in long-ago time. Yes, with freshly harvested vegetables at her feet, old as she was, she was once again a woman in prideful youth, absorbing from her mother the wisdom of her years.

Khulu explained: ‘Mother discussed with me the two meanings of the word *umzi* and *umzi* – the last syllable, the *-zi* falling in the first, rising in the second. Same spelling, different intonation, different meaning. Home. Reed. Mama asked me, “But are these meanings really different? *Umzi* meaning reed and *umzi* meaning home?” Then she explained, “Each is supposed to feed itself; look after itself; protect itself ... one’s home was meant to be self-sufficient just as the reed stands all alone, by river’s edge. Come rain, come scorching sun – it stands. Come frost or even hail – the reed will withstand them all. Human homes were like that in the olden days. Each stood alone: self-sufficient; independent; built to withstand the vicissitudes of life; and proud of its uniqueness. *Kwakunjalo ke ngaphambili. Umzi ngamnye uzimele ... kanye okuya kwengcongolo ngasemlanjeni. Umzi uzimele; awuxhomekeke komnye okanye nakwenye na into.* The reed stands alone, not dependent on another or on anything whatsoever. There is no dignity in dependence.” That is what Mama told me ... and now, I tell it to you!’



The ancestors chanted their approval.

As the day of her departure neared, Busi was not sure whether she was happy or unhappy. Okay, her mother said this happened to people sometimes – not that she paid much attention to what Phyllis said – but for once, there was validity in it: which weighed more? Was she, at this moment, happier than she was unhappy, or unhappier than she was happy?

And yet she was not surprised at her ambivalence, for she had realised her growing attachment and, yes, affection for everything here around Khulu and her community. Busi had to remind herself Brian was waiting for her in Kwanele. School, and her ‘big plan’ all awaited her there. Still, she was not as happy at the prospect of her return as she knew she ought to have been. Something had shifted. A week before her departure, Khulu reminded her to book her seat on the taxi. Busi called the driver, who welcomed the sound of her voice with a chuckle. She could tick that off her list of to-dos.

As her thoughts turned homewards, Busi remembered something she had meant to do before she returned to Cape Town. But when she asked to go and see the government project

she had heard about, the project that promised ‘To change the lives of the people of the Eastern Cape!’, Khulu told her there was nothing to see.

‘But ...’ Busi said, not understanding.

The corners of her lips downturned, eyes slanted, Khulu sucked air onto the sides of her tongue, a gesture of exceeding disgust.

‘Wait,’ she said, pulling her phone from the pocket of her overalls. After a brief call, she turned to Busi, ‘Get ready. Car will be here in half an hour. He’ll take you girls there!’

The gentleman with the red RAV4, Mr Ngacu, arrived to fetch them, but Khulu refused to go with them. She had seen enough of that stupid project, how all that money had been stolen. Our people had no shame, she said. Greed ruled their hearts. So Busi and Thobeka were accompanied by Sibuka, who had something to get in town.

To get to the project grounds, one had to go through the centre of town. When they arrived, they saw that the enormous billboard, complete with fat cows grazing, calves lolling by their sides, was torn here and there. The pictures, a little faded. But the most unsettling thing was the actual site of the project. Acres and acres of hard, unturned and unplanted land; not simply left fallow but uncared for, neglected, fallen into disuse. These were supposed to be communal gardens or demonstration lots, Mr Ngacu said.

The cattle kraals were a study in Grabbers’ Lot. Barren of any cattle, a sorry sight, clear signs of foraging, if you could call it that. Stripped according to the need of the plunderer, no rhyme or reason to what was taken and was now missing. Ugly gaps told the story. A minor war was going on here, Busi thought, for the plundering of building materials reminded her of pictures she’d seen of war-torn zones.

On the way back, Mr Ngacu explained the profound failure of this and many other government projects with one word: graft. To which, later, as she listened to their stories of the day, Khulu added another: greed.

Busi was immensely saddened. All that hope dashed. She could just imagine how people with nothing or next to nothing must have been filled with hope when the project was first announced. People like Thobeka’s family. Life was truly cruel. She must look up graft. She’d been too shy to ask Mr Ngacu what that meant although, as with Khulu’s greed, it had to mean something bad. Well, the results spoke for themselves. Graft was evil, even if she didn’t know the actual dictionary meaning of it; what it had given birth to was enough to surmise that!

The days before Busi's leaving sent Khulu, Thobeka and Sibuka in a whirl, each with things to do, tasks related to her departure. Each went about doing what was before them to do with a smile and a bit of sadness on their faces.

Busi realised she would miss them sorely. She would miss Sidwadweni. But she had no idea yet how much. She did not fully understand how much of the cultural milieu of Sidwadweni had seeped into her blood in the short space of time she had been there.

Meanwhile, Cape Town had woken up to the reality of Busi's imminent return. Suddenly, people who either had not called her at all remembered she existed, and called her. Even her Ma called. And those who had only called dutifully once a week now called almost daily. That, of course, applied to Brian and Thandi. Suddenly Busi realised she would love to be like Thobeka. Easy-going but well-grounded. Living simply, contented, uncomplaining. There was a lesson there. Busi was ashamed to think of how she complained ceaselessly about her life. Her life! Her lack of money! Sheer luxury in comparison to Thobeka's!

On the day penultimate to her departure, Sibuka had to twist several necks: two geese, both females, and two chickens, a hen and a cock. They would become umphako for the road. Poor chickens! Often, Busi felt sorry for animals, living only to be devoured by humans. Mind you, her pity didn't go even half-way towards giving up meat. No vegetarian was she.

One of the girls would knead the dough late that night. Khulu wanted her vetkoek packed hot-hot, just minutes before she left, so they would be as fresh as fresh can be. These were both kinds: fried and baked, or roosterkoek. Busi had discovered she liked the latter. Then there was laundry and ironing, which Thobeka insisted on doing (and Busi thought a waste of time and energy). Who in the townships ironed jeans and sweaters?

The day went swiftly past in a flurry of activity. It was a bustle-about day, joking, cheery talk abounding, but there was no denying a little sadness laced all that activity. Yes, Khulu and the other two were happy to be doing what they were doing for her, did it with all their hearts and willingly – but they were also sad to do it – sad it had to be done.

To think she might have missed this experience ... had her Mama not insisted and, for once, prevailed. Unaware of what she was doing, Busi had begun a re-evaluation of her beliefs, the things she held on to without much appraisal, but because role modelling pointed that way. Not for naught had Hlombe's bones turned, said the Old once more.

CAMAGU!

On that last day together, the two girls couldn't hold back tears. 'I suppose I'll never see you again,' Thobeka said.

'Why not?'

'When will you ever come here again?'

Startled, Busi looked at her friend. Obviously, the idea of going to Cape Town was completely far-fetched for Thobeka; and to think she lived a life bothered about rich white kids holidaying in Mauritius? But she realised, Thobeka was contented; her days were filled with meaning, reason, rhythm. Not a bad life at all. Compassion and admiration filled her; she reached out to Thobeka, and they embraced.

'I hope we meet again,' Busi said, emotion muffling her voice. Sooner rather than later, her mind went. Then she had an idea. Rummaging in her backpack, she pulled out the package that held Brian's perfume, which she had all but forgotten. She pressed it on her friend; Brian would not know, or mind, and Thobeka's joy at the gift made it all worthwhile. Besides, Busi now found that she preferred the smell of impepho burning, the thatch of the roof, the soil and fields outside.

Early on the morning of Busi's departure, Thobeka arrived even before Khulu was up. She brought her parting gift: cooked ibhanqa, young and tender corn on cob. With a self-conscious little smile, she said, 'A little something to chew on the road!' She also gave her something Busi had never heard of: ground roasted corn, utshongo, in a small plastic container that had once contained margarine. Utshongo has fallen into disuse in these days of refrigeration. In the olden days, Khulu explained to the startled Busi, travel was mainly on foot, distances thus long, and travellers used utshongo a lot, unlikely to spoil like meat, or even bread. The dry papery taste was strange to Busi but utshongo was something she saw she would not throw out; would eat, and perhaps, by and by, even get to enjoy.

What Thobeka also brought was a mournful face. Thinking to ease the children's unhappiness, Khulu suggested that Thobeka go ask her mother if she could see Busi off in town. The girl flew home and soon returned, changed into one of her 'new' dresses.

But later, as she witnessed their tears during their final fare-well at the taxi rank, both girls openly weeping, Khulu thought she might have miscalculated. 'Kufe bani?' she barked gruffly. The broad banana-smile on her face belied the harsh-sounding words. Her words were not a rebuke, but a reminder of what friendship brought – what all life brought: sadness was the other side of happiness. Khulu's question, 'Who has died?' reminded them all to smile.

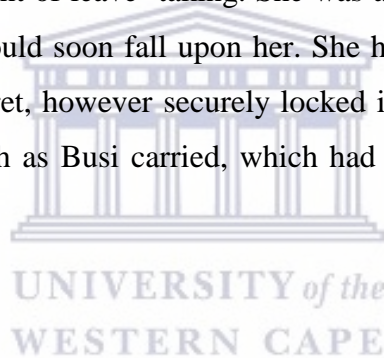
And, yes, though their eyes were glassy, smile they did. Smiled, and hugged tight as tight can be.

Tweet-tweet-tweet of the taxi signalled it was time to get on or get left behind. Busi quickly disengaged from Thobeka, threw herself at Khulu, who plonked a wettish kiss on the girl's lips and then pushed her away.

'That taxi will leave without you!'

Busi clambered into the vehicle, and seconds later, it screeched off and away with a now louder, more decisive tweet-tweet-tweet! Busi, at a window seat, face plastered there, waved and waved at the fast-fading figures of Thobeka and Khulu. She waved until they were just a blur in the distance.

Another blur was the ride back to Cape Town, during which Busi mostly slept, exhausted from all the excitement of leave-taking. She was also exhausted with foreboding, dreading all the turmoil that would soon fall upon her. She had managed so far to keep her secret, secret. However, no secret, however securely locked in the human heart, can remain one forever; especially one such as Busi carried, which had a delivery date stamped on its packaging.



CHAPTER ELEVEN

It was a very disgruntled young woman who arrived in Kwanele, which had changed a lot during Busisiwe's brief absence. That is, her Kwanele – the house in which she lived. News of that great shift greeted her on arrival, when she heard that Phyllis was now living with Mrs Bird, sometimes returning to see the family on Sundays. Meanwhile Sazi was in rehab, and it was doubtful whether he would return to school; and her own father, Mzi, had returned to Cape Town seriously ill, and wanted to see her.

As far as Busi was concerned, her father was a non-event. She had absolutely no intention of going to see him. And when she heard where he was living, in the same-same house from which his brother had thrown her child-self and her mother out after Mzi had abandoned them – she was even less inclined to see him. That was her first home, her happy home. She had no intention of revisiting the house that had haunted her throughout her childhood. *Home!*

The sojourn of three weeks eSidwadweni had changed her, opening her eyes. How pleasant, joyful even, it had been to be surrounded by a peaceful silence, a tranquillity she'd never before experienced – a place where she could just be herself, not judged by appearance or what brand of cell phone she had. Where all the people looked like her, and her skin colour was no issue, no marker, irrelevant.

eSidwadweni she'd taken and appreciated walks and talks; sights; people and the simple way they lived in peaceful co-existence; food and how it was grown. The amazing spirit of community co-operation she had witnessed during ilima – that, she would never forget. No wonder, she now reflected, she had unhesitatingly if tearfully said, 'I will certainly come again,' making a promise to Khulu at the taxi rank. She now told herself: 'That is a promise I will make sure to keep.'

Grateful for the lessons learned, fiercely aware of the change in her heart, Busi was angry. She could now see how she had been deceived, duped. Garbage had been dealt to her outstretched hand. She was determined to fight for her independence – real independence: the right to dignity inherent in self-sufficiency. She would not live on scraps from the tables of the government. She would make her own life.

Above all, she felt a deep anger at the bad choices she had made. Angrier still at what had led to those choices. She could not believe what she had done. If anyone had even

suggested she was capable of such evil, she would have ... have ... what would she have done? Attacked them? Walked away?

But she knew that it was no longer an issue of what one wanted, but a matter of taking responsibility for one's actions. Nobody had held a gun to her head. She had not taken anything, no lollies or alcohol, for a full three weeks. All she had to do was continue doing what she'd done eSidwadweni. Surely, she could do that? Yes! Oh, yes, she could! Would too, or her name was not Busisiwe.

So it was with great gusto that Busi began getting ready for school, which was starting in just a little over a week, while also working on the much-neglected garden in their Kwanele yard. In her mind, she dreamed of imitating the splendour of Khulu's veggie garden, to say nothing of the fields beyond, full of nourishing food, plenty of it, enough to engage in ilima, bartering with neighbours and supplementing one's supplies while giving to others of your surplus. Nifty and cool.

Her days after her return became well-ordered, even programmed. Busi found she had less and less time to spend 'doing nothing'. She made sure she had study time, garden time, as well as time for the inescapable house duties and chores. Even those, much as she would never be enthralled by them, she began to see them in a different light, and tackled them with less and less resentment.

She had learned a trick or two from Thobeka. She had learned to accept that which she could not change. Right now, she was a child, a girl child, in a household that had specific role allocations for members of their family.

She could not explain the intense relief she felt at the absence of Phyllis. An added bonus for her was that Owam and Esam now lived with Phyllis at her place of work. She, Busi, was for the first time in a long, very long time, child-free.

But then it zapped into her mind. *Child-free?* How could she have forgotten? Never again in her life would she ever be child-free. Never! A wave of sheer and utter dread washed over the girl, enveloped her tight, even tighter than her skin. It held and squeezed itself into every cell of her being. Belatedly, she found she was not as enamoured with motherhood as she had first believed. Yet she would have to shoulder her burden – no way out of the hole into which she had dug herself. Busi saw the truth: glaring and bitter and self-inflicted.

Friday night! The last weekend before school started. She was alone, all alone.

Everyone gone to wherever, for whatever. And here comes dear, darling, sweetest man Brian. Here he is and, o-oh! Just look what he's brought for me. Just for me.

'No, Brian. I'm off that stuff. But where did you get such a stash?'

'Sweetie pie, want some?' 'No!'

'Just a little? Have some fun!'

'No, Brian. And I mean no. Appreciate it; but am no longer into that.'

'Oh, ja-a?'

'Yu-up!'

'Really?' He was frowning at her as though she'd sprouted horns.

Busi nodded. She hoped he would not pester her. She didn't feel like an argument. Right now, her body memory was shouting, '*Why are you waiting?*' The sight of him had awakened a need, a hunger in her she had not given much thought to lately.

'Fine!' Brian shrugged. 'There's more for me, then.' Whistling, he plunged his hand into his rucksack, rummaged around, and pulled out a small bottle of Diet Coke. Handing it to her, he said, 'Your favourite.'

She gave him her smiling doll's eyes: 'Oh, you remember?'

'Don't be cutie on me.'

'Since you called me so few times, I thought you'd blown cold on me.'

'Any idea how hot I am for you right now?'

'Show me,' she purred.

After the frenzy, she was so thirsty ... needed a drink. Reached for the Diet Coke, Brian hastily opened it for her.

'Thanks!' she said, dreamily, and guzzled the lot.

'Wasn't that grand-grand?' He reached down and kissed her on her closed eyes. 'Shows how much I missed you,' he whispered, gently nibbling her earlobe.

'Show me again!' Her eyes had sprung wide as a window on a spring morning.

His voice husky, he growled, 'In a sec.' He lit up one of the lollies he had brought, inhaled and slowly blew out smoke. Eyes contracted, he looked at her through the haze and whispered, 'You have no idea how good this stuff is. Special!'

I watch as he smokes the tik pipe.

I watch, and something in me revolts. 'Just a little,' I told Brian. And the little I took demanded that I took another hit from his pipe. Brian laughed. His laugh was louder than the

Devil's in hell. I thought that was funniest, and laughed with him. Laughed at him; laughed to outlaugh him.

Suddenly, it was another day. And then another. And another. And I kept wanting. More and more and more than more. Schools reopened, and I was back where I'd been before I went to the silly Eastern Cape. Booze and drugs at Thandi's were my daily bread. No one could tell me squat-nothing; I knew it all. Knew it better than all of them. My decision to abstain? Well, it was my decision. Mine, get that? And I have power, absolute power, to revoke any decision of mine. Who wants to be a slave to things such as decisions – even good decisions? And this one wasn't even good to begin with. Who gives up heaven? I must have been out of my crazy mind!

Next thing I know, I'm back knee-deep in the murk. And apparently things are so bad I am in the same rehab centre as my cousin, Sazi. We are in the same room. They figured it was okay since we are blood relatives.

What nobody knows is how viciously vindictive Sazi has become. Yhoo, the swearing and the lashing out! I have to weave and dodge his fists. Fortunately, he's so wasted most of the time he flays and lashes, he's as pap as a sleepy dog's tail.

How long have I been in this place? No idea. Sazi is no help at all; I wonder if he even remembers his name. But where is he getting the stuff? How do I get my hands on it ... maybe that's why we are sharing a room! Hey, my great good fortune. I share a room with a Clever who gets his supply. But then Sazi has always been smart. Where does he hide the flippin' stuff? I need it. Need it. Need it desperately or I'm going to die.

One night, I cannot fall asleep. Tired as I am, all night long I toss, turn, wriggle and wiggle in bed, the tips of my fingers and toes prickly. Deep down in my throat a fire rages, my chest bursts with craving, my tongue is wrung cardboard. In the middle of this endless night, I suddenly see it is no normal, ordinary night. Witches and horrible creatures abound, and they are all after me. Petrified, I leap off the bed, strip off all the filthy clothes that scratch as though small, hard-shelled insects are crawling all over me. I tear off the two blankets I was given, spread one on the floor beside the bed and roll myself in the other. Safe! With my clothes discarded, I feel purified and protected. But I'm not out of the woods yet. The night still has me in its stomach. I cover myself in the blanket as tight as a pupa in its shell. That cocoon first kneels; down on my knees, I send a fervent, urgent, two- word prayer to the Almighty. SAVE ME! SAVE ME! SAVE ME!

Suddenly, I am back to me, monsters and insects gone, but words continue pouring out of me. Like a sorcerer's chant, I repeat those two words. Over and over, I repeat those two words. Over and over and over until my throat burns and my voice grows hoarse. Finally, I stop. Stop because I have to or must stop. Drained, I roll over, lie on my side, and plunge into a deep and dreamless sleep.

Busi screamed and screamed. In no time, someone banged frantically at the back-room door. 'What's wrong?' she heard her cousin Themba's voice calling her. Slowly, the relief dawned. She was home, safe. She was not at any rehab centre; there was no Sazi, there were no monsters, no insects. Brian must have left some time in the night: she was alone. She had been seized by a terrible nightmare.

Now her body began to tremble, her teeth chattering, and a cold, clammy sweat washed all over her, drenching her as though she'd stepped out of the shower and forgot to towel herself dry.

'I'm all right, thanks!' *Busi, get a grip on yourself. You are all right.*

'Are you sure?'

'Leave me alone!' Is Themba deaf or demented? 'Uh-h! Right, bye!'

'Thanks for caring. But I am really okay.' *He was only trying to help ...*

The full horror, the meaning of what she had done overwhelmed her. *What possessed me, dear God in Heaven? Forgive me. Please, God, forgive me!* Sick, Busi ran to the toilet – barely made it before she threw up. When that had become nothing but gurgly heaving, she limply folded onto the floor where she sat staring at nothing; no thought in her mind either. Blank.

Without knowing or deciding that this was what she had to do, out of her mouth poured: 'Tolo, Zulu, Mchenge, Mabhanekazi. Hlombe! Vumba lempongo liyanuka! Dlangamandla!'

To hear her say the clan-names of amaTolo would have surprised those who knew her. They would not have been more surprised than she was herself. She began to have an inkling how much of Khulu's teachings she had taken in. Much more than she realised.

*We have shown her
If she has eyes
She may avoid this certain future
It is up to her. Our job is done.
We can only go so far.*

Minutes later, when she had calmed down a little, she told herself: 'I have to remember; Khulu said I am never alone.' She repeated the words aloud, in a clear voice: 'I should not forget we are never alone. There is an unbreakable chain of life.'

One night with Brian, and this is the result? No, she would never go back to her treacherous plan. That had taken long enough to sink into her apparently very thick skull.

Also, was it not enough burden on the family that Sazi was in a roundabout of rehabilitation-relapse-rehabilitation? She could not add to the pain the family was suffering. Busi sorrowed for Sazi; he was one more reason to stick to the straight and narrow. Yes, Sazi's fate was part of what kept her on her toes. That, and her fear of the urges, the cravings, the craze-bringers. Easier said than done, she told herself. But: *whatever had possessed her?*

Easier said than done, a hoary voice whispered in her mind's ear again, and again, Busisiwe praised her ancestors, ooDlangamandla. She made herself yet another promise: *Each morning and each night before bed, I shall sing the praises of my ancestors.*

Not for naught had Hlombe's bones turned.

CAMAGU!

It was a very apprehensive Khulu who remained eSidwadweni mourning the departure of her eldest grandchild. Yes, she had absolutely delighted in Busisiwe's being with her. However, something kept niggling at her. Strange indeed was it that throughout all the time the child had been here, Hlombe had not once appeared to her, Khulu. It was most unusual for him to abandon her, especially during times of heightened emotions: births, deaths, weddings ... and the visit of their first-born grandchild ought to have brought him – several times, in fact.

Why had Hlombe turned his back on her? Khulu grieved for Busi's departure, and even more for Hlombe's abandonment.

Busi had called her several times from the road, but Khulu could only relax once she heard, 'I arrived safely, Khulu!' Busi had thanked her grandmother profusely for 'a most enjoyable holiday,' telling her she would plant the seeds she had brought from Sidwadweni that very afternoon. Khulu chuckled, glad to hear that Busi had not lost her new-found enthusiasm for growing vegetables. Something might still be salvaged from that incorrigible crowd that was her family.

However, again, that night, sleeping alone again, Hlombe returned to her in her dreams. But there was no comfort to be had from his presence: he was still silent, still sad.

Back in Cape Town, between the gardening, planning for high school, and house chores, Busi had more than enough on her plate. Did her school uniform fit? Were her school shoes still fine? Meanwhile Brian had apparently found a part-time job; this saved Busi time, not having him around during the day. She was so preoccupied it took several days for her to register the fact that Brian had not made another appearance since his first visit after her return. That was wha-at? More than a week ago!

When Phyllis came home that first Sunday after Busi's return, the girl almost didn't recognise her. Her mama could be beautiful if she only took better care of herself. By all appearances, Phyllis was beginning to do just that. Even the little boys looked sprightly and well satisfied with their lot; bubbly and giggly at the slightest hint of teasing or tickling.

Not that Phyllis had much to say about her stay at Mrs Bird's except that the older woman had asked her to be on the premises, almost full-time.

'I hope she's paying you for all the time you're there,' said Lily.

Phyllis looked at her sister, raised her brows, and asked, 'Do you hear me complaining?'

Weeks passed. School started. And then came the day that could no longer be avoided. Lily's sly eyes had been searching Busi from top to toe, volunteering to make her a dress. Lily had

suspected for some time, but thanks to Busi's lying stomach, still almost as flat as the well-pressed pleats of a new skirt, she could not be sure. But Busi knew the moment had arrived.

Phyllis was visiting the night the bomb dropped. Out came the story of Busi growing a child in her belly. Ukhulelwe! Her suspicion confirmed. Yes, Busi, for whom Mrs Bird was paying such good money to give her a decent education, a better chance to get a better life. Now this? Six months gone!

Phyllis wept. 'This is my luck! Just when I try to change my life, taking evening classes at St John Ambulance so I can become a qualified carer – now this! I will not allow Busi's foolishness to stop me! I will not!'

'Mzi will kill you,' said Lily.

Phyllis turned on her sister: 'Kill me?' 'Yes.'

'Did I make his precious daughter pregnant?' 'That's not the point.'

'Oh, so you know what the point is! Please tell us!'

'You are supposed to raise your daughter; teach her the ways of womanhood.'

'Apparently, she didn't need lessons from me!' 'But you have to tell Mama.'

'Me? Why don't you tell her?' 'Busi is your daughter!'

'And not yours? Are you saying my child is not your child?' 'No, child of my mother's, that is not what I am saying. But maybe stop thinking only about yourself!'

Shame solidly sheathed the eyes of both women.

'I will tell Khulu,' said Luvo, and squared his stout shoulders.

Khulu saw flashing on her phone, Lily's husband's name. Alarm bells pealed in her heart. She answered: 'Who died?'

And so did the news thunder into her ears. With a cry, Khulu threw her phone away from her as if it were a poisonous snake, and cracks crazed the screen. Her mind reeled. Surely the family would insist that the young people marry? That was the Christian way, the traditional way too – tradition in these times of unmarried women birthing ... yeh-aa!

Gone were the days of before-before, when a man's family first offered lobola to the girl's family long before he could call her wife. And never would he bed her before he called her that; and no maiden contemplated such an outrage, of lying beneath a man who had not spoken to her father! Lobola: security against adversity for the woman and her offspring.

Security, in the event husband later turned monster. Security, for even good husbands die. Security against the eventuality of any and all of life's unforeseeable, unpredictable odds.

Once again, her cobwebbed phone rang. Yhoo! Mrs Bird herself calling?

'Oh, Gracie, can you believe our Busi has gone and got herself into this kind of trouble? And she's only what ... thirteen, four-teen? Dear God, when I was that age, I didn't even know the real difference between girls and boys. Oh, I knew boys stood when they peed while girls sat down. But really ... Gracie, what are you going to do?'

Khulu gave a long, loud sigh. 'I don't know,' she said. And that. was the truth. She had no idea what role she could play in such a disaster.

Mrs Bird had. 'I think you should find your way back here. Poor Phyllis told me about it and is totally overwhelmed. I had to take her to the doctor this morning. Depression, I suspect. And she has every right to be depressed, I think.'

Khulu sighed. An uneasy silence fell, neither woman quite sure how to break it, what next to say, talk about – the trend of their usual conversations so rudely disrupted.

Finally, into the silence, Mrs Bird continued: 'You will come, won't you? You must, you know. Your family needs you right now. You know that, don't you?'

Another heavy sigh before Khulu agreed. 'Yes, I do. I think you're right. I will come.'

'Do you need any help?'

'No thanks. I will be fine. Thank you.'

'Come straight to iintaka,' Mrs Bird laughed at the old joke, but it was short, subdued.

'I will! Again, thank you for your call.'

'Bye-bye, then ...'

CHAPTER TWELVE

Khulu left for Cape Town, but not for Kwanele; her destination was her old employer's home in Bishopscourt, the wealthiest suburb in Cape Town. It never ceased to amuse Khulu how the eyes of the other passengers in the taxi would pop to see her alight at this posh spot. What resident of Cape Town did not know the meaning of Bishopscourt, home of the Archbishops of the Anglican church, including the world-famous and revered Desmond Tutu?

During the long journey, Khulu came to understand the agitation that laced both Luvo's and Mrs Bird's words: this was it! This was the doomsday premonition that had become her second skin this past while. This was what the dung pile in her heart had fore-told. The sins of her children and their children would be the end of her before the ancestors were of mind to call her.

Khulu arrived in Cape Town on a Friday; she didn't care that her daughter would be there. This was not about her or her daughter. This was about her granddaughter, the little girl her daughter had failed – not raising her correctly, according to standards of culture or church, or just simple, common decency – the way she herself had been raised. In any event, whether she went to Kwanele straightaway or waited a couple of days, Busi would be just as pregnant when she got there.

Sunday prayer was what she needed before she saw that grandchild of hers. Meanwhile, she'd come and found something else going on with her friend, something that seemed even more urgent. How long had Mrs Bird been like this? Why had neither Mrs Bird nor dizzy Phyllis thought to inform her? She had appeared fine when Khulu had last seen her, not that long ago. How could she look this gaunt, this haggard? Something was definitely not right. But MaNtaka said she didn't want any fuss and bother about her health. She was fine, what were a few dizzy spells for someone her age? Please, people must not even think of treating her like an invalid.

Another surprise: Phyllis no longer just charred for MaBird; she had been staying there, working five or more days, ever since the older woman's health had begun to decline. What was more, MaBird was full of praise for Phyllis.

Strange to say, the rough patches in her life appeared to have smoothed something in Phyllis's heart. This showed in the deliberate way in which she did her work, especially that of minding her employer when she was feeling low and lonely and useless.

Khulu took all this in: the disastrous news that had brought her to Cape Town, her friend's ill-health, and Phyllis being praised as a star. She must be losing her mind, Khulu thought, or the world had gone stark, raving mad. Nothing made sense any more. Thing was, none of this had killed her. She must be getting very old ... well, older than she felt.

That evening, Phyllis paid Kwanele a surprise visit; even more surprising was the news she brought – their mother was in town. She knew full well this would not please her sister. The whole family was on edge: the two women knew it was their shared responsibility to keep their eyes on the girl child. And they had failed.

Phyllis warned her sister, 'Our mother will blame you more.' Surprise arched Lily's brows, her eyes those of an owl: 'Me?'

'Yes, you. At least,' Phyllis went on slowly, 'she expects something from you. Me?' She stopped. Shrugged.

A brief silence fell between them, sisters eyeing each other, apprehension in the face of the younger, scorn in that of her older sister. Then, her own brows arched, lips pursed in a wicked, wicked smile, Phyllis purred: 'Mama already knows I'm through-and-through irresponsible.' Then her shoulders shook soundlessly, she put her hands on her head, took into them the beret she wore and, wringing it and stretching it like an accordion, she burst out: 'What's your excuse?' She fell onto the sofa in a heap, laughing uproariously.

Speechless, Lily looked at her sister.

Phyllis sat up and shrugged. Lily felt helpless; although what Phyllis had just said might sound ridiculous, she had a sneaking suspicion it was true. The smile in her sister's eyes did nothing to assuage the stress she felt building up inside her. Lily's unhappiness, always, but always, pleased Phyllis.

But the person who was really terrified about the visit was Busi. So, when the Sunday arrived, everybody was waiting on tenterhooks.

'Where is she?' Lily asked Phyllis, when the shadows began to lengthen. 'Does church take so long nowadays?'

Phyllis offered an explanation: 'Mama has stayed to care and comfort Mrs Bird. You know her health has not been good. Mama is so mad at me for not telling her that MaNtaka was ill. How was I to break the strict instructions from Mrs Bird not to tell her, or even her own children?'

So, they waited, their minds tracing Khulu's movements. She hated walking on the dirty footpaths of the township after all the years of working in Bishopscourt, the ways of the village, her own clean yard. Khulu absolutely loathed dirt. 'First thing done to a human being right at birth is to clean her. Clean should be like skin to a person, clean air to breathe and clean ground to walk on. God's good clean earth.' By the time dusk set in, they were thinking about her safety and how evil men had decided an elderly woman was next to virgin.

Finally, Khulu stood in the doorway. Her family welcomed her with a nervous pandemonium and open arms. In each heart, however, embarrassment, shame and anger vied for first position. Without a winner, they came together in a hostile union. No one gave direction. No one asked questions. No one offered any help.

On seeing her grandmother, Busi burst into a torrent of tears. And finally, the discussion had to begin.

'Phyllis, my dear, the child must attend the clinic for pregnant women.'

'I'm not stopping her.'

'You may have to take her there.'

'Why doesn't her man do that? Why me?'

Khulu looked at her daughter. She couldn't believe the words out of her mouth.

'She's a child, Phyllis. Your child!'

'She should have thought of that before she did what she did.'

Khulu clapped her lips, looked at her daughter and thought: 'I will have to accept that this one will be a wet rag until the day she dies. There is no understanding a mind such as hers. No understanding such a mind at all, at all, at all.'

Then the interrogation began. In which Busisiwe initially surprised herself. It was as if the words of her mother and Aunt Lily, so bent on intimidating her, were freeing her anger. She kept two conversations going, one in her head, the other in her responses. Who did they think they were? God's angels descended to earth to lead sinners like her back to the holy flock?

But under the stern eye of Khulu, the two persisted: 'Who?'

'Who what?' Busi spat. 'Spell it out!' 'The man who did this to you?'

'Did what do me? Ondenze ntoni? Out with it! Why are you so coy and cagey?'

Then Khulu stepped in. She didn't raise her voice, and concern, genuine concern, was there.

'Mzukulwana, my grandchild, there is a child we will soon be welcoming into this family. Right?'

Busi nodded. Her voice lowered, she replied, ‘Yes, Khulu.’ ‘Well, my child, a child has two parents. We cannot welcome a stranger. So, will you tell us of the other parent – the father of this new person who will soon be joining us?’

It became clear that Busi knew his name, but had no knowledge of his clan or pedigree. Nor, exactly, where in Khayelitsha he lived or with whom. She knew Brian had dropped out of school years ago, that both his parents were dead, and that he was too much for his aged granny. Brian’s father, Kholisile, had been her only child and had been gunned down in a botched car-jacking in the pandemic violence of the townships in the Western Cape, in broad daylight, right in front of his girlfriend, Brian’s mother.

Some said the mother died of a broken heart. Others said she died trying to rid herself of what her man had planted inside her before carelessly getting himself shot, peppered with so many holes his body looked like Swiss cheese. She couldn’t bear the thought of bringing yet another starving mouth into her mother’s house, with her mother’s children, and their children too, a house already full of so many mouths gaping daily for food that seldom came. The doctors cut Brian out of his dying mother’s belly. She only lived two days after her boyfriend’s death, and the two were buried together. ‘Saves me time,’ Brian had told Busi of his visits to the grave once a year, either on Father’s Day or Mother’s Day. ‘But I alternate the dates – being fair to both of them.’

‘And does the father of this new person know of your news?’

Busi hung her head. This was a sore point. She had asked Brian for a meeting and told him the news, which he took quietly; it could not have come as a huge surprise. But he had been scarce ever since.

But soon old and new feuds spilled across the table. Naturally, Lily was concerned about yet another child coming into her space. ‘Another add-on is all I need now! As much as I want to appear non-judgemental and supportive of this girl, I am not forgetting how my own sister “camelled” me out of my space.’

‘Camelled?’ Khulu frowned. Phyllis got a word in: ‘It’s a story. It’s a Mthwa who gave a wandering camel space in his cave and ended up caveless, while Mr Camel ensconced himself in his cave.’

But Lily hadn’t finished: ‘How do I know that Busi is not simply a version of you? The last thing I want is to have my yard become a typical slum-house yard. Overcrowding! Too many people in a space that will not and cannot be expanded! Why do you think I and Luvo only had the two boys? This is one of the few things about which I totally agree with Mama. If you have nowhere to put your children and call it their home, then don’t have them!’

‘This could so easily have been avoided,’ said Khulu in a soothing voice, ‘if we had done the ukuthombisa rite of passage for Busi.’

‘Ma-a!’ Lily huffed. ‘What has that to do with this mess?’ ‘Everything. You said ukuthombisa was out of date, old-fashioned, would make the child the laughing stock of all of Kwanele. Well, I hope Kwanele applauds you now. But I don’t see you sing and dance and take a bow, accepting the applause.’

‘Applause?’ Phyllis queried eyebrows raised to the doek.

Khulu nodded. Phyllis glared at her mother, closed her now-brimming eyes. In a soft voice, the voice of one unaware the mouth had opened and let out one’s inner thoughts, Phyllis asked, ‘Why applaud?’ Again, she stopped. In the silence that followed, the words sounded as if in search of some indecipherable truth. They hung in the air and no one disturbed them. In what seemed like an hour or more, but was not more than a few minutes, Phyllis went on: ‘Applaud us for this ... inconvenience?’ She heaved her exhalation, shook her head. Then, she opened her eyes and regarded those with her one by one, and, in a loud voice, said: ‘To say nothing of the shame – ihlazo!’

None among those present responded. Phyllis’s voice rose as though she could force them to hear her, as though their silence meant they had not heard the words of her mouth, those words too soft to reach their ears. ‘Plus,’ she screamed out that one word as she rose to her feet, ‘who is going to look after this child?’ This time, not waiting for any answer, bah’am! sounded a hard open palm slamming on the table as she cried out, ‘Not me!’ Bah’am! ‘No! It is not going to be me!’

Lily snapped, ‘Why would we expect you to do that when you’ve hardly looked after your own children? Busi raised all your babies, don’t forget that.’

Eyes wide, Phyllis screeched, ‘Yhoo, uyamthethelela? You take her side?’

‘If truth is her side, then I am taking her side!’

Phyllis shot back, ‘Usindwa yimali. Money burdens you, burns holes in your pocket!’

‘Is that what makes you come running to me every week for a loan?’

Khulu suddenly stood fiercely upright and strong.

‘Enough, you two! Act your age!’ she said, glaring at her daughters. ‘You seem to forget there is a new soul around you; one you are infecting with selfish lies and self-righteous anger! It is time for practical steps, and she is part of all of us, so all of us will assist her. First, Busi needs to go to a clinic. Second, we need to get some infant clothes. Third, we need to determine where and how the birth will take place. We also need to think about a name ...’

‘Thandeka, loveable,’ Busi blurted out, contributing for the first time.

Khulu ruled that one out immediately. ‘That word has a double meaning ... “By design”, so that is a wrong message. As I can see, this family had no such intent.’

Busi shut up after that, but her mind galloped past all the names she thought of so long ago now: Bonisile, Belinda, Bonke, Buyiswa, Bulelwa, Buyisile ... The boy who fathered her child who had suddenly become as shy as a bride on her wedding night. When she had asked for a name, it turned out he hadn’t thought that far ahead.

‘Your man has no preference? He has not thought of a name, all this time? He knew he’d made a human; the baby is no surprise to him, the surprise is only for the rest of us, not so?’

‘Maybe we should wait until the baby is born and allow it to give us a sign,’ suggested Lily.

Khulu agreed: ‘It’s often unwise to rush into naming a child.’ Then, eyes wearing sadness, she moved to another topic. ‘I hope this is a first-born for you. Keep it that way. Don’t you dare have another first-born! And I am not just saying this to my granddaughter, but you too, Phyllis, heaven knows.’

‘What do you mean, “first-borns?”’ asked Phyllis.

‘All yours are first-borns, aren’t they?’ Khulu answered with a question. Then she elucidated. ‘Your eldest – a first-born with your so-called husband; no lobola and ...’

‘Ma,’ screamed Phyllis. ‘Lobola is a thing of the olden days.

People don’t pay any ...’

‘Pay?’ Khulu sneered, ‘Did you say pay? Lobola is not payment. Nothing and certainly no one is purchased. Yes, these days, people more often use money. But it must not be forgotten that the money is a stand-in. It stands in place of the cattle the groom’s family offers the bride’s. *Offers*, not pays! It is the use of money that has caused such confusion around this sacred rite. ‘Feeding children has never been out of fashion. You, young people do not understand anything. Children are made out of love and loving, but it is not that kind of loving that grows them. It is the other kind, physical. It is caring, minding, guiding, nurturing. *Iinkomo ezi ke zezokulondoloza abantwana kwakonakala!* Those cows or their issue ensure the wellbeing of the children should things go awry.’

The explanation was met with silence. Then Phyllis recovered. ‘But ...’

Khulu cut her short. ‘No buts,’ she said, shaking her head, ‘I don’t know what you all learned at school. We studied the Mqhayis, the Jordans, and the Jolobes – great African writers, great thinkers. Practices such as lobola and more all spelled out for you in those books.’

‘We studied those writers too.’ ‘Doesn’t seem to have had any effect.’ ‘Meaning?’

‘Never mind that! All I’m saying, my own pocket is not the kraal into which your non-existent lobola never went. You should remember that and use your own two arms and hands – limani! Plant food for your children! There’s a yard at the back of this house as well as at the front.’

‘This is not a house.’

‘It is that if you live in it. Your ancestors cultivated land unfenced when they lived in caves! Do what you need to do with what you have. Don’t wait on wishes, for they seldom come a-visiting.’

‘Yhoo, Mama! Uyayithethela shame, imali yakho. Unkind words do truly accompany your money.’

‘And that deters you, my daughter?’ Khulu asked, and answered her own question with a vehement, ‘No! It does not stop you from coming back, again and again, asking me, a pensioner, for money. Loan or out-and-out handout – makes no difference. You don’t ever remember to pay back the money you borrow from me.’

Lips downturned in shame and anger, Phyllis left the room, Khulu’s eyes trained on her until she disappeared.

A few days after the family indaba in which Busi was grilled, Phyllis announced: ‘Mzi is coming to see you, Busisiwe.’

Busi growled, ‘For wha-at? Tell him my birthday has long passed. I don’t want to see his sorry face now.’

‘He’s your father.’

‘Since when?’

‘Well, he is.’

‘He conveniently forgot that all this time – years? And what has suddenly reminded him of me?’

‘You’re being difficult.’

‘No, Mama. You are! And so is the fool of a man who comes here pretending to be my father.’

‘Busisiwe, enough!’

For a long moment, Busi glowered at Phyllis. ‘As far as I am concerned, I have no father. Hear me? Andinatata mna, undibona nje. No father have I as I stand here before you.’

But he came. The man who had left Cape Town, who had never returned, not even once to see her, now found time and energy to visit, despite looking a skeleton of himself. Money

had long parted company with him. Jobless and wifeless, illness was the only companion of his dying days. But on hearing of his daughter's pregnancy, he had come. And he was filled with venom, furious with his daughter for disgracing his family name.

'Whose child will people say you are? Such trash ... enje yona inkunkuma! Pregnant even before you finish school? Ufuze laa njakaz' ingunyoko! You take after that she-dog, your mother! And who is the father? Where is he? At least he should come and discuss things with me ...'

Busi watched him with a smirk. Yes, the kind of smirk she had learned from her mother. Did he want to use her pregnancy to get damages paid by Brian? Busi stood mute right through his furious tirade. When he left, she wished she felt better about her mother, because she would have loved a high five from Phyllis for routing her father ...

The encounter with the old mlungu woman was another one that threatened unpleasantness. Initially Busi absolutely refused to go see her, despite Mrs Bird's written invitation – well, more of a summons really: 'Busi, please come and see me. Urgent!!!'

Busi wondered if the nuisance woman would stop paying for her posh education now. She had only just scraped into high school as it was. Her second-hand blazer covered most of her body, and the teachers probably assumed she was becoming over-weight, like many of her classmates. But during the last month of her pregnancy, she would have to stay at home, so let the Model C go ... Although when she thought of it, she knew she didn't fancy having to go to a township school. Boy, would everybody laugh at her. Ufahlakile! She had come down thirteen pegs, one for each year of her precious life! From lofty suburb heights to kasiskolo! Kasiskorokoroskolo!

So, she endured the visit, and to her surprise, Mrs Bird was unexpectedly kind. 'You want to change your life, Busi? School will enable you to accomplish that. You will be able to live a different life from your mother's.' The girl promised that she would finish school, even if she had to repeat the year.

If the family was having a hard time accepting her coming child, not so Busi's kasi friends: they were in celebration mode, even Thandi, who was spending more and more time away from school with a new blesser. They got together and gave her a baby shower from which she returned giggling and delighted. She had to be helped into the house, staggering under a mountain of boxes and packages all wrapped in bright, bright colours – baby clothes, toys and

even a few books – much to the surprise of many! Generous hilarity filled the hearts of her friends because they knew she didn't have it easy at home ... some had been there before her, and all knew what happened ... social disapproval so thick you could cut it with a knife. By the end of the ceremony, Busi was dizzy, bursting with pride.

Back home, however, that pride had absolutely no place. No place at all, at all, at all. When she entered the house, her mother, visiting from Mrs Bird, made her cringe with a look that cut through her. As though with X-ray eyes, she had looked through her and seen nothing. This look declared her non-partisan status, and it left Busi harrowed inside. A slap, kick, fist, even verbal assault, would have been better than this erasure, silent disavowal. But between the two of them now – mother and daughter – niks, nothing! Busi hurried to reach her room with all her presents.

*Go home and do not sleep, there come pools of blood;
Go home and do not sleep, there comes the end of humanity;
As dead flies give perfume a bad smell,
So a little learning outweighs wisdom and honour*

*Go home and do not sleep, your fathers will sell you out;
Go home and do not sleep, you too will sell your mothers out;
The heart of the wise inclines to the right,
But the heart of the fool to the left.*

*Go home and do not sleep, you are the base supporting the people;
Go home and do not sleep, your families are in danger;
If a learned one's anger rises against you,
Do not leave your position;*

*Go home and do not sleep, there comes a time of darkness;
Go home and do not sleep, we will not be here forever;*

*Calmness can crush great arrows to bluntness.
There is an evil I have heard over the loudest microphone.*

Go home and do not sleep, give service to the coming generation;

Go home and do not sleep, I say the real war has come.

The sort of error that arises from a professor:

Fools are put in many high positions,

While the wise occupy low ones.

PART TWO

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

I was designed by my mother
Busisiwe Mkhonto,
whom everybody calls Busi.

I am her story
pay attention when she comes through
however trite, rash, mundane she may sound
I am coming through her voice
for all her foibles are but shades of you

the whole neighbourhood gasps
when I am born
my birth shocks them
everyone is surprised
there is wailing and there is weeping
there is wringing of hands
there is blame

there is unexpected, unsuspected horror at myself
even by she who births me
she rues the day as she looks up into her grandmother's face
so day after day
they look down at me
questions in their eyes
zips on their lips
their minds jumping all over the place
avoiding my thin and frequent cries
the pitiful squeaks as of a new-born mouse
the thin, greenish stools, watery
feeding more spillage than swallow
eye movement erratic

in search of answers too painful to grasp

gradually, however, their mouths open—
and they give voice to the irrefutable reality:
something is not right with this baby

for two or three days
the family waited for the name
to be announced by this neonate
but I do not give a sign
any indication of myself
other than my body
then my navel falls – I step into being my own,
independent of source,
and then Khulu takes the bull by the horns:

CAMAGU!

Heavy was the old woman's heart. *Ukuba besizixabisile, sizihloniphile, izinto ezifana nale nyula sikuyo ngezizingezeki nje konke*, went her thoughts. 'If we had pride in ourselves, respected ourselves, things such as the mess we're in now would just not happen. What kind of people are we? Have we become? How could such a thing happen to us? Where were our eyes? And I, the oldest of us all, failed to see such perdition coming! What is the worth of living my days?'

Dazed with grief, Khulu took the baby to her room. In the sanctity of her own space, alone with the baby, she fell on her knees. Feverishly she prayed to her God, her only hope in a situation she found overwhelming: 'Father of our fathers! Parent of our parents and theirs before, humbly do I come before you and beg you. Let me be an instrument. Let my hands be the tools.' The thudding of her heart loud, she paused and wiped the tears streaming down her cheeks with the back of her hand. She continued, cried out, 'Father God, let my mouth speak the wisdom of the ages, the wisdom of the old unchanging truth: the meaning of life is its inescapably intricately interwoven oneness.'

When she was done, she sat on the edge of her bed and watched the sleeping infant breathe. The bundle wrapped in soft woolly blankets rose and fell, marking the infant's inhalations and exhalations. *If only all life were that simple!* Khulu wondered how she would steer her family through this unexpected crisis.

Sometime in the course of the night, her prayers hovered and transmuted into ancestral worship. She felt convinced that the Old had turned their backs on her family. This would not have happened were they watching over the family. They would surely have alerted her. 'And God? He, Greatest Being, Lord of All, to You Almighty, Thy lowly servant turns in this her hour of direst shame. Your fallen wretch knows still awutshonelwa langa, awuphelelwa nyanga, unguSoxesha, Mandlakazi ayinqaba, sicuntsulele uvuthu- lulele phezu kwethu lawo mandla akho, siyakubongoza, Bawo wethu OseZulwini. I cling to You. Nothing is impossible. No poison or drug or any man-made deformity is beyond Your power to reverse – if that is Your will. God raised Christ who was three days dead. Dead and buried. What is deformity to Your mighty power?'

Even in her deepest moments of anger against her daughter and Busi, who corrupted the sanctity of the womb, Khulu could not bring herself to actually blame anybody but herself for the plight into which the family was thrust. So, what would be an appropriate Christian response? That whole long day, she was seized by the question; it would not leave her. All day long, she pondered: what was she being called to do, to be?

Always be of service to others, came immediately to mind, followed closely by: *to help others in their becoming*. Although many might view such an undertaking as sacrifice, Khulu did not, for she firmly believed that it was precisely in the performance of such ordinary acts of neighbourliness to family, friend, neighbour or total stranger – humane acts – that she became 'more and more who I am meant to be'.

'This little girl must be very strong to be here at all,' she said the next morning. 'The signs of malfeasance are evident. That she managed to get herself born, after a full term too, surely proclaims her zest for living? She is a girl with mighty strength ... NguMandlakazi, her name is Mandlakazi!'

CAMAGU!

Mandlakazi.

Coming from strength, with strength,

Coming to strengthen those who will listen to her truth.

CAMAGU!

Sisidalwa esi.
This here is a creature.
In the manner of amaXhosa:
Singled out by the general to emphasise the specific.
Sisidalwa esi.
This, a creature is.
CAMAGU!

Busi was overwhelmed and ashamed. Phyllis was working on her nerves. She kept insisting that her daughter should wean the baby and apply for the grant. The bottle was okay; she needed to go back to school soon, but the long queues at those government departments! They made her feel like a dog at the dumpsite hunting for scraps, and they spoke so crudely, so humiliatingly!

And there were forms to be filled in. Appointments to be made.
Social workers to see.

Khulu demanded that Phyllis go with Busi, dragging her feet every step of the way. Phyllis was as crushingly mortified as her daughter. But, of course, she looked forward to reaping the riches of the ‘deformed baby’ grant – the deaf-money, they called it in the townships – so let her suffer. Besides, she knew the procedures and forms all too well.

All around her, Busi could hear the derogatory quips from the cleaners – talking about her like she was not there, as if she could not see that she was the youngest in the line. Speaking in code, of course. But Busi knew those ways of roundabout speech. Was she not Lily’s niece? Lily, the mistress of ukukwekwa!

They spent the whole bloody day at the government office. And now as Busi entered the house, she could hear the baby screeching like she was berserk. Couldn’t she have at least a minute for herself?

‘You came in just as she woke up!’ Khulu greeted her. ‘This one must have sensed your approach. They’re like that, the newborns. They smell the mother’s milk, and although you’ve stopped nursing her, she smells you. It is not in a hurry she will forget who carried her all nine months. She can sense you.’ She told Busi she was about to give Mandlakazi her bath. ‘Then, after I have massaged her, you can give her the bottle while I prepare her herbs.’

It was not just the baby Khulu was ministering to with roots and herbs; she had decided to tackle the problem of Sazi, who was home from rehab and sitting around idle and listless.

Khulu ground grated uthuvana and mixed it with the powder she had made burning and pulverising hair clipped off the tail of a horse. Uthuvana, a well-known cleanser, was often used to regulate upset stomachs, both as laxative or enema, while horse tail was said to make the body reject smoke and liquor that any who took the mixture could no longer stand the smell of those things, never mind use them.

‘Ukhe wafak’ emlonyeni wakho nantoni engendawo – uya kuhlanza. Should you ingest any matter untoward, you will vomit,’ Khulu told her grandson as she gave him the mixture dissolved in hot water.

‘Khulu warned you!’ Lily’s voice was tinged with some empathy: ‘Go to the bathroom and stick your finger into your throat, she advised.

But Sazi was already running for the bathroom, his stomach doing the Macarena, his hand plugging his mouth. In minutes, he had brought up everything in his guts. The heaving scared him; so much so, it proved an effective counter to what had become an unbearable urge to drink drink drink. Sazi was not cured that day, but it was a beginning.

Themba and the two younger boys came rushing in. A baby had been stolen. Again!

‘It has become a plague!’ mumbled Khulu. Almost daily, there were news reports of children who had disappeared: snatched from prams in shops with the adults under whose care they were busy paying at tills, the prams right there at their side. Children snatched from their cots in their bedrooms, the parents either asleep in their own bedrooms or, believe it or not, wide awake and entertaining friends in their living rooms, believing their little ones safe in their own home. And what was done to those poor little mites by the time they were discovered – or their bodies were – was beyond the worst nightmares.

But this was the first case in Kwanele itself. Busi’s alarm grew by the day, and added to that was Khulu’s reaction. Her fears for the baby, who should already be turning her head, but was only moving her eyes, hit their highest pitch. In her mind, Mandlakazi was more vulnerable than others. Who would care if she was to be snatched? What if, when she began crawling, she found her way outside without anyone in the house noticing? Things like that happened to little children. Khulu feared that sooner or later, Mandlakazi was bound to come

to harm. Many in the neighbourhood knew of her, of her vulnerability. Who was to say no one would take advantage of the situation?

After much prayer and communing with the Old, Khulu at last called a family indaba to plead her case. 'Let me take the baby back to Sidwadweni for a little while. Mandlakazi would be much safer there,' she said. As an added advantage, she pointed out, 'There is also far better access to traditional medicines in the rural areas.'

'For how long?' Lily wanted to know.

'Oh,' replied Khulu, smiling, 'maybe a month or two, while Busi works to catch up on her school work so she can still make her grade this year!'

*So Khulu leaves
carrying me
on her sturdy back
without a sound
I go with her
fast asleep
hidden and warm
safe and kept
beyond the Beyond
and the Beyond
is with the two of us.*

One thing about Khulu: once her mind was made up about something, she didn't waste time, but went to execution with swiftness. That very first night eSidwadweni, a new routine began for the baby. Usana lwalala ngesihlungu; lwavuka ngenembe yemifuno nobisi lwebhokhwe – dining on aloe vera and breakfasting the next morning on veggie gruel and goat milk.

Khulu believed in plasticity of every aspect of the neonate: bone and skin, so why not brain and everything else that made up this new body? Bones mended. Skin healed. Why not all that was inside this new person?

Khulu sang and talked to the baby almost non-stop, pausing only when the baby succumbed to sleep. This was not infrequent, much to Khulu's relief. She firmly believed it was during that sleep that all that had gone into the body melded and blended, growing what needed growing; mending what needed mending; restoring what needed restoration.

Sleep and rest; sleep and recuperation. Mend mend mend; and grow grow grow.

While the baby slept, Khulu summoned the Old and prayed to her Almighty God. The Maker of Heaven and Earth would surely not be defeated by so small a task as mending the broken body of this imveku, a neonate.

Khulu also started doing daily exercises with the baby: a lot of stretching of limbs; gentle rubbing of joints, toes and fingers; the palms of hands and soles of feet were made to clap and dance in the air. Long before dawn, she very gently and tenderly massaged the fontanelle. An enema was given before breakfast, and all meals started with aloe vera, so the baby then welcomed the food that followed, and learned to distinguish between unpleasant and pleasant tastes. No sugar, hardly any salt, lots and lots of fruit, berries and vegetables ground or boiled to gruel. All the baby's meals were accompanied by lots and lots of mimicry, sounds that recalled the delight of previous meals, songs and rhymes, melodious and soothing. Every bath was followed by full-body massages with oils and medicinal Dutch remedies.

All this accompanied by the sweetest music from Khulu, her songs mostly nonsensical, full of Khulu's heart-smile, her glee in living:

Nwai-nwai-nwai; Nwai-nwai-nwai-nwai!
Nwai-nwai-nwai; Nwai-nwai-nwai-nwai!
Nwai-nywai-nywai!
Nwai-nwai-nwai!
Nwai-nwai-nwai; Nwai-nywai-nywai ...

The baby invariably fell asleep under the spell of song, in a room filled with the aroma of impepho. Steadfast, Khulu kept faith with the herbs, roots and berries she mixed for the baby as part of her daily ritual. And although at first, she thought she might be kidding herself, she began to see, slowly but surely, a change in the little broken bundle on her back.

In her arms.

In her heart.

Thobeka, who often came over to assist Khulu, was the one who first pointed out the recovery that was taking place.

'She sits!' shrieked Thobeka, jumping up and down, her arms flapping about as though she were skipping rope. She was positively flying out of her skin with the excitement, the marvel of it all. 'The baby can sit!' she repeated. This time, her voice was hushed in awe.

*and this was our routine
our murmurings, deep into the night
and again, early morning,*

*in the crepuscular twilight of predawn
our humming and singing
the bliss in almost-hot wet towels
her hands nourishing my skin
rubbing oil into joints
stroking it into muscles
stretching ligaments
outside in the sun
stretched – pulled; stretched – pulled*

*Khulu's hands are whispers
of the wings of a passing dove
I fall asleep to the ministrations
of her hands infused with care
and into that sleep
the lyrics of songs pouring from an ancient throat
sink deep into my mind
into my brain, my heart, my limbs.
Later, when deep sleep overcomes
Her, nursery rhymes are overtaken
by iintsomi, the folktales of amaXhosa
these abound in folklore, in wisdom
in morality, in hilarity
no clobbering do I ever get
just gentle leading on,
guidance, encouragement
into the valley of blissful living. Amandla!
as my name implies,
deep within me is buried immense power
the same as in every living being
I am just more aware of who I am
more alive to my being
Khulu reinvigorates that which has succumbed
to ill-treatment, cruelty, evil*

*to restore and even exceed my original form
the glory disturbed, poisoned, condemned
yet love faith steadfastness heals.*

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

A text popped up on Busi's phone. She hoped it was the not-returning-any-messages Brian. He had become indisputably slippery, an eel in the soapy hands of a toddler. She looked, but the message was from sly Zodwa. Although she didn't care much for her, perhaps she had news of Thandi, another character who had all but disappeared, to the extent that Busi was fearful for her friend. It was rumoured the latest blesser had gang ties.

Zodwa sent a picture of – WHA-AT! Busi's mind reeled, her eyes popped ... With the abruptness of a hailstorm, Facebook told the world, her world, that Brian had moved on. Moved on with another girl, another sweet-sixteen-touched-NevaNeveNeva-More.

The news of his betrayal threw everybody. He had seemed so docile, if subdued about the baby; if anything, the adults suspected that Busisiwe had bullied him into fatherhood. Well, look at that! they said to one other, shaking heads.

But the more Busi heard about his whereabouts and his new lady-love, the less she cared. She found this astonishing, but it was also something she relished. If anyone had told her, a few months ago, she would not care if Brian were to disappear from her life, that he would never kiss her again, never tell her he loved her ... she would have thought that person mad. Yet, when she thought of him now, she could hardly believe how unfazed she was by his absence. Indeed, she looked deep into herself and knew, without any shadow of a doubt, that she no longer loved him ... if she ever had. Even about that, she was no longer certain.

Her personal concerns had shifted: to her child far away in the Eastern Cape, and to her school exams. She was slowly working through a pile of books in preparation for the imminent exams. Shona had turned into a great ally with the latter, while Brian's disappearance was a hidden blessing; less to distract her in her endeavours.

There were times Busi felt despondent regarding the examinations. Surely, she had missed too much to ever catch up? However, with Shona's faithful assistance and encouragement, she made better progress than she had reason to believe possible. Shona even spent time coaching her during their breaks.

'Am I one of your projects?' Busi one day demanded, rather ungraciously.

'I'm only doing what I hope you would do for me, were the situations reversed,' Shona threw back.

Busi was a little shamefaced. 'Sorry,' she said.

‘No problem.’

Before long, exams commenced. Busi felt better prepared than she’d hoped, but there was trouble for Thandi, who was ahead of her. Who, in her right mind, would miss the chance to pass Grade Twelve unless they’d gone and died? It seemed Thandiwe Dianna Diko did exactly that: missed her matric examinations. Kasi school or not, her teachers were frantic when she failed to show up for the first paper. The principal herself went to Thandi’s home and interrogated the family. Not even her father, the policeman, knew where she was. Uphambene lo mntana?

But as Thandi’s star sank, Busi’s was on the rise. When the exam results came, everyone, including Mrs Bird, congratulated her. She had done much better than she had ever done before. Straight 7s – an ‘outstanding achievement’ – except for isiXhosa, in which she got a 6. Khulu questioned this over the phone, and Busi promised she would take the subject more seriously from then on.

There was much jubilation and many congratulations. That this should be the year she excelled in her examination results surprised and thrilled everyone, given the recent developments.

‘Who would have thought, of all the years you’ve been in school, this would be your bumper year?’ Phyllis said, for once praising her daughter even if in a roundabout manner. And with equally unaccustomed modesty, Busi replied, ‘I had lots and lots of help.’

Meanwhile, Busi had not forgotten that she was a mother. Through photos and short videos, she could delight in the progress Mandlakazi was making. The baby was growing, showing signs of differentiation. She recognised people; remembered faces and smiled at the familiar ones; frowned at strangers. Busisiwe felt her chest swell in gratitude at Khulu’s ministrations, and was amazed at the change in the baby’s demeanour – in so short a period of time, too.

And, in a voice gravelly and unshy, Mandlakazi was constantly bubbling away. ‘Almost like a normal baby,’ Luvo said one evening after watching a short clip Khulu had sent. Busi bristled, then drooped with shame. What was normal, anyway?

*Normal? there it was, said at last:
the unforgiving label: normal
said in negation: not normal*

*Abnormal, away from the norm
strange weird ugly cursed different
all these and more will I encounter
during the course of my earth journey
what a difficult task is mine
to change perception
remind humanity
what it is busy forgetting:
the Oneness of them all
– of all living things – all life—
creation is One in its totality
all the laws and regulations
the conventions and declarations
uphold this one truth:
the indivisibility of humanity.*

Grieved at her uncle's words and her own sin, Busi welcomed the day Phyllis called with good news. 'Mrs Bird found a vac training opportunity for you, at Walla-Wallas! They have a programme for teenagers.'

Busi's spirits lifted. Her eyes bright and big, she said, 'Wha-at?' It was not a question. Walla-Wallas just happened to be the best retail store in the entire country.

'Why don't you call her? Find out more about it.' Right then and there, the girl did exactly that.

So, throughout the school holidays, Busi was a working young woman – earning a bit of money. It came in very handy. Although she had applied for the child grant, and had been told by the social workers that her baby qualified for the care dependency grant – what people in Kwanale called the 'deaf grant', finding the full name too cumbersome to remember – this was now for Khulu to claim.

Both Mrs Bird and Khulu would have been even more optimistic about Busi's chances of success in life if they'd known about the workshop she attended as part of her orientation at Walla-Wallas. The older woman who'd facilitated the workshop had spelled things out, very clearly, for the attendees:

‘Childhood through to youth is a time for preparation. Learn all you can, for you will need the knowledge. Stay in school till you have a certificate that tells the world how you will live, look after yourself and the children that shall be entrusted to you. Stay in school. Stay drug-free. Stay child-free until you enter the house of adulthood and then the world of work, fully armed with the pre-requisite infrastructure for happy and successful living.

‘Go forth and matter! You are here to be of count in the world!’

These words would stay with Busisiwe for a long, long time, even though it was too late for her to take the advice about remaining child-free. And throughout the school holidays, when she was not at work or doing chores at home, she was at the local library. Yes, Kwanele lacked many of the amenities associated with modern urban living, but among the few it did boast was a library. It had beautiful and well-stocked bookshelves that rivalled the best in the country, thanks to the donation of one of the Scandinavian countries.

Busi read about three to four books a week. This was a challenge her class teacher had set before schools closed for the year. Read! Read! Read! Well, Busisiwe Mkhonto was reading, all right. And whenever she went to the library, she made sure she also read the newspapers there. This was her response to another of her teacher’s exhortations: ‘Keep abreast of current affairs!’

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The village was home to many disparate people, different things to different people. To some it was heaven; to others a hell they could barely stand. To others still, the vice-like trap from which they would never escape – fate having dealt them a poisonous card.

Still, although it had its drawbacks, when Khulu returned to Sidwadweni, a baby on her back, it had always been a place of plenty, of beauty, of peace and love and restfulness.

On a Tuesday, long before a rumour of sun streaked the far horizon, Khulu was already waiting for the bus beside the gate of The Great Place, as the chief's domicile was called. She was on her way to the clinic in town – it should be much, much better than the local village clinics that were always, but always, running out of this and out of that, with nurses on this and that special leave, conference, or research – with those present deeply resentful that they should have to work, and so taking it out on the people in front of them. No good could ever come from one who lacked heart, Khulu believed. A dry spring might sound echoes of running water, but from it not a drop could ever be had.

But Khulu returned to the village that day angry and hurt. The staff at the clinic in town had ordered her to return to her small local clinic. Wednesday, she went to the local clinic as those in town had instructed, and had to bear the brunt of the nasty comments of the local nurses: 'Why did you go to the town clinic? You thought yourself better? Better than us here? Well, why are you here now? Since you've already judged us and found us wanting, of what assistance could we possibly be?'

Empty-handed, she returned with the child on her back, and felt how the village of her mind, her memory, had begun to die. It was in her past, mornings with blood-streaked skies, the soft hoot of an owl winging homeward, high, still in the sky, the eagle, the murmuring doves. Maybe all that truly survived were her memories. People had changed; and yet Khulu abided by her prayer bush, isicithi sakhe for the time of spirits, devotion time.

One morning, Khulu stood rooted to the spot and watched as Mandla, amidst scattered bushes, sat hunched and staring at some large, meaty-leafed plants. Khulu knew she knew this plant, but at that moment couldn't remember the name of it. From nowhere, a woman appeared, right next to Khulu: 'Intelezi,' she whispered loudly, 'Pluck a few leaves, go home and grind

them. Boil them. Mix with a little isolisi ...’ Then she was gone, as mysteriously as she had appeared.

Of course! Intelezi!

Coming to it like this, unexpectedly, she felt guided. Later, when Khulu described the woman of the veld to others, no one recognised her. She could have been a passer-by, someone journeying to villages beyond this one of Sidwadweni – perhaps going to Qumbu or Cingco, who knew?

Khulu crushed the leaves and added cooled, boiled water and a few grains of salt. The salt helped to preserve the medicine so that it would last for up to ten days. She then gave Mandlakazi two teaspoons of the mixture with a pinch of Epsom salts.

This became an integral part of the little girl’s medicinal therapy, both as a drink and as rubbing stuff. Much later still, those who knew something of the power of plants told Khulu this intelezi was powerful medicine used in treating birth and infant-related diseases. Khulu also used ucibicibane, which Mrs Bird called Leopard’s Lily, with its big spotted leaves, for enemas. The kindly veld more than made up for the pathetic non-service of the clinics. The little girl was always, but always at Khulu’s side, even as a crawling baby, before she walked. Once that miracle was achieved, there was no stopping her. Miraculously, none of the animals bothered her, much to Khulu’s relief. The little thing delighted in everything there was to see, and took no heed of dog or cat, geese or hen, her just-hatched flock of chickens scattered all over the yard. Mandla would run to them, talk to them, want to play with them; squawking notwithstanding. The same applied to just-farrowed sows.

Luckily, that year was a good one, lambs aplenty. So was milk. Where there was milk, amasi abounded. Mandlakazi was particularly partial to amasi: to drink, over crumbly mealie porridge, umphokoqo as umvubo. Left to her own devices, the child would have consumed amasi morning, noon and night.

But the little girl’s favourite thing was gardening. Passionate about growing things, she would follow Khulu in and out of the veggie patch in front of the house or, if she’d taken her along to the fields further away, she would dive among the tall plants.

If Khulu had an implement in her hand, Mandlakazi found the closest approximation to it: stick, or twig or stone. She scratched and dug and pounded the soil, imitating what she saw Khulu do.

All this delightful business was conveyed via texts and calls to Busi in Kwanele, where Mandla’s exploits drew oohs and aahs. All were thrilled to hear snippets of the toddler’s escapades.

Thobeka helped Khulu with texting. She also helped with the baby. She was, in a huge way, Mandlakazi's village 'mother' ... after Khulu, whom she called 'mama' before she turned two. Yes, there was contact with her mother, Busisiwe. There were pictures of Busi all over the place and a particularly clear and beautiful one on the wall opposite Mandla's cot. But phone calls, letters and even photos could never replace real, immediate physical interaction.

Free calls provided a joyous space for deep discussions between Mandla's two mothers. Busi, for her part, tried to keep a regular schedule. Sunday afternoons suited her best, and that day and time was perfect for Khulu too.

One evening, Busi called with a puzzle to solve: 'I had a call from Thobeka. She said everybody finds it strange that since Mandlakazi's arrival you have stopped going to town ... especially on SASSA pay days. You don't seem to go even for your own pension! Why, Khulu? You have Mandla's SASSA card!'

'I know. Your mother has stopped milking me every month – I suppose because of Mandla. Or maybe living with Mrs B and taking care of her, she's no longer a container that always needs to be filled. But we have all we need. I grow the food we eat. The animals kindly give us milk and, occasionally, meat. What do I need money for on a monthly basis? Now and then I use some money for clothes, but really, we are fine!'

'But I don't want you to be suffering!'

'We don't suffer. How did we raise our children before the grant?'

Another phone call was also linked to Thobeka.

'Khulu, Thobeka says the animals in her mother's kraal are the result of inqoma, whatever that is. And that, without it, her mother would have perished. Are you finally drawing money?'

'My dear Busi, inqoma is about cattle and other animals that give us milk and meat. We all saw their kraal was nearly empty, as the mine had only paid out a little fee for the loss of the father. So it was not only me, but one by one, people with more came and offered a few animals – two or so ... always young ones, female and a male.'

One evening, there was almost a fight between the two. The conversation was once again about Khulu's resistance to the grant. 'What about those who might not have enough?' asked Busi, stirring the pot.

'Why would they not have enough? That is where you must start – with the reason behind what the eye sees. For every malady known to human beings, there is a cause which, unless rectified, corrected, no amount of help will alleviate.'

'Meaning?'

‘What is the point of the child grant?’ ‘To help parents who cannot afford ...’ ‘Afford what?’

‘To feed their children.’

‘Because?’

‘Oh, for any number of reasons.’

‘Name one or two or three of those, and then tell me how the grant addresses even one of them,’ Khulu challenged.

Busi inhaled slowly, then started with what sounded like a list: ‘Lost job, too many children for the salary, father ran away, no support or poorly paid support—’

‘Stop there,’ Khulu broke in. ‘I don’t see the grant addressing even one of those issues! It won’t make insufficient wages sufficient, nor bring back an errant father. It will not make the number of “too many children” any less. I don’t see it as helpful.’

‘Wha-at? No, Khulu, you don’t understand!’

‘Those who need help should be helped, of course ... but temporarily. Help should not be a permanent feature in anyone’s life.’

‘You think the grant is that? A permanent feature?’

‘Eighteen continuous years? Good God! That is all the growing-up years of an individual. Think of the child who grows up on this grant. To such a child, the grant must seem the most natural thing in the world.’

‘So?’

‘But don’t you see? It is not!’ ‘It isn’t?’

‘No child should grow up believing they will always have to depend on outside help to be, to live. That is inhuman.’

‘So poor people should not be helped?’

‘Of course, they must be helped. *Bubuntu obo*. But they must not be helped to stay poor. That’s the whole point I’m making! People must be helped to stand on their own feet – proud, independent agents in their own lives and the living of those lives!’ ‘Oh,’ Busi said, ‘I see ...’

‘Kulungile!’ The two were so seldom at odds, that with a cough, they turned the conversation, and were soon happily chatting about Mandla’s latest doings.

eSidwadweni, three-year-old Mandla potted around at Khulu's feet, busier even than Khulu. A stick in hand, she scratched uneven furrows and buried seeds. Khulu smiled as she watched her great-granddaughter. Finally, she thought, someone who had inherited her love of growing things.

Strangest of feats! Now and again, Mandlakazi would wander a little away from Khulu and, as she played in the veld, she would often, the way children have done since way back when, pluck something from the ground or a leaf from a plant, and put it into her mouth. If she found it bragworthy, she would run to Khulu, holding the green stuff high in the air: 'Nantsi! Nantsi, Khulu!'

It wasn't long before the toddler started to plant as well. In the vegetable garden, she picked and plucked and dug with sticks, planting her own seeds or pulling out weeds. 'Le? Le, Khulu?'

By the age of four, Mandla could differentiate plant from weed, and she could identify quite a few – umsobo, which she loved; irh-wabe, which she tolerated; isindiyandiya, which she loved in that wild spinach dish with maize-meal, isigwampa, stywe pap with greens.

Busi, her Kwanele mother, came to stay eSidwadweni that year, as soon as she had passed her Grade Twelve exams, which she did with flying colours. It was another touching reunion between mother and child, with Busi overjoyed at the evident happiness and health of her little daughter. She was amused to see the child's enthusiasm for all things green and growing – noting that her play-field was in fact her great-grandmother's garden.

When Khulu had first noticed how keen the child was on growing things, she gave her a small corner section of the main garden. Impossible to paint an accurate picture of the jubilation this event occasioned! Mandla was beside herself. She and Khulu eagerly recounted for Busi what had followed.

Mandla's first crop was beans. Carefully, she spaced them, counted them, and filled the holes.

'I had to watch that she didn't drown the seeds; not only immediately after she planted them, but every hour of every day, she had the urge to give the poor things a little water!' Khulu told Busi, chuckling. The sprouts had soon appeared, healthy and none the worse for overindulgence.

Busi's arrival had coincided with the harvest, so she was in time to praise her daughter for a yield any keen gardener, or farmer for that matter, would have been proud of. Meanwhile Mandlakazi nearly killed Khulu, Busi and Sibuka with her jubilant cries of 'Look! Just look! I

planted only one, enye jwi, kodwa jonga! Look how many came out!’ She counted the number of beans in each pod, erratically, but counting nonetheless. ‘I got a lot more beans than what I planted!’

She could not stop smiling, and all had to agree she spoke nothing but the truth. The wide gate displayed by the smile showed another truth: the child had also just lost her top two incisors.

Busi was glad to be present for this small step forward in her daughter’s progress; she also relished the relaxation, the peace she found with her grandmother and daughter, and also the company of her old friend Thobeka. It was with a heavy heart that she returned home, even though she had a place at university to study social work – a source of both apprehension and excitement. There was by now no thought of dragging Mandla back to Kwanele with her; it was clear that the little girl was content and healthy in the care of her great-grandmother.

As her sixth birthday approached, Mandla wanted to stop napping in the afternoon: ‘I am a big girl now, I will be going to school soon – isn’t that so, Khulu?’ Then, out of the blue one day, she told Khulu what the name of her teacher would be. Khulu paid little heed to what the child said. The school to which she would be going had no teacher by that name. However, toward the end of the year, before schools closed, there was a bus accident in which four teachers returning from a schools-fair died. Two were from Mandlakazi’s prospective school. In the new school year, Mandlakazi was assigned to one of the replacement teachers. The teacher’s name? Why, the same name Mandla had mentioned!

Khulu could not get over it. The man was a total stranger from Port Elizabeth, and had never before set foot in the area. What did it mean? She had noticed that since she was able to speak, Mandla had always known when Busi was due to visit, right down to the actual day of arrival – before she, Khulu, had said one word about the matter. She had not paid it much attention before, but now it was becoming certain: Mandlakazi was a seer – uyabona.

CAMAGU!

The Old acknowledged her.

Camagu! Praise be!

Khulu was deeply thankful when, to the amazement of all, once she started school, it seemed that Mandla's brain was somehow unscathed by her trauma in the womb, although a reminder of who she was, 'designed' by her mother, was still traceable in her outward appearance, especially the eyes that, if one looked carefully, always seemed a little out of focus ... yes, not quite centred. She was also slightly palsied, her limbs shaking when she was tired or excited. The child's cognitive abilities seemed to be intact, however, as was confirmed when she went to school, and her prowess grew even more marked.

Bit by bit, predictions became one of her more striking gifts. And more than predictions; she would sleep, or appear asleep sometimes, eyes wide open, but unresponsive to verbal or tactile cues. And then, out of her limp form, someone would speak out, his or her voice unlike any known to Khulu: ethereal. And the voice said things strange or only vaguely understood – things only understood in remote retrospect.

There were times when she told Khulu of a visitor she did not expect, someone she had not seen for a very long time. And often, the voice would say what manner of transport would bring the visitor to Ekuphumleni: car, horse, or his or her God-given two feet, clothed in dust. Sometimes the voice would tell what colour clothes the person would be wearing, whether they were male or female, young or old, whether they were still far off, or a spittle distance away.

Needless to say, this for Khulu was not only strange, but perplexing in one so young. She had grown up with the legend of Vongothwane, true, and Hlombe himself had some visionary prowess. She understood that ukubiwa – being stolen – was the sleep from which there was no voluntary exit. But once that person had transitioned, anything was possible. They might speak in tongues; speak in another's voice, or their own. The sleeper would wake only when the Old were done. And when they returned from that other realm, they had no ken of what had come through their mouths.

But this? In such a small child? This was something else! Who should she tell? And what should or could she say? What would be the reception of such a thing eSidwadweni? To say nothing of the folk back in Kwanele? The last thing she wanted was for this poor child to be labelled or regarded as being possessed by the devil!

Her childlike ramblings via a disembodied voice easily missed the ears of the grown-ups, but in her third year of school, Mandlakazi's ability to predict burst out into the open.

Before the wife of the headman gave birth, Mandla in a voice strange and ethereal said that her child would be born twice. Indeed, the woman gave birth to twins, but no ordinary twins: twins so identical that only the woman who suckled them could tell them apart. Bantu had the stronger suck, while Bonke's was a mite gentler.

But from the moment people clapped their eyes on the twin boys, those who had heard of Mandla's prediction marvelled at its accuracy. Yes, not a few remembered the strange words out the mouth of Mandlakazi, and few among them would forget the profundity of the girl's prophecy.

As was common practice in the area, during church services Khulu usually left the little girl to play with the other children in the yard around the church. One Sunday, Mandla was nowhere to be seen. After much anxiety, Khulu discovered an older girl sitting beside the still form of Mandlakazi, a deep frown carving her face.

'Makhulu! Makhulu! Umandlakazi akavuki! Mandla does not wake up! Kodwa uyathetha. Uthetha funny. But she speaks, speaks strangely!'

Khulu stared helpless at Mandla in her trance. No amount of shouting the child's name could open her eyes. There was also no sign of anything untoward – snakebite, or ants, or blisters. No amount of fanning her face or loosening her clothes achieved the slightest stirring in the stone-still form, inert and prone on the brown dry grass of the churchyard.

Nor did the priest's sprinklings and mutterings yield any deliverance. Right then and there, Khulu decided she would zip her mouth. If Mandlakazi or the ancestors chose this place to manifest, she was not the one who would open her mouth and explain to the whole congregation that she had seen this before. What would her name be then? Surely her membership would immediately be suspended, if not out-and-out cancelled. Oh, yes, she might well be excommunicated from the holy body of the church.

'Let them deal with it whichever way they see fit!' she told herself. Then, supported by both elbows by other women, she was guided back inside the church and gratefully sank onto a seat. Hands covering her face, she sank her head towards her heaving chest. What now? And then she heard the oldest woman in Sidwadweni say: 'Leave her be! When she is ready, she will return.' And so it happened. Early, before dawn the next day, a few of the neighbours came to see how she and Mandla had spent the night. Had the girl fallen again into that strange fainting spell?

Khulu had a hard time trying to convince the sympathisers no need for their sympathy existed.

*I am called back
the Old demand my presence
the only way back is through deep sleep
unconsciousness the fleshlings deem it
I knew
I was going back
making my way to the Old
my fellow people of the unfleshed world
not an easy ride that of spirit
cold cold cold
then the flesh is left behind
I am there
home
with my fellow people of the unfleshed world
I feel the aura of its coming
I have no way of knowing how long I will be gone
I do not have the words to warn anyone when it comes
the aura is both long and strong
it is also tongue-tying I am called back
the Old demand my presence
I am silent until they speak through me
They come through as they please
I have no control over voice or message
I am but the instrument of the Old.*

The next time the trance visited Mandlakazi, Khulu took the whole thing in her stride. Without panic, she waited for the storm or spell to travel its course, waited until the little girl returned once more. This time, her voice was Hlombe's: Hlombe transported into the body of little Mandlakazi. Definitely his voice. She'd know it in her sleep. And to her, it related all Mandlakazi was seeing. All she was told – where she'd been taken – who said what to her.

Descriptions were vivid; sounds echoed; messages clear. Dutifully, Mandla conveyed Hlombe's words to Khulu until she herself felt and saw and heard as though she herself was present with him, transported by the strange and powerful telling of it.

'Ndiyakukhumbula. I miss you.'

And then abruptly ... silence.

Dead maddening silence.

Not only did Mandla do exceedingly well in school, but her uku- biwa was fast becoming legendary. Word of it spread year after year, as the girl's fame grew. Of course, some were suspicious; how could a child with her physical challenges be so gifted? If this was ukuthwasa, why did she not need training, induction? A few jealous souls said the child was possessed; others believed she was no child but impundulu, a firebird disguised, possessed by and in possession of her grandmother. Worse, there were those who said Khulu herself was an evil spirit who used Mandla for her benefit to lord it over them all. Why was her garden always the greenest, her soil so productive? Why did her hens lay so well?

Khulu pushed these murmurings to the back of her mind. Her ministrations to Mandla continued unabated. She improved this; amended that. The constant was intelezi, uthuvana, ikhala ... the mighty food of elephants and a tiny bit of isolisi and umhlonwane. Over time, this was overtaken by more and more wild fruit and berries: irhwabe, umsobo, intlokotshane, imvomvo, ingwenye – all according to their seasons. Khulu had everything under control, manageable, perfectly understood.

However, when the country hosted the Soccer World Cup, everything went helter-skelter. Khulu could no more exercise any control over Mandla's gift than she could steer inkanyamba, a hurricane. This new and alarming manifestation began two days before the World Cup games started, on the last day of school in early June.

Mandlakazi came back from school all excited, and Khulu put that down to her excellent exam report. But the girl handed that over to her, and sped off in search of Sibuka. The two returned, Sibuka carrying Mandla on his shoulders; he was jittery with an excitement Khulu had not thought she'd ever see in the lukewarm- blooded one.

‘She knows all the teams!’ Sibuka shouted, hopping about, seeming completely unaware of the weight on his shoulders.

And that was the beginning. The games lasted throughout the school holidays, and Sibuka and his group all but camped at Mandla’s feet for the duration. And, of course, word got around!

Sibuka and his friends who knew the players, the teams and the referees soon discovered that Mandla could predict what would happen in the flow of the games, or when an upset would occur. People flocked to hear her and doubly marvelled watching the games: her predictions gave a totally different slant and excitement to them. But to Khulu, of course, Mandla might as well have been speaking Greek.

After her predictions about the very last game, Mandla said something that only Khulu really noticed. In a voice wailing as if at a wake, Mandla cried: ‘2010 – the world plays; 2020 – the world dies!’ Then, the pitch of her voice changed, sounding as the voice of more than one person, the voice of a multitude – well-orchestrated, but plural nonetheless. Aloud this chorus of voices authoritatively announced, decreed: ‘Ten years from now: no trophies, only caskets; the ground will not be able to swallow all the dead!’

The rest of the people in the house were already placing bets and planning where to watch or listen to the last match, so it was only Khulu, busy cutting beans, who heard these words. She pondered, then sighed: ‘Perhaps I needn’t worry ... Perhaps I will be dead by then.’ But her heart was heavier than a bag of cement.

Once the World Cup was over, Khulu refused any use of Mandla for ukuvumisa – divining – declaring: ‘This child is no witchdoctor, sangoma, nyanga or any such. Yes, she has a gift, but that gift will guide her. When, how and why she must use it, she will know, and let it be known.’

But it was already too late. Jealous tongues had been scandal-mongering. Late one Saturday night, a man appeared at Khulu’s door: ‘MamTolo, do not say I came to you, do not repeat what I say to you, do not ask me the whos, wheres and whys. I come because I respect you, I admire you.’

In the dark of a moonless night, Khulu made out a form who was not unfamiliar. *Sondlo?*

The voice confirmed it. ‘Go!’ he said in a hoarse whisper. ‘Leave this place. Leave, at once, or you are dead. Kuthiwa uyathakatha. They say you are igqwirha – witch.’

Khulu, wrapped in a blanket at her front door, wanted to respond with the anger she felt rising in her; but his upheld hand clamped her mouth.

‘I risk my life coming to you. I warn you. Do not give the evil people of this village the satisfaction of killing you, slaughtering you like a beast of the forest. You know what I know. A case like that is never solved. Remember?’

Khulu remembered UTshiwo, a book she read in school. When was that? She had not even sprouted. Amagqwirha – witches – were put to death in the most cruel, inhumane manner; rough and knobby stakes thrust through their bodies from anus to mouth while they were alive. Thereafter, the executioner threw them off the highest mountain cliff to whatever lay hidden, groaning, gurgling, and growling in the dense depths of the forest. Or, worse still, in its ominous and brooding silence, the air heavy with the exhalations of all that lay in it; invisible, prowling, ruthless.

‘May your God and your ancestors always protect and shield you from all harm!’ Khulu thanked her informer in a soft whisper. Then she remembered something Mandla had said, had been saying, for several days: ‘Siya kuBusi! We’re going to Busi!’ And she had taken it for child’s play!

Khulu’s mind was cool as cool could be. However, she immediately made plans. She must play it casual; arouse no suspicion. Before she’d retired for the night, she had made sure, as usual, that her Sunday was ready to go. Her Mothers’ Union uniform lay ready, shoes polished to a blinding shine by Sibuka. Little Mandla’s clothes were all ready, too. She decided she would one: not panic; two: go to church as planned. She must not only go to church, but act normally while there.

As was her wont, the next morning she woke up before the birds. She had hardly slept a wink in the few hours since Sondlo’s alarming visitation. Because she had worked it all out in her mind... yes, lying wide-eyed in her bed, she had already mentally packed the bag she would take. Nothing to shout ‘LEAVING!’ Whatever the two of them needed, Mandlakazi and herself, they would find in Kwanele. Find it or get it.

Khulu was in church bright, early, looking normal as ever. Toward the end of the service, the Womens’ Manyano leader made a plea for members to stay on after the service: ‘Some urgent business has come up and we need to respond immediately. Unfortunately, this can’t wait for our usual meeting on Thursday. I promise you,’ she said, hearing loud groans and barely suppressed grumbles from some of her cohorts, ‘on my word of honour, we won’t be long!’

Khulu stayed. She was one of the few members who responded to the call and made a commitment to contribute financially to the request they'd received from headquarters. She explained that she needed to go to another village to help a visiting relative in need that day, but that she would be present to take the matter up the next Sunday. Who would have suspected she was already in flight?

Only hours later, with no farewell to anyone, she and Mandla were at the taxi rank in Mthatha. On their way to Kwanele. They were safe.

PART THREE

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

To say the folk in Kwanele were surprised to see Khulu that Monday morning would be putting it mildly. She had not warned them she was coming. Throughout the drive, whenever she was awake, Mandlakazi had sung a one-tune song: ‘Busi! Busi! Busi!’ But Khulu reminded herself: Did she not know Mandlakazi? Kakade, uzibhaxela ntoni; akamazi uMandlakazi?

Luvo heard the taxi stop outside the gate: Were they expecting a visitor? He nudged his wife, tried to wake her up. A futile action; Lily slept the sleep of the dead. From the boys’ room came a scratchy voice, ‘Da-ad! Someone’s at the gate.’ Sazi had taken a peek out the window. Not safe. He must speak to the young man. Drive-by shootings had become a common occurrence in Kwanele. Luvo jumped out of bed, grabbed a dressing-gown and strode into the living room. As he reached the door, he was surprised to see that Busi had beaten him to it.

As the small group trudged toward the now open front door, his surprise grew. Busi, a grown young woman, now in her first year of employment as a social worker, had anxiety in her heart and voice. What was wrong? Was Mandla ill?

‘Why did you come if nothing is wrong with her?’ she implored.

‘Busisiwe!’ Khulu said, a note of vexation or tiredness quite pronounced in her voice. ‘I’ve just told you, Mandla is fine.’

Pleading, Busi asked, ‘You wouldn’t hide anything from me, Khulu?’

But Khulu brushed her off. ‘Nothing’s the matter with her, I tell you.’

‘Oh,’ the young mother gave a loud sigh of relief. ‘Thank God for that.’ She turned to her daughter, said, ‘Come here, you!’ No mistaking the smile in that warm voice. The two trailed behind the others going into the house, where they met Lily, half-awake and yawning. Her eyes grew round and huge, a frown gashed her forehead. ‘Khulu?’

‘Yes, it’s me.’ She nodded back at Mandlakazi, who was in her mother’s arms, and said, ‘This one must be famished. She slept throughout most of the drive ... and we’re both tired.’

Of course, everybody was up now, so there was no chance of the new arrivals being let off the hook to go to bed. Questions rained on them.

‘Wha-at is happening?’ ‘When did you arrive?’

‘Why did you not tell us you were coming?’

‘You’ve been away for years – why are you here now?’

But a bath and a good breakfast made the weary travellers more than ready for a snooze.

Midday, Khulu got up and called Mrs Bird. From her erstwhile employer, friend and rock, against whom she knew she could lean in times of dire distress, came the startled, 'Are you telling me you're in Kwanele, right now?' She couldn't hide her surprise. 'You didn't say anything about coming back!' She added, 'Is everything all right? Is the child all right?'

Khulu replied, 'We're fine.' The worry in the other's voice reminded Khulu of the earlier encounter with Busi, and her anxiety about her daughter. Taking her to the village had never been a divorce declaration between the two; Busi had always cared, followed her daughter's progress. Now MaBird was also concerned. How did one start explaining the reason for their sudden return? Khulu repeated what she'd just said, what she'd told all the others: 'We are fine.' She chuckled before going on: 'Although everybody seems to think otherwise.'

'It happens when you take people by surprise like this.'

'I suppose so.'

A pause followed, then Mrs Bird gave a cough and said, 'In a way, I'm glad you're back in Cape Town.'

Another pause, then Khulu said, 'Oh, so am I.' 'When do we see you?'

'Well, this week, we—' The other cut her short. 'Must see you as soon as possible. Come tomorrow ... or do I fetch you?'

'No,' Khulu answered, 'I'll find my way there ...' 'Bye, then!'

Relieved Mrs Bird had not made a song and dance about her going straight to Kwanele, Khulu was nonetheless happy she'd be seeing her friend as soon as the next day.

It was one of those ironies. She had left Cape Town almost a decade before, fleeing to the Eastern Cape, bent on finding healing for her great-granddaughter, Mandlakazi. Now she was back in Cape Town, circumstances having once more forced her to move, this time to flee from the village she had considered a place of hope and reprieve. Yet her determination to work for the healing of the little girl remained unchanged, had not diminished in the slightest. If anything, it had grown.

Her responses to all the harried, incredulous queries remained subdued; more ambiguous than revelatory, to say nothing of explanatory. She explained nothing; owed none any explanation. Moreover, she had not made up her mind how much of what had sent her packing, post-haste, from her retirement home, a home in her birth village, she should share; and to whom, and for what reason. Better say nothing than lead others to incorrect conclusions.

Besides, what did she stand to gain from telling her children she had been accused of witchcraft? And that this was on account of Mandla's gifts? Would they hold her responsible for Mandla's episodes, if these recurred? Would they believe, without question, her innocence, yet more important, her great-granddaughter's innocence? If they did not, what would she do about that? And, should they say they did, would she in turn believe them? The trouble with accusations, she found – more so when they had absolutely no merit, no foundation – was that the accused became so destabilised in her sense of self that she doubted others saw the same person they had previously seen. How could they when she herself did not see the same persons in them? Shifting hearts; shifting faces. If they saw her as such, as this new evil force, who were they? And if they were not the same as she had believed them to be, had she not also changed then? Could she remain constant, all about her shifting?

Well into the night, Khulu lay awake, her mind reliving the place she'd just fled. The woes of the village had shown her even more clearly the needs of the child. In the past years, she had witnessed and lived alongside sad changes eSidwadweni. The land had stopped being kind; yields were pitiful for the few who still bothered planting anything. Most gardens were not lying fallow; they were in a terrible state of neglect, overrun by natural vegetation and, even worse, foreign vegetation. More robust than the native plants, they seemed to thrive at the expense of the latter. Indeed, a few of the chiefs had inaugurated projects where young people went about destroying the intruding plants.

What is more, she discovered she had a very cushioned life after all. Of course, that is comparatively speaking, she corrected herself. She had not thought of herself as wealthy and, indeed, she was far from that, God knew the truth of her situation. But what she saw, how people living on next to nothing but the thin hope that someone – a child or relative employed in one of the nearby towns far, far away – might send them something, truly saddened her.

Khulu shuddered, a few of the perpetually hungry faces springing to mind. Her mind turned over one issue after another. The homestead she'd left eSidwadweni. What about her garden? What of the poor animals? And, dear Lord, what would become of all her belongings? In fact, she must call Sibuka the next day and make arrangements, say that her date of return was still unknown. She must remind him to brand the two newest lambs for Thobeka's mother, who would help him to oversee her homestead while she was away.

When would she ever go there again? Would it be safe for her to do that, return to the place she'd fled? Would whoever had started the witchcraft lie have forgotten, died, or gone away? Would the evil lie itself be dead, or would it still live, most probably embellished, having grown bigger and more menacing?

Khulu thought long and hard about all these and more. However, of all the concerns keeping her awake none pressed her heavier than that of Mandlakazi – the child who had sent her back to Sidwadweni in the first place. Perhaps it was as well they had come to Cape Town. To raise a child, any child, never mind one who, like Mandlakazi, needed special attention and care, was very difficult when the purchase of a litre of milk from the spaza shop was headline news. It would bring, within minutes, a child with an empty cup: ‘Mama says please help her with a drop of milk. Her head is killing her because she has not had coffee for three days!’

In a strange way, she was relieved, glad she had been forced to leave the place. Yes, being there had helped – a lot. Just look at the journey of healing of the girl. And she herself had learned more and more about the healing herbs of benevolent nature. However, it felt good to be back in Cape Town.

*The Old knew before-before
it would come to this
much as they hoped, wished, prayed
they knew that
one of them would have to come down
live among their beloved earthlings
and I was the one chosen.*

*Our leavelings had strayed so far from the path of ubuntu
Only umntu from the other side, the spirit side,
Had the least hope of righting them; guiding them back to
The meaning of ubuntu
I am because
You are.
Umntu ngumntu ngabantu.
A human is human through the humanity of others.
That is the marrow of ubuntu. Nanko ke umongo wobuntu.*

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Although Kwanele welcomed her with open arms, there was amazement at Mandlakazi's transformation in both appearance and prowess.

Esam was first to remark on it: 'Uthetha nje kakuhle ngoku!' he announced. Khulu had to laugh, for Esam was the picture of perplexity; he had difficulty putting together the jig-saw puzzle he had in his mind.

'Your niece has grown, Esam,' Khulu said and added, 'Just as you have.' She patted the boy on his head and said, 'And, you're quite right, her speech has improved, and so has her gait.'

Esam nodded. However, the look of puzzlement did not immediately fade. Khulu could not help herself. She burst out laughing. 'Oh, Esam, my child!' she said. 'Don't look so worried. You will soon catch up.' Mandlakazi, tall for her age, had grown even taller than Esam, six years older. Esam was obviously finding this difficult to comprehend, never mind accept.

But even more incredulous were Khulu's daughters. Even with pictures sent over the years, they could not believe the calm confidence of the child, her ability to speak, her physical growth. Busi was less surprised; she who had spoken on the phone to Mandla regularly, visited Sidwadweni during university holidays. She had witnessed far more of the transformation, and yet even she was awestruck.

Now, the four women sitting down around the table, Khulu praised Busi highly for what she'd made of the garden, where every inch was now crowded with vegetables.

At that, both Phyllis and Lily broke out laughing. 'Mama, you and your gardening!' Lily said.

Her sister shook her head, 'Mama, you think Kwanele is Sidwadweni.'

'I don't!' Khulu said, giving Phyllis the eye. She went on, 'I think it is Bishops court.'

The day passed in a whirl. By the end of it, not only had Busi contacted Mandla's school eSidwadweni; she'd submitted applications to four schools and expected to hear back before the end of the week.

Very early the next day, Khulu made her way to Mrs Bird's home. There, she received disturbing news. At least, that was her feeling when her friend said, 'Dear Gracie, a very big decision needs to be made in my life.'

Khulu plonked herself onto the nearest chair, as it happened, the chair right at the entrance. This was once the prized possession of Mrs Bird's father-in-law, a bigoted racist who never stopped reminding her and her husband how indebted to him they were. As a result, much as the funny-looking chair was not only a family heirloom but also a rare antique with significant monetary value – as old Mr Bird never stopped bragging, 'the thing belonged to one of the Egyptian Pharaoh's!' – his daughter-in-law treated it with disdain.

'Maralee wants me to go live with them,' she now said. 'But they're in ...'

'Australia, I know.' 'But—'

Mrs Bird interrupted her old friend. It was clear she did not want to discuss the cancer she had fought off a decade earlier. Instead, she wanted to tell Gracie her plans in case she failed to ward off her daughters. However, she maintained vehemently that she was determined to stay in her house, and die in it when the time came.

Her daughters had chosen emigration, reversing the early twentieth-century exodus of their great-grandparents, hers from Germany, her late husband's, from England. That was their choice, and she had not stopped them. Now they were crying distance and concern because of her age and health. Who knew if and when the cancer might recur? All this she understood. It was the remedy at which she balked. They had no right to even think of dragging her to God-forsaken Australia, or even England, where Thelma, the younger daughter, had settled. But now she wanted to tell her friend about the most important matter, her will; what she wanted her to remember, 'In the event I crock out before you ...'

'No!'

'I'm just saying,' Mrs Bird said, her eyes shining with mirth. 'We are both of an age when anything can happen.'

'I know.'

'Should I go before you, remember to come to the reading of my will. You must get what is due to you.'

'But I don't want anything.'

'That is not for you to say, my friend.'

Silence fell. The two friends looked at each other, all solemn, but not at all sad. Abruptly, Khulu pushed herself to her feet. 'I don't know about you,' she said. 'But I need a cup of something.'

‘Make that two, please! And thanks for the suggestion!’ As Khulu headed in the direction of the kitchen, Mrs Bird called out, ‘There are fresh scones in the tin, if you don’t mind!’

Gracie could say whatever she liked, but she could not stop her from doing the right thing, the fair thing. It should have been done back in 1994: white South Africans should have paid back some of the unfair earnings that they had because of legislated racism. They should have been asked to give half, at least, of what they owned. That would have been only fair. Who needed more than one house to live in? Beach house or holiday house, something most white South Africans took for granted – all as unnecessary as the third and fourth cars in a family of two! No, she would give Gracie what was due to her. Her late husband could turn in his grave, if he so wanted, but the thought of him brought a deep sigh ... no, not regret, reminiscence. How long had she been a widow? God, that long!

Imagine Mrs B’s surprise when upon her friend’s return, as she was setting up the tea table, out of her mouth came the question: ‘How long have we been without them, our husbands, now?’

‘Wha-at?’ Before she got an answer to her question, she added, ‘Why do you ask?’

Khulu laughed out loud and shook her head. ‘I know if master was still around—’ She stopped, looked at her friend through narrowed eyes and said, ‘I mean, if you had died and he were still here ...’ She stopped again, looked her friend squarely in the eye, and said, ‘He would not think of us in that will of his.’

Mrs Bird nodded and reached for her cup. ‘You are right. He would not.’ That was the side of Timothy she had resented – his narrow-mindedness that bordered on racism. A good man, he’d had an abominably biased childhood he just never escaped ... or wanted to escape. Saw no need. To a large extent, that was why she was willing away the bigger portion of the sizeable inheritance he had left her ... making amends for what he had done, even unknowingly or unconsciously. Ignorance of the extent and effect of one’s bias was no excuse; it affected others, the victims, just as much as the bigotry of those who were knowingly racist.

She did it without any qualms: her daughters were provided for, and she had left a small something for Marvin, her lazy nephew. The rest went to Khulu and her family – Mandlakazi would never lack for top-rate medical treatment, should she need it – and a variety of charities.

They were just polishing off the scones when Busi rang her grandmother, jubilation in her voice: ‘We’re in!’

‘In what?’ Khulu asked.

‘Mandla’s been accepted at my old school!’

‘Yhoo!’ Khulu shouted; turned to her friend, ‘Hear that Mrs B?’ In answer to the other’s raised brows, continued, ‘Busi’s daughter!’

‘Yes?’

‘Will go to school at St Stevens, just as her mother did.’

‘That was fast!’

‘Well done!’ She congratulated Busi before ringing off.

That evening, Khulu brought up Mandla’s admission to Busi’s old school; told her granddaughter again, ‘I’m impressed by how fast you work!’ It was a remark she would have occasion to repeat when, by Thursday, all Mandla’s school needs – books, uniform, transport, extra-mural activities – were in place. That Busi had managed all this with the added chore of having to liaise with the school back eSidwadweni simply amazed her. But Busi explained that with technology, things moved faster. ‘It’s not like I have to write a letter and mail it to the school, Khulu.’

‘Still ...’

‘With email it is so-oo easy!’

Smiling, Khulu just shook her head, absolutely amazed at the young people and their what-what. What-what reminded her of Thobeka. She must remember to call the girl and her mother the next day. Sibuka too, of course! Give them an update without letting them see their flight had been planned, not accidental at all. A plan would necessitate explanation, and she had promised Sondlo she would never let anyone know what he’d revealed to her. Keeping that promise was the least she could do, although she had from the very moment of his revelation wondered what would constitute a fitting reward. However, for once, she was stumped. It is not often one is called to reward someone who has literally saved one’s life. But she was sure she would find a way. She must.

But more immediate concerns needed her attention. Therefore, next up for discussion, according to Khulu, was the matter of paying for Mandla’s education at her mother’s alma mater, with its Model-C fee structure.

‘We’ll be fine, Khulu,’ Busi said.

‘You’re not going to Mrs Bird, are you?’

‘Oh no! She’s done enough for me. I should be able to pay for my child’s education.’

Needless to say, Khulu was much relieved to hear this, and said as much. She said more, in fact. But that came later, when both her daughters were present. She felt they, probably more than Busi, needed to bear witness. They needed to see what growing one's food did, how it paid you back, gave you leeway so money did not become indispensable. Did not rule and ruin your life; you mastered the use of it, instead of it becoming your master.

After dinner, with the family present, Khulu made a point of praising Busisiwe for paying for her daughter's education. She looked at Phyllis and Lily, for both, if in different and to differing degrees, got help with theirs: 'This tells me Busi has really grown.'

One brow raised, 'And we ...?' Phyllis asked.

Head inclined to one side as though giving the matter serious consideration, Khulu let a lazy smile creep into her eyes, softening them and slowly spreading her lips sideways. Then she let out a long, soft sigh. 'We'll talk about that another time,' she said, looking her girls in the eye. She shook her head, sighed again. 'Not now.'

One thing about life in Kwanele that Khulu found hard to stomach was anyone making fun of her Mandlakazi. Especially as she had made it a point not to fight the girl's battles for her. Instead, she encouraged her, goaded her, into self-defence mode. No, not physically, but mentally.

One day Mandla had come to her great-grandmother wailing: 'The other children say I have frog eyes!'

'Go ask them to bring you the frog.' 'Wha-at?'

'Tell them you want to give the frog its eyes and take yours back. Inoba kaloku lona lithathe awakho. It must have taken yours.' That so surprised the child, she immediately stopped crying.

Khulu sat her on her lap, ensconced her in her arms and shushed her, all the time patting her fondly on her back. 'Next time anybody is nasty about your body – any part of your body – remind them your body is God-made. Then ask them if they think God made you "wrong".' Mandla asked if that were true: was she indeed God-made? 'When have I ever lied to you?'

From then on, anyone who dared make fun of Mandla got: 'You think God made a mistake?' Her unflinching stare did the rest. She soon developed further responses to that kind of bullying: 'Like yours, my eyes were made by God!' And: 'Do you know where I can get them repaired?' Her explanations were so calmly and firmly given, the others were left feeling stupid for not having realised something so obvious.

But her favourite was a play on the nursery rhyme said by a child when losing a tooth: '*Khulu! Khulu, thatha eli zinyo lamlidala, undinike elitsha!*'

This she changed to: *'Sihlobo! Sihlobo, thatha eli zinyo lam libi, undinike elihle! Friend! Friend, take my ugly tooth and give me a beautiful one!'*

This strategy soon gained Mandlakazi the reputation of being a 'toughie'; it was said that 'with such a sturdy raincoat, insults merely glided down to the ground leaving no mark on her'.

One Saturday Esam was standing at the gate, surrounded by a small group of boys and girls his age. The friends were chatting and joking when Mandlakazi joined the group. Suddenly, all talk stopped and the teens, except for Esam, started eyeing one another. There was derision in those eyes.

'What's wrong?' Esam asked, for he had noticed the sudden drop in temperature. Muffled snorts could be heard as one of the group mimicked a limping gait and another crossed his eyes.

'Did I say something funny?' he asked, adding, 'Or nihleka mna?' He was beginning to be annoyed.

'Don't worry, Esam,' Mandla said, taking one of Esam's hands. 'It is me, not you, they laugh at.'

At that, all laughter stopped. The older teenagers were amazed at the sheer lack of any emotion approaching anger or blame or begging for inclusion in the voice they'd just heard. More frightening, they'd heard pity. Great pity. But how was it possible? Eyes roamed and darted. Eyes found reflection, pair by pair, of what was in the heart. Trepidation swamped all those who heard Mandlakazi's so-grown remonstrations.

But what had called up such dread? Surely not the words from the mouth of a little girl, a little disabled girl, one who was not 'quite right', whose eyes blurred and limbs trembled? But the little girl wasn't quite done. Voice calm and peaceful, Mandlakazi told the group: 'Aninabantu. Loo nto asilothamsanqa; yiyekeni. Unkindness is cruelty; it brings none any fortune. Shed it!'

Not one of the girls and boys present would ever forget those words. What is more, many would remember them particularly when some misfortune or unpleasantness befell them. *Please God! Don't pay me back for the careless remarks of my youth!* They would find themselves praying, once more remembering the little girl's words of long before.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

*Disinclination to belief,
the sad lot of our leavelings.
The very fact of one's own life fails to
fill them with a sense of wonder – the miracle of it all.
Day in, day out, minute by minute, awake or asleep,
the blood runs
And they thank not Qamata, the All-powerful.*

*Alas, the fleshlings have abandoned reason
Hearts dark as night rule their every waking moment
In deep sleep of night, they embrace dreams of greed
Rapacious, lascivious living is the order of the day
Ubuntu has become stranger.*

A Saturday morning. TV news. An eighty-four-year-old woman burned alive in her home. First dragged out by a relative, a man in his thirties. Video shots of the incident. But it was the woman's haunting, piteous wailing that stabbed Khulu's heart as she watched the satanic drama. The woman's cry was totally devoid of hope. She cried knowing in her heart she was already dead; none would come to help her as she was dragged forcibly back into her house by two men. They then doused the house with petrol and threw a burning twig inside. A woman, in her early twenties, delightedly threw liquid, presumably paraffin, onto the furnace.

Khulu was reminded of her narrow escape. That could so easily have been her fate: Flagstaff, where this heinous crime took place, was an hour's drive, if that, from Sidwadweni. Silently, she thanked her ancestors and her God. She thanked dear Sondlo too. In this instance, he was the hands and mouth of her Lord and Saviour.

But she chose not to burden the family with this matter, neither did she mention the innumerable mishaps, inefficiencies, the rudeness, the dreadful lack of facilities and the shabbiness of the structures that existed supposedly to serve.

Murmurs of complaint were met with comparisons: ‘You say the taxi service is bad eSidwadweni?’ Lily asked shrewdly. ‘You think the taxi drivers in Cape Town are gentlemen, all legally and professionally licensed, all sober behind the wheel, none with touchy-feely fingers or just plain long fingers? That they run clean, safe, reliable service – Yii-yhoo! Uvelaphi, ndiye?’

One of the first things Khulu did, insisted on doing, was to build her own set of rooms next door. She had paid for the tiny bit of land, where once a ruined shack had stood, years before.

The main house suffocated her, she said. There were just too many people, their lungs gulping in the air long before it got to her. And when it did, it smelled of the lungs through which it had come back into the house. It certainly was no longer the air God had sent in from the outside into the house. By the time it reached her nose and it went into her own lungs, it was different, and it smelled different, too. And with some of the younger people smoking and drinking liquor, if she were not careful, Khulu said, she herself would get drunk from the fumes she inhaled. Her lungs too would get infected, and she would end up with TB or all the poison from cigarettes and tobacco getting into her lungs and her blood. And she knew there were things intsha imbibed, but never named. Well, not with names she and people like her recognised. Weird-sounding names; terribly dangerous names disguised as fun. But she had ears and heard things. People talked and there was always the radio.

So she threw herself into making her little bungalow comfortable, and took comfort in the good she saw. Phyllis looked better than she had in years. Looking after Mrs Bird was paying dividends – in more ways than one.

And she thanked God Busi had stayed on the straight and narrow, graduating from university, finding employment as a social worker. A working woman – a professional! Khulu was mightily pleased at that. And the fact that she and Mandlakazi were often together, at play or poring over books, or this small computer that looked like a typewriter but was silent, making none of those tikkety-tok-tik noises of the typewriter. Busi was forever on her machine, and so were the older boys. It was a miracle they finished their learning with the tips of their fingers not only still attached, but not looking any worse for wear. She feared all that tapping meant they’d end up with the calloused fingers of farm workers.

But although we may and do move around, the places where we have lived inhabit us too. Out of the blue, Khulu would exclaim, ‘Zange ndayibona into enje ngaleya! Never have I seen anything like that!’ in referring to the atrocious conditions people in the Eastern Cape

suffered. The prolonged drought had but added to the hardships there. Entire towns had run out of water. Families starved.

But about the abruptness of her departure from Sidwadweni, Khulu kept her mouth clamped tight. She would not put her benefactor's name in jeopardy. She could not risk endangering others; after all, the impassioned unthinking acted even on guesswork.

So Khulu remained in Cape Town with little appetite for talk on matters personal or familial either. All her answers or speeches were curt, brief, unembellished, very different from the incessant din in her head.

Those cars the officials of the Education Department drove – one each! Each of those a 4x4; each worth more than the paltry buildings of most of the village schools. Posh cars for officials of education, but no school buildings worth the name, not even latrines – what evil times they lived in! There were many mis- steps all around, Khulu reminded herself, and proceeded to look at her own assumptions. With hindsight, these definitely needed revisiting.

The burning of elderly women dubbed witches by a few crazies occurred both night and day. Those not directly involved, not at that moment named, accused, were careful to keep their distance, their eyes unseeing; they prayed in their hearts they would not be next. Prayed such would not touch them, not come near to where they stood. Doubt was easily planted in minds – could it be true? A lifetime of knowing that day's target, decades of experience and interaction with the newest 'witch' obliterated; bothersome con- science snuffed out by cowardice.

All this time ... all my life, I have been looking at the village through rose-tinted spectacles – seeing what I wanted to see – believing what I wanted to believe – what I was taught to believe. There is gross evil in the village. Gross evil; and it looks like me!

However the odds might be stacked against her in Cape Town, at least no one was accusing her of ubugqwirha, witchcraft.

And unlike the villages, in the urban areas, it was not that easy to kill and remain traceless. There was always the chance that sooner or later, the law would catch up with you.

So, yes, it was back to Cape Town she'd fled.

This time, however, things would change. They had to. She would stick it out for Mandlakazi. For the child, she would stick out anything.

Khulu wondered how the Kwanele folk, especially her family, would react to Mandla's special gift. It was only a matter of time before it manifested itself. She had thought about this even during the trip to Cape Town; now she prayed that she would be around the first time it

happened. As there was no way this could be guaranteed, she made a mental note to talk to Busisiwe about the matter. Should they alert the school about it? How would they explain?

The child had not yet been taken in Busi's presence. Therefore, for the mother, the daughter's special ability was a matter of hearsay, a mystery she had yet to witness, and about which she harboured not a little scepticism. This was something Khulu intuited, for she knew and understood the deep-seated disbelief of the westernised – amakhumsha: a label she applied to all those who had received any significant education.

Khulu was not kept waiting long to see how her daughters and their families, the Kwanele folk, would react to Mandlakazi's special gift. One evening, as Busi and Lily got dinner ready, Esam burst into the house screaming, 'Ufeyintile! Ufeyintile! She has fainted! She has fainted!'

No one asked who had fainted, for the only child around was Mandlakazi. But as the others rushed to the door, a sharp 'Ningamphazamisi!' stopped them short: there was such authority in that voice, the tone not loud but surefooted, as commanding as that of a sangoma or a chief – it could not but be obeyed.

But it was also the word choice that surprised the rushing feet to standstill. Ordinarily, one wants or needs to disturb someone in a fainting spell. Therefore, the negative command struck such a discordant note, all action stopped. But even as visible action abruptly halted, thoughts went whirling. *What did Khulu mean? Why did she say the child should be untouched, left as she was?*

But Khulu appeared unconcerned. 'Esam!' she called out. 'Bring me my shawl or a towel, whichever you find first,' she said, walking toward the door. She turned to the others, 'Yambathani! Cover yourselves!' The men knew hats and jackets were called for; the women, doeks and wraps on shoulders. Silently Khulu waited at the door until Esam brought her a towel. She draped this over her shoulders and began saying the praises of her clan as she walked toward the figure prone on the ground outside.

If the others were puzzled, Khulu's demeanour left them in no doubt that this was a sacred moment. They did as they were bid; hesitant, doubtful and confused, they nevertheless raised no objections, but stood and watched.

To everyone's surprise, Mrs Bird came through Mandla's prostrate form. There was no doubting that voice; all had heard it enough times that identifying it was immediate and certain.

‘Well done, Phyllis! Well done! Such good work deserves a raise ... wouldn’t you agree? Mmhh?’

This last word came in the form of a sigh-laugh: Mmhh? Anyone hearing it couldn’t but imagine a smile that reached even the eyes.

A few minutes later, Mandla’s own eyes popped open. She looked around, stretched, gave a long, loud yawn and then slowly got into a sitting position.

All eyes turned to Khulu. ‘Uyabiwa uMandlakazi,’ she explained and walked toward the child, reached for her and helped her up. The two walked indoors, and Khulu led her to her own bedroom, where she left Mandla resting comfortably. She went back to Busi, Lily and her husband, and Esam. Themba and Sazi were out that night. Although Busi had known of Mandla’s ukubiwa, she had never experienced it first-hand before, and was clearly disturbed. But it was Luvo who asked the first question. ‘Kanti kumhla iyintoni na le? Wha-at in the world was that?’

Khulu explained. She told them of her first experience of witnessing the phenomenon, and briefly told its history. However, she did not mention what it had birthed. She was not going to saddle her family with the sordid details. Nor did she wish to jeopardise Sondlo’s life.

‘Does this mean Phyllis is getting a raise?’

Khulu shrugged, but Lily was not going to be put off that easily. She called her sister. But after a short conversation, she shook her head and rung off.

‘Na-ah!’ Phyllis knew nothing of any extra money.

Among the delights Khulu found in Kwanele was a much-revamped garden. Busi had stayed true to her word, and the seeds she had brought back from her visits to Sidwadweni continued to flourish in her well-tended garden. Pumpkin; beetroot; sweet potatoes and potatoes; tomatoes; onion; garlic; sweet peppers; cucumber; and lots more. There were plants Khulu did not recognise as coming from Ekuphumleni at all – Busi must have found them on her own. *Amazing*, Khulu said to herself. *Truly amazing*.

As could be expected, Mandlakazi demanded ‘her own garden’ in Kwanele, too. Why not? she asked in response to explanations about ‘school work’ and ‘not enough ground’ and other such silly sentiments; sentiments the girl did not want to heed.

Eventually, it was Khulu who came up with a plan. There was a little private plot behind the Bishopscourt flatlet where Khulu had once lived. Why not make that Mandlakazi’s exclusive garden? Phyllis had done nothing there; she’d always been happy to live on

MacDonald's and fish and chips, had done so since her late teens or early twenties. Not that Khulu did not eat the stuff; she relished it, in fact. But she always said to those hard pressed to put food on the table, the sea is never near. With all that fish, seaweed, and water ... what use to those without fishing rod, will, skill or care to fish? But now, vegetables, they were a different kettle of fish! Vegetables cost so little when you grew them yourself.

AmaXhosa wona athi: 'Akukho nkwali iphandel' enye; ephandel' enye, yenamantshontsho. No pheasant scratches for another; that which does is with chicks. 'Niya kuba ngamantshontsho karhulumente kude kube nini na? Khona, uyise wabantwana nonina wabo abo ukwazi njani ukuzingca ngempumelelo yemizamo eyeyakhe xa nje ephila ngokukhongozwa?'

Hearing Khulu say, 'Now that we are free, why should we be lazy to grow our own food?', her two daughters tried to argue with her. This led to another discussion about money. Khulu looked hard at them, wordlessly she looked at them. But the sadness in the eyes was loud with concern. Loud sadness the two women could not but see.

'Let me show you something!' And Khulu upped and went to fetch her bag, calling Busi from her room to come and join them. Returning, she took out a bank statement and waved it playfully above them, seated. 'Remember what we spoke about the other day ... when I praised Busi's very apparent money management skills and you ...' She stopped and, eyeing her daughters pityingly, nodded two-three times then plunked down the bank statement she had refrained from showing to them during that discussion. Now, at sight of it, Phyllis screamed: 'Maa-mah! Where did you get all this money?'

Curious, Lily grabbed the document and perused it, her eyes growing larger and larger. Then she looked rather than spoke her question. Finally, Busi picked up the paper and scrutinised it.

'That's not my money. Look carefully.' Three pairs of eyes looked.

'YekaMandlakazi? Mandlakazi's?' All three shouted at once. Khulu nodded.

'B-b-but?'

'Busi,' Khulu said, 'do you remember when I asked you for the baby's SASSA card? What did you think I wanted that card for?'

'To get her money.'

Khulu shook her head. 'No,' she said. 'First of all, it is not her money. Children have no need for money, their parents do.'

'Well, to help the parents then,' Lily said.

Khulu nodded. ‘Help the parents.’ She looked at the three women before her, her daughters and the daughter of the elder one. ‘But,’ she said, ‘I didn’t need any help. Not that kind of help, monetary help, anyway.’

Phyllis was quick with her question: ‘What did you feed her then?’

‘You mean you don’t know, after all this time? Milk from my animals – sheep, goat, or cow. As for food, that is why we have gardens.’

‘You grew all her food?’ Lily asked.

‘That is all Mandlakazi has been raised on: food fresh from the garden and the veld.’

‘And, you’re telling us, all this money,’ Phyllis nodded her head toward the sheet of paper on the table before them, ‘is from SASSA?’ Incredulity rode on each word out of her mouth.

Lily managed to squeeze out a single word from a throat blocked by sheer disbelief: ‘SASSA?’ Khulu nodded.

Lily’s voice had returned. ‘But how? Njani, Mama?’ She bent forward, stretched her hand and took the bank statement from Phyllis, who was reading it again. Eyes squeezed in concentration the sisters read the figures. And read again. And again. Nothing made sense. *All this money!?*

‘My children,’ Khulu addressed them pityingly, ‘if you could only listen. Do not make yourselves needy for money because you know it is there. Live as though it weren’t there. Grow your own food; do not buy clothes unless you really need them, or the child does. You’d be amazed at how little children really need. But what we, grown-ups do, is foist our needs and cravings on them. We give them things they don’t need to satisfy our vanity, our hunger, our blindness. The earth gives us everything we need to live, to survive. If we treat her kindly, use her wisely, she rewards us unstintingly.’

Lily sprung a headache. She could not fathom what she had done with all the SASSA money she had received over the years. That much? In less than ten years? And for only one child? So, okay, the child got the deaf grant. But there were many children who got that grant, and their parents saved nothing at all. They were just like the rest of them, always waiting for the next pay date with hardly anything left in their pockets. Always desperately hard up.

The two sisters looked at each other, and then at Busi, who was beginning to smile. She raised her brows at her mother and aunt: ‘This time, you cannot say “Kodwa uwrongo, Mama!”’

‘And there’s something else you should know,’ said Phyllis. ‘I got that raise from MaBird ...’

CHAPTER NINETEEN

As Mandlakazi grew, with Khulu the anchor in her life, and also benefiting from the loving presence of her mother and the rest of her family, so her understanding seemed to grow. She was both extraordinarily perceptive and receptive, game to try anything Khulu suggested. She was not easily frustrated; the more she was pushed past what some deemed her comfort zone, the greater her delight. If she at first failed at anything she attempted, she didn't give up or get embarrassed. She simply got herself ready for the next attempt, and gave it her all until, bit by bit, she achieved her goal.

Khulu had decided, ever since she first took charge of this baby, to drive all self-pity from the girl's knowledge of herself, of who she was. Therefore, as understanding grew in Mandlakazi, so did her inner strength. She overcame many of her physical disabilities, and compensated where there were limitations. Her outstanding characteristic was the confidence she oozed. Confidence and determination were the two pillars on which her heart stood.

Naturally, this gladdened Khulu's heart no end. It encouraged her to even greater effort, more audacious measures, prompted by the strong murmuring and urgings of her heart.

At all hours of the day, at home, in school, Mandla would play or chat, find herself absorbed within a group. Now and again, one or more of her peers would come up with hurtful remarks that tried to exclude her. They never succeeded. The girl resisted any form of bullying; her strongest weapon was her unflinching stare. It disarmed most, shamed all, confirmed her unbreakable steel.

Regular check-ups were part of Mandlakazi's life, and Khulu accompanied her even when there really was no longer any need, as the girl grew older. However, Khulu insisted, and Mandlakazi didn't mind; she enjoyed Khulu's company, with its minimal intrusion.

At Mandla's last appointment for the year, Ms Nomzi Ndonga, the social worker who handled Mandlakazi's case, was amazed at her progress; could not but compliment her. To Khulu she said, 'Ngek' utsho ukuba sisidalwa!'

Calmly the girl responded, 'Aren't we all as created by God? Asizizo sonke; sidalwe nguThixo nje?' The retort came easily; she had used it many times before.

A huge smile broke out in Khulu's heart. Her facial expression remained unchanged; but she was mightily pleased with Mandla's response, and her heart smiled.

The social worker took note. The girl's remarkable physical progress was just the half of it, she thought. This one had character! Brow furrowed, Ms Ndonga quickly ran her eye over the file; for a moment, she'd thought she might even have the wrong file. Cases like these, where there was damage in the womb, seldom showed such positive progression. This one was, if one didn't know, almost ... normal. Except for slightly impaired vision, the stutter in her limbs ... minor really, considering the usual bleak prognosis.

But not all of Mandla's appointments went so smoothly. She and Khulu returned from a visit from the local clinic with a story that was much too familiar.

At dinner that night, Khulu launched into the tale. 'Nurses – not all of them are without hearts – a few still have hearts, and I was very fortunate today; my ancestors walked alongside me today! Didn't I get into a fight with one of these educated but misbehaved and undisciplined ones? People with certificates and no manners! Nurse, she calls herself. Yhoo! I am sorry for anyone who dies and has that one caring for her.'

'Why? What did she do?' That was Themba.

'Ungaphoswa nalizulu ufel' ezandleni zentw' efana naleya ukuba kwada! Dying in the hands of such a rude one, you'd surely miss heaven!'

'Ngoba? How so?'

'Awuzukuf' uthukis' uqalekisa kaloku? Aren't you going to die swearing and cursing? You should have heard this one's mouth!'

Then Khulu acted a scene she'd witnessed umpteen times. Her facial expression, devoid of any trace of openness, to say nothing of friendliness, neck stiffly thrown back as though confined by an ill-starched shirt collar, the shoulders slightly unbalanced like those of someone carrying a heavy load, through curled lips, in a shrill voice, she screeched: 'Tshetshani! Yiza, yiza, yiza! Anizanga kufudumez' iimpundu zenu ezinukayo apha nilale! Hurry! Come, come, come! This is no place to plonk your stinking arses and go to sleep!'

No one gulped, for the scene Khulu described was far from unusual. But to everyone's surprise, she broke into loud laughter. Then seeing the consternation in their eyes, she told the family: 'You should've seen what happened at the clinic today. I doubt the nurse who made such insults will be in a hurry to repeat the performance.'

'What happened?' several voices asked at once. Khulu pointed to Mandla, 'Ask her.' Mandla shook her head and strolled to the door. 'Nomabali! Story teller!' She laughed and said, 'You, tell them. I have homework to do.' Still chuckling, she closed the door softly behind her and left.

Khulu then told the others how, as they were leaving, they saw a mother bringing in a sickly-looking child, sores all over: ‘They were on the head, face, legs ... just about all over,’ she said, her hands patting her body in description.

‘Ag, tog!’ Luvu said.

‘Well,’ said Khulu, ‘you should’ve heard the greeting they got from the nurse, the one writing down the names of the people as they arrived.’ Khulu changed her voice, mimicking this nurse: ‘Hey, you! Take this thing of yours outside! Do you think we’re wild dogs that eat turds? You must wash yourselves before coming here. You stink!’

Voice hushed in befuddlement, ‘What is the matter with our people?’ Lily asked.

‘And that is a nurse?’ Themba shook his head in disgust. Apparently, the child had burst out crying at which point,

Mandla rushed over to her, saying, ‘Don’t cry, baby!’ She looked at the nurse and told her: ‘You are very unkind!’

‘She said tha-at?’ Lily screamed. ‘Good for her!’

‘Mandla gave that child the apple and banana pack she had in her bag,’ Khulu said. ‘The poor thing did look hungry and starved.’ But that was not the end of the story. The other patients, seeing Mandla’s act of kindness, were goaded into action. A rumble began: ‘We stomach too much from these rude, so-called educated people!’ And, ‘Uyinesi, intw’ ayiyo apha! She’s a nurse here!’ Most telling of all, ‘Ufanele ukusineda kodwa mjong’ indlel’ abad-lakazisa ngayo abantu! She’s here to serve us, but look how she mistreats the people!’

The noise rose to such a level that security called the manager. ‘That lady must either have suspected or heard complaints about the nurse before,’ Khulu said.

‘Why do you say that?’ Busi asked.

‘She was told to take the rest of the day off ... And I tell you, everybody there shouted, “Asimfuni! We don’t want her here! Makangabuyi! Let her not return.”’

‘Good for them,’ Themba said. ‘More and more people should speak up when they see something untoward, unfair, happening.’ ‘Not always wise!’ Luvu said. And sadly, none of those present could gainsay that at all.

*Kwanele has no mountains
Not even hills or dunes does it boast.
Mind you, if it did,
Would anyone be mad enough*

*There to take herself before dawn?
Who knows what or who would welcome her into that space?
That is, if she ever made it that far
Did not get accosted on her way
Brutalised within sight of the house she'd just left
The house she calls home.
The tactics changed of necessity, they changed
So did the prayer spots
But the times are without variance
Pre-dawn; midday; long after supper,
When the rest of the homestead sleeps.*

*all through the night, she sings to me
cracks jokes with me
tickles me
whispers the secrets of her heart to me
little knowing I know all these already
little knowing I send her the words
she returns to me
believing she gifts me
bright and new
the gift she gives me is
the gift she gives my family:
Khulu is the veritable Mountain
the family of the human race entire
obedience to the law of ubuntu:
Umntu ngumntu ngabantu.*

The voices were becoming more and more insistent; more frequent and louder in their exhortations, demanding to be heard.

One Sunday afternoon, Lily and Luvo had visitors. Phyllis was also home. Busi and Mandla were in the backyard, mother plaiting her daughter's hair. Next thing, Busi rushed into the living room and shouted without ceremony: 'Khulu! Khulu, yiza! Come!'

The panic in her voice made everybody there jump. With Lily leading the frenzied group, they all trooped to the backyard.

And there was Mandla prone on the bare ground, half her hair in plaits, half in uncombed tufts of disarray.

'Zis' umqamelo,' Khulu said at once, 'Bring a pillow.' Her voice was calm and that staunch panic all around. However, the others stood and watched goggle-eyed.

The still figure on the ground did not stir. Eyes gently closed, face in calm repose; only deep intakes and outtakes of breath detectable by the heaving breast.

Following Khulu's lead, one by one, the others stationed themselves fittingly – men squatting while all the women righted their doeks and straightened shawls on shoulders, and sedately sat themselves down on the izicamba-covered ground, legs before them or to the side, all covered to show as little of leg as possible ... a wee bit of ankle and never any glimpse of the calf.

They all waited. And waited ... until, in a matter of a few minutes – although to the waiting people it felt like hours – the body on the ground stirred. The neck, the head moved slightly, this way and that, left to right and back again, not unlike the small movements of uphunguphungu, a beetle, in a child's hand out on the veld, showing her the way home. Suddenly, out thundered a warning:

*Lafa ilizwe, lafa! Hini na engaka indyikityha, hini na!
Zange labonwa elingaka isikizi; zange emhlabeni uphela.
Umntu akasamnakani ngani na umntu?
Indalo iyikhanyela njani na indalo iyinxalenye yayo nje?
Lafa laphela ihlabathi!*

Death of the world! Woe, the magnitude, woe!

Impending doom of magnitude never seen before on earth entire.

How does humanity deny humanity?

How does nature deny nature, part and parcel of her very being?

Death of the world entire!

When the girl grew silent once again, with her breathing returning to more or less normal, Khulu instructed everyone to return inside. She waited for Mandla's return, for she knew the girl would come back a little disoriented, seeming confused. She would need rest to gain full restoration.

It was Mandla's uncle Owam who first noticed that these episodes seemed to coincide with the presence of visitors. A few days after this incidence of Mandla's being taken, he remarked on it over dinner. 'I've been thinking,' he said. 'Mandla is never stolen when she is alone or—'

'But how do you know that?' Themba asked. 'Are you with her when she is alone?'

Everyone laughed at the banter.

'Seriously,' Owam continued when the laughter subsided, 'It is only when there are others ... visitors and not just family that it happens ...' He stopped because he'd realised he was not absolutely sure of what he was saying.

Lily freed him. 'Maybe what she has to say needs to be heard by more people than just her family.' Then she asked around the table, 'Have you thought of that?'

Busi was meanwhile becoming not a little alarmed about her daughter's out-of-body experiences. First, their frequency concerned her. Yes, she had not yet been stolen while at school; but who was to say it would never happen? And yes, she had mentioned something to Ms Pearl, Mandla's class teacher. But what she'd told the teacher was sufficiently vague so as not to earn her child a negative label. She'd told her Mandla suffered occasional fainting spells and sometimes 'talked' during them. She wondered what the church would say about all this: demon possession, a psychiatric symptom, ancestor worship? The last – bad in the eyes of the church – was nevertheless, in her mother's heart, the best of the lot.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Thirteen-year-old Mandlakazi was in Grade Seven, a serious gardener, and a serious scholar. During the mid-year school holidays, she had announced she wanted no new clothes for her birthday or ‘other silly stuff like that,’ ending: ‘I’m too old for that kind of thing.’

Themba, now in a post-doctoral internship, asked, ‘So what do you want?’

‘Are you buying it for me?’

The whole household burst out laughing. Themba was famous for tight-fistedness. Good-hearted, he just didn’t find it easy to part with anything, especially cash. Little did her family know the announcement Mandlakazi had just made was the beginning of a campaign. The girl was on the move, and life, as they had known it, was about to do a total reversal; surely, if slowly. Not just their little life as a family, but life eMzansi!

The fruit is always in the seed.

By September, excitement was tangible not only in Kwanele, but also in Bishopscourt. Since her Gracie had returned from what Mrs Bird called her self-imposed exile in what she called ‘the sticks’, the two had taken up the friendship where they had left off. Every other Tuesday, they either had lunch or tea or went to see a movie. Mrs B’s long-ago brush with cancer had left her determined to celebrate life each day – her continuing good health also meant she could resist her daughters’ pleas that she emigrate. Now, with Mandlakazi’s transition into high school approaching, the mlungu woman had a new idea.

‘Gracie,’ she said over coffee this particular Tuesday. ‘AP Couture has a sale and I want to give your favourite granddaughter a present for graduation.’ Both forgot that Mandlakazi was in fact Khulu’s great-granddaughter, not granddaughter. But then, who minded that little slip of memory?

Needless to say, the news was received back in Kwanele with screeches of joy. Mandlakazi, somewhat of a tomboy, was nevertheless getting into the spirit of the thing, and so was not displeased at the unexpected and generous offer. The sheer excitement all around her was catching.

This was when Khulu voiced what had been on her mind for the longest while: rites of passage for Mandlakazi.

On this matter, the entire family, except for one, stood solidly against Khulu. The exception? Strangest fact of all ... Busisiwe, Mandlakazi’s mother herself, was not only on Khulu’s side but adamantly in favour of the girl’s ukuthomba. She knew, remembered, she’d

been against it for herself; and she had always regretted not having done it. She didn't voice what she felt strongly in her heart of hearts: had she had the ceremony – thombad – not only might there have been no baby, but Mandla's life, her health, would have been very different. Of that one fact, Busi was quite, quite certain. So, after they had argued the matter to death, a compromise was eventually reached. Mandlakazi would thomba the following year. Enough excitement was hers this year without adding to it. Let the girl graduate and start high school, and only then think of this exercise that Khulu and Busi insisted on. Khulu wondered what would be wrong with the girl starting high school already having had the ceremony, armed with an extra ancestral blessing. However, she was happy enough there was agreement on the event – it would take place.

Although the event was nearly a year away, Khulu realised that was just about enough time to set it up. She conceded that ukuthomba of a young woman was a mammoth undertaking. It involved more than just the chief initiate and her cohorts. There was the woman who would 'nurse' or mother them through the process: inkazana. This role was not given randomly to anyone. A woman of unblemished character, a strong role model, needed to be sought and found. Then there was no guarantee that once found, she would be available and willing to undertake the duty.

The whole thing was also costly in these days where everything was for sale, including services such as these. In the olden days, the woman would have felt singularly honoured to be asked, and, in turn, the families of the initiates would gift her with a cow or horse or bags of mealies, depending on what they had; barter would be accepted as tender – good all round, good for all. No money in those days. Money came with the white man. Yes, Ntsikane's 'button without a hole' came with the white man, and as Ntsikane had foretold, it now ruled their lives. Money! Khulu thought to herself. Well, she should go ahead and prepare for this event. It was probably the last thing she would be able to do for Mandlakazi.

Nobody lived forever, and, as it was, she had almost done exactly that. Where were all her agemates? Except for MaBird, all gone. Meanwhile, this year was drawing to a close; schools would soon be on holiday. So, just as well, she conceded, to leave it for the following year.

The phone rang just as Lulama Kodwa locked her desk, bag already over her shoulder. 'Aarrgh!' she groaned, forced herself to peek at the caller ID. Yho! Better take this one. And

she'd better forget she'd been busy getting annoyed a mere second before. Why, that outburst from her lungs was just a way of clearing her throat. What did she have to be annoyed about?

Unlike thousands – no, millions in this country – she had a job. So that was what that sound was; and she had a right to clear her throat, didn't she? No good answering the phone with a sleepy voice that said you were already peeling back the blankets on your bed, sleep beckoning.

'Good afternoon, Sir!' She hoped she sounded cheery enough, but not excessively so.

The big boss got right to the point; no banter or personal queries, she obviously wasn't what he was after. Despite the reputation that clung to him like feathers to a bird, she had always found him above board ... as far as that sort of thing was concerned. But he was one hell of a slave driver. And he forgot some of his underlings had other responsibilities besides being his grateful workers. Some, like her, were even single parents.

'This event for the disabled; the one our colleagues in Social Development have arranged with those international funders ...' His words broke into her grumpy thoughts.

'Yes, Sir!' *What about it and why are you bringing that up now?* she screamed silently. *The blooming thing was planned nearly a year ago!* Her children-to-feed mouth asked, calm as can be: 'Are you thinking we should participate?' *Well, about time, too! After all, we are the department for people with disabilities ...*

'Are you a mind reader now?'

They both laughed politely. Theirs was not the gut-deep laughter of friends, but a half-cough, half-query neither could misread as anything but collegial exchange.

Ten full minutes later, not only had she put down her handbag, poured herself back into her seat; she had unlocked the desk and switched on the desktop computer. She'd had to call the babysitter too and make arrangements for a late knock-off time.

Lulama strode to the kitchen corner of her office, made a quick cup of tea, took that back to her desk, and started a list: prospects to invite to the celebrations. Then the list birthed another, and yet another; clients, differently-abled people ... She must ask for more details: who did her boss have in mind? Those with a specific disability, any other specific category? With the differently-abled, as with any group, one had to be careful not to exclude anyone.

And it didn't end there, oh no! On top of the list of prospective invitees, she knew she would have to include service providers of different kinds: caterers; transporters; safety officials; entertainers; motivational speakers – at least one. She made a mental note to find one eager enough to waive payment or accept a token of appreciation, some gift such as a set of

pens, a mug, or a blanket ... department-branded, of course. The storeroom was absolutely clogged with the stuff.

The next morning, as soon as she'd put on the lights and hung up her jacket, Lulama Kodwa rang Ms Ndonga in Khayelitsha, one of the more enterprising and energetic social workers she knew.

Nomzi Ndonga picked up on the second ring and heard out Lulu's string of requests. All business, 'How many would you want?' she asked, adding, 'Boys or girls or both?'

Right after Lulama's call transferring some of her load, the social worker made an appointment with the matron who had run the day hospital for those with disabilities since its opening twenty years ago. Upon hearing who had made the request for participation, Matron was at first not keen to get involved: 'If they used the money they squander on themselves on providing essential services to the poor, we might have less ills besetting us.'

However, when Ms Ndonga told her the whole thing was tied to the UNMDG – the United Nations Millennium Development Goals, specifically for Peoples Living with Disabilities – she thawed some- what. It was a whole hour and a half later that the social worker eventually left the matron's office. Matron was not only now on board; she was bubbling with enthusiasm. Sure enough, she called before the end of that day to ask for the names of candidates they would send to the affair. 'Remember,' she said when the other told her she was still working on the list, 'only those under eighteen!'

'Yes, Ma'am,' Ms Ndonga responded. Fancy that! Matron reminding her of something she had first heard from her. Time the old gizzard took her pension!

Much later, as she went through her files and made lists, she suddenly thought of that case she was handling, of the exceptional young girl. Why not? She called Busisiwe, the mother of the one who was so full of beans. Busi was keen on the idea, but, buying herself a bit of time, said she would get back to the social worker.

'Can you make that soon, please?' 'Will do!'

'Tomorrow?' 'Sure.'

Once Busi had thought the matter over, she shed her reservations. Then she remembered the gumboot dance that she had witnessed all those years ago. How would Mandlakazi participate in something of that nature? Would she manage? *Well, she might not be able to dance specific steps, but perhaps she could play the drums or hand rattles.*

But she wouldn't tell the child about these plans right away, not in the midst of exams. Fine once she was done with all that – not that there was any extra preparation she needed to do; from what her teachers had been telling them, she was well equipped.

The very next day, as she'd promised, Busi called the social worker back. Ms Ndonga was delighted to hear that Mandlakazi would attend camp. Then and there, the name Mandlakazi Mkhonto was added to the list.

Meanwhile, as always, plans for Christmas were afoot. However, this year, what dominated were preparations for Mandlakazi's going to high school.

And as a backdrop to all this activity was the ever-present violence, prevalent as air, almost. Every news bulletin seemed to contain not one but several items of robbery, rape, murder ... heinous crimes that included those frightening cases where the victim knew the perpetrator. Mothers held their babies closer, children were not permitted to play outside the house, not even in the yards, unless supervised.

*Uphill all the way. Terrible
The violence to the weak, even loved ones.
While yet another toothless campaign runs:
Sixteen Days of Activism against Gender-Based Violence
Sixteen days of pretending to care, to change.*

*You will be invited to take part in a special event.
Some might dissuade you from going;
Go!
Your time has come!*

*Yes, we know
You have not been idle all along
You have used your time well*

*Well done! Well done!
But not one of us would have expected less of you.*

Finally, Mandlakazi was done with examinations, her last at primary school. She celebrated the event by giving away all the clothes she now considered 'little girlie stuff'. The girl now

favoured solid colours – especially blues – from palest sky-blue to navy. Frilly dresses and blouses were out; she was into pants in a big way.

The next day, the last day of the school year, Mandla expected no more than the examinations report. But when she got home, she got much more than praise for her glowing report. Yes, she got the praise, her due. But with it came unexpected, startling news. Busi could hardly contain her excitement as she relayed the news of Mandla's invitation to camp.

'Rather sudden, isn't it?' Lily asked.

Busi explained that she had withheld the information, fearing it might be a distraction during the girl's final exams.

Khulu huffed, 'And you thought not to tell the rest of us?' 'Well ...' Busi stopped, stumped.

Lily wanted to know where and when the camp would be held: 'And for how long?'

Busi explained that Mandla would be part of an especially chosen group of young people to go on a two-week camp.

This led to a babble of protest. All the grown-ups were dead set against Mandla attending. How would she manage? She had never even been to a sleepover party.

'But the camp is for people my age!' Mandlakazi raised her voice enough to get everyone's attention. That achieved, she added, '... who live with one or another disability!'

Silence. Eyes out of their sockets. Busi tried to guess how Mandla could possibly know this when she had not mentioned the details to anyone.

Meanwhile Phyllis piped up, asking what the child would need to take for all that time, and who would pay for it.

'Oh,' replied Busi, 'I'm sure adequate preparations have been made.' The social worker had assured her the children would be properly equipped.

Silence again. Mandla saw the silence for what it was: a veto against her going to camp. 'Oh,' she said into the silence: 'I want to go and I am going!'

Khulu was the first to relent. This was proof positive that she had achieved her goal: making the child independent and self-assured. She had succeeded, so why was she reluctant to let go?

'Of course, you are going,' Khulu said, beaming, and everyone relaxed while she told herself: *That will be a feather in my cap.* She didn't say it out loud: bragging was unbecoming, especially in an old woman. The truth was, Mandlakazi had virtually taken over her own care. She administered her own medication when it was necessary. She woke up and meditated, did

her stretches. Daily, she wrote herself affirmations. She was on the ball, alert to and hands-on with her health issues. Which, thank God, were well-nigh non-existent.

The next day, Busi confirmed that as far as the camp was concerned, all was arranged. Buses would wait for the attendees at their schools on Sunday, after lunch; but each attender would be picked up by car, details of which would be sent to the child's family beforehand for verification purposes. All stuff and staff would already be at the camp site.

It was a relief to Mandlakazi's family that the instructions to those attending were to bring only their toiletries and medication, sleepwear, and a change of clothing. During the entire two weeks, they would be wearing gym gear, which the department was providing – three sets per participant! And they were particularly happy to note the precautions taken, such as transport verification; pick-up and drop-off times as well as the names and contact details of not one but two people in case of emergency. This reassured them that Mandla would be in good hands.

What they didn't and couldn't know was that the other participants would be in even better hands. Mandlakazi had been doing her own preparation; using her powers to link up those attending; for example, matching hearing-impaired with sight-impaired. Those who used wheelchairs were matched with fully mobile but differently impaired individuals. She had designed it for the benefit of each and all through co-operation and mutual assistance. Not that the organisers knew they were being directed ...

Early Saturday, long before eyelids parted company

greeting the new day

I was summoned eNkundla

the last time before

I went out into the world

to do the work

for which I had regressed

once more into a flesh-being

there I saw the ones who like me

had been refashioned

by their mothers to be other

*than what the Most Powerful
had planned
as I had been
by my mother Busi-Honey
in her womb.*

*What have we not gone through, my mother and I?
It has been a long and winding road
we have come
here and there
straight as the bridge on your nose
at other places hilly like a mountain range
and curved as serf's busy sickle
and it is a road that has no end.*

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Mandlakazi kicked off her plan on World Disabled Day. As each participant boarded their bus, they were given a package and a ticket with their seat number. Mandlazi took hers, hauled herself up into the vehicle, and stopped. She'd been smacked breathless by a stench of perfume so strong the culprit must have bathed in the stuff instead of the usual delicate dab here and there of those to the manner born. Shaking her head, she identified the source: a girl in one of the front seats of the bus reserved for wheelchair users. Pretty, if one took the trouble to look beyond the heavy mask of make-up. Mandla shook herself, walked on and found the seat allocated to her. Immediately and without emptying the bag onto the seat or floor of the bus (evidence lay strewn all about the bus), she investigated the bag's contents. The programme she pulled out looked professional, with activities galore: swimming; racing, including wheelchair racing; card games and chess; spelling bees, poetry and prose writing exercises; cooking classes; drawing and painting; sculpting small figures or making pots; photography and more. They would be spoilt for choice.

Meanwhile, great was the excitement in the bus, non-stop the chattering. From the back of the bus, a voice shouted: 'D'you all know we are going to a wine farm?' At that, a riot broke out, everyone cheering, stamping feet, whistling and clapping.

The same voice broke out in rap: 'We gonna wine; we gonna dine; we gonna do everything bad bad bad!'

Within two shakes of a lamb's tail, half the bus had joined her, each contributing to the din.

Mandlakazi surveyed her fellow passengers. If only they knew, she thought. Yes, the fruit farm and resort to which they were heading also had a winery. However, it was its campsite they were visiting, and, given their circumstances, the last thing the organisers would give them was wine.

Of course, Mandla already knew who the rapping girl was: her name was Jacquie, and she was a bit of a bully. But she had plans for Jacquie. She had already prepared each chosen soul so they would be receptive. Indeed, they would 'drive' the initiative, little knowing that the seed was already planted in them. The best way to proceed was to make each hunger for what needed to be done. However, seeing them in real time, Mandla had to admit it was fun to

see kids being kids in spite of the labels with which society saw fit to burden them. So, a kid herself, she joined in, sang along, one with the rest of them. But she was troubled by that girl at the front of the bus. Boniswa was her name. Pity she reeked of vanity. Poor thing, what demons was she trying to wash away?

But then who here was perfect? Indeed, who in the whole flesh-world was perfect? Heavy, indeed, was the burden of being human. It was no walk in the park. Mandla reminded herself hers was to awaken each to the prospects they already had. None were without some gift, talent, to be put to use. And, right now, there was urgent business to which she should and must attend. Wine farm, indeed!

In a mental flash, into Boniswa's mind she went. The girl frowned, took a deep, deep breath, and let out a screech that would make a hadeda weep with envy. Hadee-dah!

The shock stole sound. In the startled silence, all eyes turned to the originator of the racket and her tiny frame. Where the hell had that ear-splitting sound emanated from, the eyes asked.

From the girl's mouth emerged the sweetest, musical tones ... but the words, oh the words, were far from sweet: 'Don't be in such a hurry to be assholes!' A steely eye swept through the bus, the girl's neck revolving as though some invisible machine controlled her.

'What the f—' a voice shouted, but was cut short by the girl who seemed to believe she was in charge.

'Assholes!' Boniswa hissed, seeming to grow taller while still seated. Something in her manner, the look she gave, radiated from every inch of her body, like vapour out a slow-cooking pot in a semi-lit room. Then she spat out: 'You already are! Don't you see that?' Her voice rose as she barked out, 'You all were born assholes.'

Now Mandla turned the tables. Enough was enough. Yes, she had had a tough life, but then none in that bus came from an elite private school or had Bill and Melinda Gates for parents. Fury sprang to life and scattered all over the bus as others put a stop to Boniswa's outburst.

'Hey, get off of yourself!'

'Who d'you think you are?'

'Go home, wherever that may be!'

'Must be a broken cardboard box from the sound of what comes out of it!'

For reasons they didn't know, didn't feel they needed to know, the passengers found this last remark very funny – as one, the bus broke into rapturous laughter. Then, like magic,

the atmosphere changed. Another screech, but this one a happy one, an inviting one, turned heads.

‘Yhoo! Akusekühle apha! Wow, is it not beautiful here?’ An unidentifiable voice was heard to say, and the sincerity of the remark put paid to the rancour that had been brewing. All eyes turned to the windows, and those not seated to advantage craned necks and pushed against those who were.

Someone else remarked in admiration: ‘Izindlu zamaplanga!’

‘Kodwa jonga indlela ezintle ngayo! But look how beautiful these ones are!’

‘Kutheni ezamatyotyombe zingabi nje? Why are the mjondolo ones unlike these?’

‘He-e, kakade, kutheni? Good question, really, why?’

Mandla was happy the group was now distracted. And, indeed, the beauty all around them was breath-taking. Over the wide sweep of road, tall and leafy trees on both sides with over-arching branches, their tops touching and kissing up there, their moving split marking the unmarked midway point of the road as efficiently as any formal road sign, the boring white line, trademark of tarred roads the world over. Your side: my side! This natural divider of daylight time instinctively reinforced the natural respect for one another inherent in all humanity. Indeed, inherent in all nature. Why, the very almost but not quite touching-ness of the branches up there was proof thereof. Animals and plants in the ground observed the same law: my right to exist is a function of your right to exist. And thus, was co-existence ensured.

Yes, the leafy trees spelled such splendour that the passengers on the bus were silenced as each drank it in. A little distance away from the roadsides, fruit trees boasted their own splendour. This started a guessing game, as the young people tried to identify what they could of the varying vegetation they passed. More often than not, they had no clue what it was they saw. Many had no idea of what unboxed fruit or the parent trees looked like. Their only encounters with oranges and apples had come via monetary exchange. Some would not even have been able to identify an apple tree were those not at that time heavily laden with the fruit apple-picking season.

Softly, slightly, the sweet scent of growing things entered the bus. Without knowing that they did so, the young people deepened breath intakes, pushed out chests, and expanded lungs. Their eyes softened as the goodness of effervescent new life sank into their bodies. The long road went winding on and on and on. However, there was so much to see, not one of the young people complained that the trip was interminable. Not one voiced boredom or complained of fatigue.

At last, the buses turned off the public road and, as they did so, the speed slackened. This part of the trip gave the visitors a chance to admire what the farm offered.

Even the road leading to the farm snaked and twisted, dipped and rose, showing the visitors spectacular vistas.

Finally, they reached the farm. Right at the gate, a huge slate- grey board with bold cursive letters proclaimed: HEAVEN'S BEST! Wine and fruit country in the Western Cape: among the best boasts of the region, and Heaven's Best was as good a representative of the ilk as any. The undulating grounds were a marvel, the lush vegetation a sight to drink in at all times of the year. At that moment, the height of summer, every fruit tree was laden and the air heavy with scent: apples, pears, grapes, quinces, pomegranates, apricots, peaches.

The heaviness of the trees was testimony to the good rains the region had enjoyed that year. Indeed, so plentiful was the crop, here and there an overburdened bough threatened to break off its parent trunk. Berry bushes, too, were festooned with bright sparks of colour – green, gold, blue, purple and red. They spotted people picking, children and toddlers too, copying their parents and older siblings.

A little way past the entrance gate, the road dipped. The farm lay in a valley through which ran a river, and the buses came to a stop midway between the gate and the main building in which the offices were housed. Farm staff members, two to a bus, welcomed the young people and gave out bags inside which were T-shirts in four colours – red, blue, green and orange; notebooks; pens; and a diary or book of gratitude.

As they scrambled down from the buses or were helped off them, bottles and tumblers waited on long tables – water and an array of cool drinks, all in biodegradable containers. Smiling staff and officials were standing by, cheering the group: Welcome! Namkelekile! Welkom! In all three languages of the Western Cape, they bid them welcome. 'Help yourself to a drink and find a seat.'

The young people all saw and understood they had stepped into a different realm, another world, a dazzling one, stretching as far as the eye could see. Their oohs and aahs said it all.

Orientation was swift and brief. They were told to enjoy the goodies they'd find in their welcome bags. However, of special note was the book of gratitude. In that book, they were urged to write down their daily experiences at the end of each day. The last page was for them to write a summary of the whole experience and vote for the person in their group who would represent them as their speaker at the farewell dinner – their last gathering. They were to tear that page down the dotted line and hand it in the day before the final day of camp.

The item that took their breath away, however, was the list of what was on offer. Heaven's Best boasted an array of amenities and activities for campers: cycling, swimming, rafting, boating, crafting, rock-climbing, zip lining. There were horse and pony rides, the opportunity to take a train ride through the estate, a running track, and for those more inclined to walk, paths that meandered through the vales and hills of the estate, with fully provisioned rest stops along the way. There was something to appeal to everyone. It was blatantly clear the only limitations here would be one's own. There were nevertheless guides and guards all over the place and no activity would go on without requisite supervision.

During the Q&A session, when Boniswa seemed bent on having her own meeting, Mandlakazi noted that the girl was an egoist – pushy and apparently incapable of empathy. Then she remembered. When she'd done a quick survey of who would be at the camp with her, of all the other young people, Boniswa's situation had touched her most. Poor child! Yes, her mother worked in Parliament but, dear oh dear, what a job. Not an easy thing servicing grouches who were more often than not egocentric bullies with such low self-esteem they needed punching bags as others needed air. Boniswa's mother was one of the favoured punching bags. After Boniswa's father died in a hail of bullets, a senji or hijacking gone south of south, she'd gone and had herself a hysterectomy. She had realised the only job she was qualified for was using what her Mama gave her – *au naturel*, indalo! What she had not known was that abuse was a huge part of the service for which she was signing up. Boniswa suffered the spill-over.

Roll call followed, accompanied by the camp aides leading those whose names had been called to their allocated rooms, where they were to rest until just before dinner time. Well, Mandla thought, *who ever heard of teenagers resting before midnight?* But she made her way to her room where, she knew, she would be unlikely to get any rest.

Mandlakazi did not hurry, content to observe the others scrambling. She was near the rear of the procession up the ramp and into her dormitory building, everyone rushing, eager to see their sleeping quarters. As she neared her room, raised voices let her know there was trouble ahead. Surprise!

She knocked to announce her arrival, but didn't wait for an answer; no one could have heard the knock above the noise they were making. So she just thrust the door open and stopped there as though to survey the scene. The squabbling went on regardless. Mandla coughed, making sure hers was a raucous, gruff cough. And that old-man cough did the trick. The last thing her room-mates expected or wanted was the appearance of an old fogey, and her cough had made them expect just such a one. Silence fell.

‘Oh,’ said Jacquie, the rapper from the bus: ‘And who are you?’ ‘The name’s Mandlakazi.’ She turned her attention to a slight girl who stood indecisively near her bag, her hand on it as though she were of mind to drag it out and head back home. Inclining her head towards her, Mandlakazi asked, ‘And you are?’

At once, the girl’s demeanour changed. She thrust her chest out, straightened herself, opened her eyes a little wider. ‘Glenda.’ And as though she doubted Mandla had heard what she’d just said, or felt she’d been a bit abrupt, ‘My name is Glenda,’ she clarified, ‘Glenda Booi.’

As she spoke, Mandla sensed and saw threatening tears – held back, but she knew those tears were there.

‘Booi, die boere borgeltjie!’ quipped Jacquie. The fourth girl sharing the room, who hadn’t said a word or stirred since Mandla’s arrival, closed her eyes as though she didn’t wish to see what happened next; as though the confrontation she saw brewing was too much for her.

In a far from soft voice, Mandla demanded, ‘Take that back! No one treats any friend of mine like that.’

Inclining her head in a show of exaggerated shock, Jacquie asked, ‘Since when is she your friend?’

‘Are you calling me a liar?’

Something about Mandla’s self-assuredness alarmed Jacquie. Growing up, she had been mocked for her sideways sidle and her dragging leg, so she had responded by doling out insults. But like many bullies, she wasn’t any good at an even-handed battle. If truth be told, she was a bit of a scaredy cat, even if she liked making fun of others. Now, she turned down her lips, sucked in her breath: ‘I never said you were a liar.’

The fight, it turned out, was over who was to sleep where. Glenda was hesitant to climb to the top bunk, but scared to be alone at ground-floor level. What if someone came in at night? She would be Target #1!

‘I’ll take the other floor-level bed,’ Mandla said. ‘I like being grounded myself.’ All laughed at the joke, even the quiet girl.

To clear the air, Mandla started the beautiful hymn: ‘Lizalis’ idinga lakho, Thixo Nkosi yenyanyiso!’ One by one, the others joined in, starting with Glenda, who had a beautiful soprano voice; Mandla sang alto. The third to join in was the quiet one. As she did so, she beckoned to Jacquie, inviting her to join the fun. With a nervous laugh, she did.

Between verses, the silent one spoke: ‘By the way, my name is Nikiwe; Niki, for short.’

‘Hi, Niki,’ the other three said at once. It sounded as something they had rehearsed even though, to the attentive ear, Jacquie’s voice sounded a little off key as that of someone who had not attended rehearsal as regularly as the others. Niki looked quite astonished at the feat she’d accomplished. She had spoken when no one had asked her; she had given her name. Could it be she wasn’t a mouse after all?

When the bell summoned them back to base, the promised hour of rest had been chopped down to a few minutes, but the weather in the room had cleared magnificently. Mandla stretched out her hands, ‘Shall we sing, going down?’ One hand held Jacquie’s, the other, Glenda’s, whose other held Niki’s. The four went down to the dining-room hand-in-hand, singing:

*Lizalis’ idinga lakho,
Thixo Nkosi yenyano
Zonk’ iintlanga, zonk’ izizwe,
Mazizuze usindiso.*

Dinner was preceded by a pep talk, which was important only because of who delivered it: Dr Nomaza Vimba, the Deputy Minister of Women, Children and People with Disabilities. She welcomed them, and said she was very happy they had come to the camp, and that they would not regret it. She ran down the daily schedule of events, which each camper had already seen. Then she gave a self-conscious laugh and said, ‘Happy camping! Although I wouldn’t call sleeping in such a posh place camping!’ She hoped they would not cause any damage to the property. ‘Show the owners you are grateful for their donation to the department. Who knows, they might give it to us again.’ That was it. She couldn’t stay for dinner. A cancelled flight. Her child on it. She had to rush to the airport to collect him. She was very apologetic: ‘But I do hope we’ll be seeing one another again soon!’ With a cheery wave, she was gone, leaving Ms Lulama Kodwa, who had accompanied her from the department, high and dry.

Mandlakazi wondered why the deputy minister had bothered to spin that yarn. A bad conscience? And it was not the first time, nor would it be the last that she pursued her own agenda instead of doing her job. Why had she bothered coming at all? She clearly didn’t care about the issues her department supposedly existed to address.

Internally, Mandla answered her own question: *The job is a good front for what she makes via amaqithiqithi – perks – and putting spanners in the works. Each job necessitates ‘calls for tenders’, but the winner knows which palms to oil, or they may never win another*

tender again. And the tenderpreneurs 'get a cut'. But as far as this woman is concerned, she gets herself the whole body of the animal. 'Cuts' go to the smallanyana ones. She is definitely not one of those. Not bad. Not bad at all for a woman who barely scraped the few exams she sat and didn't graduate ... although that's her secret. Worth the five grand she paid for those certificates, though. She got the job, didn't she? Absolutely worth it. That's government for you!

Dinner, as all the meals the group would share, was simple but nutritious and savoury. The best was the expedited manner of its service. The line moved swiftly. At one end, one got a number, marched on and gave that number when ordering. High on the wall behind the servers, the options were written on blackboards, the choices plain and simple: chicken curry; vegetarian curry; fish and chips; samp and lamb potjie; and for dessert, fruit salad and ice cream.

Mandla chose the veggie dish and took her seat, also bearing the same number, and within minutes, a server brought her meal. The arrangement made for ease of service and made the whole exercise run without hitches. But it was also carefully calculated to facilitate mingling among the young people; none sat with their room-mates, and, Mandla noticed, the general spread favoured de-lumping skin colour, language entities or sub-groups. It seemed that people came from a wide range of regions and cultures, and their physical and mental challenges were wide-ranging as well. Present were wheelchair users, those with crutches or braces, some visually or hearing-impaired. Some were palsied, some struggled with speech, and some had no visible physical disability, but their eyes spoke of internal limitations.

None of this seemed to affect the general buzz of young people gathered within the confines of one room, even one as large as the one where they were dining. Even the sign-language interpreters added to the busyness, their hands flying.

Mandla had already surmised that the best time to get in with this group would be either while they slept, or during the regular pow-wows – formal group meetings. The first would be easier, but the second more targeted, as it caught the subject in action; red-handed, as it were. When people shared of themselves in word or action, they were at their most receptive. The Old noticed how this was true even when people were being deceptive, or plain lying.

At the first pow-wow the next evening, the participants were asked to sit in their room groups. Next, they were given a short questionnaire that elicited their first impression of their room-mates and whether or not, within the short passage of time spent together, they had revised their initial impressions. They had to give reasons and explain their responses.

Those in Mandla's group looked distinctly apprehensive and hesitant. So when their turn came, she chose to speak first: 'I was last to arrive in my room,' she said, and saw Jacquie's head drop. She continued: 'There was already an argument when I got there.' All eyes popped, including those of her room-mates. 'I felt right at home, and soon we were all laughing at how silly we were.'

Eyes sparkling, she turned to the other three: Niki, Jacquie and Glenda, and asked, 'Right?'

All three nodded. And – 'Yup!' said the silent one. That was a surprise: Niki had spoken, and without any prodding.

When the camp directors said each room should choose a 'prefect', Mandla dissuaded Niki from proposing her, Mandla, and convinced her to support hers instead. Jacquie therefore became the foursome's monitor. A puzzled Glenda had nodded her assent only because Mandla had gently squeezed her hand. That one knew what she was doing, surely. To her, Mandla was a hero. It would be okay.

And it was – for several days. However, one day Glenda found herself unable to keep everything in. She went and told one of the directors how she would have preferred Mandla as prefect, and then relayed the whole episode of choosing bunks on the first night of camp, and the ugly language that had been used.

Hearing about that first-night problem, the directors commended Mandlakazi for her show of leadership and compassion. 'That is what we hope this camp teaches you all,' the senior camp director said. Late that night, as staff discussed the day's happenings, again and again Mandla's name cropped up. The organisers voiced their happiness Mandlakazi was part of this cohort – their very first such undertaking.

'Let's hope these kids keep surprising us like that,' said the senior camp director.

Glenda had no idea what she had done, or what had possessed her to do it. But she had just unwittingly volunteered to be the lodestone of Mandla's project. She had not only surprised the directors; she had surprised herself. That was exactly what Mandlakazi wanted: for everyone to surprise all the others but most of all, surprise themselves. That was the spur which would invariably lead to confidence.

The staff cluster responded to the senior camp director's remark with a short outburst of laughter. 'In your dreams!' responded one cynical fellow, while another added, 'Don't forget the one who reeks of perfume!'

'Did she have to come?'

This was Boniswa, and if the staff had a choice, they would have wished her away. Because her mother worked in Parliament, the girl gave herself airs and made uncalled-for, unnecessary demands. All agreed she was a pain in the very heart of the establishment – ‘and elsewhere unmentionable!’ said the youngest of the crew; they all burst out in laughter.

But Boniswa was undeniably selfish and demanding, believing the world owed her because she had need of a wheelchair. Deeply self-pitying, at every moment of her waking day, she expected those around her to acknowledge her special suffering by paying her undivided attention, providing service with a smile at her first command. Better still, before she even opened her mouth to utter an order. Could they not see she needed this or that? Where was their imagination, their sympathy for those, like her, whom life had so deprived and punished?

Mandlakazi decided her aim was to help the poor girl find peace of mind. It would be a service not only to her but to those who had occasion to encounter the ‘Princess Plaintiff’, as the others called her.

By the end of the first week of camp, Mandla’s spirit of co-operation, her readiness to include others in whatever was happening, fun and games, discussions, meals, had been noted by many. She had a special gift for pouring oil on any and all troubled waters: an argument, misunderstanding, bullying or – as happened all too frequently for the comfort of the staff – budding love or even romances that were more than a day old and therefore ancient news, or those that existed merely in the fantasies of the afflicted one. Mandlakazi seemed able to quell any fracas, or mediate without taking sides. The organisers liked her very much, and often compared her with Princess Plaintiff, to the disadvantage of the latter.

However, Mandlakazi herself noticed how all the activities were run by able-bodied people. Simply put, the abled benefited from serving the disabled. The girl sprang into action, quietly raising awareness and forming alliances. This, of course, she had anticipated; had come with full knowledge of each participant. Had she not selected them herself? Now she got into their heads, helped them to grasp the import of the moment, of the event, and what they could do with it and get from it. Was that not her brief as one of the Old: to make the ultimate outsider an intimate insider? Mandla noted what she of course already knew: even here, among people who daily suffered the experience of being othered, there was othering. The sighted believed they were better than those challenged in that category; the deaf pretended to be free of any affliction; and some of those challenged in mobility cursed their Maker for punishing them

even before they were born. In earnest, Mandlakazi set to work. Encounters of any kind resulted in her implanting the idea of belonging. This was followed by one-on-one conversations that looked impromptu, but were anything but.

During their free time, small groups would form voluntarily. In whatever group she found herself, Mandlakazi found a way of steering the talk toward self-appraisal, self-appreciation, motivation, and personal challenge. Her groups quickly turned to miniature pow-wows. Gradually, she built herself a following, something the staff members were quick to notice. 'OUR OWN INGROUP!' These words caught fire and soon became the camp catchphrase.

Mandla used this mark of approval to build the larger group she envisaged out there in the real world, once they were away from the safety of camp. In everyone she spoke to, she encouraged self-revelation. Find your own strength and then find a fellow who would benefit from association with you and your particular strength; this was her motto. As her great-grandmother had always known, it is in service to others that we truly grow.

Surprisingly, to many of her peers, the idea they could be of help was a novel one. But once it sunk into their hearts and minds, it was singularly liberating. It made them happy in themselves, in who they were. They were not useless! Shy people positively sparkled. Those short of words bubbled. Those who had believed they were slow found they could, with perseverance, sponge up knowledge. For many present, it was a veritable rebirth. In return, each 'reborn' was tasked with gathering others and sharing similar lessons.

These were soon boiled down to the three Rs: Respect for self; Respect for the other, whoever and whatever they might be; Respect for the environment in its complex entirety, for, without it, we would not be here. Our breath is but a tiny part of what we get from the environment, and we should all take better care of it than we're doing at the moment.

Another of Mandla's goals was to ensure the participants grasped the importance of complementarity – teaming up with someone whose ability eased yours, and vice versa. A wheelchair-using person could be a guide to someone visually impaired; someone without mobility challenges could help manoeuvre a chair, as in the all-too-frequent case of finding a lift with that detested sign: 'out of order'.

Mandla was not after a following, but more of a movement. Nevertheless, she deliberately sat out the second pow-wow. Oh, she attended; but only listened and observed, delighted to be playing 'plain fleshling'; switching off from who she really was. She also knew the truth of her great-grandfather's wisdom: that the bird who led the flock knew when to fall

back, to hand over to another. But there were matters to see to, and her time, she knew perfectly well, was running out. She would soon be home in the land of forever sleep.

The third pow-wow would be their last formal one as a group.

They had been asked to bring up issues arising from the previous two, and any other matters a participant felt were important or interesting for the group.

Mandlakazi stood up and asked: 'Who am I? Why am I? What can I do about the how and what of me?'

One of the camp leaders said, 'You will have to explain those questions, I'm afraid. Also tell us why you feel they are something we should consider here.' Although the lady spoke laughingly, it was clear she was far more irritated than amused.

With astounding calmness in one so young, Mandlakazi did exactly that. 'No one, in our families, talks about us,' she started. 'No one takes responsibility for the way some of us, like me, are – toxins having assaulted our forms even in the womb. Not our mothers, nor our fathers. And not the relatives, the older people who should have guided them,' she said, then stopped. Waited for reaction; and a dam overflowed its banks.

Not all of them had been poisoned in the womb! And, well, God made them that way!

'You cannot blame your mother for your disability,' cried some voices.

But an aide took the floor. He said, 'I don't think this is about blame. But if you never ask questions about your own life, who will? And if you don't, what more important issue do you care about ... what is more important to you than you?'

After several more people had spoken, one staff member asked, in genuine puzzlement, what Mandlakazi's point was.

'A peach tree will never give you an apple,' replied Mandla. 'Wha-aat?' came from the audience.

A mischievous smile lighting up her face, Mandla put up her hands, palms out, and the room quietened. 'If I don't know the essence of me, what makes me tick, how will I ever get anyone else to? If I don't know my strengths, my weaknesses, my fears, my hopes – how will I ever move toward my goals? Do I even have goals? What goals can I have for someone I do not know ... do not understand? And how will we ever fight for our rights if we don't know what they are ... not in the book, in the Constitution – but in our lives, our hearts, our minds?

We will never safeguard what we do not understand. And we will never understand anything and anyone ... until we understand the basics of our own hearts.' Saying that last word, her hand beat against her chest. And she sat down.

Everyone applauded – camp leaders, even the cheerless one who'd laughed at Mandla's opening statement.

During the comfort break just before lunch, everybody trooped to the restrooms. There were plenty of those set aside for those who used wheelchairs. But, of course, Boniswa would not go to those ... beneath her dignity.

She'd got into one cubicle, even though it was a tight squeeze, and took out her vanity case so that she could touch up her lipstick. However, while she was busy preening, she dropped her bag back down behind the commode. Boniswa tried this way and that way and a lot more ways in her attempt to retrieve the bag. However, even before she made the first move, she knew whatever she tried would be futile. She would not be able to reach. She tried anyway. Tried and tried and tried, growing correspondingly angrier and more upset. In the end, it was when she was beyond furious and just plain horribly tearful that Mandla found her. In seconds, the vanity case was retrieved and handed to its owner. The dejected figure tried to smile, laugh at herself ... but the attempt was no more successful than that of retrieving her bag. Finally, hiccupping, she said, 'Apologies for bothering you—' sniff-sniff. 'But thank you for your help.' Mandla bent over the wheelchair, patted Boniswa on the back, and the two embraced.

'Just goes to show, akakho umntu yedwa ... none of us is complete without the others. We all need others to complete us.'

Boniswa sighed. A clean, unpretentious smile made her pretty face a flower in bloom. They left the building laughing, holding hands.

Nothing lasts forever and, soon enough, it was the day before departure. At breakfast, the campers were reminded to hand in their feedback pages during the lunch break that day. The staff would go through them, and let whoever was the group's choice to address them all on the last day at dinner. That would give them ample time to prepare their speech.

The supervisors were not at all surprised when, upon receipt of the feedback pages, Mandlakazi's name led all the rest. She had been, throughout the camp's duration, an invigorating, hope-giving presence. She was decidedly the favourite among the campers to address the entire group. Each request included the phrase – *she's inspirational!* – or words to that effect.

Although the girl's popularity had already come to their notice, the supervisors suddenly became wary; although they would have been the first to attest that the praise heaped on the girl was well deserved, they felt compelled to ask one another, 'She's not going to charge us anything, is she?' They could not believe such popularity could come free of charge. But then the senior camp director said, 'What if she does?' Another added, 'God knows, we've paid for overpriced duds before.'

That brought a burst of laughter, for they had all encountered a few of those. The department was still bruised by an incident where someone had hired a dud to do sign-language ... on TV nogal! And the woman was not only a fraud, but the khwapheni of a top-ranking government official.

At dinner therefore, with an earnest attempt at a surreptitious manoeuvre, the chief director palmed a note to Mandla. But she was so clumsy that Mandla had to retrieve the note from under the table where it had landed instead of in her lap. The note informed her that she was the group's choice to represent them, congratulated her, and requested that she address the camp the following evening at dinner, the last one of the camp.

The next day was spent in a flurry of activity – not all last-minute, although there were a few of those encounters too ... and not all official. The campers were busy collecting contact details and taking pictures, as well as performing the inevitable and tiresome chore of packing up their belongings. Many took the opportunity to buy fresh farm veggies and fruit, as well as the butteriest butter they had ever tasted; delicious cheese, too.

At last, the final dinner began. After the first course, everyone settled themselves comfortably and the camp director began the formal proceedings. She thanked everybody, and said how she had enjoyed their camp like never before. 'Not even when I went to camp at about the same age you are now ... as a Girl Guide. It was fun, but I do not remember having this much fun. Thank you!' She made a few announcements before she turned to Mandla, and pretending the whole thing was a surprise, called her up to address her colleagues.

Mandla tried to look surprised, but her wide smile gave the game away. She stood up, nodded to the staff at the top table, looked around and said, 'I am terribly sorry to interrupt your meal. Please, go on eating. Kuphela, ndibolekeni iindlebe. Only lend me your ears.'

Naturally, giggles followed that, and a clown shouted, 'I need both mine, sorry!'

More laughter. Mandla raised a hand and the laughter died down. 'I think I speak for most here, if not all. We are outsiders, wherever we go, any day of the week. Right?'

Affirmations of various kinds followed that one.

‘Well, guess what? There is a very simple solution to that. But first, so I don’t upset anybody ... will those who like being outsiders, being othered, raise hands, please?’

She stopped and looked around; noticed that one of the supervisors actually stood up to take a tally.

She should not have bothered. Not one hand was raised. Mandla continued: ‘Now, will those who would like to be insiders, please raise hands?’

A forest of hands sprouted.

Mandla nodded. So did the entire top table, and a volley of clapping erupted. She waited until the noise died down to complete silence as the audience waited for her to continue.

Her right arm describing a semi-circle that encompassed all those in the room, she said: ‘But you have your ingroup right here. You are it! Don’t you see? You already belong. You are IN. But what you MUST stop doing, something I know I do, and I have seen it here too, is this ...’

Again, she stopped. Waited. And when all that could be heard was the soft, apologetic tik-tok of someone making notes on an electric device, she resumed speaking: ‘Do not allow others to define you and, you yourself, do not define yourself by your disability. We must NOT do that. Everybody, repeat after me: “I am not a disability!”’

The entire group shouted, ‘I am not a disability!’ ‘The disability does not define who I am!’

By this time, the group had sprung to its collective feet, those in wheelchairs raising arms high into the air.

In the quiet that followed as people resumed their seats, she saw the much happier faces before her, shook her head, and said: ‘Since the world makes you feel unworthy, unlovable, useless ... come together and stand as a strong group, supporting one another, but, more important than that, learning how to love yourself, as an individual; and how to love others, particularly those similarly afflicted. For only when we accept who we are, do we really have the right to expect others—’ and here she gave a chuckle, ‘—OUR OWN OUTGROUP to accept us.’

She paused for the deafening applause and whistling that came after those words. However, when she resumed, it was to affirm them. ‘We can’t expect others to accept what we ourselves do not.

Why would they love what we loathe, detest, avoid even naming, pretending it does not exist, is not there?’

At that point, Mandla had to wait for the table-banging to stop before finishing off with: 'Beautiful people, wake up. Together, we are strong. Let's make it happen!'

And as one, everybody rose up to their feet or waved their hands or stamped their feet, roaring their approval.

The next morning was a flurry of brief, informal miniature powwows during which Mandla extolled the power of the collective or mutual support; answered queries; supported the faint of heart. Thrilled at the awakening, the group decided to keep the momentum going. By the time camp disbanded, Mandlakazi's group, twenty-four young people, aged between twelve and seventeen, had agreed to continue meeting, via a closed or private WhatsApp group. They named themselves YoFoP ('Youth, fulfil our promise', borrowing from the opening words of the hymn Mandla and her friends had sung on the first night): 'So as to never forget where we are headed and what we have to offer!' Mandlakazi was unanimously elected chair of the group.

When time came for the young people to bid one another goodbye, a bone-dry face was hard to find. Last-minute cries of 'Let me get your contact details!' became the order of the moment. The bus drivers had to threaten, 'Bus going! Bus going! With or without you – going!' while noisily revving their engines.

Finally, however, bus by bus, the campers left; each heart filled with joy; with anticipation; alive to possibilities. The organisers soon followed. Each harried and harassed, remembering what loads awaited them back home. The site grew quiet.

Bereft.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Of course, back home, everybody was curious as hell, and not just family either. The whole of Kwanele wanted to know what Mandla had done at camp; how the experience was, but, even more importantly, how she had found it – meaning, how she managed.

‘Did you have a good time?’ This came from Phyllis, which surprised Khulu and, even more so, Busi. Phyllis had never taken much interest in her granddaughter before. ‘I had lots and lots of fun,’ said Mandla.

She was careful to pay compliments to whomsoever they were due, saying: ‘I couldn’t have done it without your support.’ She went on to name every member of the family, saying what they had done for her. Most didn’t remember her words, but that didn’t matter. What mattered was that no one felt excluded. However, in her heart of hearts, the girl thanked a few most fervently.

*Khulu – although really you are Khokho to me
you are the one who has mothered me
Blessed Honey-girl, who gave me life
I thank you both; with all my heart, do I thank you
let me warn you, though
I am going to need a lot of support from everyone
this is just the beginning
Isende indlela ngaphambili! Long lies the road ahead!*

There was further good news, even better than Mandla’s examinations report. Busi received an email, that once opened and read, led to congratulations and ululation. It was an official report from Lulama Kodwa of the Department and the social worker Ms Ndonga, who had received feedback from the camp organisers.

SUBJECT: Mandlakazi Mkhonto: a most enterprising young woman. She has the makings of a leader.

RECOMMENDATION: Offer a full bursary for her education and keep an eye on her. Might be suitable for internship position once she reaches Grade Eleven or Twelve.

This praise and piece of good news brought smiles to every face in that house, and Mandla was heartily congratulated on acquitting herself in such exemplary manner. ‘May your ancestors always protect you from harm,’ Khulu said.

Busi was close to tears of joy, Lily cheered and waved her arms above her head, and Phyllis broke into gospel song: ‘Blessed assurance,’ she belted out, and the others joined in. Khulu hemmed the singing with a brief prayer of thanksgiving.

That was also the last weekend before the madness of Christmas, followed, a week later, by New Year! Then, hot on the heels of all that excitement, the end of the school holidays arrived. Once Mandla got back home, the holiday frenzy took over. Happily, Khulu was not mad about what she called unnecessary expenditure, and so things didn’t go quite as crazy as with most of the neighbours. Among the most amusing things was how everybody, including the young gentlemen of the family, enjoyed fresh veggies from the garden – so much so they were willing, no, eager, to help out there. This development pleased Khulu to no end.

Next, the tedious chore of uniform-reading! However, Mandla found herself looking forward to the schools reopening. There would be other children to recruit, for that had been one of the mandates with which the YoFoP group had tasked itself – a membership drive. Although that came with the proviso: ‘Make sure they qualify!’

So the work continued. From the word ‘Go!’, right after the campers returned home, the private WhatsApp group was very busy. Soon an informal register was kept that reflected not only membership, but the skills and interests linked to these names.

During all of this, Mandlakazi was busy: by stealth, she inveigled members’ minds. But what she did there was far from ominous; she could only augment what was already present, perhaps undetected or undervalued. As spirit, she stole into unrealised and unsuspected dreams and woke them.

Part of the deal, however, was constant reassurance, which further camps helped to achieve. Social workers were eager to help the group, and pressed SASSA, donors and the Department of Women, Children and People with Disabilities to partner with them. The future of YoFoP was assured, especially after social workers and government officials grabbed the spotlight, showing off the budding group as their personal achievement and success story. Ms Ndonga, now their staunchest ally, always said the group was a breath of fresh air. ‘You’d be

surprised at the moaners we get. And here you are, disabled and all, but look at what you do for yourselves!’

Amused, Mandla saw the benefit to those who would actually run the organisation. She would not always be there; this she knew.

So it was decided to hold weekend camps every other month, with different young people with disabilities attending each time, the costs met thanks to the benevolence of donors. The excitement and anticipation this brought cannot be imagined. Having somewhere to go and something to do was a novelty for many kasi teens. To go to camp, especially when these were tied to public holidays – Easter, Youth Day, Heritage month or school holidays... what a boost to the morale of YoFoP!

Suddenly, those who had made fun or shamed members of this group now envied them. Many wondered how and why they’d been left out, and wanted to know how they could join the group.

Meanwhile, to show off his hard work, the Minister of Women, Children, and People with Disabilities had asked the social workers to bring two of their top achievers to Parliament on the day the minister would be giving the Budget Speech. Ms Ndonga immediately thought of Mandla, and the glowing reports she had received about her from the camp staff. She called her, and Mandla gladly accepted the invitation.

Even the ‘boys’, her uncles, were excited for her, although they thought mostly of the food and drink that would no doubt be served at the reception afterwards. ‘What are you wearing?’ came from Lily, of all people – she was always going on about young people focusing on the ‘exterior’ instead of what really mattered, the ‘interior’, the real person. But to Ms Ndonga’s delight, Mandla chose to go in her school uniform. Busi, in a tizz, could not shine the girl’s shoes enough, although Mandlakazi kept telling her not to make a fuss about the whole thing.

‘But you should be at your very best!’ the proud mother said. ‘Are you saying I’m usually sloppy?’

‘Mcxnfm!’ Busi sucked her teeth, rolling eyes at her. They both burst out laughing; was there anyone less sloppy in that home? Khulu, perhaps ... but that was no outright winner.

The whole family saw her off: Khulu, Busi, Lily and Luvo walked her to the gate. Neighbours came out. Why wouldn’t they? Mandla was being picked up in no less a monster than a gleaming black BMW X3. The driver, in black jacket and cap, got out as Mandla approached, and opened the door for her. At the gate, Khulu took off her doek and ululated, waving the doek high up in the air.

At Parliament, they were hosted in a palatial room, with people dressed to the nines. The women were mostly in gay, colourful apparel, also sported by a few of the men. The opposite was true when it came to suits – more men than women in those.

Mandla and another student, a boy about her age, sat with Ms Ndonga and Lulama Kodwa from the department – she who had set the entire thing in motion – right in front of that packed hall. Both the English and the History teachers had asked her to prepare a report on her visit; and when the principal heard that, she said: ‘But she must give a talk to the whole school!’ So Mandla made sure she listened, observed, took notes. The boy alongside her was also taking notes. Then came the turn for the address by the minister. Mandla sat up; after all, she was there at this gentleman’s kind invitation.

But there were no fireworks here. ‘Blah blah blah ... all protocol observed!’ Followed by a whole palaver about the fantastic achievements of his department and the various ministries.

If one didn’t know any better, to hear him speak, one would be convinced there wasn’t a single poor person in this country. According to the fantastic job the minister and his crew were doing, along with the Ministry for Social Development, Mzansi was the land of milk and honey.

Mandla started, hearing her name called out: Mandlakazi Mkhonto and Samuel Brand were to come to the front. Ms Ndonga gave her a gentle nudge; the boy was already on his feet, blushing beetroot to his scalp, glowing through his crewcut.

The social worker walked the two young people to the podium, where the minister shook their hands, hugged them, and gestured to someone who brought packages; they handed them to the minister, who then handed one to each – Mandlakazi and the boy, in that order. All through this, he did not stop talking; telling the room, the nation, how proud everyone should be. ‘Our country’s future is secured. Look at the wonderful, bright and hardworking youth we have! Not all countries can boast of that ...’

Well, shaking hands with the minister was one thing. Seeing herself do that quite another. That came later, once she was home again, and everyone was watching the evening news on television. The clamour from the neighbours was deafening. Over the wall, people were shouting: ‘Mandlakazi! Mandlakazi, is that you on TV?!’

Even Mrs Bird called and congratulated her. ‘Who knows?’ she said. ‘You might be this country’s salvation – the next Mandela.’

Mandla laughed and protested: ‘Oh no! Not me!’

‘Somebody’s got to do the job,’ said the old woman, adding, ‘Pity no one’s asked Thuli Madonsela. She’d make a good, clean, honest president.’

But the most surprising and gratifying call came from Boniswa, who video-called Mandla via WhatsApp, beaming, eyes batting rapidly – she was that excited to talk to Mandla – who was on TeeVee! ‘They don’t believe me here,’ she shouted. ‘I’m telling them I know you!’

Mandla raised her voice too, shouted back: ‘Tell them we are friends!’

Gleefully Boniswa shouted, ‘Niyeva ke? Hear that? She’s my friend!’ Coming back to Mandla, she said, ‘Tell them, friend of mine. Tell them who you are.’

Word of mouth is like a veld fire during a drought. To Mandla’s surprise, all of Kwanele seemed to know of the event; and were thrilled that one of them, a girl from kasi, was mentioned by name during the Budget Speech. They had heard that with their own ears, seen it with their eyes right there on TV!

In no time, Mandlakazi’s name was on every lip in every home where a differently abled person lived. Family, friends and government employees entrusted with the improvement of the lives of People with Disabilities got to know her name. For her purposes, Mandlakazi was extremely pleased that this meant more similarly afflicted people coming into her orbit. It soon became apparent that there was a growing number of such cases; people who fell under the umbrella of YoFoP. Here, for once, they felt at home; felt they belonged, that what they said mattered.

Soon the YoFoP group had so many members, it could split into smaller groups, with each one choosing a name that best represented its mission. Mandla’s group was called ‘Potatoes’ – for food growers, ‘Potatoes’ was as good as any other veggie name. They held earnest discussions about the meaning of gardening, its import not only to self-preservation but to independence and human dignity, and many became instant gardening enthusiasts. Although they met for mini-camps, the essentials were covered via electronic and digital means. Mandlakazi deliberately kept a low profile in the group, keen not to be seen as the leader. If truth be known, however, her heart was with her Potatoes. They worked hard: planting and weeding and reaping and distributing the food they grew ... and all the time, learning what worked best where and how.

But they also made sure they had fun. And always but always, they reminded one another why they were there, what brought them together: ‘Always outsiders, here we are INSIDERS!’

As did all YoFoP subgroups, the Potatoes recited their motto at the beginning and end of meetings:

1. We are role models for future generations, our descendants
2. We define who we are by what we do
3. We firmly believe we can do anything we set our minds to
4. We are a community, committed to self-development
5. We are helping one another get there; make it; enjoy life
6. We love who we are unconditionally
7. We accept limitations, but refuse to let them define who we are.

And to affirm the credo, at every meeting, some time was given to song and dance. It didn’t matter whether one was in a wheelchair, visually or hearing impaired ... dance dance dance! came the call. And everyone, as best they knew how, as best they could, danced. And again, according to the credo to which they subscribed, they danced together, helping one another to dance dance dance!

A ritual developed: in the throes of the music and the movement, a whistle would suddenly shrill, and everyone would stop in whatever pose they had struck. The leader would sweep eyes over the gathering and demand: ‘ARE we HAPPY or not?’

‘HAPPY! HAPPY! HAPPY!’ without fail, each time, would resound. Mandlakazi, always there, even when physically absent, would nod, heart smiling.

It was not all a bed of roses, though. Some had never before realised the role their mothers had played in creating the children’s disabilities, consciously or unconsciously, with or without intent. Others knew but only vaguely so; it was as if their mothers had accidentally made the wrong moves, wrong choices. But now, with the awakening of self-awareness and growing confidence, issues of speculation and discussion arose among the young members. There was a lot of weeping, a lot of anger, and bags and bags of bewilderment. No one was happy to cast their mother in the role of the evil stepmother or the Wicked Witch of Crocodile-Ville. But the crude facts of their bodies would not be denied; stared them straight in the eye of the soul.

So discussions were far from frivolous; people had real issues confronting them, and the group offered a platform many had not realised they had needed. Now that it was available,

wondered how they could have lived without it. They knew that now that they'd stumbled on it, this pool of mercy, they would not be able to do without it.

*You learn, dear ones
you learn:
in wheelchair, wearing stocky-heeled shoe
eyes that barely make out shapes—
happiness tastes the same in every heart
touch it! Smell it! Taste it!
Let it soak into the marrow in your bones!*

At one particular meeting, the last of the year, Mandlakazi was challenged to do something different with which to present her family.

'Something visible,' said Glenda. 'Sure!' Mandlakazi replied. 'But what?'

'I know,' offered Boniswa, now an integral part of the group. 'Dye your hair!' And proceeded to offer to do it, 'free of charge!'

As the whole ethic of YoFoP was based really on the disruption of commonly held beliefs about disability, and she was always urging the others to 'jump in and take risks', how could she refuse? But she made as though to demur.

'No risk, no gain!' came the cry, a phrase she used to urge others to action.

So Mandla agreed, but she drove a hard bargain. They could dye her hair any colour they chose if they all promised to start growing their own food. All agreed, and it was not surprising that the colour her friends picked was green!

*They dye my hair
I dye their minds, their hearts and their souls
get in there and
plant understanding deep, deep, deep.*

Well, if Khulu didn't freak out. Mandla almost laughed at her great-grandmother's reaction. *You'd think I had done something like Busi did all those years ago, getting herself pregnant with me. Look, here I am preparing for Grade Nine – am almost out of high school – well, almost at the midpoint, anyway. Time to show a little rebellion!*

‘Green hair?’ Khulu shrieked before Mandla had even put both feet over the threshold, umgubasi! ‘That’s the trend!’ Themba announced through a mouth full of the sandwich he was gormandising. *Someone should teach him not to talk with food in his mouth*, thought Mandla: *no wonder he has no girlfriend. But Sazi does! Met her at an AA meeting, but she’s turned out to be his mainstay. With her by his side, he’s doing really well.*

‘What trend? What does it mean?’ Khulu fired one question after the other without waiting for an answer. She obviously didn’t expect one. These were not questions, but statements of bewilderment and disapproval. More the latter than the former, in fact. *The hair is not a healthy green, either; I don’t know what those girls did to me, but now it’s a green that makes poor Khulu think of vomit ...* Surprisingly, Aunt Lily was the one to bail Mandla out. ‘She is grown; makes her own choices,’ she said.

‘What kind of choice is green hair? What does it say about her? About us?’ This was the day of questions in a string, Mandla noticed, without letting on that she was the least bit interested. Nonchalance was the word.

Lily continued her defence: ‘That she is who she is.’ ‘Who is ...?’

‘Mandlakazi, a high-school student?’ Her family still used such archaic terms. They fairly made the girl blush. *Student, indeed!*

‘And this is what sets her apart? Isn’t “colour-this, colour- that” the so-called trend with the young these days? How then does it set her apart? It announces to all and sundry she has joined the crowd – has become a follower!’ Khulu spat the last two words.

Next, she resorted to tradition. ‘Siphi ke esakhe ngqo isimbo, exhentsa ngezabanye nje? Where then is her own dance step or trademark – since she is dancing the dance step of others?’

For once, to everyone’s surprise, Phyllis opened her mouth to gainsay her mother, even if quietly.

‘Maybe, Mama,’ Phyllis said and all eyes popped. But as though she did not see that, as though she had no idea of the consternation she was causing, she went on, said, ‘... maybe the child just wants to belong.’ ‘She belongs here!’ Khulu huffed.

‘I mean,’ Phyllis coughed before she raised her voice just a little and said, ‘Mandlakazi probably wants to be accepted by oontanga bakhe, her peers.’

Khulu sucked her teeth, shrugged, and went to her room. But the thought had been planted. Like all teenagers, Mandlakazi desired to be accepted by other teens ... especially those, as in her camp group, with whom she shared so much more than even Khulu could really know. It was time, the old woman thought. It was time, all right.

CHAPTERTWENTY-THREE

Not long after the ‘green hair’ lawaai, Khulu plonked a big, pail-shaped grass basket on the table – one of those open ones with no handles women carry on their heads loaded with groceries from the shop or veggies from the garden. She put it right down in the centre after dinner. That stopped what little conversation had been going on, as everyone was thinking of bed. She must have had the basket beside her on the floor during the evening meal. When she saw that she had caught everyone’s attention, she said: ‘This is the best time to catch all of you. The basket you see before you ... is for each of the grown-ups to fill.’

‘With?’ Lily asked.

‘Your contribution toward ukuthomba kukaMandlakazi, Mandlakazi’s initiation into womanhood.’

Luvo looked a little taken aback. ‘Then you don’t want me around.’ He made as though to get up from where he sat.

‘What makes you think we don’t?’ ‘Ukuthomba is an affair of women.’

‘Not the preparations,’ Khulu said. Once she saw him nod, she continued: ‘I think it is time to prepare for the traditional rites of passage. Why delay?’ She added, ‘Before she surprises us with yellow or red hair ...’

‘Mama,’ Lily said, ‘what are you talking about?’

‘Nifuna ndiphinde laa nto sayigqiba ngoNoquku? You all want me to repeat what we decided ages ago?’ She looked at each person present long enough for their eyes to meet, as if taking in votes of agreement and making sure of their attention. Although only Lily had asked the question, Khulu suspected a collective opposition. Had they reneged on their agreement? So she included each one of them. If they were not in opposition to the plan, why were they not supporting her?

‘We agreed, remember?’ Without waiting for her daughters’ responses, Khulu continued, ‘Lo uza kuthomba; nithanda, ningathandi! This one is going to thomba; like it or not!’

Khulu went on to spell out once more what ukuthomba meant, and its relevance to modern life: ‘Time does not change living; what it changes is the manner in which that living is done. The rules remain the same; it is the how of it that changes.’

‘I don’t understand,’ Phyllis said.

Khulu turned the tables on her, asking: ‘Bekuthonjiswa ukuze?’

What was the significance of ukuthomba?’

‘Kwaziwe yilali yonke ukuba intombi ikhulile. That the whole village gets to know the girl has grown; that she has matured.’

‘Yena? What about her?’

‘Yena ntoni, Mama? What do you mean, what about her, Mama?’

‘Yena uza kuyazi loo nyaniso? Will she also know that truth?’ ‘Ewe nje. Ingani nguyele lo uthonjiswayo! Of course. Isn’t she the one undergoing the rites?’

‘So, you agree with me, ukuthombisa was a signal to the girl and her world that she was no longer a little girl but had transitioned into womanhood. Yes, young womanhood, but womanhood nonetheless.’

Surprised at the simplicity of this, Lily and Phyllis said at the same time: ‘That’s true!’

Khulu followed with a question. ‘How has that changed? Don’t girls grow up and become women today?’

‘They do!’ Lily agreed. ‘And they know that?’ ‘Yes,’ said Phyllis.

‘And all around them know that?’

‘Yes, but ...’ Phyllis stumbled, adding, ‘... eh ...’ ‘Go on! But what?’

Lily helped her sister out. ‘But we don’t make a song and dance about it.’

At that, Khulu rose to her feet, leaving the others seated. Her voice noticeably higher, just below shouting pitch, she said: ‘That’s not true – well, not completely true. You do indeed, and I will tell you what song and dance you make and how that works ... but only to some extent ... in the same way as the old. Your young do not go through rites of passage as of old. True. But they undergo certain rites which mark the passage of time, and also show all that they are a step further than they were earlier.’

Phyllis asked, ‘What do you mean?’

‘What did you do when Mandlakazi here passed ... what do you call Standard Six these days again? When she gradyu–wagreda.’ Busi, who had been listening quietly until then, corrected her:

‘Graduation.’

‘Of course! Oo heke!’ from both Phyllis and Lily.

‘That tells you, you who are doing that gradyu thing, that you are marching along in the path of life,’ Khulu said and stopped to glare at her daughters. ‘These signs that mark the path we travel are important. They remind us of the very purpose of life, our life. Each person is born to a purpose. However, life is so full of things that pull us this way and that, we forget

our purpose. And these rites of passage serve as reminders – to us and those with whom we live, that we must take responsibility for our lives.’

The old woman sat back down again, but held her posture upright. ‘Gradyu— is for that, today. However, it doesn’t seem to quite have the same or full impact on the young as the rites of old did. And I blame the secrecy or exclusionary manner in which today’s rites are performed. Rites are the finishing steps to the process of growing. From birth, the child learns to be as the people around her. At ukuthomba, for girls, and ukwaluka, for boys, the training is perfected. AmaJuda, like the Birds and their friends, do this for their children when they turn thirteen. Now, there are people who have stuck to their traditions. Thina, we just turn our noses up at ours. That is why our young are filling the jails, why they have all these first-borns.’

Phyllis asked, ‘Mama, what will ukuthombisa do for this one? She is already a sensible girl, doing well at school. Everyone says she is wise for her years.’

‘Wait and see. While in seclusion, she will be taught the ways of womanhood. What it means to be a grown woman. What behaviours are expected, which frowned upon, and which out and out forbidden.’

Frowning, ‘Such as?’ Phyllis asked. ‘What do you mean, such as?’

‘Which behaviours are forbidden women?’

At once, Khulu’s face took on another look, one of weariness, as she asked herself how far to go; what exactly to voice. She sighed and said: ‘The same as for men. Most are in the Bible. Many more are in the tales of our forebears, the stories we were told growing up. And all are about the promotion of peaceful co-existence: how to live a life that contributes to the life of the village; a life that destroys nothing and no one; a life that brings joy, help, and grows or encourages all things good in life. That is the essence of being human.’

‘I suppose it can’t do any harm,’ Phyllis said reluctantly. Never mind, Khulu told herself. Half the battle won. She smiled, an inner glow warming her.

Lily interjected, ‘Phofu iyafana nje nale yeenwel’ ezima- balabala; yindlela entsha yokufikisa, I suppose. It’s the same as this thing of multi-coloured hair. It’s the new way of ukufikisa– ripening.’

The family once more in agreement, Khulu smiled broadly and said, ‘Here’s something that will make you see I also march with the times, nam ndihamba namaxesha!’

A little sarcastically, Lily said, ‘Surprise us, Mama.’ She didn’t believe Khulu would say anything she hadn’t said before, at least a hundred times.

Khulu took a deep breath. ‘Remember how I’m always going on and on about how we should not be wasteful?’

Phyllis groaned; Lily sighed. 'Is this new or wha-at?'

'Well now,' Khulu went on. 'I suggest we stop the insane extravagance that has become the norm in all our affairs: weddings, funerals, circumcision, whatever ...' She paused and gave all present a steely look. There was not even a hint of a smile in her demeanour. 'When tradition started, and until recently, within living memory, the scale of all these affairs was very different – miniscule compared to today's ridiculous numbers.'

Again, she stopped, waited for questions or comments. When none came, she continued: 'But we have not adapted our manner of doing things to fit our changed circumstances.'

Luvo jumped in. 'For example, Mama?'

'Thank you, Nyana,' Khulu said, straightening in her seat. 'I'm glad you asked that question. Let us take umngcwabo, a funeral. Long ago, we buried the body the same day, if death happened very early morning. In any event, burial took place within two days after death, before the body spoiled. There was no time or means for hundreds of people, all needing refreshment, to travel to the family. Now, with modern technology, it can be weeks, even months before a person is laid to rest. Not so?'

Khulu gave a few more examples, all illustrating the imbalance between intent and method. She then suggested that the process in the matter before them – ukuthomba kwentombi, the girl's rites of passage – be adapted to suit the present while still honouring tradition. 'We must observe the spirit of the custom and the teachings imparted to the initiate. Not the trappings! That is paramount,' said the old woman.

So time, space, and fare were all refigured. The girl would remain in isolation, in her room, for one week, instead of a month.

A chicken at the start and another at the end of the ceremony would serve as offering instead of an ox and a goat and two or three or more sheep, depending on the numbers that descended on the family, honouring them as they honoured their ancestors. Respectively, Khulu and Busi would serve as inkazana and ikhankatha, nurse and aide looking after intonjane, the initiate, while she was in seclusion. Busi, a social worker, had the knowledge of today while Khulu had that of yesterday. Intonjane would get the full benefit of both; she would be in good hands. Phyllis was charged with bringing the light: candles, matches and white ochre. These would signify her entry into the spirit world.

Relief was palpable. Each had feared, if silently, the debt this would call for. But Khulu was not quite done and also, seeing the glee in their eyes, thought to burst their bubble a little,

just for the fun of it. She went on: ‘Njengoba nani nisazi, as you also know,’ laughing out loud, she said, ‘Akukho mcimbi kungekho tywala – there is no ceremony without utywala – liquor!’

The ensuing debate was short but bittersweet. Not everybody was thrilled at the idea of shrinking drinking. But none had the courage to say this openly. Khulu was firm: only umqombothi – traditional home-brewed beer – would be served and that in limited quantity: ifatyi for the first ceremony, and another for the coming-out ceremony. Ifatyi, a vat or three four-gallon tins of it. Absolutely no bottled liquor: ‘We lie when we make objects, we cannot make ourselves, the centre of our observances. Siyaxoka xa sisenza isiko ngezinto esingakwazi nokuzenza.’

CAMAGU!

Do we hunger or thirst?

Homage to us should not be bondage

To our beloved earthlings.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

D-DAY!

That week of the initiation of Mandlakazi into womanhood, the house was a beehive in early spring. As had been agreed, however, this was no extravaganza, but all the basics were present in modest quantities.

For a while now, Mandlakazi had been both prepared and preparing for this event.

The night before the actual day of umngeno, a Thursday night, the procedure began: alone, she left the house she called home. Away, she walked, bare-footed, a lone figure completely covered in an old blanket beneath which she had on only boxer shorts. From the house, in measured steps, she walked to the gate. Exited!

This marked her exit from her earlier being, whom she had been until then. Now she would not be called Mandlakazi, but Intonjane – Initiate – and perhaps given a name for the duration of her ukuthonjiswa, initiation. This also marked her withdrawal from society; she would not partake of any social activity, including staying at her girlhood home; her ‘father’s’ house, the house she had until then called ‘home’ was now out of bounds to her. Her language too, was circumscribed; there were words she was forbidden to say, and she had to substitute others by way of ukuhlonipha – great respect. All her childhood was in her past now; play and frivolity were no longer hers to have; the serious, deliberate acts of adulthood, grown womanhood beckoned, and that was the business of her seclusion: instruction into that onerous role.

Once she cleared the perimeters of her home and walked a little way from it, without turning, her back to the main house. Intonjane knelt on the ground. On the bare, bare ground, just outside the gate to her home, the girl knelt; and bowed low, as though in prayer. A forlorn figure, out from one world, the world of girlhood, a world she would never again return to, she knelt; leaving it behind her, irreversibly.

The pupa was knocking. Knocking at the door to the other world, the world of her ancestors, so that they would intercede on her behalf, so that she would be given entry and guidance and blessings into the new world she sought – womanhood: a blessed and fruitful womanhood.

A little while later, inkazana emerged from the main house. With slow, measured steps, Khulu walked towards that figure of total obeisance; took her by her left hand, helped her to her feet, and led her around the main house to the back room, where the soothing scent of

impepho enveloped her as she entered. Everything was as clean as new. For the next week, her bed was isicamba, her speech in hlonipha language, voice barely above a whisper. Immediately, inkazana directed the pupa to shower: 'Only cold water, remember!'

Intonjane returned, minutes later, and her idindala gently anointed her body with white ochre. From head to the sole of her feet, intonjane was covered with the stuff. And then she got robed so that under the blanket, she was hooded in a black doek tied under the chin, clad only in inkciyo and boxer shorts. The white clay that covered her body from head to toe indicated her nearness to the ancestors and thus her withdrawal from society.

Throughout that week of withdrawal from society, small groups of girls the same age as intonjane visited in the evenings and sat in on the instructions given. These were no secret and, indeed, increased in value as they were shared, became common knowledge.

One such evening, intonjane was stolen, the one and only time during ukuthomba. But unlike her visitors, who were much surprised, inkazana and ikhankatha kept calm. They kept calm for they knew what was taking place, but by so doing, they helped calm the girls who had come to pay homage to their agemate as she transitioned into full womanhood. And so, much as the girls were surprised, to give them credit, they kept their collective heads, knowing the two women in charge, inkazana and ikhankatha would take care of things ... and of them too.

All was calm. Eyes strained towards the figure prone on the floor.

Her voice just above a whisper, she first spoke to her inkazana; sang her clan praises, including some the woman herself barely knew, had forgotten, or now heard for the first time ... for the initiate went deep ... deeper than even inkazana knew, much to her surprise and even a little chagrin.

Then she greeted each girl there, said something pertinent that would leave the addressee wondering how on earth she'd come to know of it. When she had spoken to all, revealing each to herself, she grew quiet. For a brief moment, she lay there, silent, seemingly not even breathing.

And then again, she stirred, returned in the earlier form, spoke with the voice heard seconds earlier. Now, she repeated something she had said years before; but those with her at this very moment had no knowledge that this was a repeat performance. To them it was a new and frightening revelation. Those who'd heard it or heard of it in long-ago Sidwadweni had all but forgotten it.

Rising noticeably, and now speaking as with multiple voices, the words came:

In great jubilation,

we played and the world played with us.

Who has forgotten that time?

The voice, or voices, then called the names of the winning teams, mentioning something pertinent about each: the captain or a brilliant player, one who'd scored the deciding goal in a heart-and-gut-wrenching battle. Three of the young women present were familiar with what she was saying. One was herself a player; two had brothers interested in football, and were au fait with the game because of that.

A brief silence fell. Like mist over a hill, awe slowly filled the room, creeping up all inside them and filling each girl with dread as they heard the initiate's breathing change. Progressively, it sounded heavier, more and more laboured. It was as though she were straining to breathe, as though the air had turned thick or wet or odour-laden, making inhalation a complex and hazardous process.

At that point, one of the girls, the soccer player, made as if to rise and assist the labouring initiate. But inkazana, the house mother, put out one arm, stayed her as if a gate. Communal breath held as though by celestial order, in silence, all waited. Watched and waited. Waited, each second a full year.

Suddenly, from the breath-strapped form came a startlingly loud, harsh in-drawn breath that sounded as though there were teeth in the initiate's nostrils or further down the respiratory tract, in her throat or windpipe. The air seemed to rake and scratch over some substance or blockage ... no one could picture or guess ... but all did wonder. Then, once more, the multiple voices came. But now they were distinctly and ominously different, clad in heavy sorrow, wailing as if at a wake:

Now – the world will not play

– the world will die!

Like a world-renowned and celebrated music score, a Bach or Mozart composition, practised and well-remembered – what followed was an exact replica of the Sidwadweni announcement the girl had made more than a decade before. The pitch of the voices was even the same; authoritatively, they decreed:

*So few years.
Oh, so very few! Another event,
bigger ...
Not for playing, but for burying
– Oh, so-o soon,
Ngomso lo, like tomorrow!
No cups or trophies, but caskets instead
The ground will not be able to swallow all the dead!
O-oh! The multitudinous dead!
There will be none left to bury the dead.
Earth will no longer be able to swallow more.
Calamity of calamities!*

As can be expected, that prediction alarmed the company of girls, but inkazana was not chosen for the role lightly. Her stately demeanour, her eyes, and the occasional nod toward one or another of the girls went a long way toward maintaining calm. The bewildering phrases they heard would haunt them for years to come, though; haunt them well into their old age.

But right then, the imminence of a colossal disaster singed itself into the hearts and minds of those present. Even the grown women minding them felt their bowels loosen, ants crawl in their armpits, their bloomers mist. A fear was at once etched in every heart and mind of those whose ears the dread prophecy had penetrated.

Then voices spoke softer, more slowly, but their message remained no less frightening.

*This may seem a long, long way from home;
but it is not so.
China is like Woodstock to Cape Town,
It is like Kwanele to Hermanus,
For all humanity breathes the same air.
Therefore, be not complacent China burns
If it burns, you burn.
Iyatsh' iTshayina! China is burning!
They are human beings. We too are human beings.
We burn with China therefore.
We burn.*

All humanity burns!

When intonjane finally fell into the aftermath of sleep, inkazana put up a curtain around her, and shifted the others accordingly. She followed that with instruction regarding what they had witnessed; emphasised their responsibility and respect for the experience. As part of their culture and also their growing up, the mysteries of the Old had been revealed to them. ‘Each one of you knows you are doubly blessed,’ she ended. Inkazana spoke more truth than she knew.

*Khulu, as usual, spoke more truth than any knew
this time I was not alone
izihlwele, the multitude of the Old was in and with me
we were all there, as always but this time they voiced their presence
My time is coming
and what we sowed is seed the wind will blow about
sow in the minds of many whose lives cross these children’s
the Old have spoken!*

But this instance was a singular one. For the most part, the days that followed were spent in learning what it meant to be a grownup, a woman, wife, mother, active member of the community. Sex education was certainly part of the training the girls received. Other duties were connected to keeping a home: cooking, cleaning, gardening, animal husbandry; prevention and cure of common ailments such as running tummies, coughs, headaches ... using roots and herbs. There were lessons in beadwork; plaiting hair; doek-tying and building body strength so as to be able to carry a decent-sized inyanda on one’s head, a baby on one’s back, even while ploughing and reaping fields.

Khulu was at her best in this role. To intonjane and her peers, she said: ‘You are grown, no longer a child, a girl, but a woman. The sacred blood shows you can have children. With womanhood comes responsibility – responsibilities to yourself; family; society, then and now. Do not throw away custom without first examining the meaning of it. Only when you have done that and found its worth no longer applies, should you consider throwing it into the sea

of yesterday. Most of what our esteemed forebears did, you will find worth preserving, if adapted to today's ways of doing things.

'Let me start with sexuality, one of the most misunderstood concepts of our tradition. First, sex is your natural right; enjoy it. But, like all freedoms, it comes with responsibility. Sex can and usually results in procreation. Children come into the world totally dependent on the adults who beget them. Today, young people look at the practices of their grandparents and disrespectfully throw them into the toilet. But they miss the wisdom of those practices. Today, men and women have contraceptives. They have the responsibility to monitor the begetting of their children. If, with the methods you all find crude, the old managed this matter as well as they did, then there is NO excuse for fatherless children, a plague in our country right now. This is a crime against children... a crime, if not a sin.'

Another day, inkazana explained: 'Any unfinished childhood business must be complete by the time of your re-entry to society. You leave childhood here, at this time. Serious work now takes the place of play. You are now your own supervisor. It is up to you to keep your body healthy and strong, for the duties of a woman are strenuous, even in these days of appliances and help. Exercise and diet should be your form of prayers to your body. Pay attention to nutrition; gluttony and poor diet lead to lifestyle diseases such as diabetes, high-blood pressure, kidney problems and asthma, among others. Your health is your life, and your life is in your hands.'

On the very last day, inkazana repeated teachings she had been presenting all week: 'Check your attitude. Humility is not stupidity. Loyalty to self and loved ones is essential. Kindness and empathy; an open mind; willingness to be of worth to the world - this is how we build ourselves, our communities, our society.'

'But is the will there? Is the sense of responsibility there? Likhona na uhloni? Is there respect for self, for the other, for the environment, the mother-house of all that lives?'

'Never forget, you are never alone! Hence this ceremony, this celebration.'

On that final day, what Kwanele would remember foremost was the dignity of the ceremony, and also the family present to the initiate: a bank account!

Busi surprised all present, including herself. As uSosuthu, the mother of the solo celebrant, as well as ikhankatha, Busisiwe qualified for the right of first appearance. Strangely, she ceded this, choosing to go last.

When her turn to speak eventually came, she surprised even herself with all the tears that came flooding down her face, before all those people, some complete strangers. But once they started, there was no stopping the tears.

In a clear and sincere voice, she said: ‘Mandlakazi, my child, forgive me. It is a hard thing I ask of you, but if you can find it in your heart, forgive me. I will be part of the work you do, bear witness. All women of child-bearing years need to hear my story, which is your story; how you got to be what you are: a child maimed, deliberately maimed, by your mother, me—’ Here, Busisiwe stopped and repeatedly beat a hard fist against her chest, tears pouring down her face. ‘Young women must be reminded that when they carry their young in their bodies, whatever they ingest and drink, the baby also ingests and drinks. Therefore, they should take great care that whatever they eat or drink will do no harm to the precious being they carry. You can count on me to help. I offer my assistance whenever it is needed. It is the least I can do ... that is, if you will allow me to be part of the work you plan.’

For answer, the emerging woman went and knelt before her mother, put her head on Busisiwe’s lap. The two hugged tight as tight can be. Then the new woman straightened and leaned towards her mother’s ear. She said: ‘Mama, I forgive you, but will that bring you true healing? True healing can only come from self-forgiveness, and that comes from forgiving those who have wronged you. Only when you have achieved your own forgiving do you even have the right to ask for it of others. Only when you are grudge-free, are you able to take responsibility for errors in choices or deeds you committed, not blaming others.’

Even as Busi heard those words from her daughter’s lips, faces from her past marched swiftly, relentlessly, before her eyes. It was as though she were watching a film or TV: Papa, Mama, Brian, Aunt Lily, Thandi ... and as each face flashed past, the ugly that person had done her flashed through her mind. But, reaching deep into her heart, she found she no longer had any hate or anger stored there. She turned to her daughter, a sad smile on her face, her eyes glowing with unshed tears of relief and joy.

Busi nodded several times. With each nod, her smile grew bolder and brighter.

Again, the two hugged.

Busi turned to the gathering, still holding her daughter’s hand. She shouted above the din that had arisen, shouted until quiet returned: ‘All mothers who have harmed – abenzakalise – their children now know, cannot but know what it is they did. What is more, society knows what it has allowed to happen to millions of its children; allowed and even encouraged. To be the leading country in the world in foetal alcohol syndrome should make each and every South African ashamed. Ashamed of what we permit while of sane mind. I know I am! With

universities, institutions of religion, legal institutions and more, how do we choose to lay waste human potential?’

Khulu burst into tears. Even had she tried, she couldn’t hold the tears back; she was deeply gratified to see the rent between mother and child mend, and mend so beautifully, so authentically. With purpose and determination to do the work so sorely needed in Mzansi.

*Busisiwe,
Blessed Honey-girl y
ou are grown; healed; whole
for as you forgive others
so you may
forgive yourself.*

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

In the wake of this much-talked-about initiation, new clubs sprang and grew from the association with Mandla and YoFoP. These showed the interests of the group: needlework, gardening, cooking, animal husbandry, and building. Although Mandla encouraged the diversity, her heart of hearts was with the gardening group. This thrived, as members researched which food and medicinal plants did well in the local soil, and what they could do to enhance the soil's fertility.

But the work didn't stop there. Mandla urged the members to 'Spread the word! Infect friend, relative and neighbour with the gardening bug!' For, as she reasoned with her camp sisters and their recruits: what is good for one is good for all. Moreover, she joked, 'Let us make gardening fashionable, the in-thing!' She was leaving her footprints; planting thoughts and burying beliefs in people's minds. And it was not just young people with disabilities; able-bodied boys and girls, young men and women, flocked to join these groups.

Street by street, gardens grew healthy and strong. And there was more in store for the young gardeners. Mandla led them on expeditions of discovery: finding soil on slopes, in caves, gullies and along old, dried-up swales where water once sang.

These fertile grounds became the group's 'Fields of Hope', as they came to be known. Here they planted staples: vegetables and practical crops such as maize, beans, potatoes, sweet potatoes, pumpkin, butternut, flax, marogo, madumbi. Some members expressed fears that people would help themselves to their produce, but Mandla responded: 'Sibiye ngegunya lezinyanya! Our fence is our ancestors!' She dared any thief to 'trespass' although she quickly added, 'Wrong word! For no one owns God's land.' However, she said, 'What we plant, none may plunder!'

Miraculously, the Fields of Hope were not raided – not even once; as in the days of old, when thievery was unknown, and respect ruled supreme. Respect for self; for others; for the environment, by the kindness of which all life, particularly frail human life, survived, dependent, and without whose beneficent bounty nothing would live.

A few of the more adventurous or curious members wanted to prove Mandla wrong; test the efficacy of the ancestral protection. But the Old fenced the Fields of Hope with rings of will that no fleshling could break. So each time different young women by themselves or accompanied by friends, ventured to the fields by stealth, they never could find them. Not even

once. And when one mischievous one told Mandla of her failed attempt, saying she'd happened to be in the vicinity and wanted to show a couple of friends what she was involved in, Mandla told her, 'You are lucky. Go home and make an offering of thanks to your ancestors. They protected you.'

Those who heard that shivered, for their imagination most probably far outstripped reality. Who really understood Mandlakazi and the air of mystery she wore? Oh, she didn't flaunt it, but it was there ... indefinable but tangible.

*By day and by night
From the land of forever-sleep
We come to safeguard the seed
From it, ubuntu's rebirth shall come.
Time is almost nigh. Time is almost nigh.*

The Fields of Hope thrived bounteously; the harvests the gardeners reaped were unbelievably rich and plentiful. That, coupled with the harvests from their gardens at home, gave them such good nutrition that their health was all but ensured.

As the gardeners shared their food with others, selling at very low prices, when they did sell, they enjoyed the grateful thanks of their neighbours and customers. Not a few began small businesses, taking advantage of being right at the customer's doorstep and providing super-fresh produce; not to mention their very reasonable prices!

'Fields of Hope' soon became a catch-phrase, and business boomed. So did friendships, old and new. The Fields of Hope were featured in community newspapers and on radio talk shows. Soon thereafter, they made their way into local magazines and daily newspapers. Before long, they were among those projects receiving high praise from government and international organisations. The stellar not-for-profit organisation, Gift of the Givers, which provided disaster relief all around the globe, offered their support, advice and any guidance they might need. 'Just ask!'

It was not just crops that were ripening. The initiation ceremony had brought about a rapprochement between Mandla and Busisiwe. Although their relationship before had never seemed distant or lacking in affection, the new closeness had an almost sisterly quality about it – more intimate. Among the new ventures on which the two embarked was hiking. Mandla, always an outdoorsy person, introduced her mother to the joys of beach, veld and mountain. She wasn't able to climb rocks or steep inclines, but as long as there was a distinct path, she could manage. Meanwhile the bug bit Busi to such an extent she became the prime mover in their regular forays.

*This is my mother, Busisiwe,
honey-sweet
as the time draws nearer and nearer
for Khulu to go to forever sleep
she, it is, who will take over, carry on
therefore, I do with her as I have done with Khulu
Isina idedelana – the old yields to the new
but I, Mandlakazi,
soon, I will be gone
gone before Khulu
to welcome her home
It is a small kindness I can do for Khulu
Who has done so much for me in flesh-life.*

One fine Saturday, the sky the colour of a calm summer sea at noon, mother and daughter were out on magnificent Boyes Drive. That morning, they had taken the south-bound bus from Claremont to Simonstown so as to make their way back on foot, a pleasant walk along the sea on one side, the mountains towering on the other. Boyes Drive would take them as far as Muizenberg – at least, that was the plan. However, high above Kalk Bay, Mandla tripped and fell, bumping her head on a boulder. Fortunately, although dazed, she remained conscious, but found she couldn't move. She had cracked her left shin.

‘Don’t panic,’ she told Busi, who was beside herself with anxiety, but managed to summon help. A party of hikers helped carry Mandla down to the main road, where they could get her to hospital. When Busi returned with the news, Kwanele was riled. Didn’t she know mountains were dangerous? They were lucky they had not been assaulted or raped or murdered. But when Mandla rang from hospital and said she would be coming home the very next day, tempers cooled and laughter returned.

And, indeed, the next day, Mandla was back. Yes, she walked with the aid of crutches and the leg was in plaster but she was cheerful. She could go to school but, of course, no more hikes for her – not even walks could she manage. This was irritating enough. But it was being hindered from gardening that brought her to tears of frustration almost every day. Her garden itself did not suffer; her friends rallied and the work continued as before ... perhaps with a little more earnestness for none wanted to disappoint Mandla or make her think they had slacked off in her absence. Even Boniswa sat in her wheelchair setting seeds in planting trays.

Thanks to Mandla’s robust health, it wasn’t long before she was fully mended, the bone knit. It was at this point, when many would have expected Mandlakazi Mkhonto to shine in the limelight that she receded. Little by little, she pushed Busi and the more outstanding performers in the group forward. This core became the board of directors of Fields of Hope, with Busi recognised as the CEO. Popular now not just throughout Kwanele, but the entire nation, Fields of Hope registered as a not-for-profit organisation.

Hlombe’s words resonated. Behold a flock of birds in flight. For a moment, a season in the benevolent aerial currents of waves, one will lead while behind that one, the others follow in orderly fashion. No sooner than she falters, feeling the burden of leadership begin to weary her, overcome her strength, her judgement, than another thrusts himself forward. Not envious or grumbling or boastful. But in humble obligation, relieving the courageous leader. And assuming that when time comes for him to relinquish the lead, another worthy will just as willingly take over the obligation he now takes.

True glory dwells not in the self, but in service rendered to others for the greater good. There is no nobler pursuit than contribution to the common good – never forgetting that ISINA IDEDELANA!

*My job here nearly done;
my Agemates call me back;
now we must plant the seed.*

Then began the year of the deadly and infectious Covid pandemic, throwing the entire globe into disarray. On 23 March 2020, President Cyril Ramaphosa announced the country would be on lockdown for four weeks, beginning in three days' time.

Three days of grace, for some. Three days of a frantic scramble to stave off death by starvation for many.

That very same day the president announced the imminent national lockdown, visible panic spilled out of houses and shacks, and spread everywhere. With only three days to gather stocks, putting together enough food and other necessary supplies, including sanitary items of every kind, including disinfectant, became a major undertaking. Those who could, people with money in their purses or bank accounts, went shopping as though Christmas and all the other public holidays put together were upon them, all rolled into one. But those who lived from hand to mouth or, worse still, waded through each day in a sea of miserable penury, saw death beckoning. How would they survive with no means of begging, with everybody shut inside their cozy homes?

Lockdown, a clear death sentence to the destitute, meant that lines longer than those depicted in celebratory pictures of the 1994 election formed wherever rumour had it that food might be given away. Lines formed in scorching sun and harsh winds. Social distancing went out the window. Those escaping death through empty stomachs had little thought of death via infected lungs. To their way of seeing things, the former, an enemy well known, witnessed perhaps more than once when friend, relative, or colleague fell at its stroke, was more real, more dangerous; the other, more theoretical, perhaps less visible.

Disabled people were in those lines, waiting for food parcels.

The elderly, the infirm, were there too, even if they were barely able to walk, stand. They had no other means to stave off that belligerent hunger.

Government promised food parcels and other measures to alleviate the suffering of those who had absolutely nothing. Large amounts were reportedly spent on procuring food parcels, blankets, medical supplies, and other items the desperately poor needed.

But soon strident voices were raised regarding the chicanery of government employees. Cadre deployment made daily headlines as money went into the pockets of corrupt officials. The hungry starved as food rotted in warehouses while bureaucrats squabbled, or food parcels

were used as bribes for votes, or were simply stolen. Tenderpreneurs splurged on luxury cars while nurses fought for masks and patients fought for oxygen in hospitals laid waste by a terrible pandemic.

Meanwhile, government spokespeople advised: stay indoors; wear masks when venturing out; observe social distancing! However, from day one, the banality of evil, the rottenness of graft, the failure of poverty alleviation: these were laid bare for all with eyes to see.

Mandla's visitors at her initiation remembered the prediction she had made. In the remembering, they gleaned for clearer meaning; afraid to scare themselves more than necessary. But the informal mbizos only affirmed and reinforced their fears.

They asked and answered the question themselves, surprised by the clarity of vision that was theirs in this hour of desperate need ... a growing need. Had they not pledged not to live for them- selves, but for the good of others too – the good of the community?

In hundreds of thousands, the poor poured onto the streets, seeking anything they could feed their children. 'Social distancing' and 'wearing masks', steps so carefully articulated by the president meant nothing to the majority of the citizens of Mzansi. Their needs were basic: food to satisfy howling stomachs – theirs, their children's, and those of the elderly.

See what you grow!
Lines of beggars
Lines of dispirited, hungry,
Downtrodden by and with your help
What help is that which nails one to poverty?
Disaster after disaster
– GRAFT –
The poor robbed blind
Robbed by civil servants they trust ...

But this was no time for courage to fail. YoFoP and its satellite groups and clubs stepped in, roping in any mothers willing to work with them. Grandmothers too! And Fields of Hope came into their own, providing the hungry with food, staple vegetables and more.

What was more, they did not offer food parcels only. With each food parcel, the person was given advice and the option of taking seeds and pamphlets on how to grow their own food. And very few refused the offer.

In ever more frequent interviews, Mandlakazi and Busi spoke out: ‘See what you grow? Poverty! All those people the government purports to help are out on the streets, poor as poor can be!’

What has happened to all the helping they’ve been getting? Has it improved their lot, even a jot? No, what government help does for the poor is cement them in poverty. Ask yourself, “Why?”

‘The answer is staring you in the eye: as long as people stay poor, they will not bite the hand that feeds them. Government largesse ensures votes – and the poor are nothing but voter fodder!’

The work done by Fields of Hope and YoFoP gained recognition from those grateful for the help the group provided. But their popularity was rapidly turning into notoriety from certain quarters, especially when pointed questions were asked about why the work was still there to be done. With strong leadership and an uncorrupted state, there would have been no need for anyone else to ‘step in’ and help those starving and desperate. But the rumbling criticisms and plain animosity did not deter the gardeners. The people they served, thrilled at the sight of them, hailed: ‘Nal’ uncedo lokwenene! Here comes help that is real!’

One cold and wet morning, Mandla, Khulu, Busi and members of YoFoP were ladling soup into various food containers, even plastic bottles and tins, held out by those in the long lines of desperately hungry people. Cries of frustration filled the air. A man rushed forward and snatched some sandwiches. A collective groan broke from the crowd, and people began pushing towards the tables.

Mandla shouted to restore order when she spotted police running towards them. Khulu, unaware of this new development, was berating some of the men breaking the queue. Yelling at the top of her voice, Mandla stormed towards Khulu, waving her hands, her face distorted with deep foreknowledge.

A shot rang out. Mandla jerked and fell forward.

Khulu dropped to her knees and pulled the girl’s body onto her lap – the body she knew so well, the body she had nourished and nurtured. It was clear from the amount of blood that Mandlakazi had left for the light that sent her.

Khulu lifted her face and uttered a primordial roar. Of absolute loss. Of stark grief. Of blind despair. She flailed like a wounded lion over the girl. The Old had abandoned her.

*The poor policeman who shot me
was but an instrument of my will
I had done what I had come to do
the time had come to return to the source
my fleshless colleagues were calling my name.*

There was a national, a global outcry at this, yet another case of police brutality, and one sure to go unpunished like most of the others. Mandlakazi's name went around the world.

Khulu thought she would die from heartache, while Busi was inconsolable. But the spirit that bound them, the child they mourned, brought them even closer together. Comforting each other, they found comfort. In the end, they established a trust: AMANDLA: a programme aiming to establish self-sufficiency by teaching people to grow their own food. And in the few years she had remaining in flesh-life, Khulu would see and hear both Hlombe and Mandla in her dreams.

The police officer responsible for the shooting was suspended.

To this day, no conviction has been made.

REFLECTIVE ESSAY

Introduction

This reflective essay has emerged from a number of processes: the creative one of writing my now published novel, *When the Village Sleeps*; my reflections whilst writing and researching and the retrospective process of looking back upon the whole experience and trying to make sense of it.

Several themes have ultimately become apparent as being central to the experience. These include: the lived realities faced by South Africa's urban black poor, particularly women; the failures of the grant system; ever widening socio-economic divisions; perceptions of the disabled body within the culture of amaXhosa and the possibilities offered to us as a people if we reclaim and reconnect to the life-affirming and unifying traditions of our cultural and literary heritage. Underpinning all of these topics are questions of social and civil justice; agency; roots; and a possible way forward during troubled and turbulent times.

This reflective essay begins with a prologue in which I attempt to summarise my thirty-year journey as a black, female South African writer and also my reasons for embarking on this PhD and for writing *When the Village Sleeps*.

Chapter One gives an important context regarding the child support grant, the problematic implications of which formed the original impetus for writing my PhD novel. Chapter Two asks what is the role that literary realism plays as a narrative mode in '*When the Village Sleeps*'? Why it is important? What does it offer me as a writer in the context of this text? Chapter Three examines my decision to place a black female character with a disability at the centre of my novel. It examines my ethical concerns regarding my eligibility as an author without any physical disabilities to write such a character, and how I attempted to reconcile my sense of responsibility to accurately reflect the lived experiences of the protagonist, Mandlakazi, with an equal sense of responsibility to challenge problematic contemporary attitudes among amaXhosa towards those with disabilities and to remind my people of how disability was viewed traditionally within our culture. Chapter Four explores the impact that Covid 19 has had upon my project; how it forced me to shift away from an imagined speculative future within my narrative to embrace what I term the 'speculative present'. The final two

chapters are both in which I allowed myself some of the creative licence that comes with embarking on a PhD in Creative Writing.

In each of these chapters I gave myself permission to step away from the more traditional academic reflective modes of the previous four in order to reimagine encounters with two of the most significant 'forces' within '*When the Village Sleeps*', the first being the legacy and personality of my literary 'ancestor', SEK Mqhayi, who emerged as both an inspiration for and presence within my novel; and the second, the characters themselves whom I allowed to have 'the last word' – as it were – on '*When the Village Sleeps*' – its failures, successes, transgressions and transcendent moments, as they grill the author herself during a two-scene playlet.

Prologue: My writing journey and my reasons for writing *When the Village Sleeps*

I was born in August 1943 and thus, to most, am a surprising candidate for a PhD and many will wonder what possessed me to embark on the project this late in my life. Others will ask: Why didn't she do this, decades ago, like everyone else does?

Writing itself is nothing new; I enjoy a mildly successful writing career that spans three decades. What is new is the academic pursuit that goes with the writing of this novel. However, long before I became a writer and before the term 'feminist' became *en vogue*, I was a Feminist. However, no sooner did I embrace that label than I saw it did not quite fit, did not embrace all I was about and then I called myself a Humanist. As a woman classified and labelled 'Bantu' under apartheid, I saw clearly that the discrimination I suffered was not only and always that of skin colour. My handicap also resulted from my being female. Being on the receiving end of discrimination hurt, and it hurt irrespective of what reason gave rise to it. I see no reason to discriminate against anyone irrespective of skin colour, gender, sexual orientation, religion, race, age, national origin, language or whatsoever. It is the action of a person that gives me pause.

Over the decades my works have explored a wide range of topics and themes, ranging from the oppression of Africans by the apartheid regime, labour exploitation, township violence, to AIDS and HIV. However, what has linked all of my works is a particular preoccupation with the challenging experiences faced by socio-economically disadvantaged black women in South Africa, particularly within the context of raising children (their own and other people's). My first book, *To My Children's Children*, came out in 1990, three years short of my fiftieth birthday. The book is part one of a two-part autobiography (so far). Modest in outlook, just the publication of a book I had written would have satisfied me. However, by the time I turned sixty, I had published five books: the two books of autobiography; two books of short stories; and a novel, *Mother to Mother*, currently used in schools and universities here at home and in three countries in Europe. To date, I have published four novels; two autobiographies; four biographies; over one hundred children's stories; two books of short stories; a book of poetry; three stage plays; two radio plays; two books of essays; and numerous articles. My work has been translated into German, Italian, Japanese, Korean, and French. Most of my children's books have been translated into all the official languages of our country as

well as Braille. All of these diverse works have, in their own ways, examined the changing position of the black family within South Africa (both during and after apartheid) whilst emphasising the ongoing battles that black women must face in order to raise their children in a country that seems to do little to empower or protect them.

Did I dream of becoming a writer when I was growing up? I had a great facility with words in isiXhosa, English, and Afrikaans as a child, and so one would have expected that I might have had that dream. But no, I never dreamt of becoming a writer of books. A child such as I was had no such dreams: such dreams did not reside in situations and places such as those of my childhood. Like madness, dreams are based on what surrounds a person – we call that role modelling. I had no such role models. I did love words though and enjoyed reading what books happened my way. However, book buying and reading to the children were not part of my childhood. My parents were barely literate and we were dirt poor. Book writing belonged to white people and old, black men who were school inspectors or ministers of religion or some such. Therefore, the lack of black female author role models, to a large extent, explains my late entrée in the field. My life and the lives of women like me make me the repository of the stench, gnawing hunger pains, distressful lack of privacy in living conditions of always squatter quality; poverty-level wages for gruelling hard work with insults instead of appreciation and/praise for one's efforts. My writing reflects all this and more – how black women negotiated such treacherous terrain and failed, as they were meant and designed to fail ... others succeeded despite that deck of cards laden against them...and others still, rose like the phoenix ... and shone brilliant as the stars in heaven, forcing the world to marvel at such an uncanny outcome. I write to preserve, for posterity: what I know, what I have seen or witnessed or suffered. *To My Children's Children* begins with these words,

Child of the child of my child: As ours in an oral tradition I would like you to hear from my own lips what it was like living in the 1940s and onwards. What it was like in the times of your great-grandmother, me. However, my people no longer live long lives. Generations no longer set eyes on one another. Therefore, I fear I many not live long enough to do my duty to you, to let you know who you are and whence you are. So, I will keep for you, my words in this manner: and then I start the story of my life, from birth (Magona, 1990: 1).

That book ends with me a young adult whose life has taken a dive from poverty to destitution. I am twenty-three years old, a single parent because my husband has abandoned us. Part two of my biography, *Forced to Grow*, takes off from that point. It is the story of how

a bewildered and shame-filled me recalled the nurturing she had received from her parents who had sacrificed much to give her a chance at a better life. Added to that, the fear of failing my own children, when I was supposedly ‘educated’, a primary school teacher whose parents had not completed primary school steered me to the realisation I had to come up with a strategy to claw my way out of poverty. Education was that strategy – the one sure way out of the hellhole of destitution. In that struggle, I was helped by others. But they helped a me who was busy helping herself. *Forced to Grow* is a book I hope gives hope to others who find themselves in situation of abject need for it carries the message: You can beat poverty! It is not an incurable disease.

This PhD reflective essay and the accompanying novel, ‘*When the Village Sleeps*’, represent the next step on my literary journey. The novel itself tells the story of a severely malformed young woman, Mandlakazi. Her mother, Busisiwe, who had watched her own mother raise three children with the help of the child support grant, decided to use deliberate in utero chemical exposure – drugs and alcohol – to be awarded the larger care dependency grant by having a disabled baby.

I originally envisaged that this novel would be my first to be set not only in the present and the past, but also in a speculative future (twenty-plus years hence) when the disparity between rich and poor has reached such severe proportions that a whole generation of babies and children have been electively disabled by their parents. At the heart of this cohort would, I felt, be Mandlakazi, their leader. But whilst Mandlakazi did indeed take her place at the centre of the text, as I had envisaged, the unprecedented Covid-19 events during the writing of the novel has forced me to change the time frame. Now the story occurs in the present, but it is a nonetheless what I term a ‘speculative present’. I will extrapolate more on what I mean by the term ‘speculative present’ in Chapter Four of this reflective essay. But suffice to say for the moment, that like many authors writing during the Covid-19 pandemic, I learnt that, in spite of careful planning, life (and the characters themselves) will sometimes intervene and force one to think afresh about one’s imagined project.

Chapter One:

Context – The child support grant or it takes a village to raise a child?

The child support grant (CSG), inaugurated in 1998, was widely hailed both nationally and internationally as one of the most successful national poverty alleviation strategies. It brought hope for a greater social and economic equality to those previously disadvantaged during apartheid, proclaimed the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF). The enactment of the grant was in accordance with Section 24-29 of the Bill of Rights in the South African Constitution; which recognises the socio-economic rights of citizens, including the right to social security.

However, from inception, there were complaints about the South African Social Services Administration (SASSA): the service providers were inefficient and disrespectful, the application process cumbersome and trying. Added to that, there has been a growing number of concerns about the nature and efficacy of the grant system. Many commentators have, for instance, expressed concern that the grant does not do enough, that its scope and effect is too ineffectual, too tokenistic; and there is no monitoring and/assessment of its efficacy. After all, can just ZAR 460 a month (the amount of the CSG) truly alleviate or transform suffering within a family? Others have more provocative concerns, namely, that the system is easily abused.

Perhaps the most sinister manifestation of this is the rumour currently circulating within my community: that some parents, particularly young women, are choosing to voluntarily and purposefully disable their yet unborn babies by not only drinking but also taking drugs while pregnant. Their goal, especially regarding the use of drugs, is to give birth to disabled children and thus qualify for the higher care dependency grant (CDG) of ZAR 1 890 a month. There is never a 'free' anything in life.

One Thursday, many years ago (2015 or thereabouts), on my way back from my morning walk, I picked up *The Echo*, our community newspaper in Muizenberg. These papers are supposedly 'free'. But for years since, I have not been 'free', but rather have felt imprisoned by the article I read that morning. It told the story of a young black woman, living in one of the townships of the Western Cape, who had deliberately taken drugs once she knew she was pregnant. Why? She hoped to give birth to a disabled child and thus access the more generous care dependency grant.

To this day, when I close my eyes, I can still see her – the young mother, 16 years old. She is seated, a baby on her lap, as the interviewer talks to her, asking her questions that, I

suppose, were meant to shed some light of this very dark subject. The teen mom states she had tried to get pregnant from age thirteen. Obviously, at fifteen, success was hers, if belatedly so, for at sixteen, she had the baby. I read on until I came to her statement: “I used to drink before I was pregnant. But once I got pregnant, I started taking drugs.” Her words or words to that effect left me dumbfounded. But, from there the story went south, deep into the sordid, evil underbelly of life. The young woman, a teen mom who had just confessed to starting to use drugs after she had conceived, then proceeded to give the reason for doing that. “I wanted this baby to be deformed.” That sentence numbed me to the core of my very soul for its lucidity. It left no doubt whatsoever regarding her motivation for the decision she had taken – ingesting drugs. She knew, understood, what she was doing was harmful to the life she carried. That that was precisely the reason she did this defied my logic. Even as I read that horrendous, revealing interview, looking at the picture of mother and toddler of about two on her lap, I had difficulty reconciling the two – motherhood and abuser ... abuser deliberate, cunning, evil.

Previously, I had heard rumours that such dark and desperate behaviour was occurring amongst the pregnant poor. But I had not wished to believe it. Now here was the proof, in black and white, so to speak. When I look back, I know I went through several distinct ‘readings’ of the article. Horror! That was my initial reaction; shock at reading about a woman deliberately maiming the child she carried in her womb. I could not quite grasp how anyone could come to such an act, never mind plan and then execute it. What did such an act mean? Mean, for the unborn? Blame was swift in coming. As I read on, I asked myself, what kind of mother would do such a thing? But that in turn was quickly followed by extending the blameable. Well, considering the tender age of the mother-to-be, her mother ought to have minded this business. Yes, her mother, to my way of seeing things, came a close second. But, by the time I had finished reading the article and mulled and mulled over it, soon everybody, the nation, was next. After all, the report said ‘a growing trend’ ... therefore this particular girl was not unique. The rumours were true. I could not escape the howling absence of adult responsibility. The African saying stabbed my heart: **It takes a village to raise a child!**

Then I sobered up a little, on realising I was part of the blameable. If the nation entire was culpable for closing its collective eyes with such dastardly deeds taking place in plain view ... I, too, was far from exempt from the blame I was happy to apportion to others. I was definitely no longer a child – had not been that for decades. Mea culpa! I was part of this sinfully and/or criminally negligent village, one of these adults I was busy castigating.

Indeed, most people in South Africa are fully aware we have a huge problem with in-vitro alcoholism. At present, South Africa has the unenviable position of being the leading

country in the blight; having the highest prevalence of Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) in the entire world. South Africa has an incidence of 111.1 in 1 000 compared to the global average of 7.7 in 1 000. It is also known that the intake of drugs during pregnancy increases the chance of birth defects leading to behaviour problems in early childhood and more serious physical, emotional, and brain defects. However, despite all this knowledge, no real significant action is taken to stop the malpractice. Warnings at prenatal clinics, on television and other media are just not working. Perhaps, part of the reason is that the perpetrator suffers no repercussions: the only person who does is the innocent child who was harmed in her/his mother's womb, albeit not intentionally – as has been the case until recently. However, by extension, the nation entire suffers.

We may not recognise the direct link between our failure as a nation and our failure to do our duty to the children born of us, for us, unto us. But it is there; for just as the nation benefits from those who do thrive, it suffers the consequences from those who do not. South African jails are bursting at the seams. The criminals locked in there are examples of such failure. I do not suggest that educated people do not commit crimes but the high incidence of crime most probably points to societal failure to nurture and guide its children and young people. The village of yesteryear, mindful of precisely this type of failure, ensured that its young were given proper guidance as well as the nurturing, theirs by right, at the hands of all the adults of the village, not only their parents or families. Village life then was communal and had viability rooted in animal husbandry and the tilling of the soil. It had age-appropriate observances and ceremonies; rituals and rites of passage to ensure the successful transition from childhood to adulthood. Children were nurtured through their years of childhood – moreover, this was done conscientiously. It was also goal-directed; the independent adult, mark of successful guidance. In other words, each step or stage in the child's progression was marked in that child's development; and as soon as arrest was detected in that expected development, remedial steps taken. This tells us there was observation, monitoring, and intervention.

South Africa's children are born into the reality of the state of the nation – that is the plight of children the world over. Our nation's reality is no secret and it is a well-known fact that the majority of the nation's children is born into and grow up in dire poverty. That means they will never experience or know anything but poverty – from childhood till they become parents themselves. Can we, as the adults in this situation, the 'Village' unto which these children are born, maintain the Child Support Grant, administered as it is [and has always been] adequately addresses this enormous problem? Are the needs of these children met? Undeniable needs the circumstance of their birth bequeaths them - are they met by what the grant provides

and the manner in which that is done? What does the grant really mean? What is meant by poverty alleviation? And why are we not aiming at poverty eradication? When there is illness, the usual goal is medication toward complete recovery or wellness. Should we not have similar goals regarding the fight against poverty – not lessen it but obliterate it totally. But I doubt any mitigation will succeed when the ‘client’ or object of that mitigation is not actively involved in the pursuit of their ‘freedom’ from whatever besets them.

Until now I too have not tackled these issues or raised my concerns within my work. I knew next to nothing about drugs, could not identify any if they were spread right before my eyes, before I began my research for what was to become the novel, *When the Village Sleeps*. Even the names I see in print mean nothing, for when I was growing up, the only drug I ever heard of and even saw was dagga and not everybody regarded dagga as harmful. Today, in some countries like The Netherlands it is a legal substance advocated for medicinal purposes. Some in these countries even argue that the use of such so called, ‘recreational drugs’ helps to reduce the attraction of the more addictive and nefarious ones.

However, South Africa is experiencing a very different reality. The names of new drugs may slip from my memory and mind, but reading or watching the national and local news, evidence of their destructive nature is laid bare and is painful to watch. It was after realising all of the above – including my culpable silence and ignorance –that I decided to embark on this PhD and the creative work that would become the novel. *When the Village Sleeps* reminds amaAfrika that personal growth or development can never be accidental, can not be bestowed upon one by another. It always involves the active, persistent exertion by the individual concerned. Agrarian societies knew this very well: You reap what you sow, our forebears said. The Bible states: You shall live by the sweat of your brow. Even post-apartheid South Africa, in the heyday of our freedom, used to shout, ‘Walala, wasala! You snooze, you lose!’

The higher Care Dependency Grant may appear better compared to the Child Support Grant but it impoverishes the soul perhaps even more ... for what the mother does, has to do, to ascertain she will attain it. Of course, this pertains only to the mothers, as Busisiwe in my novel, who deliberately maim the foetus they are carrying.

Chapter Two:

The role of literary realism as a narrative mode in *When the Village Sleeps*

The positive reception of my work has brought me an awareness of being a black woman writer of an advanced age working within the framework of this country's specific literary and political discourses. As mentioned before, although I came late to writing, I have had a fairly good journey. However, the road to the published *When the Village Sleeps* has been no easy one to traverse.

When I have mentioned the topic of my novel, the flawed grant system and the disturbing trends it is now encouraging, I have been lambasted openly, accused of being anti-poor, lacking in empathy, and worse. On the one hand I can understand the heated emotions I encounter. Contrary to the promises, proclamations and election manifestoes of the African National Congress (ANC) both before and after 1994, South Africa remains a nation deeply divided between the haves and the have-nots. Once again, those on the periphery of society, particularly women and children, find themselves at the mercy of a system that has no interest in truly eliminating well-entrenched hierarchies of social and economic difference. Grants seem to me, the only offering the ANC has made to do something to help the poor. The grant is a 'trump card' on which government officials constantly harp in order to remind poor people of their cruel lot as a group to whom the apartheid government gave nothing at all.

However, whilst I can sympathise, I am someone who knows first-hand the limitations that such a system also creates amongst my people. I escaped destitution myself. I was myself once a single young mother raising my children in the locations (as "Bantu" or black-black residential areas were called then – 'township' came after the 'Forced Removals'). The plight of the poor is never far from my heart or my work. I have tackled the issue in all of my published non-fiction and fiction. So, any criticism that implies that I have no ethical right to criticise the grant system and those who exploit it, is simply unconvincing.

With this settled in my mind, the next question became how best to tell this powerful and provocative story. Like the majority of black South African authors seeking to write against the many socio-economic injustices imposed upon us by the political status quo, I have previously made use of literary realism. The literary critic, Siphokazi Koyana, has written of my work:

The lives of black women (more specifically Xhosa women for the most part) are rendered in terms that counter the effacement of their daily lives from much South

African writing, foregrounding the quotidian battle for material and psychic survival
.... In carrying out this project Magona tends to utilise the strategies of literary realism
(86).

As I embarked on my envisaged PhD novel, I knew that I needed once more to depict the lived realities of those experiencing economic destitution within this country and do justice to the great social and economic hardships still endured by the majority, women and children in particular. It is an injustice that continues to poison our communities, one that, I would argue, the meagre and stingy grant system is only exacerbating. The realism model felt, once again, appropriate for this objective. But this time, it would be used not in order to write against the corrupt and nefarious actions of an oppressive white political regime or its legacy. Instead, it would be used to speak up against a corrupt and apathetic black one.

Mineke Schipper maintains that the ‘aim of the realistic writer is constant: to write with respect to the valid norms of his (sic) time more veraciously and to put reality more directly into words than his (sic) predecessors have done’ (559). Schipper goes on to caution:

Realism does not just mean “true to the hard facts”. The realistic writer destroys certain norms of his time (and his social group) in writing more truthfully than his predecessors.... Sometimes the destruction of norms in the realistic novel only strikes the literary system but in many cases it also touches the social and political system. A concrete historical situation, a datable and locatable frame are conditions for the realization of realism (559).

I certainly wanted my use of realism to expose ‘the social and political system’ (for all the reasons already stated above). But I also hoped that, simultaneously, this mode would honour what the South African writer and academic Njabulo Ndebele refers to as the ‘ordinary’. In his seminal essay, *The rediscovery of the ordinary* (1991), Ndebele differentiates between ‘the spectacular’ and ‘the ordinary’. He argues, that the ‘spectacular documents; it indicts implicitly; it is demonstrative, preferring exteriority to interiority; it keeps the larger issues of society in our minds, obliterating the details’ (46). By contrast he defines the ordinary as ‘the forcing of attention on necessary detail’ and claims that ‘paying attention to the ordinary and its methods will result in a significant growth of consciousness’ (50).

My hope is that by focusing my readers’ eyes and minds on the ‘ordinary’ aspects of black experience, I will indeed do my part with regards to raising awareness and consciousness about the serious limitations of the current child support grant system but also the ongoing

daily suffering and grinding humiliation and hardship, that is increasingly forcing those who look to the grant system as their lifeline, to take drastic and destructive actions.

In the novel, my concerns regarding the grant system in particular, are best highlighted by a single and shocking action, that being when Busi decides to purposefully ‘maim’ her unborn child so as to maximise her potential earnings from a care dependency grant, As I have already explained, the inspiration for this particular creative endeavour action was an interview in an article – so an actual occurrence. However, as with the young woman interviewed in the *Echo* all those years ago, Busi’s extreme decision, is not ‘birthed’ in isolation. It is the twisted logic of a desperate young woman growing up in a community where handouts and a lack of self-esteem (and a lack of a sense of one’s own agency to rise up) are, increasingly, the norm. In other words, it is an extreme action borne of the reality of her circumstances and the reality of the circumstances of those around her. These realities also deserved adequate and truthful depiction in my novel, I felt, lest the readers in their minds reduce Busi (and her *Echo* counterpart) to troubled aberrations within an otherwise hospitable and harmonious community.

Here are some of the other ways in which my narrative technique draws upon the realism mode in order to give social context for Busi’s action.

Setting

As depicted in the novel, Kwanele is a seemingly fictitious post-apartheid township (there is no location near Cape Town called Kwanele). In fact, it is modelled on the many subsections of Khayelitsha (New Home), one of the last structures – that the apartheid regime put up when it was still bent on ‘pacifying’ black people or ‘Bantu’ with the semblance of change. In all of its physical characteristics (infrastructure – or lack thereof – rituals and residences, sounds and smells, etc.), Kwanele is typical of any black location near Cape Town, as are the lives of the residents living in it. It is described as a ‘ramshackle sprawl of a place, an hour by death-defying taxi away from Cape Town centre’ (24). It is a place of communal taps, and funeral tents in the cramped yards on the weekends; of spaza shops and women’s Manyano Church groups; of noisy, crowded streets where pedestrians, stray dogs and cars jostle for their space; a place of government matchbox houses, disparagingly referred to as (oovez’ umlenze/Show leg or iikotikoti (cans)) but also cobbled together shacks and the private brick homes of the slightly more affluent. In short, Kwanele could be any of the Mother City’s black locations.

Readers learn that its name means ‘Enough’. The residents of Kwanele see the irony in the name and often joke, “‘Jaa, we have enough of all the bad things here. Kwanele eKwanele! Enough in Enough!’” The place of one’s residence, like birth family and what DNA one inherits, marks a person. Referring to one’s place of birth, umXhosa will often say ‘My navel is in ... Inkaba yam ise- ’ and name a place. In traditional settings, the neonate’s umbilical cord was buried in the ground, anchor to the child’s very being – belongingness of that life to that place. Therefore, birthplace is one of the major factors that go into the making of the Self that will emerge as the individual, slowly but surely, grows into the person s/he shall be. Besides, residence determines neighbours, the pool from which friendships emerge, habits or customs such as mode of dress and grooming, speech, and many other foibles that, consciously and unconsciously, the individual selects and incorporates into the Being or Self that all the time is busy becoming.

It is also through the ‘eyes’ of Busi that the reader gets their clearest glimpses into the cultural milieu of Kwanele:

Funerals were opportunities for feasting. On Mondays already, Themba and Sazi started prowling for houses with tents in their yards. Tents meant death, and death meant a funeral, and a funeral meant food galore. Food for all, and not per invitation either. Nobody would turn people away from a funeral. Funerals were much better than weddings. The Ancestors (and God and His angels? wondered Busisiwe) were present. Now, what host would dare appear graceless before the Ancestors and God, and demand an invitation card? The bereaved family welcomed all who came to honour the dead with proper respect (3).

Busisiwe experiences deep ambivalence regarding Kwanele. The place where she lives is in sharp contrast to where she schools and that has implications, not all good. Through the benevolence of her maternal grandmother’s former employer, Mrs Bird (referred to as MaNtaka), Busi attends St Steven’s, a posh Model-C school in the city. Although segregated education ended with the demise of apartheid, poverty is still a barrier to the majority of black children’s getting a good education. The present government has done little to improve the apartheid-era schools. The result is the perpetuation of apartheid education: poorly-trained teachers teaching in poorly-resourced schools whose learners come from homes with poorly-educated parents who work at poorly-paid jobs. The vicious cycle continues. The few children, such as Busi, who attend schools outside the township are, indeed, singularly fortunate.

However, there is a price to pay for that good fortune. They earn themselves scorn from neighbours and school colleagues and suffer from a lack of understanding of their lot by parents and teachers. This indeed is the reality of Busi's life and contributes to her sense of rootlessness and estrangement within her familial urban setting.

By contrast, in the novel the reader is also presented with the setting of Sidwadweni. Unlike the invented name of Kwanele, Sidwadweni is the actual name of a tiny rural village (estimated population is just 150) in the Eastern Cape. It is a traditional amaXhosa homestead and it is where the grandmother figure of Khulu chooses to retire to.

Khulu loved Sidwadweni, her home village not far from Mthatha and near Tsolo in the Eastern Cape. The name Mthatha spoke of grandeur, glamour, splendid living. Tsolo also had much of which to be proud, including great chiefs, but Sidwadweni was the village Khulu chose to retire to after working for the same family in the manicured white suburb of Bishopscourt for decades (13).

If Kwanele is meant to highlight the life-leaching, lived realities of contemporary urban existence for many of the urban black poor in the Western Cape, then Sidwadweni's purpose through its realistic representation is the opposite. It is meant to remind my people of what has been lost in the urban jungles and what might still be reclaimed: a connection to gardening and sustenance through self-sufficiency and the therapeutic powers of nature; and an awareness of our roots and the powers of intergenerational, traditional pride and knowledge that is deeply rooted in the soil of the homestead. This is a lifestyle that encouraged both personal growth and the necessity of human inter-dependence, a perpetual reminder of a human being's never being totally independent of the need of another's helping hand. That inescapable inter-dependence is the basis for or root of the philosophy of ubuntu.

Do not get me wrong. Both settings are poor and life in Sidwadweni is no rural ideal. But the 'poverty' of Sidwadweni is one that encourages, no forces self-reliance and self-sufficiency. It is a poverty that ultimately empowers in the novel (it is here that both Busi and her daughter Mandlakazi go to be physically and psychically healed by Khulu). By contrast, the urban squalor of Kwanele, is one that disempowers through its emphasis on conspicuous consumption, and escape through alcohol, drugs and the ineffectual grant system. Life is such a long road devoid of hope in such places where people live desperate lives plagued by unprecedented levels of poverty, unemployment and men often resort to high-jacking 'amavans' – the cash-in-transit trucks in which the SASSA grants are delivered.

Family structures and dynamics

As with my previous fictional and autobiographical works, the family structures and dynamics in, *When the Village Sleeps* are what any member of amaXhosa of South Africa would no doubt immediately recognise. Busi, whom we meet at the beginning of the novel, is the eldest of three children whose mother, Phyllis, is a single parent. That she has never had a house of her own is one of the issues that gnaw at Phyllis and is a theme that many women in my community can relate to. Leading these, however, is the breakup of her marriage to Mzi, Busisiwe's father, who committed the ultimate betrayal in her eyes by cheating on her with her best friend, her maid of honour, at their wedding. When Mzi left, his uncle, from whom they rented a flat, chased mother and child out of his property. Phyllis thus lives in the home of Lily, her younger sister – an eventuality neither relish but tolerate only because of their respect and love for their mother, Makhulu, fondly called Khulu by her family. So, in a single modest location dwelling, reside: two sisters; one husband (Luvo); Lily's two sons, Themba and Sazi and of course, Busi and her siblings. These complex, cramped and often strained extended-family living conditions will resonate with many of my amaXhosa readers and is Phyllis's situation. Housing shortage is a chronic reality in the Western Cape. Phyllis nurses a burning grievance: she has never had a house of her own although she has been on the infamous government housing 'Waiting list' since before the dawn of democracy. Lily, younger, got allocated a house even before she was married and had children. To Phyllis, only one sorrow beats this: her husband's betrayal and the dissolution of her marriage, leading to her becoming homeless with her five-year old daughter, Busi. Thanks to Khulu's intervention, her sister yields and takes her in.

The portrayal of Phyllis is realistic and born of the many 'Phyllises' I have encountered. Sadly, many a woman succumbs to the hardship brought about by suddenly finding themselves in the unenviable situation of being single parents, because the man who gave them one child or six has reneged on his responsibilities and abandoned the family. This is a situation often too horrible to bear as, culturally, such a woman knows she bears the brunt of scorn not only from the deserter and his family but most probably from her family and acquaintances as well. 'Why couldn't she hold on to her man? Ushiyiwe/She's been out-distanced or outrun [in the race for his heart], ubandile/she was frigid.' That he discovers this after several children brings not question or blame regarding his character. Mothers of women in abusive relationships warn their daughters not to leave the man. 'Where will you find a better man? They're all like that.'

You think we die still married to these men because they are angels? Nyamezela! Bear it/Suffer it/stick to it!’ In other words, do not give up but learn to live with the condition. This is the reality today; it was so yesterday and yesteryear for the black-black woman in traditional society. What has changed is the level at which the abuse happens. Today, gender abuse often ends with murder and such are far from rare; indeed, they have become a daily occurrence.

Sadly, a woman may (as Phyllis did) escape or be forced out of such a marriage with her life only to drown in sorrow or sink into a psychological illness such as depression. Often, with no recourse to medical aid, her condition will go undiagnosed and therefore untreated while her behaviour deviates and becomes more and more erratic. In quick succession, following the failure of her marriage, Phyllis went on to bear two more children, much to Lily’s chagrin and Khulu’s consternation. Heartbreak has broken Phyllis and she has sunk into alcohol abuse as well as the begetting of children – paternity unknown. So, her troubles are compounded. Phyllis’s sister Lily, is not amused. At one point she declares:

If I had known that Phyllis would make a habit of making children without a husband, I would have thought twice about letting her come stay with us, she grumbled, ‘Yes, she’s my sister, after all. But the add-ons – aba songezile bakhe --- are red coals in my heart, I tell you! (36).

Both Phyllis’s unplanned and poorly-provided for parenting, and her sister’s reaction are realistic representation of the lives of poor township people. It is estimated that eight out of ten children of black-black families live without fathers. It is one of the ironies of post-apartheid South Africa that, even with readily available birth control tools, unplanned pregnancies would seem to be on the rise, certainly so judging from the number of cases of abandoned babies some found in garbage cans or on police station doorsteps. Most of these cast-away babies unfortunately succumb to the elements –that is, if they were not murdered before their bodies were dumped.

Khulu, the matriarch in this family, is a realistic figure among amaXhosa who, if not as robustly as before, still respect the grey heads/ingwevu. She is a wife of amaTolo and it is this clan and her late husband, Hlombe, that she reverts. She teaches Busi (as she must have taught her daughters once) the praises of ooTolo and the import of the clan in the life of the individual. This is not a middle-class black family but one still with strong rural and traditional ways (although that is changing).

Stern Khulu is a felt presence in the lives of her daughters. She is of the old school but acknowledges the change she sees take place. Her view is that change should not lead to the total abolition of tradition; it should be knitted into those aspects of tradition deemed worthwhile. She has financial savvy based on the ways of village life and thus does not succumb to the 'want' created by the advent of money to people who, in her way of seeing things, have no idea how to use it in methods that serve them. They end up enslaved by 'want without end'. She, it is, who adds a flat at the back of Lily's house to help with the accommodation problem caused by Phyllis' 'begetting of children'.

It falls on Busi to mind her mother's children – Phyllis often goes awol. This once again, is not an uncommon occurrence in the townships, where older siblings are frequently left to care for the young ones whilst their parents go off to work or are out of the house. As can be seen from the beginning of the novel, Busi feels the added strain. Her musings on her lot, a little envious of the boys, her cousins, Lily's sons and her brothers, illustrate this:

Little brother settled. Washing soaking. What else can I do to shut up my mother? Shut out her loud, husky voice, followed with that long quick click of tongue. Head turned half-way to the shoulder, eyes slanted, glaring at where I am sitting, mouth corners turned down when she talks to me. And those sad traces of red on her lips and cheeks. But, hey! One: I don't care; and two: the reasons for her fury are unpredictable. I have zero feelings for that woman (22).

Busisiwe is embarrassed by her mother's behaviour; she hears how her aunt and uncle talk disparagingly of Phyllis and, with growing awareness, is pained at the realisation that what others say of her mother, nasty as it is, happens to be the truth. She is also burdened by her mother's reckless behaviour for it falls on her to mind the little ones, their mother often out till all hours of the night, if she comes home at all. But Busi's wound arises from being fatherless. Broken families, fatherless children, money concerns, these are undeniable constants in Black Life, South Africa. This was fact during the apartheid era. It is fact in the democratic one.

Widespread familial poverty but the possibility of transcendental racial bonds

The theme of poverty underpins all of the aspects of my novel described above. Each of these elements of the narrative continue my lifelong literary exploration of this ongoing blight within our country. When writing of poverty within black South African writing communities I am aware that I am one of many generations of black South African authors who have felt the need to expose and examine this socio-economic ‘plague’ which has long afflicted our peoples.

Initially, representation of poverty dealt mainly with the consequences of colonialism and apartheid – from SEK Mqhayi and Sol Plaatje, through to Miriam Tladi and younger writers like Mohale Mashigo. It is also included in the works of Laretta Ngcobo (*Cross of Gold: A Novel; And They Didn't Die; and Fiki Learns to Like Other People*); Can Themba (*The Will to Die and Requiem for Sophiatown*); and A. C. Jordan (*Tales from Southern Africa and Ingqumbo Yeminyanya (The Wrath of the Ancestors)*). Many of these texts have been seminal for my own creative output, because these authors shone an extraordinary light on the lived realities of black communities. These are authors who, despite their efforts, have remained on the margins of the nation’s literary landscape. Despite that politico-social slight, Jordan’s important works on tradition, such as *Ingqumbo Yeminyanya*, have affirmed my own conviction to represent aspects of amaXhosa traditional society in my own writing. Can Themba drew my attention to urban life, most notably through his short stories in *Drum*, while Laretta Ngcobo spoke to my own concerns about patriarchy (both white and black), and its impact upon the lives of the women of amaXhosa in South Africa.

More contemporary black writers are now sharing my thematic affinities. These include Nkosinathi Sithole’s *Hunger Eats a Man* (2015) and Zukiswa Wanner’s *Madams* (2006). For me, both of these works examine the importance of collective responsibility and depict the values of ubuntu even if the term itself is not explicitly mentioned in either work. Wanner’s novel examines the cross-racial friendships of a group of upwardly mobile women living in Johannesburg showing the implications of empathy and healing across racial and class divides.

In the case of Sithole’s work, it is the stark absence of these values within the community that slowly results in the strife and hardship of many of the novel’s key characters who find themselves not only abandoned by the country’s social and economic elite but exploited by their own community. This is highlighted by description of the ‘Killer Bees’, a group that raids and robs the very poor within the community, stealing what meagre resources and food others happen to possess. As Sithole explains in a 2016 interview in the literary magazine, *New Contrast*:

It's very hard not knowing where the next meal is coming from. I think the reason why it is possible to live happily with people who are hungry is that they don't let it control their minds, but their minds control it. It's a matter of values and finding ways to deal with it in a constructive way. Another thing is that people who are really poor either live together or, because they know each other, can go pass a few homes to ask from the other poor people who would in turn ask from them at some point (15).

Sithole explains further that not only are the broader narrative strokes in the novel based upon the lived realities of his home community but so are some of the text's most shocking specifics, the 'Killer Bees':

[M]y mother was a very good storyteller and we spent a lot of time at home listening to her stories. One of those involved a time when she was a girl, I think around the 1940s and there was a depression (perhaps because of the Second World War). She said that food became so scarce that there were people who came to families and beat them for their food. That is where the idea of "The Killer Bees" who invaded, *Hunger Eats a Man* and later Canaan came from (14).

What captured me most of all was the end of this text. Even though it is set in the recent past, there is, I would realise, something of the speculative about *Hunger Eats a Man*, as by the novel's close the reader is left with a sense of doom and foreboding about the much worse that is to come if such hopeless economic and social injustice and suffering is allowed to continue.

The occupations of my characters in *Village* reflect both my concerns about the above as well as the socio-economic reality endured by the majority of black South African women. Both Khulu and Phyllis are domestic workers; Lily works at a doctor's offices; and Mzi works as a labourer and has a good (unspecified) job. Together they embody the working class and lower-middle class of South Africa's black population. None of these working adults will ever get rich from working. However, Khulu is the wisest at managing what little she earns and tries to show this by example (as well as exhortation).

And yet, women are also symbols of strength, endurance and friendship, the sort which might help us transcend our current afflictions and even work towards healing some of the open wounds of our troubled past and problematic present.

The relationship between Khulu and her former employer, Mrs Bird, has this function in the novel. In writing Mrs Bird as I do, I attempt to break the stereotype of uncaring white

women employers of black women they abuse and whose services they exploit. Mrs Bird not only pays for Busi's schooling at an institution Phyllis would never have afforded, she gives Khulu the flat at the back of the house Khulu has known almost all her adult life as her room, the maid's room; and later in the novel it turns out that Khulu is willed into possession of property. Mrs Bird, as an individual, effects redress for the crime of apartheid – in a person-to-person basis. No song and dance, no public spectacle – she pays for the sins of her father-in-law, an out-and-out racist but also for hers and her husband's sin: the inescapable benefit of white skin in apartheid South Africa. By so doing, she acknowledges the other side of that coin: the inescapable oppression and impoverishment of black people.

I have personally witnessed such an exchange or generosity of spirit and thus wanted to include it as an important dynamic in the novel. Indeed, the first time I witnessed it, before 1994, was when a white employer, a widow (like Mrs Bird), bought a flat for her maid. But then, because of the legal restrictions of the times, she registered the flat in the name of one of her children. That child, in England, 'employed' the maid; this enabled the said maid to live in the flat as a 'care-taker'. The understanding was, when it became possible, the flat would be legally registered in the maid's name or, in case she no longer lived, in that of her child or heir.

Such bonds, between madam and maid, bonds that transcend the racial and class dynamics of the day were certainly not common pre-1994, nor are they as common as I wish they were in contemporary South Africa. But there have been a few more such cases that have come to my notice. It is an alternative vision of our abilities as South Africans to live the ideal of ubuntu which I wanted to posit in my novel, and an alternative reality that co-exists with the harsher one that my novel depicts.

Chapter Three:

Writing the black female South African disabled body within the literary context of *When the Village Sleeps* – responsibilities, concerns and the power of the Old.

It is not only the (African) female poor who remain on the fringes of South African society and its literary canon, (even though their numbers far exceed those who are comfortably off), but black female disability too, is a topic which is rarely broached by South African writing.

In this part of my self-reflective, I want to consider the ethical aspect of what I tried to do with *When the Village Sleeps* by writing Mandlakazi as a young black woman with physical disabilities. In his 'Preface' to *Tilling the Hard Soil: Poetry, Prose and Art by South Africans Writing with Disabilities*, Kobus Moolman (xiii) asks:

What does it mean to be a disabled man or woman in South Africa today? In a society that for several centuries has been characterised by the overwhelming practise of exclusion and discrimination, how do people with disabilities experience their own sense of difference?

Moolman (xiii) further poses a number of questions that are extremely provocative and significant for anyone thinking of writing about disability: do disabled people in South Africa, in fact, share a general reference of experience and perception that cuts across racial and economic lines, marking their allegiance to a unique and entirely contained identity? Identity, for Moolman cannot be considered in simple monolithic terms and this includes the identity of those with a disability.

Indeed, contemporary theory, such as intersectionality, contends that gender identity 'intersects with racial, class, ethnic, sexual, and regional modalities of discursively constituted identities. As a result, it becomes impossible, as Butler (3) suggests, to separate out 'gender' from political and cultural intersections in which it is invariably produced and maintained.

The same could, of course, be said of someone carrying the additional identity modality of disability. Mandlakazi, black, female, poor and disabled is forced to carry the weight of an identity matrix which would traditionally put her at the very bottom of the hierarchies of power in a South African society in which the status quo was historically (under colonialism and later apartheid) male, white, rich and able-bodied. At the point when the novel is set, this matrix has shifted slightly to: male, black, rich and able-bodied. Mandlakazi, who is not male, rich or able-

bodied, still finds herself at the bottom of it. Furthermore, she carries the additional ‘burden’ of having been purposely disabled in the womb by her mother in her desire to secure a higher child grant as a means to break from poverty. I have already discussed in Chapter One of this reflective my reasons for creating such a seemingly incredible and shocking scenario. It is not that of a simple conjuring of a twisted imagination (my own), but is grounded in a trend which is sadly growing in our communities and one which I fear will continue to grow as the twin evils of substance abuse and extreme poverty take ever greater tolls. So, I will not dwell on why I choose to write of a protagonist who becomes disabled in this manner. Rather I will focus on how I wrote her and what I hoped to achieve.

I know what it feels like to be ‘other’ and ‘othered’. On the complex matrix of identity politics (race, class, gender), I, black, female and, in my early twenties, poor, know what it is to occupy a precarious position on the margins of society and power. It is this experience of being both on the periphery of power within South African society and the recipient, historically, of much of its oppression that enables me to be acutely aware of the responsibility a representation of a disabled black female protagonist entails. Yet, I am not disabled: do I thus have the right to write from such a perspective? What ‘credentials’ earn one the right to write from the perspective of the subaltern and marginalised if you yourself do not possess that specific identity? And if I do indeed possess the required ‘credentials’ to write from the perspective of the disabled ‘other’, how do I do so in ‘*When the Village Sleeps*’, in such a way that I reflect the lived realities of such a life with integrity and authenticity? How do I do justice to the plight of such a protagonist?

First, I wish to address the question of eligibility. Antjie Krog, in her 2018 keynote address for the international *Writing for Liberty* conference, made the following statement regarding a writer’s right to imagine those ‘other’:

A writer is free to write what she wants, but only constant self-inquiry and destabilisation about the how will bring some kind of integrity to the project. To write meaningfully about those whom you cannot, and accordingly to some pressure, may not, write about, takes more than just putting a hat on your head [...] one has to be prepared to harass, surpass, even crucify one’s tamed imagination (82).

and:

To write about the marginalised, the subaltern, the oppressed, the foreigner, the stranger, the other, demands an enormous destabilisation of the writing and even more

of the writing self... . You have to become decentred. Become minority, go where you can't, and be honest in the text about how you can never get there (79).

As Meg Vandermerwe points out in, '*Imagining the 'forbidden' racial other*' (93), Antjie Krog uses her text with great skill in order to capture this dual position of an author's right to write what she feels she must, even the forbidden 'other', and how such an enterprise is, according to Krog, doomed to fail.' This, Vandermerwe suggests, is highlighted, for example, in Krog's poem, 'servants talk' by her use of punctuation:

Krog's English translation of the isiXhosa voice is also tentative. It is prefaced with a question mark, as if highlighting the poet's own uncertainties about her ability to translate even her own imaginings of the isiXhosa in "*servants talk*" into something truly reliable and adequate (95).

Vandermerwe highlights further that Krog is drawing not only upon her own theoretical and aesthetic position with regards to representing the subaltern but she is also alluding to the ideas of Gayatri Spivak, whom she (Krog) quotes in the poem's epigraph:

By definition we cannot – no self can – reach the quite-other...

This is the founding gap in all act or talk, most especially in acts or talk that we understand to be closest to the ethical – the historical and the political. We must somehow attempt to supplement the gap (quoted in Krog, *Synapse*, 60).

I chose to adopt Krog's (and Spivak's) ethical and creative positions in the published *When the Village Sleeps* and, in so doing, both affirm my right as author to write the 'other' and also simultaneously to indicate with the text itself the precarious and ultimately impossible nature of such an attempt.

How did I attempt to do this? My technique and representation of Mandlakazi (whose physical disabilities are intended to reflect the effect of extensive in vitro alcohol and drug exposure) both demonstrate my attempt to do justice to the lived experiences of a child and a young woman like her, whilst also simultaneously demonstrating the limitations of my attempt. The struggles and prejudices Mandlakazi faced within society at large, and within the community of amaXhosa in general, are depicted in detail. At school, for example, Mandla is teased for her appearance, most notably her eyes that – for many children affected by in utero substance abuse – bulge. In one scene she returns home to Khulu saddened and shocked by how the other children at her school have nicknamed her "“frog eyes”" (203).

Yet I could not and did not want Mandlakazi to be the victim of her own parental and in utero misfortunes. Instead of being crushed by the bad hand life and her birth mother has dealt her, she, with the help of her grandmother, overcomes and even triumphs. In the novel we see how not only does she learn to overcome many of her physical challenges, but she becomes a fighter for change within her community – an emblem of hope. But there is more. Mandlakazi is also shown to have a special relationship – because of her disabilities – with the spirit world of the ancestors.

Many might argue that in converting Mandlakazi's condition from limitation to super power, I have failed to honour the lived realities of children affected by maternal-alcohol-and-drug use while they were in utero. Many of them suffer tremendously as a consequence. Low IQ, behaviour and learning difficulties as well as physical 'impairments' are not uncommon. But this 'failure' to fully honour such lived realities is not simply negligence on my part but an attempt to depict, through Mandlakazi, alternative attitudes and beliefs about physical disability that used to be embraced by amaXhosa but which in recent generations have been forgotten by too many.

Indeed, disability remains something looked down upon in contemporary society of amaXhosa. This is reflected by the terms used to describe people with physical non-normative characteristics: 'isilima' – one whose body is not whole, or 'isidalwa' –literally 'a created/creature' – as though all human beings are not 'creatures'. In the Classes of Nouns of isiXhosa grammar, the isi-class usually denotes more 'things' rather than people – although, surprisingly, the class also includes people with certain notable characteristics, for example, Isilumko/Sage; isidenge/fool; isityebi/a wealthy one. Contemporary Western disability theories and studies have sought to move the associations of physical disability away from the negative and dismissive, to positive or neutral positions through the language that is used to describe the 'disabled' body. The term 'differently-abled' has thus, for example, replaced 'disabled' and 'non-normative'.

Significantly, amaXhosa – and Bantu-speaking peoples generally – traditionally held a far more compassionate attitude towards physical disability, as a number of literary references bear witness. In *Looking Inside: Five South African Stories of People Living with Albinism* edited by Gunn and Puwana, Vinkosi Sigwegwe who lives with albinism gives us a glimpse of this compassionate stance:

Father said I should go and fetch the cattle and sheep from the veldt and help them cross the river. I was very young and my eyesight very weak. [...] Father realized

this and didn't force me to herd cattle. I wondered why he did not insist I do this job but asked other boys instead (65).

I feel it was my duty with '*When the Village Sleeps*' to reclaim these traditional attitudes towards physical disability within the text as well as remind my readers of other Traditional Knowledge Systems in which a people who were born differently abled are also posited, as having a special connection with the spirit world. In the novel, Mandla's special connection and insights are highlighted before she is even born, her voice and insights transcend time and space. In Chapter Three, before Busi has even decided to pursue her terrible plan, we meet the disembodied Mandlakazi, still a resident of the spirit world, not yet given human form - **Voice:**

[...] what act fruits me?

Oh, the profligacy of men of power; men in the moment
men who forget the oneness, timelessness, the total
inter-relatedness of all (29).

Thus Mandlakazi possesses the foresight, insight and compassion that her future twelve-year old mother lacks as, frustrated by the shabbiness of her cell phone (and the poverty it represents) Busi throws her 'old tilili' onto the couch (26), hoping that the promised increase in grant money will allow her to get a new one. Already at twelve, Busi is convinced that the grant is the only avenue to change her circumstances. But Mandla and the Old of the spirit world lament her future mother's lack of awareness of how corrupted by the handout system she had already become:

The Old had seen enough:

Do all children need phones?

That one thinks she does.

And not any fanakalo phone either.

What's wrong with the one she has?

The children get it from their parents:

Give me! Give me! Give, give give!

[...]

Hands forever outstretched,

Begging begging begging! (27)

As the novel progresses and we see both Busi's and Mandlakazi's journeys towards self-realisation, I hoped to show that it was, in fact, Mandlakazi, the one (and those like her) whom the contemporary society of amaXhosa dismisses and discards who are the empowered ones. Because of their position on the fringe of the contemporary culture of amaXhosa, a culture which belittles them, they have no choice but to forge ahead on their own and reclaim a sense of agency. This they do in the novel (with the help of Khulu and the Old) by reconnecting to traditional values and wisdom. It is these values which ultimately inspire them to take collective action against an unjust and ineffectual socio-economic and political system, rather than to wait for the said system to save them and pull them out of the poverty mire with token gestures like the grant system.

Chapter Four:

From an imagined speculative future to Covid 19 and having to embrace the ‘speculative present’

As this novel formed part of my Ph.D. degree, there was also the desire in me to try something new, to dare to push further the realism style that I have used until now; to do something I have never done before – something new to my personal oeuvre. Placing a character with a disability at the fore of my narrative was a part of my creative development (I have never foregrounded such an individual before). Tackling the ineffectual grant system was also a new focus for me. However, whilst I felt literary realism was an important and necessary narrative technique for honouring and exposing the lived realities and motives for a girl like Busi (for all the reasons already stated), I also wanted to push my craft further.

In my career I have turned my hand to both prose and poetry, plays, children’s books, memoir, and biography. But, as my supervisor pointed out, my work has almost exclusively dealt with the past or the present. Never has it focused overtly on the future. We agreed in tandem that the particular subject matter of this novel: a failing child grant system that has reached such a state of uselessness that it encourages the poor to maim their own children in an attempt to gain maximum profit, called for such a venture or focus.

The adoption of the speculative literary genre seemed ideal for the exploration of this imagined dystopian state of affairs. That is to say, we agreed that it would make creative sense to set at least a part of Mandlakazi’s narrative in a speculative future. This would be, we imagined, twenty or so years hence, when she was a young woman, dealing with the implications of her mother’s decision, at a time when many other young mothers were choosing to make the same decision. In fact, we conjectured that in this speculative future such decisions would have become terrifyingly common.

The speculative fiction genre in South Africa is still in its infancy; and what little exists has come from the pens of white female writers. Before looking at the two South African examples, however, some defining remarks about speculative fiction are in order. I want to look briefly at how speculative fiction is defined and how the genre links up with societal ills.

The Canadian author, Margaret Atwood, suggests the following in her study, *In Other Worlds: SF and the Human Imagination*:

In a public discussion with Ursula Le Guin in the fall of 2010...I found that what she means by “science fiction” is speculative fiction about things that really could

happen, whereas things that really could not happen she classifies as “fantasy” (181).
[My emphasis.]

After reading this definition, I decided to define my proposed creative project as a work of speculative fiction because I would (I thought) set the plot in the conceivable and not too distant future, to show what could happen to other deeply impoverished young mothers, if we do not confront the problem of grants and the country’s ongoing deep socio-economic inequalities.

I was also inspired by Atwood’s thinking in her essay, ‘*George Orwell: Some personal connections*’. In that essay, Atwood makes explicit the impact that Orwell’s version of speculative fiction has had upon her own worldview and writing. As a precocious nine-year old, she read *Animal Farm* and remembered: ‘The whole experience was deeply disturbing to me, but I am forever grateful to George Orwell for alerting me early to the danger flags I’ve tried to watch out for since’ (287). These ‘danger flags’ are societal dis-ease and malaise that have the potential, if allowed to continue unchecked, to create the dystopian nightmares of both Orwell’s and Atwood’s future-gazing works. Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* charts an infertile society’s attempt to continue to reproduce, an understandable – even noble – aim. What begins as biological and societal necessity, however, soon becomes corrupted, as the remaining fertile women become the womb-slaves of the society elite. This resonated strongly with what I wanted to express in my novel, *When the Village Sleeps*.

I also turned to South African writing for possible inspiration. Within the South African context there are the texts of two white female authors who have tackled the same theme of social injustice using the speculative form – Lauren Beukes’s *Moxyland* and Henrietta Rose-Innes’s *Nineveh*.

Moxyland was hailed by Andreas Spath in a review as ‘a rare treat for South African sci-fi lovers’ (quoted in Beukes, iii). However, if we apply Atwood’s definition of speculative fiction, I think it could be defined not as sci-fi, but as a speculative work. Indeed, there is much in *Moxyland* that could be plausible and feasible in the years and decades to come, even if they have not yet entirely manifested in 2019 (the setting of the novel itself). Some of what Beukes depicts already has seeds in the present. As Spath explains:

[A] dystopia set in Cape Town in 2018. ... Some things have stayed the same: Hospital Band, colourful Daily Voice headlines, Eskom blackouts, taxis, township tourists and a perpetual housing backlog. Others are eerily foreboding: all-powerful corporations that own private beaches and an exclusive subway system, and a brutal

government whose only public face is a merciless police force backed by biotech-enhanced attack dogs (quoted in Beukes, iii).

Writing in *Strange Horizons*, James Trimarco (2009) states: ‘*Moxyland* is a near-future novel, set in Cape Town about ten years from now. It shows readers a world in which corporations’ hold on our minds and bodies has sharply intensified’. He continues:

Yet *Moxyland* manages to breathe new life into this subgenre by capturing the peculiarly cynical voice of a generation that has absorbed so much branded messaging that it literally cannot imagine a gesture ... intended to do anything but stimulate the media for marketing-related purposes.

In Beukes’s work, societal disintegration is spurred on by a shift in societal values, away from human interaction and community towards the individual narcissism that comes with technological obsession. The characters in Beukes’s *Moxyland* are metaphorically stunted and ‘blinded’ by their addiction to high tech. It is a far cry from the more pedestrian, if desperate, concerns of putting bread on the table of the characters in *When the Village Sleeps*. However, the resulting emotional poverty that comes from the reliance upon technology (*Moxyland*) is no less pernicious or debilitating in *When the Village Sleeps*.

Rose-Innes’s *Nineveh* takes ecological and economic crisis as its focus. Emily Rhodes writes the following about *Nineveh*:

This story of pest control is about a prize-winning writer who runs a humane pest control service whose motto is “relocation, not extermination”. A property magnate employs her to dispose of the beetle infestation ruining his new development, *Nineveh*. Katya notices the development’s strange sterility in contrast to the surrounding swamp, where “everything is insistently alive and pushing to enter”. Katya soon discovers, however, that the exclusive building is more porous than it seems – with ways in and out not just for the beetles ... but unofficial passages for unofficial people too.

Rhodes concludes:

This story...is surprisingly gripping, but its strength lies in Rose-Innes’s preoccupation with the “shifting, restless ... discontented city” of Cape Town, convulsing in a frenzy of urban ants-in-pants, where houses are surrounded by electric fences and have their bells “removed so beggars don’t disturb” as the wealthy emphatically assert boundaries

the author shows to be futile. Here too, the writer warns of the futility of the acts of self-preservation by the wealthy when irony of ironies, they would be better served perhaps doing the opposite – opening up instead of closing down.

These two authors helped me to reimagine speculative fiction within a specifically South African context. Yet I knew that my unique focus and route (from a black marginalised perspective) had to be different. My thinking was that realism, combined with the genre of speculative fiction, might help me to get the right balance with regards to my desired creative vision for the novel.

In their ‘SF and Speculative Novels: *Confronting the Science and the Fiction*’, Michael Svec and Mike Winiski, define ‘the novum’ as, ‘a means to create cognitive dissonance’ (39). It is a feature or object in a story, such as the clock striking 13 at the start of Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, or the all-seeing screens (not yet invented when Orwell wrote his novel, but all too present now), which indicates for the reader that they are entering a future realm where there will be a clash between their current expectations and the projected reality. As Svec and Winiski explain, the most effective novums are those which still resonate with the contemporary reader, that is, their possible future creation or existence feel conceivable, or even likely, given current developments. For me, I imagined that the novum would be the large number of purposely maimed offspring who, twenty years hence, would populate the landscape of the future South Africa, each a consequence of a desperately poor family’s desire to profit from the grant system. How could we have let this happen? The reader might ask themselves, as they peered into this dark future, I have now revealed to them. The answer, or rather the seed, would be in the very present in which they sat.

Busi hits puberty and this is when recruitment of all the deliberately womb-maimed youth begins. The plot is ‘public’ and supported by the authorities who little realize they ‘arm’ subversion of a serious nature. The public movement of differently-abled people is cover for brick-by-brick ‘walling’ of an army that will rise against the government – in time. The education and training the group, which calls itself (secretly) the Grotzed (made grotesque-made) the grotesque being the hearts and minds of the parents who ‘designed’ them as well as the ‘Village’ that slept through the horror, accepting it as ‘normal’. Secret meetings, secret lingo, serious goal-oriented, they arm themselves for the ‘Take Over’.

I imagined a huge scene twenty years hence, with a country-wide screen on which was displayed the two worlds: Mzantsi helping the poor. Government officials enjoying bottles of wine, each costing the equivalent of a year's child grant; lavish dinners; expensive cars (with brand name); mansions fit for kings ...Nkandla-like and even more ambitious structures ... all this juxtaposed to long lines of the poor at soup kitchens or people scavenging for scraps in dust bins or at the garbage disposal grounds. The two faces of Mzantsi would then end with those who had 'helped' the poor at the receiving end of the same 'help' ... reinstating repercussions – a concept forgotten to nigh non-existent in the reign of the time of South Africa's new democracy.

However, as many writers know, what we think we will write when we first embark on a new creative project and what we end up actually writing, are often very different. Fate, the Muse or in my case, Covid-19, had other plans. When the pandemic hit South Africa, it became clear to me that unfathomable disaster had already arrived. The speculative future had, overnight, become the speculative present. It was now; and nothing I could conjure up in the future, twenty or so years hence, was – or could be worse – than the imminent present. That reality necessitated a change of both pace and time line. Besides, the intense restrictions Covid-19 placed on our lives as well as its powerful impact on every aspect of our external and inner worlds, meant that I could not write the novel I had previously imagined. No longer was it possible to track the country's gradual but definitive slipping (between 2010 and 2038) into a speculative and ultimately dystopian state. Nor was it possible anymore to gradually introduce my 'novum' – the aspects of the narrative and literal landscape that would indicate to readers that they had entered the realm of a speculative future. I give some hint of this at the end of chapter 6 but, as I explain there, I can do no more than hint. More would be a revelation. I beg the reader to bear with me, more shall be revealed in the not-too-distant future ... God willing! ... and the Ancestors smiling kindly at my presumptuousness ... before generously helping out and guiding me as I set off on yet another journey.

Busisiwe should have been in grade ten in 2020, however, it is now her daughter, Mandlakazi, who has had to be at that stage, and the confrontation or revelation, laying bare to society its neglect of its young, including its unborn, happens in the novel before the onset of the pandemic.

Needless to say, the plot was also affected. There would be no gradual, barely imperceptible change so that twenty years from now, the ratio of the womb-maimed young

people outnumbered those who had escaped that horror. How then would I effect the ‘Pay Back’ (as I called it in my notes) planned? This was to be the part of the novel in which Mandlakazi (and the community of intentionally disabled young people that she came to lead) finally reached the zenith of their agency and self-actualisation. ‘The Pay Back’ was to be the point in the plot when the womb-deformed would give to society at large the same ‘services’ the latter had given them.

With the advent of Covid-19 and the speculative present, I had to rethink my novel’s climax and the plot that would lead the reader to it. In the version of *When the Village Sleeps* (published by Picador Africa, an imprint of Pan Macmillan, in May 2021 during the ongoing pandemic), the ‘big scene’ disappeared, replaced by the glaring poverty Covid laid bare: long lines of the poor under merciless conditions – rain, heat, cold, among others. Uncertainties regarding the getting of promised food parcels; corruption – government officials selling donations or giving them to ‘people with connections’ – in short, the realities of Covid, realities which few could have conceived before its arrival. Mandlakazi and the much smaller community of the Yofob whom she leads do still find their path to empowerment, but they do this not by drawing upon the outrage of a dystopian future, but by looking back to the traditional values of the past, most notably uNtu.

Weighed down by the (ongoing) disappointments and corruptions stark even during the Covid present, I also had to reimagine my novel’s ending. At this point, Mandlakazi, leaves the scene. Contemporary South Africa stays true to itself and the current political status quo... no repercussions. To quote the final line of the novel, ‘The police responsible for the shooting were suspended. To this day, no convictions have been made.’ (308).

CHAPTER FIVE:

CALLING ON MY LITERARY ANCESTOR: S.E.K. MQHAYI

As my envisaged use of the speculative genre had to be discarded, I decided to drop my bucket into the well of my literary ancestors, to see on whom I might call in order to find fresh inspiration. This was not the first time I had turned to my literary ancestors for inspiration and guidance. In my 2015 novel, *Chasing the Tails of my Father's Cattle*, there are several crucial moments when I allude to the works of some of my literary forefathers. Perhaps the most significant of these was my introduction of a scene when my protagonist is a little girl who is playing outside. Her grandmother sees a snake moving towards her grandchild but does not intervene. Instead, she allows the snake to touch and be touched by the infant. The grandmother does this because she regards the presence of the snake as a specific blessing by the Ancestors. This encounter between snake and infant was a subtle allusion to another scene in A.C. Jordan's most famous novel, *Wrath of the Ancestors*. In it, the mother-figure, who is educated, Westernised and married to a prince of amaXhosa, finds a snake near her baby son. But in that text, she becomes hysterical and kills the snake. This leads to a calamity within the Royal Household because she had denied the Ancestral engagement that the snake offered.

By subtly evoking that scene from *Wrath* in *Chasing the Tails*, I hoped to remind my readers (through the figure of the wise grandmother) of their links to tradition and the need to honour our Ancestors; be open all that they might offer us. As I continued to write *When the Village Sleeps*, against the backdrop of Covid 19 and I saw that Mandlakazi and the other characters would find their salvation in the traditions and the values of the past, it once again became clear to me that I needed to draw upon texts by authors zamaXhosa who embodied said values and traditions. The author I eventually settled on was SEK Mqhayi. In *Udonjadu*, Mqhayi's main concern (like mine in *When the Village Sleeps*) is the wellbeing of the people. In the novelette, he attempts to imagine and creates a future space (the text itself was written during the height of colonialism) when amaXhosa could live in peace and prosperity driven by their own agency, but without ignoring Western influences. As Ncedile Saule explains in his introduction of the 2018 translation of *UDonjadu (Don Jadu)* into English:

'In an unprecedented feat of the imagination Mqhayi wrote this visionary allegory while the world around him was swirling with violence and turmoil [...] the writer uses his main character Don Jadu as both 'an interpreter of what is happening and a guide as to how to respond' (vi).

According to Leo Jonathan Schoots, this kind of ideal state presents a ‘fascinating vision of modernity and hybridity where Christian and traditional rituals of amaXhosa are blended together and where there is restorative justice and broad social equality’ (71).

This resonated with me greatly and spoke directly to my thematic preoccupations in *When the Village Sleeps*. Although unlike *UDon Jadu* that offers the male figure of *Don Jadu*, a principled black statesman to lead amaXhosa back to themselves, I knew that in my novel, it would be a young black and disabled female, Mandlakazi, who would embody that role.

Another Mqhayi text that deeply influenced *When the Village Sleeps* is his most famous novel, *Ityala lamawele (The Lawsuit of the Twins)*. From this I drew upon the recurrent refrain in the novel of Ancestors, the spirit child and the characters themselves, who call the current government to account and demand that those in leadership step up to their responsibilities and acknowledge the interconnectedness of things – that the suffering of the poor must be their suffering too; that the bounty that they enjoy and divide amongst themselves, is not theirs alone to possess but must be shared more equitably.

The fragments of poetry that are scattered throughout my text are often references to Mqhayi’s poems. It is also the form that I give to the voices of the spirit child Mandlakazi and the ancestors, once again in order to allude (through this form) to the traditional values that this form has historically been used by poets zamaXhosa. For example, in the fragment below I draw on Mqhayi’s poem, ‘*After the Battle*’ in his work cited above (75–78) in order to show how the poet depicts the aftermath of a battle. Mqhayi paints a vivid picture using metaphor. The battleground strewn with corpses of fallen soldiers is implied just by ‘showing’ the headdress they wore – feathers of the blue crane. The ‘heaps’, therefore, are the heads of dead soldiers. The sound and sights of battle are equally evoked by the pictures he draws in words: ‘[I]ron ate blood’ for spears clashing and weapons tearing into bodies. Afterwards, the natural order of things, even in such devastation, comes. The animals, from the biggest and strong, feast on human flesh, the order descends till vultures and, finally, it is the turn of maggots.

Awu! What can we say about earthly matters!

What was in the mind of the child, to go back to his mother’s womb?

The blue cranes stacked in heaps lying dead at Hoho:

Iron ate blood at Hoho;

Trees clashed against trees at Hoho;

The skin of the cow spoke at Hoho;

Beating and beating at Hoho;
A person passed, leaving no dying charge at Hoho;
He went to many others in the blink of an eye at Hoho;
The black vulture and its dogs ate at Hoho;
A large flock ate and left some for the white-necked raven
at Hoho;
The hyena ate and gave some to the Cape hunting dog at Hoho;
The bluebottle fly ate and left some for the worms at Hoho;
Ho- yi-i-i-i-i-i-i-ni! (76).

And now it is at this point in my reflective essay when I hope my readers will allow me some creative licence. Initially, I considered extending my more traditionally academic account of how I drew on Mqhayi. But then I thought no! This is a Creative Writing PhD and so I should draw on the licence given to me by that word, Creative. Also, I told myself, to be in conversation with the ancestor, S.E.K. Mqhayi, and to show rather than to simply tell, could offer more insight than any amount of academic extrapolating would produce. I hope that our conversation below (which I record first in isiXhosa and then in English) will answer any final questions that the reader might have about Mqhayi's profound influence upon this work.

INCOKO NOMQHAYI
nguSINDIWE MAGONA

SM

A-aa! Ngangalala yaseNtab' ozuko!
Ndikhahlela kuwe, mfo kaMqhayi;
Nditeketa, ndipitiliza, nditarhuzisa ndisithi:
Bhota, Mhlekaz' omhle!
Bhota, ngweletshetshe yolwimi lwamaXhosa!
Bhota, Mbongi yeSizwe Jikelele;
Wena wangqinwayo singekabikho thina,
Wangqinwa ziikumkani, wangqinwa ziimfundimani,
Wade waza kungqinwa zizizukulwana nezingaluncance lona olo lwimi
Koko zonganyelwe yinyani engaphikisekiyo – yegalelo lakho kuluntu jikelele.
Kukoko ke nalo umzukulwana wakho ekhasela ngakwelo ziko
Olilo; khon' ukuze othe kweloo langatye lingacimiyo
Ulilo, wena Mqhayi waseNtab' ozuko;
Samuel Krune ...Bhota, Ceduma olufafa!
Ndivumele ndibhekise le mibuzwana kuwe
Ndivumele ndicel' indlela ndenjenje:
Ithiwani na inkohla enje ngale sikuyo isizwe esintsundu?
Uthiwani na ukulungiswa umzi xa kunje ukonakala kuwo lowo?
Yaye sithe ukuze isizwe sibe leli sikizi sililo kwabe bekutheni na kakade?
Ndinga, ndingema apho; ndilinde impendulo kuwe, Bawomkhulu.

SEKM

Hambisa!

SM

Ndintloni nokubhenca ububi esibubo isizwe owaye uzingca ngaso.

SEKM

Ndimamele!

SM

Abazukulwana badlwengula ooninakhulu; iintombi zityhefa izisu;

Ooyise babukula inzala.

Abadlezana bafunisela ngooyise beemveku abazizeleyo.

Oomakhulu ziindawo zokulahlela iintsana ezingenamenyisi.

Abantwana bakhula bengakhonjiswa ndlela yakuziphatha;

Kungekho nabani na kakade ubabalisela zintsomi, ebonisa

Nazindlela ziya kuloninalume okanye encoma, egxeka, engxolisa - konke ngokufanele.

Bakhwethwa bakhankathwa zizinja ezikhonkathayo,

Sothuka ntoni na xa bon' abo bedad' ezijele besaqabe imbhola?

SEKM

Awu-u! yini na le? Umzi kaPhalo uphalele! Uthi mandithini n' ukuthetha xa kunjengoba usitsho? Azi kobe kulunge na? Hehake bantu bakowethu. Mmmhmhhh. Oooo!

SM

Ndibhenele kuwe kuba kade amazwi akho eliyeza kubantu bakho. Thetha, Mbongi yeSizwe Jikelele!

SEKM

Mazwi mani na la uthi mandiwathethe? Mazwi mani am angancedayo kobunje ngobu ububekayo ububi?

SM

Amava eenyhikityha ube nawo, wambi kuwo ekuswaza. Uzelwe emva kwesihikili sikaNongqawuse, ufelwe ngunyoko uyimveku eminyaka mibini kuphela. Awukadibanisi noweshumi ukugaleleka kwesiTwayi, ngo-1885, nto yalombesa ngembi yona indlala le lonke eli. Ungumfana ukusekwa koMdibaniso woMzantsi Afrika ngo-1910, kwemibini elandela wona lowo kwasekwa iSouth African Native National Congress. Ukho ngeMfazwe yamaNgesi namaBhulu (1899–1902); nakuzo zombini iimfazwe zeHlabathi, le yamva yaphela ngo1945, umnyaka wosizi owasithela ngawo wena lo. Singazilibali neemfazwe zolwahlutho-mhlaba, xa abantu bakho balwa ngobugorha nabo bafika bekho apha basuka babadela bababhunyula umhlaba. Kukho kuzo ezo iMfazwe yeZembe; ekaMlanjeni; neyeNtaba kaNdoda; Isandlwane kunye noBambatha . . . xa sibala nje ezimbalwa kuzo.

SEKM

A-a-wuu-uu!

SM

Wena, ngangalala yaseNtab' oZuko,

Ndiza phambi kwakho, mzikulwana kaMqhayi,

Nditeketa, ndipitiliza - ndikubongoza ndisithi:

Bhota, Mhle!

Bhota, ngangalala yolwimi lwamaXhosa!

Kanti ke nokuba ubungadlulanga kula malangatye obomi, kule milo ukuyo, akukho ikunqabeleyo, mbongi yakowethu.

Thetha, ndive zibuthuntu nje iindlebe kukwaluphala!

Ndandiba ndifundile; akucaci kukho unga angayinakana leyo; ndingathethi nto ke ngokuyisebenzisa.

Ndandiba kukho ngqeqesho ndayibambayo; ayihoywe bani ke loo mfitshimfitshi.

Sithini na ukubukela isizwe sisadalala?

Sibekwe sangaka ukuze senzeni na kanene? Ndimani na eyeyethu, kungekho usibuza nto nje?

Xa side saphukaneka, suka impi entsha itsho ukusigxwala; de inge ingasibamba nangezandla!

Lamla, Ceduma! Lamla, safa isizwe sakho! Wafa umzi ontsundu!

SEKM

Mzikulwana, hamba ze! Unga ungaqondiswa ntoni na? Loo nto ndiyenze njani na? Yaye ndiyenza ndisithi ndiyenza ukuze kuthini na kanene? Liphume!

SM

Ingaba kuthe ukuze kube nje kwabe bekutheni na kanene?

Yini na, isizwe esiNtsundu sanje ukudlakazeka kwesimo?

Yini na, intlekele yabantwana abazala abantwana; ootata abangahoyi abantwana abangababo ngqo; noomama abalahla iintsana koonina ababakhulise nzima?

Amaxhegokazi axhatshazwa ziintombi zawo ngale ndlela;

kanti akasindanga ekudlwengulweni ngoonyana noonyana babo.

Ingwevukazi esukela ikhulu leminyaka iye ekufeni idlakazeliwa, ipucapucwa ngamakhwenkwe asisizukulwana sesizukulwana!

Siyithini na le ndyikityha? Silithini na eli sikizi?

SEKM

Uthi ndim na, ndim ndingaphantsi kwesoyi, ongancedayo?

SM

Diliza yonke imida enga ingasohlula. Yidilize ukuze siphile isizwe osithandayo nozidla ngaso, njengoko naso sizingca ngawe lowo.

Kha undihlebele, mzukulwana kaKrune.

Thetha, nkwenkwe eyafund' ukolus' impahla eCacadu kwayisekazi uNzanzana; kanti iya kufund' ukolusa iintsatshana zamaXhosa eDikeni.

Thetha, mzukulwana kaMqhayi, thetha! Thetha, ndizigqogqile ezam iindlebe!

SEKM

Yii-iyoo! Awu, mzukulwana womzukulwana wam!

Awu, uthi mandithini na ukuphosa iso ngemva kangaka na khona?

Ndithini n' ukuzenz' isithunzel' esibuye sanolwimi;

Ukuze amazwi aphokok' okwamanz' emthonjeni ilizwe libanjwe yembi yon' imbhalela le!?

Koko ayikho eyodlul' eyomphefumlo ngobubi nobungozi imbhalela.

Ayikho eyodlula le ibulel' ukuzazi, ukuzihlonipha, isazela, nokuzifuna;

Kaloku nompha ochutywe walahlwa uselulutho kananjalo.

Kaloku wona kanye usengachumisa kuloo ndawo uwe kuyo kuhlume nto na ke;

Kungenjalo uthiwe xhakamfu ngumdlezana wehagu uzibonelela bethu, gram-gram, bimbilili, tshwaa!

Uyintoni na ke lo wodlulwa nayileyo? Wodlula nanguloo mph' ochutywe walahlwa?

Uyintoni na kowabo, eyintoni na esizweni esi; kanti nakuluntu alulo ehlabathini?

Elakhe igalelo kobu bomi lingaze layintoni na xa engonjalo?

Awu! Nkosi yam! Olunje na lona usizi!

SM

Ngxe-e, ngweletshetshe! Ngxe-e, Ceduma omhle!

Kaloku thina kwaNtu sinkolo ithi akusithela ubani

Akuya kumathambo ooyisemkhulu; kungona alulutho kuba usisinyana.

Wena ke, mbongi yesizwe jikelele, ungaba usesinjani na ukosamela?

Ke, uthi mawuyekwe njani na; ulityalwe njani na?

Kuloko ke, Ceduma, ndizithoba phambi kwakho.

Kuloko ndimemeza kuwe ungaphantsi kwegade.
Nceda! Isizwe siyawohloloka; gxebe, siwohloloke kade.
Nceda, mbongi yesizwe jikelele, kuba fudula usenjenjalo kakade.

SEKM

Ho-ooyina-aa! Ho-ooyina! Kanti ndanditeketa na xa ndandisithi –Vukani Kusile Magwala ndini!

Nibantu bani n’ aaba banj iinkani zabo?

Ndiya kuhlala ndinani phi na, ndingumntu nje,

Ndingumntu nj’ int’ ehlal’ ihlal’ ihambele?

Ndingumntu nj’ int’ ehlal’ ihlal’ ifuduke?

Ndingumntu nj’ int’ ehlal’ ihlal’ igoduke?’

Uthini n’ ukundimemeza ndingaphesheya, ndikwelamathunzi?

SM

Ngxee, mnt’ omkhulu, ngxee!

Wawungateketi; yaye seva ... saba sivile, gxebe.

Ntonje, namhlanje, umqa womel’ ephinini; yeyakwaNkohla inkohla.

Akukho mvisiswano. Akukho kubekana. Kukhule ugxeqwano. Kulawula urhwaphilizo.

Ubuhlwempu bugunyile. Iintsapho zikobubi ubuxelegu, isikizi. Ubundlobongela yidyokhwe yethu sonke; ngakumbi obhinqileyi. Singazilibali iintsana zisezishubeni. Ubudlwengu!

Ubudlwengu! Sabelo sini na esi oonyana bethu basithwaxa ngaso? Baphi na ooyise bala makhwenkwe nabafana abaselula? Zaya phi na iingwevu?

Ulutsha lubhedulule konke? Naluya lugcwalise iijele zema ngeembambo!

SEKM

A-a--Wuu!

SM

Ubudlwengu buzalwa yindelo ethi obhinqileyo akanto

Ngowasesibayeni kuphela umntu ntu.

Simanga sakwasimanga; ukucukula umntu ngesini. Isidima nendima yalowo bubuvuvu obungahoywa konke ziingqondi, zona zijingisa nje!

SEKM

Ho-ooYina-a! Ho-ooYina-aa! Yeyani na le ndyikityha? Lelani na eli hlazo?

Mzi ontsundu, anje amanyala! Kurhidiwe na kuni ukuba ukuzenza amakhoboka entolongo bobona buyatha? Yeyona ngcinezelo? Kokona kuhlwempuzeka kuba akulambe sisu kuphela koko nengqondo kwanomoya ngaphakathi kumbilini wakhe ubani? Uyintoni na ke onjalo? Akalilo na elokwenene ikhoboka? Kaloku yena wodlula lawa aye ethengiswa ezimalekeni ngabamhlophe? Yena kaloku uzikhoboza ngokwakhe. Konjalo ke akukho kuphuncuka kwimbandezelo. Ikhoboka lona belikhe libhungce, lizimele ngobusuku, linyebeleze, liphel' emehlweni. Wena ke uzikhoboza ngezakho izenzo, uza kuphuncuka njani na? Uza kuphuncuka kubani na, inguwe nje ncakasana umbandezeli wakho? Inguwe nje umkhonkxi wakho? Inguwe nje osisihendo nesikhubekiso, olwakho usizo lungaze luvele kubani na, njani na, nini na? Ngubani na ongakuhlangula kuwe ingenguwe?

SM

Aba bantwana bethu, ulutsha lwethu nengomso lethu, ingaba balahleke mpela na, mbongi yakowethu?

SEKM

Inguquko iyinto ehamba nokuhamba kwamaxeshe nje, zikho zona ezingaguqukiyo: umntwana uzalwa ngumzali nomzalikazi. Umntwana akasoze wakwazi ukuzikhulisa; udinga abazali aba ukumkhulisa yaye xa ngelishwa okanye nto yimbi na ke, athe waphuncukana nabo abo, wosoloko kodwa emdinga umntu omkhulu ukwenza loo msebenzi. Khumbula, umntwana uzalwa kungekho nenye ayaziyo; ngumzali omfundisa konke aya kukwazi. Koko akwaziyo yena mzali, umfundisa oko kuvumelekileyo, kukhuthazwayo luluntu alulo. Njalo ke umntwana ukhula nolwazi lokuvumelekileyo eluntwini elwaziswa ngumzali. Kanti noko kwalelweyo ikwangumzali omazisayo nomfundisayo. Ngumthetho kaNtu ke lowo: umntwana ululekwa ngumzali. Xa ndithi ngumzali ke, andithethi kuphela lo mntu mdala umzala ngqo lo mntwana koko bonke abo bakuloo ntanga yobuzali – oko kukuthi abantu abadala, abantu abakhulu, abantanga-nye nabo bantu bamzalayo. Loo nto, umntwana uyayazi kuba ukhula nayo.

SM

Heke, Ceduma! Undikhumbuza ndawo ithile kwesinye sezincoko zakho, kwincwadi yakho, Ityala Lamawele. Uthetha kanye ngawo lo mba wendima yomntu omdala ekulungiseni isimo sakhe nawuphi na umntwana ahlanguana naye. Uthi:

‘Yindawo yomntwana ukubeka bonke abantu abakhulu kunaye, nokuba uyabazi nokuba akabazi. Ikwayindawo yomntu omkhulu ukuthi, nokuba usekhaya nokuba ungumhambi osendleleni, akhalime, athethise, angxolise, ade ohlwaye, nawuphi na umntwana ambone esenza into engalungileyo. Yingozi kuye ukungathethi, kuba amehlo akhe, okanye iindlebe zakhe, se zimzele netyala’

SEKM

Kunjalo kanye.

SM

Yhoo! Mnumzana Mqhayi! Yhoo, kweli lethu ixesha akukho mntu ungaze aluleke mntwana anganzaliyo. Kanti nalowo amzalayo, umzali unemigaqo ekufuneka eyigqalile xa athi uyamluleka. Abantwana abasohlwaywa ngaswazi; kuphela ngamazwi okungxolisa kanti kona oko kungabi naburhabaxa. Zikho phofu nezinye iindlela zokumohlwaya umntwana; njengokumvimba nto ayixabisileyo enje ngokutyelela kwasihlobo okanye izihlobo ezo zize kumtyelela kowabo apha; ukumbandeza ibhaso alilindeleyo – nokuba lelamhla weKrismesi na okanye mhla wumbi na ke.

SEKM

Okoko nje umntwana eziva engozuze isohlwayo, andiboni ngxaki mna kuhlobo lweso sohlwayo. Kaloku sikho kuba kuvunyelwene ngaso luluntu, anditsho na?

SM

Nantso ke indawana ekhathazayo. Asibabo bonke abazali abayamkeleyo le yokungabethwa kwabantwana xa besohlwaywa koko ngumthetho ovela kurhulumente. Ewe, wona, ukho kuba kukho ngcinga ithi akulungile ukubetha umntwana ngoswazi kuba oko kukumfundisa ubundlobongela yaye yinto ethoba nesidima sakhe umntwana lowo.

SEKM

Yeyabelungu ke leyo ingcinga, anditsho?

SM

Kunjalo kanye.

SEKM

Iindlela namasiko nezithethe zabantu ngabantu azifani. Zingafani nje, zondele kumntu ngamnye. Loo nto ithetha ukuthi lo wenza nto ithile engakholwa ncam yiyo okanye engayiqondi, engayixhasi ngokupheleleyo, soze yaze yanempumelelo loo nto ayenzayo. Isiseko sempumelelo kuyo nantoni na ubani ayenzayo, yingqiniseko epheleleyo ekulungeni kwaloo nto ayenzayo. Lo udlulisa nje umkhondo okanye ofeza nje idinga ukuze kuthiwe naye uyenzile loo nto ayenzayo abe yena engaxolanga, engakholwanga, engavuyisekanga yiyo leyo ... kukuchitha amanzi elwandle. Nina, nithe ukuze nivume ukwahlukana neyenu indlela yokululeka abantwana kwabe bekutheni na kanene?

SM

Soyiswa ngumthetho ovela kwabasemagunyeni!

SEKM

Ingaba ezenu iingxoxo eziwuchasayo lo mthetho mtsha zawa phantsi kusini na?

SM

Hayi, Mhlekaazi! Hayi, mbongi yakowethu, akuzange kube kho zingxoxo.

SEKM

Zange?

SM

Zange.

SEKM

Konke nje?

SM

Konke. Zange kube kho zingxoxo ngawo lo mba wokupheliswa koswazi ekululekeni iintsatshana.

SEKM

Mmhh! Awu-u! Konakele! Lafa ilizwe loobawo! Ilizwe looyise nooyise booyise!

Ikumkani akulungile ivele yawisa umthetho. Kuqala, kufuneka loo mthetho kuxoxwe, kuboniswane ngawo yinkundla. Kukhona ze loo mthetho ikumkani iwuwisayo uthotyelwe luluntu luphela; kaloku luzibona luyinxalenye yokuyilwa kwalo mthetho mtsha; luye lwaba nenzaxheba ekugocagocweni kwawo – kuqondisiswa ukuba abantu uya kubalungela njani na yaye ulungisa ntoni na ngokungqalileyo kwintlalo le yabo. Sele igweba ityala inkosi, ayisuke nje yenze ekholwa yiyo, ayivele nje ‘... igwebe igqibe, kume ngayo, nokuba uluntu luya kholwa, nokuba alukholwa.’

SM

Amaxesha ngamanye; noxa namhlanje siphethwe ngabantu abamnyama, ulawulo lona lusekwe kolwaseNtshona, olwabelungu ukutsho. Awutsho na ke ukuba mhlawumbi isuka apho le yabaphathi abagqiba bodwa bengazivanga, yaye bengazihoye kuyaphi ezabantu izimvo?

SEKM

O-oo, Sizwe sam! Ngani na ukuba thina bantu singafundi? Kunini lo mkhuba usikhubaza? Ukufika koKhanyo yenzeka le uthetha ngayo yokulahlwa kwemithetho yemveli, imithetho kaNtu. Abelungu bathi eyethu imithetho namasiko ethu zizinto zobuhedeni. ‘Kuthe kwakwenjiwa njalo, kwavela umonakalokazi omkhulu, kwakhula ukungeva, nobuboja, noburhalarhume, nokuphela kohloni, nokungahoyi hlazo, nokunxila, nokungabi nambeko.’ Konakala mpela nje. Konakala kwade kwakhala naba belungu basiyekise ezethu iindlela zokuziphatha. Kaloku bebengaqondi ukuba ‘... bawuguzule umthetho kaXhosa, owawungajongiswe konakaliseni nawo – wawujongiswe ekwakheni nasekulungiseni’.

SM

A-awu! Thetha, mbongi yakowethu! Thetha, ezam iindlebe ndizivule kunene! Kaloku, namhlanje, uninzi kulutsha lufikelele kwimbono ethi ookhokho baye befathula, ulwazi nengqiqo zikude kubo abo yaye akukho nanye ababeyenza efanele kulinganiswa namhlanje. Akukho nenye kwezabo abo ekungathi kuyeleliswe nokuyeleliswa okanye kuzekeliswe kuyo. Konke ababekubo nababekwenza bubuvuvu nelize, izinto ezingafanele kulinganiswa nakukhunjulwa. Nalo uluvo olucacayo kulutsha lwanamhlanje. Akukho kulo ukuzingca ngemvelaphi yalo nangomnombo walo, lowo luphuma kuwo ngqo.

SEKM

O-oo, olungaka na lona usizi! Hayi ukungazi!

Xa ulahla esakho isithethe uya kulandela esikabani na kanene?

Xa ufulathela ezakho izinyanya, uya kungxengxeza ubongoze kweziphi na kanene? 'Umntu lo uyafana nomthi; xa umthi uwususa kwindawo obukuyo, ufuna ukuwumilisela kwenye indawo, ubulumko busekuthini uwumbe neengcambu kakuhle uze ude uthi, ukuba unakho, uthabathe nomhlaba lowo waloo ndawo obukuyo; uye kuwutyala ke.' Wenjenjalo, uya kuzuza le ube uyingqwenela yaye bubuyatha obungathethekiyo ukusuka uwugawule esiqwini umthi uye kuwutyala uze ulindele isiqhamo kuwo. Kaloku, sobe wasibona eso siqhamo; nto eya kwenzeka kukusoloko walilisela ukhala ubuza usithi, 'Azi lo mthi wathi ni na, le nto waba yinto enje?'

SM

Ceduma, Nkosi yam! Uthi kunjenjenje kukuba silahle ezethu izithethe; salahla namasiko ethu?

SEKM

Ngqo!

SM

Mhlekezazi, hambisa! Mthandi wesiXhosa, thetha! Theta, wena owakhonza isizwe ngenene nangentobeko!

SEKM

Ubomi nokuphilwa kwabo yinto exhomekeke ekuziphatheni. Uluntu jikelele, lunezicwangciso ngendlela yokuhlalisana. Loo nto ke kuthiwa ngumbuso okanye ulawulo okanye urhulumente. Umbuso lo ke ngundoqo kwintlalo yakhe umntu. Nokuba olawulayo woyise bani, njani, engenawo umbuso akukho kuye ukulawula. Olo lawulo '... yimpatho yokuphathwa kwesizwe ngemithetho – imithetho ebopha wonke ubani ukuba abe ngaphantsi kwayo'.

SM

Nkosi yam, mandicele uxolo. Mhlawumbi awuqondi ncam. Mhlawumbi ngendikwandlalela ndithi: Iluthotho imithetho esinayo kweli loMzantsi Afrika. Iluthotho yaye ilunge kunene.

Nkqu umgaqo-siseko wethu yimbalasane enconywa lihlabathi liphela. Koko, ukuthotyelwa kwayo loo mithetho ... ubukhulu becala, asinto yenziwa nguye wonke ubani. Eneneni, ndingatsho khona ukuthi ubuninzi beminye yemithetho yeli ayisiwe so sisininzi sabantu beli. Ide idelwe nkqu ngabalawulayo, idelwe nangabasemzini! Ingaba silahleke xa kuphi ngalo mba?

SEKM

Ndilusizi kakhulu ngale ngxelo uyanekayo. Ndilusizi kakhulu kakhulu. Isizwe sethu, isizwe samaXhosa, fudula isisizwe sakwamthetho. Loo nto ndithetha ngayo yeyangaphambili le-e, ukubhala oku kungekabikho. Loo mithetho ibingemithetho ibhaliweyo kodwa ibisaziwa nguye wonke ubani; umntu ekhula eyazi kwasebuntwaneni. 'Indlela yokugcinakala kwayo ke, ibigcinwa luhloni, nembeko eluntwini, nokoyika ihlazo.

SM

Hambisa!

SEKM

Ndiba ndigqibile.

SM

Khawundicacisele gca-a. Ziintoni na ezi zinto uzibalayo? Yintoni uhloni, yaye ubani woyika ihlazo kuba?

SEKM

Uhloni kukuzikhwebula ekwenzeni nantoni na engahambisaniyo nomthetho obekiweyo wamkelwa luluntu olulo. Yinto le ebethelelwa emntwaneni kwasekuzalweni; ekhula nje, uyayazi amakayenze eyazi amakangayenzi kuba ukuyenza kukwaphula umthetho – bubugwenxa ngeliphandle. Ke ubugwenxa kukona nokuba wona bani na; yaye isenzo sobugwenxa silandelwa sisohlwayo sokwaphula loo mthetho ubani awaphuleyo. Umzali ke kanti kwanekhaya liphela, akonwatyiswa konke xa umntwana wakhe enze isenzo esikukwaphula umthetho. Kaloku lisolo ekhayeni lakhe lo mntwana waphule umthetho. Ngokwenza leyo, uzibonakalisa eyinjubaqa eswele ingqeqesho. Leyo ke isola abazali bona bebefanele kwenza loo msebenzi.

SM

Lilonke, konakele ikhaya sele kunj e nje nje?

SEKM

Khumbula, ndithe kwantlandlolo, umntwana uhlonela omkhulu kuye, emazi na okanye engamazi. Ngumthetho lowo. Lo mntwana ukhula enawo yaye ewuthobele loo mthetho kuba ufundiswe njalo kowabo yaye nelali le iyonke iyawungqina, iwazi, iwuxhasa. Umntwana uthobele omkhulu kuye; okhulileyo uthobela inkosi ephetheyo; yona ke ithobela uQamata, apho kwavela khona yonke imithetho nemimiselo. Intlalo ke ibe ibekelelwe yacwangciswa ngaleyo ndlela; konke kuhambelana, kunxibelelana, khon' ukuze umntu lo abudle ubomi bakhe enolonwabo nenzolo kungekho umphazamisayo nomonayo na; kanti, ngokunjalo, naye embekile ummelwane nemilowo nezizalwane ezixabisile. Ibilungelelaniswa njalo ke intlalo kaXhosa; phofu nezinye izizwe ezi bezikwabekelela ngolo hlobo; umthetho ulawula. Bubuntu kaloku ukuxabisa omnye. Bekuxatyiswene ke luluntu – kakhulu kunjalo nje.

SM

Ukuxabisana oku, yinto ubani lo ebeyibonisa njani kanene?

SEKM

Asinishiyelanga zibhayibhile namiqulu yazifilosofi kodwa iindlela zethu zokuziphatha naziya kumaqhalo ethu nakwizaci zethu. Kulapho kuqulathwe ubuni bobuntu. Yonke le mithetho nemimiselo bendikuxelela ngayo icaca gca kwezo ntetho. Yaye, ngaphezu koko, zona ezo zikwabonisa ukuba sibe singabantu abanengqiqo nomqwalasela; abakuzikisayo ukucinga. Amaqhalo la yinto ebonisa ukuba uluntu luphela lwaye luyamkele indlela yokuziphatha engqiniweyo ukuba yeyobuntu – nako kaloku loo ndlela isaziwa ngumntu wonke, nto ithetha ukuba ingqiniwe yaye ixhaswa. Khumbula ke, asilwazi beluvela zincwadini olu. Kodwa amaqhalo ebesaziwa nguye wonke ubani.

SM

Mhleka, khawundivule amehlo ngala maqhalo nezaci.

SEKM

Avuleka mhla wazalwa amehlo kuwe nakuye wonke omnye umntu. Yindalo leyo. Nina, phakamani nilwe eli liphambi kwenu idabi; nisiyeke thina siphumle; lidlule elethu ilixa

lokuxhapha amagwebu, sizizigantsontso eziqhiwule iminqayi, nokuba leyo minqayi yeyaluhlobo lulolunye na.

SM: Njengawe nosiba, Mbongi!

SEKM

He-eha-a! Isina idedelana!

SM

Andiva?

SEKM

Lelinye lamaqhalo elo. Nokuba sele ulichule kangakanani na ekuxhentseni, kulunge ukhe umana uyishiya inkundla nabanye bazuze ithuba lokuzinika.

SM

Umntu ababonelele abanye!

SEKM

He-eke! Onke la maqhalo akukhombisa indlela yokuziphatha eyeyobuntu. Akwaba beningawagcinayo, niwagqala, nifunde kuwo. Kaloku, kuthiwa inyathi ibuzwa kwabaphambili! Fundani koko sanishiyela kona.

SM

Kunyanzelekile ukuba sizame ukukwenza oko, Bawo.

SEKM

Camagu!

SM

Nkonde yakowethu, sele nditshilo ukuba ubudlile ubomi. Uwabonile amagingxi-gingxi namahla-ndinyuka ehlabathi. Uzelwe emva kwesiyekele sikaNongqawuse (1857), wabona zombini iiMfazwe zeLizwe - kwaze kulo kwaphethwa ngawo le yesibini, u-1945, wedlula nawe, Mbongi yesizwe. Latshon' emini ilanga kulwimi lwesiXhosa; yafa imbali yesizwe.

SEKM

Hayi, akunjalo konke. Zona iinkathazo soze zaphela ebomini; kodwa ke, abantu baneendlela zabo zokumelana nazo de bazosamele. Zithi ke zakudlula baphuthume apho bebeyeke khona noxa ke izinto zingayi kube zibe njengangaphambili twatse ... kaloku ixesha lihamba nenguquko zokuba kuphilwa, kufundwa, kubonwa ngaso limbi. Ke khona, okwam ukufa bekuqale kwayintoni na kwisizwe? Ewe, sabakho isikhalwana, kodwa ke sabuya sayeka kuba kakade ke amaXhosa soloko azithuthuzela esithi, 'Akuhlanga lungehliyo!'

SM

Elo lifanele kanye le sikuyo ngoku nje imeko, mbongi yakowethu. Ihlabathi liphela lehlelwe sisihelegu esiqale ngo2019, iCovid. Awutsho na ukuba yeyona ntlekele sijongene nayo isizwe kweli thuba? Nditsho kuba kum ngathi iza kuwutyabula umzi ukuyodlula le-e intlekele kaBhubhani ka1918.

SEKM

Mandulo phaya, bekusithi xa kwehle into eyothusa umzi, abantu baphulaphule umthetho ovela enkosini – umkhomba-ndlela. Mandikukhumbuze nto: Kuthe ngomnyaka we1874, kwafika umphanga, uvela esiQiqithini, ubika ukuba akasekho uNxele, owayekwiminyaka ema80 ubudala. Lazila elasemaXhoseni, yema imiyiyizelo, akwaluswa; zema iziyolo nezisusa. (104). Ngumntu omnye ke lo ndithetha ngaye. Ewe, kwakubhubhe inkosi kodwa ke eyinkosi njalo, mnye loo mntu wazilelwa ngolo hlobo sisizwe siphela. Kubeke phi na ke xa, ngale covid uthetha ngayo, kubikwa amawaka-waka emiphefumlo ephuma mihla le? Bekungafanele na ke ngoko ukuba isizwe sikhe sinqumame, silinde, sizifune?

SM

Ngathi umvile uMongameli weli, kutsha nje. Wenze kanye leyo uMongameli, uCyril Ramaphosa; uwise isibhengezo esithi ngenxa yokugunya kweCovid, iindibano makhe kuthiwe xha ngazo. Ewe, abo bebesele bolusile baya kuwakhupha amakhwenkwe lakufika ixesha laleyo koko umcimbi lowo ube ngesantya esiphantsi, kunyamekelwe le yokuba iindibano zithintelwe. Akudlulanga nezimbini na iiveki, kwabanjwa abantu aboluse kanye emva kokuba kuwiswe loo mthetho. Mzali, ngcibi, khankatha naye nabani na obandakanya kuleyo, ukhonkxiwe; abo bakhwetha baqweqwediswa baya kulahlwa ezibhedlele. Loo mabhonyana abo achithwa, edlakazwa nje ngokungesikweni. Uthini na ke wena, Mbongi yeSizwe, kwinto enjalo?

SEKM

Mntwan' omntwan' am, inene, konakele. Kaloku okuya usa inkwenkwe endle, uya kulungisa isimo sayo, usigutyulwa ezakwankwenkwe ukuze isulungeke, ilungele ukuba ngumntu wodidi ebudodeni. Kwakhiwa isimilo somntu ekwalusweni; uyakhuliswa, eqhizwa maqhinana angaba unawo ekhula nje. Kugqityezelwa ukululekwa kwakhe. Nanku ke umbuzo: Xa wena mzali ungawuhlonele umthetho, uthi lo nyana wakho umfundisa ntoni na ngesi senzo sokumsa esuthwini isizwe sibekelwe umthetho onqanda kanye leyo? Mfundiso ni na leyo? Mzekelo mni na lowo? Ndiyaphinda ndithi: Uhloni ibe ingundoqo kubomi babantu bakowethu. Andiqondi ke ukuba loo nto ifanelwe kujika kuba ixesha eli lijikile. Umthetho ngowokuthotyelwa yaye ukuzeyisa lolunye lweempawu zomntu ocoleke gqibi. Imbeko iyamaakha umntu kanti nesizwe iyasaakha.

SM

Bawo, ndiyatenxa ngoku; kodwa ndinga ndingakubuza lo mbuzo phambi kokuba sahlukane, mbongi yakowethu: ukuba ubungabuyayo, uphile usenyameni namhlanje, yintoni obungayivuyelayo yaye iyintoni ebiya kukutsho ube sisishwakumbana esiselusizini malunga nentlalo yabantu bakowenu kule mihla yenkululeko; idyokhwe yocalulo yaxibilikayo ngo-1994? Yintoni ebiya kukubinda njengangokuya waye usadla amazimba? Yintoni ebiya kukwenza ube mnqweno uthi: *Akwaba bendiphila ngeli kanye ixesha?* Xa uthelekisa, liliphi ilixa elilelona lilungileyo kukho eliya lakho neli lanamhla oku? Ngoba?

Ndiwubuza loo mbuzo nje kukuba sime bume sixambulisana ngezinto ezifana nesiko nesithethe. Ubomi ke bona buthi buyile, buguquke bube yileya. Namhlanje, njengoko sele nditshilo, ihlabathi liphela limiswe bume ngubhubhani oyiCovid. Kuthi apha kweli lakowenu, le ntlekele yongeza kwimbandezelo esicinezele sangabo bahlala bexhalabile. Ubundlobongela bugunyile; kulawula ulwaphulo-mthetho, ingozi imngenela endlini kwakhe ubani; ukubulala umntu yinto nje engenamsebenzi. Yinto eyehla kungekho nje kuphela kanye ngelanga koko liqela imiphefumlo esutywa bubugebenga, mihla le.

SEKM

Konakele. Konakele mpela kunjalo nje. Fudula abantu bebekene, bebukana, bebambisana xa kukho ingxaki okanye isizathu esifuna inkxaso. Bekungekho mntu ungumth' uzimele ... kaloku bekho nje abantu, bakholo loo nto. Kukunqaba koku kubekana komntu nomnye into

ebiya kundenza ndidandatheke emphefumleni. Ingekho leyo kungangenkankulu ukuba ezinye ezi izinto esele ndikhe ndazikhankatha zingafumaneka.

SM: Khawundihlahlele indlela; undikhanyisele ngokwenzeka kwako oku undibalisela kona. Uthi, gxebe, intlalo ibe iyeyemvisiswano kuluntu luphela?

SEKM

Bekunjalo kanye ngaphandle kwaxa kuwe imfazwe okanye mpixano yimbi – nokuba kuphakathi kwezizalwana na okanye yingxabano yezizwe. Bekusiliwa ngomhlaba, ngempahla efuyiweyo, kanti nangokubangisana mhlawumbi ngentombi ezekwayo isuke ithwalwe soka limbi ... kanti sele iba ngumlo lowo. Kodwa khona, ngaphandle kwezo zigigaba ndizibalayo, bekulawula ukubekana ngexa likaxola-zwe. Umntu emazi umntu, embekile, embonelela; ade abonelele nomhambi odlula ngendlela, engayi kuze abuye ambone. Kwakho, jonga kula maqhalo sele ndikhe ndawakhankanya. Nali eli lithi: Isisu somhambi asingakanani, Nalo eli, njengawo onke, lalatha intlalo kaXhosa – bekusakuba njalo ke ngaphambili.

SM

Lithetha ntoni ke elo iqhalo, Ceduma?

SEKM

Bezingekho ezi ndlela zokuhamba zikhawulezileyo ninazo namhlanje. Umntu ebebetha ngezi zikaTshiwo iinyawo zakhe okanye ke aqabele ihashe lakhe esiya apho aya khona. Maxa wambi olo hambo belungathatha iiveki kanti neenyanga; esendleleni umntu. Loo nto ithi nokuba ebenduluke enomphako, loo mphako usengaphela okanye wonakale esesendleleni njalo. Uya kukhangela umzi ukuze asinde ekufeni yindlala. Umzi lusindiso lwakhe ngoba kuwo lowo kukho abantu. Ke, umXhosa ebesithi akubona umhambi, amngcambazise embuza imvelaphi nalapho asinge khona. Esenza loo nto nje ke umnini mzi, inkosikazi iyaqukeza, ilungisa esiwa phantsi kwempumlo – nokuba ngala kanonkala na amanzi; akagqithi umntu emzini enganikwanga nto isisixhaso. Loo nto yenziwa ngaphandle kwentlawulo kuba kudala yayingekho le mali yabelungu; ebikho kuphela bubuntu nezinwe zakhe lo kufikwe kwakhe. Kanti esenza loo nto nje likwakho nelinye iqhalo elimkhumbuzayo ukuba ngenye imini yoze ibe nguye okule ngxaki akuyo lo mhambi. Unyawo aluna mpumlo!

SM

Lijolise kwintoni na ke elo, Bawo uCeduma?

SEKM

Kaloku lona likukhumbuza le iBhayibhile ithi: *Yenza komnye njengoko unga kungenziwa kuwe.* Athi ke yena umXhosa, zihla ngamqala mnye, ekukhumbuza ngemilo-nye yomntu lo. Akakho omilo yimbi; ukuze ubuqonde ubunye bomntu khangela le ndlela simvakalo inye? Silila iinyembezi sakukhathazeka; sihleke sakonwaba. Akakho ohlekiswa yintlungu, aliliswe luvuyo. Ewe, zikho iinyembezi zovuyo kodwa uya kuphawula ukuswela ukujwaqeka kulowo uliliswa luvuyo. Kanti neli lilandelayo lihambisana twatse neli siliphetheyo.

SM

Liliphi ke elo, mbongi?

SEKM

Akukho qili lizikhotha mhlana. Eli qhalo lindihleli kuba lindikhumbuza ngeyam ngqo imeko ebuntwaneni bam. Kufika eqethula abantu indlala le ngo1885 – uNyaka wesiTwayi. Mna ke ndiphethe oweshumi umnyaka. Andinamama kuba undishiye ndilusana oluminyaka mibini qha. Ngokuqonda ukuba imeko ikekele, uBawo undise kwayisekazi, uNzanzana, Phesheya KweNciba, kuCentane. Lo mfo ke, noko, unezinto kuba sisibonda. Andizange nje ndanele kwamkeleka apho koko ndondliwa. Mna, ndithi ndondliwa ingekuphela nje isondlo somzimba koko nesengqondo kwanesomoya.

SM

Utheth' ukuthini xa usitsho?

SEKM

Kulapho ndabona khona inyaniso yeli lithi: Ingwe idla ngamabala. Kaloku ndithe ndisithi dlundlu, ndabe selendaphawulayo ukuba amadoda aziwayo ngalawo anegalelo ebomini besizwe. Leyo ke ndiyiqaphele kwaphaya kwabawomkhulu, kuCentane. Awuboni na ke ndibalulwa nangumntwan' enkosi, uRolihlahla, A-aa, Dalibhunga!

Yiva ebalisa ngesiganeko sokuqala kwakhe ukugagana nam lo eselula ngoko – umfanana – engumfundi phaya eNxukhwebe. Uthi imbongi ibonge ngelizwi eliphakamileyo, ngokwesiqhelo kodwa, ithe ekuphetheni yacacisa isiganeko eshle xeshikweni ibonga, ukungquzulana komkhonto wayo nentanjana yombane, yenjenje:

Umkhonto umele okuluzuko kwimbhali yeAfrika; ngumqondiso wegorha laseAfrika negcisa laseAfrika. Intsimbi le ngumzekelo wemveliso yeNtshona, enobuchule kodwa ibanda, inokuhlakanipha kodwa ayinantliziyo. Into endithetha ngayo asiyo le yethanjana elithe nca kwintwanana yentsinjana, ndingathethi nangokuphakelana kwale naleya inkcubeko; endinixelela yona yindyikityha yongqzulwano phakathi koko kukokwemveli yaye kulunge kunene, noko kukokwasemzini yaye kukubi. Masingabavumeli abasemzini abangayikhathalele konke inkcubeko yethu ukuba basithimbe isizwe sethu. Ndimbono ithi, ngeneye imini, Amandla oluntu lweAfrika aya kosamela ngengqiniseko boyiswe abasemzini [interloper]. Akungoku sibhedsha [succumbed] oothixo abangento babelungu. Kodwa siya kuze sikhuphuke sizixibilize ezi nkolo zasemzini.

SM

Uthi thina aba sakuze sifike kuloo mgangatho?

SEKM

Sukelani ukuzazi nokuzithanda; ukuzixabisa ngobuni enibubo. Leyo ibuyela kwasengqeqeshweni: Umthi ugotywa usemncinci. Ukukhulisa umntwana – eyintombazana na okanye eyinkwenkwe; injongo inye – inye qwaba: kukumlungiselela ubuntu obudala xa sele ekhulile ukuze abe lulutho kowabo kanti nasesizweni. Luvela apho ke uhlobo lweentombi, olu namhlanje lunyenjwayo. Lunyenjwa kungakhange kwasiwa so ekubeni lube kho ukuze kuthini na kanene. Kungakhange kukhangelwe ukuba ookhokho aba babesithi benza ntoni na kanenene? Yini na ukuba isizalo sabo sibe nje ukubajongela phantsi? Kukuthini na ukuba abazukulwana babazukulwana babo bagqibe ekubeni babeziziyatha boshumi? Kanti ke, xa bona aba besithi bazalwa ziziyatha, bathi le ngqondo nale ngqiqo ingaka bayithabathe phi na? Bayithengile? Abalunakani na ufuzo kubo aba? Okanye bathi bavela ezidulini na?

SM

Ingaba uthi makubuyelwe kwizithethe zakudala?

SEKM

Usana alungekhe lwabuyela esizalweni sonina; nofileyo engekhe wabuya wema ngeenyawo ehamba lo mhlaba ebewuhamba esaphila. Ubomi buqhubela phambili; utsho kaloku umbongo wam, uKhawulezis' amaxesha! Akukho ukubuya mva, Eyzekayo, kulo lonke ihlabathi eli, kukuba kuzekwe mzekweni, kodwa leyo yenziwe kuqhutyelwa phambili – kulungiswa, kuhonjiswa, kusengezwa. Oko kube kusenziwa sesi isizukulwana, esilandelayo siyengeza,

sisakhela kweso siseko sisishiyelwe seso sizukulwana sisanduleleyo. Yimbeko nentlonipho nombulelo izinto ezakhayo; kukuzazi imvelaphi yakhe ubani yaye abe nombulelo ongazenzisiyo kwabo bamhlahlele indlela. Kaloku ekolu hlelo akulo nje, ekulo mgangatho akuwo nje, ejonge ngemva, woyibona imizila yezolo. Kulapho ke kuhambe khona abo bamanduleleyo – ookhokho bakhe.

SM

Chosi!

SEKM

Mandisithele, ntombazana! Mandisithele, Tolokazi!

SM

Ngxatsho ke, Mzima! Ngxatsho ke Ceduma, mzukulwana kaGama wakho! Ube usele utshilo ukuba, 'Isina idedelana!'

CONVERSATION WITH MQHAYI

BY

SINDIWE MAGONA

SM

Hail, Bard!

Hail, great one from Ntab' ozuko!

I bow before you, son of Mqhayi

Stuttering, blabbering, begging for mercy:

Hail, handsome sir!

Hail, greatest of experts of isiXhosa!

Hail, Bard of the Nation Entire;

You, who was acknowledged long before we were,

Acknowledged by kings, acknowledged by the well-educated,

Till you were acknowledged by generations who did not even suck that tongue from their mother's breasts but were overcome by a truth undeniable ... which is why this, your grandchild, also approaches that hearth which you are; so she may bask in the undying flame you are -

You, Mqhayi of Mount Glory;

Samuel Krune ... Hail, tall Ceduma!

Allow me to address these few questions to you

Allow me to thus plead access:

What can or should be done about the sad state of affairs, the terrible degradation the black nation is in?

How is a nation regenerated when so much evil prevails?

Let me pause here, wait for your response, Grandfather.

SEKM

Go on!

SM

I am ashamed to lay bare the disgrace of the nation of which you were so proud.

SEKM

I am all ears!

SM

Grandsons rape grandmothers; maidens maim what they carry in their stomachs;

Fathers deny offspring.

New mothers go seeking for the fathers of their new-borns.

Grandmothers are dumping grounds for infants none wants to suckle.

Children grow up without guidance regarding their behaviour; and none to tell them folktales, none showing them paths to their enate uncles or praising, criticism, scolding –reprimanding as necessary.

Initiates guarded by dogs on two legs

Why're we surprised they land in jail still ochre-smeared?

SEKM

AA! Oo-h! What is this? In disarray is the House of Phalo! What words would you I speak if things are as you say? Alas, will it ever be well? Oh, my people. Mmhh. Oh!

SM

I thought to appeal to you for your words healed the nation before.

Speak, Bard of our nation entire!

SEKM

What words of mine do you believe could be of any use given the bleak picture you paint?

SM

You have experienced disaster to your fill. Born in the aftermath of the calamity of Nongqawuse, you were an infant, only two years old, when you lost your mother. Not quite ten years old, the East Coast Fever blanketed your world, famine the order of the day. You were a young man when the Union of South Africa was formed in 1910, a remarkable year two years later the South African National Congress was formed. You survived the Spanish Flu. You lived through the Anglo-Boer War (1899-1902); the two World Wars, the last of which ended in 1945, the sad year of your death. We must not forget the wars of dispossession, when

your people valiantly fought the people who found them here and immediately disregarded and then denuded them of land. These include the War of the Axe; the War of Mlanjeni; Ntaba kaNdoda; Isandlwane; and Bambatha, to name just a few.

SEKM

Oo-h, My! Oo-h What is this? What i..is this?

SM

Ooh – Mighty One of Mount Glory,

I bow before you, grandson of Mqhayi,

Blathering and dithering – I beseech you thus:

Hail, Handsome Sir!

Hail, mighty expert of the tongue of amaXhosa!

Even had you not walked through such of life's fires, in the state in which you are, nothing can be beyond you, Poet of the People.

Speak, that I hear though the ears be deaf from age!

I thought I was educated; none appear ready to even acknowledge that – never mind make use of it.

I thought there was some guidance I held onto; it helps nothing.

How can we watch the nation collapse into total disarray?

We are given this long life that we do what with? What role is ours, when none ask anything from us?

In the event we forget ourselves, the youth berate us; till it seems it might come to physical fights!

Intervene, Ceduma!

Intervene, the black nation perishes!

SEKM

Grandchild, go naked! What would you have clarified? And how would I do that? And, do it giving myself what reason for that undertaking? Go naked!

SM

What could have led to this state of affairs?

How can the black nation be in such a tattered state?

Why, the disaster of children who beget children; fathers who neglect their own; and mothers who throw babies onto the mothers who raised them at such a high price?

Old women are abused in this manner;

And they escape not rape by their sons and sons of those sons.

An old woman nigh a hundred years old dies whilst being molested by, grandchildren of her grandchildren!

How, correct this disaster?

How, erase the abomination?

SEKM

You believe it is me, me deep under the soil who can help?

SM

Demolish all frontiers that would separate us.

Demolish them, so the nation you love and are profoundly proud of heals.

The nation is very proud of you, grandson of Krune, whisper in my ear.

Speak, boy who learned to herd livestock in Cacadu, home of your paternal granduncle Nzanzana; but was to learn to herd the little ones of amaXhosa in Alice.

Speak, grandson of Mqhayi, speak! Speak, I've cleared my ears!

SEKM

Wow! Oh, grandchild of my grandchild!

Oh, how do you ask me to look this far back?

How do I make myself a zombie, now re-tongued;

That words roll out like water off a spring, the land parched in the grip of a terrible, terrible drought! But no drought is worse, more dangerous than that of the soul,

For that kills self-knowing; extinguishes self-examination.

Even a cob stripped bare as bare can be and tossed away may still be of use.

Could it not, on the spot in which it has fallen, sprout?

Or perhaps be grasped by a starving foe fending for herself; down throat and tummy!

What is he whose worth is even less than that of that cast-away cob?

What is he to his nation; to the humanity of which he is part?

What contribution could come from such a one?

Ooh! My Lord, what sorrow!

SM

Pardon, Sir! Pardon, handsome Ceduma!

Remember, we descendants of Ntu hold the belief when one departs

When one goes to the bones of the forebears;

Their worth, now an ancestor, increases.

You then, Poet of the Nation entire, what lofty and powerful one you must be!

How, then, can you think you should be left alone, forgotten?

Which is why, Ceduma, I bow at your feet. Why I shout out to you beneath the soil.

Help! The nation disintegrates; pardon me, it has already disintegrated.

Help! Poet of the Nation entire! You did exactly that before!

SEKM

Hear me, hear me! Was I blabbering then when I said:

Awake, you cowards, dawn has come!

What people are you, so stubborn?

How will I remain with you, as I am only human?

As I am only human, a thing that oft visits

As I am human, a thing that oft relocates

As I am human, a thing that oft returns home?

How do you summon me from beyond, in the world of Shades?

SM

Pardon, great one, pardon!

You were not dithering; and we heard...thought we heard, by the way.

But today the pumpkin porridge dries on the ladle.

It is one hell of a muddle

We're stuck in a huddle of muddles.

Harmony is no more. Mutual respect is dead. Blame everywhere blossoms. Rapaciousness abounds. Poverty reigns supreme. Families are in dire distress, an abomination. Hooliganism is our daily yoke, especially for woman. We must not forget babes in layettes. Rape! Rape!

What lot is this our sons bequeath us all?

Where are the fathers of these boys and young men? Where are the greys? Has youth turned all upside down? There it is, our youth, packing jails to their rafters!

SEKM

Oh, alas!

SM

Rape is birthed by a disdain that says a woman is nothing.

Only kraal humans are real humans.

What absurdity to humiliate another because of their gender.

The dignity of such a one and her role are nought

To the brains so apparent, for what hangs between their legs!

SEKM

Hear me! Yea all, hear me! For what is this disaster? What, this disgrace?

Black humanity, such disgrace! See you not that to make oneself jail slaves is the height of stupidity? The worst oppression? The worst impoverishment, for his is not only stomach hunger but that of mind and soul? What then is such a one? Is he not the ultimate, a slave par excellence? He is worse than those who used to be sold by white people, for he enslaves himself. To such a one can be no escape from bondage. A slave would once in a while escape, run away by night, steal away, by stealth, disappear. How can you escape when you enslave yourself through your own deeds, your own actions? When will you escape, you yourself your enslaver? Your capturer? When you are the temptation, the frustration, whence then can your salvation come, from whom, and how? Who can save you from yourself if not you?

SM

These, our children, our youth, our marrow – is it that they're lost for ever, Poet of our nation?

SEKM

Even as change is the one constant in life, there are things that never change A child is born of parents. No child will ever be able to raise herself, she needs those parents to raise her and if, for whatever reason, she has become bereft of them, she will still need an adult to fulfil that role. Remember, a child is born with absolutely no knowing; it is the parent who teaches the child all from what the parent knows. All that society advocates and encourages, the child learns from the parent. It is the parent also who teaches the child what society forbids. That is the law of Ntu: a child is disciplined by the parent. When I say parent, I do not mean only the adult who happens to be the child's birth parent but all adults, cohorts of his parents. The child knows that, learns it from birth.

SM

Yes, Ceduma! You remind me of a certain portion in one of your essays. In your book, *Ityala Lamawele*, you speak directly to this issue of the role of an adult in correcting the behaviour of any child the adult encounters. You say:

‘It is the place of a child to respect all those older than themselves, whether they know that person or not. It is also the place of the grownup, whether home or on the wayside, to challenge, scold or reprimand and even punish any child they see doing something mischievous. To not do that is a danger to the adult, for their eyes and their ears have already made them complicit.

SEKM

It is so!

SM

Woe! Mr Mqhayi! Woe, in this, our time, no one would dare discipline a child not theirs. But even the birth parent, she too has guidelines to observe when meting out discipline to that child. One no longer uses a switch on a child, only verbal reprimands but even those must not be harsh. Of course, there are other ways of discipling children: deprive them of something they prize such as a visit to or from friends; withhold a present for, say, a special occasion such as a birthday or Christmas.

SEKM

As long as the child feels disciplined, I see no problem with the kind of punishment. It is one society agrees on, isn't that so?

SM

There lies the problem. Not all parents are in accord with the no-switch form of punishment but that's the law from government. Yes, that's the law but that comes because there is a belief that the use of a switch for discipline teaches the child violence and affronts her dignity.

SEKM

That's white people's reasoning, right?

SM

Exactly.

SEKM

Different people have different ways, mannerisms, and customs. That being so all adhere to those. That means any participating in anything in which he holds no deep belief, understanding, nor support, can garner no success. Success is based on a firm belief in the worthiness of any venture on which one embarks. Any doing something just for appearance when such gives him neither joy nor pride, the act is tantamount to pouring water into the ocean. Why then did you, black people, agree to let go of your way of child discipline?

SM

The law of the rulers overcame us.

SEKM

Did your own arguments, opposing this new ruling, fail?

SM

No Sir! No, there was no discussion, Poet of the People.

SEKM

None?

SM

None.

SEKM

None at all?

SM

None.

SM

None at all. We were never given a chance to make our case as far as the use of the switch when disciplining children.

SEKM

Alas! Oh, we are done for! Dead is the land of our fathers! Of their fathers and theirs before them!

It is not good that a king arbitrarily lays down the law. First, that law should be discussed, subjected to different views of the law makers. Only then will the law the king lays down be one humanity obeys; for it sees itself as playing a part in its enactment. The people were part of its examination, its evaluation – to see how it would benefit them, what it corrected – and how it improved their lives. Even when a chief passes judgment, he does not do as he pleases – his word is not the be all and end all of it – whether the court is in agreement or not.

SM

Times have changed and although today the government is black, rule is still Western, white rule so to say – perhaps that is why rulers simply decide without bothering to hear what mere humans think?

SEKM

Oo-oh, My Nation, why do we not learn? How long has this habit crippled us? When light came, exactly this happened – we dumped indigenous laws, the law of Ntu. Whites said our laws and our customs were heathenish. When that happened, a great fall happened disobedience, grew, lawlessness, brutality, and the dearth of self-respect, flight of a sense of shame, drunkenness, lack of respect for others! Sheer disaster! Disaster that made even the same whites who'd made us discard our ways of doing things bemoan the resultant situation. They had not realised that they had shorn off the law of amaXhosa, a law that had also aimed not at causing wrong – it had aimed at building and structuring right.

SM

Ah – ah! Bard of Our Nation, speak! Speak, I have indeed opened my ears! For these days, most of the young have come to the conclusion our forebearers fumbled about, knowing and judgement to them foreign and nothing of what they did is worth emulating today. None of theirs can be copied or used as a base. All they were and all they did is nothing but rotten and worthless, things not worthy of emulating or remembering. That's the clear opinion of today's youth. Not for them pride in their forebearers or ancestors, the same from which they come.

SEKM

Oh, what a shame! So sad! When you discard your own customs, whose will you follow? When you turn your back on your ancestors, from whose will you seek solace or pardon? A human being is like a tree; when you remove a tree from its location, and you want to plant it elsewhere, wisdom dictates you dig it up down to its roots, and if you can also take along the soil around it; then go and plant it. If you do that your wish will be fulfilled, and it is folly of no small matter to go and chop the tree at the trunk and go and plant it and then expect fruit from it. Well, you will not see that fruit, what will happen is you will forever bewail your luck, saying, ‘Whatever happened to this tree, that it has become barren?’

SM

Ceduma, my Lord! Are you saying things are this way because we discarded our customs?

SEKM

Precisely!

SM

Sir, please, go on! Lover of isiXhosa, speak! Speak, you, who served the nation truly and with humility.

SEKM

Life and the living thereof depend on human behaviour. The world over, humanity has laid down laws and regulations to maintain harmonious coexistence. That is called rule of government. Governance is key in the life of a human being. No matter whom a brave vanquished, without governance, he is no ruler. Governance and rule spell the rule over people by laws – laws that oblige everyone to submit to them.

SM

Sir, I beg your pardon. Perhaps you do not quite understand. Perhaps I should have explained thus. Numerous are the laws we have in South Africa. Numerous and excellent. Why, the country’s Constitution is applauded worldwide. But, obedience to these laws...by and large, is not something done by all. In fact, I make bold to say the majority of this country’s laws is not heeded by the majority of the people. Even the lawmakers disrespect the law. How have we lost our ways regarding this?

SEKM

I am deeply saddened by this report you give. Deeply saddened, indeed. Our nation, the nation of amaXhosa, used to be a nation of lawfulness. What I am talking about is of a long-gone era, before writing came. Those laws were not written laws but were known to all; a person grew up aware of them from childhood. The way of safeguarding them was because self-respect, and respect for humanity, and fear of shame!

SM

Please, go on!

SEKM

I believe I'm done.

SM

Please, explain to me; explain so I better understand. What are these things you enumerate? What is self-respect, and why is anyone afraid of shame?

SEKM

Obedience is restraint from anything that is against the law laid down and accepted by the nation. This is something instilled in the child from birth; as the child grows, she knows what she must do and what she must not do for doing it would be breaking the law – lawlessness to put it clearly. And lawlessness is doing wrong by someone whosoever they may be, and wrongful doing is followed by punishment for breaking that law one has broken. Parents as well as the family entire are not happy when their child has performed an act, breaking a law. That is so because it reflects badly on the family, when a child breaks a law. By doing that, the child shows themselves to be a delinquent without discipline. And that reflects negatively on the parent who should have done that job of instilling discipline.

SM

In other words, we are thus because of the destruction of the home?

SEKM

Remember, I said from the beginning, children respect those older than they are, whether they know that person or not. That is law! The child is raised with this law because she has been

taught that at home and the whole village subscribes to it, supports it. A child obeys those older than her; the adults obey the ruling chief, who obeys Qamata, whence all the laws and observances come. Life was founded and arranged on these guidelines; everything corresponded, so each human could enjoy life fully without any disturbing or wronging her; and in return each person respected the neighbour and all others, prized relatives. That way was life systematically arranged by amaXhosa, as was done by other nations too; law ruled. People respected one another; admired one another, supported one another when occasion demanded such. Respecting others is the essence of ubuntu. Mutual respect was highly regarded, and observed too.

SM

How did people show mutual respect?

SEKM

We left you no bibles or volumes of philosophies but our ways of doing things, of conducting ourselves are embedded in our idioms and proverbs. It is in those that the very essence of ubuntu is embedded. All these laws and regulations about which I have told you are clearly enshrined in those. Moreover, the proverbs also show that everyone understood, accepted, and valued the way the living of life was arranged. The fact that knowledge of these abounded illustrates their being supported by all. Remember, this was not knowing from written books! But proverbs and idioms were known to all.

SM

Sir, please enlighten me on these idioms and figures of speech.

SEKM

You and everyone else were born with knowing them in your blood. That is nature. Yes, you needed a little help in growing it – but only at first. You, must stand up and fight the battle that is before you; and let us rest in peace. Our time of sticks wielding, even figuratively, is no more for us.

SM

As you, Poet, did with your mighty pen!

SEKM

Uh-huh! Isina idedelana!

SM

Pardon?

SEKM

That is one of the figures of speech I was telling you about. Yes, that is one of them. However fine a dancer you are, it is only right that you leave the stage at times to give others a chance to also show their skilfulness.

SM

Consideration for others!

SEKM

Exactly! All these proverbs demonstrate our ways of doing things, the way of ubuntu. If only you observed them, cherished them, learned from them. We say, inyathi ibuzwa kwabaphambili! Learn from what we left for you.

SM

Father, that is mandatory.

SEKM

Camagu!

SM

Our Elder, you lived long. You witnessed life's upheavals. Born after Nongqawuse's disaster (1857), you lived till the end of the WW11, 1945; the year that stole you away. With the death of their beloved poet laureate, the sun set in broad daylight for amaXhosa – the history of the nation came to a dead stop.

SEKM

No, that is not so. Yes, troubles are part of life; but people have ways of dealing with hem till they overcome them and then they go back to the way they were before those problems although, of course, things never are quite the same as before ... for time brings life's

inescapable changes, learning, seeing anew part thereof. Therefore, what was my death to the nation? Yes, there was some lamentation but that soon died for amaXhosa will comfort themselves saying, 'Akuhlanga lungehliyo!'

SM

Very apt! Today, Poet of the Nation, the world entire is in the grip of a terrible pandemic that broke out in 2019. Do you agree that Covid-19 is the worst disaster confronting the nation at this time? I say that because, to me, the nation will be dealt a blow worse than that of the Spanish Flu of 1918.

SEKM

Days before, when an event shocked the nation, people would wait for a word from the chief – telling them what to do. Let me remind you of this: In the year 1874, the whole land of amaXhosa mourned, celebrations stopped, no circumcision took place; parties and observances stopped, for the death notice that Nxele had died on the Island had come, he was 80 years old. Yes, a chief had died but even so, all that mourning was for one person. How much more then when, during this Covid you talk of, thousands of souls are felled daily? Should the nations therefore not halt, wait, self-reflect?

SM

You echo the words of the country's president, who said recently. President Cyril Ramaphosa did exactly that; he laid down a proclamation because of the rising numbers of Covid infections, gatherings should halt. Yes, those who had already initiated their boys would be allowed to observe the coming-out ceremonies when the time came but in subdued manner, mindful of the fact that gatherings were forbidden. But hardly two weeks passed, arrests of people who had gone ahead and circumcised their sons despite the prohibition were made. Parent, nurse, officiating officer and all implicated in the ceremonies, including the little boys who took food to the initiates and the women who cooked that food ... everybody, lumped together and jailed. The initiates, dragged to hospitals, their bhomas unceremoniously demolished. What say you, Poet, about such?

SEKM

Child of the child of my child, disaster has struck. The goal of sending the boy to initiation was character building, perfecting all the learning and training he had received in his life till then

so he would emerge as perfect as perfect can be; a worthy human being. Here, then, is the question: When you, parent, respect not the law, what do you think you teach your son, sending him to initiation, an act forbidden by law? What example is that? Again, I say: Respect was core in the life of our people. I do not believe that should change because of the march of time. It is obligatory to obey the law and self-restraint is one of the marks of true polish in a human being.

SM

Father, I digress, I but must ask you this before we part, Poet of Our Nation: if you could return, live today in flesh, what would gladden you and what deeply sadden you in the life of your people in these times of freedom; the yoke of apartheid shed in 1994? What would disgust you if you still lived? What, make a wish 'I wish I were still alive, especially in this time? When you compare, which is the better, the time of your living or today's? Why?

I ask the question because we are up in arms, these days, arguing over such issues as tradition and ways of doing things. But life, this; changes to that. Today, as I have already said, the whole world is reeling over Covid. Here in our country, this disaster adds to the hardship of our daily lives. Hooliganism has reached unheard of heights; lawlessness reigns, danger comes to one inside the sanctuary of home; one is killed over insignificant matter; murder is child's play, a daily happening and I do not mean a single murder but multiples of those – hundreds.

SEKM

Alas! The situation is truly disastrous then. People used to respect one another, love one another, assist when need arose; none a lone tree ... there are others precisely for that reason. It is the dearth of mutual respect that would make me desolate of soul. In the absence of that, it is nigh impossible the other aspects of good living I mention could survive or manifest.

SM

Enlighten me; how did this, all you tell me, happen? You do say, right, living or life was harmonious for all?

SEKM

It was exactly thus, before save for times of war or some other disagreement – perhaps among relatives or between nations. Fighting was over land, especially pasture, and domestic animals – but it was not unheard of that a fight broke and escalated over a maiden for whom marriage

negotiations were under way but another suitor happened to thwala her. On the whole, however, barring what I've just mentioned, mutual respect was the order of the day during peace times. A person knew another, respected another, looked out for one another; did that even to a stranger passing by, someone they were unlikely to ever see again. This is illustrated well in our phrases and figures of speech ... such as this one: *Isisu somhambi asingakanani*. As all the others, it illustrates how home life was lived by amaXhosa of old.

SM

What does this idiom mean, Ceduma?

SEKM

In the olden days, the modern means of transport you enjoy now were not yet available. People travelled on foot or on horseback to get from place to place. Oft such a journey would take a week or weeks, even months; the traveller footing it. even if he'd set off with provisions, that might be gone or go bad while he had not yet reached his destination. When that happened, he'll keep eyes peeled for a homestead to save him from starvation and death. A homestead spelled salvation for it signalled people. AmaXhosa, on seeing the dust-raising walk of someone afar, on foot, got cracking, getting ready to welcome what they knew would be a weary wanderer. On reaching the homestead, he is asked his identity, and given something to eat, without any expectation of remuneration. White people's money had not yet infected our land; all there were was ubuntu and hospitality. The home owner offers help for he knows he may be in a similar situation one day: the foot has no nose and thus he does not know where his might land him in the future.

SM

To what does that idiom refer?

SEKM

Where the traveller came from and where he was headed. Whilst the man of the home is doing that – a routine – the mistress of the home is preparing food for the unexpected but most welcome visitor. It was unheard of for someone come into a home and leave without something, whether food or drink, have passed through his lips – no matter how unsubstantial but was offered. And that was done without expectation of payment, for money only came with the whites; the routine was but part of ubuntu. But it also recalls another idiom which reminds the

giver that he might find himself in need as the recipient of such generosity as he metes out. Unyawo alunampumlo.

SM

Father Ceduma, what does it signify?

SEKM

In a way, it reminds one of the biblical sayings: 'Do unto others as you would they do unto you'. When you help the traveller, who knows, your feet may one day take you where he would be in a position to return the favour. Feet have no idea where they might land their owner, or when. And amaXhosa also say, 'Zihla ngamqala mnye, a reminder of the oneness of humanity. None have different physique; see how that is illustrated by the fact of our having the same emotions? We cry tears in grief; laugh in glee. None laugh when in pain or cries in joy. Yes, there are tears of joy but you will notice the appearance devoid of sorrow in one who cries of joy. We have the same needs ... same feelings ...not hard to fathom the other's need or feeling. It is the same as yours.

Akukho qili lizikhotha mhlana. And this one reminds me of my own history: The famine of 1885 was hard on our motherless family. I was in my tenth year. Father realised things were impossibly difficult and took me to his paternal uncle Nzanzana, in Centane, in the Transkei. Grandpa Nzanzana was a headman and a man of some means. Not only was I welcomed there and bodily fed. When I say 'fed' I do not mean that of the stomach only but also mentally and spiritually. I grew. In those six years, I learned much respecting the life of amaXhosa, including the refinements of isiXhosa. ... If I had not been at Centane for those six years, it seems to me as if I would not have been any help to my nation. ... it was the means of getting an insight into the national life of my people.

A leopard eats because of the spots is another idiom. When I began taking note of affairs, I realised that men of standing were those who contributed to national life. That is something I began to notice as early as when I was still at Grandfather Nzanzana's in Centane.

SM

What do you mean by that?

SEKM

That is where I saw the truth of that one, ngesiXhosa: Ingwe idla ngamabala. By the time I became aware of matters, a youth, I began noticing that men who were respected were those who made significant contributions in the life of the nation. That is something I witnessed at Grandfather's in Centane. Such learning, I believe, led to people such as Chief Rolihlahla Mandela, A-aa! Dalibhunga! ... praising my prowess.

Hear what he says about our first encounter, when he was a student at the Healdtown Institution, a young man then. During my recital before a gathering that included the Prince of Wales, my spear grazed an electrical projection. After the recital, I told the group of young men that ... The assegai stands for what is glorious and true in African history; it is a symbol of the African warrior and the African artist. The metal wire is an example of Western manufacturing, which is skilful but cold, clever but soulless. What I am talking about is not a piece of bone touching a piece of metal, or even the overlapping of one culture and another; what I am talking to you about is the brutal clash between what is indigenous and good, and what is foreign and bad. We cannot allow these foreigners who do not care for our culture to take over our nation. I predict that one day, the forces of African society will achieve a momentous victory over the interloper. For too long, we have succumbed to the false gods of the white man. But we will emerge and cast off these foreign notions.

SM

My Lord! Do you believe we will ever get there, looking at what we are?

SEKM

Pursue self-knowing and self-love; be proud of who you are. All that goes back to the raising of a child – girl or boy; the aim remains the same – just the one aim: preparation for adulthood when the child will no longer be a child but grown and be of matter at home and also to the nation. That was the aim of ukuthombisa, the coming-of-age ceremony of maidens – something today looked upon with disdain. Such attitude visited upon a tradition without so much that any examination has been done to find out what might have been the aim of doing this. No looking into what did the forebears think they were doing. Why does their antecedents think so little of them? Why do the grandchildren of their grandchildren reckon they were all fools? But then, if they think they come from such fools, where do they think the intelligence and critical analysis that is theirs came from. Did they buy it? Do they know nothing of inheritance, genes? Or do they think they sprang from anthills?

SM

Are you saying we should go back to our traditions of old?

SEKM

Life progresses, as is suggested in my poem, 'uKhawulezisamaxesha!' There can be no going back, an infant can never return to the mother's womb; and the dead can never again stand on two feet and walk the earth as when they were in flesh. What does happen the world over, is to learn by example. But that is done always progressing, going forward, step by step – this righted or corrected, that adorned ... but always augmenting. What was achieved by this generation, the next augments, adding on the foundation of what was left by the preceding generation. Respect, honour, gratefulness makes humanity whole; knowledge of where one comes from and sincere gratefulness to those who led the way. One is in this position, elevated, sure ... a look back will show yesterday's happenings. Those are the footsteps of their predecessors.

SM

Amen!

SEKM

Let me let you be, Ntombazana! Let me appear no more, Tolokazi!

SM

Peace then, Mzima! Peace, Ceduma, grandson of your namesake! You have already said, 'Isina idedelana!'

POSTSCRIPT

If I had believed writing the novel would ease my discomfort and sense of shame about the state of the nation, especially how South Africa treats its children in such a disgraceful and harmful manner, by the time I completed the novel, I knew I had been wrong. If anything, the pain had only grown for, with getting to know my characters, the empathy also grew. And knowing my country, the political situation, I also knew the book would most probably not do what I so fervently prayed it would ... arouse anger in more and more of the voting public, open our eyes to our nakedness ... But then, that was the third part of the novel, the part discarded or abandoned, due to Covid restrictions.

A big part of this journey is my understanding that '**Apartheid is dead! Long live Apartheid!**' That horrific belief arose from the realisation that although the colour of the country's rulers changed (mostly) and we have some of the best legislature and policies in the world, poverty has not only continued but is growing; the plight of the poor not at all mitigated by the political change. In his critical analysis of Orwell's *1984*, Python states: '... despite the Axis defeat, the will to fascism had not gone away, ... the corruption of spirit, the irresistible human addiction to power, were already in place, ... like drafts of a terrible future.' (xiv) ... words which echoed my own fears if you simply replace Axis with Apartheid. These are fears I harboured even in the heady days of pre-Democratic South Africa. Nigh three decades of living in the new South Africa has, unfortunately, only confirmed those fears; fleshed them. I have lost count of the number of 'Commissions of Enquiry' with which this country is plagued, proof that 'something is rotten through and through' in apartheid-free South Africa'.

Artists are supposed to awaken the nation to threats and dangers, Python maintains, expatiating that in that guise of 'working prophet' the artist can predict because s/he - 'is able to see deeper than most of us into the human soul.' I claim no such prophetic propensity. Unlike Orwell, I have 'evidence' before me. The daily news informs me of the 'corrupt spirit' currently reigning supreme in government, in business, and among ordinary people. My problem? How interrogate all this and do so adequately enough to have the desired outcome – sound the alarm?

Faced with the quandry, I wished I were Mqhayi. He, surely, would prevail upon the nation to do better – much better – reclaim our common ubuntu, dying right before our eyes. Next, came the crazy or inspirational urge: *If only!* If only I could call on him, prevail on him to, once again, use his powerful voice, cry out to the nation; remind it of his oft-voiced belief we should not abandon all that is essentially ours but incorporate into it, and after care-filled

assessment, what we take from others (colonisers); making sure we only incorporate that which enriches us – grows and strengthens us in our common humaneness – isikhulise kubantu esibubo.

Then ...

Why not? Surely, as an ancestor, he could? *Can?*

Why not call him out from the grave and ask him to do what he did and did so well ... did for the people, his people, whom he so loved?

And, that is what I did.

What I could not achieve in the novel, I redressed in this way. The questions and answers that could not go into the book pointedly came out in the imagined dialogue with the long-gone hero of my people. I asked the questions that would evoke from Mqhayi responses that illustrate not only his superb use of isiXhosa but also his huge respect for tradition and the wisdom he had acquired and shared for the good of all ... because of his great love for all humanity.

His philosophy, which he would never claim as his personally but upheld as that of all, is something I hope I have ingested well enough to eject, via his 'mouth' his 'words' to remind amaXhosa and all Africans as well as, indeed, the entire world, of the wealth there is in truth, simplicity, honour, and acceptance of one another as all children of the one Earth's Creator.

Our Common Philosophy – embedded in our sayings, our folktales, our phrases and idioms anchored us all – and we were all safe therefore. No one claimed these fundamental truths and tenets as personal possessions (intellectual property) but knew and accepted them as theirs in the collective, all-embracing nature of communal living; cooperation key instead of the vicious, heartless competition that has usurped that role in modern living, that has taught us to worship the 'button without hole' (money).

Chapter Six:

Conclusion... and now the characters

I have spent these pages attempting to give you an insight into what I was thinking when I wrote *When the Village Sleeps*, the challenges I faced, the creative aspirations I had and the problems I attempted to solve. I have also shared my literary inspirations. By this point in the story, you have no doubt made up your minds about this project, my PhD (its successes and its limitations). And yet, I feel there are still those whose voices have not yet been heard and who must be allowed to reflect upon the nature of this project. First and foremost, I am responsible to my characters and it is to them that I ultimately answer.

Below you will find my 'last words' on the matter of this PhD and the novel it produced. And they are the characters' words. They in the end are, I know, my final and most accurate judges. So please indulge me one last time as you enter Mrs Bird's sitting room in Bishopscourt, where Sindiwe the author is held to account by the characters of *When the Village Sleeps*. Once again this is given first in isiXhosa and afterwards offered as an English translation.

INDABA KWAMANTAKA
UMDLALO WEQONGA OMIBONISO MIBINI

nguSindiwe Magona

ABALINGANISWA: Mandlakazi [uyimvakalo enguOKHOYO kubalandeli bakhe]; Khulu; Phyllis noMzi: Busisiwe; MaNtaka; Lily noLuvo; Themba; Sazi; Owam; Esam; Sindiwe.

INDAWO: [eBishopscourt – ekuseni kakhulu ngeCawe. Kusegumbini lokuhlala. Abalinganiswa bethe nqadalala, kwiisofa ezimfuma-mfuma, zesikhumba esimhlophe we-e. Apha naphaya, kwiitafilana ezingalinganiyo ngobukhulu nobude, kuthe ngcu iingqayi zeentyatyambo ezimabala-bala aqaqambileyo, zibunjwe ngezintoyinto, zimo zingafaniyo, zintle kunene. Kodwa; eyona nto inomtsalane ziifoto zosapho, ezookhokho nezo zabasaphilayo ... zonke zixhonywe kudonga olunye. Izibane eziyoko-yoko, ziyitsho indlu yathi qhakra. Imbonakalo yabalinganiswa ithi kukho abamlindileyo kuba babambe iintshiya yaye nokrwaqu-krwaqu eziselfonini akaswelekanga.]

KHULU: [Eqhwaba izandla ukubathulisa, uyakhwaza athi.] He, bethuna! Aniziva na ukuba niyangxola? [Cwaka – abajamele, ahlunguzelise intloko kancinci.] Nithi kuph' apha? Lo mfazi walaph' uza kuthi singabantu abanjani?

[Ngcu. Cwaka endlini. Uzamla kalusizi, athi]: Andithanga yibani zizimumu.

THEMBA & SAZI: [Bejongene, bahleka buntloni.]

THEMBA: Okay, thetha wena, kuqala.

SAZI: Tjo, Broer! [Ajame, enyevula] - Kakade, besibekwa yintoni apha?

KHULU: NguMrs B othe kubhetele sidibane apha kwakhe.

SAZI: Yinton' erongo neKwanele? Besingadibani phaya nje?

THEMBA: Asinazo zonke izinto

SAZI: Uthini na? Izintw' ezifana nantoni?

BUSI: Izindlu zeemfanelo, njalo njalo.

LILY: Uthetha ukuba size kuthetha ngobubhanxa beetoilet apha?

LUVO: Hayi, Linda. Unjalo kanene wena.

LILY: Ndinjani? Uphi khona uSingaye?

THEMBA: Unob' usendleleni, Mama.

PHYLLIS: Kanti makangasilibazisi, simfuna' aph' ebe kho!

KHULU: Thoba igazi. Umsindo zange walungisa nto.

LILY: Uza kwenza kanye leyo, namhlanje! Khona, sekungekho yonk' into nje eKwanele kutheni? Sigugel' ebugxwayibeni siphangela? Jonga obu bunewe-newu bulapha? Soze ndanezinto ezifana nokufana nezi ... That's why silapha. Besiza kuhlala sonke kweyiph iroom, ekwanele. Zonke zikotikoti. Also, besiza kumbeka phi uMrs Bird, eKwanele?

PHYLLIS: Masibulele ubuntu bukaMaNtaka, qha ke. [Krwaqu efonini] Uphi uSindiwe? [Kanye ngoko, qhakra umyalezo kwifona kaBusisiwe, ayithi krwaqu. NoKhulu noSazi bajonga kwezabo iiselfoni.]

BUSISIWE: Uth' usendleleni, uMakhul' uSindiwe.

LILY: Lo Makhul' uSindiwe wakho, ngowokwenene yena umlungu!

MANTAKA: I hope you understand why I'll go first; I didn't call this meeting but asked Gracie, here, to call it because I hear/understand you, just like me, are not happy with the way you've been portrayed ... right? Pity the genius is not here yet ... but, perhaps, that's just as well. Why don't we start ... tell each other how we view the whole thing? That way, we can support one another. Oh, you can be sure of one thing, madam is sure to defend herself ... I can bet you anything, she will defend herself. Count my words ... that is, if she doesn't tear off and away, seething in anger. [Xum. Ubajonga ngabanye enoncunyana oluntama nto, ethe rhoqo eginya ingwiqu; ubuntloni. Uyaqhuba.]

MANTAKA: Well, as I was saying ... mhh ... uh ... [Gxuphu uSazi.]

SAZI: He, Khulu! Kakade ukubhatala malini uMaNtaka ... ngokuya wawusasebenza, wayekubhatala malini, gxebe?

MANAKA: [Erhana uMaNtaka, unyusa iintshiya] Are you saying I have not done enough for Grace?

SAZI: [Engakhathali konke.] Did she do enough for you? What, exactly, was her 'doing' and what did it mean for you ... in terms of the freedom, time, leisure, hands that stayed perfectly manicured.

MANTAKA: [Ecaca ebucaphuka] – Why don't you ask Gracie? She was one of the best-paid maids or help around here. I treated her well, ask her? I know I treated her very well. Why? All the furniture I gave her! And that is my own furniture – from this very house. Good furniture ... not some rub [Gxuphu kwakho uSazi]

SAZI: Which you were throwing away.

[Sibona umfanekiso wakwaLily ... igumbi lokutyela. Kodwa abantu bachophe kwizitula ezigudle udonga abatyeli tafileni. Kuyo kubekwe ezingaywayo ntobuhle bazo iintyatyambo ziphuma kwigadi kaMaNtaka.]

MANTAKA: Well, now and then, one needs change ... I don't know why I'm explaining myself to you ... some cheek, you got, my boy! Some cheek ... [Uphuma ekhwina edumzela.] I believe I've done well by Grace, better than you ever will, my boy!

LILY: Wangumlungu mpela ke ngoku. Akayiva le siyithethayo. Ngani ukuba umntu okusebenzele bonke ubomi bakhe angaze yena wafikelela kwinqanaba Esam sit athi: Inene, ubuhlwempu ndibushiye ngasemva!? Ucing' ukuba uKhulu will ever have izinto ezinjengezi anazo uMrs Bird?

KHULU: [Ngezwi elibungxolisa noxa lingakhwazi kangako.] EkaMantaka nam into, makhe siyiyeke namhlanje. Masiqondane nale silapha ngayo. Sonke asanelanga yindlela esizotywe ngayo kule noveli igama lithi, '*When the Village Sleeps*', anditsho? [Banqwala boshumi.] Kulungile ke, masitsho sisiya!

ESAM: Kodwa bona abantu abadala bazotywe bhetele; immo yabo, noko, iyanyamezeleka. Thina bantwana, esiyiyo – yhoo! Siyintlekisa, qha ke. Asithethi, asenzi nto, asithathi zigqibo, asikhethi – niks. Siyakhethelwa [Unqwala kuPhyllis] – sixhomekeke, mna nobrother wam, kuye wonke umntu ngaphandle komama notata ... abona bantu besifanele ukuxhomekeka kubo – qha, bobabini shame, nguCan't Come, ikhasi loMtshayina! [UESam, uhlalaphantsi; uKhulu uhlunguzelisa intloko kalusizi].

OWAM: Unyanisile, my broer; thina, asenzi fokol; asihambi nesikolo esi; uyayazi loo nto? Siyimirhuqa nje!

ESAM: No, Broer, ndiphazamile ... sobabini, siphazamile – ikho esiyenzayo. Siyatya! Ulibele? Qha, akukho oko kutya ekhaya. [Bucularha]: Asinamama; asinatata; asinakutya!

OWAM: [Engenelela engomeni]: Singamahonkco! [(Bayahigh-5, behleka.)]

KHULU: And, nina, aniyiboni imfundiso kuloo nto?

[Omabini amakhwenkwe, phuhlu amehlo; kucaca ukuba abaqondi kwanto.]

KHULU: Niyazithanda?

ESAM: Hayi, tyhini! Ngubani onokuthanda izinto ezinje ngathi aba?

OWAM: Akukho mntu unokurhalel' ukufana nathi!

SAZI: Nirhalel' ukuba ndim?

LILY: Shutapha, loo mlomo wakh' umpaku-mpaku

LUVU: Hayi, kaloku, Sweetie. Sukuba rhabaxa.

OWAM: No, Mzala, kungcono ukuba lihonkco kuneparapara.

SAZI: IOu leydi inye qha eliske layenza lona ... lisifanise nayo yonk' irhatamrhoyi ekhoyo kwezi lokishindini sihlala kuzo. Singamanxila; singamavila; siyeba, singamasela.

ESAM: Ewe, ezi lona lazibalekayo. Kodwa, uMakhulu uSindiwe, ulibele tu ukusincoma ngezimbini-ntathu ezilungileyo esiphumeleleyo ukuzenza. Asikhange satyholwa nokutyholwa ngokudlwengula okanye nenye na indlela yokuxhaphaza iintombi zale lokishi yaseKwanele. Khange kuziswe matyala azisu apha ekhaya; kanti akukho nomnye kuthi bafana balo mzi onesimhoka-mhoka sesondlo. [Elinganisa uSindiwe] ‘Ukuba uzibona umdala, sebenzisa ingqondo yomnt’ omdala. Mus’ ukuzibeka kumngcipheko xa udibene nodali wakho. Sebenzisa izikhuseli, ungenzi ubuphukuphuku, uzibone sele unosana ongakhange wacinga ngokuba nalo. Bahlonipheni abantwana abaya kuba ngabenu!’

THEMBA: [Engaqondi ncam.] Yhee-rr, ezi ntwana, ngooGoeiweg nje. Soze babe nto! Nina, benifun’ abantwana?

OWAM: Andikhange ndithi sifun’ abantwana. Ibe, mna, okokwam, ndiyabonqen’ abantwana, undibona nje.

ESAM: Unoba uyavuya uMakhul’ uSindiwe singenaba- [Ukuba makatsho, kwahlokoma wonke umntu omdala olapho; yasuka yayintswahla nje. Kodwa wona amazwi anjengala avakala noxa engacaci ukuba aphuma kubani nabani na.]

‘Abantwana!/? Beniya kubabekwa phi? Nibondlelwe ngubani abo bantwana? Not kwam! Not kweyam indlu! ... njl. njl. [Kanye kweso sithuba, galakangqa, **uSindiwe** engankqonkqozanga. Uqhweb’ izandla; uncumo lubaxekile, lolokuphoxisa.]

SINDIWE: Oo, nyhani?! Ndiyavuya? OK! But, ndivuya kuba kutheni na kanene?

[Mbakra ucango emva kwakhe. Bhuxe, ejamele aba bahleli belindele izwi kuye. Kuthe cwaka, zole, ngxolo ibivakala iphele nya-a. Abone ukuba makagqithele kongezantsi umgca.] Ndize kuba nindibizile.

ESAM: [Egqibezela leya ibibuzwa] ...kuba singenabantwana.

OKHOYO/BUSISIWE: [Ephendula le yamva] Ukhe wazibuza phofu ukuba ingaba ubizelwa ntoni? Ubunokwala – finish ‘n klaar. Akunjalo? [Encumile, umjonga ntshoo ... unqwalela kuSindiwe ongaphenduliyo, efinge iintshiyi; atsho ngesingqala.] Uze kuba unyanzelekile.

SINDIWE: [Unyuse iintshiya] Bendinyanzelekile? Bendinyanzelekile? Ndinyanzelwa ngubani or yintoni kanene? And, kutheni satheth’ iAfrikaans? Ngumtheth’ omtsha kweli khaya? Bendiba sayilahlela kude le-ee, kudaloo, ngo-1976, leyo. Ub’ ulibele, buz’ uMalema! [Uyahleka, etsala isitulo – esi sinye kucacayo ukuba sibekelwe yena. Uhlala phantsi, abone ukuba kusuke kwee cwaka, umoya wajika wangozolileyo kodwa unayo nenkxalabo.]

Mandibulise kumntu wonke. Ndiyabona ukuba ndifike mva, I hope andinilindisanga ixesha elide; kodwa bekuthiwe half-past seven. [Krwaqu ewotshini; anqwale]. Eneneni, akakabethi

loo half-past seven. Nina nizinike elinye ixesha kunelo? [Phuhlu amehlo alaqazayo – asuka kulo, aye kulowa. Unesikrokro. Nkqi impendulo. Ahlunguzelise intloko, akaxolanga.]

KHULU: Ayibizwanga ndim le ntlanganiso, kodwa ndiyavuya isehla. Tolokazi, kuthe kanti asindim kuphela onga angaqonda ukuba kuthe ukuze usizobe ngale ndlela usizobe ngayo kwabe bekutheni na. Sikubize ukuze ukhe usicacisele ukuba usidinge kuba yaye ugqibe njani ukuba mayibe ngubani owenza ntoni? *Pride goes before a fall.*

SINDIWE: Kwathini ke ukuze nibeke eli xesha lasekuseni kangaka phofu? Loo nto, ngeCawe, ezintsukwini zeveki!

MANDLA-BUSISIWE: Yiya encwadini le yakho ubone ukuba abantu bakho, ooNomthina ke ukutsho, ubaqukuqelisa ubaphehluzelisa ngawaphi na amaxesha kwaneentsuku zeveki ... owe phantsi ekufikeni ngexesha, athi shu-u nguwe. Usakhumbula na ngentombi evuka ilanga sele lingene ezimpundu laya kuphuma ngaloo mlomo walo ukhamisileyo kuba lirhona, lithe nkebe loo mlomo umilebe ngathi ngamathumbu alele osiwe aze alityalwa phezu kwezo nkuni ebesoselwa kuzo ... abo bebesosa bedikwe yileyo sele beyibimilizile ngobusuku obudluleyo ... bonke bengooQhutsu ziswana!? [Gquzu wonke umntu, xibilili, kwakhululekwa kwakho. **KODWA** oku kuphahluluka kungaqhelekanga kukaBusisiwe kulandelwa yimvakalo enzulu – elowo kaloku usuke wakhumbula uMandlakazi. Umzi awazi ukuba kanye ngawo lowo mzuzu, ulapho loo Mandlakazi. Nguye loo uthetha ngomlomo kanina – ubahambe! Bagutyungelwe ngucwaka, ilowo uphosa iliso elibuzayo kwabanye, kunyuswe amagxa, akukho onga angangowokuqala.]

SINDIWE: Ingathi ndim ndedwa ongenalo nofifi ngondoqo wale ntlanganiso; kodwa kumhlophe ukuba ingam. Ke njengoko nonke nina balapha ningabalinganiswa kule ncwadi yam isandula kuphuma, ‘When the Village Sleeps’, makuba singayo leyo apha? [Kunqalwa iintloko ngabo bonke.]

I hope niyayithanda. Endizibonileyo iireviews ziyincoma kunene. [...] Ithini into? [Cwaka.]

SAZI: Ou leydi, andazi kutheni wonk’ umntu esuke wayinkukhu esikwe umlomo nje ngoku; bebebugcwabevu apha before ufike.

SINDIWE: Bebebugcwabevu?

SAZI: Jaa, Ou leydi! Bonke, specially oo... [Themba agxuphuleke.] Igugu lingaba likhulu, umbombo uyaqhosha.

THEMBA: MamTolo, abantu banezikhalazo ngendlela oobazobe ngayo encwadini yakho.

[Cwaka: uziluma kancinci lo mlomo ungezantsi uSindiwe, ajonge kubalinganiswa abakhoyo, ngamnye ngamnye, ethe chu-u, engangxamanga, ezama ukuqinisekisa ubunyani bale agqiba kuyiva ... unqwala athi.]

SINDIWE: Oo-o, enkosi ngaloo feedback. Nindincedile yaye ndinongazenzisiyo umbulelo kuni nonke. [Anqumame, kucaca ukuba uzama ukuthibaza imvakalo anayo ... ayicaci nokuba ngumothuko na okanye umsindo na okanye nje ubhidekile. Isingqala silandelwa.]

SINDIWE: [Uyaqhuba] Iphuma nje incwadi le sindiphethe isazela sokuba ingaba nina nimvakalo ithini na ngayo xa iyonke. Ke incwadi le ikho ngani kuba ningekho ngeyingekho yona. Ewe, kuthethwa ngoWhen the Village Sleeps abe wona amagama enu bembalwa abawakhumbulayo. Ngxee, ngaleyo ... koko, ngokwentetho yanamhlanje, 'Bubomi, Sana!' Ke, phambi kokuba ndiniphendule, ndinga umntu ngamnye angandixelela ukuba isikhalazo anaso sinye na okanye ... [Gxuphu uuPhyllis.]

PHYLLIS: I wish besisinye qha Esam. [Gqa-a amehlo, ajike intloko ekhangela kwabanye aba.] Hands up, ongenasikhalazo. [Qhuzu-qhuzu, enqwala.] Uyabona ke? [Ejamele uSiziwe.] Wonke umntu uneecomplaints, not icomplaint enye ... ziliqela, shame, kuthi sonke, the whole shoot yethu!

SINDIWE: Yhoo! Hayi ke mos, ningatsho nje ukuba siza kulala apha. Mandizive. Ngubani oza kuqala?

LUVO: [Enesingqala, unyusa ehlice amagxa.] Mhlawumbi ngekuqala mna, kuba ingathi ndingoyena unezimbalwa mna.

LILY: [Bukhwaza.] Ifana nawe loo nto. Yonke eyakho into yasoloko iyintwana-ntwanana engenamsebenzi. Awuzithathi serious ... kanti awuwedwa, ubona nje.

LUVO: [Engasihoyi esi sigxeko.] Naso ke esokuqala kwezam. Kutheni undizobe ndanguva-ngomfazi nje? Yaye, ngaphezu kokuba nguloo thoba-sikutyele, andinandima icacayo eneneni kweli bali lakho; ufane nje wandihlomela ukuze uLili lo abe nesigculelo.

SINDIWE: Uxolo kwakhona. [Ukhweba uLuvo, amsebezele. Yena uLuvo uyanqwala.] Ningakhathazeka ukuba le ncoko siyayirekhodisha. [Cwaka ... babhidekile.] Ndenzela ukuba ndingalibali nto kwezi ziza kuwa apha ... kanti nani iya kuninceda loo nto ... who knows, ngeny' imini umntu afune ukuzikhumbuza ukuba wayetheni na kanene ... okanye afune ukusebenzisa nokuba sisicatshulwa sale ncoko.

SAZI: Mhlawumbi nathi, Ouledi, xa sesigugile. [Akamhoyi uSindiwe esazi ukuba ngokusebenzisa le ndlela yokumbiza, ufuna ukumenza abe nomsindo; ekaOuledi, uyayonyanya.]

LUVO: [Ubuya ethe qhiwu irekhoda. USindiwe uyambulela njengoko exakekile eyibeka ngendlela emlungiselela ukuba ayisebenzise.] Nantso, Tolokazi, iredi!

SINDIWE: OK, masiqhube ke ngoku. Kwakhona, ndiyabulela. [Kungena uMaNtaka.]

SINDIWE: [Eqhuba.] Hi, Mrs Bird, thanks for having us.

MANTAKA: Not to mention, my dear. Please, carry on; don't let me stop you from what you're doing. I had to go make a few calls ... my daughters, you know?

SINDIWE: [Unqwala, aqhube.] Kwakho, ndinibulela xa ninonke.

BUSISIWE: Mna, Makhul' uSindiwe, ndiya kude ndiye kungena engcwabeni sindambethe isono sokubulala inkonyane esesizalweni sam. Inene, undithwalise olukhulu uxanduva olu yaye lulubi kanaanjalo. Wawungenakundinika sabelo simbi, kakade?

SINDIWE: For le ndima, Busi, bekunyanzelekile ukuba wenze lo mkhuba. Kaloku, nguwo endizama ukuwubhentsisa. Bendingenakho ke ngoko, ukukwenza ube nasiphene simbi, sisesinye ... mhlawumbi, ube linxilakazi okanye ... [Angenelele uPhyllis.]

PHYLLIS: Ebeya kuba usekhondweni likanina nje?

SINDIWE: Incwadi, umongo wayo, asilulo ufuzo koko ngumkhuba olisikizi yaye ulutsha lwenza into entsha okanye ke lubaxa nto ibikade ikho kakade kodwa ingenje ukuphokela: ukutyhefa inkonyana, ayenzakalise unozala, ukuze ilimale. Nina nobabini, Owam noEsam, niphikisa eli qhalo lithi, 'Umthathi uyawuzala umlotha.' Ndinivile nihleka, ngokuba ningekabi ngootata. [Bothuke bonke, ngakumbi abafana.] Kodwa ukuba ngutata asiyo ndlwan' iyanetha. Yaye, ukubona umntwana ekhula engenamzali – eli xa BOBABINI besidl' amazimba, yembi intlungu. Akubhetele kwa inkedama kunonjalo – olahlwe ngabazali ngebom? Ukuba besingabona okanye sifunde intleleleko, intlunge engathethekiyo konjalo umntwana ... besingafaka mazwi angamanye kwigwijo lethu eliyimbalasane, uQula Kwedini!

Siwaguqule amazwi alo li gwijo, sitsho sisith: -

Qula, Kwedini!

Qula, phambi kokuba uzal' umntwana!

Qiqqa, Ntombazana!

Funga, Mnt' omtsha!

Fung' umntwan' oya kumzala, ngumntwan' omthanda nkqi!

Fung' uthi: Inene! Fung' uthi: Inene! Inene!

Owam! Owam, soze alal' engatyanga!

Owam! Owam, soz' aswel' impilo nemfundo!

Owam! Owam, uya konwab' ekhuseleke mpela!

Kuba owam! Owam, uya kuba yinqobo yothandokazi lwam.

Owam! Owam, uya kuba yinqobo yothandokazi endilulo! [Nqum.]

SINDIWE: Bafana, kuni nakwiintanga zenu, ndibhengeza ndisithi, “Idayimani izalwa lilahle elimnyama thsu!”

MANTAKA: May I interrupt ... please.

LILY: Go ahead. [Bucala.]: ‘Ngathi singamnqanda!

MANTAKA: First, let me apologize for interrupting you, Phyllis ... please, excuse me and I won’t be long, I promise. I think I should get this off my chest, before I get all emotional and tongue tied. Thank you, very much, for giving me voice in ‘Village’ ... I can’t thank you enough, too, for taking the extra steps to sort of disguise me. None of my relatives, friends, neighbours or anyone else who knows me could ever guess I am Mrs Bird. Although I have no complaints about my portraiture ... rather generous, if you ask me ... but I am grateful you took the step to leave me with my self-respect intact. I am particularly happy at how you painted such a great picture of the friendship Grace and I have ... that is very important to me ... yes, she was my ma... help – worked for me and helped me raise my girls ... but she was more than that ... much, much more ... [Encumile, uguqukela kuKhulu ambiza ngelikaGrace.] wouldn’t you agree, Grace? D’you want to say something, now, my friend?

KHULU: No thanks, Mrs Bird, I would rather hear what everybody wants to complain about first ... especially the little men/amadodana la – the grandsons.

SINDIWE: Uthetha inyaniso epheleleyo; bendifanele ukuba kukho nokuba mnye okanye mibini imizekelo yengxoxo okanye intetha evakalisa le ngcinga uyibekayo. Ndiphazamile kuleyo yaye ndilusizi kakhulu ngokuyivalela ngaphandle kwencwadi into enje ukubaluleka khona. Kodwa ke, ezi zikhwasilima ndininike zona ... ingaba zizinto ezinivuyisayo? Ningazingca ngazo? Imfundiso kulowo woba nethamsanqa lokuba ngumfundi luncwadi ... kuba ke, engonjalo, wohamba ahambe ade aqubisane mhlawumbi nayo nale incwadi – loo nto ingaba kukuphila kuye lowo.

PHYLLIS: Ibaluleke ngaphezu kobunxila nobuhenyu bam? Ukuba iyathethwa inyani, ongandibekanga lona ibalo, alikho. Yho! Hayi shame, undityabekile. [Gwiqi. Ixokozele indlu, imgxeka. Gqi, kwakho.] Hayi, zihlobo zam, niyanditsho. Kuni ndiyenomsila yona injakazi! [Gwiqi!]

[SISITHELE.]

UMBONISO WESIBINI

ABALINGANISWA: Umandlakazi [Akakho kodwa ifuthe lakhe likho]; Khulu; Phyllis noMzi; Busisiwe; MaNtaka; Lily noLuvo; Themba; Sazi; Owam; Esam; Sindiwe.

INDAWO: [Sibuyele apho besikho. Ilanga liphakamile, siyabazi abalinganiswa, ngoku bahleli bebusangqa, kukade belapha. Iziselo nencwadana phezu kweetafilana – bonke babonakala bevule iindlebe, belinde kuhle. USindiwe uhleli yena ejonge kubo kodwa umgama.]

SINDIWE: Bethuna, mandinandlalele ndenjenje; khon' ukuze singachithi ixesha elide apha size singavuni nto. Ndinga sonke singaphuma apha kule ntlanganiso sikhulile engqondweni kanti nasemoyeni. Mandinandlalele ngenjongo yale ncwadi; mhlawumbi, ndenjenjalo, ngamnye umntu uya kucacelwa yindima yalo mlinganiswa anguye kanaanjalo abone nokufaneleka kohlobo azotywe ngayo ukuba bekufanele ukuba lube njengokuba lunjalo. Siyavumelana ngaleyo?

KHULU: Siza kwala sivulwa amehlo? Asingebi sizezona ziphuku-phuku? [Nabanye bayanqwala.]

SINDIWE: Ilizwe endizame ukulidala liyelele kanobom kweli liqhelekileyo – ilokishi ekufuphi neKhayelitsha. Abantu endibabumbileyo, nina aba ke ukutsho, nabo abo bafana nabantu abaphila kule mihla yanamhlanje. Ofunda le ncwadi akangekhe athi, 'Eh, suka! Abakho abantu abanje ngaba bazotywe apha!' Lilonke, ndizame ukwakha ilizwe aya kuthi umfundi abe nofifi ngalo, alinakane. Ewe, zikho izothuso; kodwa xa sele ezikisa ukucinga, okanye ehlafuna oku agqiba kukufuda, okanye encokola ngencwadi le nomnye okanye abanye abangekayifundi, kube kho ukothuka. Kodwa noko kothuka akufuneki bube bobuthi into enje ngaleyo ngekhe nje yaze yenzeka. Bubomi banamhlanje nezabo lilonke. Wonke oweli uya kubunakana ubukhulu becala obu bomi afunda ngabo kuWhen the Village Sleeps – yimpilo eqhelekileyo yale mihla. Kodwa, ndizame kangangoko ukuba noyena uzotywe ngendlela ebonisa ukuba indlela uyiphosile okanye uyayiphosa, abe nayo yokuba inye into enokunconywa ngaye. Kaloku akufuneki umlinganiswa asesiba ngucala-nye mpela. Nani niyazi ukuba nasekuhlaleni apha, nelona bukubela lenkuntsela yetutu okanye umntu onentlamba okanye ivila ... kuye kube kho nokuba inye into entle kuye kanye onjalo umntu. Uve abantu besithi ngaye: 'Oo-o, hayi ke khona, angafane abe livila uNozi, kodwa makakuphekele! ... okanye 'Makakuculele!

KHULU: [Ukhumbula umbongo kaS.M. Burns-Ncamashe oncoma iintombi ngokuzisa iinkomo esibayeni]:

Le nt' umntu oyintombi

Liqhayiya lekhaya,

Liqhayiya lohlanga,

Sisihombo sesizwe,

Bubutyebi bendoda,

Ithandwa nalizulu.

[Gquzu, ngakumbi le mpi incinci. ULuvo unikina iintloko. UKhulu uqhwaba izandla, ezihleka.]

KHULU: Yhoo, sasingalibali! Phofu, ngoko, yayiyinyani epheleleyo le.

LILY: Kwakungoko ngoko. Not namhlanje!

[Kuthi cwaka. Abafana bajonge phantsi bekrukurutheka. USindiwe uthatha eli thuba akhwaze uPhyllis. Lowo ungena emanyonywana. Ubuqumba. USindiwe uphakama amange athi.]

SINDIWE: Enkosi ngokubuya, Phyllis! [Amehlo azele lusizi. Xhaa. Andule ukucengceleza.]:

Ukuba nje bendinomkhonto womlingo

Ukuba nje bendinomkhonto womlingo,

umtsha kraca yaye unobugorha obu ngummangaliso,

bendiya kuthi wuthatheni nindikrazule ngawo;

kakade ke nizizinto ezikwaziyo ukuhlinza.

Nindihlinze ukuze nibone intliziyo le yam xa ninonke.

Yehaa, ebeniya kukubona! Ebeniya kukubona ... nimangale kuko oko!

Niyazi na, andanele nje ukunibumba

Koko ndinidale ndicuntsula, ndixobula kubuqu obu bam?

Anindiboni na kuni aba; ningaziboni na nina kum?

Anindiva na kuni; ningaziva na nina kum?

Nindim; mna ndinini.

Ngaphandle kwam, ngekungekho kwanina yaye ngaphandle kwenu,

kwamna lo ngendingaphelele ... ngendingendonke konke nje.

Ngendingenguye lo mna ndinguye; hayi, ngendingenguye, ngendingenguye tu.

Bathandwa, niyinyaniso ekum, undoqo, ubuni bam bubhenceke kangangoko. Eningayiqondiyo kukuba nindim – indawo ngeendawo zam – oyena ndindim – undoqo wobumna – wobumna; namhlanje nje. Ngoku, ngaphambili, nangaphambili kongaphambili - wobumna ncam nakwixa elisezayo neliya kuze lize emva kwalo elo de kuphele umhlaba; kuphele konke; kuphele indalo.

Niluqobo lwam: uthando lwam, ilahleko nentswelo yam, iziphoso zam, noloyiso lwam.
Nokuba na sisenzo endizisolayo ngaso – endingakwenzanga – Mntu bendimthanda kunene, ontliziyo inkulu; wehlelwa sisifo okanye woyiswa nto ithile enje ngotywala okanye iziyobisi na. Ubuhlungu obungasokuze bumke kum, ndawa phantsi ekumsindiseni. Andabinako tu ukumsindisa kuye nakwidimoni eyabe imngenile. Ingqumbo, izinyobo, ukungxolisa, amayeza neendawo zoncedo ... andaze ndakwazi ukumhlangula ndimthanda kangako lowo waye esenyongweni kum ncakasana.

Okanye Mpumelelo ithile, esandimangaza nanamhla oku

Ukungazithembi kwintliziyo efundiswe ukuzeya

Ngqondo elibele uMthombo, uthando olungapheliyo, lusambathisa konke

Sithembiso sobomi obububo bubobakhe wonke ubani yaye ebulungiselelwe

Koko ezomhlaba iimeko, nobuethethe bakhe ubani, zisengele phantsi konke.

Isifundo: Mzali, akutenxa umntwana, asilotyala lakho. Ubuthathaka bakhe abenziwanga nguwe. Ubugwenxa bakhe asilotyala lakho kanye njengoko Mpumelelo yakhe, noxa unakho yaye ufanele ukuchulumanca ngayo leyo, yeyakhe ncakasana ingakhange yayeyakho. Zange yayiyo. Soze yayiyo. Rhoxa! Rhoxa! Ngawo onke Amandla akho, rhoxa!

Kanti, nokuba bubutyhifile, iimpazamo zomphefumlo otyobozwe yinkohlakalo

Zeze, bendinganyanzelwe bani.

Zeze, ndizenza kanye xeshikweni ndizingca ngobukhulu bona

Ubulumko obu ... kanti kuxa ndiseyela. Kuxa nditshabalala.

Mhla ndathemba obam ubugqi, ndityeshela ubulumko babazali

Mhla ndazikhanda etyeni ngenyheke, kwatak' amazinyo

Ndasala ndiyimpunya-mpunya kanomasinana

Bhongo lam libhare okomhlaba ngembhalelakazi eyimbalasane.

Wena ubhinqileyo

Mhla wadalwa wabelwa ndima iyintoni na?

Ebomini apha okwakho kuyini na?

Ingaba isibeleko esi kuphela koko ukunikiweyo na?

Abe ke amanye la amalungu omzimba

Uwathwaliswe ukuze kwenzeke ni ngawo lawo?

Ehlabathini eli, ngani na ukuba usoloko ujongelwe phantsi

Ujongelwe phantsi de wena kanye wabona isisikhundla esi

Owadalelwa sona

Isiqhelo kaloko ingqondo siyayoyisa

Xa konke okuko kwabe kusoloko kunyathelwa ngeenyawo

Uya kusuka ulibale ukuba zange wadalelwa ukuba mcangcatho

Unengqondo, nentliziyo, nako konke anako wonke umntu onguye

Mahluko ukhoyo, isini, sisabelo senzaliseko, yindalo;

Nakanye saluphawu lobunganeno, lobuphantsi, lokuswela ukuqiqa.

Zithembe. Zithande. Zifundise. Gromomo, ukhule!

[Xum. Indlu yonke iyaqhweba. USindiwe **ujonga ngqo kubafana** aba; aqhube.]

SINDIWE: UOwam noEsam: owam umntwana okanye unyana ... Esam isipho endizipha ngokwam. Phyllisndini ukhowa ekubeni uMzi umshiye kuba engade alekelise emva kokuzala uBusisiwe. Umshiya ngakumbi ngale yokungazali mntwana uyinkwenkwe – nto ebeyinqwenela kunene – nto ivamileyo kumaXhosa ... le yokuba umfazi akakazibuli engekazal' inkwenkwe; akakabi mfazi wasekhapha ncam.

zala inkwenkwe

Ebudikazini uzala inkwenkwe ayithiye igama uOwam [unyana]

Gama elisisigqebelo esizalwa yintliziyo eyophayo.

Undishiyile, undalile, kuba ndingakuniki unyana.

Bona ke, unyana ndimfumene ungekho wena.

Ndimfumene ngaphandle koncedo nenceba yakho. Nanku Owam!

Ngowesibini unyana, uzipha isipho enobukrakra kuyo yonk' into eyindoda;

ugqiba ekubeni angazidubi ngentlungu nokusola izinja eziye zazenzele kuye [**bayancwina**]

KHULU [gxuphu!] Yintoni le nto kwasoloko kunyenjwa lo ubhinqileyo? Sisono somfazi ukudlwengulwa yindoda?

SINDIWE: Inyani iyakhulula. Kulunge uyive kowenu, apho uthandwayo lusapho lwakho. Loo nto ivala imilomo yoolwimishe nabagxeki ibasike imisila! Le mbewu ityalwe ngentloni; wayamkela wayiwonga ngokuyikhulisa de ibe yindoda eyiyo uPhyllis. Ewe, wasikhulisa ke uPhyllis isipho sakhe – isipho esize engasilindele, engasicelanga.

[Ngesingqala; uguquka abhekise kumntu wonke.]

SINDIWE – [eqhuba] Ma-Afrika masilolane – masifundisane – masikhulisane!

ILAHLE LIMNYAMA THSU NJE, LIZAL' IDAYIMANI!

Owam nawe Esam - nina Makwedini, niphikisa eli lithi: Umthathi uyawuzala umlotha.

Nina, nibonisa ukuba idayimani, ibengezela nje, izalwa lilahle limnyama thsu.

Yekanyoko leyo impindezelo – le mbewu ilahliweyo, ilahlwa ngabo banga bangamenza umgqomo wenkunkuma – yena, enguPhyllis nje, uyosamele le meko wangunina kolo sana ... nto leyo ayenzayo, ngako konke anakho engulo mntu anguye – uEsam umphatha ngendlela enye noBusi noOwam. Ukuba akamama usulungekileyo, unjalo kubo bobathathu abantwana bakhe. Usikhulisile ke isipho sakhe – isipho esize engasilindele, engasicelanga. UPhyllis uthwele umthwalo wobuhle, nto imenza alindele okungekho nyanisweni aze athi akungaphumeleli koko abe ekuphupha abe mvakalo ithi ezinjalo izinto azifanele kwehlela abanjengaye ukuba bahle abantu. Ulinde okuhle kunodadewabo ongemhle yena. Kodwa nguLily otshata kuqala – loo nto uphuma ngelokhwe emhlophe. NguLily ozibula ngenkwenkwe aze alekelise ngenye, ngokukhawuleza loo nto leyo! Inkungu ilala kwintaba ngentaba. Yinto enganyamezelekiyo le kuPhyllis, uvuma amithiswe nguMzi ukuze anyanzeleke amtshate. Sisimbo esele sikhule saneendevu esi kubantu endingabo – umfana uthi intombi mayiqale izale kuqala phambi kokuba ayizeke. Eyothando indima iza mva kuba ephambili naku ibekiwe: wena, mfazi, oyiyo sisibeleko kanti nakuso eso ibe sesindizalela inkwenkwe ukuze ndikholiseke.

Fudula ilihlazo ukuzalela ekhaya okanye ukuba lidikazi – kodwa ungena kuleyo kanye, eziva enyanzelekile amthembe uMzi. Koko uMzi umtshata nje akhawuleze acace enganyanisekanga. Iminyaka mihlanu betshatile, erhaqaza, emmele ngenkwenkwe. Unyamezela konke ukurhaqaza kwakhe uPhyllis kodwa, mhla ambamba ezingubeni, ebhedini yabo, netshomi yakhe yena Phyllis, umkhaphi emtshatweni wabo ... angabi nakuyinyamezela ke leyo. Ukwaphuka komtshato wabo kunyanzela uMzi alishiye ikhaya, alahle nentombi leyo yakhe, uBusisiwe. UPhyllis noMzi beberenta kutatomncinci kaMzi. Loo ndedeba, endaweni yokuba ngumncedi kulo mfazana uhluphekieyo, ifumana eli ilithuba lokuzenzela kuPhyllis, ufuna ukumngena. Lisiko esele libuphela eli. Kodwa ke, ngokwalo elo bekungenwa umhlokokazi ngamadoda agazi-nye nomfi. Akafanga uMzi, uyaphila.

Akwala uPhyllis, utatomncinci umshiya ngelithi, ‘Kanti ndakusuke ndizenzele aph’ entombini yakho!’ Abone uPhyllis ukuba liyinene elithi: Isisila senkukhu sivela mhla kugquthayo. Ngoko ke, anyanzeleke ukuba intombi yakhe ayilinde okwesikhukukazi senkukhu silinde amantshontsho sibona ukhetshe. Koko utatomncinci kaMzi akanele nje kungcola unayo nenzondo; uyamgxotha uPhyllis nosana lwakhe. Le ntokazi ngoku inguDingi-ndawo olidikazi. Uhleleleke ngokwenene uPhyllis. Inzwakazi ibhenela etywaleni isithi icima iiwari. Intoni? Kule mihla, u’Ndicim’ iiwari!’ wayekayo ukusebenza [ukuba wayekhe wasebenza, phofu!]. Kule mihla, iiwari ziyakwazi ukudada!

Indima kaTata – ukulahlwa ngutata kumshiya umntwana ehlukumezeke bonke ubomi bakhe. Owam utata washiya kuyise engekazalwa. Kodwa andizange ndimve ekhalaza ngale meko kodwa, xa ndiphosa iso emva, ndiphawula ukuzinikela kwakhe kule ndima yokuba ngutata kwabakhe abantwana – nto ndiqondayo ngoku ukuba ngumnqweno wobakhe ubuntwana obatyumzwa kukungabikho bukayise. Ube owam utata ezama ngako konke anakho ukuba abakhe abantwana bangaza bakudinga ukuba notata. Wasikhusele kwintlungu awayivayo yena; wazama ukuphumeza iminqweno yethu thina bantwana bakhe kanye njengoko eyakhe ingazange yanakho ukuphumelela. Wayithwala intlungu yakhe ethe cwaka, kuba, xa ndicinga, wayesazi kananjalo ukuba wayengekhe wayiphumeza iminqweno yethu kuba uyise wamvimba amathuba okuhluma ebomini. Uyise wayefundile. Utata akayifumananga yena imfundo, kuphela waba sesikolweni iminyaka emithandathu. [AC Jordan=intanga yakhe nomkhaya] – uTata wayezidla kunene ngokuba uAC wayengafiki nje kulaa garaji wayesebenza kuyo yena Tata, athe imoto emke koko waye ancokole naye ngezakuTsolo; eyibuka kunene le yokuxatyiswa kwakhe nguJordan – ngathi isikhundla sikaJordan singamosulela. Kodwa ke, kwakho, mhlawumbi loo nto yambonisa uTata oko kwakungenzekayo nakonje ngaye umntu ... ukuzuza imfundo ... yena okanye inzala yakhe ke. Naku ke ngoku ndikhumbula into endayilibala ngoNoquku! Ewe, ndikhumbula ukuba uTata wakhe wathi kuthe kwezi ncoko zakhe noJordan, loo ndedeba yamyala isithi, “Dlangamandla, kuyo yonke into oyenzayo, maze ubafundise abantwana bakho. Ayikho ongaze ubenzele yona eyedlula leyo!” Fan’ ukuba yiyo le nto yaba nje ukusimela uTata ngokuziphatha nangemfundo ... engathathi ntweni konke. Kodwa wazama kangangoko, engena ematyaleni ngemboleko, esokola ... kumhlophe kuye ukuba akafikanga kwinqanaba abe ekulo uyise ... wamshiya ... embandeza njalo imfundo, nezinye ke izinto zobomi.

Lily: othiywe ngomama ondizalayo, inzwakazi, kodwa lo mlinganiswa akabikwa buhle. Ndabona ndifanele ukuba usisi wakhe ndimenze engaywayo inzwakazi le. Kodwa ke yena uLily lo, ndimnika umtshato; oonyana ababini; nomtshato ongahexiyo. Mhlawumbi ndiyibaxile le yomyeni wakhe osuke waphantse wangu’Thoba sikutyele’ – ongucala-nye. Ndazama kodwa ukumhlangula angade abe sicaba kakhulu – apha naphaya unegalelo - utywala abupha uKhulu sheshikweni uBusi akutyelelo lwakhe lokuqala eSidwadweni; kwingxoxo yokuthonjiswa kukaMandlakazi; xa enceda umfundi uBusi ngemali yesikolo esinohambo. ULily lelam inxeba – ndalekela izibulo, ndimbi. ‘Ewe, niyafana ... kodwa mhle uHarold!’ kucaca ukuba lo uthethayo kunzima ukuba makakholwe ekubeni, ngenene, ndingudade wale nzwane ndithi ndiyayiza.

Busisiwe: Ligama eli elalatha ithemba – ukubusiswa kukusikelelwa. Uyihlo, uMzi, usavuyela ukuba nomntwana yaye uthemba ukuba uPhyllis wokolekelisa ngenkwenkwe kungekudala. Uyindlezana kuwe ntwazana iyintombi yakhe, okoko nje enelo Themba. Wena ke Busi, sokuze waze walulibala olo thando – nto leyo ikuvisa engathethekiyo yona intlungu ... ukuphuncukwa luthando lomzali, namzali, utata. Lihlwili entliziyweni yakho le yokuphuncukana nothando lukayihlo. Olo thando kaloku lwalukunika amaphiko; wahluma uphaphile de lwabe lukushiyile. Wena, umlinganiswa ophambili, ube nguyena undinika umngeni ekukubumbeni. Kaloku kube kunyanzelekile ukuba ube nesiya siphene sisa esihogweni – ukulimaza inkonyana njengoko ndafunda inkqaku ngalo mba kwiEcho, nyakenye.

Ungumlinganiswa endamfumana esonyanyeka, ndanologyiko lokuba ngahle ndikudale ube yinkqu kaSathana, ube cala-nye. Abantwakwenu aba baye bandihlangula ndakwazi ukukubumba ungabi mbi kwaphela esimilweni. Kule yokugcina abantakwenu abo, undim ngqo. Ndingowesibini kwisibhozo sabantwana, izibulo ezintombini. Umama ndimcedise kunene kwaba bahlanu bokugqibela. Ngokunjalo nangomsebenzi wendlu: ndicoca, ndihlamba impahla, ndipheka, ndibelaka nokunye kwabantwana. Obambekayo umahluko phakathi kwam nawe Busisiwe, ngowokuba ‘siba’ ntoni na apho ekhayeni. Kwakungekho ziTV ebuntwaneni bam ... ndandimunca inkonxa yekhondansi okanye, ukuba kukho ijam, ndiyigobhe ngecephe okanye ngetispuni iye ibaleka kowam umlomo. Noxa nam, izibulo lam ndilifumene ndingatshatanga, kodwa ke noko ndandisele ndigqibile ukufunda, ndingasenguye umntwana wesikolo. Phofu, ngumahluko ongephi lo kuba eyona ibalulekileyo yile yokuzala ungakhange wabe ukulungele okanye ukufanele ukuba ngumzali. Awunanto esandleni, uswele, lo mntwana uza kumzala aze atye ntoni na?

Isifundo: Abantwana, kweli xesha, bakhuliswa ngemali. Bekungalungayo lowo uceba ukuba ngumzali aqale ngokuzixhobisa phambi kokuba azala owokuqala umntwana. Yindleko enkulu ukukhulisa umntwana. Asibobuntu ukumzalela ubuhlwempu – yimpazamo le abantu bakudala bebeyiphepha ngokuyala, ngokuqeqesha, ngokukhuthaza iindlela ezizizo zokuhlangana kolutsha kwiziyunguma zalo. Umthetho ube ungqingqwa, kusindiswa abantwana ukuze bangazalelwa entluphekweni.

OoOwam noEsam

Iyintoni na inkwenkwe ezilokishini

Akusengwa, akoluswa, akulinywa, akwaxhiwa nazindlu na.

Uyintoni na ke umsebenzi wenkwenkwe apha ezidolophini?

Kuyaphekwa, kuyacolwa – izindlu nako konke okuzingqongileyo; impahla

Enxitywayo iyangcola, kufuneke ihlanjiwe ke yona leyo.
 Kuzalwa abantwana, ekufuneka begciniwe boluswa ngenyameko
 Eyodlula leya yasemadlweni. Ewe, khona, injongo inye
 Ukulondoloza lowo ungenakho ukuzibonelela
 Koko ke, umntu wagqibayo ukuba endalweni apha nguye injinga
 Lo mntwana ke ngoko makakhangelwe ngeyodlula leya yokwalusa inyameko.
 Uyaphekelwa, uyatyiswa, uyacocwa akutyekenza; kanti ke nezishuba ziyatshintshwa –
 entsontsile na okanye etyhale oko ebekutyile
 Mlungise wena mpelesi. Mlungise, ufund' ukuze kowakho ukwazi ukuzenzela.
 Ungutata na okanye ungumama
 Umntwana wakho akukho kuye oma ukonyanye
 Bubuntu obu, bubuzali gqibi; akakho otya ikwali Phakathi
 Komama notata.
 Tshintsha umntwana, Tata. Mtshintshe nokuba wenze eyiphi na
 Yindalo leyo. Angathi engayi ese, ibe yembi le ingxaki.
 Mus' ukucekis' indalo
 Mus' ukuba ngutata xa luncumil' usana
 Uthando alunamida; uthando alunamkhethe; alunantsasa nakuhlwa.
 Lutho nkqi, kuhlekwa kulilwa; kuphiliwe kugulwa. Lukho sele kufiwe.
 Umfanekiso wabukhwenkwe obungu'ngqiyana' ebomini basezilokishini – akukho msebenzi
 unqaleni nawo kungekho namadoda angawo angafunda ngokubukela kuwo ngobudoda.
 Elalini [ngelishwa, iyaphela nalapho], nkwenkwe, ntombazana, unemisebenzi ejongene nawe
 ngqo. Kwintlalo yedolophu, imisebenzi ebe iyeyabantwana ngokwesiqhelo, yeyasendlini
 ekhoyo, loo misebenzi ke isaziwa ngokuba yeyababhinqileyo: ukupheka, ukucoca indlu,
 ukugada abantwana. Ngoku ke, leya misebenzi bekusithiwa yeyamakhwenkwe elalini pha:
 ukwalusa, ukulima, nokwakha kanti nokulungisa izindlu ... ayikho apha elokishini; nto
 ikhokhelele kule meko sikuyo apho ubukhwenkwe kumntu omnyama busuke babubomi belize,
 ihamte elilambathayo. Lo mntwana ukhula engageqeshelwa msebenzi de abe kwixabiso
 lokuphangela.

UMrs Bird: ngumxube wobulungisa endibubone ngamehlo – ubulungisa ebendingazange
 ndabukrokrela, ubulungisa obandothusayo ndaze ndangongcinga intsha nambono intsha.
 Ekukhuleni kwam ukuba ndibe ngulo mntu endithi ngommi ngqo weli ngokupheleleyo, xa
 ndathi ndazi, ndasebenzisana, ndamkelwa ndisamkela abantu beli abangafaniyo ngebala –

ndahlangana nabo kungengakho nje ngo'kraqu' nendlela elungiselelwe le yokuza kwam ndagagana nendlela yokuphila yabantu ababekwe ngokomthetho kwinqanaba elahlukileyo kwelam - abantu abandimemela kumakhaya abo, bandamkela apho, ndaziva ndisekhaya, ndikhululekile ... kangangoko ke umntu athi akhululeke enelungelo lokwenjenjalo kwikhaya lomnye – ndakhula. Ndakhulu ekuqondeni ukuba kukuthini na ukuba 'ngomnye' elisweni lengqondo yalowo ukujongileyo ... kuthetha ukuthini na kubo bobabini aba bantu, lo ujongileyo nalo ujongiweyo. Rhoqo, ngumbaxa-mbini lo ingenguye konke indlela engqale caleni linye okanye icul-de-sac. Ngaphezu koko, lo mbaxa-mbini unesiphumo kwindlela eya phambili. Uzala iingcinga, amazwi, nezenzo ezilandela oko kubonwe zisuka nje.

SINDIWE: Nicinga ukuba umntu, nkwenkwe/mfana, ofunda le ncwadi aze aphawule le ndima yenu, uya kuba namvakalo ithini ke?

SINDIWE: Ngoko ke, ofunda incwadi uvuna ntoni xa engqalise iliso kubo?

Ndiphuhlisa ntoni kule ncoko?

Phantse nonke, okanye nonke nje, anonwabanga ngendlela endinizobe ngayo– ngaphandle koLily. Leyo ke iphuhlisa ukhuphiswano olusoloko lukho kubantu bomntu omnye. Ewe, asinto le ekuthethwa rhoqo ngayo nebabazwayo.

[Amakhwenkwe, uThemba noSazi avakalisa intlungu yawo, ngokusoloko kwabe kukho abanxusi kowabo.] Zange thina sanekhaya elilelethu.

BUSI: Ngenxa kaMandlakazi, mna ndisindile kwiBlack Tax

LILY: Mna bendingekhe ndangabi ngumlinganiswa okhohlakeleyo. Kunzima ukunxusisa. Kunzima sele unxusise igazi lakho. Soze indlu yakho yacoceka njengoko unga inganjalo.

SAZI: Ungaze utye nto ngokwaneleyo kokwenu.

THEMBA: Uthi ndibaleka ntoni ekhaya?

KHULU: Ukuncedana bubuntu. Ngomso, nguwe.

LUVO: Ingabi sisonka semihla ngemihla loo nto. Ingabi yimo yokuphilwa kwakhe umntu. Ewe, akho amaxesha kaXakeka ... kumntu wonke, akho. Kodwa mayicace le yokuba luxanduva lwakhe wonke umntu, ukuzimela nokuthi athi akuba ezifumene ekwimeko kaNdaxhomekeka, athi khwaphulula kwakamsinya ... angasuke agxumeke iintente kuloo mhlaba/mmango wakwaSoze ndaze ndoneliseka. Andithi nOKHOYO uthi ukoneliseka yinzuzo okanye ngumvuzo wokubila kwakhe ubani; engabilanga, soze waze woneliseka.

KHULU: Wonele yinkongozelo? Lulwim' etywaleni leyo! Akukho nkwali iphandela enye; ephandela enye, yenamantshontsho!

ISIPHELO

ECHOES OF THE VILLAGE

A TWO-ACT PLAY

by

Sindiwe Magona

CHARACTERS: Mandlakazi [a felt presence-SHE, to her followers]; Khulu; Phyllis and Mzi; Busisiwe; MaNtaka (Mrs Bird); Lily and Luvo; Themba; Sazi; Owam; Esam; Sindiwe; sundry characters of Village Sidwadweni

LOCATION: [Bishopscourt – Early Sunday morning – Living Room. The characters are seated on comfy sofas, gleaming white leather. Here and there, on multi-level side tables, gorgeous vases of different sizes, colours, shapes and textures. On the walls, are other pictures and portraits displayed; but the most eye-catching display is that of family portraits, from obviously long-ago relatives and the still living ... on one wall. Resplendent chandeliers, although unlit, glint and clink and swirl to the slight breeze a silent fan blows; an air of disquiet is visible among them all. It is also apparent those present await someone's arrival and are not happy about the wait.]

KHULU: [Claps to quieten the others, shouts.] Heyi, you! Can't you hear yourselves – the racket you're making? [SILENCE – she scowls at them, slowly shakes her head.] What do you think this woman in whose house we are will think of us? [She sits. Then, in the ensuing silence, sighs and says] I didn't say be zombies – you haven't lost your tongues. (Themba & Sazi look at each other, laugh embarrassingly.)

THEMBA: Okay, you go first.

SAZI: Kyo, Broer! [Glares around, scowling.] By the way, why are we in this place?

KHULU: Mrs B said it was better we met here at her place.

SAZI: What's wrong with Kwanele? Why didn't we meet there?

THEMBA: We don't have everything there.

SAZI: What're you talking about? Wha-at things don't we have?

BUSI: Like toilets, and ... and so on and

LILY: Are you telling me we came here to talk about stupid toilets?

LUVO: No, Lily. Don't be like that.

LILY: Like what? And where is She, the reason we are here?

THEMBA: She must be on her way, Mama.

PHYLLIS: But she should not keep us waiting, we want her here, right here!

KHULU: Calm down. Anger never solved anything.

LILY: Today, that's exactly what it will! And, what is the reason we don't have everything in Kwanele? We're getting old, living in squalor while we work? [Sneers, eyes roving the room.] Look at the glamour here? Till I die, till we all die, never will we have things such as these... That's why we're here. Where, in our kotkot rooms could we all fit? And where would we put Mrs Bird, in Kwanele? [Hostile eyes rake the room.] That is, if she got inside at all, instead of waving a cheery 'bye!' at the door, after dropping off someone from her posh car.

PHYLLIS: Let's be grateful for MaNtaka's ubuntu, finish 'n klaar/qha ke. [Checks time on cellphone.] Where is this Sindiwe? [Right then, Busi's phone lights up – message. Khulu & Sazi glance at their cell phones.]

BUSISIWE: Makhul' uSindiwe says she's almost here.

LILY: That Makhul' uSindiwe of yours is a real mlungu! We wait for madam.

MANTAKA: I hope you understand why I'll go first; I didn't call this meeting but asked Gracie, here, to call it because I think you, just like me, are not happy with the way you've been portrayed ... right? Pity the genius is not here yet ... but, perhaps, that's just as well. Why don't we start ... tell each other how we view the whole thing? That way, we can support one another. Oh, you can be sure of one thing, madam is sure to defend herself ... I can bet you anything, she will defend herself. Count my words ... that is, if she doesn't storm off and away, seething in anger. [Pauses, beams conspiratorially, glances around, from face to face then, nervously –She continues.]

MANTAKA: Well, as I was saying ...mhh ...uh... . [Sazi interrupts.]

SAZI: He, Khulu! Kakade ukubhatala malini uMaNtaka ... ngokuya neh, wawusasebenza, wayekubhatala malini, gxebe?

MANTAKA [Gets drift.]

Are you saying I have not done enough for Grace?

SAZI: [Undeterred.] Did she do enough for you? What, exactly, was her 'doing' and what did it mean for you ... in terms of the freedom, time, leisure, hands that stayed perfectly manicured

MANTAKA: [Visibly ruffled.] Why don't you ask Gracie? She was one of the best-paid maids or help around here. I treated her well, ask her? I know I treated her very well. Why? All the

furniture I gave her! And that is my own furniture – from this very house. Good furniture ... [She pauses, as she glares angrily.]

MANTAKA [Continues.] Very good furniture ... not some rub... .

SAZI: [interrupts again.] Which you were throwing away.

[We see pic of Lily's home ... dining room. People sit in a circle far from the table with stands adorned with flowers from MaNtaka's garden.]

MANTAKA: Well, now and then, one needs change ...I don't know why I'm explaining myself to you ...some cheek, you got, my boy! Some cheek ... [sniffs; abruptly exits with an inaudible mumble].

I believe I've done well by Grace, better than you ever will, my boy!

LILY: [Whispers in isiXhosa.] There she goes real-White now. Understands not a word of what we're saying; abelungu never bothered themselves learning isiXhosa all the uncountable years they've been here. That someone who has worked for you all her life will never get to a point where they can say: Verily, I have left poverty behind!? You think Khulu will ever have things remotely such as has Mrs Bird?'

KHULU: Please, today, let us leave MaNtaka and my business out. Let's focus on what we are here about. All of us are not satisfied with the way we are shown in this novel, '*When the Village Sleeps*' – not so? [Vigorous nods all round denote total agreement.] Well, then, let's get on with it!

ESAM: But the grownup characters are portrayed better; have more tolerable natures. As for us children, all we are, yhoo! Things to be ridiculed, that's all. We say nothing, do nothing, make no decisions, choosing is not ours to do – niks. Choices are made for us [nods at Khulu.] – we are dependent, my brother and I, dependent on everybody except mother and father ... the very people on whom we should depend – but, both, shame ... both are Can't Come, the Chinaman's Card! [Esam sits; Khulu shakes head sadly].

OWAM: 'Strue, my broer! We do fokol; we don't even go to school; d'you know that? We're just useless gadabouts!

ESAM: No, Broer, I made a mistake ... we both did – there IS something we do do. We EAT! Did you forget? But, there's no food at home. [Songlike]: We've no mother; we've no father; we've no food!

OWAM: [Joining in song.] We be amahonkco! [They laugh, high-5.]

KHULU: And, you see no learning from that? [Both boys, eyes bulge; clearly confused.]

KHULU: D'you love yourselves?

ESAM: But what question is that? Who would love things such as we are?

OWAM: No one would wish to be as we are!

SAZI: D'you wish to be me?

LILY: Shut up that loose mouth of yours!

LUVU: Hush, Sweetie. Don't be rough.

OWAM: No, Couzie, better to be a honkco than a parapara!

SAZI: Ja, maar, die Ou lady, all she just did ... was liken us to all the riff raff you find in the townships in which we live. Drunks; lazy; thieves.

ESAM: Yup! The very things from which she ran away. But, uMakhul' uSindiwe totally forgot to praise us on the two-three good things we succeeded to do. Never been accused of even one of these sad rapes or other abuse of the women and girls in Kwanele. Noone brought pregnant girls, demanding payment of damages; and there is not one of the young men in this family saddled with child support. We listened to Makhul' uSindiwe when she sat us down and lectured us on youth sexuality – [mimicking Sindiwe] 'If you believe you're old enough to be sexually active, then be old enough to do that with respect and responsibility ... respect of self and your partner, use protection ... you don't want to wake up and find yourself with a baby you had not planned! Respect your future babies.'

THEMBA: [Misunderstanding.] Yhee-rr, these little good-for-nothing thugs – will never mount to anything. You ... want children?

OWAM: I didn't say we want to have children. As for me, I'm quite reluctant when it comes to children ... no, not keen, at all!

ESAM: Makhul' uSindiwe must be happy we don't have childr... .

[Interrupting him, the house breaks into an uproar, especially the grownups while the younger folk fight to hide embarrassment or amusement or both.

[Shouts audible but unidentifiable.] Not in my house! Who will look after that child for you? Who will feed him? Are you out of your mind? Into this racket]

SINDIWE: [Barges in without knocking.]: Happy, because?

ESAM: [Finishes.] ... because we don't have any children.

SINDIWE: [Claps her hands, smile exaggerated in wideness, derisively.] Oo, really?! [Then, without waiting for any response, gently closes the door ... sound of a distinct click. She stands, glares around at the seated figures. The lively chatter has stopped. Silence is loud.] I came because you called.

SHE: infuses the room; replies to previous question. **BUSI – voice Mandla's:** Did you wonder why? You could have refused – finish 'n klaar. Not so? [Stares, smiling ... nods to Sindiwe's eyebrow-raised silence. Then, smiling still, huffs.] You came because you had to.

SINDIWE: [Brows shoot up.] Had to? Had to? Who or what compelled me to, do please say? And, why're we speaking Afrikaans? New house rules, here? Thought we dumped that long ago, 1976. If you've forgot, ask those who were there ...your grandparents ...and if they say they were not, ask them Why. [She laughs, draws a chair, clearly set aside for her. Sits. Sees the calm silence, pregnant with expectation...continues.]

Good day, to everyone. I see I'm last to arrive and hope I've not kept you waiting long; but I WAS told half-past seven. [Glances watch, nods.] In truth, we're not at that half-past seven yet. [Plauses, eyes them with a wide, suspicious eye] Gave yourselves a different time? No response. She shakes her head, misgivings in her heart.]

KHULU: I didn't convene this meeting, but I am mighty glad it is taking place. Tolokazi, it so happens I'm not the only one who'd like to know why you portrayed us the way you did. We summoned you here so you could explain that to us: why did you need us and how did you decide on who should perform what function? Igugu lingaba likhulu, umbombo uyaqhosha.

SINDIWE: Why on earth did you choose such early an hour, on a Sunday too?

MANDLA: [Through a thought that strikes all simultaneously. Of course, none is aware of this phenomenon.] Go to your book and see what time you make everybody wake up and those who wake up late get a bashing from you ... remember: ... a girl sleeps till the sun get into her arse, worms its way right up till it gets out her gaping, snoring throat to pop out her tyke/slurping mouth, lips slack as unbraai'd sausage that got left out on the braai stand the night before ... everyone dik gevreet! [Bitter-sweet memories assail all. All laugh, a little relaxed again – silence, people look at each other, shoulders shrug, none want to be the first to go.]

SINDIWE: I seem to be the only one who had no idea of this meeting's agenda; but it is clear it is about me. As all of you here present are characters in my newly-published book, 'When the Village Sleeps' that must be the agenda then? [Heads nod as Sindiwe looks all around.] I do hope you like it. What reviews I have seen are full of praise for it. [Slight pause.] So, what's up? [Silence...then... .]

SAZI: Ou Lady, I've no idea why everybody's suddenly a chicken with beak chopped off; they were all overboiling here before you came.

SINDIWE: Boiling over?

SAZI: Jaa, Ou Lady! All of them, 'specially ... [Themba interrupts.]

THEMBA: MamTolo, people have complaints on how you've portrayed them in your book. [Silence. Biting her lower lip, Sindiwe looks at those present, one by one, slowly, ascertaining the truth of what she's just heard. Nods.]

SINDIWE: Oo-o, thanks for that feedback. You have been of great help to me and I am truly grateful to all of you. [She pauses, clearly trying to calm herself down ... it is unclear whether this is shock or anger or just plain confusion. A heavy sigh.]

SINDIWE: Even as the book was launched, I was somewhat concerned regarding how you might feel about the whole thing. However, the book is there because of you. For without you there would be no book. Yes, talk is about 'When the Village Sleeps' and your names are not mentioned at all. Apologies about that ... but, as they say these days, 'That's life, Baby!' So, before you answer me, before I answer you, phambi kokuba ndiniphendule, I would that each person, each one of you, tells me what their complaint is – and do say whether you have one or more ... or [Phyllis interrupts.]

PHYLLIS: I wish I only had one. [Turns her head to look around, eyes widened.] Hands up, any without complaints. [She chuckles, nodding.] See? [Glaring at Sindiwe.] Everybody unee-complaints, not icomplaint enye ... ziliqela, shame, kuthi sonke, the whole shoot of us!

SINDIWE: Wow! Why don't you say we'll be here till nightfall? Let me hear them then. Who'll go first?

LUVO: [Shrugs and sighs.] Perhaps I should start; I seem to have fewest.

LILY: What's new?! Everything about you is ALWAYS just a little-little, nothing of much consequence.

LUVO: [Ignores the slight.] Here's my first. Why did you portray me as a man who's pulled by the nose by his wife? Plus, on top of being that sheepish husband, I have no real role in this story of yours; it seems you just stuck me in so Lily could have someone to peck.

SINDIWE: Again, my apologies. [Beckons to Luvo and whispers something to him. He nods and hastens off; and she continues.] Please, don't be perturbed, but we are recording this conversation. [Silence ... all puzzled.] I'm doing that so that I have something to fall back on, in case I forget ... but that will also come to your aid ... who knows, one day any one of you might feel the need to refresh memory regarding what they said here.

SAZI: Jaa! Maybe we too, Ou Lady, when we're old. [Sindiwe ignores him; he is working on rattling her by manner of address, which she detests.]

LUVO: [Returns clutching a tape recorder and sets it up.] Nantso, Tolokazi, iredi!

SINDIWE: OK, now, shall we proceed? [MaNtaka returns.]

SINDIWE: Hi, Mrs Bird, thanks for having us.

MANTAKA: Not to mention, my dear. Please, carry on; don't let me stop you from what you're doing. I had to go make a few calls ... my daughters, you know? [Sindiwe nods heartily and proceeds.]

SINDIWE: Again, I express my gratitude to you all.

BUSISIWE: As for me, Makhul' uSindiwe, I will go to my grave still shouldering the sin of my maiming the foetus in my womb. Truly, you have saddled me with a huge and unenviable role; evil even. Could you not have given me a different role?

SINDIWE: For this role, Busi, I was forced that you perform this dastardly deed for that is what I am highlighting. I couldn't therefore go and have you own a different characteristic, such as drunkenness or ...

PHYLLIS: Or, be a whore ... both would make her a copy of her mother, not so?

SINDIWE: The book, the crux of it, is not heredity but a sinister and growing trait among the youth ... yes, following in the footsteps of earlier generations but much exaggerated: the mother deliberately maiming the foetus. To you two – Owam and Esam, I say: Both of you gainsay the saying, 'Umthathi uyawuzala umlotha/the mthathi tree can birth ashe!' I heard you laugh, earlier about not being fathers yet [shock registers all around, especially in the young men]. But fatherhood is no laughing matter. And, to see a child growing up parentless – while BOTH are very much alive is terrible. Isn't being an orphan better than the situation of such a one – the deliberately abandoned child? If we could see or learn the utter dejection, deep and heartfelt sorrow of such a child ... we could add new lyrics to our well-known song:

Qula, Kwedini

Qula, phambi kokuzal' umntwana! - Boy, guard yourself before you birth a child!

Qiqqa, Ntombazana! – Girl, Consider!

Funga, mnt' omtsha! – Young person, vow!

Fung' umntwan' oya kumzala ngumntwan' omthanda nkqi! Vow the child you'll birth will be the child you firmly love!

Fung' uthi: Inene! Fung' uthi: Inene! Inene! Vow and say: Verily! Verily!

Owam! Owam, soz' alal' engatyanga! Mine! Mine, shall ne'er go to sleep without dinner!

Owam! Owam, soz' aswel' impilo nemfundo! Mine! Mine, not for health nor education shall she want!

Owam! Owam uya konwab' ekhuseleke mpela! Mine! Mine will be happy totally protected!

Kuba owam! Kuba owam, yinqobo yothandokazi lwam. Because mine! Because mine, the crux of my immense love is.

Owam! Owam, yinqobo yothandokazi endilulo! Mine! Mine, the crux of my immense love is.

[pause]

SINDIWE: To the young men here present, and to all such as you, I do declare, 'Diamond is birthed by pitch-black coal!'

MANTAKA: May I interrupt ... please.

LILY: Go ahead. [Aside]: as if we could stop her!

MANTAKA: First, let me apologise for interrupting you, Sindi ... please, excuse me and I won't be long, I promise. I think I should get this off my chest, before I get all emotional and tongue tied. Thank you, very much, for giving me voice in 'Village' ... I can't thank you enough, too, for taking the extra steps to sort of disguise me. None of my relatives, friends, neighbours or anyone else who knows me could ever guess I am Mrs Bird. Although I have no complaints about my portraiture ... rather generous, if you ask me ... but I am grateful you took the step to leave me with my self-respect intact. I am particularly happy at how you painted such a great picture of the friendship Grace and I have ... that is very important to me ... yes, she was my ma... help – worked for me and helped me raise my girls ... but she was more than that ... much, much more ... [smiling, turns to Khulu.] wouldn't you agree, Grace? D'you want to say something, now, my friend?

KHULU: No thanks, Mrs Bird, I would rather hear what everybody wants to complain about first ... especially the young men – the grandsons.

SINDIWE: Mrs Bird, Ma'm, you speak absolute truth! I should've ensured there was one or two examples stating what you say. I erred and apologize for leaving out of the book such an important aspect of life. But then, the flaws I gave you, and this goes for all of you... everybody - are they things that give you joy? Can you be proud of them? Don't you see your life will provide lessons to some. They'll be different things to different people: Learning, to this one and a gift to any reader of books for, being such, they may perhaps eventually come across this book; and that would be of great help to such a one ... through the example of a life such as yours. You may inspire, or you may deter someone from error; and that's important.

PHYLLIS: More important than my drunkenness and looseness of character? Yup! If truth be told, you went to town smearing me real messy. [Abruptly leaves ... loud grumbles about her after she disappears. Suddenly reappears] **Shouts:** And, just now, you trashed and rubbished me kakuhle, my friends! [Stalks off as the **curtain falls.**]

ACT TWO

CHARACTERS: Mandlakazi [a presence - SHE]; Khulu; Phyllis and Mzi; Busisiwe; MaNtaka; Lily and Luvo; Themba; Sazi; Owam; Esam; Sindiwe; sundry characters of Village Sidwadweni.

LOCATION: [Same. By brighter sunshine, we know the characters, now seated in semi-circle formation, have been in here for a while. Cool drink containers on side tables, note books in 2/3 hands – all look intent, expectant. Sindiwe, faces group, sitting a little away it.]

SINDIWE: People, let me lay my cards on the table so that we don't waste a lot of time and gain nothing. I would that we all leave this meeting having grown in mind and spirit. Let me explain the aim of this book; perhaps, that done, one by one, each of you will see you the role of the character you are in new light; see how befitting it is you were caste in the way you were. Can we agree on that?

KHULU: Can we disagree to our eyes being opened? Would we not be prize fools? [Nods from all.]

SINDIWE: The world I tried to create is very like the ordinary world we know – townships and settlements near and about Khayelitsha. The characters I moulded, that's you, are also approximations of people we know in this era. Anyone reading this book will not say, 'Eish, get out of here! These characters are totally unrealistic.' That is to say, I tried to create a world the reader will find familiar, recognizable. Yes, there will be things astounding or shocking; but when the reader thinks or rethinks or discusses the book with others, perhaps those who've not yet read the book, there will be some revelation. Even such revelation should not cause prospective readers to say such could not have happened; what's in the book should be feasible. It is about life as lived today, with all its many complexities. All South Africans will recognise most of the life I portray in 'When the Village Sleeps' – it is modern living. However, I tried my best that even that character portrayed with the most grievous flaws, who has lost the way of ubuntu, has one or a few traces of that ubuntu – some redeeming trait or factor about which they may be praised. No character should be wholly flat or one-sided. You know that in everyday life, even the most-hardy thief or robber, or the laziest or grumpiest person ... will, even so, have even if it is one praiseworthy characteristic. You'd hear people say of such a one: 'Oo-o, Nozi may be a lazy so and so, but let her make you vetkoek! ... or 'Sing for you!'

KHULU [She recalls a school poem by S.M. Burns-Ncamashe in praise of daughters, for bringing cattle to the father's kraal.]

Le nt' umntu oyintombi
Liqhayiya lekhaya,
Liqhayiya lohlanga,
Sisihombo sesizwe,
Bubutyebi bendoda,
Ithandwa nalizulu.

[Laughter breaks out, especially from the young ones. Luvo shakes his head, exasperated. Khulu claps hands, laughing at herself.]

KHULU: We believed it ... that it was good like that; the right thing.

LILY: That was then, Mah. Not today!

[Silence. The young men sitting heads bowed, suppress giggles. Sindiwe takes this opportunity. Calls out for Phyllis, who sulkily re-enters.]

SINDIWE: Welcome back, Phyllis! [She pauses and a sadness invades her eyes; then she begins to recite.]

If only I had a magic spear
If only I had a spear magical,
Brand new, possessed of bravery rare courageous,
I would bid you seize it, rent me asunder!
For you, of course, are long skilled in slaughter.
Split me wide till my heart lay bare.
Oh, what you would behold! What it is you would see and
Marvel at what you beheld!

Do you know I not only created you;
But sliced and chiselled you out of my very being?
Do you not see me in you; and you in me?
Do you not feel me in you and you in me?
You are me; and I am you.
Without me, there would be no you and without you,
I would not be complete ...I would not be whole;
I would not be the me I am ... not at all, could I ever be.

Beloved, you are the truth of me, the essence, the whole reveal of me.

What you all don't understand is that you are me – various aspects of me – but me, the real me, the pith of me. Me Now, Before, long, long before and, by Design old and sacred, Me, way into the unseeable, unknowable future. Before. Now. For evermore.

You are my being: my loves, my losses, my errors, my hopes, and my victories.

Some deed I regret – an omission – Someone much loved, who had a great heart; got afflicted or hooked on alcohol. And, to my eternal regret, I could not save him. Could not save him from himself and whatever demons possessed him. Anger, bribery, admonitions, rehab ... nothing I did could save this one person I dearly loved.

Or some triumph, of which even I still marvel
Disbelief deep in a heart bred small by chance
Mind that forgot the Source, love unending, all embracing
Guarantee of the good life for which all are made and fitted
But life's chances, circumstances, and silly self, oft thwart that good.

Lesson: Parent, when a child goes astray, it is no fault of yours. Their frailty is none of your doing just as, when they thrive, that is not your glory but theirs. You may bask in that glory, but it is not yours. Never was. Never shall be. Bask anyway. Bask! Bask! Bask away with all your might!

But, even should it be stupidity, error of soul sodomised
Host of such sad and sorry folly still ...All mine, none forcing me.
All mine, things I did at times when pride told me of the great wisdom that was mine ... the moment I drowned; the time I perished.
The day I trusted my sheer brilliance, deriding that of parents
The day I bashed my thick lips against a rock, cracked and scattered teeth
Waste on ground, a toothless, senseless hag
Pride fled; I bereft, soul scorched like earth in grip of vicious drought. And I,
Nullified. Nullified. Nullified and cancelled by stubborn, stupid pride.

You, Woman

The day you were fashioned into being, what role was yours?
In life what are you allocated?

Would your womb be all you were allotted?
What then of all the other limbs in you?
Are they only to burden you?
On Earth, why are you always looked down upon?
Derided till you accept your lot as status you rightly deserve
Custom overcomes brain [isiqhelo siyayoyisa ingqondo]
When all you are is forever underfoot trampled
You will forget that never were you created a door mat
Brain you have and heart and all else people everywhere possess
What difference there is, gender, is Divine Providence, nature;
Never was that designed as mark of inferiority, lowliness, or lack of critical thought.
Love yourself. Trust yourself. Teach yourself. Grow and Never Ever Stop Growing Yourself!
[She bows. **Applause.** She turns to the young men.]

SINDIWE: Owam and Esam – My child or my son and my gift to myself. Phyllis believed Mzi left her because she could not give him another child after Busi and he desperately wanted a son – a typical scenario among amaXhosa who believe a wife has not really fulfilled her wifhood obligations till she begets a son, considered the only rightful heir.

When she gives birth to a boy, she names him Owam, [unyana] in her heart, completing the phrase, gall birthed. The second son is a gift to herself for the multiple rape she suffered. [Sighs, groans & other sounds of distress. Pause. Then...cont] The truth shall set you free. And it is better you hear it from the place of love, your family. That also stops whispers, disempowers gossips. [Khulu interrupts.]

KHULU: Is it the woman who was raped who should live in shame? What is her sin? Whom did she wrong? What whose did she steal? No! No! And no, again. He who committed an inhuman act – and only he, deserves condemnation. [Phyllis becomes tearful; Lily goes and hugs her. Soon, everybody is up, tearful and sniffing and hugging. But also smiling.]

SINDIWE: In cold anger against all men, brave Phyllis decides she will firmly stop lamenting what those dogs did to her and ‘take’ what they (at least one of them) threw into her and raise it to a man. She sees this as revenge – they discarded seed, rubbished her – she will rise above that and mother the child ... which she does, to the best of the who she is – she treats you, Esam no differently to Busi and Owam. If she is not a good mother, that goes across the board. No favouritism dishes she. Equity her anchor. [Pauses.]

Let us all show her some love! [All stand; a circle forms around Phyllis. Hugs and prayers. Sindiwe thanks them with a bow and continues.]

SINDIWE: Beloved, you are me. I believed I sharpened you in moulding you; taught life lessons through you: Pitch-black coal does diamonds beget!

Phyllis is burdened by her beauty, for it makes her to have unrealistic expectations or, if these are not unrealistic, unable to weather setbacks as she feels such should not happen to one with her looks. She expects to do better than her ‘ugly-duckling’ sister. But it is Lily who gets married first – a white wedding too. It is Lily who is blessed with not one but two sons, in quick succession. Inkungu ilala kwintaba ngentaba/Mist rest atop different mountain tops at various times. Unable to bear it, Phyllis allows herself to get pregnant so Mzi will marry her. Something on which he insists. ‘Prove to me, you can give me children.’ There is still stigma attached to unmarried motherhood – she risks it though. But Mzi marries her only to dump her when, after five years, she still has not given him an heir. The hurt is made even more painful in that it is surreptitious. Mzi womanises at first and it is only when Phyllis catches him in dishabille that she is any wiser. The pill she finds too bitter to swallow is that the other woman is her best friend. The rapture of her marriage leads to Mzi’s leaving the house Phyllis and her daughter call home; a rental from Mzi’s uncle. This man, instead of giving Phyllis the protection she needs, wants to bed her, ukumngena (to enter her) – the custom traditionally applicable in the case of a widow who would be taken as wife by her deceased husband’s brother. This man is not a brother of her husband but an uncle, utat’ omncinci, younger brother to Mzi’s father. Therefore, he is someone who should offer the deserted woman solace and protection; instead, he wants to sexually abuse her. When she refuses his advances, he becomes nasty; saying, ‘Kanti ndakusuke ndizenzele aph’ entombini yakho,’ making allusion to satisfying himself in the daughter. Clearly, there is great truth in the adage, Isisila senkukhu sivela mhla ukugquthayo/the anus of a chicken is laid bare (visible only) the day of a whirlwind. So, Phyllis is forced to guard her daughter like a hawk. But Mzi’s uncle has more up his sleeve and throws the two out of his flat. Homeless and husbandless, Phyllis is bereft. Beautiful Phyllis falls into irreversible depression which leads her to drink. She quickly becomes alcoholic. Ndicim’ iiwari. These days, worries swim and there is no drowning them in drink!

Fatherhood – abandonment leaves the child scarred for life. My own father was abandoned by his father. Father never directly complained about that but, looking back, I see the tremendous sacrifices he made for us, his children, were a fulfilment of the childhood wishes that were never fulfilled in his own life. He suffered in silence, I guess, for he also knew he could never

give us what his father could have given him. His father was an educated man, his son, my father, had only six years of schooling. I draw a not unreasonable comparison between renown intellectual and author, A.C. Jordan, a contemporary of my father's. When that gentleman came to Cape Town to take up a post at the University of Cape Town, he soon made my father's acquaintance because my father was a petrol attendant at a garage in Main Road, Observatory, walking distance from Jordan's place of employment. The two struck up a friendship of sorts for not only were they both speakers of isiXhosa but came from the same little town of Tsolo. Thus, they were homeboys. Father often bragged about how AC Jordan chatted to him about Tsolo; he loved the acknowledgement – as though something of AC's achievement could rub off onto him. But then again, perhaps that showed him it was possible ... to get an education ... even for the likes of him ... or his children. The friendship both surprised and no doubt amused father's employers. AC looked the part of the very educated man he was and, I am most certain, word got around he was a 'Professor' at the university. That he made conversation with father must have been something to behold to the white people at Chiappini Motors (later, Reeds). In fact, Tata did say the first time Jordan and him held a conversation that, to all watching, seemed easy and ordinary, his bosses questioned him about that after Jordan had driven off. What did they talk about? How did they get to know each other? Could he understand him? Was my father not intimidated ... or words to that effect. Ah, now I do recall, I remember something I had forgotten all these years, decades, Tata said Jordan once said to him, "Tolo, uz' ubafundise abantwana bakho. Akukho nto ibaluleke ngaphezu kwaleyo ungaze ubenzele yona! Tolo, do educate your children. There is no more important thing you could do for them!" Jordan left SA 1961, on an exit permit. But Tata over-fathered us ... he knew he was not fitter for it the way his own father had been ... the way he would have been had his father not abandoned him – depriving him of education, among other things. He nonetheless did his utmost best for us, his children. He had learnt the hurt of the neglected child and must have taken a vow to never the pattern repeat.

Lily, named after my mother who was a beauty, is rather plain. I felt compelled to give her that as her older sister is a beauty without peer. Thus, I gave her an intact marriage; doting husband; two sons. Perhaps I overdid the doting hubby bit – so Luvo stands in danger of being a flat character. I tried to rescue him, here and there – liquor to Khulu when Busi goes for the first visit; during the discussions for Mandla's ukuthomba/initiation to womanhood; financial rescue to Busi ... [not sure I succeeded in making him less flat. Lily is my own scar – second-

born, ugly. ‘Yes, the family resemblance is there ... but Harold is handsome!’ disbelief heavy in the reluctant acknowledgement. I don’t know that I ever outgrew the slight.

Busisiwe – When she was born, her father gave her that very positive name. Mzi still hoped Phyllis would give him a son. He doted on his daughter, as long as that hope held. Busi will forever remember and mourn the loss of that fatherLove. It is a love that gave her wings; she thrived till it went away. This, the key character, was the most challenging for me to ‘create’. She had to have that fatal flaw – maiming her unborn child as triggered by the article I read in the Echo, years ago, around 2011, I believe. I found her so appalling to create, I was afraid she would be terribly monstrous, one-sided. Her siblings served, partly, to make her less beastly. But there she is also me; the second of eight children and the eldest daughter – I helped mother raise the last five children. Ditto with housework: cleaning, laundry, cooking, and child minding. The only real difference would be the type of ‘stolen pleasure’. There was no TV during my childhood ... I sucked at the can of Condensed Milk or, when there was Jam, scooped out a teaspoon or two, right into my already watering mouth. Although I had my firstborn before I was married, even so, I had already left school, no longer a school child. But that is an insignificant difference for what’s of more import is the begetting of children when one is far from prepared to be a parent. With nothing in your own hand, poor, how are you to provide for this child after you give birth to her? Girls and Boys - Prepare! Prepare! Prepare for your beloved future children!

Lesson: Raising children these days takes money. It would be much better when the parent to be starts with arming herself/himself before the birth of their first child. It is very expensive to raise a child. Giving birth into poverty shows no ubuntu to the child – that is a dreadful error of judgment, one which our forebears avoided through care and guidance of youth in all its celebratory goings on. They used words of guidance, strict discipline, candid introduction and encouragement of youth sexuality ... with inescapable consequences for missteps. To save children from being born into poverty and/hardship through unplanned parenthood. Guide! Guide! Guide the young into healthy, respectful, mindful and joyous sexuality.

Owam and Esam – portrait of the ‘useless’ boyhood that is township life – no real roles and no healthy or worthy role models. In the village [alas, that is disappearing], both boys and girls had duties to perform. Urban living means only those duties traditionally regarded as ‘girls’ work’ remain for these are around the house: cooking, cleaning, child minding and laundry.

On the other hand, the duties one associates with boys in the village: herding, ploughing, house construction or mending are not there for the boys to do; leading to the present situation in which black African boyhood is a childhood of dysfunctionality. All childhood is preparation for adulthood and its attendant roles. Therefore, it is in childhood one learns to acquire skills or knowledge that will ease entry into the job market. In other words, one learns to work, to earn one's living. Work. Work. Work. And learn to love the work you do.

Mrs Bird is an amalgamation of kindness observed – a kindness I never suspected, a kindness that surprised me to thinking and seeing anew. In my growing into what I consider a true South African personhood, when I came to know, interact, and embrace South Africans of different hues – got not only a cursory and manicured glimpse of the living of people differently 'classified' – people who took me to their homes, welcomed me there, made me feel at home ... as much at home as anyone ever or is supposed to or has the right to expect to in the home of another – I grew. Grew in understanding of what it means to be the other in a person's mind's eye ... what it means to both, the perceiver and the perceived; for always, as one is seen one also sees she is seen. Always, this is a binary and not a one-way street or cul-de-sac. What is more, the binary has repercussions in the way forward. It births the thoughts, words, and actions that follow the initial perception. See anew. See anew. See anew and grow.

Owam and Esam

What is a boy in the townships?

No milking, no herding, no fields to sow or hoe

No houses to build or mend those broken

What work does the boy in the urban setting do?

There is cooking, there is cleaning of house, laundry and such

Babies are born, they need minding with care and with love

Much more than the herding on veldt. Yes, the care is kin in both

But that of the defenceless babe, more heart demands. Teach boys to mind babies

Fathers birth children too; without their participation in the making of them

There would be no babies at all, at all, at all.

And humans, long decided mightiest in all nature

Thus handle the babe with care far greater than that on veldt.

For it – cook, feed, clean when burped; do not forget the nappies
To change – whether just pee or the outrush of all before guzzled.
Nurse, hurry, clean up! Do that till time comes when she does for self.

Father or mother

Your child – nothing about her should ever disgust you
That is ubuntu, being human, parenthood peerless; neither father nor mother eats shit.
Change the baby, Father. Change her whatever the nappy situation.
That is Nature. Should she stop doing doo, in a terrible fix you'd be.

Do not detest Nature.

Don't be Father to Only-Smiley Baby

Love has no boundaries; love does not discriminate; has neither morn nor eve.
It is steadfast, in laughter; in tears; in pee and doo, in health, in illness. It is there even in death.
[Long pause, looking at her characters, wondering how they now saw themselves; hoping she had helped them better understand their roles and their contribution – not only to the novel but to the work it might, with luck, go out into the world and do: Waken the present cohorts of parents in South Africa to the responsibility that is theirs: to raise the next generation successfully that it might be fully fitted to make a healthy contribution to the nation and its wellbeing. Smiling, she bows to the applause and takes a seat.]

SINDIWE: You boys, what do you think anyone reading this book, anyone male, that is ... will feel about your roles?

SINDIWE: So, what can a reader glean, if anything, from the character in a book?

[An animated discussion. All seem less cheesed off. There is more laughter about their roles. The mood is much, much lighter.]

SINDIWE: Back to you, my very unique and essential characters. I hope all this explanation, etc., has helped you better understand who you are and why you are. None of us is perfect – perfection is only for the gods, the ancestors, and the Creator. We, lowly humans, have flaws. It is our lot, the journey of our life, to ensure we guard those that they not overwhelm us. Fortunately, we are been blessed with the gift of discernment. From very early childhood, parents and other carers make sure we understand and distinguish right from wrong. What is more, they find ways of encouraging us to follow or choose, always choose, right. No easy task doing that as your characters show ... and, as mine show especially in the moulding of you starting, if truth be known, from the very choice of subject: deliberate maiming of the unborn child.

Having heard my reasons, do you think readers, male or female, who read this book will discern your role and its importance or relevance to them?

SAZI: I hope those who get my character, especially those who haven't yet got hooked or even experimented with drugs ... I hope it scares them away from even starting. It is no fun becoming a para and its damn hard to get out of that hellhole of a situation. Shit! Yhoo, sorry, people!

BUSI: Thank you, Mam' Sindiwe. MamTolo, I sincerely hope and earnestly pray no 14-year-old ever even thinks of following in my footsteps. In fact, nobody, whatever their age, should ever ever do what I did. That is why I became a social worker ... once Khulu and Mrs Bird helped me understand what it was I had done ... the lastingness of it; incurable; irreversible ... Lord! How my poor child ever forgave me ... but, thank God she did or has. I can barely live with myself as it is ... although she has helped me heal. Now, there's a laugh! She, whom I maimed, helped me, heal. Truly, God is good!

KHULU: Bubuntu obo. Ukuhlala nenqala asibobuntu. Kaloku uxolela abanye nje nawe unga ungaxolelwa. Kungaxolelwano, ngekhe kwaze kwako luxolo nankqubela emhlabeni apha.

SINDIWE: [Nods agreement with this and indicates thanks to Khulu. Turns to Busi and asks.] By the way, when is SHE ... where did you say she'd gone, this time?

BUSI: Nicaragua. SHE's back end of the month.

MANTAKA: My, how times have changed. [Turns to Khulu.] Can you imagine *you* going to Nicaragua, Grace? [Khulu smiles, shakes her head.]

KHULU: Don't even know whether that is ... would most definitely get lost on the way!

[ALL LAUGH] ... LIGHTS DIM ... THEY LEAVE.]

[In the dark, we hear Sazi growl loudly.]: Hey, cousins! D'you think any boy reading this book and see your role would want to swop places with you? [RAUCOUS LAUGHTER FOLLOWS.]

THE END

END NOTE

I set out to converse with my characters without any roadmap or plan in mind. However, as soon as I found myself in the same room with all of them, mild bickering and complaints – some bitter, others mild, but all felt, I knew I was back in the beginning – finding my way through making things work to get to grips with what it was I needed and why.

In attempting to explain my motivation for both theme and characterisation, I was forced to dig deep into my own personal growth – what I knew about myself as well as what I had intimate as well as casual or second or even third-hand knowledge. Facts. Facts. Facts.

The unravelling of life is seldom sudden or random or, if truth be told, totally unforeseen for the road to hell is a long, winding path with many twists and turns. Very few, if any, murderers are first-time abusers or violators of the dignity and personhoods of others. Spectators, usually family or friends or colleagues are left saying, “We didn’t think it would come to this!” ... evidence the steps were there, seen, and either not stopped or unstoppable.

That none of my characters were happy with the manner I had portrayed them did not surprise me, for I had not set out to portray happy, fulfilled lives. I was gratified, however, there was recognition of some good characteristics or traits in all, although for some I had to point this out. For example, Phyllis did not see that her equal noncaring traits for all her children was a good thing. Not one of them could ever accuse her of favouritism; a bane in many families, even well-balanced ones. However, what I failed to reveal to the characters in the playlet (which I reveal here, in their absence) is that I ended the journey they were on much, much earlier than I had intended. I had planned a dystopic novel ending decades later. An excerpt from the proposal goes: ‘The third part of the proposed novel takes place at high-school level. The maimed become the brilliantly technical and highly skilled “GrosTechs”. This is Mandlakazi’s tribe. Swiftly, silently, it becomes a strong, vibrant network of similarly inflicted youngsters (although in different ways). Their “grospeel” is simple: The country let us down, made us ‘iigrogro/monsters. We, the “grotzed”, cannot expect it to mend or “right” us, ever. Let us stand up and do for ourselves. Deceptively, “helpful”, Mandlakazi’s plan arouses no objection or suspicion. The “GrosTechs” seek and find every loophole in the Constitution to advance their cause. The able-bodied world applauds them for the valour and sense of independence at a time when the majority of the “formerly disadvantaged” display symptoms of disempowerment and a sense of “entitlement”. Gradually, however, every key position in the country – be it in business or government, has a shadow occupant. Every one of those

belongs to the “grosTech”. Mandlakazi’s tribe has accomplished a silent revolution; without firing a single bullet.” ... I think, just as I did with the characters, it would be wise to reveal no more to the reader either. AmaXhosa say one should not boast of a bird one has not yet eaten. Catch and roast and then swallow it first before bragging about how tasty it is ... for, as others say, ‘Many a slip ‘twixt cup and lip!’ who knows what that part three might birth?

In this part of the essay, what I attempt to show is the pervasive petty issues that bedevil lives: sibling rivalry; racism; gender-based oppression; poverty; jealousy – to name but a few. But not everybody succumbs to these ills and some who do recover and are able to resume their lives and, for the fortunate few, surpass their former lives, outdoing themselves. The question arises: why do some and not others – referring to both succumbing and recovering.

There are those who would say it is sheer luck while others say fate and others still profess: ‘That’s life!’ Even in unsettling times such as the world is currently experiencing, gripped and crippled by the Covid pandemic and the effects thereof; much more happens in human life than can be explained. We know more than we know, live broader than we our awareness permits us to understand for we are connected to more than we know or can know for the world is far bigger than our comprehension can grasp.

These are among the questions I hope my novel, *When the Village Sleeps* - published by Picador Africa, an imprint of Pan Macmillan South Africa, in May 2021, may arouse from readers. And, as they delve further and further into the book, discern some or part of the answers they seek. However, what answers they find for themselves will be, and can only be, as in all things human, tentative, subjective, and inconclusive. There will be as many questions and answers as there will be readers, for each will bring into the reading of the book the core of their being, their beliefs and their understanding. That is only fair for so did the writer bring only herself into the writing of the novel – she could do no other. We are all trapped in our skins, our souls, our hearts and our minds.

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